An Oral History of

Ben Akert

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

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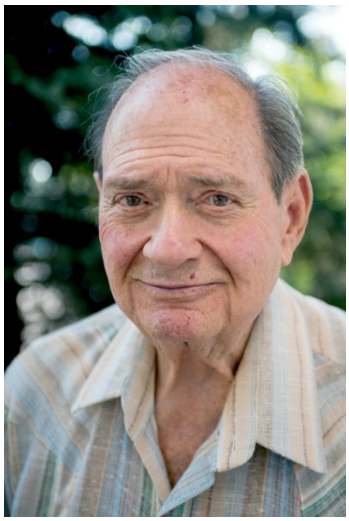
Interviewer: Matt Fearon

William Bennet (Ben) Akert moved to Reno from the eastern Nevada company town of Ruth in 1945. His parents, Bluma and Bill, purchased Grant Anderson's market at the corner of East 4th Street and Alameda (later Wells Avenue) and opened Akert Market, where Ben worked as a teenager. The shop closed in 1963 and the building was torn down. In 1966, Ben founded the local chain Ben's Discount Liquors.

The 4th Street | Prater Way History Project is a collaborative community history project launched by the Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County in 2011. The project's website, with full transcripts, photographs, and other historical material about the 4th Street | Prater Way corridor through Reno and Sparks, Nevada, may be found at http://4thprater.onlinenevada.org/.



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Fearon: I'm Matt Fearon. I'm here with William Bennet Akert. He goes by Ben. It's April 18, 2012 and I'm here at his home in Reno, Nevada. I'm just going to start out by asking Ben a little bit about his biography, where he was born and where he's from.

Akert: I was born in Ely, Nevada, at the Central Hospital, which was a county hospital. My dad had came to the Ely area in 1918, and my mother's side of the family had come there right after Kennecott started building there in, I think, 1909 or 1910. My grandfather opened a mercantile store in Ruth, Nevada, and it was the beginning of Ruth and McGill, Nevada, and was the biggest thing that ever happened to Ely. When my dad started out, he came to work in Ruth, Nevada, which is where the big pit was and the deep shaft.

Fearon: Was that a copper mine?

Akert: It was mainly copper. My dad's brother was the assay officer there, and so my dad went to work for the company as a sample grabber, where you go out and get samples of dirt. And over there it would get down to 20 below zero real easy in the wintertime, and my dad decided he'd rather work inside, so he went to work as a bartender in Kimberly. From there he wound up going to work in the grocery stores, and he worked in the grocery stores for most of the time that we were there.

My mother's parents are out of Russia— they were Russian Jews—and my mother was born in Detroit, but she came as a baby to Ruth. My grandfather had a mercantile store there.

Then my mother and dad met. My dad was eighteen or nineteen. He was seven years older than my mother, so he was in his twenties when they got married. I think she was nineteen.

Fearon: What were your parents' names?

Akert: My mother's name was Bluma Bergman, and my dad was William Henry Akert. My dad was of Swiss background and raised in a very strict Mormon family, and my

mother was of Jewish background, but they never practiced their religion because there weren't too many Jews in the West at that time. I'm proud of the fact that I came from a Jewish-Mormon marriage, and I've been married twice in the Catholic Church under good—what do you call it?—auspices or whatever. That's about me.

Fearon: You said your mom came from Detroit, but your dad—

Akert: She was born in Detroit. My dad was born in Salt Lake City. My grandmother was pregnant with her first child, which was my mother, and they were living in Detroit. Then from Detroit, she came out here to the West to be with her husband, my grandfather, who opened that mercantile store. He was a merchant.

Fearon: What brought your dad over from Salt Lake? Was it mining?

Akert: He came to work for his brother as an assayer picking samples, and the winters were a little too cold for him, and I don't blame him. That's a tough business, and it's dangerous. You go in right after they blow the side of the mountain out and take a bunch of different samples from geographic locations where they're told to. If you've ever seen them blow a hole in the side of the mountain like the pit—the whole mountain just rolls over, and they sample the ore, and then the good ore is hauled to the smelter, and the ore that isn't qualified goes to the dump. Through the years, the people went back and leached the dumps out for more gold ore and silver.

Ruth doesn't even actually exist, where I was raised. It became a dirt pile, you know, filled in. Then I left there in 1945, when I was just out of the eighth grade, and I came here. Actually, I've been in Reno most of my life, sixty-five years or whatever it is.

Fearon: Can you tell me a little bit about Ruth, though? What was it like in Ruth up until you moved?

Akert: Ruth was a mining camp by Kennecott, and it was very well organized and very controlled. The supervisors lived on one side of the town on the hill, and then there was the copper flat where some of them lived. And they were all company houses—probably, in my mind, 1,000 square feet at the most. You could get a two-bedroom or a three-bedroom, and I think you paid $5 a month rent for a two-bedroom and then another 50 cents or a dollar for a three-bedroom, and it was wood and coal stoves, outhouse in the back, and a coal bin.

