

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Martin Cox Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Male Speaker
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Good. Hard question first, and you just look at me when you are talking.

Martin Cox: Okay.

MS: Please say your name and spell it.

MC: My name is Martin Cox. It's M-A-R-T-I-N, C-O-X.

MS: Great. Martin, sort of the obvious question is, what was the Los Angeles –

MC: Steamship Company?

MS: – Steamship Company.

MC: [laughs].

MS: I just lost it. What was the Los Angeles Steamship Company? When I ask you a question rather than say, "It was great." You say, "The Los Angeles Steamship company was –" So, include my version in your answer.

MC: Right. Okay.

MS: So, what was it?

MC: Okay. Well, the Los Angeles Steamship Company got started really as a product of the boosterism of the era with the Chamber of Commerce working hand in hand and having a vision for expanding the port and introducing a first-class steamship line into Los Angeles, which hadn't had anything like that in the past. Captain Fredericks of the Chamber of Commerce and Clarence Matson were very important movers who saw great potential in the port. They lobbied the government to release some of its war-prize liners that were in surplus from the shipping board to create a new service to Hawaii. The government –

MS: Who is Clarence Matson? He is a pretty important character in the port. Who is he?

MC: I actually can't remember too much detail about Clarence Matson. So, maybe I can't answer that one at the moment. I know he's an important name in it, in terms of getting it started.

MS: Tell me again – I am going to ask you the same question again.

MC: Yes.

MS: Why did Los Angeles start this up? What was their goal? How did it affect the port, and why was it important for the port?

MC: Well, Los Angeles Steamship Company came into being around the purchase of two vessels, which were already well known on the West Coast, the *Yale*, and the *Harvard*, which

had been operating up in an express service up and down the coast. After they were released from war service, they were bought by the Yale-Harvard syndicate, as it was called, which was a large group of Los Angeles boosters. They renamed it Los Angeles Steamship Company and began service. At the same time, you had the Chamber of Commerce wanting to expand service to Hawaii to compete with San Francisco to the North. What happened is Clarence Matson of the Chamber of Commerce and Captain Fredericks both went to Washington, lobbied the government, and they agreed to give some ships from the surplus U.S. shipping board fleet on the condition that they'd be operated by a pre-existing steamship company. Los Angeles Steamship Company was the obvious choice. Even though it only had two coastal liners, they were the choice for running the new service. So, by [19]22, you had these two –

MS: Why do you not say by 1922.

MC: By 1922, you had –

MS: I was talking when you were talking.

MC: Right.

MS: Anytime.

MC: Calm down.

MS: Look at me and then –

MC: Yeah. So, the Coastwise service began in 1921. By 1922, we had the SS *City of Los Angeles* and the SS *City of Honolulu*, both these ex-German, transatlantic and Far East liners brought around to the West Coast. This was major for Los Angeles. These were the largest U.S. ships operating out here. Their arrival was a great interest to the public. They were both refitted at the Los Angeles Dry Dock Company. They were both refitted at the – let's see, what is it actually called [laughter]? Sorry.

MS: Shipbuilding and Dry Dock.

MC: Yes.

MS: Dry Dock and Shipbuilding.

MC: That's right. Yeah. Both these new liners were refitted at the Los Angeles Shipbuilding and Dry Dock company here as all first-class ships and equipped for this new fortnightly service to Hawaii. So, by 1922, you had this brand-new service, lot of public interest. You had major movers. Behind this were Harry Chandler from the Los Angeles Times, Ralph Chandler, his son, also Los Angeles Times, Fred Baker, an iron magnate. We had Max Whittier, Sherman Moses.

MS: What were they trying to achieve by doing it? What was their goal in starting this thing

up?

MC: The goal with Los Angeles Steamship Company was really to advertise the Port of Los Angeles to really put it on the map, to make some competition with San Francisco and with Matson Line in particular, which was the dominant West Coast shipping company and had been long established since 1880s. Let's take a break.

MS: So, what were they trying to achieve by competing with San Francisco? Was it also to get people to come to Los Angeles and to build up the reputation of the port?

