

Male Speaker: Sounds good to me [laughter].

MS: Yes.

MS: Let me take a picture of you. You want to just slide over. I will take a still photo. That was really good. Go ahead.

James Yamamoto: Okay. My name is James Yamamoto. J-A-M-E-S, Y-A-M-A-M-O-T-O.

MS: Perfect.

JY: Yes.

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

JY: I was born in 1936 in Terminal Island, California. Not in the prison, but there used to be a Japanese fishing village there. My father owned the community grocery store, one of the community grocery stores. Okay.

MS: Let us start off and talk about your father and your parents.

JY: Yes.

MS: Where did they come from? When did they come to San Pedro and why?

JY: Okay. Actually, my father was the manager of a – there used to be a chain Japanese market in the Greater Los Angeles area. He was manager of the branch in Terminal Island since there was a community of Japanese over there.

MS: What was the name of the market?

JY: It was called Tozaiya. He met my mother.

MS: I should tell you one other thing. My questions will not be used.

JY: Okay.

MS: When I say to you, "What is your father like," you have to say, "My father was." You cannot just, "He."

JY: Okay.

MS: You started talking about your father. Your father met your mother?

JY: Yes, my father met my mother, I guess in Gardena. My father had a branch store in Gardena also. So, I guess she was one of the clients there. I mean, her cousin was one of the

clients there. It's a long story. But they met. They got married over there. Then they came to Terminal Island to run the store over there.

MS: What year was that do you think? You say, "My father came to Terminal."

JY: Yes. My father came to Terminal Island in the early [19]30s, I would say [19]32, [19]33, with my mother, I presume.

MS: People who do not know what Terminal Island is, what was Terminal Island? What was it like? Who lived there? What did they do in those days?

JY: Okay. Terminal Island was an island constructed by dredging out the sand they dredged out of the harbor. They piled it up, and it turned into Terminal Island, basically. They constructed a Japanese fishing village on Terminal Island. There were a few thousand Japanese living there. Their wives went to work in the cannery, and the husbands went out fishing. It's turned out to be that way. My father had a grocery store there. It was a whole community there, a church and everything else.

MS: What were your earliest memories of growing up on Terminal Island? What was it like? What do you remember about the place?

JY: We all spoke Japanese there, for one thing. [laughter] Yes. I remember going to kindergarten for the first time. Nobody knew what the teacher was saying because she spoke English. Eventually, we picked it up. By the first grade though, we were speaking English to some degree.

MS: How did she teach you English? Just by talking, you picked it up? Or did you have lessons, special lessons that you took to get to learn English?

JY: Well, they had us read books and so forth. The teacher would do phonetics. With mouth – how do you say it? Exaggerating the sounds with the mouth. Yes, that's how we learned.

MS: What was the neighborhood that you grew up in like? What did it look like? It is gone now. We have to remember.

JY: Well, actually, I left the war – World War II broke out when I was around five or six. So, I can't remember too much. But the pictures I see, it's sort of like a camp type of thing.

MS: Do you remember the day the war broke out? Do you remember that day? What went on there?

JY: Well, I remember before the war broke out, I guess that's when Roosevelt created a blockade in the Pacific for Japan. So, we were very busy in the ship chandlery business because a lot of Japanese ships came. They were buying everything they could get their hands on. All of a sudden, boom, no ship, zero ships [laughter]. I remember that my father had more time at home. Yes.

MS: First of all, people do not know what a ship chandlery is. What is a ship chandlery?

JY: Basically, it's a...

MS: Just say, "A ship handler."

JY: A ship handler is sort of a generic name. It goes into various phases. But basically, the word ship handler came about – I believe that it's from the ancient days when – a handler is a candlestick maker, a chandelier maker. In the ancient days, lighting was pretty important. So, the industry of the ship is away from the city to some degree. So, they would consolidate everything at the chandelier maker. So, say, "Drop it off at the handler's. We'll pick it all up." That's how they coined the phrase ship handler. So, in today's terms, we basically try to get all the needs they want, their shopping done before they get here, since the stay is very short now, so anything from things from the drug pharmacy to food to hardware items to your beers and so forth.

MS: Well, let us go back. Do not grow up so fast. Now were you sent off to internment camps when you were young?