And they always had a guy—I remember as a boy—who carried a big tub on his shoulder, and he had a sharp stick, and he'd pick up all the papers, and it was well kept, very organized and very clean, and it was a good town for a boy like myself to grow up.

They didn't have a governor or a mayor or anything. It was just a company town. And at Christmastime, they had a community league, and even though my dad didn't work for Kennecott, we always got a twenty-five-pound bag of apples, oranges, and a big box of candy, and that was what all the kids looked forward to. That was during the Great Depression, so it was a big deal.

A lot of the people who grew up in Ely became prominent names in Reno. Ruby Kovasovich, what they call the Bohunks and Slovenians, and a lot of people came out of

that area who stayed in the state of Nevada. They traveled the world over—John Sanchez and Gale Sanchez. John Sanchez became an attorney. He just died a couple years ago. And Gale is retired. He was a general contractor. Those are people who I grew up with and remember.

But, like I say, the biggest part of my life and my friends are Reno, Nevada. So I'm just telling you that's a very small fragment of my life.

Fearon: Can you tell me, before we jump into Reno, did you have any siblings?

Akert: I had three sisters, two older and one younger. The youngest one is deceased, and of the two older, one's going to be eighty-six next in November, the other one's eighty-four, and I'm eighty-two. All three of us do not have good health, we'll say it that way. You know, I talk about them going first, but, surprise, surprise. I was wrong. You know how that is.

But this was really and truly a company town in the Depression. If you had a job there, you were well off, because you got a paycheck and you had a house and pretty much everything that you had to buy, your wood and coal, and a lot of people went out and chopped wood. My dad would buy twenty tons of coal every winter—we had a coal bin as big as this room here, and part of it was like the old wooden boxes that you'd see in grocery stores. It's all cardboard now, but you'd get those wooden boxes for nothing. You'd cut them up, and they'd make wonderful kindling. I cut the kindling and brought the coal in. And as long as I did that, I got two bits a week. That bought a root beer float and 10 cents for the movie, but that was big time and a good time. We didn't know what it was to be poor.

Fearon: So it's fair to say that you enjoyed yourself, living there and growing up there?

Akert: I had an immensely happy childhood. My parents couldn't have been better parents, and my sisters and all of us grew up. I had one sister who would tell you, well, it was tough, and then the other, they didn't get educated like they should. There were schools there. Kennecott saw to it that we had good schools. If you didn't learn how to read and write, it was your own fault. And I wasn't the brightest light in that department.

Fearon: How many people would you say—when you were growing up there, how many people lived in Ruth? What was the population, less than a thousand?

Akert: Oh, yeah, less. I think Kennecott had eleven or twelve hundred. They had the pit, and McGill was eighteen miles away. The train would go down there. It was called the Nevada Northern. It would go down the canyon, come up out of the pit, and then go down. It ran a whole load of train cars full of ore to McGill, and McGill was a big smelter out there in the flats.

And it was the same way in McGill. They had a community league, and the houses were pretty much the same, and it was the backbone of White Pine County, really. And otherwise, Ely would have never been more than a little wide spot in the road for the ranchers, and that's tough ranching over in that country. It's big and wide open. You can see Nevada, how vast it is.

Fearon: What brought your family to Reno?

Akert: My mother wanted us to go to college and she wanted to get out of the mining camp. There was no future working for Kennecott, and she brought us all over to Reno. One sister, after she got out of high school, moved to California and became a beauty operator for a while, and my oldest sister, who was in high school about the time I graduated from grade school, got married and lived in Elko and worked as a waitress and had her first child in about '47. My kid sister went up to college for a while.

I went up there [the University of Nevada, Reno] and I was taking thirteen hours of Bonehead 101, and I didn't see any future in that. So I had to strike out. I had to grow up and learn for myself. I went to the university for probably six, eight weeks. I was like a fish out of water, you know. I wasn't very well prepared at all, far more juvenile than I had hoped. Years later they made me an honorary alumni for some reason.

I read a story one time that Englishmen didn't like Americans because they bragged about only having a third-grade education but making a million dollars, and there's more to it than that, which is true. A guy's better off with a little more education and a little less money. I'm just telling you what goes through my mind, things I remember.

I came over here, and I was in the ninth grade and I went to the Northside Junior High. Northside is where the bowling alley downtown Reno is, that whole block. That was Northside, and I went there one year, and then I went up my last three years in high school on West Street where the biggest hotel now is built, the Silver Legacy. That was a mortuary on Fourth and Sierra at one time.

