

Henderson Libraries

Henderson Oral History Project

Joe Hill

Oral History of Joe Hill

conducted by

Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm

April 17, 2014

Interviewer: *Today is April 17, 2014. My name is Anne Marie Hamilton-Brehm and I'm interviewing former Henderson Fire Chief, Joe Hill, as part of the Henderson Oral History Project of Henderson Libraries. Thank you for joining me, Joe.*

Joe Hill: You're welcome.

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

Joe Hill: Well, I was born in Salem, Oregon, and my family in my early years basically lived in Oregon and Eastern or Western Idaho. My Dad worked for a mining company in Steadman, Idaho, and he had heard that the plants were going to hire—for he was working, then he got laid off. So we moved down here in October, 1952, and he was supposed to go to work for—I don't know if it was either Titanium or one of the plants. Anyway, he was going to go to work for them. Well they had a two weeks before you could go to work, and I remember he was out of money, so he worked—went into work for a construction company. Then when the job opened up at the plant he was making a lot more money working construction than he was at the plant, so he stayed on at working construction and that was basically how we got here. Just luck.

Interviewer: *Yeah, a lot of people came because of the work from the plants.*

Joe Hill: Right.

Interviewer: *Yeah. And how old were you when you came?*

Joe Hill: I was, I think I was eight years old, just starting the third grade.

Interviewer: *Okay, so what school did you attend when you came in '52?*

Joe Hill: When I came to school here, at that particular time, it was Townsite Elementary and we were in the Henderson School District. And I went to school there—well, I went to school there the rest of my time all the way up to eighth grade. Then in the ninth grade I went into Basic High School. But it was the Townsite Elementary and every—well my first years there, everybody was together. I mean, the high school—

Interviewer: *In one class?*

Joe Hill: High school was there, because I remember watching the football games. And when I was younger, you know, we would watch the football games, so the high school was still there. I don't know what year it moved over to the new Basic High School, but sometime in the late '50s it moved over there. But we were all one school at one time.

Interviewer: *And did you come with brothers and sisters?*

Joe Hill: I had—when we moved down here, I had one sister and one brother, both younger. And they grew up in Henderson also and graduated from Basic High School.

Interviewer: *What was it like when you first moved here? Do you remember very much about that?*

Joe Hill: You know, being eight years old it was—you know, nowadays if you move here, you know, you recognize the heat. But being young it never—I never even realized it was hot. I don't know why. I guess we just acclimated to it being young. The climate never bothered me. I mean we just—I mean we lived here with no air conditioning.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that amazes me.*

Joe Hill: My parents didn't even have air conditioning in a car until 1960.

Interviewer: *Huh!*

Joe Hill: So our house never had air conditioning.

Interviewer: *Not even evaporative cooling?*

Joe Hill: We had swamp coolers, yes.

Interviewer: *Oh, swamp coolers. Okay, well, at least you had that.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, we had those and they worked pretty good, but when it's 115 degrees—

Interviewer: *It doesn't matter much. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: As kids, in the summertime, we slept outside, you know, on cots and stuff because it was just much cooler outside under the trees and stuff and I just didn't—the heat never seemed to bother me. I never—it never affected anything.

Interviewer: *What neighborhood did you live in when you moved here?*

Joe Hill: I lived on Wyoming right—I guess it's between Texas and Atlantic.

Interviewer: *So that was one of houses that was built by the government, BMI installation, for the War.*

Joe Hill: Yes, it was a townsite home. I do remember that one. When we moved here, I remember seeing the paperwork on it. We paid three thousand dollars for that house. And I

used to go down every month to the Gilbreath Company, which was on Atlantic, and pay them thirty dollars a month for the house payment.

Interviewer: *Times have changed.*

Joe Hill: Times have changed.

Interviewer: *[laughter] What was the house like?*

Joe Hill: Small, you know. It was a two-bedroom townsite home. At that particular time there were just my parents and the three kids and, like I said, most of the time in the summer we slept outside and we all slept in one room. But my Dad eventually added on to the house a little bit so that the sisters had bedrooms and then I had a bedroom and my brother had a bedroom.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay, that's interesting.*

Joe Hill: So it kind of worked out.

Interviewer: *A lot of people added on to their homes. Do you think you had to get permits for that or did people just build on?*

Joe Hill: I don't think my Dad ever got a permit for anything [laughter].

Interviewer: *[laughter] They probably didn't require them back then.*

Joe Hill: Well, maybe they didn't. I know he was always fooling with the house and so, like I say, there probably wasn't even any permits required back in those days.

Interviewer: *I bet. Did any other family members move to Henderson or was it just your parents and sister and brother?*

Joe Hill: No, just us. We're the only part of the family that moved to Henderson. Everybody else remained in Oregon.

Interviewer: *Okay. What was, what was the neighborhood like? Who were your neigh—like, you may not remember your neighbors' names but what kinds of people were your neighbors?*

Joe Hill: All I remember in the neighborhood was a lot of kids. And there was kids everywhere. I mean we—when you walk outside, there'd be—two houses down, there was a family with two or three kids and just kids everywhere. So we always were outside doing something that—I know where today between Wyoming and Texas, they built a senior housing. There used to be some little apartments in there. And there was a big vacant lot and we just congregated in that vacant lot all the time. I mean it seemed like there was always twenty or thirty kids there from all those little streets, you know. They just came from miles around.

Interviewer: *Did you play stick ball?*

Joe Hill: We mostly played baseball and touch football and things. Whatever you could play out there. It was rocks, you know, desert rock, dirt, you know. I mean it wasn't any grass or anything. I don't even think there was a park in the City of Henderson.

