

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project

Carol Thomas Rugnetta Oral History

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Interviewer: MS – Unknown

Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: First question is please say your name and spell it.

Carol Thomas Rugnetta: Okay. I am Carol, C-A-R-O-L, Thomas, T-H-O-M-A-S, Rugnetta, R-U-G-N-E-T-T-A.

MS: What year were you born, and where were you born?

CR: 1941 in Los Angeles.

MS: Did you grow up here in San Pedro?

CR: I did. I grew up in San Pedro.

MS: So, tell us about your earliest memories growing up in San Pedro.

CR: My earliest memories, I went to 15th Street School for a short time. Then my parents moved to Summerland, and I went to Bandini Street School, Dana Junior High School, and San Pedro High School, then on to Harbor College.

MS: But what kind of place was the port for a little girl growing up in those days? What did you do for fun? Where'd you go, and what did you do? That kind of thing.

CR: The port really didn't exist in my mind when I was growing up. We went to Cabrillo Beach. That was the thing to do. Went to Buffums' in Long Beach, the long way around or via ferry. As a teenager, I worked on Terminal Island, spent most of my summers up in Bodega Bay. One of my aunts owned a place in Bodega Bay, California. The rest of the time, I spent here, really.

MS: So, when you were working on Terminal Island, tell me about what you were doing there. What was that like?

CR: I was working at my aunt's restaurant – another aunt, Zorka. My dad had an amazing family, some of which you've already found out about.

MS: You can't say that because we don't know anything yet. Just start from the beginning.

CR: My dad had an amazing family. They were an orphaned family brought up by the oldest sister, Zorka. All the family turned out to have businesses of their own. So, as a teenager, I worked on Terminal Island for my Auntie Z, who had a restaurant and a grocery store and a bar. My father owned a bar along with two fueling stations in San Pedro.

MS: Tell me about that restaurant. What did it look like? Where was it? Who was the clientele? What was the menu?

CR: I think the restaurant was on Tuna Street. I remember it was right across the street from Star-Kist Tuna. So, we had always the tuna smell, which meant money in San Pedro for the

fishermen who were bringing in the tuna and the cannery workers who were working and my aunt. Because all the patrons would come over and buy groceries. The fishermen would buy the groceries from her grocery store, eat at the restaurant. After work, they'd go to the bar.

MS: Tell me about the restaurant. What was the menu there?

CR: My aunt was a terrific cook. So, it was mostly Yugoslavian food. Nowadays, it's Croatian. So that she was the main cook, and she could work. She would work from 8:00 a.m. and then come home by ferry by 4:00 p.m. and have dinner for eighteen people at her house. This was a given. She was an amazing woman. She was like my grandmother. Since my father's mom and dad both died, she was more like a grandmother to me on my father's side.

MS: Describe her. What kind of woman was she?

CR: My aunt was wonderful. She was just an amazing woman. Not any formal education. She was the one born in Yugoslavia, came here with her parents and met and married a fisherman, Uncle Tom, and started her own business. They all had that – all of the sisters and brothers had that business mind. She brought up all the sisters and brothers along with two children. So, she was just an amazing woman. She really was.

MS: All those kids and working, how did that family organize itself?

CR: That I can't answer, but she had it down pat. All of the sisters and brothers really respected her. Although she didn't treat them like she was the mother. She treated them like they were sisters and brothers. My Uncle Tom took them in, which was an amazing man to take in all those children when they were orphaned. So, I would assume that's how it happened.

MS: Talk about your Uncle Tom. What kind of man was he?

CR: Uncle Tom was a very unassuming man. He was very pleasant. My aunt ran the household. I think we all have that in us. I mean, I'm a lot of Thomas in me. He was a very unassuming man, happy, jovial, fisherman, worked at the store when they bought the store.

MS: Growing up in a family like that or with family like that, what was that like? I mean, were there traditions and cultural things that you got?