And then there was Sewell's, where they are too. Did you ever hear of Sewell's? That was probably the biggest local supermarket at the time. They were on Sierra off of California Avenue right next to where the bank building, the big bank, Bank of America is now. There's another building south of it that is sort of a nothing building, but they've got different shops in there, and that was Sewell's. And then Sewell's was up on Fourth and Virginia. They had from Fourth to Fifth Street on Virginia Street, and that was the biggest building in northern Nevada at the time.

Herb Sewell. They owned one of the banks, the Bank of Commerce.

Fearon: So when you were in high school and your mom and your parents first got here, they bought that market, right?

Akert: They bought that store on the corner of Fourth and Alameda, which is now Wells. I was still going to Northside. I'd get out of school and I'd walk down to the store, and my job was to sort the bottles. There was a deposit on them, and I put them in the boxes that they belonged in and kept them organized and then stocked the beer case and soft-drink case and took care of some of the produce. I was fifteen years old and wasn't too excited about doing it, but it was my job.

And my mother and dad had a butcher working for them. It was a very small, small store.

Fearon: You said it was the northeast corner of Fourth and Alameda. Is that right?

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Akert: Yes, and directly west was the Nevada Pack. It was a killing place, and now that's where the El Rancho Motel is. And then there's a tire shop across the street, which was Locke's Drug Store, and he was tied into Hales. I think he was a brother-in-law to the Hales, and he had a couple of stores called Locke's, himself. And then there was a Union Station on the southeast corner, and then the Wells Street underpass. Do you remember Wells Street?

Fearon: Well, not that far back, but I know—

Akert: That bridge was never there.

Fearon: I saw that today when I came down that way, because I just wanted to see where the market was and saw that.

Akert: Wells Avenue was a through street. It was one of the main thoroughfares for people to get into the north valley. The north valley had just started to open up. But it got you from one side of the tracks to the other without being bothered by the train—you went under the train, and when they put the trench in there, that brought all that to an end. When I first came here, Wells Avenue was the hottest real estate in town.

Fearon: Why is that, because it was right in the center?

Akert: It was sort of the first getaway from downtown Reno, and there were a lot of little grocery stores and businesses down there. Today it's just continuous—either a drive-in or a 7-Eleven market or something like that. And then Raley's built the first store out there on the south and then something else. Oh, it was that Mexican store, you know, way out on South Wells. It's almost to Virginia Street.

Wells Avenue used to run all the way directly into Virginia, and it was always a bottleneck there, but then those shopping centers weren't there, and it was a service area. That area around Wells was fairly nice, and since then the Mexicans sort of took that over, which is not bad, but a lot of people think it's dangerous. Women say you shouldn't go down in that area because it's dangerous, but it's no different than any other place. But the Mexicans have moved in.

Fearon: When did that start?

Akert: Well, probably twenty or twenty-five years ago. Downtown Reno, as far as I'm concerned, is the pits. There are just too many vacancies, and the Indian gambling just killed Reno.

Fearon: So what was it like down on Fourth Street, in the late forties?

Akert: I worked in that area. It's considered dangerous now. The hookers hang out on Fourth Street. Right after the war, the motel business got really good. There were no big hotels, and Reno was a destination for San Francisco and Sacramento and people from

those places to come up and have a big weekend, and the big hotels hadn't been built.

There were a lot of motels up and down the street, and now they're just weekly rentals or monthly rentals. Some of them were pretty classy or decent. Time and time again, they went down.

But there was a foundry down there, and Commercial Hardware. That's on—can I look at the map? I'm trying to think. It's before you get to Alameda. I got bifocals, $500 for bifocals, and I have to go back to my old glasses to read. It's kind of getting old.

Fearon: I'm just going to mention that Ben's looking at the Sanborn map, Map 19.

Akert: There was a U.S. 40 Tavern up here, and that's all. That's a big building down there and the windows are covered with paper, and it's a nice, nice building, then right next to it is that steel fabricating plant. It's on the south side of Fourth Street. A lot of the steel that goes in these big buildings came from there. They fabricated it and got it going. East Fourth, Alameda.

Fearon: Yeah, that's just a small little section on Fourth.

Akert: Here are the railroad tracks, right? I should have said Wells Avenue, because Wells Avenue started at Fourth Street and Alameda started at Fourth Street, and then they changed that to Wells all the way down.

Fearon: So what business were you thinking was on the corner or near there that you were trying to remember?

Akert: Going north, I'm trying to think, and then it'll come back to me. Eveleth Lumber Company was on Wells Avenue right where the underpass went under the railroad.

There was no overpass. They had their big yard. They were probably one of the biggest lumber people in town, and they had an old-time mill that probably had a 10-horsepower motor, electric motor, and it would wind up and run the belts where everything's moving off of the rollers up above or the gear work. It was unique, very unique.

Fearon: Do you think most of the lumber that went into that lumberyard came out of the Sierra?

