

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Matty Domancich Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Talk back and forth, very informally.

Matty Domancich: Very good.

MS: I'll ask some questions and I may ask you to do the answer again, and it's very informal.

MD: Okay.

Male Speaker: Just look at John.

MS: Just look at me.

MD: Okay.

MS: When, for example, because my questions won't be heard, you need to include the subject of my question in your answer. So, for example, if I say, what did you think of San Pedro? You can't say, "It was great," because no one knows what 'it' is. You have to say, "San Pedro was great," so they know what –

MD: [laughter] Oh, I see.

MS: But I'll remind you. It's [inaudible].

MD: Okay.

MS: But the hard question is the first one, which is, please say your name and spell it.

MD: My legal name is Kuzma, K-U-Z-M-A. Nickname Matty, M-A-T-T-Y. Last name Domancich, D-O-M-A-N-C-I-C-H.

MS: Matty, what year were you born and where were you born?

MD: I was born in 1922, San Pedro, California.

MS: Great. Tell us a little bit about your family and who they were, what they did, and when they came to San Pedro.

MD: My dad came here prior to 1910, I'm not exactly sure. Mom came in about 1920 and married my dad.

MS: Where did they come from?

MD: My parents came from Hvar, H-V-A-R, Croatia, or at that time, it was Yugoslavia.

MS: What did your father and mother do here?

MD: My father was a fisherman here for many, many years. Passed away in 1934. He was a young man still. But he came here and fished for many years. Mom went to work in a cannery during the depression, French Sardine, or StarKist, whatever it's called. It's called different names.

MS: So, what do you remember as a little boy growing up? Where did you grow up and what was it like and any memories you have?

MD: Well, I grew up in the area called the Balkans down on 17th Street here in the three hundred block, which is below Pacific and Mesa around there. There was a lot of Croatians and Italians all over the place. We lived there, and, what else?

MS: Well, what was it like? What did the neighborhood look like?

MD: Oh, neighborhood was very, very good. Empty lots all around the place for us to play [laughter] because there were not many houses built. I remember that neighbors all barbecued like my dad did. He barbecued like crazy, fish and meat. Whole neighborhood [laughter] gave up. You could smell the barbecue throughout the country in the area.

MS: Now, you said it was called the Balkans. Why was it called the Balkans?

MD: It was called the Balkans due to the many Croatians that were living there. So, they called it the Balkan area.

MS: Who were your neighbors? Who were your friends in the neighborhood?

MD: Well, we had a number of friends. Name?

MS: Yes. Who they were.

MD: Well, like our landlord was the Carr family. They had businesses, I think, on Terminal Island when I was just a little kid. Then we had the Crickmers across the alley from us who were not Croatians, but they were very, very close family to our family. My mother would help them when they had parties and stuff like that. She would help them to do the dishes and clean up the house and stuff. He worked for the Harbor Department – Mr. Crickmer. He was, I believe, where warehouse one was, in that location. He was there. There was an office there. Those are the guys that went out to meet the ships. It's a pilot –

MS: Pilots.

MD: Pilots like, yes. So, Crickmer was in there. Then, like I said, a lot of other Croatians and Italians around too.

MS: What language were you hearing all around you?

MD: I was hearing [laughter] Italian, Croatian, and of course, English. My mother, fortunately,

learned English real quick because she had to. It's not like sometime today, they don't ever learn the English language [laughter]. But at that time, she brought me to school. I remember in the kindergarten at 15th Street School, which was located there on 15th and Mesa [laughter], and she knew how to speak English. She spoke Croatian to me at the house, but she spoke English there.

MS: So, did you speak both languages as a little boy?

MD: Yes. Yes, I did.

MS: What about your father? What did he speak?

MD: Both. Both languages also. Not a perfectionist as far as English, but he spoke it well and he did well. He could go to the store and buy things in English. Didn't have to look for a Croatian to purchase it or anything.

MS: As a little boy, what did you do for fun when you were growing up?

MD: When I was a little boy, we used to play so much. Nothing with toys. I didn't have toys because things were a little rough, I guess, to buy toys. So, we played in the yards, the empty lots, stick in the mud during the winter season. Take sticks and throw them in the ground and stick. The other guy would throw another stick and try to knock you down. Then we also played hopscotch with the girls. They'd draw squares in the cement in a contract, in the sidewalks, and we'd skip there. We just made our own fun and learned how to play softball there on the empty lots that we had. Just did all those little natural things.

MS: What about the Harbor? Did you do anything around the Harbor?

MD: Oh, well, my dad was a fisherman. So, he'd take me down whenever he was working on the nets and stuff. He'd take me down and I'd help them as a little kid filling up the needles with string to mend the nets and get them ready [laughter] for them and stuff like that. I'd sit there and watch the ships coming in. The fleet was here a lot then during that time. We saw a lot of the fleet. It was fantastic. We got a big kick out of that. Yes.

