Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Lewis Loveridge Oral History
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Please say your name and spell it.

Lewis Loveridge: My name is Lewis Loveridge, L-E-W-I-S, L-O-V-E-R-I-D-G-E, known as Lou.

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

LL: I was born in 1923 in Jefferson, South Dakota.

MS: One of those great port towns in South Dakota.

[laughter]

LL: Yes, but I've been in California for seventy-five years.

MS: How did you get to San Pedro?

LL: My mother and father drove out in a car. We were living in Iowa at the time. I came to California with my mother and father and two sisters in 1930-something.

MS: Where did you come from?

LL: We come from Sergeant Bluff, Iowa.

MS: What was that town again?

LL: Sergeant Bluff, Iowa.

MS: Sergeant Bluff. Okay. Good. What brought your parents to San Pedro? Why did they come here?

LL: My two sisters and my brother was living in San Pedro at the time.

MS: That's why they came here?

LL: Yes. Land of Sunshine was coming out from California.

MS: So, what did your father do when he came out here?

LL: My father was unemployed at the time.

MS: But eventually, he did something. Did he eventually get a job of some kind?

LL: My father, yes, he was a security guard in the shipyards during World War II.

MS: What did that job entail? What did he do as a security guard?

LL: I don't really know. I don't know.

MS: As for you, how did you get involved with the port?

LL: First of all, I worked extra on the docks in 1941. In 1942, I worked a little extra. Then I became 18 years of age, and I joined the Navy. From the Navy, I came home in 1946. I got registered on the waterfront in 1948.

MS: When you registered, what were the work you were doing when you started out there? What work were you doing in 1948 when you got registered?

LL: I was working on the hull board. I was a basic longshoreman working on the hull board.

MS: Okay. Tell me more. What exactly did you do?

LL: Just basic longshore work, handling cargo. I worked in the hull. Then after 12 years, they come days, and I went on the dock board.

MS: After how many years were you working in the hull and then what happened?

LL: Twelve years I was working nights. Then I was working in the hull, in the basement, as it was known on the waterfront. I got married after that time. Then they come days. Then I went on the dock board.

MS: Explain what that is. What is that?

LL: [laughter] You work aboard a ship, that's called a hull board. On the dock, you work on the dock. You hand handle cargo. During that time, you'd hand handle cargo. There was no containers, no heavy lifts, no cranes, no nothing at that time.

MS: So, what kind of cargo did you handle?

LL: All kinds, any kind of cargo that was coming off the ship. Loading out cotton, borax, hides, all kinds of cargo. General cargo that came off the ship that was imported to the Port of Los Angeles. When it came off the ship on the dock, we had to stow it for custom stow. It was known in those days. We stowed the cargo, so the customs could come along and inspect that cargo.

MS: The kind of guys you worked with, what kind of guys were they?

LL: All good guys, all different ethnic backgrounds, et cetera. We all got along well. I got along well with bosses, clerks, and longshoremen. A beautiful group of people in my day.

MS: Any particular characters stand out you want to tell us about, interesting characters?

LL: Yes. There was all kinds of characters in my days. We had guys that – Little Red especially was a little Irish guy. He used to go in the hall in the morning and get next to the mic and start singing. Then we had guys that used to go around shadow boxing, ten, two, and four, and all that kind of stuff. We had a lot of characters on the waterfront, all good people though. We had fighters. We had all kinds of people on the waterfront. In my opinion, we had some good people.

MS: Who were some of your friends that you remember, good friends? What kind of people were they? Your friends?

LL: My friends? I had three brothers on the waterfront. A good friend of mine was George Love. A friend of mine that I worked with, [inaudible]. I worked in a gang with some Hawaiians, (Benny Ka'auinui?) from Hawaii and (Chester Takuchi?), all kinds of people that I worked with, (Art Wilson?), a lot of good people that I worked with.

MS: That was hard work.

LL: Well, in my day, work was hard. There was no such thing as that exists today with containerization. I'm not complaining about it. All the work was hard as loading and unloading boxcars, bananas. Bananas in my day, when I worked on banana ships, they would come in stocks. They didn't come in boxes. You had to pick up that stock of bananas, put it in a pocket, going out of the conveyor belts onto the dock, and loading the boxcars with bananas. You had to carry them inside the boxcars. All the work was hard in my day. But I was young, and I was strong enough that I could do it.

MS: What was the hardest job for you in those days?

