

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Arlene Carter

Arlene (Toni) Carter

Interviewer: It's Friday, August 11, 2006. We're at the home of Toni Carter on 86 East Texas, Henderson, Nevada. My name is Shannon Berndt and our camera person is Ed Feldman. Thank you for doing this project for us. We're trying to compile a history of Henderson and the BMI plants and we're excited about this project so thank you for helping us do this. Let's, first of all let's talk about when you were a girl, where you were born, and where you grew up.

Toni: Well, I was born in St. George, Utah but I grew up in a little town called Central. It's about thirty miles north of St. George and I went to grade school there. Then I went to St. George to high school and after I left there I went...moved to California with my brother and I stayed down there for a couple of years. Then I had an opportunity to go to Winnemucca to work at the quicksilver mines and I did that. I worked there for about a year.

Interviewer: What did you do there?

Toni: Well, they were mining quicksilver which is mercury and I just helped out in the lab and whatever, you know, that sort of stuff. It was a fun job. Extremely hot (chuckle) and, uh, then I went back home for a...for a little vacation and while I was there one of my friends in Las Vegas was going in for surgery and she asked me if I would come and stay with her children while she had her surgery. So I moved to Las Vegas and I stayed...I was going to stay for two weeks and I'm still here sixty years later. (Chuckle) And I worked a little after I stayed with her children. While I went to work for a little home laundry in Las Vegas. In fact, her son is running for sheriff this year in our election.

Interviewer: Oh, who's her son?

Toni: Gil Conger. Okay? And then while I was there I met this fella who came in to pick up his laundry and he was working at BMI. He had just gone to work as a guard at the plant.

Interviewer: What was his name?

Toni: Ted Carter. And so he...he had worked at the sugar factories in Idaho, many of them. And so when he...when they found out that he had had experience and that, they called him into the lab instead of being a guard. And he suggested to one of the doctors that they hire me because he said she'll make a better worker than someone who has all that education for that. So he hired me and I worked there for, oh, several months. And then this doctor was going into research and he wanted me to go with him so I stayed in the research department until it closed down in 1944. And then I left there because that was one of the first departments to close. And I left there and went to Las Vegas and worked at a variety store for about, I think about six months. And in the meantime they, there were different companies coming into the plant and one of them was...well that was before Stauffer came. Montgomery Company had taken it over. And one of the chemists came in one day, into the store and he saw me there and he said, "how would you like to go back to work at the lab?" And I said I would love to. So I went back to work in 1945 and I stayed there until 1977 when I retired.

Interviewer: Awesome. What was the doctor's name that you first worked for?

Toni: Dr. George Parsons.

Interviewer: And what was his specialty?

Toni: Chemistry.

Interviewer: Chemistry. What did...what would...what did you do in the labs?

Toni: Well, when I was with him we were trying to find a process to make better magnesium, better quality stuff, and then after I left...then after I got out of that and went into the...when Stauffer took it over, we were just doing analytical work for the chlorine and caustic and they shipped a lot of caustic out. And we analyzed every truckload and every trainload that went out before it went. It had to meet certain specifications and we did that before the truck could or the car could even leave.

Interviewer: Um, you started working at BMI in 1942 so it was a brand new complex that had just opened up?

Toni: It opened the latter part of August in '42. Actually they broke ground in 19...in September of 1941. I watched them break ground for this complex and it was...there was a tremendous amount of work that had to go into that before it could be completed. All the building had to be done. They piped the water from the lake to the plant. The power had to be converted. And they had to build a...besides building the plant, they built up in Gabbs where they were bringing the magnesite from. They had to build a mill processing plant there and all of this was completed in eleven months and they poured their first magnesium on August, yeah, August 1942...August 31 of 1942. Eleven months and they had accomplished all of that work in that length of time.

Interviewer: Now were you working there when they...

Toni: Well, it opened in August and I didn't go to work 'til November. It hadn't been going very long when I went to work there.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of women that worked at the plant?

