

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: AL FORGIT
INTERVIEWER: Roberta Deahl
DATE: May 15, 1969
LOCATION: Newport Beach, California
PROJECT: Fishing Industry in Newport Beach

RD: I'm speaking with Mr. Al Forgit, a prominent Newport Beach resident for many years now. Mr. Forgit played an active role in city government as a Newport Beach councilman for four years, as well as having established and operated several different business enterprises in the Newport Beach area over the past few decades. Mr. Forgit, how long have you been a resident here in Newport Beach?

AF: August of 1935.

RD: And, for how long have you owned and operated this particular hardware store here?

AF: Fifteen years.

RD: And, for what length of time did you serve as a Newport Beach, uh, city councilman?

AF: Sixty-four to sixty-eight.

RD: Uh-huh? Mr. Forgit, I'm very much interested in your role in the once-prominent commercial fishing industry here in the Newport Beach area. Is it true that you, at one time, were the proprietor of a rather large commercial fishing fleet in this locality?

AF: I owned and operated the Balboa Sport Fishing Fleet out of the Pavilion of Balboa from 1935 to 1946. We had a fleet of forty-two live bait boats that operated entirely in the summertime, and in the wintertime there were commercial boats. And, we done most of our fishing for Western and for Italian Seafood, which, during the war, the name changed to West Coast Cannery on account of the Italians switching their affiliations there. So, they changed it to the West Coast Cannery.

RD: Mm. The West Coast Cannery then took on another of these, uh—

AF: And, when the West Coast sold, they sold to Western, which is Tommy and Longmoor.

RD: Uh, before I get into more technical things about your fishing fleet and boats and things like that, I'd like to begin by inquiring as to how you became involved in commercial fishing in the first place. Was it a—was commercial fishing a booming industry that might have attracted you to begin with, or did you recognize its possibility? Or, perhaps, was it just a taste for adventure, the challenge of establishing and *maintening*—maintaining such an enterprise?

AF: No, in 1922 I knew some, uh, boys that were fishing for Van Camp Cannery, Japanese boys that I met when—we had a service station, at the time, at Eleventh and Hill behind the *Los Angeles Examiner* up there. And, they asked me to go with them a couple of times, and, uh, I thought it was a pretty good deal. So, I'd fish in the wintertime and partly in the summer, and the old man, he'd take care of the business. I was single, just coming out of the Army, and everything went pretty good. But, I liked it much better than workin' for a livin'. It had a sort of sporting idea, catching fish. So, one thing led on to another, and I went into business for myself. I bought a boat—

RD: What year was that?

AF: When I first worked, I worked on what they called a striker boat with, uh, five Japanese boys. And then, later on I went on purse seiners. And then, I bought a boat and I done the chumming for the purse seiners. I'd get a school of fish lined up, they'd lay the net, load me, and I'd go down and unload. And then, I'd go haul bait, and they'd tell me where to be at a certain time. We had no radios in those days. They'd tell me to go here or go there, and I'd start circling with the boat and get the fish in a big school, and these fellows would lay the net. And, that's how we made our living for a few years.

RD: When did you first formulate your plan to go into commercial fishing on your own?

AF: When the war broke.

RD: World War II?

AF: Yeah. Because, then I—uh, the stamps, and the red tape around, and everything else, I decided to take over. I had a kind of a halfway deal going in Long Beach, and I transferred down to the Pavilion in 1935. And, it got to going pretty good. So, when the war broke I thought I would be better off in a commercial end of it than I would—

RD: This was in 1941.

AF: Yeah—than I would be in the gas station business. So, we sold out the gas stations and moved down here. And, of course, went back to Washington. And, this was the only port that was open for sport fishing on the West Coast—that is from Alaska to San Diego. This was the only port you could go out of. And, when the albacore showed up, which had been gone for twenty-five or thirty years, it created something that nobody had ever seen of this nature in Newport Beach. There wasn't a boat available that you could get to go sport fishing.

RD: It was that popular?

- AF: Yeah, it was the only place that you could go on the coast. So, I went down and bought a barge, and I paid the first couple of months for an immigration officer to stay on that barge because you had to get Coast Guard clearance to go out. This was the only port open. And then, in September, we closed down right at Labor Day, and the canneries opened. And, the entire fleet went up here to fish for the canneries.
- RD: Where was your particular vessel located—your operation? Where along here?
- AF: We kept all the boats at the Pavilion. Some of them out there on the mooring in the front, but they were all tied four or five deep, which wouldn't be a lot today. (laughs)
- RD: Did you have an office then?
- AF: Oh, yeah, we had five sporting goods stores, a restaurant, an office, ticket reservations. We had an agent. We had programs on KFI and KFWB—
- RD: What sort of programs?
- AF: There wasn't any television in those days, it was radio.
- RD: What sort of programs? Advertising?
- AF: Advertising the fleet and what the catches were, and what times the boats left.
- RD: Uh-huh? And, are any of those buildings still down there along the Pavilion and in that area?
- AF: Well, they've remodeled the Pavilion, of course. And, the bowling alley isn't upstairs anymore. They have an art gallery up there. They remodeled it. There's a new own—
- RD: You can't even recognize it.
- AF: Yeah. And, there's a new owner down there now, Davey's Locker, and I imagine that they'll put a pretty good size fleet in there, of some kind. I imagine they'll either put a Catalina boat or a—because, coming way up the bay up here in the end with their boats is kind of a nuisance.
- RD: I wonder—when you started out, did you have any advisor or financial backing from another source—partners—or, was this purely an individual venture on your part?
- AF: No, I was—I was alone. The first boat cost me \$400. It was on the closeout. It was a boat called *Kobato*. It was a Jap boat. The Jap went blind and he didn't pay his light bill. Now, a foreign boat has to pay all of the lights. And—
- RD: It was a Japanese boat.
- AF: Yes, it was a Japanese boat. And, in 1935—August was the last you could buy that type of boat and haul passengers. A commercial boat with a foreign bottom is not allowed to haul passengers anymore. So, I went in all by myself there. I was at Long Beach—

Waterhouse Landing. I moved down here. And, the reason I moved down here was the harbor opened in 1936. I moved down in August, but the dredging hadn't been completed. You couldn't get in and out very good. I got stuck a couple of times in front of the Pavilion, and I had to wait until next morning for high tide to get off. But, in '36 it was in pretty good shape.

