Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Vito Giacalone Oral History
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Male Speaker: The topic of my question and your answer, for example, if I say, what's it like in San Pedro, you can't say, "It's great." You have to say, "It's great in San Pedro," so I know what you're talking about. I'll remind you of that. It's no big deal. Okay. We're rolling? I'm going to give you the hard one first. Please say your name and spell it.

Vito Giacalone: Vito Giacalone, V-I-T-O, G-I-A-C-A-L-O-N-E.

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

VG: 1922 in San Diego on the waterfront.

MS: Great. Tell me about your father first. What did he do and what was his background? What was the back of his history?

VG: Well, he comes from Sicily.

MS: You have to say, "My father –"

VG: My father came from Palermo, Sicily. He was a fisherman there, came to the United States. His father was a fisherman. They came into San Diego in 1914, about that time. He fished Alaska on the *Star of India*. They didn't fish off of the *Star of India*. They were passengers. After that, he came back and became a tuna fisherman, one of the pioneers of the tuna industry. After that, he had our family. We grew up as fishermen. So, most of my life has been seafood. Then go ahead.

MS: Well, I was going to ask you then when did he come to San Pedro?

VG: No, my father never came.

MS: Okay. So, when did you come to San Pedro?

VG: I came to San Pedro in 1946. Now, my first time to San Pedro, I was seven years old. We docked at the old fish docks where your Maritime Museum is. They had the old piers there. They had a little commercial district there on Beacon Street. My father bought me a big Hershey bar. They were about that big for a nickel. [laughter] I took it. I was so happy. As I was climbing aboard the boat, I dropped it into the water. It disappeared. That's the last of the chocolate bar. He didn't buy me another one. That's it.

MS: Well, tell me when you arrived in San Pedro. What do you remember about how you came here? What did it look like? Aside from that Hershey bar, what else was going on?

VG: Well, San Pedro, it seemed to me, all lumber. Remember now, I was seven years old. So, it was 1929 when I came in here. There wasn't too much down there but these saloons and (Longfellow's?). Is that what they called it? Then you had the one that was so popular, Red's Bar, Shanghai Red, (Bank Café?), and Globe Theater. I remember all of that in that area, and streetcars, Globe Mill. They had a big old tank out there in front, all wooden docks. But I didn't

think much of the town at the time until I got back later on in the years.

MS: Why had you gone there when you were seven? Why had you visited there?

VG: My father wanted to take me on a boat ride. He wanted to start breaking me in as an apprentice. It was fun. It took us quite a bit, about twelve hours to get up here. The boats didn't run as fast as they do today. But I liked it. I liked it. I enjoyed it. It was an adventure as a child. My father tied me to the mast of the boat because we hit some good-sized swell. I untied myself, and he couldn't find me. He thought I went overboard. That's the true story. I was down in the engine room watching the pistons, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum. Pow, pow. He came up, "What the hell?" [laughter] He scared the hell out of him. Oh, gosh.

MS: So, when you get to San Pedro, Vito, what did you do? The ride, that visit, what did you do? Where'd you go? What'd you see? What happened next?

VG: Is this the first time we're speaking of?

MS: First time, yes.

VG: Well, that's all. That's all. He took me to the drugstore. It was on the corner. I still don't remember the name. It was there for ages. Then he took me right back to the boat, and we unloaded about thirty tons of fish. It was all redfish, rock cods, and whatever they called, boccaccios, and things like that. We unloaded at the old fish markets. Gee, I miss the fish that we unloaded. You don't have that today. It's hard to get some real good fish for cioppino. I loved it. So, that was the most I can remember at that age.

MS: Do you remember anything about the fish market at all? What was going on there when you were unloading?

VG: Not too much. Only the old winches that they had going up and down with the big square boxes that held about 300 pounds. We were all ice. It wasn't brime like it was later on, chopping that ice and breaking the fish loose. But hell, when you're raised in that kind of an environment, it's part of your lifestyle. That's what I remember about that part.

MS: Now, where did the fish come from? Was that a previous trip or did you catch the fish coming up here?

VG: No. He didn't pick me up until he got in with the load. We docked in San Diego, made more provisions, and then traveled up to San Pedro. But as far as catching the fish, we didn't have to go too far then. The oceans were plentiful. We went out about thirty miles outside of Coronado Islands and set our lines. There were a lot of fish then, but we came to a point where they had to disappear, too much fishing.

