

An Interview with
TOM
BEKO

An Oral history produced by
Robert D. McCracken

Nye County Town History Project
Nye County, Nevada
Tonopah
2011



Tom Beko
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PREFACE

The Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP) engages in interviewing people who can provide firsthand descriptions of the individuals, events, and places that give history its substance. The products of this research are the tapes of the interviews and their transcriptions.

In themselves, oral history interviews are not history. However, they often contain valuable primary source material, as useful in the process of historiography as the written sources to which historians have customarily turned. Verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the NCTHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, but it cannot attest that they are free of error. Accordingly, oral histories should be read with the same prudence that the reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information.

It is the policy of the NCTHP to produce transcripts that are as close to verbatim as possible, but some alteration of the text is generally both unavoidable and desirable. When human speech is captured in print the result can be a morass of tangled syntax, false starts, and incomplete sentences, sometimes verging on incoherence. The type font contains no symbols for the physical gestures and the diverse vocal modulations that are integral parts of communication through speech. Experience shows that totally verbatim transcripts are often largely unreadable and therefore a waste of the resources expended in their production. While keeping alterations to a minimum the NCTHP will, in preparing a text:

- a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the uhs, ahs and other noises with which speech is often sprinkled;
- b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;
- c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context;
- d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered but have been added to render the text intelligible; and
- e. make every effort to correctly spell the names of all individuals and places, recognizing that an occasional word may be misspelled because no authoritative source on its correct spelling was found.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As project director, I would like to express my deep appreciation to those who participated in the Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP). It was an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to obtain oral histories from so many wonderful individuals. I was welcomed into many homes—in many cases as a stranger—and was allowed to share in the recollection of local history. In a number of cases I had the opportunity to interview Nye County residents whom I have long known and admired; these experiences were especially gratifying. I thank the residents throughout Nye County and Nevada—too numerous to mention by name—who provided assistance, information, and photographs. They helped make the successful completion of this project possible.

Appreciation goes to Chairman Joe S. Garcia, Jr., Robert N. “Bobby” Revert, and Patricia S. Mankins, the Nye County commissioners who initiated this project in 1987. Subsequently, Commissioners Richard L. Carver, Dave Hannigan, and Barbara J. Raper provided support. In this current round of interviews, Nye County Commissioners Andrew Borasky, Lorinda Wichman, Joni Eastley, Gary Hollis, and Fely Quitevis provided unyielding support. Stephen T. Bradhurst, Jr., planning consultant for Nye County, gave enthusiastic support and advocacy of the program within Nye County in its first years. More recently, Darrell Lacy, Director, Nye County Nuclear Waste Repository Project Office, gave his strong support. The United States Department of Energy, through Mr. Lacy’s office, provided funds for this round of interviews. Thanks are extended to Commissioners Eastley and Hollis and to Mr. Lacy for their input regarding the conduct of this research and for serving as a sounding board when methodological problems were worked out. These interviews would never have become a reality without the enthusiastic support of the Nye County commissioners and Mr. Lacy.

Jean Charney served as editor and administrative assistant throughout the project; her services have been indispensable. Valerie A. Brown, Debra Ann MacEachen, Robert B. Clark, Lynn E. Riedesel, Marcella Wilkinson and Jean Charney transcribed a number of interviews, as did Julie Lancaster, who also helped with project coordination. Proofreading, editing, and indexing were provided at various times by Joni Eastley, Michael Haldeman, Julie Lancaster, Teri Jurgens Lefever, and Darlene Morse. Joni Eastley proofed all the manuscripts and often double-checked, as best as possible, the spelling of people’s names and the names of their children and other relatives. Jeanne Sharp Howerton provided digital services and consultation. Eva La Rue and Angela Haag of the Central Nevada Museum served as consultants throughout the project; their participation was essential. Much-deserved thanks are extended to all these persons.

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—Robert D. McCracken

2011

INTRODUCTION

Historians generally consider the year 1890 as the close of the American frontier. By then, most of the western United States had been settled, ranches and farms developed, communities established, and roads and railroads constructed. The mining boomtowns, based on the lure of overnight riches from newly developed lodes, were but a memory.

Although Nevada was granted statehood in 1864, examination of any map of the state from the late 1800s shows that while most of the state was mapped and its geographical features named, a vast region—stretching from Belmont south to the Las Vegas meadows, comprising most of Nye County—remained largely unsettled and unmapped. In 1890, most of southcentral Nevada remained very much a frontier, and it continued to be so for at least another twenty years.

The spectacular mining booms at Tonopah (1900), Goldfield (1902), Rhyolite (1904), Manhattan (1905), and Round Mountain (1906) represent the last major flowering of what might be called the Old West in the United States. Consequently, southcentral Nevada, notably Nye County, remains close to the American frontier; closer, perhaps, than any other region of the American West. In a real sense, a significant part of the frontier can still be found in southcentral Nevada. It exists in the attitudes, values, lifestyles, and memories of area residents. The frontier-like character of the area also is visible in the relatively undisturbed quality of the natural environment, much of it essentially untouched by humans.

A survey of written sources on southcentral Nevada's history reveals some material from the boomtown period from 1900 to about 1915, but very little on the area after around 1920. The volume of available sources varies from town to town: A fair amount of literature, for instance, can be found covering Tonopah's first two decades of existence, and the town has had a newspaper continuously since its first year. In contrast, relatively little is known about the early days of Gabbs, Round Mountain, Manhattan, Beatty, Amargosa Valley, and Pahrump. Gabbs's only newspaper was published intermittently between 1974 and 1976. Round Mountain's only newspaper, the Round Mountain Nugget, was published between 1906 and 1910. Manhattan had newspaper coverage for most of the years between 1906 and 1922. The Rhyolite Herald, longest surviving of Rhyolite/Bullfrog's three newspapers, lasted from 1905 to 1912. The Beatty Bullfrog Miner was in business from 1905 to 1906. Amargosa Valley has never had a newspaper. Pahrump's first newspaper did not appear until 1971. All these communities received only spotty coverage in the newspapers of other communities once their own newspapers folded, although Beatty was served by the Beatty Bulletin, published as part of the Goldfield News between 1947 and 1956. Consequently, most information on the history of southcentral Nevada after 1920 resides in the memories of individuals who are still living.

Aware of Nye County's close ties to our nation's frontier past, and recognizing that few written sources on local history are available, especially after about 1920, the Nye County Commissioners initiated the Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP) in 1987. The NCTHP represents an effort to systematically collect and preserve information on the history of Nye County. The centerpiece of the NCTHP is a large set of interviews conducted with individuals who had knowledge of local history. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then edited lightly to preserve the language and speech patterns of those interviewed. All oral history interviews have been printed on acid-free paper and bound and archived in Nye County

libraries, Special Collections in the Lied Library at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, and at other archival sites located throughout Nevada. The interviews vary in length and detail, but together they form a never-before-available composite picture of each community's life and development. The collection of interviews for each community can be compared to a bouquet: Each flower in the bouquet is unique—some are large, others are small—yet each adds to the total image. In sum, the interviews provide a composite view of community and county history, revealing the flow of life and events for a part of Nevada that has heretofore been largely neglected by historians.

Collection of the oral histories has been accompanied by the assembling of a set of photographs depicting each community's history. These pictures have been obtained from participants in the oral history interviews and other present and past Nye County residents. In all, more than 700 photos have been collected and carefully identified. Complete sets of the photographs have been archived along with the oral histories.

On the basis of the oral histories as well as existing written sources, histories have been prepared for the major communities in Nye County. These histories have also been archived.

The town history project is one component of a Nye County program to determine the socioeconomic impact of a federal proposal to build and operate a nuclear waste repository in southcentral Nye County. The repository, which would be located inside a mountain (Yucca Mountain), would be the nation's first, and possibly only, permanent disposal site for high-level radioactive waste. The Nye County Board of County Commissioners initiated the NCTHP in 1987 in order to collect information on the origin, history, traditions and quality of life of Nye County communities that may be impacted by the repository. If the repository is constructed, it will remain a source of interest for a long time and future generations will likely want to know more about the people who once resided at the site. And in the event that government policy changes and a high-level nuclear waste repository is not constructed in Nye County, material compiled by the NCTHP will remain for the use and enjoyment of all.

—RDM
2011

Interview by Robert McCracken, talking to Tom Beko at his office in Reno, Nevada, May 24, 2010.

CHAPTER ONE

RM: Tom, please tell me your name as it reads on your birth certificate and when and where were you born.

TB: Sure. My name is Thomas Peter Beko, and I was born in Tonopah, Nevada, on September 7, 1960.

RM: And your father's name?

TB: William P.—short for Peter—Beko.

RM: And when and where was he born?

TB: He was born in Tonopah as well, just over the hill from where I lived my whole life. I don't have those specific dates. I could supply them to you.

RM: Who were his parents?

TB: His parents were Pete Beko, who I was named after, and Savita.

RM: What was her maiden name?

TB: I don't know.

RM: And when and where were your grandfather and grandmother born?

