

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project

Roy Coats Oral History

Date of Interview: Unknown

Location: Unknown

Length of Interview: 1:17:40

Interviewer: MS – Unknown

Transcriber: NCC

Female Speaker: You want me to smile?

Roy Coats: My office is over on Terminal Island. They took the people that had been suggested that knew more about the aircraft industry at Douglas [inaudible] and all these – and the different places that started preparing for war about two years before we actually got in.

Male Speaker: I am ready.

Male Speaker: We're going to get this all on tape. So, you can talk to me. One thing that's unusual, I'm not – my questions will never be heard. So, you have to include the subject I'm talking about in your answer.

RC: Okay. Yes. I –

MS: So, if I say, "What is San Pedro like?"

RC: I under –

MS: You have to say, "San Pedro is an interesting place," or whatever. I will remind you if you forget. I may ask you just to answer the question a second time and just repeat yourself. So, it is very informal, but the first question is the hard one. Please say your name and spell it.

RC: Well, I go by what I call I. Roy Coats. C-O-A-T-S. No E.

MS: Okay. Roy, what year were you born and where were you born?

RC: 1914, January 31st, in Ladora, Iowa.

MS: Okay. Now, when you were in Iowa, did you know anything about San Pedro or the port or the harbor or anything?

RC: After I got out of high school, there was absolutely no work whatsoever. Everything was shut down. My father had lost his business. In fact, this all happened when I was a junior in high school. I was homeless my life here. My folks moved to Des Moines, Iowa, and I stayed with a friend on a front porch of his for my last year. The week I graduated, I went to Des Moines, Iowa at the recruiting station and had my aptitude test and physical. I passed with high grades. They said as soon as they opened up the training stations during the Hoover administration, everything was shut down. They didn't build the ships. They had some ships appropriated, and they needed crews for them. But they had to get the recruiting stations built. They were built, but they needed more space. So, I was on the waiting list from the spring of [19]32 until November [19]33, is when I enlisted or sworn in and went through at San Diego. Then I was brought up to Los Angeles to Long Beach, San Pedro Harbor. Put on for the heavy cruiser *Chester* until the USS *Houston* named after Houston, Texas, heavy cruiser eight inch, nine guns. I was on her for four years exactly.

MS: What was your first impression of San Pedro? How did you get here and what did you see

when you got here?

RC: Well, San Pedro is sort of a honky-tonk town at the bay ship. Supposed to be sort of a red-light district. The fleet had already moved out of San Pedro when I got here. The only thing that was left – they moved the fleet in [19]32, started to move it over to Long Beach. The Long Beach was enticing them. San Pedro did everything they could, but they didn't really have the foxy housing that the admirals would like. Most of them went over to Long Beach and put up at the hotel over there. Then the Long Beach had the pike, which was sort of the Disney Land for sailors. It didn't cost much. We didn't make any money. I got \$16 a month. Hoover cut the \$21 down to \$16, and that didn't get reinstated until Roosevelt was elected.

MS: So, describe San Pedro. What was it like? When you got here, what was your impression?

RC: Huh?

MS: Your impression of San Pedro, what was it like? What did you see when you got here in the early [19]30s?

RC: Well, I really didn't have a chance to – I was put in the A division. I was in a whale boat and a motor launched engineer. We came over here quite often. Because when the fleet moved over to Long Beach, the observer ships, the hospital ships, and the supply ships and the repair ships are left over here. I came over here in the boat, but I really wasn't exposed to the town too much.

MS: Well, you said it was a honky-tonk town. Talk about the Beacon Street and all of that. Describe that part of it. Did you get involved at all? Did you see any of that as a sailor?

RC: No.

MS: You were not a honky-tonker? [laughter]

RC: Well, I sent – from a high school sweetheart to come out here in [19]35. We were married in Long Beach. We started going together when we were fourteen. So, after I got married, I stayed pretty close to home up until that time. I got around a little bit, went into L.A. They had a red car that left Long Beach and went into L.A. But I didn't come over here too much until I went to work at Cal Ship. Then they were our landlord. So, it involved me coming over or something.

MS: Well, let us go back to the beginning. So, how did you get first involved with Cal Ship? Tell me that story.

RC: Well, we drove the first piling at Cal Ship in February of 1941. I was the 108th man hired out of 55,000. It was sort of odd. I was working at a service station for 25 cents an hour. My daughter was already about five years old, and we had twin boys. I was having a hard time making the – and – about sixty hours a week. I thought he brought his car in to be serviced. One of the other fellows took the job of what he was going to have done. When he come to pick it

