

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Historical Society

**Dr. Herman van
Betten, Part 1**

Oral History of Dr. Herman van Betten

Part 1

conducted by

Barbara Tabach, UNLV Oral History Research Center

with

Fredric Watson, Henderson Historical Society

February 4, 2013

Barbara Tabach: *This is Barbara Tabach. We're in the library at CSN. It is February 4th, 2013. I'm with Herman Van Betten. How are you today?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Well, just great, thank you. The weather's beautiful.

Barbara Tabach: *Isn't it though. It is just delightful. So Herman, we're going to start with just kind of a general background of your whole story, and then we'll focus more on the Henderson part of that. Can you start with where you were born?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: I was born in 1931 in The Hague in a hospital, a maternity hospital named Bethlehem, very appropriately. And I remember that when I had religion classes in school, they said Jesus was born in Bethlehem and I said, "So was I!" [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter]*

Dr. Herman van Betten: But they made clear it was not the same Bethlehem. Anyway I grew up there and my father owned a store downtown. Well, he used to be, you see, 1931 the depression was on, so prior to the depression he had done international business but then when the depression started he bought the store downtown The Hague and that's how we survived, a big family. And I grew up—you know, like in Europe, they have the store and you live above the store. And everybody else did, too. That was the way it was. So it was always—you know, you grew up in a lot of noise because it was right downtown, a big marketplace we could see from our windows. So that's where I grew up, in downtown The Hague.

Barbara Tabach: *What kind of store did he have?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: He sold tobacco, cigars, cigarettes, that kind of thing and he used to do a lot of business specifically with big institutions and Indonesia because Indonesia at the time was called the Dutch East Indies, and a lot of people there, they wanted good Dutch cigars and

so he—I remember carrying boxes and boxes, you know, to the Custom officers and they would seal them and they would make sure there was nothing in there that shouldn't be in there, and then we mailed them to Indonesia. So he made a lot of good money from there. He sold to hospitals and so on. So that was—basically it was retail and wholesale both. And we somehow survived until the war started.

Barbara Tabach: *And then what happened?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: That was no cigarettes, no cigars, no tea, no coffee, nothing. And that was pretty—we went through a pretty bad time. Gradually the Nazis took just about everything out of Holland to support their own troops, so by the last winter, that was called the Hunger Winter, there was just no food. People were dying in the street, you would get a little, little bit of food once a week and you could go to the store, you had an endless line and you got some sugar beets and maybe one part of potatoes or something like that, and then some people, they'd—their kids were dying—they would grab something off the shelf and then the Nazis would be out there, the Nazi soldiers, and I remember standing in line for the store and by the time I got to the main door there was body of a young woman that—bullet in her head and I— with a big sign that she had written before she was killed that said, "I am a plunderer. I am a thief." And that was the kind of thing, the bombardments and everything, that was, the last few years of the war was just pretty bad. But, hey, we all survived. But I think—my Dad died in 1948, right—pretty soon after the war, and I think that's what got him, you know, to have a big family and everything, had to take care of it and everyday going after all those business friends and begging some food and things like that, and he had done a lot of business with the hospital, the Catholic hospital, and he begged them. He said, "Can at least one of my children come

down there and eat something. With so many patients—and you, you are getting some food, how about feeding one of my kids once or several times a week?” So I went to the hospital three or four times a week and got a meal, so—[laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *So he was a good negotiator there.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: He was a good negotiator. And so we all came through alive at the end of the—but, you know, there was no gas, of course, I mean for cars, so you had some horses pulling, but then the horses were taken, too, to the Germans, because they needed them, and so eventually you had only hand carts. In the beginning, they tried to—like some buses were still running and they had like an oven in the back and they had wood burning in the oven. I don't know the process, but the buses were running, with some problem, but they had this big stove hanging after the bus, behind the bus, you know. But then eventually that was gone. I remember one day I looked out of the window and I saw the marketplace, a big crowd, and so I went there to see what was happening. And then, somebody had a horse, still had a horse, but it was probably so emaciated that the Germans didn't take it and the horse just died on the spot in front of its cart that it was pulling. And I went down there and the crowd was a whole bunch of people with knives, eating, taking all the meat, whatever meat left on that horse, and taking it home. So we were very happy and have been ever, ever grateful to America and Britain for rescuing us out of that terrible—because we would not—had it lasted another six months or so, we would not have survived. There was no food. There was nothing.

Barbara Tabach: *You said you had a large family. How many children and where were you in the family?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Well we had fifteen—well we had about twelve children living at home. My mother had fifteen children. And you know, good Catholic family, you know. I remember my father was talking to my Mom, I was in the other room, and he had got a letter from the Neo-Malthusian Society. Of course I was six, seven years old; I didn't know what that was. And they had written him, and he was talking to my mother, "Don't have any more children. You are ruining the future of the world." And I didn't know it till much later what actually was in that letter! [laughter] And he was quite a community activist. He started a big organization that would—way ahead of his time—that would take, in the summer, take all the kids—and he raised money for that—take all the kids, and take them to the beach or to parks or whatever and keep them happy. And he had buses hired to bring all the people and started festivities for them and that kind of thing. Because, I mean, as a father of a very big family he knew—what do you do in summer when you have a bunch of kids! [laughter] And of course, at that time, everybody had a bunch of kids. I mean, you couldn't buy a condom if you paid a fortune for it! [laughter] And the only magazine we were allowed to read at home, because it was very strict Catholic, the only magazine you were allowed to read at home was the Catholic Illustration. And on the back page, they had like eight big pictures of families with ten or more kids. You know, this was the ideal family. And the Church practically rules your life! I mean it was very beautiful. I mean there was nothing else. We were not allowed to listen to certain radio programs. You could only listen to the KRO, Katholieke Radio Omroep association, which was pretty dull. And so there was not much to do. So the Church filled out your life. Like for instance in Holy Week you spent practically every day in Church. On Thursday they had the processions and we had a lot of priests. Now there's only one left, I think. [laughter] And