TB: You know, I have those records; I will try and find them for you. I don't remember off the top of my head. But I do think I know that.

RM: Can you go back farther than your grandparents' line?

TB: No.

RM: Were they immigrants? Did they come from the old country?

TB: Yes. My grandfather came here first, in my understanding. And then my grandmother came later on. Essentially, it was a marriage that had been arranged by their family. I have a family tree—a genealogy sort of thing—that someone gave me as a gift. I don't know how accurate it is.

RM: Would you like to reprint it with this document?

TB: Sure. Like I say, it was a gift that was given to me. It's framed, and it's kind of a genealogy of our name. I have no idea of the accuracy of it, but I would be glad to provide it to you.

RM: I tried to get the judge to do an oral history, and he gave me the best turndown ever. He said, "Yes, subject to availability of time."

TB: You know, we always tried to get him to do the same thing. He had incredible, incredible stories all the time.

RM: That's what I wanted, yes.

TB: But it was a matter of finding his time and our time. The one thing that he wouldn't very much talk about, though, was himself. You'd be shocked about how little I really know about him, because he was so humble that you could hardly get him to say anything that was positive about himself. Everyone else in the world could tell you story after story, but he was uncomfortable talking about himself.

RM: He was a fantastic storyteller, wasn't he?

TB: Oh, yes. The problem is that I got all the greatest stories when we were riding in his old truck. They were very, very informal and off-the-cuff things, and usually I just sat there because you couldn't take it all in.

RM: I just want to mention one thing—when my daughter, Bambi, graduated from Tonopah High, with his own money he set up a scholarship for her at UNLV. Just amazing.

TB: That doesn't surprise me. The problem with that is that no one really knows all those stories. They come out of the woodwork later on, these stories, because he never said anything to anybody about them.

RM: Could you talk a little bit about your dad's growing up in Tonopah?

TB: He had one brother, Tom, and three sisters: Olga, Milka, and Rose. They lived in that tiny little house where my sister now has her salon. I guess you would say that there were three bedrooms, but the bedrooms were so small that it's difficult to imagine having all those people in that same house. But that's the way they lived, and I think they felt they were fortunate to have what they had. I think my grandfather worked in the mines. He died; he passed before I was born.

RM: Of silicosis?

TB: I think so. So I never met him. Even though I was named after him, I never met him. I think—I'm not certain of this—but he may have even passed before my sister was born, too. I'm pretty sure he did.

RM: Is she your only sibling? What is her name?

TB: I just have one sister, Victoria, who's just under two years older than I am.

RM: Tell me about your father's life, growing up and that kind of thing.

TB: Well, what I knew of him was he was an outstanding athlete. He was obviously very tall. At one point he was over 6 feet 6 inches. In our home in Tonopah there was one doorway that was 6 feet 7 inches, and he would dip to go under that doorway.

RM: Did he play basketball?

TB: Yes, he did, and he was very good. I don't believe he played in college. I mean, he went to college and law school, as I understand it, on the G.I. Bill, and he was in the military before that. But he told the story at my graduation of how his brother Tom essentially put him through college. Tom basically gave my father half of every paycheck he ever had to keep my dad in school. That's one of the reasons why my dad named me after his brother. Tom was my dad's hero, for sure.

RM: Was Tom very much older?

TB: Yes, I think there was a pretty big difference. I believe my dad was the youngest. Tom or Rose may have been the oldest. So, very much my dad idolized Tom. Tom was a pilot in the war.

RM: And your dad was in the military.

TB: He was, you know, and that's one of those things that he very rarely talked much about.

RM: When did he serve, do you know?

TB: I'd have to look at the records and see. I think that he worked more in kind of intelligence stuff, but I'm not really sure. Like I say, it was one of those things that I really would have loved to have sat him down and had time to talk with him about.

RM: How much older was he, roughly? I don't have a feel for how old he was.

TB: He died when he was 72 in '95.

RM: So he would have been born back around 1923 or '22.

TB: Somewhere in that neighborhood. But he was definitely older when my sister and I were born. I was born in '60, so he was well into his 40s.

RM: Did he marry late?

TB: Yes. He'd gone through college and gone through the military, and I think he actually had served in the legislature before he got married, if memory serves me correctly.

RM: What things about his childhood do you have any memory of?

TB: What I just remember is he had an incredible knowledge of the area—Nevada, the surrounding areas out there. He would tell me stories about how things were different, and mostly how the amount of water and moisture that we had was nothing compared to what it was when he was growing up—the amount of moisture and the amount of wildlife that existed. The amount of wild range land, grasses. He loved to hunt and fish. There are a lot of old photographs of their hunting excursions and the herds of deer. It was just incredible. He'd tell those stories when I was growing up, and you rarely ever saw that kind of wildlife, so it was hard to imagine that there was so much more back then.

RM: So the area's definitely dried up since his time?

TB: Oh, yes. And it was very disturbing to him, because it was just about the time we started hearing about the global warming and all these things. He was one who could not envision that this dramatic a change could have occurred in the absence of human involvement. He obviously knew some of the stories, and he had a divergence of opinions about whether this was human-caused or not. But he was just staggered. We'd be out in the hills, and he would show me areas where there'd be a trickle of water in the summer, and he would tell stories about how, when he was growing up, you couldn't begin to cross these. They were just raging. And you could see the streambed and the riverbed. And you wondered, "Was this ancient times when these were created?"

And he would say, "No, these were not ancient times. We're talking about a few decades."

RM: I remember in the '50s hearing old-timers talking about going out east of Tonopah and crossing Ralston Valley down toward Silver Bow. They said the grass out there was up to a horse's belly in the old days.

TB: At one point he was involved in some of that litigation involving Fallinis. I remember him trying to go back and find photographs of the area, where it was just barren desert now. And he used to say that they'd have to walk through there and jump the deer up, because you'd almost have to step on them to get them to jump up.

RM: No kidding? In his lifetime?

TB: Yes, when he was an adult. The big push then was that the wild horses were the problem.

RM: So he was on Fallini's side in that?

TB: Well, he certainly was of the opinion that the wild horses were a problem in that it was his belief that the wild horses would pull the grass up, roots and all, so it was very damaging to the rangeland, whereas the cattle would just eat the grass to the level, and then it would come back. Whatever's going on, there was a major change. I don't remember whose side he would have sided on, but I think he was called more as a percipient witness of what he saw and the differences that he saw over his life.

But he was an avid, avid sportsman and, man, he was very, very protectionist of Nevada's wildlife. You probably know the stories of him with the gal that embezzled Desert Bighorns I think it was.

RM: No, I don't know this.

TB: There was a case where there was a gal who had embezzled money. I think it was from an association for the desert bighorns or the Nevada bighorns, or some association that was very much for the protection of animals. It was very politically not a good case to take out of southern Nevada, because she was somehow connected with some pretty prominent families down there. So none of the judges wanted to have any involvement in it.

He walked right into it and said no problem. Apparently, they had cut her a pretty sweet deal with some recommendations as to what the penalty was going to be. And he came in and just whacked the heck out of her. He said, "You don't mess with our wildlife." I know that there's a guzzler they named after him that's over in, I think, the Fish Lake Valley.

RM: What's a guzzler?

TB: A guzzler's an apparatus that's built to try to trap water coming from the springs so it's in a usable form, and they build those. This one apparently was named after him. Jack Robb up here has told me about it many times and showed me photographs. I've never been to it. But they named it after him over that incident. He was always like that.

RM: What other things do you remember about, say, his youth, and stories you might have heard growing up?

TB: Like all parents—I think they want their kids to be grounded. He talked about living in a household with many children and very, very little to eat.

RM: Really, they had not that much food?

TB: No, it was tough. I think that's why he spent so much time hunting and fishing, because it was a staple of their existence. It wasn't really recreation for them. It was, "We need to feed five kids." You'd show up at the dinner table, and there was a limited amount, and everyone got what they could and were pretty thankful for it. He always stayed very grounded like that. I mean, he never was a person who was really concerned about wealth and material things. He was a public servant. That was what motivated him.

RM: He would have graduated from Tonopah High. Now, where did he go to college?

TB: At UNR [University of Nevada at Reno].

RM: What did he major in?

TB: I do not know. I know he lived at the Sigma Nu house. He was the president of Sigma Nu, as was his brother Tom, prior to that. So it was very much a tradition. A lot of stories that he told me were about the hunting expeditions that they would go on for that Sigma Nu house, because they survived on the game as well. It was a treat to have. They spent a lot of time duck hunting and goose hunting and deer hunting. They would bring it all back. So they all applied every year to get those tags. It's part of what they did to survive.

RM: And his brother helped put him through college?

TB: Essentially put him through.

RM: Then did he take a break, or did he go on to law school?

TB: I'm not sure if there was a break there. I know that his military career was in the midst of all that, and I don't remember where it fell.

RM: What branch was he in?

TB: In the army, I believe.

RM: Would he have been old enough for World War II?

