

Interview with Leba Freed-Pierce
for the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society
(Participants: Harvey Buchalter interviews Leba Freed-Pierce)

Harvey: I am interviewing Leba Freed-Pierce for an article for publication in the Legacy. And placement on the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society website.

So, my first question and it's not even a question, is Leba, would you kind of introduce yourself?

Leba: Well, my name is Leba Freed-Pierce. I was born in Albuquerque. My grandparents came to Albuquerque in 1920 on a warm December day, on the train. They brought four children; one, my father. They were ages 10 to 1. My grandfather was a Russian rabbi. When he disembarked from the train, he raised his hands to Heaven, and he said "Albuquerque is a special paradise on earth, and we will never leave this place. We must never leave this place." I have followed that sentiment and I feel very close to Albuquerque and very appreciative of Albuquerque. So, I have spent my life trying to do what is right by Albuquerque and help Albuquerque.

Harvey: Why Albuquerque?

Leba: They came here from Iowa. They had lived in New York when they came from Russia, because they were seeking no anti-Semitism, which they were able to find here, which we've appreciated for 100 years. And also, because my father, who was about 10 years old at the time was very asthmatic. He

could not walk across the room, and the doctors said, "Come to Albuquerque."
When they came to Albuquerque, the doctor said, "Sleep on an outdoor porch."
He slept on the outdoor porch until he was 38 years old and married my
mother. He lived to be 90 years old in perfect health.

Harvey: Well, that's quite a story.

Leba: Thank you.

Harvey: So, your grandfather though was born in Russia?

Leba: Yes.

Harvey: And how old was he when he left Russia?

Leba: I don't know.

Harvey: You don't know?

Leba: I do not know the answer to that, sorry.

Harvey: But he went to New York?

Leba: Went to New York, yes.

Harvey: What did he do in New York?

Leba: He was a rabbi in New York.

Harvey: He was a rabbi?

Leba: Yes. Yeah. When they came to Albuquerque, he opened a kosher meat market in 1920. So, if one can picture the Albuquerque population in 1920, it was not a way to get rich quick. They had a place on South High Street, 1501 South High Street. The brothers, Max, Philip, and Ben, as they entered junior high age, in the morning, would slaughter cow before going to school. So, if boys

think of a tough life now, they have no idea of what it was like, to, you know, slaughter a cow and have to sell the meat to restaurants and homes early in the morning before they went to school.

Harvey: Wow. I only know of two brothers, so.

Leba: Yes, and there was a sister, Pearl.

Harvey: There was a sister?

Leba: There was three brothers. Yeah.

Harvey: Three brothers.

Leba: There's Max, Ben and Philip and the sister was Pearl.

Harvey: Which were the two brothers that were in the store on Central Avenue/

Leba: All three brothers were in the store.

Harvey: All three brothers?

Leba: Yes. Yes. Max, Ben, and Philip, yes.

Harvey: Max, Ben and Phil?

Leba: Mm-hm.

Harvey: Okay, and what about the sister?

Leba: So, the sister grew up very well and happy, and she was a proofreader for the Journal.

Harvey: Oh.

Leba: But the family wanted her to marry a Jewish man, and it was a little bit difficult in those days in Albuquerque to find a Jewish husband. She was very attractive, very full of pep and life, and a wonderful person. They sent her

back to New York, to the family in New York, where she married Alvin Friedfeld (phonetic.) And they lived in Brooklyn and they had two children, Avery and Mitchell. She used to be very close to my mother and she would call my mother and write to her constantly. "We're not too happy in Brooklyn. We're on the third floor, walk up apartment. What should we do? We want to come back west."

They weren't sure they wanted to come to Albuquerque. They needed a bigger city because he was in the haberdashery business. So, my mother suggested they move to Denver. My mother was originally from Denver, and they moved to Denver and they lived very, very happily until the day they died in Denver. It was a wonderful thing for them.

Harvey: So, when your father and the uncles end up being in the bead business?

Leba: The bead business came much later.

Harvey: Okay. Fill me in.

Leba: Here was the interesting twist. My grandfather loved the Navajo Indians and he loved the Navajo rugs.

Harvey: How did that come about?