LL: Well, different times. Working in a hull was handling cotton. Cotton in my days on the waterfront was known as (Bakersfield billets?). They were big and heavy. When you were working in a hull, you had to pick them up, stand them up, high pile them on the docks. Unloading boxcars with borks and hides and those kinds of things. Everything was hand handled. It was all heavy. When you had coffee came in and 140-pound sacks were bigger than that, that was all heavy. It was a lot of hard work in my day on the waterfront. It was all hard. But we were used to those things. So, we worked together. Usually, you had a partner and you handled things together with your cargo hooks and your sack hooks and everything else.

MS: What were the tools you used? What were the tools?

LL: Well, we had sack hooks. They were little hooks that you'd hit the end of the sack when you pick it up. Because otherwise, you couldn't grasp it, especially coffee sacks. Then the cargo hooks, everybody on the waterfront in my day had a cargo hook, either on a ship or on a dock. You don't see them anymore. There's no such thing as cargo hooks. Then the jitney drivers in the days had jitney hooks. They used to be able to hook up their four-wheelers with a jitney hook and reach in the back and hook up the four-wheelers. Then once in a while, I volunteered for carpenter jobs. I had my own saw and carried those things with me, too. I volunteered all the time when I didn't get a job. I'd volunteer for anything I could get. I drove jitney. Once in a

while, I'd do that. I'd take carpenter jobs, lashing jobs. Lashing jobs came out later on.

MS: You remember you had joined the union at 48, you said.

LL: Yes.

MS: What's the importance of the union on the docks? Why is the union important?

LL: The union is the God-savior. I didn't realize it at the time because my brothers were already in the union. But the union protected me as my rights, wages, conditions, and benefits, which I have right now being retired for twenty years. I have good benefits. I have a pension, medical care, et cetera. I didn't realize it at the time, but after I got involved with the union, I realized the fact that as an individual by myself, I would have a hard time representing myself with the employer. But with the union behind me all the way, I was solid, especially out of respect to Harry Bridges, the founder of the ILWU in 1937.

MS: Tell me about him. Who's Harry Bridges?

LL: Harry Bridges was the international president of the ILWU that was formed in 1937 after the 1934 strike. A wonderful man, wonderful man, he was the father of our union.

MS: Did you ever meet him?

LL: I knew him well. I knew him well. I went to visit him two days before he died.

MS: Describe what kind of man he was.

LL: Pardon? Harry Bridges was a dedicated man for the working class. The history and background of Harry Bridges goes a long way back from merchant seamen, all the way down to San Francisco, up and down the coast, championing the rights of the working class. They tried to label him years ago as being a communist, but Harry Bridges, the rank and file was a mile away. As a matter of fact, when I was young, I made contributions towards Harry Bridges' defense fund. Finally, Harry Bridges won his case. They didn't deport him and everything else. Then finally, Harry Bridges told them, "I'm not a communist. I'm a registered Republican." He was, in my opinion, one of the finest labor leaders in the world.

MS: Talk about his personality. Was he shy? Was he quiet?

LL: No, he was very quiet, calm and cool, and collected. In the early days, some of the guys, especially down south here, they listened, and there were rumors about him being a communist and all that kind of stuff. They'd come down to meetings, and they'd boo him. By the time he left that auditorium of the meeting, they were applauding him all the way. I've been at caucus convention delegates and on a negotiating committee, but Harry would sit back in his chair. He'd sit there and listen to guys in whatever they were saying. He wouldn't interrupt them or anything else. By the time they got through, then Harry would take over. By the time he explained everything to them, everybody knew what the score was. Harry was a wonderful labor

leader deluxe, in my opinion.

MS: Now, were you involved – you must have been at your age – were you involved in the [19]71 strike?

LL: Yes.

MS: Tell me about that.

LL: One hundred-twenty days, 121 days, I think. I didn't know too much about the negotiations because I wasn't on a negotiating committee.

MS: Tell people there was a strike in 1971. What was it about? Why was it important?

LL: Well, the negotiating committee – I don't know the details on what stifled the negotiating, getting a contract, but I don't really recall what it was at that time.

MS: Wasn't it about containers?

LL: No, not containers. Containerization came on later on. I sat in on negotiations, in fishbowl negotiations in the early 1950s when I was just a kid. I've been on a negotiating committee a couple of times. Now, in regard to [19]71, II didn't know too much what was going on. But in 1971, Bridges advised the ranks up and down the coast that to solve the problem and remedy the problem, they should accept it. They finally agreed to it. The ranks went back to work. Harry, in my opinion, was a labor leader. It wasn't just Harry. Harry always said all his life, "I rely on the ranks. When push comes to shove, I'll go to the ranks, and they'll take care of it." He was a wonderful labor leader, I'll tell you. I can't get away from praising him as much as I knew him. I knew him well.

