

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Rudy Svorinich Oral History
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Male Speaker: Please say your name and spell it.

Rudy Svorinich: Rudy Svorinich, Jr., S-V-O-R-I-N-I-C-H.

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

RS: May 1960, right here in San Pedro.

MS: Now your family goes way back. Tell us about your family and its association with San Pedro. When did they come here? Why did they come here? What did they do?

RS: Well, my family immigrated to San Pedro from the Dalmatian coast of what is now present-day Croatia in 1920. Half of the family arrived in 1920, the other half of the family in 1921 and 1922. Why they were attracted to San Pedro, primarily was the climate. A lot of what San Pedro had to offer is what Dalmatia had offered. The only difference was that they were escaping the end of the First World War and the poverty and all the misery that was in some of the regions of Europe at that time. America proved to be the place where they wanted to come and start a new life. San Pedro matched the climate and the industry to which they were most familiar, which at the time, was fishing. So, the family arrived in 1920, and we've never left.

MS: Now, from what you know, from reading or from stories told in the family, what was the port like in the 1920s? What was San Pedro like?

RS: Well, San Pedro in the 1920s and the early days – and mind you, the port had only been the port in the 1920s, about 13 years at that time. There was a lot of military activity in the port at that time, going up into 1940 when the Pacific Fleet that was destroyed at Pearl Harbor was transferred from San Pedro to Pearl Harbor in 1940. During that period of time, there was a lot of military activity. There was a lot of fishing activities, which my family was involved in. The longshoreman union at that time had not even been formed as of yet. That was formed in 1934. As a quick side note, both my grandfather and grand great grandfather were charter members of the union when it was formed. But during the early days, the military had such a formidable presence in both the Navy and the Army at Fort MacArthur that on many occasions, and in fact, on quite most Sundays, as the 1920s progressed and the Great Depression took a hold, that families would visit, and my family most certainly would visit the battleships. Because the battleships would send launches down here at the end of Berth 55, and families were able to visit the ships. So, you know, during those years, times were kind of hard, and food was kind of scarce. To be able to enjoy the hospitality and the luxury of, let's say, ice cream on board a battleship as a youngster, as my dad remembers, that was quite a treat. So, San Pedro was kind of a rough and tumble town then, based upon stories that I've heard from my family. Beacon Street, of course, was known worldwide for its plethora of bars and activities and nightclubs. But one of the things that I remember my family telling me and my dad, my grandfathers, was that even though San Pedro was a "military town" at the time and known for its kind of rough and tumble ways, one could walk down the street even as an unescorted young lady and not be bothered. I mean, there was a sense of obligation. There was a sense of community. There was a sense of pride that even the visiting military personnel knew that the community had and have had to uphold.

MS: I'm going to ask you to go over that story about the thirties again and going to the ships and make the point that they were fed there, and that was what the ice cream is about. So, start again and repeat that story about your parents telling you about going over to the ships in the thirties.

RS: I remember my dad and my uncles telling me that as young children, that the battleships used to send small boats or launches to the docks. Families used to be able to go out and visit the battleships. This, of course, being in the midst of the Great Depression, some of the luxuries on the mainland were kind of not affordable at the time, such as ice cream. My dad remembers, and my uncle remember quite fondly being able to go out to some of the battleships that were sunk at Pearl Harbor, that were anchored here in San Pedro, to go aboard and look at the big guns and talk with the sailors and then get an ice cream cone or a cup of ice cream as a treat to visit on that Sunday. One of the things they also remember is that they used to have concerts. The ship's bands used to perform under these big canvas tarps that they set out in front of the guns on the decks. You'd be able to sit there with your mom and dad and your brothers and sisters and listen to this wonderful martial music that the ship's bands would perform. Then you would get a meal. The hospitality was just wonderful. Of course, during the Great Depression, it was very much appreciated by the local community. It was a real act of kindness that I think resonates into this community to this day.

MS: Let's go back. You said that your grandparents came from the Dalmatian coast. Talk about the kind of people who were here in San Pedro, the communities that were here, not just from Croatia and the Dalmatian coast, but what was the makeup of the community of San Pedro in those early days when they arrived?

RS: Well, the makeup of San Pedro in the early days – and when we talk about the early days, you know, the 1910s, the 1920s, 1930s – was a nice conglomeration of immigrants from the Dalmatian coast, from Italy, a lot of folks from Scandinavia at the time, a lot of folks from countries in Europe that had seen the worst part of the First World War and were seeking a better life in America. One of the things that I believe made San Pedro great at that time and that continues to make San Pedro a wonderful and great community, were folks coming from different cultures and different perspectives and different walks of life and different occupations, coming to a new country, in a new town, and all getting along and working for the betterment of the community and raising their families together and all embracing everything that America had to offer. Because you may have lived in your own segregated little neighborhood in San Pedro – because at that time, the Yugoslavs or Croatians lived in a certain little part, and the Italians lived in a certain little part, and the Norwegians lived in a certain little part, and the Latinos lived in a certain little part – but all the kids went to school together. So, by going to school together, whether it be elementary school or junior high school or San Pedro high school, they brought those experiences back home after school, which made the community tighter and made the community more tolerant of one another's differences. I would think that one of the things that has made San Pedro such a wonderful community after all of these years, is the tolerance and the appreciation of many cultures. Because when you look at it, everybody brought their own culture to the community. But because of the kids going to school together and playing together on the ballfields, they brought those cultures and their friends back home to them, which made the bond stronger in the community, and that bond exists today.

