

An Interview With
BILL
TOMANY

An Oral History produced by
Robert D. McCracken

Nye County Town History Project
Nye County, Nevada
Tonopah
2011

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Nye County Commissioners
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CONTENTS

[Preface](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Index ..](#)

PREFACE

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

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

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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

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

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—Robert D. McCracken

2011

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—RDM
2011

Robert McCracken interviewing Bill Tomany at his home in Summerland in the Las Vegas area May 4, 2010.

CHAPTER ONE

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

WT: William Donald Tomany.

RM: When and where were you born?

WT: I was born January 14, 1944, in Tonopah, Nevada.

RM: Can you tell me your mother's name?

WT: Certainly. Her name was Ann Banovich and then she became Ann Banovich Tomany. She was born on February the 14th, I don't know the year, in Tonopah, Nevada.

RM: What was her mother's name?

WT: Miruna Banovich. That is Serbian.

RM: Do you know when she was born?

WT: No. She was born in Montenegro and came to the United States and married my grandfather and they settled in Tonopah.

RM: And could you tell me what your father's name was?

WT: Certainly. Donald Andrew Tomany. He was born on May the 3rd, I don't know the year, in Antigo, Wisconsin.

RM: How did he end up in Tonopah?

WT: He actually ended up in Silver Peak, at the Mary Mine. He and two or three of his buddies were recruited to play football at the University of Nevada and they put them to work in the mines for the summer to get them in shape. Only one of the four went on to actually go to school at the University of Nevada.

RM: So he just continued on with the mining game?

WT: Yes. Then he got into bartending, then he got into the gaming business, then he became a policeman. Then the sheriff in Tonopah, George Barra, and his undersheriff were tragically

killed north of Beatty in a head-on collision with a car from California. The sheriff and the undersheriff were both killed and eight people in the other car were killed.

RM: What a horrible accident.

WT: My father was a deputy sheriff at that time and the Nye County Commissioners appointed him the Nye County Sheriff and then he had to run for election.

RM: What year was that accident; do you recall?

WT: It would have been about 1966 or 1967.

RM: What were some of the places that he worked before he became sheriff?

WT: He worked at the Mary Mine in Silver Peak, then he worked in a couple of the mines in Tonopah when they were still operating and he worked at the old Tonopah Club and at the Ace Club.

RM: Did you grow up in Tonopah?

WT: Yes, sir.

RM: Let's talk a little bit about your mother and her parents and her growing up. Years ago, I interviewed Kathleen "Kayo" Lydon and I learned some things about the story of your mother and her mother and the family. It is a wonderful story.

WT: Katherine Banovich Lydon was my aunt; she was my mother's sister. There were five children in the family. My grandfather Michael was a miner in Tonopah and he died at an early age of miner's consumption and left my grandmother widowed with five children. She thought that by taking them back to Yugoslavia, the family could help raise them. They got back to Montenegro and the children were very, very unhappy and they said, "Take us home, take us home to Tonopah," so they got back on a boat to Ellis Island. They lived with an uncle in Gary, Indiana, for one year until they had enough money to eventually get back to Tonopah.

RM: Could you name the children in order?

WT: Sure. William was the oldest; then it was Ann, my mother; then Katherine; then May, who died at 18 years old of . . . back then they called it a goiter. And the baby of the family was David Banovich.

RM: And when did your mother and father get married?

WT: My mother graduated from the University of Nevada in 1936 and she taught school at a one-room schoolhouse in Ursine, Nevada, over in Lincoln County, for one year and then she took a job in Silver Peak. They got married in probably 1940 or '41.

RM: And then you grew up in Tonopah. Are you the oldest child?

WT: I am the oldest of three; I am 66. One year and two weeks after I was born my brother was born, Edward Michael, who is now 65. Then Tasha, our baby sister, was born in 1947.

RM: Do they still live in Tonopah?

WT: My brother lives in Tonopah and my sister and her husband live in Reno.

RM: So you grew up almost from day one in Tonopah?

WT: Well, Silver Peak and Tonopah.

RM: What stands out in your mind about growing up in Tonopah?

WT: It was a marvelous small town to grow up in. Absolutely marvelous. There was always something for the children to do. We had a theater, we had stores, and we had activities all the time for the children.

