Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project
Nancy Utovac Oral History
Date of Interview: Unknown
Location: Los Angeles, California
Length of Interview: 00:30:50
Interviewer: MS – Unknown
Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Please say your name and spell it.

Nancy Utovac: Nancy Utovac, N-A-N-C-Y, U-T-O-V-A-C.

MS: Nancy, if you don't mind, can you tell me the year you were born and where were you born?

NU: I was born in Harbor City, California, at the Kaiser. So, basically, San Pedro, in the year 1958.

MS: Good. So, you grew up in this area.

NU: I did.

MS: In the [19]50s and [19]60s. Give us a sense of what it was like living in the harbor area for a young girl, growing up, a little girl. What are your earliest memories of the place?

NU: My early memories are lots of days at Cabrillo Beach, just a lot of fun. There was the old museum, which is now the old bathhouse. But the old museum was there, and we got to run around there. It was really, really nice.

MS: What kind of town was San Pedro then? I mean, how would you describe it if someone hadn't been here?

NU: San Pedro back then was, well, close knit, just like it is now but so much less populated. I remember going on Western and going to Lochmann Farms Dairy and the cows would be there. So, it was a lot less dense, and everybody seemed to know everybody.

MS: Now what are the kind of people who lived there? Sound like a special population.

NU: The kind of people that live in San Pedro – a lot of people related to each other. Everybody knows each other, working people, fishermen, longshoremen, just down to earth people.

MS: When you went to school here, what did you think your life was going to be like? What were your dreams? What were you going to be when you finally left school?

NU: When I finally left school, I didn't know what my dreams were. I went to Hawaii. I graduated from San Diego High School in 1976. I went to Hawaii just to take a break and work on Maui and have some fun, until my father died in 1978.

MS: Tell me about your father. What did he do? What was his background here? My father started fishing up in Washington. Then he migrated down here and started longshoring fishing and then longshoring. He was a very hardworking longshoreman. He was known for working hard, working a lot. I always remember my father. I always thought longshoreman never got days off, because my dad worked all the time. He really enjoyed his job.

MS: What kind of work did he do? Did he have any particular jobs?

NU: My dad worked in the hold of the ships. Back then they had frozen fish and a lot of hand stow. He drove winches, and then later on, he drove a Jitney, which is like a little forklift.

MS: As a little girl, do you ever go down and watch him work or did you ever see him working?

NU: As a little girl, every now and then, he would sneak us on the terminals and we'd get to ride the forklift. Yes. But I never thought I'd become a longshoreman, not back in those days.

MS: I don't think anybody would have thought that in those days.

[laughter]

So, what did you think of that when you were down there as a little girl? What was that world like to you?

NU: I just always accepted it. I always just thought it was a part of our life. It was part of our community.

MS: What about other activities that were involved with the harbor? Did you do anything else aside from Cabrillo Beach? Did you did you go and watch the ships come in? Or did you do anything else that it was more than just the beach activities? Did you see the harbor at work?

NU: Mostly just memories of the beach.

MS: So, you went to Hawaii, and you were just sort of chilling out trying to figure out what you're going to do, I guess. Tell me the story of what happened next.

NU: After high school, when I moved to Hawaii, I was enjoying life, working at the Maui serving luaus on the beach, and having fun. Deciding when I'm going to go back to college. Then my father passed away. I came home to be with my family and my mother. That's when my older brother, who was already a crane driver said, "One of you girls in the family could have dad's job." I've got three sisters. I'm the youngest. Just for fun, we arm wrestled. That's how the story goes. But we arm wrestled and I won, and I said, "You know what? I'll try it for a couple weeks," thinking all along I'm going back to Hawaii. So, here it is twenty-eight years later and I'm still on the waterfront.

MS: So, you arrive back here to stay with your family. Tell me that story again.

