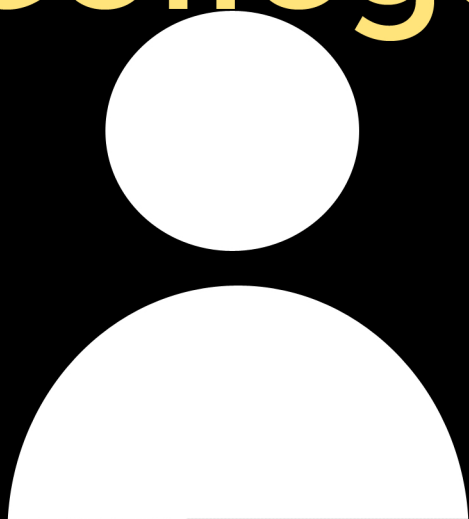


**Nevada State
College**



**Undergraduate Oral
History Project**

Oral History of Fr. Donald A. Casey

An Interview

Conducted by

Gabriel Rivera

April 15, 2010

Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project

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Father Casey

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The transcript received minimal editing to preserve the conversational style and content of the narrator.

This interview is from the series *Bridging the Past: Henderson through Oral History*.

Father Casey

Oral History of Fr. Donald A. Casey

An Interview Conducted by Gabriel Rivera on April 15, 2010

Biography

Father Donald Casey was born May 30, 1925, in Portsmouth, Virginia. In 1938, he moved with his family to Las Vegas. During one of his summers in high school, he joined a local labor union in 1942 and helped build some of buildings that comprised the original Basic Magnesium Plant in Henderson. He worked 10 hour days, 6 days a week laying down the foundation and working on the wooden buildings.

After graduating from Las Vegas High School in 1943, Father Casey entered the U.S. Navy and served in the Pacific Theater. He moved to St. Louis in 1946 after his military service. He eventually attended St. Louis University and Gonzaga University where he studied biology and chemistry. He became a Jesuit in 1950 and worked as a teacher at a Catholic high school for many years. He then decided to become a parish priest and entered the St. Francis Seminary in San Diego. He served in several California parishes before retiring in 1995. He returned to the Las Vegas area, but continued to work despite his retirement, serving as the priest chaplain at St. Rose Dominican Hospitals, director of Homebound and Nursing Home Ministries for St. Peter the Apostle Parish in Henderson, and sharing in the annual sunrise services at Palm Mortuary on Eastern morning.

Father Casey died April 10, 2012.

Father Casey

Narrator: Father Donald A. Casey
Interviewer: Gabriel Rivera
Interview Date: April 15, 2010
Location: St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church

Gabriel Rivera: Okay. Good day. This is Gabriel Rivera, and I am here with Father Casey at Saint Peter, the Roman Catholic Church on Boulder Highway. Today is Wednesday -- or Thursday, April 15th, Tax Day as Father Casey has mentioned. Father, let us hear about -- could you tell me a little about your early days here in Las Vegas/Henderson?

Father Casey: My dad worked for the UP (Union Pacific) Railroad. We came out here in 1934, but we did not really stop in Las Vegas. We went on to where he was going to work at Moapa. He stayed there for three years, and then we came back to North Las Vegas at the Stewart Ranch. From the Stewart Ranch we finally moved into Vegas itself on Fourth Street, beyond Charleston. I went to the fifth grade school here for the last year, for eighth grade, then did all four years of high school at the only high school here. At that point, I left the area and went to the Navy. The summer of '42 I worked from the end of school, May, until school began again in August at Saint Rose -- what is Saint Rose Dominican Hospital today, or as we called it Basic Magnesium, or McNeil Construction Company. I was a common laborer that helped build the plants. In the 50-year Anniversary Book of Henderson I actually saw the wooden buildings that I spent most of the summer working on. They had -- they are totally gone today, or at least when I returned to this area. I did not see them, or any even trace of them. I finally found a picture of them in this 50 Years Journal of Henderson (*50 Years Henderson*). I know they did exist, and I was working on those two buildings. They were large wooden structures which were I suppose a house, and peat moss which was going to be used to filter the magnesium, or to purify it I guess. What else do you want to know?

Gabriel Rivera: Could you tell me what -- how you got started with the hospital itself? Like how did you get the job?

