

An Oral History of John Mayer

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

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John Mayer's great-grandparents on his mother's side arrived in Sparks in the 1890s, while his father's parents moved there with the relocation of the Southern Pacific railroad shops from Wadsworth. Mayer vividly describes growing up in Sparks in the 1940s and 1950s. He taught for the Washoe County School District, and served for seventeen years on the Sparks City Council and the Board of the Regional Transportation Commission, which named the new RTC Centennial Plaza after him in 2009.

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JOHN MAYER

November 26, 2013
Alicia Barber, Interviewer

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Photo by Patrick Cummings

Barber: I'm here with John Mayer at the RTC offices in Reno. The date is November 26, 2013, and we're doing an interview for the 4th Street-Prater Way History Project.

What I'd like to do is begin by asking how far back your family has lived in Nevada and when they arrived here.

Mayer: Well, on my mother's side, my grandmother and great-grandparents came to Nevada from Oklahoma in a Studebaker wagon, and they first settled in Fallon and then they moved to Sparks in the 1890s, somewhere around there, and started a little ranch. In fact, the old ranch house is still standing on G Street. My brother has since built apartments around the old ranch. He has like forty-three apartments there.

Barber: Are there any other ranch buildings left there?

Mayer: No. They've torn down most of them to put in the apartments, but the ranch house is still there.

Barber: Did your relatives build the house?

Mayer: Yes. Actually, my mother's great-grandfather built it.

Barber: Your mother's great-grandfather. You go very far back in Nevada.

Mayer: And likewise with my father's family. My grandfather, when he was fifteen, hired out on the Southern Pacific Railroad in Wadsworth, where the terminal was and the transfer station. Then they moved it to Sparks, and they chose lots for the houses. My family was chosen eighth. They moved their rooming house there, and it was a big white building right by the grandstand, two-story. They rented rooms to people coming from Roseville to Sparks who would then turn around and go back to Roseville. They rented a room for a dollar a night, and they would pay with silver dollars. My grandfather worked on the railroad, and so they kept the silver dollars, and hence they accumulated three complete sets. But they were all missing one silver dollar from a complete set, and it was

the same one in all three sets. So they've been here a long time. In fact, my grandfather and grandmother were married in that house.

Barber: So they lived in the same house where they boarded people?

Mayer: Yes, where they boarded people, they lived there.

Then my father was actually born on Pyramid Way across from the Catholic church, because my grandmother was at church and went into labor with him and went across to a friend's house and delivered there. My mother was born on Sullivan Lane, which was out in the country on a ranch, because my grandmother was visiting there, and we kid all the time that my mother was born in a chicken coop, because there were chicken coops there, but that wasn't necessarily true. So they both were born in Sparks, actually, because it was too far to go to Reno to the hospital.

Barber: What were your parents' parents' names on either side?

Mayer: J.J. Mayer, John Joseph Mayer, and Mona Mayer were my father's mother and father. On my mother's side, they called her Lottie Vulgamore, and Jess Vulgamore. But my grandmother was a Kormeyer, and that's who built the ranch and stuff, and then she married Vulgamore, Jess Vulgamore, and they had my mother and a son by the name of Jess. Both of them are passed away now.

Barber: Did you know both sets of grandparents?

Mayer: Oh, yes. See, that's one thing I liked about Sparks, because when I was a kid, I could go down to see my grandparents on both sides. I could walk there. Likewise, when my kids were little, they could go to my parents' and my wife's parents' house. Nowadays, grandkids, their grandparents, maybe one set's in Pennsylvania, one's in Florida or something. So it was really, really a neat way to grow up.

Barber: Did you know your great-grandparents at all?

Mayer: I knew my great-grandmother. I knew her, but briefly.

Barber: That was your great-grandmother, which one?

Mayer: On my mother's side.

Barber: I would imagine living here that many generations, growing up, seeing all the changes in Sparks, you must see Sparks very differently than people who are new arrivals.

Mayer: Yes. In fact, Bernie Anderson, who's an assemblyman, and I both started at Robert Mitchell together. And we don't say, "Mrs. Jones' house," anymore; we say, "Mrs. Kladuski had that house." So we call it the Kladuski house, you know, when we're referring to houses and talking about things.

Barber: And that would be the older family that was there?

Mayer: Yes. Like Lockridges has been changed about ten times since Lockridges lived there, but we still call it the Lockridge house.

The reason Sparks was so good, we used to have block parties, and it was quite an international community because a lot of people from different nationalities worked on the railroad. So we'd have block parties, and they would bring their ethnic food, so the Andersons brought Irish stew, and Maldonados brought some Spanish food. The Italians, Puccinelli, would bring spaghetti.

We used to put tables in the street and play games, Kick the Can. You know, kids don't play like we did when we were kids. Hide and Seek, Kick the Can, all those kind of games. And it was really an evening that I have fond memories of.

The clean-up committee would clean up, and people would play cards or board games, Monopoly or some of those games, when the sun went down. This would be in the summer, naturally, because it was outside.

But it connected the neighborhood, and now people don't know their neighbors. They really don't. And I think that's one of the things that we're losing in our culture. You know, when I was a kid, if Mrs. Jones saw me pick grapes at the grocery store, she corrected me. My mother wouldn't say, "What's the idea of correcting my son?" It was, "Thank you for helping me and letting me know." Now if you correct a kid that isn't yours, you'd better watch out, you might get sued. So we're losing that part of our culture, and it's sad. It really is sad.

But it was a close-knit family. So my grandmother and my mother's side, they all went to Robert Mitchell, and then my dad and mom both went to Robert Mitchell. In fact, they were elementary sweethearts. My mother went away for nursing training at Stockton, and that was the only time that they were ever apart, but my dad would drive over the hill to see her and stuff like that. So it was a neat time growing up in Sparks.

Barber: So they knew each other as kids, and grew up together.

Mayer: Yes.

Barber: Did they get married rather young?

Mayer: No. She finished nursing school and then they got married.

