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

Interview with John S. Coogan

September 15, 2006
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Leisl Carr

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John Coogan: My name is John Shannon Coogan. I was born in Northampton, Massachusetts on September 29, 1928. I migrated from several problems—a tour in the U.S. Marine Corps—to the University of New Mexico, which I graduated from in 1952. I was hired by Reynolds Electric [Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company, REECo] in Albuquerque [New Mexico] and subsequently came to Nevada in December of 1954 to work at the Nevada Test Site [NTS]. At that time I was involved in buying electrical equipment for the Nevada Test Site as we were getting ready for the 1955 series, the [Operation] Teapot series. Basically, after that I evolved. Reynolds Electric at the time was a very small group and we were interested in expanding. Several of the things that they took over during this period of time, during the 1955-56 era, was the feeding and housing at the Nevada Test Site. The feeding was under a fellow named Warren Boris The housing was under, oh, the fellow that owned Pogo's bar [Pogo's Tavern] up here, Jim Holcombe.

Leisl Carr: *Pogo's bar? Where was that located at?*

Pogo's bar. It's on Decatur Boulevard.

Still?

North Decatur. Yes, still. And he owned that bar and ran it for many, many years until he died, I think, last year. Also one of the people that you might—it's prominently in the news here, is Jim Rogers. His father Frank Rogers was the assistant project director for Reynolds Electric at that time.

One of the situations that had evolved at the test site concerning offsite radiation exposure was that in the early days of the Nevada Test Site, in the ’51 through the ’53 series, the U.S. Army was in charge of the radiation safety program both offsite and onsite. During one of these series there were several complaints from the offsite residents. One of the stories that remains is called the Ghost of Alamo, in which a RADSAFE [radiological safety] personnel appeared in full NICs with his respirator and looked at his pencil dosimeter and told the people of Alamo, `Well, I’ve got mine. It’s time to go`, which of course greatly disturbed the people of Alamo.

What did he mean by “I’ve got mine, it’s time to go”?

He got his exposure, his weekly or monthly exposure on the pencil dosimeter, and he said that he’s got mine, I’m ready to go. Basically this led to consternation by the offsite public, which opted for the closing of the Nevada Test Site. This was rectified by having the U.S. Public Health Service [USPHS] come in and take over the functions in 1955, in part of 1953 and all of 1955. **[00:05:00]** One of the things that might be explained at this time, of course, is that in alternate years they used to test in the Pacific, and then they’d test here at the Nevada Test Site. Like in 1955 it was here; 1956 it was in the Pacific, in the Marshall Islands. The Public Health Service maintained people in the offsite communities and one of the things is we had people actually live there.

Oh, I didn’t know that.

And they lived there for the duration of the test series in these locations.

What was the reasoning behind that?

Mainly to make the people [available] so that the populace could have someone to talk to them about radiation and where the test site were going and what the reason for testing was. Also

during this time, most of these people were district health officers from different states and personnel from Washington, D.C. and in the Public Health Service in Cincinnati, Ohio and other locations. Primarily they were all professional people.

And what is the significance of them being professionals?

Well, I think that the idea behind being professional people is that they knew how—they were experienced in dealing with people, and they knew the situation of the radiation. They had some knowledge of it beyond the basic training that you would get with Army personnel. So that started it.

In 1956, Reynolds Electric was given the charge of taking over radiation safety, of which I was one of the original members.

They still call this RADSAFE at that point.

Yes.

And you were one of the original members of RADSAFE.

Yes.

Wow! Can you tell me about that, what that was like?

Well, basically what happened was we were forced into it because in 1956 there were some experiments, they had some trouble with some triggers, and they wanted to have a series of tests at the test site and we didn't have anyone that was trained at that time. The Army had two people left out there. One was a fellow named Marshall Page who later was working for the Department of Energy [DOE], and the other one was a fellow named William Wilkerson. In the Public Health Service there's two gentlemen left: one was Oliver Placak and Dr. Melvin W. Carter. And Carter, by the way, is professor emeritus from Georgia Tech.

And so basically what they did is they started, since I had had some training in radiac instrumentation, we formed a group in 1956, and with the help of the Public Health Service people, we managed to do both off-and-onsite radiation. And that was the start of the REECo RADSAFE group.

And it sounds like it was always meant to be kind of a fusion with the Public Health Service. Am I correct in assuming that?

Yes, that's true. Basically it's probably from this liaison that I eventually went with the Public Health Service, because they asked me several times to go down there and so in 1961 I did **[00:10:00]** transfer from Reynolds Electric to the U.S. Public Health Service.