Leba: He would see them on the street, on Central. My grandfather would be walking around on Central Avenue and he would meet a Navajo Indian with a rug over his shoulder. He fell in love, and he started buying Navajo rugs. they might be \$2/\$3 a piece in those days, and that was as much as anybody could afford. That was the market price. The boys loved the Indians and my

grandfather loved the Indians very, very much. They began selling Navajo rugs to saddle shops all over America.

Harvey: So, they bought them directly?

Leba: They brought them directly from these Navajos who were on the street, originally. Yes.

And started selling them. Eventually, we spent a great deal of time on the reservation at trading posts, buying, over time, thousands and thousands of Navajo rugs and became a major dealer of saddle blankets and rugs to major department stores, major museums. Major saddle shops, lodges, hotels, were featuring our Navajo rugs. At the same time, they became familiar with pinon nuts.

And mostly Ben, sometimes Phil, sometimes my father, would go to the reservation and accumulate carloads, train carloads of pinon nuts. That was 50,000 pounds of pinon nuts. In those days, they would buy directly from the Navajos who were picking these off the trees. And we sold them to the New York nut dealers. I can remember my parents arguing about the price. I was a little girl, sitting in their home, in our home, which they lived in for 50 years. That was a Hoffman brick home. They paid \$8,900 for this house in 1949. I still own it. They would be arguing because the price of pinons was maybe four or five cents/pound, and my mother would say to my father, can't you get another penny/pound? Look at the difference it would make to get another penny/pound. My father said, "No, I'm afraid if we raise the price, we won't be

able to sell them," which was probably ridiculous because I don't think there was any competition. Nobody else had 50,000 pounds. And this happened many, many times that they went to the reservation and were able to accumulate a train carload of pinons. There were some years where there were no pinons. It's a crop.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: Some years they failed with that product. And some years, they were successful. They were becoming more and more involved with the Pueblo life, with the Navajo life, and they were selling wool. They were in the wool business. They were in the hide business.

The Santa Domingo Indians asked my father to try to get seashells for them, so they could make heshe. And heshe is a bead that is made from a very specific seashell. You don't just go out and get seashells off the beach. Has to be harvested live and it is very specific. But they wanted to take this shell, cut it in tiny bits, drill it, grind it and make the strands of fine heshe. My father was a person who would search out any product that was requested. He loved to search out products and make a living that way. He was able to find these olive seashells in Africa.

At that time, of course, there were no computers. It would take years, sometimes, to make a transaction like this happen. But then suddenly, we'd hear a knock on the back door and the delivery would be made to Freed Company of thousands of pounds of seashells. Over time, my father told me

he thought, and I dealt in them for many years, too, probably around 50,000 pounds of olive seashells, we were able to import from various countries: from the Philippines, from Africa, for these Santa Domingo Indians. We sold them by the pound usually about \$1/pound. Later on, some of them were a different quality, a bigger shell from the Philippines. I remember they were \$2/pound. We were able to supply the Zunis with polished mother of pearl and many kinds of seashells, even turtle shell. In those days, turtle shell was available in small quantities. They wanted it for inlay. One time, we had maybe a few pounds of turtle shell. My father was trying to dole it out so that all the families could have some of this turtle shell. We ran out and a Santa Domingo lady came in, and we were very close to them. She threatened to kill my father because she said, "I have to have this to make a living," and we didn't have it. But we were on the search, all the time, to get products for them. Then, they came to my father and said, "We want strands of coral." And my father was able to ascertain that coral was available in Italy. The gem coral strands in Italy and we became the largest importer, I'm quite confident, in America, for coral. There were times when there would be strikes in Italy and we wouldn't be able to get a shipment for 6, 8, 10 weeks. We were selling coral all over America to dealers all over America, and they were clamoring for the coral strands. And sometimes we had a tremendous number of strands, thousands of different strands of different kinds. They were also brought in in wooden crates, but imported from Italy but sometimes we

were, you know, so eager to have the merchandise and we couldn't get it. We'd have to wait and wait and wait to get it. People would come in from all over America and also, we would send it out. We were in the import business and the export business. We would send these strands of coral to dealers all over America.

