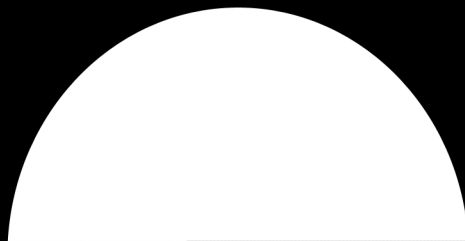
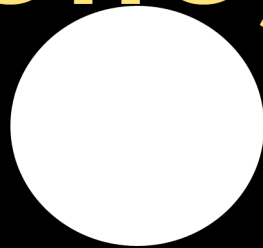


**Nevada State
College**



**Undergraduate Oral
History Project**

Oral History of Rick Watson

An Interview

Conducted by

Babatunde Adesanwo

May 6, 2014

Nevada State College Undergraduate Oral History Project

Produced by:

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Rick Watson Interview

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible with the support of the Nevada State Library and Archives and the generosity of the Institute of Museum and Library Services through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). The collaboration between the Nevada State College department of Humanities and the Library provided a unique opportunity for undergraduate students and project staff to work together with community members from the City of Henderson to acquire a series of first-person narratives.

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*.

Rick Watson Interview

Oral History of Rick Watson

An Interview Conducted by Babatunde Adesanwo on May 6, 2014

Biography

Rick Watson was born October 20, 1940, in Kansas City, Missouri, and moved to Henderson in 1946 with his family. He attended the historic Fifth Street School for a brief period until his family moved to Carver Park in Henderson, Nevada. He reminisced about his day to day experiences as a child growing up in Henderson and recalls the race relations between the white and black population in Henderson.

Rick Watson is an active member of the Henderson Historical Society where he helps keep the spirit of the Henderson community alive.

Rick Watson Interview

Narrator: Rick Watson

Interviewer: Babatunde Adesanwo

Interview Date: May 6, 2014

Location: Nevada State College, Henderson, Nevada

Babatunde: Opening statement, my name is Babatunde Adesanwo. I'm a student at Nevada State College, and I am here with Mr. Rick Watson at Nevada State College LAS Building in Henderson, Nevada to conduct a formal interview for the Nevada State College Oral History Project. This interview will be recorded and preserved for the NSC Library, so my first question is what is your name?

Rick Watson: Well, my official name is Frederick William Watson, but everybody calls me Rick.

Babatunde: Rick for short? What is the date – what is your date of birth?

Rick Watson: I was born October 20, 1940.

Babatunde: And what is today's date?

Rick Watson: Today's date is May 6, 2014.

Babatunde: Okay, tell me a little bit about where you were born, and where you were raised at with your parents growing up.

Rick Watson: Well, I was born in Kansas City, Missouri and lived there with my mother and dad for about nine months, and then we moved to Los Angeles, California.

Babatunde: Why did you move to Los Angeles?

Rick Watson: It was – it you know, it was the Depression, and my dad had job opportunities in Los Angeles and so –

Babatunde: Okay, do you feel there was a lot of movement towards the West Coast, obviously around that time kind of going through the Depression?

Rick Watson: There was you know my mother's family especially and her mother and two brothers had moved to the coast, and her mother had some sisters that were close the family and they had moved to the coast also.

Babatunde: Okay, what about your education? Did you have most of your school on the West Coast I'm guessing Los Angeles, because I don't know where you grew up?

Rick Watson: You know you mentioned that there was a lot of movement during that period of time and there was, and so we were back and forth between Missouri and California a couple of times during the war years so I was born. We lived for about nine months in Kansas City. We moved to California and lived there for about four years. My dad worked in a defense plant, Douglas Aircraft, during the war.

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He was too old to be drafted, but everybody was expected to do something to you know, to help with the war effort, and so he worked in the defense plant and in 1945, as the war was winding down they started laying people off because they didn't really – they knew they weren't going to need all the aircraft that they had on the drawing boards, and at that time his dad was experiencing bad health back in Missouri so we lived – they lived for – went back to Missouri and lived there for close to a year.

Babatunde: Oh, okay, when did you end up moving to Henderson?

Rick Watson: We moved to Henderson in 1946. We actually moved to Las Vegas in 1946, and I started school. My very first year of elementary school was in Las Vegas at the – right in the old downtown Las Vegas, a school called the Fifth Street School and Las Vegas Grammar School officially.

It was located – its back yard was located on 5th Street and for some reason or other they started calling it the Fifth Street School, and I went to school there for you know, for maybe a month and it was just impossible to find a place to live in Las Vegas, and we lived in a motel which was cramped. We had three – my family had three children and my mother and my dad and my mother's father, my granddad, lived with us so that was pretty crowded for a motel and –

Babatunde: Wow. Yeah, that's a lot so do you remember exactly what age you were when you ended up moving to Las Vegas?

Rick Watson: Well, I was five and started kindergarten in Las Vegas. We had – then my folks during that September, early October period they had got – my dad came across an opportunity for us to get an apartment in Henderson in a project called Carver Park, and well, we were just overjoyed to have a place where you could have a place where you could have a living room and a kitchen and a bathroom and two bedrooms, and that's what was available in Carver Park so we moved out there in maybe October, early to middle October.

Babatunde: Really so you were kind of excited to get out of the motel really. You were in a situation where a home was awesome, awesome, awesome.

Rick Watson: Yeah.

Babatunde: Who did you move here with? You were – you said – you mentioned your –

Rick Watson: I said my mother and dad and my sister and the brother and then my grandfather. My mother's dad lived with us also. He was the reason we came up here. He'd been in Las Vegas during the war, and he said that there a number of building projects going and he wanted to get back to Vegas. He was sure he could get a job as a you know, in the painting business, and he'd hoped to be a painting contractor and –

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Babatunde: Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like first moving to Henderson? I know you said you started off in Las Vegas, but when you got to Henderson what was it like?

