

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Melody Hall Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: I'll give you the hard question first, please say your name and spell it.

Melody Hall: Melody Hall. M-E-L-O-D-Y, H-A-L-L.

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

MH: [19]66 in San Francisco.

MS: Great. Now, how did you get involved – as a young woman – get involved with longshore work? I mean, that seems to be – for some people, would be a jump particularly for a woman.

MH: Right. It was back in [19]97, they were extending the employment to come work on the waterfront. I thought it was something interesting. So, I came and applied [laughter] and got hired.

MS: Did you have any idea what you were getting into?

MH: Not at all.

MS: Tell me what you thought about the work was going to be and what it turned out to be.

MH: I had no idea what longshoring was. So, when I came – I can tell you experience on my first day. To start off with, the attire, [laughter] I worked in classroom and office setting. So, I didn't have the attire as far as longshore. So, I had to go out and get jeans and tennis shoes because that's not what I wore. My first night on the waterfront and my first job, I recall I worked at, I think was Pier 206, SSA, and it was driving tractor trailer, in which I've never really done that, either. So, I get out there on the waterfront and these –it's a huge ship and equipment, the cranes, everything. I was really, really terrified because I felt like a little peon in this big world of the giants. So, I managed to make it through the night. It's kind of you have training but then to get out there on the waterfront, actually do it, is a whole different ballgame. I got lost in the yard [laughter]. But after that, the more and more that I worked out there, it got better.

MS: I'm going ask you to go over that story again. That's a great story. So, your first day, describe what happened. What did you see? What did it look like? How did you feel?

MH: The first day it was very, very scary because, like I said, it was all this large equipment, bigger than me. Cranes are, I guess, 100 feet tall, and the ship was so big. It was like another land [laughter] or something because from the back to the front of the ship was like a drive. So, that was scary for me, very scary. Because you are looking at these large containers hoisting over you and this large machine hoisting over you. Everything is coming past you and around you and you have to be super careful. It was very, very scary.

MS: Well, what were you doing before, and why did you decide to work in the harbor?

MH: I was substitute teaching at the time when I put in my application. The reason why I

decided to work in the harbor –first of all, I'm a type of person that I like new experiences, and I really didn't like being inside. I really wanted something outside. I really wanted a job at the beach. [laughter] That's so funny. So, well, I guess I got really close too. [laughter] I'm at the beach every day. So, going from that classroom setting, office setting, into an outside environment that was that was a challenge and something new. I don't remember how old I was, I'm not going to say, [laughter] when I came down here on the waterfront. Just say I was around three decades or something like that [laughter].

MS: So, we can do the numbers. Were you a young girl?

MH: No, I wasn't a young girl. An adult, four children, and just getting newly remarried, actually, to someone I met down on a waterfront. It was good because we were together. So, I got through a lot of things because he's my partner.

MS: Your husband is your partner?

MH: Yes, during the whole experience.

MS: So, you were a teacher, substitute teacher. How did you hear about the jobs in the waterfront? Just another job?

MH: Well, it was actually funny how all that came about. Because when I got on the waterfront, I found out that my uncle worked down here, my uncle from my dad who – which my mom divorced when I was young. So, I hadn't seen my dad. So, when I met my dad, and I found out that my uncle was down here and my aunt and couple of my relatives. But how I came to find out about it was my best friend's sister worked down on the waterfront, and she told us about the hiring. So, I just figured, okay, well, let's try it.

MS: Now, it is good money, that's mostly an attraction. What are the other attractions to the job, particularly as a mother of four kids? What were the other attractions to the jobs?

MH: Well, sorry, my freedom on my schedule

MS: You have to repeat my question. In other words, say, "One of the attractions of the job."

MH: Okay. One of the attractions of the job was the freedom of how I can schedule my work. Also, another attraction was, of course, the benefits, in which having four children, benefits are very important. Those are the main attractions [laughter].

MS: Was it an easy job to get? I mean, how difficult is it to get a job then?