MS: Do you remember the first time you went out? Did you go out with your dad fishing?

VG: Yes.

MS: The first time you went out, what was that like?

VG: During summer, I was taken out to what they call Cedros Island in Mexico and off the shores of Mexico. I was chumming bait for them at a quarter of a share. I had no canopy over me, and they fished with the poles. I got hit in the head so many times. That's why I'm like this. That canopy had to come in. I wouldn't go anymore. But this is how I started fishing.

MS: Describe that process. When you say chumming bait, a lot of people are not going to know what that is. What's the process when you went out then?

VG: Well, first, we had the bait nets to catch our anchovies or sardines. We would put them in the tank and they would be alive. When you want the fish to become wild, as we called it, you would take a scoop of bait and throw the scoop out. The fish would fly all over the place, and the fish would become, what they call, a boiling. Then you would throw your pole in, and it was only a feather. It wasn't a sardine or an anchovy on the end of it or a squid. It was just a feather and a barbless hook. As the fish would become wild, they'd bite anything. They'd just flip them over their shoulder. We would fill the decks, stop fishing, ice them. That's what I remember at twelve, thirteen, and fourteen years old. I was working as a crewman, and not much of a summer did I have.

MS: So, when you got that quarter share, how many hundred thousand dollars did you make?

VG: Well, I got $20 a week, that's all. But $20 in 1932, no, little 34, was a lot of money. But you want to know the best part of the story? I was sleeping. My father says, "We have to get up at 4:00 a.m. to unload." This is later on. About 1:00 a.m. or so, at the foot of my bed, there was an image. I'll never forget that image. I covered myself. It scared the heck out of me. My father came about 4:00, 4:30 a.m., he says, "Come on, we're going on the boat." I said, "Dad, I don't want to go." I was sleepy. I said, "I don't want to go." He says, "Well, you know why," he says, "because you're going to play ball today." I said, "Yes, but I don't want to go." As the story went, the boats were running on gasoline engines, right? As the captain went down into the engine room, they had a flywheel that they would turn over with a spike. Well, the cabin was shut all night, and gas was leaking. So, the vapors were all in there. When he turned the wheel, it sparked and blew that boat up. We lost two fishermen. My father broke both legs. The fire all through the waters was so immense. One brother, to save the other brother, jumped into the fire, and they both had degree burns, second, third. My father hung on to a pole. This all happened in San Diego. I started yelling, "Save me, save me," and a sailor came by, because San Diego had the Navy at the time. When the sailor came by, he heard the voice, went down, and picked up my dad. They took him to the hospital. That morning when I got up, after playing ball, I went down to the fish market waiting for the boat. The fellow says, "The boat blew up." I said, "What happened?" He says, "I don't know. Some of them died. " I said, "I don't know, oh gosh." I went home and called my mom. "Mom," I said, "Dad, I don't know what happened." We found out he was in the hospital with two broken legs. He survived. One year, we didn't work, and we made it. But these are things that you don't forget.

MS: That's a wonderful story. I want you to tell me that story again because it's so good. I want

to hear it again. Tell me that story. One morning, you're –

VG: Starting from where?

MS: From the beginning, when you're in bed.

VG: While I'm in bed. Okay. I got it now. I'm in bed, waking up about 1:00 a.m., and seeing this image at the foot of the bed. I covered my head and couldn't sleep the rest of the night. My dad came up, "4:00 a.m., let's go." I said, "Dad, I don't want to go." I said, "I'm so damn tired." He said, "Do you want to play ball tomorrow?" I said, "Well, yes, I want to." He said, "Okay. Come down and unload," he said, "when we come back in." Well, little did I know that the captain went into the cabin, which was closed all night. Vapors were leaking. He turned the flywheel. It sparked and blew the boat. Fire all over the place. My dad was blown into the water. One of the crewmen was blown from the boat to the top of the wharf without a scratch. I remember that. He dove in after his brother who was in the fire, and they both got burnt. My dad had broken legs, two of them, hanging onto a pole, yelling for help. A sailor came by, helped him, got him to the hospital. When I went down to help him unload the boat, they told me it blew up. They don't know what happened to all of them. I went home, told my mom. We got a hold of my dad, and we went to the hospital. There he was in bed with two broken legs. For one year, he was inactive. But we survived, and this is what life's all about.