TB: I think he was. I know he was a lieutenant. He became a lieutenant in the military.

RM: Do you know where he was stationed?

TB: It seems to me that he was stationed somewhere, for the most part, in Indiana. That sticks out.

RM: Do you have any idea what kind of intelligence he was involved in?

TB: No.

RM: What law school did he go to?

TB: He went to Hastings in San Francisco.

RM: And then returned to Nye County?

TB: Yes. And he served sometime in the Nevada legislature. I'm not sure how many terms.

RM: After he got his law degree?

TB: I believe so, yes.

RM: As a representative or a senator?

TB: [Chuckles] You know, I don't know for sure. What I do have are the Nevada Supreme Court reports from the years that he was in the legislature, because they used to print those every year, and they would list who was there. I have those volumes. I think he was a representative. Pretty certain.

RM: What was it in his character that made him become, really, one of the preeminent figures in Nye County history?

TB: I think one of the things is he just loved the area, he loved the people. He had a tremendous affinity for Nye County and its people. I'm sure that was an overriding concern. He had ethics and morals that were just impeccable. And he had the respect of everyone. I remember in his latter years when he was district judge and, I think even to the point when he was district attorney, that he didn't really do much to campaign. I know in the last elections in the district judge's position, his position was, "They all know me. If they want me, they'll vote for me. If they don't want me, they'll vote me out." The people would put up campaign signs that they'd create.

RM: For him. He didn't do it himself.

TB: He very much had the respect of the people. When he passed away it was amazing to me the letters and stuff that we found—people he'd convicted of crimes and sentenced. People very, very thankful for him changing their life. Many, many.

RM: You have them?

TB: Yes. They're still out there in Tonopah.

RM: Has anybody written a biography or a profile of him or anything?

TB: No. Again, the problem was getting anything out of him about himself. He'd talk about anything else you wanted, but he wouldn't talk about himself.

RM: I asked him for an interview. I said, "How about, maybe, next week?"
And he said, "I've got to go over to Lincoln County next week."
And I said, "I'll tell you what, how about I ride with you, and I'll interview you on the way?"
And he said, "No, I'm going to have to be working in the car on the way."

TB: He worked until the very day he passed away. It was the same thing with us.

RM: Do you know when he was first elected D.A.?

TB: Darn, you know, I should have looked.

RM: It had to be in the '50s.

TB: Yes, I'm pretty sure it was.

RM: It seemed to me like he was a D.A. for a long time.

TB: Over 20 years, I think.

RM: And became an institution in the county and, to a large extent, in the state.

TB: Absolutely. He served on many statewide commissions, which was unusual, considering the fact he was from such an unpopulated area. It was incredible. It was just amazing to me to walk around with him throughout the state. No matter where he would go people would come up to him, people he would know.

RM: The name is magic.

TB: In mean, in my career, to this very day, I meet people and they all knew him, just like you. And I'm certain it opened many, many doors for me.

RM: At least 20 years as D.A. And then did he go directly to the judgeship? That would have been in the early '70s, maybe?

TB: I think it was in the later '70s.

RM: How long did he serve as judge? Till he died?

TB: Yes. He was still a senior judge when he passed away; he was still taking appointments as a senior judge. But he had formally retired from the bench and was just doing the senior assignments.

RM: Do you know when he formally retired from the bench?

TB: I have all those dates, and I can get them all to you, but I don't have them with me. I will supply you with those.

RM: Okay, great. So, later, he wasn't a sitting judge, but a senior judge?

TB: He was appointed all over the state. Very typically there'd be a case like the one I told you about, the Las Vegas case, where the local judges, for whatever reason, typically political, wouldn't want to be involved in a matter, and they would bring him in. Because he had no political affiliations, and he did what was right regardless of what the outcome was. He was popular for those kinds of assignments, because people knew he would not be influenced by any outside agency.

RM: When you look back on his life and his career, are there any cases in your mind that really stand out?

TB: Well, he was always well known, because he had a big victory, way back when, that had to do with the taxation of the Test Site. There was a huge case where they had a big recovery, well over \$1 million, in back taxes.

RM: To the county?

TB: Yes. The county was successful.

RM: That was a major thing, wasn't it, for the finances of the county?

TB: Yes, it was huge. It was way back when, and, if I understand it correctly, it had to do with whether or not the county could tax the personal property of companies that were here working at the Test Site.

RM: Oh, yes, I think I read about that. And he won that for the county.

TB: Yes, he took them all on; it was a big thing. The guy took on the federal government. That case, I know, always stood out in his career. But there were a lot of criminal prosecutions that were very important to him. There was one case where he prosecuted a young man who'd killed a couple of guys in Tonopah. I know it was very hard—I remember—very, very hard, because he knew the young man. But he had to do his job, and he did. For many years later, he would visit that guy. His name was Mike Shellenbarger. We all knew him. My dad would

frequently visit him when he was in Carson City. And I think he spoke on his behalf several times before the parole board.

There was a point in time where Mike was actually paroled for a short period of time, and he actually lived with my mom and dad after he got out of prison. And then I think ultimately he ended up back in prison. But until he proved to my dad he wasn't worthy of his support, he got it. Because my dad knew him growing up. I know that was one of the hardest things he ever had to do was to prosecute that case. But he did it.

I know that, later, people tried to criticize him for what he did after Mike was prosecuted and after he was sent to prison. But Mike was just like any other prisoner at that point in time, and my dad wasn't using his power or influence to affect his outcome. He'd already done it—he'd already prosecuted the young man. The question was, at what point in time had he done sufficient time?

CHAPTER TWO

RM: What other cases stand out in your mind, either when your dad was the D.A. or a judge?

TB: The ones that stand out in my mind are the ones that affected me the most. You know, my dad was really funny. He tried to keep his professional stuff as much out of our lives as he could, because he wanted to be Dad. He worked so incredibly hard and so many long hours, we didn't have much time with him. So the time that he would spend with us wasn't about the law, and it wasn't about what he was doing.

But I remember once, when I was a young boy, that there was a very significant murder prosecution, and there were supposed mob ties to the guys that he was prosecuting. And there had been death threats against my sister and myself. So during the course of this entire trial my cousin, my sister, and I would have to go to and from school in a police car, and we couldn't leave school.

RM: How old were you then?

TB: I was in grade school. It really stands out in my mind, because I didn't like the whole thing. I didn't like having to do that. The kids would tease us. One day I left the school with my cousin, after school, and went to their house, and they didn't know where I was at. So when my mom found us, she just whaled the crap out of me with a belt. I'm sure I scared the heck out of her. But to me, it was "I don't want to go back and forth in a patrol car to school." It was embarrassing. All the kids would tease us.

RM: Do you recall any stories that he would have told?

TB: You know, it's funny. There was a story that he didn't tell but that was told to me just a couple of years ago. I was flying from Las Vegas to Reno. It was after a long day; I'd been in court down there. I got on the plane, and I was just kind of trying to take a little nap. There was an older gentleman that was seated—not next to me, but there was an open seat between us. He very much wanted to chat, and I very much wanted to take a nap. But somehow or another he got out from me where I was from and that I grew up in Tonopah, whatever. And he finally got my name, and he found out who I was.

So he told me this story, and the story was that he was working out on the Test Site—or maybe even older than that, where he was out on the military bases when the military stuff was still there. He was a young man, and he had come to Tonopah, and he was a little wild and a little crazy, and he got cocktailed up one night. He was downtown in one of the bars. My dad, when he was D.A., many times sort of performed the duties of the police, as well. There weren't many of them around, and if something would happen. . . . So my dad got a call that a guy was down in a bar, and he was brandishing this handgun at everyone. My dad just got up and went down there and found the guy. He was drunk and waving this gun around, so my dad took the gun away from him.

Many, many, many years later, he came back through Tonopah. He had left shortly after this incident happened and figured, "I'm going to get myself in real trouble. I'm going to get out

of here before I really get in trouble.” So he came back to Tonopah, and he stopped at the courthouse. He went to the D.A.’s office, and he asked if my dad was there.

They said, no, he was no longer D.A. “He’s now the district court judge. His office is across the hall.” They said, “Just go knock on the door. He’s open; he talks to people.”

He said he went to the door, and he knocked on the door, and my dad invited him in. He sat down, and he started telling him this story. He said, “When I was here as a young man, I got drunk and came down to the bar and. . . .” He said that what my dad had told him then was, “When you’re capable of handling this gun, come back and you can have it back.” So he was sitting there across the table telling my dad this story without having ever told him what his name was.

And my dad said to him, “Joseph, do you think you’re now capable of handling this firearm?” And that’s what his name was; the guy’s name was Joseph. He knew his name.

This guy, Joseph, said, “Yes, I am.” So my dad reached in a drawer and pulled his gun out and gave it back to him.

That’s an unbelievable story.

RM: What a story—that he even recognized him!

TB: That he knew his name and still had his gun in his desk drawer.

RM: Wow, that’s a neat story. Sometimes the stories reveal the character—say more about the man—than anything. What finally took him, in the end?