Rick Watson: Well, you know the whole area, Southern Nevada, was you know, it was a big change for our family and change in the physical environment. We were from Missouri which was green farmland and my mother was from Iowa, and that was green farmland.

Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: And Southern California was green. Southern California's a desert but very green. Henderson, Nevada was not green. [Laughs] That was – and that was 1946 and Henderson's a lot greener now you know, but because we landscaped and planted trees, and – but when we got here it was you know, the population had only come to Las Vegas three years – or to Henderson maybe three years before.

Babatunde: Right.

Rick Watson: Before that there hadn't been very many people and there certainly weren't all that many trees, so and the mountains were just kind of just looked like they had been scorched or something. You know after having lived here a lot of years we know that that's all kind of an oxidation on the mountains that makes it that brownish blackish color.

Babatunde: Yeah, the coloring.

Rick Watson: But so we were it took a while to get used to that, fell in love with the desert eventually but in the early going we thought, "Oh, my God." And it was you know, it was awful hot in August when we got here.

Babatunde: Oh, man, tell me about it. What were your neighbors like when you moved to Henderson, kind of settling down? When you guys got out of the motel, describe I guess maybe living conditions versus Las Vegas coming into Henderson moving in to Carver Park. What –

Rick Watson: Carver Park is – was more spacious. Like I said we had two bedrooms and a kitchen and a bathroom, and then we had miles and miles of desert all around Carver Park as a playground so you know us kids were thrilled with it. Carver Park had been – was built as a you know, as housing for wartime workers, and the plan was for all of Henderson and the plan when the war was over just to tear it all down and move the building materials somewhere else for some other project and you know, that didn't happen, but that was what the plan was so you know, it was temporary.

There were things about Carver Park that might have reminded you of the concentration camps that they built to house the Japanese American citizens. Carver Park was cinder block and those internment camps for the Japanese were –

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they were with construction but the picture, the one picture I have of the old Carver Park School and its wood frame was tar paper as the outside wall. [Laughs] It's [Inaudible] it.

Babatunde: Wow so the demeanor must have been a little different than living in Las Vegas and living in maybe the rest of Henderson, outside of Carver Park, just because the way you just described the way it might have looked, right?

Rick Watson: Yeah, well, it was – you know yeah, the – I think everybody that came there had that sense well, let's this town isn't permanent, and we're not going to be here for a long time and I can remember my folks saying, "Yeah, you know we'll move on somewhere else." But they never did and we – they grew old and died in Henderson, and before that happened they loved Henderson and I you know, I do, too but Carver Park was – it was rough and utilitarian, and I think that was the that was the reason because it wasn't planned to be there, but for kids it you know, there were lots of kids in Carver Park and so we had a lot of playmates and it was a place where you could have a lot of adventures as children.

Parents weren't worried like they are today about the kids getting very far away from home. We'd eat breakfast in the morning and go to school, and when we got home from school we'd go play and maybe a mile from home and as long as we were home for dinner that's all that mattered.

Babatunde: Can you describe to me what the people were like, maybe like you mentioned like as a child growing up, the friends and also, describe to me where did the people come from? Were there a lot of people as you mentioned that were there temporarily just to work and kind of get out?

Rick Watson: There were you know, for the most part there were people who worked in the plant from – I think Carver Park finished – of course a lot of what I'm going to tell you is, part of it will be childhood memory, and other things that I've learned in the 68 years since then.

Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: So yeah, a lot of the people that were plant workers. My dad never worked at the plant. You know the plant was downsizing by that time, just like Douglas Aircraft where he had worked in Southern California was downsizing because the war effort tapered off.

By the time – the war was over by the time we got to Carver Park, and there was very little need for magnesium and manganese which were the main products that the BMI Plant produced you know, steel hardener for armor plate and magnesium for tracer bullets and fire bombs and things like that. We just didn't need that kind of stuff anymore, so I think Carver Park, partly it was just a place where people who were – didn't have very much money and didn't have prospects, high prospects right at that moment, that's where they settled and then the ambition was well, let's get a permanent home you know and someplace where we can

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plant a yard. It's difficult to have landscape and grass and stuff like that at Carver Park.

Babatunde: Now how widely would you consider the community and I know you talked about kids would play outside and things of that nature but as far as your family in connection with the other families that lived there, how strong was the relationship with your family and other families in the community around you?

Rick Watson: We met you know, we met at least one family that remained lifelong friends. I grew up – and the Schindler Family. They were our next door neighbors. They moved away and then they moved back, and then we all moved – eventually moved up to the town site, that part of town that was more permanent. Although it was – those houses were described in the architectural documents as demountable homes but anyway, we moved to – up to the town site with this family that lived within just a few blocks of each other for the, you know, all of the years that I was growing up.

We went to the same high school and a number of other families, too that maybe we weren't quite that close to, but that I – we knew and went to church with and we're Catholics and we went to the old St. Peter's Church there on the Boulder Highway, and there were a number of Catholic families that were there in the Carver Park. You know Carver Park in Henderson, it was designed by a Black architect named Paul Revere Williams, and Carver Park was designed to house the Black workers who were working at the plant. It was going to be completely segregated.

The town site part of town as I recall would have been housing for maybe plant administrators, the you know, people that were fairly high up on the chain of command and then some of the more skilled workers would live there. Black employees would live in Carver Park. Victory Village would be maybe the White, Hispanic, other ethnic groups would live in Victory Village that were maybe not quite so skilled workers if I'm remembering correctly.

Babatunde: Right.

Rick Watson: And I'm not a scholar on that subject, but I think that's kind of the way it worked, was supposed to work.

Babatunde: Right.

Rick Watson: But – and so – but by 1946 when we moved there, there weren't very many Black families that lived in Carver Park. There were mostly poor White folks like us and – but a few Black families. There was a kid named Gerald Wellerby that I went to school with all through grade school off and on, either at the Carver Park school or at the town site school. The Wellerby Family and he had a brother. There were a couple little girls that went to Carver Park School. I think their name was Washington but I wouldn't swear to it.