up, I was the one that was explaining to him why the bill was so high. He said, "Coats, what the hell are you doing over here?" I says, "I'm trying to make a living for my family. We got three kids." He said, "You get your butt over to Cal Ship over to Terminal Island." He said, "You remember Whitey Allan?" Well, first he explained how he knew me. We went through training together, and he became a boxer in training. The Navy promoted boxing in a big way, the battleship. In fact, when they interviewed you on what ship they were going to put you on, [laughter] if you were a boxer of any sort, you went on a battleship. Anyhow, he was sparring. He had a regular sparring partner, exercising, and the guy wasn't there. He asked me if I would spar with him. I got in a lucky punch. I think he stumbled, but he fell down. It says I was the only one that ever knocked him down. He went ahead and became what they called a plaque belt, which was the highest boxer you could be in the Navy. Anyhow, he said they're building a shipyard. It's going to be second – the biggest one in the United States over on Terminal Island. He said the business agent of the Boilermakers, who – all the employees are going through there. They have to have a work chit from that. He said, "I'll give you a note to Whitey Allan. He's the business agent. He went through training with us too. I don't know if you remember him or not." Anyhow, he said, "Well, if you got time tonight, we'll go over and talk it over." So, anyhow, I got – went to the union hall and got this mechanics card employment as a burner and a wet layout and a welder. I went over to the hall and they gave me a chit to go to the hiring gate. I have a picture in the book there of this hiring hall. It's in the middle of a mud field. You waited in mud about this deep. The whole north side of Terminal Island was all mud. They grow 6,000 piling. The yard was built on piling. They drove the first pile on February the second. I hired in just about a month later. While I was being fingerprinted, there's about five of us in there. A guy came in with a raincoat on. It was raining like hell, mud everywhere. He came in. He said, "Which one of you guys have had rigging experience?" I said, "I worked in the oil fields a little bit." He said, "Make that man a leaderman." So, I never did any work other than manual work. I was sort of a boss. Then in August of that year, they started – this is all before *Pearl Harbor*. They started a swing shift. I went over on swing shift as a shift supervisor. I had a good job.

MS: So, this is like an example of when I ask you to repeat yourself. Because that story of meeting the guy in the garage and having him get you that job – tell me that story again in a shorter version of how you were working in this garage, how that guy came in and out. He suggest to you to go to Cal Ship. Just repeat yourself.

RC: How did what?

MS: Repeat the story of you working in the garage.

RC: Well, it was a standard station at Belmont Pier on Ocean Boulevard in 39th East Ocean. We took in our regular customers. We did their tune-up work, spark plugs, ignition, and also lubricated and sold them tires. Sold them everything we could. You didn't get any money, but you didn't get balled out for not selling more than you did last month. You couldn't sell enough. In fact, in those days – now this is for 25 cents an hour – you swept their car out. You carried a broom in your hip pocket. You washed all the windows, turn on your lights will check your spot, step on the brakes will check the brake light. That was for five gallon of gas. I worked in a signal station in Long Beach before I got on with [inaudible] That fifteen gallon was a big day,

and nobody had any money. [laughter]

MS: So, tell us, this guy comes in. What happened next?

RC: The guy comes in. One of the other tenants at the station took in this order, and he sold him on the idea he needed spark plugs and a fan belt and a few other things. Then when he came back, this guy had already got relieved. I was the one that was explaining to him about all this work we'd done and how much it was. He recognized me as being a shipmate in the San Diego training station. I had another buddy working with me. We were both needing more money for livelihood. So, I asked him also if this buddy of mine could come with us to go to Whitey Allan, the business agent. So, we both got on at Cal ship.

MS: So, tell me about when you first went down to the shipyard. What did it look like? I mean, was it pretty busy? What does a shipyard look like? What did Cal Ship –

RC: It was one solid mass of mud.

MS: I'm sorry, start again. Go ahead.

RC: They had started driving piling. It just looked like a forest. Now, these guys that built these dams and everything for Roosevelt when he started this ABC deal, work progress and National Recovery Act was six companies that built these dams. When Roosevelt was starting to – England was losing her ships, that she was – faster than they could build them. So, they dealt with Roosevelt in regard to building ships for carrying cargo to England. So, he asked actually, these companies that knew and were engineers who could really do things. (Kaiser and Todd and Bechtel, McCone, and Parsons and Bechtel?), who had built the San Francisco Bay Bridge. He was brought in to build Cal Ship.

MS: When it was finished – you watched it being built, right?

RC: Well, when I first went in, they put me on – I was a leaderman. They put me on construction, not building ships. I was starting to help build buildings. These metal buildings, you bolted them together. Also, assembled these cranes, these big, huge shipyard cranes. Then when they started the swing shift, I went over as a supervisor of the east fabricated steel storage. See, these ships were built on an assembly line. The plates came in from the steel mill, and then they were put in a warehouse. From the (mole off?), there's a template for every single plate and every bracket on the whole ship. The plate shop use these templates to shape and kink and bevel. The plates, they're twenty foot long, probably ten feet wide. Then they were piece marked. Every piece on the ship had a mark where it went. Then they were taken out, where I worked, to the east fabricated seal storage. We put them on edge where you could see the piece mark. Then the fabrication department would order these in as a – we had parts for thirty ships ahead and had them in the racks. Then they would order the plates in as they needed them. They built the sections upside down and they welded them upside down. Then when they turned them over, when they welded the other side, then they set them in front of the ways. So, they were ready to lift. As they lost the ship off the way, it'd have the first piece fall on the ship down, of the keel of the next ship.

MS: We are going to get ahead to launching a ship and everything. So, do you remember December 7th, 1941, that day, *Pearl Harbor Day*? Tell us what you remember about that and what you were doing.