RD: You were on your own then. And then, you moved down here, and during the war you formulated a whole fleet?

AF: That's right.

RD: Oh, I see. Would you have been acquainted—?

AF: The purse seiner end of it is and was the most fascinating for a long time because when you set a large net and get a large haul, it's a fascinating business. But, it's a very destructive business. When you lay around a school of fish, it kills everything. There's no spawn, there's no—none of them get away, either. They're in the sack, they're there. And, when you eliminate the spawning, of course, you eliminate the fish. It's only a question of time. And, uh—

[00:09:45]

RD: When you came into it, was it a pretty lucrative business?

AF: *Well*, we made good money. I wouldn't say you got rich at it because the price was—of course, the differential, again, was there. We got six-and-a-half a ton for sardines. See, what a lot of people don't know is that every time you dumped a load of fish at the cannery, if you had ten tons, you got penalized a dollar or two a ton all the time for the Fish and Game Commission. So, if the price—after I got off the purse seiners, of course, there was a little bit of friction there all the time. You were mostly fishing with Japanese, Russians, and Portuguese, and they was always a little—oh, friction between.

RD: Were they—foreigners sharing the same water and everything?

AF: Yes. Some of it was a language problem. You had to learn. They, uh, they lived differently. And, if you were gone some they didn't like it, so—

So, when I got into the sport racket down here, I found out then that there was a terrific waste of fish there, too. And, I didn't like a good deal of the waste of fish. I joined the Sportsmen in '38, trying to abolish the purse seining to a certain degree, and trying to at least set a spawning season so that the fish could stop and rest a while, or spawn, or have refuge where they could set—Catalina and Clemente and the [Channel] Islands would have been a perfect setup, but we lost it. We just didn't have enough money and enough guns. The commercial men misrepresented everything, of course. So then, I stepped out, and I had a Fish and Game officer who was of the same frame of mind that I was. I had a young fellow on my boat who volunteered to get arrested and test the fifteen fish law. And, Judge Dodge in Costa Mesa held it up and fined it, so from then on, the law *was* the law—when you got arrested, you got arrested. But, up to that

time, it had been on the books but it had never been enforced. But, after Judge Dodge said it—

RD: Did it help for a while, or—?

AF: Well, it helped out in this respect. The barracuda and yellowtail had reached the point where they were really suffering. Of course, everything is gone now because it's terribly over—overfished. Nobody's protected the fish. *Nobody*. And, it's one of them things. I don't know if it would have done any good or not because of the new system of roaming the high seas with these big canneries. Them Russian and Jap boats, that's what they are, they're canneries. When they come off there they're in a can. So, that's what they're doing even to your salmon up there. Now—

RD: (inaudible)

AF: Now, there's supposed to be certain sized fish and everything else, but if you're out to sea and you dump a load of fish in there and it comes out, they're canned on the other side, how can you tell the size of it? You don't know whether it's legal or not.

RD: How far offshore is this?

AF: Oh, they roam all over. There's no—they just roam the high seas.

RD: And, they have a cannery right there.

AF: Oh, they have a cannery right there, sure. So, if we'd have put seasons on and saved all those fish, I think we'd have lost them anyway now. I think these people come over here—because, I see no reason how you could stop them. And, of course, when the albacore showed up, I went and bought boats and I went into fishing commercially for albacore. When the mackerel gave up here, I went to albacore fishing.

RD: What year was that then?

AF: Oh, I fished albacore from about forty—forty-six on. After I sold out the fleet down here and the pastures, I went into commercial fishing. And then, the last couple of years I've been fishing broadbill, which is a—

RD: Now just pleasure fishing, though. (laughs)

AF: Well, no, it's a cannery, you see? Broadbill. Marlin is a sport fish. Broadbill is the one you throw a harpoon at. And, I've been selling them right here to The Crab Cookery, and you get a very good price for them.

RD: You're not in this on your own, are you? Are you doing this on your own?

AF: Yeah, there are just two on the boat, George Rhiner and myself. Well, you can make a good thing out of it. You can't get rich, you won't pay a lot of income tax, but if you're old enough to feel as though you're semi-retired, why, it's a pretty nice way to do it, if

you like the fish and if you like the ocean, which is what I like. *I* like the ocean. But, since 1922, when I first took out my license, the conditions have changed so much that there's not much you can fish for.

RD: Hm.

AF: There just isn't much of anything. It's been over-fished, and then, of course, the pollution. And, the kelp beds are gone—it's not the same ocean!

RD: And, that, in your opinion, would be partly due to the decline.

AF: Yes, you put everything together, and no spawning season.

RD: And, do you think there will ever be a lucrative business in commercial fishing down here, again, or are those days gone forever?

AF: No, I think they're gone forever. I don't think there'll ever be here—

RD: If anything, though, they'll slowly die out, the commercial fleets that are here. The dorymen are going out and—

AF: The State of California sold last year over two million licenses. I believe it must be about the highest state in the licenses, I guess. And, if you just take half of them and make a trip or two in the ocean, you can see what it does to the fish. And, all our fish: barracuda, yellowtail, and—and—you haven't seen little ones about two or three inches long, you haven't seen any of them in fifteen years. They just don't come up in quantities or are able to stay long enough to spawn. There're just no more little ones.

RD: That's what happened to the mackerel, in your opinion?