MC: Yes. The objective was to definitely build up the port and create new connections with Hawaii. At the beginning of their service in 1920, only about 100 manufacturers had business with Hawaii. By the end of that decade, the number was a thousand. Los Angeles Steamship Company also was – start again.

MS: Look at me before you start.

MC: Okay. The Chamber of Commerce began advertising Port of Los Angeles by doing two very well-attended cruises around the whole of South America. They had a huge banner on the side of the SS *City of Los Angeles*, saying Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, and really took this show from port to port. The passenger list was a veritable who's who of Los Angeles with all the major city movers, the mayor, the chief of police, really everybody's family was there. Did a great job of circumnavigating the entire continent of South America and coming back through the Panama Canal.

MS: Why not do South American cruises? Why was that the route they wanted to take?

MC: Hawaii being a new territory was really being brought into the fold. Los Angeles Steamship Company could operate a fortnightly service, a two-weekly service to Hawaii. So, as well as passengers, freight was very important. At the time, sugar, pineapple, molasses were all coming back and forth. Before that time – citrus too – had all gone by train to San Francisco and then by sea to and from Hawaii. So, this was a really major shift. Suddenly, for the first time, you had a regularly scheduled freight service. That was a huge boon to manufacturers both in Hawaii and in Los Angeles.

MS: Describe these ships. They were glamorous. What were they like? What was the trip like on these ships?

MC: The SS *City of Honolulu* and the SS *City of Los Angeles* were built around the turn of the century by Norddeutscher Lloyd. They had been built for their Far East and transatlantic services. So, they were very strong, long-range vessels, very well built. Los Angeles Steamship Company had decorated them to be very reflective of the [19]20s with brightly colored fabrics, a lot of palms inside, and they painted them white. This was fairly unusual for the time. Now, we're very used to white cruise ships. But at the time, this was kind of the pioneer. They had black funnels, white superstructure. They were very smart. They carried about 300 people, all in first class. There were a few dormitories for workers going back and forth, but that seldom was

in the press were mentioned. We had silent movie stars. Start again.

MS: Who were the passengers that were famous that they brought glamor to these trips?

MC: So, traveling to and from Hawaii, we had people like Charlie Chaplin, Laura La Plante, Dolores del Río. There's a great picture of Johnny Weissmuller with Duke Kahanamoku, one of the early surfers. We had – I can't think of her name – Irene Dunne.

MS: We had passengers, like –

MC: We had passengers like Irene Dunne, Bela Lugosi, who actually did some filming on board. There were a number of movies of the era, none particularly well known, but it was used as a backdrop for many, both comedy and drama. Often, the passengers got to play roles in the background as extras, which was seen as a great delight. They had a newspaper published on board called the LASSCO Log that would be updated daily by telegraph.

MS: So, what were the food luxuries? I mean, give me some of the luxuries that were onboard.

MC: Well, some of the luxuries on board would've been that they added a swimming pool, and they added a gymnasium. These were things that most ships did not have at the time. During the period that the Los Angeles Steamship Company was operating was during the Volstead Act. So, there was supposed to be no drinking on board. But there were plenty of anecdotal accounts of, once that ship was away from port, these interesting room on the seat of Los Angeles, called the Library, which had no books whatsoever but just a small, hatched window, was mentioned frequently as a scene of great frivolity and enjoyment. We can only imagine that all sorts of cocktails were emerging from this small hatch. No books were being read in that library, for sure.

MS: So, when they left, it was quite festive. Describe the leaving of the port. I mean, it was quite a gala, exciting kind of experience, I understand.

