

Interviewee: Look, Carole

Interview Date: January 12, 2012

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Carole Look
Wife of Restaurateur Sonny Look

Interviewed by: Debbie Harwell
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Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location:

DH: I'm Debbie Harwell I'm here with Carol Look wife of restaurateur Sonny Look.

It's January 12, 2012 and we are here to talk about Sonny's life and career for an article for Houston History Magazine. First, Carole if you could please tell me your full name?

CL: Carole Peterson Look.

DH: And tell me a little about your early life and how you came to meet Sonny?

CL: Well I was born in 1941. I grew up in Columbus, Georgia (though I was born in New London, Connecticut but we only lived there 6 weeks so I'm not a Yankee. My four high school years were spent in Winter Park, Florida. So I graduated from Winter Park High School and since I was a Floridian at that point I went to Florida State University one year but my parents that year moved to Tennessee and I went there to go to summer school while they were there and I loved the University of Tennessee in Knoxville so much that I just stayed. So I graduated from the University of Tennessee. Then after graduation I moved to Atlanta in with three great room mates. From my first job I worked for Crab Foods in their testing lab. We tested all the products. But that got very boring for me. So I ended up going to work for a private chemist downtown in Atlanta. We did analytical work of all kinds. I mean from dog food to blood stains. I mean it was just, it was very interesting. But my three roommates were school teachers and they had

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off all summer, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, teacher work days and there I was going to work every day. So I ended up going back to school, went to Georgia State and got certified to teach and I taught school, elementary school for two years and then those three roommates all married the same year, left me high and dry! So I decided that I would do something really fun and I became a Delta Airlines stewardess and that's how I got to Houston. I never planned to stay here. I just moved here because it was an opportunity to move here free and I couldn't hold a line of time in Atlanta because that's such a busy base. But here you didn't have to live by the airport and be on call for so long. So I moved to Houston with another girl in my training class and I worked for Delta for 2 years. During that time my mother and my sister (and my father too but for some reason they all came separate), mom and my much (14 years younger sister) came to visit and it was a Saturday night. It was the day after my mother's birthday. So I remember exactly what day it was. It was March 31st (a Saturday night) we wanted to go out and eat and every restaurant in town had a waiting line back in those days. That was 1967 and one of my roommates boyfriend's from Houston was at the apartment and he said, "Well why don't you all just go down to Looks? It's right down the street." We said, "Well okay" we didn't even bother to call we just went down there and waited. So in the mean... after we got a table the waitress who came around started talking with us and lo and behold she was from Atlanta. So you know there was a good rapport going right there and she gave my sister who was 11 an 8 by 10 glossy picture of Sonny standing out in front of the restaurant by the horse, way up on the stature of the horse and said, "When Mr. Look comes around why don't you have him autograph this?" We said, "Well how will we know who Mr. Look is?" and she said, "Oh you'll know!" And so

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when he came in the door like he always did, greeting, going from table to table, greeting all the customers and mama was facing that direction and she said, "Oh look there's an entertainer!" And Jan and I turned around and, "Oh wow there's this jolly man in this fancy, fancy coat and he didn't look like anybody we know, entertainer wise. So we said, "He must be Mr. Look" and lo and behold it was. And when he came by our table Jan asked him to autograph the picture (which he did) and he invited... we got to talking and he realized that they weren't from Houston and I was a new Houstonian and he invited us on the club side where you could have a drink since this was in the days before liquor by the drink. He invited us on the club side to have an after dinner drink on him. Well we weren't going to turn down anything free so we said, "Well sure!" and he said to me, "Don't pay the bill we will just give your name and address and we will send you a bill." Well I had never heard of that. I didn't think you could charge a dinner in a restaurant. So I said, "Okay" and mom and I of course later thought, he's going to pay for our dinner, not letting me pay for it. Well sure enough 3 weeks later I got a bill so he did charge me for dinner but we had free after dinner drinks and he sat down with us in the club and had coffee because he never sat down and drank with customers. He had coffee and we had an after dinner drink. Jan had a Shirley Temple. I don't know what mom and I had. That's how we met and he started talking with all of us and he asked me what I was doing since I moved to Houston and one thing I was going out Westheimer to a stable out there and paying my good hard earned money to ride a horse on the days off. Because I was a new Texan and I felt like one. My first purchase was a pair of cowboy boots. He said he had horses and he'd like to take me riding sometime. Well I thought, "Oh great, good horses and a free ride!" So he let mama know that he was a single man

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and you know his intentions were honorable and so that's how it all come about that I met him and he did indeed call me twice, before I accepted the third time he called.

Because he worked late and the two times he called that I said, "No" it was late because he worked late and he just wanted to go out and have a drink after he got out of or through work. Well I didn't want to go out then. I really wasn't interested in him anyway. So I said, "No." The third time he called me it was to go to the Court Club and I had heard about the court club and I wanted to go there. It was a private club. I couldn't go unless I went with him so I said, "Yes, I'll go." So that was our first date and that was in June after I had met him on March 31st. And the funny thing is that coming in on my flight late that afternoon was this man that said to me after passing him up and down the aisle several times, he stopped me and said, "I've got somebody I want you to meet." I said, "Whose that?" He said, "Sonny Look." I mean I couldn't believe it. I said, "I've already met him!" Isn't that funny?

DH: It's a small world.

CL: Small world well Frank traveled around selling suits, fitting his customers with suits and entertainers all over, Blanche his wife usually went with him but she was not with him on this trip for some reason. He was from Galveston but he always stayed here at the Tideland Hotel he had his own room there that he always had, it was his room and it was lined with suits and fabrics and materials for his customers to come pick out. So anyway when Sonny picked me up that night for the Court Club Frank was with him. So my first date with Sunny was also with Frank! So it was really fun. I don't know who the entertainer was at the Court Club. It was not at the Shamrock anymore the Court Club used to be in the Shamrock. It was already on the top floor of a high rise building

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downtown and that night I met Glen McCarthy who owned the Court Club. He just happened to be there and I was introduced to him. I mean that's all but I didn't realize what an important night that was for me that, that's how it started that's how I met him and was my first date. Second date was actually to go out to his country house out at Valley Lodge and ride horses on a Wednesday morning. There was a group of ladies out there who rode together every Wednesday morning (Sonny knew they did) he had a house out there and I wasn't flying I had days off during the week so Sunny and I went and rode horses with the group of ladies. So that was our second date and we rode quite a bit after that at various times. That was the beginning. I dated him for a year before we married June 29, 1968. So...