TB: He had a heart attack, massive heart attack right there. Our house in Tonopah was right there below the courthouse. The main part of our home was made out of the same stone as part of that courthouse. It had been there a very long time. And they bought it in the ‘50s, I think, and did a lot of remodeling and stuff. But that house is just, maybe, 150 yards from the house where he was born and grew up. It’s right there below the courthouse as well, right there on Main Street. He probably died less than 200 yards from where he was born.

RM: That’s nice closure.

TB: And my dad, I think, knew that he was getting on. He was so humble and—I always believed—he kind of knew he was having problems. But he wouldn’t say anything to anyone. He was very, very concerned that he would be a burden on anybody. I think he kind of knew that there was something coming. But I think he figured, “I’ve had a good life. My children have succeeded at what they want to do. I kind of think my time is done.”

RM: Would you call him stoic?

TB: Yes, I would call him stoic. Certainly if you didn’t know him you would think he was stoic. He just was not a complainer. You’d never really hear him complain. He commanded being prepared. He commanded respect from people—not to him, but to the office, to the court. So he was really, I think, in some ways kind of feared by people. But if you were prepared

and did your job properly, he gave attorneys great respect. And I learned a lot. I sit as a judge now on certain occasions, and I really learned that from him. If people have done their job, give them respect. And he was very much like that. That's why he was so admired by people. And it's the really good lawyers and judges that knew him; those were the ones that admired him the most.

RM: The better they knew him the more they liked him.

TB: Yes. There was another neat story that I was told just shortly after I started practicing law. It was a story about some property issues in Tonopah. There was a great deal of conflicting testimony about where these property lines were. They had different surveys, and no one could really reconcile what was going on. So they spent two or three days with all this litigation about where these various property lines were. And finally, after a few days of this, my dad stopped the trial and said, "Let's just have a little informal conference."

And he took them in and told them a story about why it was that there were all these conflicting boundary lines. It had to do with a guy who had been hired to do a survey. He had done the survey, and there became a big issue about how much he was going to be compensated for it, so he would never give them the benchmarks from where he originally started to survey. Then he passed away before they found out what those original benchmarks were, so no one knew what the starting points were.

But they'd brought people in from all over to try and find them. He said, "Hey, I'll tell you what happened." We had this big trial, and all we really needed to do was go in there and talk to him, and we would have figured it all out."

RM: And they settled it?

TB: I think they did. I don't know what the deal was, but it was neat how he brought all these people in.

RM: That's why my dad's shack in Tonopah sits in the middle of the street, legally. [Laughs]

TB: Lots and lots of stories like that.

RM: Any more recollections of your father and his career and his preeminent role and position in Nye County?

TB: Like I say, just being with him over the years and years and just always being somewhere where someone came up and recognized him. He had an incredible knack for remembering people's names. I am just the opposite. I have a very hard time remembering names. He would meet someone one time, very informally or whatever, and 10, 15, 20 years later see that person and remember their name. That had a real effect upon people, that he would remember their names. So, very commonly, people would come to me years later and tell me, "I saw your dad—this was the environment where I knew him—I saw him all these

years later, and he remembered my name and what it was about.” Just an incredible, incredible man.

RM: That probably had something to do with his success.

TB: I’m sure it did. He was probably a pretty lousy politician, because he wasn’t capable of telling people what they wanted to hear. He told them what his feelings were, and that isn’t always the same thing. I think early on in his career he struggled a little more with elections and stuff, especially in a small community. Hard decisions—there’s always going to be a loser. There’s going to be someone who’s not going to get what they want. It took a long time to, I think, get to a point where they respected his decision, whether they agreed with it or not. But after a while they did. You might not agree with it, but knew, whatever his decision or what he did was what he felt was right and was based upon a sound principle of some sort.

RM: From what you know of him, what was his feeling toward Nye County, this vast area?

TB: He loved it. You know, he was accused many times of being the “Godfather” that controlled all of Nye County. He was viewed that way because he was very protecting of the county and the people; he was very loyal to all of them. There was the accusation that he had burned down the brothels and he had been behind all of that. There was no shred of truth to it whatsoever, but I suspect that there were people that it wouldn’t have hurt his feelings at all if those people had been run out of there. But he wasn’t . . .

RM: He wasn’t doing it.

TB: No. I remember once, after he passed away, there was an article in the Mineral County newspaper about how there was some question that Joe Conforte, who had all the brothels up here, apparently was going to move down into Nye County. So there was a question about whether or not Joe Conforte would get a license in Nye County. And supposedly my dad’s response to it was, “We don’t license nuisances in Nye County.” [Laughter] I remember that article. I think Jack McCluskey was the guy that wrote the story.

RM: He was supportive of Bobbie, up at the Buckeye, wasn’t he? He supported the institution within the county?

TB: Yes. As long as it was a legal thing—and don’t bring organized crime into our area. But if you want to engage in something the people of this state have chosen to make legal, that was his position, and he never really stated any moral objections to it all. I think, like everyone else—at least from Tonopah’s standpoint—Bobbie did a lot of good things for that community. I mean, there wasn’t some type of function or organization, charitable in nature, that she didn’t contribute to. And people respected her for that. Prostitution was prostitution, but. . . .

RM: Did he have any failures that you know of that he wished he could have done better on, or that he later regretted?

TB: Yes. I think his one failure is that he viewed himself as being way too dedicated to his job and not dedicated enough to spending time with my sister and me. I think he really regretted that. In fact, just in the months before he passed away, he saw way too much of himself in me, from the standpoint of not taking time and working all the time and not doing anything other than dedicating yourself to your profession.

We had a long discussion, and it came as a result of the start of his last illness. I was working here in Reno, and I got a call that he was sitting on the bench in Carson City. The bailiff over there had called me and said, "Your dad can't get up."

So I said, "Do you need to call an ambulance?"

He said, "No, he just wants to rest a little bit, and he wants to come back." Because he was staying with me in Reno at the time, and he was sitting on the bench in Carson City. He said, "He just wants to rest a little bit," and then he was going to go home. I was in a deposition. I stopped the deposition, I drove to Carson, and as I was about to Carson City, I saw him coming the other way on the highway. So I flipped around and followed him home. He made it to my house okay, and I got him into the house. He was very weak, and he kind of thought he had the flu or something, but I think it was more severe than that.

Anyway, after that, he stayed there for another four or five days and never went to the doctor. I tried to get him to go to the doctor, and he wouldn't go. I had some friends that had invited me to go to Hawaii. So I had this discussion with him. I said, "I'm not going to go to Hawaii." I hadn't been on a vacation in four or five years.

He was really angry and—I'll never forget this—he said to me, "I can tell you what we did on every vacation we took as a family. I can tell you every single one of them. If you want to sit down, I'll tell you every single minute. But I cannot tell you one thing that I did on all those times I cancelled those vacations." Which was the vast majority, because we didn't go on very many. That really stuck with me.

RM: That was a nice way of putting it.

TB: It was. He said, "You have to take time. You cannot do what you're doing." You know, I was into my law practice, at that point in time, nine or 10 years and had taken maybe just one or two vacations. And he just saw it. He said, "In the future, if this doesn't kill you, you're going to look back and say, 'Why did I do all of this?'"

So I very reluctantly agreed to go on that vacation.

RM: So it had an impact on you.

TB: Oh, it did. And then, unfortunately—a month later—I was on that trip when he passed away.

But it was very interesting, because he loved to play golf, and his favorite golfer in the world was Ben Crenshaw. He just loved Ben Crenshaw. He died on a Monday. The Sunday before he passed away, Ben Crenshaw won the Master's, and my dad was so happy. I talked with him for probably half an hour on the phone the day after Ben Crenshaw won. It was just incredible.

RM: Was he a golf fan, as well as a player?

TB: Yes, he was, and a good golfer. Considering his height, it was unusual.

RM: Tall people don't make good golfers?

TB: They don't. They're too gangly and there are too many moving parts. When I was young, there was no golf course in Tonopah, and so they would go, typically, to Bishop. And as a young boy I would occasionally go with them. All his friends played for years and years. And as he got older, obviously, he didn't hit the ball anywhere like he used to. But they'd all walk and say, "This is where your dad hit a drive one day," and it was, like, "Holy. . . ." And, "He got a hole in one over there."

RM: Was he by any chance all-state in basketball for Tonopah?

TB: Yes, he was. He was a very accomplished basketball player. I know there was a question about whether he was going to play basketball at the university, and my understanding is that he was more concerned about his studies, so he didn't really want to pursue that. He kind of figured, "Whatever I would get from that would be short-lived, and I need to learn about what I'm going to do for the rest of my life." Kind of what athletes don't do in this day and age. I think he just kind of realized, "That's something I'm going to do for a few years and it's going to be fun, but I've got other business I need to take care of."

RM: Yes, he had good priorities. I really want to honor your father, so I want to get as much as I can from you on him. Is there anything else?

