

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Frank Belger, Part 2

Oral History of Frank Belger

Part 2

conducted by

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Barbara Tabach: *Okay, so let's talk about Basic, your neighborhood.*

Frank Belger: It was a bedroom community, all families. Everybody pretty much looked out for everybody else and everybody had kids, so I knew the kids on my block. But, like I said, when I went to junior high school, I didn't know the majority of kids and I was the newcomer. I was the newbie on the block, and my first year I had some trouble but –

Barbara Tabach: *Was that because of the – not knowing them or –*

Frank Belger: I was the Catholic kid.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay.*

Frank Belger: And some of the kids didn't – resented, if you will, kid stuff, okay? And –

Barbara Tabach: *The reason I ask, I mean, and I can relate to this, is because, you know, I grew up in a Catholic environment too, and then the merging when the Catholic kids decided not to go to parochial school anymore for whatever reason, that sometimes it took a while to make new friends.*

Frank Belger: It did take a while to make new friends and one of the problems that I had that I didn't realize at the time in junior high school – my sisters, as I said before, were older than I was. So whenever a new dance step would come through, they would grab me to practice, so when I went to junior high school, I was an excellent dancer.

Barbara Tabach: *All right!*

Frank Belger: I could do the Cha-cha, the Rhumba; I could do all of it. And the first dance I went to, I just wanted to find out what was going on, so I'd ask a girl to dance, and then the Cha-cha, the Rhumba or something like that would come up and I would be dancing with these girls and there would be girls standing back tapping me on the shoulder to dance. So the guys, a lot of

the guys, were on the sidelines not wanting to dance because they didn't know how. So I lived a block and a half from the auditorium, and every Friday night I'd have a fist fight to get home.

[laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] Because the girls – you were too popular with the girls. Yeah.*

Frank Belger: Yeah, and some of them, the guys would – that was their girlfriend, or their wanna-be girlfriend or something and it was all kids' stuff, you know. But I didn't – there for a while, I wasn't sure which I liked more, the dancing or the fist fights. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] It looks like you survived both.*

Frank Belger: Well, it was after my first year that everything settled down. I was accepted and everything worked out real well. Yeah.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay. Well let's – you know, the fact that your sisters were so much older – okay, so this influenced your workmanship on the dance floor, how – what did they do? Where did they go to school when they first got here?*

Frank Belger: They went to Basic High School. When they got here they were old enough to go into Basic High School and they graduated from Basic High School. They both married locally. My oldest sister, Shirley, is in Kentucky right now with her husband. They've been retired for several years and they have two boys and their family's doing well. My sister Jane lives in the community here. In fact, she would like to come to a meeting and see about the Historical Society.

Barbara Tabach: *Wonderful.*

Frank Belger: Her husband's passed away. He was with the telephone company, with Hersch Trumbo, for many years. She has a rich heritage of Henderson and the community too,

probably a different slant and different people than I have. But her era was with, oh, Mack McDoniel, in those classes of Basic High School. Mack McDoniel was the Vice-Principal of Basic for many years and he was a mayor of Henderson at one time. And he's passed away several years now. But that was the class that he graduated in, and my sisters were right close too.

Barbara Tabach: *Did they have – did they pursue different careers locally, or did they go away to school?*

Frank Belger: Well, my sister worked at the telephone company out of California. She went down and went to school and came back here and went with the telephone company.

Barbara Tabach: *Which sister was that?*

Frank Belger: Jane.

Barbara Tabach: *Jane. Okay.*

Frank Belger: Jane Pitchford. And my sister Shirley was a homemaker and raising two boys and her husband worked down at the plants. And then they eventually moved back to Tennessee and then to Kentucky, where they are now. But, yeah, Shirley, or Jane was a – in fact Ellen Shirley was the first Director of the Chamber of Commerce for Henderson, and her and Ellen were great friends and they traveled with the organization when they would go out to San Francisco, San Diego, and promote Henderson, Vegas area for the Chamber.

