PORT OF LOS ANGELES CENTENNIAL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JOE DIMASSA

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
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TRANSCRIPT BY
JENNIFER PADUA-VALLE

Interviewer: Please say your name and spell it.

Joe DiMassa: My name is Jo DiMassa. That is J-O-E Capital D-I Capital M-A-S-S-A. My official first name is Jiouse, J-I-O-U-S-E. I was named after my grandfather. It means Joshua in Italian, but being such a difficult name it never stuck. Actually, it was changed when I went to Mary Star of the Sea.

Interviewer: OK. You are getting ahead [jumbled speech]…

JD: Anyway…

Interviewer: One second, I want to know what year you were born and I you want to look at me.

JD: I was born in 1941. Here in San Pedro.

Interviewer: What is your earliest memory of when you were a child and growing up? What do you remember earliest?

JD: The earliest of the port, I guess I remember when a ship blew up called, "The [SS] Markay," about 1947. I remember we lived on Eleventh Street then and seeing the sky all red. That was my earliest recollections of the port. I was about six years old then. Before that, I do remember barrage balloons, vaguely. During the war, they had these balloons on cables that would prevent dive-bombers from coming in and strafing various areas, I have a vague recollection of that; but the most vivid is the Markay in 1947.

Interviewer: What do you know about that? What happened? Do you know?

JD: Well it was a tanker. I think it was about Berth 137 and supposedly, they ran the bunker operation or unloading an operation of the tanker, a spark blew-up, a spark blew-up the whole ship. Similar to the San Animus [spill] in 1976.

Interviewer: Let us go back to your family. How did they come here? Where did they come from and why did they come here?

JD: All of my families came from Ischia, Italy. They came here because they were primarily fishermen, era the fishing industry. The first one I know that I know about was my great grandfather. This is a story I got from my grandmother. He was a seaman, Italian seaman. Somehow, for some reason he was in the U.S Navy. I do not know how he did that. About 1870, he came to San Pedro and he saw that San Pedro was similar to Ischia, which it is. If you have ever been to Ischia, it sort-of is. The climate is the same, there is a mountain in the back and the bay is like Ischia. There was a-lot of fishing at the time. We say that our ancestor was the first Italians here. Of course, you go to any other San Pedroean, (DiMeglians?), (DiBernardos?), they are going to tell you the same story. That is what I was told and, I can follow it because my grandfather was a seaman, great grandfather.

Interviewer: What brought your great grandfather here in 1870?

JD: He came here on an American square rig.

Interviewer: What did you say your great grandpa?

JD: My great grandpa came on an American square rig ship. That is all I know. Whether it was a Navy or a merchant, I am not much sure, but he came here as a seaman aboard a ship.

Interviewer: And what do you know about your family in Ischia, who, what did they do? Was there a background because…

JD: They were mostly fishermen…

Interviewer: You say…since my voice will not be heard, you will have to sort-of include my question, so if I say, "How was your family?" You say, "My family was…"

JD: My family in Italy, they were mostly fishermen and farmers. Grandpa DiMasa, whom I am named for, who-, is a family linear. They were farmers. My mother's side were (Artianos?), and they were all fishermen. They came here because of the fishing. They left Italy during the…about 1910 and there was a lot of famine in Italy at the time. They heard about this place, it was great fishing, and they left. A number of them left. My great, my grandfather being one of them. Grandfather Artiano came as a fisherman.

Interviewer: Tell us about him, what kind of man was he?

JD: He was, he never…

Interviewer: I meant my great grandfather.

JD: My grandfather, I had two great grand, I had two wonderful grandfathers I know very well. I was always with family. The first one died when I was twenty-five, so I got to know him very well. Grandpa Artiano was a-, was a typical Italian San Pedro fisherman. Never left his roots, did not speak any English very well. The household always spoke the (Ischiadan?) dialect, the food and traditions were strictly Italian. He never got a driver's license, never did anything different than he would in Ischia. He was a fisherman all his life. My other grandfather was DiMasa. Complete different person, the person I am named after. He came to New York in 1905. He was a seaman; he jumped ship. We always called him a fugitive. He did not go through Ellis Island. He was in New York from 1905 to about 1915. He loved New York City. He liked the glitter and the lights. He came here for whatever reason in 1915, and because he had relatives here. Then he started a wholesale fish business about that time. That was his line of work all his life. He had a wholesale fish market and he would buy fish from my other grandfather. They would always argue about the price of fish.

Interviewer: What was the fishing business like when your grandparents were involved?

JD: Oh, it was flourishing.

Interviewer: Why don't you say the fishing business was?

JD: The fishing business was flourishing at that time in ninety, in nineteen-nineteen. Up until about nineteen-sixty, sixty-five, when I was a young boy I went to work for my father in the fish market. My father followed in the business. I was twelve, so about nineteen fifty-three, it was flourishing. We would come to work in the morning about five o'clock; and there would be boats two and three deep with all kinds of local fish. Anything you can…mackerel, sardines, sculpin, just one-man boats. Guys would go out with hook and line or scoop fisherman. There was plenty of fish and it was just a jumping area. We had the big Purse Seine fleet here supplying the canneries here. We had three or four canneries: sardines, mackerel, and tuna. The fishing really was the biggest industry at that time, when I recall. Up until about the sixties, then the fishing, the fish ran out. We just fished it out.

Interviewer: [Cough] Tell me about your father, what kind of man was he?

JD: My father worked in the fish market. He was a typical second generation. I say typical because it seemed like all my friends' parents were the same. Good man, he worked hard. I never saw him off sick. I mean… he worked every day. He actually ran the business my grandfather started. My father was a manager and he was the owner. We did okay. He was very devoted to his family and he was very active in the San Pedro Elk's Club. That was his diversion from the fish market. He was an officer at the Elks Club; he had a life membership; and he became an International Officer, called District Deputy. He was very proud of that. He passed away about three years ago.

