

Interview with Mayor John Driggs

Recorded on June 8, 2012 concerning Mr. Driggs involvement with the restoration of the Rosson House on Heritage and Science Park, 113 N 6th Street, Phoenix, AZ 85004

Interviewer is Thomas Walsh, Director of the Rosson House Museum

John: I would appreciate it if you would give me a card so that I could keep going on this Rosson House project.

Tom: Yeah. Right.

John: It is the Rosson House that has gotten me this card and I have had it ever since (referring to a city granted parking garage card).

Tom: Well I have a few questions that I would like to ask. I would like you to answer the questions and take them wherever they might lead you. I would just like to say that I am here in the Lath House with Mayor John Driggs. Today is June 8th, 2012, and we are doing an oral interview of his memories and recollections of the Rosson House. John, where and when were you born?

John: June 16, 1927 in Douglas, Arizona.

Tom: Douglas, huh? OK, so you had a little trip to get here.

John: Yeah, probably as a babe-in-arms. We probably came before I was one year old.

Tom: OK. So you think of Phoenix as your. . .

John: I have lived here all my life.

Tom: OK, good. What is your first Rosson House memory? We were just mentioning that when you were a youngster your coming over here to the LDS Church.

John: Well, where the Lath House stands now was the site of the first church of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormon Church. That was the only one in Phoenix, and it stood (?), looking like Solomon's, like a small version of Solomon's Temple, right at the southwest corner of Seventh Street and Monroe. And uh, before any recollections, I was brought there every Sunday by my parents as a babe-in-arms. And uh, I remembered, I remember going to that ward. It was the first ward, so we call our individual units. Our individual chapels. I went to church right on that site until 1933. Six years. Then we moved up to 47 East Vernon Street where my grandparents lived and my grandfather, Don C. Driggs, died in that home. And then my family, sometime thereafter moved into that home, and so that is where I lived until I went to high school. So that was the... So, my whole life is centered around downtown Phoenix.

Tom: Which high school did you go to?

John: North Phoenix. I was in the fourth graduating class.

Tom: Any of the old crowd still around?

John: Oh, sure. Sure. That was in 1945 when I graduated.

Tom: What did you do before you got into politics?

John: Well, the usual routine of growing up. Going to Emerson Elementary School on Palm Lane and Seventh Street, my whole eight years there. Graduated and at that time we moved into the Palmcroft neighborhood over on the other side of Central Avenue, and that when I started high school. North High. I would ride my bicycle from 2217 - - no, no - - it was 1801 Palmcroft Way, Northwest. Or Northeast! Northeast. Palmcroft is still a magnificent neighborhood. Beautifully, beautifully maintained. There is a top level residential area. I often just drive by drive by my house in Palmcroft where the memories are.

5:18

Tom: What was your first job? What did you do for work?

John: Well, actually, I had my first job when I was sixteen, working for the Arizona Sash and Door Company. They had a big factory down by the railroad track, just off Seventh Avenue. My job was installing screens on doors and windows. It was for my aunt's husband owned and operated that plant, and that was my first job.

Tom: And when did you get into politics?

John: I should give you a quick sequence from there in case this is the only recording I ever make. So I was at North High. Graduated there, and left a semester early because of summer school credits. Went to Phoenix College. Enlisted in the Navy. Then I graduated with my class in early June of 1945 and two weeks later boarded a train at Union Station for Great Lakes Naval Training Station where I went off to war. I can remember my mother taking me down to the train station there in that historic site. It was my first time being on a train and one of the first stops was in my birthplace, Douglas, Arizona. Because that was on the route. Southern Pacific route to Chicago. Went to Great Lakes. Was trained. I had qualified to go into a special training program called the radar technician program. I had to pass a test to qualify for that. That was about the only program still available. As the war was winding down. It was over in the European theater, but still hot and heavy in the Pacific theater. But I graduated from Great Lakes Naval Training Station the day the war ended. And then, from there, I went back to Phoenix College.

Tom: Did you serve two years in the Navy or anything?

John: No, I was in for one year and thirteen days.

Tom: And they decided to let everybody go.

