

Male Speaker: Speed.

MS: The first question is the hard one. Please say your name and spell it.

Robert Mohle: My name is Robert Mohle, M-O-H-L-E.

MS: Robert, what year were you born and where were you born?

MS: One second. I am going to...

MS: Hold on one second. (Neil?) is getting that.

MS: Just your collar here to match it.

RM: Okay Neil.

MS: You can talk to me.

RM: Yes. [laughter]

MS: Where were you born and what year were you born?

RM: I was born in Antigo, Wisconsin. Way up in northern Wisconsin in the middle of the winter in 1916, just before the war.

MS: What were the circumstances that brought you to San Pedro?

RM: That's a bit of a story. Of course, my parents had been out here. My father was in the railroads and had a railroad pass. So, they could just jump on a train and go around. They came out here in 1911 and checked the area and thought it was pretty great. Went to Catalina and San Pedro and various other places. They came again in 1913. Then after I was born, they decided it was time to get out of the cold winters, and they moved to Los Angeles. My father worked for the Southern Pacific for a while being a railroad man. Then Southern Pacific, I think in about 1920 or something, went on strike. That put a crump in our budget. So, my dad went to UCLA, which was then I think on either Normandy or...

MS: Vermont.

RM: Vermont. He got his teaching credential. Obviously, after that, tried for a job. Got a job with the Los Angeles School System, and the job was San Pedro. So, after having lived in Los Angeles from about the time I was two until I was seven, then they moved to San Pedro. I guess I came along with them.

MS: What were your earliest memories of San Pedro? Any particular stories or events that you remember as a youngster in San Pedro?

RM: Thinking about early days and stories of San Pedro, the thing I think about most is the place that we moved and how wonderful it was. I don't particularly remember any, just my own little stories. We moved down near the lower reservation of Fort MacArthur, which was just about a block and a half from the bluff. It was a place called Denison Avenue. It was three or four yards from the bluff and the water. So, it was a playground. It was going over the bluff, getting down little valleys. The neighborhood that I lived in, which was wonderful because it had lots of children, lots of kids my age. One of them's father was a watchman for the Harbor Department. He would take us to all sorts of the wonderful buildings that are around the harbor like the Warehouse No. 1, which is practically on the Register of Historic Places. Here, we ran around and yelled and made echoes and tried to run the big elevators that were big as a normal house and as slow as time. Anyway, playing there was wonderful. But the beach drew me and drew all of us. We all went to Point Fermin School. Some of the guys were alive until just a few years ago. But of that crowd, I'm probably about the last one around.

MS: Well, talk about coming from Wisconsin, you did not have much experience with oceans.

RM: [laughter] At my age of two years, I didn't have any experience.

MS: [laughter] What drew you to the sea? What was the first thought you had about, "Maybe I might be interested in boats and the sea?" What were your earliest experience and memories of that?

RM: I'll tell you, drawing to the sea was really natural. If you lived in San Pedro in those days, you had a fascinating harbor. You had the whole Pacific Fleet, ten or eleven battleships. Three of them inside the breakwater. The base force, which was there, the target rafts. The old sailing ships that they were so old, they were no longer operable. But some of the old sailors would buy them and live on them. So, finding a boat, if we could find one that had drifted up on the beach. We would be out in our boats. My whole life was drawn to the water. It was, I suppose, just absolutely part of me that I would eventually want to do something that was connected to the sea. Go to sea, if I could.

MS: Well, talk about this idea of acquiring boats that had drifted. What were your first experiences with boats?

RM: Of course, all of the kids in my neighborhood, we would be down over the bluff. Particularly after easterly storm in the wintertime, we only had the original breakwater here out to Angels Gate Light. The extension had not yet been built. Anyway, it drove lots of things that were not moored too well or anchored too well. It drove them on the beach. After a storm, we'd find two or three boats. So, we'd fix some of them up and try to use them. If they were good enough, we'd put a mast on them and try to find an old piece of canvas and make a sail. Then of course, that just went naturally into building a boat, a better one. On Denison Avenue, our house had a pretty big backyard. So, I built first a punt, a flat-ended, easily-built boat about ten feet long. Then in *Rudder Yachting Magazine*, plans for a bigger boat, a fourteen-foot sailboat came out. I thought I would try it. Lumber was easy to get because the lumber boats would come in and as they unloaded, a piece would fall over the side. We would latch onto it and take it down the high school and have it planed. So, I managed to build this fourteen-foot snipe.

MS: Let us go back to this boat building.

MS: We are going to change tapes.

MS: Take a second to change. So, this is great. Thank you. Let us go back to these boats that were washing ashore. Do you have any particular ones that you remember specifically? Or any particular experience, one that was better than the other or something like that?

MS: John, did you want him to wear his glasses?

MS: Yes, the glasses. Good catch.

RM: Oh, I'm sorry.

MS: Thank you. Go ahead.

