Lester Ben "Benny" Binion: Some Recollections of a Texas and Las Vegas Gaming Operator

Interviewee: Lester Ben "Benny" Binion
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Description

Lester Ben "Benny" Binion, is a native of Texas, born in Pilot Grove in 1904. His family were farmers, stock raisers, and horse traders near El Paso, Dallas, and Sweetwater. In his early teens, Benny Binion developed interests in gambling, especially by traveling with friends and relatives to farm-town "trade days," where card and number games were popular. From the 1920s through World War II, Binion worked to become established in gaming in Dallas; then, having gained considerable experience there, he moved to Las Vegas, Nevada in 1946.

Las Vegas was just beginning to boom in legal gaming activities when Benny Binion arrived there to establish the Las Vegas Club (in partnership with Kell Houssels); then the Westerner; and finally, the Horseshoe Club in 1951. He has been the principal owner of the Horseshoe since that time, becoming well known throughout the nation as one of Nevada's most colorful casino owners.

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An Oral History Conducted by Mary Ellen Glass

University of Nevada Oral History Program

Publication Staff:
Director: Mary Ellen Glass

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Preface to the Digital Edition

Established in 1964, the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) explores the remembered past through rigorous oral history interviewing, creating a record for present and future researchers. The program's collection of primary source oral histories is an important body of information about significant events, people, places, and activities in twentieth and twenty-first century Nevada and the West.

The UNOHP wishes to make the information in its oral histories accessible to a broad range of patrons. To achieve this goal, its transcripts must speak with an intelligible voice. However, no type font contains symbols for physical gestures and vocal modulations which are integral parts of verbal communication. When human speech is represented in print, stripped of these signals, the result can be a morass of seemingly tangled syntax and incomplete sentences—totally verbatim transcripts sometimes verge on incoherence. Therefore, this transcript has been lightly edited.

While taking great pains not to alter meaning in any way, the editor may have removed false starts, redundancies, and the "uhs," "ahs," and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled; compressed some passages which, in unaltered form, misrepresent the chronicler's meaning; and relocated some material to place information in its intended context. Laughter is represented with [laughter] at the end of a sentence in which it occurs, and ellipses are used to indicate that a statement has been interrupted or is incomplete…or that there is a pause for dramatic effect.

As with all of our oral histories, while we can vouch for the authenticity of the interviews in the UNOHP collection, we advise readers to keep in mind that these are remembered pasts, and we do not claim that the recollections are entirely free of error. We can state, however, that the transcripts accurately reflect the oral history recordings on which they were based. Accordingly, each transcript should be approached with the

transcript should be approached with the same prudence that the intelligent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information. All statements made here constitute the remembrance or opinions of the individuals who were interviewed, and not necessarily the opinions of the UNOHP.

In order to standardize the design of all UNOHP transcripts for the online database, they have been reformatted, a process that was completed in early 2012. This document will therefore differ in appearance and pagination from earlier printed versions. Rather than compile entirely new indexes for each volume, the UNOHP has made each transcript fully searchable electronically. If a previous version of this volume existed, its original index has been appended to this document for reference only. A link to the entire catalog can be found online at http://oralhistory.unr.edu/.

For more information on the UNOHP or any of its publications, please contact the University of Nevada Oral History Program, Mail Stop 0324, University of Nevada, Reno, NV, 89557-0044 or by calling 775/784-6932.

Introduction

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When invited to participate in the Oral History Project, L. B. Binion accepted graciously. He was a careful and discreet chronicler of his life's story through two days of taping sessions in the Horseshoe Club in Las Vegas, May 22 and 23, 1973. Mr. Binion's review of the transcript of the interview resulted in no changes in either style or content. He has designated the volume as open for research, allowing researchers a rare glimpse into the life and work of a famous Nevada character.

The Oral History Project of the University of Nevada, Reno, Library preserves the past and present for future research by tape recording the reminiscences of people who have contributed to the development of Nevada and the west. Transcripts resulting from the interviews are deposited in the Special Collections departments of the University libraries at Reno and Las Vegas. Lester Ben "Benny" Binion has generously donated the literary rights in his memoir to the University of Nevada.

Mary Ellen Glass
University of Nevada, Reno
1976

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My Early Life and Career in Texas

Mary Ellen Glass: Now, would you like to tell me about your grandparents?

Lester Ben "Benny" Binion: Well, my grandmother on my father's side was born in Texas. And my grandfather on my father's side was born in Illinois. He came to Texas in the early days when they went to movin' in there, you know. My grandmother on my mother's side was born in Texas. And my grandfather on my mother's side was born in Illinois: He came to Texas when he was around twenty-one years old. I don't know what year it was, of course. He had a saloon at Seymour, Texas, when my mother was born there. That was kind of the loading-out place for all the freighters, and everything, for the west Texas area.

I have two aunts and my uncle on my mother's side, livin' at El Paso, Texas. I was there in February, and they gave me two champagne glasses that he had in the saloon, and they were like that Steuben glass, or something, you know, that ring when you tap 'em? And I got a kind of a kick out of thinkin' about mule skinners drinkin' out of that kind of a glass now, when we have to drink out of plastic.

If you could just kind of describe what your first memories were. What's the first thing you remember?

The first thing I ever remember is—I was born in 1904, and I have a little cup from the State Fair of Texas in 1908. And I remember crossin' the Sister Grove Creek in the two-horse buggy going over there to get on a little electric train to go to Dallas, which was about sixty miles. So it was early in the morning, before daylight, I guess. So when we crossed this creek, there was a big bottom country there, and it was cotton, all of the year, and the frost'd hit this cotton, and it has a terrible odor. And the horses hit this bridge, trottin' across this bridge, woke me up, and I remember this odor, you see. I don't even remember bein' to the state fair, but I do have this cup to, you know, to give me the date, and all. And that's the furthest thing back I remember.

What are some of your other childhood memories?

Oh, I remember I had pneumonia about five times. When I was little, you see, and houses weren't too good, and this, that, and the other, and I guess—. So, finally, my dad told my mother, the way I get it, "Well, he's goin' to die, anyhow," and my dad was kind of a wild man, kind of a drunk, "So," he says, "I'm goin' to just take him with me." So Dad was gone darn near all the time, anyhow. So we was movin' some cattle—and I don't even know where—and it was pretty cold. And I remember all the men, gettin' off, and breakin' up brush, and everything, and warmin' their feet. And I stayed on that horse all day, and Dad left. I don't remember a thing in the world about this horse I was ridin'. He was a pretty good-sized horse, only he had kinda funnylookin' ears. And I doubt if I was over five, six years old. I don't even remember where we went. And almost from that time on, hell, I just been a-going.

My grandfather on my father's side was a farmer. He had quite a lot of land in Texas. And when he was a young man, he just quit work, and he was a kind of a horse trader and rented this land out. So one day, a farmer came up there to rent a farm from him; I was a little boy. But he had some big shade trees around this house, and it was real hot. We sat there in the shade, and this fellow by the name of Kato came up there to rent the farm, and they made a trade. And when the man went to go away, he said, "You see this man? That's the best farmer I know."—he had big patches on the seat of his overalls—"And," he said, "you see where his so-and-so's been stickin' out there?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Don't ever stick a plow in the ground." And I never did.

And from a real small kid, I'd go with the horse traders, and became a pretty good horse trader. And then, they all gambled when they'd get together. They all traveled in wagons, and they had some of the wagons fixed kinda like trailer houses now, but lived in. So they had known campin' places. And they'd all get together, and sometime there'd be ten or fifteen there at the time. So they'd gamble, and play cards, and do this, that, and the other, and trade horses. So one time, me and Clarence McMillan was camped on Sister Grove Creek in Texas, and a guy by the name of Oliver came in there. He came from one direction and we came from another, and each one of 'em happened to have thirty-nine horses each. Instead of going on, you had to take these horses out of the area because the people that traded them horses off, there was usually somethin' wrong with 'em, and people knew it in the area. So they traded bunches, and we went back the other way with his bunch, and he took this bunch, and went back the other way. [laughs] So I just did things like that, punched cows, and traded horses.

Did you visit the fairs, and trade days, and so forth, when you were that young?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. They had what they call first Mondays, and second Mondays; first Saturdays, second Saturdays, third Saturdays, fourth Saturdays, like that. Each town had its trade day. So we made all those, camped out. Buy them country hams and what we eat off of them farmers most of the time, you know. Had real good food. All them guys were good cooks, cooked in a Dutch oven on a campfire.

First, I learned to play poker. And everybody had his little way of doing somethin' to the cards, and all this, that, and the other, so I wasn't too long on wisin' up to that. Some of 'em had different ways of markin' 'em, crimpin'

'em, and—. So then I kinda got in with more of a gainblin' type of guy, you know, the—you might say road gamblers. And then I'd go around with them, you know, and I'd do little things for 'em, and they'd give me a little money, kinda kept me goin'. Then maybe I'd drift back to the horse traders, maybe stop somewhere and punch cows, or do somethin' a little bit, you know. Always had me a saddle and bed with me.

And then about World War I time—you see, I'm gettin' these things as I think of it. World War I time, I worked for some big mule dealers, you know, and sold mules to the army. And I learned how to tell horses', mules' age real good by lookin' in their mouth. And fact of business, I was real good at it, and all them old guys that I worked for, they'd let me do the mouthin' of the mules, and horses, and everything, you see, while they was tradin' and talkin'.

I went to Bonham, Texas with a bunch of mules, was workin' for Clarence McMillan. He hadn't got there yet. He was kind of a wild man, and had these mules in this wagon yard, where he kept 'em in them days. A guy by the name of Bryant come in there, and said he wanted to buy the mules, but Clarence hadn't got there yet, and he was real hot to buy these mules, and he had a order to go on to Tennessee, or somewhere, with them—what they call cotton mules. So he said he was anxious to buy 'em. "Well," I says, "I'll price 'em to you.

So—"Well," he said, "well, you—I'm just a little guy." He said, "You can't price 'em and sell 'em." So them old traders around there said, "If he prices mules and sell 'em to you, it'll be all right." And when Clarence McMillan got there, I'd sold him out. He was out of business. [laughs]

So we got the car and took off, and I don't remember where we went to. They had one of them old Buick cars, with great big, old, straight fenders back behind 'em. Sometimes, we'd stick in the muddy roads, and the chain'd flop up one time, and caught a fender and pulled it up over the tire. There we were. Had to cut the fender off with a hacksaw to get it off.

Tell me a little about your sales talk with these traders.

Well, in them days, everybody mostly traded somethin' if there's somethin' wrong with 'em. They had heaves in them days, they were wind-broke horses, and balkies, and all this, that, and the other, so they had to go on out of the country to where they weren't known, like I said before. They called 'em snides and dinks. So you'd have to give 'em medicine to shut the heaves down, and this, that, and the other. And some men were smart enough to detect it, and some weren't, so when you found some that weren't you made a little more money off of 'em.

Is there some way of showing a horse or a mule on its best side?

Oh yeah. Yeah, there's a lot of different angles to that. Get a horse up on a kind of a high place, and get the man down on a low place, you know, he'd look better. And if he had anything wrong with him, try to keep that turned away from the guy, you know, leadin' him around and showin' 'em. But a lot of 'em were just shown in pens, you know. They just go in there, and there's thirty or forty, somethin' like that, just go in there and look 'em over and buy the pen. But most of 'em wanted you to trot 'em out, you know, and see if they was limp, sound.

You really learned a lot about livestock, then?

And think I learned a lot about people.

Tell me about the people.

Well, you just got to kinda judge honesty, and—just like the guy that comes in to cash a check, or somethin', now. I can just almost tell about him. I don't know how I do it, but there's just a kind of a tell on people. I don't really know what it is.

Well, there's all kinds of cheaters in them days. Fact of business, 'most everybody cheated. And today, people're smarter, and it's more or less absolutely on the honor, he's on the square.

In about 1928, I opened up what they call a "policy"— it's kind of a numbers business—in Dallas, Texas. I started with fifty-six dollars that day. The first day, I made eight hundred dollars. And, of course, that was a kind of a fluke thing. It didn't make that much money, for sure, for a long time. So I ran 'till my brother got up a little size. He was six years younger than me. So he went in with me, and we ran that 'till 1945. And my brother got killed in a airplane accident when he was twenty-three.

In 1936, the city of Dallas kinda opened up gambling. So I went into the dice business there. You know, it was mostly all dice. And I stayed in that dice business from '36 'till '45. And then in '46—the last of '46, things was rocky there, no good, so a deal came up here in Las Vegas. Kell Housells and Chick Fernoy and Fred Merrill had this deal out here.

I didn't fool with dice 'till—. I knew a lot about it. I been around a lot of guys, and all, but I never really fooled with dice until '36. But there was fellows before that, that I knew, and knew about, that had what they call "daub," them days, they put on dice. And you could roll the dice on a layout, and this daub caused the dice to hesitate, slow down, and turn up on their number. It wouldn't do it every time, but you give 'em a little percentage. The most famous with this was a man named Van Swofford, and another fellow by the name of Williams—called him "Slim" Williams. He was a tall, skinny man. And Slim Williams was the first man that I ever seen that put loads in dice. The dice was all one—just the "come" line. There was no back line. There's been a lot of talk about who started to "do" and "don't," but I think, from what I've heard that it was a fellow by the name of Chicken Smart from Chickasha, Oklahoma. And where he got the name "Chicken Smart," I hear, he was a fightin' chicken [gamecocks] man.

And this numbers business I was in, the way I hear it, it started out in Memphis, Tennessee. There was a lawyer went to Memphis, Tennessee (and I've forgotten his name; I used to know it, too), and he went and opened him up a law office, and he didn't do any business, so he figured out the odds on this policy racket, and opened up. And I think the next time, somebody opened up in New Orleans, and then the next was in Dallas.

It was a fellow by the name of Warren Diamond opened it in Dallas, many, many years ago. And Warren Diamond was the first big dice fader I ever knew. He opened up in this Camp Street wagon yard. Those wagon yards had big, high fences around 'em, where nobody couldn't slip in there and steal nothin', just kind of a—looked like a stockade. So Warren Diamond had a gamblin' house in the Camp Street wagon yard, and they had this gate barred, you know, and they had a gate man on there. But one time it came a big storm, and some deputies got in a covered wagon, come a-trottin' down the street, and the man thought it was somebody comin' into the wagon yard, you know, from the

country. And he opened the gate, and it's full of deputies. And they sent Warren Diamond to the penitentiary. And there's a fellow by the name of George Footes got him out. So from then on, they was partners.

Warren Diamond, then, when he got out of the penitentiary, he must've had a lot of money in them days, so he opened up a Do and Don't dice game with a no limit. And then on up in the early '30's, a fellow came in there and threw an envelope on the line, said, "Diamond, I'm goin' to make you look."

And Diamond said, "Pass him the dice."

Shot the dice, and caught a point, and missed it, and they opened the envelope, and there's a hundred and seventy-two $1,000 bills in it. That was the biggest shot I ever heard of. And I know it to be true because I was in the hotel lobby at the time it happened.

What was Warren Diamond like? You knew him, didn't you?

Oh, very well. Warren Diamond was as fine a man as I ever knew. He did lots for everybody. Anybody that was in any kind of a—needed some money for sickness, or whatnot, he was a big giver like that. And he ran in Dallas for years, and years, and years, I imagine, just on that account. So from Warren Diamond is where I always got the idea of dealin' high limit on the dice. I guess a kid just wants to kind of pattern after some guy like that, you know. I admired him very much. Warren Diamond had cancer. And he called some doctors in from over the country. (This day, cancer wasn't too well known, you know.) So I think they told him that he didn't have any chance, and he got the nurse to give him his clothes, and he went home, and went right straight upstairs, and shot himself. And he left a lot of money to a lot of different people. He had his will made out, and everything.

I remember there's one fellow by the name of Smith. I don't know, I don't remember what connection he had with Warren Diamond, but he left him $400,000, which was a lot of money in the '30's.

Me and Warren Diamond were never competitors. Warren Diamond, when he killed himself—well, whenever a man kills himself, the business goes to gin' here and there, don't you see. I'd already opened up this policy, and he'd already quit it.

Now, this is in the early '30's, so the dice was kinda up in the air for grabs, so about '36, I got me some connections, and I grabbed it. So then it was mine from '36 to about '45.

I was wondering if you wouldn't like to talk about the Prohibition time in Dallas.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I did some bootleggin' in Dallas. But I never did make no money bootleggin'. Yeah, I never made no money in bootleggin'. No. Every time I get ahold of any money, somethin'd happen, and I'd lose a bunch of whiskey, or somethin', and just kept me poor as a church house mouse, all the time.

How did it happen? Can you tell me about some of the incidents?