DH: A great day!

CL: I know it was a great day!

DH: So how long before you knew you wanted to marry him?

CL: You know I really wasn't too interested in the beginning. I mean he was so nice and I enjoyed being with him I really did but it wasn't love at first sight exactly. But as the year went on (and I saw a lot of him) we went out a lot. I don't know one day I woke up and I just realize I was in love with this man. What's not to love about Sonny and I fell during the year it was just a gradual thing. I guess we were friends first and that's the best way.

DH: I agree with that. Tell me about Sonny's early life growing up and serving in the Navy and...

CL: Well he was born...

DH: His life before Carole.

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CL: Okay he was born in Caldwell, Texas and at some point he and his parents and siblings moved to Brenham. I know that he was in Brenham when he was 6 because he went to 1st grade right near Brenham if not in Brenham. Then they moved right in to Brenham. He was the oldest of four children there were two boys and two girls. He went to Brenham High School and at age 14 he, well even before 14 he threw newspapers, he delivered milk, he worked in a little hotel that was there in town because their family was not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination and he really needed to work I think and in high school at age 14 he went to work for the New York Café in Brenham right off of the square downtown. He started out as a dishwasher and he just kept stepping up to more and more important jobs. He became a busboy, dishwasher, busboy, night manager, then day manager and then I don't know how long he worked there but he ended up buying it and dating I guess this girl named Mary Reynolds who went to Blinn in Brenham and they married (I guess after he bought the restaurant I don't know the timing on that). Then World War II came along or was in progress already. He joined the Navy and he had a handshake deal with the man that he bought the restaurant from. That man said, "I'll buy it back from you and you can buy it back from me again when you get back out of the Navy." Well that man reneged on his promise and did not, would not sell Sonny the restaurant back which was the best thing that ever happened because it forced Sonny to move to Houston. There weren't any opportunities in a little bitty Brenham back in the mid 40's so Sonny came to Brenham, I mean to Houston. So that's how he got started here. He spent 3 ½ years in the Navy. I have a shadow box on my wall in the hall with all his medals that you can see. What else do you want me to tell you about that?

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DH: Well something you said brought to mind something. You mentioned about the handshake deal. Recently when I was at the Convention and Visitors Bureau one of the gentleman there mentioned that Sonny did all of his business with handshake deals.

CL: Sonny was such an honest man. He believed everybody else was too. You know back in those days and way before all the history of Texas, probably the whole United States or the South that's what you did. You just had a handshake agreement. You didn't need attorneys and legal papers drawn up being signed. You just made a verbal agreement and you stuck with it. Sonny would never say anything to anybody including our daughter. If he said something to her he followed through. He never reneged on a promise something he said he would do ever that I can know of ever!

DH: It doesn't happen that way anymore does it?

CL: Not at all.

DH: Okay let's talk about the restaurants. Tell me where was his first restaurant here, we know about... we talked about the New York Café in Brenham what was his first restaurant in Houston and when did it open?

CL: Well since I wasn't around back in those days I don't know a lot about his progression of restaurants and I do know that he went to work in a tavern or a bar on Reasons Street where the police station is now that the street is gone. Probably Memorial Drive goes over it or it's in that area and he made the sandwiches and the soup and the stuff like that to go with the beer that the owner sold and the owner finally said, "You're too good for this place." What a nice guy that was to move Sonny on so that was the first place that he had. Let's see I've forgotten a lot of this I'm reading. Then he had the Quitman Coffee Shop at 604 Quitman. He moved into an existing building which he

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leased for a couple of years. It had 25 seats plus a counter. Then down the street he opened Sonny Looks at 715 Quitman. After about a year at the Quitman Coffee shop he leased the building two blocks away in which operated the Look restaurant and he changed the name to Sonny Looks. That was at the northwest corner of Quitman and Everett. It had 46 seats plus a counter in the beginning and grew to 229 seats.

DH: Wow!

CL: And he had that from 1947 to '59. That was the one that so many people these days can remember but it was before my time. He was also doing catering out of Sonny Looks and needed more space so he built a temporary building across the street at Quitman and Everett on the northeast corner in 1950. That served as headquarters for catering and also barbecue as he built a larger pit then he had a Looks. Then there was the Oaks purchased in 1952 on North Shepherd where the 610 Loop is now. He bought an existing restaurant which he operated until 1953 when the right of way came through to build 610 and Looks Sir Loin House was built at 6112 Westheimer and opened in June of 1959. It was in the new (at that time) Briargrove Shopping Center which was on the outskirts of town and had a seating capacity of 472. He opened it in June of 1959 and closed it in June of 1977. I was thinking it was June of 1976 when he closed it so I'm confused about that. But anyway the reason he moved out of that location is because the owner of the shopping center was going to give it a so called "face lift" when what it really needed was new air conditioning and new innards to say to speak and so Sonny already had another restaurant the one on South Main so he just moved out when the lease was up. Maybe the lease wasn't up until '77. He just closed it which was a big mistake really because this side of town really continued to grow and that's where the

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Palm Restaurant is now. That's the only other restaurant that's been in that location because he opened his up brand new. Then Looks Sir Loin Inn at 9810 South Main opened in April of 1967 covering 37,000 square feet on one floor, had 1,400 seats. It was the largest free standing restaurant in Texas and the third largest in the nation. Tony Athanas' was Pier One...

DH: Twenty one isn't it?

CL: No Twenty One was another restaurant here in town. Pier three? Pier Four, it was Pier 4 in Boston I must have gotten the name of the Pier from whatever he was... Pier Four. I think that's right. Anyway that was the largest one. And he also had The Depot at 212 Milam down at Market Square, opened in 1971, closed in '78, end of '78. 325 seats on 3 floors. Were you ever there?

DH: One time.

