

# **Henderson Libraries**

## **Henderson Historical Society**

**Dr. Herman van  
Betten, Part 2**

**Oral History of Dr. Herman van Betten**

**Part 2**

**conducted by**

**Barbara Tabach, UNLV Oral History Research Center**

**with**

**Fredric Watson, Henderson Historical Society**

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**Barbara Tabach:** *I want to also mention at this point that the other voice that you're hearing is Rick Watson. W-A-T-S-O-N. I forgot to mention that. So Henderson was—this was the main place you worked for the Community College then?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Yeah, I worked here I think thirteen years, fifteen years, I think.

**Barbara Tabach:** *And how did you attract students and get people to take Henderson seriously?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Nobody knew where it was because the street ended at the end of this drive here and there was dirt after that. There was no freeway and there was dirt and there was a little dead end street and there was a little college. And then this next building.

**Fredric Watson:** *It wasn't even "College" at that time I don't think. The street wasn't College when you first got here, I can't remember, was it Pueblo?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Yeah, something like that. Oh, yeah, Pueblo. It was called Pueblo. And so then I used to go, I would spend my Saturdays and sometimes Sundays and go to Albertsons and I have a big table and it says Community Colleges of Nevada. People would walk by and I'd say "You know anything about the College?" "Oh, at UNLV?" "No, we have a College in Henderson." "We do?" [laughter] And I would have materials. I would write a column every week for the Henderson paper which was called Henderson Home News. I became good friends with—Scott Dickensheet used to work there and then O'Callahan's son—I forgot his first name right now. As a matter of fact, I quintupled—no, more than that—I think we went from a few hundred students to about five thousand students in my tenure. Because I advertised it left and right. I had ads in the paper for—at one time I collected enough money to get a full time ad in the paper and I had an artist do all this. What I'd learned in the Army, promoting whatever I was working on at the time, I learned to apply to the College. And I argued with the Legislature

and because I did a lot of volunteer lobbying for the Library system, you know, I did because I was also Vice-President of the first—Founding Vice President of the first Friends of the Library in Clark County. And I worked with Jean Ford—you remember that name at all?

**Barbara Tabach:** *I've heard that name, yes.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** She was a State Senator and she was—well, that's another story. And so it was really interesting how I could influence people. Okay, my lobbying in the legislature, that got me to promote the idea of getting a second building. And I gave—I just gave Cleo a big picture that the architect gave me. So eventually, first we got a parking lot out of the Committee. I lobbied for that. And then I lobbied to get the second building. And the great thing, after the problem with the selection of the architect, who turned out—did wonderful job on it—there was not—because at that time, they were building three casinos on the Strip and all the money was absorbed on the Strip. And so it was too expensive. I forgot what we eventually paid, but I think it was—the building was set on paying \$95 a square foot. But it gradually went up and up. By the time we were ready to build, it was like \$150 a square foot because all the energy went to the Strip. They were paying a lot of money. Then all of a sudden, all three casinos were done and all of a sudden all these contractors were standing there with nothing and like [unclear] told me, he said, “We have enough money to do the ground floor but the second floor of that second building we would just leave empty and then finish it up whenever you get money from the Legislature.” Now by the time the other construction was done, all of a sudden there was plenty of money and we did, I think, do it for \$90 a square foot. [laughter] And so the building was done. Lovely building—I worked with the architect—I said, “You are Hispanic, and so you know a little bit about courtyards.” All these beautiful Spanish

homes had these wonderful courtyards and that forces people to interact with each other. You know, you have a long building, people don't interact. But with the courtyard you can see on the second floor you look down. And he thought that was a great idea. And he built a real—very nice building. And then we had more and more students and now even at two o'clock in the afternoon, I came down here and the parking lot is just packed. And of course we had one security, like an eight dollar an hour security guy on the campus. Now I see police vehicles, CSN police vehicles driving. [laughter] We had this wonderful guy—I think he was Indian—who was our Head of Security. Of course there's nothing happening on this campus. [laughter] Oh, another thing I remember from my time, in the '80s there was this pandemic all across the country. People didn't want to take the exams so they called in a bomb scare. Do you remember that?

