

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Ray Falk Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Please tell me your name, say your name, and spell it.

Ray Falk: My name is Frank Raymond Falk. I go by the name of Ray. I've been going by the name of Ray ever since I started – well, ever since I was born, I guess, because I lived in a community where we had a lot of Japanese and Mexicans. Most of the Japanese and Mexicans did not have a middle name. So, I think, consequently, I had a middle name, which was Raymond, then later it became – called Ray. I went completely through school and a lot of kids that I graduated from high school with did not know that my first name was Frank.

MS: How do you spell your last name?

RF: F-A-L-K.

MS: What year were you born, Frank, and where?

RF: I was born on September the 23rd on Terminal Island. It was called East San Pedro then.

MS: What year was that?

RF: That was 1922.

MS: First question, your grandfather came here some time ago. Tell me about him. Where did he come and what did he do?

RF: Well, actually, we're German. We're of German descent, but he was born in Sweden. At an early age that he went over to London, England and sailed out of there several years. He sailed over to India via Cape of Good Hope, and later came back to London and took his job as a second mate on a ship and sailed to (Clarita?), California. Then later, he became a skipper or a captain of a ship. He was an entrepreneur. He had a business up in San Francisco and also was sailing down here to San Pedro. He came here originally in 1877. Just sailed here and was so impressed with San Pedro at the time that he bought the corner of 6th and Harbor Boulevard here. Then he sailed in and out of here. There was a big problem with the port, whether it was going to be in Santa Monica or here in San Pedro or the Los Angeles Harbor. So, consequently, he left the area here and then returned again in 1890. In 1890, he built a saloon with living quarters in the back for the family. He built this bar. He built a bar. This saloon was called the Pepper Tree Saloon. There was a big pepper tree there in the corner. The saloon primarily was not like a bar where you have a lot of knock-down and drag-outs, which Beacon Street was famous for. It was more like a brokerage where ship's masters came in and they met clients or people that wanted to invest in sailing. In the old days, the way a lot of shipping occurred was that people would invest their monies on the cargoes – the anticipated cargoes we should say, that the skipper of these ships, the captain of these ships would go to some foreign place and bring back goods to this country. Then when they came back, the cargo was sold. In my grandfather's case, they sailed up to the northern Mendocino and Humboldt counties and bought lumber and brought lumber back here to the Los Angeles Harbor. Then they would sell that cargo of the lumber. After the cargo was sold, they'd go to the saloon and they'd be paid. Sometimes you hear the money on the barrelhead. Well, this is basically where that particular

saying came from going way back into the old sailing times.

MS: What kind of ships did your grandfather sail? Do you remember?

RF: Well, this is a big large –

MS: My grandfather used to – you have to include that. So, the kinds of ships my grandfather sailed – you have to say that to me.

RF: Well, my grandfather sailed in large ships. In fact, he would buy a ship and then he would take a new ship and take it out and more or less break it in and then resell it and then go buy another ship and do the same thing again over and over again just as a business. Because when you buy and get a new ship, it's like getting a new car or something. There's a lot of defects in it. You work all these out. Then the ship is ready to be a working ship.

MS: Now, these were sailing ships, right?

RF: Of course, these were sailing ships. The ship that my grandfather had was the last one he called was the Glendale, the sailing ship, Glendale. It was a three-masted schooner. In fact, he was noted for sailing right into the harbor here under sail without the use of tugs. This was always a problem for these sailing ships, they enter and exit in the ports. If they didn't have wind, they couldn't have any power. It's hard to believe, but a lot of the old-time, what we called, tugs was actually men rowing, a boat pulling the sailing ship. It's hard to believe it actually happened. But many people, the captains – there was a fellow by the name of (Vince DeRocco?). He was one of the former tug owners here that I knew from the 30-Year Club. He was an old forerunner of the Historical Society. Some of the tales that he told about having to go out as far as Catalina to help a ship get in when there was no wind at all here. But San Pedro has been fortunate because in the afternoons usually we have the westerly winds come in and they have power to use the sails.

