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ERMA BOMBECK
1927-1996

Honored as a Historymaker 1993
Noted Author and Humorist



Erma Bombeck photograph by
Kelly Holcombe

The following is an oral history interview with Erma Bombeck (**EB**) conducted by Janice Gordon (**JG**) for Historical League, Inc. on October 13, 1992 at the Bombeck home on Foothill Drive in Paradise Valley.

Transcripts for website edited by members of Historical League, Inc.

Original tapes are in the collection of the Arizona Historical Society Museum Library at Papago Park, Tempe, Arizona.

JG: Erma, you came to Phoenix in the early 1970s. What were your impressions of Phoenix and Arizona compared to your background in the Midwest?

EB: I had never been west of the Mississippi River. I had no idea what was out here. I knew there was something because I heard stories that filtered back East that there really was a West. I had never been to California. I had never been to Colorado, never been anywhere. When I was asked to speak, one of the reasons I really wanted to come was because I was curious about the West. Was it true there were cowboys and Indians and all that stuff? I was just like any other tourist. I was invited to come speak to the Executive Club, which was a club run by a woman called Laura Danelli. She put together all these speakers and she had one a month. We came and spoke for an hour.

I brought my mother with me and we left a blizzard in Chicago where we changed planes. We had on heavy coats; I mean we were dressed for Alaska. We came out to Arizona. The plane was late, landed just before midnight. I walked out of Sky Harbor, saw these palm trees and this gentle warm breeze just enveloped us. I thought I had come to paradise. Send for the kids, that was it. I gave the speech and we stayed here three or four days.

This is a true story. I actually went home and said to my husband, "Let's move to Arizona." I had never done that. Been speaking a long time, went to a lot of places, but never had I been to a place where I felt I belonged. This was it.

JG: You felt you belonged and yet in your biography I read that you were – I don't know whether shocked is the word – but when you went to get credit at the bank they wanted to know what your



husband did for a living. Did you have any impressions on the difference in the ways in which women were viewed during your first few years in Phoenix as opposed to how they were viewed back East?

EB: I don't think the East and the West made any difference at that moment. If you were thinking that the East was any farther ahead in the rights of women, they really were not. This was at the beginning of the women's movement and I think there were inequities everywhere. I can attest to that because later in my life I was active in the women's movement, really active. I always thought that when my grandchildren would say to me, "Mama, what did you do in the war for women's rights?" I didn't want to say, "I was at home watching 'As the World Turns.'" I desperately wanted to be a part of this movement.

It was true when I moved to Arizona it was hard for anyone to believe that a woman would actually be making more money than her husband, which was sort of unusual at that time. It wasn't bad for my husband. He didn't mind a bit. But other people, it bothered them, and I think what they were looking for was stability. Bankers look at stability, "Can this woman pay her bills." But I don't think it was any different in Arizona than it was back in Ohio in that respect.

JG: Were they aware of your name when you moved here?

EB: I don't think anyone's ever aware of what I do. I think what happens is that people pick up their morning or afternoon paper, they see me in it, and they figure she lives down the street. She shops at Safeway, she goes to Penney's for the clothes. Here's a little housewife who's making a living. I don't think most people understand the column they are reading appears not only in 800 newspapers throughout the country, but the books appear throughout the world. It's a very good living is what I'm trying to say in a very delicate way. You're paid according to the newspaper and the circulation in which it's run, so this has a big audience out there and you're paid very well for it. I don't think they realize that. They think, "Here's a woman who just bats this off before she takes her nap," that's it. Not true.

JG: Were your children grown and in college when you moved or were some of them still in school?

EB: It was sort of a good time to move. Not that we're a democratic family, you understand. I mean my kids would follow the refrigerator. It doesn't matter, wherever we moved they would be there. We weren't like Ozzie and Harriet. We didn't have these family council meetings and say, "Now children, Mommy and Daddy want to move out West. What do you think of that?" We didn't do anything like that. We just said, "Hey, we're moving. This is gonna be great!"

So it was a good time actually. My daughter was going to the University of Colorado, so she just had a short hop up there. One son was in his senior year of high school and one was in junior high, so it really was a good division. It probably was harder on the son who only had a short time left in high school, but



he adjusted. He was fine. He loved it. They loved it. I remember the first time they came home from school and said, “You’ll never guess what we had. We had the greatest school lunch. We had Mexican food. It was wonderful.” They were to have Mexican food every day for the rest of their lives. It was a staple in Arizona which they didn’t realize. They had not tasted it before.

JG: What was your impression of the school systems in Phoenix? Did that have anything to do with your moving to Paradise Valley?

EB: No, I have another theory. You’re going to get so sick of my theories, I guess. I had another theory that in your lifetime you have good schools, you have bad schools, you have good teachers, and you have bad teachers; all you have to do is find out the difference between the two. You’re going to encounter them no matter where you go. What you do is you give your kids a good background. If they get a bad teacher you say, “This is not really good.”

As far as the schools are concerned, I remember I had people who came to me and said, “Oh, I’ve heard there are drugs in your school.” I said, “Really, is that right and where does your child go to school?” They would tell me and I would say, “You know I heard the same thing about yours.” And they would just fall off the chair. It’s true. I don’t think you can find a pure school that’s going to be set up that can protect your child from all of the ills of the world. I don’t think it’s possible. What we left in Ohio had drug problems, as all schools had at that time and still continue to have. I think the best you can hope for is that you can keep your own child on the right track, know where he is, ride herd on him and hope that it comes out all right – which it did.

