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Henderson Oral History Project

Elanora Leavitt

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Interviewer: It's July 6, 2006 and we're in the home of Elanora Leavitt. My name is Shannon Berndt and our camera person is Ed Feldman. Thank you so much for doing our Henderson oral history, helping with us to record what Henderson was like years ago. But let's start earlier than that. Let's start from your beginning. Where were you born?

Elanora: I was born in Salida, Colorado. Salida is, was a railroad town. Now it's part of the tourist industry.

Interviewer: Oh. Did you spend your whole life there?

Elanora: No. I really grew up in Arvada.

Interviewer: Arvada. Um, did you graduate high school in...

Elanora: I went to high school one year in Arvada and one year in Grand Junction and two years in Henderson.

Interviewer: How did you, how did you end up in Henderson?

Elanora: Well, my father was a victim of the great depression. And it took him several years with various jobs to get back on his feet. So when the war came and somehow he heard about what was going on in Nevada, he decided to come out here and see what it was like. And so he came out here and spent four or five months out here before we arrived. And we stayed in Grand Junction waiting to see what he had to say.

Interviewer: So he decided he liked it and said, "c'mon out"?

Elanora: I think he thought it was a great adventure. Yes. I think he forgot to tell us two or three things. (Chuckle) He may have told my mother but we certainly, we girls certainly didn't understand what it was all about.

Interviewer: So your father was already here, so you and who else came to Henderson?

Elanora: My mother. We had...you know they didn't make cars during the war and so we had about a 1939 or '40 Ford sedan. And my mother and my sister and I and a dog and a car piled full of personal things drove in June to Las Vegas without any air conditioning. But I think it was just as hot in Utah to Green Valley as it was in Las Vegas. You know, we roasted the whole way.

Interviewer: And you arrived in Henderson. What did you think?

Elanora: We could not believe when you'd come up over the pass there...it was two lane road, of course...Las Vegas was just a little dot down in the sand. And we could not believe this was really where we were headed. But, so I was being a teenager. It was kind of exciting to see signs that said "gambling casino" because there was no other road to come in, except Main Street you turned at Fremont. You drove down Fremont until you hit Boulder Highway and then you took Boulder Highway to Henderson.

And by the time we got to Henderson, or to Pittman, you know, we were just really gaga with the sand and the heat, wondering where was our dad. He was living in Pittman in some wooden shack, frame, sorta motel like place. I don't remember there being any doors or windows but I'm sure there was. Everything was open. The rooms were very small. They had wooden, they had built-in wooden cots. Uh, you know, it was very hot. I thought there was as much sand in the little room as there was outside. And my mother kept saying, "Where did you think we're going to stay?" (Laugh) But evidently my father had already arranged because we, we moved into right away the trailer park. They had several large trailer parks, government trailer parks up where, behind where Walmart is now. Where Victory Village is...was. Before then was these trailer parks. And all the trailers were painted army green. The roads in and out were sanded good. They had...I believe we had a front awning. They had water coolers. The trailers were very hot in the afternoon. So my sister and I would go down and sit in the, in the public shower for a couple of hours. We just couldn't believe how hot it was. And they kept saying, oh, it will be a long time before you get a house. Oh, don't even think about getting a house. But somehow or other my mother did arrange for us to get a house by September. Time school started. We had a two-bedroom house clear over on the west side of Basic Road. But there was no backyard. There were no trees, you know. There were just sticks in the yard they called a tree. I think some of them had a leaf or two at the top. But the air cooler in these old Henderson houses were too large for the homes and so they really cooled those little houses. It was like a tornado or a hurricane when you walked through the living room. The air was blowing in in a great fury. It kept the house cool anyway.

Interviewer: It was one of those original Townsite houses, a thousand?

Elanora: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. And by the time we arrived in 1943, there was already a grocery store, which we... sorta like a medium sized super market, a drug store, a bowling alley, and I think the theater either was built or was built shortly after we arrived. There was a theater.