Toni: Yes, uh, because the men were being called into Service and so they were hiring women to...to do the work because they...someone had to do it. And so those of us in the lab called ourselves the cookbook chemists because that was how we worked, with a book in our hands and, uh...

Interviewer: What were some of the other jobs that women did around the plants?

Toni: Well, they were...the ones that worked out in the plant actually did, you know, just about everything that the men do. I've seen them on forklifts and, uh, actually running, you know...doing everything that the men did.

Interviewer: They actually ran the machinery and worked with the hot magnesium and...

Toni: Yes, yes they did.

Interviewer: Wow. Um, let's see...and what was produced at BMI?

Toni: Magnesium.

Interviewer: Magnesium.

Toni: It was used for incendiary bombs. It was also a very light material and it was used in building airplanes. Uh, there was only at the time that they built this plant, there was only two other plants operating in the United States. And one of them was Dow Chemical and the other one was Basic Refractories. One of them was used...was making magnesium with a sea water process and then when they decided to build the plant here they, uh, they got their technology and their know-how from England. They sent men over there and, uh, they learned the process.

Interviewer: Um, do you know any...the story about when they went over...when they were bringing the process over from England and something happened to the ship that they were on?

Toni: No, the only thing I heard was that some of their plans for the plant had been...twice they had been on, in the process of coming over they had...once their ship had been sunk and the other time I can't remember exactly what it was but their plans were lost in transporting the plans from there to here.

Interviewer: Did the...did you ever meet the English gentleman that came over that had the plans, that knew the process of making that magnesium?

Toni: You mean Howard Eells?

Interviewer: Is that who it was?

Toni: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Interviewer: I never, I never knew who it was. So he...

Toni: Uh, he had...back in 1930 he had...he was looking for magnesium or for different ores like that and he had ...what do they call it? Homesteaded, no not home...staked, staked a claim up in Gabbs, Nevada where this...there was a large deposit of magnesium...magnesite and brucite and he had staked a claim on that way back in the 1930's. So when, uh, when there was talk about building this plant here, some of the factors that contributed to it being built was because of the cheap power, the cheap water and the, and the availability of the raw materials.

Interviewer: There's also another gentleman that he went in partners with that actually had the plans for it. Um, I don't know his name. Uh, he was the English gentleman. He was a major.

Toni: Probably if you'd say the name I'd recognize it but I can't...

Interviewer: I can't think of his name. So, how do you... what do you think Basic Magnesium...how do you think it affected the war effort?

Toni: Well, I think it had great, good effect because, uh, like I say, magnesium was so light and they could use it in building the planes and things. I think it had a very positive effect on it. And I think it's been a...building the plant was a big contributor to the economy and growth of this area.

Interviewer: So the magnesium that was made there, it was actually used in planes and making bombs for World War II. Right?

Toni: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Were there special procedures that...for like security, air raid drills, blackouts and things like that...

Toni: Oh, yes. Yes, there was.

Interviewer: What were some of those things that...?

Toni: In fact my...like I say, my husband had started to work...that was before he became my husband...but he was working at the plant and they patrolled that area all the time, uh, because they were afraid of sabotage.

Interviewer: Okay. Um, what about the general population? Did they have to have...do blackouts and have curfews and things like that?

Toni: I don't remember of any but, like I say, I was living in Las Vegas and working out here so I...but as far as I know, I don't remember any of it.

Interviewer: Um, what about rationing? Did they have to ration a lot of things?

Toni: Oh, yes, they did. I said we were rationed on gas, sugar and tires. They had a, they had a repair plant, a repair shop here at the plant where they repaired the tires because, you know, they were so hard to get that they did everything they could to...to prolong the life of them and keep them going.

Interviewer: Do you remember Anderson Camp?

Toni: Sure do.

Interviewer: That, is that the tent city?

