

Bernie Butterfield

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Summary: This interview talks about Bernie Butterfield and his store, Butterfield Jewelers, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He discusses the history of his business and his experience during the Roosevelt Park Riot of 1971. He also discusses the impact of the riot and later Central Avenue developments on his business.

Keywords/Topics: Butterfield Jewelers, Roosevelt Park Riot, business, University of New Mexico, riot, Central Avenue

Interviewed by Rebecca Prinster, Assistant Curator of History, Albuquerque Museum
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PRINSTER: This is Rebecca Prinster, Assistant Curator of History at the Albuquerque Museum. It is July 26, 2019 and we are in the Photo Archives at the museum. We are interviewing Bernie Butterfield today. And this is the first time that we have interviewed him. So, if you could please state your name.

BUTTERFIELD: Bernie Butterfield, Butterfield Jewelers.

PRINSTER: All right. And your birthdate and place.

BUTTERFIELD: 8/23/28

PRINSTER: Were you born in Albuquerque?

BUTTERFIELD: I was born in Pina, Illinois.

PRINSTER: Okay.

BUTTERFIELD: A little town south of Decatur.

PRINSTER: Okay. When did you start working at Butterfield?

BUTTERFIELD: I started working at Butterfield when I was about 7 or 8 years -- 9 years old. My job was to -- my father used to get china and crystal. They'd come in barrels of straw. My older brother, his asthma attacked always when we went to take them out and it didn't bother me. So I just was -- my job was take this crystal and china out of these barrels, etcetera. So I started very young.

PRINSTER: Wow.

BUTTERFIELD: Although I originally wanted to be a chicken farmer. And at nine or ten I was raising chickens. I was working in a little hatchery store that the farmers bring the eggs in and I

would trade the eggs in fill trays. If they didn't hatch I could take them home. I had three hundred chickens when I was about ten years old. I had the backyard, garage, chicken shed (laughing). I had chickens. But my father decided he had – I was to be the jeweler, so I became a jeweler.

PRINSTER: And, whe -- how old were you when the store moved to Albuquerque?

BUTTERFIELD: I was fourteen, it was. We moved here in 1945, '44-'45. And we uh, I went to Albuquerque High School, graduated in '46. People say how come we got to Albuquerque. My mother had asthma and breathing problems and the doctors in Illinois said you got to head to a dry climate. So the reason we got to Albuquerque: they were heading to San Diego. They got to Tucson in July (laughter).

PRINSTER: Turn back.

BUTTERFIELD: (Laughing) Uh, one day they had gasoline coupons. They're just – but anyway, (laughs) I always tell people they – yeah, they got to Tucson in July and they came back.

PRINSTER: Yeah, that makes sense. So when did you take on the operation of the business?

BUTTERFIELD: My father died in 1954 and I had gone to a watch-making – to a Precision Instruments Laboratory in California right after high school. (coughs) So I worked – Let me get me a drink. My drink. Ah. [Opening water bottle] Ah, there we go thank you. Just a second. [Drinking from water bottle and putting plastic cap back on] So I took over the operation. In 1954 he had a heart attack and died. We were down on Central Avenue from '54 to '75 and of course the riots were in '71. I can remember those vividly. I got a couple stories I'll tell you on that as they come around.

PRINSTER: Yeah. What do you remember about the store on Central?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, it was small and quaint and very nicely laid out. It was right across from the university [University of New Mexico] so we got a lot of good university business. Lots and lots and lots of engagement rings and wedding rings and things. Uh, I just remember it being very friendly and we tried to do the best job we could service-wise. And we put 91 years under our belts now.

PRINSTER: Wow.

BUTTERFIELD: Which is not too bad for an independent. Fourth generation. I have my (coughs) -- excuse me -- I have my daughter and my son-in-law and my son. My son just retired so, now it's my fourth generation.

PRINSTER: So, the day of the riot that was June 19th?

JILL HARTKE, DIGITAL ARCHIVIST FOR ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM: June 14th – 13th.

PRINSTER: June 14th, 1971.

BUTTERFIELD: Yeah.

PRINSTER: What do you remember about that day?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, there was a rumor -- there was a rumor that there was going to be some problems. There was a bunch of people over at Roosevelt Park that were rowdy. And then seems like --I can't remember the exact timing -- I think it was just before noon, we heard they were down Central Avenue coming up Central Avenue breaking out windows and knocking things down and then of course the next thing we heard they were at Galles [Galles Chevrolet] at uh University Avenue there. Well, by that time, we didn't know what to do, you know, there's -- so I was up on the roof with a shotgun. I was gonna shoot in the air. (laughs) I knew I wouldn't want to shoot them or I'd get in real trouble. (laughs) But, I-- so anyway, I got up on the roof and I was watching and here they came. Well the thing that happened that was sort of annoying if you want to know, is just before they -- I got the word about them being at Galles, the National Guard showed up right across the street and I thought well surely they'll give us a little protection 'cause a couple of them came over and stood in front of the store or certainly close by. Well, the rioters came up and of course they immediately broke our windows out and went inside and robbed us of a bunch of jewelry and the National Guard didn't do a thing; they just stood there and watched it happen. Which was sort of disappointing to think of, but uh anyway, we survived and uh we are still going strong. We stayed there then until 1975. My mother finally said, "Bernie, you got to get out of there before they kill you" because we had got burned out twice and burglarized a couple of times and it just seemed like the next thing a robbery's coming along and after the riots it was sort of how much longer do we put up with this.