CR: Very much so. We would have, oh, God, Saint Anthony's? Oh, excuse me. My aunt would have Saint Anthony's, which was celebrated all over San Pedro. She would have huge parties, do all the cooking. Of course, I was the oldest of all the nieces. So, I mostly had to do all the dishes, which I did do dishwashing at a point in my life too. I already knew how to do them. So, that was fine. But she had great parties. Great parties.

MS: So, you went all the way through San Pedro High –

CR: I sure did.

MS: – and then Harbor College, right?

CR: [affirmative]

MS: Tell me about your father.

CR: My dad was the youngest of five children. He was born in Biloxi, Mississippi, went to Oakland and then San Pedro. His mother in.

MS: Start again so we know his name, "My dad, Vincent," –

CR: My dad, John Thomas –

MS: Oh, I'm sorry – John, of course.

CR: He's the brother. My dad, John Thomas, was born in Biloxi, Mississippi, moved with the family to Oakland and then to San Pedro. His mother, before she passed away, made bathtub gin during prohibition. That's how she made money to raise the family. After she died then all the siblings went to the older sister Zorka.

MS: Tell me about your father. What kind of man was he?

CR: Wonderful.

MS: "My father."

CR: My father was a good man. Good, good man. Loved his family, loved his wife, ran three businesses at one point in his life. It was Thomas Brothers Marine fueling stations, one on Terminal Island, one on Main Channel. My mother's brother, Wes, ran the one on Main Channel always, and my father ran the one on Terminal Island.

MS: A lot of people don't know how these things work. So, how did the fueling business work in the harbor? What was its importance here?

CR: Don't forget, in those days, fishing was the prominent industry in San Pedro. So, in those days, my father fueled boats – and hard-working, very hard working like the rest of his family. So, that's how it worked. The fisherman would come in. My aunt would give them groceries. My father would fuel their boats.

MS: There was also the bar down there, too. Just as a little girl, I'm sure you weren't hanging out there too much. But describe what that was and who was there and what kind of environment that was.

CR: I would assume, just from hearing stories, my dad was the owner and the bartender. One of his nephews was also a bartender there. I would assume it was a rougher crowd, mostly fishermen though, I would think, and maybe longshoremen in those days. I'm really not sure

how the bar was. They didn't talk in front – I was little.

MS: So, you're talking about after World War 2. So, Terminal Island, the Japanese had gone.

CS: Right.

MS: So, what was Terminal Island like in the days that your aunt and uncle had the bar and the stores?

CR: There was really nothing there except canneries.

MS: You have to say, "Terminal Island."

CR: Terminal Island, in my opinion, had nothing there except for the canneries, Stark-Kist, Chicken of the Sea. That's what I saw. Now, I didn't go travelling around Terminal Island. In those days, you didn't [laughter].

MS: What did you do for fun?

CR: I went to the beach, went out with my friends, cruised Pacific Avenue.

MS: You have to say, "For fun," so we know what you're talking about.

CR: For fun, we went to the beach, cruised Pacific Avenue when I was old enough to do that, went on trips with my parents. I don't know. It was mostly that.

MS: So, tell us more about your father. That was his career.

CR: My father's career was that.

MS: Vincent Thomas, tell us about what you know about him.

CR: Well, my uncle Vincent – I, like I said, was the first born in this particular side of the family, not my mom's side, my dad's side. So, I was enveloped by all of the sisters and brothers because all of my other cousins were like in their twenties by then. So, my uncle Vincent – my mom and dad would tell me – from the get-go, would come pick me up, take me with him no matter where he went. I mean, I remember going over to Long Beach. I remember going all over with him in cars, growing up. After he married my aunt – I think I was probably around ten – my Aunt took me on my very first train ride to Sacramento, where I was a page in the Assembly. I worked for my uncle at a lot of different points in my life. His philosophy, when I worked for him, and someone would call and say they needed an answer, he didn't care whether you were Democrat or Republican. He would make you go look up in this huge book that was kept in his office and what he wanted to know was, were you a registered voter? If you were a registered voter, you got a call back immediately. If you are not, you may have to wait a couple or three or four days. But that was his thing. You better darn well know all of your local government, as well as the government in Sacramento. You better know the names who are