John: And they just decided to let people go. And the interesting thing is if you had been in the service during that World War II defined period you were exempt when they passed the draft, the

new draft law, some years later during the Berlin Crisis, they reinstated the draft. And the law read if you had been in during the World War II period for one year or more you were 4A draft exempt. And some of my buddies that had gone in about the same time I did, got out a little early, and if they were one day short of the twelve months, and some of them were drafted. I had the privilege of marching down to Union Station with two of my friends who were the first one drafted a few years later. And then they served an additional two years in the serve. So that was exciting.

9:35

And then I went on a church mission for the Mormon Church in the New England states for two years. Came back and applied to Stanford University where I graduated three years later, 1952. Then went to the graduate school of business at Stanford, and then came home to work in the family business, which was Western Savings and Loan Association. I started work there in 1954 after graduating from the business school at Stanford. And at that time we had just one branch office at First Avenue and Adams, the southeast corner. Then the company grew from there. Developed a branch in Mesa a few years later. I was the first Branch Manager for Western Savings in our office, which was in an old, a previous supermarket, Wrights Market right there on Main Street. (John coughs). They built it with a little apartment in the back, so I lived as a bachelor in this upstairs little apartment in the back of the branch. (Laughs) And so, I had to literally lock the branch up every night. Then it was in the fall of 1956, that I met my. . . I had seen her in church, and I had met her, when she was the roommate of a girl I was dating in Mesa, where they were students at Brigham University. I called Gail Dorsey up on the phone. I can remember calling her right from the bank floor one night and said would you like to go out? And she said, well sure. And I said I will pick up in an hour and I picked her up. We went to the Flame Restaurant in downtown Phoenix. A famous restaurant, and the interesting thing is that I did not take her out again until the following spring. See, that was in the fall of '55. And I took her out again the next spring after dating several other women. And then we were married six months later in November 1956. Started our family. Raised five boys. So that was . . . and then I of course, worked in the Savings and Loan. And the Saving and Loan grew and developed. And it was in the fall of . . . it was in August of 1969 when four men worked into my office on a Friday afternoon in late August, and told me that I was their candidate to run for mayor of Phoenix. And the only reason that I had had any visibility that summer was the current mayor at that time, Milt Graham, had asked me in January of that year to head up a bond committee. I developed a whole committee. We developed a \$173,000,000 bond issue, and it passed! I had my committee and went through all the routines, and spent all that time, and it passed in June of that year. But, it was invalid because it came. . . the election was on the day after the Supreme Court had issued the Cramer Decision invalidating any municipal bond election that was restricted to property owners only. And that was the case. So all that work down the drain. So that was the only thing that gave me any visibility that summer. And that is when the Charter Government Committee which was the non-partisan, good government, political action committee, which had formed twenty years earlier in 1949, to throw the rascals out of Phoenix City Hall. Phoenix City Hall during World War II and in that period was quite a corrupt city. It was as close to a bosses' run city and maybe even a Chicago. And there was prostitution, gambling, during much of the World War II period. All the service men and all the surrounding air bases, air training bases, Phoenix was off limits to military personnel during much of that period. 1949 the citizens rallied and decided that they would develop a slate of candidates to run

against the machine. That was when Barry Goldwater was tapped to run for City Council. That started his political career. From that day on, fall of '49 until the fall of 1969, with elections every two years, separately for mayor and council members, they had a 100 percent record. Never lost a single seat or mayor's position. The previous two years had been Mayor Graham's third term. Now the Charter Government Committee stipulated in their, it was informally, that Charter Government candidates would commit in advance that they would serve only two, two year terms, and then step aside and let others come in. Sort of citizen's government. Well two years previous, Mayor Graham, who was a popular and very successful mayor, he begged the committee to let him have just one more term; make an exception, because he had so much on his plate, and so much going on. Well, the committee said OK, you can have a third term. Two years later, fall of '69, the mayor said I got just a few more things I have to accomplish. Please let me run for a fourth term. The committee politely said no. That is when they went on this search committee. They spent the whole summer sifting through names and qualifications. They came up with a slate. So when they came into my office they said we already picked the slate of six candidates for council, we have that. We want you to run for mayor. This was on Friday afternoon. They said we need to know by Monday morning. I made a weekend decision. My family was up in Greer. My uncle who was president, and my dad who was chairman of the board, were both up there. I knew I had to get their permission, because at the time I was executive vice president of a major financial institution.

