

An Interview With
DONALD B. POTTS

An Oral History conducted and edited by
Robert D. McCracken

Nye County Town History Project
Nye County, Nevada
Tonopah
1987

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Donald B. and Jeannie Potts
Late 1970s

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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 incoherency. 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 known and admired since I was a teenager; these experiences were especially gratifying. I thank the residents throughout Nye County and southern 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. Mr. Garcia and Mr. Revert, in particular, showed deep interest and unyielding support for the project from its inception. Thanks also go to current commissioners Richard L. Carver and Barbara J. Raper, who have since joined Mr. Revert on the board and who have continued the project with enthusiastic support. Stephen T. Bradhurst, Jr., planning consultant for Nye County, gave unwavering support and advocacy of the project within Nye County and before the State of Nevada Nuclear Waste Project Office and the United States Department of Energy; both entities provided funds for this project. Thanks are also extended to Mr. Bradhurst for his advice and input regarding the conduct of the research and for constantly serving as a sounding board when methodological problems were worked out. This project would never have become a reality without the enthusiastic support of the Nye County commissioners and Mr. Bradhurst.

Jean Charney served as administrative assistant, editor, indexer, and typist throughout the project; her services have been indispensable. Louise Terrell provided considerable assistance in transcribing many of the oral histories; Barbara Douglass also transcribed a number of interviews. Transcribing, typing, editing, and indexing were provided at various times by Alice Levine, Jodie Hanson, Mike Green, and Cynthia Tremblay. Jared Charney contributed essential word processing skills. Maire Hayes, Michelle Starika, Anita Coryell, Michelle Welsh, Lindsay Schumacher, and Jodie Hanson shouldered the herculean task of proofreading the oral histories. Gretchen Loeffler and Bambi McCracken assisted in numerous secretarial and clerical duties. Phillip Earl of the Nevada Historical Society contributed valuable support and criticism throughout the project, and Tom King at the Oral History Program of the University of Nevada at Reno served as a consulting oral historian. Much deserved thanks are extended to all these persons.

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--Robert D. McCracken
Tonopah, Nevada
June 1990

INTRODUCTION

Historians generally consider the year 1890 as the end 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 much 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 for at least another twenty years.

The great mining booms at Tonopah (1900), Goldfield (1902), and Rhyolite (1904) 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, most of it essentially untouched by human hands.

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. Amargosa Valley has never had a newspaper; Beatty's independent paper folded in 1912. Pahrump's first newspaper did not appear until 1971. All six communities received only spotty coverage in the newspapers of other communities after their own papers folded, although Beatty, was served by the Beatty Bulletin, which was published as a supplement to the Goldfield News between 1947 and 1956. Consequently, most information on the history of southcentral Nevada after 1920 is stored 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). 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 James R. Dickinson Library at the University of Nevada, 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 selection 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 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 interviews as well as existing written sources, histories have been prepared for the major communities in Nye County. These histories also have been archived.

The town history project is one component of a Nye County program to determine the socioeconomic impacts 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 a repository. If the repository is constructed, it will remain a source of interest for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years to come, and future generations will likely want to know more about the people who once resided near the site. 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.

-R.D.M.

Robert McCracken interviewing Don Potts at his home in Tonopah, Nevada November 7, 1987.

CHAPTER ONE

RM: Don, could you tell me your name as it reads on your birth certificate?

DP: Donald Bailey Potts.

RM: What was your birthdate, and where were you born?

DP: January 5, 1923, in Huntington Park, California.

RM.: What was your father's name?

DP: Franklin E. Potts.

RM: When and where was he born?

DP: I believe he was born in New York about 1894.

RM: Do you know where in New York?

DP: I think it was Brooklyn; I'm not sure.

RM: What was your mother's maiden name?

DP: Her name was Ethel Mae Bailey.

RM: And where and when was she born?

DP: In Los Angeles, California, and I don't remember the date. Her birthday was January 10th. I was the 5th, she was the 10th, and my grandmother was the 15th; all January. But I can't remember the date.

RM: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

DP: I had one brother, Robert, almost 3 years older than I. He was killed in World War II on board the Bunker Hill - an aircraft carrier. A kamikaze bomb killed him.

RM: Is that right. What kind of work was your father involved in?

DP: When I was born in Huntington Park, he owned a large plumbing shop with 25 men working for him. Then in 1925, when I was 2, he sold the plumbing shop and moved to Valley Center, California, and bought a 320-acre

RM.: Where is Valley Center?

DP: It's just above Escondido, which is in San Diego County. The first year at that ranch he spent \$50,000 - in 1927.

RM: In making improvements?

DP: Building a big dairy barn and . .

RM: Oh, it was a dairy farm?

DP: We milked 60 head of cows.

RM: So you were raised on a dairy?

DP: Well, the ranch was everything. It was a dairy for a number of years. There were a number of other dairies in that immediate area and my dad also had the milk route. He picked up from all the other dairies, and did the cream separation, and then hauled all of the products to Escondido, where they had a big creamery. And we had the only ice house the whole area, and we sold ice. We had a 30-stanchion barn, and a 100-ton hayloft above . . . It was quite an operation.