representing you. He would test me, I mean, always. So, I knew I'd have to read the phone book whenever I went to see him to know who everybody was if I forgot them. I remember this one time. He was asked to speak at my graduation from high school, and naturally he said yes. He came, and he spoke. The one thing he told all of my graduating class was that he really wanted to be a lawyer. He didn't have thoughts of being a politician. But the reason he became a politician was because he flunked the bar exam three times. So, in that, don't give up. Keep going. You're going to hit what you want to do. It was a good message.

MS: He was obviously a skilled and successful politician. What were the secrets of his success as a politician?

CR: I think that the people – he loved his people. He loved his constituents. He would do anything for his constituents, as well as his family, no matter who. He was a well-loved man. I don't know whether he was the easiest man to live with. You'd have to ask my aunt that. Because I know my father sometimes wasn't either. But he really loved doing what he did. The people who kept him in for thirty-nine years knew that about him. See, they knew this. So, therefore, that's why they kept voting him in. You know, I worked on several of his campaigns. I loved it.

MS: Was he one of those men? Many great politicians can meet somebody, remember their name, and go into a crowd –

CR: Yes.

MS: – and know they have two kids and the names of the kids.

CR: Exactly.

MS: Tell me about that.

CR: But he knew his people because he was so into his constituents. That's what he loved. That's why he did that. I don't know whether he had a terrific memory or not. He probably did. But it was for the love of the people that he did what he did. It's hard to be in politics, especially that long. But he loved what he was doing, and you knew that.

MS: I can believe that anyone is so dedicated to something like the people of San Pedro. He might have been a difficult man because he was so devoted to certain things. Talk about that quality.

CR: [laughter] Talk about what quality? I'm sorry.

MS: You were talking about your aunt and living with him is one thing. Living with somebody who's so dedicated to one thing may be –

CR: I would think that would be a challenge, living with someone who was that dedicated to constituency. Because my father's family was so focused on doing what they were doing, I think

that – I know my dad was a little hard to live with. I'm sure my uncle was too.

MS: In what sense?

CR: In other words, my dad and my uncle would tell me something one time or show me how to do something one time. You better know how to do it after that first time. It was a good quality, don't get me wrong. I mean, it wasn't you get slapped or anything if you didn't know it, but –

MS: They had high standards.

CR: They had very high standards. The standards were high, and I was brought up with those kinds of standards, which I think I shared with my sons.

MS: Tell me about his dedication to the bridge. Don't be afraid to repeat something Mary said. Your point of view, what was that story? Why was that important to him?

CR: I'm sorry. My uncle's main focus has always been – well, first of all, I think he was a visionary. He knew there was going to be something more on Terminal Island and San Pedro that none of us did, or I don't think anybody did in San Pedro. I don't think they really saw his vision. He saw a vision that the bridge was not the bridge to nowhere, that it was going to be a working bridge. Everyone laughed at him constantly. That's why it took him twenty years to build this bridge. It consequently took us seventeen years to light the bridge, which was totally ridiculous but anyway. His tenacity – and he was a very tenacious person – is why this bridge is built today. I don't ever think they should ever tear down that bridge. Not when something takes twenty years to build, should they tear it down. If they want to make an extended bridge, great.

MS: I asked Mary about this, but I heard stories that almost daily, he would go check the progress of the bridge. Talk about that.

CR: That part, I don't know. I really don't know the part.

MS: Were you there at the opening?

CR: Oh, sure.

MS: Tell me about that.

