Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Joe Itson Oral History
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Male Speaker: The first question is the easy one. Please say your name and spell it.

Joe Itson: My name is Joe Itson, I-T-S-O-N, the last name.

MS: What year were you born, Joe, and where?

JI: 1928. I was born in Cedar City, Utah, in 1928. My father was on the railroad, although they lived in California. But I moved to Long Beach, the Harbor Area, in 1928 when I was just two months old.

MS: So, where'd you live when you first moved here? In Long Beach area?

JI: Long Beach.

MS: Right. Did you ever move to San Pedro?

JI: No. I just worked out of San Pedro and sold papers in San Pedro on the ships and that sort of thing back in the [19]30s.

MS: Tell us about those days in the [19]30s when you were in San Pedro. What was it like, and what were you doing as a little kid down there?

JI: Well, I used to like to go to the baseball park. There was a lot of baseball, Long Beach and Los Angeles. I sold papers on all the steam schooners that used to come in here before the war. They had the Navy landings, and I used to shine shoes at the Navy landing. It was a lot. To me, every place was safe, it seemed like, for some reason. But for a kid, it was great growing up because you had the beach. You were lucky to have a bicycle. But selling papers and –

MS: Well, tell me more about that. I mean, how did that work, and who were your customers? Where'd you get your newspapers from? Where did you go?

JI: They used to deliver the papers. I used to sell mostly the *Press Telegram* from Long Beach and the *Herald Examiner* from Los Angeles, which doesn't exist anymore, the *Herald Examiner*. Sometimes, we'd go out to the Navy ships on weekends with a bundle of papers also. The launches would run from San Pedro and Long Beach from the Naval Base until right out to the ships. They were very good to the kids in those days.

MS: Describe this. Today, kids don't sell paper. They don't know anything about this. How did it work?

JI: Well, you would go get a bundle of papers, and you'd go down on the steam schooners when they'd come in. You'd go aboard, and you'd bother people until they finally bought a paper from you [laughter].

MS: So, how much were you selling the papers for? How much money were you making?

JI: Well, I made pretty good money. They were a nickel a piece, and I think probably, they cost us 3 cents a piece. So, we'd probably make about 2 cents a paper. Not only that, we could eat aboard. All the old steam schooners, they used to feed family style. They'd put everything on the table. I thought it was the greatest place in the world to hang around ships.

MS: So, in those days, they didn't know you weren't a passenger. You were just getting in line for food?

JI: Oh, no, no. They knew you weren't a passenger. Sometimes, the bigger ships, the Hog Islanders, had come in from Brazil bringing the Brazil nuts. Moore-McCormack had a couple of Hog Islanders that used to run into the West Coast here, the *City of Flint* and the *Independence Hall*, as I recall.

MS: This doesn't happen like this anymore. You have to describe it to people. So, you're out there. You go get your papers. You pick them up for 3 cents. Then you take a launch or a ferry to the boat, right?

JI: Yes. But you'd ride your bike down to the steam schooners, and you'd get your bike. But they had the electric train. You could go from Long Beach Harbor, Wilmington to Los Angeles, Wilmington. It was very easy to get around. So, you'd just catch the red car, and you could zip from one place to the other.

MS: So, talk about when you wanted to sell. What were you saying as a young kid to get these people to buy papers? Did you limp, or did you pretend you were sick? I mean, how did you get the people to buy your newspaper?

JI: Well, just pester them [laughter]. But they were pretty good. They always paid you more than a nickel. So, if you sold papers uptown on the corner, you'd just get your 2 cents. But if you got down on the ship, you'd at least get a dime for the paper.

MS: What about shining shoes? Tell me about that.

JI: Oh, well, the Navy, when the sailors would go back to the ship, they'd want to look like they hadn't been out all night. So, you could always get a shine job, and that was cheap too. We had all kinds of things we'd do. We'd say, "Let me shine one of them to show you what a good job I can do." Then you shine one shoe. The guy would say, "Well, you've got to shine –" "Not unless you pay me my nickel or dime," whatever it was. I've forgotten now. So, he wouldn't want to go back with one shoe shined and one shoe not. So, we'd do little things like that. But it was a good time.