NU: Okay. All right. After my father died, I came back to be with my family and my mother temporarily. That's when my one and only brother, who was a crane driver at the time, he said, "You know, one of you girls can get dad's book," which has always been the longshore job would go to the son and the family daughter. So, we arm wrestled for the job. I'm the youngest of four sisters. There's four of us, and I won. So, I said, "Hey, I'll do it. I'll give it a shot."

MS: All the sisters wanted to take it?

NU: Yes and no, maybe not. Two were nurses.

MS: So, there weren't too many women working as longshoremen in those days, right? Were there? I mean, is that as a common thing in those days?

NU: Back in those days, there were probably three women working on the waterfront. The first woman, she was the groundbreaker. She had to take it to court. Then I think there were about two or three that they finally hired in. So, I came in right after them.

MS: What were those women doing?

NU: The women that were working on the waterfront, they were doing what the men were doing. They were lashing. There weren't so many container jobs back then, but they were lashing, working the bananas, driving the autos. Basically, doing whatever you had to do.

MS: Explain how the idea of the book works. How did you then get that job because of your father? Explain that system and how that works.

NU: Typically, when a longshoreman passes away, his job would be handed down to the oldest son in the family to take care of the family. It's just always been part of the union's rule,

MS: Okay. It applied to guys or girls. It didn't make any difference at that point.

NU: I think not until a woman named Billie – I can't think of Billie's last name. But she fought it. She had to go to court, and she fought it. She got in that way. Then after that, it opened it up for the daughters also.

MS: So, what did your mother think of your idea of you going to work in your dad's profession?

NU: My mother has always been supportive of whatever we wanted to do. So, she was all for it.

MS: So, tell me about that first day at work. First of all, how did you get started working, and what was your first job?

NU: My first day at work, how I got started working? I had to do the paperwork, the process, the physical, and then I was ready for my first day at work. I do remember, I was a 20-year-old girl, pretty shy, haven't done much with my life. My brother did escort me to the hiring hall that morning. It was a Saturday morning, probably full of maybe three hundred, mostly men, and I was so intimidated and scared. But he escorted me through. My very first job was an auto job, which was driving cars off a ship. Everybody was very friendly, very nice. They knew and respected my father, which was a big asset for me on the waterfront, how people felt about my father. That wasn't bad. Then the following Monday, I got to unload bananas, and that was not so good.

MS: Tell me about that day. What was it like for you?

NU: The following Monday, I picked up the banana job. Back then the banana ships would come in, the entire hold of the ship would be full of – not the stocks of bananas, that were in my father's, but the boxes of 50-pound bananas. So, you'd open up the hatch, look down, and you'd have to dig a hole. They'd lower the conveyor belt into the hold of the ship. Then for eight hours a day, you'd be throwing bananas. So, my memory, my very first day of bananas was black and blue, beat up and going to bed very early.

MS: You did any preparation for that kind of heavy work? Were you in shape in that sense?

NU: Well, I was young. I was young, and I think I did try to work out at the gym. I was trying to suit up for it, but nothing really gets you ready for that. So, what did the other guys in the hold think about you trying to keep up with them? Did you keep up with them? What were their attitudes?

NU: Back then, there was always somebody that wasn't happy about a woman being there, understandably. But the feedback I got and the help I got was incredible. I really do feel like I did my part. I knew I wasn't a man. I knew I couldn't do certain things, but I do feel like I was able to cover the job.

MS: You're a very good looking young woman, and you're down in the hold where these guys are rough and ready. I mean, was there any kind of conversations that they had with you? Did they give you extra respect or did they just treat you like one of the guys?

NU: That's a good question. In many ways, I felt like I was just one of the guys. But I always felt I was respected. Back in those days, the older longshoremen would help you learn. There was so much to know. They were really, very helpful. They really were.

MS: That's surprising, because, I mean, I can imagine this is a very man's world. I think in almost any job, there was a great deal of resistance to women coming into these men's job. I mean, they'd finished their day, and they'd hit the bar at the end of the day. Well, whether you were going to do that or not, that was part of their life, too. I mean, it was a whole different world that the men had. You obviously made it work. What did you do? What did they do to make it work? I mean, what did you do to make it work? Put it this way.

