

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Joan Milke Flores Oral History
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Male Speaker: In the old days in LA, it was the California Club. Well, right? [laughter]

Joan Flores: That's true.

MS: If you're –

JF: I don't know where it is now.

MS: As a woman, you couldn't get into it, but you at least [inaudible]

JF: Exactly. Well, the Jonathan Club, you could only go the third floor. Women could only and use a certain elevator, which is interesting.

MS: Right.

Male Speaker: We're rolling.

MS: Okay. Becoming a politician or a leader or a community involved here, where are the places, the institutions that you need to get support from? Where do you go to get that support?

JF: Well, first of all, you go to the individuals, the people who vote.

MS: Yes.

JF: Okay. In order to garner support from the community and to get people to support your candidacy when you're running for city council, it's necessary, first of all, to go to the individuals who are going to be actually doing the voting. But there are many other groups of people that you need to interreact with. They are the unions, they are the businesses. They're the schools that are not under city control or certainly weren't at that time. There are a lot of clubs, the Dalmatian–American Club. It's now the Croatian American Club, but –

MS: No, not just Dalmatian. It was reversed. It's now the Dalmatian–American, and then there's a Croatian Club. It's a separate club.

JF: Oh, yeah. Okay. I thought they kind of melded, but – okay. So, let me start that.

MS: Where are the places, the clubs, where would you go?

JF: Some of the clubs that I would interact with were The Dalmatian Club, The Croatian Club. I started something a little unique to city council, and I called it my Day in the District, the DID. Every Thursday I would go to one section of the district, and I had deputies in each of those districts, and they would plan visits. We'd go to businesses, we'd go to clubs. We'd sometimes do some precinct walking. When we weren't running for city council, we'd visit schools. I really got not only to know the district in that way, but also garnered support. I mean, I remember businesses saying to me, "I've been here for 35 years. Nobody I've ever worked with in city government has ever come to see me." I learned a lot, and I enjoyed that. That was my favorite

day in the district. I remember one day I went out with the port pilots and I wanted to see what that exercise of getting on a ship and having the tugboats kind of bring you into dock was like. They didn't warn me in advance, but I had to climb up a Jacob's ladder, which is, I mean, first of all, they put a bright beam – flashing beam on my arm. I said, "What's that for?" They said, "Well, just in case you fall in the water, we can find you." I said, "Oh, my, do I really want to do this?" But it was very daring. It was very thrilling, and it was very entertaining and informative. A few weeks later, I did that same exercise on a tugboat, so that I could get a perspective from the other end of that. But those kind of experiences of going to the community, learning the businesses, learning what the businesses are, learning what their needs are, and how they can better serve the constituency, I believe was not only necessary, but I believe it really enhanced my image with the citizens of the area.

MS: There are places like Auntie's and everyone seems to go to Auntie's. There's Trani's and I mean, there are places where business gets done. What are the places where business gets done in this town?

JF: I'm sorry. [laughter] There are many places in town where business gets done. In Wilmington, there's some wonderful, wonderful restaurants where the Rotary meets, where other clubs meet. In San Pedro, of course, there's Auntie's, Papadakis Taverna. There was the Princess Louise, which I'm sorry, is not there anymore. But it was a floating restaurant in the port. Certainly, there are little fish places along down in the fishing part of the port. I remember some wonderful lunches that fishermen put on, where the fishermen did the cooking. Eventually in my fundraising, once a year, I had a fundraiser. We hired fishermen from the ports areas to come up and cook for us. They did the whole smear. We had lobster, we had fish, we had mostaccioli, sauerkraut. I mean, the whole traditional food array that's so popular in the port. I was known for these fisherman's feast, we call them. I remember people telling me, "When we get an invitation to a fundraiser, nobody wants to attend, but when we get a fundraiser invitation for your fundraisers, everybody wants to go." They said, "We'll go to this one." It was just friends, served family style, lots of lively music. It was something that all of us, including myself, look forward to.

MS: Do you want some water by the way?

JF: I would.

MS: Yeah. I've got a cup over here.

JF: Okay.

MS: So, what's this about? San Pedro and San Pedro?