they're all Jesuits and you know the Catholic Church really appeals—it used to appeal to your senses. You know: the beautiful music, the gorgeous music, the incense that you smell, the big [unclear] and everybody, the beautiful costumes. We had a famous, very famous organ. My brother was the organist. And it was interesting at the end of the War, when I think of it, you were not allowed to have the Dutch flag or wear orange, because that was the Dutch color, the House of Orange, and you were not allowed to sing the national anthem or any patriotic Dutch song. You'd get arrested if you'd do that. So when the War was almost over and rumors were that Hitler had died, but the Germans were still, everybody there, you know, were still in charge of everything. And then my brother played on the organ, he played the National Anthem, and the Church was crowded and everybody sang out for us the national anthem. And he could have been sent to Germany to a concentration camp! In addition to that, my brother, two of my brothers as a matter of fact, that brother (my brother Tom) and a younger brother, they were between eighteen and forty and anybody between eighteen and forty had to go to Germany to work in the factories. So the Dutch German factory workers could then go to the Front and work. Of course, it was very dangerous to work. Because what did the Allied Forces do? Bomb the munitions factories! So we had to hide them. And then every single day, not every single day, very frequently, they would block off the whole block downtown and go door to door and look for copper, because you were not allowed—you had to turn in all your copper—look whether you had the BBC, because some people had jerry-rigged some radio, and if you had that you could go to prison. And then they looked for people that were hiding, you know, from being sent to Germany. So we had two. So every time they came, they would knock on the door and make a loud noise and then my brothers would go to the attic and it opened up, wallpaper

over it and there was a mattress in there and they would stay there, and some water. And then they would go around. And one time I had one brother who was in the bathroom and he couldn't get out quick enough [laughter], so my father got him and he says "Hop in bed"—and he was like nineteen or twenty—he says, "Hop in bed and curl up." And so the Germans went around and they came to that bedroom. He opened the door. My Dad opened the door a little bit, and he said, "Now this child has TB." And this is 1944. TB scared the hell out of anybody! So they closed the door. And the one time they came again looking for everything and they hit the door with their rifle butts, you know, made a lot of noise. And my father was a very dignified looking individual, you know, he always had a dark suit, he always had one of these old collars, you know, sticking up like that. And a silk tie and a diamond pin in it. And he had gray hair. He looked like a senator, you know. So these two soldiers suddenly opened the door, and these two soldiers looked at him, Dad, and were shouting and I remember standing in the store and seeing my dad lecturing—he knew some German—lecturing to them that that was no way to behave. He says, "Now you can come up, sit down, and I'll make you a cup of coffee. Which, of course, was not coffee but it was made out of grain and, you know, some 'ersatz' they called it, the Germans, the fancy coffee. And he told them that was no way to behave, and all that kind of stuff. Anyway, the next day these two soldiers came in and brought us two loaves of bread, which were worth a fortune! [laughter] I mean, the whole family was happy; we actually had bread instead of sugar beets. Or even people ate tulip bulbs, which is—oh, I still remember how awful they tasted! So we threw them out because nobody, nobody would eat tulip bulbs. Then my mother threw them in the trash and the next day the trash people cleaned the mold off and ate them. I mean, it was a very bad time.

Barbara Tabach: *Wow. So how old were you in 1944?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Well by the time we ended the war, I was born in '31, I should be fourteen.

Barbara Tabach: *So you were a teenager. Were you formulating—did you see a future for yourself? Do you remember what—*

Dr. Herman van Betten: It looked pretty bad! [laughter] I mean, fortunately I had one brother who had a great sense of humor, my oldest brother who was the one who was not—who was supposed to be in Germany and not at home. He kept me—he taught me Latin, and I've been teaching Latin at UNLV and the college for many years since then [laughter], because that guy, he really got me interested. So I got my mind off of it, you know, because there was no light. You went to bed whenever it was dark, which was six o'clock, something like that. So it was a bad time but we survived. All of us survived. Fortunately, one of my brothers—two of my brothers happened to be in the province of Brabant which is near Belgium, the province right near Belgium. The Germans—not the Germans—the Allied Forces had made it up to the big river and so they were liberated before this whole war started and before the winter, that terrible winter started. So they thought we all would be dead, you know. Just prior to that winter my mother had twins. So they were born in the summer of '44 and right after that the winter started. And I had one sister who, because my mother was so busy with everybody else, really took care of the twins. And they were not going to survive; they had some health problems, they were born a little early, and she managed to get them into a children's hospital. Also, using my father's name because he was well known in the city as a big community activist, and they spent the rest of the winter in that hospital and so they came out well fed.

Barbara Tabach: *So they survived!*

Dr. Herman van Betten: They survived. They would have died, for sure, because you know, you couldn't buy baby food. Of course nobody had baby food at the time. If you feed sugar beets and tulip bulbs to babies they wouldn't have survived.