CL: It was the neatest restaurant with the restaurant theme and all kinds of railroad people came out of the woodwork and donated stuff to him, a lot of it being just a temporary loans. But he had trains running around on tracks up on the walls around rooms and then in 1972 in July actually it was July 16, 1972 (my birthday) he put in a railroad car, it was a dining car that he made into a lounge and it sat perpendicular to the entrance of the depot where you could go on the train and have a drink and then go in the restaurant and have dinner. It was a Sunday because there was no business, no traffic downtown and this great big crane with a train came rolling down downtown streets and put it into place on my birthday! And I was there with Elizabeth in the stroller she was like 6 months old and I think some of his office staff were there I mean it was just something everybody wanted to see happen that's why I can remember that very well.

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And at the same time in the mid 70's just for a couple of years he had Don Quixote at 6400 Southwest Freeway. It was on the north side of the Southwest Freeway between Westpark and Hillcroft. It had 85 to 100 seats. He bought that as an existing restaurant including the name. He had five Bar-B-Q Barns and four partners in that, three partners in that there were four of them in Bar-B-Q Barns. The first one was opened even in the late 1960's at 5109 Kirby and James, Jim Goode ended up buying that many years later and keeping it as his barbecue Restaurant. Then he opened one up on Westheimer, one on Westview near Blalock, one on Broadway on the way to Hobby Airport and one at 5625 Fondren and all those of course are gone. I think they sold one at a time.

DH: Okay so the barbecue restaurants are the only ones though he had partners?

CL: Yes as far as a restaurant business.

DH: All the rest of them were his?

CL: All, right.

DH: I noticed in the other questions and answers that you gave me he didn't have anyone do feasibility studies or anything like that for selecting his locations so he just kind of went by his gut?

CL: Not to my knowledge. Now he did with the hotels. But not to my knowledge with the restaurants. But see all of them except the Don Quixote and The Depot, all of them were already in existence. He opened the Sir Loin Inn but I had just met him when that opened. He invited me to the opening. I had never been to a restaurant opening and it wasn't like a date because he couldn't come pick me up. I didn't know what he really asked me to. I'm sick now I didn't go because it was this big social thing and I've got

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pictures of that that were taken that night and free food galore! The restaurateurs just used to open their restaurants that way. Well I didn't go but that was during my time.

DH: Okay. Sonny was famous for his flamboyant jackets so how did he get started with that? Obviously he didn't start that at Quitman...

CL: No.

DH: ...I'm assuming he started that at...

CL: I think he was at the Sir Loin House on Westheimer when that started. Frank Ortiz and his wife Blanche were good customers and really actually very good friends of Sonny's attorney.

Phone interruption

CL: Well sometime on Westheimer I already said that Frank and Blanche were friends of Sonny's attorney E.H. Thorton and his wife Ramona and Frank being a tailor from Galveston I think Frank is the one that encouraged him or said, "Let me make you a few bright jackets" and that's how it got started and when Sonny and I married he had to get rid of some of these coats because I didn't have... there was no closet space. I moved into his house and there was no closet space. They were jammed full of these fabulous bright, shiny coats! I mean some not all of them were shiny but you know they were really fancy and so that's how it started. People I guess he really was a showman and he... and a ham. He just loved people and he liked I guess it was a conversation piece too and he saw right away how people went crazy over his coats so he kept some at every restaurant, or the restaurants he had at the time. He had 4 restaurants at one time for a period of time and he kept coats in all of them. When he would go from restaurant to restaurant he would change his coat. He would tell people, "If you see me in this coat

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twice in one night, the coat's yours." And I'm sure he gave a few away like that. I mean that was another gimmick to give some away. So he kept them in his offices and he would go through shaking hands with the customers in one restaurant and then drive to another restaurant and do the same thing and then go back to the first restaurant. But he would go through his office and change his coat before he did that. So and he got to be well known for his coats. People still remember those coats.

DH: They do!

CL: They ask me about them all the time but he lost weight and got rid of some and he gave some to be auctioned off for charities.

DH: Did he give any to the Hotel school?

CL: I don't?

DH: To the Hilton....

CL: No and all I've got left I've got of his I've got red brocade tails.

DH: Wow!

CL: I know it. I'll give those to the Hilton school.

DH: It will be great in one of their showcases.

CL: I know it would.

DH: Windows or something.

CL: I don't know I just can't part with it yet.

DH: Well you don't need to.

CL: And he has a beef eater costume too. That was the restaurants being English tutor style. I don't know when he ever wore it but it was made for him and I got everything

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but the hat. I don't know what ever happened to the hat or the beef eater costume. But I've got the rest of the costume. It is heavy!

DH: I bet it is, it bet it is. Well that reminds me of something I had not written down before. How did he come on the idea of having the knight and the horse out in front of the restaurant?

CL: I don't know. I don't know how he decided on an English theme. I have no idea. Maybe Gary would know.

DH: Well I always assumed it had to do with the Sir Loin.

CL: Well yeah but I don't know what came first. I don't know if Sir Loin came probably because of the steak maybe that's right and the steak being knighted or Sir Loin.

DH: Loin... right. So did he always have the knight in front of the Westheimer location?

CL: Yes.

DH: So he started that right from the very beginning?

CL: I think right from the beginning he had one of the busboys brought or a neighborhood kid. I know one neighborhood kid did it. Terry Womack I think just for a little while dressed up in the costume and rode on the horse. So he was quite known for that too. See he knew how to get people in his restaurants.

DH: It's true. Well I can tell you besides the food the things that drew my family to the restaurant and I can remember I mean from the time I was a child I would say I can remember it from maybe age 7, 7 or so I definitely remember it was when we moved to Westbury, so we moved here in 1959 I was 7 so at some point then and we would go to the one on Westheimer and I loved the butters that was my favorite thing, the different

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flavored butters and people still talk about that. My dad's favorite thing was that Sonny would come around he would greet you personally and he got a little free glass of wine.

CL: I know exactly what it was it was Rosé.

DH: Rosé!

CL: He even had his own label on there.

DH: I didn't remember that.

CL: Yep.

DH: Yep but I remember it was Rosé and that was when wine was, it seemed like just starting to become popular. So tell me about that. What was Sonny's philosophy on that and why?

