Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Brian Harrison Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Male Speaker
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: So, the first question is a tough one. Please say your name and spell it.

Brian Harrison: My name is Brian Harrison. That's B-R-I-A-N, Harrison, H-A-R-R-I-S-O-N.

MS: Brian, can you tell me what year you were born and where?

BH: 1927 in Port Talbot, South Wales, United Kingdom.

MS: You went to sea when you were a young boy in 1944, I understand.

BH: Yes, 1943.

MS: What drew you to the sea as a boy?

BH: Well, living in the United Kingdom, you're never very far removed from the sea. But I happen to live in a coastal town, a small port. I guess I was always fascinated by the ships and the navy and the merchant marine. It was almost a natural gravitation for me to go to sea.

MS: How did you go to sea, in what capacity?

BH: I went to agency as a cadet in 1943.

MS: Explain what a cadet is, what you do?

BH: A cadet is you sign with a company as a junior officer. They continue your training at sea for a period of up to three years before you can become a full ship's officer. Taking the certificates that qualify you to sail as second mate, first mate, and master.

MS: What was your education before that?

BH: Elementary school and high school.

MS: So, when you went to sea, when did you first come to San Pedro, the Port of Los Angeles?

BH: 1951.

MS: Say, "I first came –" My question is not heard –

BH: I first came in 1951 to the Port of Los Angeles.

MS: What were the circumstances of that trip?

BH: We sailed from London – no, from Liverpool, I guess, to the west coast of this country. Our first U.S. port after Panama Canal was Los Angeles, then San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Vancouver. Then turn around after we discharged the cargo, loaded another cargo, and went back to London, sort of duplicating our outward voyage, more or less calling it the same ports.

MS: What kind of ship was it? What were you carrying?

BH: The ship was called the *Durango*. It was a Royal Mail Line ship. It was about ten thousand tons. We had a crew of seventy with the captain, and we carried twelve passengers. The ship carried general cargo and refrigerated cargo.

MS: Did you have any pre-conceptions of what Los Angeles was before you arrived there?

BH: No, not really. I mean, I was excited about coming here because I'd spent a certain amount of time on the east coast during World War II. I always enjoyed being in the States, and I welcomed the opportunity of visiting the West Coast.

MS: You have any particular impressions of San Pedro when you first arrived in [19]51?

BH: Well, one thing that surprised me when I first came here that there was an absence of cranes on the docks, as we had been used to in the United Kingdom and in European ports. But no, it was a very, very nice being here, the climate being agreeable and the people that we ran into were very friendly.

MS: So, you were on shore. Then you have some experiences here in the town?

BH: Not really, because I didn't go ashore here so very much in the beginning. Wilmington didn't leave a lot. It wasn't a very attractive place to be going ashore. Unless you knew someone that could drive you up to Hollywood or to LA, it was rather difficult to get around.

MS: So, there's a story here, I understand. This is maybe not on this trip, but you're working as a dispensary. Tell me that story.

BH: On board the *Durango*, I was the second officer, which was primarily the navigating officer. But added to those duties in my particular company, the second officer also took care of the dispensary if and when you didn't carry a doctor. Under British law, you need to carry more than twelve passengers or more than a hundred people to qualify to carry a doctor. So, with a crew of seventy and twelve passengers, obviously we didn't fill the bill. So, I had the duty of taking care of the dispensary. That meant that I took care of the ailments of the of the crew and also the passengers, if necessary.

MS: Your extensive medical training was what?

BH: I qualified with a first aid certificate as required by British law.

MS: Now, there was a story I see here that a woman got sick, you had to take care of her. You brought her to the port where she was met in Los Angeles by her two daughters, and how that changed your life, that little experience. Tell me the story from the beginning.

BH: Well, the lady joined the ship when we left England in February of 1953, I think it was.