Interviewer: *Did you go exploring in the desert a lot?*

Joe Hill: Oh, we roamed the desert. On weekends we were out in the desert almost the entire weekend. It was just what we did. I mean there was nothing else to do except roam the desert.

Interviewer: *What kind of adventures did you have out there?*

Joe Hill: We—I think one of my greatest adventures was this one time—I probably was maybe eleven or twelve—I don't know how old I was—but we decided we were going to ride our bicycles to Vegas Wash and back.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Joe Hill: Well, you know that eighty percent of it is downhill, getting there.

Interviewer: *But coming back. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: We didn't make it back. [laughter] We had to get somebody to give us a ride in a pickup truck to get back. But we always had adventures. You know, we'd go out in the desert all day long and chase lizards and we used to always hike to the top of Black Mountain. It was just a thing on the weekend. You know, eight or ten boys would get together and we'd go up and hike on Black Mountain and just spent all the time in the desert. That's basically all there was to do other than, you know, playing a little baseball or football or something, but—

Interviewer: *Did you ever see any wildlife when you were hiking?*

Joe Hill: Well, no, just lizards and rabbits and stuff like that.

Interviewer: *No close encounters with rattlesnakes?*

Joe Hill: Nope, never saw a rattlesnake ever of all the times we used to—being in the desert, I never ever saw a rattlesnake. Lots of lizards. I used to go out and try to catch those big chuckwallas. But I was never successful at it. My brother, he caught a few of them, but I wasn't much into lizards and snakes and bugs.

Interviewer: *And you have some stories maybe about the hermit.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, when we were—I don't know, we were probably ten, eleven, twelve years old, but the city dump was down there near that and we used to—

Interviewer: *Near Vegas Wash?*

Joe Hill: No, near where the hermit was.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay, he was—he lived near the dump. Okay.*

Joe Hill: Yes, you had to go through the dump area to get around the corner to where his little cave was. But we used to go down to the dump all the time and pick through stuff and see what we could find and one day we just walked around the corner and saw this little kind of like lean-to and up on the side of the hill up there. So we decided to go up and investigate and see what it was and this man was living there. Real nice guy, I mean, he was friendly and he'd tell us stories about how, you know, he was mining in there. I don't think he ever found anything, but he was mining. And so, as we could ride our bikes, and when we'd walk down there, we would, you know, once in a while, we would bring him a sandwich or bring him something down there. Then when we got motor scooters, you know, we could get down there much easier and we'd probably—we'd probably visit him maybe once a month while he was there. You know, take him a sandwich and visit with him and then as we got older and started getting cars and stuff, I think we just kind of quit going, and I don't really ever know what happened to him.

Interviewer: *So he was actually mining in the place where he lived, like back in the mine?*

Joe Hill: Yeah, he had a—right, he had like a little lean-to out in the front and in the back he was digging a hole. He said he was mining anyway. [laughter]

Interviewer: *[laughter]* Well, he sounds like an interesting guy.

Joe Hill: Yeah, just, like I said, I don't know ever know what happened to him. I don't if anybody even does know what happened to him.

Interviewer: *What was it like when you were in Basic High School? What kinds of things were you involved with?*

Joe Hill: When I went to Basic, I liked sports but really wasn't that good at sports. I mean—so I mostly played base—or softball and basketball for the LDS Church. I played in those. The only thing I played really at Basic High School was, I played football for Basic. And one thing though, I definitely was on the 1960 State Championship football team.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Joe Hill: The only time I think Basic has ever won a state championship—we won that in 1960.

Interviewer: *Thanks to you. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: Well, not thanks to me. [laughter]

Interviewer: *What position did you play?*

Joe Hill: Well, I was a lineman. So, yeah, it was a—Basic was different. You know, I mean, we—there was no bussing, so we had to walk or ride a bike or however how you wanted—could get to Basic High School. I mean it was quite a ways from where I lived.

Interviewer: *Well, that's what I've heard, that some people even like would hitch rides.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, we hitched, we hitched rides. I had a friend that lived behind me that was a few years older, he was going to Basic, and every once in a while he would give us a ride to school and somebody would give us a ride or a lot of times we just walked. But I don't—school wasn't my forte. I was a C+ student at best [laughter] so just don't remember school that much. I didn't really enjoy it that much. I didn't like going to school, but it all worked out.

Interviewer: *It sounds to me like Henderson was a pretty safe community back in the old days, if everybody was hitching rides.*

Joe Hill: It was a lot different. I mean, I know times that we would take a blanket and leave on Saturday morning and not come back till Sunday and sleep out in the desert.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Joe Hill: You know, take a canteen with water or cocoa all day and come back late at night.

Interviewer: *Just camp out.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, or just go to a friend's house maybe and, you know, up in the Tract Two area and just spend all day and, yeah, but—never had any encounters with anything. I mean, never even knew about drugs, didn't know anything about Chester or any of those type of people. It just didn't exist that I knew of anyway.

Interviewer: *So the parents never worried about anybody?*

Joe Hill: We never even locked the back door of our house.

Interviewer: *Huh.*

Joe Hill: It was never locked.

Interviewer: *Was there a time that that changed?*

Joe Hill: Not, not when I lived there. Maybe after I finally moved away, but up until the time I went all the way through high school, the back door of the house was always—I never had a key. It was just open.

Interviewer: *Did you graduate in '60?*

Joe Hill: Two.

Interviewer: *'62, okay.*

Joe Hill: I graduated in '62.