Interviewer: And you arrived in 19...

Elanora: 1943. The school was located...it was a prefab affair and it was located where the Henderson Convention Center is now. And we walked to school and back. You know.

Interviewer: Did...Were...Was it just the high school, or all grades were there?

Elanora: I don't know where the grade school was. The Junior High went there. I'm not sure. My sister was four years younger than I and so I'm not really sure where she went to school. I think she went to school there. I'm not sure about that. Um...

Interviewer: Who were some of your neighbors that you lived...that lived by you on Basic?

Elanora: Across the street were the Crawfords, and Mr. Crawford evidently was some kind of a manager or something at the plant. And Jackie grew up to be...she worked, um, for a long time at the school district here in Las Vegas.

Interviewer: And Jackie is your sister?

Elanora: No, Jackie was just a friend. Um, the late Joan Swift, who used to be the County Recorder here for about twenty years, she was one of my best friends. And, um...

Interviewer: She lived by you?

Elanora: Not far. We were...not far. Her mother had a house similar to ours. One thing for sure...you didn't have to go around and compare houses very much.

Interviewer: (Laugh) No?

Elanora: Everybody lived in the same kind of house, you know.

Interviewer: And your father? What did he do? He worked for BMI. What did he do down there?

Elanora: Basic Magnesium. He was some kind of an engineer. And my mother was in the Payroll Office. I think she run the payroll.

Interviewer: And she, as soon as she moved to town she got started working there?

Elanora: Yes, in just a few months. I don't know how long it took her, just a few months. Uh-huh. And later, you know where you go to East, Lake Las Vegas? Across the road there, there was a mine there. Later she worked as a payroll person there, several years later. After I was married. My mother always worked as a payroll person. And when I got out of high school she got, she helped me get a job at US Finadium doing payroll. We were payroll people.

Interviewer: So there were a few time...there was a store, and that already...did you ever...could you buy everything you needed at the...at that store?

Elanora: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you ever go into Las Vegas shopping?

Elanora: No. It was a long time before Las Vegas had a, a medium sized market. Um, to tell you the truth, the government provided what...I thought they provided pretty well for us. Las Vegas was very small. People don't realize how small. Charleston wasn't paved. Fifth Street was only paved a few blocks. There was no sidewalks. I think that El Rancho and the old Frontier, they'd only been...the old Frontier had only been built a very short time before we got here. It was a long time before I even knew they existed. I did want to tell you one little story. Um, when I was a senior and several of the boys in high school quit high school and joined some of the Services, you know. They decided to have dances for the boys at Nellis Air Base. And so, they would round...I don't know who organized this. They would round up some of us girls and we'd get all dressed up in our formals and we would, uh. They had buses that run from Henderson to Las Vegas. And they were army colored too. And the women, and the windows were painted green also. And we would...they would load up a bus or two of girls dressed in formals and they'd drive us to Las Vegas behind the El Portal Theater there on Third or Fourth Street was a USO. They would bring the boys over from the Base who were all dressed up and we'd have like what you call a formal dance. And we had dance cards. And you'd fill up your dance card and you'd

