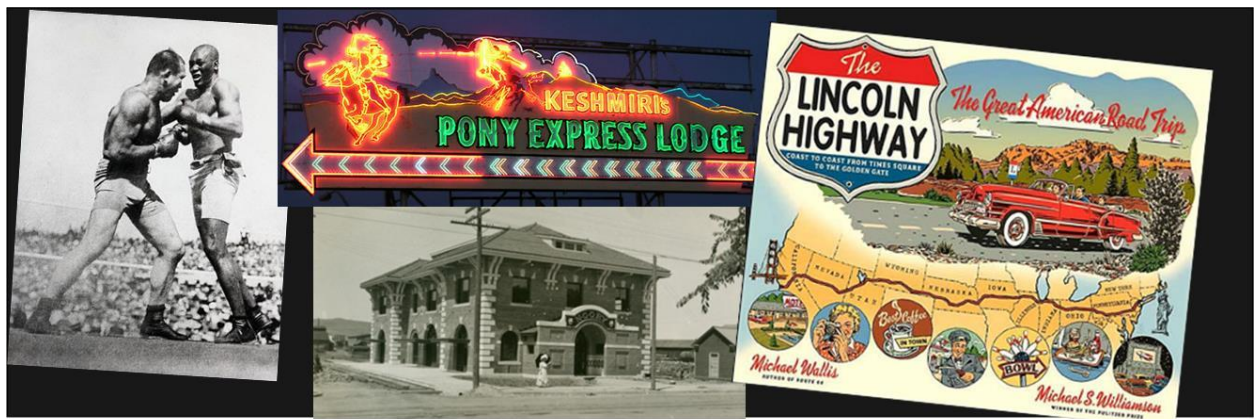


AN ORAL HISTORY OF
FOURTH STREET AND PRATER WAY
THROUGH RENO AND SPARKS, NEVADA



Prepared for
Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County
1105 Terminal Way, Suite 108
Reno, NV 89502
by
Alicia Barber, Ph.D., Stories in Place LLC

AN ORAL HISTORY OF
FOURTH STREET AND PRATER WAY
THROUGH RENO AND SPARKS, NEVADA

Featuring interviews with

David Aiazzi, Cindy Ainsworth, Ben Akert, Norm Avansino, Dick Belaustegui, Piero Bullentini, Gaye Canepa, Sharon Chamberlain, Paolo Cividino, Casey Clark, Tim Conder, Kerry Deal, Will Durham, Les Ede, Lorraine Erreguible, Louis Erreguible, John Feroah, George Flint, Paul Gray, Ann Harrington, Anita Ross Hicks, Spencer Hobson, Tim Iveson, Addie Jaramillo, Lisa Jaramillo, Rémi Jourdan, Kyle Kozar, Krista Lee, Cari Lockett, Sally Loux, Marilyn Marston, John Mayer, Lilli Moffit, Bob Nielsen, Jenny Oxier, Doug Quilici, Hugh Rossolo, Ed Scalzo, Fred Schwamb, Noah Silverman, Inez Casale Stempeck, Sandi Sullivan, Ray Trevino

Interviewed from 2011-2015 by

Jeff Auer, Alicia Barber, Paul Boone, Matt Fearon, Alexandra Horangic, Catherine Magee, Emerson Marcus, Imanol Murua, Amanda Roberts, Edan Strekal, Will von Tagen, Bethany Underhill, Laura Wilhelm

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	v
Chronicler Biographies	viii
Chapter 1: David Aiazzi.....	1
Chapter 2: Cindy Ainsworth.....	30
Chapter 3: Ben Akert	54
Chapter 4: Norm Avansino	70
Chapter 5: Dick Belaustegui	98
Chapter 6: Piero Bullentini	120
Chapter 7: Gaye Canepa	143
Chapter 8: Sharon Chamberlain and Kerry Deal	174
Chapter 9: Paolo Cividino.....	188
Chapter 10: Casey Clark	208
Chapter 11: Tim Conder	232
Chapter 12: Will Durham.....	257
Chapter 13: Les Ede.....	283
Chapter 14: Lorraine and Louis Erreguible	313
Chapter 15: John Feroah	390
Chapter 16: George Flint	433
Chapter 17: Paul Gray.....	452
Chapter 18: Ann Harrington and Bob Nielsen.....	472
Chapter 19: Anita Ross Hicks.....	483
Chapter 20: Spencer Hobson	500
Chapter 21: Tim Iveson	551
Chapter 22: Addie Jaramillo	564
Chapter 23: Lisa Jaramillo	580
Chapter 24: Rémi Jourdan	603
Chapter 25: Kyle Kozar	630
Chapter 26: Krista Lee.....	644
Chapter 27: Cari Lockett.....	661

Chapter 28: Sally Loux	683
Chapter 29: Marilyn Marston.....	702
Chapter 30: John Mayer.....	712
Chapter 31: Lilli Moffit	735
Chapter 32: Jenny Oxier	750
Chapter 33: Doug Quilici.....	768
Chapter 34: Hugh Rossolo.....	789
Chapter 35: Ed Scalzo.....	804
Chapter 36: Fred Schwamb.....	822
Chapter 37: Noah Silverman.....	858
Chapter 38: Inez Casale Stempeck.....	879
Chapter 39: Sandi Sullivan	901
Chapter 40: Ray Trevino.....	929

INTRODUCTION

Although primarily commercial and industrial today, the Fourth Street | Prater Way corridor, extending through the cities of Reno and Sparks, Nevada has long been home to a diverse mixture of businesses and residences. Fourth Street appeared on the original 1868 Reno plat map, stretching out to the east and west of the town center as a rural county road, home to ranches as well as early railroads, lumber yards, and other industry. The name Prater Way was first given to the stretch of county road bordering the Prater Tract, which was laid out for residential lots in 1904 in conjunction with the founding of Sparks. A streetcar line linked the two towns from 1904 to 1928, as the county road it followed gradually developed into a busy corridor traveled by commuters, residents, and increasing numbers of cross-country travelers.

The corridor has been highly impacted by transformations in the broader economy and shifts in transportation patterns. Designated as the route of the Lincoln Highway in 1913, the corridor (with some variations on the Sparks side) was later recognized as U.S. 40, and then displaced as a transcontinental highway by the construction of Interstate 80, which was completed through the area in the mid-1970s.

Through its decades of catering to tourists, the corridor developed a wide array of bustling auto camps, hotels, and motels, many lit by fanciful neon signs. Today, the buildings along Fourth Street range in age from the early 20th century to new construction, housing restaurants, small businesses, industrial workplaces, weekly and monthly rental properties, and services for the underprivileged and homeless. On the Sparks side, the dense mix of commercial and residential properties found along Prater Way is surrounded to the north and south by neighborhoods, schools, and parks.

In Sparks, both Prater Way and Victorian Avenue have remained busy commercial thoroughfares. On the Reno side, local businesses continue to thrive, although certain portions of East Fourth Street in particular have suffered aesthetic and economic decline since the construction of I-80, at times exacerbating problems including prostitution, crime, and a generally negative reputation among local residents. Parts of the area are currently undergoing revitalization spurred by a number of developments along the eastern edge of Reno's downtown, including the construction of the Reno Aces Ballpark, since renamed Greater Nevada Field.

THE FOURTH STREET-PRATER WAY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

In 2011, the Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) initiated a comprehensive study of the entire Fourth Street-Prater Way corridor, intending to improve not only public transportation in the area, but safety and livability. The conjunction of this and other factors made this transitional moment an opportune time to conduct an extensive oral history of the area.

Sponsored by the RTC, the 4th Street-Prater Way Oral History project began under the auspices of the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP), which was directed by Dr. Alicia Barber from 2009-2013. The interviews were intended not only to help research the history of the area, but to gather input regarding planned multimodal improvements to the corridor. The oral history project therefore served the dual purpose of documenting the corridor's past and expanding public participation in planning its future.

The initial interviews began in October 2011, continuing through 2013, with additional interviews conducted by Dr. Barber through 2015 under a contract between the RTC and her consulting firm, Stories in Place LLC. In spring 2012, Dr. Barber was assisted in interviewing by students enrolled in her graduate seminar in Oral History Methods. Conducting at least two interviews each for the project were Jeff Auer, Paul Boone, Matthew Fearon, Alexandra Horangic, Catherine Magee, Emerson Marcus, Imanol Murua, Amanda Roberts, Edan Strekal, Bethany Underhill, Will von Tagen, and Laura Wilhelm. Interviews were transcribed by Technitype Transcripts, with the exception of the interview of Louis and Lorraine Erreguible, which was transcribed by Kate Camino, and the interviews with Anita Hicks and Piero Bullentini, which were transcribed by Alicia Barber. Portraits of the chroniclers were taken by photographer Patrick Cummings of Ten2Photo unless otherwise indicated.

Chroniclers were selected for their cumulative ability to represent a variety of voices covering different historical eras, commercial and residential history, and contemporary issues and concerns. The students listed above were given the freedom to select chroniclers they felt could contribute valuable information. The oral history project ultimately comprised interviews with 43 people—a broad cross-section of local residents whose firsthand experiences shed light on the history and everyday experience of life along Fourth Street and Prater Way. They include current and past owners, employees, and regular patrons of many of the area's shops, restaurants, and businesses; city employees and elected officials; police officers and firefighters; former residents of the neighborhood; and others with significant relationships to the area of study.

Together, their interviews illuminate a world dating back to the 1930s, including stories of family markets, restaurants, bars, and other businesses; nearby schools; the residential neighborhood north of East Fourth Street that was largely destroyed in the 1960s by an urban renewal project; Prater Way's transition from rural to urban; changes in area motels and hotels; the impact of Interstate 80; controversy over City of Reno homeless services; recent revitalization and promotional efforts; the corridor's reputation; ongoing historic preservation and artistic endeavors; and much more.

By reclaiming memories of this corridor's long and storied past, this project aims to help the greater community to see Fourth Street and Prater Way in a more nuanced light, based on the actual people who have been affiliated with the street over time, rather than stereotypes and hearsay. It is relatively easy to track the history of buildings. Never before collected have been the stories of individuals who have had a close association with this corridor and literally populate its history.

Because this street was the primary cross-country route through Reno and Sparks as recently as the mid-1970s, this collection includes many stories from that critical era when residents and tourists alike had a fundamentally different relationship to this thoroughfare than do residents and visitors today. With some memories in this collection stretching back to the 1930s, these interviews document eight decades of life along the corridor.

Each interview was conducted and transcribed in keeping with professional oral history standards. The text in this volume is crafted from the verbatim transcripts of the interviews conducted for this project. Transcripts have been edited for clarity, while remaining faithful to each interview's contents, and adhering as closely as possible to each chronicler's spoken words. Following the editing process, each individual interviewed was given the opportunity to review his or her transcript and correct any errors. The transcripts and audio files were then deposited in the Special Collections Department of University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, where they are available to the general public.

While the authenticity of these interviews is indisputable, readers should keep in mind that these are personal accounts of remembered pasts, and are not presented as free of error. However, the transcripts do accurately reflect the oral history recordings on which they were based. All statements made here constitute the remembrances of the individuals who were interviewed, not of their interviewers or the Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County.

Besides the oral history interviews, other components of the Fourth Street-Prater Way History Project include permanent historical displays in RTC 4TH STREET STATION and RTC CENTENNIAL PLAZA, eight new bus shelters with historical themes along 4th Street and Prater Way, entries about 4th Street on the smart phone app and website Reno Historical (renohistorical.org), entries about Prater Way on the Sparks NV Historic app, and a comprehensive website featuring a narrative history of the corridor, slideshows of historical photographs and maps, transcripts of oral histories, and selected audio clips from each interview (4thprater.onlinenevada.org).

This project was made possible by the Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County. Additional funding was provided by Nevada Humanities and the Special Collections Department, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries. Special thanks to Christina Leach, Amy Cummings, Michael Moreno, and Lee Gibson of RTC Washoe, Karen Wikander of Nevada Humanities, and Donnelyn Curtis of the Special Collections Department, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries.

This volume is dedicated to the three beloved individuals we have lost since their interviews were recorded: Ben Akert, Lorraine Erreguible and Fred Schwamb. We are indebted to them, and to all of our chroniclers, for sharing their stories with the world.

Alicia Barber, PhD
March 2017

CHRONICLER BIOGRAPHIES

- David Aiazzi Born in Reno and raised in Sparks, David Aiazzi ran his own computing business for many years. He served as a Reno City Councilman for Ward 5 from 1996-2012, when issues of concern along 4th Street included locating services for the homeless there and planning general street improvements. He was instrumental in bringing art projects to 4th Street.
- Cindy Ainsworth A native of Los Angeles, Cindy Ainsworth moved to Reno with her husband in 1978 and worked in publishing and at the National Automobile Museum, where she could indulge her passion for transportation history. In 1997, she helped to found the Historic Reno Preservation Society (HRPS), and regularly leads a historical walking tour of East 4th Street. She is also a member of the Lincoln Highway Association's Nevada chapter.
- Ben Akert William Bennet (Ben) Akert moved to Reno from the eastern Nevada company town of Ruth in 1945. His parents, Bluma and Bill, purchased Grant Anderson's market at the corner of East 4th Street and Alameda (later Wells Avenue) and opened Akert's Market, where Ben worked as a teenager. The shop closed in 1963 and the building was torn down. In 1966, Ben founded the local chain Ben's Discount Liquors. He died in 2015.
- Norm Avansino Norman Avansino was born in Reno in 1917 and raised in Virginia City. He worked at the power company and the Farm Bureau in Reno in the 1930s, and for Senator Pat McCarran in his Washington, D.C. office. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, he worked briefly for the Veterans Administration and in 1948 began working in the front office at Eveleth Lumber, on East 4th Street. He left the company in 1980.
- Dick Belaustegui Dick Belaustegui grew up in a diverse neighborhood on Eureka Street, just north of East 4th Street, in the 1940s and 1950s. His father, Bonifacio "Bunny" Belaustegui, an ironworker, worked for Martin Iron Works, Macauley Iron Works, and Reno Iron Works. Dick worked at Pinky's Market on East 4th Street as a young man. An electrical engineer, he worked for IBM and later, the University of Nevada, Reno.

- Piero Bullentini
- Named president of Martin Iron Works at 530 East 4th Street in 1989, Piero Bullentini, a native of Italy, began his career with the company as a shop helper in 1956, at the young age of 18. Working his way up through the shop, he mastered each facet of the industry until being named vice president in 1978, and president 11 years later. He was president of the Associated General Contractors in 1999 and still serves on the National Board of Directors.
- Gaye Canepa
- Born and raised in Ely, Nevada, Gaye Canepa moved to Reno after completing high school. At the time of her interview, she operated Fred's Auto Repair and Supply at 500 East Sixth Street with her husband, Fred Canepa, who died unexpectedly in 2012. She was the longtime president of the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association (RSCBA), spearheading community efforts to promote redevelopment and resist efforts by the City of Reno to locate a new homeless shelter along East 4th Street.
- Sharon Chamberlain and Kelly Deal
- Interviewed together, Sharon Chamberlain and Kerry Deal discuss their work as Executive Director and Deputy Director/CFO, respectively, of Northern Nevada HOPES, a nonprofit community health center offering integrated medical care and support services at 580 West 5th Street in Reno.
- Paolo Cividino
- Born in Italy, Paolo Cividino grew up in California, and moved to Reno in 1989. He is founder and owner of Tutto Ferro, a custom steel fabrication business located at 616 East 4th Street. In establishing his operation along the 4th Street corridor, he joined a community of long established iron workers, steel fabricators, and machine operators practicing in the area.
- Casey Clark
- Born in North Carolina, Casey Clark grew up in Pleasant Valley, north of Reno, and then northern California. He moved back to Reno in 1996, later spending time in Montana and Arizona. A ceramics artist, he has a studio space at Cuddleworks, located at 545 East Fourth Street, where he also works as a bicycle courier for Bootleg Courier, and as a bicycle mechanic and service manager for the Reno Bike Project next door.
- Tim Conder
- Born in Salt Lake City, Tim Conder grew up in California and worked for many years as a carpenter and cement mason. In 2008, he became a co-owner of Bootleg Courier, located at 545 East 4th Street, in a space known as Cuddleworks. The building also houses studio space for artists and a coffee roasting operation.

- Will Durham A native of Reno, Will Durham is a collector of vintage neon signs from throughout Nevada and other parts of the United States. After graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno, he worked in film and commercial production in Los Angeles, and moved back to Reno in 2005. An exhibit of selected neon signs from his collection appeared at the Nevada Museum of Art from October 2012 through February 2013.
- Les Ede Les Ede’s great-great-grandfather moved to Nevada in 1872. Born in 1942, Les grew up on Sullivan Lane, near what was then the western edge of Sparks, and shares memories of his childhood neighborhood near Prater Way. He joined the U.S. Navy after graduating from Sparks High School, and then became a firefighter in Sparks, retiring in 1994.
- Lorraine and Louis Erreguible Louis and Lorraine Erreguible opened Louis’ Basque Corner at 301 East 4th Street in 1967, and also ran the hotel upstairs. A native of the Basque Country, Louis moved to Reno in 1948. Lorraine, born in California, moved to Reno in the mid-1940s and worked for nine years at Alpine Glass. They met at a local restaurant and married in 1955. Louis’ Basque Corner quickly became a regional favorite, eventually gaining national recognition for its family-style Basque lunches and dinners. The Erreguibles sold the business and retired in 2011. Lorraine died in 2013.
- John Feroah John Feroah grew up in Reno, where his father worked for the Reno Police Department. After high school, John joined the Air Guard and worked briefly for the City of Reno. In 1969, he joined the Reno Police Department, part-time, while working security for the Cal-Neva. In 1971, he began to work for the Washoe County Sheriff’s Office, retiring in 2003. He has since worked for the Reno Police Department Reserve and the University of Nevada Police Department.
- George Flint An ordained minister, George Flint grew up in southern California and moved to Reno after completing divinity school. In 1961, he founded the Chapel of the Bells at 540 West 4th Street, and four years later, moved the business into a converted home at 700 West 4th Street. He discusses Reno’s wedding chapel industry and the changes he has witnessed through more than fifty years in the business.
- Paul Gray A native of Idaho, Paul Gray moved to Nevada as child for his father’s teaching job. After graduating from Carson High School and the University of Nevada, Reno, Paul began his own teaching career at Reed High School, where he taught math, coached basketball, and eventually became Dean of Students. In 2011, he became Dean of Students at the Dilworth STEM Academy.

- Ann Harrington and Bob Nielsen
Ann Harrington and Bob Nielsen partner in developing affordable housing projects throughout the Reno-Sparks area. In 2002, they completed a project with Cloyd Phillips of the Community Services Agency Development Corporation, consisting of commercial space along East 4th Street with apartments above and additional apartments extending to the north.
- Anita Ross Hicks
A lifelong resident of Sparks, Anita Ross Hicks is the daughter of Farrel L Ross, who ran one of the area’s most successful photography businesses. He was also a property developer, responsible for the construction of numerous buildings through Reno and Sparks, including the Ideal Shopping Center on Prater Way, where Ross Photo was located for decades.
- Spencer Hobson
Spencer Hobson was born in Reno, where his grandfather, Antonio Bevilacqua, emigrated from Italy. His family members owned several casino properties, including Virginia City’s Frontier Club and Reno’s Overland and Riverside Hotels. Spencer owns the Reno Brewing Company bottling plant building at 900 East 4th Street, which his father purchased in 1956 after the brewery closed. He also discusses Reno’s Italian community and the urban renewal project that targeted homes north of East 4th Street in the 1960s.
- Tim Iveson
Born and raised in Reno, Tim Iveson spent thirty years as a firefighter—five years with the City of Sparks and 25 years with the City of Reno. After retiring, he continued to help firefighters through the Reno Firefighters Local 731. He discusses his experiences responding to emergencies along Fourth Street and Prater Way, and the impact of city development on local firefighting operations.
- Addie Jaramillo
A native of Reno, Addie Jaramillo is co-owner (with her mother, Lisa Jaramillo) of the Pet Play House at 2403 East 4th Street. The business, initially located in a converted house next door to the current address, provides indoor/outdoor cage-free day care and overnight boarding for dogs.
- Lisa Jaramillo
Born into a military family, Lisa Jaramillo moved to Reno upon her father’s retirement in 1979. She is co-owner, with her daughter, Addie Jaramillo, of the Pet Play House, which offers day care and overnight boarding for dogs at 2403 East 4th Street.
- Rémi Jourdan
Rémi Jourdan was born in Paris, moved to the Alps as a teenager, and attended culinary school in France. Inspired by an earlier visit to Los Angeles, he moved to the United States in 1997. After a successful career

in computing and other entrepreneurial ventures, he moved to Reno in 2007 and ran Club Underground and the Tree House Lounge at 555 East 4th Street. He also discusses his work with E4, an association of Fourth Street business owners.

Kyle Kozar

Joseph “Kyle” Kozar graduated from the University of Nevada, Reno in 2006, the same year he co-founded the Reno Bike Project with Noah Silverman. The non-profit community bicycle shop and advocacy group is located at 541 East 4th Street. Kozar left Reno in 2011 to attend graduate school in city planning at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

Krista Lee

Krista Lee earned a Master’s in Social Work (MSW) from the University of Kansas before moving to Reno to become the city’s first Homeless Coordinator, Housing Resource Specialist. She describes her work for the City of Reno as well as the layout and operations of the Community Assistance Center, which was constructed on Record Street, just south of East Fourth Street, in 2007.

Cari Lockett

Born in Reno in 1960, Cari Lockett became a regional contact for Burning Man in 2007. She talks about the range of Burning Man-related activities that occur in Reno throughout the year, including Decompression, traditionally held on East 4th Street each October. Lockett shares her thoughts about Reno’s status as a gateway to the playa and the city’s potential to become a year-round destination for those interested in Burning Man and its ten principles.

Sally Loux

A Reno native, Sally Loux has worked for twenty years at the Coney Island Bar, located at the Reno-Sparks border where 4th Street becomes Prater Way. She describes the longstanding establishment’s welcoming environment and some of its regular customers, and explains what has made it such a popular gathering place for the entire community for so many decades.

Marilyn Marston

In 1958, Marilyn Marston moved from the Bay Area to Reno, where she met her future husband, photographer and artist Art Marston. He founded Art Marston Printing, renting office space until 1974, when the Marstons purchased the old Zellerbach Paper Company building at 420 Valley Road. After Art’s passing in 1986, Marilyn sold the business to Valley Print and Mail, where she worked for ten years. Since 2001, she has rented the building to a series of tenants. She also speaks of her involvement with the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association.

- John Mayer
- John Mayer’s great-grandparents on his mother’s side arrived in Sparks in the 1890s, while his father’s parents moved there with the relocation of the Southern Pacific railroad shops from Wadsworth. Mayer vividly describes growing up in Sparks in the 1940s and 1950s. He taught for the Washoe County School District, and served for seventeen years on the Sparks City Council and the Board of the Regional Transportation Commission, which named the new RTC Centennial Plaza after him in 2009.
- Lilli Moffit
- Lilli Moffit was born in Germany and raised in Iowa. In the 1990s, she and her husband, Bill, moved to Reno, where he worked for Sierra Pacific (now Nevada Energy). In 1998, the Moffits bought and renovated a former Chinese restaurant at 1229 East 4th Street and opened Reno Rails, a model train store. Lilli continued to operate the business after her husband passed away in 2010.
- Jenny Oxier
- Stylist Jenny Oxier, or Jenny O, is the founder and co-owner of A Salon 7. The business started on Cheney Street and moved in 2009 into a renovated historic fire station known as 11 @ the Firehouse, at 495 Morrill Street.
- Doug Quilici
- Doug Quilici is owner of the Copenhagen Bar at 2140 Prater Way in Sparks. The bar was previously located several blocks to the west, and run by Doug’s father, Gino “Bear” Quilici. That location was demolished in 1966 to make way for Interstate 80. Doug became his father’s business partner even before Bear passed away in 1997. Longtime customer and bartender Ray Maldonado also chimes in with his memories of Bear and the popular bar.
- Hugh Rossolo
- Hugh Rossolo was born in Elko and moved to Reno in 1958. In the mid-1920s, his grandparents, Ralph and Marie Galletti, ran a small tamale factory in the Coney Island neighborhood located between Reno and Sparks. Eventually, it became the Coney Island Bar, still operated by the Galletti family. Rossolo, who became a teacher, shares family memories of the popular establishment and how the restaurant and its surroundings have changed through the years.
- Ed Scalzo
- Ed Scalzo and his wife, Susan, own Forever Yours Fine Furniture, located in the historic Flanigan Warehouse building at 701 East Fourth Street. They started the business in 1976 in Kings Beach, Lake Tahoe, moving to an old Ford dealership building on Virginia and Fourth Streets in Reno in 1980. Around 1982 they began to lease the historic IXL Laundry building at 601 East Fourth Street, operating there until 1998, when they purchased the Flanigan building.

- Fred Schwamb
- Born in Syracuse, New York in 1931, Fred Schwamb moved in 1936 to Reno, where his father, Martin Schwamb, founded Martin Iron Works in 1939. Fred worked with his father from boyhood, first at the shop's original location on Morrill Avenue, just south of East Fourth Street, and then at its current location at 530 East Fourth Street. He later founded his own steel fabrication business just across the street from the original site of Martin Iron Works. Schwamb died in 2016.
- Noah Silverman
- Reno native Noah Silverman is the Executive Director of the Reno Bike Project, which he co-founded with Kyle Kozar in 2006. The non-profit community bicycle shop and advocacy group is located at 541 East Fourth Street. Silverman drew inspiration from volunteering at a community bike shop called The Hub in Bellingham, Washington, where he earned a degree in Industrial Technology from Western Washington University in 2005.
- Inez Casale Stempeck
- Inez Casale Stempeck was born in 1927 at the Coney Island Dairy, then located near El Rancho and Prater Way. Her parents, who both emigrated to Nevada from Italy, founded Casale's as a roadside fruit stand in the late 1930s. The business evolved into Casale's Halfway Club, a popular Italian restaurant named for its location halfway between Reno and Sparks. Casale's remains a family business, as Stempeck works in the kitchen alongside her son, Tony, and some of her grandchildren.
- Sandi Sullivan
- Sandi Sullivan bought Windy Moon Quilts, then located in Tahoe City, in the 1980s, and moved the business to Reno—first to Kuenzli Street and then to a former bank building at 440 Spokane Street. She and her husband, Mike, were involved in the creation of the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association (RSCBA). Sullivan, whose family has lived in the Reno-Sparks area for several generations, also speaks about growing up in the community and the urban renewal project that targeted the neighborhood north of East 4th Street in the 1960s.
- Ray Trevino
- Ray Trevino directs St. Vincent's Dining Room at 325 Valley Road in Reno. A native of Texas, he moved to Nevada after graduating from high school, then attended UNLV and served in the U.S. Army. Trevino began working at St. Vincent's in the 1990s. He discusses the organization's free lunch program and describes the move from the dining room's previous location on Third Street to its new facility on Valley Road, near the City of Reno's new Community Assistance Center.

DAVID AIAZZI

Councilman, City of Reno, 1996-2012



David Aiazzi in front of the Morris Hotel on East 4th Street in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Born in Reno and raised in Sparks, David Aiazzi ran his own computing business for many years. He served as a Reno City Councilman for Ward 5 from 1996-2012, when issues of concern along 4th Street included locating services for the homeless there and planning general street improvements. He was instrumental in bringing art projects to 4th Street.

Alicia Barber: This is Alicia Barber. I'm here with David Aiazzi, who's a member of the Reno City Council. We are on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno, and today is Monday, February 6, 2012.

Mr. Aiazzi, do I have permission to record this interview and place it in our public archive?

David Aiazzi: Yes, you do.

All right. I want to start with some biographical questions. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

I was born in Reno, Nevada, at St. Mary's Hospital on February 10, 1956.

Were both sides of your family from this area?

They were from Nevada. My dad was from Carlin. He came to Reno to go to UNR and stayed here. My mom's father worked for AT&T, so her family traveled all around Hawthorne and the northern Nevada area.

And their families were both from Nevada as well?

Yes.

What do you know about the origins of your family?

Not a whole lot. I know that my father's side was from the Tuscany region in Italy, and my great-grandfather and his two brothers came to Nevada and settled. People always ask me if I'm from the Yerington Aiazzis. That's one of my great-grandfather's brothers. Three brothers came to Nevada, and they split up and formed three clans of Aiazzis. The smart one went to Yerington and set out to buy land. The ones who stayed in Carlin and Elko said, "I'll work on the railroad." [laughs]

Do you feel a connection to this area's Italian community?

To a certain extent. I've lost it recently, because I don't think there's that old-time Italian connection anymore in Reno and Sparks, but there sure was a lot when I was growing up. There are just not as many ranches around as there used to be.

What did your parents do for a living?

My dad had a lot of professions. He delivered beer for Bekin's Distributing, right by UNR, and then he was an electrician for a long time. His mom was Joe Conforte's housekeeper. My mom worked at AT&T, and her mom was a bartender. My parents met at the Buffalo Bar Saloon in Sparks.

What part of town did you grow up in?

I grew up in Sparks. I went to Alice Maxwell, Sparks Junior High, and Sparks High.

What do you remember about growing up in this area?

I grew up in the very new part of Sparks. There was one house across the street, and nothing but potato fields past that. We had potato fields all around us. The biplanes would still fly over and spray the fields with pesticides. I think when I was delivering newspapers, they'd be spraying DDT in the morning to kill mosquitoes. It was very simple. It really was.

Was that on the north side of Sparks?

Yes. A lot of Sparks was built on a swamp, so it's always been pretty full of mosquitoes down there. The swamp and wetlands have been built over now, so there's not that big of a problem anymore. Further on the east side, way out by the Marina, there are still some places they spray. With the potato fields, there was standing water with creeks and ditches everywhere that the farmers would use to water their fields, so there were a lot of mosquitoes.

Did playing in the outdoors figure largely in your childhood?

Oh, yes, that's all we ever did. We just had to be home when the streetlights came on. You'd get up in the morning and leave the house, and you wouldn't come home a lot of times until the streetlights came on.

When you went into town to go shopping, did you go into Sparks or Reno, or would you go to both?

It was mostly Sparks. My grandmother lived in Reno, so we'd make the long drive to Reno every two weeks or so, to come visit my grandmother.

Would you drive along what was Highway 40 then?

Actually, we'd take Oddie Boulevard up by the park. She lived off of Kings Row, so we'd take that route and not go on Highway 40 at all. We'd take the streets up by the university and that neck of the woods.

Do you remember Reno and Sparks being very separate towns at that point?

Oh, yes. They said there were three miles in between them. Now that I look at it, it wasn't three miles, but you definitely passed Sparks city limits and then the county, and then Reno city limits.

When you think about some of your early memories of Reno, what do you remember coming over to do?

Mostly, we came over for the movies. The bus would stop on the corner where I grew up on Eleventh and York. On Saturdays, all the kids would hop on the bus and we'd go downtown, get off the bus and go to the movies all the time.

Then, of course, every August or September you'd have to go downtown to shop for your school clothes, at Penney's and Gray Reid's and places like that, until the mall opened, the Park Lane Mall. That was in the late sixties, I want to say. It wasn't an indoor mall then; it was outdoor. Now it's not even there

anymore.

Tell me about the movie theaters. Which ones would you go to?

The Majestic was still there, on the corner of First and Center Streets. That had a loges section, so you could sneak upstairs and sit in the good seats. The Crest Theater, on Second Street, was an older theater. It seemed like it wasn't the nicest theater. The Granada was a very nice theater on First Street.

Back then you'd come in and—I remember 7-Up Bottling Company used to always do this thing—if you brought two bottle caps in on a Saturday morning, they would let you in for free. So kids would save up the bottle caps and go to the movies for free. It would be two feature films with cartoons in the middle, so it would last three or four hours, easily, to go to the movies.

At what age did you take the bus over to Reno to go to the movies?

I'm thinking I was eight, nine, or ten. I had an older brother, so he'd make us go along with him. It's something people really wouldn't imagine letting their kids do today.

Do you have a couple of siblings?

I have an older brother and a younger sister.

Did Reno seem like a pretty big city to you at the time?

Yes, it did, but downtown, unless you were with your parents, there wasn't anything to see and do besides go to the movies. It was full of casinos. There weren't a lot of choices back then. My dad always worked two jobs, and my mom worked, so we were a middle income family. We didn't spend a lot of money going out all the time; I think we went to the drive-in once a month. There was only one TV station in town, so you didn't have cable TV. It was, as I say, a much simpler life because you didn't have as many choices as you have today.

There were a lot of changes in the area in the 1970s. Do you remember some of the big city-shaping changes? I'm thinking of the construction of the interstate or the MGM Grand, for instance.

The MGM Grand was the biggest project I remember, because I started working when they built all the casinos at once, not just the MGM Grand. I think there were five major casinos going in at one time, and there were people living along the river. They had jobs, but there was no place else to live in this area, so they'd bring their campers and trailers. There was more work than the people who lived here could handle, so there were people living all over the place, just like hobos now. People would get mad now, but that's just where they would live so they could work on these great casino jobs.

Which other casinos were under construction?

I'm trying to think. Circus Circus was one of them. The Sahara, the Reno Hilton downtown. I think the Peppermill was adding on at that time. I believe there were five. I think Harrah's was building

their tower at the same time. Fitzgerald's was built at that time. I worked on that job.

This was after you were out of high school?

That was 1974. 1975 is when Fitzgerald's was built. That was the year I was out of high school. I got out of high school in '74.

And you went to work right away?

Yes. I got married right away, had kids right away, was working at Ralston Purina for a while. I got in the electrical trade in the union and did electrical work for a long time.

How did you get trained in electrical work? What kind of system was that?

That was a union system, and depending on how much work they had, they'd take a certain number of apprentices every year. When I got in, work was starting to get bad, so they only took five electricians that year, and then work started really picking up with those casinos after I got in, so then it got really big.

You said your father had been an electrician. Did that influence you?

It helped me get the job, that's for sure. It helps when you have people in the organization. It was a very good-paying job at the time.

When you say there was a limited number each year, was that for the whole city or the region?

All of northern Nevada. I was in the Northern Nevada Electrical Workers Union, the IBW, and had to go through the union training. They only took a certain number of apprentices each year.

Did you attend school after high school?

I took some classes at TMCC. I got an AA degree there and took a couple classes at UNR.

But you had a career as an electrician by then.

Correct.

Was there continuous work or did it come in waves?

There were a couple of waves, but it really started going down again in the mid- to late eighties. There was about a ten-year stretch when there wasn't any work. I got out of that field and got into computers at the time.

What kind of computer work did you get into?

I started off doing a lot of consulting. It was when personal computers were first coming out, and I learned them really quickly. I did that for about fifteen years.

That is very early in computing. Were you self-taught?

Oh, yes.

Was that connected to your electrician work at all?

No, it wasn't connected to that at all. There really weren't any classes for computing. You just had to learn it all on your own through magazines and getting one. They were a lot simpler than they are today, so I thought it was pretty easy to learn. I was training other people in how to use them. There were only three kinds at the time. You had an Apple, an IBM, or a Tandy from Radio Shack. [laughs]

What kind of clients did you have at that point?

A lot of businesses were just starting to use computers. I consulted for a lot of the appraisers in town, who were some of the first to computerize their work. Accountants were another major type of client, with their spreadsheets, and also word processing attorneys. Even though computers were really expensive, it was still cheaper for them to be able to hammer out some documents and make a lot of changes to them with computers. It played out very well for them, I think.

I want to go back to that time of incredible growth with the casinos being constructed. Did the city do anything at some point to relieve that housing shortage?

I think that's when everyone started buying property outside the city limits for major development projects. I don't know if people remember this. Now people blame the city of Reno or get mad at them for a lot of the growth, but the county approved much of the housing that was actually constructed. Out in the Double Diamond area, all of the construction was approved by Washoe County. A lot of stuff north of Sparks in the Spanish Springs area was approved by the county. Later on they got annexed by the cities.

So some of those developments already were underway by the early eighties?

Yes. That's the way it goes. If there are a lot of workers who need housing, then people are going to build houses. That's just the way it's always going to work.

The changes to downtown Reno in that period seemed pretty drastic. Do you remember the whole environment changing so that you didn't do the same types of things in downtown Reno that you had done before?

No, because at that time they just took down older structures and built in the same locations. They weren't demolishing whole blocks, like in Las Vegas. The projects were still pretty small. Go down and

look at the footprint of Fitzgerald's. The MGM was world-class above everyone else as far as size and scope. It still has the largest stage in North America, I think. The other ones were fairly small. I think people remember that when Circus Circus and the Eldorado built the one project together, they took out Gray Reid's, which moved out to Old Town Mall and became the anchor of the mall.

Circus Circus also took out the Reno Little Theater. That was right on Sierra Street, close to where the gas station is right now, where Interstate 80 meets Sierra Street, I believe, where the Circus Circus garage is. I think they bought the Reno Little Theater.

Then they were without a home for quite some time.

All that time. They just opened up this year in a new location, right off of Wells Avenue, down south, almost where Wells hits Virginia Street.

Did you still live in Sparks in the eighties?

No, actually, right after I got married, we moved over by Virginia Lake and then we moved around Reno a couple times, and then in the mid-eighties we moved back to Sparks. So we lived in Reno for about ten years, then back, always within the McCarran ring, even though the ring wasn't there.

What was the area around Virginia Lake like at that time?

We moved into the apartments on Brinkby, and they were brand-new apartments, so it was a very nice area at the time. I was working all the time, so I didn't really get to go out and see a lot. There was so much work. You could work twenty-four hours a day if you wanted to. It was very easy for me to not really go out and see everything. I was underage, I was only eighteen, so I couldn't go gambling, and I had a baby at home. We pretty much stayed in the apartment and went on some walks.

I always thought the Virginia Lake area was a little nicer back then because they took care of the island, and they had more money and they seemed to take care of that area a little more. I think in the last ten years they've been putting in some of those fountains and bringing it back, so that's nice.

You got married at eighteen?

Yes. We had two kids. Three grandkids now.

What was the name of your computer consulting business in the eighties?

ZZI Consultants. I wanted to be last in the phone book, so I took the last three letters of my last name. That was the name, and it worked out very well.

Where was your office?

I worked out of my house for a long time, and then I had an office on California Avenue near Arlington, right across the street from what's now the St. James Infirmary bar.

I know there must have been some developments in between running your computing business and running for City Council in the mid-1990s. What were you involved in during that period of time?

I was doing computer work, and my kids were turning eighteen and twenty, so they were out of the house. I didn't need to worry about them anymore.

In the early nineties, the City of Reno was going to sell the Sky Tavern where the Junior Ski Program was held. I learned how to ski on Sky Tavern. It was operated and run by the City of Reno at the time, and they were going to just get rid of the program and sell the property. I went to City Hall that night and I told them that they really shouldn't be doing that, and they actually listened to me, and they said, "If you think you could run it better, why don't you form a nonprofit and run it?"

So in 1992, I think it was, I formed a nonprofit with about five other people, and we ran the whole Junior Ski Program. For the next three years I ran that. We built a chairlift up there, which it didn't have, so you couldn't have snowboards there. That's where I learned that you get more done working with the city than working against the city.

The city still owned the property?

Yes, they still own the property to this day. It was jointly owned at that time by Reno and Washoe County, and we got Washoe County to step aside, and I got some money from the [unclear] Foundation and the City of Reno to build the chairlifts, and it's still an active nonprofit to this day, and I'm very proud of that.

There were about five of us who really worked really hard the first three years to figure it out, get the articles of incorporation, address the legal questions and work through the issues for the first couple years. We didn't have any snow at times, so we had to figure that out. We worked with Mt. Rose ski area and Diamond Peak, and we actually moved the program to their areas a couple of times.

We had a lot of challenges, but it was really fun because everyone was volunteering. We didn't pay anyone at the time, so everyone was doing it for the love of it. They all wanted to make sure this was a gem that stayed in the city of Reno.

What kind of program was that? What was the age range of the kids who were involved?

The kids could be anywhere from two to eighteen, and it was almost totally run by volunteers. If you wanted to volunteer to help teach kids to ski, or volunteer to drive the buses up there, you got a reduced rate for your kids to go. If not, you could just drop them off at the buses. I think it was \$60 a year back then, and we'd drive them up there in the buses and give them lessons all morning, and they could do free skiing in the afternoon. Then we'd drive them home. It was, as I say, run totally by volunteers. People would volunteer to teach, and the Ski Patrol was up there, and people would volunteer to run the snack bars. It was a very, very well-run machine because the group of people who wanted to keep it going were very dedicated, and we had a very fun time.

Was that resort also open to the public, or was it exclusively for the children's program?

No, it was only for this program, and it always has been only for the program, even today.

So there's a separate slope, a separate area just for this program?

Yes, Sky Tavern Junior Ski. You can see it if you drive up the Mt. Rose Highway. It's right after the really sharp curve.

So this is different than the Mt. Rose resort?

Yes. It's two miles away, although it's right across the highway from the Mt. Rose Resort. It's pretty much the top of Sky Tavern.

Were you doing this at the same time that you had your computing business?

Yes. That's what allowed me to do it, because I could set my own hours and it was very freeing to not have to report to someone else, so I could do stuff when I wanted to.

But at some point you wound down your involvement with Sky Tavern?

Yes, after about three years. I was really burning the candle at both ends, and it was time to move on to something else. Then I started thinking about running for City Council.

Let's talk about that, because that's a big thing to undertake, and I'm wondering if prior to that time there were other issues involving the cities of Reno and Sparks that got you interested in politics.

I'd always been sort of interested overall. I'd been listening to talk radio for a long time, so I was always calling and I thought I knew what was going on. I think a lot of people think they do until you actually get in there, when you see what really happens. But I really enjoyed talk radio, and that really helped shape what I was doing.

I knew some people who were on the Sparks City Council, so I knew some of the people who were involved, and they were encouraging me to get a little bit more involved. And I thought, "Why not? It doesn't cost much to run, so I'll do that."

Was that true, it didn't cost much to run? I'm wondering what campaigning was like at that time.

I think it's the same now as it ever was. It costs as much as you want to spend. You could spend \$25 and just pay your fee and not do anything additional, or you could spend a little bit more. Mostly it was talking to people and getting your name out there, and being first on the ballot doesn't hurt.

There are a lot of little tricks to running on the cheap, which is what I did. I had only a certain number of signs. I'd move them around. I worked on my own signs all the time. When the air races were in Stead, I'd move my signs to Stead. When the balloon races were at Rancho San Raphael, I'd go out to Stead and pick them up and move them around to the balloon races. I'd do all those sorts of things.

You obviously had moved back from Sparks to Reno before that.

Yes.

What ward were you representing?

Five, northwest.

Did you still live inside McCarran at that point?

Yes, yes, always have.

That was intentional?

No, it just always worked out that way.

Did you run against an incumbent?

No. Jim Pilzer was in the position before me, and I was going to run whether he ran or not, and the day before I signed to run, he said he wasn't going to run. So it was just Mike Chaump, myself, and Neal Cobb.

For the same ward?

Yes. The newspaper even said it was one of the best-run campaigns because we didn't snipe at each other. We all said we're running for a job, not against each other, and so it was a very non-combative campaign.

Did you have some kind of a platform or specific issues that you were campaigning with?

I just thought we needed to spend more on parks and rec. That was sort of my background. I still to this day say the city has a lot of money; we just have to decide where to spend the dollars that we have.

I remember one thing that came up right about the time I was going to run. They were talking about tearing down the Riverside Hotel to allow Mill Street to go through. That was probably the moment when I said, "No, I don't want that to happen. That doesn't make sense to me." I think that's what really made me decide to run.

Looking back on it now, it probably wasn't something that the City Council decided they were going to do. I see how it works now. Just because someone had proposed it doesn't mean the Council voted to do it. It was a proposal, and I didn't think that they should do that. In my mind, I thought, "They don't have to do that."

You thought you could influence them?

Yes, and it's still there.

There were a lot of closed properties downtown in the eighties and nineties, like the Riverside, the Mapes and a number of other properties.

When I was an electrician, I had actually worked on the Riverside, doing a complete makeover of it. I worked there for about a year and a half doing electrical work, so I knew it was a very well-constructed building. I did that as a fourth-year apprentice, so that must have been 1980.

When you were campaigning, how long did those campaigns last? The election was in the fall. Do you remember how much time you needed to spend campaigning?

You signed up in April, I think. If you made it through the primary, then you had to go all the way through November. That made it short if you didn't make it to the primary, but I managed to do that, and then I won the general. It was the first Tuesday in November.

It wasn't hard. It was long. I spent a lot of time on it, just moving signs and going to all the free events that people invite you to. People invite you to a lot of events, a lot of fundraisers. People make money off politicians a lot by saying, "You've got to come to this event, and it's \$100 a table." [laughs] So you pay your \$100 and there wouldn't be anybody there, except the same people. You'd see all the candidates all the time, and you start getting smarter about that. You start to think, "Well, I really don't need to go to that event anymore."

Have you ridden in the Nevada Day Parade?

No, never have.

Is that on your list?

No. I think that's more for when you're running for statewide offices, not really for the city of Reno.

Who was the mayor when you took office?

Jeff Griffin.

And you served in a building that is not the current City Hall?

Correct. That was a very interesting building. I thought it worked very well. There was a lot of conversation about the shape of the Council table at the time. We sat around a conference table, as opposed to a dais like we do now. We brought people in and asked them what the shape of the table should be—because it was a really big deal. The speakers were no more than a foot and a half from me. That's how far apart you were from people coming up to speak under public comment, which is great under some circumstances, but sort of unsettling when some people came up, because there are a couple of scary people out there.

Was the space overall pretty small, in every part of the building?

Yes, it was a lot smaller. We were in cubicles then; we didn't have offices. We just had cubicles.

But, quite honestly, there were only a couple of us who were there most of the time. I had my own job, so I was there every day, and Tom Herndon was there almost every day, and Sherrie Doyle would show up occasionally, but the other Council members were hardly ever there. So I had a lot of room to myself because people just weren't there.

It's a very strange job being on the City Council, because you don't have to do anything. You don't have to go to a meeting. You don't have to read a book. You don't have to take a vote. You don't have to do anything. Once you're elected, there are absolutely no requirements whatsoever, except that you not get arrested for a felony, and you have to live in your ward. Those are the only things that really have to happen.

There really is no enforcement?

There's nothing to enforce. There's no job description that outlines what you have to do. It doesn't say you have to attend the meetings. It doesn't say you have to take on all the other positions that you have on City Council, like the RTC and the governing board and the Flood Management Committee and the water company. Those are all other boards that you serve on for free, but you don't have to do any of those things, and there are people who are elected who don't do any of those things, and barely show up to meetings.

It is a paid position. In some cases, many people consider it their full-time job, their primary job.

Yes, it is a paid position in the city. I think we get close to \$70,000 a year. When I started, I think it was \$15,000 a year. We voted to keep raising it, although I was always on the back end of that, because you can't raise your own salary. You have to wait until you're reelected again to get that increase. But we thought, honestly, if you made more money, that more people would run for office, because I really believed that more people should run for office. It's startling how few people think that they should do this.

Every time I talk to someone, they say, "Well, people wouldn't like me and I wouldn't get very far." That's the same thing I thought when I was there, that nobody's going to like me, and a lot of people don't like you, but you have to just keep pushing on.

It's a very, very interesting position to be in. You set your own time and rules. But it's also freeing that you can do as much as you want. The other side of it is that I was able to take on a lot of responsibilities that nobody else wanted to do because I was on my own time, and a lot of other people had jobs they had to go to.

There are three of us on the Council now who don't hold other jobs: me, Sharon Zadra, and Jessica Sferrazza.

You've been reelected three times, so at what point did you stop operating your other business?

In about 2002 I was working for an insurance company. They wanted me to come to work for them for full-time, so I did for about two years. Then when I got reelected again in 2004, they said, "You're spending too much time on City Council and not enough time here," and they were absolutely correct. I thought I liked the City Council more than I liked the computer stuff, so I said, "Okay, you're right. Kick me to the curb and I'll go work on City Council," so that's what I did.

Aside from the Riverside Hotel issue, which took a little time to get resolved, what were some of the other big issues at the forefront when you first joined City Council in 1996?

The biggest one right after I got elected the first month was the Alturas power line which was coming through, and whether it should go on this route or that route or be underground or above ground. It was only a month after I got into office when we had to have that meeting. I do like to tell the story that the very first mistake I made in City Council was before I even took office. In the city of Reno, you get elected on a Tuesday in November, and you think, "Okay, I'll have till January to learn what's going on," because you take office in January. But not in the city of Reno. You take office the next week. So the next day, on my doorstep I got this big packet, and it was literally six and a half inches high of stuff I had to read before the next Tuesday, in order to be up to speed on what was going on.

Then we had the Alturas power line issue. I remember that was a tough, tough meeting, and the place was packed. Because of the way the table was, my back was to most of the people. It's just the way it was, so I could just see people staring at me the whole time. If I remember right, I cast the deciding vote on whether to underground it or not.

What was the source of contention for that particular debate?

A lot of people wanted it underground. These are the huge power lines on the side of the road that go from Alturas up the Stead corridor, Highway 395, into Reno. A lot of people wanted them underground. They didn't want that route at all. The line was first going to go along the base of Peavine Mountain, and those people who lived on Peavine got that route taken off, so it went right to where more people were affected, along the 395 corridor.

There's a similar one being proposed as we speak. They want to have another one go from the Alturas line over out to a plant in Verdi, and one of the routes will take it along Peavine.

That was a very tough decision, and I had to do my homework about undergrounding them or not in a very short amount of time. I remember my vote on that was to not underground, because at that time the power lines were so high voltage, they had to case them in oil to keep them cool, and they really couldn't track how much oil started leaking out. I didn't think it was environmentally sound to have oil encased in the ground if they didn't really know if it was leaking. So I voted to keep it up aboveground, and I think it was the deciding vote. So it was very tough. My very first really controversial vote was way out there.

It's always struck me that the City Council has to face such an incredibly wide spectrum of issues, and I've always wondered how much education or direction you are given to do that, or if it is primarily self-education about these issues.

I think it's mostly self-education because there's no one who sits you down. You meet with people. You try to meet with the pro side and the con side, and get their issues out there. But there's no school to go to to say, "Here's how to deal with this," so it's mostly what you learn. It's on-the-job training.

Who else was serving on City Council at that time, do you recall?

Sherrie Doyle, Candice Pierce, Pierre Hascheff, Jeff Griffin, and Tom Herndon. Judy Pruitt got booted out because she moved out of her ward.

So that's one way that you can lose your job. That's one of the few ways. [laughs]

Yes, one of the very few ways. Move out of your ward and you're gone.

It seems that redevelopment was a big issue at that time, and I believe the Riverwalk had already been completed?

The one piece of it over by the Riverside had been completed. That had been done. They had just purchased the parking garage where the movie theater is now, and they had started that demolition before I got into office that summer of '96. There used to be a parking garage where the Riverside Theater is now. They had already purchased the Mapes Hotel, so I didn't have to go through the cost of purchasing that. They were talking about all of that, but they didn't really have a plan for any of it when I got into office. The thinking was, "Let's just buy this stuff and then come up with a plan for what we're going to do with it."

At that point, was the City Council serving as the redevelopment agency?

Yes.

Would you say that those discussions about redevelopment in downtown Reno figured pretty large in the scope of what the City Council was looking at at that time?

That was probably the biggest of the more controversial issues that we talked about, which is sort of unfortunate because people in the other parts of the city think that the City Council doesn't do anything for them. It's because the media decides what's controversial or not, really, not us. We still built parks and worked on projects outside of downtown, but most of the stuff that we dealt with was in the downtown area. The movie theater and tearing down the Mapes were big issues, and then ReTRAC came along, and that was really, really big. That took over everything.

What do you think accounted for the Mapes Hotel controversy picking up so much in the late nineties? The Mapes had been vacant for quite some time at that point, and you said the city had already purchased the property before you joined City Council.

It had been vacant for eighteen years. I think there was a very strong history of people believing Charlie Mapes about how well he built the building, and he just flat out lied to everybody. He didn't ever build it as well as he said he built it. We had brought in engineer after engineer.

In fact, I knew the daughter-in-law of the guy who owned the Mapes before I got on the Council, and I had been in the building. I had the plans for it, trying to see what could be done with it and looking around, and nobody said it was a good building. The engineers said it was not a good building. Everyone

said, "It's just not worth saving at all. It's not going to be safe no matter what you put into it." I remember the one quote was that it was built more like a parking garage, where in an earthquake the building might still be standing, but all the bricks would be on the ground, because the bricks weren't part of the structure; they were sort of glued onto the façade.

When they started doing the demolition, the guys who did it took my wife and I through and showed us some of the stuff that they found. They had to do some analysis of how much dynamite to use, or TNT or whatever it was they were using, and they cut a big hole in the floor. They said, "This is supposed to have some iron through here," and it really wasn't any iron through the building. The girders were falling off. They were supposed to be connected. You took off part of the wall, and you could see how it was constructed. A lot of it was built right after the war, so it was hard to get material. So instead of bricks, there would be a little piece of wood here and a piece of wood there, just taking the place of bricks.

But people liked it. My grandmother used to tell me stories about watching Liberace play up there, and I had my high school overnight party there. Everybody knew what a building it was and they had fond memories of it, but it just was not a very good, safe building. It had been closed for eighteen years. Remember they had that concertina circular wire all around there, like Stalag 13 movies. It looked horrible, and it just could not be brought back.

I never did vote to tear it down or to condemn it, but when the Riverside people came, ArtSpace, and they looked at the Riverside Hotel to save that, we begged them to go look at the Mapes. They went and looked at it, and they told us the same thing, and they're in the business of restoring old buildings. When they told me, "We can't even touch this," I got the feeling that Charlie Mapes may have been trying to pull the wool over our eyes.

Did the work on the Riverside get resolved before the Mapes? The Mapes was demolished in 2000.

I'm trying to remember. It could have been about the same time. But we had them both up for demolition very close. I recall one meeting when we were going to demolish the Riverside. We had a contract in front of us to demolish the Riverside, which the city owned.

We took a dinner break, and I asked the mayor, Mayor Griffin, "Walk with me over there." We walked from the old City Hall over to the Riverside, and it still had the big orange signs on the side. I asked him to look under there. I said, "This is a nice building." He agreed with me and we went back, and we asked the guys who gave us the contract to demolish it, "Would you keep the same price if you demolish just the newer portion," which was that back portion, "and you give us six months to work out the front portion?"

And they said, "We'll keep the same price for you." So that's how I was able to convince the rest of the Council not to tear down the old part, because it didn't cost us anymore, and we looked more deeply into it, and that's how we got ArtSpace to come in. Sierra Arts Foundation also played a big role in bringing them in to do that. But that's how we got the time to save that building.

The newer addition wasn't as historic, clearly. Were there other reasons to demolish the section beyond it not being as historic?

It wasn't historic. It was just built. I had the old plans, and the original plan was to build a duplicate of the Riverside Hotel on the west side, with a tower in the middle that looked like the Chrysler

Building. Then the divorce trade came in, I guess, and they just put up some stuff really quickly, so they could get people living there for six months. So those plans went away, and they built that newer section just to get the divorce trade in there.



The 1940s-era addition to the Riverside Hotel was removed in the late 1990s when the historic portion was revitalized. Photo by Mella Rothwell Harmon. Image courtesy of Special Collections Department, UNR Libraries.

I recall that newer part not having a great deal of character architecturally.

Right. Just “Let’s build them quick.”

That Riverside story was a big success, and clearly it serves as a focal point for downtown now, it seems.

I think so. I think it’s affordable housing for artists, and they’re the first real people we told, “We want you to live downtown,” to get people to actually move into downtown again. They sort of gave it that spark.

I think I gave an interview to someone about how Reno has always followed the Riverside. The Riverside was originally really small, and when gaming came, the Riverside started gaming. If you follow what the Riverside’s doing, that’s what Reno’s been doing. Now it’s a place to live and work with

restaurants in the bottom, and that's what we're trying to make downtown into. I think it's been working out pretty well.

Were you involved in the arts community prior to the Riverside Artists Loft situation? Clearly the arts were a component of that, with Sierra Arts so involved. Had you been involved with the arts community in Reno before that?

I was involved more as a patron, not as someone who did anything with the arts. I just would go to things. It was very selfish of me; I liked going to them, so I wanted to support them.



The renovated Riverside Hotel, with artist lofts upstairs and busy ground floor amenities, has played a pivotal role in the revitalization of Reno's downtown. Image courtesy of Max Chapman.

You've been the liaison for the Arts and Culture Commission for quite some time. Has that been the case for many terms in your service?

Yes, for a while. When Toni Harsh got on the Council, I let her do it, because I always said that if somebody else wanted to do it, they should, since the arts organizations already know they have my

support. Toni was a very big supporter of the arts. I'd rather have more people see what arts and culture do for Reno, and they get more support if more people understand.

There's a lot more I can ask you about the different issues you faced on the City Council, but let's turn to Fourth Street a little bit. Do you remember any issues with Fourth Street looming early in your service on City Council?

The biggest issue back then was where to build the homeless shelter. That was a huge, huge issue even way back then, because before I got on Council, they were going to move it somewhere and then they decided not to build it there. That made a lot of people upset because they thought they'd supported people who were going to support a particular place, and then it changed.

I wasn't there on the Council, it's only secondhand that I hear this, but they were going to build it—the soup kitchen, they called it—a lot further east on Fourth Street than where it ended up being located. It fell into a sort of limbo for a long time because we couldn't get everyone to agree on where to put it.

Was the plan from the beginning to have a fairly sizable center that had housing and dining facilities and all the services that the current shelter provides?

The push to include those services actually came from the local groups who provided them. That's what they wanted all the time. There was a group called RAAH. I think they're still around, Reno Area Alliance for the Homeless, RAAH. They came forward and they convinced the City Council, "If you build these buildings, we'll raise the money and we'll run it for you." Then they sort of went out of existence. So, Reno got stuck with it. It wasn't something we wanted to take on, but we were told, "If you find the money to build it, then we will operate it," and so we built it and then they disappeared. I think they're bubbling up again with the same name.

That was a very difficult time. I just took a long time to settle on how it was going to happen, and, oddly enough, it also related to these lawsuits about who owns the air rights over the streets in downtown Reno.

How was that connected?

Well, the City of Reno was leasing space. You see all these overpasses, or skywalks, where the Eldorado links to the Silver Legacy, and then to the Circus Circus.

The City of Reno used to lease that space to them, and then they found out that Reno didn't own the air rights over those streets. For anything before 1906, they weren't required to dedicate the property for the streets. They just gave Reno an easement. So the adjoining property owner actually owned the air rights. If you owned property on both sides of the street, like the Eldorado did with the Silver Legacy, you actually owned the air rights. They didn't have to pay the city anything for their lease.

To resolve that lawsuit, the resorts said, "We won't make you pay us back if you put that money into building a new soup kitchen." So we put that money in.

Then, at the same time, we were told by the judges, "We're not going to put anybody in jail anymore unless you give us an alternative, a jail for people who are just vagrants and people who drink all the time. Unless you give me an alternative to sentencing them to jail, we're not even going to put them

in jail anymore.” So we were forced to build this, for a good reason. It was good that we did it. All the stars aligned and we were able to build it.

Then the railroad came along, and that’s how we got the property where the center is now. We had a lot of fights with the people who operated the soup kitchen, Catholic Community Services. They got to pick where they wanted to go. It’s their soup kitchen. We just can’t tell them, “You have to move over there.” They wanted to be closer to downtown because they said, “That’s where our community lies.” They have a job and that’s to try to get people off the streets and teach them a better way to go, in their minds, so they didn’t want to move too far to the east. So we all settled on this property that was ReTRAC property.

Can you explain that a little more? How is that ReTRAC property?

When we built ReTRAC, which lowered the tracks below ground level, the railroad gave us all the ground-level property in downtown Reno that they had owned or leased. The City of Reno now owns a lot of land along the railroad that we can develop or sell, all the way from, and including, the big area behind the Chism Trailer Park. We now own some buildings on Keystone that were along the ReTRAC property. We got a lot of that property as part of their commitment to building the railroad.

We own the Amtrak Building now, too. There are a lot of parcels that we own now, and whenever we sell any of it, we use that money to pay off the bond for building the ReTRAC.

Was anything previously standing on the site of the current Community Assistance Center, at Record Street just south of Fourth Street?

Yes. They tore down a building. I think it was abandoned. As a little side note, the guys who built the Granite Street restaurant, on Sierra, told me that they bought some of their stuff from there, so their tables were built from doors that came from that earlier building.

What do you remember about the discussions about where to put the homeless shelter? Do you remember a lot of people from that community coming to City Council a lot, or was this handled outside of City Council primarily?

It was always at City Council. Back then we met every week, every Tuesday. Now we meet every two weeks. Every time we’d get close to picking a site, a lot of people would come up and tell us why we couldn’t do that. At one time we were going to build one over at Washoe Medical Center, what now is called Renown. They came forward and said, “We don’t want you building it over here.” Every time we got close to building it somewhere, that’s when people would come out. Or they’d buy property right out from under us. That happened on Fourth Street a couple times. When people thought we were going to put it in an available space, they would buy the property so we couldn’t build it there.

So the plan for some time was to use an existing building and adapt it?

Just for the property, getting something large enough for what was going to go there. Catholic Community Services bought the old Commercial Hardware site on Fourth Street, so that’s where Catholic Community Services went. They bought the property and moved some of their services into there, so that

sort of defined where would be a good place for the whole campus. The area where they serve the meals is across the street from them just to the west, and then right across that little side rail is where the CAC actually is, where the shelter is.

How is the Gospel Mission related to this?

Catholic Community Services is the Gospel Mission. They're the ones who serve the food, and they didn't want to move further to the east because they want to be close to downtown because that's where their clients are. That's what they would tell us: "Our clients are downtown and we don't want to be very far away from our clients."

They had been in the heart of downtown before, hadn't they?

Well, to me, they are just as far away as they ever were. They were on Third Street, Third and West, I want to say. They've only moved from the west side to the east side, but the facility we built is much larger, so the people who are waiting don't have to wait outside and form long lines outside. Now they're inside, and it's much nicer. Also, at the time, they didn't have a facility to sleep. They were just serving food there.

We also found out at that time that there were a lot of groups serving food, and that's where the Reno Area Alliance for the Homeless actually helped. They all decided that it's silly for one group to serve breakfast at seven, another group to serve breakfast at nine, and another to serve breakfast at ten, because the same people would go from place to place. So they started just serving each meal at the same time, and that helped a lot, because I think they were also getting triple counted. They'd say, "Here's how many homeless are in Reno," and I never really believed those numbers because I don't believe it was that high.

There were a lot of little bitty parts that moved slowly, but things happened at the right time. When Bob Cashell was elected mayor, he decided to make it his goal, to get a homeless shelter done, and he went out and got some large donations and helped get that built.

What led to the establishment of the tent city that was at the shelter for many years?

There are a lot of people who still don't like shelters. We built a women's and children's shelter there, which is very unique and I'm very happy we did it. But we didn't have a place where you could cohabitate, so a lot of men and women who were together, and didn't want to be separated, said, "We'll stay in a tent." I think in the summer months it got overflowing over there when it first was built, so people just started pitching their tents outside.

And at some point the city prohibited that.

Well, we started finding other places for them to go. It would just get bigger and bigger and bigger if you just allowed that all the time, so we just had to say no more of that.

There have been in the past seven or eight years, a lot of developments on the east side of downtown, and the homeless shelter is just one of them. I think about the ballpark and the Freight House. What was the

motivation for that? Clearly it was moving in a different direction, to develop the eastern side of downtown Reno, which really had been a neglected area for a long time.

The homeless shelter came about because of the reasons I told you. There were a lot of things that happened. But baseball was something totally different. They were going to build in association with a development in Sparks out by the Legends, and I was told—and this is third-hand information—that the developer in Sparks didn't want the developers of the ballpark to build anything outside the ballpark. They said, "Well, that doesn't help us with our model," so they wanted to come to Reno.

We told them, "Well, you've got to break off ties with Sparks first. We're not going to irritate our neighbors to the east and say we're stealing you from them. You tell them you're not interested in going there and then come talk to us."

So they did that, and they looked all around for where they wanted to put it. It really wasn't our idea at all. They came and said, "Here's the area we want to go to." I think they liked the downtown area because it still brings in a lot of visitors. You might walk to the ballpark, even if you're just visiting here, and think, "Oh, let's go to a baseball game here tonight."

There were fairly large lots that they could acquire in that area. They only had to accumulate three lots, I believe, to construct everything they did. The Freight House, again, was part of the property we acquired as part of ReTRAC. Downtown is a really tough place to accumulate property, but they were able to do it. There was a vacant lot and an apartment complex and then the city had the Freight House and the fire station site. So it didn't take too much to accumulate the size that they needed, and that's what helped.

Do you see more development or more activity helping the east side of town?

That's the hope. Like I said, these guys want to develop. They have plans to develop across the street. In fact, their original deal with us was they could develop the first floor of the bowling stadium and also the old RTC site. That was part of their deal to come downtown. They had every intention of being larger developers, and then the bottom just dropped out of everything. They still have hopes to, but everyone thinks that's still ten years away.

On Fourth Street, I know that you have been involved in a burgeoning art scene. I'm wondering if you could tell me how that came about.

That was sort of funny. Spencer Hobson came to City Council six or seven or eight years ago talking about this project he wanted to do at the old Brewery, and he had charts and graphs and pictures and told us about them building tanks, and just had a grandiose idea. Then he dropped off the scene for a while.

But I always remembered that building, and I'd drive back and forth on Fourth Street and I'd see it once in a while. I saw a big sign on it one time, and I called and they told me how much he wanted for it. I said, "Forget that," and waited another couple years.

Then I got involved in this re-piano project I wanted to do for Artown, where we got a bunch of pianos together and I got artists together, and they decorated and painted and added onto these pianos, and I needed a place for them to put everything together. I went to Spencer and I said, "Hey, I want to do this in this building," and we talked a little bit. I just said, "Well, I'm going to be delivering them next week."

So we cleaned it up and he let us work on them in that building, and that was just the starting point. I didn't have any artists in mind, but I already had money situated to buy the pianos, and once I got all that in place, I had the pianos delivered.

I sat there with my wife one day and said, "Well, I've got the pianos here, but I don't have anybody to do it." So I made one phone call and she called somebody, and then I let the artists just sort of pick themselves, and it worked out really well, and they became a pretty close-knit group.

Then these pianos were placed around town during the month of Artown?

Yes, for all of July we placed these around town. I didn't ever provide a map. I wanted people just to find them. There were some on Wells Avenue and up at the university. There were some out by Virginia Lake. The first one we placed was at Virginia Lake, and up on the park on California Avenue there was one, and also a lot of them downtown. We had fifteen of them for Artown's fifteenth anniversary, and we left them there all through the entire month of July.

I took ten of them out to Burning Man that year and placed them around Black Rock City for a week. Then I picked them all up and piled them in a big pile and we lit them on fire on Friday night and burned them up.

When you got Spencer to agree for you to use his bottling plant building for these pianos and you went in that building, can you tell me what it was like inside?

It's a beautiful building. If you go in there at the right time of day, it really is magical. It's got these skylights. It's a DeLongchamps building. Spence will tell you about how it was built, and I'll leave that to him. But it really is a magical place. The light in there is great. There are no overhead lights for us to work at night, but during the daytime it was just phenomenal how the light would come in and it looked like spotlights would be shining down all the time, so at certain times of day your piano would be in the spotlight and you could work on it. It was very interesting.

There was plenty of room to work. It's a free-span building, meaning there are no posts in the middle, so you easily could drive trucks around or forklifts and do what you had to do. In my mind, it was really huge. It seems a lot smaller now that I've seen them build other Burning Man stuff there, to the point that now it looks tiny to me.

We cleaned it up and I got the plumbing fixed so we could operate the bathrooms, and got the city to agree what we could do over there. They came with the code enforcement, checked us over all the time and made sure we were doing what we were supposed to be doing, and it worked out well.

Then did that site continue to be a space for art?

It did. They had a couple of shows there. Spencer owns the entire block, so he also owns some property on, I think it's Spokane to the east. He owns a building over there that is entirely up to code, so he let them use that as an art gallery showcase. They were doing some art shows over there, and started to get some buzz in the local media about what they were doing. They called themselves the Salvagery Artists, and they formed a nonprofit. They worked for a little over a year, I think, in that building and around it and on the block. I think they've just been moving out this last month or two.



The Reno Brewing Company Bottling Plant Building on East 4th Street. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

So the Salvagery Artists originated with that piano project? That's how they began?

Yes. They didn't know each other before then.

Where does the name come from?

Well, actually, I was going to do a project. I have a friend in San Francisco who does this thing where he rents out cargo containers for artists in a yard, and they keep their stuff in their own cargo container and they can lock it up. I was going to do that at Reno Salvage, which Reno owns now. The City of Reno owns the property that Reno Salvage is on.

This is on Fourth Street?

On Fourth Street. So I was kicking around names with some friends of mine one night, and I said, "Well, we'll just call it the Salvagery." So when I went to Spencer—you've sort of got to get to Spencer in the right way—I said, "Spencer, I'm going to work on three things while I have time left on the City Council. I'm going to do the Salvagery project, and I can do it at your building or I can do it over here. So you decide if you want me to do it in your building."

He said, "Yeah, let's do it over here," and a couple other things I was working on. So that's how

that name came about, from Reno Salvage Company. I just picked Salvagery. It just seemed like the right thing.

Are there other issues related to Fourth Street that have come up while you've been on City Council?

Well, we tried to make that place a little nicer. We know that putting the homeless shelter there causes some stress on certain businesses and other places, so we put all the streetlights along there. The NDOT has completely resurfaced Fourth Street. I know people don't understand this very much, but we didn't own that street at the time. NDOT controlled that street. After they resurfaced the street, we traded them for McCarran, so now we owned the street. The City of Reno has to maintain Fourth Street. So we've got all the streetlights that go all the way down to Wells Avenue to try to keep that place brightly lit.

At the same time we also had the fire station over there that used to have the bug on top, just on the other side of Wells Avenue. That's where we had the sheriff for a small amount of time operating that building. It was not a shelter, but that's where people would report when they had to fulfill their public duty because they got arrested and had to do eight hours of public service or something. We got that and cleaned it up.

We recently sold that, and the woman who did that has done a good job turning that into some condos and some shops down below [11 @ the Firehouse]. They built that other building where that Zagol Restaurant is, again just to the east of Wells overpass. That came about in the last couple of years.

People have been opening up the older bars that were always there. I think that some of the same guys are trying to struggle along, but this art project has given them new life. I really believe that they see that that's a way that they can head in the future, because after we did this re-piano project, Burning Man came by, at least a group of people, to build the Temple of Transition at the same site, and that brought a lot of energy to Fourth Street.

Has that just happened one time so far?

Yes, it's only happened once outside the Bay Area and that was in Reno last year. They prefabbed it all here. It was the largest structure that was ever built on the playa, and we prefabbed it here at that same location [Spencer Hobson's property], and so now it seems pretty small to me because we had some big pieces. A lot of wood went through there.

Again, we had to deal with the fire department and the code enforcement and all that, and we got that done, and now I'm really looking forward to seeing if we can get some more Burning Man artists in this area and particularly on Fourth Street again for this year's cycle.

Do you think any more development along Fourth Street is going to or has involved rezoning very much? Has that been an issue?

That really hasn't been too much of an issue because there really haven't been a lot of people who have asked for rezoning to do a project along there. I think that's going to be for a long time the rougher part of Reno, and I don't mind that. I don't ever want to kick Martin Iron Works out. I'd love to have that stay there, and the salvage yard, and be able to have that part close to Reno where people can still get that free stuff. But we all know that when the artists move in, it's always cheaper and then it always becomes

gentrified and everything changes.

I hope it will change in the future. It would be very good for Reno to redevelop that part of the city, and good for Sparks. It's a very big roadway between Reno and Sparks, and I think that's why the RTC's involved in this too. My role on the RTC board has been also to try to reinvigorate this Fourth Street corridor and put in some bicycle lanes and other parks.

Is that a priority for you, having bicycle lanes on Fourth Street?

Not so much bicycle lanes, but maybe we can narrow it down and do what they call a skinny road diet and have one traffic lane in each direction with one turn lane in the middle. That frees up room to have parking on the street, and that helps the businesses that are there if someone can park right in front and go into Zagol for lunch or something. I think it really helps out to have more parking. Everyone will tell you that. It was just an arterial, and I just don't know if it gets so much traffic anymore that it needs to be four lanes wide going 35 miles an hour. I think it's time to change that, much like we did Wells Avenue.

Right, with the boulevard at the end.

Right. RTC fought us on that one, too. They said, "If you narrow it down, all the traffic won't go on Wells anymore. It will go on side streets and the neighbors will complain." But they did a study after we were done, and 98 percent of the traffic the street had before is still using it now. I think the same thing would happen on Fourth Street. If people don't like Fourth Street, it's easy enough to take Interstate 80.

How far down do you think that that proceed to the east toward Sparks?

I think it should tie into Victorian Avenue.

All the way out?

Yes, because they have their bike lanes and stuff all the way up to where the Y used to be. Right where Kietzke Lane turns in, there used to be a big restaurant area there. I think it should tie into there and continue all the way into downtown Reno. That would be our connection to that part of town, because you don't have a big connection between east and west for bicycles and more pedestrian-type traffic except for the river. There's a path along the river and Mill Street, which is very busy, so this would be a good connection, I think, between the two downtowns.

Do you see any safety issues along Fourth Street now?

Oh, yes. I think there's a lot of speeding. And there are definitely some safety issues with the type of people who are there. That's what you try to resolve by getting activity going on. You don't do that by ignoring a place. You do that by putting more into a place to try to resolve some of those safety issues.

Do you think there's a future for the motels along Fourth Street? A lot of people are very interested in

those buildings.

I think there can be, depending on what the owner wants to do. In the last year or two, the city's been going in and seeing the horrible conditions in some of these and closing them down. If the owners want to keep them up as motels or as weeklies, it could still be done, and they could still have a nice place. What would happen to them if they weren't motels, I don't know. I don't know if people are going to be traveling through on the Lincoln Highway anymore and will want to stay in those motels, unless we embrace this Lincoln Highway theme, which back East is a real big deal. There are people who travel the Lincoln Highway all the time, but we haven't been playing that up here. That might be possibly the next step in what we do, to say, "This is the Lincoln Highway," and get a couple of those motels to cater to that crowd and clean up and get some more neon back in there. People didn't drive 45 miles an hour so much back then. It was okay to go a little slower.

Do you think that area could be a target for revitalization?

I think it would be very easy to do. As far as bang for your buck, from the city's point of view, it would be beneficial because you don't need to put a lot into one of those properties to double its value. If you take one of these old properties and you just put a little bit into it, it will make it worth a lot more than it is right now. Even if you turn it into artist space or good bars, those kind of things can make a difference. You take some of the places in Austin—what was Austin twenty years ago, and who was transforming those areas you see at SXSW? It just takes some vision, a little bit of money but not a lot, just someone to want to do something with it, and cooperation from all the businesses.

Do you think the impetus would, like the ballpark, need to come from a developer or developers who can bring that vision? Do you think that's what it might take?

I see that the ballpark is literally on the other side of the tracks, so I don't know if that's really going to spill over into Fourth Street. The guys who bought the Lincoln Lounge, they just got lucky. They bought it before the ballpark came in, so that's something that is up on the Evans Avenue area that could spill over, because a lot of people still park on Evans and walk down to the ballpark. New people bought Louis' Basque Corner probably because of the ballpark, seeing a future there. I think it's helped the western part of Fourth Street. It's not going to help too much to the east because it's, like I said, literally on the other side of the tracks.

Fourth Street is really close to the university area, and it doesn't seem like there's a great deal of connection there. Do you see the city working to connect the university not necessarily to Fourth Street but to these areas south of the interstate?

Well, I'd love to be able to do that. The other transportation issue I think we have to create is a bike lane running down Evans Avenue to get to and from the university. I've also talked to the university about having a bike lane that goes through the campus up to Lawlor Events Center to carry that through. But I'm telling you, working with the university is just like beating your head against a wall.

Why is that, do you think?

Well, their mission is to deal with the students on their campus. They're much like casino property owners downtown: "I don't want them to ever leave my campus." So then, when they do, they think, "I don't make any money off them anymore." It's a business. The university is a business. They don't have any altruistic "Let's make the community better" sensibilities. At least in my experience, it hasn't been "What can we do for the community to make this a better place?" It's "What should the community do for us to make this a better campus?"

Reno used to be a university town. I don't think it is anymore. I'd love to get back to that feeling that we all go hand in hand, that we could do some of those things together. I'm hoping some of this will bring some of that back, by bringing the movies back downtown, the Sierra Spirit Bus.

I see more and more of the people maybe just out of the university living downtown, going to these bars, riding bicycles. In the summertime I see that connection. Whether they're university students or not, I don't know. But ten, fifteen years ago, you never saw that many people riding downtown.

The older people have moved out of the neighborhood. Neighborhoods go through their cycles also. I think the old southwest has gone through that cycle where now there's a younger crowd moving in again and raising their families there, and that's helped the downtown area.

Some of the housing developments that have gone on close to the campus have helped that, but dealing with the university itself, not so much, not so much. Their interest is the university.

It's sounding like there's a casino entity, a university entity, and a city entity, and they don't necessarily work in harmony.

Right. You try to work with them and ask, "Why don't you do this and this?"

They respond, "Well, it's not our mission to do that. We're not here to do that. Why should we do something like that? That's not what we do. We do this."

You know, they're not wrong. The university's job is to educate students, but you don't have to have a Quiznos every block. You could have it off campus, where kids would have to walk a little bit.

I thought Fifth Street could help in that way. We've upgraded Fifth Street a little bit. There's been some new stuff going on over there. I thought that the university students would at least move down to Fifth Street. There's that little development there that has the Starbucks in it.

On the west side of Virginia?

Yes. Fifth Street's a nice wide street, so that could be developed very easily, I think, for university uses. But, again, the university itself decides to build student housing, so instead of letting the market do it, they're going to do it and they get it keep it. It's for dollars. "We'll keep the money here," instead of making it three blocks away where people might walk to campus and reinvigorate the area in between the two, which is what redevelopment does. Instead, it's just, "We're going to keep it all self-contained."

You are terming out soon as a City Council member. When you look back at your multiple terms of service, what are the things that you feel most proud of?

There really is a lot that this Council's done, both as the City Council and on the other boards and

commissions, like starting the water company. We bought the water company, which people didn't want us to do at the time. It's just something that goes unnoticed, but I'm very, very happy with the way we did that.

I like the stuff that we did downtown. I think that I brought a lot to the Council as far as arts and culture. We haven't cut our arts and culture budget. We keep that going. But we've also built a lot of parks outside. We tried to keep our eyes on what really is important to a city. I remember making a statement one time. We were talking about whether we should spend money on roads or spend money on arts and culture or parks, and I said, "I'd rather have a bumpy road with somewhere to go than a nice road with nowhere to go." The Council sort of agrees with me. We took some money from streets, and we were able to keep these things funded and build these nice parks and keep parks going.

I'm really proud of the redevelopment stuff. I don't think what was done there will be noticed for quite a while, but the movie theater down there was a big, big deal. I'm hoping the baseball turns out to be a big, big deal. I'll be the first to tell you, a lot of what you do is a gamble in redevelopment, and you do that because the private sector will not gamble on it. So you have to take the risk as a government, and you wish people understood it, but it's okay if they don't. You have to take the gamble. Most of our stuff paid off.

The ReTRAC was a big deal. The stuff that I'm very proud of is stuff that most people wouldn't think of. It was a very, very hard battle getting ReTRAC done, but I'm really happy about little things, like not having to wait for a train. It's just huge. Then I always think about how much money it brought into the community during the construction phase. It was a big shot in the arm. Maybe it was to the detriment of Reno, but I think because of ReTRAC we didn't see the economy going downhill as quickly as we would have if we weren't doing that project. That was a \$250 million project right when all this was starting. People around here had jobs and that money was still flowing around. We spent a lot of money in the city, but it was always to keep jobs open, all the local jobs.

Even with the Mapes, I think that we've done a really, really good job with historical resources and saving those. We tried everything we could to save the Mapes, and I know a lot of folks don't agree with that, but we did, and I'm proud of the efforts we made to save it. I'm proud also of the decision to tear it down. Sometimes it's tough to make those decisions. I didn't really want to do it at the time. Pierre Hascheff and I were the only ones who said, "Let's try for six more months." But once it's gone, you move on and you build some stuff. I would still like to complete some stuff on that property. It's not what we thought it would be yet, but we were led down some paths.

The next thing we're doing is the Virginia Street Bridge, I hope. But there are a lot of little bitty things that I look back on. When I got into office, it was illegal to float down the Truckee River, and it was illegal to roller skate or rollerblade downtown, and now you have a roller derby down there and the Whitewater Park, stuff that was illegal just when I got into office. It really is unbelievable to me how much I had to fight to make those things legal, against all the people who didn't want kids downtown or didn't want to take the risk of people getting hurt and the city getting sued, and that still may happen.

I really enjoy those little bitty things that to me seemed sort of tiny. It didn't take much to build the Whitewater Park on our part, hardly any money at all for us, but the decision to do it was just a big decision. To let people in the river, my god, how would you let that happen?

I remember there was a performer who used to come here all the time. I saw him at the museum one time, and he came to do a set and he was all wet. He said, "You guys didn't tell me that there was a river here." He had performed at Wingfield Park. He didn't even know that you could get in the river. He said, "I'd have been here all the time."

Those are the kind of things I look back on and think we did some good work.

What are your plans now?

I really don't know. I'm still trying to work hard through November and get some stuff going. Like I say, we're working on the Truckee River Bridge through the Flood Control Project. I'm on that. I go to Washington next week to talk about flood control.

There's still stuff to do. I was going to let off the gas, but now my wife keeps telling me, "You can't. You have eleven months left. There's still a lot to do." So I'm still pushing and trying to get some stuff done. I have to go through a whole new budget cycle. I'm hoping to keep everything funded, arts and culture, and maybe a little more this year to do some new programs.

One of my major goals this year is try to help the people running for Council as much as I can. I've asked the City Council to let them sit in up there with us when we're going through the budget process so when they take office, they'll be prepared. Three of us are leaving this year, and two years from now at least three more will be leaving. So it's a huge, huge turnover for the city of Reno.

I want to thank you so much for talking with me today.

Sure, my pleasure.

CINDY AINSWORTH

Co-founder, Historic Reno Preservation Society



Cindy Ainsworth at the N-C-O Railway Depot on East 4th Street in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

A native of Los Angeles, Cindy Ainsworth moved to Reno with her husband in 1978 and worked in publishing and at the National Automobile Museum, where she could indulge her passion for transportation history. In 1997, she helped to found the Historic Reno Preservation Society (HRPS), and regularly leads a historical walking tour of East 4th Street. She is also a member of the Lincoln Highway Association's Nevada chapter.

Alicia Barber: This is Alicia Barber. I'm here with Cindy Ainsworth, who is a founding member of the Historic Reno Preservation Society, which is often referred to as HRPS, so we'll refer to it that way. We're on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno, and today is Tuesday, February 28, 2012. Cindy, do I have permission to record this interview and place it in our public archive?

Cindy Ainsworth: Yes, you do.

Thank you. I want to start with some biographical questions. When and where you were born?

I was born in Los Angeles on July 28, 1952.

Were both of your parents from that area?

No. My dad was from the Detroit area; my mom was from the Appleton area in Wisconsin.

What were their names?

Kathleen Becker and Richard J. Hanus.

What brought them to Los Angeles?

My dad was, of course, of the World War II generation. He served in the Army during World War II, and around 1947, he and his dad moved from the Detroit area to California and both got jobs working in the aerospace industry. It was a big, big industry at the time, and my dad worked with a lot of the Space Shuttle programs. He actually went back to the Mercury Program and some of those other early programs. He worked for Rocketdyne, Rockwell International.

My mom's parents retired from a business they owned—a movie theater in Appleton, Wisconsin—and moved to L.A. in the early 1940s. I don't know really a lot of the details about that. I think they retired and just moved to California for the better weather, as a lot of people did.

It was an exciting time for my mom. She was a teenager and worked in downtown L.A. I remember her telling me about working in the drugstores and all the servicemen during World War II and dating. It was a lot of fun.

Did she have a job throughout your childhood?

No. She was a housewife most of the time. After she moved to L.A., she worked for a while when she was young and then had my sister and me.

Is your sister older than you?

Yes. She's nine years older.

Tell me what it was like for you growing up in Los Angeles.

We lived mostly in the San Fernando Valley. I vaguely remember Burbank, California—we were very close to all the studios. We kept moving northwest. We lived in Reseda and then Canoga Park for a long period of time.

It was great. I remember growing up and just getting on my bicycle or taking a walk when I was very, very young, and going to the drugstore or the dime store. It's really different now. It's really a shame. Now kids don't have that freedom like we did—just going with your friends, staying out until dusk, nobody really worrying. That's what I remember, even in L.A.

Did you go to some large schools?

Not really. They were fairly small in the Valley. I went to Canoga Park High School, and it had a pretty good-sized senior class. I remember that. I don't know how many people graduated, but it was fairly large.

Did you do much traveling when you were growing up?

I traveled a little bit with my folks, but not a lot. The trip I do remember was when my grandfather passed away, and my dad said, "We're getting in the car and going across country," or partially across country, and we spent a month on the road. I was fourteen, and I remember stopping in the Grand Canyon, and going to St. Louis. We also went to Detroit, Michigan. It was just fun.

We went to Wisconsin to see my mom's hometown. I remember they showed us the theater her folks had operated. It was a cute little theater with an ice cream parlor. It was a shame they got rid of that; it was really wonderful. Maybe that's why I like roadside history, because I remember stopping at all these funky places.

We went to South Dakota. My mom wanted to go to South Dakota, and we stopped at all these places like the Mystery Spot. It seems like there's one in every region. I remember roaming herds of buffalo and donkeys, and stopping at Wall Drugs. Everybody has to stop there.

I know we rode on part of Route 66. We stopped at some weird places. I was looking at some of my postcards recently. My mom kept all that stuff for me, and I rescued it a few years back. With some of the places I thought, "Oh, this is a Lincoln Highway thing. Oh, gosh, it must have meant something." [laughs] It was really funny.

So you went through high school in Los Angeles, and then what were your plans after graduating from high school?

I was going to be a teacher, but I got sidetracked and met my husband. I went to college at Cal State Northridge. I majored in English and minored in art. If you remember where the earthquakes were, it's in that area. We called it Earthquake U. When I was attending, there was a big earthquake in 1971. They closed the college down for a week, and there were cracks in the walls.

Anyway, I went to college, was going to go to teach, got sidetracked, met Tom, and we moved to Reno. [laughs]

How did you meet him?

We met on a blind date. A friend introduced us and we went bowling. We always crack up. It was a bowling date, of all things.

We went together for about a year. He was working at Channel 5 in Los Angeles. He was getting into media and finishing up his studies at Cal State Northridge. We did not know each other at college, which was really strange. He was finishing up school and working at night and he had the opportunity to start applying for jobs. Reno opened up, so he went to work at Channel 8.

When he got that job offer, were you familiar with Reno?

Actually I was, because my folks would take a yearly trip up the coast to San Francisco. We'd go to Lake Tahoe, and then we'd always end up in Reno. So I kind of knew the area. My mom and dad liked the area, too. They thought it was a fun Western town at the time. And they gambled, of course. My mom loved to go to Vegas and Reno and gamble.

Can you remember any of your earliest impressions of Reno when you would visit as a child?

I stayed in the motel room a lot because you really couldn't do anything. My parents would always stay downtown. I remember staying at what was the Holiday Inn at the south end of town. I remember visiting the Harrah's Car Museum. My dad was a car enthusiast and we had to go see that. I also remember going to the Ponderosa in South Lake Tahoe. I remember the arch, and I thought it was kind of a funky little town. But, like I said, when you're underage, you can't do much. It was a problem. But I do remember the Car Museum. It was building after building of cars.

It was in a different location than it's in now.

Right. It was in Sparks at the time, and I have vivid memories of that, because I know they had railroad equipment. I think they had part of the Pony Express Harolds Club collection in the front, in a saloon-type area. My dad was in seventh heaven. By about the third building, my mom and I were saying, "Wow, these cars are overpowering." I thought it was great. I thought, "Wow, this man collected all these cars."

Working for the Auto Museum as it is now, you became much more familiar with the auto collection. In that earlier version of the museum, were the collections much bigger than what they're showing now?

Oh, yes. I don't know how many cars they had. I think they had many buildings, and it used to be at the old icehouse in Sparks. Robert Lee has his collection in one of those buildings right now. They had one building that had nothing but Packards. He had every year of Packard, and it was just amazing. I don't know how many cars there were just in that collection alone. Now they have around 220. Harrah had cars stashed all over in storage areas too. If you look at any of the auction catalogs, it's pretty amazing what he had.

What was the position that your husband had when he moved here?

He was a reporter and covered the legislature for four sessions. It was a great time to move here in 1978 because everything was happening. There was a lot of development going on in Reno. MGM was opening. They remodeled Harolds Club. They took over another building, and that was opening. I remember the parties. It was really fun.

Meadowood Mall opened about the time we moved here. I said, “Oh, thank goodness there’s a mall.” [laughs] They had little Park Lane, but I said, “Wow, Meadowood’s opening? OK, this town’s pretty good.”

The town was small and you knew everybody. It’s still that way even today, but back then it was especially true in the media. We had a lot of friends in the media during that time. It was fun.

Did you find that you went downtown quite a bit?

We did. We don’t gamble. But we would go for comedy clubs and music. We went to Harrah’s a lot, and they had a nice, small cocktail area—which I think they still have, by the way—and they used to have what would eventually be big acts. I remember seeing Jay Leno there quite a lot. There was also Paul Revere and the Raiders. [laughs] It’s funny, because I used to follow Paul Revere and the Raiders growing up.

You got to see a lot of acts that later became fairly well known. It was great seeing Leno, because he would come out to the bar and talk to people. It was really a nice time. I don’t know if that happens so much anymore. I don’t think so.

Did you ever go to the big shows at the MGM?

Oh, yes. We went to “Hello, Hollywood, Hello!” quite a few times. When people would come in town, you had to take them there. It was just a spectacular show. The stage was the largest stage at one time. It was pretty impressive.

Did that show change over time?

No, not really. I know they rotated staff within it because it was there for a while. They had acts in between that would change—like acrobatic acts or comedy acts. But the setting was in old San Francisco and a plane would come out at the end. It was pretty spectacular. They’ve since changed and had some pretty good shows there but not quite like “Hello, Hollywood, Hello!”

My understanding of the mid to late 1970s in Reno was that, because there was so much growth and construction, there was actually a bit of a housing shortage. Did you find that when you moved here?

Yes. We didn’t think we were going to stay here, so we lived in apartments for the time being. You could say there was a shortage because I remember the rent at apartments was high. Sparks was developed, but north Reno was not. There wasn’t a lot even past old south Reno at the time. So we moved to the northwest and that’s when Sparks and Spanish Springs started to pick up. But there wasn’t a lot of housing back then.

So you didn't think you were going to stay. Was that because it was such a short contract or because you thought you might want to leave?

Well, Tom thought he was going to move on to another media outlet—Fresno, heaven forbid, but someplace. No offense to Fresno. [laughs]

But we stayed here and we really loved it. There was just something about it. We got very comfortable here. We made friends here. Tom had friends in the media. We enjoyed the area; there was so much to offer. It was a small town, but you were close to bigger communities. You could go to Sacramento, San Francisco, and Lake Tahoe fairly easily. What can you say? The uniqueness of the state as high desert was spectacular, so we just stayed.

Tell me about how you got involved in the community. Did you start working right away?

I got a job at Baker and Taylor, a book wholesaler, which was great for me. I love books and I was a book buyer. It was an interesting job, seeing the fluctuations with bestsellers. I did it for about ten years.

I started doing a lot of tours outside the area, not so much in Reno. I was interested in Carson City and I was getting interested in history. They had a media party at the Governor's Mansion every year, so that got me going. I started thinking, "Wow, this is really an interesting place." We had some friends down there who had older homes. That kind of hooked me, too, so I started doing a lot more research. I had an opportunity to take some time off, and that's when I really got active in Reno, doing some history projects.

How did that start? How did you first get involved in the historic community here?

In the early 1990s we were trying to get an Air Race Museum going. I was interested in aviation too—transportation things. We knew some people who were trying to organize that, and I volunteered there and helped them out for a while. They were in a lousy location, so they never stuck around. A southern California big aviation museum, Planes of Fame, organized and got it going. They're into air racing.

I moved on from there, and began my involvement in museums. I really enjoyed the nonprofit world. I applied at the National Automobile Museum a few times. It was hard to get in there at the time, because they moved into their new location. Actually, I think I applied even before then, when it was in the old location. I remember volunteering to help them organize some of their archives for a couple of weeks before they moved.

I finally got a job there at the front desk. I would have done anything, because I wanted to get in the museum world. Jackie Frady, the executive director, gave me an opportunity. She knew I was interested in history, so she asked me, "Why don't you curate part of this exhibit?" They were doing their symposium at the time. They do a biannual symposium, and this one was on local history of the 1920s. She said, "Well, there's an aviation segment of it. Do you want to do that?"

I said, "You bet."

So I really started getting interested at that time and doing research. I met Neal Cobb, and he really was great. He would give me photos, and he was so knowledgeable about the area. He really helped me get the bug, too. Working there was great.

Nancy Holmes worked there. She was a founding member of HRPS, too. I would always help her with the symposium in various ways, whether it was with research or doing exhibits. I remember we did a 1950s exhibit with a bomb shelter. It was fun. I did quite a few exhibits. Later, I did one on Triple-A's automobile road service. It was a wonderful use of their archives in San Francisco, and they were great people. I also did a Harley Davidson exhibit. You name it, I did a few exhibits there. It was great.

You would do research locally but also around the region?

Yes, it was also regional. The symposium usually had local-interest exhibits. I did the divorce exhibit. We did the Reno Dames, Desotos, and Dudes. [laughs] So we got some ranch things. We set up the exhibit like it was in a ranch—a divorcee ranch area—and that was fun.

I also met Mella Harmon about that time at the auto museum, because she was doing some of the lectures for the symposium, and she really got me hooked on the preservation side.

Who was the audience for that symposium? Is that for local people?

Teachers—in-service class mostly—but there are a lot of people who come just because they're interested in the period. There's always that automobile element, too, and there are always a few lectures on automobiles. They try to wrap that around whatever period they're looking at. It's always fun to be involved in that. I haven't been involved for a few years. I kind of miss it.

Were you aware of a historic preservation community while you were working at the Auto Museum?

The controversy over the Mapes [Hotel] was happening at that time, and I started attending quite a few of the meetings at City Hall. That really got the ball rolling for preservation, or at least there was an interest started about that time. In the 1980s there was quite a lot of activity going on. You notice there are a lot of historic surveys that were done in that decade. I wasn't involved much at that time, but when the Mapes controversy kicked in, Nancy and I were upset. Both Nancy and I went on a walking tour in 1997 with Pat Klos for her Bricks and Stones Tour. The walk was wonderful and the next thing we knew, the media were there. I remember the press interviewing Pat. We met afterwards at My Favorite Muffin, because she wanted to start a preservation history organization.

At that point, was Pat just leading these tours on her own independently?

Yes, and she had been doing it for years. Pat was a teacher and her interest was in Reno history. I think she had been leading various tours for about ten years before HRPS.

So we met, and the next thing we knew, we were in Pat's backyard forming an organization. That was in 1997.

Tell me a little bit about her Bricks and Stones tour that you went on. What is that?

The tour has a lot of brick homes and stone homes. It's in the Lander Street, Humboldt area. You start at My Favorite Muffin and go south from there. It is a great tour. Pat would mostly talk about

architecture, but she'd throw in a lot about the homeowners or what was going on in that neighborhood. Mt. Rose [Elementary School] was part of that tour. It's still one of our most popular tours.

Was it just you, Pat, and Nancy who formed HRPS?

Actually, Pat had some friends who were interested, and I had somebody from the [National Automobile] Museum who was our secretary for a while. We formed the board fairly fast. We had about ten people at that time.

Why did you want to form a preservation organization and what was your mission?

I think the purpose of the walking tours, and then later, of our programs, was to educate the local population about what's here. A lot of new people moved to the area. They did not know about the neighborhoods. So I think what we primarily wanted to do was educate people.

We started out with about five tours the next summer, but we had programs right away in September. We weren't even a nonprofit organization yet. We were going through the bylaw process at the time. Our mission was focusing on education and just getting people interested.



Cindy Ainsworth leading a historical walking tour on East Fourth Street on behalf of the Historic Reno Preservation Society during the "Positively Fourth Street" event in June 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Where did you hold those early programs?

Mt. Rose Elementary School.

Where they are today.

Yes, and we are almost outgrowing that site. The last few meetings have been out the door. So history is really cool right now. [laughs]

Do you remember how that association began with the school and how you organized that?

We were looking for a room big enough to hold a crowd. Pat was with Washoe County schools, and she said, "They've got a nice room there. It's a historic building because the parents in the area at the time fought to maintain that building. It would be significant to be there."

If we do move, I'm going to miss meeting there, because it is a significant building in that neighborhood. McKinley is the only other one left of the four "Spanish Quartet" schools that were here. So it's sad.

What do you know about the history of the Mt. Rose Elementary School building?

I'm probably not the person to ask. It was established in 1910. The architecture is great. That mission-style architecture is so reminiscent of coming from southern California. I think that's why I fell in love with those schools, because it's like a lot of the architecture where I grew up. It's a feel-good building, as I always say.

Did you have a lot of discussions about what to name this organization?

I think Pat named the organization, and she said, "How about this?"

And we said, "Okay, that sounds good." So we all agreed.

She thought, "We'll be HRPS," or Harpies, as some people call us. [laughs] Pat named it, so I give Pat credit.

You mentioned the Mapes Hotel. It seems that one of the big issues of the time was what would happen to that hotel. Did HRPS have a specific agenda or any activities you intended to pursue regarding the Mapes?

At the time, our board members individually attended a lot of the City Council meetings. We wanted to start the programs right away in the fall to educate the public and to give an update of what was going on at our meetings, and that's pretty much what we did.

We stayed out of being direct preservation advocates as members of the board, but we did it individually. It got kind of hot and heavy sometimes when people would come and voice their opinions. We were hoping we could provide a voice that way in our programs.

Did you open to public membership right away?

We had a secretary and a treasurer, and as soon as we got the treasurer, we started membership that fall. So I think we had twenty-five members, which we were happy to have. But it grew fairly fast. I know we eventually had about a hundred members.

We have our wonderful publication, *FootPrints*. It was four pages, mostly dedicated to discussing the Mapes. We used that to provide information. We didn't have as much of the research, stories, and articles as we have nowadays. But *FootPrints* was available to members, and they got the walking tours for free. So there was incentive, and we did get quite a few people that first year. I remember we were surprised. A lot of them joined during the walking tours.

What were the other organizations in the community that dealt with historic preservation? Did you feel like there were others?

There was Nevada Landmarks, and I know Pat was part of that with the Lake Mansion. They saved the Lake Mansion and kept track of it for years. But, there really weren't a lot of nonprofits at that time. There were a few that came and went. There have been questions about what happened to a couple of them, and we don't know. But there weren't a lot of active organizations. There are more history-related organizations now. There are the Westerners and G.O.D. [Good Old Days] Club. There were probably some organizations like that, but not like there are now. If you wanted to do anything, you went to the Historical Society.

Was that relationship a good one? Did you find you had a lot of partnerships?

Boy, did we. When I started doing quite a lot of research [at the Nevada Historical Society], it was like Homecoming Week. You would go there and everybody would be there on a Saturday. Sometimes you didn't get through your research because you were sharing stories with everybody. This was in the research room. The library there was pretty incredible, and everybody would try to help you. And that's still the case today. HRPS built that relationship with them. We weren't that close with them, but we utilized them so often for research, that it was pretty fast that we built that connection.

The Mapes Hotel was demolished in 2000. Did that event have any impact on HRPS?

I think it increased the membership. People wanted to be active and do something. They didn't know what to do, so they came to a history group to get some information, and maybe to have a chance to talk at our programs. Once again, our programs provided a forum where they could voice their opinion. It definitely helped our membership. People wanted to get involved at that time, and it was a sad period for preservation.

Did you have any kind of relationship with the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office in Carson City, either with HRPS or personally?

Not so much through HRPS. I did individually. I bugged them a lot because I had questions about preservation. Mella [Harmon] was working there at the time, and I would just go down there and ask to

do some research. I got more involved in learning about preservation. Mella was great. I was naïve about what Section 106 was, and they would sit down and tell me, “This is what it is.”

It was a great relationship because I later started attending the City of Reno Historical Resources Commission meetings. It was a way to figure out what was going on in the city. You could go to City Council meetings, but this way you got an inside look at what was going on—I think even more so than today.

I did a few things with them, mostly getting some plaques installed, nothing big. I figured that was the one way I could help with something.

Then Mella asked me if I would be the citizen representative of the SHPO [State Historic Preservation Office] for the Historical Resources Commission. That’s when I really got a bond with SHPO.

Do you remember what year you started serving on the commission?

It was 2005.

This is the advisory board to Reno City Council on issues related to preservation.

Right.

When you were first working for the Historical Resources Commission, what kinds of places were you getting plaques for?

I felt that the old Reno arch needed a plaque. Nobody knows about the history of that—what it went through, how many times it was moved—so that was the first one I worked on. I worked with Mella on the Jacob Davis plaque. I was really proud of that one. That was a great project.

Tell us about that one.

We said, “We’ve got to mark the correct location.” There was always a controversy over where the original Jacob Davis tailor shop was. Jacob Davis designed the first riveted pants. They were white duck material at the time. This was around 1870.

A miner’s wife came into the tailor shop, because her husband couldn’t keep his pants up. So Jacob took some studs from a bridle, right from harnesses from horses, and used them as the rivets, to tack up the pockets. Little did he know what he had discovered.

He used to order material from Levi Strauss in San Francisco, and next thing you know, he was getting a patent with Levi for these riveted jeans, or pants at the time. That location was on North Virginia, only a few doors up from Second Street. So we got this plaque.

How did you get the plaque together?

I said, “Mella, you write the text, and I’ll go work with this gentleman in the Bay Area,” who was working with us with plaques. I used to order plaques through them and had them shipped. I said, “I want a pocket.”

I sketched out a little design, and, sure enough, he said we could get that done. He loved the project. The pigment matched the color of jeans. We got that little plaque on Virginia Street. Then we had a big celebration. Some of the Jacob Davis relatives were there. We had representatives from Levi Strauss. They were really pleased. They brought out some old pants they had. The Marjorie Russell Clothing and Textile Research Center brought some from the Dangberg Ranch. It was really, really fun.



Architectural historian Mella Harmon poses with the plaque marking the historic site of Jacob Davis' tailor shop at 211 North Virginia Street at the marker's dedication in 2006. To the rear, Levi Strauss & Co. Archives curator Lynn Downey holds up the oldest known pair of Levi Strauss riveted jeans. To her right stands Frank Davis, Jacob Davis's great-grandson and president of the Ben Davis Clothing Company. Actors Michael Curcio and Andy Hughes stand on either side, portraying Wyatt and Morgan Earp. Image courtesy of Reno Historical Resources Commission.

What do you think can be gained by marking the landscape historically like that?

I think it's really valuable for heritage tourism, for one thing, since so many people come to town. I'm a history nerd, so I go and look at every plaque wherever I am. I'll stop and pull over the car if I see a marker. I think for heritage tourism it's very important to mark your history.

I know it's going to be changing in the future, with iPhones and that, but for now I think it's a way to carry on that history and make sure people know the significant events that happened.

What were some of the other activities during your time on the Historical Resources Commission that involved historic preservation?

I don't think I was on the commission yet, but I know a big issue was the Fleischmann Planetarium. There was a threat that that would be done away with in order to build a parking complex at the university.

Nan Spina and Felvia Belaustegui, some of the commissioners at that time, really rallied people. I went to the meeting. I don't know how many people we had in there. The fire marshal must have freaked out. Even the architect's family came. It got a lot of press, and it really helped. Lo and behold, we still have that wonderful building. It's such great Populuxe architecture. I just love it.

Did you start giving any tours for HRPS in the meantime?

I did. East Fourth Street was the first tour that I worked on. I worked on some bus tours, too, but Fourth Street was my main interest because of the transportation history along Fourth Street and Prater Way through Reno and Sparks. I just couldn't pass it up.

I went on a tour with Gaye Canepa. She led a great tour and I got interested. She did it for HRPS for a couple years, and then decided I wanted to further the research and add some more information. She gave me her notes and said, "Sure, you take it over. I'm pleased to have somebody else take it over." So I did research and just ran with it. I like the seedy side of the town more—the nitty-gritty industrial areas—for tours.

When you first started giving that tour, where did it start and where did it go?

We started on Evans at Louis' Basque Corner. It's a great place to start because everything began at that location when the NCO [the Nevada-California-Oregon depot] was there; those neighborhoods to the north were being established, railroad neighborhoods. You had motels and apartments that were established primarily for the railroad. So that was a great location, and, of course, you had Louis'.

That particular building is the oldest continuously operating apartment or motel. It has been around since 1907, and a lot of people don't realize that. And the Marion, across the street, is the same. It's from 1908. Those were the early days of that neighborhood.

I start there and then I go down to Morrill Avenue. I've changed it a little bit a couple times, but I usually stick to the original route.

Do you stay on one side of the street?

We zigzag up and down. I tried it a different way last year, and it didn't work out. So I still zigzag. People go back and forth. There are certain areas that I like. We'll be over on one side and then I'll tell them, "We've got to go over to the other side." [laughs]

On East Fourth Street there is the NCO Building, the Nevada-California-Oregon Building. That and the downtown post office are my favorite buildings in town.



The Marion Hotel, currently home to the Lincoln Lounge, was constructed at 306 East 4th Street in 1907.
Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

I remember early on in HRPS I met the owners who had the Flanigan building at the time, and we met there. It was a paint company, Flanigan's Paint and Supplies. We had a meeting there just to show off Fourth Street.

That's how I also got involved with Fourth Street. I was interested in that building. Ed Scalzo purchased the building for Forever Yours Fine Furniture, and he's done a wonderful job. I was so happy when he took it over. I worried about it, because it was for sale for many years. The NCO depot is not for sale, but it's sitting vacant right now, which is really worrying me.

Ed Scalzo is wonderful. He's had the same business, but in three different locations in that vicinity—the downtown core and up at Flanigan's. I nominated him for one of the awards from the HRC because he was a great caretaker of that building. He loves the building; you can just tell when you talk to him. He had it up for sale, and I know it would have been very hard for him to part with that building.

But then he didn't sell it.

He didn't. He's sticking to it. It sounds like sales are up at Forever Yours. I was worried about a year ago when I interviewed him. I always go in before I do the tours to meet with him and say, "Hey, I'm coming in." I like to see what's new.

My tour is the only tour that has a ride. We take the ride on the 1925 freight elevator. It's in the Flanigan Building. The ropes go up. It's great.

I always touch base with him. About a year ago, he was pretty down. He said, “I’m testing the waters to see if I could sell it or not.” There were no takers, so he hung in there during these economic times. It was tough.

Are there other buildings along the street that you typically go inside on your tours?

Yes. As I said, we zigzag up. I’m going to look at my binder. Forever Yours was in another building that is now an auction house, Anchor Auctions. Before that, it was a laundry. We detour through that, and usually on Saturday mornings they’re having an auction. We’ll go in there and they include our group in on the auction. It’s really fun.

We go in there and we go into Flanigan’s—always a treat—and talk about Patrick Flanigan. When I can arrange to go to Abby’s Highway 40, we’ll stop in there. It’s hard to get Donny [Schwartz] awake at ten and eleven o’clock in the morning. We’ve stopped there, and it was really a hoot, because people were having a beer before we traveled on.

Donny has wonderful neon. He really supports the highway history. There’s a Lincoln Highway neon sign and, of course, the Highway 40 Abby’s sign itself is terrific. He has great photos in there. But I can never get him to wake up to do it. [laughs]

Then we’ve gone to the Eveleth Lumber Company Building. It was originally Eveleth’s. Now it’s Ray’s Recycled Tires. That building is a real jewel. It was the mill for the finishing and planning. Gaye Canepa took us in there, and the people on the tour were blown away. Nobody had been in there.

At the time, Reno Forklift owned it and they were very sensitive to what was there. They knew what they had. All the original equipment—what they used to use—is in that building. They used to use steam for all the mechanical saws. It was then converted to electric. We actually went down underneath the building. There are rats under there, but we went under there and looked. You could see the belts that operate. It’s incredible.

It’s just like arrested decay. The employees just picked up and left. We couldn’t believe it when we walked in. They still had screen doors, screens they had made, and wood frames. I was thinking, “All these people in these older neighborhoods would love to get their hands on this.” They had some wooden windows in there too. It was just incredible. Even the employees’ health and safety information was still there. Some advertising was in there too.

When do you think that business stopped operating?

I never could pinpoint a date when that left. I know Reno Forklift was in there. I would say that was probably around 1999 or 2000. I have a feeling it must have closed in 1995. The equipment’s still there.

Neil Forsyth, the owner of Ray’s Recycled Tires, knows what’s in there. He has lots of recycled tires in there. He just loves to show people, and I try to meet up with him. He’s a busy man. He was a surveyor for the state of Nevada, and he’s got some tales. He acquired this recycled tire business. He always tries to meet up with me and give us a little tour, and it blows people away. I haven’t pinpointed the date on that building, but I know it’s early. It’s in early Sanborn maps. It’s old growth timber. You can tell there’s a lot of history there.



The interior of the historic Eveleth Lumber building in 2013. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

You worry about it; it's going to burn down some day or something. We were hoping that it would have been a hands-on history area for kids to go to at one time, but that didn't happen.

Tell me about some of the other buildings on your tour that you really like.

I think those are the highlights I hit on the tour. The overall history is just incredible. It's related to the transcontinental railroad. These are major events in the history of the United States, and the history is right here in Reno. I go into quite a lot of information about that and of course I talk about Lincoln Highway, Highway 40, and the Victory Highway.

I know one building that I like and nobody pays much attention to is the old Denny's Building. I was talking about Populuxe. People are always surprised at the Googie architectural style, so I always get

a giggle out of that. I talk about what that is. It's usually spacey-looking. That one's not quite as spacey as Jack's on Prater, down the road, but it is still a pretty nice coffee shop design, and it's hanging in there. It's what El Rancho used to be—the 777. It's the building in front.

Is it now vacant?

It's vacant, yes. It's been many, many restaurants. I always like to stop and point that out. Unfortunately, I stop at Morrill Avenue, but all the really good neon is down the street. I like to point out the Sandman; what a great sign. I think that was one of the top 100 sites to stop at in USA Today at one point. If you're interested in roadside history, that's a great, great sign.



The Denny's Coffee Shop (foreground) and El Rancho Motel at 777 East 4th Street, ca. 1961.
Postcard courtesy of Steve Ellison.

It sounds like you make a real attempt to get to know the business owners and include them in your tour.

Yes, I do. Every year I try to meet somebody new or at least revisit somebody who I haven't seen for a while, and it's always fun when I go. About a month before I start the tour season, I'll go. People always laugh because I'm walking Fourth Street. "Honey," I'll say. "I'm leaving. I'm going to Fourth Street."

"Okay. Be careful."

I talk about the Reno Brewery also. We stop there. Sometimes they'll be working on a Burning Man project, so we'll go in there and take a look. I always hope that somebody's there from Artown to open the doors, because the building is pretty unique inside and another large space. It's being utilized in a good way right now, and hopefully something else will be in there too.

This is Spencer Hobson's bottling plant building.

Yes.

You alluded to thoughts that it's not the safest place. What do you think about that? Talk about your impressions of how safe Fourth Street is.

I've been doing that tour for years, and I've never had any problems, never. People ask, "You go by yourself?" It doesn't bother me. I always have my clipboard, so I look official. I don't know if I'd want to be down there alone at night, but I have been down there at night to the Studio on 4th. I've gone to events there. You just be careful. It's really well-lit, that's for sure. We do have good lighting on that street now. But you just have to be aware. I know the homeless shelter's there, but I haven't been bothered by anybody.

One time I was doing a tour and I stopped at the NCO Building to show the tile off, and I said, "Look at the beautiful tile," and this poor gentleman was sleeping in the hall, and he didn't even hear us. He was conked out.

And people were saying, "Oh, okay. Don't mind him. He's just sleeping."

But safety is always an issue. If people need something to make them feel secure, we have good lighting on that street. I know in the past they've looked at the area for some potential projects, and they're looking at projects right now with RTC. I would hate to gentrify the exterior of some of the buildings too much.

There was a Reno-Sparks Corridor Business Association. I think they're still around, by the way. They were concerned about the homeless shelter being located on Record Street, and I think that's how they started. They were looking at making improvements and trying to get the business owners to clean up the fronts and get some people in those vacant buildings. That was a concern.

Alpine Glass is another building I'm concerned about. That's a Frederick DeLongchamps building, the premier architect in northern Nevada. I'd really like to see somebody get in there soon.

Does it seem to you, since you started giving those tours, that the street has changed very much? When would you say you started giving those tours?

I'm thinking I probably started in 2005 or so. Things have changed because, with the homeless shelter, I have had to change my routes a couple times around the Morris Hotel, because there were a lot of people in the summer hanging around there. But usually I don't. Usually I just go across the street and I say, "Oh, this is our nice homeless shelter."

There was a Lincoln Highway Association convention last year at South Lake Tahoe. They came a little early and took a tour of Fourth Street because it's on the Lincoln Highway, so I did a tour then. They thought it was great. We talked about Burning Man when we got down to the Reno Bottling Works. It was good for the tourists, too. They had a good time, and they all went back to Louis' and had lunch.

To whom do you primarily give tours? Is it visitors, residents, or both? How do they find out about the tour?



The historic Alpine Glass building at 324 East 4th Street in 2015. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Through HRPS, we have a built-in group who go on every tour. But I have had people from outside sometimes, if they see it advertised. I think a lot of people are just curious about what's happening on Fourth Street. There has been a lot of interest lately. I average about thirty people, usually. I know some of them are HRPS members, but we also get people who aren't members. It's pretty mixed, actually.

Do you take old photographs with you on the tour to show them?

I do. I take my binder. This binder goes with me everywhere. I've been carrying it around a lot lately to the RTC meetings. When we get to the Flanigan Building, we usually take a little break there because we take the elevator ride, so we always set it out and people can look at it there. I always try to add new photos every year. People will give me photos. That's a wonderful thing about history and research. History people are great. They want to share everything with you. It's just so much fun.

The binder you're showing here has incredible historic photographs and clippings from Fourth Street through the years. Now, you referred to a couple of organizations, the RSCBA, and some studies that were taking place about Fourth Street. Have you been involved in any discussions about Fourth Street on the city level or participated in studies or discussions?

I attended some of those. They had community block grant money, and there was some funding for the business fronts. I have attended a few of those. Some of them got a little hot and testy, because at that period it was mainly about the homeless shelter.

I kind of backed away because I felt things were not moving. I hate to talk about that, but the Business Association was butting up against the City of Reno, and there was a lot of turmoil there. I think

they even questioned how much money was going to be given to the business owners during the block grant period. Instead, I just focused on the history and turned to that to educate people.

But I'm really pleased. I was reviewing the TOD information the other night, and they focus quite a lot in that report on promoting history. So I felt real comfortable with that project, and I used to talk about the Morrill Avenue building, with the apartments behind and the business building in front.

Where Zagol's Ethiopian restaurant is?

Right. We stop there because the trolley barn was located across the street, so I talk about that. But I used to talk about the TOD project and what was going on with proper infill. I felt that that was a really good project. It was attractive and shows people what can be done if we stick to our guns.

What are your ideas about what might happen in the future with Fourth Street? What would be your ideal scenario for how things should proceed from here?

I'd like to see some moderate, low-cost housing along the way, bringing people back into that neighborhood. Artists' lofts are always wonderful. They bring in a different element for the street, and that's really happening right now. The fire station [11 @ the Firehouse] has some artists' lofts on the top there.

I would like to see some housing brought in to make it a vibrant area. It's got a lot of stuff going in—nightclubs and that at night—but it needs more so during the day. It was a shame they lost the art store located there. It's the one that moved off of South Virginia—Nevada Fine Arts. I used to go there. I felt bad about that leaving, because that's the kind of store you want to see. The Western store, D Bar M, is still there. I'd like to see more businesses like that coming back.

It's not looked at very graciously from an environmental standpoint, but I do like the industrial element still hanging in there. I like Martin Ironworks. I think it's terrific they're still there. I don't know how long they're going to hang in there, but they're a northern Nevada big business, and they built quite a few buildings in this town—the bowling stadium, and many, many casinos. They supply steel in southern Nevada, too. I like that industrial element and hope that stays. I don't know if it will or not.

There are a lot of auto-related businesses. That's just fine. You have to have auto-related businesses anyway in a neighborhood, so I support those. As a matter of fact, I met somebody whose family owns a Chevron station almost on the border of Sparks and Reno—it's a young couple who own this—and she was terrific. She was very enthusiastic about the area and wants to hang in there as a business.

But, like I said, I would like to see more affordable housing and some businesses where people could go during the day. Let's also do something about marking it for the Lincoln Highway or the highway history. In other communities across the country, they are really getting behind that heritage in their neighborhoods. Iowa and Ohio are just gung-ho about the Lincoln Highway, as is New Mexico with Route 66.

We need to jump on the bandwagon here, because people come into town and stop and look at whatever monument there is or what's left of the highway. It's a big tourist industry. I hope that comes back.

My dream is either to have a neon museum or to have some kind of a project where we could light up some of the neon that's there and help business owners light up their neon. They do it in New

Mexico. It's a tough project because neon is so hard to maintain, but they do it. I think there are some federally funded projects in New Mexico along Route 66 that do that. They've got quite a few signs lit up not just in Albuquerque, but outside of Albuquerque, too. My dream would be to have that happen and bring in new neon too, like Abby's Highway 40. That's the perfect opportunity right there. Our neon heritage is important for this town.

While we're on the topic of that street, I know the RTC is interested in how people think the actual street might be improved to help what you're thinking about take place, everything from lanes and boulevards and medians to sidewalks. Do you have any feelings about any of those things?

The two-lane concept is good. It slows traffic down. I think most of the business owners will agree with that. We had one meeting and it looked like they were in agreement with that. If we bring in more businesses to the area, I'd like to see some diagonal parking. It gives it that Main-Street feel. I don't know if Fourth Street wants to have a Main-Street feel, but it sure is handy to park.

Medians are a tough one. The only problem with the two-lane configuration that I've noticed in other areas of town is that it's hard to get the side streets to flow into traffic. Wells Avenue is tough because the traffic is slower. It is hard to get into the lanes. But that's something I think you almost have to live with if you do something like the two-lane concept. You probably have to have turn lanes. That's the easiest way to control traffic.

Like I said, I like the industrial look. You have to have some kind of streetscape. Landscaping would be good, but I almost like more of an industrial look on that street. I don't want to gentrify it too much. We should also clean up the sidewalks. Doing walking tours, I know the sidewalks are terrible along that street. Just fixing that really improves an area.

What's terrible about them?

There's broken concrete, you name it, it's just really rough. A lot of it's gone; there's not even a sidewalk in some places. We're walking in dirt sometimes. It needs improvement that way. So I'm hoping that whole area will get improved as far as sidewalks are concerned. You could do some artsy stuff with the sidewalks too.

I'd like to see gateways to announce the highway or city. You can even have something down at Keystone, and I know they talked about that at one time. I would love to see gateways. I've seen them in other communities and small neighborhoods, and it's really cool because they've used some marker of the neighborhood—whether it's a bungalow or a lamppost that they have in the streetscape—as the symbol of the neighborhood. We have a perfect opportunity to do that with the history of the highway. So, for Lincoln Highway, something like that could be a fun art project.

You've been very involved in Fourth Street at the same time your work with HRPS was continuing. We left off with some of the earlier types of programs and activities HRPS did. Can you tell me about some more of the recent activities HRPS has been doing?

I've been really proud of what's materialized through the years. We have at least twenty-five different types of walks throughout the year. We go from May to September now, which is quite a few. The whole summer is now taken up with walks.

Besides *FootPrints*, we go into a fourth-grade class to talk about the history of primarily downtown Reno. We also talk about some of the older schools and then we sponsor a bus tour for them in the downtown region. That's a great program. Barbara Courtney started the program with Felvia Belaustegui and Jerry Fenwick. Jerry's great; he has so many photos to share, and he loves going into the classroom with the kids. It's a terrific program.

The new one we now have is the Neighborhood Preservation Fund. We've talked about doing this for years, but we never could pinpoint how we were going to do this. We have a home tour we've started in the last couple years, which Sharon Honig-Bear, board member and president, started. We would always say, "Oh, gosh, a home tour. Will the community support it? Can we pull this off?" She pulled it together and got the volunteers. It takes a lot of volunteer work.

The funds from that are going to our mini-grant program, and we're starting out with small matching grants, around \$2,500. We look at each project, and if there's something that warrants a little extra funding, we will provide that. It's a matching grant for the façade, the front of the building. We've looked at landscaping. We're just deciding on that.

We've had some great projects. We had the First Methodist Church on First Street. They had a chimney that was blocking the windows. It was installed because they had fireside chats in the 1940s, and it was blocking the windows. They wanted to remove it to go back to the original look of the building. So we helped to pay for that. That was a great project. We jumped right on that one.

We've had some simple projects that just want to improve the brickwork or the mortar in the foundations, which is very important, and we help pay for that. Sometimes we do lighting. We had a beautiful stone house, a Craftsman bungalow-style home, and the owners wanted some kind of a Craftsman lighting outside, and we paid for that. I'm so excited about this. The people on our committee can't wait to see the grants come in. We're starting up another year of grants right now. I'm really proud of that program.

Has HRPS also been involved in doing architectural surveys of neighborhoods, or is that something that certain members have worked on individually?

We've worked on that individually. I know many worked on the Powning District, mostly through the HRC, but HRPS provided a little funding for that to finish off the survey. The Powning addition is the first conservation district in the city of Reno. I'm very happy to work on that, along with Felvia again. Felvia and I worked together quite a lot during the years. She started the survey and I helped to finish it up. She had some university interns working, too. It took a long time to finish the survey. With only two people, it's very hard to do an entire neighborhood survey.

HRPS did help with that, but a lot of our members have helped individually. Barrie Schuster's on our board now, and she's really active west of Wells Avenue. Mella and I took her under our wing and said, "You've got to do a survey. You can't get around it. You have to do it." We showed her the ropes and how to do the survey. She got it done. She's finishing it up right now, and it took a long time. She had help, also.

Surveys are very important. You don't know what you have until you do a survey. If you're going to go for any kind of district recognition, like the conservation district or if you want a National Register district, you have to do a survey. HRPS will probably get more involved in that in the future as well. We have interest in the Plumas neighborhood, so we're probably going to have to help with some funding.

They did start that survey. It's almost completed, but I think we're going to expand on the Plumas neighborhood. There might be some infill in that area that we're hoping won't happen.

Are there current issues regarding preservation in Reno today that you're involved in, with or without HRPS but in general?

I'm concerned about downtown right now. The Virginia Street Bridge is a big topic. HRPS' logo is the Virginia Street Bridge, but we know that it's going to be gone. That was a big issue; it was a controversial issue, and it still is, and I think it's going to be for a while.

I'm concerned about the post office. I don't know quite what's going to happen to that if the postal authorities decide to pull out of operating it, which I'm sure they are soon. That issue is going to come up fairly soon.

There's also the Masonic Building. We have these pockets of buildings. Maybe that's not the way we should look at it. Maybe we should look at the downtown core as a whole district now and pull that together. I always feel that Second Street itself could be a district. There are a lot of great buildings along there—from the Reno National Bank building on the corner all the way to the Senator Hotel. That's the way you need to pull it together instead of these individual projects. I know with the Virginia Street Bridge, there's not much you can do about that.

Neighborhoods are really coming together. We've lost so much downtown, but neighborhoods are something we can show off right now, and that's why the walking tours are so important. People get to see where other people live and what's going on in the neighborhood. Wells Avenue has done a great job. They're really getting their act together. A lot of young couples are moving into that neighborhood, so they're restoring a lot of the homes. Things are happening right now.

Neighborhoods are so important. I think that's where we need to focus on the history of Reno, as well.

In the fifteen years since HRPS was founded, you've seen so many changes. What do you think about the future for history, historic preservation, and heritage in Reno?

Right now there's something going on. I've talked to other people with other organizations, like OLLI [the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute] and that's a different demographic. We're getting mixed age groups. We're getting younger people. It's really bizarre. We don't know what's going on. Maybe it's social networking. I don't know. I think it's working.

It seems that our home tours attract quite a lot of people. It's really a different demographic who attend those. They don't know much about a lot of the neighborhoods, so they're curious, more so than with our walking tours. They have an interest in the history already. But something's happening, and I keep mentioning Wells Avenue, but there's also the new Midtown area. It seems to be really happening right now. There are a lot of older buildings there that are being adaptively reused. People are recognizing that you can't just tear them down. Let's use these buildings.

I just did an article on the Crystal Springs Ice House for HRPS. I was always curious about the building and the people who owned the building through the years. That's in the Midtown area, also. The new owner owns St. James Infirmary, a bar over on California, and he's really bullish on that area. He was adamant that, "I'm using this building, because I hate it when you turn your back and something is gone." I'm really pleased about seeing that building being used.

To wrap up, how do you think the information you're giving me today could help the RTC or the city in making decisions about Fourth Street?

I hope some of the suggestions I made would help them look at our history as being an important element of that street. I think they have recognized that. You're doing the oral histories, which is important as well. I'd like to see some of the neon restored along that area, and I hope they seriously take a look at that and recognize the history of the highway's development through that area.

I want to thank you very much for talking with me today, Cindy.

Thank you. I hope this helped.

BEN AKERT

Founder of Ben's Discount Liquors and son of Bluma and Bill Akert,
owners of Akert's Market



Ben Akert in front of the former site of Akert's Market in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

William Bennet (Ben) Akert moved to Reno from the eastern Nevada company town of Ruth in 1945. His parents, Bluma and Bill, purchased Grant Anderson's market at the corner of East 4th Street and Alameda (later Wells Avenue) and opened Akert's Market (803 East 4th Street), where Ben worked as a teenager. The shop closed in 1963 and the building was torn down. In 1966, Ben founded the local chain Ben's Discount Liquors. He died in 2015.

Matt Fearon: I'm Matt Fearon. I'm here with William Bennet Akert. He goes by Ben. It's April 18, 2012 and I'm here at his home in Reno, Nevada. I'm just going to start out by asking Ben a little bit about his

biography, where he was born and where he's from.

Ben Akert: I was born in Ely, Nevada, at the Central Hospital, which was a county hospital. My dad had come to the Ely area in 1918, and my mother's side of the family had come there right after Kennecott started building there in, I think, 1909 or 1910. My grandfather opened a mercantile store in Ruth, Nevada, and it was the beginning of Ruth and McGill, Nevada, and was the biggest thing that ever happened to Ely. When my dad started out, he came to work in Ruth, Nevada, which is where the big pit was and the deep shaft.

Was that a copper mine?

It was mainly copper. My dad's brother was the assay officer there, and so my dad went to work for the company as a sample grabber, where you go out and get samples of dirt. And over there it would get down to 20 below zero real easy in the wintertime, and my dad decided he'd rather work inside, so he went to work as a bartender in Kimberly. From there he wound up going to work in the grocery stores, and he worked in the grocery stores for most of the time that we were there.

My mother's parents are out of Russia—they were Russian Jews—and my mother was born in Detroit, but she came as a baby to Ruth. My grandfather had a mercantile store there.

Then my mother and dad met. My dad was eighteen or nineteen. He was seven years older than my mother, so he was in his twenties when they got married. I think she was nineteen.

What were your parents' names?

My mother's name was Bluma Bergman, and my dad was William Henry Akert. My dad was of Swiss background and raised in a very strict Mormon family, and my mother was of Jewish background, but they never practiced their religion because there weren't too many Jews in the West at that time. I'm proud of the fact that I came from a Jewish-Mormon marriage, and I've been married twice in the Catholic Church under good—what do you call it?—auspices or whatever. That's about me.

You said your mom came from Detroit, but your dad—

She was born in Detroit. My dad was born in Salt Lake City. My grandmother was pregnant with her first child, which was my mother, and they were living in Detroit. Then from Detroit, she came out here to the West to be with her husband, my grandfather, who opened that mercantile store. He was a merchant.

What brought your dad over from Salt Lake? Was it mining?

He came to work for his brother as an assayer picking samples, and the winters were a little too cold for him, and I don't blame him. That's a tough business, and it's dangerous. You go in right after they blow the side of the mountain out and take a bunch of different samples from geographic locations where they're told to. If you've ever seen them blow a hole in the side of the mountain like the pit—the whole mountain just rolls over, and they sample the ore, and then the good ore is hauled to the smelter, and the ore that isn't qualified goes to the dump. Through the years, the people went back and leached the

dumps out for more gold ore and silver.

Ruth doesn't even actually exist, where I was raised. It became a dirt pile, you know, filled in. Then I left there in 1945, when I was just out of the eighth grade, and I came here. Actually, I've been in Reno most of my life, sixty-five years or whatever it is.

Can you tell me a little bit about Ruth, though? What was it like in Ruth up until you moved?

Ruth was a mining camp by Kennecott, and it was very well organized and very controlled. The supervisors lived on one side of the town on the hill, and then there was the copper flat where some of them lived. And they were all company houses—probably, in my mind, 1,000 square feet at the most. You could get a two-bedroom or a three-bedroom, and I think you paid \$5 a month rent for a two-bedroom and then another 50 cents or a dollar for a three-bedroom, and it was wood and coal stoves, outhouse in the back, and a coal bin.

And they always had a guy—I remember as a boy—who carried a big tub on his shoulder, and he had a sharp stick, and he'd pick up all the papers, and it was well kept, very organized and very clean, and it was a good town for a boy like myself to grow up.

They didn't have a governor or a mayor or anything. It was just a company town. And at Christmastime, they had a community league, and even though my dad didn't work for Kennecott, we always got a twenty-five-pound bag of apples, oranges, and a big box of candy, and that was what all the kids looked forward to. That was during the Great Depression, so it was a big deal.

A lot of the people who grew up in Ely became prominent names in Reno. Ruby Kvasovich, what they call the Bohunks and Slovenians, and a lot of people came out of that area who stayed in the state of Nevada. They traveled the world over—John Sanchez and Gale Sanchez. John Sanchez became an attorney. He just died a couple years ago. And Gale is retired. He was a general contractor. Those are people who I grew up with and remember.

But, like I say, the biggest part of my life and my friends are Reno, Nevada. So I'm just telling you that's a very small fragment of my life.

Can you tell me, before we jump into Reno, did you have any siblings?

I had three sisters, two older and one younger. The youngest one is deceased, and of the two older, one's going to be eighty-six next in November, the other one's eighty-four, and I'm eighty-two. All three of us do not have good health, we'll say it that way. You know, I talk about them going first, but, surprise, surprise. I was wrong. You know how that is.

But this was really and truly a company town in the Depression. If you had a job there, you were well off, because you got a paycheck and you had a house and pretty much everything that you had to buy, your wood and coal, and a lot of people went out and chopped wood. My dad would buy twenty tons of coal every winter—we had a coal bin as big as this room here, and part of it was like the old wooden boxes that you'd see in grocery stores. It's all cardboard now, but you'd get those wooden boxes for nothing. You'd cut them up, and they'd make wonderful kindling. I cut the kindling and brought the coal in. And as long as I did that, I got two bits a week. That bought a root beer float and 10 cents for the movie, but that was big time and a good time. We didn't know what it was to be poor.

So it's fair to say that you enjoyed yourself, living there and growing up there?

I had an immensely happy childhood. My parents couldn't have been better parents, and my sisters and all of us grew up. I had one sister who would tell you, well, it was tough, and then the other, they didn't get educated like they should. There were schools there. Kennecott saw to it that we had good schools. If you didn't learn how to read and write, it was your own fault. And I wasn't the brightest light in that department.

How many people would you say—when you were growing up there, how many people lived in Ruth? What was the population, less than a thousand?

Oh, yeah, less. I think Kennecott had eleven or twelve hundred. They had the pit, and McGill was eighteen miles away. The train would go down there. It was called the Nevada Northern. It would go down the canyon, come up out of the pit, and then go down. It ran a whole load of train cars full of ore to McGill, and McGill was a big smelter out there in the flats.

And it was the same way in McGill. They had a community league, and the houses were pretty much the same, and it was the backbone of White Pine County, really. And otherwise, Ely would have never been more than a little wide spot in the road for the ranchers, and that's tough ranching over in that country. It's big and wide open. You can see Nevada, how vast it is.

What brought your family to Reno?

My mother wanted us to go to college and she wanted to get out of the mining camp. There was no future working for Kennecott, and she brought us all over to Reno. One sister, after she got out of high school, moved to California and became a beauty operator for a while, and my oldest sister, who was in high school about the time I graduated from grade school, got married and lived in Elko and worked as a waitress and had her first child in about '47. My kid sister went up to college for a while.

I went up there [the University of Nevada, Reno] and I was taking thirteen hours of Bonehead 101, and I didn't see any future in that. So I had to strike out. I had to grow up and learn for myself. I went to the university for probably six, eight weeks. I was like a fish out of water, you know. I wasn't very well prepared at all, far more juvenile than I had hoped. Years later they made me an honorary alumni for some reason.

I read a story one time that Englishmen didn't like Americans because they bragged about only having a third-grade education but making a million dollars, and there's more to it than that, which is true. A guy's better off with a little more education and a little less money. I'm just telling you what goes through my mind, things I remember.

I came over here, and I was in the ninth grade and I went to the Northside Junior High. Northside is where the bowling alley downtown Reno is, that whole block. That was Northside, and I went there one year, and then I went up my last three years in high school on West Street where the biggest hotel now is built, the Silver Legacy. That was a mortuary on Fourth and Sierra at one time.

And then there was Sewell's, where they are too. Did you ever hear of Sewell's? That was probably the biggest local supermarket at the time. They were on Sierra off of California Avenue right next to where the bank building, the big bank, Bank of America is now. There's another building south of it that is sort of a nothing building, but they've got different shops in there, and that was Sewell's. And then Sewell's was up on Fourth and Virginia. They had from Fourth to Fifth Street on Virginia Street, and

that was the biggest building in northern Nevada at the time.

Herb Sewell. They owned one of the banks, the Bank of Commerce.

So when you were in high school and your mom and your parents first got here, they bought that market, right?

They bought that store on the corner of Fourth and Alameda, which is now Wells. I was still going to Northside. I'd get out of school and I'd walk down to the store, and my job was to sort the bottles. There was a deposit on them, and I put them in the boxes that they belonged in and kept them organized and then stocked the beer case and soft-drink case and took care of some of the produce. I was fifteen years old and wasn't too excited about doing it, but it was my job.

And my mother and dad had a butcher working for them. It was a very small, small store.

You said it was the northeast corner of Fourth and Alameda. Is that right?



Akert's Market appears in a 1961 photo. Ben Akert's parents, Bill and Bluma, purchased the market (then owned by Grand Anderson Sr.) in 1945 and operated it until 1963. The building was demolished soon after.

Photo courtesy of the Nevada Department of Transportation.

Yes, and directly west was the Nevada Pack [Nevada Packing Company]. It was a killing place, and now that's where the El Rancho Motel is. And then there's a tire shop across the street, which was Locke's Drug Store, and he was tied into Hales. I think he was a brother-in-law to the Hales, and he had a couple of stores called Locke's, himself. And then there was a Union Station on the southeast corner, and then the Wells Street underpass. Do you remember Wells Street?

Well, not that far back, but I know—

That bridge was never there.

I saw that today when I came down that way, because I just wanted to see where the market was and saw that.

Wells Avenue was a through street. It was one of the main thoroughfares for people to get into the north valley. The north valley had just started to open up. But it got you from one side of the tracks to the other without being bothered by the train—you went under the train, and when they put the trench in there, that brought all that to an end. When I first came here, Wells Avenue was the hottest real estate in town.

Why is that, because it was right in the center?

It was sort of the first getaway from downtown Reno, and there were a lot of little grocery stores and businesses down there. Today it's just continuous—either a drive-in or a 7-Eleven market or something like that. And then Raley's built the first store out there on the south and then something else. Oh, it was that Mexican store, you know, way out on South Wells. It's almost to Virginia Street.

Wells Avenue used to run all the way directly into Virginia, and it was always a bottleneck there, but then those shopping centers weren't there, and it was a service area. That area around Wells was fairly nice, and since then the Mexicans sort of took that over, which is not bad, but a lot of people think it's dangerous. Women say you shouldn't go down in that area because it's dangerous, but it's no different than any other place. But the Mexicans have moved in.

When did that start?

Well, probably twenty or twenty-five years ago. Downtown Reno, as far as I'm concerned, is the pits. There are just too many vacancies, and the Indian gambling just killed Reno.

So what was it like down on Fourth Street, in the late forties?

I worked in that area. It's considered dangerous now. The hookers hang out on Fourth Street. Right after the war, the motel business got really good. There were no big hotels, and Reno was a destination for San Francisco and Sacramento and people from those places to come up and have a big weekend, and the big hotels hadn't been built.

There were a lot of motels up and down the street, and now they're just weekly rentals or monthly rentals. Some of them were pretty classy or decent. Time and time again, they went down.

But there was a foundry down there, and Commercial Hardware. That's on—can I look at the map? I'm trying to think. It's before you get to Alameda. I got bifocals, \$500 for bifocals, and I have to go back to my old glasses to read. It's kind of getting old.

I'm just going to mention that Ben's looking at the Sanborn map, Map 19.

There was a U.S. 40 Tavern up here, and that's all. That's a big building down there and the windows are covered with paper, and it's a nice, nice building, then right next to it is that steel fabricating plant. It's on the south side of Fourth Street. A lot of the steel that goes in these big buildings came from there. They fabricated it and got it going. East Fourth, Alameda.

Yeah, that's just a small little section on Fourth.

Here are the railroad tracks, right? I should have said Wells Avenue, because Wells Avenue started at Fourth Street and Alameda started at Fourth Street, and then they changed that to Wells all the way down.

So what business were you thinking was on the corner or near there that you were trying to remember?

Going north, I'm trying to think, and then it'll come back to me. Eveleth Lumber Company was on Wells Avenue right where the underpass went under the railroad.

There was no overpass. They had their big yard. They were probably one of the biggest lumber people in town, and they had an old-time mill that probably had a 10-horsepower motor, electric motor, and it would wind up and run the belts where everything's moving off of the rollers up above or the gear work. It was unique, very unique.

Do you think most of the lumber that went into that lumberyard came out of the Sierra?

Oh, they probably bought it from all over, because they bought hardwood and different woods. Most of the Sierra wood around here went into box factories, like up at Plumas Pines. You know where Plumas Pines is?

I do.

There was a lumber mill in there, and it was strictly Portola. They made most of that stuff that went down to California for your oranges and your apples and those thin, thin boxes.

Can you tell me a little bit about working at the store when you were fifteen or sixteen years old? What was it like?

My dad closed the store on Sunday, and I'd work on Saturday. My job was to go in and sweep the floor, and take care of all the bottles so that when the deliverymen came in they'd pick up the empties, because that was a flow of cash there. Sometimes the bottles and the box that the bottles were in were worth more than the product they delivered you, with the deposit.

A lot of people would come in and say, “Do you handle deposit bottles?”

And we’d say, “Yeah.” We’d take them if they’d spend the money there. So a lot of times we ran a lot more bottles back than we bought, and I’d have to buy the extra container. It’s a rental deal, you know.

But we’d get their little bit of cash flow from the kids that did come in, and then as modern times came, there were less and less, due to the tin can, the throwaway bottle. When I started my liquor stores, I wouldn’t carry a deposit bottle. It was just too much of a nuisance.

And it’s completely gone now. I don’t see anywhere where you handle deposit bottles. That must be part of your advancement or going backwards, I don’t know which way you’d look at it. Like this here [reference to a plastic water bottle], look how thin that bottle is and it holds water. To me, that’s the most stupid thing in the world, when you’ve got good tap water. Everybody has bottled water now.

Plus plastic is becoming a major problem. There’s just too much of it.

I’ve heard it said how many times these bottles would go around the world, end to end—every year about four times. It’s probably less than a penny to blow that out. The printed label costs more than the plastic, and there’s some question about water sitting in the plastic too long if they used the wrong chemicals.

But Fourth Street was a workingman’s area, and a lot of guys lived within the area, on Eureka and all those different avenues. When I first came here, there was no Oddie Boulevard. That came much later. That came in the early sixties, Oddie, and then as the town expanded, more cars, more businesses, more little strip malls.

Down there, you know where that girlie show is on Fourth Street? That used to be Harris Food Center, and he became the mayor of Reno. In fact—well, that’s before your time. His son and his wife got killed in a deal—the boy was a gun trader, and they got shot. I don’t know exactly what happened, but he was left a complete widower. It just devastated him. But that’s going back at least forty years, I’d say.

When your parents moved and had that business, did they live near Fourth Street?

We lived on Sixth and Evans. There’s a parking lot for that Ramada right there. There’s a Ramada, and there used to be a nice church and then our house, and there was a guy named Loughlin who lived next door. He worked for Union Oil. And when he died, we bought that house from his heirs for an investment. I told my sister we’d probably make money on buying the house, and we rented it out for about ten years, and then Ramada came and bought it from us. But it was a nice home, and my dad and mother kept it up, and you had lawn and a few trees and vegetables in the back. That’s the way people are supposed to live. Not all of them do.

Did your parents walk to the market?

No, no. My dad bought a little Model-A for a delivery truck, and it had a bed on it. They bought a Ford when they came over here, about two years after they moved here, and they always had Fords after that.

It was on the 600 block, and Evans was probably three blocks, so it was about a five-block walk. I walked it all the time. I came here in ’45. I was graduating in 1949 and I bought a car. My first car I

bought myself and made payments on it forever.

I was just out of high school, and then I worked for the telephone company at nights. Then I went in the service, and I came back and I went back to work for the telephone company as toll repair. I can't remember, but I quit them because they wanted me to move to Willows, California, and I said, "I'm not moving."

They said they didn't have enough material for their construction to do anything in Reno and toll repair was long lines, and it was going from wire to cable. So my job was being reduced and what have you, but I took a leave of absence for about four months, and then I just told them I wasn't coming back. A lot of times, you know, Ma Bell will take care of you. It's not Ma Bell anymore; it's a competition company for who can get the business, and they had it sewed up at one time. And I quit and then that's when I started working in the supermarkets.

Did you ever work with your parents in that market after that time?

Yes, like I say, it was a Mom-and-Pop market, and my dad would close at six o'clock. He opened at seven, and seven to six is a long shift. But the supermarkets were coming along, and Mom and Pop used to be a little family service, you know. So I got the 7-Eleven idea.

Nobody ever has an original idea, I don't think, but there were a couple of guys around town who were bagging money with a little small store, because they stayed open late, and on the holidays it used to be that all the stores would close for a holiday. Now, none of them close. And we'd stay open and it jacked the volume of the store about \$150,000 a year. Back in those days, that was a big number. Nowadays they do that much in a day. But it got it going.

I kept it open later and on the holidays and pushed beer and more junk than groceries. But my dad still wanted to have fresh produce, and it just wasn't there, you know. You'd buy a stalk of bananas and lose half of them. You just don't come out well.

Then I had a friend of mine whose brother-in-law had the Food King Markets, which is now Scolari Markets, but they're altogether different. I went to work for the Food King, and I worked for them for five years.

Then I got married and my first wife and I were married for nine years and she got lupus and died, and I was sort of left like a cork on the ocean. I quit the Food King Market because I knew I was screwing up a lot going through that, is one of way of putting it.

And then one of the partners in the stores came back to me after my wife died in '65 and wanted to put a minimarket in downtown Reno on Pine Street. That's where Ben's Discount Liquor originated, right there. I had a mini-market, and it wasn't making any money. I had to do something or go to work for the state or something.

People, the tourists, would come by and say, "I can buy it downtown cheaper. I can buy it here cheaper." So I said I'd get into the cheap business, and I could handle buses [with tourists]. They couldn't handle buses downtown. I had a parking area where a bus could pull in.

I worked my ass off and turned it into a high, high-volume store, a lot of them, and it's an altogether different type of business now. But at one time I had Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Utah, and they were all controlled states, and California was a fair trade state, and I just did a tremendous business. I kept my prices real low, kept my labor down, and I did real well at it.

In 1971, I was remarried to the wife I've got now and doing all right, and I decided that I wasn't going to be working, humping whiskey cases at sixty-five years of age.

Because there was a Harry Parker—Harry Parker’s Western Wear in downtown Reno. I don’t even know if it’s there anymore. There were people who would have died just to have one of their stores. They had two stores—there the old-timers, the cowboy or sheepherder, would send \$100 in an envelope and a list of what he wanted, the clothes he wanted, and they’d mail them back, and they’d do that and mail the change with it.

They had working wear. They were down in downtown Reno on Sierra Street. I don’t know what’s there now. But they had a good-sized store there, and they had one on Center and Second Street, on the northeast corner of Second, and there was just a little store, but you would go down in the basement and they had probably a thousand pairs of Levi’s stacked down there, available for shipping—any size you wanted. They were unbelievable people, and that’s a thing of the past.

With your liquor store, with your parents’ market, where did you get all your inventory? Was it mostly from the western U.S. close to Reno or all over?

There was Lindley Wholesale, and it was just going into the change for the high, high volume, and my folks used to get maybe fifty or a hundred cases of grocery supplies a week. It was called Lindley at the time. It’s down there where the soup kitchen is, on Record Street. The railroad goes through there, and they built a couple of places where the homeless can sleep and stay. A homeless shelter. They let them sleep in tents out there.

Anytime you got a freebie, you’re going to collect the freebies. They put it downtown there, and then they walk on Fourth Street to the Eldorado or to the casinos or wherever during the day and just wander. And they’re not good for business, and that’s my opinion.

At Fourth and Valley Road, on the southeast corner, there’s a big long building that has a big parking lot there. That used to be Commercial Hardware. Commercial Hardware used to be pointed the other way with a lot of windows, but they changed that, and then it’s a long, long brick building. And they were the epitome of a hardware store, and then Home Depot and Lowe’s killed them, and they sold out. And the guy who bought it thought he knew what he was doing, but he went broke within a year. You’ve got to stay with the times, I guess.

And then now is that now a homeless shelter?

I think it’s St. Vincent’s Thrift Shop. They feed them there, and they’ve got a deal where you can buy real cheap clothes and stuff. I’ve taken a couple of loads of stuff to them, and they’re very thankful. And there’s a number of those thrift stores selling clothes, food, anything.

But Commercial Hardware was the place you’d go for knowledge and products. If you wanted certain kind of bolts, you’d go there. And then there was G.R. Bradley, but they were a wholesaler. They wholesaled to other stores down Fourth Street about two or three blocks east of where Akert’s Market was. And G.R. Bradley used to be on the corner of Third and Virginia where the Eldorado is now. See, that’s time and tide. Fourth Street was a good workingman’s area.

Did people convene there who lived in town? I mean, at night did people go down there?

Well, you wouldn’t want to take your wife there. It was like a roughneck bar, but it was a big, big bar, and the working guy would take his wife, nobody would bother him. But it wasn’t where a woman

would dress up to go.

Is that right on Fourth Street?

That's that building going down Fourth Street, and it's a long building, brown, the windows are nice and clean but they've got brown paper, like a paper bag, nice rolls, and the windows are all sealed with brown paper. And that's where the thrift store was for the Salvation Army for a long time. For a long time that was a big complex.

On Friday night and Saturday night, that was a big deal, when the workingman got paid—you know, in those days when I was a kid, you'd cash a check for a guy's week's wages. Forty-three dollars was a lot of money, and it wasn't until later years where you'd see a guy making \$90 or \$110. But then at the same time, I used to sell a loaf of bread, fresh bread for 12 cents, and if it was a day old, you'd sell it for 10 cents. This comparison of what prices are today, when you pay a buck and a half or \$2 or more for a loaf of fresh bread. Whoever thought they'd see bread at \$5 a loaf, you know?

You used to sell them four for a dollar at times, so 25 cents a loaf for good sliced bread. You've got to remember what was there. You say, I could have bought this and that, you get a job, and if you were making \$40 a week clear, you were doing all right. You could buy a house and pay for it, probably \$77 a month or something. Those days are gone forever.

And what else? I told you that where that girly house is. That was Harris Food Center, and then the motels came. They were building motels in the early fifties, late forties, like they were going out of style, because they could fill them up. They were servicing the casinos.

And then Fourth Street was U.S. 40 East and West. There was no freeway, so Fourth Street, the trucks brought a lot of traffic on that street. You couldn't even start to put the traffic that goes down that freeway down Fourth now, it's grown so big. If you took an aerial shot of Reno when I was in high school and an aerial now, you wouldn't believe they were the same town.

It just expanded in all directions.

That's right. And there were a lot of little bars. Oh, the Lincoln Bar, if you went to college, is the Louis' Basque Corner. Their Basque food isn't so bad, but it was a hotshot bar for college kids and for Basque food, and now it's Louis'. But it was called the Lincoln Bar.

I know you go to the Coney a lot, or sometimes now. Did you go a lot when you were younger too?

I started going there when I was working in the grocery stores, because you could get spaghetti for 55 cents or 65 cents. And the reason I remember it so well is whenever I'd work in the grocery store, I'd wear a bowtie and a white shirt, look nice, and I'd go there and I'd eat spaghetti, and I'd come out and I'd have spaghetti on me. And they had these big pieces of heavy butcher paper that had a hook on it. It was cut like a crab, and you could put that paper around your neck and it would hang on. It was oiled, sort of heavy like a butcher paper that's got a little wax in it, so that it won't go through.

It's almost like a bib while you eat?

Yeah, it's a big bib that comes clear down to your knees, practically. And I went with this guy

and we had lunch. We ate at the bar, and I said, “Look, when I wear a bib, I don’t get a damn thing on me.” My bib was completely clean. When I took my bib off, there was spaghetti on me, and I don’t know how the hell it got underneath, but it got under there, and it marked the shirt again.

But the Coney Island is an institution within itself. This is the third generation. John Galletti was a great big heavy-duty guy. He was just a sweetheart of a man. He was a good operator, tighter than a tick, and that was a workingman’s place—you go in there, and that’s one of those places where you go in, it got popular through him, and you go in there like on a spaghetti day. When you go in there, you’ll see scholars, you’ll see all the politicians, all the money people, and all the working guys and a few bums, you know, and they all intermingle and they know each other. It’s still damn good food. On Tuesday, that spaghetti’s out of this world, and we’re going to go to dinner or lunch tomorrow for corned beef down there.

You go pretty often still?

The wife and I don’t eat out nearly as much as we used to. We used to go down there for lunch. They got a plate called The Mess. Have you ever heard of that?

I haven’t, no.

It’s not a tortilla, like a Mexican—where they roll it up. Was it a taco? But they roll it up tight and it’s got all kinds of food inside.

Was it like an enchilada?

Enchilada, that’s what I was trying to think of, and they’d put a couple enchiladas on there and then like a brown gravy with beef or something in it, top it off, and then they’d throw salad on the top. A guy used to come in and order the tacos with the beans and stuff on top. Probably they were just the beans that they cooked up. And then he’d order a salad and he’d dump the salad on it. And the waitress said, “That’s a mess.”

He said, “Well, I don’t care what it is. I like it.” So he started calling it The Mess. He’d tell her, “Hey, give me The Mess.” And now it’s on the menu, and everybody, including my wife, just loves it. And it’s just something with a salad on top. But it does one hell of a volume.

Then there’s Casale’s Halfway Club down the middle of the block. And they’re famous. I went to school with her brother, and he’s semi-retired and he helps his sister down there. She’s got to be eighty-five if she’s a day, the gray-haired handsome woman. She works hard, and the food’s good there. I never hung out there much. There is a group that hangs out there, too. You know, you can travel the world over and you’ll always find a bar that’s that kind of operation, and it’s not a tough fighting bar. There are going to be fights. Any bar you have, there are going to be fights.

Now, are you good friends with Gerald Galletti?

Gerald, he is a friend. He’s just a funny duck. He’s an engineer for the railroad, but he’s a mechanical engineer. His job—he’s retired now—used to be to check all the bridges for the stress and everything. In a certain area, he was responsible to check those bridges, and I guess he knew what he was

doing.

This project is being funded partially by the Reno Transportation Commission, and they're doing a revitalization of Fourth Street. Some of the questions they want us to ask are related to the sidewalks and just the general appearance of the street. If you ever walk down there, or when you're driving down there, do you have any feelings about that?

Well, it's an old street. I would say that if somebody who was here in 1940 or 1950 would drive down Fourth Street, it would be the only street that they could probably recognize for some of the geographic things that are still here. That was U.S. 40, and it got a lot of traffic. And a lot of that traffic was people who would pull off on the street and they were in a hurry to get to California or get to Utah, and they would stay within that perimeter and use the services, the motels and other businesses.

But it was a mixed bag of businesses. Most of those businesses grew, went out into the warehouse area, and there are still a few of them down there that have been down there forever. But as far as I'm concerned, the only traffic you see, foot traffic, is that foot traffic of the people of need who live down there.

Around Valley Road?

Yeah, there are some places for the people to stay in there. I get a kick out of it. I took a real estate course, where they said the highest point of value is foot traffic in a commercial area. If you've got a hundred people a minute going across your intersection on foot, that's big time. And to be very honest with you, downtown Reno is the pits, because there are so many vacancies and there's no retail business downtown. It's either parking lots for the casinos, high-rise parking lots, or a bar for the casinos. I'm just telling you as the way I think.

I don't use the freeway anymore because they're remodeling it, and so I come all the way up Fourth Street to Sierra Street, and then I turn left on Sierra Street, because if I want to, I can drive 40 miles an hour down Sierra Street and catch all the lights, come to California Avenue, and there's no traffic in the mornings. That used to be a big business area, and now there's none.

And it's the same with Center Street. When I go to Coney Island, I don't want to get on the freeway, so I come down and I get onto Center Street, get onto Fourth Street and shoot up. But coming down Center Street, I can go north at 40 miles an hour. [laughs] Don't tell, I'll probably have the cops out there listening to this.

But there's no retail or business that any mother would want to take her daughter to downtown to buy things. There are no dress shops. You know, downtown Reno used to be a cluster of dress shops and things you needed, and you knew everybody by their first name, and probably when you know everybody by their first name, it means your business is going downhill, because you shouldn't know that many people.

I can't quote the actual words, but the highest and best use of commercial property is foot traffic. Now, that's old scale, because now that you've got to have a big shopping center, you've got to be able to park a thousand cars, and there's nothing there on Fourth Street that would drag people down there other than if you're shopping for something very specific. I went down there to buy a blower from a guy—I don't even know what the name of the company is, but it's on Fourth Street—and they keep clean windows, and they have snowplows and small utility machinery for a household, let's say. Plus I'm sure

they handle it for the big guys, too. It's neat and clean, and I walked in there. I bought a couple of blowers from Home Depot, and they last about a year and then they're dead, and so I decided I might as well spend 250 bucks or something and get a decent one, and I did. And it's going to last and it does the job.

But there aren't that many of those kind of businesses down there anymore. They've found other areas, and go in other shopping centers. Lowe's and Home Depot, they killed the regular hardware stores, where you go in and get nuts and bolts. Now you go in and they're hanging in a bag, and you don't know if that's the one you want or not, but there's nobody there to help you. So I'm coming from thinking of the old days of the quality, where you'd go in and you'd buy \$5 worth of bolts, which would be \$65 now and you're by yourself buying them.

When I grew up, every kid didn't have a car. You either walked or you had a friend or something, and then eventually you got a car. And now a guy with four kids has to have four cars, and I wonder how they do it and buy groceries and live on a decent wage. So I have a lot of philosophy, but none of it comes together, right?

It's like I had a kid working for me, and I had a profit-sharing plan, and a lot of guys did extremely well on my profit-sharing plan. Then when I sold out, they trimmed it back and trimmed it back, and the guy who's got it now, he just cut it out. He didn't want a profit-sharing. But I figured if a guy's going to work for me for fifteen or twenty years, I want him to have something when he walks away.

I've got a couple of guys. One guy who worked with me, he had \$90,000, and he said, "I still get the interest off that \$90,000. I've never spent it." And he says, "It helps me with my Social Security and stuff." He's invested it somehow; I don't know how.

And others, this one kid, he had about \$12,000. I owned some of the shopping centers in a partnership, and when I sold out, I sold all my liquor stores to Scolari's, and I told the Scolaris, I said, "You keep this guy, this guy, and this guy. They're damn good employees." I told him about this one kid, I said, "He'll work his ass off for you." But he wouldn't.

I told him, "Leave your money in the profit-sharing, because it's giving you a good return, a damn good return."

He says, "Oh, no, we can't do it." He says, "We've got to have it to live on." He bought a Ford truck with those tires as big as this table. And he probably had \$25,000 into that Ford truck, and five years later, it's not even worth \$4,000. Some people know how to save and some people don't.

But all of a sudden, you're sixty-five years old and you're living on \$1,400 a month, and that's pretty tough.

You worked at your parents' market. You got into Ben's Liquor. It sounds like you've done a lot of other stuff, too.

I worked for the Food King. The Food King became Scolari's. It went from Food King to Warehouse Market to Scolari's. In that time, my first wife was dying, and I was probably going to get fired, so I quit because I knew I wasn't covering the bases. I was trying to cover my wife.

Then the guys who owned the place called me to get into the minimarket business, and that's when I opened that downtown store as a minimarket. Right away I saw that I wasn't going to make it there because the traffic wasn't right. So I went after the liquor business and never looked back. It's like McDonald's. McDonald's has got a system that makes them the greatest in the world. Maybe you don't like their hamburger, but you still buy it when you need one. They're one of the best-run companies in the

United States. They pay dividends and their stock keeps going up. They got a blueprint and they stick to it.

I didn't exactly know what I was doing getting into the liquor business, other than I used to buy liquor and sell it in the stores at a given price with decent profit. A lot of liquor got stolen out of supermarkets and still does.

Once I got in the liquor business and got a little bit under my belt and learned more and more, what happened is when we opened the second liquor store, we did so well that I never had to borrow any money to cover the inventory.

And I said, "That's the route," and I came to the conclusion that I'll never own my inventories, because I moved them fast enough. And it's like a freight company, UPS—big semis back up to their door and unload, and there's just a jillion boxes there, and at night there are no boxes left. They're all gone. Well, I turned my inventory so fast that I always owed but I never was behind on my bills, and it worked out very well for me.

And maybe on today's market with the different competition, since different states have gone different ways, it would be different. I depended tremendously on the gambling buses. Not anymore, because the Indian casinos stopped that—it wasn't profitable for the bus or the casinos to do it, because they couldn't get people to come. A big part of my business was the tourists who would come on those buses and go home with a lot of booze from Ben's.

I'm giving you philosophy, it's just philosophy that I wouldn't advise anybody to take. But I would keep numbers on stuff. I sold enough vodka out of my stores in Reno to keep every man, woman, and child in the state of Nevada drunk continuously.

In the seventies and eighties, that was the only thing we did better than Clark County. We generated more liquor tax up here than Clark County did down there with all the casinos. Now it would be completely different, I'm sure.

But my volume was so big that I was skating on ice, because if we had a bad week, we were in trouble. I told one guy, "If they ever close up Donner Summit for two days, I'm broke," because of the traffic. You've got to have that traffic.

I got out of the business—I sold it to my manager, my general manager, and my bookkeeper, and I practically put them in business. But they paid me off like clockwork, and now it's been sold again to Keshmiri, and I don't know how he does. I go in the stores once in a while, and they're not the big-volume stores they used to be. But he's operating on maybe a different premise for what he wants out of it, and to each his own.

We talked more about Ben's than we did about Fourth Street.

Did you want to say anything more about Fourth Street, or is there anything that I didn't ask you?

When I was just a kid from nowhere in Ely, Nevada, and growing up here, I met a tremendous number of nice people on Fourth Street—most of them are gone or dead. Their kids are around and I see them and enjoy them. I've enjoyed a good life in Reno, Nevada. It's been good to me, and I've got a lot of good friends, and now I'm just old and cranky.

You don't seem too cranky to me.

Well, ask my wife. [laughs]

Maybe I caught you on a good day.

No, that's me. But I don't know. And Sally—Sally recommended me?

She did, yes.

Well, I'll recommend Sally then. I love her. She's a sweetheart, isn't she?

She is. She's a really nice lady.

I went to school with her dad, Clyde. In fact, there was a Biglieri in the paper, and I don't know which Biglieri, in the business page where he was promoted to something in insurance. There were Les Biglieri, Clyde Biglieri, and Melvin Biglieri. But Melvin, I don't think had any kids. Usually you can figure out after thinking about it, but it's a guy probably in his forties who was promoted. And it might be a complete other Biglieri, I don't know. Those are the only ones I know.

But Sally's dad is Clyde. He's a good guy. He was a Folgers coffee salesman at one time. Then he went into real estate here.

Could you tell me a little bit about your wife?

My wife is my best friend.

Thanks, Ben. I appreciate your time.

NORM AVANSINO

Retired employee, Eveleth Lumber



Norm Avansino at his home in Reno in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Norman Avansino was born in Reno in 1917 and raised in Virginia City. He worked at the power company and the Farm Bureau in Reno in the 1930s, and for Senator Pat McCarran in his Washington, D.C. office. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, he worked briefly for the Veterans Administration and in 1948 began working in the front office at Eveleth Lumber, on East 4th Street. He left the company in 1980.

Alicia Barber: I'm here with Norm Avansino, and the date is Friday, September 13, 2013, and we're at his home up at Sky Peaks in Reno. Mr. Avansino, do I have your permission to record this interview today?

Norm Avansino: Yes, you do.

Great. I'm going to start out with some very easy questions. When and where were you born?

I was born in Reno, Nevada, on February the 11th, 1917, and at the time, my folks lived on Quincy Street, about approximately where what used to be the Holiday Inn, but now it's called what?

The Ramada.

The Ramada, correct.

So is it right around 5th Street, somewhere around there?

Yes.

Were you born at the house or was you were born in a hospital?

I'm sure it was at the house.

And what were your parents' names?

My dad's name was Louis Avansino, and my mother's name was Florence. Her maiden name was Ninnis, and she was from Silver City, Nevada. Of course, my dad was born in the Truckee Meadows out on a ranch out here somewhere, and he grew up most of his life on Huffaker Lane, I believe.

So his family went back a couple more generations in this area?

Well, no. My Italian grandparents came over from Italy and settled in the valley. And my mother's folks, they're from England and were miners and came over, first settled in Michigan or in there for the iron mines. Then they eventually moved out to the West Coast, and when Virginia City was started, they settled in Silver City, just below Virginia City. I had an older brother, three years older than myself, and he was born in Silver City, and then I was, of course, in Reno.

We moved up to Virginia City from Reno in 1920 when I was three years old, and then I spent the time through high school up there and went to grammar school at the First Ward School for three years and then was transferred and moved up to the Fourth Ward School at the south end of town from the fourth grade through high school.

And you graduated from high school in what year?

Graduated from high school in 1935, one of six members of the graduating class, and as far as I know, I'm the last one of that class.

Oh, is that right? I want to talk to you a lot more about your life in Virginia City. I'm wondering could you possibly remember anything of your life in Reno before you moved up there at age three? You were pretty young.

For some reason I can remember airplanes flying over our house there, and they were landing at this airstrip that's now the fairgrounds up off of Wells Avenue. Those were World War I fighter planes, small enough to land in there, of course, and I do remember that.

And I remember that we had chickens in the backyard, and somehow I remember one of the chickens one time got into the house or up to the kitchen door and, I remember, tried to eat something off of a plate that was out on the back porch. Why, I don't know.

Did that house that you lived in stay in the family for a while after that?

It was a rented house.

So did your family still have land in the Huffaker area where the family had been several generations before?

The people who stayed on the farm did. My dad's younger brother, Johnny, John Avansino, he lived there till he died, and he's got a daughter still living, Betty Malarkey now. She married Dave Malarkey, but I think Dave has since died. I don't know whether Betty still lives on the farm or who has it now. I don't know.

We could find out. That could be fun. You probably came down to Reno to visit when you were living in Virginia City during those years.

Often we'd come down on the V&T Railroad.

Oh, you would? Tell me about that. What was that like?

When my mother and I moved up to Virginia City, that's the way we went up, was on the V&T. I remember that.

So you said your mother and you moved up. Was your father already there?

Well, my dad and my older brother, they moved up first to kind of get settled before we moved up. He transferred up there as a barber.

I was thinking it's kind of a funny time to move up there when it seems that there wasn't a lot of activity.

In 1920 now, that's when the merger of the American Flat was going big. That was a big draw, and people were moving up there then. But when I graduated from high school, which was over ten years afterwards, it had started to go downhill, and it went downhill pretty fast. When Depression came, it went all down.

So when you would come down from there to visit people in Reno, you would take the train, and how far would you take the V&T? Where were you going to visit?

Well, we stopped at Huffaker Station out there and out to the ranch. I remember going out there. But if we came down here—I remember coming down when I was five years old, to get my tonsils out at the old—I guess it was then the St. Mary's Hospital, which is no more, of course. It's been gone a long time. But we stayed with some neighbors that we used to live by on Quincy Street while I recovered from my tonsillectomy.

Did you stay down there for some time, for several days?

Oh, no, just a day or two and then back up there again.

So what do you remember about that journey on the train to come down from Virginia City all the way to Reno? What was that like?

I just remember I can still see the chandeliers swaying as the road would be rough or going around the bend or something. I can remember those swaying. Well, to me it was a big deal to be on the train.

So chandeliers sounds pretty elegant. Was the whole inside very elegant?

Well, I thought it was, yes. It was kind of plush seats and so on. I do remember going over the Crown Point Bridge. In those days when the V&T ran in lower Gold Hill, there's a ravine there and they had a wooden bridge, and the train went right over the top of that, and that was pretty scary.

When you got a little older, say, in high school, would you come down and do different things in Reno with friends?

Well, yes, any athletic events, track meets and basketball games. I remember going to the University of Nevada when they had some one-act plays up there, and I was in one of those up there. I forgot who was it—I think Julia Baldini, later Vianni, was the teacher at that time, our English teacher. I think she got me involved in that.

So there were plays that were put on by the university, but they had kids from high school perform?

No, the plays were put on by our English department. They got them together, and we presented them in a contest up there—I don't think we won anything, but it was fun to be able to participate.

It sounds like even though it was a very small school in Virginia City, they had sports, they had theater. Do you feel like you had all sorts of activities?

Well, limited. The furthest trip we took as a basketball team when I was on the team was Lovelock, Nevada. You didn't go to Las Vegas, you didn't go to Elko. You got to Carson City, of course, Gardnerville, but all local. And the Stewart Indian School, we used to play them, I remember.

Oh, you did?

Yes. But it's nothing like it is now where it's nothing to go to Las Vegas or go over to Coalville or different places. One of the biggest things we could do was get a trip to Bowers' Mansion. That was a big deal.

What was that like then?

Well, it was great because they had two pools. They had the hot-water pool with the island in the middle and all that, and then the overflow from that went into the second pool, and that was the cold pool, we called it. There was a lot less heat in it than there was in the other one.

I remember climbing up the hill to Sandy and Eilley Orrum's graves, and their daughter's. What was her name? I've forgotten now. But they're buried up on the hill above.

Would you go down there as a family or would you go just by yourself on the train with other kids?

Well, we didn't take the train down there. That was always later—by then somebody would have a car, probably, and then they began to have a bus going back and forth to Virginia too. You wouldn't get the V&T up there every day after they got the bus going. He would deliver the mail and the papers. That was—well, you've heard of Ty Cobb, of course.

Yes.

Well, Ty Cobb's dad was the bus driver, Will Cobb, and in later years Ty and I were roommates at a boarding-room house over here before I got married.

Oh, no kidding. Where was that located?

On, I think it was Bell Street. It was off of West 2nd Street, and there was a church right on the corner. It's not there anymore. I'm sure it was Bell Street.

This is down in what we call the Powning's Addition down by the river?

Yes.

Just a couple blocks up from Riverside?

Yes, right.

Were there only young men in the boardinghouse?

Yes. Threlkel's Ballpark was on 4th Street, and they used to have semi-pro players come and play on the team. I remember we had one of their players staying at the boardinghouse with us, Tony Gomez. He was quite a character, too. That's about all I remember of that.

So is that where you moved after you graduated from high school in Virginia City? You moved down to Reno.

I moved down to Reno, but I got room and board to go to Reno Business College, and it was—well, you've heard of Forrest Lovelock. Forrest Lovelock had owned the—Richardson Lovelock, they owned the Ford agency on 4th Street. Well, his mother and his sister had an extra room in their place where they were renting on St. Lawrence Avenue, and when I came down to go to business college, we were asking around where there might be a place where I could stay, and their name popped up. So my brother and I went out and looked it over, and I took a room there with them, with Juanita Lovelock, that was Forrest's sister, and his mother. And it cost me all of, I think, \$35 a month.

While you were going to the business college, did you have a job at the same time? Was this when you worked for the power company?

No, this is before I got there. I paid for business college with money I saved shining shoes in my dad's barbershop and peddling papers and delivering special deliveries for the post office.

Then you were saying you actually headed back up to Virginia City. What was the job that took you up there?

Well, it was Christmas vacation time, so I went back up there and I got a job, the WPA job, as a timekeeper. They had a crew up there repairing the old sewer line and different things that the county needed.

Alan Bible was our district attorney up there at the time, who later became a U.S. senator, you know. I worked out of his office as a timekeeper for the WPA, like I say, and the main office was down in Carson. There was a fellow by the name of Casson, I believe, and I would turn my time period things into him and all, but that was all for a handsome sum of \$44 a month.

Anyway, I stayed with that until the next fall. Then I came back down to Reno and connected with Wyman Evans, who worked at the power company, and with Wyman's help, I got a job there in writing up bills and using an addressograph machine printing up the bills that would be sent out. I ran the addressograph machine and printed up the addresses on them.

Addressograph?

You never heard of an addressograph?

Is that a brand?

No, that's a machine, an addressograph. That was probably the name of it, too. But anyway, your bill stub had about four different things on it, and you'd have a nameplate that you would have to work through an addressograph machine to get a nameplate, then go into a file, and then this—it was really complicated. Anyway, you'd sit there and you'd put your foot on the thing, and it would come down and would print this. You'd put the nameplate in there, and then you'd start with these handbills, and you'd take them and put them in there individually so it would print this part, this part, and this part. But you had to keep your fingers out of the way, because that darn thing would come down and hit your fingers if you didn't.

[laughs] Did it ever get you?

Well, I imagine it did at first. It was surprising, they told me that very few people could get that thing synchronized so you could just pick them up and keep going without having to stop. That was the main goal, was for me to be able to do that, and I was able to do it. You'd put your foot down and you'd grab the bill and put it through. This thing would come down and stamp the name and the address on different parts of the stub, bill. Then you'd grab the next one. By then the machine would flip out the old addressograph plate that was there and put a new one in. Then you'd do this again. I did that for \$75 a month.

Did that seem like a good wage to you?

Well, yeah, from \$44, it was. [laughter] Then later I got off of that.

In the meantime, besides that, you'd deliver mail around to all the different offices, the heads of the different departments of the power company. Then I graduated from there into the billing department itself, and I'd be writing up the bills or putting the figures into bills to be sent out and all. I think for that job I got \$85 a month.

I stayed there till 1939. No, I stayed there less than that. I think it was 1938, I got a chance to work over with the farm, a combination of County Extension work and Farm Bureau work and 4-H and AAA. There was a combination of all these agencies, and they needed somebody to kind of run the office part of it there for meetings and scheduling meetings and all that. And you worked with County Extension agents there. You had a County Extension agent and a homemakers' agent and an assistant. Anyway, let's see, where was I going with that?

You getting a new job. What building was the power company in, and then what building were you working in for the new job?

The power company was in what used to be the old bank building that was later torn down and has been replaced, and the City Hall was right on First Street. The power company office, which was part of the bank building, was right next to it across the alley. Then across the street from that was the Majestic Theater and the YMCA and the old post office on the corner of Virginia and First Street.

So the power company was in the building on the northeast corner of First and Virginia. Was that the Arcade Building?

No, it was right on First Street. We had part of the bank building itself. They rented space from the bank. That's all been torn down and all replaced. So it's hard to picture it.

Then when you got a job with the Farm Bureau and those other agencies, was that in the old Federal Building?

No, that's in the present Post Office Building.

Okay, because that would be a pretty new building at that point.

Brand new, yes. Yes, we were upstairs in the northeast corner on the second floor.

I've just recently been in there because they're going to reopen that building as offices. They're really nice offices.

I want to see it when they do it.

They're very spacious and they have a lot of big windows.

Yes.

Was it a pleasant place to work?

It was nice because our office overlooked the river, and I could look down and see the river and the ducks flying by. In the wintertime, I could see the big chunks of ice coming down the river and everything. We had some pretty bad winters in those days, and a lot of cool weather. I remember the ice coming down that river.

Was that building completely full of offices at that point?

It was full.

The inside, the atrium was open at that time, wasn't it? They closed it in later, but was there a central area?

No, it was all closed in. The downstairs was all closed in with the boxes and the windows and everything. Pete Peterson's office was there next to the elevators.

On the second floor?

First floor.



The Downtown Post Office and Federal Building soon after its construction in 1934. Image courtesy of Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries.

Oh, he was right down there in those great big offices that are facing Virginia Street?

Yes, he was facing Virginia. Right.

You said you were on the second or the third floor?

We were on the second. I was facing the river and I was in the northeast corner on the second floor.

So what other kinds of offices were around you in that building?

The FBI was right next to us, and I forgot who else was down there.

That building has a great history.

Oh, it has.

So you worked in different places, and then were you continuing to live in the boardinghouse, or did you move at some point?

Well, let's see. I continued to live in the boardinghouse at 2nd Street and Bell until I got married, which was in April of 1939. Then we got an apartment in the Frandsen Apartments, the old Frandsen Apartments. Have you heard of them?

I've heard of them. Where is that?

Well, you know where the [Sands] Regency is now?

Yes.

Well, the Frandsen Apartments were about there, and that was a nice place to live. There again, I think we only paid \$37.50 for rent and so on, but that was a nice place.

And tell me your wife's name.

Marie. And she was Garrett. Her dad was a railroader, a brakeman on the railroad, and they lived in Sparks. She went to high school in Sparks.

And how did you meet her?

Oh, I met her very romantically on the train going to San Francisco.

Really? Tell me about that.

Well, in those days, one of the highlights of the university, at least, was a football game against St. Mary's down in the Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. The train, the Southern Pacific, would run an excursion train down, and so I thought that it would be fun to take my vacation on this excursion trip down to see this ballgame in San Francisco. So I got on the excursion train, and while on there, I met Marie going down to San Francisco, and that's how we met.

Was she still in high school?

She was in college then. I was working for the power company.

I want to fast-forward a little bit just to talk about your time at Eveleth Lumber on 4th Street, and we'll come back and talk about what you did in the meantime, because you had an incredible career doing so many things.

I was in a lot of things.

Working for Senator McCarran in Washington, D.C.

Right.

And then, of course, serving in the U.S. Navy, and then you were telling me, kind of inadvertently, the Marines.

Yes, right. I didn't think I was going to wind up in the Marines for a year, but I did.

And then coming back and working for the Veterans Administration. I wonder, did you end up buying property in Sparks because your wife was from Sparks? Did she want to move back there?

That's probably why, yes. All her friends were down there, and they were coming back from the war, too, same as I was. There were three of us who got together and were going to buy lots in this one block and be neighbors, all three of us, and I was the only one who finally bought a lot. The rest of them didn't.

Oh, they never did. [laughs] So you bought a lot. This must have been maybe the late forties by then that you bought your property there?

Well, let's see. I got out of the navy in 1945, and I bought my lot in '46, I think, yes.

And where was that located exactly?

Located on G Street in Sparks, G and 19th, not quite on the corner of G and 19th.

So this was just north of Prater Way. Were they calling it Prater Way at that point?

They called it Prater Way, yes.

Were there many other houses up there already?

There weren't any. There was just one old shack up on the end of the block.

Had it been a ranch or a dairy?

All of that had been a ranch, I guess, yes, and the street wasn't even in. I mean, it was just a cow trail up there.

Wow.

And there was no curb and gutter, no sidewalk, no street, so that I had to take care of all that. That's right as they put them in. Not like it is today.

No. That's a big responsibility. So there were some things along Prater Way, I guess, some businesses.

It was filled. Yes, it was loaded.

Do you remember some of the early businesses or places that were along Prater Way right around where you lived when you first got there? You were pretty close to Deer Park.

Yes, right there by Deer Park. Oh, there was a grocery store right down the street, and then Ideal Drug got in there later. And Ross Photo Studio, they might still be there.

On Prater?

Yes. There was a bigger grocery store and a little grocery store, and I forgot the real ones that were there then. That's been too long ago.

But it seemed like you were close to a lot of things to shop for, where you could get food and other things.

Oh, yes, we got along. That was a good little neighborhood, yes.

What was Deer Park like at that point? Was that pool there?

I think that's the same original pool that was there all the time, yes, and they called it Deer Park. There weren't any deer there when I was there, but that was before my time.

It looked like all the way down, even going toward 4th Street in Reno, there were lots of little restaurants. We have the Coney Island Bar there now.

It's still there, yes.

The Copenhagen Bar had been closer to Coney Island, and then it looks like they moved when the freeway went in, and there were a lot of other ones.

That Casale's, she's still there. Yes, we had a lot of little restaurants on 4th Street. Of course, 4th Street in those days was the main street. It was Highway 40.

What was it like then when it was Highway 40?

Well, it was just busy, that's all. [laughs] Nothing special I remember about it, just a busy place. Then when they put in the new freeway, that changed all that, too.

I'm wondering how the job with Eveleth Lumber came up.

That goes back to my navy days, believe it or not. When I left the island of Guam to come home, I got on a troop transport, and we were in the bunks. I don't know, have you seen a troop transporter with the bunks about ten high, stacked one on top the other? That's the way they were. Anyway, I had a bunk,

oh, about three high from the floor, and right next to me about the same spot on the other tier was a fellow that I got to know, and he was coming to Reno also. We got to be friends aboardship, but I didn't ever know him in the service or anything. After we got back to the States when I worked for the Veterans Administration, I knew him there and helped him out and so on.

Anyway, he knew the fellow that worked at Eveleth Lumber Company somewhere, through his wife, I think, and I guess the subject of getting help at Eveleth Lumber came to him, and they offered him a job there to help out at Eveleth Lumber. For some reason, he didn't take it, but he mentioned my name to them and told me about it.

So, I went up to see about it, and at that time I thought the Veterans Administration was going to wind down and not have very much work, so I thought I'd better get out of here and get something on my own, because at the Veterans I was helping people get jobs, training on the job, going to school, and everything else, and I was just sitting there on a \$300-a-month job, and they were getting jobs \$500 a month or something like that, and I thought I'd better get something better. So I decided to take the job. That's how I got that job.

What was your friend's name who had brought it to you?

I can't remember right now.



The Eveleth Lumber building was built in 1902. Image courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

So did you have to interview? Was Mr. Eveleth in charge at that point?

Mr. Eveleth was in charge, and his son-in-law was managing the place at the time, and they needed somebody in the office. So for the next twenty-five years, I was on the counter and the telephone, writing up orders and listening to people and their wants and their troubles and all.

I was a bookkeeper, like I say, and filling orders, loading lumber and plywood and sheetrock on their grandmother's top of her car sometimes. They were always sending somebody down to get supplies for them when they needed something and with no truck. So we'd try and do the best we could by piling stuff on their car and tying it up with rope through the doors.

Could just describe the operation of that business? It had been there a long, long time before Eveleth bought it.

Oh, yes, it had been there as Verdi Lumber Company for years, and it was a retail outlet for the Verdi Lumber Company in Verdi. They had a warehouse and they had a mill. Of course, the mill is still there, what's left of it.

In Verdi?

No, on 4th Street. We had a cabinet shop back there where you built cabinets and made doors, windows, cabinets, and anything that came along. If somebody wanted a piece of lumber planed down, we had a planer back there and all, and circular saws and a lot of heavy equipment in there.

Was the lumber coming in on the train still?

The only lumber we got when I was there on the train was hardwood from the East Coast, but anything else by then was coming in on trucks, and most of our lumber, pine lumber, came from Loyaltan, California. We got clear pine lumber from them, and then, of course, we got Douglas fir down from Oregon, but that would be by truck.

So you weren't just a supplier of lumber to people. You actually built the products there, cabinets and everything.

We actually built things, yes.

When you had the lumber coming, you specifically ordered different types of lumber to come to the lumber company?

Well, yes, for our own use, but then you'd be selling off of that, too.

And did you also sell lumber to people who were constructing buildings and houses?

Oh, sure. That was our main business.

So how many people were working in that space at the same time? There were a lot of different jobs to do at the lumber company.

Of course, we had a truck driver and we had yardmen, and we had cabinet men and we had saw filers. Circular saws, when they'd bring them in to get filed, there was a man down in the basement of the mill, he had equipment to file, to sharpen saws, and he sharpened handsaws, circular saws, whatever you wanted. He had quite a little business going around there.

So there were multiple buildings. We were looking at a picture before of what the area looks like now, and you were saying that the main buildings are still there.

Right.

In the front, closer to 4th Street, but right behind that alley—I guess it's an alley, is it? There's a smaller road south of 4th Street, and then there's a small building that you said was the office building, and then a bigger building. Is that where all the work was done?



Norm Avansino in front of Eveleth Lumber's retail shop, where he worked. The photograph appeared in a national advertisement for the Yellow Pages appearing in *Building Materials Merchandiser* magazine in December 1965.

That was the mill building.

The large building is the mill building.

And we had a garage on one end, and the saw filer was down in here by the garage.

More on the east side of the building, then, was where the saw filer was.

Yes.

Then the building a little to the north was the office building?

That was the office, and we stored lumber in there, stored our moulding in there. We got our moulding out of Loyalton, too, our different moulds that we used, crown mould and bed mould and doorstep. We had it all in bins there, and then we could load out of there and deliver to our customers.

So you started working there in 1948, and I saw that there was a really big fire there in 1950. Do you remember that? Apparently there was just a very destructive fire there in July of 1950.

It was on a Saturday afternoon when nobody from the lumberyard was working. We used to take Saturday afternoon off, and that's when the Indians would gather over there in the lumber storage shed we had. And that's where the fire started, on the other side of the Wells underpass. I guess I heard about it over the radio, and so I jumped in the car and rushed up there and went in the back door and opened the safe and grabbed the records out, because I thought the whole thing was going to go. But it was on the other side of the overpass, and all we really lost was our little Chevy car that we had, that the boss would drive. But it was closer to the rail than the building, and it did catch fire and we lost it, on the east side. But everything else was on the other side, and we lost everything over there.

What was over there?

There was a storage shed for lumber, the heavy lumber. We had our railroad access on that side, where sometimes we would get lumber by rail. Most of it came by truck, but whenever we got hardwood, like oak, or some of those things, it would come from back east, and usually it would be combined with other lumberyards out west here, so they would park it on our siding over there, and we would unload ours as we got to it, and ship it on to whoever would be the next customer.

But anyway, that fire occurred not long after I started to work there. It was on the weekend, so that's why it got started and got out of control so fast.

Were you there when the fire trucks were trying to put it out?

Oh yeah, I got there before they did. But I really don't remember too much about that fire.

Did the company rebuild?

No, they didn't rebuild at all on that side. Everything was moved to the east side.

Was that prior to the drug store building going up, or had that already been there?

Well, it didn't bother the drug store at all. There was enough space between the lumberyard and the buildings that faced Fourth Street. They weren't in danger.

You mentioned that sometimes there were people who would hang around in the lumberyard or would steal the lumber.

Oh, yes. That's because there was no fence around the lumberyard. Mr. Eveleth never put a fence around up around the lumberyard, and the Indians used to gather over there on the lumber piles and in the cribs where we put lumber and all, and they would have their parties over there on the weekends a lot of time.

Why do you think they'd come there, of all places?

Well, just nobody would bother them.

So you remember seeing them around a lot?

Yes. We only worked a half a day on Saturday. We had to work six days a week, but we closed up at noon on Saturday. So they could do what they wanted over there Saturdays or Sunday. Then there was a shantytown on the river down below, and they're the ones that used to steal the lumber and build their shacks down there.

On the other side of the railroad and on the bank of the river?

Yes, and that was on the other side of the overpass, too, down below. Desert Glass was between them and us.

Were there a lot of break-ins? Was theft a big problem there?

Well, after a while, we had a problem. They were breaking into our office building. They were breaking the windows. Some guy would come and throw something through the window and break the window and come in and take stuff. That happened a number of times, and finally when the lumberyard was sold in 1968 and the Eveleths and everybody got out of it, then they put a fence up. Then that stopped the break-ins of our place.

But a lot of times I'd come to work on Sunday or Monday morning and find a window broken out, and glass all over the floor, and sometimes I'd even find paint spilled on the floor. We had a hiding place for our change, anyway, and they never did find it, but we had a big old safe in there, and it was never locked. You could open it up and look in there. We tried to keep our records in there, and, fortunately, they didn't swipe those, but they were looking for money all the time.

And what did they take? Tools and things, too?

Well, they'd take tools, yes. They'd steal tools even while you're in there sometimes. Like you'd have a customer and they would send you out to get something in the mill or something, and while you were gone, they'd probably take tools. When you'd go to take inventory, you find out you're missing this, missing that. You know you didn't sell it. It was gone. So we really took a beating there, I'm sure.

So was the situation where you had a lot of customers who were repeat customers who you knew very well?

Well, that's it. We lived on retail more than wholesale, yes. Most of the other yards in town were looking for wholesale business and contractors and all, and we were looking more for retail business. That's what we lived on.

Selling wood products but also paint and other things?

Paint and wood products and hardware and tools and, of course, our cabinet shop like I was telling you in the back, that helped out, too, because when a lot of people wanted something done, they'd come to us and we'd sent them out to Otto, who was our cabinetmaker, and he could build anything. He trained over in Germany.



Participants in a walking tour enter the historic Eveleth Lumber building in 2013. Image courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Did folks who worked at Eveleth Lumber help build any parts of those two houses that you built, your own houses?

Yes. For my second house, I got a lot of my stuff from our cabinet shop and our millwork. Of course, being in the lumber business when I built my second house, where I had something to say about what was going to go in it, I had one room, one bedroom upstairs where I put in knotty pine, and then the other room I finished off up there, I put in in redwood. I had to get doors to match, so for the doors that I had for my closets, I would have Otto make the sliding doors for closets up there that would match the redwood or the knotty pine.

So you had a real showcase for the lumber company in your house. [laughs] The second house was right next door to your first house?

Yes. Right.

Do you remember many of your regular customers?

Washoe Medical Center was one. When they remodeled a portion of their building, they wanted to do it in redwood, so we provided that for the conference room and some other spaces.

I wonder what you remember about the time when the Wells overpass was being constructed. That was in the late 1960s, and that was obviously very disruptive to your business, I would imagine.

Oh, it was, yes.

Do you remember the decision to make it happen, and were the Eveleths concerned about it? Was there a lot of activity about that?

Well, they just accepted it. It interrupted us, all right, because you couldn't get the flow of traffic through there while they were building, you know, because they did build it higher over the old underpass, and it disrupted the traffic quite a bit.

But one of the biggest things that caused us concern was when they put the oil pipeline through. You know, they brought the pipeline down right on the side of the railroad until they got to the Wells overpass, and then that caused the old pipeline concern, so they had to go and bring the pipeline around and up before you got the underpass from 4th Street. Between the underpass and 4th Street, there was enough room for them to bring the pipeline around and in front of our building and down the alley, our alley.

Well, they really worked on Mr. Eveleth there to get an okay to do this. They took him to dinner, he and his wife and all, and treated him real royally. I think they offered him a handsome sum of \$5,000 to be able to put that pipeline across leading into the underpass and down the alley, and he let them do it.

These were people from the city who were trying to convince him? Is that who it was?

No, it was the pipeline company themselves.

So they were told they had to do something.

They had to do something.

And they needed permission.

And they could have given him a heck of a lot more, I know, but I was not any part of that.

Did you think that it made sense to create the Wells overpass? What was the reason for building that? Did they think traffic was very bad at 4th and Wells?

Well, I can't remember the details on that, and everybody at the time thought it was a great idea, I know that. But I wasn't too much of a party to that, so I didn't know.

The other thing that was happening in that area in the sixties that I saw was that there was an urban renewal project where they were doing slum clearance and calling a lot of the houses in that area slums. It looked like it was around the area where you said you were born. They demolished a lot of houses.

That's probably when they were trying to build the original Holiday Inn. That's about the spot where I was born.

That's right. So you think they knocked down those houses to build the hotel?

They probably cleared them out. That's how they got that. By clearing out that old part, they were able to get some cheap property, I guess.

It seems like it was a very Italian neighborhood, from what I understand.

It was, yes. Well, like I told you, the only name that I can remember was Bevilacqua, for sure, and there are some others that I could probably think of, but that's the one that comes to mind first. But then I was only three years old, so I didn't know too much at the time there.

Another person that we have interviewed is Ben Akert.

Ben Akert, yes.

Do you remember his parents' store?

Oh, sure. That was right across the highway from us.

Busy little place.

When Ben was growing up, he started to get liquor in there and so on, and that's where he got started in the liquor business was with his dad, his folks over there. Yes, they were a nice, nice family.

I think he was saying there was a drugstore right around there somewhere, too.

The drugstore was right on the corner.

Was that on your side of 4th Street?

No, it was right across.

So just on the west side of where the overpass is now.

It was Hale's Drugstore at the time, and they had a soda fountain in there and they had a lunch counter. Speaking of lunches, I had to eat over there a few times, and sometimes if you wanted to take a customer to get a cup of coffee or he wanted to take you, we'd go over to get a cup of coffee over at the Hale's Drugstore counter.

Would you typically bring your own lunch, or how would you normally eat lunch when you were working?

Well, I would usually go home, but sometimes I'd have to bring my lunch, yes.

What do you remember about the Flanigan warehouse while you were working at Eveleth? Was that a pretty active space?

It was an active place, yes. We used to buy a lot of stuff from them. Three widows owned it, and they would trade off managing: Mrs. Schair, Mrs. Doten, and Mrs. Record. That family later opened Record Supply.

What did they sell at the Flanigan warehouse?

Oh, golly, what did they sell? I think they sold cement and lime and a lot of building supplies, but stuff that we would have to buy, so we'd buy from them. Then the Morrison & Merrill that was on Park Street, they were a wholesale lumber outfit too, and they had different products there we could buy. Harry Bergman ran the service station on the corner, in front of our building. He later owned the Dairy Queen and used to give me his extra cans so I could put paint in them for our customers.

It was an interesting combination of industrial places and commercial, retail stores, but then there were houses around there, too, so it did feel like you were pretty close to residential areas?

Well, and then there were a lot of motels, yes. Yes, it was a little combination of everything.

Do you remember when that motel was built on the site where the Nevada Packing used to be?

Yes, I remember then. I think the first Denny's that we had in Reno was in that building that they built there, and that was a big thing to have a Denny's move in right across the street from us.

I bet. [laughs] Pete Cladianos wrote about that in the book that he wrote based on his oral history and was saying they were pretty excited to have a Denny's there.

Right.

Were you still working at the lumber company when Interstate 80 was put in?

Oh, yes, I was still there. I thought that was a great thing to have it up there, but it sure took the business off of 4th Street.

Your business wasn't oriented toward tourists or drive-by traffic as much as others, so was the business at Eveleth Lumber affected much?

It was, yes. But for the interstate travel, it had to be done. I mean, for all the trucking business and everything, they had to have a better way to get through town.

Did it seem like a pretty sudden change for 4th Street when that opened?

Well, I don't remember that part of it. I just accepted whatever it was, I guess.

So you would have driven down from Prater to 4th every day. That was your commute to go down that stretch.

Oh, that was my commute, yes.

Did you go very often into a lot of those restaurants along there?

Well, yes, we'd try them out. If a new one opened up, we'd have to try it out. Oh, yes, whenever I didn't take my lunch, I'd have to eat somewhere, so I wouldn't always go to the same one. I'd try anything that new was in the offering.

What were some of your favorite places?

Oh, I can't remember the name of them now. There was one that later became a model railroad place. Is it still there?

Reno Rails is there. We talked to Lilli Moffitt, who owns the business now.

Yes, that was a restaurant at one time. That was a pretty good restaurant. I think that was one of my favorites at the time.

What kind of restaurant was it? Do you remember what kind of food they had?

No, I don't remember that.

The little brick building, right?

I think they were the first tenants. I don't know if they built it as a restaurant to start with. I guess they did.

That's pretty close to the Sutro Motel.

Right.

Just a little bit further down the road. There just seemed to be a lot of family-owned places a lot of people liked to go. Did you ever go to any of the drive-ins that were closer on Prater Way? There was Ray's Drive-in and there were a couple drive-in places, it seems.

Did you say there was Lee's?

Lee's, right.

Oh, yes. Lee, Hudson Lee. I think the guy's name was Hudson Lee.

Lee was the last name?

Hudson Lee. Yes, Lee was their last name. He got into the building business, too, later on, and he had a partner, but I can't think of his name right now. Then they developed a dry lubricant that they were pushing, and I can't remember the name of it now, but instead of it being black graphite, which is real messy, they had one that was silver-colored and it didn't mess things up as bad as graphite did. They were getting that on the market, and I'll bet somewhere in my stuff I've got a thing of that. If I find it, I'll let you know.

Were they successful? [laughs]

Yes. I hadn't thought of Hudson Lee for a long time.

So the Reno Brewing Company was still open when you were working at Eveleth Lumber?

About three o'clock in the afternoon when it was nice and hot and maybe we were a little slow in business, a couple of our employees used to wander down to the brewery. They'd get a free brew at the brewery.

They didn't have a bar or a restaurant. They would just go into where they were bottling it?

They just knew the people in there, and they'd welcome them in and hoist a beer or two and send them back up to us, I guess. [laughter] One of these fellows that started them doing it, he's a real character. I'm not going to give his name or anything. He had been in China working. These are all his stories, working with Chiang Kai-shek's army over there and so on. He seemed to know a lot about him, and I think a lot of his stories were pretty true, but how embellished they were, I don't know, but he could tell you stories about the Chinese and so on. He got to be a character around here with our own police department, and he even showed the local narcotics people how to go ahead and process birdseed into whatever they wanted. He was knowledgeable in a lot of things.

He was Chinese?

No, he was not Chinese. He was English.

English from England, you mean, English?

Well, I think he was originally, but he got to China and he had a big career over there. He married a Chinese girl and he's supposed to have had a Chinese daughter, but I never saw either one of them. He was in Nevada because it was not worth his life to go back into California.

What was his connection to the brewery? [laughs]

Well, he's the one that discovered the fact that they could get free beer down there by making acquaintances with the brewery people.

So he worked at the lumber company?

Yes.

Were there people who tended to work at the lumber company for long periods of time?

Oh, yes. We had Bill Hardesty, a truck driver, for years. We had Sam Kemp as the yardman and lumber stacker. For years we had Ed McDonald working in our mill building behind. He was our sash-and-door man, making the sash and door. Then we had Otto Depping, who was our cabinetmaker. They all worked there as long as they wanted to. George Gadda worked there in the summers. He ran the shop at one of the local junior highs.

And Mr. Eveleth, his initials were A.T. What was his name?

Yes, A.T. Eveleth.

You just called him A.T.?

Yes. Alpheus Thaddeus.

Is that what his name was?

I think that's right. I think it was Thaddeus, A.T.

Was he older than you?

Oh, he was an old man when I was there.

Oh, he must be, because worked for Verdi Lumber Company—

He worked up in Verdi.

—early in the century. Right.

Well, in his younger days, he was the manufacturing pharmacist over in California. That's what he did over there. Then how he got to Verdi Lumber Company, I don't know, but he had one of the better jobs up there. Then when Verdi Lumber sold out, then he took over the retail yard here in Reno, and that's how he got that.

You said that his son-in-law worked there, too?

Yes, his son-in-law was manager when they hired me.

What was his name?

Blakeley, "Spud" Blakeley. I just knew him as Spud. His brother was Bill.

So many of these businesses had baseball teams and sports teams, didn't they, around that time?

Well, Threlkel was really the only one that had them here, and he had the Reno Garage down on Center Street.

Would you go to the baseball park on 4th Street and watch games sometimes?

Oh, once in a while, but not very often. That was in competition to the Moana Ballpark.

Oh, sure. Did they really feel competitive?

I think they were at that time, yes.

You said at some point the Eveleths sold the business, and then did you keep working there after that? Who bought it?

Two young people who worked at Home Lumber Company, they got together with a contractor in town. Stuart was the main guy at Home Lumber, and Isaacson. And the contractor was Tuttle. Anyway, the three of them got together and bought it, and they kept me on and I stayed with them five years, and I had enough. I had an offer to work for a contractor that I'd been selling lumber to and helping out, and his name was Meisser, Meisser Construction. I stayed with him three years, and then I moved on to McKenzie Construction for five years after that, and then I quit. I had had enough of everything by then.

You were at the same company for so long, what were some of the biggest changes that happened, either with the machinery or the nature of the business or the kind of work you did? Were there some big changes?

Well, like I say, when I worked with Eveleth, we catered to retail. When these kids came in, they worked for Home Lumber, who sold to contractors. They wanted big stuff, and they were trying to get that kind of business. I stayed there to take care of my retail trade that I had built up and the paint business I had built up and so on, but it didn't work out as good as I thought it would.

So you must have had a pretty big showroom for the retail at some point.

When I first went there, we knocked out a wall and put in all this paint and everything that they didn't have before I got there.

So this is in that front building where the office was?

Yes. And we got more hardware, too, as I was in there.

So it sounds like it was kind of a separate operation with the retail and then what was happening at the woodworking.

Yes. Two of the young guys, they didn't treat my retail just as I would want them to and so on.

So when you left, is that when they stopped doing retail, or did they stop that even before you left?

Oh, no, they kept it going, and I don't know how much longer they stayed there. I don't know when they quit. Well, they had their own contractor friends that they brought from Home Lumber when they moved in there, so they were doing pretty good business that way.

Did they continue to call it Eveleth Lumber?

Yes, they kept the name.

I wonder when that closed. There is a big building where they're storing tires now.

I don't know. I haven't been there. The building is the one that faces right on the alley. That's where the office was. There never was a great office. It was an old building.



In 2013, the Eveleth Lumber building was being used to store tires, which were stacked around some of the lumber's company's original machinery. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Was there parking in front of the building then? Where did people park when they came?

Well, they just parked in the alley.

It looks like it had been a lumber company for a very long time, so those are very old buildings. Did you find that there were problems with the buildings since the buildings were really pretty old even then?

Well, we had to do some work on the roof once in a while. They didn't spend much money on the place, that's for sure.

Then when you finished, you worked for a couple different contractors and then you retired.

Then I retired, yes.

That was in the 1980s sometime?

1980 is when I quit.

And did you live at the house in Sparks after that?

Yes.

And you were there for many years.

Yes. I lived there until—well, the second house, I had McKenzie build it for me in—that was about 1950, 1951, I think we started the house. Then, like I told you before, it was a two-story house with a high gabled roof. The upstairs was left unfinished, and then I took that on myself with this project of different lumber.

Then later I built a huge family room out the back. When my daughter got into high school and had all of her friends around, we needed more room, so we added on. That room was a 20-foot room-by-14. It was a good-size room, and I paneled that in mahogany for my wood.

Beautiful.

So, anyway, when it came time for me to sell my house to move up here, the second looker bought my house.

They probably hadn't seen anything like it.

Probably not. Anyway, they came down from Lake Tahoe. They sold their house up there for a good sum, and they had money, and they looked at my house, and we gave them a price and they took it, and that was it.

And you've lived here since then.

That's why I'm able to live up here for a while.

I meant to drive by those houses, because they're still there. I've looked at the maps and seen where they are, so I want to go back and look.

Well, I think that's enough for today. I don't want to go too far, but thank you so much for talking to me.

Well, I hope it's worthwhile for you.

It's wonderful. Thank you.

DICK BELAUSTEGUI

Retired engineer and childhood resident of East 4th Street neighborhood



Dick Belaustegui in his neighborhood near East 4th Street in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Dick Belaustegui grew up in a diverse neighborhood on Eureka Street, just north of East 4th Street, in the 1940s and 1950s. His father, Bonifacio “Bunny” Belaustegui, an ironworker, worked for Martin Iron Works, Macauley Iron Works, and Reno Iron Works. Dick worked at Pinky’s Market on East 4th Street as a young man. An electrical engineer, he worked for IBM and later, the University of Nevada, Reno.

Emerson Marcus: I’m sitting with Dick Belaustegui, a longtime Reno resident who lived on the corner of Eureka and Sixth Streets and had a paper route on Fourth Street in the 1940s. He attended Reno High School, correct?

Dick Belaustegui: Correct.

His father worked at Martin Iron Works on Fourth Street. We are at his home in Southwest Reno. It's Wednesday, June 13, 2012.

Dick, can you tell me a little bit about your grandparents and why they moved to Nevada?

Yes, my father's parents are from the Basque country in Spain, from Viscaya, which is the province, in a little town way up in the hills. My grandpa was, I think, number seven of twelve children, and there was just nothing available for him there, so he made his way down to Bilbao, which is a seaport in the Basque country, and became a ship's carpenter. He sailed apparently all over the world, and he finally jumped ship in Port Blakely, Washington, where he became a carpenter, building sailing ships for coastwise commerce on the West Coast. My dad was born there in 1903. He was a twin, but his twin brother died a day or two later.

A couple of years later, my grandfather was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and they said he had to move to a dry climate, so he came to northern Nevada and was a ranch foreman at Taylor Canyon. He worked up there for a number of years, saved his money, and then he moved to Battle Mountain and built the Commercial Hotel, which was a Basque hotel, restaurant, and bar. A couple or three years later, that hotel burned down and he moved back up to Taylor Canyon and worked there and saved enough money, and they moved back to Battle Mountain and rebuilt the hotel, which is still standing today and was sold four or five years ago to a family that's still running the hotel and restaurant there. So that's kind of a quick summary on my grandfather's side.

My grandfather was a sheep rancher in northern Nevada, and he helped get the first Nevada grazing law passed so that people could use public lands to graze their animals. He used to run sheep all the way from Austin—Grass Valley near Austin—all the way up to the Snake River and back. My father, when he was fourteen, sixteen, seventeen, somewhere in there, was a sheepherder on that route for ten years. He walked from Grass Valley to the Snake River and back. He also had farms in Fallon that he used to raise hay on to feed the animals in the wintertime when they were down in Grass Valley.

It was when my dad was working at the farm in Fallon that he met my mother, because my mother's parents emigrated from Germany in the 1920s and were in the Bay Area, but with all the union strikes that were going on down there, my grandfather homesteaded a small ranch in Fallon, and it's that ranch that shared a well with the Belausteguis', where my dad met my mother and, later, they got married. So that's a quick background on both my grandparents.

When did your parents move to Reno?

1939. I was just a baby. They were working a farm in Fallon that was owned by my grandfather. It's the first ranch below Lahontan Dam. It's on Cadet Road, and it was 640 acres, one-square-mile ranch. With the Great Depression and everything on, they weren't making any money on the farm. They were in debt at the end of the year after they sold their crops. Then the brooder house for turkeys burned down, so they lost that crop, and the ranch house burned down, so Mom and Dad put my sister and me in a car and drove to Reno. That was sometime in 1939. We lived in a motel for a while, and Dad got a job at Martin Iron Works as a steelworker.

When did you move to the place on Eureka and Sixth?

About 1944 or '45. We lived in a little house at 614½ Eureka in an alley. It was a rental house. I remember my dad put the first running water in the house, and he put a water heater in it, so it was pretty primitive originally. The house still stands.

It was about 1944 or '45 that the house on the corner of Sixth and Eureka was owned by Grace and "Loggy" Lagomarsino, the family that Lagomarsino Canyon's named after. It was a wedding present for them when they got married, and my family was good friends with him. They moved to a new house on Mill Street, and my mom and dad bought the 604 Eureka house. So I was just a little kid at 614½, and the rest of my years at home in Reno were at 604.

What was it like to grow up there?

Oh, it was a very mixed neighborhood. There were lots of kids. We had a black family across the street. Three doors down we had a Chinese family. There was a Polish family down on one corner. There was a Portuguese family across the street. We had Mormon families immediately next door to us. I don't know, there were sixteen, eighteen kids in that one-block section between Seventh and Sixth on Eureka, and we got along fine. We had a great time.

With all this diversity, how did these groups get along together in this little area?

We were just kids. They were all of our buddies. Actually, after I got out of the Navy, I got to thinking about who the different kids were, and I realized they were different, I mean in terms of cultural background and so on.

So you didn't realize they were different when you were here.

No. You know, we went to Orvis Ring Elementary School, just four blocks away. Grace Warner was the principal, and she was the first person in Reno who agreed to take the black children from Black Springs and the Indian kids from the Indian colony into the school. So we had those two groups of kids plus neighborhoods that were mixed like mine, and we were just one big bunch of people. We had a great time.

Was there a group that you kind of aligned yourself with at all?

I had good friends in the neighborhood, and some of them I went all the way through school with. Eventually when I was in the seventh grade, a girl who was my girlfriend at the time and her family moved in next door, and another good friend of mine moved from Spokane Street into the house at 614½ that I had lived in. So those were my really close friends in the neighborhood.

Can you just talk about the paper route and what you had to do to get that route? There are two things you said you had to do.

Yes. I tried to get a paper route and they said, "You can't have one unless you have a bicycle." So over on Keystone Avenue at Fourth was the Reno Brick yard, and they took in a lot of used brick there, and you had to get the mortar off of them, and then they'd resell them as used brick. They hired kids in the summer to come and knock the mortar off the bricks, and I heard about it, and so I'd walk over there. They'd give us a trial, and we'd knock the mortar off. We got a penny a brick for cleaning up a brick, but if we broke one, it cost us ten cents, so you didn't break too many. You learned pretty quick not to hit them too hard.

I saved enough money with that to buy a bicycle from Monkey Wards [Montgomery Ward], which was on Sierra Street in those days. So I got my bike and went down to the Gazette-Journal and I said, "I got a bike. I'd like a paper route." They gave me a small route, and then later they gave me another route. I covered from Spokane and Morrill Avenue over to Elko Avenue, and from Seventh Street to Fourth. That was basically my paper route.

What do you remember about that route?

Well, I remember they paid me an extra dollar a week to cross Fourth Street because it was U.S. 40 then. It was just full of traffic. A lot of wartime traffic was coming through Reno in those days, convoys of military trucks and troops, and so to cross the street was arduous, and I used to cross at Eureka and Fourth where there was no light. I had customers in the U.S. 40 Bar, the Riviera Bar, and the Mizpah Bar, and I'd have to go in the bar every day and drop the paper off, and then come in and collect once a week.

What was it like as a paperboy going into these bars on Fourth Street?

Sometimes it was embarrassing, but the people who were buying the papers were always good to me, and if somebody said something funny or started teasing me, "What's this kid doing in here?" they'd stand up for me. I just dropped the paper off and would get out of there.

You wouldn't spend much time.

No, no, I didn't spend any time in there, but I did get a good look. I mean, I knew what was going on in those bars. It was mostly working men sitting around, usually at the bar, not at tables, and having their drinks, mostly beer.

You delivered the Evening Gazette.

The *Reno Evening Gazette* six days a week, not Sundays.

You were fourteen, about, at this time?

Let's see. I started when I was nine. I had it until I started the seventh grade.

You say you just saw some people mostly at the bar, not the tables, and this was during the daytime around maybe five or six?

Yes, we used to deliver anywhere between and five and six-thirty. Depends on when we got the papers.

So these guys were getting done with work, maybe.

That's what it was, yes. These guys would get off work. Martin Iron Works was up there. Macauley Iron Works was on the street, Frank's Foundry, a lot of other small businesses, and a lot of the men would come in after work and have a beer and then go home—I don't remember many women in the bars.

You said they would give you a hard time, and some of the guys would stand up for you. Why would they give you a hard time?

Oh, they'd just tease me, you know, "What's that kid doing in here? How about a free paper?" You know, that kind of stuff, mostly joking around.

You talked about the wartime convoys too. How much traffic for the war was going on at that time?

It was massive. All I could remember is that when a convoy would come through, they'd kind of try to keep them in one group, and you'd just wait and wait and wait, and it was truck after truck after truck. Just south of Fourth Street there were train tracks, and troop trains and trains with big equipment were coming through all the time. Us kids used to go up and just watch the trains come through. There were all kinds of war material and people moving to the West Coast. Fourth Street was busy, because it was U.S. 40, the main route to San Francisco.

So after the war, did it see a drop off at all in traffic?

Yes, it really did drop off. Another thing that happened is Sixth Street became the alternate truck route, at least in our end of town. It wasn't in the west end of town. And so we used to have a lot of tractor-trailers come through after that. I remember my mother complaining about the noise they'd make, because we had a traffic light at Alameda and Sixth, and they'd have to be shifting as they came by, and she complained about all the black smoke and noise.

You said you earned a dollar extra a day?

I think it was more like a dollar a week extra, because I only got a penny a day a paper, so if they gave me a dollar a day, that would have been way too much. I think it was a dollar a week. I remember the dollar, I just don't remember how often, but we turned our collection in every week and paid for the papers we bought every week, so I'm pretty sure it must have been on a week's basis.

Just to go across Fourth Street because of all the congestion?

Yes, and it was an industrial area, and they couldn't find anybody who wanted to deliver newspapers up there, so that was just an incentive, I guess. I saved enough money on that paper route so that when I was sixteen, I bought a used car.

You did the paper route—I think last time I talked to you, it was '47 to '50.

I was in the fourth grade when I started the route, and I ended when I started junior high in the seventh grade.

So what year would that be?

Let's see. Fourth grade I would have been nine. It would have been '47, '48, '49, and early fifties. They originally gave me just Alameda Avenue, which is Wells Avenue now, Spokane, and Morrill Avenue, and later I added Eureka and Elko and Fourth Street. That just about doubled the size of the route, roughly a hundred papers.

How did you get that expansion exactly?

I think either another paperboy quit or the district manager was having trouble with the kid who was on the route. I don't know, but they asked me. They said, "Would you like to pick up these other streets?" I don't know if they were being delivered or not. They just gave me that route. I said I'd take it, so they gave it to me.

What do you remember about that area of Reno during that time period?

A lot of Italian families. It was all working people and lots of kids. There were just lots of kids around. I was one of the few who came by every day working, so I was kind of laughed at by some of them. "Hey, stop and play," and all this. I said, "No, I've got to deliver papers." But basically it was a good time.

Were people outside a lot?

In the summertime, yes, they were. Houses were not air conditioned, and most of the houses in those neighborhoods were relatively small, and so people were outside in the summer. At five, six o'clock in the evening, if they weren't having dinner or something, the kids would be in the yard, and sometimes the parents as well. It was just a good bunch of neighborhoods. I don't say there wasn't any trouble going on, but I didn't run across a lot of it.

After the paper route, you went worked at Pinky's Market.

Yes, Pinky's Market, which was on Fourth Street—at Valley Road, there was a gas station, and then Pinky's Market as you come east off of Valley Road on the north side.

What was Pinky's Market like on Fourth Street?



The building that housed Pinky's Market from 1946 to 1964 still stands at 535 East 4th Street.
Image courtesy of Alicia Barber.

A lot of Italians shopped there. The Pincolini brothers owned it. They were twins, Guido and Bruno Pincolini, and they ran the butcher shop in the back. Then we had a full vegetable department and lots of groceries, and I worked Fridays and Saturdays as a carry-out kid. I don't know why, but we never took shopping baskets out in the parking lot in those days, but we carried everything, so it was my job to carry all these boxes and stuff out to the parking lot.

It's still there. It's a billiard parlor now. Is it the 500 block? I'm not sure what the address is. If you go to the corner of Valley Road and Fourth Street, on the northeast corner was a gas station, and then the next brick building is a pool hall now, and that was Pinky's Market.

You said mostly Italians came in there.

Mostly Italians.

Because of the ownership?

Yes, I think so, yes. One of my jobs was to go next door across the tracks to Levy-Zentner's and pick up fresh vegetables. They were a vegetable wholesaler, and had cantaloupes and watermelons,

tomatoes, anything that was in season. They'd give me a list and I'd go out the back door and I'd cross the tracks there and bring the produce into the store for them.

How long did you work there?

Seventh and eighth grade, and when I started Reno High School, I went to work at the Circle RB Lodge.

You had quite a little résumé going on by eighth grade.

I had a job from the time I started knocking that mortar off those bricks until I retired in 1999. Never was out of work.

I want to talk to you a little bit about your father's job at Martin Iron Works. What was his name?

"Bunny." His real name was Bonifacio, but when he started school in Battle Mountain, he didn't speak any English, and his given name was Bonifacio. It's a Basque name. Well, it's a Catholic saint, Boniface, and its spelling is Bonifacio. But his kindergarten teacher said, "Oh, that's too complicated. I'm going to call you Bunny," and so Bunny became his official name. He learned English in kindergarten without any ESL [English as a Second Language] program or anything else, and interestingly enough, my mother and all her brothers learned English in the schools in Fallon the same way. Their native language was German. My dad's native language was Spanish. They just learned it as kindergarteners.

When did he work at Martin?

Well, he worked at Macauley Iron Works and Martin Iron Works and Reno Iron Works depending on where the work was, but he mostly worked at Martin Iron Works.

Which is right there on Fourth Street.

Right down Fourth Street. Macauley Iron Works was at Fourth and Wells. Martin's was right almost where Valley Road comes in at Fourth Street, and Reno Iron Works in those days was out on Keystone. He was an ironworker for all of those, because in those days if they didn't have work, you were just out of work. I mean, it wasn't like you were employed. So if the contracts weren't coming in, there was no work. Prior to 1944, my dad worked at the slaughterhouse, Nevada Pack, it was called. It was at the corner of Fourth Street and Wells, and it was a slaughterhouse, and he was the guy who had to kill the animals that they had in there for the meatpacking.

When I was about twelve or thirteen, one of the kids in the neighborhood from Spokane Street burned that place down. We were told his name was Vance Marino. The walls in there were about three feet thick and they were filled with sawdust to keep it cool so the meat wouldn't spoil—and, boy, that was a huge fire. When that sawdust went off, it just billowed up and exploded. It was a real, real bad one. There are probably pretty good records in the Reno papers about that fire.

What do you remember from that fire?

I remember that the Sierra Pacific Power used to have the whole block between Sixth and Fifth and Eureka and Wells, and it was their service yard, but they also had this huge natural gas tank there that supplied all the gas to Reno. I remember that they were getting ready to evacuate people out of the house because they thought the heat from that fire might blow that tank up, so it was pretty scary.

How long did your dad work for Martin?

He worked for Martin from the mid-forties until he retired, when he was sixty-five. He was born in 1903, so about '62 or '63.

That's when Reno was really built, in that time period.

He pretty much helped build most of Reno, yes.

Can you tell me the story about what happened to your dad putting up the window at the Mapes?

Yes, that was about 1948, so I was about ten, eleven years old. The Mapes was the biggest building in Reno at the time—it might have been the biggest in the state, but it went up to twelve stories. Martin Iron Works had the only big crane in town, but their crane wasn't big enough to reach to where the Sky Room was, and so they had these huge plate-glass windows they were putting in up there and the crane wasn't reaching, so they rigged a block and tackle.

They had a bunch of men pulling on the rope to raise these windows up, which were really, I guess, quite heavy, and there was one guy standing underneath him directing it so that it wouldn't swing, and they had two ropes on it, according to what Dad said, to keep it from swinging in the wind.

But it got up high—and I wasn't there, of course, but I heard Dad tell about it—it got up high and something happened and the window started to slip, and everybody was afraid it was going to fall, and so the people down below let go of the rope, and my dad was the only one who hung onto the thing. He held on long enough for the guy to get out from underneath it. It would have killed him when it hit. But it burned through his gloves and burned through his hands.

I remember they took him to the hospital, and the doctors and the police came to the house, and they wanted mom to sign a paper to cut my dad's hands off. They said, "We can't save them."

She wouldn't sign it, because she said, "That's the only way he can earn a living, is with his hands." So he went through a really, really long recuperation where we didn't have any income or anything, but eventually it came around and his hands were fine.

What else do you remember about your dad working there and laboring?

Well, when they worked on Harolds Club, I think they were working on the seventh floor, and it was structural steel. That building was put together with rivets, and so the way they worked that, you had a fire down below, and they'd heat up the rivets till they're red-hot. Then they'd throw them with a pair of tongs and they'd catch them in a big funnel. Then they'd take the hot rivet out of the funnel and they'd put it in a hole, and they'd have a jackhammer to hit it on one side and what they call a bucking rod on the other side, and you'd push against it.

There was a young kid who went to the university who was bucking rivets for my dad, and my dad started the rivet again and the back-slip or something from that knocked him off. Anyway, he fell off the beam. They were just sitting with their legs around it. He fell five, six stories down and was crippled. I think he was crippled for life. Years ago I knew the kid's name, but I don't remember it anymore.

You told me also a story about Manuel.

Oh, yes, Manuel Baker. He was a welder, and during World War II, Martin Iron Works got a contract to build a bunch of storage tanks for Russia as part of the lend-lease program during the war. They'd get these huge plates of steel, I don't know, 10 feet or so wide and 20 feet long, and they had a big roller that would get a curve in them so they could make sections for a storage tank, and then they'd weld them together.

They were having trouble getting this big heavy piece of plate steel down into this roller, and Manuel Baker got up on the iron there and jumped up and down on it, and someone hit the switch to take it in, and it got his toes. He lost all of the toes on both of his feet, and he was off work for a very long time. My dad said later he remembers Manuel coming to work, and sometimes the blood would just come right out through his shoes, and he never, ever complained.

The interesting thing was years later it turned out I worked with his son, Marvin Baker, at the university, and we'd worked together for some years. We just had a conversation one day and Marv realized my dad and his dad worked together about the same time I did. So Marv brought Manuel over, and I went with my dad, and they had a really great visit and some great memories. That's the only time the two people saw themselves before they passed away, but it was really a nice afternoon for both of them.

That's a great story. Talk about—I think it was before or after Pinky's—when you got a job at Martin Iron Works.

I tried. It was before I went to Pinky's.

Tell the story about how your dad reacted.

Yes, that was a tough one for me. I'd been on the paper route, and I knew I wanted to do something else because some of my friends had different jobs. They were delivering for drugstores or working in grocery stores, one thing or another, and they were making more money than me, so they had more spending money when we went to do something.

So I went on my own over to Martin Iron Works that summer after I got out of sixth grade and got myself a job. They said, yes, I could help out in the shop. So when my dad came home that night from work, I very proudly told him that, "Hey, I'm going to work at Martin Iron Works on Monday."

He said, "No, you're not. You're not going to have anything to do with that. They'll break your back. They'll just wear you down."

He went over to Martin's and said, "You don't take this kid in there."

He and I were really kind of—it hurt. I thought he didn't trust me or he didn't like me or he wasn't—I don't know. Maybe he was ashamed of me.

How long did it take for you to realize what his real intentions were?

After I got in the service, so it was about seven years later.

You realized then that your dad was looking out for you.

Yes, exactly. It bothered me for maybe a month or six weeks as kind of just a real hard burn, but then I finally realized, hey, you've got to get on with things.

The way he reacted there, how much of that is a testament to the hard work that went into that job? He knew what it was going to take.

Yes, he didn't ever tell me an awful lot, but what he did say was, "They'll just give you all the hard, mean, heavy tasks, and they'll just ruin you. They'll ruin your back." He knew about Manuel getting hurt. He knew about the kid falling off the Harolds Club thing, and he just knew it was tough, dangerous work.

There was a name for the kid that was just a general flunky in the shop, and I can't remember what that was, but they'd just give him all the dirty, heavy jobs there was, and he knew that. He really didn't want me in that business, and I bless him for that. I didn't at the time, but otherwise I still might be doing the same thing he did, and he just didn't want me to do it.

Your dad died in 1988?

Yes.

What comes to your mind when you think of your dad?

Very independent guy. He was very quiet. He never, ever told me very much, but when he told me something, it was like the deal with the job, he was pretty adamant about it. He had a tough time growing up, himself. He'd herded sheep for ten years and walked all the way from Austin to the Snake River and back every year for ten years before he met my mother, and then he worked the farm in Fallon and got that 640-acre farm finished. When Mom and Dad left, his cousin Eusebia Cadet took it over. The road out there to that farm is still named after them, not my dad, but after his cousin. Dad, he was a good friend, but he was very distant.

He was a working-class man of the time.

Absolutely. Yes. Mom took care of everything at the house. I never saw Dad pay a bill and do any of the housework—but anything that needed to be repaired or fixed he always took care of. It was just expected—growing up, I expected Dad to be the guy that went to work and came home at night and had dinner with us. We never had any vacations that I can recall, because he only got paid when he was at work, and he never really made enough to be able to take a vacation, so we didn't have family vacations growing up.



With 4th Street at the bottom of the photo, an aerial view of the Martin Iron Works site shows the original A-frame construction of the main shop building before a fire in 1962 that required the entire section to be rebuilt.
Image courtesy of the Piero Bullentini family.

I also want to ask you about the history of Martin Iron Works. What do you recall of it, or do you?

Well, I know about the history of what my dad told me, but Martin Schwamb, I guess, he was a German man, and he founded the company. When my dad first went to work there—and I found this out years later—Martin couldn't pay the workers until he got paid on the job, so I remember that there were tough weeks when Martin just told the guys, "You know, when we get the job, I'll pay you," and he always did. But early on with Martin Iron Works they didn't get a paycheck every week. Later on that changed when Martin got ahead of the curve a little bit and had some money.

Your dad remembers that, or was that before your dad?

Well, my dad remembers that, and I remember the hard times during the week, yes.

They wouldn't pay him on time?

No. They'd have a job, Martin, and maybe the job took a week or two months or three months to do, and Martin didn't get paid—or maybe he got progress payments. I don't know how the business worked. But I remember Mom and Dad saying that they got paid when the job was over. Martin used to ask them to do that, and they did. They were willing because there was no work anywhere, and he always paid them. It wasn't that he held out on them, and it wasn't until he got some money ahead that he was able to pay them every week on their salary.

I want to ask you a little bit about urban renewal. What do you remember about that and what happened with that in that area of Reno?

Urban renewal. Yes, it was in between Sixth Street and Fourth and Spokane and, I guess, Quincy. I don't remember how far east it went, but on Spokane Street between Fifth and Sixth I had a lot of friends. The Stockwells lived at the corner of Fifth and Spokane, and one of my best friends, Ron Vrooman, was their grandson, and he lived with his grandparents.

The Savage family lived next door to them coming north, and then on the south corner at Sixth and Spokane were my aunt and uncle, Grace Sloan and Tom Sloan, and their sons, Tom and Chuck. The Sloans were related to me. Tom Sloan married my mother's aunt, so we were related through aunt, and Grace Sloan was Tom's wife, so that made her my great-aunt. It was her property and others on Spokane Street that the urban renewal came in for, and Grace helped get all the people in the neighborhood working together, and they hired an attorney and they tried to fight the urban renewal. It went on for a number of years, but they finally lost that case, and the urban renewal happened.

Grace was one of the prime movers and organizers of the coalition, I'll call it, to try to get urban renewal at least moved away from their neighborhood and taken away. They claimed all the way through that that that wasn't a slum and that didn't need to be done there. Long story short, they eventually lost that case too. I'm trying to think of the attorney.

Les Fry? You told me about him before.

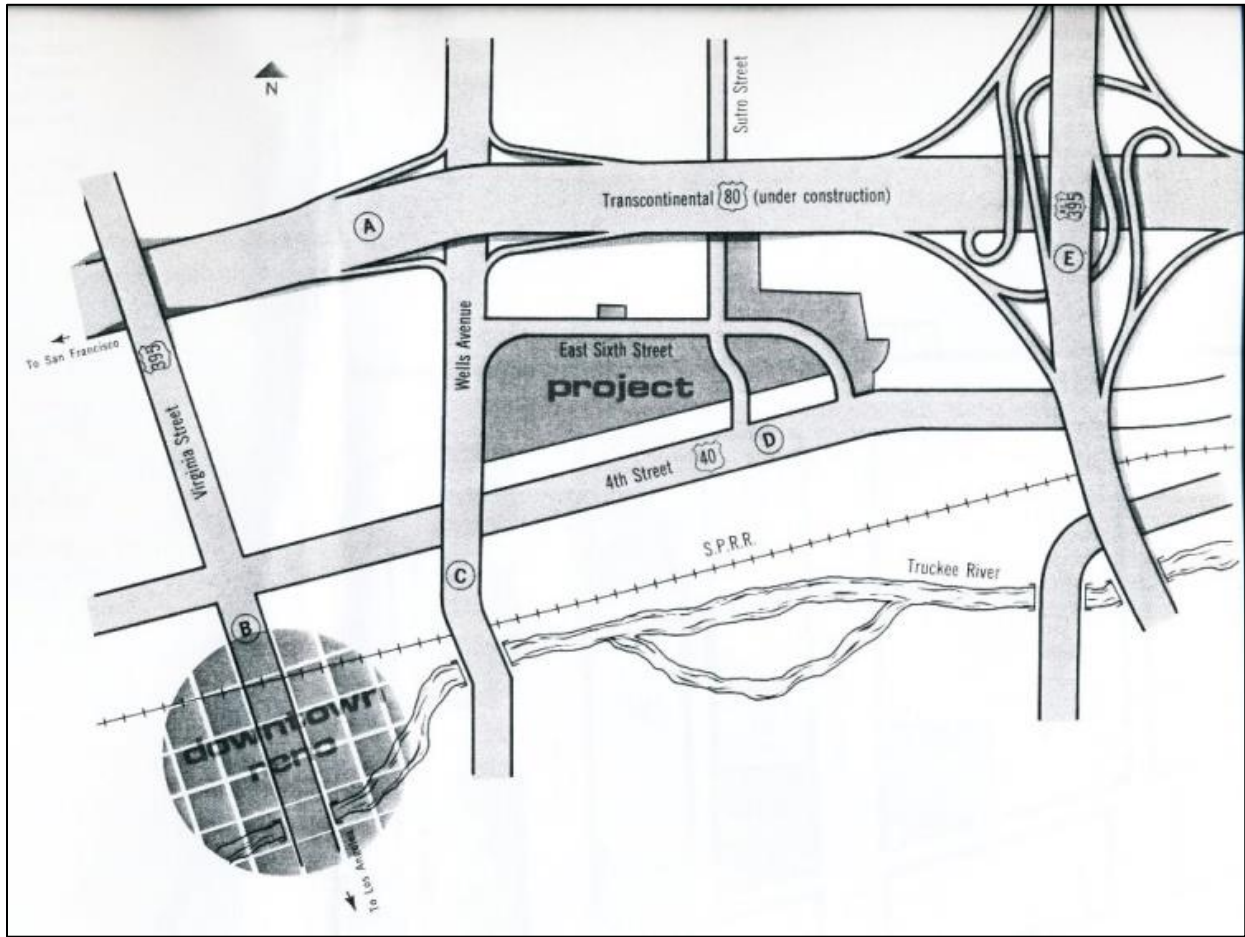
Yes, Les Fry, and his son Robert Fry, Bob Fry, is still in business here in town and may have those records. His office is on Casazza Street right behind Shoppers Square there on the north side.