Interviewer: [Coughs] Tell me about the fish marketing those days. What was it like? I mean give us a sense of what went on in the fish market then.

JD: Well, the fish market at that time were located at the foot of 22nd Street. There was about, there is twelve individual stalls. There are twelve businesses in this area. A lot of them were our relatives. My grandfather started three of the businesses. The one he ended up with was called, "L.A. Fish and Oyster Company." He actively was involved in the start-up of Ocean Fish Company, which is still there; Independent Fish Company, which is no longer there but at the time was; and then L.A. Fish and Oyster Company. So half of my relatives were down there working either at our fish market or at other ones. It was a pretty-jumping place a lot of activity, a lot of people from out of the area. We would have bate dealers from San Francisco who would come down and I tell you I got a better education there then I did when I went to college. It was just life: seeing people work together; interfacing; how-to resolve issues, and how to interface together. You had Slavs, Italians, all different ethnic groups, different city groups, and just to see it all mish-mashed together in to some cohesive group. It did work.

Interviewer: Is there a story in mind? Where you could have learned a lesson at the market?

JD: Well there were so many. One instance, it is so hard. There are so many with my father's brother, my uncle (Carin?) His nickname was (Nockcie?). He was a great guy, and interesting guy. He was at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed. Then he spent all his days [telling us about]

World War II, from Pearl Harbor until the end with the stories he told. The charisma that he would bring to the business…he was not as actively involved in the business. He was my father's partner, but is mind was elsewhere. My father was the serious one, the one that made the business flourish. My uncle had his mind in other places. [Laughs] There was always a conflict there between them, but they were friends until the end.

Interviewer: How did the market [cough]…if we could go back in time, and we are standing there on the dock…

JD: Um hm.

Interviewer: Give me a sense of what you would see. What were the activities?

JD: Well, at first you would see, you would see a lot of retired fishermen and fish market people down there. My grandfather was there until the day he died. He would be there. He would be the cook and there would be his partner from twenty years before. They would be down there kibitzing. There would be peanuckle games going on with the old retired fishermen. When a boat would come in half the family would come in to see what the catch was you know. The old man would be there and his uncles. It was a just a big community thing. It was not only workers there it attracted people. People coming every day just to see the activity. Be a part of it. They would go kibitz with this guy. Talk to this guy on the wharf. Go play cards somewhere. Go upstairs and have lunch with somebody. Go get a drink. Everybody had a bottle around. You know it was just very social, very social thing. Not structured as businesses today. It was very, very social and community minded.

Interviewer: Practicality, how did you determine the prices? How did it operate?

JD: It was interesting. I never could figure out how they determined the prices without getting involved with the antitrust laws. They would set the price amongst themselves. You know, it depended on the demand. How much fish there was for the local fishermen? If there were a lot, the actual price would go down. There was a little bit less, it depended on how much somebody on the market wanted to pay it. They really controlled their own price. I know it was to the shagrin of my grandfather the fisherman, he always complained that the prices were much too low. In retrospect, maybe it was but I know we did not sell it for that much more. There was not a huge gap in the price. We made a living. My grandfather made a living, the fishermen, and my father, the worker, made a living. It was my grandfather, there was my father, there was his brother, his two brother in-laws, and my aunt was the bookkeeper. I worked there after school with my cousin. We supported the whole family. None of us were wealthy people. There was just enough for us to survive in the San Pedro way of life. That is really how it worked: the fishermen, the fish market, the market guy, and everybody else.

Interviewer: So how did the day go? In other words [cleared throat] who were you buying from and who, were you selling to?

JD: Well in the morning, we would buy from the fishermen that went local fishing. Then we would also buy from out-of-state. Like salmon would be from up north, halibut…things that

originated out-of-state. They were always fresh fish…but it was…we would get salmon from Alaska I remember. We would get a lot of fish from Eureka, California and some from San Francisco. Very little was frozen. There was frozen fish at times, but not too much. Part of our business was we were ship chandlers, and we would sell to the other ships that would come in, so we would have frozen fish manly to put on the ships.

Interviewer: Give me a sense of what were the fish you buying and selling?

JD: The fish, well like local…the fish we would buy: seabass, local halibut, red snapper, barracuda, Spanish mackerel, blue mackerel…tuna was very…a lot of our customers were Japanese. Tuna naturally was a big commodity for sashimi at the time. Yellow tail, albacore…whatever fish that would come over we would sell. Then we would sell to like the retail for fish markets. Then you had the common fish, the known fish: the salmon, the halibut, and the lingcod things like that. Then we had a big lobster business. The lobster business was big out here. It would be, I think, from October first through March I believe. There was a lot of lobster that we would sell. We had a lot of lobster fishermen that would come in. We would cook the lobster. We had a lobster cooker in our second floor and we would cook them right there on the spot. Because I believe if the lobster or any type of shellfish dies before it is cooked it could be a problem.

Interviewer: [Coughs] Could I get some water? [Coughs again] Excuse me. This is great.

JD: Again, I am going by memory.

Interviewer: No this is terrific.

JD: I left the business in 1963 [laughing].

Interviewer: This is terrific. I am going to continue after I have some water.

JD: All right, I am really not the expert at this.

Mumbling in the background.

Unknown person: For now I think, anybody need a fill?

Interviewer: No, Thank you.

JD: Can I have one, a little?

Unknown women: Sure absolutely.

Interviewer: Sure absolutely.

Background noise…

JD: So my cousin, I did not think he would show to be honest with you.

Unknown woman: What do you think you are doing? [Laughs]

JD: Joe, he is eighty-one years old.

Unknown woman: Well I called the restaurant, and I asked but they said, "Oh, he's not going to be in for a few days." [Laughs]

JD: You know he could have forgot.