TB: My whole life, to be honest, I think he and my mother had a pretty easy job of keeping control of me, because I lived my life in mortal fear that I would do one of two things: do something to embarrass him or something to disrespect him. He commanded it of people, but never asked for it. I mean, it's just the way it was. The thought of doing something to disappoint him was . . . I couldn't bear it. Neither could the people that were around him.

RM: That probably had a really positive effect on you in terms of making something of yourself.

TB: And other people. There are so many people that come up to me and—just like the story you told me about what he did for your daughter. It's just nonstop; I see those things all the time. People come to me and say, "Your dad did this." Again, I didn't know anything about it. When we had gone through a lot of his old files, my mom was just aghast. We went through and, every other file, there would be a fee check that was never deposited, never cashed.

RM: Is that right? Just donating it to them.

TB: Yes. He'd keep the file. He was meticulous; his file would be intact. And this was when he was district attorney and could have a private practice. He'd have the whole file, and the last thing on top would be the final payment.

RM: And he wouldn't cash it. That is so cool. You just don't find many people like that nowadays, do you?

TB: He was just motivated by right and wrong. That's the only thing that really ever motivated him—doing what was right.

RM: Was he a religious man?

TB: No. He certainly wasn't an atheist. I think he believed in the afterlife, but he was so dang real and objective that I think he had this idea that, "There are certain things I can't explain. And because I can't explain them, I'm going to choose that there is all this afterlife and there are all these other things, because the other option isn't good." But he was very objective and very black and white. He never discouraged us nor really encouraged us. A lot of my sort of religious background came from my aunt, his sister, Milka, who was very active in the church when we were young.

RM: Which church was that?

TB: The Presbyterian church. She loved to sing, and she loved to take us, my sister and I, to church and stuff. As we got a little bit older and became more active in doing things, I think my dad was more interested in spending time doing other things with us. So that's kind of what we would do on Sundays. My dad loved to be out—not so much hunting, but just being out in the mountains. He loved to go out and cut wood. As he got older, over the course of his life he'd just spent so much time hunting and fishing that I kind of really feel that he felt like, "I've taken my fair share of game. I don't need to do it anymore. It's here for everyone. I've had my share, and I'll go buy my stuff now. I don't need to do it in order to survive."

I think that, and a combination of just growing older and more concerned about wildlife, and I think it very, very much troubled him that the herds of deer were so depleted over what he'd seen before. The wildlife just wasn't like it was. He knew what it was before, and I think he wasn't going to contribute to that demise, for whatever the reason.

RM: But he still went out into the woods and loved the streams and everything?

TB: Loved it. He had an old International truck that my sister still has out there. The thing had a top speed of about 50 miles an hour. He didn't care. He was in no hurry. He was up before dawn every day. He was very much an early riser, and I wasn't, and he always wanted me to go with him. He had this old International pickup, and he'd throw a tarp on the back, and many a time I'd just go sleep in it the night before. He'd get up long before dawn, and he'd drive wherever we were going at 50 miles an hour.

RM: With you in the back still asleep?

TB: Yes. And about the time we were there I was waking up, so it was a great deal. And he owned an old Willys jeep.

RM: Do you still have that jeep?

TB: Not that one, but I have two Willys. I have a Willys truck and a Willys wagon. It's just absolutely the result of all of those times that we spent. It's funny, the wagon, especially, has a very unique smell. That smell is the same smell that I smelled my whole life. Especially if you're out in the brush, you get a little sagebrush in it. It just brings me back to my youth. It's been many years that I haven't been involved in that, but I always wanted to get back to it. And now, it's very comforting to go back.

I drive those things around, probably more than I drive the Porsche and the BMW, because it gives me that sense of being back and being out, and I love to be out in those areas. I haven't done a lot of it over the last 15 or 20 years, because I work too much. Now, as I'm getting more toward the end of my career, I find that I have more time, and I so enjoy going back out there. I remember one of my dad's favorite places to go was an area called Butler Basin.

RM: Where is that?

TB: It's in the northern end of Monitor Valley. At the time there was no access into it at all, and he and my uncle built these little Jeep trails that go up in there. They had these incredible hunts for years and years and years. Now it's pretty easy to get in there, because there's been mining that's expanded the roads. Now it's like everywhere else, it's easy to get to. But way back when, it was very, very difficult to get out in there. We would, typically, go and do our deer hunts out there, and when I was little he would always find a quaking aspen tree, and he would always carve my name in one of those trees. If you carve, and if you come back years later, you can read it.

RM: You can go there now?

TB: Yes. I've been trying to find all those trees, because I remember for years and years we would go back and say, "You remember we did this?" It would be dated. I really want to go find all of those trees, because I do remember those areas very well. I've seen people that will take a piece of canvas and a piece of charcoal, and they'll rub the [carving], and it will bring the image out, so you'll have that image.

RM: That's so cool. How many times do you think he did that?

TB: Fifteen.

RM: So you've got 15 markers out there?

TB: Some of those trees may be long gone by now, because I'm talking about the '60s and '70s, so who knows? And sometimes what happens is that with each year, as those trees grow older, you can see a black image. As they get older, that thing gets bigger and bigger, and it just subsumes the whole message. So the earlier ones may not even be visible anymore.

RM: Did he have favorite books or anything that you know of?

TB: I really don't know that he did, but he was an incredibly avid reader. Part of it was that his mind was going all the time. He would very typically wake up at night, and he would read for several hours. He may or may not fall back to sleep. But he would read anything and everything that he could get his hands on. Not really a lot of books. He was more about reading periodicals—newspapers and magazines. He was just well versed. To this very day, I believe that the smartest people in the world are the ones that read all the time. He was a voracious reader.

RM: Are you a voracious reader?

TB: Only because I do it all day long. Because of that I'm not a voracious reader; I rarely do it on my own time.

RM: Was he into any particular kind of music?

TB: He loved Patsy Cline.

RM: Did he like country, or just Patsy Cline?

TB: Just Patsy Cline. It was funny, because my mom was just the opposite. My mom was a music fanatic. Her whole life was tied into music. When she passed away, I'm guessing she had 4,000 to 5,000 or more different albums. Just walls of them. She always had music on. Being in Tonopah, there was no radio. So it started with record albums and then went to 8-tracks and then went to cassettes, and then it went to CDs. She truly had thousands and thousands of them. So there was always a lot of music in our lives, but my dad just kind of let my mom [take care of that]; that was her thing. The only one I remember that he really liked was Patsy Cline.

RM: Did he play a musical instrument or anything?

TB: He played, apparently, the trumpet, but I never saw him. Probably in school. Trumpet and trombone, apparently, he played, but I never saw him do it. No, he didn't do that at all.

CHAPTER THREE

RM: What else can you think of that would help us preserve your dad's memory?

TB: To honest with you, the person that you need to talk to about my dad—that could probably give you more of the best stories about my dad—would be Bob Perchetti. Bob was very close to my dad, and my dad, as Bob was growing up, kind of took him under his wing.

RM: Yes, I talked to him. Why did he do that? Do you know?

TB: He did it for many.

RM: Bob told me that your dad had a Cadillac convertible, and he would let Bob take girls out on dates and everything, and he put a little dent in it one night. And he was just sick. He was going to have to tell him, "I dented your fender." And he told him, and he said he didn't say a word.

TB: Yes. That's just kind of the way he was. Rick Lawton's an attorney in Fallon that, to this very day, says, "I basically would be nothing if it weren't for your dad. He forced me to college; he forced me to law school." I think there are just many, many stories like that. After he passed we set up this foundation to give out scholarships in his name, and we've been doing it now since '95, every year. It's so fun to do that, because I know that's something that he did, and he loved to do it. It just gave him a great deal of pride to see any kid do good.

RM: I could tell you a story like that. Bambi had done some TV work for the juvenile justice there when she was in high school. She went down to UNLV and had a bad experience with the theater department there—the guy brought her to tears. One day I saw the judge at the Warehouse Market, and he said, "How's Bambi doing?" I told him this incident and he said, "I know Bob Maxim, the president of the university. I'll ask him about it."

TB: He did it, I'm sure.

RM: Well, Bambi was applying for scholarships, and they brought her to tears. Maxim says, "If you're so interested in this kid, why don't you set up a scholarship for her?" And that's what he did. Imagine a guy going to the president of the university, who he knew, on behalf of some kid in Tonopah.

TB: That's not an aberration. That's the norm. Those are the kind of stories I hear all the time.

RM: The other story in my mind—I can still see it. My dad and I were walking down the street in front of A Bar L. We were broke, and I needed to get money to go back for another year of school. Here came the D.A. down the street in his Jeep, and he was holding papers in his

hand. He pulled over across the traffic in front of us, and he said, "Hey, do you guys want to go to work down at the Test Site?"

I said, "You better believe it." My dad spent 18 years there, just from that one thing.

TB: It's very, very common for people to come and say, "I was out of money, and your dad gave me some money." I'm sure my mother would have been aghast, because she wanted money for my sister and me.

RM: Let's talk about your mother. Was she a Tonopah girl?