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I've heard since – then I'm friends and have worked with a lady named Claytee White who's – works at the university, UNLV, and she's working on it, a history of the Black population in Southern Nevada, and she says that you know, segregation and race relations and the way we treat each other in those days, it was not – Henderson was just not a pleasing place for Black families to live. They couldn't go to the movie theater. They couldn't go to the restaurants. They had – they were supposed to live in Carver Park. I mean that really doesn't cheer a person up very much if they're Black.

Babatunde: Right, right.

Rick Watson: So a good many of them, most of the Black population said, "Well, we'll work at the plant but we're going to live in Vegas because there's a Black population there and we can you know, we can do things. We have friends." Now Vegas had its you know, trouble with integration and segregation, too but the Black – there was a defined Black community where there was a you know, quite a population, and there was just a better, nicer place for Black families and so they chose not to live in Carver Park.

Babatunde: Now talking about just some of the daily life for children as you had mentioned, what was it – I don't know if you remember because you were a little bit younger growing up in Carver Park, but what were the things that people did and not talking about Las Vegas, talking about just in Henderson?

Rick Watson: Well, Henderson had a theater called the Victory Theater. If you look at the street names, and I'll show you this here later because – but this is a – it's a book that kids did in 1990 on the history of Henderson. I'm going to – I'll make – I'll get a copy of this for Pete and it's also online at the Henderson Public Libraries.

Babatunde: That's good, yeah.

Rick Watson: So – but you know there was a theater. There was no swimming pool. I don't think anybody, even the wealthiest of the Henderson plant workers didn't – they didn't have any swimming pools. Now today it's not unusual for people to have a swimming pool in their backyard, but that was unheard of and even in Las Vegas maybe only had a couple. There were swimming pools at the main hotels, but there were only about three I think when we moved here in 1946, like the Flamingo, the El Rancho and the Last Frontier and they had swimming pools. If you wanted to swim in old Henderson you'd – you had to go out to Lake Mead.

Babatunde: Yeah, of course.

Rick Watson: And they had rafts positioned out there and there were ropes and buoys and things that if you struggled with your swimming in a rocky, dusty old – they had a shoreline, but that was – we didn't know any better. In Missouri, we swam in the creeks and ponds and things like that, and I wasn't much of a swimmer so I didn't spend too much time at the lake, I'll have to confess. Church you know, there were church activities. There were – we attended St. Peter's Church and there were you know, religious instruction activities and for the families, that were

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picnics and parties and things that they had and after in the evenings and the town site had a – they had a pool hall and a small bowling alley, maybe with two or three lanes for bowling and that was about it.

There were scouting activities for kids, Boy Scouts. That was fun and summer camp up in the mountains of Mt. Charleston when I was a little kid, but we did an awful lot to amuse ourselves despite playing out in the desert. You know we played you know, war on everybody's mind and it was – it'd only been over for well, a year when we got here, and it was close. Up until the time I graduated from high school, it was still pretty recent in our memories so we played war games and made wooden guns and everybody worries about guns today but we were really into guns. We couldn't afford to buy one.

Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: But we made wooden ones and played war and played cowboys and Indians and explored. The older kids were – would always tease the little kids and tell them farfetched stories about stuff out in the desert. Like they would say there was an old man in a stagecoach. Well, where's it at and of course the little kids would take off out in the desert trying to find it. There were stories about Spanish gold hid out in the desert and you know, stories about where you could find rattlesnakes and just you know, bizarre things that captivate the interest of youngsters and so the desert was just a great play area.

There was a big – the Las Vegas creek ran not far from Carver Park and it you know, it's still there and it's been cleaned up and made into a nice, what they call Las Vegas Springs Preserve, but Las Vegas Wash Preserve, and you know it runs right down underneath the Lake of Las Vegas but in those days it would – we thought it was a swamp and we – that was you know that was another fun activity was to get out there and wade around in the swamp, and there were all kinds of water birds down there and it was just a fun place to go play. There was an old miner. We called him the Hermit and he lived in a cave down there, but he built a shack over the mouth of this cave and – but the cave was – once you got inside that cave it was just cool, 60 degrees rear round. It had the best air conditioning in the area.

Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: And he was – he looked like you know, just looked like an old prospector, white beard, longish hair, had an old car that didn't – just started and didn't work, so he would back it up the hill next to his house so when he wanted to go somewhere he would – he'd pop the you know, release the brake and roll down the hill and pop the clutch and that'd start the motor. Everything – and that was before very many cars had automatic transmission. They had standard transmission and you could roll start the car pretty easily, but those were the things that we did for fun. We'd catch desert tortoises and catch chipmunks, and we were always like capturing animals and ants and grasshoppers and bugs of all kinds, the great learning experience for kids.

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Babatunde: Talk about some of the differences that you noticed in Carver Park in comparison with the rest of Henderson. Was it better or worse? Was Carver Park less kept up than the rest of Henderson or what was – even other – was Carver Park more kept up than the rest of Henderson, any differences that were noticeable, even at your age, when you were living there that you could talk about?

Rick Watson: Yeah, I didn't think Carver Park was very well-maintained. I'm not sure I paid a lot of attention to it when I was 6, 7. We lived there for 1946 and about – until about Christmastime of 1949, and then we got a rental house up in the town site, the other part of Henderson. I think a lot depended on who you were. The maintenance man, he was the grounds person who was responsible for the trees in Carver Park. He lived right behind us. We lived in 16B Lincoln Street – on 16B Lincoln Street, and he must have been 18 you know, maybe 18B Lincoln and his house and the front of his place was just like a garden. He had a picket fence and grass and flowers and all neat but most everybody else didn't.

