

An Oral History of Norm Avansino

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

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Interviewer: Alicia Barber, Ph.D.

Norman Avansino was born in Reno in 1917 and raised in Virginia City. He worked at the power company and the Farm Bureau in Reno in the 1930s, and for Senator Pat McCarran in his Washington, D.C. office. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, he worked briefly for the Veterans Administration and in 1948 began working in the front office at Eveleth Lumber, on East 4th Street. He left the company in 1980.

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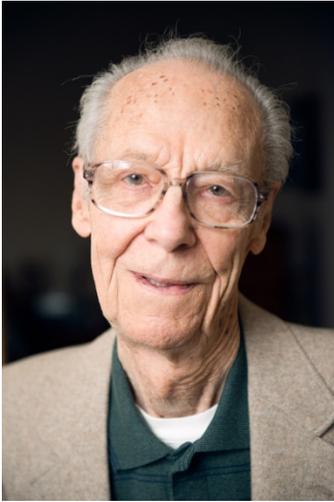
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NORM AVANSINO

Interviewed on September 13, 2013
Alicia Barber, Interviewer

Norman Avansino was born in Reno in 1917 and raised in Virginia City. He worked at the power company and the Farm Bureau in Reno in the 1930s, and for Senator Pat McCarran in his Washington, D.C. office. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, he worked briefly for the Veterans Administration and in 1948 began working in the front office at Eveleth Lumber, on Fourth Street. He left the company in 1980.

Photo by Patrick Cummings

Barber: I'm here with Norman Avansino, and the date is Friday, September 13, 2013, and we're at his home up at Sky Peaks in Reno. Mr. Avansino, do I have your permission to record this interview today?

Avansino: Yes, you do.

Barber: Great. I'm going to start out with some very easy questions. When and where were you born?

Avansino: I was born in Reno, Nevada, on February the 11th, 1917, and at the time, my folks lived on Quincy Street, about approximately where what used to be the Holiday Hotel or Motel is, but now it's called what?

Barber: The Ramada.

Avansino: The Ramada, correct.

Barber: So is it right around 5th Street, somewhere around there?

Avansino: Yes.

Barber: Were you born at the house or was you were born in a hospital?

Avansino: I'm sure it was at the house.

Barber: And what were your parents' names?

Avansino: My dad's name was Louis Avansino, and my mother's name was Florence. Her maiden name was Ninnis, and she was from Silver City, Nevada. Of course, my dad

was born in the Truckee Meadows out on a ranch out here somewhere, and he grew up most of his life on Huffaker Lane, I believe.

Barber: So his family went back a couple more generations in this area?

Avansino: Well, no. My Italian grandparents came over from Italy and settled in the valley. And my mother's folks, they're from England and were miners and came over, first settled in Michigan or in there for the iron mines. Then they eventually moved out to the West Coast, and when Virginia City was started, they settled in Silver City, just below Virginia City. I had an older brother, three years older than myself, and he was born in Silver City, and then I was, of course, in Reno.

We moved up to Virginia City from Reno in 1920 when I was three years old, and then I spent the time through high school up there and went to grammar school at the First Ward School for three years and then was transferred and moved up to the Fourth Ward School at the south end of town from the fourth grade through high school.

Barber: And you graduated from high school in what year?

Avansino: Graduated from high school in 1935, one of six members of the graduating class, and as far as I know, I'm the last one of that class.

Barber: Oh, is that right? I want to talk to you a lot more about your life in Virginia City. I'm wondering could you possibly remember anything of your life in Reno before you moved up there at age three? You were pretty young.

Avansino: For some reason I can remember airplanes flying over our house there, and they were landing at this airstrip that's now the fairgrounds up off of Wells Avenue. Those were World War I fighter planes, small enough to land in there, of course, and I do remember that.

And I remember that we had chickens in the backyard, and somehow I remember one of the chickens one time got into the house or up to the kitchen door and, I remember, tried to eat something off of a plate that was out on the back porch. Why, I don't know.

Barber: Did that house that you lived in stay in the family for a while after that?

Avansino: It was a rented house.

Barber: So did your family still have land in the Huffaker area where the family had been several generations before?

Avansino: The people who stayed on the farm did. My dad's younger brother, Johnny, John Avansino, he lived there till he died, and he's got a daughter still living, Betty Malarkey now. She married Dave Malarkey, but I think Dave has since died. I don't know whether Betty still lives on the farm or who has it now. I don't know.

Barber: We could find out. That could be fun. You probably came down to Reno to visit when you were living in Virginia City during those years.

Avansino: Often we'd come down on the V&T Railroad.

Barber: Oh, you would? Tell me about that. What was that like?

Avansino: When my mother and I moved up to Virginia City, that's the way we went up, was on the V&T. I remember that.

Barber: So you said your mother and you moved up. Was your father already there?

Avansino: Well, my dad and my older brother, they moved up first to kind of get settled before we moved up. He transferred up there as a barber.

Barber: I was thinking it's kind of a funny time to move up there when it seems that there wasn't a lot of activity.

Avansino: In 1920 now, that's when the merger of the American Flat was going big. That was a big draw, and people were moving up there then. But when I graduated from high school, which was over ten years afterwards, it had started to go downhill, and it went downhill pretty fast. When Depression came, it went all down.

Barber: So when you would come down from there to visit people in Reno, you would take the train, and how far would you take the V&T? Where were you going to visit?

Avansino: Well, we stopped at Huffaker Station out there and out to the ranch. I remember going out there. But if we came down here—I remember coming down when I was five years old, to get my tonsils out at the old—I guess it was then the St. Mary's Hospital, which is no more, of course. It's been gone a long time. But we stayed with some neighbors that we used to live by on Quincy Street while I recovered from my tonsillectomy.