RM: I was talking a little bit ago about boats that washed up after easterly storms. They were kind of gifts from the sea. But most of them were not really very good. They were just junk. The area that we had them was mudflats. It's where the Cabrillo Marina is today, the L.A. Yacht Club, and other tons and millions, not millions, but hundreds and hundreds of beautiful boats. Anyway, in our time, there were no marinas. The big yachts from the L.A. Yacht Club and other clubs, or other non-club people were just anchored. I did get one boat that I did enjoy for several years. The time I've been talking about, there was no such thing as Cabrillo Beach. Eventually, they pumped sand into the area that's now Cabrillo Beach. They built a boathouse and a little pier and various things like that. They brought down some boats from Echo Park Lake. They were all damaged and the lakes didn't want them anymore and they put them up for auction. I went down and put a bid on one. I remember it was boat number four. It had a big old four on it. I put a \$5 bid on it. So, after the bidding was looked over and checked, guess what? I got the boat. She was about fourteen feet, a clinker-built boat, a [laughter] pretty nice boat. But she had some holes in it. But the boat that they were going to give me was a different one that was in worse shape than number four. My father was mad. He went down to see the director [laughter] of the recreation area and told him that he didn't think that was very nice. I got mine, the number four. Well, I fixed it up. There was an old sailor that lived on Denison, a couple of doors away. He said, "I can fix sails for it." So, he made a little narrow rowboat. He put two masts [laughter] and spritsails. Now, if you know anything about sailing, spritsails, they're fine for bigger boats. They're not even used today in most places. Anyway, we had the spritsail sailboat and enjoyed it though. We would sail it pretty well, my next-door neighbor and I. We had good times with it. That was kind of a special boat.

MS: Did you christen that boat? Did it have a name?

RM: No, [laughter] strangely enough. I always have thought about naming boats, all of us have. Anybody that's had a boat, wants to name it. But it's very difficult to find a good name for a boat. Today, there are all kinds of junkie names that people dream up and they're funny. But for boat lovers really, you want something that's – Old Harry Pidgeon's boat was called The

Islander. Harry Pidgeon, maybe I'll tell you about him later.

MS: Yes. We will talk about him later.

RM: No, I didn't have a name for almost any of them. I was going to name one boat, *Ripple*. But *Ripple* doesn't sound too sharp. [laughter]

MS: [laughter] You were a young boy. Was your imagination being charged by reading of the sea stories?

RM: I was a great reader and I loved to read books. Things like *Captains Courageous*, Rudyard Kipling and other books of that type. I read them and loved them. But the book that influenced me most was a writer named Richard Halliburton. Richard Halliburton wrote some pretty exciting books like *The Royal Road to Romance*. So, when I was in my teens, I read *The Royal Road to Romance*. I can't think of the names of several other of his books. But anyway, they were great books and got me all excited about going places and doing things. So, I tried to follow it. I can tell you a story about 1938. I was not even out of high school. This is jumping way forward. But 1938, I decided that I was going to go to Europe. The Spanish Civil War was on. I thought, "Boy, if I can get over to Europe and get down to the Spanish border and do all this kind of things like that, maybe I could write a book." To help things along, my French teacher in high school had suggested that we correspond with somebody of your own age that's studying English in France. I'd been taking French class in high school. So, I started writing to a kid in Cherbourg. The guy's name was (Roja Fouquet?). So, I worked for a few months at (Cresses?) in San Pedro, up at 6th and the Pacific. Got about \$500 and my parents loaned me some and went down to – I'm telling too much of a story on this.

MS: No. This is good.

RM: I got a ticket on a freighter that was going to Europe, leaving Pensacola, Florida. So, I got down to Pensacola thinking that I was all going to be just by myself, and here were four other college kids. One from Berkeley, I was Berkeley at that time, and two from College of the Pacific, and one from USC. We got on there, there were a few other passengers underway from Pensacola around Florida in January. Got up off Cape Race on Newfoundland. This propeller dropped off the ship on its way to the city in the middle of a gale. Three days later, a Coast Guard cutter came and rescued us. We were very happy to see it there. Eventually, we were, after a month, towed back to Boston and the ship went to Dry Dock. The guy from Berkeley and I, (Gordon Fraser?), went down to New York and got on the *Bremen*. We got a ticket on the *Bremen* and went to Cherbourg. Met the Fouquets, fear and trembling. (foreign language). So, I got to know the Fouquet family. Roja, I asked him if he'd like to cycle through Normandy. He said, "Yes, I'd love it." Guess what? He had a beautiful sister, Yvonne. Yvonne said, "Can I go with you guys?" So, we cycled through Normandy and had a wonderful time. Finally, said goodbye to them. Went down to Perpignan on the Spanish French border and tried to get into France. Went into Spain but met some guys that had been with the Loyalists. They had been wounded and didn't have passports, didn't have any money, and I had a couple bucks. I gave them what I could and eventually came home. Great trip. Got some notes in a diary, but never wrote anything [laughter] other than the diary. Now, I don't know.

MS: This is all very interesting. You were going over to fight with the Loyalist?

RM: I wasn't going over to fight with anybody. I was going over there to...

MS: To write about it.

RM: – to write about it. I was Richard Halliburton.

MS: Who, by the way, I read as a kid too, and enjoyed it. I am a generation before you, but I read Halliburton too. Let us go back to San Pedro.

RM: Yes, sir. Yes, I think that's what we're here to talk about, San Pedro.

