

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
William Gravett Oral History
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Male Speaker: Okay, John. Let me ask you the hard question first. Please say your name and spell it.

William Gravett: My name is William Gravett, W-I-L-L-I-A-M, G-R-A-V-E-T-T.

MS: William, what year were you born? Or how do you like – are you William or –

WG: William

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

WG: December 23rd, 1937, Little Rock, Arkansas.

MS: How did you first come out to San Pedro? What was the circumstances of that?

WG: Well, my parents wanted a better life for us as we grew up.

MS: What did your father do? What kind of work he was doing?

WG: My father worked at Todd Shipyard, which is no longer here in St. Pedro's. It's closed. But he retired thirty-five years as a pipe fitter. He also worked two jobs, Regan Forge & Engineering Company. He started as a custodian and became a foreman later years. He retired off two jobs: Todd Shipyard, [19]35, and Regan Engineering, [19]37.

MS: What year did you come out here? When did you come out here too?

WG: 1942

MS: You have to say, "My father and family."

WG: My father and family, mother and father and family moved to San Pedro in 1942.

MS: So, the war was on, and you were a little kid still. But what are your earliest memories of of San Pedro when you came out here?

WG: Well, my earliest memories of San Pedro, I was five years old actually. It was a fun place. San Pedro was – a lot of nice people, and everybody was friendly and nice place to grow up and nice schools and everything. We had fun.

MS: Your father came from where?

WG: My father came from Little Rock, Arkansas.

MS: So, when he came out here, what did he do? Did he directly work in Todd Shipyard, or did he do other things?

WG: When he first came to California, he got a job at Seal Beach at the Weapons Center.

MS: What was he doing there?

WG: I don't really remember what he was doing there, but he used to work there.

MS: So, your brothers and sisters?

WG: I have eight brothers and two sisters.

MS: Where are you in the pecking order

WG: I'm the fourth from the top.

[laughter]

MS: So, when you were growing up, did you explore the harbor or do anything around the harbor? Anything you remember about stuff you did when you were a little kid?

WG: When I grew up as a kid in San Pedro, we used to go fishing in the harbor and swimming at Cabrillo Beach and hiking up Palos Verdes hills and things like that.

MS: Were you intrigued at all by all the activity, the shipping, and the boats and the fishing? Did you ever watch any of that?

WG: Oh, yes. As kids, we used to watch the ships coming out of the harbor, and we used to – we knew about the merchant marine business. We see them getting off the ships and around town and the sailors and around – from Terminal Island and Fort MacArthur being in San Pedro and all the soldiers around town.

MS: What about shipbuilding? Did you ever go watch your dad working at Todd or at least observe it?

WG: We never really went inside of Todd Shipyard and watch my father work. But we just knew where he worked and what he did for a living at Todd.

MS: Where were you living? Where did you grow up?

WG: We grew up here in San Pedro, at a housing project called Channel Heights, which is no longer there. We stayed there for seventeen years. Then we moved to another housing project here, right close to here, 216 South Beacon, called Rancho San Pedro. We lived there until 1954. My mom and dad bought a house up in 790 Oliver, remained there until I became a young man.

MS: The Channel Heights Project, who lived there? Who were the kind of kids that were there?

WG: It was a multiracial neighborhood and project in San Pedro. The kids were all fun. We

had a lot of fun playing in the project and playing in pet park and playing different sports and different activities in school and all that.

MS: Where are a lot of Black kids in San Pedro? Or what was the population?

WG: Gee, I can't – population in San Pedro when I was going to Grammar School, I can't remember the amount, but it wasn't a whole lot of Black people here in San Pedro then.

MS: Was your father a church-going man, your mother?

WG: Yes. My mother and father, church-going. They were Christian mother and father. We were raised in the church, and we attended church in Wilmington, California. That's where some of my relatives had membership there. We used to attend here when we came to California, nearly all of our lives, most of us.

MS: So, what was the name of that church, and tell me about it?

WG: New Testament Baptist Church. It's in Wilmington, a small church. The pastor lives in Los Angeles. There were two or three former pastors before I moved there. The pastor I joined was Reverend (RG?) Washington, which he was here for twenty-eight years. 1962, we moved from that little church, and we built a bigger church around the corner, which still exists there at 1244 Robidoux Street in Wilmington.

MS: Tell me about that particular pastor. What kind of man was he?

WG: He was a very caring man and very humble man. He was really a good pastor, a good one to be to be taught – we were taught the Bible to us under his tutorship. He was very – he had a wife, and he lives in Los Angeles. He never took a salary, as I remember, from the church. He didn't need a salary from the church. He joined a union in Los Angeles, and he just lived off his union salary, not the church salary.