Barber: Did you stay down there for some time, for several days?

Avansino: Oh, no, just a day or two and then back up there again.

Barber: So what do you remember about that journey on the train to come down from Virginia City all the way to Reno? What was that like?

Avansino: I just remember I can still see the chandeliers swaying as the road would be rough or going around the bend or something. I can remember those swaying. Well, to me it was a big deal to be on the train.

Barber: So chandeliers sounds pretty elegant. Was the whole inside very elegant?

Avansino: Well, I thought it was, yes. It was kind of plush seats and so on. I do remember going over the Crown Point Bridge. In those days when the V&T ran in lower Gold Hill, there's a ravine there and they had a wooden bridge, and the train went right over the top of that, and that was pretty scary.

Barber: When you got a little older, say, in high school, would you come down and do different things in Reno with friends?

Avansino: Well, yes, any athletic events, track meets and basketball games. I remember going to the University of Nevada when they had some one-act plays up there, and I was in one of those up there. I forgot who was it—I think Julia Baldini, later Vianni, was the teacher at that time, our English teacher. I think she got me involved in that.

Barber: So there were plays that were put on by the university, but they had kids from high school perform?

Avansino: No, the plays were put on by our English department. They got them together, and we presented them in a contest up there—I don't think we won anything, but it was fun to be able to participate.

Barber: It sounds like even though it was a very small school in Virginia City, they had sports, they had theater. Do you feel like you had all sorts of activities?

Avansino: Well, limited. The furthest trip we took as a basketball team when I was on the team was Lovelock, Nevada. You didn't go to Las Vegas, you didn't go to Elko. You got to Carson City, of course, Gardnerville, but all local. And the Stewart Indian School, we used to play them, I remember.

Barber: Oh, you did?

Avansino: Yes. But it's nothing like it is now where it's nothing to go to Las Vegas or go over to Coalville or different places. One of the biggest things we could do was get a trip to Bowers' Mansion. That was a big deal.

Barber: What was that like then?

Avansino: Well, it was great because they had two pools. They had the hot-water pool with the island in the middle and all that, and then the overflow from that went into the second pool, and that was the cold pool, we called it. There was a lot less heat in it than there was in the other one.

I remember climbing up the hill to Sandy and Eilley Orrum's graves, and their daughter's. What was her name? I've forgotten now. But they're buried up on the hill above.

Barber: Would you go down there as a family or would you go just by yourself on the train with other kids?

Avansino: Well, we didn't take the train down there. That was always later—by then somebody would have a car, probably, and then they began to have a bus going back and forth to Virginia too. You wouldn't get the V&T up there every day after they got the bus going. He would deliver the mail and the papers. That was—well, you've heard of Ty Cobb, of course.

Barber: Yes.

Avansino: Well, Ty Cobb's dad was the bus driver, Will Cobb, and in later years Ty and I were roommates at a boarding-room house over here before I got married.

Barber: Oh, no kidding. Where was that located?

Avansino: On, I think it was Bell Street. It was off of West 2nd Street, and there was a church right on the corner. It's not there anymore. I'm sure it was Bell Street.

Barber: This is down in what we call the Powning's Addition down by the river?

Avansino: Yes.

Barber: Just a couple blocks up from Riverside?

Avansino: Yes, right.

Barber: Were there only young men in the boardinghouse?

Avansino: Yes. Threlkel's Ballpark was on 4th Street, and they used to have semi-pro players come and play on the team. I remember we had one of their players staying at the boardinghouse with us, Tony Gomez. He was quite a character, too. That's about all I remember of that.

Barber: So is that where you moved after you graduated from high school in Virginia City? You moved down to Reno.

Avansino: I moved down to Reno, but I got room and board to go to Reno Business College, and it was—well, you've heard of Forrest Lovelock. Forrest Lovelock had owned the—Richardson Lovelock, they owned the Ford agency on 4th Street. Well, his mother and his sister had an extra room in their place where they were renting on St. Lawrence Avenue, and when I came down to go to business college, we were asking around where there might be a place where I could stay, and their name popped up. So my brother and I went out and looked it over, and I took a room there with them, with Juanita Lovelock, that was Forrest's sister, and his mother. And it cost me all of, I think, \$35 a month.

Barber: While you were going to the business college, did you have a job at the same time? Was this when you worked for the power company?

Avansino: No, this is before I got there. I paid for business college with money I saved shining shoes in my dad's barbershop and peddling papers and delivering special deliveries for the post office.

Barber: Then you were saying you actually headed back up to Virginia City. What was the job that took you up there?

Avansino: Well, it was Christmas vacation time, so I went back up there and I got a job, the WPA job, as a timekeeper. They had a crew up there repairing the old sewer line and different things that the county needed.

Alan Bible was our district attorney up there at the time, who later became a U.S. senator, you know, and I worked out of his office as a timekeeper for the WPA, like I say, and the main office was down in Carson. There was a fellow by the name of Casson, I believe, and I would turn my time period things into him and all, but that was all for a handsome sum of \$44 a month.

Anyway, I stayed with that until the next fall. Then I came back down to Reno and connected with Wyman Evans, who worked at the power company, and with Wyman's help, I got a job there in writing up bills and using an addressograph machine printing up the bills that would be sent out. I ran the addressograph machine and printed up the addresses on them.

Barber: Addressograph?

Avansino: You never heard of an addressograph?

Barber: Is that a brand?

