

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Frank Belger, Part 4

Oral History of Frank Belger

Part 4

conducted by

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with

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Barbara Tabach: *So when you look at your grandchildren and children's lives here in Henderson, how do you think you can compare that with your experience of Henderson?*

Frank Belger: Well, it was rustic for us, and we had to be self-sufficient in regard to: what do you want to do to have fun; what do you want to do today? You don't just sit around the house. And there was no air conditioning. There were swamp coolers, and they were great. And so in the summer months when we was out of school, we swam, we shot pool, or we went out in the desert early in the morning and shot guns. First of all BB guns, and then pellet guns, and then we worked up to 22s and stuff like that. And later on when I was old enough to drive and stuff, we'd go out – at that time Sunset Road was actually a cow path going up over the mesa. And in the forties and fifties there was a ranch there. The King Ranch, I think, was the name of it. They actually had cattle and stuff in their springs. There's a spring on this side and on the other side of Sunset, up in the bluffs, there's another set of springs. And that's how the people survived. And we would go out there and hunt quail and dove and rabbits in the season and stuff like that. So we had to kind of make our own fun, you know. And my daughters, they had organized sports, they had dance, they had volleyball, they had all that kind of stuff. And then my grandkids, I don't even have a clue how they go to school. I mean my one grandson, he's a state champion wrestler and he's twelve years old. He plays football. I've got another grandson plays football, baseball, and basketball. And three of my granddaughters are into dance, ballet, and all this stuff, and I mean, I don't know how they sleep, you know.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] Yeah.*

Frank Belger: But there's so much more afforded to them. And my wife got a new smart phone the other day, and she was trying to learn it and stuff like that. My grandson comes over, well,

grandma, look here [mimes pressing buttons] you know, it was like, geez [throws up his hands] you know. So the generations have changed a lot. I think the kids are more aware, not of their surroundings, but they're more aware of the worldly things. And I think in some respects they're hampered a little bit more than they should be. I think they should work more for what they have. I know my first 22 rifle, I had no – I didn't have any money involved in it, but I had to prove to my dad that I was worthy and smart enough to operate it and not hurt anybody and not be stupid with it, you know. And it's that sort of thing I think is – not lacking, but it's a whole different thing. And what's kind of nice about it now is I can sit back and love the kids and I don't have to educate them. [smiles]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]* They educate you, like you say, about the phones. I mean that reminds me of, you know, what was phone communication like when Henderson was small?

Frank Belger: Oh man, it was beautiful. You picked up the phone, the operator said hello, you said I want number 1-2-3, and the kid lives six doors down and his mother would pick up the phone and say, "Yeah?" "Can I talk to Billy? This is Frank." "All right, but not very long." And then you're talking to him for a minute, and then somebody would pick up a line and say, "Is this being used?" Then they would – [laughter] it was a party line.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Frank Belger: Then they had – we thought it was great when it went to three other parties, because it originally was six. So you basically had to pick up a phone and see if anybody was talking before you could dial the operator. And then it went to a three-prefix number, and we thought that was just the cat's meow, you know, with no operator involved. And Hersch Trumbo owned the telephone company at that time. He was a big leader with the golf course

