

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Fredric Watson

Oral History of Fredric W. Watson

conducted by

Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm

October 4, 2013

Interviewer: *Today is October 4th, 2013. We're at the Paseo Verde branch of the Henderson District Public Libraries in Henderson, Nevada. My name is Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm and I'm interviewing Rick Watson as part of the Henderson Oral History Project of the Henderson Libraries. Thanks so much for joining us Rick.*

Fredric Watson: You're welcome.

Interviewer: *I'd like to start by asking about your childhood. Could you please tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what your parents did for a living?*

Fredric Watson: I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and my dad and mother worked in a drugstore in Kansas City. That's where they met and I was born in 1940, October 20th, 1940. Lived in Kansas City with them for about nine months and then we moved to Los Angeles, the Santa Monica neighborhood, and throughout most of the war years, I lived in Santa Monica. Had a sister born during that time. Then right toward the end of war my Dad's father got sick. He lived in a place called Lebanon, Missouri. So we packed up the family and moved back there so my Dad could help him run his business and lived in Lebanon, Missouri for about a year. During that time my grandfather died and then we returned to Santa Monica. You know, during the time that we were in Santa Monica, my Dad worked in the defense industry. He worked for Douglas Aircraft and being a married father of two, he wasn't subject to the draft, but he had to work in the defense industry—which is interesting for people that had not experienced a gigantic war like we had in the 1940s. Toward the end of the war, and probably, in fact, maybe a couple of months after the war ended, my mother and father were—they were out of work. Once the defense plant closed, there were an awful lot of people who just weren't needed anymore. So we were looking for a place where my Dad could get a good job. My mother's dad,

my grandfather on my mother's side, was a house painter, and he had heard that there was a lot of work in Las Vegas, Nevada, for painters. A lot of people didn't know where Las Vegas, Nevada, was in those days. So we packed everything up. My dad sold the car he had. He and my grandfather pooled their money, bought an old 1929 Cadillac. Now this is 1945, so it was a 1929 Cadillac, and it had a roof rack on it. They bundled up all of my granddad's paint equipment and we took off from Los Angeles area to Las Vegas. In those days, that was a long, hot ride. It's only three hundred and some odd miles up here but cars were not what they are today, so we made a two-day journey out of it. Today you jump in your car and drive down to Los Angeles in less than five hours. But we stayed, I think, in Barstow or maybe Baker and then prepared for the long, hot journey across the desert.

Interviewer: *That must have been really hard on cars to go up those hills in those days.*

Fredric Watson: Oh, it was. Yeah, there was—every so many miles there'd be a car with the hood up and the radiator steaming furiously. Old tires laying along the road. In those days people changed their tire—they had inner tubes. If they had a flat tire they'd get out and, you know, break the tire down, patch it, pump it up, put it back on. And if the tire had a big enough hole in it, they'd just leave it laying on the road side. So it's a difference for kids that are hearing this interview.

Interviewer: *What about gas rationing?*

Fredric Watson: The war was over, and as I recall, the rationings had ended by then.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Fredric Watson: So this actually would have been—it was 1945, but it was—you know, the war in Europe had ended in—around April, May, and the war in Japan had ended in August and—

early August. This was late August, so we were—school hadn't started yet, so when we got to Las Vegas that was the first thing we had to do. Enrolled me in school at the old Fifth Street School. It was the Las Vegas Elementary School and it's on Fourth Street. But they always called it the Fifth Street School for some strange reason.

Interviewer: *Interesting.*

Fredric Watson: And I went to school there briefly, and we had to live in a motel. Housing was really scarce in Las Vegas. Nellis Air Force Base—it wasn't called Nellis yet, but it was a big military training base for pilots and gunners. Lou LaPorta trained at Nellis. Brought all kind of servicemen when the war ended, and a lot of them liked Las Vegas and they came back to town to live. So we lived in a motel for a couple of months and then we found that you could have—find a comfortable apartment at a place called Carver Park in the town of Henderson, and so we moved to Carver Park. And by that time there were three children, my sister Toni and a younger brother named Kit. And we lived in Carver Park for about—well, we lived there from September, October of 1945 until about Christmastime of 1949.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay. And so that's why you went to the Carver Park School initially.*

Fredric Watson: The Carver Park School was part of the Henderson School System and now they—in those days every little community had their own school district. If you had at least three children in a mining camp, then the State would help you to— your community to hire a teacher and find some facility where you could hold class. And there were a number of small, small mining camps that, you know, that maybe only had three, five students and a teacher. But later, of course, that system was kind of untenable financially and so we went to seventeen

counties school districts. But in the 1940s and early '50s Henderson was its own school district. In fact when it started, they called it the Railroad Pass School District.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Fredric Watson: Because before there was a Henderson, there was a Railroad Pass. There were mining operations that took place up there and then it was an important place when they built the railroad that carried freight up to build Hoover Dam, so Carver Park is an interesting place.

Interviewer: *What was it like when you moved there because originally it was built for the African American workers at the BMI plant.*

Fredric Watson: That's correct. Well, the war was over and an awful lot of people in Henderson who worked at the BMI plant simply weren't needed anymore and so a good many of them headed back to where they came from and a lot of people—it had been the Depression, you know, and if you weren't in—if you weren't in the military and if you didn't have a defense job, the Depression may have continued in some communities, rural communities. So those folks went back home. Carver Park, when we got there, most of the African American families that had lived there had gone back home. Another interesting thing was that there was a healthy, vibrant African community, African American community, in Las Vegas. And a lot of the African American workers just decided when they got here that it would be easier just to live there and commute from Las Vegas. It was about ten miles from—

Interviewer: *It was quite a commute, though, back then.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, on the Boulder Highway too.

Interviewer: *And was that dirt back then, the Boulder Highway? [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: No, [laughter] no, it was more modern than that by the time we got here. It was paved, but I've seen pictures of Boulder Highway when it was still dirt. During the building of the Hoover Dam, at least part of that time, I think it was a dirt road.

Interviewer: *Even up to that time. Okay, interesting. What was Carver Park like as a neighborhood?*

Fredric Watson: Well, you know, it was utilitarian, I would say. It was cinder, cinder block construction, flat roofs. Because power was scarce, although we had Hoover Dam nearby, power was still expensive and most of the power that was produced at Hoover Dam was needed in Southern California to run the defense plants and it was needed at the BMI plants. I'm assuming that that's why part of our power came from this kerosene. We cooked on kerosene and our hot water heater operated on kerosene. Kerosene is essentially like white gas. It would be like what you would use in camp stoves when you go camping, that sort of thing. So there was a big tank up near the entry to Carver Park and everybody would take their—we used—there were bottles in the stoves—they were a globe shaped bottle, but they had like a needle in the neck. You'd screw that off and kids usually were the ones that went to get the fuel, so my sister and I would go up to the tank and there's a lady who would come out and it was like, you know, five cents a quart, I think. It was very inexpensive. And it was a hand crank tank. It wasn't an electric pump or anything. And she'd crank that and fill up the bottle with fuel for you and you'd screw the lid back on and head home. And if you got kerosene on your hands, you would smell—kerosene smells like diesel fuel.

Interviewer: *Gosh, really pungent.*

Fredric Watson: So if you get kerosene—if you spilled it on your clothes or you got it on your hands, I don't care how much you washed, you'd smell like kerosene for a couple of days.

Interviewer: *So your heating was kerosene then?*

Fredric Watson: Yes, also, yeah, there was a furnace, a kerosene furnace, hot water heater and the cook stove. Tipped the bottle upside down—that depressed the needle—and then the kerosene would leak out into an asbestos wick and you'd light that and that's what you cooked on.

Interviewer: *Wow, that's interesting. So you all didn't have the problems with coal pollution that some of the towns had during the war years, I guess.*

Fredric Watson: No, most of the power in Las Vegas and in Henderson, the major part of Henderson, not Carver Park, probably Victory Village operated on these kerosene facilities too. But by and large we didn't. Although, in those days, we burned all of our trash.

Interviewer: *Oh, gosh.*

Fredric Watson: There was a big city dump for Las Vegas. I think by that time, it was on the slopes of Sunrise Mountain. And so trucks would haul all of the waste and dump it there and they would light it on fire and it would burn. It was a beautiful sight at night.

Interviewer: *[laughter] Interesting.*

Fredric Watson: *[laughter]* But it did leave a lot of pollution.

Interviewer: *Yeah, what about the plants? Did the plants pollute in those days?*

Fredric Watson: The plants did pollute and an awful lot of the operation was smelting, so titanium and magnesium had to be—it had to be heated and melted and refined and impurities gotten out. I think a lot of that heating may very well have been electric, so there wasn't a lot of

that kind of smoke. You know the pollution that I remember the most came from a chlorination process. It was chlorine gas, and I suspect that it was heated too, and from time to time there would be a gigantic explosion down at the plant and then—or even at the town, there would be a strong smell of chlorine and like it would be—

Interviewer: *When did those accidents happen?*

Fredric Watson: I'm not sure. You know, it was—I was a teen.

Interviewer: *It was back in the '50s?*

Fredric Watson: Oh yeah, we continued to have them in the '50s. They happened in the '40s for sure but—and I think that that all continued, you know, into the '70s and early '80s probably. Little by little as technology improved in this country, they were able to get a grip on that. I don't recall reading in the paper, you know, an incident like that here in recent times.

Interviewer: *And it seems like industry has decreased a little bit over time in Henderson.*

Fredric Watson: Those, you know, of course the BMI plants were, that was a huge operation, and so when the war ended a lot of—and as I mentioned, people left town—for a time parts of the plant just sat idle. But then in the '50s, as the government began to sell off all that property, they were—there were a number of industries that wanted to come to Las Vegas. You know the infrastructure for chemical refinement was already there in the plants. So you had Stauffer Chemical and several other big chemically oriented plants go into there. Titanium [Metals Corporation] came after the war.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Fredric Watson: Although, you know, magnesium was used as an alloy in building planes and things like titanium is used as an alloy. I don't think that TIMET [Titanium Metals Corporation], I

don't think as a company it was in operation at the plant at that time. That's something somebody ought to—who's listening to this interview—ought to check, validate. I was, you know, from about six years old until twenty-four would have been my experience in Henderson.

