

An Interview with Betty Bunch

—
An Oral History Conducted by Joyce Marshall

Las Vegas **Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History** Project

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

1997

Production of *An Interview with Betty Bunch* was made possible in part by a grant from the Nevada Humanities Committee.

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This interview and its transcript has been made possible with the generosity of the Nevada Humanities Committee, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The History Department of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas provided a home for the project and a wide variety of in-kind services. The department, as well as the college and university administration, enabled students and faculty to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank the NHC and UNLV for its support which gave an idea the chance to flourish.

The text has received minimal editing. These measures include the elimination of the fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases, photographic sources (housed separately) accompany the collection as slides or black and white photographs.

The following interview is one of nine conducted as a pilot project for the Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

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Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are courtesy of Betty (Rosenthal) Bunch and Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project.

Preface

Betty [Rosenthal] Bunch began dancing as a child. By the time she was nine years old she decided she would have a dancing career. At 18 years she began to work in stock theatre productions and within a short time, she had joined the Moro-Landis dancers. She began working in Las Vegas in 1956 at the Sahara Hotel as part of the opening line for Donald O'Connor. Following the Sahara, she worked as a dancer at the Riveria, and then returned to the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood. In 1961 while vacationing in Las Vegas, she landed a job dancing at the Dunes. She continued to dance, sing and do comedy until after the birth of her second child. At that time, she retired from the Las Vegas showroom, but not from show business. Her involvement in both film and stage has remained rich and varied.

This interview focuses on the time Betty spent performing on the Las Vegas Strip, including her long involvement with the acclaimed afternoon show *Bottoms Up*. The interview provides information on working conditions and the racial integration of the showrooms. Betty exemplifies the energy and talent that was so prevalent, in showroom entertainment during the 1950s and 1960s.



Betty Bunch and "fans," Sahara Hotel, 1956

An Interview with Betty Bunch

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This is Joyce Marshall. Today I'm going to be interviewing Betty Bunch at 268.5 Redrock Street in Las Vegas. This is her home. It is January 9, 1996. She and I have both looked over the release agreement and it has been signed.

Just to get started, I would like you to tell me about your early life, where you were born, brothers, sisters, that kind of thing and how you got interested in dancing. Where were you born?

In Willspoint, Texas and my folks moved to Austin when I was three years old. My mother owned a beauty salon and she was very heavily into culture. We went up to Dallas to see the ballet and whatever. My father was a bed-ridden invalid and so Mother had to take over and run the family and she did it in a very feminine way, giving my sister voice lessons and both of us piano lessons and me dancing lessons. And the dancing took with me. I just loved it and resolved at nine that that's what I would do. that I would be a dancer. Of course, everybody tried to dissuade me from it. You know, "oh, you can't do that" or, "you'll just get married." But, I persevered. Then I majored in dance at the University of Texas and I started dancing around town like for the Kiwanis Club and the Lions Club and whatever and they would pay me \$5 to come and do my iittie tap act for the Kiwanis or the Lion or the Rotary. So, I became a casual and I had costumes from the recitals. Then I did the University of Texas and did my first year of stock when I was eighteen and belonged to the Austin Civic Theater and was always involved in dancing and performing. I did the lead in my senior play in high school and went one summer after my junior year - I was always ahead of myself in school. I was two years ahead of everybody else. I finished high school when I had just turned sixteen and three

days later, graduated from high school. I had started school at five. So, I had finished my junior year [of college] at nineteen and went for the summer to New Orleans with a girlfriend. I never went anywhere without my tap shoes and one basic costume and [I] got myself an agent and went to work as an act in New Orleans. I worked at Prima's 500 and several other places, but Las Vegas was the big in place to come. So, somewhere in there I came to Los Angeles and auditioned for George Moro and got a job with Moro-Landis Dancers and opened here in 1956 for Donald O'Connor.

So, you got the job, actually, in Los Angeles and then the company moved to Las Vegas?

Yes, that happened often. I stayed over in Los Angeles for six years working at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood and doing all those Fifties movies in the daytime which was wonderful. We called it doubling or it's called bicycling now and it was wonderful fun. I did *South Pacific* and *Bells are Ringing* and *Imitation of Life* and worked hard.

You worked during the day doing movies and then you would work at night in the clubs.

That's right, one club, the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood. It was a very famous, world famous nightclub.

And the name of that show was?

Well, I was in three different ones there. It was, oh, I don't know, nobody knows the name. It was like *Viva Las Vegas* — something — *C'est la Vie* I think was one of them. Donn Arden reviews, all of them with a major star as an act. And the movies were fun.

But eventually, all the shows were coming over here. I mean, the Moulin Rouge closed, closed entirely. It's not that I was let go, the whole line was let go. They closed the place. I don't know why. I think they sold it to someone and the first job I went to interview for was coming to Las Vegas. So, I came over here to work and when that job was over, I went back to Los Angeles, auditioned for another show that was coming to Las Vegas, so I came to Las Vegas again. And, I finally realized that all the work was in Las Vegas, so I moved over here to stay.

So, the first show was with Donald O'Connor and how long did that run?

The Sahara? I was at the Sahara a year, a full year. The Donald O'Connor show ran just four weeks and the fourth week, you go into rehearsal for the next show, so that you're rehearsing all day to learn the new numbers for Ray Bolger, except Ray Bolger wasn't the next one. He was a dancer. He was booked later. I've forgotten who was right after Donald O'Connor. It could have been anybody. Marlene Dietrich was there at some point, Theresa Brewer, Martha Raye, Vaughn Monroe. They were all booked in for four weeks and on the fourth week, we started rehearsing for the new show that would be coming in. And, by the way, we worked seven nights a week. We had no night off.

No days off?

[No] We made \$95 a week, which was a fortune at the time. We considered that being very well paid. The average secretary, at the time, made \$45 a week.

How big were the lines? How many girls were involved here?

Always twelve.



Betty Bunch with Donald O'Connor at Sahara, 1956



Betty Bunch opening for star act, Sahara, 1956

You were a dancer. Were there showgirls?

Not really, not in the Moro-Landis Line. Occasionally, depending on how George [Moro] choreographed the number. I remember once, Dennis Day was coming in and they needed two showgirls to stand on each side of him for a skit. As a matter of fact, I was the one they picked. Two of us and I was one of them picked to be showgirls and, of course, dressed. Nobody did nude in those days. This was, I think, the year before the Stardust got here and the Stardust was very — everybody was shocked, you know, my goodness, they had some nude showgirls. Of course, they were all perfectly elegant ladies, but they were European girls. At the time, nice girls didn't go topless, it just wasn't done.

The difference with the showgirls here was that there was more costuming and less dancing?

Right. Yes, showgirls carried huge hats. They worked very hard. I have a lot of respect for them, but they are not trained dancers. They were hired for height and for beautiful figures and faces. They were hired for their looks and their height; whereas, dancers, obviously had to dance. We were trained, but once in awhile it would cross over—depending on the height requirements.

And the pay was no different?

Later on, they started paying nude showgirls more to give them an incentive to do the job. You know, to try to attract girls into the thing.

But, in 1956 there were no nudes.

Right, except, I think there were at the Stardust only. I've forgotten what year the *Folies Bergere* came in, but those were all English and/or French girls. Mostly, English girls.

Would you say that the majority of the dancers then by the late 1950s were European?

No, only in the French shows. We had three French shows in town. The Stardust had the *Lido*, the Dunes had the *Casino de Paris* and the Tropicana had the *Folies Bergere* and those three French shows were very, very popular and well attended. It was the big "in" thing.

Weren't they large shows?

They were huge shows. Huge shows.

So, in terms of numbers..?

Oh yes, there were 36 dancers and showgirls, instead of the twelve opening line. See. like the Moro-Landis dancers, we just opened the show and that was it, and then you got dressed.

Then you had a headliner.

Right, a headliner. Once in a while the headliner wanted the girls to join him in the finale. Then, we'd put together a finale. But, that wasn't always, it was just once in a while. Like Ray Bolger wanted us to join him in the finale, so we did a whole big dance number around Ray Bolger. The same thing happened at the Riviera. I wasn't at the Riviera until 1961 and George Burns, for instance, wanted us to do a number with him. It

wasn't hard dancing. It was just kind of piddling around and I don't know, whatever. I've forgotten who else was at the Riviera that we danced with. So many.

Was there a big turnover in the girls or was it pretty steady?

Pretty steady.

It just seems that if you worked seven days a week without a day off, that would become very demanding and people would get sick and leave.

It was. What tended to happen is that sometimes girls would come just for the summer. I remember at the Sahara, there were two girls, sisters. I even remember her name, Nina Vaughn and baby sister, whose name I have forgotten. They were from Houston, Texas and they just came in for the summer between courses or, you know, they had to go back to school. So they gave their notice and left in September and they had to be replaced with somebody else. So people would come in for the summer only and go back.

You had no recourse if you got sick? If you got sick there was no sick pay?

No, nothing.

Were you replaced or did they work around you?