Toni: Uh-huh. That was across the highway and, uh, it was, was quite a large project.

Interviewer: How do you think the people that lived there felt? Do you think it was hard for them living in that?

Toni: Oh, I'm sure it was very difficult because it was so hot and can imagine in this kind of temperature living in the, in the heat of the summer in those little tents and things, I'm sure it was very hard for them.

Interviewer: Did they even have to live through the winter in them?

Toni: Yes.

Interviewer: How would they keep warm?

Toni: Well, that wouldn't have been as difficult as keeping cool.

Interviewer: Did they have air conditioning in those tents?

Toni: Oh, no. They were just tents!

Interviewer: Oh man. Um, there were...there was a couple of Indian tribes that came from around and worked there. Did you know anything about them?

Toni: No, I don't.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you ever go to Anderson Kitchen, the Anderson Camp Kitchen?

Toni: No, I didn't. They had around the plant, they had little, what they called 'em, canteens that had food, you know, where you could go and pick up food and, uh, when we were working at the lab we could go to the canteens. But as far as going to the Anderson Camp, no, I never did.

Interviewer: So the Anderson Camp, that big kitchen was actually in the Camp.

Toni: Yes, uh huh.

Interviewer: And the canteens were like a little café though or something?

Toni: Right. But they were down in the plant.

Interviewer: Right.

Toni: The canteens were down in the plant. Where Anderson's Camp was across the highway where there were Albertsons and over in that area.

Interviewer: What was the attitude of the people that worked there towards the war?

Toni: I think they were all doing all they could to, to help. I mean, that was why all the women went to work and, uh, to do their part. They had, they had, uh, bond drives, war bond drives, and they collected cans and, you know, things like that too for the war effort too.

Interviewer: Do you remember when the crew of the Memphis Belle?

Toni: I do. Yes, I do. In fact, I have pictures of them.

Interviewer: So that you got to meet them?

Toni: I didn't get to meet them but I saw them. You know...

Interviewer: You did see them.

Toni: It was interesting.

Interviewer: And why did they come?

Toni: Pardon?

Interviewer: Why did they come to the plant?

Toni: Well, because like I say, we were contributing, our little plant was contributing a lot to the war effort and I felt that they came because they appreciated what was being done and they wanted us to know what, you know, they did appreciate that.

Interviewer: Did they actually make a bomb that said to...that had something written on it or was that just a publicity stunt?

Toni: Well, that could be. I don't know...I don't remember if...It's been a long time ago.
(Chuckle)

Interviewer: (Laugh) You remember war bond drives?

Toni: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Were they real big, big affairs?

Toni: Yes, they were.

Interviewer: Where they built them up?

Toni: Yes, they were.

Interviewer: What were some of the, the slogans. What were some of the things to make you desire to buy war bonds? Do you remember?

Toni: Oh, I really don't remember.

Interviewer: Do you remember the war bond drive after Mount Suribachi and they put the flag up...the flag raisers went around the country doing the war bond drive? Do you remember that?

Toni: No.

Interviewer: Um, So you lived in Las Vegas. What area did you live in?

Toni: Let's see, I lived in...I lived on South Sixth Street. I, uh, just lived in a home with, with a family and I commuted back and forth. I didn't even drive at that time. One of the chemists drove back and forth and I rode with him. And sometimes when we were...if he wasn't going to be coming to work or something...we, they had little buses. I'd say sometimes it would take you 2 hours to get from Las

Vegas to here. Then they had little...I don't know what you'd call them...but they were like a little cart and then they had a big trailer-like thing on the back with a shade over it, and that was how we were moved about down in the plant. When you went into the plant they would take you on these little carts. You couldn't, you couldn't just go in with your own car.

Interviewer: So the security was tight. Did they ever search, search your bags or...

Toni: Oh, yes. Many times. You never know, you never knew when they were going to do a search.

Interviewer: Um, there's the term "Magnesium Maggie".