RC: See, I got off at about 12:30 every night. I was on swing shift for fifty-four months. When I got home, I'd take a bath, and I'd start eating my breakfast before I laid down. I generally get up at 9:00. I built my house. I poured the foundation two months before *Pearl Harbor*. I'm still there. [laughter] So, I was working outside at the time. I always had my radio on. When it came over the radio, the *Pearl Harbor* was being bombed. So, that's the first I remembered. Then they didn't let you forget at the shipyard because everybody was scared that they were going to come here. They had us doing all kinds of things, laying flat on the ground, put your hands on your ears. Then another guy come by and he'd say, "Get up there. Get underneath the ways." Then there was a bomb scare for – they actually thought there was a bunch of planes up there, Japanese planes. I happened to be on shift that night. Now, with that many people trying to get home, we wasn't allowed to turn on the headlights. Boy, what a mess. Took three hours for me to get home. But then there was one of my men. I had about 200 men working for me, and one of them, they pulled up a anti-aircraft gun in a vacant lot right next to his house. [laughter] They started firing. He brought me over some shell casings from the gun. But it was sort of scary.

MS: Well, all of a sudden, I bet there is a lot more emergency, a lot more in the shipyard, get things done. There must have been a pretty quick change around going there. What was the change?

RC: Yes. Well, they did all kinds of things to promote building ships faster and help pay for them. They encouraged you to take a bond out of every paycheck. Then they had Disney give them some prints to make bonds that you'd buy in your kid's name with Mickey Mouses on them and stuff. I run across one of those. I gave it to my boy. I have one boy left. One died of cancer. The money didn't mean anything. I'd stick the check in my shirt pocket. A lot of times, wife would ask me what I'd done with the check. I says, "I don't know." She'd go through the clothes hamper. [laughter] She'd find a check in my –

MS: The scene, now, suddenly there are a lot more workers coming in. There is a lot more ships being built. I mean, try to describe how it changed after *Pearl Harbor* from what was going on before.

RC: Well, men were scarce, awful scarce. There was each shipyard and aircraft was trying to get what men there were. Now, Cal Ship even set up hiring halls in cotton fields in Mississippi. They brought these men out here, guaranteed a place for them to live, a job. Thousands of them come out. I would say about one half of our men in our yard were from the South, Okies and Arkies. [laughs] But we got the job done.

MS: So, I understand that they're – because you are working around the clock, right? Tell me the schedule. Then I understand that for entertainment, there were bands that would come and – describe – what's the –

RC: Just like Bob Hope did. Well, you name them. We had a movie star there at lunchtime, almost every lunch hour to entertain. Now, Carole Lombard, there was a ship named after her. She was killed in an airplane accident, I believe. Clark Gable, who was either married or a friend of hers. He was down at the yard at the launching of the *Carole Lombard*. Well, almost every movie star, and there was a lot of them in those days because GMC – M – Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

MS: MGM.

RC: They had stars that they really promoted, and their names were famous and recognized. But I had, out of these 200 men – and we had segregation in too. The Black (paws?) on my department. A crane crew consisted of four or five men – four men and a leaderman. They never worked on with the White. In the Navy, you know that saying, "a lot of people didn't recognize you." There was no Black in the Navy whatsoever when I was in. They said, "You mean no – except cooks." I said, "We had Filipinos cooks." That is for the officers. The Navy had a rating as a cook. They went through cooking school, same as I went through training. So, there was immigration and they brought out an awful lot of colored (paws?) But they worked by themselves. I never had a day at the yard that I wished I had two more hours to go. Never finished what I got started. I was on the run constantly. They talk a lot about the goofing off in the shipyard. There wasn't any goofing off in my department. In fact, swing ship did as much work as the other two ships put together.

MS: They were turning out a lot of ships. Give me a sense of what the output was.

RC: We delivered almost a ship a day. I think thirty-two a month. We had a launch in almost every night, twenty-six days. It ran anywhere from the ship from the time it was laid until it was all – see, we put the knives and forks and everything on the ship and put the crew on the ship before it left. That would run about twenty-six days. We have fourteen ways and ten outfitting docks. But toward the end, we were making up the beds and everything. They only at the outfitting dock to put the perishable foods aboard. They'd leave the outfitting dock first and go out on a trial run outside of the – well, most, you would see them from [inaudible].

MS: [inaudible]

RC: They give them full speed ahead, full speed, and right rudder or left rudder. They had guys that were down in the steering engine merchant – engineers, test crews watching for vibrations in the propeller and the engine, how it performed and everything. Then if everything worked good, they hoisted a new broom up on top of the mast and – meaning a clean sweep. Then it'd go over to the degaussing dock. The degaussing dock was somewhere in San Pedro here. Then they would go to the dock to be loaded, which I think most of it was out there near 22nd Street. Over the –

MS: There is a restaurant.

RC: Yes. Landing is out there now.

MS: So, with launchings almost every day, it must have been pretty exciting. Tell me what a launch of a ship was like.

RC: Well, we had several launching platforms with ladders and red, white and blue burning on them. There was always a shipyard worker invited to be part of the launching party. I've got pictures of now Earl Warren – I don't know if you remember him or not. Eisenhower appointed him as the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Eisenhower says that's the biggest mistake he ever made. [laughter] But anyhow, he was a good governor, I think, and a good attorney general of California. I voted for him. That was a big deal. That was the last ship we launched.