Well, yeah, one instance, for sure. Me and a guy by the name of Fat Harper, we got ahold of about $20,000 together, so we bought a lot of whiskey. In them days, the roads were bad, where you hauled this whiskey in from. So this old man by the name of Ward had a warehouse. And I knew him well. So we stored all this whiskey up in this warehouse when the weather was good, to make a killin' when the

weather got bad and the whiskey'd go up, don't you see. So there was a colored man workin' there, and he stole some of this whiskey, and old man Ward fired him, and he went and told the officers that the whiskey was in there. So now, they came down there and arrested old man Ward and about thirteen people, didn't get me and Fat, but we had to put up all the money to get 'em out. That whacked us out, for sure.

Where were these stills?

Most of the whiskey was made, in them days, in Freestone County, Texas. The big man down there was named Roger Young. Roger Young's been dead a good many years, and there's another one just died a while back down there in Arizona, was the big whiskey man in them days, name of Ralph Donaldson. That's the last of the big moonshiners that I know of. And then, sometimes, when the federal officers'd get too bad, they'd have to get their whiskey out of Oklahoma. But the Oklahoma whiskey didn't seem to be as good as the Freestone County whiskey.

And then they had bonded whiskey, which cost much more money to handle, and everything, and I never did do too much of that. Just once in a while, I'd tool with a little bonded whiskey. But the bootlegging, to me, was never no good.

Well, how did you get started doing that?

Well, I'll tell you the truth, I don't know. Just got started.

Just had some friends who were doing it, or—.

Oh, yeah. I knew all about it. I knew what was goin' on, but I didn't do that bootleggin' too long, maybe a couple of years.

Did you have any experience with the Prohis?

Oh, yeah, I got caught a couple of times. I got sixty days one time, and four months another time in this period of time. I went before Judge [Harley] Atwell the last time. I was the first person in the United States, I think, that's filed on under what's called the Jones Act. And you're supposed to get five years. So when I got up there before this judge, I knew him, and he knew me. And he says, "You know you're supposed to go to the penitentiary."

And I says, "Your Honor," I said, "don't send me to the penitentiary," somethin' to that effect.

And he says, "Why?"

"Well," I says, "I'm not goin' to bootleg anymore.

It must've been kind of exciting for awhile, wasn't it?

Oh, it's kinda exciting. I really never did care much about it. It was a lot of work, and everything.

How did you manage to get into bootlegging after having been a gambler before? I mean, you've really been more interested in gambling, haven't you?

Oh, yeah. Well, that was even before I got into the gamblin'. That was before '28. That was in '24, '26. I was just a kid.

Well, I was thinking you had been with these traveling gamblers before then.

Oh, yeah, yeah, them poker players, and this, that, and the other. Well, I'd kinda learnt this—. All the time, I'm kinda learnin' about

the gamblin' from these guys, you know. But then, I never was able to play anything, dice or cards, or anything, myself. I never was a real good poker player, and never did learn how to do any of these tricks like cheatin' people, or anything—which I'm kinda proud of now. But I was always pretty capable about keepin' from gettin' cheated.

Your bit was to get people to come and play the games? Was that it?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. I was always a pretty good what they called a "steer man" in them days.

What kinds of people made the best players?

Oh, trading type people. In the early days, in the oil business down there, the oil guys, and, you know, somebody that handled money all the time, and traded, moved around. What I think makes a player is somebody with a lot of energy. Like if one of them kind of fellows come to town at night, you know, he's kind of a nervous type, and he had to have some outlet, you know, couldn't just go to bed like a ordinary person.

That's what I really think about 'em. They're not—a lot of people describe 'em as suckers. But to me, they're far from bein' a sucker. There ain't nobody in the world that can produce money like they can. And most of 'em, if there's any possible chance, if he owes a debt, he'll pay it, because he's that type of a guy. He's got to pay his debts to stay in the type of business he stays in to get that kind of money.

See, I know my way of describin' things is a little bit off base, because I'm not educated and don't use good English. I know that much, too, you know.

You're doing very well.

Well, there's hardly anybody that's seen any more of 'em than I have, because I've been operatin' pretty big for a mighty long time. And I've had lots of experience with 'em. I've seen 'em come up, go down, come back up.

And if ever one of 'em was ever my friend, I never did quit him. He got broke. Just like the other day. There's a man—I won't mention his name—that lost millions of dollars. He called me up the other day, and I sent him three hundred dollars to pay his hotel bill. But he's fixed to stage a comeback. He's quit drinkin'. Drinkin's what caused him to lose his money, you know, his business. So he's seventy-somethin' years old now, but his health's good. Like I told him the other day [laughing]—'course, tellin' him don't mean a dog-gone thing—but I said, "If you'll just stay sober, you've got time to get hold of some money before you're too old." And he will, because the oil business, to me, looks like it's goin' to get real good.

Just like I was talkin' to a fellow today here, just before I talked to you. And he's lost a lot of money in town. And he asked me to let him have some money, and it'd be good in a certain length of time. But I told him, I says, "For Christ's sake, I'll let you have it, but," I said, "don't get yourself in this kind of a tight."

And he said, "Well, maybe that's the best." He's just hot to play, you know. He went on well satisfied.

Well, how about the men who ran these games, the ones that you steered for? What were they like?

Oh, they was all pretty good men. I was always in on it. Fact of business, from a early age I was always kinda in, and just kinda on the top end of it.

What were they like? Did they remember numbers real well? Did they remember cards? Did they keep whole decks in their heads?

Oh, yeah. This countin' thing ain't new. They just got publicized. But hell, I knew people that'd count them cards. Fact of business, a fellow beat me countin' them cards, and I thought he was markin' 'em. He finally told me what he did. He knew I wasn't goin' to let him play no more, so he told me about it.

You just know every high card?

Yeah, knew all the cards goin' by, you know. Just like these poker players. They know the cards, and know the percentage, and somebody can have a hand, and all this money in, and they're layin' insurance on it. Well, they got to know how many cards is gone, and how many chances he's got to make it, and this, that, and the other. I can't do that. I don't know that end of it.

I'd been there, in and out, from '22 to '28, and I'd just take a notion to go somewhere, and go off, and came back. But I always came back. Dallas is one of the best towns that I ever seen. Actually, there never was no real depression in Dallas, and there ain' t never been since.

There was a group of bankers there. They were the most liberal, smartest bankers in the world. And if anybody had any ability, they could get money. They all was in competition, but they all were friends, and if somethin' was too big for one of 'em, they'd all take part of it. One was named Fred Florence, he was a Jewish man; Nathan Adams, Bob Thornton, Teest Adue, J. C. Tennyson. Five. Let me see. There's somebody else. I forget. There was six of 'em. But I think they're all dead now, or I wouldn't mention their names. All the financial world knows that there never was a smarter set of guys than them. They kept Dallas on top.

Did you gamble with them?

No, they didn't gamble. But they never did knock it. They always knew about it, and I don't doubt but that when we was gamblin' there, but what we got a lot of help from them. They seemed to like it. And I never seen one of 'em in none of the places. And they didn't drink much. They all had their drink, but there wasn't a bad drinker, or nothin', among 'em that I knew of. Bob Thornton got to drinkin' a little bit in his later days, but he'd kinda got out of business. And all of 'em started from the ground up, every one of 'em.

What were the other kinds of businessmen that you got some kind of support from?

Oh, a lot of 'em. I was pretty friendly with everybody, you know, because I try to conduct myself in a way that kept my debts paid, and—. My dad was kind of a drunk kind of a man, but he told me, he said, "Always keep your friends, and keep your word, and you won't never get in no tight." No tight. You can always get some help.

And I was always able to get some financial help, and political help, and this, that, and the other, any time I needed it. And I never did ask nobody to do nothin' out of line for me.

I was just going to ask you about the political help.

Well, you had to have political help in them days.

Would you like to describe how you went about getting it?

Well, just like I told you. You'd have to know somebody that is influential, that you could go to and ask a favor. Most of them

moneyed people put them people in office in them days. They didn't go around and get up this "campaign" money like they do now. Just them bankers, and this, that, and the other—seemed like to me that way back there in them days, they must've put all of it up. I just don't know. But I know that you never heard tell of a politician's goin' around and askin' nobody for no money. I don't know where in the heck they got it in them days. And, now, they'd ask a lamp post for money.

Even the sheriffs didn't have to ask for money?

I never heard of it.

Did they raid you?

Not too much. Not too much.

You told me about a kind of a raid on one of your places in Dallas.

[Laughing] Well, one time, I had a crap game, and the sheriff and two or three deputies came and raided us. And there was eighteen or nineteen people in there, and me. So there came a call where they'd had a murder. And he had to leave, and he told me, he said, "Take all these people down by the sheriff's office and wait 'till I get back." So we all got in the cars, and everybody went down there. And when he came in, he said, "Well, you all got here, and all right." Said, "Well, I'm goin' to turn you loose." [laughing].

One that I remember you telling me about was right after an election.

Oh, the time them two guys come in there, and I come in there drunk, and they was raidin' my joint—they changed administrations—and I said, "What in the heck are you doin' here?"

And they said, "Well, we're raidin' this place," or somethin' to that effect, you know.

"Well," I says, "you better find out what you're doin' ." I says, "I got The Man'

And one went to hollerin' to the other one to, "Get out of here, get out of here." Said, "This so-and-so's already got The Man'

So I went along there for, God, I don't know, eighteen months or so, maybe longer, and nobody fooled with me because this word got out that I had The Man. Well, that would be the city manager Well, hell, I didn't have him.

So finally, to make it real good, somebody asked him somethin', and he said, "If the town's too wide open," just blame him, don't you see?

So now, he woke up to all about what's goin' on, and, boy, he let the hammer down! So they really did give me some kind of raidin' for lyin' to 'em. Never give 'em no money all that time.

So now, one time Dallas got in a kind of a tight for money, and there actually never was no arrangements made, but they had a real good city administration. So they just come in and raid us, and wouldn't tear up nothin', or do nothin', and we'd pay big fines. And I think we paid somethin' like, oh, $600,000 a year for fines, for a few years there. So we helped the city out, just with no arrangement. There wasn't no graft, or nothin' to it.

Business must've been pretty good when you could afford to pay fines that way.

Business was real good. But it was just comin' out of the depression. And that east Texas oil field made the business good there. All them oil men had money. I remember when oil went to thirty-five cents a barrel, there's a big boom on.

I was going to ask you to describe some of the places that you ran in Dallas.

Well, they were in hotel suites, you know. We'd just have a big suite of rooms, have the tables in there, have a bar, and we'd send out to different restaurants and get the food. Everybody knew about it, see them men a-carryin', you know, them things like they carry hot food in, with a handle on it. They was runnin' up and down the street with em all the time.

The main place was the Southland Hotel in Dallas. It's tore down now. That was the most famous one. Then the Blue Bonnet, the Maurice—that was the three main places. And we all got along good together. Just like right here [in Las Vegas]. I don't have a ill feeling towards any of these operators in town, and I don't think they do me. No, I don't think so. I just run my business to suit me, and I let them do the same. They all have that right, I think.

Well, wasn't there some kind of stiff competition there?

No, we had it all. We didn't have no competition.

How did you keep your competition out?

Well, they just didn't come there.

Why not?

Well, I don't know.

The Mafia was into every other place, trying to be.

Well, to tell you the honest truth about the Mafia, I think it's a overestimated thing. I actually never knew anything about the Mafia. I've knew people that they said was in it, knew 'em personally, but they never did tell me they's in it, so I just don't know.

There were some rumors that they were trying to move into Dallas, and your organization was too strong for them, that they couldn't move in there. And I just wondered how you managed that.

Well, I wouldn't want to go into that.

Oh, I wish you would.

No, they can tell that after I'm gone.

Well, this will have any restriction you want.

I don't want no restriction. I ain't goin' to say nothin' that has to have a restriction.

2

Early Days in Las Vegas

Well, in 1946, then, some of your people lost the election in Dallas?

Yes, [I] couldn't operate. Yeah, had to go.

This was just right at the end of the war. The war must have been kind of a profitable time for you.

It was, very profitable.

So then I came—like I told you, Chick Fernoy and Fred Merrill, they'd been a-comin' out here, and Fred Merrill had got well acquainted in this state, and there was some fellows had a gamblin' house in Reno. Fred Merrill went up there, and got to gamblin' high, and won $160,000, which, I guess at that time, was the biggest winnin' that there was in the state. So he got pretty well known, so him and Chick Fernoy, they never did have no damn money, but they was good fellows. So they come and they had this deal here [in Las Vegas] with Kell Houssels for me to put up the bankroll. And I said, "I'll go out there and try it a little while."

So we came out here, and we was very successful. So I kept thinkin' I'd leave, you know. I didn't think this town was ever goin' to be anything like it is. I just couldn't believe that. I just thought—bein' that I'd been where they close up, and do this, that, and the other all the time, I thought this just had to go. But it didn't. Thank God for that.

And, then we quit up there, and Kell sold the place (he owned it). And in that same old building, I leased it, and built the place called the Westerner. Then I sold that after awhile, and then I decided I might leave. Then this place, here, the Horseshoe, was called the El Dorado Club. It had a corporation loss. So I bought the thing and opened up here, and here I am, stuck forever now. [laughs]

What was Vegas like in '46, when you came here?

Well, wasn't but somethin' like 18,000 people here, and the most enjoyable place that you can imagine. Everybody was friendly, and there wasn't none of this high jackin',

there wasn't no stealin', wasn't nothin', just—hell, you couldn't get robbed, if you hollered, "Come rob me!" I just don't understand why it was like that. To me, ever since I've been here, they've had the best law enforcement, the most honest law enforcement that I've ever seen. A officer don't have to be anything else here. You know, they don't get the best pay in the world. But it's always been customary here, when they went in anywhere here, there's comp for their food, and this, that, and the other, and no strings attached. And as you know, a bad guy, or anything, lights here, there's just—there ain't one out of a hundred ever gets out of here without gettin' caught. Still that way.

In '46, the Strip wasn't there.

Well, the El Rancho and the Last Frontier was there, two hotels. And they had the best damn food you ever seen in your life! And the food was cheap, and they was very liberal, didn't cost you nothin' to go see the second show. Of course, the transportation was bad. There wasn't much of a airlines comin' in here then. A lot of people even came on train. A lot of people'd ride a train from here to New York, Chicago, and Washington in them days in the wintertime when the weather was bad, and all. And the automobile traffic wasn't too much.

And the biggest money that come here in them days—. Well, the bookmakers were operatin' pretty well wide open all over the United States, and when the season'd be over, they'd all come here, and they brought lots of money with 'em. That was the biggest customers then.

Now, the government's got them poor ol' bookmakers whacked around. They still come. Fact of business, there's been a bunch of 'em here lately. But taxes are high, and everything, nowadays, and they don't have the big money like they had there, you know, and the hazards of their business. I think it's a shame the way the government spent so much money doin' to them bookmakers what they've done. And they don't convict 'em, they don't do nothin'. They just harass 'em, and spend lots of money. One was tellin' me, just here awhile back, fourteen federal officers came into his house, and kicked his door in, and all that kind of stuff, just a little old defenseless man. Spent all that money for fourteen men. Two could've done the same job.

Of course, I think that's goin' to be over with all this stuff they're puttin' on up there now. I think they're goin' to have to straighten up their act a little bit, which I'm sorry to see the government get in the mess it's in. [The Watergate] business right now. I don't feel like we have a government. Like that Howard K. Smith said on the TV last night. He said, "You can't get nothin' done. There's nobody knows what to do. Everybody don't know whether he's goin' to be there tomorrow, or what not. You ask somebody somethin', he don't know nothin'." If we was to have any kind of a crisis right now, we'd be in a terrible shape. I feel sorry for President Nixon. I think that he did the greatest thing that's ever been done in the world, by gettin' to where he could talk to Russia and China. Nobody else was never able to do it before. For that alone, no matter what he's done in this thing, if it was up to me, I'd give him a "pass". And a lot of times, my motto is, "I don't trust nobody 'till they can afford it." Now, if he did do anything, he's seen his mistake. And the type of man he is, I think he'd still be a heck of a man. See, I've always said, just more or less a joke, that there's nothin' on earth I like better than inflation and corruption. But this got a little too strong for even me. But if they hadn't've got caught, I think we'd've got under a police state. They was goin' *roughshod*, them big

guys. Just like what I said about what they're doin' to bookmakers. They lied, they done every damn thing to 'em.

You weren't here when the big Continental race wire was in all of the trouble, were you? That was in the early '40's.

No, I was in Texas. Well, the big Continental race wire wasn't nothin', the way I look at it. Just all them bookmakers had this here hookup. There was a old guy by the name of Annenberg on this race wire. And just like one of 'em could pick up the phone, and say, "Hello, Omaha. got so-and-so here.

"All right, I'll take so-and-so."

"All right, Cleveland." He'd take so-and-so. But he didn't know—. It was just a kind of a communication thing. There wasn't no big organized thing. This old guy, just smart enough to figure it out, set it. They all paid so much for that service, just like you would a telephone.

Who were some of the other big operators when you came in '46?

