Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Rawlin Nelson Oral History
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John Kelley: Say your name and spell it.

Rawlan Ludvig Nelson: You want my actual name or the name –

JK: Actual name and nickname.

RLN: Oh, my real name. Rawlin Ludvig Nelson. It's spelled unusual because I've never seen it before. R-A-W-L-I-N is Rawlin. Ludvig, L-U-D-V-I-G. That's out of the Danish background. Nelson, N-E-L-S-O-N, which used to be Nielsen but was changed to sound more American. So, it's Rawlin Ludvig Nelson.

JK: But you're known as Tank.

RLN: For the last fifty years, yes [laughter].

JK: Okay. So, one thing I should tell you about the interview is that my questions aren't going to be heard. So, if I say to you, "What do you think of San Pedro?" You can't say, "It's a great place." You can say, "San Pedro is a great place." I'll remind you if you forget. What year were you born, and where were you born?

RLN: I was born in 1932. I was born in San Pedro. Actually, I was born in Sepulveda, which is just on the north end of town known as Barton Hill. Born in the house, doesn't happen much anymore. But I was born in the house. Yes. Then I grew up for a while in that house, then we moved next door and moved back. It was a Barton Hill life for ten years. Went to Barton Hill grade school.

JK: We're going to get to that. Talk about your parents, your father and mother. Tell me about them.

RLN: Well, [laughter] if I'm going to talk about my parents, well I actually have to go into it. I guess it's interesting. It's not embarrassing to me, but I could see how it might be depending on what your position is. My father we called him the Chief. His name was Ludvig Ollie Nelson. Well, I don't remember. I always called him the Chief. It's Ollie Ludvig Nelson. Well, anyway.

JK: Start again, "My father –"

RLN: My father, Ludvig Nelson, 1922. Well, I actually have to go back further to give you a real feel for it.

JK: Then you have to start again, "My father –"

RLN: My father, Ludvig Nelson. Think of 1910. Bornholm in Denmark, family with three boys. As a custom, it was at that time when the family got tight and, well, fishing went bad. The family got tight. Custom, the two youngest boys – and there was a girl also – but the two youngest boys offered to go to sea to relieve the stress on the family. So, my father, the Chief, at ten years old signs on a sailing ship as a cabin boy and leaves Denmark never to go back. Sails

around the world for twelve years around Cape Horn seven times. He was very proud of going around Cape Horn. Seven times around Cape Horn. But he came to San Pedro in 1922 on a Danish ship out of Australia. The ship is going to Alaska and then coming back to San Pedro. If you were in San Pedro Harbor in those days and looking, it must have seemed like paradise. But the Chief decided that he was going to jump ship in San Pedro. So, on the way to Alaska he sells everything. Everything he could sell, he sold. You had to get American money because they didn't take whatever the Danish money was, krone or whatever they are. Well, they get to Alaska and by chance – and this is the way the world works – the ship got iced in. So, he spent six months on a ship in Alaska with almost nothing and just had to survive. Well, the ship gets out of the ice. They come back down the coast. Well, they pull in. They anchor in out of there. They carried stuff by longboat in those days. But they anchored out. One night while on anchor, he took everything he owned – now this is hard to believe in nowadays – but he took everything he owned and wrapped it in beeswaxed-rubbed canvas, so it would be waterproof. He wrapped it tight. He tied the ins down really tight and slung this thing over his shoulder. He didn't dive in. Although he was a good swimmer and diver, he didn't dive in because it would make noise. If they'd get you, you're go into the dungeon until you leave. He slipped into the water and swam ashore. Now, I don't know how far he swam, that was never brought up. But it's got to be a mile at night. He swims in, climbs up on the rocks or whatever he climbed up on. Had one set of clothes. What he brought with him in that bag, it was something he could work with, and that was a needle and a palm. Most people won't know what a palm is, so I'll tell you. It's a leather device that goes over your hand. It has a circle in it made of wood covered with leather. What it's used for is to push the heavy needle through canvas or through ropes. He was a rigger. So, that's what he came ashore with. Well, in 1922, the job you could get, if you didn't mind putting your head down and your butt up and saying, "Yes, sir," was longshoring. This actually is the reason I'm an American, is the Chief could speak five languages. He sailed for twelve years. He sailed with different crews. He learned to speak mostly Scandinavian, but he also spoke English. So, he could speak the language. Speaking the language meant you get to stay because you weren't so easy to catch. So, he was a longshoreman in 1922. He worked for five years as a longshoreman. Now, this is where Inez, the mother comes in. There was – and it's still there – there's a house on O'Farrell, the 300 block, I think it's 378. It's a gray and blue house. It was my grandmother's house. Marie Johansen, she was my grandmother at the time. My mother, who was her stepdaughter, named Inez. This house that Marie ran was a house of prostitution plus a speakeasy. It was prohibition. Well, the Chief, my father, went there of course just to drink. I don't know if there was anything to do with the ladies. But he went there to drink. But while he was there, Inez, this daughter wasn't allowed in the house. She was fifteen. [inaudible] see pictures, I know later. But anyway, she would skate all day long. A great skater I guess because she skated all day long. Well, the Chief going in and out saw Inez. Now, I like to think it of [laughter] as romance bloomed. But there is another reality. If you married an American, you had a chance of becoming an American. If you're skating in front of a house of prostitution, you might want to get away. So, I don't know if he was starstruck or need or whatever because I wasn't there. 1927 they get together. I know this is a long story, but this is what happened. It is a Pedro story. It's a harbor story. They get together, and they get married. They have my sister named Lillian. They break up. My father is a heavy drinker. Started drinking as soon as he got on ships. Well, he's an alcoholic. My whole life he was an alcoholic. But he's an alcoholic. I imagine that was very tough. But they break up. She has a boyfriend named Matt Kovich who was a fisherman here in town. But that doesn't work. She comes back. They have my brother

Harry. Now, [laughter] I said this a little strange story. This is not Norman Rockwell and honey and wheat cakes. Anyway, they get back together again. Harry is involved. Time goes on. In a couple of three years, times really were tight. We're talking about the late [19]20s, Depression, tough times. They break up again. My brother and sister wound up in an orphanage, which I didn't know about for a long time. But they wound up in an orphanage for a period of time. My mother and father, Inez and Ludwig [laughter], the Chief, they get back together again. Fortunately, they got back together because when they got back together that third time out popped a Rawlan that would later be a Tank. But anyway, so I'm born in 1932. They're still married. Time goes on. Now, remember [19]32 we were all the way out of the Depression. 1934 is the [19]34 strike on the waterfront. My father was a longshoreman. Harry Bridges, that whole story there's more.

JK: Let's stop a second. We're getting so many things here. This is the kind of thing I'm going to ask you to do. You've got to give me a one-minute version of who your father is and how he got to San Pedro.

RLN: [laughter] So, we leave that in the back, or you want to start again?

JK: I'm going to take it in pieces. So, introduce me to who your father was. How did he get to San Pedro? For example, I read in the notes he swam here naked because he didn't have clothes. Yes, you missed that.

RLN: Naked, yes. Didn't I say that?

JK: No.

RLN: Oh, I missed that part.

JK: So, start again. Who's your father?

RLN: [laughter]

JK: What's his name? What's his nickname? How did he get here? Don't go to Alaska, just –

[talking simultaneously]

RLN: Okay, I'll do that.

JK: Go ahead.

RLN: [laughter] My father, his name was Ollie Ludvig Nelson. He swam ashore here in 1922 naked. He brought everything he owned in basically a roll over his shoulder. Became a longshoreman. Was a longshoreman for a period of five years. Then well, [laughter] he met my mother. We're good?

JK: No, that's too short [laughter]. You can't stop there.

RLN: If you're going to give it a minute, I don't know.

JK: I'm exaggerating. Good. Start.

RLN: My father's name was Ollie Ludwig Nelson. An interesting story, I believe in Denmark in 1910. He was ten years old. The times were very tough in Denmark in 1910. At least, I'm getting this from stories. I wasn't there, obviously. Gets on a ship as a cabin boy at 10 years old and goes to sea. He's at sea for twelve years. Went from cabin boy, to rigger, to mastman as he grew. Went all over the world. He was very, very proud of the fact that he went around Cape Horn seven times. He used to sing about it. He was a drinker. He drank a lot. He wasn't a mean drunk. He was a happy drunk. He sang a lot about those days. So, I learned about it basically from my father. He was out there. He came to San Pedro in 1922 aboard a Danish ship coming out of Australia. Decided this is where he wanted to be. So, one night he took everything he owned and rolled it up in a canvas roll with the beeswax to keep the water out, slung it over his shoulder, slipped into the water, and swam to the Outer Harbor – which we know as the Outer Harbor in San Pedro – swam to the Outer Harbor. I don't know where he came up, but he came up. He could speak five languages which saved the day because he could speak English. He became a long shoreman. In those days [laughter] 1922, my goodness, you bent over, you did the work, and you kept your mouth shut, which he did. Well, he did it for a long time, but he did it for the first five years. Well, he's a young, vigorous man, and he likes to drink. There was a place in town on 3rd Street here in Barton Hill that was a house of prostitution. It's still there, the 370 something block of O'Farrell, a green and gray house. Well, he went there because you could drink. There were also ladies of the evening or whatever they called them in those days. He went there frequently. But out front on the sidewalk there was a girl who was the stepdaughter of the lady that ran it. Her name was Inez. She skated every day, all through the day. The Chief – which I call him, and everybody called him the Chief – met Inez and they married.

JK: Let's go back. Why is she skating back and forth in front of the house?

RLN: Stay out of the house.

JK: Tell me that. Start again. Go through that.

Male Speaker: John, we didn't get any naked stuff in there.

JK: Yes.

RLN: Kelley, you want me to start all over again? Can I do that?

JK: Sure. Go ahead.

RLN: [laughter] That's why I was down there an extra half hour the first person who was here. Yes, I had a lot of stories to tell. I'll start again [laughter]. My father's name was Ollie Ludvig Nelson. Everybody knew him as the Chief, me included. All the children, grandchildren,

everybody called him the Chief. In 1910, the Chief was in Bornholm, Denmark. Because times were tough, him and his brother signed on a ship. He signed as a cabin boy. The brother as a deckhand. They left Bornholm, Denmark, which is an island. They left and never went back. They sailed around the world for twelve years. Actually, Chris, the brother, died at sea. He drowned. But the Chief went from a cabin boy – he's not a very big guy. I happen to be a very big guy, and he wasn't. There was genetics in there somewhere. But he went from cabin boy, to rigger, to mastman. Up in the rigging, that was a very dangerous job. But he was built like a gymnast, moved like a gymnast. He got up in the rigging, and he became a full-time sailor, went around the world. Like I said, for twelve years he sailed and went around the world and went around Cape Horn seven times. Very proud of going around Cape Horn [laughter]. Anyway, I heard the story lots of times. In that time, he became a drinking man, a happy man, a hardworking man. But he came to San Pedro in 1922, looked on shore, and decided this is where he wanted to be. So, he took everything he had. Well, he sold most of the things he had because he needed a little money. Took everything else and he rolled it like a bed roll, a canvas beeswax on the outside to keep the water out, cinched it up. Well, he is a rigger. He cinched it up tight, put it over his shoulder, and naked – because everything he had was in that bed roll – naked, he slips into the water of the Outer Harbor and swims ashore. Gets up on land, puts on the clothes that he had. Fortunately, he spoke five languages. He learned them on the ship. One of them was English. So, he could communicate. He became a longshoreman. Well, a longshoreman in 1922, all you had to do was work hard and not say anything. He could be a longshoreman, which he became.

JK: Take us to this house on O'Farrell Street.

RLN: [laughter] The Chief as a longshoreman, young man, vigorous man, all that type of thing, he got paychecks. Well, on 3rd Street in San Pedro there was a house. It was gray and blue then. It's still gray and blue. It's the 300 block. It was a house of prostitution and a speakeasy. These are Prohibition times. Well, the Chief frequented this house. I get this from stories, obviously. I wasn't born yet. He would go at this place and come and go. While he did this, there was a young girl, a 15-year-old girl, out front who skated up and down the block continuously. That's what she did. Well, it turns out she was the stepdaughter of the lady that ran the house of prostitution. She couldn't be in the house while all this was going on. So, she skated. Well, her and the Chief, however it happened, got together, and they married. That produced children and also produced a life of turmoil on both sides. You have the Recession, Depression, all that's going on at the same time. You have alcohol involved, and you have the forming of the union involved. This is all taking place at the same time. My brother and sister wound up in an orphanage for a while. They parted; they got back together. One of these get-back-togethers, they had me [laughter]. As my father was known as the Chief, I later became known as Tank. That's the beginning of it. But that's the heart. The strength of this story is the [19]34 strike.

JK: Stop. Good. You don't remember the [19]32 strike that was going on.

RLN: No.

JK: Before we get to that because we definitely want to talk about the [19]34 strike, talk about

your earliest memories of San Pedro, whatever date they are. Some incidents that you remember from the earliest days from your memories.

RLN: You want the real story?

JK: Yes.

RLN: There is a story. Are we ready to go?

JK: Yes.

RLN: Barton Hill, San Pedro, my early life, I start remembering things, oh, I don't know, five or six years old. We lived in two houses on Sepulveda. I was born in one of the houses on Sepulveda, 500 block. What I remember is – well, actually I get a little cringy when I remember. My father was an alcoholic. In 1936, I'm four years old, my mother leaves. She leaves the three children with the father, the Chief. Well, my brother is five years older than I am. My sister's seven. They had their own lives. I was big. I was shy. I had big asthma. So, I was lonely. Now, Barton Hill was a tough blue-collar neighborhood, tough kids, all that type of thing. I was none of those things. So, I stayed in the house a lot. Not like some crazy idiot, but shy. So, I stayed in the house. What it turned out to be, I was terribly lonely, very lonely. [laughter] I'm talking big time lonely. What happened is I discovered that you could get in the movies for a dime. Now, down half a block away was the Barton Hill Theater, no longer there. But at that time, it was a neighborhood theater, the Barton Hill, run by a fellow named (Mr. Shoots?). But when I found out that for a dime, you could go down and hand it to this very charming, redheaded lady in the booth up front, and she'd give you a little ticket. You'd hand it to Mr. Shoots, and he'd give you half back. You could go into that dark theater and sit away from everybody. The little kids sat down front. The adults sat in the back. I would sit in the middle because I was shy. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to say boo to anybody. But I'd sit in the middle. They had ushers and the ushers had flashlights. The concept of ushers and flashlights meant safety. The darkness meant that I didn't have to do anything but watch, right? So, I began to watch movies. That's the first part of my life. My first part of my life are black and white movies up there in that I guess it's the small screen, the 35 Miller screen. I'd look at movies. Now, these were third. They'd been to the big theaters, the middle theaters, and now they're in the little theaters. But it didn't matter to me, the first run to me. So, I would sit in the theater, double features with cartoons, newsreels and all and serials. The movies weren't long in those days, but that would take three and four hours. I would stay because Mr. Shoots would let me. I don't know why he let me, but he let me. I would stay for sometimes two and three showings. That means I was in there for eight, ten, whatever hours, watching. Later, I thought of that as being weird. But when I thought about it, it came to me that that's where I learned everything. I'll give you an example. This is very young. I'm just a kid. I'm in Barton Hill. I'm maybe 6 or 8 years old, somewhere in there. I could look it up. Myrna Loy and William Powell playing *The Thin Man*. Now, remember I'm just a kid. I'm a shy, don't-know-what-the-heck's-going-on kid. I'm sitting there watching this black and white film. Myrna Loy, William Powell pull up to the curb. I'm sure it was in a studio somewhere. They pull up to the curb in a taxi. The taxi driver gets out and opens the door and William Powell steps out, very natty, suit tie, all that they did in the old days. He reaches in. I didn't know it was called that at the time. But he

hands Myrna Loy out of the cab, which means he takes her hand as she gets out. She gets out, very natty, wearing gloves, wearing a hat. I'm sure she had nylons with perfectly straight seams. But they begin to walk toward a building. Remember, I'm telling you about the first thing that I remember in life. They're walking toward the building. He precedes her, opens the door, right? As she walks up, the camera goes to her face. As only Myrna Loy can do, she tilts her head slightly, has the look in her eye and says, "Thank you." Right? These are all single shots. The camera goes to William Powell. He says – as great actors can say – with a twinkle in his eye, he says, "You're welcome." More romance than I had ever seen between anybody. They don't kiss. They don't touch. They're not naked. She says, "Thank you." He says, "You're welcome." It was just absolutely charged with romance, not so much sex, but romance. I thought, that's how life can be. Now, my life is nothing like that. My life is hide from the teacher, stay in the back of the class, keep your mouth shut, be afraid of kids that are half my size because that's the way it was. But that's the beginning. That's Barton Hill School, my life the way things were. Now, the neighborhood was diverse. The neighborhood had everything you could possibly imagine, every kind of family you could imagine, every kind of kid you could imagine, both boys and girls. Tons of stories about Barton Hill. It was a lovely place, exciting place. But my life was a little nuts. This thing about asthma, the thing about shyness, there's a future to all this. But we're talking about Barton Hill right now, and this is how it all happened.

JK: What other movies? Are you watching *Gunga Din*?

RLN: Oh, absolutely, *Gunga Din*.

JK: What is this movie?

RLN: Well, I'm in the movie life here. I'm telling you straight out, I learned a great deal from movies. After I thought about it, I'm in my twenties and thirties and forties, and even fifty. Maybe it's even until now. I'm 74 now. Even today, I have reached back and realized what I learned from movies. They say movies imitate art, and art imitates movies or whatever you want to call life. Oh, no. Movies imitate life, life imitates movies. Both are true. Both are absolutely true. I used to be a movie reviewer on television. So, I've seen thousands, maybe eight, nine thousand movies. I've seen many movies thirty and forty times.

JK: Aside from *The Thin Man*, what was the movie or two that really molded your life and view?

RLN: I'll tell you a movie that actually turned my life down to what we call the right path – I don't know exactly what you'd call it – is the Errol Flynn, *Robin Hood*, the only really great *Robin Hood* movie ever made. But *Robin Hood*, I know people have seen the movie. Everybody's seen *Robin Hood*, it's been on television forever. But *Robin Hood*, Errol Flynn because of his dynamic personality, is able to convince a large group of men that could all be killed for doing this, that they need to do the right thing. They needed to protect King Richard. Well, again, when I'm seeing it the first time which is shortly after it came out, even though I've seen it at the third run. I couldn't afford first row movie prices. I had my dime or my 15 cents, but I didn't have a quarter or 35 cents. But you watch Errol Flynn. He composes these men. He brings them together. He tells them why they should risk their life for a cause. Now, there's all

that. There's the movie stuff. There's all the camaraderie and the excitement and the combining of people and the little guy. The surf guy is a hero. The big guy helps and the friar who can do all these things. But the real thing is that Robin Hood could lead. Robin Hood could say, "This is why you should do this," and they would believe him. Now, again in 1939 as a seven-year-old person, I didn't realize that it was going inside my thoughts. It was going inside my psyche. It was going to stay forever. I had no idea. It was technicolor. It was exciting. It was interesting. It was Pageant and Gloria de Havilland? I don't know what's her name. The girl that played –

JK: Lady Marian?

RLN: Yes, Lady Marian, Oliva de Havilland. A fine, little actress. She wore all those satin gowns, and that made my heartbeat a little faster. But I wasn't really sure about anything in those days. But there it was, and I was taken by it. From that, we move in. Now, remember I'm talking about 1939. It's not long until the war comes along. The war comes along. The movies are full of *Robin Hood* movies because they're war movies, propaganda movies. We're the good guys. They're the bad guys. But whether it be John Wayne or John Payne or John Garfield, they led people, and the people followed because they believed. Now, I'm out there in movie land, not education. Oh, I was the worst student you're ever going to meet because first off, I was shy. Once you get behind in school, very difficult to catch up. Then I had asthma that would knock me off for a week or two weeks. Of course, I learned the truant officers only followed the streets. As long as you stayed in the alleys, you could stay out of school. They'd never catch you. My father wasn't home. The Chief was a wonderful man, but he was an alcoholic. He was never home, so I could sign my own report cards, I could do that. I lived this very single existence. The movies were what kept me going. The movies kept me alive. The movies kept me interested. The movies were my education.

JK: Good. You can wipe your stuff there.

RLN: [laughter]

JK: Okay. But you were in the movies a lot. But occasionally, you've got to be going down to the docks. You got to be going maybe swimming at the BAB.

RLN: I did go swimming in the BAB.

JK: Talk about the town.

RLN: Are we ready?

JK: Hold on one second. Go ahead.

RLN: Now, all this movie-going took place in Barton Hill. So, [laughter] Barton Hill was a fascinating place. My father was a longshoreman, but I had no idea what a longshoreman was. I never saw him. He'd work a lot because he had to pay the bills. He was paying for three children. But the off time was often spent in bars. The Klondike was there, the Alaskan Inn was there, Jules was there, the Cottage was there, the Bridge House. These were all bars in Barton

Hill. He'd come up the alley behind singing around Cape Horn. I can do it. "Around Cape Horn and back again, that's a sailor's way." You could hear him coming, happy drunk, very happy drunk. He'd come in, go to sleep, get up – always got up and made a cup of coffee where you pour the hot water through the strainer with the coffee in it – cup of coffee, two Camel cigarettes, and off to work he'd go. Wonderful fellow, great sense of humor, clever as a dickens, but an alcoholic, never home. So, I would roam Barton Hill when the truant officers weren't on weekends or whatever. After school I would roam Barton Hill. Fascinating place. Where I learned to swim, where most Barton Hill kids did not other kids – you didn't come from other areas to come into Barton Hill. Not gangs, but there were like codes. Every place had its area. We had a place called BAB, I'm sure you've heard about it. The BAB stand for Bare Ass Beach. Because not everybody had a bathing suit, not even that we cared. But I learned to swim at BAB. This is where the passenger terminal is today. But I remember it very clearly when it was sand and PE tracks. The Pacific Electric Streetcar tracks went across it. We'd go down. We'd swim. We'd take a bologna sandwich that was white bread with a little mayonnaise and a slice of bologna wrapped in wax paper. No aluminum foil in those days. I remember the sandwich always had sand in it. I don't care how you protected it; the sandwich always wound up with sand in it. Because, well, your teeth are your most sensitive part of your body, so you can always taste sand. Well, that was BAB. I learned to swim. You learn to swim. Now, there was no lifeguards. There was no teaching. If something happened, you were just dead. There were other stories there too. But the way you learn to swim is you get out, and you float. You put your hands on the bottom, so it'd hold your body up. You walk like the frog or the fish coming out of the water that you see. You walk in the water. Then you kick your feet. You realize, eventually, your feet kicking will propel you. Then you see other kids pulling their arms. Eventually, you begin to do it. If you're lucky, you don't drown, right [laughter]? You learn to swim. Then it's hard to swim because you don't breathe right. You put your head in the water too much. You don't breathe right. So, you watch some more. You watch bigger kids. You watch them how they turn their head. Basically, they were doing the Australian crawl. That was big in those days. Tarzan did the Australian crawl. So, everybody did the Australian crawl. Another movie, you'd see lots of *Tarzan* movies. There's a whole story there, but we'll get to that maybe. But do this swimming thing. Now, when you're there, of course there was nobody home. I never had to go home. There was nobody there. I could go home at midnight, 2:00 a.m. I didn't. Because after it gets dark and you're young, you get a little afraid. But I would go home, but I didn't have to. So, I would do things. Mostly what I did, it was like the movies. I learned things from the movies. I learned from watching people. One of the things in BAB – I don't know if anybody else told you this story – but where the PE went over the track, there was water underneath. So, there was a slant on both sides. Well, I watched the big kids do it. Let's say I'm 10. I wasn't 10 because I moved when I was 10. Let's say I'm 9 years old. I watched these 14- and 15-year-old kids do this. I didn't even know what they were doing. They'd go under the trestle. Then they would go slowly up toward the sand. They would get right up under the tracks and wait there until the train came. Now that means you're only whatever the ties are and the steel. There were PEs going over there because it's 25 miles an hour. Tons and tons of steel are going above you. Big sound and it would go over. The trick was, could you do it? Could you lay under there with this thing so close? Well, after they'd all gone, I'd just hang out. I'd be over there and over here and not hiding out, but just staying away from everything because I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to talk. Obviously, I got over that [laughter]. But after they went, I would climb up. I went halfway up. I realized it was scary, but I know that

they'd gone up. So, I think there's got to be something to this. You shimmy on your back, and you go. Finally, I got up to where my nose was touching one of the ties or very close to it and here comes the PE. Now, I was coming up a lot of them when they weren't there. I was just figuring out what to do. Now this thing comes over. I don't know what they weighed. They weighed a lot. But you're underneath the train. You're only about a foot away when it goes over. It's chilling. I don't think that Alfred Hitchcock could make you more scared. But if you want, do it, and you realize you survive. It goes over. You survive. Then it's quiet. You think, wow. Your pulse is racing. Your heart's beating. You realize you did it. Now you're doing the same thing that 13- and 14-year-olds are doing. You're starting to say, "Oh, they can do it, I can do it." You go back to Errol Flynn. You realize that if you can talk well enough, if you're brave enough, people will follow. Then you go to Garfield and all the Johns, and you realize people will follow the movie.

JK: Now, you're a little young for this, but your father probably knew about Beacon Street. What is Beacon Street?

RLN: Oh, Beacon Street. Oh, yes [laughter], Beacon Street. Barton Hill and Beacon Street are intertwined because they're only a few blocks apart. If you're the son or the daughter of a longshoreman or a seaman or a fisherman, you know a lot about Beacon Street, because that's where everything happened. There were stores up on Pacific, but the life was on Beacon Street. Oh, Beacon Street. I don't have many things to do with my father when I'm young because he's never home. But there is an incident that sticks. I'm probably 6 or 7 years old at the time. So, that's almost seventy years ago. One morning, the Chief wakes me up. It has to be a Saturday morning. He wakes me up, says, "Put your clothes on." We slept in shorts or whatever we slept in. I'm going to make a little segue here, so you get a feeling of what we're talking about.

JK: I think also you need to refer to your father as your father, your dad, or whatever. Because if we separate the story, we don't know who Chief is.

RLN: We're talking about Barton Hill and Beacon Street. This has to do with my father who is known as the Chief. We didn't do much together. Saturday morning, he wakes me up. He says, "Put your clothes on." I was doing that. But like I said, I'm going to segue a second to give you a feeling for how this works because it has to do with the rest of the story. When I put my clothes on that morning, I just put what I had on and off we went. But it wasn't very long after that, that one day – I'm going to go back to Beacon Street – but one day, I was in my house by myself. My brother, we slept in the same bed. That's before he left home. There's another story there. But there was a two-drawer Chester drawer, oh, one of those phony wooden things that you could barely get the drawers open. I was looking for something. I had the bottom drawer. He had the top drawer. I opened the drawer. There was nothing in that drawer. Everything that I could own would be in that drawer. There was nothing there. It struck me. Well, I wasn't in a panic because I wasn't used to having anything but the concept of not having anything. Well, what it is, I had a pair of pants and a shirt on the clothesline outside. That's all I owned. There was nothing in the drawer. I talked to my kids about it later. But there's nothing in the drawer. That was our life. There was nothing in the drawer. But back to Barton Hill and Beacon Street. The Chief, my father, wakes me up Saturday morning. It was probably 4:00 a.m. Just the fact that he woke me up startled me because he was communicating. He says, "Put on your clothes

and let's go." We walked out of the house on Sepulveda. I followed him on. Even at that age, I was mostly big. He was a small guy. I was almost his size. But I followed him like a puppy down the street, down Pacific around 4th Street. We turned toward Beacon Street. We're walking along. He says, "Go across the street and walk in the gutter." I had no idea. I think I said, "Why?" He said, "Look down. Walk in the gutter and look down." Because he stepped in the gutter on his side. Well, that's what you do. There were no cars or anything, a few cars parked. But I went the other side. I started walking in the gutter. Well, we walked for about two blocks. I watched him. I watched the gutter. But nothing much happened. But as we neared Beacon Street – and I would say we'll call it 4th and Palos Verdes – I found a dime. Well, now a dime was big stuff. A dime would get you to movies. Finding a dime was big stuff. So, now, I really paid attention, right? So, then I found a nickel. Then I found a penny or another penny, another nickel, another dime, that type of thing. It was a treasure hunt. I was so excited. I got glued. Lucky I didn't get run over by a car. I got glued on the gutter, right? Well, I look across, and he was doing the same thing over there. The Chief was picking up stuff. I don't know what he's picking up because we're across the street. Well, we went down. We went across Palos Verdes. We went to Beacon. Now, there were street sweepers. There were a few people around but not much going on. Well, we got to some corner, and he says, "How much do you have?" I thought he was going to take it. I thought he was going to take the money. But I counted out. I'm guessing now – it's a long time – but I've had about 90 cents say. Well, now it doesn't sound like much today. But 90 cents before 1940, 90 cents was a pile of money. I could go to the show nine times. Well, he took his money. He had more than I did. He took his money, and he gave it to me. So, now I had about $2. I didn't know there was $2 in the whole world. I thought, "Why did we do this? How did this happen? How can it be?" I remember asking him on the way back. I asked him, I said, "What did we do? How did we do it?" He said, "Well, on Friday nights people get drinking. They're in and out of their cars. The way cars are built, and the way clothes are built, often, change slips out of their pocket." I said, "Oh, wow." I thought we discovered a whole new era of life. We walked home. Now this is a strange business because we walked home. Like I said, I had a couple of dollars. I could go to the show twenty times. I could actually afford a hamburger and go to the show, that type of thing. Never think anything like this in my life before. We got home. He had a cup of coffee and went off somewhere. We started the day off. He went off to some bar in the morning. He went off. I'm standing there. I didn't know what to do. I had $2 or more than $2 actually and change. I didn't know what to do. I sat. Actually, concrete steps were outside the little house. I went out and sat. I remember they were cold. I sat on the steps and pondered what to do with $2. Now, I didn't think anything altruistic. I didn't think about giving any to my brother or my sister or going to the kid across the street and saying, "You want to come with?" I didn't think anything. I really was – what do you call it – selfish over this thing. Because it was the first time I'd ever had any money. I was planning on doing it again the next Saturday. I thought, "Geez, this is wow. This is big stuff, right?" Well, I don't remember how I spent the money. I spent it here and there. I kept it in my own little bundle. I would spend it here. You could buy a Star ice cream or a Bear ice cream bar, kind of big, not much taste to it, but it was big. It cost a nickel, maybe not even a nickel, but probably did. It was really big. I'd buy one every now and then. I would almost hide, so I didn't have to share. But it was an interesting period of time. Where the story really gets unique, we never did it again. I was not smart enough. I was too shy and not smart enough to go do it myself. I wouldn't get up at 4:00 a.m. and go out there by myself and do this. There were $2. I don't know what the average would be.

JK: So, do you think he was giving you a lesson there for you to –

RLN: Absolutely a lesson, but I didn't take the lesson. That's the thing. My father, the Chief, all through my life, even though he was an alcoholic, never home, we hardly ever talked, there were lessons all along the line. I didn't learn the lessons actually until after he was gone. He died in 1968. I didn't learn the lessons until after he was gone. I would reflect back. I would think, "Well, he did this, and he did this, and he did that." He taught me things here, taught me about honesty, taught me about truthfulness, taught me an awful lot about longshoring when I first started, little ways. It was so subtle. It was like somebody coming and whispering in your ear. It was that subtle. He wasn't whispering anything. But he would say, "You might want to do it this way," or something like that. It was unbelievable. I didn't understand him. I didn't even care about him. I cared a little bit, I guess. But I didn't understand him or my mother until they were both dead. I'm sure this is true for everybody. I guess it's true for everybody. I don't have long conversations with people about it. I didn't realize that they both did the best they could. Now it was nuts. It was pure, plain crazy. An alcoholic man that was never home and a woman that was having affairs and left her children when they were not grown and went off to live with another man and have a child. Now that's a pretty crazy life. I firmly believe – I don't believe many things firmly because everything's influx – but I believe that these two people, my mother and my father, did exactly the best they could for their children, for themselves, for everything. They did the best they could. It was nutty as just as you're ever going to meet. But they still did their best. I think everybody does. I think that the worst parent, the ones that you read about in the paper that make you cringe, were still doing the best they could. The person that is a perfect parent doing the best they could, that type of thing. But life is full of this stuff. Again, I used to think I was kind of not unique but different because of the way it was done. It turns out that I'm just like everybody else [laughter].

JK: Let's go back. [19]34 strike, tell me why that's important. What do you want to tell us about it?

RLN: The '[19]34 strike, now, I was only 2 years old. So, I'm going to give it to you – because I picked this all up later from my father, the Chief, and I picked it up from his friends. He had lots of friends. I picked it up from other union members. I became a longshoreman, and I was hearing about the '[19]34 strike basically my whole life. I still hear about the [19]34 strike. [19]34 strike, longshoremen were unorganized. Harry Bridges was trying to organize them. He became their leader. He had that charismatic personality that is a natural leader. So, he tells the other fellow in Frisco and here in Seattle, all the places, he says, "We're going to tell them we're not going to work unless they sign a contract to make it a fair deal," whatever you want to call it. Well, the employer of that – especially in those days, the employer said, "Set up yours. We're not going to do that. You can't demand these things. You can't do this. You can't do that. You can't do this." Now, there's several fortunate things. One, the fact that Harry Bridges was the man that he is, was, whatever you want to call that. The other thing is that Franklin Roosevelt had become the president in [19]32. Franklin Roosevelt realized – again this is out of history – that anarchy was a mist or a foot or whatever you want to call it in the United States. They had to do something for the working man or the whole thing was going to blow apart. My belief is that Bridges knew this. Bridges knew that Roosevelt was on his side or at least sympathetic to

his side. So, the negotiations begun. Now, my father is off [laughter] longshoring. But when you're off, there was no extra money. There was no money. My father, the Chief, is an alcoholic. There's no savings account. There's no nothing. You might borrow money from a loan shark. You might borrow money from a neighbor. You might get the store to give you credit for a while. But that was it those days. I don't remember it too. I remembered it later because there was another big strike. If there was anything to eat, it was a very good day. It doesn't matter what it was. It could be a bowl of mashed potatoes, good day. The [19]34 strike, Bridges – I'm going to go into, what do you call it, common vernacular now. Think of it as playing Texas hold them, the employers on one side of the table and Bridges on the other side of the table. Think of Texas hold them. There are cards on the table. Each card represents something; money, position, power, hours, whatever it represents. Bridges has a big stack of chips which represent all these men standing behind them metaphorically. The employer has the employers and lots of money or big money or whatever, and they want something. They're negotiated. Everybody knows about Texas hold them. There's going to be another card turn. We will call it the turn, which is the fourth card. There's one more card to play, and that will make the decision on the turn of that card. Remember, I'm talking metaphorically, and I'm telling you how I remember it told to me. Bridges cupped his hands as you would in Texas hold them, got behind his chips, and pushed them to the middle of the table and said – now metaphoric. I don't know what happened. I wasn't there. But he said, "We're all in." The fellow on the other side of the table, whoever that may be, and his group looked at the chips, looked at Bridges, and realized they didn't dare call the bet. They said, "You win because we won't call the bet." Because there was no telling what disaster – there'd already been men killed. Men had died already. The police, the goon squads had beat up lots of people. Longshoremen had been done big damage to show them what could happen. This thing was going to be a wildfire, whatever you want to call it. They gave, and the union was formed. Well, my father, who was a big Bridges guy, they all were. They used to call him Lundberg Stetsons for the guy that had the Shipping Industry Union. The white hats, you've seen them. But the real name of them is skully. That's the real name for that hat. All these guys wore skully hats, caps, whatever they were, to show who they were, their badge of honor, their power, whatever. So, there were all these thousands of men out there with white hats and Frisco jeans that were behind this one man. So, when he pushed the chips in the middle of that table, people on the other side, I'm sure they'd done their homework, and they realized they would lose. They would at least lose property, lose time, lose people. Because once these fellows rioted, it was Katy bar the door. That formed the union. My father was a charter member, so these group of men that had backed Bridges. Now that's [19]34 [laughter]. Well, that's twelve. He'd been working as a non-union guy for twelve years. I can't imagine the abuse that he took over those twelve years. But they used to work round the clock. Your ship came in. You went on board. You worked until the ship sailed. That's all there was to it. Tough luck if you couldn't make it. That was the way it was. He worked on those conditions. Well, [19]34 strike –

JK: Hold on one second. Start again.

RLN: The [19]34 strike created the union, created the amount of hours you would work. It also created a set of safety rules that changed everything. I became a longshoreman in 1951. We're going to use that charter to remember. Let me bring it up to a hot date here. In 1951, as the economy began to grow – and, boy, I think the economy in longshoring is a great story. But as it

began to grow, they needed longshoremen. Harry Bridges said to every longshoreman on the West Coast – you can spot all charter members because not everybody was a charter member. There was only this group of them that started in [19]34. What is that, six, ten, sixteen, seventeen years later. He said, "All charter members can sponsor a son or a brother." My father, the Chief, came home. Now we're getting a little away from [19]34 here, but this is a result of [19]34. He came home. He said – because he called me the Chief also [laughter]. He didn't call me Tank. He came home. He said, "Chief, you want to be a longshoreman?" Now, as, what do you call it, naive, because I didn't know anything. There's another story why I didn't know anything. I didn't know what to say. I'm sure that I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I guess." He told me what to do to become a second class, what they called B Men, how to do this. I went to Wilmington, signed this paper, went up, and checked into the hall. That's how my career as a longshoreman started. That's 1951. It's 2007, I'm a retired longshoreman. That's a lot, fifty-six years up to my neck in this industry, one way or another. But it all happened because Bridges said, "We're all in," and the employer said, "Okay." My father was standing there after his twelve years of working like a dog or whatever you want to call that, whatever position you want to put them in, that he became a charter member of the ILW Local 13. Because of that, he could sponsor me. Because of that – and I'm going to take this a little further – in 1968, I sponsored my sister's oldest boy. His name is Mitch. I sponsored him. I was the last sponsor on the whole waterfront. I was sponsored, and the government came along after all those years and said, "Hold it just a minute. You aren't going to do that anymore [laughter]." So, they said, "That's over." But before they said it, I said, "Mitchell, do you want to be a longshoreman?" He didn't have to shrug his shoulders. He knew all about longshoring. He said, "Yes, man, I want to be a longshoreman." So, he signed up. He's working today. He's a boss on the waterfront and does very well. He's a happy guy and all that type of thing. So, there's a lot of longshoring going on. Yes, go ahead.

JK: Good. Let's go back. We've got the [19]34 strike. Let's keep going on chronology.

RLN: We go back to the [19]34 strike and start from there.

JK: No. We've got through the strike. December 7th, 1941, something happens.

RLN: You don't want to know about going down the alleys and picking up the garbage in the [19]38 strike? Much more dynamic than the [19]34 strike for me.

JK: Tell me the story.

RLN: We're talking about the [19]34 strike, big thing, formed the union. I was 2 years old. For me, the real strike is the [19]38 strike, big strike. The employer was very tired of paying good money and being told what hours that we would work and all that. I'm still a kid, but it is hot stuff. My neighborhood was composed of seamen, longshoremen, and fishermen. So, if there was going to be a strike, there was tension everywhere. The store owners were worried, the landlords, everybody was worried about the [19]38 strike. Well, the [19]38 strike comes. Now, again, I'm 6 years old. I don't know about strikes. I don't know about anything. I just know that there's problems, right? I'll tell you how bad the problems are. As I said, I'm 6 years old. I have a brother that's 11. He's five years old than I am. I had very little to do with my brother, very

nice guy. He later became a longshoreman. But I didn't know him well. I just knew that he was very cool. He was old. He was strong. He was all these things. But he came to me one day, and he says, "Come with me." I didn't know what to do. Again, I followed. When he said come, I came. We walked down the alley behind the house, went down the alley, down the house. As we were walking through the alleys, he found a paper sack like you'd get from the grocery store. He picked it up. I didn't know. I'm following him. He picked up another one. So, he had two. He put the one inside the other. We went out on Pacific Avenue. We went out on the avenue, and we started walking. We were walking toward the beach. I didn't know where we were going. I didn't know what we were doing. We walked out to 22nd Street, which is about 2 miles. There were three Fitzsimmons markets in San Pedro. Those were mid-sized markets. They would be big markets in those days but mid-size today, not a little market. They had meat markets, food, and all that. But they were supermarkets at their time. 22nd Street is the last market. We go up and go back into the alley and go behind the market. He takes a knife out, a pocket knife – I didn't even know he had it – with a broken blade. I'll never forget the tip was broke off. He opens the blade. He starts going through the trash. He found something like a potato. I don't remember what we started with. But he found a potato that was rotten on the end. He took the knife. He cut the rotten part off and dropped it, took this other half, and put it in the bag, hands me the bag. I'm 6. I got the bag. We started walking down. Now, the alley goes all the way from 22nd, and it goes farther and a couple more blocks. But it goes all the way back to Barton Hill. We walked behind every store in the alley. Everywhere there was garbage cans, trash cans, we would stop. We would cut off pieces of celery, carrots, turnips, whatever was there. Whatever was solid, he would cut the waste away and put that in the bag. I thought it was a game. I'm 6 years old. I thought it was a game. We got back to Barton Hill. There was a Fitzsimmons market just down from our place, went behind that market, and got whatever was there. Now, the bag was actually getting heavy. He said, "I'll carry the bag." Now, he's big. He took the bag, put his knife away, and we went up. It's uphill. So, we went up the alley, back through in the back door, went in the house, and he put the bag in the fridge – we had a fridge – put the bag in the fridge. I had no idea what it was all about. Of course, what it was all about is we didn't have anything to eat. Now imagine. Now, people today that sounds like something out of *The Grapes of Wrath*, exactly how it was. We did not have anything to eat. I found out later, you went to the store, and you bought something at the meat market. You bought some hamburgers. You'd ask the butcher for a bone for the dog. They'd give you a bone for the dog. They had lots of bones. They did their own cutting. So, they had lots of bones. I'm sure they sold them for rendering and all that, but bones weren't worth much. They were heavy. They were hard to handle. So, they'd give you a bone. You took the bone home. The bone went in the pot. The bone boiled for a while to get some kind of flavor. The stuff we gathered went in the pot. Eventually, especially if you had a tomato or tomato sauce, you had stew. Now, if you only ate when you could, boy, that was good stuff. When you could dip your spoon into a bowl, and it was potatoes and carrots [laughter] and all that stuff, it was grand. Again, I'm 6 years old. I don't understand the ramifications, but I remember how it happened. I remember what took place. I remember my brother was embarrassed. My brother is a straight shooter kind of guy. I'm looser than that. But I remember he was embarrassed. But he still had to do it. He said, "Geez." That was existence. Because there was no money. It was no money. So, it was nice to be able to eat [laughter]. Now, the strike was over. You eventually paid the landlord his rent. You eventually paid the store whatever you owed them. I don't know what the money lenders did in those days. Because they charged big interest and you couldn't pay it back very well. So,

they must have made special deals for the people they liked or good customers, whatever. But anyway, it was a long time. I don't know how long it lasted, but it seemed like it was a couple of months. You could look it up in history. But that was a big deal for a young boy.

JK: December 7th, 1941.

RLN: December 7th, 1941.

JK: What do you remember about that day?

RLN: You know how people say that I remember what I was doing when Kennedy died? I don't remember at all. I have no clue what I was doing, what happened, whatever. I know that it happened. I know the paper boys were going up and down the streets with their –

JK: For the next five years, San Pedro was a quite different place.

RLN: [laughter] Yes.

JK: Tell me about the San Pedro in the [19]40s.

RLN: San Pedro in the [19]40s. 1940, we're still living in Barton Hill. My father is still a longshoreman. The Pearl Harbor happens. The world goes in a turmoil. Pedro changes. A lot of people don't know this, there were barrage balloons in San Pedro. There was one in Barton Hill surrounded by sandbags, had a big winch, had a balloon, had a machine gun, had soldiers in those brown leggings with the little steel helmets on them – not little – steel helmets on, the kind that wouldn't really save you. But they had rifles. They had a machine gun. It was two blocks from my house. We had air raids. The lights were blacked out on one side. The car lights were blacked out on the top. You had to have a certain kind of curtain on your house. We had air raid wardens. I remember the air raid. I don't know if you know about the air raid, but there was an air raid. There's still the controversy of whether it was really an air raid, but there was an air raid. I think it was in [19]42. Reeves Field, which was a big Navy field on Terminal Island, had airplanes. They had hangars. They had all that stuff over there. Well, one night the siren sounded. The search lights flared, and the guns fired. We were all in the street [laughter]. They'd go out in the street in an air raid. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. There was this stuff, and everybody swore they could hear airplanes. I don't know if they could or not. I don't remember hearing an airplane. But that's what was going on. It was a big deal, a very big deal. I remember this very clearly. We took Kotex, women's napkins. We took Kotex and took them apart and rolled them as bandages because they had all that gauze on them. You would take them apart, roll them as bandages. Whatever was inside went in one bag, and the gauze went in another. We were into the war. I know you remember, but we collected newspaper. Everybody collected newspapers. Everybody collected bacon grease. Everybody collected aluminum foil. Everybody collected everything for the war. We didn't buy bonds because we didn't have any kind of money. But you bought stamps. They were called war stamps. They were some kinds of stamps. You put them in a little book. After the war, you'd get back X amount of money or something like that. Everybody had a book of stamps. Now here's where the thing comes in, very interesting bit of business here. The war was really hard on lots of people, no question

about that. People died, people were injured, awful. Well, my father was a longshoreman, which was a key industry, but he also had three children. He was older. So, he's not going to get drafted. Well, he's a longshoreman. They froze longshore wages at $1.05 an hour. They froze them. He was a longshoreman. They made him a boss because lots of guys went off to war and all that. They made him a boss, but he drank. Well, the Army was going to have none of that. They weren't going to have a boss in their job drinking. So, they fired him from being a boss. Then he was going to be a longshoreman. Well, then again, Harry Bridges. Harry Bridges sent out a memo. There weren't memos in those days. He sent out a letter, whatever he sent down, maybe a telegram, I don't know. But he said, you can go into any industry that is a needed industry, a vital industry. When the war is over, you can come back to longshoring. You don't have to stay a longshoreman. Well, the Chief, as I've told in earlier stories, was a really good rigger. Now, that's a story you don't hear very often. It's actually a folklore of my life because I wasn't there when it happened. But I've had lots of confirmation over the years. The Chief goes to Bethlehem Shipyard, which is on Terminal Island. He goes in. They want to know what he wants to do. He says, "Well, I'm a rigger." They hired him. Remember, frozen at $1.05, but vital industries they could pay whatever they needed. It was like the contractors today. But they said 3.50 an hour from $1.05. Now, that's quite a little raise. The Chief says, "Hallelujah, put me on your payroll. Let's go to work." So, this little guy that was a rigger and a seaman and a longshoreman goes to work at Bethlehem and Terminal Island, take the bus, get on the ferry, walk down to Bethlehem Steel. He's not there but a very short time – this is a really short time, maybe let's call it the first week – they're loading a cannon barrel onto a destroyer. They've got the crane. They've got the rig. They've got it all rigged up. They're getting ready to lift one. A cannon barrel was a lot [laughter]. The Chief, this little guy, smoking a Camel cigarette and his little white hat, he says to somebody, "That's not going to work." The guy said, "No, what do you mean it's not going to work?" He said, "Well, the way it's rigged. When this happens and this happened, that barrel will not go on the ship." The guy said, "Oh, no, the head rigger has got this all figured out. That's what he does, Bob." So, the Chief said, "Oh, okay." So, they start lifting. The story is the Chief started walking backwards away from it [laughter], started walking away from this lift. Now, there is a rigger, and I don't know where it all, but he's walking backwards away from it. As the barrel is lifted by this – actually, the crane was there up until a few years ago. It's one of those old rickety jobs, but it's lifting this thing up. But it's how it's hung in the thing. As it goes up, as they start to make the swing onto the ship, the barrel tilts. The barrel tilts, and it comes out of the sling. When it comes out – one end is much heavier than the other. When it comes out of the sling, it actually did a 360 degree turn in the air as it's falling back. Of course, people are running everywhere. The barrel is coming down. As life would have it, if you want to talk irony or joke or whatever, the barrel hit small in first at the dock – now, this is an asphalt dock with wood underneath – hits the dock and goes through it like an arrow, goes right through the dock, right? Now it's sitting. It wasn't perfect, but it was close to perfect. The barrel is sticking out of the dock, [laughter] just sitting there, and everybody is going nuts. The crane driver – the crane is still shaking. Because when you drop the weight, it transfers. You got the strain. The crane is shaking. The crane driver is holding on for his life. People are screaming and hollering and yelling. Everybody comes. Everybody comes who runs the place, the workers. Because the danger is over. Now it's the show of the day. Well, as all this is going back and forth, they're screaming and hollering, their head rigger is there. He's telling them why and blah-blah. The guy that the Chief had said to him that's not going to work, that guy – now, to this day I don't know who he is. I'd sent him a very big gift if I knew who he

was – he went over to the head guy, not the rigger guy. He went over to the head of whoever is running the show. They didn't wear hardhats in those days. That's current. He went over to the guy, and he says, "That guy over there said it wasn't going to work [laughter]." So, the head guy comes over to my father, the Chief, and says, "How did you know it wasn't going to work?" He explained to him. He left when he was 10 years old. He doesn't have an education, but he has his experience. He told him why. The guy says, "You're now the head rigger." The head rigger. He went from walking through the gate to the head rigger. Now, he got a raise. It was a raise to $4 an hour. Now, here's where I'd send the gift to the guy. He got a raise to, say, $4 an hour. That's an eight-hour day. That's [19]30. The Chief came home to me. My father came home to me in late [19]42, [19]40, whatever it was. Now, my brother was gone. He ran away from home. My sister had a job working at Fitzsimmons, going to school, working, and dating. She was a very attractive girl, dating a lot. My father came home and said to me [laughter] – he called me the chief. He says, "Chief, listen, I'm going to be working a lot." He says, "Could you live on $50 a week?" Now, that was more than a longshoreman made. He says, "Could you?" Again, I was so dumb, so naïve, I said, "I think so [laughter]." So, he goes back. Because he had to be there all the time. He had to be gone a lot. Well, it turned out – now, this is how life works. They said the war wasn't good for everybody. But in our household, it was awfully good. Because he's a longshoreman, vital industry, he got all the stamps. Gas stamps, food stamps, all that stuff you got in the war, he got all that stuff. Didn't have a car [laughter], but he got it automatically because he is a longshoreman. Now, he goes into this industry. It doubles, and he's got all this stuff. He goes to work at, let's call it $4 an hour. But because he is so good at what he does, he's got this, what do you call it, a gift, I guess. The head guy says, "We'd like you to stay another eight hours." He gets time and a half, eight straight, eight times and a half. The $50 a week for me was almost nothing then. But they give him a barge. They have a barge down there with a house on it. He gets the barge with a house, with a fridge. So, he gets free rein of everything. Puts beer in the fridge, big beer drink. He puts food and beer in the fridge. He comes home once a week. He brings me my $50. But because ships had all this stuff and they wanted stuff from him and they would come down and drink beer at his place, they would give him everything. They'd give him coffee. They'd give him ham. He could go out the gate with anything. He had carte blanche. He'd come home and on the ferry, he'd have big – remember the old shopping bags that had the hard handles in them? Trader Joe's has them kind of like that now. But these are really heavy things that you reuse. He'd come home with these two bags. He could barely carry them. They were so heavy. He'd come home and put them on the table and give me $50. He put enough food on the table to feed me for the week and then gave me $50. It was unbelievable. Now, he, on the job, drank all day long. He was a good drunk. He was smart and savvy and clever and smart, all those things, and he'd drink all day long. Today, it's hard to get believe. They eventually kept him twenty-four hours a day. That means that the third, eight hours was double time. Remember $1.05 frozen along. If he saved just for a little while, he could have bought a house. But the Chief drank. He drank. He loved people. He was the happiest drunk I've ever known. He would go into a bar and take time off and go to a bar and just buy for everybody. He had lots of money. The thing about a drunken sailor, they'd spend like a drunken sailor. The Chief always spent like a drunken sailor. I inherited it. My brother and sister, I think it was because of the different time, the Depression and all that, they were both very conservative, really. My brother is still alive. He's very conservative. My sister was very conservative. I'm a drunken sailor. To this day, I'm 74, I still do the same thing. I'm a little smarter than I used to be. I don't run out of money. I don't have

bad credit, whatever, that type of thing. But I learned it from them. I learned the joy of spending it. I learned the joy of giving it. I learned the joy of all those things. Again, I told you earlier in another conversation, I learned these things from him and didn't know I was learning it. I didn't realize that the Chief was teaching me how to be happy. It was a very interesting time [laughter].

JK: So, the war is over.

RLN: The war is over.

JK: You become a longshoreman. What was it like to be a longshoreman in the early [19]50s?

RLN: 1951, my father could sponsor me in to be a longshoreman. But you were a B longshoreman, a second-class longshoreman, whatever you want to call that. You weren't a regular longshoreman. There was an A book and a B book. I had a B book. In those days, the economy was just starting to grow. The B books, our first jobs, the jobs that we got, were working bananas. Everybody has heard about working bananas. Bananas in those days was a very interesting job. They came in stocks. The ship came in, reefer ships, cold ships came in with stocks of bananas. You would pick them up in your hands, carry them. You'd carry them in your waist because that's where you could hold them. You'd carry them on your waist. You'd walk them to a conveyor belt, and you'd set a stock in the conveyor belt. They would go out on the dock. Somebody else would take it out and either put it in a truck or a box cart. That's the way it was done. I thought this was longshoring. I did. I thought this is what you did. I didn't have no background for it. I would take the PE, the streetcar. I'd take it from San Pedro to Wilmington, go to the hall, pick up the job. The banana dock was a very short distance from there. You could walk. So, that's what I did. I thought, well, this is longshoring. They paid – I think I made $17 and something a day. But I realized, even in 1951, you could buy an awful lot of stuff for 17 bucks. I bought a little car. I could buy hamburgers. I didn't drink. I could buy hamburgers. I could buy malts. I could make it last all week. Then little time passed, longshoring was really starting to cook. [laughter] They called all the IDs. All the people that had been sponsored by the charter members, they called us in one day and said, "We're going to all make you A book members." "Geez, wow, okay. That sounds good." So, they made us A book members. This is January 1st, 1952. I'd just been cruising along as a B guy. I had enough money. I was fooling around, having a good time. But they gave us a book. Now, a guy, his name was Kenny Crane, longtime longshoreman, the father was a longshoreman. Kenny Crane was a gymnast out of Manual Arts High School, strong, vital, young man but older than I was. Everybody called me Tank. He says, "Hey, Tank, would you like to be partners?" Well, he was kind of a cool guy, good talker, good with the ladies, and all that. I thought, "Well, geez, it was neat of him to ask me." I said, "Yes, okay." He says, "What do you want to do?" He says, "Well, we'll check in, and we'll work." Okay. I followed him. I didn't know anything. I followed him. We checked in, got a job – remember, January 2nd, 1952 – went down and pick up a job. I don't remember what it was. We worked for 268 straight days, just kept working. Job would be two days, three days, five days a week, whatever it was. We'd go back to the hall and get another job, a lot of work, worked 268 days and worked everything. It was a whole new beginning for me. If you've never worked steel before, oh, my, that'll open your eyes. You load cotton. I don't know if you know much about cotton bales. You load cotton. They're 425 pounds apiece. You roll them into the wing of a ship. You learn a lot about how to move heavy

things. Then there was a thing called paper. Paper would be a little hard to explain. Everybody's seen paper rolls in movies where they're printing newspaper. Well, that paper came in on ships. It weighed 2,000 – well, variations of it, but 2,000 pounds, about 6 foot tall, and about 3 foot in diameter. The way you got them out of a ship is you pull them over and drop them on a mat and roll these solid. These are as hard. You knock on it, it was like knocking on wood. It was so solid. It was like knocking on wood. It would echo. You pulled them over. Now you're dropping 2,000 pounds between the two of you because it takes two guys. You pull them over with a wire with a handle on it. You pull them over, drop in this mat. Now, the first time I did it, I didn't even think it'd be done. I didn't think it could be done. It didn't seem logical that you could do it, but you can. You pull it over. You drop this thing down. When it hits that mat, of course it knocks all the air out of it. They were big foam drops, very heavy. But it would knock all the air out. So, you'd hear this thing. You actually could hear the paper moving through the air because it's 2,000 pounds pushing air. Then it would hit the mat. You'd hear this swoosh. Then you'd roll it out there. Of course, you realize very early on that if anything goes wrong, if you miss, if you make a mistake, this thing could kill you. Now this is what it was like this. This was day in and day out. You go to the hall. Every job they finish, you go to the hall and pick up another job. Not every job, but lots of jobs were new. They were brand new. I'd never done anything like this in my life. Well, I'm going to give you a for instance.

JK: Well, you go ahead.

RLN: For instance, I went on a job – well, that actually was an idea. I wasn't working with Kenny yet. I went on a job in a regular gang. They worked in gangs of six and eight men in those days. Well, actually they worked in gangs of six men on discharges, eight men on load outs. When you load it out, that means you load the ship. You got two extra guys from the hall. But I went on a job, there's six guys that was a gang. There were six guys in this gang. But one guy had taken off, and they needed another guy. So, I come out as raw as you can be. I come out, and I go down the hatch. These are all old tart line. These are older guys that came back from the war. They're working coffee sacks. Everybody knows about Starbucks and coffee and all that, but nobody knows about this time because this is a long time ago. Coffee came in big, burlap sacks. The burlap sacks weighed 160 pounds apiece. Now, in this particular job, these sacks were loaded in lockers, which means you go through a door into a big room where you got to get them out of the locker and onto a sling to send it out on the dock. That means you have to handle them two and three times because you're handling by hands. You can't roll them. You have to pick it up, move it over, the two other guys move it over, then you move it over. So, there's six men moving it like a fire with a bucket, same idea. Well, I start doing this job. Well, if the sack came 160 pounds, I'm lifting up half of it, the other guy's lifting. I reach down, and you grab the corners. That's because I see it. I'm lifting the corners. Well, you don't have to do many sacks. You're lifting half of it, and you're lifting it like this. Pretty soon, my wrists started to ache. Then my fingers started to ache. My thumb started to ache. But I kept going. It was really hurting because I kept shaking him and moving him. Well, finally, an old-timer, they waited to see what you would do. That was another thing I learned. They wait to see what you would do. Old-timer's name was Trany. Jim Trany was his name. Trany came over, and he says, "If you push the corner in, it'll give you a handle." I didn't know. I wasn't paying attention. I was so concentrated and tried to do the right thing. You take these corners. You push them with your fingers. You push the corners into the coffee beans, and you have a handle. So,

instead of grabbing it like this, you actually grabbed it like that. After that, it was like half as hard. I was good. I almost started singing. I was so happy [laughter] because I realized I wasn't going to go home with broken hands. We did this all day long. We had many sacks. It was archaic, but that's the way it was done. That's how you start. Every day, if you paid attention and particularly if somebody helped you – it was very good when they helped you – you learned every single day. Actually, you really just worked. That's all it really is, is work. But there were a thousand tricks, maybe two thousand tricks or ten thousand. I don't know how many tricks there were, but there were lots of tricks. To every single job, there was a trick, something that you didn't know. You either learn by watching – like going to the movies, you learn by watching – or you'd learn by trial and error, or somebody told you. So, it really paid – you're talking about learning a payoff. It really paid to keep your mouth shut and work hard because if you kept your mouth shut and worked hard, they appreciated it. They'd come and tell you, "Don't do it like this, do it like this." You'd realize, oh man, [laughter] what a difference if you know how.

JK: Now, this is a dangerous job. Give me some examples of illustrating how dangerous this job is.

RLN: The question came up of how dangerous longshoring was and is. I can give you both sides. I worked at it for a long time [laughter]. I know both sides. But I'll give you how it was when I started. The danger, let me see. You're going to have to picture this because it can't be duplicated. So, you just have to picture it in your head. A freighter comes in. A freighter has hatches, which means it has rooms down below the decks. The opening of the hatches are much smaller than the hatch itself. Well, the first time I ever saw this, it was interesting. I knew that other people did it. So, you make the assumption that it can be done. You go down the hatch. You climb –

JK: You can talk to me.

RLN: Oh, yes, you climb – I'm thinking. Shall I start again?

JK: No. It's okay.

RLN: You climb down in the hatch, which means you cover the hatch. You take the hatch covers off, take the tarps off, take the beams out, and you have an opening. Then you go down. If there's no cargo on the upper deck, you do it again. Now, on steel jobs, there often wasn't cargo on the upper deck. Because steel is so heavy and the ship only can hold so much weight. So, you open the next deck. Now, you could be looking down in this – let's call the hole, 25 feet wide and 30 feet long. It's a pretty big hole. There's steel down there that is 60 feet long. Now you think, "Wait a minute. [laughter] I've got a hatch that's twenty-five by thirty, and there's steel down to 60 feet long." Well, there's stanchions, which are just big poles. This steel is laying between the stanchions 60 feet long. The opening above it is at best 30 feet. Well, the first time I ever saw this, I thought this is really impossible. Well, here's what you do. There were winches, that's what picks up the steel. Now they use cranes. But there were winches in those days. Use a pickup sling, which is a smaller type of steel sling. You put it over. If it's pipe, you maybe pick up three. If it's steel beams, you might pick up two. You pick it up a short distance. You put blocks under it, four by four blocks, to hold it up. You take the pickup sling

off. This is all easy procedure. It's easy to do. Then you take a really heavy sling, and you go back at about, oh, I'm going to guess 35 percent back of the whole thing. So, there's sixty-five back here and thirty-five up here. You take this sling, and you actually do what they call a round turn. Instead of taking just the eye over and putting it into the hook, you go around twice and put it in the hook. So, when it cinches, it really cinches. You put this sling on, and the winch driver brings the hook down. There's the winch driver. There are two winches, two falls which are wires, and there's a hook called the blacksmith. You come down. You put the eye on that hook. Now you hold this eye here tight. You put the eye on there. The winch driver picks this up. Well, obviously it's going to pick up at an angle because the weight's back here. They pick it up at an angle. Now, the front it can't get up. It's 30 feet long. It can't get past this thing. The hole's only 30 feet. This is 60 feet. So, it floats. He gets it up as tight as he can, and it begins to float. The back end now is down. But because it's almost in the middle, it's kind of movable. Your job as a longshoreman – now remember, I'm a boy. I'm not a man, I'm a big boy – you take the back of it, and you actually – now this is thousands of pounds. But you pick the back up a little bit until it'll clear. It'll move, and you turn it sideways. There's a stanchion in this thing, but there's a big hole back there. Because the steel is 20 feet up. There's a hole back over here between the stanchion here, this bullet, and the steel is here. This hole right here is called the well. If you take the end of the steel and you push it over until it goes into, it'll clear the well. The winch driver then comes back on this thing. Now, remember, this double thing is holding. But he comes back on it and the tail end slides into the hole. It slides into the hole. Now, this is steel banging and crashing. The noise is beyond belief. If it's steam winches or they're really noisy, you can't hear anything. It is like thunder up there. The tail goes into the hole. If all goes well, the front, as it comes back, clears the 30 feet. Now you have this thing in the hole. It's got this sling around it here. The winch driver begins to lift it. Now, as he lifts it, it's got to come up. This is going to come out of the hole. He's got to lift it. It comes up, and it turns. There's what they call the combing. It's the top of the hatch here. Then there's a railing of the ship over here, usually about, we call it 3 feet off the deck. The steel has come out. Remember the hook's up there, and the winch driver is lifting it. He pulls it out, and he pulls it up. As soon as the wrap here, he lays the steel on the combing, and he pulls it across that. He pulls it and pulls it until the tail clears the hatch. Then he lays it down between the combing and the rail. Now there's thousands of pounds of steel sitting there, and there's this wrap on it over here. If it's pipe, it could roll away. There are two guys on deck. You have to grab that line, and you hold that. When you're holding that, that keeps it from moving. The winch driver comes back. You take a sling that matches this one. You put it at the right way, basically 35 percent in from that end. You put this sling on with a single turn. Then that guy holds that one, right? This guy takes this double wrap off, puts it to single, and he holds it. Then you put the eyes on that hook. The winch driver goes up. Now it's even like this. It's holding down. These 30 feet of steel, it's this way, but it's got to go the other way because it's on the dock. It can't land on the dock that way. It's got to turn. So, now, one or the other pushes it as it goes out. You push it. It's almost like a love kiss because you can't push it harder. It'll swing all the way around because there's a swivel. So, you have to learn just to push it enough. It's almost like a dance, like a ballet. Everybody has to do it right, or the whole thing falls apart. It's big trouble. It's a danger and all that. So, the guy pushes it in and out it starts to swing. The winch driver gets it out on a single fall. It comes down. He lands it on what is called a pipe truck, which is like a big wagon that'll hold tons of steel. You land it on that. The two guys on the dock take the slings loose. The winch driver backs in. You do it all over again. You do it all day long, same operation, in, up, over, out,

down, in, up, over, out, down. But all the time that that steel is in the air, if anything goes wrong, these gigantic pieces of steel are turned loose? You have to continuously figure out where the steel is, where you are, and if something goes wrong, where you're going to go. Oh, it was –

JK: Can you describe either some fatal accidents or close calls?

RLN: Oh, very close, yes [laughter]. I've been in lots of close calls [laughter]. But I'll give you the early on close call that's still – I'm checking if I got any sweat on my lip. I will have after I tell you the story. Outer Harbor. We're in San Pedro, and the Outer Harbor is just south of us. Outer Harbor is a very unique dock. The fact that there's a tremendous surge. The water moves in and out hard. So, ships are always moving out there and especially small ships because they're more vulnerable to the surge. I'm a young man. We go out to Outer Harbor. We're going to load. A ship comes in that is going to carry oranges to Japan or somewhere. We're going to load the ship full of oranges. Now, on an orange ship, they have to keep them cold. That's how they preserve them. We talked about unloading with beams and all that. Well, these ships, besides hatches, had plugs. These are big, thick things that keep the cold inside. So, you have to take the plugs out. Well, they always want to take out the least amount of plugs. Because it takes more to keep it cold if you take more plugs out. So, we're going to load oranges. Well, one of the things in these ships, they have wooden grates down below to let the air circulate. But you can't run a load of them. We had what they're called four-wheelers, which are bigger than a wagon but smaller than a pipe truck. You land a load of oranges on a pallet, these boxes of oranges. In this case, they're wooden boxes. They're all cardboard today. But they're wooden boxes. You land it. You roll it into the wing of the ship, and you stack them. Then you come out and get another load. That's how you load the ship. Well, we're loading. You have to bring in steel plates. A steel plate, give it 4 feet wide, 12 feet long, and a quarter inch thick. You bring them in on wire slings, just like I talked about the steel. It brings them in, and you lower them down the hatch with wires on them. You lay it down. You spread them out, You make basically a highway that you can roll this thing on. Well, we got all these plates down there. Well, eventually, as the cargo comes out, you've got to take the plates out. So, now, they changed the rule not too long after this. But to send the plates out, you put the wire slings down. You put, say, six plates on it. You put the hook in the right place. You put the hook. The guy comes down. You hook up the things. It's basically like sending out steel, and it's going straight up. Well, in this particular job, now, I'm down the hatch. There are eight guys down there. The loaded plates is going up. Now, he's going to lift it, say, 60 feet. Now, there's other plates down there because we're only taking the excess ones out. It's going up. Now, remember, the ship surges. So, as this load is going up, now we're all watching it. We're looking up like this. It's going up. Because we won't have any cargo to work with until that's done. As it's going up, it's on a single fall of the winch above that opening, and the ship is moving. Well, as it's going up, the hatch tender, the guy that's signaling the winch driver what to do – I assumed it looked like it was going to clear – he walked over to where he's going to give the next signal. He walked away. Well, the ship surged and rolled, and the end of the plates went underneath where the plugs are. So, he catches one end of it. As he pulls it up – he's still pulling it – the back sling goes slack and comes off. Well, when the back sling comes off, the front sling isn't going to hold. It can't. One sling can't hold this because it's got to be even. The plates are going to come out. Now we're down there. We're 60 feet below. These are steel plates, 4 by 12 by a quarter

inch thick. They're up there, and they're about to fall. Well, as soon as they're about to fall, I begin to run. I'm young and strong. I'm running as fast as I can run because they're going to fall. No telling what's going to happen. I'm running toward the wings of the ship, which are also wood because the air circulates behind them. They have little slots in them to control the air. I'm running at the wall. Now, again, [laughter], I think it must be falling. I'm running at what's called a bulkhead actually. I'm running toward this bulkhead as fast as I can run because you can hear the plates coming. I heard them hit. But I got to the bulkhead. There's nowhere to go. I turned to the left, right, going that way. I turned to my left. A plate had come down. Now, other people saw it. I didn't see it. The plate had come down. You've seen saws bend. The plate had come down on its end, and it had bent. Its own weight made it buckle. When it buckled as it straightened out, it slapped on the deck. But it had so much energy, it took off. It bounced like a skimp of stone, exactly like that. It's going across flying. I turned to the left. It went into that wooden bulkhead and buried itself through the wooden bulkhead into the steel bulkhead. When I stopped to turn around, it was sitting there bouncing like that. I was scared. My heart's racing, all that. They came over. People were just white. They were white as a sheet. They walked over. Nobody got hurt. They walked over to me. They said, "Do you know what happened?" I said, "Well, I knew that they fell, and I knew they hit the thing." He said, "If you'd turned to the right, they would've cut you in half." I turned to the left. He said, "They only missed you by a foot," he said, "If you turned to the left." I was on the left end of it. I turned to the left, and it missed me. If you turned to the right, you'd had about 3 feet to go. It would have cut your legs right off from under you. It'd slice you in half. I turned to the left. Now you think of what life is like. I have a philosophy that's developed over seventy-four years. I believe that life is luck, good luck and bad luck. You don't know the difference. But that's what makes it so interesting. But I certainly, if I go back to 1952 or [19]51, whenever that was, and that plate was flying through, I couldn't see it. I could hear it, couldn't see it, and I got to the bulkhead. If the bulkhead hadn't been there, it would have got me too. But the bulkhead was there. I turned to the left because I couldn't run any farther. I ran to the left. It hit where I'd been. You think how on the earth did that happen? How on earth did I turn to the left instead of the right? It just happened. On the waterfront, that is not particularly unusual. You ask about danger on the waterfront, I've seen dead people. I've seen people mangled. I've seen people bleeding. I've seen them unconscious and going out in – they used to take them out in a wire basket. Actually, they called it the basket. I'm sure there's a technical name for it. But it had hooks on it. You could lift it up with winches or with a crane. I've seen them go out in all kinds of shape. I've seen people that never came back to the waterfront because they were too injured. Oh, it was a dangerous job. There were just so many things that could go wrong. You learn. Now, if you get by the early stages, like anything, if you get by the early stage, you get smarter quicker. You learn to stand in the right place. You learn, you learn, and you learn. But you've got to be lucky. Because you could be as smart, as quick as you want – I tell you about the 4-by-4 blocks they use to pick up steel? You think this is impossible. This can't happen. I saw a load come down and a block happened to be on top of another block, like a teeter-totter thing. I saw a load break, come down, hit the edge of the block. You couldn't make it hit the edge of the block if I gave you a thousand times. Hit the edge of the block. Now these blocks are hardwood. They're about 2 – it was on a Kalmar job. They don't even have Kalmar anymore – about 2 feet long, 4 by 4 hardwood, probably weighed – I don't know what they weighed – 4 or 5 pounds, 6 pounds, something like that. The load came down, hit the edge of the block, the block went off. You can imagine the energy of a big load hitting the end of that block. Yes, we're in number two hatch.

The block went up out of the hatch [laughter]. You'd have to shoot it out of a can to do this. The block went up out of the hatch, went over what they call the king post, which everything is locked to, which is about 20 feet above the winch driver. It goes out, went over the king post, and went into the next hatch. This piece of wood falling out. It was like a meteor then, falls out of the sky and lands in the number three hatch. It just happened that nobody was there. They were working, but nobody was there. The block falls in, bounces, goes over, hits, whatever. Now they're all screaming and hollering like somebody threw it in the hatch. It had nothing to do with anything. It had to do with what happened here. Now, if you'd been over there, and you'd been standing out in the hatch for whatever the reason, or if you'd been a winch driver in the other hatch, and it came down short, whoever it hit was probably going to die. It didn't hit anybody. Have you ever seen a wire part? Have you ever seen a wire break? We call it flowering. If you have a steel cable – a steel cable like a rope is made up of all little, teeny wires, right? If you put enough pressure on a steel cable, if you do it wrong, if you do it with foolishness or something, or you don't pay attention, whatever, it'll part. It'll break just like you snapped it. Well, when a wire snaps and breaks, the little wires and the tension on those wires is so dramatic. It's pulling. Well, when it breaks on both sides, but it's mostly on the side that it's being pulled toward, they flare out. They unfurl. That's why we call it a flower. When it's done – if let's say it was a 1-inch wire – when it's done, the flower is as big as I can reach, and it's all these little wires sticking. It happens in a nano, pico, I don't even know how fast you could say it, and there's a sound. These wires, there could be hundreds of them. When they burst out of that thing, it's like a swishing sound. But if you've ever heard it, it'll scare you to death. Because if you're anywhere near when that wire breaks, if the wire broke right here and I was standing here, it would be like you would be vaporized. It would just take everything. There's so much energy in that break, it would just slice you up to nothing. It would be a fast way to die, but you would die immediately. But it would take your arm off, take your leg off, take whatever. Whatever part it could get to, it would take off. This happened not so much anymore. Because there's lots more safety rules than there was in those days. But it happened fairly often. Fortunately, people didn't get killed. I said people did get killed. People did get awfully injured. People never were able to come back to the waterfront. But that's the way it was. That was the life you did. You took a chance. They were paying you to take a chance. They were paying you to risk your life and work hard. It was fascinating. It was crazy. It was wonderful. It was nuts. You should have said, "Wait a minute, I'm going to college. Whoa, whoa, whoa, I'm going to college. This is crazy." But if you're not a college person – I had the G.I. Bill and didn't go to college. Well, I told you about my early education. I don't know if I wasn't interested, I didn't have the knack, or I just realized it wasn't for me. But longshoring, I worked in – they call it the hole because that's what it is, a hole. Everybody on the waterfront calls it the hole, H-O-L-E, and which I do. I worked in the hole for twenty years because it was so interesting. I didn't want to be a winch driver. I didn't want to be a boss. I didn't want to do any of these other – there's lots of jobs you can do. I eventually drove cranes and did this and did that. But for my first twenty years, from [19]51 to about 1971, I worked in the hole of the ship. It was just you learn, and you think. Eventually, you get to do the – oh, we talked earlier about people that lead. If you get to know something, you eventually get to lead [laughter]. I had a partner, he's retired now. His name was Larry McElroy, a really nice guy, Larry McElroy. We got to be partners. Long story why we got to be partner. It means you work with each other every day. We'd been working together. I came on the waterfront about eight years before he did. So, this is, yes, somewhere in the early [19]60s. We're working away at this job [laughter], and he says to me,

"Tank, why is it that you always tell how we're going to do something? Why are you the boss?" I said, "Because I'm right 96 percent of the time." He looked at me. He said, "Okay," and we went about our business. But you can't be right without experience. You can't predict. There's no school for longshoring. You don't go to college for four years to be a longshoreman. You don't go to school for four days to be a longshoreman. You go to work. But if you work long enough, you know why you move a plate like that. You know why you don't stand in the bite of that wire. You know why you pick a sack like this, put your hands in the sack, don't pick up the corners, make a hold. I'll give you one little bit of business here. I don't know if you know much about frozen fish, but at one time, Japan was shipping in lots of frozen fish. This is [19]50, [19]60, somewhere in there. A frozen tuna let's call it 100 pounds. I don't know if you've ever picked up a fish that's frozen. If you ever picked up a person, you have some idea what it's like. But 100-pound tuna, it has a tail, and it has a head which is pointed. Now, 100 pounds is so hard to hold. Two guys would pick it up. Whoever had the tail had a pretty good deal. He got handles. The guy with the head is trying to hold it, right? You have to pick it up and put it in a big wooden box to send it on the dock. Well, I worked a lot of tuna. Fortunately, I have long arms, and I'm big. I would pick them single. I would take the tail on this hand and grab the nose on this hand and throw them in. But you get really big tuna. It's tricky. People would use their hooks, and they'd put the hooks in the cargo. You've seen cargo. They put the cargo hook in the gill. But of course, every time you picked up a tuna, then you were picking up an extra foot. You pick up tuna all day and an extra foot, you realize what you're doing. One day, I'm on a tuna job. I'm looking around. There's a hoop about this big. I looked at it. I thought it looked like – you remember you used to roll wing toss with the ropes? I thought, "Wonder what that's for?" It laid there. We worked right by it. It sat there. We threw it on the side, and we kept working to it. All of a sudden, it came to me. It was like epiphany. I thought, "Wait a minute," because I'd seen it before, but I'd never paid much – now I'm paying. I went over. I took the hoop, took the tuna. The tuna was laying on a wooden deck because it's a frozen ship. The thing you said is about that high, let's say 3 feet. I took the hoop. I put it over the nose of the tuna.

JK: You're getting away from the mic.

RLN: Oh, yes. I took it over the nose of the –

JK: Start again, you took the –

RLN: I took the hoop. I put it over the nose of the tuna. That means the hoop moves in, about 8 inches, and your hand is right next to the tuna. Now, instead of lifting an extra foot, you're gaining half a foot. So, every tuna you lift up, you gain half a foot instead of losing a foot. Can you imagine how much easier it is if you're going to lift up thousands of these fish every day, how much easier it is once you learn this thing? Well, now after that, every fish job I went on, I made a hoop. Took a rope, made a square knot, and made a hoop. Well, we'd get in our locker – and in the old days you worked load for load. They worked a load. You worked a load. Well, if you could load your load faster, they could load their load. You spent a lot of time waiting for them to do theirs. Well, we get it there. My partner, Larry McElroy, we'd make a couple of hoops. Instead of doubling up on fish, we'd single up on fish because it's much easier to lift with this thing. We'd have our skull full of fish, and we'd be waiting for them. It was like a competition, a boyish, foolish thing. Because under logical business terms, you'd want to get out

as many fish as you can. But everybody worked load for load in those days, and that's the way it was. But this one little thing, just a little rope, changed everything. Now, eventually they came in containers. You never touched them again and all that type of thing. But for that period of time for a couple of years, it's like you had an iPod to somebody else's Tube Radio [laughter]. It was amazing that just one little thing. But longshoring is exactly like that. I don't know what it is today with containers and all that. I've been retired for twelve years. I don't know what they're doing now. I look at the ships. I say, "Wow, big well," all that, and I hear things. But if you're not involved, once you leave the waterfront, you're gone. You can't go back. There's no going back and saying, "Oh, hello George? Hello, Sam?" That doesn't happen. Because they have to pay attention. They have to do what they're doing. They haven't got time to chat. They haven't got time to look at you. They don't want to look at you. If you met them in a bar, they might buy you a drink, or you buy them a drink. But you don't go back to the docks. There's no going back to the dock. Because the rhythm is gone. Once you say, "I've retired," it's over. I watched a lot of guys try to come back and come down and be the old days, be with a guy. Never worked. They'd come one time, two times, never see them again. I was amazed at the beginning, but I realized how that works.

JK: Let's get you out of the longshore, out of the hole here for a while. Your movie enthusiasm returns.

RLN: [laughter]

JK: If it hadn't been gone away.

RLN: No, I've always been into movies, yes.

JK: Talk about your reviews that you posted.

RLN: [laughter] You have time?

JK: Sure.

RLN: [laughter] Longshoring and the movie business. I've always been a big movie fan my whole life. I started the movies very young. I've always gone to movies. They fascinate me. I think they're one of the finest forms of entertainment humans have ever invented. They are magic, truly are magic. I said, oh, there's a long history, but I'm going to give you a particular spotted history. Because, well, it's fun, and it's entertaining, I think. I'm divorced from my second wife, and I'm living in a little apartment in San Pedro up on 22nd Street. I'm going to the movies, having a good time, working, life is interesting. I'm in my mid-fifties, somewhere in there, late fifties maybe. I'm in Canetti's, which is still here, a cafe down in the waterfront. I'm sitting at a table, and the guy that rents me my apartment – I'm not a buyer, I'm a renter – but the guy that rents me the apartment, his name is Ed Fabian, wonderful guy. He's sitting there. He said to me, "Tank, you can't go." I'd been on vacation. I'd been up in Oregon. He says, "You can't go on vacation anymore [laughter]." I laughed, I said, "Well, why?" He says, "Nobody knows what movie to go to." I looked at him. I didn't realize this was taking place. He says, "Every time you see a movie, you come in here, and you tell everybody what movie to see." He

says, "If you go away, we don't know what to do." I said, "Oh," and I laughed. You think about little things that change your life. He says, "You ought to hang a blackboard out your window and say what movie to go to." I'm on the second floor on 22nd Street in this old building. It's his building. I went up to the hardware store, Perry's Hardware. That isn't there any longer. I went up to the hardware. I said, "Do you guys have a blackboard?" He said, "Yes." It was, say, 2 by 3. So, I got it. I put a couple holes in it and put a string on it. I actually drove a couple of nails in the sill – it was an old, wooden building – put a couple nails. The first movie I ever put up was *Moonstruck*, the one with Cher and all that, won the Academy Award. So, I put, "Ed, go see *Moonstruck*." I hung it out the window. Ed came by, went home, got his wife, Dottie, and they went to see *Moonstruck*. He came back the next day, and he started talking about he hadn't been to the movies in a while. It was wonderful, blah-blah, all that. So, I started doing this on basically a weekly basis every time I saw a good, not a bad one. I didn't do bad movies, only good ones. I didn't tell anybody that. Whatever it was, I put it out there, you know, *Braveheart* or whatever it would be. I'd hang it out the window. Well, this went on for a little while. I would hang it out the window, and people would talk about it. The longshoremen would say, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm just talking about movies I like." Well, the news by the local paper, an intern, Robert Bob Beck was his name. He changed history. He's like the thing with the hoop. He changed history. He came by my house. I heard him holler from downstairs. He said, "Can I talk to you?" I said, "Sure." I said, "Come on up." So, this young man comes up. He says, "I'd like to talk about your blackboard." I said, "Sure. What do you want to know?" Well, it turned out he was from the local *News Pilot* here, the local paper. It's no longer there. It was absorbed by a bigger paper. But he says, "Tell me about the blackboard." But he's looking around the room while he's asking. Well, in my room, it was just me. I knew the landlord. So, I would write on the walls because I'd like to remember things like sayings and ideas. I would write in big, black markers. Because I knew they'd paint it when I leave. So, I'd write all over the walls. I had stuff, and I had this and not crazy, but unusual. So, Bob Beck, he's writing this stuff down. You could see his eyes shifting all [laughter]. So, he calls the editor, Philip Sanfield, who is still the editor. He calls up Philip. He says, "I think we ought to have a photographer." So, they send this guy out. The guy comes out. He was an award-winning photographer, big, tall guy. But anyway, he comes out and takes all kinds of pictures and off they go. It was fun. It was interesting. The day after that, two days later in the *San Pedro News Pilot*, which was the local paper, front page cover, colored picture of my apartment [laughter] at a big store. I got the phones ringing off the hook and know this and that. Because I'd been around a long time longshoring, and everybody reads the *Pilot*. So, it was just fabulous stuff. It was just great fun. I was laughing and having a good time. I was able to talk. I was no longer shy. It was wonderful. Well, about two days later, they ran another article because the Academy Awards were coming up. The sign is out there. I get a call from the *L.A. Times* out of the blue. Yes. I'm sitting at this little desk. I have the phone ringing. It's the *Los Angeles Times*. It's the second biggest newspaper in the United States. They said, "Hey, we heard about this blackboard thing. The Academy Awards are coming out." He said, "What do you do for the Academy Awards?" I say, "I watch from my apartment." He says, "Could we send some people over?" I said, "Sure, I don't care." Well, they know more. I never got a phone. The *Pilot* calls me. I don't know how they knew, but the *Pilot* calls me and says, "Hey, we heard *The Times* is coming out your apartment." I said, "Yes." He says, "Well, wait a minute. We were the ones that put you in a paper." I said, "Well, you want to come out?" I said, "You can come out with them. I don't care." So, they sent Bob Beck and the same photographer, and *The Times* sent – I forget

their name, but their photographer. Turns out they'd all gone to Long Beach State, and they were all pals from the school. They had both sides. So, they sit in the apartment [laughter]. It's funky. Just right when you think funky, it was. But I ordered pizza. I had beer in the fridge. It was like a frat party. But they weren't interested in the academy. I'm fascinated by the Academy Awards, because I've been with it all my life. They're laughing and joking and all that. The Academy Awards come on, and this win and that win and this and that. Then they said, "Well, were those the people you guessed," or whatever like that. I had a big, grease board on hinges that I pulled up where the television was. I unloosened the thing, and I dropped it down, big board, like 4 by 6. There were the six categories. I had them all. I hit them all. I never did it again, just the one time. Life is life. Hit them right on the nose. These guys were flabbergasted because it was there when they got there. I didn't touch the board. They knew that I'd done it before the Academy Awards started. The next day in *The Times*, big whole page [laughter] where there's a section for it. But I got whole pictures and all that type of thing. Well, the *Pilot*, another big thing, right [laughter]? So, now, the blackboard became famous overnight. There was a story on top of story on top of story, but I turned it the other way. So, you could see it from both sides now because it was hanging straight out. People would come by. They'd honk. They'd yell. They did this. People would get out of their cars right across the street and take pictures. It was just unbelievable. But from that, the *Entertainment Tonight* came down. The other show here, whatever, the *Today* show came. I got six minutes on *Today* [laughter]. It was unbelievable what took place. Dennis Miller came. I was on his show. William Moore signed me as an agent. The agents signed me up. I went back to New York for the *Joan Rivers Show*. It was out of the blue. Robert Bob Beck stops at my place and says, "Hey, can I talk to you?" The whole world – that's too big a thing. The fun of the whole world changed dramatically because this guy stopped by.

JK: Now, your knowledge of movies, what about movies that were shot in San Pedro?

RLN: Oh [laughter].

JK: Tell me about San Pedro as a location.

RLN: You sure you've got time?

JK: Yes. I've got time. Tell me about the San Pedro was the location for movies.

RLN: [laughter] I call San Pedro the outdoor capital of the world for movies or the movie outdoor capital of the world, whatever you want to call it. On a weekday, on Monday through Friday, easily if you bet even money, you'll find them making a movie or a television show in San Pedro. That's how big it is. It has everything. It has color. It has excitement. It has old neighborhood. It has big neighborhoods. It has lots of streets. It has the waterfront. It has everything you can imagine. They make movies all the time here. I watch movies made from a long way back. But to show you how far back it all goes, there was a fellow, he was a poet laureate of San Pedro by the LA City Council. His name was Dick Wolf, wonderful, old guy. When Dick Wolf was small, when he was just a little kid, he rode his bicycle at the Point Fermin Park, which is the park out on the cliffs. They were making a *Tarzan* movie. Point Fermin Park was an island somewhere with palm trees with the ocean behind it, right? Buster Crabbe, now

that's going back a longways. I think it's [19]34. Buster Crabbe is playing Tarzan in his loin cloths in Point Fermin Park. But during breaks – there's a lot of breaks in making movies – Buster Crabbe would put Dick Wolf on his shoulders. He was a big-time athlete swimmer. He would carry Dick around on his shoulders and talk to him about this thing. So, Dick Wolf grew up a big fan of movies. But that goes back. They made this *Tarzan* movie there. In the same park fifty years later at least, they shot a Charles Bronson. Remember the old *Death Wish* movies? They shot the number three. The first one was pretty good. The other three were awful. But they shot the third one there. The big shootout scene in that is Point Fermin Park. *The Dash Down the Way* is White Point. That's where they shot *Treasure Island* back in the [19]40s or [19]30s or whatever it was with Wallace Berry and Jackie Coogan or Jackie Cooper, whatever his name was. So, it starts there, and it comes forward. If you really watch it – I'm a big movie fan – I see Peter all the time in the movies. You say, "Oh, yes, that's that or this, that." The Warehouse One, the one down at the end of Signal Street must be in a thousand movies. The *Sting Two* is made in the warehouses down there. The TV show, *The Closer*, was here last year. They shot a show on a barge down at the end by Warehouse One. Just a couple of weeks ago, they shot an episode on 22nd and right across from Canetti's Cafe to RNS Marine. They shot in there for three days. Schwarzenegger has been here half a dozen times. *The Eraser* was made here. One of the *Commander* movies thing was made here. All kinds of movies are made right here. They shot the *Big West Wing* episode where the tornado hits. That was up on 6th Street. I don't know how much stuff they pulled in to make that scene. It's everywhere. You'd be driving down, you'd be going to McCowen's Market up on what they call the Catalinas District, and they'd be shooting the one with the guy, *The Pretender*. That guy, Richard, whatever his name was, he was everywhere. He was like a Pedro guy. He'd have dressed in hair. "Oh, yes, Richard was in here," that type of thing. They're everywhere. Canetti's, this place I just mentioned, they must have made a half a dozen movies there. Joe Bologna was in there. Danny DeVito made that thing about – I forget the name of. Everywhere in this town is a movie set. I was talking to somebody this morning, they said they had the parking lot down by on the other end of town. They had so much stuff in the parking lot, the cops had to come and shut down the streets because nobody could go by. Two movie companies shooting at the same time. One was a television series of something, but the other one was a movie. He says that the wagons and the trailers and the thing, he says it looked like an army had moved in. *Pearl Harbor* wasn't a great movie, but it was a pretty nice movie. But the *Honolulu* was downtown San Pedro. When the Harsh Neck or whatever his name and the girl go to the movies, that's a Warner Brother Theater. It still operates here, an old theater they do retrospect movies and all that type of thing. But they're everywhere. Fort MacArthur was the Japanese installment. They built the barracks and they put the torpedoes. That was the old gunning placements out of Fort MacArthur movies everywhere in this town. *The List, the Face Off* was made here. Oh, there's a long list of movies. They're here every day.

JK: You can go back, and you probably know Chaplain and Keaton silent movies were made here.

RLN: Absolutely.

JK: Tell me about that.

RLN: Well, actually, the Warner Brothers, the big theater that's still operating, was made by Warner as a talking theater. But the old-timers, the people that go back in silent films, there was Fox Cabrillo was here, which it's now been torn down. They went to Plex movies, but that was a big old theater. They would play there. Then of course, like I was telling you about earlier in one of these other conversations, there was a step down in movies that took place. There was the first run movies. Then there were the second run movies. Now, let's say the first run in those old days, let's say it cost 75 cents to go to first run movie, 50 cents to go to the second run movie, a quarter maybe or 20 cents to go to a third run. There was a theater in Pedro called The Globe right down in the old Vaudeville House. But they also showed silent movies. In its time in the [19]20s, it was very famous. There were even small theaters where they showed old movies. But you could get in for a nickel because real estate price, whatever. The movies, by the time they got there, they didn't cost anything. So, this town, San Pedro, has a glorious history of movies. There was a guy that wrote part of it, some guy, Med Big, about location of the movie. He gave Peter a little shot. It was nice. But he didn't come close to covering what's going on here.

JK: Well, didn't the famous movie, *Chinatown* – and Robert Towne grew up here.

RLN: China, oh. Right, he lives here. He lives up on a hill.

JK: Tell me.

RLN: But *Chinatown*, the nice little business. I always loved the little bit of giddiness, the notes you wouldn't catch. In *Chinatown*, there's Walker's Cafe. It's right out at the end by Point Fermin, and it's in *Chinatown*. But in one of the scenes, Gittes, Jack Nicholson is in a car, and it's going to make a U-turn. It's a dead-end street. He's going to make a U-turn, which he does in his car, and he's going to park in front of that cafe. As he makes the U-turn, there's a barrier. On the barrier is graffiti. Of course, when they made the movie, it wouldn't have been there. There was no graffiti. They were shooting in [19]38 when there would be no graffiti anywhere. Now, *Kilroy* came in during the war. But prior to the war, there was no graffiti in San Pedro. I don't know if there were in other places, but not in San Pedro because I lived here. But when they make the turn, there's the little graffiti. They've missed it. I was like, "Aha, I saw it. They missed it [laughter]."

JK: What about Towne as a San Pedro boy? Can you tell me anything about him?

RLN: Robert Towne? I don't know him. I know of him, and I've read his story. But I have never personally met him. I think he lives in Palos Verdes up here, above it. But I don't know him personally. He's been at the Warner Brothers, the theater, talking about it's still operating. He was there when they showed *Chinatown*. I wasn't there. But he gave an opening talk and all that. Yes, it's very nice. Well, the poet Bukowski, he lived here. There's a lot of interesting people that lived in San Pedro.

JK: Onto the next question of what you remember. Who were some of the famous people who lived here or grew up here that you can remember?

RLN: Well, Charles Laughton, you remember Charles Laughton, the *Hunchback* and *Notre Dame* and all that and *Charles Laughton of Advice and Consent.* Him and Elsa Lanchester, they lived on the hill. He was around town all the time. That big, tall guy, Buddy Ebsen, lived on the hill, was an artist. He would have showings down on 6th Street at the galleries. You'd walk in and here would be Buddy Ebsen. Barnaby Jones and all those things, he danced with Shirley Temple. He lived a long time. He was, I think, 100 when he died. But he'd be this big, tall guy you walk in, it's Buddy Ebsen. He looked thirty years younger than he actually was. Dancers live a long time. But the place is full of people like that. You could walk anywhere, anytime, and there they'd be. Well, Humphrey Bogart had his boat here at 22nd Street landing. Him and the babe, Lauren Bacall, and the little guy, Peter Lorre, always hung out with, they'd be there. They'd been on their boat, getting off their boat, been fishing, been that. Leif Erickson, which is before your time, but he was a big-time actor in the forties. He had his boat at Flights Brothers. He'd be down there chopping wood, doing this, doing that. They were everywhere. The thing about Pedro, and I do love the town [laughter], but the thing about Pedro, fabulous history in almost every area, athletic history, movie history, history-history, nautical history, military history. Pedro is a very interesting place. One of the things that makes it really interesting that I didn't realize since the beginning, it's a dead end. You don't go through Pedro. You come to Peter. You leave Pedro. But you don't go through Pedro. Because there's nowhere to go. You could. You can go around Palos Verdes, but it is still a two-lane road. It's not a convenient place to go. So, you can come in, and you can go out. But you don't go through. A lot of towns you go through. You're going from here to here. You go through that town. You say, "Oh, yes, there's this gas station on the corner." But you don't leave the town because you don't get into the town. In Pedro, not only do you get into it, but there's lots of places to go, be it the ethnic food – think of the ethnic food, Mexicans in my neighborhood made some of the greatest food you're ever going to taste your life. Of course, they're friendly, outgoing, and they'd invite you to dinner. The Slavs, the Italians, the Greeks, Papadakis' place here is world famous. The Aunties right around just over here, world famous. Canetti's, the Italian guy been there forever. I think he's been there sixty years. There is an ethnic background. There is a cohesive background. Because everybody, it was like you were family. It was you against the world. People from LA were different. People from Wilmington were different. People from Redondo were different. You were a Pedro person. You even talked a different language. We call it Pedro, not San Pedro. We call it Pedro. You call it Cabrillo Beach, not Cabrillo Beach. There's even been things written about it, what a real San Pedroan does. There's a whole list. Of course, I lived during that all the time. So, it was fabulous.

JK: Well, what does a real San Pedroan do?

RLN: [laughter] A real San Pedroan, I don't know if you could ever pin it down. There's such a variation. One of the things that they do is they know each other. Well, it's not just because it's me, it could be anybody. But I don't think there's a restaurant you could – if we left here today and we walked out and you say, "Let's go eat there," I would bet you – not a lot of money because that makes bad friends – but let's say $10. I would bet you $10 as we had lunch, I would know somebody, or somebody would know me. I would win the bet two out of three times. So, at the end of it, if we did it very often, I'd have all your money. It's not just me. They know them. They know them. I was standing on a corner one day, 22nd and Pacific, just came out of the liquor store, cars going around the corner. Boss Benevoya, now he's a famous guy because

he was a cartoonist for *The Times*. He played bull, all that. But he'd been here all his life, still lives in Barton Hill, in fact. Comes around the corner. He has an old Cadillac, one of those preserved things. One of those Seville kind of cars that are famous. Comes around the corner and he yells out, "Saw you on television [laughter]," and he goes by. I'm thinking, "I haven't been on television." I thought, "Why did he see me on television? I can't figure it out." Dennis Miller, I'd been on his show six months before. They canceled the show, so they're showing reruns. He saw me on the rerun. I didn't see it. He saw the rerun. About three days later, residual check came in the mail. Then they showed the one that I was on twice, once a week and then back again. Another residual check in the mail [laughter]. I thought that's why Boss saw me on television because they were shooting reruns. That's the kind of thing it is. The guy that I grew up with in Barton Hill, he's a little old. He's my brother's age. But I grew up across the street from him in Barton Hill. This is sixty years later or whatever it is. Almost sixty-five years later, the guy that I grew up with in Barton Hill is driving around the corner and says, "I saw you on television." Knows who I am. I know who he is. I know who his brother is. He knows who my brother is. Everybody knows everybody.

JK: Coming to an end, who do we need to interview? We're coming to the end of our interviews. Give me some people that you think like you are essential to getting this portion down.

RLN: Have you talked to John Olguin?

JK: Yes.

RLN: Oh, you've talked to Allan Johnson?

JK: No.

RLN: Allan Johnson owns Tally Ho on 22nd and Mesa. It's a business, Tally Ho, a nautical business. Ex longshoreman, works with the studios and all that type of thing. Joe Bukowski.

[end of transcript]