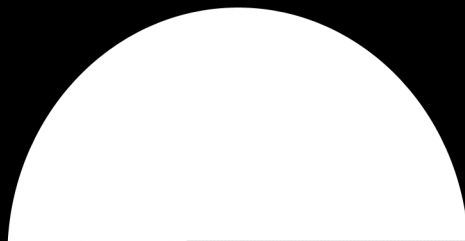
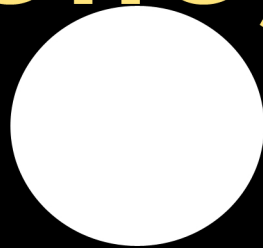


**Nevada State
College**



**Undergraduate Oral
History Project**

Oral History of Robyn R. Ouchida

An Interview

Conducted by

Leanna Lomprey

April 19, 2014 & May 2, 2014

Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project

Produced by:

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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*.

Oral History of Robyn R. Ouchida

An Interview Conducted by Leanna Lompfrey on April 19, 2014 & May 2, 2014

Biography

Robyn R. Campbell-Ouchida was born on January 15, 1971 in Columbia, Missouri. Robyn spent her early childhood days in Excelsior Springs, Missouri until 1977 when her father got a job offer to work for the City of Henderson. Robyn would spend the remainder of her childhood growing up in Henderson, Nevada.

On May 4th 1988 an incident at the PEPCON rocket fuel plant outside of Henderson, Nevada exploded due to an accident inside the plant. This giant explosion rippled through the desert and caused major destruction for nearby Henderson and even some parts of Las Vegas. Robyn was a student at Basic High School at the time of the incident. Robyn and her friends were in the bathroom when they heard the loud boom. The faculty at Basic High School evacuated the students to the baseball field and kept them contained until further notice. Luckily, when Robyn got home her house did not have much damage but the day itself changed her whole life forever. Robyn also mentioned that Henderson became closer as a community and came together to help recover from the PEPCON disaster.

Robyn still lives in Henderson, Nevada and his married to Kurt Ouchida, and they have two boys. Robyn got her B.A. in Journalism at UNR, and her M.A. in Communications at UNLV. She is also involved in many community activities in Henderson such as: Member of the Henderson Libraries Board of Trustees, Member of the Community Church of Henderson, Volunteer at Smalley Elementary School, and Member of the Henderson Chamber of Commerce.

Narrator: Robyn R. Ouchida
Interviewer: Leanna Lompfrey
Interview Dates: April 19, 2014 & May 2, 2014
Location: Henderson, Nevada

Leanna Lompfrey: My name is Leanna Lompfrey and today I will be interviewing Robyn Ouchida. We'll be conducting this interview at 1223 Gloria Mountain Road, Henderson, Nevada and the zip code is 89002. Today's date is April 19, 2014. This oral history project is the Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project. The repository is collected for the Nevada State College Library.

Robyn, tell me about where you were born and raised and what your parents did for a living.

Robyn Ouchida: Okay, I was born in Columbia, Missouri in 1971. My parents had been out of college a couple of years and when I was about one we moved to Excelsior Springs, Missouri which is near Kansas City for my dad to the town's first ever City Manager. So we lived there, I started kindergarten there. My younger sister was born there, she is four and a half years younger than I am and then in 1977 we moved to Henderson. So it was the middle of my kindergarten year, it was the same time of year, it was like April. And---yeah, we moved out here for my dad to be the City Manger of Henderson.

Leanna Lompfrey: Tell me about what it was like growing up in Henderson, Nevada during the 1970s and the 1980s.

Robyn Ouchida: Well it was a lot smaller which was nice. And you knew---my dad being involved with government and my mom taught. So we knew a lot of people. You couldn't be sneaky because there was always an adult that knew you somewhere [laughter], small town. It was a good place to grow up. I mean, you knew the kids in your neighborhood, people could go outside and play; it was pretty safe. You know, everybody would hang out at the community pool in the summer and a lot of those kids I'm still in---well they're not kids anymore but a lot of the people that I grew up with, I'm still in touch with today, so it was a good place to grow up.

Leanna Lompfrey: What was home like growing up? And describe the neighborhood?

