Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Tony Lauro Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown
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Male Speaker: I'm going to give you the hard question first.

Tony Lauro: The hard question first. That's what I was afraid of.

MS: So, please say your name and spell it. [laughter]

TL: Oh, it's Tony Lauro, L-A-U-R-O.

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

TL: I was born December 7th – very historic day later, but 1929.

MS: Where were you born?

TL: I was born, I guess it was up the block here ways. About 10th Street below Pacific Avenue. Because then in those days, you didn't go to the hospitals [laughter]. It's a home that's still there. Like I say, about on 10th, just below Pacific, in this part of town. Probably, about four or five blocks from here.

MS: Tell us about your family. How did they come to San Pedro?

TL: My father came from an island off of Naples called Ischia. See, like, a lot of times, you say [foreign language]. That would be like a Neapolitan in Italian. We speak it because in the home, that's all it was. On the fishing boats, it was all Italian in those days. It was like a village atmosphere here. Mainly, say it's like an island off – like Catalina is to the mainland here off of Naples. Probably, somebody came from there years before them, and the people just migrated afterwards, you see, to the same place where they had people at. They lived or boarded with people that were here and were fishermen from the island they were from in the old country there.

MS: What kind of man was your father?

TL: My father was a – oh, not a traveler or a real social – how would you say? Person. He was a little man. I might say, they all had nicknames that came from there in the old days, and he was the *sconchiglia*. *Sconchiglia* is the conch. The whole family afterwards was called that. That's the way it was. Some of the names were in the old country. Some of the names were given here. *Sconchiglia*, why? Because he was a little man. In those days, they had little boats. They slept on the nets and their boat and stuff. Somebody come around and said one time when he was sleeping there a moment, he says, "Look, he looks like a *sconchiglia*." That carried off to the whole family afterwards. In those days, because there were many similar names from the old country. So, everybody went by nicknames.

MS: What were some of the other nicknames?

TL: Oh, [foreign language] would be like Samson. [foreign language] would be box of tomatoes. [foreign language] would be like porpoise. Some names were given here, and some

came from families further back in the old country, you see. Like, now, when we were kids, we went along the docks, people didn't know your first name or know your name. They'd say, "*Sconchiglia*." You'd go by the family nickname, you see. I enjoyed it. It was a good culture, would you say, at the time. Because most of the fishermen in this period we're talking about were Italian or Yugoslav or Croatian today. That's when we were in the [19]40s and [19]50s here. We were probably one of the biggest fishing ports in the world. Until afterwards, they started outsourcing, and the canneries had left. Fishing was the thing at the time that supported the town. Then the port started building up. Then a lot of the people went long shoring. When fishing went bad, started going downhill, is when I –

MS: Tell me about your earliest experience. What are some of your earliest memories as a little boy growing up in San Pedro? Any stories to tell?

TL: Earliest experiences? Well, it was a small town. We started off [laughter] on the boats most of the time and the beaches along the docks here. We were always, I'd say – I don't want to put it too close today. But years ago, six, seven years old, you were running around the docks. Six, seven years old. In our case, a lot of it was on the fishing boats. I can't tell you that we went – we did go fishing at six, seven years old, but you had to go to school then. Fishing was real great then. Like I say, you were in school. Me and our group of people, the Italian boys or the Croation boys, you'd be in school. You'd be looking out at the lighthouse and the fishing boats coming in. In the summertime, I fished. I had a job, and I'd get half a share. But you couldn't get out of school until you were sixteen. Not that your parents – they wanted you to go to school as much as they can use your finances because they had no retirement. They didn't have money. It was a large family during the depression years that they come up. They didn't take, should we say, welfare or anything like that, you see. They were very proud people.

MS: When you were a little boy, what did you do for fun? Did you go down to the BAB beach? Do you know about that beach?