Unknown woman: Oh well, I know. Yes, but…

JD: He is a good guy. He is the last of my father's generation.

Interviewer: We will get him, we will get him.

Unknown woman: Yes, we will get him. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Let us go back now. When you were a kid, talking about your days working in the market. What did you do? What was it like for a young kid going around in that area?

JD: For me I loved it. I looked forward to summer time. I worked after school. I just liked being in the…I liked being productive, I liked working. I just like being accepted as a man that was me. That is what I saw. You know I was raised with these guys: my father, grandpa, uncles in a different setting when you are a little kid. When you are actually with them and you see how they react together, their hair is down, their wives are not around, and so you see…you find a whole different person. Then I see these are pretty good guys. These guys have been around the block. They were all World War II vets, they would all tell their stories about what they did. We took it for granted in those days. Oh, my uncle was in Pearl Harbor, big deal you know. We broke into a warehouse and got some machine guns, big deal. This guy was in Heiwajima [Tokyo], so what you know. Now when you look back at that generation you really appreciate what they went through. It was a common thing. Like most war veterans, they never talked about the bad times. They talked about the good times. It was just common to be around these people. I just liked to hear their stories. Some of them would talk about their stories in Europe. One guy liberated a concentration camp and I was fascinated by this.

Interviewer: Share some of those stories. What were the stories they told, and who told them? [Clears throat].

JD: Well, my uncle tells the story about Pearl Harbor that he claims that the day he died, Roosevelt knew about it. I mean, I do not know but he claimed just the way it was, that it had to be an inside job. The way they were so ill prepared. There was no command. He actually said he was in the army. He was at Hickam Air Force Base I believe. He said they broke-in. They knocked the door down, got their guns out, and started firing. There was no order. Until the day he died, he swore that government knew. He did not like MacArthur. He called him, "Dug-out

Doug." He did not like how MacArthur portrayed himself, a bigger than life person. People see it, you see this guy this guy as an American Cesar, as they call him. My uncle detested him for the way he acted and for the way he was so superior to his men. They called him, "Dug-out Doug," because he was in a foxhole. He was always hid-out. He never had any action. I remember that about him talking about McArthur.

Interviewer: Any other stories that…

JD: Oh, he use to tell funny stories about this Second Lieutenant they had. He was…they went to an island at Bougainville Island [the main island of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville of Papua New Guinea]. He was a little scared, a little nervous so he dug this big deep foxhole. He was in there, this big foxhole, and then they went out and got this big lizard. Then one night they threw it in the foxhole with the Lieutenant. I remember that story how they used to play games and things like that.

Interviewer: So as a kid, what did you do when you went down to the duff? What was your job?

JD: Well my first job…

Interviewer: Let us start again, ok…

JD: My first job was the fish market. I had to sweep the floor on the second… on the second floor. I would sweep the floor. I did that and then I would make fish boxes. I was upstairs and I would make fish boxes. Then I would come downstairs and I got to work on the floor with the men. I got to help get orders ready, unload, and help load boats, pack fish, and clean fish. When I left, I could it all. I was not good at filleting but I could clean most fish. I drove trucks and use to deliver fish to LA and go pick up stuff… lobsters down in San Diego. I did most of everything.

Interviewer: Your ring is hitting the…

JD: Oh sorry.

Interviewer: Let us get into more detail. What is a fish box?

JD: Well, that is a shipping crate. That is how they were shipped out. It is like a box of cheap wood. It was about three feet by two feet by two feet. That is how we would send our fish to the various locations: LA, Los Angeles we would put them in boxes.

Interviewer: Give me a sense of…I mean, was the market noisy, smelly?

JD: Well…

Interviewer: What was it?

JD: I thought it was pretty clean. We kept it very clean, but naturally, that fish odor permeated through the whole place. After a while, you do not notice it. You do when you go out on dates

because you could not get it out of your hands. You do, it was always with you. Yes, it was noisy; there was a lot of hollering, screaming, and a lot of swearing. It was a bunch of San Pedro Italians running a fish market. It was a pretty noisy place. A lot of hollering. To get your point across, sometimes you had to raise your pitch. It was a very noisy, loud place.

Interviewer: Now, were they speaking English, Italian, or a mix of both?

JD: Everything. Yugoslav, Slavs were speaking Slav. Italians were speaking Italian, English…you name it, it was spoken there.

Interviewer: Now, you mentioned the idea of going out on date and not getting…Is there a specific date in mind, where you had.

JD: No, not really. I just remember when you went out you were always concerned about the smell on your hands. Especially if you clean barracuda. It was a difficult fish to get that smell off of there.

Interviewer: Let us talk about some of the women. What were your grandmother, great grandmother and mother like?

JD: I vaguely remember my great grandmother. The one who was married to the guy who came here. I saw her twice. I remember… this is a recollection I have of her. It was a time when *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* came out and I remember seeing this lady with white hair in bed. She was dying at the time. That was the first thing I thought, that it was the old witch in the *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs*. I was very young then, I might have been two or three. That is the recollection I have. My other grandmas were great. The last one died about maybe twenty years ago. I spend a lot of time with grandma DiMasa. The one that came here when she was six. The one that was in the photo when President Taft came to San Pedro. She was great. She was the boss of the house really. My grandpa DiMasa was very strong, dominating person. He use to holler and scream a lot, but she was the boss. They would argue back and forth and she would just say, "Oh shut up Joe." He would get mad and stomp away, but she was the matriarch. The other one, grandma (Tanner?) was a wonderful, loving Italian grandmother with an accent. You just imaged that she would be in… what you see in motion pictures with my grandma. A very caring, loving, filling you full of food, [she] was just a great person. [She] loved her grandchildren. I was the oldest and she would say, "Oh, you are my favorite one." I would say, "You should not say that." [She] was just a great person. [She] lived in a house on 10th Street above Pacific all her life. They moved in the house when it was completed and then they got married, never left the house. Her whole life was for her family, her husband, her children, and her grandchildren. [She] went to Italy once, to see her mother in 1947. Her mother died before she got there; never went anywhere else since that time. Just a great person.