Robyn Ouchida: Okay we lived in Highland Hills, so off of Horizon, near Greenway and I don't live very far from there now, which is kind of funny. We lived in a brand new neighborhood when we moved out here from Missouri. And we actually lived in the model home and it was on Hidden Valley Road. And it was a long street you know, the streets were pretty wide in the new neighborhoods back then but we had a nice house.

You know, my sister and I each had our own rooms and we lived in that house until I was in the 4th grade and then my parents built a house down on Black Mountain Golf Course. And so we lived down there until I was a senior. And that was a lot different because there were a lot of older people live down on the golf course. It wasn't as many kids as there in the old neighborhood, which wasn't as fun. But you know; we made it fun.

Leanna Lomprey: What kind of activities were you involved in growing up in Henderson, Nevada?

Robyn Ouchida: I was in Girl Scouts and I took piano lessons and I played flute and I did synchronized swimming and swim team, what else, seems like I always had something going on. I was on a jump rope team at Fay Galloway. I really like to read. I'm a big reader still but I started volunteering at the Henderson Library when I was 6th grade because my mom was tired of hearing me saying I was bored in the summer.

So I started volunteering there and then in the 8th grade I started working for the libraries so they kind of paid me under the table. Most 8th grade kids don't have a paying job but I did, so that was kind of cool. But yeah, lots of ---you know, hanging out with my friends and roller skating at the rink. There used to be a roller skating rink down on Lake Mead and that was a big place to hang out.

Leanna Lomprey: On May 4th, 1988 when the PEPCON explosion incident happened. Tell me where you were at the time of the---when the PEPCON explosion went off.

Robyn Ouchida: Okay. It's kind of funny to tell where I was because I was at Basic High School and I was in the 11th grade and I was in the bathroom with my friend after lunch [laughter]. And I was standing by the sink, she was in the stall and all of sudden this giant boom and she came flying out of the stall, like, "oh my God, what was that." I was like, "I don't know, what happened? This is crazy."

And we run out of the bathroom and we're right by that trophy case in front of Basic and it shattered and the whole wall between the lunch room and the office there, the whole wall of glass was gone. And people were just running around crazy like what was going on, was it a bomb, was it---nobody knew what it was. It was freaky! They got everybody---they wouldn't let anybody leave the school. They put us all back on the baseball field and we had to just sit there. Everybody was freaking out. Nobody had cell phones, so you couldn't call anybody and find out where they were.

It was a crazy day and they kept us back on the baseball field for like an hour and a half, if I remember correctly. And you could look toward Gibson Road and you saw this thing going up in the sky that looked like a mushroom cloud. And having grown up here, you know they would test things at the test site; test the bombs growing up and we used to have the drills to get under our desks. So if you've grow up doing that and then all of a sudden you see this like mushroom cloud, what is going on! You know, did we just get bombed? Or are we in a war? What's going on? It was scary.

Leanna Lomprey: There have been some rumors that some Henderson residents thought that the soviets were attacking at this time. Was this true?

Robyn Ouchida: I don't remember that. But I mean, I was in the 11th grade you know, I wasn't so concerned with world affairs at the time [laughter].

Leanna Lomprey: What was your reaction when the explosion went off?

Robyn Ouchida: We screamed. I mean, we were in the bathroom and we were like, oh my God, what was that? Everybody was screaming. It was craziness you know, you think about like, the Boston Marathon bombing last year and I can see how freaked out those people would be because you don't know what's going on. Something like that happens and until everything gets sorted out, it's panic! And everybody's in that survive mode.

Leanna Lomprey: Were you worried about your family members and friends at this time?

Robyn Ouchida: I was. My dad did a lot of work with the city even after he was City Manager and at that time he was working for American Nevada Corporation which was building Green Valley and so he would drive through the area where it would look like that mushroom cloud was and it turned out later that we found out my dad actually went down there right after it happened.

And he saw a couple of---he was near Sunset Road when it happened and he saw a couple of cars go off the ground when the explosion happened and he tried to get in there to see if they needed help but they had to get the area all closed off. My mom was a teacher at C.T. Sewell; but not having a phone, you know, we couldn't get a hold of her. My sister was a student at Burkeholder. So we were all in different places and it was scary. You know, I had a car but I wasn't allowed to leave.

So it was like, how do you find out how everybody's---where anybody's at---oh my friend, Elaine, she lived right across the street from Basic and she would go home for lunch every day. Well she came back, she was home alone, that happened, she freaked out, she came back across the street, you know, they put her on the baseball field with us. She had been sitting in front of her living room window, eating lunch and the window had shattered, so her leg was all cut up. It was kind of crazy, yeah.