MS: Did your grandfather stay here and eventually live his entire life here?

RF: Well, the last years of his life, he sailed all across –

MS: The last years of my grandfather's life.

RF: My grandfather's life actually, a considerable amount of time, was spent sailing. But the last years after he came back here to San Pedro, he more or less – after he came here and operated the saloon business, he only did that for three years. Then he just would be a ship's master. Being in the saloon business was contrary to his way of living and wanted to retire. So, he took a vacation and came back. Then he invested in property. He had another ship, the Marshfield, which was a schooner. It was a steam schooner that he had invested in. He had bought property here in San Pedro in the vicinity here. He was a real entrepreneur. They built out a modest house after they came back up here on 6th Street. Then later they moved over, and had a house built over on 10th Street. That house is still standing. I believe the address is 332 10th Street.

MS: Tell me about yourself. When you were born, what are your early memories of when you were a little boy and where you were born and what was the community like where you were born?

RF: Well, at the time I was born, my father was involved in fishing. He had a small fishing boat, and he had a Japanese crew on it. So, we lived over here. Their family lived over here on Terminal Island. I have a sister that's about three years older than I. We were born over here on Terminal Island. One of my younger brothers was born there, too. But we lived in the Japanese community, the family did. The street we were born on Terminal Island was Pilchard Street. Pilchard is a – if you want to know what it is, it's a fish, but it's like a herring or sardine, small bone fish. That is the classical name for that group of fish, Pilchard. So, we were born there. I did not go to the Japanese schools. I was too young when we lived there. Oh, I have three older sisters. Two of them were born up in San Francisco. My youngest sister was born on Terminal Island, as well as myself and my sister, Charlotte, and my brother, Charles. Three of us were born over at Terminal Island. At that time, my father was – they had this fishing boat, the LaBelle. He fished out of fish harbor here. Of course, they sold the fish to the canneries here.

MS: What do you remember as a little boy growing up? Do you have any stories of what it was like growing up in Terminal Island, things you did?

RF: Well, some of the things I did, I remember going to some of the stores. Incidentally, my mother was very kind of sickly. My sister is older than when I was born. So, she came out here from Kansas because my mother was sick. Her husband had been killed in an accident with a horse buggy, a wagon or something, turned over, and he was killed in that accident. But anyway, my grandmother and my aunt and uncle came out here. They lived with us over here in Terminal Island. I remember going to the store. The stores we went to there on Terminal Island were just like the stores in Japan. They had these tubs that they have made of bamboo. The stores were strictly Japanese like you would find in Japan. Later, when I was in the Navy, I was in the occupation force in Japan there after World War II. Some of these markets really brought back memories of the markets, the small markets that we had over here in Terminal Island. Most of the Japanese, as far as I remember, that the Japanese were very friendly. Usually, we did a lot of things in regard to children. They liked playing and they always had playgrounds, play areas for children. So, we always got along very well with the Japanese community, both with the adults, as well as the children that they're always looking after. That was one of the things I remember very clearly that they never had any problem because everybody took care of their own children.

MS: I was asking you about any of the memories you had as a little boy growing up. Do you have any particular stories that you remember from your early years in Terminal Island?

RF: Well, the earliest part of it was when we lived in the Japanese community. That was a fairly happy childhood there. There was nothing. I do remember that everybody had – most of the families, they had flags. They really, more or less, had a tendency to, I guess, respect the boys more or glorify the boys because they had Flag Boy's Day and Flag Day. Most of the houses had the fish flags they'd fly. Also, a lot of the – well, almost every one of their places, they had these poles outside the back door of the house and they had a little box. These boxes were covered

