Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with Donald E. English

March 25, 2004
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Michael Childers

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Table of Contents

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disk 1.

Michael Childers*: Let's just start. What is your full name?*

Don English: Donald Ernest English.

And your date of birth?

April 13, 1926.

And where were you born at?

Oakland, California.

And just a really brief overview or sketch of your life up to the point where you kind of became involved with the Nevada Test Site.

Well, I was born in Oakland, California. At the age of two we moved to the Los Angeles area where I attended grade, grammar, high school. I was in the Army Air Corps after graduating from high school. After getting out of the Air Corps I went to the Fred Archer School of Photography. Did freelance photography after that for magazines and so on. Ended up doing publicity photography in Las Vegas for the Chamber of Commerce in 1949.

Nineteen forty-nine. What drew you to Las Vegas?

The job.

The job? Was it something you applied for?

Actually at that time the publicity department was headed by Steve Hannagan Associates, who was known to be the father of resort publicity at the time. Now remember this is 1949. He also had some other accounts: Pepsi Cola, Union Pacific Railway, Miami Beach, Florida, Sun Valley,

Admiral TV, and Las Vegas. And I'd heard about the job opportunity of doing the publicity there—it was only going to be a four-month stint—so I applied to Paul Snell with Steve Hannagan Associates and was hired and came to Las Vegas. And the tenure on the scene lasted **[00:05:00]** until about 1992 when the Chamber of Commerce decided to hand the Las Vegas news bureau over to the convention authority.

Tell me what Las Vegas was like when you moved here in 1949.

Rather warm [laughing]. Las Vegas was a small town with a kind of a big town atmosphere. The population was twenty-five thousand. When you would drive by Sills Drive-In, you had a pretty good idea who was there because you recognized the cars. It was a small town. They had four hotels and the Chamber of Commerce worked closely with the hotels doing any kind of national publicity that they could possibly get.

What were the hotels?

There was the Last Frontier, there was the El Rancho Vegas, the Flamingo, and the New Thunderbird. There was also the Club Bingo which later became the Sahara Hotel after they expanded.

And so you worked out of a fairly small office then, I would assume, or was it a much bigger operation?

At the time I started there was a chief photographer, Bill Carniel, myself, and there was a bureau chief, Neil Regan, and a writer, Art Force, another writer, Ken Frogley, and a secretary. It was called the Desert Sea News Bureau at the time and it was headed by Steve Hannagan Associates.

What did you know about, I guess, the bomb or the atomic bombs before the test site even was announced?

Zero.

Zero?

No, I didn't know anything about atomic bombs or weapons. We knew that they were testing out at the test site but as soon as the tests started we started covering it so it wasn't something that we knew about for a long time and then went in and started covering.

Yes. So there was no leading up to the tests in 1951?

Not that I remember.

No?

I'm sure there was. I'm sure they did all kinds of work out there but we weren't involved and didn't concentrate very much on it.

OK. When did you start kind of using it as a promotional tool or start covering it?

Well, as soon as they started the atomic tests Acme News Photos, which later became UPI, brought their wire photo machine. As soon as there was a test news media from all over the world started coming to Las Vegas. There was also INP, International News Photos, came and Associated Press, and they kind of headquartered at the news bureau at first anyways because we had a photo darkroom and they were able to kind of headquarter there. So it was a wonderful opportunity to get associated with the press and for us to get the name "Las Vegas" out.

You see some of the early news coverages of the test site and stuff and there's not actually anything on the test site. The photos and the stories, it's all like some glowing something on the horizon and stuff. Do you remember getting up and taking those photos or was it sort of a—?

Yes. I can't give you the date but it was a while before they started having what they called "open shots," and the AEC [U.S. Atomic Energy Commission] invited the media, the press, to come out and view a shot from an area that they designated or came about anyways as News Nob, which was seven miles from **[00:10:00]** the blast, and that's what they would call an "open

shot." Before that people were getting, like you said, the glows in the sky. And in fact one photographer, Jeff Scheib, I think was his name, worked for the *Review Journal*—and *Life* magazine was up here, everybody was up to cover the tests—but all they would get, they'd go down on Fremont Street and get the flash of light on the horizon. And he went out in the desert and actually saw a cloud—it was probably the dispersion of the mushroom cloud—and he shot a series of pictures. And to the chagrin of the press that were here, he scooped them all because he had a series of pictures of this cloud dissipating and he wrote the time down for each shot. And *Life* did a huge layout of seven pictures or something, `Here's the atomic cloud at 4:03`, `here it is at 4:09`, and this kind of thing.