I'll show you some pictures of what our yard looked like. It was mostly just rocks and dirt and I think because people – if people don't own something and they don't think they're going to be there very long, it's – it gets to be harder to be real conscientious about taking care of the property, so I remember, I told you that we were good friends with the Schindlers and they lived next door to us. The older boy and I got nails on either side of the wall and dug the ground out between two of the cinder blocks, so we could talk to each at night and my sister and his sister could – they could talk to each other, and that's criminal really to destroy public property.

Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: But it was government owned. You know Carver Park was owned. Initially, it had been built by the government and later it was the Clark County Housing Authority. They had responsibility for it so I was wrong to do that but you know, we just thought, "Well, this is not a very nice place so why take care of it?" I'm embarrassed to admit that now but that's the way we were.

Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: And I think probably a lot of other people and then most of the people that lived there didn't have much. You know they could pay the rent. It was really – it was inexpensive to live there, but didn't have much money to plant a yard or to do fixer up kinds of things. You know if you figured, even if you're just going to be there for three or four years like we were, maybe if we'd had better income at the time, maybe we'd have painted and maybe we would have planted a tree out in the front. There was plenty of water during the – to run the plant they had to have lots of water. Part of the you know, the refining process of those materials, manganese and magnesium and other things that were a part of the chemical process, needed water so the government built a big pipeline from Lake Mead to Henderson, and so part of the water went to the plant but a good portion of it went

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to all the residences and the people that lived there, and you couldn't survive the summer without some kind of air conditioning.

All the old timers in Vegas had done that and they lived without air conditioning but we had what they called swamp coolers, the evaporation coolers. A tank of water up on the roof and then a framework that you put a drip pad in. They – these pads were made of spruces I recall, later other things, but there were wood chips, real thin wood chips that were wrapped into – in a bag and they could be fitted in the air conditioner and water – there was a pipe that went into the top of the swamp cooler and then it let water drip down through these pads, and then there was a squirrel cage inside, like a big fan that blew and in that process.

It sucked air through these wet pads and chilled the air and then pumped it down into the apartment which is in Vegas and the Vegas Valley, Henderson was dry country in those days, so evaporated cooling you could get the house darn near cold with that kind of air conditioning, but the technology was such that it had the water run through the cooler just one time and then it just rann off the roof all day and all night you know, probably from about this time of year as it started warming up maybe the middle of May, late May all the way until the first of October, so that in every apartment as long as that air conditioner was on, the water ran through the air conditioner off the roof and down the street.

Babatunde: No water damage from – I mean property damage just through water leaking everywhere and kind of falling off in the summertime?

Rick Watson: Sure, there was there – yeah, and another thing is that you know, we call them roaches but they're really water bugs and well, they just loved that, so the Carver Park apartments were just full of roaches and you know, I don't really remember being – having a hoard of roaches or anything but my mother and dad were – oh, my God, they'd just go crazy and then so – and I think everybody else did this, too. We would go and get what they called a bomb and it was filled with DDT which is a poison, an insecticide, that's been outlawed since those days. Probably in the '50's they outlawed DDT, but we would wrap all the food and put them in airtight containers and then we'd set off – put this bomb in the middle of the floor and as I recall you screwed the lid off of it.

They had a propeller and it would just fill the room with DDT and of course we'd get out. All the windows closed tight, get out and go for a ride somewhere. We didn't have a car the whole time that I lived there, but after a while we did and then come back and my dad or my granddad would go and open the door and they'd get out of the way and let the apartment air out and you know DDT had kind of an oily – just left an oily film on everything, so they'd have to go wipe everything down but they'd kill the roaches and there would be just thousands of dead roaches everywhere. [Laughs]

That's – I mean that – those are – that – those are things about Carver Park that were just not appealing so people were in – they were grateful as all get out that they had a place to live but they were not eager to stay there, at least we weren't

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but Carver Park, it went from – they built it in 1943 and I think it was around until '72. I remember I was married and had kids of my own by the time it closed.

We were – I was living in Vegas by then and – well, I live in Henderson now again but during the time when I was raising my family, I lived in Vegas over by Valley High School and I remember in the early '70s my mother and dad continued to live in Henderson and I would – I came out and mowed the yard for my dad and he had a swamp cooler on his roof but I used to maintain that swamp cooler, but I remember going down to Carver Park when there was nobody there. They were getting ready to demolish it and going and finding that old apartment that we lived in.

Babatunde: Right.

Rick Watson: And you know despite the discomforts of it, I had a really a sentimental attachment to Carver Park because as a kid that was just a fun place to be.

Babatunde: Well, if you could describe to me the demographics of the United States, kind of the social demographics, knowing about segregation and going on – how did your parents and yourself included, how did you guys feel about staying in Carver Park? How much did you like the idea of staying there? Even you being White and knowing that it's – it was a neighborhood for Blacks to stay in while they worked here in Henderson?

Rick Watson: You know I don't remember my folks talking a lot about it that you know, and I can't – I mean they later we had conversations about Carver Park and you know, and the fact that it had been designed to be a Black community. You know my dad came from Missouri and Missouri was not known to be – there was – racism was rampant in Missouri. I think my dad was a good person. I think he would have you know, you would have helped people. He would not have gone out of his way to see somebody not be able to get a job or not have enough food to eat and everything but he was you know, he was raised you know, as like to believe that separation was good and that segregation was good and I think he believed that, so but I don't recall – but as far as Carver Park is concerned, I don't think that was a big issue to them.

I mean there were Black families who lived there. There was a lady that lived – a lady – a man and woman, they were a Black couple who had lost a child maybe the year before, a little girl that had died, and they didn't live there the whole three years but they were our neighbors and I don't recall my folks ever you know, there were people that would say, "Well, if a Black family moves next door we're moving." And that – you heard that kind of stuff and not just in the '40s but in the '50s and '60s, but I don't recall my folks ever getting particularly upset and they were friendly. Gerald Willerby and his little brother used to come by our place and you know my folks were friendly with them.

