

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project  
Carlos Rico Oral History  
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Interviewer: MS – Unknown  
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: You talked to Nancy. So, I'm going to ask you some of the questions that you already talked about with her because that's one reason why she talked to you. So, I got some idea of the kinds of stories you might tell. We have a nice surprise for you when it's over. Nancy looked it up in the census of your family in 1930, where everybody lived. So, you remind me to give that to you when it is over.

MS: Okay. That's good.

MS: Hard question first. Please say your name and spell it.

Carlos Rico: My given name is Carlos G. Rico. I took on a G because I didn't have a middle name. I had to have one when I went into the Navy, because I didn't want to run against another Carlos Rico someplace and get a little bit mixed up.

MS: How do you spell the last name?

CR: The name is spelled R-I-C-O, the name Rico. If you put two Cs on it, you make me an Italian which I'm not.

MS: [laughter] Well, this next thing is, what year were you born and where?

CR: I am a lifetime resident, born in 1927 in Wilmington. I was born in the Pepper Tree Auto Court in Wilmington, near Sanford and Opp Street. My mother never made it to the hospital. So, I can claim I'm a Wilmington resident really for true any insurer.

MS: Tell me the story about that neighborhood you were born in and the fact that your mother didn't make it to the hospital. Tell me that story in more detail.

CR: Well, we didn't live there my entire younger life. I lived in Wilmington – my younger life in probably in the middle of Wilmington. Later we moved to a street called O Street because the streets there go by alphabetical order. Then we moved to an M Street where I stayed until I was about sixteen years old, or seventeen years old when I went into the Navy.

MS: Let's go back. Tell the story about your birth. If you don't remember, but what did your mother tell you?

CR: My mother only told me that I was born in the Pepper Tree Auto Court, which are still there. They're still standing. They're across the street from Seko Brothers Market in Wilmington. Everybody knows the Sekos. My younger life was taken up by school. I went to Wilmington Park Elementary school. I graduated from there and I went to Banning High School which at that time was a junior and senior high school combined. I was very fortunate that I was eager to get a real good education. I'll tell you why. My dad only had a fourth grade education, and my mother was lucky that she went to the tenth grade. They married very young. My mother was sixteen years old. My dad was six years older than she was. So, my younger life was taken up by not only school but athletics. I was on several athletic teams – basketball and baseball, playing semi-pro ball in a sandlot type of situation. Then from there on, I didn't have

any schooling although as a high school graduate, I had a scholarship to go to Pepperdine, and I never could take advantage of it because I went into the Navy.

MS: Let's go back and find out some more about your parents. Tell me about your parents. Who were they? Where were they born? When did they come here? Let's talk about that.

CRW: Okay. My mother and father were born in the state of New Mexico. My mother was born in Las Cruces. My dad was born in a place called Taos. They didn't meet until they came to California, so they didn't migrate here together. So, my dad was a mine worker. He worked in silver mines in Silver City. My mother came to San Pedro via Las Cruces. But she was one of three girls and four brothers, quite a large family there. My grandfather's name was John Garcia. My mother's name was Clara. They lived up in the barrio district called La Rambla in San Pedro.

MS: Tell me about that. What was the La Rambla?

CR: La Rambla was all dirt streets when I first started going up there. They didn't get their cements streets until very much later and I can't tell you the year. But my granddad had a mom-and-pop grocery store. I remember him going in his Model T truck down to the harbor area of San Pedro to collect his vegetables and meat products and all forms of grocery that he sold in his mom-and-pop store. I remember very vividly in 1933, which was the year of the big earthquake, that I was standing on the porch in their house. They had a three-bedroom house there. And two of the brothers lived with my grandmother. My mother and her two sisters lived with my grandmother. It was a matter of collecting there on a Sunday afternoon, always to have dinner. The men got served first in a big oval table, which seated about twelve or thirteen people. The kids got to eat second. But I was an only child, by the way.

MS: Let's go back and talk about that earthquake. You don't skip past that. So, tell me that story.

CR: The year of the earthquake, I was standing on the porch in the front. I climbed down the stairs when the streets began to – and the dirt began to rumble. I could see the ground waving. Because there were a lot of empty fields next to my grandparents' home, I tried to walk a small path of about thirty inches of sidewalk that led to the back door of that little mom-and-pop grocery store that they had. I would fall off every time there was a rumble. I couldn't make it. It was just too severe in order for me to stay on the sidewalk. I tumbled off of it several times before I ever reached the back door.

MS: Tell me what it sounded like, with the buildings shaking too.

CR: You could hear a rumble of the earthquake because the Earth was really moving. It was like in waves at that time, at that particular part of the territory here in San Pedro.

MS: What did you think? Were you scared?

CR: No. At that age, I couldn't really fathom what was going on except that it stayed in my

mind. It stayed in my mind for years until I experienced the second earthquake, which was not as bad, but I was living in Wilmington at that time. I would say that that particular earthquake was the earthquakes of all earthquakes in this area, because it knocked down schools and it knocked down other buildings that were places where people were employed. Luckily, none of the city buildings that I know of in San Pedro ever came down. But they did get shaken up and they suffered cracks in the walls and dented, which maybe later years, they had to be retrofitted so they would never tumble down if there was another earthquake as severe as that one.

