

# **Henderson Memories:**

**City of  
Henderson  
Living Histories**

**VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT  
LIVING HISTORY INTERVIEW  
FATHER CAESAR CAVIGLIA  
FEBRUARY 1, 2003**

1                   MAYOR JAMES GIBSON: I'm here with Father Caesar Caviglia,  
2                   one of the most important public figures and church leaders in our  
3                   community, actually, in history. Father Caviglia, you have been involved  
4                   in both your work in the church and in civic activities for many years.  
5                   What was the City of Henderson like when you first came to town?

6                   FATHER CAESAR CAVIGLIA: Jim, before I came into town, I did a  
7                   social gram of the city, because I figured the church has to be an  
8                   instrument of change for everybody in the community, not just Catholics or  
9                   whoever it was there. At that time, we had two percent college graduates  
10                  living in the town, we had only six percent had even got to college,  
11                  unemployment was only 14 percent. We had a senior citizen population  
12                  that was about 12 percent at that time, and nothing was being done for  
13                  them. We had the ethnic awareness at that time was tearing the town  
14                  apart.

15                  So, we had to begin to do something to pull everything together.  
16                  So we rounded up -- one of the guys I rounded up to help me was your  
17                  dad. I said these are the problems that we have. How are we going to  
18                  deal with them? So we started the community college. We had to deal  
19                  with education. What was happening was the town -- the last hired were  
20                  the people from Henderson and the first fired were the people from  
21                  Henderson because the education level was so low.

22                  The plants, at that time in '72, they had the lay off. The plants had  
23                  a big lay off at that time. So, the political structure couldn't handle those  
24                  kinds of problems. The citizens had to participate in them. So, we started

1           that community college at the old St. Peters school, is one of the first  
2           things we did. Then, remember the old Victory Village behind the  
3           Cholla Chapel and St. Peters, there, I think some of those people were  
4           having maybe forty dollars at the end of the month. So we started the  
5           Meals on Wheels Program and got the senior citizen going -- senior citizen  
6           program going.

7                     People began to rally around the kind of things that had to be done.  
8           It began to be interested. The Chamber of Commerce got involved in it. A  
9           lot of the people that would make a little bit of money would move into Las  
10          Vegas, so we were losing those people. That's where we found the City of  
11          Henderson in 1972. So I rolled up my sleeves and dug in. Your dad  
12          rolled up his sleeves. And I said you've got to join the corporation I'm  
13          going to form and he said, what do I have to do? I says, just sign the  
14          minutes.

15                    MAYOR GIBSON: Now, you've had an opportunity to work very  
16          hard with families in both the civic way and, of course, through your  
17          church responsibilities. What is there about the family in Henderson that  
18          registers with you?

19                    FATHER CAVIGLIA: One of the problems - - families here all kind  
20          of work together. The place was small enough that the parents knew each  
21          other's children and kept on eye on those kind of things. What was  
22          happening, in the 1990 census, as you remember, I think there was about  
23          850 single-parent families. Big problem. Because what was happening

24

1           was the single parent was working while the youngster was out playing  
2           around. They didn't have that connection anymore, the family connection.

3                     One of the things that the churches did around here was to get  
4           these families working together. So the parents got to know each other,  
5           knew their children, knew each other's children a little better. There was  
6           some kind of value system being effected in the community. But if you  
7           didn't have that kind of cohesiveness -- I think that's one of the big  
8           problems we have now a days, everything is being delegated out to the  
9           schools or work or someplace else.

10                    One of the big problems I found in this whole valley was the parents  
11           were working. I was with Catholic Welfare back in the '60s. One of the big  
12           problems I found was the type of work that's being initiated in the  
13           community, or the valley here, was parents were gone, primarily, in the  
14           evening hours from say, 3:00 in the evening until midnight. And then they  
15           would be gone also on weekends. So, one or other of the parents was not  
16           with the family anymore. It seems to be a big problem. The churches and  
17           schools have to work together to bring those together.

18                    MAYOR GIBSON: There have been some interesting personalities  
19           who have contributed to Henderson successes over the years. Of course,  
20           you're one of those interesting personalities. What other folks have you  
21           worked with? Do you recall any particular projects that you had fun  
22           working on?

23

1 FATHER CAVIGLIA: We were on one of them together. You wrote  
2 me in on that one on the housing in Palo Verde Gardens.

3 MAYOR GIBSON: The senior citizen housing?

4 FATHER CAVIGLIA: The senior citizen housing. I had a little  
5 connection with Paul Laxalt, so immediately, you came over and said,  
6 we've got to tap Paul and see if he can give us some money for the  
7 housing on Palo Verde Gardens. And, then, of course, that grew into  
8 something more than we even thought it would be. Don Dawson took  
9 over. We had 40 units then.