and developments and stuff like that, and he made some real innovations that were really advanced. Henderson has always been, not on the cutting edge of technology, don't misunderstand me there, but they've always been – seemed to progress a little bit faster than other communities that I've read about, and I've never lived in, but I've read about. We had our stumbling blocks, we had our no-growth for years. Back in the '80s there was a lot of people left Las Vegas area, Clark County, to go other places because the work wasn't here. The hotels had slowed down. And one of the key indicators, whether you like it or not, but the big key indicator for the Clark County is, if the hotels are expanding, go ahead and invest and you'll do good. If the hotels come back, look out, because the boom is over. And that's been true all my life. I've seen it come and go time and time again and it was really not a factor when I was a kid because you had the plant complex that hired – almost everybody in the valley worked at the plants. The only people who didn't were the support services, the grocery stores, the shoe stores, the bars, the liquor stores, that sort of thing. And back in the fifties you had Titanium Metals which was a big – and the plants, you had Nellis Air Force Base, and the Test Site. That was it. The hotels were really nothing in those years. They were nothing more than a stopover for people going from Salt Lake City to L.A., and from Phoenix to Reno and they didn't come in here to own until as we know development now, I would say into the late '50s, early '60s. That's when the Flamingo really got big and that's when the Sahara developed and stuff like that. But it wasn't until then. They were in their infancy and they were trying but they weren't there, not anything like they are today. Now they're the major employers; the Test Site is nothing now. Hopefully it will get bigger but not – Nellis Air Force Base is still large but in comparison percentage-wise, Titanium and the plants are small, you know, now.

Barbara Tabach: *How about gaming in this Henderson community? Has there always been gaming here, to your recollection?*

Frank Belger: Yeah, yeah. Boulder City was the only community that outlawed it. You couldn't have a bar or have a gaming in there and then they got the bar, they got one bar downtown. And that was a big deal for them. And they were all – Boulder City was built from the Dam in the '30s. That was how Boulder City came into existence. Well from Boulder City to Henderson, which was Pitman, Henderson didn't exist. Pitman, if you ever heard of that, was a tent city off the right hand side of Boulder Highway because on the left hand side was all the government magnesium. And those people were living in tents until they built the houses, the Townsite houses so they could move into. But that's how they lived, in those tents till – I mean some of them were elaborate. They had wood floors and, you know, lots of that type thing. But that's where they lived to work the plants. And between there was Railroad Pass, and Railroad Pass was a mine, and then you could – they had a little service station there with the water and air and then you turned the corner and come down and you hit Pitman, then you hit East Las – what is East Las Vegas now, and that was Whitney. And then you went a long way before you hit the Five Corners which is Fremont and Charleston and all that. And then between Charleston and Bond Road, which is now Tropicana, off the right hand side was the whore houses, and I remember seeing them as a kid. You know, we'd go by and dad would say, "Nah, nah, c'mon." "Well, what's that out there, dad?" [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: [laughter]

Frank Belger: "Nah, no, it's just a building," you know. But that was, that was the whore houses at that time. But, yeah, the growth has been phenomenal that I've seen. And it's not all been

good but it's been – for the most part, it's been great. There's a lot of things that have transpired that have made this a very nice community to live in. And like I say, I – my wife was a thirty-four-year school teacher. I was twenty-seven years on the local fire department. I raised kids here. This place has been good to me and continues to be good to me. And I've got a lot of friends, a lot of acquaintances, and people say, "Well, you live in Henderson." "Yeah, I live in Henderson." "Well, if I'm coming through, how can I get ahold of you?" I said, "Man, I've lived there all my life; I'm the easiest guy in the world to find. Go to a fire station, they'll tell you exactly how to get to my house," you know. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] So there's still some of that small town feeling.*

Frank Belger: For me, yeah, yeah, it is. And I'd see things like the old drugstore and I can remember going in to the fountain and getting a soda and stuff like that and old McBeath, his son became a doctor, and he was a good guy. If you had a member of your family who was really terminally ill, stuff like that, he would do everything he could to help you with the prescriptions and stuff and cut the costs and stuff like that. But that was the kind of community it was. Hafens' Tires is still there today on Lake Mead. This is the fourth generation of Hafens that owned it and I've been very blessed to be friends with all of them. My family, my dad, when I was a teenager, I'd go down and get five dollar retread tires for his pickup because I'd blow them out in the desert going running around. And I could afford that. But if someone came through in need, they'd put tires on the car and get them down the road and stuff like that. And we're just kind of that helping community, you know.

Barbara Tabach: *The Hafens are politically –*

Frank Belger: No, that's the other Hafens.