MS: So, when the earthquake was over, I mean, how did other people – did you just walk around as a little kid and see what's going on? People panicking, what was going on?

CR: People did panic. They just didn't know what to do. They had never experienced anything like that, I think. In the twenty years that people lived around that area, there had never been an earthquake like that one. It was something different for us to experience. The rains caused a lot of problems with that particular barrio section because it was largely occupied by a lot of Hispanics. I can run the gamut. Gonzalez's doors is Garcia's. They all use the mom-and-pop store.

MS: Well, tell me more about that community. It was basically a Mexican American community?

CR: Very strongly in that direction.

MS: Describe it to me. Who were the families that were there? What would it look like?

CR: Of course, the streets were very muddy, especially when it rained because they didn't have sidewalks and they didn't have pavement on the streets. So, that every time we visited my grandmother, if it had rained the day before, the mud was about six inches thick. My parents had to really muscle their way into the area where they could park near my grandmother's house so that we could go inside. A lot of times we had to walk in the mud.

MS: Was it in the poor neighborhood or was it a mixed neighborhood?

CR: Most of the homes in that section were all made up of – they were frame houses, very little in the way of stucco. That's the way they used to build the homes I guess in the early [19]20s. You're talking about an area now that's east of Western Avenue. Above that, of course, was the Palos Verdes area and down below that, there were people that were – and I'm talking to the east now, the Bandinis lived in a section that was really close. If you know San Pedro, one of the street names is called Bandini. The Bandini family lived on the corner of 2nd Street and I can't recall a Bandini.

MS: People don't know, who are the – of the Bandini family? Who were they?

CR: The Bandini family was – they were founders. Some of the families were founders in the area, just like the Bixbys and the Poggis were. The Hispanic families of course, were the Sepulvedas and Dominguezs and several other Hispanic surnames, which escape me at this

moment, but they took all that land and developed it from raw land. There used to be cattle ranches up on top of the hill. Eventually, that became part of the industry here in our Bay Area.

MS: When you were growing up in the area, did you ever go see the Bandini house? What did it look like? Did you ever meet any of the kids?

CR: My experience with the Bandini family [laughs] is very comical because although my grandfather had a mom-and-pop store, there was a market on Bandini Street, which was adjacent to 2nd Street. We had to travel down 2nd Street in order to get to the market, because we wanted to buy something different than from what my granddad had. There were about four of us, I guess, that were all related cousins, to be exact. The Bandinis had a very high ten-foot fence around their property made up of a metal mesh. When the Bandini kids saw us walking down the street, they started throwing rocks at us. I think that at that time, you might say that we were experiencing a little bit of bad relations between the Caucasian and the Hispanic.

MS: You would consider the Bandinis Caucasian?

CR: Yes. Even though they had a Bandini name, they were born and reared in that and everything.

MS: Well, growing up as a kid – I mean, obviously the numbers by itself, it was basically a Mexican community by itself – a barrio by itself – did you, as a kid ever get any experiences of prejudice against kids who came from Mexico on [inaudible]?

CR: I really didn't notice the prejudices that were going on. I only used to catch it secondhand from listening to my parents talk, what experiences they had as far as being shunned upon because they were Hispanic.

MS: What are the stories? What did they tell you?

CR: Well, my dad, of course, having a fourth-grade education, spoke English. He spoke it good, but he spoke it with a very strong accent. My mother, of course, having gone to the tenth grade, she spoke English very well and handled English very well, which was a plus for me as I grew up because although I learned the Spanish language, I spoke very fluent English because that's all that we spoke of at home. But in listening to my grandmother and my grandfather and all of my uncles speaking Spanish, that's how I picked it up. It stayed with me for the rest of my life.

MS: So, what were the stories your father told you about things he encountered?

CR: Well, I think that it mostly was all the prejudices that were launched upon them were related to the area that they worked in. My dad eventually became a welder and a burner, and he got a job at Bethlehem shipyard. Of course, having a strong accent in English, when it goes to being elevated, say, to a lead man and a supervisory position way, this is where he saw to it that people were very prejudiced against him. Even though he had a brother-in-law that was of supervisory capacity, he managed to get a job as a supervisor in the shipbuilding industry.

MS: Let's go back to Wilmington when you were growing up. What was Wilmington like? What was the neighborhood like you grew up in?

CR: Wilmington was a very rural area. Real estate was very empty in areas where we all lived. The empty lots were taken advantage of. A lot of Hispanics took advantage of the fact that they had a lot of farming background, so they planted all of the empty fields with corn. Corn became a means of livelihood for a lot of people because they used to build stands on the streets and freeways in order to make a living by selling corn. We, as youngsters, a lot of us didn't find this out about until later when we were in a confessing mood that a lot of the young men that I grew up with, they used to go in and they would steal the corn. They'd set up their own little stand and sell the corn and that's the way they made money.

MS: So, who were your friends when you were a little kid growing up? What did you do as a little kid?

