

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project  
Roy Cootes Oral History  
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Length of Interview: 1:19:36  
Interviewer: MS – Unknown  
Transcriber: NCC

Roy Cootes: Is this thing going to be – the final product going to be produced on the port's website, or how –

Male Speaker: Yes.

RC: That's the way it will be –

MS: First off, it will be on the website. We will select from the people individual stories. Then after that, hopefully we'll put it together in a whole hour or two hour, whatever, documentary. But then it goes into the archive.

Female Speaker: Yes. Then fifty years later or whatever –

MS: So, hundred years or whenever, people will be able to look at this.

RC: I understand.

Female Speaker: Because it is digital and so it will be presented as well.

MS: Okay. Hard question first. Please say your name and spell it.

RC: Yes. My name is Roy J. Cootes. I live in Rancho Palo Verdes and have been retired from the port fifteen years this coming July.

MS: Great.

FS: Spell it.

MS: How do you spell your name?

RC: I spell my name C, double O, T-E-S.

MS: Great. Roy, tell me the year you were born and where.

RC: I was born in December the 3rd, 1932, in the old San Pedro Hospital.

MS: Okay. Let us go back to those early days when you were a kid in San Pedro. What are some of your earliest memories of San Pedro?

RC: My earliest memories of San Pedro were very, very happy. My father was a shop superintendent for the Atlas-Imperial Diesel Engine Company in Fish Harbor. My mother was a homemaker. I went to local schools, Leland Street School, Richard Henry Dana Junior High School, graduated from San Pedro High School in 1950. I attended Los Angeles Harbor College for two years and took a certificate in internal combustion engine technology. I can remember a disaster in the harbor in 1947, when I was just starting high school, when the tanker *Markay* blew up in the West Basin. That was rather loud [laughter].

MS: Tell me the story of that. How did you hear about it? What did you see? What did it look like and all of that?

RC: The *Markay* was a miraculous incident. Very unfortunate. It was a tanker that blew up opposite the old APL terminal close to the clock tower in the main channel. I heard it because I was out in my backyard when it blew up. There was immediately a very, very big black plume because it was an oil fire. It shook the windows. In fact, it broke some windows in the San Pedro area. The fire department did a miraculous job in putting it out. After that, the port – way before my employment with the port – rebuilt the terminals.

MS: What caused it? Tell me the reasons behind it? How did it start, and all that?

RC: I don't know that the real cause had ever been determined. We're talking about timber wharves and all the petroleum terminals were worth at timber wharves. Once you get a fire started at timber wharf with all the creosote, timbers, and so forth, everything it adds to the intensity of the fire, the creosote. It is quite a scene.

MS: Did you go down and look at it as –

RC: No, no. I did not. We all read about it in the paper the next day. At fifteen years old, I was busy doing a lot of other things.

MS: Now, tell me about your family. What was their background? Your father and what he did, and your mother? Where they came from and their story?

RC: Well, my father, as I've before mentioned, was the shop superintendent for the Atlas-Imperial Diesel Engine Company in Fish Harbor. Fish Harbor was a very, very teaming activity in those days. There were over 3,500 Japanese Americans living on Terminal Island at that time. It was a Japanese fishing village, a part of it. The other was utilized by the Italian Americans that had come to this country for fishing purposes. The Croatian from Croatia. Then Yugoslavia since changed. Al Larson's boat shop, which still is there and has been there over a hundred years, was there before the Port of Los Angeles became a port. A former Harbor commission's father started Harbor Boat Building, the Rados family, John Rados. So, there were seven full-size fishing canneries in the area. It just provided a tremendous amount of activity – of commercial activity.

MS: What did it look like? What did Fish Harbor look like if you were walking around? Was it a quiet place, an active place? What did it smell like? What did it look like?

RC: Fish Harbor was an exciting place. As a youngster, I used to ride the ferry, take the bus to the ferry building on the San Pedro side, and ride across to visit my father. In fact, I started sweeping the shop when I was about 10 years old. Running a lay, done it at 12. There were sounds from all these societies – these blended societies there. You would walk by a Japanese restaurant and hear authentic Japanese music. In San Pedro, we were very familiar with all the Japanese American children because they went to school in Fish Harbor and grammar school and

then would ride the ferry and come to our junior high and high schools. But Fish Harbor just provided a tremendous amount of employment. I can recall that during the [19]30s, the price of sardines was \$35 a ton, but they were caught very close to here. Some boats were making two trips a night and unloading their catch in Fish Harbor. Some –

MS: What did it look like? What were they doing in Fish Harbor?

RC: Well, there were job shops, machine shops, and diesel engine repair shops that were competitors of my dad's. They were prominent in the area. You had restaurants. You had bars, but these seven canneries provided employment for tremendous amount of the San Pedro population. The smells were always quite notorious. You knew when everybody had caught a lot of fish because that aroma of the cooking fish [laughter] just seemed to permeate San Pedro. So, if you're a real San Pedron, you'll remember those odors.

MS: What went on in a cannery? People who have not been inside a canner. What were they doing in there?

RC: Well, it mostly populated the canning, the cleaning, and the packing of the sardines. The tuna that was caught in Mexico was all cleaned by Japanese American women, Italian women. Wives of the fishermen who had caught the fish would ride the ferry to the canneries at all different hours. Whenever the fish was caught, it had to be processed. So, it provided a tremendous employment for the local population.

MS: What was the process of canning? What did they do? I mean, can you describe what they were doing in there?