Barbara Tabach: *Well, I bet she's got some interesting stories about that, for sure. [laughter]*

Frank Belger: You'll have to ask her. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *Okay. When you were young – we're going to keep going kind of back young and then go forward – what kind of entertainment did kids have at that time? Because this was a small town, a small community; I've got this kind of visual. What could you do for fun?*

Frank Belger: Okay, Basic Road was the end of civilization for the desert. You had the flood control channel and then you had the railroad tracks. And the flood control channel at that time was a lot deeper in the water then than it is now. Sediment has built in and it's not needed like it was back in those years, although they have expanded and built onto it. But we would go lizard hunting and exploring the desert, and there was a lot of things you found out in the desert, not just the animals, the tortoises, the lizards and snakes and stuff like that, but sometimes there was an old gun that you would find and you'd find out where the older kids were having their beer parties on Friday night and stuff like that. But hiking Black Mountain, that was a big thing, so you had to make your bones by hiking Black Mountain one or two times or ten. And I look back and I think, gee, if I'd lived in Montana, I'd have horses, and hunted deer out my back door and, you know, all kind of stuff. But in reality, Southern Nevada has been awfully good to my family and me. And growing up in the environment I grew up in, I wouldn't change it for the world. We didn't have a lot of social things for kids. We didn't – we had the Boys Club, we went down there and learned to box. And then we had later on, probably about when I was nine, something like that, they built the BMI pool. In order to fund it, they took and sold squares for twenty-five dollars, and the people got to put their name stamped in it. And the pool was a big thing. I mean socially, for kids, that was a big thing. It opened from noon to five and opened back up at six to eight. And then we had the rec hall next to it that had a basketball court but everybody went in and shot pool [laughter]. And then we had football, that was Pop Warner football was the big thing in the spring. Then of course they had all kind of baseball things, but not much basketball. It got to be its own but it wasn't that big. And where I personally learned how to swim was in the dike, because in the winter months, or summer

months, it would flood and it would fill up, and the debris would plug the pipes, and you'd have forty, fifty foot of water back there eight feet deep [shrugs], that's where I learned to swim.

[laughter] That was great.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Frank Belger: But then the pool came in, and later on I became a lifeguard and I went to four state championships for swimming and stuff like that.

Barbara Tabach: *Oh, so you were an athlete.*

Frank Belger: I would like to think I was, yes.

Barbara Tabach: *What was your stroke?*

Frank Belger: Oh, I was breaststroke.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay.*

Frank Belger: That was my forte. I tried the backstroke and almost drowned, so I stuck with the breaststroke. But, yeah, the pool was a big thing. That kept a lot of kid – and then having a summer pass as a kid, because the parents – my parents both worked. My mom was a waitress and my father worked at the plants, and so to entertain us during the day, not all the little TV-type thing, they got us passes. I think it cost seventeen bucks or something like that a year, first year, and Mom thought it was terrible about seven years later and she had to pay twenty-five or something. But we could come and go in the pool all the time. And before I became a lifeguard, I got to know all the staff, so after everybody left at eight o'clock and then they'd shut the doors and lock everything up, and then they'd open back up and all of us regulars would come in and we'd stay there until midnight sometimes swimming and stuff. Police would come

by and look in there and go, "Oh yeah, okay," and they'd take off. But, yeah, we had some great times, great memories, really.

Barbara Tabach: *Were there any hi-jinx going on as a teenager at that time or, you know, when you look back, things that, you know, the mischief that kids get into today is not always, you know –*

Frank Belger: What's the statute of limitations on some of this? [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *I think you're clear, okay? [laughter]*

Frank Belger: Oh yeah. We, we did all the stuff. You know it wasn't mean, I mean there was no vandalism or breaking into homes and stuff like that, but we had two rivalries as far as schools. One was Las Vegas, one Boulder City. And I never to this day understood why they did this, but whenever we played Boulder City in football, we all at halftime would go through the same gate to go into different locker rooms. Well, the fights would always happen at the gate [laughter]. Never understood why the coaches weren't smart enough to go, "Okay, you guys go first, we'll go second," whatever. But that was our big rivalry and we had some altercations if you will with the kids up there – no knives, no guns, no clubs – just fist fighting. And the same thing with Las Vegas. Las Vegas High School was our, probably our Four-A football biggest rivalry. And the kids in Henderson – I must say this – they were all good people. All of them today are good people. You've got the Sullivans, the Lambroses, the Stewarts, the Vincents, the Belgers – they didn't go look for fights. You know, they didn't want to get into trouble, but if it came their way they were – they stood up for themselves. And I think that if that mentality held on to today with some of our youth, we'd be a lot better off, because we never – the guys that I run with and

stuff, we wanted to have fun, we wanted to have a good time. We didn't want to get into fist fights, but if it came, it was there.

