

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Frank Herrera Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Los Angeles, California
Length of Interview: 00:41:56
Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: First question is a tough one. Please say your name and spell it.

Frank Herrera: I'm Frank Herrera. My last name Herrera is spelled H-E-R-R-E-R-A.

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

FH: I was born on February 17th, 1925. I was born in a little town in Sonora, Mexico.

MS: You came to Wilmington, is that true? When did you first come to the Harbor area?

FH: The first time that I came to the Harbor area is when I was discharged from the Army here in Fort MacArthur in San Pedro on March 20th, 1946.

MS: Did you decide to stay here? Why did you decide to?

FH: The reason why I stayed here, two reasons. One was that my family was here. They were at Dana Strand in Wilmington. My father was working for Todd Shipyard. I did go back to Arizona for a while. But the weather, the climate, the whole works, and my family being here, I just came back and just joined my family.

MS: What brought your father and your family here? When did they come, and why and what did they do?

FH: My father was a copper miner.

MS: Why don't you start again, "My father was."

FH: My father was a copper mining employee. He was what they call a powderman. He was the one that uses the dynamite to go into the caves and to get the ore and all this and that. Anyway, he was getting a little too tired of it. He had been in there since 1925, and he just started getting a little tired and sick really in 1941 and [19]42. He has cousins here in Pasadena. So, they had invited him to come over to Pasadena because of the weather. They told him, "Look, Arizona is too hot for you. Why don't you come over?" So, he did. He came over for a vacation sort of. He just happened to like coming down here to the port in San Pedro. As they were hiring at the Todd Shipyard, he did get in there and started working there since 1942.

MS: What was his job there?

FH: His job was –

MS: His job at the Todd Shipyard.

FH: At the Todd Shipyard, he –

MS: Just say, "My father's job."

FH: My father's job was a machinist and a machinist helper. So, that was his qualifications because of mostly having experience in drilling, in explosives, and all this and that. So, that's why he got the job really.

MS: Now, your family was here, but you weren't born here.

FH: No. My family, like I said, was here before I was. I didn't even know where Wilmington was. I was in the service, and they wrote to me that it says that they're now in Wilmington, California. So, I didn't know where Wilmington was at all. So, not until I [laughter] came here to Fort MacArthur that I found out that Wilmington was next to San Pedro.

MS: What were your first impressions of Wilmington and the port area?

FH: Really, the first impression was, like my family had said, the climate, the weather, so much different. It was so much cooler especially when I did get out in March. That was spring. So, it was a beautiful site and the ships and the ocean. I've never seen an ocean. I've never seen the ships at all that close. So, it was really impressive when I did see all this. Then when I found out that my father was working and helping build those ships, that was very, very interesting.

MS: Do you remember going to the ocean for the first time, putting your foot in the water? Tell me.

FH: Yes, I did. In fact, I took training in San Diego. I was in the anti-aircraft artillery. I think it was about two or three times that we did have to jump in the water with a full fuel pack and a rifle, the whole thing. Because they were training us in case we were shipwrecked or whatever. So, I did that. It was, again, very impressive to at least see the ocean and get a little whiff of the salt air. [laughter] Once in a while, I'd get a little bit of water inside my mouth and all that salt water. So, it was very, very, very nice. It was just an experience being from Arizona where it's all desert. It's quite a difference.

MS: So, how did you first get involved with the port itself professionally working?

FH: Well, I did want to work here seeing that I was twenty-one years old. So, I did get a job as a pipe fitter. I did go to work for a place in Los Angeles at Parker Boiler. They were building boilers. I did apply for it. I needed a job. So, they gave me a job at 90 cents an hour. All I had to know was what did the stilts and wrench look like and if I ever used one. I said, no. But they showed me how to use it. So, I became a pipe fitter for a while. I did have to rent a room over in Los Angeles. Because traveling from here to there, I had to get up at 4:00 a.m. and get the streetcar. By the way, the streetcars were really, really great. I wish we had [laughter] them now. But that took me to the job. But it took so long that I finally decided, well, I'll stay in one of the hotels. I stayed in a hotel on 5th and Maine for \$7.50 a week. For five days, I would stay there. Then I would come over to see my mom and dad and my three sisters here and spend the weekend. Then I would go over there again. But that, again, I spend a couple of years there doing that. But I decided, no, I better see if I can get a job here in the Harbor, and I did. I was unloading bananas. I think it was Pier 146 or 147 in Wilmington. Now, that was a job. But it was real good pay. I would work for a couple of days and that was enough for the whole week.