RM: Did you like school?

WT: Oh yes.

RM: Who were some of your best friends in school?

WT: Probably two of my closest friends were John Roberts and Bill Cannon. John Roberts's mother was a schoolteacher and for years and years Bill's mother was the administrator for the Nye County School District. I can name every teacher I ever had. For kindergarten I had the now-deceased Irma Funk. For first grade I had Mrs. Jenny Curieux. For second grade I had Ann Banovich Tomany, my mother.

RM: What was that like, being in class with your mother?

WT: Well, right up to the day she died she said of the hundreds of students that she taught over the years, I was the very most difficult. She said I challenged her at every move. And she said everybody in our family knew that I was very, very bright and that I could sing and talk before I could or would walk. I could speak both English and Serbian.

RM: My goodness. And continuing with your teachers?

WT: For third grade I had the late, recently departed, Jesolyn Del Papa. For fourth grade I had Mrs. Betty Roberts, John Roberts's mother. For fifth grade I had Maude Bart. For sixth grade I had Jesolyn Del Papa again. And then for seventh grade I had Mrs. Eula Frazier and for eighth grade I had a gentleman by the name of Lee Watson. Then in high school I had numerous teachers over and over. And Jesolyn moved from the sixth grade back into the high school and I had her four more times in high school.

RM: The old high school was where the park is now, wasn't it?

WT: Yes. The elementary school and the high school.

RM: What things stand out in your mind about growing up in Tonopah? Any stories or incidents that you recall?

WT: Not really any stories or incidents, no. It was what I consider the ideal childhood.

RM: The theater was still going, wasn't it? Was it called the Miners Theater?

WT: It was called the Butler Theater. It was located almost directly across the street from what is now the ABarL clothing store, essentially where the Jim Butler Motel is located now.

RM: Was that a big thing, to go to the movies? Did you go to the movies a lot?

WT: Oh, yes. Everybody in town went to the movies.

RM: In your email to Joni Eastley you mentioned Nye County Sheriff Bill Thomas. Tell me as much as you know about him.

WT: Thomas was a longtime friend of the Banovich family. When we would call him "Sheriff," he insisted we call him "Bill," just Bill, and his wife's name was Margaret. In the Serbian culture Christmas is celebrated on January the seventh, and Margaret and Bill Thomas were always honored guests at the Banovich home.

RM: He never carried a gun, did he?

WT: No, he did not.

RM: Do you recall any stories about him?

WT: Just the typical police stories. He was the sheriff back in the days when Nye County had only one sheriff and all the little towns had a deputy sheriff. The only police car that belonged to Nye County was driven by Sheriff Bill Thomas. Tonopah had its own police force at that time, before they did away with the town police force.

RM: Who was the town policeman then?

WT: The chief of police was Robert Emmet Lydon, my uncle. His nickname was "Freck" because when he was a kid he had freckles.

RM: He was a pretty good boxer, wasn't he?

WT: Oh yes, he was. And he went through a horrible battle with alcohol in his early days.

RM: What else do you recall about Freck?

WT: Just that he was a marvelous human being and a marvelous cook and a recovering alcoholic that did very well; just an outstanding human being. The Lydon family came from Leadville, Colorado, to Tonopah to work in the mines.

RM: His wife, Kayo (Catherine), told me Freck had kid gloves that he carried in his back pocket. And if a prisoner or a guy he was arresting gave him any crap he'd reach back and put on the gloves and the guy knew that he was in big trouble then. [Laughs]

WT: Indeed, he was in deep trouble.

RM: Tell the story of when you were coming home one day and there had been a murder and you saw the car.

WT: Back in 1952 or 1953, the daytime deputy to the chief of police, Roy Maroon (his name is officially listed as William Maroon but he went by Roy), got overpowered at the Nye County courthouse, where the county jail was located. The prisoner got Roy's gun and shot him and stole the only town police car, an old 1952 or 1953 Plymouth station wagon. I happened to be walking up Main Street headed to my grandmother Banovich's house and the town police car whizzed by me. When I saw that it was not my uncle or Roy Maroon driving, I knew something terrible had happened. And right behind that town police car was Sheriff Thomas in his car. They eventually caught the man in Beatty, still driving that old station wagon. It was a little bit like the Bonnie and Clyde Barrow report; they killed the guy.