AF: Yes, that's what happened to the mackerel here. We used to lay a net out there for bait for fishing with jack poles in the old days, and we fished for the fresh fish market down there and doing our thing. You'd have a long bamboo pole—they called it a jack pole—and we fished for live bait, for barracuda, and bull bass, and sand bass. A lot of time you'd go out there and all you'd have for bait would be two- and three-inch mackerel. And, anybody that's been here since 1942 hasn't seen one. It's been that long since the mackerel spawned here because they catch 'em as fast as they come in. [brief interruption] So, as a result, when there's no little ones, there's no big ones.

RD: That's right. And yet, there's enough for commercial—I mean, for pleasure fishing.

AF: Not much.

RD: Just off the piers and that.

AF: Well, the pier fishing is done, and so is the surf fishing. It's very, very—we used to go surf fishing. If we didn't get a fair catch—not a good catch, a fair catch—*oh*, eight nights

out of ten, we thought it was very poor fishing. Now, if you get one fair night out of ten, you're lucky. This is the difference! (laughs)

RD: In operating your fleet, would you have been acquainted with any individuals who might have also owned and created commercial fishing fleets down here, other than—you were talking about the Japanese, and the Russians, and the Portuguese—

AF: Well, if you were up around San Pedro, I could take you to a great many of the old skippers and deck hands on other boats. Uh, there's no such thing as old-timers hardly anymore because the younger boys, they don't stay with it. They stay a little bit, but there's not enough money. They leave, they just can't cut it. If you have a family, you just can't make a living.

RD: Were you in competition with any other fleet that would have been owned by somebody here in Newport Beach, though?

AF: Well, Baritoni had quite a few at Port Orange, but they gave up and sold their boats. Of course, he died. And, Pollo was there. He's gone. David Locker, he came in too late.

RD: About what time was that?

AF: They came in after the canneries closed. They have a fish market over there.

RD: That's just recently then.

AF: They got the fleet there, but, you see, all they're doing is sport fishing. Of course, they're running the year round now on that sport fishing. They run—they run in the wintertime. We didn't do that. We fished for the cannery in the winter. I don't think you have anybody out here—left out here in Newport Beach.

[00:19:43]

RD: Did these people all disband their fleets before you? Were you the last—supposedly—around Newport Beach?

AF: I was about the last one, yes. When I gave up—

RD: Why—why would you speculate that the others disappeared before you—disbanded their fleets before you did? Did they have certain problems you didn't have?

AF: I had the largest. And, the fishing was fairly good for albacore. And, uh, this kept us alive and going good. But, when the—of course, when I seen the mackerel giving up, and then—when all the ports opened up, again—Long Beach, San Diego—when they all opened up, that spread the market out. I believe that the fishing industry held this town together for—that is, between the sport and the commercial fishing, which is the same thing because the same fleet that was carrying passengers in the summertime was filling up the three canneries in the wintertime. But, I think now, with the price of property and the type of harbor we have, and the type of people we have, that it's no longer a place for

a cannery or commercial fishing, of any—any description. I agree that the harbor would be much cleaner if we was to eliminate all kinds of commercial activities.

RD: Of course, then that would leave it open merely for pleasure boating instead of any fishing at all.

AF: This is right, this is right. Good, beautiful homes along the bay there, and—and, cut out the rest of it.

RD: You were telling me earlier about how the council of the city—

AF: Well, in 1935, of course—they had laws in '35 that you couldn't commercial fish in this confounded place—that is, the cannery business. So, the boys got together—we appeared before them three different times, and finally got it over to the fact that somebody had to produce some jobs here somewhere. So, they passed it that only the Newport boats could fish in the daytime, and no net boats, no purse seining. And, no night work. You had to be in before dark, and close the cannery down. And, you had to haul your own bait that day and fish with fresh bait only. There'd be no bait problem around here.

The war changed all that. 'Cause they wanted the fish, you see? They really needed it—it was a war effort. That changed everything around. And, after the war, of course, the fish disappeared, they'd fished them out. So, there was no need of any law.

RD: They're still working on that today, aren't they—I was going to say—against whatever commercial fishing is left in the area?

AF: Yes. If a cannery goes out now I don't believe you could ever get a permit for another one. I know you can't get it for smoked fish because I was there when that law went through. No more smoked fish in town. And, I think the thing would hold true for a cannery. I don't think they'd ever let you put a cannery back in here. But, I don't think there'd be any fish for you, so I don't think you'd have to worry about it. I think the fish is done.

RD: You say that the council—was it Mrs., uh, a Mrs. Hill was on the council, and she initiated this program against any kind of fishing in the area?

AF: No, it wasn't exactly that. It was about her time when people began to look the situation over.

RD: Nineteen fifty-two, I think.

AF: Whatever—in the fifties there, they began to look it over pretty strong about the commercial fishing. They started to get a lot of beautiful homes, and people got sick of that three o'clock in the morning noise. And—and, a lot of boats would come in and the seagulls would follow them in. There was a lot of disruption. And, about that time was when it started. And, ever since then there's been a kind of an undercurrent all the time to barrel down on the commercial men. Then, you couldn't park your boat everywhere—

and, they made a certain place—and now that they open that up to anybody—because, they got to the point where there was a lot of space but no commercial boats. So now, you can put a sport boat out where there used to be a commercial vessel anywhere you wanted to. That's when that started, you see? But, it didn't hurt nothing because the commercial end of it's gone anyway. The shark—

RD: And, that eventually—commercial fishing ended with the, uh—

AF: The mackerel going out.

RD: —the mackerel going out.

AF: Well, when the war gave up, they came out with different types of medicine, and the shark liver dropped to nothing. It's not worth anything anymore. But, shark liver, at one time, produced quite a good deal of fishermen here—shark fishing with nets—because, the liver was so dang expensive. They got a big price for liver. I fished about a year-and-a-half at it. It was a good deal, but as soon as the liver dropped down to nothing, you can't sell it now. They don't want it. They have other ways—other medicine now.

RD: That was the last effort for the commercial fishermen, then, to keep in the business?

AF: That's right. And, the lobster business is gone. There's not enough lobster to fish. Most of the lobster business, I think, is gone by the way of pollution.