How did that go in the early days with RADSAFE?

I think the two things people have to realize, one is it wasn't until the 1960s that we developed anything that we could use in instrumentation besides vacuum tubes. At that time—

Yeah, I gathered this.

At that time, most of the instrumentation we had was not only heavy and bulky but it was very unreliable in certain instances.

Can you describe some of it? Don James described a few pieces, but the early pieces must've been—could you really take them around with you?

Oh yes, you could take them around with you but basically as I recall the basic gamma and beta monitor was something in a box that was probably, oh, twelve inches by four inches by six inches high and probably weighed in the order of twenty pounds, most of that being batteries. And it wasn't until in the sixties that we developed the transistor, that you really got instrumentation that could do many, many things. For example, we used to have a 256-channel multi-channel analyzer which was fed on vacuum tubes, and probably every morning I'd

probably spend a half-an-hour at least changing tubes to get the darn thing up and running. And we could look at 256 channels of isotopes with varying degrees of accuracy. Today the same machine is in thousandths of—you can do thousands of functions with it, and I think the last one I looked at was like 2,000 functions. So, you know, you go on order of magnitude with detection. I think that two of the things that were—when we first looked at radiation, we looked at the long return of the isotopes such as the betas and the gammas and the alphas because we could see those. We couldn't see some of the shorter-life isotopes such as the iodines and some of the precursors like tritiums and things like that we couldn't see, because we didn't have the instrumentation. So basically that's about where we came from. I think that probably one of the fellows that you should contact is a fellow named Clifford Penwell. He was with REECo RADSAFE for a number of years in charge of their field operations. And he's also a great storyteller. [Mr. Penwell passed away in 2007].

That's always a good thing. That's my favorite part, is the stories.

But that's how we started, and of course we looked at the early days when the '55, '57 series, looking at the '58 series, we're looking at above-ground explosions. And then of course we did start in '58, we did start looking at tunnel operations. In all of these situations we looked at the offsite problems. Interestingly enough, when we looked at onsite, Reynolds Electric of course had many, many—well, we had a great deal of resources. We had all the resources we could use, and we developed a system, you know, where—for example, one of the things we did was in 1957, everyone entering the Nevada Test Site had to have a film badge. Up until that time **[00:15:00]** it was not required. You were required to get one if you knew you were going into the area but many, many people did not. And of course this has led to, I think, many cases where

people are looking for compensation for radiation damage, which cannot be proven either one way or the other. That's our main focus, I think, right now.

The other thing is that, if I may skip ahead here a little bit, going to '61 when we started the offsite [program], when the Public Health Service—at that time, the draft was still on, and so we could get a number of young people graduating from college and have them serve two years in the Public Health Service in lieu of military service. And so we had a great cadre of young professional people that we could send into the offsite areas. We didn't have people live there per se, but they would go out there and spend all week there and maybe come in on the weekends. And this, I think, having talked to Don James, I'm sure that he's told you he has many, many friends out there.

Yeah, quite a few.

And if you talk to Chuck Costa he will tell you that he has many, many friends out there. And over the years, you know, there's been a number of people that we've worked with and known that, well, we still consider our friends. In fact, I went out last year and toured the offsite area just to talk to some of the people.

Can you tell me the geographic parameters of the offsite area, just so I can get a picture? What towns are we talking about?

Well, mainly we're talking about Tonopah, Ely, Austin, probably in Utah to a certain extent Cedar City, for example, St. George. Of course in that area you had a more hostile environment because people thought they'd been exposed, or I'm sorry, had been exposed. And then of course we had places in Kingman [Arizona] that we'd visit, for example.

The other thing that we did is we used college students every other summer to go out and inventory milk cows, dairy cows. And that was both the commercial dairies and the individual

family-owned cows. We did this throughout Nevada and Utah and parts of California and parts of Arizona. And I might say it was very successful and the students were very devoted. And of course what I did was send one man or employee with about six students and they went out and covered an area. Tremendous effort. Well, I think the students enjoyed it and it also provided us with a base in case anything did escape from the test site that we could immediately go to the dairies in the fallout area. And I don't think, there's over one or two instances where close in, like in Alamo, where we had to divert the milk. It was an effort.

Well, this is the impression that I'm getting with doing a little research on the Public Health Service and the magnitude of the effort that went into being very thorough in this monitoring. Am I correct in assuming that?