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Fredric Watson: Want to hear some more about Carver Park? That's—

Interviewer: *Yeah, I'd love to hear more about Carver Park.*

Fredric Watson: You'd asked what, you know, what kind of a community it was and I said it was utilitarian, cinderblock, flat roofs with rolled roofing on them. They used—for air conditioning, it didn't have refrigeration systems in those days. Maybe only in the big hotels and there weren't very many of those. When we got here, the Frontier—the Last Frontier and the Flamingo were the two hotels on the Strip. And, of course, I'm not even sure if it was called the Strip in those days. It was, you know, it was the Los Angeles Highway to us where those two big hotels were. But Carver Park used swamp coolers and the swamp cooler was just—kind of worked on evaporation. Another name for them was evaporative cooling. And so you had a tank of water on the roof and a box with wood chips that served as a—like a cooler pad, and water dripped through that. And there was squirrel cage fan that turned that would draw cool air from evaporation down into the apartment and that's how they cooled the apartment. In—you know humidity in Southern Nevada was not as high as it is today because the population was so small. We were basically a dry environment so—

Interviewer: *You didn't have all the swimming pools that people have today. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: That's right, that's right. And so with—you know, evaporating cooling worked really good if it—you know, if it was a cloudy day and it was, you know, it was about to rain,

then the evaporative coolers didn't work very good. You know, Carver Park was kind of rustic, not very many sidewalks. You just kind of walked on the street. Not a lot of money spent on landscaping. You know today when a new housing development opens up it's all landscaped really, really beautifully and there's just a lot of attention to that. But Carver Park was—I think it was—we were fighting a war and we didn't spend a lot of money on frills. So as I remember Carver Park, they had mulberry trees spaced along the street, the main streets in Carver Park. Lincoln Street and Washington Street were the two that I remember but very few yards had grass. So we just played in the rocks. I have some pictures I'll share with the library and so you can see what I was talking about. Our shoes were—it was hard to tell what color they were.

Interviewer: *I bet, I bet. I bet you all had a lot of fun. What were some of things that you used to do to entertain yourselves?*

Fredric Watson: Well, Carver Park was on the edge of the desert, you know, and from any point in Carver Park you could walk out into the desert in just a few minutes so—I mean, that was—it was rustic and, you know, unfancy as Carver Park was, it was a great place for kids that liked to explore. So we could hike over toward the River Mountains and we would just be way out in the desert then, away from everybody. And I think one of the goals of children is to get away from supervision. That's why they, you know, build tents in the house or get under the bed or—and so getting out in the desert was—that was a way of doing that, getting away from supervision.

Interviewer: *I remember you told me one story that was funny about and interaction you had with a snake. [laughter] That was a neat story.*

Fredric Watson: Oh, yeah, sure. Some friends of mine and I, yeah, we were hiking up toward the River Mountains up in one of those canyons, came across a snake and, of course, the snake was as afraid of us as we were of it and it got into the rocks. And I can remember getting down trying to peek into the crack to see where the snake was and he was just that far inside the crack. And you know how a snake's tongue sticks out—they use their tongue to sense what's going on around them—boy, that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Interviewer: *I bet.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, we used to—the desert was just alive with creatures and lizards and horned toads. And there were a lot of—in those days it seemed to me there were a lot more vultures and buzzards and that sort of thing. Little kids are always curious about dead animals and things so any time you saw buzzards circling up high in the air you'd know that some poor creature had expired in the desert. We would always have to go over and explore what that was. Hunters in those days used to get a permit to hunt, so they would clean a deer and then instead of—I shouldn't blame everybody for this, but at least some of them, they would just take the carcass and throw it out in the desert. We were bad in those days about taking care of our environment. It seemed like littering was a habit that everybody engaged in, so if you'd drive along the roadside there would be bottles and tin cans and metal cans and just all kinds of trash. The old dirt roads that led out into the desert from Carver Park or Victory Village or the Townsite, if you would hike along those eventually you'd come across an abandoned car. People would—their car would break down, and so they'd just tow it out in the desert and leave it there. And old timers from Las Vegas and Henderson will tell you that, those same stories. Here just not long ago, maybe in the last fifteen years, we've engaged in a huge cleanup

down at—they call it the Las Vegas Wash. And that was one of the jobs that the volunteers had to do, was to haul out old cars and old tires. Rather than take their things to the dump, people would just get it as far as they could go to get out of sight.

Interviewer: *That sounds monumental to have done that, to clean that out.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, it was a huge job. Carver Park—it seemed to me that the folks that lived in Carver Park were probably at the lower end of the pay scale.

Interviewer: *Where did they come from?*

Fredric Watson: Oh, from everywhere, like us. I mean, we were just getting started. My dad got a job—he'd worked in a defense plant. Earlier he'd worked as a pharmacist in a drug store. He, he didn't have his pharmacy license, but his uncle ran a chain of drugstores and he just hired him to be a pharmacist even though he didn't have—

Interviewer: *Those were the days. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: [laughter] Yeah, that's right. It's scary when you think about it. But he didn't have to—he didn't have a—I'm sure his uncle let him do the things that didn't require rocket science.

Interviewer: *Yeah, right.*

Fredric Watson: But I, you know, I think people that were, you know, during the war, the people who lived in Carver Park were, were war-time workers, but after the war they were just folks that needed a good roof over their head. So I think in my case, in our family's case, we were just getting started and didn't have a lot. Done fine since then, but in those days we were, you know, it was kind of a rough time of it. And I think a lot of the families were that way. Others, you know, as you became more prosperous, then moved maybe to Victory Village. And

then if you got to be a little more prosperous, then you moved up to Townsite. And then maybe the Black Mountain Golf Course.

Interviewer: *And so you, your family did move around. Where did they live after Carver Park?*

Fredric Watson: In 1949 we were able to get a—to rent a house in the Townsite area.

Remember the BMI Corporation or the people that ran the plant, they owned—also owned the housing. Later they sold that to the City of Henderson and to a developer that was responsible for selling off all that property. But in the, in the period in between when the war ended and when this transfer of property took place, the Corporation of BMI folks rented those houses, so we were able to rent a house for a couple of years. And then there were some developers that came into Henderson and they built brand new houses. Around 1952 I think that started. So all the development that you see along Water Street, particularly as Water Street goes down to the Boulder Highway behind the hospital, we call it Rose de Lima Hospital now, those were all houses that were built in that era, 1952 to about 1954, '55. They were there on Victory Road and then to the east of town on your way up to Boulder City, there were houses that would be, would have been along Basic Road where Basic curves over to—would it be Basic? No, maybe Ocean. It would be Ocean.

Interviewer: *Your guess is better than mine. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: [laughter] Well, I'd have to look at a map.

Interviewer: *Yeah. And so some of the community things that you were involved in, well, one was St. Peter's Church.*

Fredric Watson: Sure.

Interviewer: *What was—what were some of your memories of St. Peter's and its impact on your life?*

Fredric Watson: Well, I—you know, maybe my first memory was Father Moran, an old Irish priest. He was old in those days, I guess. He always seemed old to me, but he's, I'm sure he was only maybe about in his late thirties or early forties when we first met him. Yeah, he was the parish priest. He had a really thick Irish brogue. He delivered wonderful sermons, a mixture of, you know, the religion and also literature. And I guess the Irish have a poetic vein in them somewhere or another. But he—his—I remember his sermons were laced with Shakespeare—

Interviewer: *How interesting.*

Fredric Watson: —and the Irish poets. And he did have just a great—he had a great brogue. So, yeah, you know the Catholic community at St Peter's was—that was close and they had picnics and parties and religious instruction.

Interviewer: *It must have been a focal point of the community.*

Fredric Watson: It was, it was particularly for Catholics. And I think, I think a lot of people, you know, of other denominations or folks that maybe weren't particularly religious could join in. You know, the Irish Catholics, they always were happy to have a bottle of beer or a glass of wine, [laughter] or even something stronger at their parties. I just remember the families having a good time and kids having a good time. And then there—Father Moran was—he was kind of a politician of sorts too. I mean he—I guess maybe politicians, just like they do today, they go to the big churches to round up voters, and so Peter V. Moran engaged in a certain amount of politics, and that was fun to watch. And he used his political influence for some really good things. One of the things he did was when the government started selling off

property in Henderson, one of things that they wanted to sell off was the BMI Hospital. And, you know, the community, the people that remained in Henderson, they knew that they had to have a hospital here and so Father Moran kind of—I think he was one of the organizers in a plan to sell the hospital to a group of nursing Catholic nuns. They were the Dominican nuns from Adrian, Michigan and the government or whoever it was that was selling off the property at that point in time made a deal with them. I think they charged them one dollar for the property, if I'm remembering right.

Interviewer: *I think you're right. [laughter] One dollar a year.*

Fredric Watson: That's a pretty good deal when you think about it.

Interviewer: *That is, yeah.*

Fredric Watson: And it—what was it, about fifty-two rooms that they said and a radiology facility. And then they had promise—the nuns had to promise that they would stay there at least twenty-five years, and to some extent they're here after all these years.

Interviewer: *They're still there. Yeah.*

Fredric Watson: And so maybe the nuns were another part of the St. Peter's experience that I remember and have good recollections of. There were seven nuns that came to start the whole thing and they came from Adrian, Michigan. They were big Michigan football fans. I never could understand why they didn't root for Notre Dame. I'm kind of a Notre Dame fan.

Interviewer: *[laughter] That's funny.*

Fredric Watson: But, oh no, they were Michigan fans. And later Father Moran also got the community to pitch in and build a school, a Catholic school, which, you know, maybe started in '49 or '50. They built the school in the early '50s. They started out in the hall, the church hall.

Had a couple of classes there and then they built a building right next to the church. That building's still there, although it's not a school anymore. But—and so I attended school at the old St. Peter's school.

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Fredric Watson: And then by that time the nuns who worked at the hospital, the nursing sisters, recruited additional Dominican nuns whose main goal or mission in life was to teach. So the Dominican nuns were teachers at that school and I went there to school from about the sixth grade through the eighth grade. Yeah, St. Peter's did, sure shaped the way I look at things and I made a lot of friends there.