dance all evening with boys who you never saw before and would never see again. And at the end of the evening the boys would get on the bus and go back to the Base and we'd get on the bus and ride back to Henderson. Now I did that a couple of times. I think they had those dances another two or three times. I didn't go again. But, um, that was our exposure to formal dances outside of the junior and senior prom. Then in the summer...I can't remember whether I was a junior or a senior. I think I must have been a junior because when I was a senior I went to Denver. A man from Las Vegas from the YMCA came to our door, knocked on our door, and he asked me if I would be in charge of some teenage activities for the town. He was kind of a quiet man and he didn't impart much information. He just told me...I don't know whether they furnished, help furnished the food or not. I don't remember if he gave me any ideas. All I remember is that I had three or four large parties down to the lake, down to, just straight down to the original Vegas Wash. And the kids would all come. They were, everybody figured to do something. Kids would all come about four or five o'clock in the evening. We would swim and eat and after it got dark everybody had their own party. (Laugh) We did this three or four times and he never...this is what I want to tell in my story because times have changed so much. He never called me on the telephone to say, "how are you doing, Elanora?" He never said how many kids are you...do you have going or what do you plan to do next. There was no communication between this man and me the whole summer. And my father didn't ask too many questions. He one time said to me, "you're kinda busy, aren't you, Ellie?" Uh, yes! And at the end of the summer the man knocked on my door again. Oh, he also gave me a couple of posters which I posted up somewhere. He knocked on my door again. I saw the man twice, once at the beginning and once at the end. And he said, "Well, I heard you had some pretty good parties." And I said, "Yes, we did." (Laugh) The conversation wasn't! (Laugh) I mean, this is just a drastic change from what would happen today, you know. We didn't have cell phones. We didn't call each other to make sure we were coming. Everybody just came. And we didn't have any parents call or drive out to see, "are you guys okay? Is anybody slipping around?" Nobody checked on us. We were absolutely and positively on our own. And I wanted to tell this story because things have changed so much today. You know parents wouldn't dream of doing that sort of thing today or letting their kids do that. Ooookaay. And I was a cheer leader, um, the last part of 1944 and '45, and we had...we didn't have any fancy cheers. We leaned on one girl who knew something about cheer leading and her parents or her father or somebody who taught her. She'd had a little experience. We were strictly on our own. We did finally get some sweaters. But the thing I remember most was poor Henderson never won a football game. I think they may have in our senior year, very few though, only one or two. It was always humiliating to have to play Las Vegas because they trounced us so badly.

Interviewer: Did...they did pretty well in basketball, though, didn't they?

Elanora: Yes. They did good in basketball and their recreation hall was really too small. We were really crowded in there being cheer leading and people standing against the wall and up on the stage. We could have used a lot more room. That's for sure, but you know the kids did the best they could and their heart was in it...really was in it. Yes. I don't know what else to tell you.

Interviewer: Well, what other kind of activities. You did the YMCA swim parties in the summer. What other activities did you do as a teenager? Did you have regular dances like, um...

Elanora: No.

Interviewer: There was nothing like a Victory Village...well, Victory Village wasn't there then, was it.

Elanora: At the end of the War...I should have written down that man's name. He was just on an old picture not long ago. At the end of the War, there was a huge building. I think they called it the War Memorial Building but I'm not sure. You know where Water Street comes down to a V and meets Boulder Highway, on the BMI side they had a huge building there. They had two or three, I remember going to two of them, huge War Memorial dances. Roy Rogers came. Some old comedian came...I can't remember his name. They had a band, live band. Omigosh, it was really exciting. Live band from Las Vegas! Played all evening and they had all kinds of food. And that was our celebration for the victory, the war victory. We thought it was a big deal. Honey, I don't know what else to tell you.

Interviewer: What about, um...I've seen pictures from, in the trailer parks and all the little kids getting together like at Halloween and Christmas time. Did they do special things for the kids?

Elanora: They may have. I was in high school and I didn't pay any attention to what happened to the little kids. I'll tell you that. So...(chuckle)

Interviewer: Okay. Well, so you graduated, graduated high school in 19...1945.

Elanora: Yes, Mr. Peck...I believe his name was Peck was the...and later Mr. Burkholder was principal. When I first got there, there was a man named Peck who was the principal. And then later Mr. Burkholder was principal. Burkholder was very community minded, well known for several years. Very well known.

Interviewer: Yes. You graduated and then you, um...what did you do?

Elanora: I got on the train and went to Denver. Stayed awhile, came back and went to BYU then in Utah. I came back at about Christmastime. Well, let's see...we don't want to make too long a story here. I'm thinking. I was here...I was out of high school about a year or more before I met my husband. He stayed in the Air Force a little longer than was demanded by most people, trying to find himself, was how he put it. And I met him at church and we got married in 1948.