CR: My friends in the neighborhood where I grew up were all athletic-minded. One particular young man that was a lot shorter than I am, he would have had been a smoker since he was about eight years old. He introduced me to smoking. We used to grab a corncob, dig out the center, and get something to be able to breathe the smoke. We'd go around picking up cigarette butts for our tobacco because we couldn't afford to buy it. He was a good left-handed baseball pitcher. The empty lots that were behind the home where I lived on M Street became our football field. The corn stalks were still there. They were about that high. We eventually flattened all of those down doing our running in the ruts of the cornfield. We played a lot of football there. Later on, I talked to the one young man that used to play with us. We named it Mauretania stadium because that was a street name at that time. We played a lot of softball. The only place we had that was a playground was (Benny?) playground. We'd go there to play our softball and we gather teams and like I said, I never experienced prejudices because we had one young man that was Black American. His last name was (Carr?). My dad never took advantage of the prejudices that were launched against him to build any kind of prejudice in me. So, I had friends that were black. I had friends that were Japanese. So, when the war came along, to me, it was just a fly by night thing. It wasn't anything that I was going to hold against, especially the people that I grew up with because some of them were really good athletes.

MS: What else did you do for fun when you were growing up in Wilmington in sports?

CR: I was known as the wanderer in my family. That's why I have a passion and a romance with all of the southern area – Harbor City, Alameda, San Pedro, Wilmington and even Long Beach because they were our playgrounds. We used to go to Cabrillo Beach. When we couldn't go to Brighton Beach, we'd go to Cabrillo Beach.

MS: Tell me what was Brighton Beach.

CR: Brighton Beach was the best beach around here in Southern California. We used to walk from my home in East Wilmington and would take what was called Ford Boulevard at that time because Ford had a plant that was erected to build Ford model cars prior to going to Terminal Island. It was in the Wilmington side or maybe Long Beach. I think that there's a diagonal line

that cuts Long Beach off from Wilmington, and the Ford plant might have been considered Long Beach. Of course, Brighton Beach, like I said was the best beach around here, much better than Cabrillo. We had the big, huge waves, something similar to Redondo. We could get hamburgers and hot dogs there. Hamburgers were a dime, and hotdogs a nickel. We used to get snow cones there if we had the money, because a lot of us didn't have money. Sometimes, when we walked to the beach, we'd have our mothers pack us a lunch and we'd go there and stay pretty near all day. But I mentioned the fact that I was the wanderer in my family and I can boast that my dad never struck a blow on me of any kind with anything. My mother was the one that dealt the corporal punishment for my being the wanderer. Because we take off in a bunch early in the morning, we'd go to the California Yacht Club and swim in a channel. We'd go to the Edison plant and swim in their slump holes. We build diving boards out of a two by four or a two by twelve and jump off of that into the little slump holes, not even realizing what we were jumping into. It could have been very toxic for all we knew. There was an area that you could swim in in front of the Edison plant which led towards Brighton Beach. That was taken away from us by having the Naval shipyard erected there during pre-war.

MS: Did you ever go to Terminal Island where the Japanese lived?

CR: Yes, we did.

MS: Tell me what you saw about that.

CR: Well, I had friends that lived there that were Japanese. In Terminal Island, I had friends that lived there, some were Hispanic. Two families were Hispanic that we used to go and visit. The entire family would walk there because my dad didn't own a car at that time. We'd cross the drawbridge and turn right – or west as it was – and that's where all the residences were. The residences there were all built of wood. They even had wood walkways, no cement walkways there. We would visit the families there for a little while, maybe had dinner or lunch with them and then we'd trek back to Wilmington. The Japanese lived further towards the channel that the Ferry Building was on because a lot of Japanese were fishermen. They were part of the fishing industry in that ethnic group that lived on Terminal Island.

MS: What again did your dad do?

CR: My dad was a shipyard worker. He was an excellent welder and an excellent burner. I think that he was considered one of the best on the West Coast at one particular time. He got so good at it that he taught classes at San Pedro High School later on, after the war. He taught classes in welding and burning in that high school.

MS: What kind of welding and burning? What was the jobs –

CR: It all dealt with the shipbuilding industry, of course. He got to know metal really well. My understanding was that my uncles told me that he could scratch a piece of metal and know just what the density of it was and whether it would take a good weld or not. Because when they produce sheets of metal and wherever they produce the sheet metal – it was produced someplace else and a lot of it came probably from different foundries. But he could scratch it until the

texture of the metal and know whether it would fit in a weld because at that time, they used to cut a V in the big plates it took to make a ship.

MS: Tell me about your mother. Now, what did she do? What was her life like?

