

An Interview With  
RAY SHARP

An Oral History Produced by  
Robert D. McCracken

Nye County Town History Project  
Nye County, Nevada  
Tonopah  
2010



Ray Sharp  
2009

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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 unwavering 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 unwavering 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. Kimberley Dickey provided considerable assistance in transcribing many of the oral histories; Jean Charney, Julie Lancaster, and Darlene Morse also transcribed a number of interviews. Proofreading, editing, and indexing were provided at various times by Marilyn Anderson, Joni Eastley, 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. Long-time Pahrump resident Harry Ford, founder and director of the Pahrump Valley Museum, served as a consultant throughout the project; his participation was essential. Much deserved thanks are extended to all these persons.

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—Robert D. McCracken  
2010

## 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  
2010



This is Robert McCracken talking to Ray Sharp at his home in Pahrump, Nevada, November 11, 2009. Mr. Sharp is joined by his sisters Imogene, Leona, and Laverne Sharp.

## CHAPTER ONE

RM: Ray, why don't you tell me your name as it reads on your birth certificate.

RS: Ray Johnson Sharp.

RM: When and where were you born?

RS: Schurz, Nevada, December 1, 1943.

RM: And what was your mother's name?

RS: Helen Stewart.

RM: And when she was born, and where?

IS: Lida, Nevada, January 15, 1912, I think.

RM: And she was full-blood Shoshone, wasn't she? And your father was. . . . ?

RS: Louis Jefferson Sharp.

RM: And when and where was he born?

RS: Far as I remember, Ash Meadows.

RM: What is your earliest memory of Pahrump?

RS: Playing.

RM: What kind of games did you play as a kid?

RS: Tag.

RM: Where did you first live in Pahrump?

RS: Over here—at Manse.

RM: What stands out in your mind about the Manse Ranch?

RS: [Laughs] I don't know. We used to grow a garden—watermelons, beans, cantaloupe, and things like that.

RM: Was the garden mainly your father's responsibility or your mother's?

RS: All of us.

RM: Could you describe your house that you lived in across from the Manse Ranch?

RS: It had tan boards with a wood stove. I'd say it was 10 by 12 or something like that. There were four people and a regular-sized bed.

RM: A regular-sized bed; and that pretty well filled the room?

RS: On one side, yes.

RM: Where did you all sleep?

IS: In single beds.

RS: And later on we had a bunk bed—my uncle and my dad built it.

RM: How many kids were there, then?

IS: Fred and myself, Ray, and Ruth.

RS: So the whole family lived in that cabin, then.

IS: Oh, I forgot Grace. Up a ways from where we stayed, my dad's sister and her husband and kids lived there.

RM: And what was her name?

IS: Grace Scott Brown. Her husband was Ernie Brown.

RM: And she was your dad's sister so she wouldn't have been Paiute. Was her husband Paiute?

IS: He was Paiute and something else; some other kind of Indian.

RM: Did your dad always have a car?

RS: Yes. Ford, a green one. I remember one time we were taking that road and Dad hit a bump. He thought he left his shotgun on lock. When it went off, it went kaboom. It missed the tire by about that much.

RM: Oh, my gosh. Lucky it didn't hit one of you.

RS: No, it was on the seat in the back. Ever since then, he put it on the back seat with no shells in it.

RM: And then you started school in the little red schoolhouse—is that right? What did you think when you first went down there?

RS: It was all right, most of the time.

RM: Did you like school?

RS: No, I didn't. Couldn't wait till Friday; we'd get apples.

RM: Who provided the apples?

IS: There was somebody that came around and sold them, or gave them away.

RS: They gave us a big box. All the kids had one.

RM: And then your older brother, Fred, would drive all you kids as well as the other kids in the area to school.

IS: My mom drove us to school, too, later.

RS: It was in a Chevy. It had three seats—tip the front seat forward and people could get back in there—like a Suburban is now. Three kids sat in there, two in there, and four in the back and three in the front—off to school we went.

RM: It didn't take long to get down there, did it?

RS: No.

RM: But it was a dirt road, right?

RS: Yes, but the county kept it maintained—pretty smooth.

RM: Did you go to school there all eight years?

RS: No, to sixth grade, I think it was. I went to school where they've got the grade school now.

RM: Oh, by then the red school came to an end?

RS: Yes. They built that big school up there.