Avansino: No, that's a machine, an addressograph. That was probably the name of it, too. But anyway, your bill stub had about four different things on it, and you'd have a nameplate that you would have to work through an addressograph machine to get a nameplate, then go into a file, and then this—it was really complicated. Anyway, you'd sit there and you'd put your foot on the thing, and it would come down and would print this. You'd put the nameplate in there, and then you'd start with these handbills, and you'd take them and put them in there individually so it would print this part, this part, and this part. But you had to keep your fingers out of the way, because that darn thing would come down and hit your fingers if you didn't.

Barber: [laughs] Did it ever get you?

Avansino: Well, I imagine it did at first. It was surprising, they told me that very few people could get that thing synchronized so you could just pick them up and keep going without having to stop. That was the main goal, was for me to be able to do that, and I was able to do it. You'd put your foot down and you'd grab the bill and put it through.

This thing would come down and stamp the name and the address on different parts of the stub, bill. Then you'd grab the next one. By then the machine would flip out the old addressograph plate that was there and put a new one in. Then you'd do this again. I did that for \$75 a month.

Barber: Did that seem like a good wage to you?

Avansino: Well, yeah, from \$44, it was. [laughter] Then later I got off of that.

In the meantime, besides that, you'd deliver mail around to all the different offices, the heads of the different departments of the power company. Then I graduated from there into the billing department itself, and I'd be writing up the bills or putting the figures into bills to be sent out and all. I think for that job I got \$85 a month. I stayed there till 1939. No, I stayed there less than that. I think it was 1938, I got a chance to work over with the farm, a combination of County Extension work and Farm Bureau work and 4-H and AAA. There was a combination of all these agencies, and they needed somebody to kind of run the office part of it there for meetings and scheduling meetings and all that. And you worked with County Extension agents there. You had a County Extension agent and a homemakers agent and an assistant. Anyway, let's see, where was I going with that?

Barber: You getting a new job. What building was the power company in, and then what building were you working in for the new job?

Avansino: The power company was in what used to be the old bank building that was later torn down and has been replaced, and the City Hall was right on 1st Street. The power company office, which was part of the bank building, was right next to it across the alley. Then across the street from that was the Majestic Theater and the YMCA and the old post office on the corner of Virginia and 1st Street.

Barber: So the power company was in the building on the northeast corner of 1st and Virginia. Was that the Arcade Building?

Avansino: No, it was right on 1st Street. We had part of the bank building itself. They rented space from the bank. That's all been torn down and all replaced. So it's hard to picture it.

Barber: Then when you got a job with the Farm Bureau and those other agencies, was that in the old Federal Building?

Avansino: No, that's in the present Post Office Building.

Barber: Okay, because that would be a pretty new building at that point.

Avansino: Brand new, yes. Yes, we were upstairs in the northeast corner on the second floor.

Barber: I've just recently been in there because they're going to reopen that building as offices. They're really nice offices.

Avansino: I want to see it when they do it.

Barber: They're very spacious and they have a lot of big windows.

Avansino: Yes.

Barber: Was it a pleasant place to work?

Avansino: It was nice because our office overlooked the river, and I could look down and see the river and the ducks flying by. In the wintertime, I could see the big chunks of ice coming down the river and everything. We had some pretty bad winters in those days, and a lot of cool weather. I remember the ice coming down that river.

Barber: Was that building completely full of offices at that point?

Avansino: It was full.

Barber: The inside, the atrium was open at that time, wasn't it? They closed it in later, but was there a central area?

Avansino: No, it was all closed in. The downstairs was all closed in with the boxes and the windows and everything. Pete Peterson's office was there next to the elevators.

Barber: On the second floor?

Avansino: First floor.

Barber: Oh, he was right down there in those great big offices that are facing Virginia Street?

Avansino: Yes, he was facing Virginia. Right.

Barber: You said you were on the second or the third floor?

Avansino: We were on the second. I was facing the river and I was in the northeast corner on the second floor.

Barber: So what other kinds of offices were around you in that building?

Avansino: The FBI was right next to us, and I forgot who else was down there.

Barber: That building has a great history.

Avansino: Oh, it has.

Barber: So you worked in different places, and then were you continuing to live in the boardinghouse, or did you move at some point?

Avansino: Well, let's see. I continued to live in the boardinghouse on 2nd Street, 2nd and Bell, until I got married, which was in April of 1939. So then we got an apartment in the Frandsen Apartments, the old Frandsen Apartments. Have you heard of them?

Barber: I've heard of them. Where is that?

Avansino: Well, you know where the Regency is now?

Barber: Yes.

Avansino: Well, the Frandsen Apartments were about there, and that was a nice place to live. There again, I think we only paid \$37.50 for rent and so on, but that was a nice place.

Barber: And tell me your wife's name.

Avansino: Marie. And she was Garrett. Her dad was a railroader, a brakeman on the railroad, and they lived in Sparks. She went to high school in Sparks.

Barber: And how did you meet her?

Avansino: Oh, I met her very romantically on the train going to San Francisco.

Barber: Really? Tell me about that.

Avansino: Well, in those days, one of the highlights of the university, at least, was a football game against St. Mary's down in the Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. The train, the Southern Pacific, would run an excursion train down, and so, anyway, I thought that would be fun to take my vacation on this excursion trip down to see this ballgame in San Francisco. So I got on the excursion train, and while on there, I met Marie going down to San Francisco, and that's how we met.

Barber: Was she still in high school?

Avansino: She was in college then. I was working for the power company then.

Barber: I want to fast-forward a little bit just to talk about your time at Eveleth Lumber on 4th Street, and we'll come back and talk about what you did in the meantime, because you had an incredible career doing so many things.

Avansino: I was in a lot of things.

Barber: Working for Senator McCarran in Washington, D.C.

Avansino: Right.

Barber: And then, of course, serving in the U.S. Navy, and then you were telling me, kind of inadvertently, the Marines.