MS: Now, did you ever work around Beacon Street?

JI: Not a lot around Beacon Street because there was a lot of – when I was older, I used to work on Beacon Street. I used to work on the ferry that would run across from Terminal Island back and forth when I was older. Then I worked on the city tugboat, and I'd relieve for vacations mostly. Most of my sailing, I would do deep water. But when I'd be home or ashore, I'd relieve

on the ferry boat down and the city tugboat, the *Angels Gate*.

MS: Well, talk about those ferries. They're long gone. Why don't you describe what those were or how important they were? Did they have names?

JI: I don't remember the names, except for the tugboat, which is the *Angels Gate*. It's still down there. It's a historical tugboat, like the *Lane Victory*. But at midnight, they'd stopped the ferry from going, or whatever time, late at night, it was. Then they'd have the small boat taking all the – that was the one that you had to really be careful with because Beacon Street had a few bars on it. A lot of the Navy people and sailors would be coming back late at night. So, when they'd get on that boat, I'd be the sailor. I'd let go of that line and jump up in the wheelhouse in a hurry, take them over to Terminal Island, drop them off, and it would run all night. But the ferry boat would take automobiles and cars and everything else. Being a sailor, I wasn't used to working on something like a ferry boat. I was the maintenance man or day man on there, and I thought I should be doing something. Those were all very old ferryboats. I remember one time that there was a lot of soot up on the upper deck. I thought, "I'll just go ahead and wash it down." So, I hooked up the fire hose and everything. I started washing everything down. But that ferry was old. The decks were leaky and everything. All the people that had their cars down before all this soot and all the water is coming down on top of them. I remember the captain on that ferry boat, just, "God, stop that kid from [laughter]."

MS: You were trying to do your job.

JI: I was. That's all I was trying to do.

MS: That's a great story [laughter]. So, how'd you first get involved with ships and sailing?

JI: I was just around them all my life. I was always around the ships, the harbor, from selling – I pestered my parents to let me go to sea. I was late sixteen and almost seventeen. So, I got my parents to – my dad, finally, pestered him to let me go to sea. The war was on. So, I went over to the Union Hall in Wilmington. They sent me up to the Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship, which the Harry Lundeberg had the *Invader*. It had been a former racing yacht. He had this one-week school that would bypass the maritime academies out in Catalina and all these different places. So, you go up there. You row a boat for a week. Then they put you on a ship as an ordinary seaman. My first ship was right out of San Pedro here. Just like the *Lane Victory*, it was the *Niagara Victory*. The whole crew was from San Pedro. People that were probably well known were Peter Marino and Tony Troy and Bob Schroeder and quite a few local people that were – (Louis Pravados?) and just a lot of local people that were involved. So, anyway, that was 1945. We went to Honolulu and didn't stop. But we picked up a convoy partway to Ulithi and Enewetak, unescorted, and then we went to Okinawa. We sat in Okinawa for several months. That's when the war was on. I was in Okinawa when they dropped the bombs that ended the war.

MS: Let's go back. Talk about this Lundeberg School. Who was he, and what was this school like? What did you learn, and where was it? What were the classes, and what was it?

JI: Actually, Harry Lundeberg is the man who run the school. But it was named after the former head of the Sailors Union, who was Andrew Furuseth. Andrew Furuseth School of Seamanship was at Pier 5 in San Francisco, where they had this racing yacht, the *Invader*. So, many people, over the years, went through that *Invader* to get their seamens' papers.

MS: What were the classes like?

JI: The classes were mostly, how do you tie knots, and how you do this, and how do you row a boat? We had to do a lot of rowing and that sort of thing. Depending on how bad they needed you on a ship was how long you stayed in the school. But that was the way it was. It was built, so you didn't have to go to Sheepshead Bay or Catalina and spend three months in bootcamp or something. But the knot tying and the sort of thing like that – but I was ahead of the game on that because after my papers, I worked for Tom Doyle, a local sail maker. So, I worked in the sail loft for a long time. So, I was up to snuff on splicing and canvas sewing and that sort of thing.