Interviewer: *Were there any nuns that particularly inspired you?*

Fredric Watson: You know, the nun that was my teacher, she moved up with our class. Here's the way it worked: the school had—when they actually got their constructed building ready, that's when I started there. Before that they didn't have—the classes were all first and second grade and I was too old to attend there. But in 1952, they opened the new building and I was in sixth grade that year so she—this Sister, Jane de Chantal was her name, she taught sixth, let's see, fifth and sixth grade, I guess, fifth and sixth grade. And then the next year she taught sixth and seventh, and the next year she taught seventh and eighth. So she was my teacher for three years. You know most people don't, unless they were in a one room school house in Iowa someplace, they probably wouldn't have the same teacher for three years. So she, she just by nature of longevity, had a big influence on me during that time, you know, when kids are changing rapidly and learning about things. And she was, you know, she was a really strong personality. She was the principal of the school also. So she taught school all day long but also

managed the school. So if there was a problem we would have to get out our work and study independently and then she'd go solve the problem. Then she would come back. Yeah, yeah. She and Father Moran, they had an interesting relationship. She was always, you know, badgering him to get things done, patch the roof and get money for this and that. And I could always—he would just shake his head. [laughter] And we knew him, like, you know, my mother and dad and some of our friends, we knew Father Moran. And he used to, oh, he'd get really exasperated with her. That was fun, kind of like movies you've seen.

Interviewer: *Yeah, I can imagine.*

Fredric Watson: You know, I say it sounds like I attended catholic school all the time, but actually the Carver Park School was first grade through about half of fourth grade, and then I went to school at the Townsite School. When I was in first grade, there was a lady by the name Clark Carol that was my teacher, and later when I went to the St. Peter's School I—well, in fact, I went to the Townsite School from about '49, after we moved up to Townsite, for fourth and fifth grade. And one of my best friends at that school and then later at the St. Peter's School was Clark Carol's son, Glen Carol. So, you know, that's how small a town it was then.

Interviewer: *Right. Well, as you were living around town did you have any neighbors that are well-known Hendersonians?*

Fredric Watson: Van Inglestead was—lived—when we lived on Victory Road—that's after several moves—but one of the—we refer to them as the new houses in Henderson.

Interviewer: *New houses. Yeah. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: Victory Road, it was one of the new houses that they built in '52. They're certainly not new anymore. My mother's ninety-nine years old and she still lives in that house

on Victory Road. But down the street about seven or eight houses, there was the Inglestead family, and Van Inglestead was a union official, and he was—you know, Lou LaPorta knew him and they had stories to tell about him. He was influential in the labor movement in Southern Nevada. One of our neighbors was—another neighbor—was a man named Jiggs Shindler, Herbert Jiggs Shindler, and he was a really good musician. He was a trumpet player and he played at many shows out on the Strip. He was a member of what they called the relief band and the relief band, the one he worked for, was—the bandleader's name was Benny Short. And so, let's say that Frank Sinatra came to town and he would bring a band with him, but that band would have to have a day or two off during the course of the week so they could rest up. And during those days when that band took off, the relief band would come in for a short span.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Fredric Watson: And Jiggs Shindler, even during that time, he would travel sometimes with Harry James's band. Harry James was Betty Grable's husband and Betty Grable was a movie star, pin-up girl for the, you know, all of the—I think all the soldiers in World War II had a picture of Betty Grable they carried with them off to the war. And, of course, Harry James, he was a fine trumpet player and just a really big band leader. So Jiggs, our friend—and I was friends with his kids—he was just always fun to talk to because he knew what was going on out on the Strip and had good stories.

Interviewer: *I bet. That's pretty cool. Were you a member of any clubs growing up or what social activities did you have?*

Fredric Watson: Boy Scouts maybe it'd be the big club I belonged to and then things at school. I was in the—at school most of the kids that were attending—I shouldn't say most, but a good

many of the kids that attended St. Peter's—had to cross the Boulder Highway to get to school. And in those days there was, in the early days that we were at St. Peter's, there was a tunnel under the Boulder Highway. People that live in Henderson now, you know, the newcomers, they will wonder, "Well where was that tunnel? I don't see any evidence of that."

Interviewer: *They filled it in.*

Fredric Watson: They did fill it in.

Interviewer: *Yeah.*

Fredric Watson: You know, nature filled it in many times before the city finally just finished the job. There'd be a big rain storm and it would just—it would fill it about half full of dirt. I did an oral history—or filmed an oral history—with Don Biddle and his wife, Ilene.

Interviewer: *Yep, I was just listening to it today.*

Fredric Watson: And Don told me, he said that they used to—they could get a car, if it was small enough, and drive through that pedestrian tunnel. See it wasn't designed for cars to go through, but he said if you didn't steer really carefully, you'd tear off one of your doorknobs or something.

Interviewer: *I bet. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: But after that tunnel was filled in, then the kids had to cross the Boulder Highway and this was before the police department or county officials would fund crossing guards.

Interviewer: *Oh, gosh.*

Fredric Watson: So they—I was, like, a Patrol Boy and there were other kids that did that too, and we would go out and stand on the Boulder Highway with flags and stop sixty, seventy mile an hour traffic so the kids could cross. [laughter]

Interviewer: *[laughter] That's a hazardous occupation.*

Fredric Watson: I'm not sure that St. Peter's school had good enough insurance for that, but we did it anyway.

Interviewer: *It may not have had insurance. [laughter] That's interesting.*

Fredric Watson: Boy Scouts—you know, that was my first experience with the NRA. The NRA's prominent in the news these days and they quarrel back and forth on whether or not we should have background checks for the weapons we own, or whether we should produce as many weapons as we do or should it be harder to get a gun, but in those days the NRA used to take the Boy Scouts out. We'd drive out on the road toward the lake, Lake Mead—it's Lake Mead Boulevard now or Lake Mead Drive—and as soon as we got far enough away from Carver Park then we would pull over someplace where there was a hillside where ricochets couldn't hit cars out on Lake Mead Road. And we'd do target practice and practice gun safety, and just—you know, they were always bolt action 22 rifles. But that was a good experience for me, so I, you know, I had my reservations about guns, but my first experience with guns and with the NRA was a good one.

Interviewer: *Did you go hunting with your friends as a boy?*

Fredric Watson: We—yeah, you know my folks were very cautious and they didn't want me having a gun. In fact we didn't—my brother and I didn't even have a BB gun.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow.*

Fredric Watson: So we went hunting, but we hunted more like primitive men.

Interviewer: *[laughter]*

Fredric Watson: Which was—we—now we, you know, today we teach our kids in school, you know—go out with a camera or binoculars and watch the animals and everything but just leave them be.

Interviewer: *Did you have a slingshot?*

Fredric Watson: Oh, I did have a slingshot and we made slings kind of like David fought Goliath with.

Interviewer: *There's a picture of the police department and they have a display full of guns and other—and knives and other weapons, and half of it is slingshots that they've collected.*

[laughter]

Fredric Watson: That's right, yeah.

Interviewer: *They were real big back then.*

Fredric Watson: We used to, we used to make what they called rubber guns. Today's automobiles, they're tubeless tires, but in those days, you had a rubber inner tube, kind of like what you have in a bicycle tire only it was just bigger, so—and inner tubes—an awful lot of the roads in Clark County and around Henderson were not paved and so people would drive down these rough old roads and there used to be really big stickers that grew out in the desert and thorns and things that grew real low to the ground so cars driving over those or driving over broken glass or nails, a piece of plywood with a bunch of roofing nails in it, they'd frequently pop their tires and they'd—once those inner tubes had been patched a number of times, they'd just throw them away. So the kids would get those tires and cut them into strips and then we

would, we would cut out of redwood—there was always a lot of scrap redwood in Henderson, because the houses were all built—the Townsite houses were all built out of redwood.

Interviewer: *I'm assuming from—*

Fredric Watson: From the BMI project, actually.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Fredric Watson: The redwood came—I'm sure the redwood must have come from California.

Interviewer: *Yeah, it had to come from California.*

Fredric Watson: In those days they weren't protected like they are, but—so we would build a gun and use a clothespin so you'd use one rubber band cut from a tire to hold the clothespin and then you'd stick the end of rubber strip into the clothespin and stretch it over the end of the gun. And, you know, if you made the gun real long, you could really shoot the rubber band hard so it'd sting somebody. Then we would have wars with these. But we did some unsafe things, you know, we'd have rock fights.

Interviewer: *Oh gosh, did you ever get into trouble? With the authorities?*

Fredric Watson: Oh, yeah, I did. You know I was—the man that they named McCaw School, you know, where the McCaw School of Mines is in the Townsite area, the brand—it's a brand new school now, but it's named after him. Gordon McCaw was the principal. And he was the principal of that school when it—before they named it after him, it was called Basic Elementary. And he was also principal of the school in Victory Village and in Carver Park and, you know, for a time, so, because those are small schools, they figured that he could do a big school and two small schools all by himself. And, one time we—some friends of mine and I got into a rock fight on the playground. There's no grass on the Carver Park grounds or the Victory Village grounds

as I remember and certainly no grass except the football field at the Townsite School. And so they raked and tried to get rid of the rocks, but they just couldn't do it. They were just continually unearthing new rocks, you know, with foot traffic and stuff and that was—little kids in those days would just throw rocks at each other. You'd try not to throw big boulders that would hurt somebody really bad but, you know, throwing smaller rocks seemed to be an acceptable thing to do. It just, you know, it sounds crazy to me now. I was later a teacher and a principal and oh, I would just worry about the kids throwing rocks and hurting each other.

Interviewer: *Yeah, when you're a kid you have a different perspective. [laughter] That's interesting. Well, I was reading through the Henderson Coordinating Council minutes and one of their biggest problems during the late '40s and early '50s was the teenage problem. Was there a big problem that you remember with teenagers gallivanting around in Henderson while you were growing up?*

Fredric Watson: Well, yeah, I can—you know, I remember stories that the kids told. They had curfew in Henderson, so we—and I think it was nine o'clock. You had to be in bed or be home, anyway, and inside the house between nine and ten sometime.

Interviewer: *It seems like there were a lot of curfew violations in the [Henderson Coordinating Council] meeting minutes.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, sure, and kids wanting to go to the movies. You know they had matinees at the Victory Theater. That was our—that we had one theater in town in those days. It was called the Victory Theatre. It was located where the parking lot for one of the downtown clubs is now. Is that—I'm trying to remember what the name of it is—is it the Emerald?

Interviewer: *I don't know.*

Fredric Watson: It's right there on Market Street. Right where the parking lot is, that's where that theater was. So I'm sure some kids would, if their parents weren't supervising really closely, would let them go to a movie on a week night. My folks wouldn't let us go because they figured we had to be in bed and ready for school the next day. But teenagers are hard to tell them to be in bed by eight o'clock.