Les was one of the key attorneys in fighting against urban renewal?

Yes, he represented Grace and that coalition of people trying to fight that urban renewal.

What do you remember of her fight?

I was pretty small, I mean not small, but those things were not on my plate at the time. I pretty much went to school and worked, and what free time I had I fooled around with the kids in the neighborhood, but I do remember that it was a big struggle and a lot of concern and there was a lot of worry about it. There were quite a few—I don't know if they were court hearings or just hearings and arbitration. A lot of stuff went on. It took quite a while to get settled.



The Urban Renewal project that led to the demolition of many houses north of East 4th Street in the 1960s extended from Wells Avenue eastward. The land was later offered for sale as the Downtown Service Center. Map from *An Introduction to Reno's Downtown Service Center* (1966), courtesy of Nevada Historical Society.

Grace, as I mentioned before, is still here. She's at Cascades of the Sierras out off of Pyramid Highway. She has dementia, but sometimes things back in the past she can well remember. It'd be a flip of the coin, but she's in her mid-nineties now, and she's physically weak, but in good health otherwise.

You said that it never really took off, the fight against it, like it should have. You said urban renewal never really took off in that area. What did you mean by that?

Well, apparently what they did is they condemned a couple of city blocks and tore out all the buildings there, but then nothing much more happened after that. The fire station went in, First National Bank building went in, a couple of auto repair shops were built, but then a lot of those lots just laid empty for a long time. In fact, some of them are still empty. So it never really went to anything big.

Is that kind of the consensus now among people that have lived here all this time?

I don't know. A lot of the people in that part of town are gone, particularly those who were in those neighborhoods that it really affected. Again, being a kid, it wasn't something—if I'd have been in high school, maybe I'd have picked up a little more. Well, Chuck Sloan is still around. Not sure what his address is. He may remember more because his parents were involved with it. His older brother, my cousin who's my age, he passed away, so he's not available. I hate to be so sketchy on that, but I know what's there now, and it's still a lot of empty lots and it was never really developed that much.

So after you grew up in this area and went to school, you joined the Navy.

Yes. After junior high school, of course, I started Reno High, and when I was a junior, I had enough credits to graduate. Two other buddies were going to join the Navy, and I talked with them. I was seventeen and two or three days old when I joined the Navy, and I was gone from then on for the next four years out of Reno.

Then when did you come back to Reno and work at the university?

In '59, I came back. I was working for IBM. I started with them in New York, and I had from May until November in school. There was an air defense of the North American continent computer air watch center out at Stead Air Base, and I was one of sixty people assigned out there to manage, maintain, and operate that system. That was '59 to '63.

What was the system?

SAGE, Semi-Automatic Ground Environment. There were eighteen stations all around the country. Reno was number seventeen to go in. They started back east and they went all around the north part of the country, and then went south. The purpose of those was to provide manned aircraft defense of the North American continent during the Cold War. We had radar sites on the DEW line and the Pinetree Line and the Mid-Canada Line that fed into us, and if anything was coming out of Russia in terms of a missile attack or airplanes, we would spot it and be able to give at least a fifteen-minute alert.

I can't remember the exact year, it must have been '61 or '62, but it was the Fourth of July, I was on duty. Most of the military was off duty, so there were not a lot of people in, but all of a sudden we started seeing a lot of targets coming in, and we had different alert levels, but we went to the highest actionable alert level there was. These sites were capable of launching ICBMs back into Russia. We got right to where we almost were going to do that and somebody at NORAD in the Colorado mountains realized there were too many targets coming in to be real, and they put everything on hold. They didn't lower the alert, but they put it on hold.

Well, we found out later they had just turned on a big antenna up on the DEW Line, and it was so powerful it could see around the earth, and it went all the way out and it picked up reflections off the moon, and they were coming back. The range counter was like a speedometer in your car. It goes so far and then it starts over at zero. Well, just as luck would have it, the range came back in and looked like a range out of Russia, because the thing had spun over, and that's what caused the alert. Somebody was smart enough to realize there were too many targets. Russia couldn't have launched that much, and they called it off. That's been written up, by the way. You can find it in *Reader's Digest*.

What was going through your head when that was going on?

Well, that was panic time, because one civilian and one military had turned the key. We had missiles in Mountain Home AFB—there were nine of them, anyway. I can't remember where they all were. It was all top-secret at that time. But out of Reno we could launch nine missiles into some pre-targeted place, and that particular day, because it was a holiday, I was assigned to basically the War Room, where all the top people who made the decisions would come, and everything was projected up on a big screen. They had to make the call, and that was pretty scary.

But before the afternoon was over, before the shift ended, like I say, somebody at NORAD realized there was a problem. One, that particular radar was new. It was the first time it was online. Secondly, there were way too many targets. So good heads prevailed. They shut everything down. As I understood it later, with the fix they put in, they put the star tables in the computer's memory so it knew where the moon would be and where even near planets like Venus or Mars might be, so if we got a reflection, when the range thing had spilled over, it wouldn't look like it was coming out of Russia—so that was a big scare. The only big public write-up I know about it was in Reader's Digest.

How did they find out, or was the story sent in?

No, it came out some years later. It was one of those things like "The Day We Almost Went to War" or something like that. I don't remember the exact details.

You were there for that.

I was at Stead on duty. That was panic time. I think there were about ten or eleven of us IBM people on shift that day.

What would have happened? What could have happened?

Heaven knows.

Were they really about to fire back?

No, but we were in the top-level alert. We had two kinds of alerts. There were training alerts and there were colors that would go on. These lights would come on so you knew you were in a training cycle, and we'd been through a lot of training cycles, but you kind of know it's a training cycle, so your adrenaline's not going that much. You just have to do what you're supposed to do. This particular day this was not a test, and we went up to the top-level alert, but we never got to the point where somebody said, "Go ahead and arm your stuff and fire it." We never got to that.

How close?

I have no idea. All I know is we were alerted. We said, "There are targets coming out of Russia." They called in people who were off duty, because of all the military people, and they were heading in to

see what was going on. But you've got to realize we were down kind of in the front line, and all the real decisions and the high-level management was elsewhere. It was at NORAD in Colorado and Washington, D.C.

Doesn't matter if you're the low-ranking private. You can be in the War Room sometimes?

Well, my job was to make sure everything kept working so they could decide what to do. My job was not to push any buttons, but I saw what was going on on the screen.

Where was this satellite, or not satellite, but this—

It was a DEW Line. The DEW Line was a Distance Early Warning Line up in northern Canada. They were huge radars. The antennas were a couple hundred feet wide and a hundred feet tall, big steel structures. They couldn't go around the curvature of the Earth, but they could look way over, so if a missile came out of Russia, or a large group of planes, as soon as they cleared a certain height, this radar would pick them up. Automatically then you could track them with a computer, their speed and where they were headed, so you had a fifteen-, twenty-minute warning that something was not right.

But the thing that screwed you guys up was something in northern Canada instead.

When that DEW Line system came on, yes. It was a simple problem once you knew what it was. The range counters were just like an odometer on a car, so the range counters went up, and then they reset, starting counting from zero again. When the return finally came in, it just, as luck would have it, happened to be showing a distance that looked like it was coming out of Russia.

At this time you're an IBM worker.

I was working for IBM, yes. IBM had a contract to design and build what was called an AFSQ-7, which was a really huge computer, and to maintain and operate it for the Air Force. It was manned by active-duty Air Force personnel who did all the operational stuff. Our job was to keep it running and to maintain it. At that time in Reno there were about sixty of us, and we were twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, around the clock. We had a shift in there all the time.

That particular day, because it was a holiday, there were about a dozen IBM people there. Not a good day. [laughs] And we couldn't talk about it either. Everything was pretty classified.

Top-secret.

Yes. There's a good film out. If you Google "SAGE computer," you can find out a lot about that, because they show the computer and what it was doing and how it worked and everything. It was a big computer. It was about 100 feet by 200 feet. You walked around inside of it. It's like being inside of a memory. You could pull out a piece of it. It was all vacuum tubes. There's a huge building out at Stead, and we didn't heat that building; we cooled it. There were 50,000 vacuum tubes in each computer, and it put out so much heat that we just had to cool the building. It was incredible.

You started working for the university when?

Let's see. I went back to school in '59. I was still with IBM. In '63, I left IBM on a leave of absence and went to the university full-time. In '67, I graduated with a bachelor's in double-E [Electrical Engineering], and I went on to graduate school, and I stayed with that until '70, when IBM called me back.

During the fuel strike, there was no gas available in the country in the mid- seventies. IBM called me back, so I took a leave of absence from the university and went back to IBM. The idea was to finish up my dissertation for my doctorate, but with the energy crisis, IBM had abandoned the project that I was going back on, so I worked back there for eighteen months, finished up a job they wanted me to do, and came back to the university.

I was in the double-E Department from '63 to '67, '68, '69 as a student, and then from '70 to '74 I was there as an instructor. When I came back, then I went to Computing Services and I designed and built NevadaNet, which is the educational network for all of Nevada. It also includes all the courts, the rural hospitals, and the prisons in the network. It's a big network, with a couple hundred thousand users on it.

You helped build that. You're the founder.

I designed that. I was the founder and the designer and the first engineer on it, yes.

When did that kick off?

Let's see. I came back in '74, '75. The first connection was a real small one between Reno and Las Vegas. We had a remote batch terminal down there, and then we started doing dial-in access with teletypes around the state, and so it really all began in the mid-seventies. It was really in good shape by 1999 when I retired. I've got a map in the back room. I'll show it to you.

You showed it to me, yes.

You saw it.

Yes. All right, well, you retired in '99 and you've been living here in this house since?

When we came back from New York on the leave of absence, I think we moved in here in '75 or early '76, and have been here ever since.

So you're a Renoite.

Except for the time I was gone in the Navy and the time I was back east with IBM, I've been in Reno the whole time.

All these years in Reno, you started out right in this little area near Fourth Street that we're doing this project on. What have you seen in all these years? How has this area, particularly East Fourth Street, how has that changed, in your mind?

Well, along Fourth Street, starting at Alameda Avenue and Wells Avenue where the underpass is, the big overhead bridge now, there were a combination of both houses and businesses east on Fourth Street. Now most all the houses are gone. I can't think offhand if there are any left. There's a trailer park just before you make the little curve on East Fourth Street that's still there. There used to be a Threlkel's ballpark out there.

It still is there, but no one uses it.

Yes, I think it's called Governor's Field now. That was a busy ballpark when I was a kid growing up. There used to be chicken farms along there, and there were a lot of mom-and-pop groceries. There were three within a block, depending on the direction you went, from our house, and they were usually just a regular house, and they'd take a couple of rooms in the house and make a small grocery store in them, because the nearest big market was Safeway's, and it was at Fifth Street and North Virginia. That building is still there, but that Safeway Market's gone.

Reno was small. It was about 34,000, 35,000 when I was growing up, so it's ten times bigger now, and the point of it is we had two junior high schools, four or five elementary schools, and one high school in Reno, so you got to know just about everybody in town. Like in high school, at least you knew who the people were two or three years ahead of you and you knew the kids two or three years behind you, and they'd gone to one of the two junior highs, either Northside or Billingshurst, and went together to Reno High. Sparks High had a couple of hundred kids in it, and Manogue had only about fifty, and you got to know those kids by sports, the basketball games, the football games, and stuff like that. So it was a close little community.

As I understand it—and I've heard this from other state people—it was always a very friendly place. It's gotten big. I mean, we have regional shopping centers now. I look at ads in the paper now, Spanish Springs or even out to The Legends, I say there's no need for me to run way over there. So in my opinion, we're kind of little towns within this big area now.

That's how you think Reno's changed?

I think that's one of the big changes. The other thing is, is there are a few events that draw everybody, like the balloon races or the air races or the rodeo, those kind of things draw people from all over the area, but it used to be if anything was going on, it was downtown. But now it might be out at The Legends or it might be out at the Summit or out in Spanish Springs somewhere. So to me, we've dispersed a little bit, and we have an awful influx of out-of-state people. I used to know the number, and I know it changes, but the number of native Nevadans around is a small number now, by percentage. When I was a kid, we were most of it.

Well, your parents weren't native Nevadans.

No, they weren't, but all the kids I grew up with were, so just about everybody I went to school with was a native Nevadan. When my grandson goes to school here now, most of the kids are not native Nevadans. Their parents have moved here and they're in the school system. So that's one of the big differences. I don't know if that's good or bad. It's just a difference. That's all.

What about East Fourth Street?

On Fourth Street, they had the U.S. 40 tavern, the Mizpah, and the Riviera. The Riviera had a hotel, and transits and tourists would stop in and stay in those places, but there was also a family market, Akert Market, on the corner of Fourth and Wells. That's all a bunch of apartments now, and there were homes along there. Now that's all industrial. So Fourth Street has kind of moved from what was originally, a combination of business and homes to all businesses now, with the exception of the new apartments that have gone in.

Of course, there's a heck of a lot less traffic. When the freeway came through, Fourth Street wasn't the main corridor anymore, and a lot of the motels that were on there that catered to tourists have gone to weekly or monthly hotels, and especially on East Fourth Street, they've kind of gone downhill from the kind of place you might want to stay at.

I have a friend who did a study on single-room occupancies, SROs, she called them, and East Fourth Street is full of old motels that haven't closed down or faded away that are mostly monthly rentals now, so people are living in one room with no kitchen and they're trying to make do. So that's a big change. We saw poor people, but people were in houses, and just like us when my dad got hurt or when Martin wasn't paying, you went without a lot, but you had a home and a place to be. Nowadays a lot of people are living in motels or on the street.

What do you think should be done to better Fourth Street?

Well, as I understand it—I don't know a lot about it—there's a Fourth Street improvement group or something. I know they've done new lighting. They've redone some of the buildings down there.

It's historic in the sense of the buildings, and if they wanted to put it back like the Gaslight District in San Diego—when I first went to San Diego in the Navy, which was 1955, the whole Gaslight District in San Diego was an industrial slum area, really bad off, and now it's a place people want to go. There are restaurants and nightclubs and all kinds of things. Young people, professionals have apartments down there. It's well lit, a good thing to do. Sacramento did the same thing with the Old Town Sacramento. When I was a kid, you didn't go down there. It was just a slum, and now it's a tourist attraction. I think something like those two places, as examples, would be a good thing to do for Fourth Street.

So you think Fourth Street definitely has a chance to change.

Yes, what it's going to take are people who are invested in the area to come together and come up with a good plan and work it out.

What do you think that plan could be? Would it be more of a connection with the history?

Well, that would ring true with me, because that was kind of my part of town.

But how does it change its image?

Good question. I'm not into urban planning or those kinds of things.

Well, you've lived here most of your life.

Yes. One of the troubles is people with my recollections of that part of town, we're getting old, and there are not many of us left, and we're dying off quickly. There needs to be something that would attract young professionals and people who have extra money who could go out and do things. It could go all industrial, but Reno's got some very, very nice industrial areas and the kind of warehousing and stuff that the city wants, and what was along Fourth Street wasn't necessarily that kind of industrial stuff. There were small places. Frank's Foundry was a steel foundry place, and Martin Iron Works did structural steels and so on. So I'm probably the wrong person to ask on what a good vision would be.

What is the conversation like when you're talking to people who lived there, who grew up with you, who look at Fourth Street now? What are they talking about?

They basically just talk about the old times and not so much about a revival out there or anything else. The halfway club, Stempeck's, out there [Casale's Halfway Club], Mama Stempeck who runs it, that's right on the Reno-Sparks border, that business has been there since 1939. She's an excellent example of a business that's stayed there, tried to stay the same, and has hung onto the old traditions, and she'd be a great person to talk to about what's needed in that area. She's in her late eighties, early nineties, comes in every day and makes ravioli and spaghetti and serves dinner at night. Just a great place to go. Some of our friends, especially those who grew up in that area, we go there for dinner fairly often just because it's part of where we grew up. Coney Island Bar is another out there that's from that old tradition, and that's further out on Fourth.

That old tradition definitely does bring back the old crowd.

It can. The Gaslight District in San Diego, there's history in every building, and they've come up with a common theme, and it works. The lighting they put up on the streets, they're electric, but they look like they're flickering gas. The Cannery District in San Francisco has done that kind of thing. Like I say, in Sacramento, those things work, and if you've got some piece of history you can hang onto—Threlkel's Park, the Johnson-Jeffries fight, the Sierra Nevada Brewery was there—I used to deliver newspapers to him. The building is still there intact, you know, a brewhouse there in the old tradition. Those are the kind of things that could help out.

The old icehouse down there is a men's club now, but that building was where the Southern Pacific Railroad used to store their ice, and we used to go there in the summer and chip ice just to cool off, but it's a men's club now. So they've kept the building, but they haven't kept the history there. I don't know what would solve it. Like I say, that's not my area of expertise.

Well, obviously you knew a little bit about what's going on in Sacramento, San Francisco, and San Diego.

Well, yes, because we like to see that renovation and reuse. We've gone to Sacramento dozens of times, been down to Gaslight District in San Diego at least a half a dozen times, and those are impressive things. They're really well done.

A few years ago, we went back to Providence, Rhode Island and looked at the renewal that they did in Providence. Their river was kind of like the Truckee, and it was the sewer in the backwater part of town, and they made it the prominent feature in town now. There was so much junk on their river, they actually had a river fire at one point, and in order to commemorate that, on certain nights, and particularly in the summer, they have flares out in the river and they relight the river, but with flares, and people gather around and have lunch or dinner or whatever and enjoy it. So they've taken the river from being something they turned their back on to something that they present prominently, and Reno could do that with the Truckee River. Pretty much it seemed to me that from Wells Avenue, Alameda Street, east, Reno was kind of forgotten. I don't know if it was out of the city limits. I think it was in the city when I was a kid, but it was seedy.

It was seedy when you were a kid?

Parts of it, because there were a lot of low-income people in rentals. They really didn't have the means to take care of their property properly. I would say around the mid-forties when the war hit, a lot of people moved out to go get jobs and stuff, and there was kind of a boom for housing, and it all turned into rentals. When land is owned by the property owner and they live on it, it seems to me they do a lot better job taking care of it than if it's rentals. So one big issue, I think, for any area is to make sure that when you've got tenants or homes in the area, that they're owned homes and not all rentals.

It's easier said than done, though.

I know it is, and I don't know what the tipping number is. We always had rentals in our neighborhood, but the neighborhood was always kept up just because the people cared about the neighborhood.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about Fourth Street?

A lot of good memories out there. Some of it's the same, because a lot of the buildings have stayed, but where the buildings have changed it's like, ooh, there's a hole in my memory there. That's probably the big difference.

It was a whole different place when it was the national highway through Reno, because it catered an awful lot to the traffic that was going by, and that wasn't always locals. It was mostly tourists. That's why both East and West Reno along Fourth Street had so many motels. They came there when it was part of the highway. When the freeway went in, they pretty much went into decline, so the locals kind of moved in.

Well, thanks a lot for talking to me, Dick.

No problem. I hope I've answered your questions.

You have. I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

PIERO BULLENTINI

President, Martin Iron Works



Piero Bullentini in his office at Martin Iron Works. Photo provided by Piero Bullentini.

Named president of Martin Iron Works at 530 East 4th Street in 1989, Piero Bullentini, a native of Italy, began his career with the company as a shop helper in 1956, at the young age of 18. Working his way up through the shop, he mastered each facet of the industry until being named vice president in 1978, and president 11 years later. He was president of the Associated General Contractors in 1999 and still serves on the National Board of Directors.

Alicia Barber: This is Alicia Barber. I am here with Mr. Piero Bullentini at his office at Martin Iron Works, and the date is June 25, 2014. I just want to ask you, Mr. Bullentini, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Piero Bullentini: Yes, you do.

Thank you. Well, there are a lot of questions I have for you, but I do want to start with your earlier life, and ask you where and when you were born.

I was born in Italy in 1937.

And what town were you born in?

In the town of Lucca, in Tuscany, north of Pisa. Between Pisa and Florence.

And were your parents both from that area?

Yes. They were both from the same area.

Had they lived there for many generations?

My grandfathers and my grandmothers were born and raised in the same towns. The families were very, very antique families coming through the farm country of the Serchio River Valley.

And what were your parents' names?

My father was named Gino Bullentini, and my mother was Duilia Belli. My grandfather on my mother's side was in the United States for about ten or twelve years, then he went back and bought a house and a little farm, and that's where my mother was born. On my mother's side, she had four brothers. Two of them immigrated to California and spent all their lives in San Francisco and Colma.

On my father's side, two of his brothers moved to Nevada, one in 1913 and the other one in 1922. One resided in Sparks, Nevada, and then in Carson City, and my other uncle was farming in Yerington for forty years.

Do you know why they chose to move to Nevada?

They chose to move to Nevada because most of the Italians at the time were moving to Dayton. They were farming in Dayton; they were ranching there; so from one friend to another, they were all moving to the same part of the country. [laughs]

I've heard some people say that a lot of people from that part of Italy were interested in this area because the terrain was similar. Is that right?

I don't know. I know that in the Dayton Valley, they were almost all Italians. A lot of the Quilicis and they're still residing over there; there are still ranches over there. And most of them were coming from the same town I came from.

Did you see these members of your family when you were growing up? Did they come back to Italy to visit?

My father's brother—the oldest one, Alex—he went back to Italy when he was in his eighties, to visit. The other uncle, in Yerington, never went back to Italy. My two other uncles on my mother's side, they never went back to Italy. As a matter of fact, my mother never knew her older brother, because he left Italy before she was born. But I met him in 1956 when I came to this country. I went over and visited him in Colma. He had a general store and he was living very well; he made good for himself. [laughs]

Can you tell me a little bit about your life in Italy when you were growing up?

Yes, I can. We could write a book about it. [laughs] But to make it short, I grew up in the town of Lammari. It's a small town pertaining to the province of Lucca, four kilometers north of the main city. I was born in another town. When I was a year old, my father bought a house, so we moved to this little town, and I grew up and went to school over there.

For kindergarten and first and second grades, I was going to the Catholic school. From the third to the fifth grade, I went to the regular school, the state school. And after that, I went to school to the Cavanis Brothers. They were monks, great teachers, and I spent five years of schooling with them. Then when I was sixteen-and-a-half years old, I moved to the public school for two more years, what they call over there "scientifico liceo." It's preparation. They have classics liceo to become a history teacher, or philosophy, scientifico for science, engineering, stuff like that. I took the worst one. [laughs]

Anyway, in the meantime, I played soccer for three or four years on a regular team over there, and I had a lot of fun. Of course, my father decided to move in 1954, and he decided it was about time for me to go to work, so he called me to come to this country, and then I got stuck in Yerington for two months before I moved to Reno. [laughs]

But in my youth, something I will never forget was in 1943 and 1944, under the bombardment of the American troops bombing the Germans back. We were right on the front line for months, and we had some experiences. I remember one day coming back. I was in first grade. I was coming back and this German airplane was machine gunning one little truck. It was an old Fiat pickup, barely moving, but it was moving, and this old guy was holding a sack of flour back to his house from the flour mill. And I thought they were machine gunning me, because I was running from one tree to another when the plane was making these rounds. And the vehicle was just about twenty feet from me, so any of those things, the whistle of the bullets coming by. And I'll tell you. What surprised me, when I got to this country—of course I was raised over there with all those bombs and all those machine guns and everything, and then I come to this country and I see how organized this was. You go by a school, you gotta slow down. You can't go 25 miles per hour; you gotta go fifteen or ten miles an hour in a school zone. Over there, where I was born and raised, I mean the cars keep going fast, as fast as they can go; it's up to you to get out of the way. [laughs] It was just an experience. [laughs]

And you were very young during the war, but those are very powerful memories.

I was seven years old. I was born in '37, and in 1943 and 1944, that's when it happened. I remember one time we had some apple trees in the back. We had a little farm and my father when he bought the house, we had five or six acres in the back. And my grandmother, she says, "We've got those apples to pick up."

I said, "Okay." I climbed up there and it was about twenty-five, thirty feet up in the air, big apple trees, picking up the apples. And my grandmother was holding up her apron and she was catching them. All at once, the Germans saw us moving, and one big cannon just shot. My grandma was saying, "Come on down! Come on down!"

"No, I'm going to finish!"

But to make a long story short, in about three or four minutes I got as many apples as I can, and then I lay down and three shells, one after another, exploded about 150 feet from the apple tree, making big holes in the ground. And the last one cut the limb off the tree I was standing in front of. And I didn't think anything about it; I thought, "Oh, boy, he missed me!"

That just seems so precarious. Did your family ever consider moving further from where the action was, or was there nowhere to go?

We had to do it one time, because what happened, the American troops were really in our town, and the Marines were setting their machine guns and everything. One Italian guy—he was probably not playing with a full deck—he came down on a bicycle and said, "The Germans are coming back! The Germans are coming back!"

The Marines, they picked up the machine guns and they retreat. One German come by, and a bunch of Italians catch him, and they almost kill him. They start beating him and beating him. But they didn't kill him; he ran back. And then comes the S.S., coming by. So my father and my mother, they got me and my sister—she's two-and-a-half years younger than I am—they put us on a bicycle and we went across the Ozzori River. It's about twice as big as the Truckee River here, and all rocks. I remember jumping from one rock to another and the Americans were bombing the Germans, the Germans were bombing them, and they'd explode every time, you'd see it boom! And we'd jump again. We made it across. And we moved south toward Pisa and we stayed with a friend of my father for two months before we moved back to our house.

And I do vividly remember the night when the Germans pulled back from our town. It was incredible. They didn't have any more gasoline or diesel or anything, so mostly by horses and wagons they were pulling, and they were using charcoal, steam, for the truck, to pull back. And they were pulling back and the English and the American cannons kept pounding bombs, ba-boom, ba-boom, all night long, all night long. We got up in the morning and in our front yard, our front was concrete because my father was a bricklayer and concrete mason. It was nice, about twenty-five, thirty feet by sixty feet of concrete, and you couldn't even walk from the grenades exploding and there were chunks of iron all over the place. None of it hit the house. None of it.

And then, I remember a friend of mine that lives here in Sparks—his father had a field full of potatoes, and he didn't want anybody to steal the potatoes, because, I mean, people had to eat. Out in the country, you'd find something to eat all the time. In the city, you don't find any more cats or dogs or nothing; they were all gone.

Anyway, this guy, he was going to watch the potato field, and he stayed there all night to make sure nobody dug out his potatoes. I guess one night, what he did, he put a lantern in there and left a light up, and then he went to bed. I remember that night, it was about 300, 350 feet from my house, this German plane went by and dropped two bombs. One made a hole bigger than this room here. The other one, about half the size. Potatoes a hundred miles away all over the place. [laughs]

Because every night, you had turn the lights off. Even a little candle, they can spot, and boom! It was a bomb. I'd seen some airplanes dogfight, the American bombers were coming through. We could hear—I'm seven years old, and I know exactly which kind of a plane it was, if it was English, or if it was German, or if it was American, by the way the motor sounded. When the Americans were coming over, you'd know they were American because you don't see the sun. You'd see hundreds of planes. [imitates plane engines] You can hear them about ten minutes before they show up. The English interceptors were going like mosquitoes all over. [imitates mosquito sounds] And the Germans would be unloading the machine guns. [imitates sound of machine gun fire] Once in a while they'd get one. And then once in a while those guys wouldn't even be paying attention; they'd keep going; they were going up north into Italy to bomb Milan and all those big cities up there.

In the night, they'd bomb the train station in Pisa, because Pisa received—the railroad—it was one of the main stations in Italy from northern Italy, from Milan, from Florence, from Rome—they all converged in Pisa. So one night, an Allied force decided to blow all the station apart. So we were eighteen kilometers north of Pisa, and that night around one o'clock at night, it looked like it was twelve o'clock in the day. It was daylight. The explosion—oh, everything was blowing up. And once in a while, now, we are fighting the war in Vietnam, we are fighting the war in Iraq, a drone kills ten civilians. Wait a minute. During these bombings, there were *hundreds* of civilians they were blowing up. It was a war. Now it looks like they are playing games. At the time, they meant business; that's my point of view. I could be wrong.

Then I'll tell you what—one morning we didn't have a toilet in the house, we gotta go to the outhouse outside, and I opened up the back door of the house and tried to go to the toilet. I had about sixty feet to go. And here comes this S.S. with a rifle, and he says, "Halt! Halt!" You know, "Stop!"

I looked at him, I turned around the corner of the house, and in the cornfield, I was going down and I think for 200, 250 meters, it didn't take me more than twenty seconds to get to the end of it. Because when I heard the one, two shots, it went above my head, it went "zing" over my head! And I said, "To heck with you!"

Then I seen one time, my father, because the Germans were coming in and arresting all the Italians because Italy was with Germany and then turned against them, and so the Germans hated the Italians more than anybody else. So I remember my father, he twisted his back. He couldn't move. Well, I was in charge because I was the only kid in the neighborhood. I had to call the name of a girl that used to live in the neighborhood. And when I called her, "Lena! Lena!" real hard, all the men disappeared. I was giving the alarm that the Germans were coming. Okay?

Well, he couldn't move, but that day, he jumped out of bed and he kept on going, and me and my mother, we looked for them. We found him three days later. He went through this cornfield, all the men through this big cornfield, and here comes the S.S. and they put the machine gun on the corner, and they went in there this high. [gestures] Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat! Within thirty minutes, no more corn. It was all cut. Yeah.

I can see it in front of my eyes as we speak. You never forget those things. War is bad. I understand. I know what it is. A lot of people, they know because they read it, because they see it in a

movie. Well, when you see it in a movie it's very entertaining, but when you're out there and somebody shoots at you, it's not very entertaining. Kind of spooky.

So, anyway, I made it. I survived. [laughs]

Thank you for sharing those memories, because they're so important for us to know about, because a lot of us, most of us, have never experienced anything like that.

Well, the war took all we had, so that's why my father had to come to this country. Because he was a bricklayer and a cement finisher and everything, and had his own company. When the Germans came over, and they were receding, they took everything—planks, cement mixer—they needed it to build bridges because the Americans and the English had bombed all the bridges in retreat.

And so after the war, he made a big mistake. He started the business right away. He got caught by the Italian government after two years when the war was over. And they wanted at the time, I think, three and a half million liras. I think it was about twenty thousand American dollars, something like that. Well, we were broke. He said, "I don't have it."

"Well, you got so much time, and otherwise, you're going to end up in jail. We're going to do this...."

And my father wrote to his brother in Carson City, asking if he could come over. And he made the paper and he came to this country. That's why we are all here. And the funny thing was, back in 1962, we decided, me and him, to go back to Italy to stay. We got home at four o'clock, four thirty in the morning. At seven o'clock the Italian police were there, and they wanted to know when we were going to pay the taxes. And boy, they got so belligerent. First of all, they were going to get me, because I didn't serve in the army over there. I left six months before they were going to induct me without doing anything. And they said, "You gotta come with us."

I let them talk for a while; I offered them something to drink. The guy got offended and they got belligerent. But I knew what was coming, so before going to Italy, I went to San Francisco and the Italian consul gave me a dispensation for twelve months from the Italian army. He signed it and everything. So after this police was so ferocious, I said, "Does this mean anything to you?"

And he said, "Why didn't you tell me at the beginning?"

I said, "Well, you knew everything." [laughs]

I left there about an hour. You live over there, you're eighteen years old, and coming across the ocean at the time and everything, I thought it was fun. Of course, over there, you read all those Tom Mix, all those, "Oh boy, you're gonna see the Indians," Okay you're gonna see a lot of sagebrush! [laughs]

So had your father come over to the United States without the family first, and then went back to get you?

No, then he sent for me, and then I came over. And then me and him we went back intending to stay, but we couldn't stay, so we decided to bring the family over. But I went back in 1959 and got married. I couldn't bring the wife over, because I was not an American citizen yet. So I had to wait from 1956 and five years after, I had to go and get the American citizenship.

And I remember everybody had to go to school together, you gotta do this, you gotta do that, and my uncle in Carson gave me a book about American history. That morning I had to go to the court for the American citizenship, I got up at four in the morning. At nine o'clock I had to be in court with two

witnesses. I read the book; I went over there; the judge asked me 21 questions, I answered all 21, and I was an American citizen. [laughs]

When was that?

It was in 1961.

So when you first came here with your father, he lived in Yerington at the time?

No, he lived in Sparks.

Oh, your father did. But you went to Yerington?

I went to Yerington because when I got here—you know, now everybody comes across the border, they jump. They go back and forth—you know the story. I don't want to get into that. But what I went through, they went through and investigated all my life. They knew everything. First of all, before they give you the permit to leave, you have to go to the American consulate in Genoa and they give you the physical. If you've got a cold, you can't leave for United States. Now, they don't care.

Anyway, what happened, he took me—he was boarding in Sparks with an Italian family. My aunt in Yerington said, "You come here, because"—I'll tell you, at the beginning of May, my cousin was attending the last year of high school in Lyon County. So she says, "You'll go to school with him." Okay. So for a month, a month and a half, I went to Lyon County High School, sitting there listening and everything. I didn't understand much, but I put two and two together. When it came to math and stuff like that, whatever they were doing for graduation in the last year of high school, I did it five years before in Italy, so it wasn't difficult for me.

But after I was here for three weeks, over where my father was living, that's where my address was, in Sparks, where he was boarding, UNR sent a bunch of stuff and my father brought it to me in Yerington. My aunt, she went through it and said, "Okay, you've got to go to the School of Engineering at UNR so they can get you in right away.

I said, "I ain't going anyplace. I'm going to get a job and get \$500 and go back where I come from." [laughs] And that's why I stayed here. She died a few years ago at 98 years old. She always said, "I told you to go over there to UNR. I told you. I told you." She said, "You didn't listen to me."

But anyway, that's why I went to Yerington. Then my father was working. He got a job here as a finisher, painting and everything. I walked from Sparks all the way up to Verdi for two weeks steady, up and down, looking for jobs. There were a bunch of lumber mills all the way through there and we'd be walking around so see if they needed help. An Italian guy, it was Andreozzi, who lived where my father was boarding, he'd translate. They'd say, "Does he speak any English?"

"No."

"I'm sorry, we can't give him a job."

If you do that now, you're history, man.

So anyway, finally they gave me a job here, because Mr. Granata, he was the general manager here. He signed the responsibility for me for coming over, like a sponsor, and stuff like that. And I came over and I said, "Are you going to give me a job or what, because otherwise I'm going to find some money and go back where I came from."

He said, "I'll let you know. Talk to your father."

Well, that night when my father came home, he said, "Okay, tomorrow morning, you'd better be ready at 5 o'clock, because we start at six."

I said, "We start what?"

"Well, you're gonna come to work."

And I came to work at six, and I went home the next morning at 2 o'clock. I was looking for a job. The first week, I got 96 hours in. I'll never forget. It was July second, 1956.



Martin Iron Works in 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber

What kind of work were you doing, from the beginning?

[laughs] He said, "You've gotta grease the machine." My father was doing it. They gave me a can with grease and a stick, and I greased up the machine. A can of oil, and put all the hydraulic oils in the cups for the whole thing. I said, "Boy, I was looking for a job, boy."

Then I remember Granata came over two weeks later and he says, "We start everybody at \$1.50 an hour." He said, "I can't give you \$1.50."

I said, "Whatever, I don't care. I didn't ask you for money, I asked you for a job."

He says, "You know the tall guy with white hair?" His name was Martin Schwamb. "He saw you operating and the way you were working, and I'll give you \$1.60, but don't say anything to anybody."

I said, "Thank you."

Eighty cents more every eight hours! Across the street there was Pinky's Market, where a T-bone steak at the time, a one-pound steak was 75 cents. I'd have five cents left and a good dinner! [laughs]

At the time, it was a different story altogether. People came over looking for a job, they'd ask for a job and everything. Now, they come over: "Well, I'm looking for a job, but what have you got to offer? How many days of vacation will I get? How many weeks of vacation? What kind of insurance?"

Do you want a job or what? First you get a job and then we talk about it. There's been a change. A lot of people say, "You are the old way. The old way. The old way. Now we are more emancipated."

No, we are more socialistic nowadays. That's the problem. That's the problem with the world. We've all become socialistic. I am Catholic. I went to Catholic school since kindergarten. And I wouldn't change my religion for anything because I've been born and raised that way. However, the Gospel says that Jesus says if you get slapped in the face, turn your cheek and let them slap the other. No, no, no, wait a minute. You slap me in the face, I'll strike you back. That's my way of religion. [laughs]

And like now, everybody gotta eat. That's correct. If somebody goes to work, works, is sweating his blood out to work for making some money, and they got another guy who could care less, and gambles all his money until he's broke, and when he gets to 60 or 65 years old, the guy that sweats all his life to have something has to pick up some of that and give it to the guy that dissipates all the other? No, no, no, no. That's not for me.

You were a hard worker from the beginning, and you were grateful to have that work.

That's right.



Britta Halvorsen Betty Halvorsen Martin Schwamb

Martin Iron Works, Inc.

STEEL FABRICATORS AND ERECTORS

Authorized Distributors for Soule Building

530 E. Fourth St., Reno

Phone 329-8631

An advertisement for Martin Iron Works appearing in the Sparks High School yearbook, *Terminus*, in 1962

Did you talk to Martin Schwamb much at all, at first?

Yes. After my episode for a week of greasing the machine, and looking around, I thought, if he does see me, where I come from, back in Italy, I was over there, I was the king of the row, the only soccer player on a team in my town, and I could do whatever I wanted. I could celebrate, have a party the way I want. And here I am all greased like that, oh my god, you know. [laughs] So anyway, after that episode was over, they sent me to help unload the railroad cars of steel. I went out there and they were doing it this way, this way, this way. I said, "No, no, no, we're doing it this way." Of course, I was arguing with men who were fifty, sixty years old, who worked here. And I'm eighteen-and-a-half. And they didn't like the idea. But anyway, I did it my way, and this guy walked in the backyard and saw this, he looked at it and he was surprised.

He went over to get the shop foreman and said, "Who had the idea to stack all the steel?"

He said, "Piero over there."

He came over and he said, "Thank you very much," and he shook my hand. "I've never seen anything so perfect. I love it."

And then for Christmas he was donating candies, chocolates, wine, whiskey to the Lion's Club's party, to all over town. And he said, "Piero, come with me."

I said, "What do you mean? Where are we going? I've got work to do here."

"Come with me." He took me in his Cadillac and I was the delivery boy with him, he'd take me around.

The other thing is I was trying to do better all the time, to improve. And the day that he took me around, he started kicking on the little bolts: "This is two cents, these nuts and these washers, half a penny."

And I said, "What's wrong with them?"

He said, "Do you understand?"

I said, "Mr. Martin, make me understand. You got a general manager, you got a foreman, you gotta tell *them* these things. Why me? I am the very last one."

He said, "I'm telling you this because one of these days, you're gonna wear my shoes."

I turned around and said, "That's what you think. Wait until I get two or three paychecks, and you'll see how fast I'm going to move out of here." [laughs] It didn't work out that way.

And I spent so much time in the shop, laying out the steel and everything. He had a stroke and he was paralyzed. He had his daughter bring him to see me working in the shop in his wheelchair. He was something else.

Me and my father, we'd go after work every Friday across the street to Pinky's Market and buy the groceries. Many times, he'd come over, Mr. Martin, and me and my father and him and the owner, Mr. Manfredi, we'd go down in the basement and we'd have a couple of drinks all together. Then we'd go back up to the store and Vince Manfredi would say "It's already been paid. Martin paid for your groceries." He was a gentleman. He was a gentleman.

Except when he moved out. He used to live on Watt Street, and he built a house on Marsh. It was me and another guy, a German guy named Pete Fiek, who lived over there at the end of California Avenue and worked here for 50-plus years. We had to make sure no dogs were going to come over and destroy his new lawn. [laughs] We are over there, and we could care less. But before we went to the lawn,

we went over to move the furniture from the old house to his in-laws in Virginia City. We went down into the basement and he had a stepson who had a train—you know, the ones that you control? Me and Petey, we had fun. We'd go over there and played with the train and everything. We went in another room that was full of nice apples, on a big table. So I'd eat an apple and play with the train. [laughs] Once in a while we'd pick up a piece of furniture and put it in the truck.

We heard the door slam and it was him. He stood in the doorway: "Vot you guys doing?" [laughs] He didn't get on me; I was the youngest one. He got on the other German. [laughs] He told the other German, "You know, they kept all the smart ones back over there and sent all the dummies to this country!" And Pete looks at me, thinking, "What about him?" [laughs]

So then we went to watch the dogs. There was a big German Shepherd, and I wasn't going to chase the dogs out of there. No way. So I said, "Hey, Pete, let's do this. You drive over to the shop and bring a bunch of rebar and then go over to Flanigan and get a roll of chicken wire, and we'll fence the thing."

The next evening he came over and said, "That was a good idea. And what were you guys doing in the meantime when you didn't have to watch the dogs?" We were playing around. [laughs] They were good times. Good times.

He saw something in you early on that he really admired, I think, in your work ethic. How did you then learn to get more of the skills in the trade? Did someone train you?

I worked with these old people. There were a lot of people here that were working for the railroads, in the steam engine department in Sparks. When they closed in Sparks in '55, the Southern Pacific moved everything to Roseville, and three or four of these old guys came over and worked here. I was a helper, and I watched what they were doing. I would go with them, and I picked it up. Drawing-wise, blueprints-wise, I didn't have much to learn because I was doing it in school in Italy. So for me, the only thing I didn't know was the trade, like welding. I didn't know how to weld.

The shop superintendent sent me to help this guy named Charlie from Oklahoma, a hard-working man, great person. We were doing some framing for the University of Nevada. And we had these big jigs with all the angles and everything. He was on top and he gave me a welding hood and a welding stinger with the welding rods and he said, "Okay, you go on."

I said, "Wait a minute, I don't even know...."

He said, "You're gonna learn."

Well, the first week, every day I burned one shirt completely. And I learned. It scratched me, and all this part was falling down, and I learned. At the time, more than welding, we were doing riveting, so we had the furnace heating the rivets. He showed me how to do it, and then he was catching them, or I was catching them. We'd get these rivets, like bolts, you know, three-quarter-of-an-inch or three inches long. We were throwing them about sixty or seventy feet with the tongs. And we had a funnel and you'd catch the things, and you'd give it to other guy with the bolt and squeeze it. It was a lot of fun.

Why would you throw it that far?

Because it would take too long. And the furnace heats three—one, two, three. I still have the furnace. It doesn't work anymore. [laughs] You plug it in—you have the 220, you know. You threw one away, put the new one in, threw the other one, put the other one in, threw the other. And the other one

would catch it and put it in. That's one-two-a four-man operation. And you got, what, ten beams, maybe forty at the time, and each one gets six holes. And it would take the same amount. You don't have time to pick it up and bring it over there. You just threw it and they'd catch it.

It just sounds dangerous. [laughs]

What was more dangerous was the one for the ski lift. The base plate for the tower on the ski lift, you put these rivets in there, and you'd do one side with a two-and-a-half inch round chunk of steel with a concave end. You'd put it against the head with the rivet, and on the other side the other guy with the gun would shoot it—boom, boom, boom—and here he'd buckle it up. One day this guy missed it, and got my father on the chin. I had to take him to the doctor. I thought he had smashed all his teeth. No—nothing. He had a big cut. He was lucky he didn't get it in the head.

Now, I don't think anybody knows how to do it anymore.



The Martin Iron Works sign at 530 East 4th Street. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Has the process changed completely?

Completely. Now everybody's doing the welding. Welding, welding, welding. Even the welding changed, you know. You got different rods. Years ago, you'd get two pieces of steel in there and you welded across it and put a plate on this side and one on the other side, and put the two plates on and you got it. Now you don't do that anymore. You got to prepare the material with a nice bevel, clean them all out, weld it, arc it out, re-weld it, then here comes the guy with the x-rays to make sure everything is okay.

Right. So you were working in the shop very early. How soon did you start working on site, doing any work out on projects when they were under construction? Did you do that, too?

I went over there. Not much, though. I went over when we were doing Woolworth's, the roof of Woolworth's, downtown. I remember that one. First was the telephone company, then Woolworth's. And I'll tell you, one day the wind was blowing like crazy and we were putting the sheeting for the concrete on the roof, metal decking, galvanized. I got the last sheets in my hand, it was about two feet wide and twenty feet long.

The superintendent said, "Come on down! The wind is going to kill you, come on down!"

I said, "I'm going to set the last sheets. I don't want to come back tomorrow morning—I'm going to get it done now." And he's screaming at me to come down. The wind got it, twisted me around, and I'm sitting up there. I'm walking with a piece of steel that's 24 inches wide, on an eight-inch-deep steel beam. And I let the sheet go and I grabbed this beam and I loved it with all of my body. [laughs] Then when I got down, oh man, that old man really got on me. And I said, "Okay, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" He says, "You could have been dead! Don't you understand?"

I said, "I do understand."

Three days later, we were doing the stairway inside where the City [Hall] is now, the black building where the bank was. It's two floors down below, and I'm up there bolting it. And I got a little can of bolts. I moved around, and I kicked the bolts down. I didn't even know. "Bong!" It fell on the old man's hard hat.

I said, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

He said, "I don't want to talk about it. I know you didn't do it on purpose. I know you better than that."

I said, "Thank you." [laughs]

Yes, he's down there and then, "Chonk!" He was German, but he looked like one of those Germans with those army hats

I'm glad he wasn't hurt!

We had a truck one time. You know, the city dump was where Hug High School is. So me and this other guy had this old ten-wheeler from the Army. I don't know where they got it. And it wasn't going over fifteen miles per hour. It probably used five gallons of gas per mile. So we go to the dump, me and this other guy—it was Bill Granata's brother; Luigi was his name. He was about five foot two. And he couldn't reach the gas. I couldn't drive. So he was standing there, and we were coming down Sutro,

and he lost control. He couldn't stop the truck any more. So I was in the seat on the side, I opened the door, and I bailed out. [laughs] The vehicle struck "ka-poom!" against the shoulder about twenty feet down. [laughs]

He said, "Oh you're a good buddy, you jumped out of there!"

I said, "You were the driver!" [laughs] Oh, man.

Another time, me and this Pete Fiek were taking a steel beam to put it up on a school in Fallon, an elementary school. We passed Fernley and we were going along, singing. Pretty soon, this guy in a pickup came behind us honking his horn, "Beep beep, beep beep!" Pete said, "What's wrong with that guy?"

I said, "I don't know, keep on going."

Finally, the guy yells, "Hey, you guys lost a beam back there!"

I looked in the back, and I said, "Stop, stop, let's go back! We lost something!"

Oh, man, it was about a thirty-foot beam. Both of us had to put it back on the truck, with no chain or nothing. We made it to Fallon, anyway. Nowadays if you did that, you'd be in jail. [laughs]

Definitely!

But for some reason, we survived. When he started the business, the shop was on Morrill Avenue at first. It was a small place, over there. And then he moved over here. This was a tank shop. The building was moved here from Salt Lake City, and the name of the guy was Wagner Tank. I remember when I first started back on the plate shear—the machine that cut the plates—and here comes this guy. He never smiled. I couldn't stand him. He pushed everybody out like it was his own. Then I found out that it was the old owner of the building. He went broke but he was trying to intimidate when he'd come around. So I got to meet this guy. I never talked to him, because he never talked to anybody. He had a mean look. I'd keep staring at him.

So he went out of business? He must have had a big operation here, that he had built.

I don't know. We had a roller for plates and everything. Then we moved them out because we went more structural, no more plate work and stuff like that. We've still got a roller over there for quarter-of-an-inch plates. When OSHA first came over, they said that it was illegal. So we had to put a guard around it. They told us, "It's yours, you figure it out."

Well, if you put a guard around it, you can't push the plate through. So we argued, and argued, and argued. And Mr. Granata said, "You know what, we'll go to court."

Okay, we ended up in court, at the Washoe County Courthouse. What were we going to do? We were going to bring the roller to the court. It's 3000 pounds, you know? Anyway, we loaded this machine in a dump truck and we parked right in front of the court house. Guess what? OSHA never showed up. So it was dismissed! [laughs]

So the railroad used to be very important to the location, to load and unload. When did that stop being used as a way to get the materials in and out?

We're still using it.

Oh, you do?

Yes. Our crane in the old shop goes over the railroad. We got the spur coming from Sutro, and coming right all the way alongside Western Pacific, and it goes right in our backyard.

I didn't realize it was still used in the same way.

When they were putting the railroad tracks underground, I was in Chicago at the time for an AGC convention. I got home and I saw all these markings. I asked my son, "What's this?"

And he said, "The City came over and they're going to do this and they're going to do that." First of all, right in the front yard was a big circle with a cross like this. [demonstrates]

I said, "What is that? A helicopter pad or something?"

"Oh no," he said, "That's where they're going to move the oil pipeline. You know, it's a pipeline going through, alongside the track from Richmond to the tank in Sparks—you know those big tanks at the end of Sparks? It's a pipe like this [demonstrates] full of gas.

And I said, "And they're going to come through here?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "They already got—."

I said, "That's what you think."

I grabbed the phone and I raised all kinds of hell with the city engineer. I said, "Well, let me tell you something. Right now you go through alongside the railroad in the back. If you're going to come down Record Street, you bring it across here, in our front yard, then you cut across, now you tell me something. We've got a shop over there. We've got a semi truck. We fill it with forty-five thousand or fifty thousand pounds of steel on top. People are welding around. It's going to crunch the pipe and guess what, everything will catch on fire, and it's going to blow Reno to kingdom come. And you're going to be responsible for that, aren't you?"

"Oh, we never thought of that."

So the idea changed. No more. So they got it alongside that way, back that way. And they went over there. They come over and he says, "Okay, we're going to have a drainage on this side. It's going to cut through the back of your backyard."

"Yeah?" I said. "What about the crane?"

"Well, the crane can go between."

I says, "You know, we go through with twenty, twenty-five tons at a time. You have to have a solid deal."

And they studied it and did this and that, and pretty soon they changed the idea.

And I said, "You guys better take care of the pipeline going to Sparks, right underneath there."

"Yeah, we tried to locate it."

I said, "It's right there."

"How do you know?"

"What do you mean, how do I know? I saw when they were putting it in there."

"But our map shows—."

I said, "Your map is 1935. They put the pipeline there in 1960."

The City of Reno, oh my god. Anyway, they were arguing.

I said, "It's not four feet deep. It's about two foot six, no more than that."

"Oh, that's illegal."

I said, "Well, if you know everything, why don't you try to poke a hole down there and see what happens."

Well, I was right.

Anyway, they got it from over there and they go across over here, they go all the way through the sidewalk, they go over there on Park Street, they've got the stupid thing again over there, and they go over. Anyhow, they said, "You're going to lose the service of the railroad."

"Why?" I said, "Listen, you guys aren't thinking about it. Western Pacific doesn't go underground, and it's going to come over here." I said, "You just bring the spur right alongside and Western Pacific keeps going right on the side of Martin Iron Works, and you don't have any problem."

"Well, we have to see." They wanted to know how much steel we brought in in the last ten years. So we had to prove how many railroad cars. At the time we had a big job, using 37 railroad cars just for one job alone. It was paying enough to put the tracks down. So he said, "We don't have any problem."

There was another track that was going all the way down along the fence over there to the alleyway because it was delivering wheat and corn and everything to the Ghiglieri. They had a big store selling food for animals and stuff like that. Really big down there. Trillions of pigeons all over the place. [laughs] Right there at the end of it. And here was a big lumber yard, where I've got the two shops over there. And out of the gate over there, the railroad was coming to Western Pacific, Martin Iron Works, and then back all the way down to Park Street. And there was a railroad on Park Street, too. There were tracks in there because it used to be Rossi—not Rossi, Galli's Foundry, right after the war. They were casting bells and stuff like that. It was the two Galli brothers, Gildo and Osvaldo Galli. They were coming from the Marche region, the same region Granata came from.

So are there other businesses that still use the railroad, here along Fourth Street, that you know of, now? I wonder if you're the only one.

When the docks were there, they were bringing groceries, fruit, everything, loading up the docks all the way around. Because right on the other side of the dock was the fishery. They were Japanese; they had a nice seafood store. I can't remember. Oh, Record Supply, right there where the homeless are used to be Record Supply, bringing all the pipes and everything. Commercial Hardware, they were bringing everything on the railroad and unloading it right there, out back.

And Eveleth Lumber.

Not there. On the other side of Wells Avenue.

Was there another lumber company?

Over here? Yes.

What was that one called?

I don't know. The owner was from Oregon. Not only that, they were making windows all the way down at the end, manufacturing windows, and they were selling all over the west coast. I can't remember their name.

So you really saw Fourth Street change so much from when it was Highway 40. It must have been so different before the highway went in.

It was a mess. When it was Highway 40, with no freeway or nothing, we didn't have any parking, so we parked in front of the shop out there. In the wintertime, when it snowed or whatever, you had to take an hour every night to dig your car out of the mud and snow and everything before you could leave. There were all the trucks and everything, and I remember there was fighting and fighting and fighting about the freeway. The local residents didn't want the freeway to do this, or they didn't want that. Until Walter Baring told them, "You guys are going to do it or we're going to cancel the whole thing." So they got the message.

It's the same thing with this railroad. I attended almost all the meetings and one day, I lost it. We were in a meeting at Wells Fargo Bank in a conference room up on Kietzke Lane, the black building out there. There were a whole bunch of people. And I remember the guy that was fighting against it that was running for mayor—Robinson. He was in real estate, too. And Spike Wilson, he was there. A whole bunch of people. Ferenc Szony was there. He was sitting next to me. He kept bonking me. [laughs]

This other guy's got a little two-bedroom complex rented and he said if it goes there, he's going to lose it. There were all kinds of things. I said, "Let's look at the big picture." Finally everybody had something to say. I said, "You know, enough is enough. We're arguing about this and that, and that, and that. In 1957 I landed in Las Vegas in the sagebrush. That's where the airport was, a little stupid wood building. You had to walk a quarter of a mile to get out of the sagebrush on a dirt road to get someplace.

I said, "Look at Las Vegas now, because they have a mentality that's a lot better than what we have here in Reno." In Reno, one is jealous of the other one; they can't get along. Over there, they all get along, and look what they've got. Over here, for this stupidity here, we've been talking and talking and talking and this job is supposed to have been done twenty years ago." I said, "So you guys want to keep arguing?" I said, "I'm moving to Las Vegas. Good bye!" And they were all, "What?" [laughs]

You know, I can't stand it. I can't stand it. And I see at the meetings they were holding in town, you'd go over there and there were a lot of people—I don't want to mention their names—they would sit on top of the big table like a pope on a throne just to show themselves. And they didn't say anything, they didn't make any sense. Do something! Be active! I told them, "Look at Las Vegas, what it is, and then look at Reno. We've got ten thousand more resources here. We've got Lake Tahoe, we've got the snow, we've got everything, this lake around here. What has Las Vegas got? What they don't have, they created, because they've got the mentality to do it. You guys want somebody else to make the cake for you, put the frosting, and probably eat it too for you!" [laughs]

It must be really satisfying now just to think of where you came from with this business, and to be with this business after all those years, and to see what it turned into.

You're right. I also was thinking this way. My father, we went back. They wanted that money back and everything. We left, I left two months before, he left a few days before. Otherwise, we were going to end up paying. And it was going on for ten years, and then they forgot about it. If we had stayed over there—he had a partner over there, my father. And his partner became one of the biggest general contractors in Tuscany. He made millions and millions over there. So we could have had the same thing. Maybe it wasn't going to work out that way.

However, I am satisfied with what I've accomplished, let's put it that way. I could have done a lot more if I had the power to become president before 1989, when Mr. Granata passed away. I had a vision to open up all the side over there. This office, this was done when I became president. Before, we were sitting in the old place over there.

I don't know what to tell you. There's an old saying that you gotta take a chance. Okay. I always thought this way. My father loaned me \$350 to come to this country. I paid him back two months after I was here. So, the first thing I did. Now it costs \$1500 to go back to Italy; I put \$1500 aside. It's still there. If I go broke, I still have \$1500 to go back where I came from. That's it.

Not only that, but then there was a different approach. I worked up there with the men. To me, the men who worked for me were just like part of the family, okay? And I treated them the same way I would treat me, myself—treat them the same way. And it's not that I walk in [mocks puffing up his chest], no. I respect the helper as much as the engineer, because the engineer is sharp and he's got the schooling, but the helper knows what tools to use to bring it to the guy to do the work. Each one, you have to appreciate what each person is doing. The janitor is just as necessary as the Michelangelo. That's it. That's the way I was brought up.

My brother's doing real good, too. He's got a cabinet shop. He was here by the airport and now he moved to Carson City. He's doing great. I got a sister, she lived with my father and mother in the old house we built ourselves in 1965 over there on Del Monte Lane. View Crest and Del Monte Lane, a beautiful house on the corner, brick, full basement.

A week after Easter, 1964, we set the grades. We didn't have a transit or nothing. My father went to the lumberyard and chose a two-by-six, 24 feet long straight six-foot—we set a level on top of it in the middle of the street, and we shoot the level and it put the pick at the height and everything, and we set the elevations for the corners of the house. People were out there saying, "What are those Italian guys doing?"

I said, "We're going to show them what we're doing." Five-eighths of an inch lower was all we were off. My Dad put all the bricks himself. After we shot everything we were only five-eighths of an inch off on one corner. It's still going 100 percent, beautiful. My sister's taking care of the place, with two-and-a-half acres in there. She's watering it; she's got a garden. It's unbelievable. And she's two years younger than me.

She says, "I'm getting old, I don't think I can do it anymore."

"Well, don't do it." Now she's got three or four horses over there in a pasture.

And she's a good seamstress, one of the best I've ever seen. She started after fifth grade as a seamstress. She didn't go to school; she learned it from other ladies that had been seamstresses for years and years. She's pretty good.

I wanted to ask you what year you were able to bring your wife over.

I brought my wife over here in 1962.

And what year had you gotten married?

I got married in 1959. I came here in '56, I went back in '58, I got married on Valentine's Day 1959. We had a honeymoon in Rome for thirty days, then fifteen days in Florence with my wife's aunt, because she was such a lady, unbelievable. And the husband was an electrical engineer. He redesigned

two power plants in Cuba. They had a whole bunch of condominiums in Florence, one of the best places in the world. She only had one bad thing that to me I didn't like. She loved the piano and classical music. So tonight we gotta go to the Boccherini concert.

I looked at my wife, and I said, "Come on. Let's get out of here. I don't wanna go there. It's two or three hours of" [pretends to play the violin]. If it was opera, I would love it, because my uncle, one of my mother's brothers, he sang in the choir of the opera in Lucca. [laughs] But the classical music, no, no, no. Western music or whatever. Elvis Presley.

I remember in 1999, we were at the Bellagio with the AGC deal, and we came out on the stage for the presentation and everything, and Dee Colfer from Southwest Builders in Reno, she was there. She still has the picture. I impersonated Elvis Presley and she took the picture. She says she loves that picture. [laughs] And my comment—there were 2500 people there that night at the thing, and the national president of the AGC says, "Piero, what's your comment for tonight?"

I said, "Well, Peter, the only thing I can say is 'Hollywood, eat your guts out!'" [laughs] Everybody stood up! [laughs]

I'm sure they loved it! Tell me your wife's name.

Maria Pia.

Were your children born in the United States or in Italy?

My children were both born here. The oldest, Mario, was born here at St. Mary's Hospital. I ended up sitting in there when my wife was going to have the baby because she couldn't speak a word of English. She had just come from Italy. And there were only two rooms. There was another lady having a baby, and this other lady had problems or whatever, so they called a psychiatric guy to hypnotize this lady, and he said, "You are skiing. Look now, you are skiing."

And pretty soon I was feeling like, boy, he was getting to me, too. I said, "I gotta get out of here!" [laughs]

Anyway, so I went out and Dr. Ross was the doctor. But he wasn't on call that night. Dr. Stuart was on call. And I was sitting down and he said, "Everything went okay and you've got a baby boy."

I said, "Okay, great!" So I went in there.

And then when we had my daughter, we went in and my wife says, "Okay, we gotta go."

I said, "Do we have to leave now? Can we wait until 5:00?" [laughs] Anyway, we went over there to St. Mary's, I parked the car, took her to her room and everything like that, and I said, "Okay, okay."

And then she says, "You know, you're in a one-hour zone. You'd better go move the car before we get a ticket."

"Okay, I'll be right back." I jump down, go move the car, I come back, and she's gone.

I said, "Where'd she go?"

They said, "You've got a baby daughter."

I says, "What?" [laughs]

Then Mario went to kindergarten and elementary school at Veterans Memorial. I remember my wife would take him to kindergarten in the morning and he's been in the house, he couldn't speak English because my wife and her mother—I brought my mother-in-law along—they were speaking Italian all the time. And every time Maria Pia dropped him at school, tears would fill his eyes. Then he made friends

and everything. Then from there he went to Vaughn Junior High, and from Vaughn Junior High, went to Wooster. And he played football at Wooster, did real good. And then from Wooster went to UNR and graduated in Engineering. He would study at night, with a little light on his desk, all night long and everything.

And my daughter, Patricia, I never saw her open a book. Ever, ever, ever. And she went to Veterans Memorial. At Veterans Memorial, one episode, Mr. Ames was the teacher in fourth grade, and he called my wife over. He was going to hold Patricia one hour extra for two days to clean up the walls because she wrote on the toilet walls. He wanted to ask if it was okay. My wife went over there, and she says, "Two days? No." She says, "Two weeks. Two weeks."

"Okay."

She heard me one evening. I was talking at the table about when we were going to school like I did, and then she went to school and did the same thing. So she got penalized. Anyway.

She had been writing on something?

On the wall.

Oh.

Because I said I wrote on the wall. I remembered there was a case with a friend of mine. We used to tease him. We were already in high school and he was wearing underwear that looked like his grandmother's, with that little thing and we didn't know if he was a man or a woman, so we were teasing him and we wrote what he was on the wall. She goes up to the school and does the same thing. [laughs] I didn't even know she was paying attention!

But then she went over to UNR and she graduated as a dietician; she's a registered dietician. She went through all the things they gotta do. She served over there at St. Mary's, Washoe Medical—now it's Renown—the Sparks family hospital, and the VA, the internship and everything. She got a license and then she says, "I can't afford to buy the insurance to go into business." She says, "Do you got any work for me?" So she can do what she wants and come and go.

So anyway, I said, "Okay." And that's okay. I'm proud of both of them because they went to school. Even Mario had straight As all the way through. And Patricia, same thing. She never opened up a book. She said, "You don't have to come home and work like crazy all night long." She said, "Pay attention in class."

I said, "Oh, good for you."

It seems like family has always been important in this business. And I think it's very moving that you keep the portrait of Martin up. It seems like family was important to him, too, and he treated his workers well.

Well, the thing is I always thought of it this way: Each country's great, as long as the family relation is tied together and everything. When the families start dissolving, the society is dissolving, and we have a mess. And that's what we are facing all over.

Look at this country, when you got the uncontrolled immigration coming over. Then pretty soon, there's this and that. It's too much—I don't say "freedom," because we think we have freedom. We are

controlled. And why we are controlled, because there are too many hanky panky going on, and we gotta have control and make sure things don't go out of line. That's the problem.

But I don't like the way it goes, and I've been preaching it since I was president of the AGC, in meetings in New York and every place. I always thought not as much in the western [states]. I don't want to include Washington and Oregon or California. That's out of my question. I'm talking about Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, and part of Arizona, too. We still got the mentality to do things the way it was done. Not liberal like California, Oregon, and the other places. Too much. It's too much, both ways. I don't know.

But I was preaching it. I used to argue with all the presidents of all the other states, and one time I was told, "Mr. Bullentini, you'd better refrain your language because you are on the Internet." And I says, "Yes sir, why don't you tell it to somebody who really cares? I'll tell you what I think, and that's the way I feel about it."

I'm sure my arguing doesn't get any place, but I am not a guy that—I see things this way, I'm open mind to see somebody come over and suggest something to me, because even in the shop, when you asked me earlier how did you do it. Even after I was in charge and everything, I would always take advice from regular people, or the guy that was sweeping the floor. You know, that guy makes sense.

Do you still walk around the shop floor much?

Yeah.

Keep an eye on things?

Today, I went out there three times. I haven't been in the other shop for three or four days because today is the first day I'm walking around without the cane after the hip replacement. And the day before, last week, I had a general checkup, a complete physical, all the tests and everything, and my doctor, she was completely happy. She says, "You are a different person altogether."

She cut my medication down and everything. I had diabetes that gave me three pills a day; she cut me down to one because it doesn't exist anymore; the sugar in my blood is all the way down. My cholesterol is all the way down, 153 including everything, I don't know what they call it. Today they look at the computer at the thing in the examination and everything.

And yesterday I saw the heart doctor because four years ago, coming out of a basketball game I got a chest pain, and I had to sit down on the sidewalk before I got to the car. And after a minute, I was okay again. I was with my son and he says, "What's wrong?" I was sweating.

I said, "Don't even open your mouth to your sister. Just shut up. There's nothing wrong. Nothing wrong. Nothing wrong."

Well, he didn't keep his mouth shut. So two days after, I was at St. Mary's because my daughter knows all the nurses and doctors and everything over there. Anyway, they put me through all the examination and everything. And then they think it was an artery plugged up. Okay. Here he comes, they get the doctors and this anesthesiologist friend of ours, he says, "I'm going to be the chaperone for you so you'll go with me all over the place." I'm sitting in there, doing all the testing. If the balloon doesn't go through, you go open heart. They put the dye in.

I tried to raise my head a couple times and finally she says, "You don't understand." Poom! She says, "I'm Italian, too. My name is Pincolini."

I says, "Well, you don't have to pound me on the head!"

She says, "You don't understand. I told you to stay down."

And then they were through. Then I heard this doctor, Bryan and Fletcher laugh like hell. I says, "You know, you two clowns, what do you got to laugh about?"

And pretty soon, they come over and my kids, my brother, my sister, they're all out there. They thought that I was going to go in for open heart surgery. They come over and he says, "Okay, we'll take you back upstairs and you gotta take one baby aspirin every day."

I says, "Wait a minute. Are you guys gonna open up or what's going on here?"

He says, "You go home now."

I says, "I ain't coming back!"

He says, "Let me tell you. Your heart, you got one artery that is plugged up completely. But you don't have to worry about it."

"What do you mean, I don't have to worry about it?"

"No, because you made a bypass. And so you get enough blood to go around."

And I said, "You've gotta be kidding."

"No," he says. "Another guy has got the same thing."

I says, "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he says, "You built a lot of bridges in Nevada and California. Your heart learned from you. It went around that way."

Anyway, so from then on I had to go see the heart doctor all the time. Anyway, I had that thing down, the checkup, yesterday, and he looked at everything and he says, "Piero, I don't know. It's everything different. It looks like thirty years ago, probably."

I said, "No, thirty years ago I was taking a lot of high blood pressure pills."

So he cut me down on that, too. Then I went over to see Shonnard for the hips. And he said, "Today you gotta do x-rays."

I said, "Okay."

So he came over to show me the x-rays. I didn't know that the stupid pin goes all the way down my leg, down there.

I said, "What about this? This is the one that's bothering me."

So, he called over here, I'm waiting to go over there to have an epidural shot on the side for three or four months before they operate on the other side. But then the other symptoms are perfect. So I don't know.

You're better than ever.

I told Dr. Bryan yesterday, I said, "You know, Richard, I don't know."

He said, "What do you not know? You gotta be happy."

I said, "I don't know. A lot of people have said when they are not too good and then they become good all at once, that's the last strike, and then they fall down and never get up anymore." [laughs]

Do you ever think about retiring?

I've been thinking about it a lot of times when I get excited, and I get mad at something. Then after that, I think, "What am I gonna do?" I don't play golf. I can't stand it. My father used to be over there on the TV saying, "Oh boy, he's gonna get it. He's gonna get it." I can't stand it. Or other sports.

I don't know. I don't have any idea. You know, if you retire—my kids say, "We don't want to do the life that you did," twelve hours a day, seven days a week, whatever. Because I work a lot. And the thing is, when I started, I told my wife, "Okay, let's go travel someplace," so we went to Italy. First we went to Mexico, then to Italy, then we went back to Mexico. Then we went to Mexico again. We started turning around, we had a plane to go back to Italy again, and then she passed away over there in Mexico.

We were gonna travel around quite a bit. But now I don't want to go around by myself. What am I gonna do? Two years ago, I went back to Italy with my son, his wife, my granddaughter and my grandson, for a month. It was pretty good. I think it was too short because after the surgery, I thought, "Okay, I'm going to go back to Italy for about two or three months." There aren't too many people that I know anymore over there because, you know, here in the United States you see people 85, 90, 95 years old. Over there, they kick off a lot earlier than that. Maybe we got better medical care. Maybe we got—it's a different way of living, probably. Because over there, you see a person that is 65, 70 years old, oh my god, they look like you need to push them around because they won't move. You know what I mean? That's the impression to me.

But one thing about it, this country, as bad as it goes, it's still better than the rest of the world. We're still very fortunate that we are living in the United States of America, even with the aggravation. You'd like to see better things. But if you go to another place, you don't know. I don't know. That's the impression I got.

That seems like a good note to end on. See, I've kept you. We've talked for an hour and a half.

You've gotta be kidding!

I have so many more questions, but I'll end it for today, because I don't want to take any more of your time. Thank you so much.

GAYE CANEPA

Co-owner, Fred's Auto Repair and Supply



Gaye Canepa inside Fred's Auto Repair and Supply in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Born and raised in Ely, Nevada, Gaye Canepa moved to Reno after completing high school. At the time of her interview, she operated Fred's Auto Repair and Supply at 500 East Sixth Street with her husband, Fred Canepa, who died unexpectedly in 2012. She was the longtime president of the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association (RSCBA), spearheading community efforts to promote redevelopment and resist efforts by the City of Reno to locate a new homeless shelter along East 4th Street.

Alicia Barber: I'm with Gaye Canepa, the owner, along with her husband, Fred, of Fred's Auto Repair and Supply, which is located at 500 East Sixth Street in Reno. Today is November 17, 2011. We're here at

the University of Nevada, Reno.

Gaye, do I have permission from you to record this session and place it in our public archive?

Gaye Canepa: Yes.

Thank you. Let's start out with some biographical questions. Where were you born?

Ely, Nevada, on the other side of the state.

How many generations back had your family been in that area?

Three.

What brought the family there in the first place, do you know?

They were Mormons, so they went and settled—thirty miles from Ely there's a little farming community called Preston, Nevada, and that's where the great-granddad and the granddad eventually settled. My dad was raised in Preston and Lund, and then he moved to Ely. He did not like farming.

They were farmers?

Yes. Potatoes.

Do they still have potatoes out there?

Yes, they do. They still grow potatoes in Preston and Lund, very good potatoes.

About what year would they have moved out there?

Late 1800s.

Your parents were both from that area?

No, my mom was originally born in Utah, and her dad just liked to travel. He went from place to place, and he'd settle here for four or five years and then he'd go back. So she lived in Utah, she lived in California, she lived in Ely, then back to California, then back to Utah and then finally she settled in Ely.

And they met there?

Yes, they did. They both worked at Goodman Tidball Grocery Store.

Is that right in the middle of town?

It was at that time, yes. It is no longer, of course.

What were their names?

Neil and Shirley Jensen.

Why don't you tell me what it was like to grow up around there.

It's a typical small town. Everybody knows everybody and what it is that they are doing, and I had to be especially careful because my dad was a public official. So I could not misbehave.

What was he?

White Pine county clerk.

He was the county clerk for a long time?

Yes.

So there was definitely a lot of pressure on you, then.

Oh, yes, and they were very strict about grades, social events or lack of.

You weren't allowed to participate very much?

No. No.

That almost sounds like a minister or something. [laughter] Did you have siblings?

I had a brother, yes. He was killed in [Viet] Nam in '69.

Oh, I'm so sorry. So you grew up in town?

Yes, we were in the middle of town.

And you were there all through grade school, middle school?

You only had grade school and high school at that point in time, and, yes, I graduated from high school there. I was something like fifth in my class. I graduated on a Thursday and moved on Saturday.

Was that the plan for a long time?

That was the plan. [laughs]

Where did you go?

Over here [Reno].

Had you been to Reno before?

Yes. My brother lived here. I had a job waiting for me. So he and I lived together, and then he got drafted, and I got a roommate, and then met my first husband and got married. So I've been here since I was eighteen.

What year was that? When did you graduate from high school?

1967.

What was the job that was waiting for you?

I worked at a bank.

Which bank?

At that time, Security National Bank. I was the manager's secretary and did home loans.

Where was that bank located?

In Carson City, so I commuted. Then I got a job with the State of Nevada. I worked for DRI for a lot of years. I really enjoyed it up there, started with Atmospheric Physics. At that time it was Patrick Squire and that group. Then transferred over to Water Resources, where I worked for Burke Maxey. Then when I had a child, I quit there, had the kid, then went back to work for Hydro Search and John V.A. Sharp, who had been at DRI. And then went to work for attorneys after John Sharp decided to move his offices and do some other things, and I worked for attorneys until I went to work for myself with Fred.

What kind of work were you doing for all those different people?

When I worked for an attorney, I worked as their paralegal. I love union law. I love labor law, worked for Lamboli at that stage, and then I went into family law, and I've done bankruptcies and I've done business law. I still love labor law the best.

Were you ever interested in getting a law degree and going on your own?

Never. Never.

Why not?

Most attorneys have an identity crisis. They can't tell themselves apart from God.

This was not a feeling of yours, so you didn't need to go into that? [laughs]

No.

When you first came to Reno then, you were quite young. You were trying to get away from a small town. What were your impressions of Reno? How did you feel about it when you got here?

Oh, Reno was so beautiful. They had just redone Arlington Avenue at that stage, and it was absolutely magnificent, because it was very wide, very well lighted, all the green, with a tremendous number of trees, grass, flowers. What a beautiful place. Reno was small enough that you knew you could get from place to place very easily, but large enough that there were lots of things to do. It seemed to be very friendly. UNR at that point in time was busy growing, so that was a friendly place as well. Reno was lovely. It was a beautiful place to live.

Did you go downtown very much?

No. There was nothing for me downtown. At that stage, I was underage so I would not do that, and on my wages, we didn't go out to dinner.

What kinds of things did you like doing for entertainment?

We went to a lot of movies. We did a lot of outdoor things. I used to water-ski, jet-ski. I windsurfed. Rode bicycles at one stage, flew model airplanes at one stage. My present husband and I got into the car thing, of course, and we showed cars for years, and now we do the motorcycle thing where I teach how to ride. So most of our stuff is outdoors.

Did you go up to Tahoe from the very beginning to do any of these activities?

I went to Tahoe a couple times to go to the lake. Got some of the best sunburns I've ever had.
[laughter]

You would have been driving across Nevada before the interstate went in. You took Highway 50 from Ely.

When I was with my brother, we could make it in less than four and a half hours because it was open highway all the way. You had six summits. That was the major contention. Now they've done away with a couple of the really bad summits, and they're enforcing the speed limits, which is a better thing. It's still wide open, still wonderful. A lot of people don't like desert. I love desert. So, to me, it's magnificent.

Then you were working in so many different places through the seventies and into the eighties.

Yes.

Then you met your husband, Fred. How did you meet him?

Through a mutual friend. She had remarried, and he and her husband were good friends. They were up working on the boat, and she called and said, "Come on up." I hadn't seen her in years, went up, and met Fred. We had a lot in common, so we started meeting and having a good time. Then I went to the lake with him a couple times and found out we were really compatible.

Did he already have an auto business when you met him?

Yes, he did. He was already self-employed.

Was that on Sixth Street?

No, that was down on North Virginia and Mary, in that area, back in the back.

What was that called?

Fred's Auto Repair. He was very original.

But he'd worked for other people before he had his own business?

He worked for a dealership for a long time. He worked for the National Guard for nine years and then went into a dealership and then a couple of private enterprises and then started his own business.

For how long after you met him was the business located on Virginia Street?

He was there when I met him, and then we managed to move him to Sixth Street in '79. He's been there almost thirty-six years.

Was there another business at your location before that?

Yes. Stewart's Arco was there before that. That was really a great neighborhood at that stage, because you had a lot of residents, and then UNR was starting to come down that direction as well. And to make a residential area successful, you have to have good infrastructure, and the infrastructure, of course, is grocery stores, filling station, gas stations, retail, and all of that was down there at that stage.

Unfortunately, when they put the freeway in, it pretty well killed East Fourth Street. Sixth Street's done better because it's shorter. We had more residential, so it hung in there better, but East Fourth Street took a huge hit with the freeway.

Was the freeway already completed by the time Fred moved the business there? That was under way?

It was under way, yes.

What was that like? That's pretty close to where the freeway was going in, just a couple blocks to the south of it.

That's one of the reasons that we chose that particular location. We knew that there would be exits there and, hopefully, we would pick up some of the business from that. And, you know, I will give the city credit. Even when they did the trench and when they did the freeway, there was minimal mess. There was minimal construction. Right now the construction on the freeway and the exits are a bigger mess than when they made the freeway originally.

Really?

Oh, yes.

It seems like they needed to move so much earth out of the way to put the freeway where it is now.

They did, but it was not messy, even when they did the trench. We figured we would have a horrible mess and a lot of dust and dirt, and we did not. The city did not. They kept it very nicely watered down, and they'd already made arrangements where they were going to get rid of the excess dirt, and they held to it. They did a good job there.

What's the cross street where you are?

Sixth and Valley.

So you are very close to the university.

Yes. In fact, UNR's done a couple of studies. They would like to move down that direction, all the way to East Fourth Street and put that in their study area or their district, and I can understand it. I don't see it happening in the near future, but later on, yes.

What do you think would be the obstacles to that?

One of the biggest obstacles, of course, is the fairgrounds. I know UNR at one stage made the fairgrounds an offer that they would swap some land, where the farm is down off of McCarran, for some of the fairground land. And they got turned down, which is really sad.

You think it would have been a good idea?

Yes. Don't you think it's better, if you're going to have a fair with animals, to have pasture and a place to put them?

It would seem so.

Yes.

So I want to talk a little bit more about what that neighborhood was like when you first went there. Did

the person who'd owned Stewart's Arco go out of business or did they move?

No, they moved. They're up off of Seventh and Keystone right now, and then they have another one down on Second, almost Keystone. He thought those were better areas, so he moved it, just shut that one down and moved to the Second Street one and then up to the Keystone one. Then he ran into some financial difficulties and closed the Second Street one, but I think he's still in business at Keystone, or his kid is.

What's his name?

Paul Stewart.

So what else was in the area in your immediate neighborhood?

We had Food King there. At one stage they had a motorcycle shop there. They've had a motorcycle dealership there. They've had a disco there.

You mean in the same location?

Yes. Across the street where Bavarian World is, all of those things were, because it started initially as a Food King and then a Seven Diamonds Cleaner. And then went to a motorcycle repair shop, then a motorcycle dealer, then a disco place and a dance place. We had an appliance store behind us. That was Harrah's Appliance. Now it's Three-C Auto Repair. We've had Commercial Hardware, which Tom Herndon managed to successfully sell to the Catholic Community Services and turn that into their headquarters there.

That's when it was R Supply?

No, that was Commercial Hardware. R Supply was down further. It was in the old Spencer Hobson Building. That's the old brewery. In fact, if you look in that one corner, you can see a cap where the artesian well has been capped there, which is really a tragedy.

So they still have water.

Yes. He still has the water rights, too.

That's an interesting development opportunity, one might think. [laughs]

We tried. Spencer's difficult.

After the business moved, were you working for the business, for Fred's?

No, I was working for attorneys at that time.

Did you feel a connection in this whole neighborhood from Sixth Street down to Fourth Street? Did it feel like it was one business community?

Yes, that's always been a great neighborhood. Everybody knows everybody. They walked around, they talked, they helped everybody. It was really, really a nice neighborhood. At one point, it was well kept, well maintained. But, again, after the freeway came in, things started slipping. Most of the monies went downtown rather than the outlying areas, and the neighborhood started to deteriorate. When the freeway really hit heavy, then all the motels down East Fourth Street started making the change and went from being the nice little affluent motels to the weekly motels.

Do you remember when that really started to shift with the motels? Did the ownership change really quickly? Were they very rapidly affected economically?

Yes, within five years, yes. They went from being busy all the time and well maintained and well kept and booked, to nothing. And they didn't have much choice. They either sold out and moved or turned to weeklies or just shut it down.

Was there any kind of business merchants' organization at that time for the folks in the corridor?

No, no.

So you were seeing this shift happening then after you went in, your husband had located there to capitalize on the freeway, and did that prove to be sound? Was there increased business on Sixth Street because of the freeway location?

Sure. They would take the Wells Avenue exit and then come back uptown to try to park and to do some gaming and possibly stay overnight, dine, whatever. I think one of the fallacies of downtown is that they never stopped to put conventions together until much later. They didn't realize that having the Convention Center out on South Virginia was going to be such a detriment to them. Now they've discovered that and they've tried to overcome some of it, but haven't been all that successful.

Do you remember any of the discussions about where to locate the Convention Center, or was that really before you got involved?

That was before me, but Fred remembers it really well, because Joe Conforte offered the city of Reno a parcel of land, free, to put the Convention Center on. They turned him down because of his reputation, the baggage he brought with him, and instead bought the Peckham property, which is where the Convention Center is located now. So instead of it being something that they could have taken the money and used for better facilities, they opted to purchase the property and then make do with the facility.

Where was that parcel that Joe Conforte had, do you know?

Across the street.

Where do you mean?

They are on the east side of Virginia. He was offering property on the west side of Virginia.

Still on the south part of town, though.

Oh, yes, same area. Bigger parcel. They didn't like his reputation.

Do you remember going in those early years down south of town for anything much?

I lived down there at the end—let's see. I lived on Linden Street, and two blocks below Linden Street was farms. That was it.

Where's Linden? I'm not sure.

If you go down Kietzke, you have Plumb, and then further south is Grove, and two blocks beyond Grove south is Linden.

So this is north of Moana.

Yes. You had all the apartments. That was brand new at that stage, and that's where we all lived.

What kind of neighborhood was that?

It was a real mixed neighborhood. You had college students. You had retired people. You had young families. It was just the run-of-the-mill apartment dwellers.

Did you live there for quite some time?

About a year and a half. Then we moved.

Do you remember what business was like for Fred's at the beginning? Were there attempts to get new customers, or did Fred mostly bring his existing customers with him?

He brought his clientele with him, because he'd already been in business over two years at the other facility. This was so much easier to get to, perfectly accessible now. You had the freeway, plus you had Virginia Street, Kietzke, Second Street, Fourth Street, Sixth Street. So he brought his own business, and that was good.

Did he have to improve the building in any way or change it, or was it perfectly ready for business?

It was not perfectly ready for business. We had to make some changes, and then we added on the second section. Oh, gosh, that had to be in the early eighties, someplace in there.

Was that an easy process to do, at least, with permitting?

No.

It wasn't?

No.

Why not?

The city of Reno isn't the easiest to deal with. They just are not. We had the property because we have two lots down there, but we had purchased another metal building, the same structure as what we had. We had to hire an engineer to downgrade the specs because it was too strong, and they didn't understand that.

What does that mean, too strong?

That building could go through a hurricane and still stand. We don't have hurricanes here, so they did not understand that.

Inside your front door is the office, and to the left is the main work area, so are you talking about an area that's behind that or to the left further?

To the left further.

On the east side?

Yes.

What's the rest of the building made of? Is that a brick building?

No, we just put a stucco front on it. It's a solid metal building. That's why it always tickles me when every once in a while the Fire Department will show up saying, "We've come for a fire." I have nothing that will burn. [laughter]

It's pretty impervious.

"You are at the wrong location."

So when did Bavarian World become Bavarian World? Was that pretty recent?

No. Klaus Ginschel moved in there—the kids were working there and I was working there. That had to be thirty years ago.

So those changes happened long ago.

Long ago.

Early on, you were meeting a lot of business owners along Fourth Street.

Sure.

Who were some of the folks who had businesses along there who either aren't there now or whose businesses aren't there, but that you remember knowing early on?

You had Louis' Basque Corner. Louis and Lorraine have retired, and that's good. Louis is a cutie. You had Alpine Glass. They ceased to do business there. I mean, they just closed it down. We had Landa Muffler. Larry is now deceased. Motor Machine and Supply, because that kind of work isn't being done anymore, and Bill has retired and Mike is deceased. We had the little grocery store on the corner, a little gas station and grocery store, and they moved out.

Which corner was that?

That would be right across the street from Catholic Community Services.

There was a little family-owned grocery store?

Yes. We've always had the nightclubs down through there. You had Earl Scheib Paint Shop. You had some of the thrift shops and Commercial Hardware. We still have Martin Iron Works, which is wonderful. We still have Levrett's Transmission, which is also wonderful. Still have D Bar M—they're third generation as well, a third-generation business there.

Is Jack the owner?

Yes, Judy and Jack. They're real cute, nice people. All along the corridor you had all these businesses that had been there forever, and then, again, the freeway impacted business and we started watching the deterioration and the turnover. I think, as with anything, people try to do things with the best intentions, which often don't work, but because we already had some of the topless places, the city tried to put what they called the red-line district where they were going to have certain areas with gaming and certain areas with topless, and our area was the one that they decided they'd do the topless in.

Then they changed the red-line district when the Ponderosa went in, and it changed to White Orchid or Wild Orchid or one of those. Then Gentlemen's Club went in on Center Street, and that changed the district too. So we are now no longer the proud owners of all the topless bars.

That's not really a question of zoning so much as it is just getting a license to operate that kind of business?

It's got to be zoned.

So it has a special zoning category?

Oh, yes. You've got to have special zoning there, yes.

Now, you think about Highway 40 being the main freeway through town. I can understand how the motels would suffer quite a bit when the interstate went in, because they are tourist-oriented. Why do you think the residential-oriented businesses also suffered when the highway shifted?

Well, you have to have people work, and the people who were working in those businesses who suffered lived in the residences. They lived close by. A lot of people walked to work. When the business suffered, then we lost workers.

Oh, I see.

And that area also has a lot of absentee landlords, you know. You go further up to Denslow. At one stage, Denslow was a gorgeous neighborhood.

I'm not sure where that is. Is that along Fourth?

No, that's along Valley. It's up above. It is to the north.

East of the university?

Yes, and most of the landlords who own those apartment buildings don't live there, and they didn't care. The neat thing is that the city finally stepped up to the plate, and sent massive code there, and it's starting to turn around. The code actually shut down two of those buildings, and they should have.

Apartment buildings?

Yes. That's what happened. You lose the business, you lose the workers, you lose the dwellers.

So the motels along Fourth Street had been owned by local residents, even residents of the nearby area.

Yes. Well, the Bally Slot Machines was there too. It was right up the street from us where Greg's Garage is now, and it employed around 150 or 200 people at one stage, so we had a really good neighborhood, a busy neighborhood.

You're right across the street from a couple blocks of residences that extend from Sixth Street up to the freeway. The residences used to go all the way up north from that. Have you seen that residential neighborhood change over the years?

It's deteriorated. It's like any old neighborhood. What a city does is you start growing and you go

out, out, out, out, and pretty soon you have reached the outermost boundaries. There's no more land available. So then it collapses and goes right back in, and you start the whole process all over again. And we're in the whole process of starting all over again now.

When our organization [the RSCBA] got busy and stepped up and started pushing really hard, people paid attention to what a neat neighborhood it was, what it could be, and they started putting more money into the neighborhood and started paying more tax revenue into the neighborhood. They also recognized the fact that UNR is very close. Just one block away we have one apartment building that is almost 100 percent the Japanese UNR students.

Is it up on Valley?

No, it is off of Elko.

You were working downtown, you had a different career from your husband, and then at some point you got involved or even started this business association, the RSCBA. Can you tell me how this happened?

I went to work for Fred, and we were oblivious. Because we were so busy making a living, we were forgetting to live. Then all of a sudden all over the neighborhood there were these fliers about how the city was planning to put all the homeless down with us, and they were having a meeting. We went to the meeting, and sure enough. So all of us got together, because we did not like what they were proposing. We did not want the homeless facilities down there. That's a killer for business. That is just a killer for business.

The association got up and going. At that point in time, I was still working part-time for an attorney, so I didn't attend all the meetings, but the person who was doing the meetings, he travels a lot. He has his own business. He wasn't able to keep it all together.

And who's that?

That was Mike Eardley. He really is a nice soul.

Does he own a business down there?

Yes, he does. He bought Nevada Fine Arts. That's his building. He does a lot of the filming and the videos and all of that. Tanglewood Productions is who he is.

So we all got together one morning, and Mike wasn't there. He wasn't able to come. Things were falling apart. They said, "We need new leadership," and we all looked at each other and went, "Hmm. Who?" Somehow it ended up me, and, okay, it's well worth the time and the energy I'm going to put into this, and it was.

We were able to stop the city from their initial plans. We were able to force the city to put some regulations in. Their idea of dealing with the homeless is to be able to do a press conference and say, "We have cured the problem of the homeless. We have a facility there," the warm and fuzzies, ooh, ooh. What they had actually done is they just enabled. They did not empower. There's a big difference.

For those people.

Yes. The idea of a homeless facility is not a bad idea. It's their clients. That's the killer. I can't tell you the number of homeless I have had arrested on my premises for breaking and entering into my cars, my customer's cars, trying to panhandle. If they ever spent a night in your car, it's done. You have to get rid of the car. You can't get the stench out. And they have no idea of hygiene. They have no idea that this is not a bathroom as well as a place to sleep. They don't think anything of rifling through your stuff, because they're looking for money. So, yes, just turning them loose on us was not an answer.

Did you see any change before and after the Community Assistance Center went in, in your experience with the homeless in the area?

Yes. Oh, yes. It was better because we actually could call the police and they had to show up and do something with them. At this stage of the game, we're kind of back to first base, because we're horrendously underpowered with police. We have a very small force, and they have to make the decision of, "Do I go to the armed robbery in progress or do I go over to Fred's, where we have a bum?"

You said that your association was able to derail the initial plan that the city had had. What was that initial plan?

That initial plan was to put them in Sage Street, the Firestone Building, and the roller rink, so we would have had them in a line.

Oh, in three different buildings?

Three different locations, oh, yes. The soup kitchen was up across the street from the Sands, and they would have left the soup kitchen there.

The Sands on the other side of town?

Yes. The Reno-Sparks Gospel Mission was originally on Commercial and Arlington, and that was really a rundown, nasty building. The soup kitchen was further up across the street from the Sands. So you have all these people migrating now, making the rounds. What we really need to do and what we still need to do and what they still are not doing, is they need to say, "Who are you? Where did you come from? What are you doing here? What are your plans here? How are you going to support yourself? What services have you accessed?" They've not done that yet.

They are hesitant to do that because they do not want to violate their civil rights. A lot of people, when you get into their face saying, "Who are you and what are you doing here? Why are you here?" that's when you discover that they've been mentally ill and they need more than being out on the street, need more than one hot meal a day. If you say to them, "These are the services available," you find out that some of these people have the education to move into these services and actually become productive citizens. So many folks who end up homeless and out on the streets, it's just because of one really horrific incident. They lost their job, they got sick, someone in their family got sick, and they can't stay home because they're making minimum wage. It's just a really ugly cycle that they've unfortunately landed in, and there's no way out for them.

If we did a better job of communicating amongst the providers, and if you've ever attended a RAAH meeting, you will see. They will sit there and say how well they communicate, and then you'll find out that they've taken care of the same client at three different places and didn't know it. They want to think they're communicating, but they're not.

HUD has said, "You need to communicate," but they're not. What do you do?

What is that RAAH that you mentioned?

RAAH, Reno Area Alliance for the Homeless. At one stage that was headed up through—they met over at the Salvation Army's big building, and Ann Curry of the United Way was in charge of it. Then one day she came in and said, "Oh, my aunt's sick. I'm done," and left. So whether or not RAAH is still in existence, I don't know. I'm pretty sure it is. I don't know if it still goes by RAAH. But it got to be where you'd go to the meetings and they'd discuss the same things over and over and over, but never had a solution.

So you would go to these meetings?

I would go to that, yes, I was like a couple of the other members who finally said, "Enough. I'm done."

They'd all sit there and mumble and grumble, "Well, while I'm here, I can't be getting my work done."

And I finally said, "Yeah, but while you're here, you're still getting paid. I'm not. I'm self-employed. This is a waste of time. Do something."

When those initial discussions about where to locate the homeless services were going on, were you going to City Council and testifying at City Council meetings, or did they have different committees?

At that point in time, [Mayor] Jeff Griffin was really good about doing workshops. He was really great for public input. So I attended all of those. I spent a lot of my life going to Planning and to City Council and meeting with commissioners and talking to them and going through the corridor showing them what's really here, what you're going to kill if you put here.

The Sage Street site is adjacent to the railroad tracks, less than fifty feet. So when they proposed this facility, it was less than five feet from the railroad tracks. Now, here's the problem. You have Martha, who isn't quite right, and the train really upsets her. She's going to stand on this wall that's the barrier between her and the train. She's going to jump when the train comes down. Okay?

Martha's family is now really agitated. They've lost Martha. They're going to sue U.P., S.P., City of Reno, City of Sparks, Washoe County, because by the time you get this train stopped, you're no longer even—well, maybe some of the cars are in Sparks, so you've got jurisdiction there. You can stop in Reno because you've got jurisdiction there. And you are in Washoe County, so, hey, there's another jurisdiction.

Sparks, Reno, and Washoe County banded together to put Martha in this facility, so this could have been a really, really good moneymaking proposition for Martha's family had that happened, and no one ever thought about that. It never dawned on them that every entity involved could be liable for Martha's mishap. So Sage Street really wasn't a good fit.

At that point in time then, again, they started looking elsewhere. The Firestone Building looked to

be a really great fit in their world because that was a big building and they had lots of space. They could jam in a ton of cots. You could probably put a couple hundred people in there.

Mostly one big room, wasn't it?

Yes, it's one big room, and then you had an office area, so they could do that. Close to downtown, so they felt that it might be easily monitored, the whole bit, but, again, we're back to putting two hundred people, some of which have some mental instabilities, some of which are convicted felons, some of which just fell on hard times, put that together, that's not a good fit, not for any neighborhood.

At one point in time, we wanted them to do the Springfield plan and to have a really good look at it, and I got all the information. Springfield, Missouri, did some interesting things. They started the same way that Reno did. In Springfield, a very nice little nun felt sorry for some of these street people, and she put them in an older building in an older section of town. Then all of a sudden, it started blossoming. You build it, they'll come. And that section of town got very agitated and said, "No, we're not going to suffer all of this. Every area of the city should take this on."

So what Springfield did is in each neighborhood they put a facility of some sort. They met with the neighbors. They made an alliance. They would monitor, maintain, keep it legal, keep it clean, keep it relatively under wraps for the neighborhood, and the neighborhood, in return, would help by giving special discounts, helping with repairs, helping with food.

So in Springfield, if you are in the Family Center there, people don't know it. You don't have the same horrible label on the homeless kids in Springfield that you do in Reno. We have the East Fourth Street kids, which are very few now. Most of the children are out of East Fourth Street, but at one stage we must have had three hundred kids down there.

In the motels, you mean?

Yes. And all of them have that label, "Oh, you're an East Fourth Street kid. You're living in the motel. You're homeless. You're this. You're that," and that's traumatic for little children. They don't understand that. Springfield doesn't have that, because they have this scattered throughout the city.

We brought that up and how effectively it worked, how well it worked, how none of the neighborhoods had complained. I had all the statistics. Well, needless to say, the rest of the neighborhoods in Reno went ballistic. [laughs] We were called the NIMBYs [Not In My Back Yard]. Oh, my goodness, they were worse NIMBYs than we ever were.

I'll give Jeff Griffin credit in that he said, "You know, I'm having trouble finding one [location]. How am I going to find four or five? No, not even going to consider it," which was sad, because it's a workable solution.

We hear now that they put it down on us because that's where the services are. What services? There are no services down there. Closest services, Catholic Community Services, they moved the soup kitchen down there, which is part of Catholic Community Services. Salvation Army, they're clear over on Oddie, across the street from the fairgrounds, Oddie and Sutro, so that's a distance. DMV, where you would go to get I.D., it's clear down almost to Sparks. So what services are we talking here? And we could never get an answer for that.

It sounds like they were looking to reuse a lot of old existing buildings. That was their first choice, not to

construct a whole new facility.

Correct. Correct.

...which they ended up doing at, I would imagine, quite an expense.

It was.

I'm wondering if they just eventually gave up on this idea of finding an existing building that would work.

Correct. They just couldn't find one that was going to have everything that they needed in it. There was no way that they could house all these people and have all the services put together like they wanted in any of the existing buildings. Then when it became very apparent—because we were very public, we filed a lawsuit, the whole bit, to stop this.

Oh, you did?

We did two lawsuits against the City of Reno, yes, and because we went so public, then some of the buildings that they had been looking at and not telling the owners what they planned to do with, the owners put it together and would not negotiate with the city. They wouldn't even talk with them, thank you very much.

Those buildings you were talking about before, you mean, like the Firestone Building?

Yes. And we were very fortunate there. We got the Firestone Building twenty-four hours before the city of Reno was supposed to get it. We were not on their hit list.

It's quite a thing to put together a lawsuit. Who actually put that together? Did you have the assistance of attorneys?

Oh, yes, we paid for that. The association paid for that, and we had attorneys. The first one we lost, and we knew we were going to lose. What we won was the time that we needed. Our attorney was Mark Gray [phonetic], and he was very good, and he got us the time we needed. When the judgment came down that we'd lost, it didn't matter. We'd already accomplished what we needed within the timeframe.

Getting those other properties off the table?

Yes. The second lawsuit we instigated after they put in the campus down here, and why we did that is we wanted them to mediate the damages that they did to us. We wanted more lights. We wanted more police protection. We wanted all of this other stuff. We wanted some redevelopment. We wanted some benches. And that happened too. We had Chuck Zeh. He was very good at that.

So that was successful.

Yes, we were very successful. The only thing we lost out on is they were going to put in a police substation in the Alpine Glass Building, and that did not happen, which is really sad. They left the substation in at the bowling alley, and I don't know if that's still there. I've been very fortunate. I haven't had to go over there in about a year. The substation in the Alpine Glass Building would have been wonderful.

That's still vacant now, that building?

Yes. They will never be able to successfully do anything with that building.

Why not?

Because of the campus there. Because who will take it on?

It's right next door.

Yes. There's nothing that can be done with that.

What do you think of that building?

It's an old building. Underneath that awful, god-awful orange, is a beautiful old brick building, and, yes, it's a crying shame. It's like the Barengo Building. That's a crying shame.

The homeless issue, obviously, took up a lot of your time and it was a lot of what the association worked on.

Yes.

But there were a lot of other plans that you were working on, including the Barengo Building. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Sure. We thought how fun that would be, because the Barengo Building does have historic overlay, and it does have railroad track access. So we went and met with the Portola people, a couple of us, and Portola has historic trains. They would be willing to run one of their trains from Portola down to the Barengo Building, and we could have done the dinner trains. We could have done some of the sightseeing things in the summertime. That would have been so much fun.

We were getting this together, because if we did the Barengo Building, we could actually put in dining and we could put in some retail. Needless to say, the people downtown viewed this with, "Oh, my god, they'll get all our business." So they did everything within their power to scotch that, and they succeeded, so the building sits there empty now.

This is the old NCO depot.

Yes.



The historic Nevada-California-Oregon Railway Depot building in 1979, when it was owned by the Barengo family, who used it as offices for their business, Sierra Wine & Liquor. Image courtesy National Register of Historic Places.

How were they able to scotch it?

It is very difficult to try and get investors and developers when you have other people who have bigger investments and bigger developments standing there saying, “Well, we won’t back this. We won’t let this work with us.”

And we kept telling them, “We are not in any competition with you. We want to complement you, because if somebody comes down and buys a bouquet of flowers from us, we’re going to say, ‘Well, why don’t you go have lunch downtown. Why don’t you do this.’”

Downtown really never has worked well together, and they still don’t. They don’t work and play well together.

That plan for a train, was that before the homeless services was located where it is now?

Yes. Even so, you know, even with the campus being there, that still could work, putting that train, that dinner train in. That still could work very easily. However, there is—and I don’t know if it’s going to happen, but it had to be two or three years ago, there was a developer who needed to get rid of some of the train crossings, and one of the crossings was down at the campus, because we’ve always been

terrified if the train goes through there, if a child's going to end up on the hit list.

Right down Record Street.

Yes, and they were going to close some of those crossings. However, the development didn't go in, so they didn't pursue it. To put in one crossing, you have to take out another one. That's the way the UPSP works. And dealing with the railroad, if you write them a letter, you'd better have a couple years to wait because they do not respond rapidly. They take their time.

So a train still runs right by Record Street?

Yes, it goes right down through there, yes. We still hear it. There's usually three a day, and that's okay.

So what are the other activities you did? You told me before about working with John Hester on some ideas for the corridor.

Yes. John was great. John's really a nice, nice man, and he came up with a lot of really good ideas. One of the things that we wanted to do—we thought it would be nice to have the road, then the curb, and then an area of grass, and then the sidewalk, and a lot of the sidewalks down there are big enough to do that. They actually now still have dirt.

When they went and put the lights in, what we wanted for them to do was to run all the hardware for the lighting either in that area and put bricks over it or run it in the street and put bricks over it, so if any of the lights went out, we weren't constantly digging up the streets. That didn't happen.

We wanted to put in trees. We wanted to put in grass. After the lighting came in, we wanted to do our own banners down there. At Christmastime one year, we actually did a lighting thing, and it was really pretty. All the businesses put up the little twinkle lights and decorated. It was great fun.

They were looking to see if a trolley was viable, and it would be. How much fun would it be to run a trolley from Victorian Square right up East Fourth Street to end up right downtown and then back again? And we have the room.

When downtown was busy grumbling about Hot August Nights and closing Virginia Street, we said, "We'll take it." We'd love it. We'd let them cruise the middle two lanes. They could have the inside lane going east and west. We don't care. That gives us the outside lane and still some parking. We'd love it. Oh, you would have thought I killed their puppy. All of a sudden it was okay for them to shut Virginia Street and Sierra Street rather than give it to us.

Why do you think there was that resistance?

Money. They were absolutely terrified that we'd get an extra dime. Car people are funny. They don't spend the same amount of money that motorcycle people must spend. I will tell you that much.

Who spends more?

Motorcycle people. When they go to an event, they spend more money than car people do.

Why is that?

Well, if you have a \$50,000 to \$200,000 car sitting there, you watch it pretty carefully, and you stay right there with that car. However, if you have a motorcycle, even mine's a custom bike, I'll park it and leave it; no damage comes to them. People don't think anything of walking up to your car, opening it up, and getting into it, but they do not get on your motorcycle.

I can't tell you—we went to a car show and I came back and here's these people sitting in my car. "Hello. What are you doing?"

"Well, we're going to take our picture and then we're going to see how we look."

"No, you're not. You don't touch the car."

"We're not hurting it."

There have been other issues that have affected Fourth Street too. There've been redevelopment plans, TOD plans.

Redevelopment, we knew that we were going to get hammered with redevelopment simply because, in all honesty, of the three suggested areas, ours was the only one that legally qualified. It met all the specifications for the area. So we said, "If you're going to do that, here's what we would like. Our own redevelopment board. We don't want to be merged. Our own redevelopment funding. We don't want to borrow or lend back and forth. We would like joint meetings with the other redevelopment boards to compare successes and/or failures. We want to know where the money went. We want our people on that board."

When Redevelopment went in, they put Redevelopment 2, which is us, into Redevelopment 1, and loaned them the money, and then they pledged seven years of our redevelopment funds to go to the ballpark, which gives us nothing. So they took our monies and put it to the ballpark in the Freight House district. But legally they can do that. They can loan back and forth.

So Fourth Street, at this point, is considered part of a redevelopment district?

Yes. We are in Redevelopment 2. We have seen nothing from it and we won't for at least eight, nine years. If they have any monies left over from the ballpark and paying that off, then maybe we'll see it, but we're not holding our breath.

What would that funding be able to be applied toward?

You can do façading. You can do landscaping. You can actually do some street improvement, public area improvement, that sort of thing.

And the TOD?

The TOD's a real interesting setup, because what happened there is we managed to get a special planning district put through, SPD for zoning, and we wrote our own zoning. That was why we were using the first lawsuit, to give us the time to get the SPD pushed through, and we did. We had hoped that

the SPD would then not make it so easy for them [the homeless services] to move in; in fact, not at all.

Unfortunately, when you're dealing with the city, I was not aware that the city does not have to meet any of their general coding or laws or zoning. If the city wants to go in your backyard and set up a pawnshop with palm trees, they can and there's not much you can do about that. They do not have to meet their own qualifications. They should be a good neighbor, but they're not.

So we had our SPD in. It was working great. Business was doing well. We were attracting new businesses. Then they discovered that there was this transportation-oriented district that the feds were putting out. What that does is you have a certain highway, and you've got to have like seven blocks on both sides to qualify for this district. And if you set one of these up to get some transportation going, you're eligible for federal funds. Oh, boy, so, yes.

Downtown wanted the TOD. So you have a Virginia Street TOD, because they needed the federal funds. But by doing that, now they're into a jackpot because seven blocks down, that puts them in our SPD.

So the city sunsetted our SPD. Yes, that was a real surprise. I went to a TOD meeting only to find out that the SPD had been sunsetted with no notification, no nothing, and they'd decided from Wells Avenue west is the downtown TOD, from Wells Avenue east down to the border of Sparks is the East Fourth Street TOD, and they have different parameters, because there are a couple of businesses on East Fourth Street that couldn't even begin to meet what they put in the TOD for downtown. I mean, we have some heavy-duty industrial things down there.

So it's kind of a zoning issue? It's supposed to be commercial, or what are the requirements?

It is a zoning issue, and what it allows is basically not—it goes more for commercial and retail. If I close my doors to my business and it stays vacant for thirty days, to put my kind of business back in, you will have to do a special-use permit, which could cost anything from 100 bucks to \$100,000. Depends on what it is that you're proposing to do.

But if it were to be something commercial or retail, it would be easier?

It was supposed to be, but what they failed to do—and John Hester tried to point this out to them and they didn't listen to John—we don't have a great deal of parking down there. When we did the SPD, we did shared parking amongst us, and that worked out great. The city then came in with the TOD and said, "Well, it's got to be like downtown. You've got to have X number of parking places for every business." Well, none of us qualified. So now to put in a business down there in the TOD is really tough. There's not parking.

So what it really affects is new business.

Oh, yes, it killed new business.

Even in an older building it's still difficult?

Very difficult, just to meet their specifications, what they want. At one stage, Claudia [Hansen] indicated that they were going to revisit the TODs and try and get some of this straightened out. You

know, it's human nature to hurry, hurry, hurry. "We've got to get this thing pushed through. We've got to hurry. Right now we don't have time to wait." But we always have time to go back and fix it the second, third, and fourth time. Wouldn't it be better to do it right the first time? Human nature.

So the SPD and the TOD just weren't compatible because they had different structures. They couldn't both exist at the same time?

They want the TOD in there. They didn't want the SPD in there. And, now, you can't have something zoned two different ways. You can't have this zoned for education and then zone it for industrial, too. So that's why.

Now, you mentioned that the RSCBA had done these activities with the children in the motels. That's something you've really become known for. But you said there are fewer children in there than there were before. How did that program start? Did you have a good relationship with the motel owners, or how did you get this idea?

I didn't. Klaus Ginschel did. It's all Klaus' fault. Klaus came to us fifteen years ago and said, "Oh, Gaye, we need you," because he thought, "bake cookies and take them to the children on East Fourth Street at Christmastime so people think we're not just bad people, that we, too, can be good neighbors." Okay. [laughs]

So we set aside one Sunday, and we went in and we made a hundred bags of cookies. That Sunday, the cookies froze within a block. It was miserable cold. Larry Landa had a hay truck, and he was pulling it with his truck, his pickup truck, and there was a group of us. Cold. And we had gone—there were three of us at that time and eventually it ended up just me—we went the previous Friday to every motel and put up these fliers that Santa Claus was coming to give cookies out.

So we get there, no children. We ended up going door to door, knocking and trying to get the kids to come out, and we were relatively successful, frozen but relatively successful.

So the next year, we decided, well, we'll do a little bit more. We'll do 250. And word got out, because Kirkland was trying to work with us. The sheriff's community program was in the old fire station by then.

He sent his gal, said, "Oh, we need to do this." She came and said, "We want to join you." Never look a gift horse in the mouth, right? We figured, well, sure, why not? We could do this thing.

So then we ended up with some toys and some cookies, and then it just grew and grew and grew. I will say that last year when we did it, very few children on East Fourth Street, very few families. A lot of vacancies. The economy is not good.

The most kids we ran into was at the townhouse which is on Second and Arlington. Up on West Fourth Street there were more children than down on East Fourth Street. We also did a group at Denslow, and that's like locusts up there. Whew. You can be picked clean within thirty minutes.

Lots of kids.

Lots of kids, Hispanic, lots of kids. We would go to Reno Housing, but sometimes you question when they come out in Nikes with cell phones.

Reno Housing. What's that?

Reno Housing Authority. It's down off of Ninth Street.

On the east side?

Yes.

That's public housing?

Yes, low income. We went there one year. Family Resource Center contacted me, and they had a family that they needed help with, and I said, "Sure. What do they need?"

Well, they needed everything. I said, "Okay." They had eight children from the age of eight to two, and she was pregnant again. We ended up getting them WinCo gift cards with no tobacco, no liquor, but they could at least get food, Christmas tree ornaments, gifts for all of them. And the children, the older children, were very gracious in that they said, "No gifts for us. Give it to the little ones." Well, no, it doesn't work that way. No. So we give gifts to everybody, you know.

We went down there with all of this stuff, and here's a family with seven, eight kids, one more on the way, mom and dad in a two-bedroom housing, and I'm really sorry. It's called [whispers], "Enough. Stop it." Those are the heartaches. But, fortunately, not so many there, either.

Why do you think that is?

No work.

They've just gone elsewhere?

They've gone elsewhere, yes. These folks have relocated. A lot of these folks, families are doing what they used to do back in the 1800s where families live with families, mom and dad and grandma and grandpa and cousins and aunts and uncles. We see that a lot now.

Do you have plans to continue that program this Christmas?

That will be done over at the Livestock Event Center on December 17th. That worked out very nicely. Brooke Howard set that up with the Sheriff's Office. That was her brainchild. Centrally located, have a ton of volunteers, have lots of good toys, lots of good things to give out. Last year they did it there, kind of a pilot program while we went and did our thing, and by the time she opened it, she had enough people that it was around the building twice, two deep.

So this will work because of the location. It's close enough to Reno Housing. It's close enough to the motels. There are no kids there, because I've checked again. It's close enough to Denslow, and it's close enough to some of the poorer districts down off of Sutro. So it works very nicely.

It's indoors. The kids seem to be a little more relaxed and a lot warmer. As you know, Sandi and Mike [Sullivan] do the hats, and those are always given out. You would be surprised how many children we at one stage saw with no shoes, no socks, no hats, no gloves, no coats.

So that was the same part of the giveaway, was giving them food and giving them hats? She did mention the hats.

Yes. The hats are a great hit. And the Sheriff's Office, they're really cute, because that's the first thing these deputies do is they grab a hat and jam it on a kid's head, "See there? It's perfect." So, yes, it's been a very worthwhile setup.

I'm happy to say that there are no more kids on East Fourth Street. I'm really happy about that. I'm happy to say the kids that were in McGregor's—there used to be two hundred kids there.

In where?

McGregor's Inn, down at the bottom of East Sixth Street. Maybe twenty, thirty kids in there. Pony Express down by—what is that? Where Sparks and Reno meet, there used to be a ton of kids there. Maybe twenty, thirty kids now. So, hopefully, they relocated to a better setup. I don't know.

With the business association, does membership in that extend all the way through Sparks?

You can be a member. We're not picky. We welcome everybody. [laughs]

Where do you meet?

When we meet, usually over at Klaus'. Every once in a while we'll meet at Mike Steedman's. So many of us are back to trying to make a living, we're not living, so oftentimes meetings get postponed or we'll find the same four or five of us there each time.

Are there current projects that you're working on as a group right now?

We're waiting to see, number one, what they're going to do with this TOD, if they're going to go back and revisit it. If they revisit the TOD, then, yes, we've got to start putting some input into that. John Hester and that group, at one time they did a study and it probably worked in the city that the guy came from, but it would not work here. The park benches and the planters and the trash cans were really beautiful, but they sure wouldn't work here. Ours are out in the elements.

John saw that, and he was bright enough to take it and put the kind of benches and trash receptacles and lighting in that work here, and we'd like to see some more of that go. I'd actually like to see curbs and gutters and sidewalks go all the way down East Fourth Street. I'd like to see some more lighting go down East Fourth Street.

DOT doesn't own East Fourth Street anymore. They made a trade. They traded East Fourth Street for a chunk up on McCarran, so the City of Reno and the City of Sparks own East Fourth Street. That's why we could say, "We'll take Hot August Nights." Before, we could not say that because it was DOT. But now we can. We can do events down there because it is the City of Reno.

What are any other improvements that you think could be made to the street itself?

Let's try pedestrian walks. Wouldn't that be nice to have pedestrian crossings? And especially with everything that's happened within the last two weeks, I've even offered. I told John, "Give me a can of spray paint." East Sixth Street, you have a pedestrian crossing at Valley. The next one is at Wells. That's five blocks. So you take your life in your hands if you're going to go across the street. East Fourth Street, same thing, no pedestrian crossings, and that's stupid. They keep telling me it has to be engineered. Okay. Bring him on, I'll help him.

How do Sixth Street and Fourth Street compare with the amount of traffic and the type of traffic that goes down those streets?

Ours is more toward residence and business. That's Sixth Street. Fourth Street, it's a corridor between Reno and Sparks, so it has a lot heavier traffic, people going from one place to the other, and that in itself could be a really great thing if we did a trolley or improved some of the façading so people would want to stop on Fourth Street and check this out. That's one of the things we were hoping that the TOD would do, is make more bus stops, do better façading.

I know Mike Steedman's group at one stage wanted to pick up and do some arts and crafts and art fairs and things out on the sidewalks. Again, our sidewalks are big enough, we could pull that off. It's just a matter of getting the people together, getting ready to do it and doing it. I know that there are some real difficulties right now with the ballpark and the homeless. All the people, they hit them all up as they come in and out.

I was sent a message via via so-and-so and so-and-so and so: "They're asking you guys to help."

And I just said, "Bite me."

You, the association, asking you to help?

Yes.

In what way? How would you help?

Well, see if we can't get some of this homeless population controlled. Well, what do you want me to do? Come on. Think this thing through. You're the one who took the police substation out of there. You're the one who have more police patrols down south than you do up north. You've got a heavier concentration of things down south than you do up north, too, and I recognize that.

The nice thing about UNR, it has its own police department, doesn't it? And the best thing about them is they are multijurisdictional, so they can go into Reno and help and they can go into Sparks and help.

I wasn't aware of that.

Yes, and they're willing to do that. UNR has always been a really good neighbor. When the developer put in the housing at the top of Valley Road, the Highlands, it was aimed directly for student housing. There were some real problems at one stage, and UNR got a task force together and they got their people together and went in and they educated the students, and they turned a really bad situation into something that is very good.

They monitor it. They have them totally aware of underage drinking, underage partying. They have been able to talk with parents when they bring their darlings here to go to school. “This is an apartment complex that’s available, but these are the rules, and this is what we expect from your child. And if your child doesn’t do that, we will call you.” So they have been great neighbors.

What do you think about some of the other residential developments that have been put in more recently between Fourth and Sixth Street?

They’ve been a good thing, you know. Cloyd Phillips and CSA [Community Services Agency] has done that Plaza at 4th, and that’s turned out very nicely. Then we had the one on Record Street, right up above me. That’s turned out very nicely as well. So they’ve been in good things. The neat thing about both of them is they’re different. The one on Record Street is aimed toward seniors. Okay? And it isn’t low-income housing. That’s affordable housing, totally different. Whereas Plaza at 4th Street has children, it’s family oriented, so we got the best of both.

CSA, also very good neighbor. Lloyd has maintained and monitored that, and, yes, he’s with partners, but any of the developments you see of theirs are very nicely kept. We also have Orvis Ring, and that’s up above and to the back, and that’s low-income housing; however, maintained beautifully. Some of the people there pay \$35 a month, that’s what they can afford, and the apartments are very nice. So, yes, it’s been a good thing.

Do you think there could be potential for residential development along Fourth?

Until we bring the jobs in, no. We have a horrendous number of vacancies right now, everywhere in the city with everything—warehousing, businesses, residence, apartments. But until we get back on our feet and have jobs, no.

How have you seen in the last five years, say, businesses from Fourth to Sixth Street in your area being affected? Have you seen some people going out of business?

Lots of people going out of business. They just can’t afford it. They just can’t. Because we were small business. We weren’t the big corporates. The other thing is that people also have to decide whether they’re going to go to a big corporation where they can get massive discounts, or go to a smaller business where things are going to be a little more expensive because we can’t offer those kinds of discounts. And we’ve lost business with that. Folks, they don’t have lots of money. They’ve got to stretch that dollar wherever and however they can, and you can’t fault them for that. So, yes.

Now, you’re an equal partner in the business now with your husband, right?

Yes.

Are you there every day?

Yes.

How do you divide the work?

It's really easy. I hold what's called a 2G smog license, which means I can do the smogs and repair. If he does the repair, I have to sign off on it, because he is not licensed. And the reason I did that is if I make a mistake, they can shut me down. DMV can shut me down. I don't want to take him with me. I set up my own entity, so if I make a mistake, I take the fall, he's still good.

The things he likes to do I don't necessarily like to do. The things I like to do he doesn't necessarily like to do, so we balance really well and we work really well together. We have the same goals, really compatible.

When we have one of our what we call "heated discussions"—I guess other people call them arguments—both of us have sense enough to go, "Hmm," and walk away and let it lay until we can come back and settle it.

We're really fortunate. We have a good customer base, been there a long time. A lot of our customers are older now and we're losing them. It's very difficult now. The automobile industry is really tough, and a lot of people feel that you have to take your car to the dealer to keep the warranty. That is not accurate. What you have to do is show that you maintained the car under the warranty specs, so that if the dealer says, "Well, we're not going to warranty this because you didn't have the work done here," they can't do that unless they give you the parts and the labor for free. It's called the Magnuson Act. So it's always real interesting.

You work on all type of cars there, don't you, in your shop?

Yes. We do both foreign and domestic.

You have some people who work for you, too, don't you?

We used to.

Do you have any plans for the future of the shop?

I don't know what he's going to do. He doesn't want to retire. Okay. I really enjoy people, so even if I retired, I'd go do something. I'd become a greeter or I'd volunteer or I'd do something because I don't want to stay home. No. And until he decides what it is that he's going to do, I'm just going to hang out with him. It works for us.

Not having employees allows us to have leeway that we wouldn't have otherwise. We've had some great people working with us, and I'm really happy to say that with the exception of one person, every person who's ever worked for us has gone on to bigger and better things. So I feel like we've added to their life, encouraged them to go and do and be now, make the most of yourself, and they've all been young people. I like young people.

Is there anything that you would like to say about the future of the Fourth Street area and what you'd like to see or what you think it could become?

I want the Fourth Street area to become East Fourth Street again, like it was. We're not Las

Vegas, we're not Baltimore, we're not New Orleans. We're East Fourth Street. Let's clean up the buildings, put the businesses back in. Barengo Building, put in a florist shop, put in a funky little outdoor café. You could put in studio lofts above that.

Spencer Hobson's building, we had it set up, [whispers] until Spencer screwed it up, where we had—are you ready for this?—a heavy-duty and Caterpillar Museum coming in. Yes. You'd be surprised. Lots of people like old fire trucks. You'd be surprised how many people like heavy-duty farm equipment and Caterpillars, all of that.

We also had a restaurant idea that was really pretty cool. Because the building's big enough, you can put partitions down and you light it with ultraviolet, and these partitions are done with black mesh, and you have two. So the waiter comes through the partition. He's there and then he's not. Poof! It's like a magic thing.

We also had that set up where we had a dining car from SP, I think, was going to loan us one, and we were going to hook it onto the side of the building so we could have meetings in there and cater and do all sorts of things.

We could have a microbrewery there. Wouldn't that be pretty? The catwalks are still there. So you could have your lunch, go up, walk around the catwalk and look down on the copper tubing and the piping and all of that of a microbrewery. It also has enough parking there for a parking lot. So we would have had three different businesses there. We would have had the museum, had the restaurant, and we would have had the brewery.

Do you think that could still happen?

If Spencer got his head on straight, yes, sure, yes. That one has really neat skylights, so you can actually send light out of the roof there. So if you got into the Vegas frenzy and wanted that, you're right inside when the lights go.

This is the old Reno Brewery bottling plant we're talking about with the skylights.

Yes. It's very cool. It just a really cool building.

Any other opportunities then for development? You've talked about the Barengo Building and the Reno Brewery Building.

The Firestone Building is vacant again. You could do anything with that, because that's a sizable building. You could turn that into retail in a heartbeat, or you could divide it up and turn it into multiple retails. At one stage what we'd like to see happen is to do the granny flats, so you have your business here and you live upstairs. That works very nicely.

But, again, until the economy picks up, until there are jobs out there, and small business is now—the SBA [Small Business Administration] is now dummied-up, so we have Nevada Micro Business as well. They are now going for the younger generation, the college graduates, your early twenties, early thirties, because these are the people who have the time, the knowledge, and the energy. And if you get one of them in your retail with a granny flat, and it's successful, he's going to expand, but he's going to say to his buddy, “Hey, this worked really cool for me. You could make it work. You take mine and the flat upstairs, because I'm moving six blocks down where it's bigger and I've got a bigger place,” and

that's how it starts developing.

But we're back to the economy. I don't know. That is viable with the East Fourth Street corridor there. That's something that could happen there very easily.

The Fire Building that's behind it, Kelly [Rae] turned that into a really nifty setup, and that's pretty cool because you've got the beauty shop there, and then she has some very nice lofts up above, very nice. She did a good job there.

What do they call that? 11 @ the Fire House.

The Fire House, yes. So that's nifty. Unfortunately, to successfully redevelop that area, there are entities that need to be gone. Ferrari's Trailer Park, what an eyesore. And to do that, you've got to relocate these folks, so you need to find something that is exactly the same. So if they're paying—are you ready for this? They pay like 500 bucks a month to live in one of those things. But to move them, then you would have to find them another location, similar demographics, at 500 a month. So that presents a whole very difficult ball of wax.

Need to get rid of some of the motels on East Fourth Street. They've outlived their use. They would be better leveled. I am sure you've heard all the falderal about the Ponderosa and how substandard that was and is.

Do you think that was typical?

Well, I can tell you I know of at least three murders that happened there. Yes, it's very typical. You want to vacuum your place, you have to pay \$20 to use the vacuum. Well, I can see where the landlord's coming from. Short of chaining it to him, getting it back, you don't know what state you're going to get it back in, and you don't know if you're going to get it back, so you have to have enough money to buy another one when that one doesn't get returned or it's broken.

So are any of those motel owners involved in the business association?

Oh, no, no. We're not their best friends, because, unfortunately, we're saying, "You need to clean this mess up," and they don't want to hear that. Code has been wonderful. They have kept a pretty good eye on those motels, and when they see a problem, they have tried to enforce to the max and get it cleaned up and straightened up, but they can only do so much, too. They're spread thin. Everybody's spread thin. Yes, some of those need to go away.

Thank you so much.

You are very welcome.

SHARON CHAMBERLAIN AND KERRY DEAL

Northern Nevada HOPES



From left to right, Sharon Chamberlain, Kerry Deal, and the sign at Northern Nevada HOPES. Courtesy of Sharon Chamberlain, Kerry Deal, and Alicia Barber, respectively.

Interviewed together, Sharon Chamberlain and Kerry Deal discuss their work as Executive Director and Deputy Director/CFO, respectively, of Northern Nevada HOPES, a nonprofit community health center offering integrated medical care and support services at 580 West 5th Street in Reno.

Jeff Auer: This is Jeff Auer speaking with Sharon Chamberlain, Executive Director of Northern Nevada HOPES And Kerry Deal, the Deputy Director and CFO for HOPES. Today is April 11, 2012. Do you want to tell us how long you both have been working here? You can go back and forth.

Sharon Chamberlain: I've been here for eight or nine months, now, and came from L.A., so not very long.

Kerry Deal: I've been here three and a half years, and I grew up in Fallon, Nevada. I got my degree from UNR, but I lived in California for most of the time and then I came back and got the job here at HOPES

What does HOPES do? Just give a basic outline, assuming people don't know what HOPES does.

Chamberlain: HOPES is an agency that works with people who are living with HIV, and their

families and partners and children. We provide clinical services and we have a pharmacy that has a lot of specialty and understanding in education around HIV medications and drug interactions. We also have a Social Services Department that works on helping people get linked into everything related to benefits—housing assistance and food benefits and Social Security and so on and so forth— as well as getting connected into drug treatment if somebody needs that or mental health services.

We also have a resource center for people who can just come and drop in during the day and access different services, use the computer for résumés or sit down and talk. HIV is very often an isolating condition, and it gives people an opportunity to get connected in the community.

What is the organizational structure of HOPES?

Deal: We're a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. We have a board of directors, with participation by clients on the board, and then the executive director reports to the board and basically all the other departments report to the executive director.

But there are a lot of paid staff, though, is that correct?

Deal: Yes, we have twenty-six to twenty-seven employees. Most of those are full-time. The medical doctors are contracted with the University of Nevada School of Medicine. We do have our own full-time physician's assistant and RN and medical assistant in the clinic. We have two full-time pharmacists. We have a director of social services who is an LCSW, and case managers who work for the director of social services. Another service we provide is transportation, so we have a bus driver.

Chamberlain: And prevention education is a big part, so we provide HIV testing and education and services throughout the community.

Are you the only ones who do that in the Reno area?

Chamberlain: We are the only comprehensive HIV service provider in all of northern Nevada and we have clients who we serve in thirteen of the seventeen counties in Nevada.

Who are the clients of HOPES? It's a broad demographic, right? How would you describe them?

Chamberlain: I think the majority of our clients are men who have sex with men, gay men. We have a lot of clients who struggle and don't have insurance or oftentimes aren't working. We have clients who are homeless and struggling with drug use and mental health issues and have very complex lives. So really, our philosophy is meeting people where they are and then helping them to make positive change and become more stable in their lives.

But it's not just men, right?

Chamberlain: No.

Deal: We have women, and also we've had women who have given birth to children that we

followed through their pregnancy and they were all born not positive—negative.

Chamberlain: Yes, I think we've got about 20 percent women and I think right now our youngest is maybe fourteen and I think our oldest is over eighty.

Can you tell me a little bit of history of HOPES as an organization?

Deal: HOPES was organized in March of 1997, so we've been here fifteen years. It was basically, from what I know, sort of a collaboration of the three major hospitals in the area—Renown, St. Mary's, and Northern Nevada—and the Washoe County Health District. They were treating more and more people with HIV in their emergency rooms, basically, and were trying to come up with a solution to treat these people without them ending up in the E.R. So they got together and formed this nonprofit organization and applied for funding through the Ryan White Care Act, and that was basically how HOPES was started. They've been in different locations, but they have been in this current location on Fifth and Ralston for ten years, I guess.

But it's three buildings that make up HOPES, right?

Deal: Right, this Admin Building is a home that was built in 1906, and I think I mentioned to you that it is on the Historic Registry. The other older home was moved here from Hill Street in downtown Reno when they built the new art museum, and they donated the building and then HOPES paid to have it moved. Then the property behind that faces Fifth Street, I think many years ago was an old motel and then it was turned into a dental professional complex. When HOPES purchased it, there were still several dentists who were in that complex. Most of them now have moved to other locations and we've moved most of our services over into that area.

Does this have a name, this mansion we're in?

It's the Humphrey House, I believe.

Okay. Is there a long history about it? I'm assuming it's famous.

Chamberlain: It is one of the houses that the first governors used to entertain in, so it was their party house, apparently. There's a significant amount of history and, actually, we can get you a piece of that. We just recently received a grant from the State Historic Preservation Society to do some restoration and those kinds of things. It all has to be done in periods and colors. I have a long write-up, if that will be helpful.

Yes, that would be great. And the other house that's on Ralston closer to Fourth that was moved has always fascinated me. It looks gorgeous. Why was it saved, though? Was there a history to that one?

Deal: I don't know the history of that house, but like I said, when they built the new art museum in Reno, the house had to either be torn down or moved, and so it was donated to HOPES, and I think with some assistance from money from the state, they were able to move that house over here, because

it's old. I don't know if it's as old as what we call HOPES House here, but they didn't really want to tear it down, especially where a nonprofit could utilize it. That was the history behind that.

I'd like to ask you some questions about Fourth Street, now that we've sort of gone through HOPES and got a little basic about it. Do you think transportation issues play a big role in the health of the Fourth Street corridor?

Deal: I would say they do, because I think the people who live in the neighborhood vicinity probably are less likely to have private transportation, and so public transportation is very important. Even for clients who utilize HOPES who live in this area, it's very crucial.

You used to have your administration at another house that was closer to Fourth, but you've moved, is that correct?

Deal: It wasn't admin. Admin has always been in this building on the corner of Fifth and Ralston. What was over in what we call Hill House, because it was on Hill Street, was our client drop-in center and some of our development people and events people were also housed in that building.

And you had to move them out of there because what was going on?

Deal: Yes, there were some issues with particular people who lived in an area that faced Fourth Street, and particularly with prostitutes who were coming in. It didn't create a great environment for our clients to be in, as well as our own employees.

I assume the organization wasn't pleased about that when that was happening, right?

Deal: No, I don't want to say it was scary, but it was a concern.

Chamberlain: It was before I was here. I think that there were some specific instances, but I also just want to say that some of the sex workers in this area are also people who we need to be reaching and so it's very important for us to create a welcoming environment. I think one of the things that we've been talking about is an environment where people are welcome, they do feel safe, and one of our challenges there was that it was staffed primarily by development people, right, Kerry?

Deal: Right.

Chamberlain: It wasn't the case-management folks and our mental-health folks and other people who were trained on how to get people connected with services who were manning that building. I think as we begin to do more outreach and engage some of the higher-risk populations who do frequent that Fourth Street corridor, we'll structure that differently.

What would you say are some of the greatest transportation needs within the corridor?

Chamberlain: I feel like what I hear from clients is that there's not enough transportation in

general, that the transportation is not frequent enough and it's not expansive enough.

Deal: As far as reaching to the outlying areas.

Chamberlain: Yes, it's a really challenging process if somebody needs to get from our place down to access for healthcare, which is down near the Atlantis. It takes hours on the bus, and I think that that's significant, and for people coming out to access services here trying to come in along the Fourth Street corridor, it's a challenge.

Do you think there are any transportation safety needs or safety issues on the corridor? Is the traffic too fast? Are the sightlines especially bad?

Deal: I think where Fourth Street intersects with Virginia and Sierra in the center of town, that area is very congested with the casinos and stuff. I think that the congestion is not so bad on West Fourth Street. I don't go down on East Fourth very often.

But over here you wouldn't say that it's much of a problem?

Deal: We don't have any problems, no.

Do you think the number and arrangement of lanes for cars and buses should be modified in any way? If you were to be an urban planner and change it around to make it more efficient, to make it work better for, let's say, the clients, do you think anything needs to be done? Does the bus system need to be revamped in some way for people, would you say?

Chamberlain: Are there bike lanes?

Deal: I was trying to recall. I think there are. On Ralston, I've seen now they have that bike lane.

Chamberlain: Yes.

Deal: They just recently did repaving and put in new sidewalks here last summer, so that's definitely helped because they were pretty bad in this area. But on Fourth Street, I think they have bike lanes, which I think would be important. I don't know about East Fourth Street, because it seems like it's narrower over there.

Yes, I'm not sure that they actually have bike lanes. Do you feel like traffic moves quickly enough?

Chamberlain: Really just that one little section downtown gets a little congested, both with pedestrians and vehicles, people just walking out in the street and stuff.

Deal: Well, and a lot of times, too, they close off part of it for street events and things like that, so, actually, I try to avoid that area.

Chamberlain: Yes, I completely avoid that area.

Would you say that more buses are needed?

Chamberlain: Yes, I feel like it. I mean, unfortunately, I haven't ridden the bus yet, so I can't say firsthand, but I need to do that. What we hear from our clients consistently is that there's not enough public transportation.

Why do people get stuck behind buses all the time on Fourth Street when you're a driver, or have you even noticed that at all? Has it been a problem?

Deal: I have noticed that. I guess because there is no place to pull over, and if you get behind the buses and then they stop, the traffic congestion just adds to it and you can't pass.

Chamberlain: Yes, that's happened to me too.

Do you think there should be a turnoff-type situation, if that was possible, for the buses.

Deal: Yes, so that people who are in that right-hand lane could continue on if the bus is making a stop to pick up people.

Do you think Fourth Street is pedestrian-friendly?

Deal: I don't think East Fourth Street is all that pedestrian-friendly.

Why not?

Deal: Just because it seems narrower and, I don't know, it just doesn't feel pedestrian-friendly.

You're sort of referencing the split between West Fourth Street and East, and they seem to be looked at differently. But there are some similarities, right? It is still the same street.

Deal: Right.

But you're feeling that Fourth Street is not as much a problem over here in the western part as you would say in the eastern part?

Deal: Yes, that would be my feeling.

Do you have a negative perception of East Fourth Street, do you think?

Deal: I probably personally did, I guess. It's just one of those areas when I was here going to college. You really didn't go down on East Fourth Street, and particularly, I think, before they built the baseball stadium and you had Lake Street and it was just a seedy kind of area.

And so that's still your perception, or has that changed at all?

Deal: I think it's improved somewhat, definitely with the development of the ballpark and the Freight House District, although that's not directly on Fourth Street.

It does impact it.

Deal: It does seem like that. Yes, it seems better. I don't feel unsafe to drive there, but it's not a place I hang out.

Would you feel safe walking down the street there?

Deal: Yes. Well, in the daytime. [laughter] I'm sorry.

It's fine. This is interesting. Sharon, since you're new to town, you must have impressions of it too. You're coming from Los Angeles. What's your impression of it?

Chamberlain: I don't know that you want me to say this, but I guess you can conclude whatever you want. To me, Reno is small and it's not L.A., so when I hear about Fourth Street and the different areas—that it's a little seedy here or there—it's just not my impression, because Reno, to me, feels extremely safe. I haven't yet found the part of Reno where I wouldn't walk around at night or I couldn't hold my girlfriend's hand or any of that kind of stuff. It's fascinating because some of the people here say, "Oh, I wouldn't walk downtown and hold my boyfriend's hand," or "my girlfriend's hand," and it doesn't feel that way to me, so maybe I'm just naïve.

Deal: Yes, I'm leery of holding my boyfriend's hand.

Chamberlain: Yes, it's so interesting.

Deal: He came here just recently—it was six months ago—from the Midwest and he wants to do that, and I still have that perception that it's like it was twenty years ago here in Reno, that—

Chamberlain: It's not safe.

Deal: —somebody might drive in a truck and shoot you or something.

I realize we didn't go through this on tape. Can you tell us a little bit about your backgrounds? That seems to impact your perceptions as well. Sharon, do you want to say where you grew up, where you're from originally?

Chamberlain: I originally grew up back east in a small southern area and then ended up out in the Bay Area for years, and really, all over the place, including Oregon and most recently in Los Angeles for about five years. So a lot of big cities, but then also smaller places—what this town actually reminds me

of is Eugene, Oregon, and we talk about it all the time.

My partner have two little kids and we moved here because our perception of Reno is that it is so much safer and a little bit out of the rat race that we felt we were in in Los Angeles. It never stops. It's just constant. And since being here, it does feel so much more relaxed. It's a different culture and the people are different, but I found it extremely warm, extremely friendly, and it feels very safe and welcoming with good parts of town.

I think the reason I don't go down East Fourth Street is because I didn't know that there was anything down there. Is there even anything down there? I guess I see it more like, almost an industrial area. And I have to drive home that way. It's just not a place that I visit.

There's a gay bar on Fourth Street. Have you guys gone to Cadillac Lounge?

Deal: I have been in there, yes.

Chamberlain: No, really?

Yes.

Deal: They've actually done a couple of fundraisers for HOPES, too.

Chamberlain: Is it a nice, like, comfy lounge?

Deal: Kind of more what I would call the old Reno gay bar kind of feel.

Can you explain that? As somebody who's been here a long time, I know what you're saying, but it's important we get this down for history. What does that mean? [laughs]

Deal: It means that you're not sure you really want to have somebody see you going in there, or you wonder if your car is going to be safe when you come out, and it feels dark, although that one does have windows. I'm thinking of the 5 Star downtown that is very dark with no windows, or Carl's down on South Virginia—that old gay bar thing, park in the back and walk through the back door.

Chamberlain: Yes, I've been to Carl's.

Deal: And you're wondering, like, should I drink off this counter? [laughter] But anyway, it definitely has more of that feel of the old gay bar, whereas, actually, the Patio, which is right next door here, I think of all the gay bars in Reno, is probably the one that I feel the most comfortable in, and it's definitely a mixture of men and women, but it doesn't feel sleazy and I actually don't mind parking my car in their parking lot.

Chamberlain: It's bright and has a little outside area, yes.

Deal: And they have fans to circulate the air and all that kind of thing.

Kerry, you were saying you were born in Fallon.

Deal: I was born and raised in Fallon, which is just an hour east of Reno, which was a very small town, and you felt very safe growing up there. You knew most of the people in the town. I guess the biggest challenge was being gay or not really understanding being gay and definitely being afraid to disclose that in such a small town.

Then I came to Reno to go to UNR, where I got my degree in accounting, and Reno always felt safe, and that's when I started coming out and going to some of the gay bars in Reno. This was '77 to '79.

Of two of gay bars I first went to, one was way out on West Fourth Street—Dave's VIP Club.

Chamberlain: Is it there still or is it gone?

It's gone.

Deal: It's changed hands, yes. I don't know.

The owners are the same women. It's a lesbian couple.

Deal: No, no, no, they're the lesbian couple who own the Patio, but they sold it about two years ago to somebody from outside the area.

No, Kelly Rae and Pam Haberman own it.

Deal: Oh, no, I was thinking of Katie—

Chamberlain: I thought it was sold to another—

Deal: —Katie and Nina, but they sold it to—

See, I didn't know Katie and Nina owned Dave's at one point.

Deal: Yes, I can't think of what it was called, because I was there on the last night when they owned it because they had a big party.

Was it Reflections?

Deal: Reflections, I think they called it, and supposedly it was sold—I thought it was a guy and he was going to turn it into a straight bar, but I don't go out there, so I don't know if it's changed hands again.

No, according to the property records—I've been talking to them—they own it, so—

Deal: Oh, it must have sold then again, because I wondered if that guy was ever going to make it a straight bar.

Chamberlain: Is it a straight bar now or is it a gay bar?

It seems like it's a straight karaoke bar, but it's kind of confusing, like it's open at odd hours. I can't get a handle on what's going on with it.

Deal: Yes, but I do know that Katie and Nina owned it because they had a big party, the last day when they were closed. But the other gay bar that's not there anymore, I think was on East Fourth, so, I mean, the exact opposite side of town. It was called the Forum.

You used to go to the Forum?

Deal: Yes. [laughter]

I found somebody. I've been looking for people who can talk to me about this. The Forum is a famous seventies disco that was in Sparks.

Chamberlain: Oh, wow.

Deal: Yes, because it was just right there on the line, kind of.

Yes, what was the Forum like?

Chamberlain: You were going to the disco. [laughter] I love it. He sings karaoke, too.

Deal: I was taken there by one of my fraternity brothers who was supposedly bi, but I remember good times at the Forum because it was more dancing, whereas Dave's had dancing, too, but the Forum just, I don't know, it was the spot to go to right then.

Did Dave's feel sort of older, like its time had passed or it was starting to feel old by the time you were going there?

Deal: Yes, and it was like you pulled up in there and drove up this old driveway, and they had all those motel rooms that were pretty sleazy. [laughter]

So those were the two first gay bars you went to?

Deal: Right.

Wow. Okay, and the Forum was definitely a gay disco, right?

Deal: Right, from what I recall, yes, although I think other people went there to dance.

Did it feel safe there, in that location?

Deal: Yes, it was one of those that was right on the verge where you thought, is this okay? But it was fine. The others were then down on South Virginia, like the Chute and 1099, where I didn't go much, but now that one's closed and the Chute has been gone, I guess, for a long time.

This is interesting because you have two completely different impressions of the gay community because you're just coming here and you've been here a long time.

Deal: Or came back after a while.

Yes. What are your impressions of the gay community in Reno, Sharon?

Chamberlain: I feel like it's large. I feel like there actually are a lot of different connection things that happen, like with Spectrum and the different listservs and those kinds of thing that go out. It seems like parts of the community are very active. It seems like a lot of support for HOPES comes from the community, but also, as large as it is, it also feels very small, and it seems as though there are a lot of dynamics that have impacted the way people interact and the way certain groups work or don't work together.

Are you talking about the history that the groups have had together?

Chamberlain: Yes. I don't know a lot about it. I feel like oftentimes when I'm talking to people, I get earfuls of, "Oh, well, you don't know about them," and, "Oh, well, what about this," and HOPES and former centers and the current centers and everything. People know each other.

Deal: That's interesting for me, because after I graduated from the university, I moved to the L.A. area for about five years, and I've also lived in San Diego, so I've lived in the larger areas, which is totally different feeling with the gay community. They had a lot of gay business and professional associations and things like that. But then I also lived for a time, or twelve years, on the central coast of California near San Luis Obispo, and that area reminds me more of Reno as far as the gay community because there were a lot of gay people there, most of them were couples, but there were no gay bars.

We had an organization that was the Gay and Lesbian Alliance that did put on some social events and put on Pride and things like that, but you had to kind of get into these little groups, or there was the group that went camping and then the group that would go to dinner. That's kind of what I see here in Reno, too. There are these groups that you get in, whether it be through a church or Spectrum and they have different interest groups. I think overall, too, it might be better now in Reno with the gay men and the lesbians kind of working together, because it seemed before that, it was very separate. But I was just coming out in my last couple of years of college, so it was all new and hard to get a handle on.

Would you guys say that there's still sort of a bias in Reno towards the LGBT community?

Deal: I think it's much improved, but I still think that there is that segment of the good old Nevada boys' network kind of thing, and driving around with your shotgun in the back of your truck. But

I think Reno has definitely changed and I think that even like here with HOPES, a lot of people didn't even know HOPES was here for a long time and now they're aware of it.

I think there's still a stigma, particularly with HIV and AIDS, but I think, in general, towards the gay community, people are recognizing that we are part of the community and we also have disposable income. I felt really in a lot of restaurants and stuff now, they know that you're obviously together with another man and it's not uncomfortable, whereas thirty years ago when I was in college, I would have felt differently.

So back then, you definitely would have faced some sort of discrimination. It was much different, is what you're saying?

Deal: Well, in fact, this one friend who first took me out to the gay bars and who I'm still very good friends with, he and his partner live in Berkeley. They've been together thirty years. But he got kicked out of the fraternity that we were in at the university because he was gay. I had just graduated, and he was a year or two behind me and they kicked him out because he was gay, although, when they looked at the alumni of that fraternity, there were several gay people.

I want to go back to your referencing the clique aspect of Reno's gay community. You're saying it's the little group situation. How would you say HOPES' reputation is within Reno with the different groups? They can make up their minds based on what went down a while ago and it can be hard to sort of undo things, is my impression.

Chamberlain: I hear lots of different stories, and I wasn't here, but there were some very challenging times with the gay community, and HOPES lost a lot of support over the years, but I feel like folks are much more open now about looking at things again with fresh eyes. I've been told that by people, "Okay, we're kind of ready. We still hold this. We're still not happy about whatever, but let's see what happens. Let's see what H.O.P.E.S does." And that's one of the things that we want to move towards in the community is being more of a community place for the LGBT population.

Why do you think the community didn't rally around HOPES all the time? It seems so odd to me. It seems like that's one organization that everybody would say, "We're behind because we need it."

Deal: I think in most cities that was the case. They just had problems with some of the personnel who were here and there were some financial issues, and I think it created a negative image, and that's what split some people off, but I really feel like with Sharon now being out in the community, they feel like H.O.P.E.S is being run like it should be and that we really are providing such a needed valuable service in the community.

As we move forward, we'd like to become a health center for the LGBT community and really, like when we've had some of the mixers, a place where people feel they can gather.

When you were at UNR, you felt you couldn't be out?

Deal: Right, because I was at UNR from '75 to '79. We didn't even have a gay group on campus. It was very closeted. And, like I said, I also remember being out at Dave's and you'd run into professors

from the university, which was really bizarre, and they were like, “Oh, my god.” [laughter]

Chamberlain: Wow.

So it was sort of like everybody expected it to keep quiet if you ran into each other at Dave’s, one of those situations?

Deal: Yes, it was just, I don’t know, a very secretive kind of thing.

Sharon, where have you gone in the gay community since you’ve come to Reno? What are the places that you’ve checked out?

Chamberlain: Well, different bars, not the Cadillac Lounge, and I’ve just tried to meet with some of the different folks, like the Reno Gay Page. What’s that guy’s name?

Paco.

Chamberlain: Paco and the Littlest Big Sisters. Actually, I just sent them a thank you. We’re trying to get them all to come to Fresh Mex, my restaurant for Dining Out for Life, and then we’re going to go to the Five Star after that, and then I’ve been finding out, just asking everybody who I meet, “Hey, who in the community do you think that I should meet?” So from that, I’ve been going and meeting different people who are known in the community for whatever reason, and it’s been good.

Sounds like you really like it here.

Chamberlain: I do. I love it.

Some people move here and it’s not for them, and they just don’t stay.

Deal: I think the worst part was when you first came here, it was cold and this building is old, and she was so cold that she’d have the heater on right next to her. [laughter]

Chamberlain: I was so cold. It was horrible.

Deal: We put these window inserts in—

Chamberlain: It helped.

Deal: —and it helped tremendously.

This is a gorgeous building. It really is pretty. Do you guys want to say anything more?

Chamberlain: You know what I worry about is that, because you see it all the time in cities, like in L.A. and look at Venice now, it doesn’t look at all like it did twenty years ago.

You mean with the gentrification?

Chamberlain: Yes. That Fourth Street corridor is where a lot of our clients live, and what I wouldn't want to see happen is some kind of sweep, where the little hotels and the little apartment buildings and those kinds of things disappear, because we need that and we need to have a place for them.

I mean, can it improve and can we get better transportation and help build up that environment and community so that there's more neighborhood pride in it and it's beautified? Yes, but I think that we need to do that keeping those people there, and I don't agree and never have agreed with "Let's move everybody out and then make it into something fantastic." Let's make it fantastic for the people who need it who are there now.

What do you guys think of the motels? That's a remnant from when this was the highway.

Deal: Well, some of them, I think, they've maintained better than others. But if friends are coming to Reno and they're not going to stay with me, it's not a place that I would recommend them to go stay in a motel. But I agree with Sharon, I would hate to see them just come in and totally change it. It's not what the area is, and then those people wouldn't have any place to live.

Do a lot of clients from HOPES live in the hotels on Fourth Street?

Deal: Yes, because we have housing assistance, and sometimes, or at least on a temporary basis, they stay there.

Yes, there's a lot. So if those motels were gotten rid of, where would your clients go?

Deal: It's hard to find.

Chamberlain: Because the transportation isn't great, and because we're located here, it's very beneficial to have a place where if someone just lost their housing and needs a place to stay for a week or two weeks, that we can put them somewhere.

Do you think the area around Fourth, Fifth, and Keystone has been the best location for your organization just geographically, if you could be anywhere in the city? Has it served you guys well, do you think?

Deal: I think that it is a fairly central location, which is good. It's also good being close to St. Mary's, and we do work with them some, but I think they got it because the property was available. I don't know all the details of that transaction.

PAOLO CIVIDINO

Owner, Tutto Ferro



Paolo Cividino inside Tutto Ferro in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Born in Italy, Paolo Cividino grew up in California, and moved to Reno in 1989. He is founder and owner of Tutto Ferro, a custom steel fabrication business located at 616 East 4th Street. In establishing his operation along the 4th Street corridor, he joined a community of long established iron workers, steel fabricators, and machine operators practicing in the area.

Alicia Barber: This is Alicia Barber. I'm with Paolo Cividino, the owner of Tutto Ferro, which is located at 616 East 4th Street in Reno. We're here at his home in Reno and today is January 3, 2012.

Paolo, do I have your permission to record this interview and place it in our public archive?

Paolo Cividino: You do.

Thank you. I want to start out asking a couple of biographical questions. Where and when were you born?

I was born February 21, 1971 in Lignano, Italy. My mother's name is Dora and my father's name is Frank, or in his dialect it's Ciccio. My father was born in a town called Majano, which is really close to Udine, a big city in northern Italy about fifty miles north of Venice. I was born very close to where my father was from.

My mother's family is from Treviso [phonetic], which is also in northern Italy, but my mother was born in Vancouver, Canada. Both of her parents came over on a boat. My grandmother on my mother's side came over on the very last boat from Italy to America before they shut all shipping off during the Second World War. So my mother was born in Vancouver. She has two sisters.

Both my mother's parents were Italian. They had a pre-arranged marriage. This is pretty old-school. My parents are pretty old: my father's eighty-four, and my mother's seven years younger. My father was part of the Resistance during the Second World War, and fought against Hitler and Mussolini. My father has a really amazing past and my mother has a really amazing past.

My mother's first language was Italian, and she grew up in a really tight Italian community in Vancouver during Prohibition. She's got some pretty good stories. Her father was a logger, and he was gone all the time. She had two sisters, so here you have these four women in this house, and the only way that they could make money was by making wine, so that's what they would do. All the Italians would go over to their house. They'd play Briscola, which is an Italian card game, in the basement, and the cops never swept my grandmother because they knew she was selling wine. They knew she was making grappa and all this stuff, but she had three girls. What are they going to do, right?

My father would go over there to play cards, and that's how he met my mother. The priest who married them got my father work in Daly City, so they moved from Canada to San Francisco. My two older sisters were born there.

My father wanted to move back to Italy and so did my mother, so they moved to Lignano Sabbiadoro, which is a beach town north of Venice on the Adriatic. It's a resort town in the summertime. All the Germans, Austrians, French, and Swiss would go there. One of my father's sisters, my aunt, was there. She and her husband had a pasticceria, a bakery, and did really, really well.

My parents had a bar, but a bar in Europe is more like a coffee shop. You would serve alcoholic drinks, but it's not like an American-type bar. Then they had a lavanderia, a laundromat. They had a villa there in Italy, and they would rent that out during the Ferragosto, the three months when the Europeans travel. They did really well.

But I think my father had had a taste of what it was like to live in America and be self-employed. In Europe everything is very regimented and it's hard to get ahead, and I think that he felt stifled there. He tasted the American dream, and I guess he and my mother discussed it, and they decided to move back to the States. So I lived in Italy until I was four.

Do you have any memories of Italy from your youth?

Yes, I do, but I was fortunate; my family went back to Italy almost every other year. My parents

were really good about getting back there. Looking back on it, it was really special. I have a lot of really vivid memories of Italy all through my childhood, and of all my cousins in Italy.

I moved back to Italy from '96 to '98. I enrolled in a School of Biblical Studies, and I lived there for two years and got to be with my extended family over there, which was really great. I have dual citizenship, so I can work there legally. Part of me wonders why I ever came back. Part of me thinks I should have just stayed there.

Do you speak Italian?

I do speak Italian, yes. I don't speak any dialect. My father speaks dialect, but I don't. My Italian is like anything—if you don't practice it all the time, you start to lose it. Over the holidays I get on the phone with my cousins and my relatives, and my Italian is bad. It bums me out because when I lived there, it was very good. I tend to understand fairly well because it was my first language, but when it comes to speaking, I stumble. I just bought Rosetta Stone because I was upset at how much I've lost. I want to take my son, Enzo, back to Italy this spring if I can. He's going to be six in February, and I think that he'll remember that. I hope it's one of many trips. I have a very good friend who lives in [unclear], Switzerland, and I'll stay with him and also stay with my family and go down south. That would be nice.

When your family moved back to the United States, where did you live?

My father bought a house in Walnut Creek [California]. He went back to Italy to finish working, and was gone for around six months. Then he came back, and we were all together. That's where I grew up. My father had plenty of work in San Francisco. He was super employable. He's a master bricklayer. He would commute into the city, and he worked in the city for thirty-plus years.

As a bricklayer primarily?

No, there really isn't that much work laying brick stateside. In Europe when you're young, thirteen or fourteen, you have to decide what you are going to do. Are you going to go to a technical school, are you going to try and further your education in a non-technical manner, or are you not going to go to school at all?

My father was super good with his hands, and my grandfather's an amazing bricklayer, and he just said, "Look, I need you." My father wanted to be an architect, and my father's brother was an architect, and I think it was a point of contention between them, but my father was just too good with his hands. So he went to technical school to be a bricklayer. When you do that in Europe, you've got to understand—he could build anything with anything. The craftsmanship that those guys come out of school with is mind-boggling.

He ran finish work in the city. He did all the finish in the Transamerica Building and the B of A Building and the Del Monte Building. He's just unbelievable. He's the guy who I was always trying to be like, but always feeling like I was falling short of that. That whole complex.

Were you aware of his craftsmanship when you were growing up?

Absolutely. My father grew up in Italy when Italy was super poor. During the Second World

War, if you had a cow and a chicken, you were considered pretty affluent. My grandparents had land with a vineyard and a large garden, and my father grew up a farmer. So it was pretty funny growing up in the Bay Area. We had a big lot with a half acre for a backyard, and we raised rabbits and slaughtered them. All my neighbors thought we were crazy, but to me, it was normal. We had a huge garden. My father had beautiful fruit trees, and he would graft all these amazing apples onto apples, and pears to pears. He's just a super talented guy.

Shortly after we moved to the States, my father bought twenty acres in Grass Valley, which is where my parents live now, and it's beautiful, huge oak trees, horse-type country. We would go up there every weekend and work, building fences, digging trenches, you name it. I was always at my father's side working, and I really enjoyed it. It rubbed off on me, for sure.

I take a lot of pride in being good at what I do. I want to be careful when I say it. I don't want to sound arrogant, but I just think that in this country, being a craftsman is not something that people value as much as they should. I think that when you are dealing with a craftsman, whatever the medium is, it's pretty awesome when someone has that kind of grasp of what they're doing.

My father was amazing. You look at some of the things that my father built. He was young during the war, working in France, in Paris, with my grandfather because they were running from the Nazis. They were working in France, and my grandfather—this is really cool, I've actually seen this—was awarded a key to the City of Paris because he ran the crew that helped rebuild the church at the end of the Champs-Élysées that got bombed by the Nazis during the Second World War. These are really complex, Gaudi-type arches. My grandfather never made it past about second grade in school, but his mathematical skills were mind-boggling, and my father's mathematical ability is unbelievable, too.

My sister's husband has a master's degree from Cal [University of California] Berkeley in mathematics, and my father could fully hang out with him, and they could do the most complex math together. Because of his situation growing up, my father never made it past the equivalent of about tenth grade. So it's pretty amazing. Those guys were smart. Reality happened a lot sooner for them. Adolescence never occurred. My father was a foreman bricklayer running a crew of full-grown men at the age of fourteen. That's how I was raised, with that mentality.

That's just my reality. I know it's a little different than some other people, but I feel really fortunate to have it, and I think that it's served me well in my profession. I'm fortunate, too, because the guys who I have in my shop, to a large degree, although their reality looks different, operate the same way. They're real craftsmen. I'm really lucky. I'm surrounded by super talented guys, and you start to think it's normal. I'll be around other people and I'll think, "What is wrong with you? You can't do anything. You have no common sense." I have a lot of respect for where I come from, because I think I should.

Let's go back to how you ended up getting to Reno and starting your business. You went to high school in the Bay Area, in Walnut Creek. So what brought you to Reno?

My family is super intense, and I wanted to get away from them. I did okay in school; I didn't do great. I had a lot of traumatic stuff happen in my family when I was around fourteen years old, and so I just wanted to get out of there. Getting into UNR wasn't that hard, frankly. I applied to some other schools. I got into a couple, I didn't get into some other ones.

I wanted to get into the mountains. I was really into rock climbing. My sister's boyfriend, who's now her husband, the mathematical wizard, his name is John, great guy. When I graduated from high

school, we went to Yosemite Valley and took the rock climbing class, the two-week, ten-day rock climbing class, and I was hooked. So I thought, Reno's perfect, I'm going to move to Reno and live around Tahoe, so I did.

I moved to Reno in 1989 to go to the university, and I did a lot better scholastically at UNR than I did in high school. I was really busy doing a lot of stuff. I was in a band and the band was busy, and I was working, but I did well in school because I really enjoyed it.

Had you spent much time in Reno before moving here for school?

I had never been to Reno, and the first time I came over the hill and I saw those casinos I thought, "Oh, my god, what am I doing? This is ridiculous. This is such a small town, such a hick town." Initially I didn't like it. I wasn't used to this kind of arid landscape. I was used to trees and the ocean. But it really grew on me, and it grew on me so much that when I graduated from UNR, I had a degree in biogeography with an emphasis on arid lands, which was kind of ironic because I really grew to love the desert, and I think it is the most mind-boggling environment to live in. It is so amazing and diverse and cool.

Reno's grown on me, and I've tried to leave. I have tried to leave numerous times, but for some reason I always come back, and I've got to say that I've met the most colorful, wonderful people in Reno. I really have. I think this town is disproportionately blessed with amazing people, and it's weird that the town is so retarded in the midst of that. I don't get it. Reno is a dichotomy to me. I don't understand how there can be so many wonderful, super talented individuals and yet it can still be so dysfunctional. It doesn't have an identity, really, in my opinion. It's trying to figure out what it is. It's kind of a weird place to be. Because you go to some cities and it looks like they have it together, and businesses are thriving. But they're really no different than Reno. It's just that Reno's a mess.

When I arrived, Reno was still a small town. My first job was at Deux Gros Nez and the Pneumatic Diner, so I met really great people right out of the chute—really colorful, creative, energetic people. The Deux was happening. It was the first café in Reno. It was open 24/7, and Tim [Healion] and John [Jesse] were really creative. I felt like it kept me alive, being in that environment. It was something that resonated with me because when we would go back to Italy, I would work in my cousin's pasticceria. I'd make cappuccinos and gelato and stuff like that. It was really nice to be in that environment again, and I really did enjoy that.

And I got a ton of rock climbing in. It was great. And I went to school. I moved here in '89, and Reno has changed a lot since then.

How would you say it's changed?

It's become gentrified in a lot of ways. It's kind of like what happened to San Francisco. When the dot-com thing happened in the city, the city got really gentrified, and everyone who made the city colorful—and I'm not talking about the bums, but the people who made the city colorful—what I would call the working class—they all had to relocate. They all lived in Pittsburg and Antioch or Brentwood or Discovery Bay. The city became totally gentrified.

I remember when I was a kid, you couldn't go to the Mission District. You'd get shot, or if not shot, you'd get mugged. Now you go to the Mission District and it's ridiculous, or Hayes Valley or any of those neighborhoods. The city's just changing.

A couple of the really good friends who I grew up with still live in the city and know the city like the

back of their hand. They're kind of disgruntled with what's happened there. It's lost its flavor. It's kind of lost its edge. Now you have this disparity between the haves and the have-nots.

Reno in some ways is gentrified as well. You have a bunch of people, dot-commers or whoever, who moved here. They could sell their real estate for whatever they could sell it for, and they were pretty affluent in Nevada terms, so they could buy these enormous homes. You have these huge builders, Lennar and others, come in and build these Tuscan-style developments—you can go anywhere and see them. It's mind-boggling to me, and it's just trash.

Reno's grown out, not up and not in. I get why it happened and how it happened, but it's sad. I don't think that there's a whole lot of soul in what's gone on. There's definitely no quality in what's been put up in the last fifteen, twenty years. I know because I've worked on some of those homes. I've worked on multimillion-dollar homes in Arrowcreek that are just as shitty as the tract down in Damonte Ranch—they're all the same. It's ridiculous. I don't get that. I don't like that too much.

I live near downtown, and I like that. I live close to where I work. I'm not a huge fan of commuting. My house is small; it's 950 square feet. I just don't get this whole bigger, better bullshit. I'm not into it. I'm not really pleased with the way the city has grown. I'm sick of bad stucco jobs and shitty strip malls.

But I think it's got to be really hard to be an urban planner and get your head around how to do this correctly. I don't think it's an easy job. It's easy to critique it, criticize it, and make fun of it or be disgruntled about it, but I think that it's a hard job to pull off, because you have people who want to invest money, and you've got to do this.

I still think Reno is a small town. I think you still have the same kind of guys. At work I still duke it out with the same dudes. It's who you know. It's still that kind of town. There's a handful of guys who are super affluent and they call the shots, at least in my industry. And I get that and that's fine. It's a good-old-boy club, Coney Island on 4th Street, and all that stuff.

Reno has that proximity thing. It's got Tahoe and the mountains and the city and the desert and Pyramid [Lake]. It's nice to live here.

You had a very specialized major in school. Did you have career aspirations related to your major?

I thought I was going to get a master's degree and then maybe try to get into teaching at a higher level, a university level. I really thought that that's what I was going to do. Here's the deal. I didn't go to school and pick my major because I had a job aspiration; I picked my major because that's what I was interested in. I'm not like a guy who went to engineering school and became an engineer, or nursing school and became a nurse or a doctor. I'm just a guy who went to school and studied what he was interested in. I was into plants and rocks.

I didn't give a lot of thought to what I was going to do, which is maybe not that bright, but it is what it is. For some odd reason I ended up not going back to school. I was traveling a lot and I was working. I did that School of Biblical Studies in Europe.

It was a program through Youth With A Mission, YWAM, a Christian nondenominational organization. It was awesome. It was the first kind of bilingual school that they had taught in Italy. They had bases all over the world. I got to interpret and study the Bible, and that was pretty intriguing. I was raised a pretty hardcore Catholic, but I had fallen away from that. At that point of time in my life I was born-again Christian, pretty hardcore.

I was in a ska band called the Mudsharks, and we were traveling all over the States. My dream

was to travel all over the world. I had this little rock-star life, if you will. But then I had this spiritual thing happening and I went and did this school. It was good.

I think what I took away from that trip more than anything was something called a Reconciliation Walk, which was commemorating the 900th anniversary of the Crusades. I got together with five other men and women, and we retraced the path of the crusaders from where Pope Urban called out for the Crusades in Cologne, France, all the way to Jerusalem. We walked from Cologne, France, to Istanbul, which was awesome.

We were walking through Croatia and Serbia during the Balkan War. It was a trip. We couldn't get into Montenegro because they were shelling, so we had to take the ferry from Croatia to Italy and from Italy to Albania. That was really intense. That was three and a half months of just walking every day.

Then I went back to [unclear], Switzerland. I lived there for one more year after the Rec Walk, came back to the States, and the next year I went back and I walked through Syria and Lebanon by myself. That was mind-bending.

John Jesse, who used to own the Pneumatic Diner and was part owner of Deux Gros Nez, was opening what was going to be a new restaurant behind the old Del Mar Station on St. Lawrence right off of Virginia in the old Edco Electronics Building. I worked on that job with him and Ben Wilborn, who now makes guitars. He's an amazing craftsman, runs Wilborn Woodworking. He's a cabinetmaker, but now he makes guitars, and he's just phenomenal.

I was working with John, Ben, and a guy named Tom Casper, who ironically now works for me. We took this building and ripped it apart and did a crazy, super lengthy non-profitable remodel on it. John never ended up opening the restaurant, but he owns the building, and it's got some great office spaces. The building's amazing. I got to do steelwork. I also got to do a lot of stonework, which was wonderful because I grew up doing stonework as a kid with my father, so it was really nice to do stonework and set miles of tile and paint it. We did everything in there. We built the doors, the windows. It was radical.

Even though John Jesse is an oddball, and can be kind of hard to get along with, the guy's brilliant. I learned a lot from him. He was really an important figure in helping me break out into what I did. I had my construction chops, I think, from my father, or at least the ability to think. I didn't have formal training. I didn't grow up framing houses, but I did all that stuff with my father, and he was so particular and critical, so I felt like I had always been able to build things well. I learned a lot with John.

When I was on the Rec Walk, I had this really weird epiphany. This may sound totally hokey, but it's the truth. I was walking one day in Croatia. I'll never forget this. I was with this gal, Liz, who's from England. We were talking and praying, if you will, about love and the characteristics of love, and I had a vision. It was a big piece of Y-flange. A Y-flange, if you don't know, is like the letter "H." It's made out of steel and it's a big structural beam. It's used in big buildings, and it comes in all different sizes. This one that I saw in my mind was massive, and it just went on and on. It was long, maybe 80 or 100 feet long, and it was sitting on these two big limestone pillars, but it was cantilevered for 30 or 40 feet. It was sea-foam green and red and orange and all those great colors that raw steel is when it's tuned and waxed and honed.

I remember in this vision I saw this thing while I was thinking about the properties or characteristics of love, and this beam was so straight. You could walk on it. You could park a car on it. You just knew it was strong. You know when you're around steel, you have this sense that it's unyielding. It's sturdy. It's the real deal. I thought, that's love. That's what love is, man. There it is. Bam, that's it.

It was weird because from that day forward something inside me just knew, you're going to work

with steel, dude. That's going to be the medium that you express this deposit that God's put in you into the world. That was it.

I came back to the States. I worked for John. I did some welding. I thought, "Yeah, this is pretty cool." I had never really welded before. Then I took a bunch of machining classes. I took some welding classes. I did a lot of reading. I was super proactive. I bought some machines. I ran the little shop space. And that's how it all started. [laughs]

You went into business for yourself.

Absolutely. Yes, I went into business for myself. I waited tables for Bill Gilbert, the chef who owns Beaujolais Bistro. Before that, I worked at the Metro, and before that, I was at 4th Street Bistro. I was always waiting tables. I love food, I love the restaurant environment, and I loved working with John. That was when I just decided, "I'm just going to do this." And I was painting a lot, painting bikes, painting motorcycles, painting doors. That's when I started making doors.

This is something I learned when I was in the band. I was the worst musician in my band. Everyone else in my band was formally trained. I was trained. I grew up playing the trumpet, and I was a good classical trumpet player, but I never could play jazz. I could never improvise. I was never schooled in that way. I'm super rigid. If you look around my house, you'll see—it's how I'm wired. So although I loved jazz and I listened to a lot of it, I could never play it, and everyone in my band was really technically on point.

But I'll never forget Miles Davis once said, "Jazz is like America. It's supposed to be free." The point of that was that in this interview with him, he was saying, "Man, so much of what you hear today in jazz is so scripted and so limited. If you know too much, it can limit you. You're bound by knowledge." And I think what made me viable in the band I was in was the fact that musically, really, I was a baby, so anything was possible. Of course you could play five bars instead of six. Why not? Who says you can't? Like Miles said, "Do what you want. Just express yourself."

I felt like I came into my business doing steelwork the same way. I didn't have a bunch of rules or regulations or so much schooling that said you can't do that. I had just enough education from my father and not enough education from anyone else that I was able to impose my creative thumbprint on my work, and that is a total blessing, because I think that if I had known more, I wouldn't be as creative.

We all get caught in ruts. I've done the same thing a couple times, and I try not to do that. That's the beauty of collaboration. The guys who I work with, they're also super creative. And, of course, I have a fingerprint. I have an aesthetic. There is something that I like about certain things and some things just don't resonate with me. But that being said, I think if you can not be bound by knowing too much, that's a real gift, and I just fell right into that. I was lucky.

Where was your first shop space?

The first shop space was in Marvin Grulli's building on Lander and Mt. Rose—the site of the first Bibo's Coffee Shop. Right behind that is a cool upstairs office apartment, and downstairs there was a little shop space. I rented in conjunction with Ben Wilborn. We shared a space for a little while, but it became apparent really quickly that there was not enough room. It was so small for the both of us. I kept that space for a little while, and then all of a sudden I got hired to do a job at the Carson [City] Airport, and I moved my entire shop down there. I was doing all the finish work on a custom hangar for over a year.

There was a gentleman by the name of Michael Thoben, and he was the CEO of Interlink Electronics. They made laser pointers, infrared pointers. They had this whole technological area cornered. This guy made so much money. He started his business from nothing. He used to be Ansel Adams' assistant. He worked for Kodak and for Polaroid and he taught photography. Really interesting guy, really nice man, super smart, ever since he was a child loved planes. He didn't come from any sort of money. He would fly model planes, but he always wanted to be around planes. He'd go to all the air shows. He started Interlink Electronics, he made a bunch of money, and he bought planes and was just flying. He bought a beautiful WACO biplane from one of the astronauts who was on the moon—not Alan Shepard. An unbelievable plane. When you buy something like that, there are tax implications, so he wanted to keep his plane in Nevada for a while, and he ended up keeping it at this hangar that I was working on.

He was building a home on a private airstrip in Pine Mountain right outside of Yosemite Valley, and he wanted to do all this finished steelwork and he didn't have anyone to do it. He saw the work that I was doing, and he said, "Would you be interested in coming up and looking at this?"

I said, "Absolutely."

So he flew me up there. I had one employee at the time, this part-time kid. Really what he needed was an interior designer because it was a mess, and he needed a steelworker. And I just off-the-cuff played both. It was totally crazy. He rented a house for me, and I lived up there off and on. He would fly me back to Reno on the weekends. I got to fly a lot.

This airstrip is insane. The guys who have planes on this airstrip are mind-boggling. Chuck Yeager would fly in because Clay Lacy, who was Lear's test pilot (as in the Moya Lear Theater downtown), had a house there. He owns Lacy Aviation out of somewhere in Orange County, in L.A. [John] Travolta flew in his DC-3. There were all these beautiful planes. It was amazing.

So here I am, I'm just this guy, and I'm telling him, "Yeah, I think you should do this in your kitchen." [laughs] And I worked there for over a year. So I was without a shop for two years. I was in a state of funky limbo, working on these really specific projects.

Then that ended and I moved back to Reno and I opened up a shop space on Fourth Street two doors down from where I am now. That shop was great. I was there for a while. It was too small. I moved to Dickerson Road. That was good for a while. I liked Dickerson, but it's a bit of a drag, Dickerson Road is.

Where is that?

Dickerson parallels Fourth Street just on the other side of the river. Second turns into Dickerson. It's there at Chism Trailer Park. It's just demoralizing. It's where people go to die, almost. It's just kind of sad.

My shop was a nice shop; it just wasn't big enough. My machine shop room was so full I couldn't even get to my mill, I couldn't get to my lathe. I was storing stuff in there. It was a bit of a mess. The guy that I rented my shop space from on Fourth Street, Bill Botelho, was a longtime Fourth Street resident. I said, "Bill, you've got to sell me your shop," and he didn't want to do it, but eventually he gave in.

Was he still operating a business there?

Yes, he still was operating Reno Motor Machine, but he was on the tail end of that. He said,

“Look, I’m Portuguese. I don’t have to sell anything. I rent.” [laughs] Bill was like a surrogate father to me. He’s been in my life for a long time. He’s actually three years younger than my father, but kind of hard-headed and reminds me of my dad a lot, except he’s more of a gearhead, where my father’s more like a building guy.

Bill was great to me. It was hard for me to make the rent, and he cut me slack. He believed in me. He just said, “You’re a hardworking kid, I like you a lot, and we’re going to make this work out.” He’s been a really good friend to me, and he agreed to sell the building. He carried the note and he made it possible for me to buy it. There was no way I could come up with the amount that I needed to buy his old shop, my current shop. It’s a big space. It’s 6,000 square feet. My parents helped me out, which was wonderful. They said, “You’re working hard. We think you can pull it off.” And Bill carried the note. So there I was, back on Fourth Street, and I liked Fourth Street a lot. I have a love-hate relationship with Fourth Street, probably like most people who have spots on Fourth Street, because it has a lot of great history, and there are a lot of wonderful businesses and wonderful people on Fourth Street.

Then you have this element that just is so frustrating and it makes you want to shoot people. I have planters out front, and there’s always trash in the planters and people sitting on the plants. And I get being down and out. I get it. There are times when I drive to work and I’m so cognizant of the fact that I’m one bad decision away from being down and out. We all like to think that we’re in control. Believe me, I get the fact that I’m not in control of much. The wind blows the wrong way and I’m screwed. I am so extended, especially with buying these new machines and this and that, that I cannot fuck up. I don’t mean to swear, but I just cannot.

So I understand that that could happen at any given moment, but there’s a difference between being down and out and then just being pathetic. I feel like Fourth Street is where the pathetic thing happens in Reno, for whatever reason, and it gets old to be around. I try to have compassion. I try to not lose sight of how fortunate I am, but Jesus, man. You’ve got to be kidding me. It’s the same old shit.

I’m right next to the old HAWC Clinic. They moved to Record Street. I don’t really know what went down at the HAWC Clinic, but it seemed like there was always a line in front one day out of the week and I think people got some money, and then they all just went to the gas station across the street and bought White Wolf Vodka and got drunk and then threw their bottles on my door. That’s my recollection of the HAWC Clinic. I don’t know what the answer is, but I just know what the reality is.

I know there are business guys who are trying to change it, but the city, once again, the urban planning staff or someone, they’ve got their head up their ass. It’s ridiculous. You’ve got this amazing ballpark, you’ve got these great businesses, and then you have this homeless shelter. And I get the shelter, but maybe that’s not the best positioning. What are we doing, and why don’t we regentrify this great historic landmark and make this a really wonderful thoroughfare and get some trees? Why don’t we clean it up?

What do you think that would take? Do you think it’s an aesthetic issue? Are there zoning issues, in particular, that you’ve been aware of that seem to be impediments?

Yes. I used to go to some of the NAB [Neighborhood Advisory Board] meetings. They’re really frustrating because it seems like everyone talks and nothing ever happens. That’s the part of the political sphere that I don’t do well in because I’m a doer. I think, “Hey, look, this thing needs to be fixed. This is broken. This needs to be fixed.” Or, “Hey, build me this, okay, I’ll build you that.”

You want to know how to fix Fourth Street? You’ve got a bunch of people with a bunch of ideas,

but none of those ideas ever get implemented. I don't know why. It's really frustrating. I think that the majority of the business owners on Fourth Street and probably in other areas of town feel the same way. This is ridiculous. This is a waste of time. What are you doing? Are you just trying to justify your job? Why are we here? Really, why are we here? It's really frustrating.

I don't think it would take much to fix Fourth Street. I don't. I think it's an aesthetic thing, absolutely. I think it's moving some stuff around. Having that homeless shelter right downtown is ridiculous. It doesn't make sense. I get the fact that the homeless need somewhere to go. I just don't think it's downtown.

If you want to regentrify this city and make it viable, make it a place where tourists want to go, you should probably move the homeless shelter. You should probably do something with all the beat-down, ridiculous kitschy shops that litter all of downtown and the shitty weekly motels. I'm not saying knock them to the ground, because some of them are cool buildings. I'm just saying do something else with them. That's one thing to say, it's another thing to do it.

You have the university right there. It blows my mind. You've got this amazing historic residential community right there off of Fourth. Isn't it the oldest residential community in Reno, right across from me, between Sixth and the freeway? It's one of the older sections, right? And it's just beat. That's tragic, man. Those homes are amazing. I have a couple of friends who have bought in that neighborhood and tried to do something, just like I bought in this neighborhood [east of Wells Avenue] and I tried to do something. I invested a ton of time and money into this home. It was great to watch the snowball effect of that, because [architect] Jack Hawkins then designed two really modern townhomes on either side of me. When the economy was rolling, this became less of a rental kind of neighborhood and more of an owner-op situation. But since the bottom's fallen out, it's definitely spun the other way.

It's a shame. This neighborhood's just like Fourth Street. It's never going to be the Newlands area [in Old Southwest Reno] because it doesn't have the trees and other aspects, but there's no reason why this neighborhood, which was built in the thirties, couldn't be a whole lot better than it is. You're encouraging people to go out of town and live, as opposed to come into town. Give them an incentive to live in town and buy these older homes and remodel them and tweak them. I don't know what the answer is, but I don't think anyone downtown does either.

Were there specific issues that drew you to any of those city meetings, or were you just trying to get involved in general?

I think I was just trying to get involved. I just wanted to see what was going on and get involved. But after a while, after you go to ten, twelve of them, you just think, "My god, we're not getting anywhere here. I have no idea what we're doing."

Have you met with the business Association, the RSCBA?

No, I haven't.

I want to ask you a little bit about your building and the condition you found it in. There was something of a similar kind of industry happening in there, but what was it like and how did you modify the building after you bought it for your business?



Paolo Cividino's Tutto Ferro building as it appeared in 2013. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

I bought it from Bill Botelho, who owned Reno Motor Machine, and Bill was a fascinating man. He was one of the leading machinists for Harrah's automobile collection, and he had a great assortment of buddies who would all convene down there. John Scott is another great motor builder. He actually ran a water waste treatment plant for years, but he was an engine builder for Harrah's automobile collection and he worked for Bill, in Bill's shop, Reno Motor Machine. They were buddies with Joe Shepard from Shepard's Metal Magic, which was an old chrome shop here in town. Jim Shepard's passed away, but he was the chromer for Harrah's automobile collection. So there were all these really talented old dudes.

Bill was a midget racer and super into motorcycles. His motorcycle collection will blow your mind. He owned this shop. He's a big flathead guy. When I bought the shop, it was mind-boggling how much stuff was in that building. I don't know how many hundreds of flatheads I moved out of that building.

What's a flathead?

A flathead is a type of motor. He has the coolest, rarest, most unbelievable stuff. He is a collector and he doesn't collect junk, for the most part. He has these beautiful Offenhauser motors, super rare, gorgeous, that he somehow ended up with. Amazing motorcycles, amazing killer flathead intakes and carbs and all this really period-correct cool stuff. He's a cool old guy.

It took me months to move him out of his shop, and he's a control freak and he kept wanting to micromanage me, until I said, "Bill, you can't do this, man. You're not paying me. You've got to let me get you out of here." So much stuff went to scrap, and then so much stuff just went across the street to a storage space. Bill's eighty. It was his birthday last week, and he's got to start getting rid of some stuff soon because if he doesn't, I don't think his family even knows half of what he's got, or if they did, where it would be found. John Scott and I, I think, are the only two guys who know where his stuff is, and he has quite a legacy.

Moving him out was really difficult. It was totally painful. It cost me a ton of money. I wanted to choke him sometimes. But it is what it is. It's on his terms. He's old-school. So I finally got him out of

there. He kept his shop very clean. Q&D built that shop in '72.

Is that when the building was constructed?

That's when the building that I'm in was constructed. But even a really clean motor machine shop after that many years is going to be dirty. It took about thirty gallons of primer and thirty or forty gallons of paint and all new, more energy-efficient lights, and fixing the drywall and putting openers on the rollups. Here I was this little business guy, just going, going, going.

My environment has to be a certain way or I cannot be productive. I'm super neurotic. My guys make fun of me, and I get it. In some ways it's a strength, but in some ways it's actually a weakness. I can be hamstrung if my couch is a degree out. I vacuum three times a day at my house. I can't help it. But I think that that's what we bring to our clients. We bring a neurosis so they get a really killer product. You have to be neurotic, I guess.

But when you're remodeling a shop and everything has to be a certain way for you to get to work, it's expensive. I spent a lot of money getting that shop up to speed. Luckily, Bill had tons of power there, so that wasn't a big deal, but it was routing the power and getting all the 220 in place for all the welders and the three-phase for the machines.

Then I bought a water jet and a high-def plasma, all CAD-driven big machines, maybe six months ago. It cost me 60-grand to get that shop up to speed because I had to remodel it again. I had to build the offices and the kitchenette. Now I never have to leave my shop. I can live there, which I may end up doing, but it cost a lot of money. It's no joke.

That's the one thing that makes me envious of my friends who are computer guys. They've got their laptop. They do their thing. Their investment is 500 bucks, 1,000 bucks or something. It's unbelievable. When I think about the amount of money I have wrapped up in tools and my truck and the tools on my truck and my shop, it's overwhelming.

Metalworking is a really expensive profession because it is such a difficult medium to work in. It's an abusive material. It beats the shit out of your tools. The longevity of even the best tools when it comes to working with metals, even under the best care, is limited when you're going through stuff. It doesn't help that everything is kind of built to break anyway. That's a little frustrating in and of itself.

When you're spending \$5,000 on a welder and you have six of those welders, and then you have a water jet that's \$280,000, and then you have a mill and a lathe and those are all 15 or \$20,000 and you have all these consumables, pretty soon you think, wow, I've got a million dollars or more, give or take, wrapped up in tools. Then you realize, "I've got to charge quite a bit of money per hour to pay for this shit."

I know I'm totally on a tangent, but this kills me. You've got people who have these miniscule jobs: "Can you build me a 3-foot handrail for my house?" And you're thankful for the work. I don't want to say no, but I lose money. It costs me more to roll my tools out on a truck than I can charge someone to build a 3-foot handrail. It's pointless. If a job is under 8-grand, I'm not going to make money.

That's just how it is, because I have five employees and a bookkeeper, and I'm at that breakpoint where my monthly nut, because of the machinery I bought, is high. My per-square-footage cost is really high because of my water jet. If that thing's running, it's definitely making me money, but keeping that thing running ten hours a day is not a small task in this town, even though I've got, by far, the best operator here in all of Reno, in all of Nevada. I am so fortunate to have the guys that I have.

But that being said, my nut is mind-bending, and so this year I have to be so diligent. I've been

apprenticing, if you will, under Rick Reviglio from Western Nevada Supply. Rick blows my mind. That guy is up at three every morning. He's at work by four. He is a machine. It is no joke. I don't know how many employees he has. He used to have a lot more, but he knows all their names, he knows their birthdays. He's that kind of guy; he goes in the office and he just studies every day.

I've been talking to him quite a bit lately, and he said, "Look, man, you've got to start working on your business because you're at that point where you'll fail if you don't get those accounts." And that's why I had this NDOT [Nevada Department of Transportation] job. We did some sculptures out in Carson. I made some money on that job. I was so thankful for that job.

Along Highway 395?

Yes, along 395. I just had a realization that, if I took that money and I put it in the bank, in ten years it would be gone, not because I'm squandering it, but because I pay it out in wages, and there's just not enough custom work going on to support a shop my size. I realized at that point that I had to break into some sort of production work. That's when I decided to buy the water jet. The learning curve is steep. I've never worked in a production shop in my life. I've only ever done custom work.

Can you explain the difference a little bit?

Custom work is when someone comes up to you and says, "Hey, can you build me a custom one-off front door?" "Can you build me a custom Japanese soaking tub in my bathroom?" "Can you build me a custom table?" "Can you remodel my house and make it look amazing like no one else's?" That's custom work.

Production work is when someone asks, "Can you weld forty of these widgets and give me a really good competitive price on them?" I've never done that, ever, though when you own a water jet, you're cutting, you're blanking stuff out for machine shops, parts that they then machine and turn into whatever they turn them into, and there's a production schedule. If Wolf Machine needs four hundred of these blades for these things that they're building, you have to have them when you say you're going to have them or Wolf Machine is going to go somewhere else. So, too, with Hood Machine or the other, Kappes, Cassidy, a big mining company here in town. They build mines all over the world. We cut a ton of stainless steel for I don't know what, things that they are making. That's production work. You're supplying.

I'm in a potentially powerful spot where I've got machines and men who can run them, so I can supply machine shops or just the average Joe with whatever they need. I can do super high-end custom work, but now I also have the ability to do production work because I've got the skill set from the custom side and I've got the water jet and the welding and the forming capacity.

I just started building coffee roasters for Bill Kennedy. He owns the San Francisco Roaster Company, and he is selling roasters all over the world. He cannot keep up. He has a shop in Fallon [Nevada], and they don't have the machinery to keep up. He needs help. So here we are, and we're building roasters for them. That's a small production; I'm not building thirty roasters a week. I couldn't anyway, even if I tried. But we just did six, and hopefully maybe next month we'll do another group. I'm trying to get in with him and feel that whole thing out.

I'm trying to have three facets to my shop: the custom end, the production end, and then the supply, the water jet, the 2D cutting supply portion of the shop. My reality has changed significantly in

just a short period of time.

Rick Reviglio from Western is saying, “Hey, look, you’ve got to start working on your business. You’ve got to stop building stuff and you’ve got to start hustling clients and getting out there, and you can’t get discouraged because you’re getting shopped,” because it’s totally cut-throat. It is really bad. There are a lot of unscrupulous people in the construction industry, and it’s demoralizing, especially when you try not to operate that way. It’s a drag. It’s really hard to not get bent out of shape. But he says, “That’s not going to get you the next job. You’ve just got to keep going,” and he’s right. So you do, you’ve just got to keep hustling and keep charging and trying to make it happen.

I think when you have that kind of mindset, and someone asks, why aren’t you going to the NAB meeting for Fourth Street, I think, “Really?” It’s a waste of time, because my work never ends. I sleep it. I live it. I breathe it. I can’t get away from it. Sometimes I really, really want to, but I can’t because I feel a huge sense of responsibility for the guys I have working with me. They have kids. Kevin, who’s my right-hand man, who’s one of the most talented individuals I’ve ever, ever watched with a tool, he’s mind-boggling. He has three kids my son’s age and younger. What am I going to tell him: “Hey, Kevin, I can’t pay you this week because I’m not bringing the work in”? It doesn’t work that way. I’ve got four other guys in similar situations. There are other people who obviously have even more employees than that. I’m just an example, but as an owner, it’s a lot. It’s a big burden. I think the small business owner really doesn’t get support or the help that I think they deserve.

I wonder if you feel any kind of connection to some of the other businesses on the street that operate in that way. There are a number of family-owned businesses that have been there for a long time. You’re not that far from Martin Iron Works.

Oh, yes, [Piero] Bullentini is right there, yes. Those guys are awesome. I really like those guys. I respect them. They’re really hard workers, and they always try to keep their guys going. Those guys were working weekends, they were working crazy hours, and then all of a sudden it was like a ghost town over there. I was getting worried about what was going on at Martin, but they bounced back, and those guys are on point. I have a lot of respect for them, just like the petroleum maintenance guys. They’re totally quirky and weird. They’re all into old British motorcycles and cars. They’re really unique guys, but they put their heads down and they just do it.

My neighbor, Ed LaCruz, at Dyna Reno, died. He died in the alley behind the shop of a heart attack five months ago. Some homeless dude found him, called or flagged down a cop or something. He was pushing the motorcycles in at the end of the day. A lot of people would say he was probably the last real motorcycle mechanic in Reno who could work on pretty much anything. He used to be the Ducati shop in town. He wasn’t moving any product, and Big Valley Honda got it. Now his son, who’s an electrician, is trying to keep the shop open. He’s a good guy.

There’s Eric from Advanced Auto right down the street. His wife works there. Her son, his stepson, works there. They’ve got some great mechanics. These guys are amazing, super hard workers. They’re super creative. They build amazing rock crawlers and stuff like that. They’ve got a really neat clientele, really good mechanics, and, man, they’re there all the time. They just grind and grind and grind.

And Davis, Davis Frame [phonetic], that metal shop, they’re my neighbors. Those guys work. It’s a neat group of people. The bike shop guys, the Reno Bike Project, what they’re doing is totally cool, and they put their heads down. They just session. Louis’ Basque Corner is cool. The street’s got Casale’s Halfway Club. Shane’s daughter is opening up the old Reno Salvage again. That business has been there

forever. That's where that famous fight happened on Fourth Street.

The Johnson-Jeffries fight?

Yes, right, on Toano right there. I like the business owners around me, for sure.

It's interesting because you seem to have a real sense of them and the work that they're doing. How does that develop? Is it just from seeing them on the street, or do you go into these businesses? How do you get to know what they do?

Things always break. Advanced Auto will come by once or twice a week with a serious 4-1-1, asking, "Can you weld this water pump?" "Oh, my god, the exhaust is falling off this car. Can you help?" We have a symbiotic relationship. It's like, "Hey, Eric, can you help me slam my old VW bus?" We cut parts for Martin and we cut some stuff for Davis. I know the petroleum guys because I'm into vintage motorcycles. I would weld things for the motorcycles that Ed LaCruz was working on. You just get to know these guys. Plus, Bill Botelho, who I bought my shop from, was really in with these guys, and he always comes down and harasses me. So the guys would always come down and harass me with Bill.

They'd just stop in?

Absolutely, like they own it. It's hilarious. They will stop the show. We'll be working, and Bill will walk up with three or four of the old dudes and everything stops, because they just want your attention. It's pretty funny.

They tell you a lot of stories?

They tell you stories. They talk. They drink their Starbucks lattes and talk at you forever.

You talked a little bit about the homeless issue. I know there are folks in the back alley sometimes behind your shop. Do you feel, in general, though, that it's a pretty safe area?

Yes, actually Fourth Street is a lot safer than most people perceive it to be. I get why people think Fourth Street is sketchy. It's because it's dirty. There's a lot of trash on the street, and you have the homeless element, but for the most part, the homeless people are pretty harmless. I've got a bunch of really drunk homeless dudes who hang out behind my shop, and I work there late at night and I roll up my rear door. They don't ever mess with me too bad.

It's more during the day when there's some whacked-out individuals on Fourth Street. There is a lot of low-grade drug usage on Fourth Street, and you'll get some pretty weird people. A couple of the guys at my shop carry concealed guns.

John Scott, who used to work for Bill Botelho, welds for me because I make two-stroke exhaust expansion chambers for Italian scooters. He'll weld for me in the morning. He'll come in at four in the morning. The first thing he does is put his nine-millimeter on the table, and then he starts welding, because he's actually had to pull it on a couple of people.

Will people just walk in the shop?

Yes. When it's way early in the morning, we'll keep the door locked, but people will come in. I've had some people get pretty aggressive, just whacked out, just totally cracked out. Nine, ten in the morning they'll come in, eyes massive, getting really intense. It's a trip. And John has pulled that gun on a couple of individuals. It's weird. So that suddenly makes Fourth Street not seem that safe, but really in the scheme of it, it is what it is.

You've got Club Bass, and there's an element of individual who goes there. You have really scantily clad women. I always trip out if I'm working late Wednesday, Thursday, Friday night. That's when Club Bass and The Underground, Remi's joint, are open late. I always see these extremely underdressed women. I'm always blown away. I'm thinking, they must feel pretty damn safe. I mean, shit, they're just rolling in and out. It's no big deal. Young girls, man. It's a trip. So it can't be that bad.

This is not a good segue, but you do you think there's a prostitution issue along Fourth Street?

Not that bad.

That's not who you were talking about.

No, not at all. I'm just talking about girls who are going to shows or clubs. The prostitution's actually moved up closer to the Sands. Prostitution's up on Washington and Fourth.

On West Fourth?

Oh, it's totally gone west. Down by my shop, you'll see it a little farther east, you will a little bit, but it's not that bad. Mostly what you see east is just a bunch of really doped-out dudes. If you go past Ray's Tire, there are some motels by Big Daddy's Bar, and it's totally heart-wrenching because you'll see families living in there. You're just thinking, "Oh, dude, no kid should do that." There's that really depressing element, but that's just more drug-use-type stuff. I see more hookers on my way to Beto's than I do here, and it's all in that Sands Casino area.

I think we can end by talking a little bit about the street itself. Are there any improvements that you think could be made to the street in terms of transportation issues, lanes, sidewalks, or parking? Is there anything you think would enhance your ability to do business or just enhance the street in general?

Parking on Fourth Street is tenuous at best. You have to get three-quarters of your vehicle on the sidewalk to not have your mirrors ripped off, or your car hit by RTC bus drivers or other drivers. Parking on Fourth is tough, but that just is what it is. Would I love a parking lot somewhere? I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't be that cool, when it's all said and done.

For me personally, doing my business, it's tough. I have steel delivery at my shop. PDM rolls up in a giant truck, and I've got to block traffic off, or I have to have the guys park on Elko, and then I've got to drive across Fourth with my forklifts. That can be difficult. Martin Iron Works has got it wired. They've got a huge yard, so it's no problem for them. I don't have that; I'm a storefront. So from that perspective it's difficult to do business.

Fourth Street could use some trees. That's why the first thing I did when I bought that building was put planters outside. Then I put a new roof on the building and I planted some big wisterias up on my roof, and they hang over. They shade the entrance a little bit. I just think that that does something to a human, walking by a little bit of biomass, walking by something that makes you think, "Thank you, God." It's nice, and Fourth Street needs that badly, even if they just put trees into the sidewalk.

I know that there's a pipeline running across or through or down Fourth Street, and I've heard that it's tough digging on Fourth. I don't know if that pipeline was from the airport, an old jet fuel pipeline, or what the deal is, but there's something going on under there.

If they could put in some trees and just slow it down a little bit, it could be great. But it may not make sense to do that if they're not going to do something for the businesses. I think along Fourth Street, you could have some amazing restaurants in some of those cool, edgy buildings. The Alpine Glass building, which is vacant still, is a great building. The Barengo building that the guys, Justin [Owen] and Ryan [Gold], and their friend owned, is another one. I don't know if they're hamstrung, or what's going on there.

On Fourth Street, it's like one thing after the other. That place should be totally thriving. It should be like California Street but cooler, in my opinion, but it's going to take a serious commitment from the city. Once again, what are you going to do with that brand-new building that they built for St. Vincent's? What are you going to do there? How that whole thing pans out, I don't know.

With the ballpark you see a lot more traffic during the summer during the baseball season. A lot of people park on Fourth and they'll walk. There is tons of activity. So you would think that they would try and do something there.

They cleaned up the bus station. I thought that was cool. I think they're trying to really work hard to keep it safe and keep it clean. I've never taken the bus in Reno. I don't really want to, but it seems like a lot of people do. They just built the new bus stops. Those are cool. I think that there are some cool things happening. I always get excited about certain things, but it seems like it's never quite enough, or it's never directed enough.

Do you feel like your space has the capacity and the space to accommodate what you want to do with your business?

I think that if everything goes as planned, I'm going to need more space. I rent some space across the street, in the old Blue Seal Transmission Building, which is a great building, and Tim and Chad from Bootleg Courier, that's kind of their spot. I lease some space in back from the guy who owns that building.

I would love to buy the building that the HAWC used to be in because I would love to expand my business if I could, but I really would have to turn some serious numbers and really be on point to make that happen. But I fully believe that I can do that. I'm vested. I'm doing it because it's fun and because I enjoy it, but I would like to at some point in time in my life make some money. I don't really have a pot to piss in.

I'm surrounded by a lot of nice stuff because I was raised in such a way—it's like my mom told me, and I'll never forget this, my mother said, "Paolo, don't be like all these Americans," and I don't think she was trying to be a bitch, but she just said, "Don't be like all these Americans. Don't go out and buy six suits that look like shit just so that you have something different to wear every day. Buy one nice suit and buy five really beautiful ties."

It's better to go through life like that, and I've taken that analogy through my life. I'll save my shekels to buy something that I really value, as opposed to just having a bunch of shit. I restore old Italian scooters and I collect old glass pots and I restore old furniture because, to me, there's this era of pre-planned obsolescence, and I am a fan of that. That's what I like. I like shit that wasn't built to break. And that's how I build the things that I build. So I try to surround myself with stuff like that.

And all of that is to say that I would like to make some money because I work really hard, because I want my guys to be able to have a great life, to have benefits, to have insurance, and to live the American dream. I want that for myself and for the guys who work for me.

My problem is that I'm genuine friends with everyone who works for me. It's really hard to be a boss when you're someone's friend. This is one of the things I'm struggling with. They don't take advantage of that; they're really good guys. But it's probably more difficult for me than it is for them. I want to afford things for them and for myself, and the only way that that's going to happen is if I continue to grow my business, because right now I'm at that spot where it's going to be easier for me to fail, I think, than for me to not.

But I'll do everything. I'll work another job. I don't care. That's one thing that makes me so happy that I was raised the way I was raised because I'll put my head down and I will just grind till there's nothing left. I don't know how else to do it.

I think that if you've got that and you're surrounded by talent, which I feel like I am, then you can make it, even in today's economy, even in Washoe, even in the state of Nevada and the industry I'm in. There are so many guys out of work. I feel so bad.

When you have a man who's fifteen years older than you walk into your shop looking for work, that's brutal. I have such a hard time telling them—and some of these guys are skilled—"I'm sorry, stud. I can't hire you." Something inside me wants to hurl. I seriously feel nauseous every time that happens, and it happens every week, in my industry or the construction industry. It's gnarly in this town.

There are a lot of people who have had to change their whole MOs, and I think what makes our shop really unique is that we're not one-trick ponies. We don't just do one thing; we can do anything. We do custom-finished concrete work. We do custom steelwork. We'll do woodworking. We integrate a lot of glass into what we do. We do a ton of our own design. I paint a lot of automotive-type stuff.

I think you have to be really diverse nowadays to make it happen, at least in my industry, my line of work, and you've got to be consistent. That's my clients' demand. I love my clients, but they're hard because—I get it. They pay a lot of money. We're not cheap, and they pay a lot of money for what they get. They're really particular. I wouldn't want to work for someone who wasn't because I'm the same way, but it's hard when you want to say, "That's good enough. Jesus, just let that be good enough so I can make profit, please." And you think, it's not even close to good enough, and you just grind at it for another twelve hours, and there goes your profit. It's brutal. Fuck. [laughter] It's hard. Having a high standard, I think is so hard.

I know my friend Ben Wilborn can make money making guitars, but give me a break. This guy is so neurotic. He's so talented, but that is so difficult, and everything has to be just so, and if it's not, you won't sell the damn guitar. It's very hard to make money that way. It's not like Taco Bell where it's just good enough. I know this about myself.

How do you think the information you've given me today could help make better decisions about this area?

I think that if the people who were making some of the decisions about this area realized that their decision-making or lack thereof really impacted the lives of the people who make this community what it is—in a good sense—maybe they would make some wiser decisions. Maybe not. I'd like to not be that cynical.

The business owners on Fourth Street, some of us may have different ideas about what needs to happen, but I think we all know that something needs to happen, and I think we all want something to happen and we're willing to do whatever we have to do to make that happen. It's just really frustrating when nothing happens or when you see decisions being made that are so asinine.

It's so easy to just huck a dart at the homeless shelter. It's been beat up. But it's bullshit, and I'm sorry. That is decision-making at its poorest. It is such a shining example of bad decision-making, it's mind-boggling. It's a travesty, it really is. I mean, come on. Give me a break.

Fourth Street is like a diamond in the rough, and you just think, "Come on, man. It's a little gem for Reno." And if you could get the area from Fourth Street to the freeway dialed in, you really could have a wonderful, interesting, cool part of downtown. But I just don't know if it's in people's best interest. I don't know really how it works downtown. I don't know how the casinos can stay in business, I don't, because I go downtown and just think, man, who's coming down here spending the kind of money you've got to spend to keep these lights on, really? What's really going on down here? I don't really know who's calling the shots. I don't get it.

But it seems to me like downtown Reno—not just Fourth Street—all of downtown Reno needs to revamp itself because it's just a dump. It's a dump, and there's no reason why it couldn't be really amazing. There's no reason why it couldn't be like a bunch of other interesting towns that I've been to, like a Boulder, Colorado, or a Crested Butte or Telluride. Yes, granted, that's different. You have mountains right there, ski resorts right there. Or look at Petaluma. Even old downtown Vallejo is cool, or old downtown Antioch. They just decided, "Hey, let's revamp this. Let's restore this."

I love restoring stuff. I always feel like I'm given a gift when I get the opportunity to restore something, and I think that if Reno would just restore some of what it has, it'd be a more wonderful place to live and it would have a stronger sense of identity. People would be more pumped up to live in Reno than they are. That's my two cents.

CASEY CLARK

Bootleg Courier Co. and Cuddleworks



Casey Clark in his studio inside Cuddleworks in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Born in North Carolina, Casey Clark grew up in Pleasant Valley, north of Reno, and then northern California. He moved back to Reno in 1996, later spending time in Montana and Arizona. A ceramics artist, he has a studio space at Cuddleworks, located at 545 East Fourth Street, where he also works as a bicycle courier for Bootleg Courier, and as a bicycle mechanic and service manager for the Reno Bike Project next door.

Alexandra Horangic: This is Alex Horangic. I'm here with Casey Clark, who's a service manager at the Reno Bike Project. We are on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno and today is March 26th, 2012. Mr. Clark, do I have your permission to record this interview and place it in our public archive?

Casey Clark: You do.

Awesome. All right, let's go ahead and start with when and where you were born.

I was born just outside of Asheville, North Carolina, April 3, 1980.

When did you move to Reno?

1984.

Tell me where you went to elementary and high school and where you grew up in Reno.

I grew up in Pleasant Valley, which is about halfway between Reno and Washoe Valley. I went to Pleasant Valley Elementary School, K through 6. Then I went to Pine Middle School. Then my parents moved us to the Bay Area. I spent my first two years in high school living outside of San Francisco in a little town called Burlingame. I also lived in Millbrae and San Bruno. Then I moved back to Reno in '96. I graduated high school from Galena High.

What were your parents' names?

My mom's name is Afsina Kaeltoosh Clark, and my dad's name was Clarence Clark.

When you were growing up in Reno, were you always interested in riding bikes?

When I was a little kid, it was just the normal way to get around the neighborhood and meet all of my little neighborhood buddies. We grew up skinning our knees jumping bikes around in dirt and lots of stuff like that. I rode bikes pretty much since I was a little kid until now. There was a little hiatus there for three or four years where I decided I wanted to rollerblade. I can't believe I just recorded that.

I did the same thing most people do. When you turn sixteen, you get a license and scrounge up a car and eschew bikes and everything else for a couple years while you enter the driving world. But I've been riding bikes almost the whole time.

Did you think where you grew up in Reno was a good place to ride a bike as a kid?

Where I grew up, yeah, which wasn't anywhere close to town. It was really rural out there. The houses were all kind of spread out far apart back then, and it was just the best way to get to all your buddies' houses. But I didn't know what it was like to ride a bike in an urban environment for years.

Where is Galena High School?

Galena High School is on the Mt. Rose Highway, real close to the junction of 395 and Mt. Rose Highway. So it's out there quite a ways.

After you graduated from high school, where did you decide to go to college?

After I graduated from high school, I was already living in Reno. So I just started taking classes at Truckee Meadows Community College, without any real direction or aim. I did that for nine years or something like that. [laughter] I was pretty into snowboarding at that time, too, so I would take whole semesters and whole years off to go play around in the woods.

So for the first "nine years of college"—that was in quotes—I didn't really have a major. The way I picked my courses is I would just flip through the catalog and pick out four classes that seemed interesting. Then I'd take them, and I had to take twelve credits to be eligible for Pell grants. I did that until they figured out that I was basically just wasting time and they took away all my Pell grants.

During that time I had started taking ceramics, which I originally took in high school and didn't like, but I took it in college just because it seemed like an easy way to keep up my marginal GPA. It was offered at night, which meant I could play all day and go to school at night. I got sucked in and that's how I got into ceramics. After years of taking the same Intro to Ceramics class over and over again, I ended up working as an informal teacher's assistant, loading kilns, and that eventually led to a scholarship to go to Sierra Nevada College, where I was the lab technician in the Ceramics Department.

Finally when TMCC decided that I was just milking it a little too much, they cut my funding and, coincidentally, I got the scholarship opportunity. So that's how I ended up getting my degree. I never really intended to study ceramics or art, but it just kind of happened.

During those nine years you were going to TMCC, where in Reno did you live?

I moved every six months or so for most of that time, just kind of random houses with friends and apartments and couch surfing. The longest stint I had was in Northwest Reno, off of Seventh Street on a street called Beldon. I lived there for maybe three years.

That's pretty close to the highway, right?

It's pretty close to Interstate 80. I mean, you can't hear the cars from the street or anything like that, but it's definitely in the I-80 corridor.

Were you riding your bike that whole time?

Yeah. At that time I was kind of a fair-weather commuter, so I would ride my bike any time the weather permitted. I was also still snowboarding a lot back then so I didn't ride my bike to the ski hill, and did a lot of driving.

I was also getting really interested in mountain biking back then. I always had a mountain bike but I'd never gone out and really ridden trails until I was in my early twenties. So at that time I was riding my mountain bike off-road a lot and I was working in bike shops in the summertime. I would be commuting to work across town and using my bike as general transportation.

It's great when you're young. You have tons of energy. Riding bikes burns it off and when you go out bar-hopping, you can swerve your bike home without worrying about getting a DUI.

What did you think about riding your bike in Reno during that time? Was the city a good place or a hard place to ride your bike? Did you feel safe?

I did feel safe. I've never felt vulnerable riding a bike around, and I know a lot of people do. I think it's because I had spent so much time on a bike that by that time it never occurred to me that it was dangerous— when you're nineteen and twenty, nothing seems dangerous. We would go out jumping our snowboards off these big cliffs just for fun, so riding a bike with a little bit of traffic never seemed like a big deal.

Back then, there wasn't a lot of bicycle infrastructure in Reno. There were a couple big thoroughfares with bike lanes, but you could get across town safely. I did that a lot. I would live up in the Northwest and I would work in bike shops that were out towards South Reno, so it was about eight miles across town each way, and there was a bike lane for maybe two or three of those miles.

That's not very much.

But there was also a lot less traffic back then. This was before the housing boom really took off. So you didn't really need bike lanes in a lot of places because there wasn't enough congestion to demand it. You would just route yourself on less-traveled roads. You would find the routes that motorists didn't like and take those, and it never really felt like a scary thing.

What year do you think the housing boom occurred? When did you notice the congestion increase?

I didn't notice it when it was starting because most of the big development projects were happening way on the outskirts of town, and I just never got to see it. So I'm not sure really when it began. It must have been early to mid-2000s when they started building up really hard.

Let's talk about your time at Sierra Nevada College. That's in Incline Village, correct?

Yeah.

Horangic: So you majored in ceramics?

Yeah.

How long were you there?

Two years.

And you got a bachelor's of—

Bachelor's in Fine Arts.

Then after that, what year did you graduate?

'07 or '08.

Did you come back to Reno after that?

Yeah, briefly.

Where did you go after your brief stay in Reno after graduating from college?

While I was getting my degree, I had applied for a couple of artist-in-residence positions, which is this deal where you go to some ceramics or art-making facility, and you get a studio space in exchange for teaching classes. I applied to a bunch of those while I was in school and I got accepted to the Clay Studio of Missoula, which is in Montana. After I graduated, I spent a summer in Reno working at the Bike Project and then I moved to Montana.

How long were you in Montana?

Almost a year.

Did you work at a studio or you had a studio space?

I had a studio space. I got paid to teach classes at the studio and that was real part-time, maybe five hours a week or something. Then I had a bunch of odd jobs while I was there. I'd pick potatoes for a couple days, and I worked on a deconstruction crew. It was a nonprofit construction firm that went and took apart buildings and salvaged the materials. I also worked at the university there as a lab tech in the Sculpture and Ceramics Department.

Do you think your ceramics skills increased while you were out there? Did you develop as an artist?

My work itself, not really, but it was a really good experience for me because it was really hard. It was cold and I was broke and I missed my girlfriend, and I had a really hard time keeping steady work out there. It was also my first time making ceramics outside the academic umbrella. It's hard to know how much shelter that provides while you're under it, but as soon as you get out from under it, you realize how expensive the materials are and how hard it is to mesh together a normal income earning life with this really time-consuming activity. Ceramics is really time-consuming, especially when you're working in big volumes.

I felt like I was under a lot of pressure while I was there. I had taken on the project of organizing and firing this great big wood-fired kiln, which is what I specialize in. It was sort of a poorly designed kiln. It was really hard to fire, and in its brief history it had never been fired to the right temperature. Nobody could get it hot enough. I didn't know that when I went there. I probably should have done a little more homework.

The kiln was already built when you got there?

It was already built. It had been fired maybe half a dozen times before I got there, with varying results, none of which were that great. And I didn't go visit or really do that much investigative work. I was just so enamored with the idea of Montana, and also convinced that that was the right step for my art career, if you want to call it that. That's sort of the normal route. You get your degree, you do a few residencies, and then you either start a studio practice or go back to school and get a master's.

So my work didn't really improve that much, but it was enlightening to figure out how hard it was to try to pull something off when you don't have this fancy school and all the free clay you can throw.

Did you ever get the kiln to fire the way you wanted it to?

I only fired it once. We had scheduled two firings, but the first one got cancelled because there wasn't enough work to fill it. It's a great big kiln. It's twice as big as any kiln I've ever fired, and I've fired some pretty good-sized ones. It was thirty-something feet long end to end, and maybe six feet wide. At its tallest point, you could almost stand up in it.

It takes thousands and thousands and thousands of pots to fill a thing like that. At the ceramics cooperative where I was a resident in Missoula everyone was kind of employed to make work to fill the kiln so we could fire it. I set the date for the first one a little optimistically and we didn't have enough work to fill it, so I had to postpone the firing. Then we fired four or five months after that, hotter than it had ever been fired before. We did some modifications to the kiln and it was a six-day firing. We burned eleven cords of wood in that six days. It got pretty hot, but I wasn't really satisfied. I'm kind of spoiled because I fire really nice kilns with really experienced potters, and firing a poorly designed kiln with a team of not so experienced potters was tricky.

Did the Sierra Nevada College have a fire kiln that you used while you were there?

They had gas-fired kilns, but I really enjoy the process of firing with wood. There are a couple of guys around Reno who have private studios and fire with wood. I had met them before I went to Sierra Nevada College about halfway through my decade-long tenure at TMCC. I don't want to call it an apprenticeship because it was never formal, but the informal exchange was, I would show up and work and they would let me put my stuff in the kiln, and, in the process, teach me how to do that kind of work.

What's the difference between a wood fired kiln and a gas-fired kiln, in terms of the work that comes out?

There's a couple. The big one is the ash from wood. If there's enough of it stuck to the surface of anything made of clay and you get it hot enough and you keep it hot long enough, the ash will actually start to form a glass. So you can put bare clay into certain kinds of wood kilns and in certain places in wood kilns with no applied glaze, and there will be so much ash on it that the ash will form its own glaze. It heavily modifies the surface of applied glazes. It gives these really dramatic surface effects.

The other one is, and this is the one that I don't really understand the chemistry of and I don't feel like a lot of people have their heads totally wrapped around it, but because the firing is so long and the rise in temperature is so gradual and the atmosphere inside the kiln is constantly fluctuating between

having too much fuel and not enough oxygen and having a good balance of fuel and oxygen for combustion, it goes through these real slow cycles of atmosphere changes, and that just gives the clay this quality that's hard to describe. It's really fun.

How long were you in Missoula?

Nine months to ten months.

Then did you come back to Reno?

No, then I packed up my stuff and moved to Flagstaff, Arizona, and I spent about two years down there.

What did you do in Flagstaff?

I was a bike mechanic there and I also worked for a company that prototyped and fabricated bicycle trailers.

Did you do any art while you were there?

No clay, which is ironic. One of the guys who trained me learned how to wood-fire in Flagstaff. At the Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, they have probably the largest and most varied wood-burning kilns. It's a big deal if you're a wood-fire ceramicist, which not many people are. But amongst that little niche of ceramicists, everybody knows about that place. They have these amazing kilns. I had been there before for workshops and was really excited to find some way to get involved when I got there, but not being a student, it's a little hard to weasel in. I wasn't really interested in signing up and becoming a student again and I was also burned out and broke from the Montana experience.

When I moved to Arizona, I had instant work. My girlfriend was down there while I was in Montana so I got to be with her again, and I was so excited to just live in a warm house and get a paycheck every two weeks, that for the whole first year I didn't even really miss it.

After that, I started thinking about it, and I had made a few calls to the university and tried to wiggle in there. I'm sure that if I would have stayed on it I probably could have gotten a little more involved, but I was having so much fun there riding my bike and being warm.

What made Flagstaff a good place to ride your bike?

Flagstaff is really small, and I lived right in the downtown center. I was an eighth of a mile from work and a quarter mile from everything else that I did around there. Flagstaff also is right at the base of this mountain that has a really dense network of well-developed and maintained trails, and I rode my mountain bike all the time, three or four days a week.

You could ride right from town to the trailhead. You could go shred around for as long as you wanted up there and then just coast all the way back home. It was just too good to be true. So I would ride my mountain bike from home up into the woods, go run around for an hour, cruise down to work, do my work shift fixing bikes, and then go mountain biking again after work.

That was so novel to me. Around here, most of the really great trails are far away, so mountain biking is like a thing. You know, you call up your buddies and you put all the bikes in the truck and you drive up there. There it was just part of the daily commute if you wanted to make it that way, and that was so cool. I knew I wasn't going to be there permanently, so I just was taking advantage of it as much as I could while I could.

What shop did you work for while you were there as a bike mechanic?

I worked for Absolute Bikes, which is the biggest bike shop in Flagstaff by a long shot. It's a really high-volume, pretty high-end bike shop, and they had a lot of mechanics there. We would always have four mechanics working at least. There were points in the summer when we were working four at a time, from six in the morning till ten p.m. in shifts, just fixing bikes all day. There were a lot of broken bicycles in that town.

They also had old mechanics. I was twenty-nine, I think, when I moved there. Usually in bike shops that makes you the old, crotchety, grumpy guy. I'm kind of used to being surrounded by younger people and being in charge of them in some capacity, either formally or just because I have more experience. I usually end up teaching them how to repair bikes. But there it was just seven of me. The youngest mechanic there was twenty-four. That was the first time I worked in a bike shop where being a mechanic felt really professional, and I didn't have to do anything else. I didn't have to sell bikes or order parts. There were people who handled all of that stuff. We just showed up, flipped the wrenches, and hung them up and went home. It was really nice.

Is Flagstaff more a road-biking town or a mountain-biking town?

It is absolutely a mountain-biking town.

We will get back to talking about your time as a bike mechanic in a moment, but I want to ask where did you go after your time in Flagstaff?

That's when I came home, back to Reno.

Where did you live when you came back to Reno?

Right when we came back to town, for the first five or six months my girlfriend and I stayed at the River School.

Where's that?

It's up in the Northwest, off of Mayberry or Fourth, depending on how you get there. It's off of Mayberry if you ride your bike. It's right on the river, as the name would imply, real close to Strawberry Bridge that goes over the Truckee and connects to Dorkstar Park. Lindsay, my girlfriend, had worked for the River School before she and I left. It's a pretty big facility and there are lots of little outbuildings. So when we moved back, Tom, the guy who owns that property, let us stay there for real cheap while we were shopping around for a place to rent. He also put Lindsay to work, which was really nice.

What does the River School do?

It's a hard business to describe. It has all these little facets. They have a landscaping part that used to be called interpretive gardens. I'm not sure if it's still called that or not, where they would just go out and do contract landscaping and with an emphasis on xeriscaping and using native plants.

There's a lot of space there, so they rent out this little theater and people teach classes there. They host weddings and special events, they do all kinds of stuff. Onsite, they have a big greenhouse and hoop houses, chickens, goats, all that kind of stuff.

Where did you and your girlfriend move after that?

We were pretty happy to get out of there. It's a really nice spot, but there are twelve or thirteen people living there at a time.

It was like group housing?

Well, we had our own space, but there are lots of shared spaces. Everybody shares the same kitchen and we weren't staying in a bedroom; we were staying in this little foyer that used to be the office, and it was right next door to the little dance studio where they taught all kinds of super loud classes. [laughter] So that was kind of hard for us.

Lindsay and I had been living together in Arizona for a couple of years, always by ourselves, and we were totally in honeymoon mode. So it was kind of inconvenient to not have our privacy, and random people would walk into our bedroom, thinking it was still the office. It was really awkward.

Clark: So we moved to the old Southwest neighborhood, which is where we live now, right across the street from Our Lady of Snows Church.

When did you get your studio on Fourth Street?

We moved into that building pretty recently, maybe four months or five months ago, and it's in rough shape.

The studio?

The whole building. It's a 3,700-square-foot warehouse and it used to be a transmission shop. The Bootleg Courier guys rented out the entire space and they sublet some studio spaces to folks like me. When I got there, my studio space was actually two studios worth of space, so I had to subdivide it. The floors were all rotted out and the electrical was a mess as well. We moved in there about five months ago, but it took me three or four months to basically remodel everything and get it functioning.

What's the address of the building?

I have no idea, I just know it's the one next door to the bike shop.



The 500 block of East 4th Street as it appeared in June 2013. The building housing Bootleg Courier and Cuddleworks is the third from the left, painted a dark blue. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

It's next door to the Reno Bike Project?

Yeah.

So you share the building with the Bootleg Couriers?

Yeah.

They are basically your landlords?

Yeah.

What's the name of your studio?

I don't have a name for my personal studio. So far the running name for the whole operation there is Cuddleworks.

How did that come about?

It's a joke. Tim and Chad, the owners of Bootleg, took out the lease, and the only way they could really afford to pay for a space like that was to not pay rent anyplace else, so they've been pretty much flopping there. They pulled in these two little camping trailers, parked them in the corner, and they live in the trailers while we're building everything out. We're doing most of the renovations on our own dime,

which is why it's taking so long. Nobody really has any money, so we're all just pitching in and scraping by to make it work.

So Tim and Chad move in and it's pretty cold. There's no heat in the building and they both have dogs. Cuddleworks came from us making fun of Tim and Chad for having to cuddle with their dogs in their trailers to stay warm.

How big is your studio space, approximately?

Twenty-by-ten.

Are you able to produce work in your studio space or are you still renovating?

I was in there last night making pots.

Do you sell any of your pottery in town?

I have historically, at markets, fairs, and a few retail outlets, but I've been making so little for the past five years, that I haven't, really. I always have a call for it, people asking me, because they know I make pots. I sell them pots if they want something that I happen to have made, but I haven't been producing pots in a volume that would force me to find an outlet for them yet.

Is that by choice or just circumstance?

Both. It's been difficult to find the space, the resources, the equipment, and the time because I'm so busy at the bike shop and doing all this other stuff. I'm sure that I could have made it happen sooner if I felt like it was a huge priority, but I never want making pottery to feel like a job. I never want to put that much pressure on it. It's not particularly lucrative, especially in the capacity that I can do it. So if it's not fun, there's really not a good reason to do it.

This space is the first time where it's been affordable and where I felt like it would fit into all the other things I have going. It's right next door to work, right next door to both of my jobs, and it's really inexpensive. I've been collecting equipment to set up a studio for about a year and a half or so, just slowly picking up little bits and pieces as they present themselves. I finally just had enough to get going.

Do you have a wood-fired kiln in your studio?

No. The kind of kilns that I like to fire are pretty big, smoky, and a little messy. They need a lot of space, and having one downtown is probably not an option at the moment. So I have a small electric kiln that I bisque-fire, which is a low-temperature firing that I do before I glaze and wood-fire the work. So I'll be wood-firing everything with the same guys who taught me how to fire wood kilns.

What do you think of the art scene in Reno, in general?

Man, that's a loaded question. I should preface by saying that I'm not super involved and I don't necessarily consider what I make art or consider myself an artist. In school you get pigeonholed into the

Art Department, but at lots of schools, making functional stuff, making dishes, it's not very provocative. So if you're at any school that has avant-garde aspirations, it's a tough sell, which at Sierra Nevada College, it was a little bit of a tough sell. Nobody really minded, nobody told me I couldn't do it, but I also didn't get a lot of feedback or support doing it just because nobody really knew that much about it. I was probably the resident expert in the field while I was there. There were other ceramicists there, sculptors and stuff like that.

I don't have a huge tie to the gallery scene or anything just because I went to "art school." Most of my friends are painters and printmakers. I've always been going to openings and shows and it's been really, really fun for the last couple of years, ironically while I wasn't making anything. There are enough people engaged in art-making now that is there enough momentum to do our own shows, and in some cases people are opening their own galleries, and spaces like ours where people are pooling resources to come up with enough space to spread out and make stuff.

In some capacity that's always happened, but it seems like lately there's been more of it, which is really comforting and really fun to watch. It's great for me to have a place to make work, but it's also really fun to be in a place where I can watch other people make work and to be involved with all these other artists. We are not the only warehouse full of artists making stuff in this town, but we know almost everybody who is, and it's cool to see people able to do that and afford it. One of the reasons it's possible is because warehouses like ours are so cheap now since nobody wants them because the economy is trashed.

Are there any other warehouses of artists/businesses similar to yours on Fourth Street?

There was the Salvagery, which was officially or unofficially Burning Man-affiliated. It was a big warehouse just east of us on Fourth Street. A guy named Spencer Hobson owned this building that used to be a beer bottling plant, and there were a bunch of artists working in there, but since last year they all moved out and the building was shut down again.

On Fourth Street, that's the only one that I know of that's similar to ours, but there are a couple of galleries that have opened on Fourth Street in the last couple of years. I think there are some kids taking over this warehouse that's real close to us, right behind the bike shop, but I'm not sure what they're doing there.

I know a couple of them are painters, but I'm not sure if they're using that space as a painting space or if they're using it to hoard and store stuff. It's a pretty recent development, and I haven't toured the place yet.

Could you describe what the warehouse your studio is in looks like?

It's a pretty interesting building. I can't remember what date it was built, but I think it was the mid-thirties. It was originally built as a transmission repair shop. It's shaped like a giant airplane hangar, so 3,200 square feet is basically just a big rectangle with a huge kind of dome over the top of it. It's got big skylights and it is all steel rafters and open ceilings. In the main section when you walk in the front door, there's a little seating area. Right behind that is a small office where the courier company dispatches from. Everything else in the main building is basically just open space. We're in the process of partitioning, subdividing, and splitting up all the work spaces.

At the back of our section there's a big wall with a man-door in it and behind that there's even more warehouse. There's a guy name Paolo Cividino who has a steel fabrication shop right across the street from us. He rents out the back of that building and stores surplus materials and random stuff back there.

That building used to be separate from the building next door, which is the Bike Project. There used to be an alley in between them, a pretty wide one. At some point, somebody boxed in the alley and closed it off, and in the boxed-in alley is where my studio space is.

It's closed off and divided into two stories. The bottom floor of the alley now is part of the Bike Project, and I'm above the Bike Project. There are five studio spaces on the top floor. So if I'm in my studio, people in the bike shop can hear me clomping around upstairs.

Through the renovations that you guys are doing, are you trying to maintain the industrial character of the building or change it in some way?

Yes, that is the part that is moving way slower than the remodels in the alley, mostly because everything in there is huge, which makes it more expensive. We always struggle between being able to imagine the way that we want it to look and build it, and being able to afford to build it the way that we imagine it. So in a perfect world, it's all steel and plexiglass, but those are really expensive materials to work with, so we're always having these conversations about what to buy new, what to scrounge, what to spend money on, what not to spend money on, and how much money do we have to spend.

We haven't done any permanent changes to the original building, to the transmission shop. It's mostly just been paint and temporary partitions and building furniture and stuff like that.

Was the alley there prior to you guys?

Yeah, it's been there for a long time, but it's way newer than the original buildings. I don't know how much newer, I just know that it's not original.

There's really not much to preserve in the alley. It was all cheap MDF floors and those gross foam ceiling tiles with the little fake snowflakes in them, so we have no qualms about gutting and remodeling, but the original building is cool. It's a really neat building. We probably are never going to do anything permanent to it because it's not our building, we're just renting. So we're not going to pour a bunch of money to doing in any huge renovation.

What we're not doing is being super cheap and partitioning stuff off with cyclone fencing and walls made out of old pallets, which gets done a lot by folks like us who have a big space, need to cut it up, and don't have any money. We'd rather wait and spend a little bit of money and try to maintain a little bit of the building's character as much as we can.

Who is Bootleg Courier renting the building from?

The bike shop and the Cuddle Factory are both owned by a guy named Fred Meyer.

Did you have any impressions of East Fourth Street before you took a studio space there?

Yes, because I had been working at the bike shop prior to that, for a long time. So by the time we took over that building, we had all spent so much time down there that we knew the scene.

You knew what you were getting into?

Yeah. Before I started working down there, I didn't know that much about East 4th Street. I thought the same thing that everybody else thought; I thought it was just skid row or whatever. Everybody imagines it a lot worse than it really is. Don't get me wrong, there's a lot to be desired. There are some problems with that area, but before we had moved the bike shop down there, I hadn't really thought that much about it, honestly. It was just the place that people make jokes about, like, "Oh, yeah, that's where all the hookers are and that's where all the drugs are," blah, blah, blah.

We moved the bike shop there in late 2008 and that was really my first time spending time on Fourth Street, other than just riding my bike down it, trying to get off of it.

How and when did you become a bike mechanic?

There was this particular bicycle ride that made me want to be a bike mechanic. I was mountain biking at the time quite a bit. This was maybe in the early 2000s when I started getting into trail riding. I had decided that I wanted to try disc brakes, which were not totally new things at the time, but it was my first time giving them a shot. I'd been riding bikes quite a bit at that point and I had some friends who worked in bike shops. I bought a pair of disc brakes secondhand off of one of my bike shop buddies. At that time, I didn't own any real bicycle tools. I didn't really know what I was doing. I just knew how to ride them and break them pretty good, but I relied on a bike shop to repair my bike. So the bike shop installs these disc brakes. There's a part in the disc brake system called the rotor, which is just a metal disc and it just bolts onto your hub.

We're riding this trail down Mt. Rose, from the summit of the road all the way down to Callahan Ranch at the bottom. It's late afternoon when we start, and about two-thirds of the way down, I'm riding down this rocky section of trail. My friend Matt Raker's behind me, and Matt Raker describes the crash as following me and then seeing nothing but the bottom of my shoes. I didn't know what happened. I just went flying over the handlebars and tumbled, just lost it. The sun was just about going down at this point.

I get up and I look at my bike, and the rotor where it attaches to the hub had snapped because the bolts weren't fastened adequately. So I have to basically take off the rotor and ride the rest of the trail without my rear brake. I had to ride down the rest of that trail, which is pretty rocky, in the dark with just a front brake, which makes it a little bit tricky to steer. I was pretty bruised up and it was a bummer.