Babatunde: So you had a good relationship, it's not – going into the next question you know, what were your relations, race relations like as far as having neighbors that were

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African American or as you just mentioned, an African American was your neighbor talked about moving out so what were race relations like just as far as your personal experience? You said you had an African American friend and your parents were okay with that.

Rick Watson: Yeah, yeah.

Babatunde: Talk a little bit about that.

Rick Watson: We weren't close friends. We you know, we went to school together and I can remember talking to him and you know passing the time of day everything, but we didn't really hang out. I had this younger kid that lived next door to us you know, probably was my closest friend and I'm trying to think it was some of the other kids. The [Inaudible] Lapres and the [Inaudible] Korthuis' were close friends.

Babatunde: Now talk about with African Americans that lived in Carver Park what was school like? Was there segregation in the schools? Were things different at school for Blacks in – that lived in Carver Park at that time in Henderson?

Rick Watson: No, I mean the school was completely integrated but there weren't a lot of Black kids that were at the school. I mean it would have been a small number. I'm trying – Gerald and his brother, Gerald is my age and the little – his little brother maybe would have been two years younger than us. There was a kid named Butch Walker who went on to be a really good football player at Basic High School. He would have been about in the 4th grade when I was in 1st grade, 3rd or 4th grade.

There was the girl I mentioned. I believe her name was Washington and she was in my class, but they didn't stay there for very long you know, and as – and I've gone over this a bunch of times in my own mind because I wanted to talk to Claytee White about you know, about race relations in Carver Park but I couldn't remember any other kids than ones I've just mentioned to you. There may have been but that was about all I remembered.

Babatunde: What did you know about the Black community outside of Carver Park and outside of Henderson maybe or maybe in Henderson, maybe just outside of Carver Park? Did they have a lot of Blacks in the Henderson areas? I know you mentioned earlier about a lot of Blacks moving to Las Vegas because the community was a little bit stronger there, but with Henderson what would it have been like?

Rick Watson: Not very many I don't think and when we – once we moved to town site I'm trying to remember. I don't remember any Black families that were – lived anywhere near where we lived. You know I think that – I think the Black population of Henderson was very low, just not very many. I think most Black families chose to live in Las Vegas. You know the – today we you know, we have – we think of a segregated community in Las Vegas called the West Side, but during the war years I've been told that most of the Black families didn't live

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in the West Side, that that was mostly a White community and that the Black families lived along Bonanza, maybe between Main Street and 10th Street.

They tended to live along in that area, but I think the Henderson population, because of the reasons I mentioned before, just it wasn't very big as far as Black families were concerned. There were – and you know, and I don't think Black families came to Henderson until, maybe some. When I say Henderson I mean Southern Nevada really. I think there were some came to work when they built Hoover Dam in the '30s but not very many. I mean they weren't – Black families didn't and Black workmen couldn't get jobs at the plant.

I've read that Franklin Roosevelt finally you know, the Black population supported Franklin Roosevelt. They helped him get elected so they went to him and said how about it you know, we helped you get elected and why can't we get jobs at the building of the dam and I think his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, just got after him, and so they – the six companies or seven companies were building the plant, then he relented and began to hire Black workers but see small number yeah, at the plant – at the Hoover Dam. Now a bigger number began – a bigger population began moving to Southern Nevada when the word got out that they were going to build the plant and people who were out of work all over the country flocked here.

I mean this is the heart of the Depression. Until the war really got going, I think you know, people were just desperate for jobs. I talked to a guy last week, two weeks ago, who came up here to work at the plant. He is – his mother and sister stayed down in Southern California and he and his dad lived in cars. He went back and forth between California, the boy did. He was only 7 or 8 years old but his dad lived in a car for the better part of a year I think. That will tell you how hard up people were so, and I think that that was probably the beginning of Black migration to Southern Nevada, the building of the plant.

Babatunde: What about the Basic Magnesium? Do you know about Black workers working at BMI at all or maybe your parents might have done some work there. Maybe they might have mentioned anything.

Rick Watson: No, you know my dad – they were scaling back at the plant so my dad went to work down on Fremont Street. He worked in the casinos on Fremont, hitchhiked – in the beginning, hitchhiked from Henderson to Vegas to work, and my grandfather continued to live with us for a time when we were in Carver Park but – and he went into the painting business and painted houses in Vegas and in Henderson. They'll you know, they'll – I really – I can't pose as an expert on race relations at the plant. Oh, I've read and heard things but my own personal knowledge, my – because my folks didn't work there. I don't really have much recollection but I've seen pictures. Part of what I'm helping the Henderson Historical Society do right now is to go through old historic photos and try to give contacts to those photos, and they were plenty of photos taken down at the plant that's showing Black workers, so there was a good population of Black employees at BMI, not always treated well from what I've heard.

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Babatunde: Yeah, I was going to ask that next actually and even some of the stuff I know you didn't have personal experience because your parents didn't work there, because they were scaling back at the time you got to Carver Park but talk about some of the social demographics maybe at BMI that you might have known about. Do you have any stories or anything like that?

Rick Watson: You know just recently, just in the last year a man named Jack Jeffrey spoke at one of our panel discussions at the Henderson Historical Society's panel discussions and he you know, his dad was one of the supervisors down at the plant. He used to – this is the man whose dad lived in his car for the opening stages, when they were constructing the plant. He eventually worked his way up to being a supervisor and his – he knew – he seemed to know more about labor relations, unions because there was the AFL and the CIO were two competing unions that fought with each other and you know, they came to blows over labor issues. He would be a better person to talk to about race relations at the plant and of course, Claytee, Claytee. White would be you know, they would just be more knowledgeable than me.

Babatunde: And is there anything you can tell me about when you moved out of Carver Park? Were there any reasons why you moved out? Was it just dying down and I know you said it kind of got demolished towards its end, towards its stint.