RM: How would you compare the red school with the new school?

RS: The first room was for grades one through three and the second room, down here, was the office for the principal, and the next room down was for the fourth and fifth grade and the next room down was for the sixth and seventh and eighth grade.

RM: Did you go into Vegas after that to finish up school?

RS: Yes, the same school that she went to. I went to Rancho High School for three years until I got in a fight and they kicked me out of school. These white boys, kids, wouldn't leave me alone.

RM: What would they do to you? Were they mean, or what?

RS: Yes—take my book and throw it up against the wall; and I'd take it out on them.

RM: Were you pretty tough?

RS: I hold my ground. [Laughter]

RM: Were there fights in this school, too?

RS: Yes. The teacher never knew about it. This kid came around the corner, tripped me. Came around the corner with a two-by-four and hit him.

RM: You got him with a two-by-four?

RS: I had to. Anything anybody tries. . . .

RM: What about fighting at Rancho? Was there a lot of it?

RS: Well, the PE teacher took us upstairs in this room that had floor mats on the floor and (inaudible) boxing. . . .

RM: And that's how you'd settle it?

RS: Yes. A kid hit me on the chin (inaudible). I hit him three times where it hurts the most. That was that. After that, they picked their spots.

RM: What do you mean, they picked their spots?

RS: Where they could get me; punch me out. End of the school year, we would get yearbooks; people would write on them. This one kid took my yearbook and threw it against the wall—I spent \$8 for that yearbook. I broke his nose. I got suspended for two weeks after that.

RM: Did you have trouble there because you were Indian?

RS: That's what it was, probably. My friend helped me out; he was a twelfth grader and I was starting eleventh grade. And he cut school. We'd go to Vegas Village and have lunch. This kid and his buddies—four of them—would throw apples and whatever they had, bananas, at us. One hit my friend on the head. I saw the apple coming and I just took one step, hit him like that, and he went across the street and he went down on the ground—four times, until he said stop. That's my friend, you know.

RM: And what did you do after you left school?

RS: When they kicked me out of school? I went to work with my dad here on Johnny Harrell's ranch.

RM: Tell me about his ranch; and what were you doing there?

RS: Well, he and my father were 'dozing down there and he put me to work with him. We leveled all that. He took the high spots out with the 'dozer. I took the land plane [a piece of farm equipment for leveling land], after he got it done with the 'dozer, to put the ramping back on the tractor, the Cat, and dug around.

RM: Was he leveling to grow cotton?

RS: No, the first crop was barley, wheat, and oats. Then alfalfa came behind it. The bottom two fields had alfalfa and on top here we had Bermuda grass. It grew like that.

RM: Two-and-a-half feet high?

RS: Yes. We cut it and baled it and they hauled it off to town.

RM: Where were they getting their water?

RS: They had two wells.

RM: Good wells? How many acres were they farming?

RS: I think it was 300, all told. We started growing sod for Vegas and whoever wanted to buy some.

RM: How long did you work there?

RS: From '61 to the end of '68. A friend of mine got me a job up at Mountain Pass.

RM: They were mining rare earth, weren't they? And you started there in. . . . ?

RS: I started in March of 1969.

RM: What were they paying you for the farm up here?

RS: I got up to \$1.35 an hour.

RM: And then, what was your starting pay out at Mountain Pass?

RS: It was \$2.50.

RM: A big jump.

RS: Yes. [Laughs] Within about a year I was making almost \$3.50. Each year, they raised it.

RM: What was your job there?

RS: When I first started there, I was a laborer, picking up anything and cleaning stuff up.

RM: With a shovel?

RS: Yes, load a wheelbarrow, dump it over there.

RM: Were they mining a lot of ore there at this time?

RS: They were just starting in.

RM: So you were there at the very beginning of that mine?

RS: No. The mine was over there and they moved it to where it is now. They moved the mine pit—they got better ore over there. When I got to work, the road went down and down. . . .

RM: Oh, it was an open pit—the road would circle around. How many men were they working there when you started?

RS: I'd say 100.

RM: Where were they living?

RS: In Las Vegas and everywhere. Then they built a place where you can park your trailer. They charged \$15 a month. I moved up there in '70.

RM: Where did you live before that?

RS: I rented a house over in Goodsprings. They called it a sugar shack. [Laughs]

RM: Did you like living in Goodsprings?