JY: Yes. Right after Pearl Harbor, we were given forty-eight hours to vacate the whole area there. My father had a hard time since he had a whole store in the inventory and trucks and so forth. So, it was quite stressful, I think.

MS: What did he do with the inventory and the trucks?

JY: Well, he packed it up. My mother's cousin had a barn. They had a big nursery in Gardena. So, we stored everything in the barn over there. But coming back after the war, it's been broken in several times, it seems like.

MS: When you came back after the war, you were what? Nine or 10 years old? Eight or 9?

JY: Thereabouts. Yes.

MS: What do you remember about coming back to San Pedro again? I mean, Terminal Island was gone at that point.

JY: Well, Terminal Island was gone. But actually, we lived in Gardena when we first came back. Gardena, we moved around Gardena and Compton and so forth.

MS: How did you get into the business, chandlery?

JY: Well, myself?

MS: Yes.

JY: It's my father's. I don't know. It's kind of an old traditional crap.

MS: You just said you are going to do it, or you want to?

JY: No. I wanted to be an engineer. But my father said, "No, you've got to be a businessman." I hated it. I didn't want to do it. But I just ended up doing it.

MS: When did you start on your own? You worked with your father for a while, I assume.

JY: Yes. I never had a job in my whole life. [laughter] I had to work for my father.

MS: Describe how the business has changed from the days you started out working to today. What are the different changes that have taken place in your business?

JY: Well, in the old days, our communication wasn't very good. We used to go to ITT. They would go the Morse code. We send, like, Western Union kind of situation. It was so costly that we used as little words as possible and a lot of code. Then when Telex came about, I don't know. Most kids don't know what Telex is anymore. We thought that was the greatest thing. But at any rate, as the communication evolved and got better – I forgot where I was going with this.

MS: What are the different improvements in communication?

JY: Oh, yes. Communication just improved. Then after Telex, the fax came in, and then now with email. The more communication you get, the more complaints and [laughter] requisition. They would email us the whole list and say, "Hey, could you check the price on all these items?" Some of this stuff are high-tech stuff, going to Fry's or whatever. They would even name the stores to go to get it. Then "Could you send us a quote or a price on it? We'll decide whether we want it or not." So, we have to make two or three trips to the same store just to satisfy the customer.

MS: Let us go back to the telegraph days. You said they had to use code in order to keep the word count down. Do you remember what some of that code was for some?

JY: Not so much code. In the old days, we didn't use so much. I mean, what I mean by code is that we would use Japanese word and write it in English. Sometimes we could get three or four words for one word. So, it was more economical that way.

MS: What were the different countries? It changed over time that you were doing this work for. The port attracted different countries over time.

JY: Yes.

MS: Where did it start?

JY: Well, originally, my father's company, we specialized only in Japanese vessels. But after World War II, as far as Asian ships were concerned, there were only Japanese ships coming and

very few Chinese. Once in a great while, a Korean ship would come. All the agents and so forth said, "Oh." They threw everything our way which was Asian. Oof course, the Indians were different. They did the Indian and the American chandlers. But the Japanese chandler, we did all the Chinese and Japanese.

MS: When did it change? What year did it start to change to different kinds of companies and the balance sort of shifted?

JY: Okay. I know Taiwan started in the shipping industry. It's the Orient Overseas Container Line they call it now. It evolved to that. But this guy Tung, he was sort of like the Onassis of China. He had a lot of used World War II victory ships, which he put into service. Then after he ran the heck out of them, he sold it for scrap. He sold it for scrap for more money than what he bought it for. So, he really made out like a champ. So, the Chinese got into it, the Taiwan Chinese, of course. The Communist Chinese, I don't think. They just sent crew members out to various ships. So, they don't have too many ships, it seems like. Then the Koreans are adamantly into it now. So, it's quite a change. You'd think the food is the same since they're Asians, but they're all completely different.

MS: First of all, you must have people who speak all those languages, right?

