

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Janice Hahn Oral History
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Janice Hahn: Janice Hahn. It's J-A-N-I-C-E, H-A-H-N.

Male Speaker: If you don't mind, Janice, could you tell us the year you were born and where you were born?

JH: I was born in 1952 in Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles.

MS: Could you share with us some of the early experiences you had with your dad or whoever, coming and seeing the port, why you came here, what you did, some of the memories you have?

JH: Well, my dad was a Navy guy. So, he would love to come down here when some of the Navy ships were docked down here at the port. So, that would be a family outing for us. We would come down here. We would eat dinner at Olsen's. We would walk along and look at the Navy ships. Then we would take the car ferry across the bay. We would drive our car into what is now the Maritime Museum, what was the ferry building. That was a big outing for the Hahns to pay, I think it was like a nickel to go across the water before the Vincent Thomas Bridge was built. So, those were great outings for us to come down here and mainly look at the ships that were docked.

MS: What were your personal impressions of it? What did it look like to you, a little girl coming down here?

JH: At that point, it was very industrial. The best part, of course, was getting to drive your car onto the ferry and stay inside your car as you went across the water. So, it was a young girl. Then of course, I had experiences at Ports O' Call. I believe I had one of my first dates at Ports O' Call. So, that was a great draw for a lot of people to come down here and be near the water, eat in the restaurants. But at that time, still, there wasn't a real connection, I think, between what was going on the main channel and an ability for people to really sort of enjoy that.

MS: For those who don't know, what was Ports O' Call? Describe what it was, and when you went there, what was it like to go and visit then?

JH: Well, it was really one of the only little –

MS: One thing I should tell you, my questions won't be heard. So, you should include the subject. You should say, "Ports O' Call was."

JH: Well, Ports O' Call was this little village on the water. It was sort of a New England-style village, little cottages with meandering walkways, and it had restaurants and a glass blower and things of that nature. It was interesting, though, which later, many years, I began to understand this almost feeling of love-hate between the community and its waterfront. Because Ports O' Call Village was actually built to not face the water. It was built more as an inward-facing village, and the little walkways were inside the village. So, when you were there, you really didn't have a sense that you were on this waterfront. I began to recall that, many years later when I understood the new connection between this community and really wanting to see their waterfront.

MS: Now, not that we want to have a competition here, but why don't you tell me the story your dad tells about his Navy days and his skills as a signalman.

JH: Right. Well, he was a –

MS: Say, "My father."

JH: Yes. Well, this is a story about my dad when he was a Navy pilot in the Port of Los Angeles. I think they probably said, "Who knows the Port of Los Angeles and who wants this job?" My dad raised his hand and said he certainly knew the port, and he had those skills. So, he was bringing a ship in and put the wrong flag up. I think it was a flag that was not an American flag. So, I think those who were inshore thought it was an enemy ship. Baldo Kristovich, who's still alive, and whose daughter is a Superior Court judge, Marlene Kristovich, Baldo was apparently manning one of the guns and began reeling it toward the ship. It was about ready to fire. My dad realized what was happening. Instead of lowering the flag or correcting the mistake, I think he got on the bullhorn and yelled, "Baldo, stop. It's me, Kenny." So, that preempted an awful mistake. I always look at Baldo Kristovich and say, "I'm here today. I'm alive today because you did not fire upon that ship and kill my dad." So, when they ask, what did your dad do in the war, that's a story I always tell.

MS: When you eventually moved here, what was San Pedro like? First of all, when did you move here? What was San Pedro like when you moved here?

JH: Yes, I actually moved here in 1992. So, I'm really still on probation. I'm a real newcomer here. My brother had already moved here and was living here. It was a town that I think for everyone that comes here later, San Pedro is this vision of a small town, a small community in larger Los Angeles. So, it was an opportunity to live somewhere by the water and really develop kind of a small-town feeling. So, it's been a great place to live for me.

MS: But like coming to all small towns, I mean, you don't prove yourself for a while. After maybe four generations, you're sort of allowed to come in. Talk about what was the makeup of the community of San Pedro? How did you discover that or relate to that?