RM: Did the guy try to put up a fight?

WT: That I don't know.

RM: Did you do much hunting when you were a youth?

WT: Oh, yes; hunting and fishing all the time.

RM: Where did you fish?

WT: We went to all the creeks around central Nye County and to Walker Lake in Hawthorne.

RM: Where did you hunt and what did you hunt?

WT: We hunted deer all over central Nevada.

RM: What was your favorite place to go?

WT: There were several canyons where we liked to go deer hunting. We'd go fishing on Barley Creek not far from Belmont probably the most.

RM: Did you get out to Hawes Canyon at all? Was that good hunting?

WT: Oh yes. Hunting back in those days was always good.

RM: Did you hunt rabbits? I mean, they were all over the place back then.

WT: Oh yes, many. Cottontail rabbits, you bet.

RM: Did you ever do any prospecting?

WT: No. Mining was in my father's blood and in my brother's blood but the mining bug never bit me.

RM: When did you finish up at Tonopah High?

WT: I graduated from high school in 1962 and I was off to the University of Nevada. Three of the professors who had taught my mother when she went to school were still instructors and I had all three of them. And boy, was I under pressure to perform.

RM: Do you remember who they were?

WT: Oh yes. Dr. Harold Brown, Dr. Robert Gorell. . . . Dr. Gorell was an English professor and Dr. Brown was an education professor.

RM: What was your major?

WT: I started out to become a teacher and I knew that wasn't for me so I ended up getting into the engineering field, mechanical engineering.

RM: Did you graduate from there?

WT: No, I did not get my degree from the University of Nevada. Years later, after I was working at the Nevada Test Site, I did it with a long-distance program through the University of California, who was my employer.

I wanted to give you a little story about Joni Eastley and Dennis Eastley's home in Tonopah. I forget the actual name of the house. Was it the Raycraft house?

RM: Yes, it was the Raycraft house.

WT: It was lived in at one time by Judge Hatton and his wife. And growing up in Tonopah, I know of only four people that were ever allowed into his house to visit with the judge—myself, John Cavanaugh, Gary Robb, and Larry Bingham. There were four of us who were allowed to knock on the door and sit in the library with Judge William Hatton.

RM: Why was he so exclusive?

WT: He just didn't like a lot of people around him and we happened to be his pets.

RM: When was that?

WT: That would have been in the '50s.

CHAPTER TWO

RM: What did you do when you got out of the university in Reno?

WT: I knew I had to find work and my father was a sheriff by that time. I said, "Dad, with your connections with the Nevada Test Site with all those people, you can probably get me a job; I want to go to work." I ended up going to work at the Nevada Test Site. I worked one summer in the recreation department and I worked for 17 years in the radiation safety department. Then I got bored and tired of doing that and I was going to go into radiation safety in a nuclear power plant in Alabama.

But the people at the Nevada Test Site had been bugging me, and the manager of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory said, "No, you are not going to Alabama. You're going to work directly for us. You will work for the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory." So in 1979, I switched and went to work directly to work for Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory building nuclear weapons.

RM: In their design?

WT: I wasn't involved in design. I was an explosives expert so I went right into the facilities where they built them.

RM: Did they build them right on the Test Site or build them somewhere else and ship them in?

WT: They did both. Most were built right at the Nevada Test Site.

RM: And you were an expert for the explosive charge that sets the whole thing off?

WT: Yes, I was considered one of the world's experts. In fact, I would like to go to Montenegro to look up my relatives on my grandmother and grandfather's side but to this day, the United States government will not allow me to do foreign travel because of what is trapped up in my head about the nuclear weapons business.

RM: Because the charge is the key to an A-bomb, isn't it?

WT: Yes, the explosive is the key.

RM: Where did they do the assembly on the Test Site?

WT: Assembly for Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory was done in Area 27.

RM: Did they assemble a lot of weapons there or just the ones they tested?

WT: Only the ones that were tested.

RM: So every weapon they were testing was an experiment of some kind, wasn't it?

WT: Oh yes. They were all experimental.

