ABBY JOHNSON’S

INTERVIEW WITH JIM ITHURRALDE

EUREKA COUNTY, NEVADA

YUCCA MOUNTAIN LESSONS LEARNED PROJECT

held in

EUREKA, NEVADA

May 18, 2011
MS. CLANCY: Okay, we have the tape rolling. This is, let’s see, we’re going to just get your permission for this footage to be used as research. The DVDs of the whole interviews will be in archives available to the public. And, then, we’ll be taking clips to put on the web. So, we just want to know if we have your permission to use your voice and image that way?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, you do.

MS. CLANCY: Great, thank you. Okay, the tape is rolling. Today is May 18, 2011. We’re in Eureka, Nevada. This is Gwen Clancy from behind the camera, and doing the interview today is Abby Johnson.

MS. JOHNSON: My name is Abby Johnson. I’m the Nuclear Waste Advisor for Eureka County, Nevada. This is the Eureka County Lessons Learned video project, and today we’re talking with Commissioner Jim Ithurralde.

Jim, tell us what your background is, how you came to Eureka County.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Okay. I came to Eureka County when I was one year old. I moved to the Ferguson Ranch. My parents were sheep ranchers. And, I graduated from Eureka County High School in 1960. Then, I left—I went to college in Idaho, and after graduating from college, I came back to Eureka, went to work for the bank, the local branch here. And, then, I was drafted into the United States Army, and I
served two years overseas during the Vietnam era. And, then I came back and went back to work at the bank. Then, I was transferred to Elko, and I served seven years in Elko, and I came back to Eureka as branch manager of the local bank, and I was here one year and they wanted to transfer me to Tonopah, and that’s when I quit the bank because my family was young and I had just moved them from Elko the year before.

So, I went to work a year later in the assessor’s office, and I became the--I went to work in the assessor’s office in 1975, and then in 1978, I was appointed the assessor fill in the expired term of the old assessor, Tom Pastorino (phonetic). And, subsequently, I was re-elected for seven terms as assessor of Eureka County, and I was in that position, and I retired from that position in 2006. And, I was elected Eureka County Commissioner, and I’m now in my second term as Commissioner for Eureka County.

MS. JOHNSON: Wow, that’s a long history of public service.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, a few days.

MS. JOHNSON: When you were growing up in Eureka, were you aware of the nuclear testing that was happening in southern Nevada?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes. When we really became aware of it, my dad’s sheep rights were down south, which was just
north of Tonopah, so we were down there in the wintertime.
So, yes, we’re very aware of it. And, also I was aware of it
at the school, because I think I was either in the third or
fourth grade, I can’t recall, but they put the little, like,
little Geiger counters or whatever they were, little chest
things we wore to see if there was any radiation up here.
And, then, we also took a couple of field trips to the top of
Pinto Summit, which is a summit that’s about five miles south
of here, and we sat up on the top in the school buses and saw
the mushroom clouds, you know, they exploded. And, that was
early in the mornings. I remember going up there.

MS. JOHNSON: Did you wear the badges all the time,
or just on the days when the explosions--

MR. ITHURRALDE: Just on the days.

MS. JOHNSON: Okay.

MR. ITHURRALDE: And, I can’t remember if we wore
them for a couple days, you know, after the explosions.

MS. JOHNSON: Afterwards?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. I don’t recall. But, I
remember definitely wearing them little badges.

MS. JOHNSON: Did the government come around when
your dad was doing his sheep ranching and talk to him, or
check him--

MR. ITHURRALDE: I don’t recall, and dad never did
tell me. So, I don’t remember.
MS. JOHNSON: When did you first become aware of the Yucca Mountain Repository project, and what was your reaction?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Probably the first time was they had tours, bus tours, and they asked the different communities and that, and we took a bus tour, I think it’s when my son was a junior in high school, so that must have been like 1991 or ’92, we took a tour down to the Yucca Mountain site, and that’s the time when I really became aware of it. I knew it was happening, but the real--

MS. JOHNSON: And, what was that like. Let’s go into the--let’s talk about the tours.

MR. ITHURRALDE: It was just a, you know, they just explained what they were going to do, the type of site they were going to build, and they took us to the actual site.

The tunnel wasn’t even done yet.

MS. JOHNSON: Okay.

MR. ITHURRALDE: So, you know, they said this is where it’s going to be.

MS. JOHNSON: So, that was before the tunnel boring machine was in place?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

MS. JOHNSON: Or any of that. You were just looking at--

MR. ITHURRALDE: The site.
MS. JOHNSON: At the mountain.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Exactly, yes.

MS. JOHNSON: Okay. And, then, you went back other times as the project progressed?