MS: What did your father do?

JI: My father worked at the Standard Gypsum. The company changed names three times. He didn't want travel anymore with a railroad in 1928. So, he went to work for, I guess it was Standard Gypsum, which is still there today. But it went through different ownerships. He retired right at the foot of Water Street there, right down by the harbor there in Long Beach on –

MS: What did he do?

JI: His job was called a calciner, the first people that made wallboard and that sort of thing. That's what he did.

MS: Now, you were begging to go to sea. Why did you want to go to sea? How'd you get attracted to that idea?

JI: I have no idea. It was always there. I always wanted to go on a ship. I'd go down to the Craig shipyard where all the old movie ships were. Another thing, you could go to Craig's shipyard and – a paperboy didn't have any trouble getting in. They'd let you in. It wasn't all the identification tags and this sort of thing. Especially, when the war came on, a lot of the big yachts, they put them in there and painted them gray and cut the bow sprites off of them, and the Navy took them over.

MS: You said Craig shipyard was the movie shipper. What do you mean by –

JI: Well, all the movie ships, like, when they made *Reap the Wild Wind* and a lot of those old movies with Ray Milland and John Wayne and everything. Well, all those old sailing ships were docked right down in the channel, right between Terminal Island and Long Beach there, right by the Ford Avenue there. All those ships were down there, all the old movie ships. That's where they kept them. The Sea Scouts were down there.

MS: So, had you been a Sea Scout before?

JI: I went down for a while at the Sea Scouts. But I liked more of going out on the steam schooners. I enjoyed going aboard the steam schooners.

MS: So, let's go back. When you were growing up here, how did you first get involved with the sea and with sailing and with ships?

JI: Well, I lived right on the beach, and I just did. I just meticulated toward it. That's what I wanted to do.

MS: Did you watch movies of seafarers? You read books about them? Is there anything that brought that interest to you?

JI: Not really, other than the fact that it just fascinated me watching the skill that used to be involved. Even watching the longshoremen, the way they could handle a load of lumber. They had booms, and the lumber was all stacked by hand in those days. They'd have the hooks, and they'd stack the lumber and this sort of thing. I got on one lumber carrier, and I found out that they didn't take the young guys that didn't know how to handle the hook very well either. They let you know in a hurry that –

MS: You'd get hurt.

JI: Yes [laughter].

MS: So, right when the war was over in [19]45, you were in Okinawa. Were you there when the war basically ended in Japan?

JI: Yes, I was there.

MS: What do you know about the *MacKay* and that ship?

JI: The *MacKay* was a ship. The reason I'm not too much up on the *MacKay* is that I knew about it and heard about it and all the things. But I went in the Army in [19]46. When I turned eighteen [laughter], I had to go in the Army. But I got out in [19]47. In the meantime, the APL dock had burnt down. They had to build a new where the clock tower is. That was the new APL dock. Berth 150, that Union Oil where I spent several years as the loading master with Union Oil Company loading tankers out of there, it caught fire because it was an old, wooden dock.

MS: Were you there then?

JI: Not when it caught fire, no. I was in the army when the *MacKay* blew up.

MS: So, when you came back, you started working on Union Oil tankers.

JI: Well, no. When I started back, I was actually started on the standard oil tankers, which were

the berth across the way. Berth 101, I believe it was. I started out working on the *Chevron* and the *R.C. Stoner* and different – I ended up sailing [inaudible] with Standard Oil.

MS: For ships carrying different cargo, what are the unique qualities or the special qualities of oil tankers compared to people carrying lumber or people carrying fruit or whatever? What are the challenges for oil tankers?