MH: No, it wasn't easy. At the time when I applied, I had to actually go through a series of testing. The testing started from, I think, August, and I think I completed in December or something like that. So, it was a long testing. A lot of people were weeded out during that time. Then once I got in, I didn't – I wasn't a full member or a member, I was a casual, which is like being part time. So, you went through your times where you'd get jobs, and sometimes you

didn't. So, that really wasn't good for like two years. It was sometimes good, depending on the workflow. When the workflow slowed up, then I was – had to find another job or do what I was doing before.

MS: What was this testing? What were they testing?

MH: From what I recall, it was – I remember having a strength and agility test that they gave. They gave a test on driving the tractor trailers when they trained you. They had to test that. It was a written test. Then there was a lashing test in which they trained you, and then you took the test. Then you had your final, which was a general safety, not really test, but class.

MS: Do you find it easy, or was it hard?

MH: Some of them were pretty hard.

MS: Some of the tests.

MH: Yes, some of the testing was pretty hard, especially with the physical, because you're not – I wasn't accustomed to doing physical testing or things that they put you to do – have you to do. So, as far as the other tests, I mean, they were normal testing.

MS: Even now, there are not a lot of women that are working really on the docks as longshoremen. There's more than ever before.

MH: Right.

MS: But when you started out, were there a lot of women, or was it basically you were one of the beginners or one of the few that you would run into?

MH: Actually, I was one of the ones that start off where they try to get more women involved in – down on the waterfront. Before I came there, the percentage was very low. So, they were trying to – and I believe that's when they put out applications. But of course, you couldn't just tell women to come [inaudible] equal. So, at the time, I think they wanted more women to apply. I think now it's probably about 30 percent approximately. I don't know the real figures on the numbers, but probably about 30 percent women.

MS: Now, the tractor trailer job is one thing. Did you ever get in some of the heavier lifting jobs? Tell me about that.

MH: Yes. I've touched just about everything on the waterfront; crane, transtainers. Heavy lift was the job I liked a lot. I did a lot of whole jobs where I was inside the ship, and actually I got hurt really bad from that [laughter]. So, just to show you how dangerous the job is, I've been hoisted off the ship a couple of times. I was knocked out from some equipment falling on me.

MS: Well, don't go over that so fast [laughter]. Tell me the stories. How did you get hurt on the job?

MH: The first injury that I acquired was I believe – I was still a casual. I was, I think, within my – I was in my first year, went into my second year working on the waterfront. What they do is you have to tie the ships down, the cargo down to the ship, and you use steel rods to do that. A steel rod popped loose. I was working, and it hit me on the head. I woke up in the hospital. I had a helmet on, the safety helmet on, which saved my life. Because if I didn't, then I probably wouldn't be here today. It cracked my helmet. I survived that, but it just showed me how dangerous it really is on the Waterfront.

MS: You said you got tossed off the ship a couple of times? Talk about that.

MH: No, I didn't get tossed off the ship. I almost fell over [laughter]. No, almost, I didn't fall.

MS: Tell me what happened.

MH: There was a time when you had to be hoisted up on top of the container. So, you're like a 100 feet in the air. If you're afraid of heights [laughter], it's very, very scary. We have to unlock cones in which they keep the cargo stack together. Wow. I was standing up there. You have equipment, safety equipment. But it's just the fact of standing up. I couldn't stand. I had to crawl on my hands and knees because I was terrified of falling off [laughter] this thing. There was another incident. It was really funny. Because when I first came down on the waterfront, El Nino, it was a season of El Nino. I had to go on a ship. That particular day, the ship was swaying, and the wind was blowing really hard. The wind actually almost took me over. That really scared me. So, on rainy days, I didn't work [laughter]. I was afraid.

MS: Did you ever say to yourself, "What am I doing? I'm going back [inaudible]"?

MH: I've done it many a times, but I wouldn't trade it today. I think you become accustomed to what you're doing, and you start to enjoy it.

MS: What do you enjoy about the job? What's the most enjoyable part of the job?

MH: Well, I can make my own schedule [laughter].

MS: You have to say my question, "What I enjoy."

