

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Frank Belger, Part 1

Oral History of Frank Belger

Part 1

conducted by

Barbara Tabach, UNLV Oral History Research Center

with

Wendy Walker, Henderson District Public Libraries

and filmed by

Edward Feldman, Henderson District Public Libraries

June 6, 2012

Barbara Tabach: *Today is Wednesday, June 6, 2012. We're at the Gibson Branch of the Henderson District Libraries in Henderson. My name is Barbara Tabach and our cameraman is Ed Feldman. Today we are interviewing Frank Belger, and I want to thank you very, very much for participating in the Henderson Libraries Oral History Project.*

Frank Belger: You're welcome.

Barbara Tabach: *Start out by just spelling your last name for us, Frank.*

Frank Belger: B-E-L-G-E-R.

Barbara Tabach: *And what year did you come to Henderson?*

Frank Belger: 1950.

Barbara Tabach: *And how old were you?*

Frank Belger: Three years old.

Barbara Tabach: *Could I be bold enough to know or ask what you remember about being a three-year-old in Henderson at that time?*

Frank Belger: Actually quite a lot. It was a very, very small community. The plants were the major contributors for jobs and BMI was still producing magnesium. After the war years, it was still producing magnesium, and then Titanium was coming in. And all the homes in Henderson originally were transported in prior to the war years, and they were tilt-ups – no insulation. They were just temporary housing for the people working the plants. And that's how Titanium would come to be, and after the war years when magnesium left, BMI took over again and stayed, and the housing was sold. I think the selling price for a two-bedroom in Townsite was like twelve hundred dollars and a three-bedroom was like sixteen, seventeen hundred dollars and people actually bought them – flat roofs, no insulation, aluminum wiring. And when the

homes were built, prior to the war years, and then put in place, there was no street that directly led into the plant. So if a foreign bomber, a Japanese, whatever, would come over and try to bomb, they couldn't line up on a site to come in and bomb the plant. That was how Henderson was laid out. That was why we have such streets that we have now, you know. But, yeah, it was a small community – about, I'd say, seven hundred, eight hundred people at the time – and as a kid growing up here, everybody knew everybody, and my folks were probably in the Elks and in the civic organizations around town, so they pretty much knew everybody. And as a kid growing up, I couldn't get away with much because everybody knew that I was Frank Belger's boy. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Frank Belger: So it was nice. It was small bedroom community type thing.

Barbara Tabach: *What brought your family here in the first place?*

Frank Belger: I was born in Hawthorne, Nevada, right after the war years. My dad was superintendent in charge of construction up there when they built the ammunition depot in Hawthorne. He went back to driving a truck, and he was offered a job in post transportation which hauled chemicals to and from the plant. And that's what brought him down here originally. And after a very short period of time, he worked as a supervisor for Titanium Metals Corporation in the mechanical department.

Barbara Tabach: *And he worked there for the bulk of his career?*

Frank Belger: Oh, yeah, a number of years. Oh, yeah, and we were there. We planted here.

Barbara Tabach: *And you have siblings? What was your –*

Frank Belger: I have two –

Barbara Tabach: *Describe your family for us.*

Frank Belger: A mother and father, no broken families. My sisters were twelve years and thirteen years older than I am. My brother is three years younger than I am. And we grew up in a Catholic environment and went to St. Peter's School. We had khaki uniforms and a little medallion, if you will, said SPS with burgundy behind it, background. And it was a – the whole Henderson community was family oriented. And back in those years we had our own school district. And the Henderson School District before they merged with Clark County – well, actually Las Vegas, and then Clark County, it came to be – we were ranked something like twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth in the nation for academics.

Barbara Tabach: *Wow.*

Frank Belger: So it was, it was a progressive little community. My father became an Elk and – a service group – and in those years, that was before the Chamber of Commerce, the Union Chamber of Commerce and that sort of thing, a lot of the fore-fathers, the founding fathers, if you will, the LaPortas and the Stewarts and the Belgers and the McMahons and the Van Valeys, they all belonged to the Elks. And that was a focal point for a service group here. And they were the – they were the LaPortas, they were the pushers. And then later on, it became the Chamber of Commerce and the Union Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary, and stuff like that. But in the beginning, it was Elks that actually was the big service group here.

Barbara Tabach: *Well tell me, do you remember some of the special projects that the Elks did in the early days?*

Frank Belger: Yeah, they were real strong on children's eyes, children that couldn't see or had special needs for glasses and stuff, they'd put fund raisers up, and they would spend their own

money to help that cause. It became very well known that – in the community – that if someone was coming through a family, and they were trying to get from point A to point B to find work or to get with family – a domestic thing, let's say, a wife or woman and a couple of kids were passing through, they'd go to the Elk Lodge and they'd get gas money and get fed and stuff like that to get on. So they really helped in a lot of aspects and come Christmastime, their charitable organization was very well known throughout the community, and they even did welfare work during the year. But that was the core, if you will, of the service groups. After that, more of them became enlarged. You even got the Moose Lodge, and the VFW, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Eagles, and all that. But they were actually the first.

Barbara Tabach: *Now, were you a member of the Elks yourself?*

Frank Belger: My father was State President at one time and he went into the national organization, so of course I was.