CL: I don't know how he got interested in wine because I think back in those days not many people drank it like you said. But I have a book somewhere that he was starting to compile and he had dreams of writing a wine book. But I don't think he knew enough about it to ever get it done. And I'm not sure about how he started with the Rosé except for the fact there was not liquor by the drink then. You couldn't buy it except in the private club.

DH: I didn't even think about that.

CL: So ...

DH: I knew that but I hadn't put those two things together.

CL: The only way he could encourage people maybe to buy it in the private club if they didn't know anything about it was to give it out free. So he started pouring glasses in the waiting room. I think my first glass was in the waiting, like waiting for a table that

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first night I was poured a glass of Rosé and he couldn't charge for it he had to give those for free. You could pour it free you just couldn't charge money for it.

DH: Okay so before the liquor by the drink I didn't think about putting those together but before that a person could buy a bottle of wine in the restaurant? So that would not have been liquor by the drink?

CL: You know I don't know. I don't know about that.

DH: I don't know either.

CL: Let's write the question down and I'll ask Gary.

DH: Certainly if you...okay... Certainly if you brought your own. If there was a BYOB you could bring your own bottle of wine and they could open it for you and serve it for you. So maybe they could buy a whole bottle?

CL: I'm sure that that is probably the case because you could take your own. Sonny was very instrumental in getting liquor by the drink law passed in Texas and one of his arguments was if somebody brings in a bottle of liquor and maybe wine, if somebody brings it in they allow them to drink the whole bottle. Whereas if he could sell them one drink they will leave with a lot less alcohol in them then if they brought the whole bottle and they just kept drinking out of their own bottle. So... I'm sure he must have sold wine but I don't know.

DH: It seems to me too that and I don't know what your recollection is that as wine became popular Rosé was the first one at least in...

CL: As far as I remember.

DH: ... in our area.

CL: Back in the late 50's, 60's...

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DH: Even in the early 70's it seems to me when the you know the disco rage was starting and we had all the clubs around town like Alons and I can't remember that one that I used to go to it was on Richmond where the Windsor theater used to be.

CL: Yes I know... something about city?

DH: I don't remember and Rosé was the big...

CL: Probably because it was a little sweet and we hadn't fine tuned our taste buds for wine yet.

DH: Yeah could be.

CL: It was a little bit sweet so we liked it probably and then cold duck. Remember cold duck?

DH: Yes I remember Cold Duck.

CL: I think that's probably awful but it had the fizz to it that maybe we liked.

DH: Okay Sonny's restaurants seemed to be a popular destination for everybody but especially celebrities who were some of the people that he hosted there?

CL: Oh gosh there were quite a few. Anita Bryant comes to mind because there is a picture of her in here someplace. Ed McMann... oh gosh you put me on the spot and I can't think.

DH: One of the people I remember was Liberace.

CL: Yes Liberace...

DH: Athletes?

CL: Yes lots of them. If we go through some pictures maybe we will...

DH: More names okay alright. Okay anything else about the restaurants that you want to mention before we go to the hotels? If not we'll just...

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CL: Well I can't think of anything unless you ask.

DH: Okay well we might think of something and we might... okay...

CL: Except my first visit when I thought I wasn't going to get a bill. See he asked for my name and address to send a bill so he could get my name and address.

DH: That makes sense. Okay let's talk about the hotels. What encouraged Sonny to go into the hotel business?

CL: Well on South Main there was a hotel where a couple or maybe three or maybe yeah several of his friends were investing in and I think they probably asked him to go in with them and buy this hotel. So that was the first one that he had anything to do with and that was in 1967.

DH: That's the year you met?

CL: Yeah we met in March and I guess he was probably involved in it or getting involved in it right at that time and I'm sure that it just interested him because it did have food service and on top of that he learned real quickly that you could also make money in the hotel business in just a bar and rooms and so you've got a three way chances of making money, bar, restaurant and rooms and he liked that a lot. So he went on to have more. But always he had at least one partner.

DH: So let's talk about what hotels he did, he was involved with.

CL: Well the first one as I said on South Main. And this may be the correct...

DH: Progression...

CL: ... progression thank you. I'm not quite sure but I tried to do all this right.

Ramada at 8700 South Main that's the one I just mentioned and he was in it with Dick Graves, Bruce Weva, Jake Williams, Amos Hall and another man and it opened in 1967.

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Then there was a Ramada in Laredo, Texas. It opened in 1968 and I remember all of us chartered a plane, I am thinking we chartered it because there was so many. They took news people with them and to advertise it and we flew down to Laredo for the opening. That was after we married. So I remember going to Laredo to open that one. So I guess I got in right at the beginning. Then the Ramada on I -10 East in Houston opened in 1968. I remember that one. I mean the opening of it. Then Ramada North on Interstate 45 North in Houston opening July of 1970 and that one had a dynamite lounge in it, a bar, The Library Club and it made money coming and going and that's one thing, one reason was I guess that he and Bruce Weaver just... it made them want to have more hotels because that one did so good. They were the only two in that one.

DH: Now is that one a form Sunbelt or did they have a different name first?

CL: Sunbelt wasn't in existence then.

DH: It wasn't in existence so this was just Bruce and Sonny?

CL: Yes. Then Ramada West on Interstate 10 West between Silva and Antoine opened in January of 1975. I can remember having Elizabeth there at age 2 looking, it was before it was ever finished. Then Ramada Northwest Crossing on 290 and Pinemont opened in 1980, Hobby Hilton at 8181 Airport Boulevard I don't know why I didn't put the date down for that. Beaumont Hilton in Beaumont, the College Station Hilton in College Station, Texas, Wichita Falls Hilton it was changed to Ramada shortly before they sold it in Wichita Falls. It was the only hotel that they bought that was already in existence. It was a Kiva (K-i-v-a) hotel, never heard of that.

DH: I never heard of that.

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CL: When they bought it they immediately changed it to a Hilton and then the Ramada and then at some point they formed Sunbelt Hotels which was a management company and managed many others all over or in quite a few different states. Do I have a list of that? I doubt it.

DH: I don't think so.

CL: He liked the hotel business. One of Elizabeth's favorite memories is going with him on Saturdays to check on all the hotels that were in town because there was the Hilton that Sunbelt managed. The Hilton over on 59 South and then...

DH: Oh yeah the...