Toni: Well that was what they called the women who were out in the plant, Magnesium Maggies.

Interviewer: They were kinda like Henderson's version of "Rosie the Riveter"?

Toni: Uh-huh. Right.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a "Magnesium Maggie"?

Toni: Yes, I would say so (chuckle).

Interviewer: Good. Good. (Chuckle)

Toni: Definitely.

Interviewer: Cause we do too. Um, let's see. What, um...where did you go shop? For food and groceries and clothes that you needed when you lived in Las Vegas?

Toni: Well, for a long time everybody had to go to Las Vegas because there was just nothing out here. Then eventually they built...oh, I can't remember the name of the market up there. It was on Market Street. Foodland. And, uh, we had a little dress shop and a shoe shop and a...Bill Byrne had a small little grocery store like a AMPM type thing and he had liquor in there. And then eventually we got Prime Meats across the street and uh...

Interviewer: When did you move to Henderson?

Toni: Pardon?

Interviewer: When did you move to Henderson?

Toni: I moved here May 7 of 1947. I was married in October and we moved out here in May of '47 and I've lived right here ever since.

Interviewer: And you moved into this house?

Toni: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Oh. Do you remember a lot of your neighbors that were around at that time?

Toni: No. I remember the one who was directly across the street. Harriet Treem who was one of the first schoolteachers here. And she lived there until she went into a nursing home. But the others have come and gone and...there were some of them on this street like Gordon McCaw, Gordon and Elsie McCaw who lived up on the corner. And the Thornes lived on the other corner across the street.

Interviewer: Elsa Thorne.

Toni: I don't know if...uh, I can't think of...I know there were a lot of them, that you know, that lived here but they've been gone for so long that...

Interviewer: Do you remember any of the celebration or talk or whatever happened when Henderson was incorporated into a city in 1953?

Toni: Yes. They made quite a big deal of it because before that we had been Basic Townsite and in 1944, I think, they were incorporated and become Henderson. The city was named after a former senator.

Interviewer: Do you remember any of the politicians from...like the first mayor?

Toni: Oh, sure. James French. He was our first mayor.

Interviewer: What was the...what was Henderson like as a, as a whole? Was it, um, a friendly place? Did everybody know each other?

Toni: Very friendly. It used to be you'd go to the grocery store and you'd spend a couple of hours because you'd stop and visit with every...you knew all your neighbors. Well, like I said, there were only a thousand homes here and so you got to know the people quite well. Especially if you had children that was going to school, you know.

Interviewer: What did you do for...in your spare time like for entertainment?

Toni: Well, they used to have dances. They called them the...what'd they call them, the Foremens' Club or something down in the plant. And they would have dances and...

Interviewer: So the Foremens' Club was in the plant.

Toni: Pardon?

Interviewer: The Foremens' Club was in the plant.

Toni: I'm think it was. I'm sure it was in the complex there. But they had some very good dances down there.

Interviewer: Did...what about Victory Village and Carver Park? Remember about those areas?

Toni: Well Carver Park was set up strictly for the colored people and Victory Village had...in fact they had the only, like the only little place for recreation area over there. And then, then they moved across the highway over here where they had Townsite Apartments. They've torn that all down now and built these new apartments, but, uh, they used some of those places for their recreation.

Interviewer: Do you remember when they were raising money to buy, to build the Youth Center?

Toni: Buy what?

Interviewer: To build the Youth Center?

Toni: Yes. In fact I contributed that, you know, money to help. We would buy a block to build the Youth Center. Yes.

Interviewer: Did you go to the special program when Sophie Tucker and Frank Sinatra and then came...

Toni: No.

Interviewer: Do you...you remember, um, a store, like a grocery store, down in the...down in Carver Park?

Toni: No.

Interviewer: When, uh, when the plant...when they closed down and they didn't need the magnesium as much anymore and things started to go slow in Henderson, it could have dried up and become a ghost town. Why do you think it didn't? Why do you think people stayed?