The weather being very inclement at that time, she took a chill standing out on deck watching us sail from the Port of London. She was quite unwell on the way out to Panama. I took care of her as much as I was able to with the medicines that we had in the dispensary on the ship. So, I talked to her quite frequently, having visited her almost every day to make sure she was all right. Of course, when we docked in Los Angeles, her two daughters came down to meet her. I met the girls when they came on board to greet her, and ultimately, started dating the youngest of the two daughters. We eventually became married. So, that obviously had an impact on my seafaring career. Because I hadn't thought much about going ashore at that time, although I had considered becoming a sea pilot in one of the British ports. But Noreen, the girl that I was to wed, her father had been a master in the British Merchant Marine and then ultimately in the American Merchant Marine. She was well aware of what seafaring life was like as far as family life was concerned. But anyway, I decided that I wanted to come ashore at that particular point in time. So, when I passed my master's certificate, I came back out to this country and we became married.

MS: Okay. This is an example I'm going to tell you. Tell me that story again from the beginning. "There was this woman that – and take me all the way through to meeting your wife to be. Just tell me that story again. You can repeat yourself or you can elaborate on it, whatever you like. You can start off by saying, "We were taking a trip from London through the canal, and there was a woman on board." Start with that.

BH: I was aboard the *Durango* for a period of two and a half years. In 1953, which was a significant one for me, was because we carried from London twelve passengers on the way out from the United Kingdom to Vancouver. One of the ladies was sick during that particular point in the voyage. I took care of her at that time and helped her get over her ailments. Really a chill, which she'd been on deck when we were departing the Port of London. It was very cold and wet at that particular point in time, and I guess she took a chill. Anyway, I gave her what medicine I was able to. When we arrived in Los Angeles, we tied up, and the two daughters were on the dock waiting to meet their mother. They came on board, and that's when we were introduced. Noreen and I seemed to like one another and eventually it led to us becoming engaged and getting married.

MS: Was this love at first sight? What went on, and how much time did you have to come to an impression about this woman?

BH: Well, a matter of several months. Because we stopped in Los Angeles on the way north, which would be in May of 1953 if my memory serves me well. Then we met again on the way south, which would be in later that month. Then we sailed back to the United Kingdom, and she went over for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. We dated again in the United Kingdom. When we came back on the next voyage, which would be probably August or September, is when we met again, and that's when we became engaged. So, it was a matter of about three or four months.

MS: Did she know what she was getting into with a seafaring man?

BH: Yes, because her father was a ship master. So, she was fully aware of the kind of lifestyle

that it provided. I had thought of becoming a pilot, sea pilot, that is, but decided that I'd like to come ashore. So, when I passed my master's certificate, I came out to this country, and we became married, and I've been here ever since.

MS: What kind of place when you moved here and got married – you got married here in Los Angeles?

BH: Yes.

MS: In San Pedro?

BH: Yes. I was married here in Los Angeles. I lived here up in in Brentwood at first for a few months, and then moved down to the Redondo Beach area.

MS: So, when you arrived here after you got married, what kind of work did you start doing?

BH: Well, when I first came ashore, I couldn't get a shipping job. I thought it would be easy to get a shipping job because I was a qualified ship captain, but it didn't work out that way. I went to work for the Bank of America for about, well, eighteen months, I guess. That was like being a fish out of water because, well, for one thing, I'd never worked with women before. I'd been at sea ever since I'd left school, and always been in a male environment. So, this was quite an eye opener when I went to work in the Bank of America, which happened to be in Westwood Village near UCLA, and very convenient, as my wife was working at UCLA at the time.

MS: So, what are some examples of stories where you realize you were no longer on board the ship with women?

BH: Well, [laughter] there were several, really. But one of the ones that always reminds me of how different it was, what a different kind of lifestyle, the fact is that I'm right-handed, and the teller next to me happened to be a female. She was left-handed, and constantly we were getting our stamps fixed up, our stamps for stamping documents and checks and so on. That was always a source of irritation to me. Because I'd always led a very restricted kind of lifestyle aboard ship and very orderly and this was anything but orderly to my mind.