MS: So, was it fun to sort of hang out with your father and his friends doing the nets and all that?

MD: Oh, yes, I enjoyed going down with my dad to do that stuff. I enjoyed it. Yes.

MS: So, talk about what the Harbor was like. I mean, the fleet was in. What did it look like and what was going on?

MD: Well, again, I saw a lot of sailors. We saw a lot of sailors walking in the town in the streets and stuff. We had the fleet coming in. I mean, the fleet was anchored inside the breakwater here. They had – what do you call it? Target, a little barge that was also anchored out there. The fleet would take that target out towards San Clemente or different places and practice shooting at it. Then they had a number of places where they'd pick up visitors or bring in sailors

in their fleets, smaller boats, and they'd bring them in. There was a place where the ferry building is now. They had a navy landing there and they had one on 22nd street. I have photos of all of those. Yes.

MS: Could you hear them firing the big guns when they were practicing or was that too far away?

MD: That's too far away. Yes. We would hear the Fort MacArthur when they were firing, which is close to us. We'd hear that if they were firing their gun. But it wasn't too often they'd do that because the windows would shatter, [laughter] I think.

MS: So, did you swim in the port? I mean, aside from with your father, did you have anything else to do with the port itself?

MD: With the port, not as a little guy. I'd just go down there with him. That's it.

MS: So, you didn't go swimming in the harbor or anything like that?

MD: No. No. But I remember the older kids used to go swimming in the harbor from this side of the harbor, San Pedro to Terminal Island. They used to swim across. I remember them talking about that, the older kids.

MS: Did you ever go to Terminal Island?

MD: Yes. We went over to Terminal Island many, many times.

MS: Why don't you start again? We went over to Terminal Island –

MD: We went over to Terminal Island many, many times to unload fish, help – I would be there with them when they'd unload the fish, or I go where they were working on their nets even over there. Again, mom was working over there. So, I sometime go over there when she did. My dad had worked there at Terminal Island occasionally when he was between jobs on a fishing boat.

MS: So, describe Terminal Island. What kind of place was it? Who was there? What did it look like?

MD: Terminal Island was very, very busy with many canneries – numerous canneries and a lot of Japanese people lived there. Later, we went to school with those Japanese kids, and we played ball with them over here and stuff like that, and at school, of course, the San Pedro High School. They'd have to go to San Pedro High School because they didn't have a high school on Terminal Island. They had an elementary school there. Just recently, we saw a program at Warner Brothers about the Japanese, how they lived.

MS: Do those pictures look familiar to you? We saw that movie too.

MD: Yes. Did you see that?

MS: Yes. What did it look like as a place?

MD: Terminal Island was loaded with little houses behind the canneries, and a lot of dirt. No lawn, [laughter] no grass growing at all. Just sandy. Very sandy and plain. Very plain. But busy. Not crazy with traffic like it is today. But it was busy. Just the workers were there that worked at the canneries. They worked there at the canneries, the Japanese people, and they had fishing boats – a lot of fishing boats. The Japanese had many, many. I have photos of those fishing boats all lined up by the cannery.

MS: You say your mom worked at the cannery. Describe, what is that job that she did and when did she go in, in the morning or how did she know to go to work and all that?

MD: My mom worked in the canneries, like, I'm talking about, early, early [19]30s – late [19]20s, early [19]30s. She'd get a phone call – not that we had a phone. But the floor lady – they call her a floor lady, like a foreman, but a floor lady, well, she lived about three, four doors east of us and across the street. She put the light on [laughter] to signal to my mom, it's time to go to work [laughter]. So, they'd go to work like that. Or a neighbor sometime would tell her that so and so called and it's time to go to work.

MS: So, now, you can tell me that again because I want to hear it a second time. So, how did your mom find out that she needed to go to work?

MD: My mother looked at her neighbor, the floor lady, and she would put a light out on her porch, and it was time to go to work. So, my mom would set a clock, I guess every morning about 5:00 a.m. [laughter] to see was it time to go to work or not.

MS: I also heard that there were different whistles.

MD: Oh, yes.

MS: Tell me about that.

MD: Yes. We had whistles too, but I cannot tell you how they worked. I knew the whistles meant to come to work, but I didn't remember which ones were what. But they whistled, and there were no unions in either at the time. The women didn't have a break of sitting down. So, I'll tell you a story about what happened to my dad. My father worked at a cannery when he wasn't fishing. One particular time, they went to work real, real early, both my mother and father got the signal from the neighbor. The light was on that meant to go to work. The daughter of the Petrich family used to put the signal out. So, what happened is working hard and my dad would help bring the fish to the ladies to clean it and stuff. Then no breaks at all in between. So, my dad started putting boxes under their seats – I mean, where they're standing. So, they could rest and sit and work. So, one of the employees – one of the foreman asked the women. "Who brought these boxes here for you?" She says, "Oh, Mr. Tony Domancich did." So, he went to my dad, and he said, "Remove those boxes. They're not supposed to be sitting down." So, my