So on the way down after the crash, while I was brooding, I decided that I wanted to become a bicycle mechanic just so I could learn how to work on my own bikes, so that if that ever happened to me again, it would be my fault and not somebody else's. Two or three days later, I got a job at the bike shop that I had bought my bike from.

Which was bike shop was that?

Sierra Cyclesmith. I worked there for probably five or six years during the summers.

So you learned to be a bike mechanic while you were there?

Well, you never stop learning to be a bike mechanic or really any kind of mechanic, I imagine. When I first started, that bike shop was owned by these two brothers, Tim and Leon Zasadny. Tim was an ex-track racer and he was a mechanic for the Olympic track team for a little while, a really good mechanic, really hard to work for, very strict and short-tempered, never yelled or screamed, but he was not a good teacher. Leon, most of the time, was a good teacher, but when he got tense, you had to find somebody else to learn from. Between those two, I got my start, I guess, and probably a pretty good chunk of my middle. I was there for a long time.

It was neat shop, pretty high-volume, which is always good for a mechanic because it means you get your hands on a lot of different kinds of bicycles. That shop never turned down a bike for any kind of repair. There are a lot of shops that won't work on low-quality bikes. But one of our pitches at that bike shop was that we would work on anything.

We also charged a flat rate for tune-ups, which meant that to remain profitable and to be an asset, you had to be fast. You had to be able to do a tune-up on a bike in about forty-five minutes to not cost money doing it. So there was always a lot of pressure to be a really efficient mechanic, which is impossible to do when you're learning. When you're a young mechanic and you don't know what you're doing, it takes a long time to figure stuff out and you always have to ask questions and consult manuals. That made a really big impression on me. I didn't like it. I didn't like feeling rushed. I thought it was more important to do high-quality work and be proud of it than it was to remain profitable. That was the biggest effect that that job really had on me. It's where I developed my ethic as a repair person.

When did you go to the Reno Bike Project?

That was a slow entry for me; it would have been 2007 when I actually got hired. When the Reno Bike Project started, it was running out of the garage of my friend Eric Carter. This happened while I was in Incline, in school.

While I was up there, I was living in this little twenty-something-foot camp trailer in a parking lot, which did not have room for the hoards of bicycles and parts that I had accumulated working as a mechanic for years. I had maybe one or two bikes in my trailer up there, and kept the rest of the fleet down at Eric's house. He also had this big cache of all my parts. All bike mechanics are sort of bike-component hoarders. We all have these milk crates full of stuff that we latch onto.

So all my stuff was down there, and the Bike Project ends up running out of Eric's garage while I'm at Incline. The guys who started the Bike Project weren't bike mechanics by trade, didn't really know that much about repairing bikes and they weren't very good when it started.

This is Noah Silverman and Kyle Kozar?

Yes. They're the co-founders, and they didn't know what they were doing. It was all enthusiasm and very little technical prowess. Carter and I had worked at Sierra Cyclesmith and had been friends and co-workers for years. He would call me up or I'd come down on the weekends and we'd be hanging out at his house drinking beers and stuff, and he would tell me all these horror stories about stuff that they were doing to bicycles, while digging through my milk crates full of parts, cherry-picking stuff off it and selling it to god knows who.

I thought it was neat. I admired the enthusiasm. I think all cities where there's any kind of developed bicycle culture, all have a shop like that and they all start out like that. Nobody just gets a huge grant, buys fifty-thousand dollars worth of tools, rents out a space and then figures it out. You know, it's a real slow learning curve. That was just how they were starting out, but when they first got going, I didn't want anything to do with it.

What changed your mind?

It took years to change my mind. I had finished up in Incline. I came back to Reno, I started worked at Patagonia. I was pretty unhappy there; it was a really great company but a really boring job. I had already got accepted to move to Missoula and take that residency position. I had the summer to kill and I was getting in a little bit of trouble at Patagonia for drawing cartoons on all these different boxes. [laughter] My boss at Patagonia takes me outside for the third time and lectures me about how I need to find another outlet for my creative energy. So we just decided that day that I should quit.

While I was there, Noah had been calling me off and on and offering me a position as a mechanic. By that time, the bike shop had moved out of Carter's garage. I had moved back in with Carter, and the bike shop was operating out of this little warehouse on Bell Street.

I had turned Noah down a couple of times for all the same reasons. It was still a little sketchy to me. I didn't want to work there because they weren't well-tooled and they didn't have access to a lot of parts. They were getting their parts through guys like Eric, who would order it for them using another bike shop's account. They didn't know what to order, so they didn't have basic stuff, chains and cables and things that you just need to repair bikes. At that point I had been fixing bikes long enough to where I couldn't hack six chains into one chain and put it on a bike and go to sleep at night. I just couldn't do that kind of stuff anymore, and that's the sort of thing that they were doing.

It just turned out that I had quit the Patagonia job and I had four or five months to kill before I had to move to Montana. The day that I quit/got fired from Patagonia, Noah called me again and offered me the job. I was like, well, it seemed pretty non-committal. How bad could it be to hang out there for four months? It was all my friends and I had known those guys since before the bike shop existed. It seemed like a fun job. It was always really busy. There were always lots of people in there working on their own bikes, shuffling through the parts. It was just an active fun environment, and not like a normal bike shop.

Normal bike shops had, in some ways, gotten kind of boring to me. By that point it's the same crowd, more affluent people with these really expensive toys that they ride on the weekend. There's nothing wrong with that, but after years and years of working on the same kinds of bikes and meeting the same kinds of people, it was neat to see this other side of it.

In the beginning stages of the Bike Project, was it more a place for people to come and work on their bikes?

Yeah. That's why they hired me, as it started to change. When the bike shop first started, it was this open format space. There were a couple of stands and a little collection of tools and some bins full of used parts, and anybody who showed up could work on their bike. At that point there technically weren't any employees, and the people who were running it, Noah and Kyle and Eric, were the main guys when it

was running out of Eric's house, and that was cool. There were no barriers between the professionals or the experts and everyone else. It was kind of this free-for-all.

At a certain point, people started bringing bikes in that they didn't really want to fix themselves. They wanted to drop them off and pay somebody to fix them because they wanted to support the organization. At that point, the volume got overwhelming and they were also starting to get repairs that they just didn't know how to do, and that's when they decided they needed somebody who already knew how to do that stuff.

Eric was working at another bike shop at the time and didn't want to leave, so he didn't want the job and I had not wanted the job previously for the same reasons I already talked about. By the time I got hired in an official capacity, we were starting to form a Service Department and were starting to do repairs for money. Once we started charging money for repairs, everybody realized that you couldn't just hack stuff together and then charge people money. You could only do that if you weren't charging people money. Good intentions only get you so far if you don't know how to fix the machine.

So that's about when they brought me in. When I started, we were on Bell Street and there were no mechanics' stations. I worked in the stand next to whoever happened to be working in the stand next to me, and it was chaotic. There was one big bench with two sets of tools hanging on it, and people would just walk up and borrow stuff. Tools were all over the place, making it really difficult to get anything done.

When everybody's there trying to figure out how to fix whatever they're working on and they get wind that there's a trained bike mechanic in the building, questions, questions and questions start flowing. So when working at my bike stand, it would sometimes take me two or three days to do what would normally take me an hour and a half because I was constantly getting dragged away to either help somebody work on their problem or to hunt down some tool that I had just set down three seconds ago. There just wasn't enough space and there weren't enough tools to fill all the demand. So for that first summer, doing repairs was pretty inefficient, really chaotic, and a ton of fun.

Then you left and went to Missoula?

Yeah. I had already committed to go to Montana, and I never imagined that I was going to enjoy working at the Bike Project as much as I did. When it came time to get up and go, I had some hesitations. I left right after we moved the bike shop onto Fourth Street. It was the last thing I did before I skipped town.

How was the move to Fourth Street?

Oh, man, it was a ton of work, but it was fun. It was a really good experience for everybody. We didn't really have much of a budget when we moved into that space. We just knew we needed to expand. We were running out of room on Bell Street, and the Fourth Street place was really cheap. That was the big sell.

I wasn't too involved in deciding on where to move to; that was Kyle and Noah. But I was heavily involved in actually doing the moving and setting up the new shop. It took us probably three or four full days, with two trucks and two trailers dragging all the bikes, parts, tools, and equipment down there. Then we spent a lot of time building new workbenches and getting the place ready to go.

When you came back from Flagstaff, did you start working at the Bike Project again?

Yeah, when Lindsay and I decided that we were going to move back to Reno, after she finished up grad school in Arizona, I came back to visit and tell Kyle and Noah, that I was coming back, and they agreed to put me back on, which was really cool because I was coming back right at the end of the busy season. So they were going to put me on for the winter, which in the bike shop world is unheard of. That's when you lay people off.

Did you come back as the service manager?

No, when I came back we didn't have a service manager. I just came back as a mechanic. Since I've been back, there's been tons of restructuring and lots of changes, and that's when we gave everybody grown-up-sounding positions.

Do you feel like you were a part of organizing the service part of the bike shop?

As it exists now, yes. It was totally my baby. When I came back, Kyle had gotten accepted to school in New York. He's currently at Pratt, studying urban design. Kyle is a huge part of the bike shop's infrastructure. He did a lot of work. At that point, nobody really had a job description. It was just a bunch of friends figuring out what needed to get finished and scrambling to patch holes, which worked great for a long time. We didn't realize how dangerous that was until Kyle left. We were all confident that we could handle all of Kyle's responsibilities, but we didn't really know what they were. We had never sat down and written down what everybody's in charge of because we never really needed to, I guess. But it shook things up. There was a whole year after Kyle left where things were pretty unstable, and that was our fault for not thinking that would be a problem.

About what year was that?

That was about a year and a half ago. It took a long time for everybody to figure out what their job was and settle back into it, especially Noah. Having a co-executive director was I'm sure very comforting and a lot less pressure than being the only guy responsible for the organization. It's become a big organization, and I don't think anybody ever thought that was going to happen. Now we have seven or eight employees on staff, and they're all our friends. So that's a lot of pressure to make sure that all your friends have jobs the next day.

So for that first year, things were pretty wild around there. There was a lot of chaos. Another one of our guys, Anthony, took my position when I moved to Missoula. He helped us move onto Fourth Street, and after I left he was the guy who basically managed the shop. Back then, he managed everything. He did all the parts ordering and managed all the repairs. He was also in charge of all the different programs. He did a ton of work and he just got burned out. He would call me while I was out of state all the time, and we'd just have these sessions where I would basically listen to him vent because he didn't know what to do. I would offer whatever advice I had, but that's not much good from three states away. So he totally held it down while I was gone, and when I got back, I think he was just like, "Tag me out. Tag me out." So he stepped down from a lot of his responsibilities. I took over some of them and then we split up the rest.

After about a year of hiring some new people and figuring out what everybody's job was, we all just sat down and talked about what we thought we would be best at. I know how to repair bicycles. At that point I had been a mechanic for probably ten years or something, so I was really comfortable fixing bikes and I also understood how the flow of parts and repairs should move through a shop, how they should be tracked, how to remain profitable, and what to charge for repairs. I'm really the only person that's worked there who's had a lot of experience in other bike shops. So it just made me a shoo-in.

I think the first winter after I got back, I thought that we should remodel the shop, reorganize it, and move some stuff around. What I really wanted to do was build a space in the bike shop that was just for the employees who were repairing bicycles so that we could partition ourselves off, so that we didn't have to spend so much time hunting for tools that other people had come to borrow. My goal was to make a little space in there that was a place where you could be an efficient mechanic, because at that point there was a lot of service to do and it was a big part of our revenue and I thought that it was important to maintain it.

Did you accomplish that?

Yeah. I mean, it hasn't been that long, but it's been a lot easier since we did that. We had a lot of arguments about it. There were a lot of reasons not to do it. It doesn't really fit the ethos of the shop in a lot of ways, because we are a public bike shop and our job is to be an asset to the community, and we're not really supposed to be a profit-generating machine, and that part of the business does make money. The difference between The Reno Bike Project and normal bike shops is we spend that money on things that cost money, like public workstations and programs and stuff like that.

I actually was kind of against the idea of a full-service department for a long time. I didn't think that it was our job to do that kind of work, and I was really hesitant to compete against local bike shops. I was also the only one really sympathetic to other bike shops because they'd been paying my rent for the last decade. So I didn't want to damage the local bike shop scene.

When we restructured and remodeled, we basically started operating like a normal bike shop. It was the first time where we had a set pricing schedule. We charge just about the same as any other bike shop in town does for full-service repairs. In that sense, we're competing with other bike shops but we're competing on a fair market. Since we're nonprofit, we get lots of donations and lots of grants but none of that money goes into the full-service part of the shop. That little part of the business runs almost autonomously in a lot of ways. We can't really spend grant money on that part of the business.

So that was my project when I got back. That was one thing that I thought was important. I took it on and I planned the remodel and organized the workdays. Now it's done and it's going pretty good.

Do you think the homeless shelter on Fourth Street affected your clientele at all at the Bike Project?

Yeah, a lot. Back in the Bell Street days, we were giving bikes away, but we never really had a program or funding for it. We just had a lot of bikes that we couldn't sell, that were department-store mountain bikes. There's not a lot of call for them; nobody really wants to pay for them. But people donated them all the time, and we just thought we could put them to use. So we would fix them up a little bit.

At first, it would just be some random character who would walk in and ask for a bike, and we would make him volunteer at the bike shop for it. We'd make him sort parts or strip a couple bikes or help

us clean up and then when they were done, we'd hand them a Roadmaster or Huffy or whatever, and they'd ride off on it.

After a while, word got out and more and more people started showing up wanting to work off a bike, so it turned into a program, which is not a unique thing. There are programs like that all around the country.

When we moved onto Fourth Street, the difference was we were right across the street from where most of those people came from, so they didn't have to wander through downtown and find us in some back alley. We had this big storefront right on Fourth Street. It was easy to find and it was twenty-seven steps away.

We moved into the Fourth Street location right about when Tent City opened up, which was a result of overflow from the shelter right there. When we opened the doors there, we were inundated with those people. There were so many people. They were like, "Oh, you can go over there and get a bike. Oh, you can go over there and get a bike." For folks like that, that's really the only way to get around efficiently and independently, other than walking to the bus.

I didn't really have that much exposure to it because I had moved the bike shop in, got everything set up, and I was gone within a week. We all imagined that was going to happen, but I wasn't really confronted with it until I moved back from Arizona and started working there again.

Have you seen any significant changes on Fourth Street since you came back from Flagstaff?

Yeah, right in our neighborhood there have been a lot of changes. Since I got back they dismantled Tent City. Tent City at one point started enforcing all of these curfews and all of these no-pet laws and stuff like that, and a lot of the residents moved out of Tent City and just started sleeping on the sidewalk on Record Street. That got dubbed Sleeping Bag City. It was this hodge-podge of tarps and tents and people just out there all night freezing. That was in full swing when I got back, and since then they expanded an ordinance that forbids people from lying down on the sidewalk. The police came in and made a big push to disperse all of the Sleeping Bag City residents and then the city dismantled Tent City.

Those homeless folks don't disappear; they just disperse and go someplace else. So that's been a big change. I mean, that's right across the street from the bike shop. I ride right past there on my way to work every day, and for a block there used to be all this crazy traffic and people walking in the streets and wandering around and shopping carts everywhere. You had to sort of play Frogger, skipping between all these moving obstacles when riding your bike. Since all of those folks got displaced, that's probably been the biggest change to the area of Fourth Street.

There's also been lots of stuff like the warehouse next door. There's been a lot of people moving in and taking pride of ownership in the spaces they occupy. I'm proud of the bike shop for doing that. We don't have a ton of money to soup the place up, but with what little we have, we do a lot. We stretch it a long way so it's organized, it's presentable. We painted the front of the building. Even little things, like just painting the front of the building makes a huge difference in the way people perceive an area. A fresh coat of paint psychologically is loaded and not expensive, and that's a really easy and cheap way to change the way a place looks.

Was the dismantling of the Tent City a positive or a negative thing for the street in your view?

I don't know. I think that concentration of people in that little tiny area is not good and that happens anytime you put too many sardines in a can. There are a lot of fights and a lot of violence, and I'm sure that it was a pretty big burden on RPD and the folks who run the shelter to deal with. So I guess it's good that it got dispersed because at least it spreads out the load a little bit and it looks nicer. That's an intimidating scene for a passerby to walk through. If you were just ambling down Fourth Street on the sidewalk and it's the fifth of the month and everybody just got their check and they're all out there spending money, and the ones that are drinking are probably drunk, it's not a very inviting atmosphere.

So for the corridor as a whole, that's positive. I don't know that it really solved any problems. I think it just shuffled them around a little bit. So I have mixed feelings about it.

Do you feel that there's a sense of community currently on Fourth Street?

There's probably several. We have a good relationship with most of the business owners in our area, the bike shop and Bootleg, and everybody who's working in the warehouse. We've been around here long enough that we know the bar owners, we know Paolo across the street at the steel shop. We know the guys at the motorcycle shop across the street. We all have a really good rapport. So there's that sense of community. We all have a lot in common.

Our businesses really are nothing alike, but just running a business on Fourth Street has its challenges. The big one is dealing with the homeless population. For us especially it's tricky because they're our customers, and part of our mission is to make sure that they have what they need to get a bicycle and stay on it. Putting ourselves in that position has been a little bit tricky because it also intimidates other people. Maybe folks who would normally want to come check it out are too intimidated to park their car down on East Fourth Street and walk in, because people always imagine it being a lot worse than it really is, and that street has a pretty long and sordid history of not being a great place to take the kids.

I imagine most of the other businesses think of the homeless population as negative or non-influential. For example, Paolo at the steel shop doesn't really have a retail outlet, it's just a fabrication shop, and it's not like homeless people are wandering into his workspace and bugging him or anything. It's just where he parks his car and goes to work and does his job. He probably doesn't really have too many thoughts either way about how it directly affects his business. Whether he likes driving down Fourth Street and parking his car there, that's another story.

But one of the reasons that we're all there is because it's inexpensive, and one of the reasons it's inexpensive is because of the homeless population. So in that sense they're kind of helping us. We pay forty-something cents a square foot, which is pretty affordable, and if Fourth Street didn't look like Fourth Street, we wouldn't be paying forty-something cents.

Is there anything that you don't want to see change on Fourth Street if it goes under a revitalization project?

The only thing in the plan is that historical buildings get preserved. Other than that, as far as I know, it's pretty fair game. They want to install bike paths and put in landscaping and stuff like that.

Do you think that would be positive?

Yeah. It could be, for sure. I mean, obviously I'm in favor of the bike lanes because I ride my bike there every day. I'm not an urban planner and I'm not heavily involved in any kind of cycling advocacy from the top down. I don't go to those meetings. I don't know exactly what their plans are. I think projects like that are always just a delicate balance. You want to be able to fix the place up and make it attractive to businesses to move in. You want to generate activity in that area. You also don't want to destroy the area's heritage, and you don't want whatever links it has to the past to be cheesy. It's not really that cool to tear down a beautiful old building, put up some new industrial building and then put a plaque with a picture of the beautiful old building in front of it. It doesn't really make any sense. So the other thing that I worry about is that if it gets too nice, all the folks like us are going to get pushed out.

A gentrification issue?

Yeah. I guess we're kind of the first step in gentrifying that neighborhood, but we're not pushing anybody out; we're filling in vacant spaces. But that's always the pattern. The artists move in and spend some time souping it up, and then the restaurants and the coffee shops and all that stuff move in. Then pretty soon the artists have to go find someplace cheaper because all the property values increase to the point where nobody can afford to stay. So I'm a little concerned about it getting a little too ritzy. But that'll be a long ways out, if it ever happens, and I don't know if I'll still be around by then.

I would like to spend a few minutes focusing on some of the transportation issues in the Fourth Street corridor. Do you think there are any transportation issues on Fourth Street?

Yes.

What are they?

It's a pretty heavily-used thoroughfare. It's one of the only quick ways to get out to Sparks without taking the freeway. When I go out to Sparks for Bootleg Couriers, that's the quickest way to get there, straight down Fourth and Prater. It's one of the few places where on some days I feel nervous about riding my bike in traffic. There are no bike lanes and there is a lot of truck traffic. It would be nice to at least get it widened and put a bike lane strip in.

The other thing that I notice is that people ride their bikes on the sidewalks everywhere around Fourth Street. I'm sure it's a combination of people not knowing the law and people being nervous about dealing with traffic the same way that I am. I deal with it on the street, and I just get on the sidewalk where it's safer. But that's always a bad thing when you've got bikes and pedestrians duking it out for sidewalk space. Those are the bike-specific issues that I know they are addressing in the RTC plan.

As far as traffic congestion, I really don't know. I don't really drive on Fourth Street that much.

Do you think they should maintain the four-lane status it has?

Well, if it were up to me and it came down to reducing traffic lanes to make a bike lane, I'm all for the bike lane. But obviously I'm biased. I don't know. I don't notice the traffic being really significant enough to demand two lanes in each direction for the entire stretch, but I've never looked at statistics, so I'm not sure.

Have you noticed any other safety issues, other than the lack of bike lanes and people on the sidewalks on their bicycles?

Yeah, there are a lot of pedestrian issues in that area. When Sleeping Bag City and Tent City were in full swing, it was bad. There were times when I'd be riding my bike five miles an hour, weaving through people in the car lane. There's also been a huge increase in pedestrian traffic in my neighborhood since the bus station went in. There's lots of the normal jaywalking which I think is pretty normal when there's that much pedestrian traffic in a little space like that.

I get nervous around there for the pedestrians. There's a lot of drug and alcohol use and there are a lot of drunk people just wandering around in the middle of the street at night. I see them all the time. I don't know that putting in pedestrian infrastructure is really going to change that. They're obviously impaired and not making good life decisions.

Do you think that's more the homeless population or also the bar population that is contributing to the night pedestrian traffic?

It's totally both. I see people that I recognize as people who stay in the shelter. They come to the bike shop all the time at midnight, one o'clock in the morning when I'm riding home from my studio or they're out wandering around. I see twenty-something college kids doing the exact same thing. I don't know if putting a bunch of money into pedestrian infrastructure fixes that. I don't think you could spend all the money in the world and force people to make safe decisions. But it's a dangerous place to be in when they're wandering around in traffic at night.

Do you think the sidewalks are wide enough on Fourth Street?

Yeah, I think so, where they exist. East of us, I don't know if the sidewalks totally disappear, but I feel like in sections they might not be there. I'm not sure.

What do you think about parking? Do you think parking needs to be changed?

Yeah. It's an issue at the bike shop or it has been, historically. Right on the corner of Fourth and Valley, there's a little mini-mart with parking and there's parking against Club Bass, which is our neighbor to the west. The guy who rents that space for the club has rights to all of the parking that touches his building, and that's where our customers park, because there are one or two two-hour parking spots right on the street close to the bike shop, and that's it. So they park there and walk around the corner.

For a while the guy who owns Club Bass, his name is Ray, was towing all of our customers' cars. He wasn't even there. He's only open a couple nights a week, and whenever he's busy, we're closed. So there was never a conflict for parking, but he had called a towing agency and basically given them the plate numbers of his and his employees' cars, and said, "Anytime there's a car that's not one of these guys, tow them away." So for almost a month customers would come in, go shopping, go outside and their car would be gone, which obviously was not good for us. It took a while and some shenanigans to finally resolve the issue. But I'm sure we're not the only ones with that problem.

How did you resolve the parking issue?

We tried to track him down for a couple of weeks to work something out. He was dodging our calls and he's not around the club much, when we're around, anyway. So one night myself and one of my friends went out and let all the air out of one of his car tires while he was in the club.

I went back in the bike shop and waited, and him and a bunch of his club employees, who are all these young guys, bouncers, come over pounding on the bike shop door. He's freaking out, screaming at me because I slashed his tires. I calmed him down. I'm like, "I didn't slash your tires. I just removed the valve stem." I had it in my hand. [laughter] I don't think he knew what a valve stem was, so he was kind of confused, but still livid mad, livid mad. I'm like, "It's okay. I just needed to talk to you."

So I take the valve stem and the valve stem tool and my air compressor outside. While I'm gassing up his car tire, I have the conversation with him about how towing our customers is hurting our business, and we need to figure something out. So we agreed to meet when he was less angry, and a couple days later we met and hashed out a plan. We have a lot of volunteers at the bike shop, and now one of the duties of our volunteers is to go out and help us clean the parking lot. There's broken glass and beer bottles and stuff lying around there all the time, so we keep the parking lot clean and he lets us use it while the club's not open.

Well, that's a good compromise.

Yeah. It was a long way to get there but it worked out. [laughter]

Do you have any last thoughts about East Fourth Street that you want to add that you don't feel got covered?

For the recent stuff that I've been around for, I think we nailed it down. It's got this really long, long, cool history we didn't even delve into, but there are other people who know way more about that than me. So I think we did.

Great, I appreciate your time. Thank you.

All right.

TIM CONDER

Bootleg Courier Co. and Cuddleworks



Tim Conder outside the home of Bootleg Courier Co. and Cuddleworks in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Born in Salt Lake City, Tim Conder grew up in California and worked for many years as a carpenter and cement mason. In 2008, he became a co-owner of Bootleg Courier, located at 545 East 4th Street, in a space known as Cuddleworks. The building also houses studio space for artists and a coffee roasting operation.

Alexandra Horangic: I'm here with Tim Conder, who's the co-owner of Bootleg Couriers. We are on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno and today is Tuesday, April 10, 2012.

Mr. Conder, do I have your permission to record this interview and place it in our public archive?

Tim Conder: Yes.

Okay. So I'd like to start with where and when were you born.

In Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1983.

How long did you stay in Salt Lake?

Three years.

Where did you go from there?

Central Valley in California, a bit east of the Bay Area, forty-five minutes east of San Francisco.

What city?

Tracy.

How long did you live in Tracy?

I moved away when I was sixteen, so a pretty long time. Most of my childhood and adolescence.

Were you into riding bikes then?

No, I mostly just skateboarded and I wouldn't say that I rode bikes any more than any average young person.

Did you go to high school there?

Partly.

Then where did you go from there?

I dropped out. Well, I got kicked out of high school, and then I came here and went to Reno High for about a month.

Did you graduate?

No. I got my GED.

Do you think that affected how you progressed through life?

Yeah, I'd say so. Definitely.

In what way?

I was done with school by the time I was sixteen, so I grew up a little bit faster and started working young and hung out with older people. I'd say it affected me, definitely. I didn't at that time, have any interest in higher education or anything like that.

What kind of work did you do?

I became a carpenter and cement mason pretty quickly after that.

In Reno?

Yeah, I started that in Reno and then moved away from Reno and joined the Carpenters Union in Berkeley, California, and did that for about five years.

Where in Berkeley did you live?

I lived in Oakland, but I worked out of Berkeley. I lived off of Piedmont Avenue, north Oakland, on the border of Oakland and Berkeley.

What was that like?

It was good. I like Oakland a lot. I've lived there at a couple different points in my life in different areas.

So you started in Tracy, and then you went to Oakland, where did you go after that?

Came here to Reno.

So you came here to Reno, and then you went back to Oakland.

Yeah, then I moved to Oakland.

Then where did you go?

Then I moved to Portland, and then I spent a little bit of time traveling on the East Coast between New York, New Orleans, and Midwest areas like Minneapolis, and then moved to San Francisco.

What year did you move to San Francisco?

It was five or six years ago—2006, I believe.

As you were moving around, were you just doing odd jobs like masonry?

I started in the union here in Reno and then moved unions to Berkeley. When I left Berkeley Cement, I was doing large-scale building art projects, around the country for a long time. I was no longer in the union, but I was still building things, but mostly, grant work and grant-funded art projects.

What were some of the projects?

I did something for Burning Man in 2000, this big Spanish galleon called the La Contessa. I worked for other artists in Oakland, doing some welding on top of my day-to-day job.

When you did the Burning Man project, were you based out of Oakland?

Yeah, that's basically when I moved from Reno to Oakland and why. It was 2000, I believe. So I did that project and then stayed in Oakland and helped different art groups with similar types of projects—not boats, but large-scale builds. Then when I went to New York, I was part of this thing called Swimming Cities. It's this girl Swoon, she does it.

What is that?

She builds ships out of junk and takes them to different places around the world, sails them and then treats them as a docked installation. She did it on the Hudson in New York. She did it through the Venice Canal and down the Mississippi.

Oh, wow.

Yeah.

That probably got a lot of press.

Yeah, totally. It was a big deal, and she's trying to do it again.

What was her point?

She is an East Coast-based artist, and there's a lot of steam punk kids that she would come into contact with through traveling who do that down the Mississippi every year.

Could you describe what steam punk kids are?

It's a traveling punk kid that builds all their own stuff. They travel from the Midwest, cities like Minneapolis or Milwaukee or wherever up north on the Mississippi, and they build these Huckleberryesque rafts and boats and sail down the Mississippi to New Orleans for the winter, and work in New Orleans in the winter and then hop trains.

So as a mode of transportation and livelihood?

Uh-huh. Usually just one way, and then the other way they would hop trains to get back to Minneapolis.

So, anyway, she met these people through her own travels and her own friend group, and decided it would be really cool to recreate these boats by having different artists design and lead their own build, and then together create the full project, which was Swimming Cities that she was the lead on. She got it funded and did it three times.

What project was the most influential one on you during this time period?

I feel like they were all fairly equal. They were all in the same sphere. It was all related and all the people who were working on these projects were similar—if not the same people, or at least from the same group of artists. They were all really cool and you could take different things from each of them, for sure.

How did you get into that in the first place?

The person who got me into being a cement mason was one of my best friends. He worked for Burning Man in the early years helping build and set up the city out on Black Rock, on the playa.

What year was that?

It was 1998, and through him, I met some of these people. A lot of the people who used to work for Burning Man years ago were nomadic workers, a nomadic steam punk workforce, you know, and they would pick beets in the North in the spring, and then go bartend in the winter in New Orleans. They would always come build Burning Man in the summer, basically set up a welding shop out there and help build the roads and whatever. They would cycle this way for years. Burning Man started out in Black Rock in 1992 and since then until about 2001 they sort of stopped it. Now that workforce is mainly populated by people from Reno or peripherally from that group of first-comers.

So, through him I met all these artists the first year that I went out there, which was 2000 or 1999. I knew how to build because that's what I was doing for a living, and took a liking to it and started seeing where I could help with it. In 2001, I wrote a big grant to fund this ship that I built with two other people.

What was the name of that ship?

The La Contessa.

Was it at Burning Man?

Yes.

Was it one of the burned pieces?

No.

How did you go about getting a grant? What was that process like?

In that year they had just began BRAF, which was Black Rock Arts Foundation. They had established a grant board and I knew the people on the board. They had a large pool of money that they had designated from ticket sales that they were going to give to artists. But like I was saying, it's this small community of artists. Now the community's obviously much larger as Burning Man's reach extends further and further, but at that time, it was Bay Area/California-based and large-scale sculpture artists, so it was a fairly small pool.

I didn't write the grant, but I did the design for the ship, and we received the grant super easily. I think, to date, it might be one of the larger grants Burning Man has ever given, not because we wrote such a good grant or it was such a good project, but after that they started thinking, "Oh, we're giving people crazy amounts of money. We could dole out less money to more projects," which is what they do now. Although they still give the most amount of money of any privately owned company in the country to artists.

You were based in Oakland during this?

Sort of. I was between Reno and Oakland.

Your mom lives in Reno?

Uh-huh.

And your dad lives where?

He lives in the Bay Area.

Were you riding bikes during this whole time?

I was. Some of these artists had started a bike club in Minneapolis, and it made its way to New York and other parts of the country, and we brought it into Reno, and started building mutant bikes and tall bikes. That is what got me really heavily into riding bikes.

Was that influenced by Burning Man?

Well, by the people who came to Burning Man. But there's this bike club called—it was originally called the Hard Times Bike Club, now it's Black Label Bike Club, that came from Minneapolis and it started other small chapters around the country. There's one here in Reno now, or there has been for about ten years.

So that's how I got heavily into bikes, for sure.

What transitioned you from Oakland back to Reno?

Over the course of time I moved back from San Francisco to Reno. I was working as a bike messenger in San Francisco for three or four years, and my girlfriend, who was born in San Francisco, was tired of living there, so we decided we were going to take a trip to Europe for six months.

At the time, my mom was sick, so I said, “Well, we should go to Reno and see my mom, and maybe I could work for a couple of months. We could stay with her and save some more money.” We had saved a bunch of money and decided that we would do that. We got to Reno, and Bootleg had already been started by these other two guys very recently. It was about four months old at that time.

Who had started Bootleg Couriers?

Doug Moore and Chad Strand. They had started it about four months prior to me moving back here, and I had heard of it when I was in San Francisco through mutual bike messenger friends. Chad worked as a bike messenger in Seattle and that community is fairly small.

When we got back, my girlfriend at the time really liked it here, and I felt like I could buy into Bootleg and become a part of it and make it successful because of my experience as a bike messenger. So my girlfriend and I talked about it and decided to stay in Reno.

This was about 2008?

Uh-huh, it was 2008.

So you bought into the company. How did that all work?

Doug didn't have any experience as a bike messenger and he had never owned a business before. He was a very personable guy, and he was feeling the role as marketing person/personality. Chad had worked as a bike messenger in Seattle, but only for a year, and he had been riding bikes recreationally and racing bikes for a really long time, so that was his expertise.

I think they quickly realized that I understood the courier industry more than they did at the time, just because I had been in it for longer and I worked for a really small cooperative bike messenger company in San Francisco that was run really similarly called Cupid Courier. I'd worked for three different companies in San Francisco that were all very, very different—a mom and pop, a LLC big conglomerate, and then this small cooperative.

I think they both saw that I had knowledge in some areas that maybe they didn't. Plus I had saved up all this money, so I basically gave them a bunch of money, and they were really into that. [laughter]

As most people are.

Yeah, right? They were totally into that and it actually worked out really well. So I bought in and it was the three of us for about a year.

And is Doug no longer a part of it?

No, he's no longer a part of it. Chad and I bought him out a year and a half ago.

Were the terms he left on friendly?

No, it wasn't friendly. [laughs]

What happened?

He wasn't suited to the business aspect of it. He's a little older. Well, he's a bit older than Chad and I and has a couple of kids, so he has way different priorities and interests, which is completely reasonable, and it wasn't working because we weren't in a place to make a ton of money. I don't think he realized what it takes to operate a start-up, especially a start-up that is never going to make a ton of money. I don't think he was prepared for how long he was going to have to go on subsistence living, especially with a family at home.

That became really stressful to him and influenced his decision-making process and the direction he wanted to take Bootleg, which was completely different than the direction Chad and I wanted to take it. We're both young single guys and can go a long time running it the way that we want to run it which is not doing any advertising, not having some crazy office and not doing process service, which is a big part of our industry that's shitty and shady.

What is process service?

It's serving divorce papers to people. You have to be licensed to do it. Serving custody papers, lawsuits, or eviction notices.

Papers people aren't happy to get?

Yeah, exactly. Papers people are not happy to get. It's a lot more money, but it's really expensive. The licensing process is really expensive. It's an enormous drain on your resources. The payoff is definitely bigger than for regular documents, but for us it just wasn't what we wanted to do.

What do you guys want to do? What's Bootleg Couriers' mission statement?

I would say that we offer reliable, detail-oriented, eco-friendly delivery service.

How are you guys doing?

Good. We're super successful. It's been great. We've reached our target growth rates every year and exceeded them by quite a bit. We employ three people now, not including Chad and myself, which obviously are not employed.

Who are the other employees? I know Casey Clark's one of them.

Casey Clark, Dre Ballard, and Clark Demaret, who basically just drives for us here and there. So

we're able to employ some people. It's kind of been the backbone of this new venture that Chad and I started on Fourth, and we have eighty-five clients. We don't do process service. I would say 90 percent of our business is legal, and the other 20 percent is medical, and 1 percent is produce and foods. We deliver large bulk orders for the Great Basin Food Co-op on a super small scale, but they have this grant through UNR to do a farmer-to-restaurant distribution center. If they're able to get that off the ground like they plan to, it'll be a much larger part of our business, because we'll end up doing their delivery service from the farms to the food co-op and then they'll fill orders from there and we'll deliver it to restaurants in the community.

Would that be bike-based or would you be driving?

It would be driving to all the farms, but then all bike-based from the co-op to the restaurants. We'll see how that goes for them. It's definitely a pilot program. They received a very large grant to do the pilot program, but so far it's a little lackluster.

Do you think the eco-friendly aspect of your company has been key to its success?

No, I would say honestly, it's just something for our clients to talk about at dinner parties.

Really? [laughs]

They don't care. No one ever hires us because of that, ever. We maybe have one client because of it. I would say it might actually be a deterrent for many, because they don't think that we're capable of staying on a time schedule or they just don't trust it. They think that we're kids on bikes and they don't take us seriously. So I would say it's more of a deterrent, for sure.

How would you say your business model has spread? For example is it word of mouth?

The legal community here is small. I mean, we basically just knock on doors. Initially that was how we got our clients. They would see us bringing them documents from other law firms or from other court reporters or other businesses, and that's how they would see us everywhere, but we knocked on a ton of doors. We are everywhere all the time, so we know everybody. Because Reno's such a small town, anyone in the business community that's downtown or even not downtown we know, just because we're on the street constantly. So, word of mouth and just acknowledgement, seeing us around town and knocking on doors all the time.

And how do people recognize you on the street?

We have our business on our back, so our bags and our logos. Our logo and name is on our courier bags. So that's how. We have jerseys, but we don't wear them very often. [laughs]

That's the green and white stripe?

Yeah, or green and black now. I think that people now, especially for Chad and I, just know who

Chad and I are from seeing us all the time. I think because Reno's such a small bike community, especially downtown and especially in certain areas that we go to, we're like the only five people that they see on bikes. [laughs]

Really?

I would say so. I mean, not this time of year, but all through the winter and especially in certain areas of town. We're in Sparks a lot on Prater Way and no one ever rides their bike down there. If you're going to ride your bike over there, why wouldn't you take the bike path or Victorian? But we are, in that area.

What do you think about the Reno bike culture?

I would say it's small but blossoming. I think a lot of other towns draw on the commuter aspect of the bicycle, whereas Reno is definitely still in the recreational realm for cycling.

Recreational?

Like riding for fitness, basically.

Mountain biking?

Yeah, mountain biking, road racing, cross training, stuff like that. I think Reno has always been one of the best places for that because of the geography, but there are no bicycle commuters here, almost. Up at the university we see some, but downtown there are seven. [laughs]

There's seven of you? [laughs]

Yeah, but as a whole I wouldn't say it's even recognized as a form of transportation by the city or police or even residents of our community. I think it's mostly looked at as a form of recreation, whereas in other cities that I've lived, it's people's form of transportation.

Do you think that's going to transition over time?

I think that the city of Reno is somewhat doing what they can to ease that transition by creating bike paths and bike lanes and getting on board with bicycle advocacy, but I also feel like the general layout of Reno doesn't necessarily lend itself to bicycling. Business is super spread out here and far away from people's residences, which isn't necessarily a bad thing for cycling, but it is a deterrent to your average newcomer to bike riding. As opposed to riding three blocks to work, people are riding four miles. I think that will always make that hard here unless Reno does a rejuvenation of downtown where they push big business back into the city center.

What is the business address of Bootleg?

545 East Fourth Street.

What is your business space like?

It's a 5,000-square-foot warehouse based next door to the Reno Bike Project. There's a roll-up door in front and a man-door to the side of that. If you walk through the man-door, there's a common area where we have lockers, a couch, chairs, a coffee table, and a wall bike rack with all of our bikes.

Then just beyond that is our dispatch or our main office, which we dispatch from. Behind that is our warehouse space, which all only takes up about 600 square feet. In the other 4,500 square feet of warehouse, we have a coffee roastery, Magpie Coffee Roasters, that will be open in the next couple of months for retail coffee sales. Then we also have seven artists who rent studio space from us and then a large woodshop and metal shop.

What comes out of the wood and metal shop?

They're basically just my shops, but some of the artists are able to use them as well. If you pay to have a studio space there, those spaces are available to you as well. The artists don't use them a lot, but some of them do.

What did you guys have to do make the space to what it is now?

Everything.

Everything?

Yeah, it was a large antique store before. Through the course of traveling and moving around and doing these different various art projects, I was a part of three spaces that did that, two in Oakland and one in New York, where people moved into warehouse space, lived there, worked out of it and were able to turn it into a self-sustaining workshop and living space for themselves. I had always had the idea that it would be a really great thing in Reno.

Originally I thought that because the projects that I was working on for Burning Man were all happening in the Bay Area, that 40 to 50 percent of the grant money would go to transportation to get the pieces from San Francisco or Oakland to the Playa. I always thought that it was crazy that people wouldn't try to save a ton or half of their grant by working and living in Reno while they were doing the build. It's cheaper to live here and it's super comfortable for artists, because it's a small town. We just saw all that with the temple build. The food's cheap, people are nice, they can drink a lot and the Playa's right there. BRAF grants through Burning Man will no longer pay for transportation and I just always thought that why wouldn't you do it in Reno where transportation is not an issue. So I had this idea of bringing a warehouse like that to Reno for the past ten years, but didn't live here and it was in the back of my mind.

I don't drink alcohol but I do drink a ton of coffee because my mom managed a coffee shop when I was a kid, which helped the idea evolve to having a coffee space and workshops in the warehouse space. I had started the business plan years ago, but I didn't finish it until I moved back to Reno and just put it in a drawer and sat on it, always open to the idea of finding a space, but not really looking for one.

I had always thought the building next door to the Bike Project was awesome. I really like East Fourth Street—one, because of its history; two, because I feel comfortable there with that demographic of people; and three, the vibe in the neighborhood is one I've lived in my whole life, so I like it. I really liked the building, so when the building came up for lease I went and looked at it. My girlfriend and I had broken up, so I was leaving my house. I just thought, well, this is the perfect time for it. So we jumped on it and, to date we've done all the work in there.

You and Chad Strand?

Me and Chad, yeah.

So Bootleg Couriers originally didn't have that space?

No.

When did you buy the warehouse?

We just rent, but we moved into it in September of last year. We'd like to buy it. The building is considered to be the same building as the Reno Bike Project, so the same landlord. If we purchased it, we'd purchase the buildings together, not with the Bike Project, but we would own both buildings.

And you live in the space as well? It's your residence?

Yes. We are not supposed to. So that might have to be off record. [laughter]

I don't think it'll be a problem.

Well, my landlord knows, but the City of Reno doesn't know. [laughter] It's zoned mixed-use, so it's not necessarily illegal. We have a kitchen and working restroom facilities, so it's not as bad as it could be. If it was zoned commercial it would be super illegal, but it's not necessarily. It's kind of one of those things that's on the fence a little bit. So, yeah, we live there.

Are you guys producing anything that is going to Burning Man?

No, nothing's going to Burning Man. I had a huge falling-out with them. That was the original basis of the idea of a warehouse, that you could get national artists who were doing sculpture work for Burning Man to come to Reno and facilitate paying for your space for six months.

But I don't deal with Burning Man at all anymore. So now the space is definitely funded by Bootleg, first and foremost, the coffee shop, or the coffee roastery, and then subsidiary through the artists that rent the space. They pay a very small amount; we wanted to keep it super affordable for artists and really artist-friendly, and I think that we've been able to do that. They only pay a hundred bucks a month and have access to really nice shop equipment and a large shop if they want to do large-scale work. Their studios are cool and they have a kitchen area and stuff like that.



The storefront at 545 East 4th Street, home of Bootleg Courier and Cuddleworks, in June 2014.
Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Have all the studio spaces rented out at this point?

Yeah.

That's great.

And then some. [laughs]

Do you think other businesses in Reno had a Burning Man vision like you did or do you see that popping up in the more industrial part of Reno?

I don't think that anyone had a Burning Man vision like I did when I had it. I think that back then Burning Man was still—well people were like, what the hell is going on out there? I hadn't spent a lot of time in Reno other than for the past three years. I didn't come and visit very much when I left. But when I left, there was nowhere to buy supplies for Burning Man. Nobody really catered to people coming to Burning Man. Peg's would do great the week after when people were leaving, but it wasn't like it is now where even Whole Foods sells Burning Man supply kits and playa gear. It wasn't like that at all when I left. Especially when I was going to Burning Man, it was still mostly people from the Bay Area coming

and populating Burning Man. Now Reno has definitely gotten on board with that, which in some ways is really good. I think it's a great revenue generator for the community, but in other ways it's kind of corny and weird. [laughs]

It changes the idea of what it was.

It definitely changes the vibe. The son of the guy who started Burning Man is a super close friend of mine. He's really amazing and his idea behind Burning Man I still believe, is one of those things—it's one of those ideas that's so great and so pure, and then over the years because they didn't just kill it, it has become something that's super lame.

It's kind of like South by Southwest. It used to be really great for unsigned artists, and now Snoop Dogg's performing in a giant Cheeto-distributing machine or a giant Dorito-vending machine. You know what I mean? Burning Man started out great and really pure of heart and rad. The guy who started it, this guy Larry Harvey, is cool. He's super cool. Then he surrounded himself with six people who he knew really well and was friends with and went into business with them. Like anything it changes people, especially when you start dealing with millions and millions of dollars.

He saw Burning Man turn into this monster and he was like, "Eh, I'm good." He still goes, but he doesn't have any say over what goes on—he's like one of six LLC members.

So, anyway, I don't know how we got off on that. I think that people did have that idea, because people started going to Burning Man, like Dave Aiazzi, who's going to probably listen to this since he's the RTC guy, and started getting invited to parties in Oakland where they saw warehouse spaces like NIMBY or American Steel, which are these very prominent spaces that our space is directly modeled after on a much smaller scale. They started seeing these things and saying, "Oh, this totally works. Someone should be doing this in Reno," and they've sprouted up around here. Or at least people have tried to start them up, for example the Salvagery and Spencer Hobson who was able to get the Temple Build to his space on Hobson Square.

So they've happened, but they're not really sustainable, especially with Burning Man where it is now, as such a big business.

They'll probably get that Temple Build again in his big space, but you know a lot of those places, like Salvagery's closed. There was another spot, I can't even remember what it was called, but there was another Burning Man-esque workshop space on Kuenzli or East Second Street, but that one closed, too. I think people definitely saw the potential and jumped on it, but didn't really have a model that they knew was going to work for that and thought that Burning Man would carry them through, and I just don't think Burning Man's in that place anymore. Ten years ago you could have done that and ridden those coattails until now, but now doing that is over. For the BRAF, that incentive is totally gone. So what is the incentive of being in Reno when you could be in Oakland doing it in a bigger city that maybe you're from or has a larger pool of skilled labor or whatever it is? The cool factor. I don't know.

What would you say your day-to-day operations at Bootleg are like?

We start at 7:30. We have a large medical billing client that we take care of early in the morning. I pick up from all the hospitals in town. Then it's busy. I mean, we're 7:30 to 5:30 steady, working the entire time.

And that's riding from business to business, delivering things?

Yeah, totally. We have one person who drives. We take turns, because we go back and forth to Carson and Minden and Tahoe and Yerington, all over the place. So somebody's basically driving all day, also.

What type of bike do you ride?

I have a few different bikes, but for work I mostly ride this Kelly single-speed that I have.

Could you describe a single-speed?

Yeah, it's like a free-wheel but only one gear with brakes.

A lot of messenger companies don't let you ride those in other places, correct?

They'll let you ride those. Some won't let you ride track bikes. This one's a free-wheel, so you can coast and it has brakes. There are laws against track bikes. I think even in Reno there is. I think the rule for a qualified bike is you have to have brakes on your bike, but a qualified brake is that you can make a two-inch skid with your back wheel or something, which is super weird.

That's funny.

Some police in Reno will tell you that track bikes are illegal here and some won't. In other cities, I've never run into that, but I think that's the case in Seattle. Chad was telling me you have to have a front brake on a track bike. But I mostly just ride my Kelly. I like it.

Did you have any impressions of East Fourth Street prior to moving your business there?

When I lived here originally, one of the coolest clubs or punk venues for underage kids was called the Blue Lamp, and it was over there. So that was my first impression. I loved that. I liked that place a lot. They had some really great shows that were some of my fondest memories in Reno at that age. So there was that, and when I lived in other cities, I always lived in the industrial area. We are right across from Martin Iron Works. Our front windows look at Martin Iron Works and their yard. So I like it.

The Reno Bike Project was already there prior to you guys?

To us moving in? Yeah, totally.

Was that an influence as well?

Yeah, they're super close friends of ours. We would have moved in anyway, but it's nice to be next door to them. We joke about it, but we would love to take over that whole block of businesses. The thrift store is cool, we don't know the owner and there's Club Bass, which sucks. The owners are

assholes.

But the Underground owner is really awesome. His name is Remi. He's great, he's hilarious, he's French. He's trying to sell the idea to the City of Reno to designate East Fourth as the red-light district of Reno, which is my favorite. It's just so damn funny and because he's French, to him that seems totally legitimate. But it's such a tough sell to all these old white guys in Reno. I just imagine him telling them that and it just makes me feel happy. [laughter] He's hilarious, too.

So moving there had a lot more to do with the vibe of the street versus just the affordability of the street?

I would say the affordability is number one, for sure. I mean, everything over there is 40 cents a square foot right now. So it's the most affordable place to own or run a business in Reno. You can definitely get stuff for 10 cents a square foot in Sparks, but for Reno it's cheap, super cheap. Its proximity to downtown for us was really, really important for our company. So it's in a perfect area for Bootleg, the affordability is great, and then we just like it. I would say it's probably third, actually, on that list, but we do like the vibe, for sure.

What is Bootleg's relationship with other businesses other than the few you've mentioned?

I'm on the Board of Directors for the Holland Project and my involvement with them is enormous.

Could you describe what the Holland Project is?

It's an all-ages art, music, and activism initiative. We just recently moved into a little warehouse space on Vesta Street, which is down in midtown. That space houses a gallery, a show space for music shows, a library, and also a workshop space, which is mostly a city-funded workshop series for children, young adults, adults, or whomever wants to sign-up or come.

And how does that relate back to Bootleg?

We initially had an office space on Cheney Street, and Holland Project was right next door to us. We were on one side and they were on the other. So that's how. [laughs] Just that proximity, plus Chad was super good friends with them and they're all our age and doing similar social things, I guess you could say, in town, and I took a liking to them.

I was pretty troubled as a teenager and didn't have any outlets like that, especially in Reno. I felt like there was a huge void for that age group, especially as a twenty-four-hour town with gambling and tons of bars. So it struck me as a really great thing and I still believe in it and still think it is a great thing. I'm the treasurer on the Board of Directors and in the past year, we got this new space and I'm doing the whole build-out on it.

Oh, wow.

It's gone great and we're getting tons of national acts and nationally recognized artists in the gallery, and it looks amazing. We were able to reach our \$50,000 fundraising goal and then surpass it by

20-grand.

What do you think about the homeless shelter?

I love it. [laughs]

Why?

I don't mind it at all. I think it's crazy that it bothers people. In any other city in the country, there's always a homeless shelter—that proximity doesn't bother me whatsoever. There was a period in my life when I was homeless, so I can totally relate to that sort of demographic. I don't mind it whatsoever. Those people don't bother me. I don't think it increases crime on a serious level. Obviously, petty crime, for sure, but I think that that's more of a testament to social services in Reno for the mentally ill or people who are suffering from poverty than it can be attributed to having a homeless shelter. That is the only social service and it's a private enterprise, so I love seeing it. I think it's rad. I volunteer there once a month.

What do you do when you volunteer at the homeless shelter?

I help in the kitchen. I just started. It's me and Britt Curtis, who's the Executive Director of the Holland Project, who are starting to volunteer over there. We just serve food. It's cool.

What's the process to become a volunteer there?

They have a volunteer coordinator and you just talk to him, and then they do a small orientation and then see where you want to be in the place.

Do you think the homeless shelter has affected other businesses in the corridor in a negative or positive way?

It increases litter and there's definitely people sleeping behind businesses. That may be because of the train tracks, though. There's a reason that homeless shelters are built next to train tracks, because people are hopping trains to travel around if they're homeless and they want to travel. That's a huge part of the demographic. Maybe not so much nowadays, but it's still a huge demographic. It's the reason that homeless shelters are always so close to train tracks.

You think that's thought of by developers?

Totally. Totally. [laughs] I know it is. It's city to city to city and usually in smaller towns, as well. In bigger cities, not always, but in smaller towns, always. For example, The Salvation Army build their shelters within close proximity to train tracks for that sole reason.

You don't think it just has to do with the fact that it's an industrial area?

I think that could definitely be a part of it, but I've traveled around this country a lot by train. It's everywhere. [laughs] I really think there's a reason for that. There are probably a few different reasons, but I think they definitely think about that. You wouldn't build a homeless shelter in Spanish Springs—where is your community? If they're traveling, they're next to the train tracks, which 25 percent of homeless people are definitely traveling. So I think that it is thought of. I don't think it's a necessity or mandatory when they're looking for land, but I think it's definitely thought of.

What's your understanding of East Fourth Street's history?

I know it was the old Lincoln Highway. I know that it's got a lot of railroad history. Forever Yours furniture is either a state or national landmark by the railroad, as is 325 East Fourth, which is right across the street from Lincoln Lounge. Those two are both landmark buildings for the railroad. But that's pretty much all I know about it.

Have you seen any significant changes in the corridor since you've been there?

Not since we've been there, I haven't. I mean, it's only been six or eight months.

Or even just since you've been associated with Reno.

Definitely from about 2000 to now, there's been a huge change. It used to be a lot, a lot seedier. I think for me, the beginning of that change was probably the Lincoln Lounge.

In what way?

They took that building and converted it from a nearly Section Eight homeless crack motel to a nice bar and lofts. I sat on the board for Holland with one of the owners of Lincoln Lounge and Granite Street and that was their whole idea, to not gentrify but rejuvenate different areas around town and make a bunch of money doing it. I think it probably started with them and the baseball stadium. That baseball stadium is a crazy draw for that area and now the bus depot is great.

But as you move further east towards us, I think that there are a lot of businesses that you could handpick that would not have been there a few years ago. You know, Tutto Ferro, which is steelsmith Paolo Cividino. The Bike Project is amazing for that area. I think our space, when it's fully realized, will be really great.

I think it's happening all over town, but I think that in midtown and on East Fourth it's happening on a larger scale, East Fourth less so than midtown, but I think that could be directly attributed to how the street is laid out on East Fourth.

It's a busy street, you know. It's definitely not as seedy as it used to be, and I think it all started right there on that corner of Lake and Fourth or Evans.

Would you term it as a revitalization or gentrification?

I would say the city portion is definitely gentrification. But the privately owned business is rejuvenation, for sure. Our goal is not to gentrify Fourth Street. We like the homeless people, we like St.

Vincent's, we like all of that. We don't want it to go anywhere, whereas I think the city would prefer that it either go somewhere else or feel more hidden.

Do you think it's possible to really separate the two, to revitalize an area and not create gentrification through that process?

I totally think it is. I think when you create businesses where your target audience is both, like the Bike Project, for example. People pull up in Volvos and take out \$2,000 bikes to have their mechanics work on them there, and people bring in a bike that they got at the Salvation Army for them to fix their flat tire.

I think that, when you're serving both those demographics, that is when revitalization's totally in effect, whereas a homeless person is never going to go to an Aces game. [laughter] They're probably not going to come into our space and weld something, either, but I'll tell you what, they're more than welcome to hang out behind it. We don't care. We're all for it. In fact, I have a dump truck out there right now that's not working, and there are two homeless people living in it. [laughter] I just asked them not to go to the bathroom inside. I was like, "You guys do whatever you want. I don't care. But eventually it'll be running and then you'll have to find a new spot."

But I think it's possible. I think when the city gets involved, not on a personal level, they're influenced by the general idea of what it means to be homeless and what it means to have a large demographic of homeless people in an area. They look at those numbers and make decisions based on that, rather than asking, "Okay, what is our part in this and how can we make this community work together instead of just putting a Band-aid on it or moving it?" We have no social services for homeless or addicted or mentally ill people in Reno whatsoever and those services are being filled by private enterprise. They get to fucking choose where they want to be, you know. So I think that if they were to look at their part in that it would be huge for Fourth Street, because Reno's a perfect place. I am totally on a tangent.

That's all right.

Reno's a perfect place do a really progressive, fully encompassing social services program, because there's a lot of federal funding for it. There's a smaller community of those types of people here, so you could really track it. They're all in one area, basically, and there's a large population of addicted, mentally ill, and poverty-stricken families and singles in this area.

It would just be awesome. So much of that is going on around the country, but they have logistical nightmares that Reno just doesn't have. It would be really cool for Reno municipalities and Washoe County to be on the forefront of that and it would be super possible with the help of St. Vincent's and some of those motels down there, and I don't know, the hospitals, like Renown.

It's all right there, whereas in San Francisco, if you were being treated for addiction, you had to be bused out to Hunter's Pointe and then you had to come back downtown to your shelter. Then you had to go out to the Sunset for work and Job Corps. It was because it wasn't centrally located where you could have all these facilities be together, whereas East Fourth is that. Renown's there, St. Vincent's is right there, there's all those motels, there's all this land. It would be a really great thing for Reno to tackle instead of saying, "Oh, you can't sleep in a sleeping bag on Fourth Street, but you can on Fifth Street." That's their way of fixing it, which I think is crazy.

What did you think about the Tent City on East Fourth?

I loved Tent City.

Why?

Just because it was rad. It's just so funny to have a Tent City. It seems like the City of Reno bought up so many stupid buildings around town when the money was flowing, with the intention of creating city offices, or renting to create profit, to create revenue for the city, and now they're just eating it so hard. All those buildings over by Reno High are vacant. The city owns all that stuff.

It seems hilarious to me that they would allow people to set up a Tent City, even though it was run pretty well, instead of creating Section Eight housing for those people, Then to dismantle it, and not offer any solution to those people other than sleeping in my dump truck.

But I liked Tent City. It was cool to go down there sometimes and just hang out. [laughter] Weirdo people. There were some weird and funny people, so I thought it was cool. Plus, I just like the idea of a Tent City. It seems funny to me. [laughs]

Being on East Fourth, do you see the bar scene and the homeless scene mixing? What do you think that's creating?

I don't think it really creates anything. I think the types of bars are changing. When Lincoln Lounge was The Fourth Street Jazz Club, it was a spot for homeless people to go score drugs and get high in the motel above the bar. But that not what's happening on Fourth anymore. Maybe further, when you get to Dilligas, that's still the deal, but as far as Lincoln Lounge and Louis' Basque Corner and even Abby's which is kind of on the fence, are totally separate, completely separate, which I think is fine. You know those bars don't facilitate the negative behavior of somebody who's an alcoholic or a drug addict like they used to. They just do their own thing. Their clientele is a completely different person.

So I think that's good. That doesn't bother me. It used to be that those bars were definitely serving homeless people. I don't think so much anymore. I'm only talking about Louis', Lincoln Lounge, and Underground. Probably Davidson's, Dilligas, and even Abby's, are kind of still doing that sort of thing. I don't know.

Do you feel as though there's a sense of community in the corridor?

I think so. I do just because our best friends are the Reno Bike Project.

You've created your own sense of community.

Yeah, totally. They have six or seven employees. We have five. There are thirteen people with keys to our warehouse who are in and out. Three of the artists who are in our warehouse work at the Reno Bike Project. One of them is our employee also, Casey. So it's definitely this cross-pollination of folks. So for us, it feels like it.

And then Paolo's our good friend, who's the metalworker right across the street. He's a super

good friend of ours. And then the Lincoln Lounge guys, the head bartenders there are really good friends of ours and they get their bikes fixed at the Bike Project. I was on the Board of Directors with one of the owners of Lincoln.

But we don't ever get together on Fourth Street, other than between our two spaces, which is something that Remi has tried to spearhead and hasn't worked. He created that weirdo E4 thing. So that hasn't happened. I have a feeling this summer it will, because we're going to do a housewarming party at our place and I do this Artown event.

What's E4?

That's East Fourth Street's version of midtown. It's a Merchants Association. When Remi originally started it, he got all these businesses on board and then it was event-based. I'm trying to convince him to have all of these people on a list, in an email list and make it more activism-based—so show up to City Council meetings where they're talking about why the road diet hasn't happened on Fourth Street for the past eight years that they've been saying it would. Things like that, like “let's fix the street before we just start having a stupid bar crawl.” [laughs] Remi's on board with that, he's down with it. He's funny.

Is there anything that's going on in East Fourth Street that you don't want to see change, that you think is unique and valuable?

That I think is good?

Yes.

I think that the only way to get young, creative businesses, thinkers, or artists onto East Fourth Street is to keep property values low. If they go back up to what they were, you'll see all those things go away, for sure.

So, hopefully, those property values stay the same. That's nothing anyone can really predict or do anything about, but that would be the best thing for that street, other than some road construction.

Do you think transportation issues play a big role in the health of the corridor?

The city has a priority list for East Fourth Street. RTC does a priority list for the City of Reno and County of Washoe that they pretty much follow to a tee. Basically what happens is the City of Reno says, “We have \$20 million this year for road construction. Can you give us a list and prices in a priority order of what should be done?”

They do that every year, and every year East Fourth Street misses the mark. So certain City Council members keep saying, “Oh, this is going to happen, this is going to happen. You guys are right there.”

Basically what they're proposing to do is exactly what they did on Wells, create a center divider partway down, a median little island, and then give it a road diet— make it two lanes as opposed to four, and create a bicycle lane and parking. I think that if they actually did that, it would completely change the game on Fourth Street, because you'd go from a thirty mile an hour strip where people drive forty-five

because it's basically a freeway to a two-lane city street.

So currently it's a highway. It's four lanes and there are not very many stoplights. Once you get past Evans you can kind of just go for it to Sutro. I think that would completely change the game, just like it did on Wells. From when I lived here in 2000 to when I moved back in 2008, Wells became a completely different neighborhood, and I think it's 90 percent because of the construction that they did over there to change how that road works.

I think if they did that on Fourth Street, it would be awesome. That road is just not as busy as it used to be. There would never be a problem with a two-lane road over there. They've already discussed that. It just basically comes down to funding and priorities. So I think you'll see in the next five years.

What are the transportation safety issues that you see present?

Cycling down Fourth Street is ridiculous.

Why?

Because the car lanes are four feet wide. There's not a bike lane, the curb is actually out of code. It's a twelve-inch curb and curb code is six-inch curbs or eight inches max now. So the whole street is out of code.

But the city is able to say, "Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's out of code but we have a plan to fix it." Plus who's going to say anything? They could get sued if someone falls off that curb. It's dangerous to ride a bike down that street, super dangerous. Other than that, I don't see any transportation issues.

Do you think there are pedestrian issues?

No.

Sidewalks are big enough, and things of that sort?

Yeah.

What about parking?

Like I said, if you park on the street there's supposedly enough room, but we've lost two rearview mirrors and side mirrors on our car. It's just small and people are going fast and it's dark there at night.

Do you guys have parking at Bootleg?

No. We park on the street. Sometimes we park in our driveway. But it's sort of illegal to park there because you block the sidewalk. There's a back alley, but it actually belongs to S&S Metal. But I park my dump truck back there.

And it's now a house. [laughs]

Yeah, it's now a house. So we park on the street because we feel like it's safer.

What's the biggest thing that you would like to see done on Fourth Street?

That road construction.

Just the road construction?

Yes. I feel like that is a game-changer over there. I feel like property values will go up then; it's a total game-changer for that street. Right now it's almost impossible to have retail on East Fourth because of the condition of that road.

So I think it'll be huge. I think everyone over there agrees with me as well, so we'll see what happens.

I hear you have aspirations to be the mayor of Reno. [laughter]

Is that what Casey [Clark] told you?

A variety of people have told me that. [laughter]

I keep on saying that, but now I think I'm going to move. I keep on saying that. I love [Reno mayor] Bob Cashell as a person. He is hilarious. He gives money to the Holland Project, and he's just a cool guy. But as far as politically, he's a good old boy—not awful, but just older and out of touch, giving money to outside investors because they make lofty promises.

I think that Reno's funny that way, it never ceases to amaze me that they continue to subsidize outside commercial ventures downtown—for example, those stupid condos on Sierra. The Belvedere. They're completely bankrupt and vacant. There are only four units filled or something, and then ten years later they give the guy another million dollars in tax breaks and subsidies to do the stupid Comm Row. It's the same guy. Now that place is completely dead and desolate, and you've taken a Reno landmark and destroyed it. Who's going to come in and pay ten million dollars to tear down that fucking rock wall? [laughs] Nobody.

It's just like the Lear Theater. Granted, it was a privately done deal, but through the city. So the Lear Theater created a board, the Lear Board or whatever. They borrowed all this money from the state, but because they took it from the state and because Lear is a registered historical building, there are only certain things you can do with the building. But because the building is in such disrepair they never really thought it through and realized what the Historical Register said they could do with the building, but we can't do it for the amount of money that we're asking for.

We actually need three times that amount to get it back in order, because it's in a flood plain and it flooded like crazy, and blah, blah, blah. So they ask for all this money from the state, the state gave it to them, and then realized, oh, shit, we can't do what we want to do with it. Bob Cashell gave them twenty grand out of his pocket and the director of the board took a bunch of money, spent it unwisely, because there were no checks on any city funding. They were never like, "We're going to give you twelve million dollars but could we see some plans or a plan of action and some dates, and, you know, have our city planners revise it." They don't do any of that.

So instead, they just lose twelve million dollars and the Lear is sitting there empty with forty million dollars in state and federal liens, because they never fulfilled these grants. So anyone who comes into the Lear has to, off the bat, pay the liens.

They tried to shop it to the House of Blues, but the House of Blues said, “We have ten million. We’re willing to pay ten million for it, but we’re not going to pay thirty, it’s worth ten, because you have these liens.” So instead now the city just gave it to Artown, which is cool, I guess. So they’ll do something with a cool building. But shit like that seems crazy to me. I think City of Reno’s been running like that for a long time, you know?

Aces Stadium gets subsidies still. That’s great but in a lot of other places, mostly in California, when large outside developers come into a neighborhood and develop a neighborhood, it’s required of them to put X amount of dollars into a fund that goes to build city parks.

We don’t do that here. We give them money to build what they want to build and they don’t have to give back shit, and when they leave there’s nothing to hold them accountable for the subsidies or the money that they borrowed against the City of Reno or the taxpayers of Reno. It’s crazy, I don’t know why, but it continually happens. Meanwhile it’s the hardest thing ever to be a local business here. For example the Carters own Ace Hardware, Bernie and Tim Carter. They’re kind of crazy, right-wing dudes, but I really get along well with Tim. They’re redeveloping basically all of midtown. Bernie bought it up like crazy and they’re developing it. They run into so many roadblocks with the city and they started doing something that was really smart, I thought. Every time they go to the city, they write down the date, the time, who they spoke with, first name and last name, and exactly what happened, because they were running into so many times where they talked to one person who said one thing and then someone else said something else.

Then they take their notes and they have lunch with Bob Cashell, and they say, “Hey, one of your city planners told me it was cool to put the septic tank twenty feet off of the main throughway, and when we did that, the inspector came down and told us we had to stop and move it five hundred yards off.” I don’t know if this is the reason, but the whole city planning office just got fired two months ago, like cleared out. [laughs]

I guess you’re saying it’s easy for big business in Reno.

Right, it’s super easy for big business. They just push it through, you know. But, I think the Holland Project ran into the same thing where they gave them a building and took it away, and blamed it on all these crazy code compliance things. So, we’ll see. I do think Aces Stadium is great, but it seems like there are so many other things, too, that deserve an equal amount of attention.

You had mentioned that you think you’re moving away from Reno. What does that mean for Bootleg?

We had always started Bootleg with the intention of selling it. Chad went to school to be a physical therapist. I have aspirations to do other things. It was a means to an end for us a little bit. I think that barring any unforeseen things in the next five years, we would probably sell Bootleg, on one contingency, that whoever operates it, operates it the same way so that bicycles are still used. We never set out to have it be our lifetime career.

We’re on the way to the place that we really wanted it to be at, as far as how much money it makes and its influence on the community and now the space. We’re probably halfway there. Once we

get the other the rest of the way, I'm sure that we'll look at parting ways with it. That was always the intention of Chad and I. Not Doug so much, but Chad and I for sure.

Is there anything that you want to add to wrap it up?

Said my piece. [laughter]

Great. I appreciate it.

WILL DURHAM

Neon Sign Collector



Will Durham at the exhibit of his neon signs at the Nevada Museum of Art in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

A native of Reno, Will Durham is a collector of vintage neon signs from throughout Nevada and other parts of the United States. After graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno, he worked in film and commercial production in Los Angeles, and moved back to Reno in 2005. An exhibit of selected neon signs from his collection appeared at the Nevada Museum of Art from October 2012 through February 2013.

Catherine Magee: I'm here with Will Durham inside the Nevada Discovery Museum in Reno, and today is March 29, 2012.

Will, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Will Durham: Yes.

Thank you very much. I really appreciate you talking to us about your interest in neon. First, I'd like to get a little background about you, and I was wondering if you can tell me if you grew up in Reno.

I did. I was born at St. Mary's [Hospital] in 1973. I was the only boy born that night, so I was the only blue blanket. I grew up in Reno, went to Veterans Elementary, then Vaughn Middle School down the street, and then a little bit further down and to the right, I went to Wooster High School.

Did you continue on to UNR?

I did go to UNR, and I took a break because I thought that I was interested in hotel management at UNLV. I went down for a semester and I realized that my interest in that was not through that school. So I went back to UNR and got my degree in finance.

Finance, that's interesting. Did you have any experiences in school, besides going down to UNLV, that stick out in your mind here in Reno?

Well, not so much. It wasn't my favorite time. I mean, I enjoyed it. It was okay, but they weren't my best years. I don't remember college as being the good old days. I was pretty serious about school and I was working very hard at the time, so it wasn't one of my fondest memories.

How about your professional experience? It sounds like you have a pretty diverse educational background.

Well, the reason I chose to get a degree in finance was that I always have ideas for big projects and entertainment-related projects. So the one common thread was always financing, and that was the way to make it real.

I tailored my major with permission. It was focusing on motion-picture finance. I always was interested in the film industry. So I just decided that I was going to work on movies. I originally thought I was going to be in front of the camera, and my first experience was on a movie called *Hard Eight*, which was Paul Thomas Anderson's first movie. He later did *Boogie Nights*, and he's a very successful director, but his first movie was here [in Reno].

I was in a scene with Samuel L. Jackson right after he was nominated for an Academy Award, and I thought that that was going to be my calling. I thought it was great. I was a valet attendant at the Peppermill [Casino], and it took place at the Peppermill. I played a valet attendant at the Peppermill, so it wasn't too much of a stretch.

I thought that that was going to be it until I did—I guess they're called a cold-read audition, which was horrifying. It was just walking into a room with people who aren't very interested, with their arms crossed, and you're supposed to act out a section of the scene. It didn't go well. I changed my mind a little bit.

But I always wanted to be involved in film, so for the last ten or twelve years I've worked in film, in the art department. I've done set dressing, art direction, and props. I started out working mainly on

movies, and then videos, and at the end of my film career, I worked mainly on commercials. I still work on commercials occasionally.

Then when I moved back to Reno from Los Angeles, I was thinking what I could possibly do to stay that would be interesting, because the film industry is very interesting and it's challenging, it just keeps your mind moving. I wondered what I could possibly do in Reno during one of the worst economic downturns that would keep my interest. I was lucky enough to find a job at the Nevada Discovery Museum working in exhibits, which it's very similar to what I did in motion pictures, creative project management.

That's really cool. Now I want to go back to the art department. I don't think you mentioned that you had moved to L.A. Can you give me a timeline of you got into the movie at the Peppermill?

I can try. It's a little chopped up because I did a lot of film-industry work in Reno. At the time I had moved back to Las Vegas for a little while, but I was still working. The contacts that I had made were in Reno. So I would get jobs on like a commercial or a film, like the film *The Cooler*, but I was still living in Las Vegas, and I would have to come here to work. Then I moved from Las Vegas to Los Angeles three days before September 11, 2001, but I was still going back and forth, working in Reno from Los Angeles.

Then when I moved back to Reno in about 2005, I still worked in Los Angeles. So I've been commuting. I commuted back to Los Angeles, so I've never really worked in motion pictures in the city that I live. My schedule never seemed to work.

Is there a big film industry here in Nevada or in Reno?

No, not at all. There used to be a lot more. We used to get a lot of movies and there was actually commercial work for the casinos, and there was a company in town where we did some projects like toy companies and some bigger jobs. But a lot of that dried up, and a lot of the casinos started doing their commercials in-house. There really hasn't been the number of movies coming through Reno as there was in the past. The last major movie that came through was *Love Ranch*, which just didn't seem to do very well. But there used to be a lot of movies coming through, and I worked on several.

Is there a business that you worked for or did people just know you by reputation to work on these movies?

Mainly just freelancing. It's interesting when you work in film, being able to trace how you've gotten the connections you have. It's fairly easy. You remember working on that, and you met someone who introduced you to that, and people like to work with people who they know will do a good job and have a good attitude. So the connections you make aren't just about knowing someone; they're about people wanting to replicate the experience they had on a previous project. Because the work is very difficult, you want to work with people who you know can come through. In the film industry, there's no margin for error. Everything has to happen as planned. So to answer your question directly, it was mainly freelance work. If you didn't work for one company, you'd have several people who you worked for and they'd call you when they get work.

That's interesting in that you can be pretty mobile with that.

Yes, but it's mainly in Los Angeles. Living in Reno and working in Los Angeles is okay because you go down for a week or two, but now I have a family. I have a wife and young daughter, and there's no way that I could be gone that much. We wouldn't want to move there because we're attached to Reno. It just wouldn't work. Occasionally I go back for a commercial, but with the amount of time I was gone, it's not right for a family.

You said that working in the museum here is actually really similar to the film industry. That isn't a connection that I would make. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Obviously it's different, because working in commercials and film, the pace is really fast and it's very short-term projects. The way you build is for short term. But basically, working in a museum, you can make the connection to working on a film. There's a lot of planning, which would be like screenwriting, and then there's a lot of pre-production. That's getting the vendors together and finalizing the plans.

It's basically working with creative people, with the outcome being a creative endeavor. In the museum it's an exhibit, and in film it's the final project, whether that's a music video or commercial. It's trying to harness different skilled people and assets into something that works for what you need, whether it's building a set that looks like a fire station or building a catapult for the museum. Does it meet the goals that you're trying to achieve, and then once you've established that it does, how do you actually make it happen? It isn't necessarily glamorous, but you just hope the end result is fun and what you had in mind. It's a trick to actually get all those creative pieces together. It takes a lot of wrangling.

A lot of times you're carrying out the ideas of other people but bringing your sensibilities to it. So it isn't always coming up with projects from scratch. A lot of times I feel that at this museum I'll have that liberty, which is exciting to me, within the framework of what we're doing here, to be able to come up with an idea and then present it and then carry it out. That, to me, is the most exciting, to be able to start from nothing. It starts with a thought and then carries it out to something that other people can enjoy. That's the reward of this, is being able to actually carry it out, have an idea and have the means to bring it to fruition.

It sounds like it's a really good working environment.

Yes. It's challenging. There's a lot to do, because in film you generally have enough people. You work very hard but there are a lot of people. In the museum industry, you don't have as many internal resources. You're relying on outside vendors a lot more, and so it's just different in that way.

Thanks for talking about that because I just never would have made the connection.

I had to make that connection on my résumé to say why I would be a good exhibits person in a museum with no museum experience. So I needed to convey that in my résumé. I guess it works. I'm here.

I was wondering if you could talk about your interest in neon and how it got started.

It didn't start out as a massive preservation effort. It was much simpler than that. I remember people asked me how I originally got interested in neon, and I really needed to think back. I think I have developed a foundation. When I was a child, I had trouble sleeping. I didn't want to go to sleep, initially. I just wanted to stay up and bother my brother, and I'd ask him ridiculous questions. He was four years older, so maybe he was on a little bit of a different level. We shared a room, and eventually he moved out of our room into the basement.

So I was by myself and I didn't like that very much, so I would always do things to try and not be the last one asleep. If we were watching a movie as a family, I would leave twenty minutes early to try to get a head start going to sleep, because I just hated the idea of being the last one. My mother always read before she'd go to bed. I knew that she'd read for at least half an hour. So if I tried to go to bed twenty minutes before the movie ended and I knew that my mom would be awake for at least another half hour, I had a little window. If I ever wasn't able to get to sleep, I could look downtown and I'd see the glow from the casinos, and with the casinos I knew that I wasn't the last one, that there were other people who were still awake.

I also remember going downtown to watch a movie—I think it was *The Electric Horseman*—in a downtown theater. Most locals didn't go downtown that much. Especially then, there was not that much to do as a family. But I remember going to the Granada and seeing *The Electric Horseman* and the lights of downtown. I remember driving along Virginia Street and seeing this wild display of lights. From the river to the Reno Arch, each business had fifty to a hundred feet of frontage, and basically they all had the same product, so their signage was what differentiated the venues, and it was like a light circus.

That's the name of what I do now, The Light Circus. I think of it like that was; driving down Virginia Street you'd have the Mapes cowboys, you had the Primadonna girls, the Nevada Club cowboy, and just the sheer volume of lights. As a child, it's kind of ridiculous when you think about it; it has no real practical value, but it was exciting to see.

I went back and watched *The Electric Horseman* recently, because I just wanted to see it. There's a scene in there when Robert Redford rides the horse down Las Vegas Boulevard past all the casino lights, and they actually do a montage of neon signs. So I think that that may have planted the seed.

Then much later I was in Seattle, and there was a place called Ruby Montana's Pinto Pony, home furnishings for the twentieth century, and it was a great store. Whoever Ruby Montana was, she had a great eye. It was really different stuff. It was when retro was coming back. But it was really different stuff. It wasn't just your fifties' tables. It was really interesting stuff.

They had a neon sign in there from a chop-suey place, and I loved it. It was politically incorrect, but it was just so stylized—the clean illustration lines and the color—and it was beautiful. It was figural. It had the Chinese man, and it said "Chop Suey." It was the first time I realized that a sign could be separated from the building, that if the business closed, the sign could have a new life.

Then when I was back in Reno, it was such a time of change. Everything was coming down. A lot of things were closing. Parker's [Western Wear] was closing after seventy-five years, and some motels on Fourth Street. I still don't remember which was my first sign. I don't remember if it was Parker's. I think it was the Zephyr Motel, a diving swimmer. I think that was the first one.

But I didn't get it out of a preservation effort. I had a house that I shared with some roommates, and I had a really large sunroom as my room, and I turned it into a lounge. I had some naugahyde bar booths that I'd gotten, and I just thought it would be cool to have them in there. I liked vintage clothes, and I just thought that that would be really neat to have.

So once I'd gotten that sign, all these other signs were, all of a sudden, in play. The Parker's sign was coming down, Harolds Club was closing, the Nevada Club was closing, the Mapes was about to be torn down, the Holiday. Everything was happening. It was just all of a sudden that I realized that if I didn't get these, that they wouldn't exist anymore, because there was no preservation effort. The only preservation effort for the signage on Virginia Street was the Harolds Club mural. But if I didn't get these, they would be gone. So I did what I could to save them, and that's how it became a little bit more than just an interesting collectible.

You mentioned putting the Zephyr Motel sign in your room, but it sounds like you couldn't put all these other signs in your sunroom. What happened when you started collecting more?

A lot of times you don't understand how big these are. You're looking at them from the ground, and thinking, "Oh, is that ten feet?" So they're really deceiving, and so is how much they weigh.

I remember when I took the Zephyr Motel sign down, a friend of mine and I were going to just stand on the top of a pickup camper, and we had no idea how much these weighed. I remember trying to take that one down, and realized the thing probably weighed 250 pounds, and we were in a really awkward position and we almost were crushed by the sign, but we were able to get it down safely. These things are awkward and they don't store nicely.

When I was younger, I collected bottle caps and you could collect your whole life and they'd go in a few bins. But these are really difficult to store. There would be times when I just had to do whatever it took. When the Parker's sign was coming down, I didn't really get a chance to measure it. Actually, when I went to go get the sign, the sign company had already taken it down and it was already on the flatbed. I realized it was twenty-six feet long. I arranged with my next-door neighbors to store it in their yard. I mean, it was a massive sign. I have a picture of the crane setting it in their yard, and they built something to protect it.

It all happened so fast. This change was just happening. Then there'd be some that would be in storage units. I got a sign from Las Vegas that, if you stacked it all together, would be twenty-nine feet tall. That would be two storage units. I'd find people who had land and I would move some signs.

You'd have to get a bunch of friends to help you move this heavy, metal, dirty sign, with broken glass and jagged metal. You can wear out favors pretty quickly, but it was everything I had to do just to get this. They were in different places, and then I stored some at a sign company's yard. They actually threw away some of my signs, which was pretty brutal. That was heartbreaking, but, fortunately, they didn't throw any of the signs away that were just—there are certain ones that, to me, I'm so close to that I don't know if I'd ever be able to get over them being destroyed. These were nice signs, but they weren't like that for me.

Do you remember what they were?

One was the Starlite Bowl sign. To be fair, it was not the bowling pin. I had missed that. I missed that by a day. When I found out they had taken it down, it was already in a landfill. I called the landfill and had people go check, and it had already been destroyed. So this was the bowl part, which was really interesting. I don't know if it was Google style, but it felt like that. It was interesting on its own.

The other was from the Domino Motel in Las Vegas, which is a big sign. I still have parts of it, but it was the main part that said "motel" and "heated pool," I think. But those were gone. Then one of

my signs was the Buffalo Bar. Actually, some of the Harolds Club letters were damaged there. I made that decision that I needed to control where these are. I bought two diesel trailers, forty-five-foot trailers, and I put most of my signs in there. That was a while ago, and my sign collection has grown, so I don't know if they'd all fit in there. They're in different places. We're actually consolidating them now for a project, so that's nice to have them all together.

I want to get back to one thing that you said, and then go on from there. You said the Starlite Bowl sign was a Googie style. What does that mean?

Googie style is kind of fifties' diner style. It's something like the old Denny's with the slanted roofs. It's the signage that would go along with like a fifties'-style diner, like the slanted roofs of Bob's Big Boy and Denny's. It's really associated a lot with diners. I'm not an expert in Googie architecture, but I have a decent idea of what it is.

There's some of that around town.

Yes, there's a little bit left. I think Jack's Diner in Sparks, right off of Fourth. I don't know where Fourth Street quite ends, but it's right around there.

To wrap up what we were talking about before, you talked about now you've taken more control of where you store your signs, in some trailers, and it sounds like you've collected more signs than you have room for in your diesel trailers.

I have crazy things that don't fit. I have the twelve-foot leprechaun from Fitzgerald's. It's not neon, but it goes with some of the signage.

So it sounds like you collect associated things then, too, not just the neon.

It's not all neon. I collect a lot of things, but how are you going to turn down a twelve-foot-tall papier-mâché leprechaun with a big pipe? It's hard to turn down, because if I don't save it, then who will? Where's it going to go? I collect a lot of things, but my main thing is mainly neon signs—and signs with incandescent bulbs, too.

When you talk about taking down these signs, are there electrical and wiring issues? Do you know how to take care of that?

No. I've learned the hard way what not to do a few times. I have been shocked very badly a few times, and I've learned to wire a little bit. I consider these to be museum-quality artifacts, so I want them wired correctly. Some of them are animated, so it's a lot of electricity and it can be dangerous if it's done incorrectly. Occasionally I will rewire a sign, but I would only do it when it's very simple.

I was about to take down the Buffalo Bar in Sparks, and, as I said, it's hard to gauge how big a sign is from the ground. Before you take it down, you want to know where you can store it. I went on top of the building, with permission, and I decided I was just going to measure the sign. There's a ledge on the edge of the building, and I leaned over and I extended my tape down. It was kind of windy that day

and it blew it into an exposed electrode. I didn't even realize what had happened. I just felt like I was shocked by a swarm of bees.

A lot of times when these sign companies maintain these signs, they don't always go all the way through the steps, like removing the old transformers or covering all the exposed electrodes. For some of them, the only thing that's going to hit them is birds. There are a lot of dead birds there. The other time, I was just using a transformer incorrectly. It does hurt. It hurts.

So you have to disconnect the signs when you remove them from buildings?

A lot of times I use professional sign companies just because of the needs of whoever owns the building, because they would require that. So a lot of times they would make sure that the electricity is off. Obviously, I always have to make sure that before I do anything, that the electricity is off. Now I've learned more about being able to test, just to make sure that they're not hot, because it could be quite dangerous.

You mentioned the sign companies maintain these signs. Is neon still used?

Sure. A lot of times, with the main neon company in town, they would lease the signs. You'd enter into a contract where you didn't own the sign, but as long as your business was open, you'd pay a certain amount and that would ensure that the sign would be properly maintained. With a lot of the sign companies, there's a job where you drive around and check the neon and bulbs in signs at night, and keep a log of what needs to be repaired. I was thinking that would have been my ideal job at certain points because I do that anyway. I do it for free. But I was just thinking that that's such an interesting job, especially in a city like Las Vegas or Reno. I guess it would get old.

I'm having a bit of a hard of a time wrapping my head around the idea that there would be a specialized sign created, say for a casino, that the casino doesn't own but the sign company maintains.

I think the casinos a lot of times have their own maintenance people. At the Peppermill they have a lot of neon and they have their own neon shop. Occasionally maybe they would contract out if they needed a crane, but a lot of the leasing would be on motels or just mom-and-pop places where they don't want to deal with it. They build in the cost of doing business. So it's kind of like insurance. You're thinking, okay, if this neon breaks, am I going to have to pay \$500? It's just like with any insurance. That would guarantee that someone is looking out for the sign, and when there was a problem, that it would be addressed quickly.

So they would pay to have the sign created, but then have the insurance policy. I guess I misunderstood that the sign company would create it and lease it to the building so there's some sort of payment to create the sign for your building.

Yes. If you look at how the Boneyard in Las Vegas was formed [The Neon Museum Boneyard, a collection of rescued and donated signs], a lot of those signs that ended up in the sign company's yard there—YESCO—had been leased. So when they came down, they ended up in the YESCO yard. I think they probably had a lot of space back then, because I know that the sign companies now don't like to have

things in their yard long-term. That's how those signs accumulated in the Boneyard; they were the end of leases, and someone probably thought that they were worth saving, so they didn't scrap them, thankfully.

You mentioned that the signs that were damaged weren't necessarily your favorites. So it sounds like you probably have some signs that are your favorites. Can you tell me what some of those are?

Well, one is the Buffalo Bar. That sign, to me, is what makes a neon sign. The shape of it is kind of an abstract shape, and a martini glass is pouring out the shape of a buffalo head. Signs nowadays are rectangular, they're easy to make, backlit. What makes a sign expensive is the figural design work. That's complex metal work and it's not fast. So with the Buffalo Bar, I just love that sign.



Will Durham in front of the Buffalo Bar sign at the exhibit of his neon signs at the Nevada Museum of Art in 2012.
Photo by Patrick Cummings.

I do rounds of where these signs are, to make sure that nothing's changing, and I would always drive by that sign to see if anything was changing. You hear things that are going to happen, and with that one I found out that the person to talk with was in Las Vegas. I would call this man, and he was so nice. He would always thank me for calling. He was just a great guy, and he would just say, "Well, you know, give me a call in two weeks. We'll see." Because it was going to change, it was going to close, but they

didn't know when. He was just so nice to deal with. I felt good about that.

I could see it when I would fly into the Reno Airport. I could see it from the air. It was just so neat. When a sign would get close, when I knew that it was close, I always seemed to just keep driving by the sign, stalking it, just watching it and also planning on how I'd get it down.

So when it was getting close to the time for that sign to come down, he told me to talk to this man in Reno—I think he was the manager—that he would be the one that I would have to make the final deal with. There's also a delicate balance of showing interest in a sign, because before they were probably going to pay to have the sign taken away, but the second someone shows interest in it, all of a sudden it seems valuable. This guy told me, "Well, you know, I don't even know what we're going to do with the sign. I think we're going to blow it up as a publicity stunt." To hear that is horrifying, but it's also such a ridiculous idea that as a publicity stunt you're going to blow up something with metal and mercury shrapnel. I think that would be hard to get approved. Nevertheless, it worked, and it scared me to the fact that I needed to preserve that sign. So I got that one.

Another one of my favorites is the Nevada Club sign. It's figural; it's the guy—I know it as Bucky Buckaroo, the figural shape and the shape of Nevada waving—designed by Lew Hymers, and that's a porcelain sign. The older signs and the better-made signs were made out of porcelain, which is just gorgeous still, because it never ages. It's just gorgeous.

So instead of being metal like you were talking about with the buffalo, the neon is applied to porcelain?

The porcelain is on top of the metal, but it almost feels like a bathtub. When you clean it, if it isn't chipped, you can get it to look like it did when it was new. A lot of times, the best part of these signs is the patina that the paint acquires over time which makes it beautiful, and the way the paint fades and cracks, that's beautiful. But with these porcelain signs, you can make them look as they did when they were brand new, and it still has a vintage feel just because of the material.

So those are two of my favorites. Also the Mapes signs, the Mapes cowboys, those are a great, great design, and I went through a lot to get those. There's a sign from California that I worked on for years and years and years to get, and it was a guy from Van Ness Auto. In what I do, called The Light Circus, he's the ring leader. He's a cartoon guy, and in one hand he's welcoming visitors, and then in his other hand he has his fingers crossed. So you just realize or you just think, what is he ushering me into? He's become the face of what I do. I worked for many, many, many years with different owners of the property to get that sign.

When you say "worked to get a sign," would you mind elaborating a little bit on the process?

Well, it is work because that sign is a perfect example. You have to track down the owners. Maybe it's my technique, but you have to find out who owns the building, and you have to track down the person who can give you the yes or no. So I found the owner, I called him, and he said, "Yeah, I can do that." It was the easiest ever.

I said, "Wow, that's just amazing." He just wanted to trade. I would have maybe a martini glass made. It didn't go that easy. He had to talk to his wife, and then his wife said, "Maybe we'll talk to our designer, because they're designing a new den." It ended up then that they needed to talk to a lawyer because they weren't sure if they could sell the sign from the building since they were leasing it. Then it became about the lawyer, and then they sold the business. So all that work that I'd done before was

worthless, and I needed to start over with the new owner.

Working on these, it's basically letting the person know that you're the right person to have this sign and that you will respect it and that you will be a shepherd for the sign, because a lot of times these signs are family-owned. Like with Parker's, that took a lot of work because he wanted to know, "Well, why should you have the sign?"

Sometimes it's working on people, asking them, "Well, can I call back?" Because you know the sign is going to come down at a certain time you hear a business is being sold. So it's just keeping up, just making sure that you don't miss it, because the worst thing ever is to drive by a building and find that the sign's gone, because you know where it is; it's probably in the scrap yard or it's just gone.

At times it gets easier once you establish a track record. There's the Boneyard in Las Vegas, but in Nevada, I'm the person who has cared for these. The more signs you get, the more it seems obvious that you're where they should go, like getting the Mapes signs or Parker's. Being able to explain that I got Parker's helped. People would say, "Oh, okay. Well, if you have that one."

Then I got an award for historic preservation, and showing my signs publically, being able to say that I have a show coming up at the Nevada Museum of Art, shows that I'm serious and that what I'm doing is, I guess, worthwhile in their eyes. It makes it easier.

A lot of times you also deal with people who are doing demolition work. A lot of times in a demolition contract, say, for instance, with Harolds Club and Nevada Club, when a company gets the demolition contract—I think they were from out of town—part of what they get is everything that they can salvage from the building. So that includes the copper, all of the salvaged metal, and other things if there are any.

When that happens, you're dealing with people who do not care about the historic value. They want to know, "What can I get from this?" So it goes back to the idea that they previously were going to scrap it for a dollar a pound, but now that I've shown interest in it, then they see blood, and they realize that I need the sign. Sometimes it's a long, difficult dance, and it doesn't always work.

Are there some sad signs that slipped through your fingers?

There have been a few. There was a sign up in the Holiday. There were a couple sad things at the Holiday Hotel. They had great neon, that whole giant wall just filled with neon.

Is this in Reno?

Yes, right here. There was a small sign that said the Holiday Bar on this corner. I drove by it every day when I'd go to UNR, and I just loved this sign. This is when they had closed and they were remodeling. I still hadn't been able to get a hold of the proper person to give me the yes or no. The secretary who I spoke with was really hard to get around, but I figured I'd just have to do it a different way. I drove by that sign all the time, and I just loved it. It was porcelain. It was clean. It wasn't big, and I just knew that I wanted that one in my lounge.

So one day I was looking at the Mapes signs, because that was around the same time, when they were about to go, and I looked across and I could see where it was. I just noticed instantly that the sign was gone. I thought, "What happened to the sign?" I researched it, because there were still some other signs on the building, but that was the one that was a manageable size and that was the one that I wanted.

I did some research and I found out that there's a man from Wisconsin who owns a converted

dairy and he has all these neon signs. The way he acquires them is that there's a certain car he buys throughout the Midwest. I think it's an Opal. I'm not quite sure. But he drives them to the West Coast and he ships them, I think, to Europe. Somewhere it's a sought-after car. So he's found this business niche.

What he does, though, is he drives all around the United States, and he has this car carrier that has a crane pick on it. He would buy these neon signs. He had the truck and the crane, he could take them down. He could make deals quickly. Sounds like an interesting guy, but if he's poaching the signs in Reno—I mean, I would probably do the same thing—but that sign from the Holiday Bar, I will never see again and the people in Reno will never see it again. It's basically gone.

How did you find out it was that guy?

I'm not sure. I think I got a hold of someone at the Holiday who told me that. Now I realize that there were other people trying to do this. This brings me back to another one of my favorite signs, the Merry Wink Motel. I needed to secure this sign. This sign could not, could not disappear. So I went down and I spoke with the owner, and they had no intention of selling. They weren't going anywhere, and it was a functioning hotel. I made them a deal. I said, "Can I buy the sign, and you can keep it up as long as you're operating? Then if you sell it, then I can take it down." So they sold me the sign. He was an attorney, so it was all legal. So that one I secured. It was still here.

Years later, there was a feature article about me and what I was doing in the Reno Gazette, and it was above the fold, so you could see it in the newspaper machines, which is kind of funny. I get this call from this guy who sounded kind of frantic, and he said, "Is this Will Durham?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Do you own the Merry Wink Motel or do you own the sign?"

I said, "Yes." Because I was actually standing in front of that sign. And he was just so upset. I found out that it was the man from Wisconsin. He had tried to get the sign, and I just was thinking I was certainly glad that I had done that. I paid the money in advance, but I'd made sure that the sign is still here. So the sign is still up today. The motel has new owners, but I'd like to keep that sign up as long as possible because it's fairly safe and people still see it. Not so much just because it's out of the way, but my goal isn't to take the signs down; it's to preserve them in any way that I can.

I never really thought that there's a neon sign poacher driving around. Well, maybe he's not a poacher.

I know. It's a scary thing. Well, I think he is. I mean, I'm sure I'd like him. I like what he's doing, but it's an immediate threat to what I'm doing, and that was scary.

With the Holiday, too, there's a sign above the valet in the Holiday Inn script. It's porcelain, this beautiful sign. I was talking to the owner to get that one. I was stalking it, as I do—not stalking, but if I have an errand or something, I think, "Oh, is that anywhere near there?" And I make it part of my route. I drove by once and a backhoe was ripping the sign. I called and I said, "I offered to buy this. I don't understand." Luckily, there was still another sign on the river side of the property. So I did get a sign from the Holiday, but there were some real heartbreaks there that were just pretty brutal.

There have been a few others, but mainly the signs that I needed to have I got. Actually, one thing that's kind of sad, that is still a mystery, is that I made a deal with the City of Reno to trade the letters from the Harolds Club mural. They took down the pieces of the mural, but they didn't take the lettering above the mural that said "Dedicated in all humility to those who blazed the trail." They left those up

there, and as part of the deal to get the Nevada Club and Harolds Club sign, I bought everything. So I took those down.

I made a deal with the city to reunite that with the mural in exchange for the Mapes signage, because the Mapes signage was just taken down and it was in the city corp yard. When we did the exchange and I went to go get the Mapes signage—in each set of Mapes letters, the M, there's two cowboys—their legs cross, their chaps cross to form the M—and all the cowboys, all four of them, because there's two sets of those letters, were gone. So this trade that I'd done with the city and that had to be approved by the Historical Resources Commission was all useless. Those cowboys, that's the signs, that's what's important, and they were just gone.

It became a big deal with the city because the Mapes was a real hot-button issue, and it was the only building in the [National Trust] eleven most endangered buildings to actually be torn down. So it was a hot-button issue. The police were involved because I think the city thought it would get ugly if this was a final insult to the Mapes.

The next day one of the cowboys was found. It just showed up. Someone realized what had happened. They tried to tell me, they said, "Oh, it got run over by a—," and I know it didn't. I know that they were stolen.

Years later, maybe two years ago, I was on Craigslist and I would just occasionally just look up neon or Mapes or anything. I see this thing, and I realize it's one of the cowboys.

In the meantime, what I had done is I had restored both sets of the Mapes cowboys and I used the small cowboy to make patterns. I just extrapolated the cowboy to make the bigger ones. But years later, I was looking at Craigslist and I see that this is one of the signs. There's no phone number, and so I responded to the ad, and I just said, "Please don't sell these without hearing my generous offer." I realized that through greed no one will sell anything without hearing a generous offer. They want to know what it is, at least.

I got a hold of the woman and I heard what it was. She had called back. We hadn't talked. This was years later, after I made the deal with the city. So I needed to call the city, and I just happened to speak with, I think, the city attorney who remembered this. Then the person at the corp yard remembered it. Then all of a sudden it became a very big deal again. The police were involved—many different detectives. They told me to set up a place to meet this woman and that they would go out there—it was in Fernley—and she would be met by several detectives.

So I set it up, and they went and they got the sign. I guess they didn't get any information from her. I really wish that they'd pressed where she had found it, because there are still two others missing. The large ones are still out there. I know that I'll find them one day. You know, someone will tell me, "Oh, my uncle's got one of those over his mantel." I'll get them back.

When the officer delivered it to me, he opens the trunk of his Lincoln and gets this—it was one of the smaller cowboys, so it's maybe three feet, and it didn't have any of the neon on it. It's faded. He hands it to me, and seems to be thinking, "This was all the fuss?" Like, "This is what all this was about?"

But, actually, that set of signs has been shown at the Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles. It's been out at the Western Folklife Center in Elko. It's shown already at the Nevada Museum of Art. It may not look like much in its form, but it was actually pretty important to me. I'm glad that I have it. Still looking for those other two. That's one of those things that I think about, "Where are they?"

What is the city corp yard?

It's just where the city has a lot of their property, like old signs and other city property. It's out near the river on Kietzke.

With the Mapes, the little cowboy, did you end up restoring the neon, having new neon put on?

Yes.

So that's something that you do with signs.

No, I don't.

You have it done.

Yes.

Do you have neon workers? I wasn't certain how prevalent that is anymore.

Well, it's certainly declining. Neons are being replaced by LED. There are still some people who are doing neon and putting it on buildings, like the new restaurant Campo. Their signs are neon and they're beautiful. They have a little neon pig that they turn on when they're butchering, because they butcher in the restaurant. So you can tell when they're butchering.

There are still some stylish restaurants and people who understand that neon really is cool. They still use it, but it's certainly gone down. I've had some bad experiences with sign companies and people in town, but right now I have a man who I like. He does good work. So hopefully we'll be able to use him.

It seems like it's really specialized.

It is. It's something I thought about learning, but people tell you that it's going to take seven to ten years to get really good. I just don't have the time to dedicate to it. I wish I did. Maybe I will later.

Do you have signs from any other places? Are you a neon poacher in other states? [laughs]

What a horrible thing to say. But, yes, I am.

Do you collect signs in other places?

Yes. I have signs from all over Nevada. I have signs from Las Vegas. I have a sign from Las Vegas from the El Cholo Café. It's one of the oldest Mexican restaurants in the state, which is pretty neat. It's an interesting story about getting that one too.

Let's go for it.

All right. Well, it's right on Las Vegas Boulevard, and that's the sign that I mentioned that's twenty-nine-feet tall altogether. It's two tower pieces that say "café," ten feet each. The C-A is ten feet,

and the F-E is ten feet, and then there's a blade, a long sign, that says "El Cholo." Then on top of that there's a cactus and a man sleeping against it with a sombrero. It's a really fifties'-style imagery.

It was right on Las Vegas Boulevard in an area of the city that they call "the naked city," and it's kind of a rougher area. It sat right in between a peep show called Showgirl Video and an Elvis wedding chapel. I just wonder, that guy in that sign, what did he see in his time? It may have been the wedding chapel that Britney Spears was married in, I'm not sure. It was just a strange part of the city.

So I did my research and I found out who owned it. I made a phone call to Rose Whiteside. I got a hold of her and we were speaking, and I explained what I was doing. She sounded like she was pretty old. She heard me out and she said, "Well, it sounds very good, but you'll have to talk to my mother about this."

So I said, "Okay. I'd be glad to."

They said, "Well, you'll have to come meet us because she's blind now and she's pretty deaf."

So I went to meet them, and Rose senior, she was a real character. She was pretty blind and she didn't hear well, so basically everything I said, her daughter had to yell to her. I think she was in her nineties but she hadn't lost anything mentally. She was just so sharp. It was really neat because she told me she used to be a Hardy Girl, and then how she'd met her husband. So I think that she really liked the company. We talked and we had really great conversations.

I went back probably five times. I think she decided to sell me the sign early on, but I went back about five times and it was nice to see a woman in her nineties still being able to flirt. She was still just so sharp. It was really great. Eventually she sold me the sign and I took it down.

A lot of times I'll have contact with the sign company, and it's always scary because it's expensive. So I try to go and figure out the sign and how I'd take it down. That area of Las Vegas is, like I said, a kind of seedy area. A lot of prostitutes are in that area. I got there very early in the morning, probably six in the morning, and I didn't realize until then that that's a popular time for prostitutes. So I'm just standing looking at this sign, and this prostitute walks past and says, "What are you looking at?"

I said, "Oh, I'm looking at the sign."

"Why?"

I said, "Oh, I think it's beautiful." She just looked at me like I was insane. I said, "I collect these. It's beautiful." I said, "Have you ever collected anything?"

She said, "Yeah, stuffed monkeys."

I said, "Oh, like Curious George?"

She said, "I hate Curious George," and she stormed off, and that was the end of that conversation. You always meet some interesting people taking these signs down.

I'm sure you just have zillions of these stories.

I do want to do a book, and I want to include all these stories because every sign has a different story—there is no story just like, "Oh, I got that sign." With every sign, there's a story for how I acquired it. In retrospect, it's fun. A lot of times those experiences are difficult and challenging.

It sounds like there's a huge size range for these signs.

Definitely.

What is your biggest sign?

Well, I have the Harolds Club letters and they're seven feet in diameter. So those are seven times seven. Jammed close together, they're about fifty feet, forty-nine feet long. Then the Sky Room sign is very thick.

That's from the Mapes, right?

Yes. It's just really heavy. There's the steel construction, and then also the sign maintenance people leaving all the fifty-pound transformers in there that have died over the years, and the pigeon droppings. For that sign, I took out probably seven hundred pounds of pigeon droppings and old transformers, and that sign still probably weighs a thousand pounds. There is a huge range in the sizes. It's always nice to get one that's a manageable size, but that's rare. It's rare that I can carry a sign by myself, and don't need help.

I guess when you get a sign, you have to bring flatbed trucks, or how do you move these things around?

Well, it all depends. There's a sign that I'm getting now or that I'm looking at now, and this has to do with that.

What's the sign?

It's from the Sahara in Las Vegas. This is an example of what it takes. I'm in the process of this one right now. I don't know how it will turn out. I'm glad I can explain this now because it maybe gets lost once the sign is resolved either way. I got it or I didn't.

But now that sign is in play. So the Sahara closed last year, and they did an auction where they sold off just about everything there. They donated one of the signs to the Boneyard in Las Vegas. I called and I asked if there were any signs left, and they said there weren't any, but I drove through Las Vegas a few weeks ago and I saw that there was still a set of those letters. The font is just beautiful. They're a combination of bulbs and neon, which is my favorite. That club is so iconic. The Beatles stayed there. The Sahara put on concerts. I think part of Ocean's 11 was featured there. Frank Sinatra, everyone, there's so much history at the Sahara that I think it's very important to have a set of these letters to fill out my collection. I have Las Vegas signs, but this enriches my collection. If I do a museum or anything, it lets me talk about Las Vegas and its influence. That's the importance of the signs. That sets the stakes higher.

Now, I needed to start, and so I found out who owned the property. It's this entertainment group that has a lot of nightclubs in Los Angeles. I got a hold of the person after a while, and she didn't seem really receptive right off the bat, but she said, "Just email me." So I emailed her this write-up of who I am, what I'm doing, and now with some of the things I've done it's a little easier. So I sent it to her.

I get an email back that just says, "We'll donate the signs to you, but you need to have a sign company take them down." Simple. Simple horrifies me because I know it's not going to be simple. I'm in Reno and so I can't do some of my research on the actual sign. I'd seen it at night, what it would take to get it down. So then I start contacting the sign companies, and I get these ridiculous bids to take them down. I mean, so ridiculous.

Then I start figuring out, okay, does this mean that I can't get them? How do I make this happen?

I start doing the math and I can't afford that. That's too much; I can't afford that. Do I let these signs go? I need to make this decision on how can I do this, and then if I do get them, how do I physically get them to Reno? These letters are maybe ten feet high, five or six feet wide. How do I physically get them here? How do I get them down? Because I need to get a regular licensed, bonded sign company to take them down.

Now there's this constant dialogue in my head. I think, is this worth it? Then I think, yes, it is. But then I think, how do I actually make this happen? I'm having conversations with these sign people, explaining what I'm doing, trying to get it to a number that's realistic. Then I'm trying to figure out transportation. Can I coordinate transportation this way and this way, and then where do I put them? It's a really scary time because I need to have these out of there in the next few weeks. There's this time constraint.

I need to figure this out. I can't spend too much to get these. I need to figure out a way to get the sign company closer to where I am, and then to be able to figure out transportation. How do I get someone to help me get them in the truck? How do I get my tools there? There are just so many things to actually make this work, and it's scary because there's a chance that I won't—I mean, someone else could come along in the meantime and they'd sell them the sign.

There's this pressure on me, and I don't know how this is going to work out. It seems like the sign company I'm dealing with now is in the mood to help me, but I'm nervous because I don't know what's going to happen. It's exciting because if I can pull this off, it's something historically significant and it makes my collection that much more interesting. But the dice are being cast right now, so we'll see how it goes. It's exciting, but it can go wrong, too. I can put all this effort in and I can lose the signs.

It sounds like you always have, what you call it, you have some signs in play.

Yes.

You had your eye on the Sahara. Are there any signs that you have your eye on right now that aren't in play?

Definitely. I basically know of nearly every piece of vintage neon in Nevada. I've done tours where I've gone through Ely and Wells and Elko, Battle Mountain, Winnemucca. I pretty much know all the vintage neon that's out there. I actually found out about another one fairly recently in Overton, Nevada. I'd never heard of Overton. It's a cool fish, and I didn't even realize that existed. I'm aware of most of the neon that's still up, for sure.

A lot of times, in my head, I'll have to figure out is that worth preserving, is that too big? The tree from the Ponderosa Hotel in Reno was gorgeous but it was massive. There was talk of preserving it, but it is huge. It's so big that I don't know. I couldn't have done anything with it. I thought it'd be cool if every year they decorated it for Christmas as kind of a city tree. That one I couldn't save.

But there certainly are some that I look for. A lot of times I'll just drive around Reno. I have these routes where the obvious neon is. There's Fourth Street, you know. I have a route that's mainly Fourth Street but it's also Second Street. There's still some good stuff there, and Virginia Street, obviously. There are the signs that I definitely would like to have, like The Sandman on Fourth Street, obviously. That one's amazing. Actually, a crazy person just shot at the Sandman Motel a few months ago, and I was wondering if he hit the sign and I was worried. But then I thought it would add a little history. The

Sandman, that one would be amazing. The Pony Express, obviously, that one's so amazing. The Sands script. The El Rey. I think Rancho Sierra. The City Center.



The massive neon sign advertising the Pony Express Lodge at 2406 Prater Way stands high above the “Y” at the intersection of Prater Way and Victorian Avenue in Sparks. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Everybody's Inn.

The Everybody's Inn, the Ho Hum Motel, Zephyr Bar, if that ever changed. Then there are also some that I'm working on. The Heart of Town and the Golden West, those are across from Circus Circus, those are neat. The Thunderbird is an amazing sign, but that one's so big, too. It's almost like what could I do with that? What is it? Twenty-feet tall. It might even be bigger than that. There's the flame on the Lamplighter. It's the one right on Fourth. Then there's the Time Zone Motel, I think that one's neat. The Morris Hotel. There's just so much. The Farris Motel. There's some good stuff out there.

I've chronicled everything that's still out there, and I always watch to make sure that it doesn't go. I lost something a few months ago, the Spot Bar in Sparks. It was a gorgeous sign. It was just really simple. Then a Mexican bar came in and they painted it over. But I just realized that I could restore it. I can take that paint off and get it back to the Spot Bar. I drove by a few months ago and it was gone, and the people who had taken it down scrapped it. So what did they get? Twenty dollars, thirty dollars, probably. So that's a loss.

You've mentioned a couple times your big collections and maybe an idea for a museum. Have you thought much about doing a neon museum, and if you did, would you do it here in Reno or some other place?

I've thought a lot about that, the viability of it, and I've learned a lot working in a museum now, how museums work and how they're funded. But then also I've thought that this would be a great show forever, and I've thought that it'd be great if the Nevada Museum of Art would show just a piece at a time. The Western Folklife Center or Meg Glaser up there, who's always been a fan of what I do—not what I do, but just of neon—she appreciated it. I've had signs up there that they have during the poetry gathering and in the Western Folklife Center building. I've displayed that way.

Last year I decided something has to happen with this. I need to do something. I need to push this. I decided what I was going to do is a pop-up museum and just find a spot, because there was a lot of vacant real estate, commercial real estate, the cool stuff downtown, and just do a temporary museum during Hot August Nights. Then I started thinking of the season. You know the tourist season, from Memorial Day weekend you have special events all the way through almost October with Street Vibrations.

I started modeling how much I thought it would cost, how much I could make, and I thought that it would work. I made a deal with a property downtown that had a lot of commercial real estate, and it was a project that looked dead that needed help selling condos. It was a big company with headquarters all over, in Chicago, Los Angeles. So I called them and I pitched it as a marketing thing for them, and said that I thought it would be great to have something really alive in there. In exchange for that—because, obviously they're trying to sell condominiums, nice, new condominiums, but all of their commercial space was vacant—I pitched this as a marketing thing for them, and they agreed to do it. I was so excited.

I went to work, and I took time off work, a lot of time off work. I started refurbishing the signs. I started contacting press. This thing was going to happen. I was a part of Artown. I made a deal with the Nevada Museum of Art. They would have a sign in their lobby, and on the day that we would open, I was going to give a lecture and we'd all walk down to the opening. The opening was going to be a charity event for the Food Bank. I had this all lined up, and it was going to be this big event. I did the Nevada Magazine, News & Review, RGJ [Reno Gazette-Journal]. I was going to be in the Sacramento Bee. This was going to be a big deal, because Reno is different during the summer. There are so many tours and Hot August Nights. I was positioned perfectly.

Was it last summer you were talking about?

Yes, it was last summer. Then the company that had promised me the space didn't come through. I had spent all this money. I had really put myself out there. I hadn't worked and I had spent all this money, and also my name. I'd told all these people that this was going to happen and it didn't. That was really embarrassing. I had to call the charity, Food Bank, and say it was not going to happen, and then Artown and explain that, yes, I know that I was featured several times in their catalog, which is hard to do, but the show wouldn't happen. These were really hard phone calls to make.

It was one of those times where—a lot of times when I do this I think, why do I do this? Why do I do this? Then there are times when I light a new sign, and think, "Oh, okay." But it was one of those

times when I thought, really, this is too hard. It was just very stressful and I'd spent a lot, and I was just in a really bad spot. It's one of those times when I thought, I don't know why I do this. So I put it away.

Then Ann Wolfe from the Nevada Museum of Art, who's always been supportive of me—I'd shown her my trailers years before—called me and asked if I wanted to do the feature show at the Nevada Museum of Art in the fall of 2012, October 2012 through February 2013, and of course I wanted to. It was great, because this also changes the collection to what I had wanted it to be.

I've had many offers from people who wanted to use the signs, like the Aces Ballpark. They wanted to use one, but they wanted it to break up some cinderblock, and there'd be advertising. So I've turned down a lot of projects, "Oh, that's not going to work." It was also supposed to be on the West Street Market. They wanted to use one to put on the back side of a parking garage. This stuff, to me, is art, and it's not going to decorate a parking garage or break up cinderblock. I feel that this is true artwork and it's worth saving.

So to have it at the Nevada Museum of Art in their feature gallery, I think it's a risk to them, in that people might think, "Oh, it's a history thing." But to treat it as art, that's the way I feel about it, so I'm really happy that it's going to be there and take that next step.

As far as where else I think it could be shown, I think that there could be a museum here. The Boneyard in Las Vegas is so successful, and it is nothing like what I want to do. I have enough signs to rival, in the quality of my signs, to rival the Boneyard, and what I want to do is I want to bring them inside and make it a true museum exhibit, and that's not what they have in Las Vegas. I've thought of different ways to make it fresh.

I also think that another opportunity would be a traveling show, because I have signs from all over—you asked where I have signs from, and I didn't quite finish that—I have signs from Los Angeles, the Bay Area, I have a sign from Tijuana. I do have a collection that's broad enough to not feel like, "Oh, it's just Reno neon." With the signs I have, I've wanted to make the collection broad enough that it could be seen by people who have an interest beyond Nevada.

I see it as a real possibility of this being a traveling show. Neon is actually popular right now in the art circuit, so I think that it'd be neat to have a show packaged to travel, get a whole bunch of new eyeballs seeing these signs.

You can do both, I guess. You could have your base museum here and also a traveling show.

I think so, yes. In the meantime, if I was to develop a neon museum, they could be traveling in the meantime or it could be going on simultaneously. Having the show at the Nevada Museum of Art is going to take it to a different level, where the way people would look at it would be not as just some old signs; these are pieces of art. They've shown in a major museum. We'll just see how it goes. I've always seen them that way, so we'll see if other people see them as I do.

Has MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] ever done a neon show?

Well, there's the Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles. They have a dedicated museum. They're doing a great job, and they've been doing it forever. I see some of their signs, and, think, "Oh, man, I wish I had that." Then I look at some of the dates that they started doing it, preserving these signs, and it was right around the time I was born. So these guys are the pioneers. They're doing a great job there. They have a new place in Glendale.

As far as the Museum of Modern Art, I'm sure they've had neon featured. I've been going to a lot of museums lately, in Washington, D.C. and everywhere, and it seems like oftentimes neon pieces are incorporated.

In conjunction with your interests in neon and the museum in Reno and what different people have wanted to use it for, you've talked about your interest in the old motels along Fourth Street. Have you thought of any buildings in the Fourth Street area or have you thought, if you did have a museum here, where you might want to position it? Downtown, or have you envisioned it in any particular space? I was just wondering what it needs to be for you.

It has to have the right feel. I feel that the most logical and probably the best location would be in downtown Reno. I love Reno and I think it has real potential. I think that to get out of the depression it's in now that it's going to take some forward-thinking entrepreneurs. I don't necessarily know that it will come from the city.

I think that if you look at what's happening at Midtown, there's a section on Virginia Street from California Avenue to around Mt. Rose Street where so many exciting things are happening. That's amazing to see. I love that, because actually the Discovery Museum is part of Midtown. That's just exciting to see.

There are a lot of good things happening on Fourth Street, like the Lincoln Lounge and Louis' [Basque Corner] being redone. There are some good things happening on Fourth Street, so I feel like it would be a natural on or right around Fourth Street.

There are several buildings I've looked at, because I think, where could this work? There's the Flanigan Building, which is just amazing. It's that exposed brick and I think it's big enough and it has a side yard that would be good. Then there's another building, I think it's the old RESCO Building. I think that building is amazing. I've liked the building I think even before I liked neon. There are so many things you could do. That has a massive lower area that could be a museum. It could also be a café. It could be mixed-use. Then there's a tower behind it. I thought that that could work.

There's the train building out in Sparks. I know Sparks is—but this building is just amazing. It's exposed brick and massive windows. I always thought that that would be an amazing building if it was a mixed-use space. If it was lofts and restaurants, and a neon museum could certainly be an anchor there.

I would prefer to be in Reno, but it depends. I mean, so far the City of Reno hasn't been real interested in it, but you just never know. Especially I think things may change after this show. We'll see.

There are those buildings. Also, if you look at the Bowling Stadium, which doesn't necessarily have the right feel, but the location is great, close to the ball field and right near the train station. There's a portion of the building that hasn't been developed. It's right next to the train tracks, and it has massive ceilings of maybe thirty feet, and it's already plumbed for a fire, already has the sprinklers. I just think that that could be great—not the building, but the location is great. I approached the city about that and I haven't heard anything.

I also thought a good idea would be to pair it with the Automobile Museum, that it's just a natural fit. I think that kind of a synergy created by the two would be great, not that I would always want the neon museum to be joined that way—it's powerful enough to stand alone. You could do a certain mix, but people thought of the idea of mixing the signs in within the museum, and I think that the power is as a collection, to see them as a collection indoors.

A lot of people talk about it how it would be great if we had them on a median on Fourth Street,

and I would never do that just because of how easily they could be destroyed. One drunk driver and they're gone. But also I've seen that done in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and it's kind of neat, but they get lost a little bit. I see them displayed in a different way.

On Fourth Street, there's also the old Reno Brewery, the brick building, that would certainly be neat. Some people wanted to do a House of Blues type of business maybe ten, twelve years ago, and they wanted to use my neon. I thought that that was a pretty neat building. It never happened, but I could still see my collection there.

Fourth Street really has that feel. I think that Fourth Street really can come up. There are some people who have taken chances. The old Firehouse building has been redone. I think that there's still enough cool architecture on Fourth Street that I think that's the next area where there will be a renaissance. Then there are the places that have always been there, like Big Ed's. It's got that gritty feel that I think can turn into something neat. Maybe it's the neon museum that's the catalyst.

Besides getting a neon museum on Fourth Street, part of this interview is funded by the RTC because they're looking at doing some work on the corridor, and you talked about a museum and different things. You really like the feel of Fourth Street. What are your hopes for that?

It's interesting, because the development of Midtown has happened in spite of what was formally planned. The recent planning was for it to become higher density with unlimited heights, but that isn't what's happening there. What's happening there is that small entrepreneurs are taking buildings that had been neglected and turning them into something really cool. I see that sort of thing on Fourth Street. I see that possible, like with the fire station. There are definitely some obstacles. The motels along there, they have amazing signs, but they really are depressing horrible places. It's just depressing.

I think there would have to be something that would mitigate that, like someone coming in and buying The Sandman and turning it into a retro motel, which I think could be amazing. A lot of times it's just restaurants, it's coffee shops. I mean, a lot of Midtown, the resurgence of Midtown, was that the Hub Coffee Shop came in, in a tiny little building, but it was stylish and cool. The guy took a chance and it just went from there.

With Fourth Street, that's happening closer to the ballpark, and that's an opportunity, but it's going to be restaurants and I think it's going to be someone else taking a chance on doing a restaurant and then copycats following them.

I think bike lanes always make things more accessible, and parking. It's got to feel safe. I was not a fan of the lighting that was put out there. I think it's still like that; it's that really awful light, halogen. I don't know if it's halogen. I think it's more like a fluorescent. But it's an uncomfortable light. I like that they lit it, that's important, but I just think the feel of the light was actually off-putting. It may have been safer, but it didn't have the right feel.

If you look at an area like in San Diego, like the Gaslamp District, that was an area that was completely transformed, and a lot of it had to do with the infrastructure and the lights, and it just gave it that feel. I don't know exactly what it will take on Fourth, but there's enough authentic architecture that we still have the chance to make it have that feel.

In the cities on the West Coast like Portland and Seattle and San Francisco, there's modern, but then there's enough of the old to keep it authentic. I think there could be modern buildings on Fourth Street, and as long as it's mixed in with the old brick, I think it could have the right feel.

Before we conclude the interview, because we've been talking for about an hour and a half, I just wanted to ask you if there are any points we didn't touch on or things that you'd like to add that maybe we got sidetracked in conversation.

Just that I've been able to do this a lot of times with help of friends and family. My father's been a great help. He helped me move the plumes from the Flamingo and helped me move the leprechaun—that's the thing. I could just call my dad and say, "Hey, are you going to be busy in an hour? I need some help."

"What do you need?"

"I need help moving the leprechaun," and of course he understands what that means.

It's been difficult to preserve all this, but I've been able to do it with a lot of help from friends, and being able to have friends come in and help me move the signs, and also a really understanding wife, too. When I was going to do the show last summer, we were refurbishing the signs in our basement and garage, so she didn't have her garage for what turned out to be six months because a lot was happening there. She's very patient. I understand that this is kind of a ridiculous hobby, and that it's worthwhile to me, but she's understanding and she knows that it's worthwhile.

Actually, this is something I've forgotten that illustrates that. We have a new daughter, Eleanor Grace Durham. She's a little over thirteen months right now. Last year I was doing some research on Vegas Vic, and that's such a great sign. Then there was the sign that was across the street, the other cowboy that waved, the one that you see with the atomic plume in the background. It's that iconic picture. I was doing some research on Vegas Vic, and on Flickr someone had written that the man that designed Vegas Vic was still alive. I thought, how is that possible? I mean, it was put up in, I think, the early fifties. I always pictured that the man who designed it was an older man at the time, maybe someone like Norman Rockwell with a pipe, designing this great illustration.

I read about this man named Pat Denner, and that he was not only still alive, but still working in Salt Lake City in the shop that he'd always had, and he was still in there. I just thought, could this be possible?

I did a little bit more research and he was also known for designing the first Colonel Sanders. The Colonel Sanders you see, that's his design. So that and Vegas Vic, which is arguably the most iconic neon sign ever, it was just amazing.

I tracked him down and I ended up speaking with his niece. She said that he was still alive. The shop had closed, but he still painted at home. When I spoke with Pat on the phone, it was great. He told me that he was actually one of the first street artists—that's another thing that I photograph—and that he used to do portraits on the train cars way back in the forties.

He said that I could come down and interview him. My daughter, at the time, was about six months old. I felt like I really needed to do this. I really wanted to meet this man, but I also had a newborn baby and that was pretty difficult. I told my wife that I had this opportunity, and she told me, "You have to go." I thought that that was certainly understanding, because it's an opportunity that I felt I needed to do.

So I went and I got to meet Pat, and it was great. He had started to slow down a bit, but he was still pretty sharp. It was just great to see all his artwork. His house was like a gallery. He could copy any style. He was just an amazing artist. I got to meet him.

Along the way, I was excited because I also got to drive through Nevada. I timed my trip where I could drive through at night and see the Owl Club in Battle Mountain and I could see the City Center in

Elko, and all these great signs.

Then when I was coming back to Reno, I drove past Wendover Will, which is another one of his iconic cowboy signs. I had wanted to have him do a Reno Red, and that was one of the reasons why I was going there, to have him design a sign that would be like Reno's Vegas Vic. Unfortunately, he was not doing much artwork when I got there. I missed that window, but it was still great to meet him.

When I drove home, I got to drive past Wendover Will under a really dramatic sky, and the clouds opened up a section right in back of Wendover Will, and it was perfect. I had just met the man who had designed this amazing sign, and it was a great cap to the trip. He died a few months later. It was such a nice thing to be able to meet him. That goes back to having an understanding wife and that's how I'm able to do this, because it doesn't make sense. It's not logical, but it's just something I have to do.

It's a passion.

It is. It isn't something I necessarily want to do; it's something I have to do. I couldn't not do it.

Well, I think we're all going to benefit from that.

I hope people enjoy the show, and hopefully someday there'll be a museum. I think it's something that can appeal to so many people. It's like Christmas all year. The visual, the bright lights, it's beautiful.

Well, can you think of any other things we didn't get to cover that you'd like to mention? I think that's amazing with Pat Denner.

Just to be able to have met him. I think that if I do write a book, that he's certainly someone who was—he's important to me. I'd like to pass on his contribution to neon history.

I just have so many stories of taking the stuff down—I could go on forever. I have a sign from Las Cuatro Reinas in Tijuana. The lengths I would go to to get these signs. I went with a friend and I saw this sign that's Las Cuatro Reinas, and it's a woman in a wine glass. I don't know if it was an old brothel or bar. I don't know what it was at the time. So I tracked down the owner, which is even harder in Mexico, but I found the owner. He agreed to sell it to me, and so I was going to go get it. This is when I lived in Los Angeles.

I get a call from my friend's sister, who had been translating, and she said, "They had to take the sign down, so it's just sitting in the alley. You need to come get it soon." I'm just thinking, okay, there's this sign with all this delicate glass in downtown Tijuana, and it's going to be destroyed. If I don't have the glass, I don't know how to make the pattern. How do I know exactly what it was? I just realized I need to go down there. This is not long after 9/11, so going over the border and coming back over the border is tense.

I got to Tijuana at night, and all I had—I don't know why I didn't have a better tool—I had a miniature Leatherman. It was almost like a toy. My entire goal was just to get the glass off there. So I go down to the sign, and it's in this dark alley in Tijuana. I'm there and I'm taking the glass off, there's the smell of urine, and I'm just seeing the people looking at me like I'm crazy. I'm taking the glass off so carefully so that it doesn't break, in this box. I'm just thinking, why am I here? What am I doing? You know, Tijuana is a very dangerous place, especially at night by myself. Why am I doing this? What drives

me to do this?

Then I have to walk through Tijuana at night two miles, carrying this giant box of glass. I hadn't even really thought of the logistics of how I'm going to get this over the border. This is an unusual thing, this glass filled with gas. As I'm going through the border, I'm thinking, what do I say? I imagined I was going to get hung up.

I put the box on the conveyor belt and they didn't say a word. They didn't say one word about it, so I was just able to get over the border with no problem. That was just the glass. Then I needed to come back and get the sign, actually. So I told a friend of mine I was going to do it, and he said he had a truck. He said, "Oh, I'll go with you."

I rented a trailer. We were driving down to Tijuana from L.A., and it was during the worst fires ever in San Diego. I mean, the sky was literally dark brown, and some of the on-ramps, the vegetation on the on-ramps for the freeway, were burning. It felt like we were driving into hell. It was the worst air quality. I wanted to make it like a military operation. We'd get there, I knew exactly where the sign was, because I knew we were going to get attention, especially putting a sign in that has a naked woman in a martini glass or a champagne glass.

We got the sign. We lifted it in, strapped it in, got back in line to cross the border within probably ten to fifteen minutes. We were waiting. We were almost over the border. The Federales were coming through, and they saw that we had a U-Haul trailer. I think that they know. They know how to fleece people. So they realized that you're not allowed to take the U-Haul trailers in there. It's against U-Haul's policy.

The guy asked for the paperwork for the U-Haul trailer. We just realized we're about to get fleeced. Okay, I don't even care. I have eighty dollars in my pocket. I'm going to give them that and whatever my friend had. He sees the paperwork and he said, "Oh, big problems."

I realized that if they confiscate the trailer, I've already violated the rules, so I'm going to owe thousands of dollars for this trailer. I'm just trying to get to the point where we pay him off. He said, "No, no, no. There's big problems. We need to go to the station."

Then my friend just happens to say, "We have insurance on the trailer." He shows him, and the guy just looks at it and hands it back, and he goes, "Whew," kind of brushes his brow and then just walks off. That was it. We were just waiting to be fleeced. We ended up not even paying anything. It worked out, and the sign is now in Reno. I don't know if that will make the museum show. We'll have to see. We'll see how brave they are. But it's definitely one that went through great lengths to get here.

I can't wait to see this museum show.

I think it's going to be fun. Now we're in the process of getting all the signs together and deciding what should make the show. I've got some tough decisions, but I think we definitely have enough to do a great show.

Well, everybody can go and appreciate neon the same way you do, I think, when they see the show.

You don't have to really know anything about the history of neon or the history of these buildings to enjoy it. It's kind of an insult to say it's accessible, but it's something that people can enjoy on so many different levels. If you know the history, you might remember the Nevada Club or Harolds Club. And if you don't, you can just enjoy the artwork, because there are so many different craftsman and artists who

worked on these. You can enjoy the illustration, you can enjoy the metal work, the tube benders, just the colors. There's a lot that appeals.

Well, thank you for sharing your interest in neon, and I'm so glad it's going to be in the show.

Of course. Thank you for taking interest in what I'm doing.

LES EDE

Sparks Resident and Retired Firefighter



Les Ede at Deer Park in Sparks in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Les Ede's great-great-grandfather moved to Nevada in 1872. Born in 1942, Les grew up on Sullivan Lane, near what was then the western edge of Sparks, and shares memories of his childhood neighborhood near Prater Way. He joined the U.S. Navy after graduating from Sparks High School, and then became a firefighter in Sparks, retiring in 1994.

Alicia Barber: I'm here with Les Ede at his home in Sparks, and the date is Monday, September 16, 2013. Mr. Ede, do I have your permission to record this interview today?

Les Ede: You definitely have my permission to record.

Thanks so much. I'm going to start out with some biographical questions. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

Well, when was June 24th, 1942, Washoe Medical Center, Reno, Nevada.

Tell me a little bit about your family and when they first came to this area.

Well, how far back in history do you want to go?

Let's go as far back as when they came to this area or came to Nevada.

My great-great-grandfather moved to Nevada from Sierra Valley in 1872.

What was his name?

Stephen Ede. He had a ranch south of Reno. His next-door neighbors were the Huffakers. He and Mr. Huffaker gave two acres of property to the school district for Huffaker School. Stephen Ede's acre wound up being the playground.

This was the school when it was located on Virginia Street?

Yes, this is the school when it was on Virginia Street.

So he was a rancher?

He was a rancher. He had thirteen children, eleven that survived to adulthood. His oldest son inherited the ranch when he passed away, and the biggest problem there was he also gave each of his daughters, and there were five of them, \$1,000. There was not that much cash in the estate, so they had to sell the ranch to fulfill that.

The Thompsons bought the ranch, and Jared Ede became the foreman of the ranch. One of Jared's brothers was John Gleason Ede, J.E. Ede, alias "Jack." These great-grandparents lived in Wadsworth where my grandfather, Hubert, was born. When the railroad moved the division facility to Sparks, J.E. Ede moved with the town. He built a residence on 13th Street next to the Robison house. His barbershop, the Tonopah, was located in the Rialto building in the 1000 block of Harriman Avenue, AKA "B Street," AKA Victorian Avenue. The site is now inside the Bourbon Street Casino. My grandfather Hubert worked for the railroads—Southern Pacific, Western Pacific, and Great Northern. His family of three moved around quite a bit.

My father was John Stephen Ede. He was born in Reno, Nevada. His maternal grandmother lived up on Field Street in Sparks where Hubert, Grace, and John lived for a while. John attended school at Kate Smith and went to Junior High School for a couple of years. He graduated in either Colorado or Montana. He and my mother met at dances in Sparks. They were married in 1937. Their first child was born in '38. I was born in '42. They were divorced in '44. Basically, through most of my upbringing, my mother was single, through the late forties, early fifties. She didn't get married again—well, she did,

because my younger sister is a half-sister, and mother and her father were married and divorced by 1953. My younger sister was five years younger than I am.

We grew up in Sparks, on the west end of Sparks. Actually, we grew up in Washoe County, because when you walked across the street, you got into the city of Sparks. My first school was Kate Smith School. It was a brick building, four rooms, four grades, and the principal at that time was Katherine Dunn.

A familiar name.

There's another school named after her here. She was quite the taskmaster, although I wasn't too appreciative of it. I barely got through most of my schooling. When I was in the service, that's when I learned the value of an education.

I graduated from Sparks High School in 1960. Two weeks after I graduated from high school, I was in the Navy. At that time, there was also the draft, so I was dodging the draft. I joined the service instead.

Good plan.

Well, the other thing is, is at that time the Navy had "in before eighteen, out before twenty-one." I turned eighteen on the twenty-fourth of June. I joined the Navy on the twenty-first of June.

Now, tell me what that means, in at eighteen, out at twenty-one.

I had to spend three years in the service.

Is that all that was required at that time?

Four years was the requirement, but the Navy had a special thing. In before eighteen, out before twenty-one, which was three years, not four. But I did have a six-year hitch, meaning the last three years was inactive reserve. All I was, was a name on a piece of paper at that time. I didn't have to go to any reserve meetings or anything like that. It was just in case they needed me, they could call me back up, but it didn't happen.

Actually, the time I was in the service was basically just when Vietnam was starting to get hot. I did go through the Cuban Missile Crisis on board a ship.

Where were you?

I was in Cuba. Basically, I was a diesel engineman there. On a destroyer I was assigned, we had a couple of Liberty boats that were diesel-driven, and also the emergency generator was diesel-driven. So I was in charge of those. The ship I was on was commissioned in June of 1942.

It was an older ship?

It was an older ship. We were following one particular blip on sonar for three days, a brand-new destroyer frigate showed up, took over, lost the blip in three hours. I'm sure it was the sonar operators, the difference in quality of them. Anyway, that was that.

Also while I was in the service I spent most of my time on the East Coast. Panama City was my first seagoing station on what they call an oceangoing minesweeper. It's 172 feet long, 35-foot beam, built out of oak. It was a wooden ship for magnetic finds, had no magnetism around it. There were four diesel main engines in that ship, and it had aluminum blocks, steel pistons, stainless steel crankshafts, which were very expensive, nonmagnetic. This is all nonmagnetic stuff.

One incident, we were doing what they call a degaussing run, we're running through a magnetic detection field, and one of the engines blew an oil line. Before we could get it stopped, it burnt the crankshaft up, no oil. So I'm down underneath there, pulled the pan off of it, and there's only like about 12 inches' clearance between the ribs of the ship and the pan. So I was the skinniest guy, so guess who got the dirty job of getting that hot oil pan out from underneath there, all 172 quarter-inch bolts?

How do you repair something like that?

Well, it took a bunch of us. We had to drop the pan, get two guys under there to get the crankshaft down, and after we got it down, we could slide it out, but it's a 12-cylinder engine, so that's a big, heavy crankshaft. The easy part was getting it out. The hard part was getting it back in, because getting it out, you didn't have to worry about banging things around or scraping things or scratching things. It's shot anyway. You didn't need it. But when we put the new one in, we had to be very careful on where you put it so you would not scratch any of the bearing surfaces, and that was a real job. Of course, one nice thing about that, everything was cold. It wasn't hot.

On board that ship, that was the USS *Vigor*, MS0-473. I spent two years on her. We went to the Mediterranean. It was a fast boat. It took us thirty days to go from Charleston, South Carolina, to Gibraltar, max speed 12 knots, which is about 13 miles an hour. Thirty days without seeing land. It was an experience.

The other thing that was kind of unusual about the ship, there were four minesweepers in our fleet going across there, and the ship that was being our oil tender was an LST, lending ship tank, which had a lot of fuel tanks in it. But the name of it was the USS *Washoe County*. I was the only person on board ship that could pronounce it right. [laughter]

So it was quite interesting. Spent nine months in the Mediterranean. We went to Italy, Spain, France, Greece, Sardinia, and it was a lot of fun.

Was that your closest call, something going seriously wrong with the ship?

No, no. We just got out of dry dock in Charleston, South Carolina, after we came back from the Mediterranean, and a hurricane was coming through, so they hurried it up and got us out to sea, no refrigeration, no ice, no air conditioning, no nothing like that. So we're out trying to skirt around the hurricane, and I had the mid watch this one particular morning. Mid watch was from twelve o'clock midnight to four o'clock in the morning. So at about three-thirty, I had to go up and wake up the relief crews. So I come up out of the engine room, got into the main passageway, just about two steps into the main passageway, the ship rolled and I took the next two steps on the wall, then it rolled back up, and I walked the rest of the way on the deck. Well, later that morning, the skipper got on the intercom and said,

“Gentlemen, we’re the luckiest ship alive. Last night, we took a 37-degree roll. This ship is only supposed to come back from a 35.”

Do you know if any other ships capsized at that time?

I don’t know. I don’t think so. We never heard about anything capsizing at that time.

Terrifying.

But I do have a picture of our sister ship sitting on top of a wave with the screws out of the water and the sonar dome out of the water.

Which is not supposed to happen?

Well, which gives you very little boat in the water. [laughter] Very little boat.
But getting back to growing up here in Sparks, like I said, I went to Kate Smith School.

Now, how many grades? You said there were four grades. Which grades were those? The youngest?

Yes, one through four. I had to go to kindergarten at Robert Mitchell School, and then one through four there. Then I went to Robert Mitchell for the fifth grade. At that time, they moved the Sparks High School from where it was on C Street between 15th and C to where it is now, and they made the old high school the junior high, which is now called middle school. So sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, I was over there in the old Sparks High School building. My older sister was in the first class that went into the new high school from freshman through senior year.

So a little more continuity at that point.

A little more continuity at that point. The other thing that was kind of unusual, I had one teacher for six years, never flunked a grade, Mr. Graves.

The same teacher for all of that time?

All that time. He was a P.E. teacher and basketball coach. So in the seventh grade he was a P.E. teacher; eighth grade he was a P.E. teacher; went to Sparks High School, he was a P.E. teacher and basketball coach at Sparks High School. So I had Mr. Graves for six years.

Well, I hope you got along well. [laughs]

Mostly. Mostly.

Tell me about where you were living that whole time. Where did you grow up?

Well, basically, when I first started to do any writing, at that time there were a lot of freebies on cereal boxes. So you had to send the cereal box in to the company, and they would send you stuff. It took me a long time to learn how to spell Sullivan Lane, and at that time we lived at 85 Sullivan Lane.

About the time I started junior high school, my first stepdad was working for the power company, and power company employees could get natural gas in their house for free. We lived in the county, and the power company couldn't put gas in a house that was in the county. So between the power company and my folks, they went down and got the city to put the city limits right around our house.

Now, was that for any physical reason or is it just because of the jurisdiction?

Just a jurisdiction issue. The city had the franchise for the gas, the county didn't, so suddenly we're part of Sparks, and they changed the address to 585 Sullivan Lane, instead of 85.

To correspond with the rest of the city.

Right.

Now, you were actually on a ranch, weren't you? There was a lot of property there.

Well, there were five acres of property, and just after my mother divorced her second husband, she had to sell two and a half acres of it, so I basically grew up on the other two and a half acres.

When had that property come into the family?

My grandfather on the Wiltse side bought the property in 1927.

What was his first name?

Frank. Frank Wiltse. He died in '37. My grandmother, Julia Wiltse, died in '44.

And had your mother lived there when she was younger?

Yes, she was raised there, basically. She was born in '17, so she was ten years old when they bought the property there and started building the house.

Frank Wiltse built the house that I grew up in, and it was a two-story with three bedrooms—two bedrooms upstairs, one downstairs. The bathroom was an add-on after the house was built, before I can even remember. It also had a half basement under it. I still remember canning jars of peaches, apples, tomatoes, zucchini, everything, and putting them on shelves in the basement, and in the wintertime going down to the basement to get a jar of whatever to have for dinner.

Were you growing those things on your property?

Yes.

All of those, with an orchard and everything?

We had a full orchard. On the south side of the house there was a peach tree, plum tree, several different kinds of apples, crabapple tree, a shed that had a chicken coop, because basically the ranch they were running when my Grandfather Wiltse was alive was a chicken ranch, with eggs.

Had they had more chicken coops than that, or did it just take one chicken coop?

They had more. That's the only one that survived when I can remember growing up. There were a couple of concrete pads in the back that we used to play on a lot and get chalk and draw on and make hopscotch and other games on it. But that was the only one shed that had anything that we could put chickens in.

Did you have chickens there when you were a kid?

Oh, we had chickens.

Any other animals?

Dogs, cats, rabbits.

Any livestock or anything?

No, no large livestock. Just the chickens and a few rabbits once in a while.

Were there other properties in the immediate area that had more animals, that were operating ranches?

Not really. The property around us between our house and Prater Way was vacant, it was open field, with a ditch running down the middle of it. Behind us, from our house to where El Rancho is right now, most of that was vacant except the piece of property right straight behind us was Nevada Concrete Pipe Company.

That's where they manufactured pipes?

Concrete pipes. They manufactured concrete pipe there. I've got lots of small scars on the back of my head where we were playing tag, hide-and-go-seek, or whatever games, and you'd go through. At one time you could stand up and run through pipes. Well, the next time you come through the pipe and you scrape the top of your head on the pipe.

So it was not fenced in, that property?

Well, yes and no. It was a three-strand barbed-wire fence.

Kids will find a way. [laughs]

Oh, yeah. It's easy to climb over a barbed-wire fence. [laughs]

You were on Sullivan Lane. What would the cross street be now?

F Street dead-ended right at our front door.

So just north of Prater a little bit.

Yes.

Was Prater at that point kind of a country road?

No.

It had been at one point the Lincoln Highway.

Yes. Well, at one point it was part of the Lincoln Highway. When I grew up there, it was still a main drag, but it was not part of the Lincoln Highway because they'd cut the S-curve in between the end of B Street and the "Y" there.

One little incident I do remember, in 1955, Harolds Club put in the first animated neon sign, Harolds Pony Express Lodge, and they had a cowboy riding a horse galloping, turning around shooting at an Indian, and the Indian was shooting the bow at him, and you could see the arrows.

How did the neighborhood feel about that?

Nothing was really said one way or the other.

Did it make an impression on you?

Well, yes, because it was an animated sign. Most signs outside at that time were just billboards, you know. Yes, it did. And the Pony Express Lodge, which was right there on the corner of El Rancho and Prater, was where Harolds Club, when they had entertainers come in, they set up the entertainers and high rollers in that lodge. They had a special limousine to take the people back and forth to Harolds Club.

Now, to your knowledge, seeing the buildings now, are those the original buildings, at the Pony Express Lodge? Is that how it's always looked?

Yes, as far as I remember it, yes. Looking from some of the maps and aerial photographs we've got, I think Harolds rebuilt a lot of those, tore them down and rebuilt those, especially close to Prater Way.

I know it had been the site of the Cremer's Auto Court. I don't know if any of those buildings were retained or if it had been completely reconstructed.

I don't know.

So tell me what it was like to grow up in this area then. Did it feel like you were in the country?

Oh, yes, because the thing of it is, it was all open on three sides of us. Grayhaven Lane all the way to Prater Way, there were four houses on the west side of Sullivan Lane. There was us, the Markes, Ziacks next, and then there's a large gap and then Rowes, and then you hit Grayhaven Lane, and just on the other side of Grayhaven Lane was the Stone family. I went to school with Charlene Stone.

And did they all have a good amount of property at their houses, or were those houses quite close together?

They were not that close together, no. There were gaps between them. Frank Rowe and I didn't along real well together. Of course, he's four years my senior and he bullied the hell out of anybody that was smaller than he was. And Raymond Ziack—this is unusual—Raymond Ziack's house, which was two doors down from where I grew up, which would have been probably three-quarters of a block away, that house was built in Fallon and moved to Sparks.

That's a long way to move a building.

It is, but the thing of it is, at that time the contractor that was building those houses was advertising that. "Build you a house to your specifications, and we'll move it to your piece of property."

Just because they had their building company in Fallon?

I don't know, haven't got the foggiest idea, but I do remember the day that the house was moved coming down Sullivan Lane to get to that piece of property.

So, a frame house?

It was a frame house.

There was a lot of house-moving. I've talked to people who were telling me a lot about the Bevilacqua family, who were house movers, especially through Reno and even Virginia City, I think.

Yes. Well, the Park Motel, which was at 15th and Prater and F Street, the Park Motel was moved from Hawthorne to Sparks.

Is that right? Was it an operating motel there?

No, it was a barracks.

It was? Because the buildings are still there now.

Yes, the buildings are still there. The original kindergarten building at Kate Smith School was a barracks out at Sierra Army Depot and moved down as a temporary building, which lasted about fifty years. [laughs]

So just after the forties when they didn't need as much housing in these places?

Yes.

That is very interesting. I'm wondering how you turn a barracks into a motel. Would all of these structures have been connected to each other?

Well, I think they were connected here to make the motel.

Did you know who operated that motel, the Park? Was it a family-owned business?

Yes, it was a family-owned business. The Park Grocery, Park Motel was owned by the Reinhardts. Their daughter, Diane Wallace, was in the museum the other day. She still owns it. Actually, the Park Grocery was the first twenty-four-hour grocery store in the State of Nevada.

Oh, no kidding? Do you have any idea when that opened? Was that open through your childhood?



The Park Grocery stood at the northwest corner of Prater Way and 15th Street in Sparks.
Photo courtesy of the Sparks Museum and Cultural Center.

Yes. According to Diane it opened the 24-hour schedule in the late 1950s.

And that was right beside the motel?

Yes.

Is that building still there?

No. They tore it down and put that drive-through coffee thing there on the corner. Across the street where the 7-Eleven was, that was Gephard's Apartments and Used Furniture.

Pretty small furniture shop.

It was pretty good size, and they also had apartments in the back side of that. I was working for the fire department when that burned, and that was a hell of a fire.

So you came back after the service and you became a firefighter.

Yes.

Right away did you go into training?

Well, basically I was fourteen years old when I fought my first fire.

Tell me about that.

Well, with a couple friends of mine, we were out rabbit hunting north of Sun Valley, and we're down this ravine. We looked up over there and we saw smoke coming up on the other side. What the hell's over there? So we hoofed it up over the top of the hill, and we started looking down, and here's this grassfire roaring up towards us. So we tried stomping some of it out. Just about then the BLM showed up and says, "What are you guys doing?"

"We're trying to put this fire out."

"Well, who started it?"

"We don't know, because we were on the other side of the ridge."

"Well, here. Here's a shovel. Start movin'."

And that's how we got involved in firefighting, all three of us, and basically started there. A couple other wildfires they had, they called for help. Now they can't do it anymore, but you used to be able to volunteer to go fight fires, and we got to where BLM would get a fire, they'd call us.

Then when I was in the service, being a diesel mechanic, I was part of the damage control system, so we had drills and things like that. Then when I came back out of the service, I was basically a certified diesel mechanic by the U.S. Navy, and so I come down here looking for a job as a diesel mechanic, and I found one, but the guy said, "Well, this is a union shop, so you have to go join the union."

Okay. So I hotfooted it down to the union and told the guy I wanted to join the union, and he said, "Well, you can't join the union till you've got a job."

I said, "Well, I've got a job."

He says, "Where is it? Because I've got people over here sitting on the bench that want it."

I said, "Well, I went out and beat the bush to get it."

He says, "Well, you can't have it. These guys over here are sitting on it."

I said, "Well, tough shit. Bye."

So I left and got a job working for Johnson Chevrolet in the auto repair shop, worked there for a while and found out I don't like this kind of a job.

Then I went to work for Singer Sewing Machine Center, and they closed up. I don't know why they closed up. They closed up, so I went to work for McMahan's Furniture, delivering furniture.

From there I went to Harrah's for a while, slinging change, working graveyard shift again, and I didn't like graveyard shift, so I quit that and went and found a job at Home Furniture delivering furniture again, and that was much better because it's a higher-class furniture store than McMahan's ever thought of being, and their main building was on Island Avenue and Sierra Street, had a seven-story building there, furniture building.

Is the building still there?

No, they tore it down to put the judicial court in there, but I think the building was better built than the judicial court.

Anyway, so I was working there. Then my two friends that I grew up with and I went through high school with got to volunteer on the Sparks Fire Department. They invited me in, so I went over there, and in 1966, Farr was looking for another firefighter and asked me if I wanted to join the fire department. I said, "Yes." I took \$100-a-month pay raise to go there, \$399 a month, paid once a month. So that was interesting. Then, of course, Bill Farr knew practically everybody. He went to school with my mother. That's the trouble with growing up in the same town. Every teacher I had except one either went to school with my mother or taught my mother.

I don't think you told me her name.

My mother's name?

Yes.

Amy. Amy Wiltse was her maiden name. She's ninety-six years old, and if she wasn't going blind, she would probably be living at home again, and she's still sharp as a tack.

I'm so glad. So how long did the family own the property that you grew up on?

She sold the property in '61 while I was in the service, moved to another house over off of Brunetti Way.

Did that area transform pretty rapidly where you grew up? Were some of those old houses retained? Because it's now just complete neighborhoods.

Yes. Well, the McPherson house is still there. Coopers, who built his house while we were in high school, is on the corner of 21st and F Street. The house that was on the corner of F Street and Sullivan on the north side of the street is gone. They've got apartments there. And they had some huge, huge cottonwoods. Those cottonwoods had to be five foot in diameter.

The Markes' house is still there. Ziacks' house is still there. The Rowe house is still there. Stones' house is still there. Those are all on Sullivan Lane on the west side of the street. Everything else is new. G Street was not cut through until after I got back out of the service. First year my wife and I were married, we were living in the house that I grew up in, renting from my mother, and that's when they started building the apartments around, from F Street to Prater.

So it was becoming more desirable to live up in that area at that point, you think, or Sparks was just expanding?

Sparks was just expanding, and they were building a lot of apartments in there. Grayhaven Lane used to be not much wider than one car and dirt. Now it's a two-lane street, with sidewalks, curbs, gutters, and everything else.

There are some places that are long gone that you probably knew quite well. There was a dairy nearby, wasn't there?

When I was growing up, the remnants of the Mt. Rose dairy was there, but no, it wasn't operating at that time. Tarners, which was down here off of Pyramid Way, we got our milk from Morrison's and Tarners Dairy.

It was called Morrison's and Tarners?

Well, there were two different dairies. I remember in the wintertime going out on the front porch to pick up the milk with cream pushing the cap up that far.

About an inch more. [laughs]

It was frozen.

So they would deliver regularly?

They would deliver, yes, in glass bottles.

Every day?

Well, with three kids, probably every other day.

So were dairies the only businesses that would deliver with food? Would you go buy the rest of your food other places?

Well, Baker's Groceries, you could call in your order and they'd deliver your order.

Would you do that sometimes?

Mother didn't do that. She always went shopping. Although when she was growing up, they used to deliver eggs. Now, up on the hill on Wedekind, just west of Sullivan Lane, you can still see some of the old chicken coops up there.

They're empty but they're still there?

They're just empty. They're still standing. One of them the roof is collapsing in on. There were several chicken ranches up there. The Oppios had a dairy, which is right now where the shopping center is that used to be Albertson's. It's closed now. But that shopping center there on the west side of Sullivan and north of Oddie, that used to be the Oppios, and Cappurros were up there. Gaults were up there. Balmain were up there. The rock house at the top of Sullivan Lane was built by the Balmain family, and that's native rock.

So this really was an area that had families who had been there for generations.

One or two, yes. The thing of it is, that was at one part Little Italy of Sparks.

I was going to ask you. There were a lot of Italian names.

There were a lot of Italian names there, Oppios, Cappurros, Brunetti. Brunetti had the fish hatchery. Their house is still standing there on the top of that little swale between I Street and Oddie Boulevard. That army goods and—now what is it—jewelry store right there by the bar, all that area was fish ponds. We used to go up there and walk through the fish ponds all the time and watch them feed the fish and things like that.

Does that mean they were manmade ponds or they were natural?

They were manmade ponds.

And they were harvesting fish and selling them?

No, they were actually—Nevada Fish and Game was paying them to raise the fish to a certain length and then they would take the fish out and plant them in the rivers and lakes, etc.

I wasn't aware of that. So when you were talking about it being Little Italy, the people of Italian background seem to have a background more in ranching and farming, not in the railroad?

No, a lot of them were machinists. Burgarellos were machinists, and now Tony Burgarello owns Burgarello Alarms.

That's the same family. I was going to ask.

Same family. Who else is over there? Pagni was up in there, and part of their family had ranches over here on the east end of Sparks, but the Pagnis that I knew were machinists in the railroad. The Southern Pacific during the twenties and thirties imported master machinists from Europe, and most of them were Italian.

And that's how some of these families got here.

That's how some of these families got here.

Now, you were telling me that that area a little bit further west on Prater, the neighborhood had some name that was related to the railroad. Were you calling it Conductor Heights?

Conductor Heights, that's on the south. Well, actually there are two sections of Conductor Heights. There's a section of Conductor Heights on the south side of the railroad tracks between Rock Boulevard, which was 17th Street, and 21st. And then another section was from up on the hill on the other side of El Rancho to Reno city limits, and it was basically View and Field Street and D Street. That little area in there was also, because that's where John Ede was living when he was going to high school.

And the Gallettis lived in that area, too.

The Gallettis lived in that area, too. The Gallettis owned the Coney Island Bar. I still think part of their family's involved with it. Copenhagen is Quilici's, and the Quilici that started that used to live across the street till he passed away.

I was researching that a little bit, and the Copenhagen used to be located closer to Coney Island, and then it looks like when the highway was going in, they tore down that building and they opened a new one in the current location.

Right.

Do you remember the highway going in?

Oh, yes.

That must have been very disruptive for the whole Prater Way area.

Well, it was.

What do you remember?

Well, I remember they took out some of the nicest houses in the area.

Oh, really?

Well, all the SP housing there on B Street Reserve where the Nugget sits now, they took all those houses out to put the freeway in. The trailer court motel unit that was right there on the corner of Coney Island, which is now Galletti Way, is gone, because they tore through there. Four or five of the houses there in Conductor Heights just disappeared because they put that in there. There was a lumber company just on the border of Reno-Sparks on the Reno side. I used to deliver papers to it, except the Sunday paper.

Except the Sunday paper?

Except the Sunday paper. Nobody was in the building on Sundays.

That makes sense.

That's the only intrusion into Reno that I had on my paper route. The area that my paper route covered was basically from I Street south to the railroad tracks.

To the railroad tracks south of B Street?

South of B Street.

That's pretty far.

And then from 17th, which is Rock Boulevard, to the Reno city limits.

And you would do that on your bicycle?

Yes.

How long would that take you, approximately?

On Sundays, about two and a half hours, but during the rest of the week, about an hour, depending on the weather.

When you first started to do that, were you seeing areas you'd never really spent any time in before?

Oh, yes, especially south of B Street between Rock Boulevard, which at that time was Home Furniture, but it's now the Rail City, which is 21st Street. That area in there I never ventured into when I was a kid.

What really struck you about the differences between areas? Were these very different neighborhoods from each other?

Yes. The area between B Street and the railroad tracks seem to be a bit more rundown, not real pristine, whereas everything on the other side, the north side of B Street, those people took a lot of care in their houses and they had really nice lawns, nice white painted fences, weren't rundown-looking at all. There were a lot of brick homes in there, too.

And you delivered to a lot of commercial properties too?

Yes.

But just on the outside, so you weren't going inside much?

Well, yes. The thing of it is, is the commercial properties I used to deliver to were either trailer parks or motels. I'd deliver a paper to the office of the motel, and then the manager of the trailer park and some of those permanent residents in the trailer parks would take newspapers.

So the Park Motel and the Pony Express Lodge, those were pretty nice places?

The Pony Express Lodge was really a nice place. Park Motel, I really don't remember that until I started high school, and then I was always walking down the back side, because I'd walk up and down on F Street, so I didn't see much of the front side of it.

Now, it must be that U.S. 40 at that point had bypassed Prater Way.

Yes.

So that wasn't really a busy stretch anymore for them.

Well, not for them, but for local traffic it was, because everyone north of Prater Way would take Prater and then go up Prater to get to Reno.

So you could have a lot of viable businesses, just not necessarily for tourists maybe?

Yes. There were just a couple, three different grocery stores, one drugstore that I can remember, two used furniture stores, and Home Furniture had an extension there, bowling alley, Sparks Bowlarium, the Oppios. That's another Italian family, the Oppios.

You said they had a bowling alley? Where was that?

Sparks Bowlarium. It was right across the street from Rail City. It's now a little Mexican bar, but it used to be a bowling alley that had ten alleys in there. I never did get a job setting up as a pin boy in there. I know a couple of guys that did, but I didn't.

And you had Wood's Trailer Park at corner of Prater and Sullivan, which is BoJo's now, because I guess Mr. Wood was trimming a tree and fell out of the tree and broke his back.

A while ago?

Yes, quite a while ago.

Now, were you going into places like the Coney Island from an early age?

Not really, no.

I just wonder if it was a popular place to just have lunch or anything.

Oh, yes. When I was growing up, Mother would go there and get tamales.

Oh, they still made the tamales.

They made the tamales there.

They were very popular. A lot of people were selling tamales, but they seemed to be very popular.

Well, theirs had a different flavor. Well, the funny part of it is, is here you've got Italians employing a German cook making Mexican tamales.

So they weren't made by the family.

They employed a cook there, and they were the best tamales. They always had one large olive in the tamale, one black olive. They weren't real thick cornmeal shells, they were not real thin, but they were kind of a medium thickness, and they weren't real dry. They were good. I mean, they were absolutely delicious, and I have yet to get tamales that even come close to what they made. I mean, they were that big. One tamale, one meal, one person.

So you would buy them and then take them home?

Take them home and steam them.

Is that what most people did?

Yes.

Do you remember them expanding or when they started, if they kind of added more rooms over time? Did it seem like it was smaller at first? I know they had some expansions. I was just curious.

I know they did, too, but I don't remember them. Because I wasn't in that neck of the woods that often, know what I mean? Early in the morning, delivering papers, late in the afternoon, picking up the fees for the papers. Other than that, I didn't spend a whole lot of time there.

I do remember that hill going down View Street to get down to G Street and then trying to get back up that hill on a single-speed bicycle. It was murder. And on Sundays it was worse because I had a heavy load of papers still.

Now, it seems to me you were in a really good location as a kid and a teenager for a lot of things to do. It seems that there were a lot of drive-ins and different places you might have gone.

Well, okay. El Rancho Drive-in Theater was there, and one of the things we did as kids, especially in the summertime, is we'd go back there, and one of us would sneak through a three-strand barbed-wire fence, turn one of the speakers up as loud as we could, dash back across the street, and then sit there and watch the cartoons on the thing until an operator would come out and turn the speaker down. The minute he went back into the shed, we cranked it back up again.

And Frostop Drive-in was there. Used to be a used-car dealership there now, but the building is collapsing. There's nothing in there right now. The gas station is on the corner of 22nd Street, and the next building down was where the Frostop was, and then the car lot on the corner was where Eddie Howden grew up. I remember going up there to his house for Cub Scouts because his mother was a den mother.

Was the Frostop a drive-in?

It was a drive-in. It was like A&W. It was competition to A&W, and at our end of the town, we would go there instead of A&W. It was closer, and it seemed like the root beer tasted just as good, so I don't know.

And there was a Dairy Queen pretty close.

The Dairy Queen was on 15th, well, actually the same place it is right now, there at 15th. We would go to the movie, which is the Sparks Theater, which is at 14th and B. Walking home, we'd stop and get a Dairy Queen, and it was 5 cents for a cone about that big, 10 cents if you wanted it dipped. You could have it dipped in chocolate, cherry, and I can't remember what the other one was, but anyway, there were three different ones you could dip in, but I remember the cherry and the chocolate were the ones that tasted the best for 10 cents. Now, if you wanted a really big one, you'd get one for 25 cents, and that would last walking from there to Sullivan Lane.

[laughs] You had it timed out. That's great.

Do you remember how much you were paid for your paper route?

Weekly paper was 35 cents a week.

How long did you do that paper route?

Until I was a junior in high school.

So this was through in the fifties, the mid-fifties?

Yes.

*Did you have other friends who had paper routes too? You kind of had a pretty big territory, actually.
[laughs]*

I had a big territory. Well, when I quit—and the only reason I quit is I got into a fight in school, and the guy was bigger than I was, and we were doing a wrestling match, and we did a twist, and my foot stayed one place and landed on top of my ankle. The doctor said I would have been better off if I'd broke it, but I was in a cast for six weeks, so I couldn't ride a bicycle, so I had to give up my paper route.

But when I did that, the person who was managing it said, "We had to get two people to do your paper route. How did you do it?" Perseverance, I guess. I don't know.

On Prater there were little mom's-and-pop's grocery stores. There was one that I remember, it was a rock building right there at the alley between Prater and C Street. It's still there. The building's still there, but it's a motorcycle gang's bar. Then right across the alley from it was Handy Hobby's, and they're a tattoo parlor now.

And what was that?

Hobby shops. Hobby store. Plastic models, railroad models, airplanes, etc.

So when do you think a lot of these little markets started going away? There were so many of them.

Safeway.

Safeway, when that came in? Where was that located?

Greenbrae Shopping Center. And then Albertson's built there on the corner of 18th and Prater, which is now a Mexican grocery store. Then the other Safeway is where O'Reilly's Auto Parts is. Where they built that Safeway, all the little mom-and-pop grocery stores went away.

It really seemed to happen that quickly?

Yes.

It makes me wonder what those families did if they'd had those markets for so long.

Well, for a lot of them, basically, their house and the market were one and the same. They lived upstairs.

Was that true for some of the ones you went to?

Yes. Hanson's wasn't. My mother did a lot of grocery shopping at Hanson's, which was on B Street catawampus across from the Nugget. It's a vacant lot now. But when the Nugget started

expanding, the two Safeway stores and Albertson's kind of dried up Hanson's, and the Nugget bought the building and made a Convention Center out of it. It was a Nugget Convention Center there for a lot of years. It was a block west of the Masonic building, so it was down on 13th Street.

Do you have any memories of spending time at Deer Park?

Oh, yes, all summer, swimming. I spent more time swimming in the summertime than you can shake a stick at. Because we didn't want to lose shoes or anything like that, we'd walk down there barefoot, and crossing the streets at one o'clock in the afternoon when it's 90-plus outside, the asphalt street was hotter than heck, and we'd run like mad across the street and hit the sidewalk and [demonstrates]. [laughs] Cool our feet off on the sidewalk and take a slow walk down that block to the next one and run like heck across the street.

Let's see. Mike O'Neal and Dan Reeder lived across the street from the Deer Park, and I remember swimming lessons we had ten o'clock in the morning, swimming at Deer Park, you froze your tootsies off. It was not a heated pool. It was cold, I mean cold, almost like Lake Tahoe.

Then the kiddies' pool, which was shallower, you'd get out of that pool and you'd go hit the kiddies' pool and warm up. [laughs] And the lifeguards kept trying to chase us out of there, because there were swimming lessons, and they've got little kids in the small pools. We'd go hit that pool just to warm up a little bit.

Then the other place that was warm was the building that was right here, and for about four feet away from the building, the concrete was hot. So we'd go lay down on the concrete to warm up, too, get the reflection off the building, the white building, onto the concrete. And then learning to dive off the diving board.

What was in that building?

That was a changing room and locker room for putting your clothes and stuff in.

So it sounds like it was very organized. They had lifeguards. They had swimming lessons.

Oh, yes. The pool was built in 1942, opened in May of 1942, and the City of Sparks ran that, still does. They had lifeguards, although most of the lifeguards were teenage girls. They had one adult supervising lifeguard, and then they had the people taking the money was adults, and the rest of them were teenagers.

Did it cost something to swim there?

Ten cents.

Ten cents a day?

Yes.

So did that seem like a pretty good deal?



Boys diving into the pool at Deer Park in the 1940s.
Photo courtesy of the Sparks Museum and Cultural Center.

Oh, yes. All-day babysitting for 10 cents, that's a hell of a deal. [laughs]

Would you just stay there for hours and hours in the summer?

Oh, yes. We'd go down there, go down there for swimming lessons at ten o'clock, we would leave at eleven-thirty, and you'd come back in at one o'clock when they opened the pool, and I usually didn't get home until six.

Sounds like it was just a big summer activity.

Yes.

Did they sell snacks or anything?

No. No food allowed in the pool.

Just swimming.

And it was lots of swimming. I remember a couple times we tried to swim there at night. I think it was either the O'Neals or the Reeders would call the cops. We'd hear the cops' siren and climb up over the fence and get away before the cops showed up. I think the cops did it on purpose. They'd hit the siren coming out of the station.

So is it like today where the pool is fenced off but then the park is always open, the rest of the park?

Yes.

Was the rest of the park used a lot for other things?

Everything. They had picnics down there all the time, different family events. Sundays were really crowded down there, some kind of an event going on all the time. In the springtime, a lot of the schools had their final days down there at the park, different classes. I remember Saturday nights they had some bands that played down there. That was always a big crowd.

Was there a little stage?

Oh, yes. The stage is still there, except when I was growing up, you could get under it because it was all pipes and a deck on top of it, and I guess they got vandals in there. Anyway, they closed off the underneath part.

I don't think they had power, but the bands—well, the thing of it is, it wasn't electric guitars either. I mean, they had clarinets, saxophones, trumpets, all the wind instruments. So it was a regular-type dance-band-type thing. Of course, at that time, Tommy Dorsey and Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, all the big bands were still well known, and you could get the records of them. That was before people got real hooked on TV, and people made their own music and things like that. So you had a lot of different bands.

There was always a baseball game going down there somewhere. Sandlot baseball was great. It didn't have any adults involved, so, consequently, you could have fun. There were about eight or ten of us that ran around together, basically probably age seven through seventeen. When we'd get a baseball game going together, kids under ten years old got to swing the bat until they hit the ball. Over ten years old, three strikes and you were out. We had fun. I don't remember a score. We didn't care. We just had fun playing ball, you know. And we used to play there at the Kate Smith School. Actually, that school grounds ran from the edge of the McPhersons' property, and their house was on Sullivan Lane, all the way down to 19th Street.

That was all the school property?

That was all school property.

Was it all fenced in around that?

It was fenced in. But the thing of it is, you had a gate in one section of it about as wide as that wall. There was a basketball court, but the basketball court was not smooth. It was not concrete. There was nothing on it. There were big rocks like this hanging, so you bounced a basketball and there was no way you could learn how to dribble, not on that.

Then they had jungle gyms and high bars and the swing sets and all kinds of things you don't see on playgrounds anymore, teeter-totters, monkey bars, jungle gyms. Fell off the jungle gyms, you only did that once. After that, you learned how to hang on. You learn by your mistakes a lot more than you ever learn by your successes. [laughs]

Now, tell me, do you remember, did you go into Reno very much? What would be the reasons to take that drive?

Shopping for clothes, Sears. I remember trying to keep up with my mother. She was a fast walker. Sierra Street, you had J.C. Penney's, Sears. Well, no. J.C. Penney's was over here. Sears, Montgomery Wards, J.C. Penney's. When we'd go looking for clothes, that's the three stores we'd go in, and I'll tell you what, it was a footrace keeping up with Mother as she was going from one store to the next. My wife wonders why I walk so fast.

So it really was shopping central.

Yes, it was shopping central, because, you know, you had Woolworth's over on Virginia Street side. You had J.C. Penney's, Sears, Montgomery Wards, the Wonder Store, Joseph Magnin, Granada Theater, Crest Theater. We never went to the Crest Theater. It was too damn expensive.

Oh, they cost different amounts?

Oh, yes. The middle one was the Granada. The Majestic and the Tower were cheaper. Sparks was the cheapest. I mean, it was like 15 cents. I remember for 25 cents I could go to the movies and get a candy bar at the movies.

So when you would go there, someone would have to drive you?

To downtown Reno?

Sure.

As we got older, we could take the bus down, but most of the time Mom would want to go see a movie, and we'd all go to the movie and either go to the Majestic or the Granada.

Did those cities seem very separate from each other?

Oh, yes. There were definitely three miles between Sparks and Reno.

What do you remember about the Reno side of 4th Street as you came into town?

A lot of motels. Actually, the Sandman Motel was the last building in Reno, because from there to Sparks was all empty. And when you got to Galletti, which at that time was called Coney Island Drive, you had the first motel on the south side of the street, and then on the north side was the homes. Then you had the Coney Island Bar there, and Copenhagen was down the street a little bit further.

So really between the Sandman and Coney Island—

Nothing.

Casale's, I guess, was there, the Halfway Club.

Yes, the Halfway House was there but—

Very small building.

Yes. But it was standing out there by itself. The gas station on the corner there at Galletti and 4th, B Street, didn't exist. That wasn't built until the freeway started being built through there, and Washoe County took over the old motel, what was left of it, after the freeway went through.

The motel by the Coney Island?

Yes. And of course I don't remember it, but that area was basically the Coney Island Water Park.

On the south side of Coney Island?

On the south side of B Street.

What kind of water park?

Well, boats and not much. In 1927 they didn't do a whole lot of swimming. They had different paddleboats, canoes, and things like that.

So do you ever remember anything there left? No, that was all gone.

That was gone by 1927. It lasted from 1904 to 1927.

I have some pictures from earlier there, and it seems for a while later they kept referring to Coney Island, but there must have been a variety of different things there.

Yes.

But then at some point an auto court seems to have taken over that area.

Yes. Well, the State of Nevada Department of Transportation, Automotive Division got one half of it, and the Washoe County Roads has got the other half.

So I guess one last thing I'll ask you to just kind of bring it all together a little, when you were a firefighter you talked about one fire along Prater, at one of the furniture stores. Were there other fires along there that you remember that you worked on?

Not particularly. The Gepford fire was probably the most notable.



Gepford's Used Furniture Store in the 1930s. It stood at the northeast corner of 15th Street and Prater Way until burning down in 1976. Photo courtesy of Nevada Historical Society.

Did it burn that whole building down?

Yes. Well, the thing of it is, is that Charlie Gepford added on to that building without rhyme nor reason and no building permits, so it was all chopped up. Unless you lived there, you wouldn't know how to get around inside of that, and being a firefighter, full of smoke, you didn't want to go in there because you'd get lost so damn easy. The thing of it is, is that the fire was—basically when we got there, the first engine companies who got there on the scene, it already vented through the roof, so there was no reason to go inside itself. We were trying a lot of different things to try to put that fire out, but it was just so tight in there. The hallways were basically almost only 24 inches wide so you could get more rooms in the apartments, and it was so full of stuff, especially the used-furniture section of it, there was just so

much fuel in there, and no way of getting water into it. It was cooking. I do remember that they blew an engine out of one of the fire engines. It overheated and fried.



Gepford's Furniture Store burned down in 1976. Photo courtesy of Russell Clark.

Pretty devastating.

Yes. I'm sure there were other fires on there, but it was either before I became a firefighter or they were held. They weren't multiple alarms. They were handled by the on-duty crews. A lot of the buildings were just torn down because people sold the property and the new property owners wanted to do something else.

So have you retired now?

Oh, yes.

When did you retire?

July 11th, 1994.

And you've been quite busy in your post-retirement.

Oh, yes. I belong to the Sparks Museum. I was on the board of trustees for eighteen years. I belong to the Sparks Kiwanis Club of Downtown Sparks. We have a bicycle project that we have. We've moved for the third time in five years, and most of it's been because we had to. Not only did we outgrow the space we were in, but the property owners didn't want us there any longer.

What does that project do with bikes?

Well, basically its primary purpose is to get and refurbish old bikes and give them to kids at risk. Now, it's not a giveaway program. The thing of it is, the kids have to earn the bike somehow. We just deliver the bikes to the program that makes the kids earn it. Boys and Girls Clubs, they have a bike up on the shelf, and for every bit of homework you do, you get a Boys and Girls buck, and on the bicycles, you've got to have so many bucks before you get that bike.

Schools, Washoe County Schools, especially the grammar schools and middle schools, they have programs where kids can earn bikes by getting good grades, improving your citizenship, and other processes to be able to earn that bike. It's not a giveaway.

In three of the middle schools, we have an after-school project that is bike clubs. We do this in the springtime for sixteen weeks. We go in and teach kids how to work and fix bikes, and if they do good enough work, they can earn the bike that they were working on. We also teach them how to ride safely.

So we give about 1,200 bikes away a year to different school projects. UNR students come up and buy bikes from us all the time because they can get around campus a lot easier on a bicycle. We have a lot of entry-level bikes so if people want to learn how to ride a bike or see if they would like to ride bikes, we have them come up and buy a pretty decent bike and learn how to handle it.

We're trying to put together a project now where we have Saturday morning bike rides and Wednesday evening learn how to fix your bike. We always figure that if you know how to fix your bike, you're going to ride it, because if you can't fix it, it's going to sit in the garage and collect dust.

The biggest fear most people have is changing a tire, replacing, fixing a flat. This area's got a lot of what we call goat heads, thorns. They've got two little horns on them like that and look like a goat head, and those things will go through a bicycle tire like you wouldn't believe. The thing of it is, you break them off, and that little point still works its way through the tire and punches a hole in the tube. But there are ways of getting around that, too.

That's a great project.

Yes.

I can see how that would be very popular, but that's also a lot of bikes to store, so you do need a lot of room for that. Where's that located now?

We're at 145 Catron, which is up off of Parr Boulevard. We've got about 25,000 square feet, and 19,995 square feet of bicycles. [laughter]

This has come full circle because you were such a bicyclist when you were young with your paper route. Now you're helping the other kids learn how to ride safely.

Yes. Well, the thing of it is, is that people don't understand that the state of Nevada, a bicycle, if it has a wheel that's bigger than 20 inches, 20 inches or bigger, is considered a vehicle with all rights, privileges, and responsibilities of any other vehicle on the road. NRS.

Is that unusual state-wise?

No, it's actually taken after another state's rules. Most all the states have basically the same kind of rule as if you're riding a bicycle on the street, you obey the same laws any other vehicle does.

Learn the rules of the road. [laughs]

Learn the rules of the road. You don't ride against traffic. You don't ride on the sidewalk. Helmets aren't required in the state of Nevada, but they're suggested, and I can show you some helmets that people have crashed with, and they're still walking and talking today because they had the helmet on.

And I'm sure you show the kids those, too.

Oh, yes, we do. We also have a demonstration where we have two cantaloupes. Cantaloupe is about the same texture as your skull. All right. How high off the ground is your head? We drop one in a helmet. We drop one out of a helmet. Guess which one survives.

That's a good exercise. [laughs]

Yes. And the other thing—I'm on my soapbox here.

That's all right. [laughs]

The other thing is that 85 percent of all serious bicycle accidents—the definition of a serious bicycle accident is where somebody's taken to a hospital in an ambulance—are one-vehicle accidents; you fall off your bike. And less than 5 percent are vehicles versus bicyclists, but yet everybody's petrified about hitting a car or getting hit by a car.

Just learn how to bike safely.

Yes.

It seems like a good note to end on. [laughs] Anything else you want to add?

No, I can get off my soapbox.

It's a very valuable way to spend your time, and I think that's just such a wonderful thing that you're doing.

I want to thank you so much for talking to me about Sparks. I may follow up with some questions, but I think that will do it for today. Thank you so much.

You're welcome.

LORRAINE AND LOUIS ERREGUIBLE

Founders, Louis' Basque Corner



Lorraine and Louis Erreguible inside Louis' Basque Corner. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Louis and Lorraine Erreguible opened Louis' Basque Corner at 301 East 4th Street in 1967, and also ran the hotel upstairs. A native of the Basque Country, Louis moved to Reno in 1948. Lorraine, born in California, moved to Reno in the mid-1940s and worked for nine years at Alpine Glass. They met at a local restaurant and married in 1955. Louis' Basque Corner quickly became a regional favorite, eventually gaining national recognition for its family-style Basque lunches and dinners. The Erreguibles sold the business and retired in 2011. Lorraine died in 2013.

Imanol Murua: This is Imanol Murua. I am in Reno, in the Erreguibles' house. Today is Tuesday, the 27th of March, 2012. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and place it in a public archive?

Lorraine Erreguible: You have.

Louis Erreguible: We signed the paper.

Okay, thank you very much. I would like to start with your origins.

Louis: Do you mind if I tell you why I came to this country, and how I came, and what I did over here? I did quite a few things.

Lorraine: I think you should start by saying that you were born on 8-25-26.

Louis: First of all, before I came to this country, I was in Mauleon,¹ where I passed le certificat d'études, en la Escuela.²

So you were born in Mauleon in Zuberoa in 1926?

Louis: Yeah, 25th of August, 1926. And then, when I was fourteen years old, I left school and I started working with a plumber. I learned the plumbing business. Then I got a better job, going from Mauleon to Bordeaux, France.

How old were you when you went from Mauleon to Bordeaux?

Louis: Sixteen years old.

And until then, you were living always in Mauleon?

Louis: Mauleon, oh yeah. Sixteen years old. [pause] Wait a second.

Did you start working—

Louis: Oh, that's right. Because when I went to Bordeaux, then I went back to France, and that's when I went to Spain. I got a good job in Bordeaux, so I started working in Bordeaux as a plumber. And when I went to Bordeaux as a plumber, I used to live in the hotel Anatola-France. It was my aunt, sister of my mother, that used to own the place. And to pay for the rent over there because I was living there, I used to work at night in the kitchen, and I learned the plumbing and the kitchen. After that, I went back to Mauleon. That's when I was not quite eighteen years old. And that's when my aunt, my father's sister, and her husband, Justo, came to Mauleon.

¹ Maule, in Basque language. Capital city of Zuberoa (Soule, in French), one of the three provinces of the French Basque Country.

² Basque language.

Lorraine: What about the war in-between?

Louis: The what?

Lorraine: The war in-between.

Louis: Well, I went to the war first, that's right.

Lorraine: Yeah, the war first.

How old were you when the war started?

Louis: Oh, gosh, it was 1939. I was fourteen years old, fifteen years old. But I went to the war when I was not quite eighteen—seventeen and a half years old. I didn't want to go to Germany because, you know, I was afraid.

Did you go to Germany?

Louis: Oh yeah, on foot, all the way to Germany afterwards—

Lorraine: He didn't work in Germany.

Louis: Oh yeah, but I went, and the Germans, they wanted me to go to Germany. So a bunch of Mauleon people, friends of ours, we then decided to go to Spain. From Spain, some went to the Navy, some other ones, Army, some other ones different places. So then I went from there to Africa. Spain, Africa. After Africa we were shipped to England.

And what place in Africa? What town or what area of Africa?

Louis: Very close to Casablanca.

Lorraine: He was with [Jacques-Philippe] Leclerc. He was a very famous general.

Louis: Yeah, I was, you know, it was pretty bad in there. So in a month and a half, I went from France, I mean, Spain, Africa, from Africa to England...we spent maybe one week, one week in England. And then we got parachuted into France. And that was my first work in parachuting—the big guy from England, he was a captain and I think he was over six feet tall. He says put your feet on the rook of the parachute over here, and when you are ready to jump you count to twenty and if the parachute doesn't open, then you pull the little thing.

I don't know if it opened or not but, but when I got on the floor, on the ground—you know, I might have hit my head—it was still there—it never moved, and I had to open that thing with the other fingers...but it was during the night, too. I think we were over 45 people jumping in there, next to Paris.

So did you jump often with the parachute?

Louis: Only once, that was the first time in my life, and I didn't jump, they pushed me. Next, boom, next, boom.

Where was it?

Louis: That was from England above Paris.

And before England, why did you decide to go to Africa?

Louis: We didn't decide to go to Africa; we went to Spain, and they threw us out of Spain because there was a problem with France and Germany. There were a lot of German people there then, too, and so they sent us to Africa. And from Africa, you know there were Germans in there, too, so they sent us to England. We were the people they let us go like that. There were nineteen of us; two came back.

Lorraine: During the war, I'll have to tell this, they transported many people who were coming south over the border.

Louis: Yeah, that was when I was in Mauleon.

Lorraine: His father's place is the place where they all kept track of it and they would take them over the border at night time.

Louis: The other people, people who escaped from Germany, my uncle Joe—Jose—he was too weak, he escaped from Germany himself, but he helped my papa, the two brothers, and we helped all the people who used to come by to cross to go to Spain. Lots, lots of German soldiers who had enough of Hitler, I remember that.

I remember the time they shot at Papa, and they missed. There were nineteen Germans who took over Mauleon and they were living across the river from us. And papa one day was in there, just around to the basement of the house over there, just when the Germans shot at him. If he stayed there he would have had his head blown up, right about the same size...it ripped a hole in the wall. My father remembered that about what the Germans did to them. And we had a lot of problems over there, too.

Lorraine: Of course food-wise they would have to go to the farmers in the night to get food.

Louis: *Papa...comida* [Father...food]. At night, when I was doing that I was probably 15, 16 years old or something like that in there, I didn't stay too long. I went back to Bordeaux. In the meantime, we used to go, Papa and I, to the farms and trade *alpargatas* for food.

Lorraine: The Basque sandals.

Alpargatas.

Louis: We used to take some of that in there and trade it for food to the farmers. That's what they used to do. Well, I wasn't there most of the time.

Before starting to record the interview you told me that you didn't want to talk about the war so I'm not going to ask you details, but just to clarify, just tell me the places you went during the war. You left Mauleon.

Lorraine: Esterencuby was the town they left from.

You left from Esterencuby, I know that is very close to the border.

Louis: Esterencuby, yeah I stayed on a farm for a while there.

You and another 18 young Basque men left—

Louis: Yes, all from my home town, we escaped together across the border there.

You escaped to Spain, and from Spain you went to North Africa near Casablanca, from Casablanca you went to England. Where in England? What place in England?

Louis/Lorraine: Dover.

Louis: We were near Dover, then we stayed up, we were maybe 50 kilometers. I don't know, a little town in there, you know, to pick us up in the perimeter....

And after England, were you in England when the war was over?

Lorraine: No, no, no this was after D-Day when they went in, all the forces went in, the combined forces, Eisenhower and so forth, this is when they went in. As far as I can tell from what he tells me on dates.

Louis: I joined the army; I signed the paper with LeClerc, remember LeClerc?

LeClerc.

Louis: Yeah, that's right, and from there when I came back from the thing, from England, when I parachuted from England—

Lorraine: What was the town that you parachuted into, it's a very famous town, where they have the car races...you parachuted into what town?

Louis: You mean where I jumped to?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Louis: It was close to Paris.

Lorraine: I know.

Louis: Le Manz.

Lorraine: Le Manz.

Louis: Le Manz, that's where I joined the regular army in there, then I started using the, what we used to call "Chuniette." "Chuniette" is a little tank, I even drove it, not many can drive for a while, but we had the French Chuniette, but it didn't compare with an American tank. You should have seen the *cacharo* [thing]...Five speed to back up, and Jesus Christ and I don't want to talk to that—back to the war.

We were in that thing there and we headed to Kiel and we crossed the Rhine and went to Germany, and close to Baden Baden in the Black Forest, that's where it is. Every time they allowed us we were driving, and they would announce the Luftwaffe [German Air force], their planes are coming. Do you know what we used to do? Jump out of the darn tank and go hide, or at least a couple of hundred yards from the tank.

Lorraine: Because they would incinerate them otherwise.

Louis: Yeah, I don't want to go back to that because of that.

Lorraine: But you had some nice experiences.

Louis: *Cuatro amigos mataron alla, no lo creias* [Four friends that they killed there, you'd never believe it.]

Lorraine: You have to tell the story of the people where you decided to go grab the pig, and it didn't work out and they invited you back. I think that's a beautiful story. Remember you were waiting for rations? You decided to go to look and see if you could steal a pig.

Louis: That was in Strasbourg, close to Kiel with the Rhine, we met with the American troops, and we were eating beans and the Americans were tired of those rations in the cans—

Lorraine: Oh dear, what were they called?

Louis: So we used to trade the beans—

With the Americans?

Louis: That's when I saw, what's the name of the general?

Lorraine: Patton

Louis: Patton—General Patton—we were together there – and I saw him leaving there and he was saluting everybody and everything.

So you saw General Patton?

Louis: General Patton, yeah.

You saw him?

Louis: Yeah, he was in charge. I never got to talk or shake hands with him because everybody was...and they were trying to keep the people away from Patton.

Lorraine: Anyway, tell him the story about the pig.

Louis: About the what?

Lorraine: When you guys went to steal the pig because you were waiting for rations, then you got an invitation. I think that's a beautiful story.

Louis: The rations, K-rations. Those Americans were tired of eating that stuff and we were tired of eating beans, and more beans, and more beans so we used to trade our food. They used to love that. They used to give us cigarettes, packages of crackers and cigarettes, we used to trade everything.

Lorraine: So anyway, you went to steal a pig.

Louis: A what?

The story of the pig

Lorraine: Or the German pig.

Louis: The what?

Lorraine: Remember you went to see if you could find a pig.

Louis: Well, it was Christmas 1944, and we decided we wanted something better to eat, natural food. So we went to a farm over there and we wanted to kill a pig, and I remember the guy coming out of there with a fork in his hand like that. He was speaking French, it was on the border, and we said we would like to eat something, if you can sell us a little pig, so he said well...he hesitated and then pretty soon he said "It's almost time for supper, would you like to join us?" There were six of us in there, and they prepared food for us you wouldn't believe.

Lorraine: This was a German family.

Louis: We were so happy. How wonderful it was. They were very nice people. They were German, but they hated Hitler. We talked about that, but we were watching how we were talking. I said, well, I'll come back in a couple of weeks, I think it was. We went back, we took all the American K-Rations and we put food and everything, we gave them a couple boxes and they were so happy, those people.

Lorraine: So, it doesn't matter what nationalities.

Louis: The man said, "We are tired." They were 17 years in the war and they were tired of it. It was Karlsruhe was the name, Karlsruhe. Had a little...should I tell him what happened with the lieutenant?

Lorraine: Go ahead, you might as well tell him.

Tell me, please.

Louis: Well, you know I got a temper, I had a temper. So there was a group of uh, how you call that?

Lorraine: New recruits.

Louis: Yeah, a different regiment than mine, okay? And then I was walking by with a paper, I had my discharge paper in my hand. I was happy about it. And the lieutenant went by, boom, boom, boom and that was the new people that started taking over. And the lieutenant says, "You!"

He stopped the group and he said, "You, *vient ici* [come here]" and said, "Walk with us."

"I'm not going to walk with us, I belong to the par-tank [phonetic] guard. I don't belong to you people and besides I got a paper over here."

He picked up the paper and he tried to give me—he went like this to give me a slap, but my fist was faster and I dropped him. They put me in jail for six months. That's what they do when you are in there.

Did you spend six months actually in jail?

Louis: Six months.

Where was it?

Louis: That was Karlsruhe. A little town very close to Baden Baden, there was a camp in there for the prisoners. And they put me there, you know with whom? With the African, what they call the blue man from Africa to guard [unclear], so they pile up for two weeks I was over there and finally they put me in another department because those blue man if you go like this to them, boom, they will kill you.

Blue man?

Louis: From Africa they are spies, you hear about the spies?

Lorraine: They used to have their ears in the water. This was a new lieutenant from Salzere [phonetic]. Who decided he was going to be, you know...so he fell into it.

Do you remember the end of the war, where you were when you were told you can go home?

Louis: You bet I remember that. You know why?

Why?

Louis: Because they apologized and they gave twenty seven thousand francs back pay to me. Cigarettes, everything I wanted to take. So I ship everything I can, and all the guys and I, we stopped in Paris.

Lorraine: What a minute—he wants to know the date you were actually discharged.

Louis: What?

Lorraine: The date of your discharge.

Louis: I cannot tell you the date of when it was, I think it was May.

Lorraine: Of what year? '45?

Louis: 1945.

May of '45?

Louis: Yeah, May, I think it was May.

Before going home you stopped in Paris?

Louis: Oh, yeah.

Lorraine: Yeah.

What for?

Louis: I knew a lot of people in Paris from my hometown, they used to own the Ball Dance in Paris, what was the name, *no me acuerdo* [I don't remember] names.

Lorraine: What's the name of the one where the singers were?

Louis: I used to go to school with one of them, he was Spanish. He was born there in Mauleon, but both parents Spanish—Huerta!

Huerta?

Louis: Huerta. Yeah, he had the guy that used to buy the groceries and everything else, next to where we, before we reach—God! *Nombres* [Names].

Never mind.

Louis: Huerta

It will come.

Lorraine: Anyway, so you went there and—

So from Paris to Mauleon?

Louis: Mauleon, yeah.

You came to America in 1948, so what did you do the three years between the war and America—in Mauleon, in Bordeaux, what is the story of these three years?

Louis: Two years.

Two years.

Louis: I came back home after a good thing in Paris and after I talk, I call my father—*crapaud*—Dad! You know what it is a *crapaud*?

No.

Lorraine: It's a little toad or a little frog.

Louis: Yeah.

It is what?

Louis: *Sabes que es una grenouille?* [Do you know what a *grenouille* is?]

No.

Louis: *Es esas que saltan.*

Lorraine: It's a frog.

A frog.

Louis: But it's not a frog, it's a big one.

Lorraine: A toad.

Louis: *Crapaud.*

He called you that; your dad called you that?

Louis: Yeah, oh yeah, to come home.

Lorraine: Louis, you gotta backtrack one thing, though. When you were in Paris, do you remember the singers?

Louis: Where?

Lorraine: The singers, the Basque singers that invited you to join them?

Louis: The what?

Lorraine: We got their recordings—the ones who came to the Riverside.

Louis: Oh, when I came back to Mauleon.

Lorraine: To Mauleon? I thought it was when you were in Paris this happened.

Louis: It was in Paris. Yeah, that's right, I took them to Mauleon afterwards.

So what is the history?

Louis: When I was in Paris in those good days in there, we decided to go to Can-Can, the famous deal, and there was a group, "Les Compagnons de la Chanson"—there were eight men and one woman, they used to sing, and when I was in Paris I used to sing with those people. They wanted to keep me with them too, you know. I used to have a beautiful voice.

Lorraine: Louis had a beautiful voice.

Louis: I remember, I will never forget that. They made me sing over there in Paris, you know.

You sing?

Louis: Yeah, there was a group of singers, a beautiful group in there, oh god.

Lorraine: So anyway, you went home to Papa. What did you do for two years?

Louis: They wanted me to keep on going with them, I was so tempted but I say, no, I better go see my family and I went to Papa. When I went to Papa, that's what happened, he wanted me to take over the business, his business.

What business?

Louis: The *alpargatas*,

Alpargatas.

Louis: Yeah, because I am the oldest boy, he got three boys and four girls, okay, we were seven. But he wanted me to take over the business and I think, well, Papa...I spent two years working with him, in the sandal factory and then my uncle, my mother's sister and her husband—Rita, Rita was there, too.

Lorraine: Your father's sister.

Louis: Huh?

Lorraine: Your father's sister, not your mother's sister.

Louis: Dolores, that's right, I'm confused but, it's pretty hard to remember everything that happened.

Lorraine: Anyway, your father's sister and her husband.

Louis: And I say to Papa, I mean, my aunt and her husband she had sheep in this country, and he starts talking and he asks if you want to come to the United States, and I say why not, you know I've been running all over Europe, maybe I can see the United States. So they tell me to make the papers and that really was something. They give me the papers, they pay for the trip and everything with the condition that I pay when I start working over there. Everything was okay. Do you want me to tell the trip?

Lorraine: Sure, Momma and Papa took you up to Paris, they got you on TWA.

Louis: What happened, my father dropped me and my mother in Paris to take the plane directly to New York.

New York, when was it?

Louis: When was it?

Lorraine: 1948.

Do you remember the month or the day?

Lorraine: October was when he arrived.

Louis: The plane was TWA with four cylinders, four propellers, and I was right on the thing where the propellers were. There was a big bad weather.

Lorraine: In the North Sea—they were going to Ireland.

Louis: Ireland.

First to Ireland.

Louis: *Irlanda* [Ireland] there was big weather, and so we stopped in there and I was sitting in the airport and luckily there were two sisters.

Lorraine: Some French women.

Louis: “Hey young man,” *habla francais* [they spoke French], if you want to eat something?”
“Sure, I want to eat something!”

Well, the company pays the dinner, everybody eating over there. So I had a good meal. So we went back to the plane and we arrived in New York.

Lorraine: Late.

Louis: Late, so I gotta wait until 10 o’clock the next morning to go to Reno. So geez what am I gonna do over here?

Lorraine: Talk about the check-in with your suitcases.

Louis: The fruit?

Lorraine: Yeah, Papa had a beautiful orchard and momma had put some of the fruit in there in packages.

Louis: *Mi madre me preparó una comida con toda la fruta de casa, ya sabes que – alli tenia peras, tenia* [My mother prepared a meal for me with all the fruit from the house, you know, there were pears, there were....]

Tell me in English.

Louis: Yeah, so they wanted to throw them away over there, well, I don't know if they throw it away or eat it themselves, so I pick up the thing and I sit on the bench right over there, I ate the whole thing, everybody was laughing like hell. I didn't care, I enjoyed the fruit, my Papa's fruit, and then—

Lorraine: You wandered around for a while.

Louis: I wandered around all over the place.

Where were you—in the airport?

Lorraine: Yeah, in the airport.

Louis: To see if I can have a place to go to Reno, there's a pilot, Air France, oh, I'm safe. So I went over there and I said this is my situation, and this and that, and he said, "Well, we got a plane that will go to Denver, Colorado which is close to Reno and then maybe, if we got the thing, we're gonna let you know, we can put you in there." Why not? So they call me a couple of hours later and said we got room for you, so I went to the plane, and you know what it was? A bunch of entertainers from New York to Denver, Colorado to entertain—the dancers, the ladies, and everything, they put me on the plane in there, and I was sitting there with all those girls, the shortest one was about six feet tall, *mujeres, ai mama mia* [women ahi mama mia]!

Lorraine: And champagne, they had food, cigars.

Louis: *Todo fuera* [All out] *me llevaban todo para comer—es eso america todo esta bien* [They brought me food—if this is America, boy, this is good!] I had a beautiful trip in there and I went to Denver. In Denver, there was no connection either, so I had to wait. So I see a young man, *mexicano* [Mexican] *Hablo Espanol tambien y me dije* [That spoke Spanish too and he said] he saw the thing and said, "You trying to go to Reno?" "Yes, I am, come on with me." They took me to a plane, and I was going to Reno. Gosh, I go to the plane. It was 11:30 at night when I arrived in Reno. In Reno, I saw the town with lights all over the place.

Lorraine: What a minute you, they put him into a big limousine.

Louis: They must have a fiesta over here.

Why?

Louis: *Toda las luces que hay* [With all the lights that there are].

So many lights.

Louis: The limousine took me.

So you arrived late in Reno and did you have any place to go—your aunt?

Louis: *No, no, no tenía la casa de mi tía* [I had my aunt's house].

Your uncle and you had what?

Louis: *El otro tenía aquí* [The other was here].

Lorraine: They had the address he was going to.

The address was in your—

Louis: Yeah I had the thing right there, Louis Erreguible, Valley Road *y todo* [and everything] and so they put me in a taxi. I had French money, but only one five dollar bill American, I don't know, Jose, my uncle, he gave me that.

Five dollars.

Louis: Yeah, five dollars, so the taxi took me in front of the house, I gave it five dollars and by the time I turned around, he was gone. My uncle opened the door, "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I just arrived."

"We didn't expect you until tomorrow morning."

Well, I explained to him what had happened and he said, "Well, you made it, so that's fine," and he said, "You could've called me or something." I didn't even know how to use a phone over here.

Lorraine: So he asked you about what you paid the cab driver.

Louis: Oh, yeah, "You paid the..." "Yeah, I had a five dollar bill I give it to him." "Five dollar bill! You're crazy! It costs 25 cents, from town to here." I didn't know anything; I didn't know what five dollars was either in those days.

Okay, it was your arrival in America. Let's stop your history here and let's start with your wife's parents' history, I will come back to Reno. Tell me where were you born, and what's your story?

Lorraine: I was born in Nampa, Idaho. Nampa was named after a chief of an Indian tribe; it's right outside of Boise, Idaho.

When were you born?

Lorraine: September 24, 1922. I'll be 90 years old in September. Anyway, my father was in the First World War and he contracted tuberculosis and so when I was about two they sent him to the Veteran's Hospital there in Boise, and he died in '25 and my mother worked as a helper there at the hospital. She met the gentleman that became my step-father, and when I was about three-and-a-half, we went to California. My grandfather was Portuguese, from Azores, and my grandmother was German,

from Poland. He was a sheepman which was very unusual for Portuguese. They mostly went into milk cattle. And he had had pneumonia a couple of years and of course my mother was the oldest of 13 and she was born in Jordan Valley, but anyway, the whole family moved to California.

Where in California?

Lorraine: Where? We first went to Oakley, California which is in the delta land. You know, there is San Francisco, then you go up the river and there is delta land through there? And my mother and father married, and my father decided to farm, and he had asparagus and wheat and when I look back on it, my life, it was probably the most joyous, and happy time of my whole life. It was really a beautiful time of peace, and love and just a wonderful time.

There are a lot of Portuguese people in that area who had their celebrations and so forth. Then one day one of the Portuguese gentlemen came on his horse and said the Hindu down the way broke through the levy because that was levy land—they have to build up against the river. And he came back a half hour later and said you get in that car and you get out of here. The next day our house was 30 feet underwater. They never reclaimed that land. So we moved to Pittsburg, California, which was an industrial town. There were the steel mills, and the rubber mills and Dow Chemical—all of them.

How old were you when you went to Pittsburg?

Lorraine: Pittsburg? I was about five and then my brother was born, and the population at that time was very, very Italian. These people from the Isle de Femoni, in Sicily had come who were fishermen, and of course there was fish, lots of fish in the river then. But a mixture of many nationalities in that town. I look back on it and think, how wonderful!

Louis: There were a lot of Italians and a lotta—

Lorraine: There were everything; there were Greeks, and there were everything. And that's of course where we went to school, and my father became very ill at one point because he had been hurt during the war too, got mustard gas, then we had to live in Martinez with a friend. But I went through school there and I graduated from High School. I was salutatorian. I studied music for nine years; in fact, that was going to be my life.

Louis: Excuse me one second, don't be afraid to tell the truth about you and I and everybody in the family, okay?

Lorraine: All right.

Louis: Please, don't be afraid about that.

Lorraine: All right, so anyway, there was a period of time in my life, you know, you're 17 and there was a possibility of scholarship to UC and things like that, but things went a little haywire, out of some other matters for me, and I got married.

In Pittsburg?

Lorraine: In Reno, Nevada, as a matter of fact. It was my first trip to Reno, Nevada. I was 18, and he was 26, I think it was, and then we lived in Pittsburg and moved to San Francisco because he worked there, and my oldest son was born, and unfortunately, it didn't balance off. I spent many years, between having five children, I worked at Dow Chemical in the Research Department, I went to the University of California, I think I gave the children everything I could give them, but mostly alone.

So finally, he was here in Reno and he was a dealer, and this was a man who could tell you 35 pages of things on a crap table, but that takes a tremendous amount of mental ability. This was the genius part of this man, and I went through the years because I understood background, and I was a Catholic, and anyway, I finally decided that either it was gonna work, or it's not gonna work. So I bundled up everything in the whole household, and we spent all night coming over the mountain to Reno, and after a comparatively short time, I was, just after Mark was born—the youngest boy—that was it, and it just happened at that point I had a friend who had called me and asked me if I wanted to work at Alpine Glass, which is right across the street from Louis' Basque Corner, in the accounting department.

So I went in and I went to work there for nine years, on Fourth Street. And I kept my family together, and in the meantime, we used to go to a little bistro on Friday nights. It was a little Italian family, it was a family affair. All of us from Alpine, just for a few hours, and we used to get the antipasto and we'd get the French bread and the onion and the cheese and so forth, and they had the music.

I lived nearby, and the little place was here and Louis worked down Second Street. He used to come once in a while, so I got to know who he was, then one night the young man who owned the place decided that he had enough so he said, "Louis, you take over," so Louis gets behind the bar and he's pouring the drink or whatever, and all of a sudden he starts singing, then he sang the *Ave Maria*. And I can remember saying to one of the friends that was with us that night, the following day, I don't think I've ever spent an evening I enjoyed as much as that night. So it just happened—of course, I was divorced at that time—I had gone to dinner with a young man at the Red Barn, and I came home and the fellow that had the little bistro had loaned me his Henry J because my little car was disabled—he called up and asked me, "Where have you been?"

And I said "It's none of your business." I went down and said, "Here are your keys to the car."

And as I started to go, here comes Louis, and he said, "Would you like a ride home?"

But it was only about a half a block to my house. Well, that was kind of a long ride home and that's how it kind of began.

Louis: And I knew that.

Lorraine: And then he started coming over for dinner. And the first thing I remember he said was, "You don't start until your mother sits at the table," then he showed them how you wash dishes and dry them properly, and Friday nights were our night. We'd go to Carson City, this little hamburger place, we didn't have money, and he'd sing all the way there and all the way back, and then we'd go back and there would be kids peeking around the corner to see if we'd kiss good night. You know with five children it was quite a whatever, and Mark was just a baby—he was only 22 months old.

Louis: I know he was a baby, I used to change his diaper.

Lorraine: I know. Anyway, so finally Louis proposed and all he said to me was, “All I want to do is see these children walk straight, I love you dearly, and when I get married I get married for the rest of my life.” That was it. Being divorced, I couldn’t be married in the church at that time, so we got our license, and we decided to go up to Virginia City. So as we were getting ready to leave, my daughter, who was probably about 8-1/2 at that time, Margi?

Louis: Probably 10 years old.

Lorraine: 8-1/2, 9, she was there, and I’ll never forget this coat she had on, and her hair and those green eyes, and she said, “You are going to marry my mother over my dead body!”

She said that?

Louis: You know what I said? “You wanna bet?”

Lorraine: Oh dear, it was something else, so my mother and father went with us to Virginia City. Of course, my mother wouldn’t go to the ceremony because of her Catholicity but she did go to dinner with us afterward.

So the ceremony was a—

Lorraine: It was a civil ceremony, so anyway, off we start you know, of course then Teresa came along. That completed the six.

So we were married, and of course I couldn’t go to communion because of the circumstances, but the kids went. It was our first trip to France in ’72, after papa died, because Louis never got to see him again, and a dear friend, Fr. Kisic, who was Croatian, called me one day.

He said, “Lorraine, you bring me a bowl of *tripa* [tripe] over for lunch. I have a present for you.” So he came over and he said, “I talked to the bishop and he is going to give a special dispensation because you have such a good marriage. You can go to communion tomorrow before you go to France.”

That was a wonderful thing for us. And then later on, after my former husband passed away, we had a little ceremony at a little church in Verdi, where we married in the church.

Louis: We wanted to be married in the church.

Lorraine: The kids had champagne, they had the car all decorated, we had a big cake. So that is the story of that. Like I said, Louis, at that time, didn’t go up through the restaurant business. When he was working in restaurants here in this country, his cousin came to him and said, “Louis, that life is too *frivola*. You must have a nice solid occupation. I just went into the custom cabinet business. You come with me and I’ll make you a journeyman, okay?” That never happened. So Louis became a custom cabinet maker for 17 years. See all the work in the kitchen? That’s his kitchen.

Louis: Look at all those things. I made everything.

Lorraine: So that was his third occupation.

What was the year when you first met? And the first wedding and the Verdi wedding?

Lorraine: We married in '55, so we probably met in '53.

Louis: Right away after you were here.

Lorraine: We married in '55, so I must have met him in '54.

Louis: Excuse me, we've been married 57 years, right?

Lorraine: 57 years the 10th of May. So it was May 19, 1955 that we were married. It was July the first, 1977, when we had our marriage blessed.

Louis: I think you're right.

Lorraine: And then we had our 50th wedding anniversary at the New Saint Rose of Lima, in the little chapel, and Fr. Tom Donnelly was the one who built the church, he hosted it for us. And between he and my daughter Margi, who stood up and said "Don't marry over my dead body," they had this whole little story that they contrived, with music, about how she and the kids used to be. He had music about a boy and his stepfather and other beautiful music throughout—in fact, he recorded it for me. Then he ended up with the *Ave Maria* and he had us dance together at the end of our 50th Anniversary. And then we went out to our son's place in Washoe Valley and had a beautiful reception.

At any rate, to continue the story, on the 19th of May 1957, Louis went to work not feeling too well. I worked a very short distance away in accounting, and his cousin was at Harrah's estimating a job, and you should never have anybody in there working machinery by themselves, but Louis went to put a piece of wood through a dado blade, and the thing went up and his hand went under the dado blade, and it shredded his fingers.

Louis: For seven months I had pins. Nothing to that one, but it got crooked and stayed there.

Lorraine: Anyway, we survived that. It was tough. I know I took on several different jobs, and he did some stuff.

We will go back to Louis' story. What were your jobs, Lorraine, up until Louis' Basque Corner?

Lorraine: Well, during the war I worked in the research department at Dow Chemical, in Pittsburg, California. We were testing samples. They were trying to reclaim ore from old mining operations. That was the whole thing. That's when I went to the University of California too, at the same time, because they offered that. After that, I went to work for a beverage company as a bookkeeper. Then after that, I came to Reno, and I worked for Milton Industries for a period of time in accounting. I went up to that building on First Street at Milton Industries—it was a big operation, there were all various kinds of things, but it was still in accounting. Then I got the phone call from the girl who had just left the job at Alpine and decided she wasn't going to work there anymore, and she asked if I wanted a job to go talk to

Ollie. So I worked there for nine years. I've worked in the insurance business, I've worked in the rug business—

Louis: Did you work for Louis Capurro?

Lorraine: Yeah, Louis Capurro, insurance. I worked in any number of places in the accounting department. Anyway, when this happened to Louis, we had a very dear friend, he was a judge here, he was Bearnais [France], from just above the Basque Country, wonderful man, and he and his wife who was Basque had been after Louis for I don't know how long.

Louis: Excuse me, he came from Pau. *Muy cerca de Mauleon* [very near Mauleon].

Lorraine: They had been after us, Louis, for ages to get back to the restaurant business. He said, "Louis, what you're doing..." And then after this happened, you know.... It was about the end of August, I think, something like that.

Louis: Yeah, that's right.

Lorraine: We got a phone call from him, and he said, "I think the old Lincoln Hotel is up for grabs. The gal that's in there is way behind, and why don't you go talk to Judge Barrett," because that was the owner. So we went over and he seemed pretty amenable to the idea. Of course, then came the subject of money, what were we going to do for money, because we had moved into this house in '62, and that happened in—

Louis: '67, we opened over there.

Lorraine: Yes, '67. At any rate, the judge, our friend, loaned us \$6,000.

Louis: No signing.

Lorraine: And our other friend, in Lovelock, Mr. Jauregui.

Louis: Freddy Jauregui.

Jauregui, the Basque name?

Louis: He lives very *cerca* [near], very close to Mauleon. Three kilometers from Mauleon. *Conozco la familia de toda la vida* [I've known the family my whole life]. We went to see him over there, you know.

Lorraine: And he gave us \$2,500.

Louis: We shook hands.



Prior to its purchase by Louis and Lorraine Erreguible, the building housing Louis' Basque Corner was home to the numerous businesses including the Lincoln Hotel and Lincoln Bar, seen here in the 1940s.

Photo courtesy of Cindy Ainsworth.

Lorraine: And I had a little bit of insurance money, not much.

Louis: For the health insurance, \$5,000 wasn't it?

Lorraine: That was living expenses for the house. Anyway, so that's what we started on, a wing and a prayer, believe me. And that place, I could write a whole book about that place. The tile was up, there wasn't anything in the bar except for the TV. They had taken all the stuff out. For a short period of time, after it was the Lincoln Bar, this Italian lady took over and her husband came from New York and he was a chef and they had these fancy drapes—big, gold drapes, and they were so dirty, you couldn't believe it. The walls took three cleanings. Up above they had hung, what was it? Artificial grape things, and so forth.

Louis: They draped the ceilings with burlap.

Lorraine: With burlap. We took that down and it was like taking a ton of dirt down. The kitchen, the stove, it took Louis three weeks to clean the stove.

Three weeks?

Lorraine: Three weeks, and then we went to the hotel.

Louis: And the lobby?

Lorraine: Oh, the lobby.

How was it?

Lorraine: They had a swinging door lobby. Anybody could go upstairs, and of course, as we knew from one of the fellows who lived across the street, he used to turn the sheets quite rapidly, sometimes, which means they had girls up there.

Louis: Plenty of *putas allí* [prostitutes there].

Lorraine: So afterwards, after we opened it, I had a friend who was a lieutenant in the police department, he phoned and he said, "Lorraine, I want to tell you how happy the police department is that you and Louis took over." And I told Judge Barrett that one day and he said, "You mean to tell me...?" and I thought, "Oh, come on."

Louis: Tell him what happened, too, because of that. They had a man, a pimp who used to have those girls working at the hotel. So I think him and another guy from Texas, they came along and said, "You better provide those girls back up there, or else." I was behind the bar, and I said, "See those two drinks in there? You finish them or don't finish them. I want you out of here now! ... *Un txikito así* [A little guy like this]. They left their drinks in there, and said, "You'll hear from us." *Se fueron* [They left]. The same night, I was working at the bar, and [makes the sound of a bullet whishing by] through the window.

Lorraine: We had a bullet hole in the window.

A shot?

Louis: They tried to, they shoot through the window.

Lorraine: But that was the last that we heard from them, fortunately.

To intimidate you?

Louis: Yeah.

Lorraine: They tried to.

Louis: Then another lady came up over there to me and said, "You know, I'm kinda glad that you took this place up, but at the same time you're missing something." Let me tell you something, "I don't miss you if you don't show up."



Louis' Basque Corner in 2011. Photo courtesy of Catherine Magee.

Lorraine: But it took us from September until the 22nd of December to open the doors. That's how much clean-up we had to do, and that didn't even start with the hotel.

Were both of you doing that, or you had more people?

Lorraine: We had our son Jim until he got called to be in the service. We had Gary who helped us.

Louis: What was his name in there—the dishwasher? He used to clean up.

Lorraine: I don't know, we had several people to help us, but it was a job. The place had been everything, it had been the bar. I know that there was a cleaner there at one time, and I know that there was the fellow who had his place out there in the parking lot.

Louis: Tell him how many layers of carpet there was up there.

Lorraine: Four carpets, one linoleum. The first year, believe it or not, we made \$10,000.

Louis: Poor Burt Fly, he was the one who did that.

\$10,000, so there was business.

Lorraine: I couldn't believe it. There really was. It took 17-18 hours a day to do it. And then, we decided...we didn't have air conditioning, we didn't have this, we didn't have that.

Louis: There was no freezer.

Lorraine: I looked here and I looked there, I looked at the bank, but we had only been in business for a short time, so finally I went to Barrett, and I said, "Look, this is your place, and we've got to do something to make it more profitable, if nothing else, okay?" So he went 50/50 with us on it.

Louis: He finally did.

Lorraine: So we finally got the air conditioning in, and we got a new front, and so forth downstairs, and then we tackled upstairs.

Louis: Do you remember Joe Rhegetti when he opened that restaurant?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Louis: Okay, a friend of ours opened a restaurant, Italian, up on South Virginia, and one day after six months in there, he closed the place, he couldn't do anything about it. So he tells me, "Hey Louis, you want a walk-in?"

Lorraine: A walk-in.

Louis: A walk-in? Yeah, I do. I say, "How much?" He says, "Well, come and get it, \$75."

Lorraine: The whole walk-in box refrigerator unit.

Louis: With more and everything else. So the next day I walk in there, and he and I, we take it out of there, we put it over there, it's still working, that thing in there.

Lorraine: Another thing too—we didn't have a large refrigerator, and we had this one friend who worked at the laundry and Hidden Valley Country Club.

Louis: That's right, they play golf over there.

Lorraine: Anyway, he said, "I think get rid of that great big refrigerator. They have one and I don't think it will cost you much." I mean, this is the way we did things.

Louis: 10 feet wide, five feet deep, six feet high, for \$75. We went pretty quickly up there before they changed their mind.

Lorraine: But anyway, we went upstairs and pulled up five layers of carpet. They only put more on top.

Louis: You won't believe it.

Lorraine: Every room had to be spackled or steamed, because there was some wallpaper. Then we got the place that Yvonne's mother had—remember, it closed—and we got some better furniture for not so much. Do you know what we charged for meals when we started? \$2.50.

\$2.50, what for?

Lorraine and Louis [simultaneously]: \$2.50 for the dinner.

For the dinner?

Lorraine: For the dinner.

Louis: Oh, another thing, too. Tell him what happened. Everybody used to come and say, "Louis, it's going to take you at least five years to pay the debt." She and I, we worked, and one year later we paid everything off and we had \$10,000 in the bank. Remember that? And she's the bookkeeper—me, I never make it.

It was from the beginning a restaurant and hotel?

Lorraine: Yes.

Louis: Yeah, hotel and restaurant.

It was \$2.50 for the dinner, and to spend the night, do you remember the price?

Lorraine: Oh dear, what was it we charged for the rooms?

Louis: I think it was \$45 a week.

Lorraine: Probably something like that.

\$45 a week?

Louis: Yeah, \$45 a week.

How many rooms did you have?



During its years as a hotel, the top two floors of the building housing Louis' Basque Corner were divided into many small hotel rooms, each featuring a sink and enough space for a bed and a few small pieces of furniture.

Photo courtesy of Joe Elcano.

Louis: We used to have old people who used to work in the casino, who used to come there and live in there and that was good business for us.

Lorraine: We had some Basquos, too.

Louis: Yeah, we had quite a few Basque people living there.

Lorraine: I was just going to ask you a question that he just asked me. How many rooms? We had 23 rooms.

Louis: 33.

Lorraine: No, no.

Louis: We cut up the rooms on top.

Lorraine: We didn't use those. I think it was around 27, though.

Louis: Yeah, the other side of rooms we didn't use, because there was no advantage.

Lorraine: Before that, they used inside rooms, and I made one an office and storage upstairs. I didn't want inside rooms with no outside ventilation.

Louis: You know what? She and I reached 16-17 hours a day over there for at least five years, and then it slowed down after that. Believe me, we worked. She was working, I was in the kitchen, I was cleaning up.

You were in the kitchen and you were where?

Louis: Bookkeeping, making beds.

Lorraine: Making beds, washing dishes, hostessing, tending bar.

Louis: Tending bar, yeah.

Lorraine: Cleaning latrines.

Louis: We used to start work about 7:30 in the morning and close up the place sometimes at about 3 o'clock the next morning.

Lorraine: The university kids, we couldn't get them to go home.

Louis: They didn't want to go home.

Lorraine: We had a lot of aggie kids in those days—agricultural, which was associated with Basques, as you know, and, to this day, I still keep in touch with some of them.

Louis: The aggie club used to be there, sometimes 60 people at one time, kids. You remember the Sundowners? There was a group at the university, the Sundowners. Those kids in there, they were rotten! Between 18-20 years old. They used to join up at Louis' Basque Corner in the evening, they'd pick up the drink [drinking sound effects], boom, and break the glass on the bar. Remember that day?

Lorraine: Yeah. We had a dance that night.

Louis: Yeah, they got up and said, "Louis, you need any help?" They walked out and never came back.

Lorraine: You're just lucky that you didn't have a lawsuit.

Louis: I'm gonna tell you the truth, they apologized, too. They apologized about that. And you remember the one in there who threw the wine in the check-in thing?

Lorraine: Oh, that was one of the fraternities.

Louis: He said, “Don’t worry about it, Louis. Money cleans everything up.” “Not at my house, if you don’t clean yourself up, out!” The next day, that was a Monday, I remember, the whole group comes along and they repaint, they clean up. Little guy 5’3’’: *no tiene miedo de nada* [wasn’t afraid of anything]. That was when I managed.

Lorraine: But we had so many good things. We had the food gourmet who came in, we were on TV. In fact, I taped his whole series. We’ve had writers who put us in their publications. It’s really been very gratifying.

Louis: Come to think of it, we’ve had a lot of help from a lot of people in there. Remember the fourth ceiling we put in there, B.B. and I? He was a customer of ours and he helped me put the fourth ceiling to take out the lousy, gunny sack. We cleaned up. And the floor...what’s his name? What’s his name, for crying sake? Who did the floor for us?

Lorraine: Oh, Bandy?

Louis: George Bandy, yeah. He made the whole linoleum floor and did a beautiful job in there. The cost was practically nothing. He said, “Sir, I did that for a good man.” So I tell him it takes a good man to know another. I remember that. We became very good friends.

Lorraine: Then we had incidents like a Basque group that came from the old country. They were in Mexico and they came up here. And their person who was helping them, left them; they were stranded. So we kept them in the hotel, we fed them, and we got them on their way. Then we had the ballet group from Biarritz, the Basque—we worked with them for the production. We’ve been very busy with the Basque club. We belong to the one in New York, we belong to the one in Los Banos, San Francisco, and Garderville.

In the beginning were the majority of your customers Basque? Or not as many?

Lorraine: We had a combination all the way through.

Louis: It was about 50/50.

Lorraine: Yeah, it was, and I used to love particularly when the Spanish Basque and some French Basque would come—

Louis: From Bizkaia.

Lorraine: And they would start singing. Singing against each other, you know. It was wonderful.

Singing against each other?

Lorraine: Yes, in competition. And remember Fr. Sallaberremborde when he brought the—

Louis: Yeah the *cura, de [unclear], cerca de Mauleon* [the priest, from (unclear) near Mauleon]. *Sallaberremborde murió de cáncer* [Sallaberremborde, he died of cancer].

Lorraine: He brought this group from St. Jean de Luz. They were just ordinary friends. One was a pharmacist, one was a teacher. They would just sort of sing together and they formed this group called “the fishermen” in Basque. And all of a sudden, one day, here arrives Fr. Sallaberremborde with a whole group. These are the things that would happen, and at lunch time we were singing, and then they came for dinner this one time, I’ll never forget it, and they started at the bar a little bit, then with each course of the dinner they would sing.

Louis: You know what, you remember when we went to Hendaye? We went to see those people, and everyplace we went we didn’t spend one penny.

Every place?

Louis: We didn’t spend one penny, they bought us drinks and everything.

Lorraine: They were very nice to us.

Louis: And remember the one from Bayonne? The one that called us the *Americains* [Americans] in St. Jean Pied de Port?

Lorraine: Oh, yes.

Louis: *Aux cheveux blancs* [White-haired].

Lorraine: This young man came from Bayonne to apprentice at this one French Basque restaurant in San Francisco and we were at a friend’s house up in Lake Tahoe, and he happened to be up there for the weekend. Well, we went to France shortly after that, we were in St. Jean Pied de Port.

Louis: No, they come to eat in our place, I bought the meal, I pay.

Lorraine: So anyway, we were in... tell me the town where we met them in the restaurant.

Louis: What?

Lorraine: I know what it is.

Louis: What are we talking about now?

Lorraine: I know it, when we bumped into his family in the restaurant.

Louis: Yeah, that was Tellechea.

Lorraine: I know, but what was the town?

Louis: St. Jean Pied de Port.

Lorraine: All right, that's what I wanted.

St. Jean Pied de Port.

Lorraine: So we were sitting there and they had very high-backed chairs and all of a sudden, we kept hearing "*Americains, Americains?*" [Americans, Americans?] We looked over there and there he was with his mother and father. So they invited us to go to their place, which was Le Cheval Blanc in Bayonne. So in a few days we went down.

Louis: Excuse me, you know why they were there? They play handball and in St. Jean Pied de Port they had good betting, too. They bet and everything in there. The father and son were playing handball over there. So that's how we met over there.

Lorraine: So anyway, we went in and had an aperitif and everything. And then first we had—what did we have first? Probably soup, and then we had the *fruit de mer* [seafood].

Fruit de mer, seafood.

Lorraine: Well, we thought, that was dinner, you know. And then they came with the El Dorado.

Louis: Then they come with another plate with the *merluza con toda la...* [hake, with all the...], *una comida de miliardas* [a meal of (unclear)].

Lorraine: So then, after that, they make the *L'omellette Norwegian* [Baked Alaska]. Then they asked us if we like the eel. So they gave us a whole bunch of baby eels to take home.

Louis: *Una cesta con sea weeds* [a basket with sea weed] y *una docena de...* [and a dozen of...], what the hell is the name of that thing in Spanish?

Eel?

Louis: Eel, yeah. *No me acuerdo del nombre* [I don't remember the name].

Anguila. [Eel]

Lorraine: *Anguila*, that's right.

Louis: *Anguila, en frances anguille* [Anguila, in French anguille], right. *Y una docena de...* [and a dozen of...].

A dozen of eels.

Louis: *Vivas* [live], you remember? *Llegamos con esos en casa y mi madre dijo... Papa ya estaba...* [We got home with those and my mom said... Dad was there]

Lorraine: *La tia* too. [The aunt too]

Louis: *Mira eso, "Ay mama mia!" En seguida el hermano mio, chiquito, más joven, colgarlas allí, cortar y pelarlas allí vivas...* [She looked at that and said, "Ai ama mia!" and right away, my younger brother took them hung them, cut and peeled them alive] *Manolita* came there to eat too, *la hermana de mi hermana Manolita vino alli para cocinar, y ayudar a mi madre. Eso es la primera vez que comí estos* [My mother's sister, Manolita, came to cook and help my mother. That was the first time that I ever ate those].

Lorraine: That was the first time I ate them, too.

Louis: Boy, that's goooood! *Que buena la anguila* [how good the eel was!].

Lorraine: I ate horse meat over there too, which I had never eaten.

Louis: *Hemos pescado, hemos pillado muchas anguilas en el rio de Mauleon, porque vienen del mar, allí, y a la noche* [We fished a lot, we caught a lot of eels in the river in Mauleon, because they come from the sea there, and at night], in the season, you know, I'm going say it in English, in the season they come to the river. So what we do, we threw a rope with the hooks and we put *comida, tripa de gallinas, cualquier...* across the street, *y a las cuatro de la mañana, anguilas, anguilas y anguilas, buenos, asi de anguilas. Pero no dura, una semana es todo y no las vemos más para un año más,* [food, chicken stomachs, whatever, and at four in the morning, eels, eels, and eels, like that with eels. But it doesn't last, only for a week, that's all and then we don't see them again for another year]. That was good, that stuff.

Just a question about the name Erreguible. Erreguible, in my understanding the spelling in Basque should be Erreguibel, b-e-l at the end. Here you write -b-l-e.

Lorraine: That is French.

Louis: *Pero en Vasco* es Iriguibel [But in Basque it is Iriguibel].

The spelling is French spelling or Anglo-American spelling?

Lorraine: Well, what happened was, his family there, because it was the French version.

Louis: *Habia muchos Iriguibel* [There were many Iriguibel].

Lorraine: I-r-i-g-u-i, and here because they took the I as E, but he is the only one with “Erre” in his family.

He is the only one in the family with this spelling?

Louis: *Había un hermano de mi abuelo, era un tío de mi padre que cambió el nombre, Erreguibel, sabes por qué?* [There was one of my grandfather’s brothers, my dad’s uncle who changed the name, Erreguibel, do you know why?]

Why?

Louis: *Tenía a la frontera*, [On the border] he had one *cirre* [sawmill], *los arboles allí, cortaban allí, muy cerca de Valcarlos* [trees there, they cut them there, very near Valcarlos].

Lorraine: *Muy cerca de Pamplona* [near Pamplona].

Louis: *A la frontera en España. Tenía el nombre Iriguibel, pero como había mucha gente que Erreguibel, le cambió a Erreguibel. Después de eso...* [On the Spanish border. His name was Iriguibel, but since so many people said it Erreguibel, he changed it to Erreguibel, and after that] do you remember the place where I used to be? Down there in the hotel? *Había un hotel del mismo nombre, tenía Iriguibel. Mi hermana vino a visitar y paramos allá*, [There was a hotel with the same name, Iriguibel, and my sister came to visit so we stopped there], we went to eat something in there and *mi hermana: “Es nuestro nombre”. Y sabes lo que dijo el hombre? Quieres que te pague la comida?” Yo le quería echar un puñetazo. Un joven... Fuimos afuera y nunca hemos parado en ese lugar. Teníamos el nombre, era natural que mi hermana le preguntara. Le preguntó en español y todo. No, no.* [And my sister said, “This is our name.” And do you know what the man said? “Do you want me to pay for your meal? I wanted to give him a punch. A young guy... We went outside and never stopped there again. We had the same name, it was natural for her to ask him, she even asked him in Spanish. No, no.]

We didn’t talk about the period in which Louis arrived to Reno and opened the restaurant. I know, for instance, that you worked as a shepherd very briefly. So, I would like you to start telling me about that.

Louis: What I was doing over here, you mean?

When you arrived in Reno, as far as I know, your first job was to be a shepherd but just for one day. Why?

Lorraine: *Tío Justo* [Uncle Justo] was a sheep and wool buyer, and he was the one who was married to Louis’ aunt and he was the one obviously who had the idea that Louis was to come to be a sheepherder. So, tell him about the day at Ormaechea’s.

Why did you work only one day as a sheepherder?

Louis: Well, I went with my uncle up into Fallon on the Ormaechea ranch, a Spanish Basque. We worked all day long. There was I don't know how many thousands of sheep, and we had to separate the little ones, the young ones from the mothers in some places.

Lorraine: How many sheep were there, approximately?

Louis: Over 30,000. It was a lot of people working in there, and I was one of those trying to get the little ones from the mother. We worked from about 8 o'clock in the morning until almost midnight. Then we went to eat. At six o'clock in the morning we wake up, everybody wakes up. I mean they call us to go, and here comes Mr. Ormaechea, and he said, "Louis, I'm gonna take you up to the sheep camp, up in Bridgeport, California." I said, "Jesus."

Lorraine: Here's your dog, here's what, 1,200 sheep?

Louis: So he told me: "1,200 sheep to take care of, a burro, a jackass, and the two dogs and a tent and everything is ready for you to go." And I say, "No, I'm not going."

Why?

Louis: My uncle, he said, "Your uncle, last night, he went back home." "Oh yeah, you know what?" I said, "Take me to Fallon to the bus depot and I'm going back home, too." "Oh, we cannot do that to you." I say, "I can do that, I don't want to go to sheep camp. I don't know where Bridgeport is, I don't even know up on the hill, I don't know nothing about it. Except living for Reno, over here." He said, "Well, okay, I'm going to take you, but your uncle is not going to be very happy." I said, "Well, we're going to discuss that." So I ended up in Reno. I didn't have enough money to pay the bus, my uncle was waiting, and he paid for the thing there. I entered the truck there to go home and he started bawling me out, like "*Esto no...*" [This, no...]. I said, "I'm going to tell you the truth. I never had any idea to go to sheep camp in the first place." "Why do you think I got you over here? I'm going to give you two weeks." He says, "If you find yourself a job, you can stay here. Otherwise, I send you back."

Back to the Basque Country?

Lorraine/Louis: Yeah.

Louis: So, at that time, I didn't know that I went over there with a green card already.

Lorraine: He came in on the quota.

Louis: I waited one year because of the quota.

So you had a green card?

Louis: Yeah, when I first come in, but I didn't know about it.

Lorraine: He didn't know what the application of it was.

Louis: My uncle never told me anything about that. I didn't know the laws over here, so I was supposed to go to sheep camp right away for three years. And I said, "Uh-oh, not me." So, my uncle was mad. "Two weeks. If you have a job, you can stay. Otherwise, I send you back." So, the next day I get up here, really early, and I walked through town all over the place asking for a job at all the casinos, hotels.