MS: Was that basically a predominantly Black church? Or was it mixed?

WG: Predominantly Black in a Mexican neighborhood at the time.

MS: So, as you were a young boy, did you ever get into Los Angeles or ever go downtown at all?

WG: As a boy and young man growing up in San Pedro, we used to go to Los Angeles quite a bit, different activities. I remember going downtown Los Angeles, shopping, riding the red car and the bus. We'd go to different sporting events in Los Angeles as far as football, basketball games, and going to Coliseum relays and activities like that.

MS: You went to San Pedro High?

WG: Yes, I attended San Pedro High, graduated in winter, 1956.

MS: After you graduated from high school, what did you do next?

WG: After graduating in San Pedro High School, I attended Harbor College for two years. Then I went in the Army for two years. After I was discharged from the Army, I started working. I worked at – Western Electric was in the City of Commerce and worked there until – for six and a half years, I worked there. Then I later became a member of the ILWU Local 63 on the waterfront.

MS: Now, how did that happen? I mean, there were days where you couldn't become a member of ILWU and that changed in the late [19]60s. Tell us about that and how you got a chance to join the union.

WG: Well, the way I had chance to join the union, became a marine clerkman. As I was growing up in San Pedro, we were familiar with the longshoremen and the clerks in the port and working in the ships and loading, unloading the ships. But we knew that we couldn't become a longshoreman because of sponsorship. It was all Caucasian. Of course, you couldn't get a sponsor. We had friends that fathers were longshoremen clerks, and they were longshoremen clerks. Then on August 1968, we were called – they had to hire sixteen Blacks as marine clerks. There were a few longshoremen before that time. It's called – I think they got into what's called a sporty – he played sports for the ILW, and he became a member of the longshoremen. There weren't very many Black in Local 13. But we got calls from guys who we went to school with and raised with and girls who were raised with them and told us that they had to hire sixteen Blacks on the waterfront as marine clerks. We took a math test. There was forty in my group that was hired, twenty-four Caucasian and sixteen Blacks. We took a test. They took the top twenty-four scores for them and top sixteen score for us, and I was one of the top sixteen

MS: Why did you want to go work on the waterfront?

WG: We always wanted to work on the waterfront all our lives. Actually, we knew we couldn't work – we knew the condition and the salaries of the waterfront workers, and we always wanted to make more money. So, we had the chance to do it, and we were happy that we were able to become ILWU member.

MS: Now, that was particularly a period of struggle. It took a long time for that decision to take place. Do you know anything about how the suit was brought, and how it all came together, and now made possible for you to join?

WG: Well, we never found out what – how they arrived at sixteen Blacks. We never did find out why they had that. We knew why they didn't have any Blacks. We didn't know where it came or originated from. We knew it took a long time to come about. We knew that.

MS: When you did join, was there still some resentment among the Whites that were in the union that didn't like the idea of Blacks being in the union?

WG: Yes. When we became members, they resented us. They didn't want us in the union. We

were in the union because they had to hire sixteen Blacks, and they didn't like that. We had a lot of trouble. The twenty-four White members were all sons and brothers of classic marine clerks. They were familiar with the waterfront, and we didn't. We hadn't worked on the waterfront. We'd just get assigned, dispatched to different type jobs on different docks and waterfront. The Whites used to get the better job, and we got the undesirable jobs as marine clerks.

MS: Do you have any really particular incidents in mind where you're met up against resistance and basically opposition to what you're trying to do?

WG: We had a lot of opposition. We had a lot of – well, when we got hired, there was a law called Civil Rights Act 1964. That was the name of the lawsuit where we came under, and the lawsuit said no discrimination in the Union United States, race, color, creed. There were no Blacks. So, that's where we came in. So, when we – it took us five and a half years. I didn't mean to get ahead of myself. After we got in this Class B membership and Class A membership, the twenty-four White clerks told us that – and we knew, well, after being on the job that we were never going to become Class A members. The twenty-four guys told us that, "My father, my brother, my uncle, my grandfather told me that you're never going to get a Class A membership. They are never going to take those Blacks in the union. So, you're not getting in either." So, they told us we had to do something. So, we already knew he had to realize. We had a – we contacted this law firm in Los Angeles called the (Bar Center?). They only deal with labor, dealing with minorities. They explained a lot to us, what we had to go through and all that. That took us five and a half years. There were two Black men. One was from San Pedro by the name of (Hernan Segar?), the late Hernan Segar, and Maurice Porter was from Hueneme. They went through the lawsuit with – three attorneys were assigned to us. They did all the work for us, and we continued to work while they were doing all the things they had to do. They subpoenaed the records from the local union, the union records, and Pacific maritime records and the international records. Then they also went to Portland, Oregon, and they filed a similar suit in Portland, Oregon. They went up there and found information about that. They also went to Detroit, Michigan, to the Ford plant. They filed a similar lawsuit back there. They wanted to know what went on and all that. So, it took us five and a half years for the lawsuit. So, the law says you get immediate elevation on the job, five years seniority, trained to be supervisor and supercargo. It had a lot of union rules. We read all the rules, the five-year rules, had to be a Class A member before you can run for office, five years before you can go steady for a company, five years before you can go nights, and things like that. It took us five and half years. Meanwhile, we had a lot of trouble on the dockside. We had a lot of resentment and a lot of racial calling. Basically, you could have had a fight every day. I didn't have a fight myself. I had a lot of confrontations. But they had a lot of fights. They said a lot of things to us, things like, "You shouldn't be here. A Black man is not supposed to make as much money as White men. You realize how much money you're making. What are you going to do with all this money," and things like that.