JG: So your children and you were satisfied?

EB: We were happy.

JG: How did you feel about the way the political situation was handled out here, the reporting, the newspapers, and the media?

EB: You mean back at the beginning when I came out here?

JG: When you first got here, what were your impressions of what was going on?

EB: I knew that I was a flaming liberal who had landed in a very conservative community. I didn’t seem to have an awful lot in common. Of course, I had left a conservative community. I had left a very Republican area. Ohio is very Republican.

JG: You were in Dayton?



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EB: I was in Dayton, Ohio and it's a very Republican area, and I was a fish out of water there. So what's the difference? I'm a fish out of water here. We used to kid around a lot about if we found another Democrat out here, we'd have a sales meeting. It was so incredible, you would say, "Are you really a Democrat, you're not lying to me are you?" It was sort of the local joke, and this is still a very conservative community. I don't think you judge people totally on their political views because I don't agree with a lot of them at all. I think what you do is just fight it in your own way. You support candidates that you feel have good things to say. You support candidates who have the same viewpoint as you do. I happen to feel this is a state that is being dragged – sometimes kicking and screaming – into the next century. They're going to get there, but they're going to fight a lot of it, all the way.

On the matters of environment, every night I fell on my knees and I said, "Thank you Theodore Roosevelt." Because I felt that possibly had he not interjected some strong laws we wouldn't have the land protected today that we do, and this is a great concern to me. I feel there have been administrations and viewpoints here that would have sold that land long ago and we wouldn't have it, so someone had some vision.

JG: Do you feel that people were friendly when you got here, that they welcomed you?

EB: Yeah they were, they really were, even in this neighborhood. The reason why I say that is because our houses are not really close together. We don't have a lot of condos around. We don't have a lot of schools in our backyard and things of that sort. We are a rather isolated community here and yet people still bring a covered dish to your door, they still have block parties, they still knock on the door and say, "Welcome." I find that charming, I really do. It's very nice.

JG: Do you see any difference in current local criticism in the papers as compared to the Midwest?

EB: Of course there's a difference between the Midwest and here. The Midwest has been at it longer than we have. I think they seem to have a stronger sense of community back there for some reason. Maybe it is the fact that they're older and they have done it. I came from a rural community and that makes a difference. Rural communities are unique. I love them. They are people who probably reach out a little quicker to someone than perhaps they do in Paradise Valley. I come from a farming background, and it seems to me that we knew each other better. Maybe it was the times we lived in. Maybe it was the fact that women stayed at home and kept house and "neighbored" a bit more just for survival. I know I did when I was raising my kids. Maybe that's part of the reason for it. I don't know.

JG: How did your children feel coming from Ohio? Did they feel left out or did they just jump right in?

EB: It depended on the age. You get a teenager and a teenager will hate everything. Those are negative years. The teenagers hated the trip out. They hated the two people in the front seat driving the car. They hated the fact that we had uprooted them. They didn't like any part of it. They were set to be martyrs in their own time. The younger son absolutely loved it because it was something new and something



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different. He was open to it. It's a difference of age, I think. We all adjusted and now I'm getting stories back from the kids, "Oh, we're so glad we did this." Because when they go back and visit Ohio it's not the same. There's a uniqueness out here – make no mistake about it – a great uniqueness about the West. There are good things and bad things, but it is different, very different.

JG: Can you pinpoint any of those things?

EB: I don't know, maybe it's the newness of it. I don't know what it is. I think so often when you "do" the Midwest there is a sameness to the airports, a sameness to the terrain, a sameness to the people, the shopping centers. Even our airports here are different. I do a lot of traveling. You know you're in Phoenix when you see these airports. They're different. The art is different. They're not the usual cookie cutter airports. They have a flair to them. The moment you get off the plane and you look at the terrain, you think, "Whoa, this is different. This is really different." We're not sandy-desert, we're not green grass, we're not rolling hills; we're a blend of a lot of different things. You look at a cactus and you think, "My gosh, that's threatening." Then you watch this cactus bloom and you see the beauty and you see these mountains around here turn purples and reds and you think, "Yes!" The sunsets are magnificent. I know everyone's said this but it's true, it's incredibly beautiful here. It's very different; it's not everyone's taste.

JG: How much of your time do you spend here?

EB: Almost all of it. I used to do a lot of traveling and lecturing. The eleven years I worked for "Good Morning America" on ABC I was gone filming seven to ten days out of every month – on the road, tough duty. Then I decided to slow down and just do the column and books. I'm spending a lot of time in town. We also have a cabin in the White Mountains. When I'm not down in the Valley I'm up in the mountains, but I'm still in Arizona.

JG: How do you feel about the cultural advantages that are offered in Phoenix?

EB: Well, it's enough for me. If someone's from New York City, they would probably still be laughing until the end of this tape and asking, "What culture, you're joking?" It's enough for me if I can see live theater or a concert once in a while. The art out here is incredible; they have some great exhibits. I don't find a quarrel with that. I'm not used to the Metropolitan in New York City. I'm not used to Guggenheim. I'm not used to all that. I didn't have all that in Ohio. I have a lot more out here than I did back there.

JG: There has been some criticism in the Phoenix area about a lack of privacy and people walling themselves in, both ways. Do you find it to be both ways?