CR: My mother grew up with three other sisters and – or two other sisters. In Las Cruces, my granddad, I think at that time was a farmer. They had a home away from the main house that they used to travel because the fields were so big that they used to not only turn over the ground and built the irrigation because they got their irrigation probably from maybe the Colorado River – I don't know – from some river source, they got their irrigation. When my mother was a youngster, they were in school, they had to study when they went away from the main house. There was a tragedy there that struck. They used to have to use a coal lamp to be able to see and it was in the center of the of the table where they were studying. Her younger brother being the younger brother, of course – being the little wild one maybe, so to speak, had stolen some dynamite caps from somebody and he got too near the lamp. He started digging it out with a pencil and of course, it exploded. It just shattered. The glass went all over from the coal lamp. One of her sisters got some glass in her eye, which ruined that eye for the rest of her life. Unknown to anybody during that explosion, the second oldest sister – her name was Ruth –her hand was blown away. She was trying to hide it. She only remained with that much of her hand. After the explosion was over, there was a thumb that was dangling from that. So, they were too far away from any hospital that they – I guess maybe they tried to doctor it themselves. Later on, went to get treatment for it but she remains –

MS: Your mother wasn't hurt?

CR: My mother wasn't hurt at all, neither was my uncle, the youngest brother.

MS: Did your mother spend most of her time just taking care of the home and the kids that she was –

CR: Yes. They were taught how to cook, of course.

MS: How did she get to Wilmington?

CR: My mother lived in San Pedro when my dad arrived from New Mexico. They met, of course, and they decided that after, say, a courtship of some time that they would like to get married, which my granddad was against. He didn't want my mother to get married. She was too young, of course, but they didn't care. They eloped. When they eloped, my granddad got after my dad, saying that he had kidnapped his daughter. They were in Santa Ana when they made an arrest. They came out in the newspapers in Santa Ana as having been a kidnap victim and a kidnapper and also thrown in jail. I still have the newspaper article that tells that story. I saved it too, because somebody was smart enough to save it and it wound up in my hands later on in life.

MS: But your mom was a willing kidnap victim?



CR: Yes. She was very willing as a kidnap victim. Of course, she was going to school at the time, and I think she was about a tenth grader. Like I said before that she never finished high school.

MS: Let's go back to your grandparents. When did they come to San Pedro and why?

CR: I think that my grandparents came pre-1920. As near as I can recall, and I don't know if it was an idea borne out of my granddad's head that he would create a little mom-and-pop grocery store there on the corner because I never heard of him working anyplace else. All of my mother's brothers worked in the shipbuilding industry also. They worked at Todd Shipyard. They worked at Bethlehem Shipyard, as did my dad. One of his older brothers also was a good shipyard worker. They kind of grew up in the shipbuilding industry and reconstruction. When my father was employed – really fully employed – that he was working maybe sometimes fourteen to sixteen hours a day is when they started building the Liberty ships during World War II. That was an ongoing thing here for day and night. I mean, they worked around the clock to build that Liberty ships.

MS: Well, describe that. What was that like that changed it? This is really good. Thank you. Actually, I want to go back a bit on something. You talked about La Rambla, which is the neighborhood that your grandparents lived. But there were other sort of Hispanic barrios, neighborhoods. There was Mexican Hollywood.

CR: Yes, of course.

MS: Tell me about the different neighborhoods and what they were like.

CR: Well, there were two different barrio sections that a lot of Hispanics dealt with. A lot of them were ballplayers. Adjacent to Mexican Hollywood, which is another barrio section, there was a ball field that they all used to gather and play ball. It was a ritual of some of the Hispanics. I have pictures of this to prove it. Where they would don a suit, a black suit with a black tie, white shirt, and a black hat. They all look the same when they took a picture at these ballgames. Of course, eventually, my dad became a ballplayer. As was my mother's youngest brother, he was a pretty well-known baseball pitcher. They formed a team, up in La Rambla. Of course, as soon as they got that team formed, then the challenges came between the teams that were made up here in the harbor area. Not only Hispanic, but there were a lot of other ball teams that were made up of Caucasians and people that came from Yugoslavia and Italy and what have you. They made up the teams that would battle against the teams that were made up of Hispanic ballplayers. Whether they ever gained any championships or not – or I want to be a big Sandlot ballplayer, too. This was during the war, so I was waiting for my call. But we would challenge Negro teams that lived South Central, Los Angeles, maybe, and played our ballgames at a ball field called Rancho, which was in Wilmington. There were a lot of good athletes that came out of this. They not only made good ballplayers, but there were a lot of good fighters that were born out of this area that became professional fighters in the ring. Maybe someone else can relate to some of the greater fighters that were around here.

MS: Tell me the names of the baseball teams. What were the names of the teams in the leagues

that you would play with?

CR: Because we played at Rancho, we were called the Rancho teams. Whether some of the teams that were softball teams, either played for a sporting goods store – Kelly's for one – and then one ball team that eventually, one of the older ballplayers became a manager on the team that I played later on in life. They were called Janichos. That name, I guess, was born out of a town maybe in – or a description of somebody or somewhere in Mexico. I'm trying to remember some of the other ball teams, but it's – I don't really recall some of the other more –

MS: What are the big superstars in the leagues and the games that you played at?