MS: So, did any of this happen to you personally? You heard about it? Or did you witness any of it?

WG: There was a lot of it. Basically, the reason nothing happened to me, because I was from San Pedro see. All the longshoremen and clerks knew my brothers. They knew us. But the

other Blacks were from Los Angeles and couple from Long Beach. They didn't know them. They had all kinds of problems with them. They didn't say the things to us what they said to them. So, if they had said those things to me, I would have had fights too. But they never said those things to me because they knew I was from San Pedro. They knew I went to school with their son and daughter. They knew me, see. I was a good guy [laughter], so to speak.

MS: So, you were from San Pedro [inaudible].

WG: San Pedro, that's the difference. Yes

MS: So, do you remember witnessing any conflicts and fights and confrontations at all? Did you see any of them?

WG: I witnessed some fights on the waterfront.

MS: Can you tell us some of the stories?

WG: Well, just the things that were said, they just couldn't take them. They just had fights.

MS: Do you remember your first day on the job? Was that sort of a nerve-wracking time knowing that there's a lot of opposition out there? What was it like, your first day?

WG: Well, my first day on the waterfront as a marine clerk, we didn't really know what to expect when we checked into dispatch hall. They were in charge of time. They dispatched your hours. Of course, when you first start, you're on zero hours. All sixteen of us were on zero hours. So, that time, used to dispatch a lot close to one dock, and we were all together on zero hours. The dispatchers are here in San Pedro, where the cruise line is now, Berth 93. We all walked in the parking lot, walked in, and didn't really know what to expect when reporting. But everybody on that terminal, whatever they do out front, they had always told us that we were being dispatched. We were coming there. They were out front watching us come in. It's like, "Here comes the circus. The Globetrotters, here they come," watching us coming in. That's what happened on the first day on the job.

MS: Was it curiosity, or was there a sense of this is a mob that might take some action? What?

WG: I don't think they'll be able to take any action, just the curiosity, just knowing we were coming and seeing what we looked like, I guess, what's going to happen. I don't think anything was going to happen for the mob.

MS: So, then you get into the dispatch hall. What happened next, and how did you go on the job?

WG: The dispatch hall, that was a very hostile environment, the dispatch hall, us being in the hall and checking in. We had heard things that were said in the previous union meetings and what they have said about us coming in and what they were going to do and things like that. We had heard from different members and told what was going to happen, the things they wanted to

do to us at all that.

MS: Like what? What were the threats?

WG: On the job, well, get us fired. Basically, get us fired from the job, so we wouldn't be down on the waterfront.

MS: So, you went in as a clerk.

WG: Right.

MS: So, what was your first assignment as a clerk? Was there any kind of fooling around with that too?

WG: No. As a clerk, we had different types of clerk jobs, different type of jobs that clerks do, various jobs, maybe about seven to ten different various type jobs. My first job was called the basic truck delivery clerk, where the chief clerk, he gives you paperwork, assign to a trucking company, and you're going to pick up this particular cargo in such warehouse. Here it is. Here's how you make your tally. As he loads the truck, you count. He counts, and you count. Then you have to tally your checklist. He signs for it. Then that's it. That was my first job.

MS: That sounds like it was a pretty basic job. You never had any problem with it?

WG: No, never had any problem with it.

MS: When you went on later on, were there any assignments you got that were sort of challenging, not necessarily that the job was challenging, but because the environment made it tough for you or the other fellow workers made it hard for you?

WG: All the time, when I went to very different type of marine clerk jobs, it was a kind of hostile environment from the longshoremen. They didn't want to work with you. They're just saying things to you, derogatory things to you like that, and trying to do things to get you fired, basically. Like you're telling them do this and – see the longshoremen were actually working with the clerks. The clerk tells them about the cargo, where to put the cargo, what to do, and they basically didn't do what you tell them to do. So, you did feel they'd get you in trouble and get you fired, things like that.