MS: But you couldn't just say, as you would say to a fellow should be, "Shipmate, get your elbow out of here," right?

BH: No, that would be very difficult to do that. But there were several little incidents similar to that. But I was a teller for several months. Then I became vault teller, which took me into a different part of the bank and with a lot of privacy and much more what I was used to and able to conduct my job in a in a decent manner.

MS: What brought you back to the sea?

BH: Well, as I said, when I came here, originally, I wanted to work in the shipping environment, but that wasn't possible. But the first opportunity, I made the change, and the opportunity did

come through. Actually, one of the customers in the Bank of America when he knew what my background was, he made some telephone calls and introduced me to a couple of people in Los Angeles. It so happened that the company that represented my old ship were looking for an assistant port captain at that time, and I happened to be on the spot at the right time. It's like anything else very often being available at the right time.

MS: What is an assistant port captain?

BH: I was an assistant to the marine superintendent.

MS: Once again, tell me, "An assistant port captain is –"

BH: An assistant port captain is an assistant that helps the port captain take care of the ships where they come into port; takes care of the needs from the pilot in to the pilot out; taking care of people going to the doctor; taking care of the cargo requirements, the loading of the cargo and discharging the cargo as the case may be.

MS: So, I think still people don't know what is the job of a port captain? What do they do? What is a port captain?

BH: The port captain takes care of these ships when they come in and out of port. Takes care of the needs, whether it's ordering stores for the ship, seeing that the stores are delivered. Seeing crew members taken to the doctor if they're sick. Providing all of the requirements that they have when they come into port. Ordering the oil, fuel, ordering the ship's stores, many jobs of that nature.

MS: Now, is this a desk job, or is it a job that involves you getting involved with a ship again?

BH: it's a combination of both a desk job and an outside job because it necessitates meeting a ship in the middle of the night when it's arriving or sailing. So, being on the spot when they need someone who is a liaison between the ship and the shore.

MS: Now, do you work for a specific line or do you work for the port?

BH: No, I work for a specific line, not for the port. In that particular case, I worked for a company called Furnace Withy. They were the agents for many of the British companies that were coming in and out of this port.

MS: So, how does that work? You get news that a ship is coming in. They communicate with you that they we're arriving, and you know in advance. How does that relationship –

BH: They advise you when the ships are coming into port. The ships are normally on a schedule, and so many ships on a schedule providing services to the West Coast. You're notified when the ship leaves London. The cargo papers are sent out advising what kind of cargo the ship has with a cargo plan, so that we can calculate how long the ship is likely to be in port and make the arrangements for that cargo to be handled whilst the ship is here in Los Angeles.

MS: Any particular ships or situations that are most memorable to you that were complicated or difficult in some way?

BH: Well, they all provide some kind of a problem one way or another between passengers and crew and between longshoremen. There's always something that comes up that gives you time to consider what you need to do to take care of their needs. But you get some ships come in with problems. They might have some engine problem. They might have some damage problem. They might have encountered storms on the way out, and so they might require services over and above the norm. This sort of thing happens frequently. There are many ships that come in and out that will transit the port without any problem whatsoever. Others might be a succession of problems.

MS: How did your experience and what you knew, now you didn't have the same job or not, but did you get a sense of how the port of Los Angeles, San Pedro were different than other ports that you knew, Vancouver or San Francisco or London. How was it different?

BH: Well, I think one of the big differences was it was a fine weather port most of the time. The only real problems we had might be fog. The rest of the time, the weather was always very agreeable, and that helped us do our job in an easier manner.

MS: What were the port activities in those days that you were working with and around? What was going on in the port?

BH: Well, the port was developing, of course, to the port that it is today. I mean, there was a lot of a lot of activity, but not to the extent that it is in the present time, The Port of Los Angeles had a good reputation and provided good facilities for the ships when they came into port. Of course, these have been improved tremendously over the years.

MS: Now, how did you get involved with Metropolitan Stevedore? How did that started?