MS: One of the things that's sort of striking about this place are these long term cultural and social organizations and traditions in San Pedro. Talk about these organizations and cultural and social societies and various groups that really, again, make San Pedro a special place.

RS: Well, at the beginning, most of all society functions in San Pedro operate around the churches. Of course, the oldest church in San Pedro was St. Peter's Episcopal, which is now located in the cemetery down at the end of Grand. As the churches started to grow and the different cultures and the religions and the ethnicities started to arrive in San Pedro, they started forming their own social clubs. Ulabrand Hall that the Norwegians established, is still on Gaffey Street – on 12th and Gaffey. The Italians generated a whole bunch of clubs, the Sons of Italy, the Massini Lodge, all sorts of clubs. One of the most prominent is the Dalmatian American Club in San Pedro, which started out as the Yugoslav Club in the mid-1920s when twenty-five immigrants of Slavic descent got together and said, "Well, we want to form a club." Now, mind you, this was just four years shy of the Great Depression. They built this little clubhouse on the corner of 17th and Palos Verdes. In the course of nine years, were able to raise \$100,000 and built the clubhouse that exists today, which is a 22,000-square-foot facility. You can imagine, \$100,000 in 1935 is probably multimillion of dollars today. It was the Taj Mahal of its time, and it remains a central gathering place in San Pedro for quite a few weddings and anniversaries and community events. I think it's these types of organizations, both what the Croatian people brought, and the Italian people brought, and the Norwegians brought, and every other ethnicity brought to San Pedro, that they built their family life around. These organizations, where, as an example, for my family, is that both my grandparents and my parents and my wife and myself met at that Dalmatian Club. So, we all found our spouses there over multi-generations. My grandpa met my grandma there. My dad met my mom there. I met my wife there. So, it's one of those wonderful little gifts that the community of San Pedro has in these cultural and social clubs that I think is not replicated any place else in the city of Los Angeles.

MS: We're talking about churches. Mary Star keeps coming up again and again. Talk about the prominent churches and how they relate to the communities as well.

RS: Well, one of the things that, in regard to San Pedro's development, which has been one of the strongest points of San Pedro's development, was its strong religious faith. Back in the early days, we had every denomination known to world religions in San Pedro. We had a very strong Protestant denominations, Presbyterian Church, Episcopal, Methodist, you name it. The Catholic Church, Mary Star of the Sea, growing out of an outreach from downtown Los Angeles to establish a parish in the harbor area, which then sprang two other parishes in the harbor area. Mary Star of the Sea, of course, being – having grown, I should say, to the largest parish west of the Mississippi to this point. I think, as people left the old country and came to San Pedro, of course, they brought their faith with them. One of the things to which San Pedro took great pride is that when you drive up and down streets in San Pedro today, the same congregations exist that date back to the turn of the century, and I mean turn of the 19th century and the 20th century. So, you have denominations such as Mary Star and St. Peter's Episcopal and Grand View Methodist Church, Temple Beth El, the Jewish temple, all of these institutions that date back over a hundred years but still are active congregations and parishes in the community. In so many other communities where you see religious institutions fade into memory, here in San

Pedro, they still go strong. Because you have that multi-generational loyalty to one's faith, and they keep the institutions alive. Again, I think that's probably unique in in the greater Los Angeles area, if not in the Southern California area, that you have a Catholic church, a Presbyterian Church, an Episcopal Church, a Jewish Temple, and you have places of worship that are over a hundred years old, and not in regard to their structure, but to their congregation. It's simply a matter of fact in the community. Whereas you go into other communities, and you talk about something like that, that would be, "Oh, my goodness, you mean that congregation is over a hundred years old?" You say, "Well, yes." "Well, where's that at?" "Well, it's in San Pedro." So, I think that's another little gift and another little blessing that our community has that many others don't.

MS: Now, your grandfather was involved in the fishing. Talk about the importance of the fishing industry in San Pedro and what happened to it over time.