No, they just worked around you. You just learned to go on whether you were sick or not because you had to be near death to miss a show. One, you wouldn't be paid; and, two, it meant that a rehearsal had to be called. You know, they'd call you at home and say, "Get in here, we've got to rehearse. We've lost Mary Sue," or whatever. Then we had to rearrange quickly, right before the show, rearrange the number so there's not a great big gaping hole and that's a burden on your friends and they'd be angry, you know. I

don't think I ever missed a night. I don't know of any dancers that missed, i mean, you just didn't do it. You just didn't. You came to work if you were ill and oddly enough, you don't get ill much when you know that's what's going to happen.

Was it just one show a night at that time?

No, always two, an 8:00 o'clock show and a midnight show.

Dinner and drinks?

Yes, the first show was a dinner show and the second show was always a cocktail show.

/ think some of the big production shows only did one, but I'm not sure about that.

I don't think so, Joyce. They always did two. I can't think of one ever doing only one.

Much later, I think it was all the way into the 1980s, I seem to remember that Sinatra or somebody of his stature — Barbra [Streisand] — would be able to do only one show, or maybe only one show on the slow nights. But even Sinatra had to do two shows on a Saturday, I think.

So, back to 1956, you went back and forth between Las Vegas and Hollywood?

Yes, after that year at the Riviera, I went to the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood and stayed, really, for five years. It wasn't until 1961 that I came over here with four girls from the Moulin Rouge. Friends, all of us, and we just came because the job was over and we were tired. You know, we worked seven nights a week there too. We needed a vacation. We came over here and saw the show at the El Rancho Vegas, that had not yet burned. It burned that year. But, we saw that show and fiddled around. I was sitting in the coffee shop at the Dunes with my suitcase by my side. We were all meeting there. Two of us

had gone to stay with one girlfriend that lived here and two of us had gone to another. Sitting in the coffee shop, a choreographer I knew walked over and said, "What on earth are you girls doing here?" We told him and he said, "You mean you're out of a job Betty?" and I said, "Yes, I am, I'll go back and look for work starting tomorrow, you know, we're all meeting here. We're going to get in the car and drive back." He said, "You want to go to work?" I said, "Well, sure." He said, "Hold on." He walked to a booth, like three booths away and I'm watching him, like that. And when he got down there, he talked for a few minutes and then this woman stuck her head out and looked at me. And then, he walked back over and he said, "Okay, you're hired." I said, "What?" He said, "Yes." The woman was Selma Diamond and she was the producer. She was producing a show at the Dunes called *Gotta Get to Vegas* now famous as being the worst show ever done on the Strip, just dreadful. But, she used short girls. I'm only 5' 7 1/2" but she hired that height for showgirls, whereas, most of the girls in the line were shorter. So, that very night I sent the other girls back to Los Angeles without me. I found out that two girls I knew were in the line at the Dunes and they said, "Oh, yeah, you can move in with us. We have a third bedroom. No problem." I mean this all happened within 45 minutes and they asked me to rehearse that very night after the midnight show. The job was as a showgirl, so, being an efficient, organized type, I got out my pad and pencil and drew pictures of all the formations and simply said to the line captain, "Look, I can go on tomorrow night, if you need me to. I mean, I'm a dancer, this is simple." So, they fitted me into the wardrobe. We did a rehearsal the next day. One rehearsal, one walk through, me as a showgirl and I went on that night. But, it was easy. I just said to the other girls,

"you know, I'm a little foggy on the entrances, so, give me the highlight when it's time for me to walk on." But, it was just walking, there was nothing to it. I told you it was a very simple show.

You mentioned moving in with two other girls that were in the show. Tell me about housing during that time. Was it difficult to find housing?

No. There were apartment buildings, new ones all over. Later on, I just remembered the La Fonda Apartments. I'll mention that because they're gone now. Do you remember the La Fonda.

Yes, I do.

They were beautiful, elegant and gorgeous and, of course, now Steve Wynn has leveled them for a parking lot for the Mirage. I moved in with Chickie Marion, and Leslie Evans was on the other side of the Strip and they had a three-bedroom apartment. I guess that was what was available in the area and, so, they each had a bedroom and there was a big living room. They were elegant, gorgeous apartments.

The town was growing so fast.

Yes, it was. People talked then about how fast it was growing, but, you **know**, I was married to a real estate broker for twenty years and now I can look back and know that this has always been a boom or bust town. It would have a huge growth spurt for three or four years, sometimes it goes, and then a sudden bust where lots of people go broke. But, this roll, the one that started in 1985, it's still on a roll. There's been no bust.

How long did the show last at the Dunes?



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Betty Bunch in *Gotta Get to Vegas*, Dunes Hotel & Casino, 1956



Betty Bunch in *Moro-Landis Waltz*, 1956

Well, it was so awful, I think, that lasted six weeks. I was here six weeks. A wonderful comedian, Jerry Collins. He died later of a heart attack, a dear wonderful comedian. What did I do then, I've forgotten. I guess I went back to Los Angeles and then, I think I went on the road with Louis Prima. There was a big audition at the Moulin Rouge for Dick Humphries and I got the job and went on the road with Louis Prima. He had just divorced Keely Smith and was putting a show together by himself with the Witnesses. Where did we go, my goodness, we went to Lake Tahoe and then, well no, first we did the show at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood, I forgot. That's where he played. If it was no longer the Frank Sennes Dinner Show, the big extravaganza that I'd been in for five years. It's just that Louis Prima rented the theater and it was a different show. We introduced the twist in that show. It had never been done. Chubby Checker had just started doing his little twist number and Dick Humphries was a dear friend of mine and he's dead now. We sat around, the dancers with Dick, and he said "Louis wants us to do a twist number because he's going to do 'Twist Around the Clock'" or whatever that bi? hit was. Louis Prima liked to stay right on the cutting edge of whatever was new. And Dick said, "Girls, I don't know what to do, I don't know how to twist and he wants this big twist number." So, we went out that very night. We went out to the nightclubs. We went to like four different nightclubs and watched the kids doing the twist and then we sat down together. I think there were three or four of us, that went with Dick, and broke it down and discovered what it was. We did a consensus of what the kids were doing --well, this is what it breaks down to — and put in a huge twist number with Louis Prima. Then the Moulin Rouge closed, and we opened at the Crescendo. And I know that the

ladies, all the Beverly Hills matrons, would grab me between shows in the ladies' room and say "come in here and show me how to do that. It's a big fad. I want to know."

/ remember. It was not as easy as it looked.

No, there was a little knack to it. But it was fun. So we introduced the twist. Then we went to Lake Tahoe and got snowed in. It was, oh, I don't know, it was tons of fun. A wonderful life.

This was the early 1960s?

Right, 1961 and 1962. After the Lake Tahoe closed, we were there for Christmas and we got snowed in, which was just fabulous and beautiful up there. Louis Prima cooked Christmas dinner. Had us all in for Christmas dinner. He made his famous pasta, you know. He liked to cook and serve dinner for all of us, turkey and dressing and wonderful Italian food. And then we came into the Desert Inn and played the Desert Inn.

Was that in the lounge or in the main showroom?

No, it was in the big showroom. I was the line captain in that show. There were only six of us that went on the road with Louis, so they let half of the Donn Arden dancers go. There were twelve in the line at the Desert Inn at the time -- Donn Arden dancers — and they kept six of them to join us so that there would be twelve and let six go on vacation, as I recall. So, I met some of those girls too. I don't remember what I did next.

Then you didn't work for Louis Prima any more after Lake Tahoe?

Yes, yes. Well, no. We came here to work at the Desert Inn. We played, oh, four weeks here at the Desert Inn.

Oh, right. So, this was a constant turnaround. You worked job for job, you didn't work under contract for anyone, so when a show was over, you had to go out and find another job.

That's right. I look back now and think how did I do that without, temble fear, but I was always hired within the week. I don't think I ever went more than a week without a job. I was well trained and I was the perfect height and I had turned myself, by that time, into a pretty girl. I knew how to put on makeup and do my hair.

And you continued to go back and forth, between here and Los Angeles, wherever there was work?

Right. At that time I still considered Los Angeles my base because I had spent five years there, so that was kind of home. It wasn't until the Riviera job in 1961 that I really decided to move over here and stay here. It was the Dick Humphries line. It was twelve girls that opened the show.

Then you stayed primarily with the Sahara, Riviera, Desert Inn?

Well, yes, let's see. Somewhere in there was the big show at the Aladdin that never opened.

You rehearsed for that?

Three full months with Paul Godkin. Shirley MacLaine came in for New Year's Eve. We did a special, by-invitation-only performance. Even though the place wasn't open, they invited a whole ton of people in to see the show. It was a gorgeous, gorgeous show with fabulous costumes, just beautiful. Shirley MacLaine was here with her husband Steve

Parker, who produced the show with Alan Lee. I was the swing girl on that show, meaning I had to learn all the parts in a couple of different numbers.

Because you would do different roles?

