

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project  
George Love Oral History  
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown  
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Terrific. The report works. I'm going to ask you a lot of it. How do you do this? What's this? Because people in Sedonia don't know any of this.

George Love: No. No, they don't.

MS: The hard one first. Please say your name and spell it.

GL: George Love, Jr. G-E-O-R-G-E L-O-V-E.

MS: Okay. George, when were you born and where?

GL: October 31st, 1940, Long Beach, California.

MS: Great. So, did you grow up in Long Beach?

GL: No. My folks lived in Hermosa Beach and that's where I lived until 1950. We moved to San Pedro.

MS: So, when you came to San Pedro in 1950, you're 10 years old. Can you give us some impressions of what you saw and what San Pedro was like when you arrived here in 1950?

GL: When we moved to San Pedro in 1950, it was cliquish. It was a much smaller town then and there's a big Yugoslav and Italian community here. We were kind of outsiders. You're from Hermosa Beach and it was harder on my older brother. He was 5 years older because he was in high school. I was still in grade school. So, it was easier to assimilate. But by then kids have formed friendships and it takes a while to blend.

MS: So, give me some idea as you come here as a stranger, a 10-year-old stranger, you got a sense that this was a somewhat closed society in many ways. Give me any stories that illustrate that.

GL: Well, not really. If your name ended in itch, generally those guys banded together [laughter]. Ended in a vowel, those guys banded together [laughter]. There were just smaller cliques in town. But if you have good teachers, and I did, (Ms. Cullen?) was my fifth-grade teacher, (Mr. Bacchus?) was my sixth grade. I went to Leland Street School. I was fortunate, where my folks moved when we moved to San Pedro. That they were both good instructors and they mixed everybody. You go on the playground and you blend in after time. But you try harder. I don't know how to explain it. If you're going to succeed, you got to show them what you can do. So, I've always been a high achiever. I don't like being second [laughter]. So, that helped me blend in.

MS: So, as a 10-year-old, what kind of things would you do in San Pedro? What was life like for a 10-year-old outsider in San Pedro?

GL: Well, I had one good friend, (Robert Pinkstaff?). His dad worked for customs. He and I got to be flag monitors [laughter].

MS: You went for the top.

GL: Yes, we went for the top. So, we got to do that every day. Robert and I had a couple other friends, (Stanley Manaka?), Hawaiian-Japanese kid, and his folks were in the same boat as mine. They weren't as well-to-do as some of the kids, because on that end of San Pedro, a lot of the fishermen lived up on that end, because it was a little higher up the hill. They had more than we had. (Cleo Jones?), another one, he lived down on Cabrillo. His folks are from Arkansas. His dad was a janitor at First Baptist Church, where I attended when we moved here. We kind of banded together. We had a flag, when we went to Dana, we had a flag football team. It just takes time.

MS: Now, what did you think about as a kid growing up here, the port? Did you relate to that in any way?

GL: Sure. My dad was a longshoreman. That's the reason we moved to San Pedro. He became active in politics, union politics, and state and national politics, too. He enjoyed it. He was a vice president first. Although it's probably not right as parents, I'm George Jr. so on weekends sometimes he would take me with him. He'd go out and go down the ships, and I went down the ships with him. I got a much better feel for it than my brothers did. I had two brothers, one older, one younger. We'd go over Wilmington. There was a coffee shop by the dispatch hall. We'd have coffee with the guys. He spoiled me [laughter]. So, I got a feel for it much sooner than my brothers.

MS: What was it like going there as a little kid, going there with your dad? Did you enjoy that kind of hanging around with the guys? What was it like? Describe it.

GL: Well, it was fascinating just to listen to them talk.

MS: I was talking, so you start the expression.

GL: Oh, I'm sorry. It was fascinating to listen to them talk, the older longshoremen and my dad. Everybody knew everybody then. There were a lot fewer longshoremen than the local. With the system of registration, everybody knew somebody [laughter]. It's just the way it worked then. It makes you feel good because all these fellows or most of them looked up to your father because he's a union official. You have to get elected by popular vote. So, it made you feel good that they would listen to what he said.

MS: Tell me about your dad. What kind of person was he? Give me a sense of who he was.

GL: My dad was from Louisiana. He graduated from high school in the Depression. He and his older brother, my uncle Charlie, were lucky enough to get in the Navy. I say lucky enough because it was a steady job. They served in the Navy, I think, for five years, four or five years. Like most good kids then they sent money home to help support their parents and siblings. But he came to the West Coast [laughter] and never left. He loved the West Coast. The weather was better. He didn't like the rural South. He came from the rural South. My grandfather had 10

acres. They farmed besides being a foreman in the local sawmill. So, he liked it out here. After he got out of the Navy, he sailed lumber schooners up and down the coast for a while, and long short when he was in port, and finally got in the local.

