

# **Henderson Libraries**

## **Henderson Oral History Project**

**Sonya and Leonard  
Smith**

**Oral History of Sonya and Leonard Smith**

**conducted by**

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**and filmed by**

**Edward Feldman**

**March 28, 2014**

**Interviewer:** *Today is March 28, 2014. My name is Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm and our cameraman is Ed Feldman. We're interviewing Sonya and Leonard Smith as part of the Henderson oral history project of Henderson Libraries. Thank you both for joining us.*

**Sonya Smith:** You're welcome.

**Interviewer:** *Sonya, I'd like to start by asking about your childhood because you came to Henderson in the early days. Tell us a little bit about where you were born, first, and what your parents did for a living.*

**Sonya Smith:** Well, I was born in Artesia, California and my father was an electrician and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. We moved here in 1953 after my father had had a bout with polio and had been in an iron lung for nine months and then had to go through rehabilitation. Because of that, he had to change his field of work and he chose—he was a TV technician, now he would be an IT guy or electronics engineer. So once he was reeducated, he and mother opted to move up here because her asthma was so bad in southern California. So we came to the desert, and that's how we wound up here.

**Interviewer:** *Okay, but you had family already here and working at the plants right?*

**Sonya Smith:** My step-father was already working at the plants. So in '53 I didn't know he was going to be my step-father but yeah, he had already been working there.

**Interviewer:** *Okay, we'll get back to him, I guess, in a little bit. When you moved to Henderson, how old were you?*

**Sonya Smith:** Now, let's see—I won't lie—I was six. [laughter]

**Interviewer:** *Had you been to school before, or was Henderson your first school?*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, I went to kindergarten in California. But then once I came here, my class was the first grade at Basic Elementary which is now Gordon McCaw. And Mrs. Mindy was my teacher.

**Interviewer:** *That's great that you can remember her.*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, I remember all of them.

**Interviewer:** *What were some of the other teachers?*

**Sonya Smith:** Ms. Mindy was first grade, Ms. Smalley was second grade, Mrs. Brecken was third grade, Mrs. Wainwright was fourth grade, Mr. Phillips was fifth grade, and Mr. Call was sixth grade.

**Interviewer:** *Wow. So did you like going to school there?*

**Sonya Smith:** I did. It was fun.

**Interviewer:** *What kinds of activities did they have for the kids back then?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, use your imagination. Like dodgeball, we played softball, we did hop scotch, you played jacks, you know. Just use your imagination, you just could do anything.

**Interviewer:** *Did the community have seasonal events for the kids?*

**Sonya Smith:** They did. They had Christmas events and Christmas tree lightings and the best thing was, in elementary school, and it's a no-no now, I guess, we did a Christmas pageant. It didn't matter who you were, what church you went to, you all participated and each grade sang different songs and you wore these hideous little square sheets over, and then you had these paper collars that your mother made for you. Then it was divided up towards age groups, and we all appeared at what is now Burkholder in the gymnasium there and you sang. Everybody in town showed up and you sang Christmas carols and ate cookies and got sick to your stomach. We had a great time.

**Interviewer:** *[laughter] I bet.*

**Sonya Smith:** Yep, it was fun.

**Interviewer:** *You had Halloween celebrations too?*

**Sonya Smith:** We did, but not so much, because there wasn't quite so much meanness in the world. You went trick-or-treating then. You know, you knew all of your neighbors and you knew that Mr. and Mrs. Burkholder's house was the place to go, because they gave big candy bars. Not like the other ones. And Mr. Burkholder was our superintendent of the schools. And Mrs. Burkholder was our music teacher.

**Interviewer:** *They were pretty generous.*

**Sonya Smith:** Yes, they were. And they were really great people too. They really were great.

**Interviewer:** *I've heard the bottling company used to give out free cokes or something.*

**Sonya Smith:** They did, it was Pepsi Cola. On the corner of Ocean and Water. They did, they gave out free soda.

**Interviewer:** *I heard some people went back for seconds and thirds on that.*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh yeah, if you were young enough, you'd get away with that one. If you could, you could.

**Interviewer:** *When you first moved here, what was Henderson like?*

**Sonya Smith:** Dirt roads. The old part of Henderson and Water Street was paved up to Ocean Street. But the new track two that we moved into, and then the ones over where First Street and Ash is, they were all dirt roads. And it was a couple years before they paved the roads and stuff. But it was a small town; you could go anyplace and do anything. If you walked down the street, everybody knew you. It was just like they say, just fun.

**Interviewer:** *Yeah, and nobody worried about their kids.*

**Sonya Smith:** No, no. We played outside from the time the sun came up and then when the street lights came on, you went in the house. And we dug forts, and we played—all the kids would play together. And then if it was too hot outside, we girls would get together at someone's house and we'd do dress-ups and makeup and put on plays and make our parents watch this hideous thing. But they were good sports, they did it.

**Interviewer:** *I bet it was fun.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was fun.

**Interviewer:** *So you said you made forts. Did you play out in the desert a lot?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, absolutely! Up where I'm living now was a great place to come up and chase lizards and dig forts.

**Interviewer:** *Did you ever go out to the old mines around Henderson?*

**Sonya Smith:** No, I didn't. I think probably some of my male classmates were braver at that than I was. I wasn't that brave. Not at all.

**Interviewer:** *What were your neighbors like? You said you moved out to the new tract housing.*

**Sonya Smith:** We moved here in—we moved into our house August the 18<sup>th</sup>, 1953. And the Palsgroves right next to us beat us by one day. And the Moretzes lived behind us, and Eleanor House lived catty-corner and we all had Thanksgiving together; we all did Christmas together. The Mathesons were next door, the Brays across the street, the Stewarts—George Stewart and his family—lived across the street, and he later was—I think he was plant manager for Stauffer Chemical for a long time.

**Interviewer:** *So it was a real mix of people in the community.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was a real mix of people. And we just all hung out and we all watched out for each other. And it was not above or below any of the parents to snitch on us if we were caught doing something we weren't supposed to.

**Interviewer:** *Did you ever get in trouble?*

**Sonya Smith:** Absolutely!

**Interviewer:** *[laughter] Do you have some good stories?*

**Sonya Smith:** I ditched school one time and drove out to Blue Diamond. Isn't that a thrill?

**Interviewer:** *Wow.*

**Sonya Smith:** Wow! Anyway, so that night at dinner—oh, and on the way home the car broke down.

**Interviewer:** *This was in high school I guess?*

**Sonya Smith:** This was in high school.

**Interviewer:** *I hope. [laughter]*

**Sonya Smith:** Yes. And on the way home, the car broke down. Well, we got that going, and it was an old '53 Oldsmobile that weighed as much as a tank. So that night at dinner, my father said, "And how was Blue Diamond?" And I went, "Who told you?" Well, Pat Yakubik who ran the mine at Blue Diamond saw

my car, and he called my dad and said, “Gee, what’s Sonya doing out here?” So I was caught. And I was the only Sonya in Henderson.

**Interviewer:** *That’s amazing that even out in Blue Diamond, they knew people from Henderson.*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, my dad belonged to the Moose Lodge and Pat Yakubik was a member of a lodge. So you couldn’t get away with too much. I didn’t really try, but you know, that one thing did it.

**Interviewer:** *Was that your father’s only organization, or do you remember some other organizations they were involved in?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, no. He was a businessman here in town. He had Bill Merrill’s TV and Appliance a few years after we moved here. And he was a member of the Moose Lodge and of the Eagles. He was a big one to—they did toy drives every September. They would take that old soda pop bottling company we’re talking about, and all the lodges would turn it into a workshop. And they’d repair bikes and the women would make clothes for dolls and get everything ready so that we could hand out Christmas, like on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, to families that were less fortunate than the rest of us. And they did that for Thanksgiving. He was instrumental in starting, [asking Leonard] what’s that event that we used to have? Oh! Expo. Where local businesses would set up booths at the Convention Center. My dad helped get that started and that had to be in 1973 or ’74. And he worked on a lot of that.

**Interviewer:** *Was your dad involved in the Chamber?*

**Sonya Smith:** Yes, he was a member of the Chamber.

**Interviewer:** *Is that what sparked your interest in it?*

**Sonya Smith:** No. No, what sparked my interest in it was I didn’t necessarily—my father raised me to believe that if you wanted to participate in the city and you complained about anything—if you didn’t participate, you had no right to complain. So because I moved home as a single parent with two boys, I got involved in what was going so that it would go the way that I would like it to go. I volunteered my kids from the time they were five and ten. They worked with the Chamber as long as I did.

**Interviewer:** *Well, that's great experience for them.*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah. But Daddy just said that if you're going to complain, then you need to participate and I said okay.

**Interviewer:** *I think participation is good.*

**Sonya Smith:** Well it's like if you don't vote, don't complain about who's in office.

**Interviewer:** *Right, yeah. When you were—back in the '50s and '60s how did you all get health care?*

**Sonya Smith:** We just did. As a child, you don't think about it.

**Interviewer:** *Did the doctor come to your house in the '50s?*

**Sonya Smith:** No. We went down to Dr. Miller's office. Dr. Miller was everybody's doctor. And you just went down to his office, in the '50s and stuff.

**Interviewer:** *Did you ever go to St. Rose for anything?*

**Sonya Smith:** Nope, not as a child. My mother had my youngest sister there. But I knew St. Rose was there.

**Interviewer:** *Did you know any of the nuns?*

**Sonya Smith:** Later on, when I was married and went to the hospital to have my children I met Sister Marie Daniel. I met Sister Robert Joseph, who was really great. But those were the two I had.

**Interviewer:** *Yeah, I've heard great things about both of them.*

**Sonya Smith:** Sister Marie Daniel, they wanted her to write a report or a proposal on how to keep infection out of a newborn nursery. And story has it that she wouldn't do it. And they said, "why?" She said, "Because I don't allow infection into my nursery, so why should I write about what to do?" No, she kept that place spotless.