RS: Oh, it was all right. About 50, 60 people then.

RM: How many trailers did they have in the place up at Mountain Springs?

RS: I think about 100. They had the lower camp, upper camp, middle camp, end of camp.

RM: Did it turn out to be a big pit?

RS: It's a big old pit.

RM: How long did you work there?

RS: I worked there 35 years.

RM: Did you live in the trailer up there the whole time?

RS: Yes. Three years before that I lived in Sandy Valley because they . . . Chillicothe Valley. They were going to build . . . part of the camp had good metal, good rare earth, and out the camp went. Everybody moved it down.

RM: How did you get there from Sandy Valley—did you go to Goodsprings?

RS: Goodsprings and Jean.

RM: So it made it longer than when you were living in Goodsprings.

RS: Yes, another 12 miles.

RM: When you first started out there, what was happening at Jean? Were those two casinos there?

RS: Yes, The Landing and the Gold Strike. In fact, Whiskey Pete's had a little casino there.

RM: And that was all that was there, right?

RS: It was a gas station and the casinos.

RM: How big was Whiskey Pete's, then? It was a small little place, wasn't it?

RS: It was a small place, yes. Now it's big; it grew.

RM: When they tore down the trailer court up there, there weren't that many people living at Mountain Pass?

RS: No. A security guard; I reckon they had to keep one guy on duty. They had four security guards; you had to go through the gate.

RM: And the mine operated all the 35 years that you were there? How did they get their ore out of there?

RS: They had a mill right there.

RM: Did they truck it out of there to Vegas?

RS: No, the trucks came and picked it up and would deliver it to whoever bought it—back East somewhere or wherever.

RM: When they put a ton of rock in the mill from the pit, how much did they get out? How much did they ship?

RS: Oh, about 150 pounds.

RM: And it's all these different elements, right?

RS: Right. It goes through the mill and all this stuff separates. The good stuff goes one way and the bad stuff goes the other.

RM: Where do they get their water for the mill?

RS: I think from about six, seven miles down the hill—they had it pumped up there. They had four big water tanks.

RM: What are some of the other jobs you had there? You said you started off as a laborer.

RS: Then I worked in the chemical plant. I'd separate the good stuff from the bad stuff—the same way they'd do in the mill. The good stuff goes to the bottom; the bad stuff floats on the top. You've got jacklegs on the outside; it goes up and down, depending on how high you want it in each cell. Some of them are a little higher than the other.



RM: One of the things they're producing there is lithium, right?

RS: Librium.

RM: Do you know about the other things that make up rare earth?

RS: There's all kinds—cerium, molybdenum, and lanthanum—that's the stuff some of the oil companies buy and they use it for a filter for oil. They use some of the cerium for a rubbing compound. You can put it on your car and rub it on to make it smoother, make it shine more.

RM: So you worked there 35 years and then retired. And then you came back to . . . ?

RS: Good old Pahrump. Been here ever since.

RM: What year did you retire?

RS: In 2005, 2004, somewhere in there.

RM: What would you like to say about the traditional Paiute way of life and what has survived of it and everything?

RS: Oh, I don't know. It's been good to me.

RM: Do you go pine-nutting at all?

RS: I used to.

RM: Do you do hunting or anything like that?

RS: No. I can't walk too far. I used to have a lot of fun doing that.

RM: Can you talk about powwows or anything like that?

RS: We've got one that's coming up here at the end of November.

RM: What does a powwow consist of?

RS: They do all kinds of dances.

RM: Can anybody go to it?

RS: Anybody can go.

RM: But it's mainly Paiutes putting it on or is it other tribes, too?

RS: Other tribes, too—Sioux, Cherokee. . . .

RM: Can you talk any about how Elmer Bowman helped your dad get the homestead?

RS: We had to move because of the interstate going through where we were staying. We had to take up our garden and all.

RM: So that's when he helped you get the homestead? Were there any other Indian people in the valley who got homesteads out of that program? No? Do you have any recollections of Annie Beck or any of the Paiute people who were living in the community at the time? Do you have any of your own recollections?

RS: Annie and Sarah lived across the way from where my uncle used to live. And my other uncle lived on the creek down there.

RM: How do you see the future of Pahrump and the role that the Paiute people will play in the future of Pahrump?

RS: I don't know. Good question.

