Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Joe Radisich Oral History
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Male Speaker: First question is the hard one. Please say your name and spell it.

Joe Radisich: Okay. My name is Joe Radisich, R-A-D-I-S-I-C-H.

MS: And Joe, you were born here in San Pedro, right?

JR: Yes, I was.

MS: What are your earliest memories when you were growing up in this place and this port?

JR: Well, I [laughter]--

MS: A long time ago. I know you look so old.

JR: Actually, I'm older than you think.

MS: Oh, not as old as I am.

JR: Well, I mean, I've pretty much been involved with this port or a port – the port's been a part of my life ever since I was a young child. My father was a longshoreman for – since 1959. My grandfather came here, I think, in the [19]30s and was a fisherman. My other grandfather on my mother's side was a merchant marine. So, from the get-go, growing up in the city, I've been involved in the port.

MS: When you were a kid, what was San Pedro like through the town?

JR: Well, San Pedro's always been a close-knit place. I mean, we're – there's second- and third-generation families, and you know a lot of people when you go to the store. I mean, you always see people you know. If you don't know somebody, you know somebody else that knows them. So, it's a close-knit place. It's a special place, especially in terms of how Los Angeles is these days.

MS: Well, explain that. Because even earlier on, it was very different than greater Los Angeles, the kind of people who lived here, the kind of activities that went on. What was special about San Pedro?

JR: Well, I think that San Pedro was, for the most part, a blue-collar town. I mean, back in the days, most people made their living from being fishermen or even longshoremen in those days. The tide's kind of flipped now, where the fishing industries kind of died, and longshoring is the major source of employment. But I think San Pedro, for the most part, is a blue-collar town, and those are its roots. I think people that leave here and maybe take other paths, I think at the end of the day, that blue-collarness is still who they are. That's where they come from. So, I think it has an effect on everybody that comes from these towns.

MS: A kid growing up here, what did you do for fun?

JR: Well, I was thinking about the port and some of the questions you were going to ask me. And a lot of it actually was centered around the port. I mean, I remember as a youngster going down to Ports O'Call, when that was a really vibrant place. There was a ton of little stores, cool little stores down there and candy stores and things to do and going to the fish market and feeding the seals. When I look back, Cabrillo Beach was actually a beach where families went to. I mean, you actually swam in the water. There were things going on. People were playing volleyball. I don't know if it's like that so much anymore, but that's kind of the San Pedro I remember.

MS: Also, it's a very diverse town. I mean, again, like other areas of LA, you know, different countries were here. People are here that have been for generations. Talk about that and growing up with kids from whatever backgrounds.

JR: Yeah, I think that San Pedro has always had a lot of second- and third-generation immigrant families. I mean, obviously there's a lot of people from Europe, a lot of Italians, a lot of Yugoslavians -- I guess you call them Croatians now. I want to be politically correct on that. But a lot of Hispanics. There's always been a smaller African American community. But, you know, San Pedro was pretty well represented in that.

MS: What effect did that have growing up as a kid? Did that to give you a different worldview to have a lot of religion?

JR: Yeah. I mean, I grew up -- my father was Croatian. His parents were Croatian. So, we actually -- growing up, we went through those traditions, you know, Sunday dinner with the family at my grandmother's house, sitting down, eating mustard, mostacciolis, and Croatian food. And then on my mother's side, it was kind of different. It was more of a Hispanic, Latino connection. But they were different. They had their own set of traditions.

MS: What about the idea of being the son of a longshoreman? Did that give you a different perspective on work and that kind of thing too?

JR: Yes, it did. Although I believe when I was young, I really didn't pay attention to it that much. You know, my goal was always to -- actually, I was always in sports. I went through high school and went to college on a football scholarship and eventually graduated. But when I was younger, the big industry in town was fishing. You know, longshoremen made okay money, but the fishermen were the guys making the big money. Then as I said before, as times changed, all of a sudden, the longshore industry became the thing that everybody wanted to get involved with. I always wanted to be a longshoreman actually.

MS: Because of your dad?

JR: Because of my dad, because I like the work. I like being outdoors. I love being in the port working. It's a beautiful place just being outside. And if you work down here, you understand, like in the afternoon, I mean, the breeze kicks up and great views of the water, great views looking back at San Pedro and rolling hills and Point Fermin. It's just a really nice place. It's also very nice to watch the boats go by, especially if you see a big cruise ship going down the

terminal – down the center of the channel, or a big container ship. Very impressive.

MS: Now you mentioned your mother. Tell me about her.

JR: My mother was, I believe, born and raised in San Pedro. Her father was a seaman, an engineer on one of the ships back in the days. My grandmother, her mother, was a housewife.

MS: You mentioned Mexico. Was she Mexican descent?

JR: My mother's mother was Mexican. I believe that my mother grew up mostly with her grandmother, who only spoke Spanish.

MS: Were each of your parents bringing their different heritages to you growing up? Were you aware of that?

JR: Yes. Well, I would say that I probably spent more time with my father's family but that the cultures were different.

MS: We've already sort of covered this again, but for you, what makes this port special? The last thing they think of when they think of Los Angeles, they think of a port.

JR: Right.

MS: Here it is, the number one port and the number two port side by side in the country. They don't even know there's a port here. What is important about this port to you?

JR: Well, several things. I mean, obviously it's an economic engine for the region. I mean, there's thousands of good paying jobs down here in all different arenas, not just labor, also on the terminal side and the shipping line side. But for me, my favorite thing is the port itself. Like I said, I enjoy going to work in the port. I think it's a beautiful place. I think the views are beautiful, the water, the fresh air, and I do say fresh air, the breezes that kick up in the afternoon. It's just really nice being there.

MS: How did you get involved with the Commission?

JR: I have been a supporter of our Mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, since about the mid-[19]90s. I met him, and I liked him as a person. I liked what he had to say. So, when he was elected, I figure I can contribute to the Commission, bringing a different perspective, you know, somebody that actually works in the port and knows what's going on, on the operations side of things. I mean, our commission's made up of a pretty diverse group. Everybody kind of has their own niche. We have a couple of environmentalists. We have a lawyer. Well, actually, they're all lawyers besides myself. You have a banker. So, everybody brings their own specialty to the Commission. So, it's nice. When I speak to them, I don't speak too much on the legal side of things because that's the other four's area of expertise. But when I speak on how the waterfront actually works, how the operations work, and then I speak with some authority.

MS: For those who don't know, what is the role of the Harbor Commission in this situation?

JR: The Harbor Commission is a five-member Commission, where we're actually all volunteers who are appointed by the mayor to pretty much oversee the operations of the port. I mean, it's not our job. So, we don't get into the day-to-day operations of micromanaging the port but major policy questions or major questions concerning contracts or whatever need to be approved by the Harbor Commission before they can move forward.

MS: How often do you meet, and what are those meetings about?

JR: We meet twice a month, and the meetings could range from many different subjects, terminals and their leases, construction projects. Obviously, we've been dealing with the pollution problem quite a bit in the port and expansion projects. So, we do quite a few things. One thing that I didn't mention that the port does is the port is, in my opinion, involved with the community in terms of supporting different programs that benefit a lot of different people in San Pedro.

MS: But there's been a kind of a testy relationship over the years between the community and the port, and there was a secession movement for a while. How would you describe the relationship, historically, between the community of San Pedro and Wilmington and the actual physical port? I mean, what is that been that relationship over time?

JR: Well, to be honest with you, I never really paid attention, growing up, to poor politics. I actually didn't pay attention until the mid-[19]90s probably. But from my perspective, and this is just my opinion, I don't believe that the tension between the community and the port is all that great. I mean, obviously there's a smaller vocal – a group of people who voice their opinion, and I think the media picks up on that. But for the most part, I think if you ask the average – if you ask nine out of ten people on the street what their opinion of the port is, I don't think it would be negative. But that's just my opinion.

MS: Another thing that's changing from your generation and certain generations before is that so often, the people who lived here were directly connected to the port. Either they worked here, they worked in the offices, or they were longshore. They were less and less fishing, but they were administrative positions or whatever. That's changing. How is this community changing, and what do you think that's going to mean for the community and the port?

JR: I still think that the majority of the town is connected to the port in some way and has some type of employment relationship with the port, if they're not actually working directly with the port and then they own a small business or a restaurant or whatever that drives quite a bit of income from the port. I think a lot of people in San Pedro and Wilmington still have a lot of connections to the port. Go ahead.

MS: What do you think is the biggest challenge though, for the future of this port? I mean, economically, socially, you know, what's the big challenge, do you think?

JR: For me, I think that being a forward-thinking port, what we're trying to do right now really is

– we have a problem of pollution, and everybody knows that. We're dealing with that. We're taking actually some – in terms of how the industry views, as some controversial steps. But we're doing that in an effort to be able to do the expansions within the port to deal with the volumes that'll be coming in the future. So, if we don't do these expansions, we're not going to be able to handle the volumes that are projected in the future.

MS: Isn't there kind of a physical limitation of how – I mean that's what happened in New York. They ran out of space. They couldn't expand. Do you think there's a kind of a dead end ultimately in how much you can expand?

JR: There's always going to be a dead end. But I mean, I've seen ports from all over the world. When I go to Hong Kong or when I go to Singapore or whatever, I mean, I think we can compete with those ports on a lot of different levels.

MS: They're talking about a big new port opening in Mexico, for example. It's going to be this big super port down there. Where is the competition coming from for this port?

JR: Well, let me say this on Mexico. I was registered in the ILW in 1985, and in 1985, I heard rumors that we're going to lose all our work in Mexico. So, where are we in? 2008? But Mexico has gotten its share of, of, of work right now as it stands, without the new project that they're considering. You know, there are consumers in Mexico as well. But I think, realistically – and I think people that are in the know, know this – that Mexico project, where it would really affect Los Angeles is many, many years away.

MS: Now, another thing we talked about is touchy because of the negotiation going on now. But a lot of people don't know the importance of Los Angeles and San Pedro in labor history. They think of Chicago. They think of New York. They think of all that. This has been an important historic labor town. Talk a bit about the history of labor in this town and why San Pedro is important in American history and the labor movement.