TL: To tell you the truth, this may seem odd to you, but our fun at that is being able to go fishing with your dad. Like, I remember one night, we are six, seven years old, and we cried. Then they would leave. Sometimes, they did their fishing by the dark of the moon. Not like today, they have many instruments, sonar. When they went to the dark of the moon, the moon was up. They'd plan it for when the moon came to water because the fish were seen by eye, by the phosphorus. With the glaring of the moon, you couldn't see it. I remember one particular night, after crying quite a bit at home, my father takes me down to the boat. This was the *Milwaukee* at that time. It was in a very big boat. Maybe about sixty-foot boat at the time. It would be small compared to the liners today. He puts me to sleep. We might have gone out at midnight. I was only six, seven years old. He wakes me up in the morning. Then they take me – him and his cousin that was a mast man on the boat, one of the best around. Then you see, you're thrilled at the – this guy's a good mast man. He's got a keen eyesight for spotting the fish. Not fish jumping all over. Fish at a distance. The black spot of fish. Just a discoloration or what. But anyway, he puts me – I look in the hole, and there was tuna there. There was about 10 tons of tuna that we caught not too far from here. He puts me down. They lowered me down and picked the biggest one you can find. They all look alike in the schools like that [laughter]. So, I grabbed one, and I barely was able to lift it up. I'll never forget, they had big hands. My

father was a little man, but their hands were like baseball gloves. My father's cousin grabs the tail with his nail and brings it up. See, that was your share at the time to take it after they unloaded. Take it to the fish markets there. That's what we did most of the time. Kids selling fish that you got from your relatives and stuff, boats. You'd take it to the markets, and you'd make a dollar. That was big money then. As you got older, we had these wagons that we would go over to the canneries in the wintertime and load them up with sardines or mackerel or a different shark or species that the boats would give you. Because they weren't concerned. They were volume and going back out again the sea fast. You would get this from them. Then sometimes, before school, come over the ferry boat – and you didn't have all paved roads in those days. It was dirt roads and bumpy, bumpy, older docks then. You'd take them there, pull the big steel wheels on your wagon. Later on, I had a wagon that by myself, I pulled 750 pounds of fish. They were the big box and then three boxes on top and pulled them to the fish market myself. Usually, on the weekends when the boats were fishing because they didn't fish during the full moon period. There was a grace of about five nights that they wouldn't go out. That was in the winter season – the sardine season. Then in the summertime, you would fish tuna and mackerel. When you hear the boats are in or something, you'd run over there. They were coming in. See if your father or relative or somebody and help them a little bit. You'd get a tuna and bring it back to the markets and sell it. Then, hey, a dollar or two was big money then. Along with maybe shining shoes on the park here when the Navy used to be in at the harbor here too at that time. In front of the YMCA that was up the block on 10th of Palos Verdes, you would shine shoes for a nickel. On Saturday and Sunday, the fishermen were in. You'd go there. Then maybe one guy that favored you, they'd come out of church. The church then was on 10th and Center. If he favored you, he'd give you a dime. That was big money. He gave me a dime instead of a nickel. We sold the papers too on the corners in Pacific Avenue. Because then Pacific was your main street coming down 6th Street. You didn't have the westerns and such like that.

MS: What were some of the characters who were the fishermen that you remember? Aside from your father, who were some of the men that you, as a little kid, knew and remember? Or maybe some of the fish market guys. Who were some of the characters from those early days that you remember?

TL: Well, the fishermen, you had the different boats and the different owners of skippers. I wouldn't want to say today, that this guy was the best one around because there were several best in their way. We had all nicknames for them. In both groups –

MS: What were the nicknames for the good fishermen?

TL: [laughter] Let me think a minute there. Well, the one that I worked in later years was called bird head in Italian. We translated the names in Italian. In Italian, he would be called [foreign language] head of the bird. Because he was a big person, and he was my skipper. I was only sixteen years old then. But he had little pupils like – but he had a very keen eyesight. Then, it was the ingenuity of the fisherman that looked up. Not the sonar, the radar, all the things that you had today. In the summertime, I was sixteen years old, and we'd fish San Clemente Island for tuna and mackerel. But then you get kind of bored. The mast man was *Cagots*, which means the squash [laughter]. He was kind of a chubby fellow up there. Then we'd kind of get bored,

