

**Henderson Libraries**

**Henderson Historical  
Society and Robert  
Taylor Elementary  
School**

**Ilene and Don Bittle**

**Oral History of Ilene and Don Bittle**

**conducted by students of**

**Robert Taylor Elementary School**

**with**

**Fredric Watson**

**for the**

**Henderson Historical Society**

**in cooperation with**

**Dr. Janet Dobry, Principal**

**and**

**Barbara Tabach, UNLV Oral History Research Center**

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**Interviewer:** *Could you please state your name and spell it?*

**Ilene Bittle:** And how to spell it? Ilene, I-L-E-N-E, Bittle, B-I-T-T-L-E.

**Don Bittle:** And Don – I'm not going to tell him how to spell that [laughter] – Bittle.

**Interviewer:** *Let me start by hearing about your early life.*

**Ilene Bittle:** About my early life? I was born and raised in Iowa, and I grew up on a small farm. Well, on a farm, in a small – near a small town. Went to the same grade school and high school in Underwood, Iowa, and then I went to college in Omaha, Nebraska. And then eventually I ended up out here in 1958.

**Don Bittle:** I went – I was born in California but I came here when I was ten years old, went off to elementary school, junior high and high school here. We used to go and have an elementary school on the far side of the town in a place called Carver Park and it had only four rooms to it. Then we went up to the junior high, which is where the old City Hall is, or the new City Hall is. And then to the high school which was in the same place. We've had three different high schools in this town all named Basic High School.

**Interviewer:** *Who are your siblings?*

**Ilene Bittle:** I have – I am the oldest, and then I have a sister, Kathleen, who lives in Anchorage, Alaska. I have twin brothers, Larry and Terry, one of whom is now deceased, and Larry lives in Council Bluffs, Iowa. And then I have a younger sister named Jeanine and she lives in Woodbridge, Virginia.

**Interviewer:** *What did you do for a living or what did your parents do for a living?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Actually, I'm retired, but my parents were both teachers and principals. I think I'll tell you a story about them. They both taught in a small town called Woodbine, Iowa, and my

mother was teaching third grade and my father was a high school teacher. And he was given the opportunity to become a principal and superintendent of a small school district in northern Iowa. But there was one catch. He had to be married in order to accept this position. So he...my mother fortunately said that she would marry him so they got married and went to this small town in northern Iowa. But there was a hitch and a condition. Because she was married, she could no longer teach. And that was something that happened. That was very common back then, but not anymore.

**Don Bittle:** I lost track with your story.

**Ilene Bittle:** [laughter] What did your parents do?

**Don Bittle:** Oh, my parents, my father worked down at the Stauffer Chemical Company and it was in the plants down here at that time and my mother was a cook at several different restaurants here in town.

**Ilene Bittle:** And bakery – she did the baking for one of the hotels in town too.

**Don Bittle:** Yes, she – oh, what's the name of it? I've forgotten the name of it. It was a small restaurant near the hotel, and I've forgotten the name of the place. It no longer exists.

**Fredric Watson:** *Did you guys get here during the war or something?*

**Don Bittle:** We got here Christmas, December of 1944. And, well, I brought this to show you. We were in here in 1944. This is 1952 and this is the phone book for the whole City of Henderson. How small it is. There were just not that many people in Henderson.

**Ilene Bittle:** You need to tell them what the numbers were. They aren't like they're used to.

**Don Bittle:** Oh, our phone numbers. I'll just read you a couple: 862W2 – a lot of “W”s in here – 400, 219, 981J – those were the type of numbers they had back then. We didn't have the crank phones back then [laughter].

**Fredric Watson:** *Did you have, like, party line?*

**Don Bittle:** No, when we came here they did not have the party line. We were honored, really.

**Ilene Bittle:** We weren't. The farm had a – where I grew up on a farm, we had a party line so you could – when it rang, you knew which neighbor it was and if you got really good at it, you could pick up the phone and listen to the conversation without their knowing. But if you weren't good at it they could hear the phone click and they knew you were listening. And sometimes they'd say, “Get off the line!” [laughter]

**Don Bittle:** That is good.

**Interviewer:** *Did any of you guys know about the Basic Magnesium plant here?*

**Don Bittle:** I did. As I said, my father worked there, and then when I finally – well, before I graduated from high school, I worked at all of them, Stauffer, Western Electric, Titanium, American Potash, and so I did know some. Has anyone told you that there is a tunnel that runs from one end of that plant to the other underneath all of them and all of their steam and most of their electrical lines run in this tunnel. I should have brought a brick. I've got bricks from [laughter] –