RD: Mm, I think Mr. Thomas mentioned that in one of his tapes, about pollution.

AF: Abalones are gone the same way. They used to be great big things, and now they're about that big, and there's nothing in the shell. Dirty water. Pollution.

RD: But, at the time of—of the commercial fishing fleet—at its height—was really a profitable enterprise.

AF: Oh, yeah, yeah.

RD: Uh, I was wondering, for instance, what was the average salary for a fisherman? Did that depend on how much he caught, or did you put him on a pay scale?

AF: No, no, we fished straight shares.

RD: Straight shares?

AF: Straight shares. You just got paid on what you caught. Uh, some of the boats took a percentage for the boat. In my case, if the skipper had the boat all summer long, the boat took a share and every man took a share. And, they took the expenses right off the top. It made a good deal for them. But, there're a lot of boat owners that owned their own boat and did nothing but commercial fish. They used to take 40 percent off the top, and some of the boys didn't make as much as other boats. But, my boat had a very good—a very good deal there.

- RD: They got—
- AF: Yeah, they did much better because they had the boat year round. They'd haul passengers in the summer and commercial fish in the winter.
- RD: And, these other people would only commercial fish, and they—
- AF: Yeah, that's right. They'd float in and out, or would fish for so much a ton.
- RD: Um, you say that, in the early days, when the fishing was supposedly at its height, this was before the war and the population was about 6,900, or in the sixties somewhere.
- AF: Yes, I don't remember just what the population actually was here before the canneries opened. But, I know when we moved down here it was about 6,900.
- RD: It must have been a great part of the population that was involved with the commercial fishing enterprise, either in the canneries or in some other way as—as fishermen—
- AF: No. When we first moved down here, you see, there was only the one little cannery that opened up in '36.
- RD: That was Western?
- AF: No, Italian. 'Course, a little old man—Hearst, I believe his name was—opened it up, and he didn't last but about a season. Then, Bradbury and another boy from Long Beach, uh, Newport here took it over. And, they ran it awhile and then sold it to Italian Seafood. And they, in turn, changed the name to West Coast when the war broke.
- RD: West Coast became Western, is that it?
- AF: No, Italian became West Coast. Italian Seafood was in Long Beach, and they opened this branch down here.
- RD: Mm-hm. And, that was—
- AF: And then, they changed the name to West Coast Cannery, on account of the war. And then, the Western opened up after they did. And then, Garby opened up up here near Delaney's. It's torn down now. There's nothing there but Singer property.
- RD: What did he call his operation?
- AF: Garby's. Garby's Cannery.
- RD: And, they—Western was the last to go. Who was the first?
- AF: Garby went first.
- RD: And then?

- AF: And then, the other one. Western would have been gone a long time ago if it wasn't for the cat and dog food contract they *snagged* onto. They used to get these big chunks of frozen chicken—guts—and run them through the Clorox or something and turn them white and clean them up. And, that's what they've been doing for years. There's no fish there.
- RD: Hm. What is the name of this operation that cans the dog food—the cat and dog food out here?
- AF: I think they were fishing for Carnation. Yeah, they were fishing Carnation people. I think they called it Pet.
- RD: Yeah. The Pet Mill people, or whatever it is.
- AF: I think it—I think it—at any rate, Carnation people had the contract.
- RD: And, they're still here, and they're the last?
- AF: They're gone. They took the machinery out. It's up for sale.
- RD: So, they're not canning the—?
- AF: No, nothing. The machinery's gone.
- RD: No cat and dog food.
- AF: Yeah, from what I understand.
- RD: Then, that's the last to go.
- AF: Yeah, that's the last to go, the cat and dog food.
- [00:29:52]
- RD: You know, Western Cannery's going to be torn down soon, from what I understand.
- AF: Yeah, he wants to sell it, he told me. \$450,000. You want to buy it? (laughs)
- RD: (laughs) Tomorrow. What would you say—we were talking about, um, the influence of the industry—can you recall some of the jobs and markets that fed off the industry, at its height?
- AF: The who?
- RD: The, uh, types of jobs that fed off the industry at the height of commercial fishing here.
- AF: Oh, yeah. The commercial here—even the abalone fleet, which was very healthy here for years— [tape cuts out]

RD: You say that during the war the Newport Beach area was the only port open along the Coast? Could you give some reasons for that?

AF: That's right. It was the only port that was considered, uh, a recreation for the workers. And, it was situated such that there was a very small possibility of any foreign vessel coming into the breakwater, of any size there. They didn't seem to think there was any danger here.

RD: San Diego and Long Beach, then, were used for Military—

AF: Well, there were so dang many things up there. There was every device known in order to keep them from going into the harbor, submarine nets and every other dang fool thing. But, down here there was nothing, you see? There were no—and, there were a lot of boys coming back—in the hospital and things—and, they used to go out here for recreation. And, the men that worked all night in the shipyard, they'd come down and go fishing, and go get a few hours of sleep, and go back to work. They *had* to have some kind of recreation, and this was the area for Long Beach and San Diego. But 'Frisco, well now, you couldn't get a boat anyplace, you couldn't go fishing anyplace offshore. And, this is what made Easter week the big thing down here.

RD: (laughs)

AF: This—this was a jiving place. (laughs)

RD: In talking about fishermen now, I'd be interested to know if you controlled the hiring of fishermen in your fleet or was this left to subordinates of yours?

AF: No, I left it up to the skipper on the boat. If he had the boat in the summertime, with passengers—well, naturally, if he wanted to fish in the wintertime, he picked his own crew. I didn't bother him. We had 188 men working down there.

RD: Is that the height?

