

Male Speaker: Okay. The hard question first, please say your name and spell it.

Irene Almeida: My name is Irene Almeida. That's I-R-E-N-E, A-L-M-E-I-D-A.

MS: If you do not mind telling me, Irene, what year were you born, and where were you born?

IA: August 20th, 1929. I was born in San Pedro on 18th Street, at home.

MS: At home. Please talk about that. I mean, obviously, you do not remember the day you were born, but you know that you were born at home. So, what was life like when you were born? How were babies coming to the world? What was society like when you were born?

IA: Well, my mother had a midwife. My dad had a small fishing boat. He was going to go out on a small trip. My mother said, "Don't go because I'm going to have this baby." I was the third. He didn't get back until the next day. So, [laughter] that was his last fishing trip.

MS: So, your mom was not a woman to be [laughter] toyed with, huh?

IA: She was married at 15. My mother was –

MS: Wait for me to finish because I do not want your voice and my voice together.

IA: Okay.

MS: Okay, start.

IA: My mother was 15 when she got married. I was the third. I had two older brothers. They both have passed away. By the time she was 19, when I was born, I guess it was a little difficult taking care of three children. So, she wanted him around not [laughter] out to sea, so –

MS: What about making a living though? Did she not need that, too?

IA: My father went longshoring. At the time that he did – I was born in 1929 – that was kind of the Fink Hall where they had to tip the hat and that sort of thing. But my dad was a very good worker. So, he didn't have much problem getting on.

MS: Now your background is Portuguese.

IA: That's correct. My background is Portuguese.

MS: We have not heard much about the Portuguese community in San Pedro. Why not tell us about the Portuguese community in San Pedro?

IA: The Portuguese community was pretty large. But when they started to have canneries in Point Loma, that's part of San Diego, most of them went down there. The Portuguese that were here were mostly fishermen. They were pole fishermen as opposed to the Italians and the

Yugoslav that were seine fishermen. But a lot of families remained. There were fishermen that remained like Peter Rodriguez, Manuel Luz. Primarily, they were the fishing families. Then Mr. Al (Gonsalves?) – but the son later changed the name to Alves. He worked, I believe, in the canneries. (Anibal Araujo?), that family, he was a longshoreman.

MS: How did your parents first come here? Where did they come from? Why did they come?

IA: My parents came from Madeira Island. My dad came when he was 16. They both came through Ellis Island, of course, and then went to Fall River at different times. They didn't meet until they were here in San Pedro. My dad was born in Paul do Mar which is on the coast. Madeira is an island that is a volcanic island. My mother was born in the farm area which was further in the hills. She came when she was 2, although she was conceived here in the States. My grandmother went back to Madeira in order to have her. Then they came back when she was 2.

MS: So, for people, Madeira is an island off of Portugal or Spain.

IA: No. It's really off of Africa, about 500 miles or something.

MS: So, why did they come to San Pedro?

IS: Well, my dad came because his brother, John, was here. My mother's family took little side trips from Fall River, where my grandparents worked in the mills. Then her oldest brother wanted to come to California. That's her brother Jack, Joaquin in Portuguese. So, they went to Oakland. Well, my grandfather didn't like it there. So, then my uncle went to Bakersfield to try that. My grandparents and my mother and her other brother, John, went there. But they didn't particularly like that either. So, then that's when they came to San Pedro and remained here.

MS: Now when you grew or growing up here, was there a Portuguese community or families?

IA: Yes.

MS: Tell me about that.

IA: When I was growing up, there was a Portuguese community. They were all very close. There was the Rodriguez family, the Fernandez family, the Gonsalves family, Luz. There was the (Avensole?) family. There were some others, Antonio and Olympia (Lungera?). There were quite a few others. Right now, I can't think of their names.

MS: So, when you say there was this community that meant you did things together that were – let us talk more about this Portuguese community. I mean, what were the community activities that they would do together that would identify them? Were they celebrating holidays? Were they seeing each other for parties? I mean, how would the Portuguese community express itself as a community?

IA: Well, the Portuguese community used to visit a lot. Basically, when I was about 4 or 5, we

lived on 18th Street. We used to walk down to the different Portuguese families, maybe two, three times a week and spend the evening talking. The kids would play together, and the parents would be talking. During Christmastime, my mother would set up a shrine. They'd grow wheat and things like that and put it around the shrine. Some of the other families also did that with the nativity scene. They'd visit and –

MS: So, were the families in the community generally speaking Portuguese when they were together?

IA: Yes.

MS: Why not tell me?