MS: What year was that?

VG: Well, that would be about, let's see, 1934 or [19]35 in there.

MS: What was that big shadowy figure?

VG: I don't know. She's a spirit, not my time.

MS: Did you think about what it might have been?

VG: I don't know because it happened again later on in life.

MS: Tell me when it happened again.

VG: I tell you, they didn't want me early in life. They wanted me to suffer a few more years. [laughter]

MS: When you started to tell me that happened again, tell me that story.

VG: In 1943, I was in the Navy, and I was standing on a carrier at attention. All dressed up, my hat squared, beautifully shined shoes and everything, a whole complement of people, sailors up there ready to take our last liberty. The carrier was built by Kaiser Steel, which we used to call Kaiser Coffins, if you remember that saying. Kaiser Coffins were too short for me. The planes had to take off. They had to get off in a hurry. I was standing there, and I said, "Oh man, I got the wrong ship." As I was thinking about it, a Navy lieutenant came by, and he said, "We need a

driver at Coronado Island for Admiral Mitcher. Anybody know San Diego?" "I know San Diego." He says, "Report to Fleet Air." Of course, that carrier sunk, and I haven't heard any more about it. But these are things that happen during your lifetime. Actually, I was saved again. That's it. That's so many. That's it.

MS: When did you first move to San Pedro?

VG: I first moved to San Pedro in 1947, correct.

MS: Start again. We can't have any helpers. Let's start again.

VG: First time I moved to San Pedro was 1947.

MS: Why did you move, and what was the reason for that?

VG: I came up to fish my wife's uncle's boat for sardines. It was a 100-ton purse seiner. At that time, there was plenty of sardines around, believe me. We had about 135 purse seiners docked in San Pedro. They'd come in every night with sardines. It was just plentiful. That had to do a lot with the depletion of the sardines. But I fished here until we went on strike. Of course, we wanted more money. We were diminishing our funds. They were leaving. My lovely wife here said, "Why don't you sell fish? You've got a lot of that BS. You sell fish." She says, "We can make a go of it," and I did. I built my truck, iced it up, picked up fish from the markets, went from door-to-door, and made a great living out of it. Today's fish that you see in the stores were a duplicate of how I iced my truck because the stores had all their fish in plastic. When I iced it up with all the greenery and the lemons and everything and go door-to-door, people just thought it was so great. In fact, I had a profile by the news pilot titled, *The Last of the Fish Peddlers*.

MS: I want to learn more about this. So, selling fish, give me a typical day. What did you do in a typical day when you were selling fish?

VG: When I was selling fish, first place is to get a route going. The only way to do that is knock on doors. You could blow a horn, but they won't come out and ask if you'd like to see my fish. So, when they would come out to the truck, it was set up so nice and fresh. That's the way I built. The first day that I sold fish, I brought home, I think, $35. She thought it was great. My wife thought it was great. She says, "Oh my, that's a great start." Well, it developed later on. To make this story shorter, I ended up with about 400 customers a week. That included hospitals and schools and people who wanted fresh fish. Because, like I said before, fresh fish was not that great in the stores at that time. They didn't ice it. They packaged it. As I made a good living out of it and educated my children, I had a call from Stater Brothers and Vons for me to set up their stores. I couldn't sleep thinking about what a wonderful idea for me to have their car. I had, remember, no hospitalization or medical. They would take care of that and everything else. Then the voice, the woman that I lived with, my wife, says, "After you set them up, you'll just be a number." I say, "You're right." "Stay with your customers." I did it another five or six years. Then I sold everything. Retired for twenty-one years and went into Christian work.

MS: Let's go back now. Describe your truck. What kind of truck was it? How did you set up a

truck like that? Where did you get your fish?

VG: That was very easy. You usually get a half ton, three quarter ton just the bed and then have a carpenter. That's where I started with a wooden box. Later on, when I started making money, and you've seen the catering trucks, that's what it was. It was stainless steel catering truck with one side for my storage, one side for eggs and fresh bread, and the back end of it for all fish. It was really done well. I had five trucks. I had four or five years, I would get rid of it and build another one. Three of my trucks were still in this town when I retired. They were a stick shift, which is the way to go. Not with the one on the above dealer where it was too much of a gear. So, I sold fish for 35 years. In fact, like I said, I had a profile when (Brenner Martin?) had the news pilot.