RM: The charge has a lot to do with the yield, doesn't it? I mean, if you've got the wrong charge you're not going to get the right yield, right?

WT: The purpose of the charge is to essentially squeeze the plutonium pit to cause the chain reaction to get the weapon to detonate.

RM: And if you don't squeeze it right you don't get the right yield?

WT: Everything has to be just perfect, that's correct.

RM: Did you work with plutonium or were you also working with uranium bombs?

WT: I worked with plutonium and uranium both.

RM: Are both bombs about the same size?

WT: They are all different sizes.

RM: They worked on little tiny bombs out there, didn't they? I mean, ones that they could use in artillery.

WT: They worked on all different sizes.

RM: Did you enjoy that work a lot?

WT: Very, very, much.

RM: Where did you live when you worked at the Test Site?

WT: For the first few years I lived at the Test Site during the week and then would go home to Tonopah on weekends. I moved to Las Vegas in about 1969 or 1970.

RM: When did you start at the Test Site?

WT: 1966.

RM: So you worked your way up in terms of the difficulty of what you were doing. You must have had a natural affinity for the physics involved.

WT: Everything did come very naturally to me. One of my dear friends was the late Dr. Edward Teller. Dr. Teller, right up to the year before he died, would call me at my home every month or so and say, "Hello, Bill. Do you know who this is?"

"Of course. Hello, Dr. Teller."

He'd say, "Bill, I've told you in the past—do not ever call me Dr. Teller. My name is Ed."

I said, "No, you are Dr. Teller to me." I used to ask him, "Dr. Teller, why have you chosen me to be one of your favorite people?"

And he said, "Edward Teller does not let anyone near him that is not bright. You are extremely bright and therefore, you are a dear close personal friend."

RM: What kind of man was he?

WT: Extremely bright. Always very, very polite and always very, very professional. Not standoffish but a little bit aloof, I think because he was so bright.

RM: Was he the smartest guy you ever met?

WT: One of them.

RM: Who else would be in that category?

WT: Dr. Seymour Sack, Dr. Cal Wood.

RM: Were they involved in the design of the weapons, too?

WT: Oh, yes. Dr. Sack and Dr. Wood were both designers. Their specialty was explosive design.

RM: Did you see Teller frequently in person?

WT: No, our contacts were by telephone. In fact, I probably saw him three times in my entire career.

RM: Tell me about the other two men you mentioned.

WT: Dr. Sack and Dr. Wood were designers. Dr. Wood pretty much took me under his wing when I first started in the business. His name is Cal and he's still alive. I said to him, "Cal, why is it that you like me so much?"

He said, "Dr. Teller and Seymour think you're very bright, which you have demonstrated to all of us. I took you under my wing to impart the knowledge of what we were doing and why."

RM: Did they work on the site or were they also off site most of the time?

WT: They were in Livermore, California, and they traveled to the Nevada Test Site, but there were more than a few months they were there all the time.

RM: Were there any other people in the program that really stand out in your mind?

WT: Yes, I worked for a mechanical engineer who was there who had his eyes and ears on what went on. His name is Jess West. His was the actual assembly itself, he and his engineering crew.

RM: Did he live there or did he live somewhere else?

WT: He also lived in Livermore, California.

RM: Where did they make the parts?

WT: They were all made over the United States. Some were made in Livermore, some were made in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and at the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Facility outside of Denver, Colorado. Some were made in Savannah River, South Carolina. It depended on what kind of part as to where they were made.

RM: There was an incredibly deep pool of expertise at the Test Site wasn't there?

WT: It was an amazing place, all the dedicated and bright people there.

RM: And there were a lot of them weren't there?

WT: Oh, yes. Now, here's a story about Seymour Sack that's very, very interesting. Most of them at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and the Los Alamos National Laboratory were always in competition on who knew the nuclear weapon business better. One time Los Alamos National Laboratory was using one of Dr. Sack's designs and they called him up in my office and said, "Seymour, your design won't work."

He said, "It won't work, huh? I've been using this design. Don't tell me it won't work, it does work. I'll be there in four hours to get it on a chalkboard to show you how and why it works." Dr. Sack chartered a Learjet, flew to New Mexico, and got on the blackboard and diagramed his design work for them.