IA: The families generally would speak Portuguese. Not all the kids spoke Portuguese. My mother, was raised – being that she came when she was 2, she was an English speaker instead of – and when she and my dad met, my dad was primarily a Portuguese speaker, didn't speak much English at all.

MS: But he understood when she said, "If you do not get here on time, do not tell me you did not understand what I said." [laughter]

IA: Myself and my brothers could understand. We'd say a few words. But basically, we were English speakers. We didn't speak the language.

MS: Now, how did the Portuguese community fit in in San Pedro? I mean, what was their position in the community? How did they relate to other communities?

IS: Well, in San Pedro, basically, everyone just was friendly. My mother had a lot of real close friends that were Italians and Slavs and what have you. There wasn't really a separation where – at least with [laughter] the Portuguese, they seemed to be – although we visited a lot with the Portuguese. That was primarily what we did.

MS: Now, primarily Roman Catholic, so that linked everybody.

IA: Yes. Right.

MS: What was the role of the church then in the Portuguese community? What church was it?

IA: Mary Star, the old church that was down on Ninth and Center. It was a wooden church. It was really charming. We lost that church because the parish didn't want to keep it anymore. So, it was destroyed.

MS: When was that?

IA: Oh, I can't remember the year now, but –

MS: [19]50s, [19]60s?

IA: I don't want to say because I can't remember exactly.

MS: Most of the Portuguese community, what was the work that they were doing when they came?

IA: Oh, most of the Portuguese community, the men worked longshoring or fishing. Some of the women worked in the canneries. When some of the kids grew older, some of them worked there also, like the Rodriguez sons. They went fishing. In fact, one of them, Frank, was married and had two children. I was in high school. So, this was in my late forties. I graduated in summer of [19]47 from San Pedro High. He was electrocuted while he was out fishing. They were having trouble with the lights. He went to the electric box to take care of it. Unbeknownst to him, there was a cut in his boots. Of course, they were on the ocean. There was water on the deck. He was electrocuted.

MS: As a little girl growing up, describe what it was like to grow up in San Pedro. What was the town like? What was it like for a little girl?

IA: It was very nice. We had a lot of empty lots.

MS: Growing up in San Pedro.

IA: Growing up in San Pedro, I felt, was very nice. We could walk anywhere. Until I was 11, we lived on 18th Street, not where I was born, at 680 West 18th Street. We went to Mary Star of the Sea, the parochial school. We would walk to school. I can remember sometimes there was some really heavy rains, and the sewer system wasn't that great. [laughter] So, a few times, I can remember Gaffey Street was covered [laughter]. By the time we got to school, we were drenched. But they dried us out, and we stayed the day.

MS: We hear a lot about Mary Star, the school. Tell us what it was like going there. I assume it was taught by the nuns.

IA: Yes.

MS: Were there some legendary nuns there? What was it like in school?

IA: It was very good.

MS: It was very good in Mary Star.

IA: Mary Star, at least for me, was a very good school. I started in the primer. In the primer, we learned to read the printed word, and we wrote cursory. So, today, [laughter] they don't do that anymore. They don't learn how to write longhand until they're in the fourth grade or so. They don't seem to think that children have the capacity to do both. We did. There wasn't that much problem. They taught us the Palmer Method where you had to do those – I can remember a lay

teacher, the only lay teacher who was in the primer, Mrs. Kelly. But the nun would come in to teach us religion. But I can remember I used to hold onto the pencil really tight. [laughter] I can remember [inaudible] come by and pull the pencil. Of course, they couldn't get it because I was [laughter] holding onto it so tightly. I'd always be scolded for that. "You need to hold it gently." But anyway, my penmanship is fairly good now [laughter]. But I think I still have the tendency to hold onto the pen and pencil tightly.

MS: So, you felt that that education really was a good one there, and you felt that you learned?

IA: Yes. I think it was very good. The only problem that I found was I went – at that time, the school went through the ninth grade. I graduated from the ninth grade. When I went to San Pedro High, they tested you before you got in. So, they put me in advanced placement. My problem was that I didn't have exactly the same training that they had in math. So, when I got into the geometry class, I had problems with – well, I had an excellent teacher, Ms. Mueller. Well, this was an advanced placement class, so she just flew. [laughter] I was there not knowing what was going on. But other than that, I had an outstanding education at Mary Star.

MS: What did you do for fun as a little girl? What did little girls do for fun in San Pedro as you were growing up?