[00:06:46]

PRINSTER: So you mentioned that there was a rumor that there would be some trouble? Do you remember?

BUTTERFIELD: Yeah, I can't remember too much of that except that we knew there was some rioters coming up Central Avenue. I mean that was pretty well known knowledge. The Roosevelt Park thing was just sort of a hearsay from somebody. Said, "Ah, there's a whole bunch of kids." They were all kids I mean I talk about -- you know, I think they were -- they had to be high school and maybe university kids. Uh, I didn't see very many adults. But anyway, I just got the story from somebody that there was a whole bunch of kids in Roosevelt Park and they were going to cause trouble.

[00:07:31]

PRINSTER: Uh-huh. Do you, do you remember what kind of damage the store, um, experienced?

BUTTERFIELD: Our store? How many dollars or how many [inaudible]? Oh, at that time we had to have the whole front end of the store rebuilt. We had a very very good relationship with a contractor. And, um, he came along and rebuilt our front of the store for nothing.

PRINSTER: Oh, wow.

BUTTERFIELD: Which is very nice of him. I think the glass work on the show windows was about three or four thousand dollars and they stole -- as I -- best of my memory, they stole about \$15,000 worth of jewelry.

PRINSTER: Wow. How long did the recovery process take? I assume you were closed during that time?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, we were -- we were able to operate, just, you know, a little bit by a little bit. The glass on the windows was no big problem. That was over like a one day deal. The front end work was done over -- took several days but it was done in such a way that it didn't disturb our in-store operation. So, we were -- we were right back in business the next day.

PRINSTER: Okay. Um, let's see. What do you remember about the nearby businesses?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, 'cause we had a filling station in one corner and then we had an ice cream company on the next corner. And I don't think either one of them were hit. Ah, it seemed like they got up to the university and apparently the National Guard did put the fear of God in them 'cause it seems to me, they didn't go much past University and it could have been because of the National Guard being there.

[00:09:24]

PRINSTER: Did you talk to any of the National Guardsmen?

BUTTERFIELD: No, I didn't have a chance to. They were -- they were sort of aloof. They're -- they were just -- well, they were just standing around doing nothing. (laughs)

PRINSTER: Yeah.

BUTTERFIELD: But they were imposing, I've got to say that. And I think they scared them off.

PRINSTER: Let's see. Ah, what -- what, if any, long term effects did the riot have and the break-in on your business?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, the pluses was we got an awful lot of publicity. Front page coverage. (laughs) If you want to call that good coverage. We did get a lot of sympathy from the public and that -- Yeah, it was just one of those things we always -- we always tried to support any civic thing that we could - kids clubs and things. And um, I think it was just sort -- it was sort of a little bit of a plus factor. It cost us money, but I think it was -- most of it was covered by insurance so we were not out of pocket that much. Ah, my mother was mostly disturbed by it all. I still remember her saying, "Bernie, you got to get out of there before they kill you." (laughs) And, I guess we had enough stuff going on that could have happened. But I—I -- like I said, the negative part was of course, I don't know, was just sort of a "Well, we're in a bad place. We are going to have to do something about it."

[00:10:52]

PRINSTER: Yeah. Do you remember -- or did you have any interaction with the people who were breaking in? You said you were hit by a rock, but --

BUTTERFIELD: None whatsoever. I, um, like I said, I was standing there next to the cop -- policeman -- and all of a sudden a rock hit me right in the head. And I have a picture standing there of me blood streaming down [points to his face] (laughs). You don't have -- I couldn't -- I just saw it a couple days ago. I'll find it if you still like to see it.

PRINSTER: Yeah, definitely. Um, do you remember much about the summer of 1971 after the riots? As far as the feeling in town?

BUTTERFIELD: Well, the general feeling around in town was probably was that what are we -- where are we headed to? Where are we heading to? You know, this stuff going on. There had been a lot of fires you know -- we got set on fire twice and, um, it just seemed to me that whole period of time there was disturbances going on here and there. A lot of rioting as I recall. And I -- it was a very uncomfortable -- You guys weren't here? Okay. It was a real uncomfortable period of time 'cause you just said like, "What is going to happen next?"

PRINSTER: Right. Um. Let's see. As a member of the neighborhood, did you have an impression of Roosevelt Park?

BUTTERFIELD: It was just far enough away we had no relationship or no -- let's see -- nothing really to do with the park other than that was the gathering place where they all met.

PRINSTER: What about Yale Park?