So it was kind of a novel—

That's about the first time I think there was anything other than the glow on the horizon that was shot. And soon after that everybody, the press and everything, started going up to a mountain, a summit called Angel's Peak where you can get a clear view of the mushroom, and the press and everybody got spectacular pictures of the mushroom cloud, particularly from the airdrops and from the tower shots.

That's where that photo was from, you showed me earlier?

A lot of these, yes. Some of them were tower blasts, some of them were airdrops.

So to back up a little bit, was it a sense of kind of mystery surrounding the bomb, excitement, what was—?

All of the above. It was. It was exciting, it was a mystery, and also for the photographers and press covering it, you better come back with some goods, you better have a picture.

Yes. A lot of pressure.

I remember one time it was Acme and they brought in their wire photo machine and we had a technician—in those days you had to be quite a technician to operate a wire photo machine. It was a drum. You put a picture on this drum that would rotate and it would take about ten or twelve minutes for a light beam crossing the drum slowly, similar to the early days of the Victrola when they recorded music on a drum that rotated, kind of the same thing, and then when they would transmit it over a telephone wire sometimes they would have to get eight or nine long distance calls in before they could get a clear line for someone to receive it in New York or Los Angeles. But anyway his name was Doc. And this was a little later on in the atomic testing and there was an open shot and the television crews were there and in San Francisco, the headquarters for Acme News Photos. They saw the blast on television and they called up Las Vegas, called up Doc, said, Where's the pictures? We just saw it on TV. And Las Vegas was, I think, about a hundred miles from the blast and Doc said, Well, he said, the shock wave just reached Las Vegas, he said, the pictures will follow a little later. In those days you didn't have digital cameras and cell phones and laptop computers to transmit photos. The film had to be brought back physically, it had to be developed, it had to be printed, it had to be put on the drum and sent over the wire photo machine.

And how long would that take? Hours?

[00:15:00] There was some pretty big races coming back from the test site and so yes, it took hours. Several hours.

When some of the first blasts happened, you see stories in the newspaper of windows being knocked out of shops and that sort of thing.

Oh absolutely. In fact I understand later that they tried to fashion the shots so that they had enough explosive power or whatever it was to skip over Las Vegas, to kind of jump over it, but

we would wake up in the mornings sometimes and the water would be sloshing out of the pool, just exactly the same thing as an earthquake. Chandeliers would swing, water would slosh out of swimming pools, the elevators inside the elevator transoms would swing back and forth.

Was there a sound along with it or—?

Maybe kind of a rumble a little bit, but mostly the motion more than sound. One time we did a stint in the Mint Hotel. Silver dollars were big in those days and we took silver dollars and lined them up just as high as we could, piled one on top of the other. We had this huge column of silver dollars, and we photographed the silver dollars with the background of the main street, Fremont Street, and started the camera before we thought the blast was going to occur, and you could see the flash in the sky. Then, oh maybe five or six minutes after, the shock wave would hit and you could see the chandeliers swinging. We shot pictures of that, and of course the silver dollars all tumbling down. Anything to give a graphic illustration of what was happening.

So what other shots or photographs did you do with your job at this time? Beyond what some of these other guys were doing, what were you doing for photography?

Well, assorted things. Sometimes we would cover it from Angel's Peak, take pictures of the mushroom cloud. Sometimes we'd take dancers up to the top of the peak. I'd have one girl, Sally McCloskey, we did a little series that was called Angel's Dance. And she was a ballet dancer, not a showgirl, and she did an interpretive dance to the mushroom cloud as it came up and we shot a series of pictures and sent it out on the wire and they called it Angel's Dance. We just did anything we could to make the picture a little bit different because the newspapers would run the mushroom cloud pictures, but they were always hungry for anything that had any kind of a different approach. I always thought if I didn't get up to go to Mount Charleston or missed the boat, I would try to go downtown, Fremont Street, and see if there's any possibility from the top