Yes. I did different roles. It was fun and when that closed, what happened next? Oh, I know what it was. When the Riviera closed, I got the job with *Bottoms Up*. See, at that point, I had already been a dancer for some time, the five years at the Moulin Rouge and the year at the Sahara. What is that, seven years? I'd been around for a long time and I love this story. Joyce Roberts was the line captain at the Riviera and we all got our notice. The whole Dick Humphries line, entirely let go and they hired another choreographer and Joyce Roberts said, "Betty, I've heard of a job that's coming into town that's called *Bottoms Up*. It's a show out of Dallas, Texas that's a big smash hit down there and they're looking for a girl that can sing, dance and do comedy sketches and that's you." Not everybody, not all the dancers, could sing and do comedy and acting as I was trained to do and she said, "Here's the man's name. It's Breck Wall and here's his phone number." So I called, you know, terribly formally the next day about 10:00 [a.m.], long distance to Dallas, Texas and they answered, "*Bottoms Up* Production Office," and I said, "May I speak to Mr. Breck Wall, please?" And this voice came on the phone and I said, "Mr. Wall, this is Betty Bunch and I'm calling from Las Vegas and I understand, blah, blah, blah, and I'd like to audition for you and blah, blah, blah." And there was this strange, unnatural silence and then there was a little giggle. Finally, this strange voice said, "Betty, this is Billy Ray. Honey, I changed my name to Breck Wall." I said, "Billy Ray, darling, how are you?" We went to the University of Texas together and Billy Ray

Wilson escorted me to the Junior Prom the year we were both eighteen years old. He said, "Of course, you're hired. Of course you've got the job if you want it. Get on the next plane." Isn't that funny.

It is. He changed his name. That's wonderful.

Yes, who knew?

Here again, you go somewhere else, to Texas, to learn a part for Las Vegas.

Right. They had moved the show to Houston, Texas, the Continental Hotel and we did ten weeks at the Continental. I mean, I got thoroughly settled into the show because there were lots of sketches and everything. At that time *Bottoms Up* was a very fresh, intellectual, witty show. Much like *Upstairs, Downstairs* in New York City or like *Capital Steps* or that kind of thing. Nancy Austin was starring. Bill Harmon was in it and I joined the show and learned it thoroughly and well and then we came in and opened the *Castaways*. We were here for six months and it was a smash hit — standing room only.

/ remember it. It was a great show.

Do you really?

Oh, yes.

For heaven's sake. That was fun and I got to do a little solo in the show so that was back to doing sketches and parts. That was fun. And after the *Castaways*, the show was so good, they booked us into the Thunderbird, which was a better, bigger theater. Do you remember that showroom at the Thunderbird. It was a gorgeous showroom.

Yes, I do. So, the show left the Castaways then and went to the Thunderbird.

Yes, I think we had a few days off.

And was this the same situation where you worked seven days a week? Had things changed, at all, by this time?

Oh, my word, no. It seems to me, we started getting a day off. I think we got a day off. I'm sure we did. That was seven years later, you see. That was all the way into 1963 or so. And so, we had a day off, but we also rehearsed for free and we did tons and tons of publicity, constantly. Constantly working during the daytime -- radio shows and modeling assignments, you know, things.

So, you always worked two jobs.

Just about and totally on call. Breck was a wonderful boss. I don't mean that, but he did expect you to show up when told to show up and we did. We rehearsed for free and sometimes putting new numbers into the show. It could be huge work, all day, every day, until we got new numbers into the show. 'Cause it was the kind of show that was very topical and so we were constantly putting in new things. Breck would fly into New York for the weekend and pick up new lyrics and new numbers and whatever. Maybe we went to Dallas after we closed the Castaways. I think we did. Somewhere in there, we flew into Dallas and did a couple of weeks before we came back to the Thunderbird.

Did you always call him Breck then?

Yes, oh, Breck would kill me, you know, if he — he ordered me not to tell anyone that his real name was Billy Ray Wilson, he would kill me. Breck's an artist and he just decided to cut that part of his life out. He was no longer Billy Ray, he was Breck.

You worked at night and then you were always doing things during the day, but you must have had leisure time.

Yes, surely — some. I remember Mother, I got on the phone with her one time, she said, "Oh, Betty, you're living such a strange life, all those strange hours." I said, "Mother, I live a very regulated life with very steady hours. I sleep every day until twelve noon. I get up and have breakfast and then about 5:30 [p.m.] I start thinking about what I'm going to wear to work tonight." I was always a clotheshorse. I'd start getting the wardrobe together and at 6:00 [p.m.], I'd have a little snack, a sandwich or something light and leave for the theater at a quarter to 7:00 [p.m.]. I always got there by ten to seven, never later than that because it took me that long to get, you know, made up and do an 8:00 [p.m.] show, have a light snack between shows, do a midnight show, get out at 1:30 [p.m.] or quarter to two, go have a drink with friends or meet someone or have a date or whatever and get in at 3:00 [a.m.] or 4:00 [a.m.], go to bed and sleep until noon. What more regulated hours could you have than that. But, yes, there were afternoons and I did have a lot of hobbies. Several of us got together and played bridge. There were, not often, not all the time, but some other college women, let's see, oh, Marilyn Johnson who still is here, owns Rock-A-Billys now.

Married Ash Resnick?

That's right. And she had been a showgirl at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood before she came to the Tropicana, so, I knew Marilyn before. But, she was here at the Tropicana and I think already married to Ash by the time we were playing bridge. Ginny De Voix, who later became the right-hand girl to Richard Bryan, worked in the Governor's office. She represented him and Ginny played bridge. I can't think of who else, there was some pit-boss's wife who had been a dancer and as I said, I was always a clothes horse and I made most of my clothes. I sewed, made beautiful clothes and shopped.

You didn 't do any sports ?

Well, not really.

You have already related to me that you didn't go to the Lake [Mead].

Right, no. There was always the fear of getting hurt. I mean, if you strain a toe, you're out of a job. Girls that got hurt, if anybody, if you broke an ankle, you're out. You're not like a secretary that can go into work on crutches. The job is over and there is no insurance and there was nothing to fall back on. I always had money in the bank, but I mean by that there was no second job you could do. I would have been horrified to think that I couldn't work as a dancer. So, I was always very careful not to do anything that was physically dangerous.

/t was probably a very real fear to be injured.

In Lake Tahoe, it was part of the contract because everyone wants to ski in Lake Tahoe. They learned by experience that girls would get hurt and be out of the show that night if they went skiing. And so, it was part of the contract that you signed in any Lake Tahoe

hotel that you were strictly forbidden to go skiing and that you were subject to be fired if you were seen on the slopes or caught going skiing. Did you know that?

No.

It's very impressive to read a contract --I was always very serious about contracts. That's a serious thing when you sign your name to something, so, I never went skiing and was always begged to do so. "Oh, Betty, you'd be so good. You're a dancer, it would be so easy for you." "Yeah, but I'm not allowed to do so." And the same thing was here. I wouldn't go water skiing, not only because of the skin problem, being redhead, but because it's dangerous. You could fall and get hurt. Now, other girls did. There were plenty of girls that went water skiing. I was just always prissy.

Some probably just went yachting, also.

I went out on the Riviera boat one time with all the girls. Each hotel had a boat that they sent high-rollers out on. One time, a girl in the line at the Riviera was maybe dating someone who was in charge of the boat and nobody was going one day and she called and said, "Quick, quick, get your stuff together. We've got the boat for the day." Out we went with a gorgeous picnic hamper full of fried chicken and potato salad from the Riviera kitchen. This was part of the good life. You know, we had everything we wanted, anything we wanted. We were generously paid, never bought a drink anywhere in this town. Never bought a drink. Just walk in and you'd see somebody who knew who you were or recognized that you were in a show and, I don't know, a maitre d' or somebody would walk over and say, "Hey, you girls are in the show at the Riviera, aren't you?"

Then, of course, we didn't know until the check came that somebody had picked it up, but they always did.

After your second show, it was then common to go out and mix [in the casino]?

Absolutely.

And you did that in the hotel you worked in. Was that part of your responsibility as a dancer?

Yes. Absolutely. It was made clear verbally, I mean. They told you that this is part of your job to go out and mix, you know, dress and they explained it. On the first job, the Moro-Landis people were very good about explaining it. They said, "Look you're going to come in at 7:30 [p.m.]. That's when you were required to be here. You do the show at 8:00 [p.m.] and 8.10 [p.m.] you're sitting upstairs, through. That's it. Your job is over until 11:30 [p.m.,] when you're due to check in to do the 12:00 [midnight] show. And you do the show and you're through at 12:10 [a.m.]." Well, the owners know that and they just don't really think that's enough to earn this salary and they want to see pretty girls hanging around the hotel. They want to see pretty faces. You don't have to talk to anybody, if you don't want to. You certainly don't have to take any guff off of anybody. There's security guards all over there. If you don't want to talk to somebody, you just tell them to get lost. But you do have to get dressed and go out there and sit in the coffee shop or sit in the bar. They gave us free drinks in the bar, four drinks per night were allowed -- two between shows and two after the show. It could be cokes, if that's what you wanted to drink or alcohol. Nobody cared what it was, but it was free and we'd sit

together, two of us or three of us. That's why wonderful, deep friendships developed over the years, with all these girls working together, because we had such an easy job.

You had that time to socialize.

Yes, very close friendships because we had time to talk and time to visit and we knew how lucky we were. I think, most of us did.