Interviewer: *Yeah. And they didn't like the fact that they were in the pool hall playing pool with adults.*

Fredric Watson: In those articles, yeah, sure. That, you know, the downtown area had a theater and had a drugstore. It had two grocery stores in those early days, but there was also—there was also a pool hall and a bar and a bowling alley—I think—and maybe it was just two or three lanes, and that was all a kind of a mixture, the bar, the bowling alley, and the pool. You could shoot pool there. And later I think they had like a boxing arena there. Mike O'Callaghan was a teacher at Basic High School and then later the governor of the state. He and a chiropractor in town named Doc Gould, they used to coach boxing there. Harry Reid, you know, Senate Majority Leader, boxed in that club as I remember.

Interviewer: *How about that, yeah.*

Fredric Watson: So there was a lot of effort in Henderson to keep kids busy and—but I'm sure kids did wander the streets, you know, in those days. We didn't have a swimming pool until probably around 1953 or '54. They opened a recreation center and there was a swimming pool. And I don't remember anybody—I could be wrong about this, but in those days, I don't remember any of the houses having a swimming pool in the backyard. That was a luxury that just seemed unthinkable. If you wanted to go swimming, you had to go out to Lake Mead.

There was—and there were two areas, one that was primarily for the kids from Boulder City called Boulder Beach and then there was one called Las Vegas Wash. And those—there's still a Boulder Beach and a Las Vegas Wash, and you can still go out there and swim. But in those days there was a lot of attention to that. There were rafts they put out for deep water swimming.

Interviewer: *And there was a swimming program that they started in the late '40s and early '50s for kids.*

Fredric Watson: That's right, and that's how you learned to swim. I took the bus—they'd put us on a school bus and take us out to the lake and teach us to swim. And oh, it was rocky. You'd think of beach swimming as where you would have nice silty sand to walk on and everything, but Lake Mead's not that way. It's just really rocky, so you had to have tough feet.

Interviewer: *Oh, gosh. You didn't have flip-flops. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: [laughter] No, they had not invented flip-flops yet. Yeah, that was—I can remember—you talk about the changes in the way people think about things, safety for one. Today, parents really keep their kids close to home, I think, and—

Interviewer: *And they probably should. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: And drive, you know, if they have to go somewhere, they drive them or make sure that there's some sort of, you know, publicly supervised transportation or something.

Interviewer: *So growing up in Henderson you didn't feel like it was a dangerous place?*

Fredric Watson: No, I mean, it had its dangers and I recognized them in those days, but by and large we just had a different way of looking at safety. My mother was very nervous about us kids getting hurt or having a problem or something, but at the same time, she allowed us a

certain amount of freedom. I can remember hitchhiking with—yeah, when I was in—I was six years old, six or seven.

Interviewer: *Oh, my gosh, really? Well—*

Fredric Watson: With my uncle—we—my uncle just got—had just gotten back from overseas. He was—fought with the Seventh Fleet in the South Pacific, and he wanted to go swimming down at the lake and, of course, my dad had the car at work and my mother didn't drive. And a lot of women in those days didn't drive. And so we just hitchhiked. Now, he must have been twenty-three years old and so we hitchhiked to the lake and hitchhiked back.

Interviewer: *You were probably pretty safe with him, though.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah.

Interviewer: *You didn't do it on your own.*

Fredric Watson: No, no, but I hitchhiked a lot later, you know, when I was in my teens, thirteen, fourteen years old. We'd want to go to Las Vegas to do something, you know. We'd have maybe fifteen cents to ride the bus to Vegas. But if you could hitch a ride before the bus got there, then you had fifteen more cents that you could spend on some good thing, like a Tootsie Pop or a bag of popcorn.

Interviewer: *Yeah. What'd you do in Vegas when you were a teenager?*

Fredric Watson: Well, there was some good swimming pools in Vegas too. There was a pool called the Old Ranch Swimming Pool which is about where the Mormon Fort was built back in the 1800's. And it was, the water that fed that swimming pool came from the Las Vegas Creek. The Las Vegas Creek probably continued to run until, oh, the early '60s so this would have been, you know, the early '50s to mid-'50s. And that was fun; that was a fun place to go swimming.

And there were trees all around that pool so it was shady. It was just interesting to see kids from the big city.

Interviewer: *Yeah.*

Fredric Watson: Of course, Vegas wasn't really all that big in those days, but compared to Henderson that was the big city. So we would hitchhike there, and hitchhike also to go to the movies—the Fremont Theater and the Palace Theater and the El Cortez, they were all downtown and so, you know, you could have you'd have a wider variety of movies.

Interviewer: *And I heard there was a good hamburger joint too.*

Fredric Watson: Yes, there were two really good ones that we liked to go to. They were drive-ins and when, when I say a drive-in, they were the kind of, where you would drive your car in and then the waitresses would bring you a tray of food and it had clamps on it. They would—you had to roll your window up a little bit and the clamp would hook on the window. One was called Sills and the other was called The Roundup. The Roundup burned, burned to the ground during that period of time when I was maybe in seventh or eighth grade. Fires were, you know we still have problems with fires, but in those days, and in the era before that, fires were just a scourge. Las Vegas High School burned down in the '30s and then the Las Vegas Elementary, it was kind of like a K through eighth school, where the Fifth Street School eventually was built, that school also burned.

Interviewer: *Why did they catch fire? Why did they burn down?*

Fredric Watson: Just, you know, lack of technology, I guess, or poor understanding—

Interviewer: *Electrical fires or something?*

Fredric Watson: They were electrical fires but, you know, we didn't—we just weren't as skilled at warding off that kind of thing. And there were still, you know, there were still people that were using fireplace to heat their houses, and so you had house fires from things like that. Overloading circuits—we just have a lot more sophistication in our electrical systems.

Interviewer: *Yep, that's a good thing. Did you, were you able to do all your shopping in Henderson in those days or did you have to go to Las Vegas or other places to find what you needed?*

Fredric Watson: We did most of our shopping in Henderson, grocery shopping especially. Prime Meats and Foodland were the two—were the two grocery stores, and there's a— but let's see—and there was, oh there were several—there was several women's stores and like department stores where you could buy—my sisters could get their clothes there and they had Levi's and that kind of thing for the boys.

Interviewer: *And there was a men's dress shop.*

Fredric Watson: Yes, late—that came maybe about the time that they built the bank.

Interviewer: *Because it was in the bank building, yeah.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, Selma Bartlett Bank. I was a paperboy briefly and delivered the *Henderson Home News*, but when I first started drawing a paycheck from the Henderson Home News, I started an account with Selma Bartlett. She was just a young woman.

Interviewer: *Oh, how about that.*

Fredric Watson: I must have been in seventh or eighth grade. I remember she got me in and talked to me and made a passbook for me and talked to me about how to manage my money

which, you know, was interesting. I wonder how many kids today get to talk to the banker and get that kind of attention.

Interviewer: *I know.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, who was the—Harve Perry—Harve Perry was the man's name—I have a picture that I should give you that—when he lived in Las Vegas, he ran for office, maybe it was City Council or something. It's an ad from an old Las Vegas newspaper. But he was just a really nice man and I knew him, he was maybe in his sixties when he ran that store out of the bank. When I—I guess, maybe when I—my senior year, I think I bought a suit from him, my first suit from Harve Perry. Oh, he gave me good advice about how to, you know, what fabric to get and how to fit it and everything.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow, you don't get that kind of advice anymore.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, not too much. But we did go to Vegas for some kinds of shopping. My dad worked in the gaming business. I'd said earlier in the interview that he and my Grandfather were going to go in the painting business, and he got here and saw how hot it was in the summertime and decided he didn't want to be a painter anymore. My granddad continued and painted for a lot of years. And he had some interesting experiences I'll tell you about. But my dad got a job on Fremont Street in the gaming business. And he started out—you know, when you broke in in those days they had a job called a skill.

Interviewer: *Oh, how fun.*

Fredric Watson: And skills were—yeah, if it wasn't—if you didn't have very many gamblers, you couldn't just look like your games weren't fun so they had people that they paid to play the

game just to, you know, I guess just to attract other customers. Kind of like decoy ducks on the pond to attract other ducks.

Interviewer: *Right, right. That's really great.*

Fredric Watson: For a brief time my dad did that and then he worked on, oh, a number of the different games. He worked mostly at the place called Boulder Club. If you look at old pictures of Las Vegas, Boulder Club had a neon sign that was one of the first fancy neon signs that looked like Hoover Dam in the days when they had water shooting out of diversion tunnels and spraying out into the middle of the river. It was a beautiful sign. So he worked there for years and then when Benny Binion came to town—and Benny Binion bought the Boulder Club and he bought the Apache Club, the Apache Hotel, and he merged those and made them into what they called the Horseshoe Club. My Dad worked for Benny Binion. He said that Benny Binion used to—they paid cash, you know, paid the dealers, and frequently just paid them in cash or gave them bonuses in cash, which you're probably not supposed to do, probably should have—
[laughter] should have been declared earnings and all that. But they would pay them in silver dollars.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow.*

Fredric Watson: You don't see silver dollars around anymore, but if you talk to old-time Henderson people in these interviews, they'll all have a stash of silver dollars somewhere that they saved from those days.

Interviewer: *How about that.*

Fredric Watson: I have a handful that my Dad saved for me. Yeah, that's heavy, you know.

Interviewer: *They are heavy! [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: You have twenty-five, thirty dollars in silver dollars, you have to cinch your belt up really tight to carry those around in your pocket. Um, but anyway, the reason I mention all that is because my dad, he might get a bonus that way, but there was a payday, and then on payday he would—it was generally, as I recall, it was not a day when he was working, or maybe it was in between shifts. He worked long hours. In those days the dealers—and I think, you know, his shifts were kind of like other dealers—he would work three weeks without a day off and then at the end of three weeks, he would get a three-day weekend. I mean, that was—

Interviewer: *[laughter]* That's grueling, goodness.