CR: Okay. We had a lot of good softball pitchers that were very well noted. One in particular that I became a recreation director assistant to was named (Ray Salmak?). Another ballplayer that recently passed away was Ernesto Hernandez, we used to call him Netto. Another good softball pitcher became a compadre of mine. I don't know if you know what compadre means, but I baptized his firstborn. He was a good one. His name was Monzo. He was very well noted for his drops, and his rise ball and particularly hard to hit. I went up against him one time and I whipped every time. I just couldn't hit him. He was so good. Tony Monzo was his name. He later on played with Joe Rodgers' softball team was Snuffy Machado, and who was from San Pedro. There was a (Wedow Mendes?) that played softball, (Dickey Mendes?) played some softball and played a lot of football. But they wound up playing for Joe Rodgers Nitehawks and went back east to play for the softball championships of the nation.

MS: So, I go back in what was the New York Yankees of this league? What was the number one team you had to beat?

CR: There may have been baseball teams that were named Yankees, they emulated the big leagues at that time. Because at that particular time, all baseball was playing on the East Coast. One of my dreams was to go to a World Series game when I got older. When the Dodgers came to California, and they played for the World Series at the Coliseum, I didn't go. [laughs] I just neglected it. But most of us adopted a team that we liked. Mine, of course, was the New York Yankees. DiMaggio and Gehrig and all of those great ballplayers, Tony Lazzeri was on that team. And of course, all of their famous pitchers were up for grabs to as far as –

MS: Who was the equivalent of the New York Yankees in this local league?

CR: I don't think that we ever had a ball team here that was equivalent to the New York Yankees.

MS: In the sense in the league, they were the ones to beat. Who was the toughest team to beat?

CR: Well, there was always a rivalry in baseball between San Pedro and Wilmington, and some teams in Long Beach, some teams in Torrance and Gardena. But I can't recall who the outstanding teams were then. I wasn't paying that much attention to championships at that time. I just used to like to play because it was my dad's love for baseball that made me go in that direction.

MS: Let's go back to your Grammy when we started talking about some of these family gatherings at La Rambla when you went there. Tell me about that. Tell me about the food, the people who were there, what went on with their music and what was it like?

CR: We used to gather at my grandmother's house and some entire families, even my mother's younger brother would come. Of course, the women would do all of the cooking. And one of the primary things that all of my mother and her sister learned how to do was to roll the tortilla. It had to be rolled exactly round. And they knew how to pivot the masa, so to speak, which was what the tortilla was made of. They would make a stack of tortillas, it stood almost a foot high. Because there were going to be so many people eating. Of course, the basics were that we would always have rice and we would always have beans. On occasion, we were lucky to have meat because my granddad owned the store. He used to have to go get his cuts of meat, that's how we experienced getting to eat maybe good steak or a roast being made by my grandmother. She had a woodstove. No gas was pumped into that place. In the beginning, I think that they used to use coal lamps until they got electricity. They had to have it in order to have the mom-and-pop store.

MS: What went on there?

CR: All of us gathered. Of course, the kids played in my grandmother's yard. I call it my grandmother's yard because she was responsible for planting about five fig trees, one apricot tree, and other fruit trees. We would run in and out of the fruit trees. Another thing that we would experience was that they had a cellar with a big cellar door that we would open up and we'd go down in the cellar, which was just dirt. It wasn't anything that was built with concrete barriers to hold the dirt back. It was all just a matter of placing things and saving things and putting preserves in because they were good at that.

MS: They would call it root cellar.

CR: They would take and make jellies or canned fruit for the winter. When we couldn't get the fruit off of the trees, we would have some – I remember the curd tops that were put on the jars that they had in order to preserve that. They of course ate other things. You know that Hispanics learn how to eat things that were not savory to a lot of other races. That they ate nopales, which is a cactus. We used to eat the cactus apples off of the cactus. Because she had a lot of cactus, it was growing in the yard. When we wanted anything sweet, we'd go and pick loquats off of the trees. She had strawberries growing up against the fence and blackberries. That's the life of a kid around that time of in the early 1930s.

MS: What about music? Was there any music or entertainment, dancing, or anything?

CR: They probably went to dances, but there were never any. In Wilmington, there was a gathering place on L Street, which is a very famous street, by the way. L Street because they attach the gang named – they used to call them the L Street Gang. On L Street, they used to have a gathering place. Every Saturday night, they would have music and dancing. Whether they did that in San Pedro or not, I don't recall. But in Wilmington, it was called the (Notifica?). It was a gathering place for everybody to go. They would play Hispanic music and they play American

music for the younger groups that knew how to dance in that fashion. But it was a place where a lot of music was played. They usually would play until maybe 1:00 a.m. When the noise got too loud for the neighborhood, they wanted it – and it was adjacent to the one and only Catholic Church that was built was a very small, little, single chapel. Church that we all eventually made our first Holy Communion and were confirmed in.

MS: What was the name of the church?

CR: It's called the Holy Family Church. Later on, of course, they had St. Peter and Paul was built and that's one of the other Catholic churches in the remote area.

MS: Tell me what's the L Street gang is.