Barbara Tabach: *So the War—how did you decide when or what part of your life did you finally know that you were going to go to college and what you were going to do as a young adult?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Well, you see, at that time in Holland, universities were for the real upper classes. So nobody had an idea of—in the '30s, nobody was thinking of college as—you know, I mean, the world has changed. Right now, I know all my nephews and nieces and everybody, it's a natural thing, because education's free, you know. If you're a native, you get a free education and the only limit on that is—like I have one niece and she really wanted to be a doctor, I mean she was good at everything, but there's a limit on how many people can go to medical school—there are limits on it. And she waited a year and the next year it was still difficult, and so she went and got Medical Administration. She got a doctorate in Medical Administration, and now she is head of a hospital. So that's the only disadvantage is that there is a limit on the number of students. But now everybody wants to go to the university. But in the '30s it was really for the upper, upper classes to go to the university. And they spent most of the time having a good time, more than really studying, that was the general idea. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *We still do, don't we? [laughter] So when did you choose a path?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: So I did go to—I had a classical education, so I had Latin and Greek and German and French and English and Dutch and all that kind of stuff. And of course in the European education they don't have three months off in the summer. And they don't come

home at one o'clock in the afternoon from school because we went to school—our day in elementary school, or high school was: at 8 o'clock you went to Mass and everybody had to be there. And if you were late—if you were in time, you would get a red card; if you were late, you had a green card. And you had to take that to the school which was run by religious brothers or by sisters, by nuns. And that would be held against you if you were late for Mass. And then 8:30 Mass was over, you went to school, you had fifteen minutes to play and then you had school. And you came home at 4:00. And Saturday morning you got home at 12:00. From 9:00 to 12:00, so I mean you had a hell [laughter]—and then you had a month vacation in August, well, half July to the middle of August. So you had a couple months more education, and if you count the hours, you probably got a few hundred hours at least, maybe a thousand hours more than American education. So by the time you finish school and high school, you're pretty well—I mean, that's why, after such a high school, many people didn't have to go to universities because they probably have the equivalent of three years college! [laughter] So then after the War, I first worked for the Dutch State Department in Protocol. And I did that for a while and then—of course, they don't pay much, you know, and what happened also is that I was training some young people because I wanted to go to an embassy. I wanted to go somewhere where they had mountains and palm trees and nice weather, you know, because Holland has usually pretty rotten weather. [laughter] So I was training these young people, but they were, so many of them—because the State Department is very, very exclusive, you know—I mean, I was very fortunate that I got even allowed to be in there. But many of them, their father was a duke or baron or something like that. And after I trained them they went to an embassy and I had to stay there! [laughter] I said "I'm not going to get out of this country." And partly I wanted to

eventually get out of the country because I had so many—between the depression and the War, that's ten years of pretty miserable—I said, “I want to go somewhere it's, you know, somewhere else than nowhere. So I decided to change jobs and I went for a company and I sold heavy machinery all over Europe, and I worked for a company doing that. I could speak a number of languages without any problem, like I worked in France for a while. We used to go there for the annual automobile convention in Paris at the Petite Palais and then afterwards one of the owners of the companies that we sold their stuff, Monsieur Mueller, I remember him well, he was a Frenchman, and we sold filter installations. He made filter installations. And we did very well, we sold a lot, and so he took us all to [unclear: La Touatere a Gens] which is, right now, and even then the most expensive hotel in the world. And it is beautiful. It is way the top floor of one of buildings that overlooks the Notre Dame. And first we went to the basement and he got a four hundred year old port; that's the kind of advantage you have if you're in business, you know. Education, they never give you these bonuses or take you to fancy places. [laughter] So I enjoyed that. And then my boss, wherever we went, he took his daughter along, and I think it was his idea that I would marry his daughter and take—because he was getting old—and take over the business. And I had no intention whatsoever! And then one summer I took a group of Americans, because I wanted to travel and didn't have enough money to do all the travel. And I took a bunch of Americans and we visited Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, things like that. And one couple said—because I'd shown a lot of interest in America at the time and I was reading everything about the Kefauver hearings and I read all the articles and some books by—I forgot the name—the presidential candidate, the intellectual in the '50s—anyway, they said, “Now, if you ever would come to America, we'll be happy to sponsor you. You know, I

think you would have a good future there.” And I said, “Hey, I’m twenty years old and it takes three years to get a visa to go to America. That, when you’re twenty, that’s an eternity. [grumbling: You know, I’m not going to wait for that.] And one day I was driving, and I was listening to radio and they were announcing that the American Consulate, you have to realize that at the time, Australia, Canada, America, New Zealand, everybody was trying to recruit immigrants from the Northern countries: Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, because they all wanted bright people to come to America, right. And they were announcing that if you were a War victim you would be able to get a visa within like six weeks. Now, now you’re talking! [laughter]