Yes, we thought we were. There's always room for improvement. Anything you want to do, there's always somebody who can come up with, why didn't you do this? But no, we thought we were doing very, very interesting work. In fact, you know, this is involved and even today you have community monitoring stations which are run by the Desert Research Institute [DRI] which has taken over the offsite program. They're in places like Pahrump and Ely and **[00:20:00]** Tonopah and some of the ranches out in the area like Fallinis' ranch at Warm Springs and Sharps' ranch Blue Eagle. And there's a number of things like this that are done that we consider that it's a thorough effort. Probably if you ever have another, say, hopefully it never happens but say you ever had another nuclear holocaust or somebody in the world would blow up a nuclear bomb, one of the places that we probably could do a great deal of monitoring, in the western United States anyhow, is the Lightning Strike groups has five-mile grids throughout the western United States. They have stations so they can monitor the lightning strikes, and it looks to me like you could put radiation stations on those at the same time.

[At this point, Mr. Coogan's wife Betty Jean enters the room and greetings are exchanged.]

So, you know, I think that's an option for what we're talking about; that's something that probably the resource that's available right now that we haven't seen any need to use right at the present moment.

That's an interesting observation that I've not heard anyone make before.

I investigated it one time before I retired and it's possible to do.

When did you retire?

When did I retire?

Betty Jean Coogan: Nineteen eighty-seven.

John Coogan: Oh, OK. It's hard to remember these things.

Betty Jean Coogan: But he's never had to remember those things, you know, he always has somebody.

That's your job. I know how that goes. I'm recently engaged myself and watching after my fiancé as closely as I can. Well, let me take you back just a little bit. What did you study at the University of New Mexico? Did it relate to what you ended up doing?

John Coogan: No, not really. I was going to become an electrical engineer, but then I got interrupted for a year in there, so I finally just got a bachelor's degree in business to get out of there. My father had been an electrical contractor and I'd been an electrician before I went to college.

And that's the connection between you getting out of college and then REECo picking you up, because you already had those skills as an electrician?

Well, yeah, and of course what I used to do is do a lot of estimating for jobs, for the cost, and of course that's what REECo was interested in. And the fellow that hired me, his name was Joe

Lopez who at one time was the director up there at the test site for REECo, and he was an electrical engineer.

And then you just came out to Nevada. You came from Albuquerque, so you have kind of a different impression of what it was like to come out to the Las Vegas area and the test site. What did you think when you got here? Was it any different than—?

It was a very small town. Well, of course, I came out here first and then my wife joined me, I think, in January or February of the next year. We found an apartment on I believe it was on North 9th. It was the last thing out of town, there wasn't anything below there. And there was a very small-town atmosphere. I guess the thing that didn't impress me was the fact that, number one, we didn't have libraries; a very small library downtown was all you had. There was no university; UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] hadn't been heard of. In fact, the Public Health Service of course has—well, the EPA [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency] now has those buildings down on the university campus. Those were built in the sixties and that was **[00:25:00]** to aid UNLV to give them more impetus and to also turn some of those buildings back to them after a certain number of years, which I think they have. I haven't followed that too close.

Yeah, I don't know. We'll have to look that up.

Yes, I believe they've turned one or two buildings back to the university, which was the original intent for the government to build the buildings and then for them eventually to become university buildings.

It sounds like a fairly symbiotic relationship between the Public Health Service, and later the EPA, and then the university, that they're both trying to build each other up. Did the Public

Health Service have access to resources that were better because they were on the UNLV campus, or did it not matter?

I don't think it mattered too much. Well, we used several of the resources. One, I used a number of the students.

Right, right, I didn't know that.

And even during the school year, see, we had a program where you could use students twenty hours a week.

They still have that program.

And that's a great program for both parties. In fact, one of the gals I had down there, she was a secretary for me for—because I kept running out of them, and she now works for the Water District as a senior engineer.

Really! That's fabulous. It sounds like, then, it's sort of a grow-your-own kind of program where the university provides the—

Oh sure, and there should be more of that, really, because that's an interesting and beneficial relationship, I think, for both parties. And of course the other thing is that in working with the Public Health Service, one of the problems that you run into is that it's hard to find professional people that want to work in this kind of an environment. It's very difficult at times and at times, you spend a lot of time away from your families and away from home. Probably you can talk to Don James, but I bet I can safely say that half to two-thirds of his time was spent away from his home.

He said that. Not quite three-quarters but two-thirds, he was gone from his family. Did you have the same phenomenon? Were you gone a lot?

Yes, I was. Well, see, one of the things we also did in the offsite program was we had a program where we had what we called the whole-body counter. We took people into a chamber and looked at the internal isotopes that were generated in their body. We picked people in the offsite community and brought them in, and we did this for a number of years, primarily [with] some of the ranchers. Well, one of the fellows I can remember from Ely was a garage owner; he owned a service station up there. And you know we looked at all these people to see if we could find anything internal. Just visit.