MS: When you started building your first boat, tell me the circumstances of that. Where in the world would you ever learn how to build a boat? Tell me that whole story.

RM: I had talked about building boats again in backyards, just as a young kid. The first boat I built was a punt. I think I mentioned earlier that punt is two flat ends, and hopefully a little bit of a rounded side and a flat bottom. Nothing to build it. My dad helped, of course, and a teacher in high school. He knew the woodshop teacher, and the woodshop teacher would help me by planing the lumber and getting it so it would bend. We built even a place out in the backyard so I could steam the lumber and make it bend a little easier. But we didn't do much bending. That's pretty hard to do. Then, though, the next boat I built, I built it from plans.

MS: Why not start again? "The next boat I built." Just start again, repeat yourself.

RM: Oh, talking about building boats we...

MS: "The next boat I built."

RM: Yes. [laughter]

MS: [laughter]

RM: I guess I get confused when I get carried away here. The first boat was a punt. Then I decided to build something better. I found some plans that were in *Rudder Magazine*. The design for the snipe had just come out, and it looked like I could do it. It was a fairly easy boat to build. So, I made the frames and bent the sides and planked the bottom and put a deck on her and a keel, a center board on her and I had a pretty good boat.

MS: Was this something that a lot of kids were doing? Or were you unusual that you were sitting in your backyard building boats?

RM: I loved building boats. It was fun building them, and of course I even loved more the sailing of them. But my next-door neighbor, he helped me on the first snipe. A guy named

Harold Simpson. His dad ran a paint store in San Pedro. He helped me and we finished my boat and sailed it for a while and then he built one. But he's the only other one that I knew of that build boats. We were two of a kind. There weren't many others of us who built boats. I think few tried, maybe.

MS: It must have been a big moment when the boat you built that you had your launching. Can you describe that? What happened with that?

RM: We were talking about launching these boats. It's a long time ago. We had to have a trailer, so we found some old wheels. Probably my father found them, just a two-wheel trailer. We built a little V frame on it and somehow got the boat up onto it and took it down to Cabrillo Beach, which was then in, and backed the trailer in the water and floated her. But I can't remember any details. It was a great day, of course, in our lives. But it was getting the sails on her and getting her up and trying to see what we could do in Hurricane Gulch.

MS: Yachting, when you were a young boy was popular with the whole Hollywood crowd and they had boats down. What was the yachting scene for you watching it with your little boat there?

RM: Of course, I've been telling you about building boats and all that thing. But another thing that got us interested in boating was going down to 22nd Street and sitting on the lumber pier there or on the 22nd Street, Landing Bar and Grill is now. Sitting there and looking out, then there are all of these great big yachts. Right below us was a float that every one of these big yachts, and even the smaller ones, had little tenders or dinghies that they would row in. The L.A. Yacht Club had a clubhouse on 22nd Street, just at the top of the bluff. We would watch these people and their dinghies coming in, which made it very, very exciting. There were a lot of big boats with the movie stars of the day, I suppose, John Barrymore. I can't remember them. But I remember there was a six meter that was always anchored out, which was a smaller one. But it belonged to – who's the man that built the airplanes over in Long Beach?

MS: Howard Hughes?

NS: No, not Howard Hughes. Howard Hughes was of course one.

MS: Donald Douglass?

RM: The name of a big company.

MS: Northrop?

RM: Predecessor.

MS: [inaudible]

RM: It doesn't matter.

MS: [laughter]

RM: Anyway, he was one. That I'll probably come to me in a minute, his name. But these people had wonderful boats. I might digress here. I keep mentioning Harry Pidgeon because he just...

MS: We want to take him as a separate subject. So, did you dream about one day having one of these big boats yourself?

RM: No, I think it was more practical. All of us were more practical. We wanted boats, but we never dreamed of anything like a hundred-foot schooner or a yawl or a ketch or something.

MS: I am sorry, John.

MS: Turn it off. Repeat yourself because it was interrupted by the phone. Say, "We never dreamt."

RM: Talking about what kind of a boat that I might want in time, no, not the big schooner like the *Endymion* or the *Mariner* or any of those. But we thought maybe someday we could get a six meter. Even that's pretty big. But a starboard or something like that. About that time, I, of course, was in high school. At least, I was getting jobs and I met a guy.

MS: Start again. "I was in high school."

RM: I met a fellow down along the waterfront. I had the snipe then. He came along and he said, "My name is Merle Davis and I'd like to build a marina. Would you kids like to help me?" So, I went to work for Merle Davis, and he built a pretty good little marina, logs and old, fifty-gallon drums that would float around to hold the finger piers up. I worked for him for a long time. Then he started building boats. He built six and eight meters for several well-known people. The director of the NBC National Orchestra and the CBS Orchestra, those two guys both had boats and loved sailing. There were a lot of people that loved boats in those days. But anyway, working for Merle Davis was really fun and a real entrepreneur of his day. Died much too young.

MS: Where did he put this marina? Was this right in the harbor?

RM: Yes, it was. The marina that Merle Davis, that I was just mentioning, built, was almost at Watchorn Basin, which perhaps I'd have to describe that. [laughter] Not too far from Cabrillo Beach, in that general area. I think it's called West Basin now, not West Basement.