10 MAYOR GIBSON: That's right.

11 FATHER CAVIGLIA: Then, I think we added on another 60 units. I  
12 remember telling you at that time, the Mormon Church from Salt Lake  
13 owned that property. I remember you trying to get that property away from  
14 Salt Lake. I says, now you know what the Vatican is like.

15 MAYOR GIBSON: You've not only had an important role in the  
16 work and the social fabric of the community, but you've also mentioned the  
17 community college. You were instrumental in helping us get a community  
18 college in Henderson. And you, actually, were willing to house it at  
19 St. Peter's for awhile.

20 FATHER CAVIGLIA: For eight years, yes.

21 MAYOR GIBSON: You've also worked on the State Board of  
22 Transportation.

23 FATHER CAVIGLIA: Department of Transportation, right.

24

1                   MAYOR GIBSON: What has been the role of that board and your  
2                   efforts with regard to Henderson?

3                   FATHER CAVIGLIA: One of the problems that we always had in  
4                   Henderson is we only had one road tying us in with Las Vegas. That was  
5                   Boulder Highway. I guess, probably one of the few efforts. I've been on  
6                   the board now for 14 years. I was always constantly trying to bring that  
7                   road out from -- remember the old I-15 or 515, it went as far as Tropicana.

8                   Then the next step was to leverage that money to bring it out as  
9                   far as Lake Mead Drive, then from there, Lake Mead Drive out to  
10                  Railroad Pass. I think that road -- and then when Bob Rodman got the  
11                  FAA money to start 215 going to I-15 from the airport, bring that in, that  
12                  brought in all the development on that south part of the town. Southwest  
13                  part of the town. Of course, Henderson now, has much grown from  
14                  17,000 in 1972 to, what, about 250,000 now?

15                 MAYOR GIBSON: Getting close to that.

16                 FATHER CAVIGLIA: Pretty close to that number. It's a different  
17                 town.

18                 MAYOR GIBSON: You're modest. You helped every inch of the  
19                 way getting that freeway money and getting the freeway alignments  
20                 worked out and getting commitment on the part of the State to add our  
21                 projects to the State Improvement Plan so we could actually get the  
22                 project built. The Lake Las Vegas project was a private development  
23                 project that you had a hand in. What was your role with regard to Lake  
24                 Las Vegas?

1                   FATHER CAVIGLIA: Craig Krisenbeck and Ken Beck were the two  
2 developers working for the Bass brothers and Ron Brodecker. They were  
3 turned down on one of the permits that they had to have to develop that.  
4 They already spent \$18 million on that project putting that dam in. It was  
5 the old Adair -- Carleton Adair had that project. I think he traded it over to  
6 the Bass brothers. And there were several people involved in that.

7                   One day, Craig Krisenbeck and Ken Beck came into the rectory.  
8 They had been turned down. They said, of all things, you have to see the  
9 priest. I'm sure they felt like the lepers in the miracle. You know, go show  
10 yourself to the priest. They probably thought they were lepers. But then  
11 we had to turn that thing around, so every Tuesday morning, we would  
12 meet at St. Peter's, because it was "neutral ground".

13                  Your dad would appear at those meetings. Occasionally,  
14 Phil Speight was there. So we had to organize ourselves because who  
15 was defeating us on that lake project was the Strip and also City of Las  
16 Vegas didn't want us to have the water that we needed, you know, to  
17 create that lake. I think also, Summerlin fought us on that. John Goalsby,  
18 I think, fought us on getting that water.

19                  So, I think in about three months' time, we had that thing turned  
20 around. When we came up for the water, I think if it was the flood control  
21 people had been the obstacle. So they changed their votes and we  
22 managed -- actually, the principal on that one was Bob Campbell and  
23 Bob Swadell. They were the instrument behind making the changes take  
24 place. We all met at St. Peter's for about three months until we got the



1            thing reversed. I think it's been a very profitable program out there. I don't  
2            know if they've made their money yet, but they put a lot of money into it.

3                    MAYOR GIBSON: It's one of the most beautiful places anywhere.

4                    FATHER CAVIGLIA: In the whole country.

5                    MAYOR GIBSON: You know, you -- I could never really  
6            summarize your contribution, your experience. It would take way too long  
7            to do that; it wouldn't be a summary.