Akert: Oh, they probably bought it from all over, because they bought hardwood and different woods. Most of the Sierra wood around here went into box factories, like up at Plumas Pines. You know where Plumas Pines is?

Fearon: I do.

Akert: There was a lumber mill in there, and it was strictly Portola. They made most of that stuff that went down to California for your oranges and your apples and those thin, thin boxes.

Fearon: Can you tell me a little bit about working at the store when you were fifteen or sixteen years old? What was it like?

Akert: My dad closed the store on Sunday, and I'd work on Saturday. My job was to go in and sweep the floor, and take care of all the bottles so that when the deliverymen came in they'd pick up the empties, because that was a flow of cash there. Sometimes the bottles and the box that the bottles were in were worth more than the product they delivered you, with the deposit.

A lot of people would come in and say, "Do you handle deposit bottles?"

And we'd say, "Yeah." We'd take them if they'd spend the money there. So a lot of times we ran a lot more bottles back than we bought, and I'd have to buy the extra container. It's a rental deal, you know.

But we'd get their little bit of cash flow from the kids that did come in, and then as modern times came, there were less and less, due to the tin can, the throwaway bottle. When I started my liquor stores, I wouldn't carry a deposit bottle. It was just too much of a nuisance.

And it's completely gone now. I don't see anywhere where you handle deposit bottles. That must be part of your advancement or going backwards, I don't know which way you'd look at it. Like this here [reference to a plastic water bottle], look how thin that bottle is and it holds water. To me, that's the most stupid thing in the world, when you've got good tap water. Everybody has bottled water now.

Fearon: Plus plastic is becoming a major problem. There's just too much of it.

Akert: I've heard it said how many times these bottles would go around the world, end to end—every year about four times. It's probably less than a penny to blow that out. The printed label costs more than the plastic, and there's some question about water sitting in the plastic too long if they used the wrong chemicals.

But Fourth Street was a workingman's area, and a lot of guys lived within the area, on Eureka and all those different avenues. When I first came here, there was no Oddie Boulevard. That came much later. That came in the early sixties, Oddie, and then as the town expanded, more cars, more businesses, more little strip malls.

Down there, you know where that girlie show is on Fourth Street? That used to be Harris Food Center, and he became the mayor of Reno. In fact—well, that's before your time. His son and his wife got killed in a deal—the boy was a gun trader, and they got shot. I don't know exactly what happened, but he was left a complete widower. It just devastated him. But that's going back at least forty years, I'd say.

Fearon: When your parents moved and had that business, did they live near Fourth Street?

Akert: We lived on Sixth and Evans. There's a parking lot for that Ramada right there. There's a Ramada, and there used to be a nice church and then our house, and there was a guy named Loughlin who lived next door. He worked for Union Oil. And when he died, we bought that house from his heirs for an investment. I told my sister we'd probably make money on buying the house, and we rented it out for about ten years, and then

Ramada came and bought it from us. But it was a nice home, and my dad and mother kept it up, and you had lawn and a few trees and vegetables in the back. That's the way people are supposed to live. Not all of them do.

Fearon: Did your parents walk to the market?

Akert: No, no. My dad bought a little Model-A for a delivery truck, and it had a bed on it. They bought a Ford when they came over here, about two years after they moved here, and they always had Fords after that.

It was on the 600 block, and Evans was probably three blocks, so it was about a five-block walk. I walked it all the time. I came here in '45. I was graduating in 1949 and I bought a car. My first car I bought myself and made payments on it forever.

I was just out of high school, and then I worked for the telephone company at nights. Then I went in the service, and I came back and I went back to work for the telephone company as toll repair. I can't remember, but I quit them because they wanted me to move to Willows, California, and I said, "I'm not moving."

They said they didn't have enough material for their construction to do anything in Reno and toll repair was long lines, and it was going from wire to cable. So my job was being reduced and what have you, but I took a leave of absence for about four months, and then I just told them I wasn't coming back. A lot of times, you know, Ma Bell will take care of you. It's not Ma Bell anymore; it's a competition company for who can get the business, and they had it sewed up at one time. And I quit and then that's when I started working in the supermarkets.

Fearon: Did you ever work with your parents in that market after that time?

Akert: Yes, like I say, it was a Mom-and-Pop market, and my dad would close at six o'clock. He opened at seven, and seven to six is a long shift. But the supermarkets were coming along, and Mom and Pop used to be a little family service, you know. So I got the 7-Eleven idea.

Nobody ever has an original idea, I don't think, but there were a couple of guys around town who were bagging money with a little small store, because they stayed open late, and on the holidays it used to be that all the stores would close for a holiday. Now, none of them close. And we'd stay open and it jacked the volume of the store about $150,000 a year. Back in those days, that was a big number. Nowadays they do that much in a day. But it got it going.