In 1929 he sold that and took an apartment house in San Diego in trade. I then went into the 2nd grade, in 1929, in San Diego at the age of 5. You could start school then when you were 5 or 5-1/2, so I was 6 years in the 2nd grade. We were there for about a year, and the people defaulted - couldn't pay for the ranch - so he took it back.

We moved back to the ranch and we tried dry land farming, we tried turkeys, we tried chickens, and we also had 7 acres of nectarines, peaches and walnuts. And later on he tried hogs - we had 250 head of hogs. In 1937, after Prohibition, he had a liquor store in Oceanside - one of the first liquor stores. When he sold out in '41 they started Can Pendleton Oceanside on the Santa Margarita Ranch, which was a Spanish land grant.

I went all through grammar school in Valley Center, and then high school in Escondido, and about one year of post-graduate work in Escondido High. Then in October of '42 I went into the navy.

RM: Where did you spend your navy career?

DP: [chuckles] I joined up in San Diego and they took me in a station wagon to the boot camp in San Diego. Normally, if you were on the west coast they shipped you to the east coast, and the east coast [guys were shipped] to the west coast. But I went all through boot camp in San Diego, and then was put on a train and shipped to Norman, Oklahoma, and went through

Aviation Machinist Mate School. And from there back to the west -coast at Alameda, and then from Alameda we were shipped down to Port Blueneme, and we left out of Port Hueneme with the 87th Seabee Battalion. We were a PATSU outfit, which is Patrol Aircraft Squadron Unit.

RM: It's an acronym.

DP: Yes. There were CASUs and PATSUs and all that. We shipped out with that Seabee battalion to the South Pacific and went over, at that time, unescorted. Even 2 and 2-1/2 years later they were still escorting ships, but we went all by ourselves clear to New Caledonia. We stayed there for about 10 days in the bay, and then left out and went up to Guadalcanal where we disembarked and went on to the Russell Islands. We set up an airstrip and camp in the Russells, and they hadn't even taken - and controlled - Guadalcanal, as yet. From the Russells we went to Munda and set up another camp, and then to Emeru and then to Green Island. And then w the Admiralties, and then to the Philippines. And we went through 3 different squadrons. Each squadron would be out for 6 months; we were out for 18. From the Philippines we finally came back home. I came under the Golden Gate Bridge on St. Patrick's Day - March 17th - in 1945. I got discharged in January of '46, so I put in 3 years, 3 months, and 3 days. RM: How did you like the navy?

DP: Oh, I enjoyed it. Every time we would move from one island to another, there would always be an advance group that flew up, and then the rest of the gang would [follow] aboard some old wallowing tub with all the supplies and everything. I was always one who flew up first, and a week or 2 later the rest of the crew would show up.

RM: What was your job?

DP: I was a plane captain, and also in hydraulics and engine maintenance. You flew quite a bit, and were in charge of the plane and took care of it in all phases. We used to go down to Guadalcanal later for engine changes, and spent quite a bit of time down there and then back to wherever we happened to be stationed. It was quite interesting. We were particularly patrol squadrons and reconnaissance and cameras. Our planes flew over Rabaul when the Japanese still had that, and all of the other islands that were still occupied by the Japanese, so it was quite interesting. I would love to go back some day just to see some of those [places and see] what has changed, and . .

RM: What did you do when you got out in '45?

DP: Prior to going in to the service - in '42 - I managed to join the Operating Engineers. I was a cat-skinner, and worked at Camp Pendleton when they were developing that. First on firebreak in the interior, and then later in the airport, the main base, and I also worked on the boat basin, which was being constructed on the ocean. When I came back out of the service my union affiliation was still intact and kept up, so I was still in the Operating Engineers. I also bought a truck and went into the independent trucking game.

RM: Was this in southern California?

DP: This was in Escondido And I operated a black granite quarry for Monumental Stone and Tombstones, and I was in a swimming pool corporation -we were building swimming pools - and I manufactured pickup campers in another business and I had a franchise for part of San Diego County for an exclusive on bottle water. And [chuckles] I worked for a construction company with 3 brothers who were born and raised in Escondido and became quite large. The majority of the time I was in different businesses for myself. Then I started a sand and gravel business and was in that for about 8 years, and finally sold out.

And during this time, in '52 and '53, I was in Idaho and Colorado, different places, during the uranium boom looking for properties.

RM: Were you looking for yourself, or for somebody else?

DP: Well, for myself, and there was a group of 2 or 3 of us who went together. Before that, in Pala, Mesa Grande, Rincon - all in San Diego County, which is noted for pigmatite dikes - I used to do quite a bit of gemstone mining.

RM: What kind of gemstones did you mine?

DP: That's noted for tourmaline and beryl and kunzite. And then I also was involved in some tungsten and quicksilver in Mexico, and some tungsten up on Palomar Mountain

RM: There's tungsten on Mount Palomar?

DP: Yes. There are also pigmatites in Mount Palomar that produce quite a bit of gemstones. That whole San Diego County is - with pigmatites, you know.

