

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Helen DiMaggio Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Unknown
Length of Interview: 29:25
Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Ask you the hard question first, which is to please say your name and spell it.

Helen DiMaggio: My name is Helen DiMaggio, D-I-M-A-G-G-I-O.

MS: Now, Helen, you've already told me, so I know you won't be embarrassed to tell me. What year were you born?

HD: I was born in 1919.

MS: Where were you born?

HD: I was born in a hospital in Los Angeles but raised in San Pedro.

MS: I want to go back. Tell me about your family, your mother, and your father. Tell me about them.

HD: It's a lovely story. My father – as I have brought into you in writing – was born in Yugoslavia. At the time it was Austria.

MS: So, why don't you start that again? "My father –"

HD: Actually, they called it Austria many years ago, which later became Yugoslavia. His father was a widower and he remarried someone that was quite cruel to my father. So, at the age of 15, he met a wonderful sea captain. Those sea captains were very knowledgeable. My father traveled around the world at that young age with a sea captain. He finally left the ship and went to Auckland, New Zealand. From Auckland, New Zealand, he heard about Los Angeles. He came to Los Angeles and started what they have – they call it a fish farm as they do have at this particular time. Lo and behold, it was not legal. [laughter] So, consequently, he did end up in San Pedro. But prior to coming to San Pedro, he met my mother at the Roosevelt Hotel, who also is another lovely story. She came from Mexico. She was brought from Mexico also with the same scenario, more or less, that my father had to leave. Her father remarried a widow who also was cruel to her. So, her godmother, who was a wife of a very prominent general in Mexico said, "Take this beautiful girl into the United States." She was sent with her godmother to the United States. With the help of a very prominent attorney, settled and was allowed to come. Actually, smuggled into the United States, and came to live in Los Angeles. The only job that she could get was one that she spoke no English. So, she got a job as a cocktail waitress at the Roosevelt Hotel in Los Angeles. All she knew was to say cigars and cigarettes and make change. My father happened to have his business there, a very flourishing business. He was quite debonair. Saw her as she sold her cigarettes and her cigars or whatever and fell madly in love with her. Had love at first sight. Followed her home, found out where she lived. The next day, got an interpreter and had himself introduced to this lovely, young lady. They were married in 1918. Then lived in Long Beach for a short time but settled in San Pedro. Then 1919, I was born.

MS: You talked about your father having a fish farm. What is a fish farm?

HD: It's something they have like a –

MS: Say, "A fish farm is –"

HD: A fish farm, I really can't explain it. But they do have now fish farms for salmon, as you know, back East and things like that. Something similar to that. I'm awfully sorry I never knew the details as to how he even came to do this. Where did he get the knowledge to do this? Maybe living in Europe, he might have learned something there. That I do not know.

MS: As a little girl growing up in San Pedro, what are some of your memories of this town and this harbor?

HD: I loved it as a child. My only memories were my mother took in boarders. The only drawback was that I spoke no English. The boarder was French. I learned to speak Croatian. I spoke Spanish. When I went to kindergarten, I had to stay an extra six months to learn English. So, that was one of my memories that I talk about. Because it goes to show you that in life we can succeed if we want to.

MS: How did you learn English? Did the teachers help you along?

HD: Oh, yes. I stayed an extra six months in kindergarten [laughter] and really practiced. Then my mother learned to speak English fluently. My father definitely learned to speak English fluently.

MS: So, when your father came to San Pedro, what kind of business did he get into?

HD: My father came to San Pedro. He had a friend by the name of Luka Bogdanovich, who later on they decided to go in business together. However, my father went into the wholesale fish business. Luka Bogdanovich had the very fabulous, fantastic cannery – as you well know in your readings – at Terminal Island called Star-Kist.

MS: It had a name before that.

HD: Yes.

MS: Tell me again about Luka?

HD: I don't know too much about him. All I know is that my father went into standard fisheries and Luka went into the fish canneries. That he became very successful.

MS: So, how did your father come here and suddenly open and get involved in a cannery out of nowhere? What happened?

HD: This is another story, as I said, Luka and my father. In those days, I don't know how he knew about it. They had little shacks and all with these sawfish or whatever. I guess in the old country, as they speak, fishing is one of their main things. So, this more or less was his bag, so

to speak. He was very intuitive. He decided he was going to go in business. Being he had worked with fish prior to this in another capacity, they decided to get a little – in other words, we are still doing research and to find out where they had the very first fish markets. Later on, they had a fish market that was located where we have our museum. You know where our museum is and the Mexican restaurant? That's where our fish market originally was there. I worked in that particular building myself as I grew older.

