

Henderson Memories:

**City of
Henderson
Living Histories**

CITY OF HENDERSON
LIVING HISTORY INTERVIEW
MARCH 25, 2003
MAYOR GIBSON
PART 4

1 INTERVIEWER: If you think in terms of visuals, landmarks, things that
2 are significant in Henderson, what are some of the landmarks or visuals that
3 you think of when you think of the city?

4 MAYOR GIBSON: Well, I guess, because the industrial complex has
5 been here so long, even though today, the industrial complex is not in the city
6 limit of Henderson. But the industrial complex will always be a significant
7 landmark for this community. I think that Black Mountain is a significant
8 landmark in this community. When I was a kid, we hunted for chuckwallas on
9 Black Mountain. Everybody did, and there were some, actually, who hiked
10 Black Mountain and died. It's a treacherous mountain, but it's kind of our
11 mountain.

12 When I think of some of the newer - - well, even the Whitney Mesa is
13 an important, you know, geologic landmark. And you always knew you were
14 in Henderson, or getting close to Henderson, as you'd come under the mesa
15 or past the mesa.

16 Today, when I crest the hill coming into the valley, I could turn around
17 and I could look at the remarkable development at Lake Las Vegas. I can
18 look out across the valley starting with Calico Ridge and see this immense
19 span of lights.

20 When we used to travel back into the city, my dad used to say to us,
21 the time will come when the lights in this valley will extend from one extreme
22 of the horizon to the other. We used to just say, that's dad, and he's talking.
23 It is the case today. Now, if you come into the valley from the other direction,

1 the lights in the city of Henderson extend almost across this horizon. That's
2 fascinating. With the sale of land that's going to happen in November of this
3 year, it will actually extend us to the extreme of the horizon on the south.

4 Other landmarks, I think that, for me, anyway, the Boulder Highway - -
5 although it was more a highway when I was a kid, today it's just a street with
6 lots of stoplights on it. But it was really a highway with only one light at Lake
7 Mead and Boulder Highway - - will always be an important landmark for me.

8 And then there are some buildings that have been around for awhile
9 that have been for a long time important to us. In some ways, it was sad to
10 see, you know, Victory Village and Carver Park go away, because they'd
11 been with us for so long and so many of the people who live here started
12 there. So many of the luminaries in this state lived in one or the other of
13 those housing projects.

14 INTERVIEWER: Any building that you think of, or business that you
15 think of, that's just been here forever?

16 MAYOR GIBSON: Well, you know, I think of St. Peter's school. It's
17 been here a long time, on Boulder Highway. I had friends who attended there
18 when we were kids. The old community church, which is now our Senior
19 Center, you know, was there right from the time - - from a very early time.
20 The youth center that we just replaced with a brand new youth center was an
21 important landmark to us. We've tried to preserve that building by mimicking,
22 in as many respects as we could, some of the design elements as we
23 replaced that youth center because we couldn't keep it up any longer.

1 INTERVIEWER: When you think of part of Henderson's 50-year
2 celebration is living the American dream, how have you lived the American
3 dream in the city of Henderson?

4 MAYOR GIBSON: You know, I remember when I was a kid that our
5 teachers - - one principal, in particular, used to tell us that we were the future
6 leaders of this community. And he said it enough times I remember it. But I
7 was never persuaded. It was just something principals say. Mr. Robert Taylor
8 was a wonderful friend to the kids, and he was the principal at what is now
9 Robert Taylor Elementary School, for decades. I'd say, at least, probably
10 nearly 20 years, maybe longer.

11 I was just a kid who lived in a middle-class neighborhood, who was just
12 like every other kid. I went to the local schools, the public schools. I went to
13 the local high school and I came out of that. My experience here really
14 enabled me, I think. I came through that, I went away to school. I wanted to
15 come back because of the style of life and the quality of life here. I moved
16 into the older part of the city. Those were pretty much my options in those
17 days, but I could have gone to Las Vegas or anywhere else. But I determined
18 that I wanted to live here, and I built my professional practice.

19 Sometimes it chills me to think that I can still remember sitting in my
20 5th grade class with Mr. Taylor talking to us about how we needed to pay
21 attention because some day we were going to be leading this community.
22 Here I am, and I'm supposed to be the leader of the community. I can't think

1 of anyone who could have ever had an experience that more followed the
2 pathway of the American dream than I've had.

3 I married a girl who grew up in this city. I didn't know her all that well,
4 but I knew who she was. And now my children have been educated here,
5 and they've all - - all six of them - - have been away at college. One of them
6 is attending college here now. But the others are in college in other places.
7 But they all plan to come back here. They want to live in Henderson when
8 they come home.

9 I think that's the fulfillment of the American dream is to see, in part, to
10 see progress, and maturity, and development come to not just a community,
11 but to the people who live in it, in a way that prepares kind of a groundwork, a
12 foundation for the next generation, now, to have its opportunity to move
13 upward and onward. And I think that we have that here, even yet.