JI: Well, the oil tankers is of course – this will make a lot of people maybe not – but it's a more skillful job. You can do a lot of damage. You can drop a load of lumber and then restack it. But if you spill oil, it's pretty well documented. But some of the ships that later on – that Standard oil had some, and Union Oil had the *Santa Maria* [inaudible] that would carry twelve or fourteen different cargoes at the same time. Especially, when we'd go to Anchorage and those places before they had the oil up there, we'd take oil out of here and deliver it to Anchorage and Kodiak and all places. They'd have pressure appliance fuels and asphalt stock and regular gas and premium gas and diesel and minus thirty diesel, minus sixty diesel, avgas, cleaning solvent, all these different things. You would have a problem with each one of these things, keeping them from contamination.

MS: Well, explain how that happened. They were all in separate tanks?

JI: All in separate tanks, right.

MS: Describe them as people don't understand. So, you just take a typical ship with all the different things stored on board. I mean, how was it stored, and where was it stored? What are the issues about storing these different kinds of substances?

JI: Well, on a mixed cargo tanker, you would have to load it. If you had many different cargoes, you'd have to load them one at a time, and you would have to be able to keep the ship straight. When you're carrying lube oils and these different things, it would be sometimes complicated. But that wasn't the main job. The main job was getting them in, so you could get them out. Because you didn't discharge it all at the same port. You would go to different ports. So, you'd have to be very careful how you put the cargo in, so you could get it out properly. You only had so many pumps. You had more cargoes than you had pumps.

MS: So, how would you then load? What was the process of loading these multi-kinds of cargo or multi-kinds of fuels and gases and everything? What was that process like?

JI: Well, it was a process depending on what quantities that you had. They'd have to be stored separately. But sometimes, you'd have to use the same pump to discharge two different types of cargoes. So, you'd have to drain the lines and flush the lines and this sort of thing. You'd have a slop tank available, and you did it as carefully as you could. You would take the least contaminable and go from one to the other. Like, after you discharged diesel, you could discharge lube oil just by draining your pump and this sort of thing. But with gasolines, you'd have to watch out for the flash content. Avgas was a terrible thing to have to carry. Because if there was any grease in it, they would run angular tests or frying pan tests. If it showed any grease, you'd have to send the whole batch back to the refinery.

MS: What were these tests? We don't know what they are. What are the tests? What are you testing for?

JI: Well, the labs did the test. So, I didn't conduct the test, other than the flash. I used to run the flash sometimes. But the angular test, they used to run on avgases, you can refer to it as a frying pan test or something. What they do is cook it away. If there's any grease residue, a certain amount, then it doesn't pass. Because they don't want any of the – and that was heavily leaded, the Avgas was. As far as I know, still is.

MS: What about the flash test? What was that?

JI: Flash was, you have a minimum flash, like diesel and stove oil and all these different things. If the flash is too high, it would be dangerous to use as a stove oil. So, if you've got any light ends into your diesel or this sort of thing, it would flash. In other words, it might flash at 130 where it should only flash at 110.

MS: I still don't know what flash is.

JI: Flash means the vapors that come off of it can be ignited. Had to be a certain temperature to ignite.

MS: So, you're on this ship with all this fuel and gas and everything. You're on a bomb.

JI: Well, it's not as long as it was full [laughter]. When they're empty is when they're dangerous.

MS: Why is that?

JI: Well, because you've got all the fumes. It's too rich to burn, if you've got too much. I was on the *Santa Maria*. We loaded it out of Los Angeles area, full load of gasoline, diesel. It was all involved in a collision in Anchorage Harbor that – just a tremendous fire. There was fire 2,000 feet of stern of the ship. I have pictures of that fire from the newspaper clippings.

MS: So, you were in the midst of all that?

JI: Yes, I sure was.

MS: How did it happen?

JI: Well, two ships were occupying the same place at the same time. One ship was heaving up the anchor, and we were coming in and going to anchor. We kind of overrode the anchor. What happened was, down at the bilge keel, the anchor tore the hull, and the gas that was in there came out. It was so hot that as soon as it hit the surface, it just ignited into flame. The ship had to be towed out. It'd probably have sunk if it hadn't have got into a shallow spot. It burned out some of the gas. We had the steam smothering systems on and the rest of the ship was saved. We discharged it with portable pumps. This is in November of 1964. I guess it was December of

1964. So, they sent an electrician up there to ride down with me. They towed the ship out of Anchorage with two tugboats. The electrician they sent out was a prominent local man right here named Tony Demaria. Tony Demaria owns Demaria Electric here in San Pedro. He and I rode that tow across the Gulf of Alaska in the wintertime. It took us about fourteen days to get across. It was miserable, cold. I see Tony. He comes down and helps on the *Lane Victory* occasionally.