MS: Tell me again, what was the name of the company he started and when did he start it?

HD: He started the company in 1921. I was two years old. You can see our trucks today. To this day, we are still in business, thank God. It's called Star Fisheries.

MS: What kind of fish was he buying and selling?

HD: This is another thing. I brought the price list in for you just to look at. Sardines were plentiful, mackerel, local tuna as we called it, local tuna albacore, Scorpaena, sea bass, the general mill. Today, our price list consists of 175 different species in comparison to, I would say, fifteen or twenty that I was knowledgeable at the time.

MS: Wow, that's amazing. So, tell us how San Pedro was. How many other fish markets were there in those days?

HD: There were fifteen other buildings.

MS: Start again. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

HD: There were fifteen other companies, yes. They are still here. They were transferred from the prior location to the location that they have right now. I hope it stays there. With all my heart, I don't hope San Pedro even wants to get rid of the fish markets [laughter].

MS: Well, tell me how the fish markets worked. Did they have contracts with boats? Did they own boats? How did it work?

HD: Well, years ago we had many boats that came right directly to the fish markets. But everything has been depleted. Our fishing industry, we have a little squid now and then little sardines now and then. It's like Monterey and San Francisco. The fishing industry has really gone downhill where a lot of our fish is brought in. It's flown in naturally to us. We don't have very much what we call local fish.

MS: Well, how was it then though? How did it work then?

HD: Then or now?

MS: Then.

HD: Then was right off the boats and then brought in by truck. We used to get totoaba, a shrimp

from Mexico. The drivers would bring in. We got to know them quite well being that my mother was of Mexican descent. We got to jump on the gun, so they say. We had to give up our beds to give the drivers a good night's sleep and fed them. It was very profitable and very wonderful to be able to have this compatibility with the people. Thank God, because as you could see, since 1921 we have been in business. My father first. When I married, my husband took over after my father passed away. Then now my husband passed away. Now, my son is the CEO there now.

MS: But tell me again about the truck drivers.

HD: Our drivers now –

MS: Then.

HD: – then we would ice the fish and take it to different destinations. There were no such thing as fast airplanes. This was the time. We even had my sister and our bookkeeper; they'd load up the trucks here. We'd find out our destination, call them up over there and say, "Hey boys, get ready. The girls are coming in with the load of fish." There was no such thing. You could drive by down my wharf and see all my trucks there. I have quite a few trucks where are completely, naturally refrigerated. It was no problem. Now, we fly our fish and we have offices. If you want to know about that, we have offices.

MS: Let's go back to the past though.

HD: Yes, the past. That's the way it was done.

MS: So, how would they? In other words, your phone call, you have to describe to me what happened?

HD: You mean how we got our customers or –

MS: Well, the drivers. You said the drivers would come in and have to sleep at your house. Why?

HD: Oh, yes. Because they'd bring us a load of shrimp and totoaba from down there and all iced up and then put them in our refrigeration. We did have refrigeration.

MS: So, they were driving from Mexico?

HD: Yes, drive them in from Mexico.

MS: You have to explain that to me about the drive. Where were the drivers coming from?

HD: From Mexico, from San Felipe.

MS: You have to say, "We had drivers come."

HD: We had drivers that would come from San Felipe and different places in Mexico. Ice the fish, bring it in, put it in our refrigerators. We had refrigerators. Sleep overnight, have a good meal, go back, and bring us another load. That's how we got started.

MS: That's an interesting story. So, talk about yourself and working. There's some of the other names that we know. You talked about Bogdanovich. What about Gilbert Van Camp? Who is this –

HD: Now, Gilbert Van Camp –

MS: Let me finish. Oh, go ahead.

HD: Gilbert Van Camp also, in one way or other, I think – I don't want to commit myself completely – but I think he was very instrumental in helping my father in a financial manner when my father went into the business. He was also a dear friend of my father's.

MS: Tell us more about it. What did he do? What was his role?

HD: No. He was an insurance broker and all. He had nothing to do with the fish company.

MS: Wasn't there a Van Camp?

HD: There was a Van Camp Cannery, yes. That was across the bay, the other side of the family.

MS: Now, what relation, if any, did the fish market and the cannery – did you have any relation with the cannery?