MS: Let's go back in. When you first started, how did you know what you were going to do? You just bought a truck and figured this might work?

VG: I let the Lord [laughter].

MS: So, how did you find customers? How did you develop a route? What was your route?

VG: You're right. When I first started, I didn't know where to go. I just took the word of people that lived in different – one fellow came from Fontana. This is good. He had a fishing boat here. He said, "My father has a ranch out in Fontana and you would sell fish to all the vineyards. They love fish out there." So, Fontana was about an hour and a half to go. No freeways then. It was all Valley Boulevard. The sixty-six was the main road. I'd get up into Cucamonga, Ontario, Fontana, and would get into the vineyards. They had all these people picking grapes, and they would buy my fish. They would stop and come out and buy my fish. They thought it was a great thing. So, I kind of hit a gold mine there. I'd come back empty. Next day, I'd go out to Pasadena and get into these old, well-known, rich people. The servants would come out. That was an interesting life, believe me. But I work now, remember, from 5:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. I'd eat late, but I hated that. Then try to stay up for a while. I did that for thirty-five years. I know I look good, but that's it.

MS: So, again, I'm going to be really specific here. Where do you get your ice? How do you pack the thing? Where do you get your fish? How do you make it look good and all that? So, before dawn, what do you do?

VG: I'd be down at the fish market at 6:00 a.m. The Union Ice Company had a storage bin at the end of the dock of the fish market. I used a bin of ice. They would crush it and take it to your truck. I think I was paying, who knows, $3, $4 to ice my whole truck. Then I would go from fish market to fish market. The names were like L.A. Fish and Oyster, Catalina, Star Fishery, Del Mar, Staters, Independence. I still remember those names. I would pick out what I wanted, but it wasn't as it is today. You would buy your fish, pay cash, take the fish, and put it in your truck. You would ice it down and it displayed the best part of it. You still had your storage of fish. But do you know what my best secret was? I might as well tell you. My best secret was how to make customers enjoy it. When they would look and say, "Hey." So, I was known as Vic's Seafood, not Vito, Vic's Seafood from the ocean floor to your door. Right? Vic's label on

your table. I had a lot of things going for me. A customer would come out and say, "Oh, I like that." "I have something better for you." I'd open the side door, same fish. I shouldn't tell you this [laughter]. "Oh, Vito, Vito, Vito, Vic," can't say Vito, "Vic, you treat me so good. Give me two pounds." Okay. But you have to have that in business. You can't do that. Then I had my comical ways with people. You got to be a storyteller, and never tell a customer your problems. Let them tell you their problems. They say, "Gee, you have a wonderful life. You never complain." I had my problems, but everybody does.

MS: Well, you said that from San Pedro to Fontana was an hour and a half. It's got to be longer than that. It's an hour and a half today on the freeway.

VG: Well, we didn't have freeways.

MS: I know. So, it must have been three hours at least to get to Fontana.

VG: No.

MS: No?

VG: No. You didn't have the cars. Now, we're talking about 1950, 1951, very few cars. Figueroa was my outlet to Colorado Boulevard, right? That would be forty-five minutes or so. Try it today. It'd be an hour, hour and a half, switch it during that. It was different, different traffic. That's the reason I really wanted to quit. Traffic got too heavy. You hit a point there.

MS: So, who were some of your favorite customers, the ones that you liked a lot? Tell us some stories about them.

VG: I had some prominent people, some movie actors. I had some well-to-do people. I had Mr. Wardman. Bonnie Wardman was in Whittier. Her husband was one of the first builders of the telephone wires and poles and everything else, Mr. Wardman. I had the Studi brothers who were the inventors of the steel bit. They had Howard Hughes, remember? They had the same thing. I don't know if they sold to him. I don't know. I had Dina Merrill who was a movie actress. I had another movie actor. What the heck was his name? Walter Pidgeon. I had some high-class people. Then I had Katherine DeMille who was – had the foundation for children that were not taken care of, the Hathaway Home, they called it. Then I had another home that took care of children, the Episcopal Home, which had the benefactors. They were well-known people. But if I go back to my book that I have, I'd find a lot of people in there.