MR. ITHURRALDE: I only went one more time, and that was two or three years ago, we took the last tour of Yucca Mountain. In fact, they shut the lights off the day after we were there.

MS. JOHNSON: And, did you go in the middle when maybe you went on the railroad and went into the mountain?

MR. ITHURRALDE: We didn’t go in too deep, because there no railroad, it had basically had already been shut down. So, we just walked into the tunnel, a little ways in there, and then we took a tour of the, you know, the Nevada Test Site also at that same time.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes. Let’s go back and ask a question about public sentiment as an elected official for many years, you have a lot of contact with the public in Eureka County. Can you explain what you believe the public sentiment is about the Yucca Mountain Project in Eureka County, or maybe how it’s changed over the years?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Well, Eureka County has always taken a neutral position. However, the people in the north, through the Crescent Valley area, that’s where the rail, the proposed rail was going to come through right just east of
their town. They were definitely opposed to it because of the possibility of some type of accident on the train, or whatever.

The southern part of the County is pros and cons. You know, I’d say it was fifty-fifty. Some were against it, some were for it. So, I think most of them were for it because the people were for it, was they figured it was a good tax revenue for the State of Nevada. But, there were a lot of people, in fact my wife was definitely against it. Because she was also--her parents were also sheep people, too, and she knew about the downwinders and that, and she was very nervous because of that.

MS. JOHNSON: Okay. So, she was making the connection between the new project and the old project?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

MS. JOHNSON: When you were assessor, you helped the County’s Yucca Mountain Information Office to do some mapping related to where the rail line was proposed to be in the Crescent Valley area. Can you tell us a little more about the Crescent Valley area and the private property conflicts? Your office was very helpful in identifying the extent to which there might be private property conflicts with the rail line.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. As you know, direct in the railroad history, there was--every ten miles east side of the
rail track, there was every other section became private and went to the railroad company. So, therefore, that road through the north end of our county, and I don’t know if you can see this map, but there are several, every other section, is private?

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. ITHURRALDE: So, that was a conflict there for a lot of people.

MS. JOHNSON: That’s known as the checkerboard?

MR. ITHURRALDE: You’re right, the checkerboard. And, probably the biggest issue today on that railroad if it had ever gone through was there’s a huge mine down in the Cortez area, and that would definitely have been a conflict because it would have went right through where that mine is today.

MS. JOHNSON: And, they’re still doing more exploration, aren’t they?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, absolutely.

MS. JOHNSON: And, each one of those little private checkerboard squares isn’t just one property owner, is it?

MR. ITHURRALDE: There’s several property owners, yes, because some of these were subdivided into like little ten acre parcels, and five acre parcels, so there was, yes, several.

MS. JOHNSON: I think we found over 200 maybe out
of town property owners, maybe at least.

MR. ITHURRALDE: At least, definitely, yes. And, I’m sure, because I know when I was assessor, there was always, you know, exchange of property going on there all the time.

MS. JOHNSON: And, lots of out of town people who never even really knew what they owned?

MR. ITHURRALDE: A lot of them, we’d have some tax sales over the years, so a lot of them were sales that were done on the internet, and lot of these people were from Florida and probably had never been to the site, and probably still haven’t been to the sites.

MS. JOHNSON: So, the internet sales are sort of the next generation of the first land speculation that was--

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, I was the auctioneer I think in 2005 and I did it to help the clerk, because--for her sales of the delinquent parcels.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. ITHURRALDE: And, a lot of those sales were through the internet. It was very interesting.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes. We talked about being on Yucca Mountain tours. Let’s talk about when you went to Washington, D.C.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Okay.

MS. JOHNSON: You were--you are the County
Commission representative for the Yucca Mountain Project, and you went back to Washington on several occasions with our consultant, John Gervers, who helps us understand what’s going on in Washington, and with other staff people. Tell us about your experiences and observations from those trips.

MR. ITHURRALDE: You know, you always study in the history books how the government works, and all that, government classes, so I actually, I got the feeling how our federal government really works. I was shocked after probably the second tour, the bureaucracy of the federal government. There seems to be an oversight committee for an oversight committee, if you know what I mean. So, it was a very good history lesson for me about our federal government.

MS. JOHNSON: Did you meet with DOE and with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission folks?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, I met with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, also the Department of Energy. And, basically, the Department of Transportation, we went to the railroad people, and we also went to the private side of these, like the rail company, and that. It was interesting to get their take of it, and the take from the federal government side, and it was kind of interesting to see how that was all coming together, or didn’t come together.