MS: When you were sailing your snipe, where are you sailing it? Where are you going with it?

RM: We sailed the boats that we had pretty much just in the harbor and outside the breakwater. But as you grow older, you have bigger dreams. Before long, particularly when my friend Harold built his snipe, we decided that we would go to Catalina. So, two of us together, and he in his snipe and I in mine. So, we went to Catalina once. But you always dreamed of that and

thought you could take that snipe and drive her anywhere. But Catalina was the best we did. But basically, just in the harbor, which was fun and lots of wind.

MS: What about that Catalina trip? That was equivalent of Magellan for you, right? [laughter]

RM: [laughter]

MS: Was that particularly memorable?

RM: I mentioned that Catalina trip, two sailboats sailing over. Of course, with sailboats, you never go to Avalon. Those of you that know Catalina, Avalon's a wonderful place to go but not for a sailor. Sailors wanted to go to the west end of Catalina. Toward the west end, then there's, right where Catalina divides in two places, the isthmus. We'd sail there and find a mooring. There weren't many moorings in those days. But more likely and as I recall, on that particular trip, I think we just anchored and slept on our boats and stayed two or three days and had a wonderful time. That introduced me to longer distance sailing, of course. L.A. Yacht Club, I'm not sure whether they had Howland's Landing at that time or not. They're stationed in Catalina. But the L.A. Yacht Club has been (very good?).

MS: Tell me the history. What is the L.A. Yacht Club? What's its history? What do you know about it and why it is important for the harbor here?

RM: Oh, I belong to the L.A. Yacht Club. I belong to it now. I'm not a really old member, but I have been about twenty-five years. L.A. Yacht Club is the oldest yacht club in the harbor area since 1901. So, it's over a hundred years old. I think the San Diego Yacht Club is a little older and the St. Francis up in San Francisco is a little bit older. But it's a sailing club. In my early days, lots of the celebrities and wealthy people were members of the Yacht Club. Because it was a sailing club and very active club. It's remained that through the years in various locations. As I mentioned, I think, talking a few minutes ago about one of their locations, their clubhouse was on 22nd Street on the bluff. It was over on Terminal Island at one time. Then on (Sarijus Channel?) in the back harbor area. They had a beautiful clubhouse there. They and the California Yacht Club combined. Then eventually the L.A. Yacht Club moved to Fish Harbor, which was exciting and wonderful place to be because it was all by itself and seeing things going on, all the fishing boats and the good smells.

MS: What were the activities of the yacht club? What did they do?

RM: The activities of the Yacht Club are mainly just involved in sailing and racing. However, we have a station on Catalina Island. They've rented or leased a cove at the west end of the island for many, many, many years. I don't know exactly how many. A lot of the club's activities take place there. People sail over and everybody gets together and parties on the beach, barbecues on the beach, volleyball court. It's just a fun place to be. The water is clear and beautiful and it's very nice. But the Yacht Club also has activities at the clubhouse, as any normal club would have parties and so on. Yes, go on.

MS: Two things. What is the membership? How large a club is this?

RM: It's not a huge club. I suppose there are various categories of members in the yacht club. It isn't a very great big club. I suppose there are two hundred active members and three hundred non-active. The membership book looks big, but its active members are not so many.

MS: How does one become a member of the Los Angeles Yacht Club?

RM: To become a member of any yacht club, I think, and particularly I know most about L.A., but you just have to be proposed by a member. Members are always on the lookout for some nice man or woman that would like to become a member. So, your name is proposed and you eventually get to [laughter] pay whatever they call the dues that you have to. The regular dues, of course. But the joining due, every club has them.

MS: You have been talking around and around about it. But tell me, who was Harry Pidgeon and tell me his story and why he is important to understanding the history of the port in San Pedro?

RM: I have mentioned a man named Harry Pidgeon to you a couple times. Perhaps it'd be good if I did tell you a little bit about him. In the sailing fraternity, or whatever you want to call it, the people who love sailing, sailing long distances is always something to think about.

MS: Let us start again. We are going to lose you. When you cough, you have to start from the...

RM: Excuse me. Just getting over that doggone cold. Am I?

MS: Yes. So, start from the beginning.

RM: On the Pidgeon thing.

MS: Start the sentence, "Harry Pidgeon was."

RM: Old Harry Pidgeon was a great sailor in his day.

MS: You want some water?

RM: Yes.

MS: I apologize. We will have to take thing off you and get some water. So, start again.

RM: About Pidgeon.

MS: Start your sentence by saying, "Harry Pidgeon was."

RM: Harry Pidgeon was a very interesting person, but he became famous because he became the second sailor to sail around the world all by himself. The first man was Joshua Slocum, who did

it in the early 1900s. Then first man, Harry Pidgeon, born in Iowa, floated on a raft down the Mississippi River. Was a photographer by trade as a young man. Came out to California after his Mississippi trip and got a buggy and horses and went down to Mexico. Turned around at the border and went all the way up to Canada. Then came back, taking pictures all the way and selling them and making money that way. Took pictures particularly up in the logging industry and the Sierra Nevadas and things like that. Then he went up to Alaska and worked with another man getting specimens for the museum. What's the museum in Washington D.C.?