Well, the Frontier was operated by Bill Moore and Ballard [E.] Barron, and the El Rancho was operated by Jake Katleman. And he died, Jake Katleman was *one fine* man, and so was Bill Moore and Ballard Barron. Then the Flamingo opened up the first day of '47, and that was the biggest whoop-de-do I ever seen. They had Jimmy Durante, Cugat's band, and Rosemarie, in one show. This day and time, you couldn't afford to pay for somethin' like that. And, of course, Joe B. Lewis, he was one of the big attractions here, and Sophie Tucker, Ted Lewis, Sammy Davis, Jr. (he was just startin'), Mills Brothers, some of them oldtimers like that. Most of 'em that ain't dead are still damn good. But really, that kind of entertainment, to me, was better than what you have today. And the seats weren't too close together, you had plenty of room. You could rare back, and enjoy it. And nowadays, you just—so many people, just have to crowd 'em up. And for a old guy like me, hell, I go in there and sit in one of them shows, can't walk when I come out. So, I don't go any more.

But when I first came here, the Golden Nugget just opened up, which was the most beautiful place I ever seen. And one day, me and a fellow went in there, and I says, "There's somethin' on this menu I never seen; I'm goin' to have it."

He says, "What's that?"

I says, "A dollar hamburger!"

And it was good.

So when we opened up, up there, they had a hundred-dollar limit in town. This Las Vegas Club wasn't the most beautiful place you ever seen; it was a old, run-down kind of a place. So I opened up. And I didn't pay no attention to what they was payin' dealers around here, or nothin'. So I went to payin' dealers twenty-five dollars a day, and I think they was payin' fifteen. I didn't know nothin' about no union, and the union wasn't very strong then. So I think the bartenders got about sixteen dollars a day, and I went to payin' twenty. And actually, I didn't even know nothin' about no union, just hired whoever I wanted to, so all this stuff come along later. But I never did have no trouble with none of 'em. But, naturally, there's some old guys around here—they ain't around here now—that weren't too damn good in my book. They gave me a little bit of trouble on account of all this, you see. But I managed to weather the storm, and nowadays, everything's just smooth as silk, I think. And I think we have a absolutely honest state government, and I been here when I don't think it was.

I hope you'll tell me about that.

No, I ain't goin' to tell you about that. But everybody knows about it. But I have not heard *one* word about *no*body havin' to pay for nothin' under Mike O'Callaghan's [administration] since he's been there, for *nothin*'! And I believe, if anybody—now, I don't know him too well, and I've knew him ever since he was about seventeen years old, slightly. He had a uncle in Montana that was near my ranch. And he used to come out there in the summertime. And his uncle was a awful good man, and we talk about his uncle's kids, and this, that, and the other, who is his cousins now, once in awhile when I see him. But I really don't know him well. But I feel like if anybody anything out of line workin' for him, I think they'd get put right out.

When you first came here, Vail Pittman was the governor, wasn't he?

Good man. Good man. But he was old, and I think that a lot of things went over his head. Now, he had a man workin' for him by the name of Jack Walsh, who was one of his head men. And I know Jack Walsh is as honest as a day is long, and he runs the Algiers now, and he'd do *any*body that he could—in them days—a favor, and I know he never got a five-dollar bill. But they was some others that had both hands out. I ain't namin' 'em. They know.

At that time, the licenses were partly local and partly state. Do you want to talk about how you went through the licensing procedure?

Oh, I had all kinds of trouble with them licenses. I had trouble with 'em. They just didn't want to give me no license. They just hammered around. Fact of business, to tell you the honest truth, I didn't know nothin' about that kind of stuff in them days, and didn't pay much attention to it, and didn't care much about it. I didn't worry about a license too much. I just kept a-knockin' along, long as I keep the door open.

Was Mr. Houssels doing about the same way, and some of these others that you mentioned?

Mr. Houssels is a man that he don't worry too much about nothin'. He's in very bad health now, and I feel *real* sorry for him. I go to see him once in awhile, and he just makes me want to cry.

Well, he's always had a reputation of being a real good gambler.]

Solid as the Rock of Gibralter, a real good gambler, a real good manager.

What was he like in those days?

Oh, he ain't one to have too much to say, and when he says somethin', he means it. But he's just as fair as any man I ever seen, and very loyal to the employees that he feels like loyal to him. But if they aren't, he just don't want nothin' else to do with 'em. Ain't no gettin' back in with him.

So the other night, I took the acupuncture doctor out there. I begged him to go to Duke University, and he's too iron-headed to do it, and he knows he made a mistake. He might've saved his leg, you know, and he didn't have a damn thing to lose, but he didn't do it. Anyhow, he called me up, asked me if I could bring the acupuncture doctor out there. And I said, "You bet."

So I took him out there, and it really did him some good. It made me feel real good.

So his safe had been robbed since he'd been down. So I asked him, I said, "Kell, you have any idea who robbed your safe?"

He said, "Not exactly." He says, "One of five people," or somethin' like that. Says, "Whichever one that robbed it is a damn sucker, anyhow." Said, "They took the cash, and," said, "they left a stack of negotiable bonds" [laughing].

So I think maybe he's goin' over to California to see the acupuncture doctor again before they get legalizin' — they're legalized, but before they cone back in here because that *really* did him some good.

He had been in gambling here for a long, long time. So he must have had some sort of interesting things to tell you, as his partner.

By golly, I'll tell you about him—he don't tell you much! [laughing] I know where he was born. That's about all I know. He's born in Vernon, Texas. And I know his and Jack Dempsey's birthday's on the same day, same year.

One time Jack Dempsey was up there in the old Las Vegas Club. Somebody asked him how old he was. He didn't tell 'em, and Kell told him, says, "I know how old you are, Jack."

Said, "How do you know?"

Says, "Our birthday's the same day."

He said, "Don't tell 'em."

So he didn't.

Fred Merrill was in the Las Vegas Club, too. What was he like?

Oh, he's a hell of a guy with a lot of energy, a real good gamblin' house man. He works at the Sahara now, bringin' junket people in. He don't bring those big junkets, just brings a few good ones. He's takin' most of these people to Lake Tahoe now. But he's kind of a guy that no matter how much he'd get ahold of, he'd get rid of it.

Did he gamble, or did he play?

Oh, yeah. He'd gamble, and give away, do anything. He didn't give a damn. I don't think he gambles any more.

What about Marguerite La Verne? What sort of person was she? She was managing the Las Vegas Club when you first came.

I don't remember her. See, I never was much of a detail man. Just like right here. I don't even know how much that they win here, or lost here, or a thing, since the first of the year. I ain't asked a question. I don't know. I know my son—my sons, both of 'em, and my wife are going to look after it, so I don't worry about a thing.

Well, just about the first thing that happened after you got into the Las Vegas Club and sort of got settled down was that bit with (Johnny) Beasley and Helm.

Oh. That was the most unfortunate thing you ever seen in your life. I was home with the flu, and this Beasley was absolutely crazy. And the reason that I brought Beasley here, the mornin' that we was leavin' to come here, he came to my house. And actually, I was afraid to leave my wife and kids there. Of course, I had somebody lookin' out for 'em, but I was afraid to leave 'em around there, fear he'd come around there wantin' to mooch my wife for money, or anything like that—no tellin' what the son of a gun might do. He was crazy. So I just loaded him up and brought him with us.

So he just got out of the penitentiary, and he'd always been on dope. So now, he was straight as a string here for awhile, and

perfectly all right. Now, he gets on that dope again, and I'm at home with the flu. So they said he was just—couldn't handle him at all. So I said, "Well—." I talked to him on the phone. I said, "Beasley, you're goin' to have to leave." I said, "Where do you want to go?"

"Well," he says, "buy me a ticket to New Jersey (somewhere) to Jim Askew's wild west show" (he was a rodeo guy).

And I says, "All right."

So I told 'em, I said, "Send Cliff [Helm] down there to buy him a ticket, and give him some money."

Well, him and Cliff's walkin' down there to the depot— like I say, you rode a train in them days—and he told Cliff, he said, "Just buy me a bus ticket to Kingman, Arizona, and let me hitchhike, and give me the rest of this money." He says, "Give me that money."

So Cliff says, "I'll have to go back and ask 'em about that.

Cliff walks back in to ask 'em about this. (This is absolutely a true story. Cliff and Beasley's both dead; there ain't no use in me tellin' a damn lie now. I'd've told a lie if I could've saved him.) But they told Cliff to go back there and turn the air conditioner up or down, one or the other, in the engine room. Didn't have all these here—oh, maintenance men for things in them days, much.

So Cliff walked back there and did this, and when he turned around, Beasley was standin' in the door with a knife. And I guess he was full of that dope, and he went cussin' Cliff, about this thing. And he cut at him a knife, and Cliff was a security guard, and he had the pistol. So Cliff shot him. And I know two guys that seen it, absolutely, but they were "hot". You know, they couldn't be seen because they was wanted somewhere. But I knew 'em good. So they told me that Cliff was absolutely in self-defense. But when Cliff shot him and knocked him down, well, he just hauled off and shot him right in his head, and him layin' down there. Well, he knows, in his own mind and this frame of mind Cliff's in, if you don't kill him, you've got to kill him sometime, 'cause this is the most dangerous son of a gun in the world. So he just went ahead and done a good job of it.

Cliff was as honorable and as honest as any man I ever had anything to do with, Cliff Helm. And I did everything I could for him, but the thing was stacked agin' him in them days here. They was wantin' to get rid of me, too, really. They didn't want me around here. I was a little too strong in competition right then. I know who got rid of him. And they—a lot of them's died, and some of 'em has destroyed theirself in the meantime. And if they ever hear this, they'll know who I'm talkin' about, the ones still livin'. Every one of 'em's had bad luck. I think if you do anything maliciously to anybody, you gotta get paid somewhere. I believe the law of average, or the Lord, or somebody, kinda operates that.

There were so many interesting people involved in that whole case, some of those lawyers, like Claiborne.

Well, [Harry] Claiborne prosecuted him. Now, I don't blame Claiborne a damn bit. That was his business, to prosecute him. But me and Claiborne is the best friends on earth. But I don't doubt but what Claiborne— you know what I mean. I don't know where a thing like that bothers a guy. And I don't doubt but what Claiborne kinda feels bad about that. But he had bosses. We have never talked about it. And I regard Harry Claiborne as good a friend as I got. Fact of business, I'm the cause of him comin' out of that prosecutin' outfit and goin' to be a lawyer. And he's been damn good. And

I'll tell you, I think he's goin' to wind up bein' as famous a criminal lawyer as there is in the United States. He's just got to act on it. I don't know. He's just a natural.

And he's as honest as a day is long. If somebody was to give him fifteen dollars to defend 'em, and somebody offered him fifteen million to throw 'em, I don't believe he'd do it. Like a guy come and asked me one time on a deal here, come and asked me to get Claiborne to lean a little bit. "Why," I said, "I wouldn't no more say nothin' like that to him than I'd fly!" I said, "If you have a legitimate thing in here, and I knew that it was legitimate and honest, and I went and told him, I said, 'This guy's all right on this deal; you're wrong about it,' I think he'd believe it." "But," I said, "I wouldn't ask him to do a damn kinky thing, 'cause that'd end our friendship."

Did you get the lawyers for Helm?

No, Kell did. Kell got 'em. There weren't any good criminal lawyers around here then.

Ryland J. Taylor was kind of a judge type, wasn't he?

Knew the law. Absolutely knew the law, but he was a mild kind of a man. He just wasn't that type of a defender. He quoted the law, and that's all, didn't know how to really lay it down. Very fine man, Judge Taylor. There wasn't no better.

And Gubler?

Yeah, [V. Gray] Gubler's still livin', and he's just a mild, gentle man. He ain't that type of a man at all. He absolutely knows the law, but he's a civil lawyer, which has got to be down there on paper, and all, don't you see.

Did you like Judge Henderson?

Oh, Judge Henderson's the best man I ever knew.

In spite of the way this trial went?

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Well, he conducted the trial fairly. There wasn't nothin' on his part that—. It's just a kind of a stacked jury.

Was this Helm case damaging to you in your business and because of your connections?

I'll tell you what. Actually, I never did recognize damagin'. I never did give a damn about damagin'. I just kinda kept a-rollin'. I don't look back. Old guy told me one time, said, "Don't never look back, or holler 'Whoa' in a bad place.

There was a very interesting little item in the newspapers during the Helm trial, saying that a high official in Texas had contacted the Nevada governor's office, trying to intervene in this trial for clemency. Do you know anything about that?

Probably do.

Do you have anything that you'd say about it?

No.

"The official had been contacted by a political power in the state of Texas who is intervening in behalf of Helm. It was understood that the political power had been enlisted by local residents who are quite well known."

That was me. That had to be me. But I don't care to elaborate on it. I had a lot of very

high, influential friends in Texas, and it wasn't no money thing. It was friends.

That's mostly the way political influence works, isn't it?

No, you can buy it. But when you buy it, it ain't worth a damn. If you don't get it through friendship, it ain't worth two bits.

It was just about the same time that all of this happened that the Noble killing was going on.

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I never had nothin' to do with the Noble killin'. The Texas Rangers, and the FBI, and the whole works know that I didn't have nothin' to do with the Noble killin'. It wouldn't've took me a halt hour to kill Noble, it I'd've wanted to kill him.

He apparently wanted to kill you.

He wanted to kill me, but he didn't have no chance to kill me. There's been a lot of 'em wanted to kill me, but they missed.

Why would he have wanted to kill you?

He was a damn fool. Somebody else doin' somethin' to him, he thought it was me, and I just never did say nothin'.

In The Green Felt Jungle there's a big, long section about this Noble killing, and I thought maybe you wanted to say something.

Well, you know about them things. There's a little stuff in *The Green Felt Jungle* that they got from records. And there's a damn lot that ain't, you know. It's always a—-. Anywhere there's smoke, is a little bit of fire. I've done nothin' to *no*body that I didn't think it was goin' to do me some bodily harm. There's no way in the world I'd harm anybody for any amount of money. But if anybody goes to talkin' about doin' me bodily harm, or my family bodily harm, I'm very capable, thank God, for really takin' care of 'em in a *most* artistic way. And I'm still very capable. I don't have to hire nobody to do none of my dirty work. That sounds a little bit like braggin', but if they don't think that I can do it, well, just let 'em come on.

Is there any reason why anyone would want to?

Well, people get jealous, and there's that—. Now, I was never jealous of nobody, and I never was money hungry. And like I say, I never got mad at a man for owin' me. Hell, it was *my* fault if he owed me. I didn't have to let him have it. If I'm goin' to get mad at anybody, get mad at myself! You can't find a human bein' that ever owed me a gamblin' debt, or anything, that I ever said a cross word to. And I've got most of the money.

And I'll bet you feel pretty good about it, too.

Oh, yeah. Sure. That was the guy, standin' right here awhile ago, that I told him that don't get no more money. And he was very friendly about it, wasn't he? He's just hot, he just—. They're just like children; you say, "No, you wait 'till lunch." Say, "We don't eat between meals." Some of them guys like that, you know. You can talk to 'em, and reason with 'em, and cool 'em down. He's just hot, right now, to play, don't you see, but he knows he shouldn't.

Now, I've damaged a lot of people, lettin' 'em have money over the years. I let 'em have the money because I liked 'em, and I felt like that they might take the money and get even, this, that, and the other, when they was already overboard. I've drowned some of 'em,

and I learnt better'n that. I never begrudge anybody when they win.

If they win honestly.

Sure! It they win dishonest, it don't make no difference to me. I just get rid of 'em, pull 'em up, and I don't blame a man from comin' in off the street, there, and tryin' to cheat you. That's his business, Of course, if he can, he gets by with it. If he don't get by with it, well, I'll learn somethin' from him, if I catch him. I learn, "Don't—don't—. Look out for *this* next time."

Is there anything more you want to say about the Helm case?

No, nothin' more. He was a *good* guy, and if he was livin', he'd be right with me right now. And a good cowboy, good blacksmith. Son of a gun could do any damn thing. And a good cook, and a good hunter, good fisherman—just do anything, Cliff Helm.

Another thing that happened quite early in your operation of the Las Vegas Club, before the Westerner, was the time that the kid got up on the telephone pole and cut the wire.

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Anyhow, I came in there, and they were in a big argument, and the fellow's got the ticket, there, wrote out that—just like you throw a ticket in there, like you'd put a chip in the window and get the money. And they says, "Here, he's got this ticket, here, and," said, "we're not goin' to pay him."

"Well," I says, "why?"

And they says, "Well, he cut the wires."

I said, "You got any proof he cut the wire?"

Said, "No."

"Well," I said, "pay him."

So they paid him. If they was dumb enough to get the wires cut and get the first pass, they should pay him. Just don't do that no more.

A bunch of guys went to jail over that.

No, not over that one, I don't think. If they did, I never did go to no court on it. I ain't never been sued, and ain't never sued nobody. I ain't never been to the courthouse about nothin'.

Ol' Kell wasn't one to go to the courthouse, either.