18:40

Tom: Was mayor a full time job?

John: Well, theoretically it wasn't, but during the preceding buildup Phoenix was big city. It was a half a million people. One of the largest cities in the country. And yet the salary was set by charter, and the salary for mayor was \$500 a month. When I was mayor I was the lowest paid municipal employee. I said to my dad and uncle, what am I going to do if I am elected mayor? I can't support my family. At that time I had all of five boys. They said, well, if you will come to board meetings once a month and be available on call as a special consultant we'll, you know, keep you on the payroll sufficient so you can serve the community as mayor. Then what happened, was a week after I was announced by the committee, Milt Graham and four of his city council members announced that they were running for mayor on the "Citizen's For Charter Committee." That set up a huge campaign, with the primary in October, the general in December. We had to launch a huge money raising effort, because Graham had higher name recognition in Phoenix, according to Bruce Merrill, who had done surveys at that time in Phoenix. The well known pollster and political analyst, who is still very active. He had run a poll and Milt Graham had higher name recognition in Phoenix than Barry Goldwater. It was a vigorous campaign. There was a third candidate that ran. In the October election, when all the votes were counted, almost 100,000 votes. In those days that was a huge turnout. With three candidates in the race, when the votes were counted I was sixty-eight votes short of winning the election. So we geared up for the campaign, the December election. But on the Sunday after that election there was a big headline in the Sunday paper, *Arizona Republic*, saying mystery about the election. Paul Shaft, who later became editor of the *Republic*, now deceased. He was the City Hall reporter at that time. A senior reporter, Walter W. Meek, at the *Republic*, who was following this very closely, suggested to him that he take all of the more than 120 precincts, and color them, one for Driggs, and a different color for Graham. And in that pattern he found two

precincts that did not run according to a neighborhood pattern election. They went in and investigated the machine counts. We used voting machine in those days with levers. And he... As a result of that research from Tuesday to Sunday he wrote a big lead article, that in two of the precincts I trailed in the vote of those precincts by slate, by council candidates. Then he went further, and determined in those two machines, on one machine I would have twelve votes and on the other machine I would have 112. In a similar pattern on the other machine. One was in Maryville, and one was in North Central around Saint Francis Church. That raised a big issue about the validity of the election. So on Tuesday, a week after the election, the city council petitioned the county to go in and open those two machines. So on the afternoon of Tuesday following the week after the election, they went down. I sat in my office waiting. I did not go down. My brother Gary Griggs, who was my campaign manager, he went down there. And there were crowds of reporters, and cameras and television. They said there were even photographers sitting up on top of the machine with their cameras, pointed down. And when they opened the first machine instead of twelve votes on that machine, it was 112. So I was instantly elected. The other machine showed the same thing. It showed 100 more than the tally. So what Paul Marston, who was the County Recorder at the time, he met with us the next day and said, you know, I think I know what happened. I think when those machines were set, that somehow when they set those two levers, they did not lock it down and when the speedometer like gauge when from ninety-nine to 100 it went to zero. But when they moved the machines after the elections, put them in the trucks and trundled them off to the county warehouse they probably flipped. That how a week after the election I picked up two hundred votes and became the mayor of Phoenix in January 1970. So one of the strangest elections in the country.

In a way the reason why I wanted to mention that whole process, was that it was my service as mayor that led me to this whole issue of the Rosson House. Because I had, one of my girlfriends had lived, her father had a rental, in a big house, not standing anymore, but it was right next to the Rosson House. So I knew the neighborhood. And I had remembered walking by the Rosson House growing up every Sunday. Walking by the house and I imagined in my mind what a great haunted house that would make. So when I became mayor I developed a to-do list. As I was driving down to City Hall one day I just remembered the house and put it on my to-do list. Do something about the Rosson House. I went to . . . in the process of my four years there I went to the Secretary of HUD, George Romney. Told him about the project, and asked him for a special federal grant to buy that property so that it could be saved. That approval came in my last month of office, in December 1973.

26:16

Tom: That was fortunate.