Avansino: Yes, right. I didn't think I was going to wind up in the Marines for a year, but I did.

Barber: And then coming back and working for the Veterans Administration. I wonder, did you end up buying property in Sparks because your wife was from Sparks? Did she want to move back there?

Avansino: That's probably why, yes. All her friends were down there, and they were coming back from the war, too, same as I was. There were three of us who got together and were going to buy lots in this one block and be neighbors, all three of us, and I was the only one who finally bought a lot. The rest of them didn't.

Barber: Oh, they never did. [laughs] So you bought a lot. This must have been maybe the late forties by then that you bought your property there?

Avansino: Well, let's see. I got out of the navy in 1945, and I bought my lot in '46, I think, yes.

Barber: And where was that located exactly?

Avansino: Located on G Street in Sparks, G and 19th, not quite on the corner of G and 19th.

Barber: So this was just north of Prater Way. Were they calling it Prater Way at that point?

Avansino: They called it Prater Way, yes.

Barber: Were there many other houses up there already?

Avansino: There weren't any. There was just one old shack up on the end of the block.

Barber: Had it been a ranch or a dairy?

Avansino: All of that had been a ranch, I guess, yes, and the street wasn't even in. I mean, it was just a cow trail up there.

Barber: Wow.

Avansino: And there was no curb and gutter, no sidewalk, no street, so that I had to take care of all that. That's right as they put them in. Not like it is today.

Barber: No. That's a big responsibility. So there were some things along Prater Way, I guess, some businesses.

Avansino: It was filled. Yes, it was loaded.

Barber: Do you remember some of the early businesses or places that were along Prater Way right around where you lived when you first got there? You were pretty close to Deer Park.

Avansino: Yes, right there by Deer Park. Oh, there was a grocery store right down the street, and then Ideal Drug got in there later.

Barber: What was the drugstore called?

Avansino: Ideal Drug. They got down there later. And Ross Photo Studio, they might still be there.

Barber: On Prater?

Avansino: Yes. There was a bigger grocery store and a little grocery store, and I forgot the real ones that were there then. That's been too long ago.

Barber: But it seemed like you were close to a lot of things to shop for, where you could get food and other things.

Avansino: Oh, yes, we got along. That was a good little neighborhood, yes.

Barber: What was Deer Park like at that point? Was that pool there?

Avansino: I think that's the same original pool that was there all the time, yes, and they called it Deer Park. There weren't any deer there when I was there, but that was before my time.

Barber: It looked like all the way down, even going toward 4th Street in Reno, there were lots of little restaurants. We have the Coney Island Bar there now.

Avansino: It's still there, yes.

Barber: The Copenhagen Bar had been closer to Coney Island, and then it looks like they moved when the freeway went in, and there were a lot of other ones.

Avansino: That Casale's, she's still there. Yes, we had a lot of little restaurants on 4th Street. Of course, 4th Street in those days was the main street. It was Highway 40.

Barber: What was it like then when it was Highway 40?

Avansino: Well, it was just busy, that's all. [laughs] Nothing special I remember about it, just a busy place. Then when they put in the new freeway, that changed all that too.

Barber: I'm wondering how the job with Eveleth Lumber came up.

Avansino: That goes back to my navy days, believe it or not. When I left the island of Guam to come home, I got on a troop transport, and we were in the bunks. I don't know, have you seen a troop transporter with the bunks about ten high, stacked one on top the other? That's the way they were. Anyway, I had a bunk, oh, about three high from the floor, and right next to me about the same spot on the other tier was a fellow that I got to know, and he was coming to Reno also. We got to be friends aboardship, but I didn't ever know him in the service or anything. After we got back to the States when I worked for the Veterans Administration, I knew him there and helped him out and so on.

Anyway, he knew the fellow that worked at Eveleth Lumber Company somewhere, through his wife, I think, and I guess the subject of getting help at Eveleth Lumber came to him, and they offered him a job there to help out at Eveleth Lumber. For some reason, he didn't take it, but he mentioned my name to them and told me about it.

So, I went up to see about it, and at that time I thought the Veterans Administration was going to wind down and not have very much work, so I thought I'd better get out of here and get something on my own, because at the Veterans I was helping people get jobs, training on the job, going to school, and everything else, and I was just sitting there on a \$300-a-month job, and they were getting jobs \$500 a month or something like that, and I thought I'd better get something better. So I decided to take the job. That's how I got that job.

Barber: What was your friend's name who had brought it to you?

Avansino: I can't remember right now.

Barber: So did you have to interview? Was Mr. Eveleth in charge at that point?

Avansino: Mr. Eveleth was in charge, and his son-in-law was managing the place at the time, and they needed somebody in the office. So for the next twenty-five years, I was on the counter and the telephone, writing up orders and listening to people and their wants and their troubles and all.

I was a bookkeeper, like I say, and filling orders, loading lumber and plywood and sheetrock on their grandmother's top of her car sometimes. They were always sending somebody down to get supplies for them when they needed something and with no truck. So we'd try and do the best we could by piling stuff on their car and tying it up with rope through the doors.

Barber: Could just describe the operation of that business? It had been there a long, long time before Eveleth bought it.

Avansino: Oh, yes, it had been there as Verdi Lumber Company for years, and it was a retail outlet for the Verdi Lumber Company in Verdi. They had a warehouse and they had a mill. Of course, the mill is still there, what's left of it.

Barber: In Verdi?

Avansino: No, on 4th Street. We had a cabinet shop back there where you built cabinets and made doors, windows, cabinets, and anything that came along. If somebody wanted a piece of lumber planed down, we had a planer back there and all, and circular saws and a lot of heavy equipment in there.

Barber: Was the lumber coming in on the train still?