MS: Now, we're a lot of these folks who were these guys who are giving you trouble – because during the war, a lot of men came from the South. Whites came from the South and the Southwest. Were these that generation, or were these people who had been in Los Angeles for years? Or was there any difference?

WG: Basically, most of the people in waterfront, they had been on the waterfront for a number of years. Lots of longshoremen clerks were locals from San Pedro and Wilmington and Long Beach. They had been there for a number of years.

MS: A lot of people don't understand about working on the waterfront, but it's a dangerous job. Talk about that job and how dangerous it is.

WG: Well, working on the waterfront is very dangerous, probably the most dangerous job in the world. You're going to get killed or injured any day on the job. Of course, now, they have more safety features now than those when we first started. But there was a lot of injuries and a lot of deaths on the waterfront since I've been there.

MS: So, can you tell us anything that you actually witnessed that were –

WG: Yeah, I actually witnessed several deaths. A container ship came in. We were just going to start. The longshoreman went up unlocking containers, and at one fell, he slipped and fell. [inaudible], and he fell straight down on his head. He died. There was another longshoreman, he was on the on the deck. He was a signal man, a [inaudible]. When the winches and loads are going back from the ship and back and forth, he's the signal man. The boom on the car broke and the winch broke. The cargo fell down, and it cut him in half, killing him. I've seen cement slab fall on a longshoreman, killed him. I've seen steel plates fall on another longshoreman, killed him. I have seen the top handlers there, basically pick up the containers and load them on the trucks and off the truck. They can pick up about 50 tons. I saw two people get ran over by the top handler and get killed. I didn't actually see it. Some of us saw it. Some of us didn't but were just there. Then I saw the train ran over one longshoreman, killed him. I just got to talking to him, killed him. He was crossing to check the train when he wasn't supposed to be on that track, and the train decided to kill her. He had come in and ran over and killed him.

MS: You want to tell me a little bit about the tests? Tell me about that.

WG: Well, the test we took in 1960, becoming a marine clerk, that was – we had sixteen Black and twenty-four White. There were very few Blacks tested. We all were in the room. We tested. We came, we figure, about thirty. But the Whites tested, it was several hundred tested for twenty-four jobs. So, their scores ranged from 100 to 95. Our scores, the Blacks ranged from – one of my brothers got a hundred, and I got ninety-eight, by the way. The sixteenth person, Black got 78. Seventy is passing. So, naturally, all the longshoremen heard about the scores and everything. We went out on jobs, they were saying, "Yeah, he only made 78. We made 94 and couldn't get in. He only made 78." We ignored most of them. I said, "Well, if you heard the last sixteen made 78, so you also heard about the one that scored 100. How come I couldn't be the one that scored 100? It happened to be my brother, and we all look alike anyway. So, why couldn't I be the one that made 100?" That time, the longshoremen, they weren't very smart. Most of them have a high school diploma. I said, "I didn't see you taking the test. You couldn't have passed the test. I know you couldn't because you can't even spell Canada." I can tell that by working with them, [laughter] things like that.

MS: We're talking about some of the safety issues and how difficult it is to work on the waterfront, how dangerous it is. Did you ever lose any close friends in any of these?

WG: Yes, the dangers on the waterfront. Several of my close friends and workers in the scene I can think of, they've got killed. Yes. There was a foreman killed recently that got smashed with

a container, grew up in San Pedro here. He got killed. He's a good friend of mine.

MS: Did you ever have a close call yourself?

WG: No. I have never been injured in the last time or injury since I've been on the waterfront. In fact, civil maritime, they have a Safety Awards banquet every year at [inaudible] in Long Beach, up and down the pier. They give plaques out to injuries, and I received plaques. I got one in March of this year for thirty-eight years, no injuries, no accidents. I've been blessed as far as accidents and injuries.

MS: Now, do you have a family?

WG: I have a wife and two sons.

MS: Are those sons working on the waterfront? Do you encourage them for that?

WG: Yes. My older son, Carlton, which is twenty-nine, he's a Class A longshoreman. My other son, Tony, is a casual in the casual force in labor and waterfront. He's a senior at Fulton State College.

MS: Did you encourage your sons to go on the waterfront?

WG: No, I didn't encourage them. No. I didn't encourage my sons to go on the waterfront. Carlton went to college and played football. He decided to come on the waterfront himself after college. He had the choice of going to fill your major and go into another job. But he wanted to be a longshoreman. So, I didn't encourage him. I didn't encourage my youngest son, Tony. I haven't encouraged him to come to the waterfront either. He's going to college to be working in television. That's what I think he's probably going into, unless he changes his mind.