The Indians from Santa Domingo, from Zuni, would bring in their merchandise, their heshe, their inlay work, their silver work, and we would often trade. So, we would sit at the counter of Freed Company; I did this for over 20 years, 25 years, and make trades with these people. Sometimes there was money involved. Sometimes there was not money involved. Then, we would sell the jewelry to dealers and customers who would come in to Freed Company. So that was a great, great love that we had and still have for the Native arts.

One time, a man came in, a white man came in. He had a huge suitcase of Zuni jewelry and he opened it up on my counter there. It was so beautiful. And I, usually when we traded with them, they would bring two or three pieces, ten pieces would have been a lot of jewelry. This man had maybe 100 pieces in his suitcase. I looked at it and it was so perfect and so, but I said to him, "How did you get so much Zuni jewelry at one time? How did you accumulate this?" And I did not know this trader. He turned red. He said, "Well, I have to tell you the truth. I had this made overseas."

This was the beginning of the end. We were shocked by this. We were fastidious in our dealings and had never been affronted in this way, to see how these people were being abused, and of course, we did not buy the jewelry.

But at that time, and after that, many imports started coming in of artificial jewelry and that could not be something we could handle.

You asked me how did we get in the bead business? We got in the bead business also, and I promoted that a great deal. They went abalone beads.

They wanted other kinds of shell beads. I started importing those things from the Orient and also hundreds of kinds of semi-precious stones and other beads from all over the world to accommodate the trade for jewelry and for bead work and the interests of people.

We moved to -- we moved, First Street, the 300 block of First Street, the 100 block of First Street, and we also had a warehouse, which I still own on 1501 North First. But we moved in 1971, next door to the KiMo. That was a great boon for us, and we bought that building.

So, people were coming from all over the world and we were then buying exotic merchandise and beads were a big part of what we had. We also dealt a great deal in silk. I designed a lot of silk products, and many exotic items from all over the world: copper and brass wares and crystal, and we specialized in Harris tweed coats. We were in the hair-on tanned cowhide business, and that was a big national business. We imported cowhides from South America and

sold them all over the world by the thousands, and that was a very, very interesting business for us too.

Harvey: That's quite a story.

Leba: Thank you.

Harvey: Amazing. I bought a Harris tweed sportscoat.

Leba: Did you?

Harvey: Yes. But it was so heavy that I could hardly ever wear it. It was so thick.

Leba: They were like blankets.

Harvey: It was the real thing.

Leba: We used to sell them for \$25 when we started. We ended, I think, selling, from about \$35. I was in Scotland not too long ago and our son Mark bought one. I think it was about \$300 in Scotland, so you know, the price has gone way up.

Harvey: I know I didn't pay anything close to that.

Leba: No, no.

Harvey: So, what were your family's connections with say, other Jewish families, also in business in Albuquerque?

Leba: It was wonderful downtown. The Goldmans were downtown. And there were many Jewish families downtown. And also, it was so good for us because my parents loved other people. They loved the Italian people who were downtown. So, it was a wonderful community in the early days. Everybody got along and everybody was friendly. We were very close to the Bromberg family and we were -- the Lefton family were our best friends. We lived about

a block away. Seymour and Pearl left and were our very best friends, and their four children. They were the salt of the earth as far as I'm concerned.

There were quite a few Jewish people in the neighborhood. The Meyers lived right across the street from us and the Barrick were their relatives. I'm still friends with Shelly Barrick. So, there were quite a few of us that were down there working together.

Harvey: Okay.

Leba: And with the Syrian people and the Lebanese people, and the Hispanic people. All friends. All trying to help each other and getting along. The story of how my parents got married, I think, is one of the most interesting parts of the story I'd like to tell you.

My mother became an early labor lawyer. She graduated in 1932 from Denver Law School. She was one of the first lady lawyers and certainly Jewish.

Harvey: Sure.

Leba: There's some interesting stories about that. The dean -- she was 22 years old when she graduated from law school. The dean called her in to the office before it was time to take the bar exam. She was a very beautiful blonde bombshell. And he said, "Sit down, Ms. Hertzmark." She sat down, and he said, "I want to tell you something. You are not going to pass the bar and we're going to know you're a woman." In those days, the bar was handwritten. She says, "Okay. Okay."