I say, this thing you're talkin' about, there, I don't remember [that] at all. They did it to the Golden Nugget one time, and I don't remember too much about it. But the one at the Las Vegas Club, it was only $1,300 involved, and I know the people that's in on it. Them things is so minor to me, gettin' cheated. What the hell, I've been cheated thousands of times.

Just that it makes the newspapers, and the newspapers make a big thing of it.]

Yeah, but I never did say nothin' to no newspaper, or nothin', about gettin' cheated. What the hell, I'll get cheated today, chances are, in some kind of way. So it just doesn't bother me.

What other kinds of cheating things were current in the middle '40's?

Oh, there was a lot in them days—you don't see too much of it any more—guys that could hold out the cards on the "Twenty-One", and come back in with 'em, this, that, and the other, and make 'em a hand, this, that, and the other. And they crimped the cards on the "Twenty-One", and didn't have that counter

bunch to—. The counter is gettin' smarter. They've got to where they don't try to win no big amount of money. They jus' go around and kinda nibble you. You know, you never feel gettin' nibbled on 'til they bite you. So they's a certain amount of that counters around, now, that gets by without bein' detected.

Then the slot cheaters, which I don't know a thing about—I never did care nothin' about slot machines, and I never was one to—. A lot of people regards em as being money-makers, but I would never want to depend on a slot machine to make a livin'.

I depend on the dice to make a livin'. And I can go anywhere in the United States, almost, and make a livin' with the dice, if I had to, 'cause I could hustle up some players, and get in a room, and play with 'em. All you got to have is some square dice and a big bankroll, and some men that can deal. And I got two sons can do that, if we had to.

Did they try to bring dice in on you in the early '40's?

Yeah, but I've always had some guys around that was good dice men. And I know a good dice man. You know, I know enough about that. I know a good dice man. They ain't a livin' human on earth that can't be cheated on the cards, over and over again. There's always somebody comin' up with somethin' on cards.

But not on dice?

Oh, dice—if you keep your eyes on them dice, and you know 'em by the way they act, and all this, that, and the other, dice is damn hard to cheat. But I think, eventually, they'll come up with some new ways, all this electronics, and all this stuff. They may come up with some ways someday to give you some trouble with the dice. But as long as you watch them dice, and see that they don't get out of—you know, that they don't switch 'em on you.

Did they try doing that in the Las Vegas Club?

No, I don't think we ever had any dice trouble in the Las Vegas Club.

Any other kind of—?

Not too much, not too much. Just that one instance there. Naturally, some of your dealers steal a little once in awhile, you know. It's to be expected.

You know what keeps the people honest?

Fear of getting caught?

No. The biggest coward on earth would steal. His own self-respect. If a man don't have respect for himself, he'll steal, the way I believe it. And there's more people got respect for theirself than don't. If they didn't have, you couldn't operate, I don't think.

Fear will not keep 'em from stealin'. I've caught 'em, seen 'em, have 'em lay down on the floor, say "Kill me! I'm a dog. I'm no good." Damn near killed some of 'em, too [laughs]. Just kick hell out of 'em, just for bein' a dog.

You want to tell about building the Westerner?

Oh, yeah. It was a lot of fun. That's the first place I'd ever built. And them days, you'd get good workmen, and, you know, it was a pleasure. But nowadays, it's a hassle, you know. Some of the subcontractors don't get paid, and all this, that, and the other. It's a thing I'd hate to go through with. But them days, even when I built the Westerner, things

weren't so high, and you could kinda trust people. And they took a pride in their work.

Why did you want to build another club at that time?

Well, I just—there was a old lady by the name of Horton. She owned this buildin', and her husband had been a old gambler. And she'd been raised that way, and she talked that type of talk I liked, and I just kinda liked her, and just more or less built the thing. The reason I named it the Westerner, I mostly named it for her. She told me about ridin' a mule in here, and all this, that, and the other damn stuff, you know. And I just named it the Westerner. I really was namin' it for her.

How was it different from the Las Vegas Club?

Well, it's just decorated different, just decorated it western style, you know.

You had some different partners this time.

Yeah, I had some partners in that, which I don't like too much. You can't get too damn many partners. Just like bosses around a place. If you get too damn many bosses, it messes up. They get jealous of each other, and this, that, and the other. I have very little of that trouble.

Emilio Giorgetti was your partner at that time. What was he like? Was he a good gambler?

Well, yes, he was. But he had some people he wanted to work that I didn't like too much, so I just sold out to him.

Why didn't you like them?

They just weren't the type of people I like.

Good gamblers, bad gamblers, too political, not political enough?

Too political. The whole thing was too political to suit me at that time. And I didn't care, nohow.

You were having some licensing problems at that time.

Yeah, I had some licensing problems. I never did worry too much about that, either. Like I told you awhile ago, as long as the door's open, I never did worry too much about a license, or anything. Fact of business, I don't worry about but *one* thing. That's sickness. Sickness, you got trouble. Other things will go right away.

Mr. Houssels was trying to help you with the licensing when you went in.

Oh, yes, Mr. Houssels helped me every way possible, ever since I've been here. And if he had to, he'd roll out on that wheelchair to help me again. And if he was to call me, no matter what time it was, or where I was, I'd go help him. Any way I could.

This licensing thing in Nevada, I think, is kind of an interesting situation. A man can have hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of investment in a place, and still not be able to operate.

Well, I guess they got their reasons. I feel like that this group that's in there now, I feel like that they're sincere and honest. I ain't heard of *no*body—like you say, thousands of dollars. Well, you know damn well, a man

with thousands of dollars'd pay off, and they ain't been able to do it, it don't seem like to me. So I don't know what their reasons is, because I don't know what they've got. But I feel like that their reason is a legitimate one. And a lot of their reasons, I might overlook. Like I say, I don't trust nobody 'til they can afford it. If a guy's got all this money—most of 'em can afford it now, you see—to be all right.

With the Tax Commission at the end of the '40's, they were working pretty hard on these licenses, and having some problems internally, as well as with the industry. I just wondered if you wouldn't like to describe some of that.

Well, in my way of thinkin'—I ain't namin' 'em—but some of 'em wasn't no good. I think that Grant Sawyer, who I think's a *good* man—I think he depended on people, just like maybe President Nixon did, that wasn't doin' him as good a job as he thought they were doin' because he might've liked 'em.

In 1950, then, just about the time you were thinking about building this place, the administration changed, and Russell came in. And then there was another licensing hassle. Would you like to describe that?

Well, I think that I was gettin' some pressure put on me from somewhere, but I didn't pay too damn much attention to that. I got it open, anyhow.

Governor Russell seemed to be supporting you.

Yeah, he was, but he had some people that wasn't, see. He wasn't takin' good enough care of his people.

Did you talk to him?

No, I didn't. There's a man by the name of Bill Moffat, an old-time cattleman in the Reno area, and the Elko area, fine a man as I ever knew. Russell's father worked for him. And he talked to him in my behalf.

I think Russell's a honest man. But I'll tell you, them guys, they get so damn busy campaignin', doin' this, that, and the other, and they hire some bad men, and they don't recognize 'em, and they get 'em in trouble. But I think that Governor O'Callaghan has got a knack that he must know this type of folks, and I don't believe he's got it.

Well, these people in gambling regulation, in the Tax Commission, were they on the take?

Yeah, they've been some on take. They was on the take. And I have never paid nobody since I've been here. This is legitimate, and I don't feel like I owe anybody anything. I've contributed to a lot of campaigns, but just outright bribe somebody, I've never done it. I've bribed many a man in my day. But not here.

I was wondering about what you meant about the Tax Commission people. You've been a little oblique, not really very specific about what you meant, whether they asked for bribes, or whether they—?

There would've been some you could've bribed, if you'd wanted to, but I wouldn't give 'em nothin'.

The investigators, the top people, the—?

Yeah. Everybody knows who they were. That, you cannot hide. It shows through.

Would you just sort of describe the Westerner, and the operations there, what kinds of special problems you had?

Well, I didn't have too much of a special problem. I guess I've just been the boss, runnin' these things with success so damn long, that if a guy ain't just absolutely my type of a man, like Kell Houssels, I couldn't hardly be in partners with him, you know. And I'm kinda free-wheelin', and sorta like the old sayin', of bread cast upon the water come back. And if some guy loses his money, and I think he's went kinda overboard, or somethin', I might give him somethin' back, and all this, that, and the other, don't you know. There s a lot of people don't understand that, so I don't have anybody in here to contend with but my family. Whatever my sons do, I say nothing about it. Whatever my wife does, I don't say nothin' about it. And whatever I do, and if they think it's wrong, they never mention it. That's just the way we do business.

Giorgetti sort of didn't come out too well, himself.

No. We all make mistakes, and you have to profit by them.

What kinds of mistakes would you think that you made with the Westerner?

Oh, I didn't make any mistakes there, in *my* way of thinkin'. Just a—I'm just more of a liberal type of man. I'm no what you'd call a real businessman. I'm just a gambler. I'm not a businessman, you know. And a lot of people look at when they get ahold of the money, it's theirs. Well, hell, I'm liable to give some of it back, or throw it up and run out from under it.

Well, there ain't much more to say about the Westerner. Like I say, I was kinda politically, and this, that, and the other, kinda got in there with partners that was recommended by somebody, and I just didn't like it, and I got out, that's all. And I didn't care that much about it, nohow.

But you expected it to work better than the Las Vegas Club?

No, no, I didn't expect it to work any better than the Las Vegas Club. The Las Vegas Club was a damn good operation. We got along good there. But Kell owned that building across the street, and he had a chance to sell that Las Vegas Club, and put it in his building that he owned over there. He didn't own this building, and so it was agreeable with all of us that he do that. So we all just cut the bankroll up and walked off.

We made the biggest winnin' there, maybe that's been made around here off of one man at one time; we won $470,000 off of a fellow there one day. And back in them days, that was a whole lot of damn money!

Tell me about it.

Oh, it was a fellow, the one I told you I sent three hundred to the other day. And I'm still givin' him money [laughing], and the rest of 'em don't. I bet I've give him back $50,000.

Well, what about describing that day?

Oh, it was the most talked about thing you ever seen around here. The guy played so long, and his feet got tired, and he sat down. I used to drink a little, not much. But anyhow, we was havin' a little whoop-de-do around there, and I had the porters to wash his feet with a tub, and cold beer, and all such and stuff.

Lots of people standing around?

Oh, my God, yeah. It was the talk of the town.

People coming in, and—?

Oh, yeah. He bet $40,000 on one roll. That's the most I've seen bet on a roll around.

Were you ever in any danger of losing your own?

Oh, yeah! Yeah. He was off, about a $300,000 winner one time.

Did that worry you?

No. If it worried me, I wouldn't've done it. If any part of a gamblin' house worried me—. All of 'em'll tell you here that a man'd be up there and be a $100,000 winner, and I'd be a-settin' back here and wouldn't even move. It I don't feel I got the men up there—I'm asleep a lot of times, but if I don't feel I got the men up there to look after it I'm in a hell of a shape.

So it was just kind of like a big party? Anybody else playing with you?

Oh, yeah. There was a lot of players there. Any time there's a high roller around a game like that, it'll fill up.

A real big crowd.

Oh, yeah, a big crowd. It's still talked about. That game'll be remembered forever.

How about some of the other high rollers? Anybody ever come in and try to take you?

What do you mean, try to take you? They *all* try to take you.

The big gamblers, the high rollers, not the ones who just mistakenly win a little bit.

Oh, yeah. They don't mistakenly win. I'll tell you what. If a man walks in, and the dice is passin', he's goin' to win. If he walks in and the dice is missin', he' s goin' to lose. Fact of business, a player, some of 'em, can manage their money a little better than others, but the player, or the house, either one, don't have a whole lot to do with it. Them dice just run in cycles.

Do you remember any other real exciting times in the Westerner?

Oh, yes. There's a fellow came in there one time, and he wanted to gamble high. And he said, "flow do I know I'm goin' to get paid?"

"Well," I says, "I'll take you back there and show you how you're goin' to get paid."

I took him back there and showed him a lot of money. And he lost $90,000. But he was a man that played a lot, went up and down. He won a lot of times, and he lost a lot of times. But I don't know how he came out overall. He was from Los Angeles. I wouldn't care to mention his name without his permission. I don't like to mention nobody's name without permission, or somebody that I know personally, they don't care.

Did you tell Mr. Houssels you were going to do this?

He didn't give a damn. He never said a word about nothin' that happened. Fact of business, he wasn't around there too much. He had a bunch of race horses, and he was a—.

So we're up to about 1950 in Las Vegas gambling. How about talking about other things that were going on in Las Vegas between '46 and '50? I mean, before you built the Horseshoe. What was the cultural life, things that you had to do, civic affairs—?

Well, I never took no part in no civic affairs, never did belong to no organizations, anything like that. I just ain't that type of guy. Just like I was late on you this mornin'. I want to live a kind of a carefree life. I don't like too many appointments, and I don't like to be nowhere at a certain time. But culture, I don't know what that means, really.

I thought you had been active in organizing things like the Helldorado.

Oh, the Helldorado's been goin' on a long time, before I ever came here. Well, no, I never had a thing in the world to do with it. I've always contributed to it, and boosted it, and done everything I could, always buy a block of tickets, and everything, every year, give 'em away, make friends. They enjoy it very much. I like to contribute to what I think's a worthy thing. But most of these damn things you contribute to nowadays, there's too damn much taken out before it gets to the people. I don't like that. Well, I do a lot—I never turn a hungry man away from here. A guy comes in and tells me he's hungry, he's goin' to get fed. And a lot of that kind of stuff, I do it on my own, give people a room, and feed 'em, or somethin', 'til their money can get here. Some of 'em lie, and some of 'em's on the square. If they lie, I throw them out. Hope it's rainin' when I throw one of 'em out if he lies to me.

How about the politicians around here? I mean, up to 1950, the ones who were in office when you came.

The old-time politicians, when I come here, in the city, were *really* all right, classy kind of guys. But I don't think they knew too much about the progress. They was kinda like me: they couldn't believe it. I believe that. They couldn't see that far ahead. Well, I don't know whether anybody else could, or not. But they was a pretty good bunch of men. Now, there's been some get in here, now, that ain't too hotsy, I don't hardly think, but as a whole, they're sure as heck all right. Like I said before, the law enforcing here has always been honest and tops. Of course, they've let little ol' things go, which I was in favor of.

Like what?

Oh, like the girls, and this, that, and the other. But any serious crimes, or anything, they been right on top of it, and handled it very good, I think.

Well, do you think that, for example, prostitution is a problem here?

No, I don't think it's ever been too much of a problem. I'm kinda like—there was a most respected preacher there ever was in Texas, name of Dr. George Truett. And they had prostitution in Dallas years ago, I can remember, and they was tryin' to close it. He had the biggest congregation in the state, in Dallas. And one time on Sunday, he was—I'm a Catholic, but he was a Methodist. I still respect him. He said that prostitution was a necessary evil, and I kinda feel that way about it, if it *is* a evil. I don't know why in hell it's evil, or not. He did, but I don't.

Did the girls come into the Westerner or the Las Vegas Club?

Well, hell, I can't even recognize em! I guess there's some of 'em in here now [laughs]

I just wondered, you know, whether they were hustling the customers.

No, no, no, they don't do that. They're not that floozie type any more, by God. You can't tell 'em from nobody else.

And was that true in the '40's and '50's?

Used to, they was like gamblers or cowboys; they wanted to dress, like they wanted to advertise.

You haven't said anything about the Air Force base and its effect on local business, entertainment business, in those early years.

Well, naturally, a payroll helps anything. But I don't know what effect it's had around here, never paid that much attention to it.

Well, you used to see more guys in uniform.

Yeah, but they don't require em to wear a uniform any more. They used to require 'em to wear it, didn't they? Now, you can't tell 'em from nobody else. Hell, there's liable to be thousands of 'em and it's—. In the Air Force that I never did even know, you know. But when I first came here, they wore the uniform.

One little fellow, he came in here, and he was in the Air Force when I first came here, and he was nineteen. And I used to let him drink in here, in his uniform. And since then, he's been all over the world. He's been to Korea, Vietnam—everywhere. He's got braid all over him, and he ain't never had a scratch. And he used to when he'd—he'd always come back by and see me. And he came in the other day, and told me he's goin' to retire. It makes me feel good that he thought of me all this time.

Do you have a lot of customers like that, that you remember from the early days?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes, a lot of 'em.

Do you want to describe some?

Oh, I don't know hardly how to describe 'em, but there's just people that come and go all the time, and come in and say, "Well, I ain't seen you—." Oh, I'll tell you a story that happened to me the other day, that I got a kick out of it.