EB: I think it is a city of walls. There is no doubt about it and I don't know why that should be. Especially in Scottsdale and Paradise Valley there are a lot of walls. There are a lot of walls around this



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house, mostly because we're built in a mountain. They keep the house from falling down, I think. It seems to me that a lot of things that we're critical of are just signs of our times. We don't live in gentle times. There has been a metamorphosis that has taken place and we don't have that wonderful luxury anymore of being open. I still find things in my mailbox from sickies and it sort of frightens me from time to time. I should not have to have an unlisted phone number. Most people shouldn't, but they do. We shouldn't have to live like this. We shouldn't have to lock our cars and chain our bicycles to the kitchen sink, but we do. I think that criticism transcends some changes that have taken place from the 1930s and 1940s and 1950s up to present day. It has gotten worse, a lot worse.

JG: You didn't feel that way when you first moved here?

EB: No, I didn't. No. No.

JG: When would you say this changed?

EB: I think it began to change probably in the 1980s. We lived on 38th Street, and I can remember the kids leaving bicycles out. The reason I yelled at them was, "Because your mother is going to break her leg, that's why I want this bicycle picked up," not the fact that someone was going to steal it. The first bicycle was stolen at his school when my son was in the eighth grade. He was watching a game after school and boom it was gone. That was the beginning for us of starting to watch things. It did signify a time for us when we started really keeping close tabs so that we wouldn't get ripped off. It's a sad commentary. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know how far the pendulum can swing before we come back to some sanity here. It's scary.

JG: Do you find that people here leave you alone to do your own thing more than they might elsewhere? Or don't you think that's a problem?

EB: You mean about being a public figure?

JG: At least someone that has visibility.

EB: You'd be surprised. The people who live in Phoenix, most of them are like a parent. They feel very protective of me. If you went up and down the street and said, "In what house does Erma Bombeck live?" they probably wouldn't tell you. It used to be the same with Dick Van Dyke. They'd wander out there for days in the desert and say, "Where does Dick live?" No one would tell them. They rather protect you and let you have some privacy which is wonderful. You are free to move in the supermarket. You're free to shop and do all these things and act like a person. If they made you captive of your job, that would be a terrible thing. I mean the rats would be winning here, and you don't want that to happen. You want to be able to move around in society and be like everybody else. I don't mind grocery shopping. I like to do that. I like to be out and I like to go "mall" on a Sunday. I like to do that too. The ones who will make a fuss are mostly the tourists who are visiting and say, "Margaret, get a load of



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this. You're never gonna believe it!" That sort of thing happens but not by the locals. They're really great about it. They're terrific.

JG: Did you find any difference in the lifestyle out here, the socializing? Tell about your impressions.

EB: Oh, it was so informal. When we moved out here in the 1970s, I remember I wrote my girlfriend back in Ohio, "You'll never guess what I wore to the supermarket today." We wore long, flowing caftans, this was in the 1970s. We wore these big pajama things into the supermarket. It was the most laid back place I'd ever seen in my life. We didn't dress up a lot. Of course my husband loved it. Because of the extreme heat it was just a whole different feeling you had. It was wonderful. It has the feeling of a small town to me. Now I know we're over a million people. I know that, yet it is a small town. You know people. You go to affairs and you always know someone. It's a real interesting thing. I don't know how that happens when there are a million people here. But you can go all over the city and you might see someone you know. It's an amazing place to me.

JG: Do you think that has anything to do with this idea of the village concept?

EB: Maybe, I don't know. I hope they keep it that way. It's really very nice. Mostly we met a lot of friends through volunteerism. You're called upon to do a lot of things and then you get caught in the trap that you really care about those things. You're not just doing a public service announcement. I mean you get to a point where you really care what's going on in your city. It took me a while.

I know I said at the beginning of this interview that this was home and I wanted to live here. It's not exactly true because every time I would go out to give a lecture I'd say, "I'm going back to Phoenix." But when I said, "I was going home," that meant I was going back to Ohio. Maybe it was just a Freudian slip. Then one time I was flying out here really late at night. You'll know how long it is ago when I tell you that the captain of the airplane sent a stewardess back and said, "Tell Mrs. Bombeck to come forward, I want to show her something." I went up into the cockpit – which you're not permitted to do anymore – and he said, "Hey, I wanted you to see. This is why we call it 'The Jewel of the Desert.'" He said, "We leave Chicago and we got nothing down there but blackness; a few fires from the Indians, not a whole lot out there. Look out here. This is Phoenix." I looked out that cockpit window and it was like a panorama as far as the eyes could see from one side to the other. I had to turn my head to see these little sparkling lights. It was glorious up there. He said, "You going home?" I said, "I'm going home." It came out and it seemed like at that moment I did belong. I did belong to this community. It was mine. You have to put something back into a community before you get that feeling. I had arrived at the time where it was home. That's where I was going, back to all those lights. It was beautiful, just beautiful.

JG: We'll touch a little more on your role in the community in a few minutes. I have one question for you concerning your impressions of the West and Phoenix, which ought to be near and dear to your heart. Maybe it's the wrong question because you might talk for hours, but what do you think about so-called Western humor? Do you notice a difference, or to you is it the same? Is there Western humor?



