

Virginia Brownell Oral History

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Interviewer: MS – Unknown

Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: I am going to give you the hard question first. Please say your name and spell it.

Virginia Brownell: Virginia Brownell, V-I-R-G-I-N-I-A, B-R-O-W-N-E-L-L.

MS: Great. Virginia, if you do not mind me asking, what year were you born, and where were you born?

VB: 1922 in Larimore, North Dakota.

MS: Oh, wow. Now, how did you get to San Pedro?

VB: Well, it's not really a long story. But the man I was to marry thought he should come to California. This was – well, first, he came right before Pearl Harbor. Then he wanted to go to – he was in Huron, South Dakota at the time. So, he went to college. We decided that he wanted to come out here. He put his application in telephone company. He had a choice of either Ventura or San Pedro. I say San Pedro, but I know it should be San Pedro. [laughter]

MS: Say what you say.

VB: So, that's how we got started. He was in the San Pedro office here.

MS: Here is an example. You would say, "My husband was – "

VB: My husband. [laughter]

MS: Can you just continue the sentence? Start again.

VB: My husband started working here in the San Pedro office, telephone office. I lived in – I worked for the telephone office in Huron, South Dakota. So, I made a transfer from Huron to the San Pedro office. So, we both started in right after Pearl Harbor.

MS: In those days, phone numbers were different.

VB: I can remember my old telephone number, Harbor 1505. He was like a lineman. My husband was a lineman.

MS: Now, just explain, in those days you said Harbor, it was not a bunch of digits and area codes and everything.

VB: No.

MS: What were some of the names that were applied to telephone numbers in those days?

VB: Well, it was Harbor right here in San Pedro. It was Harbor 1505 in the San Pedro area.

MS: If you called elsewhere, give me some of the other numbers you might call elsewhere in the

city.

VB: Oh, that, I worked on the – we had an old punch board first. But then I went in – I worked on long distance. So, I did most to my people. Some of them were the people that were in the service and were getting their calls to wherever they lived, met a lot of nice people on the telephone line.

MS: Well, explain how that worked. Again, that is different than what it is now. How did the long-distance line work in those days?

VB: Well, really, I can't – we just had a regular board. We had the different little holes to go where we could get an outside line or things like that. But it was really – it's been so long ago [laughter].

MS: But people just did not dial numbers. They dialed an operator to place the call.

VB: Well, we had to say Harbor – like call if you're going to Harbor 102 or 103. It was usually always four numbers. Then it went into the dialing system. I took a leave from the telephone company, and I never went back. [laughter] My husband enlisted in the Air Corps. So, I started following him after our first son was born in [19]43.

MS: So, tell us about what San Pedro was like when you first came here. Was it different from what you knew before?

VB: Well, it was very different.

MS: San Pedro was.

VB: Pardon?

MS: You have to say San Pedro was very different.

VB: Yes, San Pedro was very different. I lived in the prairies, in the dust country, and just plate flatland. It was just amazing, even here – on the port here, on the oceans in San Pedro. It was hilly, certain parts was hilly. Where there's no – or there's a lot of homes now up above – on 9th Street, it was just a lot of tomato patches. I just loved the town. Just loved it right from the beginning. [laughter]

MS: In those days, there is lots of military around. Describe who is here, and what they were doing.

VB: Well, basically, the Navy was in Long Beach. Of course, we had Fort MacArthur – was very prominent here, which I think it's mostly just housing now. But it was –then my husband, as I say, went into the Air Corps, enlisted in the Air Corps. Then I just followed him. So, I was gone for –

MS: So, when did you return back after the war?

VB: Well, he probably – I'm trying to think. It would have been probably the late [19]40s. I was only gone about two years before he went overseas.

MS: You returned to San Pedro?

VB: Oh, yes. I've been here all the time. [laughter]

MS: Well, give us a sense of this community because it was a very special kind of place. Who were the people who lived here? What kind of place was San Pedro?