So, she left the office. She went and took the bar. After they graded the bar, he brought her back in, and he said, "Well, I'd like to tell you something, okay? We did not know you were a woman and you passed Number 1." Okay. But it was the height of the Depression; it was 1932. She couldn't get a job at 21 years old, 22 years old. They sent her out to Stanley, New Mexico, to teach for one year and she taught in a little tiny bathroom less school and she taught Bruce King. Yeah. And they were lifelong friends and I've been lifelong friends with the King family whom we highly respect and admire.

After that, she got a job with the National Labor Relations Board and she went to Washington, D.C. She helped write the labor law for America. Her brother, also after the war, came to Washington. That was Sidney Hertzmark, who was in the real estate business here and developed Winrock Shopping Center with Winthrop Rockefeller.

Harvey: So that's your uncle?

Leba: That was my uncle, yeah, my mother's brother. So, she was living in Washington and her brother was living there, and they lived there for quite a few years. She got homesick. By now, her family was in Santa Fe. She got homesick and she came home to visit, and she went to a Jewish dance at the temple. She went to dance at the temple.

Harvey: Temple Albert?

Leba: And Max Freed -- no, in Santa Fe. In Santa Fe. About 1940.

Harvey: Well, there wasn't a temple there, though then.

Leba: Well, there was some kind of a temple, some kind of a Jewish dance.

Harvey: Some kind of Jewish thing, okay.

Leba: Some kind of a Jewish dance, okay. Actually, my mother helped found a temple in Santa Fe, and also helped found Hadassah in Santa Fe.

Harvey: That would have been the Temple Beth Shalom?

Leba: Yeah.

Harvey: Yep.

Leba: Okay. So, he comes to this Jewish dance up in Santa Fe. And he was, my father was very handsome, very dark, black hair with dark eyes. My mother was a blonde with green eyes. He fell madly in love with her, but he didn't say anything to her. He didn't express this. They went to a dance. He comes home to Albuquerque. She goes back to Washington, D.C.

My mother told me that she had 15 men propose marriage to her before she married my father. She was in Washington with all these senators and judges and big shots and she was gorgeous and very outgoing and a lawyer. And 15 men wanted to marry her, that she said she could remember.

Harvey: Mm-hm.

Leba: She didn't want to get married. She just turned them down. But now, she gets to be 38 years old. She moves back to Santa Fe, and she's working in the Bells store. She's working ---

Harvey: She's how old again?

Leba: Thirty-eight.

Harvey: Thirty-eight.

Leba: A man named Ace McClain (phonetic) who was really Robert Chernoff, Jewish guy from Chicago. Happens to walk into Freed Company and happens to tell my father, "Hey, did you hear Marcy Hertzmark's back in Santa Fe?" Neither one had ever married. My father had not been dating at all. But he was in love with her. And he went -- he called her. He went up to Santa Fe and met her. They had three dates and they got married immediately. They stayed married and she moved to Albuquerque of course. They stayed married and they lived in this Hoffman house that I mentioned until they died, both of them, at about age 90.

Harvey: Wow. Amazing story.

Leba: Yeah, I think it's a fun story. An interesting story.

Harvey: Well, let's get back to some of the Jewish stuff, Jewish connections.

Leba: Okay.

Harvey: You know, with a small Jewish community, it seemed like unless somebody actually cut themselves off from it, they had some sort of role or some sort of involvement, we'll say. Maybe not so much a role, in the Jewish community. Can you talk a little bit about that, just your family's involvement in the Jewish community?