When I got in tax trouble, I was in Reno, in jail, for a few days one time, and they put me in the women's ward, which had solid doors there, and I was locked up in the cell. And there's two little ol' girls in the next cell to me that stole a automobile in Kansas City and came out here. They was fifteen years old. So I knew, from their conversations, that they never were goin' to get in no more trouble. So I sent word to the judge to turn 'em loose and send 'em home, and I'd pay for it, if they didn't have the money. So when they came up before him, he asked 'em, says, "Do you girls have the money to go home?" One of 'em said she did, and the other one said she didn't. "Well," he says, "I'm goin' to turn you loose," and give 'em a little talkin', and sent 'em home. And he paid this other girl's thing, and never did let me pay it, hisself.

And the other day, I got a call on the phone from a girl. She told 'em her name, and she said, "You did me the greatest favor—" They woke up; these girls wised up to what happened to 'em, you see. They didn't really know. They knew I was over there, and I sent 'em food through a—they had a hole in the door. The guy'd bring me food, and I'd have them bring them food, and poke it through there to 'em. So they wised up over the years and they had some help. So this girl said, "You did me the greatest favor that anybody ever did me, and I want to see you and thank you."

Well, she's working' here in town for a lawyer, and been here four years. She's got a sixteen-year-old son.

And the last thing I heard 'em say, when they left— they had a front cell, where you could see out on the street. And when they went out, takin' 'em to court, said, "Ol' Benny'll have our cell when we get back," said, "the dirty ol' son of a bitch."

And that's—I got a big kick out of that! [Laughing] I'm gettin' 'em out of jail, and—. I *did* get their cell. But they didn't come back. So that made me feel good, to think that he wasn't mistaken about 'em. Of course, he had 'em talk over there for several days, and by God, they'd had it! They didn't want no more of that!

I don't imagine it takes very many times to make you not want any more of that.

No, I'll tell you what I honestly believe. I know they'll never do it. You take like when a kid gets in trouble. Instead of puttin' 'em in jail with other people, where they can talk to people, and pacify theirself, if they put every one of 'em in solitary confinement, like that, and just a iron door there, and you couldn't see nobody—about a few days of that would do it. But, of course, they get in there and pop off, and entertain theirself, you know, it's different, and they get to where they don't mind it. But this here people talkin' about rehabilitation, and all this, that, and the other, I don't think they know the first word about rehabilitation.

Las Vegas has always been known for strange characters, and I was wondering if you would like to talk about some of those first few years when you were here.

Well, Nick the Greek, he was the strangest character I ever seen. Nobody never knew where he got that money. And after he ran out of money, he used to come down here of f the Strip. The Dunes give him a room. And he's come down here to eat, and he'd ride the bus, Well, he didn't want nobody to know he's rode the bus. So when I know he'd be gettin' about ready to go back, I'd say, "Say, Nick." I says, "So-and-so's goin' out on the Strip to pick up some money, or somethin'. You want a ride?"

"Yeah."

I'd send him out there, don't you see.

So now, his sister died. And he came in here, and I never seen him even show no remorse at all, and he set, and he cried, tellin' me. And he said that he had wasted his life, and just, "Yah, yah, yah." So now, while I got him broke down, I told him, I said, "Nick," I said, "for Christ sake, tell me where you got that money. And," I says, "if I outlive you, I'll tell it, but if I don't outlive you, it won't never go no further. I'll *never* tell it," and he got to laughin'. He never did tell me. And there don't nobody know.

But he was a kinky ol' guy. He'd put a snake in your pocket and ask you for a match. He was hard to stay even with. One day a guy beat him out of a five hundred and somethin' thousand dollars playin' poker. So he was give out, and I went with him to get the money to take back to give to the guy. And I said, "My God, this is a lot of money to give to a man!"

He said, "My life don't go with it," and he was pullin' his clothes off to go to bed.

And he had that money in a old chest in his room, and it wasn't even locked, down under some clothes.

Let me see. Who else might've been around here? But he was the most outstanding one of all times. And there was another heck of a character around here named Joe Bernstein, that's been a gambler all his life, never done nothin' else. And he won a lot of money, about $800,000, here, a year or two

ago, and he blowed it all back, and his health was gettin' bad. I been up at Duke University, and I knew that doctor up there was doin' some good, and he had $6,000. And I told him, I says, "For Christ sake, why don't you go up there to that doctor and get yourself straightened out?" He was gettin' some age on him, seventy-somethin'.

He says, "I don't have the money. The money's only for gamblin' ."

Well, when he had all that money, he's buy some clothes every day, dress up. He was a dressy kind of ol' guy. So he came down here one night. He had a nice-lookin' sport coat on. He says, "You like this coat?"

I says, "It looks very nice on you."

He says, "That's the first time I've wore any."

I said, "My God, you don't wear 'em twice, do you?" And he got a big kick out of that.

Then there was another character around here. He had a nickname, "Nigger Nate." He's a dark guy, he's a Jewish guy. So he had been a old-time gambler, always. Joe Bernstein, and Titanic Thompson, and Nigger Nate was here durin' the poker tournament two years ago, and they was the last three men livin' that was in the room in New York at that famous Rothstein killin'. They was in the room when he was killed.

So Nigger Nate—you know, you got to where you didn't say "nigger," which I don't think's too bad—it's just a slang word from the South. I never did think nothin' about it, and I been around a lot of colored people that didn't think nothin' about it. But anyhow, I says to Nigger Nate one day, I says, "I'm goin' to have to change your name. Can't call you Nigger Nate no more."

He says, "Whatcha goin' to change it to?"

I says, "The 'Black Panther.'"

So [laughing] he left here. He kinda liked it, you know. He got a kick out of it, but acted like he didn't like it. So now, he goes to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and the name had already followed him down there. He called me back, and said, "Now, you've hung another moniker on me!"

And then, like Willie Alderman, you know. They had that "Ice Pick Willie" named on him, you know, don't you see, but I don't believe all that stuff. He was the nicest, kindest-hearted man—I don't know anything about his past. From the time I knew him when he was here, I never knew a kinder-hearted man than him.

Then there's another one, Dave Berman, that they said did this, that, and the other, and he was another high-class guy. And actually, when I walked in the Riviera after he died, I just always been used to seem' him, and liked him, and tears came into my eyes. I just kinda choked up.

And there's another one got killed down there at Phoenix, Gus Greenbaum, that I never heard of him ever turnin' anybody down for any charitable thing, or anything like that. Good man.

I have no idea why he was killed. But he was, in my way of thinkin', he was just a heck of a good man. Oh, hell, he was the best guy! He just was—just was no foolin' about it, you know, just—anything is all right. He was *there*.

How about Ben Siegel? He came the same year you did.

I barely knew him. But, actually, he was another one, most accommodating, most likable fellow, had the best personality you ever seen. And if he was a bad guy, he damn sure didn't show it from the outside.

He was a real good-looking guy.

Yeah. There's no doubt he was kind of a—would've been on a rough order.

The way he ended up, you might guess that.

Yeah. Well, you never know what happened.

You haven't mentioned Doby Doc (Robert Caudill).

Oh, Doby Doc! My God, don't let him go! Well, Doby Doc's just the damnedest character you ever seen. He came to Nevada in 1906, and just picked up junk, you might say, and run it into a fortune, just a hobby with him. Just a— he's a kind of a pack rat.

One time, at—Elko had the first entertainment in Nevada, was the way Doby told me. 01' man Crumley did it. You see, Elko used to get more publicity than any place in Nevada, through old man Crumley. And he was just a kind of a—come here as a kind of a saddle blanket gambler. He was a cowboy. And one time, Sophie Tucker was up there. She went out there to Doby Doc's to see all of his junk, and don't let him hear I call it junk. So Sophie Tucker says, "Doby, give me a souvenir.

He says, "There's a eighty-pound anvil you can have. Just pick it up."

Doby Doc worked for Mr. Moffat, I was tallin' you about early. He was a bookkeeper. He was a very smart man; Doby Doc'd been to college, and all this, that, and the other, before he came here. So he got to be a damn old man. He come here in 1906, and done been to college; I don't know how old he is. So one time ol' man Moffat lost $10,000,000 on the wool market. He cornered the wool market. So the telegram came, he'd lost $10,000,000. Well, Doby Doc's openin' the mail—they was settin' across the desk from each other, and Doby Doc just kinda froze up. Ol' man Moffat says, "What the hell's the matter, Doby?" He's scared to tell him, 'fraid he'd have a heart attack, or somethin'. Pitched him the telegram, he raised himself, "Hell," says, "I thought some friend had died!" That's a absolute true story.

Mr. Moffat must've been quite a character, himself.

Oh, my God, what a character he was! They can't too much be said about him that he was just great. Smarter 'n a whip. After he got to be a old man, after I came here, all these cattle that come from Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, and he shipped 'em a killin' plant out there, and everything— and he worked a hundred and eight cars of cattle in Reno. He'd have all these cattle unloaded to Reno, and he lived there, you see. And he'd ship 'em the way he wanted 'em to go, to different places in California. And they said, by God, when he'd get down there in California, if there'd be four bulls that he didn't see, he'd say, "Where's them bulls, so-and-so?" Recognize 'em. I know he's go t to be the smartest cow man that ever lived in the United States.

And there was another character when I came here, called Diamondfield Jack, Diamondfield Jack Davis. And a car run over him, and caused him to have uremic poisinin'. His kidneys quit workin', killed him. So there's a nurse here in town named Mrs. Kennedy, and she knew I knew old Jack, and knew he didn't have no folks, so she called me up, and said, "He's goin' to die, so come out here."

So I went out there, and she said, "Talk to him."

So I went in there, and I didn't know what to say, and I said, "Jack," I said, "Say, Jack." I said, "They seem to think you might be in a

dyin' condition around here. What do you think?"

He says, "Hell, no!" He said, "Die, die!" He said, "Hell, no, I won't die!" And he died that night, and he didn't tell me nothin'.

And one mistake I made—he wanted me to get a girl [stenographer] and write a story, and me keep it. And if I'd've done it, I'd've had some kind of a story! You know, it come out in *Life* magazine about him bein' Governor Sparks's man, and all this, that, and the other, after that. I'd've had a hell of a story! But I didn't do it. I never was no hand at believin' that story stuff, much, so I guess it's all right. But I never did give a damn about it much, never did believe half of it.

I think you could probably believe just about anything you ever heard about Diamondfield Jack.

Oh, I think so. Oh, it's true. There's a lot of that stuff he told me was true. Great personality. He used to come out to the house. So my youngest daughter was a little girl, and he wanted her to sit on his knee. And she wouldn't do it. She told us, "He stinks." Well, naturally, we says, "Aw," you know, "he don't stink." So ol' Diamondfield Jack come out there one time. She walked over there to be sure, and she took a smell of him, and said, "Come here and smell of him." He got the damnedest kick out of that!

There's a character in town right now. His name's Indian Jack. He's livin' in a rest home over at Danville, California right now. He's a hundred and one years old, and his mind is real good, but he's blind, almost. He can just see shadows. So he's been a rodeo cowboy, and a cowboy, followed the rodeos all the time, and that's what he came here for, to the rodeo, and to see me.

Yeah, so now, Indian Jack came here awhile back, before this, and he comes over here every once in awhile, gets tired over there, you know, but it's a good climate for him, and everything, so leave him over there. So I had the news [paper reporter] to come down here and interview him. So you know how they ask these ol' guys, "What do you attribute your long life to?" So they asked Jack—and he'd drank whiskey, and been a old dirty reprobate all his life—so he says, "Him!" pointed up to the sky, you know. Says, "He can pull the string anytime He wants to!" You know, you used to pull the string and turn the light out.

So I thought that was very cute.

How about some of the women characters?

Oh, there was one around here that called herself—what was it? Madam Rainwater, or some rainwater thing. Indian-lookin' woman, all dressed up Indian style. She was the damnedest character you ever seen. Everybody knew her in town, and I don't know who she was, don't remember that much about her.

How about some of the old-timers around here? Did they accept you when you came in?

Yeah, yeah, they did. They did. There was a couple around here called Mom and Pop Squires. They been here for— God a'mighty. I think they'd been married sixty-seven years, and they was kind of newspaper people, and the *very finest* people I ever knew. They just had a lot of pep for their age, and everybody liked 'em, and they liked everybody, you know, just real people.

Well, I really think I was accepted very well by the townspeople. Some of the gamblers

might've not liked it at that time. Some of 'em was a little bit on the jealous order, and I made it a little rough on 'em, kinda playin' high, and this, that, and the other, around here, which I didn't give a damn about them.

This is just the beginning of the building boom period, at the end of the 1940's. You were not having your only business in Las Vegas at that time.

No, I've got a ranch in Montana, and had it for, oh, thirty, thirty-three years, I've been up there with that ranch.

I was thinking of the out-of-state business, like the partnership with Paul Harvey (in Texas).

Yeah, I was in the gamblin' business down there with them, but I more or less just staked 'em. They run out of money. When they paid me back, I cut out. I didn't have nothin' to do with it, didn't even have nothin' to do with it. I just sent somebody there to represent me, and that was all there was to it.

We have a place here for a summary, if you want to, of those first four or five years in Las Vegas, what it meant to you, what you learned, how you reacted to your sort of "initiation" of those first few years.

Oh, all right! All right. And naturally, I learnt somethin'. You learn a little somethin' every day. You might not recognize it, but you do. You learn a little somethin' every day, I think. Don't you? When you quit learnin', I think your damn light's went out.

3

Benny Binion's Golden Horseshoe

You were just going to describe the beginnings of the Horseshoe, and the decision to build it..

Well, yeah, yeah, all right. When I took the Horseshoe, I wouldn't've took it, but I really didn't know what I wanted to do at that time. I didn't care whether I did anything right then or not, So now, the El Dorado Club had a $870,000 tax loss, which was very attractive. So I took it, and I built the thing here. And I put the first carpet on the floor here in the Horseshoe that was ever downtown. Everybody said that wasn't no good, but it was. Everybody's got 'em now. So I just did it through accident, I guess. So the carpet cost $18,000. And the fellow that put the carpet in, well, he was a player, and the first night he played, I won $18,000, exactly. So I win the carpet [laughs].

So I put my oldest son in (he was about twenty-one then) runnin' the darn thing, you might say. Well, I had 'em to deal all the games, them boys, Jack and Ted. They learned to deal all the games so they'd know what it was all about. And each one of 'em when they become twenty-one, I put 'em in as a boss. They just as well learn early as late, you know. And they've done very damn good. They still mind me just like they was six-year-olds. Now that the kids got bigger, and nothin' for my wife to stay at home for, well, she come in here. She's pretty good with figures. She looks after books, and the money, and all this, that, and the other. Everybody has to work nowadays to make a livin'. So the Horseshoe has been a very good place for me.

So I got in tax trouble, as you know, and went to the penitentiary , and Joe Brown come here and held it together for me.

And we had the Fremont in here, you know, the Fremont group. Through hook or crook, I got it back a hundred percent a good many years ago, and remodeled it. Everything is paid, don't owe nobody nothin'. But I been here all these years, ain't nobody ever stuck a bill in my window no twenty-tour hours a day, didn't get paid. I ain't obligated to no purveyor or nobody. I paid every damn thing.

Tell me about the design of the Horseshoe, and how you decided to do it.

Well, my wife did that. My wife designed this Horseshoe. And I think she did a very good job, and it's had a lot of comment on it. I don't know nothin' about designin' nothin' like that. Hell, all I want's four walls and crap tables, and a roof to keep the rain off, and the air condition to keep people comfortable. Got to have that, you know. And I like good food and a clean kitchen. My kitchens get dirty, I'd call the health department. They'll straighten 'em up pretty quick.

Tell me about some of your partners. You had Nick, the Greek, you had Doby Doc as partners, you had Eddie Levinson as a partner. I think it'd be nice for you to describe these people.

Yeah, but actually, when Ed Levinson was in here, I didn't have anything to do with the management. I just had a foot in the door then. But I finally got all the way in.

He was a competitor at one time, wasn't he?

Yeah. But he wasn't a competitor, you might say. He was all right. See, actually, if you got a fair guy around, he's not a competitor. He's your neighbor. Actually, there's no competitors around here now. We're all neighbors. We don't try to do anything to hurt the other one. Anything that hurts one hurts all. You've got to have things—this downtown thing, and the Strip, too, got to kinda pull together.

Tell me about the opening of the Horseshoe.

Well, the openin' of the Horseshoe, they weren't too high a play around then, so the first night, the openin' of the Horseshoe, me and my wife went home about four o'clock in the morning, and when we left, we was $96,000 losers. So I went home and slept 'til two o'clock the next day or somethin' like that, come back down here, and hell, we was a hundred and some-odd thousand dollars winners! So I ain't never been in no tight since.

'Course, I got in that tax trouble. I got whacked around pretty good. Cost me about $5,000,000, so I had to have some help. So I had to sell this, and do that, you know. Had that ranch in Montana, and never did have to put no plastering in it. But when I was in the penitentiary, and come a drouth, and had to sell all the cows, they lost about $500,000, too. So them things—. But everybody stayed healthy, so it didn't make a damn bit of difference.

Well, that tax trouble, it was really more than that, wasn't it?

Oh, the heat just built up on me, and just—I didn't have no way to duck, it don't seem like.