MS: Talk about supertankers. When they came in, what effect did they have on the business?

JI: Well, Union Oil's first supertanker was built in 1971. I was sent back to Sparrows Point. I went to the supertanker school in France. Then I went back to Sparrows Point and brought it out. That was the *Sansinena 2*. The *Sansinena 2* was 70,000-ton ship. Now, that was a large ship for the West Coast of the U.S. But that was a small supertanker by these mammoth things that go into Ireland and left – the 200,000 tonners and those bigger tankers. But they just will go up and carry crude oil and bring it back. It's really, you just open the valve and fill the tank ship up and come back and pump it out.

MS: But from a seaman's point of view, moving something that big around has got to be a problem, a challenge.

JI: The challenge handling more cargoes is more of a challenge, but the ships are bigger. I used to come into berth 46 out here, and I ran from Cook Inlet – not Valdez. We went to Cook Inlet, which has flow ice. There's a lot of ice in Cook Inlet from Anchorage. For the first ten years that the *Sansinena 2* ran, I ran from Cook Inlet to Los Angeles Area. In fact, the chief pilot in Los Angeles was my chief mate on there. He's now the chief pilot in Los Angeles, Ben Christensen. I'm sure you might have talked to him. Anyway, those –

MS: What were your responsibilities in the tanker? Were you a captain?

JI: Yes, I was a captain.

MS: So, give us a sense of what a captain does on a supertanker. What are the responsibilities? What do you need to know? What are your skills?

JI: Get good people.

[laughter]

MS: Tell me, your major challenge of being a captain is to get good people, whatever.

JI: Well, yes. With my particular company, we did our own piloting. So, my primary job was to see that the ship got in and out of Alaska and back down here in San Francisco. I had pilotages for all those areas.

MS: Start again. Say that the biggest challenge for me as a captain was and start again.

JI: The primary responsibility is to operate the ship as fast and safely as possible. Cook Inlet has a lot of ice in port. So, the docking and undocking and the piloting and that sort of thing was one of my largest responsibilities since I had pilotages for all those areas, for Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Cook Inlet. So, the docking and undocking of the ships and that sort of thing. Primarily, the handling of the cargo was left with the chief mate.

MS: So, you're coming in here with this big monster ship here, piloting it into the harbor. There's not much room for error, right?

JI: No, very little. Very little.

MS: Tell me about that.

JI: You just do it very slowly. We had a supertanker channel, and at that time, half of the channel was dug out deeper. It's a lot different now. But half of the channel was dredged, I think, to 55 feet, if I remember correctly. Then we'd turn and go into berth 46, which was the outer harbor. That's the terminal where the *Sansinena* – not the *Sansinena 2* – blew up in 1976.

MS: Tell me about that.

JI: The *Sansinena* was a Union Oil-owned ship also, but she had an Italian crew. They were built in the U.S. They were built at Newport News, I believe. But they were U. S. built, but then they were put under a Panamanian flag or Liberian, I've forgotten which. But they had an all-Italian crew on it. They used to bring, from the Persian Gulf, they'd bring in crude oil to berth 46. But it had discharged all of its cargo and was ballasting when it blew up. It was quite an explosion. I was on the *Sansinena 2* at the time. I live about 40 miles from where the ship was docked. It broke all the glass in San Pedro, the pilot station and all the glass – every place in there. It looked like a war zone here when it blew up. My garage door rattled. When they said *Sansinena*, a lot of people knew I was on the *Sansinena 2* – and they would get the ships named. I remember a friend of mine, (Mark Ty?), who was practicing law at that time, he called my house. My wife answered the phone. He says, "Is Joe home?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Thank God," and just hung up [laughter]. But anyway, it was quite an explosion. I think there was ten or eleven people killed in that when it blew up.