MH: What I enjoy probably most about the job is I can make my own schedule just about. The job has become a little easier due to technology. So, you're working with more equipment. I've actually done jobs where I physically – I did the physical work, where I put – load and unload the containers. How it used to be with these ships back in the day, when they first started before the containerization. So, I kind of got a feel of it. I didn't get the feel like they did back then [laughter]. But I've gotten the feel of the physical labor. I'm glad that it's containerized now [laughter] because, wow, that is a difference, a big difference.

MS: So, how many years have you been doing this now?

MH: [19]97.

MS: Ten years.

MH: Yes, ten years.

MS: So, do you see this as a career? I mean, we've talked to people that have been on the docks for thirty years. Do you see this as a lifelong career? Or what do you see for yourself as far as the future and your relation to the docks?

MH: I'm not planning on going anywhere, I would – this is a steppingstone to anything else you might want to do. I do plan to retire by fifty [laughter]. But I don't think I'll stay here for the rest of my life.

MS: There were women before you came, but many people think this is a man's job. Did you run into some people who resented the fact that you were here and then you know, "Why do we have this woman here? This is a man's world." Did you run into that at all?

MH: I have run into that situation about the man –

MS: Start from the beginning. I'm sorry.

MH: We've run into these scenarios of where men feel that women shouldn't be on the docks. I even get it off the docks. I've ran into situations with some men on the docks. I'm the type of woman, I'm not trying to prove that I'm a woman – I mean, a man or trying to prove that I could do a man's job. I don't know if I could do it equal, I can get real close [laughter]. But some things, I'm just not built to do. I have told them, and a lot of men on the waterfront have appreciate. There are a lot of men that felt that women shouldn't be on the waterfront. They still feel that way, and that's their opinion. So, everyone has their opinion.

MS: Did you have to sort of learn to put up with some gaffe? How did you deal with that?

MH: I learned real quick that I just let the men feel that they were men and to get over it [laughter]. I wouldn't really fuss with them or stand against them. I just tell them, "You're right," and, usually it came out a lot better for me. I always felt that you can get more bees with honey than you can with salt. Som that's my theory. It's worked for me for ten years. I don't think I really ran into any males that are against me, per se, but I know they have run-ins with other women. I mean, it is always that battle is going to be there, but my theory is I'm not trying to be a man [laughter].

MS: Well, I'll tell you it would be hard [laughter] [inaudible]. Because you're a very good-looking woman.

MH: Thank you.

MS: This is a very rough and ready kind of environment. You're hanging on to lashings. You're

not hanging around the boudoir here.

MH: No, it's very, very dirty. Oh, and you need some strength, you really do. I think I work probably more - I think more before - when I'm working, I'm working more on a safety. I think harder and work less put it that way. I don't want to say it like I don't work like everyone else. But I just think it out. Rather than end up in a bad - I've seen a lot of people hurt now here. So, my main objective on the waterfront is to be safe. The safety is very, very important. Because you don't know if you're going home to your families. A lot of people come to work and never return. I've had some friends hurt really, really bad.

MS: You said you met your husband on the docks.

MH: Yes.

MS: Talk about that. Having a married couple, what are the advantages or maybe the disadvantages of being married to somebody who does the same job you do?

MH: Yes. Being with a person twenty hours a day is really hard. We actually met on the waterfront.

MS: My husband and I.

MH: My husband and I met on the waterfront when I first got down here. Well, he wasn't my husband. I met him and then we got married two years later. He was my partner. So, we worked side by side every day [laughter] and that can be really, really rough. Really rough because you see this person all day, all night, there's nothing to talk about. " You know what went on at work?" "Yes, I was there." Okay, [laughter] in a conversation. "Good night." So, it's pretty rough.

MS: When you say partner, explain how it works. Was it accidental? This guy showed up, and he was your partner?

MH: No. What happened was, how he ended up being my partner was because we're dispatched to jobs, and he was always at the same job I was at. So, then when we got in as permanent then we chose to be - work as partners. So, you have that advantage to have a person work with you as a partner. Only disadvantage you have is the work is slow [laughter]. You may get out, he doesn't. So, it worked out for me a lot because with a lot of the work that was strenuous, I had him to be - to help me also.