I like to say this. Deer Park Pool—when I grew up, there were deer there, actual deer running around outside of where it is now. The pool's in kind of the upper part, and there were deer out there. When they opened the pool, they opened the pool Memorial Day of 1942, and there were three pregnant ladies there. They have a shot at the museum. I do believe it's still there. It was when I volunteered there. Jack Kramer, Sybil Kramer, and Jack was the boy. And my mother and Lessingers. So we all would say we were at the opening at the Deer Park Pool, although we weren't born until June and July, you know. They called themselves the Beer-Belly Beauties, because they have a picture of these three pregnant ladies at the opening of the pool. And that's where I learned how to swim, and we used to have great times. In fact, I have an oil painting of Deer Park in my house.

I live in the house I started kindergarten from.

Barber: You live in the house now?

Mayer: Yes.

Barber: Where is the house?

Mayer: It's on the corner of F and 12th. I added on to it. I bought the property next door and rented it out a lot, and then when my girls were in middle school, the renter left, so I thought I'd have them use that. But it was in such bad shape, we tore it down and added a wing to our house there.

Barber: So is that the house where you lived throughout your childhood?

Mayer: No, I lived there till I was in the sixth grade, and then I moved over to Pyramid Way. My parents had a house built on the corner of Pyramid and G. Actually, it's where G comes in. We sold it after they passed away, and it's been remodeled. It's a tax office now, but it was a brick house. Hancock built it. That's where I went from sixth grade on.

They rented the house I live in for, like, thirty years, so we always say the renters paid for it. Then when I got married, I had a condo over on York, and I got married, and the little lady died that was renting it, so I went in and redid it, refurbished it, modernized the inside, and I bought it from my parents then. I've been there for, oh, thirty-five years. More than that. I've been married for forty years, and I'd say thirty-nine years we've been there. We started a family there.

Barber: So when you were talking about the block parties, was that the Pyramid Way house or the other house before that?

Mayer: No, that was the 12th Street house, before. When we went to Pyramid, it was only a two-lane road and there was dirt on each side. We didn't have block parties, but the neighbors in back of us, they had a cul-de-sac back there. Two streets came together with a big circle, and they'd have block parties there and we'd be invited to them, although we weren't really in that neighborhood. But in a way we were because we played with the kids and stuff.

Barber: Was the road called Pyramid Way at the time?

Mayer: Yes. Pyramid was a state highway and it still is today. At the south end were the railroad yards, and you'd come in there, and you'd have to cross Highway 40 and you'd go in there. The guys would go out and on the train. The shop, the roundhouse, where they have two guys from Wooster moving company, that was the roundhouse, and it was huge. That's where they would do the steam engines and put them together and send them over the mountain.

There was a big pile of sand, because they would put a lot of sand on them to get over the mountain, and we'd play King of the Mountain on there until the—they used to call them the bulls—they were security guys that would watch the trains to make sure people didn't get in and take free rides or steal stuff. They were called bulls, and they were actually security guys. They'd come and make us get off. They were huge and they were fun. It was pure sand, and we'd climb up and play King of the Mountain and stuff like that. It was great times.

In fact, I had a picture that I think my brother had, and I didn't find it when he died, but I have a picture that was of a ditch that ran down B Street, Highway 40, along the side. We had a picture of my Uncle Jack, and he had a fish as tall as he was. He caught it in that ditch. But that went away. That wasn't there when I was a kid, because they had a park there.

Sparks was very unique. It had businesses only on the north side of the street, and then the reserve was on the south, and they had a parkway all the way down the middle with a grandstand. Of course, President Truman, when he was running for office, gave a speech from that grandstand. And, of course, being a working town, we had Labor Day celebrations and all that, and labor was big. All the ladies had hankies waving. Then he gave a speech, and then we all got in cars and followed him to Reno, and he gave a speech on Virginia Street, where the tracks went across Virginia Street.

The train went and waited up there, and then he came and he gave a speech from the back of a train. That's what had a lot of effect on him winning president, because he stopped at places like Lovelock, Winnemucca, Elko. Everywhere the train went, all the little towns in America, he would stop and give speeches and stuff, and, of course, it was a surprise that he won, but that's how he won, was he went there. I can still remember that. In fact, we have some old movies someplace of the ladies were standing on our grandparents' rooming house waving their hankies, because everybody was Democrat because it was a union town. But it was quite the celebration, and that was on the grandstand there.

Then one other story I like to tell is about the corner of Prater and 15th. It was kind of like the industrial area, and if you see Skagg's Market, it's still there. That was a place called the Rock Cave, and the rocks are pretty well gone now, but it was a little grocery store. They had a big, big, long candy counter, and it was huge. We'd get our allowance, my brother and sister. We each got a dime. We'd go down there, and they had what was called penny candy. They had little cowboy hats and they had those little wax things with juice in them, that you could bite off and drink. And all kinds. So we'd spend a half an hour thinking of what we wanted. Of course, we got ten pieces for our dime, see. So we could take one of that.

In fact, the daughter of the family that owned is still around. Her name's Marge Edgington. I forget her husband's name. She used to be a teacher at Verdi, too. It was quite the place.

Then across the street where the Dairy Queen is now, they had sections, the Dairy Queen and then a little hamburger stand and everything. Then they tore them down and combined them. The Dairy Queen used to take a vacation in the winter, because you didn't sell much ice cream, and so a celebration for our family was to go to the Dairy Queen and have banana splits the day they opened.

Then where the Rock Cave was—there's an empty lot there now, it used to have a carwash on it—there was a thing called the Midget Kitchen, and they were very good to kids. They would sponsor Little League teams and they would do a lot of things. They used to sell four hamburgers and a quart of root beer for a dollar. So we'd go down. Even when I was in high school, you'd go there for lunch. A dollar—if each kid put in a quarter, you had four kids, you got the root beer and a hamburger for a quarter, see.

The guy that owned it was such a nice guy, and after our Little League games and stuff, he'd bring us French fries and hamburgers, and it was just—you knew everybody. In those days, you weren't the Cardinals or the Pirates or whatever like they do now. You'd be the Midget Kitchen Volunteers or whatever. They'd come up with some names.