8                    FATHER CAVIGLIA: That's a nice flattery, but probably not all that  
9            true, Jim.

10                   MAYOR GIBSON: How would you summarize your experience in  
11           Henderson?

12                   FATHER CAVIGLIA: Henderson was an easy place to work with.  
13           The people here were willing to do almost anything that you want. I  
14           probably came in at the right time, not because of myself, anybody could  
15           have done that. There are a lot of -- what was happening in the  
16           community, they developed things like Lou La Porta, Selma Bartlett, they  
17           were the parents of this town. A lot of good people had done a lot of good  
18           work ahead of them.

19                    There were a lot of cracks that people were falling through.  
20           Education was one of them. College education. Everything was going  
21           for -- one of the problems of a satellite community like Henderson was that  
22           everything was going to the main community like Las Vegas. We had to  
23           go shopping in Las Vegas if we wanted anything. Satellite communities  
24           have a tendency to be dependent upon a large community. We had to

1           become a large community in order to achieve a lot of the things.

2                       We couldn't -- one of the things if you'll notice, what we did here  
3           and you'll probably never find in any other place. The church groups work  
4           together here. Everybody kind of worked together. There was the little  
5           divisions we had among ourselves. They were artificial divisions we set  
6           up among ourselves. They disappeared when we started working on  
7           projects. We formed different little -- like that one on the Housing  
8           Authority for the public housing. We had a lot of people involved in that  
9           one, you know.

10                      And there were little things that separated us that kind of  
11           dissipated. We got things done. I think we were looking for the  
12           community more than we were looking for anything else. I mean, we look  
13           at the community, look how it's changed. It's a huge -- I mean, from about  
14           1990 until now, it's five times over, twenty times. Four times the size.

15                      MAYOR GIBSON: So, against the backdrop of that thought, what  
16           message would you want to convey to the tens of thousands of people  
17           who have moved here since the 1970s or '80s?

18                      FATHER CAVIGLIA: One of the things we lack. People have  
19           moved in and they were bringing in some of their own experiences into the  
20           community. But they have to remember the roots of this community. I  
21           think one of the tendencies of the whole Las Vegas valley is one of  
22           isolation. There is really a lot of isolation here. People are kind of in their  
23           little cells out there and not really tied in with anything else. I think one of  
24           the jobs the churches have to do -- and I think that's where the churches

1           have to fit in -- is to bring those people together to be divisive -- not  
2           divisive -- but to see the whole picture.

3                     One of the problems that Kenny Guinn is going to have -- Governor  
4           Guinn is going to have -- is on taxes now. People demand services. They  
5           don't want highways, they want driveways. They want private schools of  
6           the public -- you know, for public ages. They want -- that nuclear family  
7           creates a different kind of dimension here. There is probably a lack of  
8           cohesiveness because of that. We're a big sprawling community -- and  
9           the services -- the kinds of money that is needed now to have government  
10          function.

11                    The School District is building, what, one school a month. One of  
12          the largest School Districts probably in the country. About the fifth largest  
13          in the country, fifth or sixth largest in the country.

14                    Highways, we can't keep up with the roadways, the transportation  
15          here. Somebody has to pay for it. Government has to function, and I  
16          don't know what's going to happen.

17                    The water issue is going to be a big issue. People are going to  
18          have to work together and you can't do it all with money, but you have to  
19          do it with the kind of interest that took place here in Henderson. This was  
20          the American dream, Henderson was. It started out with a little capsule,  
21          a little community out there and isolated. Remember, it used to take  
22          15 minutes to get into Las Vegas. Now it takes about an hour and a half.  
23          But it has grown and it's become far more sophisticated.

24                    I was just looking at the census tracks. I think now instead of

1           having two percent college graduates, I think we have close to  
2           eight percent college graduates in the community. Which is, you know --  
3           people have to be involved. More and more involved.

4           MAYOR GIBSON: It seems like a common theme of your service.  
5           Your service has been to work cooperatively with all people. But  
6           connecting ourselves to our neighbor is an important aspect of preparing  
7           to do something good.

8           FATHER CAVIGLIA: You have to jump -- we look at the barriers as  
9           being insurmountable, but we reached a lot of barriers. I mean, a lot of  
10          people are willing to do that. You want them to do that in Henderson. You  
11          won't find that too much in the big city. This community seemed to have  
12          pulled it together. The little divisions that were there. You have to  
13          convince people.

14          I remember Glen Taylor was kind of the obstacle to building the  
15          community college. So, we had to get him roped in on being a big  
16          defender. And so, before we went to the Board of Regents I handed him a  
17          whole bunch of -- a whole box of letters. All he had to do was bring the  
18          letters up to the Regents and say, we want a community college. And I  
19          got him to do that. Then he became a big convert.