Barbara Tabach: *The other Hafens. Oh, okay.*

Frank Belger: These are the down-to-earth people.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay, so there's different Hafens.*

Frank Belger: Yes, there are.

Barbara Tabach: *Okay, so the political atmosphere in the community, has that changed over the years that you can observe?*

Frank Belger: Oh, yeah, it has. I can't speak – when I was ten years old, twelve years old, I didn't know about politics. I remember I knew the mayors, Doc French and Bill Byrne and those people, but after I came on the fire department then I become very aware of politics. I was the vice-president for quite a while and I did – was in charge of grievances. So I had to go into meetings and meet with these people and city attorneys and stuff like that, and I very quickly learned that there's not right or wrong, it's politics. And, you know, it was kind of nice politics at that time because you could sit and talk and reason some things out. You didn't win all the time, but you didn't lose all the time either. But now I think the politics have gotten more sophisticated and a little bit more dirty, I think, [laughter] a word I would use. But I'm not into politics now so I don't know, just what I read.

Barbara Tabach: *Yeah.*

Frank Belger: And I cringe sometimes, because back in the '70s and stuff when I was on the Fire Department, and in the '80s, we could go to the City Manager. We'd sit down and talk about an issue. We could go to the City Attorney and say, hey, we need to draft this legislation because we need to enforce this rule that makes the businesses safer because they're not – they're using extension cords, for an example. We need to take those away, we need to have it wired

properly and stuff like that to cut down the fires and stuff, you know, that sort of thing. And we could work with them; we could deal with them. Uh, I was on the first committee to design fire trucks for the City of Henderson. And they had a bond issue for a ladder truck and for a fire truck and they sent us all around the country. I've been to Michigan, and Minnesota, and then 'Frisco, and Phoenix designing, looking, investigating, researching. Salt Lake City, to classes. And so in those years they were very open to ideas and stuff. I don't think they're that open now. I think it's more – in fact when I retired I had my exit interview and I had four pages that I had to fill out. And the lady who was interviewing me, she says, "First question is how do you view management and the working people?" And my question was very honestly, "Them against us." And she says, "What do you mean by that?" I says, "Maxine, if you've never heard that before, I'm getting up and walking out of here because I'm on my time, I'm retired." She said, "No, I've heard it before." So we had a nice talk. But I mean that's what it's gotten down to today, and if you look at – boy, I'm really talking now. If you look at the structure of the county and the cities, you have management lives by one set of rules and the working class guys, the blue collar, are governed by a separate set of rules. And if you've got twenty-five years here [points] and you get hurt, they'll want to retire you. You get twenty-five years here [points in a different direction] and you get hurt, they'll find a new position you can handle or they'll buy you five more years to get you retired. That's the problem that I see with politics in the management today. And it is them against us or us against them. And I think you see that right now in North Las Vegas; I think you see it with Clark County; it's in the paper every day. They can't get together. They can't sit and find some common ground. And from the Union's point of view, they've been lied to so much that now they're leery, and if the cities and the counties are

actually telling the truth about their budgets, it's hard for the unions to accept it because they don't know if it's the truth now or not, because they found out over the years they were lied to. You know, I've been into the negotiations with the City of Henderson back in the '80s and you know, "We don't have the money. We just can't give you the five percent raise." Okay, what can you give us? "Well, how about three." So we take three percent and we find out they had several CD's sitting in banks worth sixty, seventy million dollars. Well, wait a minute! You know, that's not for a slush fund. It's nothing mandated by the state legislature. It's just, we've got this money tucked away. Well, we've been getting three percent raise, and then the administration would give the clerical and the city managers, like that, maybe three percent or four percent raise, but their raises were several thousand dollars based on their salaries as compared to several hundred dollars based on our salaries. When I went to work for the Henderson Fire Department I made eight hundred and twenty five dollars a month gross.

Barbara Tabach: *Wow.*

Frank Belger: [shakes head] '74. But the people now are screaming and hollering about firemen and cops' wages, well, [laughter] it's evolved. You know, it's grown.

