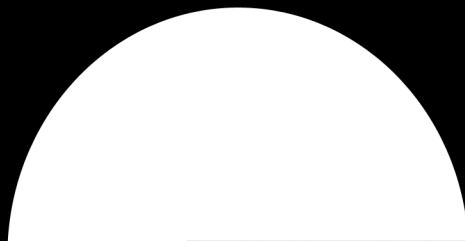
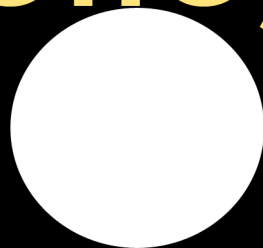


**Nevada State
College**



**Undergraduate Oral
History Project**

Oral History of Ethel Callahan

An Interview

Conducted by

Karen Schank

November 9, 2010

Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project

Produced by:

Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project

Department of History, Nevada State College 89002

Directors: Peter La Chapelle, Ph.D. and Kate Hahn

Project Manager: Melissa S. Stoner

Project Assistants: Noelle Cruz and DyAnne Wagner

Any element within, including, without limitation, text, logos, graphics, images, photographs, multimedia features, or other likeness or materials may be republished, reposted, retransmitted, or redistributed without the prior consent of Nevada State College. Nevada State College and Nevada State College Libraries requests acknowledgement whether the use is oral, web or in print. Commercial use of any portion in this material requires permission. For further information please contact Nevada State College Library: <http://nsc.edu/2744.asp>

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

Oral History of Ethel Callahan

An Interview Conducted by Karen Schank on November 9, 2010

Ethel Callahan (nee Bleak) was born in St. George, Utah, April 3, 1929 to parents Ivy Mae and Harry Bleak. Ethel grew up in St. George where she worked at the local swimming pool and movie theater. Ethel met her future husband, George "Ray" Callahan, in a diner when she was 15. Ray proposed to Ethel on their first date and married in 1944 when Ray returned from the Navy.

In 1948 Ethel and Ray moved to Henderson, Nevada. Ray had a career as a firefighter with Basic Management Incorporated and then City of Henderson after its incorporation in 1953. Ethel worked with Clark County School District, as an election poll worker, and volunteered with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

Ethel Callahan: And you already talked to him.

Karen Shank: Yes, I got your name from him.

Ethel Callahan: That is what he called and let me know.

Karen Shank: Seems like a very nice person.

Ethel Callahan: Yes.

Karen Shank: This is Karen Shank we are here doing an oral interview. It is November 9, 2010 at two o'clock. I am here with...

Ethel Callahan: Ethel Callahan C-a-l-l-a-h-a-n.

Karen Shank: Mrs. Callahan, where and when were you born?

Ethel Callahan: I was born in St. George, Utah, April 3, 1929.

Karen Shank: Where did you grow up?

Ethel Callahan: In St. George, Utah until I was eighteen when I moved to Nevada.

Karen Shank: Do you have a memory of growing up as a child there?

Ethel Callahan: Oh, yes. St. George is beautiful red hills and the blue sky and black hills. Now they have made red because they dug it out to put homes on the black hills. They dug down into the red dirt so it is not as black anymore.

Karen Shank: What are some activities you did as a child?

Ethel Callahan: Everything, we danced, we played things like Hide and Go Seek, and Kick the Can, and "Mother, may I?" and Dodge ball in the group in the streets. We would do it at night, all the neighborhood kids. I played tennis, I loved tennis, I worked as a child. I worked as first a babysitter then I worked in the swimming pool where I sold the tickets, when I was fourteen. I helped teach the little ones how to swim with the first aid classes. I worked in the theaters as taking tickets and I also made the popcorn and ushering part of the time. I cleaned the theaters before I went to school, I would clean one towards the end of my school year, I cleaned another one because there were two of them. I played other sports. I loved the sports, baseball, volleyball, basketball you name it I loved it. I enjoyed school and sleep.

Karen Shank: What time would you go to work to clean?

Ethel Callahan: The theaters?

Karen Shank: Yeah before school.

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

Ethel Callahan: Six.

Karen Shank: Six in the morning.

Ethel Callahan: Uh-huh.

Karen Shank: You had a key.

Ethel Callahan: I did. I also had it at the swimming pool; I carried the change home at night, the money that I had taken in during the day. I walked and I would carry it home at night with me. My manager picked it up the next day when I was there and just leaves me the change.

Karen Shank: How long would it take you to clean that?

Ethel Callahan: About an hour.

Karen Shank: An hour.