JY: Yes. That's the thing. In the old days, all the ship chandlers sort of went by ethnicity. So, we were the Japanese ship – Asian ship chandler. Then you had some Danish ship chandlers and the Americans. Of course, Americans and the Brits, those were the same. So, you had all these different ethnicities, and Scandinavians and so forth. But now, the whole shipping industry has changed. Each company, they own the ship, but they put crew members on from various different countries where they could get them the cheapest. So, now you have a lot of Indian crews, Filipino crews, very much a lot of Filipino crews, and some Chinese and Russians and Eastern Bloc nations like Bulgarians and Croatians and so forth. The whole thing has changed. It's a free-for-all out there for all the ship chandlers now. We don't go by ethnicity. It's who could grab the most customers, it seems like.

MS: Give me a sense of some of the unusual demands that you have to deal with for some of these ships, of which you have to buy. Give some of those stories of memorable orders.

JY: One memorable order a long time ago, in my father's days, they were requiring a lot of garlic powder on a Japanese vessel, like five, ten cases. We got it together for them and everything. Then when the ship came in, I was there on arrival. As the ships come in, you can smell the garlic on the whole ship. So, I asked him, "What's all the garlic powder for? Are you sure it's not a mistake?" He says, "No, no. We're all putting garlic powder on all our food. So, it's like an aphro –" What do you call that?

MS: Aphrodisiac?

JY: Aphrodisiac. "So, we'll be all set to go when we get back to Japan." That was before Viagra, of course. [laughter] But now, in the pharmacy department, the captain's signature, they could get any kind of drugs because they have to have that on the vessel, morphine and so forth,

too. I shouldn't say that, but because maybe the drug addicts might try to break in. [laughter]

MS: I am sure they know.

JY: Yes, I think so. Another time, it was about twenty years ago. This one captain, I don't know why, it was in the mailing time. They used to mail from the last port, the requisition, and he would have the whole thing. Then at the bottom, he has a little P.S. on there and says "On arrival, would appreciate it if you could arrange one blonde, one brunette, and one black girl [laughter] in my quarters on arrival [laughter]." We all really cracked up on that in the office.

MS: Did you supply them?

JY: Well, I didn't know any. But I met this one guy on the ship. He gave me his card. It says "theatrical agent." [laughter] I say, "Well, you guys shooting movies here?" He says, "No, no, no, no." [laughter] So, I called him up. He said, "Oh, yes, we could arrange that."

MS: What is the hardest thing that you had to get for a ship?

JY: Actually, you've been in the business long. Nothing's that hard. It's just about having to know where to get everything. It's just a matter of time. Some items, if we can't get it locally, we have to fly it in from the East Coast or the Gulf Coast or so forth. Like a windshield wiper for the bridge, it's a big old windshield wiper. The whole system costs thousands of dollars. Because the windshield wiper just goes diagonally, some of them. Some of them go like the car. They've got various different kinds. I supplied one of those. The only company that had it was in the Gulf Coast. When I called him up, he said, "Yes, I think we could get it out. We're getting a hurricane out here right now [laughter]."

MS: Over the years, now that you have got email and everything is instant, are some of these requests a little more demanding than they were?

JY: Oh, yes. Nowadays, the requests are very demanding because of the ease of communication. Especially the Indian people, they're quite frugal. They seem to be quite frugal. They're more precise and everything, what they want. They want all the slightest detail. As far as that goes, they're all frugal, basically. All the crew members are frugal. I think it's the age of being frugal.

MS: How much stuff do you have on a typical ship? Is it by container size? Is it by boxes?

JY: Well, the quantity varies very much. If it's going to be like a 30-day supply, it's not that much. If you put it on a pallet load, it would be around 4 to 6 pallet loads. It could go as many as 20 pallets, which would be a 40-foot container. Well, for instance, like the Japanese Navy coming to San Diego, I've taken as many as maybe 15 container loads to them. It's a flotilla of maybe, possibly ten vessels. So, each ship would get a container or two.

MS: Are there typical requests from, say, a Taiwanese ship, a Korean ship, or maybe a ship with Bulgarians on it? Is there a typical, you know that ship is coming, "I'm going to have to start

looking for this kind of stuff"?

JY: Yes, we sort of have a feel for it. Usually, the Russians and the Polish and Bulgarians like their cheese and sausages, various types of sausages. Koreans, they want to have – their budget is pretty good, the Korean ships. They want the best meat you could get, beef. They want the better grade, not the prime. Prime is too expensive. Japanese, mostly, you have to have good fish and good beef steak. They don't do it excessively. Then the Filipinos, they go for a lot of meat, [laughter] any kind of meat, beef or pork or chicken, poultry – not too much poultry, but pork and beef.