MS: Well, could you describe it? So, think about describing what the launching was like. Was there music?

RC: Yes.

MS: I was asking you about what a launch they were doing all the time. Describe what went on there? It must be pretty exciting.

RC: Well, it was at first, but then they blew the whistle, that had horns all over the yard, that they blow a lunch whistle and [inaudible]. When they broke the bottle, the whistle would blow until the ship hit the water and you could hear it all over the yard. Everybody would stop work and look over through the ship that was going down. While it got so commonplace that nobody paid any attention. The ship was tied to the ways with a big block of steel, with holes perforated like a check on each side of the ship. The burners had to burn just in between the holes and the ship was free and kick out a couple blocks. The ship would be built on blocks that were greased. They had a chain, big anchor chain that would slide down with it to help it get momentum. Then that would also hold it to keep from hitting Wilmington because we were right across from Wilmington. Then they had tugboats that did take it over to the outfitting dock. Then they'd move the launching platform over to the next ship that was going to be launched.

MS: So, it is interesting. It became commonplace.

RC: Huh?

MS: It became commonplace, you said?

RC: Oh, very commonplace.

MS: Did you ever see a launch that did not go well? A ship that fell over and went?

RC: No. See, ships had always been riveted until the war. One of the big welding companies invented this union – what they called union melt. But the equipment wasn't available in the quantities that they needed it. So, our first eleven ships were riveted. We didn't have real good – nobody with experience. I understood a couple of our ships had to go over to Todd's into dry dock, tighten up some of the rivets. But then they got these union melt machines, and they



would really throw the ship together with those. No riveting or nothing. It was all union melt. The only riveting that I understood was on the ship was – they had a bounding angle on the deck that tied the decks together, the plates. If a ship can withstand the launching, it can almost undertake the worst storms. Because at one time, the ship is held by its buoyancy at the after-end when it hits the water and held by the bow. So, the whole center has no support whatsoever. The deck after the anchor wind was always buckled. They had a lot of buckling. But they had a shrinking crew that would heat the plate and then spray water on it. It would shrink it, take the buckles out. That's why they – some of the ships broke up of the stress of – we build them so fast that the steel just couldn't take it.

MS: What was the atmosphere, or was this a noisy with horns and machines? What kind of environment was it?

RC: Very, very noisy. In fact, some areas, they wore ear plugs. See, they built everything, the ribs of the ship and everything. They had crews that they heated these big beams and had a – where they drove – they put a plug and a bar here. Then they'd bead or stretch or hydraulic (gram?) and everything was piece-marked. That particular beam went to a particular part of the ship. In fact, those of us that had to segregate these plates and send them in, we had to go to a school to learn how to build a liberty ship and how exactly, how everything was to go. Our biggest problem that we had in the shipyard was transportation. Getting the material to where it was needed in a hurry. That was part of my job. Because see, sub-assembly, they assembled the four peaks and the after peak, and then that would go to storage. Then the shaft alley, they made those in fifty-foot sections and they would go back to storage. So, we stored the unfinished ship, shipped that into sub-assembly, then that was sent back, except the bottom plate that was stored right in front of the ship way. But all the other stuff and all the little brackets that were only four inches square had a piece mark on it that went up into a corner. Everything was piece marked. I carried a book, which I still have, that told her all this stuff and showed isometric pictures of exactly where everything went. We had about fifty acres that I had. But I don't think we could do this today on a volunteer basis. But lawyers would lock up their shops and come down there and workers (records. Patriot there was?) – for their patriotic duty. My dad was an automobile dealer. Of course, he quit making automobiles and the – all the automobile factories were building armament. In fact, this three-inch gun over at the museum here, it was made by the Hudson Motor Car Company. It's got a stamp right on it. That's what my dad and he sold the first Hudson in Iowa, and that's when he was the Hudson Essex Packard dealer in Iowa.

MS: With all these parts and everything –

RC: He'd come out here and work for me.

MS: [laughter] All these parts and everything that he – I bet you dreamt about assembling ships at night. Was that something that constantly was on your mind?

RC: Well, I was pretty tired. I'd come home and – yes, I was in love with my job, and I did my best. I'd be the youngest one there. My dad worked as a hand rigger for me, and they didn't know which one of us was the dad. [laughter] But we wore – to segregate the – you wore on your hard hat, your tin hat. You had a scrape – painted around it and it told what your job was.

Then you had a round dot in the middle, told what shift you were on. You'd work five days in and an off a day, work five days and off a day. You still work six days a week. I think if you figure that out when you come to the eleventh, then you work eleven days without a day off. You still only work six days a week. See, Saturday wasn't an overtime day. It never was until after the war. Then Truman, under Taft-Hartley bill they called it, which started to recognize unions and allowed closed shops. They also made Saturday a time and a half day. But Saturday was never considered a holiday ever until after the war.