CL: The Ramada West, the Ramada Northwest Crossing, maybe that was all then in town. But she used to go with him to check out the kitchens and the front desk and just walk around the hotels. That is one of her favorite memories.

DH: Great. It seemed like Sonny brought his restaurant skills to the hotels too. Like I remember The Bridge at Ramada West was a fabulous...

CL: I know it.

DH: ...restaurant.

CL: And there was another good restaurant at Northwest Crossing. People would go to that restaurant to eat too.

DH: We went there for several holiday buffets too.

CL: And see those hotels also had ballroom functions.

DH: Right.

CL: And food service for those. So they really did put out a lot of food.

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DH: They did. He we talked a few minutes before we started out the suites in the hotels he was an innovator there with the Jacuzzis in the rooms. Do you know where that came from?

CL: I really don't but we had some fun times there, two bedrooms and a living room and a pool and a bar all in one suite. We did a lot of entertaining in those. He used to have his poker games there sometimes. Elizabeth had at least one birthday party there with little girls came and spent the night and we had a lot of fun in those suites and in the beginning they didn't rent them out. They were just ours and the Weavers had one and we had one and they weren't rented out. But as time went on we rented them.

DH: They were popular.

CL: Yes they were.

DH: You gave me a baby shower there. I remember them they were nice. One of the things I've heard from multiple people talks about Sonny as a mentor and saying, "Sonny was like a father to me." So what can you tell me about his management style as a restaurateur and as a hotel owner?

CL: I don't know how to answer that question. He did take a lot of young men I'll say so to speak under his wing like Lee Ewing and probably like Mike Shields. He's another one. Both of those guys went on scholarship to college from the Lady's Auxiliary Scholarship fund but they both worked for Sonny and probably from busboy on up and I know they both thought the world of him as well as others. I don't even know how many but I never, ever... of course I'm in no position to hear bad things about him but I heard a lot of good, people didn't have to say it. So I don't know about his management skills but he was very, very good at managing anything. He always believed that a meeting is

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something that should be started on time and end, it need not drag out and it started your business meeting did it, close it down, let people go home. He never thought of his employees as employees he never, he commented on that to me one time, they were his associates. Even the car parkers were associates. They were not employees. He treated them like he liked to be treated and he put them on the same level as himself. He never ever felt like anyone was below him. They just had a different job then he did. And he always, he always carried a roll of money in his pocket with a rubber band around it. A lot of it were \$1 dollar bills and he'd take that roll out and flip those dollars out and he was a very generous tipper, because he knew that the car parkers didn't make a lot of money so any place we ever went (not our own restaurants) but any place he ever went and they knew him boy he got... he was waited on hand and foot because those guys loved him. He tipped well and he was nice.

DH: What you said about him putting everyone on the same level, Tom always said that. He said that when Sonny would come in on Saturdays and he would go in through the kitchen and he'd talk to everybody and he knew everybody, he knew everybody by name and you know he was just one of them and they were...

CL: Exactly...

DH: The same as he was.

CL: Exactly and he was good at remembering names of customers and employees and he knew how important that was. We all like to be recognized by name. He knew that he just instinctively knew that. So he called everybody by name.

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DH: Not a talent I have remembering names. I'm terrible with names. I just wanted to comment also to that many of his employees seemed to stay with him for years and years and years.

CL: They did.

DH: And spend their entire career with him and work their way up.

CL: I think he wanted to retire very much before he had the stroke but he'd come home and say, "Well what are they going to do? If I close the restaurant where are they going to go? What are they going to do?" He really worried about them. So he just kept on and on.

DH: So do you have any other thoughts on why he had such a big impact on people?

CL: No other than he was just a kind hearted, generous man. He never said anything bad about anybody. He was just...but yet on the other hand he was a tough businessman. He knew that his profits would walk out the back door of a restaurant in particular if you weren't there. He was on the job when he was young and that's what's important for a restaurant person. A lot of people go to the restaurant to see the owner and so he worked hard. It was a hard business and he was there all the time but as the business grew and he had managers and more than one restaurant he couldn't be at all of them all of the time and he had a very good staff that he could leave in charge but he just, I don't know, he just knew his customers he was kind he called them by name, gave of himself and he always thought that you needed to give back to the community. He did so much community work as you see by this wall of plaques and honors out there. Every time I talked to somebody about, "Maybe I should take it down." They all say, "Oh no don't do that! It's a cool wall!"

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DH: It is.

CL: 10 feet high and they go from floor to ceiling. How wide would you say that it?

DH: I don't know 20 feet at least!

CL: 20 feet solid with honors. He did a lot.

DH: And that's probably not even all of them.

CL: No when I filled the wall up I said, "You can't bring any more home." He had a few at the restaurant I got the most important ones and I started putting them up and then he'd bring another box home. I finally had to take everything down and rearrange to put them all closer together. And he did so much that didn't necessarily have to do with the restaurant business. He worked with Variety Boys Club for instance and the Stock Show of course he was a big promoter of our youth. I can remember one time I think it was in the newspaper or on TV about some I'm guessing 11 year old boy that had been abused and taken from his parents or maybe he didn't have... maybe he was an orphan. I thought Sonny was going to go find him and bring him home. He talked about wanting that boy to raise. I mean and if I encouraged it I'm sure he would have brought him home. I mean he was just that kind of man. It hurt him to see in the newspaper child abuse. I mean he... it just undid him. He was just so kind and sweet and thoughtful. And anytime Elizabeth misbehaved she said her worst punishment on earth was to have a talking to from her daddy. I don't know what he said to her but it straightened her out. I mean he could just reason with you, reason with her and show her what was right and what was wrong and talk to her, that was punishment enough or discipline, maybe it was discipline. He said he spanked Gary growing up once, once and he lived to regret it until

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the day he died. He just... it just tore him up to spank Gary so he never laid another hand on another child.

DH: Did he ever encourage Gary or Elizabeth to go into his business?