CR: Well, they were made up of toughs. The gang element was very prominent during the war years. Of course, everybody wanted to emulate the pachuco dress, which was the long coats and the big, pegged pants which was later adopted by a lot of Caucasians, even in the high school that I went to. They were dressed in a certain fashion, and they all wanted to show off their duds on Sunday or Saturday, Sunday evening and Saturday evening also. They'd walk up and down L Street. They walk in groups. Some of them went very extreme, you know, to where they had the big chain hanging off of their belts and they wore the big hats with the feathers in them and stuff like that. But I never got that far, my dad wouldn't allow me to do that.

MS: That's the zoot suits.

CR: That was the zoot suit era.

MS: Did you hear anything about in that era about the zoot suit riots downtown Los Angeles?

CR: Oh, yes.

MS: Tell me about that.

CR: Well, it became very outstanding as far as the news was concerned that the ones that disliked the pachuco or the zoot suit or so to speak, were the Navy men. They would get chased down the streets here in San Pedro during the time that we were in the war. Because our Bay Harbor here was a sort of a mecca for a lot of destroyers and battleships and things that would anchor at the outer harbor. Of course, the sailors needed to have their liberty and everything. They would migrate even down to Los Angeles for their entertainment. Because there was a lot of hoochie coochie dancers on Broadway and Main Street. So, the sailor wanted to get his kicks by going to Broadway and Main Street. The gang element was there if it's very prominent there. Sometimes the sailors would hold a person down and cut the long hair, so to speak. Because everybody wore the ducktail hair at that time. I had a lot of hair at that point in my life or I grew the hair long. I would notice the stares and all of that from people, especially when I took a date to Long Beach or something. We had to wait for the red car, which was our means of transportation. We took the red car everywhere. We took it to Long Beach. We took it to Redondo and to Los Angeles because when we couldn't find the clothes that we liked, which was

in San Pedro, there was one store that was called (Canisters?) that had the good-looking coat. They used to sell the pegged pants. So, we couldn't find them here. We would go to little Barney's in Long Beach, which was another store that sold good clothes. When we couldn't buy their clothes that we needed – we used to use a lot of cords at that time. And the only place that you could get whipped cord was to go into Los Angeles to shop in the stores on Broadway.

MS: You said you used to get stares on the record. Tell me about that.

CR: Well, it made me a little uneasy. Because I would be wearing a coat that had long fingertip, so to speak. My dad wouldn't let me go to the pegged pants too extreme. At that time, he was buying me those Cuban pointed shoes. They were very sharp. As a matter of fact, that didn't do my feet any good as I grew up. But when we were waiting for the cars to go to either to Los Angeles or to Long Beach, we'd be sitting there by the bench, maybe sitting there with a girl or just another guy. The people would look at us. Whether they were cursing under their breath, we didn't know. But it was the stares that we noticed that we got that we knew they didn't like it.

MS: Now, there was a slang language that the zoot suiters said.

CR: Oh, yes.

MS: It's caló. Did you use that when you're growing up?

CR: No, I didn't. But I knew of it. You know, everybody used to use it, especially the guys that were called the Wall Street Gang. They would say, "I will see you later" became [foreign language], "I'll see you after a while." All of their clothes were given names. The coat was called a (takeuchi?). The hats were called tandos. I was trying to remember what the name they used to give for shoes. I kind of lost the fact that they used to have a name for pants too. I can't remember what it is now. But I didn't use that language. I stuck with the good English that I learned.

MS: Did you ever hear of the song that was a big hit called Pachuco Boogie by Don Tosti?

CR: I didn't hear that until later after I came back from the war.

MS: Yes. It came out in [19]49.

MS: We're doing a documentary on Chicano rock and roll. So, we go back to Don Tosti and to a lot of Guerrero and all those guys from that era. So, I'm getting off into another subject here. But just out of curiosity, what did your dad do? Tell us about the work he did, the jobs he did, and how that was sort of like the economy of the harbor. So, give us a sense of what was going on in the jobs in the harbor.

CR: My dad was working in the shipbuilding industry in ship repair, which was the mainstay for Bethlehem. I think they were doing more repairs in shipbuilding there. I think that most of the shipbuilding went on at Todd's Shipyard. I guess all the smaller boats were – or ships were probably being designed and built in San Diego. But my dad was a welder. He used to work a

lot with the ship fitters. Because when they had to cut this certain big sheet of metal to go on a ship even for repair because a lot of ships came in here from the war that were either struck by – maybe not only torpedoes, but others form of firepower that the enemy had. He picked up the burning along the way and became a good burner. My uncle was a riveter. So, the stories that were told to me by my uncle were the stories that when they would rivet ships that they had a catcher. They had a man down at the bottom that used to heat the rivets, hot enough that they were tossed by the one that had the catcher. He would toss it up to another catcher. Then of course, immediately it went through the hole in the ship's wall and there was what they call a backer. The riveter would be on the front end, and the backer would just have a large hunk of metal that would flatten it as the rivet machine went into action. I guess that they learned how to do a lot of construction on the upper deck to either install radar because that came along, I think, during the war. They did other ship repair that was damaged to the ship also that went on all over the structure.

MS: How did you get involved in the harbor working?