MS: When the war ended, do you remember what the impact that day, when VE Day, and then VJ Day, do you remember what the response was at the fact that the –

RC: Well, when they did away with graveyard and it was obvious that Swing was going to go in about two more weeks, I hadn't had a vacation or took time off in the fifty-four months. I didn't want to take my severance pay and – because I had a sneaking hunch national metals or whoever company – See, they put the yard up like a used army truck and put it up on open bids and anybody could bid on it. The high bidder happened to be a company back in Baltimore, Boston Metals, and who had been one of the largest scrap yards, shipyards, scrappers going back in 1906. EJ Ward, who had the same job on Swing – day shift as I did, they had hired him to do some groundwork prior to their bid. I relieved him every night for the fifty-seven months. I had to come in a half hour away. He stayed a half hour later. I did the same thing then on the (riff?) that I had. So, I sort of had a sneaking hunch I'd probably go to a (college, national metal?). So, I took a leave of absence and went back to Iowa. I worked in my dad's garage as a mechanic and took all my kids too. They entered school back there, the same elementary school I went to. The boys were in kindergarten. The girl was in sixth grade. Boy, they were way ahead. [laughter]

MS: What year was this?

RC: This was [19]46, [19]45. Went back in – well, in September, latter part of September in [19]45.

MS: So, were you in Cal Ship when the war came to an end?

RC: No, I worked that day. Yes. No, I worked – yes, Cal Ship right up until about – I took a leave of absence two weeks after the war stopped.

MS: Do you remember the scene when it was announced the war was over? Was it cheering or anything?

RC: Oh, yes.

MS: Describe it.

RC: Yes. Of course the papers were full of celebrations in New York and Broadway. The sailor that bent the girl over, just kissed her, they got a statue down in San Diego, twenty-eight feet tall. It's going to be down there for a couple of weeks, or the rest of this year, maybe longer. I've got to get down there and see that. They put her then just after I was down there about two months

ago.

MS: What was it like at Cal Ship?

RC: Well, everybody throwing their hats up in the air and screaming and hollering and –

MS: So, when the war was over – I mean, here is this big war machine that is going red hot producing ships and ships and ships and ships. What happened next?

RC: Well, you can't believe how many ships we had and landing craft and destroyers, destroyer escort, supply ships, hospital ships, aircraft carrier. There wasn't any place to put them. They had every inlet and every harbor full of ships. So, that's what got all us started finding a place to put them and scrapping the ones – see, they'd put every ship they had made, even ships that they made during World War I. They put all those in service. So, they had those. So, they started putting them up for sale immediately. In fact, my first job, after about two months on Terminal Island with them, they made a deal with Kaiser up at Richmond to use his crew to cut up five ships that we were awarded. We were awarded the first five ships on the West Coast. I was sent up there to take charge of our interest at the Kaiser at Richmond. So, I was up there for three months. Then Everett-Pacific Shipyard, that's a town above Seattle, they had a bunch of ships tied up there. We were high bidder on forty of them. They was putting up forty ships at a time. [laughter]

MS: So, what you were doing now, you had built these ships and now you are scrapping them.

RC: We scrapped fifty that we built right over here. The *Lane Victory* was built over here. The *Lane Victory* and the *Jeremiah O'Brien* and *FRISCO* and the *John Brown* were the first three ships memorialized and re-made over or restored so they could actually steam under their own power. We scrapped 500 ships altogether.

MS: What did you feel after all this energy, building all these things and then taking them all apart again? What were your response then?

RC: That was my job. We took them apart just so we would build them. Of course my experience in the Navy and learning about watertight integrity and the watertight bulkheads, then my experience in the Cal Ship, I knew all about ships. So, I was a natural for taking them down. I was over in *Pearl Harbor* for six months, and I was at Everett for about four months. I was at Richmond for four months. Then when I came back down here, I was purchasing (agent?) marine surveyor and all the ships that came up for sale, which was probably around 4,000 on the West Coast and in Honolulu. I surveyed all of them prior to purchase. I knew probably more than – I was able to get a ship ready for deep sea tow, where our competitors had to put the ship in the shipyard. I was able to do it right where it set in the reserve fleet.

MS: What's the – go ahead.

RC: I'd hire off-duty firemen in that town. In fact, in Benicia where Suisun Bay, they had about 3 or 4,000 ships there. Some of those ships, the grills were still hot. [laughter] The crew that

manned them during the war was still – they took them up there and dropped and they were picked up right up there. The galleys weren't even secured. That's where I got a lot of the stuff for the maritime museum. Because I had on every ship I looked at, besides looking at it for the company and what they was interested in, I was looking for memorial stuff and marked it, "For Save, Roy." Like the mass, I sat on that mass for almost a year, and I had to keep moving it because it was in the way. I think one of the bulldozers, D8 Cat, ran in it on purpose because he had to go away around it every time he was assigned to go over on his side. It cost me \$500 to restore it.

MS: Well, let us go back. What's the process of scrapping a ship? I mean, they cut it up into pieces. What did they do?