Leanna Lompfrey: Many homes in Henderson, Nevada were depleted or damaged at this time. Was your home damaged from the explosion? And if so, how much damaged was inflicted on your home?

Robyn Ouchida: No, we were lucky you know and we live down on the golf course at that time but it was far enough away that it---I think the house is you know, by the old St. Rose stuff, we're probably be closer and I know a lot of houses down by Burkeholder and stuff were affected. But ours was fine.

Leanna Lompfrey: Did the PEPCON explosion affect your schooling in any kind of way?

Robyn Ouchida: I think we had a day off after it. I can't even remember. It didn't really seem to. No there was a day----there were a couple of days off from school. I remember that because I ---it's a funny story. I was going to go the prom with a boy that lived down the street and I didn't like him. I just wanted to go to the prom.

And I had gotten a dress and PEPCON happened and then we didn't have a school for a few days and I thought about it and I thought; I really don't want to go with him so I ended up cancelling on him. That's not really my schooling but it affected my social life, I guess. And then next year, the next year when we were seniors, we kind of designated me for a senior ditch day in honor of PEPCON.

Leanna Lomprey: How was---what was the community's reaction as a whole after PEPCON happened?

Robyn Ouchida: I think people were a lot more cautious. You know, Henderson had been you know, low crime, pretty safe, we all felt like we--- even though we live so close to Las Vegas and you hear stories coming out of there all the time. I think we all kind of felt like we were in this protective little bubble of Henderson and nothing like that could happen and then that did and that really shook things up for a lot of people. It freaked them out.

Leanna Lomprey: Well that ends our interview for now. Thank you for participating us Robyn.

Robyn Ouchida: You're welcome Leanna.

[End of audio]

[Begin audio]

Leanna Lomprey: My name is Leanna Lomprey and today I will be interviewing Robyn Ouchida, we'll be conducting this interview at 1223 Gloria Mountain Road, Henderson, Nevada 89002. Today's date is May 2, 2014. This oral history project is the Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project. The repository is collected for the Nevada State College Library. And we will be doing our follow-up interview from last interview that took place on April 19, 2014.

Robyn, you mentioned your father worked in the city government. What did he do and what was he in charge of? What was that like?

Robyn Ouchida: Well when we moved here in 1977, we moved here for his job and he was the City Manager of Henderson. And he been the City Manager of the small town in Missouri that we came from. So we all packed up and headed out west. And as City Manager, I mean, I think they kind of oversee all the different departments you know. The mayor is the figure head of the city but the City

Manager kind of has the direct control over each department and oversees their budgets and finances and all of that.

And so growing up---I mean, I didn't know any different, my dad had always worked for government entities since I was little. And I mean, I thought it was cool. I thought he was kind of famous because he was the City Manager and we would go to City Council meetings sometimes with him and that always seemed kind of important.

Leanna Lomprey: When the PEPCON explosion took place, how was he affected by the PEPCON blast in terms of work? Did you take on new responsibilities---did he take on new responsibilities or stresses when this happened?

Robyn Ouchida: You know; I'm not exactly sure. I probably need to ask him some additional questions about that. But I know when PEPCON blew up; he was no longer City Manager. He worked for---at that point he worked for American Nevada Corporation I believe, which was in the middle of building Green Valley. PEPCON was located kind of between old Henderson and the new area of Green Valley.

So he was working more in Green Valley but he knew all the people at PEPCON just because we been here so long and being City Manager he made a lot of relationships with local companies and so when it happened I know that he drove from his office at Sunset at Green Valley Parkway; which is where the Green Valley Library is now. He drove from his office toward Gibson Road to see if he could help you know, what he could do, he knew a lot of the first responders. I don't know if it---if he took on new responsibilities and stresses because of that but I think because they were in the middle of kind of getting this whole new community off the ground that, that was you know, a big deal. It was so close by.

Leanna Lomprey: Was the day of the blast a day of fear for you? If so, what were you worried about?