One of the things I did was track Eskimos for a number of years.

Oh, from the tests up in Alaska?

From the Russians.

From the Russians? You guys were doing monitoring from the Russian testing?

Yeah.

Well, that's interesting. Can you tell me more about that?

Well, basically what happened was, there was the Russians—if you look at the map where the Russian atomic testing is, to some of the, like Point Hope in Alaska is one of the villages up there, is only like twenty miles across the Bering Sea. I mean not the Bering Sea but across the ocean there. And so what you had was the fallout that was deposited in the lichen. **[00:30:00]** Lichen is a plant that absorbs its nutrients from the air, not from the ground. Then you have the caribou which feed on the lichens. Then you have the Eskimo that feeds on the caribou. So that's what we looked at. We couldn't do a complete, whole-body thing but we did a shadow shield where you had a person bend over and you had a four-inch crystal looking at their stomach. We did that for a number of years and we followed a number of families up there.

And did you publish your findings?

Yes, they're published somewhere. I don't know where, but they're published, yes.

DOE has a website called Open Net and I've been kind of searching for some of your publications. When I find them, I can burn you a disc and mail them off if you like.

I might, I don't know. I donated a bunch of my papers to the Atomic Testing Museum.

Oh, OK. That's actually good to know.

But I don't know what they've done with them.

They're in the archives. If you donated them, they're probably in the archives. That's good to know.

OK. And then I also used to travel with a medical doctor and he did the medical side and I did the physical investigation of people who had complaints, radiation complaints throughout the West here.

Beginning how early?

Oh, that probably started in the sixties when I was with them, and then continued on until we changed to EPA. When the EPA came in, we lost a lot of this, you know, because they weren't interested and the EPA wanted a different direction.

Really! I didn't know that. Can you—

Well, EPA is a very highly political organization, and they want to do everything that's popular. They don't want, you know, something like we're talking about. What I'm talking about, following families and everything, that's a long-term study before you ever develop anything. And you know your stats and that are under question at all times; you really don't know what you're getting into until—so. And the Environmental Protection Agency, while they were interested in keeping up the offsite program as such from the testing standpoint, but beyond that, as far as doing anything in Alaska, they weren't interested. They discontinued that. We had, I

guess, a few complaints from local citizens after that but, you know, that was not the number we had before, and so I don't know. I guess to say that on the record or off the record, EPA was not my favorite organization.

Fair enough. Did you go through that transition then when the EPA took over the Public Health Service? And remind me what year that was. I don't remember.

I don't know when they took over, '80 I think or something like that. I'm not sure anymore.

OK. Did you end up working for the EPA?

Oh yeah, sure. And don't get me wrong, we had certain things like we did go to Three Mile Island.

You went to Three Mile Island?

Oh yes.

Wow. I remember that date. That's 1979, about?

Somewhere in there.

What did you think when you went there?

I thought we were making a great big deal out of nothing. Actually if you look at it and look at the reactor, everything held the way it was supposed to hold. There wasn't any release of any significant amounts of radiation. There was some short-term, low-level gaseous isotopes released in very small amounts. I thought we handled it very poorly. No, the thing I saw there that really I thought bothered me more than anything was the fact that the local people were **[00:35:00]** not involved in what was going on. So one of the things we did was we took the local police departments and the fire departments and gave them some portable instruments and told them how, gave them a short course on how they worked. We said when you're patrolling or whatever you're doing, would you please record these for us? And that really didn't get us much as far as

the information but I thought it quelled the populace from thinking that they were withheld from all information. And I guess I thought there the bureaucracy was in full swing. I have a few other complaints but one of my main complaints is against FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Administration] and I thought that they did a lousy job. I'm sorry, that's my opinion.

Oh, don't apologize to me. This is all before—

Yes. I think that FEMA—well, I think it probably has been out right now, but they were a very ineffective organization. I was down in Florida with them on a reactor site down there and they also didn't perform, I thought, very well.

Well then, this poses an interesting situation because you have the Public Health Service, who you worked for before, and they had one orientation, one attitude, and then you have these other government bureaucracies that have another orientation, another attitude. What exactly was that shift? Can you explain that?

Well, I'm not sure I can explain it except that the EPA, for example, is more interested in clean air and clean water than many other things. So that was the focus that they took and that was the main focus of the program. You still had, somewhat, the radiation offsite program over here, but it became a secondary focus rather than the primary focus. And it went down from there.