RS: My family, on both sides of my family, on my dad's side of the family, which are the Svoriniches, and my mother's side of the family, which are the Tomiches, when they both came to San Pedro eventually, from the old country, they took up the occupation of commercial fishing. At that time, there were hundreds and hundreds of fishing boats, purse seiners, and other types of fishing vessels, long pole vessels that fish tuna, that just filled our fishing slip with opportunity for local residents across the many cultures. The Croatian fishermen, the Italian fishermen, the Portuguese fishermen, the Spanish fishermen, the Norwegians, all of them had their own boats or fished on boats or had partnership in fishing boats, to which, back in the early days, it was tough for them. They didn't have all of the equipment that they have on the boats now. They didn't have all the winches. You had to do everything by hand. You had to pull in the skiff by hand. You had to pull in the net by hand. One of the innovations that – and one of the namesakes of our community is when Martin J. Bogdanovich, who was the founder of StarKist Foods – and I always tease everybody that was Charlie Tuna's daddy – went and came up with the concept of bringing ice out on the boats in order to pack the fish in ice, so you would be able to make a longer trip and be able to bring more catch back home. It revolutionized the fishing industry when he built his cannery and employed a lot of folks out there too. But one of the things that a lot of folks forget as time passes by is that this community was built on the fishing industry. As the fishing industry grew and prospered, so did the community. The community grew up around the fishing industry. One of the things that, as I recall, is stories from our family, our family both being boat owners as well as boat partners as well as being boat employees, is that the boats down here in the fishing slip used to be docked four or five or six across on both sides. That one time, there were hundreds of boats that occupied the fishing slip and provided a livelihood for the majority of the community. Now, when fishing started to decline in the early 1950s, a lot of folks transitioned to other maritime-related work, which was the Longshore industry, as my family did. But for the greater part of forty to fifty years, entire families were on their dad's boats, on their grandpa's boats, on an uncle's boat, on a friend's boat, bringing in this income into the community, which really kind of was a buffer to the effects of the Great Depression, as we saw in other parts of the country. There was no dust bowl in San Pedro because folks had their own backyard vegetable gardens, and there was always fish to eat. So, while times were hard and there was intense poverty, there wasn't the great suffering that we saw in middle America, in the Midwest, because of that industry here. So, as that industry again, started to die out in the 1950s you saw folks pick right up into the longshore industry, into the

shipbuilding industry, and still embraced some type of maritime-related job, which of course, kept the community strong.

MS: You mentioned the other part of this, and it's connected, really, to the labor movement. Talk about the importance of San Pedro as a historic place in the history of American labor movement, but also it's been an important part of the community. Talk about the development of the union movement here and San Pedro's importance in that development and its contribution and its involvement with the community.

RS: As we all know, the labor movement is very strong in the community in San Pedro. It has great roots in the community of San Pedro and the harbor area in general. One of the things that a lot of folks don't realize is that part of the reason that the labor movement was born was because of the union activism on the West Coast of the United States and San Francisco and in San Pedro as it relates to the longshore industry. I'm sure many folks have seen the movie over the years on the waterfront with Marlon Brando and Karl Malden and a few of the other famous actors of history. That's how things were back in those days, is that the favorites were picked to work on the dock. The boss, the walking boss, came out and said, "You're going to work. You're going to work. You're going to work, and you're not." So, Harry Bridges, the founding president of the ILWU, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, helped to organize an effort to where they would have the Dispatch Hall, where cronyism was no longer going to be the case by the companies, but it was going to be a fair and equitable process by which how people were going to be hired. My grandfather and my great grandfather were charter members of the ILWU, were on the picket line in 1934 when the union was founded. My dad would later become a longshoreman as well. I remember a great story that my mom and my grandma tell me, is that back in – oh, it must have been right around the mid-1930s that for union activity, there was a gentleman by the name of Mr. Padovan, who was arrested. They brought him down to the San Pedro police station, which was on the seventh floor of what is now San Pedro City Hall, and he was incarcerated. So, the longshoremen, my grandfather, and great grandfather, being one of the two participants, went and circled the building. They were marching around the building. My mother and grandmother and all the rest of the families of the longshoremen were up in Beacon Park on the grass watching this activity. They were all marching around the police station saying, "We want Padovan. Release Padovan." After marching for a few hours, the police released him. So, it's a great story where this union activism was a family event, where we're going to go down and march around the police station, and all the families came down and watched from the park of this activity. It was a rough and tumble time then too. There was a lot of pushing and shoving and a lot of pain and suffering and a lot of injury to the longshore workers at that time. Hence the motto to this day, an injury to one is an injury to all. Out of that strife in the 1930s came a way of life and a livelihood in San Pedro that exists to this day, which again, has been kind of a buffer to some of the economic downturns that we've seen in other parts of the country, but because of the longshore work here and the strong union force here, that the community has been able to strive and provide a wage to its middle class here in the community and to its blue collar workers, that have provided education for their children, has provided a good way of life, that has kept the base economy here in the community strong.

MS: This is terrific. I'm glad you're a public speaker. You've never done this before. I'm sure it's awkward. The next area that I want to talk about that's important and no longer important is

ship building. Talk about San Pedro as a ship building center, a little bit about what you know about that, again, how it may relate or not relate to your family.