MC: In 1922, when the SS *City of Los Angeles* first left LA, there was a tremendous outpouring of interest. It was a big press moment. The Los Angeles Police Band was out there playing. There were several ships in the harbor, all blasting their whistles. This was really an important moment for Los Angeles as it inaugurated a brand-new service that was to connect Hawaii, really up to the present day, from the port here. The success of the *City of Los Angeles's* maiden voyage was tremendous. There was a great deal of public interest, a lot of press, and it really was treated in the press as putting Los Angeles on the map as having its own first-class steamship company. Unfortunately, the *City of Honolulu*, which followed twelve days later, didn't have such a good ride on her return journey. About two days out from Los Angeles, a mysterious fire broke out in the forepeak of the ship at about 4:00 a.m. By 8:00 a.m., it was clear that there was no way to save the ship. Captain Lester was forced to abandon ship at that point. Fortunately, they had tremendously good weather. It was very calm. It was very warm. The steward loaded the lifeboats with roasted chicken and champagne. The band actually played while people got into the lifeboats. They all linked those lifeboats together. Some people even had parts of their luggage with them. They drifted around and even took photographs of the ship

burning. It wasn't until late that night that they were actually picked up by a rescue ship.

MS: Well, the L.A. Times did not want to publicize all this too much, did they? What were some of the things that they did after this inaugural disaster?

MC: Yeah. The *City of Honolulu's* burning and sinking was a very interesting PR moment. A very interesting aspect to the sinking of the *City of Honolulu* is that its passengers were eventually transferred to a U.S. Army transport vessel called the *Thomas*, which then continued on towards San Francisco, which was its intended destination. When Harry Chandler, who was on the board of LASSCO and also behind the Los Angeles Times, got wind of the San Francisco press getting ready to send out a press boat to interview the survivors, he got onto his contacts in Washington, clearly very powerful contacts. He actually had the USAT *Thomas* turn around within sight of the Golden Gate and return to Los Angeles to make sure that the Hearst Press couldn't report poorly or get access to the people being returned. When the ship got to Los Angeles, he held it overnight until he had time at his own expense to send out boats full of cigarettes, clothes, booze. I should say again, there actually there wasn't booze. [laughter] When the *Thomas* arrived in Los Angeles, he actually held it overnight so that the passengers could come ashore in the light of day and that the press could be there to greet the people as they came down the gangplank, who had now been provided, at his own expense, with cigarettes, a good meal, brand-new clothes, and he laid on limousines to take people home. So, down the gangplank came smiling survivors, as they were called. No, there would be no loss of life. He really turned what was clearly a tragedy – they'd lost their first ship on his maiden voyage – into a tremendous publicity boon.

MS: That is a great story.

MC: [laughter]

MS: So, this is tied up with the feeling of the [19]20s. I mean, how is this sort of like a product of the [19]20s and reflected that whole era of the [19]20s? Can you talk about that?

MC: Certainly, the [19]20s is reflected in the fashions, in the archive photographs that I've managed to come across these tremendous pictures of the flappers and these close hats and the sort of [19]20s outfits. The movies of the period are certainly reflective in the style.

MS: It is called the Roaring Twenties. So, is that part of it too?

MC: Certainly, the Roaring Twenties were reflected in the steamship company's graphics. They produced the most phenomenally brightly colored and somewhat racy graphics with gentlemen smoking cigarettes, women sitting provocatively of their feet at the bottom of palm trees with canoes in the distance, and really laid out this image of this formal yet tropical [inaudible]. Yeah. [laughter]

MS: That is fine. That is okay. So, how long did this company and this cruise last? What happened? Why did it not continue on forever?