Nothing more was ever required. No one ever called you over from the pit "this person would like to buy you a drink," or anything like that?

No, oh, no, not at the Sahara, not at the Riviera. They just wanted a pretty girl, just pretty girls to wander around.

After the second show, then, you would go back into the casino and were there time constraints on you?

Yes, how did that work? You had to stay until 2:00 [a.m.]. Then, I believe, you could go home, anybody that wanted to. I mean, they weren't watching the clock. If you didn't feel good or for some reason, you had a cold, you'd just say to the line captain that you wanted to go home, that you didn't feel good. So, all right, you know, no problem. As long as you didn't make a habit of it or abuse it.

Sure, and it was wonderful. Most of us were single. I wasn't. I was married, but girls that were single were all hoping to meet someone, perhaps, we were normal girls.

Were you married to someone in the business?



Publicity photograph of Betty Bunch at the Thunderbird Hotel, 1960

Yes, I was married to a piano player. I had met him in New Orleans and he was my accompanist. I eventually married him and then he came to Las Vegas with me. But he couldn't get a job right away, as a musician, because the musician's union requires a six-month waiting period.

Was that a strong union at the time?

Very, very. This was 1956, so he could not work until he had been a resident for six months. They wanted to discourage competition from coming in. So, he got a job as a busboy at the Silver Slipper. That's all he could get, fast, and worked at the Silver Slipper until he could get a job as a musician. I've forgotten where he went to work, but we were only here a year, then we went to Los Angeles.

How long were you married?

Just over five years. We divorced right before I went to Lake Tahoe with Louis Pritna. So, I was married the whole time I was at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood and doim{ those movies and for part of the time I was here.

He didn 't mind that you spent this time socializing in the hotels?

No, because it was totally innocent, you know, it was just part of the job.

Of course, by this time he was working as a musician and probably worked similar hours?

Yes, as I recall, he worked in a cocktail lounge somewhere playing piano. That is what he did. He didn't play in orchestras and whatever. He didn't read [music] well enough. He played in cocktail lounges.

They had a very strong union, the musicians, but the dancers had no union ?

Well, we did. There was AGVA, the American Guild of Variety Artists and I was a member.

Was that here in 1956?

Yes. I had joined in New Orleans, and yes, we were all members of AGVA. No problem, we just sent in our dues.

And what did they do for you?

Reallv, nothing.

They had no insurance plans through the union at that time?

No.

What was its purpose?

I always wondered. [Laughter] Later on, the rules were good. You had to be paid, for instance, for rehearsing and that was always an issue because at the Sahara, wait a minute, how did that work. I think, Joyce, that even though I was a union member, it was not a union town. Nobody ever came in and said anything and when I made a call and inquired, they said we can't do anything about that, right now.

They didn't have a stronghold in this town and no representatives here.

That's right. So, we had to just go ahead and rehearse. It's part of the job, and we rehearsed for free. There was no extra money to come in and rehearse and that's the way it was.

You were just glad to have the job and didn't want to make waves?

Sure, and as I told you, we were very generously paid. Ninety-five dollars a week was a ton of money at the time. It was a lot and we were well treated and it was a glamorous, elegant job — a culmination of a lifelong dream to come work with the major stars. What talented people and to be able to watch them hold an audience in the palm of their hands, just wonderful performers. I used to stand in the wings and watch them. Not everybody did that, but I always went downstairs between numbers or before I had to dress to go out front, before we took the bow or whatever it was, and watched them from the wings.

And the performers who wanted you to be there for the finale, that kept you there.

Yes, very often we did that finale number.

You said that the union eventually got some kind of a stronghold, if they were requiring dancers to be paid for rehearsal time.

Well, that wasn't until much later and all of that happened because of the Stardust *Lido* show. The *Lido* dancers, the English girls that were Madam Bluebell's refused to mix. They said they were insulted at the idea, one; and two, that they worked very hard and heaven only knows, they did. They worked the way I did at the Moulin Rouge, so I understand that. Like three huge numbers and maybe a fourth number interspersed with

variety acts and when you finish a show like that, you're exhausted. The very idea of getting dressed up to the teeth and going out front would be repugnant and, I mean, you're too tired, you're sweated out. This is a very athletic profession. And so, the *Lido* dancers simply said, "uh-uh. Who are you kidding?" So, the union could not get membership at the Stardust. And then, the same thing happened at the *Folies Bergere* and then, suddenly, everybody started just not sending in their dues and there was nothing to be done about it. Nobody came around, there was no representative and that was the end of that.

It just died out?

Yes, it died out in Las Vegas.

Lack of support? This has never been, traditionally, a union town. Madam Bluebell?

An English lady who hired girls, the Bluebell dancers. She was the choreographer, actually. She had lines all over, I think. England, and Donn Arden discovered that the English girls were marvelously trained dancers. They were very strong. He told me once that they were as strong as horses and he liked to hire them. So, they all went to Paris or they were hired through the *Lido* and everybody thought that they were French girls in the *Lido*, but they weren't. They were English girls. They were all Madam Bluebell's. By the way, that became a difficulty for those of us who were American dancers. I told you I always worked and I was never out of work. There was one summer when some show I was in closed and I was out of work for three months. I went to each one of those French shows, which is the way you get a job and went backstage, asked for the stage manager

and/or the line captain and in all three cases the English accent said, "Oh, I'm so sorry, my dear, we don't have any openings." And I would happen to have known that they did too, but they would not hire American girls. There was no special reason, it's just that that's human nature, I think, to hire your countrymen. So, there was a little hue and a cry there for a while, but I could not get a job and I was a marvelous dancer. It wasn't a talent thing, but they hired other English girls.

I wonder what arrangements they had with immigration?

Exactly. They had visas, I guess. It was kind of messy. I remember calling immigration, but the owners of the hotel, as you may know from having been here a long time, they pretty well do what they want to do.

Especially, then.

So, immigration really had nothing to say about it. Just, "sorry dear that you can't get a job."

The French shows were all part of what those hotels were pushing as the Las Vegas experience. As much as gambling, the showrooms were a huge part and you were the one part of it that involved headliners and the other, the flip side, was the productions. Would you agree that they were equally important?

Oh, sure, right. People loved the stars. It was two different modes -- the star show and then the reviews.

You spent so much time in the casinos, were you aware of the mob influence?

Yes. It was whispered around. People would say, you know, he's with the mafia or people would put their finger on noses [pushing her nose to the side] and say, "He's one of those," or "He's one of dem and dosers," was another way to put it.

It doesn't sound as if they were thought of in very high regard.

It was just kind of a fact of life. I mean, they were. I don't know. Nobody ever bothered us. We were privileged people as dancers and entertainers. We were very well treated.

You knew they were there and you knew they ran the casinos, but who cared?

Right, they were just part of the scene. I'm trying to think. I went to New York City with Tony Martin — I was a Tony Martin Bookend — right after the Moulin Rouge. When the Moulin Rouge closed, the very first job I got was as a Tony Martin Bookend and that was the prestige job to have at the time, to work with a major star, which Tony Martin was at the time, and talk about making big money. We made \$250 a week and so that was a huge amount of money at the time and, of course, he paid all of our travel expenses. It was a very, very generous salary and everybody would kill to get that job. I was lucky to get it. Two of us, only two girls did he carry with his show, and that again, was prestigious because you were not in a line. You were part of the act. And, backstage at the Copa were lots of mafia characters, people that you would just be gently told, "Oh, yes, he's connected to the mob." But, those men, the ones that were pointed out like that, would come in and take a table for twenty. You know, make reservations for a table for twenty and then twenty people would sit ringside and order everything on earth. I mean, huge bill, and they would pay in cash on the spot and tip enormously. Well now, is a

nightclub owner going to say, "I don't want your business?" Is an entertainer, who's looking to get held over, is he going to say, "I don't want to be friends with these people?" Heck, no. Those people would come back stage to get an autograph and to ask the , entertainers to go out to breakfast and you bet your boots, you'd go. Anyone would. I mean, they had limousines and tons of money spent. Nightclubs are in the business to make money. Are you going to say no to your best customer. But, they were sweet people. The ones I met were sweethearts. They treated us beautifully, generously.

/ can say the same thing for the ones that I met. However, at the time I didn 't know that that's what they were. They were very soft spoken, very generous, very nice people to be around.

Yes, beautiful suits, \$400 silk suits. You might notice that they were not well-educated, maybe they were not cultured, but they were sweethearts — kind.

/ guess you would have to say that they contributed significantly to building this town.

Oh, yes. I hear a lot of people say, and I guess I have to agree, that the town ran better under the mafia because nobody counted pennies. Everything was very open.

There were very few people counting.

Yes, nobody was counting.

/ wanted to talk to you, also, about integration. You were here before there was any integration at all and I think you were here during that process that took place during the 1960s.