JF: Let me start that again. There are many people who are not really San Pedrons who call San Pedro, San Pedro. I once heard the story of a woman who, she wanted to be grammatically correct. So, she always pronounced it San Pedro, San Pedro. Well, people would say, "No, it's not Pedro, it's Pedro. It's Pedro." Finally, she said, "I gave in, I finally started saying San Pedro." A few years later, she said, "I took a trip to Mexico and I was in a taxi. The taxi driver

asked me, "Where are you from?" She said, "Finally, I can say, pronounce it the way it's really supposed to be pronounced." She said, "I'm from San Pedro. He said, "Oh, Pedro, I know Pedro." [laughter] So, she said, "I gave up." She said, "It really is Pedro." You can really tell Newscasters or when you're traveling, when you're in L.A., you can really tell people who know this community. They don't call it San Pedro. It's Pedro.

MS: You also go to Cabrillo Beach.

JF: That's exactly right. [laughter] Cabrillo Beach. Not Cabrillo Beach. Cabrillo Beach.

MS: During your years on the council, what were the big changes that took place in the port? What were the things that were going on in that period that were changing things here?

JF: Some of the major changes that took place in the port while I was in office was, there was a great need for access by citizens to the port. Prior to that, the port mostly was about business and growing and in providing employment for people and bringing goods in for not just L.A. and the greater L.A. area, but all points in the United States. We felt that the port needed to give back a little bit to the community. So, we tried to make it our mission to have the port be a little more resident friendly. A result of that is some of the museums around. When Fort MacArthur closed, I mean, the upper Fort MacArthur closed, we wanted to make that available to the community and the port helped with that. The marinas are a good example of – and some commercial things, the hotel down at the Cabrillo Beach, there's more recognition. After I left, the Red Car came, which was a wonderful innovation. It really gives citizens a chance to see their port and to feel like it's their port. Not the port, not that port, not their port, but our port. I think that was one of the things that I enjoyed doing while I was on the city council. The promenade beginnings were another one.

MS: But tell us the story of the promenade.

JF: When I was in office, I did what we called the state of the community address. I did this in the various communities within the 15th District. One year I was doing the San Pedro state of the community address at Ports O' Call. I wanted to make it a little different. Since I'm a walker, I love to walk, I verbally imagined for the guests at this luncheon that we were starting in White Point and taking a walk from White Point to the World Cruise Center. As we went along, I pointed out the things that had happened during the year, or the issues that had come up during the year. When I finished the talk, I said, "Now, wouldn't it be wonderful if you really could get on a promenade at White Point and walk through the community, go to the World Cruise Center, and eventually go to Banning Park in Wilmington and just see all the wonderful things about this port. That had the germ of today's promenade. Hopefully someday it's going to go all the way to Wilmington. It will really tie the citizens of these two communities together in a way that hasn't been even thought of in the past.

MS: What is the accomplishment again of your years here, that you're the most proud of?

JF: The things I'm most proud of during the time that I was in office was the libraries. There were new libraries both in Wilmington and San Pedro. Again, these are issues that matter to the

people. We held the growth, even though Beacon Street changed from a Navy area, R&R area for Naval and longshore people coming in or – I'm sorry. Let me start that over. Let me think about this. Some of the things I'm most proud of that took place during my tenure on the city council was coming together of the communities. Several improvement we had, libraries built in Wilmington and San Pedro. There were many public buildings that were built here. I was proud to bring government to the citizens rather than have the citizens go to government. The marina was developed during the time I was on the city council. There were just a host of, let's see – I'm sorry. I got a whole list of these things that I –

MS: That's okay.

JF: – can't remember. Let me see. I have a list here somewhere. Let me just take a quick look.

MS: Okay.

JF: For my campaign literature. [Laughter] Let's see.

MS: Okay. We're rolling?

MS: Yeah.

MS: Go ahead.