John: So the whole mayor deal that brought me into the Rosson House picture. Of course, I went out of office, the succeeding mayor, Tim Barrow, it was something the city had to do then because we had the grant. So they started, they did the condemnation proceeding in the year 1974. Then Tim Barrel appointed a Rosson House restoration committee, and appointed me chairman.

Tom: Very good. Let me backtrack for a minute if I may. If you were walking back and forth to go to church what did the house look like, because it changes over time?

John: Oh! It did not look anything like it looked today, but it had the classic outline of a Victorian mansion. They added porches, and they filled in porches, and there were nineteen people living in the Rosson House in nineteen separate apartment units in the house. Nineteen!

Tom: They had put up walls.

John: Right. The grant was for \$200, 000 that I got. Incidentally, one of the reasons that Phoenix got the grant was that I had been asked by President Nixon, as a member of the U. S. Conference of Mayors board to. . . This was during the Vietnam War. This was during the whole effort during the Vietnam War through the Paris Peace Talks. The Paris Peace Talks were not going well for the administration. The U.S. Conference of Mayors had passed a resolution condemning the Vietnam War a couple of years earlier. So, the Vietnamese thinking that cause the mayors really control all the cities they were balking at condition in the peace negotiations because the mayors were against the war. The administration had to get some resolution on that and they prepared the resolution changing the position of the U.S. Conference of Mayors on the Vietnam War. I was on the Resolutions Committee. The White House asked me to sort of lead that effort, and they gave me the material. In several hours in a Resolutions Committee meeting as the U.S. Conference of Mayors started in New Orleans I was able to persuade the Resolutions Committee to adopt the resolution presented by the Nixon Administration. It became a huge issue in the final meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. There was a big, big debate. It took thirty, forty minutes. Everybody speaking for or against. Interestingly enough, it was shorted to be called the Driggs' Resolution. So in this final big meeting, which was to adopt the platform, to adopt the resolutions, mayors on both sides stood up and argued both sides of that issue of changing the position of the mayors on the Vietnam War. At one crucial moment, Mayor Dick Daley of Chicago, got up, strode to the microphone in the middle of this great big assembly, and I said "oh my gosh, I am sunk." Because most of the big city mayors that high visibility were speaking against my resolution. And so Daley got up and I said this ends it right here. Daley got up, walked back to that microphone in the middle of that aisle in the center of that whole assembly, and said "Mr. Chairman, I rise to support the Driggs' Resolution!" It was just amazing. And then he went on to give quite a speech, as a Democrat, as perhaps the most powerful Democrat in that whole assembly, he was supporting President Nixon. Then what happened was, interestingly enough, I got back to my office several days later, and my secretary came running in to my office, and said "Mayor! Vice President Agnew is on the line." I said, "Oh gee whiz." I picked up the phone and he said "Mr. Mayor, President Nixon has asked me to call you and personally thank you for that resolution because that will be in our opinion that will be the tool that we need to conclude the Paris Peace talks. Then a few days later I got on very personal stationery from the President. It was blue. It was a blue letter with the Presidential Seal and it was a letter from President Nixon. Just thanking me for that Resolution.

34:29

Tom:

That is a nice compliment.

John: It was kind of interesting.

Tom : So you wanted to save the Rosson House because it was a nice looking building. How about the other buildings on the Square? Did you have any thoughts about them at the time?

John: Well, you see what happened, Tim Barrow appointed the committee. In other words, the mayor's appointed about fifteen people on the committee. Somewhere you should have that list, and I would suggest you get that list and maybe I have it in my files. Maybe what I need to do. I've got huge piles of the Rosson House and I probably need to get them down here.

35:18

Tom: Yeah, we would be glad to put them in the archives.

John: The only acting member, point person the original committee who really stayed active, maybe for a year, was a lady named Kim Sterling.

Tom: OK. It rings a bell. Maybe she donated some stuff.

John: Right. There were others who. The Junior League played a huge roll in that. So with that, we started. There was a big story in the newspaper that this committee had been appointed to restore the house. There was a. So at my office at Western Savings shortly thereafter, I got a letter form Tucson, with a postcard in it, that was the earliest photograph of how the house looked at the turn of the century. They enclosed that photograph and said we understand you are about the restore that house and thought you might like this picture. That picture was priceless.