MS: So, when you went around – now, I heard something else about you. Before you got into this fish business, unless this is a fish story, you wanted to be a stand-up comedian.

VG: Yes, that's right.

MS: Why don't you tell me that?

VG: I won't say I'm sorry, but I had my life to live over again. With the connections that I had

during my war years, being stationed in Hollywood, and singing, and having the comedy attitude in different bars and all that, I didn't keep it up. I used to sing on street corners, and people would listen. They would listen, but you have a lot of guts. But my whole life has been that way. What the hell, if you don't have a sense of humor, you have nothing. Even my teachers in school, you know how they kept me quiet? They made me president of the school [laughter]. That's the only way. They put me in charge. One of my teachers, she got so angry at me. We had study hall. After the wedding, we had a lot of sandwiches left over. That was our best meal. We had walnuts and all that. I was cracking walnuts with my shoes on my desk. It echoed all through the study hall. Teacher come up. She says, "Vito, you're disturbing the class." I said, "Okay. I'll stop." Her name was Mrs. McIntosh. I was like, "Mrs. McIntosh, you see this? What am I drawing?" "A boat." I said, "I was going to name it after you. Now, I'm not." She flipped [laughter]. But you're talking about comedy. I love it.

MS: Tell me you wanted to be a stand-up comedian. Say it.

VG: I wanted to be a stand-up comedian. I wanted to tell stories. There were a lot of stories that I made up. I wrote them down. In fact, I got a whole cabinet full of jokes and stories and everything else that my daughters want to put it into some kind of a book form. But I did it in shorthand. You can't write stories up in longhand anymore, so I wrote it the way I like. As long as you have the punchline, you have the story. That's the way to go about it. That's it.

MS: Give me a favorite story that you remember.

VG: Well, there's one that I just made up about three, four months ago. Being program chairman of the retired elks, I have stories about senior citizens. Those are the senior citizens which they love. In fact, I tell them, we are 200 to 300 senior citizens at our luncheons. If you add all our ages up, we're here before Christ. That's how old they are. Then I tell them about the pills. If we all take our pills from our purses and whatever we have, we can open up our own pharmacy because we're all on pills. That's what keeps us going. Then I tell them the fellow that came in. This is a true story. But then I have to build it up, right? So, the fellow comes in and he says, "I want to see the doctor." "Right away, if you have this type of a nurse." He says, "Yes, your appointment is now. Go into the room, take off your clothes, and put on a smock." Well, I did that for the first time. I froze to death. The doctor came in about a half hour later. So, I said, "Well, can I build up from this?" Then I said, "Well, you know what, say that I went into the room, and this fellow was in there already with the smock on, and I said to him, 'Oh, I'm sorry.'" I said, "I just came in, I had an earache, and they told me to take –" he said, "Don't get angry." He said, "I came in just to read the water meter." See, this is what I love to do. A fellow comes in, he tells a nurse. He says, "Where's the receptionist?" She says, "Over here." He says, "What is it you want?" She says, "I have shingles." He says, "Okay. Go into the room, take off your clothes, put on the smock." He did. Doctor comes in. He says, "You have shingles?" He says, "Yeah, they're on the truck. Where do you want them?" See, those are the kind of stories they love [laughter].

MS: But that must have been in good stead when you were going around selling fish. If you could make people laugh, they'd buy fish, right?

VG: Yeah.

MS: Why don't you tell me about that? How important was telling stories?

VG: It was very important to tell stories. They'd come out and they'd say, "I love your fish, but they're too high." I said, "Well, I'll get a lower shell for you." They said, "Your fish are too dear." "No, no, it's seafood, no deer." You've got to keep going like that in life, believe me.

MS: Was there any particular – I mean, with all the traveling you were doing, was there a time you had a breakdown?

VG: Yes.

MS: Tell me things or any dramatic events that happened during that time?