Who was after you in Texas? Do you know?

Yeah, I know.

Do you know why they were after you?

Politically. He's worse off 'n I am right now. He's in a hell of a lot of trouble with a big scandal thing.

And they're still there?

Yeah, he's a no good son of a gun, and a thief. And I am 't. So can I say anything else bad about him?

Well, the way I follow the trial, through the newspapers, it looked as though you might have been able to stay out of the penitentiary, if it hadn't been for the thing in Texas.

Oh, yes, I could, and I could've beat this damn case if I hadn't got tricked into pleadin' guilty, but there ain 't no use to go into that too much. I got tricked all the way around by the government. See, the government ain't been all right. I think eventually, it will be all right, but you can see what's goin' on right now. The damn government's been gettin' bad for a good many years. They'd put it on you.

Now, I only had a civil suit, and this ol' fella in Dallas, that's been in the Internal Revenue longer than anybody, his name was [Walter] Cooner. And all this tax trouble come out of Texas. So old man Cooner wanted to only have a civil case against me, and let me pay off, which absolutely was right. But they wouldn't go for it. They sent five different guys out of Washington, like them task forces, before they got me indicated. Now, when I got out of the penitentiary, I settled another case, the same as that, civilly. Same as the one I had before. Well, hell, if I'm guilty before, why ain't I guilty the second time? They'd changed a little, you know. So that's neither here nor there.

There was an article in the Las Vegas Sun. This assistant U.S. Attorney, by the name of Lester May, from Texas. It said in the Las Vegas Sun that he had been "stalking" you. And I thought that was kind of a strange use of words, and wondered if you wouldn't like to explain it.

Well, I don't remember exactly how it happened, but the whole outfit was stalkin' me. At that time, [Attorney General Herbert] Brownell went in there; he was under Eisenhower. And it was somethin' similar to things goin' on up there right now. They sent a bunch of guys to the penitentiary all over the country for income tax. I think—and I don't care—there're big people in government. I don't care for sayin' what I think about 'em. I think that that type of a man, like [John] Mitchel and them, do these things to cover up the huge gamblers, and this, that, and the other— get publicity to keep the smoke screen to cover up their own damn doin's. I believe that. Well, Brownell got kinda in a jam, Eisenhower fired him. Some kind of a nickel deal over in Cuba, or somethin' or other, he was in. Some of them guys, if they're all right, they're all right, and if they ain't, well, they just have to make some smoke screen. So I happened to get in—I was furnishin' 'em smoke. And I ain't a damn bit sorry.

I'll tell you the reason why I'm not a damn bit sorry I went to the penitentiary. I'm absolutely glad of it. When I came out of the penitentiary, my youngest daughter was walkin' funny, and my family couldn't see it. So I kept a-hollerin'. I got out in March, kept a-hollerin', "This girl don't walk right." So I just kept on, kept on. Finally, in October, my wife took her and had her x-rayed, and she had a cyst inside of her thighbone, right up close to that socket, that was all ready—'most ready to burst. If it'd've bursted, it'd shattered that bone, and ruined her leg. They'd had to cut her leg off, right at the hip. Well, to have me recognizin' this thing makes me absolutely *glad* I went to the penitentiary. So they say everything happens for the best; maybe it does. This did, anyhow. And I have no regrets, about the money, or nothin'.

You said that Joe Brown held the place together for you while you were gone. It said in the paper that he had bought it—.

Well, it was a kind of a deal.

—and then he died just about the time you got out.

Yeah, yeah. And I lost as good a friend as any man ever lost. He was a multimillionaire. He had $200,000,000, and I just welcomed any part of it, which I didn't need it. All I needed was just some help. But he got his money back. But he came, hisself, and ran this place, to be sure it was— a man that rich, come and run this place, so he was a true friend.

He really did hold it together.

You damn right he held it together.

And that was the understanding, that he was holding it together for you?

Yeah. And he got a big kick out of it. lie liked to gamble high. He'd always been a gambler. And he didn't have no gamblin' house, and liked to gamble high, and he loved it.

What was he like, to meet?

Well, he was a kind of a white man, with as kind a heart as any man on earth. Oh, he loved race horses. He liked the excitement out of them, and knew somethin' about it. One time he went to New York, before they had the pari-mutuels, and he had a horse he was goin' to run, and he wanted to make some big bets to get them bookmakers used to takin' big bets so they wouldn't flinch when he bet 'em. And he bet on some long shots, and he won $80,000 on these long shots one day. He went back the next day and betted on this damn horse, and win that one. He was a guy that when he took a notion to do somethin', he stayed with it 'till he got it done. Just like he had a oil field down there in Louisiana. And he kept a-drillin', drillin', drillin', drillin'. He'd miss, drill, and he'd miss—he just kept on, finally hit that pool, and it's the damnedest gas field in the United States, right today. His wife sold it for $47,000,000. And one time, he went broke on the cotton market. He was a hell of a cotton— you know, bought them cotton futures.

In the older days, when they used to get together, gamblers get together and shoot dice, Joe Brown was potted up, and just keep passin', just let it pile [gesturing] about ten inches high. All of 'em faded. He'd just been a high gambler all his life.

And he actually tried to do somethin' for the community. He had all that damn money. Like he bought the race track out here, and was goin' to hold it for the city, and they could pay him back, and they never did. They made a mistake. Like I say, some of them older guys in here, they couldn't see the thing, you know. He didn't want to make a quarter of f that, and finally, wind up makin' about ten, twelve million, his wife did.

Bud Albright was the manager of the Convention Center. He come to me one day and said, "Do you think you can get Mrs. Brown to give us a option on that thing to give the county a chance to vote a bond to buy it?"

I said, "Yeah!"

So we went down there, and she give us a option f or— I don't know, much, much less than it sold for, of course. And I know Bud Albright's a honest man, 'cause I could've made a deal to get some kickback, you know, and he didn't even mention it. I wouldn't've done it, anyhow, but he's a honest man, Bud Albright. He just absolutely wanted to do somethin' for the county.

So she gave us the option for nothin', and the county didn't vote it in that time.

I thought they always passed bond issues here.

No, they didn't pass this one. It was one of the mistakes they made, but—.

How about some of your other partners with the Horseshoe, some of the early ones—Monte Bernstein—?

Oh, Monte Bernstein, he held ten percent when I bought him out, and then I bought him out, you know. Everything was all right there. He just wanted to have his foot in the door. But he was the type of a man that didn't understand gamblin', flinched, holler around all the time, so I bought him out.

One of the things that I wanted to ask you about was how you choose your staff people.

Yeah, you see, how I choose my staff people. There was a lot of dealers came here from Texas with me, and there's been two or three of 'em die, but there's one of 'em still left with me, and he's sick right now, and I'm very worried about him. I think maybe [there's a] possibility he has cancer. We'll know right away. Yeah, well I'm afraid, but the tests hasn't got back yet. I guess they'll get back today. But, anyhow, all the dealers I brought here were good men, and every one of 'em s a boss out on the Strip somewhere, right now, and there ain't a one of 'em ever lost his job, or any bad thing been said about him, you know. They're just good men. So there's a lot of them kind around, and luckily, I've always had some of 'em.

And you know their reputation; they're sorta like race horses. A race horse has got a form about how he's been runnin', and these guys, got a rundown on them, about how they been conductin' theirself, and their capabilities.

These were all people that had worked for you at the Southland Hotel?

In Texas. Yeah. They was all guys that worked there.

How do you go about choosing one?

Well, like I say, their reputation, and their past, and their—just—I don't know. I just feel like I can just judge a guy. Maybe I'm foolin' myself. But my sons and wife'll tell you that every time I've ever said anybody's no good, sometime it took three or four years, or five years, for it to come out, but it always turns out that way. And you got to allow for little shortcomin's you know. There ain't nobody perfect.

You must have trained people. How do you select someone for training?

I never did train 'em. They just seem like they come trained.

Do they tell you about their training?

Well, not too much. Just like this fellow working here for us, now, is one of the—good a man as I ever knew. Everybody knows he is. He worked around lots of places, and he went down to the Islands, and he never did work for me. And he came back in here from the Islands, didn't like it down there after a few years, and I says to him, I says, "What're you goin' to do?"

He says, "I'm going to go to work."

And I says, "Where?"

He said, "Here."

I says, "When."

He says [laughing], "Right away."

I said, "Well, just whenever you get ready, come on." He's here now.

Then there's another fellow workin' here that's a real good man. He was a consultant for about three or four places, for the Sheraton Corporation. And he's gettin' older, and I guess the pressure, and all, he didn't like, so he came back here and went to work. When a man does his work here, there's no pressure. If he makes a mistake, there's nothin' said about it, because he didn't do it purposely.

Have you had any dealers turn you around?

Well, I don't expect a dealer not to turn me around. I expect the *bosses* not to turn me around. You don't know that much about the dealers. I don't call it "turning around" when you—. 'Cause there's too many of them. You just can't tell. You just got to get some bad ones along. But the big percent's all right.

Well, a pit boss, he's a trusted man, and a dealer's a trusted man, in a way, but still, he's under supervision, see. You don't really—get right down to it, you really don't trust him. If you did, you wouldn't have him under supervision. A lot of it's just for mistakes. It's not altogether just his honesty. It's just with that many men, there's just goin' to be some mistakes, and you got to have somebody there watchin' to correct 'em.

Above all, I want a man to be courteous. I don't want anybody, includin' me, or anybody, that would hurt anyone's feelin's. There's a lot of people that come in that don't know how to play. Kinda guide 'em the best you can, without lettin' 'em know you're doin' it. And it they ask you a question, answer it in a nice way.

These people who you brought with you stayed with you, then, through the Westerner, and—?

Yeah, there's quite a few of 'em there through the Westerner, but they all went to weedin' out, and goin' to the Strip, and this, that, and the other. Every time a man gets good and the Strip can get him, they'll grab him.

Was one of the reasons you got out of the Westerner, because of the competition from the Strip?

No, not at all, not at all. But like a dealer, here. When a dealer gets real good here, if he can go to the Strip, he's goin' to go to the Strip because his tips are better. And you can't blame him for that. And I'm always happy when they can get a better job. They're always your friends, you know. And you take a lot of dealers like that, somebody'll be out on the Strip, one'll play high, and it a lot of them dealers feel like that nobody'd never know he told 'em, he'll tell 'em that it's your friend, come down here.

You never had women dealers.

We've got two now. We've got one girl out there that's a "Twenty-One" dealer, just a young girl. It's the best "Twenty-One" dealer I ever seen. And we're usin' her as a pit boss some, now, just for a common novelty. But we're makin' a damn mistake usin' her for a pit boss 'cause she's too good a dealer, and she's *not* a good pit boss.

But you didn't use women dealers in the Las Vegas Club or the—?

Well, no, there just weren't any. There just weren't any women dealers. I just don't know how people would've accepted 'em in them days. There's some in Reno, don't you see, but there just weren't any here. But I think that if a woman really knows how, there would be more good "Twenty-One" dealers in women than there would men, because they can just handle their hands better. They're fast. But I

never seen what I thought was a good woman crap dealer. Their hands ain't big enough, and they can't reach.

You said you wanted to talk some more about Doby Doc, and then maybe about some of the other characters, like System Smitty (Benjamin Franklin Smith).

You're speakin' of System Smitty. He's got a system, all right, but I never have seen a system that could completely cut the percentage out. There's some of 'em got systems can help, but most of them's got systems've got a little inside help, too.

System Smitty tells in his memoirs about your having found him getting a little inside help in the Horseshoe Club, and throwing him out.*

Well, you say he said I caught him gettin' some inside help, and throwin' him out.

He claimed it wasn't inside help.

Well, probably it was. If I threw him out, it damn sure was. But I don't even remember that. There's been a lot of em.

You were going to tell me some more about Doby Doc, if you don't want to go on about System Smitty.

But anyhow, he collected all this stuff all these years, and he had it stored all—everyplace, just—you can't imagine what all he has. Now, he sold it three or tour times, they pay big money down, they'd raise the money to pay for it, and he just wound up makin' him a fortune. He got hijacked awhile back. But he had on big ol' bib overalls, and he had on a big ol' diamond ring, and he had his overalls in his boots. He slipped the ring of f and dropped it down inside the overalls, and it went in his boot. He had a big stud up on his shirt, and he hunched down like he was scared, you see, and it made the bib of the overalls come up over the stud, like this, you know [gesturing the hunching down]. They didn't see 'em. They got $4,300 off of him. First time he ever was hijacked! So I'm awful proud they didn't hurt him.

One of 'em got a little rough with him, the other says— jumped him up, but he says, "Don't hurt him." So it must've been somebody that might've knew, or somethin': they had a mask on.

How about some of the other things about Doby Doc? After all, he was your partner in the Horseshoe from the beginning.

Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. He counted the money here every eight hours for—slept between eight-hour shifts. And he ate properly, and never got tired, as you'd know, all that time, because he slept three times a day. And I never seen a man in better condition than he was. So that might be the proper way to live.

Do you want to talk some more about the operation of the Horseshoe?

Well, I could. Yeah.

Okay. How about some of the other system players? How do you feel about system players?

System player's all right with me. I welcome 'em. But I like system players with money.

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*Copy in Special Collections Department, UNLV Library

How about some of these who do it for publicity, like Scarne?

Well, now, I don't know about [John] Scarne. I just don't know that much about him. He's quite a guy in his line of business. I just don't know what Scarne might be able to do to you.

He claimed to have good system.

See, there ain't nobody can't be cheated. But I don't think there's a man livin' can cut the odds out. That [Edward] Thorp, if you deal the deck out to him, he'll beat you. But there again, his system ain't no account, because if you know what you're doin', you don't deal a deck out to him. He cuts the odds down, but he can't cut it out.

How do you handle the publicity when people like Thorp or Scarne start blasting that they've been cheated, or that they've got a system that works better than others? Do the newspapermen come to you and say, "Hey, how about it?"

I just don't pay no attention to it. I just say, "Well, I don't know what you're talkin' about," or somethin'. See, anybody like that that goes off and ballyhoos around like that, well, you just add to it if you open your mouth about it.

In other words, you don't like publicity about systems. Is that it?

Really don't.

Even though you welcome them when they think they are going to win?

Oh, yeah.

Well, is there anything more you'd like to say about these more colorful aspects of the gambling business?

Oh, I'll tell you of one that I want to mention, if you don't have anything about him, Farmer Page. Farmer Page— I don't know what the word "colorful" really means, but if there was ever a colorful gambler, he was. He knew probably more than anybody I ever knew about the gamblin' business, and about how to handle it, and was as fine a man—had no animosity towards anybody. And he ran down there in California for years. Well, he was raised on the Navajo Indian Reservation, he told me. His mother was a schoolteacher. Started to gamble with them Indians when he was a little kid, and just become a terrific man.

Ballard Barron, that I mentioned, at the Frontier Hotel, his mother—he was a older man that I was—his mother and my grandmother were great friends. We was born about thirty miles apart in Texas. He was born in Fannin County, and I was born in Grayson County. He was born in Bonham, Texas. He become a gambler at a early age. He was a real good shark card player.

In them days, they didn't play gin, this, that, and the other. Played pitch, would take the place of gin nowadays. And he was a good one. Then he wound up bein' the casino manager of the Frontier Hotel, died a few years ago with a heart attack. (I saw his widow here the other day. She came here to Mary Ann Hicks's wedding. Mary Ann Hicks was Marion Hicks's daughter. Marion Hicks built the El Cortez Hotel here, and he also built the Thunderbird. He wasn't so much of a gambler, but he was a terrific businessman.)

Then Moe Dalitz and Morris Kleinman, Tucker, McGinty they come in with Wilbur

Clark on the Desert Inn, and when Wilbur was alive, and they was all together, I don't guess there was ever a better operation anyplace than they had there, run the smoothest. They had somebody there at all times to host, took very good care of everybody. Moe Dalitz told me he was goin' to build a golf course back there. I thought that was the dumbest thing I ever seen a gambler do. But that gold course, in my way of thinkin', now, will always keep the Desert Inn a top-notch place on account of that golf course right in their back yard.

This kind of stuff is just short parts, as I'm a-thinkin' of it. Is that all right?

That's tine, very good. What kind of a person is Moe Dalitz?

Very fine man, and a terrific business man.

Is he a colorful type?

Oh, yeah, very colorful. Me and him puts on a party every December at the Las Vegas Country Club. And it's the best party they have around here, everybody says. Fact of business, [we're] likely to come down here next December, put on a Western party, have good food, and dance, and entertainment. I think we had about—hmmm, might've had five hundred people there last time. If it gets big, we're goin' to have to have a bigger place, it looks like.

It's nice to have that many friends.

Yeah. Fact of business, some of 'em, I didn't even know, don't think *he* did [laughing].

What's Sam Tucker like?

Oh, Sam Tucker was a great man. He kinda liked the farm life, and he had a farm down there in Kentucky. And I never did see it, but it must've been a real nice place. And he raised some registered cattle, and this, that, and the other. I think he's livin' in Miami now. They all gettin' a little bit of age on em.