with screen, so they could put them up out of the area of the flies and pull them up, so they could dry the fish up in the air. A lot of the houses and communities or the areas there, people had their own fish that they had in these tubs, these small bamboo-made tubs. These tubs were about a foot high or half a foot and eighteen inch in them high, somewhere in that area. They had fish that they had salted there. Going back to it, though, at the time that I was born there, the Harbor Department at that time started a big mass dredging project here in the harbor. The Terminal Island itself, there were two sections. One section was the Terminal Island section, which was approximately the size from, say, 5th Street over to 9th Street. Then there were houses built. But a lot of people do not realize, originally, the little fish harbor itself came in from the ocean. We only had the breakwater because the breakwater was completed, say, in 1908, and gave some shelter to Terminal Island. But there were two bridges, two piers originally built over there on Terminal Island. Then when they started filling in with rocks and things, they built the harbor. But in 1922, they started this mass dredging project at the harbor. Let's see, Terminal Island had the community of Japanese. Down at the other end of the island toward Long Beach, they had, I guess, this small group of houses that ran along from Seaside, the streets you go to Long Beach on now. Then Ocean was this street up close to the railroad track. Those are the two main streets. The streets, like going along this community down at the other end of the island toward Long Beach, the streets were named after eastern cities, like Scranton Walk, Genoa Place, Ontario Walk, and most of the streets like that. We lived out on Scranton Walk. That happened to be the only paved street and sidewalks on Terminal Island at the time. That was the only concrete. We moved from the Japanese community down there. Then a school was built. Just where the bridge terminates onto Terminal Island now, off to the left going toward Long Beach was the schoolhouse. When they built that schoolhouse – that's why I didn't go to school at the Japanese community, but then I started school down at the other end. I was kind of the first school kids in going to that school. But then there was kind of an interesting thing. I went up to the third grade over there in Terminal Island, but my teacher in the third grade, her name was Ms. Callahan. Anyway, she was kind of a tall, red-headed gal, kind of pretty rigid. I think she was Irish. But later, after I had married and we had children and we went between duty stations – my in-laws or my mother-in-law lived over here in San Pedro in the Palisades area of San Pedro here on (Elmira?) Street. So, after we had children and my children started school, they went to that school between duty stations because I was a career Navy man. So, my children went to school there. Lo and behold, the principal of the school was Ms. Callahan, but she had been married. Her name was Ms. Mar. Well, she still remembered me from the school. I must have made a big impression on her because she remembered me very well from there because I remember always being in trouble. When I was a little boy growing up, I guess I was a little more exuberant about a few things.

MS: There is a story that I hear that, because you grew up surrounded by Japanese, that your sister still sings herself to sleep. Please tell me that story.

RF: Oh, yes. We lived down at the Japanese community. My three sisters went to the schools over there at the Japanese school. Anyway, my youngest sister, which I still have contact, in fact, I just talked to her this morning. But she's here visiting here. She lives up by San Rafael, a little community called Greenbrae. She always tells me the story that she still remembers the Lord's Prayer in Japanese. She says that a lot of times when she wants to go to sleep at night, she recites the Lord's Prayer in Japanese. That's kind of a cute story that I remember about my sister.

MS: Did you learn any Japanese yourself when you were a little boy?

RF: I used to, yes. I don't remember anything now.

MS: Who were some of your Japanese friends that you grew up with in Terminal Island?

RF: Well, these Japanese friends I had over there, it was a very close friend I called a Frank Atoshio Ono. He lives in New Jersey. Now, he moved back to New Jersey after he was sent to a concentration camp. But he was one of the ones that I [inaudible] when I went to – new to the school here. His father was a fisherman. Then there was a cello that was on the stage up here at the film festival. Charlie, he was one of my classmates. We're all the same age. We're in a bracket of, say, eighty-three to eighty-five.

MS: Tell me about the – people do not know what this is – the Pan American Clipper.

RF: Oh, yes.

MS: Tell me all about what that is. You saw it. What was exciting about that?

RF: Well, this is up into the late [19]30s. We're jumping ahead a little bit.

MS: We will go back to it.