**Interviewer:** *I'm sure she did.*

**Sonya Smith:** She was really great.

**Interviewer:** *What did you all do for recreation and entertainment in the '50s?*



**Sonya Smith:** We went to the movies, the old Victory Theater.

**Interviewer:** *Did you go every weekend?*

**Sonya Smith:** Almost every weekend, because we got an allowance of about fifty cents a week. You could get movie, popcorn, and a soda for twenty-five to thirty cents. And it was usually a double feature and a cartoon and a newsreel.

**Interviewer:** *Those were the days.*

**Sonya Smith:** Those were the days. But just the other things; we just played. You know, we just used our imagination and played.

**Interviewer:** *Maybe we could move on to when you were in high school. You went to Basic. Tell me what that was like.*

**Sonya Smith:** I went to Basic. It was fun. Basic at that time was where Burkholder is now, on Van Wagenen. Mr. Van Wagenen, of course, was the gentleman who owned Victory Theater originally. Basic was just all about fun. At that time, Basic High School was rated in the top five percent across the nation academically. Our teachers were very caring and would help you and do whatever.

**Interviewer:** *Small class sizes.*

**Sonya Smith:** No, my government class had almost fifty students in it. They did a team teaching for that. It was Mr. Huffy and Mr. Empson. You did team teaching and it was more of a relaxed class atmosphere and you did more discussion, almost like a political science. But my U.S. history teacher was Mr. Paul Ruth, who at one time was our City Councilman and has since passed on. He made U.S. history so much that I love it. I love U.S. history, he made it so fun and so interesting. But I loved Basic.

**Interviewer:** *Sounds like they had some great teachers.*

**Sonya Smith:** They did and we had a lot of activities that kept kids busy all the time. If you didn't belong to a club, one club or another, you belonged to something else.

**Interviewer:** *What clubs were you in?*

**Sonya Smith:** Spanish club, Future Teachers of America, and D.E.C.A. which was Distributive Education.

**Interviewer:** *I know you've talked to me before about sports. What were the sports like at Basic?*

**Sonya Smith:** Football at Basic and baseball. Mr. Empson, my government teacher was a big baseball fanatic. Football was just a few schools because the valley wasn't that big. The biggest rivalry was with Boulder City. That was detrimental to the health of many a young Basic High School senior.

**Interviewer:** *Why was that?*

**Sonya Smith:** Because they fought.

**Interviewer:** *Oh, yeah?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, yeah, big time, big time they fought.

**Interviewer:** *At games, like, after games?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, no, no, no, after games, after games. It was just a typical—two small town rivalries.

Then there was Las Vegas High School, which everybody was afraid of, Rancho High School, and—

**Interviewer:** *Did they beat Henderson all the time, or did Henderson beat Las Vegas more?*

**Sonya Smith:** We won state championship, I think, in 1960. That was it. My senior year we lost, to Western, seventy-five to nothing. Oh, it was so painful.

**Interviewer:** *Yeah. Living in Henderson, did you have opportunities to shop for everything you needed, or did you have to go outside to shop?*

**Sonya Smith:** At the beginning, the big shopping area was on Market Street. There was Foodland, Vernay's, Van Valey Shoes, a doctor's office, and then another Desertwear, and then around the corner was Mayor Bill Burn's liquor store and candy store. They sold the best candy there, and the barber shops. So you basically shopped there. But if it had to do with children's clothes, we would go into Fremont Street where all the stores were Penney's, Arden's, Sears, C.H. Baker, everything was on Fremont Street at that time. Then later when they built across Boulder Highway, they brought in Arden's, Carl's Shoes, and a drug store and stuff so you didn't have to always go into Vegas.

**Interviewer:** *Did you ever go to Boulder to shop?*

**Sonya Smith:** No.

**Interviewer:** *Was there just nothing in Boulder?*

**Sonya Smith:** Boulder City was as small as Henderson and limited on what they also provided, just like any small town. So they didn't have a lot to choose from. What they did have to choose from were more elite and selective things. But everybody went to Fremont Street to go shopping and eat at Woolworth's lunch counter, have a BLT and chocolate shake, so that was good.

**Interviewer:** *I bet the shakes were good.*

**Sonya Smith:** They were good.

**Interviewer:** *What other restaurants were around that you could go to?*

**Sonya Smith:** The Royal was the casino that you could go to.

**Leonard Smith:** Nick's.

**Sonya Smith:** No, Nick's was Dante's, but I don't remember—I remember in high school it was there because I took my dad for my date for the sweetheart reverse. Now, I'm not perverted, but the thing is, if you take your father to the sweetheart reverse then you can dance with all the other guys, you see.

**Interviewer:** *Oh, it was a rule, right? Some kind of game.*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah. So you took your dad and you could dance with all the other guys, and then Daddy took me down to Dante's to eat, and that was *the* place to go. That was nice dining. It was fun.

**Interviewer:** *Great. What kinds of places did you visit in the region? Like, you said you went out to Blue Diamond, did you go to the dam ever, or Lake Mead?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, my gosh, I bet you I've taken a hundred tours of the dam. That's my very favorite place. We used to go to the lake; that was not my favorite place, because there's no shade and it's all rocks. I'm a wimp; I don't like that. My dad was a great one for Sundays, not every Sunday, but about once a month getting' in the car, loading it up and packing a picnic and just driving. You drive a half a

tank of gas, and so we'd go out to ghost towns, to old mines, you know further away, and Then half a tank to come home. Just about, but he kind of knew, but he was a great one for exploring and stuff. And we would go to places that, at that time, was far. I mean, Logandale and Overton was—and exploring the Valley of Fire, and going through—there used to be a Rogers Hot Spring on the way out there. My dad used to like to go out there because of his polio, his muscles, you know, he didn't want them to atrophy, so he could get in these mineral baths and hot things and it would just really help him. So we used to do that kind of stuff.

**Interviewer:** *That's neat. Did you ever go up to Mt. Charleston?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh yeah. As a matter of fact, when I was a Girl Scout in Brownies that's where our camp was, was up there and we'd go up for two weeks. The fossils you'd find up there on Mt. Charleston are all fish fossils, so that impressed me, that fact that the water was that—that's why we're called the Great Basin, because the water was actually that high. It's fascinating.

**Interviewer:** *There are some great fossils out here. Do you recall anything about the early politicians and public figures in Henderson? I know you were real young.*

**Sonya Smith:** I was real young, but I remember when they were campaigning, they'd walk door-to-door and come in and sit at the table with you. But they do that to us now. Even now, we invite them in. Come in and tell me what you want. Like I said, Mayor Burns owned the liquor store and the delicatessen and LeRoy Zike was the mayor and he had a shoe store. The different councilman and stuff, they were just regular family people who did this; they weren't looking to make politics a career, they were looking to just do for their city.

**Interviewer:** *It was part of their being businessmen in Henderson and contributing to the community.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was part of them being citizens of Henderson too, because we fought long and hard, I guess they did, to be incorporated. Because the plants and everything, and all the houses were built to tear down and move away. Charles Henderson, Senator Henderson, fought hard with the local officials

to get us incorporated. That I know, from what my parents told me. There were many times when I thought Henderson was going to be a ghost town. From the strikes at the plant, to whatever was going on. So many people that lived here worked at Mercury, the test site, or they were military.

**Interviewer:** *That's quite a commute.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was quite a commute, and there were times when on some streets you'd see four and five For Sale signs and you thought 'Oh, Lord.' But we rebound all the time because it's a great place to live.

**Interviewer:** *The community really held itself together over the years.*

**Sonya Smith:** It did.

**Interviewer:** *Tell me a little bit about your step-father's background with the plants, because you said he was involved in the early phone system and I want to know more about that.*

**Sonya Smith:** He was. He lived on Basic Road, which now the court building is. He and his wife moved here when they started building the plants, they came out from Kansas, like many other people moved out here to build the plants. Then once the war effort was done, he went to work for Stauffer Chemical. But he had like the second or third phone installed in Henderson because he was a supervisor and they needed to get ahold of him. And it was a crank, you know, ring-ring-ring. Then an operator would connect you, and you were not allowed to stay on the phone any more than five minutes because it was all party line. So you couldn't carry on an hour's conversation.

**Interviewer:** *Right, and it was purely functional for him because they needed to communicate.*

**Sonya Smith:** Purely functional, yeah, and he raised his family here. You know, his kids. And then his son, my step-brother, worked at Stauffer Chemical from the time he was eighteen until he was sixty-five. Daddy, my step-dad, worked at Stauffer until he was sixty-five, sixty-six, so that was from 1940-something to 1980. I mean, that's a long time.

**Interviewer:** *What do you think the contribution of the plants has been to Henderson?*

**Sonya Smith:** We're here.

**Interviewer:** *Because of the plants.*

**Sonya Smith:** Because of the plants. And because of the plants, our city was known to be the only place to get fuel for all our space projects, until PEPCON blew up, of course. The titanium that comes out of our plants goes all over the world. My son is a plant manager now, down there at Lhoist, which is the chemical lime company, and does [asking Leonard]—what is that, fiberboard?

**Leonard Smith:** Gypsum.

**Sonya Smith:** Gypsum. Anyway, so the plants, they contribute to our city, but they contribute to the whole nation as far as what they get out of them.

**Interviewer:** *Right, and I know that BMI contributed quite a bit to winning the European part of World War II.*

**Sonya Smith:** Absolutely, that's why they built this. You had BMI, you had the whole plant complex, and what was the name of that Three Kids Mine, that I call Three Kids Mine?

**Interviewer:** *A lot of people do, still call it that.*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, because three kids were killed there.