AF: Mm-hm. So, we had a pretty good-sized operation down there. We had live bait underneath the canopy there at the Pavilion. It was, uh, about 200 rowboats in there, we rented during the day. They bought their bait right there at the receiver. They still have the bait there now. The city tried to rule me out of that a couple of times, but it's—it's protected. There's no reason for ruling it out. There were no seagulls. There was no reason for getting it out of there. But, they did outlaw bait receivers. I used to have some bait receivers out in the middle of the bay in front of the Standard Oil dock, and they made me take them out. I had them there two years. Tom Bushea was harbor master then. And this, of course, was a pretty sleepy little town, in those days, so—but, after the town started to get pretty well on the road to getting a lot of boat traffic, why then, they made me take the receivers out of there. And, I had a row of twenty-two bait receivers right where the Balboa Bay Club is today.

RD: Oh, they wouldn't allow that now.

- AF: No, he made me take all them out of there, too.
- RD: Um, would you—this is always the fun part for the historian, to find out, in—in knowing different individuals, the fishermen, the skippers and all that—if you can recall any of the old tales the captains would swap, or, you know, any episode of tragedy or humor that you can remember of in your time of owning a fishing fleet, and being in contact with the captains and the fishermen, and—?
- AF: No, I wouldn't say they were too much involved there. We had our differences between the sportsmen and commercial men. We had our differences, but there wasn't nothin' out of the road. Once in a while you'd get a hungry purse seiner who'd come right behind your boat and lay on to your school of fish, but this is just the hazards of commercial fishing.
- RD: I wonder if you'd reiterate that tale you were telling me about, how you had that law passed, protecting the school of mackerel, where you hired that individual to, uh, go in and overload his boat. Would you tell us, again, how that came about? That—that's an interesting tale.
- AF: You mean, when you chum for another boat?
- RD: The tale you told me before about how you hired another individual to go in and overflow his boat so you could get that ordinance passed.
- AF: Oh, you mean the fifteen, uh—
- RD: Yeah, uh-huh.
- AF: Fifteen fish limit. Well, Pete Donaldson was a young fellow about sixteen, and had his granddad with him. They were from Los Angeles. I knew them pretty well. And, after the war was over, he bought one of my boats called the *Dinah Lee*—you saw the picture of that. He took it to San Pedro. Then, he built a new *Dinah Lee* up here in Costa Mesa, about a sixty-five-footer. Beautiful boat. So, Pete wanted to help me out. So, he's the one that put too many fish in the sack. When his granddad got off the boat, why, they got pinched. Blackie was waiting for them, Blackie Cuple. He was the game warden.
- RD: Did he know you were doing this because of the ordinance?
- AF: Oh, yeah. I talked it over with Pete, and I told him what the problem was—too many fish, lying all over the deck.
- RD: You couldn't find anybody to—
- AF: Nobody wanted to take 'em home. There were too many. And, I said, "There's no sense in this." I said, "We've got no place to throw 'em. You don't want them in the bay, dead and floating around." And, I said, "We have to haul them out next morning." And, he said, "Okay." So, sure enough, we came before Judge Dodge, and old Judge Dodge

cracked his knuckles. (laughs) So, that started the ball rollin' from then on. And, Pete Donaldson gets the, uh, the credit for getting the first fine. (laughs)

RD: You had him set up—

AF: Oh, sure. We wanted to test the law. And, the judge held it up.

RD: Now, we come to the good part. In your opinion, what was the impact of commercial fishing here in the Newport Beach area?

AF: Well, I've been here quite a few years. Like I say, we moved down here in '35. But, we'd been coming down here a few years before that. We used to like to come down here quite a bit, you know? We had friends here. They had one of these Christmases where you have a tree—about 1936 or '7, if I'm correct—seven, I believe—and, everybody tried to make it a city event. Everybody in the city would kinda cooperate. So, every fisherman in the fleet donated one ton of fish. At that time, one ton of fish was \$11.50. And, it was the best, the largest, and the, uh—I believe there were more happy kids that year than any year that I've been here. It was done by the fishermen. The largest payroll in the city for years was in the canneries. In the early days, if you didn't work for the canneries or on a boat or something, you didn't work hardly. There wasn't much here.

RD: It really had quite an impact.

AF: So, we had—when Peg and I moved down here, the population was only 6,900 people. Well, you know, with 6,900 people, there's no work. Because, if you had any work—like, I—I believe one of these electronics people up here has about 2,800 now, don't he—Cullins—2,500, or something like that? All right, we had 6,900 people for everything. So, you know, there wasn't very much. And, everybody opened at Easter, Easter Sunday, Easter week. And, they closed Labor Day. Everything closed up. Every restaurant, *everything!*

RD: And, why was that?

AF: Well, there was no business. The darn town died. You couldn't do any business!

RD: That was the period for the commercial fishing.

[00:39:00]

AF: Everything was gone. So then, when the canneries really opened and got going good, quite a few restaurants opened up. And, when the war broke and we brought all these people into here, then you had a different town.

RD: Mm-hm.

AF: And *again*, the fish industry is what brought it in. This was the only place you could go fishing. The three canneries operated full bore, and the sport fishing was at the highest

level of all time. They'll never—they'll never reach that level, again. We had a great many good boats, we had large boats carrying 'em. We had King's Landing, Nineteenth Street Landing, Port Orange, myself, and there were quite a few wildcatting.

RD: Mm-hm.

AF: All on account of this was the only port open. And, you take—I can call you the Packard Bell boys, and Cormier. I can name you many, many big yachtsmen over here now that came down here just to go albacore fishing.

RD: (inaudible)

AF: And then, he stayed here. He bought a place, and stayed. And, bought a boat. And, good boats. And, they are—well, Cormier, of course, is a Chevrolet dealer. And, the Bell boys are the Packard Bell outfit that bought out Gil Fillon. These—these are people who would have never probably come down here if it hadn't been for the fact that we opened this thing up for sport fishing. And, we did that by going to Washington and provin' out that we weren't in the road. I never could understand why they closed the outside piers like San Clemente and— [tape cuts out and resumes mid-sentence]

RD: —what you would have done.

