

# **Henderson Libraries**

## **Southwest Oral History Association Mini Grant Project**

**Michele Watson  
Aguilar**

**Oral History of  
Michelle Watson Aguiar**

**a contributor to the Henderson Oral History Project**

**conducted by Fredric Watson and her grandchildren for the  
Southwest Oral History Mini-Grant and the Henderson Historical  
Society**

**June 3, 2015**

**Henderson, Nevada**

**Fredric Watson:** *Good Afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, today is June 3<sup>rd</sup>. My name is Rick Watson. I'm the Director with the Henderson Historical Society and we are here collecting an oral history from Michelle, the actress, Watson Aguiar. And assisting me today, her grandchildren, Josh and Maddy, who attend school in this neighborhood. For our first question I'm going to ask these children's grandmother to tell us about her early life in Henderson: where she was born, who her parents were and maybe just kind of set the stage for Henderson of the 1950's.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Okay, I was born in Henderson, Nevada, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1950. My Mom was Madeline Watson and my father was Clyde Watson. He worked at the casinos downtown at the Boulder Club and later The Horseshoe. I was born at St...it wasn't even St. Rose at that time. It was Rose de Lima Hospital. When I was two years old I broke my femur bone and ended up back in the hospital for three or four weeks. And one of my earliest things that I remember was Sister Marie Daniel sitting with me. They would take the patients out onto the grass of the hospital and we would...she would have me lay on a lounge out there and covered with a sheet. And so I think they believed that the patients needed the fresh air, which was probably a good thing. And her...she taught me how to sing "Oh Susanna" and she was well known down in the area. She delivered, helped deliver most of the babies, including me. And these grandkids' mother, she helped deliver her too 26 years later. When I was a little girl I went to...when I was five years old I went to Basic Elementary School which is now Gordon Cobb school and I rode a bus to school part of the time. It would pick me up on the corner of Victory and Atlantic and take me up to Basic Elementary, which was probably three blocks away. It wasn't very far at all. Then that was the end of my bus riding because after that I went to St. Peter's Elementary School. They called it grade school at that time, St. Peter's Grade School on Boulder Highway right next to St. Peter's Church. I went there from first grade through eighth grade and then I went to high school at Gorman High School in Las Vegas for high school, and then UNLV as a college student.

**Fredric Watson:** *Um, we talked to her earlier, Maddy has a question.*

**Maddy:** *Where did you live?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I lived on Victory Road, which is in the old part of town. It's the street that runs just parallel to what is now Lake Mead Parkway. Lake Mead Parkway had lots of names when I was a kid. When I was real little it was BMI Road and then it was Frontier Road and then I think next was Lake Mead Road and then they started calling it Lake Mead Parkway. And Lake Mead Parkway is right where Target is and, and our street was...ran parallel with that. And where Target is now there was a big Titanium Field. It was a big park where we used to have carnivals and there was baseball field there. My friends and I would go down there and, and play baseball a little bit. We weren't much baseball players but sometimes we'd run down there. And the prime ball was always there which made it fun. We could just run across the alleyway through some people's, through the houses there and then across Lake Mead Parkway. We'd just run across. Right now there's so much traffic you'd have to go to the

light to cross because you'd get killed. But in those days we could just look for a place and run across the road.

**Fredric Watson:** *You mentioned when you were a year and a half, two years old, breaking your femur bone, would, would you tie that, that incident to current events. Here our Secretary of State has broken his femur bone in a bicycle accident. How do you think that the treatment for your injury and the treatment for his injury would differ over all these years?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Well, I'm not sure what the treatment is now but in those days I was in traction and we've got pictures of me at...sorta laying in the hospital bed...