I kept it open later and on the holidays and pushed beer and more junk than groceries. But my dad still wanted to have fresh produce, and it just wasn't there, you know. You'd buy a stalk of bananas and lose half of them. You just don't come out well.

Then I had a friend of mine whose brother-in-law had the Food King Markets, which is now Scolari Markets, but they're altogether different. I went to work for the Food King, and I worked for them for five years.

Then I got married and my first wife and I were married for nine years and she got lupus and died, and I was sort of left like a cork on the ocean. I quit the Food King Market because I knew I was screwing up a lot going through that, is one of way of putting it.

And then one of the partners in the stores came back to me after my wife died in ’65 and wanted to put a minimarket in downtown Reno on Pine Street. That’s where Ben’s Discount Liquor originated, right there. I had a mini-market, and it wasn’t making any money. I had to do something or go to work for the state or something.

People, the tourists, would come by and say, “I can buy it downtown cheaper. I can buy it here cheaper.” So I said I’d get into the cheap business, and I could handle buses [with tourists]. They couldn’t handle buses downtown. I had a parking area where a bus could pull in.

I worked my ass off and turned it into a high, high-volume store, a lot of them, and it’s an altogether different type of business now. But at one time I had Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Utah, and they were all controlled states, and California was a fair trade state, and I just did a tremendous business. I kept my prices real low, kept my labor down, and I did real well at it.

In 1971, I was remarried to the wife I’ve got now and doing all right, and I decided that I wasn’t going to be working, humping whiskey cases at sixty-five years of age.

Because there was a Harry Parker—Harry Parker’s Western Wear in downtown Reno. I don’t even know if it’s there anymore. There were people who would have died just to have one of their stores. They had two stores—there the old-timers, the cowboy or sheepherder, would send $100 in an envelope and a list of what he wanted, the clothes he wanted, and they’d mail them back, and they’d do that and mail the change with it.

They had working wear. They were down in downtown Reno on Sierra Street. I don’t know what’s there now. But they had a good-sized store there, and they had one on Center and Second Street, on the northeast corner of Second, and there was just a little store, but you would go down in the basement and they had probably a thousand pairs of Levi’s stacked down there, available for shipping—any size you wanted. They were unbelievable people, and that’s a thing of the past.

Fearon: With your liquor store, with your parents’ market, where did you get all your inventory? Was it mostly from the western U.S. close to Reno or all over?

Akert: There was Lindley Wholesale, and it was just going into the change for the high, high volume, and my folks used to get maybe fifty or a hundred cases of grocery supplies a week. It was called Lindley at the time. It’s down there where the soup kitchen is, on Record Street. The railroad goes through there, and they built a couple of places where the homeless can sleep and stay. A homeless shelter. They let them sleep in tents out there.

Anytime you got a freebie, you’re going to collect the freebies. They put it downtown there, and then they walk on Fourth Street to the Eldorado or to the casinos or wherever during the day and just wander. And they’re not good for business, and that’s my opinion.

At Fourth and Valley Road, on the southeast corner, there’s a big long building that has a big parking lot there. That used to be Commercial Hardware. Commercial Hardware used to be pointed the other way with a lot of windows, but they changed that, and then it’s a long, long brick building. And they were the epitome of a hardware store, and then Home Depot and Lowe’s killed them, and they sold out. And the guy who

bought it thought he knew what he was doing, but he went broke within a year. You've got to stay with the times, I guess.

Fearon: And then now is that now a homeless shelter?

Akert: I think it's St. Vincent's Thrift Shop. They feed them there, and they've got a deal where you can buy real cheap clothes and stuff. I've taken a couple of loads of stuff to them, and they're very thankful. And there's a number of those thrift stores selling clothes, food, anything.

But Commercial Hardware was the place you'd go for knowledge and products. If you wanted certain kind of bolts, you'd go there. And then there was G.R. Bradley, but they were a wholesaler. They wholesaled to other stores down Fourth Street about two or three blocks east of where Akert's Market was. And G.R. Bradley used to be on the corner of Third and Virginia where the Eldorado is now. See, that's time and tide. Fourth Street was a good workingman's area.

Fearon: Did people convene there who lived in town? I mean, at night did people go down there?

Akert: Well, you wouldn't want to take your wife there. It was like a roughneck bar, but it was a big, big bar, and the working guy would take his wife, nobody would bother him. But it wasn't where a woman would dress up to go.

Fearon: Is that right on Fourth Street?

Akert: That's that building going down Fourth Street, and it's a long building, brown, the windows are nice and clean but they've got brown paper, like a paper bag, nice rolls, and the windows are all sealed with brown paper. And that's where the thrift store was for the Salvation Army for a long time. For a long time that was a big complex.