36:52

Tom: Oh yeah, to bring it back to the beginning.

John: So, that came from Tucson.

Tom: From the Historical Society down there?

John: No, just an individual who happened to see it in the Phoenix newspaper. Now I notice that maybe we can take this to a second tape so I can catch my breath.

Tom: Sure.

John: The reason why I really appreciate this opportunity is that it searches all these things, and they are all interrelated.

37:38

Tom: Yeah, well the point that history is a series of events, and not just one event or decision that

John: The other thing. The reason I mentioned the Vietnam War resolution, it was a former mayor, Sam Mardian was in Washington because he was a big official in the state Republican Party. I was still in office, and we were about to dedicate the Civic Plaza, the Convention Center. We were trying to get somebody important to come out. We (?) ask the president if he would

come out. It was a big deal for Phoenix. This big convention center. So Sam Mardian was in a small group in Washington with President Nixon. He took that opportunity. I think there were some official channels to the President. And Sam Mardian said to the president, he told him about this big convention center, and he mentioned my name, you know, Mayor Driggs. Sam Mardian told me that President Nixon said to him, "Oh, Mayor Driggs? Well I doubt if my schedule will permit me to come out, but I will send my daughter to represent me." So that is how we got Julie Nixon to come out to represent the president at the dedication of the Civic Plaza. And he said to Mardian "I'll do anything for Mayor Driggs." That was kind of a ringing thing for me to hear. And it was just because of the Vietnam War U.S. Conference of Mayor Resolution that seemed to turn the tide in the Paris Peace talks. It was that that really triggered the \$200,000 grant from HUD.

40:29

Tom: Right. Was it used to relocate the people that were living there?

John: There were... out of the \$200,000 \$80,000 was allocated to buy the property. \$120,000 of it was for federal relocation benefits for the nineteen people living in the house.

Tom: OK. That makes sense. Wasn't there also a four apartment house back there behind the carriage house that had to be torn down or moved? What about the people on the Square in those houses, what happened to them?

John: Where the carriage house that is used as a gift shop, that was a fairly large residence there. It was a house. It was a single family residence that could have been easily converted into a rooming house. As was the Rosson House. It is quite logical that if you have nineteen people living in the Rosson House, in this smaller two story residence right next door, it probably was a rooming house. But that was torn down. That was when a lady named Forrest Burgess who was related to Dick Mallory, and she died some years back. Lived in Encanto. She owned a carriage house cattycorner from the Westward Ho Hotel. She donated that to the city if it could be moved to Heritage Square. That was before it was called Heritage Square. So that was... this is Forrest Burgess that was responsible for moving that house. Interestingly enough, it was part of a property that was controlled by my wife's brother. It shows how interesting full circle things come around. So that property was moved and why you have two carriage houses on the site.

43:25

Tom: OK so the work then begins on the Rosson House but eventually somebody has to say lets do work on the rest of the block.

John: Right. That was my idea from the beginning, that we had to do that. Of course, by that time, the Mormon Church had been torn down. That was just a vacant lot, where the Lath House is now. The other important things, Tom, is that the committee is formed. We started to meet, and we literally met in the Rosson House itself. That is where we had all our meetings. But only after we started the demolition. See, it took all of 1974 to get the property and the (?) committee organized. Everything started in 1975. It started with what we called a Nail Pulling Ceremony. You probably have photographs of that. By that time, Mayor Hance was mayor. Barrow was in for only two terms, '74, and '75. So in '76 when all this had been accomplished. We really did

not start the restoration until Hance had been in office. So that would have been 1976. Spring of 1976. We had the title. Everything had been done. The city had not furnished a dime for the project. No money. So I had to immediately start getting contributions. My recollection is not very good on whether I had to stir up the contribution of the demolition. My recollection at this point is that the city did the demolition. It took three of the largest dumpsters and the period of about a month or so to in effect, go in an tear away all of the extraneous material.

46:33

Tom: Let me back you up here a little bit again. You get the idea of (?) to save the block and preserve it. Were there any surprises or major opposition from the people living here, the owners of the properties. Was it an easy buy?

John: No, it was an easy buy. The lot on the north was vacant, and in fact there is a whole story there. Are you aware of the archeological work done on that site?

Tom: Yes.