and we'd start talking about – he'd tell me, "Well, this day, I came from the old country," or this thing. They were older than me. The old people we're talking about, people, forty, fifty years old, were old then as a fisherman. I'm only sixteen. So, you'd be moving along slow up and down, waiting for the current to change or something, daytime. You'd get tired and bored. Then all of a sudden, you hear, do-do-do-do-do-do. The boat would start speeding up. That would be a sign. Nighttime, when you're fishing, the boat slowed down if they spotted something or you spotted something. But in daytime, you're moving slow. Then you see something at a distance. The boat would speed up. Then we'd holler the mast man and myself. We'd go, "There they are." Bird head, when he was a skipper at the wheel, he'd look up with a squint eye. His brother too was that way, that owned the boats too – the bigger boat. He'd look up at you like that and say, [foreign language]. In Italian, that means, if it was a dish of spaghetti, you wouldn't have got it. I already saw it, if you meant. That's the expression. The way they spoke. He meant because he already saw the school of fish. But we were – [laughter]. Yes, but he had a very keen eyesight. There's a lot of exciting stories at nighttime chasing tuna, especially nighttime. He runs around like the cowboy chasing wild horses. There's different ways that our folks have learned from the old, when they came here, how to – when the industry started being built up. Then they were small nets. Today, you've got big liners up in the South Pacific today. They carry 1,000, 2,000 tons. They have nets that are maybe 500, 1,000 feet long and very deep. But these were just little nets where we would consider handkerchiefs [laughter] compared to that day. But the trick is to tame them. Like, if you visualize the cowboy chasing the wild horses or the cattle, you have to come around and circle him and head him off. Head him off until he gets tired. There are different ways though. Until he gets tired and starts – if you notice the horses or the cattle, then you come around and let go the net real fast, I mean, the end of the net. It's a purse seine, the skiff, and the end of the net. Then you come around and close in on them fast like a corral. Then you get both ends of the net. Then you have a light underneath the boat trying to keep the fish in. So, you don't come underneath the boat wild. Then you purse these lines at the bottom, like purse strings that are cable today, they used. Then it was rope that came around. You let out at the bottom of the net, and it's called purse seine. That's how you enclose the net. The tuna, most of the time, nighttime – daytime, he hears sound on you more. But nighttime, usually, if you got around him, he'll fight back and forth, swim around. But he doesn't always sound. But I'll tell you one for Ripley here, and there are those things for Ripley. One time this guy, (Baggie?) – his name was Tony De Leva. Baggie, and there was another guy called *Due*, we called him. Because they were both Tony De Leva, similar names from the old country. So, Baggie, he was the mast man in his father's boat there in San Antonio port. The school of fish went under – this is a matter of five, ten minutes. It went under the net during the nighttime and surfaced right next to the net again. When you're a fisherman [laughter], you say, "Hey, I'll lose because I don't want to call somebody else to get them." So, he put the light on them. You don't put a light on tuna when you're catching them because he scatters and fights. You just put a light on them when you want to guide them around into the net or something there. So, he put the light on them – and this is for Ripley. The school of fish went down and came back right up in the middle of the net again, while it's being closed and pursed. That's one for Ripley too.

MS: They jumped back in the net.

TL: Not jumped. They went from underneath. We're talking a matter of, not a long time too