MS. JOHNSON: Same topic, different information?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.
MS. JOHNSON: Sometimes diametrically opposed?
MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes, absolutely.
MS. JOHNSON: And, also, we met, and I did go with you, we met with the nuclear power industry, too, on several occasions.
MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes. Right.
MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. And, they were probably upset because this is a promise that the government, he gave them that they would have this site, and they paid into that actually over the years, and it never ever happened, and it’s not going to happen.
MS. JOHNSON: Let’s move on to the next question.
Jim, going back to what you were talking about earlier, being in grade school and witnessing the nuclear tests, could you tell us a little more about that?
MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, I remember some of the drills we did at school, too, you know where we dived underneath the desks. You know, that was some of the drills that we went through at that time.
And, I’d like to go back to when we used to go on top of Pinto Summit to watch the actual setting off of the bombs down south. We noticed the flash, we didn’t actually see the mushroom, but we seen all this big flash, and all of us kids go wow, that was great. So, you know, as youngsters,
we had no fear at that time. So, you know, I can still remember, I can still see that flash out there, you know.

MS. JOHNSON: You still remember it in your mind?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, I do. You know, I mean it lit the whole southern sky. So, it was--it had to be awful big, because we’re probably what, 300 miles north of where they actually set off the bombs. So, yeah, it was neat. We thought it was neat as children, you know, we had no fear at that time. You know, later on, they showed some of the negative stuff that by testing, what happened.

MS. JOHNSON: And, can I ask a follow-up question? When did that fear start to come in for you? When did you start to sense that there were some other issues besides excitement to do with a bomb going off?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Well, I think, you know, like the downwinders came on later, but I know we were always in the sheep industry, so we knew some of the stuff that happened in the State of Utah, where several sheep died from radioactive fallout, I mean, thousands and thousands of sheep. So, that’s when we started to say there might be some negative impact from this testing.

MS. JOHNSON: There must have been some concern about the shepherders who were right there with the animals out in the wild.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yeah, at that time, though, there
was--most of the shepherders were Bask, and that's my
descendants, so we always figured a lot of these kids might
have gone back to Europe, and what--how that affected them,
you know, I really don't know if it did. But, I'm sure it
probably did. So, we were very--you know, later on, we were
very aware of what was going on, and the negative impact that
these testings had on, you know, the environment, and
whichever.

MS. JOHNSON: Well, even today, there's
advertisements in the Eureka Sentinel Newspaper for the
cancer screenings.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

MS. JOHNSON: People were exposed.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes.

MS. JOHNSON: Do you participate in that?

MR. ITHURRALDE: I have not, but my wife is because
she also--they lived in the ranch that's about 100 miles
south of Eureka, what's called the Willow Creek Ranch.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes.

MR. ITHURRALDE: At that same time when she was a
small child. So, she is in the downwinder, you know, being
tested. So, she has, you know, that fear, and because of
that, she was adamantly against Yucca Mountain, because she
remembered, you know, from that nuclear testing, and all
that.
MS. JOHNSON: Let’s move on to the next question.

As a Commissioner, public health and safety for the residents of Eureka County is a primary responsibility for you. How have you considered the Yucca Mountain Project in that way?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Well, probably the biggest concern we had was—in the rail was, it would come through Eureka County, but it also, you know, the whole rail line crosses northern Eureka County, so we were concerned about the—in case of a spill or anything, you know, how much would it cost the counties for emergency management, you know, for our fire fighters, they would all have to be trained, and we were always concerned about that. The funding of that, how we could—how can I say—it was our responsibility to make sure that this was all covered, and that was one of our biggest concerns. That was one of my concerns going back to Washington, about how they would take care of local government also. In this case, in case—even if that didn’t go through Crescent Valley, we knew they were still coming across the main rail lines across northern Eureka County, so that was always a concern of ours.

MS. JOHNSON: And, we just have volunteer emergency response?

MR. ITHURRALDE: Right. Yeah, even our fire department and our EMS are all volunteers, emergency people.
MS. JOHNSON: Let’s move on to the next question.

Jim, thank you very much for your time.

MR. ITHURRALDE: Yes. It was my pleasure, and Yucca Mountain gave me the opportunity to see how our federal government worked back in Washington, D.C. So, I was very pleased. I was very happy to represent Eureka County because we were one of the local governments that were affected by this project. So, again, thank you, and I’m glad I had the opportunity for this interview.

MS. JOHNSON: Thank you.

(Whereupon, the interview of Mr. Ithurralde was concluded.)
TRANSCRIBER’S CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that the foregoing has been transcribed by me to the best of my ability, and constitutes a true and accurate transcript of the mechanically recorded proceedings in the above matter.

Dated at Aurora, Colorado, this 23rd day of June, 2011.

s/s Mary Chevalier
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