MS: What was your pay, and what did that job entail?

FH: The stalks of bananas that came in, they were about 7-foot tall. We had to pick them up and bring them out to a conveyor. At that time, I think it was about a dollar and a quarter, an hour that I was getting. But we would work six to eight hours and two or three days. That was real good pay for me. So, I did that for, say, a year or a year and a half. But my dad had told me that there were openings in the Todd Shipyard. So, I did go to work there for the shipyard. I was a driller's helper and also a rivet passer.

MS: Well, explain. What are those jobs?

FH: Oh, boy, I'll tell you. The rivet passer, you'd have a handle with a funnel-type metal like a cone. The rivet burner, he would heat up the rivets and throw them at me. I'd catch them with my funnel and then place it on the hole that was already drilled for the riveters to rivet the plate. This was just a repair job that they had at that time that I was working there.

MS: So, you had to be a pretty good catcher?

FH: Oh, yes, I was. I became a pretty good catcher. The best time for that was at nighttime. I did love to work at night. That was second and third shift.

MS: Why is that?

FH: Because they throw the rivet, and you can see it much better than in the daytime. I became pretty good at that, really good.

MS: Where were you living at that time?

FH: I was living there in Wilmington at the Dana Strand projects. That was a government home built for the government at that time. So, my dad was in there.

MS: Describe those projects. Who lived there, what did they look like, what was life like there?

FH: Well, the life was pretty good.

MS: Say, "The Dana Strand Project."

FH: The Dana Strand Project was there in Wilmington Boulevard. It was C Street. It was about three blocks, a square, really. I really couldn't tell you how many people were living there, but we had a really nice apartment. They had three bedrooms and one bath, and they had a level. I think it was three bedrooms up on top and a nice living room and a kitchen downstairs. We lived very, very comfortable. The people that lived there, most of the people were either working at longshoring, or they were working at shipyards. There was another shipyard right across from Todd Shipyard that was the Bethlehem Shipyard. That too was to repair all kinds of ships.

MS: So, the people who lived there were basically just a cross-section of workers who worked in the Harbor.

FH: Yes. Most of them worked in the Harbor. That was the best thing that ever happened to us, because it was so close to everything. In fact, Wilmington at that time, you had everything. You didn't have to go any other place. We had furniture stores. We had car dealers. We had a gigantic mall. We had everything right here. We didn't have to go any other place. All we had to do is either walk to the store, walk up to the bank. The Bank of America was there. Security was there, all kinds of furniture stores. The business was great.

MS: What was the mix of people? Were there Latinos and –

[talking simultaneously]

FH: Yes. There was a pretty good mix. Most of the Latinos would probably end up or were mostly on the east side of Wilmington. We lived in the west side because of the projects. But it was a very, very good mixture. I'd say that it was really even as far as Anglo and Mexican American and the Blacks. I think that was a pretty good mixture. Very good people, all. It looks like everybody knew each other.

MS: So, what did you do for fun when you were off work in Wilmington?

FH: Well, for fun we used to go there again. The beach was there. We used to go down to the beach. There were a lot of places where you could go. Take the streetcar and go to Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, you had everything. You could go to see the Tar Pits. You go to Universal Studios. The first thing that I did notice also, if we wanted to see snow, we'd go up to Mount Baldy. If you wanted to go to the desert, you'd go down to Joshua Tree or to Monument in Indio. That's the desert.

MS: So, you really got around.

FH: We got around all over the place.

MS: Were there social dances?

FH: Yes, there were.

MS: Tell me about that.

FH: There were quite a few dance halls here in San Pedro. The Palladium was one where we used to go to in Los Angeles. Believe it or not, I was once a bar owner.

MS: Well, tell me about that.

FH: We had a bar called (Sasser's?). It was right there at the foot of Avalon and D Street. We had a restaurant. We had a dance hall, the cocktail lounge, the whole works and all. We catered

to most of the longshoremen, believe it or not. They'd come in the morning and get their coffee before they went to work. Lunchtime, they would come and visit at our restaurant. I was part owner of Sasser's there.

MS: What year was that?

FH: That was in [19]63, [19]64, and [19]65.

MS: [19]64, [19]65.

FH: In the early [19]60s.

MS: What were you doing between [19]47 when you were grabbing rivets?