RC: That was quite a process. After the cleaning, it was canned. Then it was put in retorts, which is a name for the big cookers, where they would steam and process the fish in the cans. That is about it. It was then packaged in cardboard containers and shipped to all places in the United States and the world. Actually, in those days, the [19]30s through the [19]40s, Fish Harbor was the tuna canning and producing capital of the world.

MS: Now, was the process – I keep pressing on this. As a kid, we did a trip with the schools, went down into the cannery. But you have to explain because a lot of people do not know. Were they hand-packing it? I mean, were there big cans going through conveyor belts? I mean, what was it like?

RC: Yes. My experiences weren't really engaged in the activities that were going on in the cannery. So, I don't want to get in trouble here [laughter].

MS: Technically wrong.

FS: Make it up.

RC: Yes, edit that out.

MS: [laughter] Well, let us go back to your father. When did he come to San Pedro? What did he do, and a little bit of his history in this?

RC: Yes, my father was born in Rodeo, New Mexico, in May of 1910. One of the exciting times of his childhood, I recall he would talk about everybody in town. It was a border town, Rodeo, New Mexico. It's now close to Deming, New Mexico. Very close to the border. So, Pancho Villa and his comrades used to ride across the border. So, all the men in town wore firearms. So, it was not uncommon to have him ride down Main Street there and rob the banks, grab a few women, and go back to Mexico. So, he was often accosted by some very, very angry [laughter] people on this side of the border resist his activities. His stepfather was a master sergeant in the army. So, my dad traveled through all the army posts in the United States and spent three years in the Philippines in the [19]20s, where his father was stationed. My grandmother's second husband was a repair yard supervisor at the old Los Angeles Ship Building Company, which then later became Todd Shipyard, which is now a shipping terminal in the port. Very famous shipyard. So, my father went to work there right out of school, serving a machinist apprenticeship there. Later on, went to work for the Atlas-Imperial Diesel Engine Company. My mother's folks were philharmonic musicians. They came to Lomita in 1916, 1917, and located in San Pedro first. My mother went to 15th Street School for three years or so. Then my grandfather bought a half-acre in Lomita. About that time, we're getting pretty close to the depression. So, he started farming chickens there. So, they produced eggs and did all that because philharmonic musicians didn't have much work in those days. My grandmother gave music lessons. My grandfather worked at Union Oil for a while.

MS: Did they play in the orchestra in Los Angeles?

RC: They played in the Long Beach Philharmonic. They also performed in shows. My mother started playing the piano. In a musical family, you could hardly grow up without learning how to play the piano. So, she was playing the piano at 3. She later sang professionally. She graduated from Narbonne High School when she was 15, married my father when she was 16. He was 19. That was 1929, when they got married. So, my mother was very active in town on the local social – the Friday Morning Study Club, the San Pedro Philharmonic Association. They did a lot to bring folks like Nelson Eddy and those to the local high school for community concerts and all that. So –

MS: Was there one big cultural event you remember your mother being involved with in San Pedro?

RC: She worked at the YMCA for many years. She was very active in the fundraising activity that the old YMCA was here on Beacon Street and is now a halfway house taken over by the county. There was a need for a new YMCA, and a piece of property was found in the western part of San Pedro. So, she was deeply involved in that fundraising campaign. She was very, very well known in the community, very active in many, many societies.

MS: What about yourself? Were you dragged off to some of these other things? Any one of them you remember, cultural concerts or something like that in San Pedro?

RC: Well, born in that atmosphere, I have a great love for classical and operatic music. My mother was continually practicing when I was a kid. So, I could whistle all those arias from Madame Butterfly to [laughter] whatever. So, I attended all of those. She tried with me at the piano, but it really wasn't my cup of tea. I was too interested in playing baseball.

MS: When you say your father was a machinist, what exactly was he doing? What was his job? You can look at me when you are talking.

RC: Okay. Sure. The job of a machinist in those days was greatly pronounced different than the term machinist of today. Technology has done that. But an apprenticeship was really necessary because a machinist of those days had to not only be proficient in the harbor area, in a shipyard environment, on the waterfront, it would also have to become diesel engine proficient as well as being able to run every machine tool in the shop. Whereas in this day and age, with the technology take control lays and programmable machines and all, it's just a different task. The machinists of today just have never had the opportunity to do all the other things that were present then. But a job shop machine shop would take on any job that anybody would bring to them. The canneries were just starting in those days in Fish Harbor, and so a lot of the canning machinery was designed and fabricated in the local machine shops in the area. The technology had come in, diesel engines had started to become very, very useful in the industry. The gasoline engines were the predominant means of propulsion beforehand. They were all subsequent to blowing up fire and so forth. Very, very unsafe. So, diesel engines were on the upswing. I mean, it was as many boats as could be built. The local shops were installing diesel engines in them, from tugboats to fish boats to work boats to just anything that went on the water. At that time, one of the interesting things in the [19]20s and early [19]30s, diesel fuel was sold for as cheap as 3 cents a gallon. So, it was a very economical fuel for fishing boats that had to travel long distances.

MS: That is amazing. Now, when you finally graduated from school and all that, what were your ambitions? Did you want to see the world or stay in San Pedro? What were you thinking about as for – or are you already started working with your dad? What were you thinking about?

RC: Well, one of the things that was very, and it is to this day, very popular, is the development of baseball players in San Pedro. We have a number of baseball players who have played in the major leagues and continue to play in the major leagues today. So, I was one of that group and played baseball in high school. Excuse me. I was on the first Harbor College baseball team. The school was just built in 1949. I graduated in 1950. So, I played on the first two Harbor baseball teams. In 1953, I signed with the San Francisco Seals. I signed a contract to play baseball with San Francisco Seals in the Pacific Coast League.