Ethel Callahan: Because I had to be at school early too.

Karen Shank: You mentioned playing games at night as children.

Ethel Callahan: Yes.

Karen Shank: What were the ages of the children?

Ethel Callahan: Oh, my goodness we started young, but I do not know, probably we started at seven on up to twelve. Maybe eleven we got busy doing other things.

Karen Shank: How did you meet your husband?

Ethel Callahan: I went to Peach Day on one of my days off, and I saw him sitting with his back to me in a greasy spoon restaurant. My girlfriend I had just decided I was never going to get married and I just said to her that is the man I am going to marry. She happened to know him; he had another boy with him. I went with the other boy, she went with Ray and two days later I went with Ray and from there on he proposed to me the first night he took me out. Of course, I was too young, I was only fifteen, he wanted to go talk to my mom, and I said if you do, you will never get back in the house so we put it off a while. He went into the Navy, his dad signed him up when he was seventeen. We did not get married until he got out.

Karen Shank: What year did he go into the Navy?

Ethel Callahan: He went into the Navy we got married in 1944, he was in until 1943.

Karen Shank: Okay. Did he have stories of times in the war?

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

- Ethel Callahan: Well yes, I have a book that he was on the U.S. Columbia, he had stories of it.
- Karen Shank: When did you move to Henderson?
- Ethel Callahan: In Henderson we moved here in July of 1948. He had started there, we have a friend that worked on the fire department, he knew it, told Ray, came out, applied for it, got it, and went to work the next morning and we moved here shortly. They gave him a choice in two or three houses, he picked one out, and we moved out that weekend. They worked twenty-four on and twenty-four off.
- Karen Shank: It was a Basic Magnesium Incorporated (BMI) house.
- Ethel Callahan: Let me see, the condition before it became the BMI fire department, it was under the county. When he worked for them, it was under the county, it was under the Colorado River Commission and it was under BMI. But BMI came, it was not quite the first one it was the same department just different ones took over. Because at one time the county had control over it and they took care of the city and everything in the area around besides the plant area. Until the city became a city and then they got their own fire department and half of the BMI men came up to the city and the other half stayed down at the BMI fire station. They split the department.
- Karen Shank: What year did they split the department?
- Ethel Callahan: The city was formed in 1953 and so I imagine that was about the time that they split the department.
- Karen Shank: Why did they split the fire department?
- Ethel Callahan: The city became an incorporated city then. They were at the time they belonged just to the county, they were not incorporated at all and they formed an incorporation. When they did that of course, they took over the duties of the city.
- Karen Shank: How did it work with the Boulder Water, you mentioned the owners of the fire department.
- Ethel Callahan: BMI? Basic Management Incorporated.
- Karen Shank: The County, they owned it too.
- Ethel Callahan: Only at different times, because one had it Colorado River Commission had it then the county and then Basic Management took over. It was different, at different times and different, they did not work together. The plant actually owned it all and owned a lot of rights and all of the property to start with.

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

Karen Shank: The Colorado River Commission, when did it own it?

Ethel Callahan: When we came in 1944, I think the Colorado I cannot tell you for sure my memory does not go, it is there but I do not know which one owned it first. Ray could tell you but, sorry he cannot.

Karen Shank: Yeah.

Ethel Callahan: I think they only had it for about a year or so after we came. The county had it for a while before Basic Management took over the plant area itself.

Karen Shank: Was it always in BMI? Was the fire department always a part of BMI?

Ethel Callahan: Yeah.

Karen Shank: Was that their responsibility?

Ethel Callahan: The plant area they built the fire station, they have it there to protect the plant and the plant, they are the ones that built the city of Henderson and they took care of it the original the ones that owned it.

Karen Shank: Were there many fires at BMI that your husband had to work at?

Ethel Callahan: May fires? Oh yes, they had fires, they had fires in the plant a couple of times, a couple of the guys lost their lives down there. Then they were burned badly, there was the plant had many explosives that they worked with, it was built during the war. They had a lot of explosives that they worked with they could just go across and one of them could catch on fire. They had to be very careful, it was like a match.

Karen Shank: Just brushing their pants?

Ethel Callahan: They always washed them before they changed clothes before they even went home. They were in that particular plant. They had washing machines there and their clothes that they wore at the plant they would wash and change into their own.

Karen Shank: What other safety features did they have for the men?

Ethel Callahan: With the fire department, they always checked their fire extinguishers and all that over the plant. They had men that did that. Of course, they took care of the town, there was an illness they had the ambulance and did that service too. They performed everything like it was a city in itself until the city was incorporated. They took care of everything that was the water, sewage every phase of the town.