MS: Smithsonian.

RM: The Smithsonian. They worked that way for several years. This was all done while he was still mostly in his early [19]20s. So, he did a lot. Then he came back to Southern California where he had a few relatives and was with them. *Rudder Magazine* came out with the plans for a thirty-four-foot yawl. He decided that he would build this yawl and do some sailing. So, he came down here, the San Pedro, and got over on Mormon Island, which is just down by the Vincent Thomas Bridge on the other side, Wilmington side. Up on the beach there, he built this thirty-four-foot yawl. When he completed it, he sailed it to Catalina. Then eventually he got another fellow that wanted to sail a little bit. They sailed to Hawaii. This was back in the early [19]20s, perhaps earlier than that. But he found that he didn't do very well sailing with another person, the two of them. The boat had no engine. It had just sails and a couple of oars. Oars aren't much good in a thirty-four-foot boat. But, anyway, he came back here and then decided that he would go back out to Hawaii again. Then he decided to go to the South Pacific, and then he decided to go to New Zealand, I think. Then up around the north end of Australia. Then leg by leg, he got down to Cape Town, South Africa. Then across the Atlantic and through the canal and back to San Pedro. In the mid-[19]20s, my father and I were out in the harbor. I was probably eight or nine years old, and rowing a boat around in the harbor and here was an unfamiliar sailboat. So, we sailed over and rode around it. Pretty soon an old fellow looked old to me, he was probably about fifty years old, or I don't know, forty. Anyway, he stuck his head up out of the cabin and said, "Hello, my name is Harry Pidgeon, and would you like to come aboard?" That was the beginning of a long friendship with my parents and Harry Pidgeon.

MS: What kind of man was he? How would you describe him as a person?

RM: Everybody loved Harry Pidgeon. He was very quiet. He came to our house every week, once a week. My mother would invite him to dinner, and he would faithfully come. But he'd come and sit in the living room and read the magazine. If you talked to him, he would answer. But always happy and smiling and nice. Everybody loved Harry Pidgeon.

MS: Was he a famous character in San Pedro? Did people all know him?

RM: No. Yachtsman knew him. I suppose people would know, yes, we did have a relatively famous sailor around. Some of the fishermen probably knew him. Then he wrote a book. He wrote *Around the World Single-Handed* and it was published. I don't know how many printings it's had, but it's several, three or four, and in French and various other languages.

MS: When he was in San Pedro, did he live on his boat?

RM: He always lived on his boat. Always lived on it and always took pictures all around the world. Wherever he went, Alaska, Mississippi, Pidgeon was taking pictures. He had thousands of glass plate negatives. When he decided, I can't remember the date but [19]30s probably, decided to go around the world again, do it again, he decided not to leave. He didn't want to take all of these negatives that were stowed up in the bow of his boat with him. So, he asked my father if he would take care of these pictures. So, my dad said, "Yes." They were in a great, big trunk in the garage for years. Really to bring that part to a close, he finished his second trip around the world. On that trip, he met a very nice lady up on an island off New York, north of Long Island. He married her at about sixty. A day after their marriage, he and Margaret came out here. Of course, got acquainted with my parents. My mother liked Margaret and Margaret liked my mother. Then they decided to go on a third voyage, but this time he had a wife. They got across the Pacific, but in a typhoon, he lost the boat. They were driven ashore in Espiritu Santo south of Guadalcanal. They lost the boat, came back, no place to live. But Errol Flynn and other people let them stay on their boats if their boats weren't being used. So, they lived on various boats. That was when, Harry or Margaret, I'm not sure which one of them, they both said, "Oh, hey, Bob's way at school, and he's probably going to be gone and won't be back and never finish it. Could we finish it? Could we buy it from you?" So, my father said, "Sure." Gave it to them for \$1. He had to pay something. So, anyway, they finished up this boat, twenty-five-footer. It was almost an exact duplicate of the Longer Islander or the thirty-four-foot. Looked exactly like it, but small. Then Margaret and Harry lived on that until Harry died.

MS: Tell me, this was the boat you were building that they bought?

RM: That's it, yes.

MS: You got to tell me that story. So, you were building a thirty-four-footer?

RM: No. I was building a twenty-five-footer. When they lost their thirty-four-footer at Espiritu Santo, that's when they came back and saw this beginning of a smaller version of their boat. They thought that they could finish it, which they did. They finished it right down here on 22nd Street and launched it there. Movie stars, everybody in the world was there. [laughter] Not quite, but there were a lot of people. The *Lakemba*, they lived on it until Harry died. Buried up here in the cemetery in San Pedro.

MS: He was known by yachtsmen and everything. But did he have any relation to the community? Aside from your home, did he go to restaurants?

RM: No.

MS: Did he live a solitary life?

RM: Very solitary. Yes. The short time that I sailed with him to Catalina, I was in high school, and it wasn't a very enjoyable time. Eating his food, that was the main thing. He ate almost no meat and no bread. He wouldn't take bread with him. He would just take some flour. I don't know. He cooked in the frying pan a few vegetables. It was pretty tough. [laughter]

MS: Tell me, so you sailed with him. Tell me about your experience. Tell me that story from the beginning.