**Leonard Smith:** The Three Kids Mine, they're going to close that up and fill it.

**Sonya Smith:** But was it Manganese?

**Interviewer:** *That's probably Manganese [Ore], yeah.*

**Sonya Smith:** Manganese. Okay, the Manganese was important to ammunition. You had a tungsten mine, which is out of town here. That was important. You had the Hawthorne plant, up in Hawthorne, Nevada that made ammunition also. So the whole state worked in the war effort in World War II, and then it continued during Korea and Vietnam.

**Leonard Smith:** Tell her about the tunnels.

**Interviewer:** *Oh, the tunnels!*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, there's all kinds of tunnels under the plants.

**Interviewer:** *What do you know about the tunnels?*

**Sonya Smith:** Not a lot. I know what I've heard. There is a tunnel that goes from here towards Sunrise Mountain. I've heard that there was a tunnel that went from here towards Nellis Air Force Base; I don't know if it actually made it all the way. But they were escape tunnels for—if the Japanese would bomb the plants, the workers could escape through it. That's why your streets in old Henderson, if you ever notice, you've got one main street, Water Street, and you've got Basic, but the streets seem to be curved in some way. That was because they thought that if a plane should fly over California, a Japanese plane, and drop bombs on this plant that no—a whole city block wouldn't be taken out.

**Interviewer:** *Yeah, I've seen them talk about that and do that in other wartime communities like that [as in Oak Ridge, Tennessee].*

**Sonya Smith:** And we had an air raid shelter, where Carver Park was.

**Interviewer:** *What else do you know about Carver Park?*

**Sonya Smith:** You know, I don't know a lot.

**Interviewer:** *Did you have friends in Carver Park?*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, I really did. I was thinking about that. They lived in Carver Park, we went to their house, they came to our house. I just thought they lived in an apartment, we didn't think anything about different classes or anything like that.

**Interviewer:** *Were these African Americans?*

**Sonya Smith:** I went to school with two boys of color, because I—you're either an American or you're not. One was Lemuel Rucker and the other was Jim Peck. They started to school with us in elementary school, they went all the way through; we just never thought anything about it. There was no racial tension or anything like that. There was more Hispanics in Henderson than anything else.

**Interviewer:** *What neighborhoods did the Hispanics live in?*

**Sonya Smith:** You know, we didn't do that. I don't remember 'neighborhoods'. Probably in Carver Park and Victory Village, where most people started out. Even when I moved there in 1965 when I got married, the rent was a huge forty-three dollars a month for a one bedroom. So many families started out in that subsidized housing and then could save money and move out. So it wasn't a bad place to live. It was nice.

**Interviewer:** *So living in Henderson wasn't dangerous in any way up until about what point?*

**Leonard Smith:** Until I got here.

**Interviewer:** *[laughter]*

**Sonya Smith:** Till you got here? [laughter] I think as society has changed, the city got more dangerous.

**Interviewer:** *Was it population?*

**Sonya Smith:** I think it has to do with population and growth and just the changing times.

**Interviewer:** *Demographics?*

**Leonard Smith:** Culture.

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, culture, you're right. [addressing Leonard] Are you giving me hints? I think so. But we all did everything together when I was growing up here. It didn't matter who you were and what neighborhood you came from; we all did everything together. Was it perfect? Probably not. But as a kid, I didn't notice any big things. We just had fun. All kids went to all things and did all things. Friday night you went to the youth center and went dancing in high school. Saturday night you went to the Mormon church and went dancing. Sunday you went to St. Peter's and went dancing. Wednesday night, you went to the Community Church and participated in their activity; it didn't matter who you were and what church you belonged to. That was our—activities were focused around that kind of thing.

**Interviewer:** *It sounds like there were a lot of dances.*

**Sonya Smith:** There were!

**Interviewer:** *It sounds like fun!*



**Sonya Smith:** It was fun, and the youth center was the place to go on Friday night.

**Interviewer:** *Did you learn how to dance, like ballroom dancing and Latin dancing and that sort of thing?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, not until I was older. No, during that time, you just hopped around a lot, wiggled, and—you know. Although you did learn how to waltz at the Mormon dances, yeah. It was fun.

**Interviewer:** *I bet! Did the churches try to earn a little bit of money through the dances?*

**Sonya Smith:** No, they were free.

**Interviewer:** *They were totally free.*

**Sonya Smith:** Totally free, and everybody that worked there were all volunteers. We didn't charge for every silly thing there was. You volunteered to put the dance on because if you put a dance on, your child participated and you knew where your child was. So if your child was doing it, so were all the other kids and their parents knew where they were all the time. We didn't have to worry about the others.

**Interviewer:** *Some of the Henderson Coordinating Council minutes from the late '40s and early '50s talk about problems with teenagers getting into trouble in town and what can we do with the teenagers. I wonder if those dances were an attempt to give kids something to do.*

**Sonya Smith:** They probably were, because when the youth center was built, it was a place for everyone to go. I only went to dances at it and I stopped in once or twice and they had pool tables and they had a basketball court and [Elwood] "Pappy" Swift and Dalby Shirley ran it. They always kept the kids busy with some kind of sports, something going on to keep them busy.

**Interviewer:** *I heard there was a boxing thing at one point.*

**Sonya Smith:** Well, that was down at Victory Village. Mike O'Callaghan used to do the boxing. He later became our governor and he was also a wounded hero in Korea where he'd lost a leg. And so if he had trouble with a student like my ex-husband, he would just take him down to Victory Village and they'd get in the ring. After he beat the hell out of him he'd say, "How does it feel to be beat by a one-legged

man?" And the boys would go, "Oh my God." You know, but they loved him and they respected him very, very much.

**Interviewer:** *So he had a prosthetic leg I guess.*

**Sonya Smith:** He did; he had a prosthetic leg.

**Interviewer:** *That's interesting that he could get in the ring. Wow.*

**Sonya Smith:** But he was a great dancer, and he was a great boxer, and a great man.

**Interviewer:** *He certainly was!*

**Sonya Smith:** He was. He really was.

**Interviewer:** *Now, after high school what did you do?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, I did what every girl did in 1965. I got married, had children, to live happily ever after. And instead, I got married [laughter], had children—my husband at that time was in the Marine Corps, so after his tour in Vietnam, we went to San Diego and then up to Oceanside, then wound up in Oklahoma. Then I came home in 1978—yeah, join the Marine Corps to see the world, wind up at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. There's just no justice in the world.

**Interviewer:** *[laughter]*

**Sonya Smith:** But we were stationed here at Lake Mead Naval Base, which no one even knew existed.

**Interviewer:** *I didn't. I've never heard of that.*

**Sonya Smith:** That's because at that time—and it's no longer—it was a top secret base. And I lived here all my life and didn't know it even existed and they had built it in 1953.

**Interviewer:** *How about that. That is the first I've ever heard of that.*

**Sonya Smith:** And if you drive back from Salt Lake on [Interstate] 15, if you look over towards the base of Sunrise Mountain, you can still see mounds where they stored ammunition and, I'm told, nuclear weapons, but I don't know that that's true.

**Interviewer:** *Is that off limits to people?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh yes, that was definitely off limits at that time. Later, once they closed it and emptied everything out, Nellis used it as a storage area and I think for a while it was a federal prison. But it was a great little base.

**Interviewer:** *That's interesting.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was a great base. It was a great duty station. Especially if you were—you get to stay home.

**Interviewer:** *So you got back to Henderson. And then what did you do? You joined the Chamber in '78. Were you going into business at that time?*

**Sonya Smith:** No, I was a nurse working at Sunrise Hospital and I wanted to—I loved Industrial Days, that we had, and I wanted to be a part of it. So I joined the Chamber as a private citizen, which was like—I don't know how much it was—and got involved in those kind of activities and kept my children involved in those kind of activities. And then later, in 1980, I was working for Nathan Adelson Hospice—got to have been a hospice nurse since 1980—got more active in the Chamber, not as a business person but as a private citizen. And then later, when Leonard and I opened the first home health care agency in Henderson in 1987, we were both active in the Chamber for the business. But I had already spent years doing it.

**Interviewer:** *How did you become a nurse?*

**Sonya Smith:** I became a nurse because I had seven sons and five of them died after they were born.

**Interviewer:** *Oh my goodness, I'm sorry to hear that.*

**Sonya Smith:** Michael, the last one, died when he was fourteen months old. So I decided that maybe I would like to help other people, being righteous. So I became a nurse's aide and decided if I liked all that crappy work, that I would like getting my degree. So I went to school in Oklahoma and got my degree and that's what I did.

[break in recording]

**Interviewer:** *All right, well, Leonard, we want to get you involved in this interview now and I want to know a little bit about your background, like where you were born and raised, and bring us a little bit up to date to when you came to Henderson.*

**Leonard Smith:** All right. I was born in Mineola, Long Island, and six weeks later I was in Princeton, New Jersey, where I spent the first thirteen years. Then I moved to Queens, New York. My father was out of work and I remember standing in the bread line with him a couple of times. Then I graduated high school and started college at Pratt Institute in chemical engineering. The tuition was only three hundred dollars a year at that time. But you had to buy your books, of course. But I got through that, and I was working in the evenings and part-time on the weekends in the surveying office. And in about 1942, the Army came around and asked us if we didn't want to be drafted and we all said, "No." And [the Army promised], "If you sign up with us, when you get finished with basic training, you can go to O.C.S. if your stats are high enough." "Yeah, that sounds good." "You want to graduate don't you?" "Oh, yeah!" So we signed and ten days later I was in Fort Dix, New Jersey, as a private. I've never trusted the government since.

**All:** [laughter]

**Leonard Smith:** But I did my basic training and then had a choice of going to the South Seas as a medic or going back to school. So guess what I took. So they sent me to the University of Illinois for a month and then Purdue for six months, and then that all broke up and I was sent to Camp Atterbury, Indiana, and I became an instructor there with Patton's 30<sup>th</sup> Division and the 106<sup>th</sup> Division, which went to the Battle of the Bulge. Sometimes we had as many as two hundred thousand people in that camp, at General Hospital and all that. To make a long story short, I had a Coke—we had six theaters on that post—and I had the Coke and popcorn concession. I worked my way into that, but I lost it and I won't tell you how.