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EB: I don't think so. It's really funny you're asking a question about humor, because ironically I've been doing this for thirty years. Ironically humor is something I never dissect. I always think it's wrong to dissect humor. What makes people laugh in a certain area? It's a lot of things. Humor has to be universal. It also has to be close to the truth. It's more risky than bungee cord jumping. It really is. You get up there on a tight wire without any clothes on and you do a balancing act and you walk across that wire very slowly. You could fall off into bad taste or you could fall off the other side for sensitivity. It's a tough road out there and you're all by yourself. You're saying, "Look at me and laugh" and you're asking something pretty amazing from someone. Usually you're asking them to laugh at themselves and their own foibles. But you're asking them to take a chance with you and it's such a good feeling when they laugh that you never question why. So what I stick with pretty much is universality. It's a hard job because of what you have to do. You have to get the attention of children. You have to keep the people you've always had. You have to get new people all the time to laugh at you. You have to laugh at old age. You have to laugh at not having a job. You have to laugh at being overweight. You have to laugh at all the "no-no's" of society, and hopefully you can do that.

When I moved to Arizona it used to be a joke that your humor would be drier, which I thought was the worst joke I'd heard in my entire life. I said, "I don't think it's going to make any difference." I challenged someone to tell me when I moved from Ohio to Arizona, had my humor changed and they couldn't do it. It is so across the board at this stage and I don't think it makes any difference at all. I like to play to Sun City. I like to play to Glendale, Sedona, and Tucson – all over the state – and I have had Native Americans, Chicanos, teenagers, the Beatitudes [a retirement community]. All of it you know and you play to a very broad audience. Now whether I get them every day, I doubt it, but there will be something that pops up that they will laugh about. I don't think there's any difference in humor in the West.

JG: Do you think your humor has a kernel in it that you're trying to share with everyone?

EB: Truth, got to have truth. If you don't have truth, people will not relate to it. You must have truth. You have to be close enough to the truth where they don't feel they are a part of it, and yet you can't get too far away from it or it has no meaning. Again, you're going the fine line. I think if you're just doing one-liners, that's not humor, those are one-liners. It's like a Chinese dinner – you know you laugh and you can't remember why – you know two hours later you need more. It's difficult. It's a difficult craft and yet I find that people adapted to it. The column was in Phoenix before I got here. I had a built-in audience when I came. Some very nice editor bought this, I think, two years before I moved here. I had an audience built in before I came which helped.

JG: In reading your biography, you decided that Phoenix was such a lovely place that you were willing to uproot your whole family. Do you ever have second thoughts about that move?

EB: No, never. I'm a restless person. I'm a curious person. I'm never married to anything. I've heard of



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women who say, “Oh, I couldn’t leave this house, my babies were born here.” What does that mean? I don’t know. I don’t have that kind of relationship with a house. I don’t even want to clean it. I think your happiness is wherever your family is. All my family isn’t even here now, but I know where they are. They’re a phone call away. I think that’s mostly what it is. I’m not married to this house. I’m not married to any one area. I’m still happy here and I’m staying here. But I feel this is a huge beautiful country. Do you ever travel and you go into a spot and you think, “I can live here, this is great.” It’s a feeling you have about a place that you could do that. I’m not ready to move yet, but I’m saying there are places where you do have that feeling. Other places you think, “Get me out of here.”

JG: You settled in Paradise Valley originally and you’re still here. Why did you choose Paradise Valley and what did this place look like when you first came here?

EB: The first house we owned here was on 38th Street, which was just across from Charlie Keating. He didn’t live there then. In fact, that was all vacant land across the way. Then Lou Grubb built a house there. That was a lot of desert area back there, which is why we liked it. It seemed a little remote. When you come out and have a week to buy a house – you don’t know areas, you don’t know where you’re supposed to be, you don’t know what’s good or what’s bad. You don’t know those things. So what you do is go into a house and if there’s an onion in the oven, it has a nice feeling to it. You think, God this is a great place. It was almost like that. I love to decorate houses. I’m terrible, I’m a frustrated decorator. I just love to do it. A lot of the houses I went into were so well done I figured they didn’t need me, so I didn’t need that house, so then I walked out.

JG: That’s an unusual approach.

EB: It is an unusual approach. When we went to this house, it was a house that had been built up to a point and then someone did not want to finish it. I thought it was calling my name. I went in and we looked at it; there was still tile to be picked out and landscaping to be done. I thought, “Yes, I could put my imprint on this.” So that’s the house we chose. There was a lot of desert off 38th Street at that time. Then we just watched it build up and sprawl and move out. This area where we live now was mostly mountains. Now there are sixty houses back here.

JG: Where did your children go to school?

EB: Camelback, Squaw Peak. You may have remembered them as they were the only children in North America who had to ride a bicycle.

JG: No, I think I had a couple too.

EB: You couldn’t have, they were the only ones, the only ones in the entire state and people used to talk about them, point to them and say they were out of touch. Everyone else had cars but they didn’t.



JG: Did you have shopping areas out here then?

EB: No, still don't. God forbid we should have a service station.

JG: What changes have you seen in Phoenix itself, the downtown area, since you've been here?

EB: That's sort of hard. I anticipated this question and I wondered how I would answer it as I really don't have an answer. You have to understand that I sit all day long, for about six hours a day, in this house. Sometimes a week will go by and I will never get out of this house. My office happens to be in my home. I know it sounds like I'm out of touch, which I am. Probably the few occasions I have been downtown have been to jury duty – they wouldn't take me. I couldn't find a parking place. I have been to the Heard Museum a couple of times and Herberger recently. I don't do downtown a lot. I just don't. I have been in America West Arena. A lot of things have grown up. I'm not a downtown person, so that's a hard question for me.