MS: What position did you play?

RC: I played the outfield and went to spring training with the Seals in Riverside. I had a successful spring training and hit 358 in the spring. I'm always expecting – at that stage of the game – to be farmed out to a lower classification team. I continued to stay with the team. So, I made the trip when we broke spring training to San Francisco and had the opportunity to play against major league teams in San Francisco, Cleveland Indians, St. Louis Browns of that day,

and the New York Giants. As the season was to begin –

MS: Okay. Let us go back to the baseball. You talked that San Pedro was a source of baseball talent. Give me some of the people that came out of San Pedro that eventually made names in the baseball world that you remember.

RC: Sure. Some of the folks when I was playing from a local area – and I'll include Lomita and Wilmington – Erv Palica was a very, very good pitcher with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Later on, my era, we had Joe Amalfitano. He's working for the Giants' shed over fifty years in professional baseball. Signed in 1954 with the then New York Giants. He was a manager for Chicago for a little while and ended up his active on field activities as third base coach for the Dodgers. Later on, we had Alan Ashby, who was a catcher for Houston, caught Nolan Ryan in Houston, and his no hitters. Ed Jurak, who played at Boston right behind Wade Boggs. From Wilmington, we had George Witt, who pitched in the 1960 World Series, and a famous Mazeroski home run game, pitched the middle innings. Before that, we had Nanny Fernandez, who played for the old San Francisco Seals in the Coast League and played for the old Boston Braves. I think one of the highlights of our childhood was we played in the era of Paul Pettit. A very historic activity in the area. Paul pitched for the old Narbonne ball club that was in the Marine League. We competed against him. Probably the Sandy Koufax of the era. Tremendous abilities and was known because he was the first \$100,000 bonus ball player. In fact, we always say he really kicked off the bonuses at that time. I think before that Dick Wakefield had gotten \$52,000, but –

MS: Any particular game you remember hitting against him?

RC: I do. I was a left-handed hitter. He was big left-handed pitcher. He proceeded to strike me out three times. But he averaged better than a dozen strikeouts a game in a seven-inning game, never walked any money. He had a major league curve ball and threw the ball close to a hundred miles an hour.

MS: Not easy to hit. Right. You were telling us about growing up into the baseball. How did your baseball career proceed and eventually end?

RC: With a successful spring, I guess a highlight in my career was I got to hit off Satchel Paige in San Francisco. I hit a ground ball, but that was active because I'm playing at that time at 20 years old. I'm playing against people that have been all awesome as a childhood growing up. When we played Cleveland, they had Bob Feller and Bob Lemon and Garcia. It was just a wonderful, exciting time in my life. As I say, I got a phone call from home. I'd been drafted. So, Korean War was on at that time. I did basic training at Camp Roberts, and played with Eddie Palmquist, who later pitched for the Dodgers. John McNamara, who managed Cincinnati and Chicago. Still working for the Angels. He was a catcher on our ball club. Palmquist pitched, I played the outfield there. We won everything there. Later, I went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, because I was going to be stationed in Europe. I went down to New York City and saw Erv Palica, who I had played semi-pro in Sunday Baseball with, who was then pitching for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Highlight of that New York's trip was going to the jazz at the Philharmonic. Seeing all the best jazz musicians of the day play. Baseball career continued in the service.

When I was in Europe, I was stationed in Orleans, which is about 120 kilometers south of Paris. I played on the post-baseball team there. We traveled all over Europe, Germany, and England, Italy. Played against John Roseboro, who later caught for the Dodgers, Johnny Blanchard, who caught for the Yankees. Everybody that played baseball was doing their time, including Ted Williams with his second tour during the Korean War.

MS: So, all this traveling you have been doing and seeing the world and all that, why did you come back to San Pedro? What was the reason in there? How did that happen?

RC: Well, I was a draftee, and of course I was most anxious to get back to continue my professional baseball career. I came back and got out in time – excuse me – to go to spring training in 1955 with the Seals. We spring trained in Brawley. It was a different kind of an organization then. When I signed with the Seals, they had a working agreement with the Yankees, but a fellow by the name of Fagan, who had a big pineapple operation in Hawaii, had bought San Francisco. While I was in the service, he had sold it. The Boston Red Sox then were the operator of the franchise in San Francisco. So, I've been away in the service. The scout that assigned me was no longer with the organization and all. So, that was a rather disappointing spring. Although I hit 300, I was optioned to San Angelo, Texas. I played in Texas that year, and had a successful year.

MS: Now, these contracts, you are, what, making, what, a million, \$1,000,002 on these contracts? I mean, what were you being signed for?

RC: [laughter] No. When I signed with the San Francisco Seals, for a rookie, \$500 was a big payday. \$500 a month. A star in the Pacific Coast League was making \$1,000 a month. I mean, people that had been in the league for a long time, baseball just did not pay the way that it does today. When I played in Texas, they picked up half my salary, and San Francisco gave me the other half of what they call option money. They made up the difference. In 1956, the Phillies were operating the Bakersfield franchise in the California State League. So, they bought my contract. I went to Bakersfield in 1956. In the first month and a half, I injured my knees. One of the things that I could do very well was run. We didn't have all this latest orthoscopic surgery that we have and everything. At that point in time, I thought I better return to San Pedro. I returned to San Pedro and started working at my dad's shop in Fish Harbor. In my early years, I basically served the equivalent of an apprenticeship in summer times. Working there, I could run all the machine tools. I was learning the decent engine expertise that was required. So, I worked at my dad's shop from the end of 1956 until 1960. I then took a job as chief engineer on a tuna clipper in the city of Los Angeles and made three trips to Mexico. Those were very successful, very profitable trips.