Fredric Watson: *How does that compare with the immigration policy today?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: It was three or four months, you know, paperwork. So I applied for a visa and as a matter of fact within five weeks I had a visa to go to America. Because I told them I was a War victim and I told them that our house was bombed. Then I felt bad, I said, “What if they find out.” I went back to the Consulate, I said “I was not honest. My father owned real estate and one of his houses was bombed, but we didn’t live in it.” They said, “Oh, no problem, we only have very few people that actually have applied, so no, no, you’re most welcome.” Then I had to raise some funds to get my ship, to get money for—because at that time you didn’t fly; everybody went by ship. That was ’56. So we started making—it was March ’56 then after I started making arrangements in ’55. So I did get my booking and I went on Holland America Line. It was ten days of travel and I arrived in America and my sponsors picked me up and that was my beginning. So I looked for a job. I had a job two days later. Well, they knew somebody, a television personality who had a show, big television show at the time—it was

well known—so they took me down to him, and they said, “What would you like to do?” I said, “You know, in the hotel business sounds good to me, because if you have good training in it you can go all over the place.” “Well, okay.” He picked up the phone, called the president of the various hotels, and then he says, “Well, they have an opening in Hotel Taft,” which was on Times Square, near Times Square and 56th Street, I think. And so I had a job the next day and started working there. The only problem was the very first day, you know, I took reservations—you helped the guests and you took reservations on the phone, but in America you write 4/2/2013, right? In Europe you write 2/4/2013. [laughter] Somebody said, “You’re all wrong!” [laughter] So I had to call everybody back and say “What was exactly the date?” [laughter] So after about two months in Hotel Taft, I was drafted.

Barbara Tabach: *Drafted by the U.S.?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Yep! Because I had signed a paper that said I would be willing to be drafted if I came. And what happens, I lived on Long Island and so the Draft Board, they see their nephews and their grandkids, they think like, “Oh, here’s a foreigner! Let’s take him.” [laughter] So, and then I was sent to Germany, which I didn’t like at all. I didn’t have particularly good memories of the Germans, you know. But then I got there and I really enjoyed it. Most Germans were pretty nice; I mean I had no problem with them. And particularly if you speak their language, they really appreciate that. They treated me—I had never had to buy a beer when I met with Germans because somehow there was this concept of rich Americans, you know, they just want to say “We like you” and the fact also that I spoke German. And “We like you.” And then I joined the—see, every little town in Germany has a choir, a men’s choir and a women’s choir. And they compete all over the area to other choirs and they drink—they have

big tents and they have three day festivals and they drink a lot of beer and eat bratwurst and things like that. And so I joined the Algenrodt—that was the little village near the barracks where I lived—Algenrodt Amerika [unclear: Sangverei] and I was a member of that. [laughter] And so I traveled with them. And the interesting thing, this is just not that long—Germany was really devastated. I made a hundred and fifty dollars a month. At that time you had four marks to the dollar. So I got six hundred or so marks. That was the salary of the average German family, the income. So I was rich, you know, because all I had to pay was my laundry and my barber. And beer! So one day somebody said to me, “I have family living” I think about fifty miles from where I was, Idar-Oberstein, and they said “You have a car,” I’d bought a little cheap Opel for three hundred dollars. “Would you mind taking my family down there sometime?” “Oh, no, I’ll be happy to.” So I took them down. And they embraced, you know, and fifty miles, that’s all. They didn’t have cars; it’s too far on the bicycle. [laughter] But I had a wonderful time, and then after a while I went to my commander, Major Jenkins, and I said—you know, the Americans always talk about football but of course the Germans don’t have the foggiest idea what you’re talking about. To them it’s fussball [laughter] They’d never seen an American football game. And I said—so, you know, you talk for nothing. Oh, by the way, I was instructed to give German classes. They marched, the entire base, into the theater, and I—once a week, I gave German classes. So everybody learned a little German, mainly what do you say to a girl when you pick her up and all that kind of stuff. Anyway, so I said “You know, it would be nice if you could give me some money so I can start a soccer team here, so then we are an equal level.” And so I had to teach these American boys on how to play soccer, and teach them the rules and all that kind of stuff. And some of them, they picked it up very, very quickly. And then

we began to play German teams, I mean high school teams, and of course lost every single one of them. Then I went back to Commander Jenkins and I said, "I'd like to see whether we could get some people from"—there's a German base and there's a French base, and there's a British base nearby—"If we can get some of those people, if you could help me make the contact, get some of those people to join, then we would have an international team, a NATO team." He said "Okay," you know, because he saw—oh, I had already made him popular because I dragged him to a soccer, several soccer games. I dragged him down there then told him—and I would introduce him and then—oh, by the way, every day after a game, I invited the press and bought them lunch, which I easily could do with my six hundred marks and I told them that Major Jenkins was becoming very popular. Because, I said, the Germans even call him the Fussball Major—the Soccer Major—and of course they never did! [laughter] And anyway, his picture was in the paper the next day, two papers, with the subtitle "The Soccer Major," the "Fussball Major" and so he was pleased, and so he did everything he could for me. Anyway, I had—prior to this, I had taken all the bad publicity out of the local newspapers and translated and sent it up through channels and eventually, way up, they got very nervous, you know. Like if it said "GI Rapes German Girl," oh, you make a nice article of that and send it through channels. "GIs Had Riot in Bar," oh, that through channels. "GIs Break into Jewelry Store," so I made them very nervous and then I came up with this brilliant idea [laughter] to start playing soccer with them, you know, and a NATO team. Then eventually the Commanding General of USAREUR, U.S. Army Europe, in Berlin really liked the idea and he hired a coach from the Wolferhampton Wanderers, which at that was the champ, the European soccer champion. That coach, we go to Frankfurt, and the U.S. Army paid for two weeks of soccer training. And by that time—and then

we invited Kaiserslautern [unclear] which was a—the champion of southern Germany, soccer champion. We invited them over to play a game with us at our base. And they came and we beat them. Because they probably sent their second stringers against a bunch of Americans, you know. [laughter] And then that made all the papers; I still have some articles on that in German. And that was really interesting, you know. Since then we did a number of games and I got all the support I needed from Major Jenkins because I made him famous, you know, that looks good for him. He probably became a Colonel before long. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *[laughter] So you were in the Army for how long?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Two years.