RC: Well, we had an advanced – see, we had those ten bursts at the outfitting dock. The ones that were over farther to the west were advanced dismantling. We took all the resealables off and – see, there's still a lot of liberty ships that they gave to Greek – Greece and other countries and – probably a thousand. The only place they could get spare parts were from people like us. Because we were scrapping liberties. So, we would save everything that would naturally be used for spare parts, engine parts, reduced [inaudible], winches, refrigeration equipment and furniture, file cabinets, anchors. Most of the ships had our anchor chain. Boston Metals also owns Baldt, Anchor, and Chain. Even the *Queen Mary* has our chain on it. The *Normandie* had our chain on it. Practically every Navy ship during the war had our chain. So, that was all saved. That was taken off first. Then at the start, the coast guard, I figured which agency, they decided these ships had to be – taken all the oil off before you lit a torch. So, that was all pumped off at this advanced dismantling, and it was sold. It was still high value and could be reclaimed. Then we had to get a fire inspector with a sniffer to go aboard and make sure there wasn't any fumes. Well, they got to the point. Later on they figured that it wasn't necessary. But we did pump the oil off because it had a value. But then they had a – they put anti-rusts prohibitive in the water tanks, which later on was considered a contaminant. They had a place up on Palos Verdes where you could dump contaminated water. But there was so many places around L.A. that was – had surplus water and they couldn't dump it into sewer. One trip a day up there, you get up there real early. The trucks would (tank truck?) and you'd wait all day to get weighted on. So, you get one trip a day.

MS: So, they brought in torches then? They would strip everything they wanted to salvage, and they would just cut the ship up with torches, or – what would happen?

RC: We had a leaderman for about every five cutters. We had around a hundred men for cutting. We had torches that were different lengths. All of our burning was – stood – standing up with an angle head on it. So, he just stood up and dragged the torch. The leaderman would show him where to cut. We cut the ship up in about the same sections and we used anchor chain, cut two holes in, go around the frame and made a bridle where the crane would pick it up. We would lay these sections that we cook out in the cutting area. We'd fill that whole area that was serviced by that one crane with sections. Then the night crew would cut them up into eighteen by sixty inches, which is prepared scrap. Then the graveyard crew would load them in gondola's plate cars. We had around a hundred gondolas. We had five-mile railroad track there. We had about a mile piled high of prepared scrap. We had around 80,000 ton on the ground all the time

for prepared scrap. We would charter a whole ship, 26,000 ton. We'd use two cranes, eighty-inch magnets. We had invented a chute that would fit the hole of the ship. You could rotate the chute on a rail that was held up like a funnel. You could rotate that and shoot this down in the ship. We did a lot of damage. A lot of the ships that we loaded had to go to the shipyard to be repaired before they left. But that was the only way you could load them.

MS: Now, early on, you began to save stuff because you had a sense of history. You wanted to preserve things. Tell me about that and how that led to your involvement much later in the maritime museum. You were stating –

RC: Well, I was able to – of course, I had first look at everything that's on their ship. Even the ones that we didn't get, I make a deal with our competitor because I knew what was on that ship that we didn't get awarded. Then on the ships we were awarded, I had first refusal on all the stuff. Of course, there wasn't much interest after the war in memorabilia. Not even with the crews that served on them. They didn't get into this until about twenty years ago. Then they wonder, "What happened to our ship, I wonder? We ought to start a memorial and a gathering place to put the stuff." So, I was sitting in the driver's seat.

MS: What were you collecting?

RC: I weigh this. I'd take it all up. I had a warehouse over on Terminal Island – it was an old keel ship warehouse. I'd take everything on the weekends. I had a dirty dozen that we would scrounge. I was eligible to sign the chit to get it through the gate with a guard that would go up to the marine sails. Then I put over in the warehouse. I bought it by the pound, not by what it was worth.

MS: What were you collecting?

RC: Old ships' lamps and mainly lamps and name plates and engine parts. Anything that was brass. The brass room over here – been over here? Well, see, that's name plates and ships wheels, binnacles, clocks, a lot of the stuff. Some of the officers, before they left the ship, or maybe – they would stash it somewhere on the ship until it was handy to get to it – to take it off. So, I knew about where they generally stash, could be at the bottom drawer of a foot locker. So, I'd look in all the hidden places. Now, the bow – I got my idea on the bow back at Fall River, Massachusetts, or is that Connecticut, Massachusetts? They have a museum there that I spent – I've worked on all the museums. I got to the point where I had a good reputation of making displays. I've worked on all the museums up and down the West Coast and over in Hawaii. We scrapped eleven fleet type subs. That was a sub that we standardized. All our subs were what they called a fleet type. We scrapped eleven of those. Even before we started scrapping subs, I got involved with the boat hand- over in *Pearl Harbor* and also *Pampanito*. I'm a big supporter of the *Pampanito* in San Francisco.

MS: How did you get involved with the maritime museum here?

RC: Through Ed Howell.

MS: You have to say, "I got involved –"

RC: Huh?

MS: You have to say, "I got involved with the maritime museum."