JG: Have you traveled much in Arizona?

EB: Yes, we really have. In fact, when we first came out you can't imagine how glorious it was to have a new state. In Ohio we knew every inch of it like the back of our hand. We were born there. Here we had a whole new state. Everything was so new and exciting. Every Sunday my husband and I would get a little cooler, put some cold chicken and a beverage in it, and take off to explore some part of Arizona – he with his camera and me, I would just vegetate. I would look out and drink it all in. We saw a lot of Arizona. We went to rodeos and small towns and had the best time. It's a great state to explore. I sound like a Chamber of Commerce. I don't mean to, but it is unique. I love to show it off.

JG: Have you gone back to any of the places that you went to twenty years ago?

EB: No, I rarely go to the same place twice. I rarely go on vacation to the same place twice. It's because I started traveling so late in my life that there's so much to see. I'm so old that I can't afford the luxury of going to the same place twice. I have to keep moving. Sometimes I go to a place that I absolutely love and someone will ask if I'm going back, and I answer that I have to press onward because I would have missed that place if I went to the same place all the time. Pinetop is about the only place where we really keep going back and that's changed a little, not a whole lot. It's still a nice little town.

JG: I'll ask you what your favorite spot in Arizona is, and I could guarantee you're not going to tell me Grand Canyon.

EB: You're wrong.

JG: No, you are going to tell me Grand Canyon? I'll be darned.



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EB: I love the Grand Canyon. When I lived back East that's probably the one spot that I fantasized about. I always said, "Before I die I'm going to see the Grand Canyon, I am." I had no idea what I was talking about, not a clue. I didn't know what it looked like. I was totally unprepared. I heard people talk about the Grand Canyon and I thought, "That sounds like a great place." We moved out to Arizona and we got in the car and I had built this up so big in my mind. We reached the rim and I had Bill stop the car. He said, "We're not there yet. We have to go back to where the lodge is." I said, "Stop the car." I hopped out and I peeked over the edge. I saw a little bit of the Canyon, the beginning of it – went crazy. I stayed at the Canyon for three days and I watched the sun go down on it. Now I'm thinking, "I've got to go down that river on that raft," which we did. I tell you I have never seen such a place that affects you spiritually. I'm not some evangelist here, but it really affects you. It makes you feel extremely small.

I will tell you a story. "Good Morning America," for all those years, let me pick out what I wanted to do, what I wanted to say and what message I wanted to get across. I said to them, "I want to do something on the Grand Canyon, something really different." They said, "Go do it." We got the researchers busy and found out there was a blind boy from NAU, Northern Arizona University. He was willing to talk to me about his trip through the Canyon. I thought this was great. I wondered what a blind person saw in the Canyon. I met this young man on the rim of the Canyon. I took his arm and sat on the edge; I mean it was scary. He didn't care, he's blind, he can't see. He didn't know where I was taking him. His feet are dangling over the side. He was a real neat kid. I said to him, "Tell me what you saw when you went down the Canyon." I still have the tape of it. It's the most astounding description you've ever heard. How he felt the rocks and the heat coming from them and knew that the sun was so intense on them and felt the little crevices, and heard the birds overhead. He had senses of the Canyon that sighted people never have. I don't think I've ever looked at the Canyon in the same way. It has had a lot of meaning for me.

JG: What a wonderful experience.

EB: It was wonderful and it knocked the socks off these people in New York. It's run several times even after I left the show.

JG: I guess that's what they mean when people talk about seeing something through your mind's eyes.

EB: It was so neat. He could feel the different layers in his touch, the time and the ages. It was exciting to talk to him, and everyone was awed by it. What did you think I was going to say would be my favorite spot?

JG: I didn't know, I expected something that would be totally different from the kind of answer that you get from most people. I figured you would have some little place in Arizona that was your special place.

EB: No, my place belongs to the world. I feel so great when I look around and I don't hear English



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spoken. I hear German, Italian and Japanese. I hear all these languages of people who have come a great distance to see this magnificent spot in our state. I'm really proud of it.

JG: There are many other spots they come to see that have their own unique beauty. How do you feel that Arizona has changed your life and your children's lives or affected your life? Do you think that you would be the same person had you not moved here?

EB: I don't know, that's really hard to know. I think about those things a lot. If my father had lived, would I have gone into writing, would I have gone to college, would I have done this stuff? That's hard. Hindsight is really hard to figure out. I don't know if it's the evolution of what you are, the greening of you, the maturing of you. I don't know what it is. I don't know that a state changes you. I don't know that the state is a state of mind for me. I think my books change me. I think people change me, the people I meet. I don't know if a state can change you or not. That's a hard question.

JG: What would you identify as the most historically significant event or series of events that have occurred in Phoenix, and maybe even Arizona, since you moved here? What do you think has had the most impact since you've been here?

EB: Probably the most significant change has been its growth. It has been astounding. I hear stories that it was wilderness where The Casa [Franciscan Renewal Center] is at 5802 E. Lincoln Drive; how it was barren there and you felt like you were going out in the country. I thought it was a great period of growth when we came between 1965 and 1970.