RS: Well, one of the most important industries of San Pedro's past was the shipbuilding industry. We had a series of shipyards in the local area, from the Second World War and prior to the small, little shipbuilding companies that exist now. We had Bethlehem Steel. We had the Kaiser plant. We had Todd Shipyards that built the majority of a whole series or a whole class of fast frigates in the 1980s here in the community and at one time employed tens of thousands of workers. But as the market economy changed, you saw those industries disappear and a lot of those workers be displaced and have to be absorbed into other maritime-related industries, whether it be longshoring or some other type of profession. San Pedro, during the early years, was basically shipping – shipbuilding, rather, longshore work, and fishing. You were in one of those three professions. One of the things that was very good for San Pedro is that each of those professions provided for a multi-generational opportunity for families to be employed in the community. So, if your dad was a pipefitter at the local shipyard, there was a good chance that you would have a chance to work in the shipyard. Or if your father worked on a fishing boat, there was a chance that you may be a fisherman as well, and the same for longshoring. So, as things started to change in the 1980s and in the 1990s we saw, and San Pedro saw, the loss of ten to fifteen thousand shipyard jobs that provided a good, steady source of income in the community. But for a period of close to fifty years, maybe even a little bit more, you had a very, very strong relationship between the shipbuilding industry and the community of San Pedro. They not only built the, as I said, the fast frigates of the United States Navy in the 1980s and the 1990s, it also saw to the building of the Liberty ships and the Victory ships of the Second World War. So, as that industry started to die off, I think part of San Pedro died with it, because it was such a wonderful time in our community. I can still hear the whistles in my mind, from my childhood, when the time to work whistle went off at one of the shipyards. Then here came the coffee break whistle. Here came the lunchtime whistle and the midafternoon break and then the closing whistle, and that you would hear those whistles resonate throughout the community. So, one of the things that I know very well is that what made the community strong in the early years were these well-paid blue-collar jobs that provided for a trade for those who were not academically inclined. That's one of the shortcomings that you hear echo across our society now, just not in San Pedro, is that not everyone is meant for college. For those not meant for college, where do they find a place of employment? In San Pedro, for all of those years, it was working with your hands at a trade to which you could take pride in, that you could raise your family, that you could show your skill, and show your pride. That's a lot of what San Pedro pride was built upon, being able to work with your hands at a trade that you were good at. So, one of the things that I think is sorely missed in our society and in our community is that type of type of trade, that type of craftsmanship, that type of being able to say, I went to work today, and I was able to do this with my hands and build that. I think that's sorely missed now. But for San Pedro's betterment, for a good fifty years, that type of pride was in the community. The pride is still there. It resonates in our memories. But for a full fifty years, that type of workman pride was in the community, which I think added to the betterment of the community and added to our strength.

MS: Let's talk a bit about your father, Senior. Who was he? What did he do? What was his involvement in the community?

RS: Well, Rudy Senior is 83 years young now, born in the state of Washington, moved to San Pedro when he was four years old, with his mom and dad and brothers and sister, went to the local elementary school, went to Dana Junior High School, went to San Pedro High School, drafted, and it's a great story. He was still in high school and had received a draft notice, one of those greetings letters from your local draft board, and had five days to graduate and then was put on a train to San Diego. He said, next thing he knew, he was sent overseas and came back three years later. Dad started out as a fisherman on one of his dad's boats. As fishing started to go away in the early 1950s, became a longshoreman and worked as a longshoreman until his retirement about 30 years ago. He's been enjoying retirement ever since. But to dad, being a member of the fishing community was always a sense of pride. I remember him telling me when they used to sit in class at San Pedro High School and if you were in one of the second story classrooms that faced the water, you were able to take a look towards the breakwater, and you were able to see, based upon the crow's nest and the mast and the shape of the fishing vessel, you know whether or not that was your dad's boat coming in or whether or not that your uncle's boat coming in or your friend's daddy's boat coming in. It was a real magical time in the community, he says, to sit there and sometimes daydream and look out the window and, "Oh, gee, Dad's boat's coming in. Here he comes. Dad's home tonight." So, my dad, as he still tells me, has great memories of growing up in the community and working on the docks, both as a fisherman and as a longshoreman, and now being able to tell his grandchildren, my children, the stories of how it was in the community and to be able to grow up here and work here and hang out at all the different nightclubs that were in town at the time and all the different drive-ins and be part of a group of fellows. Back in those days, they were called gangs as well, but not as we know gangs today, the violent type of gangs, but a group of individuals that hung out together. To grow up in those years in the 1940s and the 1950s and to marry my mom, Winnie, and to raise me and my being able to raise my family here, it just proved that if you worked hard and stayed focused on wanting to do what was right and be a good citizen of the community, that you could succeed. I believe he did. One of the things, which has been the pride of his life, has been a member and officer of the Dalmatian American Club, which was then the Yugoslav American Club. So, as much as serving his country and the military has been and working on the docks as a fisherman, longshoreman, it's also been an active member of the community, as a member and as the president of the Dalmatian American Club, being active in his social life through his ethnicity. So, it's been a wonderful life for him. He's thoroughly enjoyed it and continues to enjoy it.

MS: Now you also have or had a remarkable grandmother. Talk about her.