Interviewer: What about the [cough] Italian community in San Pedro? What would they do? What were the community activities that would go on that you would go to?

JD: Mainly it was family. There was a…we would have a festival once a year of San Giovan Giuseppe was the patron saint of their region in island. Italy has about three patron saints…Ischia

has about three patron saints. There are so many saints there. We had one for each region. Ours was San Giovan Giuseppe. Mainly it was just the family together. I remember on Fourth of July, my grandfather DiMasa and his brother's family would get together. The reason for that is Grandpa Art DiMasa's brother married his wife's sister, so two brothers married two sisters. They were very close. I remember going to Cabrillo Beach for an outing on the Fourth of July. Then we moved to Peck Park. That was a big event. Then we would have our New Year's together too with both sides of the family.

Interviewer: What would happen at these events? Can you describe them?

JD: Well, you know the big thing was around the food. Naturally, we would have Italian food. We would have macaroni and we did not barbeque. The men would play, the Italian men would play bachi ball. I remember that. [We would] play cards, three flies up, and a little bit of baseball. Nothing major, it was just…we kept active.

Interviewer: Now, as a kid. Let us talk about yourself. You talked a little bit about working on the docks at summer time. What was it like growing up on San Pedro? What was San Pedro like when you were growing up?

JD: Well, my life revolved around the Catholic Church. I went to Mary Star of the Sea grammar school and high school. I was an altar boy. First a choirboy, altar boy, and played football. We stayed among our class friends. We would go to the movies once and awhile. The Warner Brothers, I am glad it is open. It brings back a lot of memories when I got to the Warner Brothers. The Warner Brothers, the Strand, the Cabrillo that was our thing. We rarely left town.

Interviewer: What were the memories you have of Warner Brothers Theater and other theaters?

JD: I remember when the *Ten Commandments* came out, and we snuck some beer in lounge and we thought it was a big deal. I remember that. I remember seeing *Fort Apache* there with John Wayne. I remember seeing that in 1948. I remember it because my grandma was at Italy at the time. Her children were with us, living with us. My uncle, her youngest son was about three years older than me, so we were close in age. I remember us all going to see *Fort Apache* with John Wayne. I remember that. We would get home about even o'clock, I thought that was…nobody ever stayed up that late ever, it was just so late.

Interviewer: Well that theater must have been a pretty impressive place to go for a kid.

JD: It was. It was a beautiful theater. As it is now, there is beautiful Art Deco Theater. It think it was built in the thirties, about thirty-five, thirty-six. My mother, she would go there as a little girl she tells me.

Interviewer: What other things did you do as a kid growing up?

JD: Well most of the time, like I said, I would work on the fish market. I would, you know, go out with our friends. Go to the movies once in a while. I liked sports. I used to play a lot of baseball. I played little league. I was the first little leaguer in San Pedro. We use to play softball

a lot. This guy said, “They have this new deal out, it is called little league.” What is it? “Well you play hardball on a softball diamond.” I said, “What is that, how do you do that?” Therefore, I signed up and that was the first time it happened in San Pedro or anywhere.

Interviewer: Do you remember that game? What it was like

JD: No, it was a little different. It was different. As an infielder, it was a little harder because soft balls are easier to field. I do not remember. I think we dapped fairly, I think I was a shortstop. I guess we did okay. I was not a spectacular player.

Interviewer: Let us go back and get a sense of what San Pedro was like. If you walked around, what was the feel of it? Was it a small town? Whom would you see? Was there your friends?

JD: Yes, you would see your friends. It was a very small town. We took the bus a lot. People did not leave too much. There was not much activity above Western. As a matter of fact, when I was a kid, Western you could not even go through it. Have you ever been to San Pedro? Western did not even go through. I remember when they built Western; there was very little activity beyond Western Avenue. A few homes out there, but not much. There were no businesses as you have now. All the businesses were on Sixth Street, the low Pacific. It was loaded with retail stores. There was a Dunlop’s Department Store. You had (Al Fearman’s?). You had Brook brothers, not Brook brothers, the Brown Brothers. They had the Marquee and Arcade. Our doctor was there, Dr. Costa. Naturally, you have to go to an Italian doctor. Everything was located in that area, Sixth Street. Everything you wanted was there. They had a nice candy shop. I remember smelling the candy down there, See’s Candy Shop in that area.

Interviewer: What was your favorite place to go when you went downtown as a kid?

JD: I used to like to go to…I think it was called Bradford’s. It was a hobby shop. I used to like to make models. I used to like to go in there. Then there was another shop, close to my Grandma’s house called, McCorkel’s. They had a toyshop. You go down these stairs and they had a beautiful toyshop. Nothing like today, but for me it was like the Zenith of toys. They had electric trains and I collected my Lionel electric train. I still have it today. It is at my mother’s house. That is where we bought it at McCorkel’s.

Interviewer: Did you ever get into Los Angeles at all?

JD: Only…I got into Los Angeles after I…as young, very rarely. Well, let me rephrase that. My father took me to the minor league baseball team. The L.A. Angeles were the minor league team at that time. They played at a place called, Wrigley Field. It is in Watts, been since torn down. It was called, “Wrigley’s Field” because the Angeles were a farmed club of the Chicago Cubs. This field was kind of like…it was modeled after Wrigley Field in Chicago. If you were to see...sometime there was a program called, “Home run Derby.” They show it today. It was filmed there at the Wrigley Field. They still have it. We would go there and see the L.A. Angeles. I never went to Gilmore Field. That was my experience with L.A. Then when I went to work for my father, I would go with my uncle to L.A. to deliver fish to Little Tokyo. That was my only experience.