MS: Tell me how that's changed. We've been talking about all kinds of things, but the Union is another big part of the history of this port, not only for the workers, but for the town and for the industry. Talk about the union and its role in the history of the port and its role in the history of San Pedro. What is its influence and contributions?

GL: Well, the union has brought financial prosperity to San Pedro, mainly San Pedro, some to Wilmington, Long Beach, and Carson. But mainly San Pedro because when the union was first formed down here, everybody lived in San Pedro. The hiring hall was in San Pedro. It's brought stability to the workforce. It brought stability for the employers because once the union was formed, it didn't make any difference whether you worked in San Pedro or Bellingham, Washington. Whatever you paid a longshoreman here, you paid a longshoreman there, as opposed to the other coasts. So, it was a stabilizing force. In the [19]40s, [19]50s, it provided a living, not an outstanding living like it does now, but it provided a good living for those who wanted to work and work a lot. As time progressed, as containerization came in, that's when our union leadership, going along with the employer for modernization, we didn't care. As long as you take us along, give us our piece of the pie, was what Harry Bridges said. We'll do what you want. We don't want a disruption. With containerization, that's when we really began to make tremendous gains in our hourly wage. When I started, I made \$21 a day. [laughter] Now, I make almost twice that an hour because I'm a super cargo. It's allowed our membership to enjoy things in our community that my dad early on and our forefathers couldn't enjoy because they didn't make the money that we make. We've increased the property value in town. Those of us who still shop in town [laughter] support our local groups. We do a lot of community work now, which nobody really hears about, but we do. We're finally realizing how fortunate we are. We should give back to the community. Well, I've always felt that way anyway. With my children, you give back. You participate in the community. That's what we're, as a union, we're doing much more of now. We have the means to do it. We're very, very fortunate in the wages we make, the health plan we have. We bargained for all of it. We've given things for all of it because we do work in a dangerous industry. But we've made great strides. I know it's helped build San Pedro. It really has. The property values in town are outrageous. I couldn't buy the house I live in now [laughter].

MS: Well, let's go back. You're with your dad, and then how did you actually get involved yourself with the port and with, ultimately, with jobs in the port?

GL: Well, I graduated from high school, I was 17. I went to Long Beach State. The next year, the clerk's local was going to take in members. My Uncle (Seph?) worked as a clerk. My dad, being an active longshoreman in politics, knew the guys in the clerk's local. So, he wanted my brother and I to become clerks. So, we put both of our names in, because that's the way the system worked. Well, it got down to brass tacks, and my older brother said, "I got accepted in the sheriff's department." He told my dad, "Ah, forget it." [laughter] So, me being the only one left, he told me, "Don't worry about it. You can go to school later. M&M agreement's coming. We'll have a guaranteed annual income. You can work and go to school." May 1st, 1959, I went

to work as a clerk.

MS: What was that job? What did the clerks do?

GL: Well, marine clerks are the record keepers, the tally clerks. As cargo came off the ship, you would tell the longshoreman, because then there were no containers. Everything was done by hand. You would tell the longshoreman where to put things. You had a cargo book this thick. We had everything on the ship that came out in Los Angeles, in alphabetical order, all the marks, all the head marks, we called them. It got tough at times. Here's *Roebuck*. I remember to this day, SRC and a diamond. But then they would have all these other numbers by subsets underneath. Most of the guys would cooperate. But towards the end of the day, they'd mix some stuff on you. But you had to keep track of all that, how many came out. Because once the day was over, you had to report to the super cargo and tell them what your gang had done. So, you sorted the cargo. The supercargo worked on the ship with the stevedores, telling them what to take out and on the reverse side, when you load back, where to put what goes on the ship.

MS: You have to explain what the supercargo is.

GL: Each ship has a supercargo in the old days, not so much anymore, because of the system. When the ship came in, he would go up and talk to the chief mate. Not right away, if it's going to discharge, because you know what's coming out already. But if you're going to load back, you have to talk to him about what ports go where, where the dangerous cargo goes. Then he would relay that information to the stevedores, and he would tell the clerks working for him when to send it up. We had a system of paper tags that would go on the cargo, one copy. He would keep a copy and hand it to us, say, "Go load this." He was very instrumental. He was the main man. Over the years, that has changed because of containers. But that was his main job. He was something you aspired to be.

MS: Now, when you started out, was this something that came naturally to you, or was there a lot to learn?