Now it seems to be that the roads cannot contain all the people. I can sit on my porch here and count on it. There's gridlock every morning. That's bound to bring problems to a state, not only on the roads but in every aspect of our lives. It's bound to create a problem until we can catch up with it. That's why I think a lot of people are so reticent to say how great it is here when you're out in the East someplace, because there's such an influx of people. I think that's probably the greatest historic thing. If I were to list them from one to ten, that probably would be it.

JG: How do you think the area, particularly Phoenix since it is the largest metropolitan center, has dealt with the suburban growth, which is really what you're talking about?

EB: Probably not well enough. I think it's hard. When you have elected leaders – who come in every two, three or four years – unless they get a decent length of time and they really have some vision and some guts and some leadership, it is really hard to move it all ahead. That seems to be a problem with every city I think. Sometimes I get a feeling that Phoenix is a little slow to accept new ideas. Don't tell us what to do, that kind of mentality. That's good to a point, but I think you have to listen. I think you are obliged to listen and to weigh it and not close the door so quickly on suggestions. Some of these problems are such that you can solve them but it takes a lot of people. There's such good leadership in the city from time to time. I have seen it and they have made a difference, but sometimes it's like



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butting your head against the wall. You get a period where the leadership is bad and you stand still for three or four years. We shouldn't be standing still, we should be moving on. If you get a leader who has some ideas, some may be good, some may be bad, but I think you're obliged to try some of them, and we're very slow to do that here.

JG: How has the quality of your life been affected during the 20 years you've been here?

EB: The quality of my life has been great. On a personal level my career has never been better. However I can see beyond that and I can see that a lot of people's lives could be a lot better. I know you're going to get to the volunteerism but that's where that comes in. It's one thing to sit there very smug and say, "My life is great," and to the rest of you, "Good luck." I don't think you can do that, I don't think you can do that at all.

JG: Why don't you touch on those things that are near and dear to your heart and relate them to the whole picture of volunteerism in Phoenix and what you see.

EB: Oh, it's a great city for volunteerism. It's the greatest. I've always said you meet some of the better class of people in volunteerism. We started out, Bill and I, in this community with the first volunteer job we ever did down at Salvation Army. We filled up little boxes at Christmas in the warehouse – little can here, little something there, little candy canes here. We started off doing this on the assembly line. We had the whole family down there. The kids were doing it, my mother and dad were doing it, and we were all doing it. Then it's like an evolution. I've never had one thing that I've stuck with for 1,000 years. I don't do that. Volunteer people seem to think, "You don't let them down, you don't go on to the next one." That's not true. You get burnt out sometime and you go on to the next one. Anything you feel you can bring some freshness to, and you have to keep fresh doing that. I mean you're not going to be doing this job 20 years from now; you're going to be doing something else that catches your fancy. That's the way we work. Whatever sort of needs fixing at the moment.

We've been through the March of Dimes and the YWCA. I'm not doing as much for the Kidney Foundation but I will support them to the day I die. They're a great group. Now I'm moving on to another phase which is breast cancer. I'm trying to get mobile mammogram units to go into South Phoenix and on Indian Reservations and try to pick up the cost for mammograms for disadvantaged people who can't afford them. It would save a lot of lives and I'm excited about it. I'm excited about it because it's something new. It's a new thrust and that's what I want to be doing. It doesn't mean I'm going to be doing that for the next twenty years either. There are a lot of things in this city that are exciting. There's a van that goes around and picks up food all along Camelback from the restaurants and feeds the homeless. I can't remember the name of it, but it's such a great idea. It's a terrific idea, and to me that's where you're giving something back to the community. You're never going to be a part of this city and this time until you do reach out and do that.

My kids do it. My one son reads for the blind on Sun Sounds in Phoenix. My daughter feeds the



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homeless. My other son in Los Angeles has a tandem bicycle. They put a blind person on the back and my son sits on the front and pedals him all over Los Angeles—around Santa Monica, along the beaches and stuff. His particular person is a blind stand-up comic who has since retired. My son said he hears more jokes in a morning than you can imagine. You see, you get more out of it than you ever give to it, ever. Don't think that you're doing anything great because it's coming back to you tenfold.

JG: Do you think the City of Phoenix is supporting these volunteer groups?

EB: I do, no doubt about it. If every volunteer in the city for one day were to say, "Okay, I'm off today," this city would come to its knees. They can't afford us. We're too expensive. It would go broke. They couldn't possibly afford all the volunteer help they have. It keeps the city together. It's the glue. It's what makes it work, and I see this. I see people in other cities, as well as my own, who are doing these jobs and making things happen and it's wonderful. You would be amazed at the number of volunteer jobs that you think are paid jobs. They don't get any money for it. I know Bill is so involved with the Red Cross. I see these people. You read on the front page about the disaster in Florida, in Homestead. You go out to Sky Harbor and there the volunteers are. I mean before that headline hits the streets, they're there with their hard hats. They're there with their big boxes of forms and their suitcases. They are volunteers and we won't see them for three weeks or more. Sometimes they're gone for months. They don't get paid anything for this, but they're over there trying to get these people back on their feet, trying to get the electricity turned on. It's a wonderful feeling to know there are organizations around doing this stuff. This is what a city is all about. This is what Phoenix is all about, as far as I'm concerned.

JG: How would you compare Phoenix in other cities as far as volunteerism is concerned?