MC: The Los Angeles Steamship Company lasted really about ten years. By the mid-[19]20s, it was really doing tremendously well. Actually, it really peaked in 1929 and was then carrying more passengers than Matson Line. Its ships were in layovers less and less. Where there was more demand for freight, they had brought cargo vessels online as well. But really that was also the year of its unraveling. Once the stock market crash had hit, that greatly reduced the passenger numbers. It also greatly reduced the freight. Within months of that, the second *City of Honolulu* was also lost by fire. It actually burned at its dock in Honolulu. That would've taken a full third of the line's capacity away. The ship was again destroyed, but no loss of life. They were tremendously lucky in that regard. They had laid down plans for new ships on the coastal run. They had to abandon that because the financing just wasn't available. They were entering very gloomy economic times. The ships were old and really needed replacing. They took a look at several other vessels around the country to bring on online, but nothing was really very suitable. Clearly things were going downhill. Then one of their stalwart ships, the *Harvard*, which had been hurtling up and down the coast all these years, suddenly ran onto the rocks of Point Arguello near Santa Barbara. Again, amazingly, no loss of life, even though the ship was completely wrecked. Everyone was once again saved, this time by a U.S. Naval vessel. But that was really the final nail in the coffin to LASSCO's future. Matson Line at this point had been building new vessels and was clearly in a place to take the passenger service and freight service over. Matson was also very interested in getting rights to the lines that Los Angeles Steamship Company developed, namely from L.A. to Hawaii. LASSCO Line entered talks with Matson, and they eventually amalgamated. For a brief time, they were called Matson-LASSCO Line. But LASSCO was really on the down at that point. Apart from maintaining the coastal service, its ships to Hawaii were withdrawn in the early [19]30s. They were old. They needed replacing. People were complaining about the conditions on board. Matson Line had some really fantastic new U.S.-built ships that were coming out at the time. There was no way they could compete. But Matson then took over the line to Hawaii from Los Angeles and to this day still runs container traffic from both the West Coast ports to Hawaii.

MS: Terrific. From the point of view of two things, the history of the port, why is the story important, first of all?

MC: The story of the Los Angeles Steamship Company is important because I think it puts Los Angeles on the map as a major port and advertise it to the extent of making shippers realize that they had a port that was closer by one day, sailing from the Panama Canal. Also, because of the way that the coast of California curves inwards, trains from products arriving in Los Angeles could reach their destination a full day ahead of – ships coming into the Port of Los Angeles could unload their cargoes and have the cargoes reach the interior of the country a full day ahead by train because of the lucky quirk of where the mountain range ends, unlike San Francisco and Seattle where you had to cross the Rockies to get your goods to your markets. Los Angeles had an advantage.

MS: Tell me that again. What was the geographical advantage in relation to the Panama Canal, in relation to the railroads? Because, obviously, it was created out of nothing. So, what was the advantage the port had geographically?

MC: The advantage the port had geographically, it was a full one day sailing closer to the

Panama Canal than was San Francisco. Also, having unloaded those ships, you could then get your cargo to your customers a full day ahead by train because you didn't have to cross mountain ranges as you did from Seattle or San Francisco to get to your markets.

MS: Why not San Diego? Is that not closer? I mean, why was it not San Diego the big port?

MC: Actually, I don't know.

MS: Yeah. Okay. Well, they had mountains too.

MC: That's right. They did it. It's geography.

MS: San Pedro was this pretty grimy little harbor town. How did the LASSCO service change this little town? I mean, do you have any sense of that?

MC: Los Angeles Steamship Company used both 156 and 157 for most of their portside activity. This was very close to the Pacific Electric car. So, both for freight and for passengers, it was enormously convenient to get from the city to the port and then onto the ships. You could actually take the Pacific Electric car from Pershing Square right by the Biltmore Hotel and walk from the Pacific Electric car to the *Harvard* and *Yale* and be in San Francisco the next morning, which gave them a tremendous advantage.

MS: For the City of Los Angeles, what was the importance of this – for the reputation? The [19]20s was really – the town was booming. What did it do for the perception and the economy of the City of Los Angeles?

MC: Before the Hawaiian service began with the *City of Honolulu* and the *City of Los Angeles*, there were only about maybe a hundred merchants doing business with Hawaii from Los Angeles at the end of that decade. Those two ships were just such an economic engine. There were over a thousand manufacturers now doing business with the Sandwich Islands.

MS: Talk about the imagery that was part of this tropical paradise imagery that L.A. had done too. It was this perfect place. How did that imagery all work together for selling L.A. and the ship line?

MC: Right. The Los Angeles Steamship company had tremendous graphics that were very varied. They were very bright-colored. They were somewhat provocative and racy for the era. They really showed the idea of the tropical paradise as a beautiful place to be, beautiful people being happy in a beautiful place. The sun's always shining. There's the gorgeous mountains in the background, both in Hawaii and in Los Angeles. All this was reflected in the line's promotions as they set up offices in cities across the country. These brochures would've been tremendously attractive in markets where they were experiencing severe winter and gloom and months between seeing the sun. You had surfers and people living this sort of beach life and drinking cocktails on the –

MS: Yeah.