Where Rock Boulevard is now—18th Street went through there, and the stockyards were there. They were a big supporter of activities, and they had a team called the Stockman Bullets, and I played for them one year. You knew everybody. You knew the people that sponsored it. Ed Richards had the stockyards and he was mayor of Sparks, and you knew him. You knew everybody.

In fact, his daughter, Carol Smith, used to teach at Robert Mitchell. If you haven't interviewed her, she might be a good one on the early politics, because Richards Way is named after her dad. It's probably under Carol Smith, because her husband she met, he played for the Reno Silver Socks and he went into professional baseball. Then he came back and worked in the Block S, which was a sporting goods store on Victorian Avenue, B Street. I still call it B Street. But it was quite the thing.

Then across the way was the Park Grocery, and it had a motel connected to it. Reinhardt's owned it, and they were very supportive, and it was a neat little grocery store.

People don't know this or a lot of them don't remember it, but there's still an alley on the other side of the Dairy Queen that goes back. From there to the other street there was a service station on the corner, but there was a motel and it was called the Poplar Motel, like Poplar trees. McClouds owned it, and it was really popular because it was like a park setting. They had big grass out there and they had volleyball nets and they had beautiful trees and everything. A lot of people stopped there for the night before going over to California or whatever, and it was a very popular motel.

When they made Victorian or B Street go straight across, and they cut off that little "V" of Highway 40, they weren't on the highway anymore, but they put up a sign on B Street that said the "Poplar Motel" and a big arrow pointing down. So they did stay in business for quite some time, but now there's apartments there.

Barber: That faced Prater Way on the west side of where the Dairy Queen is?

Mayer: On the west side, yes. It was on the south side of Prater Way. It was across the street from the Park Grocery. And then the Park Motel, you know, it was called, was there across the street.

Barber: I get a sense of just a lot of family-owned businesses, very family-friendly businesses.

Mayer: Yes.

Barber: Does it seem like people would just walk all over the place?

Mayer: Yes, you'd just walk to wherever you were going, or a lot of people would have bicycles with baskets on the top. You'd see old ladies going down to the grocery, because down on B Street, you had Sewell's Market. You had Semenza's and Semenza's was a great place too. They had candy in the window, but not as luscious as the Rock Cave. You had that and you had—what was the other one?

There were bars, of course, down there, and it was all on the north side of the street. They had a bar that was called Mona's Rendezvous, and, of course, my grandmother's name was Mona, so we always would tease her.

Then there was a shoe repair place. Of course, the library was down there where the museum is now. Then on the outside, on the other side between where the library was and Pyramid, there was a bar and then there was a shoe place there, too, a shoe repair, a hock shop, where you'd go in and hock stuff.

Then on the next corner there was a big laundry, Sparks Laundry. Next to it was a place called D&N Bar and Restaurant. Railroaders would get off the train and they'd go there and have breakfast. My dad always used to say, because he was a railroader, he'd always say, "We like eating there because the kitchen was out and you could see them cook, and you could see if they'd drop food on the floor." It was very popular, and there was a cook in there by the name of Marlia, who was just a great guy. In fact, he was an accordion player.

I played the accordion and Frank Greco was a big accordion guy, and we used to have floats in all the parades, playing accordion, and a lot of kids would have that. I used to play "Lady of Spain" in seven different keys. People would think it was a different song each time, you know. [laughs] But it was big. So on weekends, Saturday night, they'd have dances there and he'd play his accordion at the dances. I can remember once dinner was over, kids you couldn't stay and do the dancing and the drinking stuff, but you left. So that was really a neat thing.

Barber: Did you learn to play accordion in school?

Mayer: No, no. I took lessons from Frank Greco. My mother would put me on a stool and I'd play the accordion. My dad would take me down—he had a favorite bar called the Silver Dollar Bar that was across from where the Nugget is, and he'd put me on a stool and have me playing the accordion. He'd put a hat out, and they'd put coins in it. I'd get them to put them in my piggybank. Every once in a while, he'd grab some money, buy a beer for himself, you know. But that was the kind of place it was—and I knew everybody, you know. It was just a great time.

In fact, next to the bus station that's there now, Ascuaga's Nugget was the first one on that side, except an insurance company opened a little office. But to celebrate moving the Nugget from the north side where they had a twelve-seat counter, when they expanded and they moved to the other side, they had a flagpole sitter, and they had a big thing that looked like a golden nugget, where he was going for the world record. His name, I think, was "Wild Bill" Howard. Anyway, he had a walkie-talkie, and they'd put his food on a pulley, and the waste would come down on a pulley.

The kids would come by and talk. There were three of us. One of my friends had older brothers, so we had this prank, see, and we got a bunch of chainsaws, because it was on a big wooden pole, see. [laughs] We'd talk to him almost every day. It was a big, big thing, you know. So we got about three or four chainsaws, and we got on there and we said, "We're tired of you being up there. You're not going to get the record. We're going to saw you down." So we just started the chainsaws, you know.

"I'm going to call the cops! I'm going to call the cops!" So he called the Sparks Police Department, and the chief that later became chief was like a sergeant then. His name was Tommy Hill. He would be like the DeMolay advisor for the boys. It was a boys' club, and we would play softball, and he'd pitch. So he answered the call, and he came down and he got on the walkie-talkie, and he says, "I can't get these boys in trouble. They're good kids. They're just joking with you."

He said, "Well, have them turn off the saw."

Ascuaga probably could tell you more about that. I think it was "Wild Bill" Howard. It was quite the thing.

Barber: Were you in high school at the time?

Mayer: Yes. We used to have great times, great times.

We had a lot of old family homes that businesses have taken off of, and there was a family home right across from Deer Park to the north. Gary Swall's parents owned it, and it's where that Grand Auto is now. They took some of those houses and put a—that building actually was a Safeway. Their home was there.

I used to win bets, because they had a fig tree, and you'd say to Californians or whatever, they'd say, "You can't grow anything in Nevada."

And I'd say, "Well, I'll bet you we got fig trees."