Avansino: The only lumber we got when I was there on the train was hardwood from the East Coast, but anything else by then was coming in on trucks, and most of our lumber, pine lumber, came from Loyaltan over here, Loyaltan, California. We got clear pine lumber from them, and then, of course, we got Douglas fir down from Oregon, but that would be by truck.

Barber: So you weren't just a supplier of lumber to people. You actually built the products there, cabinets and everything.

Avansino: We actually built things, yes.

Barber: When you had the lumber coming, you specifically ordered different types of lumber to come to the lumber company?

Avansino: Well, yes, for our own use, but then you'd be selling off of that, too.

Barber: And did you also sell lumber to people who were constructing buildings and houses?

Avansino: Oh, sure. That was our main business.

Barber: So how many people were working in that space at the same time? There were a lot of different jobs to do at the lumber company.

Avansino: Of course, we had a truck driver and we had yardmen, and we had cabinet men and we had saw filers. Circular saws, when they'd bring them in to get filed, there was a man down in the basement of the mill, he had equipment to file, to sharpen saws, and he sharpened handsaws, circular saws, whatever you wanted. He had quite a little business going around there.

Barber: So there were multiple buildings. We were looking at a picture before of what the area looks like now, and you were saying that the main buildings are still there.

Avansino: Right.

Barber: In the front, closer to 4th Street, but right behind that alley—I guess it's an alley, is it? There's a smaller road south of 4th Street, and then there's a small building that you said was the office building, and then a bigger building. Is that where all the work was done?

Avansino: That was the mill building.

Barber: The large building is the mill building.

Avansino: And we had a garage on one end, and the saw filer was down in here by the garage.

Barber: More on the east side of the building, then, was where the saw filer was.

Avansino: Yes.

Barber: Then the building a little to the north was the office building?

Avansino: That was the office, and we stored lumber in there, stored our moulding in there. We got our moulding out of Loyaltan, too, our different moulds that we used, crown mould and bed mould and doorstop. We had it all in bins there, and then we could load out of there and deliver to our customers.

Barber: So you started working there in 1948, and I saw that there was a really big fire there in 1950. Do you remember that? Apparently there was just a very destructive fire there in July of 1950.

Avansino: It was on a Saturday afternoon when nobody from the lumberyard was working. We used to take Saturday afternoon off, and that's when the Indians would gather over there in the lumber storage shed we had. And that's where the fire started, on the other side of the Wells underpass. And I heard about it, I guess, over the radio, and so I jumped in the car and rushed up there and went in the back door and opened the safe and grabbed the records out, because I thought the whole thing was going to go. But it was on the other side of the overpass, and all we really lost was our little Chevy car that we had, that the boss would drive. But it was closer to the rail than the building, and it did catch fire and we lost it, on the east side. But everything else was on the other side, and we lost everything over there.

Barber: What was over there?

Avansino: There was a storage shed for lumber, the heavy lumber. We had our railroad access on that side, where sometimes we would get lumber by rail. Most of it came by truck, but whenever we got hardwood, like oak, or some of those things, it would come from back east, and usually it would be combined with other lumberyards out west here, so they would park it on our siding over there, and we would unload ours as we got to it, and ship it on to whoever would be the next customer.

But anyway, that fire occurred not long after I started to work there. It was on the weekend, so that's why it got started and got out of control so fast.

Barber: Were you there when the fire trucks were trying to put it out?

Avansino: Oh yeah, I got there before they did. But I really don't remember too much about that fire.

Barber: Did the company rebuild?

Avansino: No, they didn't rebuild at all on that side. Everything was moved to the east side.

Barber: Was that prior to the drug store building going up, or had that already been there?

Avansino: Well, it didn't bother the drug store at all. There was enough space between the lumberyard and the buildings that faced Fourth Street. They weren't in danger.

Barber: You mentioned that sometimes there were people who would hang around in the lumberyard or would steal the lumber.

Avansino: Oh, yes. That's because there was no fence around the lumberyard. Mr. Eveleth never put a fence around up around the lumberyard, and the Indians used to gather over there on the lumber piles and in the cribs where we put lumber and all, and they would have their parties over there on the weekends a lot of time.

Barber: Why do you think they'd come there, of all places?

Avansino: Well, just nobody would bother them.

Barber: So you remember seeing them around a lot?

Avansino: Yes. We only worked a half a day on Saturday. We had to work six days a week, but we closed up at noon on Saturday. So they could do what they wanted over there Saturdays or Sunday. Then there was a shantytown on the river down below, and they're the ones that used to steal the lumber and build their shacks down there.

Barber: On the other side of the railroad and on the bank of the river?

Avansino: Yes, and that was on the other side of the overpass, too, down below. Desert Glass was between them and us.

Barber: Were there a lot of break-ins? Was theft a big problem there?

Avansino: Well, after a while, we got a problem. They were breaking into our office building. They were breaking the windows. Some guy would come and throw something through the window and break the window and come in and take stuff. Yes, that happened a number of times, and finally when the lumberyard was sold in 1968 and the Eveleths and everybody got out of it, then they put a fence up. Then that stopped the break-ins of our place.

But a lot of times I'd come to work on Sunday or Monday morning and find a window broken out, glass all over the floor, and sometimes I'd even find paint spilled on the floor. We had a hiding place for our change, anyway, and they never did find it, but we had a big old safe in there, and it was never locked. You could open it up and look in there. We tried to keep our records in there, and, fortunately, they didn't swipe those, but they were looking for money all the time.

Barber: And what did they take? Tools and things, too?