20          Same thing with the landscaping down the middle of the highway.  
21          Paul Laxalt had put that in one of the bills before he ran out of office.

22

1           Several of them were the detractors to the landscaping, but that actually  
2           headed for the development of the city, here. It made it a nice place to be.

3                   MAYOR GIBSON: Father Caviglia, did you have involvement in  
4           any work at all on the City of Henderson master plan at some point in  
5           time?

6                   FATHER CAVIGLIA: I was chairman of the regional master plan when  
7           Bob Gordon was the City Planner. At that time, so it wouldn't be helter  
8           skelter, where people could go for zoning and at least there'd be some idea  
9           that this area was zoned for residential, or this area was - - because what was  
10          happening is a mixture of industrial and commercial and residential all  
11          bunched into one.

12                   What we tried to do with that committee was to spread out, go beyond  
13          the boundaries of what was in Henderson. Put industrial where industrial  
14          belonged and put commercial where commercial belonged. We needed a lot  
15          more parks. We needed a lot more space, open space, for people. You  
16          know, we had all kinds of open space outside of the community, outside of  
17          the boundaries of the residential area. What we needed is to spread the  
18          interests of the community further up - - further beyond its own little  
19          boundaries. Because there was plenty of land out there. Remember, we had  
20          land that went clear out to I-15 out towards - - in that general direction. So  
21          you had to open up that whole community.

22                   MAYOR GIBSON: Did you get a lot of citizen involvement during that  
23          time?

1                   FATHER CAVIGLIA: We had quite a bit of citizen involvement. I'll tell  
2                   you where we had the citizen involvement was when we developed the  
3                   Convention Center. We had no place to meet in this town. We had the  
4                   gymnasiums of the high school. That's about all we had. And that always  
5                   conflicted with schedules that they had. So when we went for the Convention  
6                   Center, we had a lot of flack on that one. I remember we even got flack from  
7                   the newspaper, Morry Zenoff said we had - - yeah, it was Morry Zenoff who  
8                   had the newspaper - - said we're going to have a white elephant here. I don't  
9                   think the City ever had to spend a dime on that.

10                  We went to the bars and got them to chip in on - - I think it was \$50 a  
11                  machine in the gambling casinos. And I think we put a \$2 limit on the motel  
12                  rooms, so that got us enough money to run the place. Then we went, of  
13                  course, the Convention Center - - we almost tried to railroad the Convention  
14                  Authority to give us a million dollars to build that. That's one of the few days I  
15                  wore my collar.

16                  MAYOR GIBSON: If you had an opportunity to sit with someone, say,  
17                  who just moved here, is there a story that you would share with them that is  
18                  kind of a fond memory.

19                  FATHER CAVIGLIA: One story I remember vividly - - it's with your  
20                  dad. Your dad was, I think, regional representative for the Mormon Church at  
21                  that time. It was one of the elections - - he was - - your dad was the worst  
22                  campaigner I've ever seen. He would sit so taciturn and quiet about things,

1           you know. And he'd give you the very brief answers to very complex  
2           problems.

3                     Someone called me on the phone one day and said, we're gonna get  
4           rid of that Mormon. And I came down to the telephone line on the person and  
5           called up your dad immediately and I says, you're in trouble. He said, what's  
6           the trouble we're in? I says, someone's trying to get you out of your job. Can  
7           you - - I think he was majority leader of the Senate at the time - - plus I had  
8           known your dad for a number of years prior to that.

9                     So he says - - well, I says, what are you doing for lunch today. And he  
10          says, nothing. So I went down to Pacific Engineering at that time, and I was  
11          wearing my collar, which I rarely wore around here. And he said, boy you're  
12          serious, aren't you. So, we went through - - I was president of the Chamber.  
13          I had been voted president of the Chamber just the year before. So we went  
14          down the street. I'd meet him every Monday morning - - every Monday at  
15          noon we'd go down one of the restaurants in town and make sure we were  
16          seen together.

17                    Back in the '40s there was a big division between Mormons and  
18          Catholics on the Berkeley Bunker, Governor Carvell issue. That became a  
19          real bitter pill to swallow as kids going to school, one thing or another. You  
20          know, a big rivalry. And the religious thing came into play at that time. That  
21          shouldn't have happened in any community.

22                    So I'd walk down - - we'd go down the street and I'd be wearing my  
23          collar all that time and, of course, we'd go into a few of the saloons. So up in

1           the Senate, I'd visit occasionally. I'd visit up there for certain issues that we  
2           wanted to have for here, for Henderson. And your dad would always have  
3           me sit next to him. One day, that Senate body he introduced me as his  
4           campaign manager. So I says, could I have the microphone. He says,  
5           certainly. I says, gentlemen of the Senate. I said, I'm gonna let you know I  
6           dragged your dad - - I dragged Jim Gibson out of every saloon in town. And  
7           he said - - that big grin he had - - and he says, yes and he dragged me into all  
8           of them, too.

