

Henderson Memories:

**City of
Henderson
Living Histories**

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

LIVING HISTORY VIDEO

HAL SMITH

FEBRUARY 1, 2003

MAYOR GIBSON: I'm here with Hal Smith. Hal has been a resident of Henderson since 1955?

MR. HAL SMITH: Fifty-three.

MAYOR GIBSON: Fifty-three. And has been very important to the fabric of this community. Successful businessman, elected to the State Assembly, served in the State Senate, a distinguished career in public office.

Thank you for sharing some time with us, Hal.

MR. SMITH: Jim, it's such a pleasure to be with you, having known your dad and worked with him and knowing your mother so well and the things that they accomplished for Henderson and now that you're accomplishing. I really appreciate it.

As you, perhaps, know, I came here with kind of a head start. My wife's parents had been here since 1942. Lived in the fifth house on Nevada Way. So Henderson was kind of a home to us. And I was recalled to the Navy during the Korean War and brought the family here and they stayed with their mother while I was overseas.

Coming off that active duty in '53, October '53, I came to Henderson, of course, to be with my family and resume my life as a civilian. Joined the Naval Reserve immediately, was employed at Lake Mead Base, which is a Navy base, with atomic support agency. So it all fit right in. Henderson has been my home since that very early days.

During the first ten years I was here, I had a kind of a head start because of mother's being here, mother-in-law. Ruth Ball was extremely

active in the community. I think the first five years I was here I was Ruth Ball's son-in-law. The next five years I was probably Tina Smith's husband. I'm not even sure I ever regained total recognition. I'm still Tina's husband. And that's been going on for sixty-some years.

I went into business here - - the lumber business in 1964. And in '66, at the urging of Taylor, and Hampton, and Bartlett, I ran for the State Assembly. It was during those years that, I think, I probably accomplished more - - some good and some evil - - for the city of Henderson.

I recall one thing, even as early as 1958, the City had been urged to bring in the donut hole, the plant groups. And in '69 your father and I had an agreement with Jim - - not Jim French - - but the manager of Timet - - I'll think about it in a moment - - to permit annexation. And we prepared the bills, have everything ready. And I heard the bill in the Assembly side first. I was chairing the Government Affairs Committee. And Don Richards, our fireman, Chief of the Fire Department, came up and said, I don't have the equipment. I don't have the manpower. I don't have the training staff to take that responsibility underway. And fortunately, the bill failed.

I look back at it now, and the financial burden that we would have if we had continued in that vein. Fortunately, we didn't. A fireman saved us.

MAYOR GIBSON: Hal, from your early days in business in Henderson, what were some of the challenges that business in Henderson experienced in the early '60s?

MR. SMITH: Well, the marketplace was kind of limited. Our growth hadn't really started yet. Shopping in Las Vegas was easier and more established. And competing with the Las Vegas established business was more difficult. But we all managed. Our businesses all seemed to thrive over a long time.

Henderson has been - - it was called a bedroom community, and I guess that's really not too bad a name. It was home. It was a place to raise children. In my first years here, I had been active in establishing the Presbyterian church and we were fairly active in the church. Eventually, built a facility for us. Prior to that, we had been meeting in the Old Victory Hall Community Center, if you can recall that.

MAYOR GIBSON: Where was the Victory Hall Community Center?

MR. SMITH: It's where Kmart - - where Wal-Mart is now. About that location, very close in there, in Victory Village.

And across the Lake Mead was Carver Park and it was a summer organization. Had a market there, Reams ran the market, if you remember them. Just one of them is still alive, I think. They're very active in the business.

MAYOR GIBSON: From your earliest time, where did you first live in the city?

MR. SMITH: The second month after I was here, they were completing the houses in tract one, which is across the highway. And I bought a house on Elm Street. It cost me just a little less than \$9,000, which,

a few years later, I sold it for about 13 and moved up on Major Street to be closer to the high school. I got tired of transporting kids back and forth to school, so I thought that little edge would help. But it didn't really. Kids got old enough to buy a car.

MAYOR GIBSON: Did you have a partner in your business?

MR. SMITH: Hal Werzer. One of the few plant managers. He was with DDT production down in the plant, which was Stauffer Chemical. He was the plant manager for the DDT production plant. Went to Mexico for five years and established a plant down there and then came back again to Henderson. But one of the things we didn't have during those years was a number of the plant managers living in Henderson. They were living in Boulder City, Las Vegas. So Hal was one of the few that did. And I appreciated that.

We started with Jack Miller and Hal Werzer and Hersch Trumbo and George - - can't think now - - built the golf course up there, or started building it.

MAYOR GIBSON: I've understood that there was some manual labor involved where today, heavy equipment would be doing the work.

MR. SMITH: We raked rocks. We carried rocks off the field. Now they grind them up and reuse them back right in the soil. No, it was physical. It was a labor of love. And I don't play golf. Haven't yet. I've never played on that course. It's kind of amazing.