RF: (I mean?), a few. But anyway, down here at Cabrillo Beach, I belonged to the San Pedro Swim Club. That was a club that we swam in the ocean quite often as children. That was a popular beach. Cabrillo Beach is a popular beach. Well, anyway, at the same time, I was studying to be a radio operator. I wanted to be a radio operator on a ship because I had in mind to be a radio operator on a ship, so that I would be able to go travel over the world. When I come to a foreign port, they have no use for a radio operator. It's a (shore?). So, I figured I could be a radio operator and see the world. But anyway, the swim club met at Cabrillo Beach. We had a club room in the old boathouse that was there. It was demolished in the [19]60s. Next door to our place where the San Pedro Swim Club met was the office for the China Clipper. It was one of the places that it landed here on the Pacific Coast. They landed both at – San Francisco was the main place, the treasure island, and they had San Diego in here.

MS: You have to explain, what was the China Clipper?

RF: The China Clipper was a fleet of ships, of flying boats that flew from California to the South Pacific and to Japan and China. It's called the China Clipper. The ensuing landing spots [were] like Hawaii, Haiti, Midway, Canton, Christmas Island. There was a lot of – the Fiji, the Tahiti, all the different places, and Singapore. The exciting point of it was that has been – I was still going to high school at the time, and that was kind of exciting. We'd go down and see all these movie stars that come in here. I remember like Imogene Coca, Edgar G. Robinson to be some of them and a few of them and some of the starlets down there. It was pretty glamorous there. So, we're a part of it. Then it so happened that the district manager for Pan Americans,

we got acquainted with him down at Cabrillo Beach. At the same time, he was also the commanding officer of a reserve training unit here. So, I got acquainted with him. He talked us into joining the Communication Reserve. It was a radio communication reserve. He told us that we could – I say we because several of my friends also want to be radio operators. That's why we were friends because of the radio.

MS: I am going to go back after this. A pretty impressive airplane, was it not? Could you describe what the China Clipper looked like and when it arrived, what it sounded like? It was pretty impressive, huh?

RF: Oh, yes. This was the big thing about it when you had the opportunity. This manager here decided that if we could copy code it twenty-five words a minute. He would be able to see if we could send this to school up in San Francisco to be radio operators on the China Clipper. Man, this was really a big thing because just dreaming about being on those Clippers, flying to all these big ports. These aircraft carried about twenty, twenty-five people, and they were deluxe super aircraft. They had the latest communication equipment and navigation equipment. They could fly long range. They could fly, I was going to say, 2,400 miles or so. The excitement of being able to be a radio navigator on one of those and being seventeen years old, it was really enthusiastic.

MS: Describe when they came in. What was it like to see them come in and land? How did they land?

RF: Well, how did they land? It was exciting to watch them land, watch these big – well, (I'll watch?) [inaudible] plane land. These big airplanes landed out here in the outer harbor. Then they'd taxi out to a – they didn't come right up to the pier, but they had like a barge out there. They would be taken off by a buoy there. From the buoy there by boat, they would be brought into the pier at Cabrillo Beach. This is where all the fanfare was, that we could get right up close to them, get autographs and pictures and whatever we could from them at the time.

MS: Did you ever go inside it?

RF: Oh, yes.

MS: Describe what it looked like inside.

RF: Well, these aircraft, to me and my eyes, they're like a big bus, super bus inside. The windows, they have portholes on the side, so you could see out when you [were] in there flying in them. Because of my contact here with the Communication Reserve, later – see, I was called to active duty right after. When I graduated from high school in, say, the June 27th of 1941, and July 9th, I had orders to go to San Diego to a seaplane squadron down there. Because I was well equipped with radio communication, I could copy code and knew the Morse code, copy code. I knew pretty much about handling radios because I was also studying to be a commercial radio operator, as well as an amateur radio, and because I built a lot of equipment when I was going to high school.

MS: Let us go back to the war starting. When the war started, what effect did that have on your Japanese friends?

RF: Well, the Japanese friends, see, I was called to active duty prior to World War II.