Rick Watson: No, Carver Park was flourishing. There was always people lined up and eager to get a place to stay in Carver Park. It's you know, it's kind of it was not – I don't think it was terribly well-maintained but there – but the nature of the economy in the '40s and early '50s, I think there were still people that had not – I mean the Depression was over by then and I think American – the economy was burgeoning for some people but for others it wasn't – so we didn't no, we just we lived there for three and a half years and then were able to rent a house.

We were – you couldn't still couldn't buy houses in the town site but we did find a place in the town site on Tungsten Street where we moved, but we weren't so much fleeing Carver Park as we just were wanting to get to a bigger place. By then, we were – my mother was expecting the fourth of our – the children in our family, so two bedrooms you know, we had my grandfather, my brother and I all stayed in one bedroom and my – Tony, the – my sister, my mother and my dad stayed in the other bedroom and that wasn't ideal. You know that's that made for good family relations.

Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: So – but once we got up to the house on Tungsten Street, we had more bedrooms and more space. Plus we could have a yard and you know, it's just – it just was better and better maintained.

Babatunde: What about Boulder City and talking more about Las Vegas, how lively was Boulder City and even you know, I know you dad worked at the casino, I mean Vegas probably started picking up a little bit more steam towards that time period.

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Rick Watson: Yeah, Vegas was you know, Vegas was for the most part the population of Las Vegas was, if you drew a ring around the downtown, what we call downtown Las Vegas, where the Fremont Experience is, maybe a ring would be three or four miles out from the center. That would have been where most of the population was.

There was – North Las Vegas had a population center, too but Vegas was not very big, maybe 20 thousand people when we got here, and that might be a little more than there actually was but that number 20, 25 thousand people maybe, somewhere in that neck of the woods. Yeah, Las Vegas was more prosperous than Henderson. Henderson was for the most part were – there – it was a blue collar town, plant workers. Though my dad didn't work at the plant, he's – he definitely would have been classed as a blue collar worker. My granddad was a house painter and he was a blue collar worker.

Babatunde: What about Boulder City? Boulder City kind of was always just kind of – just been what it is, a little bit of a small town out there?

Rick Watson: Yeah, yeah, you know Boulder City it was kind of like that. I mean they've managed the population there. You know they only allow that town to grow by a certain amount every year and a lot of that has just been replacing people who die or move away. Boulder City's not – it's not – hasn't been allowed to get really big. You know that's a government installation. They didn't allow any alcohol. You could get – I think they sold beer, maybe not even beer in the beginning. Yeah, Boulder City was just a nicer town. It you know, it was planned. They knew they were going to need a staff to continue to take care of the dam. They had to have workers, and so it was not it wasn't planned. It was temporary.

The you know, the old – the wooden house part of Boulder City I think was thought to be temporary. It was just built on skids and there was no foundation and no basement or anything, so I think they thought those houses would be torn down but there was a portion of Boulder City that was permanent and that was – and the engineers that ran the plant or I mean the dam, they were going to be there for perpetuity so that part of town, there was a nice park up there and a hospital and it just seemed greener and nicer. I can remember you know, we'd get to go up to Boulder City that was always a treat, lounge around on the grass and –

Babatunde: You know can you talk about any of the political issues that might have surrounded segregation and tough to kind of – I know the time period. It's tough to kind of compare it to the East Coast and what was going on in the South, but did you know of any Blacks that were kind of maybe upset or thought that there you know, segregation was unfair? Were there unfair things like Blacks couldn't go to certain places, certain restaurants and did they kind of speak against it?

Rick Watson: I'll talk about that from two perspectives. As a grade schooler you know, when we lived in Carver Park and then later in the town site. You know that was – that would – in my life span that's from about 6 years old and until about 12 maybe and you know during that time, I don't have firsthand knowledge of that because

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there weren't – there just weren't Black families to talk to or Black classmates to talk to about it, so what I remember I remember from watching television or reading the newspapers and I can't say that that was always unbiased.

I mean the media and the people around the TV stations and all those you know, there were – they could be a force for good changes but they were still you know, the point of view was always from a White point of view. It was hard until Martin Luther King. You know he was masterful at driving that into the news and forcing the issue but before that, I can't say that you know, that I have a lot of recollection of that.

Babatunde: You can kind of describe it and say that it was just the way things were. People were okay with it. It wasn't really a problem more or less. It was just the way things were.

Rick Watson: Yeah, I think so and maybe that's I mean – that's a sad reality of the way human beings are, frequently worry about their own personal problems and not you know not be altruistic and think about other people who need help. It was in you know, it was always – we were democrats and from Kansas City, had been active. My grandfather had been active in democratic politics, grassroots kinds of things, not in anything very substantial but he worked hard and campaigned for Harry Truman, the Pendergast Family in Kansas City, so when we got to Las Vegas we were interested in democratic issues and Harry Truman was a you know, he was you know, if you listened to the way he talked you would think, "Well, this man's a – he's a racist. He's a bigot. He used bad language." But he also campaigned for you know, for good things.

He integrated the Army and worked hard for civil rights and so you know, so we were I mean – we and – we always voted for Harry Truman so in a sense you can look back and say, "Yeah, we were you know, we were in a way campaigning for those same things." But the Civil Rights Movement, until I graduated from college and was working, it wasn't on the front stage in Las Vegas, except for the knowledge that we made a lot of money out on the strip from Black entertainers appearing there, and yet they couldn't live in the hotels. You know they had to either live in private homes or live on – well, in private homes on the West Side. There weren't that many. The Moulin Rouge was a hotel on the West Side of Las Vegas but it wasn't – it only lasted a few years really.

Babatunde: Now can you talk about some of the things in Henderson that didn't happen anywhere else that were different or unique, that made Henderson unique in comparison to not just Las Vegas or Boulder City, but even where you lived before in Missouri or L.A.? How different was Henderson, just the life of being there, living in Henderson?