14 INTERVIEWER: Henderson is celebrating its 50-year anniversary, and
15 that's kind of amazing to me, that 50 years, I mean, that's so current where
16 you're talking about landmark events that were just eight, ten years ago. How
17 does that benefit this community, or how does it help to define this
18 community, that it's just 50 years old?

19 MAYOR GIBSON: Well, I think there are a couple things that are
20 important to us. I happen to believe that it is good that so many of the people
21 who work here, or who are on our Council, have some sense of the
22 institutional history of the community. That would be more likely in a younger
23 community than in an older community. Because the view here isn't, we want

1 to change everything and make it just like someplace else. Rather it is we're
2 unique. We want to build on the foundation that has been laid for us. So, I
3 think there is - - I don't know that there is anything extra special about being
4 50 years old except we're young. By comparison to other communities, we're
5 young.

6 Our problems are not the same as communities that are twice our age.
7 When I talk to mayors from other parts of the country, I learn about issues
8 related to the rust belt and how they're going to close schools, and how
9 they're going to clean up environmental hazards, and how they're going to
10 re-invigorate failing economies, I thank my lucky stars that the challenges and
11 the difficulties that we face here in Henderson are related to an expanding
12 growing dynamic community. There's a big difference.

13 I don't remember what your question was.

14 INTERVIEWER: You were on it. Taking a different tack from that --
15 the fact that this was a city that was born out of a plant out of World War II, a
16 battle-born city -- and a lot of those initial pioneers, the people who, you
17 know, fought the federal government not to dismantle it but to preserve it as a
18 city, are really still residents and alive. You know, the pioneers are still part of
19 this community. I mean, how does that help make this a tight-knit
20 community?

21 MAYOR GIBSON: You know, it's really helped us - -

22 I think it has really helped our community that the early pioneers who
23 fought to preserve the community and to grow it into a city and then beyond,

1 stayed here. They didn't just take off. And they are here today. They serve
2 as a constant reminder of our connection to the past. The commitments we
3 made as a community to work together to the values that they deemed were
4 important when the community was first founded and incorporated. And, you
5 know, we were a fledgling community where everybody had to show up and
6 work.

7 When the golf course was built only because the folks who wanted one
8 showed up and picked rocks and hauled them. That connection to our past
9 has really been important to us because that has kept us on track in a way I
10 don't think we could have done. There's always temptation to change. We
11 see a successful model somewhere else and we want to emulate it. What
12 we've done is we've had a pathway that has been established, and we have
13 been willing to accept that as a valid expression of what we want to be. And
14 we don't leave that pathway, we just extend it. Then we're on that journey
15 that has really been something that is consistent with and in the same
16 direction, I'd say, as the direction that we were originally put on when we were
17 incorporated as a city.

18 INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me who the first real resident of
19 Henderson was?

20 MAYOR GIBSON: James Miller was a homesteader and he
21 purchased, or he homesteaded property that really became, over time, the
22 Pittman area of the city. He sold his property to a guy by the name of
23 Jefferson in the late '20s. Mr. Jefferson actually established Jericho Heights,

1 which was, in the beginning, a tent city, 20 or 30 tents, for people who were
2 surveyors at the Black Canyon for the construction - - or, the preparation for
3 the construction of what was then, Boulder Dam, which became Hoover Dam.

4 So, he was not the first Henderson resident, because, of course, the
5 city was not even in anyone's mind at that time. The area down there
6 became known as Midway. That's how distinguished it was because it was
7 about midway between the city of Las Vegas and the dam. Over time, the
8 construction of the dam really was what gave, kind of, economic life, to the
9 things that happened here. And there was a speakeasy down in the Pittman
10 area.

11 But that was about what there was for the longest time until the BMI
12 complex was built. And it was American ingenuity and determination that got
13 that plant built. The BMI complex was built in about 11 months from nothing
14 to a producing facility that produced a metal that had never been produced
15 outside of Germany that would be lightweight magnesium that was required
16 for, particularly for our airplanes and munitions. We can be very proud of the
17 way that this community began.

18 INTERVIEWER: Did the Hoover Dam project do a lot to spur the
19 economic development in this area?

20 MAYOR GIBSON: The construction of the dam was the next phase.
21 The first phase being the surveyors, and they lived in a little tent city halfway
22 between everything, which was Las Vegas and nothing, which was

1 Black Canyon where the dam was built. After the surveyors completed their
2 work, then the companies that built the dam came in, they created over a
3 relatively short period of time the need for 5,000 employees. And very
4 quickly, the company town of Boulder City was built and then filled. And the
5 city of Las Vegas had to accommodate everything else. It didn't make sense
6 for everything to have to travel that great distance. That was a long way in
7 those days.

8 Of necessity, Jericho Heights became established and it filled up. So
9 the entire corridor, from Las Vegas to Midway to Boulder City and the dam
10 became a bus sling, kind of roadway of commerce and development. Now, of
11 course, the scale was nothing like what we see today, but we have to go back
12 to those times to see the very beginnings of what became what we have
13 today.

14 (The interview concluded.)