when you're pursing it up. You get ones like that. One night, I'll never forget, off of – between here and Catalina, we used to catch the blue fin tuna, which you don't see too much of anymore. Blue fin, in my opinion, is the preferred species of the fishermen. See, many people like the albacore, which costs more and stuff because it's white meat. But the fishermen and the Japanese like the blue fin, preferably, over the others for the sashimi. When they can't get that, they'll get others. But this night here, we spent a whole week, night and day – we used to fish night and day sometime in the tuna – and even in the sardine season. Like the guy says, "You eat when you're not hungry, and you sleep when you're not sleepy." You'd see you catch a few hours her and there. But we were going back and forth that night. We caught about – oh, it was these overcast nights. Like we had this morning. That muggy was good for fish, especially tuna in the summertime. So, we made one haul, meaning setting the net, found a school about 5 tons. Then after it was getting daytime, this was the exciting part of it, they hollered, "Turn the lights off." So, you see, you worked many times in the darkness because the lights scared the fish. We're circling. We're coming down. We found the boats. It was actually between here and Avalon. It was a very dark night. You couldn't see the boats that were finding fish then. We found the school of fish after we made the first haul. We came there on them, and they started hollering, "Turn the lights off." Because we had to get things ready to set the net again. You can see that after many years, that excitement still stays with you. That excitement of setting or chasing the school or catching the school. Sometimes, I tell these stories, I'm going through it again. Like, a person who says he catches a fish with a pole, even that setting and that – like that's very exciting. So, "Turn the lights off." They found another school of fish, bird head and the mast man. The school of fish, you treat it the way it's acting. The school of fish was acting like porpoise, staying close to the power of the boat as we're circling. It's going to be daytime, see? The water wasn't phosphorus. So, the Squash, the *Cagots*, and the mast man wanted to set. Bird head, no, he was a perfectionist. But yet, they were afraid to get – so, all of a sudden, we're circling the school. Usually, it's bird head who'll give the word. The squash, *Cagots*, the mast man, he hollers, ("*Mala*"?). So, hey, you're back there, the guy that's releasing the end of the net in the skiff, he lets it go. Because see, he hears the word, let it go. Mala means let it go in Italian. So, bird head, as much as he's a skipper, he has no alternative, but to follow through and come around the school of fish. Because if he just abandons and stops, you lost it all. But you give it a try, you keep going. He comes around and circles the school. But then that school is staying under the boat close to the boat like porpoise. Now, when you come around to pick up the end of the net from the skiff man, that school of fish is going to keep going. Turns out, the old tricks – today, they got big spotlights and everything to guide the fish. They holler out, [inaudible] to the guy in the skiff. Then we use five-cell flashlights. I make one dash to the galley to get the five-cell flashlight and come – the cook was just – so, he gets up Uncle Landy. He sleeps during the night. I knocked him down to get this flashlight. Because as we're coming to the skiff, Frank DiMeglio – New Yorker, we used to call him because he'd come from New York. He knew enough to put the flashlight in front of the boat, not on the school, in front. I push it this way too. So, that the school that's here will feel the light and move into the net. Today, the mast man has a light that would do that. But the two five-cell flashlights and the school of fish goes right into the net. About 25 tons, we got 25 tons. It got daytime afterwards. We lived happily ever after. Because if the fish would've got away and it didn't work out well, the mast man and bird head would've been [laughter] arguing there, fighting the next day over it.

MS: That's a great story. What about some of the guys that you sold the fish to? Any characters

out in the dock that were the fish market guys?

TL: Well, could I tell this other story first?

MS: Sure, go ahead.

TL: You can always cut what you want too.

MS: Yes, sure.

TL: This was summertime, and it was almost ready getting for sardine season then. We were catching skipjack. But skipjacks were tough to catch unless you had a big net. So, we'd chum them up, have some boat, [inaudible] chum them. You'd get a few, but they were big schools off of Malibu. Then you'd give the guy a third, is the tradition, not by contract there. So, then the next night, the boats caught fish off Anacapa Island – tuna, blue fin. Because the blue fin seemed to go up so far and then go out to Seymour. It turns out that I knew that we were working night and day, get groceries from (Canaries?), and then the fuel and back out again. You do that because you'd fish the nights and the daytime too. Because the fish would show then. We got off Anacapa Island. There was a big swell that day there. I'll never forget the swell. Then all of a sudden, we're just heading in – when you had a big swell, you drift, and the benches and the galley will fall out. We're talking about [19]75, but boat dishes would go flying. So, we head into the sea, and we come on the outside of Anacapa Island. That's below the Channel Islands there. Then we see a boat up ahead of us. It was the (*Anna D*?) then. I think *St. George*, he changed the name later to *St. George*. He used to be partners with my skipper bird head. But they had their falling out and stuff. But this guy lets his skiff in the water. You'd carry it on the back of that. But when you put it in the water, that's a sign he found something. So, here we go. We head for him. He's standing on the crow's nest. He lets her go, and he sets – see, it's hard. I know the people can't understand what I'm trying to say totally. But you set your net going south. Your bag of the net, you would call it, because if the fish are going out – but he was a very good – (Frank Fioso?). He was a very good fisherman too. But he sets with the bag going out. Then he is coming down wide. St. George then was sitting. He was sitting and the tail – what we would say, he's putting the bag outside. It's not actually a bag. It's meaning he's putting the center of the net to the south and the swell is coming down. He's putting it south, but as he's coming around to get his skiff, he's coming out wide and starts hollering. You could hear from the crow's nest. In other words, he was a good fisherman. The fish that was going southerly might have turned down on him. That's why he had to come wide. That's a sign for you that were standing by there to see if they're getting out of his net to try and find them ourselves. Which did happen. See, he had a – I don't want to in too much detail. It's all called purse seine. Our net was lampara. But it's same operation except that we brought the fish to the center of the net, and we pulled by hand. They pulled by winch. They had lines on top to bring in the net. We didn't have the power skiffs they have today. The big boats have big skiffs and everything to bring them around. Well, we come down. [laughter] That morning, you could see the excitement we're – this might be around noon. We're headed down swell. Now, that he set that way, not to get too much down swell and get thrown over the net. We're coming down on the side of the boat and looking for that school. Then down below, you see, like in a movie, all these destroyers coming your way. It was close to sardine season. A big fleet of boats that