9                         That's the kind of thing we had to do in this community because you  
10           can't have those kind of rivalries in a small - - in any kind of community, if you  
11           want to be civil about anything - - political - - political entity work at all.

12                        MAYOR GIBSON: I'd like you to reflect, kind of in conclusion, on how  
13           living in Henderson has given you, and others that you're aware of, an  
14           opportunity to live the American dream.

15                        FATHER CAVIGLIA: I think one of the best things that ever happened  
16           in Henderson, as far as I was concerned, is that we could work together. We  
17           could pull a lot of things together. We needed a lot of things here and we  
18           didn't depend upon - - we needed the government to run it, but we had an  
19           impact upon the government entities, the various divisions of government.  
20           Like the college.

21                        A few successes - - maybe old Saul Lalinski (phonetic), the old  
22           Communist was half right. Get a few successes, you know, and then you  
23           have more and more successes.



1           I mean, look what's happened to this little town, though. We have a  
2           community college. We have a College Drive. We're getting a new - - it  
3           makes me laugh about the new State College. Everybody's worried about  
4           how many millions of dollars - - we started that with nothing - - the community  
5           college. We had nothing going for us, except we had that one old St. Peter's  
6           school building. Used that and we used the - - remember the old Burkholder  
7           Junior High - - we used that for a while. And finally we got - - the first money  
8           we got - - we started the college in 1972. The first money we received was  
9           1980. That was - - your dad got \$1.7 million dollars for that first little building  
10          and the City gave us 76 acres up there. That whole area now is developed.

11          And bringing in the freeways, that's helped an awfully lot, develop this  
12          town. Maybe it's too big. I don't know. You know, it's too scattered out there.

13          MAYOR GIBSON: Well, I'd say that your experience demonstrates, in  
14          respect of the question about the American dream, that one man can make a  
15          difference. In this democracy, you've demonstrated that.

16          We appreciate that. We're all beholden to you for your contribution.

17          FATHER CAVIGLIA: It's been a nice town, an awfully nice town. I still  
18          consider this my hometown more than I do Ely. The only difference is there's  
19          no traffic up there and there's traffic down here. And as we get older, we get  
20          a little more hesitant around traffic.

21          MAYOR GIBSON: We appreciate you coming down and being here  
22          with us.

1 FATHER CAVIGLIA: It's been great being with you, Jim. And, of  
2 course, the old - - the Gibson boys have always been friends of mine, going  
3 way back. I think - - I think, matter of fact, your dad is from Ely, isn't he?

4 MAYOR GIBSON: Well, they lived - - my grandfather had the open-pit  
5 mine.

6 FATHER CAVIGLIA: Right.

7 MAYOR GIBSON: So that's - - they were in another part of the state  
8 for a while as he was superintendent of the mine. I don't know if they ever  
9 lived in Ely. I think they did.

10 FATHER CAVIGLIA: They did live in Ely, yeah. They did live in Ely.  
11 So we had some common roots even when we first started. We started  
12 working way back on different things back in the '60s, your dad and I.

13 Matter of fact, the water system that goes through the university right  
14 now is because of the two of us. That's, I think, 1963. The well out at the  
15 university went dry and the Mormons and the Catholics had adjoining pieces  
16 of land. The university had no money, back in the sieve, that was 40 years  
17 ago. They had no money. They had that one - - they had two buildings there.  
18 The Archie Grant Building and the Frazier Hall. I think they were building the  
19 library at that time and had that gymnasium on the side of the museum.

20 And we brought the water over from an 8-inch pipeline from  
21 Flamingo Road, across the back part of the building, over that corner where  
22 Harmon, I think, Harmon and University Street, I think, come together.

23

1           Because we had property on those two corners, the two of us. I think we paid  
2           for that. I think we paid \$5,000. It would probably cost \$500,000 to do it now.

3           MAYOR GIBSON: Yeah, or more.

4           FATHER CAVIGLIA: So we brought it back, because the university, I  
5           think, was living on wells at that time. I think sand got into the wells, and that  
6           was the end of the wells and we brought the water to them.

7           They had no money. I don't think they ever paid us back, either.

8           MAYOR GIBSON: With interest, that might be enough to help us with  
9           the State College.

10          FATHER CAVIGLIA: I wish we could have it, you know.

11          MAYOR GIBSON: Thank you.

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