Interviewer: You met him at BYU? Where did you meet him at?

Elanora: I met him in Las Vegas to church. When I got home from BYU, I decided to go to Las Vegas to church because I belonged to the LDS Church and they had...we didn't have too many young people in Henderson that belonged to the Church or who came, and I wanted to associate with younger people so I made friends in there. That's sorta the way I went. Um, I did tell my daughter a story. This is nothing exciting but, you know, when I worked at US Vinadium, I was living at home for a few months there. I had an old clunker of a car that didn't always start. I had a job...this was after I graduated, just a few weeks after I graduated. I got a job working for a dentist in Las Vegas. I'm trying to think of his name...Pace, Dr. Pace. A couple of times my car wouldn't start and I wore a little white uniform and a little white hat. So I'd walk down to what we call Lake Mead Boulevard now and I'd thumb a ride to Las

Vegas. Now my daughter just has a fit to think that her mother actually thumbed a ride. You know, I didn't think anything about it. In those days you didn't have to worry and I had a nurse's uniform on and in about two minutes a car would stop and somebody would say, "What's the matter? Your car won't start?" And I'd say, yes, and hop in and they'd take me to Las Vegas. (Laugh) You know, the dangers of life then were no...you know, almost unheard of. Very rare compared to the dangers of life today. I wouldn't dream of going out to the road and hitchhiking, even at my age today, you know. (Laugh)

Interviewer: Yeah. So you met your husband and got married in 1948 and you settled in Henderson?

Elanora: No. We lived in Las Vegas.

Interviewer: You lived in Las Vegas.

Elanora: Yes, we did. There is an article about me in the Review Journal. I'm trying to think what year ago it was. Because we lived out in the desert for awhile where the AB...B...ABCD...the D gates are at the airport. And so when they opened the D gates and they had a big party, there was an article about me in the...they called me the grandmother of the D gates. I sorta started that and so they said she calls herself the grandmother of the D gates. I did have an article in the Review Journal about that. Honey, there's nothing great for me to tell you.

Interviewer: What about when the war was on and you first moved to town and the war was still on, did there...did the town itself do anything for the war effort? Were there drives, um...

Elanora: Well you know everything was...not everything, but flour, sugar, gas...I can't remember what else. You know, they were all rationed and we had ration stamps. And since my mother worked she didn't use a lot of sugar stamps but she drove quite a bit to work, and she had a car of her own, so she would trade sometimes for sugar stamps for gas stamps. I don't know if that was legal or not but she did it anyway. (Chuckle) And there was a house down on Water Street somewhere that was the headquarters to go get your stamps, turn in your unused stamps, etc., etc. What do they call it? Anyway... rationing, those things were rationed. And, um...

Interviewer: So how did you qualify for stamps, for the stamps?

Elanora: I have no idea. I was just a teenager and my mother was in charge and I have no idea. I do remember the first summer. She had some younger brothers who were in the Merchant Marines, and they came and stayed with us a few weeks. And they wanted to go to Lake Mead swimming. My mother said that there was not enough gas for us to go traipsing around going to the lake every other day. And so they figured out how to drive up when you reach that first hill, how to coast all the way to Vegas Wash. And sometimes you coasted ten miles an hour. But they promised my mother they would only use so much gas and we would really coast and that's what we really did. They'd zoom up that hill, throw it in neutral, and we'd go put, put, put, put, put all the way to Vegas Wash because gas was rationed, you know. And one time when we were down there, a big Navy seaplane came in and landed on the lake and came right up to the ropes. It was, you know, where you swam was roped off, and, and the Navy boys got out and swam. Waved to us, you know (chuckle) and they swam awhile, got back on