MS: What was life like on a tuna clipper when you were there? What was that job like?

RC: Well, a ten-man crew.

MS: On a –

RC: On a tuna clipper, it would be –



MS: Start again. I am sorry. Yes, go ahead.

RC: On a tuna clipper, there'd be a ten-man crew plus the engineer. It was the city of Los Angeles. The clipper that I was on was powered by a 400-horsepower Atlas-Imperial diesel engine, which I was very familiar with. The boat was a fast boat, and up for those days, did close to eleven knots. We fished off Baja. We fished off Acapulco. You went where the fish was. One of the technology advances happening in those days is that there was an airplane and pilot who was familiar with the fishing industry. He was stationed down in Mexico. He would fly over and find fish and assist you in setting the net. That really increased the fishing productivity, shortened the lengths of the trips where you had to be continually looking for the fish.

MS: How did you catch them? What was the process of finding and catching them?

RC: The technology had just very, very rapidly progressed through the old days where so much of it was done by hand. There's a fellow by the name of Mario Puratić in Seattle that designed and fabricated power blocks, which would lift the net after the net had been spread and the fish had been caught. The fish brailed out of the net by the deck crew on the ship would place the net back on the stern of the boat. It would just really cut down on the manual labor. The other real advance was the use of nylon for the fabrication of the nets. Before that, it had all been cotton, which was very labor-intensive. It had to be creosoted and continually patched because the porpoise and the shark and the fish would do damage to the nets. So, the nylon was almost impervious to that kind of damage. So, there wasn't any lost time due to repairing nets in the main part.

MS: Well, take us in. People do not know any of this. You are out there in a boat, someone says there is some fish there. What happens? How do you –

RC: I would say that setting on a school of 50 to 100 ton of tuna is exciting as a big game hunt. There are porpoise. There are shark. There are tuna. There's birds over the fish sometimes. In fact, sometimes that's the way you locate the fish, because birds will be feeding where the fish are. Porpoise like to predominate where there are tuna. So, the whole process of finding tuna is one of a man located in a mast with a very good vision looking for all of these signs. Then when located, everybody springs to action. The boat circles the spots of fish. When you've got the plane above you, he can tell you. From 500 feet, you can see the fish a lot better than you can from the mast or from the pilot house on the boat. So, he'll tell you exactly where the perimeter of the fish are. He'll tell you over the radio, "Let it go." That has the happenings. The skiff that's tied to one end of the nylon net dropped off the stern of the boat. The boat then proceeds to port, to surround a fish and move the way that the plane guides you. Then you take the seiner to the skiff and grab the end of the net there. You then attach it to the northern dragger winch that's on the deck of the vessel and start to call what's pursed the net. What that does is close the bottom of the net. That is a time that is very, very critical because tuna can sometimes become very agitated. They can dive to the bottom of the net. So, you don't know for sure that you have the fish until the net is pursed. At that time, it's bunched with it in the water adjacent to the seiner. There'll be a fisherman will braille a fish that is a one end of a boom handled basket that

will go into the net and pull out a ton, a ton and a half, or 500 pounds, or whatever you can snare of this tuna that's in the net.

MS: The braille is hooking them? Is that what you are doing?

RC: It's a big basket. The braille is a big basket. It's a nylon basket. It's heavy. You've got the men on deck holding onto one end of it. You've got the other end on a line that is purchased off the boom that lifts it out of the net and swings it over the boat. Then there's a line at the bottom of the braille that allow the fish to fall out. It'll fall in the hatch of the boat or in the brine tanks.

MS: A lot of fish are flopping around here. This is pretty chaotic, a lot of water and everything. I mean, it takes a lot of skill to just stay on board during all that. I would think it is.

RC: Brailing is an exciting activity too because there can be some porpoise in this net. There can be some shark. It's not uncommon to braille the shark out, which is a very dangerous operation. It's placed somewhere else on the deck. Then it's common for a deckhand to take a big wooden mallet and smash the shark's head. But some of those sharks are very, very big. There's always an attempt to try and save the porpoise. In fact, there will be some times when a deckhand will jump into the net and grab the porpoise and push them over the top of the net.

MS: So, then you are finished. You are loaded with fish. You are heading back. When you get in the port, what happens?

RC: Well, after you catch the fish is when the engineer's job really starts, because he's in charge of all the refrigeration equipment. I can recall a trip to Acapulco where I stuck a thermometer in the water, and the seawater was eighty-one degrees. So, by the time you get all this fish on board and everything, and it's a hundred-degree air temperature with eighty-one-degree water temperature, the fish is starting to cook right now. So, you've got twenty-four hours to bring this fish down to under thirty degrees. So, in the engine room, along with the engine are a great big refrigeration ice machines. On the way down to Mexico contemplating catching fish, I would always make a tank full of cold water. What you do in order to get this water down quicker and all, it's common after you get the fish in and you get it down to thirty, you want to get rid of all that water in the tank. So, you'll put sacks of salt in the brine, which allows you to bring the water down to twenty-six degrees or so. When you get it down to twenty-six degrees, you pump all the water out and the tanks are sealed, and you get home as fast as you can. Meanwhile, you're continually running the refrigeration to keep the tanks cold, and so forth.