Interviewer: *And then I understand that you are an Air Force veteran. Did you go into the Air Force after you graduated high school?*

Joe Hill: Yes, right after I graduated high school, Vietnam was starting and I had—we had heard rumors that there was going to be a draft and so I just decided I would—I joined—I went to join the Navy because my Dad was in the Navy, but the Navy was full. They didn't have anything available at that particular time. They said it would be a few months. And the recruiter from the Air Force was in the very next table. He says, "We'll take you." I said, "Sure, okay." [laughter] So I joined the Air Force and it was a—I never regret ever doing that. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. I mean it was—I honestly believe kids should spend some time in the military. I don't mean go to war, but in the military—because I grew up—I grew up overnight. I mean, I thought my parents were stupid. You know, when you're a kid, you know? Six months

in the military, it's like they went to college, you know. I mean you just grew up tremendously quick. And it was a great experience. I was an aircraft mechanic and I got to spend three weeks in France, so I spent all my time in France.

Interviewer: *Did you learn to speak French while you were there?*

Joe Hill: No, I never learned to speak any foreign languages. But most people over there spoke English.

Interviewer: *Yeah.*

Joe Hill: When, you know, a lot of those countries you—within four hours, you can drive through five or six different countries. And they learn four or five languages. Almost everybody over there speaks at least two or three languages. And almost everybody spoke English to some extent. So it was pretty easy. I traveled all over Europe.

Interviewer: *That's neat.*

Joe Hill: I mean, we saw Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Holland, France, Spain, Italy. I mean, every time we got time off, we'd go on a trip or catch a military flight, you know, over to England.

Interviewer: *Wow, what a great opportunity.*

Joe Hill: I even went to Libya one time. Got an aircraft that was being sent to Vietnam and it had a mechanical error and they had to send some people down to get it repaired, and we were in North Africa for just a couple of days.

Interviewer: *What was that like?*

Joe Hill: You know, all they told us is don't leave the base. [laughter] Stay close.

Interviewer: *[laughter] So you didn't get to see much.*

Joe Hill: No, we didn't see much. Just the air strip and a little building that we stayed in. That was about it.

Interviewer: *Oh well, but you got to see a lot of Europe. That's great. So after you retired from your military service, you came back to Henderson?*

Joe Hill: I did. I came back to Henderson and I was an aircraft mechanic and I wanted to, I did a small stint with the military as a contractor at George Air Force Base at Victorville for just a few months, and that contract ran out, so I came back to Las Vegas. And a friend of mine had a Standard Oil Service Station, and said, "I'll put you to work," but he says, "You've got to work for Standard Oil and they'll put you through school and all that kind of stuff." So I went to work for them and worked for Standard Oil for three or four years, and then I went to work at different service stations around town and I got the—I don't remember—let's see, in 1973, I decided that I'd had enough of Las Vegas and I was going to move. So I decided I was going back, I was going to go to Idaho.

Interviewer: *Oh, huh.*

Joe Hill: Well, it was October. When I got to Idaho, it was cold. I wasn't much on the cold, so I turned around and came back, and a friend of mine had told me that there was going to be a job opening for me maybe in a month or so at this service station. And I thought, well, I don't know if I want to do that. Maybe I'll go back to work for—try to get on with the airlines. And a

friend of mine a year before had asked me to take the firefighting test. And I said, "I don't want to be a fire fighter. I don't know nothing about it." He says, "Just take the test. Take the test." So he bugged me and bugged me, so I took the test and I didn't get hired. So when I went to Idaho and then I came back, believe this or not, we were down playing pool at the Jolly Jug. I don't know if you know where the Jolly Jug [was] at, but it was in Pitman. It's the old Quonset hut.

Interviewer: *I've never heard of it before.*

Joe Hill: We were playing pool and he came in and says, "Joe, where you been?" He says, "You're up for an interview at the fire department."

Interviewer: *How about that.*

Joe Hill: And I said, "Well, I don't know if I really want to do that or not." He says, "Just go down there and take the interview." So I went down and took the interview and they hired me. I don't know why. I didn't know anything about firefighting, but they hired me, and—best thing that ever happened to me. You know, just purely by accident.

Interviewer: *That's great.*

Joe Hill: And from there on it just, I got promoted to engineer and captain, battalion chief, deputy chief and then finally made fire chief. I held every rank in the fire department at one time.

Interviewer: *Wow, so what was it like when you were a new recruit?*

Joe Hill: New recruit was terrible. It was really, really difficult for me because we also took care of the ambulance and we had very, very little training. You know, just basic first aid. The basic thing was just to get somebody in the ambulance and get to the hospital as quick as we could, you know, because we didn't know much and it bothered me. And I was on the verge of quitting about four years in. I was going to quit. I couldn't take it. It just bothered me to see people die and be injured and you couldn't do anything for them, you know, to speak of. You know, put a bandage of them. But luckily I got promoted to engineer and I didn't have to ride the ambulance anymore, so I stayed with it. But it was tough. Until we got paramedics, the life on the rescue was not good. But once we got paramedics in the City of Henderson it all changed; they're great people.

Interviewer: *I had heard that the fire department had had some training in paramedic.*

Joe Hill: We did and but we didn't get paramedics until probably early '80s.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Joe Hill: Up until that time everybody was just EMTs. We would get some of the local doctors who would train us in giving IVs and train—so the training did progress to some extent, but nothing like paramedics. I mean, they're great. I mean, they're like having a doctor come to your house. They're dedicated to that, you know, where most of us were fire fighters. We weren't dedicated to medical. I mean, it wasn't—

Interviewer: *Right.*

Joe Hill: —it, it's like—

Interviewer: *Your job is to put out the fire and rescue people as much as you can.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, medical was not my forte at all, but I survived through it.

Interviewer: *What are some of the memorable events during your career if you'd like to recall any?*

Joe Hill: Oh, I think PEPCON was probably the most memorable. I wasn't even here.