**All:** [laughter]

**Leonard Smith:** And a few weeks later I got the opportunity to run the NCO Club on the camp, so I did that for two years plus working during the day. When I got discharged, I tried to go back to school, but the timing was off, so I taught in the boys' reformatory in Massachusetts. Then went back and got my education but never did graduate—or go to the ceremony—I graduated. But DuPont hired me and I went to work for them. Thirty-four years later I went to into production and then research, then ran a laboratory, and then went into sales. After thirty-four years, I retired.

**Sonya Smith:** Now, I'm going to butt in right here and tell you that my husband's formulas are on the Golden Gate Bridge, Budweiser beer coating, Der Wienerschnitzel roofs, Earl Scheib paint, and he was the one that came up with the color for Agent Orange, not the defoliant; he developed the color.

**Leonard Smith:** I sold every ounce.

**Sonya Smith:** He sold every ounce of the color for Agent Orange. All these patents, I mean all these colors and stuff are his formula. And for aluminum siding stuff—what was that for?

**Leonard Smith:** Well, that's just the paint on the aluminum siding that we have on our house.

**Sonya Smith:** So he's modest but he's a damn genius.

**Interviewer:** *And you have a good story about a genius that you met when you were a kid.*

**Leonard Smith:** Yes, I had the opportunity of meeting Albert Einstein who lived about a quarter of a mile from the house. Walked in front of my house every day with his little bowler hat and pipe and little dog. But the school sent me out to interview him, and I really didn't realize who Albert Einstein was at the time. But we had a nice—his wife got me into the house and I had about a twenty minute interview with him. He just sat back there, smoked his pipe, and he was a real nice guy. But I didn't realize how important and what a genius he was. I wrote a school paper. I don't know where it is, and this young lady here has hollered at me for losing that for a number of years.

**Interviewer:** *Do you remember what questions you asked him? Or what the assignment was?*

**Leonard Smith:** No. It was just to interview him and just a basic interview, whatever an eleven or twelve year old kid could do.

**Interviewer:** *Twenty minutes is a lot of time.*

**Leonard Smith:** I'm assuming it was fifteen to twenty minutes because I remember he got a couple of phone calls that interrupted the thing. He was a perfect gentleman, but I just didn't realize how important he was or was going to be, and has been.

**Interviewer:** *That's really great that you got to meet him. So you've had a great career, but then you retired, and you came to Henderson.*

**Leonard Smith:** I retired early because I lost my vision. I was totally blind for three months, and when it came back, the vision came back in one eye, and I've been blind for thirty years in the other with detached retinas. The company gave me a chauffeur. DuPont was self-insured, so they didn't trust my driving, because I'd lost the eye. But I was used to working ten to two with a long lunch, Mondays thru Thursdays maybe, or out playing golf. I didn't like this fella showing up at eight in the morning and dropping me off at five at night and having me to tell him every place to go and then if I had a customer, go to lunch, I'd have to go in the customer's car and it was a—so after three months, I went to my boss—it was in San Francisco—his name was Ted Van Kirk, he was the navigator on the Enola Gay—so I just told him, "I quit." But I'd been thinking about it for a little while, so I designed this house—let me regress a little bit. My son was operating a hardware store in San Clemente and it was sold. So they took everybody out and hired new. When he cut the staff down, he said one day, he said "If you're retiring, wouldn't you like to work in a hardware store?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Well, let's go together on this. Send money, I'll look for one." So he looked all over Orange County, L.A. County and everything was too expensive. But he did have a friend up here who told him—in commercial real estate—who told him, "There's a place in Henderson—it's a small Ace Hardware—look into it." So Gordon came out, and the fellow was an airline pilot for United Airlines, and he'd sent two of his daughters through college just on

the results of the hardware store, but he wanted out of it. So I came up and he worked out a nice deal—he worked the inventory way down—so I bought it. We moved up here—I designed this house, had it built and then retired, came up and went right to work in the hardware store. We enjoyed that till Home Base showed up, which is no longer here, and they sold hammers cheaper than I could buy them.

**Interviewer:** *Yeah, those big box stores have destroyed a lot of business.*

**Leonard Smith:** So we just gave up at that point. Then as a lark in 1987, I ran for City Council against Andy Hafen and Ben Stepman and four others.

**Sonya Smith:** Charlotte Yakubik and a whole bunch.

**Leonard Smith:** There was a whole bunch in there. I had fun. But Green Valley, there was only about ten houses out there. The rest of this was all dirt roads.

**Interviewer:** *In '87?*

**Leonard Smith:** Yeah. And I'd put a sign up in the yard then drive by the next day and see Andy Hafen's sign in it. And Andy and I were good friends! I was good friends with Ben Stepman. I just did it for a lark, and I spent fourteen hundred dollars of my own money, and they spent up in the thousands, not as much as they do today. So I lost—I came in third—but I was happy. I was glad I didn't get into the Council.

**Sonya Smith:** But we've made good friends after that.

**Leonard Smith:** Oh, yeah. Andy comes up to the house, so we cook him tacos. But I started out though, when I came here, when I moved up here, my wife had been the head of the hospital auxiliary, the head of the P.T.A., the head of this—and I did so much traveling and entertaining at night and so forth, I never got a chance to do that. So when we came up here, she said, "I quit." I said, "Well, I'll try it. I've got nothing better to do." So I used to go to the Planning Commission meetings and the Council meetings. It was better than television at that time. It was like a comedy. It was so crooked. It was unreal.

**Interviewer:** *Tell me some stories.*

**Leonard Smith:** Well, I'm not going to.

**Interviewer:** *You don't want to name names of course! [laughter]*

**Leonard Smith:** Just prior to that, Rosa Herwick—works up here at Century 21, I guess it is—she was checking dumpsters or something, but she came to me and she said, “Would you want to be on the library board?”

**Sonya Smith:** It's only for four years.

**Leonard Smith:** Yeah, and to make a long story short, my vision was so bad as a kid, I was not allowed to read fiction. So I've never read a novel in my life. But I didn't tell her that. So I got on the library board and we started down here in the little one. I was chairman of the board when we built the Gibson one, up where the redevelopment is now. Then for some reason, people would resign or they made changes, I lasted. You weren't supposed to last four. I lasted nineteen years. I guess my claim to fame on that was we had a heck of a time with the City putting this Gibson library in. And then we had a couple of library directors and one was going to quit, and so I called up Joan Kerschner in Carson City, who was the State Librarian, and I said, “Joan, how would you like to be the director of this library in Henderson? We've got two or three now.” She said, “Oh, I don't know.” I said, “Well, I know you just bought a condominium in Boulder City. This is closer than Carson City.” She said, “Can we have lunch?” I said, “Sure.” So we met at the Rainbow for lunch, she went home, came back down the next week, gave me a call and we had lunch again. One of our—on the—I wasn't chairman of the board then—one of the—the chairmen didn't think that she was going to be any good. So I told Joan, I said, “Here's her address, go out and talk to her.” So Joan knew how to handle things, being up there in Carson City. She came back, came over to the house and said, “I got the job.” So she really turned that library around and more or less trained Tom Fay who was a willing student and able. He's done wonders too. But then as time went on, my wife was dying of cancer. There wasn't much I could do, so I wanted to be busy, so I was on these various commissions and boards, and I was in the chamber too. Then this young girl here was on several of the



committees, Industrial Days, so I started the chili cook-off. We had four cook-offs, it was between the Rainbow and the El Dorado. And when it wound up, we had sixty or seventy of them.

**Sonya Smith:** You had four entries that first year.

**Leonard Smith:** So then Sonya and I got together, I met her being a nurse and I had something to do. She was always talking about home health, I said, “Well, what do we have to do to start one?” That was a merry-go-round, but we did, we started it. We were, I think, shocked by the Health Care Finance Administration up in San Francisco. We had to go up there to get our license to get approved. They had two messages for us. One is they wished everybody over sixty-five was dead, number two is we’re not interested in the patients only the paperwork. That was the guiding lines for us.

**Sonya Smith:** They came right out and said that.

**Leonard Smith:** So we started it and we only did Henderson and Boulder City because people from Vegas didn’t want to come all the way through the sagebrush to get to Henderson at the time. We had about twenty-seven nurses working for us in a year and a half. But then after about three years Medicare just wouldn’t pay and I wasn’t going to lose all my money so I said, “That’s over.” We got out of the business.

**Interviewer:** *It’s hard to understand how it’s so complex, and they just make harder and harder.*

**Leonard Smith:** They make it so hard. And that was then! Can you imagine what it is now?

**Sonya Smith:** Our big thing was serving only Henderson and Boulder City.

**Leonard Smith:** We’d argue. She did the nursing, I did the books, and she said, “We’re going to serve that patient.” I said, “They can’t pay. We’re going to serve them? They can’t pay.” Well, we served them.

**Sonya Smith:** We never turned anyone down; people needed to be taken care of. They still do.

**Leonard Smith:** Then to go on a little further, the lady that I—the fellow that I had bought the hardware store—her [husband]—she owned the whole block there, from ten, twelve, fourteen, eighteen, twenty Pacific. I didn’t know that; I thought she just owned the building with the hardware store. So she asked

my son one day, "Would your dad like to buy this?" So he called me up and I flew up here and looked at it. This was before I actually retired and I had just spent my money buying the hardware store. She needed it because they were—cash—no cash, but lots of land. Her husband had a museum in Kingman and this and that. And she had—down in her basement, she had several Revolutionary rifles and a lot of stuff from the Civil War. I saw it all. But she wanted me to buy the hardware store and all the other buildings at the same time. So I borrowed some money and flew around, so I bought the whole darn thing. I had fun renting it and so forth, then I got into a little bit of a pulmonary problem, like a blood clot, you know. So I couldn't make the stairs to collect the rent. So at the wrong time, I sold the darned thing. So if I had sold them in 2006, I bet I'd have made some money—I sold them in 2011 and got nothing. So here I sit.