CR: The only way that I became involved in the harbor area as a worker was when I was going to high school. I played baseball for a man who used to work the warehouse in one of the canneries where the tuna fish packing went on. He would give us employment during the summer, when we were not playing ball, or we were playing ball at the same time. But that was my workplace – was the fish cannery. I didn't get to work in the front too much. Because we were hired to work in the warehouse where we did all the boxing of all the cans of tuna. My job was to put the glue on the carton and fold it down and stencil the code number and its destination where it was going to go. That was my job. And then I would take the carton filled with tuna fish and place it on a pallet. You had to know which way to stagger the boxes so that they wouldn't collapse once the once the jitney came along and picked them up. Or the forklift came along and picked them up and stacked them.

MS: What was this like working in the cannery? Was it noisy? What was going on there?

CR: It was very noisy, especially when we –

MS: In the cannery.

CR: In the cannery, it was kind of noisy, because of all the machinery that they had that especially when they caught wet fish, the machines would cut off the head and the tail and leave just the – and there was another portion of the operation that would gut the fish and all of that extra stuff would go down and evidently would get washed away by a small rut in the flooring. The women were taken – pack the fish in tall cans, especially mackerel. After it was packed, and it would go to another machine that would seal it with a cap. Then from there, it would go into baskets. They would put them in the retorts and do the cooking for so long. It's all a matter of knowing what you're doing in the fishing industry. They would pack sardines, of course, in oval cans too. That was the wet fish. But the other fishing industry, which was an area where my wife worked for a good 27 years was tuna packing, which was the fish all went in there by grades. And the pays was a white albacore, of course. The fishermen would go to areas where they could really fish for albacore because that was the catch for them that would pay them the

most money. But the other tuna was accepted but it went into different categories of the canning industry. I used to get to watch the women pack tuna. All of the excess tuna that became sort of like crumbled would become flakes. And any part that wasn't used of the fish that was collected usually would go into the pet food. They had pet food, also pet food section in most of the canneries. I used to watch the men unload the fish when they would come in also. That was a ritual that was very interested and educational to do. I knew a couple of fishermen and –

MS: Would you ever find it difficult to eat a can of tuna after working in the cannery?

CR: Tuna is one of my favorite fish. I love it. I eat it in several different fashions. I like to fix fish with steamed rice. I like to fix it in salad. So, it never bothered me. We were lucky enough when we were working high school that we knew we were going to get to do this because the foreman would let us do that. Is that if there were dent cans, we were allowed to open them and pour out the fish and mix it with onions and chili peppers. We take a loaf of French bread then we would cut ourselves a good section of French bread and make ourselves a big sandwich. No, tuna never did bother me. I was even watching it being packed. I'm a big fish eater. Even my wife, after we married, she used to bring mackerel home.

MS: Is your wife still alive?

CR: No. My wife died in 2001.

MS: After World War II, you came back, and you worked in the shipyards for a while.

CR: Yes.

MS: Tell me about that. What did you do?

CR: Okay. After the war was over, I had no experience in anything that's outside of my high school, experience in what I learned. I studied mostly art. I was an art major. That's why I was offered, I think, a scholarship to Pepperdine. But after the war was over, I came back and within two months, I had another cousin who was from the state of New Mexico also. He was living with an uncle of mine and we both applied to go work at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard. We had no experience in anything. So, we started out with the labor gang, which was dirty, dirty work. We used to come home with our clothes were all dirty and mucky. Because we were good at playing basketball and baseball, we hooked up with one of the general foremen in the shipyard who wanted to experience – he had won a lot of softball championships but never basketball. So, my cousin and I joined the basketball team. We immediately became the pride of this man's eye. We were given jobs as riggers, which we had no experience in. I learned how to use a chain fall and a tackle and learned all the different things that went on in an engine room in a ship. Or outside, we learned how to take the big wheels off of the ships and how to tie those off and how to turn a turnbuckle and use big heavy wire in order to make our lifts. Everything that pertained to rigging, we learned.

MS: Let's go back to the first job as a laborer. What were you doing in the labor game as a laborer?

CR: As a laborer, we used to clean the cofferdams where all the sludges went. We had to scoop that up, put it in buckets and we used to have sanders and we take the rust off of the bottom. Of course, the rust would go all over every place and permeate our dresswear for that day. So, we had to have much change of clothes on almost every day. And we didn't like that. Neither did our wives, they didn't like that we would come home so dirty. We'd have to wash all of that clothing so that we would have it for them, maybe the cycle that we went through to have a change of clothes every day.

MS: So, what does a rigger do? What's a rigger's job?

CR: Riggers' jobs, of course, they have crane riggers that work with all of the cranes. They tie all the loads up and they take them off of the ship and put them on the ship. When they work an engine room job, they have to know what they're going to lift up and how they're going to lift it because of the closed quarters. So, they would have the welding department come and put pad eyes up on the bulkheads so that they could hang a big chain fall. If you're going to take a turbine cover off, for instance, it has to come off awfully slow. Because the machinists come in and they put these little pegs on each corner. They're measured so that when you make a lift, you won't damage the turbine. It comes up real, real slow, and you have to pull the chain falls very, very slowly. Eventually, get the cover off and maybe set it to one side until the machinists could come in and repair whatever was wrong in the turbine. We used to have to remove parts of the shaft that turned the prop if they were damaged. That was a tricky job. Because you have a shaft alley in which you have to go in and set up the chain falls in order to lift a section of the shaft that turns the prop in the back and replace it. You're working with machinists so that they put the bolts and the nuts in there. They had torque wrenches. They had to torque the wrenches so that they are – it was an experience for me, I really learned a lot in the three and a half years that I worked there.