RS: I was fortunate to have remarkable grandparents. One of my grandparents, my grandmother, Mary Svorinich, lived to be 105 years old, came to San Pedro in March of 1922, my grandfather having arrived in the community a couple of years earlier and raised the money to send for her and my uncle and my aunt – my Uncle Andy and my Aunt Zorka. They were able to come from Dalmatia, which was always a source of pride to my grandfather and grandmother that they were able to come second class. They were able to raise enough money. He was able to work to get enough money to bring his family over second class. They first arrived in the state of Washington, lived there for a few years, where my dad and my Uncle Zrini were born. Then my dad, Rudy Senior, with his family, moved in San Pedro in 1929, from

Washington. They lived in a series of small little houses in San Pedro. Then in 1939, right at the Great Depression – starting to come out of the throes of the Great Depression, my grandfather was able to put enough money together to build a house for my grandmother, Mary, right on 19th Street, right below Gaffey, right on the corner of 19th and Grand. So, except for a brief period of time where she had to work in the cannery during the Depression, she was a homemaker. Raised her family. I remember some great memories as a youngster, going to her backyard. They had all the fruit trees and the vegetable gardens. One of her routines that I remember that she did for more than sixty years, would listen to the soap operas on the radio. Then once TV came along, watched her favorite soap opera, would take a midafternoon nap that she would do for years, have a little glass of red wine every afternoon, and then go into the dinner preparation. She did that for years and years and years and years and was blessed to make it to 105 years old. I had not known that most of her brothers and her sisters lived to be in their late 90s, and up until two weeks prior to her passing, had all her faculties. So, to be able to live 105 years and to have all of your faculties and all of your body controls and to be able to enjoy your family for that long, it was terrific. I remember, at her 100th birthday, that we had at one of our local institutions, Ante's Restaurant, that she actually, on her 100th birthday, got up out of her chair and did a folk dance, like one of the circle dances that you see a lot of the Italian and Eastern European cultures do. She actually got up there. Ours is called the kolo. She got up there, and she danced the kolo with the rest of the family at 100 years old. When we asked her and said, "Nana, how are you feeling today? It's your 100th birthday, and you're out here dancing." She goes, "Well, the first hundred were the hardest [laughter]." It was a great story. We used to ask her and say, "Nana, why do you think you haven't passed away yet?" Her answer was, "Because I haven't passed away yet." So, they were just great memories. She passed away a few years ago now. But to make it to 105 and live from 1929 all the way up until just a few years ago, in San Pedro, she saw the community grow and grow around her, which is marvelous for her. When we talked to her as she got older, she said she wouldn't have traded it for the world. There was no other place that she wanted to live than San Pedro, and she was able to fulfill her dream.

MS: Now, let's get personal about you. What's your early experiences and memories in growing up in San Pedro? Tell us about what the place was like. Of course, it wasn't all that long ago. I mean, we're talking sixties here and seventies. But what was the place like, and what were your memories of it?

RS: I remember as a child growing up in San Pedro, from personal reflection, I guess the best analogy that one could portray San Pedro as and somewhat to this day as well, San Pedro was Mayberry. It was the Mayberry of the *Andy Griffith Show*. Was a small town. Everyone knew everyone. People socialized with one another. It was a real tight-knit community and much so to this day that people knew who their children went to school with. You knew everybody in church. You knew everybody at the social hall. You knew your neighbors. You sat on front porches. You had family reunions in the public parks. You had holidays with your neighbors, where you would close off the street and put out banquet tables, and everybody would bring a potluck. It was indeed Mayberry. One of the things that I can recall from my youth in the community was the so many social activities that happened on any given weekend in San Pedro that continued to this day, that on Friday night, there was something happening, that on Saturday night, there was something happening. On Sunday during the day, there was something happening. I recall it just as it was yesterday, that there were occasions that when there would be

thousands of San Pedrans gathering in their own respective worlds of society on any given weekend, enjoying themselves, whether it be at Cabrillo beach or whether it be at the church hall, whether it be at the social hall. We were part of all that. My family was part of all that. So, it was a wonderful time. People talk about the radical sixties and the flower power seventies and all like that. That really wasn't as much the case in San Pedro. Yes, maybe a little bit, and maybe there was a little bit of a fringe of that type of activity in the community. But for the most part, San Pedro in the 1960s and the 1970s and for the majority the 1980s, was – and I don't mean to say this in a negative way – was stuck in the 1950s. There's nothing wrong with that. I mean, San Pedro was able to enjoy the 1950s for 40 years, instead of just for a decade. I think that says something very good about the community. It says something about the strength of the community, that one was able to enjoy family life and family values and entertainment with one's friends and just good times in a small community that, for all practical purposes, was kind of stuck in a little bit of a time warp. But what was wrong with that? I thought it was terrific.

MS: Talk about the part of San Pedro High School.