CR: Oh, sure. The opening day of the bridge had to be the hottest in San Pedro that I remember. We were all supposed to look real cute with this big opening. So, our clothes were not of summer-type clothes for some reason. It opened in November, and it was really, really, really a hot day. But it was great. It was fun. It all came to fruition after hearing about it all these years. It was just a great time. The party afterwards. It was a great time. It was good for him.

MS: But it must have been rather spectacular to go over the bridge for the first time and have

that view which you, of course, had never seen before.

CR: No, we hadn't. It was something that was out of this world because we –

MS: I'm sorry. I was talking. Go ahead.

CR: I'm sorry. The bridge was spectacular because the view was spectacular. It was something that we had not ever seen before. So, it was exciting. It was like we were finally – we, meaning San Pedro – were finally coming to light with the city of LA, which before we never had been. You have to understand, San Pedro was always the orphaned child of Los Angeles. I know that probably a dozen people have told you that. But my uncle sort of brought it to Los Angeles and San Pedro and said, "Hey, look, we're here, and look what I did." That's how I feel.

MS: You weren't born for the first campaign.

CR: No.

MS: But you probably know a little bit about it.

CR: Sure.

MS: Talk about that first campaign that he ran. What were the issues, and why was it successful?

CR: Okay. My uncle ran his first campaign. Actually, he decided to run for assemblyman, as far as I remember from the stories. My Auntie Z - Zorka Nizetich – is the one who ran his campaign and would cook these dinners and invite people. It was a close race. What put him over the top was Catalina Island. All of his dinners, all of my life that my family went to, Catalina, was represented because they're the ones that got him elected. He never forgot Catalina. Never.

MS: So, he won the vote of Catalina.

CR: Well, the vote of Catalina pushed him over the edge because it was a very, very close race.

MS: Who was he running against? Tell me what the issues were.

CR: I have no idea. I wasn't born.

MS: Yeah, of course. But talk about the issues that he ran on, the secession.

CR: I don't know. I don't know that. I mean, I wasn't born.

MS: I know, but you know of it. Have you heard about it?

CR: No.

MS: Have you heard about it from Mary?

CR: I heard about it from Mary.

Female Speaker: I know.

MS: You know.

FS: Secede from LA.

MS: Right.

CR: Right. But I didn't know that at the time.

MS: Right. But that has been a continuous thread throughout the history of San Pedro.

CR: Throughout the –

MS: Just recently, there was a secession movement.

CR: That's right.

MS: Talk about the secession feelings and movement here.

CR: I think that San Pedro could have grown a lot faster had we seceded from LA and become our own entity. I believe we could have been a Torrance, who has all the major players over there. We're not because we were part of LA. LA has never done very much for San Pedro. So, that's why, throughout the history since I've been born, we have wanted to secede periodically. Because we don't feel things were being done for San Pedro to bring us into what we should be.

MS: What about the relationship? Again, there's this love-hate relationship between the port and the town too, isn't there?

CR: Not from me. I don't see this love-hate relationship from the port. I've always gotten along with the port. I think the port is great for San Pedro. I think the port now does more for San Pedro than any other entity. I can't say anything bad about the port. I work in the hotel industry. So, I know that the port and the busyness of the port and the shipping companies bring business to our hotels with meetings, everything. I have no negative feelings about the port at all.

MS: Well, you could be positive. There's nothing wrong with that.

CR: That's true.

MS: [laughter] Do you have any of your favorite stories about Uncle Vince? Any kind of

memories that particularly stick in your mind?

CR: I had a million before I came over this scene.

MS: I'll take 500,000. That's okay.

CR: Favorite stories. God, Auntie?

FS: Can't help you.

CR: I don't know.

MS: That's your stories.

CR: I know.

MS: Well, him taking you places, going, seeing things, people you met, watching him campaign.

CR: Yes, watching him campaign. I mean, I was involved in a lot of his campaigns. He would involve me. That was interesting for me since I didn't know that much or what I was doing when I was a teenager in that department. I met very interesting people, being his niece. We met Pat Brown, Jerry Brown, Kathleen Brown, Sugar Ray Robinson. That was one of my favorite because I always liked boxing – met Sugar Ray Robinson.