(Someone sneezing)

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** ...and they put both of my legs up and they have weights and pulleys to make sure that my legs, you know, stay stationary, I guess. And, and I've got pictures of me laying in the hospital. You couldn't turn, I couldn't turn over. I don't know how long I was in traction but I was in the hospital probably three or four weeks that, during that time, until they could cast the legs. And then they put a cast from around my waist and down both legs to make sure that they kept my legs even, I guess. And, and, uh, I didn't walk with a limp when...and that was something Mother attributed to Sister Marie Daniel too. The doctor at that time wanted to put a pin in my leg and he, Sister Marie Daniel talked the doctor out of it and saying it would probably kill me if they put a pin in my leg so they didn't do that. And, uh, I don't know what the treatment is now but I'm sure he's probably in worse shape than I was because he's a lot older. Being two years old it's a lot easier to break a leg than, than when you're seventy.

**Fredric Watson:** *What were your, what was your work experience with graduation from high school? Did you work at all when you were in high school?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I didn't work in high school. I worked, I babysat. I started babysitting when I was about twelve years old and babysat all through seventh, eighth grade. We didn't call it junior high in those days. Grade school was first grade through eighth grade. So I went right from grade school to high school and I babysat. And then when I got out of high school, when I graduated from high school, I went to UNLV and during that time I worked at a fast food restaurant called the Frost House, which was on the corner of Lead and Atlantic. And it had a rotating root beer mug on top. And I always wanted to be a carhop but I worked inside. My talents were more appreciated on the inside, I think. And it was pretty fast with helping the cook with what she needed and then delivering the order to the window. And then I went to UNLV and during that time at UNLV I started working the, at the Central Telephone Company downtown Las Vegas. And during that time I didn't have a car and so I would ride the bus in to Central Telephone Company. The bus would come right down my street on Victory Road, pick me up in front of the house, which also I did that when I was a senior in high school. I would ride the bus back and forth to Gorman.

**Fredric Watson:** *Where was that? The Central Telephone Company?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Central Telephone Company was...at that time it was, on, on Fifth Street and just up from Fremont. And then after I worked there for a year or so, we moved over to the old Sears Building, which was Sixth and Fremont. Sears had closed down and they made it into the telephone company.

**Fredric Watson:** *I try to remember, where the Container Park is...*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Yeah, close to the Container Park now. And then after Centel sold out they, they became Metro, Metropolitan Police Department Records. That was their records division there.

**Fredric Watson:** *You, you'd mentioned babysitting. Who were some of the families you babysat for?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Oh, I babysat mostly for my sister's friends who were all young mothers at the, at the Henderson Telephone Company. So I babysat Kathy Franklin's kids. At that time it was Kathy Warren. She had three kids. I babysat for Vicki Glenn and Lisa...I babysat for Dee and Lee Farrell's kids. She, they had four kids. They lived on Silver Street, which was close by to my house. I was not crazy about babysitting.

**Fredric Watson:** *Do kids have babysitters? I mean your grandmother babysits you quite a bit but do you ever have a babysitter come and, and watch you?*

**Maddy:** *We, we usually have our cousins.*

**Fredric Watson:** *Your cousins, huh? How old are they?*

**Maddy:** *Um, one is in high school and middle school and elementary school.*

**Fredric Watson:** *Yeah, right, yeah, yeah.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** And I made fifty cents an hour babysitting. And I think the kids now make probably ten dollars an hour, at least, maybe more.

**Fredric Watson:** *So our families in those days had quite a lot of influence in the telephone business. What, what was our phones different when you were a little girl from what they are today?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Well, there's our phones that even if the...in the telephone company when I was there were the dial. You'd...it had a rotary dial it and each of the little numbers were or each of the finger holes were labeled with numbers and you'd dial and then click back and then you'd dial another number and it would click back and...I never worked on the switchboard. I did office work. I worked in the engineering department.

**Fredric Watson:** Now when your sister worked for the phone company, I have some pictures and it looked like it was the old fashioned where you pulled the plug and then...

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Yeah, and then this...yeah, I had an office job so that's why I used the, just the regular rotary phone but Toni did use the switchboard where you did use the plugs and.

**Fredric Watson:** *Who were some of the names of the managers and owners of the phone company in Las Vegas that you can remember?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Well, I worked for Eddie Pinion, who was from a well-known family in Las Vegas. There was several Pinions around town and the Pinions kids went to Gorman High School with me. That wasn't how I got to be working for him but the Pinions. And then there was a...