TB: She was born in Benton, which is just between Bishop and Tonopah.

RM: On the California side, right?

TB: Yes. But she came to Tonopah pretty early on and grew up there as well. My mom was significantly younger than my dad, so I don't know that they really knew one another much when they were growing up. It was after my dad had gone away to school and then came back when they met.

RM: What was her family involved in?

TB: I think they moved homes when she was young and then had a beauty store, and Mom worked in a beauty store. I think my grandmother was involved in that as well. I think they were very poor, had a lot of kids. Her father was not around, so my grandmother raised Mom and her two sisters.

RM: Let's give their names, your grandparents' names.

TB: My mom's name was Dorothy Casner. My mom has a sister, Pauline, still alive, and a sister Doris.

RM: Do they live in Tonopah?

TB: They're still there; both alive, still.

RM: And your mom is still living?

TB: No, she passed away two years ago.

RM: And, again, what was her name?

TB: Dorothy Casner. Her mom's name was Dorothy as well.

RM: And she went to the Tonopah schools?

TB: Yes. A beautiful young woman, and I think she kind of caught my dad's eye. She had been involved in some rodeo kind of function as the rodeo queen, and somehow that became a statewide thing, and I think that's kind of what got them going. Definitely a local town girl and never really went anywhere. She went to a beauty school, I think, maybe in San Francisco. I'm pretty sure that she went to school there. And my dad was going to law school there in San Francisco.

RM: They met later, though?

TB: I'm not sure, but I don't think they met in San Francisco.

RM: Did they get married in Tonopah?

TB: Yes.

RM: What would you consider the highlights of your mother's life?

TB: My sister and me. Like I say, she had a beauty shop there in Tonopah for years, and after we were born she just took care of us and that was it. Quite frankly, it's very different. I tell this story fairly frequently about our days during the week. We might see my dad for a moment or two in the morning, and then he would come home for dinner. My mom was fanatical about "we're going to have dinner as a family." So my dad would come home for dinner, and immediately he would go back to work. In our house in Tonopah, when he was district attorney, the window of our kitchen looked up at the courthouse, and you could see his office window. So, for our goodnight, we would get on the phone and tell Dad we were going to go to bed, and Dad would come to the window.

RM: He'd come to the window, and you'd see him, and he'd wave. That's neat.

TB: That was the routine. So that is one of those things that I think, if you ever asked him, he would have said, "I needed to come home and spend time with my kids, not wave goodnight to them."

And later on, after he became judge and stuff, he was very much the one that was much more active in the things that we were doing, because I think he really did regret missing that time when we were younger. He wanted to be the person to make lunches, and he wanted to be there to make breakfast.

RM: How old were you when he became judge?

TB: I think I was in high school, and even before that. Because mornings were his gig; I mean, he liked to do stuff in the mornings.

RM: Are you short of time? Because I want to go over your life, too.

TB: That, I know more about.

RM: This is a great interview, it really is. What else would you want to say about your mother so that we have an understanding of her?

TB: My mom was very dedicated to her family, as well, because her sisters had a lot of kids. Her sister, Pauline, developed multiple sclerosis as a young woman. Very, very active and developed MS. She had three children, and when that happened, for a period of a couple of years, my mom moved all of them into our house. So we all lived together under the same roof for several months when my Aunt Pauline was going through the stages of that and ultimately became paralyzed because of it. She never walked again. That was really traumatic to my mom, because my Aunt Pauline was so active. And then to have that happen.

So my mom basically took over raising five kids for a period of time. And that really never changed. My Aunt Pauline finally did move; they moved to a different home and stuff. But that was very much one of the primary things my mom did for the rest of her life—to make sure Pauline was okay and help with Pauline's kids. That was a tough job, because we were all a little bit wild, and trying to control five kids like that was a full-time job—cooking and cleaning and taking care of. That's what her job entailed.

She was just active. She was a member of the sorority there in town. She and my dad used to love to bowl. There was a bowling alley in Tonopah for years. It was really kind of the center.

RM: The one down by the Mizpah?

TB: Correct. That was open. That and maybe some Elk's functions; there wasn't much that they did. But they did like to do the bowling thing one night a week. I just can remember, my aunt and uncle would always stay with us. We always tried to stay up until they got home.

RM: What are your earliest memories in Tonopah?

TB: Oh, man, I've got memories. It's funny, this year for Christmas my brother-in-law, Tim, took old slides, and he had those slides put onto a CD. We had just tons and tons of old slides. And it was amazing to go through and see those things, because I remember a lot of those things, mostly the objects and stuff, and the rooms and things and how they were different. I have very, very clear memories of being really young and the Christmases and Thanksgivings.

My dad loved Thanksgiving, and there were years when we would have as many as 50 people that would come to our house for a sit-down meal. All of our relatives from Reno—my dad's brother and his sister—all had big families up here. And then generations of those kids. They would all come to Tonopah at Thanksgiving—it was huge. Originally, we did it at my grandmother's house. Then, as she got older, we moved it to our house, because we had much more room. We had this big sun porch, and they would set up these big, long tables in a big U-shaped deal, and they would have a sit-down dinner for more than 50 people. It was a big thing.

RM: Who cooked it?

TB: Mostly my mom. We had a gal that would help her out, would come there. I can't imagine doing it. I mean, the amount of work that went into that is just staggering. And to do it every single year; they did it for many, many years. Then we stopped, and my Aunt Milka kind of took it over and moved it to her house. She didn't have as big functions, but equally as lavish. My mom still was very active in cooking a lot of the stuff for that.

It was truly the highlight of my dad's year, because he had an opportunity to see all of his family people. It was mostly all of his side of the family. Sometimes my grandmother, my mom's mom, would come. She was remarried, and her husband would come. But for the most part, their family—her side of the family—had a big ranch, and they would all go to a ranch for those kinds of functions. So they were not really involved; it was mostly all my dad's family.

RM: Was their ranch in the region?

TB: Yes, it's out there in the valley east of Tonopah—the Clifford Ranch, out there.

RM: Stone Cabin? And what were their names?

TB: Clifford.

RM: Oh, she married into the Clifford family?

TB: My mom's sister, Doris, married into the Clifford family.

RM: Who did she marry? Doris Clifford—she married . . . was it Roy or was it Joe?

TB: I think it was Roy.

RM: Doris! I know Doris. I think she's still alive.

TB: She is, absolutely.

RM: She was postmistress.

TB: Yes, for many years.

RM: Talk about your early years in Tonopah. Who were some of your pals, and what did you occupy yourself with?

TB: It was really funny; it's so different now. We had maybe two or three, at most, TV stations. There just wasn't much on, you know. So we didn't spend time watching TV, we spent time in the neighborhood. And there were a lot of neighbor kids. The Wolfe family had a number of kids, and the Bonis had kids, and there were kids across the street, the Murnane

kids. We all spent time outside, and I can remember real battles: “It’s time for you to come in. You have to come and eat.” It was a battle to get us into the house. To this very day, given a choice, I would rather be outside than inside anytime. I’m just crazy about that.

RM: It sounds like your dad was like that, too.

TB: Oh, yes, very much so. So it was just hanging with the neighbor kids. As I got a little bit older I had one good friend, whose name was Dale Boni, and he and I basically did everything together. It’s amazing the amount of freedom that my parents gave us. Because by the time I was about 14 or 15 years old, we were taking off every weekend and just heading off to those surrounding areas. Even before I could drive. My friend Dale could drive a year or two before I could, and we would just load up every single weekend and off we’d go. Half the time we’d leave and not really [be] sure where we were heading to. We’d head off, and sometimes we wouldn’t show up until Monday morning early. I think we earned their trust early on and they figured, “Hey, you’re not going to get yourself in too much trouble.” They just gave me tremendous latitude like that. As long as my grades were good and I took care of business their way was, “Hey, do your thing.” I look back on that now, and I can’t imagine people giving their children that kind of latitude.

RM: It doesn’t exist. In fact, they’d be considered negligent, and probably so in today’s society.

TB: Right. But the bottom line is, because of what they did as we were growing up at a younger age, we were fully capable of doing that. We got firearms—you couldn’t imagine.

RM: What were some of the places you would go for the weekend?

TB: I loved to go all through the Monitor Valley. I loved to go into Peavine, up to the top of Peavine. Those were some of the places we would go. My dad loved the Reese River Valley. He’d go all the way up through Peavine, and then you used to be able drive all the way up into the head of Reese River before it was blocked off as a wilderness area. That was one of our favorite places to go. We loved to go back into there, virtually every weekend. My friend Dale’s family had a little cabin in Belmont, so we would go out to Belmont, and we would typically stay there. And then just everything in the Monitor Valley and Smoky Valley, all those places. There’s not a canyon, especially in the Monitor and Reese River and Smoky Valley, that we didn’t explore every square inch of. It was a great way to grow up.