AF: Well, there's only one fish, so if you want to go in and out—now, we have schoolteachers—in fact, a couple in San Jose College up there. That's what they do in the summertime. There's several of them. If you like the ocean and you have a boat that carries a few fish, and you get a kick out of it, your best bet is albacore because it's a terrific price. You can run out of San Diego, and you can follow that sport fleet out there, and it's only three or four hours. If you've got a good fast boat like some of them fellows, it—you get a very, very good vacation, if you like it. Quite a few of those fellows have their women with them—their wives—and, it's a regular summer vacation, and—and, they make a few bucks.

RD: But, uh, the idea of the fleet is out, and if you want to do individual commercial fishing, you can still do that.

AF: *Oh, yeah.* You can fish broadbill all summer long, you can fish albacore, you can fish bottom fish—but, bottom fish is—you can't even make gas and oil money hardly. And then, you still have your net fleet—there's a few fellows who fish out here.

RD: But, the fleet is individuals?

AF: Oh, yeah. It's all broken up now, there's not much to it. In fact, in Newport Beach there's only one or two buyers here, and they don't want too much fish.

RD: What markets are those?

AF: Delaney, and, uh, **Holly (?)** Seafood. They don't want much of anything. They'll take some fish, but if you come in with a pretty heavy load, you have trouble selling it.

RD: Is that right?

AF: Oh, yeah.

RD: Because, they have trouble selling it in the area here.

AF: Oh, yeah. This is not an area for fish. Not—they don't go for fish down here. It's hard to sell.

RD: Well, I suppose you could just say there's just too many people and not enough [fish]?

AF: It's not a fish town. People don't eat fish here much.

RD: And yet, that's what made it big to begin with.

AF: Of course, canneries—the sport fishing fleet here, I think, is healthy enough. I think they're doing all right. They don't carry a full load like we used to because there's too much competition. If you have to drive too far, you just—you can drop down almost anywhere and get on a boat. If you live at Redondo, you stay there. If you go here—anyplace you live now, there's a fleet there. San Clemente, and Oceanside, and San Diego. They've all got fleets along there. Good ones. Very good fleets. San Diego, of course, has got the prime location there because of that dang yellowtail there at Cornet Island. By the time the yellowtail quits and the albacore starts, why, if they have a yellowtail run and an albacore run, they've got a very good, healthy situation. And, up here the yellowtail have been very, very scarce for years. Not too good. And, there's bonita they're catching here. There's not much you can do with that. It's a very strong fish; very, very few people like to eat it. I don't like it.

So, it's not a healthy condition. But, most of these boats are individually owned. They operate off a landing; they make a living. But, that's a very poor way to make it.

RD: Yeah, it's a little more difficult for the individual, then.

AF: Not enough money in it. Another thing is the price is hurtin' everybody. They're hollerin' about baseball, they're hollerin' about football, they're hollerin' about sport fishermen are hollerin' about the light loads. But, the average, uh, you're depending on—and, I say this honestly because I've been in the type of these, and the type I'm talking about I've been in—and, I know the price has gotten out of line with the ordinary working Joe. And, this is the fellow that supports you. You take the \$2 bettor away from Santa Anita and Hollywood and they go broke. The fellow that has got money, he owns a boat and goes fishing by himself; he's got a—a nice cruiser. And, this is what this harbor [is] going to be right now. It's going to be a yachtsman's paradise. It is. Beautiful homes, frontage, and a wonderful bay. And, there's no room here for commercial fishing any longer. So, that if you've got a sport fishing boat, you have to depend on the ordinary Joe. And, the operating has got so high, the taxes—that the property owner along the waterfront is such that he has got to charge a high price. And, you go in to have a boat worked on today and it costs a fortune. So, it isn't his fault, but the prices are out of reach for the ordinary Joe. Now, if I go up to the ranch and get three

cowboys, they bring their wives, and they go down to San Diego fishing— (whistles) — who pays it? You wanna go on an albacore boat at \$15 a head, good Lord! You take your wife and a couple of kids, and if you're a working stiff—this is the man you depend on. The man with money don't want that type of boat. He don't have to. He's got his own places to go, or else he goes on a charter boat. Six or eight or ten of them'll charter a boat for so much and go fishing. And, this is the problem of—of paying big salaries to these fellows. You've got the charge at the gate when you pay a football player or a basketball player a million dollars like they're going to pay **Elsindore** there from UCLA. They don't pay it, you're the one who pays it. And, this is the way with that boat now. This last one they put in the water down at San Diego cost Bruce down there about 200 or \$300,000. Well, how's he going to pay it? He's got to raise the tariff.

RD: Did you say, uh—what was it—10 million pounds of fish was a good haul, at one time, and brought a good price? What would you have to do, get about 50 million now to make the equivalent of what you did with 10 million?

AF: *Oh, yeah.* In sardines we were getting \$6.50, \$7.50, \$11.50. It finally got up around to \$21, at one time. But, during my early fishing career during the 1920s, we were fishing for practically nothing. Well, today, to make a living on them things, good Lord, you'd have to get an awful price. What can you do with \$6.50? We used to figure on mackerel a ton apiece. Now, this was with these Japs—now, when we were striking, I worked on the *Sunflower*, and the *Mayflower*, and the *Smile*, and *Copewater*, and I fished on most every boat up there, striking with them boys, who were merely Japs—

RD: Is this San Pedro?

AF: —Pedro, yeah, fishin' for Van Camp. And, when you'd come in and unload them fish, and get \$7 and-a-half for the mackerel. That was your day's pay. You'd had to take your grocery bill out of there, and your fuel, yet. Of course, we were burning kerosene—what they called white distillate in those days. You don't have that type of motor anymore. We used to pay five cents a gallon for the fuel. But, you still had to take it out. And, we had to have a bait net because you had to catch your own bait every morning. So, to do that today, that fish would have to be—good Lord, they'd have to be sixty bucks a ton.

RD: Wow.

AF: (laughs) What a difference, huh?

RD: Yeah.

AF: We used to go up on the waves and pick the bottom, and then throw it back in the water. For \$25 we thought we were getting stuck. It'd cost about 200 now. (whistles) That's the difference. So, you—we're getting' ourselves— [tape stops and resumes mid-sentence]

RD: —the market?