Barbara Tabach: *For two years. And what happened after that? So how—connect the dots to getting you to Henderson, to Las Vegas area.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: So after the War I went in the Army, I came to America, worked for Taft, went to the Army and then I came back in I think '61, '60, I think, 1960, I came back to America and rented a room in Philadelphia and looked for a job. The first day I saw an ad that I thought was a shipping company; it was not. It was a company that sold supplies to ships. So I did that. It was International Shipping Company, or something. Because they had people with a variety of languages, all the ships that came into any of the ports of the East Coast I would supply them. So the first day, you got ten percent. There was no salary, you just got ten percent of the commission. So the very first day, I drove out at four o'clock, or three o'clock in the morning because the ship was coming in in Delaware. I drove down there, I hadn't had breakfast yet, I went to the ship. I fortunately was the only one there, made it all the way, and the Captain, by the time they get to a port, they have, you know, getting through the

Chesapeake Bay and all that kind of thing, they're tired. So they are going to have a drink at three or four in the morning. So I have to have a drink. So he ordered \$8,000 or \$10,000 worth of supplies. Anything from rope to eggs to everything you need on a ship, you know, cigarettes. And so we got an order for \$8,000 or \$10,000, so I made ten percent of that, of course you had to give ten percent also to the captain. [laughter] Cash! After your delivery. So I made like \$800, which way back in 1960 was a hell of a lot of money.

Barbara Tabach: *And you were a single man at that time?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Yeah. And so I did that for a while and then I had corresponded prior to that with an advertising executive in Kansas. You know Penpal Association, whatever they called it. So we had exchanged some letters. Anyway, one day after a couple of months in the shipping business I got a call from—no, not a call. I got a letter from my friend Harvey and in it was an ad from the Wall Street Journal and it said they wanted somebody at Alcoa Aluminum who could speak Latin, French, German, Dutch, and he said "That's you!" [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *Yeah, how many people were there that could speak all those languages! Oh, my!*

Dr. Herman van Betten: And so I sent a telegram, that was before you had email or anything like that, I sent a telegram to a caller: "Please, please I am applying for this, hold off on any decision because I think I have the qualifications." So I sent in my application. They had asked for a professor and I'd never been to university, you know. So they asked for testimony from a professor. Now one of my fellow people was a graduate student who also taught at the University of Pennsylvania, taught part time. He was Chinese. [laughter] I said, "I need somebody academic to vouch for me. Could you write me a good letter?" He said, "You write it,

I'll sign it. I can get University of Pennsylvania stationery." So, I wrote a letter saying, oh what a wonderful guy, he's bright, reliable, all that kind of stuff, and he signed it, so I sent that along. So I got there and I got interviewed and I got the job! And I did that for a year, but at the time I was also politically active. I worked for Kennedy—in my free time I worked for Kennedy. At lunch I would walk over to Kennedy headquarters which was right near downtown, near the Alcoa Building. And so one time, Kennedy was there, you know, Jack Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy, they were both at the headquarters because Jack had to give a talk this afternoon and Bobby was going to give a talk earlier at the Sheraton which is next to the Alcoa Building. So I talked to them, I had a Kennedy button on and I walked with Bobby Kennedy to the Sheraton and he puts his arm around me, I mean it was just wonderful. I mean these people were just so genuine. Anyway, I come, stand at the other elevator, my office was on the third floor, I had a nice corner office, too. [laughter] And the minute I get to my office, my secretary says, "Mr. Van Betten, the President wants to see you." I said, "Okay." I mean, I had never met him and didn't know who he was but I go to the elevator, go to the 30th floor, and there's this big office, and I said—he said, "Sit down." I said, "What can I do for you, Sir?" He says, "You have been observed wearing a Kennedy button." "Yeah," I said, "I just met him. It was really exciting." I didn't know anything about Big Business or Republicanism. [laughter] And he said, "We are Republicans here." It got very quiet. I said [to myself], "Okay, if I want to keep my job I write a check to the Republican National Committee and keep my mouth shut." I said, "Oh, okay. I didn't realize that but I'll take that into consideration." So I go back to my office and there are two big shots waiting for me, the business division, with clippings from the Wall Street Journal to tell me how bad the Democrats are, you know, they ruined America.