FH: Oh, yes. Well, after that, I figured that I wanted to do better things. So, I went to school. I took advantage of the G.I. Bill, and I did go to school. I went to Long Beach City College for a while. I took up bookkeeping and accounting. Not only that, after a while, I did get a job at Ford Motor Company. Ford Motor Company was right here in Wilmington in Ford Avenue. I worked there for about a year or two. I was still working and going to school. The reason why I left Ford is because they wouldn't give me a chance to take the night shift so that I can go to school in the daytime. So, I did transfer. I did go over to General Motors, which was in South Gate. There I worked and went to school at Harbor College. In fact, I graduated from Harbor College with an AA degree at the same time that I was working in General Motors. For thirty years, I worked for General Motors.

MS: When did you sleep?

FH: Very little.

MS: [laughter]

FH: But I [laughter] ended up getting married. I have six kids, two boys and four girls. But the other thing was that it took me, oh, about four or five years to get an AA degree. But I finally got it. At the same time though that I got some good promotions in General Motors, and I ended up as superintendent of the Paint Department.

MS: So, when did you leave General Motors? What year?

FH: I left General Motors in 1980. Oh, by the way, they called me back after I retired. I did retire in 1980. That was because they had an austerity program going on in General Motors at that time, and they offered me an early retirement. I was only fifty-five years old, but they offered me retirement. Either that or go back east to any of the other plants. I did go visit the other plants, but believe me, nothing like being here in California because of the weather, really. I went to Detroit. No way. I couldn't stand the cold over there.

MS: Well, what did you do after you left General Motors?

FH: Oh, I was going to tell you that after I left General Motors, they called me back to go to Mexico and work for them. Because they were building a plant over there in Saltillo, Chihuahua. So, being bilingual, they offered me the job to go down there. I did go to start up the plant. After the start of the plant, I came back, and I ended up going to the unemployment office to get my claim started. I ended up working there. After three weeks of getting unemployment, they gave me a job. So, I worked there for another ten years. I retired from the unemployment office in 1990. So, I forgot to mention.

MS: Sounds like you're never going to stop. So, what happened after that?

FH: No, I didn't. Then I started looking around. Well, I had already been a bartender and all that. I was helping the community really. I did see a lot of changes in Wilmington and a lot of changes that had to be done. So, I joined various clubs. Well, I belonged to the VFW, and I belonged to the American Legion. So, I did get in with the Wilmington community. They were getting ready to get something started in Wilmington like renovating old buildings. Just trying to do something for the youngsters here like getting something started for them. So, this is the Wilmington Community Committee that I joined. After that, when I stayed there for eight years – oh, by the way, we were the ones that came up with the idea of getting that Banning's Landing.

MS: We're going to talk about that separately. But let's go back. I want to go back to your bar and restaurant for a while. How many years did you have that?

FH: I had that for three and a half years. I finally decided that it was too much for me. Because I was still working in General Motors and coming on the weekends, and I would be bartending. We had a dance hall there. We had dances on the weekends, Saturday and Sunday. It was a little bit too much for me because I was kind of neglecting my family, and my kids were growing up. So, I decided to give it up. I sold it to my partner, and my partner took over.

MS: Were there live bands that came there?

FH: We had live bands, mariachis.

MS: Mariachis.

[talking simultaneously]

FH: Mariachis that we had on Sundays for, we would call it (tariala?), that mariachi would come and play for four or five hours and dance too. There was a very nice dance hall that we had in there too. We had four or five bartenders. We had waitresses on the weekends especially. That place was jumping all the time on the weekends.

MS: If I came to the bar and restaurant, what would you suggest that I order? What was your menu like?

FH: Oh, well, I'd tell you the menu was everything. It was a cosmopolitan restaurant, really.

You had Mexican food. You had Chinese food. We had a cook there that was, oh, top-of-the-line chef. He was African American. He was great. So, he would prepare all those kinds of dishes and all that. So, we had a real good time on it. As far as the bar, well, it was open, from cocktails to whatever you want to order. We also had the Mexican station that would come over on Sundays. We would broadcast from the Sasser's the live music and the entertainment that we had. We had the KMPC, something like that. It's Mexican.

MS: Any famous band members come to play there?

FH: Not really. They were just some of the locals that we had here, a couple of the singers that we had here from Wilmington. The mariachis usually came from Los Angeles. They were known there for their expertise in music.

MS: One of the other projects we're working on is a story of Chicano rock and roll.

FH: Oh, wow.

MS: Lalo Guerrero and Don Tosti from 1940s and [19]50s and [19]60s. Do you know Lalo's music?