JF: Some of the things I'm most proud of during my tenure on the city council is bringing government to the people rather than helping people come to the government. There were many improvements during the time I was on the city council. The Cabrillo Marina was undeveloped. There was no marina there when I first, was on the city council. We developed libraries in Wilmington that had never had a public library, and also a new library for San Pedro. There were obviously the strain improvements, the museums that came into being during that time and a continuation of things that John Gibson had started. So, there were many, many improvements. Watts, which is the northern end of this district, also needed a library. They never had a shopping center. So, we worked with the community, a business community to develop a shopping center there. There was also a lot of concern about trucks in the harbor. There's still a lot of concern about trucks in the harbor. John Ferraro, the then president of the City Council and Pat Russell were working with Scag. They did a study and it showed that trucks and trains were going through residential communities and really lowering the quality of life for these communities, particularly trains. They did a study called the 2020 Plan of the Port. That plan showed that there would be 120 more trains – more additional trains every year going through these residential communities by the year 2020. We knew that something had to be done to stop that train, if you will, from ruining those communities. So, together we worked out a plan to have a task force to say, "What can we do about this?" We eventually came up with the idea of the Alameda Corridor, which would take the trains out of those residential communities and put them on a corridor on the Alameda, which was strictly non-residential business, industrial, and take it out of those residential communities. It was a long effort. I chaired the first meeting. I remember the ports were initially a little reluctant to go along with this. Independent apartments at that point didn't want somebody coming in and making their decisions

for them. We kind of brought them in, kicking and screaming but eventually they realized that this was the best thing for the ports as well as the citizens. That eventually they were going to have to do something like this and maybe the best time to do it is when you have citizen support. So, we developed this. It was a joint project between the city of Los Angeles and the Port of L.A. and the Port of Long Beach. Not a lot of those kind of deals, because of course they're competitors, but they worked together. This has been a sterling example of two ports to our competitors working together to solve a problem. It was so successful that there were many other places in the United States where they would write to me or call me or ask me to come back and explain this project to them, New Jersey, for instance. "Tell us how you did this. Tell us how it was done, because we need to have that too." I had originally hoped that this would also be a truck route. I think every day that I'm on the Harbor Freeway, wish more and more that it had been expanded to make a truck route. I think the truckers would've appreciated that too, because they get a lot of consternation against them because of the increased traffic. It increased even more when they took the toll off the Vincent Thomas Bridge and then the trucks instead of going around to Long Beach, went over down Harbor Freeway and over the bridge to Long Beach. So, at some point that's something else that's going to have to be addressed.

MS: What do you see of the history of the port and the port community here is, I know growth is an issue that you had. Now growth seems to be the thing. We're got a big high rise coming up next door, and you're always talking about redoing Sixth Street and the Harbor is growing and changing. Now what are your views about the future and what do you think is going to happen? What are the things we should be concerned about?

JF: When I think about what's happening with San Pedro and Wilmington I have kind of mixed feelings. I love the new buildings going up, the new hotels, the condominiums with views of the water and new places to shop and new places to eat. I love that. But I have a mixed feeling about whether or not this is going to bring so many new people into the area that we're going to lose our uniqueness. That it's no longer going to be the San Pedro and Wilmington that we love. Where generations stay and children grow up and continue to live here, where the old traditions of clubs and families and church prevail but I think change is inevitable. The one thing I hope is that the citizens who live here, the people who move here will respect the history and the things that are important to the people who've lived here for those years and years and not try and make it a new enclave but rather respect the old while creating their little niche in the community.

MS: Now, you started the story about visiting Councilpersons Gibson's house and overlooking, and then there's an end to that story. Why don't you bring that in?

JF: As I mentioned earlier, when I first came to the port and first visited John Gibson at his home and saw that fantastic view of the harbor, I said to myself, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if someday I could have that view?" Well, I guess miracles still happen because I have that view. A friend recently asked me, "Why do you love being in San Pedro so much? Why do you love that condominium and that view so much? I'm sure that after a while you don't see it." I said, "I see it every day. It's the first thing I look at every morning. It's the last thing I look at before I go to bed at night." I have realized my dream.

MS: What is that you're looking at? Describe that view.

JF: That view is a view of the entire port. I call it movable art because I see ships coming in and going out. I see work happening. I see residents going to work and coming home from work. I see the parks, I see Fort MacArthur. I can even on a clear day, see downtown to L.A. but that's not the focal point for me. I like looking at my community, San Pedro.

MS: Perfect. Let me get a picture. You can move your – slide over about two feet. Now get this little –

[end of transcript]