The Los Alamos National Laboratory came away very red-faced over it. The minute they used his design, it worked flawlessly.

RM: Is Lawrence Livermore part of Berkeley?

WT: It is a part of the University of California, and Los Alamos National Laboratory was also a part of the University of California. Now both places are operated by private contractors.

RM: How do you feel about that?

WT: If they would have to test again, they couldn't do it because the expertise is gone. The knowledge of how and why does not exist anymore.

RM: That is amazing; that personal expertise is gone?

WT: Yes. The people who knew how, what, and why are not there anymore.

RM: Was Sandia Labs involved at all?

WT: Sandia was involved somewhat, mostly in the timing and the firing of the weapons.

RM: Was Oak Ridge involved at all?

WT: Oak Ridge and Rocky Flats were producing a lot of parts.

RM: Basically you are saying that the expertise was in people's heads, then? And if you had a question you knew who to go to.

WT: That is true.

RM: Did you know Bill Flangas at the Test Site?

WT: Bill Flangas is a very dear friend.

RM: Tell me about Bill. I worked with him for a very short period of time there and my dad was good friends with him.

WT: Bill was a hard rock miner and a graduate of the University of Nevada who was born and raised in White Pine County, Nevada. His mentor, Dale Fraser[sp], was also born and raised in White Pine County.

RM: Bill rose up pretty high at the Test Site, didn't he?

WT: Yes, he did.

RM: Did you know Dale Fraser very well?

WT: I knew him very well. He also worked his way up through the ranks; he did very well.

RM: A lot of people worked their way up the ranks, didn't they?

WT: That's how you got where you wanted to go. You started at point A and you knew you had to get to point B so you worked your way to point B.

RM: Did the jobs out there pay very well relative to the times?

WT: They sure did.

RM: Could you say what you were making in the '60s?

WT: I was probably making maybe \$10 or \$11 per hour. It was good at the time.

RM: That was good money. My dad worked at Area 12 for almost 20 years in the tunnels there.

WT: I did not like the tunnel work very much at all; I did everything I could to avoid it. I would give that assignment to somebody else.

RM: Were you in a position of authority there?

WT: Eventually I ended up as the manager of assembly operations.

RM: That's impressive. What do you think when you look back on your career at the Test Site?

WT: It was very, very worthwhile. I worked very hard and I got a lot of reward for my contributions to national security.

I have one little funny story that I can tell about the weapons business. One time when then-President Ronald Reagan was headed from Washington D.C. to the West Coast White House, we had a training exercise that had gotten out of control and everyone was convinced that the weapons complex was under attack. They had to call Air Force One and tell the President of the United States that the weapons facility was under attack. And the next thing I know, I was not speaking with Ronald Reagan, but with one of his aides, and the man said, "Please tell me this is not true."

I said, "It is not true. Please tell the President it was a training exercise that got completely out of control and before we could stop it, it was blown all out of proportion." The next thing I know, there were probably 40 or 50 secret service personnel and FBI agents at the facility to make sure that everything was all right.

RM: What do you think when you see the Test Site now, and what do you think they should do with it?

WT: That's pretty difficult to answer. I'm very big proponent of Yucca Mountain as a repository of nuclear waste.

RM: So am I; talk about that.

WT: Yucca Mountain is not really a mountain—it's a ridge with a hole bored in the side of it. Everyone calls it Yucca Mountain but it's not a mountain. One of our ex-governors, Kenny Guinn, had me go out to Yucca Mountain one day, touring. He would go up on top of the ridge and say, "This is incredible, to be able to look out and see Tonopah, Nevada."

I said, "Governor, you need to surround yourself with better people to whisper in your ear. You do not see Tonopah, Nevada." [RM laughs] I said, "What you're looking at right now is the Amargosa Valley."

RM: When you see what has happened to the Yucca Mountain repository program over the last 25 years or so, what do you think?

WT: Everybody thinks that the United States government has paid for that project, but the nuclear power industry has set aside money out of their pots for it and they funneled the money into the United States government for that project. It is not federal money, it's Union Power money that actually paid for everything.

RM: Do you think Yucca Mountain will become a reality as a repository?