Barbara Tabach: *Of course [laughter]. Okay. Tell me about your personal experiences with the Elks. How was that?*

Frank Belger: As a twenty-one year old man going into that, it was good. I mean, there was a lot of people there that, if you wanted to go into business, there was that step up, people there to help you. As I mentioned before, the main – the Olsens, the LaPortas, the Stewarts, Sullivans, go on and on, they would take you under their wing and give you some advice. So it was good. I never did go into business at that time, but, yeah, it was good.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay, let's go back to St. Peter's. Talk about Catholic grade schools in Henderson, Nevada, a little more for us. Describe the uniform. What was a typical school day like?*

Frank Belger: Well, I think I should probably tell you about my first day.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay.*

Frank Belger: My father took me down to St. Peter's and they were – they had an addition of a couple of rooms they were putting on. The school was built, but they were adding on. And my dad walked up to this gentleman who was digging a ditch, and he said, "Excuse me." He said, "Where can I find Father Moran? I want to get my kid enrolled in school for tomorrow." And he says, "I am Father Moran. Here's a shovel. Get in the ditch. Send your kid down there to that room and he'll enroll himself." So that was our first involvement with St. Peter's. To answer your question, it was khaki uniforms, black shoes. Later on, we were able wear Converse, the black, white-soled Converse tennis shoes. But we had a little medallion on it. And it was – the nuns at that time, we thought they were very strict and very hard on us. And in reality they weren't. They were more afraid of us becoming gangsters, if you will, or falling out, and they really molded and created a lot of good people. I can go on back to my little yearbooks and point out the amount of people who went through St. Peter's in my year who are business people, who are legislators, who are great family people. And it was – there was not only Catholics, but there was Mormon children, there was Baptists, and stuff like that, that went there for the education, and it was a good education. The nuns were different but they were honest and looking back now after many years of being gone and married and being on the Fire Department locally, I had an opportunity to get involved with the nuns again that were here and still at the hospital. And I'd sit down with a couple of them, Sister Robert Joseph and Sister Marie and, [shakes finger] "Frankie!!" [laughter] And it was wonderful. My children, we went to an affair in Henderson, it was one of these health fairs but it was also – the Jaycees put on and

it was just a fun place to go, the kids could do this and that. And my two young children, a boy and a girl, walked up – and St. Rose had their little blood pressure taking thing for free – and my son walked up and says, “Can I have my blood pressure taken?” This nun looked at him, and she said, “I don’t know who your father is, but your last name’s Belger.”

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Frank Belger: So they were encrusted in the community, and dedicated, great ladies, Father Moran – what a character.

Barbara Tabach: *Describe him.*

Frank Belger: Irish, whiskey drinker, a man that got things done. When he was building St. Peter’s – and the church was built when I was five years old – and the church was there, the grotto had not been built yet, and the school was in its infancy. They were filling classes, but they were still building rooms, and he went down to W. M. McKay which was the only block builder and concrete people in the Valley. And he walked in and says, “I want twenty thousand block, I want forty yards of mud and I want it delivered on Monday,” or Tuesday or whatever it was. And the guy is filling this order, “Oh, my, this is great,” you know. And, when he was filling the order he says, “How do you want to pay for that?” And he says, “Deliver it. This is a contribution,” and walked out. And it was delivered. *[laughter]*

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Frank Belger: He got in very tightly with Benny Binion. They were good friends and every Christmas, Benny would send him a case of his special whiskey. So one year they got a new bar manager, and a case of whiskey come and it was not of his standard. And he threw it in his car and drove back in there and picked it out of the car and walked in to the bar manager and

slapped it down and says, "I'm Father Moran. This is what I get, and you will give me a case right now." So he was – but he was a lovable guy and he got along with all the people in the community real well. And he was never anybody to be feared or anything, but he was respected. But he was a character. He was an Irishman.

Barbara Tabach: *So how long was he here?*

Frank Belger: Oh, he was here several years before me and then probably – he was here until after I left St. Peter's, which would have been probably a twelve-year period of time he was here. Then he was promoted to Monsignor and he went to Las Vegas, and he was a Monsignor there for a while and then he came back to Henderson. And from Henderson he retired and he flew back to – he had his ceremony here and everything else. He was in his seventies, I believe. And he flew back to Ireland to retire with his family, brothers and sisters and stuff. Walked off the plane and stepped on Irish soil, had a heart attack and died. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *Oh my goodness. That's sad – but good, I guess, huh?*

Frank Belger: He had a good life. He was a good man.

Barbara Tabach: *Sounds like he had deep roots here.*

Frank Belger: He did and, of course, I was an altar boy and all that stuff, and I don't know what his dedication to the religion was, but he was community oriented. And then we had some priests after that, and then Father Caviglia came in, and he's still was widely respected in the community and the state. He became a state lobbyist for different colleges and stuff and was very, very highly respected and still is. He's still alive.

Barbara Tabach: *So the parochial school system and then the public school system, did you have friends in both?*

Frank Belger: Not really. I had friends on our street, but I didn't know the kids in the public school system. So when my involvement, my years with St. Peter's ended, then I went – my mother and father sat down with me and they said, "Do you want to go to Gorman?" And that was a Catholic school. And I didn't know anything about Gorman; I was a kid, immature. And I said, "Gee, no, I don't think so." So they sent me to junior high school, which was Burkholder. At that time, Burkholder Junior High School was where City Hall sits now. Then Burkholder as we know it today was Basic High School, was the new Basic High School. So I went there and I was the new kid on the block, if you will, and I had some social problems the first year, and then it all worked out after that.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]* Okay. Growing up on the block, let's talk a little bit about – what street did you grow up on?

Frank Belger: Basic Road.

[end of Part 1]