BH: Well, Metropolitan Stevedore Company was one of the many companies that provided the stevedore services here in the port. That's the ordering of the longshoremen to take care of the loading and discharging the ships and providing the equipment and the supervision to do the job. Metropolitan Stevedore Company bought the company that I was working for, which was Associated Banning Company in 1967, I guess, they bought the company. They were very active doing the work with the ships that I was involved in. They gave me the opportunity of going to work for them as a stevedore superintendent, which was similar to the work I was doing as port captain, but in the other side of the fence, so to speak.

MS: Explain that more. What was that job?

BH: Well, as I mentioned before, the job involving port captain was ordering of longshoremen and equipment to handle cargo. Working for this for the Stevedore Company, you're doing the same thing on their behalf. So, you made sure that the longshore contract was used properly, and that we ordered the longshoremen in a timely and responsible way and provided the equipment

for that particular job.

MS: What was the most challenging part of that job for you?

BH: Well, the labor part of the job was probably the hardest job because one had to follow the contract, and one needed to be very conversant with the contract in order to be able to handle the aspects of labor relations. That was probably one of the hardest part of the job. But Metropolitan Stevedore Company had a good reputation. I was glad of the opportunity to work for them, ultimately, when they bought Associated Banning Company. I was with them then for about thirty years.

MS: From that first job that you started out with them, shortly after, there was a big strike in [19]71.

BH: In 1971, yes.

MS: Tell me about that. What impact did that have and what was your role in all that?

MS: In July of 1971, I think it was when the strike started. It's meant that we secured all of our equipment to make sure it was safe during the period of a strike. We continue to come into work on almost a daily basis. But we didn't have any ships to take care of, except a few passenger ships that came in periodically. So, most of the time we spent doing first aid courses or doing labor relations training jobs of that nature in order to keep active, because the company kept us on full pay all the time. The only thing they asked us to do was not drive our company cars excessively. I mean, to use them coming back and forth to from home to work and so on. They treated us very decently. We all appreciated that very much. Because we felt it was a very significant thing that we were kept on all during the strike, which lasted almost four months.

MS: Let's go back. What were the causes of the [19]71's –

BH: There were many reasons, I suppose, at the time, but one of them would be gang sizes and number of men that we employed. Specifically, I can't think offhand what the main reasons were, but they were enough to cause them to walk out and up and down the coast. As I say, it lasted quite a long time. But I think the efforts of the PMA and the ownership management and the union management were able to get together and eventually get it settled. But it did go on for a long period of time. There were many reasons that would cause problems when it came to striking.

MS: So, much of your work was sort of servicing the needs of these ships. Was there any particular unusual demand or need that you that really went out of the normal that you had to deal with over the years since you did this?

BH: Not really. Not really.

MS: It sounds like a movie star's contract when they say, "I want a certain thing in the refrigerator at 3:00." The demands are all pretty much consistent.

BH: Well, they are really, yes.

MS: Now, you came to Metropolitan, and what was your title when you arrived there?

BH: A stevedore superintendent.

MS: All right. By the time you retired, you were the CEO.

BH: Yes.

MS: What were the changes that brought you to that new position?

BH: Well, I was one of many superintendents. In the beginning, we had superintendent for every ship or every dock that we worked. The opportunity arose for me because after the strike in 1971, about 1973, I was taken into the office as assistant to the executive vice president at that time, which meant that I did a lot of running around for him and taking care of jobs that he didn't want to do. I had that job for several years. I must have done rather well at it, because it led to a position of vice president. Then shortly after that, executive vice president, and shortly after that president and CEO.

MS: What was the difference in your responsibilities from when you started out and when you were CEO? You had more people to tell them to do things you didn't want to do, or what the other jobs that you do?

BH: That's possible.

[laughter]

BH: Well, we were a company that – we were growing. We had a lot of activity, we had a lot of good contracts. The more people we needed to make the company work and function as a good stevedore company, and we did dry out. I think my motto was I didn't want to be the biggest stevedore company on the coast, but I wanted to be the best stevedore company on the coast.

