

# **Henderson Libraries**

## **Henderson Oral History Project**

### **Frank Belger, Part 3**

**Oral History of Frank Belger**

**Part 3**

**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:** *Let's pick up with your passion for your career.*

**Frank Belger:** Well, I've taught a couple of rookie schools and one of the points that I make to them when the rookies come on the floor – when they come on the floor out of rookie school, they're assigned a station with a captain, an engineer, a fireman, stuff like that. And very honestly, as hard as you want to make rookie school, or as much as you want to teach the kids in rookie school, when they come on the floor, they're babies. They don't know the truth; they don't know the real firefighting. And it's always left up to the engineer to educate them and teach them and some of them were just like sponges. They wanted to learn. I mean they just want – I think they want to please you to some degree, but they really wanted to learn. And there was other ones that – I had one kid that come in from California, and we have a lot from California. And the reason we have a lot from California is because down there, if you want to be a fireman, you have to volunteer to go on a fire department, then you go through an academy, like a two-year course, you get your fire science and all that on your own. And then you can be a volunteer on their department, hopefully to get a position at some point in time. So these kids down there are well-versed, well-trained and everything else, so they come up here to test. They shine over the local kids that don't have that opportunity to have availability to those schools and that sort of thing. So we had a lot of them and the one kid, he came up and he sat down and he says, "What degree do you got?" And I said, "Why? I have fire science. What are you talking about? What do you want to know?" And I said, "I've taught at community college level, different classes. And I taught EMT stuff for years." And he said, "Well I've got a degree in this, I've got a degree in that. And how about the captain?" And he said, "I don't have a degree, college degree. I've taken college classes in different things; I wanted to be

a nurse.” Well, and he just kind of sitting back like, hmph, I know more than you do. So we have what they call a green book. And it’s – what it is, is it is a reference guide to cities. It says what your water distribution system should be like; it says how many police per thousand you should have; how many firemen per thousand you should have. It breaks it all down. It’s a guide to the city. I took the book, slammed it on the table in front of him. The captain knew what was coming up; he left the room. I said, “Now we get a fire call today,” I said “Don’t put on your air pack, don’t put on turnouts. You pick that book up and you get in the back of the truck and when I get you there, we’re going to just sit there and watch. You take that book and you walk up and throw it right through the front of that window and put that fire out.” “Well that ain’t gonna work.” I says, “Yeah, and your attitude ain’t gonna work either. Now do you wanna learn or don’cha?” We got along after that.

**Barbara Tabach:** *[laughter]*

**Frank Belger:** But there was a lot of good guys that came up that really – they wanted to know the truck. A rookie fireman on the rig is a gopher. When you get to a car wreck, you get in there with the paramedics, you knew they’re trained people that have done it a hundred times and you tell this kid go get the backboard, go get the jaws, go get this, go get that. Well, if he doesn’t know where it’s at, he’s going to be looking and spending crucial time for that victim, so he has to know these things. And that was my job to teach them. And a lot of them within a cycle, which was three shifts for us, they were proficient. They knew it because they wanted to. And they were good. They’re good firemen, good captains, good engineers today. And what happened to the Henderson Fire Department was it went to a point in time when it was not stagnated, but we had growth, but small growth, and then Henderson blew up from seventeen

thousand population to a couple of hundred thousand, and we put on two more stations and hired a bunch of people, and now everybody on board had the opportunity to go from fireman, engineer, captain to above. I mean, the promotions were there. And it promoted some kids a little too early. In my opinion, they hadn't paid their dues. They hadn't learned.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Did you wake up one day and say, oh my God, we're growing so fast, how are we going to handle this? What happened?*

**Frank Belger:** Oh, yeah.

**Barbara Tabach:** *How would you describe that?*

**Frank Belger:** [sighs] I think that when it hit most of us was when we got the influx of California kids coming in. They wanted to change uniforms. They wanted to change the cornices on the helmet. And basically what they wanted to do was look like L.A. County. That was their – when they were growing up, that was their heroes, and they wanted to look like them. And we had light blue shirts and Levi pants. They were not a Levi. They were a denim type of pant, but they were nice looking. And in our system, in order to go to a fire, you had to be fully turned out. Well, you could take your shirt off, then you had your blue T-shirt on. Then you had your turnouts and all that, and you had your pants, your day pants and your turnout boots, and you were relatively comfortable. Now, when a fireman gets to the scene of a fire and he works a fire, the first five minutes of a fire, he has exerted more energy than an NFL football player during the course of an entire game. Now how they come up with that, I don't know, but I read it. And you have to go to rehab after you expel one bottle of air. You can get a second bottle, and then after the second bottle you're mandatory, you have to go to rehab. You have to get fluids, you have to get oxygen if you need it, you have to wait a few minutes before you can get