Karen Shank: You mentioned a fire at Three Kids Mine.

Ethel Callahan: Yes.

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

Karen Shank: Could you tell me about that and what was Three Kids Mine?

Ethel Callahan: I think it was called Three Kids Mine it was between here and the lake, it was on the hill as you get there. Now, they tried to cover up most of the holes that were out there because people were going out and falling in them. So they have tried to cover up the part that they did and it was another plant they had.

Karen Shank: That other mine was it at the mine.

Ethel Callahan: Well it was like a plant because the work they did was digging in. I did not pay much attention to that it was up on the hill. The one night that it was on fire, I paid attention because he was up there and it was a very dangerous block. It took a long time to get it under control and they worked on it for hours before they got it back under control. They tore the building down, they never did rebuild after that. We also had Foodland grocery store caught on fire and they had to go out and take care of that too.

Karen Shank: When was that?

Ethel Callahan: Before the city took over so that was before 1953, but the year that it happened, I do not remember the exact figure, the year.

Karen Shank: Is that where you went shopping?

Ethel Callahan: Yes, it was up off is it Lead Street behind the El Dorado up there. It has changed so much up there. We also had Prime Meats that was on the corner of the post office, which is now the bank. We had the post office and we used to cross the street to it afterward or the bank went into there. It was a small one.

Karen Shank: What other kind of businesses did you have in town?

Ethel Callahan: We had a drug store, we had a movie theater, we had barbershops, a couple of them there, and they had a beauty shop. Had a radio shack repair shop, they had a drugstore, they had like a fountain the old-fashioned fountains that the people could go into, there was a shoe repair store there.

Karen Shank: What was the fountain?

Ethel Callahan: Way before your time, they had a fountain where you got drinks like Cokes, they made milkshakes, and they had a sandwich shop and things like that.

Karen Shank: Good.

Ethel Callahan: It was very nice and very well, people enjoyed going there. We had a furniture store, a shoe store.

Karen Shank: What kind of activities did you do? What did you do for entertainment?

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

Ethel Callahan: We had all kinds, back then we had dances, holiday or something. The Catholic Church had the St. Patrick's Day dance, we had New Year's Eve dances and sometimes they were held in the big building, the titanium it was used like an administration building. Then they were held over in the church. There was I think bowling at that time because we had that too. We had the lake, which was beautiful and clean and we swam down there, the wash area was beautiful and it was really used by the people. Then there was a boat dock adjacent to the wash where they swam, but it was over in the hill a way. Of course then there was always the boulder beach. In fact, they had their swimming lessons for the kids the first day of swimming lessons down at the lake when my daughter was six.

Karen Shank: Learned to swim in the lake.

Ethel Callahan: She learned to swim in the lake.

Karen Shank: Tell me about Victory Village.

Ethel Callahan: Okay Victory Village was a bunch of apartments. They only had an entrance door or Carver Park would have the one door, you could only go in and out the same door.

Karen Shank: Really.

Ethel Callahan: There was a fire there that was terrible and that is one my husband will never forget because they kept trying to get in and it was too far-gone when they got there and there was a child inside and he had crawled underneath the bed to get away from it. After they got the fire out they found he had nightmares about that forever. They only had the one door, no back door, just one entrance in and out. Victory Village had I do not know if they had two doors or just the one like Carver Park did because they were all just apartments. It got lots of Henderson workers lived in them. Over where Wal-Mart is now and in that area there was I do not even know how many lots of people lived there. There were just a bunch of apartments and they were all kind of connected together. It was not individual places it was like apartment building only they were all on the first floor.

Karen Shank: What was the name of the development you lived in?

Ethel Callahan: It is called the Townsite it is the Townsite area. They got permission to build a thousand homes but the plant and that was apparently, what the sewage would take care of just a thousand. They had more people I think something like four thousand working so they needed more but they only got permission to build a thousand. Now a lot of them have been taken down, when they first built it, they only had one entrance one street into it, and one street you could out, you could come in either one or go out either one. It was kind of a round circle that is why it was laid out so different was because they did it for safety training when the war was on. If they had trouble, someone could not get in

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

and out easy because they would not have any idea that it was just the two entrances if they went there.

Karen Shank: I notice there is an alley.

Ethel Callahan: Yes.

Karen Shank: What was the alley for?