Interviewer: *Oh.*

Joe Hill: I was in Portland, Oregon, at an arson seminar. It was a big arson class, and we turned the TV on and we saw that big explosion that they had photographed from the top of the mountain. [whew]

Interviewer: *Unbelievable.*

Joe Hill: I thought, I thought everybody was dead. I thought, "Holy"—

Interviewer: *It looked like a nuclear bomb.*

Joe Hill: Yeah. I thought it must be everybody that worked there was dead, the fire fighters were dead, everybody. I mean, I don't see how anybody could even survive that. And then, you know, we were sitting around waiting and waiting and waiting trying to get somebody to finally—no cell phones.

Interviewer: *Oh, gosh, right.*

Joe Hill: So we were calling back trying to find out what happened and then we finally found out everybody was okay, just minor stuff and only two people had died. But—

Interviewer: *That was a little early for cell phones, I guess, '88.*

Joe Hill: Yeah.

Interviewer: *There might had been a few really big ones.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, the big ones were out there. We didn't have cell phones at that time but a lot of the people had the ones in the suitcases and stuff.

Interviewer: *Were you with other Henderson fire fighters at that conference?*

Joe Hill: Yes, yes, the three battalion chiefs had went there for an arson seminar.

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Joe Hill: Yep, it was—that was probably my biggest experience, because I—you know, not knowing what was going on back here in Henderson, who was alive and who wasn't, it looked worse.

Interviewer: *Were you trying to work the emergency from your remote location or did you come right back or how did that work?*

Joe Hill: No, see PEPCON was county. That was all in Clark County at that particular time, so the Clark County Fire Department was in charge of the whole thing. We were first responders.

Interviewer: *Right.*

Joe Hill: But then Clark County took over. That was their jurisdiction.

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Joe Hill: And the other, probably the most memorable thing, I think, was the chlorine leak.

Interviewer: *Oh, yeah. Tell me about that.*

Joe Hill: Well that was—luckily the wind was blowing just right; it took all of it basically out of town. A few people were, you know, sick and—but I don't think anybody died from it. All the leaves fell off in Henderson, of all the trees. That's about the only thing that really happened. It was a big leak, though. It was the largest chlorine leak, I think, up to that time.

Interviewer: *What was the plant?*

Joe Hill: It was Stauffer Chemical?

Interviewer: *Kerr-McGee?*

Joe Hill: Or Kerr-McGee, one of the chlorine places.

Interviewer: *They were making chlorine; they weren't just using it in a process?*

Joe Hill: Yes, they were making it.

Interviewer: *That's interesting. Well, I've heard somebody else say that all the leaves fell off the trees and I wonder how people didn't come away without some respiratory difficulties.*

Joe Hill: It was very, very early in the morning. People weren't outside, you know, going to work and all of that kind of stuff. We had a nice breeze that was blowing it away and people that really were affected were in the Pitman area. It didn't—at that particular time there wasn't a lot of people down there, so it really kind of went that direction. So people stayed inside. You know, the police department went around telling everybody to stay in their homes, turn off their air conditioning and all that kind of stuff.

Interviewer: So “shelter in place” actually works. [laughter]

Joe Hill: Yeah, it sure does.

Interviewer: That’s fantastic. Good to know. [laughter] I guess, getting back to—we’ll come back to more of your career, but I want to get back a little bit to your young life in Henderson, talking about people that you knew in town. Do you remember much about Carver Park and did you have friends in the African American community?

Joe Hill: No. None whatsoever. In fact, we were just talking about this, just maybe last year. All the time going through school from the third grade through graduating from Basic High School, there was only one African American ever in our class and he was only there for a short period of time. I think his family moved here and then they moved away and he was maybe only here for a few months. That was it. I didn’t know any of them, didn’t have any race problems. We didn’t have any race. Every—you know, I think we—everybody just thought everybody was the same. I mean, never thought anything about it.

Interviewer: Well, I remember Rick Watson says that his family lived in Carver Park so it was built for the African American community, but they didn’t actually want to live there. They ended up living in Las Vegas and everybody else just moved into the Carver Park area.

Joe Hill: Yeah, I don’t remember it being an African American community, when I was here, anyway. I mean I knew people that lived in—kids that lived in Carver Park who came to school, but no African Americans. So I didn’t even know until just a few years ago that they actually even built that for African Americans. I thought it was just like Victory Village, just another housing project.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Joe Hill: I guess it was built for that. I guess segregation was bad.

Interviewer: *During the war, yeah.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, even after the war, I guess, there was a lot of segregation here in town, but you didn't—I guess we didn't realize it. But it's different here than in the South, you know, we just—

Interviewer: *You weren't thinking about it.*

Joe Hill: I never thought about it.

Interviewer: *Yeah. Do you remember any of the seasonal events in Henderson? In the '50s they had a coordinating committee and we have records of that committee. And I know they put on Halloween parties, there were dances, there were Christmas parties. Do you remember any of those celebrations?*

Joe Hill: I remember a Halloween function. I don't know remember who put it on or what it was. I remember all of the kids were at the old Basic High School football field and they all—everybody in costume and they had a big costume contest and that's about the only thing I remember about that. But I think the biggest thing that we did seasonally here was the Industrial Days Parade and the El Dorado Days Parade. It was on Fremont Street at that particular time.

Interviewer: *So you participated in both?*

Joe Hill: I didn't personally participate in, but we went to them. You know, the family would go to the parades. We always looked forward to the Heritage—or the Industrial Days Parade. It was just the big event of the year. I mean, that was it.

Interviewer: *As a fire fighter, did you participate in Industrial Days?*

Joe Hill: We always had a—we always sponsored an entry to the beauty contest and a lot of times we would have raffles. We would sell raffle tickets, you know, for a cause. I remember one time there was a person—I can't remember who it was or what it was for, but somebody was ill and we had a raffle and raised money for them and things like that. We always had had a fire truck, you know, in the parade. That was about it.