Barbara Tabach: *Did you go to Las Vegas much? Did that seem like a long ways to go? I know you chose not to, or your family chose not to send you to Bishop Gorman, which would have been going to Vegas. Was that – did that seem like a long distance?*

Frank Belger: Oh, it was a long distance. I can remember Boulder Highway two lanes, Sunset Road was not even there, became a little cattle road in later years. If Mom and Dad decided one Saturday morning to go shopping, then we dressed up, got in the car early, went downtown, went to Sears, Penney's, Montgomery Wards, and that was an all-day thing. And the biggest thing about it was if we got to go to the Top Hat, which was on Sahara or Charleston and Las Vegas Boulevard – it was a drive-in. And they had the girls come and put the trays on your car and eat hamburgers and stuff. That was huge for us kids. You know, that was a day out. We could stand all the shopping all day long knowing that we were going to get a treat. But yeah, Las Vegas was a monumental day out.

Barbara Tabach: *What kind of vehicle did you drive to get there?*

Frank Belger: My dad, my first recollection, my dad had a 1952 two-door Chevy coupe and there were six of us. So needless to say, it was full. And then I think the next car he got was a '56 Chevy, four-door, '59 and then a '60. And these were my years, growing up. And in '65, of course, I left the nest. But he always stuck with Chevrolets and he had a guy in Hawthorne, Woody was his name, and he, every time Dad would go through there, "Okay, let's buy a new car" type thing, you know. But you know, we were not affluent by any means. I mean, my Mom shopped at, you know, Sears and Penney's and stuff. And I didn't have hand-me-downs per se,

but I did – I dressed like the rest of the kids, and you know, we weren't Marcus and Neiman and all that kind of stuff.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] So I'm envisioning this family of six all in a vehicle driving down Boulder Highway to Las Vegas to go shopping. And then, so you would stop at the Top Hat, you called it?*

Frank Belger: Yeah, it was on Charleston and Las Vegas Boulevard.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay, and you'd roll down the window and you'd put the tray onto the – how was it delivered? Were they – roller skates or walking or –*

Frank Belger: Yeah, they were roller skates, but they would come over with the tray and they would attach it to the side of your car, so the little levers went onto your window sill and then the bar would come down to hold it in place and then when they brought your food, it was there and then Dad would disperse it you know to all of us, yeah.

Barbara Tabach: *What did you eat? What was your favorite meal?*

Frank Belger: Oh, hamburgers, God, you know and cheese.

Barbara Tabach: *With fries?*

Frank Belger: Oh, yeah.

Barbara Tabach: *And a Coke?*

Frank Belger: Oh, yeah, yeah, all of the above.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] All of the above, okay. And where did you grocery shop? Did you have to go to Vegas to grocery shop?*

Frank Belger: No, originally they had Prime Meats, which was down on Army Street. And Water Street had a few businesses, but right back of that was the core, if you will, of the market: Van

Valey's Shoes, liquor store, Bill Byrne's little – he had a little liquor store and he became mayor for quite a while in Henderson – he had a little convenience store, if you will, with liquor. And then you had Rexall Drug with Mitch McBeath. He was the druggist for, oh, I want to say thirty-five, forty years. And the Drugstore Tavern still – and the drugstore building still stands today. It was the first building in the city of Henderson that was ever sprinkled and it was sprinkled on the outside and you can see it today. You can walk down there and look up, if you're going to go have breakfast at the Rainbow or El Dorado, you can look up and see the pipes today. They're still in use. But that was the core to downtown. You had Van Valey – you had the Prime Meats, you had Van Valey's, you had another dress-shop type thing in there. Then when you turned the corner, there was a bar, and then you went up to Bill Byrne's little store and then there was a shoe store and then there was two barber shops up on – going towards Firesteel Fire Station. And then across the street was the drugstore and in back of that was the show house. And then you had, on Water Street, you had – actually the El Dorado was the Wheel at that time when it was first built, and it became the El Dorado, and then the Rainbow was next to it. Then you had, if you jumped a lot to the end where Pacific is, you had the Bank of Nevada, then you had Van – or you had Perry's Clothing, and that was the upscale. That was very nice clothes. And that was pretty much – you had the little shops along there, where you had La Porta's Insurance, you had some of the other smaller shops there, and then across from the El Dorado, you had the Polar Queen which was the teenager hangout, and McMahon's Furniture and Appliances were next door to that. And then down the street at the end where Lake Mead comes across, just one half a block up, you had the – that was the Polar Queen and the other one was the – can't think of it now, but it was a hamburger joint too. And then years later, the

homes across the street were taken out and businesses were put in there where the hotel is now. There used to be a bank on the corner and stuff like that, and then going down Lake Mead you had Rose de Lima, and then you had all of the – along Lake Mead, you had all of the doctors' offices, the dentist office, the clinics and stuff like that that fed Rose de Lima.