Do you think that it was because the tests went underground? I'm just speculating if you can't say.

No, the tests were underground and as years went by, you know, we perfected a number of things.

The containment process?

The containment and also the depth of burial and things of this nature which made it less obvious that you were going to have any release of radioactivity. For example, when you go on a tour of

the test site, there'll be an area they'll take you out to, one of their famous, of course, experiments is project Sedan which was a Plowshare, peaceful use of nuclear energy-type experiment. They were going to blow a new Panama Canal is what they were going to do. As an offsite [monitor] for that, I can say that they didn't move a lot of dirt; however, the dust cloud and everything, they had to turn on the street lights in the city of Ely at four o'clock in the afternoon on an July day because of the dust from the Sedan shot. But what I started to say was that also in this area you'll see an area where they still have it contaminated, where the ground is still contaminated, and it's from a tower shot that they had in the 1957 series. It's still a contaminated area [Area 9] which we do nothing with.

Other than that, you know, I guess I'm a great believer in nuclear energy. I think it's safe. I think you can use it safely. I think you have to look at a number of things. I look at a **[00:40:00]** controversy like Yucca Mountain and I think we have put this in the wrong perspective. What we should say up there is that you're storing nuclear fuel rods for future use, and you should compare it to something like Fort Knox [Kentucky]. Now maybe this is a strange thing for me to say but you know if you look at this, in our country we haven't built a reactor in twenty years. We still have some 20 percent of our power produced by nuclear reactors. If you look ahead twenty more years, you're going to have to have 40 percent more power than you have right now, from all sources, not just electric but gasoline and everything else, just from projections, that's what they're projecting. We have taken from the Russians a number of nuclear weapons and in South Carolina converted them to fuel rods. There's a book out called *The World is Flat* which is interesting because the focus is on the fact countries are becoming international and want the same amenities such as autos, clothing, food, etc.

That's a great title.

One of the things that you have to look at is that, for example, Japan is almost all nuclear right now. So is France. China has five reactors that are being built in this country to be sent to China. India has three reactors. You're going to have to look at nuclear somewhere along the line. We talk about alternate sources like wind farms, wind chargers, and also, you know, solar panels. The thing that's wrong there is you have to look at the amount of space, lands that it would take to produce the amount of energy [as opposed to what] it would take to use one reactor. So that's my argument.

Sounds good.

So I think that what we should do is we should turn around Yucca Mountain as a dump site and say it's a Fort Knox; it's just a storage place for nuclear fuel rods that can be reprocessed. You get 93 percent back that's reusable from the fuel rod, so you should take that and use this as a Fort Knox so that you have this supply of nuclear fuel available to you.

Now as someone who monitored radiation offsite and onsite, you don't see an issue with that site being contaminated? Because I'm not sure I understand how to keep it from being contaminated. I'm showing my ignorance here. You're going to have to explain it to me.

OK, let me go back. In 1978 there was an experiment performed at the Nevada Test Site where they stored fuel rods in a tunnel, and they have all the results of that and from that they had thermal measurements and radiation measurements and almost anything that you wanted. And the experiment was successful. So it can be done. Basically the real problem with the storage of fuel rods that you have to be careful of is heat, not radiation. It's thermal heat. So if the rods are clanned, which they are when you get them, reused rods, and they can be stored separately enough so that the heat doesn't build up, there's no problem.

And that 1978 report was published?

I don't remember the name of it but yes, it was published.

Do you think it was the DOE that did it?

Yes.

OK. I'll look that up, too. It's a really interesting argument. I mean actually I haven't personally given this much thought other than—

Well, I'm on my soapbox.

Well, this is your forum. This is your chance. Because I have to sit here and listen to you. [Laughter] Which I do with pleasure, by the way.

[00:45:00] *I have another question about arc, going back to the EPA, and it's a good thing this doesn't have to be chronological because my mind fires here, it fires there, so we can be all over the place. PHS to EPA to CEMP [Community Environmental Monitoring Program]: you said DRI took over monitoring, and I'm assuming that that's the CEMP program, is that correct?*

Yes.

And that's the one that DRI runs.

Yes.

What was the philosophical transition between the three? You've kind of described between the PHS and the EPA, that it was a shift in mission and focus as far as Public Health Service was more interested in the monitoring and the EPA was more interested in water and air. How does CEMP fit into this?

Well, I think that basically what happened was one of things that was determined was that, I don't know how to put this, DRI came in as a state agency that should be involved, and then therefore some of the assets were transferred to them, such as the community monitoring program. That's where it evolves from now.