RM: How did you get into mining? It sounds like you were involved with these businesses, but somehow you got the mining bug.

DP: Oh, yes. I always loved mining as a kid. My grandfather lived in Ransberg, California, and was a mining man all his life; he died there. Even as a little tot 4 years old, [I remember that] he used to take us on ore cars into the old Yellow Astor, which was one of the big gold mines in Ransberg. I just always liked mining. One time when I was at Mercury my mother sent me a horoscope. I had never looked at one or studied one, and it was as if I was reading my autobiography; it was so unreal. It said that my monies would be made out of the earth.

RM: Is that right.

DP: Yes. [chuckles] And here being in construction and mining . . . Then in 1962 I came up to Mercury and went to work on the drill rigs on the Nevada Test Site.

RM: Could you tell a little bit about the drill rigs?

DP: Well, at that time they were putting down not only test holes, but large diameter holes in order to put a device down there and shoot it for testing purposes. I worked on the drill rigs for quite some time as a regular roughneck. They had a derrick man, a pump man, and the 2 roughnecks.

RM: What kind of drills were those, Don? Were they big augers in effect, or what?

DP: Well, every size. There were some 10-foot diameter holes being drilled.

RM: And how deep would they go with these holes?

DP: Oh, sometimes 2,500 feet. Later on out at C-site, which the AEC had, out at Hot Creek, they drilled two 10-foot diameter holes 5,000 feet deep. Those are both sitting there, unshot. The one is cased, ready to shoot, and they were going to shoot it, but they waited till they shot the one at Aruchitka, and after they shot that everything was curtailed and they never did go ahead and shoot either one of the holes at Hot Creek. The other one is still sitting up there by Morey, with fluid in it, but they never did case it because they didn't want the disturbance until they'd shot the other one.

RM: And it's 5,000 deep?

DP: Also. And 10-foot diameter.

RM: How does a drill like that work? Could you just briefly explain it? DP: They used double drill rods with reverse circulation. They'd have maybe a 10-7/8 inch outside drill pipe, and a 4-7/8 inch internally, so your fluid is being pumped down through the smaller drill rod, and then your cuttings are returned between the 2 pipes.

RM: Does it look like a big oil drilling bit?

DP: Oh, yes. The bit itself was 10 feet in diameter with a whole series of cutters attached to it, and they would change different types of cutters. For instance, if they hit extremely hard rock they would put on button-bit cutters, which are made of tungsten carbide. They might only go 4 or 5 feet and then come out of the hole and put on a cone-type bit, which would then continue to drill.

They didn't have any safety devices on the tremendous torque that was built up in twisting that rig - it would be thousands and thousands of pounds. And twice they broke off. With that torque buildup, the response was so instantaneous that the complete drill stem became unscrewed at a certain point and then they would have a fishing job. They had 3 fishing jobs out there and each one cost a half a million. To fish everything out of there and start over.

RM: What do you mean, start over?

DP: I mean after they get everything out of the hole. They couldn't drill with any of the steel; they had to fish every piece out and then start all over getting back down to bottom. So they finally put a safety device on –a brake system that, if anything broke, would catch it and hold that torque in place so it wouldn't unscrew the drill rods. Because they'd have a crane, they'd have ironworkers, they'd have people on duty 24 hours a day, 7 days a week while they were fishing.

RM: Did men work down in the hole when they were drilling?

DP: No. [And on] the floor you're 50 or 60 feet above the ground and all you have is 4 posts with a chain, and you're working around that and it's all oily and slick, and it's pretty awesome to look down that gaping hole. You can see nothing, and you know it's thousands of feet deep, and if . . . They had you wear safety belts snapped to something solid so if did go, you'd fall in, but you'd get held.

RM: [chuckles] Did you ever fall?

DP: No, but it made you think twice.

RM: Did they case the holes?

DP: They had million-pound jacks; they would support a million pounds of weight. Because the casing, as it went down in sections, had to be welded.

RM: Oh, I see; it was steel casing.

DP: And then the jacks would lower it to the next section, and this went on till they hit bottom, and then [the space] between the steel casing and the wall of the hole was pumped solid with concrete. So those jacks had to support tremendous weight.

RM: Don, I don't understand. Where are the jacks?

DP: They're on the floor of the rig, with 4 hydraulic cylinders that grip each section, and then can lower it down. And as they get to a next joint,

the rig picks it up, sets it up, the welders go to work welding it together, and then the jacks let that section down. And each section becomes heavier and heavier. They had to design the jacks . . . they'd already calculated what the weight of that casing would be at a certain depth. Anyway, those were million-pound jacks.

RM: How thick was the casing?

DP: If I remember correctly it was 5/8 or 3/4 of an inch thickness.

RM: And how tall?

DP: I think they were in 40-foot sections. When the trucks were coming in there was a whole fleet of them and they would carry one section, period; and that was a big load.

RM: I wonder where they were fabricated.

DP: I forget. At one time they were going to use a spun fiberglass-type casing, and they bought a lot of it, but it wouldn't work. It wouldn't withstand the pressures and everything else, so it just sat out there.