MC: Fell apart there. You had to forget about those cocktails.

MS: You had these surfers.

MC: Yeah. So, there was surfers in the background, and you had tremendous –

MS: It is okay.

MC: Ideas are falling apart. LASSCO was really selling the idea of the tropical paradise with a beautiful beach hotel in the background. The mountains, the sweeping palm trees, people sitting on the terrace taking tea, looking out over the surf. It's always warm. It's always beautiful. People are always happy. There's tremendous interest in the natural environment of driving in limousines to the –

MS: That is okay. I got it. Why did you get all excited about this? What excites you about this subject to the point that you have become an authority on it and collected all this material? Why does this story excite you?

MC: I first got interested in the Los Angeles Steamship Company because I read a very short paragraph in a book about it when I was about fifteen and living in England. I was curious about those white old liners. I just sort of wanted to know more. Years later, through lots of coincidences, I found myself living in Los Angeles. So, I went to the Maritime Museum to read up on it. The collection was fairly small. I just felt that the history needed to be put back into the city which had borne this tremendously important steamship company. The fact that it was so difficult to research made it more interesting to me. I was more determined to unearth all of its secrets. [laughter] So, it actually took about a decade of digging in various libraries and archives. The advent of the web made it a lot easier to get in touch with people and get stories and brochures. eBay played into that, taking over from flea markets as sources for brochures. The Los Angeles Times' index was tremendously useful, going through decades.

MS: But I mean, you were sold, just like they were selling people in the [19]20s. I think there was something about that idea that appealed to you to put on.

MC: Yes. I was very intrigued by the glamor of it and the [19]20s era transposed onto the city, and the importance, which I thought was a lost story, of the importance of this steamship company and the development of Los Angeles.

MS: Terrific. Is there anything I did not ask you about that you wanted to talk about?

MC: No. I think we covered the movies, the wrecks, the business.

MS: All right. Let us talk again about the glamor. I mean, if you were on this ship, describe what it would be like. Today, if you were at the peak of that, what would you see? What would you do? What was the food like? What was the service like? What was the room of the rooms like?

MC: The interiors of the ships, for the *City of Los Angeles*, were decorated in highly colored patterns of the era. Though most of the photographs I have of are black and white – that's not good. Let's not go down that avenue.

MS: There was a pampered trip, was it not?

MC: Yeah. These liners were really fitted out in for all first-class travel. There was a lot of linen being worn. There were a lot of tremendously attractive rooms, were very open. It really opened the ship up from its North Atlantic design. So, the rooms were more interconnected. There was more connection with the outside. Deck games on these ships were tremendously popular. All the outdoor activities, because the weather was so warm and attractive, they had built a swimming pool on the foredeck, which they called The Plunge, next to it. They actually had a large area called the Sand Beach which was just like a giant sandbox for people to lie on. There was a tremendous amount of frivolity and games going on board these vessels.

MS: Now, how did it compare to the big luxury liners we know in the East Coast, the [inaudible] lines? People always compare New York and Los Angeles. If you were going to do a cross-Atlantic trip, how would it compare to a trip that you would take on the LASSCO?

MC: Yeah. Comparing LASSCO to a North Atlantic trip, the difference would be that it would be much warmer. You would have more ability to be outside. It would definitely be a little bit less formal too. Although the whole era was more formal, there would not be the same stuffiness as perhaps you would describe it as the North Atlantic.

MS: Can we talk about how many days it took?

MC: Oh, yeah. Sure. It took the SS *City of Honolulu* and SS *City of Los Angeles* about seven days to reach the islands until they were both re-engined. Then they reduced that to five days, which significantly – let's start again. It would've taken the SS *City of Los Angeles* about seven days to reach the island. [laughter] It would've taken the SS *City of Los Angeles* about seven days to reach Hawaii from L.A. But after she was re-engined in the mid-[19]20s, that was reduced to five days.

MS: Terrific.

MS: I think we should be on take two.

MS: Yes. Perfect.

[end of transcript]