Robyn Ouchida: Well, it was just such the unknown. Yeah, I guess I was afraid. You know, we came out of the bathroom at Basic and it was---nobody knew what was going on like I said and people were---some people were crying. I mean, I wasn't crying it was just kind of, what's going on, you didn't even know what to think. And then when they put us all back on the baseball field and they didn't let anybody leave. I remember thinking, how am I going to get a hold of my mom and dad? Nobody had cell phones.

I had a car but they wouldn't let us leave to go drive our car. And you know; the stuff is like falling out of the air, so that was scary. You know, there was like dust matter that was kind of ---it was smoky. Yeah, I mean it was scary but I don't think we even knew what we were scared of because it was such an unknown thing that had happened still. Does that make sense?

Leanna Lompfrey: Was it perhaps one of the most stressful or fearful days of your life?

Robyn Ouchida: It was stressful because I thought okay; my parents are both in different places. My mom was teaching at C.T. Sewell then so she was down there which wasn't too far from Basic. And my sister was a student at Burkeholder and then my dad was out Green Valley so we were kind of all over the place and you couldn't get a hold of anybody to see where they were. You know, were they putting my sister's class at Burkeholder? What were they doing with those kids? We were out on the field where they---and they were closer. I mean, Burkeholder wasn't very far, if you think of where PEPCON was, it was a lot closer than basic.

So yeah, I mean it was stressful because I didn't know where anyone was and I didn't know what we should be doing and I wasn't allowed to leave school for a couple of hours. And when I did leave, I remember, I went home and my mom had left a message at home that she was going to pick up Jenny. I don't remember where my sister was but just to stay there and we would all try to get home and meet there you know, it might take awhile; it was scary.

Leanna Lompfrey: Did you venture at all down to the blast area?

Robyn Ouchida: Not that day. I mean, it was all ---it was all closed off for first responders and emergency vehicles but I think my dad drove us down there a couple of days later but there wasn't a lot really to see. It was just kind of a mess.

Leanna Lompfrey: Can you describe what it looked like when you saw the blast area?

Robyn Ouchida: I mean it looked like a bomb had went off you know, the Marshmallow Factory was---used to be next door and that was pretty much gone too. And the plant was gone. I mean I don't

remember details, I just remember it being kind of a mess and like debris all over the place.

Leanna Lompfrey: How did you feel when you saw the blast site?

Robyn Ouchida: It was sad, you know, that was a good business to have in Henderson and it was always---I remember when they came to town, because I remember my dad said that it was really neat that the fuel for the space shuttle was being made in Henderson. I mean, that's pretty cool. You know, that like ties us to a lot bigger things when back then it seemed like we're kind of small town, you know, on the edge of Las Vegas but then we had this kind of cool thing you know, we're sending rocket fuel to NASA, I mean, that's huge. It was sad that it was gone and it was sad that those people died and yeah.

Leanna Lompfrey: Did you or your family personally know anybody who worked in PEPCON or the Marshmallow Factory or any other buildings by that area?

Robyn Ouchida: My dad knew the guy that owned the Marshmallow Factory, Mr. Kidd. And I can't remember what his first name was. And it's funny because all these years later, the girl that I'm really good friends with now, her friend is married to his son, John Kidd who now is like 50 something.

But I remember when the Marshmallow Factory opened and they had a ribbon cutting and my dad took us there and we got like free samples and it was a big deal. So it was sad that, that was gone and I think I mentioned this in the other interview but the one gentleman that died in the blast. I think you said had Polio. My dad knew who he was; he had met him on occasion, so there were some---some ties there. I don't know if he knew anyone else there but---. I think the Gibson's had something to do with Pepcon, related to Mayor Gibson, you know the---we had an office a few years ago. Like I think maybe his great uncle was maybe an owner, might look that up, I'm not sure. There was some connection there.

Leanna Lompfrey: What was Basic High School like in the aftermath of the blast?

Robyn Ouchida: I think and I can't remember this for sure and other may people be able to tell you, I don't think we had school the next day. I think maybe it was cancelled. But I can't---[laughter] I can't recall. I just remember when we came back everybody had their story. You know, well I went home and my window was blown out or

my friend that I told you, you know, had lived right across the street and her window had blown into her leg. Remember I said; she was home eating lunch.

So everybody just had a lot of stories and I think it would have been kind of neat if maybe some of the English teachers had, had us journal about it back then because then there would be more to go back on but I don't recall us doing that [pause] yeah. I don't---I mean people were just full of stories you know, everybody wanted to tell their side of what they felt that day, kind of their experience.