IA: We used to go to the movies a lot. For fun, well, we used to – visiting our friends was a lot of fun. But we used to go to the movies maybe twice a week. We used to go to the Strand which was at 11th and Pacific, down to the Cabrillo, which was down on Seventh Street below Palos Verdes, and to the Warner Grand. Mostly we went to the Fox theaters, but –

MS: So, describe what that experience was like, I mean, when you went to the movies. A lot of kids today do not understand how different it was then.

IA: Oh, it was great. Then they'd have special things, like they'd have an intermission between. It was always a double feature. You always had news, and you always had comedy. So, it was wonderful. Then they'd have special nights where they'd give away dishes or candies or various prizes. They played lotto for brief periods. So, it was really fun. We walked everywhere. We didn't get a car until I was in the seventh grade.

MS: What kind of movies were you seeing and enjoying?

IA: I loved the musicals. Yeah. They did really produce some beautiful musicals in those days.

MS: When you got older, did you go to the movies for dates?

IA: Well, I really didn't date until I started dating Art, my husband.

MS: When was that?

IA: When he came back from the service.

MS: So, he was your first boyfriend then?

IA: Yes.

MS: How did you meet?

IA: In school, at San Pedro High.

MS: My husband, Art, and I met in school.

IA: My husband and I met in the 10th grade at San Pedro High School which, when I graduated from Mary Star, my mother asked me where did I want to go? Did I want to continue in parochial school? But I would have to go to St. Anthony which was in Long Beach. I thought, "No. I didn't want to get up really early every day and take the bus and take the bus back." So, I opted for San Pedro High School. That was really good for me.

MS: Why is that?

IA: It opened me up to meeting a lot of people and just the experience of the change from the parochial school to the public school.

MS: How did you meet your husband? Tell me that story.

IA: We met in the 10th grade, in life science class. He sat next to me. He says that he told his friend Charlie Gonzalez, while we were in that class, that someday he was going to marry me. [laughter] I can't believe it, but then – because we weren't dating or anything. He was interested in other girls. So, I didn't understand that.

MS: He was saving you for a wife while he was with the other ones.

IA: Oh, yes, [laughter] in the meantime. Yeah.

MS: So, I mean, how did it happen? One day he walked up to you and told you, "You want to go to the movies?"

IA: No. No. He never asked me out then. It was after graduation.

MS: So, tell me more.

IA: My brother played ball in (Danielsville?) which is on 13th, in Cabrillo. In the evenings, they used to have baseball games and other sports activities. I would go with my mother. We would walk. At that time, we lived on 2nd and Grand. We would walk to watch the games. Well, I would sit with my girlfriends, and my mother would be sitting up higher. Art would go, every once in a while, he'd go and be chatting with my mother.

MS: So, he would come chat with your mother.

IA: Yeah.

MS: Well, that is just a roundabout way to do it. So, then what happened?

IA: As far as Art and I?

MS: [affirmative]

IA: Well, not really anything until – my parents were very strict. So, I didn't date. But I was very active in school. That's one of the things that was good for me. I ran for school office. I was editor of the school paper. That is by election. I was also manager of extracurricular activities. When I was manager of extracurricular activities, I had to go to all the activities to collect the money and that sort of thing. So, with the dance, well, Art would ask me to dance. That's about it, though.

MS: Sneaky guy, was he not? [laughter] So, after you graduated, when did you get married? What year?

IA: 1952.

MS: Talk about changes in Cabrillo Beach.

IA: Cabrillo Beach, when I was young, was quite different than it is today. It was, in my estimation, much better than it is today. Because you had the breaker side and on the north side of the breakwater, running east and west, a long beach that was a quiet beach. And that's where all the families with the younger children and what have you would go because the waters were very calm. You could swim and what have you. I really enjoyed the beach then. We still have the beach house. We managed to save that. It has been restored. But we also had a boathouse which was quite nice, and a pier that went out from the boathouse. At the boathouse, you could rent boats and surfboards and that sort of thing. There is talk today that they want to rebuild one. Hopefully, it would be a replica of the one that we had.

MS: So, how is it different now from then?

IA: I don't quite understand how it happened. But in dredging for the harbor, that changed how the beach was. Now we have a calm side beach, but it runs north and south. We have lost that beach that was really – it was picturesque. It was very nice, much better than the strip of beach that we have there today.

MS: What about some of the parks in San Pedro? Do you have a favorite park that you like to go to?

IA: I always liked Averill Park when – it's not a park. But when I was young, we used to go to the Anderson Memorial. In fact, my mother taught a class there, how to make hot towels and that type of thing. There was a pool there. But it developed cracks. So, they covered it and

made a gym out of it years later. I never attended that pool, so I –

MS: Tell me about Averill Park. People do not know what it is. What is Averill Park? Why did you like it?