Interviewer: What was your impression of Los Angeles when you were there? Was it just…

JD: It was huge. It was a metropolis. It was something like New York City, how I imaged it. Compared to San Pedro there was a lot of activity, as it is today. To me it was bigger than life. I enjoyed it. I like big cities and I enjoyed what I saw there.

Interviewer: How did you get there? Did you drive?

JD: We use to deliver fish there. It was interesting to me that I went to the…My first cultural exchange, we had Japanese fish, Japanese grocery stores. Everything was in Japanese symbols and they spoke Japanese. One of the owners was a friend of my father, Henry Ida. He went to high school with my dad. It was a whole different culture for me. I got to see things different than San Pedro. Your eyes open up. We had a customer, (Lita?) Wong, we went to Chinatown, so that opened my eyes. It was another culture. Life is in San Pedro, in Italy. There are other things. It did open up my eyes going there.

Interviewer: There were other cultures in San Pedro, were there?

JD: There were. There were the Yugo Slavs, but they were Catholics. They were right next door to us, the Adriatic, but they spoke a different language. Essentially, they were very close in culture. The religion was the same and that is really, what brought us close together; and the Mexican families were all Catholics. There were some non-Catholics. There were other religions at the time, but most of the people I dealt with… going to a Catholic school you stay within the Catholic Community.

Interviewer: Now was there any kind of conflict between neighborhoods and kids in those days?

JD: No, no. Nothing at all, nothing at all.

Interviewer: For the Italian community, what places were the center places?

JD: Well there really…in this town, there really was not an area. I mean, there was not a little Italy, a little Yugo Slovenian, or a little Mexico. We all kind of interspersed. My Grandfather's neighbor was a Mexican family, the (Mongrels?). There would be a Slav person across the street, but they did not mix too much though. I never forget the story I am walking to my grandfather Artiano, and a friend of mine is walking across the street with a Slav kid named, (Zuey?). She was walking across the street with his grandfather who was about the same age as my grandfather. At that time, they may have been about sixty-five or seventy. I asked my grandfather, "Do you know Mr. (Schuricht?)" and Mr. (Schuricht?) is also a fisherman, [grandfather says,] "No he is a Slav." I guess Mr. (Schuricht?) probably told his grandson the same thing, "He is Italian, why would I know him?" There was not a big difference, just the language. The culture and the religion was still the same. We all went to Mary's Start of the Sea, all of us, all groups.

Interviewer: Before we leave your early days, you started to tell us about how you really started to learn as a young boy from your relatives working in the fishing industry. Tell us what did you learn from them. What kind of men were they and what kind of lessons did they have for you?

JD: What I learned is that you are a man of your word. I learned that and never quit. P. I got upset and I quit little league. I did not tell anyone. My father found out and he said, "How come you are not practicing?" [I said,] "Oh, I quit." [He said,] "You don't quit anything." He says, "Whatever you do, do the best you can. If the best you can do is be a garbage collector, then be the best garbage collector. We don't quit." So I went back to little league. I went back. That is how he…he did not lecture me much, but that is all he said, "We don't quit." That impressed me a lot, and I never saw him quit. My grandfathers, they always stuck to their professions. They always kept going. They always kept going, and they went to work every day. They were pretty consistent. They always hung in there.

Interviewer: What do you think they liked about the work that they were doing? What pleasure did they get from it?

JD: I think they liked the fact that they were their own boss. My grandfather always told me, DiMassa; he says…they were a little upset when I left. When I went to work for a big corporation. He told me, he says…grandpa DiMassa, "You know owning your own business then you do not have to work for any S.O.B." Only he said it out with his accent. That was important to him. My other grandfather too, he always had his own fishing boat. He always controlled his own destiny and my father…that was important to them. I can see how that is important working in the corporate world for forty years; how there is something to that, and they were proud of that. They were able to survive on their own.

Interviewer: What were the fishing techniques that they used in those days? How did they catch the fish?

JD: Same as essentially today. There are a-lot of methods but my grandfather was a gillnetter, which is not too popular today. Because they would gillnet a-lot of things other than seabass, but he was also a hook and line. He was a lonpar, which is kind of like purse seine but they would just, they did not have a purse ring at the bottom. I do not know too much, how it worked, but it was the old method of fishing. Then there was a purse seiner. Of course, the lobster fishermen had traps.

Interviewer: What is a purse seiner? Explain what that is.

JD: Well, I never fished but from my understanding it is a…

Interviewer: A purse seiner is…You have to say it, "A purse seiner is…"

JD: A purse sein, a purse sein method, again let me qualify, that I am not fisherman, but to the best of my recollection I believe that the net…there is a skiff and the skiff goes in the water that holds one end of the net. The boat goes around and makes kind of a circle. Then goes back around to the skiff, I believe. The bottom is a bunch of rings. They draw the rings tight and the fish are trapped

like a little purse. That is what it means. Once they are trapped in the net they have a big scoop, where they scoop all the fish onto the boat.

Interviewer: You never went out on the boat.

JD: I never went fishing. I never did that.

Interviewer: When you decided to leave…

JD: Um, ha.

Interviewer: What made you decide to leave and what did you do then?

JD: Well, I decided to leave when I went to college. I decided to continue my education. I went to Lyle University and was a business major. I got away from San Pedro. I lived on the campus and it was a whole different world out there. It integrates you with a whole different culture, a different background. I was very influenced by the Jesuit Priest. They were the order that taught there. I decided that I wanted to do it on my own. I did not want to be a part of the family business. I went to Law School for a while, that did not work out. I worked as a court clerk for a while. Then I got tired of the drive to LA, and then I said I am going to work at the Waterfront. I made an application, and I was accepted for Matson Navigation. That time when the bigger companies were in the waterfront. That is how I got down here.