of one of the buildings to see the mushroom cloud over the city. So sure enough I didn't wake up or I didn't get up in time to get to Mount Charleston so I rushed downtown and I climbed up I think it was a drugstore and it was overlooking Vegas Vic and some of the neon signs that were on Fremont Street. And I saw the flash in the sky and waited around for a little while and by gosh all of a sudden there was the mushroom cloud right between Vegas Vic and the Pioneer Club, absolute perfectly in the center. I started shooting like crazy, and you were talking about the shock wave, and there were some fellows on a building right below me and they were working **[00:20:00]** on a glass transom and they said, What are you doing over there? I said, Listen, I'm taking pictures of the atomic cloud. If you go out to the end of the building you can see it. From their point it was hidden by other buildings. And so they walked out to the end of the building to take a look at it and right about that time the shock wave hit and it shattered that transom. That glass just went all over the place. Then after I took the pictures of the cloud over the city, I got done, I thought well, I'll see what kind of damage—it was a pretty good shock wave, and Sears and Roebuck used to be on Fremont Street so I went down there and by gosh the window was all blown out. And the manager was picking up some of the glass in the display window and picking up the mannequin that had fallen, so I took a picture of that and it ran in all the papers, the manager of Sears lifting up a mannequin that had fallen after the shock wave had reached the city.

That shot you did from the top is the one that's used in a lot of postcard, the one that you see these days yes?

Yes, the picture of the cloud over the city ran in papers all over the country and *Life* magazine ran it as picture of the week, so that was nice. They said, There's danger everywhere you look in Las Vegas. That's the way they captioned it [laughing].

Did people start showing up to see the bomb like tourism or was it working as a promotional thing as years went on to get Las Vegas on the map or was it a measurable thing?

You know, I'm sure some statistician could give you some—however, it had to have had an effect on tourism because Las Vegas was in the headlines almost every day. Another thing that happened with that, we had as I said press from all over the United States, all over the world out here and they were on pretty big expense accounts. And day after day they would cancel the shots; they still had to be here to cover it. And if for any reason the wind was wrong or something happened in their calculations or whatever, they would cancel a shot. They'd postpone it until future notice or until tomorrow or for next week. And there were all these writers, reporters, and photographers on assignment out here, eating up these expense accounts, so they started dreaming up stories about Las Vegas to kind of justify their keep. So we got a real, real bonus of publicity. Everybody was looking for any kind of a sidebar, any kind of a story on Las Vegas. So it was just a bonanza for us.

You talked about News Nob earlier. When was the first time that you visited that area to see a shot?

I'm lousy on dates. I think it was 1951 or 1950.

Could you describe what News Nob is what it looks like?

OK, News Nob actually is just a spot in the desert on the atomic proving flats, seven miles from the blast. And they had bleachers out there. By the way, afterwards I'll show you a picture taken recently from those bleachers. And of course most of the tests were done at predawn, so just right after the test the light would start coming. So people were there, the press, hundreds of writers and photographers, everybody lined up, checking their equipment. And there was a little red light, like if it was a tower shot there'd be a little red light—this was seven miles away—and

you'd kind of train your lens on that, trying to find it anyways if you had good eyes, so you'd be aimed in the proper direction. Also we had explicit instructions—we were given heavy dark glasses for eye protection but even with that you couldn't look at the bomb. You had to turn around a hundred and eighty degrees of the area where the bomb was going to be detonated **[00:25:00]** because the intensity was still so great. Nobody would look at the test while it really went—

The light or the heat?

As soon as it went off, then you could turn around. That didn't mean the cameras weren't going. And you know you think—it was ethereal. I remember one time the bomb went off and the yucca plants, all the desert plants, caught on fire for miles around, and it was ghostlike because it looked like a city that had been incinerated. You could see these little flames of fire. But other than that, another interesting thing, you'd think, what would there be? Would there be a hush? Would there be absolute silence? Maybe people shouting? I'll tell you what happened. Everybody out there was responsible for—getting stories was the one thing but for photographers they better have the picture. There's no way they could go out there—and so the first thing that happened after the flash went off, *Life* magazine and AP and a lot of these people that had very expensive equipment, they had light sensoring devices so that as soon as the light went off from the bomb it would trigger the camera, and they had what they called Hulcher cameras. They were high speed cameras that took I don't know how many frames a second, and you'd hear them *chug-chug-chug-chug-chug-chug-chug-chug-chug-chug.* You'd see the flash, you'd hear the *chug* of the Hulcher cameras, and then you'd hear oaths from one end to the other, everybody fighting their equipment. OK, first of all, the blast kind of—you couldn't see too well and everybody was fighting their—they were taking—in those days a lot of people had four-by-

five cameras with film packs in them and film holders and they had to take them out and change them and change their f-stops. And anyway everybody was fighting their equipment and somebody would—their leg would kick a tripod leg and they'd be upset. But anyway that was the impression—that was the first thing that happened. Of course then a few seconds later, *bam!* the shock wave hit, so you got that. It wasn't damaging, didn't set you on your fanny or anything like that that, but it was a pretty good jolt. Then another few seconds or half-a-minute, something like that—first of all the shock wave goes out and then it comes in, so then you got it again from the opposite direction. So it was exciting.