JH: Well, I actually ran for city council in 1993 and lost. They weren't ready to put an outsider in as a city council person representing them. I began to understand the strong ties, the strong ethnic ties in this community. We have 35,000, 40,000 Italian Americans. We have about 30,000 Croatians here. So, they really have an incredibly beautiful, rich history, much of it tied around the fishing industry. So, I plunged myself into local activities. My kids went to school here. They played soccer. They played baseball. I was on the PTA. I began to probably establish my credentials just a little bit more as someone who really was involved in this community. But I began to sense what is described as the 100-year war with the Port of Los Angeles. There really was a sense that here is this billion-dollar economic engine that certainly contributed to the economy not just of this region but really of the country. Yet there was severe poverty, neglect, and hazardous conditions for people who lived in Wilmington and San Pedro as a result of just geographically living next to this entity. So, that, of course, morphed into a

secession movement later on, where the people of Wilmington and San Pedro were so unhappy with this relationship that they wanted to become their own city.

MS: As you said, that is a 100-year tradition. How would you describe the relationship, economically, socially, politically, between the towns and the port?

JH: Well, I think that extreme hatred has probably mellowed out a bit now in 2007. One of the things that we did when I was on the City Charter Commission in 1997 was we actually changed the city charter to mandate that one of the harbor commissioners must be someone who lived in the area in Wilmington or San Pedro. When my brother was mayor, he put three people on who were local residents. The current board of harbor commissioners has one person who is local, Joe Radisich, who is also a member of the ILWU. So, I think that served to give people a local representative. I think the feeling was that the mayor of Los Angeles would point five people to oversee the Harbor Department of the City of Los Angeles. Then after the meetings, they would get in their cars and take off to the Valley, East LA, West LA, and not really have to live with the decisions they were made. Meanwhile, the negative impacts of the pollution has really reached a crisis point. The California Air Resources Board last year attributed 2,400 premature deaths to cargo-related pollution. A million days of lost productivity in the workplace. Three hundred fifty thousand days of lost school days. Kids were missing school because of cargo-related pollution effects like asthma. So, it began to see this as being also a negative economic impact on the region. I think now we're at a point where the political will is that the port is going to grow, but it's going to grow cleaner. We've got to work on cleaner vehicles, the trucks, the trains, the on-dock equipment. So, that's sort of begun to address people's fears. There's still a huge pull and tension with how the port is operated under the state tidelands trust doctrine. This port is held in trust for the people of California. There is a three-commission up in Sacramento that oversees it. There's this doctrine. It's very strict in terms of how port revenue can be spent. I think the communities of Wilmington and San Pedro have always felt like they got shortchanged. They want to see money from this entity being poured into their community for a better quality of life, into their schools, into their streets, and into their landscaping, programs that really help improve quality of life. But so far, that's still a major tension, and I think state legislation will have to be enacted to change that.

MS: Isn't there an internal tension even in addition to this between San Pedro and Wilmington? Because Wilmington often gets the short end of the stick on a lot of this stuff, too. Isn't there that going on?

JH: There is. There's always been that. Wilmington considers themselves sort of the stepchild of the City of Los Angeles. Even though Phineas Banning really founded the port in Wilmington, they've probably more than any other community felt the negative impacts of the truck traffic, the pollution, the noise, the air quality. Yes, they think San Pedro gets more than they do. One of the things we've done is we've embarked on a major transformation of the waterfront property in Wilmington and San Pedro. We've embarked on what we think is a way to connect the people of Wilmington and San Pedro back with their waterfront. So, it's a major waterfront property in San Pedro. It's going to go from the Vincent Thomas Bridge all the way out to the breakwater. In Wilmington, it's going to include the Bannings Landing area. So, we can bring back recreation, open-space retail, commercial retail to the people of Wilmington, so

they can also benefit from the water. One of the things the Urban Land Institute figured out when they came out here a couple years ago to study the revitalization of Wilmington and San Pedro was you have this great asset. It's the waterfront. They characterized it as being instant entertainment. You have cruise ships, cargo containers, fireboats, tugboats. People love the water. For 100 years, the Port of Los Angeles has been focused more on its industrial side as opposed to its recreational side. We believe that there's a huge benefit to the recreational aspect of the water.

MS: Now, aren't you also in a competition with Long Beach? It's already doing that. It's rebuilding the pike. It's already ahead of San Pedro as far as development of Pine Street and all of that. But at the same time, this is the number one and number two ports in the country. How do you balance making it a fun place to go and visit with your kids versus driving 40 percent of the trade? Isn't that a pretty hard balance to make?