Leba: Well, I think they were involved more with their own families. My grandmother on my father's side was very sick. She had her legs amputated;

she was diabetic. That was an issue that had to be, you know, taken care of and took a lot of time.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: We were not wealthy people. We went to the temple a lot more in Santa Fe because my mother's sister, Millie was there, and with her husband, Lou, and their two boys, Lee and Bob. Bob became an ophthalmologist, and Lee was in government work there and in the building business. So, we were really -- we really went more to temple in Santa Fe than we did here. I did go a little bit to Sunday school at synagogue. My grandfather died very young, so that was really not a factor so much. I helped found the ORT chapter, as I got to be in my early 20s, I helped to found the ORT chapter. A bunch of Jewish gals, most of us are still friends. Judy Moldauer (phonetic) and Betty Harvie and AC DuBois (phonetic) and I know Leona Rubin and Marcia Greenbaum. We founded ORT, the Women's American ORT chapter here. A very good thing for us, I think, for Jewish life and for our relationship, and closeness together. Later, I was involved with the founding of the Jewish Community Center, although I was not always in agreement with everybody on where it should be and how it should be done.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: But I was involved in that. My husband Elliot, who's a physician, and I, ran the Israel Bond Dinner quite a few times. He was in charge. I was in charge. We were in charge together. And we did raise quite a lot of money for Israel

bonds. Oh, I'm happy about that. I'm on the Jewish Historical Society Board now.

Harvey: Right.

Leba: And was on the Jewish Community Board for some time as well.

Harvey: Yeah. Your mother also had a connection with Hadassah?

Leba: And my mother helped found Hadassah in Santa Fe and we're all life members of Hadassah. Hadassah is a big interest and charity of ours. We love Hadassah. My Uncle Sidney when he died, he was never married. Never had children. When we died, we went into his home which was on Cardenas, which is two blocks from my mother and father. He had 40 envelopes out, giving charity to 40 different groups. He was very philanthropic, and we've tried to be that way with our lives and help as we can be, for Jewish and other causes.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: Political causes, we're all quite political on the Democratic side. And we do many, many fundraisers for the Democrats and try to be helpful there where we can as well.

Harvey: Let me get back to the store on Central for a moment, okay?

Leba: Okay. Sure, sure.

Harvey: So, could you give us a picture of the store?

Leba: I think that that the Freed Company was the most exotic and unusual business I've ever seen in my life. We traveled widely and I don't mean to be

complimenting myself and I'm not complimenting myself. But because of the vast array of unusual merchandise, I've never seen anything like it.

One of the items that I did not mention, we were in the business of selling beaded and sequined appliques including to the Mardi Gras. One time, somebody from the Mardi Gras called me and they ordered 50,000 beaded, about 50,000; I use that number too much. But many, many thousands of beaded and sequined appliques and they were made in China. A supplier in China who made them for us, custom, and the theme of these appliques was pizza. So, we received thousands of little tiny pieces that looked like olives and looked like cheese and looked like pepperoni but made of beads. I also designed costumes for the Mardi Gras and for many other places and they were beaded and sequined. We sold beaded and sequined clothing.

I designed a lot of clothing in China and in India. And silks, as I mentioned in China and India, cotton clothing. We sold -- one of the interesting things, I think, one time, somebody came and said to my father, "I'd like to have a crystal ball." In those days, to find a crystal ball was not easy. But he searched for years and finally, in Germany, he was able to find some very, very fine quality crystal balls.

Now, I don't know if I should tell this story or not, but we did sell some pornographic items. In those days, it was possible to buy ivory. That was later banned, and we stopped selling ivory. But we sold netsukes, and these were ivory carved items, and some of them had -- well, there were animal themes

and all kinds of different themes, but some of them were a little on the off-color side.

Harvey: Oh yeah, sure. The Japanese were, yeah.

Leba: Yeah. And we sold something called, a medicine doll, which was a nude, beautiful ivory doll about six inches and that was actually a medical tool because in the Orient, the women would not undress. So, a doctor would have this item, and she would point to where the problem was. We sold these, but in America, that was considered a little bit on the off-color side. My father wouldn't have anything to do with that. But I sold them to ladies who came in the store, so that was kind of a fun little, a little twist that people might not expect.

Harvey: Yeah. The store also had a very interesting odor.

Leba: We had naptha because we had so many rugs and hides, and wool. My father loved wool. He would not buy anything if it were not a natural item. There was none -- the word plastic would never have crossed his lips. So, everything was real and genuine. We had to protect it from moths or from any kind of a contamination.

Harvey: That explains it.

Leba: And that is why we had that, yeah.

Harvey: I remember that very well.