McGinty's a old-time gambler, real sharp. He's dead now.

Oh, there was another guy around here when I first came here, a old-time gambler, name of Duke Wiley. And I don't know how old he might be, but be was here the other day, and I'll swear he's one man that hadn't changed one bit, from the first time I've seen him, in the way he is agin'. He must 'ye gotten old when he's twenty-one; never did age no more. He had, when I first came here, the Biltmore. Horace Heidt built this little hotel over here on North Main Street a long time ago. It was a pretty popular li'l ol' place when I first came here.

Another one you mentioned was Morris Kleinman.

Yeah, Morris Kleinman. Morris Kleinman, he wasn't too much of a gambler. He just kinda went along with the tide. But he was a great host.

And I guess the greatest host there ever was in town was a little man, used to be a prizefighter—a bantamweight, probably—name of "Gentleman Gene" Delmont. He worked at the Flamingo for years. He's retired now. He was in here the other day, gettin' pretty old.

And another man that I hadn't mentioned was Chester Simms. Chester Simms was a outside gambler for years in his young days. Him and that Eddie Arcaro was raised up together, the jockey. And he'd been a racetrack

hustler, and all this, that, and the other, and he came and ran the Flamingo for a good many years. And he was another, just a top-notch operator He knew what was goin' on, and he had a great way with ahelpin' people, great host.

And there's another little man, name of Joe Rosenberg. He came from Omaha. And he was with the Flamingo for years, and then he went with the Del Webb Corporation as a top man, and he passed away sometime ago. Very top man.

And there's another bookmaker came here from Omaha, by the name of Eddie Barrick. And he had a lot of age on him when he came here. He bought a lot of property. And he was buyin' some property, and he was takin' a lease on some more property. And they was gettin' a fifty-year lease, and he said that wasn't long enough, and he was about eighty years old, then [laughing], and he's still livin'. Mahlon Brown told me today that he just sold a piece of property down here on Casino Center Boulevard to somebody, and it looks like they might be goin' to build another hotel down there, so Mahlon told me. (Mahlon Brown is a lawyer and a senator, and a very fine man, was raised here.)

Then there's the Lamb brothers around here. Ralph's the sheriff; Floyd's a senator; Darwin was the county commissioner; he lost, but he had a business that he wasn't takin' very good care of when he was commissioner, anyhow, and he's doin' very well in his business, now, since he got out of that commission. And they're very colorful people, raised up here on the desert, and had to catch everything they eat. Ralph's as fine a man as I ever seen, and a very good peace officer. And this job's gettin' big. The city and the county's all went together now, and he handles it just like he used to handle fifteen men. And I don't know, I think they'll have over a thousand. And he'll be the boss. And he knows how to boss it.

Glenn Jones was the sheriff when I came here; and a *good* man, Glenn Jones. But he drank a little whiskey, and they got him tangled up, this, that, and the other, but he wasn't a bad man. C. D. Stewart was his deputy, and he was a character. So I had a bootmaker come in here, and I had Glenn Jones some nice boots made, and he never had had no boots like that before. C. D. Stewart seen 'em, and like to went crazy. So he tells the story, said he came a-limpin' down the street one day, and I says, "What's your trouble?"

He said, "Well, these boots is killin' me!"

And I says, "Come on, I'll get you a pair of boots made."

And I got him a pair of boots made by the man [laughing]. And ever since, he's been having' his boots made by this man.

And the mayor here, Mayor Gragson, had a furniture store, Oran Gragson's Main Street Furniture Store. It used to be on the radio all the time, and everybody knew him, and he just wins goin' away. And he wins every time. And he's the only politician I ever seen that went broke, lost his business. So he must be a honest man.

I was going to ask you about the city commissioner election and scandal, involving William Peccole, back in the 50's. He was supposed to've taken a bribe. The Las Vegas Sun said that he took bribes. The Las Vegas Review-Journal reporter called you and asked if he'd taken a bribe from you, and you were quoted in the newspaper about not having bribed him. This made the Review-Journal say that he didn't take bribes because he hadn't taken them from you.

Well, he never took a bribe from me. I haven't bribed anybody since I been here. I said in this thing before that I bribed a lot of people, but I never have bribed nobody since I been here, and never have had to. There's not any of 'em around here that I have ever seen that had power enough to *make* you bribe 'em [laughs]. It takes a pretty good man to make you bribe him! Some of 'em, I imagine, [are] willin', but *I* never did do it. I just act like I don't know what they're talkin' about. I guess I might've give Peccole some campaign money, or somethin'. We've been very good friends. But he's still a good man. I like him. He's a good man. His daddy was the smartest son of a gun that ever lived. He had a lot of property around here, and bought it when he could buy it for nothin', had a lot of foresight. Just passed away here awhile back, name of Pete Peccole. And he's got another brother named Bob that's a terrific gamblin' house man, sharp as a tack.

Oh, say, there's another guy I want to mention, Jake Newman. He works at the Caesar's Palace now. When the Caesar's Palace opened up, he bought a little bit, and they sold out, and he got some money. He used to work here for me. I knew Jake before he ever came here, when he was a kid- He worked for Max Cohen in Wichita, Kansas, in a gamblin' house. So Jake worked at the El Rancho, and he built him a barbecue place. So the income tax people got on him, and I knew he wasn't doin' no good with the barbecue place, so I needed a man to take the graveyard shift in here in the Horseshoe. So one day Jake come walkin' in. And we all drank a little bit then, you know. So me and Jake got up there at the bar, we got about half drunk, and it got to be about two o'clock in the mornin', and I says to Jake, I says, "Say, Jake." I said, "Take this graveyard shift 'till I can get me a good man."

And he said, "When?"

I says, "At three o'clock."

[Laughing]. He went in there, took that graveyard shift at three o'clock, drunker 'n hell, and he said he was there four years before I could get a good man.

You've had some other good people, like Ben Paley.

Ben Paley's a good man. Ben Paley was a old-time bookmaker from a way back—San Francisco, Chicago, and all round— big man. So he got broke, and he worked here, and I knew he's gettin' old. He was about eighty years old. One day I says to him, I says, "Ben, why don't you sit down, or work a shorter shift, or do somethin'."

He said, "When I get to where I can't work a shift," he says, "I'll quit." Seemed like to me he was punishin' hisself. So the day— he worked that day, and it was the happiest I ever seen him. And that night, he just sat down there in a chair and died with a heart attack.

That's really the way to go, isn't it?

Well, I don't think there's any good way to go. It's a kind of a damn shock, or somethin'. I don't know—they ain't no good way for it, as far as I'm concerned. My dad laid in a bed six years. And I'm a son of a gun. There was lots of days that he enjoyed hisself, and I enjoyed him, and others enjoyed him. So I don't know. *There were some of these other early timers that were here, like Tony Cornero, who owned the El Dorado Club before you—.*

Yeah. Do you know I never did know Tony Cornero. But he was a heck of a guy, and a sharp cookie.

And Jim Young, who had the Silver Club.

Oh, Jim Young, I'm glad you mentioned him. Jim Young is a sharp gamblin' house man. Him and his wife was in here the other night. I've knew him ever since I been here, and seen his kids grow up. Very fine man. I think he's the best faro bank man there is in the country.

Oh, there's another one, Pros Goumond. I don't know—I don't pronounce it properly. But anyhow, he had the Boulder Club here, old-time gambler. And fact of business, we leased the buildin' from his partner's wife, Mrs. [A. B.] Wicher, and his granddaughter, Margot.

What was he like?

Oh, he was a *great* man! I think he'd been a banker in his day. Knew the gamblin' business very well, was very successful.

But there was another one. [An] old-time gambler, just as sharp as they come, just died here awhile back. His name was [Thomas J.] Tommy Thebo. Tommy Thebo had the first gamblin' place there was in this buildin'.

The man that owned this building was named P. O. Silvagni. He built it. He was another great character. When you'd go to make a deal with him, he did all the talkin'. And he'd say, "Now, I'm talkin' for P.O." and then he'd say, "Now, I'm a-talkin' for you." But he was a fair man to deal with, if he thought *you* was fair. But if he didn't think you was fair, boy, he'd twist you.

Did he ever twist you?

No, no. I never had a minute's unpleasantness with him. I liked him.

How about Grant Price?

Oh, Grant Price. He was a faro bank dealer, and a good one. I haven't seen him lately. And he's a racehorse man, likes horses. He had some good ones when I first came here.

Do you remember Manny Kimmel?

Oh, yeah. Manny Kimmel had a heart attack awhile back. His nickname is "Alabam". He used to be the expert odds maker. And he's a sharp guy. He came in here one day, with a fellow by the name of Hand from New York, that just sold a truckin' outfit for $54,000,000. So he told me that he'd bet Hand that I'd let him bet a thousand dollars on eleven. I said, "You win it, I will."

So now, he had a system on eleven. He'd bet so much, and keep it goin' up, 'cause he never could get to a thousand. But I finally beat him, but he was a pretty tough one, pretty tough to beat him on. But he figured this thing out, you see, and he laid this little trap for me, don't you see. But the trap wasn' t strong enough to hold me.

I'll bet there aren't many that are.

Well, I don't know about that. But like I say about the systems. To my estimation, they ain't none of 'em worth a damn if you don't get no help.

You mentioned Mrs. Wicher. Did you know A. B. Wicher?

I didn't know her husband. He'd passed away before I came here. She's a very fine lady, and she does lots o'travelin' I understand, and she must have quite a lot of age on her. She and the lady that owns the building where the Pioneer is, Mrs. Beckley. A son's a lawyer, Bruce Beckley. So they were in here the other night and she told me she'd been here sixty-seven years. Mrs. Wicher didn't say how long she'd been here. They was in here for dinner.

I got a kick out of talkin' to 'em. And her husband, [Jake], he was a great old guy, think he drank a lot of hooch. They used to have a store up there in that building, they tell me.

Yeah, and there was another man, Mr. [Ed] Von Tobel. He lived to be a real old man. So one day when I got back from the penitentiary, me and a fellow was settin' over there on the curb in an automobile. Mr. Von Tobel came walkin' down the street, and I stepped out of the car and spoke to him and hadn't seen him in all that time and he recognized me just like that [snapped fingers]. I got a kick out of that.

He was a real old timer.

Yeah, one of the first.

Are there some more of these pioneer types that you want to mention?

I was tryin' to think who we hadn't mentioned. But I just wonder how they made it here without air conditioning. They was tough cookies, wasn't they? But they seemed to enjoy theirself here in them days.

And when I first came here, I don't remember too much about him, they was a little fella had a saloon up here on First Street they called Jimmy the Goat. He's been forever. He was a great friend of Kell Houssels. And [Wing] Fong had the Chinese restaurant. He'd been here for many years. I went to his brother's funeral the other day. "Little Fong" they called him. One day Fong bet on a horse. He was a great horse player. And they called a foul. Fong was walkin' the floor. Fong says, "They hold him too long for a foul claim." [Laughs] He couldn't hardly stand it, you know. Says, "They hold him too long for a foul claim." He won the bet.

But Wilbur Clark had more foresight, I think, than any gambler that was around here. Maybe him and Tutor Scherer. Wilbur Clark put all his money in a foundation out there tryin' to build a hotel. Finally got it built, with Moe Dalitz and those guys. But he bought a lot of property around here. So did Marion Hicks.

What was Tutor Scherer like?

Oh, Tutor Scherer was a shrewd businessman, not too much for gamblin', but he had Chuck Addison and Farmer Page for partners, and they was top-notch gamblin' men. But he made a *lot* of money here, on this property. But I never could see this property. Of course, I ain't no property man. My son and daughter, they have some property here. And they've done very well with it. Jack and Becky. My other son, Ted, he's sorta like I am. He's just a kind of a gambler and if he can't get rid of his money any other way, he'll just throw it up and run out from under it. But he likes to shoot the dice. And ever once in awhile, he makes a good winnin'. One day he was drivin' me to the airport. He says, "I haven't shot the dice in three weeks."

I said, "You got a good excuse, haven't you?"

He said, "What's that?"

I said, "You don't have any money."

He said, "I got two hundred bucks."

Let's talk a little bit about the trade associations. The Resort Hotel Association and the downtown group. Would you like to talk about the way they operate and how they help the industry, what it means to be a member of those?

Well, yes. I don't know too much about the Strip association, [Resort Hotel Association] but I'm sure they have to have something like that. But I've never seen anything as tough in my life as to get 'em all to agree on something. Same way with the downtown bunch. They're

all kinda set in their ways, don't you know? There ain't but hardly one way I can see to do a thing like that, and that's just to appoint a boss and if he don't do it right, appoint another. Don't have all them damn meetin's. I think the northern end of the state gets along much better like that than we do down here.

Is it hard to work with the two associations, the downtown group and the Strip group?

Well, it really isn't hard, but it's just tough to make a decision.

What kinds of things hang them up?

Like I say, everybody's got a different idea about the doggone thing, and they're all kinda bull headed, set in their ways. But they don't mean nothin' by it. Just their way of thinkin'.

But what kinds of policy decisions get them arguing, the tax situation or the kind of advertising they're going to do, or the tour packages, or what?

Well, it's more or less what the political thing is, and everybody runs his own place to kind of suit hisself about— which I think is right—you need competition to make anything thrive, I think. If everybody'd run it the same way, you know, they'd get too tough on the player. You got to have different guys come up with different gimmicks, you know what I mean, where they—different plays on the keno and

When I came here, the keno was a five thousand-dollar limit. I raised it to ten when I went in here. Then when I went away to the penitentiary, Joe Brown raised it to twenty-five. Harolds Club, Reno—used to be, everybody had the slots as tight as a drum, and Harold had his slots cut away down low. I think he taught everybody in Nevada the slot machine business. And Bill Harrah at Lake Tahoe, I think he runs about as efficient a place as there is in Nevada. He gets those efficiency experts all in all the time. He can serve his dining room about as fast or faster than anybody in the state, still. I think he can get 'em all fed in forty-five minutes.

Would you like to run a place the way Harrah does?

Well, I wouldn't. I don't like that big a place. We run pretty efficient.

What kind of an administrative staff does it take to run a place like this?

Well, we don't have too much bossin'. I think too much bossin' messes the thing up. I think Harrah runs about the same way. He don't have too much of a bossin' proposition. You got to have people who can do without bein' bossed. In any department, you got to have people that knows what to do, and make decisions right there. No matter what kind of help you got, if they can't make a decision, well, to me they ain't very damn good.

So how many bosses do you have?

Don't have too many. Three or four. But all the pit bosses is you might say a boss. Any pit boss out there makes his own decisions. He don't have to go see nobody.

Are those the kinds of things that come up in the association meetings?

No, no they don't—no they don't—they won't have that kind of stuff. I don't allow none

of my bosses to have no assistants. If he can't do it by hisself, well, what the hell, get another man. If they get an assistant, the assistant is doin' all the work. If I want an assistant I'd'a hired him first.

The cashier's cage is a very important thing. When I first came here, I didn't think that I'd ever have a woman in the cashier's cage, or anywhere else. But I find that they're the best. So a guy ain't always right, you know. I think a woman makes a better cashier than a man.

Why?

I don't know. They just got a way of doin' it.

But you do change off. Yesterday there were two men.

Yeh, I got a few men in there. And they're all right, but I think a woman can stand more aggravation than a man. You know, people come up there, aggravatin' them and all, a woman can seem to me take it a little better than a man. She feels kinda defenseless or something. She don't make no fight too soon.

Well, getting back to the association, what are the problems that keep people apart, or get them apart.

Well, I don't know. They're all time sendin' somebody up there to the legislature about this, that and the other. Tryin' to influence them and all this. The way I think about the legislature, they'll all tell you, I ain't never asked 'em to do nothin'. If the people elect them and they don't do right, I think the people'll put 'em out. I don't think they should be influenced by other people.

Well, does the downtown group make presentations to the commissioners then, the local commissioners?

Yeh.

About what, street improvements?

No, about other places goin' in. Just like they had a deal here, they called it the "red line", [gaming boundary] you know, move the red line down further and all. Well, I didn't give a damn if they moved the red line to Boulder City. But they're just havin' walleyed fits. And the guys opened a little joint up down there—it's gettin' to where you can't have a little place. You got to have volume nowadays to pay the expenses.

How about other things? There was a big hassle over the location of the freeway. Did you get involved in that?

No. I don't get involved in nothin' like that.

Or the improvement of the streets downtown. The elimination of parking.

Well, now they're talkin' about eliminatin' the parking on Fremont Street, and buildin' a mall, all this, that and the other. And I just don't know whether it would be good or bad. So I just haven't had anything to say about it.

Did they talk about the problems of individual ownership versus corporate gambling? The kind of thing that Hughes and Hilton and Del Webb have brought in?