Barbara Tabach: *So let's talk a little bit about, like, doctors and, you know, the medical, because the hospital was so close here. I mean, what do you remember about how that grew or evolved?*

Frank Belger: Well, the hospital originally came about because of the plant complex, because of the war years and all this stuff was going on there. It was a very small town hospital, and it rivaled the Las Vegas Hospital, downtown Las Vegas, which in Las Vegas was much bigger by far at that time than Henderson. But we had a lot of fine doctors. Dr. French, he became a mayor – I think I mentioned that before – of Henderson. Henderson was in their lean years and he donated his salary back every month to the City, and he was a character in himself. But they had a lot of good doctors that – all of them worked in their clinics and referred to the hospital and they worked the hospital. And they knew, obviously had the plants who had industrial accidents from time to time and stuff like that, and that all fed into their – now, back in the early years, you had the plant fire department with a limited ambulance. They had – they were no more than go pick up and deliver to the hospital. I mean that was the full medical – you might stop bleeding or something, but that was very, very young in medical. And then when the city of Henderson incorporated, they had to have their own police department and their own fire department, so some of these guys left the plant fire department and went in to be the fire chief and the assistant chief and firemen with Henderson. Well, one of the gentlemen that left there became the chief, and he was there a short period of time, a couple, three months and he

left. And the gentleman that was underneath him in seniority – because that’s how they promoted in those years, was seniority – was Don Richards. And they made him chief and he stayed chief for probably thirty years. He was the chief when I was hired on. He was a personal friend of my father-in-law. I mean, we all knew everybody, you know. And then we had Assistant Chief Dale Sauer. They made him, in 1974, assistant chief probably a year before I came on. And then we had training officer, Bob Blankenship, and that was, that was the beginning of the “no more nepotism” about five years before that, it was all civil service exams and that sort of thing. No matter who you know, you had to pass the test and get on the list and all that sort of thing. And, personally, I competed against three hundred guys for the job. Now, I did that five years in a row. Personally, I didn’t want to be a Clark County or Las Vegas fire fighter. I wanted to be a Henderson – that’s where I grew up. Well, for eight years there was no positions. It was everybody there came to work, did their job, and went home. That was it. I mean it was closed. There was no more expansion, no more hiring. The year that I did get lucky enough, I was third on the list. The two guys that – well, the one guy beat me out by – I got second – had three points military, which I didn’t have, and we were all within like an eighth of a point of getting one, two, and three. That year they hired four, and they hired four because one man retired. I took his position. Two of them went on medical leave. So that was the first time in years that there was a position. So I go in the fire department as a rookie fireman and I tested after three years for engineer, but there was no openings for eight years – was the first openings for engineer.

Barbara Tabach: *Oh, my goodness. And what year did you become a fireman?*

Frank Belger: 1974, January 16th.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay so we're in 1974, of this career. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.*

Frank Belger: That's all right.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay, so go ahead.*

Frank Belger: And then for a number of years, there was no promotions, again because we didn't have the growth. Then they opened up Station Three, which was a Quonset hut by the Boy's Club off of Palo Verde and that was the center street, that area. And then they hired three for that, and then due to attrition, retirement, and stuff like that, more people got hired, younger people. And then they started expanding a little bit more because then they got into – we had to run a full stage rescue. The City of Henderson had their own rescue. When I went on the Fire Department, they had retired the old van that they had, and they had a Cadillac. The chief loved Cadillacs so he bought a Cadillac ambulance, and it was effective, it did a good job. But to really facilitate medical in the back of it was very difficult, because you were basically right on top of your patient. You know, you didn't have anywhere to get away from him or her to get things to do medical assistance. And then we got the – we serviced the lake a lot in those years. So the City of Henderson with the Park Service come into a joint venture about '77 or '78 and they got – the Park Service bought us a modular van, and it was the first real unit that you can say was designed for saving lives. But we had to service the lake to get it. So, there's been, in my recollection, probably five times I've been on rescues over two hundred miles. I've been all the way to – oh, Callville Bay, was a lot of the weekends, but I've been to Overton, the landing out there, back on 15, coming code three to UMC, and that was not uncommon.

Barbara Tabach: *How long did that go on, that kind of distance?*

Frank Belger: Well, the call itself?