**Fredric Watson:** *From the kilns?*

**Don Bittle:** Yeah, from the kilns, yeah.

**Ilene Bittle:** The other thing, too, that used to be those tunnels were to be used if there was an atomic blast here or something went wrong. That was to be the shelter. The people were to go

down into these tunnels. And at one time, I lived at the Townsite Apartments. Those were – I mean, if you were anybody and you came to Henderson you lived at – you started out at the Townsite Apartments. That was the only place to live if you didn't have a home. And there was a man there and that was his job was to check those tunnels day after day and to make sure there was nothing wrong with the tunnels, that they were usable and could be used in case some disaster happened.

**Fredric Watson:** *Were there only tunnels just right at the plant? I heard a story once and this could be just urban myth, but there was a tunnel that went from the plant up to the Townsite area.*

**Don Bittle:** No, it was just under the – at least that's all I ever knew about, yeah. But I don't think there was ever one that ran up into town at all.

**Fredric Watson:** *Mr. Bell got here in 1944. What year did you come to –*

**Ilene Bittle:** '58.

**Fredric Watson:** '58? Okay.

**Ilene Bittle:** 1958.

**Interviewer:** *Can you tell me about your experiences living in Henderson?*

**Ilene Bittle:** About the experiences living in Henderson? Well, I think probably the most amazing part has been, number one, when I came, I think there was one sidewalk and that was about, that was about it, [laughter] where they had a grocery store and Van Valey Shoe Store. And I don't remember many paved streets either. And it was very hot and I had never known what swamp coolers were, and that's how you kept cool, was through the swamp coolers.

**Don Bittle:** Oh, where to start, I could talk all day on this topic.

**Ilene Bittle:** [laughter]

**Interviewer:** *Go ahead.*

**Don Bittle:** We had one theater, one grocery store, one men's clothing store, and – well it was combined with the women's clothing store too. Yeah, one grocery store, no – we had one place in town that could sell beer. No gambling whatsoever in Henderson at that time. It was a government town and – oh, let's see – this school did not exist when I came here and I can't remember what year it was built but I did teach here when it was a school. And the man that it's named after was my principal – well, he was my – he was the coach when I was in high school and I knew him from that, and then I came here to teach and he was the principal. And he was a great golfer. He won amateur titles in Nevada all the time. In fact, they wanted him to retire because nobody else could win, and he was really a good, good man. I taught here for eight years, and I came back to visit the school, oh, it must have been ten years ago, and I couldn't even find the room. The school had been added on, and I couldn't find the room that I taught in. But I taught at all the grades. I taught here and at the junior high school and then at the high school.

**Interviewer:** *Tell me how your family came to live in Henderson.*

**Ilene Bittle:** Mine didn't. Just me.

**Don Bittle:** My family came here because my dad could find a job at the Three Kids Mine and that's on the way to the lake and it's no longer a mine. But you can't get into it because there's a huge, huge hole. It was an open pit mine and they mined magnesium for the plants down here. And it was very low grade magnesium, so it didn't last all that long, and that's the reason I came.

**Interviewer:** *What did Henderson look like when you first came here?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Pretty barren after growing up in Iowa with lots of green, greenery everywhere: grass, trees, shrubs, flowers. I think that was probably the biggest jar, difference, was the fact that it was so brown, not green. But, of course, it didn't have snow, so that was okay.

**Don Bittle:** When I came, it didn't make any difference. I was ten years old and [when] my folks said "come," you came. But it was a wonderful place to grow up. We had open mountains; we could hike up to the mountains. It was a full day's hike up to Black Mountain from where we lived; it seemed like a full day. But we would hike up the Black Mountain, we would climb up on the rocks until we got scared by a big lizard or something, and then we would come down. We had a huge, up towards the mountain, a huge ditch all the way around the town to keep the flood waters when it would rain hard, from coming into town.