WT: I think that eventually someone is going to wake up and say, "We have to."

RM: Why?

WT: I think the science is there and if they will let the scientists show them, it would become reality.

RM: If you were making all the decisions, what would you do with the Test Site?

WT: I would reopen it and start testing again.

RM: You think there is a need for more testing?

WT: In my lifetime I've gone through four periods of seeing testing and then seeing testing stopped and resumed; and the cycle repeats itself. Eventually they are going to have to test again.

RM: Can they tell whether a bomb, a device, will work by using computers or do they actually physically have to test it?

WT: They don't call them bombs; they call them devices. Some scientific people say that a computer can tell whether a device will work, but I don't believe it. The only thing that will work is to test it.

RM: What about the shelf life of our nuclear arsenal? It's getting pretty old, isn't it?

WT: Some of it is getting very old.

RM: And there're questions of reliability, I guess?

WT: Oh yes, that's always a concern.

RM: How do you look back on your career at the Test Site?

WT: I can describe it in one word, exciting. Exciting and rewarding.

RM: My idea for the Test Site is that it should be used for the generation of power; put power plants there and fuel them with the transmutation of spent fuel and that kind of thing. What do you think of that idea? In other words, it becomes a big energy farm.

WT: That would be very nice if it were scientifically feasible. But it all boils down to dollars.

RM: Do you think they will eventually put spent fuel at Yucca Mountain?

WT: In my mind, I think they have to, as soon as they wake up and Harry Reid is gone. He can get a job with Verlie Doing at the Searchlight, Nevada, Nugget, selling those 10 cent cups of coffee. (The Doings ran the Exchange Club in Beatty for years.)

RM: Did you ever get out on the Mud Lake area near Tonopah?

WT: Oh, yes.

RM: What kinds of things took you out there?

WT: They advised me to go up there or to send one of my crew up there. It was always weapons-related work. They might be testing the support systems.

RM: Do you have any other thoughts on your career and weapons testing and its impact on Nevada?

WT: Another funny story; years ago it would have been classified but I can tell it now. At the Yuma Army training grounds down in Arizona the Americans would lob mock nuclear weapon shells into Mexico and we would have to hire Mexicans to bring them back to us.

RM: Why were they doing that?

WT: They were testing delivery systems.

RM: Did you get to Lawrence Livermore or Los Alamos very much?

WT: I had an office at Livermore and I had one in Amarillo, Texas, which was a weapons factory. I had offices in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Washington D.C. I had to spend four days a month in Washington. Probably one of the things in my job that I dreaded the most was having to go to Washington. If I'd had to go every other month or so that wouldn't have been so bad, but

once a month I would go spend three or four days and still run my operation in Nevada by long distance; it was very difficult. It was usually about needing some training money; I was always there for dollars. During the Cold War days, money was like a spigot. You asked for it and you got what you wanted.

RM: Were you spending time with politicians or officials from DOE, or who?

WT: Usually with a congressional staff.

RM: Did you enjoy going to Livermore and Amarillo and so on?

WT: I did enjoy going to Amarillo and I did enjoy going to Livermore.

RM: You must have really found a high-performing bunch at those two places, didn't you? Of course you were working with a high-performing bunch, weren't you?

WT: It was demanded of you. You were a high performer or you were gone.

RM: Did you get back to Tonopah after you started working at the Test Site?

WT: Not very often.

RM: Did you know Bill Beko very well?

WT: Very well. Bill Beko was my religious godfather and his sister Rose was my godmother. Of course, Rose is still alive, living in the skilled nursing facility in Reno, Nevada. William Peter Beko used to say, "Come and visit me in court."

I would say, "Okay" and I would go up to his court. I'd say, "I don't ever want to be in your court as an up or down."

He said, "Why?"

I said, "Because the minute I walk through the door you would give me this [gestures]. He would give me the. . . ."

RM: (Cutting his throat.) Was he jokingly saying that?

WT: He was joking with you in all those things.

RM: Did you see him much after you went to the Test Site?

WT: Oh, yes. He used to spend a lot of time in district court here in Las Vegas and I would often have dinner with him. He was a marvelous human being. In fact, when I used to go to visit him and his wife, Dorothy, at their home in Tonopah, I would walk through the back door and the first place I would go would be the refrigerator. He'd say, "I can't claim you as a dependant; get away from that refrigerator."