MS: Did you spend time with him alone? Can you tell me some stories about your time with him?

LL: No. He and my brother Chick were real close. Chick was a little older than me, and he was the secretary of Local 13. I'd been president of Local 13 about five or six times. Harry, he liked to get together with the working class, have a couple of beers, even go to the races once in a while. He was downright real. I'm telling you, the personality, you couldn't beat it. I just repeat myself how much I thought of him.

MS: Well, let's go back to some of the big issues that were for the longshoremen. Containerization was a big issue, wasn't it?

LL: That was after, no, after mechanization and modernization.

MS: Talk about that.

LL: Mechanization and modernization, I sat in on that. That was when the union and the

employer got together, and they decided that the employer had the right to mechanize technology and utilize men as needed at that time. It would involve manning different types of operations. But the union agreed at that time that the employer has a right to mechanize and it changes method of operations in the best interests of the employer and the union. Personally, at that time, I thought I was against it because I thought we'd be losing a lot of jobs. But I was wrong. After all these years, what a foresight, what a foresight the union had in negotiating that mechanization-modernization agreement. It has proved, especially in this Southern California port, we haven't lost any members. We're the largest port local up and down the coast in the longshore industry down here. Bridges always used to say, I can remember him saying, "As long as there's going to be one person working on a dock, that's going to be a longshoreman, it's going to be ILWU." Since the containerization came along, we – before containerization, there was no such a thing. I'm repeating myself. All hand handled cargo. They had a few boxes once in a while with personal stuff in it, but everything was hand handled on the ship, on the dock. When containerization came along, it eliminated men as needed. For instance, I can tell you an example. Years ago, all the ships came in where you hand handled cargo. Well, before you had containers, APL ships, the big California bare ships come in. They had five or six hatches. They worked days and nights, ship gangs, dock gangs, all kinds of people working day and night on those vessels, five and six days. Now, the ship comes in, in a day and a half, and they're gone. Eliminated men, but they're moving the ships. They're moving the cargo. It's our guys that's doing it.

MS: They're doing different jobs, but they're still there.

LL: Whatever's needed. We have crane drivers now. In my day, we didn't have crane drivers. You have crane drivers that do the work. Then you have, what they call, UTR drivers that drive the chassis and drive them away. Then you've got top handler drivers, [inaudible] trucks, and all those kinds of things. But it's all our guys that are doing it. Where we thought we'd lose all these jobs with technology, we gained some jobs. So, as far as I'm concerned, we're pretty strong. We didn't lose anything. In my honest opinion, it was foresight on behalf of the union to negotiate with the employers because of technology and still maintain our jobs and our conditions and benefits.

MS: Now, did you live in San Pedro during the time you were here?

LL: No, no, no. I've lived in Wilmington and Carson all my life.

MS: Okay. Well, tell me about when you were living in Wilmington. In the [19]40s and [19]50s when you were living in Wilmington, what was it like?

LL: Beautiful. Wilmington was a nice little town. You knew everybody in town in those days. You never had no problems as far as everybody knew everybody, even the police department. If they found you out at night, they'd take you home. I grew up practically in Wilmington and Carson. I've lived in Carson and Wilmington. I live in Carson now. But Wilmington was a harbor town. It was all union. Everything was union. Even the bars were union. Wilmington in its early days was known as Goosetown. The Avalon Boulevard was Canal Street. But that was before my time, when I got there. But I went to Banning High School in Wilmington and

graduated from there in 1942. I grew up there.

MS: Goosetown, where's that from?

LL: That's where the geese used to be on the canal down the street, Avalon. Wilmington was called Goosetown in the early days because Avalon Boulevard was a Canal Street and the geese used to be on there. So, they always used – that was known as Goosetown. That's the old term over there.

MS: Now, the port towns are not known to being very genteel. I mean, merchant marines and dock workers, these guys are rough guys. They're tough guys. So, what was the scene like? Were there bars? Were there clubs? What was the scene in Wilmington like?

LL: We got along well. I used to go to the bars once in a while when I was young. The seamen were there and the merchant seamen and the longshoremen together. We're all union. We're all workers. Once in a while, you'd have somebody that'd get a beef. But no, all the bars, San Pedro and Wilmington, there was seamen and the longshoremen got along well. Matter of fact, the history of the longshore industry is that the term longshoremen comes from history way back. Merchant seamen, when the ships used to sail, you didn't have longshoremen at that time. Merchant seamen did the loading and unloading. At that time, years gone by when merchant seamen got old, and they couldn't sail anymore. They stayed along shore. So, along that time, years ago, the history says they were called workers along the shore or longshoremen. That's how they came about. After years, the men that stayed along the shore that worked along the shore were called longshoremen. Then a union came along. The ILA came along. Then after, the ILWU came along. Then the union was formed. It was called the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. That's the way it's been since 1937.