John: Huge! If they ever tear down the ASU facility they can make a fabulous tourist attraction out of that.

47:28

Tom: Yeah. I think there was a lot of work done where the garage is.

John: That was first.

Tom: I remember the occasion where I was reading through the archaeological work. We are going to be doing a program on that with Pueblo Grande. That was good that you got the property and it was not a big deal.

John: Well I need to . . . I have a little hoarseness because of an irritation of the vocal cords, so it is always possible that I may run out of steam. We can do another session.

Tom: Sure.

John: I am beginning to lose traction on the throat. The first thing I did was go through the AIA. I knew I had to get architectural work done. So I went to the AIA. This was with some assistance from the Engineering Department, who do you go to? I got the AIA, the American Institute of Architects, Arizona Chapter, Central Arizona Chapter, to agree to do a complete working set of architectural drawings for the house.

Tom: Great.

John: They had an army of architects out here. On weekends. They did a lot of work. It was that organization, Frankenberger, and one other architect to kind of lead the fight. It took months and months. I don't know if you've seen the set, but it is that big around. It was architecture in reverse.

Tom: It is an art.

John: They literally went through and measured every inch of that property. And did all the engineering, all the electrical, everything, as a complete set of working drawings. Of course, how I had done that, was enlarging that photograph that I got. Then I got a couple of others that were contributed showing other. . .well we took pictures of the house as it stood. Then with the original photograph and then different pictures of the house as it existed in 1974, or 5. See it took a whole year. See I was not active as it took 1974 to get the project. . .

51:10

Tom: you were still mayor.

John: No, I went out in January '74. I went out of office the same month that we got the \$200,000 commitment from George Romney, from HUD. I got a great big, with the help of architects that were doing work for Western Savings. They said get one of these great big black,

Tom: Brief case

John: Carrying case for those pictures. And I started going around town showing them. That was my approach in going to the AIA and then I went to the Engineering Association. Then I started going to subcontractors. Showing them the pictures. Because I had no money. None.

52:27

John: Oh, we first spent a lot of time figuring we had to raise the money. I had committees, everything. Nothing was happening. My committee did not function all that well. We applied for a few grants, and then we just said hey, it takes too long to get grants from foundation. That is typical.

Tom: Yes.

John: Sometimes it takes two years to get a grant from a foundation. So we weren't prepared. We had nothing except photographs. I would carry those photographs around getting commitments. Architects, engineers, subcontractors. I can remember one of the first was electrical. I went to Al Wendt who just died a few months ago. Cannon and Wendt, still in business. And he was still in the saddle. I tell you what I will do Driggs, you get me the materials and I will do all the electrical as a contribution. All the labor. I went to J. H. Welch Company. I saw the boss there and he said I will tell you what I will do. It turns out J. H. Welch did the original plumbing in the house in 1895.

Tom: Wow!

54:20

John: Terrific! So I had to go out and get all the plumbing. I had a list of specs, here there and everywhere. So here we are. I think maybe I am running out of steam.

Tom: That is great. If you want to we will stop for now.

John: I am just getting started.

Tom: I know, I know.

John: I have not wasted any of your time, because everything I have said linked to the project.

Tom: Let's meet again next month. (?) We have covered a lot of stuff. I just have a couple more things about your involvement, and other people that were working on it and include sometime when the house is open and available for a tour so we can go through it.

John: Oh, sure. I figure we might as well do this right. It may take three or four sessions. It ought to be done right.

Tom: Well rest your throat. Do you want me to give you a call when you have your calendar on handy?

John: The dardest thing. I am getting some medical treatment for it. I do not know if it is age, or whatever, but there is a sort of acid reflux, the acid at night backs up. You get too much acid it burns the vocal cords. So when my ENT guy saw me a month ago he said, hey, me you don't have cancer but you've got a problem.

Tom: (?)

John: But, it excites me think about what went on.

Tom: Well good. I can call you next week so we can set up a time.

John: Or I will call you if my voice gets better. But I just hate to irritate it more.

Tom: I understand that. And then maybe I will have a chance to see some of the stuff you got; the pictures, the rest.

John: Oh, yeah. I will begin to do that because we have been at it more than an hour.

Tom: That is fine.

57:26