MS: I'm sure right now he probably makes more money than I do on the waterfront. [laughter] But why didn't you encourage them?

WG: Well, I didn't want to encourage my sons to work on the waterfront. I wanted them to do what they want to do. I didn't want to try to choose their occupation for them. They had to make the decision for themselves.

MS: But was there a feeling that there's something about the job you felt that they may not have liked, or any other reason that you thought that they should go in a different direction?

WG: No. I would like for them to come and be a waterfront worker as myself because it was very good job. The benefits are great, and the pay is fantastic. You really live a good life being on the waterfront. But I didn't encourage them to do that. Like I said, I didn't encourage them to become a longshoreman clerk.

MS: Did they ever come and watch you work, or did they know what you did?

WG: Yes. I used to take my sons to the waterfront, and they know what I did – basically what I did on the waterfront and –

MS: Well, you tell us what you do now. What is your job now?

WG: Now, I'm a supercargo which is the highest paid clerk job you can have. My job as a supercargo, my duties are, well, you can work out of the dispatch hall and work different docks every day, different – but I chose to work for a company – I work [inaudible] employees of a company and I report to every day. The shifts I supervise are loading and unloading of the ships, container ships. I work in Long Beach container vessels, and I supervise the containers, loading and unloading from the ships. I have several clerks working under me as any day do different jobs. They dispatch the containers and load containers from various parts. I instruct them where the containers should go and instruct the floors as to where they're going on the vessel. I have clerks underneath the cranes. They're placed underneath the crane, and they tell you and check all the containers on and off the vessel. I supervise them.

MS: So, you're on the docks then, literally as it's being loaded or unloaded on the dock.

WG: I'm on the dock, yes. I'm back and forth under the cranes and under the container yard, back and forth all day long, supervising and watching what's going on and making sure everything's alright.

MS: When you were a little boy growing up, did you ever dream that this is what you're going to do as a man. Did you have any dreams about that?

WG: No. As a little boy growing up, I had dreams of working on the waterfront. But as a young man, we knew about the waterfront and what happens. I would like to become a waterfront worker, but I knew that there was sponsorship. We knew about sponsorships. We didn't feel we had a chance to become a waterfront worker for that reason. I never thought I'd be a waterfront worker.

MS: What is the sponsorship program? Explain that.

WG: Well, sponsorship, as they hire, the grandfather sponsor his son. Then his sons sponsor their sons, and sons sponsor their – it's all relatives. It's nepotism, what it was. That's what they did the hiring, all family members, all sponsorship. Each member gets a sponsor. He sponsored maybe the older son this time; next time, the next son; and like that. We had no chance.

MS: So, when you were growing up around the harbor, did you ever watch these ships going and coming and wondering where they were going and maybe thinking about going to see yourself?

WG: No. As a little boy growing up, we used to watch the ships come in and out of harbor docking and leave the harbor. I never thought about being a merchant seaman or being on one of those ships. Of course, we used to go on ships. They had open house at Todd Shipyard various times, and Fishermen's Fiesta, they used to have a Fishermen's Fiesta once a year. The fishing

boats, we used to go on the fishing boats as guests during the Fishermen's Fiesta. Of course, several of our friends' fathers owned the fishing boats. They used to invite us on the ships during the Fishermen's Fiesta. But I never had dreams of being a fisherman or merchant seaman or longshoreman.

[laughter]

MS: So, what do you enjoy doing when you're not making sure that ships get loaded properly? What are your interests?

WG: Well, my interests and now, when I'm not working, being with my five grandchildren and going to movies. I'm active in a church. My wife and I are both active in the church. We spend quite a bit of time in the church. We do a lot of traveling. My wife's from Shreveport, Louisiana. We go there. We try to go there at least once a year. Her mother lives in Chicago, and we go to Chicago at least once a year. We love to travel and go to different places, get out vacations.

MS: When you go, do you ever check out the ports?

WG: [laughter] When I go, I never check any of the ports in my traveling, except when in Hawaii, I checked on Matson Terminal. Other than that, I never checked out any of the terminals when I went on all my trips. But I observed where the ships dock. When I went on different trips, I observed where the ships come into the port, where they dock and the crane. I can see the crane. But I never went down and witnessed actually how they work.

MS: What would you say to a young Black kid today about his career if he was looking for something to do? What would you tell him, from your experience, that he should think about doing?

WG: Now, if I was to tell a young Black man about his future, what he should do, I would first tell him to go to college and get an education. After education, he can pursue whatever he went to college for. I wouldn't encourage him to come on the waterfront. I'd encourage him to go to college and to graduate. Then after that, he can choose and pick what he wants to do. I wouldn't advise a person to come out of high school and try to get on the docks to try to work on the waterfront. I'd definitely encourage them to go to college and graduate.