RS: As you look at pillars of the community, one of the most important pillars of the community – other than the religious institutions, which in and of themselves are important – is San Pedro High School. Pirate Pride has been around since the first graduating class of 1903 and the first graduate, Maude Wayne, being the first senior at San Pedro High School to graduate in 1903. Pirate Pride has always been important to San Pedro. One of the things that San Pedrans share over the many generations is Pirate Pride or Pedro Pride. A lot of times, you'll hear San Pedro's name shortened to Pedro. Well, that has a lot to do with San Pedro High School. I went to Pedro. Hence, I live in Pedro. So, the moniker Pedro comes from San Pedro High School. Being a person whose parents both graduated from Pedro and whose majority of families graduated there, one of the things that we find as the common glue and the common cement or the common cord that binds us all together in the community or quite a few of us in community, is San Pedro High School, being a pirate and that Pirate Pride. Seeing the years and years of athletic achievement and then academic achievement from the high school has been phenomenal. One of the things to which you can talk to folks in the town who were from the first graduating class of the new high school, the so-called new high school, in 1939 – the school was built in 1936 and the first graduating class – to be able to talk to folks who graduated for years and years and years and years over the decades, and you have that bond with them, so many decades later, is really neat. In fact, one of the institutions at San Pedro High School, to which I was a member, was the Senior Honor Service Organization called the Knights. We all wore black sweaters with the profile of a knight right here in the middle of your chest. The women's organization in the school was called the Knightettes. So, you have many, many years of gentlemen who were Knights and ladies who were Knightettes. In fact, the first president of the Knights organization is San Pedro Citizen of the Century, John Olguin. He was the first president of the Knight organization. fifty years later, I was the president of the same organization. So, my brother Knight from San Pedro High School is John Olguin. One of the things to which we all have a common bond is the Pedro pride, the pride of San Pedro High School. Many, many folks, no matter where they go in life – and you hear this resonate from all the community – you can take the person out of Pedro, but you can't take Pedro out of the person. I think that you don't see that in many communities across Greater Los Angeles or in Southern California, where you will have a grandparent, a parent, a grandchild, a great

grandchild, all go to the same school, and probably two or three of those folks have the same teachers. In fact, my mother's eighth grade English teacher was my eighth grade English teacher. So, to have that type of history in the community, I think, is another one of those pillars that makes San Pedro the community that it is, that to have one high school that has been known as San Pedro High School since the early 1900s; and since that time, everybody has been a Pedro Pirate who has had the honor to go there, is really something in and of itself.

MS: Now, some people would say – and it would immediately prove that you were not a San Pedran – they would say San Pedro. How did San Pedro get to be San Pedro? Talk about the differences in pronunciations. What do they mean, if anything, in the town?

RS: Well, San Pedro is San Pedro because of it being, I should say, anglicized or put into the Queen's English. Actually, the name of the community is San Pedro, named after St Peter. When the community was first named by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo – and a lot of folks are saying we even pronounce Cabrillo wrong. It should be Cabrillo because he was Portuguese. In Portuguese, the double L is not pronounced as a Y. So, I would think that if we can argue over who named the town, I guess we can mispronounce the name of the town [laughter], I guess is what it boils down to. But I guess, as people came from the different places around the world to San Pedro, is that I guess it was in their vocabulary that the E was pronounced in a certain way versus in another language. So, it just became San Pedro, rather than San Pedro as what it should be called. A lot of folks call it San Pedro, which is always kind of neat for those of us who are San Pedrans, because you can tell an out-of-towner right away. It's because they pronounce the name of the community wrong, much to our amusement. But sooner than later, everybody seems to understand, well, if you are going to be a San Pedran, you come from San Pedro rather than from San Pedro or San Pedro. So, it's been kind of an inside baseball, inside kind of colloquialism that we have had over all these years, that a San Pedran comes from San Pedro. No matter where you're from, after a few years, you come to understand that.

MS: Well, there's plenty of other examples. There's Versailles. There's (Cairo?).

[laughter]

RS: Absolutely.

MS: Talk about when you were growing up. What were you imagining yourself to be? What did you want to be? What were your dreams growing up in San Pedro?

RS: Well, it's kind of interesting. As I started to go through high school – and I was active in student affairs. I was active with the school newspaper, with the service organizations, and was active on the student council and was able to be serve as student body president of the high school. I always had thought that I was going to go after my dad's footsteps. I thought I was going to be a longshoreman as well. At that time, longshore jobs were not as easy to come by as they were in following years. Registration had been closed. To become a longshoreman was easier in some of the early days, because you were sponsored by someone, either by your dad or a close family member or a friend. Usually, it was your parent. You were sponsored into the union. But because of some litigation in the late 1970s, the sponsorship quota went away. So,

they came up with a process by which folks would then become a longshore member. By the time I became of age, that the old way of becoming a longshoreman had gone, and the new way had come aboard, and the opportunities were very slim and few. So, it was a great matter of pride to my dad, is that while he most certainly would not have resisted my wanting to become a longshoreman, he wanted me to go to college, and so did my mom. So, I went to college and received my degree in Business Administration. At that time, not knowing what I wanted to do, I started working at a couple of relatives' and neighbors' businesses, first a hardware store and then a paint and hardware store and eventually got into politics, being hired by the local assemblyman to work in his district office. As I start to become involved in the community through the Chamber of Commerce and the Dalmatian Club, a lot of folks would ask me, "Gee, you kind of have a gift of working with people and listening to people's concerns. Maybe one day, you should run for office." As you're growing up and going into your twenties and late twenties, that's not what you're thinking about. You're thinking about what most men at that time in their life are thinking about, girls and dating and having fun and enjoying one's friends and stuff like that. As I started to get into my thirties, more and more folks said, "Well, you should think about it." Finally, I was at a Chamber of Commerce meeting. Everyone was grouching about LA City government. I think maybe that's something that is unique to the San Pedro community also, and we can talk about that at some time. There's never a shortage of San Pedro grouching about Los Angeles. So, folks drafted me and talked to me into running for the city council, and based upon the support of many wonderful people, I was elected to the position.