It’s funny; my dad was really funny about that. I remember, I was in law school, and I took him to dinner one night at Louie’s Basque Corner. We were just sitting there, and there were some people from out of town. They were sitting there talking about what a God-forsaken place Nevada was. And I never saw him ever really come unglued at people, but he came unglued with those people that night about them not having a clue about how beautiful this state was: “You may drive through and see just desert and have no clue what’s here. And thank God, because we don’t want you.” He loved Nevada, he really loved it. I think in his younger

years he probably would have turned a blind eye to that whole thing, but it struck a nerve that night. He was like that.

And it's really true—if you're not from here, and you haven't been in those canyons, haven't seen what's up in those canyons—there are some spectacular things. It was a great way to grow up. I wouldn't trade it for anything. People always say to me, "My God, how in the world could you have grown up in Tonopah?" And I'm thankful that I had the opportunity to grow up in an area like that, because it was great.

RM: There's something I've noticed, and maybe I can get your take on it. It seems to me that the kids who come out of Tonopah, on the whole, do really well in life. They're doctors, lawyers, vets. . . .

TB: I always tell this to people, because people think I've been incredibly successful, that I've got great skills as a lawyer, or great genes, or whatever. I always tell them I have a Ph.D. in common sense, and I got it from Tonopah High. It's really true.

RM: I think you're right. What was it at Tonopah High that gave you that common sense?

TB: You know, I think it's just that we knew better than to have a bunch of pretense, and there wasn't a lot of social ranking. You are what you are, and the kids were what they were. If you had disputes, you fought them out in the back behind the building.

And my dad was really one that was very much a common-sense kind of guy. You just couldn't B.S. him. I knew early on. You'd get about three cross-examination questions, and it was done. It was just, like, you might as well come clean. [Laughs]

The other thing that is very unusual that people say to me is that there's nothing I can't fix or nothing I can't make. And that's the product of living in an area where, if you didn't have it, you either had to find some way to fix it or make it or make do without or whatever. I've got partners here who are 40 or 50 years old, and they call me up in the middle of the night because they've got this problem with this or that. It's like they never learned that stuff—they'd call somebody to do it for them. We didn't have that option.

RM: You guys had to do it yourself, figure out how to do it yourself. That's really cool. Am I correct in assessing that kids from Tonopah, on the whole, do well?

TB: I think they do. I just think they're grounded.

RM: Yes. And it's decent. I feel like, for my daughter, it was a decent place for her to go to junior high and high school.

TB: I think they're grounded. I think they understand what's important and what's not.

RM: Where does that come from, knowing what's important and what isn't? Because my daughter has that, and so does her husband, Bill Metscher.

TB: There wasn't a lot out there. Nobody had a lot of anything. You kind of made do with what you had, and you learned to appreciate what you had more. When I was growing up, my dad was avid—if you want something you have to earn it. I'll never forget the first job I had. I wanted this minibike. The Downs Department Store, which was right there on Main Street, used to sell Hondas. When I was nine or ten years old they had a little Honda there. I wanted that Honda so bad. So I looked at it, and I'd walk by there all the time. I'd go sit on it. And so, "You want the Honda, you got to work for it." So I worked an entire summer when I was 10 years old at this driving range, picking up golf balls. My very first paycheck I got—after my dad died, I found that paycheck in his desk. He had saved it. He had deposited the money.

RM: But he saved the check.

TB: He never cashed that check. But I just learned that. And my whole life, that's the way it was. And later, I did get a car before I had the money to do it, but I only had half. So I got a loan for the second half, and I had to work to pay that off, and I had to pay for my own gas and my insurance.

RM: What kind of car did you get?

TB: A Jeep. That's all I ever wanted. When I went to law school I still had that same vehicle.

RM: I wanted to ask you, would your dad have the same Jeep he drove up to us in '58? Would you still have that Jeep?

TB: No. I've tried to find that many times.

RM: Was it blue?

TB: Yes. He sold it to Billy Roberts up there at the newspaper, and then he sold it to some people in Ely. I tracked it to the first people in Ely, but I've never been able to track it beyond that.

RM: But it was blue; so my memory was correct.

TB: An old CJ2A. I got a CJ5, because it had to be much bigger and much more powerful. I mean, it was in my blood to be in those mountains. And both he and my Uncle Jake had those old Willys. That's the only thing I've ever wanted. I've never been without a Jeep in my life.

RM: Talk about grade school in Tonopah.

TB: Well, grade school seemed good. I don't have any bad memories of grade school except for the times when he would have these cases, and we'd have to go back and forth to school in the police cars and that kind of stuff. I can remember playing basketball in junior high and being very excited about all of that and my parents being very supportive of that. As I got into high

school, my dad traveled frequently to our away games. It's surprising how many of those games he went to. At the time he was either D.A. or a judge. When he became judge he was covering three counties, and for him to try to cover and see those games—I can't imagine.

RM: What teams did you play?

TB: At that time Pahrump was our biggest rival. And we played Moapa Valley and Virgin Valley and Lincoln. We played over in Ely and White Pine. For a while we played Gabbs, but then Gabbs got moved out of our division. We would also go down there and play in Shoshone.

RM: You didn't play Needles?

TB: No. I think our farthest trip was up to Lincoln County and Virgin Valley—we played in Alamo. Sports was the big thing. And when it wasn't a sports season I was off in the mountains every weekend. The father of a good friend of mine had a service station, and I worked there. I either worked at that, or, for a year or two, I worked for the school district doing after-school maintenance.

RM: Which sports did you play?

TB: I played basketball every year, and then I did football for two or three years. We didn't have baseball then, so that's all there was. I did track a little bit. What happened with track was it started being spring, and that meant you could get back into the mountains again. As soon as it was warm enough to be camping and in the mountains, then that's where I was.

RM: And so your dad, as busy as he was, made a lot of the games.

TB: He really did. And he would travel ungodly hours to do it. A big, big supporter of all that stuff.

CHAPTER FOUR

RM: What else do you remember about your life during your high school years in Tonopah?

TB: You know, I was really involved in the athletic stuff, so that was real important to me. As I got older, it was Jeeps and hot rods and the outdoor stuff and being in the mountains. The friends I had had Jeeps or motorcycles. That's what I did.

RM: You were into motorcycles, too?

TB: Yes, from the time I was 10 years old.

RM: Oh, so the Honda was not a bike but a motorcycle?

TB: It was a motorcycle. I didn't have many. I had that one, and I had two others when I was there. Every year it was the same thing; I would work until I could get enough to upgrade it. I did that twice.

RM: Did you get into their repair?

TB: Yes, I did. I loved it, really. It was really amazing, because that's kind of what I wanted to do. I was a motorhead. Those were the kind of kids I hung around with. As I was getting ready to graduate, many of my friends were going off to those kinds of trade/technical schools. That's really kind of what I wanted to do. In many, many subtle ways my dad was . . .

RM: Pushing you.

TB: Not so much that it was a bad thing to do, but I just think he felt I was capable of more. And so, very, very subtly—he never, ever told me one way or the other, but he wanted me to go to college more to experience other things and to see what I really wanted to do with my life. So—same thing, again. I'm certain that I decided to go to the university, rather than go to a trade school, because of fear that I would disappoint him. Because it really was not what I wanted to do. It was not what I wanted to do. And I didn't do very well. My heart wasn't in it. I didn't want to do it. I had gone from being a big fish in a very small pond to being a very small fish in a big pond. I didn't adjust very well at all. I was pretty homesick.

RM: What school did you go to?

TB: Here, UNR.

RM: What year did you start there?

TB: In '78, and I graduated in '82.

RM: What did you major in?

TB: I majored in criminal justice, only because, as I got into my last year or two, it was the degree, the major, that I had the most credits towards. I wanted to be done. Even by the time I graduated I still didn't have much direction in my life. By the last two years that I was in college I worked for the sheriff's department here in their crime lab. I did an internship as part of a class that I had at the university. I went there, and I did this internship for the better part of a year. After that year they were like, "We'd really like you to come work here." So they offered me a full-time position, and I did that for almost the last two years of my college. I worked full time for them and . . .

RM: And went to school, too, full time? How did you manage that? I've always wondered how people do that, and admired it.

TB: At the time it didn't seem like that big a thing. Quite frankly, my academics were terrible until I started doing that.

RM: And then you got better?

TB: Oh, much better. Because all of a sudden it was interesting to me. Before, it was, like, math and English. I mean, I didn't like that stuff even though I think I was the salutatorian in school. But that was primarily the product of taking vocational classes and doing really well at those. I skipped all the hard stuff. So then I was doing that, and I really enjoyed it.

As I was getting towards the end of that, my dad then started planting a seed. "What do you think about going to law school?"

I'm like, "Dad, I kind of like what I'm doing."

He's like, "Well, give it some thought." I wouldn't hear about it for a month or two, and then he'd bring it up again.

About that same time I was working with a group of guys. It was a difficult job, because I worked swing shift, and then on Friday and Saturday nights I was on call from midnight until 8:00 in the morning. Friday and Saturday nights is when everything bad happens. So it was a very difficult job. And I could see that the guys that I was working with—and they were probably in their mid-40s, maybe early 50s—were terribly burned out. I kind of thought, "You know, I don't want to end up like those guys."