"Oh, you couldn't have fig trees in Nevada." So you take them over and here's figs. Now there's still one fig tree that bears fruit on the corner of—it's maybe E and 16th. Diandas, unless they've cut it down since, a fig tree.

Those were really nice homes, but then Safeway offered them more than what they wanted for them.

Barber: It sounds like that area around the park had always been a very desirable area to live. The first reference that I found to Deer Park at all was trying to advertise it as a place for housing in "East Reno" at that point. I remember reading about the deer. I didn't know that there would be actual deer around there as late as the forties or even fifties. Were they in a pen at all? How is that possible?

Mayer: The bath house is the same. They put on new siding and stuff, but it's the same. Where the fence is now that goes around the pool, well, there was another fence around that.

Barber: Just a larger one around it?

Mayer: Yes. And the deer were in there.

Barber: Do you have any idea who took care of them or how many there were?

Mayer: No, I don't know. I do know that kids would feed them apples and stuff like that. That would be your fun time, would be to go feed the deer. It's just like a lot of people don't realize that at Idlewild Park, there was a zoo. A lot of people don't realize that, but they had bears and everything in there.

Barber: And buffalo.

Mayer: Deer Park was a really a major thing for our community.

Barber: You mentioned swimming there. Were there other events that happened there, too, that you recall?

Mayer: Oh, yes. They used to have Labor Day celebrations there on Labor Day, and, of course, school started the next Tuesday. Like they have the rib cook-off now, but that weekend was a big celebration for labor, and they'd have booze and everything, and they'd have contests and they'd have auctions and they'd have beard-growing contests, mustache contests.

Square dancing was big. In fact, my fifth-grade teacher, Inez Gillis, she would have us go to the old Methodist Church basement and she'd teach us how to square dance after school. Then we'd go to, like, Rotary Club and all the clubs and stuff. In fact, we performed at the Sky Room at the Mapes Hotel, and they used to have this show that was *Be My Guest*, it was called. Betty Stoddard and our class would go and square dance on the TV show. It was quite a deal, and she was great. She went on to be a principal at Greenbrae Elementary School, but she was a great fifth-grade teacher.

But on Labor Day, the kids would initiate the freshmen coming into the school, you know, make them do strange things and stuff, take a bite of a garlic and stuff like that. It was quite something.

Barber: Oh, really. Hazing. [laughs]

Mayer: Yes, it was hazing. They'd get in trouble for bullying nowadays. It makes me laugh, because there's always been good teasing. It wouldn't matter what you looked like, they could give you a teasing nickname. If you were overweight, "Chubby," or if you had freckles, "Spotty." My sister was so thin that they used to call her "Rattle Rattle," that her bones would rattle when she walked and stuff. But it was good. It wasn't vicious. And I guess that's what the difference is, it's vicious now with the cyber bullying and stuff. But a lot of times we'd have nicknames for kids. This German kid, they called him "German." Now you'd probably get in trouble for that, see.

So I'm glad I grew up when I did. I always tell the story, my uncle was our favorite uncle. He was a bachelor until he came back from Korea, and then he got married. But we loved him and he'd spoil us. Especially my younger brother, he took him up to feed the billy goats and stuff like that. Well, he came home and gave David—told him goodbye and everything.

Well, David followed him and got lost. But we had a little dog named Tippy that was our guardian. He'd walk back and forth when my brother—he was only about four—walked down to B Street, and he was lost, of course. The *Sparks Tribune*—it's still in business, in fact, I delivered the *Sparks Tribune* when I was a kid—but, anyway, they found him crying. They not only knew who he was, they knew the phone number. Of course in those days, 2468 was our phone number and our license plate number was the same, by just coincidence. I don't know. But at least we only had to know 2468. But they knew exactly and called my mother, and she came and went and got him. But that's the way it was.

Talking about the Rock Cave, my brother went down there and he took a couple pieces of candy, and Shirley Wedow, who was one of my mother's friends, caught him. So she told my mother. Well, my mother went down there and says, "We're really sorry," and she paid for the candy bars or whatever it was that he took. And she said, "He will be down here every Saturday until he makes up for it in cleaning and sweeping the floors and stuff like that." Every Saturday he went down there. They opened at ten. He worked eight hours for three Saturdays. And that's the way it was.

And that's what this culture is really—we think "my kid," when we should be thinking "our kids." Really, it's a different world now, and I realize that. When we'd go into a restaurant, for example, and if we had a hat on, my mother would say, "Take off that hat." You never wore a hat inside the building. The Catholic church, when the women would go, if they forgot their hat, they'd put a hanky on top of their head. It was just different.

That's the whole thing with the parades and things like that. In fact, the hometown Christmas parade's a good thing, it is, but it was nothing like the Jack's Carnival Parade. Jack's Carnival had a parade that went down 15th Street and went down Prater to Deer Park and then they had a big carnival. That was what it is, and it was based on fairytales like "Jack and the Beanstalk," all the Jacks that were in fairytales. The kids would dress up in costume. In fact, my mother was in the first one when she was in first grade. She was a fairy princess.

You'd go down, and then they'd have a big carnival. It was a money-raising project for the hot-lunch program, and what that was, was to furnish paper bowls, napkins and eating utensils, plastic forks and stuff. A mother would come, like on Monday, and she'd cook her specialty, usually some type of ethnic food, like one would be spaghetti on Monday, then the next day it would be goulash. Each day it'd be different, and then they'd rotate it. The money they made in Jack's Carnival would go to help the mothers furnish the food for the hot-lunch programs.

Then, of course, maybe I was about in sixth grade, they came in and did it with a kitchen and hired people and did it that way, but they still had Jack's Carnival to raise funds for the different schools. At one time, elementary schools were in it and the high school bands were in it. They did away with it here recently.

Barber: So you remember it all the way through when you were in grade school through high school?

Mayer: Oh, yes, I can remember it all. In fact, I can remember in sixth grade I was a traffic patrol guy, so we led the parade with our little stop flags and everything. Our class

dressed in Jack and the Beanstalk costumes, and I was so mad because I had to lead the parade with the flag, and I couldn't wear a Jack and the Beanstalk costume. But it was that way all the way through.