RM: [Laughs] He got my dad and me our jobs down at the Test Site in 1958, when they started driving the tunnels. I would have never made it through school without the Test Site because my dad had a job there and he would send money from time to time. In the summers I would work on the flats and I spent that one summer up in Area 12. The Test Site basically put me through school.

WT: That's one thing with my education—my mother being a very educated schoolteacher and my father working in the mining business and as a bartender, neither one of them made very much money. I paid my entire way through college on my own.

RM: How did you do that?

WT: I had a job from the time I was nine years old. My first job was at Coleman's Grocery Store, which doesn't exist anymore. That's when I got my Social Security card. I was making 40 cents an hour sweeping floors and stocking shelves. I also sold newspapers, I cleaned yards, I was a school custodian, and I worked at the Butler Theater running projectors.

RM: Who owned the theater then?

WT: His name was Marshall Robb.

RM: Do you remember Charlie Stewart?

WT: Charles Stewart was absolutely one of the most wonderful human beings. His real name was Lincoln—Charles Lincoln Stewart. Every kid in Tonopah hung out at Charlie's. He had three slot machines—a nickel, a dime, and a quarter machine—and in the back he had pinball machines and card tables and a billiard table. Kids would come through the front door of Charlie's and if you happened to stick a coin in the slot in the machine and pull it, and if you happened to get a win, it wouldn't take Charlie five seconds to get out from behind the counter, come around, and toss you out the door.

RM: [Laughs] He'd pay you and get you out of there?

WT: Yes.

RM: Did you know the Reischkes?

WT: Oh, very well. They were marvelous people. Irma was a photographer; they sold candy. They lived in their grocery store—it was a very small store with a soda fountain.

RM: What do you recall about the Mizpah Hotel?

WT: It was an incredible place. We used to play in the elevator. And the same with the Belvada—running up and down in the elevators was entertainment for most of the kids, until you got caught.

RM: And the Tonopah Club was a hot night spot, wasn't it?

WT: Oh, very much.

RM: Did your family stay in Tonopah after you went to the Test Site?

WT: Yes.

RM: Are some of them are still there?

WT: I have a cousin that still lives there and my brother still lives there.

RM: Is there any more we can say about Tonopah? Did you know Bobbie Duncan very well?

WT: Extremely well. She was a marvelous woman. In fact, she was one of my fishing buddies. We would go out to the pond by Rye Patch after her husband died. She was generous and she was warm. If there was a family in Tonopah that needed assistance, she was always the first one to step right up and give a donation.

RM: Did you know Toni Buffum?

WT: Very well. Her nickname was Tokyo—from her military days.

RM: What do you remember about her?

WT: That she was warm, friendly, and she had a very clean bar.

RM: What bar was she running at that time?

WT: I can't think of the name of her bar. It was Al the barber and then next door there was Toni's. . . .

RM: I wanted to ask you what you recall about Red Douglass.

WT: He sold me and my family many, many cars. Al (Red) was a dear friend to us. Al's wife was Patsy—her last name was Bowler, and her father was justice of the peace for years and years. Allen Red Douglass's brother Charles was the inventor of the canned laughter machine used by Bob Hope.

RM: No kidding! I'll be darned.

WT: Of course Charles and Dorothy are both deceased and their youngest son, Bob, runs the laugh machine company. Charles would not let us call it the laugh machine.

RM: Did he invent it in Tonopah?

WT: No, in Southern California. If you go on the Internet and Google “canned laughter” it will come up with Charles’s history, all about being raised in Tonopah and that he was the inventor of the machine.

RM: How do you look back on Tonopah?

WT: It was unique and I’m very proud to say that I grew up there. I got a marvelous education.

RM: The kids that go to school in Tonopah do pretty well in the world—some of them extremely well. It is very interesting how successful many of the Tonopah kids are.

WT: Yes, they are. I think it’s the openness and the freedom.

RM: It’s the wide-open spaces and the openness socially, you think?

WT: Yes, everything open.

RM: That’s very interesting. Well, thanks for this interview.

