

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Frank Belger, Part 5

Oral History of Frank Belger

Part 5

conducted by

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with

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Wendy Walker: *Okay, I also wanted to ask you, you mentioned Mayor French and Bill Byrne as well.*

Frank Belger: Bill Byrne.

Wendy Walker: *And I was just curious. Do you have any specific memories regarding either of those two men or – because they were both mayors in the early days – or do you have anything – can you describe what they were like?*

Frank Belger: [laughter] Doc French was married and he was a very good surgeon. He did his intern work at Loma Linda University. He was highly thought of down there. But more than his surgical skills and stuff, he liked the bottle and he was – no, well, in fact, my brother and I when we were, I think I was four and my brother was two and a half or something like that, we went to Boulder City Hospital to have our tonsils out. I get there Sunday night and get prepped and Monday morning he cancelled surgery. He had a hangover [laughter]. So Tuesday comes around, we're prepped again, cancels surgery, he's got a hangover. So Wednesday comes around and I'm in a – my brother's in a coma from the drugs and I'm in and out, and they poured black coffee down us for a day and a half, lukewarm black coffee, and then when we finally come out of it, and was okay, then he performed the surgery on Friday. And he took one tonsil out of me and one tonsil out of my brother because he was in a hurry to get to the airport to go on vacation [laughter].

Wendy Walker: *Oh, my goodness.*

Frank Belger: You want some more stories? [laughter]

Wendy Walker: *Oh my goodness. [laughter]*

Frank Belger: I've had doctors look down my throat, you know, from physicals and stuff, "You know you got one..." "Yeah, I know. I've got one tonsil."

Wendy Walker: *[laughter]* Wow, oh goodness. And what about Bill Byrne? What was he like?

Frank Belger: Bill Byrne was a pretty much laid back guy from my early years of knowing him.

He liked the fight game. He liked to promote fighters and stuff, so he got a trainer. I can't

remember the trainer's full name but it was Eddie something, and he lived down on

Manganese. And he had got a kid to fight for him and did – Honey Bear Bryant was the kid's

name, and he was a good fighter. And Byrne promoted him, he trained him, and I – he never

got a title shot but he was famous around Henderson, you know, as a boxer. But he did that and

he was good for the community. He owned the Plantation Club, too, which was a local bar right

there on the corner, and he was kind of a laid back mayor. You know, we've had a lot worse.

[silent laughter]

Wendy Walker: *[laughter]* Interesting. Okay. And then just one last thing, you mentioned the

Hermit of Henderson, who I've heard tell of in just a few stories and you knew him.

Frank Belger: I knew him.

Wendy Walker: *So who was he? How did he come to be a hermit?*

Frank Belger: He was an old prospector originally and is – I haven't been down there in years,

so I can't tell you if the structure is even still there, but – or if you can get there because you

had to go around the side and it actually faced the swamp, and that's where we duck hunted.

And all the chemicals would come down through there and when we'd go out to get our ducks,

retrieve our ducks, at the end of the day, we'd go back and we'd have to take showers and

stuff. It looked like we had sunburn from our knees down and thighs down from the chemicals.

And we'd have to take and wash the birds real good and then pluck them and wash them again before we could prepare them. And he lived in this – the building was a one-room building and it was built on the front of a mine shaft, and in the mine shaft he had all of his food and his water jugs. And it was cold! And you would think in the middle of summer, it would be hot, you know, in that shed. That shed was cool from the inside of that mine. It went in about twenty-five feet and the cool was just great and he had a good life and he lived there. And to my knowledge nobody ever hassled him or anything like that. He lived there for free until he died, but he was a nice old man. I would – a couple of buddies of mine, we'd go down and bird hunt or something and bring him a duck and talk to him and stuff like that, and he was a nice old guy.

Wendy Walker: *Do you know how long had he been there?*

Frank Belger: Oh, he'd been there for years. He'd been there for years. I personally knew of his existence for probably twenty-five, and I personally had contact with him for about seven to eight. I mean, I never took him home or anything like that, but we talked and he was – he liked to be alone. He didn't like a lot – he didn't like visitors per se. A couple of us people would come – my dad befriended him before I did, and he invited my dad in and me to his place and we'd sit down and talk. And we brought him magazines one time and he thought that was a big deal but he didn't have any transportation other than a bicycle so everything he ate, people brought him stuff. I'm not going to say care packages, but people would bring down stuff from time to time and give to him and then he would get a ride into town and get his retirement check or whatever and that sort of stuff, do his shopping. But he was a colorful old guy.