Fredric Watson: That's grueling. And you know, we talk about the labor movement in this country and a lot of people are opposed to unions, but—I'm sure unions have their flaws—but when you think, how would you like to have to work that way? I mean, if you didn't—

Interviewer: *Right.*

Fredric Watson: —and if you didn't do it, there was always somebody—

Interviewer: *There's somebody who would.*

Fredric Watson: —yeah, who would. That's right. So, but anyway, he would go—he would get everybody in the car and he would go to get his pay. And my mother then would go shopping. It was convenient to shop in Vegas then because we were all down there anyway and you didn't—you know you had the car to load up with all your goods and stuff. So we did shop in Vegas on payday. And that was—a lot of times my sister would have her dance lesson about that time. Toni would go to a place called Jeannie Roberts School of Dancing, which was down just off of Fremont Street. And my mother and Kit and I—and then when Shelley came along—we would maybe go shopping. There was a Sears Store and a Penney's Store in downtown Las

Vegas and some women's shops, Helen and Hanson's, Johnson's, and others, names that I'll remember later and tell you about. Then my dad, if my granddad happened to be along, they would go visit my uncle who worked in the Camel Bar downtown, and they would have cold beer. Those days you could have a few beers, you know. Today you have to really be careful driving around if you've had a few beers. [laughter]

Interviewer: *[laughter]*

Fredric Watson: So my granddad was a painter and he worked for—a lot of the time, he worked for a contractor named Bill Rosevear and he, he painted. An interesting thing about my Grandfather was that he got to work out at the Test Site. The Nevada Test Site—

Interviewer: *That is interesting.*

Fredric Watson: That's where they tested the atomic bomb, so in the late '40s and early '50s there were—they built little towns up there that they blew up with the atomic bomb.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Fredric Watson: So that they would have some sense of what, you know, what the bomb would do in a town and how would you prepare. And they went to the expense of actually painting these places.

Interviewer: *Because it's important to know what it does to paint on a house, right? [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: That's right, it just really sings it. [laughter] No, I mean if you look at the pictures, it's hard to see where the house was let alone the paint.

Interviewer: *Oh, my gosh. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: But then—and he said to me, he told me—my Granddad was—told some tall tales, especially when he was teasing us kids, but he said that they took him up there and let

him wander around and see what, you know, see what damage had been done, which—you know, I thought that was interesting.

Interviewer: *That's surprising that they would do that with—I don't know if he was somehow classified or did he have clearance of some sort?*

Fredric Watson: No and also, you know, the half-life of that radioactivity I'm sure was longer than just, you know, a month.

Interviewer: *It's not real good for you. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: But that—you know, his stories about all that were really interesting. Later when I was in high school I got to go up and visit the test site. I was at Bishop Gorman High School in Las Vegas and they—we had a choir there and they had us come up and they had Mass, a Catholic Mass, at Mercury. And an awful lot of the people who worked at the Test Site commuted, so you—that was like—it was about sixty miles one way, fifty, sixty miles one way up there. And so he drove up and back in one day but a lot of people that—workers stayed there, especially the ones that just had the jobs that demanded—so they had Mass in a big tent and we went up and visited the Test Site. But we didn't get to go out onto the radioactive fields or anything. But that was kind of an interesting experience.

Interviewer: *Could you see the tests from Henderson?*

Fredric Watson: You could, you could see them.

Interviewer: *Oh, wow.*

Fredric Watson: And you'd—you know, there's a gap in the mountains. If you look at the Spring Mountain Range, it eventually—it was kind of a gap where the 93—is it 93 or 95—goes up toward Tonopah—but it went up to the Test Site, past the Test Site, on to—not Tonopah—

Beatty and towns like that. Beatty was not far away from the other side of the Test Site. Yeah, but in that gap, if you watched, you could see the explosion. And, of course, even—it even rose up to a point where you could see it above the mountains up there.

Interviewer: *Did your teachers stop classes so that you could watch or do anything to—*

Fredric Watson: Almost always those tests were before sunup. So we—and I can remember on occasion—well, I can remember my folks getting us up, you know, like four o'clock in the morning, or five o'clock—

Interviewer: *To watch it?*

Fredric Watson: —in the wintertime, to watch, yeah. And, but also I can remember going to school—I think on one or two occasions, we went to school early in the morning. It was a kind of a part of our—the curriculum, I guess, to watch this marvel of science. But then, you know, we'd face that way, and there would be, you know, soldiers. They had soldiers up there pretty close. And they were, of course, not supposed to watch. They'd turn around after, you know, after the initial flash, because it was a blinding light. But for us the flash was kind of screened by the terrain, but you could still see it, and it would—for just a split second, it was like you were, like ten o'clock in the morning or noon.

Interviewer: *Wow, that's amazing.*

Fredric Watson: But it would light the entire valley.

Interviewer: *But you didn't have to wear sunglasses to watch it or something.*

Fredric Watson: We didn't, you know, and I think we were probably, we were down below the level of where the actual explosion took place, so—but what it did was it just lit the sky. So there would be a flash of light and then there'd be a period of time in between and then there

would be this horrific explosion, the sound like a clap of thunder and then a big ball of fire would rise up in that space where the highway goes. And then, I mean, first the bright light and then a dim subdued light from this fireball and then it'd get dark again and then when the sun came out there would be this gigantic mushroom cloud. And then if there was a breeze or wind or something then cloud would just start to bend and would travel up toward Utah, St. George, Utah.

Interviewer: *Yeah, a lot of it went toward there.*

Fredric Watson: St. George.

Interviewer: *Had a lot of fallout.*

Fredric Watson: It passed over Bunkerville, Mesquite, yes.

Interviewer: *And I've heard that it was just lucky that it went that way. That it also could have—it wasn't prevailing winds. It just happened to be the direction that it went.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, and I think frequently that the breezes did come in—helped keep it out of our valley. Yeah, it would have been terrible if it had come this way. It was terrible for the people that lived up there. I think a lot of people had all kinds of ailments that, you know, could probably be attributed to—it's the story that John Wayne and Susan Hayward and a bunch of the movie stars were filming a movie called—what was it? The Barbarian, I think. It was a movie about Genghis Khan and they were filming it in St. George and a bunch of those folks all died of lung cancer. They were also smokers.

Interviewer: *Hard to tell what—*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, but it was—yeah, whether that was coincidence or not. But that's the story they tell.

Interviewer: *Yeah. How did you decide that you wanted to have a career in education and become a principal?*

Fredric Watson: That's probably my uncle, my mother's youngest brother studied education. He came back from the war and all the GI's were eligible under the GI Bill of Rights to go to school and get assistance. A good part of their education was paid for. So he went to Brigham Young University and studied Education. Taught school in the Provo area and eventually was the principal. I really admired him. He was like a big brother to me. He was—he lived with us for a time when we lived in California. When my Dad was working at the defense plant, I was three or four years old, but I used to follow him around, you know, just like he was a big brother. And so, yeah, I guess that was part of it. And I liked school, so, you know, school was always fun for me. And I—so it seemed to me like that's a nice way to be in school the rest of my life.

Interviewer: *[laughter] So you went to Las Vegas to go to college.*

Fredric Watson: Well, you know I went away to—for a year, the first year, I went to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Interviewer: *Oh, how about that.*

Fredric Watson: I went to a college called St. Michael's College in Santa Fe. It was run by the Christian Brothers, a Catholic teaching order. I went down there with a couple of friends from high school and that was really a fun experience.

Interviewer: *It's a beautiful area.*

Fredric Watson: If you like history, then Santa Fe's one of the oldest communities in the United States. Yeah, beautiful countryside and the mystique of Indian and Spanish culture and—

Interviewer: *Was there a big art community there?*

Fredric Watson: Not like there is today, but there was even in those days. It was, you know, writers and artists who had already staked out Santa Fe and Taos. Yeah, it was—that part was fun too. When we didn't have class, we were always out looking around to see if we could see somebody famous from the art community. Yeah, a year, that was a good year, a year away from home and learning to be on your own, that kind of thing. But then I came back to Vegas, and the next year, UNLV—although it wasn't called UNLV in those days; it was Nevada Southern. But it was like a branch of the University of Nevada. They had opened the school out on Maryland Parkway. In those days, that was just out in the wilderness. Almost no houses out there, just a few ranch houses, and it was far enough away from the Strip that it was really kind of isolated.

Interviewer: *Hard to imagine today.*

Fredric Watson: Oh yeah, sure. Two buildings, just two buildings, and a handful of students. But that was fun; it was fun to go to a small school. To get to the school, you had to drive down Maryland Parkway and the town pretty much—let's see—and that was 1959, so the town wasn't much beyond Sahara. In those days, it was before the Sahara Hotel was built, so the street wasn't called Sahara; it was called San Francisco. You know, and the Tropicana hadn't been built yet, and so Tropicana Street was called Bond Road, B-O-N-D, and I'm not sure all of it was paved yet. Maryland Parkway was, by the time I got to Nevada Southern, Maryland Parkway was paved. It was just a passing traffic, no bridges over the gullies, like Flamingo Wash, if people are familiar with that part of town. You drive—when you cross—you're getting ready to cross Flamingo, depending on what direction you're coming from, there's a big wash which is a drainage area during rain storms. It starts up in Red Rock Canyon area and goes all the way

down to Lake—to the Las Vegas Wash, so all that water winds up in Lake Mead. And we had floods in those days every bit as bad as the kind of floods we have today. So if you're on your way, you might come out the Boulder Highway and then get on Sahara, or San Francisco, and go up to Maryland Parkway and then on to school. But if there's a rainstorm you wouldn't be able to get—you couldn't get past the Flamingo Wash, so then you would have to go back and get onto Sahara again, or San Francisco, go up to the Strip, and try to find some side street or dirt road or something that would get you into where the school was. And that school wasn't landscaped either. That just wasn't a part of the budget. I mean, there was a little bit of landscaping, but by and large it was just dirt. The environment, when the wind blew, it would just be, oh, classrooms would get dusty. You'd park your car in the dirt parking lot out there and come out after class, and if you'd left the window open a crack to keep it cool, it would be full of dirt. Yeah, that was a different time.

Interviewer: *Well, and while you were a student there, you got attend a speech by Kennedy when he came to town. That was exciting.*

Fredric Watson: Yes, that was. Yeah it was—of course, I was a big fan of John Kennedy's. Yep, yeah, Irish ancestry—and I have some Irish ancestry and he was a Catholic and, you know, Catholics had thought, well, there'll never be a Catholic President. So we, you know, we rooted for Kennedy. We were glad to see him get elected. And that was fun to get to see him in person.

Interviewer: *It's amazing. What was the impact of his visit on Henderson, do you think?*

Fredric Watson: Oh, I think Henderson people, you know, because he spent time in Henderson and he spent time with some of the Henderson politicians—I think Lou traveled with him when

he was here in Vegas and we have some good pictures of him and Kennedy together. Lou—and, of course, we were—all of us were fans of Lou's too. Lou had a political career: he was a Clark County Commissioner, and he was one of Father Moran's—he used to help Father Moran with his projects at St. Peter's Church and everything, so that all made it more exciting, you know.