MS: After forty years on the waterfront yourself, when you look back, what do you think about those forty years? Do you look upon them as good years for you or mixed years or what?

WG: As I look back on the past forty years I've been on the waterfront, it's been great years. I love working on the waterfront. I enjoy my job and doing waterfront work with people and meeting people and the benefits the job brings with it and the financial gains from the job and things such as that. It's been a great forty years.

MS: If you had someone clicked you back forty years ago, what would you do? Would you do it again? Or would you take a different direction?

WG: Looking back, just forty years, if I had a chance, I'd do it again. [laughter]

MS: Good. That's good. Terrific. Any other stories you want to share with me? This is a record for the next 50 years. So, don't leave anything out.

WG: Yeah. Well, I think, back when we first started going to the lawsuit, actually the lawsuit started about two and a half years after we were on the waterfront. We realized we're never going to become a Class A. But in the lawsuit, I remember, the union said, "We don't discriminate against Black from the union." Pacific Maritime said, "We don't discriminate." The Union International was located in San Francisco, they said, "We don't discriminate." The union says, "We don't even know the hiring practices of the waterfront. Because Pacific Maritime International, they tell us what to do. We [inaudible] on the block." Pacific Maritime said, "We're the middle guy. The Union International dictates to us." International said, "We're located in San Francisco with the Union and the Pacific Maritime dictate to us. We don't know what happens on the docks. We don't know how to hire, and we don't –" they all tried to say they were blaming the other person. They had nothing to do with it. So, we had to sue all three in the lawsuit. They sent to subpoena the records from each three, the union, local itself, and Pacific Maritime International, subpoenaed the directors, and that's it. Well, the Office of Settlement, after five and a half years, it said, "We will give you everything the law calls for, define your seniority and immediate elevation on the jobs and [inaudible] the union rules and go nights and go steady for a company and all that. Class A and Class B was \$10,000 a year, Monday through Friday. Saturday and Sunday [inaudible]. You couldn't count Saturday and Sunday, only Monday through Friday, difference was \$10,000 a year. So, five and a half years, it was \$10,000, it was \$50,000 in salary, five years, 10 years – 10,000 each year, that was 50,000. Then you end the lawsuit, you get five years – \$5,000 punitive damages. So, actually, according to the law, they ordered \$55,000 from the lawsuit. But they said, "If we give you everything the law calls for, except the money. We wouldn't give you any money. If you want any money, you have to go to federal district court." So, the attorneys we had, they told us. We said, "We didn't really set out to get any money in lost wages. We set out to get rid of the class." We accomplished that. We wouldn't really try to get the money. We didn't want it. We didn't want it. We didn't set out to get any of the money back. We set out to get our Class C registration. We achieved that. So, we left it at that. Yeah.

MS: Did you have any regrets about doing that? Or did you feel that was a smart thing to do?

WG: Well, some of the people wanted to go over to federal law and federal court and get the money. Some said yes. Some said no.

MS: Now, how are things changed for those first sixteen tests coming in today? I mean, there was another lawsuit another ten years or so later. Are the conditions dramatically different than they were? I mean, how does it compare, [19]68 and today?

WG: Well, conditions now and the hiring practices now, a year and a half after we came in, our group was forty. They hired eighty-one marine clerks, seventy-five White and Six black. So, you see that wasn't too equal. So, it's twenty-two Blacks and sixteen and six, so seventy-five

Whites. So far as clerk hiring, since that eighty-one, they all came into what you call the casual hall, casual workforce. They gave out casual cards, and you come in. You go through the process, and you become a casual. You work as a casual, as a clerk or longshoreman. They hired by hours and had nothing to do with race. They hired by hours. But as far as the lawsuit after us, there was no clerk lawsuit. There was lawsuits by the longshoremen. There was the foreman, the Black longshoreman filed the lawsuit to become a foreman. Because there were only a handful of Black foremen. They filed a similar lawsuit same as ours to hire Black foreman. They had to hire so many Black foreman. Then there was another lawsuit before that called the (Galen?) foremen when they came in. Another Black longshoreman came in. They filed a discrimination suit. I forget how many Blacks they had. But they brought them in as longshoremen. Because they had no chance to come in as longshoremen, the nepotism and all that. The Blacks won the lawsuit. They brought the longshoremen in. I don't recall how many, but most of them were middle aged men, and they didn't last. They weren't there that long, see. Because they were probably fifty or past seventy, came in, see. So, they were there no more than twenty years. Most of those, they're all retired now.

MS: So, would you say that the conditions today are a little better or pretty much the same or a lot better? How would you describe conditions today from [19]68.