VB: Well, I just thought it was a lovely town. It was – a lot of beautiful old homes. I got very interested in the history of San Pedro. I started belonging to many clubs and wanted to be involved and wanted to know what they were going to be – what they were all about. My mother had this dress shop across from Warner Brothers. I helped her for a while, part-time, 18 years. So, I was connected with the wonderful ladies that worked in downtown San Pedro and wanted to just – they were just regular working girls. They came into our store. Just they were so nice to meet the people. Even the lovely ladies from the cannery, they'd come in. They'd love to buy our clothes.

MS: What was the name of the store?

VB: Hazel Taylor.

MS: Okay. The name of the store was –

VB: Hazel. The name of the store was –

MS: Start again. I am sorry. Go ahead.

VB: The name of the store was Hazel Taylor. It was originally Towns. My mother started – I was the first one to come to San Pedro. Then my dad came. Then my mother came. She had had a dress shop in South Dakota. We started just meeting – we met Lou Towne. The store was in the arcade building. So, my mother started working for him. Then it was sold. She continued working there almost 40 years.

MS: Well, he had a famous son, Mr. Towne.

VB: Yes. I knew Mr. and Ms. Towne very well and knew Bobby too.

MS: He was Bobby to you.

[laughter]

VB: I knew Bobby as a little boy. I think Bobby is – I have a son that's going to be 64, either 63

or 64. He was about a little younger, but Bobby's a little bit older. I'm calling him Bobby.
[laughter]

MS: We are hoping to get him to come in and talk too.

VB: Yes, it would be nice. Stephanie had wanted him for one of the film festivals. He was unable to come. But I knew his mom and dad. Lou was wonderful.

MS: Why do you not describe the store? Bring me back to – what did it look like? What dresses were you selling? What were the brand names? That kind of thing.

VB: Oh, we had real nice brands. What should I say? It was just moderate-priced things that the working girl could afford. It was just a real nice, friendly store.

MS: Describe it. How big was it? What did it look like? When you walked in the door, what happened?

VB: Well, when you came in, it's just the way it is right now, except there's a beauty shop in there. But we changed our – way our merchandise would be handled. I mean, certain things, you always had to have a change. You didn't want the same look all the time.

MS: So, you are talking about in the [19]50s now you are working there. Was this during the war?

VB: Well, no, this was right after – see, my son was born in [19]43. Well, it would be – she started working there in the late [19]40s. I was working there part-time when my young son who is sixty – he's 46 right now. So, I started working there part-time. But I'd like to be involved – I was real involved with the chamber at the time. So, being I worked for my mother, I kind of had my choice of hours [laughter]. I could do the outside things that I wanted to do.

MS: Did you have an outdoor window where you had displays?

VB: Oh, yes. Yes. The windows were changed about every week. We had a man that came in and would do the – change the merchandise all the time.

MS: 6th Street was a lot different than it is today. Describe the shops and the activities on 6th Street in those days?

VB: Well, wonderful, absolutely wonderful stores we had on 6th Street, which are no more, and which would be nice to see.

MS: Tell me about some of the stories and what you remember that were on 6th Street.

VB: Well, right on the other side of the arcade was Jarman shoe store that my middle son worked in there when he was just out of high school. There were three Granas brothers that – they had stores right on 6th Street. There was (Lelans?). There was Hills. There was San Pedro

Hardware. There were just so – every store was nice, really nice. (Fierman's?) Sports Shop, just there were a lot of nice stores.

MS: So, for women's clothes, what was the fancy store in town?

VB: Well, we had dressy things too. Then, see, Lelans was kind of sports. Lewis is on Pacific. They had a lot of dressy clothes. We were kind of a very conservative store for the working girl.

MS: So, who were the customers who would come in? They were literally working, and they would come –

VB: They were all these –

MS: Say the customers.