IA: Averill Park was unique, in San Pedro anyway, because it had ponds. It had crawfish and toads and different things and a very picturesque bridge. In fact, all brides and grooms still go there to take their pictures. They had nice pagodas. Another favorite park was Point Fermin. I can remember one summer that was really hot. It's cool at Point Fermin. So, my mother took the three of us. We walked to Point Fermin. As it was getting into the evening, it kind of got a windy storm. The first time I had ever seen a whirlpool. We were rushing home. We were walking home to leave the area because of the storm that was coming up. There was a whirlpool. There were boxes twirling up in the air. So, [laughter] that amazed me because I had never seen that before.

MS: So, it was like a little tornado –

IA: A little, yeah.

MS: – a little whirlwind. Yeah. Talk about the Red Cars.

IA: Oh, I really liked the Red Cars. We used to go shopping downtown Los Angeles or to Long Beach because both had beautiful stores. Not that we didn't have. At that time, we did have some department stores. We had JC Penney. We had McMahan's and that sort of thing for furniture. But it was always exciting to go. We'd take the streetcar. If you went to Los Angeles, you'd get there in about 45 minutes. It was interesting to see the different stops. They'd stop in Watts and all over. Then you get to the main station. But the department stores downtown always had gorgeous displays. During the holidays, there were mechanical Santa Clauses and elves and things. So, that was always exciting. Long Beach too, had Buffums and Walker's. They did similar things, not as extravagant as the May company and Robinsons and what have you, and Bullocks.

MS: But the land between San Pedro and downtown Los Angeles is not the way it was today. A lot of it was –

IA: No.

MS: – still agricultural. So, what was it like when you took that trip? What was between here and then? How do you describe what it was like?

IA: Well, for me, an interesting part was leaving San Pedro and going towards Wilmington and what have you. There were these bascule bridges. That was very interesting, and going through part of the harbor and that –

MS: You have to explain. What is a bascule bridge? Why was it interesting to you?



IA: Well, it was a big metal bridge. It would –

MS: We cannot be talking at the same time [laughter].

IA: Oh, I'm sorry.

MS: Start again. Okay.

IA: A bascule bridge, when the ships would go by, then it would raise up. That was fascinating to see [laughter] that. Wow. They're going on both sides. There were a lot of interesting sites along the way. It was just fun. Seeing as we didn't have a car until I was in the seventh grade, to be riding in the streetcar was an adventure.

Female Speaker: John, can I ask , staying on that subject, ask how they got to the station? Where they would walk to? Where would they catch the Red Car here? Just always talk to him.

IA: Oh, when we took the Red Car, we would walk down to Sixth and Harbor. I think at that time they called it Front Street. The depot was there. We had a very nice depot. One side, the south side was for little freight and that sort of thing. On the north side, they had benches and things to wait for the street cars.

MS: So, it crossed the channel on a trestle, the streetcar?

IA: It didn't go to Terminal Island. It went to Wilmington. It went through Wilmington, and depended on if you were going to Long Beach too also.

MS: Was there not a bridge that you went over? You had to get over the water from this side, right?

IA: As I can remember it, it went along the harbor until we got to the bridges.

MS: Right. That is what I mean. Yeah. What is the Fishermen's Fiesta? Why was that important? Describe what that is. What was it?

IA: The Fishermen's Fiesta was an interesting aspect that – and a lot of fun. It involved Mary Star of the Sea Church because they would always have a big ceremony, a blessing of the fleet before the parade started. All the families, the fishing families, would invite their friends and what have you. They'd decorate the boats very interestingly. They had prizes for the best. They'd have this skipperettes election. It was just a lot of fun to watch the boats parade. Then they had festivities on the docks afterwards that lasted – it would be a weekend thing.

MS: You mentioned the skipperette. You have to explain. What are the skipperettes?

IA: Well, it's like the queen. The skipperettes reigned as the queens of the event. It was pretty important for them. They rode in the leading boat and all that sort of thing.

MS: When did that come to an end, the Fishermen's Fiesta?

IA: Oh, I can't remember the year. But the fishing industry was starting to dwindle because of the canneries being moved. Well, the canneries weren't moved, but they were bringing in fish from Japan and from Asia. The longshoremen were unloading the fish from the trips. They were sending the boats out further and further. They would have motherships, that they call motherships, and they would unload at sea. Then they'd take them to canneries in the Third World. They were outsourcing the industry.

