

An Interview with
NORINE ROOKER

An Oral History conducted and edited by
Robert D. McCracken

Nye County Town History Project
Nye County, Nevada
Tonopah
1987

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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.

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 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 same 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 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 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 D. McCracken interviewing Norine Rooker at her home in the Ash Meadows, Nevada - April 1, 1987.

CHAPTER ONE

Robert McCracken: Norine, where were you born and when?

Norine Beatrice Rooker: August 16, 1912. In Batesville, Arkansas.

M: Who were your parents? What were their name?

R: Mary Minard Jordan and Marion Jordan.

M: Did you go to school in Batesville, Arkansas?

R: I graduated from high school there.

M: When and why did you come out west? Did you come straight to Vegas from Arkansas?

R: Oh, no. I went to Chicago first. I lived in Chicago maybe 2 or 3 years. God, I've got to think back to remember all this stuff. After Chicago I lived in St. Louis, Missouri, and then I came west. I went to L.A. for a while; I didn't live there very long, and I was on my way back home, back to Chicago, and stopped off in Las Vegas. In fact, people that I had met in L.A. told me to be sure to see Las Vegas. That's when Vegas started growing.

M: Do you know about what year that was? Was it before the war, before 1941?

R: No, it was after the war. I can't remember exactly what year. Maybe it is about that time because I was Rodeo Queen in Vegas in '48.

M: Is that right! For Helldorado?

R: Yes, I had one great horse. He was the best cutting horse that you ever saw. He was black, he was quick, and he really turned. You almost could breathe the right way and he would turn that way. He was terrific. It was him that did it, not me. It was him that did it. He really did. He was great.

M: What did you do in Las Vegas?

R: Well, I was married, and then we were divorced, and then I worked at the hotels. I worked as hostess, cashier, and that sort of thing. I worked at the El Rancho when it was the only one on the Strip.

M: Is that right! That is really interesting. Do you have any interesting stories to tell about that?

R: Well, I had an interesting life, but offhand I don't know. I went from there to the Last Frontier. I was food checker. And then I worked in their office, and then--they knew I was a horsewoman. Well I don't know how they knew that; I can't remember how, but they gave me a lease on the stables.

M: You ran the stables at the Last Frontier?

R: Yes, and I had never driven a 4-up or a 6-up before. Do you know what that is?

M: No.

R: That many horses at once in front of your stagecoach. I'd never done it before. Isn't that something! I think it's something from my ancestors or my other life; do you believe in that?

M: I don't know.

R: I don't either. It seems like it.

M: But you just took right to it.

R: Oh yes. I always had fellows working for me, and a couple of them were trying to get the 4-ups ready to take a bunch of guests in the stagecoach down Fifth Street to Fremont, and then down Fremont and back out there. Oh, the people from the big cities, they loved that.

M: And this was at the Frontier?

R: Yes. So one day these couple of cowboys were messing up. I could see that they could spill the whole bunch of them and maybe get somebody hurt. So I said, "Just get down and let me do it." And I'd never done it in my life. Can you imagine that.

M: Took a lot of nerve.

R: I wasn't scared of anything in those days. Everything was just beautiful and wonderful and I guess I caught on to it, you know. And so from then on I'd drive them to town, down Fremont and back out.

M: What year was it you rode your horse out here to Ash Meadows? Somebody said you rode out here on horseback.

R: Oh yes. That was the year 1945.

M: Can you tell me about that and how you happened to come out here?

R: I'd have to think about that. Why? I don't even know why. This other woman and I, Dolly Ruth Fieldler, she's dead now, and...oh, a 13-year-old girl, Jeannie Favinger, from Vegas.

M: How did you come out? Did you come over to Pahrump first?

R: Yes, we did care through Pahrump, yes.

M: Did you go over Mountain Springs Pass and come across Pahrump?

R: Yes. There was one little store there; it was just a little shack of a store. Pop Buol ran it. We stopped there and picked up sandwiches and things. He didn't have a lot of things. We stopped there and we got acquainted with him, and then we came on over here. There wasn't anything here then.

M: Did you follow roads or trails or what?

R: Trails. Well somebody told us the general directions, I think.

M: Did you carry your bedroll with you and everything? Water?

R: Yes. Water and everything. Each one of us got a Boy Scout kit. That way it's all packed tight. That way we had enough so that we could build a little bonfire and cook our food. Somebody asked me, "Where did you get the Boy Scout kits?" I said, "Oh, we stole them from the Boy Scouts; where did you think we got them!" I think we went down to the Salvation Army or someplace where you could buy them. And we took Bisquick along, where we could stir it up and make biscuits and fry them 2:1 the pan.

M: What made you pick Ash Meadows?

R: I'm not really sure. No, I don't think that I knew anybody that was out here or anything. I'm not sure of that.

M: What was here then?

R: Nothing.

M: Were there any people living here or anything?

R: Yes. There were some people. Let me see; I made some notes here. I can't read my own writing. Let me see. Dick Bell was here. All I know about him is he was an old-timer, and he lived out south, that way. Did anybody show you where a big house burned, the old Bradford place down there, burned 2 years ago?

M: I think so.

R: Right across there is where Dick Bell lived.

M: How long had he been here?

R: Dick had been here I guess a long time. I wish John was awake. Lovell. Let me see, who was Lovell. Carpenters, not the older ones. Guy Penell, he had 40 acres up in the north end. And Winsus sold to Foxes. Winsus bought up all this stuff around here, and then they sold to Fox. Then the country changed because they were high-hat and they were bigger than everybody, and that kind of stuff. The Foxes weren't down-to-earth people!

M: Did they have the big ranch here then or what?

R: Well they bought a lot of the smaller ones, but they never farmed here.