**Barbara Tabach:** *Oh, yeah.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** So we had about five or six bomb scares in a row. And I was just so fed up with it. You all stand outside, wait for the police to come in and all that kind of thing. So Frank Lamping was principal of Burkholder Middle School and we were friends. I said, "Frank, you know what we need to do? I need your school. Whenever we have a bomb scare, I'm going to give you a call, or if there is somebody there who can open the doors I want your permission to use your classrooms." He said, "Sure, it'd be great." So the next time there was a bomb scare, I was out there—I bought one of those megaphones, you know—and I was standing outside [and said], "Okay, everybody get in your car and go to Burkholder Junior High,"—it was called at the time—and explained where it was, "And just follow all the cars. We'll go in parade

down there.” We went down there in a parade; it’s the last time we had a bomb scare.

[laughter]

**Barbara Tabach:** *You were a very clever man! Did you work with different businesses in the community to help the Community College? What kind of relationships did you have here?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Well, you know Albertsons let me in there and a couple of other stores I went to and asked the same thing. And I worked with casinos, but you know fundraising was really not in my domain. I couldn’t do any fundraising. That was up to the President’s staff. But we had a good relationship—we had excellent relationships with the various mayors we had. We worked with some real estate experts who would let us know where there were going to be new neighborhoods and things like that. When I heard, I mean, Juan—and I think he’s gone now, he had a big real estate company, I got him an award, you know one of these college awards that they give out for people that are success stories because he had gone to a community college and got rich! [laughter] So that way we worked with companies.

**Barbara Tabach:** *The community was growing and supportive.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** And of course a lot of difference came when the freeway came and it opened up. That was, of course, Father Caviglia who made sure that it was called College Drive and that there was an exit.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Well, tell me a little bit about what you remember about Father Caviglia.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Well, he’s still alive. He lives up north somewhere. I worked with Father Caviglia in nineteen—well, it was just after we came here. I was president of a small group and I even forgot the name. It was Citizens Action or something like that. And at Carver Park—you know where that is?

**Fredric Watson:** *I went to school in Carver Park when I was a little boy.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** And it was on both sides of the street. There were all kinds of barracks-like apartments, and what they did is they put the homeless people in there. So people had a little apartment. It was not fancy. It probably had leaking faucets and all that kind of stuff but there was a roof over their head. They didn't have to sleep on the street. And they were all dirt poor. We used to go down there and meet with the families, and we would—and it was so much easier at that time—I would call—what's his name again; he owned a downtown casino.

**Fredric Watson:** *Boyd? Was it Bill Boyd?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** No, I'll think of his name in a second. And I would call him and at the time I said, "These kids have no shoes. They can't go to school. They have no shoes! Could you give me some money to...?" And at the time, way back, you could call the big shots themselves and they would actually talk to you. And he said, "Okay, there will be a \$300 check waiting for you at the cashier's office." So I go down to the cashier and pick up the check and then we go talk to businesses and see if they'd give a good discount on the shoes. And then we had shoes for all the kids in Carver Park. So we did a lot of things, get food for them and things like that. At that time I used to work for Father Caviglia who was then at St. Peter's Church. And we were good friends. When one of my kids died, he officiated at the Mass. And of course I've known him so long. He's just a great dynamic guy who's interested in a lot of civic activities around him.

**Fredric Watson:** *I think he was on the State Board of Education at one time, probably when you were in your early career at UNLV. Here's something that I noticed about the Community*

*College when you were here. It was their landscape program. It really encouraged desert landscape and drought tolerant planting before that was a big initiative by the Water District.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Yes. That was John Smith who started the program. He was a genius. He knew more about—as a matter of fact John Smith worked with the City when they did the landscaping along Boulder Highway. You know, earlier they had sprayed stuff on there so nothing would grow and so they asked John Smith, “Would you help us?” So he designed it. Yeah, John Smith was a real dynamo and very knowledgeable and he himself built some of these greenhouses, with his own hands. He also built his own home here in Henderson. He still lives in Henderson. And he was just terrific. And then, you know, I was also—because my son, my son had schizophrenia and he died at the age of eighteen or nineteen—and so I got really involved in mental health issues. And I was quite an advocate, a lot of television when it was easier to get on television at the time. I got interviewed. So I was really a spokesperson for the mentally ill and tried to get rid of the stigma of the mentally ill. And I came to the attention of Governor Bryan who appointed me Chairman of the Commission of Mental Health and then Governor Miller renewed the appointment. So I did that for about eight years. I was Chairman of the Commission of Mental Health/Mental Retardation. Spent a lot of time in mental hospitals and hospitals for the mentally challenged and things like that. Anyway, what happened is they hire a lot of people for low wages to do all the dirty work, working with the mentally ill. And there’s no—you know, I talked to them when I visited these mental hospitals and they had no way of advancement. And so I got a program going at the college that they would have four levels, depending on how many courses they take, and the Department of Human Services agreed to that. But also, they had the space down there to start a—oh, no, the mental health