MS: Did you hear stories about the early days of the union and getting it formed in [19]34?

LL: Sure. I've heard a lot of them.

MS: How did the union get started?

LL: Well, the ILWU, it got started in 1934 when two men from our area, Dickie Parker and John Knudsen, got killed during the strike. They had a tent facility in 145 in Wilmington. Scabs come down to work the ships instead of longshoremen. The cops came down, and I don't know who killed them. But one, Dickie Parker, got killed on the job right there in the picket line. The other brother, John Knudsen, got shot and died later on. But the strike was successful up and down the coast. I know the whole history about the whole coast. Six longshoremen were killed up and down the coast in 1934. But the union prevailed because we had support from the community. We had support from the teamsters up and down the whole coast. The union prevailed. The union came out all right. They were united. The ranks were united. They all stuck together.

MS: Do you think the young guys working now in the docks appreciate the struggles of the union and appreciate it, or do they just take it for granted sometimes?

LL: Some. Most of them do, sir. Most of the guys on the waterfront today know the history and background of the union. They know how the struggles that we had, even before me. Like I came into the union, I was getting $1.67 an hour in my time. I didn't have pensions and medical at that time. But I got it later on after the union came along. I think they understand. But a lot of them that come working on the waterfront today really don't know the struggles and what we went through, the bargaining with the employers, the times we had problems with it, and they kind of take it for granted. But in my honest opinion, such as the 2002 lockout, it wasn't a strike, it was a lockout in the ILW up and down the coast, they stood pat together. They were solid on the picket lines. They were solid. In my opinion, I think they probably will now. There might be a few individuals that don't understand the struggles. I'm repeating myself, the union representing them and taking care of them, besides representing themselves. With unity and solidarity, you got more power talking for you than you have one individual. I think they understand that, but that remains to be seen because we probably might have some problems in 2008. All these things that we've achieved all through the years, a lot of people don't understand the struggles we had to get those. It wasn't all that easy, bargaining with the employer and everything. I've been on negotiations, and I was president of the local a few times. During my time as president, the understanding, the affiliation, negotiating with the employer, not the negotiation, but meeting with the employer was good. We had a gentleman by the name of (Mr. McAvoy?), the area director or area manager of Southern California. I was able to talk to the employers, the labor relations committee, and we could iron out our problems. We understood one another. We got along well. I was proud of my dealings with the employer. When we made an agreement, you stuck by it. But I don't think that's the same thing with the PMA today, up and down the coast. They don't understand the history and the background of labor relations, et cetera, that we've had for years. We've come a long way.

MS: From the point of view of a guy who's worked on the docks for forty years, what is special about the Port of Los Angeles to you?

LL: What's special to me about the Port of Los Angeles? The improvements and the changes that the Port of Los Angeles has made through the years to coincide with mechanization and modernization and containerization. I think that I have been appraised and appreciate the fact that the Port of Los Angeles has made all these things so that we can be competitive. The Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach are the two finest ports in the world. They move the cargo. They've made changes under Mayor Bradley. [inaudible] used to be here at the Port of Los Angeles. I knew them all. I'm well with them. In the olden days on the waterfront, warehouses were all wooden warehouses. Some of them had metal sides. Some of them were antiquated and everything else. The Port of Los Angeles moved and built newer warehouses. The old [inaudible] Dock in Wilmington was an example. They built warehouses and they moved. The Port of Los Angeles is being commended, in my opinion. They've done a hell of a job, along with the Port of Long Beach with all the cranes and everything else that we've done. They've changed the whole outlook of the waterfront where the cargo comes in and moves out. It's second to none in the world, in my opinion. I really appreciate the Port of Los Angeles. I knew Mayor Bradley well. I knew all your past officials of the Port of Los Angeles. As a matter of fact, we've had two or three of our longshoremen that have been on the harbor commission, the port commission. We've got one on there right now, Joe Radisich, [inaudible], and Tommy

Warren have all worked for the Port of Los Angeles. That's the idea of talking with one another. It's been beneficial as far as I'm concerned. I really think the Port of Los Angeles is doing a terrific job. I was in office when the 2020 plan came around to change the waterfront all the way around, and they're doing it. As long as we can talk to one another and get along with one another, we're all right.

MS: Sounds good to me. [laughter]

LL: Yes.

MS: Let me take a picture of you. Why don't you slide over? I think it's still cool. That was really good.

[end of transcript]