rehabbed back out, blood pressure, all that sort of thing. And then you come back, the rigging, you get suited back up and go back out. So we had it down to where we had very comfortable attire underneath the turnouts. Well, when the influx from California come up, they come up with the Nomex, we want the Nomex. Well, the Nomex was very popular in California because it's fire resistant, fire proof, but it doesn't breathe. It's very hot. So what are you in most of the day? You're in hot clothes in the 120 degree temperature out there doing inspections or going to a store or going to see people or whatever. And they wanted to have that. Well now, in California, they have a lot of brush fires, so the Nomex clothes was important to them because they didn't have to wear the big bunker stuff. Well now they get that on in Vegas, we don't have brush fires, now it's a deficit. So it was that sort of thing that came in that we – the older guys that were in a minority by that time – were going, oh my God! Can't these kids wake up? And they brought some good ideas with them; they became some very good firemen, very good paramedics. A lot of them I consider my friend today. But if I had my druthers, I would have rather seen more local kids get the opportunity to become firemen and maybe less of the influence from California.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Gotcha.*

**Frank Belger:** Personal opinion.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Gotcha. Well, that's good. [laughter] That's valid. The city grew so fast. So it affected the Fire – what else – the Fire Department. What else did you watch and observe as an adult there?*

**Frank Belger:** Oh, the police were leaps and bounds – the police went crazy.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Okay.*

**Frank Belger:** To this day, I have some very good friends, personal friends, who are police officers when I was a fireman getting on – they got on at the same time. We knew each other and we went on calls together, went and drank some beer together and stuff like that. But the Park and Recreation under Dundee Jones, which is a very good man, we had a couple of mayors that thought that the Park and Recreation City Managers really were bad about that, that we had to have Park and Recreation for everybody. And when you had the largest department in the city, it's Park and Recreation, that takes a lot away from your core. And when I say core, I mean your maintenance people, your fire, your police, so now you have all these guys up there trimming lawns and doing backhoe work and all this kind of stuff. And a lot of them are volunteers who get paid a couple hundred bucks a weekend to officiate baseball games, football games, stuff like that. But when Dundee was able to expand on the Park and Recreation, that took a lot away from, or took some away from the core. And that became a little bit of a problem in budgeting times and stuff like that. But I think that when the growth hit, Calico Ridge went in, Lake Las Vegas went in and all of the development along Lake Mead and now St. Rose Parkway, when that hit, we had to provide services because that was major tax revenue. And a lot of funding went in to supply that. And then we still had, as far as the city was concerned, we still had Green Valley, which as far as a lot of people out there are concerned, have never lived in Henderson [laughter], they live in Green Valley! Where do you pay your water bill to? Okay. Anyway.

**Barbara Tabach:** *[laughter]*

**Frank Belger:** Anyway, you had those offshoots for a while before the building came close to the core of Henderson downtown. And you had to provide service of that. We didn't have a

station in Green Valley when Hank Greenspun built the golf course and put up fifty, sixty homes out there. We still had to provide them with fire protection and medical, but we didn't have the capability, so what they decided to do between the chief and the mayor and all that stuff, is they decided to put a satellite station in. So they actually bought a house on Green Valley Parkway, one block in. It was on the corner, and in order to put a fire truck in there, they had to extend the carport, the garage, something like six feet, seven feet. They bought a two and a half ton Ford pickup and they had a company build it for them. And they had a pumper and they had a little bit of hose and all this kind of stuff in it, medical stuff too and our firefighting stuff. And we could park that in that station to provide medical until we can get paramedics out there and some type of fireproof protection, if you will, for structural fires and stuff like that. Well, all of the structures were relatively new except for on the golf course, and they were very expensive homes at that time, so we didn't have a lot of fire problems, but we had to provide the medical. And we had car wrecks and stuff like that, so we had the little mini-truck, which is what they called it, in the station. We bought two of them. And I was engineer out there for several years. And then I opened up Station Four when they decided to build a modern station with paramedics and a real fire truck, or a larger fire truck. And it really started blossoming then, all the bluff area, all that; it really got large.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Were there ever, you know, in that sprawl, that initial sprawl, like Calico Ridge and some of those other places that you had mentioned, were there ever surprises as somebody, a longtime resident, and you're watching this growth happening, going, why are they building there?*