MS: You were not here then?

RF: I was not here in San Pedro. I was in San Diego. I was at my sister's. One of my older sisters happened to live down on Ocean Beach. So, I was at her house on a Sunday. Well, I had a day off. I had been in the Navy less than six months. I just happened to be at her house, which I stayed – when I wasn't at the base, I would always go to her house. But I was at her house when we heard the news of the Pearl Harbor being bombed. Then over the radio, we heard to report to a duty station. So, the squadron I was in – because we would fly in flights as far as a thousand miles out to San Diego. Because we were flying around the clock, we'd set up a plane. We'd fly a big one in probably twenty hours of flight. Then we had a plane come in, we'd refuel the plane and put a new crew on it and fly out. Another crew would fly out the same distance. This went on continuously from that time for a few months. Then things calmed down a little bit. This is getting to be a long story. We're jumping away from it.

MS: I am going to go back. I am going to jump ahead in time really again because there is so much to tell and we do not have a lot of time. You are wearing a Polar Bear Club sticker. What is the Cabrillo Beach Polar Bear Club? Tell me what that is and how you got involved with that.

RF: Well, I've always been a swimmer all my life. Since living on Terminal Island, I learned to swim at a very early age. They have a nice, good surf on Terminal Island. We could body surf over there. How I got involved with this Polar Bear Club, I always had hung around the beach before. Also, when I was growing up, I could swim pretty well. I knew how to swim pretty well. We had a coach, Jack Chaney, he was our swim coach. He was the one that instigated. He was a director at Cabrillo Beach. He and a lifeguard started originally the Polar Bears back in 1953. At that time, I was in the Navy. So, I didn't come back here until I retired from the Navy in 1961. I used to go down to the beach and back to my old habits because I think, at heart, I'm a beach bum. But anyway, I got involved with the Polar Bears. I really got involved with them.

MS: What are the Polar Bears?

RF: Well, the Polar Bears is a group of people that swim. Actually, we swim daily, every day. We have people swim. We all have keys to a room down at Cabrillo Beach in the bathhouse. Other swimmers, ocean swimmers, they're kind of – most ocean swimmers are individuals. They like to swim out and go in the ocean, usually swim almost alone. We try to go work the buddy system, which I firmly believe in, being somebody with you in case something happens. God only knows what could happen. But the Polar Bears is a group of people that just love the ocean, swim daily, and exercise. The premise of the Polar Bears is just health, physical fitness, and community service. I really got involved in them back in the late [19]70s after I retired and I got to spend more time. I had kind of a health problem.

MS: Why are they called the Polar Bears?

RF: The Polar Bears because they go and swim in cold water. I got involved with them in the late [19]70s. Then how I got involved in them, the bathhouse was closing down, the bathhouse itself because it was deteriorating and it was run pretty bad. It was going to be partially boarded up. We were the only ones because I was president of the (realty?) board here in San Pedro and also president of all of the realty boards in the Bay Area here. I got pretty well publicly and got politically involved with the community. So, I petitioned the recreation parks and the city council via the councilwoman at that time, Joan Flores, for a room at the bathhouse because it was being deteriorated. So, I helped take over. I reorganized the Polar Bears into a formal club. The Polar Bears were just a loose group of people. They used to just go down to the beach and hang around and annually put on the New Year's Day our first swim of the year. But then later I got involved in it, I built a nice throne and kind of formalized the club and the bylaws and got officers, presidents and vice presidents, secretary, treasurer, regular organization. But at the same time, we keep a formal set of officers. Plus, every year, we elect a male and female to be king and queen. We put that every day. Then every year, we celebrate the crowning of the king and queen. Everyone goes in the water. But at the same time, we started working on revitalizing and rehabilitating the bathhouse because it was going to be torn down. In fact, they shut it down.

MS: We are running out of time, so I am afraid we are going to have to cut this a little short. If you could just slide your chair about a foot or two to the right, I am going to have to take a picture of him.

[end of transcript]