CL: Oh yes he did. He, I think was very disappointed that Gary didn't follow in his footsteps because what's better in the restaurant business than family? You can really leave your business and travel with somebody in the family taking over. But Gary saw how hard his dad worked and Gary helped too growing up. He worked in the office and in the restaurant too and he did not want to go into the restaurant business because that was too hard and you never had any time off. So he became a veterinarian instead. He spent a lot of time at the Valley Lodge where the horses were and he just I guess gained a love of animals and big animals and small animals and when he first started his practice he had both but you have to go out from Houston to treat big animals so he dropped that from his practice and only does small animals now. But he never wanted the restaurant business. Now Elizabeth I encouraged her not to do it. I said, "Oh my gosh you won't ever have any time for yourself or a family!" She kind of got interested in a little bit in the hotels. I might have encouraged that but not just strictly restaurants that's...

DH: And even that's hard I mean it's 24/7.

CL: It is.

DH: They never close.

CL: I know it. So I wasn't very encouraging.

DH: It's hard to think though that being that was easier you know I can see that you... the office closes on weekends and at night you get to go home or whatever but the whole thing of going to veterinary school could not have been easy.

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CL: He had to work on Saturdays he found out that the time wasn't a whole lot better.

DH: That's true they are open on Saturdays.

CL: That's what he liked.

DH: Well let's talk about the Rodeo for starters. Sonny was a big supporter of Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo...

CL: He was very big.

DH: ...tell me a little bit about some of those...

CL: Do I have that in here?

DH: I don't know probably... wait. Okay so we are talking about the Livestock Show and Rodeo.

CL: I don't know how he first got involved with it but he's been involved with it for a long, long time and he did a lot like he was... I think he was Chairman of the calf scramble for instance and I know he had to be Chairman of various committees in order to rise in the ranks like he did because he served as Secretary, Treasurer and Vice President of the show and was a lifetime Vice President for quite a few years before he died. So I don't know maybe because he had horses. He used to ride in the parade downtown as a lifetime officer and I got to do that once with him. It was so much fun. That was just so much fun to ride on horseback on the parade. So maybe that's show he got interested because he loved horses. He loved his horses. He had seven I think that was the most he ever had at one time. But quite a few after that his own horse was "Miss L" and she could jump a fence from standing still next to the fence almost that. She was the most wonderful horse. He could turn her on a dime she just followed his instructions beautifully. She was a great horse. We had some really good horses. Four of them were

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white or light and those four white ones were the ones that worked at the restaurants.

There was a stable on Greenridge down from the Sir Loin House, it's all apartments now but that used to be fields. There was a stable down there and they used to walk that horse to the Sir Loin Hand then when the other restaurant came about over on South Main they would trailer the 2nd horse there, every night.

DH: Oh boy!

CL: Then after 2 weeks those 2 horses would go to Valley Lodge for a vacation and the two that were white out there already were brought into town to work. But "Miss L" was brown and there were a couple other brown ones because there were 7.

DH: Were they quarter horses?

CL: Yeah quarter horses and that got off of the stock show except maybe he loved his horses so much that he got involved or maybe he got involved with the stock show first and then came to love horses. I don't know which came first the chicken or the egg! But he did love the stock show and got lots of people involved. In fact when somebody new came to town if they had anything to do with the restaurant business he "made" them join the Houston Restaurant Association and Texas Restaurant Association and the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. He said, "You need memberships in those to get anywhere." And he several times won the award for getting the most memberships in whatever organization. So I mean he really worked for the... He always told me don't join anything unless you are going to work in it.

DH: And you have.

CL: Not like he did.

DH: No but you've been in the Rodeo Art Committee now for how many years?

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CL: Well...

DH: You founded it.

CL: One of the founders of it in 1968 but it started out actually in 1969 I guess founded '68, first year was '69 so however many years that is, 43.

DH: Something like that. I had a question... oh didn't he buy I think you told me once a grand champion...

CL: Yes.

DH: What was it?

CL: Steer. Yeah long time ago, long time ago. Not anything like they do these days. All the money they spend. Those go for so much money now that they have groups that buy it.

DH: But relative...

CL: Mostly.

DH: Relative to the value of a dollar then versus the value of a dollar now.

CL: I guess that's right. I mean he bought lots of things. Pigs, chickens...

DH: And what did he do with them?

CL: A lot of times he donated them. I hear stories back before my time where they would give the animals back to the kids or they would give it to another donate, another organization to raffle off again or auction off again.

DH: Did he ever, did the restaurant ever have a wagon in, a chuck wagon in the...

CL: Oh yeah Sonny had one of the first ones. Now a days... well maybe that's not so but for a while there was an advertiser on either different advertiser on the different advertiser on either side of the wagon. Now I think it's the whole wagon is back to one

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advertiser. Sonny was one of the first, they probably I can't remember but they probably only had 3 wagons, now there are 6. They do 2 races, three and then another three. I bet in the beginning it was only just three. I don't remember but anyway he was one of those wagons. And he met the drivers of the team and found out... found out that of course no advertiser wants to lose all the time, so those drivers take turns winning. So it's a set up thing. Of course that makes sense. You're not going to advertise if you lose all the time! And if you know that you can watch and you can see how somebody could win but they are kind of holding back. Isn't that funny!

DH: That is funny.

CL: But the crowd didn't know it and you don't know it either unless you've been down there talking to them.

DH: Right.

CL: And it shoots before they go who is going to win. So you can still bet and let it be fair.

DH: I forgot did they have the chuck wagon races when they were still in the Coliseum?

CL: No.

DH: They didn't start that until they went down.

CL: No.

DH: It probably wouldn't have been big enough.

CL: I'm pretty sure because I don't remember it in the beginning. I think I can remember when they first started it. So I'm almost positive in saying that they didn't have them in the Coliseum.

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DH: It seems like there may not have been room.

CL: No.

DH: Okay anything else about the Rodeo?

CL: I can't think of anything. Ask me a question.

DH: Well let's move to the Convention and Visitors' Bureau. Sonny was a huge promoter for the city in getting people to come.

CL: Right because it benefited him directly. He was one of the founders of the Convention Counsel that they called it back in those first days. There was a Houston Visitors and Convention Counsel. Later it became the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau. And then in 1980 and '81 for two years or from '80 to '82, I guess he served as the Chairman.

DH: That's a big responsibility.