How did you apply for the jobs when you didn't speak English?

Louis: Applied for the what?

When you went asking for jobs at the casinos, the hotels, how did you manage with the language?

Louis: I couldn't even speak one word of English, okay, and some places people used to help me. Nobody wanted to hire me, because I couldn't speak English. So, I finally walked in there, five miles away, to the only French restaurant, called Eugene's. There was a Swiss man and an Italian guy. They both worked in Paris for many times, they went to Canada and they came back and bought it. Eugene sold his place, and then they came from Lake Tahoe and they moved to Reno and they took over. It was about 10 o'clock in the morning when I arrived in the place. I saw somebody cleaning up the front in there. You know what that guy looked like? It looked like a Basco. And I said, "*Euskalduna?*" [Are you Basque?] "*Bai*" [Yes].

Three brothers were working there, the Ornaga family, from St. Etienne de Baigorri. There was the old man, the one who was cleaning up in there, the one who was doing the dishes in that place in there for a long time. His name was Manex. Then, there was Raymond... Manex Ornaga, Raymond Ornaga, and Pierre Ornaga, three brothers. It used to be Ornaga and they changed to Arnaga. We'll come back to that.

So, Manex looked at me and he says, "You looking for work?"

"Sure, I am."

He said, "Well, Gilbert the owner, the cook, the chef, is coming over here within 10-15 minutes. He's going to be here, maybe you can talk to him."

So, okay, I could speak French, he was Swiss French and his partner was Joe Patruca, an Italian that speaks French, too. They worked in Paris before they went to Canada. He said, "You looking for a job?"

"Yeah, I am."

He said, "What kind of jobs?"

"Anything will be okay with me."

"Did you ever work in a kitchen?"

So I explained to him that I was a plumber in Bordeaux, France, and I worked to pay for the rent in my aunt's restaurant, in the hotel. To pay for the rent, I used to work in the kitchen with my aunt.

"What have you been doing?" I say,

"Well, seafood and stuff and so on and so forth." "So," he said, "when do you want to start?"

"Anytime."

He said, "Come back at 2 o'clock and I'll put you in the kitchen with me."

That's how it started. It took me until 2 o'clock in the morning to leave that place over there because there were 12 hours exactly that I worked. \$5.00 a day and one meal. I walked—no bus, no nothing. I couldn't even take a bus because I didn't know where I was taken. I walked back to Valley Road in Reno, Nevada, and I unlocked the door and my uncle said, "Where have you been?"

"Working."

"Working where?"

"Eugene's."

"Eugene's? What the hell were you doing over there?"

"I was working in the kitchen with the chef, Gilbert Rousseau."

Lorraine: Where did you learn to cook?

Louis: The next day, I was supposed to go at 2 o'clock. So, my uncle and my aunt say, "Well, you work at 2 o'clock?" "Yes. I'm gonna walk." "No, we gonna take you." They wanted to find out if I was telling the truth, and I said, "Good." So they took me over there, and they talked to Gilbert: "Yeah, I hired him yesterday, he seems to be pretty good in the kitchen." I was working with a Filipino guy with the seafood in the kitchen and I did quite a bit with seafood stuff in Bordeaux. He and I were working together and Gilbert was watching: "Pretty good." So they didn't come to pick me up at 2 o'clock in the morning.

They didn't go.

Louis: I had to walk.

How many miles?

Louis: About five miles.

It was on South Virginia?

Louis: Yeah, way down. So I went back home. He took the next day. I don't remember exactly what happened. He said something. Well, he charged me so much to stay in his house. So, the next day he said, "You owe me \$1,100 for the trip over here to this country." That's the only thing I heard. Before that, it was \$750. "So, you gonna give me so much per week when you get paid, to stay over here."

The first week I made \$29 in one week, and the first thing I did, two o'clock in the morning, I crossed the street to where they used to have a coffee shop open all night, I went over there with Pierre Ornaga and had bacon and eggs, "*xingarra eta arraultzea*" [bacon and eggs]. Pierre Ornaga had an old car and he took me back home. He took me many times back home. So, everything was okay. I stayed in that place for 10 months, 12 hours a day, \$5.00 a day and one meal. There was another, La Pochard, with a Breton from Bretania cook, French cook, but that's what he used to make ham stew.

Lorraine: Every day.

Louis: *Con patatas, jamon, carrotas, es todo zanahorias ay, ay, ay todos los días la misma cosa.* [With potatoes, ham, carrots that's all, carrots, ay, ay, ay every day the same thing!] Every day the same thing.

Lorraine: How about your weekends when you helped at Gilbert's house?

Louis: Yeah. In the meantime, on Mondays we were closed. So, Jo Paturca said, "Tomorrow I'm gonna take you to my house. You can help us in there to clean up the windows." *Tenía una casa muy grande* [He had a very big house]. I went over there, I cleaned up all the windows. His wife made me a salad around noontime to eat. *L'eché, lechuga* [lettuce].

Only lettuce.

Lorraine: That's it.

Louis: Yeah, *es todo, ni paga ni nada eh* [that was all, no pay or anything]. So that went on for a few weeks, you know. After 10 months, I said—

Lorraine: You also did some plumbing for them.

Louis: Did what?

Lorraine: You also did some plumbing for them.

Louis: Did what?

Lorraine: Didn't you do some plumbing for them?

Louis: *Tenía...* [I had...]

In English.

Louis: Yeah, that's right. I forgot to tell you the brothers used to sleep—they built a shack on the back end and they were plumbing for the toilet and everything. "Louis, you get a day off on every Thursday and before I start working, go inside and do the plumbing." All the things I did for that place over there, you won't believe it. But I had a job, and I was at peace with my uncle because I used to pay so much, \$15 a week.

To stay over there?

Louis: To stay over there and eat over there.

I suppose that eventually you decided to leave.

Louis: His wife, Justo's wife, was my father's sister. She even told me one time, I better tell you that, she got mad at me or some stuff like that and she said to me: "Oh you French men, you think you own everything." *Viene del mismo pueblo. La abuela, la madre de ella, era mi abuela, era hermana de mi padre y me dijo en Francés [unclear] y no quería hablar francés conmigo. Español todo el tiempo. Y gracias a Dios que mi madre también hablaba eso. Eso, aparte* [She was from the same town. The grandmother, her mother, was my grandmother. She was my father's sister and she tells me that in French [unclear] and she didn't want to speak to me in French. Spanish all the time. Thank God my mom spoke that. Thus, aside...]

How long were you working in Eugene's and how long were you living with your uncle and aunt?

Louis: What?

How long were you staying with your uncle and aunt in that place?

Louis: I didn't last a long time up there. Before 10 months. You know we got a little bit tired. So one time I told my aunt Dolores, "Tía, I'm gonna pack up. I got a place to stay with Raymond Ornaga in Ryland Street. He's got an apartment with a kitchen, two beds, so we can cook and everything in there. Bathroom and everything and it only cost me \$10 a week." We used to pay \$20 a week between him and I for the apartment. When we had a day off, we used to go to a nice coffee shop and go eat Corn Flakes and stuff like that, and *xingarra eta arraultzea* [bacon & eggs], ham... *Sabías lo que hacíamos?* [Do you know what we used to do?] Over there they used to put out the crackers so you could serve yourself if you want. So sometimes we used to stop in there and ask for a cup of coffee, and he and I would pick up the crackers and crack poom, crack poof, crack poof, *y comía todo el paquete* [I ate the whole pack]. Almost the whole thing. That was our pleasure to do that.

Lorraine: Anyway, on Monday he normally was supposed to have the day off, and so he had made plans to go to Lake Tahoe with Serge, right?

Louis: Oh yeah, on Monday that's how I stopped working there.

Lorraine: And he had—

Louis: At 2 o'clock in the morning I was in the kitchen taking the... how you call that?

Lorraine: The screens.

Louis: Yeah, the screens. Take them and I had a fork in there to get them out, to go down and clean them up and put them back. That was at 2 o'clock in the morning and that was Sunday night. Joe Patruca, they were having their dinner, and he came and he said: "Oh, we got a special party tomorrow and tomorrow you're gonna work."

Monday.

Louis: Monday. I say, “No I’m not.” I said, “Serge and I...” because they knew Serge. He was our waiter, and a good friend, French, about the same age as me. We pick up a car and “Louis, let’s go to Lake Tahoe and spend the day tomorrow.” “Sure.” So I told Joe Patruca, “Not tomorrow. I’m taking this Monday off and we’re going to Lake Tahoe. I saw Lake Tahoe only once before and I want to go.”

Lorraine: Let me interject something. He had had several successive Mondays that he was supposed to have off, but they pulled him in. He hadn’t had any time off.

Louis: That was my day off. The other Mondays I was cleaning up the windows. So he ramped on top of the stove with the screen, left the screen down on top of the stove and I have the fork in my hand, and Joe Patruca started running over there: “You wanna kill me?”

Lorraine: He had a mad look in his eye.

Louis: I went over there and put the thing on the table next to them and I said, “You know, hey Joe, this is enough for you, I don’t need it.” Gilbert took me to the kitchen and he asked me, “What happened?” I say, “Well, I was cleaning up those things in there, he told me to go to work tomorrow, but I already planned to go to Lake Tahoe with my friend, and I want to take a day off once in a while. So I say, “I quit. I don’t want to work over here no more, not with that man in there.” “No, Louis! You can stay over here but you have to talk to him.” ”No, I quit! First of all, \$5.00 for 10 months, one meal for 10 months, and the same thing every day of the week, that’s enough for me.”

After that what did you do for a living?

Louis: I never had to worry about that. The second day I was at home I received a telephone call from Andre. Andre used to have a restaurant up on Center Street.

Where? What street?

Lorraine/Louis: On Center Street.

Louis: Then, “Hey, Louis.”

He was from *Palois* from Pau, so he said, “I heard that you quit Eugene’s. Do you want to work here?”

“Okay, I can go back to the kitchen if you want.”

And he said, “Okay, sure. Come on tomorrow about 8 o’clock in the morning and I’m gonna introduce you to the chef.”

So I went over there, and when I went into the kitchen, the man was about 6’ 5” big and *tenía un zapato así* [his shoe was like this]. *Alemán*.

German.

Louis: German, and he says: “You won’t believe this. I am French and German.” He was at the war and I was at the war, well I guess, the other side. He took me under his wing and he showed me how to cut meat.

[Phone rings.]

The German guy.

Louis: You wouldn’t believe how nice a man he was. He took me under his wing and, believe me, he showed me what to do, how to cut meat. They bought a half a steer at one time and he showed me, “This piece is this, this piece is that.”

He showed me how to cut it, and he’d make me cut it and he’d say, “You’re doing pretty good at that thing, I see you know how to use your knife, good!”

And all the time he had a little something special for the two of us to eat. Then it was about three weeks I worked with him, something like that, when Andre comes to me and says, “Louis, I got a good idea for you. I know you are doing good in the kitchen, but let me tell you something, I’d like to put you in the bar, with the bartender.”

Lorraine: The bar boy.

Louis: The bar boy. “You want to learn like that.”

“Sure, I’m in the kitchen all the time, the bar is okay with me.”

So he put me in the bar. In the bar it was the same thing as in the kitchen. The bartender who was working there, the first day I work with him in the bar, he splits his tips with me. Then he took me at 2 o’clock in the morning, when they close up the place, to the Grand Café for breakfast. And I never see a thing like that in my life.

“What do you want to eat?” Ham and eggs. He ordered Corn Flakes and a banana.

I said: “That’s all you eat?”

And he said, “Yeah.” So they brought the stuff in there, he takes a hankie [laughter], you know why he was eating corn flakes and a banana? *No tenía dientes* [He didn’t have any teeth]. He didn’t have any teeth, so he says, “Don’t worry about it.”

And every night he took me in there he buys everything. And, then, pretty soon, I think after about a month, I was with him, or maybe less than a month, he said, “Louis, you know how to make those drinks, the most common drinks. You take this stand of the bar, and I’ll take this one over here.”

And he knew what he said: “I bet anything that you’re going to have all of the ladies.”

Lorraine: He was a pretty handsome young man.

Louis: That was the truth. The girls were like that, to the left of the bar where I was. And then, that’s what happened: \$18 a day plus the tips, I used to make an average of \$35 every day. At first, when I was working in the kitchen, I had to work from 8 o’clock in the morning. And, after that, I would start at 2-3 o’clock in the afternoon till 2 o’clock in the morning—about 10 hours. \$18 and all the food and drink I wanted.

Lorraine: And you were able to buy your car.

Louis: I saved every penny, and six months later I bought a Pontiac.

Pontiac? How much did it cost?

Louis: I paid cash \$4,200. I met her driving that car. She had a Pontiac, too. One of those little ones.

What was the name of this restaurant, this bar?

Louis: The name was André.

The name of the bar?

Louis: The same thing. André restaurant. And then from there we went to Big Hat. He quit there because Harrah's Club bought that thing for Harrah's Bingo, and then he took the Big Hat.

Where was the Big Hat?



The Big Hat, at the corner of Moana Lane and South Virginia Street, in 1950.
Photo courtesy of the Nevada Department of Transportation.

Lorraine: That was on the corner of Moana and South Virginia.

Louis: Moana and South Virginia, Big Hat, and he took me with him to work over there. And there was an Italian waiter there that he told André: "If you don't take Louis with me, I quit." That's to tell you, I used to make more friends, that's on the side, too. You don't have to put this, but I used to sing pretty good.

Lorraine: Very well.

Louis: They had a piano player, Eutilio, in the Big Hat. One time Clark Gable came up from Lake Tahoe. He was making a movie. There were about seven or eight.

Do you know if the movie was The Misfits?

Lorraine: No. This was prior to that, way back before that.

Do you remember which movie he was filming?

Lorraine: I'm sure that Louis probably doesn't know.

Louis: The movie playing?

Lorraine: He was wondering if you knew the movie that he was in at Lake Tahoe when he came in there, but I'm sure you didn't know that.

Louis: I don't remember the thing.

Okay, tell me the story.

Lorraine: He had some beautiful women on his arm, anyway.

Louis: Outilio was playing like that and he said, "Hey Louis, sing *La Vie en Rose*." I used to love to sing that song. He started, Outilio, like that and they were all the way to the bar and I started singing. No more noise from the bar, everybody all started to listen to me singing. It makes me cry thinking about it. Anyway, he says, "I don't know what you're doing," Clark Gable says, "but you know I'm gonna take you with me to Hollywood." And I said, "No, no." He really wanted to take me with him. I used to love to sing. At the Santa Fe Hotel when I was working in there.

Lorraine: Santa Fe Hotel.

About Clark Gable: Did he give you a good tip after the singing?

Louis: Who?

Lorraine: Did Clark Gable tip you after the singing?

Louis: What do you mean? Did he put \$20 in the piano for me? Oh, yeah, you bet your life! Well, \$20, that was something. It took \$2.50 for a meal.

Lorraine: Well, this restaurant was the last place in Reno at that time. There was nothing but farms beyond there.

Louis: Farms, well, that is part of my life. That was beautiful. As a matter of fact, I used to stop at the Santa Fe Hotel, I used to work at the Santa Fe Hotel part-time.

In the Santa Fe Hotel? Doing what?

Louis: I used to help the cook in the kitchen and serve the tables.

After the Big Hat?

Louis: Oh, yeah. André sold the place and went to Las Vegas with his boy. He opened a place over there.

Lorraine: In between, you went to the Riverside.

Louis: Yeah, the Riverside. Two weeks I worked in there.

The Riverside is another restaurant?

Lorraine: Yeah, that was a big restaurant right there, near the river.

Louis: It was a casino, and the chef was from down south.

Lorraine: From South America, he was French.

Louis: He was French. His name was Louis.

Louis?

Louis: Like me. That's right, I worked there for a while.

Lorraine: Well, you went to work as a bus person. Ramon decided to make you a waiter.

Louis: Yeah. What was his name? The Maitre d'?

Lorraine: Ramon.

Louis: The Maitre d' put me as a bus boy to clean up the tables. One week later he comes to me and he says, "No, no, you got too much talent. I'm gonna put you as a waiter." It was hard for me to write in English, so I used to go to the kitchen and write it in French for the chef.

Lorraine: It was white gloves thing. That's how fancy that place was.

Louis: We used to make Crêpes Suzette in front of the customers, flambé. I was talented, all right.

After Riverside you went to Santa Fe?

Lorraine: No.

Louis: Well, yes.

Lorraine: Mention one item there, though. They used to have entertainers that came there. So after it was all over, we used to be singing and so forth. And those were the days before Vegas, when the big stars used to come here, like John Wayne, Frank Sinatra, all that type of person. So, here Louis is working there.

Louis: John Wayne, Frank Sinatra....

Frank Sinatra, John Wayne were there?

Louis/Lorraine: Yeah.

Did you see them?

Louis: Rosemary Clooney, the big shots from Hollywood used to come.

Lorraine: Anyway, this one time they brought in, of all people—go ahead.

Louis: You see, that was in between Riverside Hotel, Santa Fe Hotel, and the [unclear]. I'm a little bit confused about the thing. I'm talking about something about 55 or 60 years ago.

I understand.

Lorraine: Anyway, here he is at the place and who comes in but the Compagnons de la Chanson, the ones that he was singing with in Paris. But he went on his spree.

Louis: There were eight singers and one lady singer, called Les Compagnons de la Chanson. Most of them were Basque from the South of France, and they used to sing in Paris, when I got out from the Army.

Lorraine: You talked about that, Louis.

Louis: From the army I was in there. Instead of recognizing me, they made me sing with them over there. They wanted to keep me with them.

But you met them in...?

Lorraine: In Paris

In Paris. But in Reno?

Lorraine: In Reno they were booked at the Riverside and they remembered him.

Louis: And I was working at the Riverside Hotel at that time. They made me sing over there, too.

So you are telling that you worked for a while in the Santa Fe Hotel. At that time, how many Basque restaurants, or motels or boarding houses were still in the area of Lake Street and Fourth Street, that area where Santa Fe and Louis' Basque Corner are? How many Basque restaurants, do you remember?

Lorraine: Just the one.

Just one?

Lorraine: Just one. Then the one across the street.

Louis: The Toscano.

Lorraine: The Toscano was an Italian name, but the Basques ran that.

Louis: Then there was the Txikito Club.

Lorraine: Yeah, that was a bar.

Louis: There were two Basque people who ran it. That was a bar.

Lorraine: Conseso [phonetic] and—

Louis: Conseso and Dolores.

Lorraine: Conseso and Dolores, they had a boarding house.

What was the name of the boarding house?

Lorraine: Conseso and Dolores what? What was their last name?

Was it on Fourth Street?

Lorraine: No, it was down right there where the railroad station is.

Louis: Son of a gun, what was it? Next to Harolds Club, on the same alley.

Lorraine: It went that way, but the front part of it was on—oh, isn't that terrible?

Louis: He had the name next to the Blue, the dancing place in there, and they used to have the pharmacy right next to it.

Lorraine: The pharmacy was there, yes.

Louis: Oh, are you thinking of the name of the street?

Lorraine: Yeah!

Never mind, it's not important. I have a list here of all the Basque restaurants and motels. I think that by that time they were already closed, but just in case, one is Alturas, do you remember Alturas?

Louis: Alturas?

Hotel Alturas Restaurant.

Louis: Cesar Alturas, that is what's his name, Maria, *es un pueblito Basco* [it's a small Basque town].

Lorraine: He's talking about a hotel.

But there was a hotel or restaurant back in the old times.

Lorraine: In Reno, the Alturas Hotel in Reno.

I read about that. And there was the Toscano, the Indart, the French Hotel, the Start, the Aitona....

Lorraine: They are prior, I think Catarina is the only one that had anything.

Louis: Etchart, Catherine Etchart. She used to have a hotel up on Second Street.

Lorraine: It was on Second Street.

Let's try to finish your story up until Louis' Basque Corner. So, the Riverside, Santa Fe, and from Santa Fe...?

Lorraine: How about your one day or week at the Mapes Hotel?

Louis: The what?

Lorraine: The Mapes Hotel. That was a short stay.

Louis: There was the one time, my cousin wanted to bring me, and take me to be a cabinet maker. And I was seventeen years with him. I built up my whole house.

Lorraine: Talk to him about when you went to the Mapes.

Louis: Yeah, that's when I was working during the day, and I used to go to the Mapes Hotel.

Lorraine: Oh, I see.

Louis: Yeah, to the Mapes Hotel.

Lorraine: All right, you better get to the Santa Fe then first, that's the next thing.

Louis: The son of the Santa Fe Hotel, I used to go over there, off and on, for almost four years at the Santa Fe. And I worked with Martin Esain, he used to own the place.

Martinez?

Louis: Martin Esain, he came from the Aldudes. *Sabes, allí arriba cerca de la frontera? Les Aldudes, cerca de Elizondo. Pasa la frontera Elizondo, Les Aldudes, St Jean Pied, St. What? St. Martin* [You know from there above close to the border? The Aldudes, near Elizondo, just over the border St. Jean Pied, St. What? St. Martin].

From Elizondo you go to Izpegui and from Izpegui to St. Etienne de Baigorri.

Louis: St. Etienne de Baigorri, yeah.

Lorraine: So did you work part time for Martin before you went to work for—?

Louis: Remember, I used to work as a cabinet maker during the day.

Lorraine: I know that, but I'm talking about prior to that time. You worked there.

Louis: Oh yeah, I was staying at the Santa Fe Hotel. I used to live upstairs. I'm not going to pay rent. The boss, Martin Esain, he was just like my father. You know, he took care of me, you won't believe it. He even went to visit in France with his nieces and nephew, he brought them over here. He went to France, and he gave me all the keys to the whole hotel, to the bar, everything and I was only 22 years old. Remember that? I was 22, 23, 24....

Lorraine: Around 23.

So at that time you were a cabinet maker and at the Santa Fe Hotel?

Louis: He used to call me: "I got a party tonight, Louis *vient*, [come] come on over here and help me, I need help." That's when he had Joe, his nephew, Zubillaga, from Les Aldudes. He brought him over here with Anita, the sister, and, what was her name? She was married to Jose. Oh, for crying sake, I used to work with her. *Dos hermanas y un hermano* [two sisters and a brother]. Anita, Jose....

Lorraine: I'm sorry I can't remember her name. The tall one.

Never mind.

Louis: *Los nombres, ay ama mia!* [The names, ay ama mia!] *He trabajado con ella mucho tiempo* [I worked with her for a long time]. As a matter of fact, when we opened Louis' Basque Corner she came to help me in the kitchen... Etchemendy, what was her name?

Lorraine: Oh yeah, but she wasn't part of the family. She wasn't Joe's relative.

Louis: She was what?

Lorraine: She wasn't Joe's relative. You're talking about Beñat's wife.

Louis: Yeah, Beñat.

Lorraine: He was the bartender there.

Louis: She was married to Beñat Etchemendy, at any rate.

So your last job before Louis' Basque Corner was the Santa Fe and cabinet maker?

Louis: Cabinet maker, yeah.

And after Santa Fe, there wasn't any other restaurant?

Louis: No, Santa Fe and cabinet maker.

Now I want to talk about Fourth Street. When you [Lorraine] arrived on Fourth Street to work, you arrived earlier because you worked for nine years at Alpine Glass. Was that on Fourth Street?

Louis: Yeah, it was across the street from the restaurant.

Was that in the '50s?

Lorraine: '52.

It was '52 when you started. Could you tell me how different the Fourth Street area was when you started working there?

Louis: That was beautiful, Fourth Street.

Lorraine: Next to Alpine Glass was the Milk Depot, they called it, where the lawn is now. Every morning, I can remember, the big head of one of the companies that carried all the vegetables and so forth, and one from the liquor company, you could always see them, every morning, go have their coffee there. On the corner was another little restaurant, right across from Louis' Basque Corner, on Evans Avenue. On the far corner there was a tire company. This Italian fellow had it.

Louis' Basque Corner was several things during its years. I know there was a cleaners there, an artist—oh dear, what's his name? A very prominent artist was there. He even used to have his little thing where the parking lot is. The trains were going at that time, where the big station place is. And everybody knew everybody, you know. On the little street, E Street that was to the east of Alpine, there was a Portuguese fellow who had this little shop. I can remember the first year that I wanted an advent wreath. That's this wreath you have before Christmas. I went down to Mas Maba, Lilly Maba, going towards Sparks, they stocked the flower shop there. And I went in and I asked Mas, I said, "This is what I want." He had never heard about it.

Louis: They were Chinese people.

Lorraine: So he went over to the little Portuguese fellow and he made the rim and so forth and so on, I remember that. Right next door was a little bar, and right next door Mary Quilici had her little coffee shop where everybody would go for their 10 o'clock coffee in the morning. Across the street, where Maury Moffet was, was the sign company. There was a sign company, remember? Maury Moffett. Then on the corner across the street was Albers. This was a place where went to get your hay for the horses and your barley and so forth.

Louis: Yeah, barley. You could buy anything to feed animals in there. It was a big place.

Lorraine: And then Louis says that right across the street was Pinky's Market. Well, Vince and Terese were dear, dear friends of ours for years, and they carried, in this little tiny grocery store, it was the only place that his uncle on the other side, Tio Justo, Renee's father... Renee's father's name?—would go.

Louis: Jesus.

Lorraine: Jesus, I knew it was a J. He was a sheepherder, but a very particular man. I mean, he made his own wine. When he went to the store he had to have his sardines that are in oil from such and such a place.

Louis: Sardines, Portuguese.

Lorraine: And, then, he would go up to the meat counter and tell them exactly how he'd want the piece of meat.

Louis: *Una costillita fina* [a really thin steak].

Lorraine: I mean, he was that type of person. And they were there I don't know for how long. Let me stop and think. There was the other glass company right there by Wells Avenue.

What was the name of the other company?

Lorraine: What was the name of the glass company? Desert Glass.

Louis: Next to that big hotel, on the alley in there.

Lorraine: There's a used tire place right there now, it was right in the back of it there, all right.

Louis: That's it, next to Wells Avenue.

Lorraine: And wasn't there a... there was another little feed place in the back where people used to get eggs? Remember? Next to the river.

Louis: Yeah, God. She remembers all those.

Lorraine: Alpine had of course the main glass company, but then they had one where they took care of glass on automobiles and that type of thing, down the street.

Louis: Then the hotel.

Lorraine: Well, you're getting farther down now. I'm trying to think... Ben's mother, Ben that has Ben's liquors, she had another little place just beyond Wells Avenue, an old grocery store for years [Akert Market]. Then there was the old brewery, of course [Reno Brewing Company]. I think that should be revitalized for something. There was an Italian hotel, and the Highway 40 Club that was on Fourth Street.

Louis: The Highway 40 was a beautiful bar. They used to have music and everything, a lot of people. Fourth Street was very, very attractive to the people. It was.

Lorraine: Well, it was like another family at that time. I mean, everybody knew the other person and they associated with them.

Louis: That was a part of Reno, Fourth Street, East Fourth Street.

Lorraine: And of course the Halfway Club. I mean, that's been there forever. It's on Fourth Street and that's been there, my goodness, fifty-some years.

Louis: I've been 64 years in Reno, you've been here what? 50?

Lorraine: 52.

Louis: 52. Ok, that Halfway place in there. It still exists.

Lorraine: And it's still the same as it was. If you went by there, like somebody said to me, if I went by there and I was new in Reno I'd say, "Ooooooooooh," you know. But it's there, and, then the Coney Island.

Louis: The Coney Island on Fourth Street, too.

Lorraine: And of course, that's where they had the big fight, the Big Fight.

Louis: Yeah, boxing.

Where?

Lorraine: Oh my gracious, that was—

Where? In Coney Island?

Lorraine: No, let me stop and think. It was on this side.

Louis: *Jack Dempsey se ha peleado aquí, en Reno* [Jack Dempsey fought here in Reno].

With whom?

Louis: *Jack Dempsey, con el español* [Jack Dempsey with the Spaniard]

Which Spaniard?

Louis: *Como se llama?* [What's his name?]

Lorraine: The Basque.

Basque?

Lorraine: It starts with a 'P.'

[Paulino] Uzkudun? Uzkudun fought here in Reno?

Louis: Yeah, oh yeah.

Lorraine: And, then, they had the big one here in Reno.

Louis: *El campeonato* [the championship]. It lasted 24 rounds.

Lorraine: And then they had the big one between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries.

Louis: Oh gosh, *había mucha pelea aquí en Reno* [there were a lot of fights here in Reno]. Yeah, that's right.

Lorraine: Anyway, he won, of course. Of course, that was the whole world, and the one of the fellows that started one of these.... Where was it, where was the hotel that you stop in as you go to Las Vegas? That hotel that you stopped to eat at, anyway, this gentleman [Tex Rickard] had struck it rich down there, and he had lots of money, and he's the one that promoted this fight. And then there was also apparently, some kind of a park [Coney Island], where they had entertainment for the kids, and things like that in that area. Of course, that's going way back again.

Louis: You're not talking about the one on the corner of Sutro and that little bar in there, that was the fighter, was his brother...?

Lorraine: No, it was farther down than that, it was farther down.

There was more than one place for boxing, or only one place?

Lorraine: They rebuilt the second one because it had to be so much bigger, I know.

Louis: Over there, how they call? Where they have the horse shows, they used to have a ring in there too.

Lorraine: On Wells Avenue?

Louis: Wells Avenue, yeah.

Lorraine: Oh, the Livestock Center?

Louis: Where they got the rodeos.

Lorraine: Yeah. I said the Livestock Center.

Louis: Livestock, yeah, that's where they used to fight. They had a little ring in there.

Lorraine: And, of course, at that time, being that Fourth Street was the main artery, all these motels were considered A-1. Some of them were very, very nice at that time, for that period of time.

Louis: That was the most important highway there was from the East to the West.

For you was it the place for social life? When you went out to drink something, to take a coffee, you usually went to Fourth Street area places?

Lorraine: Well, even before that, yes.

Even before?

Lorraine: When I was at Alpine, like I say, they were all familiar faces.

Louis: What was the name of the little place in there, where they used to serve breakfast and coffee, next to Alpine Glass?

Lorraine: The Milk Depot.

Louis: Yeah, but the—

Lorraine: Oh, Mary Quilici's. Mary Quilici's was next door.

Louis: But what was the name of it?

Lorraine: Mary Quilici.

Louis: There was in there, there were three places very, very familiar, where people used to come and to have something to eat a little bit. And, then, I don't remember the thing, the Coffee Bar? No, no... Where Manuel Chavez used to work, too.

Lorraine: Oh, that was on the corner of Virginia and Fourth Street. That was a soda shop. And right across the street from there, if I recall, there was a hotel, that people passed. It was an upstairs place.

Louis: Le Pasteur. The guy used to own that place.

Lorraine: Because I remember the lady coming into Louis' and talking about it.

Louis: Yeah, for crying sake, yeah, that's right.

Lorraine: It was just upstairs there. Where Welsh's Bakery was.

Louis: The guy was limping. He had one wooden leg. He had an accident up at the ranch and they cut his leg, he had a peg leg. That's the one that had that place in there, like a motel.

Lorraine: The Alturas Bar.

Alturas Bar?

Louis: It was on Fourth Street, too.

Lorraine: Yeah, that was. What's her name? The one who was married to?

Louis: Zaticas.

Lorraine: No, it's the one, the widow in Gardnerville—her husband was a brother or something to them, and he had to sue them to get all his money.

Louis: You're not talking about Zaticas?

Lorraine: Zaticas, no, no. Zaticas was the one—

Louis: Helen was—

Lorraine: No, no, you know the one that married our [unclear], that became the chef at the J.T., that was in San Francisco for a while and he lived with us?

Louis: Oh, the one that went to San Francisco.

Lorraine: But what's the name of his in-laws?

Louis: The guy used to have the sheep up at Bridgeport over there? For crying out loud.

You are trying to remember the name of the owner of the Alturas Bar?

Lorraine: Yeah.

It was a Basque man?

Lorraine: Yeah. It's his wife who ran the bar.

Louis: She's Basque, yeah. The lady who used to run the hotel, she's Basque.

Lorraine: That's been there for years, and years, and years.

It was just a bar or was it a motel?

Lorraine: No, no, it was a bar with rooms upstairs. I don't know how they're rented. And, of course, I know just from the little bit that you hear that Pete, the attorney—

Echeverria?

Lorraine: Echeverria. Didn't his mother have a little boarding house of some kind there on Fourth Street? Remember, on Fourth as you're going west where the bus depot is right now, at one time there was a school there, and they lived, I think, very close to that place. And she had some kind of boarding there at her house. I'm almost sure.

Louis: Yeah, Pete's wife.

Lorraine: Pete's mother-in-law. Of course, they would know more about that, the daughter.

So you said that all the faces were familiar there on Fourth Street. Are you talking about Basque people and Basque bars? What other backgrounds did the people on Fourth Street have? I mean, were there many Italians, or Portuguese? Was it a mixture?

Lorraine: When I came to Reno in 1952 the population of the state of Nevada was predominantly Italian.

Louis: Italians.

Lorraine: They were the ones who came, they're the ones who bought all this land.

Louis: Sparks was *Italiano*.

Lorraine: As far as the Basque were concerned on Fourth Street, I wouldn't say that there were many.

So, there were Italians.

Louis: A lot of Italians. All around Reno.

Lorraine: Chinese, we had Chinese.

Louis: All around Reno, all the farmers were Italians, practically 90%.

Lorraine: Except the Basco that you could have bought the land from and you didn't [laughter]. Oh dear, I'm trying to think.

Louis: Oh gosh, you know, when you're young you screw up everything.

We were talking about the background of the people on Fourth Street. So, Italian, Chinese, some Basque....

Lorraine: Jewish, there were Jewish people.

Louis: There was Portuguese, too.

Lorraine: Yeah, Portuguese.

Louis: On Fourth Street.

Lorraine: There were some Basques that owned one motel at one time.

Louis: Two motels, to the east of us.

Two Basco motels. Do you remember the name of them?

Lorraine: If I was going down the street I could point them out. I'll have to think.

Louis: Right on Fourth Street, two motels, a young couple. As a matter of fact, I think they came from Navarra, close to Pamplona, they knew each other in the old country. I remember the story about that, they knew each other in the Old Country, they both came over here separate and then they got married here and bought the hotel. *Como se llamaba... La cabeza, hombre, después de 85 años, sabes, se lleno de mucho* [What was his name... The head, man, after 85 years, you know, is filled with a lot].

No, but you are remembering many things.

Louis: She helped me to remember a lot of things.

Let's go back to Louis' Basque Corner. In the beginning, how many people started to work with you? In the first years how many people were in the staff? And after that, what were the changes?

Lorraine: I think that the highest number we ever had working for us, if I recall, was I'd say about 23.

23 people working with you, including you?

Louis: Yeah, we had quite a few Bascos from Spanish.

That was not in the beginning. In the beginning, how many?

Lorraine: There was Louis and I, Jim, but very shortly he got called up to duty, probably one bartender. Let me stop and think. Louis and I, and Mrs. what's-her-name?

Louis: And Hilario was cooking.

Lorraine: Yeah, two in the kitchen, the dishwasher and the—

Louis: Y Juan Lavari.

Lorraine: Louis, he said when we first started. Juan wasn't there when we first started.

Initially, in the beginning.

Lorraine: Yes, I guess it was Juan and Hilario, you and I, the dishwasher.... Okay, that's five. One bartender.

Six.

Louis: One dishwasher, the one that stuttered.

Lorraine: Anyway, that's six. We had a maid for upstairs. Seven.

Louis: Evelyn.

Lorraine: And a clean-up person. Eight.

Louis: And then in the kitchen with me there was—what was her name? What was her name from Gardnerville?

Lorraine: Yeah, she just worked a week.

Louis: Yeah, but we started with that.

Lorraine: I know that, but we have to think.

Louis: Helena Etchemendy.

Lorraine: All right, and we haven't considered waitresses. We had Mary Beth. Who was the original waitress?

Louis: Teresa.

Lorraine: Teresa wasn't on the staff when we started.

Louis: Oh, when we started.

Lorraine: When we started... [calling] Mary Beth!

Mary Beth: What?

Lorraine: I have a question. Come up the hallway, please. She could probably tell you more about downstairs.

Louis: The first time, who was the woman who came...?

Lorraine [to Mary Beth]: When you were waitressing who else was waitressing, when we first started? Do you remember how many we had on the floor?

Mary Beth: I'd say four because you only had the one dining room.

Lorraine: Yeah, okay, that's what I needed to know.

Four waitresses? So, a total of about nine. The organization of the restaurant, I mean the place, did it change over time?

Lorraine: Yes, because when we started we had the bar, we had one dining room, a kitchen, and the back room. On the other side, in the front, we had a lobby. And behind that was a little room, where I did the bookkeeping. And of course, as I said, we were in there for a year and we just knew that we had to do something with it, as far as the quantity of people that were coming in and so forth. And, in fact, our opening night we couldn't believe the people that showed up. We were inundated. We had people on the sidewalk.

And the only thing I did was, I sent a little postcard to everybody I knew. That's when we tried to get money from the bank and this and that, but we hadn't been in business for that long, so finally Judge Barrett agreed to go half and half with us. So we changed the front, we made the second dining room, put in the air conditioning and a few other things downstairs, and then we tackled the hotel. And then, of course, we were able to generate more business that way.

Louis: All the work, I did in there.

Lorraine: Oh, he was putting up the walls and all that, Louis. That's right.

You were saying me that you were very busy, you worked a lot, about 17 hours a day.

Louis: The first day that we served in there, we opened the thing the 23rd of December, two days before Christmas.

Lorraine: The 22nd.

Louis: The 22nd I mean, three days before Christmas, we opened, and that night we served three hundred people.

Three hundred?

Louis: The first night. And we didn't have but one tiny room. So we started serving at 6 o'clock and the second serving at 8 o'clock.

Could you tell me each of you, more or less, how was one day for you? I mean, what did you do to work 17 hours a day?

Lorraine: Well.

Wake up at what time?

Lorraine: We wake up...of course we had children still going to school, so we had some things on for them. They were mostly on their own; there were two of them.

Louis: We opened the place at 7:30 in the morning.

Lorraine: Yes. So, we were down there what? Seven.

Louis: Oh yeah, around 7 o'clock we used to go down there.

Lorraine: And, of course, he'd set up the kitchen and so forth. And you'd have to set up for the bar, you'd have to get all the tables ready. You have to get all the preparations of the food going. And then, in those days we had a lot of retired people who lived in all these little places that are gone now around Fourth Street, for all the motels, and they'd come in for their little glass of wine, or whatever.

In the morning?

Lorraine: So they'd be back and forth, at any rate. And then you'd have to be ready for lunch. And then, on my side of it, I had to help down there, and then get the money counted from the day before, and get ready to go to the bank, take care of anything that needed to be done up in the hotel. It was just a non-stop job. And then, of course, you had to make your purchases for the kitchen in-between, and I'd have to do things over the phone. Then, before you knew it, it was dinner time. Of course, that was your major part of the day.

Louis: If you want to know the truth, every time I think about it, I'm getting tired, only thinking what it is we did.

Lorraine: In those days we'd serve until 10 sometimes. Even 10:30. Into the evening area, there are people who have stayed over, they're at the bar, you're cleaning up, getting ready for the next day. In the meantime, Louis, at that time, at that point, he'd be in the bar working, too. And, as I said, sometimes we had some university kids around, and we had a heck of a time getting them out of there.

Louis: 10:30 from the kitchen to the bar, and at three o'clock in the morning, go home.

Three o'clock in the morning.

Lorraine: That happened more than once.

Usually what time did you close?

Louis: We tried to close at midnight. It never happened. It never happened. When we had the kids from the university, to be able to close the door I used to take them to the Nugget in Sparks and bought them breakfast. That was the only way I could get them out.

Lorraine: But anyway, like I say, it was a full program. Did we close at all then when we first started?

Louis: What?

Lorraine: Did we close any shifts at all?

Louis: We went all the way through, Lorraine, we went all the way through.

Lorraine: Well, we didn't have lunch on Sunday.

Louis: Yeah, but once in a while you used to go take care of the kids while I was still in there.

Lorraine: I know.

The name of the restaurant or the hotel was from the beginning Louis' Basque Corner?

Lorraine: You know how we decided that? We were sitting with Josephine Gezelin.

Josephine?

Lorraine: Josephine Gezelin. She was a Basque lady who was married to the one that helped us to get the money to open. He was Gezelin but she was Basque. Anyway, we sat there trying to decide what.

Louis: He was a judge.

Lorraine: Anyway, we thought this name and that name and this way and that way. Well, we thought Louis' name should be on it, okay? I said well, it's Basque.

Louis: And it's on the corner.

Lorraine: And we're on the corner, so that's how it got to be Louis' Basque Corner.

And did you try from the beginning to give the restaurant, the bar, a Basque character?

Lorraine: Absolutely.

How was it?

Louis: Everything, everything.

Lorraine: Well, through the food, through the pictures that I had on the walls, the type of menu that we had, the type of food that we had. Also we had two *chisteras* [Jai Alai baskets] that we put on the bar.

Louis: I have four of them in the closet.

Lorraine: I know we let them [the new owners of Louis' Basque Corner] keep the other ones. There's this friend of ours that gave us, and we had the Basque kerchief decorated.

Louis: Oh, excuse me, why don't we show you for two minutes all the things in here.

No, afterwards, after we finish the recording.

Lorraine: And another thing too, that's when Etcheverry in San Francisco, Odette Etcheverry, just in her little back of her garage, had a little room, and she started importing Basque things and I got in touch with her. I had the most beautiful scape on the wall at that time, of them doing the warriors dance that they do, on the edge of the ocean. It was the most beautiful thing, and, then I would buy things from her. Then when we went to France we got the tablecloths, you know. And, we had *bota* bags [wineskin] that we sold, we had berets that we sold, books from the university that we sold. I know we contributed to the Basque cookbook.

From the beginning you had the big tables, the family-style dining?

Louis: The first time it was a long table, three long tables all the way across.

Lorraine: That's the only way we could do it in that room.

Louis: Anybody could sit down; we used to sit the people next to each other, too, and when it was full, they had to wait.

And did the American people like that way of dining? It's not usual for them.

Louis/Lorraine [simultaneously]: Oh, yeah.

Louis: Well, sometimes there was one that didn't want to sit down there, "Ma'am," I used to say like this, "Sir, I'm gonna tell you the truth. There are a lot of restaurants in Reno." I was maybe too frank with the people.

Lorraine: Yeah, but you did it with finesse.

Louis: That was really the way I said it, you know, like that. I didn't insult anybody, you know. Then you admit it, I mean it, most of them they come to try.

About the food, how did you manage to serve Basque-style food, being in Reno? I mean, the material, the food, is important for the Basque gastronomy.

Louis: The thing I find out, when I was working in the Old Country, I had a *tant* [aunt], my father's sister used to own a restaurant. Then I had the other one, the Le Quai de Bacalan, and Le Tour de France, two hotel and restaurants from two in the family. I guess in our family, they were generous in the kitchen. I had two uncles that used to go to, the—

Lorraine: The big boats.

Louis: Had big boats, you know.

Lorraine: Gliders, gliders.

Louis: Two of them, one used to go from France to Africa, the other one to the United States. They had [unclear] *va lejos* [goes far]. They were chefs. I mean, they were taking care of lots of cooks on those boats and they both ended up with a lot of money.

Lorraine: How many cooks did that one have, I forgot. You mentioned it.

Louis: 35 cooks in one big boat, they each served 1,200 people on the boat.

Lorraine: And I will say this, there isn't a member of Louis' family that I know, that isn't a wonderful cook. It just seems to be inherent thing, I guess.

Louis: I learn and I follow lots and lots of recipes from my mother, my aunt, Manolita. Oh, she was a good cook, that one there. It comes naturally, I guess.

Were you able to accomplish these recipes here in Reno? Because you didn't have the Basque foods.

Lorraine: No.

How did you manage to do Basque food with American food?

Lorraine: Of course we always had steak, lamb chops, that type of thing, but they just had to get used to the fact that the *tripa* [tripe] and the *lengua* [tongue] and so forth, they were educated there.

Louis: They used to love that kind of food.

Do you remember which dishes were the more successful in those days? In your restaurant.

Lorraine: One was the rabbit.

Louis: The rabbit, beef bourguignon, *las rabos* de beef [oxtails]. Old people would say “Yuck!” It’s pretty common they don’t stop eating. Okay, *Tripa Callos* [Tripe].

Lorraine: The oxtails, the *tripa* is—

Louis: That’s the *rabos*.

The tripes. American people can eat tripe or it is very strange for them?

Lorraine: Yeah.

It is hard to eat it?

Louis: I used to cook it. I start with 10 pounds a week, pretty soon it became 15, 20, 25 pounds a week.

Tripes.

Louis: *Tripa*, they clean up the thing.

Lorraine: And it’s mostly people that have it in their background, Italian people, Basque people and so forth, the others, the sweetbreads, though.

Louis: The sweetbreads, *gollard*.

Lorraine: The *gollard*, that’s very—

Louis: “What is, what is that?”

They ask you, “What is that?”

I say, “The glands of the neck of the animal.”

“Yuck!”

Le comen un poco, y el dia siguiente vienen y te preguntan eso [They eat a little and the next day they ask you for that]. That’s right, that’s the truth,

What about the drinks, because the Picon Punch is...

Lorraine: Of course, that's a big seller.

...a very popular drink in Louis' Basque Corner. Myself, as a Basque, I didn't know about Picon Punch in the Basque Country. So, tell me the story about the Picon Punch.

Louis: The Picon Punch, that's one thing that we got. The pecan over here is a nut, but the Picon over there is a liquor, by the captain of the African Legion. That's a story, a true story. He contracted the fever, so he decided to get mix up in there.

Lorraine: Quinzana.

Louis: How do you call that thing in there, for crying sake? What he called Picon, his name was Picon, the *saison* [seasoning] he used to make in there. He made some.

Lorraine: Herbs.

Louis: Some to cure his sickness, you know, and if that worked, and it was made with herbs, they had the... God I don't remember the—

Lorraine: Quinine, Quinzana.

Louis: Quinzana yeah, Quinine, the roots of a tree. God, *no me acuerdo ya* [I don't remember anymore].

Lorraine: At any rate.

Louis: It's gonna come along. So he fixed this thing for himself, and then he went back to France. And in Bordeaux that's when he started with the Picon, and they saw him making the Picon, and that became the aperitif for the whole of France and Spain. The Picon was very famous ever since that.

It was famous as an aperitif in France and Spain?

Louis: Yeah, in France, so they start coming. It used to be the real stuff, but now, they lost the recipe I guess, so now they make the Picon.

Lorraine: They spoiled the recipe.

Louis: It's not complicated. They put some grenadine and brandy—

Lorraine: Orange.

Louis: Mixed-up orange.

So it's grenadine, orange—

Lorraine: Now this was the imported. They added orange to it and it is not the same.

Louis: That is the real Picon.

Lorraine: And the percentage is less, too.

Louis: So, now we use another one. What do we call that thing in there?

Lorraine: Well, it's the domestic one now. You put a very little bit of grenadine. Louis doesn't like any grenadine.

Louis: No, it's bitter, very bitter.

Lorraine: So you have to sweeten it. A little bit of grenadine, then you pour your Picon, then you put your seltzer water in it, and you stir it very well. Now this is when I take the lemon peel and put it around, but a lot of the bartenders don't do that, and then you bless it with a little bit of brandy on top. As a matter of fact, we got a phone call one time from Miami, Florida, and they said: "Someone is here asking for a Picon Punch and we don't know how to make it. Would you please tell us?"

Louis: Yeah, and we tell them.

Lorraine: Believe me, it's the aperitif of the Basque hotel in this country. You know, and Winnemucca coffee is the digestive.

Louis: *Es un completo con café Winnemucca y anis.* [unclear] *con un mano en las escaleras*, you know. [It's a set with coffee Winnemucca and anisette. [unclear] hand on the stairs, you know] That's the thing there we call it, you know. Who came up with that?

Lorraine: Mike?

Louis: Mike Olano that owned the hotel in—what's the name of the town, for crying sake?

Lorraine: Yerington.

Louis: *Que cabeza, también* [what a head].

Where is the town, in Nevada?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Gardnerville?

Louis: No, not Gardnerville.

Lorraine: It's on the way to Elko.

On the way to Elko... Winnemucca?

Louis/Lorraine: Winnemucca.

Louis: Mike owned the hotel in Winnemucca and he's the one who came up with that thing, and he called it "*el completo*" [the set] – that's the coffee, anisette, brandy, and a cigar, "*el completo*."

Lorraine: Yeah, that's the old country, that's the first time I ever saw that.

In the Basque Country we say un completo when we want a coffee, liquor and a cigar.

Louis: And he started that and now all the Basque people start serving that.

And the Picon Punch was first served in Louis' Basque Corner, in America I mean?

Lorraine: Oh, no, no, no.

Or in Reno, or you knew other places before you were serving it?

Lorraine: The first Picon Punch I ever had was in an Italian place on Broadway in San Francisco. I was working for an Italian gentleman in Pittsburg, California and I was going to San Francisco for a play or something, and he said: "Lorraine, you go to this place, you order the chicken risotto, you have one Picon."

Because I'd never heard of it, he said, "And then you drink a second Picon, by that time the risotto is beautiful."

But of course we say, "Two are the Picon and the third is the punch." Be very careful; they can be very potent.

Louis: Now I said Picon, but it's Tourani Amer [brand name].

Lorraine: Yeah, Tourani Amer.

Louis: The other was Picon Amer—Tourani Amer now, because it's the closest one to the real stuff.

You always had many customers, you ran a successful business. Why do you think it was so popular, Louis' Basque Corner? What was the clue?

Louis: Louis' Basque Corner, I'm gonna tell you exactly what happened one day in there, when Manny, Manuel Chavez and I were busy as hell.

Lorraine: And then I'll answer your question.

Louis: A party came of 41 people; they ordered 41 Picons. So we fill up the glasses. About ten minutes later, one guy comes back: "41 more!" Three times in a row, that night in there we served exactly 12 bottles of Picon. You know how much money we make, on that? A piece we used to pay about \$6.50 for the bottle, and for one Picon....

Lorraine: He wants to know why we were successful, I guess.

Yes, why was Louis' Basque Corner so popular? Why is still so popular?

Louis: Well, we push the Picon Punch to the people, you know, you gotta try that before you eat. It gives you more appetite. It's the truth. You drink one Picon, it makes you feel like eating, you know. A lot of people feel that way. And I knew then, I pushed the thing the most I could for that. And believe me, and as I keep on saying, if you've never had a Picon, you are allowed only two Picons, because the third one is the Punch. That comes from me, and then they laugh.

Lorraine: Overall, this is my opinion, it was a labor of love for us to begin with. I asked Louis here, about a year ago, one day, just out of the blue sky: "Did you ever think we'd fail?"

He looked at me and said, "No."

And that's his attitude; he isn't a failing person, to begin with. Secondly, I think we extended warmth of friendship as well as good food. You know, there's an ambience. I used to listen from up above, and I could tell the time the people sat at the table, they started having a little glass of wine, I could almost tell how the business was. There was something exuded there. And I always said, you come in as a stranger and you leave as a friend. And the very fact that people sit together. You never walk in the place that you don't meet someone, someone different.

Louis: And a lot of people they don't even know each other, by the time they finish the meal, they sit at the bar, two or three together.

Lorraine: The set-up of itself worked but then, it was—

Louis: It was like family.

Lorraine: Our staff were caring people, let's put it that way. We were a family. I think all that goes out along with ambience.

Louis: That's what it is.

Lorraine: What you exude and what your staff gives, backed by good food and something a little different, and then family-style, just the connotation of it says it's a togetherness. And the fact that it was Basque, I think, that very definitely made it distinctive. I think that's why the Basque hotels maintain as long as they keep everything going correctly. But it was a labor of love. It wasn't just a business.

Louis: That makes the people feel at ease. Just like they never see each other, but something you feel, like you say, ambience, it's like an electric shock to the people, you know. You enjoy it, you start talking like that. And every time I used to say to them, when we used to have a drink, "You better not to drink too much because you have some wine coming with the meal, too." You know, "Oh, I think I can take that." And I used to say, "I know you do."

Lorraine: And let's face it, this man has had a personality always, from the beginning.

Louis: No matter what, I've made friends.

Lorraine: And he goes to the grocery store now and it's, "Hi Louis." He goes to church, it's—

Louis: I mean, I'm a natural. I don't beat around the bushes. *Lo digo franquamente* [I say it frankly]. That's what I do all the time.

Lorraine: And we've had our get-togethers. We've had Basque dances, when they came from the Old Country for that exhibition from Bordeaux. There were gatherings at our place. When we would have our Basque picnic here, we would serve a Basque breakfast. It was always something we were doing, and we worked closely with the club, too.

Were you involved, as you told me, in different Basque clubs?

Lorraine: Yeah, we belong to San Francisco, we belong to Los Banos, we belong to Gardnerville, we belong to Reno. I think that's it.

And associations in Reno that are not related to Basque but other associations, were you involved in the Fourth Street community? Do you have a relationship with the other businesses or the other neighbors?

Lorraine: Oh, yes.

Louis: As a matter of fact, we have a lot of people coming from San Francisco, from all over the place, in there, most of them a lot of business people. They come to Louis' Basque Corner because they enjoy the place. You remember, the chef, what's his name? The French chef in there, the Basco chef?

Lorraine: You mean the one that was at the Basque Center?

Louis: Yeah, they used to come from San Francisco, the big chef from the big place, the big restaurant over there, and, God, I forgot the name.

Lorraine: Well, he was wondering about our association with—

Louis: Gabriel.

Lorraine: Oh, Gabriel, okay.

Louis: He came from St. what was the name of the place? We went in there? *Jexux maitea!* [dear Jesus!]

Lorraine: Yeah, I know, but he wants to know what our associations with other people on Fourth Street might be.

Louis: Oh, on Fourth Street? We can brag about it by saying, all the people around Fourth Street came to Louis' Basque Corner. They are still coming. I mean it.

Lorraine: Well, we can go down the street there, you've got the police, I mean the fire department, they come in.

Louis: The police too, the mayor of Reno, too. There's some attraction, but the ambience now, it changed a little bit. I mean, with the new people, but it's still good because—

Lorraine: Well, we have Klaus, at the Bavarian World. We have the fellow that, the Toro fellow, that your slow mower with. We got the cowboy place [D Bar M Western Store]. Let's see, I'm trying to think. Oh, we've got Levrett's, we've got Landa.

Louis: Yeah, they're on Fourth Street, what's the name of that guy in there that used to have Flanigan's?

Lorraine: Oh, yeah, they took over Flanigan's. I don't know his name but he's in all the time [Ed Scalzo].

Louis: Yeah, he comes to our place all the time.

Lorraine: Then we've got the ones that have the quilts, where the bank used to be [Sandi Sullivan and Mike Sullivan, Windy Moon Quilts].

Anyway, you served drinks, people were drinking until late, some people got drunk, I suppose. Did you have any serious problems, late at night? Fights?

Lorraine: No, we really watched it pretty closely, to begin with.

Louis: We got lucky. One time...what was the name of that club from the University?

Lorraine: Oh well, yeah, the Sundowners.

Louis: A bunch of rich people and they think they own everything. Once they were in there and they were throwing drinks on the ceiling and everything.

Lorraine: That was a fraternity.

Louis: A fraternity, yeah. But, I mean, so, “We can do anything, money can buy anything.” So I say, “You want to know something, money won’t buy Louis. I want you people to get out of there and you better clean up all that mess over here.” That was Saturday night. Sunday morning they all come and clean up the whole dining room, remember?

Lorraine: Yeah, that’s a fraternity, but as far as being there late in the evening and so forth, we were very careful about people drinking too much. We asked them to leave, and take a cab, or get somebody to take them home.

Louis: The Sundowners they went overboard, the Sundowners they were a club from the University they all come in there, and they run around.

Lorraine: I think you told him this.

Louis: They drink a Picon and break the glass on the bar, like there. I got out of the bar, do you remember that?

Lorraine: Yeah.

Louis: I got out of the bar and I grabbed one, and I grabbed him by the arm, flip him over, and out. *Con el brazo así* [With his arm like that]. And I push him through the door, and I hit the fire hydrant and I come back in there and the other guys say, well. There were seven Basco guys at the bar, they all got together and started coming to the Sundowners. We got those people out of there right now. Never came back.

Lorraine: We didn’t have many incidents, we didn’t.

Louis: Things like that, no!

Lorraine: The only problem we did have at one time, was when they closed all the places on Lake Street, and all the little girlies decided to come to Fourth Street.

You mean the prostitutes?

Louis: Ah, yeah. *Las putas* [The prostitutes].

Lorraine: That was a time.

When was it?

Lorraine: Oh God, this has been what, maybe 20 years ago now?

How did you handle it?

Louis: Handle? The cops come along and they pick up. You know the people at the bar, they used to laugh about the one girl being picked up.

Lorraine: This would be at lunch time, particularly.

They were in the street? Out in the street?

Lorraine/Louis: Oh yeah, out in the street.

Louis: I keep on telling them, I say, "What's so funny to you people?" That girl maybe she had a...what do you call that sickness in there?

Lorraine: HIV.

Louis: Yeah, maybe the guy go with her and then he go with his wife, I mean.

Lorraine: It took us quite a little while; we finally got them taken care of.

Louis: I keep on talking to the girls. "You laughing at that, you like to get one of those girls, you don't know what you're gonna get."

So I stopped them. I used to be mad when customers start laughing when they see a girl picking up, "Oh, look at that one, oh look at this, and ay, ay, ay."

One time there were three or four on the sidewalk in there like that and they said, "Come on, come on, come on."

I went out and I start saying, "You want to fish, you better get out of there," and I called the girls over here. I do not want that.

"Oh, can't you have a little fun?"

"That's not fun to me, that's hurting the business, that's what you're doing."

Lorraine: We finally got rid of it, between that and the welfare situation down the street that was a problem. To begin with, of course Mark had the business then.

Welfare situation, what do you mean?

Lorraine: Oh, we have the St. Vincent's dining room which was Commercial Hardware. They sold out and the city took over that whole area back in there, where they're housing all the people that don't have a place to live. They do a pretty good job of it. In fact, I'm not anti-that.

Louis: It's pretty clean now.

Lorraine: Yeah, but for a while it was a problem. It was a problem, because they'd defecate in certain places.

Louis: Fourth Street is becoming like it was before.

It's becoming...?

Louis: Clean.

Lorraine: Yeah, it is. They built that one housing area in there where that, not Filipino, what it is? It's another ethnic restaurant and I understand that they have done more things further down the street and even have a little entertainment bit across from St. Vincent's.

Louis: At one time, the businesses dropped down quite a bit, because the ladies that used to come along, two or three got their purses stolen, remember that?

Lorraine: Okay.

Louis: You don't remember that? One lady that come along one time, she come crying, you know that somebody stole her purse right from the back door. And, you know, one of the customers that was with me, one of the bunch, the regular bunch that used to come with Zimmerman and those guys, one of them, he used to be a football player: "Come on Louis, let's catch up with those guys."

We ran and we had one in a head lock and the guy that stole the purse, and the others saw us coming and they threw the purse back on the floor in there. If he had caught those guys, the guy that was with me, he'd pick up those two guys in there, and he'd kill them.

Lorraine: No, he shouldn't do that.

Louis: You don't remember that?

Lorraine: No, I don't remember that; I was probably upstairs. That was an isolated incident.

Louis: Not only once, it happened two or three times. That's why the women didn't want to come in the evening to eat at Louis' Basque Corner. They were afraid.

Lorraine: Yeah, for a while there was a problem because of that. It affected business.

When was that when there were some problems and the atmosphere on Fourth Street wasn't so good? What time was that?

Louis: That was way back.

Lorraine: That was when we were still first in there. So I had to go back into the seventies, probably, eighties maybe.

You were talking about your vision, about the changing of Fourth Street.

Lorraine: I do, I feel it's more alive now.

Louis: Oh yeah, a lot more alive.

Lorraine: And I think there are enough people on it, who care about Fourth Street now.

Louis: Even the homeless now, they don't—

Lorraine: If you looked at those people, you knew that some of them were not just down and outers. They were people that something happened to—they lost their job, or something like that, and there's a need for it, and I say now, it's pretty much under control, I really do. Because, see, they wanted to put that place over here, over there, over here, over there, finally they chose good ole Fourth Street. I think there is a real potential, but I do think, and I've told Mr. Robert [Cashell], our mayor, that Fourth Street has always come last.

Louis: Not any more.

Lorraine: And I don't think that they have given a thought to it, what it was and what it could be. I look back at the fact that that little old trolley used to go up and down there. I mean, what an attraction that would be for tourists. Once all of these places were settled in to be a tourist attraction or a working place, that's attractive.

Louis: That Bob, he came to eat at Louis' Basque Corner. As a matter of fact, the last time he came to eat was, you know, with whom? With the one that passed away, what's his name?

Lorraine: Bill Raggio?

Louis: Bill Raggio and him—there were five people in the corner table having dinner together.

Lorraine: This was our illustrious state legislator.

You mentioned the trolley. Do you have a specific opinion about the transportation issue, on Fourth Street, how could they improve?

Lorraine: Right now, downtown they're running this little jitney bus that you can get on with no pay, that can take you to the various places.

Yes, those go from south to north.

Lorraine: Yeah, yeah. And what they've done to Victorian Avenue in Sparks, we're just an extension of that. Wouldn't that be wonderful if it could start in Sparks, and go all the way to Virginia Street?

Simple.

Lorraine: Simple, and it brings back an essence. Reno, just in the time I have been here, let alone the time that Louis has been here, has changed so much. I mean, it was a picaresque little western town.

Louis: And another thing too, Lorraine—

Lorraine: I can't think of the name, the attorney's name from San Francisco—he was from Nevada originally—anyway, he came in and I remember him saying, “Don't make a glass and chromium Virginia Street in Reno.”

And what is it. That part is, then we have our sheep camp wagon out there that I've had for ages, and we put it in the parade, you see, the rodeo parade. And the last time—this was two years ago, I can remember—as we were going down Virginia Street, we started on Liberty and were just going down to the railroad tracks, and there was such a mish-mash of stuff on Virginia Street. It made me sick. I mean, when I came here you had Harolds Club, you had the Nevada Club, you had something over here, you had this nice restaurant over here, and now, it's just, to me it was just honky-tonk.

Louis: They changed the things that we used to do. Instead of starting on Sixth Street, they start up there, the reverse.

Lorraine: Yeah, that's the rodeo parade. It just happened that one time, they did that.

Louis: And there was this confusion. What a mess it was. I had to turn the wagon in there, I was driving the truck, I had to turn the wagon in the middle of the people to go the other way. That was quite a job.

Lorraine: At any rate.

Louis: And the mayor was over there, too. He stopped in there, he got up, he said, “Hey, Louis!” I said, “Jesus, the mayor.” He opened the place for me.

Lorraine: I told him one day, “Did you ever realize how many people know who you are in this town?” I said, “You've made a name for yourself.”

But at any rate, I don't think it's changed us, but I do feel, and I tell you I have a little book in here I'm gonna give you. I don't know, maybe you've seen it? Beth Miramon wrote it. She belonged to our group, this group I'm talking about, but she has been a spokesman for Reno from day one. I wrote an article in the paper one day about various things on Fourth Street. She read it, and she phoned me, and said, “Lorraine, I agree with you.” And she'd be at the Historical Society. She had a tremendous love of the old place and what it was, and she just passed away. And I didn't realize that she had written this second book here, but I got a copy of it.

We will go later, when we finish the recording. So, you wrote articles for the newspaper?

Lorraine: Yeah, I wrote a couple.

What about? Fourth Street issues?

Lorraine: Yeah, I did. Well, journalism was my thing once upon a time. At any rate, in high school it was.

Do you remember what they were about, the articles? Do you remember the topic?

Lorraine: Well, it was primarily about the reinstatement of Fourth Street. I brought into it our part of it, too, and how we felt about it. I don't even know where I have the things right now but, as I said, I have a whole thing from when we were in this organization. Well, in the first place they got a grant. They went to a tremendous amount of trouble to get a grant. And we got an architect, and all these plans. I don't know whatever happened to them, and everything was set up to go. And I don't know whether the city didn't come forth on their part of it, or what it was, but I think the fact they put the lights on, as far as Wells Avenue was their contribution to it. But it was really done well.

Louis: Well, I'm kind of glad they put those lights in there. That changed everything.

Lorraine: I remember the architect was a woman. And she was the one who told me how we could take the paint off the bricks on the building without destroying the grouting in it. Because, when we first took over that building, it had signs painted here.

Louis: You should have seen that. It was a cacophony.

Tell me about this association, the Reno-Sparks Corridor Business Association. You were members of this association?

Lorraine: Yes, we were.

What is it about, this association?

Lorraine: Well, it was about promoting Fourth Street. It was all the different people.

Louis: Yeah, we belonged to that club, all right.

Lorraine: There must have been a good 30-40 people that belonged to the club, I would say. And they were all interested in bringing up to what it should be.

Were you members from the beginning?

Lorraine: Yes.

Do you remember when it was founded?

Lorraine: Oh dear.

More or less?

Lorraine: It was probably in the seventies, I would think.

Louis: Yeah, we used to be members of the club in there.

Lorraine: They still do, what they call, their little charity runs on Christmas and Easter.

[phone rings]

Lorraine: This is a calm day.

A calm day?

Louis: Yeah, a little bit that phone rings every five minutes without stopping.

We are finishing. The last question, we were talking about the association. So the association was very active? I mean, how often—

Lorraine: Did we meet?

Yes, meetings or events, how much were you involved in that?

Lorraine: We met at least once a month, did we not? Yeah.

Louis: Yeah, once a month it was.

Lorraine: And usually we were at the Bavarian Inn. Klaus is a very strong person in this, a very good gentleman. They always had their Christmas party at Louis'.

Louis: And Fred's wife, she really does—

Lorraine: The lady that owns the repair shop, the car repair place, Fred's place there on Sixth Street.

Louis: Yeah, Fred's wife [Gaye Canepa].

Lorraine: She was a cracker jack. I mean, you'd be there at the council chambers at the city.

Louis: Even she moved stuff, I tell you, that woman.

Lorraine: She was terrific. She got more things done, but like I say, after we left the business for ten years, our son took over until he got sick, and somehow, I didn't used to get there, of course, I wasn't involved.

Louis: She was working for a lawyer once, and pretty soon, you know what she is doing now? Fixing the cars with her husband.

Lorraine: She was a very astute lady.

Louis: And she knows what she is doing, too.

Lorraine: Like I say, there was such an effort, and I can remember the night before the election when our mayor was elected, he happened to come to Louis' Basque Corner. So I went down to the corner and said, "Bob [Cashell], what are you gonna do for us?"

He said, "I won't forget you."

Well, we got lights.

Louis: I tell him, "You know what Bob, I'm gonna tell you the truth, I'm kind of glad you showed up because we need someone like you."

"Oh, Louis, you're right!"

Lorraine: They've got a big thing on their hands right now, with that fire department.

Louis: *Buen hombre* [good man].

What mayor are you talking about, the mayor that is the current mayor? What is the name?

Louis: Bob Cashell. I know that man for so many years, he used to own the...

Lorraine: Bordertown.

Louis: Bordertown, okay.

Lorraine: He came from Texas and took it over and made it a success.

Louis: There was a Basco guy that lived in our place that used to go over there, I mean, work for him. One day he got sick and Bob Cashell himself called me to find out how he is and if he was feeling better. He'd take him to work, and come back the next morning to take him to work, that's to tell you what kind of man he is. I remember, yeah.

Lorraine: Yeah, we had a couple that went back to the Old Country.

Thank you very much for your very interesting stories. Before finishing, do you have anything more to say about Louis' Basque Corner, about Fourth Street, about Reno? Would you like to say anything?

Louis: My opinion about Fourth Street: Fourth Street is changing a lot for the good. I hope it keeps going good on Fourth Street, that's my opinion.

Lorraine: And I personally feel that it needs a little more input from our city government. I realize there are cash shortages, and so forth, but I don't think we should be forgotten. And I still feel there is a very good possibility, if ever they got together with Sparks, that there could be something done to enjoin that property which again, would excite people to take some of the places that are a little dreary and do something with them.

Louis: They call Fourth Street a corridor that makes Reno and Sparks almost like one. That's the way I feel, too.

JOHN FEROAH

Reno Police, Washoe County Sheriff's Office



John Feroah on the University of Nevada, Reno campus in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

John Feroah grew up in Reno, where his father worked for the Reno Police Department. After high school, John joined the Air Guard and worked briefly for the City of Reno. In 1969, he joined the Reno Police Department, part-time, while working security for the Cal-Neva. In 1971, he began to work for the Washoe County Sheriff's Office, retiring in 2003. He has since worked for the Reno Police Department Reserve and the University of Nevada Police Department.

Edan Strekal: I'm here with UNR's very own Officer John Feroah. We are on the campus of the

University of Nevada, Reno, and today is Friday, March 23, 2012.

Mr. Feroah, do I have permission to record this interview and place it in the university's public archive?

John Feroah: Yes.

Okay, let's get going then. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

I was born in 1948 in Los Angeles, California.

What year did you and your family move to Reno?

December 1948.

So not long after you were born?

Right. Five months later.

What brought your family to Reno?

Part of it was family. My grandparents had moved here, and my and uncles and aunt. My father wasn't finding work, I guess, down in Los Angeles. He wanted to get into law enforcement, so he moved to Reno to see if he could get on the Reno Police Department, because they wouldn't accept him at Los Angeles PD because he had an astigmatism. His eyes were fine, but because of that, the doctor wouldn't clear him. So they moved to Reno.

Did Los Angeles have pretty strict standards for their law enforcement?

At that time they had a doctor who was in charge of all their medical for the Los Angeles Police Department, and he thought that if you didn't have perfect vision, that you weren't going to get hired.

Your dad wanted to come to Reno for a chance to get on the Reno police force.

Right. He started with the Reno Police Department, February 1949.

What did your mom do after you moved to Reno?

I come from a family of nine kids. So my mom took care of kids. And really back then women didn't work as much outside the home. There were six below me. We moved here in December of '48, and my brother just below me was born in June of '50. Then as we went along, I had a sister born in '51, a brother born in '54, a sister born in '57, a brother born in '60, and another sister born in '63. My mom and my dad loved kids.

How old are your older two siblings? How much older are they than you?

A little over a year each. Mike last Monday just turned sixty-six, Jim's sixty-five, and I'm sixty-three. I'll be sixty-four in July.

So your dad got hired on with the Reno Police Department very quickly after you guys got to Reno.

Yes. He worked a couple jobs in between, but then he went to work for Reno Police Department.

How big was the Police Department when your dad was on it?

It wasn't very big. When he got started he walked the beat for a lot of years. Reno at that time was so small that you had two walking beats downtown and a paddy wagon. The two walking beats were east beat, which was everything on the east side of Virginia Street from Fourth Street down to First Street and in between and over to the lake, in that area. That's east beat. West beat was everything on the other side of Virginia Street, same parameters, over to Arlington. He worked graveyard for a lot of years on the walking beat or swing shift.

If you had the walking beat downtown, then would Washoe County Sheriff's Department have taken care of a lot of the stuff outside of the proximity of the city?

No. They didn't have that many people at the Sheriff's Office. When I got into law enforcement Reno had about 35,000 people in the area, that was in '69, and Reno PD took care of everything, of course, which they'd always done. Everything inside the city limits belongs to the Police Department. Everything outside the city limits belongs to the county.

That's the way it was. But the Sheriff's Office, I think they only had seventy-some people who worked at the Sheriff's Office. That included Incline, Gerlach, everything in northern Washoe County, which goes all the way up to the border of Oregon.

People don't realize how large Washoe County is.

Right. It's a large area. So the Reno PD was probably—I want to say it was 250 total people at Reno PD. This was '69. I guess when my dad went on, it was probably 100, 150 people, including civilian staff and officers.

Reno's population was still a somewhat transient population.

Somewhat. My mother-in-law and father-in-law moved here in the forties, also. They worked in the casinos, which were the mainstay of the area and the tourist industry. In the summertime, this was the busiest place you ever saw. In the wintertime, it was quiet.

Divorcees mostly coming?

Divorcees coming to town, yeah. That was a funny thing to see.

In this neighborhood just west of the university, you see a lot of sheds converted into housing, and downtown off Mt. Rose Street and that area you see a lot of apartments and houses out back.

But those were for a lot of the casino workers.

Oh, that, too.

Yeah. They had places around here, in fact, out in Verdi. I laugh because that was one thing that my father-in-law had done when he came to Reno. Before my mother-in-law and father-in-law got married, he moved to Reno. He lived and worked at a ranch; it was out in Verdi out on the river, the Donner Trail Guest Ranch, that's what they were called.

Oh, guest ranch.

Guest ranch. And he was, as they said, a stud out there. That was his job. He took care of the ladies that needed to be taken care of.

They hired handsome cowboy-type men.

Yeah, and he was a big man for his age back then. So that was his job. Reno was a small town. When my dad was working, in order get a hold of an officer who was walking the beat, before they had portable radios, they had a streetlight at the corner, right in the middle of the intersection of Second and Virginia, and one on top of the New China Club, which was over on Lake Street and Commercial Row.

They had wires that ran from the Police Department where it is today and went over there. If they needed to get a hold of the officer walking the beat—this is the only way they could find them—they'd turn on a switch and it would turn on a red light, a beacon that would go on. Unless he checked in on the telephone. They had telephones, too.

So the Police Department was where it still is today over on Second and Kuenzli?

As a kid, the Police Department was in the basement of the original City Hall that I knew of, which was at First and Center. I'm trying to think when they built the police station down on Second. It was actually in the fifties they built it, because the '55 flood did impact that. So it had to be right around '51, '52, '53, somewhere around there.

What do you remember about the neighborhood that you grew up in, and where was that?

The first house I remember was up on Tenth Street, 39 West Tenth, which is gone. It's where Sierra Hall is now. We lived there up until kindergarten, the last in May of 1954. Then we moved from there to Margrave Drive, which is one street south of Plumb between Kirman and Kietzke. It's four blocks long, and back then it was county. We were out in the county. So that was back in '54. The street was dirt. I remember that well. A lot of kids. Of course, I come from a family with a lot of kids. But it was fun. Reno was a fun town.

I know we've talked about this previously, but the airport wasn't there yet? It was all dirt roads?

Plumb Lane was a dirt road. They were thinking about building the airport because they'd bid and gotten the 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley. So when we moved there in '54, there wasn't anything there. I can remember because in 1956, my dad was promoted to sergeant, and he, for some reason, had to fly out and we had to take him out to the airport terminal, which was where Gentry Way is now. There's a Jet Center out there now. I can remember going out there to the airport, and it was a big Quonset hut, which was the hangar.

It's like military.

Military, right. Well, a lot of that airport was built because of the Air Guard. Reno Airport wouldn't have been built yet. There were airports around Reno. There was one that was over by Washoe Golf Course. There was one up on Seventh Street. There was one over in Sparks, which is where the Petro station is now. There was an airport over there, and then there was Reno Airport.

I don't even know when they built Reno Airport. The City of Reno at that time owned the airport, and in order for them to get the federal funds, the Air Guard was the reason. Because the Air Guard needed such a standard for their runways and taxiways, the federal government was giving them money to build it up. It wasn't something that most airports got. But the Reno Airport was basically built off of funds from the federal government to keep up the facilities so they could have the the Air Guard.

They had the F-86s. They had those for a long time, and then they went to the RB-57s, which was a reconnaissance bomber, they called it, and that airplane there was a British design aircraft, and went from that to the 101s—the B models, the C models of those.

Oh, the C and B, the Bs are the bombers, the Cs are the cargo planes.

Well, no, they weren't cargo. These were versions of the same aircraft which were fighter aircraft. Reconnaissance. RB-57 was a reconnaissance bomber. The British built it with a wood frame. The Americans built it with a metal frame. So that was the design. Then they went from that to the 101s—the 101 was a two-seater aircraft, one- or two-seater, and it was a flying rock was all it was. If you didn't have those engines going, you weren't going anywhere. Very light armament on them. There aren't many. I think there were some machine guns just to be on the safe side. Then they went to the F-4s, and then they went out of the reconnaissance business, and this was a highly decorated unit, to what they have now.

Now all they've got out of there is C-130s.

130s, yeah. The 141s aren't flying anymore. You see a C-17 every once in a while

How long were you in that neighborhood, south of Plumb?

Actually, my sister still lives in the house. She bought the house. They bought the house from my mom after my dad had passed. We've had that house since 1954. They moved there in '82, I want to say, '81, '82. So long time.

How long were you there?

I moved back in for about a year, but didn't actually move out of that house until '71. I was living at home when I first got into law enforcement and was working downtown. I wasn't married, had no kids.

It was in '69, you said, that you got into law enforcement?

Yes, in '69 I went to work for Reno PD, part-time.

What do you remember about where you attended school in the area, and how did you get to school?

The first school I can remember was Orvis Ring, which was down on Evans where the Orvis Ring Apartments are now. That's where the school was. I went to kindergarten there. Then we moved down to Margrave, so from there I went to Veterans Memorial, which, I don't remember, I think we walked back and forth to school, which was quite a distance for kids of five, six years old. I had two older brothers and we'd get a ride with Mom if she had the car that day.

Then we went from Veterans to Anderson, which is down on Berrum, and we were bused over there. It's over off of Lakeside, around Moana and Lakeside. So you're talking, what, two three miles?

It's a good distance from the Plumb area to Moana.

Right. So we were bused over to there. We went there for two years, and then from Anderson we went to Southside, which was at Liberty and Sinclair, sitting where the old City Hall was, which is now the Discovery Museum. It was there, and there were two buildings—the one that's still there, the red brick that sits right on the corner of Sinclair, and then another one. I was actually in the other building. We were bused to Southside. We went there for half a year, and then they built Echo Loder, which is down on Apple Street, a block from our house, which we walked to every day.

Then after we finished up at Echo Loder, we went to middle school or junior high school, they called it back then, at Vaughn, and that was seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. Then to Wooster, and I finished up at Wooster.

Where is Vaughn Junior High?

Vaughn is off of Vassar and Kietzke. Bresson, actually, the street is called.

And that was seventh through ninth?

Seventh through ninth, and then the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades were at Wooster High School.

Was Wooster in the midst of neighborhoods when you went there?

Wooster was built in '62. They started building it in '61. My oldest brother was in the first

graduating class, then my brother Jim was second, and I was in the third, barely. They built Wooster because they needed a second high school in Reno, of course. So Wooster was built in that area, which was out there. Actually, the only houses that were there are the ones between Kietzke and where Wooster is now. Then there were a few ranch houses. The fields where Sak 'N Save and all that stuff were all fields.

In fact, we had a sheepdog, growing up, and that dog used to go over there and chase those horses and roll in all the manure and whatever, and come home and oh, my god. His nickname was Punky, and he was punky-smelling.

I'll bet he stunk. Bet it was great for him.

Oh, yeah. He was a happy dog.

That's hard to imagine. That area is so commercial now.

Oh, yeah. It was all pasture. If you look from Plumb Lane south, there's a car dealership down there, there are some mobile home parks. But over on the east side, that was all fields, and the Margrave family had owned all that property. He was a wealthy contractor here in town. He built homes. They had a home up here off of Court Street. Mostly the family had ranch land, and then they owned all that property out there. It bordered up against the airport property.

In fact, that was another thing. The airport property, part of that was owned by Matley. You see Matley Lane around Reno. The Matley family owned part of that. So property was taken from different people to build the airport. The Ferrari family had a ranch out on the other side of the airport. They took some of that land for the airport.

Is that Ferrari of the realty company that's in town?

I don't know. I just know part of the family. But they took a lot of different property from different people to get to where they wanted to be. When they built the airport, Rattlesnake Mountain, how it's cut out, part of that went in underneath the airport as fill.

When I was young, before I got into law enforcement, I worked for the city on the survey crews, and they had one project, it was the east-west runway and taxiway that they had to fill in because it kept sinking. That ground out there was marshland. So they had to fill it in and they were bringing in rock. They had a borrow pit, they called it. A borrow pit is where they go and pick up what they want out of it, and then just backfill with dirt or mud or something like that.

Well, they found a place over by the airport that was filled with rock, and I mean I'm talking rocks of all shapes and sizes. That's what they used, the borrow pit, to fill in that part out there on the east end of the east-west runway and taxiway. I was on the survey crews working out there when they did that. I mean, they were throwing rocks into these holes and filling up green mud and crap out of there like you wouldn't believe.

That's hard to imagine, I guess. You just don't think of a swamp around here.

Yeah, but there was in this end of the valley. The whole southeast side of this valley was all

swampland, all wetlands, as they call them now. You notice if you go out around Hidden Valley and that area, you'll see that.

Was that your first job?

Oh, no. It was my first job working for the government. The first job I had growing up was a bag boy. They call them courtesy clerks now.

Where was that at?

The first place was a store I can't even remember the name of. I only worked there for a short time. I hated the place, but it was down off of Grove Street. There's a dance place there now, but it was a cash-and-carry type grocery store, and it wasn't anything nice. It was kind of a grungy place.

Then the next job I had was working for Eagle Thrifty, which was the predecessor to Raley's, and I worked at the one on Wells Avenue, which is now another market. I worked there cleaning up the butcher shop, and you'd have to clean it after the butchers would go home, clean up all the garbage and saws. That was quite a deal to clean up a saw, the band saw. Oh, I cut the hell out of myself more than once. And it was slippery. They had sawdust on the floor. It was really something.

Then after that I got a job at Sewell's Market, which was over on Virginia Street. This was Arroyo and Virginia, down south, which is Statewide Lighting now, or at least it was. I don't know what it is now. I don't get down there that much. That was where I worked for my junior and part of my senior year.

Then I worked at the Mapes Hotel as a busboy because I was in food management. I originally thought I was going to become a cook or chef. I still like cooking. I finished off till I went in the service. In 1966, after graduating, I joined the Nevada Air Guard. I worked as a busboy at the Mapes Hotel in two different restaurants.

I worked there when it was really kind of going downhill, little by little. It was still a good restaurant. It was still a good place to work, a decent place to work, but by that time there were a lot of stories or rumors about Charlie Mapes being such a drunk and he'd come in and fire people or do this or do that. I only saw him a few times.

They had a place in the Mapes—it's a club where people, businessmen can go eat, and you buy a membership. It's like a dining club and they play cards and do whatever, and it's been at Harrah's for years, but it used to be at the Mapes at one time. That was up on the second floor of the Mapes and they had a restaurant.

The Sky Room?

No, the Sky Room was on the very top. It was on the very top floor. That was another thing. But that was more of a banquet room when I was working there. They had the Coach Room, which was built with red leather seats and was real nice. It was a nice dinner house at night. During the day they had lunches and for some of the old elite of Reno back then, that was a nice place to go.

I'll remember the name of that other place, because it still exists to this day, this club that's down in Harrah's; there's a round circular insignia or decal on their window that says that they're members of that, and people can go down and have lunch. I've had lunch there once or twice with different people,

and it's like a social club, businessmen's club-type thing.

So you joined the Air Guard in 1966.

Sixty-six, and got out in '71, activated in the Air Guard, did all kinds of stuff.

And did you leave Reno for any long period of time?

I was in Texas, and then I came back from basic and they sent me to Sacramento for two, three months for on-the-job training. I came back and I was home. I got in a car accident in 1967, where I crushed vertebrae in my back, so I didn't work for a few months. Then I finally got a job working for the City of Reno on the survey crews.

Then in January of 1968, January 26th, they called up the Air National Guards and the Reserves because of the *Pueblo* crisis. If you go back in history, you'll see the *Pueblo* crisis was the North Koreans. While Vietnam was ramped up, the North Koreans got the *Pueblo*, which was a spy ship, and they took it, and when they did that—I'm trying to think who the president was then. Johnson activated us. I want to say it was Johnson.

They activated us and we stayed on active duty until June of the following year. We spent six months here, and then I was transferred. Now, the Air Guard at that time had about 720 people out at the Air Guard, and they sent us to seventy-two different bases. The flight-line people, they were all sent to Korea. If you were in supply or the Fire Department—they have a Fire Department out there—or the Security Police, they sent them to seventy-two different bases around the world.

In fact, what happened to me was there were the people of lower rank. I was only an E2, E3 at the time, which is like an Airman II striper. Everybody who was a two-striper, some guys out of the photo lab, somebody else, too, somebody out of supply, I think, I don't remember, but there were a group of us who were sent to Clovis, New Mexico. We were at Cannon Air Force Base down there.

Out of that group, two of us got to go to Germany for two and a half months. Everybody was sent TDY, or temporary duty assignment, different places around the country. So I went to Germany for two and a half months with another guy, to Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany for that two and a half months. Got to see a little bit more of the world.

There were guys who had to go to Korea or Japan. One friend of mine—in fact, the guy used to be the mayor of Sparks, Tony Armstrong—he was a fireman at that time out at the Air Guard, and he was sent to Colorado to go in the missile silos. He was a fireman in that.

I'm trying to think half the people. My brother Mike, who was in the Air Guard at the time, my oldest brother, he was a medic and he was sent to an air base down in Victorville, California. He spent his time plus a little extra so he could get out. He was a staff sergeant at the time. We had guys everywhere. We had cooks who were sent to Korea, Japan. I mean, it was amazing in a way, the way they sent everybody everywhere. You could go anywhere. It was really something.

We went through your jobs briefly, and we'll get back to that. When you were growing up in Reno, what did you do for fun? Can you describe some of the places that you used to go?

Oh, as a young kid, I could tell you I was six and seven and eight years old and we were walking from Margrave up to my grandparents' house, up on Tenth Street, because they lived there up until '64 or

'65, something like that, '64, I think it was. We used to walk up here as little kids.

That's a long walk.

Yeah, and we had a ball. Nobody bothered us. As a little kid I can remember going with my uncles and we'd walk down the alley. Between Virginia and Sierra was an alley that went all the way from Eleventh Street up here, all the way down to Fourth. It went through Fourth to the tracks.

So to Commercial Row?

Commercial Row. To Third Street, actually.

Seven blocks worth of alleyway, though.

Alley all the way down. We used to walk down there. In the summertime the Reno Parks Department would have a program so we could all go to the parks. My wife, in fact, would go to Whitaker Park up here. She was born and raised here in Reno.

Then we would go to Echo Loder or over to Wilkinson Park, right off Taylor and Kietzke. That was our summer thing that we'd do. You played baseball, you played softball, you'd play whatever we wanted to play.

Did they have picnics too?

Oh, picnics, yeah. My birthday's in July and my mom and dad's anniversary was the 23rd of July, same day as my birthday. But they were married three years before. Well, they got married in '45 and I was born in '48. Then my dad's birthday was the 22nd of July. So every year we would go up to the lake in July, just to have our picnic. It was a yearly tradition we did up until probably just before my dad passed away. I was married and most of us were married. But we still like to do that as a family, go up to Zephyr Cove, and it's been that way years and years. That was an all-day trek to get up there, it seemed like.

I was going to ask you. How did you guys get up there when you were younger? What route did you take?

We'd leave here from Kietzke to Virginia Street, then take Virginia all the way down to Highway 50, and up Highway 50. It was a very long drive back then. I can remember some of the cars that my parents had. In '57 or '58 my parents bought a '55 Ford Fairlane—I think it was a Fairlane—Ford station wagon. The big one. Red and white.

Two-tone with the chrome down the side.

Right. Big nine-passenger station wagon. It had to be that many for all of us kids at the time. We rode up there and went back and forth in that.

I had three uncles and an aunt who lived here also, and we were all very close family. My grandfather, who was a professional baseball player in the twenties and early thirties, and then worked in

different other things after that, they were here. This is on my mom's side, not my dad. My dad's parents died. He was raised in an orphanage.

We all were very close. My dad felt that my mom's family was his family, that close, and they were. I had an aunt who considered my dad her brother, not just her brother-in-law, but her brother. She was very close to my dad. My uncles were close, too. I mean, we needed something done, oh, call Paul or call Bruce, see if they can come over and help, or Don. Don was my mom's oldest brother.

Everybody's here then, it sounds like. Oh, that's nice. It's good to have that.

On my mom's side. On my dad's side, his family was all in California. It was funny. They came up to visit all the time, because we had the biggest family. My dad wanted a big family. My uncle and aunt down there had one kid each. So I had two cousins who lived down there. I still do. I have contact with them, and then the rest of the family lives here. Not all, but most of them live here.

When you were younger, did you go downtown? Did you do anything downtown at all?

Oh, yeah. We would walk down there. As a small kid, I can remember, we'd walk down there all the time with my uncle, and they were in high school when I can first remember, because they were quite a bit younger than my mom. We'd go down and walk wherever we were going to go, to the theaters down there. The Crest Theater up on Second, right off Second and Sierra, was right at the end of the block.

There was the Wigwam restaurant on Sierra there. The northeast corner of Sierra, would've had the Wigwam right on the corner, and then there was a small little jewelry store right next to that, and then there was the Crest Theater and then a shoe store on the other side, which was where you get your Buster Brown shoes.

Then there was something else in there like another jewelry store. That building where that was is completely gone. The Wigwam was where they had the apple pie, and, oh, it was good food. You had the Granada Theater, which was down on First Street, and that was part of the Masonic Temple.

On First and Virginia?

Yeah. Right between the Masonic Temple there was a building. That was on First, *and* then at First and Center was the Majestic Theater. So you had all three movie theaters there, right within a couple blocks. That was one thing we got to do a lot of. They used to have on the weekends—we'd look forward to it, too—Old Home, which was a dairy, Old Home Dairy and Model Dairy, Crescent Creamery, 7-Up, which was the Chism family. They owned 7-Up back then.

They also owned a dairy, did they not, the Chisms?

They had Chism Ice Cream. There was another one. But they would all sponsor movies on the weekends for us. They'd go year-round, but you always remembered it in the summertime because you'd have your school programs or your park programs during the week, and then on the weekends you got to go to a movie, and, of course, Sunday was with the family and we went to church, the Catholic Church.

Oh, there was another theater. There was a theater called the Tower Theater, which was on the corner of Ryland and Virginia Street. By the court house and post office.

It would have been near your one elementary school right there, right?

Well, yeah, it was a couple blocks over. In fact, we were talking about car dealerships. Winkel Pontiac and GMC was at the corner of Ryland and Center, and it was in a two-story building. The garage was in the basement and the car dealership floor was up top.

Most of them were, like we talked about previously, indoors at that point then, too.

Right. And they had the parking lot—what's there now is a US Bank.

Was there any public transportation when you were a kid?

Oh, yeah. You see, they have a bus now you see that they used to have out—I think you still see it down at the RTC yard, which was kind of a yellow and orange, yellow top with an orange bottom. I think that was the color, and that was the Reno bus lines. It was actually a private company that ran the bus service here in town.

And it was like a domestic route then?

Yeah. They had four or five buses. The school district had its own buses. The public transportation was the other. That was the Reno bus lines. It didn't have anything to do with the city. It was a privately owned bus service.

So sort of like Waste Management, I guess, in that it's a private company that provides a city service.

Right. That's what I remember very well.

So the theaters downtown we talked about, where the dairies and whatnot that would sponsor movies, was that inside the theaters?

Yeah. It was in the theaters. Whether that be at the Majestic or the Crest or the Granada, whichever one was doing it that day, that was any one of the theaters there.

I know we talked about your wife briefly. She was a lifelong resident and still is of Reno. When did you meet her?

Actually, I met her in '71, even though we grew up here in the same part of town, and her parents and my father were friends. Her mother worked for the *Reno Gazette-Journal*.

Well, it would have been the Reno Evening Gazette probably at that point, right?

Reno Evening Gazette and the *Nevada State Journal*, and she was on radio and he was on TV. I can remember as a small kid, he was on TV besides being in the gaming business.

Was he a newscaster?

He did the sports. He actually had played. When he was young, he played football for the Philadelphia Bumblebees. He played at Penn State, and then he went and was taken on the Bumblebees, which was the original Eagles, Philadelphia Eagles. So he played for them as a professional football player, but this was before the war. He'd be 104 right now if he was alive.

He came to Reno and he loved to play cards, so he started playing cards here and he got into the gaming business. He was very good with numbers, very good at knowing the gaming business. You had to know a lot of those people back then that when they said that they were watching somebody count cards or somebody crimping or doing this and doing that, you had to be good at that in watching them. Most of those people smoked a lot, they drank a lot. It was a rough crowd. I know a lot of them, and those people were tough people, tough people back then.

So he was a casino man.

He worked in the casinos, yeah. His wife did public relations. She was doing advertising. She had her own advertising agency for a while that she ran out of the house. They lived on Nevada Street right where the freeway went through. They took out their house to put the freeway through.

So their house was in that neighborhood that was demolished?

Right. The house that my parents told me that we lived in, the first house—we lived in an apartment down on Moana Lane when we first moved to Reno—the house that we lived in later was on Vine Street right where the freeway is. It was a brick home, beautiful home, and they tore it out.

For the express purpose of putting I-80 through there?

Right, right.

Yeah. I know a lot of houses got demolished in that. Could have been that it was considered an undesirable neighborhood?

I don't think it was. It was nice. My aunt, who was younger than my mother—she passed away a couple years ago—she was out of school when I can first remember. She worked for Hale's Drugstore, which was a chain of drugstores within Reno. Hale's had the one down at Second and Virginia. There was a Hale's drugstore right where the Cal Neva door comes out there. Right there was their entrance.

That terrible tacky brick, fake brick door right there?

Right. That was right there, and then they had one down here where the parking garage is now for the Circus Circus at Sixth and Sierra. That was a fairly new building. But there was another one that they had over on the other corner at one time.

What's your wife's name?

Toni.

And you met her in 1971?

I met her officially in 1971. She was working at the sheriff's office. She worked in what they called ID, which was the records section. But we didn't go out. She was married before that to a guy who I had known, and we have a daughter that I adopted who was her daughter from the previous marriage. But we started going out in '72, after her dad had passed away. She went to St. Albert's School when it was down here on Artemesia. She is a year younger than me. St. Albert's was the church down here.

Next to the new dorms, right?

Right. That was St. Albert's Church, and my mom used to work for the priests there as their housekeeper. She'd work over there, cooking lunch and breakfast for them, or lunch and dinner, and then she'd come home to us, since we lived a block away.

We went to church down here at the same place. Then she went to St. Albert's. We went to public schools, because my dad, on a cop's wages, when he started with Reno Police Department he was making \$150 a month, paid once a month. It wasn't a lot of money even for back then, but it was survivable.

He loved the business. You know, this is a business that you get into and either you love it or you hate it. I've been in it so long, I guess I love it. I don't know. There are parts of it.

So Mom worked part-time so they could buy the house on Margrave. They saved up for it, just to put a down payment. He used his VA to get it. By the time we moved in, there were five of us already, five kids. There was my brother Mike, Jim, myself, Tom, and Mary. So there were four boys and a girl. We moved into the Margrave house, and that was a two-bedroom home. But we were all young.

When we moved in there, my dad didn't have a garage put in, so that he could add a room, and little by little he'd start adding a room on. Then it went from a two-bedroom to a three-bedroom. My sister got her room, because by then came along George and Mary and Maggie—Margaret, my younger sister. Then there was another one, and, it went from Maggie to Tony, from Tony to Annie. We had to add rooms as we went along. So the house was a construction project from the get-go.

The funny thing was that my dad paid \$9,000 for that house. It had a third of an acre. Maybe it was a half acre. They were half-acre lots. It was a good-size home when we moved into it, and we thought we were in hog heaven. And it had a floor heater. I mean, that's a long story to get into. But he kept building, and he added a room on in the back which was going to be the kitchen, because it had a small kitchen. It was just a dinky little kitchen. So we added on a kitchen that was almost like a convention kitchen, and then added a dining room at the same time with a fireplace. It didn't have a fireplace originally, but had room for it and they put it in later, something that was just added, and then made another bedroom out of where the kitchen was. So it was just a work-in-progress for years.

When you met your wife, were you working for the county or were you working for the Police Department?

I went to work for the Sheriff's Office in '71. She was already there, also, and then we started

going out in '72. We both worked for the Sheriff's Office.

So you were with Reno Police Department from 1969 part-time, till '71?

Seventy-one, and then I went to work for the Sheriff's Office. But a year and a half is what it turned out to be at the Reno Police Department.

So when you worked part-time for RPD, what was your job? Were you on the beat?

I did everything I could do. It was a job where I didn't get paid. I worked part-time. I was working at the Cal Neva at one time, and I also worked at Wittenberg Hall as a group supervisor, they called it, which meant you were the baby monitor. You monitored all the little kids, who were not little kids, but the kids that were in there, and you were basically their jailer. I did that for about five months. I was asked to leave because I broke a clipboard over a kid's head.

That would do it.

Yeah, it did. I didn't need it anymore, anyway. I didn't like it. Then I worked at the Cal Neva here in town, then up at the lake. I worked at the Cal Neva Lodge. Then came back down to work here at the Cal Neva downtown until I left in March of '71 when I got an ulcer—I had an ulcer from working in there. I got in more fights, because you had to do your job.

You were doing security at Cal Neva?

Cal Neva, yeah. That was my full-time job. At the same time, I was at the Reno Police Department part-time.

What was the crowd like in the Cal Neva at that point?

Well, not too many times you have to fight two people at a time.

You hope not, anyway.

I did, you know. You get people that were cheats who were in there. I had a guy hit me in the jaw, pissed me off. It was a different crowd. It was a rough crowd. But at the same time, once they knew you were going to handle whatever came at you, they kind of backed off, the locals did. When you told somebody to leave, they left. When you liked somebody or you had people in there that you could deal with, they behaved themselves, they got to stay. You got to know everybody and everything. It was different. It isn't a high-class place now, by any means. But it wasn't much more then. I even got hit twice when I worked down there.

How tall are you?

Six-four.

How much do you weigh?

I'm over three bills now, three hundred and—

But you're a big guy.

I wasn't as big then. I was a lot thinner.

Still tall, though.

Yeah, still tall. But the thing was that I was—it sounds goofy—but I'd sit there at night, and I'd go to bed and I'm thinking, something's going to happen. I'd better know what I'm doing. I'd think about, well, if somebody comes up, I'll take them. I'll put him in the wrist lock, and I'll grab their wrist and I'll get it so it's secure, and I'll walk them out the door. We were trained that way. Well, if somebody does this, I do that.

I think you'd put me in a wrist lock.

Yeah. Right. So you know what that feels like. I used it all the time because it didn't matter if it was a little old lady or big strong guy, bigger and stronger than me, if they were going to hit you, they were going to hit you hard, and they were going to try and beat the hell out of you. They didn't care.

In fact, I guess that was the funniest part. The club that's on Second and on the Center Street side, that side of the Cal Neva, there was one guy working that, except on a weekend where you'd have two guys working. Well, if you could find your partner. They would sit there and something would happen, and you'd better be able to handle it.

The one time that I got it was with a guy that was a retired court reporter, a real idiot. He started getting real mouthy and acting up and everything, and so I put him on the ground, and somebody came up behind me. We used to wear sport coats with our gun underneath the jacket, and I had my handcuffs hanging off the back of my belt on the left side. I felt something go on just after I put this guy down on the ground. I was going to handcuff him, take him to jail. That was all part of it.

But I felt something and I turned around to the left over my shoulder, like this, and this guy raised his foot up—bad thing to put him on his back—and I wore horn-rimmed glasses, heavy frames—turned around like this to see who it was. It was a friend, one of the guys who worked there. That was your backup. I turned around like this and a foot knocked my glasses off. “Son of a bitch,” I said, and I went “boom” like that, nose, and his glasses broke, just shattered.

I felt bad about it, but he went to court and pled right away. But your backup was the pit boss, your backup was the key man or whoever. That was your backup from down there. So it was different.

So that went on for a year, roughly?

Yeah. A year-and-a-half.

Then you went to Washoe County Sheriff's Department.

Right.

We'll get back to Washoe County. But first, can you describe any memories of traveling on Highway 40, either east towards Sparks or west toward Verdi? Was that the only route to Sparks prior to the construction of the freeway?

You could get over to Sparks easy enough, one way or the other. You had some streets that you could take. You could go down Kietzke and get over to Sparks. When the floods came, you had to go around to get to Sparks, and it never affected Sparks like it affected Reno that I can remember. But most of the time, getting to Sparks, you'd go down Fourth or you could go up around Oddie Boulevard, go that way or if you go north, Wedekind Road was another alternate highway, and you could travel Wedekind to get over to Pyramid Way to go north.

Can you remember traveling on Highway 40?

Yes. Not so much east. I mean, a few times east, but not so much as I do going west one or two times. Oh, more than that. I guess I'm thinking of one or two times. One time, when I was young, they were building I-80 over Donner, and so we'd go up to Squaw Valley or something like that, and you'd get on Highway 40 to go out of Reno, and go along, as we see Fourth Street now, and you'd pick up Highway 40 and be winding around going out in through the canyon out to Verdi and then up the canyon by Truckee.

I remember a lot about Fourth Street. It was like you were coming into the greenbelt area, because you were coming along the river. In the summertime when you'd come in, it was beautiful coming in the valley. The hills would be kind of the desert hills looking to the east, but you'd get to see the green down in the canyon there, going along Mayberry, see Mayberry. It was Tahoe Industrial Park or Tahoe Timber, which was over at Tahoe Industrial, that area. They had a lot of lumber in that area. I remember stacks and stacks of lumber.

We knew a guy who was a forester for them that used to go up and bid all their lumber deals. He was a neighbor over on Margrave. Coming in, the motels that were there, you'd see—there was nothing for a period—after you left Tahoe Timber you'd go down a ways, and then you'd hit some motels, Jack Pine Motel and another one on Fourth on the left. There was nothing on the right because that was railroad property.

And coming into town, of course, McCarran wasn't there, so there was nothing going over to the right till you came down into where Fourth comes down. There were motels again as you got to where you now see McCarran on the left, and then there was nothing again on the right until you got down to where you make that curve coming over by the trailer park, which has been there for years. The motels up there were nice. There was a restaurant up there.

Washoe Steakhouse used to be, at one time years ago, called the Rusty Scupper No, Rusty Scupper? It's been a couple different names. Where Johnny's Little Italy is now, there were a couple of restaurants. There were a couple of restaurants and bars as you went down. Where Mi Casa Too is used to be the Chinese Pagoda.

Then you go down a little bit farther and on the left there's a motel—there are motels all the way through there, but there was a motel, and Second Street would come in there also, where Stoker is now.

They changed that with the trench.

Second Street used to dip under the road there, right?

Under the tracks. Then Dickerson was on the other side there. So then you'd come down and on the left was the El Tavern Motel. That was the one that had a coffee shop, but it was number one, as they would call it in law enforcement. They called, "I'll be at number one and I'll be at number two," which were the two places they'd always go for coffee, because they're open twenty-four seven, number one being the El Tavern, and number two being the Gold 'N Silver. That wasn't even open until '54, but those were places that I can remember. Then you'd come around just past Keystone and there was a shopping center when I first remember it, left at Vine and Fourth, which is where the Gold Dust is now. They have the whole block.

Then there was the Gold 'N Silver, which is still there, on the opposite corner. The Donner Inn was right here. It's still there, at the corner of Washington and Fourth. Also the Chapel of the Bells. Then there were motels in here.

They'd be on the south side of Fourth and Washington, right?

Yeah, there were places down in through here. I can't remember all of them. I remember some of them.

A lot of them are still there operating.

Yeah, but these aren't. This whole block was torn down and then they built the Gold Dust West.

So that's the block between Fourth and Fifth, and Vine and Washington.

On the corner used to be a motel that was owned by a guy who was a Sparks cop. He got into investing into property, and he's a very wealthy guy now, I guess. I don't know if he's still even alive. But he had the motel there, and then sold that to John Cavanaugh, Jr. John Cavanaugh, Jr. is the one who owns the Gold Dust property.

So the motel was on the north side of Fourth Street, at Fourth and Vine?

Right. But that was a later motel. I think there was one there earlier than that.

When you would go to the El Tavern, was the Silver State Lodge still open?

Yeah, that was still there, with the cabins.

Because that was demolished not too long ago—pretty recently.

Not that many years ago.

And that was a landmark.

It was a landmark. People would go stay there at the cabins, and they'd really have a grand time staying there.

It was pretty expensive, that area, wasn't it?

Yeah, it was. Oh, on Fourth Street as you came down there past the El Tavern, you'd come down there a little bit farther and then you'd go past the Silver State Motor Lodge, and then you'd come up and there was a skating rink off to the left, where Parr Construction is now. Then on the right there was a warehouse. I want to say it was a liquor warehouse, which is where a glass place is now. Then there were trailers. I don't know what's in there.



Some of the cabins at the Silver State Lodge, constructed at 1791 West Fourth Street in 1931 and demolished in 2005. Photo courtesy of Max Chapman.

There's a trailer park there. There's the ice distributor there also now.

Right, and before the ice distributor, that ice company's been there for years and years.

Looks like an old building.

It is, very old. Glacier Mountain, I think it is, or Crystal Ice.

Crystal Ice it is.

Okay, but right there, just before Crystal Ice was the skating rink, and then there was Crescent Creamery, and it was up on the hill. Basically you can see where there was a little bit of a hill area, and that was the creamery itself. My uncle worked there, and when my uncle worked in there, he worked in the bottling plant.

Then my other uncle went there and started delivering. He was with the police department, then left for a short while, for about a year, and went to drive a truck, thinking he was going to make more money driving a milk delivery truck, and decided he wanted to get back into law enforcement. I worked up there with him, and I'd ride with him. We'd go up to the Lake and Carson City and delivered Crescent Creamery milk down there.

So I know that place, and then you'd come down and you went by the ice plant, and there was a motel in there, a little one. But then the trailer park, and then you'd go past the trailer park, then you'd come up to your grocery store, which was where Ben's Discount Liquor is, at Keystone and Fourth. I can remember that as the grocery store. It was called Food King Markets.

That's what I remember, and across the street on the right there was a gas station that was back down west, across from where the motel was on Fourth. Then you got to Keystone and there was a gas station on the corner, the southwest corner of Keystone. It was a Regal station.

That's where Chevron is now?

No. That's where the Terrible's, Jackson—

Oh, it's a Texaco now.

Texaco or whatever it is. Then you get to where there was a gas station where the Standard station is now. On the corner of Fourth and Keystone there was a Sambo's.

Where Jack-in-the-Box is?

Where Jack-in-the-Box is, that was Sambo's restaurant, and then you went from Sambo's—let's see. What else? There was a steel yard actually from where the tracks are. There was a gas station and then I don't know if they took it out or what, but that was where the steel company was, between Third and Fourth at Keystone. A lot of the block was Reno Iron, and they were there for years. There was a house in this area between Third and Fourth on Vine—it was a rental yard, like an apartment or roominghouse-type thing. There was an alley and then a building that is owned by the guy who owns Gold 'N Silver now. Then the Donner Motel, and then there's the Chapel of the Bells, at Washington and Fourth. I can remember that because they were always doing weddings there, and they had their limos. It's been there for years and years and years.

Between Washington and Ralston on Fourth, there was a bottle house, a motel and a bottle house, and then there was the Frost Top. It was a restaurant. There were actually three Frost Tops. There was one on Fourth Street in this area here. I can't remember what was on the side, and then the gas station on the corner, which is now Northwest Tires.

That place there, the Frost Top, was one place we used to go to. We were always in there as kids.

That's what you did at night on weekends. You went trolling Virginia Street and then you'd come over to the Frost Top, or go around and go back down to the other Frost Top which was on South Virginia, which is now an Indian restaurant.

So you would drive around looking for chicks, is that it?

Jack-in-the-Box Pickin' up girls and having fun, yeah.

And so Frost Top, was it a drive-in?

Drive-in, right, and they had the girls on roller skates, and we'd see if any hot-looking chicks were there, that type of thing. That was funny because my wife was going in and out of there, but being a year younger, you know, it was another story.

In that whole section, I can remember most of it but not all of it. There were motels and all kinds of crap like that, buildings of some type. On the north side of Fourth between Washington and Ralston, they all catered to the traffic going through. On the corner where that floral shop is, on the north side of the street at Ralston and Fourth. And across the street, it's part of the Sands now, but it used to be a three-story apartment building, and they had apartments going up and down, as you went down.

I remember the next section of Fourth, because there was a house that sat back on Chestnut, or Arlington as it's known now, and we used to cut the lawn there, and then this old couple developed part of it into apartments. They paid us. My uncle got the job somehow, then it was handed down to us, and it was nice. You got ten bucks, five bucks a week. Back then, that was a lot.

On the south side of Fourth between Ralston and Arlington was a motel, and right next to it was the car wash.

Where the Sands parking lot is was a car wash?

Yeah. There was a car wash there. Then they had the gas station, and then later on they built a restaurant, which was a Denny's, right there in the middle of the block, where the Sands parking lot is. That's the Cladianos. They had the El Rancho Motel over at Fourth and Wells, and then they expanded from Fourth and Wells over to there, and put in another motel, and some of the building is still there if you look at the Sands. They turned it into offices and stuff like that.

But it is clearly an old two-story motel.

Right. They put in the Denny's and the gas station. The gas station they took out of there probably fifteen years ago, the guy that had that gas station. But over on the north side was Cal Vada Jeep. They had the Lincoln Mercury and Jeep dealership at Arlington and Fourth. Again, they were small. All of them were small. Then right next door to it there was an apartment building.

Which is still there, I think.

No, it's gone. Everything is gone on the north side. That apartment building I knew because I had a girlfriend when I was first working at the Cal Neva who I'd go over and visit all the time, and she lived

in that place with another gal. It was an old rooming house is what it was. Big wide halls. The halls were as wide as this room.

Then there was another motel, of course, and I can remember that. There were motels through this whole area. A little bit farther, between Arlington and West, between Fourth and Fifth was the original Reno High School, then Central Intermediate School, they called it then, between Fourth and Fifth Streets and Arlington and West.

It was around '53, '52, '53—I want to say it was '53—when they took the Reno High School and built the new Reno High School over on Booth Street.

Where it is now?

Where it is today. My two uncles went to school in the original school. And my aunt, I want to say she went to high school in that building. Then they moved it over there. But the funny thing again was it had two levels of gymnasiums, and it was a multi-story building. Then that turned into Central Middle School or Intermediate School, as they called them. Then across the street was what they called the Green Building, and the Green Building was everything that's down on Ninth Street now. That was the school offices for the district.

The ones that are off of Record Street there?

Ninth and Record. Actually, Ninth and the tracks. All that was over on West Street. Then there were either motels or apartments until Sierra. Daniel Motor Lodge was there originally, and then they expanded to the south side of Fourth and Sierra.

Shim's Army Surplus Store used to be at Third and Sierra. Shim's. Shimovskis were the people who were here for years. Still are here, the family is, but I knew them, known them for years. Then at Fourth and Sierra on the north side was a mortuary. It was always dark and dim, you know, trees, beautiful scene, really. Then there were auto parts and so forth right up going up Sierra Street. Now it is all the Silver Legacy. It's the whole thing, two blocks.

Sewell's Market was there. There was a furniture store. Later they tore these buildings down. There was an auto parts store. Sewell's Market was there for years and years. Sewell's, that was *the* place to go.

At Fifth and Virginia was the church. Gray Reid's was there, and the bank. Then the original Safeway's was over there, between Fourth and Fifth.

Fifth and Virginia is where the pawn shop is now, and then there's Mexican food and Chinese food or something like that in there. Then you come down, there's other business down through there. Reno Furniture was a place in there. I can't even remember half of them.

So all of that is the Circus Circus now, right?

No. This is between Fourth and Fifth on Virginia. There was a motel on the corner, and they tore it down. But all kinds of different businesses were up in through there. There's bars, McDonald's and everything now. Fourth and Virginia was the original Wall bar, and, by god, every student who went to school up here was in the Wall, every sports fan. I'm trying to remember what was at Sierra and Fourth. Oh, it was a gas station.

A lot of gas stations downtown.

Well, Fourth Street was the main thoroughfare. Until you got to Virginia Street, which was 395. So Fourth and Virginia was where everything was. Then there was Welch's Bakery. You'd walk by there and smell fresh bread baked every day. Oh, my god. Then as kids in school, two of the things you got to do around here were you got to go to Welch's Bakery for a tour and get some fresh bread or go to one of the creameries—those were our big trips around here. It was something.

There were hotels, like the Plaza Hotel at Plaza and Virginia. Or Sierra. And then there was another auto parts place. A lot of auto parts places.

Yeah, it seems like it. A few big businesses replaced so many smaller businesses there.

Right. There were just different stores. There was a parking lot for Sewell's, and a Pythian Hall, plus there was an appliance store at Fourth and Virginia. There was a Standard station. That was where the Pizza Oven was. The Pizza Oven was another big hangout for a lot of people.

Sounds like Highway 40 then or Fourth Street has changed quite a bit.

Quite a bit. It's changed. Between Keystone they took out quite a bit of the property where Reno Iron was, and at one time there were restaurants back there. Where that Texaco station is now used to be The Regal. It was just all property going down there where the tracks were. Behind that gas station was where Burger King was for years, and then they moved them over to the other side of the street.

Where they are now.

Yeah, where they are now. Ben's Discount Liquor. Sambo's was taken out of there. Of course, that was empty because there were suits brought against the company because of the name.

I was going to ask you about that.

Yes. They had one there; at that time, the world was changing for blacks, more that you respected their color. And they had a black Sambo. That was a lion, too.

That wasn't Sambo's logo, though, was it?

Yeah. Little Black Sambo. That was what they said, and they had little plastic deals above the counter that showed Little Black Sambo.

Yeah, I've seen the children's books.

Right. So that was why they took that out. They closed Sambo's there. There was another Sambo's where Jack's is in Sparks. That was another Sambo's restaurant. There was another one down on South Virginia. It's a Chinese place now at Plumb and Virginia. That was a Sambo's restaurant. The one

at Fourth and Wells was a Denny's restaurant.

So it sounds like it's changed considerably, then.

Oh, yeah. Then where the Gold Dust is they had Sprouse Reitz and Washoe Market. Washoe Market was another local grocery store. They had two stores, the one on Fourth Street and the one on South Virginia at Arroyo, I think it is. I'm trying to think of the other ones. I can't remember all of them, but Washoe Market, Nevada Food King. Of course, that was the Gadda and Baldwin family that brought in the Food King. They came out of Idaho to come to Reno. People came to Reno from wherever to start businesses, and they made it pretty well. Harrah wasn't from here originally.

Now, where was he from?

I want to say California, maybe back east. I'm not sure. I can't remember.

I want to say he was from Idaho. I thought he was.

Ascuaga, or Dick Graves was from Idaho. Dick Graves was the one who started the Nugget, of course. But Warren Nelson at the Cal Neva, Leon Nightingale, Jack Douglas, everybody came from somewhere else to start businesses in Reno.

Were there ever any initiatives to clean up or improve downtown Reno that you can remember?

Yeah, every once in a while you hear that.

I've heard the term being thrown around. I'm not sure what that involved.

At one time you'd hear about cleaning up downtown. It's so dirty, it's so this, it's so that. So they put up these fake facades in front of the buildings. But they really couldn't change, you know. They were trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and you can't make it if you don't have all of the tools to do it with and you can't get people to cooperate.

Now, like a lot of the businesses downtown there's a guy—the business where I said the pawn shop is up on Fifth and Virginia, that whole building in there belongs to a guy by the name of Dr. John Iliescu. Iliescu, a Jewish guy, very prominent plastic surgeon back then. But he bought all this property. He owns property like you wouldn't believe all over this area, and he buys it wherever he can. He's so filthy rich, it's unreal. He owns two floors of the Arlington Towers. He owns property on the south side of the river behind the Park Terrace Apartments. There was a medical building in fact; it's a red brick building right next to the Park Terrace Apartments.

With the little awning out front, right?

Right. He owns that building.

I'm familiar with this man. He owns a lot of property around here.

A lot of property around here.

He just buys up historic property, too, is that correct?

Right. Right. He used to own the Wingfield Mansion, had the place right next door to it, and then one of them, the old one burned, but that's another story.

I've heard about that, too.

Yeah. He had a lot of antiques. In fact, his nephew's the one who has the pawn shop at Fifth and Virginia there, and every once in a while they come out—they had a Honda Dream motorcycle that was sitting in that pawn shop that he wanted to sell. It's a collector's item, and he's selling it in a pawn shop.

That pawn shop's still open. I know one of them closed.

Right. Not that one. Well, that's another thing. You get to Fourth and Virginia there, and you can look at it. I'll tell you about some of those other businesses that are in there.

But that property—that guy has bought a lot of property around here, and Iliescu now is worth millions and millions and millions of dollars. He's a funny guy. He likes me for some reason. I don't know why. I had some great contempt for him at one time, for no reason but I didn't like what he was doing. But, you know, that's another story.

Anyway, at Fourth and Virginia there was—later on it was a candy store. Later on it was a candy store, but there was a hotel above there, plus shops down below, and I can remember that. I want to say it was the fifties, forties, maybe it was the forties, Chet and Link Piazza opened a place called the Sportsman's. The Sportsman's corner now over at Fourth and Vine.

Oh, the old sporting goods store that closed down recently.

Right. But the original store was downtown, and you could come in here and they had stuff. Those guys, who had been born and raised in Reno, I think they were, but they had in their store all kinds of sporting equipment. They had in their store all kinds of hunts. They were on safaris, they did this, they went hunting for that, they had it all in their place there. The Sportsman. They had everything in that place. It was amazing.

Also in that corner there was a place called the Squeeze Inn that they eventually ended up in restaurants. All kinds of different businesses through there. There were pawn shops eventually later. Then that corner, along Plaza Street near the tracks, was wiped out. There were motels and hotels in there.

Center Street used to be University Avenue. Between Fourth and Fifth on Center there was a big car dealership that took in the whole side. But that was also part of the bus barn—for the Reno bus service was in here. Lawton's was at Fourth, and that was bought out by Richardson Lovelock, and they had their dealership in there. Lovelock was the last name. The family came from Lovelock. I guess that was who the family was named after. They lived out in Lovelock and at one time they moved to Reno and took over the dealership. Then Richardson, I don't know how they got into it.

There was a gas station, and then right behind here—I'm trying to think what it was as a kid. It's

parking is what it ended up as, and then it was part of the Ford dealership. Their used car sales was over there, and then there was an auto repair shop. Yeah, that was a body shop. That was where the Events Center is now.

The ballroom's over on the west side of the street.

Right, which took in the whole west side of Center Street.

Then on the east side's the Events Center, and then where the bowling stadium is was the Reno Junior High School.

Yeah, or Northside, they called it. There were two gyms in town that were the same way. They were gladiator pits. That's what they looked like. Because you had the gym floor here, and then you'd have a wall so you couldn't go onto the court, and you'd watch from behind a little wall that stood about this high.

So you were below them?

No. You were about the same level as they were, trying to watch the game. It was a gladiator pit, we called it. That was way back. But that was Northside. That's where the bowling stadium is.

The V&T came in at the railway station. That's still the depot. That's where the V&T Railroad came in, and it headed south, towards Carson, on Holcomb.

Yeah, so it ran past where the auto museum is.

Actually, behind it.

Well, that's where the bridge was.

Yeah, that's where the bridge was, behind it, and it ran down behind and then down Holcomb, and there was a road that went alongside of it, Holcomb.

Starting at First going up to Fourth Street between Lake and Evans, where, say, the baseball stadium is now and the new bus depot is there, can you describe what that area used to be like?

It was just old buildings. There were motels over there. It was kind of a dive place. There was a gas station on the south corner of Fourth and Lake which was a Flying A station.

Louis' Basque Corner is right there at Evans and Fourth Street on the north side. There's a motorcycle shop right now on the west side of the street.

Right. But then they built the motels and had more motels. But they were all rooming houses, buildings like that. You had businesses in through there. There were garages and stuff like that.

There was a bus depot next to the Santa Fe on Lake and Second.

Right. That was the Trailways bus station. Then there were all businesses. Those buildings are still there, at Evans.

They took out a lot to build that new bus depot. But it's been down for a long time. There's been nothing there.

It was a plaza. It was a parking lot and a plaza.

There was a motel over there. The motel that was owned by—can't think of the guy's name. He owned the motel, and he ended up blowing most of his money on hookers. He'd pick up some hooker and that was his lady. He'd take care of her and put her up and set her up and everything, and she'd take care of him, which was fine for him. Then he'd go on from there.

But I worked as a kid in a business called Central Credit—it had telephone lines between all the casinos here locally, then it'd go to Vegas with the telephone lines to all the casinos down there. It was a system set up to notify the others, so if you cashed a bad check up here, they're going to know about it in Vegas.

Where was that located?

That was over on Evans.

Evans between Third and Fourth, or Plaza and Fourth Street?

Right.

So where there—there's just a couple of little buildings scattered over there right now.

Yeah.

Then there's the bar, the Lincoln Lounge is over there. And that's still there. That's an old brick building.

That's an old brick building. There's a bar downstairs. There was a hotel upstairs at that time. Now it is just apartments. It went back to the alley.

The train trench cuts it off now, I think.

Well, yeah, it's up a little bit, because there's a motel in here now. Lindy and Company was where your homeless shelter is—St. Vincent's and the homeless shelter. Then you come down, and over at the corner of Fourth and Evans was a place. A greasy spoon is what it was. Good food, though, greasy spoon, hamburger joint in there. Then Louis' right across the street to the east. Then right behind Louis' was a parking lot. Reno Grocery Company ended up being Monarch Foods, which is now the warehouse for NC Auto Parts. That's their warehouse. But that's still there, that building.

Then you have the NCO depot there. Then Sears, Roebuck had a warehouse back there, which is

now a furniture place. They do a lot of cubicles.

So that would've been catty-corner to the north of the NCO depot.

Right.

So it was really, getting past Evans, it really starts to get an industrial over there, huh?

Yeah, it turned into that. You had a hotel which is still there. Most of this stuff is still here building-wise. But they took some out. At one time there was a gay bar.

Is that the Highway 40 bar?

I think it is called that. They turned that into Davo's, which was an Italian restaurant at one time, good food. I think it was run by Davo who was a gay guy, who had that one and another one. Put more up his nose than he should've been.

Then down here you had the Yancy Company, a roofing company, I think that was the building that is now a chemical company, on the north side of Fourth Street. It was all taken out. And now the Fire Department is there, close to Valley.

Commercial Hardware had moved from Sierra and Commercial to Fourth and Valley. That's where they were at. So now that is where St. Vincent's is, part of their parking lots.

They have a thrift store over there also.

Yeah, and the thrift store.

Do you think the construction of I-80 through Reno affected what was going on on Fourth Street?

Most assuredly, yes, because before that, it wasn't probably always the prettiest or the nicest, but it wasn't bad, and they kept up their businesses because they wanted people to stop in. You came into Reno, even when they built the freeway—there was another business called the Cow Palace, which was up on Keystone where the freeway is now. The Cow Palace, that was a place everybody went to because it had good hamburgers. It was the place to be. If you went to Reno High School, you went to the Cow Palace.

Was it a big place?

No, it wasn't that big. It seemed big at the time, but it wasn't that big. But these places like this, and the homes that were over there were all old stately-looking homes going down the corridor down there, where my wife grew up at her house, and she can remember on Nevada Street there were a lot of nice homes. But all those businesses kind of did die off. When they started to die off, they turned to crap. So it made the Fourth Street corridor look like hell.

They tried building. Between Washington and Ralston there is a building that was three or four stories high, looks like an old hotel, then they made it into timeshares. That was built there because they

were going to have a nice little hotel there for people coming to Reno. Well, as soon as they brought in the freeway, everything started dying off there. There's the Travelodge and then there was this place right next to it.

That kind of died out, and they were trying to rebuild it. They were trying to reinvent the wheel, and Reno started dying, because you'd come over and you could stop in Reno and there was a gambling spot, but then they pulled stuff to Reno or to Sparks, then they started pulling stuff to California, the Indian gaming. So it just all started dying downtown.

About what year, would you say? Just a rough decade anyway.

I'd probably say in the seventies it started dying off because it changed, Reno changed. In my opinion, it started dying off. I think that downtown Reno started losing a lot of its pizzazz. In the early seventies they had Harrah's. Well, back in the sixties they had Harrah's, which was a small club. They had the Golden Hotel, which was a nice place. I mean, it wasn't really fancy, but it was nice. Cal Neva didn't start until the sixties. The Palace Club—they had the Colony Club where the Cal Neva was.

They had the bingo parlor, which was on the corner where Harrah's took over at the corner of Second and Center. The bus depot was over across from the hotel—I'm trying to think. It was on the east side of Center Street, and that's where skid row was, but everybody knew where skid row was, and you stay away from skid row. They had the Overland Hotel there, which is a nice, decent place, decent food. But then on the west side of Center, you had Harrah's. That took over the old Golden property, built that hotel.

They took over the New China Club also, basically.

I don't know if they bought the land. I think they did.

The late 1970s. Late 1977.

Right.

Bill Fong closed down, and then it was basically demolished really quickly afterward.

It was a parking lot for Harrah's.

And the parking lot never got fully developed to what it was supposed to be.

It got paved and that was it. But that's back when they started letting more blacks into the casinos. You know, there were blacks who worked at the casinos here.

Yeah. It was segregated, though.

Yeah. But if you worked in it, you could work there but you couldn't eat or—well, you could eat if you were in the back room, but you couldn't gamble in those places. That's when they built the New China. Bill Fong found a niche, and he did. He was quite a character himself. His daughter still lives here.

It changed downtown, and then in '78 when they started building the MGM—'77, '78, that changed Reno's atmosphere altogether.

Circus Circus was '78 and the Sundowner was '75.

Right. But for the Sundowner they just tore down Central High School, because by then they'd built Swope and Clayton. So they didn't have any reason to have that Central.

So it just started changing. People started buying up property. They all were going to build a bigger, fancier toilet—I call them toilets—casinos, and they did. So they kept buying up property and took downtown where the Cal Neva is from the casino on Virginia Street. It was the Hale's Drugstore, and then next door was the Waldorf. It was called the Waldorf, and it was a nice little dinner club and bar, and you get a hell of a meal in there. They had a guy, Jack Joseph, you'll see him advertising on TV now, who was in radio, and he'd do a nightly show from the Waldorf. I was going there before I worked graveyard. You could get a great meal in that place.

Then next door there was the Byington Building, and the Byington Building was a three- or four-story building. Downstairs, I can't remember what kind of shops they were, but I remember there were shops downstairs. Then they had dental offices upstairs and offices, accountants and so forth, in that building. It was great. Great place to go in. Your downtown didn't seem so bad on Virginia Street.

That was in that era when they would leave your downtown core, and they would go out to shopping centers. Woolworth's was there for years, even though they rebuilt that building after one of the floods. That was there for years even afterwards.

That was maybe the '97 flood. I can't remember when exactly, but it was kind of dying out. But there was Lerner's store and there was R. Herz and Brothers. Well, they were all starting to leave, and they went out to wherever. We had a Montgomery Wards, Penney's, Sears, they were all in Reno, and McMahan's, they were all businesses that were in the downtown corridor. Well, McMahan's moved out to Plumb Lane where that RESCO, the restaurant supply house is. They moved out there and they built that building.

Looks like an older sixties-ish building.

Sixties building. It was right around the sixties or seventies. Some friends of ours lived behind that, kids we went to school with. But Sears had moved out of their building downtown and out to Park Lane Mall. Penney's had taken the building they were originally in, and moved into that building on the corner of First and Sierra, a several-story building there. But that was back in the fifties that happened, and that was a fairly new building for them.

Let's see. Who else was there? Sears, Penney's, Montgomery Ward's. They were all downtown and they all moved out of the downtown corridor. Penney's was the last one to leave downtown. There was a Menard's store. I told you about Menard's. There was Rick's—I can't remember the name of that store. It was at the corner of Second and Virginia, the northeast corner—was that Menard's? It might have been. There was a clothing store there, Lerner's, that moved out to Park Lane Mall. A lot of these places, they just got up and went.

Is that because the freeway displaced the main corridor?

The downtown corridor was just kind of closing up then. My dad knew the guy at Lerner's, and every year my mom would go down there and buy stuff for my sisters, for my younger sister, and he always used to give my mom a discount. But it was that kind of an atmosphere downtown that kind of went [flushing sound].

Then they started building the bigger places—the MGM and then the Nugget, and they figured we didn't want a strip like Vegas. So they were kind of stopping. Reno has hurt themselves in what they've done—and I was thinking about this the other night, in fact. If they would've opened up the corridors that they wanted to—when they built the Convention Center out there—they had two places where people could stay if they were going to the Convention Center, going to anything out there, and that was the Golden Road Motel, which is now the Atlantis, and the Holiday Inn, which was the original Holiday Inn we had here in Reno. It's part of the Holiday Inn Corporation, and that was down where that Super 8 Motel is now, on South Virginia. Those were the two places you could stay besides the other dumps that they had down there, the other motels. There weren't that many places to go.

I know that they wanted to initially put the Convention Center in the center of downtown.

Right. These guys have all these wonderful ideas and they try to reinvent the wheel and they don't look at the long-term process. So what has happened now is even your casinos, the Peppermill and the Atlantis, do fairly well outside of town. Harrah's is like this. That was the original Harrah. The original Circus Circus, of course, was in Vegas, but this Circus Circus up here was Pennington, Pennington Medical. He was the one who had a lot to do with the Circus Circus up here. Carano got into gaming. There was Cashell, and then down with the Pioneer Inn, which is gone. I don't think he was into the Onslow, which was another casino where Cal Neva has their hotel now.

Downtown, that was the Onslow originally, and that was some of the partners that had gone into the—oh, what do you call that place?

The Virginian?

No. The Virginian was part of Cal Neva. I don't know if it's still. No, it isn't.

No, it's just kind of there. The Comstock was another big casino.

The Comstock was started in the seventies. That was Jack Douglass and—who was the other guy in that? Jack Douglass was one of them. But, no, the other place I just told you about. The Pioneer Inn.

Where the Wild Orchid is now?

No, no. The Wild Orchid was Conrad Priess and some other guys. Conrad Priess was money, and I don't know where he got his money, you know, but they built the Ponderosa.

Oh, that's the Ponderosa.

Conrad Priess and—oh, I can't even think of half of the guys that were in that—they went in and they built the Onslow, and that was another one. But they were all intermingled here and there and

wherever. It was like all these things came together. It was funny because the Pioneer was a good place for a lot of years. They had a place called the Sword Room in there, and everybody and anybody—or Denny’s—the people who ran this town met at Denny’s in the morning. There was a Denny’s in the Pioneer Inn. There was a table in back. Bill Raggio used to go in there. You’d see him in there. A guy by the name of Dyer Jensen.

Where was the Pioneer Inn?

The Pioneer Inn down at Court and Virginia. There was a bank on the corner.

It’s still there, isn’t it?

No, no. It’s all gone. It’s all parking lot now. But that was the place where the big shots met back in the seventies and eighties when they had Denny’s down there. It was something. The Sword Room. The town’s changed so much.

I think that by pulling all the casinos out of downtown and the way it was, “Oh, we can’t have this here. Oh, we can’t have that there,” basically ham-stringed everything that was happening in this town. If you would’ve kept all your gaming, basically the main part of your gaming in the downtown corridor, it would’ve kept building up nicer and nicer, and then start expanding south, which they did.

Actually, the Ponderosa was the first one south, and I worked there as a kid. Then down where the Peppermill is was a motel. It was called Hill & Sons Motel. Growing up, we used to go there as a kid. The Hill & Sons was a nice motel down south. They had weekly rentals for divorcees who used to come to town.

That was still something that would happen even when I was young, in high school. That was at the Hill & Sons that they would have that going on. But then Peppermill came in. I don’t remember when they started, but they came in and they opened up the bar and restaurant in there with a few slot machines, and that’s built from there on, to what it is now. If I’m not mistaken, the original Peppermill came out of California.

It’s a big operation now.

It’s a big property now. It used to be that down there Century Theaters had the drive-in, had motels and Eugene’s was the restaurant that was down there. Eugene’s was a fine dining place. If you were going to go out for an outstanding meal, Eugene’s was one of them. But that’s the way change is in this area.

It sounds like the retreat of retail and other businesses downtown, and I guess some of them were displaced by the large casinos, but then the casinos also scattered a little bit.

Even some of the casinos kind of died out.

And then the highway not running through town anymore, being displaced by I-80.

Then they started moving. The Eldorado was the first one that started moving on them. There was

nothing on the north side of the tracks until they built the Eldorado, which I want to say was in the late seventies. Everything was south of the tracks, per se.

That's the way it had been since the thirties.

Right. Kept on the side of the tracks so there was no big problem. Then there was, like I said, the Colony Club. Was the Colony there? There were some places down there, even growing up as a kid I can remember, down where the casinos were they had the Reno Turf Club. The original Turf Club had a deli in there that had amazing sandwiches. Oh, my god. My dad, we'd go when I was in high school. So this was in the early sixties that my dad would take us down there, and after a basketball game, we'd go get sandwiches at the Turf Club and bring them home. We'd sit there at night having pastrami or whatever kind of sandwiches you wanted. Oh, my god, the flavor just—you didn't want to stop eating them, they were so good. It was all your Jewish-style deli-type thing.

They eventually built other buildings. Part of the buildings were where the SP Building, or the train depot is. Part of that is where they built—I'm trying to remember the name of the casino because it was on the tracks side. There was a casino and then there was—it was a small place. There was a small casino, then Harolds Club—and Harolds Club was like a four- or five-story building. Sam Butera was in there. Oh, what the hell is her name? Used to see some decent acts in there.

Yeah, Reno was lauded as like the entertainment capital of the world for a while.

Oh, yeah. You got to see Sammy Davis, Dionne Warwick, I got to see her at Harrah's years ago. I'm trying to think who we saw over there. Different people over the years you'd see, they'd come in. But the casinos were right on Virginia Street.

Over to Center and then on Center you'd have places like the Overland Hotel, where the ground floor was all casino. But it was different. Then you had your bus depot, which went from Center Street over and along—they still had that—you know the garage that Harrah's has?

Yeah, on the back side is part of the bus depot.

That was the original part of the bus depot.

You can tell because it doesn't fit with the rest of the building.

So Harolds sold out to the Hughes Corporation—Howard Hughes, Summa Corporation, they called it. Then Fitzgerald's, when Lincoln died—Meta Fitzgerald who the student services building is named for—sold all that to the corporation that has Fitzgerald's. I think they went bankrupt in Vegas. They opened up in Vegas. But that was paid for. That building was paid for.

Fitzgerald's?

Oh, yeah, but he built that building, Lincoln Fitzgerald. It was paid for, lock, stock and barrel. That was the way the man was. He owned the Nevada Club, Nevada Lodge, Nevada Club, and then he built the Fitzgerald's building. So they sold them. It's just that a lot of the gaming has just been a

downward spiral—and they were told, people in Reno and Sparks were told years ago, diversify, because gaming wasn't going to help, and their diversification was warehousing. Well, warehousing is for whatever business built in here. One time we were Hush Puppies. With the big Hush Puppies shoe it was the big warehousing site for Hush Puppies, in Sparks.

Hawes valves manufacturing, for your house faucets. I don't know if they're still in Reno or not, but these were different things. They tried to bring in business. Part of it was I-80 would give them help. Part of it wasn't.

No, that makes sense—and then you were talking about—you were talking about that area over around Lake Street as being kind of a seedy area. Did you ever go down there for your job with RPD? Did they take you down there?

Oh, yes. At that time, back when I started, east beat and west beat was something that they still kept an officer walking down there, and usually two of them at night because you never knew what you were going to come up against. So I learned walking at night down there, walking east beat and west beat, and I just loved it. Oh, my god, I loved that. I loved it when, not that many years ago, we did it for what they called the part-timers or the reserves.

The Reno reserves was the William units, they called it. That's what the name was. Well, as the William units, we walked a whole area. Back when I started law enforcement, Reno had an east beat or west beat. East beat, you were going up around and the drunks were down, and when I was doing it then, it was against the law to be drunk in public. Then, later on, it changed. You know, they made it civil protective or a civil violation. It wasn't a crime. It was just helping them get sobered up.

Then they had these other programs. But when I used to go down there and you'd see somebody drunk, passed out on a bar at the Aggie's or the Depot or the S.P. bar, you'd go up and wake them up and take them, call the paddy wagon and say, "Got one. Come get 'em." Take them out, put them in back of the paddy wagon, you know, secure them and put them in there. It got to be kind of spooky sometimes because it could be a lot of problems. But it was different.

You know, the seedy area, you got to walk around. Of course, that one that I told you about, that was originally over on Lake Street, never went to it there, didn't go to it until it was over on Virginia Street. That was great food, great, great food, soul food.

Yeah, that's what I have read, soul food. That was originally at Lake Street where it was a little more diverse.

Yeah, well, on Lake Street, where that was, that was skid row for Reno. That was a bad area, the beat. So there were a lot of different things that happened. The Mizpah was where Lake Street was. The Cosmo was on that same block.

Right—and all of that, that kind of stuff kind of consumed the whole block where the bus depot and stadium are now, right?

Well, no. The bus depot was from Second to Commercial. Second and Lake was Trailways, and then Benetti's, had Nevada Novelty. They were next door to it. Then you had some other kind of store next to that, and this is going west on Second.

In the alley, there was a place that went down, it was what they called the Cellar, which was a bar. It was kind of a topless bar back then. Then you went across the alley, and I want to say there was another bar. Maybe it wasn't right there. There was something right next to the alley, and then above, you had the Star Hotel. The Star Hotel was basically rooming houses when I walked down there. Then you had another bar in there and then you went around and there was a clothing store on the corner. Parker's Western Wear used to be in there, and when you went around, you were at Commercial. Then you went up and there was a parking lot and then the Greyhound Bus depot. Then from Greyhound you went up to the alley, east and west alley, and I'm trying to think—that's Douglas Alley? I think it's Douglas. I can never remember which one's which.

I get confused with the alleys too.

I know Lover's Lane's, the alley that goes north and south between Center and Lake. Then the other ones, one was Douglas and one was Lincoln Alley. That was Douglas Alley that was on the north end, that ran east and west. You went across that, then there was the Overland Hotel.

The Overland Hotel was a two- or three-story old-time hotel. Pick Hobson, at that time, when I was young, was the guy who had that building. Decent food, took care of the cops. Cops were always in there having coffee or eating or whatever. You want to get off your feet, go in there. He didn't care. He was happy to have you in there. He had a pit boss in there, a guy by the name of Bob Davis. He used to be a professional boxer. These drunks would come in and they'd start giving him shit and he'd just box them bad, then throw them out the door and say, "Get out of here." Honest to God. He was an old guy. His son and I went to school together, and even when I worked down there, which was at twenty-one, twenty-two years old when I was working the Cal Neva, I worked part-time up at the Overland one or two nights a week. These cops used to do part-time work elsewhere—moonlighting. You go up there, still a tough bastard. Oh, my god, he was a tough man. Nice guy, nice guy. You just didn't cross him.

So that was a different town. Then you went down and you had your bars, your Aggies, the Depot, the S.P. down to Cosmo. All the drunks hung out there. They sold Gold Bell white port, which was the cheapest wine. It was in a bottle so you could sit there. The Indians would hang in there, all your drunks. Indians, there was one guy who would get drunk at the Aggies and Depot, then he'd walk out the front door when he'd run out of money and walk over to Lake on Commercial. Down Lake to Second, from Second he'd go over back up to Center, Center back up. He would walk around that block, stumbling to where he was walking straight, bumming money just to get another bottle of wine.

As a sheriff and also a police officer, did you ever get called down to Fourth Street?

I can't remember too much on Fourth Street that I had gotten involved in.

I mean, with the county I would assume that—

West Fourth was the county.

West Fourth was county jurisdiction.

West Fourth, if you went past Reno Auto Wrecking that was up on the hill, on the right side

where it makes that big curve on Fourth Street where the trailer park is. Back down towards those motels there and where the Micasa Too is, from there west was all county.

You'd get calls in there all the time. Not Micasa. Micasa I worked part-time at, Micasa Too, but we'd get calls to go out there. There was an armed robbery just shortly after I joined the Sheriff's Office, back in '71. They took hostages because they knew they were going to do it. They had a snitch on the inside. They knew they were going to rob this place. It was a gay bar on West Fourth—Visions, I think is what the bar's called now. It used to be a motel called Dave's VIP—and it's probably where I got to be around gays more than I had ever been before in my life.

They had gone into this bar, and this group had been burglarizing and robbing wherever they could do it. They went in there, and there was an undercover officer sitting in there drinking, knowing this was going to happen, and then they had guys outside waiting for this crew to go in. Once they went in, they were spooked in the inside so they held hostages in there. I had to go out there and we had to sit outside. I hadn't been around gays that much.

I was sitting out there and it was in June, and in June, it still gets cool here at night. I had been in the station, getting ready to go home when this went down. They said, "Come on. Everybody's got to go." So we loaded up, had short-sleeve shirts on, and said, "Grab your whatever."

I said, "Okay," and I grabbed my handgun, which was a .38 and I jumped in somebody else's car. We didn't have that many patrol cars. We get in the patrol car and we get out there, and we're sitting out there outside the car waiting. We've got this building surrounded, right? I'm freezing my ass off because it was so cool. All of a sudden, the guys negotiated out one of the guys who was gay and he comes running out and, "Oh, oh, oh," like this and swinging his arms, very gay, you know. He goes up and he hugs him, "Oh, I'm so scared."

I'm going, "What the hell?" You know, I'm not used to seeing that. It was my really first time dealing with the gays. It ended up the situation was fine. The guys gave up. They went to prison and all that.

So there was no shooting?

No shooting, but it was something, they were ready to kill people in order to do it, and they ended up talking them out.

As a Reno police officer, were you ever on East Fourth?

I don't remember. I don't remember calls so much down there at that time because in Reno, I was mainly downtown. They only had seven or eight cars on the road at a time here in the area. I worked the traffic car more. With the traffic car, you could be on Fourth Street working. But normally not much happened on Fourth Street. You remember accidents that happened. Accidents were one thing that happened everywhere. I even got in a traffic accident at Fourth and Sierra. A guy drove into me. I didn't get cited, and I should have, probably. But really I think that's about it. Nothing major. I had more stuff that I got involved with at the Sheriff's Office serving civil process, delivering some papers over there. But the most I had ever dealt with was when I used to walk the beat. That was the biggest thing for Reno after I retired from the Sheriff's Office.

And this was in the nineties, wasn't it?

No, no. This was 2006 to 2009.

This was very recently.

Two and a half years ago.

And so you were back downtown as the reserve.

Right. But it wasn't volunteer—you were paid part-time police officer.

So this would have been right around the same time then that the homeless shelter was relocated down the street?

Yeah, we dealt with the homeless shelter, we dealt with the St. Vincent's Dining Room and all that. It's different now than it was then. A lot of your businesses that were down on Fourth Street have left the area. The El Rancho Motel, which is down there at Fourth and Wells, used to be a fine upstanding motel. It was a nice place to stay, and then they had Denny's there.

El Rancho, that's a really big motel.

Two-story, big corner, right underneath the Wells overpass. That's another joke, but I'll tell you about that later. But that was a fine place to go to. They had a bar and a restaurant there on the property. Pete Cladianos and his brother, the Cladianos family had that place, and it was a nice place. Flanigan's warehouse was Flanigan's Lumber Supply, a nice well-kept area. All of it was well kept down on there. When they brought in the freeway, it went down the tubes, because there was nothing to make it look nice anymore.

Now, where they put the overpass in, they had the overpass and the underpass. You go underneath the eastern tracks on Wells, and even then it would still stay somewhat nice. But then as times have gone by, they put in the trench that blocked off the underpass. Well, what happens when they block off the underpass? It makes that area kind of die. So that's mainly what's happened. A lot of that area has just died off. There's a steel business, Davis Steel, over on Elko. I think it's Elko. That's right behind the gas station. That was a business that came in there after. There were all big warehouses. Nevada Bell used to have a building over between Eureka and Elko. Eureka was where they used to pull in. There's a beer warehouse on Elko, but they took out the tracks. The tracks are gone, have been for some time.

There was a whole area that Martin Iron Works ended up taking over. Commercial Hardware was at Valley and Fourth. And then they had a gas station here, which is still there. That gas station was the Zellerbach building. It was a painting contractor. At Elko and Fourth is a gas station. Then there's a small-engine shop. They sell lawnmowers and stuff. It's changed so much. IXL Laundry was where the auction place, Anchor Auctions, is now. Anchor Auctions is there and then the gas station. Reno was quite the little town.

At Ray's Tire Exchange, basically what they do now is they recycle tires. That's all they're for. H&N Steel was back in there on North Park Street. There were nice businesses up in there. They've changed a lot of that now. It's just all dumps.

People say, "Oh, we can't do this. Oh, we can't do that." There were oil distributors. There were all kinds of different wild things that were back in there. Most of them have just gone downhill since then because they blocked it off with the trench or they blocked it off with building the overpass. So basically we've shot ourselves in the foot and made that the rundown area it is.

They try every once in a while to put a place in there where they can do something to make it look better, like on the corner of Fourth and Wells they have places or apartments and shops in there. What the hell? Why would you do that?

There's also housing behind that, too.

Right, right. But why would you do that? Trying to make it look better for what?

I think it was part of a revitalization. I don't know what the initiative was.

It made it one block and that was it.

Do you think that the homeless shelter being down there has any effect on it?

The homeless shelter it's not going to make it any better. The thing is, because it doesn't make it any better, it keeps it basically in the slum level. The guys on Fourth Street, they're trying to revitalize that again. Oh, yeah, let's just make it a silk purse again. Well, you can add all you want to it. Until you build something that's going to pull people in, you're not going to build anything.

People come to Louis'. Louis' Basque Corner is still there. Louis has had that place for, I don't know, forty years, fifty years. Louis' family has run that place and they take care of the building and they have people living up above. It's a fire trap to me but, you know, it'll make it. But Louis' is the only thing on Fourth Street there, and the Event Center that they're going to have, and the bowling stadium's actually losing a lot of money.

Well, it doesn't actually cater to the public, really.

No, it doesn't, and they're not going to cater to the public. Just special events and that's it. That's why they're trying to make that all a convention area down there, at Fourth and Center.

What do you think the city could do to improve Fourth Street or do you think there is anything they could do?

They'd have to change the whole outlook on it. Because as you go down Fourth Street you look at the motels, the bars that are down there. There's a bar at Fourth and Sutro. It's a bikers' bar owned by some Reno firemen. The place looks decent, but it's nothing much. There's nothing down there that makes you feel safe.

Do you like any aspects of Fourth Street? Do you enjoy any aspects of that part of the street?

No, not anymore. I like one place down there and that's Los Compadres restaurant, a Mexican

restaurant.

Where is that at?

That's at Fourth, where Fourth and Sixth come together. That used to be a Sizzler. I like that restaurant, because I've known the guys who own it for a long time. But really there's nothing over there. If you want to go over there, over to Twin City Surplus, that's one thing. But really there isn't much in there that you're going to want.

There's Casale's Halfway Club. That still operates.

That still operates, and when she dies, I think that place will die because she's the cook in there.

Coney Island still does okay.

Coney Island's still there, barely. You know, most of those places that you get into and you deal with down in there, they've been around a long time. They're going to survive. Casale's, I've eaten their spaghetti sauce. That's the first time I ever had spaghetti sauce that burned your mouth. But it burned your mouth because of the spice not because of the temperature. I mean, you can live with the hot, as long as it's the heat from the oven. Not the heat from the spice in there. They've got very spicy food, and it's good. I mean, don't get me wrong, it's good. Coney Island's very well known for its corn beef and cabbage on Saint Patty's day. So it's going to make it.

It's like Jack's. Have you been into Jack's? Jack's used to be decent before, and then Jack's kind of went downhill.

He wasn't paying taxes.

Well, that was another guy.

Oh, that was the other one?

Yeah, that was Jim. In fact, that's a long story, but Jim came to town—he's originally from Hawaii. Jim met his wife, I think, because she worked for Delta Airlines. His wife, she's a half Chinese, half Caucasian gal, very pretty, and he met her. He's this playboy and all that. They were living up in Oregon and they moved down here from Oregon.

The family does, the whole family. Al—I want to say it's Al, the guy that owns Peg's. That's who it was and Jim's working over there part-time for him. The daughter, when she's in town, she's over there. I mean, she was really a pretty gal. Nice and sweet, all of them were. This was her second or third husband, but he had a gambling problem and he had a zipper problem. So the gambling problem is really what got to him. That's what keeled him over. But they went and bought Jack's from Jack Achoch because they wanted to have their own business. They thought they could make it big. They ran it into the ground, Jim did.

I never cared for the food there anyway.

Well, when Jack originally had it, it was a decent breakfast. So that was the difference in Jack's back then. The original Jack's was over on 22nd and Prater. Good food. It was down there a little, because it was a small little deal in there. That was one place. But you start going down Fourth Street, and Fourth Street's really gone downhill, even in Sparks.

Well, it turns into Prater then. You have the Pony Express.

The Pony Express used to be owned by Harolds.

Harolds Club, yeah. It wasn't in Sparks and it wasn't in Reno, initially.

Yeah, and then Sparks took it in and El Rancho. In fact, the building right next to the freeway there, which is now the auto body—McCarran Auto Body—used to be Yellow Deluxe Cab. My uncle went over there. My uncle was the brother-in-law to one of them. It was Baker Drake. Bob Drake was the one who ran it, but my Uncle Pete's brother-in-law was the one that—Baker, Herman and Inez Baker, he'd worked for them for years at Yellow Deluxe Cab. Their place used to be at the corner of where the Circus Circus garage is on Sixth and Sierra. It was on the southwest corner of Sixth and Sierra.

Across the street was Rissone's gas station and then Rissone's auto parts, which was eventually changed into Ichiban. He took the building and refurbished it and made it Ichiban.

From an auto parts store to an Ichiban's Steakhouse.

Yeah. Itchy-buns, we used to call it.

How do you think the information that you've provided me with today will help give greater understanding and clarity to Reno's long and varied past, from Fourth Street being the main stretch through town scattered with various business and services, to the current state of freeways and massive hotel casino operations?

When they put in the freeway, they were asking to put it closer to downtown and it would've probably taken in part of Fourth Street and possibly taken in part of that area there. But they moved through downtown Reno. If you think about it, looking from the freeway, you can tell where the Legacy is, but you couldn't see the original downtown Reno. That took the business out of Reno.

The freeway got built right over the top of the Nugget, so what do people see? The Nugget. "Oh, we'll go there." You pass right through it. It's like the stupid train trench. I know why they wanted to do it. But you basically cut up Reno and you took an area of ground that was down there. It was very historical. It was down below, but you basically took this town and split it in half with that train trench. Now you have a baseball field down there. What was in the baseball field? There was a firehouse, it had been warehousing, it had been apartments.

Chinatown.

Chinatown, yeah. There was nothing really gained by a lot of this construction. It was the original

“Give me the money.” Let’s say the Lovelock family—the Richardson Lovelock family—well, those two families that got together—they sold to Bartlett Ford and then Bartlett moved out there and then they sold to Jones West.

So who got the money off that property? It’s who got the money off the property we converted? Where the bowling stadium is, part of that was owned by the Reeves family. The Reeves family, they sold the property. Greg Reeves, after his dad died and his mom was in bad shape and he took over—sold that property, came out with a fortune. Not what he could get today, but a lot of money. They got that parking lot. They also owned a jewelry store, which is where they were going to pull the drugstore downtown here. Not Walgreens. The one that’s on Sierra and Second. Rite Aid, one of them, whatever it was, that was CVS, I think.

But they’re all the same father company, I think. Anyway, it was the drugstore down there, which didn’t last very long.

Right, yeah. That didn’t open. Because the gaming conflict with, I want to say was Caranos. I don’t know, one of them. It was a big property. But these property guys bought all this property. They’re the only ones who made money. The rest of the businesses, they’ve run out. They have run businesses out of business because of their greed or they want to sell it to this certain guy.

The one person—and I don’t know if he owns that building, Goldilocks, he has done very well for himself, considering, over the years. Goldilocks, which is downtown, is a jewelry store—I think he bought that building, but he has developed and made everything from south down on Center Street to Second Street, Second and between the alley. Right behind that gift store.

And he’s done all right. But it’s the families that have made the money around here that don’t reinvest it back into the community.

The Goodsell family or the Mack family that have Palace Loan and Jewelry, one time they ran two or three different pawn shops. Let’s see, there was Palace, Cannon, and Cameo. Those places there, when Harolds Club bought all that property from the buildings where the original Palace Loan and Jewelry was—they owned all of it, plus where the Pacific Pawnbrokers is, that was part of the Mack family. That was Ron Mack, and the one that’s in Vegas now.

But Joan, I’m pretty sure her family is Goodsell, a good Jewish family, and they built this new building. The old man Goodsell, if you were going into the pawn shops, he was there, plus Dennis Mack, who was the owner and Darren’s dad, and they had that place down there on Commercial and built this new one. I don’t think the building’s that nice, but they had all this money they’ve invested into that place, and I don’t know if they give back to the community. That’s one thing. Most of these businesses don’t.

That could have something to do with it.

Well, you know, at Thanksgiving they have their big turkey thing that the Eldorado gets involved in—not the Eldorado, the Silver Legacy, and that’s put on by local preacher—and they put it on for the homeless people. They’ve been doing stuff like that for years around here, but that’s once a year. What about the rest of the year?

When businesses started closing down downtown, who do you think got all of the businesses or still was doing well with the money and wouldn’t help with anybody else to keep going? It all benefits

each other. That's the casinos.

When Bill Harrah died, they took the estate they sold to the Promise Corporation, which was Holiday Inns at that time. Then Holiday Inn split from Promise Corporation, and they still have it, I think. Yeah, the Promise Corporation still has it, and that's the second largest casino operator or one of the larger casino operators in the nation, in the world, I guess, now. The other one is MGM Grand in Vegas, which is Circus Circus and half of the Legacy.

But they don't really help any other time, and these people are making money and all they can think of is their own pocket. That's hurt a lot of Reno. In Vegas, you're going to keep the bums away from downtown if you move them someplace where they're not going to be out bothering your patrons or you're going to do better for everybody if you have the people down there watching.

Reno had a good thing. We cleaned up downtown. I say "we." The guys who were walking the beat down there, we cleaned it up in the period of time we worked down there. There were sixteen of us at one time, or seventeen, I think, at one time, and we would walk down there, have somebody downtown every day of the week. We cleaned up downtown Reno.

In what regard?

Walking the beat, we cleaned up downtown Reno to the point where the businessman, everything else, people were feeling good about walking downtown. So what happens? You fire all the guys doing the work, and because the RPPA doesn't like it and the city says, "Oh, we don't have any money." Well, you don't have money because you're not getting your tax dollars in because you're cutting off your nose to spite your face, and that's what these guys have done.

So the casinos aren't putting money in to help this problem, to fix this problem. They just worry about their little nest egg right here, and they should all be putting into something like this, because they have what they call a tax district down there. Their tax district is paying for guys who work prostitutes and that kind of a thing, which is something they've cut back on. Even though the tax district is paying for it for numerous officers, they've cut them back to where they can't work down there because some commander didn't like that idea. So the City of Reno, the Police Department, City Hall, the casinos, they're cutting off their nose to spite their face because of this, "I want my little piece of the world and my piece of the world." They're not building up the businesses in this town. That's my opinion.

No, that's why we're here. So do you think that this information could potentially help the city or transportation commission in making any future decisions?

It could if they wanted to listen. That sounds so negative, but I think if you are going to really help this area, the only thing I could really say is if you want to keep your business and the doors open and your business prosperous, prospering in here—downtown, Fourth Street or anything else—you've got to clean up by using some of the benefits that you have to help benefit everybody. Yeah, it benefitted me to work down there. I'm not saying that—I'm saying that you have people who are willing to come in and help clean up, not just tear up the street and rebuild the street for you. I'm talking about people who are willing to come in, and the casinos were paying for different people to go down there and sweep up trash and they were cleaning that place up. The City of Reno said, "Oh, we got to cut those guys."

That's part of what makes going to a place desirable.

Clean streets.

Clean streets, nice streets, accessibility.

Not being bugged by “street urchins,” as I call them, the transient people who come through bumming money, the drunks laying there in the middle of the road. I mean, I got up in the morning—this is just one incident. I was walking, I came out, everything’s fine downtown. I’m walking downtown and hit Virginia Street and I start walking north. I get to where one of the pawn shops is down here, here is a drunk woman sitting like this, legs spread, passed out.

On the sidewalk?

On the sidewalk. Oh, my god. All right. So I call, and we get her up. I call and say, “Hey, I got one.”

“Okay,” and they come over and they start to pick her up, and I go around the corner and here’s another one passed out on Fourth Street on the same block, Fourth and Virginia, passed out. Got his pants down around his ankles. It’s Leonard. Leonard is an old-time drunk. Nice guy when he’s sober. When he’s drunk, he’s an ass, complete ass. So Leonard’s right there, he’s passed out.

Well, it turns out these two drunks got out of the hospital. They’d gone to the hospital for being so drunk, got out, escaped or whatever they did, went over, stole another bottle of booze and they shared it between them. They were blitzed. I guess they took both of them to the hospital to get checked. It’s like, oh, my god. Why do we look at people like this? Why do we have this on our streets? There should be somebody on graveyard. When you have people walking the beat, that’s what has helped a lot of New York City, I think. When you have people walking the beat and looking at things, the presence itself is making the difference. The casino owners and business owners downtown, as soon as we left downtown, guess what? The day after we left, all your bums and panhandlers, everything was downtown, downtown right away.

They said, “Get out of here.”

“Why? We don’t have to. There’s no cops down here anymore.” Well, they kicked us out of there in 2009.

I hadn’t been walking downtown recently until this year, and I was kind of surprised.

Oh, yeah, and the thing is that I don’t put anything past these people, and that’s my opinion. I don’t put anything past them.

I think that’s a good way to conclude for now.

That’s all right. That’s good.

Thank you for your time on this.

No problem.

GEORGE FLINT

Owner, Chapel of the Bells



George Flint in his office inside Chapel of the Bells in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

An ordained minister, George Flint grew up in southern California and moved to Reno after completing divinity school. In 1961, he founded the Chapel of the Bells at 540 West 4th Street, and four years later, moved the business into a converted home at 700 West 4th Street. He discusses Reno's wedding chapel industry and the changes he has witnessed through more than fifty years in the business.

Will von Tagen: I'm here today with George Flint, the owner of Chapel of the Bells on West Fourth

Street. We're presently in Chapel of the Bells, and today is April 4, 2012.

First off, George, do I have permission to record you right now for the public archive?

George Flint: Absolutely.

Great. George, can you tell me, when were you born?

George Flint: I was born on April 12, 1934, which means I'm about eight days short of being seventy-eight.

Where were you born?

In southern California at the port of Los Angeles, which is called San Pedro.

What stands out to you in your childhood?

Well, I don't know how to answer that. I spent my first nine or ten years living in southern California. Then my parents relocated to Wyoming during the Second World War to be near some of their Japanese friends who had been relocated there in the holding or concentration camps that the federal government saw fit to move them into during the war.

Then after the war we stayed in Wyoming and I finished seven years of public schooling there. I had a good growing-up, and the highlight of my years toward the end were that I was an accomplished sports writer for the particular high school I attended. It went beyond that in that my work was accepted enough in the state of Wyoming that I became a kind of a runner for several of the newspapers, the larger papers in Wyoming. I turned down a full-bore four-year scholarship to go to the University of Wyoming and study journalism to follow my parents' wishes for me. That was to study religion. Do I have regrets sometimes? Yes, but you can't look back.

What was it about religion that interested your parents?

Oh, my parents were both fanatical religionists, as their parents were before them. When I say fanatical religionists, they were Pentecostal religionists, very devout; they would go to church every day of the week, almost. They were from that era of the early-day fundamentalists, where almost anything that was fun was sinful. As a kid, I wasn't allowed to go to dances or go to the motion picture theater. I never smoked and I don't to this day, never had a problem, because if I'd have come home with cigarettes, I'd have probably had my arm cut off.

They were just very, very strict fundamental Christians. I don't think there are very many today who fall into that category, because religion, as so many things, evolves up and down. The same people then from churches like the Assembly of God Church, who were so fanatical in their behavior, they have almost done a 180-degree turn today. What was terribly sinful and wrong when I was a teenager is accepted by those same people or their offspring and their children and grandchildren as being perfectly okay.

I didn't grow up with a lot of appreciation toward the church because of the fact that it was rammed down my throat, both my sister and I—it's just two siblings—it was rammed down our throat to

the place that you almost develop a negative attitude where you want to go the other direction.

Being a preacher's kid—and that's what I was because my parents were ministers—I looked at other preachers' kids and there was generally a revolt among preachers' children because of this sort of thing. A lot of them—they called them PKs or preachers' kids—absolutely turned their backs on the church and anything religious. I never did, really. I always maintained a faith and a belief, but I never harbored the same fanaticism that my parents did.

As I look back, it was terribly severe. I'd sneak off on occasion and go to the movies, and when I came out of the theater, I had to look both ways to be damn sure that my parents didn't happen to be driving down the street, this sort of thing. When *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* came out, I think I was in second grade, about 1940, and the school—we were still in California—was invited to a free matinee in the local town theater showing of that motion picture. We had to bring a signed slip from home. Well, my parents said that it was God's will that I would not go to such a sinful thing and, as a result, out of the 360 kids in school, I was the only one not allowed to go to the movie. In fact, they had to keep a teacher back at the school to babysit me while everybody else was at the motion picture theater. So that kind of shows you the extremism that I was subjected to in my youthful years.

As a result, I have to be candid with you and tell you that I never appreciated my parents very much. Their whole life was their church, and I could hardly wait to get away from that. Yet I followed their wishes and I went to three different divinity schools, and finished my schooling in 1956, but I was never called, in my own mind, to go into the ministry. Yet having this wedding chapel, in a sense, would probably have never happened if I hadn't have had that religious background, because the government officials were very, very strict when I started fifty years ago that unless you had a ministerial background and were active in some sort of a ministry effort, you couldn't officiate and perform weddings.

So one thing led to another, and here I am today, fifty years later, but I'm one of the few wedding chapel operators today, either in [Las] Vegas or Reno, who really comes from a trained divinity or religious background. Most of them are people that just got into the business because they thought it was a nice business to get into, and most chapels hire other ministers to come and do the weddings. I've always been able to do my own.

Did you have any significant childhood or adolescent romances?

There were some girls I enjoyed, from maybe even the seventh grade through high school, but I never dated, mainly because of the fact that I wasn't allowed to do those things. For example, I couldn't go to the junior-senior prom in high school. I went to a junior high dance one time with a girl named Berdina Butler, who I was rather fond of. My father got word of the fact that I was at that dance, and he came in and yanked me off the dance floor, leaving Berdina standing there helpless by herself. He took me home and took a belt and beat me so bad that I thought I might not be able to walk for a week. If he'd have treated me today like he did then, he probably would have gone to prison for child abuse.

There were other girls that I was fond of, but I never developed any real attachments, mainly because I realized that I couldn't offer the benefits that most young ladies want as far as dating and that sort of thing. When I did go off to seminary, I got involved with a young lady who was also a student there, and we married a year after high school and had four children. So that area where most kids date is pretty much a void in my formative years.

What were your friendships like?

Oh, I had some good friendships. In Wyoming, a lot of fellows banded together in hunting, big-game hunting, that sort of thing. Also because of my background in sports journalism, I was accepted and I was part of every traveling athletic squad from that high school, almost an extension of the coach. So I had some good friendships.

In fact, I was talking to a gentleman today who I finished high school with, and that was sixty years ago. I still have contact with five or six, maybe seven kids I graduated with, and there were only about forty in our class. So I think that's kind of unique in that there were friendships created in grades seven through twelve that have lasted sixty and more years.

How exactly did you get involved with sports journalism writing?

It wasn't my idea. The little school I went to, which was about 220 kids, always had a handpicked student who wasn't active in athletics, as far as being an athlete, to work with the athletic director who coached most of the various sports, and this person almost became an extension of the coach and did all the statistical work and all of the sports coverage not only for the two local papers, but for the big city papers in Casper and Cheyenne.

Early on, late in my sophomore year, Floyd Hart, who was the athletic director, came to me and said, "Flint, I'd like you to take over," he named the other person that was graduating, "I'd like you to take over that job." Candidly, I didn't know anything about what I was doing, but I learned pretty fast.

I am proud of the fact that I developed a pretty good name for myself in the state—it's a small state, of course—in that there were times that the *Tribune* and *Eagle* in Cheyenne, and the *Morning Star* in Casper actually retained me, as a high school kid, to cover athletic events for them when they didn't have staff to send. I was the only high school student among all the professional journalists who had access to the press boxes both at the football and basketball games at the university in Laramie.

Do you have any regrets that you didn't continue in that field?

Of course, but you can't really build on those regrets because my life has been good. I've had fifty years in Reno that have been very interesting and very fulfilling, and had I gone that direction, I wouldn't have had the same family I have today. I wouldn't have the same kids. I think it would be disrespectful for them to say that I regret the fact that I did what I did and that they came into the world and so on. In reality, you have regrets and yet you don't have regrets that are haunting or that bother you on a day-to-day basis.

I've looked at other people. Curt Gowdy was a recognized sports journalist who reached the ultimate in television coverage and television reporting, and he came from Wyoming. I probably could have gone a long ways in that endeavor, but I long ago set aside any what you would call real regrets.

Can you tell me about the first time you saw Reno?

Oh, I can't, because I was very small. My parents would travel back and forth to see family in Idaho when I was very small and would come through Reno, and then during my grades six through twelve we came through Reno. A lot of times we drove through at night and I was probably asleep in the back seat.

The first time I really remember Reno was when I came here in the summer of 1961. I came here on a visit, or it was on the tail end of a vacation, and the reason why my wife and I detoured from Sacramento going home to Oregon was the fact that my sister lived in Reno, and I was told she worked in a wedding chapel. So I said to my then-wife, that was my first wife, "We've got the time. Let's drive over to Reno and visit Virginia," my sister.

I was impressed with Reno. The Reno of fifty years ago was such a much more alive tourist destination than I find it today. If I have any regrets, it's the fact that Reno's gone downhill, particularly in the last thirty years, as a tourist destination.

But I was impressed with Reno, and when I arrived here and saw this little wedding chapel my sister worked in, which was out on West Fourth by the now Mi Casa Too restaurant, there was only the little wedding chapel she worked in and one other one, which was called the Park Chapel. They opened, I believe, in '55, and now we're talking about '61. And kind of the camera clicked or the machine meshed or whatever you want to say. I said to my wife, "You know, this would be good for us. I've got a background in ministerial endeavor and religious things. I've got a pretty solid background in photography." Because it was more than just an avocation to my father. He was an accomplished photographer, and I grew up being pretty efficient in that area, too. I said, "I think those two things would work together. It'd be fun to get into this business."

At the time, I was a religious education director in a church in Oregon, but I wasn't married to that job, and I was really making my living in sales, traveling. I thought it'd be fun to move to Reno and open another wedding chapel. I could see where we could improve on the two that existed in Reno already, and that's really how the whole thing fell into place that we moved here, and now we are almost starting our fifty-first year in business.

How much time had passed since you completed your seminary and you decided to open up?

About four years.

What do you remember being most fascinating to you, as far as the tourism industry in Reno at the time?

Well, when I came to Reno, I didn't have very much money, and what I had I borrowed, and I knew we weren't going to just overnight start making a return that would probably support us. So I applied for a job at Harrah's to basically pay the bills until the chapel became self-supporting. I think back to the summer of '62 when we opened for business, I was a change boy for fifteen bucks a day. Harrah's was so busy, Harolds Club was so busy, the Mapes was so busy, the Riverside was so busy that a lot of times you couldn't find a machine to play or a spot at a table to sit down and play Twenty-one. I was really amazed then as to how popular Reno was.

Now, about fifteen years later, Las Vegas began to really exploit itself with the big super resorts, the MGM and The Mirage and those sorts of operations, the real big places, and then along came the Indian casinos in California, and to some degree I think Reno just rolled over and said, "Well, we can't compete with the Indians. We sure as heck can't compete with Las Vegas. So we'd better just sit here and try to survive."

I think the two men who really made Reno a hot place as a tourist destination were the late William Harrah and also the late Harold Smith, Jr. They were both marvelous exploiters of our gaming industry. They were great entrepreneurs of running the business. They both did heavy advertising in the

Bay Area, and the people reacted positively and Reno swung. I mean, Reno really was an outstanding, blossoming, busy, weekend tourist destination city.

Now I see when I drive to Las Vegas, which I have to on business on occasion, I see more Oregon and Washington and Idaho cars between here and Vegas on the highway than I see Nevada cars, because I've come to the conclusion that most tourists now who really want to have a week's holiday in Nevada, will come from their home in Oregon or Washington or Idaho and they come to Reno for the first day, and they may walk across the street from the motel and play a little bit at the Silver Legacy or the Circus Circus, but for the most part, this is just a stopover. They drive on to Vegas for their week. Now, when they drive home, of course they have already spent all their money, so there's no use to stop in Reno at all.

But I'm very saddened about the general lack of promotional spirit in Reno. I said to our mayor, Bob Cashell, "Mayor, what are we going to do about this? This town is headed downhill fast." This was maybe seven, eight years ago, when he was first mayor.

He said, "Oh, George, don't bother me with this. I'm having too much fun being mayor." And it occurs to me, as I look at the City Council and the County Commission, that they have very little concern. They leave the promotion of Reno up to the Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber of Commerce leaves it up to the Visitors and Convention Authority, and the truth of the matter is, nobody really does much.

Now, I have to give John Ascuaga credit. John's done a damn good job for Sparks and to some degree for even northern Nevada. Of course, he's nearly ninety now. In a way he worked hand-in-glove with Harrah and Smith, and those three separate entities did a wonderful job of promoting this part of Nevada tourist-wise. But with the early death of Bill Harrah, I think he was only sixty-two, and then the Smiths sold out to the Hughes Corporation and basically folded their tent and left the area—they were all getting up in years, of course—there has been nobody that ever stepped in to fill their shoes.

I happen to know that the gentle lady who runs Circus Circus for the Mirage Company in Las Vegas, she can hardly go to the restroom—forgive my candidness—without checking with Las Vegas. One of the things I think is unique is that you look at Harrah's and you look at the Silver Legacy and you look at Circus Circus, and they really are extensions of Las Vegas resort interests. To some degree, at least, I've always felt that Vegas considers Reno its stepchild, and even though they have investments here, they're more inclined to say, "The harder we support Reno or promote Reno or attempt to develop Reno, it's just going to take away from our Las Vegas business."

To some degree, South Lake Tahoe suffers from that same problem in that all your South Lake Tahoe properties also have their parent companies in Las Vegas. I believe all of them do. If they make a profit out of northern Nevada, fine. If they don't, let's not worry about it. I think that's really where they're at.

I have more people who come in here to be married, who came to Reno twenty or thirty years ago when they were kids, and they say, "What's happened to Reno?" I took a set of pictures that I took to the legislature's last session of all the closed downtown core buildings that are businesses that are now closed up. All you've got to do is turn left at West Fourth at Virginia and go north toward the university, and you see motel after motel after motel that no longer exists.

At one point, we had twenty operating wedding chapels in Reno in the seventies and early eighties. Today there are actually only four operating stand-alone chapels in Reno. Some of the resorts, like Ascuaga's Nugget and the Atlantis and the Peppermill, do have in-house chapels, but they don't operate commercially like we do. They're there to serve their guests. They don't exploit their chapels. So we've shrunk, for all practical purposes, from about twenty wedding chapels down to four. That's

certainly understandable when you look at the fact that since 1978, which just coincidentally happens to be the year Mr. Harrah died, our wedding industry has shrunk from nearly 40,000 weddings a year to under 10,000 weddings a year.

At the same time, our local population has doubled, which really means that out of the 10,000 weddings that we may have this year if we're lucky, 30 to 35 percent of those weddings are locals. So we're down to the place now that instead of having 500 tourist weddings a week, we're lucky if we have 100 tourist weddings a week.

It isn't easy for me to maintain this chapel, now Reno's oldest wedding chapel. I was number three when I started. The rest of them all came after me, and most of them have died. But I worry that as I look around the town, as I listen to and I talk to politicians, that they're all concerned about the budget for firefighting, and they're all concerned about education and the tax base, etc., etc., but you hardly ever hear any of them talk about, "Let's try to bring the life, the tourist business back to Reno."

In fact, I've had old-time Reno people say to me, "Oh, the hell with tourism. Reno's a nice little city. We can get along without the tourists."

So would you say it's more the mindset of Reno or the mindset of outside America that has contributed to the decline?

Oh, I don't think the mindset of America is nearly as backwards as what I see as far as Reno goes. I took my wife on our last anniversary to Harrah's Steakhouse last November. Harrah's Steakhouse has always been among the finest restaurants in the state of Nevada. I was embarrassed for the restaurant that night by how bad the food was, how bad the service was, how generally unconcerned the staff was. I didn't make a big issue out of it but I said a couple thing to the maitre d'. He said, "Well, it's an off night and we're short of help."

Our association that I represent, the Nevada Brothel Owners, had a one-day association meeting down at Harrah's about three years ago. They gave us this big lovely room, and I said, "If Mr. Harrah was here, he'd have a stroke." The Formica on the tables was cracked, the carpet wasn't clean, it was torn. Nobody seems to have any real motivation.

Now, let's talk about Fourth Street. Fourth Street is a disgrace today. I mean, you've got businesses closed. You've got businesses sitting empty that have been for years. Prostitution, the illegal prostitution on East and West Fourth Street is runaway, and, candidly, this only probably helps the Atlantis and the Peppermill in that this used to be the main feeder line into Reno prior to the freeway, and now it's the street that most people, for all practical purposes, would rather stay away from.

Is this the original site of your wedding chapel?

No, this is not the original site. The original site was half a block further east in a little frame building, which is a little Victorian house probably built around the turn of the century, in 1890, 1910, somewhere along in there. At the time that I was looking for a spot in Reno, it was a dry cleaner pick-up station. I saw a sign that said "Victor Cleaners." Now, that building was operated by another wedding chapel operator after I left there, and I had both places running for a while because I didn't leave that building until 1979.

Some Oriental interests, a Chinese family, bought that property, including that little house. If you drive down there, you'll notice about half of it's been torn down and cut away. I think they had plans to

develop an Oriental market there and a restaurant, and the economy apparently interfered with that, because I see nothing's been accomplished. That little building's just sitting there decaying. But that was my original spot in Reno.



Chapel of the Bells at 700 West Fourth Street opened in 1965. Photo courtesy of Mella Rothwell Harmon.

That was also on Fourth Street?

Right. It was 540 West Fourth. This is 700. When I came to Reno, I parked right across from what was then the Travelodge. Now it's called the Desert Rose Inn. I parked alongside the street. In those days, they had parking on the street, not parallel but horizontal or whatever you call it. I looked at this building. I walked up to this corner and I thought, wow, would that building make a great wedding chapel. At that time, it was still red brick, hadn't been painted white, and a family lived in it. It was their home. There were a lot of homes and a lot of residences still being used then as residential properties.

Ironically, four years later I had a chance to buy the building, and by that time I could afford to, although I had also opened a wedding chapel in Las Vegas. So suddenly I found myself with a little spot here at 540 West Fourth, had a business in Vegas, and I still thought, wow, this would be the winner of all wedding chapels. I had to come up with \$10,000 for the down payment on it, that's what they wanted, and when I handed them the \$10,000, I had to find about eight more dollars in my sock, as it were, because it took every cent I had just to meet the down payment.

But we've had this building now since 1965, and I think we'll probably stay here several more years. We'll survive, in spite of the fact that weddings are off as badly as they are, mainly because the wedding industry's no longer feeding thirteen to eighteen wedding chapels; it's only feeding four. We're not making very much money at the moment, but I have some hopes that there will be people elected to the commission and the City Council that will have some interest or some motivation or some desire to do something special with Reno.

I've suggested to people that what we probably ought to do is duplicate what they have in Truckee, maybe even put in wooden sidewalks downtown and Western bands, and just get maybe even a little on the hokey side. That would certainly be an improvement from what you have downtown now, where you have store after store after store, particularly that area between the railroad trench and the Riverside Hotel or what was then the Riverside Hotel. You've got that entire west side of Virginia Street for about a block and a half, two blocks, where in fact, that have little, if any, current commercial occupancy.

So I won't say I'm depressed about the core of Reno, but I will say I'm saddened by it, because it bothers me that nobody seems to really have any sort of long-term goals or dreams to revitalize it. Now, we have this Redevelopment Authority, and they've done a nice job with the Riverwalk and developing the Truckee and so on, but that's pretty much for the local people. That isn't a tourist draw.

I've got some kids, part of the family, who live in Idaho and they grew up in Reno, and they refuse to come visit me anymore because they say Reno's so crappy-looking. It saddens me.

Now, we've hired a new director of the RSCVA, the Convention Visitors Authority, and he's here from Detroit, which is a tough town, and he has proposed a new advertising agenda on something like a million and a half dollars, and most of it is signboards and that sort of thing. He may get people to come back to Reno, but when they get here and see the way the town looks and so on, it may, in fact, even drive them more permanently away.

I had a lady call me on a business-related matter five, six years ago, and in the conversation I said, "Where are you?" And she told me she was in San Pablo, California. Well, that's on the east side of the Bay just north of Oakland. I said, "Are you a family person?"

She said, "Yes, we have teenage kids."

I said, "Do you come to Reno and visit?"

She said, "Funny thing you should ask me that." She said, "Reno was our favorite place to go until Reno went bankrupt."

I said, "What?"

She repeated it and used the word "bankrupt" again. I said, "Reno's not bankrupt."

She said, "Don't tell me that." She said, "Harolds Club is gone, the Onslow's gone, the Mapes is gone, the Kings Inn is gone." She named every single closed major property in the core of Reno. She said, "They're defunct. They no longer exist." And she said, "As a result, it depresses us to go to Reno."

Sure, if you go to the Silver Legacy and you never leave the building, you're going to be okay, basically, but people like to move about here, there, and yonder. I think the Eldorado should almost be ashamed of themselves for the fact that their greed—and this is my personal perspective—their greed has been to keep their own personal clients so entombed in the Eldorado and the Silver Legacy that they don't want to go anywhere else in town. To some degree, I blame the Carano family for a certain mentality that has helped literally shrink downtown Reno to where it is right now.

If you were to walk a ways down Fourth Street in the sixties when you first arrived, and then turn around

and come back and walk back in today's times, what sort of perceptions might you see and emotions might you feel?

Well, of course, the Sundowner is the biggest property on Fourth Street that didn't make it, and they hung in there for about fifteen or twenty years and finally threw the towel in. But I would say the biggest perception that's depressing to me is that both on East and West Fourth you used to have your choice of maybe twenty to twenty-five first-class, fairly high-end motel properties. A lot of them had cocktail lounges, and some of them had small casinos. For all practical purposes today, I can't count five really outstanding motels on East or West Fourth. I don't think there are any on East Fourth, and there's only a couple left on West Fourth.

The Travelodge, which is now the Desert Rose Motel, was in business when we came to Reno in 1951, and it didn't lose or give up its Travelodge franchise until about five years ago. Business is so bad there, they don't even keep their office open in the evening for travelers to rent rooms. I notice when I go home at five or five-thirty their office is already closed, and says it will open at nine a.m.

So people have kind of given up on Fourth Street, and I think it's even worse on East Fourth than it is on West Fourth. But there isn't much on West Fourth right now to write home about either. You've got to stop and realize also that one of the nicest motels we had in Reno was at Sierra and West Fourth; it was the Daniel's Motor Lodge. The Eldorado bought that and tore it down for parking.

The big properties that are close to Fourth Street, the Eldorado and the Silver Legacy and to some degree the Circus Circus, they have used Fourth Street for things like parking, and they haven't kept any degree of sensitivity as to seeing that West Fourth Street or East Fourth Street survive as viable commercial properties. I don't know what the tax base is as it relates to what it brought in then and what it brings in now, but just between here and the six blocks back to Virginia Street, on West Fourth where we're at at the moment, there are at least seven or eight empty sizable vacant lots or the same size with a closed structure on them.

You have to realize that before the freeway—and the freeway came through about 1970 or '71—before the freeway, everybody coming into Reno from the west came through West Fourth, and that's why I immediately looked at West Fourth when I came to Reno fifty years ago for location, because West Fourth was the feeder into Reno, and, of course, now that is no longer the case, even though some people pull off way out on West Fourth, three miles out, or at the Keystone exit or even to some degree at the Virginia exit. But once the freeway came through, that obviously didn't help. To some degree also, the big properties that I've already mentioned several times were wonderful for Reno, but they were also the downfall and the death blow to a lot of the motel properties.

I could just say simply that there's a lot of nostalgia left with me inasmuch as I remember a West Fourth Street that was vibrant and alive. I will give credit to a few properties, like the Gold Dust West across the street. They've bucked quite a trend in developing and building that casino property. It used to be a couple of strip malls or a strip mall and a small motel called the Wood Motel, right across the street from us. They've done quite well, but they cater, 90 percent or more, to the locals. They're not a tourist draw.

Other than the Gold Dust West and the Gold 'N Silver Coffee Shop next door and this particular building, about the only other viable businesses from here to Virginia Street are really the north side of the Sands, which comes up to Fourth Street, and to some degree the Bonanza, or the Comstock, I think it is, which is still a pretty nice motel. But we're not too far from ghost-town status.

You said to me earlier when we were talking, that at night this particular business, the Chapel of

the Bells, stands out really nicely. It's white and it lights up nice at night, it's well lit and it's still somewhat of a draw.

I have to add this, too. The type of clientele that comes to Reno, I hate to say this but it's true, is a whole different clientele than those who get their MasterCard out and fly to Vegas. The clientele we get is the low end of the earning scale. Our weddings come from Susanville and Redding and Roseville and, to some degree, Sacramento, and I feel badly for so many couples. I've had couples come in here that I wanted to buy them a tank of gas because they hardly had the money to get home on. I did a wedding yesterday, and the couple started to leave me a two-dollar tip, and she said, "We better keep that two dollars, honey. We may need it to get home on." I think Reno still draws that financial level of tourist only because they don't have the bucks and the financial ability to really go to Sin City, or Las Vegas.

What are your thoughts about some of the newer tenants and business owners on East Fourth Street? We've got the folks at Lincoln Lounge and the Reno Bike Project. What are your thoughts about those folks?

Well, I think that you've got some people on East Fourth who are trying real hard. The young guys who bought Louis' Basque Corner are trying to carry on a tradition that Louis and his wife started about thirty years ago. The Lincoln Lounge, that particular business per se, has existed for quite a while under various ownerships and so on. But there's certainly nothing on East Fourth for the tourists.

Now, my son works as a bartender and kind of an assistant manager at the Halfway Club, which is just about halfway between Virginia Street and Sparks, and it is an Italian restaurant that's been continually in business since 1937, but their business is almost 100 percent locals, and even when we have big weekends like Hot August Night and the Air Races, etc., my son tells me they never see any tourists. There's nothing that really any business on East Fourth can do now, other than to survive off the locals who live in the immediate area or at least live in the Reno-Sparks area.

Another thing I want to say is that almost all the motel properties that are left, particularly on East Fourth, are strictly weeklies and monthlies now, and the few motels that are between me and downtown, this seven-block area, they're advertising weeklies too. None of these motels are successful right now as far as being overnight or vacation motels or one- or two-night stays. They just aren't.

This particular motel right next door to us has a terrible reputation. It's a drug den, and there's not a day goes by, literally, that I don't see the REMSA service or the Reno P.D. or the Fire Department over there hauling people out, drug busts. In so many ways, West Fourth Street's become almost a toilet of Reno activity.

I've even asked myself recently, do I really want to continue to operate Chapel of the Bells at West Fourth? Now, at my age, and I'm just two years short of eighty, at my age I'll probably stay here and continue with the West Fourth location, mainly because I have two granddaughters and two daughters and a son-in-law who are my major help who are on my payroll here. So I think it's our family intention to try to keep this a viable investment, but we would be a lot smarter to be downtown in a location and probably in an empty store building on Virginia Street.

The other wedding chapel that does the most business in Reno right now is the Arch of Reno Wedding Chapel, which is down between First and Second on Virginia. They're ensconced in there with a tattoo parlor on one side and a liquor store on the other, and yet they do pretty good business because they're in the center of Reno. Yet they tell me—and we're pretty good friends back and forth—they tell me that their biggest problem where they are there on Virginia Street is that particularly when the door

closes at night and they go home at ten-thirty, they wake up in the morning and it's obvious that people have been sleeping in the doorway and urinating on their glass and their doorway and so on. It's just a sad state of affairs.

What bothers me more than anything else is I don't think any of this had to happen. We just didn't have any entrepreneurial spirit to carry on once the Harrahs and the Smiths, the Harolds Club people and Mr. Harrah, passed on. The downhill for Fourth Street and the core of the city almost started with their demise. In fact, if you look at the wedding business, the last really great year we had was the same year Mr. Harrah passed away, and we've had a downhill shrinkage each year in the marriage industry without exception since that year, 1978.

Absolute best-case scenario, what might Reno look like in ten years, and what would it take to get it there in absolute best of circumstances?

What would be the best-case scenario? Well, first of all, it's not going to happen unless somebody is motivated to come in here with an entrepreneurial, exploitive, aggressive attitude. Now, at one point in time, there was conversation—this was a bunch of years back—about Donald Trump doing something in Reno, possibly even on West Fourth. There was even some conversation about him buying the Gold 'N Silver Coffee Shop next door and maybe even this whole square block, which would have probably included this property.

I have to say this, and I don't say it with any sarcasm, but Dave Aiazzi, who's been sitting on the City Council for twelve years and I think has termed-out now, he's more concerned with bike paths down West Fourth Street so the bicycles have their own lane to peddle through than he is with how many tourists come in here and spend much money.

We had a case of a couple who got married here about three years ago, and it happened to be Air Race weekend. They innocently called the Chamber of Commerce for the names of two or three motels or hotels, and the lady at the Chamber of Commerce said, "Oh, for god's sakes, don't come to Reno this weekend. It's full because of the Air Races." That very weekend the Silver Legacy had a 30 percent occupancy. So there's an intelligence lacking, and that's what bothers me.

Now, the best-case scenario is for the mayor and the RSCVA and the redevelopment people to have a series of seminars and meetings with people like me who have been here for a long time, and pull all our heads together and say, "What could we together do to entice a rebuilding of the core of Reno, including Fourth Street?"

Now, Cabela's, out near Verdi, they got a STAR bond loan. There's also a STAR bond loan associated with Scheel's in Sparks. There's no reason in the world that we couldn't probably successfully put together a really nice development. It might be kind of like a Western-themed town right within the Fourth Street corridor, something like a downtown Truckee.

I think it's coming up on almost being too late to do it, but I think it still could be done. But I don't hear anybody saying, "Let's do it." Like I said, and I don't mean to badmouth my good friend Bob Cashell, but whenever I've talked to him, and I've mentioned West Fourth Street to him several times, he always kind of pats me on the tush and says, "George, it's all going to be okay."

But I don't think Reno would have ever been what Reno was if there hadn't been people like Harrah and Ascuaga and the Smith family. There were some others like Conrad Priess and the old man Fitzgerald. They built Reno and they promoted Reno, and they made Reno a place where people won, drinks were nearly free, food was very inexpensive, and I think to have the best-case scenario that you

just asked me about, we've almost got to go back to that kind of a mentality. Get people here, get some whiskey in them, get them fed cheaply, and then they're going to want to go out in the casino and play. Now we expect people to come here and stone sober go to the tables and play. Well, it doesn't work that way.

The biggest single thing that's sad to me is that Nevada—Vegas and Reno both—were built on high-end entertainment that didn't cost anything. All you had to do was make a reservation, go to dinner, buy the dinner, buy a few drinks, and you got to see Dolly Parton or Bill Cosby or whoever, Liberace, Nat King Cole, and you didn't pay anything for that. Now they expect people to come from California and pay \$75 to \$100 just to get in to see Bill Cosby. That means that a couple in Redding, California, who wants to come and see Bill Cosby, the wife and the gentleman and his mom, it's \$300 just to get in the door. Well, that's not what built Nevada. What we did was we got people here for nothing, and got them happy and relaxed, and then we made money off of them by making them want to gamble.

Another thing I don't see any more is this: it used to be that you'd see photograph after photograph after photograph in the San Francisco papers about people who had hit it big on the slots or on gaming in Reno. The *Sacramento Bee* used to carry all kinds of these advertisements for winners in Reno, and none of that is seen anymore. Now, I notice Ascuaga still does it in the local paper and he still does it to some degree on television, but in reality, almost exclusively the winners are local people because we just don't get that firm, strong, solid tourist base that was the backbone of our industry, of our community for so long.

It doesn't take much imagination as you go to places like the Bonanza out on North Virginia or even downtown at properties in south Reno like the Peppermill, to see that a huge percentage of the clientele are locals. Since we have almost half a million people living here, the locals can carry tourism to some degree or the gaming industry to some degree.

I don't know that I certainly have any particular pattern or recipe. I do know that when we started out in business here, the people who ran the Riverside Hotel then, they came out to see us and they gave us certificates to give every single couple a bottle of champagne, free. All they had to do was visit the casino at the Riverside. And that sort of mentality really did work. Today it's just the opposite. My son-in-law took his girlfriend out the other day to one of the high-end properties in town here and ordered two Coke and whiskeys, and they were small glasses and they were mostly ice, and the two drinks were \$18. Now, come on, already. The couple in Susanville, California, or Redding or Alturas aren't going to drive to Reno to pay \$18 for two drinks, and that's what we seem to be expecting them to do.

Now, to a great degree, if it wasn't for our convention business, I don't know if we'd even be alive today. I hear now that one of the things they're planning for this summer is at the corner of Commercial Row and Virginia Street, they're going to turn about a block of Virginia Street into a bowling alley. Well, you know, that's terribly questionable, from my perspective. They do it every year. They close the streets for Hot August Nights. They close the streets for the Air Races. They close the streets on the weekends for so many things, and all it does is cripple getting around downtown. I've had motel operators tell me for years that they hate those big weekend celebrations, because once they close Virginia Street, and to some degree they always seem to end up closing it right at Fourth Street, people are so confused as to where to go.

This is an example of it. We have brochures in the courthouse for inexpensive weddings, and there's a map on the back of that brochure, how to get to the chapel. We even highlight the way, and during times when Virginia Street's closed, we highlight coming up Arlington rather than Virginia Street

because they can't get through Virginia Street. Just like you can't get through Virginia Street right now north of West Fourth because of the repairs.

Almost without exception, and I don't know what it is, but people look at that map and instead of driving west, they drive east. I have more people calling me sitting out in front of the Nugget in Sparks saying, "We've driven all of Fourth Street and never did find your wedding chapel." That certainly underscores the fact that it's very easy to confuse the tourist, particularly when you start blockading streets for these high-end promotions. It doesn't have any huge negative impact on the Silver Legacy or the Circus Circus or the Eldorado.

On the other hand, the condition of things in Reno right now are such that it isn't just the Chapel of the Bells that's hurting or some of these motels that have closed their door, and they just tore the Shamrock completely down the other day off East Fourth. Look at the problems the Silver Legacy is having. They've got a note due that's almost \$150 million, and they've been getting a stall or a postponement on that for about three months now, and supposedly they've got till April 30th to come up with some new program.

But when that hotel was built, what, twenty, twenty-five years ago, it was never in anybody's wildest imagination twenty-five years later going to be facing possible foreclosure themselves. So there's the biggest property in Reno, except for the Grand Sierra out by the airport, the biggest single tourist property in Reno is on the verge of bankruptcy and may be forced to close. I think it's a \$142 million obligation that they can't meet.

The RTC has invested some interest in expanding their routes on Fourth Street, the Fourth Street corridor. What do you see as some of the greatest transportation needs on Fourth Street?

I don't know how to answer that candidly, because I'm not exactly sure what you're really asking me. We've got a good bus service. They stop out here fifteen times a day on this corner, and you mentioned it when we were talking before you turned on your recorder. But I don't really know what the concern is related to transportation. I don't think that has really much to do with the tourism factor. Now, maybe on the other hand, maybe the Visitor Convention Authority has some sort of thinking in their mind that if there was better transportation there'd be more tourists moving about.

I think it's pathetic that for people who come to Reno who stay in the downtown corridor, whether they stay at Harrah's or stay at Silver Legacy, for them to go shopping while they're in Reno is a six-mile drive out to Meadowood Mall. In reality, a lot of people don't come here just to gamble. Yeah, Dad will play poker or blackjack or whatever, but Mom and the kids get tired of the acts at Circus Circus after a while, and a lot of people really do enjoy going shopping. Shopping for people staying in the core of Reno is almost a fifteen-mile roundtrip out to Meadowood Mall and back, and, by the way, a cab drive each way is about \$25.

So one of the things that might be a huge plus for Fourth Street and the core of Reno would be something like the Gray Reid's Department Store that operated here for many years, and they were a good store. They were engulfed by Circus Circus. They were in that property at one point. But we need some really quality family shopping opportunities for people still right within downtown, not six miles or seven miles away south, down South Virginia Street to get out to Meadowood Mall.

I think the closure of the other shopping center, Park Lane—it was only three miles out instead of six—tearing that completely apart, was a mistake. Originally they tore it down because there were proposals to develop a big casino and resort property there which never came to fruition, but that's

another thing.

We've had so many people who get married here who say, "Where can we go shopping? There's no shopping in Reno," because nobody has told them we do have a nice shopping center out at Meadowood Mall, but, as I said, it's a \$20 cab ride each way.

I'm sitting here being pretty negative with you, I realize, but my biggest negativity isn't so much what we do or don't have, my biggest negativity, as it relates to principally Fourth Street, is that it doesn't seem to me that anybody gives a damn or has any sort of motivation or vision at all to do anything to recreate, at least to some degree, what Fourth Street once was.

Fourth Street once was the main feeder into Reno right out here about six or eight blocks going west. You had that beautiful log cabin motel; I can't remember the exact name of it now. It was a popular destination place. All the little units were like miniature log cabins. Well, here about ten years ago they tore it all out, and it's been sitting there vacant ever since. So we've got a lot of vacant land. Some of the people, like Donald Trump, who had looked at it and shook their heads and gone the other way, nobody, I guess, sees a whole lot of potential, and that's kind of sad.

Would you like to see parking changed in any way?

I don't think so. I don't think parking change is going to change a damn thing.

What about issues for pedestrians or bicycles, such as wider sidewalks, or additions of bike lanes?

Well, those kinds of things can come after you start seeing people come. I've got to tell you that one Saturday I was in San Francisco, and my wife and I went down to Fisherman's Wharf. It wasn't even a particularly nice day, and Reno was in the doldrums that weekend because the weather wasn't very good. We could hardly walk around Fisherman's Wharf because the sidewalks—and they have twelve-foot sidewalks all around there—were so full of people that you could hardly move about, which brings up another point.

I think, and I've got to say it, I think some of the fallacy of promoting Nevada and northern Nevada as the ultimate great destination opportunity is very short-sighted, when you realize that the people who live in California have the Redwoods and Yosemite National Park and Sequoia National Park and San Francisco, which is one of the most unique cities in the world, and Fisherman's Wharf, which by itself is a huge draw. We want these people to come over and see what we have, when, in reality, they have a lot more to offer than we do. Now, we did have the casinos. We did have a corner on that until the Indians started building their casinos, and I think there are now casinos as close as ten and fifteen miles from San Francisco on Indian land.

I respect what you ask me about parking and things like sidewalk improvement and so on, but those things you do when you start seeing the people come back. But just to have wider sidewalks and maybe more parking, hell, you got enough parking right now. There are a couple of parking garages that are almost empty and nonexistent. Fitzgerald's is an example; their parking garage is a ghost town.

I just don't see those things—and I'm being a bit redundant, forgive me—I don't see those things being germane to making Reno hop and jump as it once did because I think until you entice people with some awfully good opportunities and some wonderful jackpot opportunities and that sort of thing, I don't think the size of the sidewalk or the crosswalk means much at all.

A friend of mine, not a close friend, but I know her well, won \$32 million at the Rail City Casino

in Sparks on the Megabucks machine about three years ago. Thirty-three million dollars she took over a twenty-five year period, so she gets like a million dollars a year after taxes. Yet two weeks after that happened, you didn't see one single advertisement about it. That's the kind of thing that makes people want to come to Reno.

I know this sounds a little corny, but you used to see in Vegas big, huge signs up the side of a hotel property saying "dollar drinks" and "50-cent shrimp cocktails." You've got to offer people unbelievable deals to make them want to come visit you. They'll appreciate those unbelievable deals and then they'll start gambling in your casino. But when you charge—and I'm being again redundant—when you charge fifteen to twenty bucks for two drinks, all of a sudden you're getting into people's gambling money, because all they're going to gamble in most cases is their extra or their disposable income. You can't take that all away from them and expect them to have anything left to play, and I think that's probably part of the problem that the Silver Legacy is facing. Their rooms are expensive, moderately speaking. They've got high-end restaurants that are expensive, and there isn't really any great motivation to go in there and gamble, and that's what they needed if they were going to survive financially.

Do you have any favorite or special memories about an experience on Fourth Street or in Reno?

Oh, nothing more than the fact that I can remember when it was real busy. But I've got to take you back forty-five years ago when I had my wedding chapel in Vegas. Even then, even then I would leave the strip in Vegas, drive out to the airport, take a plane to Reno, and head back to the wedding chapel here, and it always made me feel—I don't know whether I want to say nostalgic or depressed, that I just left a place where everything was hopping, and I got back to Reno where you could shoot a 30.06 rifle down the street and not hit anybody.

Reno was built—and I have a favorite story I've got to tell you—Reno was built with a whole different mentality than what built the success of Las Vegas. When I came to Reno and took the little place at 540 West Fourth, it was an antiquated old building. In '62 it was probably seventy-five years old or at least sixty-five years old. I applied for a business license and a Certificate of Occupancy, and for about thirty days the City of Reno harassed the dickens out of me. This wasn't right, that wasn't right, the furnace needed a different firewall around it. We needed a second bathroom. The wiring was antiquated. This wasn't quite up to code. I didn't think I'd *ever* get open.

Three years later I went to Vegas. By that time I had a few bucks in my jeans and a partner who'd come in from out of state who wanted to add some money to the pot. We were going to open a wedding chapel in Vegas, and we found a spot in a property just off the strip in a motel. We were going to lease three motel units, they were large units, and turn it into the Chapel of the Bells on the strip in Vegas. We were just about to sign the lease and I said to my partner, "Wait a minute. Let's go down to the Building Department and find out what their demand list is going to be."

"What do you mean 'demand list'?"

I said, "Well, when I came to Reno, I almost gave up before I got the right to open a business, because they were so nitpicky with me and so demanding."

He said, "I understand what you're saying."

So we went down to the Building Department and I got this little lady sitting down at a desk in the Las Vegas Business License Department, and I said to her, "Let me tell you what happened to me in Reno. I thought I'd better come talk to you first, because I don't know what you're going to demand of me from the standpoint of heating and air conditioning and parking, etc., etc. Why don't you give me a

litany of what your demands are going to be before I sign this lease.”

She said to me—and I was a young man then; I was about thirty—she said, “Listen, young man. We don’t do that. That’s not how we run things in Vegas. You sign that lease and do your best and go ahead and get opened, and we’ll come out sometime in the next three or four or five months and be sure everything’s in order. If it isn’t, we’ll help you bring it up to order.” Then she says, “And, by the way, would you like the mayor to come out for your grand opening?”

Now, that was the difference in the mentality that built Las Vegas compared to what built Reno. Yet because Fourth Street was that corridor that everybody had to come in through to come into Reno, it was only normal that the motels, the wedding chapels, the restaurants would do well, because every car coming into Reno was exposed to it.

I can’t be altogether critical of me and the other businesses, inasmuch as the freeway itself changed the complexion of Fourth Street to a great degree. When the freeway opened, our traffic just dried up overnight. So I got to figuring out, “Where they going? What are they up to? Where are people going? I guess they’re driving on down to Virginia Street and getting off.”

So I went up to Keystone and started watching the traffic patterns, and what happened was people were still getting off at Keystone, but there wasn’t anything that directed them to Fourth Street, so a lot of them were driving down to Second Street or clear down to First along the river and making a left turn to get into downtown Reno. At the time, at the corner of Fourth and Keystone, the Palace Club, which is another club that no longer exists—that’s part of the Harrah property now—the Palace Club had a great big huge signboard that just said “Palace Club Downtown Reno,” nicely lit.

I knew [Silvio] “Sil” Petricciani, who just passed away recently in his nineties, I knew him enough to call him. I called him and I said, “Mr. Petricciani, would you let me, at my expense, at the top of your sign, all along the top of that big sign, put a forty-foot by three-foot arrow that said turn left for downtown Reno here?”

He said, “Sure.” He said, “I’ll even call Young Sign Company and tell them to do it for you.”

I said, “No, I’ll pay for it.”

He said, “Ah, you’re just a young guy. Let me take care of it for you. What do you want it to say? Left turn for downtown Reno?”

Do you know when that sign went up, all of a sudden our traffic came back? Now, there was a motel that had a circus name, almost like Merry-Go-Round Inn. That wasn’t quite the name, but it was a circus-related name, and they opened up early in the year, like in February. That place sat empty for weeks, and it was embarrassing. Finally, I said to the manager of the place, “I’ll tell you what to do. Go to one of the car lots in town and rent or buy or borrow about six or eight cars that they don’t mind selling for next to nothing, and put them in the parking lot in front of various rooms.”

He said, “What’s that going to do?”

I said, “It’s going to draw the traffic in, and you’re going to be a success.” And he did it. I think he started out with five old cars he put in there, one here, one here, one here, and, you know, the damn motel started filling up every night. You’ve got to lead people. You’ve got to direct people. You’ve got to help people.

It doesn’t help either, as far as Fourth Street goes right now—and I’m just going to use the words crude as I can—the Travelodge, which is now the Desert Rose Inn, is the biggest whorehouse in Reno. The girls live in there and they’re working out of there. They’re picking up guys and taking them there. You think Mustang Ranch is a big operation. The biggest whorehouse in downtown Reno right now is the old Travelodge. Even up until they switched names and gave up the Travelodge franchise, it was still a

damn nice motel, even though it was about sixty years old. It'd been kept up really nice.

I sit here every Saturday and do my thing in between weddings, and I can see right through here, I can see the action on Fourth Street. About three Saturdays back, I counted seventeen street hookers get in and out of cars at this intersection. The police basically do a little raid or a little sting every now and then. I said to the mayor, I said, "Mayor, why don't you put some signs up about two on every block between here and downtown that say prostitution in the city of Reno is illegal and punishable both to the prostitute or the lady and the client?"

"Oh," he said, "George, that'd make a terrible image."

I said, "It wouldn't make as bad an image as what you got right now." We jokingly call them hooker lookers. There's a group of them. I'll bet there's about there's a thousand of them who routinely pick up girls on Fourth Street. There was one guy with a "Pyramid Lake" license plate in a light green Toyota, and I haven't seen him here for a few weeks, but he'd pick up three and four girls a week. He did it for years. It became almost a joke that he was the leader of the pack, as it were.

But you can talk about street crossings and sidewalk improvement and all that sort of thing. They did put in these new lights. You see the one right there? Above the stop sign? They put those in about five or six years ago, old-fashioned-appearing lamps, and that did kind of doll the street up. I'm inclined to think if they were to hang flower baskets like they do on South Virginia or on Virginia Street, if they were to hang flower baskets off those lights and maybe have some nice, well-maintained sitting areas like bus bench areas, I'm inclined to think it would be a plus and a positive for Fourth Street.

I said this already, but I'll say it again, where Fourth Street today is, is almost a natural happening when you turn the number-one feeder street into just another street by having the freeway come through and cut it off. So to some degree it was bound to happen. We would not survive on Fourth Street if it wasn't for our Internet visibility and our brochures in the courthouse, because 75 percent of our business comes off the Internet and our brochures and with some of the motel properties that work with us, and that wasn't the case fifty years ago. Fifty years ago, you could depend on the fact that just the traffic coming into Reno would pull a lot of business off Fourth Street into our parking lot.

We had one Fourth of July—I'll never forget it—it was about the first year this chapel was open Labor Day and we still had the one at 540 open Labor Day, and we did 168 weddings in these two properties on a weekend.

One hundred sixty-eight couples were married in the two properties on a weekend. Now we consider just with this property alone if we do twenty-five weddings on a weekend, we're tickled to death. But, of course, much of that is the fact that the market is terribly shrunk or smaller than what it was during those glory years.

Is there anything else you'd like to add that you felt you didn't get a chance to say?

No.

Well, thank you so much for sitting with me, George. It was wonderful hearing you talk.

Well, it's a bit bitchy, I realize. I think that this property, this corner, which I was offered about ten years ago a million dollars for, I don't know that I could sell this corner today for any more than 250,000, even with this nice building on it. Some of that's the economy. It's not just Fourth Street's evolution or backwards evolution.

I think the biggest single thing is that I don't see any monied interests that have any motivation to do much about either Fourth Street or really the core of Reno. Stop and think about the fact that one of the nicest motels in town is right smack dab across the street from the Silver Legacy, and it's the Thunderbird Motor Lodge. They have now put up a wrought iron fence there, and except on weekends they don't even keep the place open anymore. They lock the gate so you couldn't even pull in there if you wanted to.

Now, our tax base has been badly hurt by the shrinkage in gaming and other tourism-related matters, but because the population has increased during that thirty-year period of downturn, the property taxes and the other spending from instead of it being a county with 200,000 people, it's a county now of over 400,000, that's made up for much of it.

It kind of bothers me—and I do want to say this, and I like Governor Brian Sandoval a lot, we've been friends a long time—I admire the fact that they want to diversify our economy with other things than tourism, but every other city in the United States is trying to do that same damn thing. We had one advantage over all of them. We had a rip-roaring gambling destination, and yet we don't seem to have any motivation to reinvent that wheel or to re-exploit that one advantage. I mean, everybody's got a pretty place to go to. Everybody's got some plus. But we had an extra huge plus in that we had gaming available to northern Californians.

I think, to some degree it's a bit of a cop-out to blame it all on the Indians, because you know what? For years I've heard it said that we can't compete with Vegas, but, you know, we could've competed with the Indians. We haven't tried to. I don't know what the story is on the Indian casinos now. Some of them I think you still can't buy liquor in them, and a lot of them don't have destination facilities like rooms. I don't think they've ever really tried to feature entertainment at the level that Vegas and Reno did, and to some degree they haven't had to. Their very presence has worked for their general betterment. On another line, the Foxborough casino area in Massachusetts was one of the most successful Indian destinations for the last twenty-five or thirty years. Suddenly, their economy has collapsed. It used to be that every member of the tribe got a sizable monthly check, and that's been completely cut off. I think that's just the economy.

It's kind of sad in the fact that part of Reno's problem isn't our lack of vision or isn't the fact that we haven't had a Bill Harrah to promote Reno. A certain amount of what we have left and our lethargy, as far as exploiting the area, is directly tied to the economy. California has 10 percent of the country's population. Californians today are collecting one-third of all welfare monies from the federal level on down. So here we have a state with 10 percent of the total population of the United States, and yet they're getting one-third of all the welfare. That includes food stamps and everything else. So the economy has additionally been a huge slap in the face to us.

There's a motel on North Virginia that used to be called the Orleans and I think it's a Super 8 now. It's up there almost across from Lawlor Events Center. I pass that every morning and every night when I go home, and it almost makes me cry that most mornings when I come by at eight o'clock, and that's about an eighty-room motel, they're lucky if they've got six cars in the place.

Now, we've still got some things to offer, but we've got to get together and figure out how to make people want to come enjoy those, and one of the first things we have to do if they're going to enjoy it is to clean it up. It just looks like a real, unfortunately, not very attractive tourist destination.

Well, thank you so much.

PAUL GRAY

Dean of Students, Dilworth STEM Academy



Paul Gray at Dilworth STEM Academy in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

A native of Idaho, Paul Gray moved to Nevada as child for his father's teaching job. After graduating from Carson High School and the University of Nevada, Reno, Paul began his own teaching career at Reed High School, where he taught math, coached basketball, and eventually became Dean of Students. In 2011, he became Dean of Students at the Dilworth STEM Academy.

Paul Boone: I am here with Paul Gray, who is the Dean of Students at Dilworth Middle School. We are on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno, and today is Thursday, May 3, 2012.

Mr. Gray, do we have permission to record this interview and place it in our public archives?

Paul Gray: Yes, you do.

So why don't you tell me about your background.

I was born in Blackfoot, Idaho, and we lived in Aberdeen, Idaho, which is a small town in central Idaho. My dad was a schoolteacher, and I lived there for the first six years of my life. Then he got a teaching job in Douglas County here in Nevada and we moved to Gardnerville, and lived there for two years. My mom was working with the state school lunch program, and she had been commuting back and forth from Gardnerville to Carson. So they decided it was time for my dad to do the commuting and we moved to Carson City, where I essentially started school at third grade, and went all the way up through graduation in Carson, Carson High School.

After I graduated from Carson High School, I attended the community college for two years, one in Carson City and then the second year I spent at Western Nevada here in Reno.

I left school for a couple years and saved up some money to come back, went back to school here at UNR and graduated from UNR. After that, I got a teaching job that started at Reed High School. I spent pretty much my whole career there up until this past year and became the Dean of Students.

What did your dad teach?

My dad was a shop teacher, a vocational teacher. At that time he taught the metals classes, the woodworking classes, and the automotive classes. Douglas High School was a pretty small school at the time we moved to Gardnerville.

What was his teaching philosophy? What was his take on education? What did he hand down to you in that regard?

I think he just had a love for what he was doing and really enjoyed sharing that with kids and watching them grow. I think with the shop classes you see the growth. You can really see kids starting to learn skills. I think that's pretty much what he passed down. He had a love for sports. I had two older brothers. One was very successful in sports, and I followed him, so I played sports also.

What sports did you play?

I played football and basketball, played three years on the varsity basketball team at Carson and one year on the varsity football team.

What years were those?

From '74 to '76 were the years in basketball, and then just my senior year, football. I played in the lower levels and then decided not to play my junior year.

What were the coaches like that you grew up with? Do any of them stick out? You coached for a while, too. What did you glean from them as you were coming up?

I think you take something from all the different coaches, and some of them are things that you would prefer not to do and some of them are things that excited you as a player. The basketball coach I had was Tom Andreasen, and he was a person who instilled a lot of confidence, and I felt really comfortable and successful under him. I enjoyed playing basketball and football. It was more the hard-driving mentality, and maybe that wasn't me.

So what are some of the activities you got involved in as a young man and a teenager around Carson and Gardnerville?

Well, it was always something based around sports, like sandlot baseball, which relates to *The Sandlot* movie a little bit. You don't see that as much anymore. I think it's more organized activities and sports today than just pickup games where kids will get together and they'll carry a bat and a ball out and have some gloves, and they'll play with whatever number of guys they have.

It was always based around sports, from the Little Leagues to the Youth Leagues in basketball, flag football and football, and that's where my friendships came from. Those were the kids that I hung out with, other kids playing sports.

Through elementary, middle school, high school, what was school like for you as a young man? Were there teachers you remember from that time, and maybe why you remember them?

Different teachers for different reasons. There was a science teacher in seventh grade who really stood out. He was tough, but it seemed like I learned a lot, and he did some fun things, he had some fun activities. He tried to do a little more hands-on demonstrations than just teaching straight out of the book. I think one of the things that I remember is he had a live rattlesnake in his class in an aquarium, which I don't think any school district would probably allow today. But it was cool to see a live animal, and he showed how they responded, the sensory glands and those things. It was fun.

Since both your parents were involved as educators or part of the school system, did that change your perception of school or how did it impact your experience as a student?

I have three brothers, two older and one younger, and I'm actually the only one who went into education. My wife, who was my high school sweetheart, we started dating our sophomore year in high school and got married after her junior year in college, because I had left for a couple years. We got married and she finished up. She was an exceptional student. Then I went back and got my degree after she finished up. But we both went into education.

So the impact from my parents being educators is hard to say. I'm sure there's some impact there, but I think it was just the fact that my dad always enjoyed getting up and going to work and seemed to like what he was teaching. It wasn't until I had gone off to community college and done college myself and he was teaching a community college class in welding and I had taken that class, that I'd actually seen him as an instructor.

But, ironically, my oldest brother got the skills of the shop classes. He's really handy with his hands. He can build things, he can fix things, he can do all those things. I can't. That wasn't the direction I went in education. My direction was more in mathematics, and so after I got my degree, I became a

math teacher and followed coaching. So those two things were my love.

You've been around schools for quite a long time. When you were in high school in the seventies and in elementary school, middle school, in the sixties and seventies, what was it like then and what are some of the similarities, differences you see being a student and now being an educator?

That's interesting, because being the son of a teacher, I saw toward the end of my dad's career—and he was in his fifties when he retired, probably his late fifties—what I saw was he was feeling like the kids of that time, which wasn't too far off of where I was at in school—I was probably just graduated from high school about the time he was getting ready to retire—the thing that he was saying was, “The kids today don't have any respect.” Well, that was my generation of kids going through, and having had some friends who have retired from the school system that I've been a part of, that's what they say. “Oh, kids today don't have any respect.”

I think it's more you reach a point where you don't have those close connections with them. You're not watching the same movies, you're not listening to the same music, and you probably don't have those same connections with the kids. So it may feel that way, but I don't think that the kids today are less respectful. I feel like the percentage of kids today are the same. If it was 95 percent of the kids that were real good kids, had real strong values and respect, it's 95 percent today. But I think some of the schools are bigger, so you see more kids who struggle with some of those issues. There are times that they're trying to find themselves. Yeah, there could be some issues with respect at times.

Did you first move up to Reno for junior college? Is that when you first came up here?

Yes. The first year in college was junior college. It was all the Western Nevada Community College system at that time, and it's separated since then. It's now Truckee Meadows, and I think it's still Western Nevada out in Carson. I'm not sure. But I started at Western Nevada in Carson, and then the second year came to Reno and lived in Sparks in an apartment with some friends, and went to the community college there.

What were some of your first impressions of Reno, and what was it like when you first were up here as a young man and as a young married man too? You said you got married your junior year in college, right?

Right. It was much smaller. It's fun to see the changes that Reno's undergone over the years. I think probably during my lifetime the biggest change that I saw here in Reno was when—at that time I believe they called it MGM—it's called Grand Sierra Resort today, was built, and the number of jobs that that brought to the area, and then it brought about this growth with other casinos. So we started seeing Harrah's getting bigger and some of the downtown casinos getting bigger, and it wasn't too long after that you started seeing the Peppermill sprout up and Atlantis, and more of the casinos that are here today. It was very active and construction jobs were here. There was a lot of housing that was going up.

When I played basketball in high school, we played at the Centennial Coliseum, which is now the Convention Center across the street from the Atlantis, and that was the outskirts of town. You felt like you were arriving in Reno when you got to the Convention Center. There was the Magic Carpet golf course, which is a little further out. That was out of town.

At that time my wife was my girlfriend and we were in college, and something happened with my car and we'd ended up parking in that parking lot and had to walk back to use a phone. It was in the wintertime, so I don't think they were open at that time. We walked back and it seemed like we walked forever to get back to the Convention Center. So it's just that Reno has gotten much bigger than what it was at that time, and it grew so fast. Now it seems like it's leveled off a little bit. But those are probably some of the biggest changes.

What was Fourth Street like when you were a young man here? What was your impression of Fourth Street?

Well, that was how you got from Sparks to Reno. That was the main road and it was a little more lively then, I think. Now, some of the businesses have gone away—it's quiet.

What were some of the lively businesses there? Is that where you'd go out at night?

No, if we went out somewhere, we'd go to some of the places downtown, and some of those places that were favorites then are gone now. You look back on them with fond memories. And later when we got married, we liked to go to the Glory Hole. That was on Fourth Street headed west. It still is on the outskirts of town, but it's changed. I think it's Washoe today. So that's changed. And there was a hamburger place downtown not too far from the Pioneer, a little bit over toward Vassar Street, called Bailiwicks, a great place to get a hamburger. Loved to go there, and it's gone.

What were the hamburgers like there? What was that experience like?

It just seemed like it was a bigger hamburger. For me, being a big guy, that was always a good thing. The fries were fresh-cut fries, and nice juicy patty, big patty. It just seemed like it was a fun place to go. It wasn't a place where a college kid or right out of college would go all the time because it wasn't something you could afford all the time, but it was something, it was a nice treat to go to Bailiwicks, and then on a special occasion it was the Glory Hole.

What was the Glory Hole like?

It was a rustic setting. It was what you would think Nevada would be like. The feeling to me was like walking into a mine shaft place. It had that rustic old feel. They had a nice salad bar and it was just a steakhouse place.

What was it like for you as a student to come to UNR—or University Nevada, Reno, after a couple years of junior college?

The classes seemed more personal with the community college because they were smaller, and it was a nice transition going from high school, where it just seemed like the instructors, because it was smaller, got to know you a little bit better.

When you get into a little bit bigger environment, like the university, the learning's more on you. Some of those classes can be bigger, and, of course, as you go higher up, the class sizes start to thin a

little bit. But I enjoyed all those experiences. I enjoyed the experiences at the community college and still look back at those with fond memories. Then the experiences I had here I enjoyed, too.

University of Nevada has grown too. I'm sitting here in a beautiful facility [the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center]. They've really added some nice things to the campus.

Did you play any sports when you were in college?

I played junior college basketball for two years, and had an opportunity to go on to Eastern Oregon University, and it just seemed like the best thing was to stay here. It was reaching that point where you realize it's going to end sometime, you're going to stop playing sometime, and maybe the sacrifices that I had to make to continue to play for two more years were not sacrifices that I was willing to make. So it was time to hang it up. At that point the decision was, well, I'll go to work for a couple years and earn some money and go back to school.

What did you do when you were out of school, what did you do to earn money?

It was an odd journey for me. I'd actually been working a little bit for an armored carrier, and they had a car service part of that where they'd just drive around and pick up bags of checks, I guess. I'm not sure exactly what were in the bags. After doing that for a few months, I worked my way up to the armored trucks. So for a couple of years I was in an armored truck, carrying a gun, carrying money. I had some interesting experiences through that, but I came to the realization that this is not what I love and this is not what I want to do for the next thirty years of my life.

What were some of the experiences that helped you make that decision?

Well, we'd see articles on armored car, or armored truck robberies. Then there were a couple of experiences. A couple of our guys had walked in on a robbery—it wasn't a robbery at the truck; it was a robbery of a business. It was a Long's at that time in South Tahoe, and they walked in on it. Fortunately, there were no gunshots or anything like that, nobody got hurt. But there were a couple times where you have people who are following you and you wonder a little bit about this person—what are their intentions here and am I ready to pull out a gun? And it wasn't me. I'm not a gun guy. Strange being from Nevada, with the great outdoors where people like to hunt and shoot. It's not me. I'm different in some of the experiences of Nevada because there are a lot of good hunters here and people who like to ski. Because of basketball, I didn't ski, so I never snow skied, I've never been hunting, but those are great experiences for people here.

So when you came back to college, did you know what you wanted to do? Did you have a major in mind? Did you have a career in mind?

I did one of those career-interest tests, and because of the math background, it kept pointing me toward accounting. So I thought, well I'll go—at that time it was managerial sciences, and that has accounting in it. I was on that track, and at that time when I came back I was married, and I reached a point where I said, "I'm not sure if I'm really a mid-management guy," because that's where you're going to start out. I think my wife helped me clarify that education and coaching were the things that I really

wanted to do.

After my junior year and a bunch of credits, I made a change and ended up going into education, and my major is actually in business and my minor's in math. So I ended up getting a job teaching mathematics, which wouldn't happen today because of the high qualifications, but that's the direction I went.

So you just needed a B.A. back then to get a teaching job? You didn't have to go through the credential program or anything like that?

No. Yeah, things have changed. [Laughs]

You started at Reed. What was the interview process like? How did you find yourself at Reed?

Well, that's interesting, too. Having played basketball in the area, on a team that was pretty successful in Carson, I got to know some of the other coaches a little bit, and they got to know me a little bit while I was playing.

My wife got a teaching job at Reed High School for a woman who left who was pregnant, and the coach at that time, Paul Kautz, who was a longtime coach for Reed High School, needed a freshman basketball coach. I was still taking classes here at the university. He asked my wife if I'd be interested in coaching, so I said, "Oh, yeah, sure." So that's where it started.

I coached for two years before I'd actually started teaching at Reed High School. The first year was with the freshmen, and the second years were with the JVs, and my third year of coaching, which was my first year of teaching, was as a varsity assistant. I did that for three years.

I did another year of JV basketball in between, in that period of time, and after six years of being an assistant under Paul Counts, he recommended me for the job as the head coach. He was at that time ready to retire and he had actually been the first coach hired when the school opened. At that time I think he had thirteen or fourteen years in and he was ready to step down, and he recommended me, and it worked out that I ended up getting the job.

How did your coaching change from your start coaching the freshmen and JV to becoming an assistant and then the head coach? What was the trajectory for you? What were your initial plans or hopes or thoughts of being a coach, and how did that mutate over the years?

Well, I knew that I wanted to be a varsity coach, but I was just happy doing what I was doing at the time. I felt very fortunate to have a great mentor. He was one of the best coaches and most respected coaches in the area and still is.

It was great to have that experience, and he taught me to be a student of the game. I think that was one of the lessons among a whole bunch of other lessons, but I think that was one of the things that I continued to do throughout my eighteen years of being a head coach. So that was how I got started coaching.

What philosophy did you develop as a coach? What were your goals through your progression?

Well, I started with just a simple statement and grew outward, and it was "athletes first, winning

second.” The belief behind that was that I was going to do what was right for the athlete, rather than what was best for trying to win games, and tried to always place the athlete first, getting to know my players, connecting with them, understanding them as people, and not seeing them as pieces in a game, something you would move around like on a chessboard. I was always trying to make sure that I treated them fairly and respected who they were as people.

Sometimes doing the right thing wasn’t necessarily what they felt was the right thing. If they made some mistakes, I had to correct them. We had an incident in one of my seasons where six kids decided they were going to drink on a road trip. I felt like the lesson needed to be learned that they had signed a contract with the school to say they weren’t going to do that and they broke that contract, and it was my job to make sure that they understood that there were consequences to that. One of the players was the son of a judge, and the judge sent me a letter and said, “I wouldn’t have done anything differently from the way you did this. This is what I do in court every day. You make sure that they have consequences, but you treat them fairly.”

There were a lot of things that I learned from Paul Counts in coaching, and the values part of it was one of the things I learned.

What was unique about coaching at Reed? What were some of the challenges, some of the advantages, some of the best memories or just memories of coaching at Reed?

I enjoyed my whole experience there, even the year that we had the kids who were suspended for drinking. It created its own set of challenges, and I’ve seen some of those kids since then and we’ve had good conversations.

I guess to get back to your question; Reed High School when it opened was the second high school in Sparks, and Sparks High School had had a lot of successes with athletics. Now a new school comes along—a shinier penny, so to speak, comes along—and attracts a lot of kids to that school. So we had good talent, we had good players, we had good kids. It was just a great experience to be around kids who had that passion.

I think over the eighteen years I’ve always seen coaching as two lines—and there’s the mathematical part—two lines on a graph. One is going up and that’s the wisdom part, the learning part, learning and understanding more as a coach. The second line is one that’s starting high and going down, and that’s the part that’s the energy. I started with a lot of energy and probably not a lot of knowledge, but I had a lot of enthusiasm for what I was doing and ended with a lot more knowledge and, I think, just by nature, not as much energy.

Did you have a system you ran or did you adapt to your players as they’d come and go?

There are some coaches who are really system people. They’re going to run the same system no matter who comes through their system. I felt like—maybe it’s being overconfident or cocky, I felt like I could adapt to them, that we needed to have something in place that was best suited for them.

So there were years, my first couple years, we ran like crazy, and they were putting up some numbers that hadn’t been seen in the area, I don’t know, for sure in a long time and maybe not at all. The first year we averaged eighty-eight and the second year we averaged ninety-two, and over a two-year span we had something like sixteen 100-point games. But that fit the talent.

When I took over the team, we had six returning guard types. So conventional wisdom said two

guards. I could play three guards and play them in two ways. So we pressed a lot, we ran a lot, we were fast breaking, we were looking to shoot fast, and it was a different game than a lot of people were used to. At the time, it was pretty similar to what Loyola Marymount was running, and they were putting up huge numbers. It wasn't that I designed a game to fit Loyola Marymount. It wasn't until after we started playing the way we were that I had seen what Loyola Marymount was doing.

After two years of that, those players graduated and it changed. We had some big guys that who a little more methodical, and running wasn't going to suit them. It would go against our strengths. So we slowed the game down and became more methodical and worked the ball inside more and didn't press much.

So it was constantly adapting, and I can't say that I was always right in evaluating the style of game that we were going to play, because we tried to run the gamut with some players who I thought were going to be well suited for it and it didn't work out at all. It became a year of bad decisions, bad breaks, and bad luck and I felt bad for the kids because we were reaching for answers, too, and it just didn't quite fit.

But through that span there are lots of things that I remember. I never got into coaching to coach my own sons because when I started, they were little. One was four and one was one. But I stayed in it long enough that I ended up coaching them both. Obviously those are some good memories. I enjoyed the entire time. It was the nature of who I had become as a person, as was running out of energy, not having maybe the energy to do a full program, a year-round program, which is the direction that high school basketball has gone. That's what led me to decide it was time to leave.

Is that the big change you saw as a coach over the time you coached?

Yeah. There are a couple of changes. Probably two biggest changes from the time I started till the time I ended was that, I definitely agree with that. It was the keeping up with the Joneses thing. One person would start to add a few more things in the off-season, another coach would start to do that, and before long the entire league. Then how do you keep ahead of the pack?

I would say that when I left coaching, there were about three down months and the rest of the time you're playing, you're doing something. There's more outside programs available for them, the AU-type things. There's the Jam-on-Its and the Ballers and those programs weren't there when I started. That's definitely one.

The second was in my last year or Paul Counts' last year when we went to a tournament in Las Vegas, a Christmas tournament. He was haggling with our athletic director on how much money per day the kids would get for the per diem, and everything else was paid for by the school. My first year I was haggling with the athletic director—in that one year it had changed—on how much, if any, money we would get for the trip. By the time I had left, we were pretty much self-sufficient. We did our own fund-raising; we paid for pretty much everything at that point. We'd get some money from the school, but not much. It was maybe about a tenth of what we needed. So the financial part of it changed over that period of time considerably, and the amount of off-season had changed also.

How did coaching form you as a teacher and administrator?

I think as a coach, you really have to make sure that all your players are understanding. You're constantly doing checks and some of the assessments that you would have in a sport would be the games.

So you get good at evaluating where you're at, what you're doing, and what you need to do differently. As a classroom teacher, that's what I think you want, is you want to make sure that the student who's having the toughest time understanding is still coming along. You're making sure that they're still there and they're still with you, and you're not moving too fast. You still want to move at a speed where you don't lose the kids who are picking it up fast themselves, but you're constantly doing those checks for understanding and assessing things in an ongoing day-to-day, every-class-period basis. I think it's understanding where kids are coming from.

