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

Interview with Oscar Foger

May 5, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Suzanne Becker

Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews conducted by an interviewer/researcher with an interviewee/narrator who possesses firsthand knowledge of historically significant events. The goal is to create an archive which adds relevant material to the existing historical record. Oral history recordings and transcripts are primary source material and do not represent the final, verified, or complete narrative of the events under discussion. Rather, oral history is a spoken remembrance or dialogue, reflecting the interviewee's memories, points of view and personal opinions about events in response to the interviewer's specific questions. Oral history interviews document each interviewee's personal engagement with the history in question. They are unique records, reflecting the particular meaning the interviewee draws from her/his individual life experience.

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 3, Disc 1.

Suzanne Becker: *If you could begin again by telling a little bit about yourself, where you're from, how you ended up out in Las Vegas and made your way to the [Nevada] test site?*

Oscar Foger: My name is Oscar Charles Foger. I was born in Houston, Texas May 17, 1942. I came to Las Vegas. My grandfather ventured out early in the thirties and there was work, so my parents decided that they would move out here, and along they brought the family. I been here since 1943.

So you were very young.

Yes. I went through the school system here. I graduated from Las Vegas High School. I played a year of professional football with the San Francisco 49ers.

Really!

Yeah.

What year was that?

In 1960. And from then I had an injury, so I came home and sought employment, and I went to the Nevada Test Site, where I started off as a custodian out in Mercury. And from there I worked in the warehouse. Then the mine training program came up, which I applied for and was accepted. I worked as a miner from 1967 to 1995, then I retired. I worked underground in the tunnels all this time except my latter years. I think about six years I worked outside as an expediter.

What is that?

Ordering tools and supplies for the tunnel. And maintained that position until basically the test site itself was kind of shut down, besides a little skeleton crew, I think, in 1990, it started. Then Yucca Mountain started, and I left the test site area and went to Yucca Mountain, where I finished up my time. And I worked over there, I think, for five years on that project.

Digging out the tunnels for that?

Right.

Some are huge.

But I retired out of there in ’95, and that’s probably been the end of my work career there.

So you were out at the test site at long time. I’m wondering if you could talk about what it was like when you first got there in the mid-sixties.

In the mid-sixties, most things was opened up then to minorities. It was basically kitchen work, custodial work, Teamsters, and construction. They didn’t have any black miners at the time, and that was one of my things that I wanted to get into because we didn’t. Then they started allowing the minorities to get into the different other crafts, and I was just blessed, you know, that I was selected in taking advantage of it.

But as far as the work itself, it was the best job I think a person could ask for. I never had an opportunity too much to work in the casinos downtown. All my life was spent up there. But going through, I guess, the growing pains with segregation and things back in that time, just a lot of things wasn’t open for minorities, and we had to go through that period. But as the years progressed, we did get better and things started opening up for us. I was just still thankful that I was one of the ones that accepted it and had a good job. Reynolds Electric [Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company, REECo] was one of the better companies I think a person could ever work for.

[00:05:00] *Did you go out there with the intention of being a miner, or you just went out there because the test site was a pretty good employer and had a lot of jobs available?*

Yes, I went out there because the test site was a good employer and you made a decent living. In town, working at the hotels, it never appealed to me because I didn't want to really get into that kind of work, and you didn't make the money. And I knew one day I was going to start a family. I was, matter of fact, single. I didn't get married until '65, but I knew one day I would have a family and I would need some means of supporting them halfway decent, make a decent living anyway. And they provided that. They provided that the whole time I was out there.

It was a different experience. Being around a different environment and being around a different type of work that was involved out there, it was like another world once getting into the mining part of how a tunnel was actually drove, the type of working machinery that was used underground. And that was something else, you know, we had a kind of a rough time then with being a miner trainee and really, I guess then, being accepted; because there were some things you was allowed to do still. They had another craft underground which was bull gang [which] was basically minority.

What was the bull gang like?

Underground labor. You did most all the labor work, but the actual drilling and driving tunnel, was primarily—was really the miners' work. A lot of machines, they wouldn't really help you to catch on. Some of the guys would. You know it's just like anything else. You have a few people that help and you're going to have others that have problems with different groups.

But in all I had some great supervisors; two in particular I really just feel a lot about, even like a brother, matter of fact. Lavell Atkinson was [is] a person really close to my heart. And by him being a Christian person also, I think [he] understood the problems that we were going

through, and basically what I was out there for, just to make a decent living. And another guy, Ray Bennett—I couldn't say enough about—was really helpful. And quite a few of the miners. I've got a personal friend who is white, Jack Pryor—moved on to Arkansas. Now we communicate at least once a month. We worked together for quite some time.