Leba: Yeah. We won several awards for our windows and I used to publish quite a few articles about business and things that we were doing at the time, and so

we were kind of a place where people came from all over the world to see Freed Company.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: Buying from about 30 countries all over the world.

Harvey: Amazing. Just amazing.

Leba: Yeah. Not amazing. Not amazing.

Harvey: Well, yeah, the world knew that -- well, yeah, it is. I mean, the only one.

Leba: No.

Harvey: Everybody knew that the Freeds were Jewish?

Leba: Mm-hm.

Harvey: Was there ever any issues or confrontations that arose?

Leba: Never. Never.

Harvey: Because of that?

Leba: Absolutely not. I am so grateful to be able to say, as I think I've mentioned, that we felt like the Court Café was across the street. That was my father's great friend, Arki. I think they were from Lebanon or Syria or someplace. The Metuccis were our friends. The Domenicis. Everybody was a friend. Never in my life until now have I felt anti-Semitism. With politics the way they are now, the national political scene, you know, we see what's going on with the country, but in the early days, never in my life would it have crossed my mind. Actually, I was a solo singer in school many a time, singing

Christmas carols. Never occurred to us not to sing Christmas carols. We had a Christmas tree. It's kind of a cute story.

My parents, when they were first married, lived on Montclair SE, in a new apartment. And the lady next door was Mrs. Bower. She didn't know they were Jewish and had no idea. And she said, "We have an extra Christmas tree. Would you like to have our Christmas tree?" And my mother said, "Well, I'd love it, but I don't think my husband would allow this. My husband was a very religious Jew who read the Bible every day. Read Shakespeare every day. Read the encyclopedia every day. Kissed the Bible constantly. Loved the Bible. I have the Bible. It's torn to shreds from all his reading of it, and she asked. My mother asked my father, "Would you like to have a Christmas tree?" She knew he'd say no. He said, "Of course, I'd love to have one." So, we had a Christmas tree all the years of our lives growing up. We used to go and buy the Christmas tree, a live Christmas tree. My father loved it. So, there was no feeling of, "Oh, they're Gentile and we're Jewish." None of that kind of thing. I'm very thrilled to be able to say that we've lived in a community where we never felt anything like that.

Harvey: Did your family have a connection though with the temple or with the synagogue in Albuquerque at all?

Leba: Not too much.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: Not too much. More in Santa Fe because that's where the rest of the family was.

Harvey: Yeah. right.

Leba: And there were many other relatives in Santa Fe of the last generation, and so mostly we did go to Santa Fe.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: Mm-hm.

Harvey: Okay.

Leba: Yep.

Harvey: Okay, I'm going to skip over now to you.

Leba: Okay.

Harvey: And I'd like you to talk a little bit about your passion.

Leba: Okay.

Harvey: Which is the museum.

Leba: Okay, thank you.

Harvey: Wheels Museum.

Leba: Okay, okay. I mentioned that my parents, my grandparents came on the train in 1920. I was a teacher, and worked at Freed Company for many, many years. Married Elliot Pierce. He had three children when I married him: 2, 4 and 6. And we, three or four years later, had Mark, who's now a physician/neurologist. But for most of my life, I've tried to do things to help downtown and worked in downtown projects.

In the early nineties, when Mark was still in B'Nai Israel synagogue preschool, I discovered that the rail yards of Albuquerque were available for sale. This was the steam locomotive repair shops of the Santa Fe Railroad. Twenty-seven acres of property with about a million square feet of buildings. And I determined to find out more about this. I was taken, after about making 50 phone calls to the Burlington Railroad, which owned the property, by an armed guard. I never knew if they were scared of me or scared of something. I never knew. They took me with an armed guard to see the property. When I walked into the property, I started to cry. I could not believe that such a magnificent and iconic property was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, unrealized, and closed. Abandoned since 1977. And I decided to save it, and I went to Mayor Baca, who did not evince too much interest, but I started making hundreds of phone calls and I called Heather Wilson, who was the --

Harvey: Congresswoman.

Leba: -- congresswoman at the time. United States Congresswoman. She came over with a group of us and she looked at the property and she called me at Freed Company where I was working and she said, "Can you take half a million dollars from HUD?" And as fate would have it, at that moment, a man named Alan Clark who had been a city department head for 30 years, was standing at my counter.