this big seaplane and took off. (Laugh) I had no experience with Nellis Air Base or anything, except, you know, the civilian McCarran, McCarran Airport did not exist. You landed out to Nellis. And when I went to Denver for a few months that summer, I rode home instead because I worked delivering messages from the railroad station to all the airlines up and down whatever the street was. So I wanted to fly home. I figured I was a big girl. So I saved my money and I wrote to my mother and I said I'm flying home on Western Airlines. I'm going to arrive about midnight. You have to be sure and find me wherever it lands out to Nellis Air Base and I won't have a nickel with me. I'm spending all my money on this airline ticket. And, uh, my boyfriend gave me ten dollars before I got on the airplane so I had ten dollars with me. I think I had to change planes in Salt Lake but I don't remember. I'll tell you what I do remember. Wherever we landed out to Nellis, there was sand everywhere. I don't know how they found the strip but I'm sure there was an edge to it. But wherever he ended parking, there was sand all over the place and little sand dunes, etc., etc. How my mother and father found me I'll never know. (Laugh) But that was the airport in those days. You know, and it was a two motor airplane and when you landed the tail went down to the ground, you know, so you were kinda on a slant. And I think the airplane only held say between 35 and 40 people. I don't know...it was, it was not a big plane in those days. And that was my first excursion flying to Las Vegas.

Interviewer: Wow. Um, when the war ended, um, did your parents' jobs end? When they closed down BMI?

Elanora: Yes, my father later went to work for Stauffer Chemical Company. He was some kind of an engineer then. What would he...when he took us to see what he did, what he really did was watch dials. There was some kind of room with about a dozen dials. That's what he watch...that's what he did for several years. And my mother worked, like I said, at that mine that was out at...

Interviewer: Three Kids Mine?

Elanora: I don't think that was the name of it. But, you know, I don't know for sure. When you turn into Lake Las Vegas, it was across the street...was there...I can tell you a story about my mother.

Interviewer: OK.

Elanora: I'm trying to think of the name of the lawyer. He was a well known lawyer. He was Henderson, uh, he was in charge of Henderson legal things or something. When...okay, my husband was recalled in the Korean War and I later went to Japan and we lived in Japan for a year. And while I was gone to Japan my mother drove my car to work and back...out to the mine and back. She got a ticket for going eighty miles an hour. We bought...it was after the war and we bought a brand new Chevrolet car with kind of a bronze color. And so she drove my car while we were gone and she got this ticket for eighty miles an hour. She said I will never admit I was going eighty miles an hour. Clayburn, Clayburn was the name of the lawyer, and all the old timers would know who that is cause he was very well known in Las Vegas. And he was the lawyer for Henderson at the time. And she said she was going to go to court and nobody was ever going to get her to say she was going eighty miles an hour. Well, she did not know what she was getting into. And this is how she tells the story. That lawyer (and my mother was kind of a forward speaking woman, you know. We didn't doubt that she was going to have

something to say)...she said that lawyer stood up and he put his finger so close to my face I could have bit it off. And he said were you or were you not going eighty miles an hour? And I looked at him and I said, "Yes." (Laugh) That was our family story for I don't know how long. And later on I was called on a jury where Mr. Clayburn was one of the lawyers. I'll have to say he was a very forthright man. And he...when my mother told the story, I understood what she meant. (Chuckle) Honey, that's the only thing I have to say. That's the only thing I have written down here.

Interviewer: Let's see...

Elanora: I do have this quilt, if anybody wants to see it or has any curiosity or anything, it has about thirty or forty names on it from the old Henderson LDS Church. Their names are embroidered on this quilt. And if anybody wants to see it, they can call me up and I'll be glad to show it to them. There might be some grandchildren or great-grandchildren...

Interviewer: Well, would you, would you like to get it out. Is it accessible, we could film, film the, the quilt now if you?

Elanora: Okay. [I wish the date was on this quilt but I don't think it is. But I know it's 1959 to 1960.]