MS: It's what they call the honey-do list except it went into the work, right? Honey, do this. [laughter]

MH: Exactly.

MS: Tell me get again, your partner's -you're in all different kinds of jobs. Talk about the different jobs and how that partnership works in the different kinds of jobs.

MH: Okay. For instance, when we work the warehouse, he was my partner. So, when we load the containers, we are assigned a container. We work that container, our containers, until the end of the day. So, I'm doing the paperwork. He'll do the physical. Or we'll switch back and forth. So, right there, were side by side. If we do something like lashing down the ships, tying down the cargo, then we're side by side. If we're doing truck delivery, usually not far off – only time there will be something where he's not really far off but driving the equipment. He's there. So, it was like I knew someone there had my back regardless. So, that's basically how it went.

MS: So, how did you sort it out when you're doing something, like saying, "Who's the boss?" Or do you figure it out? You're both equal, and you're going back and forth. Did you work that out? Or does he say, "Well, wait a second. I'm the husband. I'm the man. I did this. You do that"? Or do you have to work out and negotiate that out on the job?

MH: He's the man. So, he's the boss [laughter].

MS: I like the way you said that. [laughter] How old are your children now?

MH: Twenty-three.

MS: Oh, they're grown.

MH: He's on the waterfront too, my eldest. Twenty-one, twenty, and sixteen.

MS: One of them works in the waterfront.

MH: Yes.

MH: So, when they were growing up, what did they think when kids in school say, "What does your mommy do?" They said, –"She's a longshoreman," and they said, "Why?" What's the response of other kids to the kind of work you were doing?

MH: Well, since my children went to school in Harbor City, practically everybody [laughter] is a longshoreman. So, they were excited. But it was like when – if they were to have a project at school or something, and they said longshoreman, well, everyone knew what it was. So, they were excited with that.

MS: What is it about this job that gives you particular pride or pleasure about what you do in your career that you've chosen?

MH: I will have to say, the pleasure it gives is I'm able to do things that I probably wouldn't have been able to do with the salary I was getting before [laughter]. The time you're able to have, actually, you can set your schedule if you want to work on a day side or night side shifts and work it around if you have younger children. Of course, mine are older. But at the time when they were younger, it worked out for me. The pride I would probably have is that – knowing that what I do keeps America moving. I think that's very important, especially when

the war broke out and all that stuff. I thought that was – what I do is contributing to America and its economy.

MS: You live in Harbor City. So, you're near enough to the harbor.

MH: Well, I'm in Long Beach now but yeah.

MS: What does San Pedro and the San Pedro harbor mean to you? What does this place that you work in and spend a lot of time in, what does this place mean to –

MH: San Pedro, hmm [laughter].

MS: You can be honest. If you don't like it, you can say so.

MH: I mean, that was a question I never thought about. I've never thought about that.

MS: [inaudible] job to some extent. I mean, you're working in the number one port in the country.

MH: That's true, the expansion. Wow. I know a lot of people I work with are from San Pedro, even though I went to school in Harbor City [laughter]. Wow. Well, the development I noticed is really gone up as far as – I don't really stay San Pedro a lot [laughter].

MS: You don't spend your time here. Okay.

MH: I don't spend a lot of time –

MS: What would you say to a young girl who was looking for something to do? Was this a job that you'd recommend for her? Is this the job for everybody? Is this a job for every girl?

MH: I would say if there was a young girl looking to become a longshorewoman, if she's a tough girl and could tough it out, I would say yes. She will probably be able to do this. But the waterfront is not for everyone. Some young ladies will not be able to do it or deal with it. That's just the truth. I've seen it.

MS: In the end, what does it get some people? How does it get them that they can't do it here or don't like it in the end?

MH: I think some people think it's too strenuous. Some young ladies I've spoken with think it's too strenuous. They can't deal with the male-female battles that sometimes go on, not much but it gets there. I think they just – a lot of them are very timid. So, you're around so much heavy equipment. You can't be timid. You really can't.