Rick Watson: Well, it's hard to know you're different when you're from someplace, but you know when you – when you're a world traveler you know, then you get to be – then you get to sense your differentness. You know you see other communities and things and we weren't. Oh, you know we travelled down to the Pasadena to

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see my grandmother but that was about the extent of our travel. Looking back on it I guess our blue collarness. We had a panel discussion last – a week ago Saturday night and the mayor of Henderson, the former mayor, Bob Groesbeck, told a story.

You ought to make note of this. You can find it on, let's see Insidehenderson.com and he said that he lived in Pittman and you know, Pittman was – tended to be older and maybe not as well-cared for as the town site or even the Carver Park maybe, and he said that it used to hurt him when kids from Vegas or people from Vegas would refer to Henderson as Hooterville. I mean I just – they just – the kids from Henderson looked down their nose at Henderson and I'm sure that adults did the same thing with our parents. They were you know, blue class – blue collar workers were not you know, not highly educated and just more you know, kind of a redneck type population I guess.

Babatunde: Talk a little bit more about that. I'm a little bit interested to hear that because my grandparents grew up here in Las Vegas for a very, very long time and I've heard that name Hooterville.

Rick Watson: Hooterville.

Babatunde: What does that mean? What does that entail?

Rick Watson: Oh, I don't know. I've – another term I've heard is Hendertucky.

Babatunde: Hendertucky, I haven't heard –

Rick Watson: Have you ever heard that?

Babatunde: I've never heard of that before. I have heard Hoot of Hooterville before through my grandparents but –

Rick Watson: Hendertucky, yeah, and then of course and I didn't hear that when I was a kid growing up, but I've heard people say that since then and I guess it's just – it's like –

Babatunde: Is it like an offensive thing or something like that or –

Rick Watson: Well, I think Henderson people oh, it would make them mad but I think they also kind of got a kick out of it.

Babatunde: Oh.

Rick Watson: Just like you know, like people from the South today that will get aggravated but also kind of get a kick out of their reputation for being rednecks and proud to be an Okie from Muskogee. How's that sound?

Babatunde: Yeah, yeah. [Laughs]

Rick Watson: So – and my dad was from the Ozarks of Missouri and he you know, his language he you know, he was not articulate, and he had to stand a lot of country

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colloquialisms and speech and everything. Maybe that was part of maybe – yeah, the way you talk maybe. It's you know, you're judged by the language that you speak and whether that's fair or not I don't know. Abraham Lincoln was – I think he's very articulate but he's pretty folksy and he kind of liked being folksy. He was a storyteller, came from the backwoods but read you know, just a prolific reader, and so he was able to kind of shift gears depending on the crowd he was running with, had to give them time so maybe that's part of what Henderson population was like.

Yeah, you know it would be fun to know where everybody came from. You see that would help because I think a lot of the Black families that came to Southern Nevada came – they came from the South. There had been a migration after the Civil War to the industrial centers in the North, but I think a lot of the Black population that came to work on the dam and at the plant came from the South. I've read that they came from what Fordyce Arkansas and what's the town in Mississippi? I mean that's the generalization and I'm sure that's not universally true but big numbers did come from those places.

Babatunde: I've heard that.

Rick Watson: And maybe it's just because if somebody in your family goes somewhere and is successful, then they're trying to draw their you know, their relations and friends to come join them and that's kind of why we came here. My granddad had been here, and he had urged my mother and dad to come to Vegas.

Babatunde: Was there any social dynamic around living in Carver Park maybe between you and the other kids? Kids are immature. They have their rumors that they listen to from their parents, folktales, anything like that? Excuse me, talk about you know, Victory Village supposed to be for like you said, the Whites who were supposed to be – it was built for Whites and other races to live there and then the Blacks lived in Carver Park. Was there – was that kind of something that was well-known within the community, like that's the way it was supposed to be as far as kind of Victory Village goes?

Rick Watson: I didn't know that as a kid. I've read that later. I knew that Victory Village was just – it just seemed to be better cared for, a lot more grass, a lot more trees and you can you know, even as a kid you can see that. Victory Village had mulberry trees that you know, today most of the mulberries in Vegas, they're fruitless mulberries but Victory Village had fruit-bearing mulberries. You ever eat mulberries?

Babatunde: I haven't had them before, no.

Rick Watson: Oh, they're [inaudible]. [Laughs]

Babatunde: I've never heard of it.

Rick Watson: To me, I mean I'm – today I guess I wouldn't be the – I don't really have blueberries I guess but mulberries were free and oh, God, we used to go up to

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Carver Park when I lived in Carver, I mean go up to Victory Village when I lived in Carver Park or later hike down there from Tungsten, because there weren't a lot of fruit-bearing mulberries in the town site but there were a lot of them in Victory Village, so we used to go down there and climb up in the trees and eat mulberries and that was a treat. My granddad lived in Victory Village after a while. Yeah, I think Victory Village from a kid's point of view, was – seemed to be step up from Carver Park just – and maybe just because it was shadier and had more grass and was better maintained.

Babatunde: Better place to hang out, right?

Rick Watson: Yeah.

Babatunde: Now after you left Carver Park and after you left Henderson, right? You left Henderson after a certain while or have you always stayed in Henderson?

Rick Watson: I lived in Henderson from 1946 to 1965 and when I finished college, I got a job teaching in Las Vegas but I stayed in Henderson. I still lived at home until let's see, '64, '65 was my first year of teaching so August of 1964 until November of 1965, I continued to live at home and teach in Las Vegas and just commuted and now I got married in 1965, and the school where I was teaching was in Vegas and it just seemed convenient to try to find a place to live right close by that school, Ruby Thomas Elementary School which is an elementary school. It's right behind the Boulevard Mall. You ever shop over at the Boulevard Mall?

Babatunde: Yeah, yeah.