MS: Well, boxing was one of his issues as well. We know about the bridge and everything. But he did a lot for boxing and boxers as well. Talk about that.

CR: Sorry. My uncle was involved in boxing a lot. That was one of his loves. So, he went to a lot of boxing matches. He cared for the boxers. He watched the boxing commission here in California to make sure it was on the up and up for these boxers. Also, education was a big high point. He helped get Los Angeles Harbor College off the ground and Dominguez. He was instrumental in getting Dominguez University started also, if my memory serves me correct.

MS: Now, for boxers, didn't he get some kind of program for healthcare or pensions? Tell me about that.

CR: Did he? I believe with boxing he was instrumental in getting healthcare and a pension plan for the boxers. Because there was none. Boxers would end up on the street. So, he saw to it that they were treated fairly and honestly by their promoters.

MS: That went back to his days when he was actually a boxer himself.

CR: He was a boxer in high school and in college. Yes, he was.

MS: In all of his years in office, was there ever a close call that he ever almost not come back

and be re-elected?

CR: Memory serves me, there was not a close call. I remember his last election campaign, and I was really worried because he wasn't campaigning. I remember calling him up, and I said, "Uncle, you've got to do some sort of campaign." Because his opponent was not a fair opponent. He was sending out literature that made my uncle look really, really old. He would say, "Don't worry, Carol. Don't worry. It'll be fine. Whatever happens, happens." So, I went, okay. Man knows what he's doing. That's when he was defeated.

MS: Do you think maybe it was one of those decisions you make without deciding, that, basically, he didn't –

CR: I think so.

MS: He decided to retire but didn't run. He just quit. He wanted to see how far he could go, but he was ready to retire.

CR: I think probably he was ready to retire. I think maybe that's why he didn't run a campaign. He did not run a campaign. Maybe he knew he was going to have health issues. Maybe that was it too. I don't know. But I believe he was so good at what he did that if he chose not to run the campaign, he knew what he was doing by not running it.

MS: You knew him. Did he have ambitions to run for governor or beyond the Assembly?

CR: Not to my knowledge. He never wanted to run for governor or go for senator or anything else. I do believe it was because of his love of his district. He loved his district. He embraced it. He ran with it. He was good for it, really was.

MS: So, in retirement, after the defeat, did he take retirement well? What did he do after that?

CR: I think he did take retirement well. I know he stayed home a lot with my aunt. I don't know whether she took his retirement well. I know he would go out in his garden. He loved his garden. He loved to plant and probably had good memories. I really didn't have that much connection with him in those days after. I mean, we talked, and that was it. Am I right?

FS: Right?

CR: Was it hard on you when he retired?

MS: To have him around all the time. Personality, what kind of man was he?

CR: My uncle was a very unassuming person. If you didn't know he was the assemblyman, you would not know he was the assemblyman. He never boasted, never wielded his power, and he had a lot of power. The rest of the family was like that, too. A lot of them had money, and you'd never know it. I mean, they lived nicely, but they all worked very hard. They're all very unassuming people.

MS: Do you think that's the secret of his political success, that he didn't take himself too seriously?

CR: I sure do. He did not take himself seriously, and I think he thought it was a privilege to be in office. I know he thought it was a privilege to be in office.

MS: It's hard to separate the bridge from his legacy. What do you think his legacy is to San Pedro today? Include the bridge, but anything else?

CR: I think that he was instrumental in the cannery working and the cannery works in Terminal Island. The cannery workers loved him. Naturally, the bridge. He was instrumental in the boxers, the boxing, instrumental in the education that's around us. He just did a lot for San Pedro that his name can be tied to.

MS: But at the same time – and it's not necessarily his fault – the fishing industry went away, shipbuilding went away. A lot of changes took place in the harbor that were changed from what the harbor was before, his life. Was that difficult for him to see those? He fought, I'm sure, against all those changes.