NU: To make it work for me, I didn't try to be a macho man. I didn't try to be a femme fatale and have them help me either. I really, sincerely felt like I wanted to be respected for my job. I really did try my best. I didn't have anybody do the job for me, and so I the feedback I got and the respect I got, I do feel like I was respected, and I feel like I did my job.

MS: Were there any mentors who sort of took you aside and helped you and guided you, any specific ones that you felt were helpful getting into this new world?

NU: There were probably a few. [laughter] There was many, many. Throughout the years, I had partners where sometimes you work one-on-one with a certain partner. So, you'd have the

same partner. Back in those days, there were also ships that would come in right here at the cruise ship – what is the cruise ship terminal now – that you'd be loading ships out. I think they were going to India or different places around the world with soybean oil and these sacks of wheat sacks. I think they were 50-pound sacks. One of my longest job was twenty-one days of filling up a ship with the handshake, the American handshake, going to these poor countries and filling up the ship with wheat sacks and soybean oil boxes from the ground up. One of my longest job I probably had was right here at Berth 91 before it was a cruise terminal. It was a regular terminal. It was a ship that we filled with wheat sacks and soybean oil going to impoverished countries. It would take twenty-one days, twenty days of being on the job and filling up the entire ship. So, there was a certain stow, learning how to do the stow, flooring off and building up throughout the whole entire ship.

MS: Now, did you ever think, you know, "Gee, maybe this was a convenient job. But maybe I should be doing something else." You're still young. There are all kinds of options ahead for you. Did you ever have second thoughts?

NU: I never thought I'd give it up entirely because the flexibility. That was always beautiful to be able to work when you want and not have to be tied into it. So, some years, I would work maybe half a year, and travel or/and I have gone back to school. So, I really felt like I was able to live my life and still keep the job. I never really felt like I had to leave it in its entirety.

MS: The money was good?

NU: The money was good and the benefits are great.

MS: So, after your banana job, what were some of your other memorable jobs that you had early on in your career?

NU: Some other jobs, mostly what I did was work in the hold of the ship. When I did most of my longshoring, it was before the mass containerization. So, a lot of the cargo was in the ship, like steel, steel beams, coils, and you'd climb down the ship's ladder and hook up these beams of steel, 50-, 60-foot beams of steel and hook them up, send them out. I'm just grateful that I'm still alive and not injured.

MS: What's dangerous about that work? Talk about the danger of it.

NU: Oh, everything was dangerous. Everything's big, loud, fast. I mean, nowadays, it's really fast. But back then, working in the hold of the ship, there was no little getting hurt. It was major injuries.

MS: As you began to develop a career, how did the career work? I mean, how do you move up the ladder or are there stages? Tell me how in your particular career that you moved ahead.

NU: Interesting with longshoring, it's such an individual thing. There are some people who start longshoring they remain a longshoreman. Other people aspire to be a clerk, a crane driver, boss. So, it's really definitely an individual thing, and there's no right or wrong or one path to go. So, I

originally thought I'd maybe want to be a crane driver. But my chance for going clerking came up first. So, I thought I better check out that avenue before I wait for the other. So, probably ten, eleven years into being a longshoreman, I tried clerking, which that's what I'm doing still today.

MS: Describe that. What is that job?

NU: Clerking is basically keeping track of the cargo, which nowadays it means using a computer, inputting containers, keeping track of all the cargo that's coming off or onto the ship.

MS: You ever miss being back in the hold?

NU: In certain ways, it was the good old days, the camaraderie, the ease, just the simplicity. There would be ship gangs, and they had a little front house, and they were made out of wood. That was where the front men hung out. It was just a different world. After work, we would hang out in the parking lot and talk. Nowadays, it's just a lot more fast-paced. It's just different.