Toni: Well, like I say, when that closed up I think they got down to about four thousand, four thousand population and people wanted...well, they...the Legislature wanted...they wanted the Legislature to do something to buy this plant so that, so it would not become a ghost town. And through the Chamber of Commerce or something like that, they were able to get the members of the Legislature down here and they toured the plant and they decided that they would...you know, that they would do something about it and, uh...I'm not sure, but I think it was the Colorado River Commission then that did finally buy it and then they eventually turned it over to the people...started when they got their first mayor and their first city council things and they had a difficult time in those...trying to get this started because they didn't have any money to work with and...

Interviewer: So was the town, the homes and the hospital and everything owned by the same people that owned the plant? Everything was owned by the same people that...

Toni: Well, I don't know, when we bought our home, we bought it through Gilbreath who was...had charge of the homes. But I don't remember exactly who had the homes because we rented for a long time and then they...when they decided to sell they decided to sell to the people who were living in them (cough...excuse me) and, uh.

Interviewer: When, when you moved to Henderson, was your husband still working at the plant?

Toni: Yes, he worked there for twenty-eight years. He retired, uh, he retired two years before I did and he said, finally after two years he said, "I'm tired of being a housewife" (chuckle) so I thought, well, I guess I better do something about this. So I went to the plant and told them I was going to quit. They said, oh, you can't do that. You have two more years to get your vested rights in. So I said, well, my marriage is more important than my job. And they said well, what if we let you work during the winter time. Take the summers off and come back. I did that for two years.

Interviewer: Oh.

Toni: We had a home up in Utah and we would go up there for the summers and then come back here in the wintertime.

Interviewer: So you were a valued employee!

Toni: Well, I don't know (chuckle). But they don't usually do that.

Interviewer: (Laugh) No, no they don't.

Toni: In fact, they told me once I retired I couldn't come back. But I said six months after I left they were begging me to come back. (Chuckle)

Interviewer: Let's see. What about Pittman? Do you remember anything specific like ...was Pittman always called Pittman?

Toni: To my knowledge it was.

Interviewer: Okay.

Toni: There was one a little further down the road that they called Whitney. That was Whitney Ranch. But yeah, Pittman was kind of a booming little community during the war time.

Interviewer: You remember a place called Jericho Heights?

Toni: Jeri what?

Interviewer: Jericho Heights?

Toni: No.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's see. (to cameraman) Do you have any...?

Cameraman: Well, let me ask you, you had first worked at the plant when you were living in Las Vegas. When you were doing that and you were commuting back and forth did you socialize a lot with the people that were at the plant or...

Toni: No, I don't think I did.

Cameraman: You kinda kept to yourself.

Toni: Well, not necessarily...well not intentionally but because I didn't drive you know and I would just come out for my job and then I'd go back and that was...so, like I say, there was a part in there where the town itself was growing that I wasn't that aware of because I wasn't out there that much.

Cameraman: But when you moved out here...?

Toni: But after we moved out here, we, we become quite active in a number of things, you know. We participated when they had the...remember when they were...uh, that's probably before your time. When they were giving the Salk vaccine for polio?

Interviewer: I do remember that.

Toni: Okay. We went up...we were helping to distribute the vaccine for that and, and, uh, we worked on the election boards and just whatever, you know.

Cameraman: Well, when you decided to make the move from Las Vegas to Henderson, what were some of the reasons that you decided to make that move?

Toni: Well, because I had just gotten married and we decided, you know, that we would...cause we were both working here at the plant and it would be easier if we lived here. So...but I have loved Henderson ever since I moved here. It's been a great place.

Interviewer: Did, um, when you working for the BMI, for Basic Magnesium, did they have get-togethers as a plant? Like picnics or...there are pictures that shows like participating in the Helldorado Days?

Toni: Yes, we participated in Helldorado Days. In fact, my husband drove the truck, the truck or the car or whatever when they would enter a float in there. He would drive one of the cars and...I remember walking in the first parade that they had out here.