M: When was it that the people sold to the Foxes?

R: I'd have to get my husband, if I can get him out of bed. He wasn't feeling very good. Did I tell you about Bloody Gulch?

M: No. Tell me about that. Where was that?

R: Well, that was the old bootleg joint. It's down here just, not very far, about maybe 4 or 5 miles. There's 2 different ways to get in there. We haven't been down there for many years, but it was quite interesting. If you know the old road like we know it, you go down there, and it's a kind of drop-off, but then there's a lot of springs down there. And it was an old hideout for the bootleg joint. There were a lot of bottles and things down there.

M: Is that right! When? Back in the 20s and 30s during Prohibition?

R: Oh yes.

M: Were there ever people living there while you were here?

R: No, but we found out about it so we went down there to see what it was all about. It was quite interesting, you know. But it's a hideout and you don't know it's there until you kind of drop down in there. It's, well, a gulch, and there's springs down there. It would be interesting some day if you come down and we could go down there.

M: Yes.

R: I don't know how the roads are now. I haven't been off this place in so long I don't know. That's what I say, I've lived in the cities, and lived in Las Vegas, and I don't know how I ended up here in the middle of the boondocks. But I love it.

M: When did you move here?

R: Let's see, I was Rodeo Queen in '48. I believe it was the next year or so, '49 or '50.

M: You came here before Pete Peterson, then?

R: Yes. Where he lived later was vacant.

M: How did people make a living here then?

R: There weren't that many people here so I don't know. Let me see, who was here. Different times, different people lived here. Now the pupfish are going to take over.

M: What do you think of the pupfish thing?

R: Well, I think it's stupid. What the hell do they want to save the whole country for the damn pupfish when you can't hardly see them they are so small. You want me to give you my opinion. [laughs] Oh boy. It's really ridiculous, you know, but I don't give a damn. If they want to buy my property, they can have it.

M: You are willing to sell out?

R: Yes, I'm going to sell to them.

M: Where will you move to?

R: Well, we have 240 acres at the south end of Pahrump, so we're going to move onto that. They told us that they will move our home. I'll buy a new one, you know. And they said they'll put on our electricity and drill a well for us. Imagine that! Well, are asked \$1,000 an acre so that would be \$200,000. You'd sell too, wouldn't you?

M: Yes, I think I would. That's a good deal.

R: I've lived through all of the things that went on in this country, and the people that came and went, and it's really a big headache. You've got a lot of nice people in Pahrump so why not move over there and live our old age and the rest of it- So over there and live it up. I mean, just neighborly and so forth. Do you know Tim Hafen?

M: Yes.

R: OK. Our 240 acres is just east of him, starting about, I believe about a half a mile east of him, and it goes on east 240 acres.

M: That's worth a goodly price right now.

R: Well, we could still sell a lot of it and have plenty to live on. So we'll go down there and fix the spot and then start selling off some of it if we need the money. I don't have any kids except these dogs to leave it to. And I don't know who I could trust to take care of them and take care of what they would own if I left it to them. Really, I tried people out and tried people out, and it seems like there's no such a thing as a true friend anymore, I don't believe. And money will buy them out anytime.

And I like people for people. I'd like them to be like Mama and Papa were, you know. They were honest, and they believed in God, and they believed in being honest, and they believed in the Bible, and they went, we went to church all the time. We were raised in the Episcopal church. It wasn't like all of our life was the church, but we were raised right.

M: Do you have brothers and sisters?

R: I have one brother. He lives in Arkansas. He owns a theater down in Fort Smith. And I had a brother killed in the war; one of those diver planes got him. He was the first boy, and then the second one is down there, and then May Velma's gone. My oldest sister, Helen, is alive, and me.

M: So you're, what, 70...74?

R: Yes, I'm getting there. Or I got there, I guess. I've got a sister right out of Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Her husband was in the service and retired from the service. I'm not sure what her capacity was. She did a lot of work alone so that she could be close to him when he was overseas and everything. So she had a lot of experiences.

M: What did you think when you rode into this valley the first time?

R: Oh, it was real interesting. I mean I always loved the country. It was very interesting, although I don't see how.

M: What did you find interesting?

R: Damned if I know. [laughs] I was just full of vinegar, and I just thought it was just something to do, and we saw the water holes. We've a lot of springs here; have you seen them?

M: Yes, I have.

R: Now they want to fence them off so that people can't go swimming, people can't do this. And they're protecting wild animals, but why in the hell they allow these licenses to kill. Hell,

they are always shooting down there. They give them licenses to go out there and shoot. Nobody's out here to see what they're shooting or what they are fishing for. So one of it makes sense. They contradict themselves. Hey, I'm for saving animals because I'm an animal lover, but I believe in fishing if you are going to use them and don't waste them, but why save these little pupfish. They are not any good for anything. We've got them here in our water. We have to strain them out. To keep them from coming through our pipes. Nobody comes up to see them. So we don't bother them, and they don't bother us. It's ridiculous. They've got some other reason for it, but I haven't figured out what it is yet. Have you?

M: No I haven't.

R: Me, either, because they want our property awful bad. Two-hundred-thousand wouldn't be bad to sell the property. We could buy a lot of dog food, couldn't we baby. This one's blind.

M: He was born that way?

R: No. She just went blind, but she stays with me. And I'll tell you something, she keeps track of me.

M: I noticed her ear. Boy she's really listening with her ears

R: She says that I know my Mama, and I know that my Mama takes care of me. Yes, that's Mama's baby. I can say Buffy, and she can be across the room, and she'll find me in a hurry. Sweet little baby; Mammy takes special care of her. And that's my Squirt right there.

M: That's Squirt.

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