MS: Tell me if some of these questions are too personal. Is it hard to separate – because you were a woman working with all these men – your personal life? Did you find yourself interested in maybe seeing guys after work or did you try to keep your work separate from your personal life?

NU: I think most of my private life, I tried to keep private. But when you're working with people and you're getting to know them, you do form really close friendships.

MS: A lot of that guy's camaraderie, was that something that you felt you could participate in and again, just as another guy? Because there is this after-work life for longshoreman. How did you feel you could or couldn't get involved in that? What was your attitude toward that?

NU: Well, a lot of these people I really did enjoy being with. So, sure, we used to maybe go to fights or movies. But basically, when work was over, I went home.

MS: Did you have any relationship at all with the other women who were there? Did you have any special bond with them, or just your team, whoever they were, how you related to the other workers?

NU: Well, as the years went by, there were more and more women. When they started hiring big groups, there'd be more a percentage of women. So, in a way, it was great, because I did get to have more women friends and the camaraderie with the women and have somebody else to relate to. Because back when I first started, there weren't even any women bathrooms. I mean, you didn't even think about that. We had to have women's bathrooms. So, that was a luxury.

MS: What about how did you dress? When you showed up to work, what would you look like?

NU: Most of the time, when I was a longshoreman, I did the dirty work. So, I wore coveralls, zip up coveralls, hard gloves, hard hat and for lashing.

MS: As you indicated in these pictures, talk about that Miss Harbor. I'm sure you we're proud to represent your fellows, but in a different way. They didn't have any opportunities in the past for a longshoremen to run for Miss Harbor, right? So, tell me about that.

NU: Back in 1979 or [19]80, that was probably my first year in. They used to have a pageant called the Heart of the Harbor. It was Wilmington – it was the harbor of San Pedro, and it was a beauty pageant, basically. Many people thought, "Geez, you're a longshoreman and you work on the harbor. Who should not represent the harbor?" So, after a little coaxing, I got talked into being in a beauty pageant. It was basically a really good experience. I didn't win. I was first runner up, but it was a positive thing.

MS: Did you challenge the winner to lift a 50 pound sack or something?

NU: [laughter] I should have. That might have done it.

[laughter]

MS: Talk about the differences between day work and night work when you're working as a longshoreman.

NU: Nights are really incredible, and they're just less traffic. It's a lot less hectic, more dangerous. But for some people, it's just the better end of it.

MS: Did you have a preference of when you worked?

NU: I did both. As a longshoreman, I mostly worked days. Then I worked for a few years nights with the gang. We would work certain jobs as a gang.

MS: You became a clerk after ten years, you said, eleven years?

NU: I think so. I'm bad at dates. I wasn't in no hurry to become a clerk either. I still really liked what I was doing. But I realized it's time to move on, or at least check out what's going on next.

MS: In those days, the term was – and it's a less popular term now – is feminist. Were you someone who saw yourself in the [19]70s as really representing women in that term of finding an equal place for women, or did you just do your job? How did you feel?

NU: I felt that I don't think I really thought I was a feminist. But then at the same time, I do feel like I was breaking ground and paving the way for the others who maybe have it a little easier because we did, or maybe they don't, but hopefully they do. Because even though there were some hard days, and there were days I came home crying. It wasn't an easy thing. It was a struggle.

MS: Can you share some of those hard days that you did leave and go home crying, or why and what happened? You don't have to name names.

NU: Okay. I probably tried to erase them from my memory. But no, I do remember that sometimes, I felt that it was hard always being in the spotlight. I also feel like, whatever any other woman did, I had to represent everybody. So, if they were upset with somebody not holding their own, it affected all of us. So, sometimes I just felt it's just hard to just do your job and try to carry on your own job.

MS: You have a specific day or event that was particularly hard for you or a situation?

NU: No.

MS: Yes, you do.

NU: Come on.

[laughter]

No, I don't.