- AF: I would say that, uh, about 90 percent of the, uh, people were in business on the waterfront. You know, in the repair yards and the hamburger, ice cream—along the beach. They had a big business along the beach there. The social club was quite a place there. Small stands, you know, hamburger places and things. But, like I say, uh, Labor Day you just closed up. That was the end of that. Everybody—well, there were several of them there that I used to know very, very well—and, they made just about enough in the summer to carry them through ‘til next spring when they opened up for the crowd. So, you see, there wasn’t very many jobs, there wasn’t much to do here.
- RD: So, most of whoever was here was involved in some way in serving the—
- AF: The boats.
- RD: —the fish—the fishermen, or the boats, or the canneries.
- AF: That’s right. There was one, two—about five tackle stores. The pier was pretty fair, they done pretty fair along the pier there. But again, that’s all fishermen and boat business.
- RD: So, most of the population lived along the coast here, didn’t they?
- AF: See, there was nobody in Corona Del Mar and the hills—no population there at all.
- [00:50:11]
- RD: When did that begin to change, though? You said it was after the war—during the war—
- AF: During the war.
- RD: —when the port was open.
- AF: No, no.
- RD: And then, the increase—the population. And, they brought in other things like industry.
- AF: Well, after they dredged the harbor in ’36, it started to pick up a little bit. But, even when the war broke in 1941, it was a dead town. There was nobody here hardly—*nobody* here hardly. But, soon as this harbor was the only place on the coast that you could take the boat out on the ocean, this change the whole picture. Then, things began to wrap up.
- RD: I wonder if you’d reiterate, again, um, the reasons you disbanded your particular fleet.
- AF: Well, I could see—they opened up—they opened up from Alaska to San Diego, and, of course, every port had its own boat. San Diego had a wonderful fleet down there just sittin’ and waitin’, just waitin’ for the war to stop. Santa Monica and Redondo started to run right away. Oceanside, San Clemente—Long Beach has got the biggest carrying passengers of anybody up there in the harbor. *Oh*, they got a lot of carriers. And, I could see where we were gonna drop way back to about 1939, ’40, maybe a little bit more. We

had a bit more population here. And, I could see where we'd taken off the cream, and I decided to—

RD: What year was this, then, that you disbanded your fleet?

AF: I was—I was completely gone in '47.

RD: What was the, um, the strength of your fleet, at—at its height? How many—

AF: Forty-two boats.

RD: Forty-two boats and 188 men?

AF: Yeah, 188 people working there.

RD: And, when you disbanded, what did you have, the same amount?

AF: The same amount, yeah. We were still going good when I—when I disbanded it. Yeah, we were still hittin' good. Another thing that hurt the—most people won't be honest about it—but, one thing that hurt everyone was when they stopped the slot machines and the punch boards. This town started to go hog wild when they had that keno. (both laugh) *Oh, what a difference that keno made! Oh, Lord!* But, again, we're just pipedreaming. I don't think them days will come back, either. That's the reason we go to Las Vegas three, four, five times a year; we kinda like to look things over.

RD: So, when you abandoned your fleet, do—do you felt that the fishing industry had completely declined, or was in decline, and you were—?

AF: Oh, yeah, it was about done.

RD: What would you say sort of ended this whole era of commercial fishing?

AF: Well, the mackerel left.

RD: About what time was that?

AF: When they fished the mackerel out it was—it was just about 1950; from '50 on it was no good at all. No good at all. It just dropped down too low. There just wasn't any fish. And then, Governor Brown, uh, give them the coup de grace, as they call it, when he opened up Catalina Island. And, there was quite a few little boats making a living for the fresh fish market, going back and forth, and there was—wasn't a ray of sunshine there for the few schools of mackerel who hung around there to spawn.

So, when he opened it up it took just three nights to clean out Catalina. The first night, Tony Millakee, the skipper on a very good purse seiner—I won't mention the name because Tony's still on it—he had a full load the first night. The second night he had about two-thirds. The next night he had about ten ton, which is not even payday. And,

that was the last of it. *Three nights* and they had fished out Catalina Island. That had been a sanctuary for—for years.

RD: Oh, wow.

AF: That shows you the carrying capacity of that fleet. That's an *awful* carrying capacity there. *Lord!* Now, if they had let that stay there—there was an area there of fish that apparently were what we called home guards—they were there practically the year round—and, those fish did spawn there because we were catching a few six- or seven-inch mackerel—which, you don't find them that small. So finally, there were one- or two- schools that hung around there all the time, and especially inside Avalon Harbor. You see them in there all the time. And, these fellows were making a living off of that. That ended when—there's a couple of them still trying it, I guess. But, *Lord*, they can't make both ends meet. So, when you—when you don't have a spawning season you can look for trouble. We don't have it.

RD: You think the dorymen are on the way out, too.

AF: They're done. I think the biggest problem there—in another year or two—you see, we have enlarged the sewer at the Santa Ana River. And, we have extended the pipeline out there so far now—it used to be one mile, now it's five miles, if I remember right—I was on the sanitation district, too, and I should remember—but, instead of a 48- or 120-inch line, you now have an—oh, man. And, if I remember the latest figures, there's about forty million gallons of water a day going in there. Chlorine. Well, by going out that far, that's going to take these dory fishermen right out of the business.

RD: Chlorine kills the fish?

AF: Yeah. Bad water. Kills everything.

RD: Is that what they mean by pollution?

AF: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, the sewer empties out there. Now, it is so strong that in some areas there you set your bait net up there, and about a week later it just comes apart, it just rots out. Oh, yeah, that's awful strong up there. Yeah, I lost a good net up there about two years ago. So, I look for that dory fleet to give up.

RD: In about a couple of years, five years?

AF: Well, some of them, I guess, will be there a little longer, maybe. They have other ways of making a living, I guess.