MS: As a machinist, you are responsible for all these machines that are going on to not only get the winches and all the nets, and then also getting the refrigerating system to work and all that. That must have been quite a challenge for you. If the refrigeration screws up, you got a problem there, right? So, what are the things that are the breakdowns and the concerns that you have as a machinist onboard a ship like that?

RC: I can recall an incident on the second trip that I made. We were fishing off Baja. It was at night. A crew member woke me up and said, "The engine's slowing down." So, I went down in the engine room, and there was some smoke coming from the propeller shaft. So, I shut the

engine down. The mechanical lubricator that's attached to the engine that lubricates that spring bearing had failed, and so the bearing was running without any oil. This is a Babbitt-filled bearing. So, anyway, I took the cap off the top of the bearing, started to edge it up, told the skipper to make for Cabo, for Cape San Lucas. We were only about two hours away. So, running the engine very slow with the cap off the bearing, we got into the end of the harbor there. There was a little cannery run by a man named Luis. At that cannery, they had a lathe. It was blowing outside. So, there were a number of fishing boats that were swinging on anchor in Cabo. So, I got in a skiff. I went around all the boats in the harbor and collected all the Babbitt hammers that everybody had on board, because –

MS: Explain what that is. What is –

RC: Well, Babbitt is the bearing material that I would need to repair this bearing. Rather than call a towboat from San Pedro and have them come down there, lose the trip and all, I decided to make this repair myself. So, I disassembled the spring bearing. After collecting all these Babbitt hammers, which is the material that you use for re-Babbiting it, I went ashore and, at the cannery, made a deal with Luis that I could use his lathe. He was convinced that I could operate it. It really wasn't the appropriate machine to bore this bearing with because it was rather small, but I made a boring bar out of an old model T-axle. I took a torch and burned all the old Babbitt out of the bearing and took a piece of pipe and re-poured the bearing – heated the Babbitt, re-poured the bearing, and went ahead and bored the size that I needed to fit our tail shaft, 6 inches in diameter, and reinstalled it. We successfully completed that trip and came home. After I had gotten off the boat, I ran into the skipper about a year later, and I said, "You ever go into the shipyard and get that bearing done?" "No. Why, Roy? [laughter] It's doing just fine."

MS: I have a note here about warehouse doors. What are the challenges of warehouse doors that you had to confront?

RC: Well, by this time, I'm married, and I'm starting to have a family. So, the fishing industry, while very profitable, I decided to come back ashore and go to work. I took a job at the Western Engine enterprise agency in Fish Harbor because I thought I'd like to get some experience in some other types of diesel engines. While a competitor of my dad's enterprise, I just thought it'd be a valuable experience. Anyway, while there, there was a vacation relief opportunity at the port. Don Hall and Henry Smith, who ran the shop, asked me if I would be interested in coming over and helping them out for three or four months, and I said, "Sure." One of the reasons that they wanted me was that the ferry *Islander*, which was an automobile ferry that transported passengers and cars from the San Pedro to the Terminal Island site, had an Atlas engine. In fact, it was the first Atlas engine that Atlas manufactured. It was Atlas engine number one. In fact, it was the first common rail diesel engine manufactured in the United States. Originally, the ferry *Islander* had served the Port of Seattle for many years. They had retired it in 1940. But everybody had a sense that we were going to be involved in a war pretty soon, so the Port of Los Angeles bought this retired ferry from Seattle and brought it down here. It was refurbished. It ran here between San Pedro and Terminal Island from 1940 until 1963, when a Vincent Thomas Bridge was built. The Atlas, it had a habit of smoking a little bit too much. They thought that maybe I could correct the situation, and I did. So, they were happy. The harbor department was happy. But that vacation relief ran out. That was in 1959. It was then that – I've lost some dates

here. I was at the port before I went fishing. I came back. I worked at Western Engine. Because of my experience with the port, they had encouraged me to take the examination for machinists for the Los Angeles city. So, I worked at Western Engine for about six months. I got a call from the Department of Water and Power. I went to work for them as a machinist at 1630 North Main Street in Los Angeles. That was a real good job. I worked there for the better part of a year. I worked at Boulder Dam, worked at the (Pelton Water Wheel?) and the Haiwee Power Plants. Very, very valuable experience. I really enjoyed it. But in June of 1962, the port had a retirement machine shop. Smith and Hall asked me if I wanted to come back down here. I could transfer down here. So, I did, because I lived in San Pedro, and that other job had been a long drive because the harbor department was only 15 minutes from where I lived. I came to work for the harbor department and began work as a machinist there. Our main job that we had in those days was taking care of the ferry *Islander*. That was number one priority. As I say, it went out of service in 1963 because the state insisted that the port get out of the ferry business after they built the Vincent Thomas Bridge because they wanted to make sure that they would derive enough revenue to pay for the construction of the bridge. They didn't want any competition to the bridge. The machine shop had the responsibility at that time for – there were twenty-six pieces of floating equipment in the harbor. Pilot boat, port wardens boats, our own tugboats, pile driving rigs, all of which had diesel power. The exciting thing about working as a machinist in those days is that we did everything. Some of the things were so old, you couldn't get parts for, so we machined them. Another advantage of having a machinist that could do both the inside and outside work, something that many people don't get the opportunity to do.