RM: So then they'd fill the sides with concrete, then did they rig a hoist on it so men could go down there?

DP: No, men never went down. Everything was lowered from the platform of the drill rig with the kelly and the drill rig.

RM: Oh; so they didn't go down to the bottom of the hole and then tunnel out.

DP: Oh, no.

RM: And then did they fill the hole after they put the device down? DP: Well, if they were going to shoot it they would use sand and different types of material and fill the hole back up; stem it. When you stem any hole, that means filling up the void with some type of material. If you were going to shoot a round in a tunnel you'd stem each hole.

RM: I can remember that my dad - perhaps I'm recalling wrong - had to go down in the bottom of those holes one time.

DP: Well, this is a different hole than out at C-site. They put miners down the holes that they put down at Mercury that were not as deep and not as big in diameter [and the miners] belled than out. Nobody but the government could do that, because anyplace else you'd have to have a manway - an escape route. And there the cage fit the hole, and that was it. You went down and you stayed down there, and the only way you came out was up the cage - no other way.

RM: Where were the holes that a man could go down?

DP: At the Test Site at Mercury - out on Yucca Flats. And the other ones I'm speaking of are out at Hot Creek.

RM: And you worked on both?

DP: Yes.

RM: How long did it take them to drill a hole like the ones at Mercury –to go down a couple of thousand feet?

DP: Well, I'm not sure they went that deep. I don't recall, but some of those holes - just guessing - they would drill and be set up with a head frame and go down with a cage for men in about 3 months. Then the miners took over and ran some drifts or else they belled out the complete bottom. They had a few mishaps, which were in the paper. They had that one crew that was trapped down there for a week.

RM: Did they get them out?

DP: Oh, yes. And then they had another one that was quite a disaster; the water was coming in and they pulled the cage up between the wall of the casing, and the man between was just ground up. There were some people killed on that one. So they had some mishaps.

RM: And how long did you work in those holes?

DP: I worked from '62 into some time in '63. I left and I came back in '64 or '65, and that point I went into the tunnels at Area 12. I was in the tunnels for about 4 or 5 years, and from there out to Hot Creek and C-site.

RM: What did you do in the tunnels?

DP: Well, most everything. They have operators inside who run the mucking machines and all the trains and a lot of other things. And then they have operators outside who load all the trains with a forklift, use a dozer to muck out the dump from the ore cars that are dumping all the waste, and then also a skip loader for loading sand in the gondolas that go inside, and I did it all.

RM: So you were working as an Operating Engineer there.

DP: Yes.

RM: Were you a member of the union in Vegas - the operators in Vegas, or where were . . . ?

DP: Yes. Well, Local 12, which happens to be - the headquarters are in Los Angeles, but Las Vegas is a branch.

RM: And did you live at the camp at Area 12?

DP: Right. I stayed there 5 days a week and commuted to Tonopah on weekends.

RM: When did you first come to Tonopah?

DP: In 1962, when I first started at Mercury.

RM: What brought you up here as opposed to, say, orienting out of Vegas?

DP: Well, I don't like big towns in the first place; I like small towns. And I used to go to Pioche and Caliente and all these other small places, and being interested in mining, and Nye County being the center of a mineralized area, I settled in Tonopah.

RM: So you kept a place up here, too.

DP: Yes.

CHAPTER TWO

RM: What was living like at Mercury at the camp at Area 12?

DP: They had a fairly nice camp. It's 42 miles inland from the main camp at Mercury. They had dormitory-type barracks, and they also had trailers that accommodated 2 men on each end, with a set of bathrooms; so you had 4 men to a trailer. And they had a mess hall, a gym, a theater, a rec hall where you could buy beer and hard liquor, and pool tables and TV rooms. It wasn't bad. The food at times had lots to be desired, [laughter] but other than that, I didn't mind it.

Although there are guys who cannot stay away from the bright lights; they have to be in town every night. A lot of people drove that every day of their life, from Vegas - and even from Boulder City - to Area 12 and back. From Boulder City it's 112 miles. They drove that 225 miles a day year after year after year.

RM: Did it wear them down, do you think?

DP: Oh, I'm quite sure [it did]. They're putting in about 13 hours a day to get paid for 8 with 5 hours of travel time.

PM: Probably they really wore out cars, too.

DP: Oh, the mileage that they piled up on those vans . . . There were carpool vans and guys would charge to have somebody ride with than - they'd haul 7 of them at a whack. I never could see that, myself. If I had to drive over 10 miles to work I thought it was a crime.

RM: Yes. Could you tell a little bit about how labor was organized in the tunnels at Mercury?

DP: You had all types of crafts, and each craft is designated as to what they can do, and you can't infringe on something another craft is supposed to do, even though you would see that maybe it should be done. And that would cause problems. Then you had the tunnel walker. He changed with each shift, and you worked for that walker. And then under the walkers they had shifters, who ran each crew. You might have 2 or 3 crews, with a shifter for each crew, working under one single walker. Then outside you had the superintendent of that tunnel, and then you'd have an area superintendent who would be in charge of the entire area and all of the assistant superintendents.