**Fredric Watson:** *Do you remember the names of the ...?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Yeah, Walt...shoot...Geary, Walt Geary was the president of the telephone company at that time and his kids also went to Gorman.

**Fredric Watson:** *All right. So then you'd after having worked at the phone company for a period of time you decided to go back to school...*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I had already been to school for a year and then I took a year off and worked at the telephone company. I continued to work there part time while I went back to school and it took me a little longer since I was working and going to school. And when I finished there then I, my last year I student taught and then I taught for three years before my kids were born. Maddy?

**Maddy:** *What school did you go to?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I went to, I think I already said I went to Basic Elementary for kindergarten and then I went to St. Peter's Elementary through grade school from first grade to eighth grade.

**Fredric Watson:** *I think she used to...maybe you were referring to what university you went to.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Oh, were you talking about college?

**Maddy:** *Yeah.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I went to UNLV.

**Maddy:** *Hmmm.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** For college. But it wasn't UNLV at that time. When I started it was called Nevada Southern University. So it was NSU. And I went there and I think in my junior year it became UNLV, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

**Fredric Watson:** *How has that school changed since you were a student there?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Oh, it's changed dramatically. When I was there, there was three buildings for class, well, the administration building and then two classroom buildings and then the library and that was all. There was Rite Hall, Grant Hall, Frazier Administration Building, I believe, and then the Library.

**Fredric Watson:** *The City of Henderson Archive had some really good aerial photos of, of the Nevada Southern and UNLV University.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** And that was the gym too. We would go into the gym for P. But it was relatively small. You could drive up and pull right up in front of your classroom practically, right in front of the Administration Building and then there was...you know, I keep hearing about all the parking problems at UNLV. That was not a problem in those days. There was one dorm and some of the kids from Boulder City actually, because it was quite a drive for them, every day they would stay in the dorm. So my only time I ever saw the dorm was when I went with my friends from...we were doing a project together...sometimes I'd go over to the dorm and talk to them in their cl...in their dorm room.

**Fredric Watson:** *Did you know what you wanted to do right away when you enrolled at school?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** No, not at all. In fact, but they...you had to declare a major right away and since there was so many education people in my family I declared education and I never really did decide what I wanted to do. I ended up, keep, kept going through and graduated and taught a few years and then I had my kids and so then I quit teaching at that point.

**Fredric Watson:** *What school did you teach at?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I taught at Jean Ward Elementary School, which was...it was by the airport, not far from the airport near Linden, well, Tamaris and Hacienda right off Maryland Parkway.

**Fredric Watson:** *Who was your principal in those days?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Uh, Neil Twitchell was my principal when I was teaching and then later he became the principal at Gordon Cobb, which is where your Mom and your Aunt Laura and your Uncle Bruce went to school. Is that Josh?

**Josh:** *Um, like, what, um, stuff did you have when you were a little kid and compared to now?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Um, to play with?

**Josh:** *Like at school.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Oh, at school? Um, our play, when I was at St. Peter's school, the playground was not paved. It was all dirt and rock. It was just like if you went out here to the

desert to play behind you, behind your wall. It was just rocky and dirt and there was swing, a swing set, and a teeter-totter and a merry-go-round, wooden, with a wooden circle with bars on it where you would hang on and somebody would just run real fast and they could go round and round and everybody would jump on or jump off. Pretty dangerous. Now they would not allow it. Nothing was covered. There was no shades over anything. There was no rubberized mat to fall on if you came off the slide or the swings...oh, there was a slide too. And nothing was covered to with the slide, the slide would get really hot. The swings would get hot and if you happened to come down hard after one of those you would just land in the gravel. We had a lot of scraped knees, a lot of bloody, bloody legs in those days. We'd go back into the classroom and our shoes would be filthy and our legs would be covered with dirt. Sometimes we'd have to stop in the bathroom and clean ourselves up because we'd be bleedin'.