MS: What about these warehouse doors? [laughter]

RC: One of the priorities that we had is that the port in those days was – it was mainly a break-bulk cargo port. It was before the advent design and installation of container cranes. So, most break-bulk cargo was stored in warehouses. So, the port had built intensive warehouses throughout the twenty-six miles of waterfront they had. All these warehouses had huge rolling steel doors. In fact, there were 2,600 rolling steel doors in the harbor. Because the port was a twenty-four-hour, seven day a week port, there were activities going on all the time. There was great damage happening to these doors all the time. Forklifts running through them, failures the gear mechanisms or the electric motors that drove them. Also, there was a three-man crew that continually, daily, did nothing but tour the harbor and repair these doors. It's very important to the tenant because they needed security to these warehouses. So, they were always very, very unhappy if there was a door that wasn't in a state of repair.

MS: Now, you started literally at the bottom and became supervisor. Talk about that and what that meant for your work. That now you were not just trying to make an engine happy, you were trying to now make a lot of other people get their jobs done. So, how did that happen? What did it mean to you?

RC: Well, I was almost 30 years old before I came to work for the port on a full-time basis. I think I was blessed because I had this private sector experience in harbor and port-related activities, as a machinist and diesel engine activities. The port revolved around those things. In 1966, Don Hall, who was my immediate supervisor at – his title was machinist working foreman – had retired after thirty years of service. His son later came to work for us as an engineer. Vern

Hall, who later promoted very high managerial position in the port. Lifelong friend, by the way. In fact, my grandmother gave him his first piano lessons. Anyway, he retired in 1966. There was an examination held for the position. I was within the top three on the list. The then management selected me to run the activities of the then ten machinists and two welders and blacksmith activities of the port. In 1968, the job was looked at again by the civil service, CSA, recognized that the job was much more than a working supervisor. Because there wasn't much of a chance for you to independently doing work, to plan, organize, actuate, and control these folks all over the harbor. The geographical span of control was twenty-six miles. So, they changed the title to machinist supervisor, which meant that I had to take another test. I was number one on that list. These are city-wide held examinations. So, I was a machinist supervisor from 1968 until 1969, when the titular, head of the mechanical repair section that also had the automotive garage and the ship's carpenters and boat building section, retired after thirty years. So, the examination was held for that job. I was number one on that list. So, I was promoted to that position. Through all these times, I would continually take supervisory classes and management classes. I did a lot of exciting things. Of course, it was during this period of time, 1969 to 1977, that the port itself became very active in the container crane installation, repair, and maintenance. The first container crane that the port bought was November 1968. It was placed at the East West Terminal at berth 120 in the West Basin. It was PACECO, number 317. Construction and maintenance. I had to convince the general manager that the yacht activity had become so extreme in that area. That thing was going up and down, up and down, up. I told them I can't keep it running anymore. I mean, you're going to be shut down. You're going to really, really have a problem, because when it's shut down, you're going to cut off that channel to navigation.

MS: I know. It was a big channel.

RC: So, I convinced –

MS: We are going to talk about this on camera. So, let us go back.

RC: Yeah. Okay.

MS: But I am glad you liked my little bridge. [laughter]

RC: I wish I had been able – when did you do this?

MS: We will give you the copy. Vern was interested in it too. I mean, (Julia?) has got a copy somewhere –

FS: Not many years ago, I would say.

MS: Yes. When they closed the dam, they did not wait.

FS: Yes. Whenever the year they closed it down.

MS: Yes. They were building the new bridges. They had to document it because they were

going to stop its operation.

FS: It was a mitigation thing.

RC: Okay. Well, I'm telling you, I got it shut down in 1977.

MS: Yes. This is in the [19]90s, regardless.

RC: It shut down. I made them stick it in the air and only put it down for when the railroad had to go across it. I had to reduce this repetitive thing in order to keep it until they got around to building a new one.

MS: Okay. Let us go back to [19]68.

RC: All right.

MS: You said this is a really exciting time for you. What was exciting about that period?

RC: November 1968 was the start, as I regard the golden years of the Port of Los Angeles. We had designed and constructed a container terminal at berth 120, 125, where a World War 2 shipyard had once been positioned. At this container terminal, we had purchased and had erected one container crane. It was a unique container crane because it was – and I consider it something way ahead of its time for that early, a generation container crane because it would lift two 20-foot containers simultaneously or by changing the lifting beams which lift one 40-foot container. We were in on the ground floor of that. Certainly the pioneer in the Port of Los Angeles of container crane activity was the Matson Shipping Company. They had purchased PACECO, Pacific Coast Engineering Company's container crane number one, which is presently, or the last I heard, still up in Alameda. It was stationed at berth 200, just adjacent to the Matson Cruise Terminal at 196, 198. It operated from 2000 – no, from 1960.

MS: Start again at "It operated."

RC: Yes. The container crane that Matson operated at berth 200 operated from 1960 until the new terminal in 1965 was built on Terminal Island at 208 and was moved then to that terminal. But the first port-owned crane was the PACECO number 317, installed at berth 120. As a machinist supervisor at the time, it fell upon me as to have the crews that we're going to responsible to mechanically maintain this crane. The electrician supervisor had the electrics and electronics. The rigging supervisor had the wire rope at that time. Anyway, like everything brand new, and like everything that gets constructed, there are always bugs in it. So, we were continually making adjustments. In fact, there was an occasion where a longshore operator driving the crane, operating the crane, got injured. There was no seat belt in the operator's cab, and a wire rope became disengaged from a trolley wire and trolley roller wire on the boom and caused the crane to lurch and throw him and hurt his knee. So, we took a look at this thing, and we talked to PACECO. In house, we proceeded to design a trolley tensioning device that would correct this problem. So, we manufactured all the machinery for that, installed the hydraulics for it, and corrected that. Anything that is in port operations is subject to failure at any time. So, we

gave that the same kind of service that we gave the ferry *Islander* when it was running twenty-four hours, seven day a week service. So, we spent many hours on weekends and at night making repairs to that container crane so that it could service the ships the next day.