Interviewer: *Do you remember other reasons you might have gone to Las Vegas when you were a kid with the family besides the Hell Dorado Parade.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, back in those days, when you needed to shop for anything, you had to go to Fremont Street.

Interviewer: *Oh, really? The Henderson shopping was not—*

Joe Hill: That's where J.C. Penney's was, Sears, the Electric Company was downtown. I remember riding the bus lots of times with my Mom, you know, with us kids, we'd go down to Fremont Street. She would go shopping or do things. There was some shopping in Henderson, of course, you know. We had Perry's Men's Shop and, and Van Valey's Shoe Store and there was a little market here, you know, that was a grocery store, things like that. They were around.

But the major shopping if you really wanted to do—you had to go to Fremont Street. That's where everything took place.

Interviewer: *So you—I've never heard anybody say that before about the electric company being in Las Vegas. Did you have to go to Las Vegas to pay your electric bill?*

Joe Hill: My Mom did.

Interviewer: *Wow. They didn't have an office in Henderson?*

Joe Hill: Not that I remember. I remember we would go—we would take the bus, because my Dad had to have—we only had one car—he had to have the car to go to work. So we would catch the bus and go down to Fremont Street, and I remember she said, "I have to go pay the electric bill." It seems to me it was right next door to Sears. And she would pay—I guess she could have mailed it, but I don't know if she—went and paid the electric bill.

Interviewer: *Did you ever stop in—I've heard that people would stop at a drive-through and they had like good shakes. Do you remember any of the places in Las Vegas that were fun to go to?*

Joe Hill: No. We didn't go to Las Vegas much other—like I said—

Interviewer: *Just to go to the mall or to Penney's.*

Joe Hill: That wasn't a mall.

Interviewer: *It wasn't a mall. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: It was a Fremont Street. [laughter]

Interviewer: *It was just Penney's on Fremont Street.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, Penney's—I think there was a Sears. There was a few other shops, you know, along Fremont Street there mixed in. But I don't remember all of them. I just remember vaguely riding the bus down there and we'd—my Mom would do a little bit of shopping and I remember when Vegas Village opened in North Las—or not North Las Vegas. I guess it was down on Las Vegas Boulevard. It was the big shopping. That's where you could buy groceries and clothes and like Walmart, you know, you could buy everything. And when that opened I know we went there a lot buying groceries and stuff because there was nothing here. Then I think Vegas Village opened up where the casino is today. They had a Vegas Village opened up there for a short period of time. But growing up here as a kid there wasn't much shopping in Henderson. I mean if you wanted a pair of pants you went to Perry's and to get shoes you went to Van Valey's. Other than that, you went to Vegas.

Interviewer: *Did the teenagers go to Las Vegas a lot?*

Joe Hill: Oh, you know, when we got a car and we could drive, everybody cruised Fremont Street. [laughter] That was the thing you did. You know, you'd go down and cruise Fremont Street and U-turn at the old train station and turn around and come back. Just something you did. And we didn't spend a lot of time there.

Interviewer: *You didn't try to go to the casinos. Sneak in? [laughter]*

Joe Hill: No. Never tried to go to a casino. I just always was into other things, you know.

Interviewer: *Did they have a drive-in theater there?*

Joe Hill: There was a drive-in theater. I don't remember—I remember my parents taking us to a drive-in theater once in a while and I remember going, but I just can't remember where they were at. Doesn't seem like they were too far, but we had the Victory Theatre. That's where we went.

Interviewer: *Right, right, so you had a good theater.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, we always went there almost every Saturday. We went to the Victory Theatre.

Interviewer: *What was that like? What did they do there?*

Joe Hill: They had movies, you know, movies and you always—you had the Buck Rogers serials and, you know, you went back every week to see those. I remember, I don't know what year it was, but it had—when the Rexall Drug was there on the corner, my mom worked for them for a while and I remember she used to give us a silver dollar and I would take myself, my sister and my brother to the theater, buy us all popcorn, buy us a coke, and I was able to pocket twenty-five cents.

Interviewer: *That's pretty good. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: [laughter]

Interviewer: *Those days are long gone. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: Yeah. So we went just about every Saturday to the theater. You know, if there was a movie we wanted to see. I mean, you didn't have choices of eight or nine movies. Whatever was there was there, you know.

Interviewer: *Did they have games for the kids?*

Joe Hill: No, there was no games. You know, you mean like arcade?

Interviewer: *Right, well, not like, you know, not video games, of course.*

Joe Hill: Pinball machines?

Interviewer: *But I heard that they would have the kids come up on stage and they'd, you know, play funny games with them.*

Joe Hill: I don't remember any of that.

Interviewer: *Between the features or before the features.*

Joe Hill: If there was, I don't remember that.

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Joe Hill: It could be.

Interviewer: *I think there was some boxing for kids in town in the fifties. Did you participate in the boxing?*

Joe Hill: I did not participate. I remember it. It was a—wasn't it a police organization or something? It was sponsored by the police department? I remember some kids that I knew, went to school, they were over doing the boxing. I never did.

Interviewer: *And there was a swim program too, I know, that I think they had out at Lake Mead for a while. I'm not sure how long it was at Lake Mead. That might have been before you came to town too.*

Joe Hill: Must have been. All I remember is there was the pool, the BMI pool. I remember going up there to take swim lessons in the summertime and swimming at the pool and, of course, if we could find a ride or find somebody to take us, we'd go to Vegas Wash, and that was about it.

Interviewer: *How did you get health care in the old days?*

Joe Hill: St. Rose.