VB: The customers, they were basically, a lot of working girls. They come on their lunch hour. They were all different offices, telephone company. We had certain customers that they knew what they liked. Merchandise would come in, and we'd put things down for them. We knew just one lady wanted everything white or beige. So, we always put things back, so they could come in and see what the new merchandise was.

MS: Do you have any particularly memorable customers who were –

VB: Basically, I do. Yeah.

MS: Well, could you share some of those?

VB: Well, I don't know.

MS: You do not have to name names if you don't want. [laughter]

VB: Well, I don't know. I knew a lot of the ladies. I still run into a lot of people, that I remember them from the store. See, I'm going to be 85, and I was – how old was I? I was quite young when I was working in the store. But we had a lot of – just everybody was – they were nice customers.

MS: So, when you were working in the store, I mean, did you work – you were out of school at that time, or you were married?

VB: Yeah. I was married. Well, at that time, in [19]61, my young son was born. So, I basically did quite a – well, I did before, I worked there and then afterwards too, kind of part-time for about eighteen years.

MS: Let us go back and describe San Pedro in the late [19]40s and in the [19]50s. I mean, there are things that are not there anymore, I mean, red cars, all of it. How did you get around in those days in San Pedro?

VB: Well, basically, I always had a car. I can't remember ever using a bus or anything. I used to – with the red car, I never really went into LA or anything like that. I just basically just stayed right in San Pedro. [laughter]

MS: Why leave paradise?

VB: [laughter] Right.

MS: What was Terminal Island?

VB: Well, I knew a very good friend that was a purchasing agent at Bethlehem Steel. We'd go over there. He'd take me over there, like, on the weekend and go into the office. Then he'd show me different things on Terminal Island. And, of course, my kids loved to ride the ferry. That was a Sunday afternoon jaunt. Then I was the second car that went on the bridge when the bridge was opened. We had a big party, the last – the boat ride on the ferry and a big dinner at Slav Hall and then the chamber. We went across the bridge for – got special little plaques for [laughter] –

MS: That is good. I want you to tell me that story again. So, you were talking about the Vincent Thomas Bridge.

VB: Yes.

MS: So, start with the story about that day and what was important and what you did and the importance of the Vincent Thomas Bridge.

VB: Well, we had a big chamber party the night the bridge opened. That was the late [19]60s. We had a lovely dinner at Slav Hall. Then we had a ride on the ferry, the last ferry boat ride. Then they made kind of a little group of cars that crossed the bridge as the first people to go over the bridge. I can remember the second car – I don't remember who was in the first car. But the second car, I remember with Mark Sampson. He had been a – well, he was a coach over in Wilmington. Then he kind of got into real estate. I know he was one of the men that was in the car with me that night. So, it was a beautiful evening having that – pardon?

MS: Go ahead. I am sorry.

VB: No. I said it was a beautiful evening with the opening of the bridge.

MS: Must have been quite a view too for –

VB: Oh, yes.

MS: Tell me about the view.

VB: Well, it was just gorgeous. Of course, we didn't have all the lights and everything we have

now. But it just – and it really was – it's not that high. But it just was – just a thrill driving over that bridge. It just finally had been – everything had been done. We were having our first ride.

MS: Tell me, why did they build that bridge? What was the reason that they had to build it, and what effect did it have on San Pedro?

VB: Well, it's history. It was naturally to help –of course, it cost a lot of money, I'm sure. It took a lot of years to buy. Well, of course, they had the fare to go back and forth. Some people still wanted to go around and over to Anaheim. They didn't want to pay the price of the bridge [laughter] – to pay for the bridge – to get on the bridge, I should say.

MS: Why did they have to build it though? Why did they build it?

VB: Well, basically, the whole reason – I'm not into that really, the reason. But it was just another way to get over to the island and over to Long Beach.

MS: I understand the ferry had room for like 12 cars. So, you would wait three hours to take the ferry.

VB: Right.