dad says, "Look, they've been here since 6:00 a.m. and no breaks at all and they're still working. So, can't you let them sit and work at the same time? Because they're big boxes." He said, "No, you move those boxes." So, he fired my dad. So, Mr. Bogdanovich, who owned StarKist, found out about it and came to our house the next couple days later. Oh, my mother came home first from that day of work. She says, "How come you're home so early?" He told my mom what happened and that he got fired because he put boxes there. Well she told Mr. Bogdanovich from StarKist and he came over and says, "Tony, you can come back to work. The women will have boxes. You're right, when they're working long hours like that, they should have a break. Because they're still working and cleaning the fish." So, he hired my dad back [laughter] at that time.

MS: Okay. Here's an example. That's such a great story. Tell me that story again and pretend you never told it to me before. Start from the beginning, your mother and father went to work.

MD: Okay. My mom was working there, and dad would be fishing. Sometime, my dad would go to the cannery to work when fishing was slow, or he changed boats. So, one time, my dad and mom went to work very, very early, about 6:00 a.m., I would guess, or earlier than that in the morning. Because they got the signal from the lights from the neighbor that it was time to go to work. So, they're working steady all morning. My dad found some boxes for the cleaning ladies that cleaned fish so they could sit and put them underneath them. He'd let them sit on them. He got big boxes. Well, a foreman saw this, and he asked the ladies, "Well, who brought these boxes here? What are you doing sitting down on the job?" They said, "Well, Tony Domancich brought them because we were standing up so much." So, he came to Tony Domancich, my dad, and said, "Move those boxes." My dad wouldn't do it. He says, "No, because they've been standing up doing hard work and they should have a break. Their break is, while they're working, they're resting a little bit." So, he insisted my dad move them. My dad wouldn't. So, my dad got fired and was sent home. [laughter] My mom got home about 5:00 p.m., a long day, and she says, "How come you got home so early?" Or, "How come you got home and didn't wait for me at the cannery?" He says, "Well, I got fired. I put boxes under the ladies' seats." So, mom was upset because it was during depression time. At that time, they were paying about 25 cents an hour. By the way, this foreman told them, "They'd be lucky they're making 25 because it's going to be less," like that too. So, my mother told Mr. Bogdanovich, the owner of StarKist, or French Sardine at the time, that dad got fired. That her husband got fired because he put boxes because the ladies were working straight through for many hours without any rest, any break. So, Mr. Bogdanovich says, "Well, you tell him to come back." Well, my dad would not go back. So, Mr. Bogdanovich came to the door – back door of our house, I'll never forget that. Back door of the house knocking on it. My dad invited him in and he says, "Tony, I heard what you did, and we will have boxes and seats for the ladies while they're working." So – I think we got a lot of work here.

MS: Sorry. Tell me a story about the depression and the kind of soup that your family had in those days. Tell me that story.

MD: Okay. During the depression, we had a lot of local little stores in the neighborhood. We had about two of them within a block. Mom would send me, sometimes she'd say, "Go pick up 10 cents worth of soup meat." Or sometime, "20 cents worth of soup meat, and tell them to

throw in the bones." They never paid extra for the bones. So, we'd buy it. But it was tough to buy meat at that time, I guess, during the depression. I thought it was normal, but it wasn't [laughter]. Then one time, my dad gives me a dime and he says, "Here's a dime." He says, "You've been good. Go to Canetti's store across the street from the 15th Street School and get some gum for yourself." So, I went, and I put that dime in the machine. [laughter] Well, that machine didn't work. It was supposed to be a penny machine. So, I asked the owner, or one of the owners at the market, I say, "Mr. Canetti, I put in a dime, it didn't work." He said, "Too bad. You lost money." So, I went home, cried that I lost the dime because I couldn't get that gum and I didn't have any change. So, that was a depressing time. I remember things like that during that era.

MS: Any other stories you remember?

MD: Yes. I remember another story of my sister. She was about eighteen months younger than I. We were at another store down on the corner of 16th and Center. She was telling my mom – our mother, "I want this, and I want that." "Mom said, "No, Nelly, you can't have it." She started crying and raising – and my sister would raise Cain and she says, "No, Nelly, you cannot have it. We don't have the money for candies." So, she kept crying and she starts spanking her – as we're walking out of the market, starts spanking her. She says, "Do you want some more candy? You want some more candy?" "No, mom. I don't want no more candy." [laughter] So, I remember that during depression days too.

MS: [laughter]

MD: I was kind of shook up too that Nelly was crying so badly [laughter] for candy and she got spanked and finally said, "I don't want no more candy. I don't want candy."

MS: What was the difference between the Croatian community and the Italian community? Aside from language differences, what were the – I mean, there were some similarities. Both were Catholics, right?

MD: Yes, mostly. Yes. I was Catholic.

MS: What were the differences between the communities? Did they have different kind of celebrations?

MD: No. They celebrate the church things like Christmas and stuff together. The Italians, they'd have certain Saint days, I guess, that we didn't have, or the Croatians didn't. Both had a lot of family gatherings where they'd sing and stuff like that. Italians would sing their Italian songs, and the Slavs or Croatians would sing their songs and drink their wine. We as kids [laughter] would always – whenever we had parties like that or family gatherings, we always had to go. Not like today where my kid would say, "No, I don't want to go there." Now, when they said, "We're going to visit another family," and we always walked no cars. We'd always sit on a couch with their kids – with the other kids. Then pretty soon, we'd see our guys – the men drinking wine that they made [laughter] and then pretty soon, start singing. Then we'd say, "Hey, check the red noses." Because their noses would get red from drinking wine and singing

and stuff. "Check the red noses. Check the red noses." So, then we started calling them red noses. Like, Croatians, I don't want the whole world to know that one, but [laughter] we say, "Look at the red noses. Look at the red noses."

MS: What were the songs they were singing?

MD: They're Slavic songs and Italians would sing their own –

MS: At the parties, the men would sing Slavic songs.

MD: Yes, and the women would join them too – the mothers would –

MS: Well, you have to go from the beginning and say that at the parties –

MD: At the parties, they would sing their old country songs, Slavic songs, and women would join them also. We as kids would watch them and get a kick out of – and we would start learning the songs too.

MS: Can you give me some of the songs?

MD: Oh, let's see. Oh, Mariana.

MS: How was that sang?

MD: Oh, Mariana [foreign language]. Mariana means – that's her name – sweet little Maryanne, like that. I don't know all the words. Then some other ones – oh God, there was many songs.

MS: Give me another example.

MD: God.

MS: What's another one they'd sing?

MD: I forgot them all.

MS: [laughter]

MD: God.

MS: Well, as you sing, your nose starts getting red. I don't know what happened.

[laughter]

MD: Mine didn't because I didn't have any wine today.

[laughter]

MS: Where did the wine come from? Talk about the wine making.

MD: Okay. Wine making, the Slavs and Italians – the Croatians and Italians made their own wine. We had about, gee, eight to twelve grape dealers in San Pedro. They'd rent garages or different locations. They'd buy the grapes, I think September and October, from the farms out here. They'd bring it in and store it there, and they'd sell it. They were little businesses that they had during the wine season. So, then they would deliver, too, to us. We'd maybe buy a ton of grapes, and they'd buy different kinds. The red grapes, the white grapes, and they'd mix it sometime. They'd make the light wine, white wine, or red wine, dark red wine. They used to crush it with a grinder. They'd go in a crusher on top of a big barrel about this big around. We'd crush it and I'd help my dad. The kids would want to say, "Matty or Kuzma," because my name is Kuzma, "Hey, Kuz, come on out and play." I'd say, "I can't. I got to help my dad crush grapes." [laughter] He'd be fishing. So, he'd crush the grapes with, again, a winder machine and throw a box in. The box and the crusher had a catcher like – a box shaped only at an angle. Then he'd crush it and it'd go into the big vat. Then when you'd crush all the grapes, one of our jobs as kids would be, if my dad went fishing again, to watch it and watch the grapes grow – what they call ferment. If it fermented too high, it'd go over. So, my job was when my dad was out fishing, for four or five days, to get on top with boots and crush the grapes and hang onto the side of the vats. Walk around and crush the grapes down. Then when he'd get home after four or five days after fermented so many days, then my dad would come back from fishing. He'd open the valve down below or the vat, and get all the loose juice out, start pouring it on barrels in the cellar in the basement. Then when he put it in the basement, he'd always have to be careful and keep it – if the barrel is this big around, he'd keep the wine down maybe five, six, seven inches. So, give it fermenting time again because it fermented in the barrel too – the juice. So, he'd get all the loose juice out and then the grapes, they're still in the vat. Then he'd put them in another press and then squeeze it and get some more juice. A press was about, oh God, this big around and set up about this high, and you had quite a bit of grapes in there. Then we'd have to carry the juice out of that down to the barrels and put that in there too. Then when you got rid of the grapes, they're dryer now because we pressed them. Then we'd put it outside in boxes or bags – gunny sacks or something, for the trash man to pick up. But the whole town would smell of wine [laughter]. You could smell the wine all over the neighborhood.

MS: Now, was this during Prohibition time as well?

MD: Yes.

MS: Tell me about that.

MD: Well, all I know about Prohibition time is they allowed so many gallons that you could make. I was a kid then, so I didn't know.

MS: For medicinal purposes.

MD: Well, I guess, yes.

[laughter]

I guess. Yes. But they did pretty well. Then we were allowed so many gallons to make. I don't know how it was exactly.

MS: So, then your father sold that wine to –

MD: No.

MS: Or just for the family?

MD: Family.

MS: So, how did it taste?

MD: It was good. We were broken in to learn how to drink wine. Like, instead of straight, we'd put in an inch or two of wine in a glass, and the rest water. They'd make us put water, or they'd put water in for us, so we don't get bad habits. So, I never got drunk on wine. I still do that. I go to the Elks Club and I'll order a glass of red wine and I have a couple sips and I put a little water or ice cube or something in there to – and I could drink more [laughter].

MS: [laughter] Right. Exactly. Well, so, after you graduated from high school, what did you do next?

MD: I went into service.

MS: After I graduated –

MD: I went to work for Los Angeles Shipyard, which is Todd's later, here in San Pedro. I went to work there. Before that, I worked at a – while I was in high school, I worked for a service station too down here and not far from here, in 9th and Palos Verdes. I worked there for almost nothing to learn how to work [laughter]. From the seventh grade on up [laughter], I started working.

MS: What did you do at the gas station?

MD: Just lube and oil and wait on customers. That's what service was our business, you know? I worked there at the gas station for – you know where the main post office is here?

MS: No.

MD: Well, it was across the street, south and up on a corner where the empty lot is on a corner now. It used to be the YMCA next door. That was the YMCA, that big building over that way from the post office – a block away.

MS: So, when you graduated from high school, tell me what happened next?

MD: When I graduated from high school, I was still working for the gas station – service station for a little while. Then I got an opportunity to go to work at the shipyard. It was called Los Angeles Shipyard – ship building. I went to work there as a draftsman because I took drafting in high school. I was a draftsman and I worked there – see, I graduated [19]41 and I was working there for about a year. Then another friend of mine and I wanted to join the Navy, and we were offered a – what do you call it?

MS: Commission?

MD: No. Deferment. Deferment and we turned it down [laughter]. He and I both joined the Navy, and I went in the Navy.

MS: So, after you got out of the service, what happened? You came back here?

MD: I came back here, and I went back. The guy that owned the service station wanted me to come back to work there for him, and I did. So, I went to work for Marty (Bellack?) at this gas station by the post office. He wanted me to take over as a partner, which I did. I came in as a partner. He took me in as a partner, and I increased the volume being there because my era kids would start trading with this. So, we did very, very well, just double the gasoline gallonage. So, then Shell Oil Company had a station up on 9th and Gaffey a few blocks away. They asked me to take that over too. So, I took that over and I went in the service station business up there and there. So, I did that for a number of years.

MS: What was a gallon of gas for those days?

MD: 18 cents, price wars due to surplus of fuel. Now, with no wars or anything else, now there's a shortage.

MS: The relationship between the port and the business community is always sort of intertwined, right? What is the relationship between the port and the business community of San Pedro and how does that work out?

MD: Well, with me and a lot of our people that grew up here in it, I think it's fine. I really think it's great. Because we need the port and that helps our community, other businesses too. If we didn't have the port, nobody would be here compared to what is there now. I remember when there was thirty thousand people here in San Pedro with the port then. But more people have moved in since then. So, now, we have, what, seventy thousand.

MS: So, I keep hearing again and again and again that the number one institution in this city is the Elks Club. Tell me about the Elks and their history, and why are they important for understanding San Pedro?

MD: Well, the Elks Lodge in San Pedro is a hundred years old. It was started here in San Pedro in 1905 between 5th and 6th on Beacon. I have pictures of when Beacon Street was dirt street and a sign across Beacon Street, Welcome, Elks. Oh, I have photos. You guys ought to come up

and see them sometime.

MS: We will do that. Yes.

MD: I have pictures of people in front of a building between 5th and 6th Street that were Elks all in front. They took pictures, and I have those photos too.

MS: And they at the lodge?

MD: I have them at the lodge all the time.

MS: Here, it's the place to have lunch and dinner too.

MD: Oh, great. Yes. Yes.

MS: So, how do the Elks work? How do they relate to San Pedro? What's their importance to this community?

MD: Well, our Elks do a lot of charity work for youth and stuff. We have scholarship funds. In fact, I am involved with that. I'm not on the scholarship fund committee, but I'm raising money, selling history pictures, and the money goes to the fund. Every photo I sell, we make money out of it. But after I pay for it, whatever the profit, goes directly to the scholarship fund. I put it aside. Every month, I turn it in. It helps a lot of charitable work, crippled children throughout the country and state. California Hawaii Elks Association does a lot of charitable work for the crippled kids.

MS: Do you want a glass of water, or –

MD: No.

MS: You sure? You're good?

MD: Yes. I'm Okay.

MS: Good. How many members of the Elks now?

MD: We have over three thousand in this club here in San Pedro.

MS: Tell me, aside from the charitable activities, what goes on at the club?

MD: A lot of dinner dances and stuff to make – we have activities for our membership, like a gym, swimming pool, tennis court. So, we do a lot to make it good, and invite for membership.

MS: A lot of clubs like the Elks and the Rotary and Lions and all that, are having difficulty getting younger people to join. Is that an issue for the Elks Club too?

MD: Well, we always thought that, but it's not too bad. We've got a lot of young people in our club now. Now, too, [laughter] they have to take women in because they started suing us.

MS: [laughter]

MD: In different places, they sued. But we have a lot of young people. I joined when I was young. I joined in 1952, I think. [19]52 or [19]53. So, in fact, I was in my twenties. So, it's a good organization. Really is. Yes. Come up one day especially when I'm on duty.

MS: Definitely. I mean, we've heard. We have to do that. Talk about some of the old characters you remember from San Pedro. Any coming to mind, stories about some of the memorable characters that you've met living here? Do you think of any of –

MD: Memorable characters? Oh, God. What do you mean? Maybe people that became politicians or some thing or –

MS: Well, just people you knew that were interesting people that people tell stories.

MD: Oh, Vince Thomas.

MS: Yes. Well, tell me about that.

MD: Well, he's the guy that dedicated a bridge –

MS: Okay. Tell me about – who was Vincent Thomas?

MD: Vincent Thomas was our assemblyman here. He's Anthony Nizetich's uncle. The bridge is named after him that goes across the Terminal Island. I happened to be exalted ruler of the Elks when we broke ground for that bridge in 1960 or [19]61, when we broke ground for the bridge.

MS: Tell us who he was and what kind of guy was he?

MD: He was assemblyman –

MS: Vincent Thomas was –

MD: Vincent Thomas was –

MS: I'm sorry, wait for me to finish then go ahead.

MD: Vincent Thomas was our assemblyman for our district out of the state of California, out of Sacramento. He was a councilman for many, many years. I don't know how many years, really, I forgot. But he kept getting reelected and reelected because he did such a wonderful job for our communities in our district, which is a 15th district, I believe.

MS: What kind of guy was he? How would you describe him?

MD: Oh, wonderful, wonderful, personable guy. Really a wonderful, personable person. Just, he would attend functions in different lodges here and clubs and stuff like that. He would be involved in the community. A wonderful guy.

MS: What's the story of the bridge? Why was there the bridge and how did it get built? Give me a sense of the history of the Vincent Thomas Bridge.

MD: Okay. Well, we had ferries here to go across the Terminal Island for the women and men and cars would go back and forth. Then people would also like to drive. They'd go around towards Wilmington and towards Terminal Island in Wilmington through that way. Then Vince Thomas came up with the idea of building a bridge to shorten the runs for cars. Then they got rid of the ferry, which I kind of miss that. I always thought, "Well, should have kept the ferry." One ferry anyway. Because if some people want to go, it would've been interesting to see, especially tourists, go across on a ferry. It would've been nice. But then the industry got so big – the fishing industry got so big and everything. The workers were going back and forth like crazy on the bridge. We had an airfield over there too, at Terminal Island. I don't know much about it, but it was right at the end of the bridge. It was a little airport like. It wasn't a commercial trip or –

MS: Private.

MD: Or private something. Yes. But he was a fantastic man. His wife is still living. I know where she lives too. But Anthony will tell you a lot more about him.

MS: Yes, he did. He told us a lot of it.

MD: Oh, did he?

MS: Yes.

MS: Do you want me to pause?

MS: Yes. I'm just checking my notes here.

MD: Do what? Leave?

MS: No, not yet.

MD: Oh. [laughter]

MS: We can't get out of here that easy.

MD: [laughter]

MS: But we're almost done. We're almost done. You've been involved in preserving history. I

mean, in 1988 for the hundredth anniversary –

MD: Centennial.

MS: Centennial. Tell me about that and your involvement with that.

MD: Okay, fine. I owned my last business when I got mad at the oil companies for doing what they're doing for gasoline. They called me a communist [laughter] for the way I felt. You want me to tell you a little bit about that? Okay. I was with the oil companies for a long time and ran a station on 17th and Pacific – Shell Station. We were doing quite well. They sent me a letter in late January that February purchases will be cut back twenty percent due to a shortage of fuel. We were selling gas at 18, 20 cents a gallon, and I said, "What's the story here?" So, they came to meet with me – the bosses – one big boss and a sales rep, and they said, "Well, don't you know there's a shortage of gas?" I said, "Well, the war is over with though. Korean War has been over. Vietnam war is over. So, how could there be a shortage now?" They said, "Well, there is. So, don't have to worry. We don't care about giving service because there'll be a waiting line to get gas. Because you're not going to get a lot of fuel. Going to get twenty percent less than you ever bought. That's starting in the first month and then it'll drop more." So, I said, "I can't believe you guys. This is a racket going on." That's when he says, "Well, you sound like a communist." I said, "Well, then I'm going to get out, but I might be a communist." So, they said, "Well, what are you going to do?" After a little more discussion, they said, "What are you going to do if you get out of here?" I said, "Well, I know service. So, I'll open something. I'll open another business where I give service." He's like, "What?" I say, "I don't know." I saw a guy riding a bike right in front of my station and I said, "I might open a bike shop." "What do you know about bike?" I say, "I know nothing, but I know service." So, doggone it, if I don't, and I go and open a bicycle shop. My first ad was Matty's Shell service is no longer servicing automobiles. But Matty has the bike palace now. Call the bike palace. We service, pick up, and deliver bicycles instead of cars. Service is our business all day long here. Where it was it in the service station anymore? You recall when they we were waiting in lineup to get gas?

MS: Yes. [19]70s.

MD: In the [19]70s, that's right. [19]73. Yes.

MS: So, you opened the first communist bike shop.

MD: The first communist bike shop.

[laughter]

I opened it across the street too. It was a Buick dealer there. The Ford dealer was down the street and he was renting some spot from the Buick dealer. So, he said, "What's this I hear that you're going to open a bike shop?" He said, "You know, Matty" – his name was – oh, God. Can't think of it right now.

MS: It's okay.

MD: He said, "What's this that you're opening a bike shop?" He said, "You know, I looked it up and that's the fastest growing little business going." I said, "It is?" He says, "Yes." He says, "Look, I got space here. I'll rent you some space there, and you open it." So, I contacted a bike company, Raleigh, which is from England, and they found a guy that was a manager at another bike store. I interviewed him and put him to work as a manager there to teach me the bike business. So, we went in, and I opened the darn thing. Well, in November of that year, after I was in the business for a while and business was doing real well – the bike business because ads and everything else that I ran. People were upset about the oil communist anyway – starting to get upset. Well, the same guy that called me a communist called me up one day and he says, "Matty, could we have lunch one day?" He said, "Are you still pissed at me like that?" I said, "If you want to have lunch, it's okay with me." So, he came down, and we went out to lunch. He says, "I'm here to apologize for calling you a communist. You know what my job is now? To close stations and use the stations empty tanks for the surplus that we had that you said we had. That you said there should be a surplus because there's no wars anymore." He says, "I have to close the stations that are out of business and use the tanks. The tankers are loaded in El Segundo and also Peter [sic] Harbor here, outside the breakwater. I said, "I knew they were." He said, "Well, that's my job now, to close up the stations." He said, "I apologize for calling you a communist." [laughter]

MS: You should have called him a capitalist.

MD: Yes.

[laughter]

Yes. I should have, yes. Really, yes. Yes. Really.

MS: That's a great story. So, after the bike shop –

MD: So, the bike shop – I was there for quite a while. Then in – when was it? Centennial was [19]88 or something?

MS: [19]88, yes.

MS: Yes, [19]88. I took in my godson. My godson worked for me. He was out of high school and everything. He liked it and I took him on as a partner, see if he liked it, being a partner. He liked it. So, then I sold it to him gradually so he can pay back. So, then I was off for about a month or two and I got involved in the community a little bit. Then they saw that I was pretty successful in the business. And they said, "We're going to have a centennial year down at Ports O' Call. I mean, we'd like to open a store at Ports O' Call. We're going to have a centennial year in San Pedro." So, they said, "Would you put a store together for us?" So, I did. I organized a store. We got rented, place it down to Ports O' Call. We found all volunteers, including me – I almost got a divorce twice because my wife says, "You're working harder now than when you were making money."

[laughter]

She used to get all upset at me. Anyway, we did very well. We'd made \$69,000 at one year, and that's –

MS: What was the store like and what'd you sell there?

MD: Oh, we sold just accessory items that people wanted. Then I started with the pictures that way too there. Some photographer had photocopies and he cataloged them for me. Well, he didn't catalog at the time. He just had them loose. Then volunteers were selling them. We had about forty-five pictures that he had negatives on. But the volunteers were selling them and not marking down when they sold. They were numbered and they weren't marked down. It just was photo and that's it. So, then I told the guy, I said, "Number them and date them when they were taken and let's catalog them. Then let the people order from the number and the date in the catalog." He says, "Well, you think that'll be better?" I say, "Yes, it'll be better." Well, what happened is that people weren't buying that, I was ordering them from the photographer to make copies of this number so and so. Then people start looking at the catalog and they said, "Matty, do you want more pictures?" I said, "Yes." They all said, "I bet you, we have some at home." So, they start bringing them to me, and I give them to him – the photographer shows some, makes a negative. We built up – now, we got hundreds of them as an inventory. They're all cataloged down and they're going crazy selling them.

MS: Did you ever know of a guy named Bob Weinstein who had a collection – so, what did you do next after you made so much money there? You got involved in helping the [inaudible].

MD: Okay. After the Centennial year, I didn't do much [laughter] for about a month or so. Then the same committee that had Centennial says, "God, we did so well. Why don't we help the historical society with their home that they just moved down here right above the water?" You know where it's at?

MS: The Mueller House?

MD: Mueller House, yes. So, we helped them. So, we made about \$70,000 there the next year helping them. Got some cement work done for them and a lot of other things. So, anyway, we did that for a year. We opened that store also at Ports O' Call. The people were fantastic about helping. That's what's great about this community is we get people to work, and they really helped us a lot.

MS: You've lived here all your life?

MD: All my life.

MS: For people who've never heard of San Pedro, or maybe never even heard of the Port of Los Angeles, what would you want them to know about this place so that they could appreciate what it is?

MD: San Pedro is a great community that has a lot of good history in it that'd be interesting to a lot of people. It really would be interesting to a lot of people.

MS: What is it about this place that needs to be known wider? Why? Why Is this place special?

MD: San Pedro has so much to offer to others. I know people that have moved away from San Pedro and haven't stayed very long and have come back. They missed it so much. I just ran into one the other day from Oregon and they said, "God, I thought Oregon was nice, but I sure miss San Pedro." I hear this from people like crazy.

MS: If you were, for some reason, forced to go away, what would you miss most about San Pedro?

MD: The people. I would miss all my people, my friends that I have here. It's such a close-knit community that we'd miss one another. We really would miss the people.

MS: How has it changed in the years you grew up here? What do you think is happening in the future?

MD: Well, how has it changed? Let's see. San Pedro has changed to be bigger. A lot bigger. The hill used to be called San Pedro Hill. Now, it's [laughter] Palos Verdes and Rolling Hills and everything else, and that was San Pedro Hills. I saw some maps showing San Pedro Hills. So, the growth is just tremendous that's happened to it. Western Avenue, we didn't have a Western Avenue. I have a map showing Pacific Avenue as West Street, and that was the last street before our time. So, there's a lot of growth that has happened here. So much has come up. Look at the harbor itself, how it's built. A beautiful harbor, I think.

MS: What do you see as the future of this place?

MD: More growth. For the future, I think it'll be bigger and better. Our downtown will grow. Our sixth street will grow. That's where we used to walk. From 17th Street [laughter] to 6th Street, mom would walk and us kids – my sister and I. We'd walk and shop and walk home. We never had a car until mom got married a second time after dad passed away. Then we'd start catching a bus if we did. Because we never had a car, we'd catch a bus to Point Fermin Park and stuff like that, to go picnic. My dad worked there too a little bit during the WPA. During WPA, he worked there.

MS: How did your dad die?

MD: TB. My dad died from tuberculosis. Because that was a bad sickness at that time in that era. He caught it from a guy on a fishing boat that had it too.

MS: Nothing he could do.

MD: No. No. He was up in Olive View Sanitarium up in San Fernando. Remember Olive

View?

MS: Sure. Still there.

MD: Yes. My cousin is a nurse, and she works there now [laughter]. She invited me up there about a year ago. They wanted me up there to tell the new people that are running it how it was then. It was kind of interesting too. I was in the sixth grade when I was up there. I was up there

—

MS: You went to visit your father?

MD: No, I was there as a patient. Not a TB patient, but in them days, they used to give you a shot in the arm. If it turned a certain color, they'd be concerned. So, they were concerned about me. So, they sent me to Olive View. I went to a school up there. I wasn't restricted or anything else in the sanitarium. I was able to play outside and everything else. I just have a resting period in the afternoon and stuff like that – resting period. The real sick one would be restricted because we couldn't see a real sick one. I couldn't see my dad up there or anything else.

MS: How long were you there?

MD: I was there for over a year. Yes, over a year.

MS: What year was that? Early [19]30s?

MD: That was in, yes, [19]33, [19]34. Dad died in 1934. October 27th, 1934. Yes. That's a date too that's in my mind a lot. That's the day I made my invasion in the Solomon's. I'm going in on a landing craft. We're going in and I'm on a fifty caliber. I said, "Oh my God. This is the date of my father's death. October 27th." I never forget that. So, then I was in there from the sixth grade through the first – let's see, A six until B seven, I was in there. That's how they used to call classes, remember?

MS: Yes. Now, you said your mother remarried. When did she remarry?

MD: When?

MS: When?

MD: Oh, she remarried about a year and a half later after dad passed away to his buddy. He was a good friend of the family.

MS: What did he do?

MD: Fisherman also. (Nick Patrisovic?) was his last name. A great guy. He treated us right and everything else. He was a good man. He used to go fishing down in Mexico and South America and all that. Big boats. Yes.

MS: Well, I think we've run out of time, and I need to get a picture of you before –

MD: You do?

MS: So, if you slide over to the left –

[end of transcript]