On Friday night and Saturday night, that was a big deal, when the workingman got paid—you know, in those days when I was a kid, you'd cash a check for a guy's week's wages. Forty-three dollars was a lot of money, and it wasn't until later years where you'd see a guy making $90 or $110. But then at the same time, I used to sell a loaf of bread, fresh bread for 12 cents, and if it was a day old, you'd sell it for 10 cents. This comparison of what prices are today, when you pay a buck and a half or $2 or more for a loaf of fresh bread. Whoever thought they'd see bread at $5 a loaf, you know?

You used to sell them four for a dollar at times, so 25 cents a loaf for good sliced bread. You've got to remember what was there. You say, I could have bought this and that, you get a job, and if you were making $40 a week clear, you were doing all right. You could buy a house and pay for it, probably $77 a month or something. Those days are gone forever.

And what else? I told you that where that girly house is. That was Harris Food Center, and then the motels came. They were building motels in the early fifties, late forties, like they were going out of style, because they could fill them up. They were servicing the casinos.

And then Fourth Street was U.S. 40 East and West. There was no freeway, so

Fourth Street, the trucks brought a lot of traffic on that street. You couldn't even start to put the traffic that goes down that freeway down Fourth now, it's grown so big. If you took an aerial shot of Reno when I was in high school and an aerial now, you wouldn't believe they were the same town.

Fearon: It just expanded in all directions.

Akert: That's right. And there were a lot of little bars. Oh, the Lincoln Bar, if you went to college, is the Louis' Basque Corner. Their Basque food isn't so bad, but it was a hotshot bar for college kids and for Basque food, and now it's Louis'. But it was called the Lincoln Bar.

Fearon: I know you go to the Coney a lot, or sometimes now. Did you go a lot when you were younger too?

Akert: I started going there when I was working in the grocery stores, because you could get spaghetti for 55 cents or 65 cents. And the reason I remember it so well is whenever I'd work in the grocery store, I'd wear a bowtie and a white shirt, look nice, and I'd go there and I'd eat spaghetti, and I'd come out and I'd have spaghetti on me. And they had these big pieces of heavy butcher paper that had a hook on it. It was cut like a crab, and you could put that paper around your neck and it would hang on. It was oiled, sort of heavy like a butcher paper that's got a little wax in it, so that it won't go through.

Fearon: It's almost like a bib while you eat?

Akert: Yeah, it's a big bib that comes clear down to your knees, practically. And I went with this guy and we had lunch. We ate at the bar, and I said, "Look, when I wear a bib, I don't get a damn thing on me." My bib was completely clean. When I took my bib off, there was spaghetti on me, and I don't know how the hell it got underneath, but it got under there, and it marked the shirt again.

But the Coney Island is an institution within itself. This is the third generation. John Galletti was a great big heavy-duty guy. He was just a sweetheart of a man. He was a good operator, tighter than a tick, and that was a workingman's place—you go in there, and that's one of those places where you go in, it got popular through him, and you go in there like on a spaghetti day. When you go in there, you'll see scholars, you'll see all the politicians, all the money people, and all the working guys and a few bums, you know, and they all intermingle and they know each other. It's still damn good food. On Tuesday, that spaghetti's out of this world, and we're going to go to dinner or lunch tomorrow for corned beef down there.

Fearon: You go pretty often still?

Akert: The wife and I don't eat out nearly as much as we used to. We used to go down there for lunch. They got a plate called The Mess. Have you ever heard of that?

Fearon: I haven't, no.

Akert: It's not a tortilla, like a Mexican—where they roll it up. Was it a taco? But they roll it up tight and it's got all kinds of food inside.

Fearon: Was it like an enchilada?

Akert: Enchilada, that's what I was trying to think of, and they'd put a couple enchiladas on there and then like a brown gravy with beef or something in it, top it off, and then they'd throw salad on the top. A guy used to come in and order the tacos with the beans and stuff on top. Probably they were just the beans that they cooked up. And then he'd order a salad and he'd dump the salad on it. And the waitress said, "That's a mess."

He said, "Well, I don't care what it is. I like it." So he started calling it The Mess. He'd tell her, "Hey, give me The Mess." And now it's on the menu, and everybody, including my wife, just loves it. And it's just something with a salad on top. But it does one hell of a volume.

Then there's Casale's Halfway Club down the middle of the block. And they're famous. I went to school with her brother, and he's semi-retired and he helps his sister down there. She's got to be eighty-five if she's a day, the gray-haired handsome woman. She works hard, and the food's good there. I never hung out there much. There is a group that hangs out there, too. You know, you can travel the world over and you'll always find a bar that's that kind of operation, and it's not a tough fighting bar. There are going to be fights. Any bar you have, there are going to be fights.

Fearon: Now, are you good friends with Gerald Galletti?