**Sonya Smith:** But he helped change parking on Water Street too. It used to be people that went to the El Dorado or the Rainbow Club, they'd just park anywhere in front of local businesses and they'd park all damn day. Well, Leonard was instrumental in getting only the two-hour parking, so they would have to move.

**Leonard Smith:** They hated me.

**Sonya Smith:** They did. The people, not the businesses. The businesses were grateful that you were freeing up their parking spaces.

**Leonard Smith:** Then they got the diagonal parking on Pacific, you could just get more parking spots. But up here, we all had dirt roads, so I was the one that went around this whole section nineteen to get streets in. We had people here that had five to ten acres, didn't want to spend the money at two thousand dollars a lot. They didn't think far enough ahead that they could sell one of their lots and pay for the five acres. So by the time we were done with litigation and all that, it was six thousand dollars a person—a lot. But we got them.

**Sonya Smith:** That was fun. Because we were married in '89, and we were still dirt road and Pacific was still two-lane potholes.

**Leonard Smith:** You know when I moved here in '82, Sunset Road was a two-lane road, that's all it was, with potholes and whatever. But I've been working with the downtown redevelopment for a long time and the City was really good to me; I mean, we got along fine. I had the whole façade of that building done—not the way I wanted it—the way they wanted it. It looked like hell, I thought. But they did it, spent ninety thousand dollars doing it. Then I got them to help anybody I got in there to rent, I got the city to give them grants for signage and one restaurant; they put quite a bit of money in it to refurbish it. Working for a big corporation, you think one way, but then you start to work this way and you can just see the corruption and where the waste of money is. For instance, we put a line in for an alley behind the buildings for one extra electric line. The power company charged us twenty-one thousand dollars to run nineteen feet of wire, and we had to dig the trench. Well, we didn't—I didn't—the City did. But that's the way things went. The only other story I think I can tell you is when we built the Gibson Library, there were people involved in that other than the library board but sat at the library board as just people influencing the library board. So they got an architect, and he drew up plans for the Gibson Library—it looked like the Taj Mahal. We had about one third of the money we could pay for that. I know that the City and the library board, we paid five hundred thousand dollars to that architect, and he put it in his pocket and never paid anybody. Yes, he did, he paid two councilmen and a city manager.

**Sonya Smith:** That was terrible, that was a mess. Then it was a nice library.

**Leonard Smith:** It worked our real nice; it was a nice library. But it just didn't—as we grew so fast, it just didn't serve the community. So then we put in the Paseo [Verde] Library over there. I was on the board and I didn't have too much to say because, I've got to admit, I don't know that much about libraries. You know, I try to keep the cost down, that's all.

**Interviewer:** *But you know business. What do you all think about the dramatic growth of Henderson into the Green Valley area and beyond?*

**Leonard Smith:** It didn't impress me that much because when I moved to Los Angeles—I was transferred there in 1953—it was about like—there were little spots, all like little Hendersons around. By the time I left in 1982, it was jam packed from one end to the other and freeways that were two lanes were now nine, and they were still blocked at two in the morning. So I saw it grow there, and the growth here—and I've got to admire the City for the planning they did on the landscaping for the rest of—well, Green Valley, Anthem and all that area through there—it's beautiful, I think.

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, and making sure that there were parks and schools. My only issue with when Green Valley first started, was that they thought they were quite elitist and they wanted us to change our Industrial Days name because they didn't want it to reflect on the plants. Well, why the hell do you think Henderson is here? Because of those plants. So I fought that for like five years. But when someone made their mailing address as Green Valley, Nevada, then they found out that they were indeed in Henderson, Nevada. But that was an area where when they moved in, husbands and wives had to work and children weren't watched after, and they had—the police had a lot of trouble with that area because of that at that time. And it grew so fast, in Green Valley. Yeah, remember?

**Leonard Smith:** Well, I had the Nevada parole office as one of my renters upstairs. Their biggest problems were Green Valley and Boulder City and Sandy Valley—1983—that they had problems with. But then I had to get rid of them because someone said that the poor parolees shouldn't have to walk upstairs to see their parole officer. And they passed a resolution on that so they had to leave. On the other side of the offices, I had the Clark County Juvenile, which I wasn't unhappy to get rid of because they tore the places apart. But that was the same reason for them: those poor kids couldn't walk up the stairs. It's a shame. They could rob places, but they couldn't walk up stairs.

**Sonya Smith:** You have to remember when we first moved here, Green Valley area—Sunset to Pecos—was farmland. It could be homesteaded at that time. We used to drive out on that dirt road and choke to get fresh eggs, fresh vegetables and stuff like that out at the farms because they had the water there, so they could actually grow things. It was taking an adventure to go down Sunset, which like I said was just dirt road then, but you got all your produce and fresh eggs and stuff from that area and it was fun.

**Interviewer:** *I've heard that Sunset was a rolling road, too, but it was fun.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was a rolling—yeah, my sister used to get carsick, and I used to say, “Daddy, drive faster; let’s see if Cathy will puke. Let’s see what we can do!” So the area, it was just small town and then you went out of town to do that.

**Leonard Smith:** I never figured why, but in Green Valley, the water table is quite high, because you can dig for a swimming pool out there, and come out the next morning and there’s water in it.

**Sonya Smith:** There’s underground things.

**Leonard Smith:** There’s some underground stuff.

**Sonya Smith:** But you could tell by the trees. There was the Paradise Golf Course out there and I think Howard Hughes put some money in that area, and did a bunch of stuff. Then of course, Wayne Newton had his place out there and that was great.

**Interviewer:** *But when Green Valley first started, [you recalled that] there was a lot of crime and that’s because there was less police force here?*

**Sonya Smith:** No, I don’t think it was less police force.

**Leonard Smith:** I think it was money draws drugs.

**Sonya Smith:** And they were moving into what they thought was an affluent area, and here were people who were—

**Leonard Smith:** Nouveau riche.

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, and both parents were working, and children ran a little freer. But it couldn't be helped; I mean, they were more expensive homes.

**Interviewer:** *Was this during the '90s?*

**Sonya Smith:** '80s and '90s? Yeah. And then when PEPCON blew, they all were so surprised that their houses shook. Surprise, surprise!

**Interviewer:** *What was your experience of the PEPCON disaster?*

**Leonard Smith:** Oh!

**Sonya Smith:** Go ahead.

**Leonard Smith:** Well, the first blast went off and we said, "What's that?" Then you had three blasts, and the second one, we evacuated everyone—we were on the second floor, at the Home Health—had the second floor as my offices—so we evacuated that, went downstairs—we evacuated, but one of my gals working up there and I were looking out the back window. We saw this shock wave—you could see it coming, and she caught glass all over her face and I caught a little. We ran downstairs, and the third blast, I was standing in front of the bricks, Sonya went across the street—I tried to get the Chinese out, but they were playing cards, so they wouldn't leave—but everybody else I knocked and said, "Get out!" And it blew, and it blew every window in my building out and blew the whole side wall out, knocked Sonya down on top of the manager at the gas station.

**Sonya Smith:** No, no, it knocked John on top of me!

**Leonard Smith:** Well, and I landed out in the middle of the street.

**Interviewer:** *Oh, my gosh!*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, and I was talking on the telephone to one of our partners, and I heard this blast, this shake to the building, and I said, "You know, this is exactly why we need to be on the disaster plan for Henderson. We need to join that team." Well, then all hell broke loose. Then the second one came, and we're running and we're evacuating, and this, that, and the other. Leonard and I go outside, and John

Holman comes out of the back of the gas company and he's limping and holding his leg, so I run over to see if he's all right. Well, then the third blast hit and just knocked us down, and John just landed right on top of me. And he said, "Are you alright?" And I said, "I'll be fine, if you get off of me!" Then one of the nurses that worked for me, we went to St. Rose to find out where they wanted us to go to help with triage.

**Interviewer:** *There were a lot of injuries.*

**Sonya Smith:** There was a nursing home down behind—[to Leonard] what's that casino on Boulder Highway that John Tesh owned?

**Leonard Smith:** Oh, yeah, there at Sunset Road?

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, anyway, there was a nursing home behind there and we went down there and helped evacuate some of the seniors, the elderly there.

**Interviewer:** *Where did they go?*

**Sonya Smith:** They went up to St. Rose.

**Leonard Smith:** Later that afternoon, Sonya and I drove down Water Street, they had it blocked off, but Sonya has a way of volunteering her way to get through places. Everything was boarded up; there was no looting, no nothing. I don't know what happened at the other ends of town, but right through here it was—

**Interviewer:** *I heard they had martial law for two days.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was martial law, but Jim Goff was chief of police at the time. The Rainbow Club and the Eldorado Club let people come in there and at six o'clock at night they locked the doors, they stayed in there, they gave them blankets to sleep, they fed them, and then opened it up at six o'clock in the morning. But Leonard and I just drive up Water Street—my town was gone. Every window was gone. I cried, because my town was just terrible. And the next morning when I got up, and—

**Leonard Smith:** I cried because I didn't own a glass company.

**Sonya Smith:** That's right, you cried because you didn't own a glass company, because hells bells! But it took them no time at all, the citizens of Henderson, to rally and put plywood up, at all. I know the National Guard was here. And the next day, I drove up Water Street, and my whole town was boarded up. It was the spookiest and the worst feeling I ever had in my life. It just, oh, it made my gut just wrench. It was terrible to see my town, you know, my home.