RC: I got involved over the maritime museum. Councilman Gibson, who was our councilman of this district, his field secretary, a fellow by the name of (Ed Haulk?). He had an idea of putting a museum together. He'd been in the Merchant Marines. He was showing a busload of elderly citizens around the island. Then the loading dock, and of course we had all the steel. Then we had our diesel division, big building down here in our office down here. He stopped in one day to ask me to give him a write-up on the ship that he could tell these people about. That started the ball rolling. We spent every weekend together gathering things together for a museum. Then Councilman Gibson got the old ferry building here, donated over to us. Mayor Bradley was one hundred percent for it. He appointed Bill Olson, who was an old timer here and was one of the original historical society members of San Pedro. He and several others were all appointed as an advisory of putting a museum in the ferry building. Ed Haulk even got permission. I had this stuff running out of my ear, got permission to put stuff in the old firehouse underneath the city building here. Then the Harbor Department owned this piece of property where I've got the bow. See, when the museum started, they didn't know whether it should go into park or recreation or whether into the Harbor Department. We would've liked to have seen it to go into the Harbor Department, but they didn't want it. So, Gibson finally got the board of park and recreation involved. Then he also got a million-dollar CEDAR grant. There's a program called CEDAR, that was initial mean something. Our original employees, our workers – helpers were CEDAR. Those young people that out of work.

MS: Do you remember the day – I am going to ask you if you remember the day the museum opened.

RC: So, we were up there two weeks ago. For a week –

MS: We are going to go back and ask you now. Tell me about the opening of the museum. Must have been an exciting event to get that started.

RC: Well –

MS: When did it happen? Tell me, when did it open and what was it like?

RC: We rushed like hell to get everything we could that people had promised us. I had a trailer on the back of my car, and I had a roof carrier. Then I had available from national metals, semi-truck, anytime I wanted them. So, we picked up cases, display cases, ships wheels. Now, all this stuff had all been refinished, didn't need any work. The guy that owned coordinated wire rope over on – in Wilmington on Anaheim [inaudible]. He was very sympathetic about saving stuff for future generations. So, he helped me a lot. I had a lot of friends in this harbor that helped me. He had a boat. It's still one of our centerpieces over there that was made by some guy in Europe, I believe. He made it out of all different kinds of wood. Beautiful. It's got a little one

sonar engine. I went over and told him I'd like to have it for the weekend for the opening. It's still over there. [laughter] It was 1980.

MS: Well, tell me about the opening. What day did it open, and what was the scene like, and what was going on?

RC: Well, we had quite a few people come down.

MS: What you say? The museum opened in 1980 –

RC: That was in May, I think.

MS: Start again. I was coughing. Go ahead.

RC: All the time – anytime the locals –

MS: I was coughing so we could not hear you. So, go ahead, start again.

RC: Anytime the locals came, it was something new because we were building the museum. It's still that way. Because we've had three directors now. Mary Francis, the director we have now, she has different ideas completely from what the other two directors have. I have to accept that because the world's passing me by. What I considered maybe a real beautiful display, maybe she doesn't. She got make room for what she think. She come from this museum back in Mystic, Connecticut, which I was a member of for a number of years and have been there a number of times. It's one of the nicer older museums in the country. That's a pretty high paying job. They have to have a lot of credit to be able to be eligible for – put in their application.

MS: Let us go back. Tell me the year and the day it opened, and what that day was like.

RC: Well, I think it was in May, and it was 1980 and we – all of us were involved, but – oh, by the way, before we opened, we were given all the stuff at the Cabrillo Museum here in Pedro. It had been closed for a couple months, I guess. So, I had two friends that had pickups and then I got a couple of my friends and their cars, and we hauled everything out of the Cabrillo Museum before opening day. So, we had that and had nothing up on the second deck at all. That was roped off. Then what we call the Navy deck now, that's the one to the left, where we have the Navy models. That was practically empty. At the time, the tall ships made Los Angeles. So, we had a couple tied up at the dock outside, and they were given rides on the United States training vessel and also the Norwegian or Swedish and the Norwegian airline. I believe they sponsored a big deal in the room, which is now the Navy deck. That took place that week we opened.

MS: So, when you opened, was there a big crowd outside the door? You opened the door, everyone rushing? What did the scene look like?

RC: I don't believe so.

MS: What did it look like, the scene?

RC: I don't think so. I think they just came in gradually. See, there's still people here that don't know that museum's there. [laughter] So, it's hard to get publicity. Like the *Lane Victory*, it's – they're advertising now in L.A. papers about their tours. They got a museum, which I was very much involved in their museum. But anyhow, this museum here, we're considered probably the sickest largest one on the West Coast and one of the top ten in the nation. For floor space, we have out at Fort MacArthur at Angel Gate, they have all those army barracks out there that are empty. The Los Angeles has – they're rented out to different people, but we have two of those out there. They're a big building. They're clear, full of stuff that people have donated, and it's a crying shame. So, on all the museums in the country, they don't have enough storage. They have to refuse a lot of stuff. Stuff they think maybe they can put it on a revolving display, it stored. I had stuff up in the brass room that I found out it went to storage, and it wound up back at my house.

MS: You have not only preserved a lot of history, you lived a lot of history of ship building and the – after the war period and collecting stuff. What do you think is important for people today to appreciate about the history that you have lived? The shipping and the ship building and all that, why is that important to know? What do you think they should know about it?