MS: Aside from food, what are the other demands or requests that you get from these ships? Aside from the differences in diet, are there other kinds of things that one nation wants more than another?

JY: Yes. As far as food, it's very standard. Food is considered as very standard stuff they want. Right now, they go in waves of modes of things they want. Right now, computers are a hot number. The last couple few years, the Indians and the Russians, as soon as they get here, they want to go out and go look for computer, go to Best Buy or whatever. Food is standard. [laughter] So much potatoes and so many things and nothing exotic. Nothing exotic.

MS: Now, how, economically, does this work? Do they have an account number, and you give them a bill? How does that work?

JY: There are various ways they buy it. They go through a catering company, or sometimes the company itself pays us with their signature and so forth. Once in a while, we'll get some cash deals too. When they pay cash, they expect cash discounts and so forth. [laughter]

MS: Now, with all the internet these days, what stops people from just ordering on the internet and having it delivered to the port they are going to and pick it up there? Why would they need a Chandler? If you are going to buy a computer, why would you not just go on to Best Buy website and order it and pay for it and say, "Ship it to the post office box in San Pedro, and I'll pick it up there"?

JY: What do you mean, the computer?

MS: Yes. Why would you need a Chandler? If you can order stuff over the internet directly, why would you use the ship's Chandler?

JY: They want to be there physically and experience – the customer wants to be there physically and touch the computer and test it out rather than order, looking at pictures of the computers.

MS: In that case, would you just simply tell them where the Best Buy is, or would you have the machine in your office and have them come and look at it?

JY: No. We have to furnish their transportation and tour them around town and go from store to store, go Circuit City, then to CompUSA, then to Best Buy and so forth. Then after they

surveyed a few stores, then they said, "Okay, that store," then we go back. So, that's what they need us for actually, the transportation, basically.

MS: I assume translation as well if you are dealing with –

JY: No. The Indians, they all speak English well, while Russians aren't that good. But they could get by.

MS: So, you charge them. You do a markup on the computer.

JY: No.

MS: Where do you make your money then?

JY: No. That's part of the service that we provide, take them shopping. Otherwise, if we don't provide various kinds of service for them, they'll probably take their stuff – their order somewhere else. Because ship chandlers, we're competing with other ports also. For instance, the Russians, they've got a big Russian – not a big Russian – well, it's a Chandler with a lot of Russians in Vancouver. There's a really strong port over there, even in Washington and so forth. So, it's pretty tough. Our biggest competitor basically now is Shanghai in China. The meat in China is very cheap. We try to scare their customers and say, "Hey, what about the SARS, the virus, and the mad cow [laughter] over there?" [laughter] They don't care as long as it's cheap. But they're getting it for about half-price compared to over here.

MS: You do, when you sell, not computers, but if you sell meat, you mark that up. That becomes your profit.

JY: Yes.

MS: Okay. That pays for the service of taking people around.

JY: Supposed to, anyway.

MS: Supposed to, right. Theoretically.

JY: Yes.

MS: I only have one last question. How things have changed from your father's days. How would you sum up how it changed from your father's days to today, the business that you are in?

JY: Well, in my father's days, my dad, his big enjoyment was going to the post office and getting orders in the mail. But nowadays, it just cranks out of the fax machine or open up the email. There'll be a whole bunch of orders in there. The communication is phenomenal right now. I wish my dad was still alive. He'll be quite amazed at how we get our orders nowadays.

MS: How does the Port of Los Angeles compete as far as a Chandler's port? How is it known

worldwide as a place for people to sell and to buy stuff?

JY: Well, the Port of Los Angeles is pretty well-known with all the services available here in the port. Every service you could think of is available here. I hope we keep it that way. We have a little problem with accommodating the service for the vessels because of the busyness of the port, and trying to get access to the ship. Because we would be in the way of the operation of loading and discharging of the vessels. That seems to be the big problem right now, having access to the vessel. But other than that, everything is available at this port. So, that's how it's well-known. It's such a big part here.

MS: Good. I think we made it perfectly, a few minutes. Slide your chair.

[end of transcript]