CL: I know it, it is. I've got all that history written up too someplace because Robert well Roy Guy and I went over to visit Robert Newbone before he died. Roy is still alive and both of those guys were also past Chairman. Roy and I saw the need to get this history written down before it just... nobody was around to tell it. So I've got that written down some place. Maybe not right here but it must be here on my computer some place. I've also given what I could add to the Convention Bureau.

DH: I'd love to see that at some point when you find it.

CL: Well I'll look on my computer and see if I can find it.

DH: Okay. What kinds of things did Sonny say that drew people to Houston? I'm just curious how he attracted it.

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CL: He should have been President of the Chamber of Commerce because he loved Houston. He never said anything bad about Houston but of course he wanted people to come here. He wasn't ever going to say anything bad about it. He just thought it was a great place. I mean he's been here since the '40's and he has seen, certainly, a lot change. He just loves Houston!

DH: I'm sure that came across. It was home to him. Okay let's talk a little bit more about family.

CL: Okay.

DH: Tell me about your family, Sonny's children. I don't think we talked about that earlier.

CL: Well he and his first wife Mary had one son Gary who became the Veterinarian. His wife Mary died of cancer back in 1964, April of '64 I believe. He was single for 4 years before he and I married. Gary though in the meantime, himself married. He and Tony Barbara married in 1967, or '66 they were married before I met Sonny. They were married 3 years longer than we were. So we married in '68 so they must have married in '65. They have one daughter, Marlo but we had a daughter, Elizabeth before their daughter was born. So Elizabeth is 15 months older than Marlo. Elizabeth has been married 13 years already.

DH: I can't believe it.

CL: I know it. She has four children ages 9 ½, 6½ and twins that are 3 ½ boy would Sonny be surprised, two girls first and then two boys. So it's just perfect. They are adorable. Marlo has one child Gavin who is 4 ½ so they all, she lives in Plano so all 5 of

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those children don't get together very often but when they do and the older they get the better it is. They had a great time at Christmas.

DH: I bet. Now Elizabeth had Lauren before Sonny passed away?

CL: Yes Lauren was 2 or almost 2.

DH: But she hadn't had Kate yet.

CL: No we didn't even know about Kate. But I think all those children think they know Granddaddy because Elizabeth has pictures all over their house and they talk about it. We talk about him a lot. So if you ask them if they know him they'd probably say, "Yes."

DH: That's good.

CL: Yeah.

DH: What did Sonny do to relax what were his? Horses you mentioned.

CL: Well during the working day between lunch time and night time because he always went back to work. He'd come home mid afternoon or even later and he had a lazy boy kind of chair. He'd get in that chair, he'd push back and he could go to sleep for 10 minutes. That revived him enough to go take a shower, dress in a tux because he always wore his tux but with a black jacket and then go back to work at night. But that just pushed him back in his chair. And whenever we traveled in vacation time he never ever called home to see how things were.

DH: Wow!

CL: He said, "If they need me they know how to call me." If he didn't relinquish that authority to them to run the business well they could never make any decisions on their own. They needed to be able to do that. So he didn't want to be calling home telling

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them what to do or ask them what they did. If there was a real problem they could call him. He never did business away. He really just forgot it as far as I know. He could just push it out of his mind. He left somebody else in charge. He did love his horses. We used to go out in the older further back days and ride horses a lot. He loved to cook at home. He liked to grill outside. He liked to swim and I say that very loosely because couldn't swim. He had a pool at Valley Lodge and we had a pool here but he never let his feet get off the bottom of the pool. He couldn't swim but he loved to get in the water anywhere which is really funny because he joined the Navy and he had to bribe them on his swimming test. And the way he did that, he was the cook on the USS Beagle and he bribed the higher ups by giving them steak and good food if they passed him on his swimming test. And it worked! That's what he said. That's how he said he got in the Navy. I'm sure you can get in the Navy without being able to swim but see he spent a good bit of that time on a ship at sea and he couldn't swim. And he said that whenever they went into a port he always had to stay on the ship because he said they had to go down a rope ladder to go on the dingy to go into the port and he was scared to death of falling off the ladder and he couldn't swim if he did. He stayed on the ship! We have laughed about that for years!

DH: It's funny.

CL: So swimming, horseback riding, cooking.

DH: You had your place in Brenham for a while. He liked going there.

CL: Yep once we sold Valley Lodge we wanted, I wanted just a little bit of land to have horse for Elizabeth so we ended up buying the place in Burton actually 7 miles west of Brenham and we had that for a while. We loved going there and he loved, that's

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what... I think working for him was relaxing. He loved to have parties and to entertain. He loved to entertaining and have people over, the more the better. He gave me so many surprise birthday parties I can hardly count them. He was very clever at it because he never gave me a surprise birthday on a big birthday. He gave me a surprise party for my 44th birthday. Now who is going to be, who would expect on the 44th? He gave me a surprise on the 59. Who is going to? I mean when I walked into that party I told everybody after I was shocked to death and came to my senses. I expected everybody to think I was 60 already. I'm not 60! I'm only 59 and he gave me another surprise, oh he did give me a surprise for 50.

DH: Is that the one at Brennar's?

CL: No that was at Maxine's. The one at Brennars wasn't a surprise. Yes he gave me other birthday parties but you know what he hated surprises himself because I gave him one surprise right here at this house and Gary, we used to have a motor home and Gary and Tony came over and picked us up in the motor home and we went out. He knew something was up because he looked around in the kitchen that day and said, "It sure is clean in here!" There were no papers stacked on the counter. Everything was put away and then caterer was sitting down at the end of the block waiting for us to leave and then they moved in. We took him on a ride in the motor home, Gary, Tony I guess Marlo and Elizabeth and I and drove him around him and we blind folded him so he wouldn't know that we were coming back to this house. He had a fit. He hated it but he was a good enough sport to allow us to do it and we just drove around, tried to get him confused so he had to have known that something was up (like a birthday party) but he did not like the way that it was approached. It was for his 60th and it was a house full of people here

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when we got back home. Let's see there was another birthday well I don't know but he just said, "Don't ever surprise me again." He didn't like them he wanted to surprise other people but he didn't like to be surprised. People were kind of scared to have him over for dinner because he loved to give smaller dinner parties at home like 10 people or even a little more and have course after course after course at the table with all the wines to go with every course. You know you'd start out with salad or even we learned to serve salad at the end of a meal like Europeans do but a salad then a fish course then the wine then (after hors d'oeuvres of course) and then a sorbet and then your main entrée and a wine with all these different things, then a cheese course and then dessert. He loved doing that and he used to have Joe the car parker, one of the car parkers help him and he would... Joe was the greatest black man you've ever met in your life. He was one of the family. He used to teach Joe... he'd go in the kitchen with Joe before Joe would come out and serve the wine and teach Joe about the wine and Joe would come out and tell us about the wine. It was so entertaining. I can't tell you how much and Joe used to do the horses at Valley Lodge too. I mean trail rides he liked to do that. We had a good life. He worked very hard and deserved the good life.