Interviewer: *St. Rose. Did doctors come to your house if you were sick with a cold?*

Joe Hill: I don't remember any doctors ever coming to our house. Not here in Henderson.

Interviewer: *There were doctors that had offices around St. Rose though, probably, too, right?*

Joe Hill: Must have. I only remember one time ever being sick and having to even go down to the hospital.

Interviewer: *You never had your tonsils out?*

Joe Hill: I did, but not here. I had them out in Oregon before we moved here.

Interviewer: *Oh, okay.*

Joe Hill: So, I don't ever remember seeing a doctor. I remember one time going to St. Rose and that was it.

Interviewer: *So you probably—you only went there once. You probably don't remember any of the folks that worked there, the nuns.*

Joe Hill: No, I don't remember any of that.

Interviewer: *Are there any other businesses that you recall that you'd like to talk about? Do you remember anything about BMI and any other plants?*

Joe Hill: Not growing up, no. The only, the only thing I remember about the plant—I had a friend that lived down in a trailer park in Pitman, and I used to ride my bike down there. And then we would come back up, and there was a river, stream that flowed under Boulder Highway just before Pitman. I don't know where it went—runoff from the plants. We used to get it—

Interviewer: *Ew. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: We didn't know any different. We would get in there, and we collected mercury.

Interviewer: *Wow. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: Yeah! We didn't know it was bad for you.

Interviewer: *Well, you turned out okay. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: Yeah, we used to get it in bottles and stuff and, yeah, the water was—it was cool. It was like a rainbow. It was green and red and—

Interviewer: *How did you collect the mercury?*

Joe Hill: We'd just get down there and dig around and we'd come up with it, and it'd be in the bottom. You know, we didn't ever collect much.

Interviewer: *There must have been a lot in there for you to collect any at all.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, there must have been. [laughter]

Interviewer: *That's very toxic. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: Yeah, it is. We didn't know any different. I imagine that water was toxic. And we were in it, you know. I remember it being colored, green and red.

Interviewer: *Did you ever get burns walking through it?*

Joe Hill: Nope. We didn't do it that much, a few times. You know, it wasn't like we did it every day. I can probably remember three or four times we ever did that.

Interviewer: *Wow. That's interesting. So getting back to your career as a fireman, when the PEPCON incident happened, you said you were a battalion—*

Joe Hill: Battalion chief, yes.

Interviewer: *Chief. And then it was not too long after that that you became the chief.*

Joe Hill: Well, I was battalion chief for—let's see, from '80—I don't remember the exact dates. For about four years I was battalion chief. Then I was a deputy chief for about four years, and then I was chief for almost six. I retired in 2001.

Interviewer: *But you accomplished quite a bit as Fire Chief of Henderson.*

Joe Hill: I think I did. I mean, I think one of my greatest accomplishments was—I remember going to a meeting when the developing started. You know, all the developers started out in Green Valley and on the other side. Dudley Jones was Parks and Rec Director at that particular time and he had some kind of an agreement that they would pay to put parks in. So Phil Speight and Shauna Hughes were—at that time I said, "Well, why can't we do the same for the Fire Department? Why can't we make them build a fire station?" They said, "That's a good idea.

We'll run it by the Council and see what they think about that." So they came back, I don't know, sometime later, and said, "Yeah, we'll write that in." So any of the big developers had to build us a fire station and furnish all of the equipment so Lake Las Vegas built us a fire station, furnished all of the equipment. Rich McDonald built us a fire station and put all the equipment in it. Del Webb built two, put all the equipment in it. So, I think that's, what, four stations? One, two, three, four was built by developers at no cost to the City.

Interviewer: *That's great that you thought of that.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, that saved, I don't know what a fire station and all of the equipment—probably cost three or four million dollars, so you're talking well over a good ten million dollars.

Interviewer: *And you were responsible for picking out the equipment for these stations?*

Joe Hill: Yeah, we picked out the equipment. We got with an architect and designed a station that we could rebuild every time so it brought the cost down. We'd give that to them and they'd have to pay to build it. Another accomplishment I think was pretty good was the Fire Training Center.

Interviewer: *Yeah, that's great.*

Joe Hill: We needed that. The fire fighters were not getting trained properly. So Councilman [Paul R.] Ruth at the time was a real advocate of the fire training and he helped us a lot getting that through and we finally got it built. And it was—at the time, it was a state of the art fire training center.

Interviewer: *What kinds of things did it allow you to do that you couldn't do before?*

Joe Hill: We had a tower where you could do multi-level firefighting. It had gas fires that we could set inside. We didn't have to burn wood and all that. We could go in there and light fires with natural gas and it just made everything safer. We could practice rappelling, just practice the whole entire firefighting skills. You know, we had a car out there that we could burn, so it just made a different—we used to—our training was when somebody'd donate us a house and we'd go burn it, which is not very safe.

Interviewer: *That's not safe for the neighborhood. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: That's not safe for anybody. I mean, this way, the building structure is all—inside, it was metal. We could light a certain fire and firefighters could go in and practice putting it out. There was smoke machines, so it was just much safer for everybody and a lot better training.

Interviewer: *How often do you do training?*

Joe Hill: Well, they did training all the time. It was done every day.

Interviewer: *That's great.*

Joe Hill: We had rookie schools, you know, that they'd go through their training and use the training center. You came out of rookie school, you were a better firefighter than I ever was, because of the training that they got just out of rookie school.

Interviewer: *That's great. Then I think there was some other—I feel like there was something else that you did as Fire Chief.*

Joe Hill: You know, in the time that I was the fire chief was probably the best time to ever be a fire chief because the city was booming. I mean, it was unbelievable. I mean, the city had

money. Money was pouring in, developers were trying to build. So all we were doing is hiring firefighters, building fire stations, you know, getting equipment. It was just—and the training was getting better. Everything was just going wonderful.