So it moved from the Army to the Public Health Service and REECo, to the EPA, and REECo was still onsite with RADSAFE?

REECo still did onsite.

To the state system, which was CEMP. That's really interesting. Do you have any thoughts as to why it went from being military to federal to state?

Well, going from the military, I think, is, in my estimation, you know, there's the right way, the wrong way, and the military way.

[Laughing] You can say this because you were in the Marine Corps.

And, I had a lot of exposure to military people during the period of time that we were working at the test site. I think that that explains why you do it the military way was something that you couldn't sustain, I mean their training of people, you know, you have rigid, set rules and you can't deviate. And yes, the other thing is, the number of community meetings that we've had held at night and in bars and in churches and other places, schools, I don't know how you explain all those, but very basically I think it was dedication. We had two great mentors. One was Oliver Placak. He was really a great teacher. And Melvin Carter was a young man when he started with us and got his Ph.D. and then he went on, and he has had a great career. One of the things, as I mentioned, he went to Georgia Tech after he retired here, but he was the director here at the lab for a while. Also he was president of a group that's called the Health Physics Society, which is a group of professional health physicists and people that work on that program. There's a number of people who've done an amount of work in there. Chuck Costa has done some work in the Health Physics Society with training people to work on reactors, mainly technicians. And I was on the board of directors for the Health Physics Society.

For the Health Physics Society? Wow.

So yeah, there's a number of us here that, you know, been there, done that. Obviously the number of people that have run through the Nevada Test Site is just tremendous in one way or **[00:50:00]** another, the people that have worked there, been associated with it or something else.

And some of the studies that were done there, I'm sure if you look at some of the studies that were done there, there's benefit from them. Not only from the nuclear side and from the cessation of the Cold War, but I'm sure that, well, for example, I'm sure radiac instrumentation, radiation instrumentation was greatly improved by our working at the Nevada Test Site.

Absolutely. It sounds to me as if your work, your collective work, you and your coworkers and your supervisors and everybody who was involved with radiation monitoring. Don James, I think, said that you guys were called to Three Mile Island because you were the experts in the field.

Yes. Well, been used to doing it.

Yeah, and that's an interesting contrast that you gave me with the information flow from your organization, the Public Health Service in this case, to offsite communities versus what happened at Three Mile Island and the lack of communication.

Yes. And, you know, I must say that I for one was not always in favor of the AEC [U.S. Atomic Energy Commission] or the DOE or whatever it was and some of their decisions. I felt that sometimes that, well, for instance, in radiation damage cases right now, everybody that has a certain cancer can get $150,000, which is a pittance. It's a pittance if you're going to die from cancer. But I don't feel that's right. I think that there's many other causes, you know, that keeps people from getting cancer. And some of these people, the people I saw in the sixties and seventies that were complaining about radiation damage, one of the things that struck me very, very strongly was the fact that these people had been hit with large, high medical costs and did

not have the medical benefits or the medical insurance that we have now, in some cases. You know, to a large extent, that's still true today. Fifty percent of your bankruptcies right now are from people that have had medical bills that they can't pay. I think with this one, we give you $150,000 if you have this type of cancer, you know, one fits all, I don't believe in that. I think you should take the time to look at it and see the individual cases, rather than make a mass subjection. My point.

Well taken. Anything else? I'm using that as a filler so I can look at my notes real quick because I know that there were some other specific things I wanted to ask you. Oh, your security clearance. Did you have a Q-clearance?

Sure. And I also had a top secret military clearance.

Was that given at the same time or was that—?

No.

How is the process of getting these clearances? There have been some funny stories about people getting their security clearances.

Well, I got the Q-clearance from when I worked for Reynolds Electric. And I don't remember when I got the top secret military clearance.

I'll tell you a funny incident. You know you have Groom Lake, Area 51 up there. Well, for a long time, and I don't know how this came about but, for a long time I had to go up and I had to put this package, it was a high-air-sampling package, on this plane. And everything was security covered except for what I worked on. I put this sampler on, and then when the plane would come back, I'd have to go up and get the sampler, and it was taken off and taken by a plane over to California to be processed. And in my ignorance, I **[00:55:00]** always thought this

plane was a drone because when it took off there was another plane that took off with it. It wasn't until [Francis] Gary Powers crashed with the U-2 that I knew what it was.

That's great! [Laughing] You were putting sampling packages on a U-2. That's fabulous. And you didn't know?

I didn't know. I had no idea.

That's wonderful. I didn't know about that relationship between the test site and Area 51. I mean so far people have talked about them fairly separately. But this was a regular occurrence that you were—

Oh yes.

