

Henderson Memories:

**City of
Henderson
Living Histories**

CITY OF HENDERSON
LIVING HISTORY INTERVIEW
MARCH 25, 2003
MAYOR GIBSON
PART 2

1 INTERVIEWER: Do you think the community got something special
2 out of the fact that it was a plant community, and that this plant had been so
3 instrumental in World War II and a certain sort of pride, you know, and just the
4 cohesiveness of everybody kind of working together, playing together, going
5 to the Youth Center and the pools together?

6 MAYOR GIBSON: I think the plants were an important part of our lives
7 back then. My father worked at the plants. My neighbors' parents worked at
8 the plants, and some of them worked in other places. But the economy of the
9 city - - and I don't really mean just the money. I don't remember what it was
10 like for merchants when things were difficult at the plants. But I do remember
11 that the general welfare of the community was challenged when there would
12 be some labor unrest, or when one of the plants would shut down for a time
13 because it didn't have contracts and it wasn't producing.

14 In fact, I remember the congregations, the churches in Henderson
15 would pray that the plants would get - - the companies would get contracts
16 and the people could go back to work. Or if there was a strike going on, that
17 somehow it would be settled so the people could go back to work. It was kind
18 of an interesting kind of thing. While not all of us were dependent like is
19 depicted in some of the coal-mining towns where everyone worked for the
20 company. That really wasn't how it was. Still we were all close enough to
21 one another that when the neighbor was out of work, we all knew he was out
22 of work and that we were hoping that something would change and he'd get
23 back to work.

1 INTERVIEWER: Moving back to your school days, can you walk us
2 through the different schools you went to and something you remember about
3 each school.

4 MAYOR GIBSON: When we moved to Henderson, I had been in
5 kindergarten in Las Vegas at the 5th Street School, which is where the
6 Federal Building is today. And we moved out to Henderson and the school
7 that I was zoned into was Basic Elementary School, which is now McCaw
8 Elementary. And it is still a functioning school. I remember that the
9 playground was dirt. I remember that they had a gymnasium in that school - -
10 which they don't do anymore - - with a higher ceiling, a regular gym. It wasn't
11 a full-sized gym.

12 I remember the - - you know, I remember my teachers. I remember
13 the class rooms. We had a lot of fun at Basic Elementary. I was there just
14 two years, more or less, and they opened - - we moved down to Valley View,
15 and the first school I attended down there is what is now Robert Taylor
16 Elementary, but which was named Park Village Elementary at the time.
17 It was another school that was built after the same general model. And we
18 had a wonderful time.

19 I did not get to walk to school as a kindergartner or in my first grade
20 year. But when I got a little older in the 2nd and 3rd grade, very often mother
21 would let me walk with, you know, with my buddies. And we had to walk
22 across what seemed to be a great expanse of open desert to get to
23 Robert Taylor Elementary because there hadn't been development there

1 Today, Grove is built out, Ivy, Juniper, Cola, Linden, Metropolitan,
2 those are all streets now that are built on the desert area that we had to cross
3 in order to get to Park Village.

4 And then they opened up what was then Valley View Elementary
5 School, which was just a block and a half away from my home. That school is
6 now C.T. Sewell Elementary. I was a sixth grader, so I was in the oldest
7 class in the school. That was the school I graduated from elementary school.

8 And then I attended Henderson Junior High School, which was - - from
9 the time I attended junior high was here on the campus where our City offices
10 are today. It had been the original high school. When the new high school
11 was built over at what is now known as Burkholder Junior High School, they
12 put the junior high here. And then I went from here to the high school at the
13 old Basic High School or what is now Burkholder.

14 INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about high school, one
15 thing?

16 MAYOR GIBSON: I had a great time in high school. Probably my
17 funnest year was my senior year. I remember the - - I was the student body
18 president my senior year, and I probably acted like I thought that was a big
19 deal. I've learned since to think differently.