fished in New Mexico were up this way now getting ready for sardines. But they came out for tuna. Now, you're looking, trying to find that school before all these boats come and churn the water at you too because we're the closest. Here we go. We're heading down, slowly looking, real heavily. All of a sudden, there was this guy, very keen eyesight, but he was a nervous person. He wouldn't go on the crow's nest, but he could spot the fish. He was bird head's cousin or godson too but had those little keen eyes [laughter]. I don't know what they have to do. He hollers as we're going down. He hollers in Italian. He says, [foreign language]. "There they are." We had just passed them. Well, they had sounded a little bit and just started to come up, and there you see a nice school of fish. Big tuna. Well, big by those days. Forty, fifty-pound fish, about 50 tons of fish, just moving along slowly, down swell. They came out of his net, or he didn't get around them good. They sounded and just coming up, and we're just ahead there. These boats all coming out [laughter] like destroyers. We're swinging, and he – [foreign language], his nickname was. It means tiger shark. But he had a very keen eyesight. I'll never forget, like his godfather bird head. See, that was important in those days. You didn't have planes and helicopters and sonar and everything. So, you're almost trembling [laughter] like that. [foreign language] We come around. You make your circle to see if they keep heading that direction down swell. Well, a lampara – it's hard that I can't even understand it. Bird head comes around. He sees the fish are moving down swell. That's not a good sign. You don't have power skiffs or anything. His old partner missed him. So, he sets directly down swell, puts the net there. Now, we're coming around to the skiff. The fish are going in there. Down swell means that we're pulling these nets in by hand. It's about a 300-fathom net and 35 feet fathoms deep. Let me get my figures because somebody said [laughter] they want to correct me on it. Thirty fathoms deep. See, the swell or the wind, we're up above. So, naturally, the net that's down there, unless – we don't have lines that's going to push over the net. So, what we do is New Yorker and the other owner, (Luigi Colonna?), we have to get in the skiff and the bow to try and bring the boat around. We're pulling the boat around. Then once we get all those corks – so, you don't go over it. We get those. Then we come back to the – after we do that. But the net is all on one side. The fish are going over, under, and every which way [laughter]. Because you weren't able to let them swim in there because of the way they were going. Today, that would've been no problem, especially with the bigger boats. But the smaller boats, everybody's pulling on this side, then slinging the net to the other side. Well, actually, fortunately – and that was the latter part of the season [laughter]. We're pulling in the nets, ripping it. Tuna going under, over us, swimming away. Well, we did straighten out the net. Meaning, bring it alongside, and then you put the stick out in those days. Today, they don't even have to do that no more. But we put a stick out. It was a big eucalyptus tree stick that you would put over the skiff so that it wouldn't turn over from the weight. Usually, your ends of the net weren't always – and this lampara, it would be called, the ends would always not be the best. But Baggie always kept – knew to bring the fish in there, so it wouldn't rip. So, we got the fish alongside [laughter] all right. So, the young kid climbed the stick that's over the skiff to get in the skiff to help Lui in the skiff there. So, you had a partition there. You're grabbing tuna and putting them over to that side, so the skiff doesn't turn over. Because it's not the big skiffs of today. So, then afterwards, they bring up the – once you bring the net in so far, then you bring up the bottom to bring the fish up until you see the whites of their eyes, you might say. But then they've always had – and they're just dead weight then compared to some other species or else if the net was kept wide, but you had no choice. So, then it's time to brail them. [laughter] That's the other problem. We brail them and then – today, they've got all newer aluminum and pipes and stuff for brail. But then, you used