RM: Who was the super down there while you were there?

DP: Bill Flangas was the head honcho at that time. And then you had a lot of other superintendents in charge of each individual tunnel, with all of the walkers working for them.

RM: What tunnels did you work in?

DP: I worked in E-tunnel and N-tunnel and T-tunnel and I also worked in the Area 15 shaft for probably 2 years.

RM: Now, where's Area 15?

DP: It's below Area 12, but it was sunk and shot at the 800-foot level by a private contractor. Then Reeco took it over and sank it on down to 1,400 and then shot it again themselves. I worked in it from the 800 to the 1,400 - all that time.

RM: And it took 2 years?

DP: They were on that about 2 years; yes. They had an awful lot of drifting to do; it was all in solid granite. And then after they shot it they had a re-entry; I was on that. It cost \$1 million just to get back down to the bottom again.

RM: Could you say anything about your feelings about working around the radiation?

DP: Well, everybody wore a dosimeter. Of course, in the very beginning, when I was on the drill rigs way back in '62, I saw the results of tunnel, when it blew out.

RM: What was that?

DP: That was right there on the backside of Area 12 camp. The gas-seal doors blew out, and the whole area lit up like a Christmas tree, with everything on fire. It was just ready to engulf all of Area 12 camp when the winds came and took it the other way. And then later on they had that Sudan Crater, which they shot. They didn't evacuate anybody; everybody just stayed around. Later if they had a shot, everybody would be evacuated to Mercury. You had to go there and stay until it was all clear.

RM: But before those accidents they didn't evacuate?

DP: No. It was real weird.

RM: What was it like when a shot went off there?

DP: Well, [sighs] unless they had problems, you didn't pay much attention to it. But then - that one - they had some real problems.

RM: Did the ground shake and . . .?

DP: Oh, golly, I'll say. [chuckles] It felt like you were in the worst earthquake going.

RM: But after that they evacuated everybody to Mercury.

DP: Yes. You'd have to go out the night before and they would try to have rooms for you in Mercury, and you'd stay there and then wait the next morning until they finally shot it, and then they would give you an all-clear and you'd finally go back into camp again. But that one shot had contamination of all the people's cars who were there, and they had quite a time.

RM: In the very beginning, what did you think about working around that kind of thing?

DP: Well, fortunately there were some guys who went back in on every re-entry, and had to go in on full suit-up.

RM: Why don't you explain what re-entry is?

DP: That's after a shot is made. Everything's recorded down at Command Center, but they have to go in to see what is left, and what they can retrieve and a few other things like that. If there's been a lot of radiation the person who goes into re-entry has to go in on full suit-up. You have to wear a mask and everything. Fortunately I evaded most of those, because I'd just as soon stay away from something you can't smell, see, or taste but can still cause a tremendous amount of harm.

RM: Did a lot of the workers feel that way, do you think?

DP: Well, I think so. But it's hard to say. There were a lot of things that the AEC told you and did that have since that time all been contradicted. They do a lot of things differently.

RM: What about when they just went in without full suits?

DP: That's when the RAD-safe monitors, who monitored the amount of radiation, went in with their instruments and declared that it wasn't a high enough level to be of any great harm. And you just wore coveralls and booties and gloves. Then if it got really bad you also had to put on a mask and breathe oxygen and that sort of thing.

RM: Did you ever worry about your exposures there?

DP: Well, I never had that much, thank God. I'll knock on wood. Because some guys had problems later - they never did come back.

RM: You mean, they had health problems?

DP: Yes.

RM: Do you think that some people suffered health problems as a result of working there?

DP: Well, I would say so.

RM: Do you think the government would acknowledge that?

DP: No. You haven't seen it in any of the suits that are brought, you know. They're not going to put themselves in a position of being sued constantly by admitting to anything. [chuckles]

RM: So you believe that there was some health risk to some people working there.

DP: Oh, I feel there was.

RM: Have you noticed, in any of your observations, any things that would suggest to you that people you knew, or fellows you worked with, suffered unduly because of the exposure?

DP: Oh, not to put my finger on directly. I can't say that, really.

RM: I find it very interesting that the Department of Energy has never done a health survey of the workers down there. Which I think is . .

DP: What you don't know won't hurt you.

RM: Yes, right. [laughs] What was it like to live 5 days in the camp there, and then care home on weekends?

DP: It was all right. You changed shifts every 2 weeks in the tunnels. You'd be 2 weeks days, 2 weeks swing, and 2 weeks graveyard. When your shift was up at the end of Friday, [if you were] on graveyard, you'd get off Friday morning at 8:00. On days you'd get off Friday at 4:30, and on swing you'd get off Friday at midnight. No matter what shift you got off, you'd jump in a vehicle and head for Tonopah and have a short weekend or a long weekend, and back to the same old grind for the next 2 weeks. I absolutely despise graveyard - each day got worse.

RM: Did you work down there continuously, or were there breaks where you would go mining or something?

DP: No, I worked there continuously until I went up to Hot Creek in 1968.