MS: So, that must have been, for you, a bit of a wake-up call of what could happen.

JI: Well, the call was there. But those were some very strange times actually. I went to a couple of the hearings when they were discussing what possibly could have happened and everything. But there was an LNG terminal that was going to be built into San Pedro over where Fish Harbor is. I know that the city council was to have their vote the next day, I believe, and that killed the vote. There was a lot of people disturbed. There's a lot of people who wondered if maybe that could have possibly been the reason it blew up. But I don't know. There was nothing ever definitive on that. But it blew up, and there was an implosion right in the middle of it. The bow and stern just went down. The mid-ship house blew completely over the control arms on the dock and lit on the guard shack. They never found the guard, never even found his gun. He had a gun. The pump man that was loading the ballast, they went over and – they never found the

guard. In fact, some of his relatives, they had a trailer and come over and was searching for him. They didn't want to tell them not to, but it was – but the pump man, I remember the pump man was out on the fence. He blew completely off the deck and was impaled on the fence over there. I think there was probably eleven people killed in that job. Then they rebuilt the dock, totally rebuilt the dock, so they could continue the oil. They put the pipeline extended over to the ore dock and inside of it. Then we went into there until they got the dock rebuilt. Then the first landing at the dock, at berth 46 again, then was the *Sansinena 2*. We'd come in from Cook Inlet. When we first went in there, they watched us pretty close. The Coast Guard and the port police and everybody involved watched us land when we docked that first docking at the new dock, which was a much nicer dock, by the way. The chief mate, who was now the chief pilot in San Pedro, he was on the bow. We docked without incident. For the most part, there was never any more incidents on the *San 2* at berth 46, to my knowledge.

MS: Was the wreckage still there or had that been cleared?

JI: No. The wreckage, that was all cleared out. All cleared out.

MS: Okay. Before we get on to the *Lane Victory*, I want to know more about what a captain does. What do you do? How many men are on board your crew? Give me a sense of what your job is basically.

JI: The number of men on a ship just depends. The ships got newer and bigger. The crews got smaller and smaller. When the T2s used to run, there'd be forty, forty-two, forty-three people. As the newer ships came out, they would be dimetcoted and had nice coatings on them. So, they didn't rust like they did prior. They would continually try to get the crews smaller. They got them down to about twenty-two, twenty-three people on the last ship that I was on, which was *Sierra Madre* for Union Oil Company West Coast Shipping.

MS: A lot of it is, you're just at sea. So, what is the crew doing while you're –

JI: The crew is divided up into watches. You had two ABs on each watch on the last ships. Now, you used to have three on a watch, but later on, you had two on. You'd have a lookout and a quartermaster and then one of the mates. The navigating officer would watch the radars and the different equipment and navigate. But they'd relieve each other. You'd have six ABs on the ship.

MS: What is an AB?

JI: An AB is an able-bodied seaman who has at least three years sea time on deck.

MS: What are your responsibilities as captain?

JI: My responsibility would be to see that they carry out their duties.

MS: Now, is it operated in a military fashion, yes or no sir? Or how's that operated?

JI: No. Well, most of the sailors and this sort of thing are polite, even the ones on board ship. I might be Joe when we're ashore, but I was still called captain aboard the ship. Things like that get to be a habit and go through. Some of the older people that I sailed with years ago, they still refer to me as captain. But I don't – you're not a captain if you're not on the ship anyway.

MS: So, what's the hardest part of your job?

JI: I don't really know that there was a hard – when you say hard I don't understand what you mean by –

MS: The most difficult part. There's easy stuff, and there's –

JI: Well, some things are harder for some people than they are for others. If a person has reasonable skills, it's – some people enjoy it, some people don't. I never thought any of it was hard. Sometimes, it would be long and tiring. If you were standing on the wing of the bridge up at Cook Inlet, maybe for twenty-four to thirty hours while you were loading and discharging because of the ice, it'd get long and hard. But it wasn't hard. It was just long.