Interviewer: *Who were some of the other politicians in Henderson that you recall?*

Fredric Watson: Bill Byrne was the Mayor, one of the mayors of Henderson. Bill Byrne and his wife, Julie, he had a—they had several businesses in town. They had a small store that was kind of like a modern day Seven Eleven, or these convenient stores. You know, they didn't have a full lineup of groceries, but sold kind of the basic things that maybe if you were in a hurry and didn't want to go through a long check-out line, that was the store that you went to. And so his wife, Julie, had a store across the street where the main product that she sold was an exchange of comic books. So you might go to the drug store that was run by the McBeath family, and they would—you would buy a new comic book there. But then after you'd read it and your sister and brother had read it, then you could take it to Julie Byrne's place, and she would have big stacks of comic books. So you'd give her your comic book, and then you'd get to take one, so it was like a library, a comic book library.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that's really great.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, the Byrnes. The first mayor was Dr. French. I think he operated on my dad as I recall. My dad had varicose veins. He operated on him.

Interviewer: *Okay, I've heard his name.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, and he's—we have some good pictures of him in those first City Council meetings were held at the old fire station/police station. Who were other? Well, Mike

O'Callaghan was a famous politician. He came to—he was injured in Korea, lost a leg in the Korean War, if I remember correctly, came to Vegas and taught—or came to Henderson and taught at the Basic High School, taught there a number of years. He lived across—he lived in basically the same neighborhood that we lived in.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Fredric Watson: Henderson, the old Town Site construction included alleys in between—today they wouldn't—these big developments don't make allowances for that. Houses are closer and closer together, but the alleys were places where the garbage trucks would go to collect garbage, and they gave you a way to have kind of a rougher exterior of your backyard if you wanted to raise chickens or have a garden. And you could do those things in those days. I remember a lady that had a chimpanzee in her backyard.

Interviewer: *Really? [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: She'd say, "Be careful of him, kids; he'll bite your finger." [laughter] "Don't stick your finger in the cage."

Interviewer: *[laughter] Where did she get a chimpanzee?*

Fredric Watson: I don't know.

Interviewer: *That's something.*

Fredric Watson: I'm trying to remember who that was. I can't remember the name. But anyway, Mike O'Callaghan lived across the alley from us, taught at Basic High School and was just a really popular teacher.

Interviewer: *Did you know him personally?*

Fredric Watson: No, he went to St. Peter's—I mean, not—another—O'Callaghan was an Irishman and he was friends with Father Moran, but I can't say that I knew him personally. But, I mean, I knew who he was. He would wave to everybody because he had kind of a political nature.

Interviewer: *Yeah, yeah, he had big dreams.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, and he was a good governor and was just good for Henderson in a lot of ways. Those are the ones I remember the most and clearest memory, but certainly there were others, and an important part of Henderson history.

Interviewer: *Well, so, we were talking about—you were going to college in Las Vegas and then you became a teacher or did you become a principal right away?*

Fredric Watson: No, I taught school for a period of time and then did some quasi administrative tasks and then eventually was a school principal. I taught at Ruby Thomas Elementary School when I first started. That was, you know, that was just maybe a year after seeing John Kennedy that I finished school. And Ruby Thomas Elementary School was in a fairly new neighborhood. It was brand new, in fact; it'd only maybe been there a year before they built the new elementary school. It was a beginning of a period of explosive population growth in Las Vegas. But, so, it was a time when they were building the Boulevard Mall. That was the biggest and fanciest shopping area in Las Vegas at the time.

Interviewer: *So that's where the jobs were. So you couldn't get a job as a teacher in Henderson? Or you just wanted to work in Las Vegas?*

Fredric Watson: Well, when I applied for that—when I applied to teach for the Clark County School District. They sent me to interview with Bill Wallin [William H. Wallin], who was the man

that was going to be the principal of that school. So it wasn't like I was—shopped for a particular school.

Interviewer: *They sort of placed you. That's interesting.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, yeah I remember going to interview. Another person that we should—that you should have—should interview for an oral history with me, his name's Art Harsey. And Art Harsey was a policeman, a Henderson policeman, and his wife was secretary to Gordon McCaw. His wife's passed away now, but he would be a—have a lot of good stories to tell.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that would be fantastic.*

Fredric Watson: But he and I interviewed for—both interviewed for jobs at that school, and it was a school. It was—you know, accommodate the kids, all these new children that were moving into that neighborhood behind the Boulevard Mall. Just, you know, just a couple blocks off of Maryland Parkway. And it was all brand new neighborhood.

Interviewer: *How many kids did you have in your classes in those days?*

Fredric Watson: They were big classes. You know, the school within a year had about twelve hundred kids in elementary school. It was designed for—

Interviewer: *[laughter] That's huge!*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, just a really big population. It was a school that was designed for about six hundred and fifty kids so it was twice what the enrollment was.

Interviewer: *Why were so many people coming to Vegas at that point?*

Fredric Watson: Jobs, you know, just the construction jobs.

Interviewer: *Oh, construction jobs for the casinos.*

Fredric Watson: There were—yeah, there were a lot of casino jobs, and maybe that brought a lot of people. But then you had to have all of the infrastructure and jobs to take care of them.

Interviewer: *Right, everything had to be built.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, big construction. During that period of time, there were maybe five or six hotels that were built on the Strip. And those big hotels employed maybe three, four thousand workers, dealers, and waitresses, and the people that took care of all of the rooms at the hotel, the people who took care of the swimming pool and the grounds. So it just—it brought just a lot of people to Vegas. Then at the same time, you had all of the—the test site continued to have—employ a lot of people. And Nellis Air Force Base was—that got bigger. Nellis was engaged in training for Second World War gunners and that sort of thing. Once jets and—I'm thinking about NORAD and the Cold War—there was just a big emphasis on training at Nellis in jet aircraft and Red Flag, whatever, and all the NATO nations sent people here to Vegas to be trained in fighter pilot technology.

Interviewer: *So probably North Las Vegas was really booming at that point.*

Fredric Watson: North Las Vegas got really big, sure.

Interviewer: *So when and where did you become a principal then?*

Fredric Watson: You know I taught at Ruby Thomas, then I worked in several other, kind of like Federal programs jobs. But during that time, the school district and, well, the whole nation, really, spent a lot of money on education technique. We were really worried because the Russians, the Soviets, got ahead of us in the development of satellite technology. They were the first to launch a satellite, so we were worried that maybe part of the reason why we'd fallen behind was because our education system wasn't working right. There was a lot of money,

Federal money, that went into schools and I worked in some of the grants for those, you know, developed that, that expertise. And I worked there for maybe five or six years, and then I was appointed to be an elementary school principal. I went to a place called Howard Wasden Elementary School and I was a principal for twenty-two years. I was involved in, oh, five or six different schools. I was—helped to open new schools, because that population explosion went on for that whole twenty-two years and it's probably getting ready to get started again. You know, if you watch the housing market in Las Vegas, little by little it's coming back.

Interviewer: *We can hope, right? [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: Yeah. So, I was the principal of the first elementary school out in the Summerlin neighborhood. When, you know, we were talking about my being in grade school and being in the Boy Scouts, I can remember going on a trip, a camping trip, to Red Rock Canyon, and when we got to—let's, see, we were on Charleston Boulevard and we got to Rancho Road, it converted into a gravel road. All the way from Rancho Road into Red Rock Canyon, and we camped out in that Calico Springs area which is—

Interviewer: *It's beautiful.*

Fredric Watson: But the interesting thing to me is that from Rancho Road to the mouth of Red Rock Canyon, and you cross through all of Summerlin, which is the Howard Hughes Corporation's development of the planned community that—I mean that it's just like it became a massive—it was like going to another town when you went to Summerlin.

Interviewer: *It still is in some ways.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, it is, sure.

Interviewer: *It's a trek.*

Fredric Watson: Like Anthem is for Henderson. So, you know, I was principal at the Lummis Elementary School in Summerlin. Lummis was a nephew of Howard Hughes and, let's see, it was Howard Hughes's grandmother, I think, either his mother or his grandmother, her name was Summerlin. And that was—is that right? I'm just sure that that's correct and that's how they got the name for Summerlin. And it was—they were partners with the school district in developing the first schools that went into the Summerlin neighborhood. That was fun working with—I got to meet Lummis, who was the namesake of that school and was kind of legendary in Howard Hughes Corporation. Because when—Howard Hughes in his latter years just kind of lost, you know, like a lot of really old-timers kind of lose it—he probably had Alzheimer's as he got old. I'm not sure the term was used that far back but his nephew, along with a lawyer, a good attorney, kind of rescued the corporation. And he had good stories to tell. Yeah, that was interesting. They donated land for the building of the school, which really helped the school district.

Interviewer: *Well, that's really great. I hadn't heard anything about that, but that'd be really interesting to know more about.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, Clark County never did have, they didn't charge fees to developers in most cases, so it was—that really helped when big developers would do the things that—to offset the cost of building new schools.

Interviewer: *But were you ever a principal in Henderson?*

Fredric Watson: No, I never was a principal in Henderson. In fact, I didn't live in Henderson for—from about 1966 until 1997, I lived in Las Vegas near where I was working. Well, in the

beginning I lived near where I was working, and after I started moving to different places like out in Summerlin, I had a long drive.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that would be quite a commute, yeah.*

Fredric Watson: We lived right near Sunrise Hospital in Las Vegas. But then in 1997, we bought the house in Green Valley and—which a lot of us needed our family to be closer to my kids. I had a daughter that lived right close by there. And then, of course, my mother and my two sisters continued to live in Henderson, so it was easier to go and visit them.

Interviewer: *Yeah, yeah, Henderson is still a very close community. People seem to grow up in Henderson and either stay or come back.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, a lot of nostalgia in Henderson. Of course, I retain all of that, yeah.

Interviewer: *I want to ask you about of some of your memories of events that happened in Henderson. But at this point you may have been in Las Vegas. But I was going to ask you what are your memories of the PEPCON explosion?*

Fredric Watson: Well, I can remember it distinctly. I was the principal at a school called Helen Smith Elementary School. Helen Smith was, let's see, it's located just off of Charleston above Rainbow, to give viewers an idea of where that is. That's a long way from Henderson.