people, they had some space near the campus on West Charleston and they had some people that were mentally challenged work in a little nursery they had down there. So I got together with John Smith and the people from Mental Health and said, "What if you get a real expert down there? You won't have to bother with it anymore. Just give the title to the College and they have the funding and they can make a hell of a place." And it's still there now and I made sure in the negotiations that they would always hire a dozen mentally ill or mentally challenged patients to work in it. And so, John Smith, I don't know if you've ever seen it, but it's near the campus. There is still—you drive by and they say—and so that was a wonderful thing that worked.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Now John Smith was a businessman, or what was his—*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Who?

**Barbara Tabach:** *John Smith.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** No, John Smith is the horticulturist. And that really made me believe—I mean, all these technical problems came when one of my jobs was being Dean of Business and Industry, so twenty programs dealing from robotics to car repair. That gave me a tremendous respect for people in the crafts. I mean these manuals are not easy to read! You have to be pretty smart, you know. They are thick, you know. I don't understand it! And then I find out, because we had community counsels for each of the crafts, so for car repair we had a bunch of car dealers or heads of repair at the car dealers. For air conditioning we had some air conditioning people that owned air conditioning. So we had—I used to meet regularly with all of these committees. So we were talking about car repair, I said, "How much is"—and this is—you're talking about 1980s, in 1980s, they said, "How much does a good mechanic make?" "Oh

it's just \$50,000." And I was thinking, "That's just slightly less than I make and I supervise two hundred people. And I have a Ph. D.!" [laughter] He said, "Bob." I said, "What Bob?" He said, "You're a good transmission mechanic." Because they are paid not by the hour but by the job, so if they can do it in three hours instead of five, they make \$100,000 per year. I said, "Hell of a lot more than I make!" [laughter] And then, because this happened to me, when I was at UNLV, I walk into a hotel and then at the desk, I said, "Oh, you're one of my students." "Yeah, I got a degree in History." I said, "What are you doing behind the desk here? You should be out with the big boys out there?" "No, no, I'm a woman." You know, I mean, that's the way it was. But then also, you find people with a Masters in English, and I was staying one time—because I got involved in Henderson Shakespeare in Henderson. I did that for ten years. And I got involved in that and then we stayed at the Railroad Casino Hotel, and there, the girl who was cleaning my room was one of my former students who had a Masters in English.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Oh, my.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Because at that time in the '80s, it was very hard to get a teaching job of any kind with a Masters in English and no Education degree. And then you see, at the same time I'm Dean of Business and Industry and all these people are making a lot of money. So I got a tremendous respect for people in the crafts. I mean, it's not a bad idea you know to get even a two year degree in something you can make money with and then get your Ph. D. in whatever you want. [laughter]

**Barbara Tabach:** *[laughter] Well tell us, the Shakespeare in Henderson, what was that?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Oh, well it was started by Judy Steele who is now head of the CCSD Foundation, and she asked me early on to be a member of her Board. And we had, you know a

pretty, pretty good Board for many years. That's what I liked about the County Commissioner Woodbury.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Bruce?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** He was also on that Board, and actually unlike so many others, you know, public officials I've met over my career that are on boards and never show up, he actually showed up every single time. And I told him one time, Commissioner Woodbury, I said, "I told my wife that you were a Republican and she didn't believe me because she thinks only Democrats are that good!" [laughter] But that was nice. And what I did there, because of my literary background, every time—it used to be free—but people who gave money, a certain amount of money, there was a separate section for the donors. And they could sit in front and everybody else got in for free. So that's what paid for it, you know. And then we had the Shakespeare play every year in September.