RM: And that's where you worked in the big 5,000-foot-deep shaft.

DP: Right. That was in '68 and part of '69. And then in '70 I went back to Mercury a couple of times and then left in '73 and retired in '74.

RM: What did you do in the interims?

DP: I worked on a few construction jobs that were not related to Mercury. The last one was for Helms on that road job from Coaldale to Mina - the entire job, for the length of it.

In '73 when I left Mercury for the last time, I acquired the turquoise mine and went to mining turquoise. Of course the boom in turquoise was on and had been for - at that point - about 2-1/2, 3 years.

RM: What year was this, now?

DP: This was in '73. I had made up my mind that I wanted to go ahead and get a turquoise property, if possible, and at the same time I figured I didn't really have enough for retirement, and I still had my Teamsters card, and I was going to work construction in, maybe, outlying states during the summer months, and then draw unemployment in the winter months to supplement my income. So I started looking for a turquoise mine.

RM: Could you give us an idea about what turquoise was worth in those days?

DP: At that time good turquoise was selling for \$400 and \$500 a pound, and high-grade like Lone Mountain was bringing \$1,000 a pound. There was no problem getting \$1,000 for the Lone Mountain nuggets.

RM: What would high-grade turquoise look like - polished?

DP: It could be either in nugget form or it could be in cut cabs (short for cabochons), with spider web or a beautiful matrix and a deep blue. It was just hot all over the United States and Europe at that time. I found a property that I liked the looks of, which happened to be in Lander County. At that time it was owned by Mendles Winfield, who had bought Lone Mountain from Rocky Wilson and was operating that. He had put his brother up there the year before to work this property, which was originally known as the X-15 because it was so far out. Later on the name was changed to Red Mountain. It was [originally] discovered by the Edgars.

RM: How did you acquire it?

DP: I knew that Mendles was thinking of selling it. His brother had pulled out, and Mendles had moved all the equipment off, so it finally became available and I acquired it in 1974. I moved up there [alone] with a compressor and slept on the ground and cooked over a wood campfire for about 4 months, working it by hand, and then I got a man from Battle Mountain in there who had a D-8 Cat on a percentage basis. It had quite a bit of overburden and all this had to be moved with some big machinery. The property really started producing, and I worked it during the years of '74, '75, and '76.

RM: Where is it located?

DP: It's out in the Carico Lake area, about 58 miles out of Austin going towards Battle Mountain. You would turn off into Carico Lake, which is off to the east, and it's 28 miles in from the highway, and in close to Crescent Valley; in that area. There are numerous turquoise mines in that immediate vicinity.

I got this D-8 in there with a man on it, and we got to moving some real muck, and we hit very good turquoise, and the property kept producing, and then later on I had another set of leasers - 2 young men from Arizona -who were the last 2 operators in there, and they took out a tremendous amount of turquoise. One thing led to another, and from the turquoise mine I finally ended up not having to go to work anyplace else so I have remained [chuckles] retired for the last 13-1/2 years.

RM: What kind of rock was the turquoise in?

DP: Well, this happened to be all in a black shale. And most of it was all individual pieces, whereas a lot of turquoise is [in] seams, and it's associated or adhered to hard rock. It either has to be sawed out - and it won't cobb clean . . . But this happened to be small pieces - nuggets - and almost no rock; just all in a big fault zone. And setting the nuggets side by side with Lone Mountain nuggets, you could not tell the difference; they were the same quality.

RM: How big were the nuggets?

DP: They would range from, say, 1/4-inch clear on up to nuggets that would weigh 300 or 400 carats, which would be maybe 1/3 pound.

RM: And it was deposited by solutions going through the shale?

DP: Well, the geologists informed me that at one time this was all underwater. And someplace in the immediate area there were some volcanic eruptions which spewed forth a lot of fly ash. This fly ash all came down on the water, and slowly settled, and then as the seas all receded, here was this turquoise in place, all encapsulated within this volcanic fly ash that hardened. And then over the millions of years, because of erosion on the side of the hill, and that's where they found it - from tracing the float. So it was, fortunately, a property that was entrapped within itself for millions of years, so the turquoise was still there.

RM: Then the turquoise was already there and the fly ash came down and covered it?

DP: Right. Because we had to go through - in some places - 14 feet of just conglomerate of volcanic mixture with not a piece of turquoise in it until we would hit the turquoise zone.

RM: So the fly ash came down on the shale.

DP: Right. And then there was quite a bit of fault movement in there, and every place you had a big roll in the structure - and you can see these rolls right in the walls of the cuts we've made - you would always have high-grade nuggets in that immediate area. We made 3 benches, and eventually took each one of those out to where the walls became straight up and down, and the property was about - from top to bottom - between 80 and 100 feet in depth, and 100 feet across.

RM: And did you say there is other turquoise in the area?

DP: Yes, there's other turquoise in the area, and there's also other turquoise on the same property.

RM: Do you still own the property?

DP: I sold a portion of it, but I still retained 10 claims. There's a zone in there of another type of turquoise that has never even been worked - it's still all in place.