20 In the early '60s and through the middle '60s, and I'm sure since then,
21 Basic High School was recognized as a really fine high school. Our academic
22 performance was good, even, maybe better than good. I remember the
23 school received some awards for academic performance. I don't remember

1 today what they were, but we felt like we could compete with anybody and I
2 remember my year, we did. We had winning seasons in most all the sports
3 and we had - - in that year the Clark County School District began putting
4 together a group of youth that came together to share and learn a little bit
5 about leadership.

6 And our principal, Mr. Dooley, put together a leadership course, and
7 the kids that were in my class that were in student leadership attended an
8 early morning class where he taught us about being a good leader. And we
9 went into Las Vegas and all the student body presidents from across the
10 valley, and there weren't that many schools in those days, but we were all
11 together. We had an opportunity to make new friendships. I remember
12 dating girls who went to Las Vegas High School. And we knew kids at all of
13 the schools because the place was so small. I mean, Las Vegas, itself, was
14 not all that large.

15 INTERVIEWER: What would you tell us about the town in the '60s?

16 MAYOR GIBSON: Well, in the 1960s, I would say - - at least in the
17 middle '60s and beyond - - the city began to, maybe, be a little more than a
18 factory town.

19 I think that up until that time, fairly said, we were more of a plant
20 community, that is, the industrial community and in the period from 1965 or so
21 on, it seemed to me. Now I have to admit that it may be because I was
22 getting a little older and I was noticing other things and seeing the world a

1 MAYOR GIBSON: '66. I graduated from high school in 1966.

2 INTERVIEWER: Can you tell us a little bit about the '70s.

3 MAYOR GIBSON: The '70s were really kind of the beginning of the
4 second significant period of the life of the city. When the federal government
5 made land available to us, we then could begin to spread our wings some and
6 opportunity became kind of the watch cry. We were able to sell land to folks
7 who would invest in the community. And, of course, the most significant
8 of those who purchased tracts of land during that time would be Hank
9 Greenspun and his family.

10 Some time in the early '70s, I want to say, they built a golf course. I
11 think that Howard Hughes' company had something to do with that. And not
12 long after the golf course, the planning had been initiated and we started
13 seeing the actual development, and then construction, and then home
14 ownership in what is now Green Valley.

15 That changed the entire landscape of the city. It changed the
16 demographics of the city. And it really made us a much newer place. We
17 began to renew - - and that's something that it was time to have happen. The
18 homes that we were living in -- there were some of them that were built, of
19 course, in the early '40s, the older Townsite-style homes. And then the other
20 homes that were built out here were built in the early '50s. And there hadn't
21 been much else. There were some homes that were built in the early '60s,
22 but a few of them. And then, finally, in 1970, we began to see the new styles
23 and new architecture and a new commitment to the development of the city.

1 INTERVIEWER: When Hank Greenspun first made the purchase,
2 there was a fair amount of controversy about Green Valley and,
3 geographically, there was a bit of a chasm, too, because the County and the
4 big plot of land in between and, you know, Water Street area and the Green
5 Valley area were kind of separate. Do you recall anything about some of the
6 early concerns of Green Valley, and then later, how that kind of moves into
7 look at what this is doing for our community?

8 MAYOR GIBSON: In order to really appreciate what happened with
9 the development of Green Valley, you have to remember that we had
10 contiguity but we didn't have a complete contiguity with the land that became
11 Green Valley. There was a lot of land that was not in the incorporated city
12 along Lake Mead Drive. In fact, my grandfather and the company that he
13 founded had, I think, 800 or 1000 acres of land that was all in Clark County
14 until the '90s or the very, very late '80s.

15 When we did an annexation agreement and brought that property into
16 the city - - and there were, of course, other land owners - - quite a number of
17 them. And that entire tract of land that we could say runs from
18 Boulder Highway to Stephanie in the east west direction and from, let's say
19 Lake Mead to Russell Road, it was mostly Clark County in those days. So
20 there were concerns. How do we get water and sewer up there and maintain
21 it as a municipal service? And there were some who thought that the City
22 shouldn't do that. Fortunately, the City had the good sense to do it.