Harvey: He was with the library, wasn't he?

Leba: He'd built all the libraries and all the museums of Albuquerque. I knew him. And I had kind of talked to him about this a little bit and he was retiring. He came in, just as that phone call came in, and he was at my counter. I said to him -- he said, "Would you like me to be your executive director?" And I said, "Yes." And right then and there, I said to him, "Can we take \$500,000?" I was a gal working at Freed company. I had no government experience. I did not know how to take \$500,000 from the government but he did. We started working and raising money. We've held more than 25 major fundraisers. We've received \$2,000,000 from the state. The project has been very difficult. We've had several developers who have been unsuccessful. But in 2007, and at that time, I had had Wheels in six different locations, I was able to persuade Marty Chavez and Ike Benton. Marty Chavez was the mayor at that time. Ike Benton was the councilor. Still a councilor. To buy the property and Bill Richardson gave the Wheels Museum \$2,000,000 in state money to put into that purchase. We purchased it for \$8,500,000. The city took title. The Wheels Museum has a mandate to be on the property.

Harvey: Is this the entire property?

Leba: This is the entire property of the rail yards.

Harvey: Where the rail yards are now.

Leba: That is right. Where the rail yards were, and it is the place that made Albuquerque a city. Before the railroad came to Albuquerque, Albuquerque

was smaller than Belen or Bernalillo. There's a long story about how the railroad came to Albuquerque. It's because the prices in Albuquerque were so much cheaper because we were such a small, nothing town.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: When the railroad came in, they wanted to move to Old Town. They were not able to. Old Town was expensive. It was close to the river and the people of Old Town did not want the railroad to come.

Harvey: Yeah.

Leba: Yeah, because they wanted the horse and buggy business to continue.

Harvey: Mm-hm.

Leba: So, it was a big fight and the railroad didn't know what to do. They eventually moved to 1100 South Second where we are now. When they got going, they employed a quarter of the male population of Albuquerque. They repaired 40 steam locomotives a year, a month. Forty steam locomotives a month for decades. It was the major employer. It was the reason Albuquerque became a city, really that New Mexico became a state, and it was a huge development center for America. It was the largest steam locomotive repair facility between Chicago and Los Angeles, and it is the only one remaining today in America.

At the time of the purchase, we moved Wheels Museum into what was the Storehouse. It's a 21,000 square foot building and we began to accumulate exhibits. We have about \$2,000,000 worth of exhibits now. We are a volunteer-run organization. We work with the city, the state, the federal

government. we work with UNM, CNM, many corporate sponsors, and many private people to develop the museum.

In the museum, we have quite a few full-sized automobiles. We have a Model T. We have a '27 Buick. We have a '23 Star. We have a fire truck. We have a milk wagon, buggies, farm wagons.

We have many, many model exhibits as well. We have many model trains. We have a flight exhibit from UNM. We have an architecture exhibit from UNM. We have a library, archives, a gift shop, and we are doing everything that we can.

We had a failed developer within the last few months, but we have a new developer and I was able to bring that new developer to the project, a very, very capable man with great experience in development and finance and hotel, and many -- he's been a mayor of other cities. Very, very interested in the project. So, we're optimistic now that we can make this project happen. The current mayor, Tim Keller, has told us that this will be his legacy project.

We're working closely with him and his staff to see to it that this rail yard becomes the most important place in Albuquerque and maybe in New Mexico. It will be the largest project ever attempted in New Mexico. We're only about six feet from the main line of the Rail Runner, Amtrak and the Burlington Railroad.

Harvey: How far?

Leba: Six feet. So, we are in a fabulous position. We have the private Rail Cars of America wanting to locate here permanently. We work with the 2926 steam locomotive, which is the largest locomotive in the world. They are located a few blocks away from us, restoring that train. But it's about ready to run and the original home was the railyards. We're hoping it will come back to do excursions. So, we have many, many, large important ideas, for the redevelopment and we think that it can be the economic driver of the state. Or certainly one of the major ones. And that is the project that I've worked on as a volunteer for 25 years.

Harvey: Amazing.

[end of recording]