CR: He did.

MS: But was that a struggle and difficult thing for him? Because he lost those struggles in the end.

CR: He lost those struggles, but also –

MS: Say what those struggles are.

CR: The struggles with the fishing industry. I'm sure he felt the canneries were lost because the canneries chose to move to foreign countries. So, the fishermen had nowhere to offload their fish when they came in. So, they in turn started fishing in other countries. So, you basically have fishermen, local fishermen, who are gillnetting or whatever they're doing, offloading here to the smaller fish companies.

MS: Shipbuilding, too, was lost during those years.

CR: Shipbuilding was lost. I believe that the shipbuilding – I don't know why that was lost. I really don't.

MS: Well, there weren't really many ships to start with.

CR: Well, yeah. They weren't building here.

MS: But those are huge economic losses to the community. Yet the community didn't blame him, it seems.

CR: Why would they blame him?

MS: Well, he's the politician who's involved.

CR: No. They wouldn't blame him for that. Because, again, the canneries wanted to go foreign. I'm sure it was cheaper labor. That's why.

MS: Mary said that he was very conservative. Yet he was very popular with Labor. Labor is not necessarily a conservative organization.

CR: My uncle was a Democrat. So, I don't think he was very conservative. He married my Aunt, the Republican. I remember going to many, many election nights over at their house, and her side of the family would be in one room watching the results. We'd be in the other side watching the results. We're all friends. But when it came election night, we had Republicans, and we had Democrats [laughter]. It was fun.

MS: What was his relationship with Labor, with a very powerful political component here?

CR: Labor, he was always a friend to because he understood it. Because he came from nothing. Don't forget, self-made man. So, therefore, he knew what it was like to struggle. That's why he was always a friend of Labor.

MS: The other big political issues that were statewide issues, where did he stand, for example, civil rights, which is in the [19]60s and [19]70s? What was his position there?

CR: I can't answer his position. I would only hope that his position would be my position. Don't forget he came from Biloxi, Mississippi. So, coming to California, you become very liberal living in California. So, we were for integration and everything that it stood for.

MS: What about another big issue during his term, the war in Vietnam? Was he a supporter of the war?

CR: I don't know. I really don't know.

MS: So, on a national scale, he obviously wasn't a national politician, but the big national issues of the day, was he concerned with that? Or is he pretty much zeroed in on his constituency?

CR: I really don't know those things. That wouldn't be something that I would know. I know him from an uncle aspect. He was a great uncle. You know, he's a great uncle. As far as his political issues nationally, I really don't know. I know the ones locally.

MS: Well, I think it's interesting. Mary said he got along with all the mayors. You've got Democrats of all levels, and you've got Republicans of all levels. He got along with all of them, right?

CR: That's right.

FS: Yes.

MS: So, he's clearly had the ability to do that.

CR: Yes.

FS: He was really highly respected by both sides.

CR: Yes, he was.

MS: That's a big compliment.

CR: He was the dean of the assembly too. So, that helped.

MS: As someone who grew up who's been connected deeply with this town, with the families of this town – this is kind of a final question – what does San Pedro mean to you as this place? What is it to you?

CR: Well, let me share with you. When you're growing up in San Pedro, the normal thing is you want to get out of San Pedro. By the time I wanted to get out of San Pedro, I was married, and I was pregnant. So, I thought, "Why do I want to get out of San Pedro? I want to raise my children in San Pedro." San Pedro's the best town. To me, we have everything. We have the water. We have the mountains two hours away. We have everything right here. I love San Pedro. I would never move from San Pedro. Hopefully, my sons wouldn't. I know my husband won't. So, there you are. We're good to go.

MS: Good to stay.

CR: Good to stay, I should say.

[laughter]

MS: That's perfect. Great. I'm going to ask you to move over too now.

[end of transcript]