BUTTERFIELD: Uh, that was right across the street and um that's where they all -- they all -- the rioters sort of stopped there. As I remember, that was their stopping place and that's where the National Guard were basically guarding the University. The governor obviously had called them in. And they were protecting the University and there was a couple of them that came across the street but they didn't do anything. And they -- the kids, I don't know you could see them here [picks up museum photograph: PA2018.100.024] go in and out. You know, you could see there. They were smashing windows and whatever you want to call it. Yeah, they had, uh, I'd say we didn't have much relations with them, but they were there.

[00:13:38]

PRINSTER: Yeah. How long were people looting the store? Do you remember?

BUTTERFIELD: Probably half hour or so. Yeah, they were -- you know, they were in and out. There was a whole bunch of them. You see a bunch of them here [points to photograph again]. Ten times that number. I don't know how many. I was up on the roof thinking, "Should I take a shot or should I not?"

PRINSTER: Yeah.

BUTTERFIELD: I was ready to defend my -- myself and my property, but I took the better way out and decided I could replace this stuff.

PRINSTER: Yeah. Um, do you have any other comments about the riot?

BUTTERFIELD: Nothing really that I can think of. Like I say, I can remember vividly. Nothing you know strikes out -- we were just -- what do we do next? What do we -- what do we do next?

PRINSTER: Yeah.

BUTTERFIELD: And the next was to get out of there, that area as quick as we could. So it took a couple of years. We owned the property there. My father bought that when we got here in 1946 -- when we got to Albuquerque. And so we bought our property up on San Pedro -- Butterfield Plaza, and we have been going strong. I got my son, my daughter, my son-in-law -- although my son is retiring -- he is sixty-five. So we'll see what happens next.

PRINSTER: Do you still work in the store?

BUTTERFIELD: I don't go in full-time anymore. I gave it up at ninety.

PRINSTER: (laughs)

BUTTERFIELD: I figured that -- I figured that's a good round number.

PRINSTER: Yeah.

BUTTERFIELD: So I had a great big birthday party and retirement party last year. So uh, this year I'll go ninety-one now, I'll see how things go. I go in and pick up my mail and make a phone call or two. And, yeah, I do a little bit of this a little bit of that. I'm more relations, more PR work. I go to about four different clubs and City of Albuquerque golf, boards. And I'll tell you where I spend a lot of my time, hitting golf balls.

PRINSTER: Yeah. (laughs)

BUTTERFIELD: Trying to hit golf balls. I've had a good time. I've had a good run over the years. There isn't much I haven't done.

PRINSTER: Yeah, that's great. Well do you have any questions for us?

BUTTERFIELD: No, I don't other than just what's the time -- what's the time deal? Where will it be and?

PRINSTER: Should I stop? Okay.

[END OF PART 1]

[INTERVIEW BEGINS AGAIN]

BUTTERFIELD: Uh, Bernie Butterfield, Butterfield Jewelers. We were down on Central Avenue from (coughs) -- excuse me -- '45 to '75, but they widened Central Avenue once or twice while we were there. Every morning, I'd go over to a friend of mine named Nugget Rostad?? --he had an oil company--he'd come by the store and we'd go to Chisholm's and have a cup of coffee. It was just tradition. Every -- It seemed like every morning here'd come Nugget. One time Nugget comes running up the street, "Bernie! Bernie! We got to do something! We got to do something!" I said, "God, what do we got to do, Nugget? What do we got-?" -- he says, "They're up at Cent-- up at Girard, and they're gonna widen Central Avenue." There was nothing about it in the papers, I mean, there's no information that I'd ever seen. I says, "Well, what, like, what the hell can we do to --they're going to widen it and we're going to stop them?" And he says, "They're going to widen it sixteen feet. Eight on each side and do you know what that's gonna do to our side of the street?" Oh. Our side-- here's the sidewalk and our jewelry store. That'd put the street right up practically to our front door. Oh my. Well, what do we do? He says, "Well, I know the governor, Campbell." And he says, "Aren't you a Sigma Chi?" I am, yes. And I said -- he said, "Well, Popejoy -- President Popejoy of the University -- is a Sigma Chi, why don't you go talk to him?" So I got--I went right over and he took me right in and I said, "We gotta do something." I said, "We -- if this happens, (coughs) Central Avenue will be a slum. I mean, it will. Every business will have no parking, no place for customers to stay. It's just--". So, he looked at me and said,

“I’ll do what I can.” Next morning, instead of taking the eight foot each side, they moved twelve foot over on the University and four foot on our side.

PRINSTER: Nice.

BUTTERFIELD: Otherwise – That was all the way from Girard to University Boulevard. Cause all of the University—all that was a bunch of weeds and tumbleweeds. There was no buildings along there to speak of; they hadn’t gotten to their building phase yet, so it was sort of – I thought that was a absolutely [inaudible] to see here, how could this happen overnight? I’m not talking about a week or a month with all kinds of planning. They just shifted everything like that. Instead of going over here, they went over here. Isn’t that amazing? (laughter) You ever heard a story like that? (laughter) Anyway, that’s my – that’s my other story of fame.

PRINSTER: Nice.

BUTTERFIELD: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW.