

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Dennis McCarbery Oral History
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Male Speaker: Good. Hard question. First, please say your name and spell it.

Dennis McCarberry: Oh, God, how can I do that? My name is Dennis McCarberry, and that's M-C-C-A-R-B-E-R-Y, and Dennis with two n's.

MS: Dennis, please tell me the year you were born and where were you born?

DM: 1939, and I was born in Los Angeles, California.

MS: When did you first come to San Pedro?

DM: I was fortunate enough to come to San Pedro in about 1968. I was working with the Daily Breeze newspaper at the time and was able to move here with my soon to be wife.

MS: Before that, you were in Long Beach?

DM: No, I was in the South Bay area. I was a reporter photographer with the Daily Breeze.

MS: Did you have any other connections to the port before that or was this your first connections when you came to San Pedro to a port?

DM: Well, I was raised in the Eagle Rock area, so my first connection with a port was to go into the Navy and go in and out of ports. So, that was my introduction to port activities. Of course, it's a very different kind of activity, but I was mainly in and out of either San Diego, or Alameda, up in Northern California, and then did some Far East cruises.

MS: When you were growing up in Eagle Rock, did you have any idea that there was a port of Los Angeles or – [laughter]

DM: Well, I first was introduced was we would come down. It would take an awful long time to drive down because there wasn't much freeway construction yet. I ended up in the Long Beach side more than San Pedro, but both ports were very small at the time.

MS: What brought you down there?

DM: Well, summertime and the heat, and somebody would say, "Let's go to the beach."

MS: When you came here in [19]68, what were you doing when you came here?

DM: I was working with the Daily Breeze.

MS: Right. So, tell us about the Daily Breeze and give us a sense of the history of that little background of that.

DM: Well, the Daily Breeze, it started off as a newspaper around the turn of the century in Redondo Beach. Then moved over to its current facilities in Torrance, probably around the

1950s. It's been the primary regional newspaper for the South Bay area for all that time. I was a reporter photographer, and then I was one of the editors, the assistant city editor for several years.

MS: What are the kinds of stories that you were covering that maybe got you to San Pedro? Can you give us some of the sense of the stories you're covering?

DM: Well, I would do an awful lot of things, but I covered cities. I covered Gardena and other cities. I didn't have a beach city at the time, but I loved to do features in photography as well. So, I would do things like, I went out and did a feature on *The Monitor*, the ship that sank off of Palos Verdes. I always loved the ocean environment and all of that, so I would drive around it and look for photography opportunities and all of that. I lived in Redondo at the time, before I moved here, and I was able to walk to the beach two blocks, and I did that every opportunity I had. So, once I escaped Eagle Rock and came down and got next to the beach, or the water, I haven't left.

MS: As a photographer, what were the things that attracted you? What kinds of images were you looking for and enjoyed capturing in San Pedro in the harbor area?

DM: Well, there's just so many things that for somebody who's not from the area, or even from the area, but doesn't get down to the beach, there's so many different things. It's such a different world and the terminology, the actions, the sizes of the ships, even back in the [19]60s, when the ships were small, they were big, and I was on an aircraft carrier when I was in the navy, and that's a monster. So, all of these different kinds of ships, you've got all the different activities. In the old days, there was a lot more manual working of the docks than there is now, and everything's in a container used to be before. In the [19]50s and stuff, people were putting it on their shoulders and carrying it off and putting it on pallets and carrying it away. I've got friends in Wilmington that tell me about getting out of the military after World War II, and their first job was longshoring. They would literally carry the bananas off to ship. Well, one of the things that happened with that is you get these little creepy crawlies moving across your shoulder, so they had these tarantulas and things to contend with.

MS: What were the stories you maybe did while you were reporting? Were there any particular big stories that involved the port that you remember?