Barbara Tabach: *This was amazing! [laughter]*

Dr. Herman van Betten: This is like fifty some years ago. You know, that was possible. And I thought, well, there goes my future, I am not going to act the way they want me to act, and write checks, and of course I was still single. So then I talked to Patricia, whom you met, and she was also working for Kennedy at the time. And I said—and we had dated once or twice, and I said, “I just hate it.” She said, “Why don’t you go away from there!” I said, “What am I going to do?” She said, “I don’t know, go to college. Get an American degree,” because in America, a European high school degree, even though it is pretty much equivalent of an American degree, is—so I said, “Yeah, that’s an idea.” So I started researching and I found out the cheapest university in the United States was the University of Texas. If you have no residency, you know. For two hundred dollars, all you can eat, as many credits as you can take [laughter] a month—a semester! Two hundred dollars a semester. Now at UNLV, I think it’s one credit or something, you know. So it turned out to be a very good university, one of the top universities in America, in Austin. So then we had another date, and I proposed to Patricia and—because we had all that in common. We had so much politically in common, and then I gave my resignation and we went to Austin, Texas. She took a job as a public health nurse. So that we would survive and find the \$200 tuition I needed. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *Excellent plan!*

Dr. Herman van Betten: She, I think she made \$4,000 a year at the time. So, I thought, “Now let me do something that goes fast. So I’ll take a degree in German and French because I’m pretty fluent in it.” I took a lot of Credit by Examination. Anyway, the Dean calls me in, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and he says “You have been selected to be a Junior Fellow, and that

means you don't have to pay any more tuition, and things like that." Then he looked through my credit, he says, "You've been here a year; you're already a Junior." So I finished a degree in two years. And then I saw an ad for Comparative Literature, for a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. Now, Senator Humphrey had instituted that after the Second World War. Most of the people, the soldiers that went all over the world, he found out they didn't have the foggiest idea of where in the world they were, didn't know anything about the country, didn't know anything about the history, or whatever. So Humphrey took it out of the Defense Department because they paid—the Defense Department paid for this particular scholarship—and took it out of Defense Department money, which always has plenty of money, for people who go into fields that would give American students a broader view of the world's languages and cultures and whatever. And the requirement was that you would know four or five languages, or at least four. And I'd had Greek, German, Latin. So I applied to University of California and the University of Georgia because they both offered that and both of them offered me the scholarship. Now, Pat made \$4,000 a year as a full time nurse. The scholarship was \$5,000, tax free. And they paid your tuition and everything else. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *This is sounding good, okay.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: I mean, we rented a beautiful home near the campus. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *So you chose USC?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Yeah, I chose USC and we were there for the riots and everything. So I spent my three years there and of course being still very good Catholics, we had one child after the other, so in no time at all we had three. And then I took a job in the—that was the time that I had my "All But Dissertation," ABD, so I still had to write a dissertation. And we came to Las

Vegas; I was offered a job here. At the time, there were plenty of jobs available and I went to a number of places, and Comparative Literature was still pretty new and I didn't know quite what to do with it. And then I came here to what was called the Nevada Southern University, which had a one floor library, only the first floor was finished, and it had, oh what's his name? His son is married to Dina Titus.

Fredric Watson: *Dr. Wright?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Yeah, the Wright Building. That was there; that is now gone, too. And a couple of other little buildings, that was it, and the gym was there. And that was about it. And so I came there for an interview.

Fredric Watson: *Didn't they call it Tumbleweed Tech? [laughter]*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Yeah. So I came there and was interviewed, and [they] said, "So what do you like to teach?" Well the other people didn't know what to do with it. I said, "Do you have anybody teaching Latin?" "No, that would be great." I said, "Classical Literature and Translation?" "No, we don't have that course." I said, "Greek Mythology or any kind of Mythology?" "Oh no, we don't have it." So I made my whole—I said, "Are you well staffed in German?" They said, "No, we are short there, we only have two people in German and they have more students." So I taught everything I wanted. And I could have taught French, too, if I'd wanted to.

Fredric Watson: *What year was that, now?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: That was in 1967.

Barbara Tabach: *What was the city like in 1967? What were your memories of Las Vegas when you first hit?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Well, it was a small town. It was really quite small. And sometimes we had a babysitter, we'd had another baby in the meantime, until I finally had enough of it.

Barbara Tabach: *So now you had four kids—new life in Las Vegas. [laughter]*

Dr. Herman van Betten: I have four kids, have to write a dissertation. [laughter]

Fredric Watson: *Where'd you settle? Where'd you buy a house?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Beg your pardon?

Fredric Watson: *Where did you move, or what neighborhood?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: We wound up in Francisco Park, which at that time was considered an upscale neighborhood, and now it's not. Anyway, but we had a nice house, it had a swimming pool and everything like that, so with four kids it was just great. Anyway, so I had to finish my dissertation, which took a while. Pat unfortunately couldn't work, with three kids in diapers. You know, I mean, it's pretty difficult to go to work. Now eventually, David Cantor—David Cantor was a County Commissioner and a lawyer, and a friend of ours—we had known him for a long time—and he was on the School Board. He said, "I'm not going to run anymore, why don't you run for School Board?" I said, okay, with four kids, you know, maybe I can do something, because I have some very strong ideas about education and I think there's a lot wrong with it. So I ran and I won. Kenny Guinn was the Superintendent and we became good friends. So I did that for four years.

Barbara Tabach: *So what years would that be, the School Board?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: '74-'78 I was on the School Board. But I made a lot of enemies, and you know, like for instance, they had—that was before Title IX, the head of Sport Activities at the School District would come in front and say how well all the football teams are doing and all the

basketball teams. And I said, “How many girls have a chance to play sports?” It got very quiet in the hall, and then he said, “Well, we have the Baseball Bunnies.”