INDEX

A

Al the barber,
Amargosa Valley,

B

Banovich, Ann (Bill Tomany's mother)
Banovich, David (Bill Tomany's uncle)
Banovich, May (Bill Tomany's aunt)
Banovich, Michael (Bill Tomany's grandfather)
Banovich, Miruna (Bill Tomany's grandmother)
Banovich, William (Bill Tomany's uncle)
Barley Creek fishing,
Barra, George,
Bart, Maude,
Beko, Dorothy
Beko, William Peter "Bill,"
Belvada Apartments,
Bingham, Larry
Bowler, Patsy,
boxing,
Brown, Harold,
Buffum, Toni "Tokyo"
Butler Theater,

C

canned laughter machines,
Cannon, Bill,
Cavanaugh, John,
Coleman's Grocery Store,
Curieux, Jenny,

D

Del Papa, Jesolyn,
device testing at Nevada Test Site,
Doing, Verlie
Douglass, Alan "Red ,"
Douglass, Bob,
Douglass, Charles,
Douglass, Dorothy,
Douglass, Patsy (Bowler),
Duncan, Bobbie,

E

Eastley, Dennis,
Eastley, Joni,

explosive charges for nuclear weapons,

F

Flangas, Bill,
foreign travel ban,
Fraser, Dale
Frazier, Eula,
Funk, Irma,

G

Gorell, Robert,
Guinn, Governor Kenny,

H

Hatton, William,
Hawes Canyon hunting,
Hope, Bob,
hunting/fishing,

L

Las Vegas, Nevada,
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, California,
Los Alamos National Laboratory, New Mexico
Lydon, Catherine "Kayo" (Banovich; Bill Tomany's aunt),
Lydon, Robert Emmet "Freck" (Bill Tomany's uncle),

M

Maroon, William "Roy,"
Mary Mine
miner's consumption (silicosis
Mizpah Hotel
Montenegro
Mud Lake
murder car,

N

Nevada Test Site
Bill Tomany's engineering degree and,
Bill Tomany's views on present / future use,
Fraser and Flangas at,
nuclear weapons construction / design,

wages,
Wood and Seymour at,
nuclear testing
Bill Tomany's views on present situation
explosive charge, importance of, 11
loss of knowledge about,
nuclear weapons construction / design,

O

Oak Ridge, Tennessee,

R

Raycraft house,
Reagan, Ronald
Reid, Harry,
Reischke, Irma,
Robb, Gary,
Robb, Marshall,
Roberts, Betty,
Roberts, John,
Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Facility, Colorado,
Rose (Bill Beko's sister),
Rye Patch,

S

Sack, Seymour
Sandia Labs,
Savannah River, South Carolina,
schools
Searchlight, Nevada,
Serbian language,
Serbian population in Tonopah, holiday customs,
silicosis (miner's consumption
Silver Peak, Nevada,
slot machines,
Stewart, Charles Lincoln "Charlie,"

T

Teller, Edward,
Thomas, Bill as Nye County Sheriff,
Thomas, Margaret,
Tomany, Ann (Banovich) (Bill Tomany's mother),
Tomany, Donald Andrew (Bill Tomany's father),
Tomany, Edward Michael (Bill Tomany's brother),

Tomany, Tasha (Bill Tomany's sister),
Tomany, William Donald "Bill"
as assembly operations manager,
bilingual, English and Serbian,
birth,
Bobbie Duncan and,
denied foreign travel,
as explosives expert,
as friend of Edward Teller,
hunting/fishing
jobs financing college,
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and,
Los Alamos National Laboratory and,
move to Las Vegas
as murder car witness,
Nevada Test Site and,
playing in elevators,
schools,
Washington D.C. and,
Tonopah, Nevada
birthplace of Bill Tomany,
Bill Tomany's childhood in,
Bill Tomany's family in,
Kenny Guinn and,
police force,
schools,
town children's successes in life,
Tonopah Club

U

Union Power and nuclear waste,
University of California
University of Nevada,
Ursine, Nevada

W

Walker Lake fishing
Washington D.C.,
Watson, Lee,
West, Jess,
White Pine County, Nevada, 6
Wood, Cal,

Y

Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository,
Yuma Army (Arizona) training grounds story,