Well, I wrote that paper at the University and have put some of that on record because I thought it was so interesting. The most interesting historical incident was at the Sahara when they brought the Treniers in and there had never been a black act. The Treniers are a group of brothers. There are five brothers, twins, and then three younger siblings that are fabulous entertainers. They're still around, now, and I worked with them on a couple of occasions — the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood — they were a wonderful act. But, what happened that is so fascinating to me, historically, is that we were sitting up in the dressing room one night when the line captain said "Girls, a strange thing has happened. One of the pit bosses has requested to come backstage and talk to you." This never happened. No boss would ever come backstage and certainly not to the dressing room. Never, ever. This was the one and only time I ever remember that happening. Well, this man came backstage and he said in no uncertain terms -- he was very boss like—he said, "Girls, we are going to bring in a black act, a troupe of five men called the Treniers and they have a reputation for being interested in white women. If any of you girls are seen even talking to one of those men, much less having a drink with them or going out with them, if you're even seen, you'll be fired on the spot. Now, do you have that really clear? You will be fired if you have anything to do with the Treniers." And we all just, "Yes, sir. Okay." He said, "Now they're not going to be dressing there in the lounge. We've ordered trailers to be put in the north parking lot." This is before the Sahara went all the way up to what was called San Francisco Street then. They did put trailers out there and the Treniers were ordered to enter by the north door, walk directly to the stage, do their show and exit. We were ordered not to talk to them. Now, later, I was there and

witnessed that and they were a big hit. They were wonderful entertainers. Later on, I got to know them a little bit at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood and they had us all out to their home for a big barbecue. We met their mother and father. Fabulous, big party that they gave for us one time after the show and they were nice men.

But you obeyed the rules at the Sahara.

Oh, sure, and they knew. The Treniers knew that if they went out of their way to try to be friends with any of us, that it would get us fired. They knew that. So, we just totally stayed away from them. Many years went by and I returned to UNLV to get a degree and got it in American Studies and decided to write this little mini-history. I decided I wanted to put that on record as part of the integration story. I did an oral history project with the Treniers and talked to them openly about this and they told me some stories that are on those oral history tapes that will knock your socks off and horrify you. Really, unbelievably cruel things that were done. After the Sahara, they were a big hit. They were booked into the Last Frontier and they knew that black people were not allowed in the lounge. But they had a friend of theirs, a girl who was a young singer who was very special to them. I mean, she was like a friend of the family and she wanted to be a singer and she came to town from out of state. She was half white, herself, and they decided to have her come and see the show. They took a little chance there, but she came to see the show. And while they were doing their opening number, one of the bosses or maitre d', came to her in the front row and said "you have to leave, you have to get out," and they escorted her out, on the spot. It broke their [The Treniers] heart. It was so embarrassing to have that happen, that they just kind of disintegrated on stage and a couple of them

walked. They just couldn't finish the show, is the real truth. I mean, this lovely, young girl was actually thrown out of the lounge show. So there was a big discussion about whether or not they were going to go on. I mean, they told the bosses that, "You know, we'll just leave quietly." But, of course, the bosses didn't want them to leave, so they negotiated and they talked back and forth and they said "We're terribly sorry it's happened." One particular boss, I wish we knew his name, a pit boss, came back stage and said "Please go on. You know, we love you guys. You're absolutely wonderful, you're so marvelous, we just love you, please forgive us for this and just go back on stage." It was time for them to go, so they went on stage and started doing the show and this pit boss came up on stage with them with a bottle of champagne and said "Here, let's have a drink. We want to make up with you guys," and poured champagne. And after that show, they got fired for drinking on stage. Do you believe this? That's what happened to the Treniers.¹

This is Joyce Marshall. Today is February 7, 1996. I am here with Betty Bunch in her home and we are beginning our second interview. It is 10:00 [a.m.] and the signed release form is still in effect.

Last time we were talking you mentioned Moro iMndis. Is that two people?

Yes. George Moro, spelled M-O-R-O and Ruth Landis. I never met Ruth. She evidently did not work with George past a certain point. I'm not sure if they were married. Gosh, somebody ought to know that. I do know that they owned a dance school in Sherman Oaks, California and it's still there, as a matter of fact. But George Moro was a precious

person and he is the one who had a line of dancers in the Sahara. But, he was the only one who came up and did the choreography. I don't think I ever met Ruth or heard of her. She was evidently retired, stayed at home or something.

He was just at the Sahara?

Yes. I believe that's all he was. He might have had — no, he had a line up in Reno.

That's right, he had a line in Reno. A lot of the girls went back and forth to Reno.

Another name you mentioned, Frank Sennes.

Frank Sennes owned the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood and his brother, Rocky, didn't work much at the Moulin Rouge, but Rocky joined. Then Frank Sennes moved over here and was the entertainment director at the Desert Inn.

Do you know how to spell Sennes?

S-E-N-N-E-S.

I spelled it right. I'm so impressed. I think I remember seeing the name.

I always called him boss because I was there so long. I was there five years. I even knew where the kitchen was and would go down to the kitchen. The other girls were all, you know, astonished that Betty had the run of the kitchen.

That's what I'd want the run of, the kitchen.

Indeed. But they moved up here and Frank Sennes actually was involved in a little bit of the scandal at the Desert Inn concerning Howard Hughes. Forgotten exactly what the

¹ End tape 1.

scandal was. I loved Frank Sennes. I wouldn't want to say anything bad about him. He was a sweetheart of a man. Short, little wonderful man that never made passes at anyone, you know. There was nothing embarrassing about him. He was kind of fatherly and marvelous but there was some talk that maybe a lot of steaks disappeared to go up to his restaurant. He then bought a restaurant on the top of Mt. Charleston. I guess he bought *the* restaurant on top of Mt. Charleston.

/ was going to say, I think there's only one.

And I will say that the time I drove up there with Joel to have dinner, I walked in and did a, "WHAT! This carpet is from the Desert Inn." It was. The whole carpet had been taken out of the casino at the Desert Inn. I'm sure that they put in new carpet and rolled it up and he bought it from housekeeping, you know. That doesn't make him a bad guy. A lot of people did that. Well, anyway.

How about some other names? Ginny Des Voix. I've spelled her De Voe is that right?

No I think it's D-E-S V-O-I-X, yes, and her other last name is Oakes, Ginny De Voix Oakes.

This is someone you danced with that is still here?

Yes. We played bridge together. There was a group of us that were college women and Ginny was Miss Tennessee of— I don't know what, 1963, 1962 or something. She was one of the girls that played bridge with me with Marilyn Resnick and several other girls. Dolores Engle comes to mind.

All still here?

Yes. I guess they are. I haven't seen them in years. Well, I see Ginny once in a while. Ginny got involved with Richard Bryan and she's a Junior Leaguer and **got** heavily involved in doing campaigns for Richard Bryan with Bonnie, which I'm also involved in. So, I'd run into to Ginny once in a while. She became Richard Bryan's southern Nevada assistant. She was the liaison down here. Ran the Governor's office here, smart woman.

You talked about getting a divorce right before you went to Lake Tahoe, when you went up to work and I was just wondering when you got remarried, how you met your husband?

I got divorced in 1960, or was it almost '61. Then, after Lake Tahoe I went back to Los Angeles and eventually got that little job. I told you about getting that job at the Dunes and then went back to Los Angeles.

To that wonderful show at the Dunes, [laugh]

Yes, and then, the same thing happened. I was really very lucky about getting hired. I came back over here again with girlfriends, just to visit. You know this used to be a wonderful vacation place. Went into the Riviera and was sitting in the coffee shop and in walked Dick Humphries, who had been the choreographer/line captain with the Louis Prima show on the road. And he said, "Betty, for heaven's sake, are you in. . . . , have you You've got to come to work. I need you to start next week." And I said, "Oh, Dick, I can't do that, you know, I've got things going on in L.A. and there's pictures coming up that I want to do." Well, he just begged me into it. He said, "Please, you know, personal favor, I need you." So, again I moved and stayed over here and was at

the Riviera for a full year. Then, I don't know, somewhere in there, five years or so later, I moved to the Play Pen Apartments, which was a famous apartment building over on Sierra Vista [Street].

Yes, I remember them.

Famous because they had a nude pool. It had two pools, one big public pool and then there was the little private nude pool. The reason I moved there is Theresa and Len. Len was a famous. Lenny Cohen was the disc jockey on everybody's favorite [radio station]. "The voice of Las Vegas," he was called for many years and I had been maid of honor at their wedding. Theresa and Lenny lived at the Play Pen Apartments. They said, "Come live over here." I said, "It's too racy for me. I can't." And they said, "Oh no, come on, Betty, it's nothing like that." But they did warn me about, "There's this bachelor that lives right over there and he's going to be knocking on your door first thing in the morning, the second morning you're here. Stay away from him. He's got a boat at the lake and he's got blah, blah, blah." To make a long story short, I lived there a full three years. I never saw the inside of the nude pool. Never. Never even got the courage to go over there and peek over the fence. Just being a redhead, I don't tan anyway and I was just terrified of the place. They also told me that there was a man that lived back at the back and his name was Jim and he was a famous local bachelor and they were pretty sure that he had a video camera. He had a video camera that was in a place that he could focus over the fence of the nude pool. Oh, I'm making this a long story. My next door neighbor was Joel [Rosenthal].

Was he the one they told you to stay away from?