RC: Well, listen, if I've got the money and they need it, they're going to have it. The upkeep on ships that are made memorial, a lot of maintenance. It's just, you can't believe a ship made out of steel sitting in water, it has to be dry docked about every couple years. The bottom scraped and prime coated, then [inaudible] and chip and paint. You chip one day, paint the next. That's why the Navy had such large crews on the ship. Most of them are chipping and painting. That has to be kept up. Now, I'm a very big supporter of a Destroyer Escort in Albany, New York, the USS *SLATER*. They're eventually going to get that thing, so it will get out of the way. But they have worked and worked to get that ship in shape. In the wintertime, they have to move it across the river. That's the Hudson River up there. Then they got to move it back. They just moved it back last week. It'll be open for visitors this week.

MS: I mean, what I am saying personally for you, why do you do this? I mean, why do you care about this? What does it mean to you?

RC: Well, nothing is saved on a ship, unless there's somebody like me that has an interest in – there's – a lot of these people that served on these ships now that they've got interested and started to preserve them, they know I probably might have something they can use. I can't help them. I can't help them telling them I don't have anything but a check. So, I don't need money more now than I do, although I've always donated, paid my membership to all these groups.

MS: But personally, I mean, do you feel proud, or do you feel happy that you preserved this stuff?

RC: I don't care. My family used to say, "Why do you put so much time over at the museum?" They said, "You don't get any credit for it." I said, "I'm not looking for any credit. I just want to preserve something for the future generation." I wrote a little article when we dedicated the propeller over there, which expresses my view at that time and still does. But my memory's



getting a little short. But it's something in regard to – there's three things that happens to these parts of ships. They're either sunk or they're scrapped, or they're preserved. Now, like that propeller, now a cruiser has four of those on it. We scrapped eight of them, eight cruisers. So, that gives us sixteen propellers. You can't ship a propeller because they're wide and they have to be a special trailer that has a notch down in the center. One of the blades go down there. All of our propellers, we perforate them at the hub and then drop a headache ball on the blade and you knock the blade off or you – later on, they took a chainsaw, a Homelite chainsaw. Instead of having a chain going out there, they put a wheel that they – an arbor that they put an abrasive wheel that would cut metal. They would score the propeller at the hub and bust it off. That way, they could ship it. A propeller with manganese bronze, it brings a good price. I worked under the table deal on getting the propeller and through Todd's – actually, that propeller was – when a ship goes up for sale, government agencies, even the Boy Scouts, can put in that they didn't like something off the ship. The board of education, now what they were going to do with that propeller, I don't know. But they wound up with it. It was stored over at the Todd Shipyard.

MS: But I guess what I am asking is the same thing your family asked you.

RC: Huh?

MS: I am asking the same question your family asked you. Who cares about all this stuff, these plaque? Why should we care about all this old ship stuff?

RC: Well, you wouldn't believe how many thousands of people go aboard these ships and take their kids. At the *Lane Victory*, they take 600 on their cruises out there. They make enough money to buy the oil. That's the most expensive deal on these trips, is the oil. Now, the old volunteers that are still with us, they're putting in a lot of hours. Now, when the 50th anniversary of *Normandie*, you couldn't believe the enthusiasm. I gave a thousand dollars for the oil. In fact, they had everything ready. The *O'Brien* in San Francisco, an old liberty ship. It was the oldest of the three. The old *John Brown* in Baltimore and the old ship in Frisco, it was the only one that made it. The chief engineer panicked on the *Lane Victory* down off of Mexico. Somebody had cut in a tank that had water in it into the water that had oil in it, that contaminated the water for the boiler. He shut the ship down. There's a manual that tells you the procedure to go through. That you switch tanks and do this, that. But he brought the ship back. Most of us, we didn't want any money back. We just left it there for – I still give the *Lane Victory* and the ships in Frisco money and especially the one back in Albany because I still got a lot of stuff. I had four garages in my neighborhood. This was the things that – we throw it out, that is the histories of ships. When I surveyed a ship, I made all these notes on everything that was resealable and how much it would cost to tow the ship, what needed repaired before we could do it. Then at the end of the year and we had two sets of files. We had to keep files, I think, for seven years. Of course, was in business for forty. So, we dumped out about eighty files a year. They always asked me to get a working party. I'd have them pull out everything I wanted. Well, I wound up with all these file cabinets and garages in my neighborhood. Well, gradually I got evicted from garage here and garage there. So, I have one room in my house. You can't believe it. I didn't have room for the file cabinets. So, I put the stuff in boxes. I go back there. I pulled out a lot of stuff and gave her on Cal Ship and *Lane Victory* and then other. See, we're involved in quite a few things in the harbor here. We put in the bulk loader out there, forty-nine, fifty in the older

harbor. I purchased the equipment, the conveyors and everything for that. Then we had American Billing Company – we billed automobile bodies. Before they started shredding automobile bodies, they bailed them. So, that was all brought down to our plant and shipped down here.

MS: I think we run out of time, unfortunately. We keep talking. Did you ever know a guy who was interested in sailing ships? It was a good friend of ours, Bob Weinstein. Robert Weinstein, who was interested in preserving sailing ships, the *Balclutha*, the ship up north in San Francisco and the *Star of India* in San Diego. Did you ever know him?

RC: Robert?

MS: Weinstein.

RC: I don't think so.

MS: You had a lot of photos of sailing ships and – which you gave to the maritime museum. But anyway, if you could slide your chair over and so I can take a still photo of you.

[end of transcript]