MS: Again, for people who don't know what these companies are, how big a business is this? I mean, what kind of gross would a big stevedore company do in a year? Is it a small business, big business or super big business?

BH: Well, in those days, I suppose a company like Metropolitan Stevedore Company, the gross revenue probably between a hundred and a hundred fifty million at that time. So, a lot different today, I'm sure, because of the container ships and the volume of container ships.

MS: That's my next question. How has the job that you did when you first started out and the business that you knew when you were first started changed from what it is today?

BH: The business as it is today has changed so much because of containerization. If you go

back to when it started, which was probably about 1962, there were very few boxes at that time. The boxes were handled basically then by stevedore companies. Today, it's changed so much because a lot of the companies are the steamship companies themselves that become self-stevedoring.

MS: So, that affected traditional stevedoring business, I assume, that there was less need for what you were doing before.

BH: Very much so, it's affected the business to the extent that there are very few private stevedore companies now, coast wise and nationally, because of the fact that stevedore companies have become steamship companies have become stevedore companies in their own name. After all, they provide the ships and the containers and a lot of the equipment. So, to use somebody else as a broker, so to speak, means that you've just taken on another layer that you really don't need.

MS: What about the port itself, I mean, aside from the containerization, the size of the growth of it, would you ever imagine when you came here in [19]51 for the first time, and [19]53 when you moved here, that the Port of Los Angeles would be what it is today? Did you see that happening the future?

BH: Not really. I think of the port as it was, I mean, it always seemed like a busy port, and the ships were coming and going. It seemed that there was always a steady stream of vessels coming in and out. But when I look at the business today, and I see the volume of container ships, and when I read some of the statistics down below on one of the black hunts down there, about the volume of business, say, with China, for example, in billions of dollars. It's incredible that it's reached the stage that it has today.

MS: Now, you've been retired since the [19]90s, right?

BH: Yeah, I retired in [19]94.

MS: Does it ever get out of your blood? Do you ever see those ships coming in down the horizon and trying to figure out what their needs might be or what is going on in those ships? Do you still find yourself engaged in that?

BH: I don't think of it in those terms. I think of it that I'm glad that someone else has got to do it. I'm happy that I don't have to worry about the labor contracts and the continuation of work. I wonder if, say, if I were back working today and a situation like 1971 developed, and the company took care of us as well. I wonder if I would be able to take care of the people in the company the same way, because things have changed a lot in that time. For one thing, the longshore labor force is much bigger now than it was, and yet, the other companies' staffs have gone down somewhat.

MS: So, is the sea out of your blood?

BH: No sea is not out of my blood because my wife and I like to go cruising when we get the

opportunity. I didn't think I'd like cruising, but I found out whilst I was still working that that was one way of getting away from it for a couple of weeks was to go aboard ship, because it'd be very hard to get in touch with you then.

MS: But I bet you're hard on the purser though.

BH: Pardon me?

MS: I bet you're hard on the purser, though, right?

BH: [laughter]

MS: Making sure that you get what you need on board.

BH: Well, not necessarily, no. I think you become very tolerant as you get older.

[laughter]

MS: Well, thank you very much. One more question?

Female Speaker: Yes, please, a couple. One is you have a reputation, at least inside your home of keeping an eye on what's going on out there. Tell him about that reputation.

BH: We live in Palos Verdes, right on the on the cliffs, and so I'm able to watch the ships coming and going up and down the coast. I have a large telescope in my family room. Anytime there's a ship passing, I always get the binoculars or a telescope to look and see what's happening. I can generally identify the ship. If I can't read the name, I can identify the ship or the shipping company, normally, by the colors or by on the ship side very often the company name will be written. My wife and daughter have always got a kick out of me doing this all the time, because I would always come back with some choice piece of information about the ship. So, I would come back and say, "Oh, it's such and such a ship from so and so," and I'd be looking at it through the glass. They would say, "Well, what's the captain having for breakfast?"