RM: When did the turquoise market soften?

DP: It started to soften in 1976, and by the end of that year it was almost over. But there never has been enough high-grade turquoise to go around, and there never will be enough to go around. During the boom it was only through the efforts of people who had tremendous amounts of low-grade, or chalk, and who came up with a stabilizing process and a treating process that would enhance the color, that could even begin to supply the market.

But you take the older people, who have been in the game for 25 or 30 years, in Gallup and other areas of New Mexico and Arizona who are still going today . . . They're down to the point of cutting Lone Mountain that they bought way back when for \$100 a pound and which they've had in their safes for 30 years. Turquoise used to run in cycles - every 7 years, about, it would have a boom cycle. It's been over 10 years now, and hasn't had the big cycle. But I understand it's picking up quite a bit in Europe now. But the people who have been in the game in high-class jewelry - made in gold with high-class stone - are still every bit as active as they ever were. You need gem-quality turquoise to set it in gold, or it doesn't appear beautiful. The majority of quality turquoise is set in silver. RM: How did you sell your turquoise, Don?

DP: Well, that's the funny part. I have no idea to this day how people found me; they came from all over. I would be up at the mine for a whole week, and I'd come in with turquoise, and there would be people waiting at my door.

RM: You mean here in Tonopah?

DP: Yes. At times I'd have to go to Bishop and get a motel room just to have peace and quiet. After being up at the mine for a whole week, I would have nothing but a stream of people bothering me. I never had to take any turquoise on the road to sell.

RM: They beat a path to your door instead.

DP: And some of them I've never seen before or since, and have no idea how they got hold of me.

RM: How did you deal with them? Did you set a price, or did you dicker with them?

DP: There was never any dickering on my part; everything was set at an exact price to everybody. Because invariably people will get together and discuss what they bought from who, and what they paid. And if you changed your prices, somebody would come back and say, "Well, you sold so-and-so at such-and-such a price and you charged me more. How come?" By establishing a set price, I never had any complaints on the grade of the turquoise that I sold them, I never had any complaints on the price, and it worked out - I think - much better that way.

RM: Could you say a little bit about some of the turquoise mines in the vicinity of Tonopah?

DP: Well, you have one of the oldest, that is known world-wide, and that is Lone Mountain That was discovered by Lee Hand and worked by Rocky Wilson and his father from 1928 or so on. It has produced some of the finest in the world.

RM: Where is that mine on Lone Mountain? Is it on the Tonopah side of Lone Mountain, or on the other side?

DP: Well [chuckles] I don't know how you would describe that, because actually . . . It would probably be almost on the other side, because when you get to the mine you're looking out towards the valleys that encompass Silver Peak.

RM: Is it up high?

DP: No. In fact, considering that you go down, and then you go up, I think that it might even be considered slightly lower than Tonopah itself.

RM: Are there extensive workings there?

DP: Well, it was worked as an incline shaft with underground drifts, in all those years, but when Winfield took over he made an open pit out of it. He worked it down to a depth of about 100 feet, then before he sold it the first time, he drove a drift almost north from the bottom of the pit. Later on they took that floor of the pit down another 60 feet to where that drift looked like it was a little cave dweller sitting up there. Then the present owners turned around and filled part of the pit back in and covered up the drift, even, now. There was some fine turquoise in that drift, yet there was only one person who ever even went underground and worked that, and that was Roger Nicely. He took out some beautiful sea foam nuggets. The present owners have shut it down, because it got quite dangerous - the mine inspector really shut them down - and the pit ran out at bottom; they have never gone underground to work anything. Unless a person knew that that drift was there, you wouldn't even see it.

RM: Do you have to hand-sort all of the muck with turquoise?

DP: Yes. Of course, if you see turquoise . . . For instance, a lot of guys would get a Cat and they would sock the rippers clear down - maybe 2-1/2 feet - and then they'd back up and drop the

blade and maybe push \$1,000 worth of turquoise right over the dump and never even know it. We mined very selectively. Sometimes we would start up the Cat and only drop the rippers 6 inches, and barely scratch, and here would be turquoise showing. We'd shut down and we'd work the whole day just mining pieces.

But regardless of how carefully you mine, when you have a black shale that's damp or wet and mud in there, a lot of it gets coated and you never know the turquoise is there unless you have water to wash it. That's why a lot of the dumps of these properties that were good properties still contain a lot of turquoise. All you have to do is put in a washing plant, with a trommel and some water, and then once you wash the coating and everything off, you have it on a belt and just have pickers picking up the turquoise off the belt.

CHAPTER THREE

RM: Don, what other turquoise mines are you familiar with in the vicinity of Tonopah?

DP: In Tonopah itself you have the one mine over out of Columbus Marsh –the Ajax. It was a large property, primarily in greens and blue-greens, that produced quite a bit. And there's another property that is close to the Ajax. You also had a property in Candelaria that Johnny Martin owned, and then the property that's out here at Royston has probably produced as much or more turquoise than most combined properties in the state of Nevada. Even during World War II Royston had 18 sets of leasers on that one property. It's produced some exceptionally fine turquoise.