No, no, no, he was a sweetheart. No, Joel was a dealer. He was a dealer then at the Desert Inn. He was my next-door neighbor and one day I was going to go to Los Angeles for the weekend. It was Valentine's Weekend, as a matter of fact, and I just ran into him on the sidewalk as I was loading up the car. And I said, ""Would you be so kind, neighbor, as to take in my newspaper every day so that no one needs to know that I'm out of town?" And he did and when I got back I gave him a Valentine card as a thank you. I mean, it was handy. So, I wrote thank you very much and put in his door. After that, I kept running in to him. Every time I turned around, there he was at the garbage can and there he was in the laundry room and there he was on the sidewalk. He told me years later that he used to keep a waste paper basket right by his front door so that when he **saw** me coming out of my apartment, he could grab that trash can and meet me or follow me.

Oh, that's cute.

Yeah, it was cute. I could literally knock on the wall between the two apartments. That's how I met Joel. He was my next door neighbor and I just thought he was this sweet little Jewish boy. He is younger than I am and has a baby face'. So, I thought he was harmless. Wrong again.

So, you ended up getting married and then did you quit dancing at that point?

No, no. Let's see, no, I continued in *Bottoms Up*. I was in *Bottoms Up* at the Thunderbird by that time and we had a rare day off. I've forgotten how we managed to get a day off. I think we worked seven days a week, but for some reason, I don't know, something, that maybe closed the showroom for a day to shampoo the carpets or something, I have no

idea. But, he and I drove up to Tonopah and got married and then very shortly, like three months later, I got pregnant. That's the reason I got married is that I had an attack of baby fever. Then, I stayed in *Bottoms Up*, pregnant, until I was six months along. I danced until I was six months along. Well, that was 1965 and the chemise was the heavy-duty fashion at the time, so, it hid nearly everything. I wore a leotard in the finale, but I had a prop that I could hold over my stomach, and besides, I was a dancer and in marvelous shape, you know, I just looked a little thick.

And you were tall.

Right, thick through the middle. But one day when I was six months pregnant, I walked in. Oh, I know, we had started getting a day off then because I'd been off a day and I came back in and sat down at the dressing table and looked in the mirror and suddenly it was showing for real. I burst into tears and dashed in to Breck Wall, and said, "Breck. look, I can't, I cannot possibly, you're going to have to work around me. I cannot do the show. Look at me!" And, Breck [said], "Oh, now calm down, it's not that bad." He had [humored] me along, you know, the whole time saying, "no, no, you don't show." Finally, even he had to admit, yes, indeed, you could see that I was pregnant. So he said, "Just give me two more days, just give me today and tomorrow and I will figure a way to get around you in the show and find a replacement." What he was really doing, I found out later, was that he wanted that long to plan the party.

They had a shower for you?

[At this point Betty breaks down and begins crying.]

I had forgotten how thrilled I was because I thought, you know, people leave the show and you just, "Bye, see you later," is the normal way. But Breck had done this huge party with champagne and cake.

Well, I think you were special to Breck.

Oh, absolutely. As a matter of fact, I went back into the show after that.

After the baby was born?

Yes, Ricky was born, what, three or four months later and Breck called and said, "Betty, we're going to the Bahamas and you've got to go." I said, "I can't possibly go." He said, "You just have to go." My whole career, you know, I don't even think about this until I'm telling you the stories. But I've been so fortunate with good friends, loyal friends and at the time, Joel had gotten tired of dealing and he wanted to do something serious and I had said, go to real estate school. He did. And so when this happened, Ricky was [about] six-months old or so and I said, "Joel quit your job there at the Desert Inn, dealing,. Take full time to study real estate to get prepared to take your broker's license, come with me to the Bahamas to baby-sit Ricky at night so that I can do the show. You need a vacation. You haven't been off in a long time. So, that's what we did. We went with *Bottoms Up*, taking Ricky with us. He was six months old in his little carriage and we worked and we came back. Another reason Breck talked me into it, he said, "When we get back from the Bahamas, I have a contract for one year at Caesars Palace." Well, I didn't want to miss that. That was the juice job of the world.² It was fabulous. We did six weeks in the

² The term "juice" refers to a connection which usually gets someone into a great job.

Bahamas, then six weeks in Lake Tahoe, which was also wonderful fun with the snow and baby all bundled up, then we got back and played one year at Caesars Palace. It was absolutely fabulous.

You talked about being lucky, but, isn't it just possible that this was an arena that forged those kinds of friendships?

Yes, oh, yes.

If someone knew that you were dependable and a good dancer then they would be seeking you out?

Well, actually, *Bottoms Up* was more special than that. We were truly family to each other. We spent Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day together by choice, exactly like a family would do, because we had been out on the road together. More even than that. Now this may be a little shocking, but this was back in the Sixties and Breck insisted that we all dress together. We never had separate dressing rooms. There was no boys' dressing room and girls' dressing rooms. We all dressed together. It was easy to work, there was nothing embarrassing about it. The girls always went into the actual cubicle of the john and took off our clothes and put on our hose or, in my case, I used to get there early enough that nobody was there yet. So, I could just skin into my show hose and in the show we wore like a trunk bottom and a nude show bra. It was a heavy-duty bra, you know, so it was as if I were sitting there in a bikini today, a swimming suit or something. We used, that as a base, so, we all just sat there. But, the reason we did that is so that we could get the news of the day from each other. Discuss what we had heard on the news,

discuss what was in the newspaper and possibly use it in the show. And we did. We were not as totally topical as say, Mort Saul or something, but we threw in **little** things. That's why the show was so popular. We were very, very contemporary and very witty and we did change things.

I'm trying to remember where it was when I saw it. I saw it a couple of times. It was a great show. My husband loved it.

It was a charming show. I was very proud to be in it. We played to standing room only for that entire year at the Thunderbird and the entire year at Caesars Palace. So, that was a wonderful job for me. I made wonderful money and just worked afternoons. I would put Ricky down for his nap and his baby sitter would arrive at the same time. And I left for work and he would sleep two hours and the babysitter was there for him to wake up. One hour later, his mother would walk in the door. So, he was with a baby sitter for one hour a day and in return for that I got top dollar. We were able to save money and buy our first little house because of my working like that.

Now, at some point you have another child.

Yes, let's see, *Bottoms Up*, there we were at Caesars Palace and I forgot. Oh, we were going to close and Breck booked a tour to Australia and he said, "Of course, you're going Beulah." My name was Beulah in the company. We all had our affectionate, little backstage, company names and mine was always Beulah. I said, "Breck, you know I cannot possibly go. Joel is now established in a real estate. You know he's working as a real estate broker. He's not about to go. I can't possible go without him with a year-old

child. I couldn't handle that." And it made Breck furious at me and he put me on what everybody that's ever worked in *Bottoms Up* knows what I mean when I say the "shit list." The "shit list" doesn't get spoken to. Breck's a very dynamic, unusual person and he was very angry that I wouldn't go. I mean, he's an unreasonable man in many ways. That's why he is partly a genius — he's unreasonable. It made me angry that after all our years of friendship that he would be angry at me like that. And so I read in the paper that there was going to be an audition for a big equity show, huge show, *Once Upon a Mattress* and I went down there and auditioned and got the job. Just like that, got the Queen, major role and, you know, I gave the proper notice. I didn't hurt the company or anything, but I gave my notice and left two weeks later, which was only about three weeks before they were due to leave anyway and to go Australia. By the way, I'm very proud of this, so I'm going to brag to you now. He had to hire somebody to replace me. He had to hire three women to replace me. He really did. He had to hire a comedian that could handle sketches, but the girl he found could not dance. So he had to hire a dancer and the dancer he liked and found could not sing. So he had to hire a singer. I was very thrilled over that. Well, that's a whole other story because I ended up teaching the replacements my part which is unheard of. You know once you give your notice, you're out. But, even though I was on the "shit list" I loved those people and I wouldn't see them hurt or to hurt the show in any way. And so I taught all my replacements how to do my numbers and where they were in the show and all that stuff. But, I went to the Desert Inn and worked a serious job and it was while we were doing the job at the Desert Inn, or while I was doing the Queen, that I discovered I was pregnant with Danny, my second baby. So, at the end

of that show, when the show closed, I was about three months pregnant, maybe four. And I knew that that would have to be it, that would be the last show because I needed then to stay home and Joel was doing very well. By that time we had bought our first little house, so I stayed home and became a full-time mom.

How was that for you mentally, that transition?

Oh, dear, it will make me cry again. I'm sorry, I'm so emotional. Actually, the reason it makes me cry is because that's what I did then was cry.

Everybody cries when they talk about the day they had to walk offstage and not dance anymore.

I had a kitchen clock. I think I eventually took it down, but, you know, it was a big kitchen clock and every night at 8:00 [p.m.], I'd sit and cry. [Betty is crying while telling this story]. Isn't that weird? The reason the musical, *A Chorus Line*, was so popular and dancers supported it so thoroughly is because it really tells the truth about a dancer's life. It's a cliché across the board that most dancers I know, if you question them closely, I think I told you that my father was an invalid, so, I didn't really have a strong masculine presence in my life as a little girl, which translated means, I didn't have a daddy saying no daughter of mine is going to be a dancer. That's a tough life and many, many, many dancers are that way. Or, we had divorced parents, I don't know, there were problems. The business attracts innocent little girls with problems that need the applause. That's why we do it. We need the applause and the spotlight to be assured that we're okay.