**Leonard Smith:** It was unfortunate for two reasons, one is if that had been Kerr-McGee down here, which did the same thing, we wouldn't be here today. The other one is that they had I don't know how many cars of liquid hydrogen that didn't blow at that PEPCON plant. If they had blown, the whole city would've gone.

**Sonya Smith:** But it was just—and then I asked Chief Goff about looting. He said there was no looting. Everybody pitched in to help everybody. We recovered and then later Leonard—I was on the All-American Cities Committee for the City of Henderson, part of the Chamber of Commerce American League or something for cities. Anyway, we were chosen of the top thirty cities in the nation, and so we end up going to San Antonio and doing a presentation on PEPCON—and that was my project was the PEPCON blast, and then somebody else had the economic portion and another one had the St. Rose Dominican, how the blast affected it, and this, that, and the other. But when you consider that Kidd Marshmallow Company was completely leveled, yet they kept all of their employees on salary as long as they would volunteer, and their hours were managed, they kept it until they opened the plant like, what, eighteen months later or something like that, and only two people did not return to work at Kidd Marshmallow and that was because the place they were volunteering hired them, because they did such a good job. It was like, sixty-thousand hours of volunteering?

**Leonard Smith:** Yeah, it was tremendous. Millions of dollars they spent.

**Sonya Smith:** It was tremendous. Yeah, millions of dollars that Kidd Marshmallow spent to keep their employees and not move their plant out of Henderson.



**Interviewer:** *That's really extraordinary.*

**Sonya Smith:** It was. The whole community was extraordinary.

**Leonard Smith:** I remember the day of the blast, Dale Starr, who was the fire chief, was on his way out there when the third one hit. You should have seen him the next day. I used to have breakfast with him every morning. His face was just—the windshield was blown apart—and his face was just all cut up and his neck, shoulders.

**Interviewer:** *I was talking to his wife Lynn about that and she said that she was in the car with him and I guess she ducked down, but she said she had glass in her legs and the injuries were—*

**Sonya Smith:** She did. Oh, yeah, and my parents—my dad and stepmother—lived in the triangle on Brown Street—they lost a window. That was it. And my mother who lived up on Water Street in the original house that we bought just lost a window. We were really lucky as far as residential places.

**Interviewer:** *Was it because they were behind the mountains?*

**Leonard Smith:** It just depended.

**Sonya Smith:** No. You know, I think it's like when an earthquake or a tornado goes through, there's just some people that don't have any damage. Now, my girlfriend, my longtime friend, she lives over in Hillcrest on Bismarck Street. We walked into her house and I looked, and the whole back of her house was gone. And I turned around and I said, "You don't even want to see this. Let's go. Let's go down and evacuate people and stuff." And they end up—instead of putting a wall back up, the insurance company told them it would be cheaper for them just to add a room, expand it out rather than try and patch something.

**Leonard Smith:** All I did here in this house was lose the drop ceiling in the kitchen, it dropped, and a couple of door jams were cracked. My wife was here and I had a housekeeper here for her. But the house on the next road up, Desert Rose, was thirty-eight thousand dollars' worth of damage.

**Sonya Smith:** I think it just depends where you are, and you know, that FIB Bank or corporate headquarters there on Paradise, they had doors that were pulled off the hinges and stuff, and that's a long ways off. But I guess it's the way the percussion goes out. But we were really lucky. But it saddened me something terrible to see my town—and I consider Henderson my town, and I'm very chauvinistic.

**Leonard Smith:** It didn't take long to come back, though.

**Sonya Smith:** No, it didn't take long.

**Interviewer:** *How long do you think—you said about a year and a half for the marshmallow company to recoup. What about the rest of Henderson?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, they pitched right in, they recouped.

**Interviewer:** *So it was like less than two years?*

**Leonard Smith:** Water Street within two weeks was back and looked just like it did.

**Sonya Smith:** Less than two weeks, Water Street was back.

**Interviewer:** *Everybody was open again? Really?*

**Sonya Smith:** Absolutely! We had a hundred million dollars damage and that did not stop us, not one bit. You have to remember, the people that owned those businesses survived World War II. Why were they going to let a simple damn explosion interfere in their lifestyle.

**Leonard Smith:** We'd seen more than one.

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, you'd seen more than one. That's the mindset of the people of Henderson. At Basic, the Basic on Paseo Verde—what is that called? Well, I call it the new Basic, but where Basic High School is now, my son, my youngest was there and the drop ceilings fell, and he got a little scratch. But otherwise, they all evacuated out to the football field and someone said, "Hide under the bleachers." And Gary went, "Are you crazy? If it shakes, the bleachers are coming down. I'm sitting right here in the middle of this football field where nothing's going to land on me."

**Interviewer:** *I remember one of my friends from college talking about the Cal State Northridge earthquake, and they were playing soccer or something like that in a field and I think that was probably the safest place for them to be.*

**Leonard Smith:** Yeah, they always tell you to stand in the doorway. Heck no, run, get out of the house! Where there's nothing above you.

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah. I'm real chauvinistic when it comes to Henderson and I always have been. I don't buy anything out of Henderson unless I absolutely cannot get it from someone in Henderson. I was so grateful when we actually got a mall here. When Galleria opened, that meant I didn't have to go into the Boulevard Mall; I didn't have to go to Meadows. Why should I put money into that part of town when I can spend it in my own town?

**Leonard Smith:** It upsets her now when they still call it Hooterville.

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, I hate that. They call Henderson Hooterville. I'd like to snatch them baldheaded, whoever says that! As a matter of fact, we had a long discussion on Facebook one time about someone saying Hooterville. I went back, well, there is a Hooterville, New Jersey but there is no Hooterville, Nevada. And we are not Hender-tucky either. This guy said, "Well, I hated it." And I said, "Well, good, then don't bother to come back. We don't want you here."

**Interviewer:** *You were talking about Facebook, do you know about the 'You know you're from Henderson if' [Facebook group]?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, we do that all the time!

**Interviewer:** *You participate in that a lot?*

**Sonya Smith:** We do that all the time. As a matter-of-fact I was quite dismayed to see that they had torn down that yellow Quonset hut in Pittman, because my dad used to go down there in the late '50s and visit with the guy that ran it. His name was Jim Thorpe, the all-American. My dad used to love to spend time with him and go down there. Pittman itself has some of the greatest history there is.

**Interviewer:** *What are your memories of Pittman?*

**Sonya Smith:** Well, my memory of Pittman just was Pittman. But I know the history of Pittman was the fact that it was a place between the [Hoover] Dam and Las Vegas. The guys that were building the Dam used to like to have a good time, they wanted a little drinking, a little dancing. They worked in a government town that didn't have that. And Vegas was way too far to drive in a Model A or Model T. So Pittman was formed. Three clubs, Scotch and Soda and a couple others—big bands used to come there, and they had cottages. When I say big bands, I mean Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey.

**Interviewer:** *Fantastic.*

**Sonya Smith:** I mean, they would come, and the guys would come down with their wives and they would dance and have a great time. But Pittman was the entertainment capital and the only other place to go was Fremont Street, which was saloons and this, that, and the other.

**Interviewer:** *And really far away.*

**Sonya Smith:** And really far away at that time. I know one couple, Phil and Peggy Hubel—and Phil ended up having a business here—Phil played saxophone in the big band and Peggy was one of those sultry singers like a Julie London-type. They ended up staying here and opening a business, Hubel's T.V. and Appliance, whom my dad went to work for when we first moved here. So that's how I learned about the history of Pittman.

**Interviewer:** *And Hubel was a Chamber director.*

**Sonya Smith:** His son Ron was on the Chamber. Then his son Ron coached my son

**Leonard Smith:** Ron was a councilman.

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, he was a councilman. And Ron coached my son in baseball later. But Phil and Peggy were always good people.

**Leonard Smith:** Why don't you tell them who your Brownie leader was?

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, Leonard loves this story about my Brownie leader! We had a lady that was our Brownie leader who lived in Las Vegas, but she would come all the way out here because she wanted to be a Brownie leader. Well one night my dad and I—my dad, who was the love of my life, and I are watching this old movie called the Dolly Sisters with John Payne, Betty Grable, and June Haver or something. It was one of those song and dance things from the '40s. And I said “Daddy, that woman really looks like Mrs. James, my Brownie leader!” And he goes, “Well Sonya, that’s because it is Mrs. James.” I said, “No daddy, that’s Betty Grable.” And he said, “Sonya, that’s Mrs. James.” She was married to Harry James. They lived in Rancho Circle in Las Vegas. She would have us over to her house every summer for a barbeque—you know, the Brownies—and there would be her guests, and later in life I found out that they were Victor Mature, John Payne, Alice Faye, Phil Harris. They were just Mr. and Mrs. James’ friends. And John Payne was a great barbecuer. We were just kids! We didn’t think anything of it. You didn’t know any different. She would be down on the floor doing arts and crafts with us. But she came out of Vegas to do it here in Henderson because she didn’t want any notoriety. She just wanted to be with the kids, which I thought was great. She was a great person. How did I know she was such a pin-up girl! I had no idea.

[break in recording]

**Interviewer:** *There were probably a lot of celebrities hanging around.*

**Sonya Smith:** Well, Frank Sinatra and Sophie Tucker built our youth center. They did a fundraiser. As children, we weren’t allowed to go because that was adult entertainment. But they raised the money and the way I understand it, the youth center was paid for in cash. There was no bond, there was no loan, they did a fundraiser and it was built.

**Leonard Smith:** Sinatra did a lot for a lot of people around here.

**Interviewer:** *That’s really great. Now, how did he get involved in this?*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, someone probably asked him, some city official. Listen, knowing Pappy Swift and Dalby Shirley who ran the youth programs, they probably just went out and asked him. First of all, all you ever had to do was ask. They could only tell you ‘no.’ And I never had anyone tell me ‘no’ when I would ask for things.