Barbara Tabach: *Yeah.*

Frank Belger: But back there it was a brotherhood. You knew everybody. If someone got hurt or their family needed something you were there to help. And the camaraderie was unbelievable. And now with the largeness of the departments, police too, I've talked to several police officers, I know them personally, and they'll say the same thing. It's what can I get out of it for me, you know, it's not so much of – I grew up here, so when I'm in the fire department, my whole impression of being a fireman was to help, to help people. And what made it doubly tough on

me is that after I got into the department ten, twelve years, then some of the kids that I went to high school with, some of the girls I dated in high school, I would get called to their mom and dad's house when they were dying. And then I'd have to deal with the siblings that I personally know. And that made it really tough on me, whereas, if I was a fireman in California I wouldn't know these people.

Barbara Tabach: *You were anonymous.*

Frank Belger: I could empathize with them and feel bad for them, but I wouldn't be – have a personal relationship. So that made it tough. But it also made it kind of gratifying because in some respects I was able to talk to some of them and help them through and to this day, I take some pride in that.

Barbara Tabach: *Are there any other stories you'd like to share with us today?*

Frank Belger: Yeah, but I can't back them up with facts and I'd probably get sued. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: [laughter] *Oh well, it could be – how about do you have class reunions? Do you guys – is there a large – what was your graduating class? What size, of people?*

Frank Belger: In high school?

Barbara Tabach: *Yeah.*

Frank Belger: Mine was sixty-five and we had a ten year. We haven't had one since.

Barbara Tabach: *You're overdue. [laughter]*

Frank Belger: Well, my class was kind of a – the class before me where my ex-wife was in, a lot of them were – they were all my friends, but I mean, I had associated with them more than I did with some of my own – my age. And when they left, man, the school for a year was kind of like duh. And then the class behind me, I understand, they were very popular and they did a lot of

things together and stuff like that, but my class was a lot of good people and a lot of good people are on the board today. The Worsers' girls and some of those, Mary George and some of the old Henderson are on the board and very good people. But the class was kind of a fizzle. But the class – my ex-wife's class, I would like to have went to their reunion four years ago because I knew everybody. I was friends with all of them. We had a great time together. I drank more beer with those guys than I did with the guys in my own class. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] You need to have an all school reunion. You know, so you get all these – you know, that kind of gathering.*

Frank Belger: Well, I think with, like my wife, she went to Millard High School in Fillmore, Utah, and her class reunions were quite large and people come out of the woodwork to go to those and they're starting to do three years in a row, you know, like '61, '62, '63 or whatever and I think that would be a fun thing to do.

Barbara Tabach: *Yeah.*

Frank Belger: But you have to remember that every generation of classmates, you have to get it where no more than two or three because these guys at the top don't know the guys at the bottom and the guys at the bottom don't know the guys at the top, you know. Now, it would work in Henderson if you had the '47s and the '50s, and the '55s, and the '60s, because they all – everybody knew everybody. You know, and that was a hard thing for me as a kid. It turned out to be a blessing. I couldn't get away with nothing. I mean [laughter].

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Frank Belger: Ring, ring, ring. "Hey, Frank, your son..." "Okay, I'll deal with that!" But, the aspect of Henderson, one of the core features, was the churches. St. Peters was large, the Mormon

Church was just starting and they had the Ocean Street chapel, and then you had the Community Center, and the Community Church was big in those years. That was the three predominant, and everything spiraled from that. And it wasn't so much in those years, "Well I can't associate with you because you're a Catholic or you're a Mormon." It was too small. You played ball with everybody. You went to dances with everybody, you know, that sort of thing. That was the core of the religious background here. You had all the little ones. The Jehovah Witnesses was small and all that sort of thing. Southern Baptists were small but those were the three predominant and they worked together.

Barbara Tabach: *Then you said your wife, your current wife, or second marriage, right?*

Frank Belger: My second marriage.