I wasn't the star basketball player. I started and I felt like I had some pretty good success, but I wasn't the star. So my perspective is I had to make sure that I was learning what I was I had, to make sure that I was learning what I was doing when I was playing, and I think a natural-gifted athlete doesn't necessarily have to learn it, they can just do it, and sometimes they can't explain it.

I think you see some great players like Magic Johnson, who maybe had a little trouble coaching because it came easy to him and he couldn't understand why other people don't get it. I think that for me it didn't come easy and I understand you've got to take some time with this and you try to help bring those kids along. So that attitude, that philosophy is what I carried over into the classroom.

You mentioned as a coach you had the athletes-first philosophy. Did you have a similar philosophy in the classroom or do you have a different name for it?

No. I'm sure that existed, but I didn't ever formalize it in words. I just like to see kids succeed. There was a class that I had, it was an algebra support class. Those were kids who were struggling to understand algebra and failed it at some point. It's a requirement to move on, to graduate. So I have these kids in class who have already had some failure and they've already got some resistance and dislike for mathematics. "I don't understand it, I don't get it and I don't like it." I don't even know what point in the year it was, but there was a girl in there and she said, "I don't understand it. I don't get it."

I explained it again, and she said, "I still don't understand it. I don't get it. I hate this."

I explained it again. By now I'm starting to get a little frustrated because she's putting up some walls that are really tough to get around. I didn't get angry at her, but I got a little more forceful and said, "You do understand this. You do get it, and we're going to get you through this."

Later on, I didn't have her after that class, she had gone on to other classes, but she ended going on and taking trigonometry and did pretty well. It was one of those feel-good stories. You never know exactly where they go or how much they're understanding and how much impact you have, not as much as you see on a court, because you're seeing them. I think that's probably what my dad experienced in his teaching. He could see it. He could see them. He could see them understanding what it was that he was teaching. You don't necessarily see somebody understanding a formula or an equation. It takes time.

Can you take me through a typical class you would run? How did you run your classroom, from lessons to behavior? If I was taking a class, what could I expect going in?

Well, I enjoyed teaching geometry classes probably the most, because for me that was most visual. You could see shapes, you could build things and you could do things. I probably started out with some warm-ups, sponge-type activities, something that refreshes from the day before, gets the kids back in the mode of thinking about mathematics and gives me a chance to do the administrative things you need to do in a classroom, take your attendance and make sure that all your kids are there.

So we do some short warm-up, and then we get started with whatever that day's lesson was or we might do a review of whatever their homework assignment was and try to clear up—lots of times I like to put kids together in small groups so that they could talk about the problems and maybe go over the problems, whatever things that they're having trouble with. Then I'd ask kids to go up to the board and put it up on the board, demonstrate a little understanding.

Then we'd get started with the lectures, and I like to do a discovery approach, for example, discovering that the three angles of a triangle, no matter what triangle, add up to 180 degrees. So we start out with drawing some triangles and cutting them out and tearing off the angles, and then putting them together so that they could see how that arced over to 180 degrees.

Then we'd get down to exploring, "if we put this in an if-then format, what would that look like?" And obviously you have to guide them through the first few times, but you get to the point where they start to understand that, okay, if a polygon is a triangle, then the sum of the angles is 180 degrees. It wouldn't always sound exactly like that from student to student, but that's what they'd understand, that's what they get. You know, triangle, 180 degrees.

It would be those things where they would do the hands-on cutting some things out, and the little discovery, and that's what I really liked about teaching geometry. I had those opportunities.

What was your classroom management style, when you're dealing with the different students?

Well, I think it just starts out with early in the year talking about respect and role-modeling respect. When those situations come up where they're not being respectful, reteach it. They're kids and they'll learn. Some kids don't really know what that means. So it's part of that learning process. We're teachers, and I think probably the biggest thing is role modeling and treating them with respect. As long as you do that, I think most kids will respond in a pretty positive way.

What was your biggest strength as a teacher? What was something you felt like you could rely on in the classroom? What were some of the things that you felt comfortable, confident with in the classroom?

Well, I felt comfortable and confident with what I was teaching and how I was teaching it, and I felt comfortable in talking to kids and getting to know them, those things.

What was your biggest challenge as a teacher? What were some of the areas you really felt like you needed to improve in?

I was never one of those teachers who felt like this was the most important thing in their life, that my class was more important than somebody else's class. I respected the fact that they all had differences, and some kids just don't like math. My wife didn't like it and still isn't crazy about mathematics. In high school she hated it, and she was an incredible student. I mean, she'd kill herself to just get through a problem.

What was unique about Reed High School? If you had to explain to somebody what Reed High School was like during your time there, what were the students like, what were the teachers like, what was the school culture there, and did it change over time?

I think there was a lot of energy. It was primarily a middle-class white school when I started there, and it diversified over the years. It's a great school today; it was a great school then. I'm trying to really come up with some differences. It was big. It's always been one of the larger schools in the district, and it seemed like we were always bursting at the seams.

I think early on there was probably more school spirit, and I think that's what I see in all schools. It doesn't seem to be as much school spirit, and I think maybe in a sense that's good, because kids are finding things to do rather than going to games. I mean, they're being a part of clubs or they're being a part of other teams. There are so many more sports to play. They're involved in band or ROTC or they're involved in drama, in theater productions.

So maybe that's my perception of what school spirit is, going to the basketball games and packing the gym or going to the football game and having these big crowds, but I don't think you see as much of that as at one time. When I first started, there weren't as many sports then as there are now, and there are definitely more kids involved in a lot of different things. So a little bit of that school spirit is now spread into other activities and sports and clubs.

Just as a math teacher, what were some of the challenges with the students? How did students respond to math and how did you deal with that attitude?

I think a lot of students, because the answers are either right or wrong, feel like it's 100 percent right or it's 100 percent wrong, and they don't understand that they could be going through that process. This is what I tried to help them understand is look at how much of this you did right. You just made a simple mistake here. It's a multiplication error or you're adding a negative number and a positive number and came up with something very strange. But I tried to take them through the steps and help them understand that you do understand quite a bit of this, you just made a simple mistake.

I think the tendency, especially with students who don't like math, is when they get it wrong, they really don't like it, and it's helping them understand you did a lot of this right. You just made a simple error, and we fix that, you got it. You understand the concepts; you just made a simple mistake.

At Reed you shifted from the classroom to an administrative position. Did you still teach or did you go right to the administrative position?

I went from the classroom to, at that time, being freshmen Dean of Students, and the Dean of Students position is primarily a discipline position. You're dealing with the kids who have some discipline issues in the classroom or in the halls or somewhere on campus.

My position as the freshmen dean came as they discovered that the transition going from middle school to high school was difficult for some kids, and my position was more a position that looked at attendance, it looked at grades, I worked with counselors pretty closely, I did discipline. Then when they became real busy in the discipline office, the Student Relations Office, then I would help out sometimes with them. I might be dealing with a sophomore or a senior, but my position was primarily dealing with freshmen trying to transition into high school.

What happened was as the economy started to change, of course, the budget started to change for the Washoe County School District. We're still, have been, going through cuts and that was one of those positions that was more a luxury item than a necessity. When you're taking teachers out of the classroom, I think you've got to draw the line somewhere. So my position as the freshmen dean at Reed was cut, and

that's when I went to Dilworth.

I had an opportunity to go to Dilworth and become a Dean of Students there. So now, instead of dealing with freshmen trying to transition into high school, I'm dealing with eighth-graders getting ready to transition into high school. So I think that I can tell them what they're about to encounter, what's coming, "This is what's ahead for you and these are the changes you're going to experience."

As a math teacher and the dean, how did you see the curriculum change over the years you've been at Reed? What are some of the biggest shifts or things you've seen in the curriculum?

Oh, I think the whole accountability piece, which is driving assessments and data, that has changed tremendously. There's more testing and more trying to interpret what the tests mean and trying to align the tests with the teaching, so getting to what is a common core. So that a math class at McQueen High School might look the same as a math class at Reed High School, trying to standardize that a little bit more so they're all taking the same tests at the end, the proficiencies in high school, the CRTs, the criterion reference tests, in middle schools, and all the schools are taking those tests so that they can look at the data and try to compare school to school how things are doing. I don't know. We'll see over time how that plays out.

When you first started teaching, you didn't have that alignment going on? You had a little more control over your own curriculum?

Yes. In fact, they could be different within the school in two geometry classes. It came down to a teacher's point of emphasis. We had more diversity within the types of course offerings. There was a course that I did part of my student teaching in, called financial management, and the teacher pretty much had written his own material for it. He was doing things like present value and future value, and he was doing things like credit cards and how you pay down on credit cards, and, of course then you could do that whole thing on a spreadsheet on a computer within seconds, and he was doing it with handheld calculators, going through sixty payments to try to show what that looked like to a student who was paying the minimum on their credit card. A valuable class, but it didn't align with the math curriculum moving toward getting kids ready for college. That course is no longer offered and not offered in the math department. So it's changed. Some of it's for the good and for some, the jury is still out.

Tell me about the community, what was the relationship of Reed with the surrounding community it was serving and just maybe Sparks in general?

It's interesting because it opened in '74, and when it first opened, it seemed like it was way out in the middle of nowhere. There were no homes and it almost seemed like you took a dirt road to get to the school. My first experience at Reed was as a basketball player at Carson, and it seemed like it was so far out. By the time I started teaching, there were more homes, weren't too many businesses, and there weren't any businesses around the school. Things didn't much go past Sparks Boulevard. Then it just continued to grow, and now you go up past Vista and out into Spanish Springs.

I think that Reed High School was a well-respected academic and athletic school. I think it was a school that did well in everything and was competitive with some of the best schools in the state.

So you're at Dilworth now, and you started last year or this year, the beginning of the school year?

Right.

It's a STEM Academy. Can you tell us a little bit about what a STEM Academy is?

STEM Academy is science, technology, engineering, mathematics. So those are the focal points for the school. It's more project-based learning. So kids are actually doing things. They do them in nine-week increments. They work in small groups. They're given a project to work on.

This project that they're doing now is on ballooning, and they're going to be working in conjunction with engineering professors up here at UNR. They're going to be putting things together in a payload that'll be taken up in a balloon up to 100,000 feet so that they can see and experiment with different things and how they react to the temperatures and the air pressures and the radiation at that altitude. They get to design what their payloads will look like. Then they're going to get to send them up and see what that looks like at those altitudes. They can watch their experiment if they want to, or they could just watch the balloon rise into those heights. That's one of the projects that they're working on now.

They've done some different types of projects throughout the year. They're in cores. We do this on Wednesdays, and the whole day is built around their STEM projects on Wednesdays. Then on Monday, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays they go to more regular classes, where they would get their algebra or their eighth-grade math, and their ELA and P.E. and all the rest of those things. But on Wednesdays the day is built around that STEM project or that project-based learning.

Is this a Sparks-Reno School District program or is this a national program that you've adopted here?

It's a national project that is still in its early stages, so there's not really a template for it at this point. I think much like the project-based learning, we're doing a project-based learning with the whole STEM thing, so we learn as we go and make changes and modify and redefine. We're constantly assessing where we're at, what we're doing, and how does this fit into the overarching goal.

What's the educational philosophy behind the STEM movement? Is it this project-based learning?

I think it's more on a national level, too, but definitely within the community the feeling is that students need to work more in groups, which is what would be expected beyond graduation and college, as you work in groups, you become better problem-solvers and understand how to work collaboratively on projects. It's trying to get kids to work together. If I can boil it down to a real quick point, it's getting kids to work collaboratively together.

You mentioned your wife worked at Dilworth for quite a few years. Can you maybe give us an idea of what Dilworth is like in that community, how it's grown up over the years and what kind of school it's been?

She went there in 2000. She'd been Dean of Students at Reed High School, and she went to Dilworth as an assistant principal and did that for five years. Then she was the principal for three years at

Dilworth, and then she went to Clayton for a year and retired.

Dilworth opened in 1960, so it's been open for fifty-two years, and like we were talking about Reno, the community has just continued to grow outward. So it's changed. The school, the demographics have changed over the years. Probably some of the more affordable housing is in the Dilworth area. We're a Title I school, which means we have a lot of free and reduced lunch students and we have a high percentage of minority students. That's what the school looks like from a demographic standpoint.

As a dean, what are some of the issues you've been dealing with this last year? Just generally, how have you been interacting with the student body?

Well, as a dean you deal with a lot of discipline issues, so those discipline issues are pretty much the same school to school. Some of the tougher ones are when you have kids who are bullying or being bullied. In middle school, it seems like the friendships and friendship groups change fast, so it's like watching the sands blow. You never know exactly from day to day whose friends with whom, and why or why they're not.

We have, like every school, incidents where kids will have drugs. So we have to deal with that.

There are the fights. I can remember getting in a fight in middle school myself. So I'm not sure what I would've done with me in middle school. I wouldn't have done what the assistant principal did then, I know that.

Did he have a little more latitude in his punishment?

I think so. He called us in and gave us a nice lecture. I can't remember exactly what he said, but it was one of those "Don't do it again," deals, and we were back in school the next day. That's not the direction schools go today. I think it'd be hard to find a school where they had a fight and they just said, "Oh, you learned your lesson. See you tomorrow." There are usually suspensions that go with that. I think they're the same issues that we were dealing with at Reed.

What's been your approach as a dean at Reed and at Dilworth? I mean, how much latitude do you have? Are you pretty restricted by school policy now or is there a certain philosophy or approach you like to take with troubled students or students who are getting into trouble?

It depends on the nature of what they've done, because there are things that are outlined in school district policy as far as how you can deal with that. There is some consistency with what Swope may be doing with their student and what we're doing with our student, depending on the issue. But there's some latitude in some of the more minor behaviors.

I think you have to start with helping them understand what they did and why it was wrong, and then move to what could you have done differently. "If you had a chance to do this differently this time so that you didn't have this outcome, what would you do differently?" Trying to get them to help understand that there are options, and selecting appropriate options. That's the direction that I go with most of it, and try to get them to talk a little bit about what it is that they're doing, why they did it, and how they could've done it differently.

Is that similar to your coaching and education experience, where you figure out where everybody's at and

try to find the best solution?

Well, try to treat them as an individual. Try not to just rubber-stamp and send it through. I try to take a little extra time. My hope is that if I take a little extra time, that down the road it saves time and that we don't have to deal with necessarily that same problem again, that they learn something from it.

As a son of an educator and a student and basketball player and college student, then as a teacher and administrator, what are some of the education issues you think have been pretty consistent over the years or have changed over the years? I mean, you've been around education pretty much your whole life. What are some of the key things you think would be important for somebody to know about education from mid-century until now?

I think that the people who get into it and stay in it have to have a passion for being an educator. It's not something that you take as a job; you take it on because it's really important to you in your life to try to make a difference in kids' lives. So I think that's been consistent. I think that of the people who get into education, there are people who get into it and realize, "Whoa, this is a lot of work and this is not necessarily the direction I wanted to go." And they end up getting out of it and going some other direction. But the people who go into it and stay in it have got that passion, and they want to make a difference in kids' lives.

I think there's a lot of internal gratification to that. Not a lot of financial gratification, but a lot of internal gratification. The exciting moments are not so much inside the classroom at that particular time. It's when the kids go on and they come back and they say, "You know, Mr. Gray...."

Not too long ago I had this B.E.S.T. [Business Education Skills Training] Kids dinner. All the middle schools had twenty-five kids that went to this B.E.S.T. Kids that's sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, and I'm there with our Dilworth kids and with our principal. I had an adult come up to me and say, "Mr. Gray, I had you when I was taking math." He said, "You really helped me understand it." He said, "I'm taking a college class now and it's an algebra class." He said, "It's not real hard, but I'm not understanding it as well." He said, "Can I come by and get some help?"

I said, "Sure." So those moments you hang onto. I'll be telling that story forever. [Laughter]

Let me give you a little hypothetical here. You've been around schools most of your life. Say if you got to be in charge of the Reno, Nevada, school districts and you could pretty much do whatever you want. What programs and policies would you really want to see implemented, and could you do it yourself?

I think it'd be a simple philosophy like I had in basketball. It would be to help kids find what they're good at and help them try to find what they love and try to do their best at it. I think if everybody who was out there working found something they loved and tried to be the best they could at it, we'd have a nice society. People wouldn't be as stressed out.

I've heard it put by different people, if you find what you love; you never work a day in your life. I think that I'd like to see schools spend more time helping kids find what they love, what they're passionate about, and encourage them to become the best they can be at it. I think we've gotten to a point where we're feeling like, for example, we don't have enough engineers in our own country to fill the engineering positions, and we're hiring people from other countries. So we're trying to force-feed the system to get more people out into the engineering profession. That's just one example.

I think in the meantime, we might be sacrificing a few kids who don't want to follow that. They're not the kids who necessarily love math or they love English. They might be passionate about theater or passionate about band or passionate about art. They have things that they're passionate about.

It seems like the focus in education is narrowing, and that's concerning to me. I'd like to see us get back to the intentions of going to charter schools and smaller schools. Those are good intentions, but I think some of those kids are missing out on opportunities that large comprehensive high schools have.

Sometimes I do believe that high schools can become too large, kids can get lost in them. They become just a number. But I also think that the opportunities that present themselves, the diversified curriculum that is available in the larger school that you can't have necessarily in a small charter school, I think the intentions were good, but I'm not sure that it's working out the way it was intended, at least from some of the literature I've read. The design of the charter school is not necessarily the reality of the charter school.

I would like to see getting back to more comprehensive high schools that offer real diversified curriculum, and we're trying to reach out to kids in all areas and help them find what it is that they love and what they're passionate about. If we could do that and weave in a little algebra and weave in a little English along the way, all the better.

You mentioned when you started talking about education, that some people get into it and never realize how much work it is. Can you give us an example what your typical workday as a teacher was and what your typical workday as a dean is, and, how much work there is in it?

Well, there's the preparation time with teaching, getting the lessons ready, reviewing them, and then actually going out and having the lesson through the day. The eight o'clock bell that starts that first class, or seven-thirty, whatever that time is, until the bell rings at two-thirty or when the school day ends, you're pretty much on stage. It's go time. You're presenting or you're helping guide or you're there with the kids, and it's a lot of energy.

Then there's after school, taking care of the papers, whatever that looks like. It could be reading them in English or correcting them in the math classes or whatever that looks like. Do the assessments and then reevaluating, okay, did they get it, and do I need to go back and try it a different way or try it again or weave it back in somehow? So there is that out-of-school time that I don't think a lot of people see, and that could be on weekends.

With my dean position, I don't know exactly. There's no planning or preparation that really goes into it. It's reacting. I don't know what's going to happen that particular day. I'll start out my day, I'll get there somewhere around seven and take a look at the emails to see if there's something that happened, a teacher had sent something in, or if there's something that I need to be aware of going forward into that day.

Then it's being out and being around in the halls and seeing how things are going, just being a presence and connecting with some of the kids. You try to connect with as many as you can.

Then once the school day starts, it's just whatever rolls into the office until the school day ends, and for us it's at three-thirty and it's cleaning up the paperwork until four or five o'clock. So that's where my day goes, and it could range from simple things like today I was trying to help a student find his backpack, to more complicated things where it might involve school police. You just don't know.

Could you describe some of the traffic patterns for staff and students in Dilworth? For example, do a lot

of the students walk, is there bike riding, pedestrians, the car drop-off? What are the general traffic patterns of a school day?

We have quite a few students who do walk. We have three buses that come to the school. So when you consider a population, that's not a lot of the student population. We don't have a lot of kids who are coming in on buses. It varies a little bit in the wintertime. We'll see more cars dropping kids off in the wintertime, but quite a few kids walk.

What's a little bit different than Reed is we probably see more kids arriving at school earlier. We do offer a breakfast in the morning, and there are quite a few kids who come and have breakfast. Prater's a busy road, and there are quite a few busy large roads that kids have to cross. They have to cross McCarran. Some kids will cross McCarran, some kids will cross Pyramid. Those are two major roads in the Sparks area, with Prater being an intersecting road that's a major road going east-west.

From talking to parents or staff members and kids, what are some of the biggest safety issues or concerns in the area?

When my wife was the principal at Dilworth they had a student who was hit and killed on Pyramid. I think that some of those safety concerns come with the kids crossing some of those major roads.

When we get into the wintertime, the sun is coming up a little later and it's darker or going down earlier and it's dark when kids are leaving school—we have an extended day, ninth period. The normal school day ends at two-thirty and our extended day ends at three-twenty. So if you have kids who are leaving school at three-twenty in the wintertime, it's starting to get a little bit darker. Those are concerns.

What are some of the big needs in that area for traffic or transportation?

They've done a nice job with the school zone itself, and I think they've addressed on Pyramid some of the problems with getting across the street there, trying to discourage kids from crossing at other than places that have lights. You don't see that on McCarran much because it's the nature of the way McCarran is laid out between Victorian and Prater, even all the way up to Greenbrae. You pretty much cross on McCarran at the lights, but Pyramid isn't so much that way. There are some of the smaller side streets that kids could be coming out of, and I think more of the kids are using the lights now.

Do you think any arrangements of lanes for cars or buses should be modified in any way? For example, should there be a simple bike lane—or do you even have buses running down that street?

We have a bus that goes from Van Meter, which is over by Reed, that comes out of Van Meter and comes down Prater coming from the east going westbound. Then we have a bus that picks up over in the Sparks High School area, and that comes down Prater the other direction. So those are primary busing routes.

Do you think those routes service students and staff fairly well in the community?

I think so. As far as I know. Having been my first year there, I haven't spent a whole lot of time

looking at the bus routes.

How about parking in the area? Are there any changes you see that would be beneficial there or is it a pretty good parking situation?

Parking for the school?

The school or maybe the surrounding area, too.

Around the school on Prater there isn't any parking on the street, which is good because you don't have the kids who are going to be darting out behind cars and things like that. I think as far as obstructing cars on Prater and their vision of the students, I think it's pretty visible; kids are pretty visible.

I can't really think of anything offhand that would make it better or easier. We don't really have a street that you can turn off of Prater that connects into another street. There is a street right by the school, but it goes into a cul-de-sac, so cars have to go in and turn around and come back out onto Prater. It would be nice if that went all the way through, but those are homes.

The RTC [Regional Transportation Commission] study is looking at the whole Fourth Street corridor, but do you spend much time down there? They're looking at car and bus lanes and maybe bike lanes arrangements. What would you like to see in that area? What do you think would be a good arrangement down there like for parking? If you got to make that corridor, especially as you get towards downtown, over again with the new bus station, the Aces games and stuff, what would you like to see done on that part?

On Fourth Street I don't ride my bike as much as I used to, but I used to ride it quite a bit, and I'd stay off Fourth Street on a bike. There's really not a bike lane and not room for a bike. I think what they've done over on Arlington, condensing that down to one lane in each direction and putting in the bike lane...of course, you're still talking about a road that goes from Reno to Sparks. I don't think it's a highly traveled road where the traffic would be hard to get through or it'd slow people down a whole lot. It'd be nice to see condensing it down and putting a bike lane in there so that more people could bike.

There's not a whole lot of reasons to park on Fourth Street. There are some older motels that are down there, a few businesses, not a lot, but they all have their own parking, so there's not any reason to park on the street itself, but I think a bike lane would be nice in each direction.

How about the buses that go up and down Fourth Street? Is there anything you'd like to see changed with that or any bus transportation or public transportation issues you think need to be addressed?

I like what they've done with the RAPID and putting in fewer stops that are specifically for people that are traveling longer distances, and it'd be nice if they had a few bus lines like that. I don't know how that would work out with the schedule, but it'd be nice if you could get on a bus—at one time you could; I don't know if it's still available—you could get on it at the Nugget and it went out on the freeway and came downtown, so there wasn't a stop.

I have on occasion ridden the buses. It's always eye-opening to see some of either the Reed students or Dilworth students who are bus riders, and where they're going to. We had a Reed student who

was going over to Sutro, and that's how he got to Reed and that's how he got to his home; he rode the bus. It's a pretty long way from Reed to Sutro.

We have a student who comes from Sun Valley, and he rides the bus to the downtown station, and then from the downtown station to the Sparks station, and then catches a bus that goes over to Dilworth. I think the first bus he catches is somewhere shortly after six out of Sun Valley. I can't imagine getting on a bus, spending an hour and a half on a bus to get to school. But as far as your question, it'd be nice if there were fewer stops.

So maybe a RAPID system that goes down Fourth Street like the one that goes down Virginia?

Right. Since that is a corridor, it'd be nice if they had some light rail or something like that, I guess if we're throwing around money. It all comes down to dollars. It would definitely be nice if they had something like that. Phoenix is a very large area and, of course, San Francisco and those places are very large areas, but there are times when we go to those cities we use not so much their bus system, but their light rail, the Metro trains, or whatever they want to call them, and it's a nice way to get around.

Is there anything you'd like to add, anything about transportation or education, like I said, or anything?

No, I think we covered a wide range of things. I hope that I gave you an interesting perspective.

Very much so. Very much so. Thank you very much.

Thank you.

ANN HARRINGTON AND BOB NIELSEN

Affordable Housing Developers



Bob Nielsen and Ann Harrington outside the Plaza at 4th Street in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Ann Harrington and Bob Nielsen partner in developing affordable housing projects throughout the Reno-Sparks area. In 2002, they completed a project with Cloyd Phillips of the Community Services Agency Development Corporation, consisting of commercial space along East 4th Street with apartments above and additional apartments extending to the north.

Laura Wilhelm: So just to begin, I'm sitting here on 380 Linden Street with Bob Nielsen and Ann Harrington on April 9, 2012, to conduct the oral history as another portion of the Fourth Street and

Prater Way Oral History Project.

So, why don't we start with you, Bob.

Bob Nielsen: Okay.

Tell me a little bit about how you got here.

Nielsen: Sure, just briefly, I grew up in southern California, and came up to Reno to go to the University of Nevada in 1964. At that time, as a student at the University of Nevada, I was kind of aware of Fourth Street because I had friends from the university who were working down there at the El Rancho Motel, which is not far from where our property is. It's actually just right on the other side of Wells, and so we got to know the area fairly well. It certainly had fallen on tough times at that point because people were using other ways to get through Reno than the old Highway 40 corridor, so the motels had fallen on fairly hard times, but not as bad as they got later. There was still some activity in them at the time.

I went through the University of Nevada, and through a series of events became a housing developer in this community, and have been an affordable multifamily housing developer for the last twenty-five or twenty-seven years.

At one point in the process, we came together with the Affordable Housing Resource Council, which was an organization that was designed to help developers find affordable workforce housing, and Ann Harrington had been hired. I was on the Board of Directors and Ann was hired by the board to help us in that effort, and then how many years was it, Ann, before you went on your own?

Ann Harrington: It was four years, Bob, from '93 to '97.

Nielsen: Okay, so in '97, Ann went on her own as a consultant and we became partners on a number of deals. Ann came to me, I believe, with a proposal to do a project on what was then an old wood lot, which was between Wells and Morrill on Fourth Street or Highway 40, that corridor. I, of course, reacted as a developer. I said, "Who's going to want to live under the Wells overpass?" Because that's basically what we would be doing.

Ann said, "No, I think this is going to be a great deal." Our other partner is Cloyd Phillips from Community Services Agency Development Corporation. Both Ann and Cloyd said, "No, that's something that needs to go down there," so we devised a property that consisted of two- and three-bedroom apartments behind, basically, retail space, which consisted of storefront retail with one-bedroom apartments above it. That was the concept, and much to my surprise, Ann and Cloyd were right about it. It leased up right away and continues to be a very good family affordable housing project in that area.

Unfortunately, the retail continues to suffer. We were in great shape until the recession, and with the recession we lost good tenants in that project and have been unable to get new tenants to occupy those spaces, so that becomes pretty difficult. Part of the reason why we did the project in that area is the city had funds, redevelopment funds. Were they redevelopment, Section 108 funds?

Harrington: Yes, Section 108. I'll talk about that part.

Nielsen: Okay, why don't you do that for a while.

Harrington: Okay. Part of the reason why I was interested in this area of town was that in 1998, Pam Behr [phonetic], who worked for the Community Development Department, was trying to put something together to provide improvement façade loans and other kinds of financing to business owners both along Wells Avenue and Fourth Street, and that money was going to be grant money from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD, called Section 108 funds. It made me think that this might be a good area to look at if we were going to try to do a mixed-use project, which is what we call that kind of development with both retail and residential in it.

I helped them write the grant to HUD and it was approved, so that was probably '99 at that point. Then we went and got the rest of our financing through the residential stuff, and we used some of that Section 108 loan money to build the commercial side of it. That project was completed in September of 2002 and, as Bob said, it pretty much has stayed full on the residential side ever since, for the last almost ten years.

Nielsen: So that's why we are where we are.

Tell me a little bit about your impressions of the area. When you were younger, you said you were going to the university. Did you spend time downtown at all?

Nielsen: Sure. I was living in the dorms, and in those days, you walked down to Hales #5 if you needed to cash a check, or on Sundays when the dining commons were not open, you would walk down there for dinner and we would do that every Sunday. So, yes, we hung out downtown a little bit, not so much on Fourth Street, but certainly downtown.

The reason we hung out on Fourth Street is because our friend was one of the guys at El Rancho, and if we had people staying in town for one reason or another, we would hook up with him and put them at the El Rancho, which wasn't a bad motel at the time. Obviously, all of that corridor has become tougher.

How far do you guys go in terms of your study to the east?

All the way past the Prater Way corridor.

Harrington: Right, I think we determined that. We have another property that's right on the corner of Prater and Pyramid, so I think that's part of your study area. That was the very next property that we did, Bob.

Nielsen: That's right.

Harrington: Yes, that was the next one, so we were already in the mode of working with local government, figuring out the kinds of things that they wanted to see.

As a matter of fact, that project that we built there came about as a result of the City of Sparks putting out a request for proposals because they wanted affordable housing in Sparks. They got three responses from three developers, and ours was one of them, and the City of Sparks went and purchased that property for us and leases it back to us. They used redevelopment money to do that because the property at the time that they purchased it had been vacant for a number of years. It was an old Valley Bank Building, B of A Building, and hadn't been used for a long time. There was a lot of graffiti on it and

a lot of weeds growing, and it wasn't very attractive.

We were one of the three developers that sort of won that contest and then we got them to buy that piece of property. That was back in 2003 and we completed that project, which is seventy-two units for apartments for low-income seniors, and they're one- and two-bedroom apartments. We completed that—I think that was in 2004, Bob. Does that sound right, spring of 2004?

Nielsen: Yes, it does.

Harrington: I think that's when it was, so that was really [unclear] the City of Sparks and we worked very closely with them to get that done. Between the City of Sparks there and the City of Reno over in our other project on Fourth Street, they were kind of the main reasons that we were doing something in that corridor.

Nielsen: Yes, and I think we also made the decision that we wanted to do infill because properties were getting smaller and smaller, and so we thought, well, let's look for infill sites to make that work.

I wanted to mention tangentially that there was another reason why I would spend time down on Fourth Street, and that is Casale's Halfway Club and the Coney Island Bar. When I was a teacher, even prior to becoming a developer, I remember all the referees, and we had a whole bunch of guys who were teachers, friends of mine, and coaches, who would always meet at the Coney Island Bar. They would go off to referee games, we would coach games, and then we would meet there afterwards and tell stories about the games that we had coached and/or refereed. So there was that, and then, of course, Casale's Halfway Club.

Harrington: It's been a favorite of yours for years.

Nielsen: It's an eclectic place, but somewhere that is very, very interesting and has been highlighted in the AAA magazine and a number of other publications, plus they have great ravioli.

Harrington: I remember Robert Nielsen having his fiftieth birthday party at Casale's.

Nielsen: That's right.

Harrington: And a lot of people came. There was dancing. It was great fun and it lives on in the oral history of our social circle because it's still talked about.

Nielsen: Yes.

Where did you teach?

Nielsen: I taught at Sparks and Reed High Schools. I loved teaching, but you couldn't in those days feed your family, so I had to figure out something else to do. I decided, I ought to build apartments. What the heck? It's a natural move.

Was it an out-of-the-blue decision?

Nielsen: I had a friend who was involved in a property down in Las Vegas that was the first senior bond-financed deal in the state. That was Jeff Lewis.

Harrington: Right.

Nielsen: So we got started. We decided there was a way we could build things. Neither one of us had any money, and we decided we could do this and we did. We didn't make a lot of money—

Harrington: And didn't spend a lot either.

Nielsen: No, and we built a lot of apartments.

Harrington: That's right, that's right.

Nielsen: It was kind of fun. And creative.

Harrington: And, you know, those two properties that we're talking about, the Plaza at Fourth Street is the official name of the one over there on Fourth between Wells and Morrill and then the one on Prater and Pyramid is called Sierra Crest Senior Apartments or something like that.

Nielsen: Right.

Harrington: Those two were the start for me of being a developer. Before then I worked for nonprofits and was a consultant, and those were my first two projects that I was actually willing to put my own money in.

Nielsen: I would say also that Cloyd Phillips and I, and also Ann, to the extent that Ann was involved with most of our properties, tried to break new ground, tried to figure out ways to do things that hadn't been done before so that people could replicate them and continue to build affordable housing for people in this community.

And were you born here, Ann, in Reno?

Harrington: No, I was born in western Massachusetts, Westfield, Massachusetts, and lived in a whole bunch of little towns out there and moved to California in 1980. I worked in affordable housing there until '93, when I came up here to Reno to work for that Affordable Housing Resource Council that Bob mentioned. Bob was on my board then and hired me to come up here and work. But I've been here almost nineteen years.

Nielsen: So you came out here as a very young girl.

Harrington: Absolutely. I was only three when I came out to work, right? No, I came out right after college to work in California.

And how do you guys think that transportation improvements will help improve the image of Fourth Street?

Nielsen: Well, there have been a lot of improvements already, with the lighting.

Harrington: The lighting helps a lot.

Nielsen: Yes, and a number of other things have happened down there. Our property and a few others have, I think, helped things. I think it helped a whole lot to move the homeless shelter away from where it was to where it is now. Fourth Street still has a tough reputation and, frankly, you can go down there any given time and you could find some tough activity going on, whether it's drug deals or prostitution. That's happening down there, so it's got a ways to go.

The other Fourth Street institution which I became very fond of was Louis' Basque Corner, too, the Basque restaurant.

Harrington: Yes, we get a lot of investors and lenders over there. They wanted to experience authentic Basque cuisine, which is not something you can get everywhere else in the country.

Nielsen: Well, it's unique and interesting to people, and I think they've done a great job of upgrading that restaurant and still keeping the menu the same, so that's good news.

Harrington: And the other property that seems to do really well on Fourth Street is the furniture store, Forever Yours.

Nielsen: Yes.

Harrington: They've been there a long time.

Nielsen: I've bought stuff from him.

Harrington: Me too. We buy almost all our furniture over there and it's one of the main reasons to go to Fourth Street for us, to go to the furniture store.

Do you think there are any areas of Fourth Street that are underutilized?

Nielsen: Well, it's probably all underutilized to a certain extent.

Harrington: Yes, exactly. [laughs]

Nielsen: I would love to see that brewery have something done with it. I don't know what the heck it would be. We certainly looked at that property, and the guy's [Spencer Hobson] pretty proud of it and has kept a pretty high price on it. I guess the entire Burning Man from last year's Burning Man was built in that facility. I don't know that enough people know that, and it's something that people should know.

There are other places on Fourth Street that I've certainly frequented. Certainly Ed's—we used to call Ed's Alley Inn. Now what's it called, the restaurant there?

Harrington: I think it's still called Ed's. I think they got rid of the rest of the name.

Nielsen: And then the Western wear store [D Bar M] that was right there. It still is. I've certainly purchased stuff from them. And then there used to be an art store between the two of them. I don't know if it's still there or not.

Harrington: I don't either. Yes, I haven't been on that particular block in a while.

Nielsen: I've purchased stuff from them, too. Was there a mattress factory that was on Fourth Street?

Harrington: Yes, there was.

Nielsen: Reno Mattress.

Harrington: Yes, but many years ago. I think it moved out around the first year I lived here, so it's been gone a long time.

Nielsen: I know I bought mattresses from those guys.

Harrington: Yes, I think that that's right, almost all of Fourth Street is underutilized when you really look at the value of land and vacant or unused buildings. The Barengo Building is still sitting there vacant.

Nielsen: Just amazing, yes.

Harrington: It's a beautiful old historic building which should be used for something. There's so much opportunity there that it's incredible, but given where we are with the economy now, there aren't going to be a lot of people willing to step up, take some risks, and put some money there.

Nielsen: You know, it's kind of too bad that that newer area which has Midtown Eats went out that direction instead of out Fourth Street, because I think it could have gone either way.

Harrington: Yes, I think that's true, but maybe when the economy gets a little better, people will be looking for places to invest that will represent some good bargains.

Nielsen: And when you think about it, with the exception being the Barengo Building, which doesn't probably have appropriate parking for that size of building—

Harrington: Yes, it doesn't have any parking. It has two parking places in front and that's it.

Nielsen: Midtown Eats doesn't have any parking and maybe they would have done better had they located where they would have parking, and there are certainly areas that have parking along there.

I also bought a transmission at Landa, the transmission place across the street, so I've done a lot of business on Fourth Street.

Harrington: Yes, you have.

Nielsen: You go down Fourth Street on the way to Beto's, which is on Fifth Street.

Have your impressions of Fourth Street changed over the years or do you think it's always been in the kind of the state that it is now?

Nielsen: No, it was better when I was here in school. It's gone downhill from there. I think we kind of caused somewhat of a resurrection when we built our property there. I think things leveled off. The mayor or the City Council put in the lighting, and I think that helped. Moving the homeless shelter helped. I think those businesses and those condos that are now in the old fire station certainly helped, so there's been a lot of help. There's just, as Ann points out, an economic problem with any commercial situation in the City of Reno or Sparks or northern Nevada.

Harrington: Yes, at this point that's the reality.

Nielsen: And we're suffering from that.

When you do a new development project, like a couple of the ones you're working on now, how do you gain community support or get people interested in that?

Nielsen: Well, interestingly enough, we always begin this process without community support because we do multi-story properties and people are initially always afraid of that. They're afraid of it for a number of reasons. First, they think it's going to deteriorate their property value. That absolutely is not the case, but that's what they believe. If they're younger and have kids, they think you're going to overcrowd the schools. They sometimes use as an excuse, "Oh, my gosh, we can't handle any more traffic, and you're going to bring in crime and all kinds of those things." The reality is usually just the opposite.

In fact, not particularly here, but in other areas where we've been doing properties and we had a lot of community backlash to them, we have asked people and provided transportation for people to go talk to neighbors in other areas that we had developed, and that was always a positive thing. So we never start out with the community behind us, but by the time we've built the property and operated it, we typically have the community behind us.

Harrington: Right.

Nielsen: So it's a series of meetings that we go through. We go talk to the advisory boards. That typically is where things begin. In the last one that we started, which is over near Virginia Lake, we had tremendous neighborhood opposition to it. Fortunately for us, the property was properly zoned and was in

an area where the city encouraged development.

Harrington: Which has been typical of all of our properties. One of the ways that we move around that issue is that we're always looking for land that's zoned. So what do we want to do? We're not going in asking for changes.

Nielsen: Right. So that's what happens. Everybody starts out against us, but then we convince them, and it's because Ann is a very persuasive person.

Harrington: No, that's not the reason. It's because the properties look good.

Nielsen: That too.

Harrington: And they don't cause problems.

Nielsen: That's true.

So could any of those strategies, do you think, be employed by the RTC for some of their urban renewal plans for the area?

Nielsen: I don't know what their plan is. If they had a plan, I would certainly be willing to look at it and comment on it if it were detailed enough as to what they proposed. Are they proposing taking out things like some of the old motels and replacing them with other activities?

Well, I think it's in the study phase right now.

Nielsen: So what should be there?

Yeah.

Nielsen: Boy, that's tough. I mean, unless you can get the number of businesses, whether they be restaurants or some kind of a club or something, to go down there, you need a critical mass to keep that going, and I just don't see the critical mass today economically as being there. We're struggling with our downtown. We're struggling now with some other areas, the Wells corridor and the Midtown area. That needs to evolve into something and I don't know what the something is. Do you know what it is, Ann?

Harrington: I'm not sure either, Bob, because I think the main problem is, at least on the Reno side of Fourth Street, that a lot of the buildings are more than functionally obsolete. Many of them are downright dangerous. The problem is that if you take all those out, where are the hundreds of people who are living there going to go live? I think that's a big issue with anything that gets done on the Fourth Street corridor. You take out businesses like that, and those families and individuals living there don't have a hundred other choices, and I think that's step one.

Nielsen: And they're probably one step away from homelessness, right?

Harrington: Exactly. If you take away their motel option, there probably aren't enough motel rooms left in the city that they can afford to accommodate them, and so you're just going to increase the homeless count, and that makes no sense to anybody. So I think that it's a systemic problem that's got to be attacked from the very bottom ground-floor level, which is that you've got people living there who don't have other choices.

Are you glad that you stayed in Reno this whole time? Are you ever thinking of relocating?

Nielsen: Oh, no, it's a great place to live.

Harrington: Yes, we love it here. We made that choice a long time ago to stay.

Nielsen: I love the outdoor life, and it certainly sits on the edge of a vast outdoor recreation area. Actually, not on the edge; in the middle.

Harrington: In the middle of it, yes.

Nielsen: I'm thinking east of here, you talk about hunting and fishing and camping and hiking and gliding and paraskiing and all kinds of stuff, it's just fabulous, and of course, to the west of us is Lake Tahoe, which is fabulous, so it's a great spot and that's why we're here.

Did you meet your wife here? Is she from here?

Nielsen: I met my wife in seventh grade in California. I didn't like her, but I married her.

Harrington: Bob!

Nielsen: I got to like her.

Harrington: Yes, you did. She learned how to tolerate you, too, so you got lucky there.

Nielsen: Are you speaking about our relationship now?

Harrington: No, we're not going there. [laughs] We're not going there.

Any other suggestions for the RTC, something specifically that you would like to see?

Harrington: I think that clearly the entire success of public transportation on Fourth Street or anywhere in the city is having frequent bus service so that people can really use it, and make it so that it's convenient and easy as possible. I think that a lot of people in our project on Fourth Street, the Plaza on Fourth Street, do use the bus. I don't think as many do who live over in Sparks on the Sierra Crest project, partially because some of them are seniors. I don't know. Bob, don't you get the impression that there are more of them using a bus at the Plaza than there are at Sierra Crest?

Nielsen: Yes, I would think so. Now, we buy bus passes at Sierra Crest, don't we?

Harrington: Yes, we do. Part of the deal with the City of Sparks is that we could put in fewer parking places if we bought bus passes and made them available to our residents, which we do every year. That's kind of cool, I think.

Nielsen: Yes, maybe I should have called her and found out how much they're utilized, but I know that we continue to do that. So I guess what Ann is saying is improved transportation.

I think an effort like you all are doing to try to redefine what folks want there is very important. I was a little bit involved because I was on the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce when Wells was redefined, and I think Wells continues to get a little better.

Harrington: Yes, I think so, too.

Nielsen: I would like to see Fourth Street in the same mode, continuing to get a little better. I don't know how to do that. I guess encouraging additional jobs and additional activity is a good thing.

Great. Thank you very much.

Nielsen: You're very welcome.

ANITA ROSS HICKS

Sparks Resident and Daughter of Photographer Farrel Ross



Anita Ross Hicks in 2016. Photo provided by Anita Ross Hicks.

A lifelong resident of Sparks, Anita Ross Hicks is the daughter of Farrel Ross, who ran one of the area's most successful photography businesses. He was also a property developer, responsible for the construction of numerous buildings through Reno and Sparks, including the Ideal Shopping Center on Prater Way, where Ross Photo was located for decades.

Alicia Barber: I am here with Anita Ross Hicks. We are at her home in Sparks on Farrel Ross Drive and the date is March 13, 2015. I just want to ask you first, Anita, if I have your permission to record this interview with you today to make available to the public.

Anita Hicks: Yes, it would be great.

Thank you so much. We have a lot to talk about today. We are focusing on the property on Prater Way that became the Ideal Shopping Center, which your father developed. I'd love to start back a little bit before that, though, and learn a little bit about him, so we have some context for why he was in this area, and if your family was actually from this area before that generation. We want to lead up to how he came to establish his business and move to Prater Way.

Oh, that would be lovely. Let me just start by saying that my father is Farrel Ross, and he always went by Farrel L Ross. His whole middle name is just *L*—not with a period after it, just *L*. His parents made that into their routine with the boys; they just gave them an initial. Maybe they just weren't too creative or maybe it was the style of the day. We have never been able to figure that out, but it always used to annoy him when people would put a period after his *L*. That's neither here nor there, but just how things got confused when he was alive, because people used to call him Ross all the time, or Farrel, or ask "What does the *L* stand for?"



Farrel L Ross. Photo courtesy of Anita Ross Hicks.

He was born in 1920, and he lived on an Indian reservation, so he had little exposure to anything. It was very remote. He decided that he wanted to sell seed packets to this teeny little town where the residents were very spread out, so that he could get his own camera. Well, when he finally earned enough to buy his first camera, he didn't have any money to buy film. [laughs] So it was a big learning process for him.

Then he had a roommate when he went to school who introduced him to photography, and he also worked for a drugstore in Idaho, because that was where he wanted to go to school. He wanted to become a forest ranger. He was only able to go to school for a semester there, and his folks needed him back at the farm, so they came, picked him up, and brought him home.

But then he heard about an opportunity to earn more money than his dad ever thought of earning in his lifetime. The railroad would give you seventy cents per day if you could pass their telegraphy class. That was going to be held in Ogden, Utah, so he pursued that. In the meantime, he met my mom and married her. Eventually he was hired by the railroad, which at that time was gearing up for World War II, when so much was needed in terms of transportation.

He was transferred quite often, and they were transferred to a little tiny place about an hour and a half out of here in Parran, Nevada, which is no longer even visible—it was just in the middle of the desert. My mom got out and said, “This has to be what hell looks like.” [laughs] That was the first time, I think, my mother ever said that word. [laughs] It was very traumatic for them, and yet they were some very good years. But that introduced them to Sparks, Nevada, because on rare occasion they would be able to come in and get some groceries here. They bought their first car here, but that was also when they had gas ration stamps, so they had to save up to buy those stamps and couldn't drive their car very far.

He was eventually transferred into the station in Sparks, and there, he went from a telegrapher to becoming the youngest train dispatcher. He worked seven days a week, and it was very grueling work. It was a lot of stress, and he decided that that was going to wear him out quicker than he desired, so he decided he would go into business with a man named Barney Bernard. Barney knew more about photography, and so he taught my father a little bit about it.

Then my father, Farrel, decided he'd get this teeny tiny little scooter that he could barely fit himself on, but he could manage. He rode from downtown Sparks to downtown Reno and started standing on the courthouse steps in order to catch newlywed couples coming out of the courthouse, take their picture, and then send it to them COD. I think he'd charge them fifty cents to a dollar for these pictures. And that was how he started really getting his name out there.

Well, the other photographers didn't think that that was too fair, and so they went and appealed to the City Council, who passed an ordinance that you could no longer do that. So he started doing weddings and school pictures and yearbook pictures. Back then, very, very few people had their own cameras, and so it was always the job of a professional to take all their pictures. For Christmas, he would become very, very busy. It was the best time to take a family picture, especially around here where people didn't have generations of their family living with them. It was very transient, even back then. So Christmastime was a very busy time for him.

My mother, trying to save money, would then oil those pictures, and she would have to put in all the coloring. You had to describe who that person was, if you had brown eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, the color of your complexion, the color of your hair, the color of your clothes. The job of the receptionist was to put all that information in so that my mother could color those pictures. That's what it was called—coloring pictures. “Oiling” is what she would always call it. For the majority of my early years, she did that so many hours a day before Christmas, that by Christmas her hands were cracked and bleeding. But

it saved my mom and dad a bundle of money to have her do that, so she continued to do that while he was still busy.

He had the largest photography studio in northern Nevada, and in the fall, when he was starting to do yearbook pictures and school pictures, he traveled all of northern Nevada as well as northern California to get to their schools and take their pictures and then get them sent off. Added to that, Christmastime was always busy, so we rarely saw him. He would always try to make it home for dinner if he wasn't out of town, and make sure that he played with us kids. But the bulk of the responsibility for the raising of six children was on my mom. They worked really well as a team, my mom and dad. My dad could not be successful if it hadn't have been for the total dedication and support of my mother.

My dad then decided that he wanted to have his own studio, so early on, when he was still working for the railroad and still thinking that maybe he could reduce his workload—I'm not sure that worked out well—by going into photography, he started on Thanksgiving Day to build their own building on B Street. It was a little building, and even back then he had really good business sense, so he built a duplex-style building, where he could have his studio on one side and rent out the other. Therefore, his side would be free because of the rent he earned from the other tenant.

It worked out well for him, but by that time, the business partnership dissolved, and he became the sole owner of Ross Photo. This was his first building experience, and it wasn't too shabby, but it wasn't the greatest. But it gave him confidence, and so he decided that he would look at the property at 1845 Prater Way. There was a home there, and he moved our family into that home to live for a few years. I think it was two or three years. Then he lifted that home up and moved it to 1063 15th Street past the high school, and we lived in it there, because he didn't want to waste anything.



Two of the first storefronts in the Ideal Shopping Center in 1956 were Dick Rock's Ideal Drugs and the Ideal Laundro-Matic. Photo courtesy of Anita Ross Hicks.

He employed a contractor to help him, but towards the middle of the project, the contractor took all his money—absconded with it and left town, leaving my dad with all these workers and nothing to pay them. He did pay them; he got all the workers paid somehow. But then he had to pick up the pieces with very little money and finish the project.

He knew what he wanted, and he wanted to have more units. So he went into Utah, grabbed my uncle, who had just had a little bit of experience being a bricklayer—a masonry guy—and he brought him out. Together, they developed a lot of property here in town as Ross Enterprises. My dad really got the bug to develop more property through the years, so in 1973, I believe it was, after twenty-some-odd years, he decided to sell Ross Photo. He had invested so much of himself in development and the photo business, and he was so fragmented. And he had very good employees, one of which was my brother, so he sold Ross Photo to my brother and three other employees: Kaz Fujimoto, Tom White, and Helen Radmall, who is my aunt, as well. He felt very confident about them and gave them a very good deal.

Then he started developing all this other property, and he really loved that. That was his whole passion, along with photography. He always continued to dabble in photography the rest of his life and loved it. He was asked many times even after he retired to do more weddings, and he really enjoyed that.

He enjoyed meeting people, even though as a child he was extremely, extremely shy, to the point where he wouldn't even like to go to family gatherings—he'd cry and run away—so he had to overcome that. And through the help of my mother giving him enough confidence, he would go out and force himself to drum up business. Meeting people became very good for him, and after that, he decided he really liked people and became a very, very friendly person.

He also during that busy time of his life worked well with the community and city Chamber of Commerce and a number of the community organizations. He was always highly effective, not necessarily participating with them, but promoting them and helping them in any way he could with the amount of time that he had. He was also very, very active in his church, and all the time that he was busy in community affairs as well as his business, he was always most devoted to his family and to his church. He always attributes his success to that, that his priorities were well grounded.

It does seem like photography is one of the most socially demanding types of professions you can be in, to be around all these different people and to have your job be to help them feel comfortable so you can have a good session and they can have a good photograph.

He was always, always the best at taking baby pictures. He could make a baby smile regardless if that kid was screaming. He could always get a good baby smile. Even to the day he died, we had people come into the hospital or meet him and say, “Mr. Ross, you took my pictures when I was a little kid,” and they always remembered it with such a great feeling. Even today I go into people's homes and I look at their pictures, and I see a little “Ross Photo” on the very edge and think, “That's my daddy.” It makes me very proud.

When he had the studio in the Prater Way property, what prompted him to move his actual studio from B Street to Prater Way?

He just had a sense. He knew that the downtown area was getting kind of old and rundown, and he knew that the direction of commercial business was moving down the street. With Park Grocery and Safeway opening on Prater Way, and then Food King, which was right next to him, a lot of the major

commerce was moving to that little area of town. That's where he wanted to be so he could have great access to all the people traveling along Prater Way. That was the main corridor through town, so there was a lot of business and a lot of people going through.

When he had the studio in the Prater Way location in the Ideal Shopping Center, can you describe how it was set up? If you walked in the door, can you take us on a little tour of what his studio was like?

Yes. It changed over the years, but in the early years, he only had one suite. When you walked in, there was a little sitting area, and Norma Crompton, the receptionist for years and years and years, would be on the right-hand side. Then he would lead you down a long corridor to the studio in the back. That is where it always was; regardless of any kind of changes or upgrades, his studio was in the back of the building.

As you went in, there was a little bathroom where he would have his girls put on powder-puff drapes for their yearbook pictures. Then outside the bathroom as you turned left, that was the studio. Of course, I was little so I don't know how big it was, but to me it was a very big room. All the different backdrops would be on one wall, and his camera would be on a tripod facing the backdrops. Little stools and little toys would be over to the left before you got to the backdrop, along with a cupboard full of props—he always called them “props”—for propping people up so that they wouldn't be too far apart. He always went to conventions to get the latest and the greatest in photography and tried to always upgrade his methods. He always wanted to take at least one thing away from a convention that he was going to improve on.

Then over to the right-hand side, he would look into his camera. Also on the right-hand side was a wall full of windows and an outside door where he would come in. He would park in the back of the building, and he would come through that door most often. Then beyond that was always the workroom, as we called it. There was a workroom and the darkroom and the processing room. Those would be the areas where you would develop the pictures. The black room is where you had to take photos straight out of the camera and then process them. And then the workroom is where they would cut the pictures or frame them or dry them. Pictures were wet when they'd come out of the solution, and you'd have to take them and dry them, and sometimes they'd curl. As little kids, it was always our job to take turns placing the pictures on the dryer.

Then as time progressed and colored pictures came in—because prior to that it was all black and white or sepia—then he opened up his own photo lab in Sacramento, California. It was a lengthy process back then to do colored pictures, so the color would be shipped down there and then shipped back. But it was a huge disaster. [laughs] It was a good idea but a really bad manager stole tens and tens of thousands of dollars from him, so he literally almost went bankrupt at that point when his manager was very fraudulent and stole a lot of money.

It was one of the hardest experiences of his entire life to have something that he felt so strongly about and had invested so much money and time into developing, and then to have to sell it for a fraction of the cost because it nearly sunk him. It kind of took the heart out of his love of photography, so at that point he just stepped away.



The Interior of Ross Photo at 1845 Prater Way. Photo courtesy of Anita Ross Hicks.

Why did he open that in Sacramento and not locally here?

Because the technicians that they needed weren't local and he couldn't train somebody fast enough. Those technicians were available in Sacramento. And this guy was a shyster and really had a good song and dance about why they had to have it in Sacramento. But, basically, it was so that he could get money away from my dad without my dad really knowing. Because of that, it was really a difficult phase of his life, and like I said, he just decided to walk away, so he could pursue things that he had more control over. He never trusted somebody quite like that again.

So he had a couple experiences like that in his life. That wasn't the first time he had been cheated like that.

Oh, yes.

And yet he continued onward from that to have such a successful business in both areas, photography and property development. That's really a testament to his fortitude, I think. [laughs]

The really good thing about my dad is that he had such a big heart. That is the really big thing that I take away from that, because he was able to forgive. He was able to walk away and just forgive. He just picked up the pieces and he went on, and he never held a grudge.

That's extraordinary.

I want to ask you about some of the other tenants in the Ideal Shopping Center. Well, I have two questions. One is whether you know when the great sign was put in the front, the Ideal Shopping Center sign, because I don't know how old it is or how long it was there, but it's fabulous. And the other question is whether you can share any memories of the other tenants. I know that Ideal Drugs with Dick Rock was the first business to be in there. Can you just tell me anything about the sign and then also the different tenants?

The sign went up in the second stage—so probably about three or four years after they finished the first stage. When they started that second stage and it was starting to look like a shopping center, then they put that up. I'm not really sure who made it. All I know is that when it was getting very old and not working anymore, we had to make a decision—this was fifteen years ago—to either take it down or to invest money in it. I said, “You can't take that sign down, Daddy. You have to leave it there,” because it's so iconic, and there really isn't a sign on Prater Way corridor that is a neon original like that. So that's the only reason it's there, for the historical value.



The sign in front of the Ideal Shopping Center in 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Ideal Shopping Center is in an L-shape—half of a square, if that’s what you want to call it. When they did the first stage, the very first tenant was Dick Rock, and he was a very young pharmacist. And because my dad was going to name it Ideal Shopping Center, it became Ideal Drug. It was the one thing on the east side, and then they went south and built the other units. He was a very good tenant. He started with one unit and then expanded to two units. Well, in the seventies, you really didn’t want to have Ideal Drug. [laughs] It had kind of a different meaning by then—it was just kind of funny in the seventies to call it Ideal Drug—but he continued to call it that.



An advertisement for Dick Rock’s Ideal Drugs appearing in the Sparks High School yearbook *Terminus* in 1963. Image courtesy of Sparks Museum and Cultural Center.

The end unit has always been a laundromat—there was always a laundromat and a pharmacy. And early on, there was a beauty salon. It would often change hands, but there was always a beautiful beauty salon there that they would update. Irene Almond used to work there all the time, and she just was the greatest. She could do your hair any way you wanted it. She always would pop into the studio, and she and my dad got to be great friends.

Then during World War II, people were introduced to our area from outside, and a lot of the Air Force people came in. But there weren’t any offices in the area for doctors. So because of Stead, Dr. Raymond and Dr. Stoker and Dr. Diedrickson and all those very, very early Sparks doctors started in the

Ideal Shopping Center, and they stayed there for a long time until they could see that they needed to go out and get newer facilities. So there wasn't a doctor's office after that.

Pat Higgins had a real estate office in there for quite a while until he moved out. Then there's always been a little café here, and after changing hands many times, it became what it is now, a little Mexican place. But it was always a café.

Then there was always Ross Photo. It started in that first little section, and then as it grew, it went into another unit, and then ultimately it took over three units. Then there was a music store right next to Ross Photo. The guy who started the music store just left one day. [laughs] He walked away. He gambled all of his money, and he couldn't pay the rent. He didn't have anything left, so my dad said, "Well, I'll take your music store." So he took it over, and that is how C&M Music Store came to be. My dad had no clue how to run a music store. He was selling pianos and organs just right and left, just not knowing what to do. [laughs]

So he went to school. He went to the Kimball Piano factory convention, and he learned how to sell pianos. But he knew he wouldn't have enough time to do it himself, and so he went to BYU and he posted a notice. He met Wendell Carpenter during the first interview, told him he was hired, and brought him home. [laughs] And Wendell Carpenter has owned that music store ever since. When Ideal Drug moved out in the seventies, C&M Music Store moved into that space and stayed in the Ideal Shopping Center for many, many, many years.

Here's an interesting side note: next to the music store was a little place where Betty Stoddard had a little exercise studio called Niblack. [laughs] It was a little exercise area for women. If I could only have had a picture of the inside of that! They had this machine that you'd wrap around your bottom and it would vibrate, and it was supposed to vibrate the fat off your bottom. She had ladies going in and out of there trying to get rid of their bottoms. [laughs] Betty Stoddard was famous even back then when I was a little girl, because she had a TV show on after school, and she would show a movie. That was famous for all us kids, because we'd always want to run home after school and see what Betty Stoddard was going to show for her movie. [laughs] So I'd see her come in. It was really fun to watch her come in and out. She always had her makeup perfect. Her hair was always immaculate. And she was young and beautiful.

So a number of things have come in and out, but to start with and for very many years, it was always the drug store, the hair stylist, the café, and the doctors' office. But I neglected one that stayed there for the very longest amount of time, and that was Western Print Company. They printed books and papers, and they were a major binding company. In fact, many of the early Nevada history books were bound and printed by Western Print Company. They stayed in that corner section of the shopping center for many, many, many years, and finally Dorothy Marston—she was a widow for quite some time; I can't remember the husband's name—ran that herself for a very long time, until she was eighty-some-odd years old. They couldn't sell it because the equipment was aged. It was where you had to take the individual type and set it out, so it was still typesetting. But she stayed there and worked and worked and finally they closed and left all that equipment in there, and we just had to get rid of it because we couldn't sell it or store it or anything else. That was a very sad day when Western Print went out, but it was there for a very long time.

And your family still owns the property?

Yes, we do. [laughs] My dad has been dead now three years in July, and he set up his affairs so that now that is run by myself and my husband and my brother. So his properties are still around. He

didn't ever like to get rid of much. [laughs] That's one of them, and to this day, we still have that original sign, that is on the corner on Prater Way. I still love it, and if I ever take it down, I will be keeping it in my backyard.

So he had left the photo service—well, he had passed that along to his children, and other partners. How long did that photo service operate, or is it still in operation?

That is a good question. His partners started to go on to some other things. It's very difficult to have four partners in a business. My brother was the first one who sold his shares, and that left my aunt and two of the employees. My aunt was getting old and beyond retirement age, and wanted to move to be closer to family, so she sold her shares. Then it was no longer family-owned, but the two employees sold it to a national chain, and that national chain kept it as Ross Photo clear up until the end of 2011. Then they moved and failed, because they moved and didn't use the name of Ross Photo. It was a long-established name, and people associated a lot of good memories and good quality work with that name. So it is no longer in business and it is no longer around here in town. But it was there for close to sixty years. That's an estimate. It was a very long-established business, and it's sad to see it gone, but photography has changed a great deal.

My dad was also instrumental in getting a studio, Ross Photo, on 812 North Virginia Street, as well as on Wells Avenue. And he also had a studio that only lasted until the flood of—I believe it was '55, which completely demolished that. It was at 1-1/2 North Virginia Street on the north side of the river, and he lost everything. That was another huge setback, because he had all of his equipment, all of his pictures, and all the film there. Everything just swam around in there because the water was three-quarters of the way up the building, and it just ruined everything. So they just had to completely take it as a loss and lick their wounds and go back to the 1845 Prater Way Ideal Shopping Center. [laughs]

Where was the studio on Wells Avenue? Do you know if that building is still there?

Yes, that building is still there. It's a little shopping center at the corner of Wells and Claremont. Pettin Place is there now. He built that building and then put Ross Photo in it. With anything that is brick, you can tell my dad built it with my Uncle Garth, because it's all brick. [laughs] Oh, gosh.

Now, something you had told me before but didn't go into this time is how the shopping center got its name and who came up with that name.

My father, Farrel, just came up with it. He said, "Well, Ideal was perfect for my image of what this was going to be." It was going to be an ideal setting, an ideal location, and he just thought that was a great name, so he named it Ideal Shopping Center, which is good, because nobody else has used Ideal anything for a long time. And back then it was a good word. Everybody used "ideal."

I was reading a lot of the ads from the fifties and the sixties, which were calling Prater Way the "Main Street of Sparks." They would compare themselves to Reno, and one thing they would say is that there was ample parking, there was free parking, no cost for parking. It seemed like it was a competitive thing between Prater Way and downtown Reno, but Prater Way had the edge because there was so much space

that all the new developments could create parking lots as part of their development—which is, of course, what the shopping center did too.

Thank you to the city of Sparks. Yes, it was a major bonus, because everybody went to downtown Reno to do their shopping. There was Gray Reid's and there was J.C. Penney, and if you wanted to do any kind of clothes shopping or upscale shopping of any kind, you had to go to Reno. There was a distance between Sparks and Reno. So whenever you'd say, "I'm going to Reno," it was always, "I've got to go to Reno," if you're from Sparks. Or if you're from Reno, "I've got to go to Sparks," like it was this major hour commute or something like that. I always thought that was pretty funny, the way people described that.

But Sparks really had more open space. They wanted it that way. They didn't want to have everything so congested. And it became the main corridor that B Street used to be. When B Street became more congested, they moved everything to Prater, so Prater Way was the major corridor between the two cities and also the corridor to go shopping. The parking was so much better, a lot more open. And the grocery stores were the same way. We actually had grocery stores in Sparks, while in Reno it was very difficult to get the grocery stores. They had more neighborhood grocery stores in the early days. When Food King and Safeway came in, that was huge because you could park without any trouble, or you could walk. A lot of people in that area walked back then. There weren't so many taxis in Sparks. There were far more taxis in Reno, but they were still expensive.

I wonder if you can tell me about your high school years, and what years you were in high school. I get the sense that especially around Prater Way and 15th Street were a lot of teenage hangouts. [laughter] There were a lot of these little drive-ups and drive-ins. Could you describe that at all and tell us when you were in high school?

Well, growing up in the fifties, where Scoopers is now was A&W, and A&W was huge. It was a drive-in. You would pull up and there was a little shelf that pulled out for you to put your food on. They came to your window and they'd put the tray on the shelf, and you'd eat right there in your car. It was fabulous. My dad would treat us especially to root beer floats, and that was the beginning of an obsession with root beer floats. I love them. But it was for everybody.

There was Robert Mitchell Elementary School and there was Sparks High School, and in the early days there was the junior high, before the junior high was built over on 18th Street. So you had this little circle of children all over the place.

Then you had Park Grocery, which was like, "Hello, candy world!" [laughs] Candy world was our Park Grocery. That was wonderful. Then we had Dairy Queen open up when all of us were very little. And Dairy Queen has had a myriad of changes. It's been able to transform itself and maintain that very same location for all of these years. So you always had these places that you could go for lunch and after school or play practice or after sports events. You didn't have very far to go. And they catered to us. It was a lot of fun to not have to go so far away, and so they were really very accommodating.

Well, A&W decided to move to Reno, and then Scoopers came in. So when I was going to high school, it was Scoopers. But I definitely remember the A&W root beers. Scoopers was just as accommodating, I think, as A&W, with a little different menu. As time went on, it was a little more rundown. But they've got great food now. We go down there all the time. And we don't go anywhere else besides the Dairy Queen. I mean, when you get a little devotion, you stay loyal.

Then there was always the little cleaners where that Saag Market is now. There's a little cleaners or a little grocery store there. Different hands took over there as time went on, but that little intersection was a hot number because you had so many kids hanging around there doing things after school, and families on the weekends. It was all very family oriented and everyone had a great time. [laughs]

Do you remember two places that aren't there anymore, the Midget Kitchen and the Country Boy that were on that corner for a while? It might have just been for a little short period of time, but the Midget Kitchen was just south of that Saag Market building, and the Country Boy was on the 15th Street side of the Dairy Queen for a little while.

It was. It was, but they weren't as popular. [laughs] Those were more for the older kids or the older set, because you just had these set things that you had to do as a kid, and those were the places you go. The other ones were for adults. [laughs] You didn't tread across.

Do you remember ever going inside Gepford's Furniture store or when it was Patrick Higgins Country Store?

Yes, we did.

Can you describe that a little?

I was a kid at the time, so it always had things that were of no interest to me at all. The only interest I had in it was that it was there and I had to see what was inside. But it was always kind of dark—you know how an antique store is—and there's always the smell of old things. Mr. Gepford actually didn't like children in his store, so you couldn't go in with a group of kids, because he'd shoo you out. But I went on occasion to the store just to look inside, and it was the same feeling that you would have when you'd go into an old antique store. There were always secondhand used things, and older, and so you'd get that kind of musty old smell.

I don't think Mr. Gepford ever aged. I think he was old when I was little and old when I was growing up. You know, you get that perception. But my dad thought he was just a great guy and had a great rapport with him. But for me and the children of my age and era, we were always leery of Mr. Gepford. [laughter]

That's great, because I hadn't heard any stories about it, really. Of course, that building's been there since the 1930s and then developed over time. But I could imagine it had a bit of a musty smell.

It did. But the really good thing is that Sparks was such a bedroom community to Reno, and we didn't have or attract people with money. So his store was of vital interest to people that were transient and railroaders and of vital interest to those people that needed something cheap but needed something in their homes. They didn't need a lot, because Sparks, in particular, had homes that were very small. And it was always convenient that when they moved, people could sell things or give them back to Mr. Gepford. He really filled a need in the community. So you've got to give him that. That is how he stayed in business; he was able to provide a service that Sparks, in particular, really needed at the time.

That's a really great explanation, because I could see that when it was founded, it was during the Depression, and so you could really see the need for that. But it's interesting to think about Sparks as always having a population that might not have been as well-to-do but needed things right away and that that was there for that.

Yes. Railroaders were very transient, for the most part, and that is really what started Sparks. And then you had all the feeder industries, the fast foods or the little neighborhood grocery stores or whatever, and he was one of them. But nowhere else in town had that service. He was pretty much the big cat in town for that service, and it really was more of a service. They're a service industry business.

Prater Way had become that very busy central main street of Sparks starting in the late fifties and into the sixties, it seemed, but then Sparks kept expanding. And your father was part of that with a lot of the property he was developing further out. It seems like you had Greenbrae pretty quickly, and the expansion outward kept continuing. I'm trying to understand the development a little bit. The community seemed to become a little more fragmented. There really wasn't a main street of Sparks anymore; there were just a lot of different shopping centers all over the place—which is kind of what happened in Reno, also, I guess.

It really was. There wasn't very good planning, truthfully, if you ask me. But what really precipitated the move of the commercial areas was that downtown Sparks was already filled in with the smaller, older homes. So if Sparks was to grow—and I can totally see how Sparks City Council would view this—it had to go outside the boundaries that existed at that time. So all these new developers began to fill in all the pastures around the city. When I was little, we had horses, and we could go to the end of our pasture, we went up in the hills, and we'd come up on Wedekind Road and ride our horses everywhere. We lived in fields that were wonderful as a kid.

But the housing developments precipitated the need for commercial units to be built to accommodate the new growth in Sparks because the industries in Reno were growing. Early on they started getting into warehousing, and the gambling industry was really growing. They had to have a little bit lower-cost homes for those people to live in, and also for the feeder industries. So that is really why the Greenbrae Center had to be built, because all those homes were shifting to the east and to the north, while the tiny town center was filled with what it already had. So I can see how that pattern started.

Then Oddie Boulevard was built. I remember when that was built because it was really close to our home, and it was great to go play on all the dirt piles that they had for the housing and Oddie Boulevard. Oddie Boulevard then really became the major thoroughfare. So it just kept moving north. You started with B Street, then it switched to Prater, then it went to Oddie Boulevard, and now it's gone to McCarran. And now you have development clear out to Spanish Springs.

And it's kind of remarkable that so many of the buildings along Prater Way that were built in the fifties and early sixties, when it started to really get developed, are still there, some being used for the same purpose and some for different purposes. But it's a great snapshot of that era.

It is. It is. Along with 4th Street in Reno, so many of those buildings are the very same as they were before. And I know Sparks has really tried in their way to spruce that up, and they have done as good a job as they can, and, of course, it has to do a lot with the individual owners as well.

I neglected to mention something that everybody in my era would love to hear about, and that was Mr. Happy. You're looking at me like, "I don't know Mr. Happy." Well, *everybody* in my era knows Mr. Happy. [laughs] It was Mr. Happy Toy Shop, and Mr. Happy Toy Shop was located on the south side of Ideal Shopping Center, and that's where he started. Mr. Happy had the only toy shop in Sparks, and so anybody who was anybody wanted to go to Mr. Happy. He was fabulous at Christmastime. That was where we would drool over the toys. It wasn't at the big shopping centers, and we didn't have the big toy store. Mr. Happy had cool stuff. And he actually did so well that he didn't last there for more than maybe ten years, and then he moved to a bigger place in the Greenbrae Shopping Center.

So he was in the Ideal Shopping Center first?

That was where he started. Everybody in my era knows Mr. Happy Toy Store. It lasted for a long time.

So there was a guy who actually went by the name Mr. Happy?

Yes.

Do you know what his real name was?

No. Nobody wanted to call him anything but Mr. Happy. [laughs] He looked like Santa Claus. He had a little round face and white beard, and his hair was pretty, and he was a little chubby. He was Mr. Happy, and everybody knows Mr. Happy. I bet the Sparks Museum would have a picture of Mr. Happy. He was wonderful. But that was where he started, there in Ideal—how could I forget that?

That's great. [laughs] You have the very unique experience of living on a street that's named after your father in a house that you lived in for a while as a child, and there are other things in town that are named after your father, too. Can you tell us what the other properties are in town, and explain how you feel about the legacy that's left on the landscape from your father?

Oh, thank you. Well, my father, of course, as I said, got the bug, and he brought my uncle out here, so he wanted to make sure that they had work to do. So with Pat Higgins as his realtor, he started looking for things to develop. The corner of Prater Way and Pyramid has a big corner for a gas station, and that used to be next to the Ma Bell, the Nevada Bell building, and then there was a big ranch, Chicken Coop Ranch, and a home. He bought that and immediately they razed the chicken coops and the home and put a gas station there. And we still own that property. That gas station is pretty vital; it's been there for many decades.

Then he also developed Ross Plaza, which was located directly behind our home. He bought that property and then developed it in stages, just like he did with Ideal Shopping Center. The Ross Plaza on both sides of Rock Boulevard is another big project that he had, and he got all of his kids involved in that one, too.

He also had projects in Reno, at 812 North Virginia and on Wells Avenue. He bought a lot of properties and also built properties for apartments there in Reno, as well. Number one, though, at 812

North Virginia, was named after my mother. And I have the cutest story to show you how much he and my mom loved each other. He built that property and he did a lot of the work himself. When he was to the point where he could occupy it and he wanted to name it, he secretly had the name put on the building. And then one night he grabbed my mom and said, "Let's go. I want to show you something." He drove her to the front of the building and said, "This is the name of my building," and he had named it after her. That's why it's called the Della N. Apartments, because it's after her. [laughs] It was just something to show his appreciation for all that she did to make him successful.



The Della N. Apartments at 812 N. Virginia Street. Photo courtesy of Anita Ross Hicks.

Then he went on to build the building on Wells Avenue, and he's built some apartments on Monroe. On Neil Road, he built a number of little cottages that he later sold. It was a huge, huge undertaking for him, because he did a lot of the work there himself, as well. At Thirteenth Street and G Street and a number of little places, he would just build on his own. He would take out a loan and leverage one property so that he could build another property, but he never wanted to leverage something to the point where he'd lose it. He always had to do his paperwork, and he always did it by hand. He never did anything more than scribble a bunch of figures on paper and do it all in his head.

As a result of that, he had to make a decision in 1978. His properties were getting so numerous that it was beyond him to take care of it all. So he asked my husband to come and work for him, and they developed quite a bit of property together. On this street here on Wedekind Road, he bought six acres

first. That was across Gray Day Acres, which is Les Gray. He bought that first, and then eight acres right next to it came available, and so to keep his brother close, because they were always very close-knit, he sold the six acres right over here to my Uncle Garth, and then he developed the homes right here. The first home right here is where I was moved into when I was twelve years old, and I have lived in four houses on the same street named after him.

That's just so special. Who can say that?

Nobody but me. [laughter] Who stays on the same street? Just me. [laughs]

And as a result, you have such accumulated knowledge of this area. I'm just so grateful to be able to speak with you about this—

Thank you.

—because you can give a first-person account of so many of the important eras of the area's history that I don't think have been documented very well.

Not very well.

So it's just a real pleasure.

And that's what we appreciate you for. You are awesome, in my eyes. We're all sitting there looking at you, saying, "Thank you. Thank you for doing this." Our little area has a difficult time developing history and keeping it close to us. Because we are transient and because we want to move forward instead of backward, we seem to lose our history, and therefore we need this. Thank goodness there are some funds that they've coughed up to help supplement that. But it's not just that. You really have the passion for it, and that, my dear friend, is why you will be our saving grace. Our history will be in your hands. Thank you very much. [laughs]

Thank you. And I'm sure we are going to talk in the future about other topics. [laughs] Thank you so much, Anita.

Thank you.

SPENCER HOBSON

Owner, Reno Brewing Company Bottling Plant Building/Hobson Square



Spencer Hobson inside the Reno Brewing Company bottling plant building in 2011. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Spencer Hobson was born in Reno, where his grandfather, Antonio Bevilacqua, emigrated from Italy. His family members owned several casino properties, including Virginia City's Frontier Club and Reno's Overland and Riverside Hotels. Spencer owns the Reno Brewing Company bottling plant building at 900 East 4th Street, which his father purchased in 1956 after the brewery closed. He also discusses Reno's Italian community and the urban renewal project that targeted homes north of East 4th Street in the 1960s.

Alicia Barber: I'm with Spencer Hobson at his office at Hobson Square. It's Monday, October 3, 2011.

Mr. Hobson, do I have your permission to record this interview today?

Spencer Hobson: Yes.

I wanted to start by just asking you some biographical questions. When and where were you born?

I was born at St. Mary's Hospital in Reno, Nevada, in 1943, and we lived at the Rosasco Ranch for a short time.

Where is that ranch?

Rosasco Ranch is basically at the end of where the fairgrounds are, near Sutro Street. Wedekind Road runs through the middle of the Rosasco Ranch. We moved from there to Arlington Avenue by the time I was three years old. We had a family house on Arlington until I was in the fourth grade, and then we moved to Timothy Lane, which is in Southwest Reno off of Holcomb.

The first school I can remember was a day school at Marcie Herz. Marcie Herz was one of the originators of the Reno ski program. She would load a bunch of us little monsters up in her station wagon and we would go skiing at Sky Tavern. She was very well known for that.

That was in kindergarten. Then, Mt. Rose Elementary School was right up the street, so I went there through the third grade. Then, we moved to Timothy Lane and I went through the rest of my elementary school at Huffaker. After that, my family sent my brother and me to the Army-Navy Academy in Carlsbad, California, a military school.

How many years were you there?

I graduated there—I was there four years. That was high school.

Do you know why they sent you to a military school?

My brother got the choice of either going to Elko for reform school or going to military school. He didn't like going to school. He cut too much school, and being the little brother, I just went with him.

What was your brother's name?

Richard Hobson. He was named after my uncle, who was "Pick" Hobson. Pick's real name was Richard Hobson.

Did you go to college?

I went to numerous colleges and junior colleges, and I never graduated. I went to the University of Nevada; I went to Foothill Junior College; I went to one right outside of Carlsbad. Then, I started working for the family and never finished college. I got through the last half of my junior year and then got out of it.

I liked arts too much and couldn't find the arts I liked. I had trouble in military school because of

that. I did photography for the yearbook there; that was my outlet.

What was it like growing up in Reno?

It was a very small town. I remember when I was living on Arlington, every day I would come down to 505 Montello Street in the Fourth Street area. My grandfather, Antonio, had his business there—Bevilacqua House Moving. They were house movers. Most of the homes were moved either by my grandfather or his brother, John Bevilacqua.

Each one of them had two sons. My grandfather had Aldo and Rumolo. Those were my uncles and they had their house moving, A. Bevilacqua House Moving, and then Janine had two sons, Johnny and Dario. They had Bevilacqua House Moving. One was A. Bevilacqua and the other one was just Bevilacqua.

Did your grandfather emigrate from Italy?

He came here from a little place in Italy called Torriglia. It's up above Genova. You'd call that Swiss-Italian up there. It was right around 1900. He and a lot of fellow Italians moved to this area—the Capurros, the Oppios, the Avansinos, the Lagomarsinos, and the Caranos. You can line them up and they all came here because this was more like northern Italy. They all got established here and took over the valley.

Was house moving his first profession?

No. In Italy he was a fireman, and he did terrazzo work. When he came here, he started doing terrazzo work and got into cement work. Then, he got into putting foundations underneath homes because most homes had rubble rocks. When he started lifting these houses up, they then started moving them. I have pictures of him—I believe it's a 1907 picture—moving one of the big houses down through Reno, right in front of the courthouse. We'd move houses to Virginia City. We'd move houses to anyplace and everyplace. They became known for that.

He also did a lot of curb and gutter work in Reno. On California Street, there was a rubble cement wall built—he did a lot of that.

When I was a kid, I worked with him moving houses a lot of the time. I had a lot of fun with it. We had a real good time doing that.

What would you do as a kid to help out?

My cousin, Mike Bevilacqua, and I were the smallest ones in the family when we got started. So we got to crawl under the houses and were the first ones to start getting them off the ground. We'd place the jacks and get everything set up so the house could be raised. We'd get the timber underneath it so the house was secure.

Sounds a little dangerous.

Well, yes. We learned how to manage black widows very well. The house couldn't fall on you

once we started blocking it up, though.

I would also do what they call “riding the roof.” When you’re moving the house, there are power lines and telephone lines in the way, so a lot of times you have to lift them up and walk them over the roof and then back down the other side. That was a real good job for my cousin and me because the other workers were busy managing the house as it was going down the street. That was a lot of the stuff that we did, and it was fun.

You got that great experience of riding a house down the street.

Yes. We’d do it at sunrise, so I fell in love with sunrises. What a place to be. We’d move the house, and once we got it under way, we’d stop and have breakfast. It was a real family journey there. We moved houses to Virginia City. We moved box trains to Virginia City—we put them out on cliffs, basically. Lake Mansion was first moved by my family. A lot of mansions around here were. There are quite a few on the way to Carson City that we moved.

By the time you were helping out with this, were they using motor vehicles to move them?

Yes. I’ve got a picture of him with an old truck. I think it was called a *fragile* at that time. They did the first moves with horses and pulleys, so there was a lot of labor to it. Then, they got a big truck called a Corbett. The Corbett was an ex-war truck, and I don’t think it could go past 35 miles per hour, but it could pull anything. We pulled to Carson City on the Old Road, so that was fun. We went to Gardnerville. It was a crazy circumference around there. They were the first ones all around and they’re still very well known for what they did.

We have a lot of oral histories in our collection that mention houses being moved by the Bevilacqua family.

My grandfather designed a system that was called the *bosta* system because there was a beam in the front. It was a triangle system. The first ones had steel wheels that were about fourteen inches wide, and they were all steel-spoked. He would balance this thing in a triangular way and then the rear ones would steer together. You put a plank between them on the tongue so that the front wheels of the rear dollies would steer, and then the front one would steer and it was hooked up to the truck. You could spin a house on its own diameter.

You mentioned 505 Montello. Was that his house? Did he have a separate office?

No. He worked right out of his house. It was a duplex, and there was always one of my uncles living next door.

In another house that the family owned?

Yes, because the whole house-moving part was in the backyard. He had garages where he could maintain everything. I think that’s where I got a lot of my mechanical ability, because they’d turn me loose in there. I couldn’t touch a lathe or the welder, but I could use any other tool I wanted. They were

Italian, so we had a lot of stuff to work with. I was always making something. I was always doing something back there. My grandmother, Gemma Costa, and mom were very artistic. They were real talented people.

Did your father work in the business too?

No. My father was the Welsh side of me. He was born in Homer, Illinois. They moved out here in the early 1900s and settled in Corning, California. My father was going to college at Berkeley to be a doctor, and his father passed away, so that ended that.

Then, my father worked with the U.S.G.S. There's a book called *The Three Iron Men in the U.S.G.S.* He and some fellows by the name of Smokey Moore and Scott Peterson did all the trinities here. They rode on horseback, and wrote a book about them because they figured a way to do the triangulations and set all the topography on it. They did it in record time.

That's a kind of surveying, trinity?

Yes. That's how you calculate elevations and find the mountain—like you see drawn now, you see the elevations. They used what they called an *alidade*. I got my dad's original alidade. The U.S.G.S. gave it to him, so I had it restored. They would set it up on a table with a rod, and they'd go out and do this work. One guy would stay on one side of the valley, and the other would go over to the other side.

It was before the survey equipment they have now. You'd set the alidade up on a table and level it. It had power to it, and they'd run a rod on the other side. Then you would calculate elevations with it. Basically, it made a topographical map of the area. They were the first one in the trinities to do that. Smokey Moore ended up being the head geologist for the U.S.G.S.

When did your father move to this area?

He came here in 1939 or 1940. When he first came here, he worked at the Palace Club with Sil Petricciani and Sil Petricciani's father. Sil just passed away.

I saw his obituary just this weekend.

Yes. Silvio's sister, Marietta, was married to my uncle, Pick Hobson. I know that family pretty well.

Then the war started happening. My uncle went in the military. My dad couldn't go in the military because his whole shoulder was basically pulled off of his arm from playing football. So he went to Hawthorne, Nevada. He and a guy by the name of Harry started Harry's Club in Hawthorne, Nevada.

What was your father's name?

My father's name was Joseph or Joe. They started Harry's Club there, and they cashed the payroll for what was the largest Navy ammunition dump in the world at that time.

At that time, there was no bank in Hawthorne, so my mother would come to Reno. She was lucky because she had a Buick. She would bring my brother, who was four years older than I, and our chow-

chow, into Reno to cash the checks in order to maintain the business.

That could have been some large quantities of cash.

There were some pretty good quantities. She would drive to Reno and get the cash, they'd go down to 505 Montello Street, park the car, leave the cash in the car, and spend the night. Then, they'd get up in the morning and drive back to Hawthorne to maintain this.

It seems like a bit of a leap for your father to have gone from surveying to working in the Palace Club. How did that happen?

In between that, he got out of surveying and he and my uncle came to Reno because there was work here for Topaz Trucking Company. Topaz Trucking Company is the company that moved the concentrates from Virginia City down Geiger Grade.

That's concentrates for mining?

That's gold and silver concentrates. The trucks were so old—Geiger Grade is pretty steep grade—and you would hit the flats up there about four miles outside of Virginia City. They would tie a log on a chain on the back of the truck so that it would drag the log down the road and slow them down. Then, when they got down to the bottom, they'd take the logs off. So there was a pile there, and I guess they moved them back and forth. That was their brakes. [laughter]

So he worked for the trucking company for a while?

He worked for Topaz, yes. Then, they got into working at the Palace Club. My Uncle Pick also worked there, and that's where he met and married Marietta. He worked at the Palace Club first, then he ended up going to Hawthorne and working there.

In about 1940, they came to Reno and my father bought some property on Virginia Street. They built the Frontier Club there. The Frontier is basically the north half of the original Harrah's that's on Virginia Street. They had Bingo there for a while. Then they got into Keno and table games. They moved Virgil Smith, who you may or may not interview. They worked the slot machines together in there.

Let me back up just to link these two sides together. Can you tell me your mother's name and how your parents met?

My mother's name was Thelma Bevilacqua, and she worked here at Grey Reid's. I don't know exactly how they met. I imagine it was probably through Petricciani. I know my mom said she ran him off a number of times. She would get off work, and he was always there. They decided it was a match, so they got married before the war. My brother was born in 1939.

Is your brother your only sibling?

Yes. He died at thirty-one in an automobile wreck. He crashed a car coming off of Virginia City right by Silver City in what they called the “Devil’s Gate.” He was pretty wild, though. He was pretty notorious around town—he was known for a lot of things. [laughter]

Can you describe your father?

My father was a real gentleman and very true to his word. He was a very intelligent person. He would do mathematics in his head. I’m a lot like that because I’m always jumping around with things to do.

He was always getting involved in different businesses. We had property in a lot of places that didn’t pan out for oil wells. He was there when Charlie Steen made his discovery in Moab. My dad was up there with some sections of land, also. They just didn’t have anything on the land. He knew Charlie very well—he knew him when the family was living in a one-room cabin up there with all four boys. He wanted to be a doctor and he should have been. He could read a book by just turning the pages, and then recall it. You’d tell him, “Page thirty-one, second paragraph,” and he would read it to you.

So he had a photographic memory?

Yes, not mechanical at all. He couldn’t do that, but he was always playing with different businesses, land, and ranches. We’ve owned ranches and property all over this area.

After we moved to Arlington Avenue, they began building the ranch house, so I moved to 245 Bonnie Briar, and 240 Bonnie Briar was one of the El Reno apartment houses that my grandfather moved all over town.

I lived there for two years, and then we moved out to Timothy Lane. We had a ten-acre ranch out there. After Timothy Lane, when I started college, we moved out to Washoe Valley and I grew up on my family’s ranch called the San Antone Ranch. San Antone was 5,000 acres.

Where was that located? Is it still open land?

If you take Franktown Road, when you get to the end you start curving around. If you look off to the left there, you’ll see a little point of trees and it looks like a small home there. Well, the small home is really not a small home; it’s huge. We had twelve bedrooms on the hill, with two guest houses and this immense house. It had an Olympic swimming pool and ten acres of lawn. It had orchards and fish ponds. It was completely self-sustaining.

It was built by a Frenchman at the time of the war. It went from the Frenchman to another old gaming name you’ll hear, Jim McKay. Jim McKay was a very good friend of my father’s, so we bought the ranch from him. All through my high school years and start of college, I’d come back home to that. That was my summer home.

We went all the way to Washoe Lake. Where the golf course is sitting now was really part of the San Antone Ranch, and then the Lightning W bought it. My dad always sold stuff a little bit early. It’s where all those nice homes are up there.

It was controversial, but supposedly one of the oldest schoolhouses in Nevada was on the property there. I’ve still got the school bell from it.

So your parents lived there for quite some time before they sold it?

Yes. We sold it because of my mom, but we should have kept it and developed it because it's major estates. My mom would drive into Reno every day to see her mom. At that time, that was quite a drive.

They believed that a Frenchman built the house and the estate. We had walk-in ice boxes on the property and there were other houses. When you shut the gates it basically became a dynasty. When we moved in the house, it had a lot of Navajo rugs, but it also had all of this German stuff. I had a table that had German werewolves on the end with the swastikas in it. I still have some of the jewelry that came out of there.

The kitchen was huge, and there was a staircase that went up over the kitchen, and up above it was a cedar room. In the cedar room, there was also a shortwave radio and it was all German. I still have those.

They believe the Frenchman was watching Hawthorne ammunition dump, and was basically a spy. His idea was the Germans were coming and he could be completely self-sustaining. The property had huge greenhouses. It's something to see. It's something to really investigate. I'd like to know myself.

What ended up happening to him?

Well, he ended up dying. Then, Jim McKay got it, and I don't even think he had it for a year before we bought it. My dad fell in love with it and we moved out there.

Did they enjoy ranch life?

Yes, my dad and my uncle both did. My father owned two ranches outside of Elko, Nevada. He shouldn't have sold them when he sold did. They're in a little town called Lamoille, and they're now called Spring Creek. It's a resort area today. I used to go up there and buck bales with him in the summer and go fishing out of the old ranch house. It was just a working ranch.

When you were growing up, you really had experiences in city life and out in the country working on ranches.

Yes.

Talk to me a little bit more about this neighborhood that your Grandfather Bevilacqua lived in, around Fourth Street. Was it an Italian community?

This was a real Italian community. There were a lot of brick homes. There was a lot of Italian life. There was the Reno Brewing Company. The Hook family was very involved in the Reno Brewing Company and lived right up the street. I'm trying to think of what Italian name wasn't here; they were all here. A lot of them were concentrated around where the Ramada is today, but it was the Holiday Inn before. Reno then came through and did what they call urban renewal.

You know, Fourth Street is the old Lincoln Highway. It used to be a real fun street. There were small businesses. The motels were always busy with people traveling through, because Highway 40 came

through here. That was the main thoroughfare, so most of the motels and some little restaurants around here were always busy. I believe that Johnny's Italian Restaurant—which is up on West Fourth Street now—used to be down here. They called it Johnny's Little Italy at that time.

You mentioned a place to me called the Subway.

The Subway bar, yes. That was on Wells Avenue before the overpass. It went over the Truckee and the train was above it. There was a tunnel that went underneath it, and the Subway bar was right there. The Subway bar was an Italian bar, and it had bocce courts on the side of it. We'd come down here on Sundays with my grandfather and I'd play bocce with him with most of the Italian kids and everybody. I was the only little blond Italian that was running around. [laughs]

So, there were a lot of Italian homes and a lot of Italian businesses.

Yes. They were neat homes. Most of the Italians were pretty proud of all their homes. My grandfather had property on what would be Fifth and Quincy now, which is in the dead center of where the Ramada sits. There was a little market there that he rented out. He had some rentals there and some homes. My Uncle Romolo ended up living with my grandparents in that duplex. My Uncle Aldo lived on the corner of Quincy and Fifth, on the north side.

Were there a number of small commercial buildings in that area as well, or was it mostly residential?

It was all mostly residential up there and here on Fourth Street. On the corner of Montello and East Fourth Street here, there was another little convenience store that was here. Then, if you go across the street, on the east side of that, there was a Dairy Queen type of building. My grandfather built that. It ended up being a Dairy Queen-type place for a while, and then it ended up being a drive-up liquor store for a while.

It's on Fourth. It's still there; the little building is still sitting on the corner. It sits on the northeast corner of Montello and Fourth Street, right across from Ernie's.

In one of the newspapers I saw reports of a Mrs. Ginocchio who was protesting that her house was going to be demolished in the urban renewal project. Did you know the Ginocchios?

Yes. There were some beautiful real granite rock homes here. As you know, most Italians use brick or stone when they build. That was the Ginocchio family's forte.

Then, in the later 1950s, the black community started down here. So, we had the Poor Butterfly across the street from us on Montello. The Poor Butterfly was a business that would do cleanup. If you needed junk removed, they would haul stuff away from your house. They'd clean the stuff up, and sometimes they'd sell it. They were very nice people.

Do you know who ran that?

I can't remember. Of course, Montello Street and Fifth Street were dirt at that time, and there were little lights hanging out over the streets. I can remember when they put the sewage in down there.

We would play hide-and-seek, and they would have what they called oil lamps burning. They were round. They called them smudge pots. They'd have smudge pots burning down there so you could tell where the hole was so you didn't drive in it. We'd sneak down there and run up and down through where all the sewage was going in and we had fun with that.

Then, right next to my grandparents' home, there was a home owned by Mrs. Davis. She owned a whole little section there, and there were some little rentable units. I guess you'd call them mini-apartments. It had about four or five units with people living in it. Later, Luther Mack lived right next door to us.

Did any of those apartments cater to the divorce trade at all, or were they just for residents?

Most of those were for residents. Most of the divorce trade was based out in southwest Reno, but these were out on the southeast corner of Fifth and Quincy Street. There was a woman there by the name of Mrs. Orange. She was a black lady, and she was like the lady on Aunt Jemima pancakes. She was number one. When I'd have a birthday, Mrs. Orange always had something going for me up there.

She had a couple of little units in the back. When the first black entertainers came to Reno—and we're talking Sammy Davis [Jr.]—they couldn't stay downtown Reno, so they would stay at Mrs. Orange's place. Then, later Bill Harrah built that place on Mt. Rose and the entertainers would stay there.

He built a house on Mt. Rose?

Yes. It's on Mt. Rose. When you first start up the hill, there's nothing on the right-hand side to turn into. You turn in and go around the lake that's there, and, you'll see this real nice 1960s-era home that Bill Harrah built for the entertainers. All of the entertainers that he took care of spent time there.

This was really quite a vibrant neighborhood where your grandfather lived, with a lot of businesses and families, mostly black and Italian, it sounded like.

Yes, and there were little grocery stores. My grandfather owned property on Montello and Fourth Street—the first little building that you see on the northeast corner there—they did ice cream in there. It was a drive-up—not a Frost Top, but it was like a Dairy Queen. He also built the building next door. You can still see it. It says “Bevilacqua.”

I'm trying to remember what was first in there. I remember helping build it—everybody in the family helped build everything around town. That's what we did in the winter or in the spring; we would build homes for the family. We'd end up either mixing the cement or doing other stuff to help.

So he built it to lease out to other people?

He built it and leased it out. It was two stories. Of course, it had a full basement, because all the Italians have full basements. If it's an Italian house, 90 percent of them have full basements because it's the cheapest thing you could build in a house at that time. It was all about family. They used the basement a lot of the time for aging salami and wine. That's the reason those were in there.

Do you remember a lot of that happening in your household—a lot of eating, making wine, Italian food?

We would always do wine. When we had the house on Arlington, it had two apartments and an older garage in the back. I remember deer hunting and deer salami. We had a lot of family that was down in the Modesto area, so they'd come up. There would be wine and all these fun things going on. It was always a party. That's what it was for.

My grandmother was a very good cook, and we'd have the whole family meet down on Montello Street on Sundays. I grew up with all my cousins and all the family. There was always a barbecue, especially in the summer, and just fun things going on.

In the summer, we'd go to Franktown Road where you go out on the old [U.S.] 40 there. There's Bower's Mansion. At Bower's Mansion, there was always a big Italian fest. It would just fill up—everybody would be there. Kids would go swimming and hike the mountain. We grew up that way. It was a real tight community.

Reno was small. Reno had Reno High, Manogue, and Sparks when I grew up, as far as high schools. B.D. Billingham was a junior high. Central was almost done, which was right up where the bowling stadium is today. Then, there were Southside and Northside junior high schools. You went through to seventh or eighth grade in grade school, went to junior high for two years, and then went to high school.

They started phasing B.D. Billingham, which is on Plumas. I believe Southside is the school on the corner of Liberty and Sinclair.

Right, that's the Annex Building. I want to go back. You mentioned that some of those areas around Fourth Street were targeted for urban renewal. It looks to me like the urban renewal area started between Fourth and Fifth Streets going up to Sixth Street and then was east and westbound between Wells Avenue and Sage Street. This was in the early 1960s. Can you talk a little more about that?

I was young; it was in the 1950s. The idea was they were going to improve Fourth Street. All that property ended up vacant because they did the urban renewal project and took it all over. That was the original spot where the convention center was supposed to be.

We're talking about where the Ramada Inn is now?

No. Up the street from that, because there was no Wells Avenue overpass at that time. If you look up there, you'll see all kinds of vacant land and some newer tilt-up warehouses. They were going to build the convention center there, and so John Hammond built the Holiday Inn in that area because it was supposed to be the gateway to the convention center.

My father obtained this piece of property [the Reno Brewery bottling plant] in 1956. I can't remember the exact dates, but he bought it because he was looking at building a casino here to link in with the convention center.

Urban renewal came in, and the intent at that time was to put the convention center here. So, they came in here and took all the old Italian community out, and just kind of said, "Here's going to be Reno's convention center. All at once, we're going to have all these things going on here." They came in and took it over and tore all the houses down.

That's when Hammond came in, and built the Holiday Inn where the Ramada is now because he was planning on being right next door to the convention center. Hammond is the guy who owns all of the

Holiday Inns and is a very wealthy person. Now he's in Florida and builds all the ones with the golf courses. He's one of the biggest Holiday Inn owners in the world.

All at once something happened with the plans for the convention center and some politics. Norman Biltz and Virgil Smith ended up getting the convention center moved out to South Virginia and leasing it—I don't know if it was all of it or just part of it—to the city of Reno for the convention center. It was still a very small operation at that time.

When you went down South Virginia Street at that time, Reno ended at Moana. Things started picking up outside of there. On the corner there was the Big Hat, which was in the brick building that's an Italian place now. It sits on the southwest corner of Moana and Virginia Street. It's called La Vecchia now, but it was called the Big Hat.

It had a big neon hat sign. Then, there was the Golden Road restaurant, and there was a motel in the back of it. It was a lot like the Peppermill. I believe it was Hill & Sons motel that sat off the road there. It was a little place, and the property across the street was also owned by them.

Norman Biltz owned the Golden Road, which was out on South Virginia Street. I believe they also owned the property where the convention center is. They talked the city of Reno into leasing the property and building the convention center out there, instead of in the Fourth Street area. Today, that's the Atlantis. I don't know if you notice there's a walkway now that goes over right into the convention center. I believe Farahi still owns that property. That's why there's a walkway from the Atlantis to the convention center.

They just kind of turned their back on Reno and went out to the most undesirable place to put a convention center in the city of Reno. It was just one of those tactics.

It just kind of shut down everything on Fourth Street. Fourth Street had big plans because the convention center was going to be there. The motels could handle it— everything could handle what was going to go on. There was no Eldorado; there was no Silver Legacy; there was no Circus Circus. All gaming was on the south side of the tracks.

If they had intended targeting this area around Fourth Street for urban renewal, for a convention center, but then that didn't happen, did they still end up demolishing a lot of houses?

They had cleaned all the houses out. They went in and took them all down with the rumors of the convention center. Then they walked away from it. They just threw their hands up and it sat for years with nothing going on.

Do you know of anyone personally whose home was in that area, whose house was lost due to the urban renewal project?

My grandfather owned a little corner store and everything that was on the corner here. Quincy and Fifth Street is right where the hotel sits, and my grandfather had property across the street. My uncle lived there, and also a fellow by the name of Joe Mazeo left there. Joe Mazeo was a piano player, and he played either at the Mapes or at the Riverside. I took piano [lessons] from him.

I'm trying to remember the Italian family that had really a beautiful old home right next door. It was all made out of squared granite block, and they just went through and basically took it out of there. Some of the people really didn't want to move; they were older Italians. Then, there was Mrs. Davis. Mrs. Davis lived behind my grandfather, and they took all of that property out.

Was she Italian?

She was related, yes.

That house you were just describing was in very good condition and part of the idea for urban renewal was that you were clearing out slums—that you were cleaning out private properties that were blighted in some way. So, in your memory, was this a blighted area?

No. It wasn't a blighted area. I think, at that time, you would call it middle-to-lower income, but the people that had the houses here...most of them were in pretty good condition.

Right across the street from my grandparents there was the Poor Butterfly, which was a cleanup company. It was a black family that was there. They were really neat people. Mrs. Orange lived there. She had some really neat little homes. It's nothing like it is today. At that time, people took care of their lawns; they took care of things. A lot of units were lower-income, I guess you could say, but the people took care of their property. It wasn't anything like what you see there today. So that's what we've got to improve.

Was your grandfather's house at 505 Montello part of this urban renewal project? Did it get demolished?

No. My dad found out that, through the urban renewal, they had to match any offer for anything that was coming in if there was another offer on it. They used some politics there because we didn't want my grandfather to move. He was getting older and he did not need to move at that time. So, my dad put a big offer in on the property and they couldn't match it, and that's why it's the only house that you see. There's only one home that's all the way up, now it's on Sixth Street. But if you look up there, there's only one home that's there on the corner of 505 Montello Street, and that was his yard. Anyhow, it didn't get wiped out. Everything around it got wiped out, everything.

The house is still there. Now they went in and made it more commercial. The people who bought it stuccoed it and it was a little duplex. They had Italian parties in it about every Sunday during the summer.

You said that the city had to give the homeowners the value of their home. They had to pay them?

Yes. They went through, and I don't know what kind of appraisal they did, but I don't know if it was what you'd call fair compensation. I'm not aware. I know they didn't match at least the value on my grandfather's piece.

In your recollection, did those families who lived there stay in Reno and just move somewhere else?

Yes. Most of them moved around—my grandparents and the next-door neighbor on the west of them. The last tenant in there was the Luther Mack family. Luther Mack grew up right next door there.

So they moved to another part of town?

Well, Luther Mack, yes. When you take an old community and tear all the houses and residential out of it and leave it all barren, people start moving. Of course, they compensated them, but then they turned around and walked away from the project.

When the urban renewal project actually started demolishing houses, did that happen all at once?

Yes. It was massive. I was away at college when that went through. I think they did that in 1965. I was going to school down on the coast and I know when I came back, there were a lot of things going on. I was doing a lot of other things, and so I guess I kind of ignored what was going on, probably because I wanted to. I didn't like seeing what was going on with this area.

They must have rezoned that whole area commercial. Then it just became open to private development?

Well, yes. They started selling some of it off, and they got the clinic that's on the corner of Wells and Sixth Street now. Some of the warehouses were put there, and some of them became distributors. There were liquor distributors up there because they figured they could be closer to downtown.

So just private business, then.

Yes.

How did that change the area? It was still an area that was very vibrant and rich as a community with residences. Is that what changed?

Well, the residents all moved out and got new locations, and we just sat here with nothing going on. Next, they got the fed money to do U.S. 80. So U.S. 80 started and, all at once, Fourth Street wasn't vibrant anymore because it was the old U.S. 40.

When 80 went in, that also divided the homes that were around here. Where the fairgrounds were, there was low-income housing at that time, but the residents were working people and everybody really liked it. When they put U.S. 80 in and cut Reno in half, they didn't do Reno any favors.

You remember houses being all the way north where the freeway is now? Did those all get demolished?

Oh, yes. There was a little grocery store on the corner of Quincy and Fifth Street. We had baseball fields here for kids, and, yes, it was really nice. There was a kid in the Air Guard who had another hall here. They'd have a lot of people come down and they would have special events going on at the hall.

At that time, it was Sixth and Quincy. You came down Sixth Street, and at Quincy you would turn left and then you would turn right again, and you'd go into this little area. "Swede" Matheson owned the area.

Swede had this little place down there, and there were a lot of Italian things that went on there also. A lot of things also went on at Laughton Hot Springs here in Reno for the Italians. That's when Fourth Street was very vibrant.

Was the area that Swede Matheson operated actually demolished for I-80?

Yes. When you go underneath there, if you look to the right, there's some kind of a goods store there. He was right about there. You can see across the street there are still some of the brick homes the Italians owned.

When I-80 was going to go in, do you remember discussions within your family, within the neighborhood, or within the community that were protesting that location? Was it a big public controversy?

No, because urban renewal had already come through and cleaned out most of everything. It was basically, "This is what we're doing," and they just did it. They moved the baseball park, Governor's Park, right alongside of I-80.

As you can see, everything changed across the street. RTC is down there now, and there was a fellow who had a warehouse that was just up the street in the space where RTC is now. That's on Sixth and Sutro streets. It sits over on the northeast side where RTC does their bus maintenance. That's still in there; I'm sure it is.

What do you recall personally about when the interstate was completed? It was completed through Reno in 1974, and clearly that would have been many years in the making. Do you recall that time?

I remember it going on, but I was living in the southwest part of Reno. Even if I went down to see my grandfather, I was still going out about two blocks away from him. I do remember not being able to go through Montello Street anymore. A lot of those things were going on, but you just kind of stay away from construction areas.

It's like when McCarran went the ring route and there was controversy on doing the ring route around here. There were a lot of things going on at that time.

I would imagine that the Fourth Street changed enormously once the interstate was done.

Once urban renewal came, Fourth Street just started dying, as you can see.

Do you think it started changing immediately?

Yes. You could see things going on here. West Fourth Street had a better survival because there were still residents, homes, and businesses there. Down here [on East Fourth Street], things just really started tapering off. People don't migrate to dirt. That's what happened down here. Once U.S. 80 was put in, I don't think it was very long before Ernie's Truck Stop went down. Ernie's Truck Stop was right on the corner of Montello and Fourth Street.

That was a very thriving stop?

Oh, it was real thriving. He had a great stop there. It was a lot of fun. Well, then they started building truck stops outside of town. On West Fourth Street, just on the other side of Keystone, there was McKinnon and Hubbard's Richfield truck stop. I worked there for a couple of summers filling trucks up,

and it was real thriving. There were a lot of trucks in there. Then, all at once, 80 was just a bypass to get by and truck stops started showing up, and so they'd pull off the freeway there instead.

Was that one of the first types of businesses to suffer from relocation with the interstate?

Yes.

Do you recall other businesses suffering pretty quickly, too?

A lot of people don't know it, but next to McKinnen Hubbard, there was a roller skating rink. I forget the construction company that's in there now, but there was roller skating before.

All the little motels and everything started dying off, and, of course, during that time downtown started to get major hotels and casinos.

In the 1970s you had the MGM Grand going in, and then a lot of construction downtown to make a lot of the existing ones bigger.

The little motels here just started dying off.

A lot of these motels do date from before Interstate 80 went in—the ones that are still there.

Oh, yes. They were there in the 1940s and 1950s.

They must have a very different clientele now. Do you remember when that really started to happen? Now, the majority of them are weekly rentals. Did that happen pretty quickly?

I think it just kept tapering off, and the casinos made rooms more affordable than motels. Everybody was into seeing the flash of what was going on at that time. So, these started dying off. I'm glad to see that back East the Lincoln Highway is really catching on.

Is this redevelopment of the Lincoln Highway that you're talking about?

Well, they're restoring them. There are people and families now who are taking the old highways—like the original Lincoln Highway, which was a bunch of different numbers and highways—and they're restoring the motels and old restaurants along them. People are taking those now instead of the freeway because, at 65 miles an hour, you don't get to see any of America anymore.

The old motels are filling up with people now. We don't have that big of a movement here, and I don't know how to really get it moving, but that's what should be done here before it isn't too late. We have a real little piece of gold in the motels and their deco. I mean, they were pretty fancy in their time.

Let's go back a little bit. As you were growing up, you would help out your dad and your uncle in some of their casino properties, right? They had the Cosmo Club and the Frontier?

Yes. They had the Frontier Club. The only thing I did in the Frontier Club was I was small

enough so I could get between the slot machines and take a coat hanger, and make a pretty good income.
[laughs]

This was without your family knowing?

No. They gave me the coat hanger. The casino business was pretty cool at that time. It was all family. It was real gamblers in Reno at that time. There were no big-business gamblers. These guys were real gamblers at the time before Harrah's sold. Once Harrah's sold, the whole gaming industry became more corporate.

So you remember it being a real family business industry.

Oh, yes. It was fun.

Were you getting coins that had dropped on the floor or were you actually getting into the machines?

No, no, just dropped quarters. The machines were set up on these little stands so things would roll around. I'd go in there and dig the money out.

Did they not patrol too much about having kids in there, or was this after-hours that you would go in?

Well, there was no after-hours. You were open twenty-four hours. I'd go in there, though. I'd go down and see my dad. I'd go run around in there. Big money to me was a buck or a buck and a half then. I made a fortune at that time. [laughs]

They had the Frontier for about ten years or so, didn't they?

Yes. Then the Frontier Club sold, and my father bought this and then they got involved in the Overland Casino, which was on the corner of Center and Commercial Row. Across the street from it was the Palace Club; catty-corner to it was the Golden; south of the property was the Greyhound bus depot; on the other side of that was Parker's Western Wear. That was basically what was in there.

There was a drugstore on the corner of Second and Center, and then Bill Harrah started Bingo there. The rest was the Golden that the Tomerlin brothers started. Then, Sil Petricciani and his family had that gaming. As things went on, the family kept getting the Commercial Row property. There was the Depot Bar and a pawn shop there at that time. The Depot Bar was right about dead center.

When you walked out of the depot, you walked right into the Depot Bar. Down on the end was the Cosmo Club. That area at that time...when you went on Commercial Row, when you went east of the Overland, they were considered derelicts down in there. A lot of the blacks would go to the Cosmo. Bill Fong had Bill Fong's New China Club there. The Santa Fe was there as well. This is the Lake Street area, and where the hotels are that burnt down about two or three years ago—the Mizpah and those.

So, just one street over was considered a very different kind of character?

Yes, there were all these rumors. They said at the bottom of Bill Fong's there were opium dens. I

never saw them, so I don't know. I know there were walkways that went underneath the trains, but I don't remember any of those.

There was a little building called the Flyer Building or the American Flyer, where Bill Harrah started his collection of cars. He used to park them down there. He would keep the maintenance on all his trucks, because they were meticulous. I don't know if you ever heard about him doing that, but they never left here. If it was snowing and they were here, they were washed and sent back up to the lake, and if they got up to the lake and it was snowing, they were washed and sent back down here. They all had whitewall tires on them, and they were painted light turquoise. They all had "Harrah's" on them. If he found them dirty and he was going up or down to the lake, heads rolled. He was very meticulous with his actions.

Once you got older and moved on from scrounging for coins under the slot machines, you started to get a bit more involved with these casino properties.

Well, then I went away to high school. So, that was in the era when things were changing—from 1956 to 1961.

What was changing?

What my family was doing. They were looking into ranches and my dad was playing with his oil wells and stuff that didn't pan out. He was doing that, and I was away at high school.

I came back home and still worked with my grandfather. I moved houses up until about 1960. Then, I turned sixteen and got my first car, and I ran the elevators at the Overland.

They had a person who was always in the elevator to run the elevators?

You ran the elevator.

Oh, you actually physically ran it?

Oh, yes. It was physical. You ran it with the old controller. Larry Fix, who's a federal judge here now in town, got his first job there, and other friends of mine.

It was a good job. It was fun. You would take people up to their room and you always got tokes. The wages weren't really heavy, but you got to work different shifts, so everybody had some time. You'd work graveyard shift, night shift, or day shift. In the night shift, you would go up for insurance. They had a round clock in a leather bag, and it had a little receptor. You'd start up at the penthouse at the top, where my grandmother lived.

Which grandmother was this?

My grandmother on my father's side. Her name was Rachel Spencer Hobson; that's where the Spencer comes from.

She lived in the penthouse, because her husband died. My dad's father died when my dad was seventeen, so she was a widow all that time. Everybody took real good care of her. She was another great cook.

Especially if I was working night shift, I would hear the buzzer go off to go up to the penthouse. I'd run up to the top of the penthouse and open up the door, and there was always a stool sitting there with a glass of milk and homemade cookies. [laughter]

You were telling me about this clock.

Yes, the clock was a leather clock and there was a timer-type device and you put a round piece of thin paper in it. You would go up to all of the exits. You'd walk all the hallways that were up there, and when you got to the end where the exit was, you'd stick paper in there and it would punch the paper for you. They called it punching clock.

You'd go down through all the floors there and do it all. That was a record for the insurance company for security and if it wasn't punched, you'd get in trouble. I think we had to do that every couple of hours.

Was there something mechanical on the actual wall on these different floors?

I think what happened was the clock rotated around and it had a set of punches in it. When you pulled up this little lever and put the paper in there, you'd activate the punches and they would punch, and the paper would rotate around through this thing. So when it punched it, you could see the time. It had one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and on each floor it would punch the time and location. I have the clock.

So you ran the elevator and then you performed those checks.

We'd perform those checks. My aunt was the bookkeeper there.

What was her name?

Her name was Mabel O'Brien. She was married to Jim O'Brien, a famous pilot around here.

That was your father's sister?

That was my father's sister, yes. At that time, they lived on Lakeside and Moana. My uncle had a ranch back there. My aunt lived in the front house and my uncle lived in a little house clear up a dirt road. We had horses. There's a medical unit on the corner of Baron Lane and Lakeside now. There's a medical brick building there, and my uncle built that house. Reno ended at Moana Lane. It was all dirt after that.

So you look around Reno now and you see your family history everywhere on the landscape?

Yes. There's property on every corner that my family has had. Topaz Lodge was my family's. I can go around this town. I wish there had been more Italian on that side, because they would have never sold any of it. [laughs]

Clarence Thornton was interviewed by our program in 1982, and he said that the Salvation Army had a

soup kitchen on East Fourth Street, and the building belonged to A. Bevilacqua.

Yes, they did. There was a Salvation Army soup kitchen. That is the building that you'll see on the north side of the street right there.

What's the cross street of that?

That's Montello Street.

Oh, okay. So A. Bevilacqua was your—

My grandfather, Antonio.

Thornton was interviewed in 1982, and said the building was still there. It's an auto parts place now, or was in 1982.

Yes, and now I don't know what it is. When my grandfather moved houses, he knew all the police and everybody at the courthouse because he got his permits at the courthouse. Around the house, everything was Italian. I didn't learn to speak Italian because it was during the war, and after the war it wasn't proper to teach kids Italian; they had to learn English.

Anyhow, my grandfather would go in the courthouse and he'd get a little bit excited. When he got excited he didn't know whether he was speaking English or Italian. He'd go "tut, tut, tut," like this. So his nickname at the courthouse and everywhere was Grandpa Tut Tut. [laughs]

Your father bought this brewery building [the Reno Brewery bottling plant] right after the brewery went out of business, and you said he was intending to build a casino here.

Yes. I'm trying to remember what exactly went on with the whole transaction part of the property, because I was away at school. I know that Redfield came here and completely redid the well on the property.

Is that Lavere Redfield?

Yes, That is LaVere Redfield. He completely redid the casing and everything was put in new. The first well was in 1903, and it was all rebuilt.

He rebuilt it while it was still the Reno Brewery?

Yes. It was still the Reno Brewery. In the 1950s, the Reno Brewing Company was the largest distributor of beer in the State of Nevada. They distributed Sierra Beer, One Sound State, and Malt Rose. There are pictures you can see where they had their 1953, 1954 Chevy delivery trucks. They would deliver all over Reno.

Well, the lobbyists, influenced by some of the bigger brewing companies, had a law passed in the State of Nevada that, as a brewery, you could not distribute your own beer. So, once Sierra Beer and Reno

Brewing Company had to go to a distributor, the beer basically sat on the shelf and Coors, Budweiser, and Pabst were all at once distributed to the casinos.

Because they didn't distribute their own beer, they couldn't get it into the market? Is that what happened?

I think basically what happened was it went into the distributors and the big boys said, "You want to distribute Sierra Beer or do you want to distribute...?"

Then it becomes the distributor's decision.

It just sat on the shelf, because the Frontier Club was the largest single identity of Sierra Beer in the State of Nevada. The Hook family lived right by my grandparents. We knew the Hook family and everybody that was involved in it. So, once that went down, my dad bought it. The only reason the big building came down is because they had already partially started taking it down.

That was the building where the offices were that was right here on the side?

Yes. The big actual brewery was here. The building that stands now as the DeLongchamps Building was built in 1940 and it was the bottling and distributing building for the beer.



The original Reno Brewing Company building (rear) with the 1940 bottling plant building in the foreground.
Photo courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

The well is on what's now the empty lot, where the actual brewery was?

Yes.

So Redfield made those improvements, but then the business failed.

Yes. They failed, so Redfield backed out of it. There were even rumors—I saw a clip from the paper someplace and verified—LaVere had some problems with the government at that time. They came in and he went to jail. He had a ticker tape in there. He had a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. They said that he was probably looking for a way to launder money through the brewery, which I don't think was true, but that's one of the old fables.

So your father bought the building from the Hook family?

Yes. In the transaction, there were two different families involved—German people, and I can't remember the other ones. My dad bought that from them. That was this piece of property here on Spokane, and it was the main piece of property that's over on Fourth Street. That was an L-shaped piece of property.

Do you remember, when you got back from school or when you came back to Reno, what this property was like then?

Yes. There was nothing back here. There was an old building sitting here, and it was full of cases of empty Sierra bottles and all the labels.

We're in a building that was constructed in the 1970s right here on Spokane.

Yes. There's another old brick building that had a loading dock. I can remember it vaguely because I was running the elevator at the Overland, and when I had time off, I went to Lake Tahoe.
[laughs]

I remember this being all vacant here. I remember that "Tank" Smith, who was a mayor here, had a concrete company and rented the bottling plant building for quite a few years.

In fact, there was a stoplight put in on the corner of Morrill and Fourth Street because of Tank and all the things that were going on. Morrill Street went across the railroad tracks then and went down to Sutro Street or along the river; Sutro Street never went over the river, anyhow. The closest thing was Wells Avenue if you wanted to get over the river or you had to drive all the way down to Kietzke, further east.

When do you remember being around Fourth Street and getting more involved in it again? How long did your parents own this property? Did they decide to develop it or were they just going to lease it?

He just kept it leased out and had some different businesses in there. Tank Smith moved out in the early 1960s. Then the building went vacant for a while, so I came down here and started building cars

over in the big building.

Some of the floats for the University of Nevada were built over there. It was a big beer bust in there. Keggers flew very easy and it was a lot of fun.

Because you're pretty close to the university here, so it was pretty convenient.

Well, it was a big building and they could build a float in there. I believe the float was for Nevada Day. It was that time of the year, so it was a nice warm place.

Keggers went real freely in there, and I'd work on cars and have fun. I started being around the property more and started falling in love with the DeLongchamps Building. People weren't into history and who built what or anything at the time. We were down on Fourth Street and we started deteriorating, and we deteriorated pretty quick.

The Eldorado got going and then Circus Circus got going and then the Silver Legacy got going, and, of course, The Sands on the corner of Arlington and Fourth.

The Peppermill was out there, and it was just a little restaurant with Hill & Sons Motel clear at the back of it. Two young guys started that. I kind of grew up with that. Once that thing got going and they started a casino, they got out of the contract pretty quick. They got in and the rest is history. But, for a long time, clear in the back was always a little part of that motel. There was a dirt road that you went up.

The Peppermill you're talking about?

Yes. Hill & Sons Motel sat pretty far off the back, but on the right-hand side there was an old white house. I don't know if you'd call it a mansion, but it was a very nice home. That's where Jim McKay lived at that time. Behind that was Virginia Lake.

When this building was being used by the university kids and you were working on it, was this the 1960s or so?

Yes.

What else was around in your immediate neighborhood here? We have some businesses around here. Were they still operating?

There was a building here on the corner where Ray Heating is. Steve Scolari had that, I believe.

The grocery people?

No. Scolari, I may be off on that. I know Steve. But there was a little business there. This back here was warehousing at that time.

Back here to the east of us?

Yes, where the Spice House is was really Rainier Bottling Works. Then, during Prohibition it shut down and became known as the Ice House. Reno Brewing Company never did shut down during

Prohibition. They did near-beer and soda pops.

Was Rainier Brewing still operating after Reno Brewery closed?

No. It went down during Prohibition. It was called the Ice House at that point.

On the other side are ironworks and a lumberyard.

Well, yes. Over here on Morrill and Fourth Street, on that northwest side, there was a gas station. I can't remember whether there was one or two in there at that time. Then, of course, there was the motel that was very busy.

On the corner where you just go underneath Wells Avenue was that old restaurant, Sambo's. If you look to the right, there's that big motel that sits there. Then there looks like a little restaurant that sits there.

Oh, sure. The Rancho 777, is that the one you're talking about, with the building in front?

Yes.

That was Sambo's?

Yes. Sambo's was a big deal, and it was full all the time. The street was moving pretty well. I'm trying to remember when I-80 was done, and I don't remember.

I think it was 1974. I think it was the mid-1970s, and I'm wondering if things changed instantly when that happened. Do you remember Fourth Street suffering immediately?

Yes. I was going down to Foothill College and when they started the 80. I can remember driving the 101 and going to San Francisco before the real 101—it's called 101 Business today—and it was vibrant. Then, when they put the freeway in, it died. From San Francisco all the way to San Jose, were all motels.

That's where I think we ought to look today, at what people are doing with these. People ought to look at what's going on with the old Lincoln Highway back East, and we should start on it yesterday. Everybody gets into teardown mode. After the teardown mode, they all look at it and say, "We took a valuable asset, something that really was Reno, away," and they can't build it back like it was. They just can't do it.

Talking about this time period, the 1960s and 1970s, is really fascinating, especially in the 1960s, this being a building that went through a couple of things with the bottling plant and the university kids using it.

Well, we were in there building the float for two weeks. It wasn't a big deal. Then, Blue Seal Transmission came in and a radiator shop came in for a while. Blue Seal Transmission was John's. He came from a very wealthy family out of California. He was notorious for driving while intoxicated and

playing with the Highway Patrol. He was a real character.

Then, Ray Tires came in. Now, Ray Tires has a little tire shop down the street.

The last name is Ray?

Yes. He can tell you stories.

Were they in the bottling plant building?

Yes, they were in the bottling plant building.

Was it getting more and more industrial and car-related?

Yes. You had to put anything in the building, whatever could keep us moving. There was a Commercial Hardware where Salvation Army is today on Valley and Fourth Street. I want to say that was the Horgan Brothers. That was the neatest hardware store in Reno. Everybody went there.

It was huge and it was like Ace's is today. When you went in, you didn't have to buy a bag of anything; they just had everything there. It was really friendly. Everybody went to Commercial Hardware. Commercial Hardware was on the corner of Sierra and Commercial Row and the old building was there.

Then, they built that big building here and moved out of there. It's the one that's all brick right now and has the arches in it. If you go over the railroad tracks on Commercial Row, it sits on the southeast corner.

Oh, you're talking about the really old commercial building by the old Reno Casino? It was the Masonic Building very early on.

Yes.

So that was Commercial Hardware. Well, that was very small. So they had more room out here then.

Well, yes. They expanded. Reno was really small.

There were some viable businesses. It sounds like it was hardware stores, tire stores, and some restaurants that were still on Fourth.

We had restaurants through here, yes. Alpine Glass moved in there. The original Tripp Plastics was where Davidson's, the bar, is today and next door to it is the Harley shop. Warren Tripp could probably tell you something about that.

Tripp Plastics came here and the guy that started it was Wally Tripp. Wally Tripp was very intelligent. He could really put things together. If you go to Tripp Plastics today down on Gregg Street, it's huge. They're the ones that invented the Keno machine that works on air. They invented the dealing shoe.

The dealing shoe?

Yes, when you go in now, all the cards go into a dealing shoe; they deal them off like this. [demonstrates] They did that.

He and a doctor invented transportable incubators for kids. If you go in the shop now and look in the back, they've got a little museum. You will see plastic, what were called candles, at the time. They took about a one-inch piece of plastic rod and he drilled a hole in the top so that it would reflect down. The first one you'll see in there was made for the Frontier Club. It was the first thing that went on the slot machines to let somebody know there was a jackpot. It was wired in the jackpot and had a bell on it. It had what they called an awards card on the front of it. It tells you the payoffs for that machine. If you hit a jackpot, the bell would go off and the change girls would come turn off the switch, record it, and pay the jackpot.

It sounds like this was really a hub for all of these innovative inventions for gaming.

Yes. There was a lot going on here.

A lot of entrepreneurs.

Yes. Old Redd, which was Bally's machine, was out on the end of Dickerson Road.

Who was that?

That was Si Redd. Si Redd was Bally's and IGT, and he started out pretty small here.

During the summer, another one of my jobs was slot machine repair out on Baring Lane, right off Lakeside, which was my uncle's ranch. We bought some barns. They were basically loading docks from Stead Air Force Base. They moved one of them out to Baring Lane, and they moved the other one out to our house on Timothy Lane. With the one on Baring Lane, we would do slot machines.

With slot machines, at that time, there was a Bally and a Mills machine. We hired a guy by the name of Tony out of Chicago. He was one of the best slot mechanics around. He worked all over this town for a lot of people, but he worked for us first. They designed a slot machine that was called a Mills. They had castings made back in Chicago. On the Mills machines, you could get in the coin acceptor with a hook. You could get in there and play the machine. It had a window that was supposed to recognize it, but a lot of times that didn't happen.

So they took the two machines and made the coin acceptor from the one go into the Mills mech, because the mechanics of the Mills mech were better. They were all mechanical machines, so they were better than the other machines. So we would build those things down there. At that time, at the Overland there were all these crazy-looking slot machines—a mixture of two slot machines—that went in there.

So you were very mechanical too.

I'm very mechanical. The other thing that's interesting is when we started Keno at the Frontier Club, it was the first club in the State of Nevada to have a \$12,500, 55-cent eight-spot. The Overland was the first casino in the State of Nevada to have a \$25,000, 55-cent eight-spot ticket.

You'd play it for 55 cents and if you got all eight, you got \$12,500. At the Overland, if you got all

eight, it got moved up to \$25,000. They told us every casino went nuts when we did that at the Overland.

That's a huge jackpot.

Well, I was twenty-one at that time. We started about a year before that at the Overland. We were the first to let blacks come into our casino and sit at the restaurant. That was in the 1960s.

Was this before the Civil Rights Act?

I think it was starting to happen.

It was a voluntary thing you did? It wasn't because anyone was forcing you?

It was the right thing to do. They would drive all the way up from Oakland and they were gamblers. We put the \$25,000 ticket in and, of course, everybody was hitting. I've got the original winning tickets at home. Also, I was writing Keno at that time. With one of the \$25,000 tickets in there, I wrote it, called it, and paid it.

Immediately?

Well, yes, but that's when there were the old Keno queues. You wrote Keno. It wasn't like today. It was really fun because you became an artist on all these 190-way eight-spots with 24s. Or, you could play all these 4s and these people would just mark these things up really crazy.

You had to write it all down the side, and then they took a Keno ticket, and when you called it, there were Ping Pong balls in a cage. You'd pull it and push a button and the number would come up. You had a guy alongside you and he would have a stack of Keno tickets, and he would physically punch them.

Then, after the game, he would check them. You'd put them out on the counter and they'd go up to the checkers up above. It was also your responsibility, so you checked each ticket. If somebody said there was a winner, you had to check it and figure out the payoff. The checker up there would be your verification. We had [Reginald] "Arkie" Parker up there as a Keno manager, who ended up doing quite a bit of stuff around here and doing Keno because he was very good at it.

The casinos were fun. The machines were mechanical, so all these things were going off with these machines. You always had change guys running around and you had change girls giving people change. You didn't put a card in. The machines were mechanical, so you'd hear five clicks, "ch, ch, ch, ch, ch." Then you'd hear the alarm and the bells going off for jackpots, and the bars were packed. It was human, you know—it was a human organization. There were no mechanics to it. It wasn't to where everything just lights up and you go up and get a Keno ticket and look at the numbers and say, "Yeah, we owe you \$100." You checked the ticket—a Keno checker checked the ticket. On a good night, behind the counter we'd be wading through Keno tickets that came in.

When I was twenty-one, I wrote Keno. That's what I wanted to do. I didn't want to be at table games. I liked Keno. You had a stool you sat at, so these guys would take a piece of string and hang it up underneath your stool and light it with a cigarette. There's all this paper around and you're sitting there writing Keno tickets. You go around, and, "Something's on fire!" It was a big roar. Everybody had fun

with you with that about the first or second day you were there.

I grew up in that casino. If you were new in there, they would tell you to go get the Keno crank. The Keno crank was so you could roll up that cage for the Keno ball. You flipped it by hand and everybody had a rhythm. It was like playing a tune. When you got good at it, it was like, “ch, ch, ch, puh, ch,” number three.

Well, they sent me to Harrah’s at the time. They’d send everybody out for a Keno crank. You got to meet everybody in all the casinos because it was a joke, and they knew you were a new Keno writer. Because I knew the people and I was working graveyard shifts, I could go to the lake during the day. So I just went home.

I showed up at work the next night, and they go, “What happened to you? You didn’t find the key to Keno?”

I said, “I couldn’t find the Keno crank and it was almost time to go home, so I just went home.” All at once they kind of figured out what I did.

Then I pulled slot machines. I worked with a big guy by the name of Dickey. At that time, Nevada Bank of Commerce was butted up against the alley on Virginia Street right across from the Mapes. If you go by there where the Bruka Theater is, it was there. So, we did business there. We’d walk across town with the same thing, checks, and come back with money. Sometimes, we had to go in the car. We’d loaded up with coin. You’d load up with bags of real silver dollars. A lot of them were new uncirculated silver dollars—put them downstairs.

You never ran into any trouble with that? Because everybody was doing it.

Well, at that time, you couldn’t get out of town, and if word got around, the best thing you could do was turn yourself in. [laughs] You couldn’t get out of town because they were trying to build the 80 and all that, so you’re running on these real small roads.

The airport was so small, you couldn’t fly out if you wanted to. There are four roads that go out of Reno, so where would you go?

So it felt like a very safe town?

Oh, it was a safe town. It was absolutely safe. That was the YMCA there next to the Mapes parking lot, and City Hall was across the street at that time.

The theater was right there. Did you go to the Majestic?

The Majestic, yes. Good friends of mine, the Swansons, owned the Center Street Hotel at that time. Lucille Rose ran that hotel. Her son, Johnny Rose, and I were very good friends. I’d come down to town and we’d spend the night there. The bowling alley was next to it at that time. We’d go bowling, run around Reno, go to the YMCA, and go to the Majestic. The Crest Theater was on Second Street and Sierra.

There was a Wigwam Café there at that time. That’s where everybody went for apple pie, and it was the big café. Next to that was the Crest Theater. The Crest Theater had a thing with Model Dairy where they had these square quart bottles and you’d get this red tag that said “Model Dairy.” If you took those and turned them in at the theater, you could go to the theater for free. They had it all

figured out because the parents would go next door to the Wigwam, and then you'd go and have lunch at the Wigwam. So on Saturday morning we would go down and go to the free show at the Crest Theater and watch the Bowery Boys and the Three Stooges. It was a big deal to do.

Grey Reid's was downtown and I. Magnin's was downtown; Menard's was downtown; Gotchy's Shoes was downtown. My mom would meet all of her friends. They'd go to the Wigwam and go shopping. It was fun.

When did it seem like that kind of character of downtown as the center for residential life changed?

Well, the casinos started getting staggered around and then I-80 went through. I think that made a big impact. Then, Park Lane [mall] opened up. When Park Lane started going in, downtown started to deteriorate.

I think one of the reasons that downtown Reno did deteriorate is because there wasn't sufficient parking in Reno at that time. There wasn't the parking like we have today. There was a parking lot that was right across from the Majestic Theater on the east side of Center Street. The telephone building was on the north side of First Street on the corner. That was the original telephone building, and the other one was called Reno Central. You kind of drove down, and that flooded.

Harolds Club tried pigeonhole parking that was on Plaza. You'd drive in and they'd pick your car up and stick it into a spot there. There was no parking, though. Then, the city of Reno decided that they were going to make money and came in and put parking meters in. Well, you'd get a parking ticket a couple of times and you'd go, "I'm not going to go to Park Lane." They had one-hour and two-hour limits on the meters. People don't want that.

The best thing Reno could do to help downtown is to take a big cutter out. They cut them now. Now, you have to go down to the corner with your credit card and put it into the machine. The best thing Reno could do would be to eliminate parking meters. If what they're making in parking meters was spent for commerce down there and the taxes and starting to build the city back up, I think it would more than pay for what those parking meters have brought in.

I go down now and park on Arlington Avenue someplace and I just walk down. I enjoy the walk. If I'm going to a baseball game, I park off Court Street and walk down there because the walk is good and fun. I don't like parking meters. When I was younger, I had too many tickets. [laughs]

You came back here and you were doing some things in the 1960s in town. At what point did you start working in Virginia City? How did that come about?

Virginia City came about, I believe, in 1968. My family went up there and bought the Bonanza Club and the Skydeck right next to it. Right on the block there was the Silver Dollar Hotel. We bought those two properties, and then we went across the street and bought the Comstock and the Cartwright. We ended up with the small building in there that was Red the Candy Man's for quite a while. We had the Comstock and the Cartwright Hotels, which were boarding houses that went all the way from C Street up to B Street. I lived in one of them for quite a while. It was an old boarding house and I lived upstairs. That was fun. We kept those leased out for quite a few years.

Our idea was to try and get a hold of the Silver Dollar Hotel at that time so we could build something there, but that didn't come to fruition.

We had slot machines in the Bonanza Club. We had all of the Polk carving slot machines which

were done by Frank Polk and were very famous. There are some still around, but we auctioned most of them off and collectors have them.

They were full stand-up wooden carvings done by Frank Polk, who is in the Cowboy Hall of Fame for his carvings. They were just very unique. There was a Mexican and a big Indian with headdress. One of them was said to be John Wayne, and there was supposed to be an original there of Frank Polk. So they're very unique.

Each one was all hand-carved, and they put a Mills mech in all of those machines. It was real unique. When you walked in the Bonanza Club, there were rows of slot machines, but they were all cowboy characters.

Were these all ventures that your Uncle Pick and your father were working on in partnership?

No. These were my dad and myself.

What role were you playing?

I was basically the manager. I ran them and took care of them. We had a gift shop. I brought up a fellow by the name of Ed Blankenship, who was a very famous glass blower, and he blew glass in the windows.

Ed was from Reno. He and I got to be real good friends because we had a slot machine repair shop in the back of the Bonanza Club. I always asked Ed why he didn't blow glass a little bit larger than what he was doing. He said he couldn't get a torch tip the way that he wanted it. I told him I'd build him one. So, I learned to blow glass, and Ed got his bigger torch tip.

You learned how to do that in Virginia City?

I learned how to do it in Virginia City, yes.

How would you say Virginia City at that point differed from how Virginia City is now? Was it a very popular tourist destination?

Yes. It was very popular. There was the Stope and there were two or three little bars around there. We had main entertainers all the time playing music, and in the Bonanza Club I brought a piano player into the bar. He sat down and played the piano and I couldn't believe what this guy would do. We ended up getting him a room at the Silver Dollar, and he would come down and play this world-class piano. The guy was unbelievable, and he was kind of like a little Liberace kind of guy, had rings and stuff. During the evenings we would end up with a guy by the name of Pappy, who was a little character, and he'd play the bass fiddle. He'd lie on the floor and put it up between his legs and play it. Then we ended up with another fellow there and he could really play the piano.

I would close the Bonanza Club a lot of times at two or three o'clock in the morning. I would try to get everybody out of there because it became a real local little place to go. Then, you could go down to the Stope and listen to music. Like I said, that was more jazz-type music. Virginia City at that time had the nickname of a "drinking man's Disneyland."

It was just real casual and a lot of fun. Everybody really worked together. Now I've seen it

change; it's changed quite a bit. It's still Virginia City, and I think that Hugh Roy Marshall is doing a lot for up there. Hugh Roy really wants to see some things happen, and he's trying to push them. I've met Hugh Roy a few times. I've been on his TV show. He's a Nevadan out of Texas, but he says he's a Nevadan.

I just met him this summer, and got on the show, too.

Did you? Isn't he something? He's a character. He belongs in Virginia City. He fits in Virginia City. We had a lot of characters up there who would move around. Most of them have passed on or moved down the road a little bit. It was a fun town, though. It still is a fun town.

There was a whole rock-and-roll scene up there that had links to the Bay Area too. Was that happening at that time or had that already passed?

No. We had the Red Dog Saloon, which was a real hippie bar. You'd go down there and, yes, it was rock-and-roll, but there were a lot of drugs and a lot of pot, so I didn't go down there too much. They tried some concerts and quite a few things in there.

It sounds like there was a real diverse musical scene, lots of different styles of music.

There was stuff all over, yes. The Bucket of Blood always had music, and the Union Brewery was a really fun place.

Is that still there?

Yes, but it's nothing like it was. When I was younger we would go down to American Flats. That was in the 1960s, and there was a full-on hippie scene down there with bands and all kinds of things playing out. That was an experience that went on. [There were also] the Sutro tunnels.

They had a little town around there, right?

Yes. Well, at the Sutro tunnels there were a bunch of old cabins. There were a lot of things around there, so everybody went down and played pretty good too. That was another place that was played.

How many years did you live there?

I was only there for three or four years. I finally bought a little house right across from Hugh Roy's mineral place, his museum that's there. I lived there for a couple of years. I was on C Street, and I would drive out at two o'clock in the morning when I was living here in Reno.

You went back and forth a lot?

For a while, I'd go home and go to bed at two o'clock in the morning and then get up and have to

be in there by nine o'clock and have it open by ten. I was very lucky because a lot of times I don't remember riding home. I was just tired.

So you finally got a place up there?

I got a little place up there and lived there, yes. Then my brother got killed going down by Silver City. He flipped his car at Devil's Gate, it's called, and he died. I moved to Hawaii in 1970 and blew glass, thanks to Ed. That was a fun experience for about a year, and then I came back.

Came back from Hawaii?

Yes. I was married to my first wife, Judy Wade. They were out of Texas, and so we came back and got a divorce.

A Reno divorce.

A Reno divorce, yes, here it was. It was fall of 1971 that I came back here. We then started liquidating things that were in Virginia City. I kept one building up there that was Red the Candy Man's. I went in and completely restored it. It ended up being Julia Bullette's. Before that, it was Calamity Jane's. It was run for quite a few years as Calamity Jane's, a bar. It went through a couple of different owners, and things started happening up there and so I had to liquidate it to maintain the brewery building here.

Did you gain control of that from your parents at some point?

Well, we sold off the four pieces of property we had up there. I really liked this building that was there, and I was single at the time. So, I went and put an apartment upstairs in it and was planning on living there. Then, I met my current wife, so that didn't happen. I just sold it two years ago. I miss it because I put a lot of work in it myself.

That's a lot of time to own that property.

Yes. Well, what was interesting in the piece of property is when I was remodeling, first the mortar on the walls on one side was what they call a lime mortar—there's nothing to it. There was really no foundation in some of those old buildings, so the floor had fallen down in one corner.

I decided I was going to fix it and fix the leak in it. When I got down to the one corner, there were about two or three floors that were built on top of one another in that one corner. The floor would slump down and they would just build it up. So I said, "I'm going to tear this whole floor out of here." We tore the whole floor out and I decided to put a foundation underneath it. We designed the whole foundation underneath the thing.

Was there no basement?

There was no basement in it. There were rumors that the mines were underneath it and you'd fall in. Well, if this building goes, the whole building goes now, because this foundation is overkill.

While I was digging out down there, I kept kicking a little square thing with my toe. I finally got mad and decided I was going to get it out of the way so that I would not trip. When I dug that out, it was a book. I have that book at home. It's in excellent condition, and on the back of the book it says "W.F. & Company, Virginia, Nevada." The book starts in 1867, and W.F. & Company is Wells Fargo and Company. It's the out-commission book of the Douglas family that's very famous here that's from Gardnerville; that's why Douglas County is here. I have a record of all the gold and silver bullion that came out of Virginia City up to 1913. All the numbers of the bullion are registered and you can tell whether it's gold or silver. The penmanship...it's really an interesting book.

It's amazing. I keep saying I'm going to go through every page, and I just don't get to it. That's when Carson City first started minting silver dollars. It went down to Virginia City to be made into coinage. So not only was it gold and silver, the coinage is listed there also.

This was just in your building, just sitting there in the floor?

It was just in the floor. It was under the dirt, because in 1913 there was a fire there. I guess this thing got underneath the floor some way. However it got there, it got there.

What was the building?

I don't know what it was before. At one time, it looked like it was something to do with a millinery shop. I don't know if Wells Fargo was really in there or what was in there. Why would that be buried under the corner of that building?

What's the address of that building now?

Well, 55 South C Street is what we got as a number. The numbers on C Street are very confusing, because NDOT came through and renumbered them. So, I found it as 55 South C Street. I got a window made up that says that, anyhow.

The book is real interesting. The reason I want to follow it through—all the signatures and all the writing is done by the different people that were there—but it also has the Douglas family. They were moving \$3,000 or \$4,000 a week out of there at that time.

If you had a watch you were going to send to San Francisco to get work done on it, it'll say "One watch, San Francisco," and there were little deeds that got transferred back and forth. It's a really interesting book.

In that book, all at once, the rubber stamps started coming out for the date. So in 1911 and part of 1912, you would see that only certain people would use that stamp. It was too modern. Finally, in 1913 it got to where everybody was using the rubber stamp, and the penmanship started falling away. The old penmanship is beautiful.

I want to talk about your specific properties here, your plans for them, and what you've done with them. Let's catch up a little bit here. In the 1970s, you were in Virginia City. You came back here. Your father owned the bottling plant building.

Yes.



The vacant Reno Brewing Company bottling plant building in 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Can you fill me in on the intervening years and what happened with this property up through now? Obviously, you own these properties, that building and a lot of other ones.

Yes. With the bottling building, the main brewery was torn down because it was just too old and they already had started demoing it.

On the corner of Spokane and Fourth?

Right. My father wanted to put a casino in here, which would have been really nice. That's what his idea was, because there were whispers of urban renewal coming through for quite a few years, but that didn't happen.

Then, we had Tank Smith in here. Tank Smith was a mayor here and had a concrete business here for a while. In fact, because of Tank, we had a stoplight on the corner of Morrill and East Fourth Street for a while so that his rigs could get in and out. That was power.

Then we had Blue Seal Transmission in here. I think it was called A-1 Radiator. Ray Tires was in the building, and Dunlop Electronics was in the building. After Dunlop Electronics, it was R Supply, a plumbing supplier. That was the last business in the building, and they were out of here in 1989. R Supply was the irrigation division of Record Supply, which was up on Valley Road, where all the homeless are. That's how they ended up with that piece across the street on Fourth and Valley, where they built the temporary firehouse. That was part of it. They bought all that property from them. Then, they went out on Rock and built the new R Supply out there, and that got sold to a bigger outfit.

So then this building was vacant again?

Yes. That was around 2000. Peter Wilday, his adopted son, and myself designed a full House of Blues theater to be put on this property. It was designed very well.

Had you been working with the House of Blues organization?

Well, I met a fellow there through some family. His name was Kevin Morrill, and he was the senior vice president of the House of Blues. At that time, the House of Blues was going public. They really didn't want to step into another building here, but Kevin was setting me up with all of the entertainment and venues to go on with this piece of property. He was very excited about it.

When he came up here and I showed him what we had, he said, "This will be one of the top four venues on the West Coast," because the building stands alone. So if you went over to the Holiday Inn and said, "Coming to you from Reno and old downtown Reno, the Reno Brewing Company presents..." the whole building just lights up because of the DeLongchamps design to it.

There are a lot of entertainers who come through here on their way to Salt Lake City. We were zoned industrial and it ended up being a very big problem trying to get a special-use permit to do what we were going to do. I think it maybe had something to do with the fact that that's when the Events Center was coming to be born.

I think some of the hotels and casinos there were a little nervous about what we were going to do. What they didn't realize is that we could bring in a thousand people for three shows a day. Plus, we would have a restaurant, a bar, and an espresso bar.

If a thousand people a day came to our theater, where would they stay? The venues that we had coming through were venues that are not interested in the Eldorado and they're interested less in the Event Center. They like the House of Blues atmosphere, and so it was a completely different venue. I've got the drawings clear down to the heat lamps done for this thing.

The whole thing was designed and we had investors and venues lined up. We got the thumbs-down, so we walked away from it.

You were applying to the city for a special-use permit?

Yes.

Did they give you any reason why they declined?

No. It was just a put off. The city should have said, "Wow! You guys are doing something for Fourth Street. What can we do to help you get this?" Not, "Here's what you have to do." As you can see, we have the parking. We have everything going for us. The little place down here under the old Martin Iron Works was slated to be what I want to call a speakeasy. We had some people interested in opening up a jazz bar restaurant down there.

This is on your property now?

Yes.

You owned that property at that point as well?

Yes. I bought it.

What's the address of that property?

300 Morrill. It had been the Martin Iron Works Building and then it was Sierra Engineering, where they built the chairlifts for the Olympics. Then, George Pimple had it and that was Reno Forklift. He just used it for storage, so I bought it from George Pimple.



The original home of Martin Iron Works at 300 Morrill Street is now one of the properties owned by Spencer Hobson. Photo courtesy of Piero Bullentini.

Did you buy it in the 1980s sometime?

No. I wanted to have a whole block because I didn't want anybody in the middle of my [properties]. I bought that piece and then I bought the piece next to it, which was Reno Vulcanizing—not the Menantes but the Bessos.

I wanted that piece of property because I felt if I had a whole block, there was nobody that could tell me what I could do with my block. There was nobody who could hold me up by owning a piece in the middle of it like sometimes happened. Santa Fe is one of them. Dr. Iliescu became pretty famous for doing that sort of thing around town. I didn't want that. I wanted a whole block so we could design it, and that's what we did; we designed a whole block.

There are some drawings of what we were going to do here. It was pretty amazing. This would have been all commercial retail with little shops, and that would have been a whole plaza over there. There would have been outdoor entertainment and farmers' markets going on outside—a whole different venue at that time.

So, you owned this building that we're in now, which is 315 Spokane, at that time, too. This building was constructed in the mid-1970s?

My dad and I built it in 1974.

In this building now we have your offices, the Hobson Gallery, and then you lease out some of these other spaces?

Yes. I have Feed World that started in here right after we built it. We have a body shop that's next door. We had about three different shops in there, and the body shop was real successful for a long time.

After your special-use permit was denied for House of Blues, where did you go from there?

At that time, we designed a bottling company to go in here.

A bottling company?

Yes, for water. I've got the bottling building. The water is available, and that's still on the back burner. We designed the whole blueprint on a bottling building. I had some investors who wanted to come and do the bottling building, but we just didn't see eye-to-eye on the way that they thought I should participate in it. I didn't feel like putting up my property to have them run a business and tell me how much money I was going to make and sign the property over. So that went away.

The Reno-Sparks Corridor Business Association got started here, so they set up certain bylaws of what could be done and what couldn't be done in the Fourth Street corridor.

That's a community organization.

Yes, and I was part of that for a while. One of the big things was there could be no homeless shelters or anything like that in this area. Of course, you can see what happened over on Valley Road. Well, the other thing they were concerned with was automotive dealerships.

They didn't want that kind of thing because they didn't feel it would bring traffic here. I would have it running if they would back off. At first, I wanted to take my big building and put Private Party Cars in it, like Private Party Cars over on Mill Street.

Private Party Cars is a display area where you bring your car to sell and you rent a spot. I wanted

to take my big building and turn it into a Private Party Cars, because there are a lot of people with hot rods, motorcycles, and real upgrade cars who don't want them parked outside on a lot all the time. Our address and our location are as good as theirs. I tried to get it so that I could put this in, and they told me no. I'm still fighting with [the city] a little bit.

The reason I'd like to do that is I think it would bring a lot of people down here. All at once, it'd be like a Hot August Nights venue because we would have nice cars in here. It gives me the ability—without the huge expense of trying to start a business and grow into what I'd really like to be—to create income on my building. I don't have an inventory; all I'm doing is renting a space. It would bring more class to Fourth Street because the cars I'd have would be upgraded cars. We'd put a coffee and espresso shop in it. It would give me the ability to have a real good cash flow and start taking care of my property here.

Then, as Reno grows into where we are, the big building would be done and I could say, "Okay, thirty days, I don't have inventory." I can do the dream that I see. I think, because of Hot August Nights, we would really start drawing people in and this area would pick up. Let's go for the arts. I'm handicapped now with a big building. What am I going to put in it?

So, that building is still zoned industrial and some of the buildings around here were at one point industrial, but clearly have been zoned commercial in the years since, right? I'm looking over here at the Spice House now.

Yes. That happened way back, though. Things went on and special-use permits [were given]. See, the Spice House here wasn't a threat to anybody.

What I see is, I should be given the ability to do what I want over here. Cattycorner to us is a building complex, and there's medium-income residential in the back of it. Fourth Street is not zoned for that one bit. They got their special-use permit to put that in. We are not supposed to have any residential on Fourth Street at all, and that got built over here.

Now, what about the motels?

Well, they're a commercial identity, but the motels are all grandfathered in.

You had a number of commercial businesses that were in your large building.

Yes.

So did those all have special-use permits?

Well, they were all considered industrial or automotive. If you go down to Metric Motors, they'll have their cars out on the lot. At one time, that lot was a used car lot. So, why can't I go back and show its use? Let's believe in what can happen. They'd rather see it turn into dirt, I guess, than to see it turn into practicality.

It sounds like there are a lot of different issues with zoning and special-use permits, and other inconsistencies along Fourth Street as it stands now, as far as development goes. Do you see that as one

of the major challenges?

I see it as a major challenge. I look at the city of Reno and what's going on and I think they ought to step up to the plate and say, "What do we want to do here? Do we want to turn this into a community? How do we entice people to come in here without a bunch of obstacles before you get there?" You can go to a lot of other cities with a lot less obstacles to go through. In fact, if you want to see what happens, go down and look at Las Vegas. Reno was bigger than Las Vegas. We had more casinos and we were a lot bigger than Las Vegas, but Vegas said, "Build it."

Instead of building the Atlantis, the Peppermill, and those outlying casinos, we should have said, "If you're going to build the casinos, they're going down Fourth Street to Sparks." What kind of an impact would that be? They're always talking about community impact from casinos. Well, if all the casinos were on Fourth Street, there wouldn't be any community impact. We would still have Reno and all the casinos would be here.

We are right off of U.S. 80. We have 395 right here. We could have impacted it—really built something up and down Fourth—and it would have made it a lot better for downtown. But we have some casino owners here who have very narrow tunnel vision in a "me, myself, and I" environment. They're afraid to see things come in, which is why we're starving here in Reno. The other thing that had a big impact here was the Wells Avenue overpass.

How did that fit into this?

The Wells Avenue overpass basically took everything east of Wells Avenue down to Sage Street and, all at once, isolated us from downtown Reno and any development going on there. We ended up being isolated in that way. The Wells Avenue overpass is still, to me, like the Berlin Wall. That was built by Helms Construction.

What was the reason for having an overpass there?

They wanted to get over the railroad tracks with a major four-laner that now goes over the river and the railroad tracks. If you look underneath there, there's the old Wells Avenue Bridge, but that went underneath the railroad tracks.

The old Wells Avenue went under the railroad?

Yes. For some reason, they wanted to jump the whole thing and give it more of a link to Highway 80.

The Wells Avenue overpass is not the most structurally sound piece of property. It's been redone two or three times now. The original construction was a little shady, let's say. I think they should have, when they had the railroad right-of-way there, lowered the track down because of what's sunken in there now. I think they could have done that, and it would have been a major improvement for Fourth Street because we wouldn't have a barrier there now. It's not a very good-looking structure to start with.

Before that overpass, do you remember Wells Avenue being a very busy thoroughfare as it intersected Fourth Street?

Oh, yes. There was a stoplight up here. It was still an easy connector at that time. It's just that it was two lanes instead of four lanes. I think it was more viable and better for linking Fourth Street to Kuenzli and incorporating the river, though. Now you start over on Sixth Street and when you come down you're clear over and you don't come out until Second Street. It kind of creates a dead area.

Underneath it?

Well, yes, and where Kuenzli is. They have the old bridge that's underneath it all blocked off. You can't get to it and it's probably more sound than the new one. Why can't we link that across the river? There's plenty of room for parking there.

The nicest part of the river—nicer than uptown and Wingfield Park—is right along the river there, and right now all the homeless enjoy it very much.

Right along Wells?

Yes, Wells Avenue up to the [National Automobile] museum. It runs on the south side, but on the north side there's plenty of room for parking there. Why can't they take that and go down to where the old Wells Avenue bridge is now, open up the whitewater that Dave Aiazzi is working at now, because the whitewater seems very successful for us. Open up the whitewater so it comes all the way down there. That means that you could park all of the rigs from the guys with canoes and stuff on the north side of that piece, instead of having them park where they do around Reno.

We open up that river and make it so people can enjoy it. Not only is it good for that, but there's also the ballpark. People are parking clear up at the Eldorado and the Cal Neva to walk down to ball games. I know that the casinos probably like that, but why couldn't we use that parking underneath there where you could just walk up to the game?

There's nothing there now. There's one little power plant, but there's nothing down there. If we could put in a walking/bike path at the Wells Avenue bridge, that would come up over and I'd like to see it tie into Morrill Street. All at once, it opens up. If we put residential in here, people have a walking/bike path so they can enjoy the river, which more and more people are doing.

Right now, if we want to enjoy the river, we have to go down to Sutro Street or all the way up to Evans Avenue to get to it. With a bike path and a nice way to do it, all at once we could bring Kuenzli together. We make the river the center of Reno, which it should be. Like everybody says, how many cities have a river running through them, and how badly have we ignored ours? It's kind of sad. I think it would make everything come together. It would make Reno really viable, and I think Reno should look at doing things for younger people and recreation.

Clearly the development of the city is moving eastward. You were mentioning the ballpark that went in. I can't recall what year that was. It's been a couple of years now, but not very long.

Yes, right.

That would kind of overcome some of what you've identified as the isolation of this area through some of those major projects, the Wells Avenue overpass being very significant.

Right. The Wells Avenue overpass right now is one of the major accesses to get to the ballpark. People have found that, instead of getting off on Sierra Street and going all the way through Reno and trying to find parking, they get off on Wells Avenue and go over Wells Avenue and use Harrah's parking. The Harrah's parking is blocked off after the game, so if you're going to go downtown, you have to go over Wells.

They could do the same thing with lowering it, and it would be like what San Francisco did with the Embarcadero Freeway. You went into one of the prettiest cities in the world and you saw a freeway in front of it. I was there for the earthquake. I was at the marina for the earthquake in 1989.

A friend of mine owns buildings there. He has a restaurant there called E'Angelo's Pizzeria. Ezio is a Rastelli. He came out of Italy and I met him through one of my aunts. This Rastelli family started the Crystal Springs on Center Street. I was helping him pass bricks off of his roof at five o'clock in the evening because they said there may be an earthquake; we were passing bricks down the staircase.

There was a warning for the earthquake?

No. A building inspector just came in there earlier. A lot of times I go in and eat with Ezio because the cooking is really good. I go in to see Ezio and he says, "No, no, no. You have to help me get the bricks off the roof first. I promised the building inspector we'd do them." We passed the bricks down—about four of us—and the earthquake went off at 5:07. I was there.

I didn't even realize what went on. Luciano, another guy who was in a big earthquake in Italy, threw me underneath the staircase, and said, "Earthquake! Earthquake!" I'm stacking bricks down there, and when we walked out on the street, that's when we realized everything that was going on. All Ezio's water bottles and wines were on his second floor, and that stuff fell off there. When we went out on Chestnut Street, it was really—

You could see the damage immediately.

Yes. Ezio lives on Bay Street, so we ran around the corner. I was inside that building that burned before it caught on fire. We smelled gas and everybody pulled me out of there.

So that was different. Anyhow, everybody said, "No, no, no. We have to rebuild the Embarcadero." They didn't want to see that freeway come down. Instead, they made the Embarcadero a wide boulevard. Now when you drive into San Francisco, [the view] coming over the Bay Bridge is unbelievable.

The only thing that happened to Chinatown and the Italian community is now you drive down that huge boulevard to get there instead of the freeway. The whole Embarcadero just came to life.

It's just been revitalized, yes, and it's interesting to think about that in a comparative way.

Yes.

Do you see this as a critical time to make some sort of larger decisions and commitment about Fourth Street?

Yes. It's so critical. We're a couple years behind. Everybody goes, "Well, there's a recession." So we want to put people to work, and there are a lot of grants that can be brought in here to redo this area. We need to center our focus and say, "Let's do Fourth Street and let's finish it," instead of going to other areas. We need to get into the construction right now—get construction workers, get materials, and get this under way. It's going to take quite a few years to get it going.

If we put the money into it now, there's about an eight-year cycle when everything is really good—we have this whole cycle. My idea is that we be the first one up to bat, instead of saying, "It's really good and we got an eight-year cycle, so let's put two years or three years into building this," and then saying, "Well, it's a failure because it was only four or five years of good." Let's get it done. People would be here like mad. This area would grow.

Around here, we have some stuff with permaculture that we're playing with. We're so lucky now for what we have on East Fourth Street, and we should take advantage of it because we have the ability to build a community, like what Zappo's is doing in Las Vegas, except we're way ahead of Zappo's. We don't have to wait a year and a half for City Hall to be vacant so we can start doing something. We can start doing it right now. We can do permaculture. We could do gardens and housing around here. We can revive Fourth Street. I'd really like to see it look like art deco; it is art deco. If you look at the buildings, it's 1930s and 1940s art deco. I looked at them again this morning. We could build a community that would be inspiring to a lot of people. We have the ability to put in residential. Like I said, we have the ability to do permaculture. We can truck water. We have water.

We could make things grow here, and permaculture is now a big thing. Solar is another big thing. Instead of tearing down and rebuilding, how do we use what we have and turn it into something? It all doesn't have to be new. I believe you can build a whole community.

Of course, the arts are a favorite of mine. I know that some of the Burning Man artists, like David Best, are looking around here and thinking about coming. Let's inspire them to come here, because if we could bring in six major artists from Burning Man, the culture for the arts here would just grow.

I want to ask you to elaborate on two things. One would be your involvement with the arts community and how you got involved with having more artists involved in your property here. The second thing I want to make sure we talk about is how you think Fourth Street could, from this point forward, be improved.

Well, in 2010, Sierra Arts and Dave Aiazzi decided to do pianos for Artown. Dave Aiazzi brought that up because he had seen it done. Artown did it, and Sierra Arts were involved. Anyhow, Dave Aiazzi heard about my building and came in and said, "Can you work with us? We need the building for about a month or so. We'd like to build the pianos for Artown here." I said yes.

What were they doing with those pianos?

There were about fifteen to eighteen of them that were placed all over Reno. They did it at all locations—on California, on West Street, at Wingfield Park. They were all over town. The idea was to turn the artists loose so they could do their artwork on a piano, and these pianos were placed all around Reno. That that was a theme for last year's Artown.

We did that, and I saw the artists, these young people, come in. They were kind of helter-skelter, but I loved the arts going on because that's me. They got in here, and when they put pianos out, Dave said, "Well, after Artown is over, we're going to bring the pianos back down there so we can do

something with them.”

So they came back down here and the artists started working around. I invited the artists—I said, “I want you guys to stay around, okay? If we get this thing going, maybe we can create something and I can be entitled to a little rent on this.” I wanted to start a community and to start things going.

Anyhow, we brought the artists back. I’ve got two of the pianos. Six or seven of them were burned at Burning Man, and the frames to them sit right over here. There was an art piece inside of a big building for a while with them.

I kept the artists on, and they formed The Salvagery. They were in the big building and they went through the year. We had various open houses and things going on, and they started to do art together; they started putting collaborations together. I liked that, and we started getting things moving down here. Then, the Hobson Gallery at 316 Spokane was available, so they decided they wanted to put on a gallery show in there. So we took this and painted it and put on a gallery show.

Was it named the Hobson Gallery then?

The Salvagery named it. They came in here in June of 2010 and we worked all the way up to May of 2011. The Temple of Transition for Burning Man approached us. Dave brought them down, and we started talking to the temple people about building the temple here. So we moved The Salvagery over to Morrill Street basically.

Did you have anything in the other building at that point?

No. I stored my things in it. It had been rented a year before that, but then in 2009, things just started falling apart around here. There was an ambulance service that was right here. Then we had Drake cab business in here for a while.

So Dave Aiazzi introduced the Burning Man artists to you?

Yes. They knew the arts were down here and so there was some interest. They didn’t want to build in San Francisco. So Kiwi, Irish, and Risky, who were the main instigators in this, came down and we negotiated. I said, “It’ll be good for Reno. Let’s get some notoriety. We’re the gateway to the Black Rock Desert here. Let’s see what we can do and instill that into people.”

Maybe we could get that feeling down here for Fourth Street because that’s what we are. We are the gateway to the Black Rock Desert, and that includes Burning Man and a lot of other things that happen out there that people should be aware of. So that’s how that got going. The temple is supposed to be out of here within a few days now.

Did they spend the whole summer constructing it in the big building?

Yes.

Then they brought it back after Burning Man?

No, they burnt it; the temple was burnt.

Are some of the artists still here?

Yes, Kiwi and Irish and some of the artists are still around. They're cleaning up the building to supposedly leave it in pristine condition. We'll see what happens there. Now The Salvagery is down there in the corner, but I think they're looking for another location.

Would you like to see collaborations with the Black Rock artists continue?

Yes, and that's what we're trying to do here. Right now, we have the interests of about six major artists from Burning Man. One is David Best, who is known all over the world. He's the builder of the temples, and he wants to come here. In fact, I think he's going to be here talking to us about this building, maybe.

If we can bring that here, I think we can bring the full feeling of Burning Man here, which is a real different feeling for people to have. I think we can make Fourth Street unbelievable. Time-Life has made a book that's out now about the one hundred most famous sites in the world. Burning Man is the center of the book.

Burning Man is growing, so why shouldn't we capitalize on it, if you want to use that word. We are the gateway to the Black Rock Desert and we can create something that no other place, not even San Francisco, can create for the Burning Man feel. We have a whole community—a whole piece of property of urban renewal—that we can build with residents and artists. We can build hydrocultures in there. With the Burning Man community, we've started something that is pretty outstanding to be one of the top hundred in the world. There's no place else that can do that. They can't do that in San Francisco. We have the proximity and we have land here that there's nothing on and something needs to be done with it. The city of Reno ought to say, "Let's get it on." There's a way to do it.

Are you talking about these properties that are north of us right here?

Yes. Right now my focus would be Sutro Street up to Evans Avenue, but up to Valley Road if you go over between Fifth and Sixth Streets. There is a lot of room to build a lot of things. You could really make a real community here.

Is The Salvagery now running the Hobson Gallery?

Yes.

Then another piece of the puzzle is the permaculture organization. Can you talk to me a little bit about how that relationship started and what that is?

Well, it really started with Mark, who was one of the temple people over there. There's a whole permaculture group here in Reno, bigger than people realize. Then Gadget got involved, who is Jonathan Lewis, and we started laying out what we could do here because of the water we have. It's very interesting. This piece of property is probably the greenest piece of property in Nevada. We have a DeLongchamps Building that was a 1940s green building; we have 65 acre-feet of water on the property,

which can cool or heat anything that's on the property.

Our exposure for solar is unbelievable. Because of the railroad tracks, there's no way a structure can ever be built that will take away our solar and what we want to do. We have the ability to go up on top of the bottling building and put wind generators on top of each one of the skylights that are there, which wouldn't be an eyesore; they'd be more like a piece of art. We could create a whole block here that would be absolutely self-sufficient, which probably TMWA and the power company [NV Energy], should embrace. Here's a community that's doing it, so be proud of it.

They're trying to build the most efficient green building out here. It's being built here in Reno. We don't have to go build a new building. This building is a green building. They never turned on a light bulb during the day for the whole building of the temple. Everybody's karma and feeling was excellent because they used all natural sunlight building something instead of fluorescent lights.

We have water that comes out at 55 degrees. So, with that 55 degrees we can swamp-cool it and cool that whole building down. It's pretty cool. We have the perfect exposure and enough property to build all the solar we need so we can heat the water. We can put electric solar panels up so we can create our own electricity. We can create more than enough to take care of this whole piece of property. We can put ten wind generators up on top of the building, which will also help us generate the power that we need.

We're here with a little jewel, and right now, it's like when the temple moved out; it's like all at once we're trying to start over again. Dave Aiazzi was down here two or three times a week on his bicycle and I haven't seen him since the temple moved out. Why should we let this die? Right now is when we should be doing something.

This block will make a statement in Reno. It'll bring Fourth Street in. It will also bring in a lot of interest for the Black Rock Desert. It could be shown as something that's a green statement; take something that's old and make it green rather than trying to build new. To build new is millions and millions of dollars. This is not that much to do. This, for a couple million dollars, can be a jewel.

Are you open to other types of uses for the large building?

I'm trying to take anything. Like I said, a car lot is one. We're looking into what we do for artist co-ops. We put in galleries down there. That's what Reno is lacking—artists with their own workshop or gallery to sell out of. The Riverside was a good idea. It brought the artists here. But where did those artists go to sell their work?

You mean the Sierra Arts Gallery at the Riverside?

Yes, upstairs all the artists live there. If there's an Open House, you can go up and see their work. Most artists don't like that, because artists are artists. They live and they work in it. One of my ideas was to take part of this property and do artists' lofts in it, and take the main building and do artists' workshops. So the artist gets up in the morning and comes down here and does his work.

You put two artists, minimum, in a work area. One artist is always responsible during the work hours to be working in their workshop. You put a manager in to help them sell their artwork, and put a gallery in. So we put a gallery in and we have a manager who knows how to sell art. When people come in interested in some art, the manager says, "Can I help you?"

They look at the art and say, "Oh, well, how about—."

“Alicia has that. Let me introduce you.”

In five minutes they get to talk to the artist. The artist should be doing art. That’s where these arts fall down that we have here right now. That’s where we’re having problems with The Salvagery. I tried to do something and they won’t allow me to do what I want to do.

Let me sell you the work, or else the artist ends up trying to sell his own work. The problem an artist has with selling his work is that it’s a part of him, so it’s real hard for him to let go in the first place. The next thing is he’ll talk for hours about his piece of art if you want him to. So, if he even has \$1,000 piece of art hanging on the wall, if he looks at the time he’s put into it, it probably cost him \$3,000.

Managing the artist. I’m not thinking of anything new because it’s been done now and that’s called Studio on the Park. It’s in Paso Robles. They have got it. I walked in there and said, “My whole idea works.” They’re doing well. The woman who started that is part of the Torpedo Factory, which is real famous back East for doing what we want to do with the arts. That’s what I’d like to do with the arts and I think we could grow.

I’d like to bring in the steel art and the metal work from Burning Man and place it around Fourth Street. I’d like to become the broker for the artists. I’ve already talked to quite a few of them. They say, “Yeah, can we do it?”

For 2011 right now, we’d be assembling art around Fourth Street. It would spread all over Reno. What would happen with that is, we would become the broker for them. We sell it; the artist has work to do for 2012. Then, when Burning Man is through in 2012, if any of our 2011 art hasn’t sold yet, it’s probably not saleable. So, every year we have new art here. That causes people to want to come to Reno because everybody wants to see the Burning Man art.

So if you want to see 2011, be here. If you want to see 2012, you’d better be here, because every year we change. That would create a real community here because it would be changing all the time. We’d have a lot of artists in here because it would become a real art community. That’s my dream, but it’s hard. I feel like I’m starting all over again from what I’ve put over a year and a half’s work into.

Why do you feel that?

Well, The Salvagery’s got their thing. They’re going to put it down. I asked them to pay some rent and they told me no. They’ve had it for free all this time. I’ve been sponsoring them. Now they’re raising money to rent another building, and I’m thinking, “Okay, there are a lot of real talented artists here. We just need to manage it a bit more.” I think it has to be a whole new venue the way you do it.

With Paso Robles, the artist walks in there and is told, “Here’s what you pay for rent. You pay rent and you do it.” What’s happened here is they think it should always be gifted to them. The idea of them having to pay rent, for me, was like, “You guys are going to have to get off your butt. You guys now have a responsibility to do something,” and that’s really hurting them. So, the next time, I’ll tell them “Here’s what we’re renting; Here’s what it is.” That’s the way you get accomplished artists. These people are very talented, but they don’t have a clue what business is.

Is the Hobson Gallery space being leased?

I’m not getting anything for that either, and so one day I’ll probably just scratch out the Hobson Gallery. They now informed me that the Hobson Gallery is their name and they’ve got a business license in that name.

So you have a real vision for this area.

Yes.

In the meantime, what do you think could be done with Fourth Street that would really help your vision for your own property and the surrounding area? You are very community-minded, and I'm thinking specifically about some physical things for the street, transportation, or for sidewalks. What do you think?

We need all new sidewalks put in and we need some creative landscaping. I like the way that Stremmels did it. I like the way it goes all year-'round. I think they did a neat job. We don't need it to be the same as California with every other street; that's unique.

I think we need to cut it down to basically three lanes, like what California Avenue is right now. We have a center lane for turning and two lanes for transportation. We have on-street parking, which we really need here because it'll make people feel comfortable again. Right now, with every place you park, they want you to park around the back of something.

We are not there yet. Remember, we're the derelict part of Reno. So, we need to put in on-street parking, put in real good lighting, do the sidewalks very well, and put three lanes in. It's a main corridor, so there's supposed to be money coming in to do that. I think those changes will help.

If we have the center lane going through the middle of it, we now also have the option of the streetcars. Those used to run here at one time, and I think people would park here and ride the streetcars, like in San Francisco; that's fun. It's not fun to ride the bus, but it's really fun to ride the streetcar. With it being three lanes like that, I think we should open this up and make it a main corridor for Hot August Nights to get to Sparks.

So it's not now used for that?

They were using it, amazingly, because of the freeway construction—everybody's finding out about it. But wouldn't it be fun to open it up and let them know that we can have some of the venues also? Hot August Nights is a part of Reno now. Are they going to be selfish and keep it downtown? What they should do is open it up, which would help disperse the little bit of friction that goes on around downtown Reno—the fights and things—because we've got now six thousand cars that come through.

Everybody's supposed to be in downtown Reno, shoulder to shoulder, if they want to watch the cars, and that can cause friction. Wouldn't it be nice to just have the sidewalks here so you could come down here with your picnic and your lawn chairs, and sit and watch cars cruise instead of going on the freeway trying to get to Sparks?

With Sparks, Victorian Square is a big area for Hot August Nights also. You're not really seeing Fourth Street used as a way to get from downtown to Sparks?

This year I noticed it because the freeway was shut down and there were all the pains with getting on the freeway. So, there were more and more cars using Fourth Street. I started getting a smile on my face. If we did Fourth Street up like the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s era, we wouldn't have to worry about

someone trying to beat up the Hot August Nights. We would have something where people would just go down through there and say, “Man, it’s like 1960s was. This is fun.” We have a venue now like Long Beach, where they wanted to do it. There are quite a few towns doing Hot August Nights venues. They don’t have the ability we have, though.

I’ve even designed some parts of East Fourth Street where we could put in garage communities because they store individuals’ cars all over town here. People pay a lot of money for that. Stead is full of them. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a place where everybody would be sitting with their cars in their garages, with little cafes, and they’d get to show off these cars that they have?

This is no new concept on my part. They’re doing it back East. A guy has started one little place back East, except he’s out in the country. He can’t stop building it because these people are putting their hot rods into these really neat garages. They’re spending \$500,000 to go in and remodel the garage so that people can have their cars there.

They come down on the weekend and set them all up. Wouldn’t it be a nice venue? Instead of Hot August Nights being a one-destination weekend, let’s create a Hot August Nights town. Let’s create something where hot rods are welcome. We can create a venue here, and the venue would still match right in with the arts and the community that’s going on here. There’s a lot of area here to work with. There’s a whole area just west of here on Fourth Street—just a couple blocks away from us—where you can build a real neat community.

Do you think that this vision for revitalizing this area, in particular East Fourth Street, is compatible with it remaining a pretty busy transportation corridor between Reno and Sparks?

Yes, but here’s what we can do. When the freeway [U.S. 101] went in between San Francisco and San Jose, it turned into blight, just like what we have. They created incentive and cleaned it up. Now, from Burlingame all the way down to San Jose, the 101 is really neat.

Where we have the advantage—even over what 101—is that we have Sixth Street. Sixth Street can become the commercial corridor. If you want to get downtown and you have to get downtown, that’s what you’ve got to do. Our problem here is we have four lanes, and, if people are going through here to get to Sparks, they’re coming through at 35 or 40 miles an hour because it’s allowed. Slow it down so people can start looking around and seeing things.

We also have Fifth Street, which is a very wide street that comes down to Morrill Street. So, for the Fire Department, that is a main corridor so we’re not choked there. We’re very fortunate. We have Sixth Street with all the commercial stuff; we have Fifth Street that can be a main corridor for the Fire Department. The Fire Department’s just up here anyhow. If they had to go down one block, if this was blocked bumper-to-bumper. They can still get through here.

Those don’t go all the way through to Sparks, so at what point would they need to shift down to Fourth?

Right about at Sage Street.

So just try to give this part of the street a different character?

Yes, let’s do the three lanes and see how it works. There’s a center corridor. Well, what can we do there? Sutro Street is a divider right now, like with Wells. But if we can build this through from Sutro

Street to Evans and go from the river to the railroad tracks, to the freeway, that is a big chunk.

We can create a whole community here and I think it'd be unbelievable, and we could really be proud of what we've done. All it would do is make downtown thrive, because the housing units and the residential that we would put in here would be affordable, whereas the condominiums in downtown in Reno right now are more for upper-middle-class. It's a half a mile from East Fourth Street to downtown Reno. So if you can create something easy with bicycle transportation and everything, I think it would thrive.

Do you see better provision for bicycles being an important part?

Yes, exactly like with California Avenue. I think California Avenue is what we need to look at.

Is that diagonal parking on the street or is that just straight parking?

It's straight parallel parking. We do have huge avenues like Morrill and Spokane; they're 70 feet wide. We can put diagonal parking there with no problem.

How do you see these ideas as being compatible with the services for the homeless that were put in on Record Street? Do you have a lot of engagement with that community?

I don't. I think they put those in in a rush, without really looking and considering what they were doing. They moved the homeless community closer to downtown Reno, and they've also now impacted the Triple-A baseball stadium they put in across from it. Maybe we should have put homeless services in on Parr Boulevard. I believe in taking care of the homeless; we need the homeless taken care of. I don't know if I feel the same about some of the street people who are around with the advantage they take of us.

The advantage they take of the properties?

Well, yes. Let's help the homeless who need help. But we've given them an opportunity to panhandle right in downtown Reno in a community that's trying to grow. If you go down there this winter, you'll see it. They're camped all over the streets in tents.

Couldn't we have found another place that we could have opened up for that? Maybe it could have been Parr Boulevard. Maybe it could have been a little bit more remotely out of Reno, where they're welcome to set up a tent city. All you get now is complaints.

The city is even complaining about it. The city complains about it; all the commercial owners complain about it; all the property owners complain about it. It's impacted the middle of the town. So can't you move them out a little way? I don't want to neglect them. I asked them why they didn't put it up at Parr where they had the room to do it, and they said the homeless couldn't ride their bicycles uphill.

I said, "Well, set up a bus system." But the one thing that's happened with them putting the homeless closer to downtown Reno, is that it has really cleaned up East Fourth because they don't come down here panhandling.

Have you seen a big impact in that way?

Oh, huge, because there's nothing for them to come down here and panhandle for. The railroad right-of-way with the fence going all the way around here has discouraged a lot of people.

Now, if you go to one of the prettiest places in Reno—the area of the river that's between Wells Avenue and the museum—and you walk down there in the summertime, it's impacted with tons of homeless. I believe it should be enjoyed by the people of Reno who are paying for it, though.

For a time, a lot of people really associated East Fourth Street with prostitution too. Did you ever see that as a constant presence along here and has that changed?

Well, they were here. I've been working in the big building since I was a kid when we didn't have it rented. I'd go in there and build hot rods. I'd have all the doors open and I never yet had a prostitute hold me up or trip me to the ground. It takes two to tango with the prostitution. Whatever it is, it's in downtown Reno and it's allowed to happen. It's in Vegas. It's everywhere that's here. We've discouraged quite a bit of it here along Fourth Street.

If you notice now in the news, 90 percent of anything that happens on Fourth Street always happens on East Fourth Street. How come it's always East Fourth Street at Evans or East Fourth Street real close to downtown Reno? Prostitution is not down here anymore, and the only reason that it's happening up there is because you've still got the homeless impact there. A lot of them are homeless, so how do you generate any money? So it's in downtown Reno. Why don't they just say "downtown Reno?" The casinos don't want to have that on the news, so East Fourth Street is a real easy one to blame it on.

How do we clean it up? We light this place better, clean it up, and make the sidewalks better. We have the bus system now running for us about every five minutes here. If you generate people and you generate walking traffic, that will eliminate a lot of it. A lot of the homeless-homeless, who aren't beggars, do not like people.

So you see the bus lines having a positive impact through here?

Oh, I think the bus lines are fantastic. I'm real happy about it. One of the things that gets me is I'm finding out that the freeway being redone is one of the greatest things that happened to us, because people now are using Fourth Street more. That's why I say, "Why aren't we doing something so people are talking about what's going on on Fourth Street?" When the freeway opens again, they're going to go back to driving that route.

If people saw things happening here now, it would really start creating something in here. I laugh at myself, though, because I leave work here and go down to the street and, at four or five o'clock, I'm waiting for what seems a lifetime because there's traffic on Fourth Street. I have to start laughing at myself, and think, "Isn't this what you wanted? Be patient. It's here. It's happening. You got movement here."

Let's do something here and show that there are things going on. The city, the news, and TOD [Transient-Oriented Development] should be promoting this right now—"Look at Fourth Street!" Whatever the blurb is—"Hey, there's more traffic on Fourth Street. Hey, there's something going on Fourth Street!" We have the traffic and people start paying attention. When the freeway opens, it's going to go like this [snaps] again.

Isn't that ironic that it was the interstate that took the traffic away from Fourth Street in the first place?

Right. Let's promote it as the old Lincoln Highway. Can't the *RGJ* or *Reno News & Review* do a piece in the paper and create an interest? We got news generated because of the temple here, but the only other news that we ever get is the bad news.

So maybe it could be a deliberate attempt to try to focus on some optimism and some positive use. Do you think it would make a big impact?

I think it'd make a huge impact if people became aware of it. If you tell people or put a blurb in the paper just once a month and most of it's bad and a little bit's good, people just...Our media seems to like beat something up more than they like to promote it.

I've thought about doing a publication down here. I was going to call it *Just the Good News* and make a whole paper where that's all we focus on. What happens in Reno that's great? So many great things happen in this town that people don't know about and don't hear about. There are arts here, and plays, and how do we promote those? It'll probably take six months before people go see what's going on on Fourth Street.

Why doesn't somebody actually go to these little bars? All they want to do is tell you how bad they are. They're not. They're cleaner than most of the bars are around Reno. Most of them are owned by people who live here. They're good people and it's fun. We have that Thursday Night Crawl. You can ride the pedicabs up and down the street. That's fun.

I don't know. I hope Reno just doesn't let us die, because I'm losing. I get real excited about something and then I try and do something and I get shot down again. Fifty-six years of that gets a little tough.

I want to thank you so much for talking to me.

Well, thank you for listening. That's what I see with Reno, and I know that you know some of those people on TOD. We need to wake them up and say, "We have a jewel here. We have something." It incorporates everything from I-80 to Kuenzli to downtown.

This river right now is as pretty a Reno as you'd ever want to walk through. People aren't even aware of the bike paths and a lot of people won't take the bike paths down here because they're afraid of them. So, let's put some cops on the path and do what we have to do to let them know that they can come down here and have a picnic. Dave Aiazzi is real good for that. He's really into the bike path.

TIM IVESON

Retired Reno and Sparks Firefighter



Tim Iveson on East 4th Street. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Born and raised in Reno, Tim Iveson spent thirty years as a firefighter—five years with the City of Sparks and 25 years with the City of Reno. After retiring, he continued to help firefighters through the Reno Firefighters Local 731. He discusses his experiences responding to emergencies along Fourth Street and Prater Way, and the impact of city development on local firefighting operations.

Catherine Magee: I'm sitting here with Tim Iveson. Today is March 24, 2012, and we're going to talk about Fourth Street.

So can you state your name, please?

Tim Iveson: Timothy Larry Iveson.

Thank you. Is it okay that we're recording this interview today?

Yes, it is.

Thank you very much. To start off, could you tell me if you're from Nevada?

I am. I was born and raised in Reno.

Where were you born?

St. Mary's.

And is your family from Nevada?

They are. My father was born and raised on a small ranch outside of Gerlach, Nevada, and my mother was born and raised in Battle Mountain, Nevada.

Were their parents raised in Nevada as well?

On my mother's side, yes. One of my grandfathers came from Austin, Nevada. The other came from Battle Mountain, Nevada. On my father's side, I believe my grandparents and great-grandparents came from the East Coast.

Can you tell me where you went to school?

I went all through school in Reno. I started at Hunter Lake in about 1965 and then was moved to Roy Gomm Elementary School when it opened up sometime around 1966, maybe '67. At that time, Roy Gomm was out in the middle of nowhere. Nobody wanted to go to it. It was just a horrible place to be. Students were bused in from Verdi who were troublesome students that had basically been removed from Verdi Elementary. So it was a school for the outcasts, but we were district for it and that's where I ended up going, and I enjoyed it. From there I went to Swope Middle School and from there to Reno High School.

And then did you attend college here in Reno?

I did. I spent roughly six years with no degree to show for it, lots of credits, but I took the classes that I thought I would need to get by, and the piece of paper that stated the college degree wasn't going to get me any further than what I needed.

When you were in college or growing up in Reno, did you have any interaction with the East Fourth Street area, basically from Keystone to Sparks?

Sure. There are four restaurants that I can distinctly remember going to as a kid and I still go to them today. The Gold 'N Silver is probably the city of Reno's coffee shop—any morning that you want to go in there at seven o'clock, eight o'clock, you'll see a half a dozen tables of businessmen drinking coffee and eating ham and eggs, getting their day started from building contractors to Wally Rusk, who had Caravan Campers off of Fourth Street, west of that. A lot of businessmen in there.

Then on down the way would be Louis' Basque Corner. That's been around as long as I can remember, had a little hotel above it, still does. Then Casale's Halfway Club, and then, of course, the Coney Island. As a kid and as an adult, those are four of the restaurants that we frequent quite a bit, besides the modern stuff, of course.

Casale's is west of the Coney Island, on the same side of the street, just a little tiny place. I haven't been in there for a few years, but the last time I was in there, one of the owners was still behind the counter making pizza and raviolis.

I understand that you are a Reno City fireman.

Retired, yes.

How long were you a fireman?

I spent five years with the City of Sparks and then finished with twenty-five years with the City of Reno.

And now you're retired, and are you still involved with the Fire Department?

Not necessarily the department, but I am involved with the employees through the Reno Firefighters Local 731. I volunteer my time through the union to assist some of our men and women who end up either hurt or come down with an occupational disease, whether it be cancer or a heart disease or a lung disease, and I help them get through the hassle of the workman's comp claims.

Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like being a fireman in Reno, and do you have any memories particularly of Fourth Street, or does anything really stick out in your mind during the history of your employment?

Fourth Street is always interesting in the summertime with the special events, as far as firefighters are concerned. A lot of times, whether it's Hot August Nights or the motorcycle rally [Street Vibrations] or any of the other big events that come to town, the corridor downtown will be blocked off and that includes Fourth Street, so it makes it very interesting to get around. A lot of times it will be set up so we can pull the barricades down and drive through, but a lot of times there are vendors on the streets and everything is blocked off and you can't drive through.

New Year's Eve is also an exciting time downtown to be a fireman. You're busy. You're up all night. A lot of times we would put on a backpack filled with medical equipment and carry our radios and just walk the streets because we knew we were going to be assisting with medical calls downtown.

At one point, the Fire Department would overstaff for those special events, and we would basically

have fire engines that weren't in fire stations but were just located throughout a strategic area to try to get into these places, because we're bringing in 100, 150,000 more people than normally live here, so we know we're going to have calls and we're going to be busy.

You mentioned medical calls. So that's also part of being a fireman, you don't just deal with fires?

Yes, the majority of our calls are medical-related. Reno Fire does not transport. I wish we did. I think we would be more efficient if we did the work in the field and transported. I also think financially city-wise it would benefit the city to be able to bill for the transportation, but a private ambulance company does all the transportation and all of the billing. That would be REMSA.

Did you ever have any calls where you went into any of the buildings downtown or on Fourth Street?

Of course, the modern casinos we're in all the time with medical calls, with smoke detectors, and thank goodness, for the most part, false alarms. We have had a situation, on the site of the Eldorado—I wasn't on duty that day, but I was at our old headquarters and I got to watch this. One of the big neon signs went up in flame. I guess I shouldn't say neon because they're not neon anymore, but it was probably about 30-by-50, the sign that burned. It was pretty impressive from the outside where they'd fallen off, but nothing penetrated the building.

There have been several smaller fires in some of the older establishments, the Morris Hotel or down by the Alturas Bar, but those are old hotels and most of them have basements. A lot of them not only have basements, but they had tunnels that went from underneath the old Lincoln Highway, so you could go from one building to another. Those are mostly blocked off now, but they could pose a serious problem for firefighters if you got a basement fire and those old timbers start to burn. Smoke and fire can find a way through things that people can't crawl through.

Have you been in any of those tunnels?

Yes, not for a long time. One of the things that happens when you first get hired on a district, in whatever fire station that they place you in, the captains will try to get you out and get you familiar with the buildings so you're not lost if you do have a fire in one of these buildings. So we do these pre-planning walk-throughs with the building owners most of the time, and it gives us an idea what we're going to deal with under smoke and low light or no light conditions. So, yes, I have been in most of them.

That's interesting. Do you know that a lot of people in Reno think the tunnels are a myth?

Well, they're not. [laughter] Most of the tunnels are blocked off, but most of them were on Virginia Street, not necessarily Fourth Street, and they went from the larger casinos and the older casinos, the Horseshoe and Harrah's. No, there were plenty of tunnels. Whether they're still there, I can't tell you now.

That topic has come up quite a bit in a lot of different realms.

Is that right?

Yes.

No, they're there. I can't tell you how many, but there's more than one.

So you've been in some of those resident motels, like the Morris Hotel. What was it like inside? Can you remember being in the Morris?

They're old. Their rooms are very small. The beds are very small, typical of the era in the forties and the fifties. I imagine at one time they were very nice. We've had several fires in the area—we've lost the Mizpah. That wasn't on Fourth Street, but it's all part of that era. I imagine these old hotels will be there until they end up burning down. There's really not a lot of desire for people to purchase them, tear them down, and build something new.

They're going through some changes on East Fourth Street and the business community is getting involved now, but I don't see that happening for a while. I think they'll eventually just either fall down or burn down. It's an old warehouse district, as well, and it was probably six or seven years ago that we had a huge snowstorm—heavy snow, and lots of it. We probably lost three, four, five of the old warehouses when the roofs came down from the weight of the snow, so things like that turn these old buildings into parking lots in a hurry.

I didn't realize that kind of damage was happening there.

Yes.

I mentioned Fourth Street just because that's one of the areas I've been interested in, but it's basically that whole district, the warehouse district, the Freight House District. As a fireman, what do you call that area?

Well, we use the same language that the city uses, because they're redevelopment districts. The Freight House District is where the ballpark is now. They have the RDA 1, RDA 2, and these are redevelopment districts and that's how they classify them for tax purposes.

So when you get a call on the radio, would you just give a street location, or how are you oriented to find yourself when going to a call?

Address, street address. They would never tell us that this was in the Freight House District.

Those are more contemporary terms for the area.

Yes, those are, like I say, for tax purposes, whether they're developed through STAR bonds or special tax incentives to bring businesses downtown. I'm not an expert certainly on these districts, but I do know that there are several special tax districts downtown.

Can you talk about the redevelopment of downtown and how that has impacted your work over your thirty

years as a fireman?

Sure. When I came to Reno Fire in 1984, we had four engines downtown, and on top of that, two truck companies and one utility rig or rescue rig, with the combined four stations downtown in the downtown corridor. We now have two. Now, the downtown area has grown. The high rises have gotten higher and bigger with more rooms, and you would think that we would have more people and more stations downtown, but that's not what has happened.

As Reno grew, the downtown grew. So did the outlying districts. Rather than build new stations, we moved two of our stations. Station 3 was on the corner of Virginia Street at California Avenue, at that intersection. That station is now at the Moana Ballpark and that station is gone. It's now Starbucks.

Station 2 was in the Fourth Street corridor, East Fourth Street, on Morrill and Fifth, so it was one block off of Fourth Street. That station is now, or was, the homeless center, and I believe now it's privately owned, and that station has moved to just below Hug High School on Sutro, so it's moved way outside of the corridor just like the one that moved to the Moana Ballpark.

Station 1, our headquarters station, was torn down when the [new Reno Aces] baseball park came to town and it is temporarily relocated on the corner of Fourth Street and Valley. Like I say, it's a temporary structure. It's a couple of double-wides stuck together with a tent-type structure—

I've seen it. Like a Quonset hut?

Yes, like a Quonset hut. You see them on the sides of the road. NDOT will store gravel or salt or something in them to keep it dry. So that's what we're using to house our equipment. We have a truck and an engine in that station.

How long has that station been there as a temporary station?

Boy, you know, since the ballpark came to town, so three years, and I don't anticipate it to be very temporary. I think it's going to be there for a long time. I don't think the city has the finances or the appetite to build another headquarters fire station like we had.

So Station 1 was the headquarters fire station, and the service support, the truck and the firemen who man the truck, are at Fourth and Valley. Where did the administrative people move?

Well, just so you know, in Station 1, we had two engines, and the engines are the apparatus that carry hose and water. We had a ladder truck and that's self-explanatory, and we also had a rescue rig and that was used to run certain types of nonviolent medical calls, non-cardiac medical calls, something where two people could handle it because it was housed by two people. Our heavy rescue piece of equipment was stationed there. Our boats and a boat and a trailer and a Suburban that we use for water rescues, all of that was there.

Because the river's right there.

For the river, yes. Dispatch was there in the basement, and our headquarters, our administration, fire chief, battalion chiefs, our staffing office, all of that was in that building, so when that building went

away, everybody had to find a new home, and it went away in a hurry. It wasn't like we had two or three years to plan this; we had several months.

The firefighters, myself included, worked with the administration, trying to find the best location to put the new headquarters fire station, meaning it had to be out of the flood plain. The city owns quite a bit of property downtown as a result of the train trench, but none of that property that was, quote, "free" to build something on was ever deemed to be the best place to put your downtown fire station. It was either in a flood plain or it was too far away or it didn't have good access to Virginia Street or to the freeway. A lot of the calls from downtown end up on the freeway, as well.

So with that said, the city decided that the cheapest thing for them to do was to build some temporary stations that were relatively close—the main station on Valley and Fourth that has an engine and a truck in it, and then they also added another temporary station in the parking lot of the Grand Sierra Hotel and Casino.

So that was all part of Station 1.

Yes, right. Not the best, but better than the original plan—initially, the city was not going to replace any fire protection downtown, and obviously, as the firefighters, we had an issue with that. If we don't have firefighters nearby and we do have a fire, the longer it burns, the more dangerous the structure becomes and the more dangerous it is for firefighters.

I'm just trying to get this straight. So Station 1 has been divided into two locations. Does that include dispatch and the administrative, or is that simply the equipment part?

Simply the actual firefighters and some of the equipment. Administration originally moved to a business building on the corner of Holcomb and Liberty. They have since moved out of that building and now they are on the fourth and fifth floor of City Hall downtown, and that includes the battalion chiefs, who also run calls, so it's difficult for them to be in the office and get a fire call, have to find the elevator, get on the elevator, ride it down, then park their apparatus. Obviously, they can't just park it on the sidewalk nearby, so they're a half a block away. So by the time they end up getting to their vehicle to respond to the fire, they've had a fairly lengthy delay.

You asked about dispatch. Prior to the [Reno Aces] ballpark, dispatch had already moved out. They had probably been out for a year and a half or so, and they're up at a regional dispatch. Up by Truckee Meadows Community College is where they are now, regional with police and with fire, not with REMSA. They have their own dispatch but also with Washoe County Sheriff's Department.

I'd like to touch back on a couple of different subjects that seem to be centered on the original question of the impact of developing the downtown area. It seems like this development has had a really big impact on the fire protection services, and one thing you mentioned was the train trench and property that may have been examined that would be something that you guys could have built something on. Could you talk a little bit about the train trench? Because that occurred while you were a fireman, didn't it?

Yes, it did. It's interesting that you say that, because back in the sixties, the idea of building a trench through downtown was talked about, and also the idea of taking the train around Reno. There always has been a mentality from some business owners downtown that having a train go through the

downtown corridor is hurting business, so to speak. Myself, I always like to stop and watch the train.

The idea resurfaced maybe ten-plus years ago, when the Council, at that time with Bob Cashell as the mayor, really wanted to build this trench. Funding was coming through bonds, and they felt that it would clean up the downtown corridor. They also argued that when the train comes through and it stops—because Amtrak will stop in downtown and pick up people—the firemen can't get from one side of the track to the other.

So the city tried to say that the firefighters were hampered and they wanted us on board with them, when, in reality, the trench, in our opinion—in my opinion especially—is a lot more dangerous because of the aspect of fighting fire underground, because part of the trench has now been enclosed, so it's no longer a trench; it's now a tunnel.

At any rate, I believe it was the Council's idea to put it on a ballot and see if the citizens of Reno wanted the train trench. Well, overwhelmingly no, the citizens did not want the train trench, but we got it anyway, and today we're having some real issues paying for it. I believe the city, because they're currently having a lot of cutbacks, and taxes have dropped and so their revenue has dropped, is having trouble making the payments on the bonds that were issued for the train trench, as well as one or two other bonds downtown. With the impact of real estate doing what it did and everybody kind of being hurt, it's caused some financial issues, and I don't know how much longer the city is going to be able to pay what little bit they're paying without trying to restructure the bonds, if they can restructure the bonds.

And I understand the ballpark, in that area as well, was a bond issue, a STAR bond. That was not part of the train trench project.

No, no, definitely not. There are a couple of projects in Reno that I know of that are STAR bonds. STAR bond, I believe means Special Tax Abatement something. A number of years ago, the lawmakers allowed for this to happen and it was an incentive to bring companies, businesses to the area. Cabela's is a perfect example, up by Boomtown, of a STAR bond. The baseball park is another one in the Freight House District, and I believe it encompasses more than just the ballpark. I believe all the retail around it, as well, is all part of that.

One of the things that happens with that is that when you go in and buy a soda or buy a ticket to a ballgame, the taxes that would normally go to the General Fund to pay for essential services like fire and police protection, like parks and rec, education for our schools throughout Washoe County and through the City of Reno, those taxes no longer go to the General Fund. Part of it goes back to pay for the construction and part of it stays in the district, but it does not go to the General Fund, and that also causes an issue when you're trying to pay for essential services. When you have special tax districts that no longer pay into the General Fund, the General Fund is certainly losing money.

You mentioned that the firemen didn't have a lot of notice about Station 1 being closed. I'm a little confused about how that could be, because it seems that if there's a redevelopment plan, that would have taken a long time to happen. But you mentioned that the Fire Department didn't know that Station 1 was going to be affected. Do you know how that came about?

Well, I don't know the ins and outs of SK Baseball—and that's the group that has the ballpark. I was told that one of the things that had happened was this group, SK Baseball, runs a minor league team that is affiliated with the Arizona Diamondbacks, so it's their Triple-A baseball team, which is their

highest level before they make it into the major leagues. They were moving out of Tucson and they were looking for someplace to go. Whether Reno approached them or they approached Reno, I don't know, but the time constraints were so tight that they had only a certain amount of time to get this ballpark built before the opening of the season.

That was kind of how it came about, but, of course, our fire station, our headquarters station had to be demolished prior to the ballpark being built. So when I say we didn't have a lot of time, we didn't have two or three years to plan, which would have been nice for a project like this. The projects downtown are nice. They bring people in. But by the same token, the more people, the more police and more fire protection you need. At any rate, we did not have a lot of time. We worked as hard as we could as firefighters to try to come up with locations, like I was talking about, and alternatives to providing fire protection downtown.

At one point we were going to live in the bowling stadium and we had most of that worked out, and then, for whatever reason, that fell through. There's a police substation downtown, as well, and we were going to move in there with just one tiny crew to keep our presence directly in the downtown core. For whatever reason, that fell through and eventually we had doubled up at Station 4, which is off of Ralston up by UNR. It's the other station that is part of the downtown core, so we ended up having two crews run out of that station. It's a pretty small station to do that, but that was about the only way we could still provide timely, adequate fire protection to downtown prior to having the temporary stations built.

Another thing you mentioned with the train trench is that the City Council had this idea of cleaning up the downtown area, and I guess I'm a little confused about how a train trench would clean up the downtown. Could you explain that to me?

Maybe that's not the right term to use, but, like I say, there was a push by some of the businessmen downtown to get the unsightly train and the tracks and everything that goes along with that, below ground. Anybody who has lived next to a train track realizes that it becomes a walking corridor for a lot of people, and I think some of the businessmen downtown just didn't want that, so they wanted to lower it. Then they can build bridges over it and travel freely, as well as enclose part of it, and then use that as extra real estate. So that was part of the idea.

Certainly from a safety aspect of being a firefighter, we had never envisioned them enclosing any part of the trench, other than where the roads went over it. I know when I was there we did have a game plan of how we would attack an emergency, whether it was a spill or a crash. The train carries so many things, everything from nuclear waste to toxins to fuel, so it is an issue to have that in a tunnel, enclosed.

Would that something that would involve consultation with the Fire Department or is this more of a planning issue where they don't need to discuss potential hazards with the Fire Department or other public service providers?

There were a lot of open meetings on the train because the trench was something, unlike the Freight House District, that didn't go up overnight. The trench was something that was planned out ahead of time, as well as all the access of how emergency services were going to get over the trench as it was being built before the roads and the bridges went through, so I'm sure there were discussions with the Fire Department about it. Like I say, I don't ever remember them coming to the Fire Department and saying,

“Well, now that we have it built, we want to enclose part of it,” because that would certainly have been an issue with the firefighters at the time.

But as firefighters, whatever challenge they put in front of us, that’s what we’re going to deal with and we’re not going to have a lot of say about whether there’s a trench or not, so we can explain some possible hazards to it, the downside and the upside, and certainly there’s an upside to having the trench there. We don’t have people lying on the tracks anymore committing suicide downtown, which we had a lot of. I shouldn’t say a lot, but enough that you remember those calls. And a small leak was contained inside the trench. So there are some upsides to having the trench.

Are there any memorable events other than the suicides that you recall when you were working as a fireman in the city?

Just a lot of calls in that corridor. East Fourth Street, off and on since I can remember, has been a magnet for drugs and prostitution. When you start to leave the downtown corridor itself and you get east of, say, Lake Street, east of Valley Road, the hotels turn into motels, and the vast majority of those motels are weekly or monthly rentals. They’re not for tourists or they’re not being used by tourists. They’re being used by folks who are down and out, and that encourages the drug traffic and the prostitution.

The police will come in and clean things up for a little bit. They’ll do their stings and they’ll arrest a half a dozen people in one night, and then you read about it in the newspaper and it kind of slows down for a little bit. They’ll do a sting for a week or two and pretty soon the prostitution has kind of moved away, and then six months later it comes back, and with the prostitution comes a lot of drugs, a lot of violence.

That part of the corridor has a lot of small liquor stores which tend to lead to robberies. There’s a little liquor store near Fourth and Lake, and as a firefighter downtown in our old station before the ballpark, we could count on at least once, maybe twice on a Friday and Saturday night going just to that location because there was a fight in the parking lot or there was a knifing or there was a robbery or gunshots. It’s kind of Reno’s little ghetto, I guess, is one way of putting it.

As you probably know, with these projects and things they’re trying to change the character of downtown. Have you noticed anything happening with the transition of downtown, say with the new Freight District or the relocation of the homeless shelter or even the new bus terminal, the new transit area? Have you noticed any positives or negatives that have impacted downtown in that way?

Both positive and negative. The more people, the more things happen, and certainly the businesses that have started to build out on East Fourth Street, down around to Valley Road, they’re bars and they’re restaurants. They bring in a lot of people, which brings in some undesirables, a lot of drinking. I haven’t worked out of that station on Valley and Fourth because I retired by the time it was built, but talking to the firefighters who work out of it, they spend a lot of time across the street at a couple of the bars on Friday and Saturday nights. The fire marshal will come in from time to time because the occupancy load is being exceeded. In other words, there are too many people in the bar for what the municipal codes say they can have.

I think it’s a good thing to bring businesses back into that corridor and encourage them, and if they can continue on east, I think that would help as well. At some point, like I say, these buildings will either fall down or be torn down, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing, and then maybe a new business will step

in, but there are pluses and minuses to having those types of establishments.

Part of the funding or the funding for this project is from the Regional Transportation Commission, and the RTC is interested in getting input for this corridor between Reno and Sparks. That was the old Lincoln Highway and old Highway 40. And they want to do some revamping of the streets, so I'd like to ask your opinion in two facets. One, as a fireman in protection services, what do you think you'd like to see on that street as far as revamping lanes, sidewalks, lighting, etc. and then I'd ask you the same question as a citizen—what might draw you down there as well? Let's start off with the fire protection services aspect.

Strictly as a firefighter, you always want to deal with aspects that make our jobs safer. When we go to a fire or we go to a call, if I get hurt before I get there, then I become part of the problem and not part of the solution, so our safety always starts with us. Once we're safely on the scene, hopefully then we can help. Getting there sometimes proves to be a challenge, and I believe as many firefighters are killed every year in wrecks responding to fires as are killed by fire.

I did spend a lot of my career dealing with driving and operating fire equipment, so for me it does hit home to be safe as a fire equipment operator. Driving in those conditions with lots of people on the sidewalk, at special events, with maybe some impaired drivers on the street because there are special events and the booze is flowing freely—that's just the way things are.

Probably one of the key things that would help firefighters get through that corridor as you're running up and down Fourth Street or you're on Fifth Street or any of the parallel streets, is something that attaches to the streetlight itself. On the fire trucks, we have a switch that we can throw that will throw a beam of light and it will activate that and it will turn the light green.

If they're not there already, and I don't believe they are, at the major intersections, Sierra and Fourth, and Center and Fourth, and Virginia and Fourth, and Valley and Fourth, Lake and Fourth, if we can have those instruments installed so our lights turn green, that does more than just allow us to move. It allows the cars ahead of us that get bottled up because the light is red, and then here comes a fire truck behind them with red lights and sirens. They don't know what to do. It'll turn the parallel streets red and it will turn our thoroughfare green. So as a firefighter, those are the types of things that we try to encourage the city to do.

Are there other aspects with buses, like turnout lanes or things like that, that you'd like to see? Bike lanes, I think they're talking about. Do you have any opinions about those?

The bus turnouts are obviously needed. Wherever you have a lot of foot traffic and you have a lot of buses, it's nice to have those, not just for emergency vehicle operations, but just for the everyday driver.

Bicycle lanes would be an interesting thing on Fourth Street. The City of Reno has installed a lot of bike lanes around town, and typically what they have are two lanes in each direction, so it will be four lanes. They will turn it into one lane in each direction with a center median and then the bike lanes on either side.

That type of a thing on East Fourth Street could pose a problem. The center lane is obviously going to be empty most of the time and that's because it's a turn lane. That would be the lane that the firefighters would end up driving in. The problem with that is if it's plugged because a car is turning—and we get a lot of traffic downtown, especially with these events. So if a car wants to turn into a parking

lot or to a restaurant or just down another street and he can't go because of the traffic, then that center lane is plugged and that means the fire engine is plugged. He's not going anywhere.

Police cars are a little bit different. They're smaller and they can move over into the bike lane, I'm sure, and get around, but we're not going to move a seventy-foot fire engine through a bike lane.

So depending upon how the city went about putting bike lanes on East Fourth Street, it could be a very good thing or it could hamper us at times during the peak events.

Maybe there could be ways where if they do, say, choose a bike lane, if they made that area wider than normal for a bike or a bike and pedestrian lane or something like that, that could be something you could drive through.

Sure, yes. Absolutely, yes.

As a person who has a long family history of going down to restaurants on Fourth Street, what would you like to see, as far as a private citizen? Would you like to see wider sidewalks or more parking or less parking, a pedestrian area? Do you have any ideas that might entice you down there more often?

Of course, being a firefighter and having run up and down that corridor to some horrible events, a lot of violence and vehicle accidents, probably for the biggest thing for me would be safety aspects, so lighting, a police presence. Obviously, the drug and the prostitution has to go away.

I remember when my kids were here in high school, they would want to go to events downtown and they thought I was crazy because I would say, "No, you're not going downtown. It is not a safe place, especially once it gets dark." And it wasn't because Reno is a gang-infested, horrible place. It was because in my career I had seen all the bad stuff and I didn't want my kids to be one of the unlucky ones who fell into that.

Obviously, the water park in the middle of the day, those type of concerts are different than nine o'clock at night, ten o'clock at night, dark and wandering in and out of even Louis' Basque Corner. Trying to find your car after you walk out of Louis', there's very little street lighting and it's not the most desirable neighborhood. So I think probably clean the neighborhood up from the drug and prostitution, and the gang aspects, and add more lighting.

That kind of sparks something I had just seen on the news a couple days ago, where they're contemplating legalizing prostitution in a particular area downtown in Kings Inn, which I think is on the west side of Fourth Street. I didn't look up where that is. And you mentioned cleaning up the downtown and Fourth Street corridor, in particular, of prostitution. I'm kind of curious. Legal versus illegal, do you think there'd be a difference?

I think there'd be a big difference. Legalized prostitution has been in Nevada a long time. We don't hear of a lot of horrible things that happened in or outside of a legal brothel. A number of years ago, there was a shooting out at Mustang. But the Kings Inn—you mentioned that—that has changed names a half a dozen times. It's closed, I believe, right now. My father was a building contractor in town, and I remember when I was in high school, it was called The Reef at that time. He ended up getting a contract to do some work in there, so I did actually work in that as a carpenter at one time. But I have not heard that about legalizing prostitution there. Obviously, Washoe County would have to get involved because

it's not legal in Washoe County.

No, it's illegal.

But that would be interesting to have a legalized brothel two blocks off of Virginia Street, three blocks off—

On Fourth Street.

Yes, on the Lincoln Highway. Well, it wouldn't be the first time that there's been a trick or two pulled downtown, so— [laughter]

I think we've covered a lot of the topics. I want to thank you very much and I just want to conclude this interview, unless you had some other topics that you think we might have missed.

Probably not, other than just to mention some of the businesses that that corridor has held over the years. I believe it's a thrift store now, but it was Commercial Hardware, and you probably remember that as a little girl.

I loved Commercial Hardware.

That was our only hardware store. That was before Lowe's and Home Depot and that's where you went. You went there to buy everything from Dutch ovens to duct tape, to furnaces, to screw drivers and hammers and lumber and everything else, so that was a business that we were sorry to see go. That was an anchor for that part of the community, for that part of Fourth Street. That truly was. That was the type of business that you need to bring back, in my opinion, to that area because it's a clean business. It doesn't involve drinking.

Down the street from that was Martin Iron Works, and again, that was a family-owned business and employed a lot of people, a very clean business, open at seven in the morning, closed at six at night, so the nighttime aspect wasn't there. Just some of the businesses along that corridor that are no longer there. I think if you can bring them back, encourage businessmen, whether it's warehousing or it's something similar, like a door shop or a metal-frame shop, something that is industrialized and that's clean, I think that would help the corridor.

Yes, having some real anchor businesses, as you've said. I think that's a really valid and insightful comment. Anything else you'd like to say?

No, I think that's all. That's all I've got to say.

Thank you very much.

ADDIE JARAMILLO

Co-owner of Pet Play House



Pet Play House at 2403 East 4th Street. Photo by Alicia Barber.

A native of Reno, Addie Jaramillo is co-owner (with her mother, Lisa Jaramillo) of the Pet Play House at 2403 East 4th Street. The business, initially located in a converted house next door to the current address, provides indoor/outdoor cage-free day care and overnight boarding for dogs.

Amanda Roberts: I am here with Addie Jaramillo. We're here on 2403 East Fourth Street in the Pet Play House, where Addie is a co-owner. The date is April 1, 2012.

Addie, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Addie Jaramillo: Yes.

Okay, great. Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself. Let's start off with where you were born.

I was born in Reno.

Have you lived here all your life?

Yes.

Tell me a little bit about growing up in Reno. What was that like for you?

Well, I love it. I'm really proud of Reno. A lot of people, I guess later on in my life, have talked about how it's not [Las] Vegas and it's trying to be Vegas, but I like it better than Vegas. I like to go to Vegas, but Reno is definitely, I think, a better place to live.

And where did you go to school?

I started out at Mount Rose Elementary School and then I went to Jesse Beck, and then for middle school, I went to Swope, and then Reno High and then three years at the University of Nevada, Reno.

What was your major at the university?

It started out as journalism and then I switched to studio art major and art history minor.

Are you an artist yourself?

Yeah, I guess, on the side. My main thing was photography. That's mainly what I like to do.

There's certainly a lot of great opportunity out here, beautiful landscapes and things like that.

Yeah, I think so.

So what do you think about Reno? Has Reno changed for you since growing up?

Well, I think more so recently. I guess my first real memories of downtown Reno and the tourism industry were when the Silver Legacy was being built and it kind of seemed like it was on the up and up, and more recently there are a lot of things closing down or in the middle of being redeveloped, and maybe it doesn't really follow through, so I guess it's different now. I'm sure it has everything to do with the recession, but it just seems like things are a little stuck right now.

What are your favorite things about living in Reno?

I personally like the nightlife. I like to go out to the restaurants that are here and do more tourist kinds of things. I'm not really into the whole outdoors thing very much. I go to Tahoe every now and then

and I do like to go downtown by the river. I think it's a small town that has a lot of entertainment, but it's not something like New York.

Did you graduate after three years of college?

No, I didn't graduate. I was already doing what I wanted to do as a career, and a lot of the other people around me were going to school to get into a career, and I found that it was kind of holding me back from my career because I was having to go to school so much and I couldn't focus on my goals of being a business owner. My major wasn't something that I wanted to do professionally. Growing up, I'd always known that I was going to go to college. It was something that I had to do. It was kind of an option when I got into college because I had enough money to where I could buy a house, and another thing that I like to do is I want to buy property and rent it out.

So I had enough money to buy my first rental property and I was talking to my parents about it, and they were saying, "Well, you could either buy your first house or you could pay for college," and so I decided, okay, I'll pay for college and I did that.

Then I basically did all the schooling that I wanted to do in the photography and art area, and all I had left were some things like a math class and some extra stuff that I needed in order to graduate, and it was just holding me back so much from my job that I thought, I've already learned enough of the stuff that I wanted to learn, so I'm just going to leave it at that.

It sounds like you got what you wanted out of college and then got out at the right time.

Yeah.

So you said your dream was to be a business owner and you are a current business owner here at Pet Play House. Is that something you were really interested in?

Yes. The first thing I wanted to do was be a journalist. I did that in high school and I didn't really like it as much anymore, and since I'd been doing this for so long, being a business owner, and it was working out really well for me, I decided that's really what I want to do.

I do know you're getting married in about two weeks, is that correct?

Yeah.

Can you tell me a little bit about your fiancé and how you guys met?

Yeah, we met, I think it was three years ago now. He was a bass player in a local band and his guitar player was dating my best friend, and then she introduced us at one of his shows at a place called Pizza Reno downtown.

Is that place still there?

Yes.

Are you going to take a honeymoon or anything like that?

Yes, not right after the wedding, because when I travel, I don't just do it. I like to plan it out and it would kind of be like planning a second wedding, so I'm going to wait until all the wedding planning's done and then I'm going to plan a nice vacation. So it's going to be afterward. It would be too stressful for me if I had to leave right after the wedding.

What's your fiancé's name?

Adam.

Is he still a musician?

He is. He quit the band that he was in, but he still plays bass and he's looking to get into another band after the wedding, probably.

Do you have an interest in music as well?

Yeah, not as much as he does, but I like music.

Let's talk a little bit about your business here. Can you tell me a little bit about Pet Play House and how it got started?

Yes, we do dog daycare and dog overnight boarding, and we started it because we had a dog who was really bad and destructive at home and she needed to constantly be exercised. Even when we were taking her for really long walks, she still had too much energy and was being bad, so we looked into daycare. It's something that was a lot bigger in San Francisco and places like that.

We did have one here in Reno, and we checked it out and it wasn't really something that we wanted to do with our dog. It was just like a warehouse, all indoors, and it wasn't quite what we thought of when we thought, "Oh, doggy daycare, it sounds like a fun, colorful experience."

We figured that we must not be the only ones who felt that way, and we decided to open a dog daycare with our idea in mind, thinking that, okay, I'm sure some people like that, but I'm sure there are people who would like our idea, too, and that's how we started it.

What kind of dog did you have that was so active?

She was a mutt from the Humane Society. She was, like, a hound mix, I'd say.

Can you explain what your philosophy was for doggy daycare?

Our main thing was we thought the dogs would want to go outside, not just stay inside, because a lot of them are trained at home to go to the bathroom outside, so we didn't want them to be confused and worried about what's going to happen if I go to the bathroom in this inside area.

Lots of dogs like to go outside and run around. It's fun for them. They like to go to the park. We thought that lots of dogs were scared and upset to be in a cage and a kennel, so we wanted to open something that was more like home, that they would feel more comfortable in, so that's what we went for was homelike and indoor-outdoor. Cage-free.

This is a really nice place. I've seen some of what you call doggy condos for overnight stay. They're pretty luxurious. Can you tell me a little bit about the condos and the accommodations here?

We started out with all cage-free group boarding and then we found that a lot of dogs don't do well being around other dogs at all times. There were some people who wanted their dogs to stay with us, to have a nice place, but they were dog-aggressive and needed to be kept away from other dogs, so we built these condos and suites that are still cage-free. There are no cages. They're actual rooms with walls and doors rather than a kennel. We still went with the homelike concept in that they have TVs, something that reminds them of something that they hear at home, and dog furniture that they can get up on, and pillows and rugs and stuff like that, so it's still not like a kennel. It's much better than that.

This is a huge building we're in. But this isn't where the business started, correct?

Right. We started next door at 2401 East Fourth Street. It was a brick house. It's still there and we still own it, but we basically only use it for the backyard now. That's where it started out for nine or ten years. Then we built this place and it took building it a little while, and then we moved in here, I think two or three years ago now.

Why did you guys choose the house next door?

Well, we looked at quite a few properties that were for sale at the time, and this one was really good because we would be able to have an outdoor area, which is what we were really going for because that would set us apart, and it was a really good location right off of I-80 and 395. We were thinking, well, people with kid daycares don't want to drive out in the middle of nowhere just for that. We were trying to make it convenient for people who were either on their way to work or on their way home, so that they could have a convenient place to drop off and pick up their dogs.

And the business seems to be doing quite well, despite the economic recession.

Yeah.

So what made you decide to leave the house?

We thought we would have a lot more freedom in having our vision completely what we wanted it to be if we started with a building that we designed, because going into a house, you have certain restrictions. You have to work with what you have. We couldn't really have our condos and suites and large daycare rooms in the house. We really needed to build something from the ground up. Even when we first started the business, that would have been what we wanted to do anyway. It would have been great to just have the money to completely construct a huge building, but we had to start it up and

generate money and clients. But ultimately this is what we always wanted to do.

This is quite a step up from what's next door. It's a small ranch-style brick home.

Old house, too.

And this is a huge building. Do you know how big it is, square footage?

I don't know. Lisa [Jaramillo] knows more about that.

What sort of clientele do you have here?

People who want to spend money on their dogs and can spend money on their dogs, not that we are extremely expensive in comparison to our competition, but people who want to spend the money to leave their dogs somewhere nice, rather than spend less money in a place that's not as nice or just with their friend or something.

We talked a lot about dogs, but why not cats or any other sort of animals?

That's always been a thought. That's what we were thinking about doing in the house next door, because right now the inside's not being used at all. We thought about that more seriously here and there, but I have cats at home and recently they got a sickness that's really contagious, and I was thinking about it. It's completely airborne and I'm thinking, gosh, if we just had one cat staying there, then all of the cats would be sick, and it's almost something that seems not really worth it unless you had each little housing unit on its own air system, because it's very contagious.

That might be quite costly, though.

Yeah, I don't know. What we were thinking recently was, cat sicknesses seem to be a little more costly. There are several cat-boarding places in Reno. We've talked to them, and aren't doing very well. A lot of people just want to leave their cats home. Cats do tend to be a little more stressed out when you take them somewhere else. They tend to like to be in their own environment more, so we're not sure it would be quite as successful a business as a dog daycare would.

I think that cats tend to be sort of independent.

Yes. A lot of people, when they go out of town, just say, "I leave a bowl full of food and my cat eats it, and then by the time I come back, the cat's fine and still alive and everything." Dogs aren't quite the same.

Certainly not. They need much more attention. You do have cats at home, though, so you have nothing against cats?

No, not at all. I love both cats and dogs.

Just maybe it's not as practical.

Yeah, and personally, I just know my cats wouldn't do well in a boarding situation. We had a dog who really needed that type of thing, so that kind of personal experience is why we went with the dog thing and haven't quite crossed over to the cats yet.

You talked about several business opportunities in the area. Do you have something else going on? Do you own another business?

No, I don't own another business. It's something I definitely want to do. A lot of my energy is focused on this right now, and also we're thinking about expanding this business, so once that's all done with, I will have plenty of time. But definitely I don't want this to be my only thing.

How would you like to expand on this business?

Whatever we do, we want to keep with the same concept that we've been doing, in that it's luxury and there's outdoor access. Unfortunately, if we were to go somewhere else, we might not be able to have outdoor access. We can here because we're grandfathered in. The zoning changed on us, but because we owned the property and we were already doing outdoor with the dogs, it's still fine. But if we built another building at another location, it might not be the same case.

We've been thinking a lot about expanding, taking down the house next door and building something there, or just building on top of what's already existing here, or buying property around us. There are a couple of places around here that we've looked into—some of them have been for sale and some of them haven't been, but we've talked to the owners and said that we're interested in buying.

Again, this is a really good location, so we would have no problem expanding here, and it's kind of scary to think of having to go to another location and not really being sure if it's a really good location and not being able to fill the spaces that you've built. I think we're leaning more towards expanding here, but we haven't ruled out another location somewhere else.

I guess things are going well. Are you full here on a regular basis?

Yeah, we are. It's kind of disappointing that we have to turn clients away. A lot of people thought when we built this place that we built too big and that we wouldn't be able to fill these spots, but we were immediately full.

How many dogs do you think you have here on a regular basis?

During the week we have a lot more. I'd say on our busy days we have up to 140, but on a normal day during the week, about 120. On the weekends we don't have as many in daycare, but we're completely full in boarding always on the weekends, so I'd say it's maybe fifty dogs on the weekends.

How many boarding units or condos do you have? How many dogs can you board?

Well, we have twenty-two of those individual units and some people have more than one dog that they keep in there, so it can be anywhere from just twenty-two to a little bit more if there are some more dogs in their family. Then for the slumber party we take ten to twelve dogs a night, which is the group option, the boarding option.

It might get kind of crazy if you have more than that.

Yes, I think they probably want to stay up and play, so a nice small group is good.

Do they tend to go to sleep when they're all out here?

Yeah, they do. We do try them out before accepting them into the slumber party, and sometimes puppies don't work out very well because puppies do want to always play if there's another dog around, but generally, since they've been in daycare all day, after dinner they're pretty tired. Every now and then you'll have a dog that wants to stay up all night, but for the most part, it goes pretty well and they fall asleep.

Let's talk a little bit about Fourth Street then. You like your location here on Fourth Street?

I think it's very good for business in terms of the traffic and the freeway proximity. But definitely the worst part about being here is the reputation it has, the street.

Recently there was a homeless shelter built on Fourth Street a little ways down from here. Do you think that has affected the area as well?

I think so. The homeless people obviously don't have cars that they can drive away from the homeless shelter, so once they're there, they're hanging around this entire street.

Do you think Fourth Street's changed since you started the business here? And what was that, thirteen years ago?

I don't think it's changed a lot. I haven't been alive to see it anything other than this, really.

Where would you like to see Fourth Street going in the future? What type of business would you like to see around here in the future?

I think it would be nice to bring in a strong business, maybe some sort of chain that could bring in clients that aren't just the ones who are hanging out here and living here.

When I go shopping, I know everything's always on Virginia Street or McCarran, and there are a lot of things like Best Buy and the mall right there. It would be nice to have something where people would come off of Fourth Street and know that there's some sort of Best Buy or a grocery store or something like that, something big that they could go to, and then other businesses could build up around that. Something big would bring a lot of people in and then littler shops can open up around there and get the people who think, "Oh, I just went to Walmart. Maybe I can grab a coffee on my way home," or

something like that.

Are you pleased with the flow of the traffic here and the transportation on Fourth Street?

Yes. I wouldn't say our main clientele is drive-by. A lot of people just know about us from word of mouth, but we definitely do get a lot of people who come in to us and say, "You know, I drive by all the time and I finally decided to stop in because now I have a dog." I like how busy it is. There are a lot of people going past—it's a pretty busy street to get from point A to point B, so I think it's pretty good. Especially for businesses it's really good, I think.

What would you say about the businesses that are here currently? When I think of Fourth Street, I think of a wide variety of businesses. You've got you guys here, the luxury doggy daycare, and right next door is a bar, and across the street there's some industrial use and mechanics, and there's an auction house and ironworks and art and all sorts of stuff like that. So to me it's an eclectic street, and I wanted to get your opinion of that sort of thing.

Yeah, it definitely is. It was, I think, more geared towards industrial until recently. It's kind of hard to open a lot of businesses here, because there are not a lot of people who go here, other than those who are traveling through to go to work or getting off the freeway to go to another business that's here. A lot of people come here just for us and because of us. Maybe now they go across the street to get a soda or to get gas, something like that. There's not a whole lot of big businesses right here.

There's been a lot of recent construction projects in the area, and right here on the freeway, I think your exit is closed right now.

Yeah, now it's closed. I think it's been a week, maybe two weeks it's been closed.

Do you think that the construction going on around here has affected your business at all?

I don't think it's affected our business. Our people still come to us. It's a little more of a hassle. They tell us that they were almost late because of it, but it hasn't turned anyone away from us. I think a couple other businesses around here have reached out to us to help them with some promotions to get more people here despite the construction, so it makes it seem like some other businesses are being affected by it. But not ours—our people are still coming to us.

Which businesses have contacted you about that sort of thing?

The Chevron down here right off Galletti. They are running a promotion with the Halfway Club next door, where if you buy five gallons of gas, you can go to the Halfway Club and get a free sandwich, and I think the idea is that if they're there, they're also going to buy a beer or something, so that helps both businesses. With us, we explained to them that we don't really need to promote ourselves, so they were saying, "Okay, well, maybe we can say that if you come to us and get five gallons of gas, then you can get a free treat from Pet Play House." It wouldn't really bring people here because we don't need that right now, but it would still be a promotion for them.

I think definitely the gas station needs it. If you can't get off of the exit in a timely manner, you're just going to go to the next exit and the gas station that's there. So I think it's definitely hurting them. You don't really have a loyalty to a certain gas station, I don't think.

I have a couple specific questions about Fourth Street to ask you—mostly about the corridor of Fourth Street, which includes the street itself and the businesses around it. So do you think transportation issues play a big role in the health of the Fourth Street corridor?

The health of the people or the businesses?

Probably both.

I don't think it's bad for the businesses. I think it's good. I think it's a lot of traffic. It's always busy, except for at night it slows down, but during the day, even on weekends, it's always really busy here and I think that's good for businesses. For people, I don't think it's affected them at all, so I think it's all right.

Are you happy with the current way the street is set up for transportation through here?

I think so. I haven't really thought of any problems with it.

What do you think are the greatest transportation needs in the corridor? Is there something that needs to be done out here on Fourth Street?

Well, I don't know. It's not really a transportation need, but maybe some sort of landscaping along the street.

So some aesthetic enhancer?

Yeah, like an island or something with flowers.

How do you think that would help the street?

Well, I think it would encourage the other businesses around here to make their places look a little better, because a lot of places have weeds and broken-down fences and signs, and it's hard to spend the money to fix all that if your neighbor's place looks just as bad. You know, if you have some motivation to make your business look a little better, then you would probably do it. I think that would be good. It would encourage everything to look a little better around here.

Do you have any plans or ideas or something you'd like to do for your property aesthetically?

Yeah, we had to put in some street art. Building this place, we were required to spend a certain amount of money on art and landscaping, but we have a couple other plans that we would like to do.

And you mentioned a minute ago about street art. What exactly does that entail?

Well, it didn't matter what it was, but we had to spend money on some sort of artistic piece in order to have this building here, and a certain amount of money on the landscaping. They had some opinions on it. They wanted it to be a bench, and we thought, well, we don't want people sitting on a bench that's considered our art, so we went with our little metal sculptures out there instead. But unfortunately, people tie their bikes to that.

I didn't realize those were out there. Can you describe the sculptures for me?

They are converted pieces of bike racks that have cutouts in metal, so I understand why people put their bikes there because it looks kind of like a bike rack, but it's our art piece. We have two of them out there.

It's meant to be decorative, but you used part of a bike rack.

Yeah, and there's a lot of other things downtown that they are bike racks, but they're artistic bike racks, so it's a trendy thing. We went with that.

Did you have a local artist design them for you?

My mom did that. She designed them, but our construction people put it all together because they needed to be welded and drilled in. We couldn't do all that.

Do you enjoy working with your mom here at the Pet Play House?

I do. It's comfortable. There are certain days where we're not here together. We're only here, I think, three days together and it's comfortable. I always know that she can handle things and she always says that I can handle things, so it's pretty nice, better than working for someone you don't really know that well.

It's always nice to have confidence in your business partner.

Yeah, it's quite relieving.

Do you have any managers here, or do you take on those responsibilities?