**Fredric Watson:** *Shakespeare in the Park?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Yeah, Shakespeare in the Park. And I would write the explanation in the program, and then when it started, I would tell people—the nice about it was you get a lot of people that have never been to a theater, because it's free. They take the kids and everything. And so they have no idea because of the language and everything, so I would spend about ten minutes at the beginning explaining what you see first and who's who and I said, "You know, you have still some time, read the program and see what's that." And then I would make all the announcements, you know, "Pick up your trash please," and thank the volunteers, and thank the donors and all that kind of stuff. I did sort of the PR. I did that for about ten years. And that was also a lot of fun. I also brought in some technical—because at the College I

had all these technical programs, so whenever things didn't work right, the light thing or whatever, the sound, I could always bring in people from the College and they volunteered. And so that was Henderson Shakespeare in the Park and I really, really enjoyed doing that. And then I also worked with Richard, who owns all the rich developments—I forgot his last name. I was on his Board also. He wanted to start a Cultural Center, which never, never came off. But Shakespeare in the Park was just great, and it tied in because I could use public—my approach to the public by mentioning the Community College, which once a year, when you have a chance to have a big audience, because we had like three or four performances in a row, so I would do that three or four evenings, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, I think we did it.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Okay. Was that part of the Nevada Humanities Committee?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** We would get some money. Oh I served on that too for about seven years, on the Nevada Humanities Committee. Yeah it was interesting when I served on the Nevada Humanities Committee—that was after I got kicked off the School Board by the voters. I was asked to be one of the founding members of the Nevada Humanities Committee and what they do is they get grants from the endowment of the humanities and then we would regrant it to groups that would promote the humanities in Nevada. And the terrible thing according to some of the presidential candidates who said, “What a waste of money. We can solve our debt problem” for, what is it, a few million dollars? [laughter] Peanuts! Anyway, that's what we did, and it was a very interesting time and one time I suggested, because we would meet with the Humanities Committee all over Nevada, regularly. So one time, I had met socially the President of the Stardust—I forgot his name, sorry about that. Anyway, he had a private plane, of course. And I asked him, I said, “Can I meet with you?” You know, I gave him a call and I said, “Could I

sit down with you? I have a question.” He said, “Sure.” And so I went to his fancy office at the Stardust. I said, “I just wonder whether you’d be willing to serve on the Nevada Humanities Committee. We meet four times a year at various places around the State.” “Yeah,” he said, “I’d be honored to do that.” So next time, I said, “We’ve got his plane that we can, fwoosh.”

[laughter]

**Fredric Watson:** *Get to a meeting! All right!*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** He’s not going to fly coach! [laughter] And then one professor from Reno, a Political Science professor whose specialty was The Mob, he stood up and went to the blackboard and he said, “Now this is the [unclear: Deporte] family, this is the Teamsters Union, and this is this, and this is how it relates to that, and phish, we can’t do it!” So that was the end of that! But the Humanities Committee, that was the interesting thing also, when we first started with the Humanities Committee, you know, mostly it went to upper class people, the money, because they were the ones who had the idea. And I said, “We need to do something with the West Side. We need to get something, get some of these people involved, to have this variety. And so I was talking to some black ministers and black people, and finally I found a little group that was willing to put something together, and they were going to have this and this and this. So a month later I go down there to check on it—we gave them—they had—and I forget the details of the plan of what we were going to do, but we gave them like \$8,000. So a month or two months later I go check up what was happening to the money. They said, “Well we haven’t really been able to start.” I said, “Can I look at your checks, what went out? What happened?” “You know we had to hire a lot of consultants.” And it was all his friends: \$500 to that; \$1,000 to that. And the money was gone!

**Barbara Tabach:** *Oh, my!*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** And then I had a good friend at a radio station, and we got Father—not Father Caviglia, Father Vitalli, remember that name?

**Barbara Tabach:** *I remember that name, too, yes.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** I think he's not in jail right now. But Father Vitalli and a few other community people and some very responsible black people, and we got radio time for free! Half an hour for four weeks to talk about integration and all these things so we could go to tell the Federal Government, "We did use the money," you know, but I didn't say it was for free. [laughter] And of course you could tell the Federal Government and sue them for fraud, that's the last time you would ever get any black people involved in it. Later on, after this debacle, we got some very good minority groups that saw the writing on the wall and did a good job. That was very interesting.