**Ilene Bittle:** You would go out to the lake all the time.

**Don Bittle:** Well, yes, the only swimming that we could do here was at the lake at the time. There were no swimming pools in either Las Vegas or Henderson at that time. And I got to swim on the first swimming team Basic High School ever had. And we would get in cars and we would drive to the lake and swim up and down, and it was in the Spring and the lake water was about fifty degrees and we would just about freeze to death. And if we had a day the wind was blowing and we got out of that water, we thought we were going to die. It was something. And we did that for, oh, we did that for about four weeks and had one meet, went to Blythe, California, for a swimming meet. [laughter]

**Ilene Bittle:** And that was it.

**Don Bittle:** That was it.



**Ilene Bittle:** I think you ought to tell them the story of you and your football buddies being out late at night.

**Don Bittle:** Oh, no. That's not –

**Ilene Bittle:** I think that's funny.

**Don Bittle:** We had a big party at a young lady's house that her parents happened to be out of town that weekend. And at that time we only had about oh, I'd say, twenty-three people, twenty-four maybe, on the football team. And all of the football team was there and we were having – we had a good time. And we were out rather late. It was about four o'clock in the morning when we started walking home. No – none of the kids in high school at that time had cars. And so we walked every place, rode bikes. Anyway, we were walking home and having a good time, and up the road comes a pickup, and we look at it and it's our coach, Mr. McDoniel. And he didn't say a word, didn't wave at us or anything and he drove right on by, but we knew we had problems. Come Monday, he took all of the football team up on the bleachers and started reading the riot act and telling us that whoever was – because he only three or four of us. And telling us that anybody that was at that party should come down and admit it, and they were going to kick us off the football team. All but one kid came down. So they couldn't cancel the season, so we ran a lot of laps to make up for that. And of course the kid that was up in the stands that didn't come down, he was lying through his teeth. [laughter]

**Ilene Bittle:** And I like the one, too, where you were kicking cans down the alley.

**Don Bittle:** Oh.

**Ilene Bittle:** And that's a good one too. A bunch of the others –

**Don Bittle:** We had a police force in Henderson of two policemen. Mr. Hickman was the main one and Mr. Pagan was the other one.

**Ilene Bittle:** Audrey Pagan.

**Don Bittle:** Audrey Pagan, yeah. And we were, we had come back from a football trip to – I believe it was Needles. So we got home well after midnight, and we had a – one of our players lived clear over in a place called Carver Park. You know where Sewell School is? Well, it was across the street from Sewell School. So we decided that he shouldn't be walking home by himself. So we, about a half a dozen of us, decided we'd help him make sure he got home, because it was dangerous here, you know. You might run into a squirrel or ground squirrel or something like that. So we were protecting him. Well, as we went down the street, we were making – we went down an alley and we were kicking cans. We'd see it, we'd toss a few rocks here and there, and making a lot of noise. So somebody called the police department. We got out to Boulder Highway, which was not four lanes at that time, it was only two. And, of course, it was late at night, so we decided it would be funny if somebody laid down in the middle of the street and stopped a car when it came, which was very foolish. So we talked the one kid into laying down in the street. The car came and, boy, he put on the brakes. It was the police, who had been called. They stopped. By the time they stopped, we were up and running. I mean, and we ran through a place called Victory Village and it's where Walmart is now that went clear up to where the post office [is], and it was a rather large area. By the time we got about halfway through it, there the police were waiting for us. They came right where we were going. We got there and they had a big old Buick for a police car and we couldn't fit in it. They only had one police car and all of us couldn't fit in it. So they stopped the car and they told about three kids

to get in and they said, "The rest of you stay right here." And we had to because they knew us. They knew us by our first names. They knew our parents. So they get back in the car and they start it, but it won't start. "All right, you guys standing out there, push." We had to push the police car to get it started [laughter] and then wait for them to come back and get us. So they take us to the Police Department, which was just a real small building. They didn't have any place to incarcerate anybody, and they just read us the riot act and said, "Now, do you want us to call your parents and have them come and get you?" "No!" So we explained what we were doing. They said, "We'll take Herbert home. You guys go home." And that was the kind of thing we did back then.

**Ilene Bittle:** That you could do.

**Don Bittle:** You could do it and not get in a whole lot of trouble. And it was basically everybody in town knew everybody else, so you didn't dare do much.

**Interviewer:** *Where did you live in Henderson?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Where? I started out by living in that apartment on the side of a house on Oregon Way. It was the home of Theo Elstner, who was a very well-known kindergarten teacher here in Henderson. She taught kindergarten for many years, for a long, long time. And then from there I moved to the Townsite Apartments. I lived also on Ocotillo, Ocean – my goodness, I realized all the "O"s. [laughter] And then, now, Valley View Drive by Foothill High School.

**Don Bittle:** We moved here and moved to Idaho Way in the old Townsite area where all the wooden houses are still today. And then I've lived all over town. I've lived on National Street, Major Street, Church Street, and now up in – where do we live? Valley View Drive.