Interviewer: *It is, yeah.*

Fredric Watson: And it was morning, or probably getting ready to dismiss kids for lunch, and I was in my office talking to one of the teachers and—one of the third grade teachers had come down with, you know, had some problem that needed to be solved. And the teacher, who's name was Carrie Leary—and her aunt was Rosemary Clooney, and she's George Clooney's cousin. And she—her dad and mother both were in the entertainment industry. They

performed on the Strip. But anyway, we were talking and then there's this—like a clap of thunder. It seemed like it was just in the backyard of the school, the back playground. I thought maybe a plane had crashed in the neighborhood, so we raced out on the playground to see what happened. We looked all around and you could see a big column of smoke rising up out toward Henderson. You know, of course, that worried me because my mom and dad both lived not far from where I knew that column of smoke was. And it was—we couldn't find out because—what happened—because it knocked out the communication lines. The, you know, the phone company—and it's in between PEPCON and Henderson—yeah, radios, radio communication was about all that the police had. You know, they had some way of communicating, but the telephones were out, and that was a scary experience. And they had a number of Henderson families whose kids attended Helen Smith School. If you have a—if you're employed away from where you live, the school district will allow you on the space available basis to get a zone variance. So if somebody worked somewhere out in the Westside of town, they could bring their kids to a nearby school so they would be right close by if their kids had problems in school or got sick or something. So we had a number of families, workers that worked in our neighborhood whose kids attended the school. And they, of course, wanted to get back out to Henderson to see what had happened and I think some of them were able to get away early. And then there were other families that weren't sure that there wasn't something bad going to happen in Vegas. It was kind of a hysteria. So you had people come to school wanting to withdraw their kids from school for, you know, not permanently, but to take them home, and I think that happened all over town. And, of course, we started hearing these stories about damage to schools in Henderson, you know.

Interviewer: *It blew a lot of windows out in Henderson, I've heard.*

Fredric Watson: It did. My mother and dad's house, it cracked the—there's a—in all of those homes there was a big picture window that looks out into the front yard, so it cracked that picture window. My brother's little boy was about a year old, maybe a year and a half, and my sister's little boy was about three or four, and they both were there at the house at that time and were sitting not far from that window. So luckily, it didn't shatter. You know, the door jambs on the bedrooms in the interior of the house were broken just from the concussion.

Interviewer: *A lot of damage, a lot of money, cost from that.*

Fredric Watson: Oh, yeah. Lou La Porta again—I keep referring to Lou, but he's such an integral part of Henderson history. He was an insurance agent and he—my folks had an insurance policy with him, so it was just one of the families that had to draw on insurance to repair the house, fix the door jambs, fix the window.

Interviewer: *I've heard that the insurance people were real good and worked really hard to get everybody squared away.*

Fredric Watson: Sure, yep, that's a true story. Yeah, it's just an interesting phenomenon, it seems like the explosion caused like shock waves that did unusual things. I had a teacher later that worked for me up in Summerlin who had—was at the time of the PEPCON explosion, teaching at C. T. Sewell School, which is on the road out to the lake. C. T. Sewell is almost across the street from where the old Carver Park was. And she said that they would have damage in one room, the next room would be not—would be untouched, then the next room would have damage and the next one would be untouched. So it was just almost like—

Interviewer: *It was a wave, yeah.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, just like a wave, destructive, the building. Yeah, I knew some of the principals. Lanny Lund was a principal at Basic High School. He gave us a good interview that we posted on Facebook for the Henderson Historical Society. And he had some—that's a good one to read. Someday we ought to get him to come out and sit for an oral history too. He taught at the old Basic High School when he first got to town in the early '60s and then later was principal at Basic High School.

Interviewer: *Well, that's another thing I wanted to talk to you about, is your role in the Henderson Historical Society.*

Fredric Watson: Well—

Interviewer: *How'd you get involved with that?*

Fredric Watson: My sister volunteered me [laughter] to be a volunteer along with her, which is fun—I'm glad she did because it's been fun. Yeah, if you have nostalgia for the old days in your home town, the Historical Society, that's a nice place to spend some time. And I like to write, so—I'm very slow at it, so I'll never be famous or rich from my writing, but I do get a kick out of it, and all the technology and all the social media.

Interviewer: *Well, you're managing the Facebook page.*

Fredric Watson: That's right.

Interviewer: *And writing blogs on the Facebook page. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: Right. I'm getting better.

Interviewer: *That's really great.*

Fredric Watson: I hope to be more productive in the coming years.

Interviewer: *It's great advertising.*

Fredric Watson: And I love old pictures, too. You know, I'm kind of addicted to looking at old pictures, which aggravates my wife no end because I've constantly got old pictures scattered around the house.

Interviewer: *[laughter]* That's how it is, right? What do recall about seasonal events in Henderson when you were younger and Industrial Days? Did you go to the parades?

Fredric Watson: Oh, yeah, yeah, everybody did. Yep, Industrial Days was, I mean, it was just a big, big celebration, big party. Las Vegas had its Helldorado parade and everything and Henderson had Industrial Days. And they were fairly close together in those days so it was—that was nice springtime—you mentioned seasonal—well it was—that was kind of a—when those events came, there was a signal that school was about over with, and so—and that just made them all the more delightful because you'd begin to think about all the good things you were going to do in June, July, and August.

Interviewer: *That's really neat. Then they had Halloween parties in early Henderson.*

Fredric Watson: Oh, yeah. Yeah, Halloween was special. In those days, kids would get out and they would just comb the entire town. Yeah, like take pillowcases instead of a sack.

Interviewer: *You made out like bandits. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: My brother was—he was—I always wore out—I think got cold and, you know, I'd do a little bit, but my brother, I can remember him bringing just a huge—I don't know how he could carry them all, the trove that he got. And then he'd clear out one of his dresser drawers and pour all of his candy into that dresser drawer.

Interviewer: *And save it. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, and the candy would get stale and hard. [laughter] He would feast on that all year long.

Interviewer: *[laughter] That's really funny. I think all kids do that.*

Fredric Watson: They had—you know, today, I think most of our soda pop industry is remote, you know, from Henderson. But in those days there was a bottling plant right in Henderson. The bottling plant was up not far from where the water reservoir and the water treatment center was in Henderson. And I think that old building's gone now. But the people that ran the bottling plant, they were a favorite target on Halloween. You'd go to their house because that's what they gave as treats. They would give you a bottle of soda pop.

Interviewer: *Oh, that's cool.*

Fredric Watson: And that, of course, that was the—you know, we worry today about kids drinking big gulps and mass quantities of soda pop, but in those days, if other families were like ours, that soda pop was—that was a treasure that maybe you would only have on the weekend. Maybe some Saturday night, you'd have a bottle of soda pop, but during the week—now, in Henderson—maybe continued the Depression experience. I think a lot of the workers that came to populate Henderson came from—I mean they came there to get jobs because jobs were so scarce everywhere else. I've heard stories about people who came to Henderson and camped in culverts, lived out in the desert. They came months early before the work actually started just hoping that they'd be here—there in time to get a job. So anyway, it was a frugal crowd.

Interviewer: *Do you think it's changed since then?*

Fredric Watson: Maybe not for the old timers. My mother's—we pretty much take care of her now, but up until the point where she, you know, she was independent, she was still saving things, you know, old sheets she would, [laughter] she wouldn't throw them away. She'd tear them into squares to use to wash the windows. And she would, yeah, she'd—she did not forget hard times. Her dad worked, he tells the story about how he worked on the Missouri River cutting undergrowth and stuff along the river, tearing it out for some sort of project. And then, at the end, when it was time to go get paid, the man said, "I'm sorry, I don't have any money to pay you." He said, "All I have are—I've got a truckload of potatoes. I'll give you a couple of sacks of potatoes." And then—so they brought the potatoes home, and that's what they had for dinner for weeks.

Interviewer: *Well, that's pretty good. Potatoes are pretty good for you.*

Fredric Watson: [laughter] That's right. Yeah, at least they didn't go hungry. But I think a lot of the Henderson families remember that, you know, those hard times. I remember families in Carver Park after the war, they managed to get a place there and had a little—scraped up a little bit of savings. But as I recall, there were people that were really scraping. A lot of beat-up old shoes and kids hunting for cigarette butts to take home for their folks so they could roll their own. I don't want to paint too dire a picture but those are—but I do honestly remember those kinds of things.

Interviewer: *That's interesting.*

Fredric Watson: Oh, we were talking about Halloween, and we've gotten far afield from—

Interviewer: *Oh, that's okay.*

Fredric Watson: But Halloween was, of course, Halloween was a big, that was a big event, and because it was not—it didn't seem to be—our parents didn't seem to be afraid that anything bad would happen to us, we went out and kind of wandered the town. You had to be home by a certain time. I think every family set that, you know, and maybe older kids stayed out later, but Halloween was—that was fun. Christmastime was interesting too. The stores in Henderson and in Las Vegas—there was kind of like an internal competition among the people that ran these stores to have the best window display and it always included some mechanical display, Christmas display.

Interviewer: *That's really neat.*

Fredric Watson: It would remind you maybe of Swiss toys that were—

Interviewer: *Animatronics? Love those.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, windup, you know, for the most part, but—kinds of stuff, but, yeah, marching soldiers or—

Interviewer: *Did you have a New Year's parade or a Christmas parade?*

Fredric Watson: You know, I can't remember. Not, I don't think in Henderson. It may have been, but I don't recall it and I don't recall one in Vegas either. But I do remember going down Water Street looking in the store windows and then going into Fremont Street where—in those days, that's where all the stores were, by and large, the stores were along Fremont Street. And that was always fun and the decorations, and lights and all that kind of thing were really—that was fun.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that must have been really neat. What changes in Henderson have you observed over the years that we haven't talked about?*

Fredric Watson: Well, I think, you know, this—the whole worry about kids being out and around maybe—I think that some of the tragedies that we've seen, we see in the news, may be translated more into Henderson. You know it's—

Interviewer: *People are afraid? Or are the dangers real?*

Fredric Watson: I think, yeah, well I think traffic, you know, for one thing. In those days—I mean, nowadays everybody's got a car from the time that they're sixteen and a half, you know, until they just can't drive anymore, so you might have two, three cars in a family. That just puts a lot more cars on the road and adds to the danger. Yeah. Then Henderson's bigger, just more people. You know, fewer people, fewer dangers. There were dangers in the Henderson desert, you know, that is different from what we experience today. There were, you know, because there had been so many prospectors in Southern Nevada, there were a lot of things left behind: holes, old mine shafts and things that were not properly covered, you know. Kids—and I can remember kids going out and wandering the desert—and we all did. We just—and it was just fun to explore. And kids would find those things and fall down mine shafts. I can remember when I was in grade school, every now and then there would be a story of some sad family that had lost somebody either badly injured or killed.