GL: As you start, there's a lot to learn. Because my dad was a longshoreman, some of the guys, some of the clerks didn't like that part. Because some clerks with sons or brothers didn't get their people in and meet the son of a longshoreman [laughter]. I'm working as a clerk. But there is a lot to learn. Like when a truck driver comes down to pick up cargo in those days, he had to come down with a delivery order from the customer. He would go to the steamship line office there on the dock. He would have to go to see them, make sure the charges were paid, customs were cleared. If everything was released, sometimes they would hold certain parts. Then he would get his delivery order, the company's delivery order, take it down to the office. Every dock had an office where the chief clerk sat. All of us new guys were basic delivery clerks. The truck driver would give him the delivery order. He'd call on one of us, say, "Here, go deliver this to him. You better make sure you deliver the right cargo [laughter] or you would pay."

MS: So, talk about your career then. How did it move from there, and what kind of different responsibilities did you get over time?

GL: Well, at that time, registration was slow. When you're first registered, you're a Class B clerk. I was a Class B clerk for a little over five years. So, we did nothing but basic work. In a way, it was a blessing, because you learned how to do everything. With our system these days, people don't know how to do basic work. But that's another subject [laughter].

MS: You're not the only industry.

[laughter]

GL: After that, I had to wait another two years before I could do what they call key work, where you could be a super cargo, or a chief clerk, or a floor runner who assists the super cargo. So, I did that for two years. You have to have your Class A book for five years before you can go steady. I think it was [19]69, I went steady for Marine Terminals as a plan man, they called it. Vietnam was roaring then. Marine Terminals had the stevedoring contract. The plan man would – the floor runners would send up cargo. Under the Army system, there was a – I forget the name for it, but there was a long number, about 10, 12 digits plus letters, that's assigned for every shipment. They would bring those into the plan man. I would make a hatch list, which is a piece of paper with everything going into a certain bay, certain hatch on the ship. Then after I did that, I would go up on the ship and draw a picture. Back then super cargos all did plans. That was part of your job. It was considered part of the job. But they were so busy at the Army dock that they needed, what they called, a plan man.

MS: So, what does a plan man do?

GL: Well, a plan man writes up all these hatch lists. He recaps them at the bottom. He goes to the ship's plan and say, for a tween deck, you have all these lists of for tween deck, Nha Trang, 52 pallets, the culverts, and you list what's there for Nha Trang. When you come out into the middle of the hatch, the square, we call it, you might have something for Saigon. You'd put what was there for Saigon. Then you'd get all that information from your hatch list. That's compiled from the paperwork the floor runners give you.

MS: So, obviously, there's a kind of a skill to knowing where to put this stuff, right?

GL: Right.

MS: You accumulate that over experience.

GL: Right. It's just something you pick up. It's interesting work. For me, it was fun. Once I got to doing things like that and became a plan man, then a super cargo, it was wonderful work.

MS: So, tell me about your work as a super cargo now.

GL: Well, when I first started to work as a super cargo, again, it was before containers. I would work a lot right down here where the passenger terminal is. It was called *CMI* then. They had *American President Lines*. They had *Pacific Far East line* and *American Mail Line*. But they all had bigger ships. They had eight, ten, twelve gangs. As a super cargo, you worked your buns

off [laughter]. But I was young then. You can run up and down the gangway then. My dad happened to be a dock boss there, which helped. The guys would give me a little more cooperation than they would some. But you're moving all the time. You're talking to the mate. You're talking to the foreman. So, they know where everything goes. You have to go down and talk to the people that work for you, the other clerks. You go home tired [laughter].

MS: Well, what's the worst mistake a Marine clerk could make? I mean, how can you screw up?

GL: It's easy. You can deliver the wrong cargo.

MS: What's the worst error that a clerk could make?

GL: It all depends on what you're doing. If you're on truck delivery, you can deliver the wrong cargo. One of the guys delivered, well, a motorcycle that went to New Mexico and it was the wrong one. They delivered cars that had gone all over the state. They were wrong. Myself, one of the ships I worked at, *CMI*, we were discharging bags of pepper. Well, the whole square was full of these bags of peppercorns. The hatch boss called me because he wasn't sure which ones. I told him the wrong ones [laughter]. We discharged for half an hour or so, forty-five minutes. The hatch clerk finally got a hold of me, who was sorting them on the dock. He says, "Hey, these marks don't match." So, we reloaded those and discharged the right ones. But in those days, you could get away on the ship anyway with mistakes because the guys would help you. They'd start putting the wrong ones back and send out the right ones. So, it wasn't too catastrophic.

MS: It also never got off the dock.

GL: Right.

MS: Somebody didn't open up this package. It's supposed to have bicycles in it. It's a bunch of peppercorns.

GL: [laughter] Right. But those things did happen.

MS: Now, you talked about the kind of changes that you've been at this for such a long time.

GL: Right.