Ethel Callahan: It was just a wide alley because the homes still have a lot of yard, I do not know why they built so much room between them, but the way they laid the town out, they left an alley behind each house.

Karen Shank: Tell me, did you know about a tunnel under Boulder Highway?

Ethel Callahan: Not under Boulder Highway. I know that the plant, there is underground places that they could have been bomb shelters during the war. There are many under the plant, I am not aware that they go under Boulder Highway because the plant area is on this side of Boulder Highway. That is the only one I am aware of. They used to keep even food so if they had to get people in to it. That is the only one I am aware of they had was they had bomb shelters under the plant.

Karen Shank: And they had food and water down there?

Ethel Callahan: Uh-huh.

Karen Shank: How many people would fit, do you know.

Ethel Callahan: You know what my husband knew how many but I do not, but it was a lot.

Karen Shank: A lot, okay.

Ethel Callahan: That is a big area for them to have a big basement area. But they would be in different parts of the plant.

Karen Shank: Was it built before the plant, before the building was put up?

Ethel Callahan: You mean?

Karen Shank: The tunnels.

Ethel Callahan: I am sure because it was built during the war. I am sure that they would build that first and then with the plant on top of it. Just like you would build a basement.

Karen Shank: Was there a civilian or community effort to support the war in Henderson?

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

- Ethel Callahan: Well I came, my husband had gotten out of the service by the time we came down here. I do not know what they did during that time. We came in 1948 and the war ended in 1945.
- Karen Shank: Okay. Did you have that type of activity in St. George?
- Ethel Callahan: For the war? Oh yes they would have, we were on food stamps and they would have different things to send to the boys overseas, the USO. Yes they did.
- Karen Shank: What were the stamps for?
- Ethel Callahan: We could only buy so much gas, sugar; you could only buy so much sugar. Let me see, that is the only two I remember because that was when I was in high school. My brother had gone to the war.
- Karen Shank: How did you get the stamps?
- Ethel Callahan: Okay they would come in the mail. They allotted you only so much to each person. I was twelve and I took them to the store and did all that for my mom, but how they got to the house I am not sure. But each person was only allotted, each family was only allotted so many. I assume they probably came to the mail because they were allotted by the family; each family got so much gas, if they needed it. We did not have a car so we did not have gas stamps you had to have a car to get them.
- Karen Shank: Did you participate in drives for the war?
- Ethel Callahan: As a child, we probably did but I do not remember exactly what we did.
- Karen Shank: Do you remember listening to President Roosevelt's Fireside Chats?
- Ethel Callahan: I remember listening to President Roosevelt yes, but I do not remember what he said I just remember listening to him. And when the war was declared on, Pearl Harbor was bombed, I remember hearing that come on the radio, then that is what we had was the radio, we did not have television then.
- Karen Shank: You mentioned that the going back to the fire department, you mentioned that it had closed eventually from I guess it was a Stauffer and it became Stauffer after BMI was that correct?
- Ethel Callahan: No, after when they closed the plant, they kept it in there until they decided that they would go with the county. Then they closed the plant by the department clear down. My husband went as safety engineer and he checked all the hydrants all through, not only the hydrants, the fire extinguishers all through the building upstairs, downstairs, under the basement everywhere. He did that, but they closed the fire department down and the county took over the protection of the plant.

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

Karen Shank: What year was that?

Ethel Callahan: Let me see 1984 or 1985. Because my husband was the engineer about two years before his heart attack and that was in 1987.

Karen Shank: Was there ever a time when Civil Rights was a problem in Henderson?

Ethel Callahan: I do not ever remember them having trouble. At one time, I think the Carver Park is, where I see colored people I do not recall I do not want to say anything against them because I do not feel anything. At one time they lived in Carver Park and they put all of them lived there. But I do not ever remember they worked hand in hand with the men at the plant. I do not recall if it was one was a fireman. I do not recall any trouble with them at all.

Karen Shank: Okay. What changes have you seen in Henderson since?

Ethel Callahan: Wow, everything. Between here and Vegas there were stretches of nothing but desert and beyond Tropicana. Henderson grew from everybody in the town to a city. It has just grown every which way towards Road Pass there was nothing between here. It used to end pretty much like on Horizon and then that has been built up since that way. When Tropicana was not even a paved road through until after we moved here in 1948, it was called the Long Road at that time. It was finished, it has entirely changed. The hospital was here, the Governor gave that to them for a dollar to the sisters and the Catholic Church a lot of the churches were built by the plant and they let them buy them for a dollar, not ours but the others.

Karen Shank: They let the religious groups buy it for a dollar.