Interviewer: *Oh, gosh.*

Fredric Watson: There were blasting caps that kids found out in the desert, too. And maybe from prospectors, but also maybe from the building of the railroad, the Boulder local. And the kids would find those and think they were like a firecracker, and they would put them on a rock and hit them with another rock and kids would—you know, you could lose fingers or be blinded by things like that.

Interviewer: *Ugh, gosh.*

Fredric Watson: So those were dangers that—kids would go down to Lake Mead. There were favorite diving places where you'd dive off of the cliffs at Lake Mead. You know, a lot of kids had a good time doing that, but there were also some tragic accidents that happened at the Lake. Hitting rocks that were—they didn't know were there.

Interviewer: *Oh, gosh.*

Fredric Watson: Or kids would be stunned and drowned. So where today, you know, our big worry is about traffic and maybe crazy people loose in society, Henderson in those days, it was our, you know, our freedom to explore the environment that sometimes led us into tragic settings.

Interviewer: *And did you—I don't remember if you actually knew the Hermit personally, but do you have any story about the Hermit that you'd like to tell?*

Fredric Watson: The Hermit, yeah, I once met the Hermit. And the kids—I was probably one of the—late to get down there to see him and visit with him, because I can remember the kids in the neighborhood talking about—"Have you been down to"—we called it the swamp. But it was really—it was the Las Vegas Creek, and that's where he lived. And Las Vegas Creek in the old days was just water that came up in artesian springs in—up around where the Water District's offices are today. And that water ran down past Helen J. Stewart's ranch and made its way down to the base of Sunrise Mountain. And then it went underground and would pop up every now and then in a spring. But it was headed toward, oh, ravines that had been dug long ago by heavy rains and things. But as population grew in Las Vegas, and we had an awful lot of run off from sewage and—

Interviewer: *The plants?*

Fredric Watson: —the plants, sure, and golf courses and things like that, it became like a river. I think Las Vegas Wash is now one of the three biggest rivers in Nevada. That's another thing to fact check me on, but I think it is. Well, this old fellow lived down there, and kids would come back and say, oh, we met an old prospector and he had good stories to tell and he will share his food with you and [laughter] something like that. And if you were hiking out in that area, you didn't want to drink that water, because it was polluted, but he had water, and so he would share his water with you. I rode my bike down there, my brother and I and a couple of other kids, and we met him. He had a—his car backed up to the hill and he lived—he had a mine shaft that he lived in. He had like a tent or a canvas thing over the front. I've seen a picture in the Henderson Home News that shows a house, a shack built near—that I think is probably the same person. They refer to him as the Hermit. But I don't remember a house at the time that I was there. He was—yeah, this mine shaft was cool. It didn't go back very far. Seemed like it maybe went back about twenty feet and he was cooking steak, some kind of beef or something. It smelled wonderful.

Interviewer: *Did you get to go into the mine shaft?*

Fredric Watson: Oh, yeah, yeah, he let us wander around.

Interviewer: *I heard that was interesting, that—Frank Belger was telling a story that it was really cool in there. It was cool from the rocks, you know. It was like, probably like a cave. That's pretty neat.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, underground the temperatures are constant, and even if it's really hot outside, if you can get down far enough. They've found—archeologists have found evidence of

Indian dugouts, Paiute dugouts, along that Wash, so we know that they lived along there when they hunted, that kind of thing. Yeah, the cave was cool. He had—my brother remembers him having like five gallon water bottles in the cave. He was ready to share his lunch with us. I posted a story about that. Or no, what I—actually, what I—before I did that, I had read in one of the publications that the Basic High School Alumni Association put out, I read a letter that a lady wrote. She was saying that she wasn't going to be able to come to the reunion that year but that she felt bad about that and, you know, she commented on all of the changes in Henderson. And she said that she understands that they were building a place called Lake of Las Vegas and she wondered—and did the ghost of the Hermit prowl or visit, or some fashion, that area? And I thought that—and I had completely forgotten about this hermit so I wrote her a letter, or an e-mail I guess it was, and she, and she said, yeah, that she'd never actually met him but her husband had told her about him. And her husband had said he and his dad—and his dad, I think, was in, worked either at the Three Kids Mine or the Plant so he was probably interested in all the mining that went on in that area. And I think the hermit was a prospector. So she told some stories about that, and so I took the things that she wrote and combined them with my own memories and posted them on the Henderson Historical Society's—on their Web site. And I've since posted another piece, you know, referring back to that Henderson Home News article. Yeah, I would like to find out more about him. In the news article, he says that he was, that he was in the contracting business. And he built, he says, "I built—my company built the big cement building just west of the underpass." Which is a clue that—you know, west of the underpass, that would have been, I'm sure, the Bonanza underpass, because I don't think they built the Charleston underpass until the mid-'50s. So that would have had to have been—I

guess that's one of my next steps is to go down to the County Assessor's Office and look at the old plats they have there and see when somebody built that, got a building permit for that.

Interviewer: *Yeah, it would be interesting to see. What do you enjoy most about having lived in Henderson?*

Fredric Watson: Oh, I guess just a freedom to explore. It seems to me that kids today have so much of their life scripted for them, you know, you're going to take dance lessons and music lessons and then you're going to go to this sports activity and then you're going to have after school classes and, you know, we were—you know, we did family things together, but we were free to do, just to do a lot of things, to explore, to tinker and invent. You know, there was a lot of imagination—maybe that's the word for it—a lot of imagination in our lives. We weren't embarrassed to go out and re-enact a movie we had seen, or play, you know, play cowboys and Indians, and I'm not sure, I don't know whether kids do that kind of stuff anymore. I mean, really little kids do, but we continued to do that stuff [laughter] till it almost got embarrassing.

Interviewer: *[laughter] Well, it's fun, though. What do you think are some of the issues that Henderson is facing these days?*

Fredric Watson: Well, yeah, you know, the issues that the nation faces. I think, you know, I think clean air for one thing.

Interviewer: *It's cleaner than it used to be, though.*

Fredric Watson: It is. It is for sure, but not as clean as it was in the mid-1940s, just because of population.

Interviewer: *Right.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, I think, I think a lot of pollution comes from automobiles. I think that's an important thing that we need to resolve. We need to get out of, in my estimation, we need to get out of fossil fuels and we have the opportunity, you know, of our environment, you know, our constant sunshine, to, you know, to just do things in a better fashion. So I think that's important. I think water is going to be a huge issue for our, you know, for our region, for our country.

Interviewer: *Yeah, we're really taking a toll on Lake Mead. It's really gone down and it's not recovering, is it?*

Fredric Watson: No, no, and it probably won't if, you know, if the people that are doing all the weather studies are correct—and it's looking like they are, so—and if our population continues to grow, we seem to be powerless to regulate population growth. So—and if that's the case, then science is going to have to save the day for us and so we really need to invest a lot of money in that, capturing every drop of water that falls. We get, we have return flow credit for water that goes through our system. You know, our sewage system is returned to the Lake, so we get a credit for that. But rainfall, there's—we don't get a credit, so I think that'd be an interesting thing to look at, how to capture. We get a—

Interviewer: *Yeah, how to get more when we get it.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, and save every bit of it. I think cost of education, you know, I think we need to—badly need to make sure that we don't, you know, get frightened by the cost of education. I think that is a worthy investment and I think the worry that—you know, about taxation. We have to find ways to raise the money necessary to have good libraries and good schools. They're invaluable. And when you get old you see that, and sometimes I think young

families that are worried about being able to make ends meet, maybe they can think of ways that maybe we don't need public education and public libraries, but then I think at life's end they'll realize that that's a mistake.

Interviewer: *It's a big part of the community and that's what's important to Henderson, right, the community?*

Fredric Watson: Absolutely.

Interviewer: *It always has been. What else would you like to share about your experience in Henderson that we haven't talked about?*

Fredric Watson: Oh, I can't think of anything really. You know, I keep thinking back on, you know, when I was really young, because that was so much fun. Long bicycle rides, I guess. I can remember riding my brother's bike. A friend of mine and I snuck away with my younger brother's bicycle. He didn't know what we were going to do and he never would have consented, but we rode this bicycle. And we had a third friend who had a motorcycle, and not a— it was a small ESA, but it was strong enough to push us up the hills, and so we—the two of us got on the bicycle and the friend with the motorcycle pushed us all the way to the lake, and then up to Boulder City, and then down through Railroad Pass and back to Henderson.

Interviewer: *That sounds dangerous. [laughter]*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, it was, just fool—really foolhardy.

Interviewer: *I can't believe you did that.*

Fredric Watson: It made me really watchful of my own children. You know, whenever I saw that glint in their eye, they were planning some strange thing like that.

Interviewer: *Why were you borrowing your brother's bike? Why didn't you take your own? Did you not have one?*

Fredric Watson: I think my bike, I think my bike had given up the ghost by that time. And Kit had a fairly new bike. That was, you know, that was an interesting experience. Yeah, all of the hunting, the animals in the desert, following them, and watching them and learning from them, I thought that was always fun. And then listening to stories. I always liked to listen to the stories that old people told in the Henderson area, and there were a lot of them. People that served in the War and people that worked at the Plant. People that were just adventurers who had come to Las Vegas. I think those things, those are fun aspects of growing up in Henderson that I remember.

Interviewer: *That's neat. You know, career wise, I know you don't like to brag, but they named a school after you.*

Fredric Watson: They did. It's the Fredric Watson Elementary School. It's over in North Las Vegas.

Interviewer: *That's really neat.*

Fredric Watson: Yeah, on Congress Street. Yeah, you know, to be remembered is—that the Greeks believed that you never really died and as long as somebody remembered who you were, so—

Interviewer: *Well, you've done so much for the communities of Henderson and Las Vegas, so I'm sure you're well known and everybody's very appreciative of what you've given us.*

Fredric Watson: Well, thank you.

Interviewer: *Well, I sure have enjoyed interviewing you today.*

Fredric Watson: Well, thank you.

Interviewer: *Thanks for coming.*

Fredric Watson: Yep, I enjoyed it.