That's what we do right now. We're just the ones doing the management. It's really hard. It's a lot of work, very time-consuming. You think that when you're a business owner, you shouldn't really be working more than your employees, but that's what we're doing right now, for sure, and we've been doing it for a long time. We're ready to step away a little bit and hire a manager. We've been looking for the right person now for a while, so it takes a lot of letting go, trust, but we have to do that at some point.

When you get a manager, you might have some more time on your hands. What would you like to do after

you bring in a manager?

I would want to do it because I'm getting married and I'm going to be having kids, and I can't imagine right now with how much I work, I wouldn't even see my kids. I wouldn't ever be able to go to their school functions or anything like that. I would never see them. So for me, I'm going to be trying to live a normal life.

For my mom, she's getting older and she wants to—not retire. She's not that old, but she wants to be not working so much. She's just going to, I would think, spend more time at home, probably.

How many hours a week do you think you spend here, on average?

Well, I work every day about, I'd say, fifteen hours, probably.

Fifteen hours a day?

Yes. Both of us do because we do some night shifts, as well, so I have one day off—well, it's not really a whole day, but it's pretty much a whole day off.

You're here six days a week, then.

Well, I'm here seven days a week, but I get to leave during the day on one of those days.

That does seem like quite a bit of work.

Yeah. I've done it for a very long time, so a lot of people say that, but it's normal for me, so it's all right.

And you spend the night here too? How often?

Yeah, we're staffed twenty-four hours a day. I spend the night once a week. We have two other employees who take shifts, and then my mom as well.

I guess with a kennel, someone has to be here.

Yeah, and that's another thing that sets us apart. A lot of other kennels aren't staffed twenty-four hours, and if I were to leave my animal somewhere, that would panic me, so I would feel more comfortable with a twenty-four-hour place. Something could happen at night.

Well, let's get back to some of our Fourth Street questions.

Okay.

I've got a couple more for you. Let's see. Are you aware of any safety issues in the corridor? For example, is the traffic too fast or are there any bad sightlines, where you come around a corner or

something and you can't see? Anything that strikes you as a safety concern?

I don't think so. Personally, when I drive here, I think traffic speed is pretty effective. If it were slower, I don't know. Like I said, people use it as a way to get from one place to the other, so I think if it were slower, that would be a little frustrating for people. They'd probably just be speeding anyway. For as long as we've been here, I don't think I've seen an accident right in front of us or anything, and I haven't really heard of it being an accident-prone area, so I don't think there are any speed or sight problems.

What do you think about the arrangement of lanes and the number of lanes out there? Are you satisfied with that?

I think it's good. I think the turn lane is really good because there are a lot of businesses here that you need to turn into. It seems to work pretty well with the kind of traffic that's here.

So you don't think they should be modified in any way? For example, should buses have their own lanes or anything like that?

No, I think the buses just pull over right by the bus stop and that seems to be all right. I don't think it should change now.

And you like having a central turning lane?

Yeah. I think that's good.

What would you like to see for pedestrians and bicycles in the area?

Well, one thing I notice is that pedestrians sometimes have to weave around because there isn't always a sidewalk for them. If it's snowing, people have to walk in the street because there are no sidewalks, nothing that can be shoveled, and the only thing that's clear for them is to walk in the street, so I think sidewalks everywhere would be good.

You want sidewalks?

Yeah, I think so.

And how wide? What do you think?

I don't know, just like a typical sidewalk, I guess.

I guess it is sort of spotty. There are some sidewalks. There's a sidewalk in front of your building, but not all of them.

Yeah, our property next door doesn't have a sidewalk. There's some landscaping right where the sidewalk should be, and people have to either walk one way or the other to go around the landscaping.

Next door to us, they have a kind of a gravel area, but it's not a sidewalk.

You mentioned that especially during winter there's a problem, so the sidewalks aren't maintained or nobody does it. You know, they have the little sidewalk snow movers. They're like miniatures of the street version. So nobody comes out and maintains the sidewalks during the winter, the ones that are here?

Well, we do, you know. We shovel our sidewalk and we have our landscaping company that shovels our whole parking lot with the snowplow thing. I think other people must do it, but definitely not everyone.

Have you had to do that this year? We've had sort of a mild winter.

Yeah, there were just a couple days where I had to shovel.

You had to shovel? [laughs]

Yeah.

Couldn't give that to one of your other employees?

No, you know, it's a safety issue for our clients, so while they're doing all their stuff, I want to make sure that no one falls down in the parking lot.

Have the clients said anything about the street itself?

No, not really, nothing other than the recent construction being a problem with the freeway, but nothing else other than that.

With the Fourth Street Project, they've been discussing perhaps making some changes here. Do you think that would be a positive thing?

I think some changes would be really good. If things looked nicer, I think it would encourage everyone to make everything look nicer. It encourages people to come here. I know on Wells, I personally really like the streetlights and the little art thing in the roundabout. I think that made that place look better. Doesn't look so down. So I think some aesthetic stuff would look good.

And we talked about sidewalks and you do want to see some more sidewalks.

Just, I think, a consistency would look good. I think it also looks like it's a finished property, because a lot of times it's just dirt and it has weeds in it, so I think if it looked like it had a sidewalk, it would look a little better.

What about something like bike lanes? Have you noticed a lot of bicyclists out here on the road?

Some bicyclists. Not more than usual. I know there are a lot of bicyclists on Arlington because I think a lot of people like to use that bike trail by the river, but for here, I'd say that the main thing is the car traffic. That's what people mostly do.

So do you think they need bike lanes?

I don't think so. The bicyclists who are here, they do pretty well with riding their bikes just as they would on any other street without bike lanes.

How do you feel about parking in the area? Would you like to see parking changed in any way?

I think maybe for any of the businesses that might be new, or in a developed building, or where someone built a building, I think it's good to require that they have a parking lot. We were required to have a certain size parking lot. I know the business next door to us, the Halfway Club, they don't really have a parking lot and it's definitely not big enough for the type of business they are. So I think parking for the businesses that are here would be good. If everyone had a parking lot, that would be good.

Does your parking lot suit your needs?

It does. Sometimes, like I said, other people will park here, and at our busy times, that's when we notice there's a problem, but it's, again, because people are parking here who aren't supposed to be, who aren't part of our business. But for the amount of clients we have in the busy times, it's a good-size parking lot.

You said perhaps more parking would be helpful. What about something like on-street parking?

I know they have signs everywhere that say, "Parking for this Business Only," but again, if there's on-street parking, I think that people would be parking here if they're going to the bar in front of our business and we definitely wouldn't want that because we're a business that needs to be quiet and dark at night.

You guys have an interesting business in that someone is here twenty-four hours a day, so you get to see what happens at all hours of the night and day. Do you have problems at night with noise or traffic or anything like that?

Not at night, not with noise or anything.

We're hearing a doorbell. Is that the alarm for the parking lot?

No, the alarm for the parking lot, we turned that off for the recording, but that's the doorbell that rings every time the door opens.

And I guess you do keep the doors locked at night, right?

Yeah. A lot of it has to do, also, with the fact that we don't want the dogs escaping either.

So are the dogs allowed to go outside in an enclosed area at night?

Yeah, yeah. They're allowed to still go outside. We have the sliding doors to the yard that are open, and we have pretty high fences and all the gates are locked.

So you've never had a problem with that?

No.

Well, is there anything else you'd like to say about Fourth Street or the business, anything we may not have covered?

Not really, I guess just that I wish that businesses that could generate more money would move in here. I think it would be good.

Okay, well, I just want to thank you for your time.

Thank you.

LISA JARAMILLO

Co-owner of Pet Play House



Pet Play House at 2403 East 4th Street. Photo by Alicia Barber.

Born into a military family, Lisa Jaramillo moved to Reno upon her father's retirement in 1979. She is co-owner, with her daughter, Addie Jaramillo, of the Pet Play House, which offers day care and overnight boarding for dogs at 2403 East 4th Street.

Amanda Roberts: I'm here with Lisa Jaramillo and we're here at her business, the Pet Play House, at 2403 East Fourth Street in Reno, Nevada. The date is March 31, 2012.

Lisa, I'd like to ask, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Lisa Jaramillo: Yes, you do.

Okay, great. Let's go ahead and get a little information about you. Could you tell me where you were born?

I was born on June 11th of 1963.

Where were you born?

I was born at Homestead Air Force Base in Florida —near Miami. A hurricane took it out and it's no longer there.

Did that have anything to do with your deciding to relocate?

No, no. My dad was in the military and we traveled a lot. We were in Florida for three years and that's where I was born. My brother was born in Arizona and my sister is from Sacramento, or Mather Air Force Base, which I think is also no longer there. My mother is originally from [unclear] area, the [unclear] family. I think my dad was stationed in Fallon at that time, and they met here in Reno and then they got married. They began traveling and we've lived in quite a few places.

Fallon's the Top Gun academy, right?

Yes. My father was in electronics and he built the flight simulators that top pilots have to fly. He did quite a few exciting things, was out of town a lot throughout our childhood on military missions and things like that. He went to Nagasaki and Hiroshima—he was over there for that, testing and that kind of stuff.

That's kind of intense.

It was, which we all attribute to his early demise. He died of cancer. They worked with a lot of the radiation from that testing.

I'm sorry. That's really unfortunate.

Unfortunately, our military people a lot of times are used experimentally, and they had radiation detectors on them that they could feel the heat of the radiation from the explosions, and the detectors never went off. So they were exposed to a lot that wasn't reported.

Goodness, that had to have been hard on your dad.

Well, I wasn't even born yet. That's why we came later on in his life—they had to wait until they were sure that they didn't have any of these problems from all the radiation before they could start having children, so my parents were very old when they had children. More information than you wanted, but, yeah, there's a story there.

It's unfortunate the way your father was treated, but I think we have a lot of that here in Nevada, so it's not unheard of.

It's very true.

So you lived in quite a few places growing up, then.

Well, yeah, we did. I was obviously born in Florida and then moved to Sacramento, Mather Air Force Base. We lived there for six years and then went overseas to Germany, were there for three or four years, and then moved to New Mexico. We lived in Clovis for a few years and then my father retired, and because my mother is from here, they decided to move here after retirement, and that's how we came back to Reno. That was in 1979.

How old were you then?

I was thirteen, I think. I was a freshman in high school, so however old that is.

So you lived in Germany. Did you enjoy that? Did you speak German?

Not a lot. My sister did a lot of the exchange student programs over there. She spoke a lot more German than we did, but we did live in the towns. We lived off base for several years and then moved on base later on, but we lived in the community and it was a lot of fun.

And you have one sister?

One sister and one brother. I'm the youngest.

What do you remember about coming to Reno in '79?

Well, it was interesting. It was very different than it is now. My mother, having been from [unclear] Gardnerville and Reno and having not been here for thirteen years, was very surprised. When we came into town, we were looking for a hotel to stay in and we went to the Sutro Motel, which is very different than it was back in the day when my mom lived in Reno. It used to be a nice hotel. We came in in the middle of the night, and it was dark, and so in the morning when we woke up and looked out the window, we decided that we were going to a different hotel. [laughs]

Fourth Street, the way my mother remembers it, was very different from when she was a child, and it's also very different now. In the years when we first moved here, we lived over on East Eighth Street in Sparks. That's where we got our first house, and Prater Way at that time ended pretty much right there. There were none of those shopping centers or anything at that end of town, so it's very different, quite a lot bigger than it used to be.

What do you think about the changes Reno has gone through?

I think it's great. I think Reno is still a small town. Everybody knows everybody here and that's

kind of nice. It's still nice that anywhere you go in Reno you can be there in five or ten minutes. A lot of the people who move here from California are used to the long commutes to work, and a lot of people are now moving out into the Spanish Springs areas and farther out of town, but we currently live in a house in downtown Reno, on South Arlington. It's nice just to be able to get to places quickly where you don't have a huge commute.

I love the architecture over there.

Yeah, Old Southwest is very nice. We love that area. We also own my daughter's house. She lives next door to us. We bought that house as soon as it came up for sale and it has a lot of history. It was one of the original houses, 1919. We see pictures of our house from years and years ago. By the Mapes Mansion, that's where we live, right there on the corner of Mt. Rose and Arlington. We see pictures of my daughter's house when it was the only house there and then we see our house when it came into existence. So it's an interesting old neighborhood.

So your daughter lives next door to you. And you also co-own this business together, correct?

Yes, that's correct.

You guys must have a very close-knit family.

Yes, we do. She's an only child and so she grew up with us, so to speak.

Let's talk a little bit about your business here, the Pet Play House. What sparked your interest in starting a business?

Well, my husband and I have been doing a lot of investing in the area. We have a lot of real estate. We have rental property, and he, just a year before we started this, or maybe it was two years, had purchased his business, which is Casazza Oil Company, and so we're always looking for things to do. At the time, we had a dog. She just died two weeks ago, so it's kind of a difficult thing—

Oh, gosh. I'm so sorry.

—but she's the reason why we started this business. She was a crazy old dog. She was a puppy, and we needed daycare. She was crazy. She was destroying things in the house and a maniac. My friend, who took her dog to another daycare, she said, "This is what you need to do because this will save your marriage." [laughs]

We went to that daycare, and I just felt like I couldn't leave my child there because it was a warehouse and it was very smelly. So then I thought, I could do this and I could do this way better.

So my sister and I, we originally were looking around to do this business together, and we found the house next door, which is where we started, at 2401, and set it up like a child daycare with the backyard and play toys and the same kind of situation as that.

Then after ten years—we outgrew it way before then—but eventually, in ten years we were able to build this building by the property and build it.

This is a huge, huge building, quite a big step up from the house next door.

It is. We more than tripled our capacity, and offer a lot more services than we used to offer. There was only one other daycare when we started, and then when we started, a couple more cropped up, but we're the only daycare that had an outside area so the doggies could play inside and outside. The rest were warehouses that were converted, so the doggies were stuck inside all day, and it was quite smelly in the other places.

So in ours, our doggies were encouraged to go outside, and people really liked that their doggies had a natural environment—just like at home, we enforce the potty training. You go outside. You don't have to go on the concrete floor, so that was our huge draw. People really liked that aspect of it, so we became popular immediately.

A lot of the other daycares went out of business in that timeframe just because they were offering the same thing. They weren't going into the new renovations and the things that their customers wanted. That's why we chose the design that we had.

The reason we chose Fourth Street was because it was originally zoned industrial and that's what it has to be for a kennel. You have to be zoned industrial. So it just happened that that was the perfect location because it was a cute little house and served our purpose. It has a full basement over there, so there was quite a bit of room for the amount of dogs we thought we were going to get, which expanded way beyond the walls of the house.

Then this property here was for sale. My husband knows a lot of people in the community because he does fuel where he's at, so he sees a lot of the construction companies, and he knew Leland Hernandez, who owned this property, and we made an offer on it and purchased it.

That's right when a lot of the rezoning was going on with the City of Reno trying to change this over to mixed-use, which is commercial, industrial, and residential, which works for our purposes because we're grandfathered in because of the house for that property over there.

This property, because we built on it, had to conform to the new zoning which is mixed-use, which was very disappointing because when we purchased the property we had a plan and a goal, and the city was having meetings about that and they told us that if you already own the property, you wouldn't be affected by the new zoning. Unfortunately, the truth of the story was if you owned the property but it was undeveloped, you would be subject to the new zoning as soon as you tried to develop it.

Okay, so this was a vacant lot?

It was. It was abandoned—we have pictures of how horrible it was. There were trailers, old abandoned trailers. There was actually a man murdered in one of the trailers.

My goodness.

Yeah, he was from the trailer park. Actually, people from the trailer park behind us murdered him. He was a worker, a vagrant worker for the Halfway Club next door, and then he would spend the night in this abandoned trailer. Apparently, he got in a fight with some people in the trailer park and they killed him with a two-by-four. It was a pretty brutal thing.

Well, Fourth Street's an interesting place.

Yeah, it is.

When you started the original business next door in the house, did you have an overnight kennel and everything, or was it just doggy daycare?

First we started out as daycare and that's all we did for the first couple of years, and then all of our customers were requesting that we do boarding, and so then we started to implement that as well. It was strictly as if you were in a house. It was a house, so it was doggies laying around all over the floors and beds and stuff. There were no kennels to put them in or anything like that, so it was a very natural environment and not very stressful, and our customers loved it.

However, occasionally the customers would want their dog to be put in a kennel or whatever at night and some people feel their doggies get over-stimulated and they need to go away and have some quiet time to themselves. It's your dog and you know what your dog needs. So that's why we decided when we built this to incorporate the suites and condos.

We are not okay with the cage situation. That's our deal. We are not a place where your dog is put in a cage. We have very nice rooms. They're much like bedrooms with TVs, piped-in music, comfy beds. They're very nice accommodations for your doggy at night. We have smaller ones and then we have bigger ones, and then we also have use of the yard for the outside areas.

We still do the slumber party, too, which is what it's called, where the dog beds are all about this area here and the doggies all crash, and somebody's here with them all night long.

It's very luxurious here, the accommodations for the dogs. I've never really seen anything quite like this.

We're the only one like this in Reno. Others have tried to replicate, but have not succeeded, so, yeah, it's very different. We did a lot of research in Europe. That's what we called it next door was European-style boarding, and that's what they do there—they have dogs over to the house and a bunch of dogs in a house, and they free-run and that kind of thing.

Then we did a lot of research before we built this one about other things throughout the country, similar situations like PetSmart Hotels and Camp Bow Wow, similar to that in California. They have several chains across the United States. So we definitely went for the luxury because that's what our customers want, because these are their children.

Yes, I can understand that, as a dog owner myself.

And you can't have a good time on vacation if you think your dog is not having a good time. If your dog is miserable, you're going to be miserable, too.

That's true. And it's just dogs here, correct?

Just dogs. We had originally thought that we would do something with cats next door, but we haven't done that yet. We're definitely busy with the dogs.

You still own the building next door then?

We do.

What's it being used for now?

Nothing right now. It's just storage, and it's also in case we ever need to evacuate, we have a place to take the doggies, so we have a plan with that.

I guess you have to think about all sorts of things like that.

Right, and for instance, if there was ever any kind of a contagious disease, we could take doggies over there and separate them on a different air supply than what we have here, because a lot of doggy things are airborne.

I didn't know that.

Yeah, so if you ever get something scary, you want to put them on a different air supply so that everybody's not breathing the same germs.

That's good to know. Can you tell me a little bit about what you do here day to day?

We do doggy daycare. Doggies come in when their parents go to work, and the doggies run around and play and socialize with other doggies. We encourage good doggy behavior, no jumping, no barking, no peeing inside. We help the owners with that.

A lot of times we get doggies that are not social. For whatever reason, they haven't been around a lot of other dogs, and the owners want them to be friendly with other dogs and so they'll bring them here so that we can introduce them to different dogs and teach them the proper play styles, because some dogs, if they're taken away from their owner or from their parents too soon, they don't get the mommy signals on how to interact and how to greet other dogs, because there's a definite greeting process that goes on, a sniffing that has to take place, or things will not go well. So we encourage them to do it the right way.

That's interesting—sort of behavior skills.

Little bit. We don't get into any crazy behavior training, obedience training. This is the fun place. We're not a rescue. We don't take doggies that have a history of bad behavior or aggression simply because there are places that do. That's what they do. They're trainers and they want to rehabilitate dogs, but we feel like people come here because it's a safe, fun place and they're not being exposed to aggressive animals, and so we don't allow those kind of animals in here.

That reminds me, earlier you mentioned something about the insurance company telling you certain breeds you can and can't have here.

We get a better insurance rate because we have fewer injuries, because we don't take dogs that are

aggressive or pit bulls or any of the bull breeds.

So it's really just pit bulls?

It's pretty specific, and not pit bulls, bull terriers, bullmastiffs.

How do you feel about that?

I actually had a pit bull and he was very aggressive. He tried to kill my other dog twice. He was very good with people. I think they're very good with people. People want to say that it's all in the breeding or it's all in how you raise them, and it's not. They were bred originally for a specific purpose in life and that was fighting, and they're powerful dogs. They don't have a locking jaw or anything silly like that, that people want to say about them, but they are powerful dogs and they can do a lot of damage. They're also from the terrier breed, which is very active and hard to train.

So in that respect, we love them. We do take them in private boarding, but we can't take them into the group play area for the safety of the other dogs in our environment. They're great dogs. We have no problem with them. We love them. I've had them, but not in a group play situation. Unfortunately, people will want to say, "Well, mine's a good one," and everybody says their dog is great, and then you put another client in jeopardy, so no.

Insurance companies all over town are refusing to have boxers in apartment complexes, pit bulls also. Your homeowners' insurance can turn you away if you have a pit bull. It's a very common thing, very common. If you own your own home, you'll find all about that. We can have Dobermans and Rottweilers and German Shepherds. German Shepherds are known to be the dog most likely to bite.

But we're happy about that, in that our insurance rates are low, which is very important to a business, and the fact that because we don't have those kind of breeds here in group play, we don't have a lot of injuries, we don't have a lot of vet bills. In other daycares, that is not the case.

So if something happens, you're responsible for vet bills and things like that?

It depends on your policy. For our policy, when people sign up, they say that we will do due diligence, care for their dog and do what we see fit, and we also say in our sign-up that if we see that your dog is acting aggressively and it has hurt another doggy, we're responsible, whoever the aggressor was. A lot of times, it's that you don't know who started it, so you can't really blame one or the other and so they'll take care of their own bills.

Occasionally we have paid bills for things, minor things that have happened, just because the owner was upset, but our policy is that you're responsible for our own dog, and if your dog has caused damage to another dog or another person, if you bite one of my employees, you're going to pay their bill. And that discourages people from coming who know they have an aggressive dog, who know their dog has potential of doing harm. They think, "Oh, I'm going to be paying bills. I'm not going there."

So that's the policy. Whether we always follow it, not always the case. We have paid vet bills – just as a part of doing business.

Yeah, and that's good, I guess, if it acts as sort of a weeding-out process.

It does. It certainly does.

What time do you get here in the morning?

We open at six-thirty a.m. and close at six p.m. during the week. We have people who spend the night. Occasionally I spend the night. Generally, they get up at four-thirty in the morning, start feeding the dogs and taking them out and that sort of thing. Most of the crew comes in at six when we open at six-thirty, to prepare for the incoming dogs at six-thirty in the morning.

So there's someone here twenty-four hours a day.

Twenty-four/seven. Long hours here.

Do you get more business with the daycare or the kennel services?

It's about fifty-fifty. In the wintertime, we have more daycare because people don't want to leave their dogs at home when it's inclement weather, and also because their kids are in school, so during the winter and the school year, we have more daycare than we have boarding because people are not out of town and that kind of thing. In the summer and then on any spring breaks our boarding increases, so it's a fifty-fifty situation. It kind of ebbs and flows depending on what time of year it is or what's going on, but it's pretty steady on both sides.

That makes sense. How many dogs would you say you have here on an average weekday?

About 120 total. That's an average day for us.

That's quite a few dogs.

It is.

But they have a really large play area.

They do.

The big dogs, at least, and then there's a separate area for small dogs.

We believe, in life, big and little dogs have to learn to get along, so we have a big and small dog play area. So for dogs that like it and if the owners are okay with it, big and little dogs are all together. We don't take any big dogs that are little-dog aggressive, which sometimes can happen and they can't do daycare because there are little dogs out there.

But then we have some owners who don't want their doggies in with big dogs for whatever reason, little-dog people, and so they have their own separate little-dog area with a yard also. But in life, big and little dogs really do get along. They do and they should. They should get along and they do get along, but some owners are afraid.

We got our two dogs at the same time because they got along so well together. We were just looking for one, but we got them at the SPCA in August, so it hasn't been very long. But we just couldn't leave one of them there. They were just too cute.

Oh, they were left that way. That's sad. Yeah, that would be sad to just take one.

So we brought them both home.

Well, good for you. We support the SPCA a lot. We do a lot for the SPCA. We give them food. We used to have events for them over there. We used to have a doggy Easter egg hunt where the doggies would come and hunt for Easter eggs that had little cookies in them, and we've done Halloween costume contests and all kinds of things that support the SPCA. We also support the Humane Society.

That's great. Are you involved with any other sort of organizations?

Not as involved as that. We do, of course, for the Fourth Street Food Bank and those kinds of things.

Could you tell me a little bit about that?

We also do Veterans of Foreign Wars and that kind of stuff. You get a lot of calls for that kind of thing, donations. We used to do the Shrine Circus, but then my daughter, who's very enlightened about that, said we're not going to support them anymore because they're so mean to their elephants and the animals in the circus, which is true, which I hadn't even thought of when I was giving them money. But, yeah, we support the local community.

That's great. I guess that's sort of part of really any business' place in the community, right?

It is.

Is there anything you'd like to mention about the business in particular that we haven't discussed thus far?

I don't think so. I think the main thing in our business is that we're driven by what our customers want, as far as services for their pets, and that's what any business should be doing.

Well, it seems to be working for you.

It is.

Especially in this time, this economy, a lot of people are struggling.

And it's so weird because with all we've done—we haven't felt it at all because people love their

dogs and they will spend money on their dogs, I think, before they spend money on themselves. I don't know whether that's a good thing to say about society or not, but we haven't had a problem at all with anything like that. It's been nothing but building. We actually need to build a bigger space because we need more space.

Really? Do you know about the square footage of this building we're in here?

Eighty-three hundred.

Because this is a rather large space.

It is. It's huge.

But you need a little bit more?

We do. We're always full, and it's upsetting to our customers. They keep begging us to build a new place because when they have short-notice boarding we can't take them. We're full. So all of our customers want us to build somewhere else.

Do you have any plans to do that in the future?

We would like to. We've looked at several properties around here that are vacant as well.

On the Fourth Street corridor?

Yes, just because it would be close by and it's an easy access area with the freeway on and off. It's a good location for this type of business, people wanting to get to the airport and from their homes. It's getting from home to work. It's centrally located. It's perfect for this kind of business. Unfortunately, the city would rather have condominiums here.

Oh, is that so?

Well, I'm assuming. That's what they're building all downtown, which hasn't gone that well. City of Reno.

Do you want to talk a little bit about Fourth Street? Obviously you chose this location because it's centrally located.

We originally chose it because of the location and the zoning.

So it was a must to have industrial zoning.

Exactly, for the type of business we wanted to do.

Why is it, do you think, that kennels must fall in an industrial area?

Because of the noise. People in houses don't want to have kennels next to them, dogs barking. Industrial areas are noisy.

Do you want to talk a little bit about the process you went through to start a business here on Fourth Street in Reno?

The process, as far as getting a business permit and that sort of thing, was very simple. It's just forms that you fill out and find a location, and that was relatively easy. The building of this building was much more difficult and most of that was because of the change in zoning.

How did that affect you?

Well, because it's in a transit district, they had all kinds of rules about density, how big the building had to be for the size of the lot, how much parking you had to have. We had problems with power lines in the back. We back up against a utility easement. Unfortunately, the trailer park has parked their trailers on the easement and so when our utility trucks wanted to come in, there were trailers there. We could have made them move, probably should have made them move the trailers, rather than delaying our progress to put the building up, but that's what was chosen to happen.

So there are trailers on your property?

No, they're behind us. They are actually on Fifth Street, but they're parked on the utility easement.

So they're perhaps not supposed to be there.

Exactly. Whatever's on the utility easement has to be mobile, but these are very old mobile homes, so they can't be moved. They would fall apart.

Do you have any opinions about Fourth Street in general?

Fourth Street used to be the old Lincoln Highway. It was commerce. It's a huge industrial street, with businesses, trucks, transportation all up and down. It's always been—it still is. There's quite a bit of traffic. It's a four-lane street out there, with the middle lane a turn lane. It's a very busy street. The motels, unfortunately, have gotten really run down. Now mostly they're apartments. People live in them, not as motels as in traveling, but as in that's where they live, for whatever reason. A lot of interesting people are on the street. We have the homeless shelter up the street, so we do get a lot of traffic. Not sure if they're coming from the Galletti Way Hospital, Mental Health Hospital, and then traveling back and forth to the Food Bank situation. But we see a lot of interesting things on the street.

How far away is the Galletti Mental Health Hospital?

That's just a couple blocks up. I'm not sure why, other than the fact that they have to be on the

street for the homeless shelter and the St. Vincent's Dining Room, so it's a huge congregation of the mentally ill who have been homeless and other homeless people who don't, for whatever reason, want to be in the shelter.

And the shelter is relatively new, is that correct?

Yeah.

How many years do you think it's been here?

Maybe two. Just shortly or around the same time as the ballpark, which makes absolutely no sense for the City of Reno to want to upgrade the area and have new sites and put in a homeless shelter right where they want tourists to come and go.

So you think that's perhaps a negative.

Huge mistake.

Have you noticed any changes in the area since the homeless shelter went up?

What I noticed was we went to all the meetings and such regarding the rezoning and they told the business owners that they would not allow the homeless to congregate on their sidewalks in front of their businesses. That was one of the things the city promised, and then we ended up with Tent City and people all over the sidewalks in front of all the businesses right there by the homeless shelter. It was horrible, horrible. If you ever drove down there or went by there or tried to go to a game, it was horrible.

Panhandling is an unfortunate fact of life, but I think if the city wants to improve the area, you don't put that there where you're trying to improve the area. The homeless shelter's beautiful. It could be a beautiful hotel, could have been perfect for the baseball stadium to have guests stay there.

Do you think maybe there was a better location for it?

I'm sure there was. I'm sure they had a lot of difficulties trying—because they did try to find better locations, different locations, but they didn't.

And then they didn't follow through with the businesses and keep them off the street in front of their businesses. Matter of fact, Bob Cashell, the mayor, gave them tents for Tent City to encourage them to stay there, nice tents.

Immediately after giving them the tents with the aluminum poles, the people living there cut down all the tents and recycled the poles. So that was really effective. And so then they continued with their blankets and cardboard boxes because they took down their gift of a nice tent and a shelter to recycle it. Grateful people.

But he had a heart. He wanted to help, which I don't think it was the right thing to do because you don't want to encourage them to stay there—but they stayed, even though the tents were gone because they recycled the poles.

What other changes have you noticed in the area, in the Fourth Street corridor since you've had your business here?

Well, they want to encourage the corridor, like Sparks did. They did their entire Prater Way. They put in beautiful lights, which is encouraging to business because you see an improvement, you see sidewalks. They said they were going to do it here. They did all of Fourth Street up till Sutro, so from Sutro to Galletti Way they stopped. They said, "We don't have enough money. We're done."

So I was required to pay for that. I have a beautiful sidewalk and beautiful lights out in front of my building that I had to pay for that conformed to what the city wants for the area. Everywhere else, all the businesses got those on the city's dime. So any company or any business that wants to build here will have to buy those things themselves, whether they want them or not, which looks nice and it's great, but they have to pay for them themselves, which is a huge expense and it's in addition to the business expenses that you had already initiated and decided that you were going to do.

Another unfortunate thing is if you want to improve your property, like, for instance, if the Halfway Club would want to do something nice over there, if you exceed a certain dollar amount, then you have to conform to the new zoning, which means they'd have to put in those lights and a sidewalk and do all this stuff that they don't have the money for. So they're stuck in a quandary along with, I'm sure, many of these businesses. They can't spend to improve their property because then they'll have to spend more because the city will require it.

So the lights that you're talking about, are these just regular street poles, street lamps, that sort of thing?

Candy-cane lights, all with the whole theme of Fourth Street. It's kind of the same thing that Prater Way did. They have a little bit different light fixture, but it's lighting on vertical poles. They look really nice, and they require that you have a sidewalk, and I'm surprised that the idea hasn't been involved here because half this area here has no sidewalks. That's what the city would have put in had they continued from Sutro down to Galletti Way. We'd actually have sidewalks for our handicapped people, and we do have handicapped people on the street, homeless handicapped people who can't get by on their wheelchairs because we don't have sidewalks.

So that's something that you might like to see more of?

I would love to see sidewalks and I would love to see them finish the project that they said they were going to do.

Well, hopefully, that's something they're working on with this project.

Unfortunately, this project, I think, is a little different—they want to change it to two one-way lanes, or they want to cut the traffic on this street. They want to put in bike lanes. They want to put in a median. They can't finish the lighting and the sidewalk, but they want to do all these bus stops, giant bus stops, which I highly doubt will ever make it down to this end of Fourth Street because they don't do anything on this end of Fourth Street. We've been forgotten.

But I think it would be a big detraction to the area because this is a major highway. People travel—this street is so busy during the week with traffic, people, businesses, trucks getting from here to there,

and you want to cut it down to one lane each way? Do you know the bottleneck that's going to create? Where are these trucks and cars going to go? It's going to be constant bumper-to-bumper traffic on the street, which is silly.

You've mentioned a couple times now that this end of Fourth Street doesn't really get as much attention as, I guess, closer to downtown.

And West Fourth Street. They've gone all the way out West Fourth Street with their streetlights and sidewalks, and they stop at Sutro.

Why do you think that is?

I don't think they care about this end of Fourth Street. They don't travel on this end of Fourth Street, probably. They don't see it. They say they ran out of money. It's entirely possible they did run out of money, but maybe they should invest a little money to finish the project. It's what, three, four blocks to finish?

So are the candy-cane lights that you had to put out front, are you paying for that electricity and everything?

No, the city pays for electricity. I paid to purchase them.

It seems a little unfortunate that this area, you feel, has been left out.

Well, if they want to encourage business, they have to put in a little, too, and I think that they look at it from the selling side of it. They're saying, "Fourth Street, this is great. This is up and coming. This is going to be great."

Yet when you look at it as a buyer, you're looking at it saying, "Why is this great? You don't care about it. You haven't finished the streetlight thing. Why would I want to invest in here if you're not going to do anything?" to the city. So they'll go elsewhere. We have so many abandoned buildings and vacant lots along here that would be perfect for certain types of business. They also restrict the kind of businesses that can go here now because they've decided what they want is businesses with residential on top.

They did do that down there at Wells. They have a convenience store, one of those little Dollar Store-like things, which never really took off, but they have apartments above. When we were building here, they thought that we could have apartments above our dog daycare. And my comment was, "For hearing-impaired people?" I mean, does that make any sense? It doesn't.

They need businesses in here that support the people going to work in this area and the people who are coming from work and going home, but it seems like they want to get rid of all the car garages, auto mechanic garages. Where are we going to get our cars fixed? People want to drop their car off on the way to work. It's convenient for that kind of thing. They want to put in a bar. They want this to be an entire bar district here like some other city—I think it's San Antonio. I can't remember what it was.

Texas?

I think so. They're trying to model this after some other city, and they put in all these bars and nightclubs and it was just this booming thing. That's another thing they want to do. They hire all these crazy focus groups, like recently they had a focus group come through and do a study. One of the businesses not too far from here is Reno Ironworks, and their focus group idea was to have Reno Ironworks start doing their welding outside so that the public could watch. Okay?

All right.

Do you see any problems with that?

Well, I—

You can be blinded by watching an arc weld. You can be blinded.

But also I wouldn't think you would want metal and whatnot out there in the elements like that.

True, but they thought it would be interesting for the Fourth Street corridor to be watching ironwork outside, and they paid so much money to have this focus group come up with that as an idea for Fourth Street. City of Reno—I mean, that money they spent on that focus group, they could have finished streetlights out here and made it more of a desirable place for businesses to come and make buildings, and that kind of thing.

Where would you like to see Fourth Street go in the future? What direction would you like to see the corridor head?

Well, definitely I'd like to see more business in this area, businesses that support the outlying community, not necessarily residential. There are a number of problems with residential here. We're right next to the railroad tracks, very noisy, extremely noisy. When the trains hook up here, it's a huge loud bang. Why would you want an apartment building next to the railroad track? If you were purchasing a home and you had a choice of a home right next to the railroad track or in a nicer area, that's where you would go. Businesses like auto repair shops, kennels, veterinary hospitals, feed supply stores, those kind of things, that's okay. Nobody cares about whether there's a train going by next to your dog supply store. It doesn't matter, but a home, it matters. You're going to end up with buildings that aren't going to be able to rent or people that can't afford it.

It drives the prices down cheaper, even though it might be similar quality to elsewhere.

But you can't charge the same amount of money. So you need to think about that kind of thing for location. So I think businesses, not residential. And the other noisy thing is the freeway. When we went to these meetings when they were trying to change the zoning, people were complaining, "When are you going to put up my sound abatement next to my house where you're building this huge freeway?" Okay, City of Reno, why are we putting in more houses in a noisy area that we're going to have to spend more money on to stop the noise of the freeway that's already there?

So you think perhaps they need to shift—

Rethink what they're putting in. I don't think this is a place for residential. This is a place for businesses that support the outlying residential areas and support what's here already—the casinos, businesses that support the casinos, businesses that support people who come to work at the casino. This is a business district, and it has been and it should be. Restaurants, things like that. Dry cleaners.

Well, the way the street has developed, at least from what I can see, you have quite an eclectic mix of businesses here already. You've got some bars, restaurants, doggy daycare, and the welding and feed supply, motels, quite a few varieties of business.

I want the City of Reno to encourage improvement of the existing properties, which will make the vacant properties more valuable to people who want to move in without putting in roadblocks for the people who want to make their businesses nicer, which means if you want the businesses to improve, you need to give them something, like streetlights and sidewalks.

Do you think the requirements that they're imposing on businesses to build and start up here are too much of a deterrent?

I think for a business, obviously, we could afford it. We did. But if you want to encourage them to do it, you give them something. So if you were to put in some nice sidewalks and streetlights by those vacant lots, people, investors might look at that and say, "Hmm. Reno's doing something here. This really is going to be a nice area. Let's invest in this area." And they're not going to do that until the City of Reno does something. I mean, why would you do it here when you could get it somewhere else?

It is a great location, though. I guess it definitely has that going for it.

Centrally located, easy on-off freeway traffic, except for now that we're under construction our freeway exit's closed until August. It's far away, far away, long time of having to detour.

When did that exit close?

Just two weeks ago, I think.

Do you think that's going to affect business here?

A lot of our customers are complaining about it. A lot of the businesses, like Halfway Club and the Chevron, are doing things to promote their business during the construction so people will still come. I know my brother-in-law owned Land of Muffler right there at Wells and Fourth Street, and when they closed the Wells exit, he had a definite drop, and it's permanently closed.

I know businesses in this area are worried about it. Then they're considering this new plan to put in medians and change it to one way, also thinking how that's going to impact their businesses in a negative way, putting in bus stops, crazy big bus stops. Have you seen those?

I'll ask you some questions they're specifically interested in for the corridor. Do you think transportation issues play a big role in the health of the Fourth Street corridor?

What do you mean by transportation issues?

I guess we've sort of been talking about that already.

I think it's a busy street that needs to remain four lanes. I don't think narrowing the street, congesting traffic is going to help on Fourth Street. Putting in bike lanes, it's very dangerous for people on bikes on Fourth Street. They should, I feel, be allowed on the sidewalk or where there aren't sidewalks because the street is not wide enough for bikes and four lanes of traffic, actually, five lanes of traffic. It's very scary for them. When I'm driving on it and there's a bicyclist, I move into the other lane because I don't want them having to swerve for a broken gutter and swerve into my car. So that, I think, is a problem.

What would you like to see happen for pedestrians and bicyclists? Would you like bike lanes?

No. There are bike lanes right over here one block on either side. There's the river bike lane, so you can easily go one block over. You could ride your bike to and from work on something that's already been built and already been dedicated to that purpose. Mostly it's the residents and their kids riding their bikes around here a little bit, people going to work. Some of my employees ride their bikes to work.

Have they voiced any concerns?

About the scariness? Yeah. I think they should put in sidewalks and I think they should allow the bike riders to go on the sidewalk because there's no room on the street for them.

Would you like to see a wider sidewalk than what's already here?

We don't have a whole lot of sidewalk here. My sidewalk is very wide. That's what they required of me. I was required to give up part of my property for a city easement. I was required to give them part of my land.

You'd like to see that sort of caliber of sidewalk continue?

Sure. Any kind of sidewalk would be nice because there is not a lot of sidewalk down here.

So perhaps they just need to pay a little more attention to this side of Fourth Street.

Yes.

Are you aware of any safety issues in the corridor? For example, do you think the traffic is too fast here or are there any bad sightlines or anything like that?

I feel, for what the street is, for the traffic that this road needs to carry, this is the speed limit we need to go. I don't see any problems with the speed of the traffic for a business district.

If they're changing it, I think it is a very bad idea to put in residential here—I'll say it again—potentially there would be issues there because you have, potentially, children and people on the street. This is a business district, so this is the appropriate speed for the road.

What do you think the greatest transportation need is in this area? Is there something you'd like to see more of?

A transportation need? No. What would that be?

Well, I guess if you want more stoplights, or fewer, or something like that, wider lanes.

Yeah, wider lanes. It's already a five-lane street. What could you do more than that?

What do you think of the number and the arrangement of lanes currently on the street right now?

I like it the way it is, four lanes. This street carries enough traffic that it needs to be four lanes. If you were to take out a lane on each side, you would have a bottleneck. It would be nice if they put in medians like they did right by the Eldorado. It's still four lanes, well, five lanes, and then they put in medians with trees. It looks very nice. They've put in the candy-cane lights. There's no bike lane there. There are nice sidewalks. There's a median that looks really nice and then they have the turn areas in that median, kind of like what they did on Wells with the medians in the turn lanes.

For the entire length of the street, I think if they put in the little median planting areas, that would definitely make this a nicer-looking area for investors.

Okay. So you would support the medians then, for aesthetic purposes?

Aesthetic purposes, yes.

How about the buses? Should the buses have their own lanes?

I don't think so.

Well, you did mention about their wanting to put in more bus stops.

Well, actually, they're doing these crazy huge bus stops like what they're doing on Virginia Street. I don't know if you've ever been there. Down by the Peppermill, in that area, they're putting in these huge concrete bus lane things, and when you look over there, you see two people sitting, waiting for a bus when they have nine chairs. So do we really need that? No.

You think it's a bit much?

Too much.

So you, I guess, would not want to see that here.

No, definitely not. There's nowhere to put it. If you want to put businesses in, where are you going to put those? They detract from the look of the building. They block the view of the building, which, if you're driving by and you want your business to be seen from the street from people driving by, you don't want a huge bus stop in front of it.

I believe there's a bus stop just here in front of the parking lot, right?

Right here by the Halfway Club, there at the end of our thing.

Yeah, when I was pulling in, I was behind a bus.

Someone's sitting there now, a homeless person.

Oh, really? Okay, perhaps he's waiting to go somewhere.

Unfortunately, with the bus stops that we have here, this is where the hookers sit. This is where the drug dealers sit and wait for their deals. Yes, some of our employees take the bus too. They don't want to sit near the bus stop because of who's sitting at the bus stop.

So you think that's perhaps a problem that the city should address, could address?

Yes. The crime element in the area.

What would you like to see done about that sort of thing?

Well, the unfortunate part is when we've had people—for instance, there's one particular lady who when she's not on her medication does crazy stuff. She'll defecate on the sidewalk and do a variety of things—yell at customers, beg for money—and when you call the police, they know who she is and they will discourage you from having her taken away. They'll come in and say, “Oh, she's just off her medication. We'll take her down to the hospital and she'll be fine,” and blah, blah, blah.

Then a half hour later she's back. They didn't take her to the hospital. They didn't get her any medication. They just moved her off our property, which I was told—many of our customers happen to be police officers and they said, “Don't let them discourage you from filing because it is their job. They don't want to do the paperwork. They don't want to have this person in their car. Make them do it anyway.”

How about parking? Would you like to see parking changed in any way?

I think that the businesses should be required to have their own parking.

Their own parking lot?

Uh-huh.

How would you feel about on-street parking?

There's no room for on-street parking. I think that if that on-street parking were restricted for that particular business and only people from that business could park there, that it might not be a bad idea, but I think if you had on-street parking, certain businesses would absorb all that parking, and then unless there were restrictions, your customers couldn't use that parking, so that's why I like the idea of the parking lot. If you have a business that requires customers to park, then you provide a parking lot.

So you're happy. You have a parking lot here for your customers.

We were required to put in a parking lot and we did.

And this is sufficient for your needs?

It is.

Would you like to see on-street parking anywhere else for any particular reason? Do you think it could be beneficial somewhere else?

Not on this main thoroughfare. This is a main thoroughfare. We'll go back to that mantra, main thoroughfare. Not on a main thoroughfare.

So it sounds like you're expecting this area to be easily passable, I suppose. People should be able to travel at speed through the corridor.

Sure, because it is a main way of getting from Point A to Point B. It's not where you go for a leisurely drive, whereas on the side streets maybe you'd want to do that. But if you're going from Point A to Point B, you need to get there in X amount of time. You don't need to be sitting at a stoplight.

Yeah. Well, there are quite a few stoplights, every block or so.

Really?

Yeah, near the downtown area of Fourth Street.

It does get pretty backed up down there.

It gets a little congested, I noticed.

It does, so don't put in stop lights to slow things down. Let people get from Point A to Point B and

don't obstruct the view of the businesses that are there, because that's what you get. You get drive-by business. People see you.

Right, right. That's how I saw you guys, just driving by. I like the window in front. That giant window kind of resembles a doghouse entrance.

Yes, that was the architect's goal.

I got that, so that's good. [laughter]

A lot of people say they thought this was going to be a church because of that big window—and I guess a door or something. They thought that's what it was going to be.

Yeah, well, it's got the circular top to it like that. It looks very much like a little doghouse.

Yeah.

Or a big doghouse. It's a very large building.

Got to get a big dog out there now, big statue.

Oh, yeah. Is that something you're looking to do?

No. When we first started, we had thought about the blowup dogs on the roof or something like that, like a Snoopy or something, because it would look cute. Cartoon factor, but it would also draw attention to the building—people could see us from 395:

“What is that? I've been watching your building for weeks,” that kind of thing. “I just finally decided to drive by and see it.”

Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't discussed yet about the corridor or something you would like to address, something you'd like to see done here?

I just think that the City of Reno needs to look more from an investor's point of view, not from the city's selling point of view. They need to change seats and think, if you were an investor, what would you want to have the city offer to entice you to come here? And I wish that they wouldn't want to make us a city that we're not. We don't want to be San Antonio. We're Reno. We've always been Reno.

Reno is a great place to be. We don't want to be something that we weren't or aren't or don't want to be. People come to Reno because they like Reno. If they want to go to San Antonio or whatever city that is—I don't think it's San Antonio—they go there. They go there.

And this street, too, certainly has quite a bit of history.

History, yes. I mean, it's incredible. Reno has great history. For instance, my daughter's house was built in 1919 and it was a guest house. Someone lived there, but it was a guest house for people who came

to Reno to get divorces.

You had to be here for a certain number of days before you could file for a divorce, so people would come to this house and stay there for the X number of days required to get their divorce. People would throw their wedding rings off of the Virginia Bridge into the Truckee River after their divorce, as a celebration that it was over. We've got the silver. We've got the breweries. We've got the lumber companies. This is a great city to expound upon. For instance, did you know that we have an old Indian squaw that lays up against the mountain?

No, I was not aware of that.

You have to see this.

All right, so we're walking to the front of the building.

Oh, you can't see it because of the clouds. But if you look up against these mountains here, Mt. Rose, there's a group of mountains right here, the Sierras, and the farthest mountain—there's three, one, two, three, and the third mountain to the left, it's the profile of an Indian woman laying back like this, and you can see her face and her breast. Then as the snow melts, you can see her war paint show up. It's beautiful, and nobody in Reno knows about that, nobody. You look up there the next time you're driving by.

I will. I will.

Stop your car so you don't run off the road, but take a look at that. It's beautiful. No one knows about that. My mom tells me these stories about the Indians and the baskets and all that stuff. My mom lived on a ranch out in Jacks Valley. That's where she was born. Indian Birdie [phonetic] made her cradleboards and baskets.

We have great history of Reno. Let's do that. Let's not be someplace else.

RÉMI JOURDAN

Operator of Club Underground



Remi Jourdan inside Club Underground in 2013. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Rémi Jourdan was born in Paris, moved to the Alps as a teenager, and attended culinary school in France. Inspired by an earlier visit to Los Angeles, he moved to the United States in 1997. After a successful career in computing and other entrepreneurial ventures, he moved to Reno in 2007 and ran Club Underground and the Tree House Lounge at 555 East 4th Street. He also discusses his work with E4, an association of Fourth Street business owners.

Paul Boone: I'm here with Rémi Jourdan, who's the owner of Club Underground and a member of the E4 [Merchants] Business Association. We are on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno. Today is April 17, 2012.

Mr. Jourdan, do we have permission to record this interview and place it in our public archive?

Rémi Jourdan: Yes.

Great. Why don't you tell me about your background, when and where you were born, and bring us all the way up to now.

Sounds good. I was born in Paris in '68, the month of a student revolution. It was actually May '68. I was born a month after, or two or three weeks after, but that was a revolution that impacted the social and economic situation in France. It started with a student movement.

I was born in Paris and I grew up most of my teenage life in Paris and moved to the Alps, France. Then later on I moved west, to Toulouse. My master is from a culinary arts school. I did five years of Cordon Bleu and a couple other well-recognized cooking schools in France.

Then I moved. I came for the first time to the United States in 1989, to Los Angeles for a month's vacation, and ended up staying six months. I drove around the country, not just the states, but I went everywhere—east, west, crossing Texas and about twenty other states, and fell in love with it, fell in love with the country and, obviously, fell in love with an American woman.

I went back to France and she came to visit. Kind of the same thing happened. She came to visit for a month and she stayed five. We ended up getting married and we lived in Paris and always had a dream to come back to the States one day, and that dream became a reality when she got relocated from the company she was working for and we moved to Los Angeles in '97.

What was it like growing up in Paris as a kid? How old were you before you moved to the Alps?

My parents were both in politics and they were hippies. It was '68, so it was the elephant pants and funky shoes and smoking a pipe and big beards, long hair. It was interesting.

I've never been to Israel, but it almost felt like it was a kibbutz community type of an environment where I grew up. Where we were living in an area in Paris, we were all sharing. We were all family. The parents were friends and the kids were going to school together and it was kind of like a big community, very social. And growing up in Paris is interesting because you're exposed to multiculturalism. You see all different facets of living in the big city where culture is predominant, with art, music, and whatnot. So very young, you're exposed to a lot of culture that typically kids are not exposed to.

At that time there was a black and white television only. We were only allowed to watch it, maybe, just before the news for a half an hour and we were not spending hours watching TV. There were no video games. You have beep-beep. I don't know if you remember the beep-beep, with the two little tennis balls back and forth. Pong. Call it beep-beep, the noise it made. But that's about it, so it was more outdoor activities. It's fun for kids, Paris.

What were your favorite activities to do around there? Were you into sport or hobbies or art when you were a kid, what were you running around doing?

Soccer and fights—

Fights. [Laughs]

—and Judo. I was in Judo. Now, I had a lot of energy, so anything that could consume me physically, my parents were happy about it. Yeah, that's about it, and then when we moved to the Alps, it was obviously skiing. We were living a half an hour from a ski resort.

Where in the Alps were you?

Grenoble. In '68, they had the Olympic games in Grenoble, which is kind of a valley where all the major ski resorts are located, but you can ski any of those resorts. It was mountains everywhere. You're surrounded by mountains, so that's the main activity. I used to ski in the Alps.

What was it like for the Olympics? How old were you when the Olympics were going on?

I was born in '68—but Albertville did the Olympics in '92, I believe that was '92, and for us it was overwhelming as kids. Albertville is in Savoie, which is about an hour from Grenoble and an hour from Geneva, right there. We just remember a lot of people coming to our town but it definitely had benefits for the city, for the development of the infrastructure and they built a bunch of parks and stadiums, and it was big money coming into town.

You mentioned when you were in Paris you had a community school that you went to. Was it just the commune school or you went to a public school?

It was all public, definitely—all the neighbors, basically knew each other. Around that time, we were not closing doors, we were not locking doors, so we could go to each other's place. All the kids were the same age and the parents were friends, so it was in that respect a big community. In the seventies a lot of things changed. After the student revolution a lot of things changed for more women's rights and more equity, liberty and for everyone pretty much.

Did school change? Did you have a different type of teacher or curriculum?

No, no, later on. But it was more like the mentality was changing, the generations of my parents—that was '68. That was forty-four years ago. My parents were twenty-five. They were just toward the end of their studies, but it was very influential on a lot of people. We were not just students. People were impacted by the movements.

What was school like for you in France? It's probably very different than the United States or maybe it's similar. But what was it like going to school for you?

I hated it.

[Laughs] You hated it? What was it like?

I hated it.

What was the problem with school for you?

Like I said, I had a lot of energy and I couldn't still sit for more than ten minutes. A lot of kids at school were looking for attention and doing stupid stuff. It was in the early ages. I was really into girls.

I never fit into a system of education, a system, work systems. I was always different. I always wanted to do things my way, not the teacher's way, and if we were told to do specifically some way, I would do everything the opposite way, so kind of fighting the authority, which was very different at home.

My parents were very laid back—not the authority that you would expect from parents who had troubled kids like myself. They were kind of like “Let him do his thing and see what happens.”

So you said your parents were involved in politics. Was that their profession or was that just what they were involved in?

It's funny because I spoke about it to someone earlier this week, and I think I had a dream where I was explaining to someone in my dream what my mom was doing and someone was asking me where I was from. It was in a suburb of Paris and she was, at that time, head of the urbanizing organization, basically, building the city. It was a new city, and they were planning a city plan to build the new city in a suburb of Paris. My mom was not an architect, but she was heavily involved with all planning aspects of building the city.

My dad is a civil engineer and both were in politics working for different ministers. My mom was the equivalent of the Secretary of State for the minister of the city. That was the minister that was built, I believe, under François Mitterrand in the eighties, and they've always been involved in the community. Today my dad is a mediator between the judge and troubled kids. He's retired. He's seventy-two and he's still heavily involved within the community and in politics in general, as is my mom.

They're socialist. I know it's a bad word here, but it sounds different in France. Actually, in French politics, being Republican is really—it's a bad word, and here it's “socialist,” but I don't think people know exactly what it means to be a socialist. But from generations since socialism as a party has been created, my family has been in that party, so we share liberty, fraternity, equality among everyone, and sharing, making sure everybody's protected and got healthcares and everything they need, even though France is completely broke.

But we might have another socialist president three weeks from now. The French election is—the first round is Sunday and the second round in two weeks, May 5th or 6th, so there's a good chance we're going to get a socialist president again.

So you moved to the Alps when you were a teenager.

Yes.

Was it for your parents' work or did you guys decide to just move from Paris?

Yes, because it became tougher and tougher to find a socialist city. [Laughter] So they were moving quite a bit—my dad was in the private sector and he wanted to put his time and his work towards more the public sector. So they were looking to be relocated, and there was a place and he found a job, and there was work for the city of Grenoble and so we moved there.

Was that a big switch for you, moving from the cultural capital maybe in Europe to a smaller town?

Yeah, but because of the way we were living—very open-minded and sharing everything in the community, within the community—it was not such a big change as I was expecting it to be. Of course when you're kids it's easy to make friends. I was nine years old, ten years old, so at ten years old, you lose your friends, but you kind of forget about them anyway and you make new ones, so it was not very hard to adapt. So it was really cool. We had snow, which we didn't have in Paris, so that was a different element, a new element for me.

And you enjoyed that?

Yeah, definitely. It's exciting. Snow, it's exciting in general.

So you said you went to culinary school.

Yes.

So that was after your public school experience. You wanted to do something different?

Right, very young, after I finished the equivalent of high school, I wanted to learn something and I was not really into the school system. It was definitely a hard time to focus, a hard time to concentrate and study and be calm and be able to sit for more than an hour in school, so I wanted to learn something.

I didn't know what I wanted to do, and my parents went on vacation to Corsica Island, southern France, and we went to Club Med for a week and I was looking at people working there and went, god, this is a great job. You work in Club Med you can go and swim in the Mediterranean, and yeah, you work, but it didn't seem like it was really work.

I was thirteen years old, thirteen or fourteen, so I talked to those guys that were working there and I said, "Hey, what did you do to be doing what you're doing?"

They said, "We went to hotel and restaurant management school."

And so during that vacation I told my parents, that's what I wanted to do and good or bad, that's what I did. And so I went to Thonon-les-Bains, which is the oldest traditional culinary art school, very hard. Traditional.

Where was that located?

Thonon? It's on Lake Geneva, Lake Léman. Basically, you're looking across to Lausanne, which is another great hotel/restaurant management school. I was there for three years. You learn everything pastry. You learn how to become a chef, but you learn also to manage a hotel and to do any type of jobs in hotels and restaurants from chef to waiter, working at reception, reservations and all this.

And then I didn't want to work after this, so it was like, I was going to continue to study so I went to do my master, my culinary art school master in Toulouse, which is not in the Alps, but towards Bordeaux on the west coast, and did two more years there, and I still didn't want to work. [Laughs] So after this, that's when in '89 I went to Los Angeles.

How did you decide Los Angeles or the United States, and not traveling around Europe?

I have two sisters, and one of my sisters was in school, and there was a student exchange and there was this guy, this Californian guy who was in our class. He was doing an exchange, staying in this terrible French family where they were really mean. They would not let him do anything, no going out. They were opening his mail and they were just very rude to him, and so my sister invited him to come home to our house, my parents' house, for the weekend.

He stayed six months, which got my parents in trouble with that organization because the kid didn't want to go back to the previous family. My parents told that organization they didn't want any money from them. They just wanted to take care of a kid that was great.

And then I was very young. I was ten or twelve years old, and then he came back when I was nineteen, when I was graduated, and he said, "Well, if you want, you can come with me. I'm going back to L.A."

I had no idea where L.A. was, and he mentioned Hollywood. I had no idea what Hollywood was, where it was on the west coast and whatnot. I said, "Sure," so I went and that was the year of the bi-centennial of the French Revolution, 1989. We partied for a week, crazy, and I jumped on the plane and came to Los Angeles. I was living in Santa Monica and loved it, on Venice Beach, actually, and just fell in love with it, all aspects.

What was your first impression of Los Angeles after living in France?

I love it. I love it. It was very different. People were open-minded, very different, but a lot of space. That's what I really like. It was like we were not on top of each other in a small car in a small apartment, on narrow streets always trying to find parking and whatnot, or in the subways and underground, and so it was that sense of space and it was very enjoyable.

How long did you stay in L.A.? What did you do with yourself?

For months I kind of stayed in L.A. and got acclimated to living in that big city, and then we had some friends. We went and we left cross-country for a couple months. We drove from state to state all the way from south Texas, New Mexico, Alabama, and Mississippi, Georgia, and all that, and Florida, all the way to New York City.

Then we were going to fly to New York City. We split and I said, "Okay, what am I going to do?" I was twenty-one and I was in love, so I went back to L.A. And my visa was getting expired, and my great-grandmother was going to die. She was 89 years old. So I said, "I have to I have to tell you. I can't take the risk not being there." So I went back. I went back to France.

What was your impression of the United States as you were driving across it? What do you remember from that trip that stands out for you?

What stands out, being in Lompoc, somewhere in Texas at this friend's property, his parents' property, where he has his own gas station in front of his house, and it was a hundred of acres of land and cotton and lakes and cows, and it was just like something I was not exposed to, like a John Wayne Western movie.

It was kind of like comparing to movies you might have seen younger in your life. It was that, plus it was real. You were discovering with your own eyes that life of living in those big spaces.

For me it was interesting coming from France, where France is not even the size of Texas. And there's a lot of diversity in the language, the food, the landscape, the everything. If you drive 100 kilometers, it looks completely different, and here it's like you have to drive 300 miles. You can be in the desert driving for five hours and you're still in the same landscape and the same thing.

And then you go from state to state and people are so different. Alabama, Atlanta, or, New Mexico, Texas, New York, Florida, all those people are very different, very different, very different.

I think Texas is interesting for me because they could probably not understand a word I was saying and I could not understand a word they were saying, and we had a great time. It was very different.

So you said you met your future wife when you first came over.

Yeah.

Did you meet her in L.A.?

Yes, yes, we met in L.A. She was working for Congressman Waxman, I remember, at that time. It was in '89. She was a major in political science and a very interesting lady and a very smart, beautiful Californian, like you will describe a Californian. And we were young. We were living in Venice Beach, surfing and not worried about anything, and I was not worried about what I was going to do in my life. Plenty of time to figure it out. I was enjoying myself. I mean, that's the best way to do it.

And she came back with you to France?

Then I went back and I start managing a hotel/restaurant.

So you decided to work, finally. [Laughs]

I finally decided to work, not for very long, though, and then she came six months later and I quit my job and said, "Okay, let's find an apartment in Paris," and I moved with a friend of mine. She didn't speak a word of French and she came with her cousin. They were in trouble for a month, kind of the same story, reverse. It's kind of interesting because I did that, and she did the same thing and she never went back, so we ended up getting married. She ended up going to Alliance Française, French Alliance, to study French, and she ended up getting a job and got promoted in that job, and being fluent in French and really enjoying herself, too, yeah.

So when did you come back to the United States permanently?

May '97. I think May '97.

So you had been continuing to work in Paris at that point?

I was—I was managing clubs and a cabaret.

Is that when you started to get into the bar/entertainment business?

I was first in the clubs and cabarets when I was very young. When I first moved back to Paris, a friend and this boyfriend and girlfriend, I was very successful, made a lot of money, and I decided to travel around the world, which I did. I backpacked. I left everything and I went and traveled the world, and I came back a year, a year and a half afterward.

Where did you go?

Everywhere. I did twice around the world, thirty-seven countries. I mean, briefly, I started from Paris to Moscow, Moscow, then New Delhi, and in between I would take the train and buses and bicycles and whatnot, hitchhiking.

But New Delhi, then New Delhi to Thailand, Malaysia. In New Delhi, of course we went to Nepal, Himalayas, all this trekking. I went down to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, spent a lot of time in Australia, the east coast mostly, Darwin, Brisbane, Sydney. And then from there we went to New Zealand, Cook Islands, Rarotonga, Tonga Islands, Fijis. We spent six months in the Pacific and then from there went to Tahiti, Bora Bora, Huahine, a bunch of other places in the Pacific. I went back to L.A., down to Mexico, Central America, came back to L.A., and flew back to London and then Paris.

Wow, that's quite a trip.

It was. It was a trip. It was a trip.

What are your strongest memories of that? What kind of stands out of that experience?

That we're very fortunate. I think we don't realize what we have in our culture and our country. Whether it's France or the United States, it's the same thing. We are spoiled very spoiled.

I don't think we realize what we have, and it's important to see so many people who are unhappy. When you travel around the world, you see very poor people who have a smile on their face and open the doors and welcome you to their home and cook for you and invite you to stay over and will pick you up and drive you and give you anything they can give you. There's less of a sense of possessing things and there's more value of sharing in general.

What I really remember is, for me, the fun part was being able to adapt yourself to not only a different currency, but language, religion, everything, culture, countries, weather. When you travel an average day a week, two weeks, three weeks in each country and you do that for a year and a half, two years, you have that sense of being world citizens and not being French or coming from a specific part of the world, but you feel more connected, actually, with people and life in general.

It was quite an experience, quite an experience especially because we were traveling—I was traveling pretty carefree, meaning all I possessed was my passport, my tickets. This is the only thing I was worried about. We had this little thing we put under your pants, little pockets, and that's all we cared about. So we left with a little bag like this and we were just giving things away. We were buying after we were done with it, so we're moving to another country.

Was it you and your wife?

No, it was with a friend of mine.

So you said in '97, you moved to the United States.

Uh-huh.

Why did you decide in '97 to move to the United States and what did you plan on doing?

I thought at that time, I was done, and I went around the world. I had successful businesses. I kind of learned on my own leaving school and by leaving my parents when I was fourteen, so I learned pretty much what I know by myself. I feel I had done a lot and it's hard to go back to the same routine, or I had a hard time—I tried to go back to Paris after traveling around the world, and that was this amazing experience with incredible people and I was exposed to so many cultures, and I felt like I was back to where I had left a few years before that and it was not satisfying anymore. It was not as exciting as it was at first, and I wanted to find a challenge and I always had the dream to go back.

And so the opportunity came when my wife at that time relocated to Los Angeles, so we just jumped on—I was ready to go. I said, “Okay, let's do it, move to L.A.,” and in very good condition because it's a national company. They took care of everything. They moved our apartment from Paris to L.A. I got my resident card and my citizenship a while after. It was very easy for me to move to the United States.

So when you moved, you got settled in, and what did you decide to do?

I worked in a car wash because I remember the movie *Car Wash*, they did Rolls-Royces, in the seventies and eighties—I thought I wanted to do jobs that I would have never done and nothing that I'd have to be proud of, but I just wanted to be exposed to people and close to people, and learn, because my English was still not so good. Interestingly enough, my French accent is coming back more and more. It's kind of ironic, but at that time, it was more like I just wanted to do fun jobs. I didn't really have to work. My wife had a great job making good money, so I sold disposable cameras on Hollywood Boulevard and I worked in a car wash and a French bookstore.

What else? And then rapidly that was for about a year, and I got really lucky that Microsoft offered me a job. It was kind of unexpected. They were looking for someone with hotel and restaurant management experience and knowledge to develop and recruit what we called ISV, software developers, independent software developers, and bundle packages for small businesses in vertical markets, so I got a great job, and was paid a *lot* more money than I ever imagined I would ever do in my life.

I had a great job and I started a company with another guy. I was literally in an office with Steve Ballmer—he's president of Microsoft—with Mike Pickett, who at that time was the co-founder of Merisel, which is before Ingram. Now Ingram is, I think, the biggest one, Micro Ingram, but it was the largest computer store in the world, an \$8 billion company, and so I was with those guys and we were just twelve employees, so it was kind of fascinating.

Would you explain what you did with that a little bit more?

Yeah, they hired me for the wrong job.

They did?

Yeah, I ended up doing dental and healthcare on top of hotel and restaurants. But it's a funny story. When they told me how much money they were going to pay me, with my broken English I said, "What?" They sensed it was definitely not enough.

And rapidly they said, "If that's a problem, we can discuss it."

And I said, "Okay," and when I realized the fact I was like, "Absolutely no way." Back in the nineties, it was way over a six-figure job. It was just incredible and I was in Venice Beach—everything was an unreal kind of thing. They hired me and I traveled around the states again, all around the country.

The initiative was called Microsoft Big Day and they were doing seminars for small businesses where they were inviting the ISV, the software developers, and serving vertical markets.

I was a senior product manager and there were three different virtual markets: bundling Solutions with HP, Compaq Okidata, that time Lexmark and with selling those services, basically, bundling the services for small businesses, so it was kind of that forum to explain to small businesses how to run their business.

So I was an expert finally almost overnight explaining "You're a small businesses owner," how to run the business dental practice, law firm, healthcare, hotel, restaurants. I don't know. It was a lot of fun. Very hard to work with Steve Ballmer. You start at five o'clock in the morning.

So you were going around the United States this time as a businessman and working. Was it a different experience?

Totally different.

What kind of impression did you take back from America this time?

Business. It was all about business, and when you work for a company like Microsoft, basically you sign off your life. Someone will call you on your team at four o'clock in the morning to ask you a dumb question that cannot wait until you get up at seven.

For staff we had 180 seminars in 200 days or something, so we were doing a seminar almost every day. It was fast-paced, but at the same time, it was exciting because it was something new. And we have all stock options. We were all going to become millionaires, and so what the hell if you wake me up four o'clock in the morning. You make a couple million dollars in a year or two, so why not?

How long did you do that?

We did that for two years. I never thought we would and then that was not the training things anymore, and then I got other jobs in other dotcoms. Obviously, when you work for and with Microsoft, it's the land of opportunity knocking on your door for jobs, left and right. It was ridiculous. We kind of could pick and choose what we wanted to do, and they were all like today, very famous companies, and I went different a route. But yeah, it was an interesting, interesting time.

I remember it was '98, '99 those three years until 2000, and after 2000 after the internet world trade show in New York and everything collapsed—it was very interesting for me to see that. There was no money exchange. It was just crap. It was just business to business. They were trading but there was knowledge or platforms or software or hardware. There were no transactions. There was no money.

The money was coming in for venture capital massively, but when I say massively, the second company I worked for, first round of funding, we got \$3 million. The second round of funding we got \$150 million. It was ridiculous. I was located in L.A. I had two offices, one in L.A. and one in San Francisco. We were flying private jets and it could be just me in the plane. Money was flowing. It was just insane, insane. In San Jose, everybody had their own private jet. Everybody was below thirty years old. It was just unreal, just so much money put into it.

Then when everything fall—when the big castle fell apart it fell apart really quickly and everybody start becoming consultants, kind of like trading the knowledge, the know-how as independents, and obviously we had millions of people in the job market. There were some serious issues because everybody was living way over their standard.

They had very expensive houses. The real estate market was absolutely ridiculous the million-dollar houses. So when everything collapsed, I got another job for a company called Digital Islands and that was doing connective network, mirroring network. And then one more time I got hired for the wrong job, but I took it, and it took me a couple weeks to figure out what I was supposed to do, but it was fun.

I ended up working for the CIA in Chinese governments, big financial corporations all around the world doing intelligent networking, DNS stuff kind of like if you remember AT&T, the big scandal a couple years ago where we found out that they knew where you were, what you were doing. They all know. They all know.

Actually, the technology I was in charge of as a project manager again was the technology that allows those big guys to do intelligent networking, which is basically they ground it in your zip code, find out who's doing what from where, how often and why, where you're buying and where you're connected to, and that sort of thing.

So there's an application for Microsoft, where if you download in your product—if it's inside of your server, if you're in France or on the East Coast or somewhere in Seattle, Richmond, to upload or download your upgrades, then that same technology was used to send you the closest server where the content is.

But the Chinese government was using it—now I can talk. I couldn't talk about much of my work. We had a nondisclosure for five years after this due to serious background checks to get that job, but the Chinese government was using it to block sites. CNN was not in China for long time and a bunch of other Fortune 500 companies, very few were actually in Chinese markets. CIA, that's obviously what we were doing. It was fun. It was fun. I have no idea what I was doing, but I was really good at it. I have a very funny story about that.

Okay.

Because I didn't know what I was doing, and because I got hired for the wrong job, and because probably people would figure out very quickly that I didn't know nothing about it. The team I was managing, they were all double PhDs, scientists, that actually built the Internet and built those mirroring networks completely and it was very impressive, and so I was kind of afraid that they would find out that I didn't know what I was doing or didn't know anything about it.

I didn't have to do anything. That's the best part. I was a manager, so I was managing those guys, but they are better than anybody and they knew what they were doing. So in the corporate world, you have meetings, team meetings and cross-department meetings and whatnot and lunch meetings, and so what I would do, I was using Outlook at that time, Outlook calendar, and I was booking all my days, Monday to Friday and I would leave about half an hour between meetings. I didn't have any meeting, no meeting. I was creating my own meeting, right? So I was blocking, basically, my calendar.

So everybody was like, "God this guy's busy. We can't get a meeting." So I was going to meeting, a half-an-hour meeting. Everybody sits down. There's only five minutes. We talk about the meeting agenda. That's another five minutes, so I was good already for ten minutes. Then everybody's introducing himself. It's five more minutes. We talk about an issue. Five more minutes, so like, twenty minutes, twenty-five, and then I will just open questions. I will ask people questions "What do you mean? Which way do you think is the best way to go?"

And then when they were asking me questions, I would just respond to them with another question and I got away with it for a couple months. And I was very successful at it and I got a promotion and perfection in the art of working in any circumstances.

I think what I learned the most from all the travel is being able to adapt myself to any situation, to be in a very challenging position where it's not easy. No one's going to make it easier for you, kind of like you built your own, you work hard. You focus, you learn, you stay motivated in whatever you're doing, and that's the ability to adapt yourself in different environments, whether you're in one-on-one conversations or talking to a diversity of people or find yourself consigned to an environment where you have no knowledge or you don't know anything and you don't know what's going to happen. So I think that's traveling and being exposed to all those different cultures, I think that's why I had the ability to adapt myself.

So then after that, the dotcom was not doing so well. We got bought by Cable & Wireless, which is the oldest telecommunication company, 120 years old, from London, UK. They're the one that put the cables through the Atlantic and that it's used for fiber optic, but that was done in 1900, so there's nothing new in technology, really. They bought out the company and my company got bought by those guys who bought Exodus and we merged and it was a nightmare within—they had no idea what the U.S. Internet business was about.

They were an old telecommunications company, old mentality, and they didn't understand the business period of the markets. We went from billions of dollars to nothing fairly quickly, and we started laying off people, and I decided I would volunteer. I was one of the last one to leave and I said, "I'm leaving. There's nothing else. We have no work. We have nothing to do and we're just getting paid for no reason."

So I started a funnel cake business. I went to Arizona. In between I got divorced, but that's a detail. I had a girlfriend and she was from Arizona and we went there. I went to a street fair and I saw a trailer of this old couple selling elephant ears. I thought, what is this? It's kind of like a flatbread fried and doughy,

crunchy from the outside, doughy from the inside. You put powdered sugar on it, and literally I was fascinated by this old couple working in that trailer, and there was a line of fifty people nonstop all day long buying those elephant ears, and it was not cheap. It was five or six bucks for a little piece of cake.

And I thought this looks like something interesting here. What about doing something similar? And then her dad was with us and said, “Well, there’s another product called funnel cake from the Dutch in Pennsylvania. Why don’t you guys do that?”

That time, my girlfriend was managing a Target store. Me, I had just quit my job, going back to L.A. I thought, “That sounds interesting. We could do music festivals and figure it out. We’ll buy a little trailer and buy a big truck and just give a shot.”

We started doing it. Literally two months after we’d done a hundred festivals in the first year and then fifty festivals the second year and thirty festivals the third year and then ten. We did the Coachella, the street scene in San Diego to a big half-a-million-people festival, three-, four-days’ festival and made a *ton* of money, and so we did that. It was interesting. And then I came to Reno.

So how did you go from funnel cakes to Reno? What was the transition there?

A friend of mine called me. There’s no real transition. I had money, and it was like, okay, what’s the next thing? Because I’m not going to sell and make funnel cakes the rest of my life. It’s good for a while. It’s good money. We had a good time, saw a bunch of festivals. It’s fun. We only worked thirty, forty days a year and made a good living. It’s not bad, but I was like, okay, what’s next?

Then when I was thinking about it, a friend of mine called me and says, “Hey, I got this opportunity in Reno, man. You should come and check it out.”

I’m like, “Rio, Rio, Rio.” I’m like, “This is really cool. I’ll come. Rio, man. How do you get that? That’s awesome. This is so exciting.”

He’s like, “No, no, no, no. I mean Reno. Reno, Nevada.”

And I was like “Screw you.” I said, “No way.” I hung up on him, I hung up the phone.

He called me back and said, “Just come and check it out. It’s a club. It has music and I thought about you,” because on the side job when I was doing the funnel cake and working for the dotcom, I had a record label as well at that time with digital download at the same time Napster got shut down. We got a major lawsuit by BMI that was definitely going after us because we were two smart kids and we figured out how to do digital downloads. They were losing a lot of money, so I was doing that on the side.

I said, “Hmm, music. Music, cool, but Reno, man. Rio is a lot cooler than Reno.”

“You ought to come and check it out. Come and check it out.”

So I came and fell in love with the place,—once again, I didn’t know really what I was doing, but I said, “This is again something different. It’s probably going to be very challenging,” because I didn’t know anyone, not one single person. I was living very comfortably in my house in L.A. in a very good situation, and I never went back to L.A. I stayed. I said, “All right, let’s make it happen.”

So what was your first impression of Reno when you came up to check it out? Did you have any expectations coming in?

I had no expectations. I was really confused with McCarran Boulevard. That really took me a while to figure out what the hell—why McCarran is everywhere I go, and I didn’t understand that it was

all around the city in a circle. But drugs, drugs. I had never been exposed to drugs like this crystal methadone and—it was crazy. Here it was just everywhere.

What year was this?

2007. Everywhere. It sounds like maybe it was the environment, but especially on Fourth Street. And we were living on State Street, a little place there when we first moved to Reno. I have a business partner and he had the multi-million-dollar house, tennis court, swimming pool, Jacuzzi, I mean 7,000-square-foot house. I'm like, "Woo-hoo, I'm a club owner," boom, boom, boom.

Well, we ran out of money three months after we took over, didn't know what we were doing, so it took us a while—and then the business partner quit. It was three different people trying to run the business. They were not really ready to work hard. They just wanted to get laid and I mean, cute girls and have a good time, but they didn't want to do the work or learn how to make it work, and I put all my savings, all the money I had. I'm like, "I have no choice. I got to—I got to figure out."

At that time, I had someone doing booking. I didn't know what booking meant. I have no idea and I knew we were losing money. It was like, "if we're going to lose money, I'd rather do it myself and learn. At least if I lose money I can blame myself and not someone else." So I let that person go and learned by doing it. It was very hard.

This is the Club Underground you took over?

Yeah, yeah. It was very hard, very hard, very hard. No one's made it easy at all. There are not many friends in this environment. It was very competitive. People are jealous. They don't want to work together.

These are the other club owners?

Yeah, yeah, just like a fearless battle all the time like stealing shows and who's doing what, and I was just never exposed to that type of business and mentality. And then coming from L.A., where you have 10 million people versus 200,000 people—the L.A. attitude at the same time, because I've traveled so much and I lived in a small city before for myself, I thought it's kind of cool.

Yeah, it's hard. It's a really tough business, really, really tough, because we didn't know what we were doing, obviously, but also because that was 2007. By February 2008, everything collapsed. The economy went to the dump completely. I mean, almost overnight in a month we lost 50 percent, 60 percent of our business. People started losing their jobs and the economy, they lost their house, got evicted from their house and it was not too much of a party with people spending money to come to your bar or come to see a show.

I never felt unsafe on Fourth Street. That's a funny thing because even though I was never exposed to as much drugs as in Reno, it was not Fourth Street. The drug thing was not Fourth Street. It was everywhere, everywhere in the city and they put the homeless shelter there and that definitely didn't help. I was like, "Oh, god. What are we going to do?" And Tent City. That's not going to help us. People are not going to feel safe to come here.

So just try to stay positive all the time, and then my two business partners left four years ago. I've been running the Underground for five. I just keep focusing on the positive aspect and try turn it into

something, not thinking about all the different reasons why I should stop and not do what I was doing, and just do my best.

Four agreements: Always do your best. Don't take anything personal. You can't take anything personal in that business. Don't do anything that you would not want someone else to do to you, which is a respect thing, and be positive just hoping for the best and not the worst to happen.

Of course, your mind can't stop thinking oh, what if, but to run a business like this a nightclub business on Fourth Street when you don't know anybody, you have to be objective. You have to be positive about things.



Club Underground at 555 East 4th Street, ca. 2010. Washoe County Assessors photo.

So how has it changed over the last five years? Do you feel like you're in a better spot now than you were at the beginning?

It's not easier. It's very interesting. Times change. Business goes. As of today, I'm the longest club owner in Reno. I've been five years as the New Oasis, Stoney's, the Green Room closed. You name it, 210 North. I mean, you name it. A couple other small places, they're all gone. There are new ones, but it's not easy and the economy is not better, so it's been going on for five years. It's hard. I feel like I'm somewhere running a successful business, but it's not making any money and not enough money to pay myself the five years, so it's between a business and a hobby.

But I'm passionate about it and I'm passionate about the community. I think that I found a really strong community in Reno, maybe lacking in support, but that sense of community that I had maybe when I was ten years old. I was explaining earlier I felt kind of the same especially with the Burning Man community. I feel that sense of connection with art and want a better world, a better place to live, and beautifications of our areas and dreams and things like that.

There are the Burning Man communities, the biggest Burning Man communities anywhere in the world, the Burner capital, obviously being so close to it, and kids. I love to do stuff with kids, giving an outlet to stay away from drugs and trouble, be in a safe environment where they can practice art whether it's dance, music, or painting. I always think about it. There's not much to do for kids, meaning under eighteen and one way for them to stay occupied and not going crazy is music. That's why there are so many bands here in Reno. It's unbelievable the amount of bands, we're very fortunate to have so many here in town.

Unfortunately financially, it's not really viable. If I could get some help somewhere from the city to recognize that it's a must-have to have outlets and venues and just locations that can cater to kids again so they have something else to do so it's the two aspects: the music, the local, the community, Burning Man, and the kids, .

When I walk down the river in the summer, and I see all those kids, "Hey, Remi! Thanks, man. Awesome! We love The Underground. Thank you for doing what you're doing." It means the world to me. That's why I do what I do. It's not because of the money. It's not because it's great. It's because people really appreciate it and it touches people's lives individually.



Club Underground in the center of the 500 block of East 4th Street, ca. 2010. Washoe County Assessors photo.

What's it like working at The Underground for you and your employees, and what's the work environment? What's in a day for you, and especially if you have a show that night, what kind of goes into your workday? What's it like working at the Club Underground?

My girlfriend, right now is getting up at six-thirty, so that's usually when I'll wake up. I wake up. I don't get up. I work. I do all the administrative stuff like booking, which takes quite a bit of time. We do about twenty events a month, so we have to create those shows. It's not just booking a band; it's booking a show. So I usually do that in the morning and then I come into town at two o'clock in the afternoon. It's pretty much almost seven days a week, taking care of the club, cleaning. I have a cleaning crew that comes in. I put in some orders and delivery.

Working at The Underground, I couldn't do it if I didn't have such a strong team of really cool people who are the same since the day I bought the place, so it shows you that it's kind of very unique in this environment. And I couldn't do it without the people I'm working with, but it's long hours.

Usually my day starts early in the morning and finishes early in the morning, and people don't realize when we have a show at eight or nine o'clock at night that I've already done my fifteen hours, twelve hours of work. It doesn't matter. No matter how tired I am, or frustrated, or worried, I automatically, when the doors open, I switch. It's show time. I don't let that impact much on the business or my employees because I realize if I don't have good time during the show, my employees won't have a good time and nobody probably will have a good time, and the reverse. If they don't have a good time, I don't want to have a good time, so we'll make it a good time.

I mean, life is too short and it's a difficult time right now for a lot of people, especially in Nevada and especially in Reno. Then I feel it's one of my responsibilities to make sure they have a good time. And who cares if I'm tired and frustrated, or if I have to deal with issues all day long? When it comes to shows, if you come to a show, you don't want to see a club owner being pissed off and mean to people or not acting accordingly to the environments, which is you're providing dreams and entertainment for people and a little time to escape from their life and the reality of it.

So what do you do once the show starts? What's your routine?

There's no routine. That's the thing. It fits me and the same time it makes that business a little tricky because there's no routine. There's some of it, but not really, depending on the show, but typically, I run nonstop. People who come see me, usually they say, "We love to see you, but when we come to see you, we don't see you. You don't have much time for us."

I make sure everything's supposed to be where it's supposed to be—the music, the lights, the bar, the door and sometime we have multiple events going on. There's also the other club, the Tree House Lounge, in the back, so there's always something else, something to do.

Do you own the whole building?

I don't own the building; I'm leasing the building.

And so the Tree House, do you guys have a partnership with them or are they separate?

No, that's me, too. It's two cabaret licenses, two liquor license. You can close the door and have separate businesses.

What's the Tree House Lounge for you?

Tree House Lounge is more underground. It's only twenty-one. We don't allow all ages there or under twenty-one. It's a bit more artsy. It's a bit more sexy, but also we do punk rock. We can have a metal show, punk rock. We can have DJs. It's a smaller room. It's more intimate. It has that feeling of a major city like San Francisco or L.A. You will find those dive bars and there's no signage. You have to know where it is, and you walk through a small little door and you walk in there, and there's minimal lights, people having a good time. There's art on the walls, and people can be themselves and not act different than who they are, and that's kind of the idea.

So it's more of like a bar with entertainment than a club and a cabaret like the Club Underground.

Right, right. It's not open as a bar. I'm never open as a bar. I'm only open there as an entertainment. So there's a different type of entertainment, smaller, and sometimes it's because the Underground might be booked. We're doing the Tree House Lounge and the lounge in the back and sometimes when we have a big party we have both places going on.

Now, you mentioned the sense of community in Reno that you really like. Is that part of the reason you started or helped start the E4 Association?

Yes, yes.

So why did you decide to start it? What were some of your hopes and what are some of your concerns around that idea?

Because I think Reno has so much potential. I was talking to businesses down the street for a while and all I was hearing is what they didn't like, what they didn't want, and I thought, gosh, that would be great if you can tell me as much as you told me what you don't want, if you were able to tell me what you do want. Just start the list. Think about it—that took a while to get to know each other a little bit.

I saw the baseball stadium coming up. I thought, oh, maybe that's an opportunity. Maybe that's a chance for us on Fourth Street, that corridor where we lack—I don't know if it's interest or attention or money. I don't know what it is, but I don't see anything coming our way. I truly believe that if you start doing something on your own and you show people that that could work, that people will show interest in what you do, maybe they'll ending up helping you, and if not, that's fine. We'll still do it.

There have been several people in the last twenty years. That's what I heard last week. I'm not the first one who tried. Usually it lasts a few months and then it goes in different directions or ideas, so people get tired of it or don't want to put the energy and effort into it, and don't want to do it anymore because it's too much.

And it's true, it's too much, honestly. It is. It is a lot of work and I'm by myself running my business. It takes time from my business that needs me more than anything, but sometimes if we don't think outside the box and we don't do things for others, helping each other and as a collective try to come

up with something better and be productive in what we do, and we don't act on those ideas, then nothing happens.

And we can complain about what we are supposed to do and I'm really hoping that by doing that, people realize and act on it. People realize it's almost like a natural expansion of the city. Where else is the city going to expand? We have so many empty buildings on Fourth Street, vacant buildings that could be used for art projects like the Burning Man collective.

As a matter of fact, there are galleries opening left and right, so it's really encouraging. Since the Reno Bike Project moved in, now there's another art gallery opening next to mine, so the whole block where The Underground is has changed in the last couple years just because of this.

Now the members of E4 are getting to know each other as merchant business owners. We can list what things we don't like, but why don't we focus on things we think we can change and have a positive impact on our community, on our street, and hopefully in our business, to make it so people understand it's a safe place to come and hang out. As a matter of fact, not to point fingers at anyone, but it's probably safer than downtown Reno—some areas of downtown Reno—and we can try to change this perception of Fourth Street, the wrong perception people have about Fourth Street, which actually has more diversity, more variety of entertainment and can offer so much more than any other areas in Reno.

We have parking, which you don't have in Midtown. Midtown, they get a lot of attention and that's what Jessica's Junkie did for Midtown. It took a couple or four years, five years, and had a good buzz about it. She deserves to be successful like any other businesses, but if she didn't start it years back, then nothing would ever have happened. So I feel the same.

It's not about me and it's not about The Underground. It's about finding the positive and building on this and doing something and not expecting anyone to take your hand and say, "Well, let me help you," because that's not going to happen.

We used to have a redevelopment team. I don't even know what happened, if they do have a team or if I believe they probably don't have any money, and if they have a team, it's probably one guy. He's probably asking himself the same question, "What can I do?"

So doing little things like putting those monthly events together, making awareness and getting some media coverage so people show interest in this part of town, I think that's positive. That means a lot. That's the reward for me. I'll see it happening.

Now the next phase is that I have ideas because Reno is so predominant with Burning Man. I think Burning Man generates over \$30 million just in local businesses, not Burning Man itself, but people who come by for Reno, buy food or stay in hotels or consume and help the local economy. I think the Fourth Street corridor could be really a great spot to have, whether temporarily or permanent, art installations related to Burning Man. Burning Man is huge. You've got to take benefit from it any way we can.

The capital of Burning Man is Reno, and the natural center is Fourth Street.

Yeah, and I don't think we really capitalize on that opportunity at all. I think permanent sculpture along Fourth Street would help make Fourth Street the Burning Man art cradle, or corridor, or whatever you call it.

A matter of fact, I just had a meeting with the Reno Burner LC. They have a core project that we're working on, and they specifically want to do what I just mentioned. I have some drawings here. They're building a regional network where people come to Burning Man with a project. I've only been to Burning Man one time.

I'm living in a different world, but I'm more a burner than most burners who go for ten years. I don't know. I feel like it speaks to me, the mentality, the art aspect of it, but they have a bunch of different regions and each region has a regional network, like the Reno Burner LC represents Reno and Tahoe.

They're all Burning Man communities, and they're building a gateway arch which is like this with Burning Man. Obviously it's visual. The idea will be to do an E4 Plan/Burner/gateway for Burning Man, but having it all year around not just one week a year—and leverage that as a tourist attraction.

So people are coming from out of town to stay in those casinos in downtown, and what do they do? What do they do in Reno? There's plenty of things to do—don't get me wrong—but that would give them additional attractions or activities and interests and reasons why they should come here.

And the idea with all this—it's nationwide. It's all around the country, having those regional networks, those networks been built that belong to Burning Man LC of its original network and exchanging art.

So the art, the gateway, a big arch being built in Reno, that's the Reno project, might go to Chicago in October and then here we might get a sculpture from Seattle—so it's creating synergy and also leverages the restoration of Lincoln Highway, the historical aspect of the street.

So there's the Burning Man community aspect, the Lincoln Highway Restoration Project with permanent and temporary art placements along the streets, special events maybe summertime next year or springtime, a big garden party, whatever it is, to then promote the city, promote its activity outside the city, and in California there are a lot of people who love to come to Reno. We just have to give them more reasons than twice a year with the Hot August Nights celebration, a reason why we should come.

So you talked about the reputation of Fourth Street and perceptions. When you first got there, was that something you knew about or was it something you saw? And then in the five years you've been there, is this kind of the motivation behind why you want to create a new East Fourth Street?

Yes, correct. Like I said, I never felt unsafe. I spend more time on Fourth Street than anybody I know, well over twelve, fifteen hours a day for five years. I know people on the street and I know business owners, and I didn't have that sense of being unsafe, insecure.

But is that the perception of Fourth Street has that you'd heard about?

No, because I didn't know anything about Reno. For me, I was working with some redevelopment in downtown L.A. and I was a docent. I was part of a Los Angeles Conservancy doing a historical walking tour about art deco in downtown L.A. And that was ten years ago and a lot of people, a lot of Angelinos won't even go to downtown L.A.

We were dealing with 70,000 homeless. We had tent cities on every sidewalk, every street in downtown. I mean, it was not easy, but by doing it repetitively and not giving up and doing what we thought was the right thing to do, now downtown L.A. is booming.

Last weekend I was listening on NPR. They have 110,000 people going to downtown L.A. on a bicycle, which would never happen. They would not even drive to downtown L.A. Now they are going on bicycles. Real estate is booming. It's a hip, trendy place to be. There are artist lofts left and right. There are restaurants and bars. There's a brand new Nokia theater. People invest millions of dollars, developers renovating buildings. They are all occupied.

So I keep that in my mind, why not do walking tours on Fourth Street, because there are definitely a lot of historic landmarks down this street. People don't even know the history of the old building where the temple, Burning Man temple was built. It's a big deal. But I mean, the temple was built there last year. So we already have some success stories under our arms.

You might want to talk to the Historical Society. They do walking tours of Reno. You should see if you could sell them on a walking tour of East Fourth Street because they know the landmarks out there. They know the fighting stuff, so and the other buildings there.

You are talking about one specific group in Reno?

Yes, the Nevada Historical Society. They do walking tours. [Ed: The group is called the Historic Reno Preservation Society.]

Yes, I know Barrie [Schuster]. She gave me a little kind of private tour one time and I was really excited about talking to her a little bit more about it. She's done some amazing stuff on Wells and she knows a lot about it, too.

The graduate students did an architectural survey, too, so they might be able to add to some of that, too.

Yeah. That's awesome. That's awesome. I mean, that's basically leverage is what it is, and so we built the E4 and then we turn into a collective effort. Say, "Okay, well, E4 is—" We call it E4 to move away from East Fourth Street, the stigma, and promote it as a safe place to go out. I never heard anyone getting in any problems on Fourth Street.

How can we brand our area? Like Midtown did. Midtown is Midtown. E4, E4 is great. It's good branding, but that's not going to draw the tourists. They don't know about E4. E4 doesn't mean anything to them. The younger crowd that tends to be congested in the same streets downtown—what can we do to get those guys a little bit more excited to come see us, come see that it's a totally safe place and we have more entertainment than any other places in Reno just in a few blocks.

And so we came up with the red-light district. Growing up in Paris in the red-light district, I see it successful in a bunch of different cities around the world. In San Diego, they call it the Gaslamp District, but it's kind of a red-light district too. Nobody wanted to go there. Downtown L.A., you don't have to call it the red-light district, but there's the garment district, there's the fashion district, and now people go, but believe me, ten years ago it was a ghost town. You would not find any people in downtown L.A. Now it's booming great.

So it's kind of doing the same thing. We call it the red-light district because that's where it is. We have three strip clubs in town that are on the streets and we have a lot of historical landmarks. It's an older part of town and there are a lot of arts. That's the reason it attracts a lot of artists, because it's not so clean and there's a lot of empty buildings, and it has an industrial feel to it that you don't find on Second and West. So that's what artists want. That's where artists want to be and there's no disturbance of residential areas, no nuisance, no problem with finding parking. We're ready to bring the big crowd.

So what does the red-light district mean to you? I mean, what was the red-light district like in Paris and how do you see Fourth Street being a red-light district?

Not sure yet. We just started last week.

What are your hopes for that, then?

The concept is really working closely with the Lincoln Highway folks to bring back this good old time. This great landmark we have, these great historical facts about our city and about the street, so maybe educate people. You're right about doing a walking tour, educating people, like you said. You'd be surprised. I mean, those walking tours—what I was saying, in downtown L.A. with the Los Angeles Conservancy, they were not tourists doing the walking tour. There were Angelinos who were born and raised there. There was on the average, some of them, thirty, forty, but most of them fifty, sixty, seventy. They have no clue that they just discovered another part of their city where they were born and raised about in two and a half hours with a walking tour of amazing art deco architecture, and we could do the same thing on Fourth Street.

We just call it red-light because it's something a little bit more sexy, and it's capitalizing on the way it is already. It's a red-light district. That's where people want to get a little bit funky and go to be able to see a rock concert, or maybe go to a swinging bar down the street, or go to a gay bar, or go to a biker bar or just a regular bar, or go see Cuban restaurants or go hang out in an art gallery or exhibits or just walk down the street and be exposed to things that they haven't seen and they don't know about.

You mentioned a couple times, when you traveled around the United States, about how the movies you saw had one concept of America and then you had another. When you were growing up in France, did you see a lot of American movies and what kind of impression did you have of America before you came here?

Americans were strong, tall. They drive big cars. It's a big country, very rich. They're number one. As far as the movies, mostly Western movies, Woody Allen, John Wayne just to name two. There's an adoration. There's really a love relationship between the United States and France. I don't think it's comparable because they are based on different principles and they have different histories, and it's still, I feel, a young country. Both are very rich in histories and culture. Here I feel like it's new, everything's new.

My family, in the house we have in Provence, it has been in our family for 250 years. There is a portrait of my great-great-grand-parents in 1750 at home. So I feel very fortunate I have this, and I think people sometime disconnect it because they don't have much family history, because it's only second- or third-generation immigrants most of them are—and it's built on the individual here. It's very different. It's more individual, but at the same time there's a very strong desire to do things together as a collective way—stronger than in France, stronger than in Europe.

Maybe to explain, when I first moved to the United States it was my birthday and I decided to invite the people I knew. I already knew quite a number of people and invited about thirty, forty people and I catered and I cooked, and five people showed up and I really had a hard time. I was new. I didn't understand. It was like, why people didn't show up?

And the next day I see my friend and he's like, "Oh, yeah, sorry, man. I couldn't make it. I got busy and something else came up," and I didn't understand. In France, if you do a party, that's the

opposite. You invite five people and you tell them “Okay, you can invite one person,” and they invite ten, and then you have fifty people, right? Every single time.

The other thing in the United States is you go to a party, you bring your own drinks. You don’t do that in France. Yeah, you bring, but you share. It’s not your beer. You’re drinking. You brought the beer you’re going to drink. It’s like put it all together. So it’s different. It’s a different attitude, different mentality, but I think both work very well.

And when I go back to France, if I hear someone saying something negative about the United States or America, I’m totally defending them. I’m a U.S. citizen, too, so I have dual citizenship. I’m French, but I’ll feel almost equally a U.S. citizen, so the same thing here. If I hear someone saying, “Oh, the French people don’t like us,” Freedom Fries and what we went through with the Bush era for years, it was pretty tough. It was like close-minded, trying to make people believe that French people hate Americans.

Well, if you know a little bit about their history, you’re going to find out that we’re very connected. We’re very connected from 200 years ago, even Napoleon when he bought Texas. Mississippi or Lafayette and Montgomerie and the Americans helped facilitate the French Revolution after your own independence. And the same guys fought here and there in World War I and World War II.

When I hear about the war, you know exactly what happened, and it’s like “Well, we saved your ass.” Well, yeah, but there were about 15 million people who died and yeah, you waited until Japan invaded and whatever.

I don’t want to start a whole conversation here, but I think in school in France we learn more about history and geography and we are more exposed to elsewhere, not just learning the French geography as much as we learn about your United States and Russia, and so we can place a little bit more where things are. Here it’s so big but in a big country it’s harder for people to learn about each other’s states.

Let me ask you some of the transportation questions and we can wrap up, and if there’s anything else you want to talk about after the transportation questions, we can. Do you think the transportation issues play a big role in the health of Fourth Street Corridor?

Yes.

How so?

I will take an example. Some of the members of E4 say, “Why don’t we rent a bus and get the bus going up and down the street?” And what we’ve done is something different. We leveraged the pedicab. I don’t know if you’ve seen those pedicabs in town where it’s easy to stop. You don’t have to worry about parking. There’s no pollution and it’s more friendly. It’s more fun than jumping on a bus to jump on the pedicab. You can jump on a pedicab for a block or two and decide to walk, and it’s kind of like what we want.

We want people not be afraid to walk down the street. Nothing’s going to happen to them except finding out about what’s actually along the street. I didn’t quite understand why they moved the bus station from one block to another. For me, it’s probably a big money thing, but they probably got some funding that they have to use, and I honestly don’t know, but I think it’s a waste of money to move it from where it was.

And then what are they going to do with this empty lot where the bus station was? I don't see that much benefit because people who hang out in bus station don't hang out anywhere else. They go to the bus station to get their bus. They might cross the street and get a soda or something—so I don't see a really positive impact.

I think that the street itself maybe could have one lane and have bicycle lane. I don't think we need four lanes. I would personally rather not have that much—there's a lot more traffic on Fourth Street.

Unfortunately, it doesn't do any good for the businesses. It doesn't bring any additional income to all the small businesses down the street, and I would try to divert that traffic maybe to Fifth Street, or to Sixth Street. There's nothing really on Fifth Street. I don't think there are a lot of businesses on Sixth Street. There's a lot more traffic now.

Also planting trees, maybe. Make it maybe be more attractive to people so they do feel like they want to walk down the street and it could also reach up to Sparks. This whole area, there's so much to do, but we start block by block. We start little by little.

What do you think the biggest transportation need is in the whole East Fourth Corridor?

Bicycle.

Bicycle lane? Yeah.

I would take the bus. I personally don't take the bus to go anywhere—in France we have a lot more public transportation. Here the distance can be challenging, but I know the people will take the bus. Two of my employees who work long hours, late hours, early hours, they live in South Reno. Two of them can't drive or don't have a car. They're taking the bus, so for me it makes common sense to take public transportation. For a lot of people, it's not.

And as far as the bus, they have a beautiful bus station now. I don't think they need anything else themselves. As far as the bus, it doesn't do anything on Fourth Street. I don't see any benefits having a bus going up and down Fourth Street.

Are you aware of some transportation safety issues in the corridor? For example, is traffic too fast or are there bad sightlines?

Buses riding fast.

Buses riding fast?

Jesus. The problem is that at some areas, actually, it's right in front of The Underground, my neighbors have this issue that the line is narrow, so if you park where you can park, and there is both a bus and a car, they can't drive at the same time on those two lanes.

So the two lanes are too narrow?

Yeah, the one lane is too narrow, so therefore they all have to move to basically one lane. Buses are driving fast. That's all I have to say.

So with the arrangement of lanes, how would you like to see that corrected then, modified in any way? You mentioned before a bike lane or two lanes of traffic and a bike lane?

I would like to see a dedicated bike lane and a lane. I heard there was some project underway, but that was four years ago.

So you'd like to make sure there's enough room for parking bikes and traffic, but with the two-lane situation, you have to drive around buses, so it's really a one lane that's crammed into two lanes?

Right, right, right.

You mentioned this before about pedestrian and bikes, that we don't need to necessarily go over that again, but maybe I'll ask you so you can clarify, because it's in that section. What would you like to see for pedestrians and bicycles in the area?

Be able to ride their bikes. I mean, we need a safe bike lane. There's a huge sidewalk, but no one's walking, so maybe there's something to do there. And not on the safety aspect of it, but another idea would be painting the sidewalk. You have an art commission on each block or whatever makes it happen—it costs nothing to be very attractive and invite people to walk and park their car.

Obviously parking, because right now, not only do we not get the benefits of the baseball stadium, but they take all our parking spot. They walk. They don't come to a business to patronize the businesses, but they do park right along the street to go to the Aces stadium, so I think even the Aces stadium doesn't have enough parking.

That's actually the next question. How would you like to change the parking there? For example, do you like more on-street parking? Would you like it to be parallel or diagonal? If you could create the parking on Fourth Street, what would you do to change it?

Maybe there's a designated area where you can park. For me as a business owner, I need some space where the band can load in their stuff and load out. They've got to be able to stop in front. If they can't stop, then I'm out of business. They're not going to park a block away and bring their drum sets and guitars and amplifiers.

So more loading zones for a business like yours.

Yes, for businesses, a proper loading zone. This was weird, a red curb in front of my building. I don't understand why it's red. There is no garage door. It's not blocking anyone and it's almost a safety issue because, therefore, we have to back up a little further. And like I said, the lane is getting shorter on one side, so almost every car mirror gets broken and stuff like this. So make it convenient for people if they want to drive and then park somewhere, and then they can walk or take a pedicab, or even take the bus or use those other mean of transportation than cars which pollute, make noise, and are so inconvenient. You have to park. They're expensive.

The other thing I'd like to see is that from the Aces Stadium, instead of closing that whole end of it, maybe there's a path they could open up on—where Valley Road is. So make it not so congested. They're not coming all the way. Mill Street is crazy when there's a game. There's no parking anywhere. I think it's going to ten bucks or fifteen bucks, last time I saw, for parking so obviously that's an issue to be addressed. They're using every other neighbor's parking. They don't have any parking facilities just for the Aces stadium, so at least maybe we could benefit from what they built there for the overall benefits of the city and not just specifically the Freight House or the Aces stadium.

When you have 2,000 people coming to see a game it should help our economy. They should not just jump in the car right away—they should come in a little bit earlier and be able to walk down the street and have more facilities to park in than just that same cluster, the same area.

So specifically, Valley Road, you could maybe access it through a pathway, for cars, or just for bikes or people?

Yeah. If you see the Aces stadium, it finishes on Valley. You just open it up so people can have another gate where at least people can get out. They can not necessarily get in, but they can get out.

They're making things more transparent, and especially what I heard that we, as taxpayers, are paying for, so maybe some small businesses on the street could benefit from it. Provide some additional benefits, and I would be happy. I think it's great what they're doing. It's just—I don't think—they didn't consult a lot of people about what we thought, and I don't know if they have any interest to know what we thought would be probably beneficial in the long run because if there are businesses that close, we all burn. If we close, they all burn. We could work together. It seems like they try to isolate themselves. It sounds like it. I'm not saying they are at all, but it looks like that's where it is.

Maybe they could be a partner in the E4 Business Association.

Right, I would love to have the Freight House District be a part of the red-light district. Why not? What I find fascinating is that people in downtown L.A. with 20 million people find ways to work together, developers, business owners, our conservancy a bunch of nonprofit organizations, and address the issues, but in a city with 200-plus, 300,000 people in the area, it seems like we can't work together, for some reason. People have a really hard time cohesively coming up with ideas that will benefit each other in the long run and they really struggle to work together.

It's kind of an interesting dynamic. It's like everybody's scared. Everybody's so worried about their own that they're looking with a narrower view instead of enlarging their view and seeing the bigger picture, like we're all going to benefit each other if we work together.

And if we open it up, we get to know each other, and that's what the E4 is all about. There are no other areas, and not just downtown, but in Reno or Sparks, as a matter of fact, where people intentionally get together and say, "Well, let's change what we can change. Let's take ownership of our own future and destiny and at least do what we can."

And if it's not much, it's not much. If it's all we can do, that's what we'll do—but with the issue of the wine walk, the beer crawl, they're all fighting. They're all fighting with each other. "Which one's going to take more business from me," and we are desperate to get more business, so we are not in a position to point fingers and say, "Well, you do this, and how come you got—?"

Me, personally, I do a show and I get four, five hundred people. I don't want to share. It's like when those people are done, after a concert, I don't want them to go other places, not so they go home, but you see what I mean? Like going out and maybe stopping by another bar or seeing the gallery that's still open or a coffee shop or going to late dinner—there's five hundred people right there. There are people who are scared. In other areas, if we don't work together, it's awful. When we work more and more together for the best and for each other—it all benefits the city, and makes the city more attractive to people out of the city to come and visit us, patronize our businesses, help our local economy—contribute to us because there's a lot more money in California than there is in Reno, and there's no reason why those guys stop coming. If we stop doing events or if you stop giving a reason why they should come, then, you know, they don't come. If you tell them, "Hey we've got some cool stuff going on," then they want to come and check it out.

Well, thank you for your time. I appreciate it.

KYLE KOZAR

Co-founder, Reno Bike Project



Kyle Kozar (left) inside the Reno Bike Project with Noah Chubb-Silverman in 2011. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Joseph “Kyle” Kozar graduated from the University of Nevada, Reno in 2006, the same year he co-founded the Reno Bike Project with Noah Silverman. The non-profit community bicycle shop and advocacy group is located at 541 East 4th Street. Kozar left Reno in 2011 to attend graduate school in city planning at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

Alicia Barber: I am in Reno, Nevada, talking on the phone with Kyle Kozar, who is in New York City, and we’ll be discussing East Fourth Street. Today is October 10, 2011.

Kyle, do I have your permission to record this telephone conversation and to place the recording in our archives?

Kyle Kozar: Yes.

Thank you. So I wanted to start out with some biographical questions. When and where were you born?

I was born in Reno, Nevada, in 1982 at St. Mary's Hospital.

What part of town did you grow up in?

When I was really young, I lived in the west part of town off of Canyon Drive, and then my parents got divorced and I moved in with my dad when my mother moved away. Then I lived up off of Manzanita, off of Skyline.

Where did you go to school?

I went to Roy Gomm Elementary and then Caughlin Ranch Elementary, Swope Middle School, and Reno High School.

How many generations has your family been in Reno?

I'm first generation. My parents are both from different places. My dad's from southern California and my mom's originally from Kansas and then from Southern California, and they moved here when I was in my mom's belly. My older siblings were all born in other places.

What are your parents' names?

My dad's name is Mark Kozar, and my mother's name is Creda Stewart now. She was remarried about 15 years ago.

How many siblings do you have?

I have three older siblings. I have an older brother and two older sisters.

From an early age, were you always interested in bikes? Did you have a bike?

Yes, totally. I've always been into bikes. When I was a kid, I had a bike and I rode around town. I was always into skateboarding and snowboarding and things like that. When I got into high school I was fascinated with driving, same as all sixteen-year-old kids seem to be, but my senior year I started riding my bike to school again, and when I got into college I was always riding a bike, and that became my main means of transportation.

Up through high school, do you remember Reno being a good place to ride a bike?

I don't know that I ever really thought about it when I was younger. When I was growing up and

in high school, I just thought that Reno was generally a pretty nice place to live. I think I was kind of oblivious to what makes a place safe to ride a bike or what makes a street safe to live on or play on.

I don't think I started thinking about that until I was in college and started riding my bike more and becoming a bit more of an advocate for better roads for cyclists and motorists. I started realizing that it wasn't really a bicycle-friendly place and that there really weren't any bike lanes and there really wasn't that much ridership. I think that's when I started thinking that it would be nice if Reno was a better place to live and cycle in.

Talk about your experiences in college a little bit. How did you make the decision of where to go to college?

I decided to go to UNR because I got the Millennium Scholarship, and I didn't quite know what I wanted to do with my life. I went to UNR and started taking core classes, and I think about a year and a half into it, I decided on a major. I studied journalism, and then about a year into that I decided to add a second major, Spanish, so when I graduated I got a dual degree in journalism and Spanish.

You were saying that you used your bike a lot in college.

Yes. I don't even really know why, to be honest with you. I had a car, but I just enjoyed riding my bike, and I think that's one of the things about riding a bike. You might have a different reason to start doing it, but once you do start doing it, you realize all the other advantages. At first, it's annoying having to ride, but then after a while you realize that the most enjoyable part of your day is riding to work, as opposed to driving or whatever it may be. I think it's kind of addicting, and a lot of people get addicted to it for that reason, that they realize all the extra benefits that they get out of it. There was a big group of us in college who always rode our bikes everywhere.

Were you saying that you started to become an advocate for bike riding while you were in college?

Yes. I don't know that I was as publicly an advocate. I didn't have any way to get out and really advocate. I don't think that I realized that that's what I was doing, but I would tell people that they should ride their bikes.

Then the Bike Project started. I graduated and a friend of mine—well, a mutual friend of mine who lived in Bellingham, Washington, and went to college there, Noah Silverman—moved back to Reno. He was born here and grew up here, and he used to work at a place called the Hub in Bellingham, Washington, that was a really cool community bike shop. I had been up there and visited him and other friends and had seen what they had going on there when I was in college. I thought that was really cool.

I'd been looking for a job but couldn't really find one, and didn't really know what to do with myself. So we started the Bike Project on sort of a whim, because the two of us were hanging out and started talking about how it'd be cool if there was another group that was pushing for better biking infrastructure and a better cycling community in Reno.

Then I drafted a letter describing what we wanted to do and our vision. We emailed it to a couple of bike-shop owners who we knew, and the president of the Procrastinating Pedalers, Terry McAfee, and asked them to forward it around, and they did that and we got a pretty big response.

We sent out another email, and then decided that there was probably demand for that sort of

organization in Reno. We knew nothing about nonprofit management or even that it was going to be a nonprofit. We knew nothing. We just started networking and trying to formulate the idea and learn how to make it happen.

So you were kind of testing the waters a little bit, and then did you go ahead and start physically operating the project for a bit before you secured nonprofit status?

Yes. We started going anywhere there was any group of cyclists. We gave a presentation to the Pedalers. They had a Critical Mass, and we went down there and spoke to the group of maybe forty people before they rode. We were just trying to network as much as we could. I think a lot of people discredited us at first because we really didn't know what we were doing and we didn't have our vision well-articulated, but it happened over time. We did gain enough support to hold our first event, a fundraising event. It was a bike drive and sort of a party with different events—messenger bike races, an alley cat race, and a couple other things.

Did you say alley cat race?

Yes.

What is that?

It's like a bike messenger race, where there are several stops and people have to go to each stop and bring a package from one spot to another.

Did you do that in central Reno?

Yes, all around downtown Reno. Our first event was at Record Street Café, the old Record Street Café, which is now Bibo 3.

Our friend Eric Carter, who was a mechanic at a shop south of town—High Sierra Cycling—he had tools and stuff in his house, and he had a basement that he let us use. He let us start storing our bicycle donations in his backyard, and two nights a week he would let us have anybody who wanted to show up come there and work on their bikes. He was really gracious enough to let us do that.

As we were doing that, we determined that we probably needed to become a nonprofit and to secure a better space. We kept networking and meeting people who might be able to help us and would mentor us. We met Susan Clark and her husband, Don Clark, who I knew from my childhood. He is an architect at Cathexes, which is on Second Street, and they had a new building. Susan had an education-based nonprofit, and she agreed to be our fiscal sponsor, our fiscal agent. We were a nonprofit under her umbrella while we were getting our act together.

We got our first grant through them, which was a project to have different artists build bike racks around town. There's a bike rack in front of City Hall, two cement blocks with railroad ties coming out of it. That was one of the bike racks in our project; it was cool to get one there.

Who was that grant from?

It was two grants. One grant was from the Nevada Arts Council and we got additional matching funds for the downtown bike rack in front of City Hall through a city grant. All of that was under Susan's nonprofit, and at the same time, she was working with us and we were filing for our nonprofit status. We were running the shop out of their building and renting a space from them.

I skipped over a part. We did move from Eric's basement to Noah's garage, and we were there for about six months. We were open two days a week there, and people would come and fix their bikes.

Through this whole process of moving around three times, we would have weekly meetings open to anybody at Silver Peak Brewery. We'd get good turnout. Twelve to twenty-five people would show up and it was kind of an open forum for people to discuss cycling issues and what they wanted to see happen, and to plan advocacy events and other ways that we could engage the community.

We were at the Cathexes building [250 Bell Street] for another year, I think, and then that's when we moved to Fourth Street, where we are now. We moved there because we were growing too big for the space. We had gotten our own nonprofit status at that point and we wanted a space that was little more suitable for our needs. Noah and I had shopped around a while looking for a different space, and we met our current landlord, Fred Meyer. He was really agreeable and he wanted us in there, so he helped us make some changes to the building that enabled us to do that.

Prior to moving to Fourth Street, were you doing bike sales, too, or did you just have open times for people to work on their bikes?

We sold bikes. We were refurbishing them and selling them, but we were also having events like a ladies' night and doing some of the open workshops that we still have, and having open work stands. It was interesting because we were just learning as we went. We would do something one way and then we'd run into an issue, and people would voice their concerns about the way we were doing something, and we'd just change the policy. We really did just adapt and learn as we went, as far as how to manage the organization and how to make it most effective and reach a lot of people.

I feel like the Reno Bike Project has had a huge impact in the community, and I think it has since it started. We've done a good job of getting bicycles in the news, and I think that alone is a big part of the advocacy, getting it on people's minds and getting people thinking about alternatives to their cars. I think we've done a good job of that.

What role would you say that having a board of directors plays in getting more community support? How did you get about forming a board of directors?

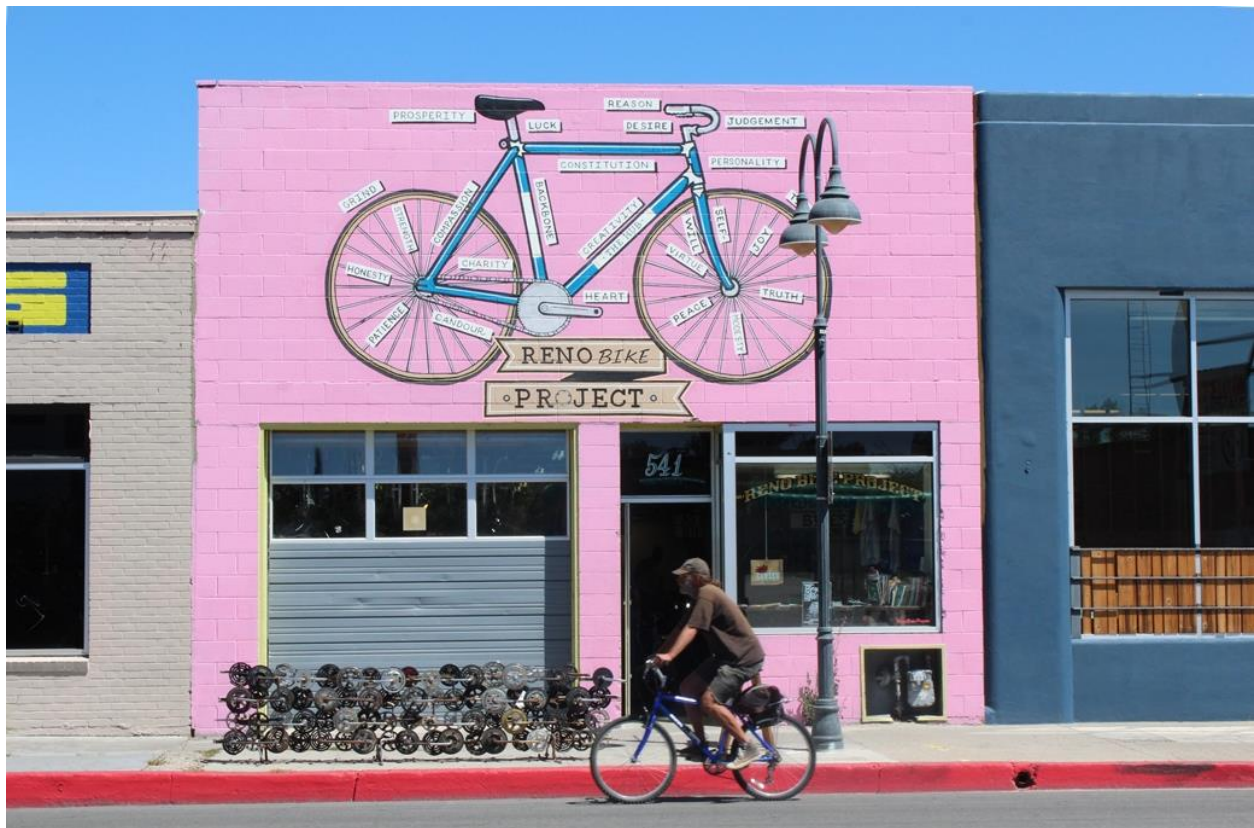
Noah and I talked about it a lot and we started trying to find people who would be interested. It's kind of weird with a startup nonprofit because the founders basically form the board and hire the board, in a way, whereas in an established organization, the board is already there and the board hires the executive director and the program director. When you found the organization, it's kind of a switch. In a lot of ways the founders are managing the board, because the founders have their vision and mission, and they have to relay that to the board, and then the board has to adopt that and take it over.

I would say that the board is really important in regard to reaching out to other demographics who we might not necessarily be reaching. That is one of the huge ways that they can really help. I think a lot of the board members we have are going through a little transition and revisioning. We picked these people because, first, they were involved in cycling or they had additional professional skills—they were

a lawyer, accountant, or whatever could help guide us as far as managing. But then I think ultimately the goal for the board is to be connected to other demographics of people who don't necessarily hear our mission or see our vision, and they're working to advocate for the mission of the organization.

So they meet periodically.

Yes. For years we had monthly board meetings. For a small organization, it's important to have an active board, so you want board members who not only want to help reach these other audiences, but also who have an interest in getting their hands dirty and coming in and helping out at an event or other activities.



The Reno Bike Project building at 541 East 4th Street in 2013. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

By the time you moved to the Fourth Street location, did you have a number of paid staff members?

When we moved there, I think we had one mechanic, paid hourly, and Noah and I were getting a stipend of about \$400 a month each.

Did you have a lot of volunteers?

Yes. We ran for two years with no paid staff, just volunteers, and then we started paying a mechanic who could be there all the time, and then we started paying ourselves. The other part of running a nonprofit is that you have to pay people for their work. Volunteerism is huge and it has enabled us to do what we've done, but you reach a point where if you're not paying people for the hard work they do, they might lose interest or they can only stick around for so long. That was a big goal of ours, getting a paid staff and paying people living wages to compensate them for all the sacrifice that they make to make it happen.

Let's talk about Fourth Street a little bit. You talked about the space a little. Did you have any impressions of the street before moving to that location?

Yes. We went down and met with our landlord, Fred, a couple of times and looked at the place, and Noah and I had discussed whether or not we should do it. That was one of the main concerns: "Is this going to really hurt our business? Are people going to be willing to come down to East Fourth Street at night for a workshop?" Because there are these ideas—I don't know if they're misconceptions—that East Fourth Street is kind of a dangerous, sort of scuzzy area.

We did talk about that, but ultimately we decided that the location for us is awesome and we wanted to be in a more industrial part of town. We decided that the space was really good and that if there was any problem with the façade of East Fourth Street, we were just going to deal with that and take it in stride.

What was it about this space that worked so well? You said that the landlord helped you make some changes to it. What kind of space was it?

It was a transmission shop, and there are two buildings that were at that point connected. They were originally separate, and then they were connected, and then he helped us separate them off again, and we just took one side.

It was cheap. It's actually, I think, one of the greatest areas of town. The landlord helped us put in a front door. There was an existing structure for the front window and the front door that's there now, but it was walled up with cinderblocks. He helped us knock that down and get a storefront put in, and it's great. It has garage-door rollups and two stories, and a lot of storage, and the shape of the building is really unique. It's got a lot of wall space and that's a lot that we didn't have before. For us, storage is a huge issue and that was awesome.

You said you think it's one of the greatest parts of town. Why do you think that? What makes it so great?

I think it's great because it has a lot of character and there's a lot of opportunity there, and I think other people in Reno are also recognizing that. It used to be a very happening area, and then it sort of got rundown, for whatever reasons. Now I think people are seeing the opportunity of Fourth Street as a main corridor that can be both a commercial corridor and, possibly a residential and retail corridor.

It's very unique. It's got a mix of the population who live in that area, with the industrial buildings and the industrial work that's happening all around it, and now there are popping up all these different kinds of commercial businesses and bars and restaurants. It's interesting because it's kind of

rough-and-tumble, but it's not as bad as I think most people think or used to think of East Fourth Street.

Would you say that your business philosophy or just the way of doing business changed once you were located on Fourth Street?

Yes.

How did you have to adapt things?

Because of the homeless shelters there, the Men's and the Women's and Family Drop-in Centers, and there's a bunch of different halfway houses in all those nearby neighborhoods just south of the freeway, around Lake Street, and the thrift stores and the food kitchen, St. Vincent's, and now the tent city. With all of that population around, our business, being a nonprofit and having recycled bikes that were donated to us, definitely had to cater to that population, which is something we didn't realize that we were going to have to do when we first moved there.

It was probably in the back of our minds, but we didn't realize to what extent we were going to have to embrace and interact with our new neighbors. That definitely, right off the bat, was an interesting thing because we wanted to help these people. We're a nonprofit and we want people to ride bikes, and these people clearly need transportation because the bus system isn't necessarily up to par or they can't afford the bus.

At first we started giving away a few bikes, but then we realized that we can't just be giving away all these bikes because we don't know what's going to happen to them. They might just take them and sell them because they want the money instead of the bike.

So we developed the Gift Bike Program that we have, and that was first, to be able to serve that community, being that they're our neighbors and we want to help take care of them as much as possible, but also to serve them in a way that isn't self-defeating in that they would just take the bikes that we give them and sell them, because that's not what we want to see happen with the bike.

That program definitely went through some phases. At first, we would say, "Oh, you can volunteer. If you volunteer in here, then we'll give you a bike." We did that for a while, but then we realized that's exactly what people were doing. They were volunteering and then taking our bike and selling it. People were starting to exploit the program a little bit and take advantage of us. So we had to keep adapting it. Now they have to verify that they are in a workforce program, or staying at the shelter, or volunteering for another organization. They have to volunteer, and then we give them a bike and lights and locks and some education on safe riding.

I've been gone for a little bit and I know that when I left in January we were rewriting that program a little bit for a new grant to get it funded, and it underwent a few changes. I'm a little forgetful of the exact details of what we were changing, but that program has been a huge success and we've seen tons of success stories of those people who are incredibly grateful and got a job and kept a job because of the bike we got them.

That community comes in to the shop all the time and we help them all the time, helping them patch their flat tires or whatever it is. We know they don't have the means to pay for a patched flat tire, and that's not really our goal. Our goal is to help them be able to use that bike as transportation, and so we help them. I think we've been accepted into that community, the organization has, as a good neighbor. They watch out for us and we watch out for them. There have been some incidents when we got broken

into or when a fire started. I think somebody had a fire in the alleyway behind the shop and it lit the building on fire. There have been some incidents like that where we've been taken advantage of or robbed, but for the most part I feel like that community has embraced us and we've embraced them as good neighbors that take care of each other. So that's been kind of interesting.

Have you found that any of your anxieties about other groups of folks being anxious or unwilling to come down to that area have proved to be true?

No, it didn't, because once we moved there, our business increased tenfold. I feel like that wasn't an issue and that our concerns about that didn't come to fruition. They weren't justified. I've heard people complain, "Oh, you know, people don't want to come down there," or, "Oh, that bike shop is just for bums," or whatever it is. But I think most of the time when I hear those sorts of criticisms, most of the time they're not real and they're just people being jealous or hateful for whatever reason. I just write them off. Because we do see lots of different people come into the shop, and we bring lots of different demographic types into that neighborhood, and we do have well-to-do bike collectors who might be in there digging through a bin right next to a guy who's down on his luck and living in a homeless shelter, and they're right next to each other. That's not an uncommon occurrence in there. I think it's got a pretty interesting dynamic in that way.

I'm wondering what kind of connection you feel to the surrounding businesses.

I think the businesses down there all look out for each other. I think they're pretty specialized businesses. We're a very service-based organization and we happen to have a service that caters to low-income individuals who use a bicycle as their main mode of transportation. Club Underground I don't think really caters to that crowd so much, but at the same time, I haven't seen any issues between Club Underground clientele and the low-income population that's living there. I think a lot of the businesses that are down there are pretty specific, like Paolo Cividino; he does custom metalwork for tons of huge projects in Reno. He's done Bibo's and Chapel Tavern and any building that has major architectural metal facades. He moved his shop [Tutto Ferro] down there, and there's a motorcycle shop right across the street from us, and he's right next to them. They're all very specialized. We know all those people, and as business owners, everyone is sort of neighbors. But I think their businesses are so specialized that they don't necessarily cater to serving populations, broad populations.

Have you had any formal connections with the business organizations in the community? There's that Reno-Sparks Corridor Business Association, and E4 is a newer group that might have formed since you left.

Yes, I heard about it since I've left. When we were there, I know there was an association. I think Noah went to a couple of the meetings, but other than that, not really. Other than just knowing them and seeing them on the street and chitchatting. I think that that E4 thing, from what I've heard, is really trying to unite the Business Owners Association down there. But I'm not quite sure what that is.

While you were here, were you participating in any kinds of meetings with the City of Reno or anything that was involving proposed changes to Fourth Street or to bike and pedestrian planning in the city?

Yes, I went to a couple of BPAC meetings.

What was that?

Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee. They did a bunch of visioning workshops for bicycle and pedestrian access with the RTC and Fehr & Peers Transportation Consultants.

I'm not sure what that is.

Shoot, I forget. But the city is in the second phase of completing their comprehensive bicycle-pedestrian plan to be adopted into the city plan, and they did these visioning charrettes at different community meetings and at various times, like at the RTC, at the bus station in Reno and the bus station in Sparks.

I went to those, and those were really cool. They were trying to get public input into what sort of changes should be made and where people wanted to see better bicycle and pedestrian infrastructures changed. I participated in those meetings, and I think the planning firm that put that plan together did a really good job. I read it not too long ago, and it's really good. I think there's always a balance in any sort of city planning between prioritizing what your budget allows and then looking at what people want and where the low-hanging fruit is as far as what can be implemented and how quickly it can be implemented versus what you can pay for, and at the same time looking for long-term changes.

I know Fourth Street was definitely always brought up as a main thoroughfare that should be adjusted to be more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly. There are no bike lanes on it now and it's sort of a death trap for pedestrians and cyclists. I know that that was brought up and that was mentioned in the plan as a long-term change that might take place.

Anybody who rides it or walks up and down it knows the sidewalks are broken and in disarray, and there's not a lot of space for pedestrians. There are no bike lanes and very little street parking that can act as a bike lane, even. You basically have the gutter and then two lanes of traffic. It is a heavily trafficked road, so anybody who rides up and down it knows that cars are trying to swerve around each other to get down the street faster, and so it's just kind of frightening. Because of the industrial buildings, too, there are a lot of heavy trucks and big semi trucks driving up and down. So I think you feel that way when you're on it just because of the huge machines that are flying by you and the lack of space.

When you think about what your ideal vision would be for that street as a cyclist but also as a business owner, what do you think they could do?

It would be interesting to make it a slow boulevard-type street with a center median similar to what they did to Wells Avenue. Wells is a good example of a street where they created parking; they created one lane each direction, they have a turning lane and/or a median with plants and trees in it. A little bit of greenery is always nice, especially in that area that has virtually no trees, and maybe widening the sidewalks or doing big out-cuts where the sidewalk can push out, little nodes for pedestrians to feel safe while they're waiting to cross the street.

I think there's a lot of space on that street because it is sort of like a four-lane highway, and it doesn't need to have four lanes of traffic. I think they can focus on making it more user-friendly,

including all modes of transportation. They could run a bus route. If they're going to expand bus rapid transit, that should be one of the main thoroughfares, and they should have that center lane be for medians, as a median with greenery or a train line or a bus line. There's a lot of opportunity there, I think.

I want to make sure we put on the record the reason that you left Reno, why you're in New York, and how moving there and what you've been doing since might have influenced some of your thoughts about Fourth Street.

I moved to New York in January of 2011 to get my graduate degree in city planning at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. I was influenced to do that for a number of reasons, but one reason was being involved with the Bike Project and seeing the transformation that a small group of people can have in a community like that. Getting involved and wanting to see the city transform into a more livable place led me to think about city planning as something that I want to pursue more. There are a number of reasons why I moved, but that's one of them.

Has your studying of planning while you've been at the Pratt Institute influenced your thoughts about Fourth Street at all or helped you understand it from a different perspective?

Yes, absolutely, but because I'm so busy with school and working here, I haven't sat down to really reflect on some recommendations for what could happen there, other than just the issues that I've known in the past. The traffic is kind of horrendous and there are some equity issues as well with the population that lives there versus the re-gentrification of the area that a lot of people are pushing for, which I think is good. I just think that there's a balance and that there are other people at stake, other stakeholders in that conversation who I would be concerned might be overlooked.

Who are you talking about?

I think that it's an interesting balance if you want to make it a very hip street, where there's a lot of interaction with lots of bars and restaurants, juxtaposed against the new homeless shelter that they've built there and the new food kitchen. They basically have said this is the area for low-income individuals in Reno, and then there are other groups who say, "Well, we want this hip, young crowd with restaurants and bars and shops and stuff." I think there's a little bit of a juxtaposition there, and I think that that would be a conflict that would need to be addressed. Maybe it doesn't matter. Our shop has proven that a lot of people are willing to come down there in spite of the fact that there are those people, but I also know that a lot of people feel uncomfortable, still have the opinion that East Fourth Street is dirty. I'm not quite sure how that would play out.

How are you able to stay connected to the project? Do you have any kind of relationship with how operations continue now or are you on hiatus with that?

I was there in the summertime for about a month and a half, and I helped a bunch when I was there. I still talk to the guys who are down there on the phone a lot and via email. I'll edit things that they write. I'm still very interested in it and I want it to succeed, being one of the founders. I am still involved, and I still post on the blog on their website, when I see an interesting article about cycling. I'm not calling

the shots or doing any major work, just kind of piecemeal here and there. Where I can help out, I will.

Do you have any vision for the future of the Reno Bike Project and activities that they might do, or has it pretty much satisfied your vision?

It's interesting. I think that the vision continually changes. I think that our vision when we first started still is the vision of the bike shop, although I can't speak for the guys who are there running it now. We want Reno to be a bicycle city, and when people think of great American bicycle cities, our goal was for them to think of Reno—Portland, then Reno, and I don't think we're even close to that yet. So the vision has not been fulfilled. We have made some huge headway, though, and I think Reno as a city has broken down some of the huge barriers that were maybe holding it back initially from moving in that direction.

Reno has come around to this idea that bike lanes and livable streets are really good for our community, and that they make this a more enjoyable place to live, which, in turn, will hopefully increase people wanting to move here and will increase economic stimulus. I can only assume that somebody has that relationship in their head in the city planning office in Reno.

It used to not be that way at all, and there is still huge opposition anytime a new bike lane goes in on a street. Arlington and California or Mayberry were perfect examples of that, where there's all this opposition from the people who live in those communities—or maybe who just drive through those communities—against having those bike lanes because it takes away one of the lanes of traffic through a residential neighborhood. You don't need three lanes or two lanes of traffic in a residential neighborhood in one direction. To us, it seems obvious, but there's still this opposition.

That being said, I remember I was at a City Hall meeting where they were discussing one of the bike lanes, the extension of the Mayberry bike lane all the way into California Avenue. I had been at meetings before where there was opposition. It was a debate on whether or not we should do the bike lane. When I went to that meeting, Chris Louis—he's the project manager at RTC—got up and gave his presentation and there was no opposition to it and every City Council member was completely in favor of the extension of the bike lane. Even [Mayor] Bob Cashell said, "You know, I live on Mayberry, and since that bike lane has gone in, even in spite of the opposition that we originally got about it, that bike lane has made our community better." He publicly said that at the City Hall meeting. I thought that was really great, and I thought that was a huge stride in thinking for the whole community of Reno, the whole city. When your officials are stating that we want bike lanes on all the streets, I think that's a huge step in the right direction.

Which do you think comes first, increasing the number of people who are riding bikes, or improving the physical infrastructure of the city to make it more conducive to riding bikes?

Well, I think it goes both ways. In order to put the pressure on the city to want to increase the bike lanes—and this is the approach that we took at the Bike Project—we've always said, "We want to put more people's asses on bike seats. That's what we want." So we took that approach, getting people affordable bicycles, encouraging ridership, showing people that you can ride year-'round, that it's fun, that it's great, and giving them the tools to do it.

Then as you increase the numbers of riders, people start to notice, "Wow, there's a lot of bike riders," and those people start to get fed up and, as a constituency, push on the political leadership to say,

“Hey, we need to really change. We don’t have the facilities that we need to get to work.”

I think it goes both ways, then, and as more bike lanes are put in—because safety is the number-one issue that people do not ride bikes; they’re concerned about getting hit by a car—and you give them space and infrastructure, more and more people see it as a safe thing and then they recognize all the extra benefits that come along with that. Then more people start riding who maybe wouldn’t have initially, just from the encouragement. But now that they’re encouraged and it’s safer to do, they’re more likely to go out and do it. I think that’s the way it works. It goes both ways.

How important do you think it is to get the support of the university or college students? Have you had success in reaching that demographic?

Yes. College students are the one demographic that you have no problem convincing to ride bicycles. I think that’s true anywhere you go in the world. For some reason, college students really like bicycles. It’s an interesting thing. In high school, kids don’t want to ride bicycles because they want to drive cars and be cool and have the sense of freedom that they can ascertain from having an automobile. Then they get to college and for some reason—I don’t know if they go hippie or what it is—everyone wants to ride a bicycle, and it’s just easier and better to ride around campus and get to town. Then maybe after that there are people who stick with the bicycle, and there are people who don’t ride as much because they drive their car, they have to go far to work, or they have kids. It’s more complicated not having a car when you have kids. You can do it, though.

So you’ve had some support for the Reno Bike Project from students?

Yes, totally. That demographic is completely in support of the Bike Project and has been. And the other thing is, we were recent college grads when we started it, too, so we still had a lot of connections, and still do. A lot of the volunteers down there who are very involved are still college students, so they bring with them their other cohorts.

Do you think that the Reno Bike Project should stay on Fourth Street?

Yes, totally. I don’t know why they would move to another place. The only thing I could see is, if the demand were there, it would be interesting to have some offshoots, kind of satellite shops, because it is kind of hard to get to sometimes. If you’re coming from other places, it might be not the best location. So maybe there could be a location in far south Reno or somewhere.

Are you thinking of coming back to Reno when you finish your degree?

That is still up in the air. I’ve got a long way to go still. I still have a year and half after this semester, and I’ve got two big projects and a thesis that I still have to do in that year and a half. Right now I’m just focusing on school. But it’s definitely crossed my mind. Lots of people ask me that, and I think there’s a lot of opportunity there. I actually just started reading your book yesterday, and it’s really great. I’m interested in it.

Thanks a lot.

I think that that one of the biggest issues that Reno faces as a whole is that their economic identity is totally confused, and I think they're at a dip in the boom-and-bust cycle, where they need to figure out something new that's more sustainable in the long run.

Do you think Fourth Street could possibly be a part of that?

Yes, I think Fourth Street definitely will be a part of that. I think the whole downtown area will be a big part of that. This whole idea of sprawling out...eventually people are going to come around to wanting to live in higher-density areas. I'm studying all this theory right now, but there's a lot of potential gain of community strength and interconnections when you live in closer quarters with people.

I think a lot of people in the economic times that we're having are coming to realize that strength comes from the unity of those connections and that community support. As we move forward, for the whole nation, the world maybe, the "American Dream" is not going to be quite so individualistic; I think it's going to be more communal. I think condensing our living spaces a little bit is probably what's going to naturally occur, but that's my own opinion.



Brian Mandio speaks on a bike-led historical tour during the Positively 4th Street event in June 2014. The group pauses on the temporary bike lane installed on the 500 block of East 4th Street. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

KRISTA LEE

City of Reno Homeless Coordinator



Krista Lee outside the City of Reno's Family Shelter in 2011. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Krista Lee earned a Master's in Social Work (MSW) from the University of Kansas before moving to Reno to become the city's first Homeless Coordinator, Housing Resource Specialist. She describes her work for the City of Reno as well as the layout and operations of the Community Assistance Center, which was constructed on Record Street, just south of East Fourth Street, in 2007.

Alicia Barber: I am sitting with Krista Lee, who is the Management Analyst and Homeless Coordinator for the Community Resources Division for the City of Reno, and we're in her office at City Hall. It's Monday, October 24, 2011.

Krista, do I have your permission to record our interview today and place it in our public archives?

Krista Lee: Yes.

Great! Could you tell me where you were born and where you went to school?

I was born in Topeka, Kansas, and I lived in Kansas until four years ago. Two of my grandparents were born and raised in Kansas City and lived their whole lives there, and I'm not sure if my other two grandparents were born in Kansas, but they lived a significant part of their lives there.

I grew up in a small town and then I moved to Lawrence, where I attended the University of Kansas for six or seven years, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student. As an undergraduate, I majored in psychology and sociology with a concentration in women's studies, and my master's degree is in social work.

In between my undergraduate and graduate programs, I took about six months off, thinking that I would find a job, but I couldn't find a decent-paying one, so I decided to get my master's degree. When you get a liberal arts degree as an undergrad, they don't warn you ahead of time that it's not very useful in the real world.

I wanted to work with people in poverty, and I was really interested in psychology and sociology, so my main interest was in working for a Mental Health Center or working for the Division of Welfare, something along those lines. I just like learning about psychology and sociology, so I thought, why not try to get a job in that area?

It soon became clear that to get a job, either a graduate degree or more experience was necessary, and when I was looking for a job, it was really hard to get my foot in the door. I liked Lawrence and I liked living there. At that point in my life, I wasn't ready to move away.

Tell me about that graduate program. What is the degree program and what kind of coursework did you take?

My degree is a Master's in Social Work (MSW), and the program at K.U. is a little bit different than the University of Nevada, Reno's program, in that you get to pick what kind of track you want to follow. You can pick a clinical track, and within the clinical track there are four different concentrations: health and mental health, children and families, aging, and another one I can't recall. Or you could pick the Administration and Advocacy track, which is what I chose. That track focuses more on the macro side of social work—policies and advocacy—and a lot of people who choose that track end up being managers. I really didn't have an interest in being a director of an agency, at least not then and really not now, but I like advocacy and policy, making an impact on the larger picture.

During the degree program, did you work in the communities surrounding the university?

Yes. You have to do two years of practicum, because I was in a two-year program. So my first year I did my practicum at the Douglas County AIDS Project, working with individuals who were either homeless or near homeless who had HIV or AIDS, and that was really interesting. They get HOPWA, Housing Opportunity for People with AIDS. It's a federal grant to house people who have HIV, and we

worked with those individuals doing case management, helping them get to their appointments, that sort of thing.

This was in the city of Lawrence?

Yes. Then my second year I did my practicum for an agency called MAACLink, Mid America Assistance Coalition. It's in Kansas City, Missouri, and they do a lot of different things. At the time, they had an information referral line for people needing all types of assistance, and they had a lady who helped provide support. She held support groups for case managers in the community, people who were working with people who were homeless. So she did trainings and support groups for them. They had funds for back-to-school supplies.

They did a wide variety of stuff, but one of their major roles was to serve as the database administrators for the Kansas City Homeless Management Information System. It's a federally mandated database, and anyone who receives federal funds related to homelessness is required to participate in entering client-level data into the system. So they administered that system, and in fact, my current office is the grant recipient for the HMIS funding for Reno and rural Nevada.

What drew you to this kind of work?

For two years or so during my undergraduate years, I did a couple of other jobs related to direct service. I worked overnight at a homeless shelter and in between my graduation and entering grad school, I worked for the 1-800-Medicare line. I was already a little burned out on the direct client work, but I still liked the whole topic and liked knowing that maybe I could make an impact somewhere on the issue of poverty. I chose the advocacy track because I thought maybe it wouldn't require that I do a whole lot of direct service but I could still be involved.

After you received your degree, you then started to look for a job?

I got my MSW in 2006, and actually, I got a job even before I graduated, at our Mental Health Center in Lawrence. The city of Lawrence had provided funding to hire several homeless outreach workers to provide street outreach to the people who were either staying in shelters or who weren't, to try to connect them with mental health services and housing and everything that they needed.

One of my professors specialized in homelessness and she was really involved in the community's efforts to address homelessness. She told me about the job and gave me a referral, and although I had to interview, I got my foot in the door through that avenue.

I did that for about a year, and I just got really burned out. It was really hard. It's really draining on you. I was working with homeless families, and I was working three other jobs on top of it because I had so many student loans. I realized that I needed to find one good-paying job, so I started looking online and found my current job.

What was the title of the job you applied for?

The title was Homeless Coordinator, Housing Resource Specialist, and the job description included a lot of administrative tasks like working with providers, helping to coordinate services, helping

to make sure the providers were all talking to one another, and making sure that the Community Assistance Center was providing the services it was intended to provide. It was primarily administrative with some advocacy. We can't lobby because we're federally funded, but we advocate just to make sure that we're implementing the right kinds of policies and that the community is thinking about the clients when they're implementing new policies.

Was it a new position?

Yes, it was a brand-new position, and it coincided with the building of the Community Assistance Center. Once the city started construction on that, I think they realized that it was going to take a lot more work than just building a building, that you needed to have somebody there to help make sure things went smoothly on the larger-picture side of things.

Until that point, Leann McElroy, who was the former chief of staff, was working more in an advisory capacity. She retired right when I got hired, but she had been involved in attending a lot of the community meetings about the planning of this whole campus. I don't know if she attended meetings before that happened, but she was really the community liaison for homelessness.

Did you come to Reno to interview for the job?

Yes. I'd never been here before my interview, and I came out here for my interview and was here two days and left.

The Community Assistance Center was under construction at that time, just south of East Fourth Street on Record Street. Did someone from the city take you down to look at it?

No. They suggested that if I had time before I left, I could go down and see it, and so I did. I went down and introduced myself to Ray Trevino over at St. Vincent's Dining Hall and told him that I was just in town interviewing for the job, but I was really interested in seeing what the campus looked like and how it operated. Ray had been running the dining hall for a long time. He talked to me for a few minutes. I had to leave town that day, so I didn't get a whole tour, but I did come down and look at it.

Was the dining hall that St. Vincent's operated part of the Center or was that a separate program?

It's hard to describe, because the dining hall and the Gospel Mission were part of the whole construction process. There was some sort of agreement—and this was all before my time—where I believe the Gospel Mission and St. Vincent's transferred the title to their existing properties then located in the central downtown area to the city in exchange for these new buildings and new properties.

The Community Assistance Center is enclosed within a gate, and so even though they're right next door, people differ over whether St. Vincent's and the Gospel Mission are considered part of the Community Assistance Center. If I'm talking to someone who isn't familiar with the services, I describe the whole area as the Community Assistance Center, but to somebody who really knows the area and knows the services, I make the distinction that the Community Assistance Center is officially just the area inside the gate.

However, they are all invited to the provider meetings and the directors' meetings we hold within

the gates, so they are kept informed about what's going on and what the needs are.

After you interviewed and then went back to Kansas, did you get a call with the job offer?

Yes. They called me and offered me the position, and I hesitated. I think I actually turned it down at first. [laughs]

Really? Why?

Because I was inexperienced in job searches, besides working retail and that sort of thing. I thought that at my first real type of job I would be able to negotiate. City positions at that time—I don't know if they still do—listed a salary range and potential for bonus, so I thought there was room to negotiate and there wasn't. They just offered me the lowest pay. I was surprised, but I don't know what I was thinking. I'd also never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd get the job, so I was thinking, "I can't move." I cried all night, thinking, "What did I just do?" I called them the next day, and asked, "Is the job still available?" They said yes, and I said, "Oh, I'll take it." [laughs]

It was really embarrassing. I can feel my face getting hot just talking about that. But it was a big move and I didn't know anybody out here and I just hadn't really believed that I would get the job. I gave a month's notice at my current job and then moved to Reno in September of 2007.

Where was your office?

I began working on the fourth floor of City Hall. This was back when there wasn't enough room for all the employees, back before the economy was as bad as it is today. The Community Resources Division was housed with the Redevelopment Agency, and there wasn't any office space available there, so they placed me in an open cubicle on the fourth floor with another division. I was back in my own corner by myself, and it was lonely. But I was only there for probably nine months or so before I was essentially relocated to operate our first tent city down at the Community Assistance Center. We formally organized it in June of 2008. So from June through October, I was working six to seven days a week down there, running a campground, basically.

Can you tell me which parts of the Community Assistance Center were completed when you arrived and what was still being constructed when you began to work at the site?

When I first started my job, the only part that was complete was the Men's Shelter, and that's in 315 Record Street on the second floor of the building. The interior of the first floor of the building wasn't finished. After I got hired, they started construction on the Women's Shelter and the Triage Center, which were both in the 315 Record Street building, and the Reno Police Department Crisis Intervention Team office, which is in that building, too.

Once we started the first tent city, I believe the Women's Shelter was just about completed, because I recall that I used the front desk area as a meeting space where I kept my cold drinks because it was so hot. I had some resource materials in there, but most of my time was spent outdoors because that's where all the clients were.

At that time, they must have already started construction on phase 2B, which was the 335

building, which opened in October of 2008. It's three stories high and the roof has a playground on it. The Family Shelter is in that building. We opened up that building in October and then we opened up the Women's Shelter the same month and the Men's Cold Weather Shelter around November 1st. Then we closed the tent city down.

We didn't really realize it at the time, but there is always, it seems, a group of people who just are not able to or choose not to utilize traditional shelter settings. So once we closed the tent city and opened up the shelters, there was still a small group of individuals who tried to camp out on the property, and we relocated them, I guess, several times—unintentionally, of course. We didn't really want them camping there because there were facilities available for them to use.

At one point they set up camp in an alleyway between the 315 and 335 buildings. They didn't really set up tents, from what I recall, but they set up a lot of mattresses and blankets. It just became like a big junkyard, with trash everywhere. You could hardly walk through the alley, it was so full of stuff.

Eventually we removed them from that area and fenced it in so that they couldn't go back there. After that, I don't recall if they tried to sleep anywhere else on the campus during that winter, but once the Cold Weather Shelter closed in March of '09, there was another situation where men who had been staying all winter in that shelter now had nowhere else to go because the regular Men's Shelter is pretty much always full.

This is where I start to lose my timeline because we've had so many different renditions of these tent cities. I believe that it was in the spring of 2009 that we designated an outdoor sleeping area just beyond the day-use area that's at the CAC. The city of Reno hired staff to allow people to sleep overnight on the ground in this designated area, but they weren't allowed to bring tents or anything. They could bring their bedding and that sort of thing, but then they had to remove it all in the daytime.

We did that all summer long, and then the majority of the individuals who we hired for that stayed on and operated the Cold Weather Shelter that winter. So from the winter of '09 to '10, the same group of people, for the most part, operated that for the city of Reno. That's really the first time the city has provided direct service, as far as operating a shelter—I mean outside of that first tent city—and I wouldn't really consider that a shelter operation. But in the previous year the Gospel Mission had operated the Cold Weather Shelter.

So the city decided to do it, and then that spring, March of 2010, there was again a large group of men who had been staying there all winter long, who now had nowhere else to go. A lot of the individuals who stay in the Cold Weather Shelters are chronically homeless; they've been homeless for a long time. A lot of them have drug and alcohol issues, mental health issues, that sort of thing, and quite a few of the gentlemen who stay in that shelter prefer that one because there's no case management requirement, really. You just go in, you sleep, you get up and you leave, and so there's not really any expectation that you're going to try to move on and obtain housing or a job or anything else.

So come that spring, there were all these guys again who didn't have anywhere else to go, and so they started sleeping out next to the railroad tracks where's there's a railroad spur, as we call it. I don't know what the formal line is called, but it runs along Record Street between St. Vincent's Dining Hall and the Record Street buildings. It's in use, but only about twice a day; they go one way and then come back. They were sleeping and they set up tents along there, right behind St. Vincent's Dining Hall, and then just as the days went by, each day it pretty much doubled in size. Pretty soon it extended clear down the tracks for a little bit.

Finally one day the mayor came down and said, "Get them inside," or something like that, because it was really hazardous for them to be sleeping there, basically without supervision. There were

just a lot of problems, and we'd seen that the first time we had a tent city, before we organized it—that they had tried to set up their own tent city, but there was a lot of prostitution and drug use. At one point there was even a gang started of people living there who were trying to rule the other people there, and it just was not a good situation.

So staff came down and created this new tent city which we ended up calling “Safe Ground,” on the model that they had in Sacramento. There's a group or coalition called Safe Ground in Sacramento, and they call it Safe Ground with the idea that it's a safe place to camp for people who cannot or choose not to access shelter. At least it's a safe place for them to be. They may have had some different rules than we did—some of them say absolutely no drugs or alcohol, that sort of thing. Of course, we say that, but once they get inside the tents they can do whatever they want. Once we organized it again, it very quickly grew to over 200 people living there.

It was in one specific area?

Yes, it was relocated into our day area where we had all these shade structures up. The day area is a place for people who are living at the Community Assistance Center to go outside and smoke or talk to their friends, that sort of thing, and not be in the way of traffic, because there's really no other space besides the parking lot for them to be in. The day area allows them to get out of the traffic.

We ended up having to move the shade structures at some point. We allowed them to set up their tents, and before you knew it, it was full. You couldn't fit another tent in there. We said, “Okay, no more tents. No more. Whoever is here can stay here, but we're not taking any more new people.”

Somewhere around that time, too, we tried to implement a committee of individuals living there to help police the area. They ended up being elected. We said, “If you are interested in fulfilling this role, turn in your name,” and then we created a ballot and everybody living there voted for the committee members. So there was a committee and they called themselves the Betterment Committee.

In the Safe Ground they actually started some reform very early on because they helped to provide some input on what the rules were. The city said, “These are some rules that we can't live without,” and then the committee put in rules that they thought were good ideas too. The city had some safety rules prohibiting flames, saying you can't have a fire or a propane heater or something similar in your tent with a flame because of the risk of catching everyone else's tent on fire, and no drugs and alcohol, no prostitution, some of the legal criminal issues. I don't remember what kind of rules the committee put in. For the most part, they agreed with what we said.

How did it work?

The first committee was all right, but over time, they agreed to hold reelections every so often. I don't remember if it was every six weeks or what. Several months into it, we started getting a lot of complaints, and actually there were committee members quitting left and right because there were allegations that some of the committee members were taking bribes to allow new people to come in and sleep or to let people get away with doing other types of illegal activities. There was just a lot of corruption going on. In fact, after we said no more people, probably a month or two went by and the numbers came down slowly just from people leaving or getting kicked out. If they were blatantly violating the rules, then they'd be asked to leave.

On September 1st of 2010 we organized it again, and we said, “No more committee. This isn't

working. We gave you plenty of opportunities to try to fix it.” So we said, “On September 1st if you want to continue living here, then you need to participate in case management and try to find a job or housing or whatever it is that you need to try to get out of this situation.”

We removed everyone on the first and we did a cleanup of the area. We picked up all the trash and everything that was accumulating, and then that same day we re-registered everybody who wanted to be there back into the area. So there were roughly 120 people who re-registered on September 1st to stay there, and we ended up keeping a couple of the committee members on to help with re-registration each week. Once a week they were required to come in and tell whoever the person was at the time, “Yes, I’m still staying here.” If you didn’t re-register, we would post a notice on your tent that you didn’t re-register, saying, “Please come in and tell us whether you’re there or not.”

If they still didn’t come in, then we would take down their tent because there were a lot of times when people would just move out and they’d leave all their bedding and a lot of their stuff behind because they couldn’t carry it with them. We wouldn’t know where they went, if they went to jail or if they got an apartment or whatever. Usually if they went to jail or the hospital, somebody else there knew that and they’d tell us, so we would make accommodations as we needed to. But if they just picked up and left and nobody knew where they were, then there was a process we had to go through.

Fairly quickly we began to tell them, “At a minimum, once a month you have to meet with a case manager.” So I was the case manager.

Another part of your job.

Yes. So they were required to meet with me once a month and within that first month, probably twenty to thirty people either said, “I’m not going to meet with you. I don’t want to meet with you,” or they were given some sort of notice like, “You haven’t met with your case manager by the 31st and must exit Safe Ground,” and still didn’t come in. That first month they wouldn’t have been asked to leave based on not doing anything; they would have been asked to leave because they didn’t meet with the case manager.

Quite a few people were asked to leave at the end of the first month, and from there on out, each month a few more people would either leave or be asked to leave. I felt like I was really flexible with them as far as demonstrating that they were trying to do something. “Sign up for housing,” I’d say, “I’ll give you the application. Just fill it out, bring it back in, and we’ll mail it or turn it in,” or, “Go look for a job and bring me applications that you’re applying for jobs or something.”

There were some individuals who just wouldn’t do anything, and so, unfortunately, I had to ask them to leave. When we started the case management, I pretty much let them set their own goals: “Whatever it is that you need to get out of here, then let’s work on it.” Some of them weren’t able to do it due to drug and alcohol addiction issues, or just didn’t want to. It’s not a large percentage at all, but there are some people who prefer the outdoor sleeping environment and at least felt safer doing it in a place where it was allowed for free, versus along the river or wherever else they would go. So each month we lost a few more people.

We actually did have quite a few who obtained housing, once they got into the process. I don’t have the exact numbers handy, but there were over twenty who got into some sort of permanent living environment, whether it was subsidized housing or people who got their Social Security retirement in the time they lived there. I tried to help get one guy into senior housing, and he said, “No, I don’t want to live with those old people,” and he went and rented a motel. Still, he made the choice to go rent the motel, so I

still consider that a permanent living environment because he was eligible for cheaper housing and chose not to take it.

By June of 2011, we had three or four people left living there, and they had been there for over a year. There was shelter space available for a few individuals—on the first of the month there are always shelter beds available because a lot of people get disability income or retirement income, and so they go out and rent a hotel for a week or two and then they gamble or drink the rest of it away and come back. On the first, you can always get a shelter bed.

We said, “There’s really no reason why you guys are still here. Yes, you’ve done everything we’ve asked.” But at that point, do you say, “You can live here forever”? A couple of the guys had pretty significant criminal backgrounds and weren’t able to obtain housing. One of them was seeking disability and one of them was seeking employment, and he did get a part-time job. They were eligible for the shelter and so we just asked them to go into the shelter and we closed that final tent city.

Currently, there’s no more city-provided or city-condoned tent city or any outdoor sleeping accommodations. The jurisdictions do not have funding for the Cold Weather Shelter this year, so the Reno Area Alliance for the Homeless has been trying to come up with a resolution to that, either by providing a Cold Weather Shelter from November to March or, at a minimum, at least on nights when it’s really, really cold out. They haven’t found a location yet.

Where has it been in the past?

It was held on North Edison Way, but those buildings were part of the flood project and the ones that we’ve used in the past are being demolished. The problem is funding, really. There’s no money to pay for utilities or transporting people out there.

Did the city operate buses to take the clients out there in the past?

Well, this past year we contracted the shelter out to the Volunteers of America. They’re the contractor for the regular shelter, and they have their own mini bus that they used to transport them out. The year that the city operated it, we actually leased a van from one of the local car companies, and it would leave from the Community Assistance Center. It required a lot of back-and-forth travel because either transportation method only held fifteen to thirty people, and the shelter’s capacity was seventy-five men. They would transport them back and forth as long as it took—three to five round trips—and then they’d transport them back downtown in the morning. The shelter was just open during the nighttime, for sleeping.

So prior to the tent city that emerged when you arrived to work for the city, had something like that happened ever before in Reno?

Not that I know of. As far as I know, there have always been people camping along the river and in the woods, places that aren’t in the public eye as much. As far as I know, there haven’t been any other tent cities organized within or on public property.

In your experience and from your education, are tent cities common throughout the country, or did it seem unique to you?

These days it's pretty common, but three or four years ago when it started, we did do some research. It was kind of unique, I would say, because Reno is small in comparison to the major cities that have them. Seattle is the major one that comes to mind. Seattle had one for years; they had several tent cities. We did a lot of research on how theirs worked, but at that time there were maybe one or two others we could find that were actually organized.

You always hear about New York encampments of people sleeping under the bridges, but it's not really the same thing. They're doing that on their own. They probably have their own organization within themselves, but it isn't a matter of a third party coming in. Really, of the Seattle tent cities that I've read about, most are actually consumer-operated. They have their own council that enforces the rules. We just haven't had a lot of luck with that model here.

For its size, does Reno have a proportionately large homeless population?

I've never compared Reno's population to any other community, so I'm not really sure. We have issues that are unique to Reno, like gambling. I would say that the majority of the seniors who we serve are gambling addicts, so that's a unique factor here.

Right now the economy is so bad that we are serving a lot of men who might not have become homeless in previous years. A lot of them have issues, but when there were more jobs than there were people, they would have had no problem finding a job if they lost a previous one. They might fall off the wagon or something else would happen, and then have to come back down to use the shelter, but for a very short time, not years at a time. That has played a significant role, I believe, with our population.

Is there treatment offered in the Community Assistance Center for things like gambling addiction and alcoholism, or does that happen somewhere else? Do you refer people?

Some people would disagree with me, but I don't see that there are a whole lot of resources available for gambling addictions. For those who we know are gambling addicts, we try to inform them about payee services, where an agency would step in and their check would come to the agency, and then the agency would pay their bills or their rent and give them the rest of the money. So we try to inform them about that.

I know that there's a Gamblers Anonymous, there's the Problem Gambling Center and those types of organizations, but they've never, to my knowledge, done outreach to our folks. I've tried to contact them to come to meetings and tell us about their services, and they've never been open to it. I may be misinformed, though—that's just my observation.

What about drug and alcohol treatment?

For drug and alcohol treatment, currently we have WestCare. They operate the Community Triage Center on the back side of the 315 building. They provide drug and alcohol detox services. Typically a client will stay there from three to five days in detox, with the hope that they're going to transition them to a longer-term rehabilitation program. There have been a lot of challenges because the longer-term recovery programs out there have pretty lengthy waiting lists unless you have a way to pay for it yourself, which most of our people don't. We also have AA groups on site too.

Are those pretty well attended?

No.

Prior to September of 2010, when you were requiring case management, was there any requirement for case management in any part of the center?

All the shelters require participants to work with a case manager, and in our very first tent city we required them to show proof, each week when they re-registered, that they were trying to do something, but it kind of became a joke. They'd just go grab an application at Cal Neva and bring it back and say, "I'm looking for a job."

I'd say, "Okay, that works." They only had to bring in one thing, and most of the time they didn't follow through on it; they'd just go get an application or they'd share one amongst themselves. So it was kind of a joke, but that was our first attempt at it.

How many people were down there? Did you have other staff who have been working one-on-one with the populations in the same way you have? You said you became kind of a case worker, really.

For the tent cities I was the only staff person assigned there. Within the shelters they have case managers for the shelter clients, but they don't provide services if you're not in the shelter.

You were saying it's kind of a fluid population in terms of people staying at the homeless shelter who are able to get housing for a week or two weeks at a time, and then return.

Yes. A lot of the individuals living in weekly motels along Fourth Street and the downtown Reno area—well, even Sparks, too—those people most of the time are on the verge of being homeless, if just one thing should happen. They say that about everyone, but those people are really on the verge, and the conditions that some of them are living in are just unimaginable. There are a lot of bed bugs in some of the motels. They're notorious for bed-bug issues. You can read the paper and see the crime that happens along Fourth Street. They're just not very safe.

The school district actually considers families with minor children to be homeless if they're living in a motel, so there are extra services available to those kids, but for adults, legally they're not homeless.

And there are a lot of those motels.

Oh, yes, yes.

Does it seem to you that there's always room in the motels for any of these folks who want to stay there?

Yes, they're just expensive. Some of the individuals who are disabled get just under \$700 a month in SSI income, and most of the motels rent for a minimum of \$125 a week. That doesn't leave much for food or medication or anything else.

Do you find that those folks who are living in the motels often still come down to St. Vincent's for the food?

Oh, yes, yes. And they use Good Shepherd's Clothes Closet, which is at the campus, to get free clothing. They come down to the Resource Center to get their mail and use the phones. They're still accessing pretty much all the same services, just not the shelter.

So that might account for a lot of them walking back and forth from the motels to the Center during the days and at night.

Yes.



Krista Lee inside the Community Assistance Center on Record Street in 2011. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

What do people need to do to access the food there at the dining hall? Can they just show up and eat?

Yes, for St. Vincent's you can just show up and eat, luckily. We have food stamp outreach too. The Food Bank provides a food stamp outreach team that comes down to the Resource Center once a week, and they sign people up for food stamps.

How do you qualify for food stamps? Just signing up?

You need to apply. I couldn't tell you all their requirements, but it's income-based and they take into account how much you're paying in rent and medical expenses, and how many people are in your household. I believe you have to have certain forms of identification.

What are the capacities of the indoor shelters, as far as how many people they sleep?

The Women's Shelter holds 50 adult women. The Men's Shelter holds 158 adult men, and the Family Shelter is set up a little bit differently. They're actually given individual units in the Family Shelter, whereas the men's and women's shelters are basically each a large dormitory room. The Family Shelter has twenty-one family units and six units for what we call the maternity unit, which consists of six rooms either for women in their last trimester of pregnancy or for women with small children. Each of those units consists of one bedroom with a shared common area and kitchen area, whereas the rest of the family units are almost like apartments. They each have their own little kitchenette and bathroom and living area and bedroom. There are no stoves, just microwaves, a refrigerator, and a sink.

Is there a limit to how long people can stay in those shelters?

Yes. For the Women's and Men's Shelters, you can stay up to ninety days if you're meeting with a case manager. For the Family Shelter, you can currently stay up to six months, as long as you're working with a case manager and making progress.

We're not really sure if that's going to stay the same, because there's federal legislation coming out requiring communities to try to shorten shelter stays and reduce recidivism of people becoming homeless. Depending on what the actual regulations in those bills say, that could impact what we do. But it's going to be really difficult with a lack of affordable housing to reduce the shelter stay, especially for the families in the Family Shelter. One of the really positive things about being able to stay six months is that a family can get their name on the waiting list for subsidized housing and actually be able to attain it. If we shorten the allowed time, then I'm not sure what would happen. It's a real balance between keeping the federal funds that you're getting and showing the outcomes that they want you to have, and actually doing what is working, so time will tell.

Is there subsidized housing in a number of different areas in town?

There are a lot of different forms of subsidized housing; for instance, the state offers tax credits for a variety of properties. There are quite a few of those, but those apartments don't necessarily target the homeless unless they have an income, a more than minimum-wage income.

There are very limited resources for housing based on a person's income. Section 8 through the Housing Authority and the public housing units are one option, and then there are other properties in town that get some sort of Section 8 assistance or public assistance to offer very low rent so the person only pays 30 percent of their income or thereabouts towards rent. If your income is \$600, then you're going to just pay 30 percent of the \$600 in rent, or roughly that. You can't find a standard market rate unit for that price. But those are very limited and most of those properties have waiting lists.

Can you tell me about the gates around the Community Assistance Center? Why are they locked? What

are they for?

The drive-through gates close early in the winter. They close at six p.m. in the wintertime, and they close at nine p.m. in the summertime. Then there's a pedestrian gate on the side, where the people who live there can move in and out until about nine o'clock.

Actually, the gates came after the campus was really up and running. We had quite a few incidents where people who weren't living at the campus would come through in the late evening hours and try to sell drugs or they'd do a drive-by, scoping the place out, and we weren't sure if they were gang-bangers or what they were looking for. They'd just come in and try to start problems with the people who were living there. So that's why we started closing the gate at nighttime.

Is there a person staffing the pedestrian gate?

We have security guards there all night, so if somebody shows up after nine, they may have to stand there for a couple of minutes if the guard's doing rounds on the other side of the building. But as long as you can demonstrate that you're supposed to be living there and you're not completely inebriated, then they'll let them in.

Was the first tent city outside of those gates?

No. Well, I don't know that we had the gates back then, but we did end up at some point putting up a temporary gate on the back side of it because the first tent city was in a dirt lot that's now a parking lot. There was a fence on the back side, and then at some point we started having a security guard set up at nighttime to check people. They were given I.D. cards saying they stayed there, and if they came in after nine or so, they'd have to have a card to get in.

You spent a lot of time on the site at all times of day. What has the relationship been with the surrounding businesses or with other property owners?

I think most of the business issues were addressed back before I was with the city. I know that before I started, they had neighborhood meetings, and the executive director of Catholic Charities at the time, organized those. He's no longer there. His name was Michael Ford. They would hold meetings to let the businesses know what was going on, and I know that there had been a lot of discussions with the neighborhood even before they started construction, in the planning process.

Since it was built, we really haven't had a whole lot of interaction with them. There have been a couple of times when we had people sleeping out on the sidewalk this past winter, and two or three neighbors put in complaints about it. I contacted them back and said, "We're working on it and this is what we're doing. If you want to come during public comment, you can speak out on this." It puts more pressure on the issue and sometimes helps us resolve it a little quicker if it's not just us saying it's a problem.

It seems that site was chosen because it was pretty centrally located, close to downtown. Does it seem to be a good location to you? Are there any problems with the location?

Well, I don't know that I could speak to that. I think that as long as you have the services that the homeless people need in one place, it might not really matter where it was, as long as you still have access to transportation and other services. They don't take buses a lot, but you need to have transportation available for those who do. The one advantage to being downtown is that it's near the main transportation hub, which is just a block away. And it's easy for them to ride their bikes around to get to places. There are quite a few men, especially, who ride their bikes.

I talked to the folks at the Reno Bike Project, and they've worked with a number of people who worked with them to get a bike, and they said that's been a pretty positive experience.

Definitely.

So are there people who are living at the homeless shelter who do have jobs and they just don't have enough money to rent an apartment, or do they mostly not have jobs?

Most of them don't, but there are people who have jobs. Some of the individuals who do get jobs are there for a variety of reasons—either they've got garnishments on their wages and they aren't making enough to afford rent, or they have other addictions. Yes, they're able to hold a job, but they spend their money on other things or they just got a job and they're saving up to be able to move into a place.

Can they come back after some window of time if they've reached the limit of how long they can stay there?

Yes. If you stayed your ninety days or you haven't stayed ninety days in a row but you've been there three different times within ninety days, then you have to be gone for six months before you can come back.

Do you see that happening very much?

Yes.

And where have they been in the meantime? Are they able to find housing for that long or do you think they sometimes end up sleeping on the street?

Most of the ones who leave by their own choosing, who haven't maxed out their time, probably go into motels with friends or get a room themselves, but then they lose it at some point and come back.

If they've used up all their time and are asked to leave, it's hard to tell where they go. Some of them, I'm sure, do end up on the street, but those people are hidden. We don't really have a way to identify that. And there are so many people in the shelters that at this point we don't even have a way to ask them, "Hey, where are you going?" or even to try to keep track of that. You just don't know. Some of them may leave town. The transient population will go on to another shelter somewhere else. Those are few but they do exist.

Did you tell me that there's a garden somewhere on the campus?

Yes, on the roof of the Family Shelter. I think it's through the school district. It's a program for the kids in the Family Shelter to teach them about eating healthy.

And there's a play area up there too? What kind of stuff is up there for the kids to play with?

There's playground equipment. The only people who can get up there are people with keys, and those staying in the Family Shelter units are the only ones who have them. On the main campus, we have sex offenders, we have people with all kinds of backgrounds, and so the rooftop playground is unique and it's safe. I think it's a really cool idea. I don't know that any of the other homeless campus facilities out there have anything like that.

Also, this summer, we gated off an area back in between the buildings where the people used to sleep—there's a pedestrian gate to get through—and the Rotary Club came down and installed a basketball hoop with boxes full of balls and a giant Checkers set, and Hopscotch, and maybe Four Square or something else in that area too.

The parents aren't allowed to smoke on the roof, and so they can go down there and smoke and the kids can play.

I wanted to ask you some transportation questions because the RTC is interested in knowing what you might see as transportation needs on the street, how anything physically can be changed that you think might help the populations that you're familiar with. They're talking about improving the street for traffic, for bikes, for pedestrians, for buses. Is there anything you can give some input on?

A lot of our clients do ride bikes. On Fourth Street I'm not as familiar with the Sparks side, but it would be really nice to have a bike lane on Fourth Street. I've lived on Fourth Street before, and at one of my prior residences I also traveled down Fourth Street to get on I-80, and there are a lot of places where you have to get completely out of the lane to avoid the bicyclists because the lane is pretty narrow. Then you're risking a traffic accident because you're stopped there and other cars are going around you, and it's really difficult and dangerous for the bicyclists, especially because a lot of our clients don't wear helmets or don't take the precautions to be a safe bicyclist as some other people do.

I don't know that they can do anything about this, either, but at the intersection of Fourth and Record Street, if you're turning left onto Fourth Street—especially when there's a lot of traffic, like when the Aces games are going on and people are parked on the street—you have to pull your car out almost into the intersection to be able to see if any cars are coming. At least that was my circumstance. I just have a car. Maybe if I had a truck I could see over everything, but that has been problematic.

I do appreciate that they put in a new crosswalk at Evans Street, but I still see a lot of people crossing the street at the railroad track crossing, too. I don't think it's as bad as it used to be, but it's still problematic sometimes.

I don't know that this makes any difference either, but it seems like there's a streetlight, which I don't recommend removing because I think it provides some safety, but there's a streetlight right at the corner of Fourth and Record on the west side of the building. Maybe it's part of the railroad track or the railroad crossing lights, but it's a large pole that is right in the middle of the sidewalk, and you have to maneuver one way or the other around this pole. I don't even see how a wheelchair would get around it. It's a pain if you've got a bunch of people walking. If you're by yourself, it doesn't matter, but at certain

times of day there's a lot of sidewalk traffic.

Overall, not that RTC can do anything about it, it would be nice to see some more pride, as far as the neighborhood goes, on the Reno side. There's just a lot of trash along the street and around the vacant buildings. There's always a ton of trash within the fenced-in area around the Alpine Glass building.

Whenever I used to drive home along Fourth Street, you could tell it wasn't as clean as the rest of the city. I lived on West Fourth near Ralston in an apartment when I first moved here, and just from East Fourth to West Fourth, even downtown, you could really tell the difference.

Is there any expectation that you'll go back down to the site to work down there again or don't you really know? You're working in City Hall now.

Yes, I'm enjoying being at City Hall. Like I said at the beginning, I chose administrative advocacy social work because I was more interested in the larger picture. Working with the population on a daily basis is really draining and difficult, and with the limited resources we have, my experience has been that it's not a forty-hour workweek job, not that my current job is either, but there were a lot of weeks I was working sixty, seventy hours a week, and it's just not manageable for my personal life and my mental health.

It might be a different story if we had unlimited resources to be able to do creative new things and have more success in getting people housed, but when you see the same individuals over and over again for years, the opportunities to feel rewarded are very few and far between. So I don't know. I am enjoying working back at City Hall a lot.

CARI LOCKETT

Reno Resident, Reno Burners LLC



Cari Lockett on East 4th Street in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Born in Reno in 1960, Cari Lockett became a regional contact for Burning Man in 2007. She talks about the range of Burning Man-related activities that occur in Reno throughout the year, including Decompression, traditionally held on East 4th Street each October. Lockett shares her thoughts about Reno's status as a gateway to the playa and the city's potential to become a year-round destination for those interested in Burning Man and its ten principles.

Will von Tagen: Today is May 14, 2012. I'm here with Cari Lockett.

First of all, Cari, do I have your permission to record you today?

Cari Lockett: Absolutely.

Perfect. So can you tell me where and when were you born?

I was born here in Reno, Nevada, June 19, 1960, St. Mary's Hospital.

And you've spent a great deal of your life here in this town?

Yes, born and raised. I've done a little bit of traveling here and there, but mostly I've always come back to Reno.

Are your parents natives of the area?

Yes, they are, so I consider myself third generation. My grandparents actually came here in the early thirties, and both my mom and dad were born here in Reno.

How does your Nevada heritage seem to play a part in your life?

I think it's quite significant. I think that it's a rarity that you find natives. There aren't that many left, and so it gives me a perspective of knowing what the history of the area has been. I feel really close to this basin and knowing what the history has been like, not only from Nevada in general, but Reno specifically, within my lifetime, anyway.

What part of town did you grow up in?

Early on, I was in east Sparks—the old downtown Sparks area. Then we moved out to the North Valleys for a little while, and that was prior to the freeway coming in. The only way to get in and out of the North Valleys was on Old Virginia Street going up past the old Bonanza. So it was kind of rough getting in to school on snowy days.

I also was pretty much raised at my grandmother's house over in old Southwest Reno, over by the Reno High School area, and then later, during high school time, we moved over into Sparks. My mom bought a house over there in 1971, so I graduated from Reed High in 1978.

In your childhood, you mentioned that you had to come to town to go to school. What other occasions would bring you into town?

Well, we went pretty much every day. My mom worked in town. She was a single mom with three kids. I was the oldest of three. And it was just a matter of getting us into town to school and then over to my grandmother's, where we would spend our afternoons after school until my mom got off work and then would take us back home. So pretty much it was between home and grandparents and school.

What sort of work did your mom do?

She was an executive secretary. She worked for an accountant at one point and then she worked for a civil engineer here locally for about thirty-five years.

When you spent your days after school with your grandmother, would you stay at her house or would she take you into town, or what did you do?

Well, at that point, back in those days, let's say 1967 to about '71, we had free reign. My grandmother lived down near Idlewild Park and I went to school at Mt. Rose Elementary School on Arlington and Lander, and I had a lot of friends, of course, in the neighborhood. We basically could ride our bikes from my grandmother's to my friend's house. We used to ride our bikes out to Park Lane Mall. In those days, it wasn't an issue. Traffic wasn't a big issue. Abductions weren't an issue, and so kids really had a lot more leeway, as did we.

Park Lane Mall is interesting. It no longer stands there anymore. What do you remember about Park Lane Mall?

I remember when it first went in. It was the first mall in town. Now, from my grandfather's perspective, that corner of Plumb and Virginia, that was originally a turkey ranch, apparently, and then it turned into the Park Lane Mall. And that had to have been late sixties, maybe early seventies. There was nothing south of Park Lane. It just didn't exist. Maybe the Convention Center was down there, but there wasn't a whole lot in between. And it was the first open-air mall. They later covered it, when closed malls became more popular. But that was *the* place to shop in my day, in the seventies and early eighties.

What sort of stores do you remember going to?

Sears, Weinstock's, Woolworth's was in there. Those were the three main solid places, and then there were little shops, like Anita's was a clothing store we used to get school clothes from. Sneed-Hearn is an interesting one, because that was run by a friend of the family, and it was kind of one of the first hippie-dippy-trippy stores in town, and it was at Park Lane. I can't remember what the other ones were. If I do, I'll come back to it.

Do you remember at all what your grandparents' perspective was when they watched that area of Reno develop and grow?

Oh, they couldn't believe that it had gotten that far. From their perspective, when they first came in the thirties, Reno was only about eight thousand people, and there was a good ten miles of open space in between Reno and Sparks. And Sparks would have been maybe three or four thousand people.

When I was born in 1960, Reno was only about fifty thousand people, so in my lifetime it's now grown to about three hundred and fifty thousand in terms of the whole area. From my grandparents' perspective, they never thought it would get that big and go out that far. In fact, my grandfather used to get on the bus and go for a ride just to see what was out there and how far the city had grown. He didn't like to drive, but he'd sure get on the bus and go for a ride.

Did they seem happy with the expansion?

As old-timers, not so much. I think they were resigned to the fact that growth happens over time, but for them, they liked the small-town atmosphere of early Reno. That's what attracted them here in the first place.

Were they still living here when the bigger projects came up, such as the building of the MGM Grand?

Yes, that would have been 1976, and they were both still here. My grandfather had just retired from Flanigan Warehouse, which was on Fourth Street. He was the warehouse manager there from the early forties to about 1978, somewhere in there. Maybe '74 to '78 is when he retired.

What were their thoughts when they saw such big projects come to this little town where they spent their lives?

"Oh, it'll never be the same," kind of standard old-timer remark. "Never be the same. What are they thinking? How can they do that? How can we support that many people, that big of a casino? How's that going to bring people in?" That was the kind of comments.

What do you remember of that time?

I remember that that was a significant change in this valley because it was the first large-scale casino that was outside of the Virginia Street corridor and not in Sparks, where the only big casino in Sparks, of course, was the Nugget.

When it came in, it changed the face of the valley because it brought in so many construction workers. And the thing that I remember the most was that there wasn't enough housing at the time to support all the construction people coming in, so people were living in trailers and little trailer parks or at the rest stops, going east out of Sparks and even going west out of Reno.

That caused a successive boom in construction, so then there were all these houses built from, say, about '76 to '80, and that filled some of the need with these construction workers who stayed on, but then there ended up being a glut of houses. So it was kind of one of those things where the ebb and flow just didn't quite mesh. But ultimately it started bringing a lot of people into Reno and more big buildings started coming in.

Did you go to the MGM Grand much when you were growing up?

Only for special occasions. Being a local, you don't necessarily go to the casinos. We're not into gambling, but we'll occasionally go for meals. There are always the family buffets for special occasions and that sort of thing.

As far as the MGM goes, because it was such a novelty item when it first opened up, we would go over there. And they had this one special feature that we really liked, and it was a spiral staircase that went from the main floor down to the basement where all the little shops were, and in particular it was really cool because it had all these glass panels. So when you walked down the stairway, you would see multiple reflections of yourself down that stairwell, and it was just one of those things that was really flashy and unusual and glitzy and glamour-y and something that we really weren't used to around here.

What else do you remember occupying your time with when you were growing up?

A lot of outdoor play. In those days, like I say, we could ride our bikes pretty much all over town, because it was only about five or six miles in diameter from my grandmother's house to, say, Park Lane or over to our school or to downtown. Or we used to go west out towards Mayberry where there was the Mayberry Bridge, and we'd go fishing out there and we'd ride our bikes and we'd float down the river and that sort of thing.

I can remember—this is a little side story about Reno—but when the Mayberry Bridge collapsed, it was one of these single-span iron bridges. There's only one left, which I believe is out in Verdi. But at the Mayberry Bridge, an overweight strawberry truck went on the bridge and collapsed the bridge, and the strawberries floated down the river. And I can remember my grandfather going down and collecting strawberries as the little baskets fell out and bringing home these strawberries. That was just a local legend when the bridge went down.

Did it seem to be a pretty big deal to the town?

Oh, absolutely, because that was kind of a local landmark. It was one of the old ranches out on the east end of Mayberry, and, of course, now it's all grown up. Mayberry Park is out there. It used to be wild in our days. Now it's all pretty much developed, and there are parking lots and picnic tables and that sort of thing. But in our day it was just wild river, and the old ranch was still operational at that time. I don't believe it is anymore. The old barn is still out there, and I'm not sure who owns the property, but pretty much it's not a working ranch anymore.

At this time, did there seem to be a pretty strong distinction between the folks who lived in Reno in the city and the ranching folks?

I don't really know, per se. I think that a lot of the old ranches are owned by old Italians, and my grandfather was Italian. That was one of the things that brought him to this area, because in those days in the thirties, if you were an Italian or Irish or anything that was unusual, they oftentimes weren't welcome in places. But because Reno had quite an extensive Italian heritage, a lot of the old-timers had come and settled and taken up land and started either growing things like garlic and onions and potatoes or raising cattle, so you'll notice that a lot of the old ranches that are still operational are old Italian ranches.

To me, there was a different feel back then. Because the town was so small, people really knew each other and respected each other. And as it's grown, we've lost a lot of that connection with the old-timers, because they're dying off, and because the population has grown so much, there aren't very many locals, if you will, that have been here for a long time.

I think now you could talk to the old ranchers and I'm sure that would be a whole 'nother interview in terms of how they feel about all the new people who have come in. But back then, I think it was fairly symbiotic. Everybody worked together, and there wasn't an issue between being a rancher or being a city person, because everybody had to work together one way or another. Ranchers needed products out of the city, and the people in the city got products from the ranches.

You talked about your grandfather working at Flanigan's Warehouse on Fourth Street. Do you remember anything special about those times?

I do. That was, again, prior to the freeway coming in, and I remember when the freeway came in and demolished a lot of the old houses that would have been just below Whitaker Park and below the university and right before getting into downtown where current I-80 goes through. Fourth Street was the main thoroughfare, so all the time as I was growing up, that was the only way in and out of town—no freeway.

There were still little businesses that were open up along there, a lot of the auto courts. There are still remnant auto courts that now are just the seedy motels on Fourth Street. But in their heyday, they were quite sophisticated and it was very much new in the 1950s and sixties to have these auto courts where people could stop at and stay. It had a real flavor, a historic flavor.

Flanigan Warehouse itself, this beautiful old building, deep, dark, and cavernous, had a great elevator that we used to get to play on. And the thing that was so special about it was it was a freight elevator, so it didn't have any rails around it. It was just open, so as a little kid, five, six years old, being on this elevator, you'd stand in the middle and hope you didn't fall off.



The elevator in the center of the historic Flanigan warehouse, now Forever Yours Fine Furniture, located at 701 East 4th Street. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Grandfather was there for all those years. He used to talk about a lot of the old-timers who he knew and worked with—Dick Record from Record Supply, who, in fact, owned one of the other buildings on Fourth Street. I don't remember which one, but the old warehouse was right there on one of the spurs, because back then, of course, the railroad came through and the spurs would come off into the warehousing district. That was the only warehouse district there was. The Sparks warehouse district didn't exist yet. And so that's how they got their freight.

I just remember that it was a neat old building. It was one of the only places where people could go for supplies. Another one that was down there, kind of similar, was Copeland Lumber, which you don't see anymore. I think there's still one down in Gardnerville. But it was also a materials supply place. It was on Sixth Street, which would have been two blocks north of Fourth, but still on those railroad spurs, because that was the primary mode of transportation back then.

Are there any businesses on Fourth Street that you remember from when you were a kid growing up that are still standing and in operation today? What's been your perspective as far as seeing them change or develop over the years?

Louis' Basque Corner has always been there. So have the old motels like the Morris Hotel, and there's another one there maybe by the Alturas. I can't remember its name, but they were all there and active at that point. And I remember the Sierra, not the brewing company itself, but there's a building there that was dedicated to wine and spirits [the historic Nevada-California-Oregon Railroad Depot, at one point the home of Sierra Wine & Liquor]. I believe it's got a historical marker in front of it now. But in my time it was a brewery building. So I do remember that.

And then I remember a lot about traveling. When we'd go out of town heading towards San Francisco, we'd take West Fourth Street all out along the river to where Mayberry would come in to West Fourth, and then we'd go past what was called the River Inn, which was operational back then. It's been closed down now since the seventies. I don't know what the issue is. I think it had something to do with taxes. But that was the site of an original hot springs. In its heyday, prior to my time, when it was being renovated as the River Inn, I believe it was called Laughton [or Lawton] Hot Springs, if I'm not mistaken. And that would have been functional during my grandmother and grandfather's time, say, back in the forties and fifties.

Taking Fourth Street west to get over to California, there was no freeway, it just was the old original Lincoln Highway, and there were lots of little old-fashioned motor courts going west also. And as we would get out, the last stop before you went up the mountain through the canyon where Boomtown is now was called Bill & Effie's. And we'd always stop there for breakfast prior to heading over the mountain to go visit family.

Before the freeway opened up, did people seem to have a good idea of what the impact would be when that opened up, or was it sort of a surprise?

I think it was a bit of a surprise. I was a little bit young to have been involved in any of the political understandings of what was going on. If it had come in during my high school years, I would have been much more cognizant, but it came in when I was in grade school. So I don't really recall except that it was a big deal and the construction was huge and it took down a lot of the old neighborhoods, like I

say, just south of the university. And there were upset people who didn't like change. Reno's kind of like that. A lot of people don't like change; they want it to stay small...and change happens.

In grade school do you remember going on any field trips?

I think we would come up to the university and go to the planetarium. I remember that. Maybe up to Virginia City, Model Dairy Milk, the University Ag Station out towards the east side of the valley, the museum down in Carson City. We had a Museum of Art here, I believe, back to 1904, but as a kid I don't remember them taking us to that museum. The Historical Society was here then. I can remember going up to the Historical Society. The two-headed calf was particularly entertaining.

What were your experiences like on those field trips, do you remember?

You know, I think just being an excited little kid, seeing all these new things that you wouldn't be exposed to in the classroom. I particularly liked the Nevada State Museum down in Carson, which is the old Mint Building. There were some great displays there. We always liked to go down into the basement where the old mineshaft display was. And then one of my favorite exhibits upstairs was the historic clothing collection—all this beautiful vintage clothing going back to Civil War times when Nevada became a state and all the way up into the turn of the century and up into the twenties and the thirties. They've since modified that display, and now it's really modern, and I can remember actually being disappointed when they did that, because it changed the whole feeling of being an old-fashioned kind of a museum to a modern display, and it was very disconcerting.

Did you feel a pretty strong connection to the Nevada history?

Absolutely. I'm a born-and-raised, dyed-in-the-wool Nevadan, proud of it. I believe, for me personally, this is the Great Basin. This is the land that nobody else wanted. And so the people who came here and settled here are hearty folks, and they love it. They love the wide-open space, they love the independence. It definitely is the wild, wild West.

Do you feel that a lot of people still hold onto that belief?

I think the people who are true Nevadans at their core or who came here earlier do. I like to say that the people who came here before '76 when the MGM came in, they're almost natives. They kind of qualify. After the MGM, it was just catch as catch can and people coming in for a quick buck. A lot of them stayed after the construction, but they didn't have those kinds of roots and the appreciation.

And then you get into the nineties and you've got people selling out in California, getting big bucks and coming over here and investing in McMansions. Then you've got the developments down on the flanks of the mountain like Caughlin Ranch and Arrowcreek and Somersett and all those high-end sorts of places, which are basically California transplants, and it's changed the face of the valley a lot.

In my opinion, you get a lot of people who say, "Oh, we left California to get away from it," but then they come over here and they're doing the same dang thing in terms of building strip malls. They've got to have their strip malls and McMansions, and it's just not the same kind of people.

In Reno, it seems, they used to really capitalize on the wild, wild West feel.

Absolutely.

Harolds Club and that whole Western motif, but it all kind of went away when the new, bigger casinos kind of came in.

Mm-hmm.

Do you remember when that was all taking place?

I would say in the early eighties, because really the death knell, if you will, for downtown was when the Mapes closed, and that was the early eighties, followed by the implosion in about 2000. It was a Super Bowl Sunday. And so that property was fallow for about twenty years. Nobody could seem to get it together to renovate it. It was a hot item of discussion amongst the City Council and the city fathers and the local people. There were extreme movements to try and save the Mapes. There was a real dichotomy between those who wanted to put everything we could into saving it and those who just wanted to get rid of it and build something new and thought that it was too cost-prohibitive, even to save the shell, to take out the asbestos, to retrofit it so it would be earthquake-safe, etc., etc.

But when that building went down, it really was the heart of Reno because it represented all that history. It had been there since the thirties. It had had the big entertainers come through in the sixties, like Sammy Davis, Jr., and the other Rat Pack people, and Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable had stayed there. And it was just the centerpiece of town, and when it went away, the whole spirit just kind of went away.

And at the same time you also had Las Vegas growing up, so Las Vegas was coming into its own in the eighties and started building, building, building on the strip and making this bigger strip. Not the Old Frontier strip, but the huge strip with the Luxor and the Stratosphere and the this and the that, all these big ones that came in. And so that began to then draw people away from Reno into the more Disneyland environment, the adult Disneyland of Vegas versus the old-fashioned retro Western experience of old Reno.

What are your thoughts on what's happened to the site where the Mapes once stood?

I think it's not bad. I'd like to see a nice sculpture there. I've always thought something like a nice heart that shows that this was at one time the heart of Reno, maybe with a picture of what the Mapes looked like and a little bit of the history. A lot of us refer to it as the Mapes Plaza, versus the Downtown City Center Plaza, just because that's historically what it was. I think now it's being utilized in a good way. There are a lot of nice events that happen down there. They do the roller derby, they bring in the ice rink during the wintertime, lots of special events happen, so it's at least a nice community area, if you will.

I hear a lot about the day when the Mapes was coming down, but something I don't hear a lot about was when Harolds Club became Harrah's Plaza. Was there the same kind of uproar around that time?

I think people had maybe just given up by then. I think the fact that the Harolds building was not that historic, if you will, made a difference. Architecturally it wasn't really special. One thing is that the mural that was on the front of Harolds was salvaged. Thank god. Somebody had the foresight to take that down, and it's now been re-erected over at the Fairgrounds, so people can still see it. It's not as visible. You can't see it from the street off of Wells Avenue, but if you get back to where the Arena is, you'll see the nice big display, which basically commemorates the pioneers coming over the mountain, whether it was the Donner Party or other wagon train people, coming over to the West.

Do you feel that it's significant, taking even a portion of that structure and preserving it?

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I wish there was more of a sense of preservation. Any more, it almost seems like city fathers don't have either the wherewithal or the budget or the long-term planning or maybe they just don't even have the desire. I'm not sure where it comes from. A lot of the preservation efforts have actually been done on an individual level.

I understand that there's a man locally [Will Durham] who has started in the recent past collecting a lot of the old neon. I know they've done that in Vegas. Well, now they're doing it up here in Reno, and, hopefully, there'll be a Neon Museum display. It's disappointing to me as a local, as a native, that there isn't more attention paid to maintaining our historical integrity.

What are some ways that you feel that they could improve upon that?

Perhaps by developing a more devout Historic Preservation subcommittee. I'm not in directly on what the City Council is doing, and that may already be in place, so I may be talking out of turn. But for Fourth Street, that being the historic, or one of our last Historic Districts, I know that there is movement to try and raise the level of interest in Fourth Street and preserve some of those buildings. How far that's going to go, I don't know. I think it's going to depend on individual participation rather than city participation, and we'll just have to hope for the best.

A lot of times what happens is that you don't get the information delivered publicly until it's almost too late. You hear things, and things will be happening behind the scenes, and pretty soon you hear, "Oh, they're going to be demolishing such-and-such a building," and then there's an uproar about why didn't we know and how can we all get together and scramble right quick to get this thing saved. And if there was just a better mechanism of communication, we would know and could get more involved.

It's sort of a common theme around town—renovation versus demolition.

Mm-hmm.

Do you feel that one or the other is more beneficial as far as economics? I guess what I'm trying to say is what sort of relationship between the two do you think would be required to kind of get that boom back in Reno?

Well, when you look at a lot of the other towns in this country, Main Street sort of towns who have decided to invest in their Main Street Historic Districts and create shopping districts, it goes really

well. Look at Boise, look at downtown Boulder, downtown Fort Collins, downtown San Diego. There's an area in downtown Oakland. Of course downtown San Francisco, not the Financial District, but some of the other historical areas. So it works. It brings people in. People love it. They want to see these old buildings. They want to feel connection with their history or to know the history of an area that they're visiting.

Personally, I think it's a win-win situation. I think it's much more positive to invest in preserving a history of an area, cultural and architectural and historical, versus just knocking things down and putting in something new that has no real value. And face it, a lot of the current architecture just really doesn't have much to say for itself.

Now, you're very involved with the Burning Man scene, are you not?

I am indeed.

Can you talk a little bit about that?

Well, I first went to Burning Man in 1999. This will be my fourteenth year. I was picked up as a Burning Man regional contact in 2007—I think it was 2007—because of my interest, because of the fact that I am a native of Nevada, because my background is in anthropology, and because I'm just one of these people who really believes in art and culture and intelligence.

That's what Burning Man represents to me, so I'm happy to be an ambassador for the project. I like to be able to tell people about what Burning Man is and what it isn't. A lot of people have preconceived notions about what goes on out there, and I like to let them know that it's more than what they think. It isn't just a bunch of crazy people out in the desert having a rave. This is about super intelligent people, the best minds on the planet, that are coming together for self-expression, for creative ideas, and inspiration that they then put together and bring out in terms of art cars and art projects, to share and create just for the sake of doing it.

It's really quite amazing, and we've come a long way here in the Reno area, because at first, Burning Man had that reputation, "Oh, it's just those crazy, wild hippies in the desert," and we've actually come to have a good working relationship with the city.

We have brought playa art from Burning Man to be temporary installments in downtown Reno. We've had fire shows associated with the grand openings, and what we've done is really created a niche here in Reno that the community has been able to get behind, and they really like what Burning Man is doing. We're a very civic-minded organization. Our goal is to put art in public places and to influence culture based on the ten principles of Burning Man.

And those ten principles are?

Oh, my goodness, I knew you were going to ask me that. I may have to look them up and get back to you on that. But the primary one is de-commodification, so there is no selling at Burning Man. It's not about advertising and putting McDonald's on the banner as a sponsor. This is a self-sponsored event, if you will. The people who go to Burning Man are what make Burning Man. There are no corporate sponsorships.

Another one is radical self-expression, so everyone is encouraged to come and be what they are at their best through costumery, through acting, through performance art, through physical art, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression. Yes, radical inclusion. Everyone is welcome. There are no prerequisites.

Oh, my heavens, I only got four out of ten. I should know this better. I'll have to get back to you on it. [laughs]

Burning Man happens once a year, but there are certain elements that are present year-round. Can you tell me little bit about some of those activities?

You bet. Over the years we have developed quite a community so that there are regular events. We usually have some sort of a Burning Man function about once a month, whether it's a costume party, get dressed up, come out and play, kind of share your spirit of enthusiasm and artistic-ness with the outside world. In March we do a Brides of March event, which is an old Cacophony Society event, if you will, and people dress up in brides' dresses, boys and girls, and we'll go on a little pub crawl and we'll just show up at places and we'll go get our picture taken on the front steps of one of the chapels, and we're just out having fun. And people love it. They honk as we're walking down the street. We're like an impromptu parade, and it's wonderful to engage people. They don't see these things every day, and it makes their day. The pleasure of seeing people having fun and responding to people having fun is an amazing magical moment that breaks down a lot of barriers and invites people to come out of their shells and to participate in a larger community. So that's one event that we do.

And then we do a Yuri's Night in the spring, which is kind of a pre-Compression. It's like gearing up towards the new year of Burning Man coming up this summer, and that happens in April. That's a celebration of the first astronaut in space, Yuri Gagarin, and it's always a Burner-attended event, even though it's the kind of event that goes on all over the world on that particular night.

Then in the summertime, Controlled Burn has developed themselves as a wonderful fire arts performing group, and they are a part of Artown, and they put on Compression about midsummer in July and that's a wonderful thing that occurs down at the Mapes Plaza, the Civic Center Plaza, with huge fire art, a fire performance, very well attended. And the beauty of that is that it introduces people who have never experienced fire arts to what fire arts are all about, and probably one of the hallmarks of Burning Man is that we've introduced this fire art form into the world.

Now, granted, fire performing actually goes way back to tribal times, particularly in Polynesia, in Micronesia, Melanesia, and Maori culture, Hawaiian culture. Early poi spinning is what they call it, the poi on the end of the ropes and spinning fire. It's just something that's been adopted by Burners and this new culture.

Then, finally, last but not least, in October after we all get back from the playa, we put on the Decompression, which is on Fourth Street. We use the Underground as a little bar venue, and we tend to close off Elko Street and the alley behind The Underground, and we set up what basically is like a mini-esplanade. It kind of replicates the environment at Burning Man along the main city center where we have art cars, participatory art. Individual theme camps come and represent. We usually have a theme of some sort. People come in costume. It tends to be an all-night event with live music and DJ music, art inside the venue, art outside the venue. It's just a way to kind of wrap up the year, and everybody gets to come together and share their stories about Burning Man, dust themselves off and come and say, "Wow, we had a great year."

Now, the monies that are raised from that project we—the Reno Burners LLC, of which I’m a big part of—we then turn around and re-gift that money back into the community. So it’s not that we’re there to make money for our own coffers; we’re there to make money to put back out into the community. And that’s one of the ethics of Burning Man.

How did it come to be at that place on Fourth Street?

I think because it’s an available venue that works. Remi Jourdan, who manages the Underground, has been very kind to Burners and worked with us for several years. He allows us to use the venue. We have a good shared ethic in terms of how the events happen, and it’s a good venue. It’s off the beaten path, so to speak. There aren’t too many venues in town that could host a large gathering of people where we could have outdoor art and outdoor fire performance and outdoor art cars and such. So that’s the primary reason that we’ve done it on Fourth Street.

And I’d really like to see more happen. I have this vision that down the road we might be able to, for a weekend or for a day, maybe a Saturday, close off just a small stretch of Fourth Street, maybe from Valley Road to the Wells Avenue overpass, and have kinetic sculpture races, do something really fun like they do in Seattle and Portland, and bring some of these kinetic-powered art pieces down to Reno and have a wonderful event, call it the Fourth Street Garden Party. We could even have some stationary art and sculptural art and maybe even find a way to work with the city to have these things placed permanently on Fourth Street as a part of a revitalization effort and making it a more attractive place.

I believe Spencer Hobson, at some of the properties he’s got down there, like the Reno Brewery bottling plant, he’s opened up for portions of Artown that deal with the Burning Man, so people can come down and use it as a place to begin crafting some of their artist sculptures. Are you familiar with any of that?

Absolutely. I was down there last year when he was kind enough to open up the building to the temple, the International Arts Mega Crew, i.e., the temple crew, and they built our giant temple which goes out to Burning Man. That’s one of the hallmarks of Burning Man is on Saturday we burn the man. On Sunday there’s a temple, and the temple is a place of reverence where people can leave their offerings and their remembrances of people lost, pets lost, their life changes that have happened, and it becomes a very sacred space. It’s a totally different environment from the rest of what’s going on out on the playa.

The temple that was built last year was quite magnificent, and it was the first time that it was built in Reno. We’re very proud of that, and we also feel that Reno, being so close to Burning Man and the playa—we call ourselves the Backyard Burners—this is the gateway community that most everyone comes through to get out to the playa. So we’d really like to see more development going towards recognition of Reno as a backyard community that can be a support system to people and artists coming in from all over the world. There’s a lot of potential with Spencer’s place and other places along Fourth Street, some of the large-scale open lot areas that could be turned into building zones where some of this public art could be built. It would also create an attraction where people might want to come down and visit and look and learn more about Burning Man and art and public sculpture and all those good things that can dovetail to make a city more viable and more interesting artistically.

If all that did come to take place, do you feel Fourth Street is ready for that surge of attention?

I think, absolutely. Absolutely. Reno's always been a little bit behind the times in terms of stepping up to the plate of modern evolution, if you will, in terms of taking lessons from other historic cities like Boise, San Diego, etc., who have developed their downtown Historic Districts. And for the life of me, I don't quite get it. Reno is just a little bit slow to come around.

But I think the energy is there and I really think that Burning Man has created an impetus to make that happen, because there's enough of a community here, and we've got a good relationship with the City Council, several individuals on the City Council who know what we can do as Burners, how community-oriented we are, that we do get things done, and that we're here for the benefit of the people. And I think that it's a win-win situation. It's just a question of growing into it, and I'd like to think that we're ready. It just remains to be seen.

Do you think that's a mindset of mostly just the Backyard Burners who are here locally, or do you think it could be something that other portions of Burning Man can come to embody?

I think that we represent Burning Man because we're so committed to going to Burning Man every year and being a part of that and bringing our projects and helping to build and the volunteerism that goes with it. I think Reno still, honestly, needs a little bit more education. The more we can do publicly by putting ourselves out there as, quote, unquote, "the Burner community," and showing people what Burning Man is and what it isn't, the more viability we get and the more interest, and people will come away saying, "I had no idea that Burning Man was all of this, and it wasn't just a bunch of drug-crazed hippies in the desert." And it gives a much more favorable impression, and I think the more we can expose ourselves and then influence people in the everyday—we call it "default"—world, the more likely they are to get on board and to want to support some of the Burner activities and interests in terms of putting Reno on the map as an art location.

The potential here is phenomenal. We live in a really small valley with a couple of good old-fashioned north-south streets that could be total bikeways. You can get across town. There's no reason that we can't turn this into a model environmental city. I would love to see that. I've been thinking about that since I was in my early teens, and the potential is there. It's just a question of growing into it and getting people on board.

It seems like there are sort of three main powers in the town that really dictate what happens. There's the city, there are the casinos, and there's the university. How do you feel that the three of those can best work together for the betterment of the city and the Fourth Street corridor?

I think everybody needs to realize that there's enough for everybody. It's not just about the casinos and keeping people in the casinos to get their money. If only the casino people would realize the advantage of having people out on the street at outdoor events, which they've gotten much better at from, say, the eighties, mid-eighties, nineties on. They've closed down Virginia Street on occasion and done these outdoor things, like the Rib Cook-off and the Blues Festival and Street Vibrations and Hot August Nights and things like that, so they're already on board to some degree, and I just think that everyone needs to realize that there's enough to go around for everybody.

The university could participate in terms of being down along Fourth Street, maybe some of the engineering students or just students in general. The environmental studies people could come down and work on Fourth Street, and we could create something, maybe some community gardens.

And then the city fathers have to realize, and I think they do, that historic districts make a city. They're not something to shy away from. They're something to support. I think it's imminently doable. It's just a question of having people work together and, again, embrace that whole ethic that there's enough to go around. We can work. We can make this happen for everybody's benefit.

You mentioned a few moments ago about bike lanes through the corridor. How would you like to see those implemented?

The more the better. Perhaps, say, along Fourth Street, if there were bike lanes on either side and then only two lanes instead of four lanes of traffic and maybe a median in a middle or maybe a trolley that might take people. I believe in the old days—it was before my time—but I believe there was a trolley that went along Fourth Street. And something like that would be awesome, because you could turn it into something kind of like the San Francisco cable car. If you were to get a replica of the old trolley that used to run on Fourth Street, make it run on diesel or organic fuel oil or whatever, you could have it be a part of the historic district that could take people on tours and point out different buildings and what that history was and how it related to the Lincoln Highway and when Highway 40 first came through town and was the first interstate, basically, or the first highway that went from east to west.

I think the potential is phenomenal. Fourth Street is not as heavily traveled now because of the freeway, since it bypasses it, so you could get away with a more pedestrian element, a bike element, and, again, just two lanes of traffic with maybe that little median or, like I say, the trolley. That's what I envision.

How far do you see this historic district stretching out? What would it encompass?

Boy, that's interesting. I would say certainly from Center Street east all the way to the split at B Street and Prater. I think that would be appropriate. Then maybe a little bit from Center Street west to about Keystone Avenue, and then definitely another stretch from Keystone west all the way to Mayberry, because there are some individual motor courts. Unfortunately, a couple of them have been destroyed, so that area is really not, in my opinion, as viable as part of the historic district, and there aren't really many businesses out there that would be conducive to a historic district. So I think you're really looking at Center Street east.

We've already got some existing businesses in there that are doing well. What do you feel could best fill in the gaps between the already existing businesses?

I think perhaps more little cafes with little outdoor seating areas, some more art spaces, whether it be built spaces or art galleries, little boutique-y sorts of things, just anything that would be conducive toward a tourist historic district area.

I don't know if you've seen around town these newer and much more enclosed and nicer bus stops around town. Have you seen any of those?

Yes.

So one of the thoughts are possibly using those as a way of presenting historic information, kind of making each one of these bus stops almost a little attraction in itself.

I think that's a fabulous idea.

How do you feel that could be best executed?

Well, I think with some good historic photos, with some subtext, maybe with a map so that as you're standing in this bus stop and you're looking out one way, you've got a map that says what this building used to be, and what this building was, and what this building is and just a little history blurb about that particular area. It would be an excellent educational area.

It's interesting with historic markers. There's sort of a fine line, and if you make them too artsy, they risk being overlooked. In fact, we've got six markers where the Mapes used to be that talk about the history of that site. They're a little hidden because of the art surrounding it. But in other places, you've got a cement cylinder with a plaque on it that really doesn't do much of anything. Coming from an artist's viewpoint, what do you think is the best way to combine those two so that you can really use the art to grab the attention of the person going by, but it doesn't really detract from the historic relevance of the site?

Well, I think that could be easily done with some sort of a sculpture. You get an odd-looking modern sort of sculpture and then you have a placard right smack in the middle of it or maybe at the bottom at the base, so that a person would be attracted to the art in the first place and then have the opportunity to look at this placard that either gave some information about the historic relevance of the piece or of that area what this spot used to be, and then, of course, something to recognize the artist and what their perspective was on that particular piece.

We're starting to see a lot of pieces show up around Reno. For example, a few years ago I believe it was the museum that did a project painting the sheep, bighorn sheep, which is the state animal of Nevada. And so you'll see these painted bighorns, they're bronze sculptures, all over town in various places.

We've even had a couple of permanent exhibits. We've got one Burning Man sculpture that was permanently installed in Whitaker Park up by the university off of Ralston. The big lotus that's in front of the Nevada Museum of Art is actually a Burning Man piece that the museum bought, and I understand that they're interested in purchasing additional pieces. So there's art out there, and there's a guy who does the kinetic wind sculptures, and a lot of those are downtown. There are just pieces here and there. I think if we looked deeper, we'd see a lot more than what we're really aware of.

And murals are another excellent opportunity. I think that there ought to be a mural on the Wells Avenue overpass, because it's a total eyesore at this point, and it would be wonderful to have something that was reflective of the community, on both sides of that overpass so that you'd see something pretty as you're coming in and out underneath Fourth Street.

Do you think the public cares about this issue or that they might just not clearly know about the issue?

I think they don't know. I think they would care. I think if they were given the options of knowing that, hey, here's a plan that we're thinking about and we want community input—this is what, say, for example, RTC is planning on doing along Fourth Street and which city fathers are backing them up and what they want to do along Fourth Street, and we're looking for community input. Absolutely necessary, you know.

And I know that there are channels where that happens, like neighborhood advisory committees and that sort of thing. Unfortunately, that information doesn't get out to the general public, and I think we need the news people to be more proactive in terms of reporting on what's happening at City Council meetings or what to be on the lookout for. And I realize that's a big job, but we really do need an advocate, a public advocate, who can be that liaison between what's happening with the various political entities that are making these decisions and letting the public know so that they can participate. Radical participation, that's another one of Burning Man principles.

It's a good one. Are there any events or activities that you remember that almost mirror what's going on now, where the community really did come together and make a difference?

You know, in my day, the State Fair was a big deal, and it's unfortunate to see that this year they couldn't even have a State Fair because there weren't enough funds. I don't know what it is, if it's just a changing of the times, changing of the guard, people are not so much interested in hometown fairs anymore and 4-H and what the original fair was all about, not just the carnival rides, but the actual fair which showcased community endeavors, arts, and 4-H and animal husbandry and that sort of thing. It just, for whatever reason, it just wasn't able to happen this year, and I don't know if it was a management issue or if people are just not interested. Face it, the culture is changing. People are not so much interested anymore in a lot of the old stuff. That's the downside.

The upside is that I think you could get them interested if you continue to teach them. A lot of young people these days don't have that connection because they haven't been raised up and been taught that there was a life before cell phones and computers, etc. I mean, it's just a mindset, and I think we just have to work with it.

What do you remember being fun about the fair?

I loved to see all of the displays, the artwork that people did, the blue ribbons and the red ribbons and the animals, and who got the best ribbon for the best prized bull and that sort of thing. And then, of course, there was the rodeo, and there was a segment of the rodeo that happened with the fair. And the rodeo was another event that's big. Now, Reno's rodeo still is. It's the highest purse in the western U.S., I believe. It's one of the biggest rodeos in the West, so it still gets a great turnout and a lot of community support behind it.

I don't know. You get a lot of new people coming in and they just don't have that same sense of the history of the area, and I think that we need to educate them and get them involved and teach them about how Reno got to be on the map in the first place, how Nevada became a state in 1864, as a result of the Comstock Lode and as a result of supporting San Francisco and supporting the Union with funds that basically ended up winning the Civil War. There aren't many people who know that. And those are important things. That's how we got to be.

There's so much history, but at times it can almost feel like it's spread out too much. You've got Virginia City and Carson. Do you think was the fair something that unifying piece?

Well, yes, for northern Nevada because it was the Nevada State Fair. I'm not even sure if they had such a thing in southern Nevada. I really don't think so, because Las Vegas came on the scene a good hundred years after Reno was established. That might be exaggerating, but close. Reno was established in—let's see. Myron Lake, about 1856 or something like that, built Lake's Crossing. I should know that. That was a toll road and basically people were coming through with wagon trains, going up to V.C., going over to California, and the V&T Railroad was established.

And, hmm. I lost my train of thought.

You were talking about how the fair kind of unified all that.

Yeah, I think so in some ways. And also the Nevada Day Parade, that's a huge event in Carson City on October 31st, or whatever weekend is close enough. They've changed it to the weekend. It brings people from all over, and huge community support. True Nevadans come out for that. There's nothing like a true Nevadan. They will wear their colors and their Nevada flags and their Nevada shirts, and we're proud of it. This is the land that nobody else wanted and, by golly, we're proud of it, wide open space.

Tell me a little bit about your days here at the university.

Well, let's see. I graduated in '78, I started up here in '79, and I got my degree in '85. So it took me about six years, putting myself through college, working part-time. And, you know, back then it was a lot cheaper; it cost me about \$500 a semester, and it was doable. I tried to go out of state, but couldn't afford it, and as it turned out, staying here was probably the best thing I could have done. I ended up with a degree in anthropology. I worked with the best in terms of Great Basin anthropologists and archaeologists, Don and Kay Fowler, Warren D'Azevedo. I ended up working at Desert Research Institute for ten years, doing field archaeology in southern Nevada, and so basically I'm a Great Basin anthropologist/archaeologist.

Did you live on campus at the time?

No, no. Being local, during that time I was either at my mother's house and for a while I had my own apartment, and then I was at my grandmother's house for the last few years while I was finishing up, because that helped me, of course, to save money to not have to work as much. Besides that, I was in the field a lot. There was one semester that I took off so that I could go work. We were on the Yucca Mountain project, as a matter of fact. I'm proud to say I walked one of the first roads on Yucca Mountain before there was any heavy construction going on. We documented all of the archaeological sites in the whole area prior to them doing any construction. So it was a pretty fascinating project.

In your free time, did you spend much of it on campus at all, or were you off doing something else?

Not so much. I was on campus strictly for schoolwork sorts of things, and then I was up at Desert Research and out in the field and pretty much all over the place. Being a local girl, out camping here and

there, we'd spend a lot of time at Pyramid and Lahontan and a little bit up at Tahoe and just all over. I had relatives who came from northern California, so we'd go visit up there during the summer, and just a lot of local events around here.

How do you feel your experience in anthropology shaped who you are today?

Oh, significantly. I think I've always been cognizant of culture and that it is evolving as we speak. We are all a part of it, and I can see it happening. I can see those milestones. When you get a collective consciousness that all of a sudden makes a difference and everybody is on the same page, you've heard it referred to as the hundredth monkey. If a hundred people start doing something, then it becomes exponential and spreads out into the culture.

So, for me, this ties in with Burning Man and with finally seeing the evolution of culture to the point of the mixture of art and intelligence and how that makes a difference in our cultural evolution, and I really see Burning Man as leading-edge culture. And that's why I'm really, really proud to be a part of it, because I think it can do so much for the evolution of the world and for humanity in general, because it relies so much on volunteerism and people working together and not being invested in monetary gain and not being invested in advertising benefit, etc. It's all about the human component, one-on-one, creativity and play and artistic expression. And I really just think it's the new wave.

And so, for me as an anthropologist seeing this, watching this, it's all played into my life. What can I say? To me there's nothing better than being an anthropologist because it's just about being human nature, studying human nature.

Well, I guess it's probably a little bit of both, people affect culture and culture affects people?

Correct, yes, absolutely.

How have you seen Burning Man change from the first time you did it to where it is now? Has it kind of stayed or the same?

Oh, no, it changes every time. It's like anything. You start to add population growth and it changes the effect. Like we were discussing earlier, when the population started growing here in Reno, it changed people's orientation. You had the old-timers who knew what the basic constructs of the area were, or, say, the old-timers at Burning Man, who have a real deep understanding of what Burning Man is and what it isn't and how we're shaping culture and what we believe in and the ten principles.

And as you start to get bigger and bigger and more people become interested and more people come in, it can get diluted a bit, and we're back to this issue of having to educate people about the original premise or the original history, so there's an appreciation for what we're out there doing or why here in Reno that we want to preserve Fourth Street, because it's part of our historic tradition.

And it's the same with Burning Man, so, yes, it has changed, always. You can't go from 25,000 people, or when I first got there, to now 55,000 people and not have it change. One thing that's real significant is the infrastructure. We've gotten a lot more organized and things flow a lot better. There's a lot more volunteerism. The city doesn't happen without people volunteering. It's strictly a self-made city. It's not like Coachella, where they pay people to come in and set up stages and put on music events. This

is something that people just bring. We make it happen. The Burning Man organization sets up the infrastructure, they provide the blank canvas, and then we provide the art.

So I think that a similar thing, there's a similar analogy there with Reno and history and newbies and educating newbies and helping them to understand this environment that we live in, whether it's Reno proper or the playa specific.

From what I understand, Burning Man is a town that builds itself out of the desert. What does that mean for Nevada and for that whole culture?

Well, I've often made the analogy that the Black Rock Desert, this big empty playa, is a blank canvas, and when we go out there, here's this beautiful blank canvas, and from it the man rises and the city rises. And we create this event and all this energy is happening, and then we burn those structures and release them into the ethos, into the cosmos. And so when the man burns and the temple burns and then everything goes back into the dust and it disperses, we leave that blank canvas again to come back the next time. So we rise out of the dust. We go back to the dust. It's really an analogy of birth and death and resurrection.

And I think, too, because it's our desert, it's the backyard, and so many of our local people, we go out there and play in that desert all the time when it's not Burning Man. People go out there to go hunting, to go to the hot springs, to go exploring into the Black Rock high rock, in the Immigrant Trail area, and just Nevada in general. You'll never find more outdoor rugged individuals than you will in Nevada.

Does it still seem that you get a different feeling each time you go out, or does it kind of start being the same?

It's funny, because it's the same yet it's always different. I mean, there are certain elements about it, like just coming off of the highway and getting onto the playa and the first dust that gets into your nose, and you're just loving it. It's like you're back to this place. And then you've got the camaraderie with the other people in line and everybody's just so happy and excited to be there, and you make it fun. You make whatever the experience is, because sometimes it can be frustrating sitting in a line and waiting to get in, but you make it happy, you know, and you share with your neighbors.

So the event is everything from pre-planning to getting there, to being there, to getting out, to winding it up at Decompression. So it's really not just that week in the desert. It's everything leading up to and beyond, and we like to say, too, from the Burning Man perspective, it's not just a week in the desert; it's about the other fifty-one weeks a year, because we're out bringing Burning Man culture to the world on a regular basis, and it's not just here in Reno. It's in every community out there in the world that has a Burning Man region established. It could be Portland; Seattle; San Francisco; L.A.; San Diego; Chicago; Utah; New York; Florida; Southeast. They're everywhere. Plus they're all over—they're international too. We've got burns happening all over the world. It's really gotten quite big.

Do you feel the city fathers could learn something from Burning Man?

Absolutely, particularly about organizing and creating a volunteer spirit and utilizing creative energy, because people are looking for a place to put their creative energy. People want that so much, and they want community and collaboration and a family, being able to work with somebody to make a

difference. That, I think, speaks to every human being in our hearts. We want to be a part of something bigger and we want to make a difference. And instead of being isolated, Burning Man helps you become part of that community, and then when you bring it back out into the world, you connect with other people and you bring them into the community. And so that's what's happening, in leaps and bounds. It's like this growth spurt, this amoeba that's just oozing out and bringing people in. And, yeah, the city fathers could learn a lot, particularly about organization.

Best-case scenario, what do you think Reno could look like in ten years?

I think it needs twenty. [laughs]

Okay.

Oh, gosh. Best-case scenario, downtown Reno, Virginia Street would be a pedestrian mall where there could be regular events, and Center Street and Sierra Street would be the north-south corridors, and Second Street and Fourth Street would be the east-west.

Fourth Street would be developed as a historic district with all the little shops and art and such that we've talked about earlier, bike lanes, etc., that that could be a real corridor, maybe with a nice archway. We've had three different Reno arches. Why not have another archway, something like, "Reno Backyard Burners: Welcome to Reno, the Gateway to the Playa."

We really want to capitalize on what Burning Man has created and how popular it is in modern culture and what it can deliver to the default world, to cities out here, by being able to bring that art and that experiential artwork, if you will. Another one of our principles is experiential, immediate experience. So I see that.

I see a lot more bike paths, a lot more carlessness, if you will. There are certain areas like the main area of downtown, that could be certainly a lot more pedestrian versus car traffic. I see a lot of potential. I see art everywhere. I see a lot more murals, a lot more outdoor cafes, performing art locations. Artown doesn't just have to be a month. Reno is Artown, great. Let's make it all twelve.

Now, what might the worst-case scenario look like? What do you think?

Worst-case scenario? That nothing gets done and things get stalled and we get another twenty years behind and we're not really living up to the potential of what can be done in a metropolitan area with their historic resources, their community resources, their artistic resources. A lot more can be done a lot more quickly if we just get the people on board.

And I really don't know where the issue is. I don't know if it's, per se, funding because a lot of what we do is volunteer. Maybe it would cost a little bit to buy a piece of art, but we'll put it in. There are ways to partner with the Burning Man community and the city fathers and the default community, who wants to participate and make our city better.

Look at Wingfield Park and look at the whole river corridor, how beautiful that's come along in just the last few years. It's gorgeous, and there's so much potential of keeping it going, more art, more sculpture, art tours, bike tours, maybe little safari cars like they have in San Francisco that take you around and actually point out certain historic things.

The university here is a land-grant institution that's got a lot of history. Mackay School of Mines, the building we're sitting in right now, is a beautiful building. People should know about it. They should see it.

Anything else you want to add?

Bring it on. [laughs] Nope, that'll do it. [laughs]

Well, thanks so much for sitting down with me today.

You're very welcome. It was a pleasure.

SALLY LOUX

Server, Coney Island Bar



Sally Loux inside the Coney Island Bar in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

A Reno native, Sally Loux has worked for twenty years at the Coney Island Bar, located at the Reno-Sparks border where 4th Street becomes Prater Way. She describes the longstanding establishment's welcoming environment and some of its regular customers, and explains what has made it such a popular gathering place for the entire community for so many decades.

Matt Fearon: It's March 19, 2012. I'm here with Sally Loux in Reno. I'm going to ask Sally as many questions as she'll tolerate. I'll start with biographical questions and then ask a few questions about Fourth Street.

Sally Loux: Okay. Perfect.

The first one I have for you is, can you tell me when and where you were born?

I was born in Reno in August of 1953. My dad was born in Reno, so I'm a definite native Nevadan, native Renoite. In fact, my maternal grandparents were some of the first pioneer settlers to the Truckee Meadows.

What was your maiden name?

Biglieri or "Bilieri," properly pronounced. It's Italian.

You just talked about your dad. Can you tell me a little bit about him?

Oh, my dad's an awesome man. My dad served on the Reno City Council for two terms. He was a vice mayor here, and that was in the seventies. He's a true Reno lover, just loves Nevada and loves Reno. He is eighty-three now, almost eighty-four, very active.

He went to Reno High School and met my mother there. They were high-school sweethearts and were married for fifty-one years when my mom passed away. He keeps really active. He'll see some injustice in the paper and get on it. Just recently he thought something was going on with the animal control situation, and I think they had closed meetings and were supposed to have open meetings. So he was addressing that.

He was the lead councilman in creating the Citifare, currently the RTC. They revamped it, I guess. He's done a lot of good for the community.

When you say he's active, do you mean just politically or in all kinds of ways?

Yes, all kinds of ways. He's politically active. He's politically interested, I should say, very interested. Nothing goes by him. He's so aware for an eighty-four-year-old person, of not only the city, but the state and the country and the world. He'll mention things I can't even imagine he's aware of or that I even know are happening. So, yes, and his mind is going a hundred miles an hour all the time. He's a great man.

He dances every Friday. He and my mom were phenomenal dancers, and after she passed, he waited a while, and then he went back to dancing. There's a senior dance club here. He does that every Friday night, he dances. It's at the Senior Center on Ninth Street. They have a really nice dance every Friday night. My dad's not a drinker, so he goes there and dances. When you're an eighty-four-year-old man, there are certainly a lot of women available because a lot of men seem to die sooner than the women. So he goes there and he's quite a good dancer, so he can dance all he wants. In fact, sometimes he doesn't go because it's a lot of dancing.

He's a great man. He's probably the most honest and moral man I've ever known in my life. He wrote a book recently called *With Malice Toward One*, which is the story of some injustice served to him when he was on the City Council. That's a whole 'nother story. We can get into that.

It sounds like you have a really good relationship with him.

I have a great relationship with my dad. I love him. I have three sisters. Well, one passed away from MS about six years ago.

I'm sorry to hear that.

Yes, we're all real close, and everybody is here in town. Two of my sisters live in Sparks, but we're all right here.

Do you live in Sparks?

I live in Reno.

You mentioned you have three sisters. You mentioned what your dad did for work. What about your mom when she was alive?

She was a homemaker. My dad opened a window business when some of us were in college, and so my mom worked for him a little bit. They had an older home that they created a store out of—I think there's a pawn shop there now. What was the name of the street? It's kind of the corner of Rock and Glendale, and then they built a warehouse there. They had the window business there, and my mom worked for my dad a little bit there.

My dad's a realtor. In fact, he just got a forty-five-year recognition for the National Association of Board of Realtors. He's a realtor and he works. He continues to work. He told me about two months ago, "I'm thinking about retiring."

And I said, "Well, you know, you deserve it." He started selling newspapers at eight years old, and has worked straight since then. He told me that, and I said, "Yes, I think you've earned it." That was two months ago and he hasn't stopped going in yet. He does property sales, basically. So he keeps busy. He goes into his office whenever he wants, and he goes every day. He works out at Sports West three days a week, and he's just great.

You mentioned your family had a long history in Reno, even before your dad.

Yes.

Do you know what brought your family?

I do. In fact, just last weekend I was on Ellis Island doing some research there. My great-aunt on my dad's side came to Reno. I don't know if it was kind of a mail-order-bride situation, but she came to Reno and married, and they had a farm in Pine Valley in Eureka County, Nevada.

Then my grandmother—that was her sister—my grandmother's mother got very sick in Italy. So the uncle, the great-uncle, sent for all of the remaining children. My grandmother was eight. I researched this this weekend. There was a three-year-old, an eight-year-old, a ten-year-old, and a twelve-year-old that the husband of her older sister's oldest sister, I think, came and got because the mother in Italy was

sick. They came across the ocean in the steerage compartment of a ship and went to Pine Valley. My grandmother started cooking at eight years old because my uncle had a contract with the railroad workers, so my grandmother helped cook for the railroad workers in Pine Valley from the time she was a little girl. So you can imagine coming from Italy. She was a phenomenal cook.

Then she met my grandfather and they married when she was seventeen. They settled for a while in a little place called Palisade, which is now a ghost town. Then they moved to Reno when there was no more work there. They grew up very poor, and my dad grew up very poor, but he's made a really good life for himself, hard worker.

Then on my mother's side, my mother's great-great-grandfather was in the Revolutionary War. I think they settled in Kentucky and then came out from there. The home that they lived in is still off of old Spanish Springs Road in Sparks. My mother's maiden name was Van Meter. So her family were longtime Truckee Meadows residents.

Do you know what brought them out here?

I should know that. What did bring them out here? I think ranching—ranching and property. They homesteaded, actually. I think it was just the westward movement. I don't think they were miners or anything like that. I think it was just the opportunity to have land and farm out here.

You said you grew up in Reno. Where did you go to school?

I was born here in Reno. When I was a year old, my dad got a transfer to California. I lived there for eight or nine years, and then my family moved back here when I was ten. I went to Rita Cannan Elementary and Traner Middle School and Wooster High School and the University of Nevada, Reno.

What did you do at the University of Nevada?

I got a degree in child development, which I never actively used except in raising my own children. I love kids.

How many kids do you have?

I have two. I have a son who's twenty-five, he's a geological engineer in Portland, and I have a daughter who's twenty-three and she's a teacher.

Is she in Reno?

She's in Reno.

What was it like growing up in Reno?

Awesome.

Do you have any fond memories?

Oh, yes. I have so many good memories of growing up in Reno, because I had an incredibly secure childhood, you know. I can't think of a bad memory, really.

But when my dad became involved in politics, it was fun, and the fact that my parents grew up here. In those days you didn't go anywhere where you didn't know someone. We'd go out to dinner, we knew someone. It was obvious before, but when my dad got into politics it was even more obvious—you couldn't go anywhere. So you had to be good. [laughs]

We had a really nice, close, happy family and good friends. We didn't have a ton when I was a child, but I never knew that, never knew that I didn't have as much as some people, because we're all very secure in what we did have. We had everything we needed. We just didn't have a lot of surplus. I didn't really realize that until I talked to my parents later.

I remember moving up here and the snow, because we lived in Fresno when we were in California, and that was just so much fun. Then just the neighborhood, tons of kids and cousins here. I have lots of my cousins here. The family holidays became much more exciting because my grandparents were here and my cousins were here. We'd all get together. My cousins were all boy cousins, and so the four of us girls plopped into this bunch of guy cousins, but we still had a great time and it was really fun to have family all around. Those were probably some of my fondest memories.

Then I was really, really active in high school, so that was fun. I was a cheerleader and I guess I would say I was an athlete, although then they didn't really have girls' sports—they had GAA [Girls Athletic Association]. I did gymnastics and whatever was available. I was pretty involved in high school, and class offices.

A lot of people have bad high school memories. I have wonderful high school memories. I had great times, great friends. I have lifelong friends now. In fact, two of the girls who I work with at the Coney are old friends—Lorri Galletti's family owns it, and she and I were friends through boyfriends in high school. So I've known her since I was fifteen years old. Our boyfriends were really good friends.

Are those boyfriends your husbands?

No. Her boyfriend became her husband but not mine. My husband and I met later—he was up here from Boulder City, Nevada, where he grew up. He was up here going to school when I met him.

Do you remember the first job that you might have had in high school or afterwards?