**Fredric Watson:** *You know, the St. Peter's school has a big collection of old black and white photographs and I was looking at some of those and the kids' shoes in those pictures are dusty and beat up and you can tell that they played in really rough environment.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** And we all wore leather shoes. We didn't, couldn't wear tennis shoes to, to school and most of the time we didn't even have tennis shoes. I wore saddle ox...saddle oxfords, black and white saddle oxfords and they were always filthy, dirty. I would usually polish them on Sunday but they would be pretty dirty the rest of the time.

What was your, what was your starting pay as a teacher in, what year was that? 1979?

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** 19...I started in the, in the winter of '74.

**Fredric Watson:** *You started mid-year?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** The teacher...midyear...I had student taught the first semester in '73 and then the teacher next door to me from where I student taught was leaving town. Her husband had gotten transferred so I took over her classroom in February of '74. And I got paid once a month, \$500 a month, and starting salary was \$7,600. I think it averaged out to \$7,600 a year because I was paid on a twelve-month schedule. And I thought that was just a huge amount of money. My, uh...

**Fredric Watson:** *(Chuckling) How much had you been paid before?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Oh, at the telephone company I was making \$2.22 an hour. So, um, yeah.

**Fredric Watson:** *That was minimum wage probably or was there such a thing as minimum wage?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I think that...yeah, there was a minimum wage but, you know, it was...actually, I remember Mr. Pinew apologizing to me when he said, he said, "You know this job only pays \$2.22 an hour and I'm sorry". And I was just thrilled because at the Frost Hop I was making a dollar and a quarter an hour. So I was thrilled with, uh, um, the \$2.22.



**Fredric Watson:** *Hey, kids, this is important because that's, that's the issue right now at our Legislature and all over the country are debating whether or not we should raise the minimum wage to what, about...?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Fifteen.

**Fredric Watson:** *Fifteen dollars an hour'd be typical around the country. So having minimum wage of \$1.25 and \$2.20 at the phone company.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** But when I was getting \$500 a month teaching I was thrilled with that too because I was, we were able to put that away. My husband was working part-time and we got the GI Bill because he was going to school and the GI Bill paid \$150 a month which was just exactly what we needed for our rent. We rented an apartment across from the street from UNLV. And so we lived off of what he made at his part-time job and paid the rent with his GI Bill and then could bank that \$500 a month, which became, which enabled us to buy a house fairly quickly. My, our first house cost \$20,000, \$28,000 in 1974, right after, shortly after I started teaching.

**Fredric Watson:** *What kinds of benefits did you accrue from your jobs at the Frost Hop and then the phone company and then as a teacher.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Well, nothing at the, at the, at the Frost Hop or the telephone company because I was only a part-time...well, even when I worked there full-time...I did work there full-time for one year...I don't think there were any bene...I don't remember getting any insurance. Of course, I was 21. I wasn't too concerned about insurance. But at the school district, of course, I got insurance and I actually accrued some retirement benefits. A PERS, which I didn't appreciate at the time and the minute I quit teaching I cashed that out. \$900. Maddy, do you have a question?

**Maddy:** *Josh does.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Josh?

**Josh:** *I know we were talking about school tomorrow. What did you have in, in, like, the classrooms and...*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** In the classroom when I was in school at St. Peter's? Um, We had a chalkboard that went across the front of the classroom and across the side, big, long chalkboards 'cause all the work was done on chalkboard. The teacher would put everything up there when she was having us practice our math or our English. We would go up, she would call the rows up one at a time, and we would do our math work and a lot of our English work on the board and she would correct it right there in front of the other kids. And then she would call another row up. We also had a lot of work on paper but so that everybody could see what we were doing and maybe learn from our mistakes, they would wat...most of the stuff was done on the chalkboard. No carpeting in the classroom. No drinking fountains in the