FH: Oh, yes. Well, one thing that we usually did go over to – oh, gosh, he was a great guitarist. He owns a Brooklyn bar. I forget his name right now. It'll come to me. But we would go up to also La Fonda, which was the really famous Camperos or the mariachis at that time. In fact, it still is. They still have the Camperos in that, La Fonda. It's a really good restaurant and good entertainment –

MS: In Wilshire.

FH: – right there on Wilshire Boulevard.

MS: So, you sound like you're really, really busy. But when you came later in your life, you decided to get involved with Wilmington and the community and young people. Talk about how the Banning's Landing project began. What was it? Why did you do it? What is its contribution to Wilmington?

FH: Well, there was about fifteen or sixteen of us, mostly the businesspeople that were from Wilmington. We had a couple of the Wilmington activists like Gertrude Schwab and Bill Schwab and quite a few of the businesspeople that were involved like Juanita Foods. Mr. De La Torre, he was involved in there too. We had some of the longshoremen that were involved in that. We just decided. It took us about ten years to come up with a drawing of the Banning's Landing. In fact, we had made plans and hopefully, that we could get a 20,000-square-foot building. Lo and behold, ended up with 10,000-square building, but can't be too choosy. At least we got something going. It took us that long to get it.

MS: People don't know what Banning's Landing is. What is Banning's Landing?

FH: Banning's Landing is a building for the community whereby they have community meetings. They have entertainment for the community. It's a beautiful building. It's shaped like a ship in the front there. It was really Gertrude Schwab that named it Banning's Landing because that's when Mr. Banning landed, according to the history. In fact, we have a statue of him right outside the Banning's Landing. That building is being used quite a bit for educational and also for organizations that want to meet there and all kinds of activities. In fact, the Los Angeles Council is going to be there. They have been there a couple of times. Now, in fact, here tomorrow, seventeenth, they will have a meeting there from 6:00 p.m. on up. The port has that up now.

MS: So, what is the importance of Banning's Landing to the community in Wilmington? What does it mean? It took ten years, that was a long struggle. Why was it so long? Why is it so important that you –

FH: To me, it was no fault of anyone. But Wilmington has always been – to my knowledge and the way I saw it, it was kind of neglected. They took everything out of there. We used to have the, like I mentioned, banana boat. We used to have that. We used to have the Catalina Freight. Catalina used to be there. The ship used to be back and forth. They took that away. They took almost everything of importance that we could see right there at the Port of Wilmington. There was nothing left. So, all of us got together. We decided that let's renovate Avalon all the way down to Water Street. Then we decided that we should have some kind of a community building over there for Wilmington. That's how we came up with a building that would be for the community, and it's being used by the community. That's very important. We're trying now – because I now belong to another organization which is the PCAC, Ports Community Advisory Committee. I belong to that. We do have a subcommittee, which is the Wilmington Waterfront. I belong to that too. We have put ideas together to get baseball parks, soccer parks, and all of that activity, that we would have to have an area that is right now being built from Avalon clear down to Figueroa. We've got that berm and the buffer that we're talking about. It's being worked on, hopefully, that I could see it before my time [laughter]. But they are working on it now. In fact, they're going to finalize the whole thing tomorrow. They're going to come up with a plan. Hopefully, that is going to go through, and now we're going to start.

MS: What is that going to mean? This is great. Give me a sense of what really the conditions are and were in Wilmington and what the place was like and why the kinds of things you're doing are so needed.

FH: The conditions, that's one of the reasons why I stayed here. I liked the place. I looked at the people. The facilities that we had in the early years that I was here, [19]46, [19]47, [19]48, like I mentioned before, we had everything here in Wilmington but slowly and but surely started deteriorating for some reason or the other. It was just neglected from – I don't want to mention the council people that were on it at that time. No. But there was some neglect of Wilmington. Everything was out of there.

MS: So, what were the problems then at that time?

FH: The problems were very –

MS: The problems in Wilmington.

FH: In Wilmington, the problems were that the streets were not maintained. The trees and the vegetation and all that was not maintained. There was one heck of a lot of wrecking yards all in Wilmington. Naturally, we had a lot of the oil derricks that we had there and all that. We were comfortable, but it was not that clean the way we like to see it clean. It was neglected completely, like I had mentioned before then, when they took out the Catalina Freight, when they took out the ships that were coming in like Matsonia, other big cruising ships. They took them out of there, and they moved it somewhere else. Some of them came over to San Pedro, others to Long Beach, and all that. Hey, we paid a lot of taxes. We paid a lot of taxes into the fund. I felt that we never got what we were supposed to get or what we deserved. We had big semi-trucks going in and out of Wilmington, the Main Street, Avalon, and Anaheim trucks coming in and out. I have to give credit for one couple that really worked on that. That was Bill and Gertrude Schwab. Those two were the ones that really started complaining about the big trucks, complaining about how dirty it was, that the trash was not being picked up, and the big wrecking yards coming in. They were coming in more and more. Once you have those wrecking yards, it breeds a lot of evil, really. Because not only were they coming in collecting junk and all for them, but there were also people that were coming in that were really not the right kind of people.