WG: Well, conditions today are a lot better as far as hiring Blacks as forty years ago. Because forty years ago, I say you had no chance to become a longshoreman or clerk until the lawsuit we had. But now the way they do it, the way they do the hiring now is done through the casual hall, and everyone has an equal chance now. Well, it's really not equal because every union member and longshoreman and clerk, as they hire, they had these, what they call interest cards. Every member gets an interest card and can sponsor one family, anybody, one person, and being a lot fewer Blacks, so you're still talking about Fewer blacks than Whites. Anybody can have an interest card. As a matter of fact, they had half a million interest cards came in as a casual, and 17,000, I think, were union members cards and – no, not seven – all seventeen were union member cards. You see, union member cards, you're automatically in the lottery. Everyone is in the lottery, but the union members' cards are automatically picked in the lottery. They were automatically in the lottery. The ones had to be put into the lottery. All of it didn't get picked. But you're guaranteed to get into the lottery as a union member interest card. You're guaranteed.

MS: Anything else you want to say?

WG: Well, I can't think of anything. I'm sure I missed a lot of things that happened. A lot of things went on. Offhand, I can't think of anymore that I haven't already told you.

MS: What was your worst day on the job?

WG: Well, on a job, I never had any really bad days on the job. When we went on a job, they trained us to be marine clerks. Well, we worked about three months before they trained us. See, the reason for that, they want us to look dumbfounded and be stupid and be fired, if you don't know how to do the job, fire you. But we were intelligent enough to figure out the job, how to do the job. We had very little help from the marine clerks. Some of the members helped us. Most of them didn't help us. Like I said, being from San Pedro, the ones that came in with us,

we knew all of them. We always had help. But the other Blacks never had the help that we had. But I never had any really worst day, bad day on the job. I didn't have a job I didn't really know what I was doing until I learned how to do it.

MS: What was your best day on the job?

WG: Probably my best day on the job was getting my Class A membership [laughter].

MS: Tell me, when did that happen?

WG: Well, because, as a Class B clerk, you couldn't pick your jobs. They assign you. You check in, they assign you to different jobs. You didn't get to pick your job. Class A member, you get to pick your job and go where you want to go. We have seven different types of jobs we do. You pick the type of job you want and the dock you want to go work at.

MS: So, you remember that day, what you felt, and what you did?

WG: As I became a Class A, I can't remember my first type of job when I went as a Class A where I was – but that was – all the jobs were good. Then later, I became a state employee at a company called ITS in Long Beach, International Transportation Service. That time, when we first started got our Class A membership, they weren't too eager to hire Black clerks, daily – clerks every day. So, you were very fortunate to get a steady job if you were Black.

MS: Do you remember when you got your Class A, did you go out and party and celebrate?

WG: When we got our Class A, we had a picnic in pet park for all the families, and we invited anybody wanted to come to the picnic. The attorneys sponsored it for us. The ones in the lawsuit, they sponsored for us. It was a big picnic and a lot of people there, family, friends, and some union members.

MS: So, it was an emotional time for you?–

WG: Yeah, it was very emotional. Because we know what we had been through on the docks before we won our lawsuit. We knew what would happen now is as a Class A member, what we will be able to do now as a Class A member, opposed to being a Class B clerk, not being able to attend union meetings or pick your jobs or – and make as much money as a Class A member.

MS: Good. You'll walk out the door, and you'll probably say, "I forgot to tell him – " [laughter]

WG: Yes, I'm sure I'll forget a lot of things.

MS: Okay. Your father and mother are pretty remarkable parents. Tell us, first of all, your family. What are they doing? What are your siblings doing? Talk a bit about your mother and father and how they really helped you all.

WG: Alice and Clarence Gravett were their names.

MS: My parents.

WG: My parents, Alice and Clarence Gravett, their names. As I said, they came from Little Rock, Arkansas. Later on, they came to have a better living for us than they had in their lives, coming up. My dad was a sharecropper in Arkansas. He had worked on the farm near the Arkansas River. What he did, he used to rent the boats and fishing equipment for the people who wanted to go fishing. That's what he did in Arkansas. He picked cotton for a living. Yeah.

MS: But they cared a lot about education. Talk about their attitude towards school [inaudible].

WG: My parents are very educational minded. They stressed education all the time. We're studying, stressed education all the time. Every evening in the house, imagine 15 in the house, and everybody would be studying. You'd think you are in a library, so many people studying in there. All of my family, my brother and sibling went to two years of Harbor College and USC Cal State in Long Beach and –

MS: Tell me the story about your father and your mother and going to school with you and how he wouldn't work.