VG: You see, the Lord is with me. Yes, you're true. There were so many things that happened. I was going on Baseline in Fontana. Baseline is a street above sixty-six, nighttime, 1955. Deer were still in the hills. I go down one of the dips, and in front of me is this beautiful male deer. I missed it by that much. If I would have hit that deer, it would have come right on top of me, number one. Number two, here I am on the freeway at Lakewood Boulevard, and I'm the second car in line. In front of me was an elderly man. No, it was the third car. Behind him was a bunch of kids honking the horn, blowing this and that. The old man gets out, has a gallon of gasoline, throws it in their car, and throws a match in there. The thing just, whew. I backed up. There was nobody behind me, thank God. That car came in flames. That man flipped. He went. Now, those are things you think would not happen, but you never know who's out there. That's why those are a couple of them. I'd come very close of being in accidents within seconds. Missed the car because you're traveling for thirty-five years, no traffic tickets and no accidents. That is really phenomenal. Somebody's watching over me.

MS: Obviously, you wanted to be able to make sure when you ended the day, you didn't have any more fish in there, right? How did you do that?

VG: That's a very good point. I'm glad you asked.

[laughter]

VG: I'd go to the poorest section. I never told my first customers that. I'd get rid of it at any price I could. Where do you make your profit? From the beginning, to the end. Whatever you have at the beginning, you're paying for your fish, paper goods, and everything. The end is what you have to bring home. That's what I used to go to. I used to go to all the great pickers that lived in shacks, dirt floors. But one thing that I loved about these people, they would play their guitars and sing, not a worry in the world. Here I am thinking about going home, this and that, family, school, how to educate them and this and that. They just were wonderful people to deal with, very, very poor people.

MS: What were you selling your fish for? I mean, were you selling whole fish or fillets? Tell

me how you were displaying it and what were you selling it for. What kind of fish were you selling?

VG: Well, of course, the red snapper was always in demand. Your small fishes were your major profit, squid, anchovies, sardine, mackerel, because you'd buy them for one or two cents a pound. If you could sell them for twenty cents a pound, the markup was great. Yet it was cheap. You filleted your fish or you bought it from them filleted. That was a little higher price. I remember when I was selling jumbo shrimp, it was 98 cents a pound. My king crab legs were about a dollar and a quarter a pound, which today are $14, $15 a pound. Northern halibut, which we call barn doors, they were 300, 400 pounders. We were selling them for $1.69. Today, it's $15, $16 a pound. Abalone, you can't buy it anymore. Lobsters, what, you can remember at a dollar or two a pound. Crab, the same thing. But you can't buy fish today unless you really have the money. It's high. But I love it. They're good.

MS: Let me ask you another question here. How many customers did you have on your route, and how many miles was the route?

VG: On my route, miles that I would travel and customers that I would have was in my profile. I had 400 miles a week that I would travel. In my thirty-five years, I think the reporter that interviewed me said that I went to the moon and back. It was 280,000 miles plus, whatever it was. Then customers were, like I said, just about the same, about 400 a week, my customers. That was a good number, about 100 a day. I only went out four days a week. I needed a day to clean up and a day to buy my fish. You always bought at the end of the week. You make your profit in buying, not selling. I think all businesses are like that. It's in your buying, your merchandise.

MS: How many people were there like you out doing that? Were you fairly rare?

VG: At the beginning, I'd say there maybe was traveling about sixty, most Japanese. A lot of Japanese after the war went into it. But it narrowed down to maybe ten or fifteen as the years went by. There was a reason that industry died. The reason that the industry of selling seafood from door-to-door died was because of the big stores. They put the pressure on us through the health departments. I had to go to court twice. The ones that stood up for me were doctors. I'll never forget that in Whittier. The doctors were off on Wednesdays at that time. This happened at that court hearing on a Wednesday, and I had two doctors in there with me. They stuck up and they say, "This man's fish is better than any fish in any store." So, they let me go for another year or two. But then they wanted me to carry a sink with water, wash my hands after every sale. How are they going to do that? Then they wanted me to have the back of the truck with a glass that would cover. Because when I'd opened it up, it was all open. I say, "My friends, I says, when this thing closes, all the dust gets on it. When I open it, I have it all on my hands." He says, "That's why you wash your hands." So, they actually caused us all to quit. All the door-to-door salesmen today, helmsmen, produce, bread men, fish men, no more peddling. What you see on the streets today are against the law, on the corners. They don't want you to do it.

MS: So, when did you stop doing it? What year did it end? What did you feel that last day on your last route?