Well, the way things has got nowadays, as high as thing's got, it would be impossible for individuals to own them big hotels. Even

I guess Harrah must have realized that and he went public. I don't know what in hell a man'd do with the money, and how in the hell he'd ever borrow enough money to build one of them things nowadays. When I first came here you could've owned one of them hotels.

Do you remember the time Art Linkletter did the broadcast from down here in front of the Mint? They interviewed System Smitty and a bunch of other guys.

No, I don't remember that. Art Linkletter did a lot for the Sahara and The Mint when he had that show. They give them people a free trip to Las Vegas, all this, that and the other. He did a *lot* of very good publicity for 'em I think. Sahara and The Mint.

Well, what did it mean to business downtown when they built the Union Plaza?

It helped downtown.

How?

Well, they got them rooms up there, and brought more people, they run a nice place. It added to the beauty of downtown. Just made downtown look bigger, finer.

Is the competition for business between downtown and The Strip enough that it really causes a competitive situation?

Well, naturally it's competitive. There's thousands of people comes on the Strip don't even know there's a downtown. Used to, in the old days, when they didn't have so many shows out there, people'd run around and they wouldn't have nothin' to do, they'd come downtown. That's the reason I've got this high limit, to attract people downtown.

Well, you have another thing that you're kind of proud too, besides your high limit, your million-dollar display.

Oh, yeah. That million dollar display. That million-dollar display is I'd say, just as good a advertising thing as they is in town.

How did that come into being?

Well, I went to Washington, D.C. one time, me and my family. People lined up there for five blocks to go in the Treasury ever' day there to see that money. So I had the idea of puttin' a million dollars in a glass cage of a thing. So Joe Brown had lots of money, so when he come in here, I told him about it. So he come up with the idea of puttin' it in there like it is with them ten thousand dollar bills, which was a hell of a idea, better idea than mine. So when Joe Brown died, Fremont [Hotel] was in here then, so it'd've cost sixty thousand a year then to keep the million dollars. So they didn't think it was worth the money, so put the money back in Joe Brown's estate. And we rocked along here, and then now, when we gets it over by ourself again, well I says, "We'll put the million dollars back in." So we like to never found the ten thousand dollar bills. Parry Thomas here with the Las Vegas bank (he calls it the Nevada Bank now he's got a chain of 'em), he found these bills in a bank in New York and got 'em for us. So they say there's not too many more left; I don't really know. I ain't never seen nobody's stash. Somebody might have a lot of 'em. Well, about advertising. Naturally we have signs on the highway, and have some radio; radio to people driving in, it's pretty good advertising. A few years ago, I went to Oklahoma City and the Cowboy Hall of Fame there, they had the finest stagecoach that I ever seen there. So there's a girl, I knew her father, knew her

always, her husband's a lawyer lived there, and I said, "God dang, I'd like to have a stagecoach like that."

So she says, she says, "I know the man that built it, very well. He's a man named John Ferzell." He did this thing for a hobby. He set up a shop, and he's got coaches from all over the world. And he give them to the state of Oklahoma. He set up his shop, put these coaches in repair.

So she called him up on the phone, said, "A friend of mine wants a stagecoach like that."

So I got on the phone and he says, "I'll build it for seven thousand dollars."

So I thought he's two thousand too high, but I says, "Go ahead and build it."

Well, it cost him over ten thousand. There's 3,300 man hours in it. We use that to go around to all the rodeos, parades all over the country with it, keep it on the road all the time. Got a feller drives it named Carl Taylor, very good man. So there's a Wells Fargo Bank. They've got a bunch of these stagecoaches set around the lobby of their bank. So there's a feller out there at Red Bluff, California buildin' those stagecoaches for them now, and my man was out there the other day and he's chargin' them $17,000 for these coaches now.

So it's a very good crowd pleaser. And Chill Wills rides it a lot when he has time. He likes to be before the public anyhow, you know, and he gets a kick out of ridin' it. We'll have it here in the parade Saturday [Helldorado parade]. Then I'm gonna take it from here to Clovis, New Mexico, then come back to California later this summer, show around down there in Texas and New Mexico a little bit.

And then that million dollars advertises us a lot, you know. Them people that has their picture made there, I just wonder, there's no tellin' how valuable that is advertisement-wise, because even if they show it to two people each, that might come in here—in the summertime we take six hundred pictures a day, so that's quite a lot of people. All I know there's many a one comes in here to see it. And I know I don't know where in hell they find out about it, but they sure come to see it. So they can get their picture made.

And I don't know, this poker game here gets us a lot of advertisement, this world series of poker. Last year it was in seven thousand newspapers; I don't know how many it was in this year, whether it was more or less, but we got awful good coverage on it this year. We had seven players last year, and this year we had thirteen. I look to have better than twenty next year. It's even liable to get up to be fifty. Might get up to be more than that; it will eventually.

How did you start that?

Well, there was a fellow by the name of Tom Moore started it in Reno, invited us all up there one year. Holiday Hotel. So we enjoyed it very much, everybody enjoyed it so; good get-together too, you know. So Tom Moore sold out, so I says, "Well, we'll just put it on." And Jack took ahold of it (my oldest son) , went to puttin' it on. So we've really improved it over what it did—we improve it every year. And this was the most thrilling game—I've seen lot of poker games; this one this time was the most thrilling game I've ever seen. Pug was down to $30,000 once—there's $130,000 in the game—and when it got down to two men, Pug was down to $30,000 once, Johnny Moss was down to $30,000 once. Johnny Moss come back, put Pug down to $30,000, and then Johnny bluffed his money of f Pug. Johnny's a big bluffer anyhow, you know.

He bluffed with a single ace or something didn't he?

Yeah. Bluffed with nothin.

Yeah. Johnny Moss bluffed, single ace. But Johnny Moss's gettin' a little older. I don't doubt but what Pug was the best player, but I think a few years ago, Johnny Moss was the best. But when a guy gets older, they can't set there. I never seen but one poker player quit the game with any money when he got old, with a lot of money. He was a fellow they called "Society Red" from Dallas, Texas; name was Henry Hodges. When he got old and seen he's slippin' a little bit he quit. I guess that's about all for that.

What kinds of advertising people do you use? Do you like a special kind, I mean, an advertising agency, or a single person, or do you just have somebody who sort of lives in and takes care of it?

Well, we do it different ways. We got Jimmy the Greek [Snyder], he handles this poker game. And I think he's gettin' to be about as good a man as there is around. He's got that column, he's got a lot of personality, he's a good speaker, and he's gem' around all over the country. And he knows all— he's got that column in a lot of papers and knows a lot of newspaper men, you know. And I think he can just get about as good a coverage as anybody. And we use him some. Fact of business we use him exclusive for the poker game.

The first year, when he put on the poker game here for us, he didn't charge us anything. Howard Hughes had just let him go, and he wanted to prove hisself, what he could do, he just took this poker game. Hell! Nobody thought you could get this much publicity out of this poker game! I didn't, but he did. He said, "I just want to show 'em what I can do with this poker game. Let me have it."

We said, "You got it!"

He put it in seven thousand newspapers. So I'd say that's pretty doggone good. And all we did, we paid a few of the newspapers [reporters] the expenses here. Most of 'em didn't even take it. You know, to come here.

You had mentioned about Jimmy the Greek Snyder, having worked for Howard Hughes. When we talked before, you told me some things about Howard Hughes and what it had meant to Las Vegas to have him here. Wondered if you'd like to put those on the tape?

Oh, yeah! I think that Howard Hughes was good for this town. He spent a lot of money here, and I don't think money hurts any damn place.

Did you meet him when he was here?

Oh, I knew him a long time before, but I didn't see him when he was here, of course. I haven't seen him in years. Just like some newspaper guys come in here and ask me, say that they understand that I know Howard Hughes. I said, "Yeah, I know him."

So they says, "What do you know about him?"

And I kinda rared back in my chair and like—just like I was gonna tell 'em something. "Well," I says, "I guess I know as much about him as anybody."

Oh, they got all thrilled, and said, "What do you know?"

I said, "Nothin'." [Laughs] So I don't. I don't think anybody knows anything.

What was he like when you knew him in Texas?

Aw, he just—I don't know. He wasn't—I didn't pay no attention to him. Just like anybody else. There was a lot of guys like him

down there in them days, you know. He had lots of money, and there's a lot more of 'em had a lot of money, so—. He didn't have it all, so wasn't nothin' to it.

Did you play cards with him?

No.

Shoot dice with him?

No.

Or see him in one of your places?

Oh, yeah. He'd been in some of our places in Dallas. Seen in places in Houston. He wasn't much of a gambler. Just kinda played around just for fun, you know. He wasn't one of them serious gamblers, as I know anything about.

Then you really think he was good for Las Vegas?

Well, I really do.

Is he still good for Las Vegas?

Well, I don't see that he's any worse than any other corporation. Same thing ain't it? I don't know that much about it, but I can't see that he's done anything here that hurt a thing. I know one thing. If he'd show up here, there'd be so damn many people here that there wouldn't be standing room!

What do I think's the future of gambling in Las Vegas? I think it's all right. If it wasn't I'd be sellin' out and gettin' away from here, because I ain't married here to this—the sky's my home. I can go anywhere. I never did see no place that I just thought I couldn't leave. I was raised in a wagon too much, moved around too much. I don't miss nothin' after I leave it. Make the best out of every situation. That might sound like bull to a lot of people, but it's true.

Tell me about these awards that you have had, and the recognition of your philanthropies to the community.

Well, I win the Heart Award here from the Variety Club, one time. And that's pretty damn good. It surprised me. I'm tellin' it shocked me, I didn't have no idea. Well, hell! I hadn't done nothin'. Lot of people I thought had done a lot more than I'd ever done—they must've been mad at all the rest and give it to me.

But I don't know of any other awards I've win. If there is, I don't know nothin' about it.

There's a old guy here, old Jewish man, the only Jewish prospector I ever heard tell of. His name was Colonel Fink. So he passed away. And me and Hank Greenspun, ex-governor Vail Pittman, and a old judge [Nores], up here from Pioche, and a shill from over here at the Fremont, went to his funeral. And I'm settin' beside old Hank. I says, "Hank, I tell you one thing I've noticed in this town." I says, "A man dies here and he ain't got no money, he don't draw worth a damn.

How do you get along with the newspaper people?

All right, I reckon. Well, me and Hank's been friends ever since I been here. Of course, he does some things I wouldn't do. But that's his business. I wouldn't tell him different. He gets a *way* out sometimes. But he's a tough cookie. But like I said, there ain't but one thing that worries me, and that's sickness. What the newspapers says don't mean a damn. Ain't nobody knows nothin' 'bout that a week later. They think they're just a-raisin' hell. They ain't

doin' nothin' but spin their wheels. Same thing about this Watergate thing here. Two weeks after that's over, forgotten. Don't you think so? And it's kinda becoming boring with people now. They wish it'd just—. Push it all out of news, off the air, and all this, that, and the other, you know.

Do you remember when Hank Greenspun was in all that trouble with McCarran, and all the gamblers boycotted the Sun. Did you get involved in this?

No, I didn't.

Did they ask you to?

Yes. They called me out on the Strip, and told me they was going to take out all the advertising out of the *Sun*. That the Senator was mad at him. And Gus Greenbaum said, "We gonna bust him."

And I said, "Gosh, that's bad!"

He said, "What the hell's bad about it?"

I said, "You gonna have to bust me, too."

So I didn't like that kinda stuff. Just like the Senator. He was a good old man, but he's gone. What the hell! He wasn't gonna be here forever. Why do you want to go along with that? I think people puts too much importance on theirself. I ain't never seen one you miss too damn long after he's gone. So I just don't know about that. You miss you mother and father and them, but the other people you feel a little bad for a day, but [gestures waving] don't think of them no more. Your family and your brothers and sisters and all this, that and the other, you do, but—.

Well, I'll tell you what. I got a book wrote by a monk in 1500 and something. Old priest give it to me up there in the penitentiary. And it's just little sayin's that he thought of every day that he wrote down. They's one there, he says, "Don't censure no man for his shortcomings." Says, "We're frail creatures; you might do the same thing tomorrow."

In other words, I was readin' that little old book, and there's a lot of things in there that just shows you that, hell, you can stub your toe and fall down and kill yourself. You just ain't very powerful. Now, I had three years to read it in.

Oh, I thought it was five.

Well, it *was* five, but I only done three and a half.

4

Conclusion and Some Notes about My Family

What other kinds of things do you like to do?

Well, I like to trade cattle and I like to trade horses. I still do. I have a horse sale on my ranch in Jordan, Montana every September. Man's got to get some exercise, and if you're a little bit on the lazy order, you got to be forced. So the horses and cattle makes me get out and get some exercise quite often.

What kinds of things do you do for entertainment here? Do you gamble?

No, I don't gamble. I play a little poker now and then. I'd rather just set down and play just for a hour or two.

You can't gamble in your own place?

No, these poker players get too tough for me.

What do you think about gambling as a business. I mean philosophically? What do you think about gambling as a way to spend your time?

Well, it's just knowin' what you like. I like it. I like to be around the people. Fact of business, I've never spent an unpleasant moment here. People don't worry me a bit. There's two words, you know. Yes and no. You can just shut it off there.

Well, there's a lot of satisfaction, isn't there, in giving other people this kind of pleasure?

Well, I guess there is, more or less. Well, I don't know. I really don't know. Fact of business, I ain't got no sympathy for no kind of people, but little children and old people and sick people. People that's able bodies and well, I ain't got no sympathy for them. I think they've made their own self whatever hard luck they got. But if somebody's sick, or old, or a little child can't help hisself, they got to have help. But the able bodied people, I wouldn't give a damn if I seen one out in the snow bank, hairnet on one foot and a

boxing glove on the other'n, I wouldn't feel sorry for him.

I'd like for you to take some time to talk about your family, because I know that you're real proud of them.

Oh, yes. I am proud of them. Very proud of my family. They're all good workers. My wife works here, and my daughter [Barbara]. They count the money and look after the office. And Jack is the boss. Ted's next boss. And everytime I say anything to Ted about doin' anything, he says, "Well, we'll have to see Jack."

We get along real good. Them boys mind me like they was six years old. Don't have no arguments. One does somethin', nobody says nothin' about it.

I only got one daughter [Brenda] married. Jack and Ted, they're not married, and my youngest daughter [Becky] not married. My oldest daughter's [Barbara B. Fescher] been separated. She has three sons and they're up at the ranch, Montana. The oldest one [Ken], he went to school two semesters in college and had him down there with my son-in-law in Amarillo, Texas lookin' after some cattle on the wheat, and he learned quite a lot about it. So he decided he didn't want to go to school, so I just sent him up to Montana and put him to runnin' my ranch. And the other two wasn't doin' no good in school here, and one of 'em—middle one [Steve]—he says, "Well, I ain't doin' any good in school. Let me lay out this semester and I I'll go back next year. I want to go to the ranch."

I says, "All right."

The little one [Bob] says, "I ain't doin' no good. Let me go.

And I said, "Here you go." So I don't know whether they will ever go back to school or not. But if they ain't gonna get no education, they ain't no use to waste time goin' to school. Just as well be workin'.

So I imagine they'll turn out all right. Someway.

I'm very well pleased with my family. I put them boys in here when they twenty-one and put 'em a boss, go from there. There ain't nobody works harder than Jack. Long hour man.

Well, we're almost down to the end of this. I just wondered if you would like to expound a little on your philosophy of life and what it all means.

Oh, I've done told you a little bit of what I think about life. I just don't think that these people walkin' around all rared back and writin' up and raisin' hell about this, that, and the other, to me, they just don't mean nothin'. I just don't pay no attention to them because I know they're gonna go away. Don't mean nothin'. They'll lost their job or they'll get sick, or they'll have a stroke, or just any damn thing happen, or they'll get to doin' somethin' else. They can't stay on you forever.

Do you feel that way about yourself, too?

I don't do people that way. If somebody does something to me, and he kinda straightens up, I forgive him. But if he don't never straighten up, I just don't have nothin' else to do with him. Lot of guys have done things time and again and they'll come on back and I'll try 'em again, try 'em again. Sometimes all right, and sometimes they ain't. But I don't just never just condemn 'em. Had an old boy workin' for me one time, and he didn't have much sense. And I told him, I says, "I'm through. I'm firm' you."

He says, "Well, what have I done?"

I says, "You haven't done anything."

Well, he says, "I'm not gonna quit. And I'm gonna go to work."

And he did. [Laughs] Worked for me long time after that.

What have I forgotten to ask you? I've been sitting here for two days asking you questions. I feel as though I must have forgotten—

Oh, my God! I think we got enough! I don't know whether this thing'll just be a lot of bull anyhow. But bein's you was nice and wanted it, you're the first one I ever told anything like this. The first one. I don't know how in the hell you got it done. I say, I say I don't know how *you* got it done. I don't know how come you to do it.

Well, I don't know either. But I'm glad we did.

I am too, really. The way I understand this, it's going to be a history. I want to dedicate this to my wife, Teddy Jane Binion. We've been married happily for forty years.

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