**Frank Belger:** [laughter] I shouldn't have told you about that earlier, should I have?



**Barbara Tabach:** *[laughter]*

**Frank Belger:** What's surprising to me is that Henderson, their landfill, was on Lake Mead going towards the lake and you could go there anytime you wanted to during the day and dump anything you wanted to dump. Well, for years, they dumped along the foothills. And at the end of the foothills, the road went around and went down along the wash. And there was an old hermit that had a cabin built into the mountain there. And I got to know him because I go down and hunt ducks and stuff, and I got to know him. And we never thought nothing of it. That was the dump. Well now it's Calico Ridge. *[laughter]* The people have actually spent a lot of money putting a lot of homes out there at great expense and they are actually living on the old dump.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Do we know, did they clean it up before –*

**Frank Belger:** Oh, they did some restoration. I can't remember the eye doctor, Bagley, I think his name was, he developed that and he did some work and stuff like that. Now they're cutting into the mountain and they're putting homes up, expensive homes up and tiered them on the top of the mountain and stuff. But the original project was on the dump. Now, what they did to cover it up or whatever else, I have no idea, but that was many, many years of everything – batteries, mercury, you name it. You know, maybe a couple of bodies. I don't know.

**Barbara Tabach:** *[laughter]*

**Frank Belger:** I don't know, but it was there.

**Barbara Tabach:** *How about that, bodies, notoriety of the community you grew up in. I mean, I know it's Henderson, it's not Las Vegas, but you know, when you tell people where you're from, do you tell them you're from Henderson or do you tell them you're from Las Vegas and what do they ask?*

**Frank Belger:** I tell them I'm from Henderson.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Okay.*

**Frank Belger:** If you are an avid hunter or fisherman in the State of Nevada, when you went north – and you had to go north. You could fish Lake Mead, but if you wanted trout streams and stuff like that, you went into Elko or Ely or Winnemucca and places like that, and the local people up there would take exception to you. They'd see the license plates, at that time, said Clark County. They don't now, but at that time they said "C" for Clark County. Well, they'd stick their nose up in the air. You guys are coming up here and catch our fish and pollute our streams and where you from? I'd say I'm from Henderson, little community down south. Then I was more accepted. If I said Las Vegas or Washoe County, Reno, you know, it was a brawl. But for years, you were faced with that in the State, and the rest of the State, the cow counties, they're very important to the State for the agriculture and the beef and the other things that they have, the industry they have are very important to the State. And the sad part about it is that for years and years and years they didn't realize that Washoe County and Clark County provided the funding for their roads and their infrastructures and their dams and a lot of stuff like that. We were looked down on if you came from Las Vegas or from Reno, so I'd always say I'm from Henderson. And I'm proud to be from Henderson. I've lived here all my life basically.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Well, you know, like, some people are disparaging. When I first moved here, you know, it was like, "Oh, there's a smell in Henderson. There have been explosions in Henderson. Aren't you worried about living in," you know, "Hendertucky?" I mean, I can remember somebody saying that to me, and it was like, "Well, you know, I like Henderson, but I just wasn't here during those periods." But what did you experience? Do you remember those?*

**Frank Belger:** Oh, vividly.

**Barbara Tabach:** *And how do you feel about it? I mean, can you describe those?*

**Frank Belger:** The plant, all the plants, Kerr-McGee, Titanium, Stauffer, Potash, all of them had a very good track record. They had injuries from time to time, but as far as damaging explosion-wise, they had a very good record there. The thing that happened, clear back before the fifties and the forties, and then when I worked at Titanium for three and a half years at one point in time – and they would dump what they called their sludge dryers at night. Now this was a by-product that they had to clean out and get rid of, okay. So it would go in the wash underneath Boulder Highway, no ponds or no settling ponds in those years, it would just work its way to Lake Mead. Well, you had American Pacific, which was Gibson's plant that did the perchlorates. Well when they had batches that weren't up to standard or whatever, I've been told that they would dump it off in the wash. And now, the last ten years, the scientists have been saying, gee, we've got perchlorates in Lake Mead. Where's that coming from? Well, ask an old Hendersonite. [laughter] He can probably tell you. But they have since went in and cleaned up a lot of those areas, the plant areas and that. But it was years later that they'd actually put in settling ponds, that they lined them and all the sludge and stuff would go down there and evaporate off. And if you ever flew into Las Vegas from over Henderson and looked down, you could see all those beautiful green and orange and red, different ponds out there, and that's what they were. They were the by-products of all the plants. And they've since went in with a lot of wells and stuff and extracted a lot of the slop over, if you will, chemicals out of the ground. So, that's been good.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Yeah. Okay. Any other memorable events in Henderson that you can recall, or think people should remember?*