Avansino: Well, they'd take tools, yes. They'd steal tools even while you're in there sometimes. Like you'd have a customer and they would send you out to get something in the mill or something, and while you were gone, they'd probably take tools. When you'd go to take inventory, you find out you're missing this, missing that. You know you didn't sell it. It was gone. So we really took a beating there, I'm sure.

Barber: So was the situation where you had a lot of customers who were repeat customers who you knew very well?

Avansino: Well, that's it. We lived on retail more than wholesale, yes. Most of the other yards in town were looking for wholesale business and contractors and all, and we were looking more for retail business. That's what we lived on.

Barber: Selling wood products but also paint and other things?

Avansino: Paint and wood products and hardware and tools and, of course, our cabinet shop like I was telling you in the back, that helped out, too, because when a lot of people wanted something done, they'd come to us and we'd sent them out to Otto, who was our cabinetmaker, and he could build anything. He trained over in Germany.

Barber: Did folks who worked at Eveleth Lumber help build any parts of those two houses that you built, your own houses?

Avansino: Yes. For my second house, I got a lot of my stuff from our cabinet shop and our millwork. Of course, being in the lumber business when I built my second house, where I had something to say about what was going to go in it, I had one room, one

bedroom upstairs where I put in knotty pine, and then the other room I finished off up there, I put in in redwood. I had to get doors to match, so for the doors that I had for my closets, I would have Otto make the sliding doors for closets up there that would match the redwood or the knotty pine.

Barber: So you had a real showcase for the lumber company in your house. [laughs]
The second house was right next door to your first house?

Avansino: Yes. Right.

Barber: Do you remember many of your regular customers?

Avansino: Washoe Medical Center was one. When they remodeled a portion of their building, they wanted to do it in redwood, so we provided that for the conference room and some other spaces.

Barber: I wonder what you remember about the time when the Wells overpass was being constructed. That was in the late 1960s, and that was obviously very disruptive to your business, I would imagine.

Avansino: Oh, it was, yes.

Barber: Do you remember the decision to make it happen, and were the Eveleths concerned about it? Was there a lot of activity about that?

Avansino: Well, they just accepted it. It interrupted us, all right, because you couldn't get the flow of traffic through there while they were building, you know, because they did build it higher over the old underpass, and it disrupted the traffic quite a bit. But one of the biggest things that caused us concern was when they put the oil pipeline through. You know, they brought the pipeline down right on the side of the railroad until they got to the Wells overpass, and then that caused the old pipeline concern, so they had to go and bring the pipeline around and up before you got the underpass from 4th Street. Between the underpass and 4th Street, there was enough room for them to bring the pipeline around and in front of our building and down the alley, our alley.

Well, they really worked on Mr. Eveleth there to get an okay to do this. They took him to dinner, he and his wife and all, and treated him real royally. I think they offered him a handsome sum of \$5,000 to be able to put that pipeline across leading into the underpass and down the alley, and he let them do it.

Barber: These were people from the city who were trying to convince him? Is that who it was?

Avansino: No, it was the pipeline company themselves.

Barber: So they were told they had to do something.

Avansino: They had to do something.

Barber: And they needed permission.

Avansino: And they could have given him a heck of a lot more, I know, but I was not any part of that.

Barber: Did you think that it made sense to do the Wells overpass? What was the reason for building that? Did they think traffic was very bad at 4th and Wells?

Avansino: Well, I can't remember the details on that, and everybody at the time thought it was a great idea, I know that. But I wasn't too much of a party to that, so I didn't know.

Barber: The other thing that was happening in that area in the sixties that I saw was that there was an urban renewal project where they were doing slum clearance and kind of calling a lot of the houses in that area slums, and it looked like it was around the area where you said you were born. They demolished a lot of houses.

Avansino: That's probably when they were trying to build the original Holiday Hotel. That's about the spot where I was born.

Barber: That's right. So you think they knocked down those houses to build the hotel?

Avansino: They probably cleared them out. That's how they got that. By clearing out that old part, they were able to get some cheap property, I guess.

Barber: It seems like it was a very Italian neighborhood, from what I understand.

Avansino: It was, yes. Well, like I told you, the only name that I can remember was Bevilacqua, for sure, and there are some others that I could probably think of, but that's the one that comes to mind first. But then I was only three years old, so I didn't know too much at the time there.

Barber: Another person that we have interviewed is Ben Akert.

Avansino: Ben Akert, yes.

Barber: Do you remember his parents' store?

Avansino: Oh, sure. That was right across the highway from us.

Barber: Busy little place.

Avansino: When Ben was growing up, he started to get liquor in there and so on, and that's where he got started in the liquor business was with his dad, his folks over there. Yes, they were a nice, nice family.

Barber: I think he was saying there was a drugstore right around there somewhere, too.

Avansino: The drugstore was right on the corner.

Barber: Was that on your side of 4th Street?

Avansino: No, it was right across.

Barber: So just on the west side of where the overpass is now.

Avansino: It was Hale's Drugstore at the time, and they had a soda fountain in there and they had a lunch counter. Speaking of lunches, I had to eat over there a few times, and sometimes if you wanted to take a customer to get a cup of coffee or he wanted to take you, we'd go over to get a cup of coffee over at the Hale's Drugstore counter.

Barber: Would you typically bring your own lunch, or how would you normally eat lunch when you were working?

Avansino: Well, I would usually go home, but sometimes I'd have to bring my lunch, yes.

Barber: What do you remember about the Flanigan warehouse while you were working at Eveleth? Was that a pretty active space?

Avansino: It was an active place, yes. We used to buy a lot of stuff from them. Three widows owned it, and they would trade off managing: Mrs. Schair, Mrs. Doten, and Mrs. Record. That family later opened Record Supply.

Barber: What did they sell at the Flanigan warehouse?