MS: That's another thing. I mean, what is the largest transit you would be making with a ship? I mean, how long would you be at sea?

JI: We wouldn't be at sea too long on the *Sansinena 2*. About five days would be the longest.

MS: So, how would your schedule go? Would you be five days on, five days off, or how would it work?

JI: No. I worked about it – toward the end, it was day for day. You're off half the time, whether it was sixty days on, sixty days off, or whatever it is. You could adjust it however you wanted it.

MS: But recently, there've been a lot of new technology been brought on board ship. I mean, now, there's satellite connections and all kinds of stuff. Is that something you had to keep up with, or was that change really evident for you?

JI: No, I had to keep up with all the new technology. I went back and got certified for electronic for radar. Even medical, I had to go become an EMT and be on the National Registry of EMTs.

MS: What is an EMT?

JI: An EMT is an emergency medical technician. You would have to go to different schools during your different times. I went to supertanker school for ship handling in France, in Grenoble, France. I went to another simulator school at LaGuardia Airport in New York. I went to the firefighting school at Texas A&M and all these different things. But truly, the electronic marvels are what's going on right now. I'm so impressed when I go to the pilot station and see what they have right now. It's just hard to believe.

MS: Tell me what they have.

JI: Well, they have portable readouts, like, little flat – probably 10 or 12 inches wide, and it has the ship on it. It shows the docks that you're going by. It shows your movement. It shows your speed, your set, and your drift. You can measure any distance from any buoy, and it'll pick up other ships that are coming in from the radar. Union Oil West Coast Shipping was outstanding. I mean, I can't get over how much they went for safety and put electronic charts aboard. We had the first commercial electronic charts, to my knowledge, that was installed on any ship. So, the last few years that I sailed, we had electronic charts. Therefore, I could look at the radar or the readout. I not only saw the chart where I was and the ship in the middle of it. But I could see the – and it was superimposed on the radar, so other ships and everything, it was just looking like a television program. Not only was that on the bridge, that was duplicated in my office right down below it. So, I could, at any time, look at one of two screens. I could change the radars from down below. Because we had three radars. I could change from one to the other. I could also look at the ECDIS system, which was the electronic charts. I could tell what our speed was. I could see where we were on the coast. You could navigate from my desk [laughter].

MS: That's great. Tell me about the *Lane Victory*. What is that, and how were you involved with that?

JI: The *Lane Victory* is a World War II ship, just like the one I made my first trip on as an ordinary seaman. I can't give you as much information on the *Lane Victory* as the people that, sixteen years ago, took this ship out of the boneyard and just rebuilt it and did a tremendous job of what they did on this. The last year and a half or so, I've acted as the master on there. So, really, on the *Lane*, I'm a Johnny-come-lately, as far as this sort of thing. However, I used to help when they would go to sea, carrying the passengers, when I was still working. When Captain Tilghman was on there, he would always call me and tell me to come down and give him a hand. So, I used to do some of the piloting for him, in and out of the port.

MS: Well, you have to explain what it is. During World War II, what did that ship do?

JI: Oh, during the war, those ships just carried general cargo. They would carry whatever they needed to. I was an ordinary seaman. So, I really didn't know what was – except that they'd carry everything you'd need to build, rebuild what has been demolished by bombs and everything. They'd carry creosoted pilings to build docks and clothes and food and Coca-Cola and ammunition, just everything that was needed to – that was set up by whoever set it up. But there were just hundreds of ships, and they were just full. They couldn't unload them ashore because there's no place to put it. So, the ships would just sit there. During the months in Okinawa and then every night, the kamikaze planes would come over from Japan. So, they would have all these little LCIs steam through all the ships and put out smokescreens to where they weren't visible from the air. This went on for several months until they ended the things with the Hiroshima bombs.

MS: Did these ships go in convoys, or did they go unescorted?