**Frank Belger:** Well, PEPCON and Kerr-McGee. Those were pretty memorable. Those affected a lot of people. My early years on the fire department, I had just made engineer in '80, and – '82, I think, and that's when the MGM burned up. And we were asked to send in, first of all, an ambulance. And so I took the first ambulance in with the firemen and we went to the MGM fire. And him and I worked that for probably twelve hours. We hauled somewhere in the neighborhood of ninety people to local fire departments, to local hospitals and stuff. And it was a round robin thing. You would come back in, load up, and take back out. And at one point we had to get fuel because we were running out of fuel. We had to refuel. But that was, that was an interesting – it was a disaster. It was a tragedy to a lot of people. I learned a lot from that fire, management-wise, seeing management, triage. My partner and I were asked to go around back from Henderson and we come in the back, and at that time it was an empty lot and Wally Lynch was my fireman – he's since retired captain, good friend of mine – and we got back there and there was people – they looked like ants coming out of a burning building. And they were sitting down on the dirt. And to this day, I don't know how it happened, but Clark County School District sent a bunch of high school girls and they had orange, bright yellow almost orange, like paint gloss, and they were going through covering people up making sure they were okay. And we were the only medical in the back at that time and we had to make life and death decisions. I can haul you, you're salvageable. I can't haul you. [shaking head]

**Barbara Tabach:** *I can't imagine what that must have been like.*

**Frank Belger:** Tough.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Even today I can see it's emotional. Wow. You still don't know where those kids came from.*

**Frank Belger:** Nope. They were in Clark County buses. But I learned a lot. It was very educational. And I told my partner on the way back to the station that night, I said, "Put that in your memory banks. You'll never see this again." Eight months later I was driving a crew, code three, in a fire truck to the Hilton Hotel fire [laughter] and I was thinking to myself, do I really want to do this? But it was – they learned a lot on that fire. Clark County learned a lot from MGM. Clark County, they were having war games at Nellis, so they had these big Sikorsky helicopters, big twin screws. Well, they come over the MGM and they were laying down cables and picking people up off the top, one or two at a time. And the bad part about it was the prop wash was pushing the smoke back down through the elevators and the building stairwells and stuff so it was causing more of a problem than it was alleviating. So when the Hilton went down I was first in line to get a pumping assignment, so I was – my crew and the guys who were with me were all in fighting the fire. And I was waiting for a standpipe system to hook up to, to pump to supply water so they could fight fire. And I sit there and I watched and they had called McCarran Airport and they had got all these private helicopters, and it looked like a Ferris wheel, and they were all lined up over here [pointing] and one would pop down top of the roof, pick up one or two people, and go down in the parking lot and drop them off, and go back and get in line. And another one come back, pop, and go back and get in line. It was more effective and more efficient than the big Sikorskies ever dreamt of being. But they learned and they got – under Chief Parrish with Clark County, they learned from the MGM like you wouldn't believe. That's why all the hotels have to be sprinklered now. They had a command of vehicles set up

where they were in cars in the front of the MGM, and they couldn't hear, they couldn't talk to each other because of the loud noise from the helicopters. So they got a great big, well, mini – not a mini, but a big motor home type thing and converted it all to telephones and communication systems, sort of like an insulator, where they could sit and talk and listen and stuff like that. So they learned a tremendous amount from that fire. Tragedy, but if you don't learn something from the tragedy then it compounds the tragedy.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Very wise. That's good. Do you have family?*

**Frank Belger:** I do.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Okay. How many kids do you have?*

**Frank Belger:** I have four children that are mine. One was my wife's oldest daughter when we got married the second time. I have two by my first marriage and I adopted two.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Oh, great. Do they live around here? What do they think about [laughter] Henderson?*

**Frank Belger:** Well, my son moved to Michigan with his wife and by her family. And he got a good job there. My youngest daughter, she moved to South Carolina and they love the Myrtle Beach and that area. And her son's a sergeant in the United States Army doing his second tour of Iraq. But I have ten grandchildren and one great and my daughter's wonderful. My two daughters live here and I'm a very blessed man.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Do they ask about the old days in Henderson or do they think about their own old days?*

**Frank Belger:** No, they grew up here and I think that for the most part they – they're just like I was back then when I was a young father. They were caught up in their own world. They're

raising kids. They interact with us all the time. We have a great relationship. I adopted the two of them and they came to me asking if I would adopt them. And I originally thought it was – I had been in their lives about six years. My wife and I dated for that long a time. And she had her oldest daughter and I had my youngest daughter and they did not [joins hands]. So we knew that we couldn't, you know, so we kind of held off and then when we got married, the girls came to me and asked me if I'd adopt them. So I said, "I'm really flattered. That's great." Well, about thirty days later, they pinned me down at the coffee – or at the dinner table in the dining room. They said, "Dad, you know, don't you want us to be Belgers?" So that's when we got the attorney and went and had it done.

**[end of Part 3]**