Yes. Oh, very well. In fact, I haven't had very many jobs. I've had a lot of long-term jobs. My first job was at Shim's, which was an army-navy surplus store, and it was located at 325 North Sierra Street. I took the job when I think I was fifteen and my sister was seventeen. She was a senior in high school, and she was going to go away for the weekend and she needed someone to cover her. So I went down there, and I ended up filling in for her quite a bit. I ended up working there all through high school and through college.

When I finished college, I was offered the first management position there by anyone other than family. I worked there for quite a few years, and then quit there. I should tell you more about that job, though. It was located where the Eldorado parking garage is now. The owner there was named Fred Shimkovsky, and that also was a family-owned business. His grandfather opened that business as an army surplus store, probably fifty years before I worked there. Then his dad worked it for a while, and then the

gentleman who I worked for, Fred Shimkovsky, who was my first boss and perfect first boss, just such an incredible businessman, taught me so much about customer service and how to treat people, generally, if you want to have a successful business. He just was a great guy. He's still living and I still am in contact with him regularly.

Then I quit there and worked at Sassi Lassi, which is where I met Sue [Sue Ashby – a Reno native and a mutual friend of the interviewer and the interviewee]. I hired Sue. It was a really, really popular junior clothing store. Sue was a senior in high school and she came in for a job. I hired Sue and we've been friends since she was a senior in high school. One of the girls who I met at Shim's—so that was a long time ago, too—she and I are still friends, and Sue and she are friends too. When you live in one town forever, it's a whole different story.

When did you start working at Coney?

When I got married, my husband was going to school in Phoenix, so I quit Sassi Lassi and went to live in Phoenix. When we got married, I moved to Phoenix and we lived there for about two and a half years while he finished school. Then we came back here.

I actually went back to Shim's for a little bit, and then I got pregnant and I didn't want to work at Shim's anymore. Downtown had totally changed. I called my boss at Sassi Lassi and said, "You know, I'm pregnant and I'm not going to be there long, but if you can use me I'd like to come back." She put me back into a management position, which was really nice for me, but probably not so good for the girls that I worked with. I think there was a little resentment there. I worked there till my son was born, and then I was pretty much a stay-at-home mom until he was probably five.

Then my friend Lorri Galletti started doing Wednesday-night dinners at the Coney Island, and that was twenty years ago. She said, "Sally, I'm thinking of doing Wednesday-night dinners at the Coney. Want to come help?"

I said, "Sure."

I remember the first night we did it, we were pretty busy. Her family life is pretty much like mine. She grew up here, and the Coney is very popular with local people, so we had a lot of local people there, and they built up. They're still doing Wednesday-night dinners.

Then shortly after that, a couple years, maybe, no, not even that, a year and a half later, one of the waitresses there, Nettie Galletti, who is Lorri's aunt, stopped waitressing. She had waitressed there her whole life. She was probably in her late seventies or early eighties when she quit. They said, "Do you want to waitress?"

I said, "I've never waitressed in my life, but sure." It worked out really well because the hours were ten to two. My kids were in school. It's such a comfortable place to work. Friends come in. In fact, when I quit working Wednesdays about a year ago, it was, of course, a loss to me financially and with my friends, but the loss was that so many of the customers become such good friends. So that was hard. I've been there almost twenty years.

When you said you had a lot of local people, just people you knew from school or anyone? People who knew your dad?

Every facet of local people that you can imagine. Because most of the people who work at the Coney are local native Nevadans or native Renoites, friends of all of us come in. Bill Raggio was in there

the week before he died. His daughter, Leslie, and I were at different high schools at the same time together, and she was in shortly after her dad died, and I said, “You know, your dad was in here last week.”

She said, “I know. This was his favorite place.” She bought some food or ordered some food to go for a family thing they were going to have prior to the service.

John Ascuaga is in there at least twice a month. Every imaginable politician comes in, especially during campaign years, because it is a spot for native Nevadans and people who are interested in what’s going on in Reno.

I was talking to Gerald Galletti, who is the only survivor of that middle generation of the Coney. I was talking to him before I came today, and said, “Tell me who are some of the most prestigious people that have been here.”

He said, “Walter Baring was here, Alan Bible,” these are all senators, “and Barron Hilton.”

I’ve served Barron Hilton. He and a gentleman named Bill Shea, who owned a nice hotel in L.A. or Beverly Hills, were friends, and Bill Shea was a good friend of John Galletti—John’s son, Greg Galletti, is the owner now of the Coney Island. Bill Shea and John Galletti used to hunt together. The Sheas used to come in, and then consequently Barron Hilton came in. We do a lot of game feeds, where people go out and hunt and bring their game in for us to prepare. So the Sheas started doing that.

Gerald told me an interesting story today. He told me that Bill Shea and his family—he’s deceased now, but he had five sons and a daughter—would have dinner parties there. They’d have the sons valet park the cars. Well, if you know the parking lot at the Coney, it’s very small. I said, “Was that just so the kids could make money?”

“No, it’s just so that people could be dropped off right at the door.” I don’t know where they parked the cars. All around town, I guess. But he said when the kids became teenagers, they would do valet parking for the Coney. That was kind of a funny story.

Brian Krolicki’s been in there, [Brian] Sandoval’s been in there, governors. We see the mayors of Sparks and Reno frequently. Many, many attorneys eat in the Coney for lunch regularly, as well as a lot of local contractors or construction workers, people who work for the Department of Transportation, because it’s right there. NDOT [Nevada Department of Transportation] is right on Galletti Way. We also get a lot of people who come in from the DMV. With its backlog, they’ll pick a number and come over and have lunch and then go back to the DMV, and they’ll be right in line. A lot of our friends come in and a lot of everyone’s friends come in.

We have a serious repeating clientele. When we get new people, we’re really happy, because a lot of our clients are getting older. We lose a lot of clients every year, so we try to generate and cultivate some young people. A lot of that happens because people do parties. One night a week we do serve to the public, but the rest of the week, often, every night of the week, we’re serving private parties, whether it’s birthday parties, rehearsal dinners, retirement parties, family gatherings, the game feeds. When they invite other people in, then we’re exposing them to our food, which is phenomenal, as you know.

Last night we had a party, and several of the people were new and were just saying, “Oh, the food is so good.” We serve family style at those parties, and one lady asked for a straw so she could just suck the spaghetti sauce out of the bowl. [laughter] It’s fun to work for a place where you know it’s good quality, good food.

I think my whole life history has been that way in my work. All my jobs have been that way, but it seems to be the kind of work I like to do, where it’s just like family.

It seems like you've gotten along fairly well with the owners of the places you've worked.

Yes, I have. I'm still in contact with all of them. I've been blessed that way.

Can you describe the relationship between local businesses on Fourth Street and the Coney—it sounds like there's interaction because a lot of people come in there for lunch and such.

Right. There is. In fact, I was talking to Gerald [Galletti] about that earlier, too. You know, Fourth Street used to be the Lincoln Highway. It was the main run through town. Then when the freeway opened, I think in the early seventies. He said it was late sixties, and he has a mind like a steel trap, so he's probably right. In my recollection, I don't remember driving on the freeway in high school. But he said that as the freeway was being built, it made such a huge impact on their business because there was so much foot traffic prior to that. Because of the freeway, the Department of Transportation bought up all the property around to build the freeway, so thereby they took away a lot of homes. At the time, he said people would just walk over.

Across the street from the Coney there used to be a park called Coney Island Park, in the early 1900s or late 1800s, and that's how the Coney got their name. Then after that park, there was a motel there that had weekly rentals, and behind it was a trailer court that had sixty or seventy mobile homes where people would just walk over—more so for drinking, when the bar first opened, than for eating. He said the foot traffic was phenomenal, and people would just walk up and down and hop in the bar, probably like it is downtown or even more than that.

Then on the other side, north of the freeway, people would walk from north there, like on Field Street. They no longer have access to do that. I think it definitely affected the Coney's business at that time. Since then, they've put in the restaurant and cultivated it a lot more. But we do still have people, people who work very close. People from NDOT come over there, like I say.

A lot of people drive, though, from downtown Reno. All the attorneys drive from downtown Reno. We were concerned because they're closing the freeway exit for us now. It's supposed to be today. It didn't close, but the sign is up that it's going to be closed. Greg called the Department of Transportation, and it's going to be closed for five months. The way it is now, you get off on that exit and it's just a circle and you're in our parking lot. I think people will have to go down to Rock Boulevard and loop back. We were concerned about that, but we've been talking to people who come from downtown, and they just come down Fourth Street anyway. So hopefully it won't be a huge hit for us in our business.

I think that there was a lot more walking and nearby traffic in the past among our patrons than now. People mostly drive. In fact, we have had issues lately where people say, "I came by, and there was nowhere to park, but you're not that busy." Well, we'll have a table of eight men, and they've all come in their own cars because they're meeting there, and our parking lot isn't huge. So a lot of times when it looks like it's busy at the Coney, it really isn't that busy. It's just there's nowhere to park.

Gerald also told me that in the front it looks like there are doors on Fourth Street that go into the Coney. I asked him about that, and he said originally there were picture windows there and then they put doors in. People who would walk in that would just kind of stagger in the front door. It was busy on Fourth Street and they didn't want people walking out inebriated and falling into the road with the traffic, and they always had the side door to the parking lot. So they boarded up the Fourth Street door and it eliminated the people just happening in who really didn't want to be there.

Anyway, there was a lot more foot traffic, I think, than there is now. There were a lot of weekly

motels around. I said, “Well, was that people from divorces?”

He said, “Not necessarily. Just people who lived in those situations at that time,” like after the war.

But now it’s not so much foot traffic; it’s mostly people driving. You can often go into the Coney and there won’t be a woman in there as a patron. It’s often just men. In fact, a couple weeks ago, these three women walked in, looked around, turned around and walked out. You want to say, “Hey, come in. You’ll be fine.” If I hadn’t been busy, I would have, but it’s kind of old boys. It’s getting to be a little bit old girls too.



The Coney Island Bar at 2644 Prater Way. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Is it just because it’s kind of an old boys’ place that they feel like they’re not welcome?

I don’t know. That isn’t the case at all. In fact, it surprised me that these women walked out. I think they probably had never been there, because we have a lot of women who come in there now. But there are days that you’ll come and there won’t be any women. I don’t even notice it really, anymore. But there are days that there will be, not for the full day, but times during the day at lunch that it’s just all men, businessmen, politicians, attorneys, construction people, car salesmen, every walk of life. It definitely is a little more male-dominant.

We used to have these groups of women who came in. They kind of had a falling-out amongst themselves so they don’t meet there anymore. But we still have a lot of women who meet there regularly. We had this one group of women that came in, we called them the “Sex and the City girls,” but this was about two years ago, because they were always just dolled to the max. In fact, I think they were interior designers. So they’d come in and looked beautiful, striking. Boy, the heads would turn, and it was kind of

fun. I think my daughter was busing tables there at that time. Both my kids have actually worked there. My daughter named them the “Sex and the City girls.” But we do have a lot of women who come in, and they’re always really comfortable and welcome.

We have a group of men who play pinochle every day of the week, bar none.

Do they live around Fourth Street?

No, they all drive. There isn’t much housing anymore around there.

Yes, it’s mostly businesses, I guess.

It’s mostly businesses, yes. No, they all drive, and they play pinochle from lunchtime till four o’clock or three or something. I was asking Gerald that today, too, I said, “Have there always been pinochle players here?”

He said they used to play a game called Solo, and I have no idea what that is. His dad, the original owner, they would play Solo. Then when Gerald’s brother, John, who is Greg’s dad, came back from the war and opened the restaurant, he started playing pinochle.

So, every day, any day you in the Coney, Monday through Saturday, there’ll be a group—there’s probably about twelve of them. They rotate and they play pinochle. Some of them are retired, some of them are stockbrokers. What else? Business owners. I’m trying to think of the blend. We have an ex-University of Nevada basketball coach who plays regularly. It’s a funny group.

Sometimes when you’re listening to them play, you think, why do they come play with each other every day? Because if they’re not winning, they’re angry sometimes. You think, whoa, why would you come here and have somebody yell at you like that? But they love each other. Yes, it’s funny.

So they eat and drink while they play?

I would say half of them eat lunch prior to when they play. Most of them don’t drink alcohol. Some of them will once in a while, but most of them will have a soda. Some of them drink a little bit. But they’re just a group of friends who meet together. Some of the past players have passed away and moved on. But I think, short of death, I don’t think anyone’s just quit playing. They’re pretty diligent about it.

That’s neat.

Yes, it is neat. The bus doesn’t really bring us any—there’s a bus stop right outside the Coney, but we don’t have customers who come on that, unless perhaps they’re going to the DMV and then pop in. We love people from the DMV.

Is there a bus station right on Fourth Street, too?

Not that end. There are just bus stops. I think the only real bus station is downtown.

The Regional Transportation Commission wants to know about the street, such as your thoughts about the bike lanes, the sidewalks, whether they should widen the street, the traffic, is there too much speed.

Just your general thoughts about that.

We do get some people walking in, but it's very little. Very few people walk in that area. It's become kind of a dingy area. In fact, sometimes when you tell people where it is, they say, "Really?" In fact, I've had people come in for dinner parties from out of town, say there's a rehearsal dinner for a wedding or something, and they'll come in from out of town, and I've had a couple tell me, "When we pulled up, we thought, oh, my gosh. Where are they taking us?" Because it's in a pretty rundown part of town. I'd love to see it renovated. I'd love to see it more upbeat. But then they say, "But, oh, my gosh, the food is so great. It's a good atmosphere. It's happy in there." It's just so low-key.

I think the traffic is okay there. We have kind of a weird situation where we're at because people get off that freeway [Interstate 80] and make that loop into the parking lot, and some people turn out of the Coney and turn left, which really is an illegal turn, because just to the right of you when you're coming out of the Coney is a streetlight. So you're turning left across lanes of traffic really where there's a left-turn lane to go down Galletti Way. It's probably not the best thing we should do, but people do it all day long. I hope nobody gets a ticket thanks to me.

It's not necessarily very clean. The sidewalks are not kept up. But I don't think there's really that much foot traffic there. I'd love to see more foot traffic, but I don't know where people would walk from. There is a motel on the corner of El Rancho and Prater that is a weekly motel, and people do walk there because maybe a lot of them don't have vehicles. We do see a lot of bicyclists go up and down.

Is that with the Reno Bike Project at all?

No, I think it's people who don't have cars. But I think for what they need, they mostly go north, where there are grocery stores. There's no grocery store near us. The gas station is there and they have little incidentals you might need, but there is really no grocery store on Fourth Street that I can think of or really anything that a person would need for their daily life, other than the gas station, if you need gas.

It's funny for me because I drive. Now because the on-ramp to the freeway is closed, I have to go down Fourth Street to get home, and sometimes I'll drive all the way down Fourth Street. I live off of West McCarran, up by McQueen High School. Sometimes I'll drive all the way down Fourth Street. Sometimes I feel like maybe I shouldn't because I'm not sure how safe it is. Other times, I love to drive down Sixth Street especially because of the old architecture there. It's just phenomenal. They're the most beautiful old huge homes that were one time just the center of all that was happening in Reno, and the homes are now broken up into weekly rentals. It makes me sad, because they're just beautiful. The architecture in this—have you ever noticed that when you drive down?

I haven't been to that part of Sixth. I've been on the western part of Sixth. Is that over by St. Mary's, that area?

Yes. Well, in that area, even if you head east from St. Mary's, right below the University of Nevada, the homes there are beautiful. You don't really notice it because it's kind of a rundown area.

I think of different cities that have really developed their old downtowns, like Sacramento or Portland, where my son is. I don't know if they've kept them nice or they renovated the areas.

But, gosh, we have such history up there that is so beautiful. Take a drive down Sixth Street and look at the homes on the right side as you're heading west, beautiful brick homes, actually huge homes

that have just incredible architecture, incredible woodworking and inlaid brick in a pattern that's just beautiful. It makes me sad to have all that probably bulldozed away someday and made a parking lot.

How old do you think those places are?

Oh, I'll bet they're from the early 1900s. Yes, probably from when the university was built. Yes, I would guess that.

When I was on the history page the other day on Ellis Island, I was looking up my grandparents. I looked up my grandfather also, who came from Italy in 1912. I was really interested that his brother was here prior, and his brother was his sponsor. You had to have a sponsor. As you came through Ellis Island, they asked you where you came from, your age, and if you had a sponsor.

My grandfather, whose name was Serafino, his brother was Ernesto and his address was listed and it was 710 Winter Street. As soon as I found that out, I'm in the car looking up 710 Winter Street. Winter Street now, I think, only runs as far north as Fourth Street, and then to the river, and there is no longer a 700 block of Winter Street. But I thought, wow, isn't that amazing that in 1912 when my grandfather came, Winter Street was where people lived.

So as I drove up and looked again, such beautiful homes, I'm sure they're not practical to renovate, but they're just so beautiful, and the history of them is just fascinating to me. I'm sure there's great history. I'm sure if the Coney could talk, you'd have some phenomenal stories at the Coney, because people have been coming there forever.

We have one gentleman—I think it's going to be his seventieth birthday. They were having a party. Maybe his seventy-fifth. In May he is having a party there. They just asked me to work it the other day. He has been coming into the Coney on Tuesdays since he was four years old. He used to come in with his dad. So for seventy-one years this gentleman has been coming into the Coney on Tuesdays for our spaghetti. That's amazing. How many places have that?

Do you know this person's name?

Oh, yes. Yes, his name is Bill Tessler. His kids come in, and he has grandkids now and they've been in there. They're little babies now, maybe five.

We have so many generations of people that come. In fact, today I served Kyle Landa. He has a business on Fourth Street. Well, his dad was a classmate of mine. There's Landa Muffler on Fourth Street. It's on the corner of Fourth and Wells. Kyle's father, Larry (who was my classmate), has passed away. He died not long ago of brain cancer. But Kyle was in today with his wife. They're young, probably late twenties, and their baby, Sparo, who's just two, has been coming in there since she was in an infant seat. They come in, and today he brought his grandmother, Larry's mom. There's four generations of people who come to the Coney regularly. So it's pretty interesting. A lot of that is our business at the Coney, more than people that just happen by.

Do you think there are any other businesses like the Coney, where you get generations of people, on Fourth Street?

There is Casale's. Casale's opened about the same time as the Coney, and the lady who owns it, her name is Inez Stempeck. I think her family was probably Casale, but I'm not sure about that. But

they've had an Italian restaurant down on Fourth Street for as long as the Coney. In fact, when her husband died, everybody kind of stepped in together to help. She's eighty-five. She works there every day, makes ravioli, and they have, I'm sure, the same generational people come in there also.

Let's see. There's the mattress store on Fourth Street. They've had a hundred years in business, and Mike comes in the Coney for lunch all the time. So there's someone whose business is down the street that comes in for lunch regularly. We call him "Mattress Mike." He comes in regularly for lunch. He's there several times a week for lunch.

How close is the other Italian restaurant to you?

It's probably not a mile, maybe a half a mile. In fact, if people come in, like today a girl came in who was at the DMV and we had just stopped serving lunch, so we'll say, "Try Casale's down the street." Because they're open, I think, all the time, from lunch and through dinner every day. She said, "Well, I need somewhere close because I got a number at the DMV."

We said, "Oh, you can get in and out down there too." That's another good thing about the Coney. You know you can have an hour for lunch and come from downtown and get your lunch and get back to work. Hopefully, it will be that way once the freeway closes.

You said a lot of people drive rather than walk, unless they're coming from the DMV.

Right. Even then, I think most of them drive. Most people drive to the Coney. There isn't much foot traffic really. The foot traffic that is on Fourth Street, at least our end, are not generally people who will come into a restaurant to eat.

We have people who will come by to the back of the Coney and ask if there's work they can do to earn a sandwich. I would say that's pretty much more of the foot traffic at our end at the Coney. Now, it certainly wasn't always that way. I would say, though, that since I've worked there, in the twenty years it's probably pretty much been that way. But in speaking with Gerald today, he said everyone walked. That was what he said exactly. Everyone walked when this was the heart of the town, and people walked here for lunch. Why would you drive if you could walk? Go have a cocktail and walk home.

Do you think fewer people walk because the neighborhood is more run down or because the sidewalk isn't in good shape?

I think two things. I think that less people walk because there are very few homes around there. And also, people just don't walk as much. We've had some people who ride their bike regularly. We used to have a trailer court right by us that a turf company has bought now and taken over. But again, those people who lived in that trailer park were not our customers.

Generally speaking, the people who come into the Coney are people who are either stopping in to have a beer after work, and the people who come to lunch are people who have been brought in there by someone else or met there, and they drive and meet there on their lunch hour, or groups of women come. We've had the Red Hat Society women come in. We've had groups of Bunco women who skip Bunco, and instead come to the Coney for lunch as well as often for dinner. A lot of family people come.

Is the age group older or is it mixed?

Older, yes. The bar crowd can be a little bit younger. Well, the bar crowds anywhere generally are younger. But the food patrons are generally older, although we're hoping to get more and more young people. Yes, a lot of retired people.

We've been talking about this, because sometimes we'll be slow and we'll laugh that they're all dying. They're all dying. We need to cultivate some new people. Greg is forty-nine and he is such an incredible man. He's just a really good, kind, generous man, a great family man. He does a lot of donations. I probably shouldn't say this because it's hard for people to do donations now. He's had to cut back because his kids, his oldest son now is in high school, so he'll gear toward their needs now in donations. But he's a huge supporter of the Boys and Girls Club. We get a lot of clients who also are involved in the Boys and Girls Club, because they want to honor people who support their charities. He'll donate to the Juvenile Diabetes or American Cancer. So we'll get people in that way. He'll donate a dinner, say for twenty people, and then hope that they will spend money at the bar so it'll be kind of a wash. As he does that, we always get new people who are exposed to the Coney. Honestly, I've never had anyone say anything but wonderful things about the food.

I think the Coney continues to be successful for two reasons, or more than that, several reasons: Greg and his incredible sense of business and being such a good community member; the people who work at the Coney are like family, family to each other and family to the customers that come in; then the families that come in, generations of people who come into the Coney. I don't think the Coney exists because it's on Fourth Street. I think the Coney exists for those other things. I think it probably got its start because it was on Fourth Street, but it continues because of the food, the people, Greg, and generations of people.

If for some reason all of a sudden it moved somewhere else, a lot of those same people would go, regardless of it being on Fourth Street?

Well, you know, that's a really good question. I don't know if the Coney would continue if it moved. I don't think it would continue if it moved into a strip center or a place where it wasn't convenient—the parking is at the door. You park and you walk twenty feet and you're in the Coney. It's not like you have to park in a parking garage and go up.

I think the Coney would continue to exist. I think it would probably lose some customers and gain others. But it will never move. I'm sure it will never move. If they were to kick us out for some type of high-rise thing, I doubt that they would move. I think they would close.

At least when I went in there, it seemed like it's a nice kind of home environment.

Definitely. Yes, there's no frills. It's just an old, warm, happy place. Bartenders will know people who are walking through the door, see them in the parking lot, and have their drink on the bar before they get there. On Tuesdays, especially, we have customers who come in, they sit at the same table, they order the same thing. There are many people who we just go up to their table and say, "You want the same?"

"Yep."

Today there was a gentleman, his name is Jim Henry, he's an old farmer and really a nice man. He's been coming in there for a long time. He was joining some people. Usually he eats by himself. I came to his table and just brought his coffee, because that's what he has. His other friends ordered, and I

said, “So you want the usual?”

He says, “Yeah. What’s the soup today?”

I told him, and I said, “Okay.” He tells me what he wants, and I said, “I already wrote yours.” Because it’s that way. I mean, there are many people who have lunch at the Coney five days a week. Not many places can say that, unless it’s part of a boarding home and it’s a free meal or something.

But on Tuesdays we laugh that it almost becomes boring because they’ll order the same thing every single week. But it’s what they like and it’s dependable. You know it’s going to be good. Greg uses all fresh stuff. I think the only can they use is tomatoes.

There are people who my dad told me about who would really know a lot about Fourth Street. My dad’s best friend from the time—or one of his best friends—there are three or four he’s still friends with—Coe Swobe, who was a state senator here, he married a woman named Janet Quilici. Her uncle was Forest Lovelock and they owned the Ford Agency.

Whereabouts?

I might have this wrong. The Ford Agency was on the corner of Center and Fourth Street. Rissone had a gas station there. It was Rissone’s.

I think that my dad said that Pete Cladianos, who owns The Sands, would be a wealth of information. Bob Ferrari, who also comes into the Coney—his daughter-in-law, or daughter, Marlene Cate is her name, she would have a lot of information. Jay Atwood, I forget what business they had—the gas station on Ralston and Fourth.

But those were people my dad said, “Oh, my gosh. He’s got to talk to Coe Swobe,” who is an attorney here in town, and you can reach him on the phone for sure. I think he married Janet Quilici, and that was the Ford Agency. I’m not sure who it was. I’ll get back with you on that if you want. My dad could give you a phenomenal wealth of information. I know Gerald [Galletti] is incredibly interesting, very sharp man, really intelligent. You know how some people in their eighties lose it?

Not Gerald, not my dad. They both have memories that you cannot even imagine. I’m trying to see if I covered all the things that Gerald talked to me about.

You dad’s first name is Clyde?

Clyde, yes. I think that you could really get a lot talking with Gerald, and those people that I gave you as far as Fourth Street, or my dad. I’m sure he’d be a wealth of information too.

You know what? I think that people who grew up here, probably as it is with any town, they love it. My dad’s such a lover of Reno and so interested in the history and in the forwardness of it. He’s just passionate about this town. It’s been his home his whole life. He went to the old Reno High School, which is where the Sundowner Hotel is. He and my mom were boyfriend and girlfriend then.

He went to the old Billingham Middle School. Then they made a new one up in the north. It was downtown. He went to Southside Elementary School. Just old Reno, where they used to just all be downtown, all in those neat old homes.

I remember shortly before my mom died—you may not want to record this, I don’t care if you do, but shortly before my mom died, and she knew she was dying, I asked her to take me on a little tour of where she had lived in Reno. She took me to this little house on the corner of Sinclair and Liberty, I think. Yes. There’s a building there now—well, it’s some city building. I don’t know, but it used to be an

elementary school [the Southside Annex].

She told me that she would walk out the house, walk down the street, look back and wave to her mom on the porch when she was about, six, and walk to school. One day the phone had rung, and her mom was not on the porch. She's six years old and she comes running back because she was sure her mom had died. She could see the school from the porch, so my grandmother would watch her walk to the school. It was all just right there.

I'm pretty sure in those days everything walked to everything. In fact, I have the buggy that my mom used to push my sister, older sister, and I in. She didn't have a car till I was about ten. And to take us to the grocery store, she'd just walk downtown and walk to the grocery store. Everybody walked.

Do you know where the grocery stores were? Were they right downtown?

Yes. I think it might be still there. It was called Lander Street Grocery. I think they had an apartment on Forrest, and she would just load us up in the buggy. It's a huge buggy. I mean, you don't see things like this anymore. Why I have it, I don't know. Just because it's one of those things you can't part with. There was room for the groceries and both my sister and I. My mom would have to strap me in because I'd climb out. It was a whole different time, I think, when they grew up.

It sounds like you had a really good relationship not only with your dad but your mom.

Oh, yes. My mom was my best friend. Yes, in fact, I miss her so much. She's been gone almost eleven years. Some days it seems like yesterday. And my parents had such a good relationship, you know. It's not like they never argued. They argued. They were passionate at both ends, good and bad. They loved each other so much. I think that gives kids a great sense of security.

Yes. That's great. It sounds like you had such an interesting, fun life.

Yes. I've been blessed. And to live in a town like this. For some people—and it's true—you gain a lot when you move. You definitely gain a lot. I'm happy my son's in Portland. You expand your horizons. When Tom and I first lived in Phoenix when we were first married, that was really good for our marriage. But when you have friends from high school that you still see regularly, it's rich. It's good. I don't know. I guess it has good and bad. I mean, there are no secrets, and maybe it helps you to maintain a better sense of what's right and wrong because those people know you all along. I don't know.

You go back home and you're home. It doesn't matter where your home is. When you go back home, it's home. When my husband graduated from high school in Boulder City and left immediately, because you leave Boulder City when you graduate, you just leave. We would go back home and it was the same thing; it was just home.

Actually, Boulder City is such a phenomenal community. Just like Mayberry. We'd go back home, and actually it became that way for the kids and I. We'd be there, it was like, "Okay, we're home." His parents lived in the home he grew up in. There were a few friends who stayed there, but most of them left. It was just home.

Then his dad moved away the last couple of years. It's like you lost that. There's nothing drawing us back down there, and it's like you lost your childhood home. Even my parents moved from the home that I grew up in to be closer to my sister, who died of MS. So

they're closer to me. They moved closer to me probably four years before my mom passed away. Even though they were closer in area to me, it wasn't like going home, because it was never my home. The home that we lived in as children, I still think of as my home. But it's weird.

You know it's such a small world. Sue's father-in-law, when Jim [Ashby, Sue's husband – mutual friends of the interviewer and interviewee] took his dad to his high school reunion in Etna [California]—

Etna, yes. I remember you telling me about that.

Yes, so funny. My niece, Stacey, is married to a man whose family lives in Etna now, and her grandfather-in-law, I guess, her husband's grandfather, was the janitor of the school in Etna where Jim's dad went to high school. I mean, what a small world. She says, "Oh, Jim's taking his dad to Etna."

I said, "Etna?" Then I told Stacey, my niece, I said, "Did they go to school there? Did your in-laws go to school there?"

"Yeah, and his grandfather was the janitor." Her in-laws live in a hundred-year-old house that was the family house. Such a small world. Totally off your subject, but interesting.

What would you say your general thoughts are about Fourth Street in relation to how it fits into Reno?

I think that, at least at our end, at the east end of Fourth Street, it's just gone downhill pretty badly. I think that even downtown Fourth Street has seen some serious changes. I think that it'd be nice if it would be cleaned up. There are a lot of shoddy motels on Fourth Street. There are a lot of people who are essentially homeless who live around Fourth Street. It's not an area that is attractive to people at this time.

I think that the Coney, like I say, succeeds not because it's part of Fourth Street. I think it has established itself because it was on Fourth Street. I would say the Coney is probably one of the most successful businesses on Fourth Street at that end. The Coney, Casale's, Mike the mattress company—and his business has suffered, too, because what he does a lot of is custom-sized mattresses for motorhomes or people building fancy sitting areas. With the economy, people aren't traveling as much, not buying motorhomes, not renovating, so his business has suffered.

But, yes, I would love to see Fourth Street pick up and look good again. Basically, I never really thought about what you said about the sidewalks. The sidewalks are dirty. They're not maintained. There are no pretty trees on the sides. It's concrete to concrete. It's not attractive. It really isn't attractive. It'd be nice if it could be. Does that answer your question?

It definitely does, yes.

I wish it would be cleaner, but it's not.

Is there anything else that I didn't ask you or that you might want to talk about that I didn't bring up?

I think I've pretty much talked about the things I know, when downtown Reno was everything. You know what I do remember? I do remember really well when they opened Park Lane Mall, which is now torn down, which was at Plumb and Virginia Street. I don't know how old I was, but they opened

Park Lane Mall, and I remember we didn't have a mall at that time. There was Sears downtown and Penney's downtown and Woolworth's.

Right on Virginia Street?

Yes, right by where the theaters were. There was Parker's Western Store. Right next to it was Sears, and that's where you shopped. That was where people shopped. My mom worked at a little store called the Wonder Store downtown, when she was in high school, and then there was Gray Reid's [Gray, Reid & Wright Department Store]. That was a big—what's where Gray Reid's was? I think Circus Circus now.

But I remember when Park Lane Mall opened and Sears moved out to Park Lane Mall. I remember my family having this huge conversation about how no one will drive that far to shop. Now we have the Summit Mall, which is doing well, I think, probably not as well as maybe they'd like, with the economy turndown. Prior to that was Meadowood Mall, which is very successful, and both so much further out. So the town, as it grows, it just grows further and further and further out. I'd love to see the renovation of downtown Reno like they did by the river, and it's beautiful.

I probably shouldn't say this, but we have a homeless problem here. I'm sorry for those people. I'm very sorry for them. Except for the grace of God, I could be there, too, or the grace of my wonderful parents, I guess. I think that that's a problem we have to deal with before we're going to get a lot of people milling around downtown. I'd love to see it. I'd love to see it like it was.

When you think about my family thinking, "Oh, nobody's going to drive to Park Lane Mall," and now that mall has come and gone, and we're going further out. Well, and the homes. The homes aren't in this area of town anymore. People don't live in the center of town anymore. Very few people live in the center of town. People get out and move away. My son lived in the Riverwalk Condominiums. That used to be a hotel, the Comstock Hotel.

In fact, one of my really good friends and Sue's good friend Erin was a realtor for the Riverwalk. She bought a condominium there and lived there from the time it opened until just recently. She's transitioning to a condo they have in Scottsdale. But moving downtown was exciting to her. They lived on acres of land in Spanish Springs, and they moved downtown. Even the homeless situation got to her, and she got to where she didn't like it. She didn't want to walk around that. You have this real expensive home—but I think that is the way it is probably in any downtown situation.

I know that for my son, in Portland, that was the same situation for him. They lived in that Riverwalk, they rented it, and then they moved up to Portland. So they liked it well enough to try it again in Portland. Now they have just in the last month moved further out into a suburb, and like not only not having that around, but also space.

But really, there are so few homes in downtown Reno now. I guess on California Avenue and that area, which is a beautiful area, it's probably the closest—Marsh Avenue and that area there. Think we'll ever return to that? I don't know. I'd love to see—I mean, it's funny that you ask me about this, because I'm sure people think I'm crazy when I say that, and I've said this for years, I just love to drive and look at the old homes and think of what happened there. Center Street, Sixth Street, up by the university, all around that area, homes that you just drive by, you don't really notice because they're kind of rundown and shoddy, but if you stop and take a walk or just look at the architecture of these incredible homes that were built with such love, it's just amazing. There's a home on the corner of Ralston and I think it's University Terrace.

Oh, I know which house you're talking about.

With the round porch.

Right by Whitaker Park there?

Exactly.

Yes, I know right where that is.

What a beautiful home. All those homes around there, they're just gorgeous. Some of the homes that have been made into fraternities and sororities, they're just beautiful homes.

Yes, they're nice.

All the sororities on Sierra Street were homes at one time, big estates. It's kind of interesting to me. I don't know. I kind of like old history like that. I never liked history when I was a kid. [laughter] But now I'm intrigued. I think that's part of who your history teacher is. If you have a history teacher who just makes you read and they put nothing into it. . . . My nephew is a history teacher at Mendive, and he's gotten some phenomenal letters from kids saying, "You make history come alive for us." I think, boy, what a gift if you can do that to kids. Because we are what we came from, and if we don't know the past we're losing a lot.

Well, thanks very much, Sally.

You're welcome.

MARILYN MARSTON

Owner, Zellerbach Paper Company building



Marilyn Marston with some of her husband Art Marston's paintings in 2014. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

In 1958, Marilyn Marston moved from the Bay Area to Reno, where she met her future husband, photographer and artist Art Marston. He founded Art Marston Printing, renting office space until 1974, when the Marstons purchased the old Zellerbach Paper Company building at 420 Valley Road. After Art's passing in 1986, Marilyn sold the business to Valley Print and Mail, where she worked for ten years. Since 2001, she has rented the building to a series of tenants. She also speaks of her involvement with the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association.

Laura Wilhelm: Today is April 27, 2012 and this is Laura Wilhelm with Marilyn Marston. Before we get

started, I'll ask do I have your permission to record this interview and put it in our archive?

Marilyn Marston. Okay. Is it okay if I refer to some history notes a little bit?

Of course.

Because I did bring a little bit of that.

Excellent. So why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born.

I was born in San Francisco, but at the time my parents lived in Burlingame, which is about 17 miles south of San Francisco. They had lived in San Francisco for a while, when my sister was born. She was about four and a half years older than me. They moved to Burlingame because it was where the fog ended. If you look back at the history of that area, that's where all the San Francisco millionaires ended up moving, why they ended up moving down the peninsula to Burlingame, San Mateo, Belmont, and Palo Alto. So that's where I grew up.

And do you have any childhood memories of Reno or traveling old Highway 40?

Oh, yes, I do. We had family friends who lived in Twin Falls, Idaho, and owned a cabin on a lake, Petit Lake, which is in the Sawtooth wilderness section a little bit north of Sun Valley, Idaho, and we would drive there. This was in the late thirties. Because we couldn't afford anything else, we drove all the way to Twin Falls from Burlingame, and then spent time at their cabin at this lake. Then the war came along, and after the war, we went back and did it some more.

But we came through Reno, sometimes—usually Carson City because at that time Highway 50 was a little better than Highway 40, so my memories are maybe a little bit more of that area, Carson City. To my sister and I, that was the edge of nothingness once we went through there, and they were always building, working on the highway across Nevada, so there would be 50-mile detours, with no air conditioning. Finally we got to the point where we would stop overnight in Winnemucca. And there was a little motel there that had a swimming pool, and that was just heaven for my sister and I after driving, hot, in the middle of summer.

Those are my earliest memories of Reno. And of course the gambling. On the way back, sometimes we would stop at Lake Tahoe where the casinos were, and my mother and father would go in for just a short time, mostly my mother, and my sister and I'd sit outside, leaning up against the building, which you could do in those days. Those are my early, earliest memories of this area.

What brought you to Reno to live, eventually?

I graduated from UC-Berkeley in 1957, and my sister and brother-in-law were living here then. They had only been here a year or two. They were recruited. My brother-in-law was recruited by Tom Wilson of Wilson Advertising Agency from San Francisco to Reno, and they invited me to come and spend the summer here with them, which I did, in a tiny little duplex on Kirman Avenue.

I went back and stayed for a year with two friends who were doing physical therapy school at UCSF, so I lived in San Francisco for that year. After that was over, I was living at home with my

parents. My sister and brother-in-law came down for Thanksgiving, and said, “Why don’t you come and live in Reno with us,” so I did. That would have been in 1958. I’ve been here ever since.

When you moved originally to Reno, did you spend time at all downtown?

I did, because I worked at Nevada Bell in the Engineering and Building Department, which at that time was housed over the old Riverside Garage on West First Street. When we got paid, friends that I worked with would take our paychecks over to Harrah’s and cash our paychecks for a free drink chip. [laughter] So, I was very familiar with the downtown area and the little shops along the way—Joseph Magnin’s and a lot of the stores that are gone now.

What were your impressions of Fourth Street at that time, if you had any?

At that time? Gosh, I don’t really remember. I probably didn’t venture over there. I probably just had the stereotypical picture of it. Of course, the freeway was not finished yet then, I don’t think, or maybe it was. The motels along Fourth Street were still viable at that point, I believe, as far as I know, because that was just before the ’60 Olympics. And I think that’s when they finished the freeway, or maybe it was a little bit later, through Reno, anyway.

I remember eating at a couple of restaurants along East Fourth Street. There was a Siri’s restaurant. But mostly I think we just stayed downtown or went up to Lake Tahoe. My brother-in-law for one summer had the use of a little car that was called a Singer. It was a little British sports car. Since I was single, and they didn’t have any children, we had a wonderful summer just driving to Pyramid Lake, Lake Tahoe, just going all over in that little car.

It was fun. I remember swimming at the old Lawton’s Hot Springs pool out on West Fourth Street. I remember that vividly. Let’s see what else. I remember eating at what at that point in time was the Mesa restaurant up the Mt. Rose Road, before it became the Lancer. Wow. I haven’t thought about those things in a long time. [laughter] What else? Well, there are many different restaurants. I remember a Moana Supper Club on Moana. Where else did we go? We went to see shows.

Actually, my first job when I came for that summer was at the Mapes Hotel. Because my brother-in-law worked for the Wilson Advertising Agency, he got me this job. I worked for the assistant manager, Gordon Hooley, right by the front desk, and in those days, not having computers, they had a little card file of people’s reservations. And it was my job to keep that up to date and pull cards out for whoever was supposed to show up that day and give it to the front-desk people.

When they would take a break, sometimes I would actually man the desk or answer the phone or whatever, which was very interesting. I don’t remember any really big movie stars, but I remember the name Moffatt, who was a rancher from northern Nevada. I don’t remember exactly where he lived, but he was very wealthy and he would come in and stay there. So I remember that. And I remember being in the casino with the casino manager there, Mr. Pechart, and just getting to know the people there. And the little elevator man. [laughter] In those days they had those.

That was a fun job, and because of that, I was able to go up to the top of the Mapes’ Sky Room and stand in the back and watch the shows. I remember seeing Lili St. Cyr, the stripper, and Rowan and Martin. A lot of different people came there. That was kind of cool.

I know eventually you and your husband bought a building and operated a business on Fourth Street, but

a little bit before that, how did you meet your husband?

I met him when I worked at the telephone company. I worked with a gentleman who was an engineer there, Bill Curtis, and he was very nice to me and the other gal who worked in the office. They had a summer picnic every year, the telephone company did, Nevada Bell, and that particular year—that was in 1960—it was at Donner Lake, the west end of Donner Lake.

So I went to this picnic with them. My future husband was there. They knew him because he had been dating one of their relatives, so they introduced me to him. He was a photographer, an artist, so he was there in his little boat. He was taking pictures and whatever. Then the next day he took me out to Pyramid Lake with this little boat. That's how we met.

What led you eventually buying your building on Fourth Street?

Well, he started the printing business, Art Marston Printing. He worked for the Catholic Church, actually, when I met him. They had a printing business out off of what is now McCarran, which was then the old Manogue High School location, in their big gymnasium there. They had set up a printing plant there to do their own printing for the Catholic Church, for brochures, sending out mailings for whatever they needed locally and so forth. They decided to do some printing for some of the church members, doctors and whatever, and they did that for a while, but then they were told that they couldn't do that because they were nonprofit. [laughter]

So Art decided that he would start his own printing business and was able to use those people as his customers, and the church donated, I think, a printing press and I can't remember just what he needed to start up. He rented a little space at 3400 Mill Street, which was kind of a Quonset hut, a metal building right at the end of the airport runway. I think we were there for about a year. It would get so cold that the ink would get hard and he'd heat it over a bucket of warm water. [laughter] It was really pretty primitive.

Then from there we moved to 132 West Street, right next to where the West Street Market is, actually where the bar is. That was like a little mall. There were four different businesses in there. There was a hallway and then there were four little businesses there. And the back room was the biggest room, and that was the one that we rented. Gradually, as each one of the other tenants moved out, we took over each room, until we made it to the front. [laughter] We had a front door, finally. This building was owned by Dorothy Benson, who also started and owned Arlington Gardens on Plumb Lane.

So we were there for quite a while because we bought the building over on Valley Road in 1974, so we were there probably seven or eight years on West Street. And we just needed a lot more space. Our neighbor, who found this building on Valley Road, was one of the McKenzie Construction people, and they were thinking of buying it, but then they decided they didn't want it. They were our next-door neighbors and told us about it. We immediately liked it when we saw it. It was in an estate. The owner had passed away and his wife wanted to sell it. So that's how we acquired it.

Do you know any of the history of the building?

Here's a funny story. I recently looked this up so I got the date right, if I can find it. I think it was in 1984 that we knew they were going to repave Valley Road, and we received a letter from the City of Reno, from the city engineer, and they had done all the surveying and had drawn up all their plans for the new road and everything, and they sent us this letter. Mind you, this building is a brick building. It's

8,000 square feet on the bottom and it goes right to the sidewalk. You've seen it.

So we get this letter and it says "To facilitate proposed improvements to Valley Road scheduled to commence by July 1984 and to clear the public right-of-way and private structures, the City of Reno requests that you remove your building from the Valley Road right-of-way as soon as possible." So somebody didn't go out and look to see what was there, but they essentially were telling us to move our building back about twelve inches.



The building at 420 Valley Road was constructed in 1939 for the Zellerbach Paper Company.
Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

[laughs] What did you guys do about that?

Well, what happened was I spent a lot of time up at the Historical Society because I knew that at one point before we bought the building—and I had never seen it—there was another building next door. So my idea was to prove that all the buildings on that street had that same line, and we couldn't find the benchmark or anything. Surveyors couldn't find it, so it turned out that neither one of us could prove where the line was, so I got my title insurance company involved in it and we finally ended up writing an agreement with the city, which is attached to the property description, that says as long as the building is there, we don't have to give back the twelve inches, but if the building is ever destroyed, then they get it back. [laughter] And of course they had to redraw all their plans. [laughter] But I kept this letter because I just thought it was just so funny.

I did know that this other building, Nevada Transfer and Warehouse, had been there before my building and that they had actually built my building at 420 Valley Road to provide a warehouse for Zellerbach Paper Company. They were the first tenants. Just recently because I was thinking of getting a

city historic designation for my building, just to see if that was possible, I did a little more research and came up with the fact that the original owner was Harry Stewart, who at one point or two different times was the mayor of Reno.

And this article is about their celebration in 1957 of their fiftieth year in business, Nevada Transfer and Warehouse. They started the business in 1907 and they were considered the first and one of the very largest delivery and trucking firms in the state. They had another location on Lake Street, but it says, however, their main place of business was in the same location that the company is today, 440 Valley Road. That's the location next door.

I don't know when that building was built, but it was torn down before we got there. By going through the city directories—we went through the city directories from 1939 on, because that's the year my building was built, and looked at the address 440—we determined that there were businesses there up until 1965, and then it said 440 was vacant. So I'm assuming that's about the time that it was torn down.

I did find a map that showed that my building and that building were considered all one building. That leads me to believe that I can claim that that ex-mayor owned my building at one point in time. But it became several different businesses after that, as different businesses moved in and out. It was mainly used, I think, for warehousing and that kind of thing.

It's built to be very sturdy. It's not on ground level because there were railroads that came in behind it. The two buildings were there. The railroads went in between the two of them in the back. I'm guessing that Zellerbach Paper Company unloaded paper off of those freight cars. So the building floor is railroad-car height. So it's not street level. I guess that's typical of a warehouse, that it would be up like that. And a loading dock in the back. When we bought it, it had been a building material supply company. So that's basically the history that I know.

Like I say, Harry Stewart was mayor—let's see, it says in here he was an alumnus of UNR, class of 1894. He was elected mayor of Reno from 1919 to 1923, and he was again elected for the 1943-'47 term. He was married to the former Annie Quinn in 1921. He built his home at 502 Island Avenue. Then the next year or a year or two later, Harry died and she ran the business. She tried to keep it going. This is in '58, so this is just a year later. It's an article saying that the company had been sold, was sold to Ellery Sabin, a moving and warehouse man from Michigan. I guess he continued to run it, and then Mayflower Moving was in there for a while. Then I don't know what happened after that until '65. So that's about all I know.

And you rent the building out now?

I'm trying to. [laughs] My husband died in 1986 and my son, Ron Marston, was working there with us at the time in the camera department. He was doing all the plates and negatives. We had probably about fourteen or fifteen employees at the time. My husband died fairly quickly after he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, and I kept running the business for two years, mainly because I was able to count on my son to be there.

But I knew that computerized printing was coming into play and I didn't know anything about it, so I knew I was going to have to sell it. I started working on that probably about a year after he died. I had to gear down to a smaller operation because it wasn't really profitable at the time, but then I turned it around a little bit and it was worth selling.

I sold it in 1988 to Valley Print and Mail, and I stayed there working. I was going to leave, but I stayed for about a year, as kind of a transitional thing. Then I was going to leave and the owner said, "Oh,

we were going to have you learn computer stuff.” They actually did direct mailing also, so they had databases they had to keep up and manage, so I said, “Gee, I think I’ll stay.” [laughter] And I did. I worked with a couple of other people and I learned. For ten years I sat at a computer and did data entry for them. So I was the landlord and the employee.

Interesting combination.

Very interesting. [laughs] So that was from ’89 to ’99, and I turned sixty-five in 2000. At that point they were going downhill and they owed me a lot of rent money, so I left when I turned sixty-five. A couple of months later I started [laughter] an eviction process on them, so they were out by January of 2001.

Then I rented it to somebody who was just warehousing some audio equipment and so forth, and they were a branch from the Bay Area, of Macro, and that’s what it still says on the building, Macro, and then when 9/11 happened and the economy went downhill, they were not doing well and they pulled out.

A little bit after that, a leasing management company found these two older guys who had sold old used office cubicle walls and file cabinets. I guess they had done pretty well before they moved in there, but they didn’t get along very well. One of them left and the other one kind of got too old, so he left. [laughs] And left me with lots of panels. So that was my first disaster. [laughs] Then it was vacant for a little while, and then Mike Steedman, who owned the bar across the street, was also in the house painting business, Truckee River Painting, rented it and he was there until about a year ago.

Now I have two young guys who are trying to set up a business in there. I just decided I wanted to see something different in there, not just warehousing, so I’m giving them a chance. I do have a lease with them. It’s for nothing, basically, but it binds them to the conditions of the lease. I’m giving them some time to try to start this up. Not forever. They know that. I have spent more than half my life dealing with that building, so it’s kind of attached to me sometimes, I think.

Are you involved or you were involved in the Reno Sparks Corridor Business Association as well?

Yes, from almost the beginning. They had actually started it before I knew about it, for various reasons. Originally it started because of the Wells overpass situation. They were going to replace that and they were going to close off the underpass, so some of the other businesses further down on Fourth Street, Landa Muffler and Levrett Transmission, Commercial Hardware, and some other people were in that, too. They started a business group to go to the City Council meetings and find out what was going on and make the report to them and so forth.

Twice, that happened. The first time they were successful in keeping the underpass open, and then the second time, I can’t remember why—whether they were doing repair on it or what the reason was—we couldn’t stop them from closing the underpass, but we did have an engineer who was part of our organization. He reminded the city that they still had the option to provide one more crossing at the railroad tracks, and I believe there was a crossing—it would have been the next one down at Sutro—Street. I think that’s how that came about. There was nowhere between Lake Street, I guess, and Coney Island drive which is now Galletti Way, to cross the tracks. So they were able to provide an extra crossing. It was a long stretch.

So they were able to do that. It was just kind of a loose organization. Whenever we needed to get together, we did.

Then, of course, the homeless situation came up and there were various places along Fourth Street where the city wanted to place the homeless shelters, and then more people got involved in it.

But we did some other things too. We always tried to address the people living in the motels along Fourth Street, especially the children. We started the “Christmas on the Corridor” parades, where we went up to Bavarian World—they were helpful in letting us use their kitchen to bake cookies—and one of our members’ ex-husband could get the boxes of unbaked cookies, so we did that and bagged them, and then we collected toys. We went out on flatbed trucks on snowy cold days. [laughter] We’d send out flyers ahead of time that we were coming, went to all the motels along Fourth Street, and the kids came out. It was fun. We started that and are still doing it, actually, but the sheriff’s department has kind of taken it over now. But we did that for many years.

The manager of what was then Holiday Inn was a member, and he was able to let us use the pool area for a Father’s Day get-together for the dads and kids on Fourth Street, with hot dogs, so we did that. We also did a Mother’s Day event where the girls could bring their moms or the kids could bring their moms, and we gave them a carnation and brunch there. So that was nice to do.

We tend to do things like that along with complaining to the city. [laughter] But when the trench came along and they realized that the city could take over R Supply building on Record Street, that pretty much ended all that. That was pretty much a done deal. I’m still the treasurer, have been for, I don’t know, twenty years, to perpetuity. [laughs] Gaye Canepa, up at Fred’s Auto, is still the president. It’s still kind of a loose organization.

A lot of times we’ve talked about what we could do on Fourth Street to revitalize it, and realized that we could not do it alone. It takes the city to give us some help, and, of course, the city now has no money. They did put up the lights, if you’ve ever been down there at night, five or six years ago, something like that. They put all the streetlights down there, so now it looks like an airport runway. [laughter] It really does. And that’s very helpful, because, you know, you don’t want to have the dark area there.

But it’s always amazed me, I guess because I’m so familiar with the area, that so many people in Reno just think of it as this horrible, terrible, dirty, crime-ridden area, and I don’t see it that way. I’ve never had a problem being down there. I know there are some fights that go on probably in the bars and so forth, but especially where I am on Valley Road, it’s not that far from downtown.

And with the city bus station moving over a block and then the Events Center and now the baseball stadium, there are more people walking around there. So it’s not as bad as people think it is. [laughter]

What kind of suggestions would you have for improving the area?

The best thing I think that could happen, because I’ve seen this done in other places, is for a developer to come in. By coincidence, there happens to be an East Fourth Street in Berkeley, which is right near the railroad there, and a developer did that, came over, bought a block-full of buildings and revitalized it, put little shops in there and so forth. It took a while. On the second block he did the same thing; it didn’t take quite as long. So gradually, he established a very nice little shopping area there that’s a fun place to go to.

But I think because of what I’ve seen when we’ve had our meetings with the group, everybody has a different idea, and they don’t like so-and-so’s idea. So it’s impossible. Nobody down there has that kind of money to do anything. Some of those buildings are still owned by other people who rent them out,

and that's their source of income, but they don't have the energy or time to do any major project like that.

I think that would be the best thing that could happen, for some developer to come in. I don't see it like Cal Avenue or even Midtown. They are smaller businesses that are more people-friendly. Fourth Street tends to be more the mechanics and the Martin Iron Works and businesses like that, that just don't adapt to walk-in traffic like that.

It would be a little different kind of thing. It's very hard for small businesses to come into the area to start a business because it was all so industrial, and I know this firsthand because my neighbor came in from out of state and wanted to open a little model train store, and he had to go through all kinds of hoops to get the permits and change the zoning and all that kind of thing. Meanwhile, the RSCBA was working with the city to rezone that whole area to commercial from industrial, and they made a deal with us that if we hired the engineer and drew all the plans and everything, they would waive all the fees to do it. So they did, and it worked well. That was probably fifteen years ago.

Martin Iron Works was a special zone area, and the hotel had to be separate because it had gaming in it, but it made it much easier for businesses to come in there and get their zoning requirements. It also put restrictions on the kind of businesses, like no more mobile-home parks—we did put some restrictions in there. We also suggested that they try to keep the original architecture theme, the brick buildings, because in so many of those buildings the brick came from Reno Press Brick. If you look down there, you'll see a lot of them that have the same kind of design on them, on the roofs and so forth. So that was another thing our Reno-Sparks Corridor Business Association did accomplish.

Even though the city said they would never change it, the city has now changed it, and divided that area. I think from Wells Avenue over, it's a separate area, and from Wells to the west, we're considered part of downtown now, I believe. They have changed it somewhat.

And is there anything else you'd like to add? Your experiences or memories?

I have a lot of memories of the street. Of course I remember some of the old businesses. Commercial Hardware was our favorite place because whenever we needed anything for maintenance or repair on our building, we just walked across the street, and it was there. I remember when we moved in there, across the street from us, which is now where the temporary fire station is, was the old Albers Feed and Seed building, which was just like a huge barn, a big wooden barn. I think they had moved out, but the building was still there and it was a huge fire hazard, and I believe it was condemned. At first I thought it burned down, but I think maybe it was just destroyed on purpose, to get it out of there. Then that property became part of R Supply. They used it for their parking lot.

They let us use it, too, a little bit, for our truck. A lot of those businesses have been there for a long time, on those two blocks, actually, most of the way to Sutro.

We talked about trying to get little signs that say "Lincoln Highway" on them in Reno, but we never were successful. Up until fairly recently, Fourth Street was still part of the Federal Highway System. I don't remember exactly when that changed, but I think around the time that the Silver Legacy was built, because they built that overpass over the street. I think they somehow got around that.

I don't think it's still part of the Federal Highway System anymore, but there's no reason why we shouldn't have it marked. I think Lincoln Highway wound around a lot in Reno. I've seen many different descriptions of where it went. I know it went down Fourth Street and then at some point it came south, I think maybe on Sierra, and over First Street, down past Riverside Drive and then through Idlewild Park. It made a sort of roundabout route and then eventually came out on Old Highway 40, out on West Fourth

Street.

If you've ever been out on your way to Verdi, there's an overlook—it's a scenic viewpoint coming east into Reno, and it overlooks that little valley there. There are two cement pillars on either side, and they have the letters carved, "Lincoln Highway." That is part of the original highway.

Oh, neat.

JOHN MAYER

Retired Teacher, Sparks



John Mayer on Prater Way. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

John Mayer's great-grandparents on his mother's side arrived in Sparks in the 1890s, while his father's parents moved there with the relocation of the Southern Pacific railroad shops from Wadsworth. Mayer vividly describes growing up in Sparks in the 1940s and 1950s. He taught for the Washoe County School District, and served for seventeen years on the Sparks City Council and the Board of the Regional Transportation Commission, which named the new RTC Centennial Plaza after him in 2009.

Alicia Barber: I'm here with John Mayer at the RTC offices in Reno. The date is November 26, 2013, and we're doing an interview for the 4th Street-Prater Way History Project. First I want to ask you, Mr. Mayer, do I have your permission to record this interview?

John Mayer: Absolutely.

Great. Thank you. I'd like to begin by asking how far back your family has lived in Nevada and when they arrived here.

Well, on my mother's side, my grandmother and great-grandparents came to Nevada from Oklahoma in a Studebaker wagon, and they first settled in Fallon and then they moved to Sparks in the 1890s, somewhere around there, and started a little ranch. In fact, the old ranch house is still standing on G Street. My brother has since built apartments around the old ranch. He has about forty-three apartments there.

Are there any other ranch buildings left there?

No. They've torn down most of them to put in the apartments, but the ranch house is still there.

Did your relatives build the house?

Yes. Actually, my mother's great-grandfather built it.

Your mother's great-grandfather? You go very far back in Nevada.

And likewise with my father's family. My grandfather, when he was fifteen, hired out on the Southern Pacific Railroad in Wadsworth, where the terminal was and the transfer station. Then they moved it to Sparks, and they chose lots for the houses. My family was chosen eighth. They moved their rooming house there, and it was a big white building right by the grandstand, two-story. They rented rooms to people coming from Roseville to Sparks who would then turn around and go back to Roseville. They rented a room for a dollar a night, and they would pay with silver dollars. My grandfather worked on the railroad, and so they kept the silver dollars, and hence they accumulated three complete sets. But they were all missing one silver dollar from a complete set, and it was the same one in all three sets. So they've been here a long time. In fact, my grandfather and grandmother were married in that house.

So they lived in the same house where they boarded people?

Yes, where they boarded people, they lived there. Then my father was actually born on Pyramid Way across from the Catholic church, because my grandmother was at church and went into labor with him and went across to a friend's house and delivered there. My mother was born on Sullivan Lane, which was out in the country on a ranch, because my grandmother was visiting there, and we kid all the time that my mother was born in a chicken coop, because there were chicken coops there, but that wasn't necessarily true. So they both were born in Sparks, actually, because it was too far to go to Reno to the hospital.

What were your parents' parents' names on either side?

J.J. Mayer, John Joseph Mayer, and Mona Mayer were my father's mother and father. On my mother's side, they called her Lottie Vulgamore, and Jess Vulgamore. But my grandmother was a Kormeyer, and that's who built the ranch and stuff, and then she married Vulgamore, Jess Vulgamore, and they had my mother and a son by the name of Jess. Both of them are passed away now.

Did you know both sets of grandparents?

Oh, yes. See, that's one thing I liked about Sparks, because when I was a kid, I could go down to see my grandparents on both sides. I could walk there. Likewise, when my kids were little, they could go to my parents' and my wife's parents' house. Nowadays, grandkids, their grandparents, maybe one set's in Pennsylvania, one's in Florida or something. So it was really, really a neat way to grow up.

Did you know your great-grandparents at all?

I knew my great-grandmother. I knew her, but briefly.

That was your great-grandmother, which one?

On my mother's side.

I would imagine living here that many generations, growing up, seeing all the changes in Sparks, you must see Sparks very differently than people who are new arrivals.

Yes. In fact, Bernie Anderson, who's an assemblyman, and I both started at Robert Mitchell together. And we don't say, "Mrs. Jones' house," anymore; we say, "Mrs. Kladuski had that house." So we call it the Kladuski house, you know, when we're referring to houses and talking about things.

And that would be the older family that was there?

Yes. The Lockridges' house has changed owners about ten times since Lockridges lived there, but we still call it the Lockridge house.

The reason Sparks was so good, we used to have block parties, and it was quite an international community because a lot of people from different nationalities worked on the railroad. So we'd have block parties, and they would bring their ethnic food, so the Andersons brought Irish stew, and Maldonados brought some Spanish food. The Italians, Puccinelli, would bring spaghetti. We used to put tables in the street and play games, Kick the Can. You know, kids don't play like we did when we were kids. Hide and Seek, Kick the Can, all those kind of games. And it was really an evening that I have fond memories of. The clean-up committee would clean up, and people would play cards or board games, Monopoly or some of those games, when the sun went down. This would be in the summer, naturally, because it was outside.

But it connected the neighborhood, and now people don't know their neighbors. They really don't. And I think that's one of the things that we're losing in our culture. When I was a kid, if Mrs. Jones saw me pick grapes at the grocery store, she corrected me. My mother wouldn't say, "What's the idea of correcting my son?" It was, "Thank you for helping me and letting me know." Now if you correct a kid that isn't yours, you'd better watch out, you might get sued. So we're losing that part of our culture, and it's sad. It really is sad.

But it was a close-knit family. So my grandmother and my mother's side, they all went to Robert Mitchell, and then my dad and mom both went to Robert Mitchell. In fact, they were elementary sweethearts. My mother went away for nursing training at Stockton, and that was the only time that they were ever apart, but my dad would drive over the hill to see her and stuff like that. So it was a neat time growing up in Sparks.

So they knew each other as kids, and grew up together.

Yes.

Did they get married rather young?

No. She finished nursing school and then they got married.

I like to tell this story. When I grew up, there were deer at Deer Park—actual deer running around outside of where it is now. The pool's in kind of the upper part, and there were deer out there. When they opened the pool, on Memorial Day of 1942, there were three pregnant ladies there. They have a shot at the museum. I do believe it's still there. It was when I volunteered there. There was Sybil Kramer, and Jack was the boy. And my mother and the Lessingers. So we all would say we were at the opening at the Deer Park Pool, although we weren't born until June and July. They called themselves the "Beer-Belly Beauties," because they have a picture of these three pregnant ladies at the opening of the pool. And that's where I learned how to swim, and we used to have great times. In fact, I have an oil painting of Deer Park in my house.

I live in the house I started kindergarten from.

You live in the house now?

Yes.

Where is the house?

It's on the corner of F and 12th. I added on to it. I bought the property next door and rented it out a lot, and then when my girls were in middle school, the renter left, so I thought I'd have them use that. But it was in such bad shape, we tore it down and added a wing to our house there.

So is that the house where you lived throughout your childhood?

No, I lived there till I was in the sixth grade, and then I moved over to Pyramid Way. My parents had a house built on the corner of Pyramid and G. Actually, it's where G comes in. We sold it after they

passed away, and it's been remodeled. It's a tax office now, but it was a brick house. Hancock built it. That's where I went from sixth grade on.

They rented the house I live in for about thirty years, so we always say the renters paid for it. Then when I got married, I had a condo over on York, and I got married, and the little lady who was renting it died, so I went in and redid it, refurbished it, modernized the inside, and then I bought it from my parents. I've been there for, oh, thirty-five years. More than that. I've been married for forty years, and I'd say thirty-nine years we've been there. We started a family there.

So when you were talking about the block parties, was that at the Pyramid Way house or the other house before that?

No, that was the 12th Street house, earlier. When we went to Pyramid, it was only a two-lane road and there was dirt on each side. We didn't have block parties, but the neighbors in back of us, they had a cul-de-sac back there. Two streets came together with a big circle, and they'd have block parties there and we'd be invited to them, although we weren't really in that neighborhood. But in a way we were because we played with the kids and stuff.

Was the road called Pyramid Way at the time?

Yes. Pyramid was a state highway and it still is today. At the south end were the railroad yards, and you'd come in there, and you'd have to cross Highway 40 and you'd go in there. The guys would go out and on the train. The shop, the roundhouse, where they have two guys from Wooster moving company, that was the roundhouse, and it was huge. That's where they would do the steam engines and put them together and send them over the mountain.

There was a big pile of sand, because they would put a lot of sand on them to get over the mountain, and we'd play King of the Mountain on there until the security guys—they used to call them the "bulls"—would come and make us get off. They were security guys that would watch the trains to make sure people didn't get in and take free rides or steal stuff. Those sand piles were huge and they were fun. It was pure sand, and we'd climb up and play King of the Mountain and stuff like that. It was great times.

In fact, I had a picture that I think my brother had, and I didn't find it when he died, but I have a picture that was of a ditch that ran down B Street, Highway 40, along the side. We had a picture of my Uncle Jack, and he had a fish as tall as he was. He caught it in that ditch. But that went away. That wasn't there when I was a kid, because they had a park there.

Sparks was very unique. It had businesses only on the north side of the street, and then the reserve was on the south, and they had a parkway all the way down the middle with a grandstand. President Truman, when he was running for office, gave a speech from that grandstand. And, of course, being a working town, we had Labor Day celebrations and all that, and labor was big. All the ladies had hankies waving. Then he gave a speech, and then we all got in cars and followed him to Reno, and he gave a speech on Virginia Street, where the tracks went across Virginia Street.

The train went and waited up there, and then he came and he gave a speech from the back of a train. That's what had a lot of effect on him winning president, because he stopped at places like Lovelock, Winnemucca, Elko. Everywhere the train went, all the little towns in America, he would stop and give speeches and stuff, and, of course, it was a surprise that he won, but that's how he won, was he

went there. I can still remember that. In fact, we have some old movies someplace of the ladies were standing on our grandparents' rooming house waving their hankies, because everybody was Democrat because it was a union town. But it was quite the celebration, and that was on the grandstand there.

Then one other story I like to tell is about the corner of Prater and 15th. It was kind of like the industrial area, and if you see Saag's Market, it's still there. That was a place called the Rock Cave, and the rocks are pretty well gone now, but it was a little grocery store. They had a big, big, long candy counter, and it was huge. We'd get our allowance, my brother and sister. We each got a dime. We'd go down there, and they had what was called penny candy. They had little cowboy hats and they had those little wax things with juice in them, that you could bite off and drink, and all kinds. We'd spend a half an hour thinking of what we wanted. Of course, we got ten pieces for our dime, see. So we could take one of each. In fact, the daughter of the family that owned is still around. Her name's Marge Edgington. I forget her husband's name. She used to be a teacher at Verdi, too. It was quite the place.

Then across the street where the Dairy Queen is now, they had the Dairy Queen and then a little hamburger stand. Then they tore them down and combined them. The Dairy Queen used to take a vacation in the winter, because you didn't sell much ice cream, and so a celebration for our family was to go to the Dairy Queen and have banana splits the day they opened.

Then where the Rock Cave was—there's an empty lot there now, it used to have a carwash on it—there was a thing called the Midget Kitchen, and they were very good to kids. They would sponsor Little League teams and they would do a lot of things. They used to sell four hamburgers and a quart of root beer for dollar. So we'd go down. Even when I was in high school, you'd go there for lunch. If each kid put in a quarter, and you had four kids, you got the root beer and a hamburger for a quarter.



The Midget Kitchen, which once stood on 15th Street just south of Prater Way, appears in this advertisement in the 1962 Sparks High School yearbook, *Terminus*. Photo courtesy of Sparks Museum and Cultural Center.

The guy that owned it was such a nice guy, and after our Little League games and stuff, he'd bring us french fries and hamburgers. You knew everybody. In those days, you weren't the Cardinals or the Pirates or whatever like they do now. You'd be the Midget Kitchen Volunteers or whatever. They'd come up with some names.

Where Rock Boulevard is now, 18th Street went through there, and the stockyards were there. They were a big supporter of activities. They had a team called the Stockman Bullets, and I played for them one year. You knew everybody. You knew the people that sponsored it. Ed Richards had the stockyards and he was mayor of Sparks, and you knew him. You knew everybody.

In fact, his daughter, Carol Smith, used to teach at Robert Mitchell. If you haven't interviewed her, she might be a good one on the early politics, because Richards Way is named after her dad. It's probably under Carol Smith, because her husband she met, he played for the Reno Silver Socks and he went into professional baseball. Then he came back and worked in the Block S, which was a sporting goods store on Victorian Avenue, B Street. I still call it B Street. But it was quite the thing. Then across the way was the Park Grocery, and it had a motel connected to it. The Reinhardts owned it, and they were very supportive, and it was a neat little grocery store.

People don't know this or a lot of them don't remember it, but there's still an alley on the other side of the Dairy Queen that goes back. From there to the other street there was a service station on the corner, but there was a motel and it was called the Poplar Motel, like Poplar trees. The McClouds owned it, and it was really popular because it was like a park setting. They had big grass out there and they had volleyball nets and they had beautiful trees and everything. A lot of people stopped there for the night before going over to California or whatever. It was a very popular motel.

When they made Victorian or B Street go straight across, and they cut off that little "V" of Highway 40, they weren't on the highway anymore, but they put up a sign on B Street that said the "Poplar Motel" and a big arrow pointing down. So they did stay in business for quite some time, but now there are apartments there.

That faced Prater Way on the west side of where the Dairy Queen is?

On the west side, yes. It was on the south side of Prater Way. It was across the street from the Park Grocery. And then the Park Motel, it was called, was there across the street.

I get a sense of a lot of family-owned businesses, very family-friendly businesses.

Yes.

Does it seem like people would just walk all over the place?

Yes, you'd just walk to wherever you were going, or a lot of people would have bicycles with baskets on the top. You'd see old ladies going down to the grocery, because down on B Street, you had Sewell's Market. You had Semenza's, and Semenza's was a great place too. They had candy in the window, but not as luscious as the Rock Cave. There were bars, of course, down there, and it was all on the north side of the street. They had a bar that was called Mona's Rendezvous, and my grandmother's name was Mona, so we always would tease her.



The Poplars Motel - 1525 Prater Way - Sparks, Nevada

The Poplars Motel, once at 1525 Prater Way in Sparks. Postcard courtesy of Dick Dreiling.

Then there was a shoe repair place. The library was down there where the museum is now. Then on the outside, on the other side between where the library was and Pyramid, there was a bar and then there was a shoe place there, too, a shoe repair, a hock shop, where you'd go in and hock stuff. Then on the next corner there was a big laundry, Sparks Laundry. Next to it was a place called D&N Bar and Restaurant. Railroaders would get off the train and they'd go there and have breakfast. My dad always used to say, because he was a railroader, "We like eating there because the kitchen was out and you could see them cook, and you could see if they'd drop food on the floor." It was very popular, and there was a cook in there by the name of Marlia, who was just a great guy. In fact, he was an accordion player.

I played the accordion and Frank Greco was a big accordion guy, and we used to have floats in all the parades, playing accordion, and a lot of kids would have that. I used to play "Lady of Spain" in seven different keys. People would think it was a different song each time, you know. [laughter] But it was big. So on weekends, Saturday night, they'd have dances there and he'd play his accordion at the dances. I can remember once dinner was over, kids you couldn't stay and do the dancing and the drinking stuff, but you left. So that was really a neat thing.

Did you learn to play accordion in school?

No, no. I took lessons from Frank Greco. My mother would put me on a stool and I'd play the accordion. My dad would take me down—he had a favorite bar called the Silver Dollar Bar that was across from where the Nugget is, and he'd put me on a stool and have me playing the accordion. He'd put a hat out, and they'd put coins in it. I'd get them to put them in my piggybank. Every once in a while, he'd grab some money, buy a beer for himself, you know. But that was the kind of place it was—and I knew everybody, you know. It was just a great time.

In fact, next to the bus station that's there now, Ascuaga's Nugget was the first one on that side, except an insurance company opened a little office. But to celebrate moving the Nugget from the north side where they had a twelve-seat counter, when they expanded and they moved to the other side, they had a flagpole sitter, and they had a big thing that looked like a golden nugget, where he was going for the world record. His name, I think, was "Wild Bill" Howard. Anyway, he had a walkie-talkie, and they'd put his food on a pulley, and the waste would come down on a pulley.

The kids would come by and talk. There were three of us. One of my friends had older brothers, so we had this prank, see, and we got a bunch of chainsaws, because it was on a big wooden pole, see. [laughter] We'd talk to him almost every day. It was a big, big thing. We got about three or four chainsaws, and we got on there and we said, "We're tired of you being up there. You're not going to get the record. We're going to saw you down." So we just started the chainsaws.

"I'm going to call the cops! I'm going to call the cops!" So he called the Sparks Police Department, and the chief that later became chief was like a sergeant then. His name was Tommy Hill. He would be like the DeMolay advisor for the boys. It was a boys' club, and we would play softball, and he'd pitch. So he answered the call, and he came down and he got on the walkie-talkie, and he says, "I can't get these boys in trouble. They're good kids. They're just joking with you."

He said, "Well, have them turn off the saw."

Ascuaga probably could tell you more about that. I think it was "Wild Bill" Howard. It was quite the thing.

Were you in high school at the time?

Yes. We used to have great times, great times. We had a lot of old family homes that businesses have taken off of, and there was a family home right across from Deer Park to the north. Gary Swall's parents owned it, and it's where that Grand Auto is now. They took some of those houses. The Grand Auto building actually was a Safeway. Their home was there.

I used to win bets, because they had a fig tree, and you'd say to Californians or whatever, they'd say, "You can't grow anything in Nevada."

And I'd say, "Well, I'll bet you we got fig trees."

"Oh, you couldn't have fig trees in Nevada." So you'd take them over and here's figs. Now there's still one fig tree that bears fruit on the corner of—it's maybe E and 16th, at the Diandas, unless they've cut it down since, a fig tree.

Those were really nice homes, but then Safeway offered them more than what they wanted for them.

It sounds like that area around the park had always been a very desirable area to live. The first reference that I found to Deer Park at all was trying to advertise it as a place for housing in "East Reno" at that point. I remember reading about the deer. I didn't know that there would be actual deer around there as late as the forties or even fifties. Were they in a pen at all? How is that possible?

The bath house is the same. They put on new siding and stuff, but it's the same. Where the fence is now that goes around the pool, well, there was another fence around that.

Just a larger one around it?

Yes. And the deer were in there.

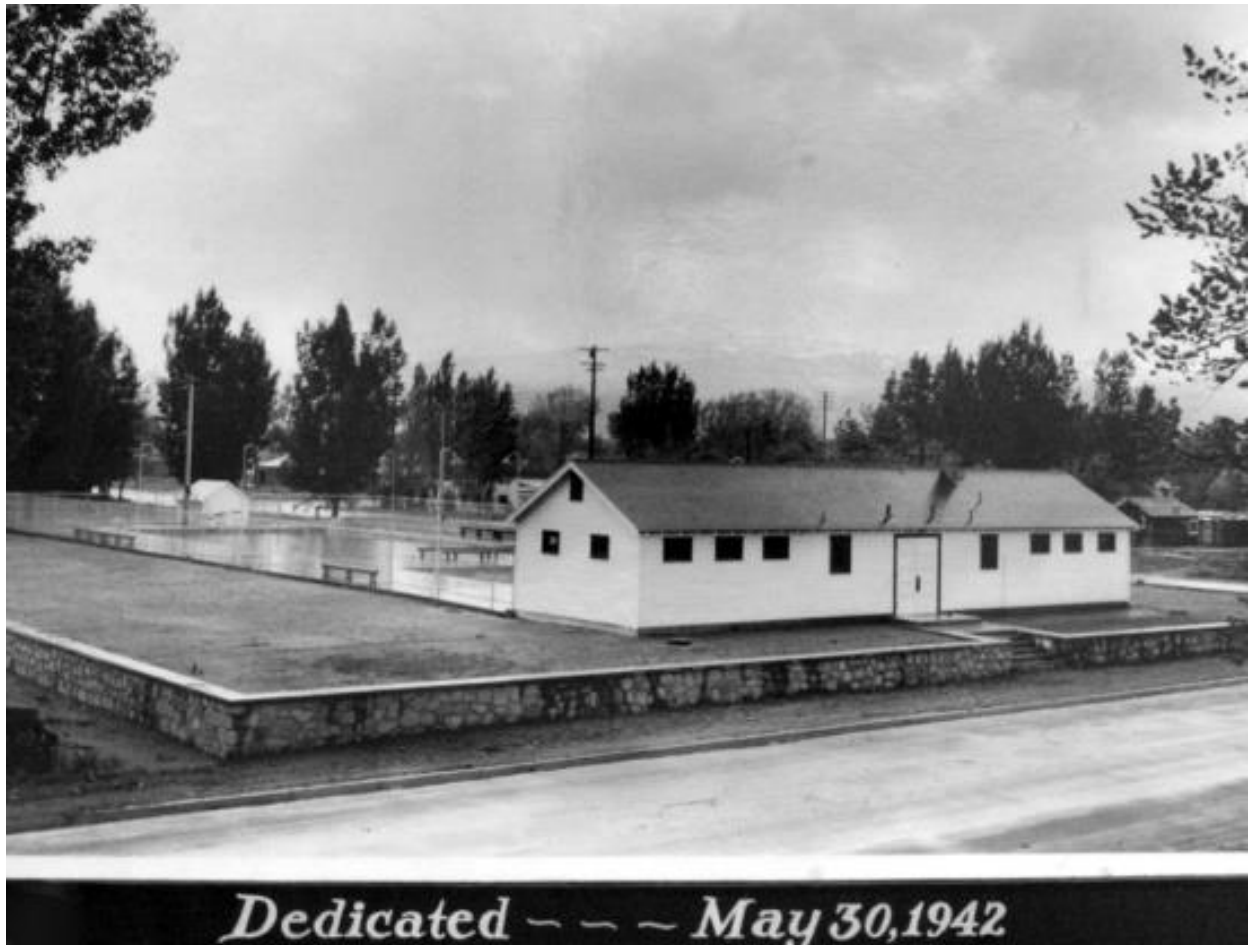
Do you have any idea who took care of them or how many there were?

No, I don't know. I do know that kids would feed them apples and stuff like that. That would be your fun time, would be to go feed the deer. It's just like a lot of people don't realize that at Idlewild Park, there was a zoo. A lot of people don't realize that, but they had bears and everything in there.

And buffalo, or bison.

Deer Park was a really a major thing for our community.

You mentioned swimming there. Were there other events that happened there, too, that you recall?



The pool at Deer Park in Sparks was dedicated on May 30, 1942.
Photo courtesy Sparks Museum and Cultural Center.

Oh, yes. They used to have Labor Day celebrations there on Labor Day, and, of course, school started the next Tuesday. They have the rib cook-off now, but that weekend was a big celebration for labor, and they'd have booze and everything, and they'd have contests and they'd have auctions and they'd have beard-growing contests, mustache contests.

Square dancing was big. In fact, my fifth-grade teacher, Inez Gillis, she would have us go to the old Methodist Church basement and she'd teach us how to square dance after school. Then we'd go to Rotary Club and all the clubs and stuff. In fact, we performed at the Sky Room at the Mapes Hotel, and they used to have this show that was called "Be My Guest." Betty Stoddard and our class would go and square dance on the TV show. It was quite a deal, and she was great. She went on to be a principal at Greenbrae Elementary School, but she was a great fifth-grade teacher.

But on Labor Day, the kids would initiate the freshmen coming into the school, you know, make them do strange things, take a bite of a garlic and stuff like that. It was quite something.

Oh, really. Hazing. [laughter]

Yes, it was hazing. They'd get in trouble for bullying nowadays. It makes me laugh, because there's always been good teasing. It wouldn't matter what you looked like, they could give you a teasing nickname. If you were overweight, "Chubby," or if you had freckles, "Spotty." My sister was so thin that they used to call her "Rattle Rattle," that her bones would rattle when she walked and stuff. But it was good. It wasn't vicious. And I guess that's what the difference is, it's vicious now with the cyber bullying and stuff. But a lot of times we'd have nicknames for kids. This German kid, they called him "German." Now you'd probably get in trouble for that.

So I'm glad I grew up when I did. I always tell the story, my uncle was our favorite uncle. He was a bachelor until he came back from Korea, and then he got married. But we loved him and he'd spoil us. Especially my younger brother, he took him up to feed the billy goats and stuff like that. Well, he came home and gave David—told him goodbye and everything. Well, David followed him and got lost. But we had a little dog named Tippy that was our guardian. He'd walk back and forth when my brother—he was only about four—walked down to B Street, and he was lost, of course. The *Sparks Tribune*—which still in business; in fact, I delivered the *Sparks Tribune* when I was a kid—but, anyway, they found him crying. They not only knew who he was, they knew the phone number. In those days, 2468 was our phone number and our license plate number was the same, by just coincidence. I don't know. But at least we only had to know 2468. But they knew exactly and called my mother, and she came and went and got him. That's the way it was.

Talking about the Rock Cave, my brother went down there and he took a couple pieces of candy, and Shirley Wedow, who was one of my mother's friends, caught him. So she told my mother. Well, my mother went down there and says, "We're really sorry," and she paid for the candy bars or whatever it was that he took. And she said, "He will be down here every Saturday until he makes up for it in cleaning and sweeping the floors and stuff like that." Every Saturday he went down there. They opened at ten. He worked eight hours for three Saturdays. And that's the way it was.

And that's what this culture is really—we think "my kid," when we should be thinking "our kids." Really, it's a different world now, and I realize that. When we'd go into a restaurant, for example, and if we had a hat on, my mother would say, "Take off that hat." You never wore a hat inside the building. The Catholic church, when the women would go, if they forgot their hat, they'd put a hanky on top of their head. It was just different.

That's the whole thing with the parades and things like that. In fact, the hometown Christmas parade's a good thing, it is, but it was nothing like the Jack's Carnival Parade. Jack's Carnival had a parade that went down 15th Street and went down Prater to Deer Park and then they had a big carnival. That was what it is, and it was based on fairytales like "Jack and the Beanstalk," and all the Jacks that were in fairytales. The kids would dress up in costume. In fact, my mother was in the first one when she was in first grade. She was a fairy princess.

You'd go down, and then they'd have a big carnival. It was a money-raising project for the hot-lunch program, and what that was, was to furnish paper bowls, napkins and eating utensils, plastic forks and stuff. A mother would come, like on Monday, and she'd cook her specialty, usually some type of ethnic food, like one would be spaghetti on Monday, then the next day it would be goulash. Each day it'd be different, and then they'd rotate it. The money they made in Jack's Carnival would go to help the mothers furnish the food for the hot-lunch programs.

Then maybe when I was in about sixth grade, they came in and did it with a kitchen and hired people and did it that way, but they still had Jack's Carnival to raise funds for the different schools. At one time, elementary schools were in it and the high school bands were in it. They did away with it here recently.



A Jack's Carnival parade on B Street (now Victorian Avenue) in 1930. Photo courtesy of Neal Cobb.

So you remember it all the way through when you were in grade school through high school?

Oh, yes, I can remember it all. In fact, I can remember in sixth grade I was a traffic patrol guy, so we led the parade with our little stop flags and everything. Our class dressed in Jack and the Beanstalk costumes, and I was so mad because I had to lead the parade with the flag, and I couldn't wear a Jack and the Beanstalk costume. But it was that way all the way through.

Now, once you got into intermediate school, seventh grade, you weren't part of it too much until you got into high school, in the band. In fact, I played the tuba in the band in high school, and it happened that Shirley Wedow, who I mentioned before, was standing on the corner of the street with my mother and the band's coming down, and it was pretty long. It started around 4th Street and came down and then it followed the highway. They closed it down. My mother's standing there, and she says, "Look at that, Shirley. Everybody's out of step but my son John." [laughter] That was something they were kidding me for till they died. My dad would always kid me. But stuff like that was fun and it was great times and it was great places, all of those places.

All of the schools that you attended were pretty close to each other.

Yes.

Did you walk to school through all your years?

Yes. In fact, when we moved over to Pyramid Way, I was going to the intermediate school. The house is still there. It's a big white house behind the theater, and it's got a copper roof on it now and everything. You've probably seen it if you've gone to the movies. Big white house. The band director, it was his house, Mr. Kissell.

So I went and I forgot my tuba, and I turned around and went back. So my dad said, "When did you realize you had forgotten your tuba?" Because it was pretty big, you know.

I says, "When I got to Mr. Kissell's house." So you knew everything. See, you knew the people. You knew where teachers lived.

At first, when I was in first or second grade, the Korean War was going on, and there was a teacher, her name was Katherine Dunn. She's got a school named after her now. But she lived behind in some apartments. She had half of the apartments and another person had the other, and it was like in a horseshoe, and there was a bar in the front. She rented an apartment to a gal that taught with me, Lena Juniper, because her husband was in the war, and he since went on to be a general and everything. Doug Bunington is his name. He's still alive. And you knew that's where Mrs. Bunington lived was above Katherine Dunn's. So it was really kind of neat.

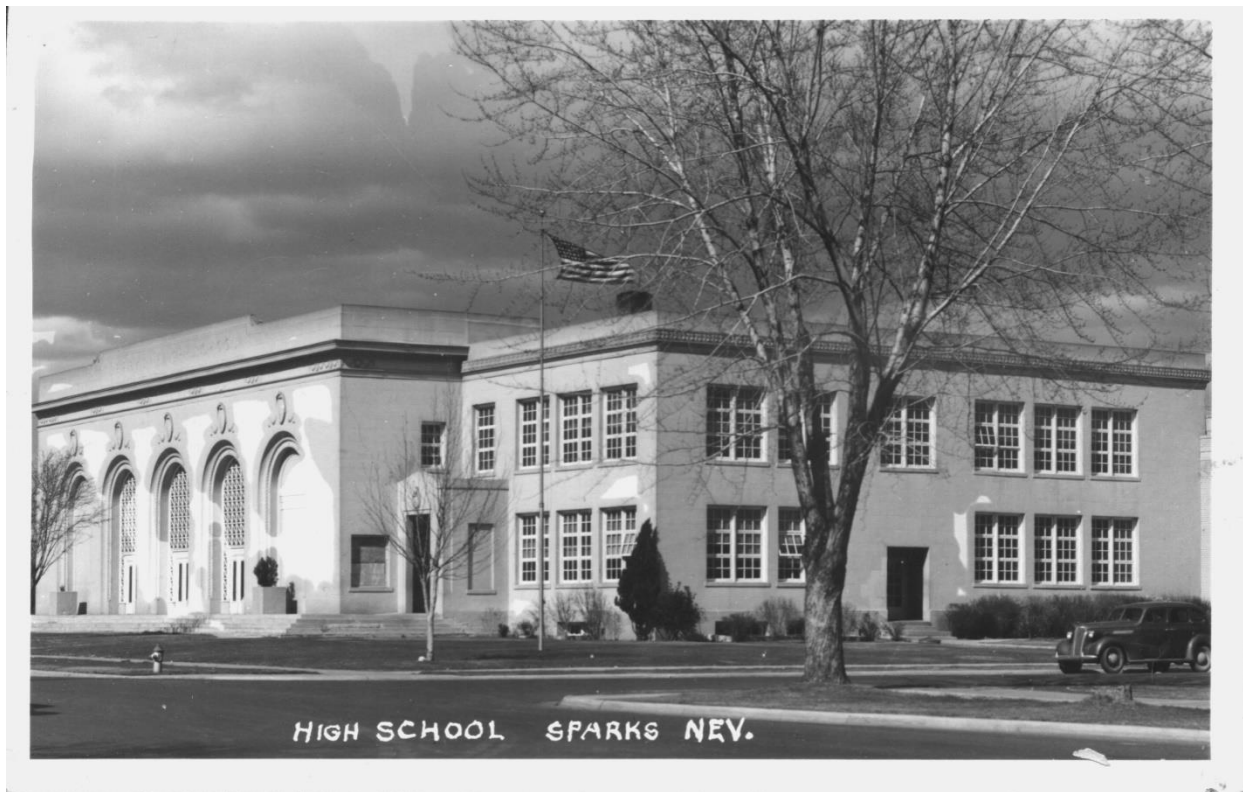
Was there only one intermediate school when you went to school?

Yes. When the high school opened, they changed it from a junior high and high school and shared the same, and, in fact, there were two wings. The gym was on one of them, and the junior high was down, and then the auto shop and wood shop were here. In junior high, you had wood shop and it was there, and you shared it with the high school. Then on the other side was the auditorium where we had a stage and everything, and then there were classes above it.

There was a superintendent of the Sparks School District, because they did not merge until like 1955 or something like that. Procter Hug was the superintendent of Sparks School District and he had his offices upstairs there. Then the principal had his offices across in the junior high. But it was all one. There was one principal for the whole thing.

Prior to that, was there no intermediate school? I'm trying to get the chronology of the schools.

The schools were K through six until the high school opened. Then they started what they called the intermediate, and it was the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth, and then ninth to twelfth was at the high school north of where it is now.



The original Sparks High School built in 1917 on 15th Street. It served as the high school until 1953.
Postcard courtesy of Dick Dreiling.

That high school was new when you began attending, right?

Brand new, yes.

What was that like? Did it appear very new and modern?

Oh, it was wonderful. Yes, it was great. See, before it was built, the football team dressed in that school, and then the football field was where it is now, and there was no school. In fact, that was all like swamp around there, and, in fact—

North of Prater?

Yes. They used to have a big pond on 12th Street where the library is now and the baseball fields are now, right there where the Sparks Library is.

Then upstream, Brunetti's had a fish hatchery, and us rotten kids, we went up there one time and we opened the gate from the fish hatchery and let the fish go down to the pond. Of course, we shut it and everything, and then we'd go and catch fish in the pond. [laughter]

So one day we were taking Frankie Brunetti, who was in our class, fishing with us and everything. They had little tags on the fish at the hatchery there, the fish farm. They would identify the weight and keep track of the weight and everything, and then they'd sell it by the pound, see. Like if you wanted fish for dinner, you'd go over there and you could get fresh fish.

Well, he caught one with one of these tags on. "How'd that fish get in here?" [laughter] So they figured out what we'd done, so they made it more secure. Instead of just the gate pulling up, they kind of locked it. We used to do stuff like that. We used to have fun. It didn't hurt anybody.

So that hatchery was intended for people to buy directly from it?

It was a private one, yes. It was not a Fish and Game hatchery. Even nowadays they have them around. But it was a private one where they'd raise fish and take it to market and stuff like that.

Why was it connected to that pond to begin with?

You know where Paradise Pond is now? The ditch used to come in there and go through that property, and they used the water. Then it'd come down into 12th Street pond there. Then there was another ditch came around, and where Robert Mitchell is now, it would come around, and then it'd go by that 12th Street pond, and then it went up and it split in two at Pyramid Way. There was no Oddie Boulevard, but right about where Oddie Boulevard is now, it would go north and up that way, and it would go to Greenbrae Shopping Center, which was not a shopping center. It was an airport. If you go there where the hardware store is now and look at it, that was a hangar. Look at the building and you can tell that it was a hangar. People don't know that.

The other one turned and went right in front of our house on Pyramid Way, and then it would go south and then it'd cross Prater and it went along by the City Hall and out to the farms and stuff that way, see. It all was for irrigation. In fact, the Orr Ditch that's still up there, most of them are covered now, like the one in front of my house on Pyramid was covered.

Where City Hall is now used to be a field. It was called Burgess Field. Well, when they put the City Hall there, they made the other one over here and called it Burgess Field, see. It went right down along Prater Way all the way out, and right there it was open, and we had baseball fields for Little League in the fields there.

We had a kid named Cole Kennedy one time. If you ever go by there, there's a little grocery store. That's where home plate was. He hit a ball all the way into the ditch. He was a good ballplayer. He was a real good ballplayer.

But then you'd go out, and you know where the Sparks slough is? On Sparks Boulevard, that ditch that goes through there, it's called the Sparks slough. It would go that way, and the ditch that went by over there, it just turned before, about where the marina is now and would go across there and head to the river.

When you were going to high school, did it seem like the high school backed up against a very rural area?

Oh, absolutely. In fact, Danny Hanson—you've probably heard of the Hansons. They had a little farm-like deal on the other side. In fact, when Greenbrae was built, where there are those apartments and condos on the other side of them, that was all fields. In fact, they have at Greenbrae, unless they've thrown them away—because I was principal at Greenbrae—we had pictures of the kids petting the cows on the other side of Greenbrae School. They had the fence there.

My brother was supposed to go to Greenbrae when Greenbrae opened, but my mother didn't want to hear it, because she could just walk down G Street to Robert Mitchell, and she wouldn't do it. She sent him to Robert Mitchell, and then the principal said, "Oh, we'll keep you here." Of course, she was pretty active in the PTA and stuff. But he was supposed to go to Greenbrae. So that was in the early fifties, I think, around '55, '56. It was wide open there.

I want to catch us up a little bit with you and your life. What year did you graduate from high school?

1960.

From Sparks High. What did they do then with the building where the Sparks High School used to be?

Well, it still was the intermediate, and then what happened was they opened Dilworth, and then the next year they opened Sparks Junior—well, it's called Sparks Middle School now, where the shooting was. Then they tore the old one down, and they made a deal with the county because the county had actually owned the property. They made a deal with the county and they traded the library building, where the museum is now, for the justice courts, and they got that one for the municipal courts, and that's why it's there today.

That's a new building or did they adapt a building?

Well, for a long time they didn't have one, but they built that one.

They built it new.

Yes. They tore everything down. See, it was the old type with the shop underneath, and they had an incinerator in the middle, and the gym, the locker rooms were under the bleachers, and the bleachers were permanent—they couldn't move—and it was like a pit. The court was down there and the bleachers

were up here above, and they were as wide as this table, and you'd sit on this. [gesturing] The other guy would sit on the other one, and his feet would be down on where you sat. It was really quite unique, quite unique.

In fact, they had the shower rooms underneath. The girls' shower was here, and the boys' shower was here. [gesturing] So guys would say, "Oh, I think Judy's in the shower now, and I'm in the shower," and there were jokes about that. Then in one of the classrooms, the desks were like stadium seating.

We had this rotten kid. In fact, when he graduated from high school, he looked to make sure he had his diploma, and he didn't have his diploma. He had to make it up in the summer. While he's doing that checking, he walked off the stage.

But we had this really nice teacher—Maisie was her first name—so she's up explaining on the blackboard. He decided he wanted to go home, so he climbed out the window and went home, and it was from the second story. I think he was six-nine or something like that, and he was real tall, good basketball player, good athlete. And she never even knew it. She turned around and kept on talking and didn't even know it. [laughter]

So then the next period marked him absent, of course, so they go and the principal says, "Maisie, you have Harold marked present," and Mrs. Jones, or I think it was Freeman, actually, was English the next period. "And she didn't have him marked absent. How come?"

Maisie said, "He was in class." [laughter]

We used to do pranks and stuff like that. We had twins that would always switch places. One was an athlete and one was a boy cheerleader, first boy cheerleader. In fact, we had two boy cheerleaders when we were seniors, first ones in the whole state of Nevada. One was Stockwell, Donny Stockwell, and the other was a kid named Herman Nichols. So when you go down Nichols Boulevard, that right there was their ranch, Nichols ranch. And he was a cheerleader.

See, my grandparents on my mother's side, her dad had a ranch on Prater Way, way out about where Marina Drive comes in now. That was a ranch there. A lot of ranches. There was a blacksmith shop where the Taco Bell is now, and when we were kids, it'd be fun, we'd go down, because Prater Way had the ditches, as I was saying, all the way, and you'd walk the ditches, and you'd go to the "S." You'd eat lunch and fool around and then come back. There was a blacksmith, and we always would love to watch the blacksmith work. In fact, I don't know if the people that have my parents' old house still have it, but we had a fireplace and he made a custom fire screen for the fireplace, with trees on it. Then he had a mountain with the "S" on it. My brother and sisters, we always used to ride bikes out there and stop to watch them make horseshoes or whatever.

McCallum was his name. They called him "Smitty" because he was a blacksmith. His real name was McCallum. His son graduated high school with me and received the Nugget Scholarship, one of the first ones to receive the Nugget Scholarship. We just loved to watch him. He was a big old guy, big muscles, and you know how they would hit it and stuff. It was just fun to watch him. A lot of times we wouldn't even make it to the "S" because he would be making buggy wheels or he'd be making—he used to make them for—oh, what do they call those things? They would race them. They'd race horses with this little two-wheel thing on the back. It's not a real buggy, but they sit like this with their feet up like that. He would make wheels for that because he made them lighter. He would make them for people back east, because that's where all the racing was, you know. But he did wonderful work.

That was on Prater Way?

Yes.

Very far east?

Yes, where the Taco Bell is now, and there's a Pep Boys on the other side of it. You drive in and the Taco Bell is here and Pep Boys was on that. That was his property.

What would the cross streets be, approximately?

Well, it's where I Street comes up there, and I think it's Stanford that comes in. Stanford or First comes in before you get to there. It's where the old Target used to be.

What did you do after graduating from high school?

Well, I went to Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon. I wanted to be a minister, and it was a Baptist Church school. I got up there, and I came home for Christmas and I said, "I can't take the rain." So I came back to UNR, and graduated from UNR. I had a stint in between because I got out of the Air Force, I joined the National Guard, and I was activated during the *Pueblo* crisis. When the *Pueblo* was taken, our national guard here was activated during that.

So I got the G.I. Bill, but it took me ten years after I graduated from high school to graduate from college because I had interruptions with the service, because in that time, when Vietnam was just starting, they had a draft lottery, and they picked by birthday. Well, my birthday was the fourth one. I even went down to take the physical. My dad says, "You're going to get called for sure here at number four. Do you want to sleep in a bed or sleep on the ground?"

So I was selling shoes at Gray Reid's Department Store, which is where Circus Circus is now. I worked in the shoe department there, while working my way through college. The guy who ran the shoe department was Homer Riggs, and he was a pilot in the Air National Guard. He got me into the Guard so I didn't have to get drafted. I was a parachute rigger, so I had it made. Then when I got out—because when you get activated you're in the regular service—I qualified for the G.I. Bill. My family wasn't that well off, so I went on the G.I. Bill to UNR and got my bachelor's degree. Then I went to work for Washoe County School District, and then I got my master's. My first year, I got a job at Jessie Beck, and I loved it. I was there for a gal that had cancer, and she was really bad off, but she said she was coming back.

I was going to the Olympics, and so I got a job at Stead, and I was moaning and everything. My grandma says, "John, everything works out for the best. Everything works out for the best." So I got a job at Stead before I left to the Olympics, and then I met my wife there. So we got married the following summer. My grandmother, she was a cute gal, and she wrapped it in tinfoil, her gift to us, a white bowl, and she wrote with paste or whatever, she put it down, she said, "Everything works out for the better," and put sparkles on it and everything. And we've been married over forty years, so I guess it worked out for the best. [laughter]

What was her maiden name?

Peterson.

What's her first name?

Janice.

She was a teacher, also?

Yes. We decided that we'd both put in for a transfer. We both liked Stead very much, but we both put in for our transfer, and whichever one got the transfer first, the other would stay at Stead and the other one would go. Then I worked on my master's and then I became principal at Verdi for five years, and then I went to Greenbrae and I was there for nine years, and then I went to Lincoln Park for three years.

These were all as principal?

As principals, yes.

What was that master's degree in?

Educational leadership. Then I ran for the city council, and now I'm on the school board. I just feel you've got to give back to your community, especially me because I've been there and was raised there, and I can remember. This is the thing that's different than it was when I was a kid. Each of us, my brother and my sister and myself, we each got to invite our teacher to Sunday dinner, and it was special. You would brag that Miss Gillis is coming to our house for dinner on Sunday. It was very special. My mother would take a paper bag and she'd put flour and everything in, and she'd put chicken in there, and we'd have fried chicken. Then afterwards, we'd sing songs.

Nowadays, a lot of parents tell them, "Oh, you don't have to listen to that jerk," talking about teachers. It used to be we respected our teachers so much. I can name every teacher I had, beginning in kindergarten with Miss Egliar, Miss Dalger first grade, Miss Borghi second, Mrs. Walker third, all the way down. I could remember all of them because you loved them. See, that's what we need.

When I go into classes, I tell the kids I love them. We're too afraid to use that word, and it's changing everything. It really is. To the kids, I say, "Your teacher loves you. Your principal loves you. Who else loves you?"

And they'll say their mother or Jesus and all this other stuff. A lot of times, they say, "You."

And I say, "Yeah," and I go like that. [opening his arms]

One teacher told me I was going to get in trouble for that, but I said, "I'd like to see the headlines, "Mr. Mayer arrested for saying he loved the kids in Miss So-and-So's class."

I really feel that's what we're missing today is that real connection between educators and the children that they serve. And I tell the kids, I say, "You know, they talk about the taxpayers. The taxpayers are paying for these schools. The taxpayers are doing this. You *are* taxpayers."

"What do you mean, Mr. Mayer?"

I say, "See those Adidas you have on? When you bought them, you paid taxes. When you go to the movie, you pay taxes. When you go buy a shirt, you pay taxes. You *are* taxpayers." And the light goes on.

I'm happy to say we got a Student Advisory Board established since I've been on the board, and two kids from each high school meet with us. Then we have a kid on our board that participates in the discussion, shows us the surveys and everything, and gets these kids active in looking after and realizing that they have input into their education.

That's the difference between now and when I went to school, because I knew Mr. Poulakidas—there's a park named after him in Sparks—who taught me in sixth grade. He worked for Isbell Construction Company, and he made more doing that working weekends and summers than he did teaching, but he loved us and he was tough on us. He was very, very strict. He would take these kids that suck their thumbs, he'd beat them. He'd get them so they weren't sucking their thumbs, because he cared, especially when they were doing that in sixth grade. He cared and he wanted them to not do that, so he put mercurochrome and iodine and stuff.

On their thumbs.

Yes, to get them to stop, and he did it. It's just a different world.

I would imagine that the experience you had, especially growing up here, and also from being an educator, gives you a very unique perspective on the school board.

Yes, and I think it's something that the school board needs, because too many are using it to get a name for themselves. I don't need to get a name for myself. I don't need that. But I need kids to be accepted for who they are. Any kid can learn. These people that say, "Oh, they can't learn because they're different," or, "They can't learn because they're special," that's baloney. That's baloney.

I had a set of twins, autistic, and people say, "Oh, those autistic kids are driving me nuts." And they both, both of them, at the same time, got an invitation to Eagle Scouts, both of them. And it's not easy to get Eagle Scouts. They both got it and they're both at Utah State University now. They're juniors. One's in drafting, and the other's in architecture at Utah State. And it's perfect. They chose perfectly, because they can be in a little room, they can do their drawing. I don't know if you know much about autistic people, but when they draw—when they were in third grade, I still have the picture. One of them drew me a picture of a campfire and the logs around it. He even had little bugs on the logs, so much detail, see. The dad worked for Granite Construction, and he got them in. He asked me. I said, "You know, you ought to go over to the Mormon Church and get in scouting. It's right by my house. Get them into scouting."

So he did and actually he joined the Mormon Church through that, which isn't bad, because Mormons, they raise good kids, I'll tell you. So then when they got accepted to Utah State, he and his wife—and they have a younger daughter—they bought a house in Logan and got transferred because Granite's big in Utah, too. But they got it away from the university, and the boys stay on the campus because they want them to be independent, but they want to be close enough if they need something, that they're there. But that's what it's all about. That's what life's about, acceptance. That's what I would say.

I've probably taken more than your time.

No, this is terrific. I just have a couple more questions, and we can finish up.

You've been talking about community so much, and you've given so much through the school board, and I'm just curious what prompted you to join the board of the RTC. Where there things specifically related to transportation that interested you?

I was on the city council, and they appoint one person from Sparks. I wanted to be in, and no one else did, and I was on it for the whole time I was on city council, seventeen and a half years, and I just am interested. I don't know if anybody since I've been on does, but I ride the bus. If I got to a Bighorns game downtown, I ride the bus. If I go anywhere and if I didn't have something after it, if I had, say, a dentist appointment, I'd ride to the dentist if I didn't have to go across someplace else.

I'm also very, very interested in paratransit. I had a secretary that has a son that has spina bifida, and so paratransit was the only way he could do things and everything, and I really wanted to make sure that the handicapped had accessibility on buses and on paratransit. So I was very interested in that and also people that are transit-dependent. My son was transit-dependent until he was about thirty-two, because he just didn't have the money for insurance and cars when he was going to schools and stuff, so he did it by public transportation.

In fact, they named a building down in Sparks, the Transit Center, after me, because I gave so much and I fought so hard for routes that took people to kidney dialysis, Veterans Administration. The bus was about two miles from the stop, so I got them to cooperate, and put the buildings right by the RTC. Now, I think, though, they moved out where they don't get bus transportation. But that's the veterans' choice.

But I really feel that that's the way we go. Like Victorian Avenue where they put the bike path all the way to the Marina, what a wonderful thing that is. I hope they do that to Prater, but I don't know if they'll be able to.

So it sounds like even though you got involved in the RTC not necessarily intentionally or deliberately, it became a very wonderful thing that you participated in.

It became a big part of my life. I was active in APTA [American Public Transportation Association]. I was active on the boards and so forth, the committees. I never ran for offices, but I helped Celia Kupersmith become president. I loved APTA. When I was on the board, I'd go lobby every March, because, really, for a small state like Nevada, we had a lot of power there with Reid and Ensign. We had a lot of power so we could get them to do a lot of things. I think we got more than our share of monies through our reputation and our lobbying and stuff like that.

It's great to hear what other people do. I told Heath Morrison, when he went to Charlotte-Mecklenburg, I said, "You might as well sell your car, because they have trolleys and buses and everything there. You won't need a car." "Well, they furnished me a car," and I guess going from school to school, you need it.

What I'd like to see is development around transit stops. One of the famous chicken joints in all of America is at the end of the line of one of the trolleys, but now they've extended it beyond. You go in and you buy the chicken, and there are only two tables in there, so you buy it to go or you eat outside on the bus stop. But you can get it and get back on the trolley and go anywhere you want to go.

They have little boutiques and little curio shops and everything at the Transit Center. I wish we'd do that here. One place that would be ideal is Oddie Boulevard over there where they tore down Shopko, put some apartments there and shopping and everything, revitalization. How good would that be? That's

what I'd like to see happen, but in all of the depression—I call it a depression. They call it a recession, but it really is a depression.

Maybe on the rebound, we'll look more at urban planning and things like that. Midtown, those three guys—I forget the name of the bar—they're involved in Midtown, and they donated and spearheaded a playground for the handicapped kids at Peccole. They're three young guys. I mean, if they're forty, I'll eat my hat. They're in their thirties, I'm sure. They have a bar, and I forget the name of it now, but they're setting the world on fire. They do a lot of philanthropy. They give a lot of money away and stuff. Through the Chamber's program for leadership in Reno, these guys donated and did all this at Peccole, and it's wonderful. I tell them, I said, "I'd like to see you guys get in urban development along transit corridors."

And they said, "Well, that's what Midtown's kind of becoming." So I'm glad to hear that. I'd like to see a trolley right down 4th and Prater, to tell you the truth. [laughter] In fact, I told Derek Morris, before he didn't get appointed, I told him, I said, "Start easy. Get rubber-tire trolleys." Because what they can do, you could buy a bus frame and they put this trolley frame right on top of it. It looks like a trolley. They've got the oak chairs and everything, and they've got the bell that you can ring and the whole bit. They're all over a lot of cities. But start with those rubber trolley deals, and then go to a fixed one if you want to. But they are into this rapid transit also, and I don't see as that's that bad, but I think it's got to be expanded.

So it could be that in some of these developments that we can move back toward a more walkable community, like the one you grew up in.

Yes, exactly. You know, just outside Kansas City where they've got the ball field—what's the name of it—they've built an urban core where you can walk and it's safe and it's well lit and it's just fantastic. It's just fantastic, and they've got an indoor water park, like out here only indoors, and a hotel there. In fact, the same company that developed it developed Legends, RED Development. That's their home base, of course, Kansas City. But downtown Kansas City, you can walk all over and you don't have to worry about anything. So I'm all in favor of that, I'll tell you. But it's money. Money talks.

And you have new generations here too. You have children living here still?

Yes.

How many children did you have?

Three, and they're all here, and that's what I like is that they haven't found a need to go elsewhere, so it's nice. It really is. Like I say, when they grew up, they could go to their grandparents and everything. I hope their children can go. But they'll marry somebody from Austin, Texas, or someplace and move away. [laughter]

But I'm glad, because family is everything. I really believe that. It's a cliché, but it is. You're nobody without a family. That's why some of these poor kids, even rich families, they're too busy at their country clubs and everything, and they're neglecting their kids. That word "love," they don't even tell their kids they love them. Lot of families are that way, and I don't know what we're going to do about it. I wish some of these ministers would get on the love wagon and preach it.

That's a wonderful note to end on. I want to thank you so much.

You bet.

LILLI MOFFIT

Owner, Reno Rails



Lilli Moffit inside Reno Rails in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Lilli Moffit was born in Germany and raised in Iowa. In the 1990s, she and her husband, Bill, moved to Reno, where he worked for Sierra Pacific (now Nevada Energy). In 1998, the Moffits bought and renovated a former Chinese restaurant at 1229 East 4th Street and opened Reno Rails, a model train store. Lilli continued to operate the business after her husband passed away in 2010.

Bethany Underhill: It's March 28th, 2012. I'm here with Lilli Moffit at Reno Rails at 1229 East Fourth Street. Lilli, do I have your permission to record?

Lilli Moffit: Yes.

Okay, so where were you born?

In Germany, and we came over to this country when I was five years old. We went through Ellis Island. Right now I'm sixty-five years old. I've been in this country for sixty years.

It wasn't easy for my parents because they didn't know anyone. Our family was sponsored, and that's how we ended up in Iowa. My father was not a farmer, but the people who sponsored them were a farm family who gave us a place to live, My brother tells me, because I can't remember everything, they didn't treat us that well. My brothers went to school with not the best-looking shoes for the cold winters in Iowa, and a teacher noticed it and got a hold of a Quaker church. The church helped us and helped my father to get out of that situation and find employment. Then we moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Can you tell me about your schooling and higher education?

I have a bachelor's degree, and that was a tough thing to get because in those days they don't help you with the language. The teachers never understood that when I went home I spoke Russian, because my dad's from Ukraine and my mom was German. I mean, I spoke English to my two older brothers, across the table. [laughs] One language, then another language. A lot of teachers didn't know. And then, of course, because what happens, the blacks live in a certain area, the Europeans live in a certain area, the middle class lives here, and the upper class lives over here. So I didn't go to the best elementary schools.

I always feel like I was lacking in that because I'm not a good speller. Good thing we have [Microsoft] Word now. I wish I had it in college, because I did have professors tell me, "Man, you're a lousy speller." Because I didn't take time out to really look up the words. But now with Word, I'm a great speller. Word helps me.

I had a hard time. I really had to work for my bachelor's degree, not like my daughter and my son, who find it so easy. I had to go to the library early in the morning and study until ten or eleven o'clock at night just to get through, but I think it's because of my lack of education as a young person.

What was your major?

My major was sociology. I thought I was going to do social work, but I ended up doing computer work.

So what brought you to Reno?

Actually, my husband's job did. I was married to my husband for forty-one years. Hopefully I don't tear up, because I lost him two years ago. I always felt that when my husband succeeded, the whole family succeeded. We moved around a lot in our forty-one years.

We came to Reno twenty-four years ago, and what was Sierra Pacific at that time—now Nevada Energy—brought my husband here. Before my husband accepted the job, he was kind of concerned because we'd never been to Reno. Well, we drove through Nevada years before. We lived in California for a while; Hartford, Connecticut; Houston, Texas. We moved around a lot for my husband's jobs.

So he flew me out here. Of course, the first thing I thought of when he said Reno, Nevada, I

thought of prostitution, gambling, and didn't think of anything else till I got here and I fell in love with Reno. I love the mountains and it's a beautiful city, and we're close to the ocean. So we came here twenty-four years ago.

Did you have an interest in model railroading?

No, my husband did. I had no idea he wanted to open up this store, which he opened up eleven years ago. Well, actually twelve now. I knew he loved trains. Sometimes he'd set up a train for the kids. When he was a kid he played with used trains, nothing new. His family couldn't afford it.

When we lived here in Reno, one day he said to me he wanted to open up a train store, and I said, "I don't care what you do." I never care what anybody does, as long as we don't go Chapter 11 with our home. I worry about our home that we live in.

So he did a lot of research, Bill. Bill Moffitt was his name. He went out, checked out the malls. Arlington Gardens was a popular little mall, but what he found from the different malls was that you had to have their hours, their janitors, so he decided that we should start looking for a building that we could afford to buy. It was just by accident. I called a realtor. She couldn't make it, but another guy came in her place, and he was great. Sometimes you don't get the best realtors, but he was listening to us.

The piece of property that we were looking at was on Wells, and he said, "You don't want this property." The reason was there was no parking. He said, "I'll find you a piece of property that you guys can afford."

He called us, and he showed us a place in Sparks. Then he showed us this building, which was an Asian restaurant. There was parking in the back, it was affordable, and he did a lot of work for us to get it, because it was owned by three different people. I mean, he had to go to a nursing home. He had to do all kinds of things.

We bought this building. What was interesting is my husband worked for a five-and-dime when he was a teenager—he had a master's degree in computer science—so he knew a little bit about retail. So we bought this store. We had to gut it out. My husband and I and a person we met who was living next door at this hotel, Kelly, came into our life. The three of us literally removed all the booths, four layers of tile, and five or six layers of wallpaper, but before we got to the wallpaper, there would be three layers of paneling. It's like people came in here and they just layered everything. So in a way, we were kind of lucky because all we were doing was removing layers.

When we first looked at the building, my husband said, "Oh, I'm only going to remodel the front part." Next thing I know, we're remodeling the whole store.

He didn't really have any idea how to open up or run a business. It just so happened, I read later on, that we did the right thing, because we kept working but we were open on weekends. And I read that that's one thing that some business advisors tell you: don't give up your daytime job until you realize that you can run the business or that there's a need for the business.

So that's one thing that my husband did at the beginning, and he lucked into a lot of the cabinets that are up front. I think when he first opened up the store, he was thinking that he would sell a lot of used train things.

I do like trains. I think they're fun to run and watch, and I think it's a great family hobby, but this was my husband's passion. After we opened up the store, he started getting a little bit of merchandise in, and then one day he told me that he permanently wanted to come in here and work. Again, I said, "Sure. Do whatever you want." I kept working.



Reno Rails at 1229 East 4th Street in 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

He came in here, opened it up seven days a week, and came out with a great business. We have a lot of good customers. He was a great person to talk to. [Cries] Sorry, I'll tear up because I don't think he realized how he touched people. Kids came in here and they tell me now that he was the person who made them love trains, now that they've grown up a few years. A lot of people enjoyed coming in here talking to my husband for maybe three or four hours just about the passion. You know, when you have a passion, you can talk about your love. And my husband always told me that he learned a lot from his customers. He knew some things about trains but didn't really know a whole lot. You learn by sharing.

My husband didn't sell a whole lot of old stuff. MTH was just starting to come out, Mike's Train House. My husband liked their products, so we carry a lot of their product. He even had Mike Wolf [the CEO] come here for a weekend, and a lot of customers from all over California and Nevada came so that they could talk to Mike. They ran trains in between the buildings. I've got pictures. He answered a lot of customers' questions.

It was just by chance that Mike got put up at the Nugget because one of our customers is actually married to the daughter, and he loves to run trains. They put Mike and his family up at the Nugget, and Mike really loved seeing the Sparks train yard.

What MTH actually does is go out and record train sounds, real train sounds, and they put them in their engines. They even have talking in their engines, and a smoke grate. It's a great product for your money compared to Lionel.

My husband died two years ago, and I'm not a rich widow. The richness is in the store with all of this inventory. I've actually lowered the inventory probably in half. He had it so full of stuff. I have two great guys who work for me now, and they interact with the customers because they love to run trains. I just listen to what they think we should buy and keep the store going because there's a need in the community.

I do have customers who thank me for keeping it open, because we lost another hobby store, High

Sierra. We're strictly a train store. He died two months after my husband. He was very ill, and his daughters didn't want to keep it open. Some of it was because they didn't have the best of help, and one of the girls is a nurse, and they're just too busy to make sure it's operated. I had very little to do with this store until my husband died, and then I had to walk in here and figure out what the heck's going on and how he did business.

I keep telling my kids that if something happens to me and the store is still open, they need to be interacting with it. You can't just let some manager run it, because you can't trust them, for one thing, trust them in a way that you have it at stake. They don't really have anything at stake. But otherwise they're fairly trustworthy.

How long has Reno Rails been in operation?

Twelve years. My husband opened it up back in December of 1998, and he was in here for eleven years. He was a very lucky man and lived his passion. I mean, how many of us can say we lived our passion? He did that, and then he died two years ago. So I've kept it open now for two years.

What was your profession during the time that he was working here without you?

I was a computer programmer. We've been here for twenty-four years. I commuted to the Bay Area for twenty. I was a data processing consultant. You name it, I worked there. The Gap, Hitachi, PG&E. They were six months to two years that I worked. I commuted back and forth, because there isn't the opportunity in computers here. What I found out when my husband was working for Sierra Pacific was that they do not hire husband and wives. They have that rule. A place where I could first find work was in Sacramento. That's how I got started. I commuted to Sacramento on the Greyhound, on the bus. That was for eighteen months and then I got a job for Hitachi in the Bay Area. I flew back and forth for twenty years.

I quit work four years ago, two years before my husband passed away, so I feel like I'm just starting to learn Reno. You know when you're working somewhere else, I'd come home on the weekends and do my own thing. I am a hat designer. I do make custom-designed hats, and that's kind of on the back burner. I haven't been doing too much of that. So that's what I was doing.

You said you feel like a newcomer. How does that affect how you run your business?

It was my husband's passion, and I'm running it for a profit. He made a profit, but I have to definitely make a profit because I have three people. I have Matt, he does my computer work for me, and I have Jack and Bob. They're both retirees. I have to make enough money to pay them.

The bank still owns the building, so I have to pay them. I run it more like a business. Some things my husband priced lower because he could. He didn't worry about paying himself or anybody else's salary except for Matt. Matt did work for Bill for about five years, and he started in here when he was sixteen. So I upped the price of some items—more of an MSRP. I'm running it a little differently.

Customers need to tell us what is it that they want to see in our store, because people don't realize some things that I learned from my husband. When the MTH or Lionel or whoever the manufacturers are, come out with a catalog, if you don't order what's in that catalog—and that item's going to come out a year ahead—if you didn't order it, the chances are you'll never find it. Either they won't make it because

they didn't have enough orders, or only the people who bought it, maybe ten guys bought a specific engine, so then people that want it, they go out looking. They look on the Internet, they look all over the place to see where they can buy it. But, hey, I'm sorry, you can't. And that's how they keep the price of engines and cars up, and that's how you don't lose value if you buy a train.

Every time we'd go to a train show, my husband went and looked for Mike Wolf, the CEO of MTH, and he said, "Mike, what would it take for me to convince you to build the Virginia Truckee engine or train set for our area?" Because nobody was making them, or very few people were. This is strictly an O Gauge with a little bit of G, and we will carry HO trains.

My husband convinced him, and my husband actually sold somewhere between 150 to 200 train sets that were made specifically for our area, the V&T. He did do a great job. I don't know if people realize that he promoted that, and now we've got to somehow convince them to make stuff for the Western region, because they make Eastern names.

I learned some things from my husband because we shared information, but I'm learning more and more. I have headaches every other day, or find out things that we didn't do—you know, I make mistakes. But instead of selling the store, I'm going to take it one step higher. We're going to become an online store, because I see how that's we can compete. We can't just sit here.

We have a website, of course. We just signed up for PayPal, and we will have a store where people can come and buy stuff in our store. My husband left me with a heck of a lot of old trains that I know I can't sell in the store. We don't have the customer base here locally in Reno. Our customer base is out East, all over the world. We have customers from Australia, Germany. We've sent things to Japan. By bringing in a lot of the old things, I think the only way I can really sell it will be online through eBay or through our Reno Rails online store. Then people can buy it instantly.

People locally purchase more of the new trains?

No. They purchase some of the old, too, but we don't rely on them for our business. There are some months we do more business from the East Coast because they've emailed us or called us and said, "I see you have that engine. I want it."

One guy did tell me a year ago, pretty close after my husband died, he ordered six cars from us. He said, "How did you end up getting such nice merchandise in here, and Eastern names?" Because he said he'd been looking all over, and he could find it here.

I told him about my husband. My husband did have an insight after eleven years what to buy, and what would sell. That's something you learn. You learn it from customers, and my husband had a brilliant mind. He might not remember your name, but he knew he had five customers who loved Alaska cars or the Alaska name. He might buy something with the Alaska name, and then when those guys came in, he'd tell them, or he'd email them, "Hey, I've got this Alaskan car in." He knew out of those five people the chances are one or two of the guys would buy it.

That's what we're missing because he's gone. We don't know our customer base, and I have noticed it's changed. A lot of the people who my husband had had bought quite a bit. I can't imagine they can buy any more. I mean, how many engines do you really want, or cars?

We've got a new base. We've got a lot of families. We have one guy who comes in and he's got his kids making buildings for their trains, and they got their own train cars and they're running them. It's kind of a family hobby. It's better than them watching TV all day.

Were trains part of raising your children?

Just a little bit. You know, you're into Girl Scouts, you're into Boy Scouts. My husband did have trains set up, a little train board in a room, and he'd run them for the kids, and then at Christmastime we'd have one around our house. As matter of fact, my son asked me specifically to make sure as I'm going through the old stuff, that if there's anything he can remember, he wants to keep for himself so that he can remember his dad.

When my husband was in this business, before he opened up, he did a lot of consulting, too, on the Midwest. While he was working there on the weekends, he would go and buy old trains. So some of that he specifically bought to resell in our store. I'm ending up doing more of that than he did, because he was more into the newer stuff. That seemed like what the young kids want. They want something that smokes, talks.

How did you and your husband meet?

Oh, you're going to make me cry. The first year I went to Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. It was a Teachers College. Then the second year my brother convinced me to commute to the University of Iowa from home. Well, it's a heck of a bigger school.

After a year I said, "You know, I don't know what I want to do." I started working in retail in a Younkers—it's like a Macy's store—and I ran across a young girl who I worked with when I was a car hop. When I was sixteen, that was my first job. I worked at an A&W. She was going to a dance, and I'd been questioning, "What am I doing? I don't know. Do I go back to school? Where do I go?"

So she invited me to go to this dance, and I thought, sure, I'll go to this dance. What else am I doing? So I went, and this young man, my future husband, which I didn't know at that time, asked me to dance, and, of course, I was listening with one ear and not the other ear. He's telling me, "Oh, I just came back from Europe." He had taken a class in England, and he had come back from Europe.

We were dancing and I was listening. I don't know about nowadays, but in those days you don't know if the guy's honest or not. He seemed like a nice guy, and the guy he was with, my friend didn't really like—she said, "Let's ditch them." So I ditched him.

But he had remembered enough information—my name, and he remembered I was from Marion, Iowa, right next to Cedar Rapids, and he called me. Because he was going to school, most of our dates were in the library, and I was taking a class here and there, you know, junior college. Sometimes I just loved to take a class. A lot of our dates were going to the college library and studying.

I didn't know him very well, and he went to his parents—I don't know how long we dated. I think we met in March, and we got married in August. I didn't know him very well. Actually, the first time he proposed to me, I turned him down, because I always wanted to travel, but I was thinking to travel with a girlfriend. I'm outgoing now. My husband helped me to be more outgoing. At first I wasn't that confident or that outgoing.

The second time he proposed to me, he said, "We will travel," and we did.

But I tell people the story, which is that I had to marry my husband. The reason I did, looking back now, is that my husband was very driven. We're both high energy. My husband would leave early in the morning from Mount Vernon, Iowa, and the next town is Iowa City, Iowa, if you look at a map. He would go to school, and after that he would go from Iowa City, Iowa, to Cedar Rapids to do a warehouse job at McKesson, which is another thirty miles.

Then he'd leave his job and he'd come and date me in Marion, Iowa, which is the next town, maybe ten miles. But from Marion, Iowa, to Mount Vernon, Iowa is probably, a thirty-minute drive. So, like I said, a lot of our dates were going to the library and studying, or going to a movie.

When he left my house, after dropping me off and driving from my house to his house—he told me one night he was driving in the ditch. He literally had fallen asleep. So guess what the man was doing? He was actually setting an alarm clock. When he left me, he knew approximately what time he'd come to that curve, and set the alarm clock so that he wouldn't fall asleep. That's why I tell people he was going to kill himself. [laughter]

I think about my husband now—when you're high energy and you're constantly moving, you don't realize it until you sit back and think about it. My husband was always driven. He was driven from the day I married him, and so was I. I've slowed down since I retired. I sit down, have a nice cup of coffee. I don't rush out of the house like he did.

I married my husband and we were married for forty-one years and we have two kids. He was the best thing in my life. When we first got married, he worked at a feed mill and I worked at a toothbrush factory to earn enough money so we could go to Europe. He still was going to school. So we did, we went to Europe in '69. We had a Europass and traveled all over.

When I came back, I had my son and then thirteen months later I had my daughter. I was a stay-at-home mom and my husband worked, and he got into data processing. He'd always say to me, "Honey, you know, if something happens to me, you've got to support this family." So he made sure that I went to school, went back to college, and I got my bachelor's degree. It took me a while.

He would take the kids camping. We lived in a small apartment, and if the library was closed for the Fourth of July weekend, and I had finals, he would take the kids camping so I could sit and study. He was a very supportive husband. He wasn't demanding. Neither was I; we were a partnership. We made sure that he grew and I grew.

As we were moving around, I was getting credits here and there, and came to find out that if I went back to school at the original school that I started with, University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, I had less credits and I could graduate faster. So for two summers my husband lived in Hartford, Connecticut. I went back to Iowa. My mother-in-law, who was the aunt who raised my husband, she took care of the kids, and I went and I lived in a dorm. I spent two summers there getting my degree, but then I'd come and visit the kids.

Meanwhile, my husband had no vehicle. He was rebuilding twelve pillars, twelve concrete pillars. We had this beautiful old home and a half an acre of land right in West Hartford, Connecticut. My husband didn't tell me he was doing that until I came home and he said, "Look what I did this summer, rebuilt all twelve concrete pillars" in a wheelbarrow.

People don't know. If you saw a video of this place, how bad it looked, you would think, are those people crazy? You'd see how bad this place looked and all the work that we did; we scraped by, but that's what my husband and I have always done.

I always worked with my husband. I'd be standing anywhere, if we were rebuilding a porch, any of our fixer-uppers: "Hand me the hammer. Hand me the screwdriver, the pliers." And then, "Hold this, do that." I was the gofer. "Go get this at Home Depot or the hardware store," so he could keep working.

We really had a great marriage. Like I said, we were partners, and it's hard after one goes away, dies. [Cries] Sorry, I tear up still. It's been two years. I had to go see a therapist after he died. She said, "How many people can say that he was the best thing in my life?"

You talked about how you two were high energy and driven. How has that helped you in your business?

One of our customers—I won't give you his name—when he saw the building in our video—we took a video of it—he said, “You know, Lilli, it's one of those buildings where what you do is you find the nearest fire hydrant out there, you knock it off so it isn't functional. You start the building on fire.” He said he would have never tackled it.

We're hard working. I mean, I'm talking about everything in here, the layers. The thing that was weird was my husband and I were going to come in here and gut all this out and redo it, and then this Kelly came into our life, which was a great thing. He wanted some of the lumber that we were throwing in a dumpster in the back. He came in and started talking. We found out that he had the right skill set and that he was cheap.

My husband gave him a key so he could start wall-boarding the ceiling, and he helped my husband and us a lot. The three of us laid all the flooring in here. Where we're sitting here in this office used to be the freezer. They literally took the plywood off, and it was sawdust in there. Everything that you saw, we could not ever have afforded to hire a contractor to do what we've done. We wouldn't have this place if it hadn't been for me and my husband's work and Kelly who helped us. But we've always been energetic.

What happened to my husband is that he had a stroke. He died in twenty-four hours. We bought another business. We bought a rail cleaner. It's called Centerline Products. It's different gauges, N, HO, O, G gauge and standard gauge. Five years ago we bought this business and we moved it here to Reno and my husband was trying to run that, run Reno Rails and everything else. He was getting up way too early.

Every time I came home, I always said, “Bill, you look tired. You know, you need to rest. Don't be in such a rush to swallow down your coffee or your breakfast.” He'd be looking at his watch, and thinking, “Okay, I got to go, go, go.” I think he overdid it. Really, he didn't rest his body enough.

Looking back now, I think with his high energy and being so driven, who knows. Who knows what causes strokes, but he had a stroke in the middle of the night. I called the ambulance right away when he accidentally woke me up. That night at five-thirty when our son came to see him, he had another stroke, and he was brain-dead that night. Then the next morning his heart stopped.

My husband was healthy, a very healthy person, never smoked a day in his life. We drank wine once in a great while, but he was a healthy person, but very driven, high energy and driven.

Was there a community response after your husband's death?

Oh, yes. We're very private, my husband and I. I realized that because I hardly know anybody in Reno. My daughter lives in Vegas and our son lives in L.A.

My husband always said he wanted to be cremated. I had him cremated. I'm sure I was deranged the first year. My son said that since we didn't have a funeral, that we really needed to have something for our customers. So we had one of the guys email as many people as emails as we had. On a Sunday we had customers come into the store. We had food.

My husband always had a garden, and he would take vegetables to Chuy at Fresh Mex. Chuy at Fresh Mex brought in a lot of food and some alcohol, some beer and stuff. Customers did come in to pay their respects and we kind of had a wake. People said they wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for the store, wouldn't have even known each other. So that was kind of nice. That's what we did because we don't

believe in funerals. We like to see people alive. Of course, the only people who were there when he died were our daughter and our son.

You talked about your relationships with the other businesses in the area. Can you expand on that?

Not a very good relationship. [laughs] Well, one other reason my husband opened this store, not anything against any of the other hobby stores that were open, one thing my husband did, was not only look at buildings, but he looked at other stores, his competition, and the guys weren't friendly. People told us that. When we first opened up the store, they told my husband, "You are so friendly," and my husband was. My husband was very people-oriented. He'd say, "If I don't have it in the store, I'll go find it for you." He did a lot of that. He would go get things that he didn't have in the store for people, and people appreciated that.

We tried not to compete. My husband liked O Gauge, and that's what he understood. There already was the hobby store, High Sierra. One of the other ones on Moana, I forget the name of it, I think, was getting up there. I think he either sold the business or closed it, and one of the other train stores Reno had when we originally moved here, got smaller and smaller too. But we never tried to compete with High Sierra. High Sierra carried the N, the HO. We complemented them. Somebody came in looking for HO, we said, "High Sierra has it." Or if they went to High Sierra, they would say, "Well, Reno Rails has O that you're looking for."

Reno is kind of strange, and some of it was strange, too, because Bill and I were kind of loners and we spent time together as a family, and we're not social butterflies. So we didn't really get involved in the community. I may be very talkative but I'm really an introvert. I don't like huge groups. I had this one lady try to convince me to go down to the downtown fair. We did that kind of stuff when the kids were young. I don't need to do that now. I need to rest, sit and have my cup of coffee, do my thing, read, and then help run the store.

We tried to start a club. My husband actually helped start the G Club that's in town. I guess they run trains. One group of people runs trains; the other group likes to socialize. My husband tried to start that. We started having like a place for people to come and meet each other.

It didn't go too well, because those people were kind of in it for themselves. I mean, they're very nice people, don't get me wrong, but they weren't as willing to share their hobby with somebody else because they were already way ahead. I've had a couple people who are new to the community ask is there a club—because other communities do have a club. They could come here. They could run their trains on a train layout. I would provide pizza or whatever food and soda pop and water, and let them sit around and talk about or share their knowledge about trains.

We are going to try that again. I keep saying that, that I've got to walk my talk. My boss used to always say that to herself. "We've got to walk our talk." I need to do that. I keep thinking we're going to do that. We just need to pick a Sunday afternoon, send out emails and see what happens.

You talked about the community. Has Fourth Street's location affected your business practices, and if so, how?

It hasn't really. One thing I disliked about the *Reno Gazette*, when they wrote about Fourth Street is that they didn't walk down here to see that there are businesses. There's a nice fabric shop not far from here, there's the mattress place across the street, we were here. They didn't talk about that. What they talk

about are prostitutes and bars. If you walk down here, sure, anywhere in town you'll find a bar and prostitutes, but there's more to Fourth Street if you walk down here and see the businesses.

For one thing, we could afford this building. I hate that commercial I hear on the radio right now. "Location, location is important." Nuh-uh. Location is not important to your business. We are kind of unique. It's a unique hobby, and people will find you. They will find where you are. If you're the only train store, if you are a doll shop, if you are a unique shop, they'll find you. They'll look in the Yellow Pages and they'll find you. A lot of it is word of mouth.

The only reason we're on Fourth Street was that my son came down, saw the building, and said, "Remember, guys, this is a good business between Reno and Sparks," which I never thought of until he mentioned it, and it was true. People drive on Fourth Street to get from one to the other, and some people will spot the store. If they're interested, they'll pull into our parking lot and come in, and they'll say, "Oh, I just recognized your store is here." That's the reason we're on Fourth Street, because we could afford it twelve years ago.

Has the location allowed you to expand in any way?

You know what? We cleaned up the neighborhood, in my opinion, because we discovered that under all the dirt, there was some kind of blacktop. My husband started sweeping and he realized it. So we had it blacktopped.

At first it was where people were leaving their trash. We put a fence between our building and the Mercedes repair shop. It's really narrow. People could go in there and use it as a bathroom. They can't get in there anymore because it's fenced off. When we were working here, there were people lying on the back door. I mean, they had to wake them up and say, "Keep on moving."

Like I said, we could afford this street. The building, everything that we had, and the parking lot was good. We've had a few little stupid incidents, like somebody broke into a car, but, otherwise, we haven't had any bad incidents.

We did have one incident, after my husband died. Someone was thinking about pulling the wires out of our electric box, and that set the alarm off and it scared them away. They did do it to somebody else really bad. But we haven't had any really bad incidents.

I've got good customers who shoplift here, and I caught them. One guy had been shoplifting probably for five years. I asked him not to come in here, and my husband played cat-and-mouse with him, following him around. Well, when my husband died, I put in cameras because a car was broken into. I thought for all of our safety, for the guys who work for me, we need to have a camera on the parking lot and in the store, and we did catch the guy.

He's a great big train enthusiast, and I hate to say that his friends came in here to make sure it was his picture and not somebody else's. They said, "Well, we had him in our house. He's been to our house."

"Well, I don't know what he did in your house, but he shoplifted here." The best thing is the man can't come in here anymore.

Talking about some issues that you have had in the area, do you remember when the Record Street Homeless Services opened?

Yes, I kind of remember that, because my husband used to go to the meetings, political meetings. It was set. Whatever they were going to do, there is a Fourth Street group of people. I don't know if they

still meet or not, but they were meeting pretty heavily at that time and my husband would go to the meetings. Of course, the politics and what they were going to do were already set. They just want people to come in there and breathe heavy and scream and holler and get nowhere. My husband realized that, so he didn't attend any more meetings.

Really, it hasn't impacted me because it's far enough down. If anything, it's these fly-by-night hotels that bring in the riffraff that might affect me. You know, they removed some of the lights off of the building over here on this one side. But I think it has something to do with somebody in the hotel room who doesn't like the light on or something. But that doesn't really bother me—it's never impacted me being around, the homeless shelter. We're far enough away from it.

Did your neighbors in the businesses next door share these opinions about the homeless shelter?

Well, yes. Like I said, my husband went to the meetings. I'm sure we were all there complaining about not having it there.

I meant the attitude about the meetings being pointless?

No, no, they all did. You know, the politics is pretty well set. They're going to do whatever they have to do. But it hasn't really impacted us in any way, really.

I had my mower fixed and that business owner was impacted. He's right across the street. He was impacted. Somebody broke into his building from the roof or something, and then he always has people laying there breaking his window. Knock on wood, we haven't had the problem.

Can you talk about what traveling on the street is like and whether it affects you or your business?

There is an effect. The bus stop used to be closer to our building and then they moved it further down, which helped. People do come in once in a while. They want work. I did have one guy wash the windows. He seemed real—he bought his own bucket and stuff. People do want work, they want change. We did have one guy at the very beginning who shoplifted. But they're not shoplifting; they're more looking for work or handouts. I think that's happening not every day, just once in a while. I think it's consistent probably all over town. The unemployment now is pretty bad in our whole country. People, once in a while, do stuff. That's the only thing.

Do you think it would help your business to have more pedestrians?

No, no. But I did tell you, some of the people, because we're on Fourth Street, tourists who come to Reno and don't have a car, they figure they can stay downtown and stay in one casino, and they will take the bus to our business. My husband would tell them which bus to catch. I hate to tell them I don't know the number now, but my husband did. My husband knew the exact number. "Catch that." It's right across the street, actually. Every once in a while, some people come and take a cab down here. But no, not off-the-street traffic. Really, the people who come here are the ones who are looking for trains.

Do you think transportation issues play a big part in this corridor?

I don't. Well, I don't see that many people. I see a lot of people on the bus going to Meadowood [Mall] when I'm driving around. If anything, I see maybe one or two people. No, it does not.

Do you think there are any needs for improvement for this area for transportation?

I couldn't say yes or no because I don't take the bus. I took mass transit when I worked in the Bay Area, but I've only taken it once or twice. I don't know. I think what people probably need, especially with the price of gas, is to be able to get to a job, not so much to get to somewhere to shop. I don't think we need it—I think it's adequate, from what I see.

One thing I do have a little complaint about is that I don't know that they ever clean our street, Fourth Street. I will sweep the sidewalk and sweep the gutter because there's so much dirt, and I've never seen a street cleaner here. I was going to call the city and see. I've seen one around my home, where I live, but here I notice the sidewalk just gets terribly dirty. It must be from the traffic, but there is quite a bit of traffic that goes down this street.

Are you aware of any transportation issues that involve safety or are there any things that you think are unsafe?

No. It's terrible, because I did something for my own mental health. Since my husband passed away, I do not watch TV. I do not read the newspaper. I kind of live in my own little world because I have so much going on. I'm afraid that—I'm a very emotional person—with some of the things that have happened in the world, I would have been sitting in front of the TV bawling. So I've literally shut some of the world off. I hate to say that, but I have to for my own sanity right now. I do pick up the newspaper, but most of it's not happiness in the paper. I've done that. So I'm not really aware of what's going on.

But even with your knowledge of what's right outside your front door.

I don't feel afraid. My daughter keeps telling me, "Mom, take mace in." You know, we only had one incident in the twelve years that we've been open. Two men walked in, one from the back door, one from the front, and hit my husband, knocked him to the floor. Didn't hurt him real bad, but knocked him to the floor where they could take the store wallet, which didn't have a lot of money.

We do take safety precautions here. We keep the back door locked now, and I've always told the help that if they don't feel comfortable with a person in the store, you ask them to leave if it's somebody who walked off the street. Some of the times people walk off the street, and they've got a backpack, and they have a true interest in cars. They can't afford to buy it, but, boy. I've had customers come here off the street, just looking, and they're harmless. I don't know, maybe I'm naïve, but I don't think we've had any really bad safety issues here. That's good, because Fourth Street is known for I don't know what stuff.

Do you think the number or arrangement of lanes for cars and buses should be changed?

No, I think it's okay. It's four lanes; it's two lanes going both ways. I've never really been down here when I thought the traffic was jammed. Every once in a while, though, I'm in front of the building and I'm making a left-hand turn into our parking lot. One of my customers actually was doing that. A car

behind them was waiting for them, then the next car actually hit that other car. So I'm a little concerned about that. I think that's double yellow, where you're not supposed to pull in. So the customers do need to be cautious about that.

What about the inclusion of a turning lane in the center of the street?

That would be nice. Reno's doing a lot of that, and that's kind of nice to have. There are a lot of accidents at this intersection [Fourth and Sutro], but that's because people are running red lights.

I don't know if that's important. There was a car accident here. We were never notified. My husband was never notified by the police department. A guy got pushed by a drunk driver, hit that streetlight that's in front of our building, and hit the corner of our building. No one told us about it, except for the gentleman who got pushed and hit. He came in and said, "A guy pushed me." Oh, and they broke the window of our store door. I had to fix it. I got tired of seeing a broken window. But that annoyed me. Somebody, I think, the police department, should have said this had happened. I mean, I paid for the glass myself. I think the insurance company of the person who caused the accident should have paid for it all, and I thought that was mishandled.

So when you talk about community, that's an incident that I thought somebody should have expressed to us. We shouldn't have had to find out through a customer. We would have never known who broke it. The only other incident that irks me, too, that's happening all over town, it's not just Fourth Street, is where people are writing into the glass, where you can see the writing. That annoys me. We have a little bit of that, and eventually I'll have it fixed if there's enough of it. But that's not just Fourth Street; that's all over town.

What would you like to see for pedestrians or bicyclists? Would that be anything you're interested in?

No, that really wouldn't. I notice we're getting more in the community, which is nice. Actually, my husband walked a lot of times home just because he wanted the exercise or he wanted to walk the dog. Sometimes he would walk home from here, which is quite a ways. He would cut through some of the area.

No, you know, bicyclists are not going to come down here. We're not attracting bicyclists to our business.

I go to that artisan movie night on Tuesdays. They will give you a reduction if you ride your bicycle to the movie. No, that wouldn't impact our business in any way.

You guys have really good parking.

Yes, we do.

But would you like to see parking in the area changed in any way? Would you want it diagonal or parallel?

No, we need to see the traffic going through. No parking in front of our business. As a matter of fact, we'd have the Fed Express park on the sidewalk, and I've had a customer do that. I think, "Wait a minute. You don't park on the sidewalk." We have parking in the back. I think the parking should be left

alone.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

JENNY OXIER

Founder and co-owner, A Salon 7



Jenny Oxier and A Salon 7. Portrait provided by Jenny Oxier and photo by Alicia Barber.

Stylist Jenny Oxier, or Jenny O, is the founder and co-owner of A Salon 7. The business started on Cheney Street and moved in 2009 into a renovated historic fire station known as 11 @ the Firehouse, at 495 Morrill Street.

Jeff Auer: This is Jeff Auer and Jenny O [Oxier]. We are at the Firehouse in Reno, and today is April 24, 2012. What can you tell me about the Firehouse itself? Because I know there was some remodeling that went on, right?

Jenny Oxier: Correct. This firehouse is one of the first firehouses that Reno's ever had, so the historic value is just amazing. It sat vacant for quite a bit of time. They built several new firehouses around town, obviously. You see them all over now. After it was no longer a firehouse, it ended up being the mission for a long time, and that's why it's ventilated, to correspond with people living here.

It sat vacant again for another probably ten or twelve years, and then our developers, HabeRae Investments, ended up taking over the building because they wanted to take a historic building and make it unique and kind of create an anchor to build a community around this area. Obviously, since we've been here in the last three years, lots of stuff has popped up, so, her idea was correct in that sense. That's

a little bit of history about our building. Also, this was the building that my business partner—her dad was a firefighter—worked in.

She's a native Nevadan, so you can imagine how special that was for us. This building was the "spider bug building" for so long, and the gentleman who actually did that sculpture was my friend in middle school's stepdad. I remember him talking about it when we were twelve, about how he built this spider, and we thought, "What? That is so ridiculous," and then years later you go to Hug High School and you see murals of the spider bug building, and it was a big landmark here. It's been neat to be in this space, and to feel the energy of all the history is super awesome.

How big is it? It seems huge on the inside.

Well, my section alone is 5,180 square feet. And then there are nine artists' lofts above us—nine living and work spaces, that's what they call them—and one on the side, and then, obviously, the bagel shop, which is where we're sitting right now.

Are they full?



Station 2 at 495 Morrill Avenue was built in 1950 and served as a firehouse for more than 37 years.
Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

I think so. I think with any apartment complex, especially during this economy, they're going to see a lot of turnover, but there's never nobody up there. It's usually fairly full. I think the newness of the idea has dwindled a little bit only because it is such a small space upstairs and you have to really think about how much you're paying in rent as opposed to a different space, because Reno's pretty easy to live in.

How old is the building itself?

This building was built in the 1950s, and I don't know necessarily why it stayed vacant for all those years. The city owned it. I just think over time the buildings just—they dissolve, and then obviously this is Fourth Street. You have to remember again that this is where people used to hook. We still see a little bit of that, but now that the ballpark's over here, the Freight House District, this is all up and coming, with all the businesses that have opened up around here.

It's fairly old, but Eddie used to have pictures of it. I wish I had some to show you, but it was neat to see this building back then and all of the landscape behind it with nothing constructed.

Oh, really? There was nothing here?

There was nothing. I mean, you could see plenty of stuff on the mountains behind it. I think the Wells overpass was still here, but the way the pictures were taken, you could just see on the side there were no apartment buildings. It's really neat to know that it's been here that long. I wonder how many people have walked through these doors.

So it's just these two businesses then?

Yeah, these two businesses. The SPCA used to be next door till they got their new building, but now there's a groomer next door. SPCA had been here for *years*. It's neat to see that as soon as something is out, something is taking its place, which is what the idea is. You want to see those businesses keep popping up all over.

Tell me about Salon 7.

Well, we've been open for a little over eight years, and originally, when I opened the salon, I had no business degree. I had no idea besides the Internet how to run a business. We started out on Cheney Street and, again, we were an anchor for that, for the Midtown area. A decade ago there was nothing around us besides Black Hole Body Piercing and a few other businesses that have since closed down and other ones have popped up. There are about twenty that have popped up around that area.

When I originally opened the salon, it was not to be a salon owner and that was not my lifelong dream. I just wanted to have a space where I could be myself and kind of create my own purple cow. I have a lot of business savvy for not having a degree and I felt like I just had something to say and I feel like gay people needed a soapbox to stand on and, obviously, having a business gives you a lot of leverage.

The first year we were 600 square feet with only five employees, and then a year and a half later, a girl, my first employee that I hired—she was a girl who I had gone to beauty school with—came into

some money. I thought she'd make a great business partner and I said, "Do you want to come into business with me?" We expanded after that and then went to fourteen chairs and ended up opening up another salon in the Sands. We closed that down a couple years later because with the economy it was hard for hotels to keep it busy. And then over time, we have created a culture for ourselves.

As I've gotten older, I've become smarter and you learn, you live and you learn. So we have more structure. We're just around the same as any other salon, just a different style. It's been interesting because I never thought that I'd create a culture, but it's true, you know, after a decade of being in business, you realize you have something good and it works. Oh, now we're 5,000 square feet. I guess that's what I should say.

How did you come up with the name?

When we teach at beauty schools, that's one of the questions where we give out a prize, because I want people to wonder why. Eight years ago I was trying to think of names, and I really wanted to engage my clients in taking ownership and I wanted them to have a say in what was happening. So it was narrowed down to three names, and it was A Salon 7, A Studio 7, or Headbangers. Had I known Headbangers would have been perfect, I probably would have named it that legitly, but I'm really glad that I didn't—although back then the seven had no significance to me at all.

I was born and raised in Reno. I've been around gambling my whole life. Stupid people come from out of town and think that their lucky number is seven, so I was thinking, oh, seven. Actually, Studio 7 won, but it was taken by a photography studio in Las Vegas, so I had to go with Salon 7, which now has been amazing because on 07/07/07 we had a wedding every fifteen minutes in the salon.

Now as I've gotten older, I think thirty-three monumentally hit something for me and all of a sudden numbers have precedence, and so now every time I pick a number or I think about something, I think, it has to have seven or it has to have three or it has to have something that has to do with gambling.

I didn't know that I was going to be doing that, but, ultimately, people really do think of seven as their lucky number and will pick us first. The "A" was even another smart choice that I thought about ten years ago, not knowing about Facebook and Myspace and all these things. The "A" was added so it'd show up first in the phonebook, so I wouldn't have to put an ad. But now we show up first in people's pages. So it was really smart back then to do that, and since then I've seen other salons do that. They add an "A" or an "N" or an "An" or whatever to their name to do the same thing I did, and imitation is the biggest form of flattery, so I think, whatever. I copy other people, too.

How long were you in the original space over there?

We were there for five years, starting in 2004. We moved here almost three years ago in August, 2009.

How would you say it's organized, the business? I got a brief glimpse of it. It's just chairs in the back.

Well, we are departmentalized, and I'll give you a tour and then you'll be able to see it better, but we have hair, nails, and spa. That's in the very back. It's tucked away neatly back there so it's a little more private, but departmentally that's how we are.

And who would you say your customers are?

It's so funny because by looking at me and looking at my staff, you would think our demographic is, like, seventeen to twenty-nine. To be quite honest, because of the level of professionalism and the education that we have, my personal demographic for my chair is thirty to sixty-five, and the demographic for the salon as a whole is anywhere from eighteen to sixty-five.

Usually the majority of our clients, because there's only a small section of people who can afford to get stuff done here and usually people in high school can't, we cater to professional women, liberal-minded professional women or conservative. They just know that our education is topnotch. Everything that we're doing is progressive, and that's why they come to us. People are getting past the look of somebody, and the way that they talk and their verbiage is what's keeping someone in your chair. It's the professionalism that you have. So we're artists. We're supposed to look a little unusual, but we're supposed to act nothing like that. You're supposed to be very professional.

Do you get men in the salon?

Yes. We do cater to the gay community, too. I think people just feel comfortable here, transgender, obviously, and know that we're a safe zone for all that, me and Tonya both being in the community. We're pretty out. But we get a lot of gay men. We have a lot of gay people who work here. Still, the majority of people who work here are straight, but it's advocates, people who love and care and don't really think twice about gay people. It's so part of their every day, it doesn't even matter, but, you know, it's very rare that we get a client in here that is offended. They know that if they come here there's going to be somebody who may be a man dressed in a dress who needs to learn how to do their makeup, and they just need to be open. It's not about tolerating, anyway; it's about being accepting. You cannot walk through these doors and feel like you're going to judge somebody by any means.

How many people work here?

About twenty-seven employees. We have independent contractors because they're all independents.

What is your relationship with Fourth Street as a business?

It's funny, because I've had relationships with the businesses that are on Fourth Street prior to even being here, so EN Soul, which is right around the corner, they're our hair extension place. We've been doing business with them since I started my career. The strip clubs that are around here, the owner is one of my clients. I've known him for years. Cadillac Lounge, we know the people who are in there, the owner of Lincoln Lounge, and he owns Imperial, and Granite Street is also one of my clients and I've known him for years. He came from New York, found us online and became my client. You know Louis' Basque Corner down here? Tonya's family has been going there for years. I mean, they're old, old, old Reno, very Italian old Reno, and they've been going there for years.

When we got here, it was a little slow truckin' at first. There wasn't a lot of traffic. Now we have people—and unfortunately during the construction, it's harder to get people down here, but I feel like the

stigma that has been behind Fourth Street for so long is kind of melting away. Thank god for the ballpark, you know. All that good energy and the beautiful streets and stuff are moving towards this way.

Again, we are an anchor in this area, kind of the pioneers behind all the other businesses opening. There's something opening up on the corner here. Steve Starr owns Studio on Fourth. We have a great relationship with the mission. You can't not envelop what is happening here on Fourth Street.

Since you're local, what are your memories of Fourth Street? You sort of are alluding to the stigma like everybody knows what the stigma is you're talking about.

Well, if anyone's from Reno or knows about it, Fourth Street's always been the place where the hookers would be. Like, that's where the girls work. Now in a day and age where I feel like sexuality is becoming a little less taboo, the novelty has worn off. People aren't so shocked by things anymore. I feel like now girls are no longer working on the streets. I mean, there are. Don't get me wrong. We see them a lot, but not a lot of girls are working on the streets. They're working in brothels now. We work closely with Mustang Ranch, too, so not that it's okay, but that it's cleaning up, I guess you could say.

It's cleaning up. People aren't looking at the brothels as places that are skanky. The streets are cleaning up, especially on Fourth Street. I mean, there are still a lot of motels farther east, but all of this that's really close to the heart of downtown, not much at all. I mean, we have more trouble down on Cheney.

Really?

Yeah, oddly enough, way more trouble down on Cheney. With people sleeping in the backyard, needles. It's just because everything's so tucked in, and this is more of an open space. Not that it won't be tucked in eventually. I'm sure stuff will be happening across the street, but there are churches in this area. There's, you know, the fence store across the street. It's changing and you can see it start at the Freight House and work its way down slowly but surely.

As a child, do you remember it being skanky, Fourth Street?

Oh, yeah. Well, because the original Reno Arch is right off of Lake Street, and that's kind of where the traffic was happening for so long—well, not when I was alive, but, I mean, some movie set came in and redid that, made us a new arch, but I can't remember when. I can't remember the history of that now. But when I was younger my mom would say, "Don't go to Fourth Street because that's where the hookers are." Because I would cruise, because that's what we did when we were sixteen. I would cruise up and down there, and my mom would be like, "Just don't go to Fourth Street."

Well, you must have at least tried it once, right, to see it?

Of course. We'd go right through it. I don't listen to anything my mom says. Yes, we drove right through it and—

And you saw hookers, I'm assuming?

Oh, yeah, we would see them. You know, this area isn't like that so much anymore because it's happening everywhere now, and if it's not happening on the streets, it's happening in safe places like brothels. And it's okay. Nevada is okay with prostitution. We legalized that here and I'm okay with it, too. I just don't want it around my business, obviously.

Well, as a business owner on Fourth Street, how do you feel about those motels?

Well, fortunately, they're so far down the east side. It's really underneath that overpass over there, and we don't really see it. What we do see, though, is a lot of transients from the mission, people going to Tent City. All of that's right by the ballpark, though. There wouldn't be a city without a mission or homeless people. We would not be a thriving city if we didn't have that. It's part of our culture. It's part of any big city's culture.

You can be a business owner and totally get upset about it and try to fight it. To me, people will respect you and leave your business alone if they know that you're helping out or you're doing your part in making your face known, especially volunteering at the mission or anything like that. We haven't had any trouble.

As a business owner, what do you think can be done to make it better for you here on the Fourth Street corridor?

Exactly what they did to downtown, redoing the sidewalks, creating parks, hub communities, like how they do in San Diego where every district has its own grocery store, hardware store. Micro-communities is what it is, and that's what we're creating down here. We're still part of downtown. We're just the east side of downtown. And getting along with other businesses is crucial. We go to EN Soul as often as we can. We got to the Ethiopian restaurant my friend Suda's [phonetic] parents own. He's been a client of ours for a long time—I went to middle school with him. You know what I'm saying? So that's the kind of family community. This truly is the biggest little city. It's a big city where everyone knows each other, and that makes it little. Everyone knows everyone.

So that's how we try to act—we try to sell to each other and stay local and build micro communities. The only thing we need down on this side now is a grocery store and a hardware store. We have Twin City Surplus, so that's sort of hardware store-ish.

Do you think the city's committed to the Fourth Street corridor?

Yes and no. I can say it's very early, although the ballpark's been there for a minute now. We've been here for three years. That's still very short in the long-term goal. So I feel like no, not right now, but I think they will. Do you know what I'm saying? I think they will start taking it very seriously because of the business that we're bringing and the revenue that's coming. I think the city will eventually. I do. I truly believe it. They've done it with every other district that I've seen. They need to redo the sidewalks.

What's wrong with the sidewalks?

Well, you can see where they upgraded, downtown by the river, how they have the planters and carry on that same theme through downtown.

Do you think transportation issues play a big role in the health of Fourth Street?

No. We're right by the bus station.

So there are no transportation issues on Fourth Street that you see as a problem?

Not that I'm aware of. I mean, I have a Prius. [laughs] I think getting access to here, unfortunately, with the construction, now—that's the only problem is the construction that happens all year long. That's a pain in the ass for anyone who knows that you can get anywhere in Reno in fifteen minutes.

Well, see, I can't complain. This is the power of positive thinking, because I look at what they did to 395 northbound in the eighties on the ground and it looks all fancy. I just can't help but thank them; that looks beautiful. I can't wait to see how big our freeway is and how accessible it is, but I just wish it would be done. They work on it every year. When are they going to get one guy who can think into the future and make the freeway look how it's supposed to? Because I really like what they did with it.

I could complain and bitch about it all, but that's the only thing is the construction. Reno never seems to be stopping—I just wish we would do it right the first time. But it's Reno.

What kind of transportation issues, and not just public, are needed in this area to help you, for things like cars and parking?

Well, as it grows, that's where that's going to come into play. Like I said, right now we're still very early. I can imagine this place will not be booming until seven years from now. Seven, see? Not until seven years from now. About a good decade is when it will really truly boom—because think about how long it took them to redo downtown by the river and how long it's been now. It's been a while.

Oh, yeah, twenty years.

It seems like it was only like yesterday, but it really has been a while, and it's going to take some time to get all that stuff done. Since we're in the early stages, I don't know. If I want to think long-term, I'm thinking parking structures, but again, we're not that far along. I think people in Reno don't like to walk, so the more free parking we have, the better. I know in San Diego in one of their micro communities, which is Ocean Beach, they leave it up to the districts to decide if they have to pay for parking or not. I know ours is a city thing, but for right now we don't pay for parking outside of our building and we have great parking.

We're in a location where we have access to a lot of parking, but some buildings are tucked away right on the street or in a strip, so they are dealing with Fourth Street itself and the parking. I feel like I've never been able not to find a parking spot. Now, when that changes, obviously, as this area grows, that may be something that they'll have to look into, but right now we have a bus stop right around the corner and the city center is right there. It's only four blocks from here. But people in Reno don't like to walk, so four blocks to somebody is far away. To me, I'm thinking I could walk from here to the Circus Circus and that's just not that far. But people will start walking because gas is only going to get worse, I'd say. And

the people in the United States are getting smarter about being overweight, so when people get skinny, they want to be more active. They're going to walk.

Are you aware of any transportation safety issues in the corridor? Would you say the traffic is too fast on Fourth Street? Are sightlines bad as a driver?

No, not right now.

That's all good?

Eventually, if they build something in this lot over here, we will probably need a stoplight or something because you can't see when cars are parked that way, but again, that will be years from now. But I think on Fourth Street, all along that area, there's no parking. It's all red. You can't park along the street there, and that keeps things more visible on both sides.

Is that a good thing to not have parking on the street?

Yeah, bad for the businesses, good for visibility as far as not getting in accidents, but I think that could be easily fixed. Put parking there. For the buildings that are right there, put a stoplight. That would easily fix that, but that's just me.

Do you feel like you're always behind a bus driving on Fourth Street?

I'm very rarely driving. I'm on the freeway the whole time because I live in Sparks right behind In-N-Out. Hop the freeway right there and I get off the freeway to here. So I don't really see downtown. I go to Midtown a lot because I eat over there often and I don't feel like I'm ever stuck behind a bus.

Do you feel like you have clients who complain about Fourth Street transportation issues to you?

No, they don't have problems. No, actually, not at all. As I say, they only have problems finding our location, but that's not hard now.

Do you think the buses should have their own lanes on Fourth Street?

Not yet, but maybe as we get more crowded. I'd probably say in about five years maybe start planning something like that, but in Reno, everything's very slow. I feel like in five years that the planning of it should begin so then in another five years they do it. So in a decade from now, that would be feasible.

Right now, if we were to put something in, I'd be like, "Why the fuck are they wasting money? Finish this. Finish that out there." But like I said, maybe in the future that would be something that would definitely make sense—I see it in San Diego and San Francisco all the time. They have to have that. We're not in a need for that yet, but I also think why not do it while it's slow, while there's not as much traffic going along Fourth Street. Do it now while it's slow, so that way it doesn't impede on anybody's schedules or doesn't inconvenience anybody during the construction like this.

What would you like to see for pedestrians to make it more pedestrian-friendly?

There's something that we don't have on this side of downtown is a park, and not that it's for pedestrians and maybe for pedestrians, but maybe something. We do need a park over in this area. That's what they did for Wingfield and it looks amazing. Not that we need an amphitheater by any means, but we just need somewhere that is more inviting for not homeless, you know? And maybe bridges or walkways.

Those big metal walkways that go over the streets?

Yeah, on the streets, for pedestrians, but right now I don't know if a lot of people are dying on Fourth Street. I'm not sure if that's the case. I mean, I definitely would probably revisit that if that were the case, if there were a lot of deaths on Fourth Street during a certain time, but right now I feel like there's plenty of space to walk, but it's just not pretty.

So it's not friendly because it's not pretty?

Yeah, the closer you get to the east side of Fourth Street, you start to get scared, and if it were just some planters, people would be like, "Flowers! Let's walk there." It needs curb appeal. It needs some brand-new concrete. Like, this whole building is brand new, down to the concrete. Everything is brand new. It was a shell.

That's amazing.

I know. Isn't that crazy? If the city won't do it, the business owners will get together and we'll do it ourselves. It doesn't take much to put planters up. We can get them donated.

What about bicycling? Do the cyclists need their own lanes over here?

A lot of people want to ride their bikes. I think that would be a very good idea now, a bike lane. That way it won't impede on the people who are walking on the sidewalks because the sidewalks aren't just, straight sidewalks. Sometimes there's gravel and businesses have rock and landscape and whatever. So I feel like that would be very good right now. I know a lot of clients who bike here from Old Southwest because they all live over there, so they'll bike over here, and I told you, people are getting smarter. They're getting healthier.

You did sort of allude to parking here. Do you see parking as a problem in this area and do you think it needs to be fixed by the city and change it to parallel or diagonal parking on Fourth Street?

Yeah. So listen to this. When we first got here, we were parking diagonal. You can fit many more cars that way. So the city first blocks out rectangular spaces and can fit, maybe four cars. Well, we just ignored it and kept parking the other way. Well, the city got a hold of our landlord. It was, like, you know, blah, blah, blah. The city came in and fixed it and made them diagonal.

Now, who was the person who originally thought they'll get enough spaces if they're rectangle? Who does that? Who doesn't do it right the first time? Those are extra city dollars spent in places they shouldn't be. I don't even know this shit and I could have done that. It isn't rocket science. My issue is, they're doing it two and three times over when you could have done it right the first time, and I teach these guys not to do that. Do it right the first time. Take the time to do it right the first time, and I think that's an age-old secret. Do it right the first time.

I think, right now parking is okay, but on Saturdays and Sunday, you come in here and you can't find a parking spot either. We're busy.

Oh, so then how can that be fixed?

Well, thank god, we are friends with most of the other businesses around this area and I think they appreciate our traffic. So they allow us to park over by the fence place, and, they let us do whatever we want, sort of.

Do you think they need to make something more official to alleviate that?

Probably. Especially during the Aces games and stuff, I know that there's only that parking garage right in front of them. Even just a few blocks down, which is us, I mean, that could have been a parking lot. That would have been great. They would get out of their cars and have to walk somewhere, and that would be amazing. It will be an issue eventually. It was a huge issue when we were down on Cheney. The people who owned that parking lot would not allow our clients to park there, even though they had nobody.

Did you have some initial reservations about moving to Fourth Street when this property first came available? Did you know about the legacy of Fourth Street and just have reservations about moving over here?

No. We knew the ballpark was coming in. My client had just opened Lincoln Lounge. These are all people I already know, and at that time, too, a lot of the businesses around this area, like the Reno Underground, which is the club down the street, had been around for years. So I wasn't too concerned about it, especially once we knew what building it was. This is a landmark.

And I could pick up and move to Sun Valley and our clients would still come. There's no doubt about it in my mind. They followed us right over here. I think for other businesses who don't have a clientele that they see every six to eight weeks, it might be a little different. They would have had some reservations. Another one is the Daily Bagel opening up here. I'm sure she's had to struggle a little bit, too, because her business is a shop with no shopping. She's doing great, though. If you build it, they will come.

Have you had issues with street people being here?

Yeah, but we had it worse over at the old salon when it was, like I said, a little more tucked away, easier to hide. We're so used to it. Being downtown, that's part of the deal. You work or have a business downtown, that's part of the city appeal. We can't have a big city without homeless people, and so they'll

come by and try to sell us some really weird shit during Christmas and I'll say, "Honey, you can't sell that in the salon. You have to go. You're scaring some of our clients."

They're like, "Oh, yeah," get all offended, but then they leave. They're fine. What I do miss is the dogs from the SPCA walking around here. I used to put out water and stuff for them.

Oh, that's cute.

Yeah.

I meant to ask you about the developers of the building. What can you tell me about them?

Kelly Rae and Pam Haberman, I think we've known for so long. They're actually outside doing yard work. They approached us back in November, maybe six years ago, and they said, "We want to find a space and we really love what you guys are doing here. We love your culture. We love that you're gay business-owned. You know, we love that." And, you know, "If we build you a salon, will you come?"

I was like, "Yeah, duh, of course." I would do it anyway. We wanted to be in a position where we could own our own space. That's the only reason why we moved is because we wanted an opportunity to have a lease option to buy. Everybody wants to own their own piece of the pie and that was kind of where we were coming from, and so we're in a position where we can do that, and we're so grateful because that's part of the appeal.

Did they do a lot of properties along Fourth Street?

They did one right behind us on Cheney. They did 8 on Center. I'll let them talk about that because they have so many other ideas coming into the works. It's just been great. Like I said, they approached us about it and we were totally on board. I did my research about them first prior to that, just to make sure that their motives were genuine and they were.

I guess you're fascinating on a lot of levels because—well, how do you identify yourself? Are you lesbian?

Well, you know what's weird is I've been a lesbian for twelve years and just recently I just started dating a guy, just recently. But I believe in Kinsey's scale. I feel like your sexuality changes throughout your life, and he's a great lesbian. You know what I'm saying? I still identify as a lesbian. I'm trying to embrace my sexuality. I just—I don't feel comfortable there. I feel comfortable being lesbian, for people's labels. That's what I feel more comfortable as, but like I said, it's too soon to change my whole—I'm not coming out. I never did come out even when I was gay. I was just gay. So to me, I'm just whatever.

Can you tell me a little bit about your background? You said it before we started recording, just where you're from. You grew up in Sparks.

Yeah, well, the funny thing is I grew up in Sun Valley, in the back of Sun Valley, and I went to Sun Valley Elementary School all my whole elementary school life, and then I went to Billinghamurst

Middle School, and then my freshman year, I went to Reed High and I was there for three years, and then I graduated from Sparks High.

And you didn't identify at all as a lesbian back then?

Well, no, because nobody did. Nobody did. As far back as I can remember, I've always done both. My first kiss was a girl when I was eight, but my first real kiss with a boyfriend was when I was sixteen. I was Mormon from the time that I was twelve growing up. I just have always been whatever, but I felt like the LGBT community needed more of a voice in that sense, and I have a strong one, so—and it's been interesting, now having a boyfriend, I feel like I've gotten more discrimination from the LGBT world than I ever did from the straight world being gay.

So, like I said, I still identify as gay, or bi, I guess I should say, but I feel like the bi is confusing for people, too, so I just want to—I may be needing to bring a voice to that. Now that lesbian and gay are cool, I need to go to the bis so I can be like, “No, bisexuality means you can be biemotional. That means you can kiss and love and kiss and love both sexes. It's not just about sex.”

What was it like then? What was your impression of LGBT life when you were growing up here before you came out? Was it hard?

No, you know, what's funny is my mom and dad both lived in California and then came here and had me, and they didn't marry, so they never divorced but they broke up around when I was five. And my mom always had gay roommates, so gay men have always been a part of my life. My first prom dress was bought by my mom's gay best friend, you know. I just wasn't aware. I didn't know that I would have liked girls in my adult life had I not tried it, and that's where I feel like a lot of people miss out on their sexualities because how do you know you're not—how do you know you're straight if you've never tried to be gay? I question a lot of breeders a lot about that. I give them shit about it because I say, “How do you—?”

They say, “Oh, that's so gross, you know.”

I say, “Well, how do you know you're straight if you've never been with a gay guy or you've never kissed a guy, never done anything? How do you even know? But you probably have but you just don't admit it, you know.” I feel like I've just been kind of all over the realm.

My parents don't know—never knew what to think about what I was doing. They had no choice, but I always was a good kid. I wasn't, like, molested or anything. I was a cheerleader, for chrissake. I mean, I was hometown princess, but I just made choices and did whatever that was best for me.

And people are usually taken aback by that, but then realize that they love me and they think, “Oh, wait a second. I like her. But she's gay. Well, I guess I like gay people.” And it's changed over the level of me owning a business. At first I'd say, “I'm gay,” in your face, whoa, like that. “Are you scared? Woooo.” And then I met a really nice Mormon girl, because I did theater at TMCC, and I said, “Whoa, I'm gay, whoa.”

And she said to me, “So?”

And that was the first time I was all, “Wait. What do you mean “so”? Whoa. ‘I kiss girls, woooo.’”

And she said, “My best friend's gay.” And that totally turned my life around. I have so much respect for religion and I have so much respect for people and disagreeing with what they do is best for them, and leave me alone and let me do what's best for me.

But my life has changed now. Now I think, “You love me, you love me. I’m great,” bah-bam, short song and dance and I’m gay, and they say, “Oh, I like gay people.” It’s not as taboo anymore.

In the nineties, it was different then, wasn’t it?

Yeah, I had gay friends in high school, but they weren’t out. And being in theater, I was always surrounded by gay people, and of course you knew they were gay, but they didn’t come out. Girls especially wouldn’t. My parents never really taught me to not accept that. My dad has five kids and three out of five are gay. My dad said to me when my brother was bringing his boyfriend home—we were laughing, ha-ha, “He’s gay,” ha-ha-ha—and my dad says, “Stop it. You be nice to his boyfriend.”

Even being Mormon, they didn’t outright say gay people are bad. They just kind of beat around the bush in a nice young child kind of way, that it wasn’t for us, but—and then once I started to have sex, I thought, “What do you mean? I didn’t die. God didn’t come down and strike me dead. I’m fine.” Then I just made my own mind after that.

You came into the community around the millennium.

Yeah, I started beauty school in—shit, how long ago was that? I had my first girlfriend when I was twenty-two and I’m thirty-four.

So around 2000?

Yeah. I met my first girlfriend. We were together for eight years and we’re still really good friends. We broke up about five years ago. Like I said, though, we were together for almost eight years and that a long time. From twenty-two to twenty-nine, that’s a long time.

Have things changed between, let’s say, ten years ago and now, 2012?

Oh, yes. The biggest jump of acceptance I’ve ever seen. We just marched—I was just downtown for the Day of Silence. We were protesting, and not one single “Faggot” or “Dyke” or whatever. It was honks and woo-hoos—yeah, huge. And it’s because of advocate-owned businesses. It’s because of out gay people, because the worst thing you can do as a gay is be in.

I got a book when I first got gay and it’s *The Lesbians’ Handbook*. And the advice that she gave in that book was she said no matter how hard it is, don’t hide who you are. No matter how hard and how weird you feel, or whatever, don’t hide it, because the next time somebody sees it, the shock value goes down. It’s so true.

That was twelve years ago, so totally, there’s been the biggest jump in acceptance I’ve ever seen, but also then the biggest jump of bullying, because kids are coming out younger because they feel okay.

Do you feel the media played any role, like Ellen and Rosie and all them coming out?

Oh, helping 110 percent, yes. I was told at a salon not to tell anybody I was gay, and that’s why I opened my own salon. I said, “You know, I’m going to go open my own salon.”

Good for you.

Well, I'm a redhead and I'm very stubborn, and when I was younger I was super stubborn. And, you know, it ultimately leads to where you need to go. I'm grateful that I met her because I got gay, sat on the soapbox, needed leverage, opened a business, expanded, became successful, and, you know, everything happens for a reason.

Do you feel there's total acceptance in Reno now?

No. There's just tolerance, and that's okay. The younger generation is accepting us because they know no different.

What about the outsider tourists? Are they still problems, like the cowboys coming in and screaming?

You know what? I went smack dab into Clarksville, Tennessee, and my cab driver managed to find me a gay bar to go to. I'm so oblivious to it, because in my world and even if I take my world to other worlds, in my world everyone is just who they are. And now the minority are the people who are opening their mouths and saying "faggot," "dyke," and shit. They're a small minority. And they don't want to be looked at, they don't want to be judged, so they're going to keep their mouths shut, you know. Like I said, the only discrimination I've felt in the last twelve years is when I got a boyfriend.

So I really haven't—me personally, now I don't look gay, so that's probably a reason. When I say "look," I mean, not butch, but I think people find it intriguing, and I don't know because it's not my world.

Would you feel comfortable walking downtown holding a girlfriend's hand?

Yes.

Kissing?

Oh, yeah. And I would comfortable with my guy friends coming down Fourth Street and kissing. Women are more accepted usually because men find that fascinating. But gay men are—gay is cool. To anyone in my age and younger, gay is cool. And you know what the stereotypes of gay men are? You have great style and you're hot. Really? That's a bad stereotype? Come on.

[laughs] There are worse things in the world.

Right. There are worse things to be stereotyped about, and it's just—again, times have changed. They have changed significantly in the last eight years since I've owned a business. Everyone used to call us "the gay salon." Now we're not the gay salon anymore. We're the cool salon. So we went from gay, a negative, to cool.

What would you say about the interrelationships between gay business owners or the whole gay politics scene in Reno? That's gone through a lot of phases over the years. You've been a part of some of it, right?

Yeah. I pick and choose where I stand because I represent the young, I felt like, and the old gays were not so much on board for all of the progressive stuff that was coming.

You felt they were, what, stuck in the past?

Yeah, and so bitter. I grew up with parents who are totally accepting and loving of all people, and I just felt like most of the gay people who were above or older than me were coming from a place of so much torture. And gay people, transgender people, anyone who's in my age bracket or around my demographic are growing up with parents who are loving and accepting, and so I feel like the olders were very bitter, like they were just kind of mad about everything.

And still there would be man-hating lesbians and religious-hating gay people, and now there are gay religious people and there are churches here that embrace gays. It's been eight years in the making, so I'm so used to being surrounded by love and people embracing it, and if they don't, they keep their mouth shut because I'm louder than them. You know what I'm saying?

Yeah.

I don't know. The older population, I feel, just really was very bitter and kind of melancholy.

Would you say that sort of characterizes the LGBT community as a whole, the leadership community of that community?

Well, the leaders are now my people or my peers.

They're your age group now.

Yes, we are taking over. I mean, look at the BOC. Our president is twenty-four years old.

BOC?

Build Our Center. I'm on the board.

Build Our Center is what?

We are the committee to build a center here in Reno, a nice center, like a center center like the kind they have in L.A. and San Diego.

A community service center?

Yes, a community service center that caters to LGBTQ, but it will be an “A”. Don’t forget the advocate, but there are going to be all kinds of wonderful events and advocates, friendly stuff. Our president is twenty-four.

It’s Jeremy, right?

Uh-huh, and Jeremy’s boyfriend is one of my employees. It’s a tight-knit group here.

How is Build Our Center coming?

Amazing. We just got finished with all of our bylaws for our 501(c)(3), so we’re just waiting. We’ve been fundraising for the last two years nonstop to try and raise money. And really what we’re trying to do is we create events first. We’re building events to build awareness and we’ve been doing webinars with Las Vegas’ center, and all of their presidents and chairs. We’ve been in contact with a lot of people, and there’s so much support for smaller cities and their centers, so much support.

We just finished a webinar on donors and we’re getting ready to start soliciting for donations and finding people with money, gays and even advocates who want to put money into this. Everything was slow at first because we were getting the board together and getting the bylaws. Everything’s so technical at that point. It’s annoying and boring.

And now we’re just getting ready to start the momentum—people are getting to know us now. We have business cards. We’re fancy. It’s slow, but it’s getting there. Everything’s slow.

This community needs it really bad.

Yeah, I know. We are very well aware of that, and the more people we talk to, the more we have to solicit, the more information we get. So it’ll happen, trust me.

Any idea when you guys will be up and running with the space, or is it too soon?

I can’t divulge that—I don’t want to put something out there and have it be wrong. It’s the preliminary stages of getting it. Once we have our 501(c)(3), the sky’s the limit. It’s like waiting for your license and then you can drive. So we’re just waiting for that, and then once that goes through and we have all of our paperwork, we’re a tax write-off.

And then after that, it’s smooth sailing, and a lot of people will want to donate because they can write it off.

So that’s our plan, but we, again, we’ve been fundraising for the last two years. It’s been incredible. The board who is in place right now has an elder, has a younger, has an in-between. We’re trying to look at all aspects of it.

And of course I have to ask you, since you’ve been around the community for so long, you’ve probably been to many of the bars and the clubs. Care to talk about your experiences? What was your favorite one to go out to?

You know, there's a special place in my heart always for the Patio. And the reason why I say that is because it was the first gay bar that I went to with my girlfriend. [laughs] Nina and Katy have been around for so long and have been great friends of mine. I mean, we share donations back and forth and they've just been there and they're solid, and they've had the same kind of bartenders who watched me come out, watched me go through girlfriends. I like the 5 Star, but it's kind of overtaken now with a lot of straight people. It's still gay-dominated, but I'm just not into the club scene anymore.

I was wondering if you could talk about the ones that are gone, too.

Oh, like Visions? When I first met my girlfriend, it was, like, every day of the week we had a place to go and Visions was on Wednesday nights. Visions, man. Okay, let me tell you. Bad Dolly's and the 5 Star and Carl's were where I used to pick up my mom's roommate from in high school.

Are you serious?

Yeah, I'd pick them up from the bars and bring him home because he'd be wasted out of his mind, and then, like I said, the Patio—I just have so much respect for Katy and Nina and how they run their business. They own their building and as a business owner, I have a lot of respect for them. I think over time, I've been to every single gay bar here.

What was Bad Dolly's like?

Bad Dolly's was a lesbian bar. [laughs]

I know. Everybody says that and they talk about it, like, wistfully, you know, misty-eyed. They love it. Was it all that?

Well, it was probably not, you know, but back then you just had a place to go, and I know my girlfriend, prior to me meeting her, would frequent there a lot. And then it closed, obviously, but people do talk about it with so much nostalgia, like, "Oh, remember Bad Dolly's?" They had karaoke. I remember them talking about that.

What was Carl's like back in the day?

Well, when I first went to Carl's, I was not gay then, and I had gone with some friends. I just remember walking in and the boys just staring, like, "Why is a girl here?" It's interesting because it's very segregated. We are becoming slightly like bigger cities. The bigger we get, the more segregated we become, which is fine.

And you said 5 Star back in the day too? What was that like?

I didn't go inside. That's the one place I used to pick up my ex-roommate from, my mom's roommate, and I remember it because it had five stars above the door. [laughs] I never went inside, though.

DOUG QUILICI

Owner, Copenhagen Bar



Doug Quilici with a portrait of his father, Bear Quilici, at the Copenhagen Bar in 2014. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Doug Quilici is owner of the Copenhagen Bar at 2140 Prater Way in Sparks. The bar was previously located several blocks to the west, and run by Doug's father, Gino "Bear" Quilici. That location was demolished in 1966 to make way for Interstate 80. Doug became his father's business partner even before Bear passed away in 1997. Longtime customer and bartender Ray Maldonado also chimes in with his memories of Bear and the popular bar.

Alicia Barber: I'm here at the Copenhagen Bar in Sparks with Doug Quilici and Ray Maldonado, and it's the 29th of October, 2013. I just want to ask both of you if I have your permission to record you.

Doug Quilici: Yes, you do.

Ray Maldonado: And yes, you do.

Thank you so much. What we're trying to do here is get a lot of background information on the Copenhagen Bar and understand not only this business and the history of the people who owned it and who started the business, but what this area has been like over time, with the knowledge that this bar was originally located in another spot. If I could, I'd like to first ask you, Doug, to talk a little bit about your family's background and how far back the family has lived in this area.

Quilici: My grandparents came from Italy, though I don't know the year. My dad was first generation here on that side. He met my mom. She lived in San Francisco and came up here during the Depression, and that's when they got together. But my father was born here. They survived the Depression. My mom had a worse time in the bigger cities, but out here in Sparks, Dad went through all the Italian ranches when he was a young man, then went to World War II, came out of World War II and bartended at the Stag Inn and decided to get into the bar business himself. That's when he opened up the Copenhagen Bar by the Coney Island.

So where did they live when they first got married or when he first lived here, do you know?

Quilici: They had a couple places that they rented in Reno, small little alley houses, and then he saved enough money to buy a little place on Winston Drive up by what used to be Manogue High School, up in that area. It was right down the street from the rendering works, which is still there and smelled really good in the summer. So that's where I grew up till I was eleven.

Then we moved. He bought a couple acres that used to be the old Mongolo subdivision. It was the Mongolo Ranch and John Mongolo subdivided it. He begged my dad to buy five, ten acres over here, and Dad could only afford a couple acres. So he got a couple acres over there, built a house, and my sister and I and everybody moved to Sparks. It was out in the country at the time by North Truckee Lane.

How was that for you? I would imagine it was a big deal to move from the city to a country area.

Quilici: Oh, it was great. Well, I wouldn't say the city. Reno was pretty small even back then. There were a lot of ditches. I mean, it didn't feel like the city, but I liked it. We had horses and stuff and it was enjoyable.

Was he working on ranches, when you recall that, or was that before you were born?

Quilici: No, he worked on ranches during the Depression just to make some extra money for his mom and stuff. And my dad's dad, he worked for the railroad as a greaser or something, when he first came here, but he never learned English. He had trouble assimilating and he ended up actually killing himself, from depression. I guess he missed Italy and stuff. But my grandmother, Rosa, she did really well. She came to live with us, I remember, when I was a little kid, just before she passed away.

What was your grandfather's name?

Quilici: Joseph. Joseph and Rose.

Where did they live?

Quilici: They had a little place in Sparks. From 6th Street to about 15th Street, that was the old Italian section. They had a place, and I believe it was on either 7th or 8th Street. It was a little house with a little basement and a wood stove to heat it up. They grew up in that area because everybody kind of went where the language was spoken. It was such a big Italian population from Sparks. Everybody kind of congregated around there and the churches.

So how would you define the Italian area? Where was it specifically?

Quilici: It was over by 6th Street up to 11th, 12th, 13th Street over in Sparks, but on the other side. You know where Sparks High is on 15th? It'd be on the other side, down. That was all the old Italian section.

So by the time you moved to Sparks, you were already very familiar with Sparks.

Quilici: Yeah.

You visited family?

Quilici: Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, of course.

Was your grandfather alive, that you remember him?

Quilici: No, I don't remember him. I remember my grandmother, but not my grandfather.

What's your earliest memory of where your father was working?

Quilici: The Copenhagen, the old one. I'd go down there with him on weekends or something. He had to go down and stock up or just check things out, so I'd always ride over there with him. I remember when they tore it down and they bought this property and I remember them building this property. Those are my memories.

What was that area like where the original Copenhagen was? That's the area where the interstate is now. How close was it to the Coney Island? Can you describe that area?

Quilici: We were right next door to the Coney Island. The Chevron station was still there. I remember the gas station and we were just right down from it. It was Highway 40. There was no Highway 80, just Highway 40. You had to go through downtown Reno to go up to the lake, and it was

like a big winding road. It took forever to even get up to Lake Tahoe. I would say it was like Fernley or Fallon back in those days.

And were the families close? Were those businesses competitors?

Quilici: Oh, sure. My dad, he didn't get along real well with Mr. Galletti. He had some problems and there's a feud there. Italians, you know, they're fighting somebody all the time. So him and John didn't get along real well, because the Coney Island used to be the tamale factory before they turned it over to a bar. So I'm not too sure what the feud was about, probably money, knowing the Italians. [laughs]

Can you describe, as you remember it in that original location, what the place was like and what kind of people went there? What was the atmosphere?

Quilici: It was so different then, because in those days the bars were really, really the old-style neighborhood bars. The upkeep wasn't too good on them. It was just a meeting place for 99 percent men. In fact, very rarely did you see women in those days, and I remember that as a kid. It just didn't happen.

You'd get shot now, but I remember going up there, and even here you'd see kids in cars, you know, while their grandfathers or fathers came in to get a beer while they were going to the dump or something, and these kids would be out there for, like, an hour and it was just comic. Kids would be playing out in the parking lot and I'd go play with them because there used to be an orchard back here, and same with the old Cope. There were lots of fields and stuff. Now you'd get strung up. But back in those days, nobody thought differently.

Did they serve food?

Quilici: No. Well, that's not true, because the Old Copenhagen had a little window because there was a little grill or something, as I remember. They used to have sandwiches, but that gal was only there for a couple years and that was the end of it.

There was a little kitchen?

Quilici: Yeah, and then it was a storeroom after that. I remember they had this dark storeroom when I was a kid.

Do you know if your father had had that building constructed or was it already there?

Quilici: It was already there, and it was the same floor plan that they used for the old Spot Bar on B Street, the same builder. It was identical to that. That's what it looked like.

Which bar are you talking about?

Quilici: It was the Spot Bar and it's called La Morena now. It's a Hispanic bar now. That's the old Bowlarium that's called the Oasis now.

We have the history of how the Copenhagen Bar dated back to the thirties, I guess. It sounds about the same age as the Coney Island, I think.

Quilici: The Coney might be a smudge older. Inez at Casale's Halfway Club, I know she goes back to the thirties, also.

Now, Ray, had you been into the old bar in the original location?

Maldonado: No, I didn't make it up there. I came over here, what was it, 1969? I was coming here in 1968.

But it was kind of new.

Maldonado: Yeah, I was in the liquor business, wholesale, so I would work with the salesmen that would come in here.



The Copenhagen Bar at 2140 Prater Way in 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Which business did you work for?

Maldonado: I worked for Sierra Wine and Liquor, which was owned by Pete Barengo, and then I went to the McKesson and then Southern Wine & Spirits and back to McKesson.

Did you work for Barengo when their office was in the old railroad depot?

Maldonado: Yes, the WP, Western Pacific.

What was that building like to work in? That's a pretty historic building.

Maldonado: It is historic. It was two stories. We only used the bottom of it. It was unique. It was really different.

I heard it's been recently purchased and might reopen as a restaurant or a brewery or something.

Maldonado: Yeah, they've been talking about that for lots of years.

Now, Doug, when they decided where to locate the interstate, I guess they must have just decided where the route would be without consulting business owners. Did your dad ever talk about how he had felt about that? Was he upset about it?

Quilici: Yeah, he was because, you know, we got the bulldozer and the Coney and everything did not. In fact, it's a big joke with Inez Stempeck, you know, that we got bulldozed. I just remember that my dad was scrambling around to find a property. In fact, they bought a little piece of property on B Street over here that was, like, 30 feet wide and 80 feet long. It was next to a gas station over here. That was originally where the Copenhagen was going to be, and then this property came up because there was a house here. So I think Harold [Lucey] found it, and they made an offer on it and they got it.

So there was a house on the property, but there was nothing here? They actually constructed this building?

Quilici: Right. In fact, behind us was an orchard at one time and there was a ditch that ran up behind here, so this was a really open area. Between Reno and Sparks at that time, there were a lot of open fields. It was just open fields everywhere.

Do you think that even after the interstate went in, Prater Way would still have seemed like a desirable street to be on, even though it wasn't on Highway 40 anymore?

Quilici: Yeah, Prater's always had a lot of traffic and that was one thing they liked. They either wanted to be on B Street or on Prater. That was the ideal.

So you're saying you remember the construction of this building?

Quilici: Yeah.

What can you tell me about that?

Quilici: For years we had all the guys who worked on this place as customers, all the concrete finishers. My girlfriend's dad, Frank Peterson, he did the fireplace here and he was a brick mason. My dad hired a lot of the old families to build the bar, who were in the trades, from roofers to concrete guys to masons and whatever.

It sounds like it was a community effort in a way.

Quilici: Yeah, because there were only so many companies. And you knew everybody. Back in those days, Sparks, you knew everybody. You know, Joe's working for this guy, and this guy wanted this guy, and knew the garbage guys. It was all family. Every business was a family. There were no corporations or anything.

They wanted deliberately to make this look like the old location, right?

Quilici: Yeah, because Dad didn't like change. Hence, keeping the name Copenhagen, a Danish name for an Italian family, I don't know, but, you know, you don't want to jinx yourself. So it's bigger, but where the barbershop is now, is where the pool table would have been at the old Cope, but the doors, the entries were the same.

So the old location had a pool table in the front?

Quilici: Yeah, in the front. Until a car drove through the wall and demolished the front. [laughs]

Really? When did that happen, do you know?

Quilici: Dad got a call late one night. Old Irish Charlie was bartending. He was quite the drinker, and he said, "Bear, a car just drove through the front door."

And he said, "Oh, Charlie, you've got to sober up."

He goes, "No, I mean it this time, Bear. A car's in the middle of the place." So it messed up the pool table and everything.

Were there people who had worked for a long time at the old location who continued to work at the new location?

Quilici: As far as the bartenders, yeah, we had a couple of them. This other guy we called Sarge, he came down here for a while. There were a couple of the old-timers that I remember who worked here when Dad first opened up.

So at the old location and even here, was your father a hands-on owner, every day behind the bar?

Quilici: Oh, my god, yeah. My dad used to work a lot of hours. He'd work a lot of hours, twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours every day. In fact, he always felt kind of guilty every once in a while that we never got to go fishing a lot. I remember he'd open up every once in a while and he'd kind of feel guilty, but he had to work.

Can you describe what he was like and what tone he set in the place?

Quilici: Well, my old man was a big guy, but he was probably the fairest—I'm not just saying this because he's my father—he was probably the fairest guy and the most nonjudgmental guy I've ever met. I don't care if you were a millionaire or a guy that was just struggling paycheck to paycheck, he just treated everybody the same and it was genuine. He didn't put airs on for anybody and he was just real fair, but, boy, if you crossed him, you got the little finger in your chest. He'd chew you out. He'd tell everybody to dummy up, or if some guy was screwing up and messing up with his family or whatever, he'd pull him aside and say, "You've got to pull your head out, and I don't want you in here for another month," and that kind of stuff. He was that guy.

What did he think about running a business like a bar? Did that sometimes mean a lot of challenges for him as far as just running the place?

Quilici: At the old Cope, he used to have live music, Western music. He didn't tell me this, but he told my mom this. He came home and he had five fights in one night, and he said, "That's it. I'm done. There's no more music, anything like that." He just wanted to run a bar. In fact, he didn't even want a pool table when we moved down here. Harold wanted that. Because he just didn't want the drama and all that stuff that went with it. But other than that, he seemed to enjoy it.

Tell me about Harold a little bit and who he was and what the relationship was.

Quilici: Harold was a real smart guy.

This is Harold Lucey?

Quilici: Harold Lucey. He was Fitzgerald's right-hand man, him and "Fitz." He was kind of the brains of Fitzgerald's, to be honest with you, and you never hear about him. I don't know how my dad met Harold, though I know a lot of dealers and stuff used to come down to the old Copenhagen from the old days of Harolds Club and the Primadonna and all the old joints, so I presume that's how they met. Harold was from around here also, and they just decided to open up the bar when the eminent domain thing went through at the old Cope.

So they were partners for a while?

Quilici: Down here.

In this location?

Quilici: Not up there. Yeah.

For how long?

Quilici: There's a clipping in the office when they opened up the Mint Club, so they were still partners there, and Dad was probably in the Mint Club for a few years and it just wasn't for him. Harold was a casino-background guy, so he took full ownership of the Mint Club and then Dad took ownership of the Copenhagen.

They just operated them at the same time?

Quilici: Yeah, they did. Dad didn't really care for that. He was kind of a small-town guy, and Harold had more visions than my dad did.

So that place is a little different.

Quilici: It was a casino, you know, so way different.

And you never had any slot machines or anything?

Quilici: We did, but not like the Mint Club. We had the old Jennings machines. In fact, I have two up there that we had restored, but the old single-coin Jennings and stuff, that kind of thing.

So Ray, you have memories of Bear also?

Maldonado: He just told it the way it was and he meant it too. [laughs] In fact, he taught myself and a bunch of other guys I went to school with handball, and we were playing at the Y. And it would be Harold Lucey and Bear and Joe Morrey, Santino Oppio. So he took about four or five of us and taught us the game of handball.

Well, I switched over and started playing racquetball. So he came and a couple other guys came to see us play racquetball. We were playing over here on Matley Lane, at the Reno Athletic Club. He went downstairs and got my bag and he took out an old racquet that I had and then he presented it to me, and he sewed lace around it because it wasn't the man game, you know, handball.

Quilici: That's true.

Maldonado: He sewed lace around it and he presented it to me. Oh, god. He was quite the guy.

Did it seem like a lot of the same people would always come in all the time into the bar?

Quilici: All the neighborhood bars were like that back in those days. It's so different now. That's why you don't see too many real traditional neighborhood bars, in my opinion, because, there's so much stimulus now, that people just don't—when I was younger, it was a meeting place. You came

down here to either find work or talk to somebody or watch a game or something. It was a genuine meeting place that maybe you'd see in Europe now, that kind of flavor that you just don't see anymore.

Although this seems to have that feeling.

Quilici: It does. It does, but we're one of the few. I mean, like, the Coney Island and us and Inez [at Casale's Halfway Club] and, well, the Elbow Room, but they just closed up. It's really changed a lot, the neighborhood bar. I'm just going to keep it a neighborhood bar and keep with that tradition, no matter what.

Did you work in the bar growing up at all?

Quilici: I used to mop out when I went to Dilworth. I'd come in to make some extra money, and the graveyard bartender would show me what to do and what I was doing wrong. But I used to come down and mop out, yeah, when I went to Dilworth.

Do you have siblings?

Quilici: I have a sister.

Would she ever work in the bar, too?

Quilici: No, no. In fact, my dad never had a female bartender, ever. A few years before he died, there was an older gal that worked for the Bowlarium and the Spot Bar. I can't remember her name. She was about seventy. I was going to go on vacation. She was just a great lady, and so she worked two shifts here. You know, the first female bartender we ever had and she was, like, seventy years old, but she was really nice.

I'm wondering if you could describe what it is like in here now and if it's changed a lot since your dad was the owner.

Quilici: It's changed a lot.

When did he pass away?

Quilici: He passed away in '97. I became his partner. I think I was in my thirties when I became his partner. He was 51 percent, I was 49 percent, because he didn't want me to go apeshit with the business.

We used to have a lot of construction guys, all the trades. We'd have union painters, union finishers, carpenters, and stuff like that. This is when the town was really booming in the seventies and eighties, and then it's just kind of dwindled. We don't get that anymore, or a lot of the trades now go to, like, Baldini's.

The generations have changed in what they want from an establishment. We still get some of the guys I see, but they just don't hang out here. You know, they've got families now and it's expensive.

You just don't want to drink your life away, either. So people's mentalities have changed a lot in the bar business, which is a good thing, because I used to see a lot of heavy drinkers back in the day when I was a kid, you know, some serious guys. They were all hard workers, but they were heavy drinkers.

Would they come in after work and just stay for hours and hours?

Quilici: You bet.

Because the construction trades are often finished in the afternoon, right?

Quilici: Absolutely. It was a place to talk about the day and stuff like that, and we used to cash tons of checks here on Friday.

Paychecks?

Quilici: Yeah. In fact, just to show you how things have changed, when you cashed your paycheck here, you got a free pack of cigarettes and two free drink tokens, Lucky Strikes. Whether you smoked or not, you got them. [laughs]

I remember my dad telling me they used to give away bags of Lucky Strikes on the doorknobs at college.

Quilici: Oh, yeah. That's what you did.

When do you think things really changed? In the nineties or so?

Quilici: Yeah, I'd say early nineties and stuff. You could see the change coming with the trades and just with the changes in Reno and Sparks. And then, of course, the depression we just went through here in the last four years really took a hit on the trades. And when you're kind of a working man's bar—though we do have a lot more females coming in, but we're still about 70 percent male—it's taken a toll on everybody. I'm going to stick with it no matter what and keep running it the same way my dad did.

Tell me about when he took you on as partner. When did that happen? What were the circumstances there?

Quilici: My mom didn't want me to come in this business at all. I went to college. I was a music major, actually. Even my dad, he never pushed me into it. When I came to work here, I think I worked here for probably seven years before I became a partner, and it was just mainly because if something happened to him, it would just make it easier on the transition with all the legal stuff we'd have to go through.

But he still worked here full-time?

Quilici: Oh, yeah. He'd come down up until he died. When he passed away at home, he was getting ready to go play handball, and Mom found him dead with his handball stuff next to him. He

always came down here. I'd mop and he'd do the register, and then he'd go play handball with the guys. So that was kind of a good thing, really. He didn't linger or anything like that, which would have killed him.

Who were his friends?

Quilici: God, he had lots of friends. Well, a lot of the old-timers like Ray was saying, like Santino Oppio, and a lot of the old Italian families. But Dad wasn't a real big social guy. He very rarely drank. He'd have maybe a beer with dinner. I never saw my father drunk ever, ever. He liked to go to bed at nine o'clock. He was just a really low-key guy to own a bar, and he wasn't real flamboyant or anything.

Often that's true. People own bars, they really have a great sense of responsibility.

Quilici: Yeah, well, a lot of them die of cirrhosis too, though. [laughs] I know a lot of bars owners kind of drink themselves to death, but Dad wasn't one of them.

There's so much character in here. Can you tell me something about the way it's decorated and if it's been the same since you remember?

Quilici: No, it was pretty plain.

Maldonado: We call it Quilici's Museum.

There's just a lot of stuff in here.

Quilici: When Dad moved from the old Cope, he didn't want a bunch of junky beer signs and stuff, and so it was real plain. Harold had it like a lounge in here, almost. So twenty years ago I just started—I have a lot of fascination with the thirties and forties, so I try to collect stuff that has something to do with Nevada, and a lot of it, because I'm kind of a horsey guy, is horse stuff, and the old Italian wine bottles. That's pretty much how it's centered. A lot of the stuff's given to me, so when somebody gives me something that fits that era, it never leaves. It goes up here until I'm dead and then they can have an estate sale.

There's something about that combination of the Old World Italian look and the Western decor, the ranching stuff, that seems very local to this area. You were talking a little bit earlier about all the ranches that were up here in this area, especially north of Prater. Growing up, you remember a lot of open land there?

Quilici: Oh, yeah. I used to go out and get hay for our horses at the Oppio ranch just over the hill where Home Depot is. They had two ranches back there. Gary, our barber, he came from Yerington and he's a roper and does a bunch of roping and stuff. So it's always been a lot of cowboys and construction workers and pool shooters and stuff like that, but it's still kind of old Sparks. A lot of Gary's customers are still a lot of the cowboys that he ropes with, who have been coming in for forty-some years.

Can you tell me a little bit more about the history of the barbershop here?

Quilici: They got Gary, I think, about three or four years after they opened this place up. There was another barber here. Gary just came out of barber school, and Harold snagged him up and they wanted to get him up here, and Gary came up here and he's been here over forty years cutting hair, longer than I've been here.

What's his last name?

Quilici: Rogers. Gary Rogers. He's a hoot.

It's just so interesting to have an open door between the barbershop and the bar.

Quilici: Yeah. Well, when he's not mad at me, it stays open. When he's mad at me, he slams it.

What else is the same or different since your dad ran the place?

Quilici: We still have the same registers from when my dad opened up the bar. That register there is from 1949 and then this one over here is 1951.

You don't use them, do you?

Quilici: Yeah. I just found a place where I can get register tape and ribbons for them.

In town?

Quilici: No.

You have to order them?

Quilici: I think it's in Illinois. But, you know, if I'm hiring a bartender—I've had the same crew for a long time, but I've actually had people come in looking for work. They don't know how to make change without the computer register, and I don't know how to work a computer register. It's kind of odd. It's kind of like going to the Smithsonian.

They're great. They have some character. Did the bar always serve picon punch?

Quilici: Yeah. Yeah, a lot of the old drinks and stuff, although you don't serve too many Manhattans anymore—

They're coming back.

Quilici: Yeah, well, not here yet, but— [laughter]

Are these the original stools?

Quilici: No, no, I've replaced those a couple times.

So you've done quite a bit of redecorating it seems.

Quilici: Oh, yeah, yeah, and just general maintenance. I just put on a new roof a couple years ago, and other things to just try to keep up the curb appeal, and make it nice.

Tell me how the neighborhood has changed. Were there other businesses that were once here that are gone now?

Quilici: Yeah, it's been rough. This area has been real rough. I mean, there was the old Frostop across the street, Oscar's place. It was a drive-in, like an A&W. A lot of people don't remember that. It's a car lot, and the place next door is a car lot. We bought the building next door to us. There just aren't the businesses anymore that you used to see, you know. The neighborhood's still a good neighborhood, though it gets a bad reputation, and I really don't know why. I think it's still fine for me. Like I said, there used to be an orchard behind us and then the apartments took that over. That was kind of nice. That was all open fields behind us there.

About when did that change? When was that?

Quilici: They built that, I would guess, in the eighties.

Do you know who owned the orchard?

Quilici: No. No, I don't. I remember we used to use the parking, though. We used to have trucks parked out for two or three acres back there, though.

Gerald Galletti was telling me that where the Coney Island parking lot is used to be where his grandfather had a garden. They lived in the area around Field Street. He was talking about how, a while back, there had been more walk-up traffic to the Coney. People mostly drive here now, I would imagine.

Quilici: Right, exactly.

At the Coney, they actually closed off their front door because they didn't want people stumbling out into the street.

Quilici: Right, exactly. That was so close to the street, yeah. I've never seen that door work, never.

So you said you bought the building next door?

Quilici: Yeah.

What was it?

Quilici: It was a garage and that was built in 1948. The whole reason my dad bought it is that there was a guy named “Fast Harry” and he was kind of a dubious motorcycle guy. He rented a place just down from us and he’d have the bikes going like this. Well, Dad found out he was looking at this building next door to us, and he goes, “Oh, hell, no.” And he bought it for, like, \$40,000 or something, so that’s how we acquired that building.

And just leased it out?

Quilici: Yeah. It was a garage. It was a single-car big garage. And now the renter’s been there for seven years, but they just use it for storage and stuff. But that’s how we acquired it, out of fear.
[laughter]

So were there other bars along this stretch earlier that aren’t here now too?

Quilici: The old Pony. It’s gone.

Where was that?

Maldonado: Where the car wash is up here. Where the street makes a Y. And the Wagon Wheel and the Chuck Wagon.

Quilici: The Chuck Wagon, yeah, yeah.

Maldonado: Chuck Wagon. It was a restaurant and a bar. The Pony bar was owned by Dale and Rose Goings. I used to call on them when I first started selling liquor. You know, when you first start, they give you all the small little bars where nobody’s doing anything. Somehow, Dale and I ended up good friends, and he used to take me fishing out at Lahontan. I got most of his business, though.

When did they close?

Quilici: He moved to Wild Horse. He bought a place up in Wild Horse, probably in the eighties, and they knocked it down. It was just a real small bar, kind of like the Spot Bar was, the old Pony. There used to be a lot of bars. On B Street, I mean, there used to be just bars everywhere. Not so much anymore, which is kind of a good thing. You get people moving around. And now the Elbow Room closed, we’re the only one around here, which I don’t like. I’d like to see a couple of the joints open up, you know.

And there were little grocery stores, little family markets around, too, right?

Quilici: Yeah.

What were the closest ones to here that were family markets?

Maldonado: Well, that Mexican Lindo owned by Miller, and the Park Grocery.

Quilici: Park Grocery on 15th.

Park Grocery was by the apartments.

Maldonado: The Road House, that used to be a convenience store.

Quilici: There was nothing up here until they built Albertsons.

Did the Pony Express Lodge there ever have a restaurant or bar with it? It was always just a motel?

Quilici: Yeah.

I've been looking into that one a little bit too. That hasn't changed much over time.

Quilici: No, it hasn't. In fact, I think they had one of the biggest neon signs in northern Nevada. When it was working, it was really cool.

Maldonado: Isn't it still owned by the Keshmiri family?

Quilici: Yeah.

Maldonado: That's another guy I got to know, Joe Keshmiri. We played racquetball together. His boys took over all the properties.

They took over the Pony Express Lodge. Do you know about when that happened? I can look that up, but it seem like it's been decades.

Quilici: It's been a long time, yeah.

Was there anything else that got torn down besides the old Copenhagen Bar when they put in the interstate, do you know? I know that was earlier.

Quilici: I know they bought a bunch of homes where the overpass was, on A Street and stuff, but no business that I can really remember.

Just the Copenhagen.

Quilici: Yeah, yeah, just the Copenhagen. Funny how that worked.

People talk about the area south of Reno and how those ranches and farms turned into housing developments. It's really pretty recent, like the late eighties, nineties kind of thing.

Quilici: Absolutely.

Is that about when things were changing, or was it earlier, north of Prater Way up here with all those ranches you were talking about?

Quilici: Well, it was the building boom. In the late seventies and eighties, the building boom just went crazy, and that's when the grandkids of these ranches sold out. They were offered so much money for these developments, Di Loreto and all those out in Spanish Springs. There was just nothing there. And, of course, the water rights went with everything. So the kids just skedaddled, which is unfortunate, because we lose a lot of agriculture, which I think is really important for this area.

And that kind of bugs me because during Will James' time, Reno was really noted as a kind of a cow town and a fun place to go to, with Douglas Alley and the old casinos, and people used to move around, and it was a lot of fun. It's such a sterile environment now, in my opinion. I mean, who am I? These guys are gazillionaires. But it's a shame we can't bring some of what made Reno back again. In the last thirty years, it was a huge mistake, you know, to lose some of that Western flavor. Now we're just kind of like everybody else, almost California-ish.

A lot of people we're interviewing have talked about that. We interviewed Jack Bassett at D Bar M, the Western store. Of course, they've been there since the sixties and have strong connections to all the ranching families, who cowboy and do rodeo and everything.

Quilici: Absolutely.

They still have those relationships, but those people don't live close by town anymore.

Quilici: Right.

You can't have the land.

Quilici: No, exactly, and even where the Reno Rodeo is—I used to volunteer for them—it's such a landlocked event now, you know. It's so different anymore. I'm starting to sound old, you know, like an old guy, "I remember when." But to me it doesn't make sense, the direction they're going.

Can you think of anyone who could help us understand a lot about this Prater Way-4th Street corridor, who we can interview now, who might have some good stories to tell or bring back that history?

Quilici: Well, I would definitely interview Gary Rogers. He's been around. I'm sure a lot of the businessmen, you know. I can't think anybody offhand. I'm not really sure. I'm not familiar with a lot of businessmen.

Maldonado: How about Coney Island—Greg Galletti?

Quilici: She's been up there.

Yeah, and we'll talk to Greg a bit more, too. We interviewed Sally Loux, who's a server for him. She's been there for so long, and evoked what it has been like.

Quilici: Oh, sure.

In your memory, when you think about this area from Reno to Sparks, do you remember when they were really separate cities?

Quilici: Oh, yeah.

Did they seem very separate to you?

Quilici: Yeah, absolutely. There were a lot of open fields, Paradise Ponds, and that was the old gravel pit. But, yeah, there were a lot of fields just like south of town. Once you went pass North Virginia a little ways, that was it. There were just ranches, and you were way out there. Going to Carson was a big deal. Now it's just all kind of blended into one, you know.

I like western Sparks. You still have a lot of the old buildings, which I like, and hopefully the landlords will keep them restored, and keep the old brick buildings that you've seen on 4th Street and Prater.

Yeah, you have to look a little harder to see that. You go down to Victorian Square and they're bunched together.

Quilici: Right, which is way cool. I like those old places.

That's kind of like downtown Reno, too. That's what we're trying to do with this project is create more awareness of the historic places. We're going to have a smartphone app for Reno history, and there's one for Sparks already, so you can get on your phone and look at a map and see where these historic places are and get stories about them.

Quilici: That's a great idea.

It would be really cool if we could get some photos from you of your dad or of the interior of the old place or anything.

Quilici: I was telling somebody yesterday, after I first talked to you, that we don't have one picture of the old Copenhagen. There was a lady—Dad had a painting of it, and her husband stole it out of the Copenhagen. When he passed away, he got a call about twenty years later. I was here when he took the phone call. She wanted to sell it to him, and he said, "That painting's mine and you can take it to the grave with you," and that was the end of that. So that's the only picture I know of. So you weren't really missing much.

Did your mother pass away, too?

Quilici: Yeah, she just died a few years back.

Was she ever involved with the operation of the business?

Quilici: No. When I was here, she'd come down and count the slot drop, the nickels and stuff when we used to have hoppers, but that was it. She was a bowler. She loved to bowl.

So this was his business.

Quilici: Yeah, he didn't really want Mom, you know—see, it was just different. You didn't have women like you do now hanging out in bars. It just wasn't done. So, yeah, it was pretty old-school.

So what are your hopes for the place?

Quilici: Keep it open. I'd like to keep it going and have a resurgence of people who kind of appreciate the older-style environment that is old Sparks, which I really like. And if it doesn't, that doesn't matter because I'm not going anyplace. The place is paid off, so I'm going to keep it running the way this is and do it like that.

That's good because it is really distinctive. Ray, why do you like coming here?

Maldonado: It reminds me of the old days. Like Doug said earlier, it was a social thing. People came down here just to enjoy each other's company and conversation, and it hasn't really changed that much. Like Doug said, people came down here who needed a job here or something, "You know where I can go get this done or that done?" It was all communication, and Doug hasn't lost that now. I mean, I come down. I enjoy working here on Sundays because everybody comes down. They all talk and have a good time, play pool. We put out a little bit of food on Sundays and other occasions.

Quilici: We just had a Columbus Day deal that we do every year. We make a bunch of Italian food, and you help yourself to wine and stuff like that. That's what I like, the old-school parties. We used to have the bagna caudas out there on the deck.

Used to have what?

Quilici: Bagna cauda. It's an old Italian feed. We would do it standing up. It's anchovies and olive oil and garlic, and everybody cooks their own. Everybody has a skillet in front of them. But it's just gotten wild, a little too wild.

Maldonado: That's where all these bottles came from.

Quilici: Yeah, a lot of these wine bottles came from those.

Do you have a kitchen? Do you make the food here?

Quilici: No. No, you cook it outside. Everything's raw. I have a snack-bar license. But you just cut everything up and everybody cooks themselves, and you just drink wine and eat all this garlic-, anchovy-flavored food.

What about that last event you had? You just bring in the food to do it?

Quilici: Well, I cooked the sausage here and stuff a couple days before, and I make all the sauce and then we throw it out. We have Italian music playing all day long, which everybody hates, but I don't. I tell them they can gut it out for three hours once a year. [laughs]

Do you advertise that at all or is it just word of mouth, something like that?

Quilici: No, just word of mouth, put it on the chalkboard. It's just real family oriented.

Maldonado: He's playing Dean Martin music and—

Quilici: Louis Prima.

Maldonado: Louis Prima.

I love it. It does seem like you've got this little group of places. You have the Coney, you've got the Halfway Club.

Quilici: Absolutely.

Anywhere else that's operating now that you'd put in that category?

Quilici: I was thinking that because there's only—I mean, a lot of the Italians had the neighborhood bars, you know, the old Crystal Bar. Now that's the only three I can think of right now.

And they're all on the same street.

Quilici: Yeah, that's still the family-owned, you know—

Maldonado: Adolph.

Quilici: Adolph Burgarello, yeah.

Maldonado: Right on 15th.

Quilici: It's called Burgs now, but it used to be called Adolph's. Tony, the nephew, is running it now, and he could give you some insight because that's a real old Italian family, the Burgarellos, Burgarello Alarm is part of his family.

That whole area on 4th Street was very Italian. A lot of Italian families lived in that area. I was talking to Spencer Hobson. He owns the Reno Brewery Bottling Plant Building. He's got a whole side of his family that's Italian, the Bevilacquas.

Quilici: Oh, sure, the house movers. They used to move houses.

A lot of those buildings were torn down for an urban renewal project in the sixties. They seemed to have been single-family Italian houses for the most part.

Quilici: My sister and I, we just bought a little rental over here on 4th Street, and it's one of the old Italian places.

In Sparks?

Quilici: Yeah, in Sparks. It's got the basement in it, two bedrooms. They're old railroad houses. Lot of the railroaders owned those homes over there. That's when Sparks was an actual railroad town, because we used to have a lot of railroaders coming through, but they're all gone.

You said that your grandfather worked for the railroad?

Quilici: Yeah, he did. He was a greaser, something to do with greasing wheels. I know he tried to get my dad on there. He remembered his father coming home just smelling like this diesel and he said, "I'll never do that job. Never."

Gerald Galletti worked for the railroad. He was a railroad guy for a long time.

Quilici: When we had the roundhouse down there and stuff.

Well, I won't keep you any more today, but this has been so great.

Quilici: Oh, it's been fun.

HUGH ROSSOLO

Relative of Galletti Family, Owners of Coney Island Bar



The Coney Island Bar. Photo by Alicia Barber.

Hugh Rossolo was born in Elko and moved to Reno in 1958. In the mid-1920s, his grandparents, Ralph and Marie Galletti, ran a small tamale factory in the Coney Island neighborhood located between Reno and Sparks. Eventually, it became the Coney Island Bar, still operated by the Galletti family. Rossolo, who became a teacher, shares family memories of the popular establishment and how the restaurant and its surroundings have changed through the years.

Alicia Barber: I'm here at Bishop Manogue High School with Hugh Rossolo, and the date is November 20, 2013. I just want to start out by asking you if I have your permission to record this interview today.

Hugh Rossolo: Yes.

Okay, great. I want to go back and get a little bit of your genealogical history. Can you tell me how far back your family arrived in Nevada, which generation it was?

My grandparents.

What were their names?

Ralph Galletti and Marie Gallo, I want to say. I believe Grandma's name was Marie. Last name was Gallo, for sure.

So those are your grandparents. Then what were your parents' names?

Hugh Rossolo, same as mine, and Mom's is Pearl Galletti.

When were you born and where were you born?

I was born in 1950 in Elko.

What was your family doing there?

Dad worked for the Soil Conservation Service, so he was stationed in Elko at the time. They had just moved there in '48.

They had lived in Reno or Sparks before that?

They had lived in Reno, but he and Mom got married in '48, and right after they got married, they moved to Elko.

Then how long did the family live there?

We lived there till '58, and then moved back to Reno.

And moved back why?

Again, the job. Basically, his job in Elko ended. It was flood control, and they built several diversion dams in Elko, and then he came to Reno and supervised some of the building of the diversion dams in Northwest Reno.

Do you know anything about how your parents met and where they lived before they got married?

Well, my dad was best friends and best man at my mom's first wedding, and I'm not exactly sure when that was; somewhere in the late thirties. Then her husband went into World War II and he was killed in World War II. Then when Dad got out of the service—he was in World War II also—about '46

or something, anyway, my assumption is there was a great courtship there, and then they got married in '48.

Do you have any siblings?

My sister, who was born in '42, her dad was my mom's first husband.

Would you say that you grew up in an Italian community?

Yes. Well, did I grow up in an Italian community? [laughs] I don't know if I grew up in one, but my families were certainly Italian. My dad's family is Italian also, and my grandparents there also came over. So both grandparents arrived from Italy, from different sections, and really couldn't understand each other much because of the dialects, but had pretty heavy Italian customs, anyway.

Was there a lot of Italian spoken in the household, or dialects?

There was amongst the older generations because they didn't speak much English, but they did not allow the kids to speak Italian. So my dad could speak, and my mom could speak enough to her mother, but for the most part, they spoke English because that's what you did here. You didn't speak Italian.

I was just wondering about that Italian community, because obviously there are so many Italians in this area, and a lot of them are interrelated, and there were a lot of community areas that actually had a larger number of Italian residents or residents of Italian heritage in them. I'm wondering if you lived in any areas like that or were aware of any areas like that growing up.

Well, the answer to both of those is no. In the area when we moved to Reno, they were fairly newer houses, and so there was no Italian community around that. So, no, I really didn't.

We were talking about Fourth Street and Prater Way and, in particular, Coney Island because you have a family relationship to the Coney Island Bar and Grill. Can you talk about that a little bit, just explain what the relationship is?

Well, my mom is the oldest of the four siblings. She had three other siblings, all of Ralph Galletti and Marie's children. So she's directly connected. And she did work down at the Coney when she was young, because everybody in the family worked down there. I mean, how they made a go of it initially was that everybody just worked.

What were the names of those four siblings, do you know?

Pearl's the oldest; that's my mom. Then Annette, her sister, they were about two years apart. She went through life as Nettie, if you heard about her, and she worked down at the Coney her entire life and retired from the Coney. She was pretty darn close to eighty when she finally retired down there. Then John Galletti. There was quite a distance between Nettie and John, probably eight years or

something. Then the youngest one is Gerald, who's still living, and there were fifteen years between my mom and Gerald. So there was quite a span in there.

So tell me your understanding of how the Coney got founded and what the Gallettis were doing before that. The family who founded it operated the Sugar Plum?

Yes, Nick Galletti. My grandfather, Ralph, came over, and I believe he was going to work in the bank in San Francisco. His uncle or his distant relative, but not that distant, was Giovanni with the Bank of America in that time period. He got there and wanted him to fund a shoe store in San Francisco for him, because that's kind of what Italians did in San Francisco. Anyway, the money didn't come, he got kind of upset and he went back on the train and, for some reason, got off in Sparks.

Grandfather worked at—I think it was called the Nevada Bar or something, and it was on B Street maybe just east of where the Nugget is now, but on the other side of the street down there. He ended up working there and, I think, buying part of that. Then when Prohibition came, he went up and bought the Sugar Plum in Reno, and then that didn't do so well. Then they came down and got involved in the Coney.

My mom's family lived right behind the Coney, and they were farming. My great-grandfather, my mom's grandfather, was a stonemason and did a lot of the stonework around town that you see, and worked on some of that stuff.

And that was John Gallo, is that right?

Yes.

So he already lived there in that area?

That's my understanding.

In a building that's no longer there?

Right. It was right where the freeway is, right behind the bar. There was an alley right behind the Coney Island, and my grandparents were just on the other side of that alley where they connected to the parking lot of the Coney. That was my great-grandparents, and my grandparents just lived down the alley towards Field Street. Field Street's still there but it's cut off from the Coney by the freeway.

So do you remember those houses?

Oh, yeah, very distinctly.

You spent time in them?

Yes.

Could you just describe them a little bit? You were describing the layout, but I had read somewhere that they had had a chicken coop, maybe, or rabbits. What was that whole area like?

As far as I remember, they had all of that. My great-grandfather had passed away. I think he was picking fruit or something and fell off the ladder and got hurt pretty badly, and he was laid up for almost a year in the house and then never—you know, in those days, you just never recovered. The house had cement floors and it was stone, and I just remember with my great-grandmother, it was always cold. It was just a cold house. I'm not sure if it even had central heating. I don't think any of them had central heating, but I think she ended up with an oil stove, and she had a big fireplace, but a very cold house. It was surrounded by orchards and they had a huge garden and chickens. Both houses had chickens and rabbits. Great-Grandma had rabbits.

Were these all used for food eventually?

As far as I know. As a kid, I didn't ask too much, but I believe they were, yes. And if nothing else, at least eggs from the chickens. We had a lot of chicken eggs.



Ralph Galletti, a native of Genoa, Italy, married Mary Gallo in 1914, and together they opened the Coney Island Tamale Factory in the mid-1920s. Ralph died in 1964. Photo courtesy of the Galletti family.

Were there other houses relatively close by, or were they surrounded by their own land, and so there really weren't close neighbors?

On one side of the alley going between my grandparents and my great-grandparents, there were a couple of houses in there, but there wasn't anything on the other side of the alley that I remember, towards B Street as you went down that way, but maybe it was torn down or something during the time.

We know that that building that houses the restaurant now was built in the thirties, that brick building. What are your earliest memories of that building or that business? Was that a place that you went in often with the family?

We went in often, but not as a business. When we were in Reno for Thanksgiving or Christmas, particularly Thanksgiving, not much Christmas but Thanksgiving or Easter, we would have the family dinners down there because of the space, because the homes were pretty small. They were pretty small to have a big crowd in. Those are probably my first memories of the place.

I don't know if they ever took you downstairs, but it still has kind of a dirt floor in it and a basement. We used to play down there in that area. It was just fun. You know it was remodeled in—I think it was probably the early, early sixties, and they added the current kitchen on. If you go in there now, you can see how the old kitchen used to be back in that dining room, what's now the dining room part in the back.

So the only tables that were for the restaurant were in what's now the bar area?

The bar and then a long narrow hall that came down the west side of the building.

That's interesting. So they added on. Do you get the sense that they did that because there was so much business?

Yeah, they just expanded the business, and I think they had to do some modernization to the kitchen, so they just expanded it and made the big kitchen in the back.

So were you ever around the cooking when it was happening in there?

I bussed tables down there for a couple summers in the mid-sixties, so I spent my summers down there at lunchtime doing the tables and that kind of stuff.

Was the front door facing 4th Street open for business at that time?

Yes, yes. I have to think about that. It was open, and there was a jukebox, the old-fashioned jukeboxes, that lasted down there longer I think than almost any place else in the world. [laughs] But it was at the front end, too.

Did they always get a real mix of people in there of different ages and different backgrounds?

As far as I know, yes. I was talking with my uncle Joe the other day just because I just remember when we were in high school, when I was in high school, high school sports were really big, and there was only Reno High, Sparks High. I went to Wooster when it was new. So there were only three or four schools.

After the big games, the coaches and the refs all went down to the Coney Island. That was the big deal on Friday and Saturday night, and after the UNR games they would go down there. It was just kind of a meeting place for all those folks. So it's always kind of had that real local draw, but pulling from all walks of life down there.

And they always served lunch and dinner, to your memory?

No, just lunch. It wasn't till my cousin Lorri decided she would like to do a dinner down there that they began dinner.

So that is relatively recent, then.

I think she said the other night she's been doing it twenty years now, which really shocked me.

And not every night.

Just Wednesdays. She started Wednesdays and Saturdays, but now it's just Wednesdays. On rare occasions she does a Friday night dinner.

Now, you remember that place before the interstate went in.

Yes.

So can you remember anything about that time period? Did you live in Reno at the time? Did you live in Reno-Sparks area at the time when the interstate was going in?

Yes.

Do you remember the impact that it had on the Coney during the time or how your family felt about it? What a huge thing to happen in the backyard of the restaurant.

I don't know that they felt too bad about it, because the actual business was pretty well preserved. I don't remember how much interruption there was in terms of when they were actually building the thing on the side, you know, trying to go over 4th Street and all. That must have clogged that area in there, but I never remembered them complaining too much about that. My Aunt Nettie was thrilled because they actually got a new house out of the deal down in Sparks, that they were able to move down there from the settlement of my great-grandparents' house and their house.

So prior to that, they had all still lived in those houses?

Pretty much, yes. I'm not sure what happened to my great-grandparents' house, because they passed away in the early sixties, and I just don't remember what they did with that house. My Uncle Gerald and my Aunt Nettie were still living in that house, and my grandfather was still alive then. So they were still living in the original family home when the freeway came through.

Were there still gardens and animals at that point, do you think, that you recall?

I don't think there were any animals. I could be wrong. And the gardens were gone. The gardens were only at my great-grandparents' house, that I remember, so they were gone, too.

I do remember this now. The original Coney Island before the brick house, they moved that from where it was and moved it down the alley to where my grandparents' house was, and they set it down kind of like in the backyard by the chicken coops, as I remember.

You're saying the original place where they had sold the tamales?

Yes.

What did that look like? Was it just made of wood?

Yeah, it was just an old wood house. As a kid, I thought it was pretty big, and it was just all bunches of junk in there. It had a counter, more than a bar, where you would eat at, and the rest of it was just an open structure, maybe somewhat as big as this room [a classroom], maybe a little bigger.

We were talking before about when Ralph owned the Sugar Plum and then moved to his wife's family property. Do you know if they built that structure that you were just talking about, or do you think that it already existed?

I believe it already existed, because I think whoever had that was operating it as a tamale factory, and then my grandfather just bought it, and, hence, the cook came along with it, which is how we got into the tamale business as an Italian. [laughs]

I was just looking around in the ads. Tamales were very popular at that time. There were a number of different tamale places around town, so it seems like the trendy thing was to have tamales. Someone at some point had mentioned tamales. I'm trying to remember who said this to me, but tamales, which were Spanish, I think, Spanish or Mexican, run by an Italian place, but someone had mentioned a German cook.

Yes.

Do you remember a German cook?

Yes. Uncle Joe was telling the story the other night. When they bought the place, it was a German cook that was running the place, that showed them how to make these tamales that were based on

the Spanish variety and not the Mexican variety. I'm not sure what the difference in the two is, because the entire time I've been alive, that I know of, they've never sold the tamales. They always had enchiladas.

Another non-Italian dish.

Another non-Italian dish, with beans. [laughs] It was very popular.

Do you have any idea why they would have gotten out of the tamale business?

I'm just thinking it was easier to make the enchiladas than it was the tamales in the long run, because you didn't have to do all the corn. I don't know how you make tamales, really, but you must have to do the corn and then wrap them in the husks. And enchiladas, you just kind of use the tortillas, do it that way.

What kind of food beside enchiladas would you say that they grew to specialize in or that the menu consisted of, that you remember?

Exactly the same as today, minus we didn't have steak sandwiches. They did corned beef and cabbage on Thursdays and spaghetti with roast beef on Tuesdays. Now they've added pesto, which they didn't before. But they've always had ham, beef, corned beef sandwiches, the sandwiches during the day. So the menu hasn't changed much as far as I know.

When we lived here, they were open at night as a bar and that kind of stuff, but now they close pretty early, as far as I know, but they have lots of private parties on Friday and Saturday nights, so that's what they moved toward instead of just being open for the general public. These private parties are extremely popular.

Do you remember, as far back as you could remember, other businesses being in that local area that aren't there now?

The one I do remember hasn't changed much, except catty-corner across 4th Street, I guess, because it's toward Reno, there used to be—I think it was called Stop and Shop grocery store. It used to be a fair-sized market for the era, I guess, because we didn't have large supermarkets too much back then. It was right on the corner of Coney Island and 4th Street. I want to say it was called Stop and Shop or something like that. They used to send me over there if they'd run out of lettuce, a couple heads of lettuce.

So if there was a grocery store there, it seems that there must have been other residences in that area, too?

I just don't remember any. But as you go up 4th Street, at least in those days, there were more motels in that area, and then where the freeway is, there were homes back in that area, because those were all taken out when the freeway went through. What's left of Field Street kind of dead ends up there, if

I'm right, but those were all homes, back that way. I don't remember much of what was up where the DMV is now. I'm not sure what was on that side, although I used to ride down that road all the time.

Do you remember the Copenhagen Bar being in its original location there?

Now that you say that, yeah, it was just down on the next corner.

Was there a street between it and the Coney? I'm trying to place it.

I'm thinking there was. I'm thinking that's where Field Street came into Fourth Street, and they were on the Sparks side of that street.

Did you know the family who ran it? That was the Quilicis.

Oh, yeah, well, I know that name. I didn't pay much attention to that. Yeah, that would have been taken during the freeway, wouldn't it?



Sometimes referred to as "Tamale John," John Galletti tends bar for a lively crowd at the Coney Island Bar around 1950. Photo courtesy of the Galletti family.

They demolished that and then the family built a new one down in their current location.

To be honest, I heard of them [the Gallettis] doing more with that bar than with Halfway. There was more love for that bar than the other one.

From the Galletti side?

From the Gallettis. I don't know why that is, but maybe it's the Sparks connection actually, because they were there in Sparks.