BETTY BUNCH
SAG/ AFTRA/AEA

Current publicity photograph of Betty Bunch

That's why we love it because it's the place where we're okay. We're admired and we're applauded and, you know, when you give that up, that's kind of tough.

So you knew you had made this decision consciously when you had Danny, that you were going to be a mom.

Right, right. I didn't like it but I felt that it was the smart thing to do. I already knew that you can't dance forever. I mean, it's just too hard and, you see, dancing in *Bottoms Up* was very easy. It wasn't the tough, tough, huge dance shows that I did before I got into *Bottoms Up*. *Bottoms Up* was more of a -- I was more of a comedian than I was a [dancer]. I worked in the dance numbers because I enjoyed it, but these were not can-can numbers with jump splits and etc., that I had done for years in other shows. I knew that I couldn't go back to that, not at 33.

That brings me to another point. I know you talked about working as a showgirl as opposed to a dancer. In one of the numbers you were in, they needed a showgirl. Did that make any difference to you? Was there a conscious desire to be a dancer and not a showgirl or vice-versa. Did it matter as long as you were on stage?

Oh, no, no. Dancers are terrible snobs. Those showgirls are not trained at all. They have no talent. They are just pretty, that's all, and tall. Very, very tall and pretty and they are nowhere near the trained performers that dancers are. No, it was a dancer would be insulted to be called a showgirl. I mean, you would immediately correct someone. "No, no, no, I'm not a showgirl, I am a dancer." This is weird, there's always conflict, isn't there, when you're talking emotions like this. On the other hand, if you were in a show as

a dancer and they needed a showgirl in a particular number, for a particular reason, then, you would be very flattered that they picked you out of the dance line because it would indicate that they thought you were pretty, you see? It was kind of a little competitive thing.

As long as you knew that you had been hired as a dancer, you could make that transition, but you would never go out and be hired as a showgirl?

That's right. Actually, I worked twice as a showgirl and the first time it was, indeed, because they needed a showgirl to go out and do a little sketch with Dennis Day for George Moro at the Sahara. So, they took two of us out to be showgirls and go out and do these little sketches with Dennis Day. Then the other one was the story I already told you about sitting in the Dunes Coffee Shop and the man hiring me on the spot and what they needed was a showgirl. So, that was fine. It was only, as I told you, the worst show that ever played the strip.

And only lasted six weeks, so there you have it.

Right.

I wanted to go back a little bit. You told me a story the last time I was here. We were in your bathroom, I think, because you have the picture of you and Jimmy Durante and he's hugging you. We were talking about sexual innuendo, did you ever feel as though you were harassed in any way and you told me "no. " Then you followed it with the story about how —

Jimmy grabs?



Betty Bunch with Jimmy Durante at the Hollywood Moulin Rouge

Yes.

Well, yeah, but Jimmy was so obviously not serious about it. He was so impish. All you had to do was slap his hands and step back and say, "Jimmy, now you stop that" and he would giggle and stop. He didn't mean any harm, you know.

Today, that would not be tolerated.

No.

Was it that you didn't have the awareness? Would it bother you today? Today, if you were on stage dancing and Jimmy Durante or another star did that to you [put his hand on your breast] —

I don't think we can answer that question with any sense because the reason Jimmy Durante is a star is that he is totally unique. He is like no other human being on earth and it showed on stage and it showed off stage. So, a nun would have giggled and slapped his hand and said, "now, Jimmy, you stop that" because he was that precious. He was just so darling and well-meaning. At least that's the way he struck me. I mean, it was almost like your brother or something. He didn't mean it. I guess I'm babbling.

No, it makes sense. You 're saying that it was just who he was that made you accept what he did.

Yeah, and the expression on his face was just so hilarious that he would do a leering, it was almost like a Marx Brothers comedy. He was hilarious.

You knew he had no serious designs on you.

Right, and he immediately stopped the minute you indicated. I think what's dangerous is when they don't stop, you see.

You never had those kinds of situations?

I can't think of any. I just think that can't be true. I must have had them, but I'm just not remembering.

We talked a little bit last time and I don't even know if this was on the tape, but we talked about cosmetic surgery. How much pressure was put on the girls at that time to enlarge their breasts?

Totally, if you wanted to work. Let's see, how can I put that? It's not that anybody said, "Betty, you've got to go get-," it's just that if you wanted a job.

And you could look around and see the people around you and what they looked like?

That's right and suddenly — let's see, what year was that? Nudity was the big in-thing. It was like learning the twist. If you wanted to keep up in the dance world, you had to go learn the new dances and what was going on and in the early Sixties it was. everybody was getting silicone shots. If you wanted to compete, that's what you better go do. You know, otherwise you're not going to be working. And you could see that, it was quite obvious. Same thing happened with cocktail waitresses, or the one or two that I knew. I think I overheard a conversation one time with a cocktail waitress telling another cocktail waitress, "he says he's going to fire me if I don't do something about my boobs." You know, it was just kind of prevalent then. Of course, George Kliefkin was everybody's doctor. He was doing the silicone shots.

Oh he was?

Oh, yes.

/ knew he did abortions. So, he was like an everyone doctor? I didn 't know he could do that also.

Joyce, I thought he was a very nice man, but George was probably totally unethical, totally. For one thing, we all called him George. I can clearly remember. I know I went to see him and I remember after the little exam, whatever it was, standing at his desk and he said, "Okay, what prescriptions do you want?" I said, "Well, I want to try that diet pill that you gave Teresa because it's working good for her. It's a time release capsule.

"Okay," and now he's writing. And, while he's writing that one, I said, "But I do want you to renew my other diet pill in case that one doesn't work for me." He said, "Okay, second diet pill." Now, of course, this is speed. You know, we're talking about speed. So, he wrote me the second prescription for the different kind and then I said, "Oh, that thyroid pill that you're giving June because I think I'm a little tired." He said, "Okay, thyroid pill. What else?" You know, you just mention it and George would write the prescription right there on the spot and hand it to you, no problem. And then, he'd say, "When you going to come in and get those silicone shots? You're flat chested. You're going to be out of work soon? When you coming in?"

It turned out to be kind of dangerous thing.

Well, yes it did, because we're talking about direct injections. This was not implants, this was direct injections. I don't know but I'm sure that half the plastic surgeons in town have removed god-knows-what for half the girls in town.

Now also during this time, abortion was illegal in the State of Nevada, but I think it was pretty well known that he was the abortion doctor.

I have a girlfriend who went to him for nine abortions. Nine.

Did she ever see him? Do you know? Yes, they were good friends. *So, he would just do it for her.*

Yes, he came to her house and she already had three children and her husband was a respected hotel executive and so they were like friends. In fact, I'm not sure but maybe they were actually social friends. It's possible. Maybe that's why he was not so secretive with her. But, yes, he came to the house.

Pregnancy for dancers and for people who had the money to get abortions, it was not a problem even though it was illegal?

Right. I drove a girlfriend down to Mexico. That was the other thing we did then. I drove her down to Juarez. I've forgotten how we found the doctor, I guess she knew the address. Someone had given her an address and I took her to that address and waited. I remember it being a little scary.

It was cheaper but I would imagine pretty unsanitary.

Yes, in some cases. I mean, how do you know. Then we spent the night in a motel in San Diego. I guess, you know it's funny, I haven't thought about this in a while.

Well, that would be Tijuana.

Oh, all right. O.K., right. It wasn't Juarez, it was Tiajuana. Juarez was on the other side of El Paso, I forget. That's where my sister lived and we used to — well, anyway. Then I drove her back the next day and she was perfectly fine. Actually, I drove another girlfriend to an abortionist in Los Angeles. He was in an office building. It was his regular office but you went after hours. You went after dark, like I think the appointment was for nine at night or something and he let me wait in the waiting room and when she came out she was very groggy. I had to help her to the car. So, yes, that happened, very sad. That's one of the reasons that I am much in favor of sex education.

One of the women that I interviewed said that if you got pregnant, you just had to deal with it because during those times, you went out and had a good time and if you made a mistake, it was your problem. You had to take care of it.

I know one of the things I'm shocked to read and hear in the newspapers today is that counselors talk about the father's responsibility and the young boy and how they're going to have to track him down and make him face up to it. That always gives me a laugh. I think that's ridiculous because the boys don't get pregnant. In my day, what mother emphasized to me was, look, it's your problem. You're the one who gets pregnant. So, you're the one who has to take care of it and I did. I was always, you know, a responsible.

But, yes, you were on your own if anything happened like that. There was no help.

There was no recourse.

You couldn't even go to court?

No, no, no.

One other thing I wanted to ask you to kind of switch gears. You talked about line captains. I'm not sure what the difference is and what does a line captain do?