RM: Wow, where is Royston?

DP: Royston is going out on the Anaconda Road, and then you would swing off to your left and go into Royston . .

RM: It's in the Monte Cristo?

DP: In the Monte Cristo Range. Then the other property that's on down the Poleline Road going towards Gabbs is called the Easter Blue - originally - or Blue Gem. That property at one time was owned by my wife's grandfather, Cirac, and there was a shooting over it . . . That has produced some beautiful turquoise, and it's all in quartzite, so it will not cobb clean. Every piece that's in a seam of quartzite must be sawed out. But with the hardness of the quartzite, the quartzite takes as beautiful a polish as the turquoise itself. When they contrast the two, I think the top-quality Easter Blue is one of the finest turquoise I have ever seen. It's also produced quite a lot of nuggets. Then you have a property at Pilot Mountain, which is on the backside of Mina, that has produced an awful lot of turquoise, and other properties in the Mina area.

But the biggest group of turquoise mines - and this is in relation to the inland seas and how the oceans receded - seem to be centered in Lander County, Nevada. Well, you have some around Eureka and you have some around Elko - in those 2 counties - but in Lander County itself, you have a tremendous amount of turquoise in Tenabo, in Crescent Valley, in Red Mountain, in Carico Lake and the Fox mine has produced tons of turquoise. The man has, I don't know, 500,000 pounds of low-grade treating rock stored in warehouses there now.

The Edgars were the premier turquoise miners in that country all their life - they knew and had every property. They always thought, 'Well, it's so simple to go out and get another property.' But when the boom hit and all these properties were taken up, all of a sudden they found it hard, themselves, to come up with a property that would produce anything of quality. Because if you have a property that will produce 8 to 10 percent of the total output in high-grade turquoise, you have an exceptional property.

We graded in 5 grades: gem quality, high-grade, medium-grade, low-grade, and chalk. And the only grades that I would consider cutting or fooling with were the top 2 grades. What

the leasers and people did with the other, lower, grades, I could care less. I didn't want to get involved in any stabilized or treated gem; just nothing but high-grade.

RM: Do you think the stabilization of turquoise hurt the market?

DP: No, because, as I said before, there was never enough to go around, and the demand was there, so they had to come up with a stabilized turquoise to meet the demand. But knowledgeable people still demand high-grade natural; that's your only real top quality. There have been some very good treating processes that have come up, and they've managed to take a low-grade that had no value or appearance whatsoever, and turn it into a useful turquoise for the public who could only afford a small amount for jewelry or things like that. But the knowledgeable buyer who loves turquoise as a beautiful stone and can afford to pay for it, wants high-grade spider web or matrix-type stones.

RM: Yes. What did you do after the turquoise mine?

DP: Even during that time I acquired what I felt were good mining properties that would be interesting to a major mining company. And I would do a certain amount of work [on them], but primarily would then interest somebody to either lease them or buy them or take them on because of the money required to develop them. I have dealt, off and on, in mining properties myself.

RM: Do you want to talk about some of the properties that you've dealt with?

DP: Well, I had quite a few properties, but finally - in my [chuckles] later years - I've decided to dispose of quite a few of them. I still have a large property in Pioche, and I have my turquoise mine, and I have another property down in San Diego County, close to the Mexican border, that is still a good property.

RM: Do you have any in the Tonopah area?

DP: No. I have had properties in the Tonopah area and outside the Tonopah area, but the majority I had I have disposed of.

RM: What is the Pioche property?

DP: Well, the Pioche property is a past producer in the heart of the Pioche district that was a gold, silver, lead property. It was worked from 1937 to 1948 and has a recorded production of \$1 million. And it's in quartzites. It's silicious sand carbonate ore - not sulfides - and it's strictly gold, silver, and lead. It's a very good property and it has a lot ahead of it still that has hardly been scratched.

RM: What about the San Diego property?

DP: The San Diego property is a gold, silver, lead, zinc property that was found by a man who was my partner at the age of 17; he's now 84. He worked that property by hand for 50 years of his life. He never presented it to anybody or anything; it was his life's work and dream, and it should be drilled and put into production, really.

RM: Were you involved in any of the properties in Round Mountain area?

DP: No. The only property out of the Round Mountain area was the big property up in Ophir Canyon that Jimmy Larson and I had for 17 years. And we did an awful lot of work on that. The English were in there during the 1860s and '70s. They had a mill in there, and it was one of the bigger producers in all of the Toiyabe Range. The English were in Kingston Canyon, Park Canyon, and Ophir Canyon, and they had mills in every one of those canyons. But of all of the production and everything that was known and recorded, Ophir had by far the largest of any property in that range, which goes from Peavine clear into Austin.

RM: Have you been involved with any properties in Tonopah over the years?

DP: Not really right in the heart of Tonopah. I had 3 patented claims out in Lone Mountain area that I have since sold. In the heart of Tonopah itself I had some claims, but other than that I wasn't involved in the actual heyday or the mining of any of the properties. That all happened before my arriving in Tonopah.

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