EB: We work with the best of them. We are right up there with the best, there's no doubt about it. We don't have to hang our heads over volunteerism in this state. It's on every level, that's the amazing thing. It isn't just people in Paradise Valley who come back from the tennis game and look for something to do. That's a misnomer. These are people who are really dedicated to this. I feel that, not only on that level, but on middle class, lower economic levels, they all volunteer. Some people on lower economic levels say, "Hey, I can't give money, but I can give my time." You'd be surprised.

Another surprise is the number of teenagers. You hear bad things about teenagers all the time. They're on drugs, they're shooting each other at night, they're in gangs and they're hard to handle. There are more teenage volunteers in this country now than there have ever been. I see it here in Phoenix. They do all kinds of stuff that people never hear about, so it's an active community.

JG: Where do you think this ground swell is coming from? Do you think it's coming from the top down, from the churches, from government, from the people themselves?

EB: Pure need. I don't think economically we've ever been at such a low ebb in our lives. I think



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people – and it isn't even political – I think they just picked up the slack. Things have to be done and they said, "We'll do it." I can see this infiltration going in the schools where they've had to cut things. People are saying, "Hey, we'll do it. We'll get volunteers. Parents will do it." I think most people are on overload, but that's okay. They're willing to do it and they're willing to raise money. It's a nice feeling. If you want to know what's right with America, this is where to look. There's this reaching out of people, on some common ground, where they don't question anything except here's a job, let's do it. That's what keeps me going. That's why I'm optimistic and I write humor.

JG: I know you wrote a book on children who had cancer. What did you do with the proceeds, and why did you do this, what got you started?

EB: Well, it really wasn't my book. It's one of these projects that sort of had a mind of its own and shoved me around and told me what to do. I really had very little control over it. There was a need for a book to put in the hands of children who were surviving cancer. They needed to know that someone was still living and beating the disease. They needed optimism and they needed someone to give them a voice and say, "This is the way I want people to treat me. This is what's on my mind." Because they're little kids they can't write books and they don't have their own publisher and agents, so that's all I was. I was an instrument for them.

I started to interview these kids and boy I was hooked. They wanted it to be funny, can you imagine that? I took the first three chapters in and said, "What do you guys think?" They said, "No, no, Erma, you've got to make it funnier." I said, "What do you mean I've got to make it funnier? If I've got to make it funnier, give me lines. Come on you guys, give me something to go on." They did. They gave me their optimism. They gave me their feelings. I followed these kids around for two years. I went all over the country interviewing everybody.

Their book came out and they were pleased with it. The domestic proceeds totaled \$1,000,000 and went to the American Cancer Society for research. The foreign proceeds – which really weren't as much, I'm guessing maybe \$150,000 – went to the Eleanor Roosevelt Fund. This is a fund that is set up to exchange oncologists among foreign countries. In other words we get two from Holland over here and we send two to Germany. We get two from France and they get two from somewhere in Italy. This is a great program and we get there faster once we pool our knowledge. It was a great experience for me. It was a terrific experience because when I got cancer last April all I had to do was pick up this book and read it, my own book. I thought, "I'm not so bad off, I can do this." It's that kind of a book, it's a very optimistic book, makes you feel good.

JG: So you ended up with a little humor in it. That's a great healer.

EB: Oh, a lot of humor. It is a great healer and there are some things that should be said. The kids wanted to be treated like children first and patients second. People forget that. It's bad enough to have your childhood taken away from you with trips into the hospital and the drawing blood and the



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bone marrow and all this stuff. It's even worse when people start treating you as an adult patient who's going to die. That's not what you should do. I'm not going to say the book raced off the shelves. It's a hard book to even pick up. It's hard because you don't want to be depressed, but I found that this is a book that's going to be around for a very long time because when you need it, it's there. You're going to know it's there and you're going to thank God because you really do. I'm glad I wrote it.

JG: It's one of those things you'll always feel good about.

EB: Oh yeah, I should have been doing that. That was a little volunteer job that took about two years of research, then you write it and one year on the road to promote it. I don't begrudge it at all. It was a great time in my life, but then I'm ready to move on to something else.

JG: I'm going to go a little philosophical here and ask you if you were going to reach out to the politicians of Arizona and to the people of Arizona, what charge would you give to each of those two groups? What do you see that we need to concentrate on?

EB: Boy, you hit on something that I really feel strongly about. I don't know what's happened to politics, but I think we can do better with our candidates. Why better people aren't running, I don't know. We've got to stop electing used car salesmen and cocktail waitresses or this state is not going to move forward. I have to question sometimes why people run for office. Is it an ego trip? Does it look great on a business card? Does it look great on a resume? I don't understand this.

I want to believe people run for office who have some idea or vision which says I can make this better, I really can. I've got ideas that I want to implement. Now whether or not voters or the press dissect these people to such a point and expose their lives that they say, "Who needs this?" I don't know. But we have to find a higher caliber of person to run. We must do that. I look around at some of the people running for local offices and it really upsets me. I don't know if this is true anywhere else because I'm not anywhere else. I'm here, this is where I am. I notice it. It is very upsetting to me. It has nothing to do with your politics or what you are, it's just the caliber of person who is running—not good, no ideas, don't have any idea what to do once they get there. It wasn't just the AZSCAM thing. What it did was to give us insight into some of the people that we put in charge of this state. People are going to have character flaws, but stealing aspirin in a drug store on weekends. We've got to do better than this. I'm telling you things that I feel when I talk to my husband over the dinner table. I really try to support people who will not be an embarrassment to the state. Everyone goes through bad times but we've had a lot of it recently, a whole lot of it. It bothers me terribly, it really does.