MS: Let me ask you about some other things. Talk about Ports of Call. What is the story of Ports of Call? You were there when that opened too, right?

VB: Yes. I could remember the pikes opening up. I can remember Parkhurst. I remember a Hickory farm man too that I knew very well. Because we were all kind of active in the chamber at the time. I can remember those stores being opened.

MS: But the whole thing, tell us, what is Ports of Call? When did it open?

VB: Well, that was way back in the late [19]60s, I think. We all loved it. Of course, things just changed too, and trying to keep it going. That's another thing. But we had a lot of functions there. We loved the little stores. But there has been a big change. But I hope for the – something happens like what they have over in Long Beach.

MS: So, when I am going to ask you to tell me about Ports O' Call is you have to say, "Ports O' Call is." So, start your sentence saying that.

VB: Oh, I'm sorry. [laughter] I'm a poor speaker.

MS: You are doing a great job. You are doing a great job.

VB: [laughter] The Ports O' Call was, or is, I should say.

MS: Why don't you start again? Go ahead.

VB: The Ports of Call was a beautiful place. It was very, very exciting to even – you'd love to go down there on Sunday afternoon and take your children or take your relatives or friends who love to go to the different shops.

MS: Were you there when it opened?

VB: I wasn't there at the opening. No. But because of these people I knew, they were active in the chamber and everything. I can't remember the name of the Hickory farm man. I knew him very well. But I can't even remember him now.

MS: Did you ever go sailing? Or did you ever go out in the water or the harbor at all?

VB: Oh, yes. [laughter] We would go – every Christmas, my young son, we always had reservations to go and see the boat parade. Many years ago, we were tied up with a group that had a sailing boat called *Gwen Wynn*. We did a lot, going to Catalina and different things like that, chartering the *Gwen Wynn*, which my husband and another fellow chartered the *Gwen Wynn*. They went down to go treasure hunting down in Costa Rica. So, that was an experience too. [laughter]

MS: Did you go with them?

VB: Oh, no. My middle son at that time, I think he was only about 2 years old. Everybody thought we were crazy. My husband and this other fellow [laughter], they chartered the boat to go down treasure-hunting.

MS: So, they came back with tons of treasure?

VB: [laughter] So, unfortunately, they had a bad trip going down in Papagayo and all that. My husband broke his leg down that way. They got as far as – they did get to Costa Rica. The government did come aboard the ship in case there was anything that was to be found. So, we had quite a few nice little trips on the *Gwen Wynn* but mainly Catalina.

MS: So, what did your husband – he started working in the phone company. What did he end up doing? What was his profession? Give me an example.

VB: My husband worked for –

MS: Okay. Start again one more time.

VB: My husband, after the telephone company, he was in the service until the war. He was a bombardier in the Air Force. That was [19]45, I believe, when war was over. So, he started going into the car business. He started working for Don Kott Ford. He passed away about 20 years ago. He – well, he worked there about 30 years. He ended as administration for Mr. Kott.

MS: You got involved in the Chamber of Commerce. When did you get involved with the chamber?

VB: Well, it would have to be – oh, it would have to be in the late [19]60s because I just loved it. I belonged to all the different committees. I never wanted to be president [laughter]. But I loved – and I still go to all the mixers and just like to go and do anything pertaining to the chamber.

MS: What is it about this town that you like so much and love so much? What is it about San Pedro?

VB: Well, basically, it's the people. The people, the wonderful people. When I retired, I did – for a while, I was the administrator up at Palos Verdes Villa retirement home. Then I went over to (Heischer?) Corporation. I retired from there. People would ask me, "Where are you going to live? You've retired now. Where are you going to live?" Of course, my husband had passed away when I retired. I said, "I would only be in San Pedro. I love it." I've met so many wonderful people. I still have a lot of nice friends. Now, at my age, all my friends are passing away too. So, there was just something about the town. I started belonging to everything, just Maritime Museum and Cabrillo Beach, the lighthouse. Anything that pertained to San Pedro, I loved.