DM: No. Like I said, my main beats were the cities in what they call the Sentinel Valley, which was in the South Bay, as far away as from the beaches you can get. But I was fortunate enough to create my own opportunities, if you will, to do some beach kinds of things. Every once in a while, you get assigned to a city council meeting, but it's not quite the same. I was really fortunate that at my time with the Daily Breeze, I was able to meet a gentleman who worked with the Redondo chamber, which I also worked at afterwards. He hired me as the public information director for the Los Angeles County Department of Beaches, That was paradise for me because I was right on the water, the building was on the water. Lunch break, you go run along the beach, either North or South of Manhattan Beach, where we were, and it was fabulous. Going with the lifeguards and doing that, they have a very, very serious business, but at the same time, there's still a lot of good, fun things that happen at the beach.

MS: Now, were you here either as a reporter or involved with the port when the ship sank, blew up in the harbor in the mid-[19]70s?

DM: I was here. My wife and I had gone that day that *The Sansinena* blew up. My wife and I had gone to a Laker game, and we came back, and our dog was freaked out. Our fish were just going nuts in the fishbowl. The area around us had a lot of windows blown out. Our front window wasn't blown out, but it sure shook up the dog and the fish. Throughout town, there was just a lot of destruction, but I was not there when the actual boom happened, but we were here for that.

MS: How did you get involved with the port of Los Angeles professionally?

DM: Professionally, I was very fortunate. I had worked with the city council office, with Councilwoman Joan Milke Flores. Again, I was not here at the port. I was not in the San Pedro office. I was in the downtown office. But we had a day in the district every Thursday, and so we would go into the community and make sure that we were talking with the folks. I was able to get to know people down here. I left Councilwoman Flora's office and went to SCAG for a little bit, Southern California Association of Governments, and then was able to get on here at the port. I thought I had died and gone to heaven, because part of my area for SCAG was all of Orange County and the Southern half of Los Angeles County. So, I was doing a lot of driving. When you end the day at 5:30p.m. in San Clemente and have to drive home, that's a long grinding. So, now I have or had a one-mile drive to work and like I said, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

MS: What was your first job here?

DM: My first job here at the port was as a public relations representative. I was that for probably a year before I started promoting up.

MS: What were your assignments that were memorable when you first came here as a PR representative?

DM: The Port of Los Angeles has grown and has become this real monster that you see today over a lot of little steps. When I first came here, they were just getting to the first million container year, and everybody thought that that was quite a coup. The PR section was doing support for that. So, that was part of it. Then the growth during my thirteen years was just incredible. I mean, I was thinking about it as I was getting ready to come down, and the growth and the fun things we did in celebrating some of that growth was really special.

MS: Give me an example of some of the fun things you did to celebrate.

DM: Well, an example was of the fun things here at the port as we grew, were that Pier 400, we had a celebration for the completion of the dredging and the fill. That was literally on the fly. We recreated a little tent city kind of thing out there on nothing but sand. The night before, this huge wind thing came through and messed with everything. We had built a box to put

memorabilia in and put away for fifty years, and they're supposed to open it after fifty years. I had asked our construction maintenance guys to make us a little box. Well, they came back with a box that I could have fit in. So, we put in all kinds of books and programs from all the different events and flags from the different companies. The plans for Pier 400 and all of that working with the Army Corps of Engineers, we were able to do that. It just worked out great. We had probably 300 people out there on the sand, all the logistics worked out and we sweated our way through all of that. But in the end, we had a great event. That's the kind of activities that we did a lot of, because we were having a lot of growth bigger and smaller. But that was one of the monster events that we had.

MS: I see on your notes this is Steve Howe.

DM: Horn.

MS: Horn. Tell me about Steve Horn and that story.

DM: Well, Congressman Steve Horn had the Port of Los Angeles, or part of the Port of Los Angeles and his area, and he was instrumental in getting some votes through in Congress. Part of my job before I retired was as state and federal legislative representative. So, I was in with our contingent talking to him about the benefits of dredging and that kind of thing. He asked if I was a resident of his district because 99 percent of the time, the answer is no. Well, I was. He looked at me like, "No, I don't think so." So, he had me go over to this huge map on his wall, and I pointed out where my house was. He was very pleased to find out he had a real constituent who could vote for [laughter] that was coming to him to talk about the port.

MS: What were you coming to talk about? What was the circumstance of that meeting?

DM: We were talking to Congressman Horn regarding the dredging project that we were trying to get accomplished. Nothing in the port happens very fast. You have a lot of environmental issues that you have to deal with. Then you also have the political issues of getting the funding out of the federal government and doing everything correctly in that process so that you actually end up with the federal funding. It's a challenge. It's a lot of interesting activities. But the bottom line is you really have to show them that it is a benefit to them. As with Horn, he was in Long Beach, LA, so he knew what the ports meant to the area. But I was telling the story recently that we had a meeting with, I believe, he was from Iowa, a senator from Iowa. He was there, and we were talking to him, and he was sort of, "Uh huh, uh huh." Then we told him about the deliveries to his major corporation that was in his hometown. He literally sat bolt upright and paid attention to us the rest of the way. We were able to do that because of some studies that had been accomplished that allowed us to know exactly where things coming through here are going. It's a remarkable story. When it doesn't get there on time, the cargo, it's really bad for the folks on the other end. So, he knew how important it was that his biggest business didn't get slowed down.

MS: This is an association with the Alameda Corridor, I assume.

DM: The Alameda corridor that was the folks that had come up with those statistics. But we

were using an updated version of those statistics regarding the dredging.

MS: Tall ships, how about that?

DM: The tall ships. We were able to participate in the biggest event, I guess, in Southern California in a long time. We were working with the Los Angeles Maritime Museum. The port was the host for the tall ships. That event, in three days was bigger than the Tutankhamun event at the LA County Museum in terms of attendance. The man who was the manager of the LA Maritime Museum had been manager up at the museum where the King Tut was. So, he capped his career with this monstrous attendance. We had tall ships from all over the place, and we had just massive crowds. I ended up at the last day of the tall ships. We had some workers that were helping us from Beacon House, which is a local area house that helps people with drug and alcohol problems. I was doing life lessons, was sort of talking with one of the guys, who obviously had been through a lot, but he was interested in trying to help himself. So, we were sitting out there as the sun was getting ready to set, chatting about life.

MS: Well, describe that event. What happened on that event?

DM: Well, the tall ships event here, it was the first major tall ships event that had been in Southern California. We brought in about twenty tall ships. Most of them are recreations of tall ships, but some of them are just basic, brand new tall ships.

MS: Explain what a tall ship is?

DM: A tall ship is a sailing ship which is run by sail. It's totally the old technology and they're just beautiful ships. The U.S. Coast Guard tall ship, *The Eagle*, was one of those tall ships, and it is huge. When you see all of the coast guard people that staffed that ship in the sails as they came down the main channel was just remarkable. They had smaller tall ships also. They're all tall ships, except some are taller than the other. [laughter] But they had tall ships that were replicas of some of the ships that sailed around the world early and they are really small. I mean, you go, "How did they get all these people on board? Then how did they ride the waves?"

MS: I see a note here. It says, sitting in parking.

DM: Oh, that was my story about the –

MS: Lot with Benson Beacon.

DM: Oh, that's the –

MS: That's the same story?

DM: Yes.

MS: Okay. I think I've gone through notes overlap to some extent. How has the port changed from the 1990s? Give us an economic sense, a physical sense. How was the port change in

those years?

DM: Since I was able to begin working here in 1990, the port of Los Angeles has grown in its throughput and everything it does remarkably. When I first came here, we were just going through the transition to 1 million containers a year, which was gigantic. Even before that, when Dr. Perry did the dredging, which allowed us to become a major port, we were the number eight port in the country at one time. Then we became number one and we were that for many years until Long Beach caught us. But then we opened up Pier 400 and took off ever since. The economics of it is we've gone from one million containers in 1990 to 2007. I think they're like ten or eleven million containers and we've not only that economic import for the whole area. But the terminal operators and the shipping people have been able to take a ten-fold growth, or eleven-fold growth, and do it without very many hiccups and that's remarkable. It shows that by them being able to work the system as best they can, and not having a bunch of hard, fast rules to say, "Well, this is the best way you operate." Well, no, they figure out the best way to operate, because the whole business here is about getting the containers off the ship, on the dock and off the dock and inland. It doesn't do anybody any good to have them sitting there on the dock. So, all the economic advantages disappear if it just sits there and it's not good for us because the port can't put another container in there. If there's a container there and it's not good for whoever's expecting whatever's in that container, if they can't get it to their thing. So, the economics, I don't have all the numbers, but it's just staggering the numbers. I know Jack Kyser from the LA County Economic Development Office. During the [19]90s, we had a major recession and the only thing, according to him, that kept the economy going was due to the throughput from the Port of LA and the Port of Long beach.

MS: Tell me the story and the importance of Pier 400, Pier 300. What's the significance of that story? What is that story?

DM: Pier 300, Pier 400 development was vital to the growth of the Port of Los Angeles. It created new land, new terminal space. It allowed the companies to be able to go onto a site that was large enough for them to do their operations. When I first arrived in 1990, APL was just moving into the terminal on the land here, and it was a ninety-nine-acre terminal. Everybody's going, "What are they going to do with ninety-nine acres?" Well, they found out real fast because they filled it up and did the throughput and using all their ninety-nine acres until they wanted when Pier 300 was done, they wanted Pier 300. What are they going to do with 250 acres? Well, they did the throughput. They had an audience here in America that was just willing to buy anything, and if it's cheaper, we don't care where it was made. We had a program that we developed for the schools in the public relations division. Part of it was regarding where things come from, all of that. What we were doing in service training for the teachers to show them how to use this product. They were having fun. One of them goes, "Where are these things made?" Well, they would look at their collar or the thing in their sweater or whatever. It was funny because even some of them were reading of countries that they didn't know about. So, one teacher would say, "Where the heck is (Maldives?) or something. Somebody said, "Oh, that was formally this and that and the other thing." So, it's a fascinating world we live in, with everything coming from everywhere and we're the end product. Unlike many ports, we don't tranship very much. We are the end product it either stays 50 percent approximately stays in the area, and the other 50 percent goes beyond the mountains. So, most of that stays. A little bit

goes on into Europe, but most of it stays. Some of it now goes what they call North, South, down into Mexico or South America and back and forth.

MS: What is Pier 400 and what's its importance?

DM: Pier 400 is the second landfill that was done. Pier 400 is now where the (Maersk?) terminal is, and there's also a lease turn operation out there where the little birds that have a sanctuary, and again, it's a very large land mass that was created. They used some technology that they actually had learned from the Chinese in some of the exchanges when Mr. (Birtz?) was our executive director. They used reeds and stuff to help get the moisture out of the ground, and it saved incredible amounts of time.

MS: The Alameda Corridor had to be sold to people outside of San Pedro in Los Angeles. Tell me some of the stories that you remember most and best about the Alameda Corridor and getting it sold because it needed money from more than just here.