Interviewer: When you left San Pedro to go to Loyola, you had a different perspective on the place. What did it look like from a far based when you were in the midst of it?

JD: From my own?

Interviewer: Yes.

JD: Well, to me…

Interviewer: How did your attitude change?

JD: My attitude changed; to me it was a big time. We use to go to theaters. We use to go to movies, the Grauman's Chinese Theatre and I think I got a little snobbish. I think I did. I was not the San Pedro guy anymore. I was big time. I went to the big University and taught by the Jesuits, not by some parish priests. I go to the Grauman's Chinese; I do not go to the Warner Brother's anymore. I joined a fraternity and you know we drink real whisky. That is what happened. I got wrapped up into it. I wanted to make it on my own.

Interviewer: Did you end up going back and re-appreciating?

JD: Well sure yeah. I settled in San Pedro.

Interviewer: Why did you do that?

JD: (Sigh) What else could you do? I did not know, even though I had all these snobbish ideas San Pedro was my home. I could not get away from it. I never even considered not living there. Socially I stayed with my college friends. A lot of them were from San Pedro. My roommate was from San Pedro and my other friends were from San Pedro. I did make association with others that I would meet up in LA. But I…you know that is a good question. I never even considered not living out of San Pedro. I do now, but at the time, I never thought about it. I came back home.

Interviewer: Aside from just your history of the place, what was it about it that you found yourself being drawn back to it?

JD: My guess, everything was here, my roots. Even though I was snobbish and I did not want to be, I wanted to be something else. I really was not. I was what I was. I came back here with the Church of Mary Star and did all those things. Of course, working at the waterfront… it is in my back. It did not make any sense to live anywhere else.

Interviewer: You mentioned a couple of times, Mary Star of the Sea Church. Tell me what is that; and what is its importance to you?

JD: To me it was our parish…

Interviewer: You have to say the church name.

JD: Mary Star of the Sea, meant to me, was that everything centered around the church my mother, grandfathers. My mother and grandmothers were very staunch believers. The men not so much. You know, they practiced but not as much as the women folk. Everything was at church. At the school, it was very tightly run by an order of nuns. They were very strong; you know you had to go to church. You had to go to the station of the cross. You had to go to confession every Thursday, to make the nine first Friday. Everything just revolved around the Catholic Church. The feast days, everything was at church. I liked the ceremony of the church. I became an altar boy. I liked being part of it. I liked being on the altar, being a part of the ceremony. I enjoyed that part of it when I was a younger kid. I did that. It was just a whole way of life. Summer time, you would even go hang out with your high school friends. Then the rest of the time, you were in school at Mary Star.

Interviewer: Once you were in college, you went to work at Matson What did you do there?

JD: Well I started out as a management trainee.

Interviewer: Say, after I left college.

JD: After I left college, I did have a stint. I worked in downtown LA for a while, as a court clerk when I went to Law School. That did not work out. Then I came…I got tired of driving the freeway so I tried to find something closer to San Pedro. I did not want to leave San Pedro. I was associated with the waterfront in the fact that we were ship chandlers and I would go to the various docks to deliver fish. That industry kind of fasted in me; the movement of freight, cargo, the ships,

commerce and I was attracted to that. That is why I applied to MATS. They hired me as a management trainee in 1965, and I have been in the industry ever since.

Interviewer: As a little kid, you were living at a harbor seeing ships come and go. Did you ever dream of where they were going to, where they are coming from? What was that like?

JD: Yes, I use to think about that. I was interested in containerization. At that time, they just they just threw a few containers on deck. That is an interesting concept. They can take the cargo from this container; put it on a truck…that is an interesting concept. Now today it has just exploded. Inter-mobilism is just the way of transporting goods. I was kind of interested. That is why I went to work for Matson, because they were the first one. They and (Sealab?); but Matson was big in containerization.

Interviewer: As a kid growing up, seeing ships come and go, did you ever dream of going out into the high seas?

JD: No I never did, I never did.

Interviewer: ah, ha.
JD: I was always fascinated by them. I would go on board to bring fish. There were so many nationalities in those days: a lot of Scandinavians ships. At that time there was a Scandinavian Center, it is still there up on Harbor Blvd. Every time a Scandinavian ship would come, they would play the national anthem of either Denmark, Sweden, or Norway. It was always going. There were a lot of Scandinavian ships at that time. A lot more ships then they have now because they are smaller. A lot of Japanese ships, Filipino, German, Italians, you name it, English, there were a lot of different flags. Some American flags too but not so much anymore. Matson is the only one I know of.

Interviewer: What about all the legions of Beacon Street and Harbor and all that kind…What was San Pedro like? It was not all gatherings of the Catholic Church.

JD: No, we were told never to go down there.

Interviewer: Start again.

JD: Beacon Street, actually growing up in San Pedro was a place you did not go.
I remember going down to Beacon Street and my father, for some reason, would like to buy the Examiner on Saturday night. He would go down to Beacon Street to buy it. We would go down there and there would be the Salvation Army playing on one of the corners. I forget which one it was. It was just jumping and I would look around. We were not supposed to be there. Now my father, they were frequent there, Beacon Street, I did not. I remember, I just remember it.

Interviewer: What was the legion at Beacon Street? What did you remember?

JD: Well, it was bad place. There was a…it was rough and tough, and drinking. You know when you were raised a staunch catholic at Saint Mary's Star you just…it was a bad place. It was Sodom and Gomora down there. You know you just do not go down there.

Interviewer: When you went down to get the newspaper, what did you see?

JD: (Sigh) I just remember a lot of people, a lot of people. I remember the police walking too two to a beat, I remember that. That is about all. There was no…there were a lot of people. It was like Las Vegas, smaller version of Vegas. A lot of people, and a lot of uniforms. There were a lot of Navy people there. Just a lot of activity. All the bars were jumping and lights…there were thirty-six bars at one time. They all had their own lights and they all had…all open and ready to go. It was a real jumping place.