Barbara Tabach: *Baseball Bunnies? Okay.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: [laughter] And the women in the Hall just roared. Because Title IX came in '75 or '76, you know, it wasn't there yet; it was really interesting. So I made some people unhappy and then the next person, the next week there was another person, a lady who had a team called the “Rhythmetts” in the School District and they were all cute white girls that did rhythmic dancing, and so of course I couldn't resist, I said, “How many colored—kids of color, do you have in your group?” “Well, none at this time.” I said, “Don't you think that black girls have a sense of rhythm, too?” [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *And they said? [laughter] Left them speechless?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: So it was one battle after the other. And then, you know, when I— people talking about all the wonderful people who graduate and all that kind of thing, and I said, “You know, I go to all these graduations and people are crying and I cry, too, because a lot of people graduate and they don't know how to read and write.” That was the time, though, it was the '70s, people did, they were just moved on. And then, the big—what led to my defeat by four hundred votes, eventually, was the battle with the Mormon Church. Do you remember that?

Fredric Watson: *No.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: The Mormon Church had proposed to have release time for Church during the school hours. So every hour, a number of people could go to the nearby seminary or church, the Mormon Church, and get their hour. Because, and as they told me, “I don't want to

get up at five o'clock in the morning to give these," because they go every morning, the Mormon kids, they go every morning to these seminaries. And I think that was an encroachment of Church and State. I mean, that was not right. I was very much against it and I was mad at Kenny Guinn, I gave Kenny Guinn holy hell, I [said], "Ken, you sent three top administrators to Arizona because there was one school district there that had this system in place." I said, "You're using State money for sectarian purposes." Because the hotels, the travel, everything, they didn't pay it themselves; you paid for it. And yeah, he tried to—and I liked Kenny a lot, but I think he did something wrong there. So then I got a call from the Jewish Federation. They were very much against it. "Would you meet with us?" And I met with the Jewish Federation, and they were just so much against it. Then I got a call from the Methodist Ministers Association and I met with them. And then I met with the black ministers. I met—and everybody, week after week, they came there to protest this kind of—oh, everybody arguing the separation of Church and State, and then Mormon state presidents would come in and talk and quote the Bible and [I would say] "You know, it's nice to quote the Bible, but we really are a secular institution—that's the school district—and we have Buddhists and we have these and these people. And then the Catholic bishop said, "Hey, that's a good idea, we have enough Catholic Churches all over the place." And I got contact from them and they said, "We'd like to have it, too." [laughter] And I still went against it and then the next day, they had this Bunker—Bunker was a part time senator at one time, one of the [Berkeley] family.

Fredric Watson: *Berkeley.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Good Mormon and he had a column in the newspaper. And he attacked me. He took a whole column to attack me because this Ph.D.—didn't name me by

name but he called me, "The Ph.D." I was the only one with a Ph.D. "This Ph.D. thinks he's smarter than his bishop and refuses to abide,"—and I still have that thing somewhere—"and refuses to abide by the wishes of his bishop." In other words, bishops should control people in public office, whether they're Mormon bishops or Catholic bishops. Anyway, so the next time, in '78, they had a Mormon doctor run against me. My signs kept disappearing all over the place. Mormon missionaries went door to door. And several Mormon principals supported me. They thought I had done a good job and they said, "Sorry about this whole thing." They believed in separation of Church and State and so everywhere I went, you know, to PTA meetings or whatever, "Oh, you're running against Brother"—now I forgot his name.

Fredric Watson: *Lyman?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Layman. "You're running against Brother Layman." "Oh, I think Brother Layman is running against me!" [laughter] Anyway, I saw their point and I think religion is good for people, but, you know, not at cost of Separation of Church and State. Being from Europe, officially Dutch Reform Church is the state church. I mean, like Jefferson and everybody being in Europe and seeing the Catholic Church running the country, you know, that's why they came here saying "We don't want any of that." So I was very happy that that happened. So I lost by a couple hundred votes because they maintained that I was—you know, Layman married his—I won't go into that—but I mean—

Barbara Tabach: *That's okay. [laughter]*

Dr. Herman van Betten: But I was the "Anti-family Candidate" because according to their literature, I was in favor of teaching homosexual lifestyle to the children. At the time, a homosexual was a pervert, so and anyway I was a pervert. So I lost by a couple hundred votes

but that was fine. But already one time at a political meeting, Richard Bryan was governor, I believe, at the time, and a few other politicians, the Attorney General, they said, "Oh, Herman, you have to shut up a little bit because you're never going to be elected." I said, "You know, what do I get paid—twenty dollars a meeting?" At least I hope I did some right thing and woke people to the effect that girls have rights and all that kind of stuff. So I said, "If not, that's okay." So I lost it and I—but I had a wonderful time."

Barbara Tabach: *But you made some good friends along through all of this. You served the community.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: And ever since, good friends with people in the Jewish Federation, I met a lot of most wonderful Baptist ministers and rabbis and you know there's nothing like having rabbis and black ministers come talk to the school. I mean those rabbis are wonderful preachers. Black ministers, they can out do anybody! [laughter] So it was an interesting time and I really enjoyed them. You know, after the School Board meetings, that was before we had the Open Meeting Law, and that was interesting because we had that conference—you know where the conference room is, you know—and all the decisions were made out there. So one time, because Kenny was a wonderful guy, he was the only Republican I ever worked for, to get reelected and reelected in the first place. After the Board Meeting, we used to go to my home, because it's close by, and drink some beers at the pool. But at one o'clock I said, "Kenny, you have seventy-eight percent name recognition at this time." "Naw," he said, "I have to make some money first." You know, because of his poverty background, which he did. Anyway it was a very interesting experience. I'm very glad that I did it. I learned a lot. And I made some good friends.