DM: Yes. The development of the Alameda Corridor was a remarkable activity. I was blessed in a way to be able to be there at the start and be at the completion of the project. It began when Councilwoman Joan Milke Flores, who I worked for – and I was her transportation deputy. She understood that if we didn't do something to fix the situation before the train started running, that we were going to lock down East-West traffic on the Eastern side of LA county and something had to be done. Unlike a lot of times, you wait until the problem comes and then you deal with it. She wanted to get out in front of it. I was working, actually with her office and interfaced with some of the folks here at the port who for years had a mantra that they would not go off port property to do anything. I had a very interesting discussion, a little heated discussion with one of the chief engineers during that period, when I said, "Look, it doesn't do you a bit of good if you don't get them off the dock. You've got to get the product off the dock, and the only way out is truck or train. So, you need to help." He went back and got the okay for the project to be sponsored inland by the port. Well, the actual selling of the project, we were able to get all of the various cities along the way eventually to – I mean, they saw the need. But to work out all the details is a monstrous project. To work and get 100 percent political cooperation is a remarkable thing also. So, that took a number of years. It started off in the mid-[19]80s with a report by Gill Hicks out of SCAG, and it got finally accomplished. I believe it was 2001 or 2002. It took going back East to Washington DC, going to Sacramento to make sure everybody understood the economic value and just the lifestyle factors, that if you didn't do this, you were going to make life not very nice for anybody trying to drive. You were going to eliminate the ability to grow your economy because you needed to get the product off the dock and out of here. Since 50 percent of the things that come into the port are going East, train is the best way to do it. At the same time, we were doing the Alameda Corridor, we had done again, it was Councilwoman Flores who was helping push this. They did the intermodal container transfer facility in North Wilmington and Carson. It was a rail dock. So, instead of having to truck, as we did when I first came here, from San Pedro and Wilmington, all the way to downtown to the rail station, we were able to truck a mile and a half, instead of that twenty miles, and save all the grief that that implies. So, that worked out. That showed the way. Then the corridor needed to be built and was built.

MS: Any particular memorable meetings that you can remember and turning points in getting this thing moving along.

DM: Yeah. One of the most memorable meetings I had was the one where I met with Vern Hall, who was the chief engineer at the time here at the port. As was the city attorney's opinion at the time was that you couldn't spend any port money off port property. That's when I got a little heated with him and told him, "It isn't going to do you a darn bit of good if you don't get your containers off the dock. The only way you're going to get them out of here is through train for the stuff going back East." He was able to go back and talk to staff here and came back to councilwoman and said, "Yeah. We want to move with the project and the port is going to cooperate." That was a critical meeting. I had some meetings with some politicians that it's always fascinating that sometimes with staffers and the elected person, we've had several meetings. It's frustrating as well as sort of comical that you meet with the elected and they tell you, "Yeah. They want to support this. They want to do this." Then they assign you somebody who is opposed to it and you got, "This does not compute." [laughter] But you have to work around those issues. I mean, these are people issues, and so we on the big sense, were able to work with all of that.

MS: What about selling it nationally?

DM: From my point of view, it was a grind getting it done. I mean, it's just you had to stay positive. You can't get frustrated and let that bother you. But we were really fortunate that our people here in Southern California, the whole congressional group elected in the state assembly and the state senate were in with the project. Some of those got elected and moved up the ladder, then they were also in key positions back in Washington, D.C. Because they were for it, that allowed them to meet with their colleagues and speak from their heart. "This is a good thing for us, it's a good thing for the country." But as I mentioned on that other occasion, when you were talking to some of the elected that you didn't know that our people in Washington, DC were the ones who knew they would need to have it shown. How does it affect me? That's where the statistics at the Alameda Corridor were put together that wonderful study that showed where things went. Because when you go to somebody from upstate New York and you tell them, "Hey, this is important." They go, "Sure. Yeah, right." Well, it is if they all of a sudden understand that one of their bigger businesses in their town or the biggest business in their town has things generated through the Port of Los Angeles that keep their business going. That's critical, and they understand that. They understand it very well. [laughter]

MS: Sorry to wind this up. From your experience, what do you think the importance of the port has been to San Pedro, the town? What is San Pedro, the town, contributed to the atmosphere of the port? What is this?

DM: You want me to be positive? [laughter]

MS: I want you to be honest. I know it's not a love affair made in heaven. What is the nature of that relationship?