HD: We had relation with the cannery. I used to go down and work with my husband and wait for the boats to come in with sardines. So, a lot of times we would unload the sardines and we would truck the sardines into Terminal Island to the canneries. That's where we got the jump too. My husband worked with the stars and the moon. We knew about the time the fish would come in and we were there to receive the fish and truck it into the canneries across the bay.

MS: So, explain that. When you say working with the stars, explain. What do you mean by that?

HD: Nothing. It's just an old fisherman's characteristic that it's full moon they wouldn't work because the fish wouldn't surface with the full moon. It had a lot to do with the fish industry, the moon, and the stars, yes.

MS: What about yourself as you were growing up? Talk about any jobs that you had connected to the fish market.

HD: Yes. When I was ten years old, I went to the fish market. My father had fish poison. He was stung by Scorpaena which is a dangerous fish and had fish poisoning. I thought everyone

had to do what their fathers told them to do. So, yours truly was the oldest. I went down and I wrote the bills. My father taught me how to extend the bills, which was a very simple thing at that time. It wasn't big business. I would fill out the bills of lading as my father would be right there telling me what to do. I've been involved ever since. I am proud to say I'm a who's who because of the fish [laughter] industry. Now I'm very happy that I did that. I can't imagine a ten-year-old now doing that. But I thought that you just did what your father and mother told you to do at that age. So, consequently, I did go down there, and then I also worked on the books. I was a bookkeeper for many years.

MS: Tell me about your father. Your extended family is involved in various aspects of fishing.

HD: I brought pictures.

MS: Just tell me all the different family members and what do they do in the fish business?

HD: We'll start with my sister who went down and also was very instrumental in helping. She was one of the truck drivers [laughter] and nailed the boxes. My father was still alive. Then my husband was running the business after my father passed away. My sister continued to help us. Then she got married and with a Fistonich name. She married a nice gentleman, Nick Mardesich, and then opened American Fish Company, which Mr. Arthur Ross – who was a very prominent gentleman from San Pedro. Everyone knew Arthur – was one of the part owners at the time. So, they opened up American Fisheries. Then my very handsome young brother also stayed into the fish business and opened Andy Seafood. So, I brought a picture of all the three offspring that went into the fish business. Then after, my brother-in-law retired. My brother just recently passed away. The Star Fisheries has taken over the other two companies.

MS: So, talk about the founding. When was Star Fisheries founded? What were the circumstances of that?

HD: That I don't know.

MS: 1947.

HD: Star Fisheries, my father decided to sell Standard and [inaudible] time that he thought he was going to retire. He made a good life. Then along came my husband and had worked for my father. Heard that Star Fisheries was going to be sold because the owner of Star Fisheries had now gone into a big cannery and wanted to get rid of the fish market. So, here we go. From Standard, we went into Star with my husband as one of the partners with my father.

MS: That was in 1947?

HD: That was in 1947.

MS: I have a note here that you would get the jump in the business, and you would sell the sardines to the canneries and the fish livers to Parke-Davis.

HD: Parke-Davis.

MS: Tell me about that.

HD: Oh, well, that was interesting. Let's see. I'm trying to think of the year. Gosh, these years have gone so fast. In the [19]40s, we had a contract to get fish livers to sell to Parke-Davis. I think they maybe called it cod liver oil or whatever. But we did do that. We did that. But that didn't last too long. But it was a temporary and a very interesting thing.

MS: So, your son now is running the business.

HD: My son now is the owner.

MS: Tell me about how that happened, how he's starting to run the business.

HD: Well, my husband and I were on a cruise when I lost my husband on Panama on a cruise. After my husband passed away, then my son took it over. But he had been working with the company prior to that. He left college and came to work for us.

MS: So, from 1921 to the present, how has this business changed? Or is it pretty much the same business?

HD: Oh, no. It's changed tremendously. From 1921 it was much different. We used to sell to little restaurants, little grocery stores. It was on a small scale. Now, our particular business is the one you're interested in our market. What we do is we are very fortunate we sell all the fish to the Albertsons. We have a plant in Las Vegas. We have a plant in Albuquerque, New Mexico. We had one in San Antonio. We have, let's see, San Antonio, New Mexico, Las Vegas. We sell to all the Albertsons and different big companies up the Coast. That's what we do. So, all the grocery stores.

MS: So, no longer the mom-and-pops.

HD: We don't sell to too many restaurants or anything like that, no. We concentrate on selling to supermarkets.

MS: The fishing industry was huge in the 1950s. Then it slowly started to decline. What happened? Why did it suddenly become not the great industry it was in [19]40s and [19]50s?