Interviewer: Do you remember the components that it took to make the magnesium and where they came from?

Toni: Where they came from?

Interviewer: Um-hum. Like...

Toni: Well, like I say, part of it came from up at Gabbs where they had a magnesite mine over here between here and the lake and, uh, I know they used the magnesite. One time they used a lot of peat moss. I don't know why.

Interviewer: Did that come in on a train from somewhere?

Toni: Uh-huh. Trains and trucks and...

Interviewer: And there was some other...salt.

Toni: Yes, they shipped in lots of salt.

Interviewer: And where'd that come from?

Toni: Prob'ly over around Death Valley or someplace here in Nevada, though.

Interviewer: Was it in Nevada? Cause I think I've been reading. It gave some of the components and from different places and I was just curious where they...

Toni: That salt they would bring in and then they had huge big tanks down there and they'd put the salt in there and put water in it and make it into a brine. But whether that was for the...that wouldn't have been for the magnesium. That would have been for later for the chlorine and caustic and...

Interviewer: Okay. Well I think...

Cameraman: That's it?

Interviewer: That's good.

Cameraman: Two questions. Two more questions.

Interviewer: Okay.

Cameraman: You know, a few times we've mentioned Gabbs, Nevada? Which is where we got a lot of material for the magnesium?

Toni: Pardon?

Cameraman: Gabbs, Nevada?

Toni: Gabbs, yes?

Cameraman: Where's that located? Or where was it located?

Toni: It's still there. It's between here and Hawthorne. It's a little ways off on the road if you were going from here to Reno. It's before you get to Hawthorne, it's...

Cameraman: So Northwest of Las Vegas?

Toni: Uh-huh.

Cameraman: Now you were mentioning how you would check all the materials before they'd be shipped off in the train cars.

Toni: Well, basically I remember. It's been...like I say, I've been retired twenty-some years so...

Cameraman: Do you recall some of the places the materials would go to?

Toni: Oh, yes. We, we sold a lot of material to Clorox and Purex and, and soap companies like that.

Cameraman: One more question. Now when we were talking about when the war had ended and things kind of slowed down at the plants, you mentioned that the population was about four thousand people...Do you recall during the war when it was peak production about what the population was at that time?

Toni: Thirteen thousand.

Cameraman: So population dropped by two-thirds almost.

Toni: Um-hum.

Cameraman: That's...must have had quite an impact.

Toni: Kind of interesting to see how the population has grown. Because, like I say, in fact, when they were going down...like when they were deciding what they were going to do, then it, then it went up to about eight thousand and now it's what? About two hundred and fifty thousand? Something like that.

Interviewer: And higher.

Cameraman: Now you mentioned Pittman was quite the happening place.

Toni: Well, yeah. There were lots of bars down there. (Chuckle)

Cameraman: That was a lot of night life...that kind of thing. Recreation was down there.

Interviewer: Well at that time when Pittman had all the bars and everything open and everything was there gaming and bars in Henderson?

Toni: Yep. Yes. Gaming had become legalized again in 1931 when they were building the Dam. It had been legal once before that but then they had outlawed it and for like some twenty years it hadn't been legal. And then in 1931 they legalized gambling again. Now that's when they changed the limit for divorce. It used to be three months and now its six weeks. That was changed at the same time.

Interviewer: So you remember when they built the casino down here...was it the Royal and, uh, what did Bill Byrne open? The Royal?

Toni: I think the first one out here was The Wheel.

Interviewer: The Wheel. Were people upset when the casinos came right in downtown?

Toni: I don't think so. There was so little to do here I think they were happy to have any, you know, anything that was new and different.

Interviewer: Well, that's all unless you have some other memories or thoughts that you'd like to share with us.

Toni: I can't think of any that...

Interviewer: All right. Well, thank you.

Toni: Okay.