1 The real conflicts - - obviously, there were political issues and conflict
2 back at the time that the City made the commitment to the development of
3 Mr. Greenspun's property, but the real conflict really arose as people began
4 to buy new houses in master-planned communities. And you contrast that
5 with what we had over here in the older part of the city, and people over on
6 this side of the city saw all the new amenities going in over there and
7 wondered why the City wasn't doing for this side of the city what was
8 happening over there. Not really appreciating the fact that the developer was
9 building all of that out to add value to his development.

10 It was in that time frame that people who lived, mostly it was the
11 people who lived in Green Valley, liked the Green Valley address. Henderson
12 still was an industrial town. We still had a cloud. Some of them began to talk
13 about living in Green Valley. In fact, there were some who wanted to secede
14 from the city of Henderson and become a city of their own and become
15 Green Valley. And when they started that kind of talk, I think, there were a lot
16 of people in the older part of the city who thought good riddance. Let 'em.

17 Fortunately, we were able to work to mend most of that. And, I think,
18 today - - while there are still people who live in Green Valley, or Green Valley
19 Ranch, or Seven Hills and Anthem, I think those help us in the way of
20 landmarks - - identify where they live, but people are quite proud to live in the
21 city of Henderson.

22 I think that the city has done a marvelous job of overcoming a very
23 difficult issue and we have - - it's not a homogenous community, that is, we're

1 not all the same everywhere. But I think that's part of the character of the
2 city. That's what attracts me to the city. It's not the same from one end to the
3 other.

4 INTERVIEWER: The '80s is when Green Valley really started to roll,
5 and then Lake Las Vegas was starting to get kicked off, and it seemed like
6 the town was pretty - - immense momentum. I don't remember the exact
7 population, but there was something like 24,000 in the '80s, and 70,000 in the
8 '90s, and reaching 100,000 in '93. And during this period of momentum, the
9 city faced some major challenges with the PEPCON explosion. But it seemed
10 coming out of that there was a renewed community. It almost - - in some way
11 brought the community closer together. Can you talk to us a little bit about the
12 late '80s and your recollection of what was going on in Henderson.

13 MAYOR GIBSON: Yes. Henderson was 63 or 64,000 people in 1990.
14 So we had grown from 1966 or so from about 12,000 to about 64,000 over
15 that period. The growth had been pretty steady. We'd had a spurt or two, but
16 it was pretty steady growth. And it was with the build out, the eventual build
17 out of Green Valley that - - and the division I talk about really came into full
18 bloom in the '80s, kind of late '80s and early '90s. That was when it was
19 really discussed.

20 In 1988, the Green Valley area had grown to almost be built out. In
21 fact, I don't know when they really built out the last pads in what was the
22 original Green Valley area to the north of what is now Lake Mead or the 215,
23 but it was probably in that time frame when they got close to it.

1 In 1988, the PEPCON plant - - which was a plant that produced critical
2 material for the space shuttle booster motors and for many of the defense
3 rocket systems - - exploded. And there were series of fires and explosions
4 that leveled that plant and did substantial damage to residential
5 neighborhoods that had grown in around the plant. Not all that close, but
6 close enough, that when the blasts occurred, there was property damage.
7 That is the company my grandfather founded. My father was the president of
8 PEPCON when it exploded. He died of cancer in August.

9 So it happened May 4, 1988, it exploded. I skipped my 40th birthday,
10 so I'm not really as old as you think I am. My birthday was the next day, and
11 he died a couple of months later.

12 During that time period, we as a community, went through some - - you
13 know, there's always finger pointing when you have that kind of thing happen
14 - - but there was a mature commitment to trying to work through whatever the
15 issues were. And as a community, I think we really didn't focus on litigation.
16 There was some. But what we did was we worked to rebuild the community
17 during that time. I think there were some commitments - - even if they were
18 mostly inner commitments - - made by people that they were going to stay
19 here.