Interviewer: Going back to your professional career. You got into the container business instead of starting, when you were working on the LA container terminal. Tell me about that and how the business began to change at port.

JD: Yea, I did go to the LA container terminal in 1968. That was the first major terminal LA Harbor. It was a consortium of four Japanese steam ship companies. They leased the property and we were the managing group for that group. They were the first container, major container crane in LA. It was owned by the Port of LA, Twin Lift Crane. It was the first time I ever saw a fully KLT, built from KTL [manufactured out of polypropylene to VDA standards and specifically designed for the automotive industry's needs] up container ship. Before that, all the Matson ships were converted ships. Most of the fleet, at that time, were converted from C3/C4s to container ships. At that time, the Japanese were the first ones to build the container ships. The first one I saw the Hakone Maru, NYK ship. The reason I know that is because they went to Matson for their first call. Matson was the agent and terminal operator for NYK. That is whom I work for today, but there was a separation between them.

Interviewer: Do you remember being particularly impressed by seeing that?

JD: Oh very much.

Interviewer: Tell me about when you first saw the ship.

JD: Well, it is funny. The first time I saw the NYK ship was my last day at Matson. [Laughs] I worked on the project and then I left Matson to work for this new container operation up at LA container terminal. I recall the Hakone Maru had to back down into its berth. It was the biggest ship I have seen in my life. It is nothing today, but it was huge. I remember it backing down. It was the last day on the job. Then I went to work for another group of Japanese steam ship companies. The ships were very similar. They were all ships built specifically for containers.

Interviewer: (Coughs) How did the container business change shipping you think?

JD: Well what the container business did…not only shipping, it changed commerce in the United States because of the relatively inexpensive movement of goods through intermobilism, where

products were being manufactured in other locations other than the U.S. Now whether it is a good thing or bad thing…you can say it is a bad thing because it completely eliminated any type of manufacturing in this country. Everything you find at Walmart, Kmart today is manufactured somewhere else. That is because of containerization, because of the logistic movement of goods and at the relatively low price.
It is good for the industry, but as far as for the U.S economy, a lot of manufacturer jobs were lost because of it.

Interviewer: Ah, you worked with European car imports for a while.

JD: I did that, yes, I did that.

Interviewer: What was that business and how did that get into the port?

JD: That was interesting. L.A.T.C. ceased operation in 1985. The Japanese broke up and they went on their own. They closed the corporation, so I went to work for a freight up union company who was the agent for Wallenius. The European cars were quite a different concept for me. It was a whole different head of operation. I was really impressed working with the expensive European cars: Mercedes, BMWs, Jaguars, Volvos, SAABs, the Ferraris, and all these exotic cars. It was great. It was a whole different concept. It was good to get away from container for a while to go into a whole different thought process. Of course, the process is quality. Auto manufacturers are very, very concerned with quality. They are very proud of their vehicles. Your respected the cargo a lot more because of what you were handling. It was a whole different process and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed my ten years with the automobile business. Then we moved to Port Wineman. I started an operation up there for a while.

Interviewer: (Coughs) Now the strike in 1981, tell us about that? What was your involvement in that? Why did it happen?

JD: Um, Wow, why did it happen? I do not know if I could really give an adequate historical account of why it happened. I think it was that one of those times where people wanted to…maybe it was time…somebody wanted to strike. Somebody figured it was time. Maybe the employer had enough and they let him go. The said, "No, we got to draw a line in the sand right now. We can't let certain work go." One of the big issues with the container freight station, with the advent of containerization a lot of the work was being lost. The cargo was being stuffed in containers in areas close by and Lyle W. felt that was their jurisdiction. That is why they really fought for it. They struck for about six months because of it. I remember it because it was on my thirtieth birthday. June thirtieth is my birthday and that is when all the contracts end. It was 1971. I worked all night and we knew something was coming. We were there day and night. I remember when it happened. It was chaos. It was just chaotic between six and midnight. Then at midnight, everything…they shut down. They walked off: all my friends, the long shore man, I went to school with a lot of them. I was management. We were very close. We said good-bye and good luck. A couple of foreman stopped by. They stayed by, it was midnight, everything was quite, and they brought a case of beer put it on the dock and we celebrated my birthday. Just three of us, we sat on the stringer piece. We drank beer and ah, I should not say this today. You are not supposed to drink on the job, but that is what happened. We drank beer and broke the bottles on the rocks. I

will never forget that. Then they gave me a hug, "Well Okay Joe, you know we do what we got to do." I said, "I understand, me too. I will see you guys when this is all over." It lasted for about six months.

Interviewer: What was the impact on the…what did it look like? Did everything just grind to a halt?

JD: Oh, yes. There was no activity. No activity at all. You know there was not, it was not as…the economy was not as geared to the industry as it is now. We had that lock out about eight years ago, when three days would cause havoc. It can never happen again. The economy in this country is too reliant on all the goods that come from elsewhere. All our merchandise comes from elsewhere. At that time, it was not quit that way. You still had TVs made here. You still goods, clothing, the essentials in life were still manufactured in this country so people could survive. It was not as noticeable then as it is now. It really was not. That was six months. The economy did not…it was a little irritant but it survived.

Interviewer: What about a town like San Pedro? You had people on both sides of the fence. Did it ever affect the economy?

JD: No. It did not. We understood most of the people were long shore men; there are not that many management people. There was no problem. They understood. I used to cross the picket line to come into work. There was no problem because they knew I was management and they knew I was just doing what I had to do. It was not an issue. I would stop and talk to everybody, ask them how they were doing. There was no hostility at all.

Interviewer: How did it eventually get settled? Were you involved in the negotiations?