MS: Well, there were these squatters and, for want of a better term, these very high crime rate areas that were going on at the time. Weren't there?

FH: That was because of what I had just mentioned. That was a good place to hide, don't you think? We used to call it the third world from Alameda, the square up to the bridge from the freeway, all of that area. It's quite large. It was nothing but bad stuff, family, and all this and that. Like I had mentioned, I gave this to – mentioned Gertrude and Bill.

MS: Why don't you just actually describe, what was that just bad stuff? What was going on there?

FH: Well, what was going on, we were talking about drugs, prostitution. There was a lot of young girls up and down. Not only in the streets there, but everybody knew where they were. Most of the time, they would go there. That's where a lot of the crime had started really, gang bangers. I hated to see some of the schools there – again, the schools were doing fairly well, but the attendance was poor. The kids, let's say the high school age, the drop out was way up high. Not only because of the gang bangers and all that, but there was very little work other than longshoremen really. That's about the only thing that we had. If you wanted to get a job, that's the only job that you would get, refineries and the longshoreman.

MS: So, what is your dream for Wilmington?

FH: My dream is –

MS: My dream for Wilmington.

FH: My dream for Wilmington is to have the youngsters benefit from what we're doing there. Because we want to do this for them. Not only will that keep them out of gangs, but let's bring Wilmington back and put it on a map again where Wilmington deserves to be mentioned as a good and healthy city. That's what we're trying to do. But we're going to have to start from the youngsters, the elementary schools, up to the Banning School. We have the chance now of getting this athletic field started for them. That'll keep them out of trouble. That'll teach them something. I always say in the schools that we used to call it the three R's: reading, writing, arithmetic. There's another R that I'd like to get in there, and that's the teaching responsibility. That's what I like to see. Hopefully, it'll come in my time, but we get started anyway.

MS: Well, let's say your time lasts for another twenty-five years. Wouldn't that be nice?

FH: [laughter]

MS: All your dreams come true. What is Wilmington like in your dreams, twenty-five years from now? What do we see there? What would be going on there?

FH: I'd like to see nice buildings being built, the businesses coming up again, the whitening and cleaning and repairing the streets again, and beautifying, which I have to give credit also to our Mayor, Villaraigosa, that wants to get a little green. He's talking about, what, a million trees that we want to plant and all this and that. That we want to see. We want to see all of Wilmington beautifying again. That's what I like to see. We'd like to see also the good and available transportation for the senior citizens that need to get around Wilmington.

MS: Let's say I'm someone who's really very hard-nosed, and they say, "Well, why should we do this? Why just is Wilmington going to the dump? Why should we care about Wilmington?"

FH: [laughter] That is very, very wrong to even think about it. But there are a lot of hard –

MS: Mention my question, we should care for Wilmington because –

FH: We should care about Wilmington because this is the place where we are still growing. Especially now, there are more jobs coming in the longshoring. There's more shipping and receiving from longshoring. The jobs are here. Naturally, we're just going to have to clean the air a little more and get the people to start and beautifying their own – in fact, there is a lot of remodeling of homes right now in Wilmington. The prices of the properties has gone sky high. So, a lot of people that are wanting to stay, their siblings, their daughters, and their sons that are wanting to stay here, they are remodeling places in Wilmington. That's a good sign that we want to stay. It is a good place to stay. It is the heart of the whole Harbor, really. It is the right place to be. Hopefully, I'd like to see that grow for the better of the whole community.

MS: Perfect. Excellent. Anything else you wanted to tell me?

FH: We were talking about me coming from Arizona. My grandfather was born in Tombstone, Arizona. He was about nineteen years old when he went back to Mexico to fight the Revolution.

Would you believe me? He had seven brothers here already in the United States at this time. They all were in Texas, New Mexico, and here in Pasadena. So, that Arizona deal was really great. In other words, I went to high school there in a place called Miami, Arizona. I went to high school there. That's where I was drafted from 1943.

MS: Well, we're going to tell the story about the port. So, Arizona is a no-port spot.

FH: But Arizona was just where I would say that I was born.

[end of transcript]