Wendy Walker: *That's interesting. I just recently learned about him so since you mentioned him, I thought I'd ask a little bit more.*

Frank Belger: And you didn't ask about the tunnels in Henderson?

Wendy Walker: *Well, you know, that came up at some point. There are tunnels connecting the plants. Is that correct?*

Frank Belger: No.

Wendy Walker: *No?*

Frank Belger: Well, yes, yes and no.

Wendy Walker: *Okay.*

Frank Belger: Why I even mentioned this is it was brought up in conversation in one of our meetings and I was sitting there and somebody said, "Well, what about the tunnels in Henderson?" Everybody looked at each other. I go [raises hand] well, I can tell you about them. Titanium Metals when it was built was built prior to the war years and in anticipation of a disaster. I mean, if you knocked out a big magnesium plant which makes bombs and aircraft and stuff like that, it'd be a big coup in the war effort. So as I said before, Henderson was laid out in a half circle and a shot here and stuff like that, nothing that you could line up bomb sites and come right into the plant. So when they built it, about two and a half to three stories down was a tunnel, concrete-lined tunnel, that went the entire distance of the plant complex at that time – there was more plants on down below so it doesn't go to all of them – and it paralleled Lake Mead. And why it even made the papers in the '80s – oh, not even the '80s, probably the late '60s, early '70s – is because they were looking for bomb shelters. And the government criteria was you had to put a bomb shelter with government funding in a highly populated area type thing, yada, yada, yada. So they wanted to look into the feasibility of using the tunnel. So all of the plants says, "No." Well I went to work at the plants in 1966 to 1968. I was a heavy

duty mechanic, so my job at times was to go down and muck this out or go over here and see this or fix that or whatever. Well I went down in the tunnels and the tunnels actually had the port-a-potties with the chemicals in them for people. They had all the chemicals to put in the water to purify it. They had toilet paper; they had dried food; they had Geiger counters; they had dosimeters; they had all that stuff for civil defense. And it was – at one time, it was quite involved, and they – I'll never forget it – they had light bulbs hanging down from a cord and about every twelve feet you had a light bulb, and you could walk the entire length of the plant complex underground. And it had been there for so long that the dust had grown to about four to five inches on top of the concrete so you were walking on top of this dirt all the time. And there was no doors, the one door that was there you just opened up and continued on down. But the lights burned forever. Now who went down and replaced the lights, I have no idea, but I've been in there a couple of times. And then the other one was perpendicular to Lake Mead on the other side of the plant, and it run towards Boulder Highway. Well they had the Magnesium Club, which was a bar set on the highway. You had the fence to the plant, then you had the tunnel that went right underneath the fence and they had a place you could come out. And it was about sixty yards from the Magnesium Club so some of the plant workers from time to time would take their lunch at the Magnesium Club and then go back to work. [laughter]

Wendy Walker: *[laughter] Oh, wow.*

Frank Belger: That was the only two tunnels that were built, constructed in Henderson as of that era.

Wendy Walker: *Now that tunnel that came out near the Magnesium Club, apparently there was also a tunnel the kids could walk, that would let them walk underneath Boulder Highway so that they could get to Saint Peter's School. Was that the same tunnel?*

Frank Belger: Right. Oh, no, no, no, no. No, no, we're talking about the plant complex; we're talking about Boulder Highway and Saint Peter's between Basic Road and Lake Mead Drive. Okay, that was nothing more than just a little walkway underneath the highway to – people could walk, kids and everything else, without being hit by cars.

Wendy Walker: *Right, okay.*

Frank Belger: No, these were covered, two or three stories underground tunnels and all lit up. And you could [laughter] go have a beer at lunch time, you know.

Wendy Walker: *[laughter] Wow. Okay, I think that's all I had, so thank you very much.*

Frank Belger: Well, thank you for having me. I've enjoyed this.

Wendy Walker: *So have I, yes, great.*

Barbara Tabach: *Thank you so much, Frank.*

Frank Belger: Thank you.

[end of Part 5]