JH: Well, it's the challenge that I faced when I was elected in 2001 was how do I continue to nurture this economic engine which benefits the region and the country? How do I preserve a quality of life for people in Wilmington and San Pedro who deserve, as part of the formula of the people of California – I mean, this port is for the people of California. How do I give them back this recreational aspect? I think you can do both. I think you can have this economic engine. I think you can have clean air. I think you can have a recreational opportunity. It is all possible. I don't think one is mutually exclusive over the other. You can have it all. I think we have a more interesting main channel than our neighboring community of Long Beach. Their main channel – really, they don't really have a main channel. They have the water. But we have something even more exciting. We have cruise ships, which we have about a million passengers that embark and disembark on an annual basis. Again, we have the most powerful fire boat in the world. When it sprays its water, it actually goes over the Vincent Thomas Bridge. We have a Vincent Thomas Bridge that, through the efforts of the community, we've now lit with these gorgeous blue lights at night. So, we really have a more interesting main channel than Long Beach. We just have to get the promenade built, and we have to attract more commercial retail.

MS: What's the timeframe for this promenade development?

JH: Well, I wanted it to be done yesterday. But I've been told it could take anywhere from ten to twenty years to actually complete that. But we have nine miles of waterfront just on the San Pedro side. That's bigger than San Francisco, Seattle, Oakland, San Diego. We have really a more expansive space of waterfront to develop than even those towns. So, there's no reason we cannot benefit from a tourist attraction and a place for locals to go, just like those other cities.

MS: Let's talk about this economic engine. A lot of people just don't understand how significant this port is, economically, not only for America, but for the world. Talk about that aspect of it again.

JH: Well, I think the economic benefits of this port being combined with Long Beach, the largest port complex in the country, accounting for over 40 percent of the trade that comes into this country, I think it was made very real to us in 2002. I think everyone always talked about it before. Everyone knew how many jobs it accounted for and how many billions of dollars it

meant to the economy. But in 2002, the West Coast ports shut down during a labor dispute. It was really the first time I think the economists got to quantify what it actually meant to the economy. It was shut down for ten days. It was a shutdown that was known about. It was predicted. So, some of the cargo was already beginning to be diverted to other ports to sort of prepare for it. But even so, we were able to quantify that every day that this port was shut down, it cost our economy \$2 billion a day. That is huge. The other interesting aspect is it impacted the global economy. I actually was in Asia at the time with my brother on a mission, a trade mission. We were meeting with businesspeople in China and Japan and Korea. They were already feeling the effects of the shutdown of this port. We were told later that there were some businesses in China that never recovered because of just a ten-day shutdown, so, which leads me to talk about the security aspect. Because my fear has been that if someone wanted to cripple the global economy, they would attack and target and destroy the Port of Los Angeles.

MS: You sink a tanker in the main channel; that would do it. Looking to the future, aside from the benefits of developing the waterfront and all that, we've got a condo construct. Many of the people, the old-timers, have mixed, if not, negative feelings about what they see. We often hear complaints about how wonderful it was in the [19]50s and the [19]40s and how it's not what it used to be. But now, there's a promise of, hopefully, changes and making it more wonderful again. But there's an ambiguity about that, that it's not going to be the same place. What do you see, looking at that component of it, the social and newcomers coming in and changing? What's the future of the community?

JH: Well, I think the future of the community is very bright and hopeful. The problem has been that the current makeup of the community has not been able to really support the kind of businesses that we have, even right now, in downtown Los Angeles. John Papadakis –

MS: You meant San Pedro.

JH: I mean, San Pedro.

MS: Let's try that again.

JH: Yes, okay.

MS: The people in the local community.

JH: The people in the local community have really not been able to support the businesses, the restaurants, the shops in downtown San Pedro recently. In fact, John Papadakis of the Papadakis Tavern, which really puts us on the map, has said it's been the outsiders that have been able to keep his restaurant alive for thirty years. So, again, when Urban Land Institute came out here, they said, "You want to revitalize San Pedro? You want to bring this place back to life, support your restaurants, support your businesses? You build housing in downtown San Pedro. Along with the development of the waterfront, you're going to have a first-class community." So, we've been pushing forward. I believe what they said. So, I've been courting developers to come and build housing in downtown San Pedro. Because we know that if people live in San Pedro, they will go out at night to the restaurants. They will shop in the shops. They will walk along the

waterfront and support any kind of commercial retail that's there. So, it's already been very successful. People from – locally and other places are seeing this as a chance to live by the water. Because some of the other places, Redondo Beach, even Long Beach, is outpricing some people. So, this is – I think it's our future. Our future is to build more housing in downtown San Pedro, develop our waterfront. I don't think anything will ever harm the charm or the ethnic diversity or the rich history that San Pedro boasts. It's only going to improve it.

MS: Perfect ending. Anything else you wanted to add, wanted to say?

JH: I think that's good.

MS: Great. Okay. Well, I need to take a still photo of you.

JH: Okay.

[end of transcript]