Leanna Lomprey: Did everyone have the same reaction of fear or anxiety? Or did other people at Basic High School have different emotions about what happened that day?

Robyn Ouchida: It seems like everybody was kind of in that state of like, ah and wonder, like, I can't believe this happened in our town, this is crazy, you know, what did you think it was when you saw that cloud? And you know, some people immediately thought it was you know, we have BMI the magnesium plant and all that stuff down there and I remember when it happened and there was that could in the sky.

Some people thought, oh, the plants have blown up and so coming back here and hearing everyone saying, it wasn't the plant it was you know, the rocket fuel plant not the big ones down off of Lake Meade. I think most people had that reaction---I mean, yeah, it seemed---it kind of stressed people out. It made them anxious but you know; it was one of those weird things, like does this only happen once, you know, I don't think we thought it could be something else.

Leanna Lomprey: Did anybody in Henderson thinks something like this could happen again, could it possibly?

Robyn Ouchida: Well I know that after it happened it was a lot of talk about the other plants that you know, that have always been in Henderson, that started Henderson after World War II or during World War II, the magnesium and BMI mine stuff and I know that a lot of new safety regulations went in at those places after this happened.

Because before even though everybody thought they were being safe as they could, nothing had ever happen that bad and so I think it took something like that to kind of make people think. Well you know this did happen. We've got even bigger plants; right down there, closer to homes, closer to a hospital. I mean, right behind

the hospital. What would happen if something happened at one of those, you know?

And over the years there's been---you probably remember, there's been a few like perchlorate or whatever it's down there leaks, you know, they like gotten people out of that area. I don't think it's happen in 15 or 20 years but I know there was a couple of leaks down there for a while and they would evacuate that area. So I think it made a lot of companies and people have to re-think like their emergency procedures and safety regulations and all that.

Leanna Lomprey: Were some of the Henderson residents fearful to stay in Henderson after PEPCON exploded?

Robyn Ouchida: I don't remember that. I'm sure there were people who were. I don't remember hearing that from my side. But you know, there's always going to be people who take everything to the extreme. But I don't recall hearing that.

Leanna Lomprey: You said that you got a couple days off from Basic High School. Upon your return, did you see and damage or destruction to the school? Were the broken windows boarded up? What was going through the students and teachers mind in the aftermath of PEPCON?

Robyn Ouchida: Well I remember coming back; it seemed kind of weird because we had been there when it happened. And I remember that---that the glass wall, like between the multi-purpose room and the office hallway, right there, that was still boarded up and were some front door windows boarded up near the office. They gotten in there and cleaned it up pretty good I think during the days that there wasn't school.

So you didn't see a lot but if you were a new student, you were coming in and you were like, oh my gosh; all these windows in my school are boarded up, this is kind of crazy. And I think they had those areas roped off, you know where people couldn't go near them. I seemed to remember that we got redirected and we had to go to lunch through the other way instead of the way right by the office, remember how you could go around toward the other end. I mean, I think everybody was still a little on edge but it was good to get back in the routine right away and you know, life goes on, it's a crazy thing but it didn't devastate us as much as it could've.

Leanna Lomprey: If PEPCON were to happen again [inaudible] in Henderson, how do you think the city management or the city in total would be able handle, if an incident like PEPCON were to happen again?

Robyn Ouchida: I think it goes along with you know, sense then just like those other plants in town, all the advanced---all the advanced safety regulations and OSHA stuff has comes so far sense then. I think that they would have a better handle on it and I think 9/11 happening, really you know, made city governments and even private corporations, everybody across America, just really be so much more aware of things that can happen in an instant without warning.

I would hope that the city would be more prepared because you know; they've been through all this training now. You know, if 9/11 hadn't happened and we were talking having this same discussion, I think it would be different. I mean, I think that having PEPCON occur, changed a lot of things and then I think it probably kind of went back to status quo for awhile. And I think 9/11 really you know, up the ante because that just---it's a whole different world out there, you know what I mean? What if a terrorist hit one of those plants now? What would happen? I don't---I would hope that the city would be prepared but a lot of people still live, right there. So it's kind of interesting how houses keep being built in that area. I don't know.

Leanna Lomprey: Well thank you for your time Robyn for this interview and that concludes our interview for today.

[End of Audio]