Right. And the Copenhagen Bar never served food so much, but Casale's and Coney would serve food, so they might have been competing for the same people. I'm thinking about when the Coney had the door opening on to 4th Street, and I'm wondering if there seemed to be more walk-in traffic, of people walking into the restaurant, or if people were mostly driving even then, from other places.

The only people that I knew of that used the front door were ones that parked on that street, because you could park along the curb out there, and they would come in the front. But I don't remember any walk-in traffic like that, because the parking lot was nowhere near as big as it is now because of the apartments.

The Star Apartments next door?

No. My great-grandfather had built four stone apartments. If you take the current parking lot and you kind of divide it in half, the apartments were on the Reno side. They weren't in Reno, but they were on that side of the property, on the west side of the property.

He constructed those? He'd had those built?

Yes. They tore those down. Gosh, I don't remember when those were torn down, maybe in the seventies, maybe even the eighties. My mom lived in one of those with my sister for a while. I think there were four of them, four separate apartments, because as a kid, they were pretty tall apartments. They were right in that parking lot, so the only parking lot you really had was the little strip between the apartments and the Coney itself.

I didn't know about that. So then as you remember, were there a lot of family members who worked at the restaurant? And I'm wondering if they did, who did what?

According to my mom, originally, when they were kids, they all worked down there, but like I said, Mom went to business college and then she got a job outside of there. Then Uncle Joe went to the railroad. But my Uncle John and Aunt Nettie worked there their whole lives. Then, of course, John took over the business, and Nettie was part owner of the business, too. When my grandfather left, he left it to both of them, and so she worked, like I said, until she was eighty-something.

Did they cook and tend bar, or did they hire people to do that, do you think?

Initially, they did it all, you know. My Uncle John would do the cooking, Aunt Nettie did waiting. They did—it was a big deal—they hired a bartender. That was kind of a big deal, you know. And then they hired someone to help out. Well, actually, Uncle Johnny would do the kitchen, Nettie would serve, and they'd have a bartender out front. It really was a very small operation. Then they just over the years got bigger where they couldn't physically handle it as much.

You were saying that Nettie brought in business herself, just by the force of her personality. I wonder if you could just describe her.

Well, she was absolutely full of life, and she loved a good time and she loved people having a good time, and I think that was almost infectious, that she just had a personality that just made you like her, and she liked everybody. So I think she just made you feel welcome, and you just kind of wanted to party with her in a way, because that was her personality.

She was the front of the house for decades.

Oh, yes, absolutely, yes, for decades. Very thin, kind of short, but just full of life, and she would run a million miles an hour, and she could carry dishes like—just amazing.

Did she work there up until the end, or had she retired?

Pretty much. Well, she had retired. I think she was in her very early eighties when she retired, maybe a little before that.

Did you ever get a sense of what kind of youth she had or what she was like when she was younger?

Very fun-loving, my mother used to say. Yes, she liked a good time, she liked to party a lot. Never married, and neither did Uncle Gerald, so they were both home all the time. They never lived anywhere else.

Did they live with their parents?

Yes, they were still living there when the highway took the house.

So this really was just a family compound, really.

Yes, it really was, yes, all in that same area.

When you go into the Coney today, does it still seem very much like the place that you grew up in?

Oh, it's exactly the same. The only major difference inside is that they moved the bathrooms. So other than that, it's exactly the same, yes. And moving the bathrooms was a big deal.

Where were they before?

You know where you go down the hall—I guess I shouldn't say "hall." But you go by the bar to go to the bathrooms now, they were right there on the right, that little hall you go down. So they kind of went into the serving area back in the kitchen, back towards the kitchen, not in the kitchen, but in there. So they ripped those out. You look at the ceiling, you can kind of see where maybe the walls were, and if you look in the dining room, you can see a pipe coming out up to the ceiling now. That's where the stove was originally, along that wall, when it was just the two rooms, before they added the back addition.

That's very helpful, thank you. You'd never know that. It's hard to trace that kind of thing.

It just seems like there are just a handful of places in the area that seem to have endured for so long, especially in the same family. Are there other places that you can think of that you feel are kind of like that, the way the Coney is? Are there any other places that seem to have that same lineage?

That's a good question. None that I know of exactly. None that I know of, except I do think that the John Ascuaga's Nugget started out that way when they bought it and took it over and the whole family was running it, and particularly during its heyday. And there was a great connection between them and the Gallettis.

What's that connection?

John Ascuaga still goes down to the Coney for lunch on occasion. It's Sparks. I think that's the key in there. I just don't know enough of those other businesses. I'm not real sure which other ones would be.

What do you attribute its longevity to, the fact that it seems to be so singular in the kind of business that it is, how successful it's been?

Well, I think there are a couple of things. They've maintained the atmosphere and the quality over the years, but I think with the successive generations, particularly when Greg took over, and when he took over, he was pretty young and he brought a whole younger crowd in with him, which I think kept it going, because I think that's just vital to keep your business. And they switched a little bit. They went to doing these parties so you could bring a group of your friends down, and they would cook you anything you want. So they switched a little bit, and I think it kept the people coming down there. That's kind of what I attribute it to.

I don't know Greg's kids very well, and they're still fairly young, so I don't know if there's someone lurking there to keep that going when he retires, which I'm sure he's a long way away from. I'm not intimating that at all. But I think that's what keeps it going. You have to get the young crowd in there, because everyone else dies off.

When they have the dinners, are they always family style, that you know of?

As far as I know, except on Wednesday nights I think you can ask for a served dinner if you want it served, but the ones I know are all family style.

It's such a neat thing to serve family style, there and at places like Louis' Basque Corner. There aren't a lot of places that do that. It's very warm.

See, I think it's that atmosphere. I don't know the last time you were in there, but they painted it. She just had a fit over it because it's not the same color as it used to be, although they admitted they needed painting. They changed the color.

The interior or exterior?

Interior. I had to look twice before I could really tell—I don't think it's something you'd go in there and say, "Oh, my gosh, you just painted this." They didn't make it a drastic thing, but spruced it up a little.

Does your family still get together there at all as family?

Well, they might. I mean, honestly, we just haven't been a part of it. My wife and I lived in Elko for forty-some years. We just moved back to Reno a couple years ago, or moved to Reno, so we've really been out of sync with the group down there, because we just haven't been around at all. So we're back now.

Do you have any other stories you'd like to share, anything that comes to mind?

We were talking about those parties and stuff. For years they've done something special—I can't remember what they call it now, but people can bring all their chukkars and their birds down there and they'll cook them and make them into spaghetti sauce, and they'll serve them for everybody, the wild game feeds, just different things that you can have. They'll work with you to do it, and I think that's one thing that's kept them going, too, in terms of popularity.

It's really personal, kind of catered to what you need.

Yes, you can kind of make it what you want, that kind of stuff. I think they're doing great. Everybody knows about the Coney. Whether they go there or not, they kind of know about it.

One way or another, even though the interstate might have seemed kind of invasive coming in right there, it does make it very easy to explain how to get there, take the exit and turn the corner. [laughs]

Absolutely, absolutely. They used to talk a lot about the streetcar that went down there. Somehow I ran across that. It was only in operation for a few years, but it was sure a big deal. They used to talk about doing the streetcar. They took it to school. I can remember my mom saying that, that they used to take it down to Sparks High and that area.

That's interesting to think of it as for students. We got some pictures of it down there. Everybody wants to get a trolley or a streetcar back, because everyone wants to do those kind of touristy things.

How unique would it be, yes. I'd spruce up that area of town a little bit before you put a streetcar in there. [laughs]

This has been incredibly helpful. I want to thank you so much for talking to me.

Well, I'm glad.

That is all illuminating personal information that I wouldn't have had any other way, so thank you so much.

Well, good. You're more than welcome.

ED SCALZO

Owner, Forever Yours Fine Furniture



Ed Scalzo and his wife, Susan, inside Forever Yours Fine Furniture in 2012. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Ed Scalzo and his wife, Susan, own Forever Yours Fine Furniture, located in the historic Flanigan Warehouse building at 701 East Fourth Street. They started the business in 1976 in Kings Beach, Lake Tahoe, moving to an old Ford dealership building on Virginia and Fourth Streets in Reno in 1980. Around 1982 they began to lease the historic IXL Laundry building at 601 East Fourth Street, operating there until 1998, when they purchased the Flanigan building.

Edan Strelak: I'm here with Ed Scalzo, owner of Forever Yours Fine Furniture. We're here at the business, at 701 East Fourth Street in Reno. The date is April 25, 2012.

Mr. Scalzo, do I have permission to record this interview and place it in a public archive?

Ed Scalzo: Yes.

Okay. Then we can get going. Could you tell me where and when you were born?

I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 9, 1951.

What did your folks do?

My dad worked for the government. He worked for the arsenal. That was his job his whole life, pretty much, and he was also a musician in the evening. He was in a rock and roll band.

Is there an arsenal in Philadelphia?

It's a famous arsenal, Frankfort Arsenal, yes.

What kind of rock band, a contemporary rock band?

A fifties rock band, fifties, early sixties rock band.

Did they do cover songs?

Covered some originals, you know, early days of Dick Clark and rock and roll.

What about your mom?

My mom was born in Philadelphia as well. She was a work-at-home mom and she volunteered a lot. She was an inspiring lady, and had high expectations of her children.

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Two sisters and one brother, and I'm the oldest.

Can you tell me about your schooling and from there also your higher education?

I was raised initially in Bucks County, around Bristol, Pennsylvania. I went to a small parochial school from first grade to seventh grade, and in seventh grade my family moved back to Philadelphia to be closer to my dad's work, so the rest of my education took place in Philadelphia. I was again in Catholic school, and I went into a Catholic high school. Then I graduated and went to Penn State University—Ogontz was a branch campus, then the main campus at State College, Pennsylvania, for the last couple of years.

What did you study?

I studied marketing. I was a business and marketing major.

What year did you finish up with school?

I think I graduated in the summer of '73.

Was your parochial school a Catholic school?

It was a Catholic school. Boys were separated from the girls, but they shared a building.

Could you tell me what your wife's name is and how you guys met?

My wife is Susan. I met her after my first year at college, or maybe it was my second year of college. I met her at a friend's house. I was moving up to Penn State, and coincidentally, she was starting Penn State in the fall as well, so we made a point of being friendly. We were friends for the next four or five years and became more than that after that.

And you guys got married soon after that?

We married out west. We moved out west together. I moved out first, actually, and then Susan moved out a couple of years later. She moved down about '75, '76, and I moved down right after college in '73.

What initially brought you to this area?

Like a lot of people, I felt Penn State was the Gateway to the West, and the West was happening. Everybody wanted to go west, just like the old days: "Go west, young man."

What was going on that was so exciting?

The music scene, the freedom of a new place without asking Johnny's dad for a job, just the opportunities that seemed to be available out there.

More self-determination rather than relying on your lifelong connections?

Yes. A big change in my life was that my parents had moved away. They moved to Germany, so I really didn't have the roots to stay behind. My brothers and sisters went as well.

Did you ever leave the States for any extended amount of time?

I have over my lifetime, yes. But how I first started getting into furniture, was going to visit my folks in Germany. They would take me all over to the second-hand shops to see all the old German stuff. My mom was an early picker, as far as going to junk shops, so it kind of inspired me as well. It was just a

fun thing to do and once in a while you got a bargain out of it. It's kind of like a search that ends up with a reward.

So when you visited your folks, that's when you really started to get interested in antique dealing?

I saw some opportunities. I would buy a butter churner, a hundred-year-old butter churner in Germany, and eventually it made its way back to the States with my folks and it was mine. And seeing the history of Europe, and how short on history we were, really was stimulating.

So you initially just started buying antiques. How would you deal antiques in those days, with no Internet?

I moved west and I was looking for my next step. I actually answered an ad in the newspaper that said put yourself in business for a hundred bucks. I called the number and happened to hook up with somebody who had an antique collective. That was an opportunity for me to get into business for a very small amount of money, and that's kind of how it started.

What did they provide you with for \$100?

A ten-by-twenty space in a collective.

Like a stall, essentially.

Multiple antique dealers, yes.

Like the Antique Mall downtown?

Like the Antique Mall or something. Right. We used to call them collectives, but I guess that's a communist word, right? [laughs]

How long has Forever Yours Fine Furniture been in business? Has it always been by that name?

At that point I lived in Marin County, which was a great area to live, of course, north of San Francisco. And I answered another ad in the newspaper, and that ad led me to a six-week journey through South America. When I came back from that, I wanted to live at high altitude, so I took a week break and went to Tahoe and fell in love with Tahoe. I'd been there before, but had a new perspective. There was an old hardware store. The hardware store had moved to a new location and it was sitting empty, so I inquired on it. The fellow who owned the collective wanted to get the people out. He wanted the whole building for himself, so it was time for a change, and that was the change.

I moved to Tahoe. Susan moved out and joined me, and we started Forever Yours Furniture, mostly geared toward antiques, initially.

So it was mostly an antique shop, and it was located in what part of Tahoe?

In the North Shore, in Kings Beach, in the old hardware store right on the corner of Coon and North Lake Boulevard. We could close up and walk out and go for a swim. It was right on the beach. Beautiful.

What year was that in?

That was in 1976. In the early spring. We started there and then proceeded to sell antiques. We used to buy the antiques on the East Coast, and then we started—through our connections from a previous collective store, we had connections into England—so we used to go to England and buy antiques in England.

I noticed that a lot of stuff that you have in the store now is from China and India.

Well, today I have stuff that comes from India, Katmandu, and it's just a small facet of what we do. Our claim to fame is our American gear, our American case goods that we sell, which offer choice and quality that kind of differentiate us from any other stores in town. We really do have top quality here, so that's what we evolved into. But we still have a little of our roots in antique and funk.

I saw some folk stuff. I wasn't sure if a lot of the stuff out of Asia came from your England connection.

No, that's just another person I met in the early days of San Francisco. I've kept my business connections over the years. I haven't burned any bridges.

It seems it opens you up to a wide array of different businesses. Also on the website it says that you have Amish furniture.

We sell Amish furniture, American-made Amish furniture from the Midwest, and that's very beautiful stuff. A company out of California that's all handcrafted, high quality, called Stuart David, that's also an exclusive line, as well as the Amish. Those kinds of things, that's our niche, really. That's what pays the bills, these things.

I wasn't sure if the Amish furniture was a connection to your East Coast roots.

No, that came about later. This has been an evolving business. It started with very little money, so it was a grassroots startup, basically.

Can you describe for me the progression that brought you from your Kings Beach store to this current location here at 701 East Fourth Street, the old Flanigan Warehouse?

Well, after a few years in King Beach, we had a friend who we brought in on the business, and then we realized there was not enough business for all these people, three people to exist, so we started looking toward Reno as a market opportunity. We came down to Reno, and right downtown was an old Ford dealership with a big showroom facing the main drag, on Virginia and Fourth Street, facing the Eldorado Casino, and it was for rent. Somebody had the rest of the building, but was looking to sublease

the showroom. So we stepped up and signed a lease and rented the showroom and went for it.

What year was that?

That was April 1980.

And those windows of the showroom—I've seen a picture of the Barlett Ford building—they faced right out to Fourth Street.

They faced right out to Fourth Street. Right.

How long were you in that location?

That started to go pretty good, and about 1982 I rented another building down the street, on Fourth Street, 601 East Fourth, which was an old Laundromat warehouse. It was pretty rundown. We rented that just for storage for the containers we were bringing in from England and from the East Coast, because there was still a fairly large percentage of antiques in those days. We were doing new stuff, but not to the degree we do today. So it was maybe 50-50, 50 percent antique, 50 percent new stuff. We rented a warehouse for storage, basically, and it was on Fourth Street as well.

So you never actually ran your business out of 601.

No, we did.

Oh, you did.

There was a progression. The fellow who owned the Ford building kept raising the rent, and I had this other building secured, so we got an SBA [Small Business Administration] loan to remodel the building, got a long-term lease, and we remodeled the old Laundromat building, cut out big windows so we had some showcase windows, and just redid the whole building. It was fun, exciting, something different, and we opened up at 601 East Fourth in 1986.

What was Fourth Street like when you arrived?

The further you went east down Fourth Street, the more funky and derelict it got, without a doubt. There were some little businesses just barely holding on. There were several bars that were pretty shady. There was a little bit of darkness down there. There were hookers on the street. So it was definitely not in the zenith.

Where you were, though, closer toward downtown, was that a little less that way?

Yes, downtown we were right there in the hub of it, so that was fine. There were never any problems there. That was the main tourist area, so it was fine.

What's there now? The Reno Ballroom, right?

The Ballroom.

So, in 1980 you got to your first location. In 1986, you moved into the old laundry.

Right, 601. There we stayed for the next twelve years. In 1995 or so, another really beautiful unusual building came up for sale right next to us at 701 East Fourth. That was this building, the Flanigan Building. We had successfully used SBA several times to grow our business, so we had that ace in the hole. We were approached by the building's owner. We didn't really consider it much, originally. Then it just bounced around. They couldn't sell it. Nobody could figure out what to do with the building, the property was so big, and then the city bought it before us. The city was going to make a homeless center, but that fell through. The building couldn't pass code for the homeless center.

Also at this point, the street businesses joined together and started the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association (RSBCA) to stop the progression of the homeless thing taking over Fourth Street, and so we formed a business association and basically were able to stop the Fourth Street homeless concept, and had it written into the city code that it wouldn't come here.

Then at some point, about 1997, early 1998, we decided we wanted to get the business, the Flanigan Building, that we would step up and take that business on, and we did that through an SBA loan, purchased it as an owner-occupied, and that grew into what we have today as Forever Yours Fine Furniture, which is a unique business and a unique store in an ever-changing part of the downtown.

Because it is such a unique building, can you describe this Flanigan Warehouse for me a little bit?

The firemen have a special training class because this building is all wood, so they actually come in here, the firemen, and run the firemen classes through here, to show them this type of structure. It's big old timber. It's old virgin timber from the turn of the century, the 19th century to the 20th century, I'm talking about, big timber from there. The timber starts in the basement and goes through the first floor, up to the second floor, and all through the ceiling. It's huge one-foot-by-one-foot chunks of wood, just big timber everywhere you look. It's a wooden structure, basically, a wooden and brick structure.

It's very old too?

Yes. In fact, it's the second oldest standing commercial business at this point in the city's history, and it's also the oldest functioning commercial building, because the older business in town down on Commercial Row is nonfunctioning. It's the old Masonic building.

So this one was built in 1902.

Right.

I read, again, the basement was dug in 1904, so not initially. But how many square feet is this building?

I'm told it's 35,000. When we bought it, it was advertised as 35,000. So that's what I say it is.



Forever Yours Fine Furniture, located in the historic Flanigan Warehouse, in 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

What was the condition of the business when you got in here in 1998?

The core of the business was in good shape. The cosmetics were poor and it needed work. As I said, we bought it with an SBA loan. We got some extra money to remodel, to get it up to where we could use it. Luckily, our use was easy to approve as a retail furniture outlet, so it was a good fit, and we closed the building up and worked on it for about eight months, mostly just gutting it and opening it up, making it as roomy as it possibly could be.

And then in June of 1999, we opened. We bought the business in October of 1998 and we opened in June of 1999. We got the CO and we opened. For a while we had two stores. We still had the 601 business, since I couldn't get out of the lease, and then eventually we sold the lease for a token amount of money to Anchor Auctions, who took over the business and has been there ever since.

Do you have a relationship with any of the other business owners here on Fourth Street?

Sure. I was in the business organization, and still am. It's not functioning today as it was. You know, this is a community of small business people, Fourth Street. There are no huge corporations on this street; it's all family-oriented businesses. I know pretty much everybody at this point, having been on the street for thirty-plus years, so I pretty much know everybody in a good friendly way.

The Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association, that's part of what a lot of these other business owners were in?

Yes. We definitely had a high point of joining together to stop the homeless shelter back in the mid-nineties. We were trying to stop the homeless thing from overrunning the street, with people working, trying to make a living. It's not that we're against the homeless people; it's just where they were going to locate it, where there are businesses that pay taxes.

How has Fourth Street changed since you've been here? What kinds of improvements have been made since you've been on the street?

Fourth Street has come a long way. It still has some of the most unique spots to shop or eat in all of Reno, and it's progressed. There are a lot more young people coming into the Fourth Street corridor in these big old warehouses, doing creative things. There's the Bike Project that came into town. There's a guy doing iron work. There have been a lot of nice things going on.

There are a couple of businesses that still need to come up to spoof. The old Salvation Army business has been sitting empty for six years. That's kind of sad, as it's a big 35,000-square-foot business. If it had some kind of dynamics to it, it would help the street immensely.

Then the ballpark came in, the bus station moved further east, young people took over Louis' Basque restaurant, and did a good job. You've got young people taking over the Lincoln Lounge. So there's fresh blood and there's a good direction for Fourth Street. It just needs to hopefully come to fruition.

There's a lot of unique architecture on this street too.

Yes, it is the old U.S. 40, so it is the Lincoln Highway, which is an historical highway. If you want to talk about the history of Reno, this is the core of the history of Reno, so that's what makes the area also unique. Plus we're a couple streets down from a major university. So we are a shopping street that parallels Route 80, just a block or two away. We should be utilized more than we are as an asset.

That's true, I think maybe the construction of U.S. 80 really cut off the university from this area.

You could think that way, but there are connections. The university's growing so much, it might even cross over U.S. 80.

That's possible.

It's right at the brim of it right now. And the people at the university would easily come down to Fourth Street if the character takes it up a couple more notches. It's going to become a shopping street. You can see it, just like Fourth Street in Berkeley, just like Old Town in Auburn. That's what you do with old parts of town that parallel the freeway; make them into shopping districts.

Lincoln Lounge attracts a very young crowd of people all from the university. I could see people, rather than going from the university to downtown, which is dominated by casinos, perhaps coming to small

establishments on Fourth Street.

We do, actually, business with the university. We've done several offices. When they remodeled the English Department, we did it in an arts and crafts mode with office furniture. So we've had a lot of contact and business dealings with the university, which has been a big plus for us.

I hear that you used to be able to walk from the university, using alleyways all the way, down to First Street, but now that I-80's there, it disrupts the flow a little bit.

Well, old Reno has alleyways. Alleyways are a functioning part of the old part of town.

What are some noticeable changes that have occurred in Reno itself since 1980?

In about 1976 they expanded with about a half a dozen new casinos, and that's what first caught my attention. Then by 1980, I said, well, there's enough action down there, we should go down there. Then it pretty much grew at a rapid pace through the nineties, and then it really took off, from the end of the nineties into the year 2000. The town just really, really grew. Business was outstanding. We were doing a couple million bucks a year in business. It was really a good time, and a lot of people thought it would never end, but as we know today, there was an ending to it.



The historic Flanigan Warehouse around 1900. Photo courtesy of Neal Cobb and Jerry Fenwick.

This region is prone to boom and bust cycles. We know that. But was it because a lot of people were moving into the area in the late nineties and early 2000s?

People were moving here. It was a fresh area, had a lot of potential. It is adjacent to California, with more conservative, easier tax rules, and it's connected by Interstate 80 and airports. It's just a real good distribution center for the whole West. So Reno seemed like a hot spot.

There are no floor costs in the warehouses here either, which is another thing.

Yes, that's part of the stimulation to bring people here for distribution and logistics.

The history of this business when it started was commercial warehousing. People could warehouse here until, say, wool got to be a certain price, then they would sell it. That's all part of the history of this property. This property was more than the Flanigan Building. There were other buildings. There was a hide house; there was a slaughterhouse; there was an ice house. It was all here on the old Highway 40, and the trains came in. It was quite a commercial area.

Today, you know, with the remnants, every building you see had some history, being an old firehouse, an old drugstore. Every building has something, an old Laundromat has some kind of background like that to it, which makes the area unique to this town.

How about the building directly behind the warehouse, that big multi-story brick building?

We call it the Resco Building. Believe it or not, I think it was the slaughterhouse years ago, and then it was a paint shop, and then it was the Resco. It's been a bunch of things. It's an unbelievable building. If history tells it out, there may be expansion of Forever Yours into that building. We'll see.

It's currently unoccupied?

No, it's occupied by Davis Construction and it's also for sale by Davis Construction right now. Davis Construction really doesn't need the building, so we're actually in negotiation with Davis Construction for that building.

That would be interesting.

Me and a partner of mine. We're thinking of a design center. We're thinking of expanding here. If we get it, it'll be utilized for its core attributes, the bricks and the openness and the lines. It'll be aesthetically pleasing when we're done with it, but it'll still have its old reference to the past. Much like this building.

Has zoning changed at all since you've had the business?

That was the Catch 22. We had changed the zoning to keep any homeless shelters from coming into the corridor and affecting negatively the business area, and then the city and the City Council blew out our zoning and rezoned it and brought in the homeless facility and built a huge homeless center

adjacent to the downtown in the Fourth Street corridor, which has come back to bite them, in my opinion, because after that, they invested in a beautiful ballpark downtown, and the homeless center is right next to it and creates problems for sure. It's created a lot of problems for downtown because that's where all the homeless people go, directly downtown, and for us it actually was a godsend because they focused everything in the downtown corridor, and it's hurt the downtown quite a bit.

It directs people west rather than east, I guess.

Right. There's nothing at East Fourth, so downtown is west of it. All the asking for money takes place down there.

So what is the area zoned for now?

Well, they still can't put a homeless facility on Fourth Street itself. Fourth Street itself is still supposedly not capable of having a homeless drop-in center, but right off Fourth Street on Record Street is the huge facility, so that's created problems for people in that part of town because it just flows over and it's stopped any real investment right in front of it. That's a flat part of the street.

And Alpine Glass is out of business, right?

Yes, they're gone, so we've got a derelict Alpine Glass building and a derelict old Barengo building that's a beautiful building but is overrun with people sleeping behind it and things like that.

St. Vincent's took over the old Commercial Hardware. That was after the new zoning. St. Vincent's came in, took over the old Commercial Hardware building in the 1990s or something, I'm not sure when, and then they refused to move, and that's what brought the rest of the homeless center to them instead of going somewhere else that maybe would have been better for the town.

Commercial Hardware was kind of a competitor or another business like the Flanigan Hardware that was in here, a place where you could buy individual nuts and bolts. It was old-time, before Lowe's and Home Depot type hardware stores on a big scale. It was a unique, very unique business.

What type of customers do you get in here? Are there a lot of curious passersby? Do you get people coming from out of town?

We get a lot of repeat business. Our customers are older at this point in this business because we've kind of gone upscale a little bit, but when we first started, with just antiques, they were people of all ages. Nowadays you have to be a little more economically situated to shop here than you did in the past, and that's the progression we went and were happy to go, and that's where we're at. I'm trying to have more stuff for younger people who are just starting out—a little more affordable—on the second floor, but the high quality of goods we're trying to keep kind of dictates somebody who is fairly successful in life to purchase.

So you get a lot of people who are redecorating their homes or moving into new homes?



The second floor of Forever Yours Fine Furniture. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber

Moving, leaving, decorating, remodels, everything to do with the home. We've been around a long time, so our name's been in this area for thirty-plus years, with millions and millions of turnover in products, so we get people, lots of people. And we have a unique building that people want to come in, so it's kind of a win-win situation. People are still surprised what's in here today, but a lot of people know about us.

The core of our business today is when you come in, you buy a bedroom set. You don't just buy the bed; you buy the bed, the nightstands. That's the progression the business has taken. This business is quite different than it was twenty-five years, twenty years ago. It's been a learning process and a maturing process.

Repeat business leads to more purchases, like a bedroom or dining set and a hutch. You want to get the whole room if you can. You want to get the whole ball of wax. You want to sell them everything that fits that room if you can.

Has the train trench affected your business at all, as far as you can tell? Was the construction disrupted at all?

No, the train trench, to me, was a positive. Some people didn't like it in the Fourth Street Business Association, but I thought it was a positive. It's made the town quieter. In the long run, maybe it doesn't make that much difference, but it seems to give the downtown its own personality more, rather

than a personality with a train. The train was part of the personality of downtown for a long time. Now it's not because it's sunken. The construction of the trench didn't seem to spread out all over the town. It was kind of centered where it was.

So have the additions of the ballpark and the new bus depot, as far as you can tell, done anything to improve the area?

Yes, and the Events Center they built, and the bowling alley. There's a whole bunch of new beautiful stuff down there. I myself believe that Reno will have another uplift here just as people keep producing the graduates from the university. It's a town that has a great personality. It's unique. It's got a good climate. It's got access to I-80 and the California market, near the great city of San Francisco. It's a great place to live, as far as I'm concerned.

In your opinion, has the reputation of Fourth Street changed recently? What might further change the reputation of this street?

Fourth Street's leaving behind its old reputation of prostitution and nothing but derelictness. What's changed that is the ballpark, the Events Center, and the younger people moving in, and that's a trend that's going to keep going. Fourth Street's going to slowly but surely get better and better. There's no two ways about it. And like I said, it's really accessible from Route 80. It has several on and off exits to Route 80, so it makes it very accessible and historical, so it's going places. I still think Fourth Street's going places.

What is your hope for the future of the Fourth Street corridor?

I just hope it becomes more of an economically progressive area. I'd like to see a café on the street. I think it's real doable. The building I look at is the old firehouse with the parking. That would make a fantastic café. I'd like to see that, a coffee shop to back up the café. There are plenty of nice people doing art things and stuff. The Reno Bike Project is a great addition. It's just got a lot of uniqueness.

What will happen to the Flanigan building itself, I don't know. I'm hoping it maybe stays in the furniture trade as a place where people can walk in, just browse and shop. It's a big building, so it has limited purposes. We'll see what happens. It's always going to be a unique building to Reno. The future is just going to make it more unique. It's a great building, has a great history, and I think the town will appreciate it more and more as the years go on.

It certainly is in nice shape for as old as it is.

Yes, thank you. I might add we won the Preservation Award in the year 2007, recognized with that award from the city of Reno, my wife Susan and me. It's pretty much in original condition.

Do transportation issues play a big role in the health of the Fourth Street corridor?

Well, I think they can. I think people are going to use public transportation more and more, and

Fourth Street used to have an old trolley that went down Fourth Street from Reno to Sparks.

Right. And then to Plumas Springs.

Right. With Fourth Street right now, they're talking about changing the dynamics of it and making it more bike-friendly, so that's all good stuff. I think public transportation represents a sort of maturity in a lot of cities, to have good public transportation, and I think that will be the case for Reno as well.

What do you think the greatest transportation needs are for the corridor as it stands?

I don't know. Maybe to get the people to take the buses more, maybe a free day, maybe like every Wednesday it's free or something. In Portland they have the downtown cores for their trams, and they're free. You just jump on and off. It makes it so easily accessible and useful, that you almost have to be an idiot not to use them. That's what could make a big difference down here, just make it a no-brainer to use public transportation. It's starting. I mean, they have the buses going down Virginia Street, the Express that goes down. They've got those new ports with digital signs. It looks very European. They're like a kiosk for sitting there waiting for the fast bus that comes down. The accordion bus goes down Virginia Street every twenty minutes or something like that.

Are you aware of any transportation safety issues in the corridor?

No, I don't know of any safety issues.

Do you think the lanes should be modified to have fewer than two lanes or a center turning lane or should the buses have their own lanes? Do you think that would make the flow of traffic a little bit better?

I think definitely things should be studied first—the streets, not just Fourth Street, but Sixth Street and the middle street should all be studied to see the flow around all these new things, the Events Center, the ballpark, the new bus center. There should be an optimum approach to that. I think you should try to maybe run around Fourth Street a little more rather than using Fourth Street for all the traffic. That's my personal opinion. I think Fourth Street should be developed more commercially for bikes and walking, to make it more pedestrian-friendly, and let Mill Street and Sixth Street carry the burden, or the bulk of the public transportation vehicles.

Do you think bike lanes would be a good idea or maybe wider, newer sidewalks?

Wider, newer sidewalks are good. Bike lanes. Just get it so you could have cafés. If you made wider sidewalks, you could have cafés with dining in front or seating in front. Just make it user-friendly, not just bus-friendly and car-friendly, but user-friendly. Make it more pedestrian-oriented and use as an alternative Sixth Street and Mills Street, and take what Fourth Street offers and highlight it instead of battling it.

With wider sidewalks you could have more trees, perhaps.

You could have trees, you could have cafés, you could have people outside. Like I said, the proximity to the university makes that dynamic possible. The history of the area is here. If you drive up I-80, think about it. You get off in Auburn, you've got old town Auburn. You get off in Truckee, you've got old town Truckee. Why couldn't you get off in downtown Reno and have an historic Fourth Street? What does that do? That brings people into your town. It's a marketing strategy, but it's a common-sense strategy. It's already a win-situation for Auburn. It's already a big win situation for Truckee. And Reno has ignored its assets so far, and now, unfortunately, it seems like they're emphasizing the buses going to a baseball game over taking Fourth Street and developing it to be more user-friendly. I'm disappointed in that, to be honest.

I know in Auburn, too, there's a lot of emphasis with plaques and markers of what's what. And that could easily be done on Fourth Street also.

Right. Right. Definitely on the core part of downtown Fourth Street, and even stretching into on the other side of it a little bit towards Sparks. But we'll see. Is it all about the buses or is it all about having a commercial street that is dynamic?

I know you have a plaque on your building that says Flanigan Square established 1902.

Yeah, we did that. We also named it Flanigan Square. We added that. It was always considered the Flanigan building, but since we own the whole block, we decided to call it Flanigan Square.

Not to be mistaken with Hobson Square.

Well, he's a latecomer. [laughter] He's a wannabe there. No, I like Mr. Hobson.

How is parking on the street?

We have our own parking, so parking's not an issue for us. If they want parking, all they have to do is create a public lot somewhere on the street. People will park and walk a few blocks if the blocks are interesting and dynamic. That's not a problem. So there are ways to deal with the parking.

There's plenty of lighting on the street now.

The street is lit up. The street has all the ingredients. It's just a matter of who wins—the buses and cars, or pedestrians and bicycles and commercial activity.

I saw recently that they're using the old bus depot for events every Friday, and that's on Fourth Street.

That's a fantastic thing, the food trucks. That's something that's gone on in many cities across the country. Portland is a leader in that. It's time to learn from other people.

There are a lot of things to be done, like you say, a user-friendly dynamic area, with cafés, maybe even a

grocery store.

There are buildings on this block. I could see the old Salvation Army building being a Whole Foods or a Trader Joe's. It's got parking. It's got all the assets and then it could service the whole university area, this whole north area of town.

It's the same old dilemma for America. Does the car win out over everything? Is everything about the car or are we going to get more people-friendly and pedestrian-friendly? Fourth Street offers it if they take it that way.

It's easy to walk down Fourth Street. It's easily walkable, but the sidewalks are narrow.

Why walk down the street when you have to breathe the vehicle fumes? Minimize the vehicles, two lanes, one each way. That's all you need.

Is there a lot of residential around here? I don't know.

There isn't much residential, but there's the potential for residential. There are big lots available off of Sixth. In the past they've talked about student housing and things like that. There is some senior housing in the corridor. You can live above your business if you want in this corridor, which is a neat factor, and I believe the guys at the Lincoln Lounge are doing that.

And also above Abbey's Highway 40.

Isn't that the Morris Hotel there?

I think that's the same building, but I think people live above those also.

They live in the Morris Hotel. Abbey's doesn't have a building over it.

Oh, it doesn't. Okay. And there's also that housing right down the street now, right? On the next block.

There's housing over there. That's subsidized housing, which is good. It's not a problem. Everybody needs a hand.

Is the El Rancho still open next door?

That's subsidized housing as well. Both the next two housing facilities, the El Rancho and the newer one are housing-subsidized.

The El Rancho used to be a very nice place. And then the Wells overpass there—

Killed it.

—kind of killed it a little bit, from what I understand. Thanks a lot for your time on this, Ed. I think we got

some good information here that should be useful.

Thanks for your interest, Edan.

Absolutely.

May the future be blessed.

I hope so. Thank you.

FRED SCHWAMB

Founder of Far West Steel Fabricators
and Son of Martin Schwamb, the Founder of Martin Iron Works



Fred Schwamb inside Martin Iron Works. Photo provided by Fred Schwamb.

Born in Syracuse, New York in 1931, Fred Schwamb moved in 1936 to Reno, where his father, Martin Schwamb, founded Martin Iron Works in 1939. Fred worked with his father from boyhood, first at the shop's original location on Morrill Avenue, just south of East Fourth Street, and then at its current location at 530 East Fourth Street. He later founded his own steel fabrication business just across the street from the original site of Martin Iron Works. He is joined later in the interview by his sister, Betty Dodson. Fred Schwamb died in 2016.

Alicia Barber: We're here in Reno, and the date is November 13, 2013. Fred, do I have your permission to record this interview with you today?

Fred Schwamb: That is fine.

We're going to be talking about Martin Iron Works today and your experience with the family business and what you remember about other places on Fourth Street, too, but I wanted to go back first and ask how long ago your family arrived in Nevada.

1936.

Who arrived here in that year?

That would be my mother and my father. Turned out later on in life that I found out it was my adoptive father. My mother ran off with [my sister] Betty's father, I should say, and came to Reno. I always thought it was my dad, but found out he adopted me, see, here in Reno. Back in 1936, we were the ten most wanted. [laughs]

So what had happened?

My birth father was looking for us. He finally realized where we were. But I never met him until I was a junior in high school.

Where did he live? Where was your mother coming from, when she came to Reno?

Syracuse, New York. That's where I was born.

What year were you born?

1931.

So you were quite young, arriving here.

Five years old.

Do you remember anything about that journey?

Not really. We had those old cars. Well, you see how old they were in that picture there [from the early years of Martin Iron Works]. Dad started that business in '39.

Martin Iron Works. Did your mother arrive here with your adoptive father or did they meet here?

No, they skipped Syracuse together. They just took off.

Tell me their names.

Martin Schwamb and Doris Schwamb. That's Betty's and my mother.

Did they get married in Reno?

Yeah. The one that married them—I'm trying to think—he was a judge here in town. I can't remember his name, but I'd known him real well years ago because we were in some of the same groups together. The judge played football, I think for Cal, the University of California. Judge Beemer, that's what it was.

Had your mother's family lived in New York for a long time? Is that where they were from?

They came over in the twenties. I don't know the exact date, but they immigrated over.

Where did they come from? What was her heritage?

Dunzk, Germany at that time. Now it's called Gdansk, Poland, but it was Dunzk, Germany back then.

What was her maiden name?

Oh, gosh, let's see. You might want to ask my sister. Silvesky, but don't ask me how you spell it, though. It's either s-k-i or s-k-y. I still don't know. Silvesky was her last name. Their father, my grandfather, came over first and he was working. They were German but they were still from Gdansk, which was a mixture of Polish and German and everything else. But they always called them—I don't want to say it. "G.D. Polack." So you can imagine.

He changed his last name to Bremer and my uncle also changed his name, at the same time. When they came over, he changed his name to Bremer, and so then my grandmother, when they came over, her name was Bremer then, too. The three sisters, our mother and her two sisters, kept the name Silvesky because they were going to get married anyway, so the name would change.

At least everyone changed their name to the same name, or it would have been very confusing. Your father, Martin, then—your adoptive father—where was he born?

Frankfurt, Germany. We had two half-sisters. He had two daughters. One of them has passed away and the other one is not too well. She lives over in the Sparks or Spanish Springs area with her daughter.

They had moved here, too, then, to Reno?

Just the youngest daughter, the one who lives over there. They had moved to Reno when Martin Iron Works moved to where it is now, see.

So a little later, then.

Yeah.

How old were you when you found out that Martin was your adoptive father and not your biological father?

Well, I was over in my last year in Billinghamurst, so what would that make me? I got out of high school in '49, so I was around fifteen or sixteen years old. I was sitting on that wall that's still there and we were doing track. A fellow comes by and asks if Fred Schwamb was sitting there anywhere, and they all pointed to where I was at. You know, I had never seen him before, and he says, "Well, I'm your father." That's the shock I got. I had a hard time getting over that.

Do you know what had led up to that, how he happened to come by that day?

No, he just wanted to see his son. He had given me a watch and I still have the watch, but it doesn't work anymore. It's inscribed on the back, "Father, 1945." That's when he had given it. I think he sent it here to the house, not this house, because when I was in Billinghamurst, we lived over on La Rue between Gordon and Nixon back there.

Right now, we're in a house on Humboldt. Is this the family house?

Yeah, yeah. We moved here when I went to high school. We moved down here right across the street from Billinghamurst. That's when Billinghamurst was still going on, still over there. Betty was quite young when we moved down here.

She's younger than you.

Thirteen years.

Where did you go to grade school?

Right up the street here, Mt. Rose.

At the historic Mt. Rose.

I haven't been back there since I got out.

Well, it's still lovely inside. Did you go to kindergarten there?

I went to kindergarten over at Southside Elementary School or that brick building that sits on the corner. That's where I went to kindergarten.

We call that the Southside School Annex now. There was another school, right, another Southside School?

No, that's the only one I know of from that time, Southside, and when I got to high school it became Husky Haven, the same brick building. It's on the corner of Ryland or Liberty.

At Liberty, right. What was Husky Haven?

It was just a group where you could play ping-pong and stuff like that, a place to go after Reno High School, the old Reno High School.

Do you remember being inside the Southside school, what the classrooms were like?

I don't remember that at all. When we moved over to La Rue, up on the hill between Gordon and Nixon, I went to first grade at Mt. Rose.

Did you go through Mt. Rose for all of the grades?

Yes.

What do you remember about going to school there?

You know, everybody was pretty much friends. I had friends that lived right across the street. In fact, they were the first people that we met when we came to Reno, the Neuenswandlers. They lived right on the corner of Taylor, at Taylor and Arlington. Well, the house is not there anymore. It's just an empty lot. Somebody leveled the house and did nothing with the lot. They were friends. I see Al once in a while, and Roy, his brother, was in the same class I was. Al was older and he was always interesting. He was a pitcher in high school. I played baseball in high school. Their father was the distributor or whatever for Hoover, and he just did it out of his backyard there, I guess, or the garage.

Did he go door to door?

That's what the father would do, yeah. Al was in the army, I was in the air force, and his brother was a naval aviator. His brother retired from the navy and is still living in Pensacola, Florida. But anyway, we all met here, and the folks had a German party here after the Korean War. So Al and Roy and I, we all went downtown to the Golden Hotel, and Rosemary Clooney was there playing. We were sitting in there having a few drinks while she was singing, and she sang a song and I don't remember which one it was, but she had never recorded it. She sang it down there. Al comes back and he was quite a piano player. You would never know with this guy, but he had an ear for music and he sat down on that piano right there [points], well, one like it, and picked out that song on the piano. He was pretty good at that piano, and Roy played.

They were taught by Rassuchine. I don't know if you ever heard of his name, but his son, Rassuchine's son, and Al were in the same grade in high school. This fellow's son, Rassuchine, was the pharmacist over at Renown for a long time. I think he left there now. He lives up there by our oldest

daughter, our daughter now up on Pleasant View, I think, up there just past the Sparks Family Hospital or Renown or whatever you want to call that hospital up there, or the Nevada Medical Center, lives around the corner from that.

So he gave music lessons to kids through town?

Well, the grandfather did, across the street. He was a tough old bird. [laughs]

Did you ever take music lessons?

I did way late in life until my wife came down sick, and I haven't touched the piano now for over two years. I was taking lessons then. She just died last July. Well, I had ended up with a piano that Betty's daughter had, and it was out here in the garage. It was a baby grand. Oh, boy, was it in bad shape. The piano itself was fine, but everything else, the keys were all dirty and black. They drug this sucker out. I've got it over in my house now and now I can't get rid of it. It doesn't belong to me. [laughs]

How great to play. I'm very sorry about your wife. I didn't realize that was so recent.

Yeah, she passed away last Fourth of July, of all days.

So tell me what it was like to grow up in Reno. What kind of things would kids do for fun? Did it feel like a small, safe town?

Oh, yeah, you could walk downtown. That's the only way when we were small kids, and nobody bothered us. The police all knew who we all were. In fact, one of them lived right over here on Taylor Street, a couple doors down from the Neuschwanders. I can't even think of his name now. I lose track of names, but anyway. They all knew us.

When I went to high school, I rode my bicycle until I got my first car, and that was a Model-A Ford. Boy, I was living then. [laughs] Paid \$200 for that Ford and sold it two or three years later for \$225, and I thought I was making a killing, boy, 25 bucks. [laughs]

What year did you graduate from high school?

Forty-nine.

Tell me what high school kids did in the forties.

Well, I was under the arm of a tough German, and I had to learn my trade. That thing there, I built that one over there at the old shop.

Oh, it's beautiful—what do you call that?

It's for a fireplace.

For holding firewood.

All hand-hammered and everything. I did that when I was sixteen years old, something like that. I made that for Betty later on in life. I made my mother a coffee table and also an end table and then a candleholder similar to that one there that's sitting on the table, except it's an eight-sided one. My daughter has that.

So you were learning the trade starting at what age?

When I was in Billingham there, I was catching rivets when I was fifteen years old.

Catching rivets, what does that mean?

Well, at one time way back when, everything was riveted. All the seal was riveted. We did a lot of work around town here and connections were all riveted in the shop. They'd heat this rivet up, about a three-quarter rivet about yea long in the furnace down there in the shop, and then they'd throw it at you and you'd have to catch it in a bucket.

Why did they throw them?

That's the only way they could get it to you is by throwing it. Otherwise, it would cool off too fast and they had to run over there. [laughs]

So this was the job of kids, to stand there with a bucket and have rivets thrown at you?

That was me, and I had to be careful because I was way underage for the state. Otherwise, if I got injured or something like that, the state would have come down on my dad real bad.

Let's talk about the shop then. He had the shop for as long as you can remember? Did he start it as soon as you moved here?

1939, he started that building there.

We're talking about the old Martin Iron Works building on Morrill.

Yeah.

And was that the kind of work he had done previously on the East Coast?

Oh, yeah, he learned his trade over in Germany.

Did he ever tell you about that or how he learned it?

You could tell that he knew it on the forging. I worked on the forge with him, and he'd have me heating up this thing when I was a kid. Eventually I learned how to do that, and sharpening picks. They don't do that much anymore. They don't use picks much anymore. They use backhoes or whatever you want to call it.

What was the pick used for?

Digging holes, and a crowbar. You learn how to sharpen them and temper them. It's a temper seal in the forge.

Tell me your early memories of that first shop and who was working there. What were they doing?

Well, we would do a lot of work during wartime when World War II broke out. My dad, being German, had a real strong German accent, you know, and he went up to Herlong to get some work. The purchasing agent talked to him and heard the German accent. Back then, boy, people were a little jumpy, you know. So the purchasing agent asked him, he says, "Well, how did you get here?" And he said some little old dirt road, and got in there and there were no guards on it. So he says, "Well, if you leave, you better go back the same way you came because the guards at that gate, they might—." [laughs] So he had to go back the same way he came to get here.

We did a lot of those igloos up there for the ammunition storage. We made the screens, hundreds of them, ventilation screens. I used to putter around out there, and we made bolts. One time Dad—I think it was Dinwiddie Construction was working up there at Herlong, and they called them "she bolts," for forms. Now they've got snap ties, whatever they use now, but back then it was "she bolts." It's got an inside thread and an outside thread, and it's sort of tapered so that when you knock it out.... He saw these things laying there and he asked them, he said, "Can I take a few of these with me and see what I can do with them?" They were twisted up and bent up and everything else. Back then you couldn't get nothing. You couldn't buy any more bolts.

So Dad brought them back, about a half a dozen of them, and he worked on the anvil there and straightened them out. We had an old lathe, a little lathe from Sears, Roebuck he bought, and he trimmed them down a little bit to polish them up and things like that, sent them back to them.

A week later, we had three truckloads sitting there, old dump-truck loads, the old ones, not those big ones you see running around now. They used to have short beds on them, lined up. They dumped them all out, and there were three truckloads of them. So they dumped them right there. Well, we were busy then. [laughs] I learned how to straighten that stuff out and I worked on the anvil, too.

You worked on those at the time?

I worked on the forge. I remember all the rest of my buddies, they were all going playing sports. I finally got around to playing hardball, baseball at Reno High School. Then I played softball at Mt. Rose. Betty's got those pictures of me and Don Carano.



The original location of Martin Iron Works at 300 Morrill Avenue. Photo courtesy of Piero Bullentini.

So was this a paid job? Were you paid to work there when you were growing up?

A couple bucks a week was about all you were making. That was a lot of money for me. [laughs] Kept me out of trouble anyway.

Were you a pretty well-behaved kid anyway?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, I learned real quick. My dad—I've never told this much to anybody, but one time I sort of told him a story, lied to him and he knew different. Boy, he says, "Well, you're too big to get spanked," and he let me have it, knocked me clean up there clean across the room. I learned my lesson real quick.

We had a hard-nosed principal up at Mt. Rose. She kept us in line, too, Mamie Towles and all the people she had there. They named the school after her, for crying out loud. All of us guys, when we were up there in school, we turned out real great because she kept us in line. If you caused any problems with her, when you got in trouble, you had to go see Mamie Towles. She'd just say, "Grab your ankles," and, boy, would she let you have one. [laughs] And then she'd send a note home to your parents and then you'd get it again when you got home.

I would have bet you'd learn pretty quickly after that. Did your dad have other people working for him at that time?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Several? How many, do you think?

Well, we had maybe a half a dozen working there. Bill Granata, well, he passed away quite a few years ago, but he started working there, learning his trade, but then he ended up in the navy. Well, his family moved to Carson City, but anyway, he ended up in the navy. When he came out of the navy, he

worked there and he eventually ended up becoming president of the company. I always liked Bill because we both came up through the same school. He was older than I am, but he came through the same way.

He worked at the company for a long time, didn't he?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

So what else was around the area there where the original Iron Works was? Were there other very active businesses in the neighborhood?

Sierra Machinery was right across the street. I eventually moved into part of the building there with my own business when I had my own steel business, right across the street from where I learned mine. And then the City of Reno built that train trench and they took my building right out. They moved the north Reno route right through my building, so that made me retire. I was getting too old then to start all over again, so I retired.

What was your business called?

Far West Steel Fabricators.

So when you say across the street, across which street?

Morrill Avenue, right across the street from that building. And Eveleth Lumber was next door to us to the north. They had that lot there and then their office building right there.

Do you remember that always being a very busy place?

Oh, yeah, as a lumberyard, yeah. There weren't that many of them around, so they were quite busy there.

And then much earlier, there were things in the area that aren't there now, like Ben Akert's family's market, and there was a drugstore.

Ben graduated from Reno High School the same time I did.

We interviewed him for this project, too.

Did you?

Yes.

He'd probably know quite a bit there.

Did he grow up working in his parents' market the way you grew up working for your dad?

I would say so, but I didn't know Ben back then that much till we got to high school and were in the same class. He went to a different junior high, I think. But we all pretty much turned out pretty good. Don Carano was in our class, before they had the Eldorado. Now he makes and sells wine.

So did it always seem to you that you would go into that trade?

Not really. When I was over in Billinghamurst, my favorite was woodwork, and George Gadda, Sr., he was the instructor. When we got out of Mt. Rose and went over to Billinghamurst, we had to take wood shop. They don't have that anymore. First thing in seventh grade, we all got in his room. There were all these benches all throughout the place. He says, "My name is Mr. Gadda and I eat raw bear meat." Man, those kids were just— [laughs] But he was pretty sharp. He kept us all in line. I liked him. He was my favorite teacher in school.

I did a lot of woodwork, turning on the lathe and stuff like that, and I made a lamp. I don't know whatever happened to the lamp. Put all this figured gumwood together, glued it together, and then they had a show. I made Betty a rocking horse before she was born when I was over there.

You were pretty young.

Yeah.

So you always liked working with your hands?

Uh-huh.

You liked building things?

Always did, but now I can't do much anymore. My hands are—got that neuropathy. My hands tingle. When you weigh 240 pounds and you drop down to 175 in about six weeks, I thought that was the end of the world for me.

That happened to you?

Yeah, weighed 240 pounds.

Wow. What was the reason for dropping all the weight so quickly?

Neuropathy. It ended up in my knees. My knees feel like I got a ten-pound weight on them, each knee, and my hands still tingle. The rest of me is in pretty good shape, though. [laughs]

The building that the business was originally in, was it constructed by your dad or was it there before, do you know?

No, he had it built, but the structural steel—my dad became friends with Herrick Iron Works in Oakland, California at that time. They built the trusses and everything for that building, but Dad put it up, and then we did work for Herrick then. They did work up here, at Eagle Picher down the canyon down there, I don't know if you know where Eagle Picher's plant is.

No.

About 15 miles east of Reno along I-80. They did work there because there were no places that they could do that, and Dad erected it for them and that's how they got together.

In fact, I worked for them. My last summer going into high school, I worked for Herrick Iron Works in Oakland, but I worked in their office. They set me up. Gale Herrick was the owner, president of the company, and he set me up at the YMCA. I got \$30 a week working for him down there and it cost me \$10 at the "Y" to live there, and so I couldn't afford to ride the bus, so I'd walk to work. It was about twenty blocks. I'd walk through the black section at that time. It was all the blacks and they never bothered me. I'd just walk through, and the guys would say, "How you getting home?"

"I'm walking home."

"You're walking home?" They knew where I was walking through. I never was bothered and I didn't know much about blacks then. Only had one girl at Reno High School that was African American and she graduated with us, but that was about it.

What area would you say that was then, that was the black part of town?

Well, the shop was at 18th and Campbell, and the "Y" was on Broadway. Really I'm not too familiar with that area, but that area between the two there. Probably still is, if it's not all demolished. I don't know.

So you were working in the shop through high school?

Oh, yeah, I worked in the shop for a long time.

Did they ever add on to the building that you remember?

When Dad moved out of there and moved over to Fourth Street, Sierra Machinery rented his old building and they added a metal building on the back, on the east end of it.

Is that still there?

Yeah. Yeah, they left the building there. But we used to work out there—outside, not in that building. That part of the building I never worked in because it was built afterwards, but we used to do a lot of our work out in the backyard there, and that's when we used to walk over to the Reno Brewery there and see Gus. He was the beer man. I guess you'd call him beer master or beer meister or whatever you want to call him. "Gus, can we have a shot of beer?" All of us were over there because we'd work up a sweat outside there.

“Okay, guys, grab a little cup.” He’d take it right out of the vat there for us, and we’d have a sip and we’d go back to work. Do that now, you’d get fired. [laughs]

So was that in the Reno Brewery building that’s still there now, the bottling plant, or the one that was demolished?

The one on the corner was their warehouse and the brewery was next door. You ought to talk to Ray Dohr, because his family was involved with the brewery. I think he’s still in Reno here.

So when you would go to get your little sips, was that in the main brewery building?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, he’d give us a little cup of beer, and we’d go back to work. Sweat it all real quick, you know. [laughs]

So would you take a lunch and just eat lunch at work, or would you eat in the area somewhere?

No, mostly I ate over at the—it’s not there anymore. They tore the building down. I think it was called the Riviera Hotel. It was on the corner—god, I can’t even think of the street now, but it was right on Fourth on the corner, and it had a restaurant in the back. But back in those days, the older guys that worked in the shop, they’d drink their lunch and then they’d go back to work. Not me. I’d go out of the bar back then. [laughs] But a lot of the guys that worked there were iron workers. They worked in the shop and then they went out in the field and put it up because there was nothing else for them to do. So that’s how they would do it then. That’s in the old building there.

There were a lot of places along Fourth Street that were hotels and restaurants and bars.

Yeah, back then. At one time before they built the El Rancho Motel there—I don’t know what they call it now; I haven’t been down there for quite a while, anyway, there used to be a rendering plant—

Nevada Packing, I think, right?

Yeah, and they used to bring their bones next to this building over on the rail siding, in an open train, open gondola, or whatever you want to call it, and they’d just dump them there. Boy, after a while, that place would smell.

They would dump them there just for junk?

Well, no, just so they’d haul them away by the railcar.

So they would just be waiting there—

Yeah, not in an enclosure. Oh, god, it used to smell. Also we were getting rats in this building, and they’d be running over the top of the office. We had a Frenchman working for us. He said, “Oh, I

know how to get rid of those rats,” and he built traps over the office of this old building there and he’d get them suckers. [laughs]

So would a lot of different companies come down Morrill to access the railroad and put things on the cars there on Morrill Street?

Yeah, they would put it there—there was a siding there. There was a wooden—what would you call it— a wooden dock, really, a pretty good-sized one. They’d park those railcars right there and then they’d drive up there and they’d dump them inside the railcar.

Did the train come pretty frequently?

Well, just the cars, not too often. It’d take them a while to fill them cars up. They’d get maybe a couple, two or three of those cars.

So they’d fill them up and have them stay there until—

And then they’d rot. [laughs]

So you weren’t very unhappy when they closed.

No, no. Well, finally my dad got after them because they just couldn’t stand it anymore. Yeah, he got after them.

What was the reason for moving into the new property? Was that property already there, the building where Martin Iron Works is now?

Well, part of it was. It used to be an A-frame-type building. What it was, it was Wagner Tank and Casing during World War II, and they brought the building in from someplace and put it up there.

Which part of the building are you talking about, the really large—

The one that’s on Fourth Street, not the one that used to be the lumberyard back in there.

But I know there’s a brick building and then there’s the large building where the whole setup is, right?

The main building that faces north and south. Later on, Piero [Bullentini], who owns it now, bought that other building where there used to be a lumberyard. They bought that building.

So it was a tank company?

Wagner Tank. They made oil tanks for the war service, and a lot of these guys that worked for us afterwards worked there because they were too old for the service, so they worked there. When that closed down, they came over and worked for us. That building was empty. What it was is that the

ground had sloped from street level to about four feet in the back or five feet toward the tracks. So when Dad got it, he filled that all up, because the building was level, but the ground sloped and it was all dirt. I wouldn't dare venture what's underneath in that dirt there now. Everything could have been working in there. But then he had it paved out and then sort of leveled the floor off, at least enough to work on it.

Well, it was quite interesting. One time after my dad had bought the building, and he got it from the bank or the bank offered it, I think, for \$80,000 and he was wondering how to pay for that, you know, but eventually it was worth it. One time when I was at the university, they threw a party in there, you know, big beer busts back in there. I knew some of these guys. "What are you doing here? Dad owns this building." And here they had a big party going on. These gals were down there. [laughs] Then eventually they left and finally we moved everything over.



Martin Iron Works at 530 East 4th Street in 2014. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Did they clean up after themselves?

Well, if not, it got all buried in the dirt and all that fill in there.

But anyway, then we had that fire. I can't remember what year that was. Burned the whole roof off.

So it was an A-frame and that burned.

Yeah, the whole roof burned off. Oh, man, that was the worst thing in the world that could have happened to us because we had a bunch of work. It was in February, but I don't remember the year anymore.

But anyway, we had the Golden Hotel and we had the first unit out at Tracy for the Tracy power plant. There was another job. We had three jobs and we were shut down for two weeks. Fortunately, the

one crane we had, it still worked once we got the power back on. But we were open air in there for a long time till the following winter before we got it all closed in. It was a rough go.

Did he want to move over to the current building because business was going so well and they needed more room, or what was the reason?

Well, there weren't that many steel companies. Reno Iron Works and Martin Iron Works were the only two. Then H&N [phonetic] Steel came along. McCauley Iron Works. Tom McCauley, the father, he was around. My dad had worked for him when he first came here, for Tom McCauley. But then those were the only ones there, nothing large enough to handle the projects, really, that were going on here, and to keep the other steel companies out, that's the only thing you could do is move up.

Because it seems like the capacity would have increased a great deal in the new building.

Oh, yeah. The bigger you get, the more you've got to have.

Did a lot more people start working there too?

In the new building, yeah, yeah. We had quite a few more there.

So tell me what happened after you graduated from high school. Then what did you do?

Then I just kicked around a little bit. I still worked for my dad, and then I mentioned I went to school down in L.A. I went to a business college down there.

Why did you choose L.A.?

It was the Woodbury Business College, and figured I didn't have enough time for anything. But anyway, no, I had a couple years in the service during the Korean War.

Was that immediately after high school?

Well, pretty much so, about a couple years after high school. But I kicked around a little bit.

And then you decided to come back to Reno after L.A.? Was that always the plan?

No, I stayed down there. See, I had a big argument with my dad. He and my mother got divorced and we weren't getting along too well. But I was working down there. After I got out of school down there, I went to work for a steel company down there, made metal buildings. I spent about five years, well, not working for them, but about three or four years with them.

But anyway, Bill Granata came down one time and he wanted me to come back up. He asked me to come back up. My dad never asked me to come back, but Bill did. We were always good friends, Bill and I, because we went through the same school, learned the same trade the same way. So I came back up and made amends with the old man. [laughs]



Fred Schwamb inside the office at Martin Iron Works. Photo courtesy of Fred Schwamb.

And then worked for him?

Let's see. I didn't work in the shop then, but I worked in the office, estimating.

Can you explain to me in the current building, in the setup, what happens in what part of the building or what the operation was like?

Well, when you face the building from Fourth Street, the brick front or masonry front was the office part of the shop, in other words, and our office was upstairs. We had a detailing office. The detailers had the upper windows for a while, and then eventually they switched things around and that became the accounting office. My office was in the back, further back, where it was a little bit more quiet.

What kind of detailing work was that? What did they do?

Well, when you get a job and it's out for bid, you've got the structural steel showing on it, and you take the little component out of that and you draw it so somebody else can make it, dimensions and everything, and then you hope that it's going to all fit when you put it together.

The people who did that, did they have an engineering background or drafting?

More drafting than anything. We had a fellow up there, John Pope, and he was a good draftsman. He was in the merchant marine during the war. But anyway, he came out of that little town on the outside of Fernley. His dad worked for the railroad there. He was a good draftsman. He had a good mind for mathematics. He was half Seminole and half white. The Seminoles were out of Florida. He was married and his wife was a full Blackfoot. She was a very nice lady. He was good with drafting, but he'd always draft the stuff that was really easy and then all the garbage he did on 8½-by-11 sheets. But he was good, though. He was one of the better ones. He was fast.

But anyway, when the time came for him to retire or leave, his two kids—he had a boy and a daughter—they both joined the army. He had a home on the Callahan Ranch area up there that he built himself. He put the foundation in with rocks he got out of the ditch up there, whatever creek that is up there, and he built the house himself, but then he decided he wanted to sell it. He was sort of a character, but like I say, he was good.

He decided he was going to go to L.A. and take his wife down there with him, L.A. or San Diego, one of the two. Anyway, he went and built a sailboat down there and he sailed that sucker to Hawaii with a sextant, they call it. That's taking the shots from the sun or whatever it is, no communication. They sailed that baby to Hawaii over there and sold it.

Then he came back again and he built another one. As he was building these things, he became more of a hippie-looking-type guy. [laughs] He had silver-gray hair anyway. Then he built another one and he sailed that one down to Panama and sold that one there. Then he came back up. He was getting really strange, but his mind was still there. He'd come in and visit us all the time.

One time I'm looking at the *San Francisco Examiner*, and it said they followed these three boats, powerboats, from Mexico on up here, to the Bay Area. Well, about ten miles out, they transferred over. They were hauling marijuana, and one boat was linked with a John Pope. I wondered if that was the same John Pope we knew. [laughs]

Sure enough, when they pulled him on the layover there, they arrested them all. But fortunately, the boat that he was on, where his wife was on—she didn't know this was going on. She didn't know they were hauling marijuana. They arrested them all. Oh, she got mad. She has 300 acres up in the Dakotas for the Blackfoot, and she said, "That's it," and she went back there. Like I say, she was a real nice lady, but she couldn't hack that.

So then we had to write letters. Dad wrote letters to whoever we had to write them to for his character reference and stuff like that. If they needed a job, we'd put him back on. But he came here, and his daughter had gotten out of the service by then, so she became his responsibility. Eventually I think he went to Hawaii. We never saw him anymore. So he was sort of a character. [laughs]

That's quite a story.

They had five tons of marijuana in them two boats, a lot of marijuana back then.

I almost hesitate to ask about anybody else who worked there, but was he the most colorful?

They were all good guys. So many guys working there.

And before you had been working there, because you obviously had had business experience and training, had someone else been doing the accounting and that kind of work before you came back to do it?

They had a lady there, Chris Schnitter, and she was the bookkeeper back then in those days. She was pretty sharp. She was a hard-nosed gal. She was a tall, slender gal, about as tall as you are. But she was good at the books and she took care of them.

Then did your dad continue to be really hands-on? Was he working in the shop?

He did once in a while, but he was mainly getting the work. That was the main thing. When we moved over to the other building, he pretty much left it up to Bill Granata back in those days. So I worked in the shop for a long time before I went to L.A.

Now you can see the railings next door on that little apartment house that our sister and I own, next door here, I made all those myself, but I made those when that contractor was a friend of mine at that time. He's passed away now. But anyway, I said, "Well, Gene, you've got to make it by the dimensions because I'm building the rails." That was when he was digging the footings. You wait till they measure them, the people that measure. I said, "Well, Gene, you've got to follow dimensions," and I kept at him. [laughs]

Did you make things in the shop?

Oh, yeah, yeah. I worked a long time in the shop there.

Did you make personal projects too?

I did all the rails for my own house. Then when I got married and we had this place on Daniel Webster right off of Plumb, and I did all the railings on the face of the wall. It's the third house off the corner, I'm still living there. I bought a house that was already built by some people, and they had a masonry wall that ran the full length of the property—I don't know if you're familiar with that little park on Daniel Webster. There's just a little small park in there. It's right across the street from that. I hand-forged all these scrolls. If you look at it, it's all hand-riveted, over 100 of them, 150 of them, something like that. It's all painted white. It needs a paint job. I'll have that redone next summer.

Tell me—you just mentioned getting married—how you met your wife and when you got married.

Well, the shop foreman of Martin Iron Works introduced me to her because he was living right down the street from her. I married a woman that had four daughters and we had one of our own, and then the oldest daughter, well, did herself in. It was too bad. I don't know. She was married and had two

children, and her husband was a real nice guy. He was with the power company here for a long time. Then he went to PG&E down in Fremont and worked there till he retired. But she ended up committing suicide. But that's the way it goes sometimes.

I'm sorry.

We still have four daughters. I've got one that's married to George who has Reno Forklift Storage Systems and another one that's retired with her husband, lives in Arkansas, and the other daughter is an RN at Renown. Her husband is a building contractor, houses and stuff like that, remodeling, and he is a good one, too.

What was your wife's name when you met her?

Betty. [laughter]

What year did you get married?

We were married for forty-five years. Well, I think I took it out of my—I have to carry it in my wallet. We got married a day before Mother's Day, but they keep changing that date and I could never remember. [laughs]

It's true. Doesn't make it easy. After you married, did you move into that house right away?

Yeah, we picked it up right away. When I got married, I had a few bucks in my pocket. I barnstormed around, but I got tired of that pretty fast. I managed to have a few bucks.

So how long did you work for Martin Iron Works?

Till 1978, then I left. That's when the whole downtown went wild with buildings and everything and casinos, and I left and I've never been downtown since, at night. I've never gone back. Well, I had to go when I had my own business once in a while for business during the daytime, but I never went downtown. In fact, I still haven't.

Why did you leave the business at that point? Was it because you were starting your own business?

Well, I got in another argument. My dad had already died, and I had a problem with one of the members of the board. He was married to my half sister. He became a real problem, and everybody thought I was nuts for what he was doing, and so I had the whole board against me. Well, I went to work for Reno Iron after that.

I don't want to mention any names. And then when I had my own business, we were doing Wells Avenue, and Bill had to come by my place of business to get home, so he'd stop by occasionally and we'd talk for couple hours at night. That's why I would get home at eight o'clock at night, I was talking with Bill.

Then he come by one time and he says, “Well, Fred—.” They had a problem with the same person, but the problem when I had it was only about \$5,000. When he had it, it had come up to about, well, six figures.

I said, “Bill, you’re lucky if you find it. I left the water over the dam.”

He says, “Well, the attorney says, ‘Fred was right and you’re all wrong.’ Is it too late?”

I says, “No, that’s the way it goes sometimes.”

So I had mine for about eighteen and a half years, my own business, till the city come along.

[laughs]



Fred (left) and Martin Schwamb at the office of Martin Iron Works. Photo courtesy of Fred Schwamb.

At least it was gratifying to hear that eventually, I would imagine.

Oh, yeah, yeah. Like I say, we were pretty close friends.

Where did you locate your business?

Right across the street from this one.

Across the street from the original Martin Iron Works building on Morrill?

Yeah. That building is still there, part of it is. The office part is still there. In fact, the fellow that started with me, he took the other half. Reno Forklift used to be in half the building and I was in the other half, but my shop was separate.

A separate building but on the same property?

Yeah. That's the one that the city ran the north Reno route through. They moved it about 100 feet north, which went right smack through. I said, "I'm too old to get started all over again." I was about seventy-two years old then.

Did they offer you money to buy the property? That's how it happened?

The first time, they didn't offer quite enough, so my daughter, who's pretty sharp, Pat, she and George got this other attorney involved. I can't think of his name, but he was young. He wrote, I think, two letters or three letters or something like that. He got us a few bucks more, quite a bit more because he got 40 percent of it. [laughs]

So that was your retirement offer, then?

Yeah, really. Yeah, that was it.

What kind of work did you do out of your shop there primarily?

Same type, structural steel.

For commercial buildings largely?

Yeah, not the real large ones. One of the largest ones we did is the one that's across the street from the old Porsche Building. On Liberty Street, there's that three-story, four-story building there. We did that one. That was about the largest I ever got into.

Did you go back to working with your hands?

I did all the forge work until we shut her down. See, in the old shop we had a coal forge.

Can you explain what that is?

It's run by coal, coal and air, and then we converted that and then we got that over to the original place, where, in fact, I think they've still got the forge. The EPA back then started the—when you run a coal forge, you can smell that coal all over. I mean, it just hangs. It doesn't just go up in the air. It just hangs and you'd smell it. He came into our place—I don't know who it was, but from the EPA, and says,

“If we catch you again using that forge, it’s a \$500 fine. If we catch you the second time, it’s a \$1,000 fine, and if we catch you the third time, it’s a \$10,000 fine.”

That’s when we shut the forge down and went into gas. I had a gas forge. I bought it. They had an auction at the new Reno High School because they closed all the industrial arts classes down and they auctioned it off. I got the forge for, I think it was, \$350. But I never did like a gas forge. It never quite got the steel out of it. A coal forge, you could get it white hot, but on a gas forge you can leave it in there all day long and it’ll never burn the steel up. But it was enough to do.

I made that table one weekend, I think it was on a Fourth of July weekend, for my sister, this one here. She bought the glass top and I made the table for her, and she had it painted.

It’s beautiful.

And I made that little candleholder for her.

I was going to ask why you would continue to use a coal forge if it was against the law or against regulations. But it was just because it worked better?

Well, yeah, you get better heat. I’m surprised I don’t have lung cancer from breathing that stuff all the time, but back in those days you never gave it a thought. Well, I don’t think I’ve got lung cancer. I’m still alive. [laughs]

I enjoyed working more on the coal forge. In fact, I’d brought a coal forge with me from L.A. I bought one for fifty bucks down there. When I moved up, I had a Mercury, a two-door Mercury, and I had that forge in there and all my stuff. I left L.A. in the early morning hours and I got out of there a ways and I went and had breakfast on the way up. It was daylight. The old Highway Patrol looked me over to make sure I could see out the back window on the mirror. I had all my stuff in that one little Mercury.

So it’s small enough to fit in the back seat of a car, a forge?

The one I had. In fact, I’ve got it in my yard right now. I use it just as an ornament.

And would the Iron Works have several of those or only one at a time?

You would usually only have one. My dad got the forge that’s in that building right now. He got that out of Virginia City with all the tools from a blacksmith’s shop up there someplace.

So that technology didn’t change for a long time.

No, it still doesn’t, really.

So I started my business and I asked the guy, because I was going to put a coal forge in there. I called the people up where we used to buy our coal from. He says, “Oh, Fred,” he says, “if you want to buy a railcar full of coal, I’ll get it for you, but otherwise, forget it.” Back then, the EPA came down on everybody, especially with the coal, because unless you want to build a \$100,000 thing to clean the air, you just couldn’t do it.

Did the coal just come from a local supplier somewhere?

The supplier, I think he was down in Stockton.

So would the coal arrive on the train?

We would get it in bag loads. We'd buy maybe ten or fifteen bags at a time. A 100-pound bag, it's quite a bit of coal, but still it goes pretty fast when you're working on the forge all the time.

Would they just come on a truck?

Yeah, they'd ship it up on a truck for us. It was fun working then, back in those days. We had a lot of fun then. In fact, I burned my hand here when I was still pretty young. I had a glove on, working on the coal forge in the old shop, that one there. The coal went in there and burned a hole in my hand. Before I could stick my hand in the water, which was right next to where you're working, I had a hole burned in there about a quarter-inch-round right down to the bone. I never did go to a doctor. My hand swelled up and I'd stick it in Epsom salts. I didn't dare go to a doctor. The state would want to get after my dad.

Because you were too young at that point?

Yeah, working in the shop. See, I could work there so long as I didn't work with any of the machinery or nothing. I could sweep the floor and stuff like that, but that's all I could do. But if they found out I was doing that, they'd have really gone after my dad. That would ruin my career [laughs].

What did you do immediately? You just wrapped it up and went home?

No, I didn't go home. For years you could feel the hole right there, but it's closed over now. It happens so fast you just don't know it, see.

So you'd be working on the forge and there's always a big pot of water?

A big barrel, a wood barrel of water you had right there always right next to you, because you had to use it for tempering and stuff like that.

But I enjoyed working on the forge. Had a lot of fun.

Are those still skills that people use today, or has it just changed considerably with technology?

I think most of it's changed to gas now, mostly gas forges, because you just can't get the coal anymore.

But do they still have to do the same kind of work, even though it's a different kind of forge?

No. Gas forge, it depends. Right now you can buy most all that stuff. There's outfits that—I don't know where they get it from, but I've got a catalog at home about that thick, and you can just buy everything now and just put it together.

Can I ask you a little bit more about other places along Fourth Street?

Yeah, sure.

You were talking about when all the growth happened, when everything started building in the late seventies, and that's about when the interstate went in, too, which would have changed Fourth Street a lot.

A lot, yes.

So can you talk about some of the places where you would go, especially before that time? Just describe some of those places.

Well, the I-80 ran through most of the residential areas, the old Reno up there. I remember the state had a house for sale right there because they'd buy up more property than what they needed, and what they didn't need, they'd sell. There was a house there. They wanted, I think, \$45,000 for it, and I tried to get one daughter to buy it. Not my youngest one, but another one, and they didn't want to buy it. It was a real neat house and it's still sitting up there. Every time you go down the freeway, you can see that house sitting there. It was right there on, I think, Evans Ave and the freeway right there.

Right above Sixth, right up there by the freeway?

They called it the Billingham house. Now, that's not the same one that's the Billingham School over there. A different Billingham, I think. It had the old doors. The lights switches were all push-button, black and white. You could walk in this house and on the right side was, like, a living room. On the left side was a big dining room or a library, whatever you call it, and then it had the stairway going up, a circular stair. Well, that was sort of a neat old place, I thought. If I needed a house, I would have bought it.

Now we're looking at some photos from the Fourth Street building. This is a photo of the front of the shop and this is before the fire.

It was in February, I remember, because then it rained for about two weeks straight after with the roof burned off.

And this is in the fifties sometime?

Betty Dodson (Fred's sister): No, it's later, the sixties. I was about sixteen, '64?

I wouldn't want to take a shot at the time.

Well, we'll figure that out, because it sounds like it was a substantial fire, you were saying. How did it start?

Well, there's a door here that led out into the shop, right back here where my thumb is, right in that area there, and there was a water fountain right there. They say that a cigarette was thrown down there and it started it, but the way that building was, it was just like a torch, and just took the whole roof off the main shop there.

What time of day was that?

Night. I was working there late when that happened, but I wasn't there. A salesman was there, a deck [phonetic] salesman. We took off around six-thirty, seven o'clock, and we'd go to this bar. A couple friends of mine, the Lazich [phonetic] brothers had this place out on Kietzke. What the hell was the name of that? I don't know what the name of that bar was anymore. We walk in, and "Fred, your plant burned down."

"What do you mean, your plant burned down? I just left there." And sure enough, I went back and it was all over with. Whoa, what a mess.

We're looking at the photo of the table where Fred is looking straight at the photo, just so we can identify this later.

I'd be looking north, theoretically north. This was on the first floor.

So everything burned.

Well, destroyed. The tables and stuff like that, the fire department— and that painting, they saved that painting too. They covered it over real quick. They got into that office area.

This is the landscape painting. Do you know anything about that painting?

I've got it hanging in my house.

Where did it come from?

Hans Meyer-Kassel was the painter and what it was, he was German. A painter never gets rich until he dies. He was an artist.

Dodson: He's actually quite well known.

Yeah, he painted that one up there [points to the wall]. All these pictures that are hanging around here, most of them.

Dodson: Yeah, tell her about this [points to a portrait of a boy]. This one is Fred.



Martin Schwamb at his desk with his Hans Meyer-Kassel painting behind him. Photo courtesy of Fred Schwamb.

So this artist was local?

Oh, yeah. Back then when that was done, he had his office—at either Harolds Club or the Nevada Club—upstairs on the second floor, before they changed everything around. They had an apartment up there and they lived right there.

And he was German?

Oh, yeah.

He was born in Germany?

Oh, yeah. But you go to Genoa, where he finally ended up in, and you talk to the people there, they didn't know who he was. And one time I went into the art place across the street from where he lived, and they didn't even know he existed.

How did he come to do your portrait? Because this is a portrait of you as a boy.

I was about nine years old?

Dodson: I don't know, Fred.

Well, it was done in 1940 and I was born in '31, so I'd be about nine years old.

Dodson: Yeah, it says 1940.

Betty Dodson has joined us, we'll just say for the record here. [laughs] Fred's sister.

Dodson: Because I think this is fascinating.

It's a wonderful portrait. Was this because the German community was very close here?

Pretty much so, yeah. They're not really, like you say, close, but everybody was friends. There were always German parties and stuff like that.

You mentioned a German party before. That just means a bunch of Germans were invited to a party?

Well, yeah. [laughs]

What would happen at a German party?

Well, my mother would have it here mostly, and once in a while they'd be at somebody else's house, not very often. I mean just good days, and they were always very friendly.

Would they make traditional German food?

Pretty much so, yeah.

What do you remember eating that was German?

I don't remember back there, but my mother always cooked bratwurst, or bockwurst, they call it now. I keep telling them at the Gold 'N Silver you're supposed to cook that with red cabbage and not sauerkraut. [laughs] In fact, I just had it a couple days ago.

Were there any places in town that were German restaurants?

Dodson: Not at that time. Were there, Fred?

Well, there was the Stein.

Where was that?

That was on Center Street next to the telephone building.

The Stein, what do you remember about that place?

It was a good hangout down there. It was right next to the telephone company. In fact, I haven't seen their boy for quite a while. He's been pretty ill. His mother had it there, and you'd go in there and you could have dinner. They didn't serve you. You had buffet style all the time, and it was pretty good. Sort of a friendly place.

The City Hall at that time used to be right across the street on Center Street, not the one up where the parking garage is now [the Cal Neva parking garage on First and Center]. It was a little different town back then. Like I said, I haven't been downtown since 1978, '79.

So when Martin Iron Works was at the Fourth Street location, would you walk downtown from there or would you just drive if you had to go downtown?

Sometimes to go to lunch we'd walk out the back door and walk down the tracks to a little restaurant that was across the street from Harolds Club down there. It was called the Nomad, on the other side of the alley, and you could go in there and have a tremendous beef sandwich and a bowl of soup. We'd go there. But we'd walk, not all the time, but we'd walk there occasionally, a couple times a month or more, rather than driving down.

Let's go back and just finish about the fire. Because with the fire, if it completely burned that building, did it have to be completely rebuilt or was anything salvaged?

We pretty much operated with an open roof after that. We changed the wall that was next to Commercial Hardware at that time, and we got away with a lot of stuff because the fellow in the building department there was a close friend. He let us get away with a bunch of stuff. Back in those days, you know.

So once it was rebuilt, is that what's still there today?

Uh-huh, in that one building. They had the other building, which was a lumberyard at that time. Not Eveleth Lumber. I can't think of the name of that lumber company that was next door there for a long time.

So what are some of the other places? I did want to ask you about the Copenhagen Bar, just because you mentioned it, because it was originally located near where Coney Island Bar is now. It was right next door?

Well, only two buildings were there. It's probably about where the gas station is now. I think that's where the Copenhagen probably ended up. It was, at one time, the Standard station. I think it was right around in there. We'd go there. In high school we'd go there. "Okay," Bear would say, "you guys get in the back and you conduct yourself as gentlemen back there. You don't cause no problem," and he'd let us have a beer and we'd go in the back. [laughs]

What was in the back? Was it just tables and chairs?

Well, there was a bar there and it had a dividing wall on the bar, so you couldn't see in the back. So he put us in the back there, and we'd conduct ourselves as we should. Back in those days, people didn't bother you so much unless you caused problems, so we didn't.

Did they serve food there?

Back in those days, I don't think so.

Did you ever go to Coney Island, too?

Oh, yeah, especially on Tuesdays and Thursdays. But I don't go there by myself because I'm afraid I'm going to run into somebody who would want to buy me a drink. I don't drink anymore. [laughs] I gave that up a long time ago. So I haven't been back there again.

Did you know the Gallettis at all?

I don't know the family that runs it now, but I knew the other ones. Their parents I knew, or recognized. Then we'd end up going to Louis' Basque Corner all the time, and Louis and his wife were running that.

We interviewed them also, and I'm so glad we got to speak to Lorraine before she passed away. What do you remember about going to Louis'?

Pretty much eating their tripe. I liked their tripe. I ran into Louis one time at Raley's over here on Mayberry, "I miss your tripe, Louis."

He says, "Well, why don't you just come there. I got a whole gallon of it in my car." He had a big gallon over there. [laughs]

They had good tripe. My mother would make tripe, but, oh, god, it was bland, no seasoning at all and it was terrible.

What were the other businesses that Martin Iron Works did business with that were in that area? Were there any kind of partnerships with other companies?

Not that I know, no. PDM is the only one. They were over in Sparks. It was the Sparks warehouse, but they were mainly out of California.

Dodson: Didn't Martin Iron work a lot with Walker Boudwin?

Well, a general contractor, yeah.

Dodson: Yeah, there were general contractors they would have worked with. PDM was a steel company.

It was a steel warehouse company. We would buy our products from them. But Dad mainly bought, for the larger projects, from the mill. We'd buy it directly from the mill back then, and then they had the railroad spur. Even at the old shop, the one on Morrill Ave, I'd buy from the mill on large buildings, but back then, PDM wasn't even in town. There was no warehouse in town.

So you'd buy the material from the mill. What kind of materials?

The beams and columns.

Dodson: Where was the mill at that time, Fred?

Back east.

Dodson: Was that Bethlehem?

Yeah, Bethlehem and U.S. Steel.

The material would come straight from there?

From them, yeah, on railcars.

When your father passed away, was that pretty sudden? How old was he, about?

Seventy-two.

Dodson: Yeah, seventy-two. No, he was older. He was seventy-four. I was surprised. I always thought he was seventy-two.

But he had strokes quite a bit. He'd feel real good, and after a while, you'd realize when he's going to have another stroke because he'd get [unclear], and, boy, he was sharp. And then he'd get another stroke and he'd be knocked down, and it would take him several months to come back up.

There's a shrine and I was in control of the shrine, and we were up at a convention up in Seattle. She [Betty] calls me up, "Dad's dying. He's in the hospital."

My wife and I, we left the next morning at four o'clock in the morning and drove all the way from Seattle to the hospital here at eight-thirty at night, straight through. He looked the same to me as he always does. [laughs] And I missed my trip, the boat trip [unclear].

Dodson: I felt so bad about that. I thought he was dying.

Looked the same.

Dodson: He was at home, pretty much bedridden until the end then. It was pretty bad for, what, two, three years, I would say.

Pauline had nurses around the clock, three eight-hour shifts there.

So someone else had taken over the business before that for a little while?

Well, Bill was president of the company then.

Bill Granata?

Yeah.

We were talking a little bit about Piero Bullentini, who now owns the business. When did he start working there and what kind of work was he doing?

Well, he was doing the same thing there. His brother has B&C Cabinet. His brother's an excellent cabinet builder and he moved his business to Carson City from Reno here. He still has a cabinet shop there. I don't know when Piero started, though.

But he worked with your father for a while?

Yeah, he was there when I came back from L.A.

Dodson: He was in the shop, wasn't he?

Working in the shop.

Then why did Bill sell the business to him? Is that what happened?

No, I sold out, and then Bill, he didn't sell out; he died. He died during the period of time they were going through this business with that same fellow, and Piero took over the same thing, and finally told him, you need to turn your stock in, or I'm going to have you thrown in jail. Piero's a very honest man and so was Bill. We all pretty much were, straight.

But it was fun working in the shop. I enjoyed it. If you look at the railings I did next door here, all the railings on the apartment house next door here, I did those. I made those weekends and at nights.

Dodson: And that fireplace thing and my table.

He was describing all the things that he had made, that are just lovely.

After I left the business, I really don't know much about what Martin Iron Works did, anymore. They became a competitor. [laughs]

How was that to be a competitor with the company that your father had owned? You had your own business and you had a good niche, too.

Well, I went to Reno Iron Works for a little over six years. They had a fellow who was there. He was a consultant, very sharp. He came out of World War II. He worked for a steel company down in Arizona. And the owner said—and he was single yet—said to him, “How would you like to go to college?” The owner put him through college and he came out a mechanical engineer. He was sharp with numbers.

And then he came back to work there, and by that period of time, he had a wife and a couple kids. The owner says, “How would you like to go to Harvard?”

“I can’t afford Harvard.” He said “Who’s going to pay for it?”

He said, “I’m going to send you,” and he went to Harvard and he majored in business. He has a mechanical engineering degree and he majored in business with a—what do you call it? Well, he took a business course, but he majored in accounting and, boy, was he sharp. In one year I learned an awful lot from that man, just a different way of thinking.

Over the years, I had about a pile of paperwork like this, stuff that I’d written down, and I’d save it, put it in the drawer and save it up. I eventually went through it all and I made a folder, a big binder of everything that I could think of, sort of in order, and I had structural here, miscellaneous items there, all these things. So that way it helped me because then I had to hire a takeoff guy to do it, so that way I could train him in the way to think. You had to think completely different than what they do. I don’t know how they do it at Martin now—it used to be so much a pound. Well, it wasn’t that way at Reno with Willard Reed [phonetic] when he was consulting. He thought completely different and he had a better way. I always thought his way was much better than the other way because you always knew what your bottom dollar is going to be. They may do that there now. I don’t know. It’s hard to say.

Is that the system you used when you started your own business, then?

Oh, yeah. I still think the same.

Dodson: You might want to teach that to James, my son.

Your boy does far more than that, though, don’t he?

Dodson: Yeah.

So I wonder, when you look back and you think about your dad and his business and how long he ran it, why do you think it was successful for so long?

Well, first of all, he had people that came up through the ranks. We had one fellow he hired from Webb Brown’s office, Tom Meredith, who was a structural engineer over in the old building over there, and then Tom came to work there and he’d work a half a day in the shop and half a day in the office. That’s how he learned, and then eventually he started his own place, Meredith Steel. His wife was a schoolteacher at Reno High School. Tom was sharp. He had his problems, but we didn’t worry about his problems because they weren’t ours. [laughs]

So your dad hired good people.

We hired good people there, yeah, really good people there.

How would you describe Martin himself as a businessman and a worker?

Well, both ways, he was pretty sharp. He was partners with somebody in Syracuse. I don't know who that was.

Dodson: Wasn't he an engineer or—

I don't think he was, no.

Dodson: I always thought he had a degree.

Back then you could take the AISC manual. American Institute of Steel Construction, they had a manual, and you could pretty much design your own steel from it. You always added 20 or 30 percent to the weight. When you do a steel business, it's always by weight, because you pay so much for the material and then your labor is so much, and it works out pretty well, and your overhead is so much. But I wouldn't want to go back to it anymore. When I closed mine down, I sort of freelanced for a couple years there and I did work for the fellow that bought all my equipment out. I freelanced a little bit and did work for them.

So when you left your business, well, your building got demolished, right? [laughs]

Yeah.

You didn't retire immediately then?

No.

You continued to work freelance.

I worked a couple, two or three years, did work for him, yeah. Just making takeoffs is all I did. I didn't work physically anymore.

What does making takeoffs mean?

Making estimates from the drawings. More so for Reno Iron than I did for Val because Val, who has the machinery now, is pretty sharp, quite sharp. He comes from a long background, too, of working in the steel business. He's a Mormon boy, but you don't hold that against him. [laughs] He is a pretty nice guy. He's a nice guy.

So when did you retire finally and stop working, or you still do this and that?

When they ran that train through the building, that's when I stopped, sold the equipment to him. That's when the business got so bad around town that nobody was doing any work.

Dodson: About 2008?

Pretty recently?

I've got to count on my fingers. Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

Four or five years ago?

Before that, even, I think, yeah.

Dodson: Well, because 2008 was when everything just fell apart.

Yeah, but it was slow before that.

Dodson: Was it?

Yeah, yeah. But it was fun working. I've always worked, and like I say, all my buddies, they were all chasing girls, and I had no time to chase girls. [laughs]

You were just in the shop. That's a lot, yeah.

In high school, I'd have to work at night or after school and weekends, Saturdays, sometimes Sundays. I remember one time living here, I had my bedroom down in the basement. Dad come down, "Fred, we've got to go to work."

"What do you mean, go to work? It's three o'clock in the morning."

"No, we've got to go get a car out of a hole." A friend of his who was a general contractor, a house builder, called him up and needed help. I guess his son was going to the university. I don't want to say who it is, because he's still around town here. [laughs] But anyway, they were whooping and hollering and they come downstairs.

That was when Sierra was two-way. They had a big hole right there in front of the army store. That's where the old surplus store used to be on Sierra Street, Sierra and 3rd Street, right there. They had a big hole right in front of the thing and they had, like, a pile of dirt. And they came down Sierra Street and said, "Well, let's jump that hole with our car."

Dodson: Oh, my god.

The car didn't quite make it and it was hanging by both bumpers, like you see in that commercial where that gal is on that boat and the car rolls back. About the same thing, except the car that went over the top of that hill had both bumpers up. Oh, god. Nice car too. I was in high school then, or out of high school. I'm not sure where I was, pretty close, though.

They were down there at three o'clock in the morning and they had to get the crane, and Dad was the only one that had the crane, that little old crane. And they get down there and they had to pick that car up, put it back. Fortunately, it still could run.

I wonder how he got involved. Because he had the crane? So that would happen from time to time?

Yeah, because nobody else could pick that sucker out of that hole. It was hanging on there. Wish I'd had pictures of that baby.

Just a good community man, to go to the rescue of people.

Yeah.

Well, that's great. Then we're going to look at photos a little bit, but I just want to thank you so much for talking to me. I've really enjoyed it. Thank you.

NOAH SILVERMAN

Co-founder, Reno Bike Project



Noah Silverman (left) with Kyle Kozar inside Reno Bike Project in 2011. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Reno native Noah Silverman is the Executive Director of the Reno Bike Project, which he co-founded with Kyle Kozar in 2006. The non-profit community bicycle shop and advocacy group is located at 541 East Fourth Street. Silverman drew inspiration from volunteering at a community bike shop called The Hub in Bellingham, Washington, where he earned a degree in Industrial Technology from Western Washington University in 2005.

Alicia Barber: I'm talking to Noah Silverman. We're on the UNR campus. It's Friday, October 7, 2011.

Noah, do I have your permission to record this interview and put it in our public archives?

Noah Silverman: Yes.

I want to start by asking you some biographical questions. When and where were you born?

I was born in Reno at St. Mary's Hospital on July 11, 1980.

What part of town did you grow up in?

I think it's called West Reno—west of Hunter Lake off of Plumb. I grew up on Thomas Jefferson Drive.

Where did you go to school?

I went to Trinity Montessori, and then I went to Cambridge Elementary. They're both private schools. I went to Swope [Middle School] and then I went to a boarding school in California at a school called the Dunn School, in the Santa Ynez Valley, which is just north of Santa Barbara.

How many generations back has your family been in Reno?

My siblings and I were the first to be born in Reno. My mom was from Washington originally and then lived in Los Angeles. She moved from L.A. to Squaw Valley, and was ski-bumming when she met my dad. He was from Kansas City and then moved to Vegas and then moved to Reno, where he went to UNR. He went to law school in Boulder, Colorado, and then moved back to Reno.

What are their names?

Gary Silverman and Janet Chubb.

I'm wondering, as you were growing up in Reno, were you always interested in bikes?

Yes. We never had a TV, so we always had to find stuff to do outside. So I rode my bike. My parents actually gave me a ton of freedom. They were lawyers and they didn't really care what we did. They weren't home after school, so we had to amuse ourselves.

Did it seem like Reno was a good place to bike as a kid?

Yes. Honestly, I can't say that I really thought about that. When you're a kid, you ride on the sidewalk. I rode my bike a lot, I can say that, for fun and for transportation. I wouldn't compare my opinion now to what it was then, because it's two different worlds.

I started riding my bike quite a bit in high school. That's where I really got into cycling and started racing. The school I went to had a kind of mountain bike team. A teacher who happened to be there convinced the school to let him do that, and there were, I think, seven kids all from the same grade.

You competed with other schools?

No, we did only mountain bike races, and we would just go to whatever races were in the area. We'd go as far north as Monterey and then we'd go south a ways.

Did that happen year- 'round?

No, just springtime. It was kind of an anomaly, I think. It could probably never happen again. It was just the one teacher who proposed it and had seven kids to do it, and the school said "yeah," and the parents said "yeah," so they went for it.

Were the people who were in those races mostly older than you?

No. You go to these races and there are age groups and skill levels as well. You have junior races, which are probably our age, teenagers, and then you have people of any age who race in the A or the B or the C, A being the highest. We all raced juniors, and none of us were really any good, but it was a great opportunity. The teacher was really cool. He let us get away with murder, and we got to leave campus every day.

Were these just day trips or would you spend the night?

They'd be fun camping trips. It was totally unlike anything that boarding school is usually like. So it was a lot of fun.

So did he also teach a class?

Yes, he was an English teacher—Jamie Wheel [phonetic]. I think he lives in Colorado now. We only did it sophomore and junior year, and he left after our junior year. We were all in the same grade. He was obviously the person in charge and I don't know how we lobbied, but we got one of the new incoming teachers who knew nothing about mountain biking to take it over for that year, and it was not terribly organized. There wasn't a lot of focus or discipline, but we still got to do it, and we were seniors and it was great. It was fun.

How did you make the decision where to go to college?

My best friend from Reno moved to Seattle when I was in high school, and after high school I wasn't stoked on Reno. I just wasn't having a good time here. So I moved to Seattle and worked as an arborist there for a couple of years, trimming trees, which I still do. I'm still an arborist.

After a couple of years in Seattle, I was ready to go to college. My goal was to take a couple years off. A bunch of my friends in Seattle went to Western Washington University, which is in Bellingham, so I went up there, attended community college at Whatcom for two years and then transferred into Western.

What did you think of Bellingham?

It was great. It was cozy. It's a tough town to make a living in, actually. It's really small and there's not a ton of opportunity. With all those kids coming in and taking a lot of jobs, it's not an easy place to find a solid job.

What were the industries there?

There used to be a Georgia Pacific paper mill there. I remember a big stinky paper mill that they've since torn down. So that was the industry. I'm sure there must have been some logging because I've been out on the winding roads, but that never played much into what I knew about Bellingham.

Did it feel like a real college town?

Yes, it did. There are a lot of young people. I think the school has 10,000 people, and it's a small town. It's roughly 60,000 or 70,000, I think, including the outlying areas. The downtown was really concentrated, and there were a lot of bars. You'd see a lot of kids on campus, see a lot of kids downtown.

Did you bike around town?

Totally, I did. I didn't really get into road biking—even now I'm not that into it—until Bellingham. I started to do a little of it.

Did you have a different bike for riding on the roads?

Yes, I did. I think I did my first Century ride then, which is a hundred-miler. But mostly there is great mountain biking in Bellingham, so when I got connected with The Hub, which is a community bike shop up there, and I met other people, then I started riding with them.

Tell me about The Hub.

The Hub is a community bike shop, like the Reno Bike Project. It was kind of our model for what we tried to do, and it's a place where people donated bicycles and they essentially recycled them and reused them to the best of their ability. If a bike was complete and good, you could fix it up and sell it, or just sell it "as is" and someone else would fix it up. If it was only in bits and pieces, you'd take the parts off that were good, put those in the bin and then recycle the rest of the bike.

Did they have a pretty big crew of people who were mechanical experts on bikes who could rebuild them?

No experts, no experts. We had a little crew while I was there who were just dedicated and really enjoyed it and that's why they were there. That place was partially volunteer, partially staff, and most just part-time.

Was it near campus?

It was near campus. It wasn't on campus. It was downtown and the campus is six blocks up the hill, basically. You could be there in four minutes.

Do you remember how you found out about it?

From what I remember, there's a bike path that runs through Bellingham, and it's right on the bike path. I just stopped in there one day because they had huge piles of bikes.

Did you work there as a paid job or as a volunteer?

I volunteered there off and on for two or three years.

Do you know how long they've been around?

They've been around, I think, over ten years now, and it started as a Yellow Bike Program, where they got some money from the city and they got a bunch of bikes fixed up and painted them yellow, and then left them around town for people to ride.

Just for free?

Right. But those bikes always get stolen and trashed, and those programs never work out. As I understand it, two people started that, and then this guy Kyle came in and basically said, "You guys suck," and got them out of there somehow and took it over. He's been running it ever since.

When they would get the donated bikes and then fix them up, was the idea to sell them for a pretty low price?

Yes. A new retail bike can start at around \$400, maybe a little less, and most of these bikes were in the \$200 to \$300 range. The lowest-quality new bike is pretty low quality. Initially, it'll work pretty well, but the parts are kind of cheap, so the longevity isn't good. These older bikes are built to last. Some stuff breaks, but with new parts and a ton of old parts, you can get stuff going for really cheap. It's how we modeled the Bike Project. It's just an affordable resource for people who want to ride a bike. So that's what they did and that's what we did.

When you were at The Hub, who was taking advantage of that service and buying these bikes? Mostly students?

A lot of students. I think a lot of cyclists—mainstream is not the right word—but a lot of cyclists are turned off by the community bike shop vibe for some reason. I don't know why. They go and buy all their stuff new, and I don't think they really get it, because they're more recreation-minded. That could be totally untrue; that's just my opinion. You get a lot of commuters, people who ride their bike every day who do it for a conscious reason as opposed to just for fitness. Those people, I think, tend to gravitate more towards community bike shops. It's political, to a large extent, whether it's overtly or not.

I can see that, yes, if their cycling is part of a broader philosophy about how to live life or be responsible to the environment.

Exactly, and to not drive your car every day. A lot of those people tend to migrate towards community bike shops. But so do students and other people since you can do some repairs in a community bike shop for a tenth of the price it would take you to go to a normal bike shop and pay for a new part and labor.

So you'd actually do repairs at the bike shop, too, at a cheaper rate?

Yes. We were always doing repairs and providing people with public workstations that they could use, that they could rent themselves. Each workstation has a full set of tools where someone who wants to learn or knows how to fix their own bike but doesn't have all the tools can come in, pay three dollars an hour, and have access to all these tools and all these parts. So they can fix their own bike instead of paying a shop to do it, and instead of having to buy all these tools. The Hub did that and we do that, too.

Did you become aware of other places besides The Hub that were doing this when you were involved there? Probably since then you have, too.

Since then, quite a bit.

Were you aware that it was a unique kind of service?

Well, I knew it was unlike anything I'd ever been to before, without a doubt, and I was totally into it. I mean, I still am, but I was totally drawn in. I had never done any kind of volunteering before, and was totally stoked on volunteering then. It just combined a lot of passions, cycling and helping people get on bikes, and having them stoked to do it. It was a totally new experience, something that the Bike Project is trying to bring to UNR because they don't have it.

We'll get to that in a bit. At the same time, you were in college. What were you majoring in?

I was actually working on a vehicle design degree.

So it's kind of related.

Yes, totally.

Does vehicle design also include bikes, or was it mostly focused on cars?

That program was focused on cars. It wasn't an engineering degree. Technically it's called Industrial Technology. I think it's a bachelor of arts degree. But it was a similar passion. I always liked bikes and I like cars, too. I had a real interest in them, and it suited my learning style, which is very visual, very hands-on.

There's a program called CATIA that we used extensively, which is hyper-sophisticated stuff. It's what Boeing uses to design all their airplanes, and it's incredibly powerful software and incredibly expensive. So I learned on the top stuff, which is great. It was fun. It's like drawing on a computer but doing it really well, and being able to do anything your mind can come up with.

It seems like such a specialized program. Did you know it was there when you applied? Is that what you were interested in?

Yes. My friend was into it and I didn't have any direction I wanted to go in—part of the reason I didn't go to college right after high school. So when I heard about that program and saw it, I was pretty excited. Like anything, it doesn't always turn out. It's not exactly what you expect it is. The hands-on machining part is hyper-technical, which didn't suit me that well. Some of that stuff is super boring. Machining is actually pretty boring. It's a means to end because you can make some cool things, but it wasn't what I wanted to do.

So you didn't think of continuing on in a career in that?

No, because you're either sitting at a computer all day drawing parts, which was fun, but not something I wanted to do all day every day, or machining, which is definitely not something I wanted to do all day. But it was a fun, interesting program. I took a lot of math, which was fun, too. I really enjoyed it. I was doing that and working at The Hub. It was a good time. I got a lot out of college, I think, not as much from school directly as just the experience.

When did you graduate?

2005. I traveled for a year and then moved back to Reno.

What made you decide to come back to Reno?

I wanted to move back home.

Did you have the seed of an idea about a bike project? How did that come about?

Yes. It was something that I was really interesting in doing. I guess I had talked about doing it or at least thought about doing it in Reno, and met Kyle [Kozar]. I had met Kyle a couple times, but we weren't friends. This kid from Reno named Yale Johnson moved up to Bellingham and lived with me. We had a lot of mutual friends, and Kyle was one of his good friends. We started hanging out in Reno, and we talked about it a couple times and then one day we just decided to do it, and that was that.

What did it take to get started? Did you decide you wanted to have a shop right away?

Our goal was to create a community bike shop, a resource for the community to come and fix their bikes affordably, to get their bikes fixed affordably, or to buy an affordable bike, just like The Hub. So the vision was pretty clear: we need a shop, we need bikes, we need employees.

We just had our five-year anniversary last Saturday. On October 1, 2006, we sent out an email stating that we were going to start a community bike shop and that we were looking for volunteers and donations, and then we started talking to people and organizing shop nights once a week in our friend's basement.

We were there for a couple of months—I don't remember how many—and then we moved to my garage for probably six or eight months. We moved into 250 Bell Street on September first of 2008. We were in that building with Cathexes. They rented us a big section of the garage.

So as you moved from place to place, how many people were coming in? Was it just staffed by you and Kyle?

No. One of the original volunteers was a kid named Anthony Arevalo, who still works at the Bike Project. We'd have maybe eight or ten people in the basement on a given night. That would fluctuate with the temperature and whatnot, and then we moved to the garage and it would be more than that.

This whole time we were having meetings and organizing and trying to figure out what we needed, getting our nonprofit status and developing a board of directors and job positions and getting employees. By the time we moved into the Bell Street shop, we had hired one person. Kyle and I didn't get paid. We hired a mechanic to run the place.

It just kind of snowballed from there. By the time we moved out of there, I think Kyle and Anthony and I were the three employees, Kyle and I being salaried, and Anthony on an hourly pay.

How hard was it to get nonprofit status?

A UNR college student—she might have been a grad student at the time—named Gwynne Middleton took us on as her project to help us do that. She did a lot of the paperwork. It costs almost \$1,000 just to apply. Between raising the money to do that and then having her do all the paperwork, it is a lot of work, but it wasn't that hard. They sent the application back to us a couple of times. They wanted it to be clarified further. But we got it—it might have been 2008 or 2009, and they make it retroactive to the day that you filed for a corporation.

What was the advantage of that, in your eyes? Was the goal always to become a nonprofit?

Always, yes. We modeled the Bike Project after The Hub, which is a nonprofit, because even though we sell bikes and generate revenue, our goal is always just to help people get on bikes, to provide them with an affordable way to fix a bike or get it repaired or to find a bike. Being a nonprofit, there's a lot of tax you don't have to pay, obviously, and you can garner donations. So that was always the plan.

How did you go about asking people to be on your board of directors?

A lot of the time we just asked people who we knew and thought might be a good person, mostly just cyclists—and some people approached us saying, "I'm interested in your organization." But that meant going to those people and telling them about our vision and our mission, and saying, "Do you want to be a part of this and help us?"

A big part of the role of any nonprofit board is oversight, ethical and financial, to make sure that

the organization is doing what it says it's doing and is helping people. A lot of people are probably really confused about why we make money, and how that actually helps the community, but we have nine board members right now who make sure that everything we're doing is on the up-and-up.

How often do they meet?

Quarterly right now.

Why did you think that Reno needed this kind of organization? Was there some specific reason?

Yes and no. I had seen what a difference it had made in Bellingham in that so many people utilized it, and Bellingham, I think, is a much more cycling-oriented community. Washington—western Washington at least—is just a different place than Reno. But at the time, the cycling movement was really strong in Reno. A lot of people were riding bikes and the whole fixed-gear fashion was really in vogue then.

What is that?

It was a fad. On a regular bike, the back wheel is always turning, so when you ride it, you can stop pedaling and the wheel just turns. You can't do that on a fixed-gear, so you're always pedaling. Because of that, you can ride with no brakes. You'll see people without brakes on their bike. It's because you can slow the bike down by essentially back-pedaling.

That whole fad or fashion, whatever you want to call it, came out of bicycle messengering, because a lot of the messengers ride fixed-gears. It's just because they're low maintenance. They ride their bikes every day and they can't afford to have them break. There's really just a chain and nothing else. So that's where it came from, and the whole image caught on and suddenly everyone was riding messenger bikes around. It still persists today, but it's not the thing to do or ride these days. A lot of people ride fixed-gears today, but five years ago it's like everyone had one.

The bikes that you work on could be all types of bikes, right?

Yes. We repair any bike. And people give us every kind of bike to either fix up and sell, or just sell it "as is" as a project. But, yes, we take anything, because people ride any and all sorts of bikes.

Was there a relationship with the university from an early point at all?

No, and there still isn't. It's something that we've tried to develop but have failed.

Why do you think that is?

I think there are a lot of reasons. I guess this is considered a commuter campus. There aren't a lot of people who live on campus. I don't think anyone in the administration really thinks it's a priority. I just don't think anyone at the university really understands what an asset it would be to push cycling on this campus or any campus.

Do you think you're going to keep trying?

Yes, I know we are. It's something that we talked about yesterday and that I have actually pushed for since the day we started the Bike Project and that I feel real strongly about because I know that's where I caught the bug. I was in college and riding my bike and Western had a college bike shop, which was good for a lot of things, but even something as simple as just having a place to go on campus when you've got a flat tire. Now the closest place to UNR is the Bike Project, but it's still a mile away and it's not convenient. I can't imagine how many bikes are sitting in bike racks with one flat tire. If that student could walk it to class, go to class, and then fix it afterwards, they'd be riding their bike again.

I saw you had a table during the first week of classes by the Union up here.

Yes. Right.

And because of that, I noticed that there was a place to get air right by the Knowledge Center because someone was pumping their tire up, and I would never have noticed that except there was more of a bike presence that day around there.

We actually had a little visioning meeting, a strategic planning meeting with the staff two days ago, and one of the things we talked about is trying to have consistent, almost weekly, workshops on campus, where people can come and get help or get their bike fixed for free. Obviously, part of it is to promote the Bike Project, but the other part of it is just to get kids' bikes fixed and get them thinking about it.

Let's talk a little bit about Fourth Street. You had a couple of other locations before moving to Fourth Street. Was the Bell Street one the location right before Fourth Street?

Yes.

So talk to me about why you wanted to leave Bell Street and how you ended up on East Fourth Street.

We moved into Bell Street, and the section that we were in was just a warehouse, and there wasn't a door. There was a garage door and it was in an alley. At the time, it was fine. It was a steppingstone on the path to Fourth Street, I guess you could say. But I think our landlord was ready for us to move on, and we knew someone who was looking at the space on Fourth Street, and they invited us to come look at it. It didn't really work for them but it kind of worked for us. So our landlord gave us the nudge and we picked up and moved.

What was the Fourth Street site like when you first saw it?

It was a lot different. If you had seen it then, you wouldn't recognize it today, because we did a lot of work to it. For one thing, the front door wasn't there. It was actually a brick wall. The entrance was there, but it had been bricked over. So we busted that out. We put a new big window and put glass back in

the door.

The garage door was already there because it used to be a transmission shop, so I assume they pulled cars through there. If you go next door, it still stinks like transmission fluid and oil. It's kind of gross. Our place doesn't stink. It stunk when we moved in there, but it got pressure-washed and cleaned, and for whatever reason, it doesn't smell anymore.

So it and the storefront next door were connected?

Yes. They were the same business for a long time, and the two buildings are still connected. If you go upstairs, you can walk next door. There's actually a door between the two downstairs, but it's been blocked for a while.

What's your address?

Our address is 541 East Fourth Street, and next door is 545.

What's the space like? Can you describe it for me?

It's a cinderblock building. You walk in and there's a really long, relatively narrow space—I think it's fourteen feet wide. The building is roughly twenty-eight or twenty-nine feet wide, and it's split down the middle. The west side runs all the way back. The east side used to be an alleyway. I didn't know this, but our new neighbors were looking at the plans, and the two buildings used to be separate and that was an alleyway, then someone busted out the wall to the alley and joined them together.

If you walk upstairs you'll see the brick wall that used to be the outside of the wall next door. You can also see the big steel beams where they reinforced the building, probably when they put a new roof on and made the building extend to the other wall.

How did you modify it for your business?

When you walked in before, there was a little foyer area and then two walls that ran east-west, and we took those walls completely out. We made the east side of the building one large room. There was a regular door to your left when you walked in, and we busted that all out and reinforced it with a header and widened it by about ten feet.

Now, if you walk in and you look left, there's a counter.

What happens in the different parts of the building?

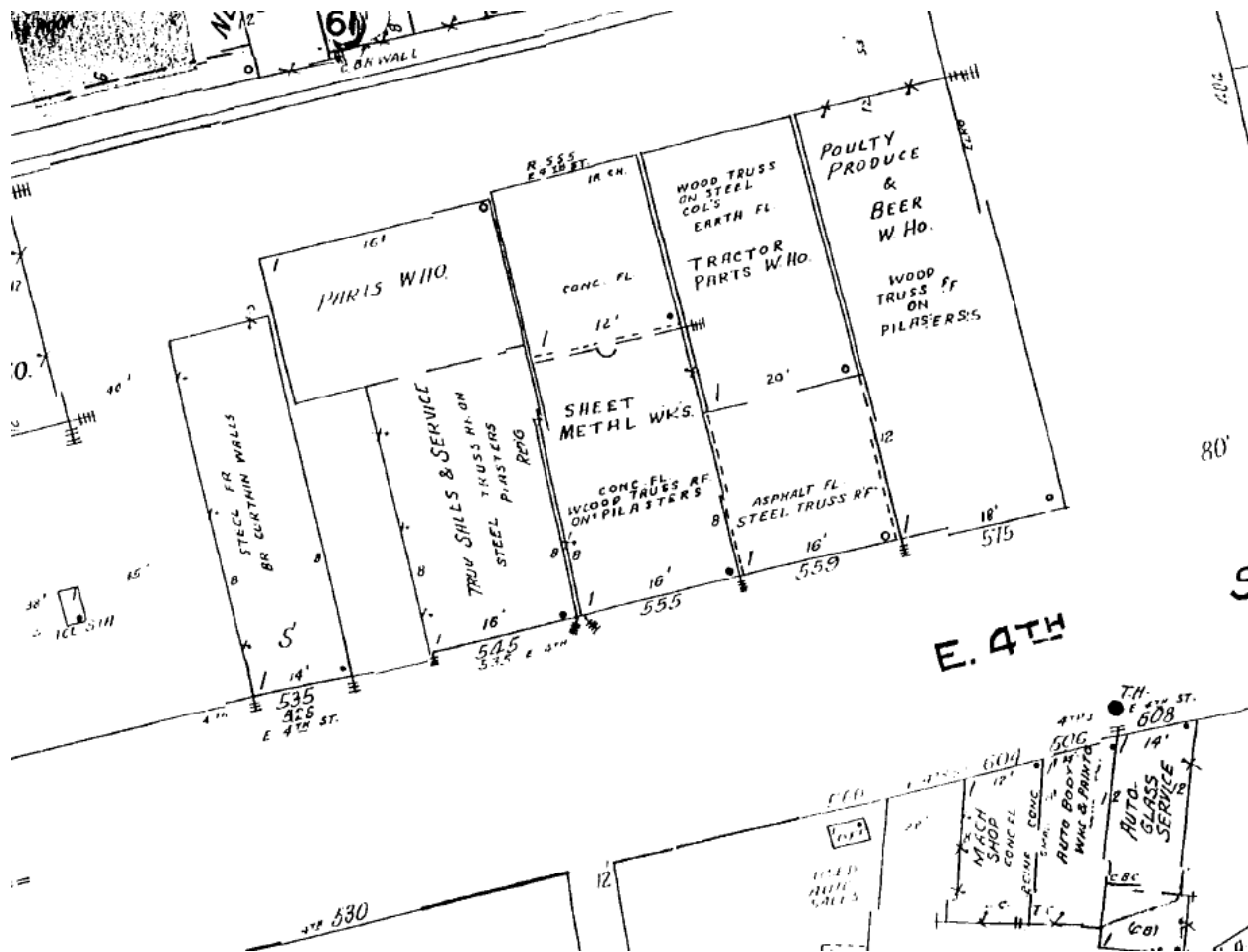
If you walk into the building, the east side is where we store all our bikes. On the west side is our service counter and all our service workstations, and where we store all our new parts and whatnot. It's kind of our staff work area, and in the back of the west side are the public workstations and more bike storage. Then upstairs has the office and more bike storage.

Has the space upstairs changed since you've been there or is that how you found it?

Yes and no. When we moved in, there was no one next door, so we had the whole upstairs, and then the guy next door moved in and the landlord, even though he promised us that space, gave it to them. He was going to try to give them the whole upstairs, and I said no. I managed to save the office and maybe a third of the upstairs space. Those guys put a wall in. When they moved out, they took the wall out and we took it back over.

I would imagine it's good to have a separate space from the workspaces for your office.

Yes. That place is just really busy, so there are a lot of distractions.



Part of the Reno Bike Project space was once an alley between 535 and 545 East 4th Street, as seen in this detail from a 1949 Sanborn fire insurance map. Image courtesy of University of Nevada, Reno Libraries.

Do you feel like you're going to need more space at some point?

We've talked about it. Yes and no. If we had more bike storage, we could expand our operating area, but right now we're just finding the balance between those two. But we remodeled this summer and

opened up a lot of space. The workstations on the left used to be in the back right corner, and we moved all of it up front. The counter used to be in the back, too, so we moved everything up to the very front so that we're more welcoming. People were kind of confused when they walked in.

Did you have any impressions of East Fourth Street before you moved the business there?

No, I didn't. I didn't really think about it much.

Did the location just seem good because it was affordable or did you look at other spaces in the city?

We looked, but nothing really fit our price range and nothing was ever a viable option until the Fourth Street place came up. When we moved in there, we asked a lot of people, "Do you think this is a good place for us to be? What do you think about that neighborhood?" We got a lot of mixed sentiments. That was pre-recession, I should say, or right in the beginning of that monetary crisis, the subprime mortgage crisis, so things weren't that bad then. I think things were slowing down for Nevada, but it wasn't that bad, and the baseball stadium was already being built and there were plans to put that mall in nearby.

Some people said, "This is a great opportunity. Fourth Street is going to improve drastically." Other people were really pessimistic, and I kind of joined that camp. I don't know if "pessimistic" is quite the right word, but I'm definitely realistic about what it is right now and what it could be. It has a long way to go to make it a place where I think the public wants to go and hang out.

Did you have to adapt the way you operated in any way because of the location or the surrounding area? I guess the flip side of that is, did it allow you to do things that you couldn't do at the other place? How did things change once you got into the new location?

The old location was attached to an office, and there were people constantly looking over our shoulder to see what we were doing. Once we got our new space, it was all ours. As long as we paid the rent, the landlord really didn't care. He gave us free rein to do what we wanted with the building, and so we could run with it and do whatever we wanted, and it was a lot more feasible for a retail location. I don't think things changed much. We kind of were hellions at the other place. That's probably the reason we were asked to leave when we were. I think the biggest concern we had was whether people want to be here at night, and most people don't.

Are you open a lot at night?

We're open until seven in the summer and six in the winter. But Fourth Street, as dingy as it is, it's really not a dangerous place, I don't think.

Why do you think people stay away, then?

Well, they don't have much to do down there, with the exception of going to one of the auction places or the thrift store. There aren't a lot of attractions. It's a lot of motels and industrial businesses, and there's no place to eat down there. People aren't shopping and they're not eating.

There are a couple of bars but those are places that you drive to. You're not going to walk from a downtown bar to another down there, or from a downtown restaurant to a bar there. There's nothing in the proximity. I think Evans Avenue is about as far east as most people wind up walking from downtown. Louis' Basque Corner is right there, Lincoln Lounge is there. Studio on Fourth and then Abby's, and then the next place to eat, I think, is Casale's Halfway Club, which is more than a mile, and then the next place after that is Coney Island.

The only people who really walk down Fourth Street are the people who live at the shelter or who live in the motels.

Was the homeless shelter already in when you moved here?

Yes.

And did that concern you at all?

Totally. We talked to a lot of people about that, and just decided we're going to go for it.

And you're pretty close to it, so what has your experience been? Is there a lot of interaction?



Displays set up inside the Reno Bike Project during the Positively 4th Street event in June 2014 explain the Better Block Project then underway, as well as planned improvements to the corridor. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

Yes, a lot of those people come to our shop either to try and get a free bike from our gift bike program or to fix their own bike or to buy a bike.

So there's a gift bike program that gives away bikes for free?

Yes, the recipients have to do ten hours of community service with another nonprofit. We used to do it in our shop, but we're just too busy these days to take care of that program, and so we farmed it out and said, "You have to go to another place, do ten hours of work, and then bring a letter back."

Were you doing that at the other location at Bell Street or did you just start this on Fourth?

We were doing it informally. People would come ask us for bikes and we would hook them up. That was always part of our plan, but it didn't get formalized until Fourth Street, because then we had a ton of people coming by, and once word spread, it snowballed.

Have there been any problems with that program? Once they get the bike, is it theirs forever?

Yes, and the goal of that program is to provide transportation to people who need it—affordable transportation, because even a bus pass or riding the bus is expensive, and as long as your bike works, you can ride it anywhere.

We've been trying to refine the program. We hooked a lot of people up who just sold the bikes or would get drunk and lose them. Our goal has been, in refining the program, to really get those bikes to people who other organizations recommend, who can really benefit from it, who genuinely need transportation because they can't afford a car, because they have a job and they need to get to work or somewhere else.

Do you find that it's hard to monitor what does happen to those bikes?

There's no way for us to do it.

So you might just hear something about someone selling it.

A lot of the people who we serve are highly transient, and we don't have the resources to look after people like that. It's like, "Here's your bike. Thanks." Here's the next person. I think, honestly, there's a twenty-person waiting list right now for those bikes.

How many would you say you give away on a monthly basis or a year?

It depends, but it's over 250 since we've started keeping track, and it's grant-funded right now.

Where do you get the grants?

E.L. Cord, John Ben Snow Foundation, other foundations.

Do you have someone who spends a lot of time writing grant applications? That's pretty time-consuming.

I do it. One other program manager does it. We have some relationships with these foundations now. The programs are in place, so it's mostly refining and resetting. We don't have a formal grant writer, but everyone works on it a little bit.

Does that funding allow you to purchase new bikes to give away or are all the bikes donated?

All the bikes are donated. What most of those grants pay for is the labor to repair them.

You must get a lot of donations of bikes.

Hundreds a year, maybe even thousands. We sold over five hundred bikes in August for Burning Man alone, and most of those bikes came from Burning Man because so many of them get left out there.

How did that Burning Man relationship start?

Burning Man has a Yellow Bike Program, which is run by a local gentleman we knew named Travis, who is part of the Black Label Bicycle Club. It's another bicycle club in town. We met him and he basically invited us. His job is to pick up and deal with every bike that gets left out at Burning Man, and that's anywhere from seven hundred to a thousand bikes a year. He doesn't want to bring them back, so he donates them to various charities. Burning Man has several semi truck trailers, and they fill those up with bikes and send them to us. We don't pay for the bikes; we just pay for the delivery.

It's a great deal. We wouldn't be where we are without Burning Man, without a doubt. It's been huge. And every year it's grown. We doubled our bikes from last year, and we probably doubled from the year before. We sell them all for \$55.

They're all super cheap. You don't want to take a bike out there that's going to get ruined. We get a lot of the bikes that we've sold back in the shop afterwards. We've had to rent space to store them all. We rented space last year, at 420 Valley. Since we got the upstairs back, after the antique shop next door moved out, we have all our bikes upstairs again.

When we got the second truckload in the spring, Travis said, "I'll hold onto those bikes out at Burning Man" for us for the next couple of months, so we don't have to pay storage. They're in a semi truck. Burning Man has a ranch that's on the other side of the Black Rock Desert, about twelve miles from the event site.

Do you have any interactions with the folks who were building the Burning Man temple in Spencer Hobson's building or is that a completely different crowd?

Some of those people came over and bought some bikes from us, but it is a very different crowd, a lot of people who don't even live in Reno. You could probably write a couple of books on the whole DPW crowd, Department of Public Works. They're the people who work for Burning Man.

Thinking about Fourth Street a little more, can you tell me since you've been there if there have been any

significant changes?

We've been there three years, so there haven't been a ton of changes. People were really optimistic when the baseball stadium and that mall was going to go in where the Mitzpah was, between Lake and Evans. They were going to build an outdoor mall there. People were really optimistic about that and it was going to be good for everyone, but obviously that didn't happen. The baseball stadium is there, and that didn't do much, considering that for a long time, you could see the tent city from the baseball stadium. Turn around from watching a game, and there's the tent city—that was a major turnoff. So, in my mind, it hasn't changed much at all.

Do you feel that there's a sense of community there at all?

I don't know if "community" is the right word. I know most of the people on our block. People just go there to work, I think, for the most part, with the exception of Remi Jourdan.

Have you had any involvement with any of these business associations?

No, and I know Mike Steedman has been pushing for improvements and Remi's pushing for it. Sometimes I feel like I should support their efforts, but I just don't think it's realistic right now. As a result, I don't go to any of it. Sometimes I feel guilty about it, but I don't think right now is the time for it.

What are their goals?

They want to make Fourth Street a place to visit.

What do you think would need to happen to make that feasible?

I think the homeless shelter has to leave the area. It's dead-set in there and there are hundreds of people who have no place to go, who just hang out on the street. If you walk or drive down Fourth Street between the bus station, which is on Lake, to Record Street, maybe a couple of blocks east, there are a lot of people just hanging out on the street with no place to go, walking back and forth.

Does that seem to be the majority of the pedestrian traffic?

Oh, yeah. I don't think anyone else walks down there.

When you get walk-ins, do you feel like they're people who have driven specifically to your business?

I don't think we get walk-ins, other than that crowd. I think people drive or ride to our shop. It's kind of an industrial area. Martin Iron Works is across the street and there are a lot of construction-related businesses around there. People aren't hanging out on Fourth Street. They usually go there to work and then go home.

How much are you impacted by the people who are living in the motels along Fourth Street? Do you feel

like that's also a group that's walking around on the streets a lot?

Yes, those people can't afford cars, so they travel by bus and they travel by foot or by bike.

There are a couple of businesses around there, like Louis' Basque Corner, the Lincoln Lounge, Studio on Fourth and the bars like Abby's. Do you see that crowd on the street very much?

All of those places have parking lots, so I think everyone just drives down there. But we're talking about a car-centric community anyway. For me, most people I see ride their bike to Lincoln Lounge. That's the youngest, hippest place. Abby's is not a young crowd at all. Louis', no. Studio on Fourth, sometimes. That place is really hit or miss for just everything.

You have a pancake feed at the shop, right?

Right.

How has that been?

It's great. We modeled it after Bellingham. They used to do it in Bellingham on Bike to Work Day. So we just do it one day a year, and it's fun. We show up at five-thirty and start cooking pancakes on a camp stove on the sidewalk and about a hundred people show up. It's a way for us to show support for people who ride their bikes. We give away free t-shirts to everyone—well, to fifty people who show up.

We work with the Truckee Meadows Bicycle Alliance on that. They do a big Bike to Work deal, and this is how we participate.

How many paid staff do you have now?

Six.

How many volunteers would you say you have?

Consistent volunteers, people who come weekly—five to ten, depending on the week. There are also a huge number of people who we call every once in a while when we need help. It's hard to say. I don't have an exact number.

But it seems pretty busy.

Yes, it is, and it's slowing down now that the weather is cooling off. But in the summertime it was busy.

What do you really enjoy the most about having this business? Is it what you wanted it to be? Do you want to do more?

It's far surpassed our original goals. We're an advocacy organization, and we just wanted to have a shop. That was what we wanted, and now we do almost fifteen events a year to promote cycling, the cycling community, and cycling culture in Reno. Now we do two weekly workshops. I couldn't ask for a better job. It's something that I co-created and got to make, with a lot of other people's help, the best that it could be, especially for Reno, and the limited number of cyclists and volunteers that we have. I think we've come a long way. I know a lot of people have worked really hard. What do I enjoy about it? It's everything that I wanted it to be.

Beyond getting more support from the university, are there other major goals that you want to achieve?

I would like to create, personally and with the organization, some kind of extensive public education about bicycles, teach kids in schools, create some programs for schools to teach cycling, and advocacy and safety and that kind of stuff.

Is there any other organization in Reno that does what you do or that does complementary things? Are there any other bike-oriented organizations you have any relationship with?

There's the Kiwanis. They actually run a similar bike shop to ours. It's all volunteer-run. It's been run by the same people for ten years, Roger and Ellen Jacobson. It's on 2500 Valley Road. It used to be up on Comstock, but they moved. Now it's pretty much at the top of the hill where there used to be a fencing place and there's a skate park.

They run a very similar program. They're structured a little different. It's through the Sparks Kiwanis, that organization. As I understand it, when they started, their goal was to get bikes to kids. They refurbish some bikes and sell them. They sell a lot of bikes, actually.

We try to operate much more like a bike shop, doing repairs and that kind of thing. They sell bikes. They garner a huge number of donations. They've been in this town a lot longer than we have, and so they get all the bikes from the Fire Department and the Police Department and I think they're connected in some ways that we're just not. So they get quite a few bicycle donations.

Did you know about them when you started your project?

Yes. We tried to work with them. They can be difficult to work with. We tried. We attempted to partner, but it didn't work out. So there is some competition there, for sure.

The other organizations in town are the Nevada Bicycle Coalition, which is primarily one guy, Terry McAfee, who is kind of a lobbyist/advocate. He helped get the three-foot law passed. It just went into effect October first. The three-foot law stipulates that cars have to give a bicycle three feet.

And then they passed another law that increases penalties for motorists who injure a cyclist while driving recklessly. Before, it used to be kind of a slap on the wrist, and now it's a lot more severe. I don't know how much more, I couldn't say, but it's more severe now.

Is there any more legislation that you've been advocating about bikes?

No. Some people want a mandatory helmet law. I don't like those kinds of laws, but helmets are a good idea. I think Reno needs a lot more bike lanes and maybe for the price of gas to go up some more.

You need the price of gas to go up. [laughs] A lot of people wish for the opposite.

I don't even wish for it, because I end up driving quite a bit.

Some motivation though, some incentive to get on bikes.

Yes, exactly.

Is there anything that you think you'd like to see not change about Fourth Street?

I guess it would be a shame if they tore down some of the old buildings, because those buildings have character. They've been there a while. But I know that Bellingham, since I've been there, did a major facelift of its downtown, and they have a really quaint, cozy little downtown. They did a lot of redevelopment, and I think that's what it would take to get Fourth Street on the up-and-up.

I honestly think that the homeless shelter would have to leave and then people would want to have to invest in Fourth Street and make it a destination. Investment of funds, bring some restaurants, bring some more bars, bring some shopping, and make it a destination.

Do you think there are transportation issues that are lacking?

I think it needs bike lanes, without a doubt. It's a major thoroughfare but it's not a busy one. It's actually on the calendar. It's in the master plan to stripe it all the way to Sparks. I think a lot of people ride on Fourth Street. I think a lot more people would if it had a bike lane. It's a straight shot to Sparks from there.

I don't ride the bus, but as far as driving, it's easy. You just get on there and you can be in Sparks in five minutes. The sidewalks are actually really wide, at least where we are. If you get farther east, it turns into a dirt sidewalk. There's plenty of parking. A lot of it is street parking, and right where our shop is, it narrows and the street parking goes away. But if they restripe it, they always do parking, bike lanes, driving lanes and then a turn lane. So that would solve a lot of these problems, I think. They probably still wouldn't have parking where we are.

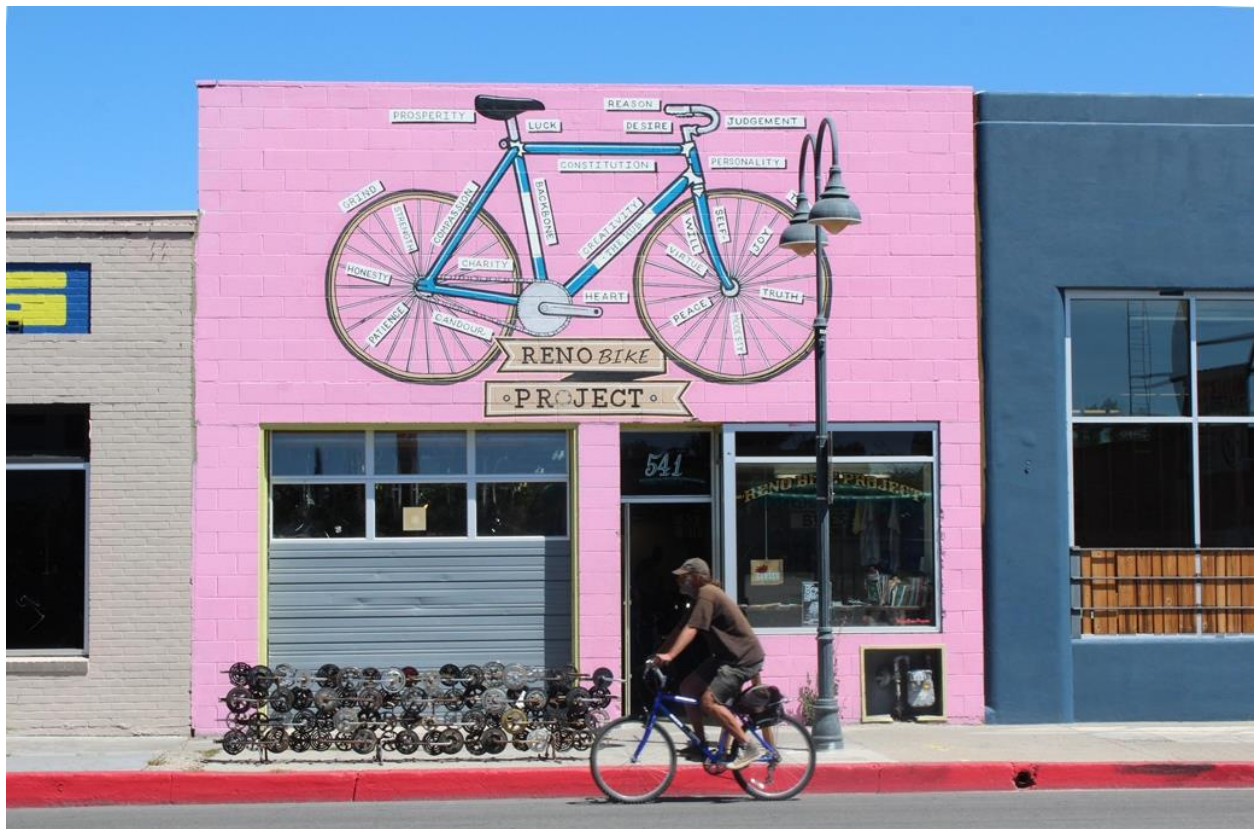
Is there anything else you think the city could do?

My question is, does Fourth Street need to be improved? It kind of is what it is, and I just realized that sitting here. Why does it need to change? There are plenty of other places in Reno that are more suited for investment—even California Avenue, which is, in my mind, the pinnacle of what Reno could be as far as a little commercial, community area, and downtown has a lot of potential. Downtown is okay, although the casinos kind of eat up everything. But Fourth Street...it was Highway 40 but it's not anymore. People travel through Interstate 80 now.

With the exception of the bike lanes, I don't know if they really could do much more. There aren't a ton of empty businesses down there. People use Fourth Street because it's relatively cheap. So I guess that's the question that I have: Why take the biggest hurdle you can find and sink a bunch of money into it? Are we hurting for that much space downtown?

And you think it wouldn't necessarily make a difference to your business anyway?

I don't think that I wouldn't benefit from Fourth Street being better. I don't think that at all. But I just wonder, why does it have to be East Fourth Street, which is obviously the dingiest part of downtown right now? If they're hard up for space and they want to try to make downtown that much nicer, I can understand just going for it—I don't have a problem with Reno being any nicer. I like this place and I could stand to see it nice, but I just don't know if that's the best place to focus their energy. That's the realization I had talking about it today.



The Reno Bike Project building at 541 East 4th Street in 2013. Photo courtesy of Alicia Barber.

INEZ CASALE STEMPECK

Owner, Casale's Halfway Club



Inez Casale Stempeck inside Casale's Halfway Club in 2014. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Inez Casale Stempeck was born in 1927 at the Coney Island Dairy, then located near El Rancho and Prater Way. Her parents, who both emigrated to Nevada from Italy, founded Casale's as a roadside fruit stand in the late 1930s. The business evolved into Casale's Halfway Club, a popular Italian restaurant named for its location halfway between Reno and Sparks. Casale's remains a family business, as Stempeck works in the kitchen alongside her son, Tony, and some of her grandchildren.

Alicia Barber: I'm here with Inez Stempeck. It is November 19, 2013, and we're here inside Casale's Halfway Club. I want to ask first if I have your permission to record today.

Inez Casale Stempeck: Yes, you do.

Thank you. I wanted to start out by going back a little bit and ask you how long ago your family arrived in Nevada.

My father came in 1913.

What was his name?

John Casale.

Where did he come from?

Genoa, Italy.

Did he come straight to Nevada from Italy?

Yes, he did.

Do you know why, what prompted him to come?

I don't know. He came to Tonopah first and he worked on the farm, and then he came to Reno and worked for Shell Oil Company. In the meantime, his sister wrote that she found him a girl, just what he wanted, and so he said, "Send her to me. I'll send you a visa."

She was writing to him from Italy?

Yes.

So she found him a girl in Italy. Okay.

So he sent her a visa to Reno. Well, it was a small community then, and all the Italians knew that John was getting a girl. So he went to Sparks and picked her up and took her and put her in a cab or somebody's car. She had a big hat on and she was dressed in a suit, and she was very thin, stately. So then he walked her down Virginia Street. Several years ago I had a chance to go on that car from Sparks to Reno.

What car?

The old train car. And then they showed me the Halfway Club and all that, and it was really very interesting.

So that was your mother?

Yes.

So your mother was sent from Italy. Did she know any English at the time?

No.

Had she known anyone who lived in the United States?

No, but she knew America was where she wanted to be. She was twenty-nine years old, and what she was a—she took care of the children, you know. She gave shots, she did everything.

She did that back in Italy?

In Italy. So she came over here, and she was here three days and she married him.

What was her name?

Elvira.

What was her last name?

Pazzili.

Did any of her immediate family ever move to the United States?

No. Dad's brother came one time, I don't remember when. But he borrowed some money and then left.

So your parents were the only members of their families who lived here.

Yes.

Did you ever meet their parents, your grandparents?

No. My grandfather on my mother's side had died when she was two, and her mother was hidden in the attic during the war, during the Second World War.

Where did they live?

In Florence, in [unclear]. They hid her in the loft and every night they'd bring her food.

Why did they hide just her?

Well, she was the oldest in the family and I guess the Germans killed them so they wouldn't eat so much food, you know, and so they hid her. They'd go up and brush her hair. She had real long hair. They'd brush her hair and talk to her, and then they'd sneak back to the house.

That's extraordinary. Did your mother tell you that whole story?

Yes.

So your father had moved to Reno, and you said he'd worked on a farm in Tonopah?

Yes.

How did he get that job, do you know?

I don't know.

But then he came here and worked for Shell Oil?

Yes. He died awful young.

I read that.

Fifty-nine, something like that.

What do you remember of him as a person? What was he like, your father?

He was very quiet like my brother, quiet, but when he got mad, stand by for ram. But he was sick for a lot of years, thirteen.

So when you were a child, do you remember him being ill?

Yes, he was an epileptic. So every time they'd drag a chair or a barstool, I would jump. But he was good, you know. He was good until he had a seizure. When he had a seizure—this was their bedroom and that was the door out.

We're sitting in the dining room and this was the bedroom that we're in.

So if he'd go into a seizure, you know, we'd hear him. We couldn't handle him. I was little. My brother was four years younger. We just couldn't handle it. Sometimes there was men at the bar, friends, and we had a neighbor over on this side that he'd come over and help, but sometime we just couldn't handle him. He was awfully strong. So we'd lock the door. We had a little puppy, a little fox terrier, shorthair, and she'd curl up at the end of his bed and that was it. She didn't eat, she didn't drink, she didn't do nothing as long as he was in a seizure.

Would he be hospitalized at all?

Not until the end. On the death certificate they said that he had pneumonia, but who knows.

Did your parents speak Italian to each other?

Yes.

Did they speak the same dialect? Were they from different regions?

They're from different regions, but they talked.

So did you speak Italian when you were growing up?

Oh, yes, my mom's side, the real Italian. My dad had a brogue, so when he wanted to tease somebody, we'd say it like that. Then when we talked serious, then we talked like my mother.

So they spoke differently.

Yes.

Was that the main language you spoke in the house, Italian?

Yes. I didn't know American when I went to school.

You went to Orvis Ring, right?

That's right.

And you learned to speak English in school?

In school.

Was that pretty typical of the time? There were a lot of Italians around here.

Oh, yes, they taught you, and how she learned to talk was to read the billboards.

Your mother, you mean? Read the billboards out here on Highway 40?

Yes. Well, they were big letters and she'd just enunciate them out because that's what you do in Italian. If you know the word, you could spell it.

So when you and your brother started going to school and learning English, did your parents start to learn more because you were learning more?

Oh, yes.

Did your father work for any other places in town after working for Shell Oil before they started the restaurant?

Yes, he was a janitor for Majestic Theater, and then he went to work for Sierra Brewery and then it got sort of dangerous. He'd have to walk on top of the vats.

Was this in the Reno Brewery where they made Sierra Beer?

Yes. So it got sort of scary, so he quit.

Did he work in the building that's still there?

Yes.

The bottling plant building?

Yes.

Did you ever go there as a kid to see him working?

Not much. Well, he worked midnights, and Majestic too. But I went to work for Majestic after I was in junior high.

That was a beautiful theater, wasn't it?

Yes, it was.

What did you do there?

Usherette.

What is that?

Well, you wore bell-bottom trousers and a nice long sleeved button-up shirt, and then you had a flashlight and you held it behind you like this, so they could see the steps. And then they had the loges go upstairs and if they had just regular, well, stay down.

So this wasn't for movies. This was for theater performances?

No, movie.

Did people have assigned seats or did they just go sit wherever they wanted to?

Where I seated them. Maybe they had a preference, then they'd tell you.

Was that a pretty good job for young girls to have?

Oh, yes, it was.

Do you remember what they paid you?

I don't remember. Candy store right next door. I bet they could tell you.

There was one next door?

Yes, Majestic.

That's right, and it was in the same building, wasn't it?

Yes.

Because it was right by the YMCA. That was a really pretty part of town.

Yes, it was.

Your parents came here. They got married here in Reno. Did you say what year that was that they got married?

1920.

And what year were you born?

1927.

And your brother is older or younger than you?

Younger. He was born in '31.

And where did the family live when you were born, and where were you born?

Well, I was born at the dairy down the hill, just as you turn where that trailer park is. I lived there in a rock house.

So the family was operating the Coney Island dairy at the time?

At the time, and then I think a year or two after, they left there with me and the check writer. That's all they left with.

And the what?

Check writer.

What's that?

You know, they put the check in and then put the numbers in.

So they had another business at some point and they would need one of those. That's great. Did the building you were talking about remain there for a long time, do you remember?

Oh, a long time. It was rented. Well, we had sixty cows at one time, yes.

When I was born, my dad was so disappointed I wasn't a boy. Terrible. So the doctor, big man, said, "John, don't worry. When she gets about eighteen months old, you take her over the hill," because I had black hair, "and take her over to the Indian colony and just drop her off. Pick up a boy, and they'll never know the difference until the blue eyes show up. Then you'd have a little trouble."

So that satisfied my dad for a while. Then four years later my mom wanted a boy, so they told her, "Don't. You can't have any more."

"Oh, yes, I can," so she did. She had a little boy, and then he was happy. Named him Jerry John Casale.

Your little brother.

Yes.

So you were actually born on the dairy.

On the dairy, yes.

Did people have doctors come to deliver at home at that point, do you know?

Yes, and then there was a woman across the street and she was like a midwife, and she took care of my mom. My mom had lost a couple before, so right away the old gossips in town said, "Look at that. That John has got her washing the bottles," you know, washing the bottles, to lean over the big sinks. Well, she never washed a bottle in her life.

So what did that mean?

That means that he worked her over that sink and that she'd lose the baby. Just gossip.

There were a number of other dairies in that area, weren't there?

Not right there.

A little further east, I guess.

Yes.

On Prater Way. Were you too young to remember living there?

Oh, I don't—

You don't remember that. Where's the first place you remember living?

Here, but we did have a house up on West 7th and we lived there for about a year till this house got built.

Were you just renting that other place?

No, we owned that property. They did salvage that property there in the Depression.

So was the house that you lived in next the house that's now the restaurant or is it the one that's behind the restaurant?

The one that was beside the restaurant.

There used to be a house there?

Yes. But we had that other house up on West 7th and that's where I remember because I've got pictures of me on top of the—you know, those houses used to have the things like this. There was a porch with the steps right here in the middle, and then two sides.

Steps that went up with cement stoops on the sides?

Yes. So we went up there and then we rented for a while, and then we got so far in this, and then couldn't do it no more, so we sold it.

And that house may have been demolished for the highway, or is it still there?

It's still there.

Where is that house?

Seventh and Canal.

So did you start going to school when you lived in that house?

No, here.

It was later.

My brother was born here, yes, and I sold him right off the bat. Sold him right off the bat. “Twenty-five cents, you can have him,” because they got me a little rocking chair. I had that rocking chair and I’d be outside the door, and they’d go in and I couldn’t go in because I was little, so I just sold him. So then they came out and showed the baby, and I said, “Oh, no, no, no, you can’t have him.”

“Well, you can’t have a quarter either.”

“I’ll get you some more money.”

So you bought him back?

I bought him back, but they didn’t take the money.

That’s a house that doesn’t exist now, but then there’s the house that became the restaurant and one in back. When were those different houses built?

This [the current restaurant] was always built for a building and business and the bedrooms, this was, and this house here was built later when my mom remarried.

The one behind this house?

Yes, behind. And then Steamboat and I moved in the front. We had all the kids.

Into this building?

To the store.

The one next door. So your mother did get remarried. Who did she marry?

She married a man that she knew for years, you know, and they traveled a lot.

Your parents had already started the restaurant. Did they start it because he was having difficulty working in other places? Was that part of the reason?

No, well, it just started out with, like, a fruit stand. The trucks would come out of Idaho— oranges, apples, stuff like that, and we’d just take the overflow.

Where were they delivering most of their produce? Into the cities of Reno and Sparks?

Yes, Levy-Zentner for the big deliveries. Well, we had one south of town, too, but I can't remember the name. Nevada Produce. But then they took all the rest, and then when it came time, like October, my mom and dad would go down below and they'd pick out grapes for the wine.

Where would they get the grapes?

Like Lodi, Colfax.

Would those be on those delivery trucks, too, or would that be a special trip just to get grapes?

Just to get grapes.

And then the wine would be made here in the house?

No, we'd sell it. We'd sell the wine grapes here, and they'd take them home.

So other people were producing wine.

Everybody always made wine.

I've heard a lot about that. But you never made wine here?

No, next door to the house when we lived over there. We never intermingled the two.

So in the home. People were able to make wine even during Prohibition at home?

Oh, yes.

And then afterwards. Do you know why your parents bought this property here, of all places, the location?

They were together. They were together, two lots. The man that sold them the dairy said, "You gave me a lot of money. I'll give you a couple lots up the street." So he gave them two lots.

So that was the reason for the location. Those were actually pretty close to where that dairy was.

Yes.

Do you know what his name was?

Cafferatta.

So he purchased the dairy from them and gave them this land?

No, he owned that property where the dairy was. So then when my dad left, he said, "Well, you need some property," so he gave them these. Little did he know this was going to be the main thoroughfare.

That's right, because that was very early on. Do you think they got a lot of business early on for the market? Because this was far out of both towns at that point. Did a lot of people go by and buy the produce, do you think?

Oh, yes.

Were there other people living in this immediate area, too?

Yes, all the motels. Motels were all full with little garages next to them, you know, a lot of kids. And when they'd get a divorce, well, they'd leave the kids there and they'd go gambling or whatever. I fed a lot of kids. There was mine. Heck, one more, one less didn't make no difference. One comes to see me yet. He's in his forties, I guess.

Anyhow, there was two brothers and a sister, and the dad was a longshoreman and he'd come here to get a divorce from his wife. The kids would fight over clothes, you know, every morning and everything, and so when they'd come home from school, they'd come over, play with the kids. So when I fed them, fed them all, and all he can remember was the meatballs. He says, "Oh, Inez." He comes to see me yet. He said, "Inez, if it wasn't for you feeding us, we'd have died."

I said, "Yeah, I guess so." And you know what gets me? After all that suffering those kids did, they remarried.

The parents remarried? How soon, do you know? Pretty quickly?

I don't know.

Funny. But they stayed here?

No, no, they moved.

Do you remember, then, the motels that were close by? I guess the Star has been there for quite some time. Were there others that were close by?

Restwell.

That's right. That's very close.

And then the Star is right next, that brick house, and down a little ways where the garage is, that was the Home Auto Court, right there where the road goes back that way.

To the east of us?

Yes. Then across the street was the Tahoe, up that way, and I don't know if there were others.

West of here. Did the families who managed those motels usually live on the property, that you remember?

There?

At any of these motels. Were they usually run by someone who actually lived on the site?

Oh, they lived right there.

So did you know those families often who ran the motels?

Oh, yes. The motel was like this [stretches out hands] and there was an apartment in the middle. That's where they lived. Well, that's the way you keep track of them, you know. And I see now they're combining them, but you can't keep track of them.

Do you remember who some of those families were who ran some of those motels? Did you know them pretty well?

Oh, yes, we knew them well, but I don't remember the names.

So when your parents had the restaurant together, it was the market, the fruit stand, at first, and then later developed more. But how was the work divided? Who did what around the place?

Well, we were too little. My mom and dad, they did it all.

How did they split the work between them, do you know? Did they both just share everything?

They just shared it and did what they had to do.

After your father passed away, did your mother reconsider having the business here?

You know, Reno Army Air Base opened and a lot of new people come in, and it sort of scared her, so she rented it out for eighteen months.

What scared her about it?

She slept all the time. She was so tired. So that was it. Then they sold all the liquor that was there, everything, and they were going under. She'd come back and took it, because we owned the property.

So she took the business back again from the people who were leasing it and then decided to expand a little more? Because at some point there in the forties—I'm trying to remember when this was—it kind of

expanded a little bit and started to have eat-in as well. Maybe that happened earlier. It was take-out and then eat-in also. Some of those ads we have are from 1940, 1941, and it was definitely a restaurant by then.

Yes, when those other people took over, they made it a restaurant, but before then we had cold ravioli.

For take-out?

In the cases.

And then when it was leased to them, did your family continue to live here in the other house?

Next door.



Casale's Halfway Club in the mid-20th century. Photo courtesy of Neal Cobb and Jerry Fenwick.

So you were all close by.

Yes, but then they didn't have that end of the house.

The back end that's now the kitchen?

Yes.

It just wasn't built yet?

No. Soon as they left, then she built back there. Well, my brother and I were getting older and couldn't stay in the same bedroom, so she built the ravioli room and the storeroom. We had that. Then we got a real stove, not just an old-fashioned wood stove because we didn't cook here.

So you remember getting the big stove?

In there?

Yes.

It was already old when we got it.

Where was it from, do you know?

No.

Some other restaurant maybe or—

Oh, probably.

So things got more professional or at least more like a regular restaurant at that point.

Yes. That was after my dad died.

So you went through school here. You went to Orvis Ring and then where else?

Northside. And then I didn't like Reno High because they all had pearls and angora sweaters and I didn't have any, so I said, "I'm going to Sparks High." So I quit, but that didn't go over too good with Mother and Father. So he gave me a lickin'. He turned me over his knee and spanked me, and I thought, "Boy, that must be pretty bad when you quit school like that." So I quit school in about April and I told him, I said, "I'll finish school if you let me go to Sparks High."

He said, "Okay. You finish school and you go."



Jerry Casale and Inez Casale Stempeck pose on either side of their mother, Elvira Casale, before a family trip to Detroit in 1950. Image courtesy of Inez Casale Stempeck

So your intention when you quit at Reno was not to go to school at all? You just didn't even want to be there?

Didn't want to be there. I'd go to Sparks. But all my girlfriends went to Sparks, you know, from this little area.

So why had you gone to Reno in the first place then, Reno High? That was further away.

Well, it isn't where it is now. It's closer to town. Well, I didn't like it there. Snooty. So anyhow, so I just started Sparks. But anyhow, this was April, and in June he died. I knew I was going to go to school and I was going to graduate, so that was settled. But then I started helping my mom with the checks and the money in the bank and stuff like that. But I always said I'd never come in this business and I'm not bringing my husband in here either.

So I married Steamboat, and she said, “Oh, Steamboat, what a good name for a bartender.” I knew I was sunk. [laughs] So anyhow, he come out of service and we went to Detroit, my mother and my brother, me, Steamboat, and our baby, Charlie. We went to Detroit, and then we came back, and he became a partner of the Halfway Club. I started having kids, but once you’ve got kids, boy, you don’t get to—so she cooked for him and everything, and she talked Italian to him. She’d get mad, she’d start talking Italian.

Did he understand her?

Yes, he understood her.

What was his background, his heritage?

Polish.

What was his name?

Casimir Stanley Stempeck.

Why did they call him Steamboat?

Well, when you go in the service, you know, they’d call him Steam, Stem, then Steamboat, and Steamboat stuck.

How did you meet him?

Well, he was stationed at Fallon, and my mom and I and two or three other girls went to open house. He was behind a torpedo and, you know, naturally, when the girl gets up there, well, then he’d let the air out, you know, hit the floor, and the air would come up and blow your skirt up. And my mom said, “You’re making me lose all my milk.” [laughs] You know, if you’re going to have a baby and you get scared or something, you lose your milk.

So was it a pretty common thing to go over to Fallon? Was it a dance or something?

No, you’d just go through and see the torpedo and some stuff, just their stuff they had.

How did he end up there? What was his story? How did he get there?

Well, he was sent overseas for ten months or something, whatever it was. Twenty-seven months later, he loses his ship in Okinawa. And he was okay. I met him again a little later, and a guy that I knew a long time stood me up.

He stood you up?

Yes, so he moved in. And I'm biting my nails, and he says, "Quit biting your nails. If you don't quit biting your nails, I'm not dating you anymore."

I go, "I didn't know that you knew that you were going to date me anyhow." So I thought, "Well, I better not," so I didn't. I said, "Listen, I drive my own car, I have my own checking account, so there it is." So anyhow, we had a few drinks, and then he had to go back to Alameda because he had transferred from here to Alameda.

So anyhow, two weeks later he comes back. He played ball and played all kinds of sports. He had his thumb in a cast. He broke it, so he couldn't play ball, couldn't work. So he took a week off. So he stayed here. This was May, June, and we were married in August.

What year was that?

Forty-six.

Then where did you live when you first got married?

Well, we went to Alameda.

For how long?

We were in Alameda a year and a half, or two years.

Did you always intend to move back here?

I did. I don't know about him. This is my home. But, yes, he had a chance to go to a couple of big colleges and he didn't go because at that time you didn't go anywhere when you had children. So he turned them down.

When did you move back here from Alameda?

When we got out, when we got out of the service.

Maybe in 1948 or so?

Maybe '48.

Then where did you move? Where did you live when you came back here? Right here?

Yes. Oh, sure. Came home.

And then did he start working for the family business at that point or did he do other work first?

No, he went right back there. And then he went to work for a commercial transfer, moving houses, but he always came back here.

How had things changed in this area since you'd left? Had they changed very much? Had there been more construction or building?

No.

It was about the same?

Same. The auto courts were more active.

So you could tell that business along U.S. 40 was picking up?

Yes.

Did you have much of a relationship with the other restaurants that were just down the way here, the Coney Island and Copenhagen?

Copenhagen, no, we didn't much, but them days, I didn't drink, you know. Gallettis we knew because we were in the ranch business when my mom and dad were alive—but after mom and dad died, then we had less contact. Once in a while I'd see the kids, but I don't know them.

I wondered if there was much of a sense of community among either families in this general neighborhood or the Italian community, or who you kind of tended to socialize with.

Well, they were in Sparks. We were in the county and then Reno is up the way, so we didn't have much to do with them.

That's interesting because they're in eyesight, basically. But just being in the county seemed like a different kind of identity?

Yes. Then when she came back, could have been before she left, before she rented out, maybe before my dad died, we applied for a liquor license, and my mom and dad, they asked them to come up to the commissioners, and the sheriff was the head of the commissioners. So she went up, and you know who was fighting us, was our good friends and neighbors who had motels or rented rooms or something like that. So she got up and sat down, and she said, "I'll tell you what. My bar will be a lot cleaner than their motels."

And the sheriff went, "Okay, Casale, I'll give it to you for two years and I don't want no trouble."

She said, "Okay."

She came home, opened up. But all the time we had sheriffs and everybody else drinking in the back room.

So the motels were objecting because they thought it would bring down the neighborhood, it would bring kind of a bad element around? That's what they thought?

Tony mostly. He's the middle one. Charlie was in the service. He went to Vietnam. Then he come back and he went to work for Sierra Power, so he's always worked for them, and then the last ten years he's changed. He went to Bell Tel [phonetic] because he didn't get all his papers from the university. He knew everything there, but he didn't have the paperwork, so they let him go. So anyhow, he moved to Winnemucca and he went in as a warehouseman. And, you know, there they asked him, "Stempeck, what in the hell are you doing down there?"

"Well, it's the only way I could get in here."

They said, "Get your ass up here now," and he had to run upstairs—they took him right away, took him upstairs.

So how many sons and how many daughters did you have?

Three and three. I had Charlie, then John. Let's see. John and then Madeline—she's the one that's living with me now—and then Tony, then Helen, and then Maria. But Helen just moved to Mexico.

You were telling me about her.

She's so happy.

That's good. Your husband passed away. It was in the sixties, wasn't it, in the 1960s or seventies?

Sixty-nine.

Did you think then that you would definitely continue the business?

Oh, I did. I did. A lot of people tried to get me to stop, go with welfare, go with this, go with that. No. I don't like to fill out paperwork, so I didn't. "You can make \$1,400 a month."

"No, I don't want it. I want to work."

So I just stayed and plugged away and I kept it going for a lot of years. In fact, Tony said, "Mom, I don't know how you did it."

Have the people who've come in changed over the years, the types of people who come in?

Oh, yes. Yes, that's for sure.

But a lot of regulars, a lot of people who come all the time?

A lot of people that come back, yes.

So, okay, I'd better go.

Thank you so much for taking the time. I might come back and have follow-up questions at some point, but I really appreciate it.

That's okay.

Thank you so much.



Casale's Halfway Club ca. 2000. Photo courtesy of Neal Cobb and Jerry Fenwick.

SANDI SULLIVAN

Owner, Windy Moon Quilts



Sandi Sullivan bought Windy Moon Quilts, then located in Tahoe City, in the 1980s, and moved the business to Reno—first to Kuenzli Street and then to a former bank building at 440 Spokane Street. She and her husband, Mike, were involved in the creation of the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association (RSCBA). Sullivan, whose family has lived in the Reno-Sparks area for several generations, also speaks about growing up in the community and the urban renewal project that targeted the neighborhood north of East 4th Street in the 1960s.

Sandi Sullivan inside Windy Moon Quilts in 2012.
Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Alicia Barber: I'm here with Sandi Sullivan, and we're on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno. Today is Monday, November 14, 2011.

Sandi, do I have your permission to record this session and put it in our public archives?

Sandi Sullivan: You do.

I want to start with some biographical questions. Can you tell me where you were born?

I was born in Reno, Nevada, at St. Mary's Hospital.

What was your maiden name?

Lagomarsino.

What are your parents' names?

Norma and Ed Lagomarsino, who were both also born in Reno, Nevada.

How many generations back does your family go in Reno?

Just the grandparents, both my grandparents. My mother's side was from Switzerland, and on my father's side, the Lagomarsinos were from Italy.

What was your mother's family name?

Lepori. They had a dairy farm on Pyramid Way.

On Pyramid Way north of town?

Right. All of that was their ranch.

We'll come back and talk about your grandparents and where they lived in a little bit. Can you describe the neighborhood that you grew up in?

For my early childhood, we lived on Wells. We had some houses on Wells Avenue. That was when I was very young. Then when I was probably about seven, we moved to Wilkerson, which is over by Veterans Memorial [Elementary]. It was a new part of town, with new homes, and we lived there until I was in the eighth grade.

At that time, my parents bought a very large home that was on the side of St. Mary's Hospital that was to be destroyed for the new cardiac unit, and they moved it out onto the family ranch. It was the first house that went down Oddie Boulevard. They cut the house in half and brought it down Oddie Boulevard and put it on a far section of the ranch, and that's where it's been until now.

Where's that ranch?

The ranch is on Pyramid and McCarran. That was the whole ranch. It went all the way up there, and the house is on the east corner, right on Pyramid and McCarran, with a very large veranda porch and pillars. It was actually built in 1906 by a lumberman, and it has a huge history. My parents moved it out there and then remodeled it, brought it up to code and everything, and that's where we lived until—well, my mother still lives there.

Do you know who moved the house?

The Bevilacquas.

Do you remember that happening?

Oh, I do, because I was absolutely devastated. By the time they got the house out to the property, the roof had caved in and the house was in two huge sections. Tons of dirt had been dumped around the home for fill, because that end of the ranch was much lower. Probasco, who was building that, wanted to get rid of the dirt, so he dumped all of the dirt for my dad to use there at the lower part of the house.

Who was that you said?

Probasco Building. He built many of the houses in that area. He was dumping this, and I went out to see it, and I went, "Oh, my gosh, my friends." You know, you're at an age when your friends will be impressionable. [laughs] I thought, "Oh, my gosh, no one will ever come out to this house." The inside ceilings were dropped and all that.

But then, you know, Bevilacqua just squeezed it right back together. It was amazing how they did it, and then put the roof on it, and then they started remodeling it all.

Was that considered very far out of town at that point?

Very far. That was the one thing. I went to Bishop Manogue High School, which was right by the university at that time, and no one would come out there. I mean, that was way too far to come out and pick me up.

How did you get to school?

My dad was a policeman, and so I went into town with him and he dropped me off, and then my mom must have come and picked me up until I could start driving.

Did the family raise livestock out there?

We had sheep, and when my grandfather was alive, it was a dairy ranch. He had cows and that was the pasture for them. He did some haying.

Did you work on the ranch at all?

I went into the dairy barn frequently. The smell of raw milk, I can still smell it. It was like [demonstrates]. The barn is still there, the actual barn, and then the Catholic church has built their church up on part of the property.

Are there other houses of that same era still around that neighborhood now?

These houses came from St. Mary's, so they were right over here [near the university].

They were the biggest houses in the area?

Oh, yes, very definitely.

So it was kind of a shock for you to move out to the ranch when you'd lived in town before.

Yes.

What do you remember of living in town in the area of Wilkerson? Do you remember that area much?

Yes, I went to Veterans Memorial Elementary School—walked to school, and just had a very close neighborhood. Houses were very close together, so we played in the streets and all kinds of things.

My father was a three-wheeler policeman. He did patrolling all around the downtown. He used to pull us up the street on his three-wheeler on a sled when there was snow, all the kids. It was a typical 1950s neighborhood, with the kids just playing. We didn't have computers, so we were always outside.

Your father's name?

Edward.

Was he a policeman during your whole childhood?

Yes. The whole time, until he retired.

So you went to Veterans Memorial, which was built, I think, in the thirties.

I think it was, too, because I went by some time ago and they had something up. It was quite old.

In the fourth grade, I came down with rheumatic fever, and I was confined to bed for a year, so I actually missed the fourth grade. Then I was okay, and I went to Otis Vaughn [Middle School], which had just opened. I went for one year there and then we moved out to the ranch, and I went to St. Thomas.

When you were confined in bed for a year, were you still doing schoolwork?

Yes, I had a homebound teacher.

Was that something that you remember other people experiencing at the same time?

No, I don't remember anybody doing that, and they don't treat it like that today. They don't restrict you to bed now, but at that time that was how the treatment was. They thought that you had to stay in bed so that there was no stress on your heart to have any problems or anything. I went to bed for a year, but I survived. I was fine.

You have siblings, right?

Yes, my brother, Edward. He's five years younger.

You had one side of the family who had this ranch, and then you also had family who lived in the neighborhood around Fourth Street. Who was that?

That was my father's side, and they were from Italy. On that side of the family, my grandmother could not even speak English, hardly. They were very Italian, so we communicated, but most of the time it was in Italian.

On the Lepori side, my grandmother also spoke Italian, but she did speak more English, too. But Lagomarsino, she was pretty Italian-speaking, of which I don't know. They spoke Genovese, actually, not the true Italian. It was a dialect. My father spoke it, but I didn't.

Where was their home?

That was right off of Sage Street. It was a lovely brick home that had a small porch, probably a thirties style, built by—I asked my mother who it was built by some time ago, and she said probably Belli [unclear]. He was a contractor here, Belli Construction, because there are other homes in the area. I'd have to research that to see if it really was.

What do you remember about that neighborhood?

You drove into a kind of driveway, a big graveled area, and there was a large barn. It was all wooden. They had a great big garden, and chickens and rabbits and sheep. And then some smaller houses against the side to the right of the property, and she had tenants who lived in there. There was only one who I remember. My brother and I were discussing it. He remembers, too, it was a black woman who was very small in stature, very nice and very friendly, older, but I was young, I couldn't tell you how old. Everybody with gray hair looked old, and she did have gray hair. [laughs]

My brother said he called her Mary, and I always called her Mama. But she would come over frequently to my grandmother's and bring her things or just talk, always outside. When we were there, they were always outside.

And those were pretty small houses?

Yes, they were. I was never inside of one. They were wooden, so I couldn't tell you what it was like inside.

Pretty sizable lots then?

It was probably about ten, twelve acres. It was very large.

Was that pretty common for that area, do you think?

No, I would say that that was one of the largest parcels there, because it backed up to Wells Fargo Trucking, which is a big trucking area, where the surplus place is now.

Twin Cities Surplus?

Twin Cities Surplus, yes, it was all there.

Were there a lot of trucks there?

A lot of big trucks. And then there was the ballpark that is still there. When you drive around onto 395, as you turn right and go up to 395, you can look to the right and there's a ballpark there. That ballpark almost came to the edge of the property.

Did it seem to be a real city neighborhood, or did it seem not really dense?

It was very farm-ish, because we went to both of them and that's how it was. It was very country-ish. It seemed far away from where we lived, because to go out to Sparks at that time was miles. There wasn't an Oddie Boulevard. It was all just surface streets. You went down Fourth Street all the way down to Sparks, and then you hit Pyramid and went straight out Pyramid. It was a long ways to go.

So you took Fourth Street, which was Highway 40, all the way out there.

It was the only way to go.

What do you remember Highway 40 being like?

Very busy. All the motels were always very busy, and, of course, at that time they were at their peak. They weren't anything like they are now. It was very lively and pretty. The Nugget was just being built. There was not a lot of congestion. It was just kind of straight. The hotels that have the older signs, you can tell, were the older ones that were there. Businesses were along there. I couldn't tell you what businesses were as such.

Did people seem to travel back and forth from Sparks to Reno along Fourth Street a lot?

I think that was about the only way, because there wasn't an Oddie. There wasn't a freeway. Nothing.

Do you remember, as you were growing up, taking Highway 40 out the other direction west of town?

Oh, yes, because my aunt lived out that way. The Belli Ranch is out that way in Verdi, and that was my Grandmother Lepori's sister. We would go out that way if we were going up to visit at the ranch.

Did that get rural pretty quickly once you went out the west side?

Very, very quickly. It was very rural, and it was a long way to go. You wouldn't go in the winter, because they didn't keep up the roads. We had a '49 Chevy, I can remember. We still have that car. My

son has it.

So was it just a little two-way road then, two-lane?

Yes.

Would you ever go all the way to California on Highway 40?

Yes, we did, and then the freeway opened. Interstate 80 going over opened. I remember driving it before the freeway, and it was very windy, and, oh, you'd just kind of get frightened. As a child, it was kind of scary.

Did it seem that once the interstate went in, that it was a lot faster to get up there too?

Yes. I don't think we traveled as much as we travel now. I mean, that was a long way to go, although we had relatives in Stockton who had fruit farms, and they used to bring food over in the summer, and we would go down and get fruit there. So we did go, you know. They had walnut ranches and peaches.

Do you remember spending much time downtown when you were growing up?

Absolutely, many times, because all your shopping was downtown. Joseph Magnin's was there. Lerner's was there. Out south, now, there was a Hansel and Gretel that was quite fashionable for young girls just going into high school, where one of the bars or something is now, but mostly everything was right downtown.

My first job was right downtown in a cigar store. Everything was very confined between Harolds, Harrah's, Primadonna, the Nevada Club, the five-and-dime. The Masonic Lodge was there. Penney's on the other side was there, so it was pretty—and then Parker's Western Wear, and Murdock's was also there. For Christmas, that's where you went shopping. Gray Reid's was down there.

Right, in a couple different locations. By that point, wasn't it where Circus Circus is now?

It was still further south at one point, and then it went up to where Circus Circus is now.

It was closer to First Street or Second Street.

Yes.

Did you get the job with the cigar store during high school?

Right after. When I graduated, I got it. I was working. I was going to college at that time at Nevada, and I worked for Pop Southworth, who was a councilman. He had a vending—Southworth Vending is still working. He had a ranch out in Washoe Valley. He had apples. He just had a lot of history behind him.

What was it like working in that store?

It was a very small little souvenir sort of thing. I knew nothing about retail at the time. We had a very old antique cash register that's probably worth a fortune now, cute little thing. But he was very much a businessman. Many of the policemen would stop in. He'd give them a cigar or something. He was friendly. He used to walk down to the bank with money, and nobody ever seemed to bother him. Nowadays you'd be really leery, and it was all silver dollars—the bag was quite big, full of silver dollars.

Which bank would they use?

Must have been the First National right there. I think it was called First National.

On Second and Virginia?

Second and Virginia, right. It was great. It was a big old-fashioned bank. And then he would always go over to Harolds Club for lunch. He had a special table, and once in a while he'd say, "Well, you can come over." I'd go to lunch over there with him. It was kind of cute. He was a very small little man.

How did you get that job?

My dad knew him, and he wanted somebody just on Saturdays. I think I only worked Saturdays and Sundays, and my dad thought it would probably be good if I earned a dollar. The wage was probably 29 cents. I don't remember my paycheck. [laughs]

So you were going to Nevada at that point?

Right.

Did you graduate from Nevada?

Well, I graduated from x-ray. I went to x-ray school here. At that time, the university had an x-ray school here. Now it's with Truckee Meadows, but at that time it was through the university here, so my diploma says university. I was working at Washoe [Hospital] and doing radiological technology.

The actual equipment that we used was out in Stead, because they had just vacated Stead Air Force Base, and they left their hospital mobile unit, so we would go out there and use the equipment. Then we would actually do our affiliation with the hospital, and I affiliated with Washoe—Renown now.

During your studies, you were working at the hospital?

Yes, we actually went in and had preceptors, and then you went to the classroom, very much, I imagine, like the program is now. I'm not quite sure, but it was ages ago.

That was before these new buildings that are now Renown were constructed. Did you work in the old building?

Quonset huts. They had Quonset huts. It was a very small main brick building plus the emergency. After I graduated, I probably worked for about six months before I went to nursing school.

Was that your plan all along, to go to nursing school?

No, not really. I worked emergency room and I really liked it, and I liked nursing, and so I thought it would be a good combination. Today it's a great combination, but twenty years ago it was like you were a foreign object, you know. [laughs] Things weren't integrated as much. X-ray was there, all the nursing was theirs, and you released the patient and the x-ray people took it together. Now we're very sophisticated with all the equipment we have, so it became the same.

Where did you attend nursing school?

I went to San Francisco at St. Luke's.

Was that the only place you considered?

Yes, I guess so. I didn't like the University of Nevada because I hated their nursing hat. [laughter]

You'd better describe this hat now.

It's a cowboy hat. Have you ever seen it over at the School of Nursing?

No.

It's a cowboy hat, and it's flat here and it wings up here. I think that's why nobody ever wears it. And so I thought, oh, no, you shouldn't go to Nevada. [laughter]

Was it typical of schools to have their own version of a nursing hat?

They all do. Oh, yes. Nurses don't wear uniforms anymore now, but that was something that was very important.

The second reason that I really liked doing it is because of affiliation. There were many hospitals that I could affiliate with in San Francisco. We did burn traumas at St. Francis. We went to Berkeley for a lot of different things. We were down at Stanford, had open-heart at Stanford, just a lot of generalness. I liked the overall program. It was during Vietnam, so we had psych with actual returning vets, so the exposure was monumental at that time, busy, busy, busy. Haight-Ashbury, we worked Haight-Ashbury right in the middle of the drugs.

When were you working there?

Sixty-nine through '72.

Yes, quite a time to be in the area.

Yes, marching in the street. I mean, it was really the whole drug culture we got in the Emergency Room. At that time, doctors rode on ambulances and then they got killed, so we couldn't go on ambulances. We did San Francisco General because they affiliated the nurses just everywhere. All the nursing programs did in that area.

You were from a pretty small town in Nevada and then went to the Bay Area with all this going on. How did that feel for you?

The difficult part was probably relating it to your parents, because they were not there at all. To me it was huge. It was right in the middle of everything. Ben & Jerry's was just starting their ice cream right down from St. Luke's Hospital. They had a Ben & Jerry's there. It's kind of sad that you didn't know what was really happening at that time because you didn't know what it would ever turn out to be.

It was very unsettled.

Yes, that sort of thing, and of course the Vietnam War—Angela Davis was always on the street, marching, from Berkeley. It was a difficult time, but I think the nation was in a difficult time.

But the second part of it, in nursing, what we saw, of course, we were recruited very aggressively to obviously go to the war zone because they needed nurses so badly at that time, and most of my fellow classmates actually signed up for the reserve, signed up and went at some point. I didn't because I was engaged to my husband, who was already in the Marine Corps, so I thought I'd never see anybody. But it was just a fast-moving time.

Did you live in San Francisco?

Yes, we did. We had two different apartments, yes, with roommates.

With some other nurses?

Right.

When the nurses would go over and serve, did they do that through a specific military branch?

They do, whatever one you sign up for or were recruited for, yes, and my roommate chose the Navy. She went into the Navy and there were a few who went Air Force. I wouldn't have picked Air Force because I probably would have got air sickness or something. But they paid your tuition then. You could go on base, and so we went on base because my roommate signed up with the Navy. So we bought our food on base. It was quite discountable. Then I think they had to give back two years, I think it was.

Which base was that?

Right in San Francisco, whichever the name of that one is there.

How many years was that program?

St. Luke's was a three-year nursing program, three continuous years. You had no time off. Your curriculum work was affiliated with the colleges, either San Francisco City College or Berkeley, where you went and took histories and those sorts of things. You had to have a prerequisite to get in, a lot of anatomy and physiology and microbiology and chemistry.

Had you taken those things at Nevada?

I had, yes.

Did you meet your husband in the Bay Area?

No, I met him here, and then I was in school and then he just got back. Colorado State, he graduated from. He was back getting his master's here and then he got drafted, so then he decided to go into the Marine Corps. I met him three weeks or so before he went into the Marine Corps.

How did you meet him?

It was at a cousin's wedding. He was tending bar. [laughs] So I went back to San Francisco and he went back to OCS [Officer Candidate School]. Then we didn't see one another again until he got out of officers' school, engineering school, all of the schools that they send the officers to, and then I graduated from nursing school, and we came back and got married. Then we were stationed in Camp Pendleton for a few years, and then the war, of course, was decelerating, so they weren't sending any more troops over there.

Tell us his name.

Mike Sullivan, Colonel, United States Marine Corps, Marines, retired. So that's what happened. Then we came back to Reno.

Was that always the plan?

Well, actually, Mike was at University of Colorado because he was going to be a veterinarian and he was on a scholarship from here to there with a WUE, I believe is what they give when you don't have a school. I think it's a WUE. And then with the war, they cut out a lot of scholarships. So when we came back, we had a little boy. Sean, our first-born, was born in California, and then we were coming back and he said, "No, I think we need to do something else."

He actually was given the job at Sierra Pacific as the first environmental department, so he started all the environmental for Sierra Pacific Power. They didn't have any smokestacks on and they were polluting, so he would go back to Washington and do all the environmental things for them. Then he

retired from Sierra Pacific, too.

How long did he work there?

Twenty-five years.

Was that right in Reno?

It was here and then it was down on Terminal Way, but not where it currently is. The first Sierra Pacific that he went to was right on Virginia Street.

Right downtown?

Yes, pretty much, yes.

So there were still a lot of different resident-oriented businesses in downtown at that point. Was that in the seventies?

Yes, it was the seventies when we came back.

By the time you came back, was Interstate 80 completed?

Oh, yes. That was done.

Was the MGM Grand constructed, do you remember?

Yes, yes, that was constructed.

Did things seem different in Reno when you got back? Had a lot seemed to have changed?

No, it seemed very small, still. I went to work in nursing at St. Mary's and it was like the cerebral flow really stopped over the mountains. They did things very differently here. Yes, they did. Of course, it's California. It's more progressive. Its hospitals demanded a lot of different things. Nurses were given a lot more authority and different things to do. I thought it was just different.

What was the job that you got at St. Mary's when you got back?

I took a floor nursing job when we came back. I worked nights. The kids were little, so they went to school. When prospective payment was passed during the [Ronald] Reagan administration, which changed all of healthcare tremendously, Medicare became my specialty and I was department head of all of that. So that's what I did for—because we were not paid on a per-diem basis any longer. We were paid on a prospective payment under the diagnosis that the patient had, which is a completely different sort of thing, and so we had huge losses. We had rules that we couldn't afford. It was a very traumatic time, just like it is right now. It very much parallels it now because the ICD-10 will be coming in now. It's the same

exact thing. It's breaking the code out, and your payor sources for medical records for any hospital. It became a real challenging time.

So did you have to do a lot of administrative work in conjunction with that? Was it more an administrative job than caregiving?

Yes, more administrative than actual hands-on. Just like now, we were watching what was happening to the patient in the hospital. Did they meet all the federal requirements? Were they sick enough to be in the hospital? All the same things that we're doing now, but more so. We didn't have short stays then, so we started short-stay units to get them underneath that DRG so we could be reimbursed. It was a very complicated time monetary-wise, just paralleling what will be happening now with Medicare issues.

How long did you work in that job?

Three years, and then I left to go to law school, the old college law school that we had here. I think we were enrolled for about six months, seven months, and then they closed the law school because they lost their accreditation.

Do you know why?

They didn't have enough funding, I think. I don't remember the exact reasons now why they lost it all, but I think it was kind of a political thing, too, because they never wanted the law school here. They wanted it in Las Vegas, where it is now, and then it went there. A lot of the people who were in my class went down to transfer to California or went somewhere else, but I had kids, small kids, and I said, "No, I don't want to do that."

What had inspired you to go to law school in the first place?

Probably two things. Water issues, because I saw so much of that with my family ranch, how vital water was and due to the need, how it would become a big legal issue in times to come. The second thing was healthcare. Healthcare was going to become a huge legal issue, the care of, the paying for it was going to really be at the forefront, I thought.

So going to law school then wasn't an option. You chose to stay in town.

I did. I stayed in town, and I thought, what am I going to do with my life? We had horses at that time and my daughter competed a lot with horses, and a friend of ours had Windy Moon at Lake Tahoe. She had this retail fabric store—they made quilts—and I thought, you know, I could really do this.

In the meantime, I went to Sierra Nevada College, which was here, and I got a degree in business, so I thought, gee, this is really interesting. I could do this. I kind of understand what I'm doing.

I decided, if I wasn't going to do law, I might as well go into something, and I was kind of glad because I worked with a lot of lawyers on different cases, medical cases, before all of this, and I thought, you know, I don't know if I would be really happy spending my whole life arguing. In the end it really

worked out for the best. Then we bought Windy Moon.

You bought the business that was in Tahoe?

It was in Tahoe for five years before we brought it down here, yes.

What town?

Tahoe City.

Who did you buy it from?

Kenneys [phonetic]. He was a physician, too, and she was a great lady, Jackie Kenney. He has passed away since then, but I think she's still up at the lake. She had a house on North Shore—no, on East Shore is where her house was and they lived up there, and she made comforters and quilts and fabrics. So that started, and quilting was just really starting at that time. It was like the baby.

Really?

Yes. The rotary cutter had just been invented. It was right at the very beginning, so I got into it at the beginning.

What year was that?

Eighty-six, I think it was, or '89.

What's a rotary cutter?

It's a cutter like a pizza cutter that you cut fabric with, and you can make very straight edges.

And it was just invented at that time for quilting in particular?

Yes, because we didn't use scissors anymore, and we could cut very straight angles. So I started. I knew nothing about quilting or anything. We just kind of fell into it and started going to shows and buying fabric and teaching people to quilt.

Did you buy the business with the intention of bringing it to Reno?

No, I never did until we were declared a foreign corporation and they put huge taxes on us, and I thought, oh, no, we're not foreign.

Because you were in California, but you were residents of Nevada.

Yes.

Was that a new policy?

Well, I don't know that it was so new. They started enforcing foreign because they needed monies, and we said, "Ah, I don't think we're going to do this." So we moved it to Reno.

Before that, you commuted up to Tahoe City?

I did, for five years.

How was that?

Oh, that was horrible. The ride in the summer is usually wonderful— very traffic-congested to get all the way from here up to Tahoe City, but I enjoyed it. I left really early in the mornings and I enjoyed the drive. But in the wintertime—I did a quilt that I entered into a show called "A Trip Behind a Snowplow" because you're always coming down, especially because I came down Mt. Rose. You knew where the good parts were, but the rest of the people on the road didn't.

Then you made the decision that you wanted to keep the business, but you wanted to open it in Reno?

Right. I moved it to Reno, and about that time my husband retired and so he came on as the chief financial officer. I gave him the job of doing all that. Together we have three sewing-machine dealerships now, and he has a repair and we have a Longarm so we can do quilting for everyone. It's expanded quite a bit, so we've just grown with the industry, as the industry's grown.

Is the current site of the store the first location you had in Reno?

No, we were actually on Kuenzli in the old Kuenzli Building. It was a large building that was there. We were there for five years. The building that we're in now was a bank and it came up for sale, and so we bought that and moved.

What's that address?

440 Spokane.

It had been an active bank until right before that?

Yes, it was a Wells Fargo. Wells Fargo sold all their banks off in that major move, and that's what was kind of interesting. They had a covenant on the deed that related back to the urban renewal.

How so?

You know, I told my husband I should have really looked into it more. It stated something about how this was built with urban renewal's something.

Do you have a copy of that?

I probably could dig it up, whatever it said, yes.

That's interesting.

Something referred to the urban renewal, and I thought, this is mystical. Here it's not that far from my grandparents' property, and obviously the only thing that got built in urban renewal was a hotel and a bank, basically.

Let's talk about that a little bit and then come back to why you chose that location for your store. What do you know about that urban renewal project?

I was young. I was probably in early high school when everything started, that somebody was going to take the grandparents' property away. The reason was always unclear why they would want to take anyone's property. I never really heard anyone say because it's old or because they were going to do something with it. It's just that they were going to clean up the area, whatever "clean up" meant. I mean, everybody can clean up something, but enough that you have to tear down a house that is beautiful?

It was very, very devastating to my grandparents. They did not understand that at all, that anyone could come in and take everything they'd saved for. It was a huge trauma in the family. I remember that. My grandmother became very ill, and exactly what she had, I don't know. Somebody said she kind of had a nervous breakdown or she was just really, really upset, but she became ill and eventually died. She was out of her home, but she was living with a nurse because she was ill. She was in a convalescent type of home. Then my grandfather also became ill, and he went to the hospital and then he died.

Was this in the early sixties?

Yes.

Was their house demolished?

Yes, it was.

Was that after they passed away?

It seems like it was, because once they got sick, I didn't go over there. My dad didn't take me over there. Then I would hear them say, "They're going to rip down the house." I mean, that's a very tragic thing to have done to somebody who's come from another country and worked hard and had no reason. It was just very devastating.

And as a child, it's hard to understand.

Yes, and you don't ask a lot of questions. You just kind of listen. That's what I can remember.

So they had both died by the time you were in high school.

Right. And they were older. I couldn't tell you their exact age, but I'm sure this added to their stress. The exact causative situation, I don't know, but it was very, very stressful for them.

Do you have any memory of that demolition occurring?

No, no. I never saw it, no.

You really didn't have a reason to go back.

No, I never saw it.

Do you remember that being an especially Italian neighborhood? Any other families you remember that lived around there?

Well, it was kind of like a little miniature ridge. Other names they talked about, but I didn't actually meet them, or if I did, I just said, "Hi," or something if they came over, because there was a big hedge around the property.

It was pretty private?

Yes, it was pretty private.

So here you are moving your business. Did you move from the Kuenzli location because you wanted more room, or what were your reasons for looking for another location?

The lease came up for option and then a few things changed that we didn't particularly like, so we thought, well, since we're moving everything—at one point we had two stores. And since we're moving everything down here, it would be an opportunity to find a bigger place to do different sorts of things.

The bank was a very large building, obviously, with a big parking lot on Fourth Street, which was a difficult thing because Fourth Street has just steadily gone downhill, something that was at one time such a vital link. I remember at Christmas, everybody would decorate, with lights along these places, and to go from that to something where there's nothing but girlie saloons and drugs and prostitutes, and there were a lot of prostitutes walking up and down the streets. When we moved there, I thought, "Oh, my gosh, what have I done? This is probably the worst thing that we have done." We're off the main drag, but there were a lot of prostitutes around.

Did you and your husband have some discussions about the location?

Yes. "Why did we ever do this?" But we needed a big building that had a lot of parking, and it's worked out really well. We've never had any issues. And Fourth Street is changing dramatically. It has changed, and then we formed a Business Association with Gaye [Canepa] and quite a few businesses in

the area that were there. We all started going to Council meetings to say, “We want street enforcement” and things, and then things started changing. We became very verbal.

This is the Reno-Sparks Business Corridor Association. Did that start up after you opened your business?

I think it was there. I think they were just starting. I’m pretty sure, and Gaye could probably tell you exactly. They were just starting, but we joined, obviously, as soon as we could. They were very active. Gaye was the president and still is the president, and has just been wonderful keeping up with what was happening and meeting with officials. She and my husband did a lot of that sort of thing.



Sandi Sullivan outside of Windy Moon Quilts. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Did you know her before?

No.

I want to talk about your activities with that Business Association, but I’m wondering if you could describe what that building was like when you first encountered it and what you needed to do to transform it into your business.

Really, it was very much like it is right now. We didn’t have to do a lot except move the counter

out with the banking counter and where the drawers were as you walked in. We had to remove that. But it was a big empty building that had a conference table in one room, which we still have, with orange conference chairs. Nothing else. A little tiny torn corner of a dollar bill, I think, is the only money we found. [laughter]

Nothing in the vault.

Maybe a penny or something. I was hoping maybe one of the safes—we had a very large vault.

Hadn't it just closed as a bank, so it was in good condition?

It had just closed as a bank, yes. It was very well maintained and had a big empty room to stack more fabric in. Then we got the shelves and all this for our fabric. I think Linens and Things went out of business and it had huge racks and different things, so we went down and bought all their racks.

I wondered who bought those sort of things when a store gets liquidated.

Other stores, yes, because they're a really great price and you can fill your needs. At the big box stores, you can buy the nice expensive things.

And the building has two stories, so did they already have offices on that second floor?

They did have offices on the second floor. Parts of it were added on and we thought, oh, great, we can have people up here. But at that time the fire code said, no, you could not have people up there because we didn't have two fire escapes. So we couldn't do any classes on the second floor. Our bathrooms are on the second floor, which is okay, but we couldn't have anything but an office. Since then the code has changed and we don't have to put in a fire escape, and we can have a class up there. That was kind of fun.

So you got there. You made the commitment to open a business. Do you remember opening day or doing any advertising when you first moved there?

I think we did. I don't have any copy of it, but I think we did. Advertising in the newspaper was always pretty expensive, so we'd send out flyers. We always did a newsletter that we mailed out to everyone until just recently. We did our own newsletter for years, and we just now went online with it, but we mailed out a newsletter and told about our classes and what we were doing. In fact, people keep asking me to do it again. It's a lot of work to put out four newsletters a year, but people like that.

You said you had two locations. Where was the other one?

Kuenzli.

You had them both operating for a while?

No, just Kuenzli. The other location was at the lake when I was at Kuenzli, so I was still at Lake Tahoe.

Oh, you still did both.

Yes, yes.

So moving on to Spokane helped you consolidate.

Right, yes.

That's when you stopped commuting.

Yes. Thank you very much, yes.

So you learned about the Business Association pretty quickly as soon as you moved to that area?

Right.

And what were some of the specific activities that that association was pursuing?

They met with the sheriff's department and the code enforcements to make sure that—and I'm sure Gaye will go into all of this—that everything was met.

They met with City Council regarding the homeless shelter. The Business Association obviously wanted the homeless shelter to be moved further out of town so that our tourist area and all of these businesses would be not impinged by that sort of thing, because we wanted to clean up the entire area, which was a large issue. They did not prevail, but they were very strong in working with all of those sorts of things.

So that was still very much in discussion, the location for the homeless services that they have on Record Street now.

Oh, absolutely.

Did you testify?

I went there. I didn't testify. My husband testified. Oh, yes, all the business owners testified. They each took a different aspect of why it would not be the best, how it would impact businesses in the area, tourism, all of these sorts of things.

At that point, my understanding is that there wasn't one coordinated site that the city sponsored for homeless services. There were a couple of different locations, kind of scattered.

Yes, they were kind of scattered, so they wanted to consolidate it all into one place, and that's the

location they chose. They had picked quite a few different spots that met the code and would have been good to get them away from the tourists.

It's an interesting thing. I just heard with this economic downswirl that we're in now, that many cities currently are looking at bringing tourists back into their towns, and the biggest thing that they're saying is that we have to clean it up, it has to be meticulous, and it has to be very safe-feeling. And that was our biggest issue, that we would not make our tourists feel safe if there were a lot of homeless people hanging around. We need to take care of the homeless and we care about the homeless, but we don't need to parade them in front of the people who are coming in to gamble and have a good time.

You were making that argument about tourism. Were you making arguments about how it would affect your businesses too?

Oh, obviously, very much so. The motels were very, very filled at that time. There were many, many children in the motels. In fact, we do a project at Christmastime. We make hats and we distribute them with the sheriff's department, and they have a lot of toys. Gaye is head of all of that, so she can probably tell you about all of that. We have distributed for years all of the hats and toys to all the kids in the motels, because there was so many who were living in motels. This year we're not doing it because the sheriff's department says there aren't any children living in the motels anymore.

Why is that?

Because of the economics, because of the jobs. They've all moved away.

Out of town?

Evidently.

Really?

Yes, I was surprised too, and the sheriff's office said, no, there's no need to do that. So we're not doing it. This is the first year that we're not doing it, so we're giving blankets. We're making blankets and giving them to the convalescent hospitals and those sorts of things for our fundraiser. But there used to be lots—oh, the kids would just pour out of the motels. You couldn't believe it.

So you'd see them a lot.

Oh, hundreds of children, yes, and they'd have all kinds of toys and cookies. Bavarian World would make all the cookies. Every year we baked cookies to hand out, and they got donations from just everybody for toys, for all the kids. They said this year, there are none.

Is that a very sudden change? Do you remember last year there being a lot of kids?

There were a lot less last year. I remember we made eight hundred hats and we barely handed out four hundred, and we usually ran short before. And this year they said that there just hardly are any. There

are a few. I see a few next door to us. They seem to be more stable. But the rest of them said no.

Do you have much interaction with the people who are living in those motels?

Not really. They're so transient. They were always so transient that they weren't permanent residents at all. The kids would come over once in a while if there were children there and, I don't know, ask for different sorts of things.

They'd come into your store?

Yes, once in a while they would, but nothing particular, that they got a ball on the roof or something, that sort of thing.

You said earlier there was a big prostitution issue along Fourth Street. Has that changed?

Yes, it changed really dramatically. There were streetwalkers all the time, and now once in a while you can see one or two and they look very obvious. You can tell, but nothing like it used to be. Too bad we didn't take movie videos or something, because there were a lot.

Is that change pretty recent?

Well, we've been there about thirteen, fourteen years, so ten, eleven years ago, it was pretty bad.

Do you have any idea why that would have changed?

One, they said the Internet. A lot of prostitution was moving onto the Internet rather than onto the street, and then I think the police presence. And lights. They put all the lights up.

They did that a couple years ago, didn't they, with the pretty close streetlights?

Yes.

Does that come all the way down to where your property is?

Yes. So it's not dark anymore. It's very lit up.

What other issues besides the toys and hats for the children and the homeless shelter has the Business Association been involved in, do you know?

Zoning areas, putting us in the corridor, different taxation areas that would be zoned, and obviously meeting to encourage businesses to come down into the older buildings. It's kind of difficult to take over an older building, though, because of the code issues and the parking. I think probably some of those issues will start resolving a little bit, particularly parking issues because they want to get people down here. This is a hard economic time, though, to start a new business. And then they built some

apartments, too, and the streetfronts. I think they were done with some federal dollars.

So you would be encouraging the city to try to encourage businesses to open in the corridor?

Sure. They were trying to make it into an arts district. Because of its older uniqueness, it tends to attract artists, as such, and that's kind of struggled. It's gone more towards the west versus the east.

West Fourth Street?

Yes.

With Wildflower Village and there are some arts-related things over there.

Yes.

When you mentioned parking, what's the parking issue?

Well, it's just difficult—some of these buildings don't have any parking except on the street, and I think there's a certain amount of parking that you need to have per square footage of your building, so that's difficult for businesses to comply with.

Have there been zoning changes that you're aware of since you've been there?

They did, and I'm not exact on what they did. They changed it so that they would prevent some businesses from going in. Gaye would probably be specific and I'll let her speak to that because she really knows all that from when they first started the association.

Is that association still active?

Yes, we are still active. We're not really fighting any issues right now like they were in the very beginning, with the zoning and all of that. We still have the usual issues— law enforcement, police presence, drugs, gangs.

Are those big issues?

It was more so. Graffiti and all that sort of thing was. It doesn't seem to be as high of an area now that I'm aware of. There were a lot more abandoned vehicles. You don't see as many.

Have you had crime that's affected your business?

No, we really haven't around us. No.

Do you remember when the homeless services were being discussed, other people who were active in that discussion about one side or another, about where it should be located? You're saying your husband was

involved in it and so was Gaye.

Yes, of course, most of the businesses did not want it there at all. Mike could probably speak to this very well because he did all of that. I was kind of in the background. He and Gaye did it all. They wanted it to be strictly a business corridor and to develop business, because it's difficult. The homeless shelter has been a very difficult thing. There have been a lot of issues around it and a lot of businesses hoping to come in now, they don't like that. So it could be very historic and very artsy, but it has to meet all the criteria for a lot of businesses to want to invest their money in.

Who do you find that your clientele is?

Well, we're a destination, obviously, so they have to want to come to me. The majority of our business is from women, tourists. We get a lot of tourists during the big events. Hot August Nights is a big draw because the ladies come with their husbands and their cars. It's been kind of interesting over the years, because I had a big group that came with the Corvettes and, as the husbands pass away, the wives don't come anymore, so you can see the change. Of course, the demographic is getting older. It's getting to become an older generation. I know some people from Hot August Nights have asked what other businesses can do to keep them coming here because that age group is aging. Maybe do different things for the wives, because they have found that if the wife doesn't like to come, the husband usually won't come.

Obviously, you're such a draw for women, and not just as a quilt shop, but as a fabric shop, too, right?

Right, although we have mainly cotton fabrics, but most of the women are quilters. We do classes and we do different events during Hot August Nights. We do t-shirt quilts. Many of the clubs give out t-shirts every time they have a club meeting, a Harley meeting or any of those kinds of clubs. They give out t-shirts, so we do big t-shirt quilts and people love them. I mean, what do you do with a t-shirt? Keep it in the drawer. We free up that drawer space.

I hadn't thought before about how your business taps into a lot of different special events that draw tourists. Have you always kind of seen yourself in that way?

Yes, very much so, and because of the proximity to the downtown clubs, too, people can get to us easily, but quilters will find you. There are books and now with the smartphones, you can obviously just Google it and it will tell you where you are and people rate you. Everything that you see on the Internet, you're subject to all of that.

You're tapped into that now. You said you've been emailing your newsletter.

Yes, we're beginning to. We have an online store. We email our customers and let them know, but everything is pretty much going towards high-tech. Our sewing machines are very high-tech.

I noticed that.

So our ladies are kind of all getting dragged into the computer age. [laughter]

Kicking and screaming.

Kicking and screaming, yes.

Aside from the Business Association, are there other ways in which you engage with the other businesses on the street?

As far as the Ramada, it was the Holiday Inn when we first started, but the Ramada, and the Holiday before that—have been great. We do a lot of workshops over there. We bring in guest speakers, and they have a beautiful space—their top floor just overlooks the whole city—it's like the Sky Room of the Mapes, almost, like a second Mapes. It's kind of the jewel, the diamond in the rough. We've had workshops up there that have been very pleasant, and different events. If we need extra space that the store can't handle, then we go over there. And people can have their car fixed on the street and just come to the store. A tire place is right down the street, too. Fourth Street has been mostly auto.

The Ramada has a lot of land. Did there used to be something else there that you remember?

No. They have a huge parking lot. They own a lot of the land all the way around it, too. I don't know if that sold with the Holiday—Mr. Harmon [phonetic] owned it—he is a very wealthy hotel man who owned and bought a lot of the land.

He's not local, is he?

No, no.

Have you gone back to see where your grandparents' house was? Do you know what's there now?

Yes, the McGregor Inn.

Is that a little motel?

Yes, it's that big building right there by the gas station.

What street is that on?

Sage.

It's on Sage just off of Fourth?

Yes, right there.

I can look this up, but does it seem like that might have gone in pretty quickly after this renewal project?

I don't think so. I don't know.

We're going to do some detective work about all this.

Yes, we'd have to detect the dates to see about that.

What do you like about being located near Fourth Street?

It's central to a lot of things. I live out south, and if I didn't have a reason to come because of my business, I probably would be like a lot of residents; I wouldn't go to the downtown. But I'm kind of forced to go there because I have a business there. And it's really enjoyable. It's nice.

Our downtown needs a lot of work, and I wish more people would be putting their energy into it. I think it's probably going to happen because of the condos and the younger people wanting to move more downtown. I don't know that it'll happen in Reno as such.

I travel quite a bit, so I always go to different trade shows in different places, and some of the big downtowns, like Minneapolis, they've just done unbelievable things with their downtowns, just really creative architecturally, fun. I wish those people could come here and inspire us to do that, because there are some great buildings and young people who like that upscale condo sort of look. And businesses. I think you can see now with the ballpark and a lot of law offices are moving right downtown, so it's maybe a start.

Yes, and some restaurants.

Yes, restaurants, and I have some younger employees and they love some of those little dining places. We're smaller than Minneapolis, too, so we are going to take a little bit longer. When I'm a tourist in another town, I want to go see things that I wouldn't see in my town. I don't want to go to a McDonald's in the middle of downtown. So that uniqueness of keeping your structure is important. We destroyed so many structures that were so wonderful that we have very few left that we should really treasure and help reconstruct and facilitate, because that's what the tourists like. If you want the tourists to come back, they want uniqueness. They want to see something that they haven't seen wherever they're from. And now gaming has no longer got that edge, because they see gaming everywhere, and pretty fabulous gaming. They're going to really look at shopping, but unique shopping, unique things.

Do you think that anything could be done to the infrastructure along Fourth Street or around Fourth Street that could help contribute to that?

I think so. We have a lot of major industries along Fourth Street. Some of the motels, they're all private property, so I don't know what you'd do to make them become something different, unless they sell and new ownership takes over and changes something. I think probably some code enforcement would help, to say you can't have this looking like this, or inspection to see what it's actually like inside. I think that would force them to be more presentable and more encouraging to people, because those buildings represent a period of time that I think you want to preserve, but I think it needs to be brought up to today's standards.

That era is very classic and retro and very much in, restoration is. Restore America, that's what they're all saying. So I think that that could be a very big positive thing, because we do have some of that classic infrastructure left.

Are there any transportation safety issues you're aware of along the street that could be improved by changing lanes or changing bike lanes or sidewalks or anything?

Well, I don't see that you could make the street any wider. Obviously, you'd have to destroy a lot of vintage properties, and so you kind of defeat your purpose. I don't think it was ever intended, as time goes on, to be a busy, busy street, although it is getting busier.

When going from Reno to Sparks, obviously it is about the fastest way, so there are large trucks on it versus just passenger vehicles. Perhaps limiting that, limiting the big trucks from going back and forth, to keep it just to vehicles would be a safer for bikers and all. Even the buses, it's really amazing. I'm not into the bus study, but buses pile up three and four at a time. I'm wondering, how does this happen?

Is there a stop near your store?

Yes, there is. There's one right there on the corner, and it seems like I'm never on Fourth Street that I'm not behind a bus, not necessarily going east, but coming west there seem to be more buses. And then they go down Sutro, so there are a lot of buses coming from the bus station, too.

How are the sidewalks around your store?

They're fine. They're sidewalks. The side streets off of Fourth, in the snowstorm, are the last to get cleaned. They stay covered for a really long time with snow, so they didn't have a high city priority. But Fourth Street got cleaned, and with the lights—Reno just absolutely amazes me. When you go to Las Vegas or when you travel, there are people outside sweeping and cleaning and just picking up everything. Reno has none of that. That alone should be the presence that we should be having. I guess it's the clubs' responsibility to be doing some of that. I imagine some of the larger casinos in Las Vegas clean up and do all of that. But cleanliness is where we have to really look to, I think. That seems to be the focus, and cleanliness, with the trash on the streets, we need to pay a little better attention.

Do you find that you go downtown, into the heart of downtown, very much for anything these days?

If you have company coming in, yes, you do. The clubs have some great deals, and their food is pleasurable. My kids won't go downtown because they can't stand the smell of smoke. They just hate that smell and they don't want it on their clothes. That's just the bottom line, so you don't drag them into it. We're older. I guess we're kind of used to it, not that we particularly like it. I don't like it, either. But it seems to be something that they can't get over. Smoke stays in your carpeting, stays in everything.

I know myself at my store, if I have an employee who smokes, they can walk in and the whole place just gets fumigated and I get complaints from customers, from everyone instantly. So you have to do something about it, and you would think that other people would act on that when they get complaints, too, but they don't.

In our continuing exploration of this whole Fourth Street area, is there anything else you think we should be looking into or any other stories or people or places that you can think of that we should research a little more?

I think that there are a lot of people who are really interested in doing something, but everybody's just kind of doing their own thing. I think it's like anything. When you plan an event, you have to have a focus or a theme, and I think it needs a theme. If U.S. 40 is going to be what it is and what it should be, then I think that that needs to be where we start. Do we bring it back and make that theme what it is? And then look at everything we need to do to meet the standards of that environment, rather than everybody just doing whatever they want to do. I think if people have a direction, they'll say, "Well, my business can fit in this way versus going the other way." I think they need to build the structure and say, "This is what we want it to be, the vision."

And give it an identity.

And give it an identity. If you want to, bring it back retro to what it was so that our tourists and our residents moving from Sparks to Reno—which is not very far now, really—have some continuity of what the towns were, because they seem to have remained the same. They haven't changed. There's no new fancy businesses, no hotels that have popped up there. They're pretty much vintage, which is okay. We can keep it like that, but it needs to be improved along the way. That's my story. I'm sticking to it.
[laughter]

RAY TREVINO

Director, St. Vincent's Dining Room



Ray Trevino at St. Vincent's Dining Room. Photo by Patrick Cummings.

Ray Trevino directs St. Vincent's Dining Room at 325 Valley Road in Reno. A native of Texas, he moved to Nevada after graduating from high school, then attended UNLV and served in the U.S. Army. Trevino began working at St. Vincent's in the 1990s. He discusses the organization's free lunch program and describes the move from the dining room's previous location on Third Street to its new facility on Valley Road, near the City of Reno's new Community Assistance Center.

Bethany Underhill: Hello. I'm here at St. Vincent's at 325 Valley Road with Ray Trevino in his office, and he is the director of St. Vincent's Dining Room. It is April 11, 2012.

Ray, do I have your permission to record?

Ray Trevino: Yes, you do.

So can you tell me where you were born and about your schooling?

I was born in Floresville, Texas, thirty-two miles southwest of San Antonio, Texas. I went to Floresville High. I graduated there and moved to Nevada right after high school.

What made you want to move to Nevada?

My dad was stationed here at Stead Air Force Base. He was military police, and my mother worked for Sears. I came here after being raised by my grandmother.

Where did you work? Did you go to school right after high school?

I was interested in going to school at Texas A&M, and my family was pushing me that way, to go to Texas A&M, so I could study theology, and I really wanted to do something for the church at that time. However, for economic reasons and because my grades weren't up to what they should be to get into Texas A&M, I got a partial scholarship for Sul Ross College and a partial scholarship for San Marcos State in Texas. Both of them are teacher schools. I declined that and moved to Nevada to be with my family.

Here I visited UNR, I did not like UNR. I wound up going to UNLV, and I went to UNLV for a small amount of time. That was in business. I went into the service right after that. I did not finish UNLV. And then I came back.

What branch of the military did you serve in?

Army.

How long have you been living in Reno?

I think since about 1960. My folks were here in the forties. They moved here in the forties because he was got stationed here by the Air Force. I don't know if you know, you're a young person, but Stead used to have an Air Force base and it was quite a big military unit there, so they needed military police. He went from Texas to Fort Benning, Georgia, and then from there he came out here, came out west.

After you served, where did you start working?

I worked in different places. I noticed I was not happy with the places I worked, but I did work in construction in Washoe County, Storey County. I even went to Alaska on a short trip working for Morrison-Knudsen. It's an international construction firm. Then I came back and I wanted to go into the

restaurant business, so I started up a little restaurant and that led me to another and that led me to another, and then a bar here and a bar there. I wound up with five restaurants and five bars at one time.

Then I got married and had children, and then I got divorced and the children were growing up. When I got divorced, I decided to give myself back to the church and give myself to Jesus, and Jesus brought me here to St. Vincent's years and years ago. I've been here twenty-one years now. St. Vincent's was a very small place and we've grown into what it is now.

Going back to when you first came to Reno, did you have any preconceived notions of Reno? Did you have any idea what it would be like here?

No, just that my folks really liked it here. They liked it here a lot and they encouraged me to come out here for opportunities.

You said it was mainly religious motivation to begin your work at St. Vincent's—did you immediately become a director?

No. I came as a volunteer. I volunteered three days. I wanted to volunteer forever once I came in the door and I saw what there was. Father Wright was in charge then. Father Wright brought me over to the director at that time, who was Kevin Day, and he told Kevin, "This is the type of person I want to run the dining room." They put me on the payroll, and I told them I didn't want any money, I didn't need any money. That's not why I was doing this. After a year they decided to pay me a little bit. So here I am now, twenty-one years later.

So you worked for St. Vincent's when it was at its old facility as well.

Yes.

What was the transition to the new facility like? How is this new building different from the old one?

The old building was an old constructed building on Third Street. It was a Grand Auto business before. Since we moved, the building has been knocked down. It was 6,500 square feet, corner to corner, outside to outside. The inside was remodeled to put in a walk-in and a freezer, small living quarters, one room, and then the kitchen.

It was remodeled by several big people in the community at that time. William Thornton was one of them. Mr. Nightingale was another. Cavanaugh's were another. They were the big instigators of having this done for the Catholic Church, for the Catholic diocese. It was on Lake Street before it was made to move out of that area onto Third Street. We have been in existence for seventy-one years. It's been a great place for people to come and to have their lunch. We've always had a lunch program.

You asked how that building compared to this building, and I would say that three of those buildings would have fit into the building that we have now. There, we served 280 to 350 people at noon every day, Monday through Sunday. There's a seven-day workweek. I helped design this building. I helped design the entire kitchen. All of the equipment is my idea. The colors that you see everywhere are my colors. So we have traded that 6,500 square feet for 319,000 square feet, with the help of the city and

a couple of foundations. Their help has been very dramatic because they're the ones who helped build this institution here that we have now.

Now we serve up to 850 people in a lunch program that we have Monday through Saturday. It's only six days right now. However, we're working on reopening on the seventh day. We're trying to get that. For economic reasons, we had to fall back a little bit and open just six days, but we're looking at opening up seven days again.

Like I said while ago, we have a lunch program. We do not have a dinner program yet. However, when I designed the kitchen for the future, I designed it with proper equipment so we could have a lunch and a dinner program for whoever needs dinner. Whoever needs lunch, we're here.

I didn't know that you helped design all of this. What was that like? Did you have to do a lot of research or did you just go from all your experience that you had? When did this building become your headquarters?

Having all the businesses in the past and being connected to several organizations that I've been associated with, it seems like it was easy for me to look at the future. It was easy for me to tell the mayor and the Wiegand Foundation, "I need so many square feet." Everybody laughed at me and said, "You're never going to get that. You're going to get exactly what you have here." This was prior to us moving.

I said, "Okay. Fine. Then we're not moving."

They said, "Well, you have to move."

I said, "You know what? You want to tackle the Catholic Church? Go right ahead. You tackle the Catholic Church. I, right now, don't want to move. So come up with some more proposals." We had different meetings in the city with different organizations, with different donors, and the city itself, the mayor, Mayor Griffin at that time, and then later Mayor Cashell. So we'd been visited. I'd been visited by Senator Reid, by several dignitaries, including our governor.

We have the ability to go forward. Going forward, we have to look at what can we do the best. Our mission is to help people. Our mission is to feed people. Here at the dining room, that is our mission. Our mission for the organization is to help people with whatever their needs are, no questions asked. We don't ask for anything. We don't want to benefit from anybody. That's not the reason why we're here. We're here because we believe in Jesus, we believe in the Lord, we believe in doing this type of work for Him. We believe that we are set in the right place to help people.

I've been blessed. I don't know where this knowledge comes from. I pray a lot and it seems like He tells me what to do. Our kitchen has grown to have seventy to eighty volunteers a week who pledge their time. They want to come and be part of this. Again, those are people who do it with the passion in their heart. They don't receive anything. They receive our thank-yous. We get all pumped up because we see people in the community who really want to help. However, the volunteers who come don't expect to get anything out of this other than whatever it is that they are personally looking for. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Yes. I definitely saw that yesterday.

Yes. I'm glad you were here yesterday. You did see us do a feeding, and there were over seven hundred people yesterday. As the month goes on, it escalates into being more and more of a population. We do not take names here; the door's open for everybody—men, women, children. Children have to be

escorted by a family member or by a guardian. We don't care who it is. We feed the homeless people, we feed the working poor, we feed anybody who comes to the door.

We run strictly by donations here at the dining room. So it's kind of hard to keep on going, but we push and push and the community helps us out a lot. If it wasn't for the people in the community, I don't think we could exist.

We're going into the seventy-second year, I believe, and I think we're solvent right now, not enough to put out the second dinner yet, but we're working on that.

You said you "had" to move from your location on Third Street. What was the force?

That's really a long story. It has to do with politics. I'm not a politician. I know that we were outgrowing that building. The city wanted to build a campus for all of the organizations to work together. The building across the street, which is the old Commercial Hardware building, became available in the early nineties, so Catholic Charities took a big step to acquire that building.

Through the years, this property was donated to the city. The property was barren except for a small plumbing company that was here, owned by Jack Reviglio. He also had dibs on the property around here. He bought the property and donated it to the city, and donated his property to the city when he moved to a different location.

So the city, having all of this in mind, decided to build a couple of buildings on Record Street, which became the family shelter, the men's drop-in, and the Reno-Sparks Gospel Mission. Valley Road is the next street over, so they decided to ask us if we would move here and build a building from the ground up, with most of the footage that I wanted, keeping in mind that I was already told that we weren't going to move because they were going to give me what I wanted.

I've always thought that I'm put here for a reason. I've always thought that I want to help people. That's my goal, that's my life, that's what I feel I should be doing. I believe that that's what the Lord put me here for. Having said that, the specifications of this property became available to me when I was told that, yes, I could have this, I could have that, I could actually have a huge kitchen where I could grow with that kitchen, with the possibilities of newer equipment, better equipment to be able to feed hundreds of people daily. So when I was given that green light, I jumped on it, I worked with it, I went ahead and here we are now today.

That's really amazing. So what's your relationship with the other charities in the area, with the Gospel Mission? Do you guys ever work together or do you just keep to yourselves?

We've been kind of in the Dark Ages, you might say, in the community because we are who we are. We've been in business for over seventy years. That tells you that it's a success. Why is it a success? Monetarily-wise? No. People-wise? Yes. Are we a success because we're an island? No. We're a success because we have partnered with many, many other agencies. Coming into the years of 2008, 2009, and forward to now, we have partnered with many other agencies that are in the same mission of helping people.

When I said that we're in the dark area, it is because we've believed that people who need help will find us. Well, yes and no. There are many people who are living in the community who are not Catholic. Catholic people know of St. Vincent's. They know that we feed the homeless. It hasn't been to where we've been advertising for years and years and years, because that wasn't the mode. That was not

important. Getting into the present times it is very important because the economy the way it is. Partnering with other agencies is the most important thing that there is in our community. Why? Because we can extend the benefits and we can extend what we have to do for others. Remember, we are here to help people.

On my end, the dining room, I pride ourselves in being who we are, of being able to help people every day. We don't stop with just one or two meals. I don't know where we stop. I have medical groups that come here to the dining room. There are leadership groups that come here from across the United States. The mayor loves this area because he likes our dining room because of its cleanliness, its ambiance, its lighting. He has meetings here. Other groups have meetings here.

Medically speaking, we have opened the doors to many people who need medical attention. Whether they need an HIV test, whether they need a blood pressure test, whether they need a dentist, whether they need footwork, they need general practitioners.

I opened the doors a long, long, long time ago to medical groups that want to come in here. The School of Nursing from the university comes here once or twice a year. They do their work here in our dining room. Why in our dining room? I want to offer the dining room to everybody because the people are here. They're not across the street; they're here. They're not at the river; they're here. People come to eat here. They come to spend their hour and a half here. So why not offer services at that time? Consequently, it does work. Many people, agencies that have been here before, doctor groups, nurses, dentists, people who cut hair, everybody wants to come here to help the people that need help. So in answer to your question, the dining room is more than just a feeding place.

And it's going to be more in the future. People like you who are interested, people like you [specifically addressing the interviewer] who become interested in our mission, who become interested in other people are the most important to us because you're young, you're the one who's going to carry the banner for us. Whether you think that this is just a paper for school or not, this is going to work on you.

Oh, I know.

As it works with you, you'll have others who you will bring with you, either here or someplace else, to volunteer to help others, and that's what life is all about, helping others. Life is love. God is love.

You say people are here. How does the location on Fourth Street affect your ability to provide services? Is it more effective being here?

To answer your question in short, where we were on Third Street was good, but it was isolated. Having moved here and opening the doors, you might say, with other agencies, the Reno-Sparks Gospel Mission is right across the street from us. The family shelter is right across the street from us. The men's drop-in center is right across the street from us. On the other side, on the east side, we have our own Catholic Charities building where we have our executive offices. We have our adoption center, immigration center. We have a pantry. We have emergency assistance. So we are centrally located, you might say.

When Tent City was built, they built around us because they know that we offer something free. We offer substance. We offer a meal. We offer something that people can use daily. So having moved here was probably the best move that I have had in my adult life. Being away from here would not work the way it's working now.

How much of your food is donated or purchased?

I would say 80 percent of our food is donated. We do a certain amount of buying because we don't have the proper channels to get the donated items that we need, specifically like Styrofoam cups, a certain size of items. I had partnered with other companies that offered these products to me for free. However, there's no consistency in sizes. We believe that if there's an eight-ounce bowl of soup, everybody should get an eight-ounce bowl of soup.

Sometimes people's mentality as they come through the line is that they believe that somebody's getting more than they are. It doesn't work like that. We offer the same thing to everybody. I believe you saw that yesterday. You were firsthand here. I asked you to come because I wanted you to see what we actually do, to get a formation in your mind as to how we operate. So about 80 percent of our items that we have in our—you might say—business, what we feed the clients, is donated. The other part is not donated. We do have to do some purchasing.

Do the donations affect what you choose to cook for that day or how do you plan the meals?

When we have the trucks go out into the community to pick up foods, they go to a certain number of stores. Today is Wednesday. Today our truck only goes to five stores. Thursday, tomorrow, our truck goes to eight stores. Friday, our truck goes to eleven stores. And they have to be there at certain times. Having said that, we pick up different things. When the truck rolls in, I look in there to see what there is, and that's how I make my meal.

Are stores your main source of donations or are personal donations a factor?

Personal donations run about 10 percent. The different stores supply us with about 60 to 70 percent of our groceries, and then it comes into the other 20 percent of us buying.

When you moved to Fourth Street, were you aware of any community response? What was the reaction of your neighbors?

You really want to know this?

Yes, I do.

Well, when we moved here, we had meetings every month with our neighbors, private businesses, the Police Department, the mayor's office. We had several caregiver organizations that also came to our meetings. Meetings were productive because our neighbors, the business neighbors, they did not want all this influx of homeless people, people who weren't working, people who were in and out of jail, people who were drinking and considered bums, and people who were just sleeping on the street, people who were using the restroom on the street on every corner and behind every bush. We worked with the Police Department. We worked with the people themselves. I, myself, worked with the people day and night. I guess I just want to do that.

We let the people know that we did have facilities inside, that you don't have to go outside and use the restroom outside for whatever reason, behind the bush or by a tree. So we gained some momentum there. The Police Department was very helpful in sending a couple of policeman at that time who really had compassion with people. I know of a couple of policeman, they're retired now, but they wore a gun on their hip and a rosary in their pocket. So those type of policeman I needed.

The Lord puts people in your way who will help you and enable you to go forward. I really believe that. I've seen my life change. I've seen the life of many other people change. Not because of me, that's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying that I've seen the goodness in people, and there's a lot of goodness in people. Not everybody is bad. Many people have got a direction that they've lost. Many people have got love in their heart and love for one another, but they've been hurt themselves. They've been pushed back into a corner, many of them self-inflicted, many of them born that way, many of them not being able to communicate with anybody.

Fortunately, we've had the help of other agencies and the Police Department, and I praise them because they do so much good work in our community, but so do the caregivers. So do the nursing staff, social services that we have in the community. There are all kinds of ways to help people. If that person is receptive to your help or if they tell you that they need help, that's when you really want to jump up and you just want to say, "Sure," and just go forward and help them every which way you can with whatever their needs are.

I don't mean a referral. I don't mean give them a piece of paper with somebody's name on it, "Here, go see them," to wash your hands of it. No, that's not what I mean. I mean sometimes you've got to be hands-on. There are a lot of people who can't think for themselves. A lot of people can't read or write. Older people, white, black, brown, it doesn't matter. There are a lot of people who need help. A lot of people shy away from a person like you [addressing the interviewer] because you're carrying a clipboard, because you're carrying questions. They'll shy away from you because they're afraid of you.

You're a little girl. Why would they be afraid of you? They're afraid of you because they are afraid of what you represent. You have questions. They don't know the answers. They're afraid they're going to have to sign something, and they don't know what they're signing. Consequently, a lot of these people stay in the background where they are now. Many people have got family issues so they can't go back to their families, or maybe they're wanted by the Police Department in some other state, some other community. Not everybody is squeaky clean, right? So, skeletons in closets, I think everybody's got them. I hope you [addressing the recorder] hear this.

But the thing is that the people in the community, at one point, were not receptive at all, the ones here on Fourth Street. Then it became more prevalent to them that, you know, we're here to help people. We're not here to hurt people. We're not here to engage in arresting people. We're not here engaged to finding out who you are, why you are. No. We're here to help you if you want the help.

In our agency here, our door swings open. I told you yesterday, we do not take names here. We don't preach here. I don't care if I know you or not. You want to tell me your name, fine. You can tell me your name. You don't want to tell me your name, don't tell me your name. I ask two things of you, that's all, when you come here, and that's keep your hands to yourself, no fighting, that's all. Enjoy your meal. Sit down with your tray, enjoy your meal, and leave. That sounds cold, but that's exactly what we do.

If you want to stay around, if you say, "I need to go to the doctor," I'll take you. "I need to go see a priest or a nun. I need to go to church," I'll take you. I'm your boy. I want to do that. "I need a job." I'll find you a job. "I need clothes." I'll get you clothes. I don't want anything from you. But this is who I am. I want to help you if you want help.

Now, you say your two rules are keep your hands to yourself and no fighting. How do you police that? Do you have security or anything like that?

We used to have security. With the economic sanctions that the city went through, the reserve officers that they had are no longer in the community. We used to pay for that type of security, but we don't have that anymore. We have had our own private security, but that doesn't seem to work, either. We kind of go on the merits of goodness from everybody, and we try to stop everything. I think in six years we've called the Police Department five times, because we've needed the Police Department here to take away an element that was harassing somebody else, and I mean bodily harassment, something that we could not control. Other than that, we try to dissuade everything and not have any problems.

You noticed yesterday two people yelling at each other and so on. It's best to tone that down and not be aggressive with those types of people or with anybody, because aggression just brings higher aggression. I really believe in being able to talk with people and communicate with people. I think to myself, "What would Jesus do? How would He handle this?" Did He ever have fisticuffs with anybody? I don't think so. I think He picked up a table and threw it at somebody one time, something like that that's in the Bible, but I don't believe that there were any fisticuffs or karate chops or anything like that from Him.

Jesus was a lamb. He was a giver. He was love. I'm talking about all the volunteers who come here because, as you noticed yesterday, they all made light of what had happened, and this yelling and screaming, as soon as it started, it was over. If we build on it, it gets bigger.

So how many people do you employ or are under your employ?

Right now, at the present time, there are eight of us. There used to be ten. It got down to four. Then I was able to get other people in here but only on part-time basis and, of course, we use volunteers.

What is your workday like? How many hours are you here or how many hours go into preparing that single meal?

For me personally or the whole staff?

The whole staff.

We start at 8:00 in the morning. This is a regular day. We start at 8:00 in the morning, and our meal is at 11:15 to 11:30, that's when we open the doors. We have three hours to make a meal. We have specialty equipment. We've got that giant soup pot that you saw; it's a steam kettle. Then next to that is a tilting skillet. That is called a brazier.

So what they do here in the back part of the kitchen, is they cut everything for me, they put everything together for me, and then I come around the following day or that afternoon or morning and I piece it together. I try to make it palatable to where everybody can enjoy it, remembering that I have to have so many servings from that one unit to satisfy everybody. When I say satisfy everybody, I'm a stickler for portion control. Why? Because this is what creates problems for the people who are standing

in line. They see one plate that gets so much and another plate that gets so little. Well, if it's the plate that they're getting and it looks so little to them, then they say, "Why didn't I get more?"

I want to avoid all of that. Everybody is treated equally, number one. Everybody gets the same portion. Nobody's going to go away hungry. They're going to have a meal, they're going to be satisfied. If they're not satisfied, I will make sure that they get something else to satisfy them. I may not possibly be able to give them the same tray with everything on it because I don't have enough of that for everybody. I do have enough of that to give you, once, the entire tray, and that's the starch, the main entrée, the vegetable, the milk, the coffee, whatever I have there. What I can do if you're still hungry is wait for me in the lobby where we feed the people who come in late—and there are many of those; for whatever reasons, they come in late—and you can get a sandwich to go. We'll do that. But to give you the same amount as I gave you already, I don't have enough groceries for that.

What do you hope for the future of the St. Vincent's Dining Room? Like you said, you want to open an evening meal, but is there anything else you would like to expand or provide more services?

I believe that with the economy the way it is, we are constantly seeing new faces that come to use our facility. The economy the way it should be, that I think it should be, we shouldn't be feeding anybody. That would mean in a perfect world everybody would be in their rightful place, everybody would be, economically speaking, solvent. I don't think that that's going to happen. I don't think that that's going to happen to the tune of everybody being put in their rightful place. So I think there's always going to be a need for us, but hopefully there'll be a lesser need because people will be able to enable themselves to go forward, enable themselves to be more productive in their own life, for themselves, not for anybody else but for themselves.

Again I bring out the fact that many of these people can't read or write. Many of these people are older. Many of these people are, for one reason or another, mentally handicapped. I want to help everybody. I want to put everybody in my life, in my world, in my heart, in my mind, I want to put everybody where they want to be and be productive for themselves for a future.

I think Jesus wanted to do that. Jesus gave us choices. We have choices to make daily. So consequently, we don't always make the right choices, and whether we think we do, whether we love right, whether we love wrong, who knows, but trying to help people is a big thing. It's an easy thing for some people. I find it easy trying to help people. A lot of people don't know what to do.

I get a lot of volunteers here, ladies who wear a \$400 pair of high heels. I have men who have \$1,000 suits who come here to volunteer. They volunteer five minutes and they're crying. I bring them to the back here and console them and tell them this is why we're doing this. The Holy Spirit is touching your heart. This is the goodness in you. The goodness in God, this is coming through. Many of these people leave before the lunch hour is here. Some I never see again. Some will call me and want to come back again and say, "I want to do this. I want to do this."

I say, "Okay. Why do you want to do this?"

"Because I want to help people."

I say, "You know what? You need help, too." I need help daily.

So we do this for everybody else, not just for you, not just for me, but you do this for yourself. When it comes out from yourself and you get to know yourself, you'll be able to love others.

That's beautiful. Thank you. So these questions are more about the area specifically. Do you have an opinion on the motels in the area or how they affect the people you serve? Do you have any opinion on that?

Some people stay in motels. Many people stay on the ground. Many people can't afford the motels. Whenever a motel gets burned down, we lose more bedding, more areas for people to go to. We lost the Mitzpah. The Mitzpah was a huge area for a lot of the people that we feed. They didn't have cooking facilities there. However, it was shelter for them. Many of them are retired, many of them are on Social Security where they do get some type of benefit every month so they can pay their rent for two weeks at least, and they're in those motels for at least two weeks. The rest of the time, they're on the street.

I would like to see more shelters. I would like to see more housing, but I don't believe that that's in the immediate future. As we go forward, to 2012, 2013 and so on, I don't see much help there for people. I wish there was. I think the motels that are there need to be cleaned a lot for anybody and everybody. We lost many motels there right across the street on Virginia Street, right across from Circus Circus. Those are all shut down because there's going to be building built there. Another casino, I guess. But we lost three motels there. With those three motels, there were seven hundred rooms.

So that's another seven hundred gone. We do not necessarily need more shelters. We need motels, we need hotels, we need low-income housing, but we can't afford low-income housing for everybody. But we do need that type of housing.

Do you think transportation issues play a big role in the health of Fourth Street corridor or what is the biggest transportation need in the corridor? Would it be like better busing or bike routes or anything like that?

I don't think I'm the person to answer something like that because I know very little of it. I do know that people complain about the cost of taking rides now from their home or from one destination to another. I believe that there's a reason why they have these set rules of certain hours when people can use certain transfer tickets. I believe that's an issue with many people who they are not able to meet that, even though they already paid for the ticket. I don't know. I'm very sorry. I don't know how much it costs, a dollar-fifty or a dollar-seventy or if it costs seventy cents. I don't know what the cost is for the ride. But one of the biggest complaints that I hear is that they're on a time limit and a time frame, and they really can't be assisted that way correctly.

Do you know of any safety issues in the corridors, any blind spots?

I believe we need more police traffic. We need patrolmen. We need that type in our area, in about a five-block radius, we do need that. That's from the other side of the ballpark all the way to, let's say, the university. Let's say from Virginia Street all the way down to Wells, in that whole area. This is more centrally located, and at any given time there are problems and there are dark areas, like you mentioned.

Do you think the number or arrangement of lanes for cars and buses should be modified? Would a turning lane or anything like that be helpful?

No, I don't see that. I see that the Fire Department moved here a block away from us, and I don't think that was a very good move in our community because it just congests the area more. We have the train tracks that use Fourth Street. I've seen where the Fire Department has tried to come out and drive on Fourth Street headed west. They can't because the train is parked there. So it was a very bad move. That was not handled correctly.

What would you like to see for pedestrians or bicyclists in this corridor? Any improvements or anything that can be done to make their traveling easier?

The area around here needs a professional company to come and monitor this for at least sixty to ninety days, and at the same time every day, the same time every night, to monitor and see where the congestion is, where the traffic rage happens with many of the people who are walking. Remember, at lunchtime we have over eight hundred people walking the streets here at the end of the month. So you can't tell me that that doesn't bring out problems with people who are traveling.

One more question. Would you like to see parking on the street changed in any way? On-street parking, parallel or diagonal, would that affect you in any way?

There's no room in this area for parking. It's just not feasible. That does not work in this whole five- or six-block area.

Well, thank you very much.

Thank you.