Akert: Gerald, he is a friend. He's just a funny duck. He's an engineer for the railroad, but he's a mechanical engineer. His job—he's retired now—used to be to check all the bridges for the stress and everything. In a certain area, he was responsible to check those bridges, and I guess he knew what he was doing.

Fearon: This project is being funded partially by the Reno Transportation Commission, and they're doing a revitalization of Fourth Street. Some of the questions they want us to ask are related to the sidewalks and just the general appearance of the street. If you ever walk down there, or when you're driving down there, do you have any feelings about that?

Akert: Well, it's an old street. I would say that if somebody who was here in 1940 or 1950 would drive down Fourth Street, it would be the only street that they could probably recognize for some of the geographic things that are still here. That was U.S. 40, and it got a lot of traffic. And a lot of that traffic was people who would pull off on the street and they were in a hurry to get to California or get to Utah, and they would stay within that perimeter and use the services, the motels and other businesses.

But it was a mixed bag of businesses. Most of those businesses grew, went out into the warehouse area, and there are still a few of them down there that have been down there forever. But as far as I'm concerned, the only traffic you see, foot traffic, is that foot traffic of the people of need who live down there.

Fearon: Around Valley Road?

Akert: Yeah, there are some places for the people to stay in there. I get a kick out of it. I took a real estate course, where they said the highest point of value is foot traffic in a commercial area. If you've got a hundred people a minute going across your intersection on foot, that's big time. And to be very honest with you, downtown Reno is the pits, because there are so many vacancies and there's no retail business downtown. It's either parking lots for the casinos, high-rise parking lots, or a bar for the casinos. I'm just telling you as the way I think.

I don't use the freeway anymore because they're remodeling it, and so I come all the way up Fourth Street to Sierra Street, and then I turn left on Sierra Street, because if I want to, I can drive 40 miles an hour down Sierra Street and catch all the lights, come to California Avenue, and there's no traffic in the mornings. That used to be a big business area, and now there's none.

And it's the same with Center Street. When I go to Coney Island, I don't want to get on the freeway, so I come down and I get onto Center Street, get onto Fourth Street and shoot up. But coming down Center Street, I can go north at 40 miles an hour. [laughs] Don't tell, I'll probably have the cops out there listening to this.

But there's no retail or business that any mother would want to take her daughter to downtown to buy things. There are no dress shops. You know, downtown Reno used to be a cluster of dress shops and things you needed, and you knew everybody by their first name, and probably when you know everybody by their first name, it means your business is going downhill, because you shouldn't know that many people.

I can't quote the actual words, but the highest and best use of commercial property is foot traffic. Now, that's old scale, because now that you've got to have a big shopping center, you've got to be able to park a thousand cars, and there's nothing there on Fourth Street that would drag people down there other than if you're shopping for something very specific. I went down there to buy a blower from a guy—I don't even know what the name of the company is, but it's on Fourth Street—and they keep clean windows, and they have snowplows and small utility machinery for a household, let's say. Plus I'm sure they handle it for the big guys, too. It's neat and clean, and I walked in there. I bought a couple of blowers from Home Depot, and they last about a year and then they're dead, and so I decided I might as well spend 250 bucks or something and get a decent one, and I did. And it's going to last and it does the job.

But there aren't that many of those kind of businesses down there anymore. They've found other areas, and go in other shopping centers. Lowe's and Home Depot, they killed the regular hardware stores, where you go in and get nuts and bolts. Now you go in and they're hanging in a bag, and you don't know if that's the one you want or not, but there's nobody there to help you. So I'm coming from thinking of the old days of the quality, where you'd go in and you'd buy $5 worth of bolts, which would be $65 now and you're by yourself buying them.

When I grew up, every kid didn't have a car. You either walked or you had a friend or something, and then eventually you got a car. And now a guy with four kids has to have four cars, and I wonder how they do it and buy groceries and live on a decent wage. So I have a lot of philosophy, but none of it comes together, right?

It's like I had a kid working for me, and I had a profit-sharing plan, and a lot of guys did extremely well on my profit-sharing plan. Then when I sold out, they trimmed it back and trimmed it back, and the guy who's got it now, he just cut it out. He didn't want a profit-sharing. But I figured if a guy's going to work for me for fifteen or twenty years, I want him to have something when he walks away.

I've got a couple of guys. One guy who worked with me, he had $90,000, and he said, "I still get the interest off that $90,000. I've never spent it." And he says, "It helps me with my Social Security and stuff." He's invested it somehow; I don't know how.

And others, this one kid, he had about $12,000. I owned some of the shopping centers in a partnership, and when I sold out, I sold all my liquor stores to Scolari's, and I told the Scolaris, I said, "You keep this guy, this guy, and this guy. They're damn good employees." I told him about this one kid, I said, "He'll work his ass off for you." But he wouldn't.