Father Casey: In 1942?

Gabriel Rivera: Yes.

Father Casey: In 1942 I joined the labor union, and they trucked us out to build Basic Magnesium. Everybody I guess worked for McNeil Construction, I do not know. But anyway, they trucked us out here. There were more jobs than we knew what to do with. We worked a 70-hour week, ten hours a day, six days a week. One of the first jobs I had out here was laying the foundation of what is the hospital today. Then I worked over on Building 1 and 3, and finally ended up on those wooden peat moss sheds, and I spent most of the summer

Father Casey

working on those two wooden buildings. They were very big. They were as big as the metal buildings that were being built for the ore of production, which comes from northern Nevada. It was being trucked down here. I understand -- no, I read something, it was not being trucked. It really went by railroad way around by Salt Lake City, and then came back to Vegas. It was the ore from northern Nevada that came to here for making magnesium. I knew when I left the Navy in '43 that we were very successful in building -- making ore, making magnesium here. I had heard someplace when I was still probably in the Navy that we had done so well that we stopped making magnesium before the war ended. The big plant that I helped build became a white elephant, and stayed a white elephant for some years before different corporations began to fill in those buildings and use them. Whatever happened to the peat moss sheds that I worked on I have no idea. All I know is they were totally gone when I returned, and I only found one picture showing them at all in the history of the Henderson here.

Gabriel Rivera: Could you tell me about if you had any encounters with the priests or the sisters that were there helping the Basic Magnesium Hospital, if you ever met any.

Father Casey: In the summer of '42 when that hospital was being built, it was all Defense Plant Corporation. It was all government. It had nothing to do with church. I never met a priest. In fact I did not even know that a priest had been assigned from Gardnerville I think, northern Nevada, to Henderson here to set up a parish in Henderson. He also was instrumental in getting the sisters here in '47 I believe it was -- in '47 to get the sisters to come here. But I left here in '43, and I was in the Navy -- I was just out of the Navy. I got out of the Navy in '46. But when I got out of the Navy, I went to Saint Louis, Missouri, to go to college, so I did not really stay in Vegas. I left and went to Saint Louis. I did not keep track of what was going on in this area, other than the fact that every time I would come here, it was like a new city I came to. It was totally different than anything I had left. It was rebuilt over and over again. In fact, when I came here, we were only about -- in 1940 -- 34 I think there were only about 5000, 8000 people in the city of Vegas. Of course in Moapa there are only about 20 people out there. Some place along the way, Clark County had more people in it than all of the state of Nevada in 1930 or something. Clark County grew so rapidly that it took the -- all the rest of the state down. When we came here in '34, Reno was the city, and everything that had anything to do with government or activity came from Reno. We did not even have sisters here when I was taking catechism here. In catechism, we only had it in summertime, and the sisters came from Reno. They tried to teach us kids, who were pagans down here, something about our Catholic faith. I finally got confirmed just before I went in the Navy in 1943. I somehow missed the confirmation, which was every two years I think at the time. I missed it whatever year I was supposed to get it, and I finally got confirmed just before I entered the Navy in '43.

Father Casey

Gabriel Rivera: Do you have any information about Saint Peters itself, if you know of any?

Father Casey: When I was working here in the summer of '42, I did not have any idea. I was not looking for a church anyway. We worked -- as I said, we worked six days a week, ten hours a day. What was going on in the rest of this area, I knew they were building houses here, I knew they were constructing tents here, I knew that people were actually living here. But almost all of us who were working here seemed to live in Vegas. We took big trucks, boarded the trucks there in Vegas, and were driven out here to work. We worked for ten hours, and they put us on the trucks, and we went back to Vegas. What really was going on in other places out here, I have no idea, because we were too busy just putting up what was called Basic Magnesium plant.

Gabriel Rivera: Do you have any other information that you could possibly give me that could help me with Saint Rose or Henderson, or anything, that you feel open to?