WG: Now, my parents, whatever we did in school. they always take interest in. They come, and they'd always meet with – my mother was a PTA member all the time. My dad, the first day of each school year, my dad, even though he worked two jobs, he would not work that first day of school. He'd come to school and take us to school the first day of the school year and my mother too. My mother used to come to school almost daily or weekly and check, meeting with the teachers, talking to the teacher and checking on us and checking our grades and our behavior and things like that. We were well behaved. None of my brothers and sisters ever got into any kind of trouble with the law or anything. There's nothing like that.

MS: Tell me when you said in your family, you've got a brigadier general brother, what they all end up doing in their lives.

WG: When I became a marine clerk, there was four of us became marine clerks at the same time when I came in [19]68. There was four of us, came in as marine clerks. We were working before that, but four became marine clerks. Then one became a longshoreman later in 1982. He became a longshoreman. He worked various jobs before that also. Then one brother became a Los Angeles police officer for twenty-five years. During these twenty-five years, he received a Medal of Valor for saving a kid's life at the Coliseum one day. He gets a Medal of Valor for that. Actually, my brother, he was the first Black police officer who got assigned in Harbor Division. There were no Blacks allowed to work in Harbor Division as policemen or firemen in San Pedro. He was the first Black policeman assigned in the Harbor Division. Then he retired at twenty-five years. He was always in a National Guard – remember, he became a National Guard when he was sixteen. All the while he was in the Police Department, he was the National Guard. After he retired from the Police Department, he became regular Army. He had been to school. He graduated from Long Beach State in USC and several academies and graduated from the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia and (army warfare?) college and several – and he became a

brigadier general. They wanted him to stay. He could have gotten another star. But he said he had enough. He didn't want to go any farther. Actually, he might have gotten another star. He would have gotten – he was married thirty-three years, and his wife passed away. After she passed away, he didn't have much of a drive right after that. Because his wife, everything he did, she was instrumental in – whatever he achieved, she's right with him. After she passed away, he didn't have a desire to go any farther.

MS: You said one of your relatives was a doctor too?

WG: No, not a doctor. No. There was a –

MS: How would you describe your father as a man? What kind of personality was he? What kind of man was he? Was he disciplinarian?

WG: Disciplinarian, yes. My father was a disciplinarian. We didn't see him that often because he worked Monday to Friday. He'd leave for work even before we got up. Sometimes we'd see him before he went to work. He left early. He just came back at midnight or after midnight. So, we saw him on the weekends. Whatever we did and didn't do, our chores or didn't get a good grade in school or whatever, we didn't do our homework, my mother would always keep record. Come Saturday mornings, he'd line us up according to age. He'd go down the list, and he'd see what you did. He'd give you a couple of licks whatever [laughter]. Then if you didn't have anything that you didn't do anything wrong, he said, "Oh, you couldn't have been good for a week [laughter]." He's going to give you a whack [laughter]. Yes, he wasn't very big man. He was only about 5'7", 135 pounds. But he was a very hard worker. I never once [inaudible]. I never once heard my father say he was tired or didn't want to go to work. I remember him being sick one day, missing work, being sick one day.

MS: What about your mother? What was she like?

WG: My mother was a very good mother, a very good cook and took care – always had clean clothes and our clothes laid out and always knew what clothes belong to who and what belong to where. She'd always lay our clothes out for us. We had drawers, and she watched out – and she kept the house clean. Later on, we got older. She started working with the cannery in Terminal Island. As I said, they were always active in the church all through the years.

MS: Can you talk about going to school and changing clothes? Can you mention that?

WG: Yes. They had different activities at school, and we had to dress certain ways. Like President May Day, each class had a different type of May Day dance they did, and like Mexico or China or Japan, and you bought that type of clothes, wear it in your – we didn't have the money. My mother will pick my father's check up on Friday. She'd go down, cash it and go down the store and buy the clothes and bring them to school. The other kids wear their clothes to school. We bring ours. She'd bring ours in school. We go in the bathroom and change clothes, so we could like the other kids, what we had to have.

MS: So, it sounds like a really wonderful family. You think that's part of what gave you the

qualities that you have that really allowed you to benefit from the work you were doing and the suit? Was your father someone who said, "We deserve to be treated equally"? Was that something on his mind? Or did he instill that in you at all? How do you feel about something like that? So, what was your father's attitude toward the suit?

WG: My father's attitude toward our lawsuit, he was very happy that we were able to become waterfront workers. Because he knows he didn't have a chance to become a waterfront worker. He did work at [inaudible] lay off time to time and he – after work – and he'd worked on the docks as an extra longshoreman. He knew about the type of longshore work and what happens on the waterfront. He was very happy that we were able to get on the waterfront.

[end of transcript]