A line captain is responsible for cleaning up the show. She's responsible for details because a show gets less than fresh as you keep working and little habits will creep in. Like maybe in rehearsal an arm was set at a certain angle and as you keep performing it, suddenly your individual style will take over and you'll start putting that arm in the wrong place. Well, its the line captain's job to have eyes in the back of her head and to see that. When you come off stage you have to say, and I was a line captain several different times, you just have to say, "Marilyn, on the five count of that leap you're putting your arm in the wrong place." You know, clean it up. So, the next night you watch her and if she has not cleaned it up then you have to say, "Marilyn, I need to see you between shows." Then you make her. She has to be rehearsed and fixed. If it's not fixed then, you have to call a rehearsal of the company and everybody dreads that because, but then you get all that. Actually, they used to call them clean-up rehearsals. The line captain would call a clean-up rehearsal maybe once a month because little things creep in there. They just do. So, you'd get them all cleaned up at one time, for instance, "Let me remind you ladies that the one count is to the side, not to the front."

Did that ever cause any animosity among the girls, between the other dancers and the line captain ?

Sure. Yeah, the line captain had to have a tactful personality and be very strong.

// separated you, in a way, from the other girls. You were, in effect, their boss.

Yes, it did.

It paid more money?

Gosh, I can't remember. I'm not sure, maybe, not much.

Wouldn't have paid much.

It was more of a prestige position than actually getting money for it?

Right. They might have gotten \$25 a week more, or something. I'm trying to think when was I a line captain. I was a line captain for that Louis Prima Show for Dick Humphries at the Desert Inn and there were only six dancers in that show so it wasn't a huge thing.

They were already close friends of mine so they didn't seem to resent it. But, I remember a girl named Carol had messy hair. She had naturally curly hair, very wiry, and we were supposed to have it sleek and as the job continued, she would get sloppier and sloppier about pulling her hair back and spraying it. She didn't want to do that, you know, and it was my job to get on her because Dick would come to me. I know this is astonishing, but we had bosses that would actually come to the choreographer and say, "That girl looks messy on stage. I want you to do something about it." They really did. I think they did it out of ego, you know. What do they know about entertainment. But they did get



Double exposure of Betty Bunch superimposed over Fremont Street casinos

involved. Then, eventually, I remember Dick came to me and said, "Betty, you have to do something about Carol's hair. They're getting on me from out front." So, I told her she had to do something and she was highly resentful. But she did start slicking it back more. If you don't do that, a show really can get out of line. It can get sloppy and lose its crisp sparkle.

/ imagine that's a difficult thing to do anyway because you do the same thing day in, day out, to keep it fresh.

That's the ongoing problem with all performers. As an actress, the phrase is the illusion of the first time. I mean, in training at the University of Texas we talked about that a lot. That's a major part of your job. You must maintain the illusion of the first time. It's hard.

When we ended last time, we were talking about the integration of the strip and we talked about the Treniers. You mentioned that when you passed them, they wouldn't talk to you because they didn't want to get you fired because that was a real possibility. But, as time went on, those rules became lax, especially in the 1960s. I think that you told me that you didn't remember working with any black dancers. There was one at the Aladdin, Lilly, but you never opened and you didn't know what happened to her. So you remember any others?

No.

Do you ever remember socializing with any blacks.

Not really. They just weren't around. They weren't allowed in the hotels or in the showrooms and they weren't back stage and they just, I don't know.

How about black entertainers.

Well, like I told you, the Treniers, but that was after the Sahara, you see.

Yes, later, in the 1960s.

Later, yes later. They invited the entire cast. It wasn't me, it was the entire cast that went to their home, their parents' home, for a huge barbecue. That's why I remembered that their parents were very polite, lovely people. No, there just was not. There was no socializing. That's how I got interested in this entire subject in the first place. When I went back to school to get my degree in 1974, I took two classes a semester, just piddling around, and it took me until four years to finish the degree that I had started at the University of Texas. And there were black people in my classes, you know. I was an American Studies major and there were only four of us and one of them was a black girl. She and I discussed it once. The other black kids, they were kind of normal people, you know what I mean? They didn't know what had taken place just twenty years earlier. They had no sort of awareness and I don't know how we knew that. That's a strange thing, isn't it? When I say, how did we know they weren't aware or that they didn't appreciate, but I think that they did not. In discussions, they never acknowledged the historical facts connected to it. Nobody ever said, "Well, that was in the time when we weren't allowed in restaurants," or whatever. It was never referred to since they didn't know that had existed. That's why I got so interested in thinking this has got to be preserved as a factual account of the way it was here.

Your tapes are wonderful. They really are. The stories that the Treniers tell would be lost forever if not for your tapes. So, I for one am thrilled that you did those. Another thing, in your interview with Fluff Le Coque, you and Fluff are talking about why there were no black dancers, even in the 1960s when they were allowed to walk into hotels, they were allowed in restaurants and they could be interviewed for these shows. There were still very few of them. The reason that Fluff gave during that interview was that it threw things off balance, that it was a visual concept on the stage and that everybody had to be the basic height and the same basic color. When they put blacks on stage, that altered it. Do you still agree with that today? Was that, in fact, why they were not hired?

Well, yes, sort of. I think it's what our perceptions are. It's a matter of consciousness. We have now all become conscious of what we did to people of color for so many years. So now when I go to see *Jubilee*, Fluff is still the captain. She's still running that show and, bless her heart, she lets me sit up in the light booth. You know, it makes me feel special that I get to go up there and watch. There are a couple of black dancers in the chorus. I remember specifically a male, black dancer and your eyes see that just as you see, oh, that one's blonde and that one, you know, has a big nose, or whatever it is. But, we don't register a double take like we would have back in the early 1960s and the 1950s. At that time, the consciousness would have been, "Good lord, look at that. There's a black person dancing right there with those white girls! Are they going to let him partner them?" You know, that would have been the perception back then. Now, that's over.

It took another generation.

Right. So, now you just kind of let it go when you see that. Your eye does not get jarred.

It's a subliminal reaction, not a conscious reaction.

That's interesting. Just one last thing. I wonder as you look back over your dancing career and you've done some wonderful things, if there is anything you would change. If you could go back and say, "Okay, I'm going to do these years over." Is there something you would do different.

Yes. Three different times I said, "no." I believe when somebody comes to you and says, "hey, why don't you do this?" that it may be a door that's opening for you and you should pay attention and probably do it. One, I was way too modest as a little girl. I was very talented and very pretty and did not know it. Did not know either one of those things.

When I worked at the Copacabana] in New York, I was a bookend for Tony Martin. I wasn't in the regular line at the Copa and I met the choreographer, Doug Coutry, and said to him, "Oh, I always wanted to be a Copa girl, you know, they're so famous." And he said, "Well, you're hired." I said, "WHAT?" He said, "Oh sure Betty, I'd love to have you. The minute the show closes, anytime, you've got the job anytime." In fact he said, "Do you sing?" I said, "Well, yes, a little." And he said, "Good, I'll front you. I'll build a number around you. We'll do a Texas number. That's what we'll do." And I didn't follow through on that. It scared me. It was like, "who me'?" I can't believe, now. that I turned that down or didn't follow up on it. It was up to me when the show closed, you know. I stopped in Texas to see Mother and then went back to California. All I had to do was call him. He gave me his phone number at his home. He said, "Just call me. You're hired anytime." I never called him, never followed it up. Another time is when I said no.

I went with a Barry Ashton show to Japan and they had a huge ice show that came into town, the *Ice Follies*. On our day off we went to see the American ice show and went backstage, as Americans or entertainers want to do, and met the stage manager and just sat around and chatted with them. The stage manager said, "When do you close with the Barry Ashton show? Why don't you come join our tour? I'm short of dancers" I said, "'I don't skate." "Are you kidding?" He said, "I'll teach you. Ice-skating is nothing. I'll teach you to ice skate. It's the dancing part that is hard to find." I said, "No, not me, I'm scared. Well, I could kill myself now." That was stupid. I mean, I could have gone on a world tour. They went on from Japan. I don't even know where all they went, some wonderful, wonderful places. And, my third saying no was when I was in Japan with this same thing. I was still in Japan with Barn' Ashton. Shirley MacLaine's husband, Steve Parker, had been the producer and we knew him from here. I'd worked for him at the Aladdin. So, he came to the nightclub and asked those of us who had been in his show, there were about five or six of us, to join him and he took us out to dinner and to have drinks. I sat next to Steve and just chatted with him and said, "We're going home soon and I don't want to go. I love it over here. It's wonderful fun." And he said, "Fine, why don't you let me send you to Saigon," where he owned a nightclub, "and you'll be an act, you know. You don't have to really be a stripper, you can just dance in scanty outfits." I said, "Who me? Not me, no thanks." and didn't go. Now, I wish I had. For one thing, he wanted to pay me \$1,000 a week.

That was a lot of money.

1964, that was a lot of money. I should have taken that. I would have come home, you know, with a nest-egg. On the other hand, I might have gotten killed in Saigon.

It was pretty risky at that time.

Yes, yes. It was being bombed. That was serious stuff, but I'm not adventurous and now. I don't have the chance. I think, I wish I had. I wish I'd gone. So, there's the three. I said no three times.

All in all, though, you still had a wonderful career and met some incredible people and you have Rick and Danny.

I ended up having it all and I loved it.

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