I told him, "Leave your money in the profit-sharing, because it's giving you a good return, a damn good return."

He says, "Oh, no, we can't do it." He says, "We've got to have it to live on." He bought a Ford truck with those tires as big as this table. And he probably had $25,000 into that Ford truck, and five years later, it's not even worth $4,000. Some people know how to save and some people don't.

But all of a sudden, you're sixty-five years old and you're living on $1,400 a month, and that's pretty tough.

Fearon: You worked at your parents' market. You got into Ben's Liquor. It sounds like you've done a lot of other stuff, too.

Akert: I worked for the Food King. The Food King became Scolari's. It went from Food King to Warehouse Market to Scolari's. In that time, my first wife was dying, and I was probably going to get fired, so I quit because I knew I wasn't covering the bases. I was trying to cover my wife.

Then the guys who owned the place called me to get into the minimarket business, and that's when I opened that downtown store as a minimarket. Right away I saw that I wasn't going to make it there because the traffic wasn't right. So I went after the liquor business and never looked back. It's like McDonald's. McDonald's has got a system that makes them the greatest in the world. Maybe you don't like their hamburger, but you still buy it when you need one. They're one of the best-run companies in the United States. They pay dividends and their stock keeps going up. They got a blueprint and they stick to it.

I didn't exactly know what I was doing getting into the liquor business, other than I used to buy liquor and sell it in the stores at a given price with decent profit. A lot of liquor got stolen out of supermarkets and still does.

Once I got in the liquor business and got a little bit under my belt and learned more and more, what happened is when we opened the second liquor store, we did so well that I never had to borrow any money to cover the inventory.

And I said, "That's the route," and I came to the conclusion that I'll never own my inventories, because I moved them fast enough. And it's like a freight company, UPS—big semis back up to their door and unload, and there's just a jillion boxes there,

and at night there are no boxes left. They're all gone. Well, I turned my inventory so fast that I always owed but I never was behind on my bills, and it worked out very well for me.

And maybe on today's market with the different competition, since different states have gone different ways, it would be different. I depended tremendously on the gambling buses. Not anymore, because the Indian casinos stopped that—it wasn't profitable for the bus or the casinos to do it, because they couldn't get people to come. A big part of my business was the tourists who would come on those buses and go home with a lot of booze from Ben's.

I'm giving you philosophy, it's just philosophy that I wouldn't advise anybody to take. But I would keep numbers on stuff. I sold enough vodka out of my stores in Reno to keep every man, woman, and child in the state of Nevada drunk continuously.

In the seventies and eighties, that was the only thing we did better than Clark County. We generated more liquor tax up here than Clark County did down there with all the casinos. Now it would be completely different, I'm sure.

But my volume was so big that I was skating on ice, because if we had a bad week, we were in trouble. I told one guy, "If they ever close up Donner Summit for two days, I'm broke," because of the traffic. You've got to have that traffic.

I got out of the business—I sold it to my manager, my general manager, and my bookkeeper, and I practically put them in business. But they paid me off like clockwork, and now it's been sold again to Keshmiri, and I don't know how he does. I go in the stores once in a while, and they're not the big-volume stores they used to be. But he's operating on maybe a different premise for what he wants out of it, and to each his own.

We talked more about Ben's than we did about Fourth Street.

Fearon: Did you want to say anything more about Fourth Street, or is there anything that I didn't ask you?

Akert: When I was just a kid from nowhere in Ely, Nevada, and growing up here, I met a tremendous number of nice people on Fourth Street—most of them are gone or dead. Their kids are around and I see them and enjoy them. I've enjoyed a good life in Reno, Nevada. It's been good to me, and I've got a lot of good friends, and now I'm just old and cranky.

Fearon: You don't seem too cranky to me.

Akert: Well, ask my wife. [laughs]

Fearon: Maybe I caught you on a good day.

Akert: No, that's me. But I don't know. And Sally—Sally recommended me?

Fearon: She did, yes.

Akert: Well, I'll recommend Sally then. I love her. She's a sweetheart, isn't she?

Fearon: She is. She's a really nice lady.

Akert: I went to school with her dad, Clyde. In fact, there was a Biglieri in the paper, and I don't know which Biglieri, in the business page where he was promoted to something in insurance. There were Les Biglieri, Clyde Biglieri, and Melvin Biglieri. But Melvin, I don't think had any kids. Usually you can figure out after thinking about it, but it's a guy probably in his forties who was promoted. And it might be a complete other Biglieri, I don't know. Those are the only ones I know.

But Sally's dad is Clyde. He's a good guy. He was a Folgers coffee salesman at one time. Then he went into real estate here.

Fearon: Could you tell me a little bit about your wife?

Akert: My wife is my best friend.

Fearon: Thanks, Ben. I appreciate your time.