Barbara Tabach: *And because we really want to talk a little bit about Henderson history—you came to the Community College, what, just a few years after the School Board?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: I taught at UNLV for fifteen years and then Judith Eaton was President of the College. And I had met her socially a number of times. So one time she said, “We have had three searches for a Dean of Communication and Art,” which encompasses anything that’s not technical. And he said, “We had three interviews and we just can’t find anybody good. Why don’t you apply?” And I was Associate Professor and I realized to be a full Professor, I would have to spend the next few years in the Library—and I just dreaded it—to write the book that I was working on. So when she said that—I mean, [whispers] I wouldn’t have to go to the library anymore. Sorry about that! [laughter] Dusty, warm library. So applied for it and I got the job; I became Dean. So that was in ’82. Then in ’84, I was at the Cheyenne campus and I was Dean of all these—about departments on the three campuses. And then the Henderson job came open because the person they had was I think fired. And then there were two people. There was Betty Scott—remember that name—or me. Now, the community, Father Caviglia, who had a very close relationship with Betty Scott wanted—and Father Caviglia is very important in this town, as you well know. I mean, I just noticed that one of the buildings has his name on it. And there’s probably a street named after him, too. And I’d known him for thirty years, too. Father Caviglia was an old friend. Anyway, they wanted, the establishment wanted Betty Scott, because Father Caviglia kept telling everybody, the City Council and everybody else, you know, “Push for Betty Scott.” And then I got the job, which already made a lot of people mad, plus, Senator—oh, what’s his name—he’s dead now, they named the street after him, the last street?

Fredric Watson: *Cannon? Howard Cannon, was it?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: No, no, no. Senator—he was a Mormon bishop, too. I’ll think of his name in a second. He was a senator representing this area and he was LDS, and of course I had a bad name with the LDS you know, because of my battle—or with the Catholic Church, for that matter. So he was very unhappy, but the President pushed through and I was appointed. And it was a wonderful, wonderful job. I really enjoyed it. I really did three jobs. I was Dean of the campus, Dean of Business and Industry, which is all the technical programs on the three campuses, and Dean of Extension (that means all these little places we have where we offer courses in Pahrump and all of Southern California and the prisons. So I did all three things for a little over \$60,000 at the end. [laughter] Now they make fortunes, but I mean I never went in it for the money; I had a good time. So I enjoyed all three jobs, I mean it took a lot of time, my kids were growing up and on their own, so that was no problem. And I did that till ‘95 and then a new president came in at the Community College, which was then still a community college. Anyway, I changed the name from Clark County Community College. I wrote a big paper on it and argued and got it changed to—because every time I was out in the boondocks, they said, “We are not Clark County.” So I said, “Let’s change it! It makes more sense.”

Barbara Tabach: *So it was changed to what?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: And so it was changed to Community College of Southern Nevada and then later on they changed it to College of Southern Nevada, and it’s still a community college. I think it’s right because Community College is to me a name of honor, not a lower level. I mean it’s done more good for America than many universities.

Fredric Watson: *It’s a concept. It’s in the literature, too, the community college concept.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Yeah. It's fantastic. The community colleges are all over. And it all started with Truman. After the war, all these GIs came back and they got the GI bill, they didn't have enough universities to take care of it all. Truman said, "We don't need lots of people with BA's in History; we need people that know how to run the country." So the auto mechanics and things like that are just as valuable as the others.

Fredric Watson: *Truman had never been to college.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: No, but he realized that that's what you need, you know. And so he came up with that concept, the community college, and they have been wonderful. And I used to talk to counselors all over the district when they asked me to talk to them and I said, "You all want your kids to go to Harvard; well hardly anybody will get there. And at the last thing, you might send them to UNLV, you might recommend that." I said, "Why don't you recommend the community college. Parents will love you!"

Barbara Tabach: *How many students? How did the Community College change over the years that you worked there?*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Well, when I got there it was seventeen dollars a credit and now I think it's two hundred dollars a credit. [laughter]

Barbara Tabach: *It got more expensive!*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Yeah, they had some temporary buildings, and then the first building was at Cheyenne Campus. And then I think this campus, the Henderson Campus was built in 1980. And it was just this building here that was the only building.

Barbara Tabach: *We're at Building C? Or, no, we're in the Library. That's it.*

Fredric Watson: *Building C is the Caviglia—that's the building that has Father Caviglia's name on it, Building C. How did you get here from the Francisco Park community when you first had to drive.*

Dr. Herman van Betten: Oh well, you know, Boulder Highway, that was the only way at the time. I was very happy when they finished 93, way, way later that I could drive. God, I remember sometimes I used to take Lake Mead down and there was absolutely nothing. I came from Henderson and would go on Lake Mead and as soon as you were—there was no casino, no, you went on Lake Mead and there was nothing all the way to Eastern and then at Eastern I took the right and there was nothing till you get to Sunset Park! It was just unbelievable. And I remember, you know, driving one of my brothers who had been here early in the '70s and then later on he came back in the '80s and I drove him down, he says, he couldn't believe it, the enormous change that has taken place. Then we got, as I mentioned earlier, we got that second building built and we got a parking area. I remember going with the committee from that—

[end of Part 1]