RM: Are there many Paiutes left here?

RS: There's a few.

RM: How do you feel about getting tribal recognition for the Pahrump people?

RS: We tried that. They wouldn't do it because we don't live on a reservation.

RM: When did they last try? Do you remember?

IS: My nephew Anthony Frank, Johnny Frank's son, tried. My son was in the hospital and he needed help and I was trying to get him some help through the Indian Health Service. He tried to talk to the people, trying to get some help for him. And they refused to see him. He passed away.

RS: Oh, that's a nice picture. This was your son—what was his name?

IS: Edwardio. I have another son left—Richard John Hill.

RM: Do you have any children, Ray?

RS: I have one, Aisha Ann Sharp.; she's somewhere in Oregon. I had a son but he passed away from muscular dystrophy.

RM: Oh, how awful.

RS: His body'd straightened up and he could walk. God's with him, you know? He would get on the floor and roll back and forth and he got mad—his whole body just tightened up. Up he came and it went away; down he went.

RM: So you had two children. I didn't ask you how many children you had, Imogene.

IS: Two. I've got three grandchildren.

RM: Do they live here?

IS: Two of them do; the other one's in Las Vegas.

Leona: One of the girls lives in Las Vegas. She just turned 13. She lives with her mother.

RM: What's her name?

Leona: Alyssa Jordan Hill.

RS: Known as "Cowgirl."

RM: Is there anything else that we should be talking about, Ray?

RS: Before I retired from there, I got to drive one of those big trucks. Those tires were. . . .

IS: That's like climbing on top of the house.

RS: The first few times I went to work, I told the Lord, "Keep a hand on my big truck." Going down that hill. . . .

IS: It could tip over.

RS: One time the drive shaft broke in that truck—out of the pit, though; not down in the hole. Well, coming out of the pit, there's something snapping. So the truck came back and I made it coast right into the bank to keep from going back down the hill over the bank.

RM: That was quick thinking because you couldn't hold it with the drive shaft broken.

RS: No, because the air was bleeding so fast. So they took the truck to the shop and fixed that. They fixed the air lines on that truck and got everything where it worked—air conditioning and all that stuff. After that, it didn't bother me. I had more courage after that because I knew what to do next time it happened.

RM: How long did you drive a truck there?

RS: About a year and a half. I said, "Before I quit here, I'm going to be driving those big trucks." I did. I was happy, too.

RM: Did you like working in the lab there?

RS: The chemical plant there, yes. They had big rows of tanks from there to there. Like I was saying, they had jacklegs on the outside where you'd adjust the flow. The more stuff you want in it, you raise the jackleg up to bring it up. Then you put the probe in—a pipe about that big—to see how much stuff you've got in there. If you need a little more, you raise it up a little more.

RM: Do you have any memories of Pop Buol?

RS: I remember going over there and getting the apricots and grapes—big grapes. The white ones.

IS: Purple and red.

RM: Do you have any recollections of Walt Williams?

RS: I worked for him for three months driving a cotton-picker. I worked in the cotton gin after that.

IS: He used to race.

RS: We'd get our cars all souped up real good and make a quarter-mile mark where the power company is in the middle of town. We had one marked off out there, one down below Bowman's and we had another one towards Blosser's.

IS: We only had one sheriff.

RM: Who was the sheriff at this time?

RS: Larry Bowman. If we saw him coming this way, we'd all go the other way.

RM: We forgot to mention Steve Brown. What would you like to say?

RS: He's my uncle.

IS: He used to work for the store, helping Fred Harris stock the shelves at the Pahrump Trading Post.

RM: What do you recall about the store and its owner?

RS: They're good people, Fred and his son Jimmy. I don't know where they are now.

RM: And those were Steve Brown's photos? Who would they belong to now?

RS: They're ours now.

IS: They're in the museum; a friend did that for us.

RS: Wayne Maples or something like that.

IS: And Harry Ford.

RM: He copied them? Okay. Thanks so much for talking to me.

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Mountain Pass, California mining job,  
ranch work  
retirement in Pahrump  
in Sandy Valley, Nevada / California  
schools  
and truck driving hazards*  
Sharp, Ruth (Ray Sharp's sister  
Shoshone Indians  
Stewart, Helen (Ray Sharp's mother),

T  
truck driving hazards

W  
water,  
Williams, Walt,