Avansino: Oh, golly, what did they sell? I think they sold cement and lime and a lot of building supplies, but stuff that we would have to buy, so we'd buy from them. Then the Morrison & Merrill that was on Park Street, they were a wholesale lumber outfit too, and they had different products there we could buy. Harry Bergman ran the service station on the corner, in front of our building. He later owned the Dairy Queen and used to give me his extra cans so I could put paint in them for our customers.

Barber: So it's an interesting combination of industrial places and commercial, retail stores, but then there were houses around there, too, so it did feel like you were pretty close to residential areas?

Avansino: Well, and then there were a lot of motels, yes. Yes, it was a little combination of everything.

Barber: Do you remember when that motel was built on the site where the Nevada Packing used to be?

Avansino: Yes, I remember then. I think the first Denny's that we had in Reno was in that building that they built there, and that was a big thing to have a Denny's move in right across the street from us.

Barber: I bet. [laughs] Pete Cladianos wrote about that in the book that he wrote based on his oral history and was saying they were pretty excited to have a Denny's there.

Avansino: Right.

Barber: So the motel there was really close to some industrial places, but still it wasn't too loud, do you think? It was still kind of a pleasant place to stay? Were you still working at the lumber company when Interstate 80 was put in?

Avansino: Oh, yes, I was still there. I thought that was a great thing to have it up there, but it sure took the business off of 4th Street.

Barber: Your business wasn't oriented toward tourists or drive-by traffic as much as others, so was the business at Eveleth Lumber affected much?

Avansino: It was, yes. But for the interstate travel, it had to be done. I mean, for all the trucking business and everything, they had to have a better way to get through town.

Barber: Did it seem like a pretty sudden change for 4th Street when that opened?

Avansino: Well, I don't remember that part of it. I just accepted whatever it was, I guess.

Barber: So you really would have driven down from Prater to 4th every day. That was your commute to go down that stretch.

Avansino: Oh, that was my commute, yes.

Barber: Did you go very often into a lot of those restaurants along there?

Avansino: Well, yes, and we'd try them out. If there's a new one opened up, we'd have to try it out. Oh, yes, whenever I didn't take my lunch, I'd have to eat somewhere, so I wouldn't always go to the same one. I'd try anything that new was in the offering.

Barber: What were some of your favorite places?

Avansino: Oh, I can't remember the name of them now. There was one that later became a model railroad place. Is it still there?

Barber: Reno Rails is there. We talked to Lilli Moffitt, who owns the business now.

Avansino: Yes, that was a restaurant at one time. That was a pretty good restaurant. I think that was one of my favorites at the time.

Barber: What kind of restaurant was it? Do you remember what kind of food they had?

Avansino: No, I don't remember that.

Barber: The little brick building, right?

Avansino: I think they were the first tenants. I don't know if they built it as a restaurant to start with. I guess they did.

Barber: That's pretty close to the Sutro Motel.

Avansino: Right.

Barber: Just a little bit further down the road. There just seemed to be a lot of family-owned places a lot of people liked to go. Did you ever go to any of the drive-ins that were closer on Prater Way? There was Ray's Drive-in and there were a couple drive-in places, it seems.

Avansino: Did you say there was Lee's?

Barber: Lee's, right.

Avansino: Oh, yes. Lee, Hudson Lee. I think the guy's name was Hudson Lee.

Barber: Lee was the last name?

Avansino: Hudson Lee. Yes, Lee was their last name. He got into the building business, too, later on, and he had a partner, but I can't think of his name right now. Then they developed a dry lubricant that they were pushing, and I can't remember the name of it now, but instead of it being black graphite, which is real messy, they had one that was silver-colored and it didn't mess things up as bad as graphite did. They were getting that on the market, and I'll bet somewhere in my stuff I've got a thing of that. If I find it, I'll let you know.

Barber: Were they successful? [laughs]

Avansino: Yes. I hadn't thought of Hudson Lee for a long time.

Barber: So the Reno Brewing Company was still open when you were working at Eveleth Lumber?

Avansino: About three o'clock in the afternoon when it was nice and hot and maybe we were a little slow in business, a couple of our employees used to wander down to the brewery. They'd get a free brew at the brewery.

Barber: They didn't have a bar or a restaurant. They would just go into where they were bottling it?

Avansino: They just knew the people in there, and they'd welcome them in and hoist a beer or two and send them back up to us, I guess. [laughter] One of these fellows that started them doing it, he's a real character. I'm not going to give his name or anything. He had been in China working. These are all his stories, working with Chiang Kai-shek army over there and so on. He seemed to know a lot about him, and I think a lot of his stories were pretty true, but how embellished they were, I don't know, but he could tell you stories about the Chinese and so on. He got to be a character around here with our own police department, and he even showed the local narcotics people how to go ahead and process birdseed into whatever they wanted. He was knowledgeable in a lot of things.

Barber: He was Chinese?

Avansino: No, he was not Chinese. He was English.

Barber: English from England, you mean, English?

Avansino: Well, I think he was originally, but he got to China and he had a big career over there. He married a Chinese girl and he's supposed to have had a Chinese daughter, but I never saw either one of them. He was in Nevada because it was not worth his life to go back into California.

Barber: What was his connection to the brewery? [laughs]

Avansino: Well, he's the one that discovered the fact that they could get free beer down there by making acquaintances with the brewery people.

Barber: So he worked at the lumber company?

Avansino: Yes.

Barber: Were there people who tended to work at the lumber company for long periods of time?

Avansino: Oh, yes. We had Bill Hardesty, truck driver, for years. We had Sam Kemp as the yardman and lumber stacker. For years we had Ed McDonald working in our mill

building behind. He was our sash-and-door man, making the sash and door. Then we had Otto Depping, who was our cabinetmaker. They all worked there as long as they wanted to. George Gadda worked there in the summers. He ran the shop at one of the local junior highs.