MS: Although there are many more women than there were before, do you find other women that you can get together with and commiserate with or celebrate with or feel a certain connection to? Or is it basically, you leave the job then you go? I mean, do the women workers

on the port, do they feel a particular camaraderie?

MH: Actually, yes. There are a lot of females that I deal with outside of the job, travel with, I have done a lot of things with. So, there's camaraderie there. What I like is the – what I want to say – the ethnic mix on the waterfront. Because you have every race there is and everyone seems to get along pretty well. There's not a lot of prejudice going on that I know. If it is, it's kept quiet, which is good. But yeah, pretty much I have a lot of friends that I deal with. A lot of my friends are from work.

MS: This is relatively early not only for women but for Blacks to be involved, to be part of –

MH: Right.

MS: Do you know that history? Do you appreciate what went on before you came to allow it for you to be –

MH: I do appreciate it. As a matter of fact, I was just thinking about that. Because, of course, this was primarily a male job, and they never thought about women being here on the waterfront. Now, the women are here, and they're actually holding their ground. So, I [laughter] congratulate one good friend of mine who is probably the second or third walking boss on the waterfront. So, as far as the scenarios of – my uncle was here, at the time, when there were scenarios with African Americans and the White. But it's funny because this is primarily Hispanic when I came here [laughter]. So, I don't know, because it was just San Pedro area, but my uncle came from San Francisco, the port up there, which is primarily Black. So, when I visited them, it was so funny. I actually visited a couple of the ports, Hawaii, and it's really funny how you go to different places, and you see the different mix. Then when they all get together – because I've done a lot of little celebrations and stuff with the Harry Bridges Institute and everything like that. Harry Bridges is of course, the main man [laughter] that actually paved a lot of the way for where we're going today.

MS: How would you talk about what you know about Harry Bridges and his importance?

MH: Harry Bridges, from what I know, he saw the waterfront back then as it is today, and Harry stepped out and made a move to make it where we can have what we have, with the safety, the union, the pay we get, vacations, and all that other stuff all combined. So, I look at Harry Bridges as a hero, I want to say, for the ILW as it is today.

MS: Is there another woman working that you also look to as either a mentor or a heroine? Is there a woman that maybe was ahead of you and was somewhat of a pioneer? Or anyone else, whether it's a woman or a man, that you look to and say they made it possible?

MH: [laughter] That's my problem. I mean, there are several people that I do appreciate, and one of the people is David (Aryan?). Because when I was a casual, he actually had an education class. Through that class, it taught me a lot of information about the waterfront, the history and its makeup today. I knew nothing about unions. Even though I was in a union, it was just like just a union [laughter], union to whatever, pay your money, keep it going. But with him, I was able to get involved in the union and understand more of the concept of unionism. So, I have to

give that to him. There are probably more people right now. I can't say names because I'm terrible with names. But there are there are several. One person I look up to – one young lady is (Patricia Geary?). Because I actually try to follow behind her with how she loves the union, and she does everything to educate others. I hate to say names because I'll miss out on people [laughter].

MS: When you were a teacher, some people say there's no more important job than that. You had hard hours, and you didn't make a lot of money.

MH: Right.

MS: But that was an important job too.

MH: Yes.

MS: If you were back in a classroom, and you were in front of a bunch of students in a classroom, and you had to tell them about what you do and give them some sense of what maybe they would want to do in their lives. What would you say to them about working on the waterfront?

MH: I will probably tell, if I went back to class to tell students, that working on the waterfront as a stevedore – [laughter] I just lost all my thoughts.

MS: So, one final question, what would you tell a young girl, a young black girl, about what you've learned in your life and what she should be thinking about or dreaming about or can achieve based on the experiences you've had?

MH: What I would tell a young girl that I would come in contact with is that if she feels that she can succeed in doing anything, to go for it. Don't let anyone hold you back. When I came on the waterfront, I didn't think I could do what I do, and I didn't think I would end up liking what I do. From my time here on the waterfront, it changed my whole idea and thinking. It changed my idea of thinking that you can achieve. You can find good in everything. So, don't just settle for less. Go for it.

MS: Inspired me.

MH: [laughter]

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