JD: No, I was not. I was not. Actually, it was a Taft-Hartley Act. Nixon put the Taft-Hartley Act in about September, I believe. The reason I know was that I was called up to San Francisco as a witness. I was on a witness stand of some Federal judge, just a strong (chemogenal?) judge. I never…he never wanted to hear any arguments. He just wanted… "What's going on here?" Some guy is giving an argument…I would never forget, the Union Lawyer was giving an argument why they should stay out. He [the judge] says, "What is going on here?" Then the guy says, "Well we have been out, and we want the Taft-Hart Act." And he [the judge] says, "Alright, you got it, go back to work." That was it. They said, "Thank you very much Mr. DiMassa for…" I did not say a word. Ok, but I did not say a word. I was up in the stand when he decided what he was going to do.

Interviewer: Did the mail have to get through?

JD: Well there was mail. We used to unload mail. How we did it, we just had an agreement with the Union that they would do it. We would go to haul and get certain people out there: our Foreman, our clerks, and we would have an operation. We would take off the mail, put back what was not mail on the ship and delivered it. Everything was fine. With the court order, they had to get the mail off.

Interviewer: What was the Fishermen's Fiesta?

JD: Well it was a…

Interviewer: Why don't you say, "The Fishermen's Fiesta was…"

JD: The Fishermen's Fiesta was…

Interviewer: Let us start again. I am sorry.

JD: The Fishermen's Fiesta was a very, major activity in San Pedro. From as far as I can remember until about the sixties. It really flourished in the late forties and fifties. It took place around September. What it was…the Bishop or the Archbishop; I guess it was a Catholic thing, of LA would come down and bless the fleet. That is really, where it started.
It evolved into a big media event. I remember my father had big dinners on the second floor of his fish market for the media and a lot people. It was a big activity. The biggest recollection I had was that everybody was drunk. I was a young kid, but there was a lot of drinking going on, including my relatives. All the boats, this was before the actual boat parade. I think the fiesta would start on a Thursday or Friday; and they would have booths and they would have different activities. Then Sunday was the actual parade. The boats were all decorated. They would go around the harbor and they would ah…there were contests too. They would judge whose boat had the best decorations. Each year they would have certain themes I remember. Yes, there was a theme for the decorations. My cousin had a boat, the Tacoma. My grandfather's nephew. We would go on that boat occasionally, or sometimes we would just stay at my father's fish market and watch the activity from the second story. It was very…it was really a big deal. It was on the TV. They would broadcast it. I remember one time at my father's fish market that a Navy destroyer came along side. They would allow people on board and watch the Navy destroyer. I remember when the destroyer came in the destroyer dock. I remember about five percent, maybe ten Navy key guys came off with brooms. They swept the whole dock. They just swept it clean. They would clean it up. I was surprised they did that because it was our dock.

Interviewer: What were these boats decorated? What did they look like?

JD: Flags some had flowers.

Interviewer: I am sorry go ahead.

JD: First, they just had pendants and flags. Then they got pretty sophisticated. Kind of like Rose Bowel Floats. They really got into it during the good years. Then as the fishing waned, so did the fiesta. At the end, I do not know if they have it anymore or not. They may but I doubt it. There are no boats left. At the end, it was kind of sponsored. It did not have the effect it once had.

Interviewer: Do you remember any particular boat that impressed you?

JD: Yes, there was a boat the wheel of fortune, I remember it was a Patty Paige. I was singing the wheel of fortune. I do remember that. It was funny. The boat going down the harbor with a

wheel and I forget…If it was the Patty Paige or whom, but there was a song called, *the wheel of fortune*, popular about that time. They played that recording. I remember that.

Interviewer: It looked like a wheel.

JD: Yes, it had a wheel.

Interviewer: Please describe it again.

JD: It had wheel, like a roulette wheel. Bigger than that wheel.

Interviewer: Sort of the final question.

JD: Um, hm.

Interviewer: Growing up here, how has San Pedro changed from when you grew up? It is a different place now. The harbor is a different place. How are things different?

JD: Well it is bigger, the population...

Interviewer: Let us start again I am sorry. San Pedro…

JD: How has San Pedro changed since I was a young person? Well like everything has changed in the last forty-fifty years. It grows and people change. When I started, it was run by immigrants, who were very steep in their family lives. Now you know it is a different generations of people that are educated, that are more attuned to the American way of life. It is bigger. There are a lot more different groups here now. I remember just a few select groups: the Italians, the Mexican-Americans, and the Yugo solve-Americans were the predominant group at that time. Somebody may question this when you show it to somebody, but in my mind, that is what I recall. Now it is all ethnic groups here. They are not from here. They do not have the roots. They come from the outside. Whereas we felt it was our town since my grandmother came here in 1906, my grandfather in 1905. They kind of built the town. Now you do not have that.

Interviewer: You came here to live, and you came back here to live from college. For somebody who has never heard of San Pedro, and you wanted to give him or her an impression of this place, how would you sum up? What is San Pedro? I am sorry starting with San Pedro is…

JD: Well, San Pedro is…one of the things about San Pedro is it is a Peninsula. Because of the geographic design of the area, you are stuck here. You cannot go anymore out to the west. Kind of like San Francisco that way. There is only one way…of course you have the bridge. San Francisco is kind of the same design. People like it here. People like what they see and they stay. They do not consider themselves as part of the city of Los Angeles, which we always are, we are. We always say we are San Pedroean. It is a way of life. It is a culture. It is a thought process. Everything you have is here. You have no reason to change. You have the best climate. You got the view. Why go elsewhere? I have, I left thirty years ago but that is for a different reason.

Interviewer: What is the best thing about San Pedro for you, when you think about it? The best thing is…The best thing about San Pedro is...

JD: I guess the best thing about San Pedro is my youth and my family. The way of life that I remember. It is not here anymore. That is the best thing for me.

Interviewer: Perfect, thank you that was terrific!