RM: As I said, I sailed with Pidgeon. I sailed, I think, it was a three-day trip. [laughter] But there aren't many around that did it. It was an interesting trip at the time that I went with him. By the way, my father was along on this trip. I wasn't by myself with Harry. He kept his boat in West Basin. At that time, the entrance to West Basin, there was a drawbridge over the top where the Pacific Electric trains would go across from San Pedro to Wilmington to Long Beach and L.A. We left in the morning and there was no wind, and he had no engine. So, we drifted around and got to this drawbridge. He called up to them and they raised the bridge. The bridge keeper yelled back, "Well, I've got a lot of trains waiting out here. You better hurry up and get through." So, we pulled the great, big fourteen- or fifteen-foot oars out and tried to roll her through, which we did. That was the start of that trip, which was the only trip I made, the three- or four-day trip.

MS: So, during these three or four days, is he a conversationalist or did you spend a lot of time just looking at him?

RM: [laughter] No. I mentioned before that Pidgeon was very quiet. He'd talk when we'd talk to him, sure. He wouldn't tell us much about his voyages or anything.

MS: There we go. Take some more. You ready to go?

RM: No, let me blow my nose. I think I can. You want a couple more minutes?

MS: [laughter] So, tell me, sailing with Pidgeon, was he a raconteur? What was it like?

RM: Sailing with Pidgeon was fun. We just sailed quietly and peacefully. I can never remember Pidgeon saying more than about ten words in a row. So, I didn't really learn much about his experiences as a kid going up and down the Mississippi or up in Alaska. It was just things that I'd read and have read since.

MS: So, when he left on his trip leaving from San Pedro, was there a grand farewell or did he just slip away? What was it like?

RM: It was pretty much a slip away, yes. On his first trip back, it was almost like somebody in the movie industry got to him. There was a fan dancer named Sally Rand. Sally Rand came down and was on his boat. But those situations were few and far between. Pidgeon was quiet.

MS: If he was a quiet guy, how did he attract all these Hollywood stars? You would think he would be a party animal with all that going on. Talk about his relationship to Hollywood.

RM: He did have a certain relationship with Hollywood. The only people in Hollywood that were interested in the Harry Pidgeon were guys that were interested in their own boat, that had boats, that sailed, that were members of the Yacht Club. He was always in need of money,

although he never asked for it. But everybody knew that he had needed money to live. Whatever he got from his book, the sales were not great. So, they'd have fundraisers for him. The L.A. Yacht Club had fundraisers. But that wasn't the only yacht club. All sailing people knew him and liked the old guy. He was really neat. I'm digressing again here. But the pictures that my father was keeping for Harry, when he died, his wife, Margaret, went back to City Island or whatever it was in New York and just left them. My father tried to find if any other relatives that were still alive wanted them. They didn't. So, when my father died, I had them. They're thousands of glass plates. I knew they would just disintegrate. So, I searched for a fitting home for them and went to the University of California and everywhere else. It wound up that the University of California Collection seemed to be the best. So, I then turned them over to UC Collection that's up in Riverside. That's where they are today.

MS: Did you ever know another photographic historian who would have probably been fascinated by these? Bob Weinstein?

RM: Oh, I knew Bob. Sure.

MS: Bob is a good friend of ours.

RM: Oh, I knew Bob Weinstein. Yes.

MS: He must have been fascinated to see those photos, I think, then.

RM: Oh, Bob was down at the house all the time. Our house, that is. Yes, he liked Pidgeon and he got to know him a little bit, I think. I can't remember precisely.

MS: So, you were in the Navy for twenty years. That took you away from San Pedro. So, what year did you come back to San Pedro and what was it like when you returned?

RM: In my career, I was (clearly a?) naval officer, of course. I went to the University of California and graduated from Berkeley in 1940. I'd always wanted to go to the Naval Academy, but I couldn't get an appointment to the Naval Academy, which was very difficult to get unless you have some political connections. So, when I graduated, I got a job with the railroad and then various other jobs and didn't like any of them. But a program developed. The Navy had a program for college graduates. They called it the V-7 program. If you would go to one of their Annapolis or Northwestern or various other places, and study for and get through it for ninety days, you would get a commission as (an incentive?). So, I did. They sent me to Northwestern in about November [19]40, I think. So, I got through my ninety days and became a ninety-day wonder and was sent to my first ship out in Pearl Harbor. So, I was in Pearl Harbor in about April of 1940. On early days of December of 1940, they moved our ship over there, over right alongside the *Arizona*. On December 7th, here we were tied up to the hotspot of Pearl. So, when the *Arizona* blew up, it blew our ship over and blew our skipper over the side. I went over and most everybody else who was on deck went over the side. We managed to get through that all right. Then later in the day, I was wounded. She had received a couple of bomb hits. Since she was a very valuable ship, a repair ship, which was needed in the South Pacific at that time, so they got us out of there really in a hurry and we went down to the South Pacific.

MS: Let us go back here. You casually mentioned, "Oh yes, I was here at Pearl Harbor and my ship was blown up." That is a great story. Here you are, tell me the story from the beginning. What happened? [laughter]

RM: [laughter]

MS: It was not just, "Yes, my ship fell over."