[laughter]

BH: They thought I knew too much about what was going on onboard the ship.

[laughter]

FS: One other, I still don't know from the way you were describing at the beginning, what drew you to the sea and what you feel about the sea, and if you can imagine living away from the sea, Tell him, not me.

BH: Yes, I know it's rather difficult.

[laughter]

MS: You're married. You know how this works.

[laughter]

FS: We're married.

MS: She'll pretend I'm the boss but she's telling you what to do it.

[laughter]

BH: Let me tell you one thing about what's the captain having for breakfast. I'd really like to tell you what really precipitated that. It happened when I was sailing on a ship called the *Darrow* back in 1947. We were running to Buenos Aires. We were going into the port, and we were about ten miles outside. Maybe not that far, five miles outside, when the pilot cutter was coming out to meet us. I was the officer of the watch on the bridge with the captain. The chief officer was forward, and the second officer was after, as we were approaching the port. It was when the pilot borders came out from the breakwater that the chief officer rang up. He always went to the stations when we're entering port with a big pair of submarine binoculars. He really caused the story because he would call the bridge and say, "Second or third officer, there's a pilot boat coming out from behind the breakwater." This pilot boat is some miles away from us at this time. That was when he called up to tell me this. He said, "Tell the captain." So, I went to the captain and said, chief officer reports that the pilot boats are coming out from behind the breakwater. The captain said, very imperiously, "Ask the chief officer what the captain is having for breakfast." That's what really caused that story.

[laughter]

BH: But I went away to sea because, as I say, it was in my blood. My father had been in the navy during World War I, and I just wanted to go away to sea. When I stop and think about it, it was 1943. I was 16 years old. How my parents agree for me to go at that time, I don't know, but they did because they knew that's what I want to do, that's what I talked about,

MS: That's what was going on. So, this is not an easy job, right?

BH: No. No, it wasn't. I was lucky because I actually had more experience to bombing in the United Kingdom during the war than I actually did when I was at sea, even though I had two years of the war at sea. But I just had it in my blood, and I wanted to do it. I fully intended to stay until I got command but marriage took care of that.

MS: You lost command.

[laughter]

MS: Were you here for the big explosion in the Harvard servicing?

BH: Yes, I was.

MS: Tell me about that.

BH: The *Sansinena*? Yes. The *Sansinena* blew up in December of [19]76. I can remember it shook us all up because we heard it even where we lived in Palos Verdes. But we didn't know how bad it was at that particular point in time. We didn't know exactly what had happened. The bad thing about it from our point of view was we'd had a bad night the previous night because one of the fellows that worked for us died, and I'd spent a great deal of the night out with his wife helping her with the problems that were related to that. So, we hadn't had much sleep on the Friday night. Then on the Saturday night, we went to bed early at home, and the *Sansinena* blew up. A former neighbor called up to see if we were up. We'd gone to bed early because we were tired from being up the previous night. We had a call from a previous neighbor calling us to see if we were all right because she had heard the fact that there'd been an explosion in the harbor. Yes. It was a bad situation because the bits and pieces of the ship were all over the place. I forget what the statistics were now, I think there was a loss of life.

MS: Did it affect your work at all?

BH: No, not really.

MS: Well, I've done my questions.

[laughter]

MS: Thank you for that. Is there anything else you want to tell me or share?

BH: I don't think so. I probably exhausted my –

FS: Your sea tales?

[laughter]

FS: I reject that.

[laughter]

BH: Yes. No –

MS: Did you see any serpents or mermaids or anything around the harbor? I think none of that, no?

BH: No. I'd say the harbor is a lot cleaner than it was –

[laughter]

FS: Yes.

BH: –when I first came here. They've been very diligent in pursuing the cleanliness of the harbor and oil spills and things like that. There's a remarkable difference between what it was and what it is today.

MS: Terrific. Great. I need to take your picture.

[end of transcript]