Now, once you got into intermediate school, seventh grade, you weren't part of it too much until you got into high school, in the band. In fact, I played the tuba in the band in high school, and it happened to be Shirley Wedow, that I mentioned before, was standing on the corner of the street with my mother and the band's coming down, and it was pretty long. It started like at 4th Street and came down and then it followed the highway. They closed it down. My mother's standing there, and she says, "Look at that, Shirley. Everybody's out of step but my son John." [laughs] That was something they were kidding me for till they died, you know. My dad would always kid me. But stuff like that was fun and it was great times and it was great places, all of those places.

Barber: All of the schools that you attended were pretty close to each other.

Mayer: Yes.

Barber: Did you walk to school through all your years?

Mayer: Yes. In fact, when we moved over to Pyramid Way, I was going to the intermediate school. In fact, the house is still there. It's a big white house behind the theater, and it's got a copper roof on it now and everything. You've probably seen it if you've gone to the movies. Big white house. The band director, it was his house, Mr. Kissell.

So I went and I forgot my tuba, and I turned around and went back. So my dad said, "When did you realize you had forgotten your tuba?" Because it was pretty big, you know.

I says, "When I got to Mr. Kissell's house." So you knew everything. See, you knew the people. You knew where teachers lived.

At first, when I was in first or second grade, the Korean War was going on, and there was a teacher, her name was Katherine Dunn. She's got a school named after her now. But she lived behind in some apartments. She had half of the apartments and another person had the other, and it was like in a horseshoe, and there was a bar and stuff in the front. She rented an apartment to a gal that taught with me, Lena Juniper, because her husband was in the war, and he since went on to be a general and everything. Doug Bunington is his name. He's still alive. And you knew that's where Mrs. Bunington lived was above Katherine Dunn's. So it was really kind of neat.

Barber: Was there only one intermediate school when you went to school?

Mayer: Yes. When the high school opened, they changed it from a junior high and high school and shared the same, and, in fact, there were two wings. The gym was on one of them, and the junior high was down, and then the auto shop and wood shop were here. In junior high, you had wood shop and it was there, and you shared it with the high school. Then on the other side was the auditorium where we had a stage and everything, and then there were classes above it.

There was a superintendent of the Sparks School District, because they did not merge until like 1955 or something like that. So Procter Hug was the superintendent of Sparks School District and he had his offices upstairs there. Then the principal had his offices across in the junior high. But it was all one. There was one principal for the whole thing.

Barber: Prior to that, was there no intermediate school? I'm trying to get the chronology of the schools.

Mayer: The schools were K through six until the high school opened. Then they started what they called the intermediate, and it was the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth, and then ninth to twelfth was at the high school north of where it is now.

Barber: That high school was new when you began attending, right?

Mayer: Brand new, yes.

Barber: What was that like? Did it appear very new and modern?

Mayer: Oh, it was wonderful. Yes, it was great. See, before it was built, the football team dressed in that school, and then the football field was where it is now, and there was no school. In fact, that was all like swamp around there, and, in fact—

Barber: North of Prater?

Mayer: Yes. They used to have a big pond on 12th Street where the library is now and the baseball fields are now, right there where the Sparks Library is.

Then upstream they had a fish hatchery. Brunetti's had a fish hatchery, and us rotten kids, we went up there one time and we opened the gate from the fish hatchery and let the fish go down to the pond. Of course, we shut it and everything, and then we'd go and catch fish in the pond, you know. [laughs]

So one day we were taking Frankie Brunetti, who was in our class, fishing with us and everything. They had little tags on the fish at the hatchery there, the fish farm. They would identify the weight and keep track of the weight and everything, and then they'd sell it by the pound, see. Like if you wanted fish for dinner, you'd go over there and you could get fresh fish.

Well, he caught one with one of these tags on. "How'd that fish get in here?" [laughs] So they figured out what we'd done, so they made it more secure. Instead of just the gate pulling up, they kind of locked it. We used to do stuff like that. We used to have fun. It didn't hurt anybody.

Barber: So that hatchery was intended for people to buy directly from it?

Mayer: It was a private one, yes. It was not a Fish and Game hatchery. Even nowadays they have them around. But it was a private one where they'd raise fish and take it to market and stuff like that.

Barber: Why was it connected to that pond to begin with?

Mayer: You know where Paradise Pond is now? The ditch used to come in there and go through that property, and they used the water. Then it'd come down into 12th Street pond there. Then there was another ditch came around, and where Robert Mitchell is now, it would come around, and then it'd go by that 12th Street pond, and then it went up and it split in two at Pyramid Way. There was no Oddie Boulevard, but right about where Oddie Boulevard is now, it would go north and up that way, and it would go to Greenbrae Shopping Center, which was not a shopping center. It was an airport. If you go there where the hardware store is now, look at it, that was a hangar. Look at the building and you can tell that it was a hangar. People don't know that, see.

The other one turned and went right in front of our house on Pyramid Way, and then it would go south and then it'd cross Prater and it went along by the City Hall and out to the farms and stuff that way, see. It all was for irrigation. In fact, the Orr ditch that's still up there, most of them are covered now, like the one in front of my house on Pyramid was covered.

Where City Hall is now used to be a field. It was called Burgess Field. Well, when they put the City Hall there, they made the other one over here and called it Burgess Field, see. It went right down along Prater Way all the way out, and right there it was open, and we had baseball fields for Little League in the fields there.

We had a kid named Cole Kennedy one time. If you ever go by there, there's a little grocery store. That's where home plate was. He hit a ball all the way into the ditch. He was a good ballplayer. He was a real good ballplayer.

But then you'd go out, and you know where the Sparks slough is? On Sparks Boulevard, that ditch that goes through there, it's called the Sparks slough. It would go that way, and the ditch that went by over there, it just turned before, about where the marina is now and would go across there and head to the river.

Barber: When you were going to high school, did it seem like the high school backed up against a very rural area?