JR: Well, I mean, as I said before –

MS: Don't say that.

JR: [laughter] I know. San Pedro is important because it is a blue-collar town, and many people drive their livelihood from the waterfront. We have the workforce. Our union, ILW, has a long history of struggle in fighting for working people, not just in our industry, but in – we've engaged in struggles for many different causes over the years that benefit working people. That's our history. That's what our founder, Harry Bridges, believed in. Actually, that's what makes us who we are today, in my opinion.

MS: I mean, again, I know you're not in this story, but I'm sure you know a lot of history. What do you think is the most important change that's happened recently in the port, whether it's for good or bad?

JR: [laughter] A lot of things have happened.

MS: I mean, containerization is like the first thing you think of.

JR: Well, yeah, I can go that route.

MS: Or you can talk about, you know, environmental changes and that kind of stuff.

JR: Yeah. I think in the times that we're – you know, right now, I think this whole environmental question and the way California law reads right now, is probably the biggest change that's happened in a long time. I mean, there's been some technological advances that the terminals and shipping lines have used that have made some changes within the workforce. But that was going to come, and that's probably inevitable. But I think the biggest thing, in my opinion, is probably this whole question of environmental pollution.

MS: In many ways, the port is really ahead of the curve here. I mean, you're leading the way. Something people say is that, you know, if you have all these high standards, you're going to be cutting your own possibilities of growth. Because people, they're going to go to the cheapest rather than the cleanest. Is that a problem you face in the future?

JR: I think it's a consideration, but I don't think that somebody's going to ship a container of tennis shoes bound for Los Angeles through Seattle. I don't think the cost savings will be that great. But it's definitely a consideration for cargo that would be, for example, put on a rail and sent to Chicago. So, I believe that the port needs to be competitive in those type of situations. But I think it's important to understand that, yes, we are the first one who's meeting this environmental issue head on, but I don't think we're going to be the last. As we speak right now, Oakland's moving forward with some programs. And really, I believe this whole question is being addressed by many ports throughout the United States. So, I think five years from now, you'll see that although we were the pioneers, we're definitely not out there on a limb on this issue, hopefully.

[laughter]

MS: Anything else you want to say or add? I mean, I have a question. Maybe it'd be hard for you to –

JR: Go ahead

MS: – answer. I mean, what baffles me is, as I said before, the port is not on the radar of most people when they think of Los Angeles.

JR: Right.

MS: Why? Why isn't this port better known? You know, when the 2002 strike came up, people realized 40 percent of the trade is coming through here. That was astonishing to people. They have no idea there's even a port here. Why isn't this place better known?

JR: I don't know. I don't know. That's interesting. I think that it's getting better known with this National – I think this National Geographic series has done more for international shipping than anything that I've ever seen.

MS: Makes it the most dangerous place in the world, looks like to me.

JR: It is a dangerous place, believe it or not. I mean, as you're working on the docks, things – you know, you hear these noises, and you start to turn them out after a while. Everything just seems kind of routine. But when something does happen, I mean the consequences are pretty dire.

MS: Do you have some close calls?

JR: I have had. Over the years, I've had many, many close calls.

MS: Give me your closest.

JR: I mean, I've almost slipped and fallen off containers stacked up six high on the ship, especially working during the winter when it was maybe raining or blowing. I always work nights. So, the weather conditions, it can get very cold on the docks. I've almost been run over at times, and I wasn't even knowing it. But you know, after the fact, I realized, jeez, I almost got run over. That's happened a few times. Things breaking and almost hitting you, you know. I worked the old break-bulk ships quite a bit, not the containers, but the loose cargo. I've seen, you know, slings snap or the load of whatever lumber or steel have fallen back into the hatch and almost got hit. So, I think if you interview any longshoremen, they'll – everybody's got their own set of stories. There's no doubt about it. But if you look, there's been – over the last ten years, there's been a very, very high percentage of deaths. I mean, I think we're even more than policemen.

MS: Not a good note to end on. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

JR: I wanted to talk a little bit – when you asked me the question, is the port a special place? Why is that a special place? Or you asked me the question about, well, why don't people come down here more?

MS: Yeah, I mean, nobody.

JR: I think, back in the day, people did come down. I mean, when Ports O'Call was pretty vibrant, you know, I think a lot of people from Los Angeles did visit this area. But as other areas developed, you know, maybe Long Beach or wherever, Marina del Rey, different places in Los Angeles, and San Pedro didn't advance; I think it might have hurt them. But I think over the last ten years, with the boom in international trade and all the ships coming in and out of the channel, I think that we have a real opportunity to do something here, to make an attraction, a different type of attraction. It's not downtown Long Beach. It's not Marina del Rey. It's a working port. That, in my opinion, is what will be that attracts people to this place. Because if you're sitting down there on, hopefully, the promenade or at the fish market in the future, or if you're sitting

down in Acapulco having a drink and you're watching a big cruise ship or a big container ship coming down the harbor, that's a beautiful thing.

MS: That's a better ending.

JR: Yeah.

[laughter]

MS: Thank you very much.

JR: All right. Thanks.

MS: Great.

[end of transcript]