RD: I wonder if—you said that you have finished commercial fishing. You disbanded your fleet in 1947, but you have continued more or less— [tape stops and resumes mid-sentence]

AF: You know?

RD: Mm-hm.

AF: Now, when you can draw people from Washington—and, we had people from that big plant over there in Nevada that used to come over every Thursday. Sixty people when Newport Beach was lucky enough to be the only place on the coast that you were allowed to fish from in the ocean. No wonder things picked up, no wonder that everything went good. A fellow come to me and he said, “Can I talk to you a minute?” And, I said, “Certainly.” He said, “I bought a business down here, and I want to know what’s the matter.” He said, “They used to buy a carload of beer every Monday and every Friday.” And, he said, “I can’t sell a truckload in a week.” And, I told him, “You just bought a dead elephant. You should have been down here when the war was on and this was the only place open, and then you’d know what we mean.” So, whenever you have a boat that has slot machines on it and you have a town that—we had a wonderful chief of police. They put up with a lot of harassment and a lot of things they shouldn’t of because the town was—the town was—

RD: Was this during the war?

AF: Yeah. The town was wide open. Saturday night we had the—you know, you couldn’t put any lights on, it was dark. All the lights had to be out. The streets would be full of all night people walking along, didn’t know what to do or where to go, waiting for the boats next morning to go fishing or lay on the beach. They were here.

RD: And, this was all the big brass from Washington and around?

AF: Yes. People from everywhere. You couldn’t get a room, there wasn’t a room left. The people at the place were very, very tolerant. It was a wonderful situation as far as gettin’ this town started. And, of course, now we’ve reached the point where the boys that started it no longer need it. This is not a place for—for anybody who’s in a commercial racket, of any branch. Because, the price of the property is too high, you got too many beautiful homes, you’ve got a different type of town. Now, you don’t have to worry—now, as far as my story’s concerned, I would be far better off if nobody came. I’d just deal off my hometown people.

Sunday kills me. Sunday used to be a big day here because everybody worked on their boats, everybody fixed up their apartments, cleaned them up, painted them for rental. Today at 11:00 on Sunday, the town’s dead. You can’t move. If you live on that point, you can’t leave home because when you come back you can’t get in your own garage. There’s a car parked there. And, if you leave the garage door open there’s a car in the garage.

RD: (laughs)

[01:00:21]

AF: Now, this isn’t funny. The police—there’s—there’s not too many of them—the police don’t even have time to haul them out of the garage. Now, this is the kind of town we have today. And, when we started in—like I say, we had about seven thousand people

and it was a sleepy hollow. They called it Mackerel Flats, and up on the hill they called it Goat Hill, and it was just about that. I had ten acres of strawberries up there, and there was people next to me had about ten goats. I used to call her, uh, Goat Annie. She had ten goats. There was one there that—and then, they had about six, seven milkers up there. It was goat paradise up there, and I had ten acres of strawberries up there.

RD: Do you—do you own expensive property here in the beach, or did you at one time?

AF: I did, yes. We owned several beach properties. This is the only one we got left here now.

RD: That's what, these eleven lots along here?

AF: Thirteen. And, uh, it makes—it makes a nice deal.

RD: I would say, after the war and the influx of population.

AF: Well, we were fortunate. When we went into something, we didn't want to lease or anything else; we like to buy it. And, of course, the price of property went up—it wasn't that we were smart businessmen, it was just the fact that we hit a town that exploded. And, we got a lot on account of the war. Now, that Army air base up there—in the morning you'd see the soldiers lined up for a block-and-a-half waiting to get in the restaurant to eat.

RD: Hm.

AF: We were fortunate. We had the ranch and had a lot of cattle. We had a lot of hamburger. We only had about four or five things. We had ham and eggs and—

RD: You owned your ranch, then?

AF: Oh, yeah.

RD: Where was that located?

AF: It was up here in the valley, Perris. It's the Hudson Farm. Peggy's folks, uh, homesteaded it in eighteen—1873. This little old man you saw in the paper that died here the other night, he lived with us here for forty years. He was ninety—ninety-eight years old and he was one of them that pioneered that thing. And, they had some trouble a few years back, and Peg and I got into it. It's a family affair. And, during the war, we only served about four things there in the morning, ham and eggs—a lot of eggs—and, hot cakes, and that was it. But, them soldiers, they would line up around the corner. They didn't want to go back to the base, you see?

RD: (inaudible)

AF: Half of them officers are right here today. There's a great many of them that bought and stayed right here. In fact, they just buried one in (inaudible) the other day that got

discharged right up on top of the hill up here, where this college is—you know where that is?

RD: Mm-hm.

AF: He never went back to Massachusetts. He stayed right here, and he died here when he was sixty-five years old—lived right over here near—near the, uh, city hall.

RD: You've really see how the population changed.

AF: Oh, I been here long enough to see the old-timers either die off or leave on account of making so much money selling off to real estate. That the—the new people are an entirely different type of people.

RD: Is the area more settled, though, because—

AF: Oh, yeah.

RD: —of the influx of people—

AF: Yeah.

RD: —or are they transient? Do they come in and leave?

AF: No, the—the population of Orange County is changing a little under every four years. Every four years you have a new group of people here. They say in another ten years it'll be about three-and-a-half. Which means—you've got a lot of industry here. And, a guy gets transferred, the Army quits—El Toro and them—they leave Orange County and everything else. So, every four years, you can count on—and, it reflects back on your books downstairs. If you have any kind of a credit relation, you can tell immediately that your population is changing all the time. They don't meet you, they just pay up and they leave. They go to a different part of the country. And, you can tell immediately when you look at them books that you got a different type of people coming in. You look at the cars. You got more Cadillacs and—and, uh, Lincolns here than anybody in the country, I believe.

RD: It's a pretty rich area, I know that.

AF: Yeah, it's reached that point.

RD: Thank you, Mr. Forgit, for you cooperation and you wealth of information about the Newport Beach fishing industry.

END OF INTERVIEW