DH: So Sonny had a stroke in 1991.

CL: November 13, 1991.

DH: Tell me about your life after that because he amazed me at how he continued to remain active in the community and involved in things.

CL: Well his mind was certainly not affected. You know once it started healing and coming back he was at St. Joseph's Hospital, St. Luke's Hospital and TIRR for a total of a week short of 5 months, I was going to say 6 months, but 5 months. Then I had just a

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year old Suburban and even the therapist at TIRR couldn't figure out how to get him in that Suburban because he had lost the use of the right side of his body. He could walk with help right in the very beginning but it was iffy and soon those muscles atrophied and he couldn't walk at all because he didn't have use of that right leg. And they couldn't figure out how to get him in that Suburban. Well I was determined. I'm the one who figured out how to get him in the Suburban. It took the strength he had on the left side, his left arm and leg to help me help him. But he got in there. And I was determined that we weren't going to let any moss grow under us so we just went and did. We didn't stay long. We took a lot of trips. We flew on some. We flew to Washington D.C. to see Elizabeth. We flew to New Orleans. I can't remember flying anywhere else. But we took driving trips all across Tennessee and went to Georgia quite a few times. Probably at least once a year to see Mama and we drove to Minneapolis, Minnesota and we drove to Los Angeles, California (me doing all the driving of course) which is fine I like to drive. That was good but he really... any time we ever went anywhere before his stroke we flew because he wanted to get there. We had business where we were going. And so driving the country was new. We really, really enjoyed seeing the country that way, just doing what we wanted to do. He continued to be honored by different organizations (mostly hotel and restaurant) and we still had people over for dinner. We were still invited out. Life didn't just change socially too much. I remember and he was never shy about trying to talk to people but I really tried to stick by that wheelchair because I didn't want people feeling embarrassed or odd if they couldn't understand what he was trying to tell them so I was there to bridge the gap if I could. But you know if it was a man or I mean a business person that knew stuff I didn't they could talk to each other. They just knew

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what he was trying to say because of business. One time we were at a hotel in Austin it was when Elizabeth was moving back to Texas and she had taken the car and gone to look for an apartment and Sonny and I were sitting in the lobby of the hotel of Roger Malard's hotel in Austin and I wasn't close to the front desk we were sitting way over in the lobby and Sonny rolled over to the front desk and started talking to the desk person back there and I was feeling so bad for the desk clerk because I thought, "Oh he's not going to..." They carried along the longest conversation. I couldn't hear it but I was watching because I wanted to go help out if I needed to and I never went over there. They just talked and talked and talked. So he never, ever was shy about getting involved and trying. It was just his personality. It's just a shame. He would have been such a great consultant.

DH: He would have been a great anything. Well didn't he also continue serving on committees and boards and things with the CBB or the or am I not remembering that right?

CL: Well the Stock show he continued to serve out there but "serving" wasn't exactly, isn't exactly the right word either. He continued to be a lifetime Vice President and I took him to all his meetings which was kind of fun for me.

DH: Well that's what I mean.

CL: Because I got to go in those meetings, those closed door meetings and back then there were only 50 of them. Now there are a lot more but then there were only 50 and all but 3 were men and I got to go in there and I remember that chairman saying, "Anything discussed here today is not to leave this room." So I felt very privileged to listen to their conversation. So Sonny was always interested but he couldn't really give back anymore

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because he couldn't carry on a conversation, he couldn't talk. So yes he continued to do that and yes he was still on the board of the Convention Bureau and I took him, we went to all those meetings and when he died they made me an honorary member. So I get to go to those board meetings when I want to which is very nice.

DH: That is nice.

CL: I felt extremely honored that they would let me do that. I can't vote but I don't want to vote!

DH: Well I can... the way I remember is that as time passed he talked more and more or maybe it was just as time passed I understood him better I'm not sure.

CL: And I think people got used to him and weren't "scared" of it anymore. So when you are relaxed you can understand more perhaps and he did get better. Usually after a stroke you get the most back in a month and really the most back I guess in six months. But I'm telling you after 4 years all of the sudden Sonny was saying stuff that I hadn't heard him say before. So I think really the fine tuning continues on because the nerves in your brain reroute and you do get better.

DH: But I remember too he was still sharp. I mean I remember one time he and Tom were having a conversation about something he had read in the Wall Street Journal and there was no... no impairment in terms of how he was thinking and he was still thinking about business.

CL: Oh yes, oh he did. He read the newspaper every day from cover to cover and if anybody needed to know anything about what is happening in town if you could pull it out of him he knew the answers. He was just incredible. He used to roll... he could be here without our help (or me) for a while and one day he backed himself out of that door

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right there out onto the deck because he wanted to be outside, scared the living daylights out of me because he could have tipped over backwards. But he was just never afraid to do anything. I mean he wanted so much to be independent and one, another time (showing his independence after stroke) our good friends Pete and Jane Scooper and Sonny and I flew to Los Vegas so that's another place we did fly. Went to Las Vegas and we got ready to leave the last day and we were down in the casino and Sonny wasn't afraid. He even gambled at the black jack table but not without me right there. But he was just rolling around in the casino and we couldn't find him to come home. We could not find him! He had gone back to the room and he didn't have a key. He had gotten on an elevator, gone up whatever floor we were on, got out and went to the room and got a maid to let him in.

DH: So how did you find him? Did he come back down?

CL: No we just went to the room. I mean that finally occurred to us that maybe he would do that! What a man!

DH: Yeah that's true.

End of Interview