Rick Watson: So it was right close by there so we found a – my wife and I found a house after a few months. We lived in an apartment near the mall, but then we found a house in Francisco Park, just walking distance to the school where I taught and also to Valley High School, and then we lived there for 30 some years while all our kids were growing up.

Babatunde: Looking back at your experience in Carver Park and when your family first moved here to the Vegas Valley, would you say that Carver Park for the most part was an opportunity more or less to kind of get settled in Vegas? I know you said a lot of people moved there, because it was just you know, a cheaper way of living to kind of get things started, or was it a bad experience or maybe kind of a time in your life where you kind of you wish you didn't have to go through maybe?

Rick Watson: No, I don't – me personally, I think my mother and dad, I don't think they liked Carver Park. I think my – I think just living in you know, a place that was just not very well-cared for, that just bothered her and Carver Park was you know, even the you know, we – I loved the kids down there but that was – it was just kind of a rough neighborhood you know, and I think that kind of scared my mother. I'll give you an example. There is a – you just – there was a family that lived in the next apartment up from us, bought a couple of hogs and decided they were going to butcher them and Carver Park had – they had wonderful clotheslines. You

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know it wasn't very well maintained but they had – the clotheslines were like four by six posts and maybe six by ten laterals and then lines run on them.

They made a – just a really strong device for, if you wanted to pull a motor out of a car or if you wanted to butcher hogs so these guys, they brought in two hogs and of course the word got out to all the kids in the neighborhood they were going to butcher these hogs, so we all flocked down there to see it and they – of course they were sensitive to us watching so they said, “Now you have to turn around. Look over there toward the mountains.” So everybody turned around and of course they shot these hogs and then hoisted them up on the thing, gutted them and hosed them down, and you know, just – now that – I mean that was our – that was our neighborhood. There – maybe a hundred years before that would have been commonplace but that's not really – have you ever seen hogs butchered?

Babatunde: No, seen a pig get slaughtered before, no, I haven't. [Laughs]

Rick Watson: My granddad brought a chicken home, chopped its head off right in the – just right in the front – in front of our apartment, and it was – they had – it was an old like a block of wood or something there, just chopped his head off and cleaned the chicken. It was just – and that – I mean that was commonplace but it wasn't very gentle. I think that you know, that's kind of it worried my mother and but for me and for my friends, Carver Park was an adventure, and you know when I so when I talk to old-timers who lived in Carver Park, I'm like – I always get excited and want to know where they lived you know, and who were their friends and that kind of thing.

Babatunde: What else can you tell us about your experience in Henderson, any events, any big happenings, maybe coming to the Henderson area, coming from outside perspective or just things that may have happened that might have been a big deal? What else can you tell us about your experience here in Henderson?

Rick Watson: Oh, you know over the years the Boulder Highway I guess is – Boulder Highway was – it was like a main way to get into the valley from Arizona, and there was – it was just a really busy thoroughfare for commerce, and then like I – there were always – there seemed to be always car wrecks. If you read the newspaper and listen to the news, even today you frequently will hear about somebody getting hit by a car trying to cross the Boulder Highway. That happens – that happened a lot in those days and it continues to happen.

You know that always – that was always kind of scary, that thought and we had to cross the Boulder Highway. We went to the St. Peter's Elementary School so and rode our bikes down there, and I know my folks really worried about that. I think the community worried about the Boulder Highway as far as safety is concerned but it was – for kids, the highway like Carver Park was an adventure. I can remember let's see, I guess maybe we still lived in Carver Park. I can't remember how I managed to get up to the Boulder Highway to see this, but there is a bunch of trucks hauling cattle pulled up to the corner. You know where Boulder Highway crosses Lake Mead?

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Babatunde: Yeah.

Rick Watson: That intersection, it would be the north yeah, the northwest corner which had been where all the tent city had been, where the – when the guys came to actually build the plant, they didn't have any place for them to live so eventually they put them up in tents and that – in that triangle it would be formed by Lake Mead and Boulder Highway on the northeast, northwest. Anyway, these trucks pulled up with you know, they had cattle in them, threw down the ramps, turned all the cattle loose in this area and then went and opened a fire hydrant so the cattle could get a drink of water and for little kids, I mean that was just like seeing a cattle drive because they're – I mean there must have been 200 cows there getting a drink of water.

That was you know, an exciting moment in my young childhood. I think another thing that I got excited about was in the Carver Park years was just watching the planes being ferried back to Arizona. I say back to Arizona, that's where they went. That was the final resting place for a lot of aircraft and I mean there was a period of time when you would just hear this deafening roar, and the sky would just go black with planes that were being ferried down there to be dismantled and I mean they would reclaim parts of them for other projects and things.

The hermit I guess is you know, we used to ride our bikes down to visit with this old prospector and I think an awful lot of Henderson kids, if you ask them, "Do you remember somebody named the Hermit?" "Oh, yeah." I talked to a man who the other day who he was a fire chief in Henderson and asked him if he remember the Hermit. "Oh, yeah, I used to ride my motor scooter down there. My mom would make him sandwiches and my friend and I'd ride my motor scooter down there and take these sandwiches to him." And oh, he had retirement and he – I don't think he was he was down and out. He just chose to live down there.

The PEPCON explosion, of course I was out of Henderson by then, but I followed that really closely because my folks still lived in Henderson. They you know, they were maybe only three, four miles from where that explosion went off. My sister was working for the phone company. She and her husband both worked for the phone company and that was you know, they were not far from where the where it went off. I have another sister that – and her little boy was – he'd stay up at my mother and dad's house after school, and my brother's little boy was at their house when PEPCON blew up, cracked a big window right next door where these two kids were sitting, broke the door jams.

Babatunde: Well, I'll tell you right now. I've probably learned more in this last hour and ten minutes in here listening to you than I've done in all my research trying to find as much information on the Carver Park, Victory Village area, but this is going to conclude our interview with the rest of the questions. I appreciate your time.

Rick Watson: All right, I enjoyed it myself.

Babatunde: All right.

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