MS: This is 1993. Talk about that race. Who were your opponents? What were the issues? What kind of campaign was it?

RS: Well, I joined the race for the city council in late 1991 for a seat that was to be open in 1993. The incumbent was Councilwoman Joan Milke Flores, who's a wonderful person. In fact, as I tell her, as I tell everyone, if I had known her as well today as maybe then, I probably wouldn't have run against her. Because we share a political philosophy. We share a lot of the values. She's a terrific person. But at that time, there was a lot of discontent in the community. I don't think it was targeted as much with Joan. It just was historic against Los Angeles. So, here came a local harbor area boy from San Pedro that was saying all of the things that I think people wanted to hear that I believe true in my heart, that there needed to be more attention at the local level of things in the harbor area that needed to be done, public safety, public works, community good works and programs, and our message resonated. So, in 1993, there was a field of seven of us running to challenge the incumbent Councilwoman Flores. She and I ended up in the runoff together. A couple of weeks later, about six weeks later, I defeated her by a 53-to-47 percent vote, with the majority of the vote coming from San Pedro and Wilmington. Of course, the 15th Councilmember District being represented for many, many years before the both of us by Councilman John Gibson, who was our councilman for more than 30 years. There has always been this love-hate relationship between the harbor area and the city of Los Angeles. In fact, the late great Assemblyman Vincent Thomas, who was our assemblyman for 38 years, from 1940 to 1978, who the bridge is named after, ran a reelection campaign in 1949 for the 1950 elections with campaign buttons that said, "I hate Los Angeles." So, there was always the sentiment that Los Angeles could have done more for San Pedro and for Wilmington and for the other communities of the 15th District. I was able to ride that wave of higher expectation into public office. After serving for eight years, I kind of think we did our job. Because after eight years in

office, we were able to provide \$1 billion of additional public works, public facilities, community programs, to the people of the 15th District without raising their taxes, without any fee increase. It was just my staff and I and a lot of other good folks going downtown, mixing it up with the mayor and the other council members, and bringing those resources back. So, that's a track record that I'm very proud of. There's a whole grocery list of programs and facilities and new buildings and things that we were able to do in the eight years by just going downtown and mixing it up with them a little bit. It added up, over eight years, to be a billion dollars. I'm very proud of it.

MS: There's also a special relation with Los Angeles in the bigger sense. But there's a relationship between the town and the port, the harbor. Talk about that relationship during your years on the council.

RS: The relationship between the Port of Los Angeles and the harbor area communities, especially San Pedro and Wilmington, has always been that of, I should say, big brother. I mean, because for most folks, during most of the 1920s, 1930s, forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, all the way through 1980s, the main presence of government in the harbor area was the Harbor Department. It was what we saw every day. So, when we thought of the city government and what was represented by the city government, it was the Harbor Department. For a lot of folks, that was something negative. But for the majority of San Pedrans, it was overwhelmingly positive. Even though there has been some distraction over the last few years, when you take a look at what the port has done in regard to growth for the harbor area, one can only imagine what could have happened if State Senator Stephen White, back at the turn of the century, had lost the battle to develop the port at Los Angeles. Instead, it would have happened in Santa Monica. So, could have San Pedro and Wilmington been just Playa de Pedro or Marina de Wilmington? Maybe. But you would not have had the occupations. You wouldn't have had the economic vitality. For a lot of folks, you wouldn't have had the pollution as well. It's an issue that folks are now addressing after many years of not paying attention to it. But when you look at the overall picture over the many decades, has the relationship – as the symbol of government of Los Angeles in the harbor area, the Port of Los Angeles, that relationship to the communities – has it been positive or negative? For the most part, it has been overwhelmingly positive. Now, again, in regard to some of the concerns that have appeared in recent years, such as environmental consequences and public health consequences, yes, those issues should be addressed. Yes, they are starting to be addressed in the manner that they should have been but were not and will continue to be addressed. But when you look at it, if it not be for the port, would we have had all of the amenities that we have in the community? The answer is probably no. Would we have had the bridge to Terminal Island? Probably not. Would we have had the breakwater? Probably not. Would we have had Dead Man's Island removed from the middle of the channel where commerce then could freely flow? Probably not. Would we have had some of the beach facilities that we have? Probably not. Would we have had the employment? Probably not. So, the Harbor Department has picked up quite a bit of the tab in regard to the quality of life of the harbor area over many decades. So, if there's one significant gift that the city of Los Angeles was able to provide the Port of Los Angeles – even though the port predates the city annexing the harbor area by two years, Wilmington and San Pedro joining in 1909 and the port being established in 1907 – it has been the blessing of the port. Because if it had not been for the port, could the communities had developed in the manner by which they did? The answer is no. So, I