MAYOR GIBSON: What was it like to raise a family in Henderson in the '50s?

MR. SMITH: Well, my family is kind of close knit. We communicated with each other at dinner in the evening. We participated in our church activities. We didn't have the problems with dope and things of that - - my children are all non-smokers, all non-drinkers. They didn't take after their dad. I had the misfortune of smoking for 50 years and I wear this thing now because of it. So, it was a good place to raise children.

MAYOR GIBSON: Do you recall the grocery stores that were downtown and where they were situated? Any of the other businesses?

MR. SMITH: Yeah. There was a clothing store established where the Rainbow Club is now. And that was a grocery store also at one time. And there was drug store across the street. There was a grocery store in back of the drug store before the lodge bought it. That was closed. The post office was where the bank is now. The original bank was on the corner that is now a vacant lot. Hersch Trumbo's telephone company was where the telephone company still is, but it was the entire company then.

Which reminds me that one of things I had to do as an assemblyman was get a horse track. It was quite an effort. Selma Bartlett told me one day, she said, Hal, you've got to do that, or you'll never come back up here. And I believed her. We, unfortunately, ran into the fact that the horse racing was not going to be profitable and, in fact, it would be costly. We had an interim period where we were going to allow dog racing. And that was even more

difficult than getting horse racing. But we did get it through. It, eventually, failed on the - -

MAYOR GIBSON: But they, actually, built the track.

MR. SMITH: Oh, yes. It was an operating track.

MAYOR GIBSON: Hal, they actually built that horse or dog track in Henderson. Where was it actually situated?

MR. SMITH: Well, if -- I guess, if you went straight east of Smith's Food King you'd be about on it, it would be very close in there. It's between where Kmart is now and Smith's Food King across the now existing road. It's houses and more houses and more houses.

MAYOR GIBSON: It's probably not too far from the Clark County Museum.

MR. SMITH: No. It would be in the same neighborhood.

MAYOR GIBSON: If you had an opportunity to sit with a brand new resident, somebody who just moved here, tomorrow and share an experience you had in Henderson about Henderson, in an effort to help that person understand this community, what experience would you share?

MR. SMITH: I think the thing that I would share is it's a community that has people that get together and communicate. I think that's - - a word friendly or not. I don't know, I'm not sure. I think we are. If we take the trouble to meet our neighbor, you'll find there's some association. You'll find friends. And it's open that way.

I think when the contest was on to name this community, “A place to call home,” that’s a good slogan. It is. It’s been home to me for 50 years. It’s been home to my family for 50 years. And I have my entire family here. All my children were home today. Pete flew in from Maryland last night. Vicky came up from San Diego last night. They are here to celebrate my 86th. So, I am very thankful to have kids around.

MAYOR GIBSON: And happy birthday.

MR. SMITH: Thank you.

One other thing that I really had fun doing was the Lake Adair project. And I don’t know whether that’s been brought up by any of your former other guests or not.

MAYOR GIBSON: Tell us about what you’re talking about.

MR. SMITH: Carlton Adair got a section of land from the federal government, four square miles, and a little water rights with it. He envisioned building a dam at the bottom of the Las Vegas Wash and building a community there. But he was just never able to really get it accomplished.

And the legislation that we adopted created an umbilical cord from the existing city boundaries out to that area so that we could include that in the city of Henderson, which we did. There was a trigger mechanism. And I don’t know exactly how that went. I can’t remember that. The city would be renamed Lake Adair. It had lots of pros and a lot of cons on that. The boys in office were really hot to do it. I can’t say that all of the public was that hot to

do it. Everything was done legislatively except the tree ring of the change of names.

MAYOR GIBSON: Lake Adair is - -

MR. SMITH: Is now Lake Las Vegas.

MAYOR GIBSON: The dream, actually, was fulfilled.

MR. SMITH: Somebody else did it, but it was done. Some man dreamed it, provided the access to do it and it was done. So, that was a plus.

MAYOR GIBSON: Hal, you've had the opportunity to live here and be a businessman and a civic leader. How has your experience in Henderson allowed you to fulfill the American dream?

MR. SMITH: Well, everything has been helpful. That's hard to say. I don't know that it's that helpful today, but it was then. When I needed a building permit, I'd go down and see one person. I'd get a set of plans, pay a few dollars, and have a building permit. The inspector would come around and inspect me and determine whether or not I was doing it properly. It was just nice, it was home.

The people at city hall, there were very few, really busted their tail feathers to help you out and keep you going, and that was helpful. The schools were excellent. We had our own school board or school district, you know, at that time. Glen Taylor was extremely active in that school thing. And I can't remember what year Gal Gray (phonetic) was able to sell us on consolidation, but we did, we consolidated. I don't know if that's been good or bad, but we did it. There are attempts now to undo it with justification, I think.