Interviewer: *Well, it's great that your facilities and your equipment and the building could keep up with the expansion of Henderson, because otherwise it would have gotten out of control.*

Joe Hill: Well, if the city had to pay for all of those stations and all that equipment it would have got out of control. They wouldn't have been able to do it. They couldn't afford to put the people, the equipment—a fire truck is close to \$400,000. A station is probably close to more than \$2,000,000, you know. So there's no way the city could do it.

Interviewer: *Yeah, so you saved the city all that money.*

Joe Hill: A lot of money was saved, yes, by the developers.

Interviewer: *Very smart. So after you retired, what kinds of things have you been involved with?*

Joe Hill: Well, I took up fly fishing, so that consumed me.

Interviewer: *That's an art.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, I'm a hobby junkie. I can't have one hobby for too long. It kind of bores me, so I've done rock hounding, fly fishing, wood working, you name it. I still do fly fishing and I still do wood working but it—I just stay busy.

Interviewer: *Where do you like to go fishing?*

Joe Hill: I go to Colorado every summer.

Interviewer: *That's nice.*

Joe Hill: And one thing I try to tell everybody that's getting ready to retire from the fire department is number one, don't retire too early, and number two, make sure you have something to do. Not another job for God's sake. You've already quit one job so don't take up another one, but have something you like to do that keeps you busy because I know friends of mine that retired, they got their twenty years in, said, oh geez, I'm going to retire. And they became couch potatoes and they died, you know.

Interviewer: *Because they weren't active enough.*

Joe Hill: Just didn't do anything. Your mind isn't active, nothing is active anymore, you know, you just—you've got to be—have something to do.

Interviewer: *Well, you're pretty active at Clark County Museum.*

Joe Hill: Well, that was very, very lucky. I had a lot of time on my hands and I couldn't hobby everything, so I originally went to the Wetlands, I was going to be a volunteer down there and she said, well, we didn't have any openings right now, but I could fill out an application. She said, "Have you tried the Clark County Museum?" I said, well, I went down there and she said they didn't have a volunteer program. She said, "Let me check for you." So she called them and they said oh, yeah, we'll take any volunteer we can get. So I think that was about 2002, 3, something like that and I've been volunteering there ever since. I love it.

Interviewer: *And aren't you the coordinator, the volunteer coordinator?*

Joe Hill: I am now but I just schedule it. That's—I don't—strictly a volunteer. I enjoy what I do, and anything I can do for the museum, I love to do it because it's a great museum.

Interviewer: *It sure is.*

Joe Hill: You know, and it's the only place that people can go to see the history of Clark County. I mean, that's it.

Interviewer: *I think that what they've done, especially with the houses, the history of the houses in the region is just amazing.*

Joe Hill: Oh yeah, and I love the school tours because the kids—I try to get through to the kids that life always wasn't as it is today. You know, people grew up without air conditioning, people grew up without cell phones, people grew up without computers. All those things, televisions—I remember, I don't know what year it was, but it—I was in high school before we ever got a TV. We listened to the radio. It was a big deal. We all got around as a family and would listen to a radio show and that's what we did, I mean.

Interviewer: *Do you recall some of the radio shows that you listened to?*

Joe Hill: *The Phantom.*

Interviewer: The Phantom, *great.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, and *The Lone Ranger*. I remember my mom would come out and yell at us. We'd be playing basketball outside. Said *The Lone Ranger's* getting ready to start. We'd all go inside and listen to *The Lone Ranger*. [laughter]

Interviewer: *[laughter] That's great. You've observed a lot of changes in Henderson over the years and you've been involved in some of those changes. What do you think has changed the most in the time that you moved here until now?*

Joe Hill: I think just the size. I mean, back when I was growing up here as a kid, I mean, we were just the townsite area, there was no Green Valley, none of that. There was no shopping. I mean, we've progressed. I mean, we're a big city now. I mean, it was just a little bedroom community back then. Excuse me, I could tell you a story. I can remember the engineer—the engineer is the person that drives the fire truck—and the test was, to be an engineer you had to memorize every street in the City of Henderson and where every fire hydrant was.

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Joe Hill: Well, that was simple. There wasn't that many streets and there wasn't that many fire hydrants. *[laughter]*

Interviewer: *[laughter] So it wasn't too bad.*

Joe Hill: It wasn't very tough at all. Today they have electronic map books and everything that they have to use. There's no way you'd know where every street was. But in those days, in the 1970s, you knew where every street in this town was at.

Interviewer: *Well, you sure wouldn't want to depend on Google Maps, either. They'd get you lost. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: No. *[laughter]* But it was very, very small. Very small, I mean, Water Street was it. I mean, we used to cruise Water Street. You know, drive down to the Arctic Circle and get a Coke

and turn around and drive back out and go to the Polar Queen or the Pack Out, whichever it was called at that particular time, and the Frost Top. And Water Street was it for us, you know. We didn't go to Las Vegas very often, you know. Once in a while we'd go, like I say, go cruise Fremont Street, but just because everybody else did it is the only reason we did it. We mostly stayed in Henderson. I mean, I didn't go to Boulder City. Boulder City was like a foreign country. I didn't know anything about Boulder City. I never went there. I had no reason to go to Boulder City.

Interviewer: *It's so close. We think it's so close, but—*

Joe Hill: But there was nothing in Boulder City then either. There was no reason to go, you know. So Henderson was it. Henderson was where we lived and where we did everything. I mean, growing up, that was it. Until I moved away, we did everything in Henderson.