MS: So, were you a member of the Polar Bear Club?

VB: No, but I would go down there on New Year's Day [laughter]. But I never would go in the water. [laughter] But I knew people that – it was kind of a ritual. If we were around, we always went there New Year's Day. I'm just trying to think of the fellow that was always – oh, I just saw him the other day. I'd met him. He was always very active with the Polar Bear Club. He was a king at one time. [laughter] But it was a lot of fun. [laughter]

MS: Well, are there any stories I have not asked you to tell about or talk about? Anything you want to tell me about the store or working?

VB: Well, my dad, he came here after I did. Then, of course, my mother did. But during the war, he opened up a used cars lot. He became a Tucker franchise man. So, that was when –

MS: It is okay.

VB: That's when they were trying to – the big three were trying to take Tucker out of the picture [laughter]. He was selling Tucker radios and Tucker luggage for a downpayment that you got your name on the list for getting your Tucker. We had two of them. My oldest son belongs to the Tucker Club, which he is still in contact with the club. So, of course, that was when everything went down the drain there.

MS: Well, that is a great story. Explain – for people who do not know what it is, what was the Tucker? What was that?

VB: Well, it was just supposed to be the Tucker.

MS: I am sorry. Start again. Go ahead.

VB: The Tucker was supposed to be a very – new in everything they did, with the engine in the rear and everything. Of course, my boys, they could tell you a wonderful story. We used to take it up to Vegas for showings. Of course, they were young and everything, but much younger. But it was just – we have Maddie up at the elks, he has a whole book of pictures. One of the pictures is one of the viewing of the Tucker when we had a big open house when the people came – had been in the paper. But in his little book of pictures he's got of the opening.
[laughter]

MS: Well, tell me about it. So, where was your father's Tucker?

VB: Right at 5th and Gaffey.

MS: Okay. My father's Tucker. Start gain.

VB: My father's car lot was at 5th and Gaffey where he started the used car lot. It was Frank C. Taylor, right on the corner of 5th and Gaffey. So, he was there a few years. Then his illness – he was ill for quite some time.

MS: How did he get involved selling Tuckers?

VB: I don't know how he ever got that – got into that. I have no idea. I'm sure my boys probably – my oldest boy, naturally, would know. Then my young boy, he has a lot of Tucker pictures. But as far as how he ever got the franchise, I have no idea.

MS: But you owned two of them.

VB: Yes, we had two. They were 5,000 apiece. He rolled one in Chicago. The office was up there in Chicago. He kind of made a mess of one. So, we sold it. My father sold the franchise to some man up by – I think it was up by San Luis Obispo, Pismo Beach, I believe, is where he sold the agency to, or the franchise. That was the end of that.

MS: So, what kind of car was it to drive and to use? I mean, describe what it was like.

VB: Well, very modern. I have Tucker little models and very sleek lines. Well, it was just far advanced. Just far advanced, I would say.

MS: So, was San Pedro, everybody all excited about Tuckers?

VB: Oh, of course. Of course. They sold all these radios, Tucker radios. They sold the luggage. It was just a big, big opening. People were very excited about it. Of course, [laughter] it was pretty bad. [laughter] But my son, my oldest son, of course, he always kind of was interested. My oldest son, Bob, is very active in whale research. He's a doctor in whale research. So, he's traveling the world. Even though he's old as he is, he's not ready to retire, he says.

MS: He should be up in Sacramento with those whales trying to get out of the river.

VB: Yes. Isn't that something? Yes. It's something.

MS: Are there any more stories that you –

VB: No. [laughter]

MS: You sure? Okay. Why do you not –

VB: Well, I'm not – as they say, I wasn't a very good –

MS: No, you were great. The Tucker was a wonderful surprise.

VB: Yeah.

MS: If you could slide your chair over about 2 feet, that would be great.

[end of transcript]