HD: That is a mystery. Fish actually disappeared to my knowledge. All this, for some reason or other, it just left. Monterey, the boats would go out, have deck loads, come in, go back out and get another deck load. There are no more sardines. No more fish. Then slowly we didn't get all the tuna that we usually get. So, what do they do? Some of the big companies have opened tuna companies down in Peru, different places. We don't have the canneries like we used to have. It just died. The fishing industry, like I said, right now it's just a little bit of a once in a while, a few squid and different things. But there's hardly any fishing here at all right now.

MS: What do you see as the future of the business in San Pedro?

HD: The fish business as far as having fish, the availability of fish here and all, unless some unknown miracle happens that we get fish back again, that we will be in the position to ourselves ship out. As we bring in, as you will see my prices where we're getting a lot of fish from different countries. That would be a miracle. As far as the fish industry here and the boats and all, it's depleted quite a bit, yes. It's sad.

MS: Now, you've spent all your life in the fish business and your family spent all their lives. What are your feelings about spending your full life in it? What does it mean to you?

HD: I feel that I've been very blessed. How many families have been able to stay together for all these years and to have the pride of knowing that that you're still here. That my husband had a plaque on his wall from Lucky Mark. It's many years ago. "It's been an honor to do fish business with you exclusively for thirty years," from Lucky Markets itself, from the president of a big company at that time. That was later taken over by, as you know, Albertsons. To be able to have maintained the business as we have, I feel very fortunate and very happy. Because it's afforded me all the luxuries in life that I might need or want. So, what more can we ask out of life? This is a small town. This is a town where you don't have to drive miles to have a friend. As you see, we kiss and hug and we know everyone in this town. It's very unique.

MS: What does San Pedro mean to you as a town?

HD: I don't think there is any place in the world – I have traveled almost half the white world around – that could compare to San Pedro. I am very disappointed where it's going. I am speaking as an eighty-eight-year-old woman. You want my point of view, an honest point of view. I think they're destroying the town. Young people when they say prosperity, they want to see this. They want to see that. Well, San Pedro had something unique. Everybody was a gumbadi. Everybody was a friend. Gumbadi means a godfather. We were like one big, happy family here. It was a melting pot. Outside of New York, I presume San Pedro was the biggest melting pot in the whole United States, in my way of thinking. I just think there's no place in the world like San Pedro. But like I said, at this particular point, this particular year, I've seen changes that have upset me very much.

MS: Like what?

HD: Well, like we have become the stepsisters of Los Angeles. I was on a cruise and I was told, "Don't get off to San Pedro because there's nothing there to see." This is Los Angeles Harbor, this sort of a feeling which is wrong. San Pedro is like, you would say, one big, happy family, which it is not getting there now. I'm always worried. But it won't be in my generation that they're going to try to move the fish markets for more – what do you call those containers?

MS: What are the changes that are taking place that are making it less of the town of the big family?

HD: It hasn't been that big of a change considering what they're doing now. But what will

happen when all these places are going to be filled, these new condos and all of this, then what's going to happen as it is because of union disputes and all. We used to have JCPenney's. We used to have Montgomery Wards. We used to have Sears and Roebuck. We had dress shops. This was a thriving, beautiful little town where you could go down the corner drugstore and have a soda. It's losing a lot of its charm that it had.

MS: Don't you think all the people who are spending all that money in these condos are going to want to have a dress shop and a supermarket right nearby them?

HD: You would think that all the people in San Pedro wanted it too. But we can't because of the union. Money is the name of the game, let's face it.

MS: So, you don't think that all this new development is going to bring the town back as you get older now?

HD: Well, it might bring it back in the people that will be coming in in popularity. But it will lose the feeling of closeness that we've had here.

MS: What is it today or what is it ever that you love the most about San Pedro?

HD: You mean what event?

MS: Event or just a personal experience you have that sums up what you feel about this place.

HD: What I feel about this town. You mean a personal incident where I'm concerned?

MS: Yes.

HD: When I was in the hospital, when they didn't have enough room to put the flowers in my room. That they had to be all the way from one end of the hall to the other to know that in this town, this could happen. You didn't have to be a movie star to have this happen. You just had to be a friend.

MS: That's a pretty good way to end it [laughter]. Thank you. Thank you very much.

HD: That's it?

MS: Anything else you want to tell me?

HD: No. Let's see. No. Anything you want to ask me?

MS: Well, I think I asked everything I wanted.

[end of transcript]