MS: Well, I am going to jump backward and forward here. Nothing compares, of course, to the Badger Bridge as [laughter] a marvel of engineering. You might want to talk about that little bridge. Any stories you have about that?

RC: The Badger Avenue Bridge spans the Cerritos Channel, was a mechanical device that required constant maintenance and repair. Built? I don't recall the years it was built, but it was built for Model T traffic. It had railroad trestles. The real great import of this was that it was the only rail access to Terminal Island. It had to service the U.S. Naval Shipyard on Terminal Island at the time. All through the war, World War 2, through the Korean War, very vital to just all the activities that happened in Fish Harbor. It was the only way that they could rail access that there was to the Fish Harbor area also. Anyway, as I say, it was built and fabricated in early 1920s, I'm sure, forged drive shafts, cast iron gears that continually shredded teeth. The previous method of repair that usually would shut the bridge down in the down position for at least two or three days would be to braze the teeth back into the gears and continue operation. When I became a machinist foreman, I thought that because the engineering division had no immediate plans to replace the Badger Avenue Bridge, we better do something with the gears. So, we proceeded to replace the gears with cast steel gears. We then ceased to shred gear teeth. But all the drive shafts were starting to get rather tired. They were all forged. So, there was an occasion where we had a sheared shaft. The chief engineer and I met in a field. He asked me my advice as to what we could do here, because these were forged shafts and all. I said, "I think that we can repair this in place. I know a method that we can repair it. We can use some flange clippings and replace the portion where it's broken. I think we can get it back in operation in minimum amount of time." So, he agreed with my method of repair. We did that and proceeded there. Later on, through the process of cleaning up the water in the port, there was one of those unintended consequences that happened. It was the rapid acceleration of the going to lunch on all the timber by the laminaria and [detritus] in the harbor. The port, early on, had researched through its testing laboratory.

MS: You got to explain that in more detail. So, what was happening here?

RC: With the advent of the clean water, it just gave a haven for two marine organisms named laminaria and (torita?) to attack timber. So much of the timber in the port had been constructed in the [19]20s and [19]30s that most of the creosote had leached out. So, it no longer provided the protection that you would get from worm infestation. At a time, it was noted that this marine organism was eating better than one inch a section a year. Now, with 26,000 bearing pile and seven thousand timber fender pile in the harbor, all the petroleum terminals, with the exception of the supertanker dock at the outer harbor, were all timber. We had to keep them in operation. So, as I say, research by the test lab devised a method with polyethylene and pylori chloride coverings installed by marine hardhat divers that we could wrap the timber pile to plus six, that is six feet above mean high tide to protect those timber pile. That program was started by the CNM engineer, my predecessor, before I became director of port construction and maintenance. The Badger Avenue Bridge was a timber edifice, and so it required wrapping of those trestles. That

was a major undertaking. In 1977, I was promoted to port director of construction and maintenance by the then general manager, Fred Crawford. There was an examination for that job, and I was number one on that list. One of the things that I proceeded to do was a complete and total evaluation of all the structures in the harbor, timber and otherwise, so I could put together some organized plan to remediate all the deferred maintenance that had occurred through the harbor through a lot of years. One of the divers inspection reports indicated that a lot of the wraps that had been put on the Badger Avenue Bridge really had been put on some members that really didn't have the structural integrity that were going to do any good. So, I undertook a contract with spring hard hat contractors, and we completely rebuilt the railroad trestles in 1978 and [19]79 to the Badger Avenue Bridge. That maintain the integrity to those railroad trestles where I didn't worry about a railroad engine going into the bay.

MS: There are some other issues with that bridge. Subsidence was another issue you had to deal with, right?

RC: The bridge had subsidence two major times, which I always related to the pumping of petroleum products, oil by the Port of Long Beach adjacent to the naval shipyard. The bridge had been raised in two lifts, one in ninety – I remember because I was working in Fish Harbor. I remember it was lifted once in fifty-six, and it had to been lifted once before that. That I don't recall when. But it had been lifted up because of this subsidence. In fact, that subsidence even threatened the closure of the naval shipyard during the Korean War. Another instance of the Cootes family [laughter]. By this time, in the 1950s, the Atlas-Imperial Diesel Engine Company had become a division of the White Motor Company, and the White Diesel Engine Division of the White Motor Company. They retained my dad as the manager of that facility. They built the superior diesel engine, which was again another marine, but they also did a lot of oil field – built a lot of oil field engines. Superior engine was a very popular engine. Long Beach and the navy were quite concerned about this subsidence. So, it was determined that it was the oil pumping there that was causing that. So, White got the contract to correct this thing. My dad oversaw the installation and maintenance repair operation for a while until the Long Beach Oil Development Company took it. White sold the Long Beach Oil Development Company a dozen White superior diesel engines on some Quinplex oil well pumps. That started the re-pressurization of that area with salt water, which stopped the subsidence. Those engines are still there.

MS: We have so much to talk about, but I know we want to talk about the *Sansinena*.