JI: Both. The last part of our voyage was unescorted. As a matter of fact, we got fired upon, and we didn't get hit. There was a DE, destroyer escort, that was accompanying us. So, I

remember the sirens went off, and the ship started to – I was on lookout at the time. I was sitting on the bow with my feet hanging over the side. I just thought it was porpoise. But I guess we'd been fired at. So, I was the lookout, and I'd just had my seventeenth birthday. So, I was curious. I phoned the bridge and said, "What's going on up there?" Needless to say, they didn't give me much of an answer, but [laughter].

MS: A lot of Liberty ships were built here.

JI: Oh, yes.

MS: Tell me about that.

JI: Yes. Liberty ships and sea ships and victories were all built here in San Pedro. Consolidated Steel over by Craig's shipyard that I mentioned earlier, they built Liberty ships. They were all riveted and side launched. Instead of running them stern first when they launched them, they side launched them. That was quite a sight watching those old side launchings.

MS: Why would they do that rather than the other?

JI: Well, they didn't have room to back them out across the channel. So, they had to go out on a side launch. But to watch those things get cut loose and just go sideways, crashing down into the water was quite a sight. But Consolidated Steel and Western Pipe and the different shipyards are on here. Cal Ship was the one that really turned out the ships. That's where the *Lane Victory* was built and the *Niagara Victory* that I sailed on.

MS: So, what happened to the *Lane Victory*? It was going to be scrapped? How was it saved, and how did it become what it is today?

JI: Well, a group of people, Joe Vernick, Clint Johnson, and (Alan Fronson?) and a fellow named Smith, they just all got together. They went up and got this – I think that you should talk to Clint Johnson or Alan Fronson. They can give you, from day one, how it come about. I sure can't because, like I say, I come down to help them and volunteer as the ship's captain and take the glory for what they did.

MS: [laughter] All your years involved with ships in this harbor and of course others, but many were in this harbor. How has it changed since you started in San Pedro, Los Angeles?

JI: The change in this harbor and every place is just night and day. I look at all these restaurants and everything right now, they filled up where ships used to come in and bunker up outside there. Inside the berth, inside the harbor, ships used to come in there and bunker. Well, they filled that in for a bird sanctuary of some kind. There's a whole lot of different thinking going on. The harbor is just real clear. At one time, when I spent two years as a loading master at berth 149 on the Union Oil dock, in those days, you'd see a lot of oil slicks and a lot of dead fish. Now, it's pretty clean. It's very clean.

MS: How has your job changed over the years from when you started as an ordinary seaman to

today? I mean, how has the world of a seaman changed in those years?

JI: Well, the seamen have changed in as much as there's – the tankers haven't changed that much other than the equipment that cleans them. All the hoses and the butterworth machines that we used to lower and have to clean ships and run hot water through them and pump them out, now, they're all built in permanently. So, you just go open valves and do this sort of thing to wash the ship. But there's less work involved. But on the freighters, there's been more change on freighters than there has been on tankers. Tankers still oil in, oil out, even though they have a lot nicer equipment and this sort of thing. All the tankers now are inert. They have inert gas systems in them. So, as you pump out the oil, you generate inert gas and put on top of the oil. So, the tank is never in an explosive range. There's no oxygen in there. So, as long as there's no oxygen, you can't have an explosion or a fire. This is one of the safety things that have transpired now. Crude ships and all these things, where they would have explosions in these things in the beginning sometimes. If *Sansinena* would've had inert gas, it would've never blown up.

MS: So, all those computers and electronics are going to have robots on the bridge. You'll be sitting at home watching your computer screen. What's happening in the future for sailing?

JI: Well, I couldn't say, but there's got to be somebody out there to watch the computers, I guess. Sometimes, the light switch breaks, and it has to be repaired. But you're still going to have to have people look out the window. Otherwise, you're going to have collisions.

MS: Is there anything that you wanted to talk about that I didn't ask you about?

JI: Not really, except that I think that it would be beneficial for you to talk to the people that put that *Lane Victory* together. Because they did a magnificent job.

MS: Now, did you talk to my wife, Nancy, for this, or did you talk to Stephanie?

JI: No, I talked to your wife, Nancy.

MS: Do you have the telephone number still?

[end of transcript]