Being that close, I mean, how large are these explosions? Seven miles doesn't seem like it's too terribly far.

They were huge.

And then also you mentioned you have these goggles and you can't see through them, they're so dark. The lenses of the camera, did you have to do anything special with the cameras because of that or no?

Yes. Well, we put all kinds of filters on the camera for the initial blasts, and close the aperture down to the smallest opening, then just by guess or by golly, kind of open up the aperture and continue shooting. Then as soon as you could, you'd take off the goggles and start shooting the mushroom cloud.

What were the restrictions on what you could shoot and could not shoot?

There were no restrictions. There was nothing to—seven miles away, you know, what…? One time we went out and they said, `OK, we're going to allow one photographer to go in the trenches one mile from the blast and shoot and media, you can make up your mind who goes.` So I was with the Las Vegas News Bureau and I shot sixteen millimeter. I did a lot of newsreel photography, and stills. So everybody said, `Well, English, you're`

neutral. We know that if you **[00:30:00]** go out there you're not going to shoot a special camera for yourself and have some film that's exclusive, and you'll be fair, won't you, and distribute the film to everybody? So you're elected. So I was elected to go into the trench one mile from the—

And this is with the Army troops?

With the Army troops. Said, Oh gosh, I got my equipment together and went out there and we had a general that gave us a briefing before we went. He said, Men, he said, when they start counting down for that bomb, ten, nine, eight, seven, when he gets to that last second, that's going to be the longest second in your life. You better believe that you won't realize how long that second is going to take, and I thought, Well, this guy… That's what we do is we have to time for time exposures and in the darkroom printing, you time one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two. I said, this guy's full of baloney. Anyway, we were in the trenches and had the camera on a tripod and I had to keep the camera just below the surface of the trench because I didn't want any part of me or any equipment exposed. And there came the countdown, five, four, three, two, one, and I thought, By God, that guy's right. This is the longest second. Well, as it turned out it was a misfire [laughing]. So anyway, that was the longest second. I was very disappointed, of course. I didn't get any pictures. And we stayed in the trench for about a half-an-hour or so until they were sure that…. Speaking of misfires, *Collier's* did a story on, and I wish I could remember the scientist's name. I don't have it. You probably will get it in your research. But there was one of the atomic scientists that would go up and disarm the bomb, and I was fortunate enough with the writer from *Collier's* to be there in the interview. We drove out to the test site and I took a picture which they ran, a big color picture. *Collier's* is a—people may not know about it now. It was like *Life* magazine and *Look* magazine. It was a big magazine at that time. They ran a big color photo

of this scientist. But he said—and it was really interesting, it was a hundred-foot tower, so his job was to climb up and go into the unit at the top of the tower and disarm the bomb. Also with telephone communications to their headquarters to—and he would announce what he was going to do to the bomb for each step before he did it. Just in case it did go off they'd know at which point it happened [laughing]. Well, it was hot out there. He climbed a hundred foot up to the tower and the door was locked. He said whoever armed the bomb and came down, nobody was going to go up there, but it was procedure, you had to lock the door. And they never thought about it, so he had to go all the way down the tower again, get the key, and then climb back up and disarm the bomb.

These towers are several stories tall, right?

This one was a hundred foot. So just kind of an interesting little sidebar.

A little nerve-wracking, I'm sure, for you.

Yes.

Of course you hear about being seven miles away from it today, or even a mile away in a trench, and you think of all the different radiation and all the stuff that we know now about bombs and it sounds something that you wouldn't want to do in a million years. Was this something that even you guys thought about at the time or was it—?

You know, we were very trusting. I don't recall anybody saying, `Listen, I think I'm going to be radiated, or I'm going to get some gams.` They gave us badges that were supposed to detect **[00:35:00]** any radiation and we would wear them and then turn them in at the end of the time. I never heard of anyone being called, saying, `Gee, you were radiated.` But we just—kind of the age of innocence and everybody believed what was going on. Well, I

mean we didn't know about the things that were happening with the downwind in Utah and all that until later.