Ethel Callahan: Yes.

Karen Shank: Which buildings were those?

Ethel Callahan: The Catholic Church was on Boulder Highway but I think they built that since but they are still part of it still standing. The community church, where the senior center was and that was the community church at one time.

Karen Shank: Did they build those with Federal funds?

Ethel Callahan: I am sure because the government built them during the war. When they built the town and they built the city, I mean the hospital and the churches to make it a town for the people.

Karen Shank: Did you attend any of those buildings?

Ethel Callahan: Let me see, we had the dances over in the Catholic Churches and we always went to St. Peter's Day dance, we loved dancing. The community church probably for different things like the world of peace or something that they

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

have. My faith is The Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints, I attended that one. We built them.

Karen Shank: You built?

Ethel Callahan: The people for the money we had dinners, and different things. And then the men would go up and work on Saturdays to help build and the different trades to pay to put it all together and build the building, the one that was on Ocean Street, LaTroia [sp] street Chapel the one on Ocean Street they built that one. They members had to earn enough to make sure half of what was paid for and the church paid the other half. But before you could have it dedicated it had to be completely paid for. That is the way we did it, now they do not do it that way, but they did then.

Karen Shank: What year was that completed?

Ethel Callahan: We used to go to church in the schoolhouse the Townsite schoolhouse on Water Street. Then our chapel was built I should look that up because I have it, probably in the 1950s. Well my daughter was eight so 1953.

Karen Shank: Tell me about the Townsite Schoolhouse.

Ethel Callahan: The Townsite School it took care of the elementary and the high school all together, to start with. It was the buildings that the city was up in the property. They had a big gymnasium with where they played basketball and they had lots and lots of rooms because all of them attended it there. The hallway was outside; it was a one-story building and the rooms you would come out of one to the outside and into the next one.

Karen Shank: Is it still standing?

Ethel Callahan: Once the gym was definitely they tore it down. I am not sure I would have to go up there and see if they left any. I think that for a long time, there were parts of it they used, but they have been taking it down a little bit at a time. They have been rebuilding different things up there; I doubt that there is any of it left anymore up there.

Karen Shank: What part of it did you use as a church?

Ethel Callahan: The rooms where they went to school we just had two or three of the rooms on Sunday and all the churches went there for different faiths. It was a different church at different times.

Karen Shank: How did you arrange times?

Ethel Callahan: I think it was just big enough that some could have been in one part while another was in another part. It was very well used, but I do not think they had anything to worry about to arrange times because we were all the one Lord in

Callahan, Ethel - Interview

our church and the rest were the same. I think there were plenty of rooms that they took care of all of us.

Karen Shank: Were you here when the PEPCON blast?

Ethel Callahan: Yes, I was working in Vegas, but my husband had had his heart attack then and so he was at home. I could not get back to him and besides I had to stay on my job because I was Clark County School Districts supervisor and we had to make sure, if the kids needed food that we could use our schools to give it to them. Because they cared for them there and we could not get back into Henderson for a while.

Karen Shank: Was your home damaged by the?

Ethel Callahan: It was cracked and they had to come in and fix the cracks because it was cracked in several places.

Karen Shank: Where were the cracks?

Ethel Callahan: In the ceilings

Karen Shank: Did you have any windows broken?

Ethel Callahan: I do not think any were broke. There were windows broke everywhere I mean in the town. There were cracks in different parts of the house. We did not have a broken window. My husband was here to open the door to keep it from being a vacuum because he was a fireman for so many years he knew what to do. He also heard the blasts at other times when he had been working. In fact, he had always gone on fire calls at night when the sirens went. He left whether it was his shift or not. The day of PEPCON blast he was not able to work or did not have any strength to do anything but he got in the car when he heard the blast. He jumped in the car to go to help and he said he got clear down halfway to Lake Meade and it dawned on him he would only be in their way. There was nothing he could do so he turned around and came back home. From just a habit of all those years going he went.

Karen Shank: Has there been any changes in the community since that PEPCON blast?

Ethel Callahan: We were last in the PEPCON blast, because it was a terrific blast but the people, we did not lose, unbelievable. Actually, the injuries were very light for that type of a blast in our town, it rocked next-door windows out, and we were blessed. Somebody was watching out of the whole town that day.

Karen Shank: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about that I maybe have not covered about Henderson?

Ethel Callahan: I do think so. You probably have covered most of what I can tell you. I am not very good at explaining this stuff to you.

Karen Shank: You did great, thank you.