Mayer: Oh, absolutely. In fact, Danny Hanson—you've probably heard of the Hansons. They had a little farm-like deal on the other side. In fact, when Greenbrae was built, there's those apartments and condos on the other side of them, that was all fields. In fact, they have at Greenbrae, unless they've thrown them way—because I was principal at Greenbrae—we had pictures of the kids petting the cows on the other side of Greenbrae School. They had the fence there.

See, my brother was supposed to go to Greenbrae when Greenbrae opened, but my mother didn't want to hear it, because she could just walk down G Street to Robert Mitchell, and she wouldn't do it. She sent him to Robert Mitchell, and then the principal said, "Oh, we'll keep you here." Of course, she was pretty active in the PTA and stuff. But he was supposed to go to Greenbrae. So that was in the early fifties, I think, like '55, '56. It was wide open there.

Barber: I want to catch us up a little bit with you and your life. What year did you graduate from high school?

Mayer: Sixty. 1960.

Barber: From Sparks High. What did they do then with the building where the Sparks High School used to be?

Mayer: Well, it still was the intermediate, and then what happened was they opened Dilworth, and then the next year they opened Sparks Junior—well, it's called Sparks Middle School now, where the shooting was. Then they tore the old one down, and they made a deal with the county because the county had actually owned the property. They made a deal with the county and they traded the library building, where the museum is now, for the justice courts, and they got that one for the municipal courts, and that's why it's there today.

Barber: That's a new building or did they adapt a building?

Mayer: Well, for a long time they didn't have one, but they built that one.

Barber: They built it new.

Mayer: Yes. They tore everything down. See, it was old type with the shop underneath, and they had an incinerator in the middle, and the gym, the locker rooms were under the bleachers, and the bleachers were permanent, they couldn't move, and it was like a pit. The court was down there and the bleachers were up here above, and they were as wide as this table, and you'd sit on this. The other guy would sit on the other one, and his feet would be down on where you sat. It was really quite unique, quite unique.

In fact, they had the shower rooms underneath. The girls' shower was here, and the boys' shower was here, see. So guys would say, "Oh, I think Judy's in the shower now, and I'm in the shower," and there were jokes about that. Then in one of the classrooms, the desks were like stadium seating.

We had this rotten kid. In fact, when he graduated from high school, he looked to make sure he had his diploma, and he didn't have his diploma. He had to make it up in the summer. While he's doing that checking, he walked off the stage.

But we had this really nice teacher—Maisie was her first name—so she's up explaining on the blackboard. He decided he wanted to go home, so he climbed out the window and went home, and it was from the second story. I think he was six-nine or something like that, and he was real tall, good basketball player, good athlete. And she never even knew it. She turned around and kept on talking and didn't even know it. [laughs]

So then the next period marked him absent, of course, so they go and the principal says, "Maisie, you have Harold marked present," and Mrs. Jones, or I think it was Freeman, actually, was English the next period. "And she didn't have him marked absent. How come?"

Maisie said, "He was in class." [laughs]

We used to do pranks and stuff like that. We had twins that would always switch places. One was an athlete and one was a boy cheerleader, first boy cheerleader. In fact, we had two boy cheerleaders when we were seniors, first ones in the whole state of Nevada. One was Stockwell, Donny Stockwell, and the other was a kid named Herman Nichols. So when you go down Nichols Boulevard, that right there was their ranch, Nichols ranch. And he was a cheerleader.

See, my grandparents on my mother's side, her dad had a ranch on Prater Way, way out about where Marina Drive comes in now. That was a ranch there. A lot of ranches.

There was a blacksmith shop where the Taco Bell is now, and when we were kids, it'd be fun, we'd go down, because Prater Way had the ditches, as I was saying, all the way, and you'd walk the ditches, and you'd go to the "S". You'd eat lunch and fool around and then come back. There was a blacksmith, and we always would love to watch the blacksmith work. In fact, I don't know if the people that have my parents' old house still have it, but we had a fireplace and he made a custom fire screen for the fireplace, with trees on it. Then he had a mountain with the "S" on it. My brother and sisters, we always used to ride bikes out there and stop to watch them make horseshoes or whatever.

McCallum was his name. They called him "Smitty" because he was a blacksmith. His real name was McCallum. His son graduated high school with me and received the Nugget Scholarship, one of the first ones to receive the Nugget Scholarship. We just loved to watch him. He was a big old guy, big muscles, and you know how they would hit it and stuff. It was just fun to watch him. A lot of times we wouldn't even make it to the "S" because he would be making buggy wheels or he'd be making—he used to make them for—oh, what do they call those things? They would race them. They'd race horses with this little two-wheel thing on the back. It's not a real buggy, but they sit like this with their feet up like that. He would make wheels for that because he made them lighter. He would make them for people back east, because that's where all the racing was, you know. But he did wonderful work.

Barber: That was on Prater Way?

Mayer: Yes.

Barber: Very far east?

Mayer: Yes, where the Taco Bell is now, and there's a Pep Boys on the other side of it. You drive in and the Taco Bell is here and Pep Boys was on that. That was his property.

Barber: What would the cross streets be, approximately?

Mayer: Well, it's where I Street comes up there, and I think it's Stanford that comes in. Stanford or First comes in before you get to there. It's where the old Target used to be.

Barber: What did you do after graduating from high school?

Mayer: Well, I went to Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon. I wanted to be a minister, and it was a Baptist Church school. I got up there, and I came home for Christmas and I says, "I can't take the rain." So I came back to UNR, graduated from UNR. Well, I had a stint in between because I got out of the Air Force, I joined the National Guard, and I was activated during the *Pueblo* crisis. When the *Pueblo* was taken, our national guard here was activated during that.

So I got the G.I. Bill, but it took me ten years after I graduated from high school to graduate from college because I had interruptions with the service, because in that time, when Vietnam was just starting, they had a draft lottery, and they picked by birthday. Well, my birthday was the fourth one. I even went down to take the physical. My dad says, "You're going to get called for sure here at number four. Do you want to sleep in a bed or sleep on the ground?"