How many years did you do that for, do you know?

Six months, maybe.

Do you remember what test that was on or series?

No. See, Groom Lake started up there in '56. And I used to be involved up there because there was a family that's still around known as the Sheehans who had a mine on the other side of Groom Lake. I used to have to go up and talk to the Sheehans all the time. And certainly, you know, some of the things we did was—so I was familiar with the area up there and I knew what was going on. REECo built Area 51.

Oh, I didn't know that. They contracted to do the construction and the flight lines?

Yeah, they did the construction, put in the airstrip, put in the buildings. And they still have—you know, I don't know how it is now but, REECo provided all the kitchen help, you know, the cooks and the people who clean. And, well, there's a number of things that REECo did in the early days. Now I'm not sure how it transpired later. And with the offsite program we always had to put a man up there in case we had to evacuate that during the test. And he never got very

far, I don't think, but I mean, by the same token, he was there and the commander of the base knew he was there and he was to tell these people what they were to do in case evacuation or shelter became necessary.

Something went wrong.

Yes.

OK. What did you do for REECo? I haven't asked you that yet. You only worked for them for a few years.

Yes, I worked for them from '54 to '61. I worked in RADSAFE from '56 on. I was the superintendent of the field operations.

So that means you oversaw some of the last atmospheric tests as far as safety stuff?

Sure.

What did you have your people do? What were you responsible for as far as equipment and location of personnel?

Well, OK, what we had to do was make sure that people had proper respiratory protection and they were clothed in anti-c[ontamination] clothing, you know, the cover-the-body type of thing. And then we had an instrument repair shop in which we had portable instruments. The radiation monitors went in and worked the atmospheric shots to delineate where the lines were, the 1 R and the 100 MR and that type of thing. They also aided in recovery parties where they'd go in to recover samples and decon[taminate] the test, monitors did that. And other radiation problems we had to do, we did.

And you guys were innovating as you went?

Yes, we had a film badge program up there and I had a friend of mine that ran the film badge program and he would change your badges as you came out of an area, to make sure. And

[01:00:00] then of course we had the monthly exchange of film badges for everybody who worked there. Other than that, we had all the laboratories, all the scientific parties going in; they would have to have—we'd either send somebody with them or they'd send their own people with them, but most of the time they took one of ours with them, because we knew the area, we knew where they were and what they had to do. The above-ground shots were interesting.

Did you see?

Oh yes. Sure. We had these high-density goggles that we wore. We could see the demonstrations. Yes, everything didn't go exactly the way you wanted it to. There was a shot down in Frenchman Flat [Priscilla in June 1957] and at CP2, the CP [control point] hill up there, the shock wave come up and we're standing there, so we all sat down. We could see it coming, and so we all sat down. It knocked all the doors off all the buildings. And these are big old heavy metal doors.

Oh my gosh. Did anybody get hurt?

No, they didn't get hurt. We got rolled around a little bit. Of course we were younger and we were tougher.

The other thing is that the hours that you worked were kind of—it's always been that the hours you worked up there, even when I was up there the last few years where I used to have to brief the panel, the test panel, on the offsite conditions, you had to get up at like three o'clock in the morning and you'd be up all day. It was a tough life for a lot of those people. Plus the fact that, you know, like Don James said, you were gone most of the time.

Yeah. I'm going to stop—

[01:02:26] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 2.

So you ended up training these young men, then. Instead of them going over and serving overseas or somewhere in the military, they came to you and they had this varied experience either out in the rancher community or in the lab or doing all this stuff. It's a really interesting forum. I don't know that I would've put those pieces together.

Well, I think it was a beneficial program for everybody, you know, and I believe that you could go through the offsite area and talk to most anyone and they could give you a favorable impression. That is important, I think, especially when you're in an area like the test site. And the other thing is, when you look at the state of Nevada, there isn't a lot out there.

Not so much, not in the Great Basin area.

No, but there are some unique individuals out there.

You mentioned the Sheehans. What is his name?

Dan Sheehan and his family. And, well, there's a whole bunch of Sharps.

Jean Sharp Howerton, she wrote a book called Railroad Valley. *That's the one I was thinking of.*

Yeah, that's the one. She's a granddaughter of the people from Blue Eagle Ranch.

Fallinis?

No, the Fallinis are—

Oh, Twin Springs.

Twin Springs. And then there's three brothers named Sharp at Nyla.

Three Sharp brothers?

Yes.

What about the Whipples?

The Whipples are in Hiko.

OK. And the only other name I've heard is the Uhaldes?