Barber: And Mr. Eveleth, his initials were A.T. What was his name?

Avansino: Yes, A.T. Eveleth.

Barber: You just called him A.T.?

Avansino: Yes. Alpheus Thaddeus.

Barber: Is that what his name was?

Avansino: I think that's right. I think it was Thaddeus, A.T.

Barber: Was he older than you?

Avansino: Oh, he was an old man when I was there.

Barber: Oh, he must be, because worked for Verdi Lumber Company—

Avansino: He worked up in Verdi.

Barber: —early in the century. Right.

Avansino: Well, in his younger days, he was the manufacturing pharmacist over in California. That's what he did over there. Then how he got to Verdi Lumber Company, I don't know, but he had one of the better jobs up there. Then when Verdi Lumber sold out, then he took over the retail yard here in Reno, and that's how he got that.

Barber: You said that his son-in-law worked there, too?

Avansino: Yes, his son-in-law was manager when they hired me.

Barber: What was his name?

Avansino: Blakeley, "Spud" Blakeley. I just knew him as Spud. His brother was Bill.

Barber: So many of these businesses had baseball teams and sports teams, didn't they, around that time?

Avansino: Well, Threlkel was really the only one that had them here, and he had the Reno Garage down on Center Street.

Barber: Would you go to the baseball park on 4th Street and watch games sometimes?

Avansino: Oh, once in a while, but not very often. That was in competition to the Moana Ballpark.

Barber: Oh, sure. Did they really feel competitive?

Avansino: I think they were at that time, yes.

Barber: You said at some point the Eveleths sold the business, and then did you keep working there after that? Who bought it?

Avansino: Two young people who worked at Home Lumber Company, they got together with a contractor in town. Stuart was the main guy at Home Lumber, and Isaacson. And the contractor was Tuttle. Anyway, the three of them got together and bought it, and they kept me on and I stayed with them five years, and I had enough. I had an offer to work for a contractor that I'd been selling lumber to and helping out, and his name was Meisser, Meisser Construction. I stayed with him three years, and then I moved on to McKenzie Construction for five years after that, and then I quit. I had enough of everything by then.

Barber: You were at the same company for so long, what were some of the biggest changes that happened, either with the machinery or the nature of the business or the kind of work you did? Were there some big changes?

Avansino: Well, like I say, when I worked with Eveleth, we catered to retail. When these kids came in, they worked for Home Lumber, who sold to contractors. They wanted big stuff, and they were trying to get that kind of business. I stayed there to take care of my retail trade that I had built up and the paint business I had built up and so on, but it didn't work out as good as I thought it would.

Barber: So you must have had a pretty big showroom for the retail at some point then.

Avansino: When I first went there, we knocked out a wall and put in all this paint and everything that they didn't have before I got there.

Barber: So this is in that front building where the office was?

Avansino: Yes. And we got more hardware, too, as I was in there.

Barber: So it sounds like it was kind of separate, really, operations then with the retail and then what was happening at the woodworking.

Avansino: Yes. Two of the young guys, they didn't treat my retail just as I would want them to and so on.

Barber: So when you left, is that when they stopped doing retail, or did they stop that even before you left?

Avansino: Oh, no, they kept it going, and I don't know how much longer they stayed there. I don't know when they quit. Well, they had their own contractor friends that they brought from Home Lumber when they moved in there, so they were doing pretty good business that way.

Barber: Did they continue to call it Eveleth Lumber?

Avansino: Yes, they kept the name.

Barber: I wonder when that closed? Is it the building where they're storing tires now? Is that one of the buildings, do you know?

Avansino: I don't know. I haven't been there. The building is the one that faces right on the alley. That's where the office was. There never was a great office. It was an old building.

Barber: Was there parking in front of the building then? Where did people park when they came?

Avansino: Well, they just parked in the alley.

Barber: It looks like it had been a lumber company for a very long time, so those are very old buildings. Did you find that there were problems with the buildings since the buildings were really pretty old even then?

Avansino: Well, we had to do some work on the roof once in a while. They didn't spend much money on the place, that's for sure.

Barber: Then when you finished, you worked for a couple different contractors and then you retired.

Avansino: Then I retired, yes.

Barber: That was around in the 1980s sometime?

Avansino: 1980 is when I quit.

Barber: And did you live at the house in Sparks after that?

Avansino: Yes.

Barber: And you were there for many years.

Avansino: Yes. I lived there until—well, the second house, I had McKenzie build it for me in—that was about 1950, 1951, I think we started the house. Then, like I told you before, it was a two-story house with a high gabled roof. The upstairs was left unfinished, and then I took that on myself with this project of different lumber.

Then later I built a huge family room out the back. When my daughter got into high school and had all of her friends around, we needed more room, so we added on. That room was a 20-foot room-by-14. It was a good-size room, and I paneled that in mahogany for my wood.

Barber: Beautiful.

Avansino: So, anyway, when it came time for me to sell my house to move up here, the second looker bought my house.

Barber: They probably hadn't seen anything like it.

Avansino: Probably not. Anyway, they came down from Lake Tahoe. They sold their house up there for a good sum, and they had money, and they looked at my house, and we gave them a price and they took it, and that was it.

Barber: And you've lived here since then.

Avansino: That's why I'm able to live up here for a while.

Barber: I meant to drive by those houses, because they're still there. I've looked at the maps and seen where they are, so I want to go back and look. Well, I think that's enough for today. I don't want to go too far, but thank you so much for talking to me.

Avansino: Well, I hope it's worthwhile for you.

Barber: It's wonderful. Thank you.