**Barbara Tabach:** *That is interesting!*

**Fredric Watson:** *Another thing I was interested in was the use of Solar Energy here at the Community College. It seemed to me that this particular campus was one of the first in the Valley to do that.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** That was after I left. That is more recent. Nobody talked about it at the time when I was here. But I'm very happy. They have some solar energy here on campus?

**Fredric Watson:** *Yes. There's a study program and they're doing some training—if I've done my research properly, but I did have the timeline wrong.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Oh, that's wonderful. I'm all in favor of it. I mean, if they can do it in Holland where the sun never shines, I mean! [laughter] As a matter of fact, in Holland, people

can vote on their electric bill. And if twenty percent of the people want renewable energy then the electric companies have to do twenty percent renewable energy. So that's one way to force it. They have by law! You have to do that. We should have something like that here. That would be great.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Well is there anything else that you could—do you have another question? Are there any other topics that we should cover pertaining to Henderson?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Well, we can talk about the—as I said, my work with the mentally ill in the '80s, while I was Dean here, I started the Nevada Children's Center. Which is, because what I noticed when I was on the School Board, is there was very little if no—teachers didn't know what to do with kids that had mental problems. I mean there was not one child psychiatrist in town at the time, you know, in the '70s. So there was a lot of problems. As a matter of fact, I remember when they first got television in the classrooms, there came a lady—a teacher came to protest at the School Board meeting and went on and on about how the School Board and Kenny Guinn were using their televisions to spy on teachers! And everybody was laughing and everything and then I realized this woman is paranoid schizophrenic and nobody knew it. I mean, counselors were not trained either to really work with mentally ill people, particularly mentally ill children. So now their talking about, "We have to do much more Mental Illness because these people grow up and then they have no affection, they have no effect, they do this, they do that, and then they kill people." But you have to get to them early. So that's what we do. We get kids that have seen—have seen their siblings murdered. We have about seventy kids that we take care of in an afterschool program. And they get the twelve week or twenty-four week three-and-a-half hours a day treatment program by psychologists and everything like

that. And these are the very kids that either wind up in a mental hospital, you know, or wind up shooting people, because some of the kids have been so abused, either by foster parents or by their own parents, that they have no effect whatsoever. They have no feeling. They resist any approach with love or anything like that. So these are the kind of kids that twenty years from now, they'll be "the" major problem. So that's what we take care of.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Now is that a physical building?*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Yeah. It's on Pecos. Yeah. And we're barely surviving from day to day because, you know how it is—Medicaid, "You should pull yourself up by your own bootstrap." And "Why don't you just give them," you know, they have treated somebody for twelve weeks and then they send the bill to Medicaid, Medicaid says, "Well, you could have done that with a couple of pills." Because, what happened—and that's not really relevant to, but it's still interesting—what happened is they fired all the people working Medicaid for the State, you know, because of this Republican thing of private companies do it much better, so they hired HP, Hewlett Packard, you know, the computer people, who had developed a program, you know, for paying Medicaid bills. And so they gave the whole program to them! And of course through them, the less money you give out the more money they make! So we just barely make it from—but that's something that comes out of my School Board experience, out of my Mental Health experience. So I'm still on the Board; I've been president for many years, and that's what we're working on.

**Barbara Tabach:** *Wow, that's wonderful. Any—*

**Fredric Watson:** No, I think that covers it, covers the bases really well.



**Barbara Tabach:** *Do you have any other stories you want to tell us about being in Henderson specifically?*

**Fredric Watson:** *The struggle for funding, struggle with the Legislature for funding is—well, that’s ongoing.*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** Yeah, we are “takers!” [laughter] All these kids are “takers.” But you know in the long run they’ll have to pay for it anyway, because these kids, they’ll have to go lock them up. This is not anymore the proposal, but my dream is to eventually have a residential center where kids can stay. Because right now, the kids that are really bad, if we can’t handle them and we have no success with them. Where do they go? They go to Texas. They go to Utah. At \$25,000 a month.

**Fredric Watson:** *Really!*

**Dr. Herman van Betten:** And we can take seventy kids for \$50,000 a month!

**[end of Part 2]**