Barbara Tabach: *You've been married or she was a school teacher for thirty-four years. Is that what brought her here?*

Frank Belger: Yeah, her and her first husband moved down here from Utah, and she graduated from St. George University, whichever. I don't know, she told me a million times, CCS or whatever it is, but she moved down here and got a teaching job, and then he became insurance for Don Jensen Realty, uh, Jim Jensen Realty and our fire department promoted him to run for City Council at one time. That's how I knew him. I met her; she was my daughter's third grade school teacher. So that's how I knew her. And then, I don't know, it was two or three years later after that, and she'd moved to Utah for a year and got a divorce, and she didn't like it in St. George, so she moved back here and got another contract and she was at C. T. Sewell. And we had a fire drill, and there was four of us that conducted the fire drill, and we come walking out and she come walking out of the lounge right in front of us. Well, that was a violation. We could

have flunked the school because all of the teachers have to be out of the building, all the kids have to be out of the building, but she was hiding out.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Frank Belger: So she walked up and says, "Well, hi there, Mr. Belger." I said, "Well, Mrs. Wooten, how are you?" She says, "No, not Mrs. Wooten anymore." And the captain looked at the other two fireman and went [cocks his head] and they disappeared around the side. And I was talking to her and I said, "Well, I'm divorced too now," and, you know, "How are you doing? And how's your daughter?" and all this kind of stuff. And I called her up that night, and it took a lot. I mean I – my captain finally said if you don't call her, I'm going to. I called and asked her out and the rest is history. We've been married twenty-five years now. And she's the love of my life. She's the best thing that ever happened to this cowboy. Just the things that she's done for me, the things that she's done with me, I couldn't ask for a better mate.

Barbara Tabach: *And her name again?*

Frank Belger: Julie Belger.

Barbara Tabach: *Julie Belger. And I know people retire from other places to Henderson. Are you both going to stay retired in Henderson?*

Frank Belger: I've got ten grandkids, seven of them live here. Does that answer your question? [laughter] There is nowhere I'm going to be able to go, Honey. I mean, I'm going to live and die here.

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] That's a beautiful ending.*

Wendy Walker: *I have actually a few questions I'd like to get back to if you have still some time. One of them was PEPCON and that was sort of a big event here in Henderson.*

Frank Belger: It was a huge event.

Wendy Walker: *And I imagine the Fire Department, I think they responded to that fire.*

Frank Belger: Yes, we did.

Wendy Walker: *And you were on the Department at that time.*

Frank Belger: Yes, ma'am.

Wendy Walker: *So can you tell me what that was like from the perspective of somebody with the Fire Department.*

Frank Belger: Okay, what you need to understand is that the plant complex which incorporated Kerr-McGee at that time and American Pacific were in a donut hole. They were Clark County property. We had no jurisdiction over them. But as I mentioned before with the mutual aid pact, if there's a disaster, we're the first ones in. I was having lunch with the battalion chief. I was off duty, and we were at Nick's Supper Club and we were discussing some training. He was the training officer, battalion chief in charge of training, and we were discussing classes and he had a van. And we heard the explosion at Nick's, so we got in the van. I drove and we got out to the – just over the railroad tracks on Lake Mead where the batch plant is there, Hatchers. And we pulled in there and he was on the radio trying to get confirmation of what – we could see the flames and stuff. We heard two explosions but we didn't know exactly what was all going on and I got out of the car, out of the van. And I got the binoculars to get a visual to see if I could see victims, to see if I could see what was burning. And at that time the explosion had ruptured a natural gas line and the flames were from the natural gas and the third explosion went off. And it actually knocked me to the ground and I rolled a couple of times, and I can remember the back of my neck feeling like I'd been sand blasted from the dirt hitting me. So we