VG: That was something I did feel, you're right. Twenty-one years ago.

MS: Just give me a year.

VG: 1987, [19]97. Is that about it?

MS: [19]86, it says.

VG: [19]86, yes. I retired in 1986. I remember that, yes. That was hard to let go after all that. Building a business up is great. You don't know where you're going to go, where you're going to start, how much you're going to make or anything else. But I had a wonderful woman behind me. I've got to tell you. I don't usually say that. But she gave me a lot of, what they call it, guts to get out there. "You could do it." She says, "You could do it." I'd come home. She never bawled me out for being this, that, late, or where you've been. Always had food for me. Listen, that's why I'm still with her.

MS: Good idea.

VG: I've been looking around but –

MS: You can't find anything better.

VG: [laughter]

MS: So, what was that last route? Describe what you did and what you felt.

VG: The last day?

MS: Yes.

VG: The last day on my route, the whole week, because everyone was different. Remember, now I had different days. I had a lot of people that were crying. "Oh, no, don't quit us. Don't quit us." I had a lot of drinks. I used to pretend that they come out with drinks. I'd take a sip and my truck looked like Nino's Bar. I'd put it down, bottles of beer. Then you'd have to go into homes, too. This was a part that I didn't like. It shouldn't be on tape, but you could knock it off. Some of those women out there are something else, not men, women. My morals are high, believe me, and I kept them that way. No way was I going to get involved with any customer on my route. You could delete that. But it was tough. This is door-to-door salesmen. It's tough.

MS: There's nothing more sexy than a fish salesman.

VG: Oh, God, especially when you get a good-looking one.

[laughter]

MS: That last trip, tell me again. That last week, describe it again what happened.

VG: Well, I'll just say my last week was the toughest week of my life facing my customers who didn't want me to quit. But I told them I can't go on. The health department won't let me and I wanted to retire, too. Gosh, thirty-five years and I was sixty-three or sixty-four. I could have gone another year or two. But I just didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it. What I was talking about is a story that has to do with customers. You have to, like I say, make up stories sometimes where this woman was going to take a shower. Her husband was already in the shower, and the doorbell rings. The husband says to her, "See who it is." She says, "But I'm nude." He says, "Wrap a towel around you. Please, go down and see who it is." Well, it's her neighbor, Bob. Bob looked at her and said, "Jeez," crying. "What do you have under there?" She says, "Nothing." He says, "If you drop your towel, I'll give you $500." She says, "He won't know about it, my husband. $500 is mine." She dropped her towel. He says, "You look nice. Thank you," and left. Well, she went up. Didn't say anything. Her husband was coming out of the shower. "Who was it?" She says, "It was our neighbor, Bob." He says, "Did he give you the $500 he owed me?"

[laughter]

MS: We're going to end it on that one.

VG: That's it.

Female Speaker: Can I say something now? His customers really loved him.

MS: Well, why don't you get into the hot seat?

FS: No, I don't want that. They would call. They want to drive out there after driving over. They wanted him to go.

MS: Hold on one second. We'll get him to tell us that.

VG: Oh, God.

FS: Where's the fisherman? He's not on the list. I want the fisherman.

MS: I hear your customers really loved you. Tell me some stories about that and how that happened.

VG: We became a family.

FS: I'm telling you –

MS: Start again.

VG: My customers, they really enjoyed me and they loved me because I was invited to

anniversary parties, weddings. Not only that, what really got me, the children that grew up as I was selling fish that were two and three years old were now thirty-five and thirty years old. They would see me, "That's my fish man. That's my fish man." Even today. Today, he says, "Oh, gosh, he had the best fish. I love the sand dabs. I love this. I love that." That works on you. That really works on you. One of the stories that I made up that has to do with this was in the Ozarks. There was a woman that was eating one of these big sandwiches. She started choking. She said, "I can't breathe. I can't breathe." One of these people from down under says, "Lady, let me help you because I heard this on the radio." "Please," he says, "lift up your dress." He pulled down her panties, and he kissed the right cheek. She went into shock and dislodged the obstacle from her throat. She says, "I can breathe now. I can breathe." He looked at her and says, "I've never seen this done before, but I heard it on the radio. It's called the Heimlich remover."

[laughter]

[end of transcript]