JG: What would you say to the people of Arizona and of Phoenix? What do they have to do? How do they have to change in your opinion?

EB: We have to have an attack of guts from some people who really do have the ideas and say, "Hey, you know, dodge the slings and arrows, and go for it. I mean if you've got something to give, I know



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it's going to be difficult for you. I know it's going to be hard. We never said it would be easy, but run the gamut. I mean really go for it and try to make a difference." Hopefully, we'll see someone running who does have some vision for this state. Most of the people running, I don't even know what they're about. One person ran – this is true, and I'm not going to give a name – I watched the commercials and I never heard a voice. I don't know what the man sounded like; I don't know what he was saying. There was a voice-over and someone was saying what a great family man he was. Who cares? I mean, it's not important. I wanted to know what he was going to do for the state. What do you have in mind for us? How can you push us ahead? A lot of ideas wouldn't shake us up that much. I hate the idea of standing still because this is a great state. The population says move forward, everything says move forward. We're ready and it's something we must do. I tell them to go for it.

JG: It sounds good to me. In fact, I think that's probably a good way to live your life is to go for it. You only have one opportunity.

EB: It is. You can't play it safe all your life. You can say, "Look, I'd like to do this but I don't want to put my family through this." There is something at stake here and we've had some leadership that has been great and they have advanced us. You don't want to turn into a state of status quo, a state that never tries anything, never does anything. Even the states that are trying things and make a mistake, all right, they'll try something else and maybe it will work this time. I think that's the way life is. You have to keep trying all the time, trying different things, challenging yourself, that's what you have to do.

JG: Now I'm going to ask you a question that's, in a way, much more mundane. The Historical Society is doing some work on the Winnie Ruth Judd case. You came, I believe, during the period of time when they rediscovered her in California and Governor Williams was thinking about pardoning her, which he ultimately did. Just in case you have some thoughts or some recollections of what was going on at the time that might fit into this.

EB: None at all. I don't have any ideas at all. I remember she was very old and that's all I remember. I know the jingle that goes with it. In fact – this is strange – I didn't even associate Winnie Ruth Judd with this state. The Grand Canyon, yes, Winnie Ruth Judd, no. I really didn't associate her here.

JG: Speaking of associations, I mentioned to my daughter who is a school teacher in New Jersey, that I was going to be talking with you and she said to me, "Oh, I didn't know that Erma Bombeck was from Arizona." You mentioned earlier that your humor was universal and it seems to me that you probably have achieved that. I think probably what you set out to do, which is touch everyone, you have achieved.

EB: I think those of us who live here—Bil Keane, the "Family Circus" [cartoonist]—have to be careful to an extent that we do keep it universal. We can't talk about the heat too much. I've mentioned a couple of times in the column I'm from Arizona. I'm from the West. It's not a big secret, but we do have to be careful because other people wouldn't relate to 115 degrees, they wouldn't do that. I don't relate to it myself actually. You have to be careful. If you'll notice in Bil's column he'll have snow and snow



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shovels and all the things that probably they're having back in Philadelphia. So you do have to be careful when you're syndicated to keep it is as broad-based as you can. So we mention winter from time to time.

JG: Well, there is winter in Arizona, which a lot of people don't know about.

EB: Oh, I hate people who say we don't have seasons. Of course I have seasons. I'll get out that moldy winter coat and show it to them.

JG: Before we close this interview, do you have any recollections that you would like to share with us that I didn't happen to bring out or any thoughts you would like to share with us?

EB: The first thing that comes to mind is I have a lot of hope for this state. I'm like a lot of people; I'm here so I don't want it to be sprawling and big. I love the idea of it being a great metropolitan city with everything available to you, and yet I like the idea that it's a state of such small-town diversity. I tell everyone, where else in this world can you go and have Barry Goldwater, Alice Cooper and Erma Bombeck in the same neighborhood? I mean does that boggle your mind that we'd be on the same planet, let alone be in the same neighborhood? I love this idea of being a small town and knowing the checkout girl, your dental assistant and the needlepoint lady. I hope that it keeps its newness. The thing that attracted me to Arizona is that it is such a young state. It really is. It's so young, the third youngest actually. You get the feeling when you come here that everything isn't finished yet and there's something you can do. A lot of states have been around so long, I mean what are you going to do to them? What are you going to do to Virginia, for crying out loud? I mean everything has happened there. It's finished, not finished like over, but I mean everything has been done to it. This is new, it's something to build on, and it's something to pull together, to create. We're in the midst of creation here. We're still very young. I think that's what I love about the volunteerism. Everything you do is going to be a part of this for a long time to come. I like that idea of being a part of it.

JG: We like the idea of having you here and the Historical Society likes the idea of you being willing to be one of our Historymakers™. I thank you on behalf of the Arizona Historical Society and also myself for giving all of us, because we're all going to listen to this, the opportunity to hear what you have to say and get some of your viewpoints and a number of kernels of wisdom. Thank you very much from all of us.





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Carter and Rosalyn Carter



With ___ and Gary Collins



With Rose Mofford and