**Interviewer:** *Well, the sisters at St. Rose went to Fremont Street and asked the casino owners to donate a car for their charity. That was amazing!*

**Sonya Smith:** That’s right. And Monsignor Moran, who was with St. Peter’s before St. Peter’s was ever built, hit every casino and if someone won a jackpot, he’d say, “Ten percent’s mine!” And that’s how St. Peter’s was built, you know, cash.

**Interviewer:** *How about that. He was clever.*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh, yes, he was a clever, clever—and a nice man. And Mike O’Callaghan helped build the community church and St. Peter’s. He was on the slave detail, the way he tells it.

**Interviewer:** *[laughter] Was St. Peter’s your church?*

**Sonya Smith:** No. I was raised Baptist and Mormon.

**Interviewer:** *Did you have a church, a Baptist church?*

**Sonya Smith:** No, we didn’t at first. Then later it was built on the corner of Kansas and Atlantic. But you went to the Mormon church on Saturday and the Catholic church on Sunday and if you wanted to go to church, you went to any church. I went to any church and I learned a lot. There was just none of this ‘you can’t go there.’ We went everywhere.

**Leonard Smith:** That’s the difference between a small town and like living in New York City where you had this group here and that group there, and one block didn’t talk to the other. You could live in New York City and live next door in an apartment for twenty years and not know your neighbor, never talk to them.

**Sonya Smith:** Here, even now, my neighbor across the street will call Leonard and say, “You need to trim that tree by your office; I can’t see you sitting in there.” Then I’ll look out in the morning and I can see her house, and she can see my house.

**Leonard Smith:** Yeah. I’m trapped in here—because she was out of town one time so I strapped on my oxygen tank and walked out to get the newspaper, which I’m not supposed to do. She calls her back East, “He’s outside getting the newspaper!”

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah, Francis calls me.

**Interviewer:** *[laughter]*

**Sonya Smith:** So that night when I talked to Leonard, I said, “Did you have any problem picking up the newspaper?” “Who told you?” I said, “Francis.”

**Interviewer:** *[laughter]* *Nothing has changed in Henderson.*

[break in recording]

**Sonya Smith:** I can tell you how great the state of Nevada is, also, because during the time when my first husband was in the Marine Corps and we were stationed in San Diego, we had a child that was born with multiple medical problems. And I had worked for seven months to keep this baby alive and I had fought with the military doctors. My husband at that time was an enlisted man, and they just didn’t treat dependents really well. Anyway, we made but one phone call to Howard Cannon who was our senator, and I made one phone call to Mike O’Callaghan who was being sworn in as our governor. And he said, “Well, Sonya, what do think? What do you want me to do?” I said, “Well, you’re a marine. This is a marine and this is his family. You need to do something so my child will be taken care of.” Anyway, as it turned out, I could not get civilian care for my child, they refused it. And I ended up going before an admiral and a general and all of this stuff, and I was just twenty two years old and I wasn’t very mouthy then like I am now. The admiral said, “Well, you can’t have civilian care.” And I said, “What did you say?” He said, “You can’t have it.” And I went, “Really?” Howard Cannon had given me a phone number to call

if this admiral gave me any lip. So I said, “May I use your phone?” He said, “Yes.” So I dialed this number, and I said, “They told me ‘no’—this is Sonya Gibson—they told me no.” And he said, “Let me talk to him.” And I said, “Okay,” and I handed the phone to this admiral. And he went, “Yes, yes sir, yes sir, anything she wants, absolutely, whatever she wants,” and hung up, and my husband at the time was quaking in the corner figuring his Marine Corps career had just gone down the toilet. He said, “Who was that?” And the admiral said, “Vice President Spiro Agnew. She can have anything she wants.” And I said, “You’re damn right.”

**Interviewer:** *That’s a great phone number to have [laughter].*

**Sonya Smith:** Yes, it was. I really don’t know what kind of a politician he later turned out to be, but as far as I was concerned, he was God because he got me what I needed to take care of my child, who eventually died seven months later, but that wasn’t the point. You know, I was throwing a fit. Well you do to protect your family and your children. And that’s how I got interested in nursing.

**Interviewer:** *You did whatever you could.*

[break in recording]

**Interviewer:** *What else would you all like to share about your experience in Henderson?*

**Sonya Smith:** Well, being from Henderson—I was employed by Nathan Adelson Hospice, which is a Las Vegas—

**Interviewer:** *They’re great, yeah.*

**Sonya Smith:** And I was nurse number three. We were just starting out and I did sixty-four lectures a year, I taught at UNLV, and [taught] community college nurses on hospice care. But my most fun was my patients, even though they were all terminal. But I had this one gentleman, his name was—I can tell his name because he’s long passed—Ralph McCann. He was from Mississippi, and he was a porter on the strip in the ’40s. When he smiled at me, all you saw was white and gold teeth. I loved that guy. He was the sweetest thing and he loved me. He told me if he was forty years younger and wasn’t afraid of



getting hung, he'd follow me anywhere. Then he explained to me that being from Mississippi and being a man of color, you didn't really talk to white women or look at white women, which was foreign to me. But his greatest love was boxing, and he had all kinds of posters from all boxers—Muhammad Ali and this, that and the other. Well, he was dying and the goal at that time was to keep them at home as long as possible. But Ralph didn't have a caregiver so he wound up in a nursing home and I wanted to take him to a fight. Sugar Ray Leonard and Tommy Hearn were fighting their first fight, and so I got hold of the guy that owned the MGM. I said 'I want your ring-side tickets.' He said, 'Well, sure Sonya, anything you want.' He was being sarcastic, and I said 'Good, I'll be by to pick them up.' He said 'You're kidding,' and I said 'No, I'm not. I have a patient who loves boxing. He's dying and I want to take him to a boxing match, but I want your ring-side tickets so he really sees. You know, he has good memories.' He went 'All right, okay.' So I ended up having to put Ralph into a nursing home and he couldn't go then.

So being that I am shy and withdrawn, I went to Caesar's Palace where Sugar Ray and Tommy Hearn were training. I walked in to Sugar Ray Leonard's camp, like I knew exactly what I was doing. I wanted an autograph was all I wanted. And I wanted an autograph from Tommy Hearn for Ralph. Anyway, it turned out that Sugar Ray was more than a gentleman and he said 'Let me make a phone call. Where are you parked? Go get your car and bring it around back.' So I did, thinking oh my dear God, okay. Anyway he and the other guy came out of Caesar's, got in my car, I took him to the nursing home where Ralph was. It was Tommy Hearn. They went in, spent an hour and a half with him. Then after the fight, they came back without an entourage, without any paparazzi, brought him gloves, towels, pictures and they decorated his whole room in all this stuff. My boss said 'How did you do that?' I said 'I asked.' All he could have said was 'no,' but he didn't say 'no.' He made the last six months of this man's life special. But working for hospice and living in Henderson meant that almost everybody I took care of, almost everyone lived in Henderson, so I had a connection with almost everyone. It burned me out after a while. Three years was all I could do and that was twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. But I

would just ask anyone, like I said, Senator Gibson, being that my name was Gibson at the time, but I wasn't related, well, I would just walk into his office and they'd let me in to see him. One time, he said, 'What do you want?' I said, 'Money.' [He said,] 'How much do you need?' I said, 'Three hundred dollars.' [He said,] 'What for?' I said, 'I have a patient that needs a glucometer," which is a blood sugar machine, "and their insurance won't pay for it." And he'd write me a check. I'd go out and cash it and buy the patient whatever they wanted. He could have told me no, but he didn't.

**Interviewer:** *You have extraordinary initiative.*

**Sonya Smith:** Well, I have been told—it's been called other things, but initiative is good. I've just found that all you have to do is ask. There was a place in Whitney that was a Sportsmen's Lounge, and this is 1981, '82, so it was just a small little place. I had a patient in Whitney who—they had nothing. They had no food, their power was going to be turned off, they had no phone, they had nothing. So I went and I admitted her. I stopped at Sportsmen's Lounge, and the lady needed to go to radiation for pain, not for a cure. But they didn't have any money for gas, so I walked in and I asked for the owner. He came out and he said, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yes, I need a hundred dollars' worth of your gas free." He went, "Oh, okay, why's that?" So I told him about this patient that was dying of cancer, needed to go to radiation treatments because it would cut down on her pain. She could be transported in the van, but they had no gas. Well, he cried, and he said, "Absolutely, tell them to come. My mother had cancer and I know how hard it is." So when the husband of my patient went over that night to fill his car up, the guy had brought out five bags of groceries and he gave them food, because I had told him they had no food. Then I went back to the office, and I called Hank Greenspan and he said, "How much is this going to cost me?" I said, "A lot. Their power is going to be turned off, and I need you to pay their power bill until she dies, and I need you to pay the telephone bill until she dies." He said, "Okay." Then I made a call to the state and I said, "I need food stamps for them." "When? It will take a while." I said, "No, I need them tomorrow. You can do an emergency thing. I want food stamps and I will pick them up tomorrow."

Which I did, and then Hank Greenspan paid their utility bills, they got their food stamps. We took care of them. And Sportsmen's provided them with gas to go to their treatments until the day she died. All you have to do is ask.