RC: 1976 was another epic event in the history of the port. The supertanker *Sansinena* exploded at the terminal in outer Harbor. That is one that I will never forget because I was entertaining a fellow ex-professional baseball player and his wife at my home. We were sitting in a dining room, eating dinner. All of a sudden, there's a huge explosion. Now, I live or lived at that time about eight miles away from outer harbor. I thought a gas main had blown up in a street adjacent to my house. Windows rattled and we were all – I went outside to see if I could see anything, didn't, came back. About five minutes later, I get a telephone from the general manager. "You better get down here. I'll meet you." Fred Crawford, at the time. "The *Sansinena* has blown up at the super terminal. I know I'm going to need you and your folks." So, I met him at the ferry building, which then housed an office of the port wardens' office at that time on the San Pedro site. He said, "Well, you need to run out there and survey what's going on. I'm answering the



telephone to all the questions." Because all the TV stations and radio stations were barraging him for things that they just didn't have a handle on yet. I went out there and quickly assessed it. Adjacent to the supertanker dock in 1965, we had made a coal, iron ore, petroleum, and coal terminal. ABLE, American Bulk Loading Enterprises, Division of National Metal and Steel, operated at that time. As I drove out there, the fire department was engaged in their operations there. The fireboats were all there. Tremendous plume. I could see the bow of the ship sticking in the air. It was obviously a disaster. No other way to term it. Berth 58 through 60 is just across the slip from the bulk loader. I viewed the bulk loader and saw that there had been damage to the car dumping operation, sheet metal blown off the structure. But other than that, there were no edifices that were very high that would take effect from an explosion like that. But these rolling steel doors, although they were a different type, that facility had been built before the mechanization of the doors, so they were hand-operated. But they were huge, 25-foot-high doors, double-hinged. The majority of them on the side that faced the supertanker dock were blown up. They were blown up. They were all open. There was cargo in the shed. Number of the adjacent homes in the area there, it was obvious broken glass.

MS: What was the scene like? Was there sirens going on there, smoke? What was the feeling?

RC: The LA Fire Department's fireboat and fire land-based operations was fantastic. I've never lost my admiration for that fire service to begin with. I had a very, very good relationship with Chief Brown, who was a battalion chief in this area here. Of course, their response was so good and so fast that – but it was organized havoc. The organization was the fire department. The havoc was the epic that happened.

MS: Were there boats within the water, plumes of water on the fire?

FS: I know the smoke was very high.

MS: The smoke and everything, what was going on?

RC: Yes. The plume was tremendous. I mean, there was a lot of product on the ship yet. My role in the operation at the time was I quickly took that all in, but I was personally more responsible for responding to the general manager as to the degree of the damage that was done there, and what we could do about it and who we were going to get to respond and all that. So, my tour there was stay out of the way of the firemen and take a look at what I could and get back to headquarters here to make a report.

MS: What caused it? What was the sequence of events that –

RC: I –

MS: Okay. We can continue to talk here for a little bit.

FS: Can we just tie that up and ask how many doors needed to be fixed? How long did it take? What impact on the – because you don't have those warehouses now, right? But maybe –

RC: Very few.

MS: So, what was the impact of this then? When you finally did your assessment that had to be fixed, what did it cost?

RC: Well, quickly in this review, I tried to operate one of these doors, and it was operable. So, I knew that we had a chance to give some kind of security to that shed. So, when I got back, I reported to the general manager. He said, "Well, proceed to do what you can." So, that was in the process of getting together a crew of fellows and get them out there and give the security to berth 58 and 60 that we could. The other sheds that were in the area were so positioned that they didn't take the blast the way that berth 58 and 60. It was in a direct direction of where the blast would occur. But the other facilities, Warehouse Six, Warehouse Twelve that were out here really didn't receive too much damage.

MS: It is a kind of a final question. You spent your life here. If you could talk personally to some extent, what is this harbor mean to you? What is this history that you have lived this town, San Pedro? What does it mean to you personally when you think back of all your years here and your experiences here?

RC: The port honored me in July 1992 with a small retirement, a retirement dinner. I was honored by the presence of some port commissioners there and quite taken that my efforts had been recognized by these folks in my fifteen years of directing the division. The Port of Los Angeles was the best job that I ever had, including my years playing baseball. If I had to do it all over again, I would do it exactly the same way. This port means so much to the local economy and to the economy of the United States. During my years of employment here, with the containerization and the effect that it's had on the port has become number one in the United States, number seven in the world. I mean, that's a far cry from what it was when I was a kid, because the port was just a different activity. The shipyards, the fishing industry, and the longshore industry were basically the economy of the city, but it was just a different thing. Of course, the advent of the container crane and all the efficiencies that it has brought as – the Port of Los Angeles is the jewel of the Pacific coast. While I was director of port construction and maintenance, I had an opportunity to travel to Japan on a couple of occasions to deal with – through the years, we started buying Japanese-manufactured container cranes. The deputy executive director and I would go to Japan. Wonderful fella, and I have to mention him by name because it was Dr. Perry, L. Roy Perry, who came to us in 1979. He was previously the executive director at the Port of Tacoma. When he came here, he brought his assistant general manager and chief engineer down here to assist us, (Daniel Mossman?). It was a management team that just put together the essence of what we see now, the 2020 program. What we see now is the result of the 2020 program. My fervent wish is that the port is thinking about 2050 now. I'm sure that they are. I know they have a different set of challenges now. I wish them well. But outside of my wife and my family, the Port of Los Angeles continues to be the love of my life.

MS: Could not end it any better. Thank you.

FS: That was great.

RC: Thank you.

MS: That was terrific.

RC: Thank you.

MS: Thank you.

RC: Very professionally done.

[end of transcript]