really think that, more than anything else, for many, many decades, the government of Los Angeles, as represented in the harbor area, was the Port of Los Angeles, and they did a terrific job. I mean, to be a harbor commissioner during the thirties and the forties and the fifties and the sixties and even up to this day, was a big deal. It still is a big deal. When a harbor area person was appointed to the Board of Harbor Commissioners by the mayor of Los Angeles, that was big news. That was really big news, as it continues to be big news today. But back in those days, that the big city of Los Angeles and the mayor of Los Angeles would actually appoint one of us to be one of his harbor commissioners, that was really something. In my working with the Harbor Commission during my eight-year tenure and working with the harbor commissioners today, we have to realize these folks are volunteers. They do this out of the goodness of heart. In looking at what the Harbor Commission and the Harbor Department have done and continue to do for the port, my question to any detractor that's out there is, where would we have been without them?

MS: Has business activities in the port changed, and particularly with the oncoming of containerization? The direct economic connection to employment in the town has changed. San Pedro is changing now. It is not somewhat the enclosed community that it was before. It's becoming more and more a different kind of place as it relates to the port, economically and personally. The fishermen are not there anymore. The longshoremen are there but fewer. The shipbuilders aren't there anymore. How is the town changing, particularly as it relates to the port?

RS: Over the course of the last few decades, the community has been changing based upon how the industry has been changing in and around the port. As we all know, shipbuilding has gone by the wayside, which a lot of families and multi-generations of the same family worked. You see the canneries have left. The longshore industry, because of mechanization and because of improvement in technology, that you see a workforce that continues to grow a little bit on the waterfront, but by and large, has flattened out and may continue to grow a little bit, but we'll never see the numbers that we saw in commercial fishing and/or shipbuilding. So, as shipbuilding has disappeared, and commercial fishing, for the most part, has disappeared, and longshoremen is a very small growth; you see different types of employment and dynamics coming into the community, a lot of service businesses, a lot of retail businesses, a lot of freight forwarders, a lot of smaller businesses, Mom and Pop type businesses, a lot of transportation businesses, to which professionals are moving into town, rather than blue collar workers. Part of the dynamic that we're seeing in the community now is that blue collar workers for many decades in San Pedro were happy with the status quo, were happy with their job, were happy with their employment, and perhaps maybe not had the education nor was the time right for the type of social activism that you see in the community now. But you see a lot of folks that are highly educated coming into the community now, that are not multi-generational and are now taking a look at issues to say, gee, folks, how could you allow this to happen over these many years or allow things to happen the way they occurred, especially in regard to the environmental concerns. You see a lot of environmental activism now. It's not saying that the generations past were not concerned with the quality of life in the community, except that the concerns were different. It was trying to make a living, trying to go ahead and make sure the community was safe. Because you were talking about then folks that were just first or second generation that had come to a community, and anything was better than what they had fled. One has to remember,

the community and the history of the community, is that most folks who came to San Pedro in the early days were fleeing totalitarian regimes. They were fleeing kings or potentates or dictators and some pretty bad folks from their country that if indeed they were a cobbler, that it seemed that their family was going to be cobblers for the rest of their life, that if you were a blacksmith, your whole family were going to be blacksmith. So, America and San Pedro provided the opportunity to be whatever you wanted to be, and that was good enough. But now, you have a whole new generation of folks coming into San Pedro who are not a multi-generational San Pedran saying, "Well, maybe what you put up with for all these years was good enough, but it isn't good enough for us and our families." So, you have that little bit of a conflict between the many generations of San Pedrans that were here saying, to us, this is still paradise. It may not be perfect, but it's good enough for us. It's as close to perfect as we want it, where others come into the community and say, but it could be better, and this is how it could be better. So, one of the things that I think, as these two diverging positions get to live with one another long enough, that there'll be more of appreciation of each other's positions. Because one of the things to which San Pedro had to embrace in its early years was tolerance. So, the tolerance of our forefathers and foremothers will have to transcend in today too. So, if we were all tolerant of one another's ethnicity and religions and ways of life and occupations a hundred years ago, now, we have to just be a little bit more tolerant of each other's political positions at this point in life, and each other's priorities now in regard to working for the best in the community. I think what makes San Pedro still a special place as it relates to the diverging dynamics based upon our economy and the people who have lived here and who are starting to live here, who have come here, is the appreciation for what each brings to the table. One of the things that has always been San Pedro's strengths is that, well, we all may be hungry, but if you bring a fish and you bring some wine and you bring some bread, we're all going to eat. So, I think that's what's important to look at it in the perspective of San Pedro, for this decade, is that if you have an expertise in this, and you have an expertise in this, and you have that multi-generational history here, but I have a specialty here; why don't we all bring it to the table? We may not necessarily all be eating now. I mean, we're all well-fed. But we can make the community a better place to live and work. I think that's what we have to look at, and I think that's the direction we're going towards.

[end of transcript]