classroom. No bathrooms in the classroom. There was a cloak room across the back where we would go in. There was hooks, we'd all hang up our coats or sweaters if we had to wear them and put our lunchboxes on the shelf there. There was no lunchroom. We didn't have a lunchroom in, in our school. Kids would either go home and eat their lunch or they would eat at their desk during the lunch hour. And we had a thing called oil. Everybody had a piece of oilcloth which was kind of like a piece of plastic. It had felt on one side and shiny stuff on the top and we would...everybody was required to bring one in their lunch box. And you'd set it across the top of your desk and eat there. And we would buy...usually at lunch you brought a thermos, which thermoses were kind of a pain because they broke a lot. If you dropped it, it was glass inside and it would break. So most people would buy their milk from the, the school. Anderson Dairy would deliver milk and ice cream to the school every day. And so we would go into a little closet area or storage room and buy the milk, and buy a little carton of milk for a nickel. And they would keep it in the freezer in the storage room and then at lunch time the older kids would sell the milk and sometimes ice cream and candy afterwards when we were out playing on the playground. We could either get ice cream or candy from, from the kids that were selling it. We all had recess together. I think everybody ate at the same time and everybody took recess at the same time. The older kids played on one playground where they could play basketball or...and they were rougher. And then they'd keep the little kids back where, where the, the merry-go-round and the slide and the swings were. Those were for the little kids, first through fourth and then fifth through eighth were on the bigger playground where they had basketball hoops and had areas to sit and talk and stuff. Maddy?

**Maddy:** *What street did you live on?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** I lived on Victory Road which is the street just runs parallel with Lake Mead Parkway and Lake Mead when I was a little girl had a lot of different names. When I was real little it was called BMI Road for Basic Magnesium Incorporated and then it became Frontier Road and then I think it was, after that it was Lake Mead. It might have been called Vegas Wash Road in there sometime too, maybe before, even before Frontier. And right where Target is? You know where Target and that shopping center is? That's Lake Mead. And then the next road up from that is Victory Road. And most of the town was between Lake Mead or where like Lake Mead Parkway is now and Gordon McKay Elementary School and most of the town was right in that area.

**Fredric Watson:** *That house, when was the house that you were raised in for most of your, your childhood built?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** It was built in, or we moved into it in August of 1952. When I was born actually I was...mother and daddy and my brothers and sister were living on Tungsten Road and then they built the newer house, which we've always referred to as the newer house, were built in 1952. And actually when my family moved into that house in 1952, I was in the hospital because I had broken my leg, my femur bone. So they moved in while I was in the hospital.

**Fredric Watson:** *As I recall, you spent a lot of time on the floor recovering. You were in that heavy cast.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Yeah, they...um, that casts at that time were made out of really heavy material called plaster of paris and I had a cast down both, all the way down one leg and half way down the other leg, and it had a bar across right about where my knees were. So that I could be picked up under my shoulders and by the bar. And so, so that I, they didn't...my mom and dad didn't have to worry about me falling out of bed and maybe injuring myself and breaking the cast, I would...they put a mattress on the floor and had me sleep on the floor until the cast was removed. Which I think was several weeks.

**Fredric Watson:** *Let's jump ahead in time again and talk a little bit about your varying work experience. You, you were a teacher, you worked for the phone company, you worked in the fast food industry as a youngster. You had several other jobs in your lifetime.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** When the kids, when the kids were small I went to work part-time at St. Peter's Church directing the religious education program and I did that for sixteen years and then after that I went to work for the City of Henderson, first as part-time as a floater. They just put me where they needed me which really turned out to be a good job because I worked, for the first year I worked almost full-time, part-time basis but they kept me working pretty much full-time during that time filling out for people who were on maternity leave or out on sick leave or just extra help that they needed. Once I got to know a lot of the people within the City, everybody was so good and as, as they knew me, every time a new job would come up, they would say, "You've got to apply for this". And so I eventually worked my way into the Police Department and became a secretary within the Police Department and I worked there for sixteen years before I retired in 2012, '13, 2013.

**Fredric Watson:** *Who was the pastor at St. Peter's during that time that you were...?*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** When I was working there it was Father Caviglia at St. Peter's in Henderson, NV, was the pastor and then he retired in 1994 and shortly before I left there and went to work at the City.