Father Casey: I -- as I said, the summer of '42 I actually worked out here. The summer of '41 I did not really work there. My older brother worked at what is now Nellis Air Force Base, the current Air Force. So Vegas was changing very rapidly, but most of the time I just did yard work in various places in Vegas. My experience of coming out here and joining the union was the first time I was employed outside the city of Vegas. My older brother was never in -- worked outside the city of Vegas until he got that job at the air base building that place, the summer of '41. No, I did not pay much attention to the church. I was not much of a churchgoer. I did not pay attention to what was going on with churches in those years that -- before I went in the Navy.

Gabriel Rivera: Okay. Do you -- is that pretty much all that you have for us today? Or do you have anything else to share?

Father Casey: I came back here in '94 to live and retire. When I came back here in '94, of course, we have a big city, we have a multitude of churches, we have cities. Henderson, which did not even exist when I was here in the first place, was now a city, and it was I think the second largest city in the whole state of Nevada by the time I came back here in '94 already, which is unbelievable. And North Las Vegas, I guess which was nothing but a little spot on the map, was a city in its own right. Boulder City, of course, always existed over there, but it was always separate. Because in the '30s you took a day's travel to get over to Boulder City, so people did not go to Boulder City unless they were going to visit the dam or something. I knew there was a city over there called Boulder City, but beyond that I did not know anything about -- Laughlin, of course, did not exist, and I do not think anything else. Well, Good Springs existed, but I never -- I was never out there. Moapa existed because the railroad went there. Of course, the Mormons were settled in the Moapan Virgin Valleys. That -- those were settled places. Those cities have totally disappeared -- some of them totally disappeared in the 50 years that I was

Father Casey

gone. From the 40s until I came back here in '94, Moapa had ceased to exist as a railroad community. The name continued, but it was covering Moapa Valley and not Moapa the city. Well it really was not a city in '34, but anyway. We had a school there, we had a railroad depot there, we had a railroad yard there so to speak, we had a cattle-feeding place there, we had a turkey farm there, and we had a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp in Moapa at the railroad station. In the Upper Valley we had another CCC camp up there. Where Warm Springs is, it was also a CCC camp. Those were private ranches in the -- what we call the Upper Valley, above the Indian reservation. The school primarily was an Indian school, so the Indians were bussed to the school, and most of the population in the school were Indians, but they never went beyond third grade usually. I was in that school from third grade through -- well, I skipped a grade. I got out of there in three years. The Indians -- there was never an Indian in the other schoolroom. There were only two schoolrooms. Most of my time was from fourth to eighth grade, and I was in the other schoolroom, and no Indian I ever recalled ever made it to that room. They all dropped out before they ever got there. Moapa was sort of a thriving community in the '30s. In '94 the school was gone, the railroad depot was gone, the houses that people lived in when I was there were gone. There was nothing left there but two saloons, neither one operating anymore. That was it.

Gabriel Rivera: I wanted to see if you can go into depth about the CCC (Civilian Conservation Camps) camps. What is that exactly?

Father Casey: I do not remember now what year President Roosevelt started putting young people to work and sending them out into the Hinterlands to do -- well, at least in the Moapa area, and both the one in Moapa itself and the one at Upper Valley, these kids were coming out there to rebuild the irrigation ditches. The Moapa River does have water in it, and there were irrigation ditches off the Moapa River. Who built those things I have no idea. But mostly by the time '34 came, they were not being used because nobody was farming anything out there anymore, really. They were out there to reopen these ditches, and maybe instill some kind of farming again. There was a minor bit of farming that took place in the -- what we called the Upper Valley, nothing in the Lower Valley there where the other CCC camp was. I think in the Upper Valley they were primarily responsible for putting what became a swimming pool and an RV park. Sometime during the years that I was gone, there was a high-class RV park that existed in the Upper Valley, where people paid a sum of money, and they could go there and spend a month or a week, or whatever it was, free of charge. They had the huge swimming pool there, which these CCC kids had built. Of course, they had the buildings that the CCC kids had built to be housed in, to enjoy life in. The Lower Valley they did not build any houses that were permanent. Nothing was left by the time I returned here. Whatever they built down there was gone.

Father Casey

Gabriel Rivera: Well, I believe that you have given me enough information for what I was looking for. I just want to say thank you again, Father Casey, for giving us your time and your experiences here in Henderson and Las Vegas, Moapa, and your workings in the union for the hospital. Just thank you again.

Father Casey: Well, muchas gracias to you too.

[End of audio]