It helps morale if people feel that they have immediate or very quick access to the fount of government, whether it's city hall or the school board. I guess that's what has been so helpful about Henderson. Particularly during the period of time that I was active in doing these things, was the fact that it was our servant. It responded to us. It helped us out.

Last night we had an incident at the house that was very unexpected and unusual. Two girls came to our backdoor and pounded on it saying they were about to be beaten. They were pretty scruffy looking little girls, but they were there seeking protection. We called 911. And just in a few moments, two young police officers were there. I don't know what occurred after that, but those are things that are typical of Henderson. Immediate response to your needs, and I like that.

MAYOR GIBSON: Hal, if you were to reflect on, maybe, just a couple of milestone happenings, occurrences in the city of Henderson over the years, particularly, in the early years that were milestone occurrences, in your mind.

MR. SMITH: Almost everything we do is, in some way or another, a milestone. It's different. We used to be able to drive downtown to the UP Depot in nine minutes on Boulder Highway. There was no speed limit. Straight line, no traffic, no lights. And suddenly we get lights, and so we're slowing up a little bit. I remember the first one in Henderson, Boulder Highway and Lake Mead. Things changed.

The first big market we had was a milestone. That's over there and now all practically defunct. It's at the corner of Lake Mead and Boulder Highway. The stores are closed; it's all gone. That was a huge market at the time. We had a grocery store open in Henderson, in the old city. It was a milestone at the time.

One of the things that - - you talk about people. We had a very active new priest in the Catholic Church. Father Caesar came. And he was a milestone and he still is. When your dad was running for office, his only problem was in the primaries, as you know. So we would all gather around at Caesar's convenience and put on a show to get our wishes accomplished.

Selma Bartlett is somebody that Henderson has been her child. She has loved it and she's spoken about it. She gets people to do things whether you like to do it or not. We were having a feud one time with the architecture on the library and the city hall. Rosa was not talking to Lorna and Lorna was not talking to Rosa. They insisted - - Selma got me and she said, Hal, you've got to go down and talk to those people and get them together. You've got to do it. Okay. And I did. And I think I probably lost three friends in doing it, but I got them together. Whether it accomplished it or not, I don't know.

There was the first series of federal lands above the railroad track that were for sale in five-acre lots. That started to move the population and the housing up over that way. That was new. That was an event.

I think in the mid '70s, Green Valley, the master planning of that community was another one of those things that boosted us.

Each passing year, the events that occur are more carefully planned and are on a grander scale, and with more cooperation than they've been in the previous years. The City Council now has aggressively gone out to do parks and recreation things that people need in their daily lives and they want, and are succeeding. Where we had just been barely stepping on it before.

I've been privileged to attend most of the grand opening ceremonies, and they are just excellent facilities and are being used. That's the important thing. They're out there.

MAYOR GIBSON: Hal, fairly recently, you were honored by the Clark County School District with an elementary school in your name. Tell us how that feels, what that experience is like.

MR. SMITH: Well, you know, in the first part of the '70s, an assemblyman by the name of Swackhamer eventually became our Secretary of State, and I decided to go back to Washington and tackle the federal slot machine tax.

The federal government had assessed \$250 per year on coin-operated machines. And we endeavored, for a number of years, to get that money back for Nevada. Bill and I just happened to hit at the right time and were successful in getting the return of that money to Nevada for education. The first \$5 million went to the university system, everything else after that in the first part went to the K-12. That now amounts to in excess of \$30 million a year, which is an amazing amount of money. It was supposed to be used for augmenting education in both the K-12 and the university.

In '83, in the legislation's infinite wisdom and need for money, they put it in the general fund so it now is part of the general fund. But that recognition is what caused them to determine them to name a school for me. The unfortunate part about it, they said, you live in Henderson and we know that, but your activities were kind of statewide and we've got a new location out there by Sam's Town and we'll do it. So, the 18th of February, two years ago, the school was dedicated. The dog that I had was a Siberian husky, and his picture is a great big circle in the front of the school, so the kids are known as huskies.

I go out about once or twice a month and I read to classes and see the kids. They all talk about Moki. It's kind of fun. It's kind of nice. It's one of the things that comes to you in your later years. And I like it.

MAYOR GIBSON: It's nice that your contributions can be recognized, at least, in part while you're still with us. And you're very deserving. You've made a tremendous contribution. We appreciate what you've done.

MR. SMITH: Jim, I'm going to say something, and probably it's not part of this. But I'm going to say it anyway. Your father was well established in the legislature when I got in. He and I, at opposite ends of the hall, served the same committees. Your dad was an inspiration and he was a leader and a true statesman. And I rode back and forth. We would ride back and forth then, we didn't fly back and forth. We'd spend five or six hours with each other every weekend.

He was more than you want to know. Your mother was just the thing.
Thank God you're a combination of the two of them. And I've told you that
before. Thank you for that and thank them for that.

MAYOR GIBSON: That's kind of you. Thank you.