RM: Yes. I could go on for a couple of hours about that.

MS: Just tell me what happened.

RM: Basically, I was signal officer on the ship. On Saturday, I had had no duty and I went ashore and I had a Hupmobile. Did you ever hear of a Hupmobile? I had a two-door Hupmobile with a rumble seat. I got a date with a nurse at the Navy Hospital. We went down to Waikiki and had a big night and went to a movie. Big night. Anyway, she had the duty, had to get her back about midnight. So, drove back to Pearl and took her to the hospital. Dropped her off, said goodnight, went over back to the officer's club. That was where the officer's boat landing was and parked the car in the parking lot. Went back out the ship. Didn't have the duty on Sunday, so I was going to sleep in. Of course, first thing I heard in the morning and the first thing I woke up with was a couple of bangs off in the distance. Then a short time after that, somebody came running down through the passageway yelling, "We're under attack. It's the real thing. It's a real thing in General Quarters." Then about that time, "Bang, bang, bang," with the General Quarters' alarm. Grabbed my stuff and went to the bridge. I was signal officer, so I had to be way up there. Got up there and the Japanese planes were coming across. Torpedo planes, they have to come in really low, really get down to about ten-feet high off the water and twenty feet maybe. They dropped the torpedoes and then they try hard to climb and get over the mast of the ship they were firing at or the torpedo was trying to. So, here they were. I had my forty-five on and everything. So, here we were, everybody was trying to shoot. I was shooting my forty-five [laughter] at these planes. They were so close, you could see the pilot, you could see the gunner in the back, or the torpedoman or whatever he was. So, we were watching them. Once in a while, a couple planes went down. About that time, "Boom." The high-level bombers came over and they dropped their big bombs on the Battleship Row. Of course, these battleships were all lined up, straight line, nice and easy. All they had to do was go over the top. The *Otter* ships were torpedoed, of course. Four of them were sinking. The *West Virginia* was right next to us, and she was sinking. The *Tennessee* or something, and then the *California*. I don't know. There were two or three of them there. The oil was coming out and burning. Of course, one of the bombs hit the *Arizona*. It's been the story that it went down the stack, or at least went through a couple of decks and got into the forward magazine and the magazine went up. I suppose it was one of the biggest manmade explosions that had taken place up to that time. She went up and our ship turned way over on the side. Our skipper, who had been out – we only had a couple of guns – and he was out telling our gun crews what to do. It blew him over the side and all the gun crews. Our exec thought the ship was going to go all the way over. So, he ordered to abandon ship. Those of us who were up around him, up on the bridge where he, over the side thirty feet jumping into the water. So, I went down into the water. [laughter] I think a good part of the

story is that I had bought a new hat for inspections a couple days before for our Saturday inspections. It cost me \$14. When I jumped in the water, I had my hat on. I went down and here my hat was floating. Right behind my hat was all the burning oil from the *West Virginia*, big old flames coming up. There was a boat also on the other side, a forty-foot motor launch. I didn't know quite what to do. I wanted my hat but I also [laughter] saw that oil. I made the decision and I left my hat and went to the motor launch. Managed to get into the motor launch. There was one other guy in there. He was a signalman. He couldn't start the engine, but he could steer the boat. So, between us, I could start the engine. I got the engine started. We went around, picked up a bunch of guys in the water, brought them back to the ship, and got back aboard. The skipper had gotten back aboard. By that time, the *Arizona* was just a wreck and burning. So, we managed to cut our lines to the *Arizona* and went across the harbor. Anchored and the ship started to sink because we'd taken two bombs. One went all the way through the ship, right out the bottom. The other one started a fire. So, the skipper thought, "We better not stay here. We'll sink." So, he cut the chain or let the chain go, and just ran her up on the mud at Aiea so she wouldn't sink. About that time, another wave of bombers came over and we ran out of ammunition. So, we had to go down into the magazines, get more ammunition out. Ships in those days, a lot like ours, had some ready-service ammunition up on deck, ten or twelve rounds. But when that was gone, you had to go with the magazine. So, they asked for volunteers. My boss, he got seven volunteer sailors to go with him. They went down the forward magazine and got ammunition up. But there was a great big fire in the forward part of the ship where one bomb had gone. It was fumes and everything. So, he had to come up and the guys were with him. So, they asked him if they should flood the magazine, and he said, "No, I think we can get a little bit more, then flood." So, they asked for volunteers, and of course, I thought, "If my boss did it, I can do it." So, I got seven guys volunteering with me, and we went way down, I don't know, fifty, sixty feet down a ladder to the forward magazine. I got a fire hose and I didn't know anything about the magazine, but the guys did with me, sailors. They load up the elevator and send it up. Another load, another load, another load. Pretty soon, I began to feel really woozy. So, I yelled into the magazine. I was out in the little handling room, just outside the magazine, water all over the place. "Think you can take it any longer?" They yelled back, "No, we can't do it." So, I said, "You can get going." I counted one, two, three, seventh guy went up. I remember I turned off the hose, started up the ladder, last thing I knew. Next thing I knew, I was on a hospital ship and I had passed out. Supply officer got a rescue breather on and came down and put a line around me, and they hauled me out and sent me over to the hospital ship.