Uhaldes. Yes. Sheep people. Gretchen still lives in Adaven.

That's the same line everybody says. In that whole list of ranchers, there's the cattle people and then there's the Uhaldes, the sheep people.

Well, there used to be the Parris's. The Parris's used to have sheep up there. Bert Parris was the head of the family. Get Ken Giles to tell you about Orrin Nash who lives in the railroad car out there.

There's a guy that lives out in the railroad car?

Yes.

Out north of Vegas? North of the test site?

Well, he's out from Hiko.

OK. Is he an interesting character?

Yes. Breaks horses.

Does he?

That's all he does. Well, he runs a few cows, but he breaks horses mainly.

How interesting. Well, is there anything else? I mean any other juicy bit or detail or story? I'm sure there's a thousand things, actually.

[00:05:00] There's lots of them. I don't know.

I have one question about CEMP again. We spoke about it briefly. I recently went to a CEMP meeting where they had a guy come in and talk about how to talk to the community.

Now was that at Mount Charleston?

No. Well, there was the Mount Charleston and then they had a meeting over at the Atomic Testing Museum, and that's the one I went to. And it really struck me, that meeting was more about how to present the information in way that almost sounded like they were selling

something to the community, and that struck me as being very odd. I wondered what your observations were, because in my head there seems to be a split now between taking information and making people aware of what's going on and repackaging information for the purposes of convincing. Does that make sense?

Yes.

OK. I think I need a little help understanding the picture.

Well, this sounds like some character from the University of Utah talking.

I don't even know who he was. I wish I could remember.

Well, basically of course it's very hard to go in and to sell anybody anything, you know. Like in my case, I want to sell you this dog out there right now. It's much easier for you to work your way in and gain the trust of people than try to sell anything. And I guess I'm a great believer in the fact that you have your opinion and I have my opinion, and there's no need for either one of us—we may come to some point of agreement in the middle, but I don't want to invade upon your opinions and you shouldn't invade upon my opinions, OK? Does that make sense to you?

Yeah, it does.

And I guess that's my answer to that. I just don't believe in that. If you want to go out and talk to people, I mean, I think that you have to meet them on their ground. You're not going out and telling somebody, well, I—a typical example right now, I think, how we're going about it in the wrong way, is Pat [Patricia] Mulroy with the Water District is trying to scare us into thinking that we need this pipeline right now. We've got to have it. We've got to get the Spring Valley water down here.

Yeah, that's been all over the news.

She's trying to scare you. I don't believe in that. I think that if you wanted to do that, what would be much better is to go to Spring Valley and say, we're going to put in some test wells to see how much it draws down the water and how much the table recovers. In a year or two years time, then we would like to approach you if it's fine to bring water down. It's a much easier sell.

That's a really interesting comparison, because in both cases, with the radiation monitoring and with this water issue, decisions seem to be predicated upon this exchange of information and this approach, let's see, what would be a good word to describe it? The Public Health Service, under your direction, those radiation monitors approached the community members as peers. I think that's the word I'm searching for. As opposed to Mulroy's approach, which seems to be more, what's another word for that? I'm short on words today.

Yes, well, too many of our people today in government and everywhere want to shove something down your throat, this is the way it is, there's no black or white, this is **[00:10:00]** what it is right now and this is my opinion, I know better than you do. I don't think that works. Not with the thinking public. And all you're going to do is make people mad. Actually if Mulroy gets into it, you know, it's an interesting thing, going outside of the mould of Nevada here. One of the things that they're doing in Cedar City and St. George is they're proposing a pipeline from Lake Powell into St. George and Cedar City to bring water to their location.

No kidding. I didn't know about that.

Yes. And that was part of the agreement that was made when the lake was formed, that they could get water out of this lake.

That's Utah's percentage?

Right. If they get that through and they get it on—I'm not quite sure how you pump water upstream and then they got to come up for a ways and then go back down, looking at the

topographic maps, but I think that it'd be interesting to see. Of course, one of the great things right now anywhere in the West is water rights. It's going to be almost worth as much as land is worth, and land without water rights is not going to be worth anything, until we do something, again nuclear. See, the San Onofre plant in California is a nuclear plant. It was originally scheduled to produce fresh water from seawater, and of course we never got that on. So it'll be interesting to see.

Yeah, and you have an interesting perspective on this. I mean you've brought up some points that I hadn't even thought of. This is very cool. Is there anything else?

No.

Good.

Enjoyed it, and hope you did, too.

I did. Thank you very much, Mr. Coogan.

[00:12:40] End Track 2, Disc 2.

[End of interview]