MS: Now, what about the accidents?

CR: As a shipyard worker, we took on a lot of facets of the ship. The ships coming into the Naval Shipyard – one of the accidents that I had experienced at the time was not our fault. But it happened anyway was when we were drydocking a ship. We used to have to handle the big hawser – they call them the big Hawser lines, they were made out of a rope. Later on, it became a different kind of hawser. They did it with plastics. But we were handling the hawsers and in order to bring a ship into drydock, you have to watch the walls so that it doesn't come close. We weren't close to the wall. But drydocking a ship, they have to lay the keel blocks so that the ship will land right on the keel blocks. You bring them in when the drydock is full, and then they empty it. But when you're bringing it in, and the drydock is filled with water, you have to use it. They have the turnstiles that are turning around the tube. You lash the hawser line on so that you can bring the ship in so that it's even on both sides. Well, I think that when the supervisor is actually the one that call the shot on that we needed to go to starboard, or that we had to go to the port. He called for a pull on the hawser to pull it towards the port side. And it hit the quay wall. It damaged some of the area that was part of the machinery that helps to empty the water. They have little areas that are built it was stairs that go way down. But they have a section there that as you go down, they have pieces of machinery on the side of the drydock that takes to empty the



water or fill it up or whatever. But that was the only accident that I had ever experienced in. But there were a lot of accidents that happened where the limbs got broken. But there were cuts and things like that that probably went on in the engine rooms and other areas where maybe a line was snapped, and somebody would get hurt by the snap of the wire. That happens quite a bit.

MS: For the final question, you grew up here in Wilmington in San Pedro. What do you think about this place, this harbor? What does it mean to you, this town, this harbor, this port?

CR: Well, I can quote you a chapter and verse of how I became sort of a romanticist about the harbor area. That I've been here a long time and I've watched all the changes that have gone on. Not only the demographics, but the geographics and the industry that has changed and some of the things that I experienced during all of that time in growing up in San Pedro. The changes that took place, I knew that they were going to take place because I had studied the history clear back to Phineas Banning. He predicted that we would become the greatest harbor in the world at one time. I know that there were all kinds of things that were going on in the harbor at that time. Not only did they import a lot of things that were used locally but things that went to Los Angeles and they were horse and buggy type of things that they traveled with. The Hispanic has been here a long, long time, but he became known as the "greaser" because they used to clean the cowhides that used to be shipped to the East Coast to make shoes and purses and belts and everything. They were the only ones that would do the dirty work, clean the grease off of the hides and get them nice and clean. Knowing that history and the things that developed, it didn't bother me like it does a lot of other people here in this locale. I had a romance with this area ever since I was a kid. I stuck around and eventually bought my home in Wilmington. Not only did I work here locally, but I was hired as a graphic designer at Harbor College later on in life after going through school, going through art school. But all of the changes don't bother me. A lot of people are bothered by the train whistles. To me, I can be asleep, and I can hear a train whistle I said, "Boy, things are really moving in this in this harbor." A lot of people take a bad light of the cranes, it stands so high in the harbor area that they don't like the looks at it from their vision way up on Palos Verdes or something like that. That they don't like the looks of the crane. They even had to had them redesigned one, and that didn't work because the longshoremen couldn't work with a new design. So, knowing all of that history and –

MS: For you, what does the crane mean? But for you, what do you think about the cranes?

CR: Well, I love them. I eventually became a transportation dispatcher at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard. I love cranes. I used to have to work with them myself. I had a (truck green gang?). Being a transportation dispatcher, I used to have to send flat cars to certain parts of the Navy Yard and I'd send a truck crane to load them. Or else I'd call a transportation for a big semi-truck to come and that we were going to put a load on it. If they had to lift a boat out of the water, I had the proper crane to go to that area and lift the boat right out of the water. Or take it off of its skids and put it on onto a truck and it was shipped someplace else. No, cranes don't bother me. I learned about the gooseneck. I helped put the big German crane together, the floating German crane. I happened to be there when they brought in parts. I remember the foreman's name, his name was (Busini?). He had the job of putting that and erecting that crane. So, that eventually became one of the biggest lifters of – well, I think the limit I think was 250 tons that they could lift out of the water with that German crane. If you know the history of the German crane, when

the war was over, they took these cranes that were built by the Germans. I think the Russians took one, but they tried to float there to Russia. And on the high seas, they lost it. Well, we were smart enough as engineers that we brought it back in pieces and erected it here. It's become a boon. I think it's still – well, I take that back. I went through the Panama Canal recently and that's where the German crane is now.

MS: Okay. We're going to pause. I'm going to take a picture of it.

[end of transcript]