MS: That kind of changes from the camaraderie in the old days and how it is today and things are faster. Talk about those kinds of changes in the work and the men working together. How has it changed?

GL: When I first started, everybody was on the job. It took everybody to be on the job. You knew a lot of the people from being around. As you're down here longer, you get to know everybody when you're a small group. You help one another. If one of the guys doesn't feel good, you'll give them a hand while you're doing your job and things like that. There was a

better sense than camaraderie. As we progressed and our membership started to build again, because for years our membership went down. One time our clerk's local was down to about 300 members. Today, we're up to 1,400. But that was under the old registration system. There's really, to me, there's two things that happened. The change in our registration system in the [19]80s, late [19]80s, where anybody could apply because we were getting discrimination suits. Rightly so because we, in a way, we took care of our own. But that was deemed illegal. We had to bring in other people that none of us knew. The isolation, it got to where there's so much machinery in the yard with the different equipment, with top handlers and transtainers. If I were working as a top handler, I'd be out there by myself, me and that top handler driver. If I were working a transtainer, it would be me, a signalman, and a crane driver. So, you lose that closeness. You don't see everybody for a long period of time. Because in the old days, even on truck delivery, when I first started, in the morning, while you're waiting for the truckers to get there, everybody sits around and you're all talking, sports, whatever. You don't have time for that anymore. You get on the job. You have to get out and get busy. Even now, you get to the job. Where I work at [inaudible], we get there at 4:30 a.m. You have to mark up all your paperwork for the people that are going to work for you. You don't have time to visit. Everything moves so quickly now that people come to work for you. You tell them what you want done. You send them out to where they're supposed to be, and there isn't time. The pace has quickened so.

MS: Also, there was a different, from what I understand, there was a different life on the docks. I mean, as Nancy said, you were talking about there were bookies. There was this whole world on the dock, talk about that a little.

GL: Sure. Well, it used to be that guys have a hook in one pocket and a race in front of them in another [laughter]. My dad was a horse player. He loved the track. Everybody, well, not everybody, but a lot of guys had bookies. In fact, when I used to go with my dad on Saturdays, that would be one of the topics of conversation. Who was running that day? [laughter] Who was going to the track? Who didn't work today? Who's going to the track to take it all? If anybody had a bet, they'd take it up for them. In fact, there were some Saturdays I'd go to the track with my dad. I'd love to go to the track. I used to go all the time. [laughter] My dad, Dewey Long, he had a bunch of friends.

MS: Well, who were some of the characters that you remember that really were characters from the old days?

GL: There's quite a few, but their names slip me.

MS: You say there was a guy.

GL: Well, we used to have guys that would, how would I say this, boast of their manliness. [laughter] My dad worked with one of them. He was a winch driver and he would get up over the combing of the hatch and look down and say, "Hey guys," [laughter] things like that. We had a cooper. The cooper's a guy that fixes everything that's broken. In those days, a lot of guys drank, part of the job. Most drank scotch because that's mainly what was imported [laughter]. You don't see any bourbon. I remember one day, I was working for my uncle. He worked for



Furness Withy. They had English ships so they had scotch. This one surly guy went into what they called the cooper shop where they fixed everything and asked the cooper for a half pint, put it in his pocket. The cooper told him no because he didn't like him. So, cooper went about his business and the guy reached in and put it in his hip pocket. I remember Dick, it was his first name, the cooper. He saw him and as he turned to leave the cooper shop, he just took his hand and broke the bottle, [laughter] things like that.

MS: Now, where did the cooper get those bottles?

GL: Well, if a carton was open, say when a trucker came in to pick up a hundred cartons of scotch, if there was one in the pile that had been opened, he would take it to the cooper shop. The cooper would tape it all up, inventory it, make up a cooper report. One would go with the trucker. One would go to the office. So, when the claim was made, they would know what was short.

MS: Sometimes what was short was staying with the coopers.

GL: Yes. He always had something to drink in the drawer. [laughter] That's one story my uncle told me. He says, "Now, George –" because all the warehouses then, the doors were chained. No automatic doors. I was young. I didn't drink. I didn't like the taste of scotch. But my uncle told me, he said, "George, if you ever want to drink, you think somebody's going to have a nip," he says, "watch the chains." He says, "If you see them moving, all that means is somebody's down there behind the pile having a drink [laughter] because you couldn't see him. The guard couldn't see him down behind the pile." [laughter]

MS: Inside secret.

GL: Right. [laughter]

MS: Unfortunately, useless information for you.

GL: Yes, for me. [laughter] Today, really useless.

MS: Well, any other stories you want to share with us?

GL: That's it. There's so many.

MS: Well, I need to take a picture of you now.

[end of transcript]