About that same time my dad was more about, "Hey, you ought to go to law school. No one says you have to be a lawyer, but you're going to learn lots of cool stuff, and it will always help you in your life." He just said to me, "If you don't now, you'll never do it. You've got all the freedoms in the world right now. Just go do it."

So, kind of reluctantly, I said okay. Part of that was that at the time Mills Lane was going to run for D.A. When I left he said, "You go to law school, you come back, you work for me." I thought the world of Mills Lane, because he was my kind of no-B.S. guy. I really liked that guy. I said okay, and off I went.

The first year was a real transition, too, because of a whole different style of learning. And I kind of struggled with it. I mean, I was fine, but after the first year of a very Socratic

method of teaching and a very subjective method of teaching, it took me a year to pick up on it, and then after that I did really well.

RM: You mean in law school? Where did you go to law school?

TB: In Sacramento: McGeorge.

RM: That's three years?

TB: It was a four-year program. There was a good friend of mine, Don Logan, who's now the GM of the Las Vegas 51s, a AAA baseball team. He and I started together, and they only offered him the evening program. Since we went together, it was like, "If you're going to go in the evening, I'm going to go in the evening." That made it four years. The evening program was spread out; they took a three-year program and made it four. It was typically for people who had full-time jobs or families or whatever, that worked during the day, and they would go mostly to those classes during the evening.

RM: Generally, they're more motivated.

TB: Yes, I thought they were, too. I never regretted that. It was an additional year, but after he left, in fact, I was going to accelerate and go back and do it in a three-year deal. But my dad kind of convinced me to stay. And I was working at the time.

RM: Where were you working?

TB: I worked for the U.S. Attorney's office, and I really enjoyed what I was doing. In fact, the last summer of that I went and I worked in Yosemite. I worked for the U.S. Attorney's office prosecuting the misdemeanor crime in Yosemite. Absolutely the funnest summer I ever had. It was just a gas. I prosecuted a lot of the base jumpers, the guys who would jump off the cliffs with the parachutes.

So it turned out I did really well in law school and then had lots of opportunities. But I never really pursued any of them, because I had always gone to school with the idea that I was going to come back here, and I was going to work for Mills Lane. I was a member of what they called the "Order of the Coif." It was the highest level, and only a few limited law schools have it. You have to be accredited to the Order of the Coif, and I think it might be only the top 10 percent of the class that gets admitted to that. I got offers sight unseen from firms all over. I never even pursued them. I never went to an interview because I was going to come back here and work for Mills Lane.

So I finished up my school, came back, took the bar exam, and I passed. In fact, one of the highlights, really, of my life was that at the time, I think it was Justice Springer on the Supreme Court had called my dad. Everyone was waiting for the bar results to come out, and no one knew what the outcome was. But Charles Springer knew what the outcome was. He called my dad, and he said, "Your son has scored the highest on the multi-state we've ever had." That was one of the highlights.

RM: Oh, my God. I'll bet your dad was proud. And your mom, too.

TB: Yes. He never called me and told me that I passed until it came out officially. I called him and said, "Hey, Dad, I passed."

He said, "Yes, I know."

I said, "What do you mean, you knew?"

He said, "I knew last week."

I said, "I can't believe you didn't tell me."

The other thing is, when I was in law school, for whatever reason—I think it was kind of a fear factor—we were being taught constitutional law at McGeorge by Anthony Kennedy, who is a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. At the time he was on the Ninth Circuit. He was an incredible guy.

The Socratic Method is that the people in the class taught the class through the professor. It was a very different way of doing things.

RM: You mean, he would quiz them and everything?

TB: People would get called on every night. Constitutional law was one of their most difficult courses. For whatever reason, Anthony Kennedy—and he was the most brilliant man I've ever come across, bar none—never brought a book or a note. He would come in there, and he would quote, at length, footnotes out of these cases. You'd be reading them along, and he was incredible.

RM: He's the swing man on the Supreme Court now, isn't he?

TB: Right. So, for whatever reason, he would come to class, and he was so far above everyone that he'd get a little frustrated when he couldn't get what he wanted. The first couple of nights he came to me, and I gave him the answers he was looking for. From that point forward, I swear to God, if he got frustrated at not getting what he wanted . . .

RM: He'd go to you, and you'd give it to him.

TB: Yes. So I spent a year in mortal fear of screwing up. I was very, very prepared for that course for an entire year. For every course, there's a treatise of books that's put out by this company called American Jurisprudence. And American Jurisprudence would give accredited law schools what they called the AmJur Award. They would give this AmJur Award in every single subject—the AmJur Award would be given to the student who got the highest grade in any given class at these accredited schools. And I got the AmJur award from Anthony Kennedy. At that time he was just on the Ninth Circuit, and later he went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

RM: And he's the only judge from the West on the court now, isn't he?

TB: Yes, I think so. He's just incredible. It was really funny, you know. That would have been my third year. The fourth year, when I was working for the U.S. Attorney's office, I worked downtown in Sacramento, and the U.S. Attorney's office was in the federal courthouse. And Anthony Kennedy had an office in what they called the Green Monster. It's this great big huge building in Sacramento at the end of the K Street Mall. I would see him occasionally out on the K Street Mall during the lunch hour. And he would kind of talk with me and stuff. He'd stop and me and ask me, "What are you going to do after school?"

I'd say, "I'm just going to go to work in the District Attorney's office." I didn't realize, in the overall scheme of things, leaving law school and doing a job like that is so far down the scale of what one could possibly do.

So he suggested to me one time, "Do you want to clerk for a judge in the Ninth Circuit?"

I said, "Oh, no, I want to go work over there." Subsequently, I got a call from Proctor Hug, who was on the Ninth Circuit with Justice Kennedy. And Proctor Hug said, "If you want to come clerk for me you can."

And I turned it down. [Laughs] Because I wanted to be a trial lawyer. I wanted to go work for Mills Lane. Well, as it turns out, after I had passed the bar, I went over there and had a meeting with one of the guys at the D.A.'s office. And I was so offended by things that had been said in that meeting that I decided right then and there I wasn't going to do it. I was not going to work for the D.A.'s office. So I had no job. Everyone else in my class—their careers had been set. They knew exactly what they were going to do. They'd been interviewing for months, and they all had positions, and I had no job.

So I called my dad, and I said, "I'm not going over there."

He said, "What do you mean you're not going over there?"

I said, "Let me tell you what happened."

And he said, "Okay, you need to go out and beat the bushes and see what other places might have."

I said, "Give me some names of some places." He gave me the name of this firm.

RM: This firm that you're working for now? What's its name?

BT: Erickson, Thorpe and Swainston. I've been a partner here since 1989. It's my firm.

He gave me the names of about four different places. I sent these four places letters and said I'd like a job. And I got offers from every place.

RM: They probably just snapped you right up with a record like that.

TB: I came to this group because all of them were from little towns in Nevada, except for one. They were much more laid back. There are some exclusive clubs and organizations here in town, where these other firms would take me to these very high-faluty kind of deals for lunch, and suits and ties. I came here, and these guys took me to Louie's for lunch. We sat over there at the bar and just chatted for the afternoon. I never left. I've been here ever since. Wouldn't trade it for anything. And I've had a lot of opportunities to go other places, much more elite, but these are real people. And they're just family.

RM: Do you get back to Tonopah much?

TB: Occasionally. One of the things that's really been fortunate for me is that one of my major clients is an organization that is a group of public entities from all over the smaller, rural counties. The only ones that aren't part of this are Clark County and Washoe County. So I have a lot of opportunities. I've been representing these entities, like the cities and counties and municipalities all over the state, for more than 20 years. So it gives me an opportunity to stay where my roots are. I've been representing Nye County for more than 20 years.

RM: Tom, thanks so much for talking with me. This has been very interesting.

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Reese River Valley, Nevada
Robb, Jack,

S
Sacramento, California,
scholarships,
schools
grade school,
Hastings College of the Law
McGeorge law school (Pacific McGeorge School of Law
parents in San Francisco,
Tonopah High School,
Shellenbarger, Mike,
Shoshone, California,
Sigma Nu fraternity
silicosis (miner's consumption),
smell memories
Smoky Valley, Nevada,
Socratic Method,
Springer, Charles,
Stone Cabin, Nevada,
stories
boundary dispute story,
Joseph in bar with gun story,

T
television in Tonopah,
Thanksgiving get-togethers,
Tonopah, Nevada
beauty of area
"can do" attitude in,
Downs Department Store,
grade school,
Presbyterian church,
schools,
success of Tonopah students,
television,
Tonopah High School,

U

uncashed fee checks,
University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV),
University of Nevada, Reno (UNR
U.S. Attorney's office job,
U.S. Supreme Court,

V
Virgin Valley, Nevada,

W
water availability in area over time
White Pine, Nevada,
Willys Jeeps,
Wolfe family,
World War II,

Y
Yosemite National Park