**Fredric Watson:** *But you went to school in Carver Park. Did somebody –*

**Don Bittle:** There were four – it was one building with four rooms in it, and it's set way up off the ground and you had to walk up a good half a dozen steps to get up into the room. And when I first came here, there were so many kids in the – I was in the fifth grade – there were so many kids in the room that we had to sit two to a desk. But they closed that down and took it down not too long after that.

**Fredric Watson:** *But you had to walk – so you had to walk from the Townsite area down to Carver Park?*

**Don Bittle:** Yes, we walked down there. They used to have a tunnel that went under Boulder Highway so that we didn't have to cross Boulder Highway. We went under Boulder Highway.

**Fredric Watson:** *What ever became of that tunnel? Do you remember?*

**Don Bittle:** They filled it up and it was – it was above Texas Street and above where the Catholic Church is and you would cross there and go through Victory Village onto Carver Park.

**Ilene Bittle:** One of the – well, I just happened to remember one of the things I would like to mention is that I became a librarian after teaching at Basic for nine years and I taught English and Social Studies, U.S. History, U.S. Government and taught History with Mike O'Callaghan. Do you guys know that name at all?

**Interviewer:** *I've heard of it.*

**Ilene Bittle:** You've heard of it. He ended up being the Governor of the state, but he started – or one of the things he did was as a teacher at Basic. And then I became a librarian, so I worked at the library at the old Basic which is now Burkholder, but it was the old Burkholder, not the new Burkholder. And then when they built Basic, then I helped move that library over to the new Basic, and then Margaret Moss was the librarian at the junior high and she was ill, so I

helped move the junior high library to what was Burkholder. So then eventually we introduced computers, and there had been no such thing as computers in the libraries until we were at the current Basic High School. And we had to do all of that also from scratch. There weren't any programs to input books easily.

**Interviewer:** *Did you have any occasions to go to Las Vegas?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Did I have any occasion to go to Las Vegas?

**Interviewer:** *How did you travel?*

**Ilene Bittle:** When I first came here, I didn't have a car so I went with friends, and probably the one thing I really remember is going and Christmas shopping and getting a Christmas tree and putting it in a friend's convertible. That was, you know, kind of unheard of if you're from Iowa. But no, we just – and then we had cars. Then after that I got a car.

**Fredric Watson:** *How would you have gone to get a Christmas tree in Iowa? It was more of a ceremony I'll bet, wasn't it?*

**Ilene Bittle:** [laughter] Yes, yes, a lot more – they had lots of tree lots, also, that they did here originally. They used to have tree lots everywhere here because it was a fund raiser. They don't do that anymore. Too many – I think there are too many liabilities.

**Fredric Watson:** *You know a question I wanted to ask –*

**Ilene Bittle:** Go ahead.

**Fredric Watson:** *I read somewhere that they hauled a lot of magnesium – or what's the ore?*

**Don Bittle:** Magnesium ore.

**Fredric Watson:** *Magnesium ore from the Gabs area.*

**Don Bittle:** Yes.

**Fredric Watson:** *Trucked it all the way from – that’s like 250 miles wasn’t it? Do you remember ever seeing those trucks?*

**Don Bittle:** Yes, it was high grade ore, and those trucks would come in all the time, and they would come down, what is it, 93, and come through Vegas and come right to the plants, and yes, we would see them all the time.

**Fredric Watson:** *Well, long drive.*

**Don Bittle:** Long drive, but good jobs back then.

**Fredric Watson:** *I’ll bet.*

**Don Bittle:** Yeah.

**Ilene Bittle:** And there were two things you asked about. Number one, we both do remember the atomic bombs going off. That was like my first year here and I remember taking students out to the bleachers at the old Basic which is now Burkholder and sitting on the bleachers and looking up the road and waiting for the blast to happen and be able to see the mushroom. And we did.

**Don Bittle:** And I did it – I – she came in ’58 and they were still doing it then. I was in high school when they started it, and they would take us up to the bleachers and we would sit there and all of a sudden you would see this huge cloud coming up and it was – well, what is it – over a hundred miles up there. And you would see that huge cloud come up and we would sit there and all of a sudden the bleachers would start shaking and that was the blast that finally got to us. You could feel it over a hundred miles away.