DM: The relationship between the community of San Pedro and the Port of Los Angeles is one

of being intertwined. But over the years it has changed as the nature of San Pedro changed, and as the nature of the port changed in the beginning. The fishing industry was what employed most of the people here. There's only one place you can go fishing from. We had the largest fishing fleet in the world at one point in time out of San Pedro. So, that was critical. Everybody in the community understood their relationship to the port. Well, over the time you get into the [19]60s, [19]70s, [19]80s, [19]90s, you ended up with a lot of different economics. People moving here because it's a beautiful community, it's in a wonderful location. It's got all kinds of pluses, but they don't have any relationship to the port. They work downtown or they work in the South Bay or somewhere, and so their relationship is totally different. They don't feel the economic attachment to the port that the older community did. So, that had created some tensions and the public was some of them were genuinely concerned. Others were trying to make political hay. You had some folks that created the term when the port was ninety years old that there had been a hundred-year war between the community and San Pedro. Well, that doesn't compute when you've only been here nine, eight years, but that's okay. But they created this image, and it was politically done by one individual who wanted to retain a position that he had, and he figured that he could start it and stop it all in the same year. Well, if you would have known PR a little better, you get something like that out of the bag, and once people start talking about it, it stays that way. So, the hundred-year war really wasn't. There are still so many people in town that have a relationship with the port. A lot of folks don't see it, or some people compartmentalize their thinking. During the daytime, when they're working, they're making their money because of the Port of Los Angeles. At night, when they're living in their house, they're upset because the port is there. Well, you can't have it both ways. I used to live near a racetrack. Well, if you move next to a racetrack, you're going to have noises that come out of a racetrack. I also once lived next to an airport. Well, if you don't want the sound of airplanes coming over the roof and waking you up in the middle of the night, don't live next to an airport. Sometimes most of us have the opportunity to select where we live. Not everybody's that blessed. You move next to someplace and it is what it is. To try and make San Pedro and the Marina del Rey won't work, and to try and make Marina del Rey and the San Pedro won't work because the geographic area doesn't work but some people get into that. So, I don't understand it because I've lived here, like I said, since 1968, and most of my time here was before I worked for the port and it's a great town. I remember going down to the docks before all the fences, and you were able to just walk all the way to the edge of the water on the docks and we used to do that a lot. But as time went on and security and all kinds of other issues, you got the fences and people can't go down to the dock except for in certain public areas, and there's a lot of those, but everything changes.

MS: What does San Pedro and the port mean to you personally?

DM: Well, San Pedro and the port mean to me, it's sort of a grounding. When I first came here, I just love the area. I've been here whenever we would travel, whenever my wife and I would travel. We would come back down and usually go to Ports O'Call restaurant and have a toddy or two to get back grounded. We're back in our town because it is such a special place in my mind. No place else that I'm aware of, not even Long beach that you have the main channel right next to so much development. Where you just sit there and you can just watch the ships come by and you can imagine you can do all kinds of things with that. So, it's a very special place to me. I've retired. I haven't moved away. I don't plan to leave San Pedro. It's just a very

remarkable town. The port is an integral part of that. I lived in Redondo, where you're living pretty close to a yacht harbor. Well, a yacht harbor and the port are just two different worlds. We have yacht places here in the Port of LA, and they act and look and feel like a yacht place. But the hugeness of the port, the vitality of the port, how everything seems to move in slow motion. But when you take into what's there, what's on these ships and how big they are, everything's huge. It's like, visually, it all matches. The cranes are huge. If you stand underneath the crane, they're huge. You stand next to a ship, it's huge. But when you visually look at it from some of our lookout points along here, everything matches. So, it's in a scale. But my understanding is that one of the TV, not TV, but the movie producers used the cranes here as the idea for these walking crane like things that fought in a movie. But it's the kind of thing that you can let your mind really roll here at the port and just envision and see and just think about where the ships have come from and what this place has meant, both historically. During World War II, if this place wouldn't have been here and doing what it was done, we would have had more problems. Korean war, the Korean bell out here is an important thing to the Korean community as well as to us, because so many of our young men and women went through the poor Los Angeles on their way to Korea. So, this is a historic, important little town, and a lot of people don't know all of that history or don't feel it. But it is a remarkable town.

MS: Perfect. Let me get a picture of you.

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