MS: How long did this take? All this you are in the water, you are out of the water, you are down, it is the second wave. How long was the attack?

RM: I have a watch at home.

MS: I am going to change the tape.

MS: You are going to change tapes. Saying that, how long did this attack take? This is minutes, hours, that you were involved in all this?

RM: I've been talking to you about this attack. When you're undergoing something like this, you really lose track of time. You don't know how long, or at least when you're thinking about it

after years. I have a watch that I got from either college graduation or high school, I can't remember. But I was wearing it on December 7th and it stopped at 9:15 a.m. So, that must've been it ran for probably twenty minutes after I went into the water. But then, of course we had to get the ship underway and get across to Aiea and anchor, fire all our guns, and put her up on the beach. It was probably an hour or maybe two. I really don't know.

MS: It must have been all hell was breaking loose. What was it sounding like? What was going on?

RM: For this hour or two, all hell was going on. But I saw this movie, whatever it was, about December, *Pearl Harbor*. Everything is so condensed in the movie that it looked somehow – the real thing, it's not as condensed. It's dragged out, even though I can't remember the time frame. It seems like we were doing sort of normal things for a period, and then it would start again. There would be a great deal of firing and planes going down and bombs dropping. Then quiet again for a while. So, it wasn't the continuous action that probably it seems in reading books and seeing movies.

MS: But the concussion, the sound of the *Arizona* blowing up, do you –

RM: I was just talking about the concussion or speaking of the *Arizona* blowing up. What did it feel like? I truly think back and try to remember, I just don't remember. It must have been a huge thing to knock our ship. Ours was a big ship, not like the *Arizona*, but we were four hundred feet long probably and ten thousand tons. So, the old *Vestal*, she was a wonderful old ship, a good ship and everything, but she was old. She was keel laid in 1904, I believe. Built as a collier or a coal carrier and converted to a repair ship later.

MS: That story is just amazing. But I want to get back to San Pedro.

RM: Yes.

MS: What was San Pedro like when you came back here to live again? Why did you come back to live again?

RM: After twenty years in the Navy, living all over, living on the East Coast, I had a tour of duty in Norway with NATO. You do live in many places, but San Pedro has always been for many of us, and certainly for me, it's always been I loved San Pedro. I had fun here and I enjoyed it. Of course, most of all, my parents were here. So, they lived in a house around Point Fermin. So, when I retired, where else to go? So, I came back here and got my teaching credential and went to UCLA, just like my dad did. This time not up on Vermont, was it, or Normandy, or wherever. [laughter] It was in Westwood. So, I went there and had a good couple of years and got a job with the L.A. School System and was teaching school. So, I came back, didn't live right in San Pedro. I bought a house in Manhattan Beach, because I liked to be by the beach and swim. If I was going to be a schoolteacher, I'd have long vacations and could spend them on the beach and ruin my skin. [laughter] Which I did. Was close to my parents as they got older.

MS: Go ahead and stop taping.

MS: We have speed.

MS: So, talk to me about San Pedro as a yachting town and why we should know about that?

RM: San Pedro is, of course, a wonderful port and an interesting place. But it is a good place for yachting people. It's a good place because as your children grow up, the water is smooth. You can bring your kids up sailing the little dinghies and things like that. But perhaps even more important, San Pedro has been pretty good about having certain backwater areas that marinas could be built and a place to keep your boat. Which is of course obviously very important if you want to sail. But even I think one of the most important things is that it's the closest to Catalina. Catalina is a draw for all yachtsmen. Instead of sailing thirty miles, you can sail nineteen miles and they get to Avalon or the Isthmus. But even beyond that, it's an interesting port. That if you have guests coming down, you can take your guests down the main channel, see activities that these people would never in their lives – particularly if they come from Midwest or away from the ocean anyway – they see things here and activities that are – you meet interesting people. Many of our friends they're all shoremen or fishermen. I grew up with all of the sons of fishermen and Croatians generally or a few Japanese. Frank Deguchi was one of my boyhood chums and lived over at East San Pedro on Terminal Island. Borti A. Petrich and (Joe Zara?) and all these guys that were interesting. Their parents were wonderful people. I loved them.

MS: How has the harbor changed from when you first came here as a seven-year-old from today?

RM: [laughter] After I retired from the Navy and came back here, it was a different harbor than I'd left it twenty or thirty years before. Obviously modernized. In modernization, of course when you dream about the old fun days that you had, things are quite different. It's a different looking port, not nearly as interesting to just poking around your nose. You can find a few of them down (Sarijus Channel?). But it's kind of hard to find much really old and interesting. But still, a fascinating harbor. But it's not like it was. It isn't with the old sailing ships that you could find them here and there. The fleet isn't in. It's just a busy port now, but still exciting for visitors.

MS: Perfect. Anything else you wanted to say to me? Any other stories that I missed or any comments you wanted to make?

RM: As soon as I get away from here, yes.

MS: [laughter] Well, why not move your chair if you can about two feet.

[end of transcript]