**Fredric Watson:** *I can remember getting up before sunup for one or two of those tests, and when the bomb would go off it would be, for a split second, it would be like daylight.*

**Don Bittle:** Yes. Lying over a hundred miles away and it would do that. It was just amazing.

**Fredric Watson:** *Scary.*

**Ilene Bittle:** Yes.

**Don Bittle:** We were here during the PEPCON blast, too. We were teaching, both teaching back then.

**Fredric Watson:** *What schools were you at?*

**Ilene Bittle:** We were both at Basic then and it was lunch – we had split lunch so it was lunchtime and then we could hear this noise, and my first thought was that the chemistry department had done an experiment that had gone awry. And then we realized that’s what it wasn’t, that it wasn’t that. And the two of us, he came to get me, and we went out the front door of Basic and we happened to both look up at the same time, because we both remember the roof just rising, of Basic, and going back down again. And then, of course, the same type of thing as with the atomic, we could see this big black cloud down over the plants but it took a while before the blast hit.

**Don Bittle:** And there was more than one blast.

**Ilene Bittle:** Yes.

**Don Bittle:** The one that hit while we were still in the building, it brought down all these kind of things, the lights were hanging down – I was in having lunch and the ceiling tiles started falling down and so we got out of the building. We went to the front of the building. We were closest to it, and that was amazing. You could just see the blast coming across the desert at you because it was gathering up dust and you could just see it coming.

**Ilene Bittle:** Right. We also were able to go outside when the MGM fire was – I just happened to think of that – that we could see it from the front of Basic. You could see the fire at the MGM where several people lost their lives.

**Fredric Watson:** *After those, the MGM fire, there was a fire at the – it was the International – it's a Hilton.*

**Ilene Bittle:** Yeah, the Hilton, it was the International then.

**Fredric Watson:** *Then there was PEPCON, and it seemed to me the school district, seemed like a lot of the agencies around town had started changing their regulations.*

**Don Bittle:** They did, yeah, yes. Fire extinguishers in the roofs and in all the hotel rooms and things like that.

**Fredric Watson:** *Yeah, the schools, see in here, kids?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Yep, all in here too. Oh, do you have another question?

**Interviewer:** *Was living here dangerous in any way?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Well, we, I think we just pretty well covered that. [laughter]

**Fredric Watson:** *I remember – I think we've interviewed a bunch of people and a lot of people say, "Oh, this is a peaceful existence and I don't remember anything dangerous." I felt safe as a kid, but I do remember every now and then there would be stories about dangerous things happening out in the desert around here, blasting caps and people falling down old mine shafts.*

**Ilene Bittle:** People falling down in mines.

**Don Bittle:** Yeah, there was that, but you know, people didn't lock their doors. People just left their doors open. They'd go away. You didn't worry about it. It wasn't until much later that that started.



**Fredric Watson:** *They left the windows open?*

**Don Bittle:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** [muffled] *If you got sick, where or how did you get your health care?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Move your hand so we can [hear you].

**Interviewer:** [soft voice] *If you got sick, where or how did you get your health care?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Now say that again, health care?

**Interviewer:** *If you got sick where did you go for health care?*

**Ilene Bittle:** Oh, oh, okay. Oh, you just went to – there was Dr. French and who else? There were a couple of doctors around here and St. Rose was here.

**Fredric Watson:** *A famous doctor, Dr. Coogan.*

**Don Bittle:** Dr. Coogan and Dr. Starzinski

**Fredric Watson:** *Starzinski's another name.*

**Don Bittle:** Yeah, those were the only two doctors in town and they were down at St. Rose De Lima, down here. They had their offices there. Dr. Coogan, you'd go into him – penicillin was a new drug back then and it was a cure all for everything and you would go in and to Dr. Coogan, and he was a rough old guy, and he would say, "Ah, you're going to have to come back for another shot. Let me just give you two now." And he'd load that thing up and give you two.  
[laughter]

**Fredric Watson:** *I remember. It seemed like it was as big as a football pump.*

**Don Bittle:** Oh, yeah. It seemed like that. [laughter] But that's where we would go and they had the hospital down there too. St. Rose was there. So we had good healthcare.

**Interviewer:** *What changes in Henderson have you observed?*

**Ilene Bittle:** It's just gotten way, way big. Too big.

**Don Bittle:** It's too big for us that grew up when it was a small town.

**Interviewer:** *What do you enjoy most about living here?*

**Ilene Bittle:** The fact that you don't have to put up with cold weather in the wintertime, the snow and ice and blizzards.

**Interviewer:** *Is there anything else you would like to share with us?*

**Don Bittle:** Well, I know it's too hot in the summertime here anymore. We leave town when it starts getting hot.

**Fredric Watson:** *Where do you go in the summertime?*

**Don Bittle:** We go back to Iowa now. We spend six months here and six months there.

[end of recording]