Interviewer: *And then you came back to Henderson. And you live in Henderson.*

Joe Hill: I did. When I came back I bought a house down on Manganese and lived there until I got on the Fire Department and I sold that and bought a house on Tungsten. And I lived in that until I got married, and then when I got married, my wife had house in Las Vegas and she wasn't up to moving to Henderson quite yet, so we lived in that house until we built our house up on Rancho. But I've been in Henderson basically my entire life. It's a few times I've been outside. Most of the time it's been right here in Henderson.

Interviewer: *What have you enjoyed most about living in Henderson?*

Joe Hill: I don't know. It's comfortable. The traffic is—compared to Vegas, it is basically non-existent. I mean, I live on Rancho. If I want to go to the mall, get on the freeway, I'm there in five minutes. I can go to the mall—where I live up there, around Rancho there basically isn't any traffic except early in the morning or late in the evening when people are going to work. Other than that it's just—

Interviewer: *Lake Mead is getting pretty crazy these days.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, Lake Mead is terrible. I don't know where all those people live. I go out to Lake Las Vegas once in a while to teach fly fishing classes out there and I say, "Where's all these people coming from?"

Interviewer: *Or going to. [laughter]*

Joe Hill: Yeah, yeah, or going to. I mean, it's unbelievable.

Interviewer: *Yeah, it's a mystery. [laughter] What else would you like to share about your experience in Henderson that I haven't asked?*

Joe Hill: That's about it.

Interviewer: *Would you like to talk about any of the people in Henderson that you've known and other people, people that worked for the City?*

Joe Hill: Well, all the time I worked for the City of Henderson, I never regretted going to work one single day, because all of the people—I enjoyed working. I enjoyed—it seemed like we always had a good City Council that—we always had a good City Manager. I mean, I thought Phil Speight was a great City Manager. Let's see, Shauna Hughes was a good City Attorney. You

know, I just enjoyed working with all those people. We had a good mayor in Gibson. I mean, I don't think we'll ever, ever have a mayor like that again. And just enjoyed working for the City of Henderson. It was an enjoyable time. Up until the time I retired, I think it was more like a family. It hadn't got to the size and the problems they're having today. I mean, we used to—if you remember Janice Wiese, she was the Personnel Director. She used to have parties. Everybody was there. I mean, they invited everybody. The City Manager was there, Finance Director.

Interviewer: *At her house.*

Joe Hill: Yeah. And Phil Speight would have parties and people got together. We went to the lake and rented a houseboat one time with people from the City, you know. And everybody seemed to—everybody got along.

Interviewer: *Henderson is such a close community, close knit.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, I don't think it is that way now from what I hear. I don't know. I don't work for the city any longer but at the time I worked there, it was great. Very close.

Interviewer: *Up until like the '90s at least?*

Joe Hill: Yeah, well I retired in 2001 and it was great up to then. I mean, I can't say after that. I didn't work there.

Interviewer: *A lot has changed since the '90s.*

Joe Hill: Yeah.

Interviewer: *In Las Vegas, too.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, I think basically the construction and the boom really stopped, what, about 2003 or so, it started slowing down and money started getting tight and things started changing. You know, when things are going good and smooth and there's lots of money flowing, everybody's happy. When that tapers off and goes downhill, a lot of people aren't happy anymore.

Interviewer: *The recession was tough on everybody.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, it sure was. Luckily it never affected me. I mean, my house went down in value but I wasn't selling it anyway so it never bothered me.

Interviewer: *You weren't moving. Yeah, lucky. What do you think about the future of Henderson? What do you see in Henderson's future?*

Joe Hill: Well, I think, not just in the City of Henderson, I think the whole valley, they have to do something about the water. That has to be done quickly. We can't—we've got to quit talking and do something because you can see the Colorado River, where we're at, and if you could—you know, we need to learn from history. They've had these droughts before. You know, it wiped out the Anasazis. And so, you know, droughts have happened and we have to do something. And I think that's the most important thing this valley needs to do, is figure out how we're going to maintain water.

Interviewer: *You know, one interesting thing I noticed about the lake is—Lake Mead—is that you can see how far it's gone down. You can see these terribly deep white patches where the water has receded, but I've seen a picture of Lake Mead in some old wartime photographs, and that white strip was there even then so—it wasn't as large as today, but it was there then. So I think that water has been a problem in this area for a long time.*

Joe Hill: Sure it has. It's a desert.

Interviewer: *We have to conserve.*

Joe Hill: You know, you can't continue building and having grass in the middle of the desert. I do remember when we first came here, so it had to be in '53, '54, somewhere in that particular time, when you drove down to Vegas Wash, that water wasn't there. You drove across onto the other side to launch the boats and stuff, so the water was down in the '50s also. But I don't know if it's as bad as it is today. I mean, we've got a lot more people drinking that water today. I mean, you go back to 1900, there was more water than they needed because there was only 30 people living here, so they didn't need a lot of water.

Interviewer: *And on top of it I think we're selling some of the water to California, aren't we?*

Joe Hill: I'm sure. They got the biggest share of the water. But the valley has to do something or it's not going to be around.

Interviewer: *Well, it'll be interesting to see what happens.*

Joe Hill: Yes, it will. I don't think I will be around to see it, but I feel for the other people if they don't do something.

Interviewer: *Yep. Joe, is there anything else that you'd like to say that we haven't talked about?*

Joe Hill: Nope. The only thing that I can say is that I am a very, very luck individual that my parents happened to move to Henderson because it made my entire life and Henderson's been good to me and I'll always be good to Henderson.

Interviewer: *Well, I think Henderson's a great place to live and I've enjoyed interviewing you today.*

Joe Hill: Yeah, okay great. Thank you.