But like I said, there [were] some that helped, some who were supportive, and then there were others that had problems with it. But we did manage to get through, and I always tried to carry myself in a way that I would gain respect. I gave respect and also I gained respect, so I was allowed to do quite a bit. They had this one machine there, didn't too many run, which drove the tunnels, an Alpine Miner™, the great big machine that it cuts the rock. And I had gained a little experience. Before the time was over, I got very efficient with it, and I was allowed to go to different tunnels to operate it.

But by then things had opened up and became good. But the work itself was hard work. It was really hard, hard work, but what comforted you, you knew Fridays that the paycheck was going to make the difference. But we did a lot of sensitive work **[00:10:00]** with a lot of nuclear experiments.

What did you think about that?

Personally, I thought there was a need for it, realizing in order to have a strong country we had to have a strong defense. And this I still believe was primarily the main thing that kept America free, kept war from being. We never had a war on our turf over here. I think that's one of the main things that kept us free, because of our power. And it was great to be a part of that. I never went to armed services, but I figured that was a way also to contribute. The work we did, a lot of it was technical; a lot of it we didn't talk about, but we was always involved.

Now did you have a security clearance at the time that you were out there?

Yes, I did.

I would imagine.

Right. To work on some of the events, you had to have a, what would you call it? You had to have one of the highest clearances that they were allowing, you know, the civilian people out there.

The Q-clearance?

Right, the Q-clearance. Well, you seem to know about it. That's what it was called then, the Q-clearance, which I did have. It allowed you to work more closely with the scientists and with the experimenters and all those different type people, once the tunnel was driven and they started getting the other things together, the devices and whatever. That was another experience. If you just think, if you just sit and think about nuclear testing, the first thing [that] comes to your mind, especially if, say, you're driving a tunnel, is just dig a hole and place a device back there and set it off. But not so.

Right. A lot more goes into it?

Yes, Ma'am, a lot more. And a lot more hard work, detail work, of making sure everything is really safe and harnessed.

Within the tunnel?

Within the tunnel itself, before anything else is happening. And then once that's over, what we had was a reentry; you had to go back in and assess whatever damage was done, which [was] a new experience. I had a chance, too, to be on what we call a reentry team. Basically that's what they did.

But in all and, working with that, you met a lot of brilliant minds out there. Now I sometimes, some of them that's still living, I can see on TV and other places and say, `I worked with that guy once before.`

But it supported—I know with my people it made a difference in our standard of living, a lot of us taking advantage of it and did well. I raised my family. That's why I thank God every day that I was allowed because I made a decent living. I was able to send my kids to college, and support my family like I thought they should be, and live comfortably. And after retirement I'm still living comfortably because they're really, really taking care of us.

But the only problem I have now is after all this is said and done, the things that we went through, some of us got illnesses from some of the work that we did, and the government is not doing anything about it. Some [are] getting paid for it, but [there's] no price you can put on a supporter's life or a family member's life. And then the health problems that some of us now are coming up with, and still nothing. They don't deem that it really happened and you have to go through a lot of extensive questioning. And my part, even my hearing is bad. I never **[00:15:00]** had another job. All my life, my whole working career was right there, but still I have problems of getting anything done about my hearing. Blood clots developed. I've been on Coumadin for, oh, fourteen years because blood clots just show and go to my lungs, which is dangerous. They keep saying something else could occur, it was prior to. Whatever excuse, it doesn't add up.

Right. And you've gone through the screening and the—

Yes, that I have.

I know they do it fairly regularly.

Yes, I think it's now like every three years. I went through mine. Right, I went through all of that.

Yeah, and still it's questionable?

It's questionable that it came from anything that we incurred up there at the test site. But it's just ironic, most everybody working up there has the same problems, or die with the same problems and nothing is really being done. And that's down-heartening.

Did you ever think about that while you were there working, or did they ever talk about that, that there was a potential for this?

No! Because most of the workers—well, I know myself—was just ignorant to the fact about radiation, the dust hazards, any other thing that we worked around. We were just kind of ignorant. And like a layman, we'd think water would cure all. Just go and take a shower.

Well, why would you think differently?

Right. And matter of fact, it came home to a lot of families because the clothes we wore were contaminated and we brought it home, washed, and you know your wife or the kids come up with something.