Interviewer: And that's when your parents went back to Mich...Michigan?

Elanora: This has the names on it... Here's Bob and Lorna Kesterson. Wasn't she mayor here for awhile? Well, her names on here.

Interviewer: Do you know who made it? Who made the quilt?

Elanora: Oh, I imagine the relief society did. Canon Blanche...Reverend Canon...he was on, on one of the Henderson committees for something quite a few years.

Interviewer: President Jim and Audrey Gibson?

Elanora: Yes, that's the Mayor's parents. Yes. Let's see. Fawn Reese...um, she died not long ago. They moved to Henderson, to Boulder City and I don't know what to say about them. Let's see who their daughter married...I can't remember...doctor or somebody. Let's see, she died not very long ago.

Interviewer: Gouse. Paul and Kara Marshall.

Elanora: I knew quite a few of these things, but I don't know how many other people would know...the Maynards.

Interviewer: Oh, yes. The Maynards.

Elanora: The Maynards lived here a long time. They had quite a few kids. I don't know what happened to the boys, I have no idea, you know.

Interviewer: Mrs. Maynard, she's living with her daughter in Henderson.

Elanora: Is she?

Interviewer: Yes. I'm hoping to interview her.

Elanora: She would know my father. She'll know who my father was. And my mother. Pratt and Winnie Prince. They knew my mother and father lived...is there a Blackmore Street?

Interviewer: Yes.

Elanora: They lived on Blackmore Street, clear over on old...not clear to the highway but a few blocks from it. We went over there because Pratt and Winnie Prince lived about two doors from mother.

Interviewer: Oh. Okay.

Elanora: One of the old gals...Is that their name? Was honored. What was the last...was it July the fourth? I think she was honored on July the fourth at some ceremony. They had it in Las Vegas. Oh, at the Veterans' ceremony at the graveyard, whatever they did, you know.

Interviewer: Oh, the Bunkers.

Elanora: Yes. I don't know what happened to them. They went to California. I don't know what happened to them. Anyway, dear, I have this blanket if anybody's interested. If Mrs. Maynard would like to see this quilt, I'd be glad to show it to her.

Interviewer: Okay.

Elanora: Or anybody else that you run onto, you know.

Interviewer: Okay.

Elanora: I just wish the date was on here. Like I say, it's not a fancy quilt, it's just...

Interviewer: No, but it's all hand quilted.

Elanora: It's kind of fun.

Interviewer: It is.

Elanora: You know. Kinda fun to have. My kids all enjoy seeing it. Some know...some grandchildren in the family...oh, and my two elderly uncles...one of them still lives here. He, he enjoys seeing it. They were later farmers. They came back after the war and they were farming in Henderson.

Elanora: I appreciate you coming.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much.

Elanora: Bringing the young man and all this equipment and everything.

Interviewer: Yes. I couldn't do it without, without Ed.

Elanora: I'm very glad, I'm really glad you know. I'm sure the library district is glad too. My step-granddaughter goes across the street from the library to the recreation center, wasn't that the multi-cultural recreation center.

Interviewer: The Multi-Gen.

Elanora: We certainly didn't have anything like that when I was in high school or junior grade school.

Interviewer: They had a library, though, right? A little, tiny...

Elanora: I don't remember. I really don't remember. We didn't have a lot of activities. I, I did enter the speech contest. I think I won either first or second. I can't remember, the speech contest they had. But I don't remember there being a swimming pool. I think the swim was out at the lake. I don't remember a library. I took piano lessons from a lady who lived two doors down.

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much. I appreciate...

Elanora: Shannon, you're very nice. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you came the first time.

Interviewer: Well...

Elanora: The night before I went to the hospital. And, you know, I didn't even know which hospital I was at. When I finally got hold of my daughter, she said well, where'd you get this number? Where are you? I said, "I don't know where I am." So I had to ask the woman in the bed next to me, "Where are we, anyway?"