So I was selling shoes at Gray Reid's Department Store, which is where Circus Circus is now. I worked in the shoe department there, while working my way through college. The guy who owned it was Homer Riggs, at the shoe department, not the whole store, but he was a pilot in the Air National Guard. So he got me into the Guard so I didn't have to get drafted. I was a parachute rigger, so I had it made, you know. Then when I got out—because when you get activated you're in the regular service, see—I qualified for the G.I. Bill. My family wasn't that well off, so I went on the G.I. Bill to UNR and got my bachelor's degree. Then I went to work for Washoe County School District, and then I got my master's. My first year, I got a job at Jessie Beck, and I loved it. I was there for a gal that had cancer, and she was really bad off, but she said she was coming back.

I was going to the Olympics, and so I got a job at Stead, and I was moaning and everything. My grandma says, "John, everything works out for the best. Everything works out for the best." So I got a job at Stead before I left to the Olympics, and then I met my wife there. So we got married the following summer. My grandmother, she was a cute gal, and she wrapped it in tinfoil, her gift to us, a white bowl, and she wrote with paste or whatever she put it down, she said, "Everything works out for the better," and put sparkles on it and everything. And we've been married over forty years, so I guess it worked out for the best. [laughs]

Barber: What was her maiden name?

Mayer: Peterson.

Barber: What's her first name?

Mayer: Janice.

Barber: She was a teacher also?

Mayer: Yes. We decided that we'd both put in for a transfer. We both liked Stead very much, but we both put in for our transfer, and whichever one got the transfer first, the other would stay at Stead and the other one would go. Then I worked on my master's

and then I became principal at Verdi for five years, and then I went to Greenbrae and I was there for nine years, and then I went to Lincoln Park for three years.

Barber: These were all as principal?

Mayer: As principals, yes.

Barer: What was that master's degree in?

Mayer: Educational leadership. Then I ran for the city council, and now I'm on the school board. I just feel you've got to give back to your community, especially me because I've been there and was raised there, and I can remember. This is the thing that's different than it was when I was a kid. Each of us, my brother and my sister and myself, we each got to invite our teacher to Sunday dinner, and it was special. You would brag that Miss Gillis is coming to our house for dinner on Sunday. It was very special. My mother would take a paper bag and she'd put flour and everything in, and she'd put chicken in there, and we'd have fried chicken. Then afterwards, we'd sing songs.

Nowadays, a lot of parents tell them, "Oh, you don't have to listen to that jerk," talking about teachers. It used to be we respected our teachers so much. I can name every teacher I had, beginning in kindergarten with Miss Egliar, Miss Dalger first grade, Miss Borghi second, Mrs. Walker third, you know, all the way down. I could remember all of them because you loved them. See, that's what we need.

When I go into classes, I tell the kids I love them. We're too afraid to use that word, you know, and it's changing everything. It really is. To the kids, I say, "Your teacher loves you. Your principal loves you. Who else loves you?"

And they'll say their mother or Jesus and all this other stuff. A lot of times, they say, "You."

And I say, "Yeah," and I go like that [demonstrates].

One teacher told me I was going to get in trouble for that, but I says, "I'd like to see the headlines, "Mr. Mayer arrested for saying he loved the kids in Miss So-and-So's class."

I really feel that's what we're missing today is that real connection between educators and the children that they serve. And I tell the kids, I say, "You know, they talk about the taxpayers. The taxpayers are paying for these schools. The taxpayers are doing this. You *are* taxpayers."

"What do you mean, Mr. Mayer?"

I says, "See those Adidas you have on? When you bought them, you paid taxes. When you go to the movie, you pay taxes. When you go buy a shirt, you pay taxes. You *are* taxpayers." And the light goes on.

I'm happy to say we got a Student Advisory Board established since I've been on the board, and two kids from each high school meet with us. Then we have a kid on our board that participates in the discussion, shows us the surveys and everything, and gets these kids active in looking after and realizing that they have input into their education.

That's the difference between now and when I went to school, because I knew Mr. Poulakidas—there's a park named after him in Sparks—who taught me in sixth grade. He worked for Isbell Construction Company, and he made more doing that

working weekends and summers than he did teaching, but he loved us and he was tough on us. He was very, very strict. He would take these kids that suck their thumbs, he'd beat them, you know. He'd get them so they weren't sucking their thumbs, you know, because he cared, especially when they were doing that in sixth grade. He cared and he wanted them to not do that, so he put mercurochrome and iodine and stuff.

Barber: On their thumbs.

Mayer: Yes, to get them to stop, and he did it. It's just a different world.

Barber: I would imagine that the experience you had, especially growing up here, and also from being an educator, gives you a very unique perspective on the school board.

Mayer: Yes, and I think it's something that the school board needs, because too many are using it to get a name for themselves. I don't need to get a name for myself. I don't need that. But I need kids to be accepted for who they are. Any kid can learn. These people that say, "Oh, they can't learn because they're different," or, "They can't learn because they're special," that's baloney. That's baloney.

I had a set of twins, autistic, and people say, "Oh, those autistic kids are driving me nuts." And they both, both of them, at the same time, got an invitation to Eagle Scouts, both of them. And it's not easy to get Eagle Scouts. They both got it and they're both at Utah State University now. They're juniors. One's in drafting, and the other's in architecture at Utah State. And it's perfect. They chose perfectly, because they can be in a little room, they can do their drawing. I don't know if you know much about autistic people, but when they draw—when they were in third grade, I still have the picture. One of them drew me a picture of a campfire and the logs around it. He even had little bugs on the logs, so much detail, see.

The dad worked for Granite Construction, and he got them in. He asked me. I says, "You know, you ought to go over to Mormon Church and get in scouting. It's right by my house. Get them into scouting."

So he did and actually he joined the Mormon Church through that, which isn't bad, because Mormons, they raise good kids, I'll tell you. So then when they got accepted to Utah State, he and his wife—and they have a younger daughter—they bought a house in Logan and got transferred because Granite's big in Utah, too. But they got it away from the university, and the boys stay on the campus because they want them to be independent, but they want to be close enough if they need something, that they're there. But that's what it's all about. That's what life's about, acceptance. That's what I would say.