But I just think the government should step up and be responsible. They know what occurred. They know more than we do. And they knew beforehand the effects that it was going to have on the bodies. But you just have a hard time, and then going through all this screening. It's like a witch hunt. Maybe this happened, but they pick and choose where it could have occurred, but never on the test site. It always happened somewhere else. I went about my hearing and he was asking me did I hunt? So I told him, `Yes, I hunt once a year. I go deer hunting once a year.`

He said, `Well, that's probably where the loss of hearing come from.`

I say, `I don't make a living hunting. I go hunt, shoot maybe five or six rounds a year.`

But I was under there daily with air percussion drills and everything under there was noisy, even the locomotives, setting off the charges. All that was noisy. When we first started in

there in the early sixties, we didn't have the proper hearing protection. You either used—first it was rags. You'd tear you a little piece of rag and stick it in your ear. Then they went to that Bilsom, cotton.

And that's what they gave you guys?

That was for ear protection. Then later on in the years, I think about '71 or '72, they started giving us those little Styrofoam earplugs, furnishing them. Then they made some type of other earplug, had it molded for your ear, not custom-made, but they wasn't worth anything either.

It sounds like you spent the first eight or ten years really without any ear protection.

Protection. Hardly any safety was really enforced. I know a lot of times we be in back there driving a drift with those machines and all this dust would be in there. If you didn't get a rag and tie around your face—especially we used to blow a lot of sand in plugs and things, and all that sand back there—if you had a rag, you'd tie over your face. Then later on we got respirators, but that was later on in the years. Then there was times that you went back into a tunnel that had been exposed, and you wouldn't have the proper protection until later on something happens. **[00:20:00]** That's another thing that was down-heartening also, you had those dosimeters that we wore for detecting radiation. I think about every quarter or something, they'd send you a little mail-out that radiation level was really low or it was nonexistent. Just constantly, year after year, you would get that same thing. Now, you know better.

What did you think about it at the time? Did you think anything of it or did you just believe that yes, the radiation levels were low?

It's bad, you put your faith in people and especially the ones that [are] supposed to be looking out for your best interests, and here were medical people sending you this information. So just like going to your private doctor, if he tells you whatever you're doing, drinking or smoking is

hazardous to your health, you look into it. And the same thing they were telling us, you know, wasn't no problem.

Yeah. Why wouldn't you believe them?

Right. You just swallow it and keep going. But later on in the years after the ones that didn't get a chance to retire, you know, passed on, then the lights start coming on [that] something went wrong somewhere. We had quite a few friends that I worked with, you know, never lived long enough to enjoy their first pension check, you know, just died. Not old, elderly men but young men. And today there's still some that [are] really ill and affected by it. Some they're taking care of, and some they're just kind of passing the buck. So that makes it a little rough.

[Telephone rings]

Excuse me one second.

Sure.

[00:22:22] End Track 3, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 4, Disc 1.

OK.

But you know if we had been a little more informed, I think, of the hazards that we could face about that type of work there'd probably still been some that would've went into it. And maybe that was the reason, probably a lot wouldn't have accepted [it]. By it being on a government installation, they needed to get these things done, they had to have people. But they just wasn't really open and honest with us, with whatever went on down there.

So as I say, with that experience in the tunnels there and leaving from there, going to Yucca Mountain was another brand new world. And I had worked prior on some projects that it were for Yucca Mountain but never knew it until we went up and start seeing some of the—

At the test site you worked on some projects that ended up being part of the Yucca Mountain project?

Yes. Yes.

What kind of things, if you can talk about them?

Well, you know, something about testing the rock to see how much heat they could hold, see how much water, how much moisture, [it] would hold, and the type of grounds, and different things. But never knew it until we went down to Cashman Field and they had an exhibit showing the things that we had actually done where I was working at. But again, we were just working, and nobody—I guess sometime maybe it's better not to know things.

It seems like there was a lack of communication for some things.

That it certainly was. It certainly was.

And did they talk to you about secrecy? Were you not able to talk about some of the things that you did, outside of the test site?

No. Even in the tunnels, it was a need-to-know, that type thing. But there was a lot of things that—

But you couldn't come home and say after, you know, a day like when there was a test, you couldn't come home and tell your family about that.

No. No. No, you couldn't get involved in a lot of the things that went on in the job at home, or even I know some guys that—

DUE TO A DISC MALFUNCTION THE BALANCE OF THE INTERVIEW WAS LOST

[00:02:56] End Track 4, Disc 1.

[End of interview]