eucalyptus trees that you couldn't do anymore today. So, we start brailing them. We can't reach the fish. They're too deep. Meaning, as much as we see, too deep. So, what to do? It was always a no-no. Once you've tied down and got everything secured, don't bring it up again. You could run into troubles of ripping, and you'd lose everything once you did that point. There's a lot more involved, but we can't get into that because of time element. So, what we do, we get one of our big oars out of the skiff. An oar maybe the size of this room here. We tie that onto the end of the brailer, the eucalyptus tree, and we reach the fish [laughter]. So, you could brail up to a thousand pounds or so. But we're brailing four or five fish at a time, just enough to lighten up things as much as we can, not to have to bring them up again. There's a lot of names for that – to bring them up again like that until we lighten it up more. You're still fighting the big swell that's there, and that's all weight on the net and stuff. So, we lighten up the net. Then we bring it up some more. We come up with about – where today, they bring you 100 tons like that with [inaudible] or more even, the bigger boats. But then we were smaller boats than the people from our foreign countries that developed this here. So, we bring in about 25 tons of fish, tuna. We did save them. It was probably 50 tons but who went under, who went over and everything else. So, we get them in. It was a hot, sunny day in the month of September, probably about [19]48, [19]49. So, here we go. We start heading home to bring the fish to – that time, we fished for Van Camp, which is today, Chicken of the Sea that you see in the can. Then after the plane comes overhead, "Clear the area, clear the area." [laughter] They used to fire missiles off of Point Mugu. There was a missile area off of Point Mugu, I think, similar like that other place up further there. But anyway, now, which way did we go? Down or up? So, "Clear the area." We should have come straight down, and we would've been out of the area. But anyway, we didn't know. We came back and we have this fish. In those days, all the smaller boats didn't have refrigeration. So, we had to go into Santa Cruz Island, the Yellowbanks, at the canneries. It wasn't our cannery. Boat had these tenders – which were regular fish boats, no nets – that would take the albacore off the smaller boat. So, they didn't have to come in. Because then there was a big demand for the fish here. So, we went and unloaded to get this fish off the boat because we don't have refrigeration. You don't want them spoiling. This boat had the ice and refrigeration. We unloaded in the middle of the night onto this boat here to get them off and not to lose them. Two days later, we had an argument which quite – there was still fish being caught around. Then one day, there was the argument between – there was one school of fish. It was about 10 tons – a couple of days later – and two, three boats sat on it. You can tell it's a wild school and doesn't want to be caught. So, then we get to it. This other boat, the *Nancy Rose*, which was George Fukuzaki – and he was a very good fisherman. Japanese, from the Terminal Island area that came back to fish like some of them did. So, he felt it was his school, and we felt it was our school. It would sink and come up. We all wanted to take another chance though – two, three boats. It took the whole day before one boat got – a bigger boat, a hundred-foot boat defense, I think, got them with a bigger net late in the afternoon. But at this time here, we were going side by side. Then all of a sudden, the fish came next to us. The mast man says – it looks like they were slowing down a little bit. So, we let her go. I mean, "*Mala*." This guy's just following us [laughter] and just tearing up our net. Because that's what would happen many times. The excitement of the fishing in the school and the tuna that would be wild. Well, I always maintained, why he did that, I understand the excitement and such like that. When he could, actually, instead of tearing up our net, he could have just gone through the center of the net, like the appropriate thing for him to do, and just made noise – because the school was wild – and just run right through our net. This way here, he just tangled up all his propeller. He stalled

there, and the other boat, the *Western Explorer*, had to take him into Yellow Banks. They had to get down there swimming to clear their propeller. It's funny thing here how a few years –

MS: We're going to have to pause. There's so much more to do. But I want to take a picture of you first.

[end of transcript]