But it was a sense of trust, you said. Then was there also kind of a sense of, oh I don't know what the term would be, national security or this is something that needs to be done?

Yes, we all did. I think most people did think that it was important that we do it to be competitive with the Russians and everyone.

Right, because it was the height of the Cold War at this point. This is the height of the Cold War.

Yes. Yes.

Was it a sense of pride in Las Vegas? I mean I think of the Clark County emblem or their symbol being a mushroom cloud.

It was. It was a lot of pride. We were hosting all these people and we thought that we were in whatever way contributing to the national security, and it wasn't until later that you started hearing the negative reports and things like that. At that time everybody was all for it.

How long did you stay working for the bureau?

As I said I started in 1949. It was going to be a four-month stint with Steve Hannagan. At the end of the four months Union Pacific pulled out as it were, and they contributed quite a bit of their money for the promotion of Las Vegas in those days. They had a lot of passenger train service. And they pulled out and the Chamber of Commerce wanted to hire the staff itself and Steve Hannagan wanted me to go to Sun Valley, Idaho. And I'm not a snow person so I opted to stay in Las Vegas, and I ended up there for about fifty years. Wasn't the same job I started with but it was a lot of fun and a lot of excitement.

And as those years went on, obviously they started doing the tests underground. Did you guys finally kind of quit covering it or quit using it or—?

No, we covered underground shots for a while, and the only thing you ever got was when they vented. A little smoke or something like that. But no, after that, when they quit doing the tower and the aerial shots, that kind of slowed things down and there wasn't that much coverage anymore. Photographic coverage anyways, except what the AEC would release, and they had handouts.

As a photographer, how does the image of the bomb play? I mean you see some of the photos that you've done with the dancers. How did you approach the image of the mushroom cloud?

Well, the mushroom cloud kind of became the symbol of the atomic bomb. I guess from the early tests in Enewetak and all those, the result of the bomb was this mushroom cloud with an icecap on top. Very graphic. It became the symbol of the bomb. In fact one time we got the idea of having Miss Atomic Bomb and we tried to get some additional publicity, and took one of the showgirls from the hotel and made a mushroom cloud out of cotton over the bathing suit. And she put the bathing suit on and took a picture and had her raising her arms with this mushroom cloud bathing suit and called her Miss Atomic Bomb. And the picture ran all over the country and in **[00:40:00]** fact it's even in the Smithsonian Institute today [laughing]. Kind of a corny thing but it worked, for publicity anyhow.

It sounds like the whole image was something positive. I mean somewhere along the line it must have changed, or did it change as an image?

Oh, I don't know. You mean the mushroom cloud or—?

Yes, I guess just because of the image of the bomb as, you know, you got into the 1960s and I'm sure the 1970s and stuff, did that image as a photographer, you didn't want to use it anymore or—?

Well, there just wasn't that much testing. No, anything that was going on, we covered. We never backed off of anything.

How much did the town grow during I guess the 1950s and 1960s?

Well, statisticians can give you a better note on that. During the 1950s and 1960s it grew but compared to what it's doing now there's just no way to—there were long—there'd be spurts of growth and then seven, eight years of things just kind of running even. There were slow times in the 1960s and of course different things had happened in town. Howard Hughes came to town about during one of those slow periods and started churning things up, and then things slowed down for a while and Steve Wynn started building magnificent new hotels and things started changing. And the last ten years it's been nothing but a steady climb on the scale. It's just outrageous. It's just hard to imagine.

So it kind of feels like there's a pretty large disconnect from today's world from 1949 and having the test site out north and lot of people wouldn't even think about that anymore.

No, and from my standpoint and the publicity and so on, during the years we worked so hard to create a news image of Las Vegas and today Las Vegas *is* a news image now. And even during the 1960s and 1970s, things would happen in Las Vegas, they would be big news. If they happened someplace else, they weren't. But it was because, I don't know, I think we just kind of created a news image. Now there's so much going on that all the national news is generated and originates here.

So you were pretty successful at your job then?

Yes, I think we were but you don't need that intensity of a publicity campaign now because there's just so much going on that just to keep up with it, the press can hardly handle it.

Do you have any closing thoughts about the test site or your role with the bureau or that time period?

No real closing thoughts. It just was a very exciting time and it was a lot of fun and a lot of challenge and a lot of reward.

Thank you.

[00:43:57] End Track 2, Disk 1.

[End of interview]