Barbara Tabach: *Well, I mean, no, I mean, historically, how did, how long did that go on?*

Frank Belger: Well, that went on about five years.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay.*

Frank Belger: And then what changed the advent of that was paramedics in Las Vegas and Clark County. We were not paramedics. The Henderson Fire Department was very unique. The training officer, Bob Blankenship, was, for our department, ahead of his time. If he'd have been Clark County or Washoe County or L. A. County he'd have been right in his niche. But he studied, he learned, he tried to advent for us. So he got – we couldn't get paramedics. I volunteered to go to paramedic school on my own and they couldn't do it, because even back then it cost something like seventy-five thousand dollars to send a guy to paramedic school if he was willing to go. Then by the time you put him on the rig and outfitted the rig with all the equipment and medical supplies and stuff, and all the continuing education, it was like a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a person. Well, the City of Henderson was not in the position to spend that kind of money to do that. So that got shot down, if you will, and then it was several years after that that we finally put a referendum through to the voters and we got paramedics. And by that time, I had floated up and I was way out of the medical, not out of it, but I was past that form in my life, my career. But when that happened, when the paramedics hit the Valley, then, of course, the Park Service wanted a more advanced life support and stuff like that, and then Fight for Life came in, so they were drawing on them and then we pulled back. We still did a lot of Callville Bay runs, but we still pulled back a little bit. I mean Vegas Wash and the marina, and stuff like that. And then we had what they called the mutual aid pact. We had a mutual aid pact with everybody in the county, and what that actually means is,

if you have a disaster above the capabilities, then we can call on you to send all the help you can afford to send us at no charge to help us out and then we will do the same thing for you if you have one. And we even had – at one time – I don't know about now – we had one with San Bernardino County and Phoenix, Arizona. So when the MGM burned up and killed eighty-eight people, Phoenix Fire Department, very advanced, they got a crew of high rise specialists and a jet, private jet, flew them to Vegas to work the fire while it was still going on.

Barbara Tabach: *Wow.*

Frank Belger: Yeah.

Barbara Tabach: *I didn't know that.*

Frank Belger: It drew a lot of people. But in the basic years of the fire department, we did the best we could with what we had, but we had very little. I mean we were basically a snatch and get to the hospital. And then Blankenship, Chief Blankenship, got us what they call modules through the state, and we were the first department to get IV therapy in the field that weren't paramedics; it was before paramedics. We could actually go and plug in IVs in people out at the lake, out at Callville Bay, out at Stewarts Landing or whatever, and Doctor Ravish was our counselor and he had a book in the ER room. In that time, it said that you had to have personal contact with a doctor to authorize an IV. He signed it blanked, so he gave us carte blanche to do that without his authorization. Then when we showed up at the hospital, we had to sign in [laughter]. And we did. And then we got MAST [Medical Anti-Shock Trouser] trousers; that was a big thing.

Barbara Tabach: *What kind of trousers?*

Frank Belger: MAST trousers. When someone is hurt in the extremities or anywhere where they have a lot of fluid loss and stuff like that, you actually put on trousers up to their chest, and you inflate them to a certain pressure to get the blood flow up in the upper organs, the heart, the lung, the liver, the brain, to sustain life until you can get them back to a hospital for more advanced treatment. And we had the air traction splint; that was another module that was a broken femur splint that you could actually – when you have the broken femur, the thigh muscles cramp, and that causes tremendous pain. So we put the splint on and actually wrap the foot with a bandage-type of affair and you would crank it to where you would pull the leg back to its normal length, that way releasing the pressure on the muscles to reduce the pain. We never got to the point where we could give pain killing drugs or anything like that. But those were some of the things that the Henderson Fire Department was first in the state doing, and in a lot, the first in the nation.

Barbara Tabach: *That's amazing.*

Frank Belger: And we were building up to paramedics and we finally got them. And then once the paramedics come in, all of the people on board and today are still EMTs, so they can perform basic life support until paramedics get there. So it's a very full service fire department that you have in this community today. And it's a very good fire department.

Barbara Tabach: *So you've talked about your personal career. You started in 1974.*

Frank Belger: Yes, ma'am.

Barbara Tabach: *And then you eventually became – you were never a paramedic.*

Frank Belger: No.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay. So talk about – what were, like, the benchmarks of your career. How long were you a fireman, first of all, I guess?*

Frank Belger: Eight years.

Barbara Tabach: *Just eight years, okay. And then what happened after that?*

Frank Belger: I became an engineer and at that point in time, I became what they call PRIN. I was a Professional Rescue Instructor in Nevada, and at that time the people like me were the highest qualified teachers for medical in the State of Nevada. And we had two. Captain Chris Berry, he became a captain. He was my partner and he was one of them. And we taught classes to the Henderson Fire Department, to the new guys coming up and continuing education and stuff like that. And then we got our certificates for the modules and then we kept teaching that. Then when I became engineer, that was about the time that it was more advanced; then the paramedics were coming into their own and that sort of thing, and that's when I – that surpassed my credentials, paramedics.

[end of Part 2]