**Interviewer:** *It's amazing how you're able to pull people together like that. That's an extraordinary talent.*

**Leonard Smith:** She can do it.

**Sonya Smith:** Well, one thing is I don't really ask. When I called Hank Greenspan, he just said, "How much is it going to cost me?" I said, "A lot." When I called Mike O'Callaghan, [he asked], "What do you want?" [I stated], "This is what I want." But I don't bully them, I just say this is what I need. I need this done. These people need to be taken care of. They are members of our community. It used to be for years that we would adopt a family on Thanksgiving, my girlfriend and I, and I was single at the time, before Leonard and I got married, barely making ends meet, but we would adopt a family—Betty—and we would buy turkey, potatoes, dressing, anything so that they had a Thanksgiving meal. When my sister taught at Hinman [Elementary School] in Pittman, she taught special needs children. That's an area where the income isn't as high at that time as other places. So she used to do a Thanksgiving dinner and she would buy most of the stuff, but turkey was a hard thing to do. So I went to the Rainbow Club and asked Oscar, who was the general manager, I'd say, "You think you could cook me a turkey?" And he'd say, "Yeah, what for?" and I told him. So I go to pick up the turkey—well, he didn't cook me a turkey. He cooked me three turkeys and he had a chef carve it. They served it on big trays, so they had to carry it out to my car with everything else, potatoes, gravy, you name it. So I would be hauling all this stuff to my sister and then that meant that her kids would have Thanksgiving but they would also be able to take enough food home that their families would have something to eat over the four day weekend. All you had to do was ask and I asked Oscar about one turkey and I got enough turkey to feed twenty people. Just ask, because Henderson always rallies.

**Interviewer:** *Well, and apparently the whole state of Nevada. You got everybody involved!*

**Sonya Smith:** Yes, and I'm not beyond. I had a patient one time who was dying and she was from Columbia. She just wanted to see her brother and sister. Her sister was a nun in Columbia, her brother was a priest. Well, immigration had the nerve to tell me it was going to take six months. I said, "Not hardly." I called Paul Laxalt, who was our senator—I have no shame—I said, "I need these people up here and I need them up here now." He said, "Okay." Anyway, he arranged to have them up there and they were here within a week. They stayed with her for thirty days until she died. They took care of the business that she wanted done and then they went home. All you have to do is ask because other family members know what it's like to go without or to have hardships hit them. Sometimes you just need a little support and Henderson's always given me that.

[break in recording]

**Interviewer:** *Well, it sure has been fun talking with you about all of your Henderson stories.*

**Sonya Smith:** Well, there's probably a hundred more that I can't even think of!

**Interviewer:** *Did we cover everything, Leonard?*

**Leonard Smith:** As far as I'm concerned, but I'd say we could probably think of quite a few more.

**Sonya Smith:** Well, we've just done a lot of stuff.

**Leonard Smith:** She worked for the police department for years. They'd call at two o'clock in the morning, she'd go down to the police department and draw blood.

**Sonya Smith:** And one of the police officers used to sing to me every night. Adam Might, who has passed, he would sing, "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," even in July, he would sing to me [laughter] and I loved it. That happened because I got a phone call from Jim Goff, who was the chief of police, and he said, "How long would it take you to find me four nurses to draw blood on DUIs and get paid per diem?" I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Well, call me back when you've got a few names." So I called him back twenty minutes later and I said, "Okay, I have four." He said "No!" I said, "Yes." He said,

“It only took you twenty minutes?” I said, “Yes, and they’re all good nurses, they’re all clean records, they’ve all been finger printed, and they’re all good phlebotomists.” And he said, “Okay,” And we did that for five years.

**Leonard Smith:** It was interesting.

**Sonya Smith:** It was interesting; I used to love it.

**Interviewer:** *Did they catch a lot of people?*

**Sonya Smith:** Yes.

**Leonard Smith:** Everyone that was brought in, if they were a DUI or drugs or something else, had to be blood tested. And she ran into a variety let’s say.

**Sonya Smith:** A variety. Some people I could have missed and it wouldn’t have been a problem. I did have a reputation though for always showing up for court because even John Marciano would look and say, “Do you ever miss?” And I said, “Nope.”

**Interviewer:** *No, you can’t afford to because then you lose the case, right?*

**Sonya Smith:** He had a DUI and he has to pay for it and no I’m not going to [not] show up.

**Leonard Smith:** There’s a fellow you should interview.

**Sonya Smith:** John Marciano, he knows everything, he’s a good guy. He’s helped us with a lot of stuff.

**Leonard Smith:** He was City Attorney, you know.

**Sonya Smith:** You know Henderson had the first burn unit in the state.

**Interviewer:** *That’s what I heard from Frank Belger.*

**Sonya Smith:** Frank and I graduated in the same year, only he’s older than I am.

**Interviewer:** *He had some good stories.*

**Sonya Smith:** Yes, and he has a different bunch because he went a different path. You know, he became a firefighter.

**Interviewer:** *Was he your age?*

**Sonya Smith:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** *You know he used to visit the hermit. Did you ever get to meet the hermit?*

**Sonya Smith:** I never met the hermit. I probably thought he was some weird, strange man that my dad always told me not to talk to weird, strange men and I did just that.

**Interviewer:** *Belger says when they were going out hunting they'd bring him a duck and he'd share his meal.*

**Sonya Smith:** I heard that they did that. But that was a guy thing; that was a boy thing. I was strictly into a girl thing. Why in the world would I want to be equal with a boy and have to come down? I was on a pedestal and that's exactly where I wanted to stay. I'm planning right now my fifty year class reunion from Basic. We're going to do it in 2015 at homecoming. It'll be fun; we're planning that.

**Interviewer:** *The high school reunions here are really popular. Everybody loves to visit here.*

**Sonya Smith:** They are. But we haven't done one for our class since twenty years. We did a twenty year class reunion and I found out that I went out to school with a bunch of really nice people. And we're going to do a fifty year class reunion and I'll find out I went to school with a bunch of really old people if they're still here. But you have to understand, my class of '65, ten percent of the young men in my class were killed in Vietnam. That's a very high percentage for a small town. Jack Cousins was the first young man from Henderson to be killed in Vietnam and he was in my class. Buddy Lunsman was in the class ahead of me and he was also killed in Vietnam, Robert Ward, I mean there's lots of others, Sonny Hopkins, and this, that and the other. That was a high percentage for a small town.

**Leonard Smith:** I lost almost seventy-five percent of my college during the war.

**Sonya Smith:** In World War II, yeah.

**Sonya Smith:** Even now my classmates, we've had out of a hundred—I think we had a hundred and sixty-nine in our class—I might be mistaken about that—but forty and fifty of them have already died for many reasons, I have no idea. I was going to tell you, one of the big things when I was seven, was to

drive up here to this general area and look towards Vegas, towards Jackass Flats, it was called, and we got to see the above ground testing, the mushrooms. Yeah, that was quite an event that went on here. You had dozens and dozens of cars lined up at pre-dawn to witness this because it was such a site to see.

**Interviewer:** *What was it like?*

**Sonya Smith:** Enormous. Considering we were a hundred miles away, it still was just—for a kid it was just awesome.

**Interviewer:** *Was it a blinding flash?*

**Sonya Smith:** No, not really from that distance. It was very bright, and it wasn't something you needed goggles for or anything like that, being that far away.

**Interviewer:** *Did it light up the—could you—*

**Sonya Smith:** Oh yeah, it lit up the sky. It went up and it burst and it made its mushroom, lit up the sky, then you just saw black smoke and stuff.

**Leonard Smith:** It couldn't have been as big as the one at Hiroshima.

**Sonya Smith:** No, the one where Leonard's former boss was navigator on the Enola Gay, that was—

**Leonard Smith:** He was seventy-five miles away and it almost blew the plane apart.

**Interviewer:** *It's hard to believe they survived.*

**Sonya Smith:** I know and Ted is the only survivor that we know of that, as of this date, we think he's still alive. He makes more money now traveling around giving lectures on the Enola Gay and the fact that the plane was put in the Smithsonian, he went up there.

**Leonard Smith:** He gets about fifty grand per talk and he didn't make that much working for DuPont.

**Sonya Smith:** That was a big thing here, was watching that.

**Interviewer:** *How many did you get to see?*

**Sonya Smith:** Two. I only remember two and then they either stopped it or they went to underground testing. But I vividly remember seeing two, my dad getting us up and taking us up there. That was a big thing.

**Interviewer:** *Even if you didn't see the testing, could you feel it?*

**Sonya Smith:** Not at a hundred miles that I noticed. Nothing that I noticed. Now, my girlfriend's family that lived in Enterprise, Utah, St. George, they felt it. And of course, that radiation is what filtered over that because John Wayne, Susan Hayward, and Robert Taylor were filming *The Conqueror*, which, of my hero's movies, that is the worst one he ever did. But all of those stars, except for Eli Wallach, died of cancer, Robert Taylor, Susan Hayward, and John Wayne, and all of the extras. But see that's what we do as a civilization, we go off half-cocked, we come up with something to end it like the atomic bomb without realizing the consequences that it's going to play. We design Agent Orange as a defoliant to help them fight in the jungle, without knowing the repercussions of what that chemical did. Is that the reason that out of seven children, I only have two that survived? Because the others were born with some kind of anomaly and my husband at that time was exposed to Agent Orange. That's always a possibility. And I have a special needs granddaughter now. Is that because my children's father? You know you don't know. We just do these things without knowing the consequences.

**Leonard Smith:** I only did the orange [dye].

**Sonya Smith:** You only did the orange. Otherwise you're perfectly innocent. Just the color. Ask me something, something that you're just dying to know about Henderson.

**Interviewer:** *I think we've asked just about everything!*

**Sonya Smith:** What about you [directed to Edward Feldman]?

**Interviewer:** *Yeah, because you grew up here, Ed.*

**Sonya Smith:** You grew up here, Ed, what else?

**Edward Feldman:** *I just kind of like to think back about how it was. It's very different now.*



**Sonya Smith:** It is. This side of town doesn't seem to be so different.

**Leonard Smith:** The other side reminds me of Orange County, California.

**Sonya Smith:** But this side of town—my neighbor's mother died about six weeks ago—well, we all took food over. This side of town still does that. I'm sure that other neighborhoods in other parts of Henderson carry on that, but that's just something that you do. This side of town, we still go to the cemetery and put out flags and flowers on Memorial Day and that's another small town thing that you do. And now, my third great-grandchild will be born here in May and that will be another generation.

**Interviewer:** *Wow. Congratulations.*