MS: Now, Nancy tells me you have a funny story or sad story or funny together about your father getting injured with a turnbuckle.

IA: Yes.

MS: Why not tell me that story?

IA: My dad being a longshoreman, one year, it was about Christmas, he was working and a turnbuckle – he was on deck. The turnbuckle came by and hit him in the mouth. He lost his two teeth. That was the year that the song came out, All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth. [laughter] So, that's why we remember it so well. Because I used to tease him all the time and sing the song until he got his teeth. [laughter]

MS: There is a story involved with your father's retirement that I hear. So, why not tell me the story of the circumstances of your father finally deciding to stop working on the docks?

IA: My dad was ready to retire when he was 65. He was going to retire on his birthday, which is October the 19th. Well, it was either two or three weeks prior to that, he was working, and a man was killed practically next to him. We had heard about the accident. We were really concerned because we didn't hear from him. Then when he came home, he was somewhat shaken up about it. So, I went over. Because Art, my husband, had told me that there was an accident, and my dad had been there. So, I went over. I said, "That's it. You cannot go back to work. You're scheduled to retire." My mother too, she was uptight that it was too risky to try it anymore.

MS: Well, why not tell me that again? I want to know more details about the accident. What happened?

IA: I can't remember it too well now. But I think the boom swung, and it hit the man. He was not too far from my dad. So, it could have been my father, just through the grace of God.

MS: I also understand that your family was a small orchestra.

IA: A small orchestra? [laughter] No, not really. My youngest brother studied violin. He got to be pretty good. He studied with Ambrose Russo who was a neighbor across the street from where I was born, on 18th Street. He also was in a band Mr. (Sons?) band. He played the piccolo. My oldest brother played the clarinet in the band. When it came time for me to take

some music lessons, I really would've preferred to have the piano. But I inherited my brother's clarinet. [laughter] I was in the girls' band. The bands used to participate in the parades. There would be parades through the town at various times, Christmas and other times. The band nearly always participated. One time, I brought the drum [laughter]. I led the drum in one of the parades. I didn't play it. I pulled it down.

MS: If I had to look back over your years in San Pedro, what are some of your fondest memories of your life here in San Pedro?

IA: Oh, I always loved school. My time in school was always good. Raising my children was so much fun. We used to do a lot of special things. I like San Pedro today. We can't beat San Pedro. It's very unique. But as I was growing up, it was nice to have the empty lots because we could play there, fly kites, play ball, skate. Nowadays, our children are all in – they have to be in games where they are directed. There is no free play. I miss that. I think it's nice to just have pickup ball and what have you. I miss that about the old days, having that freedom of walking to the library and what have you. We had a beautiful old library in the same location, at 10th Street. But it was a beautiful building, kind of like Queen Anne. I really liked that library.

MS: What are your experiences in the library? When you went there, what did you enjoy doing?

IA: I was an avid reader. I was always reading. I liked fairytales when I was young, everything. I liked reading, so –

MS: If you had to describe to somebody who does not know what San Pedro is, how would you describe this place to them? Starting with the sentence, San Pedro is.

IA: San Pedro is, as I said – to me, I feel it's unique. People got along well. I can't remember any racial problems. Everybody just blended and accepted each other. The thing that I like about San Pedro is that the families stay. There are five, six generations of families here. That doesn't happen today in many places. I think it's because of the feeling that you get here that we do have that, that people want to stay.

MS: What about the fact of being a port town, does that have some quality that adds to the –

IA: Well, for me, my family has always been involved with the port, with my dad, my brothers. They were longshoremen also. When Art came back from the service, his brother-in-law got him a casual card so that he could work. But then he had to go back into the service for the Korean War. He went back for another, I guess, 13 months. But because he had that casual card before he went into the service, when he came back, they had to reinstate him as a casual. So, that's how he also became a longshoreman. So, our life has been the port.

MS: Terrific. That is it.

FS: Anything else you want to add? Anything else you want to say?

IA: Well, let's see. [laughter] My youngest daughter and her husband still live in San Pedro. My youngest daughter lives only about four blocks away from us, and her husband. She married Peter Manghera who my husband was his confirmation sponsor. His parents were my daughter's baptism sponsor. [laughter] So, it's interesting that they ended up being married. They have two children. My oldest daughter lives in Rossmoor. That's in Orange County, close to Long Beach. She has two daughters. My son lives in San Pedro. So, we're still close. So, it's nice.

MS: Good. Let me take a picture of you.

[end of transcript]