I've probably taken more than your time.

Barber: No, this is terrific. I just have a couple more questions, and we can finish up.

You've been talking about community so much, and you've given so much through the school board, and I'm just curious what prompted you to join the board of the RTC. Where there things specifically related to transportation that interested you?

Mayer: I was on the city council, and they appoint one person from Sparks. I wanted to be in, and no one else did, and I was on it for the whole time I was on city council, seventeen and a half years, and I just am interested. I don't know if anybody since I've been on does, but I ride the bus. If I got to a Bighorns game downtown, I ride the bus. If I go anywhere and if I didn't have something after it, if I had, say, a dentist appointment, I'd ride to the dentist if I didn't have to go across someplace else.

I'm also very, very interested in paratransit. I had a secretary that has a son that has spina bifida, and so paratransit was the only way he could do things and everything, and I really wanted to make sure that the handicapped had accessibility on buses and on paratransit. So I was very interested in that and also people that are transit-dependent. My son was transit-dependent until he was about thirty-two, because he just didn't have the money for insurance and cars when he was going to schools and stuff, so he did it by public transportation.

In fact, they named a building down in Sparks, the Transit Center, after me, because I gave so much and I fought so hard for routes that took people to kidney dialysis, you know, Veterans Administration. The bus was like two miles from the stop, so I got them to cooperate, put the buildings where—they put it right by the RTC. Now, I think, though, they moved out where they don't get bus transportation. But that's the veterans' choice, you know.

But I really feel that that's the way we go. Like Victorian Avenue where they put the bike path all the way to the Marina, what a wonderful thing that is. I hope they do that to Prater, but I don't know if they'll be able to.

Barber: So it sounds like even though you got involved in the RTC not necessarily intentionally or deliberately, it became a very wonderful thing that you participated in.

Mayer: It became a big part of my life. I was active in APTA [American Public Transportation Association]. I was active on the boards and so forth, the committees. I never ran for offices, but I helped Celia Kupersmith become president. I loved APTA. When I was on the board, I'd go lobby every March, because, really, for a small state like Nevada, we had a lot of power there with Reid and Ensign. We had a lot of power so we could get them to do a lot of things. I think we got more than our share of monies through our reputation and our lobbying and stuff like that.

It's great to hear what other people do. I told Heath Morrison, when he went to Charlotte-Mecklenburg, I says, "You might as well sell your car, because they have trolleys and buses and everything there. You won't need a car." "Well, they furnished me a car," and I guess going from school to school, you need it.

What I'd like to see is development around transit stops. One of the famous chicken joints in all of America is at the end of the line of one of the trolleys, but now they've extended it beyond. You go in and you buy the chicken, and there's only two tables in there, so you buy it to go or you eat outside on the bus stop. But you can get it and get back on the trolley and go anywhere you want to go.

They have little boutiques and little curio shops and everything at the Transit Center. I wish we'd do that here. One place that would be ideal is Oddie Boulevard over there where they tore down Shopko, put some apartments there and shopping and everything, revitalization. How good would that be? That's what I'd like to see happen,

but in all of the depression—I call it a depression. They call it a recession, but it really is a depression....

Maybe on the rebound, we'll look more at urban planning and things like that. Midtown, those three guys—I forget the name of the bar—they're involved in Midtown, and they donated and spearheaded a playground for the handicapped kids at Peccole. They're three young guys. I mean, if they're forty, I'll eat my hat. They're in their thirties, I'm sure. They have a bar, and I forget the name of it now, but they're setting the world on fire. They do a lot of philanthropy. They give a lot of money away and stuff. Through the Chamber's program for leadership in Reno, these guys donated and did all this at Peccole, and it's wonderful. I tell them, I said, "I'd like to see you guys get in urban development along transit corridors."

And they said, "Well, that's what Midtown's kind of becoming." So I'm glad to hear that. I'd like to see a trolley right down 4th and Prater, to tell you the truth. [laughs] In fact, I told Derek Morris, before he didn't get appointed, I told him, I says, "Start easy. Get rubber-tire trolleys." Because what they can do, you could buy a bus frame and they put this trolley frame right on top of it. It looks like a trolley. They've got the oak chairs and everything, and they've got the bell that you can ring and the whole bit. They're all over a lot of cities. But start with those rubber trolley deals, and then go to a fixed one if you want to. But they are into this rapid transit also, and I don't see as that's that bad, but I think it's got to be expanded.

Barber: So it could be that in some of these developments that we can move back toward a more walkable community, like the one you grew up in.

Mayer: Yes, exactly. You know, just outside Kansas City where they've got the ball field—what's the name of it—they've built an urban core where you can walk and it's safe and it's well lit and it's just fantastic. It's just fantastic, and they've got an indoor water park, like out here only indoors, and a hotel there. In fact, the same company that developed it developed Legends, RED Development. That's their home base, of course, Kansas City. But downtown Kansas City, you can walk all over and you don't have to worry about anything. So I'm all in favor of that, I'll tell you. But it's money. Money talks.

Barber: And you have new generations here too. You have children living here still?

Mayer: Yes.

Barber: How many children did you have?

Mayer: Three, and they're all here, and that's what I like is that they haven't found a need to go elsewhere, so it's nice. It really is. Like I say, when they grew up, they could go to their grandparents and everything. I hope their children can go. But they'll marry somebody from Austin, Texas, or someplace and move away. [laughs]

But I'm glad, because family is everything. I really believe that. It's a cliché, but it is. You're nobody without a family. That's why some of these poor kids, even rich families, they're too busy at their country clubs and everything, and they're neglecting

their kids. That word “love,” they don’t even tell their kids they love them. Lot of families are that way, and I don’t know what we’re going to do about it. I wish some of these ministers would get on the love wagon and preach it.

Barber: That’s a wonderful note to end on. I want to thank you so much.

Mayer: You bet.