**Fredric Watson:** *What are your remembrances of Cesar Caviglia? He was, he was quite a personality.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** He was, yeah, a very dynamic personality and, and, uh, did a lot for the community. He was that, at one time he was President of the Chamber of Commerce. He got the Senior Citizen Center going. He was really concerned about seniors having adequate food and housing. So he ran a lot of things out of the old school. The school had closed down in 1970 so we had this big facility over there that was only being used part-time for religious education, so during that time he got a senior program going in one of the classrooms and they installed a kitchen where Meals on Wheels could be prepared and they had one classroom set up with tables and chairs so the seniors could go over there and have a good lunch. And

another room set up with arts and crafts and just a place where the seniors could sit and visit and in that...when that was outgrown they moved out to a portion of what was now City...at the area that the Police Department's actually sitting on. It was part of the old junior high and they put a big kitchen out there and an area room for seniors. And so he got that going. He also started the Community College. Community College was already going in Las Vegas. And, but he thought Henderson should have a campus because it was so many people out here that were working and it was hard for them to travel into Las Vegas for the classes. So he got that going and used some of the classrooms at St. Peter's, some of the old classrooms up at the Townsite Elementary, what had been Townsite Elementary, used those classrooms and he got the...the idea was so that the working person that hadn't been able to go to the University could take classes in their evening hours and get at least an associates' degree so that that would lead to better wages for them, better earning potential and a better job for them. Henderson had a really low college graduate level or statistics here were pretty low for graduates so he felt like it was important, especially for these people that were working, to be able to get a college education.

**Fredric Watson:** *Father Caviglia's history is interesting just as was Peter B. Moran, who was the parish priest at St. Peter's some time before Father...*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** St. Peter's had always been a big part of the community. Father Moran came here as the first pastor. The government had, had a need to build a couple of churches because the workers here at the plant needed, they needed to, you know, something for their spiritual life. So they built a Protestant church and a Catholic church and Father Moran was called on to be the pastor of the Catholic church, St. Peter's and then Community Church was, was a Protestant church. Father Moran was also really helpful in getting people...in fact, he helped find a home for our family before I was born. My parents were in Las Vegas and had no place to live. The war had ended and a lot of the housing was being taken up by returning military people. Housing was shortage, or there was a shortage of housing so Father Moran sent them out...or someone, a priest in Las Vegas had sent my mom out to speak to Father Moran, who got them housing in the old Carver Park area, which had been vacated by a lot of the workers at the, at the plant. The Dam didn't need them anymore and so they were renting to regular Henderson residents. And that's where they, the family started as residents of Henderson in Carver Park.

**Fredric Watson:** *Having essentially seen them, you know, Henderson residents, it seems like a good many of them knew really important people in the political world and influential people in industry and business.*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** When I was going through the, all of the archives over at St. Peter's during my time there, they were just stored in boxes and so we were sorting through that and we found lots of letters from, from Father Moran back and forth between he and Pat McCarran, who was a senator and different people in government, where, how he managed to (missing info from first interview tape) picture of the hospital and the church for, for the residents of

Henderson. The hospital would have been closed down. It was a BMI hospital. It was linked to the plant, the plants. So he was a major reason why he, why the hospital remained operating in Henderson. He got the Dominican nuns to come out from Adrian, Michigan to run the hospital and it cost the city a dollar. He purchased the hospital for a dollar. And the church, I think, also for a dollar.

**Fredric Watson:** *Umhmm. Umhmm. Yeah. I'm, I'm thinking, too, this, just, just ordinary citizens in Henderson were, too darn good many of them, could claim that they knew younger at this stage, or...*

**Michelle Watson Aguiar:** Yeah, it was such a small state that the senators and governors were, you know, were often, you know, going to, to all the towns in Henderson, or I mean in the state. So regular citizens saw them probably regularly.

**Fredric Watson:** *Umhmm. Okay, let's, let's just call a recess now.*