got back in the van and retreated back into Henderson proper and then they set up command posts and stuff like that. Like I said, I was off duty, so I left and I went to my wife's school, who was my girlfriend at the time, and they were releasing the kids, and there was buses for those kids who couldn't be picked up going to Boulder City and [laughter] she says – I said, "Let's get your daughter; let's get out of here." "Okay, where we," she says, "I want to go to my house. I want to go to my house." Okay, so I'd already been there to her house and – because her one daughter was in high school, and sometimes she'd go home, and I wanted to make sure she was okay – and we pulled into the driveway and my girlfriend, my wife now, she's going through the purse looking for her keys, and I said, "Wait, you've got one window in your house." You know, I go, "Walk through," you know, "You don't even have to." And so that was a big event. On top of the mesa, there was a tremendous amount of destruction up there. My wife's home was, I think it was like forty-some thousand dollars repair damage that had to be done. All of the windows were out of it and that sort of thing. There was, there was so many stories that came out of that. There were three secretaries in the city of Henderson. One worked for C. T. Sewell; one worked like La Porta's, the one La Porta was downtown, and the other one I can't remember where they were at; but all three of these women at the same time had went to the plate glass windows in front of their business and looked out and thought, boy, there's a big cloud of smoke, we heard the big bang go off, and all three of them turned around to walk away when the third explosion hit, and all three of them had to have surgery on their Achilles tendon because it severed their Achilles tendon [laughter].

Wendy Walker: *[whispering] Oh, my God.*

Frank Belger: And you know – and then there’s all kinds of stories like that. But it was, it was a big devastation. That night, we had – martial law was declared in Henderson by the Governor and you couldn’t go in that area that was hard hit unless you had a driver’s license and you could prove that was your residency and that sort of thing. They didn’t want looting and there was a ten o’clock curfew. If you were found out after ten o’clock they had the authority to arrest you and throw you in jail, no questions asked. They had the FBI in here; they had the San Bernadino County Sheriffs in here; they had Maricopa County Sheriffs from Arizona; they had Utah from St. George; they had them all. I mean, everybody was here and all of them had jurisdiction to arrest you on the spot.

Wendy Walker: *Wow, I didn’t realize that and was that just the one night?*

Frank Belger: Actually it lasted two nights, two nights until they could get a handle on it. Most people could get back in their homes within a couple of days. And the insurance companies did a great thing, I thought. They went to the hardware stores and they bought pallets of plywood, 4-ply sheets of plywood, you just come get what you needed to board up your home. And we boarded hers up, and then I moved her into my home, which was farther away, with the kids and stuff, and that lasted about two days and she had to go home. So we went and opened up her place and started cleaning it up, and she needed stability for her kids. So yeah, it was devastating.

Wendy Walker: *How long did it take to – for the community to recover from that?*

Frank Belger: Oh, months. I called up the next day after it was over with, I called a window company and I says, “I need a 4 x, a 3 x, I need doors, da ta da ta, all this kind of stuff.” “Okay, you’re on our list.” I said, “When can I get them?” “Oh, probably six weeks.” And I was going,

this is unbelievable. They were having trucks coming in from Phoenix and Southern California, flatbeds with all these windows and doors on them, and trying to facilitate people that needed them. I went to St. George and bought all of them and brought them back, so I got her taken care of quicker, within a couple of days. But, yeah, the town – no town is prepared for that type of disaster. It just isn't – unheard of. So everybody wanted doors, and everybody wanted windows and skylights, and it cracked concrete and it did a lot of – not so much structural damage to buildings. There was some but not a lot that I knew about. But all the insurance companies sent their disaster teams in here, and a lot of them were independent adjustors. And they came in and they'd come out and it was kind of carte blanche. I mean, they come into her home and they said, "How about this doll house?" I'd built a doll house; it was like 4 x 4 and had a little second floor to it where the kids could get up, you know. And I said, man, it's pretty shot. Well, it was shot before PEPCON. He gave me six hundred bucks for it, no questions asked, you know. Okay! But, yeah, it was a big thing for Henderson.

[end of Part 4]