MS: Go bring out the – no more wounds.

NU: No.

MS: What about some funny stories? What are some of the funny things that happened in your job where you went home laughing?

NU: Well, I'll tell you this story, because it's a funny one. This would never happen today because there is a different world now. For the cruise ship, we used to be able to go onboard, we unload the baggage. The cruise ships are much smaller. Can't even think of the name of that small ship. But anyway, we'd get to unload the baggage, stay on board. Once in a while, stay in the bar and have a drink with the passengers. That happened one time, and lo and behold, the ship is sailing, and we're still on it. So, I mean, that's funny, but it wasn't funny. We ended up that they had to call the port pilot. We had to climb the Jacob's ladder off the ship out of the breakwater. But that was a pretty funny story that kind of goes down into history. [laughter] The day we sailed with the ship.

MS: Well, what did the passengers think of all these longshoremen hanging out?

NU: Well, some of them didn't mind.

MS: It was clear who you were. Dressed for the upper decks. [laughter]

NU: That's right. Some of these longshoremen, they had great personalities. They were socializing.

MS: So, after a few at the bar, going down Jacob's Ladder, was that fun?

NU: It was fun, but I was glad that it was over. But, yes, it was fun.

MS: Any other funny story? That's a good one?

NU: That's a good one? Well, there's a few, I'm sure.

MS: I'd let you think about them.

NU: Okay.

MS: You have a six year old, I understand, Nancy.

NU: I do.

MS: Right. So, now, how does your work as a mother and you continue to work as a longshoreman? Is it the flexibility of hours that allows you to do that?

NU: That's exactly true. The flexibility of hours is wonderful for a working mom. For one thing, for me. I've been working for 29 years now, so I don't work that much anymore. I mean, I'm semi-retired. I work as the bare minimum, almost, so I could be with my daughter and my husband. I enjoy my life, and when I go to work, I enjoy my job.

MS: Is your husband connected with the harbor?

NU: Not at all.

MS: Not at all?

NU: Not at all.

MS: That's interesting.

NU: He works for Boeing.

MS: Works for Boeing.

NU: [affirmative]

MS: So, how did you meet and what did he think about dating a longshoreman?

NU: My husband and I met at the Long Beach Museum of Art. Actually, I was going to a concert there after work, meeting up with some friends. He was there volunteering, and

we met there.

MS: So, he said, "Oh, yeah. What do you do?" You said, "Well, I work on the docks." Was he prepared for that?

NU: He was open minded, very open minded. He enjoyed it. He knew I enjoyed my job. I was self-sufficient and independent, happy.

MS: Now, do you see your daughter down there in the banana hold coming up in the future? Or what do you see for her? Would you encourage her if she was interested in working in the harbor to do it?

NU: If that's what she wanted to do, I would be supportive. But I I'm hoping that's not what she wants to do. She'll be doing something else, I'm sure.

MS: You've had a unique experience, and very few people, women – men or women, who've had the kind of point of view that you've had of the harbor. You grew up here as a girl and all that. What does the harbor mean to you? What does this town mean to you? Can you give me some sense of that feelings you have for it?

NU: Well, I feel very fortunate to have grown up and in this community. It's unique. It's the fact that the port is our home. It's the port for Los Angeles, but it's basically our home. So, I feel very fortunate with that. It's been really good for me and I appreciate it.

MS: What do you think your dad would have thought of what you've done with your life? What would he think about it do you think?

NU: My dad, I really do believe would have been proud of me. He was never one to say, "Women don't belong on the waterfront." He was very open minded in that way. I do believe my dad would have been proud of me.

MS: Great. Any other stories you want to share?

NU: [laughter] You want to hear the stories?

MS: I want the stories. What else you got here?

NU: [laughter] Good reporting. That's all I can remember for now.

MS: You've been working here in the port for some time. How have things changed from then and now? It's not always to be [unintelligible] all the time. But honestly, what are your feelings about how things have changed for the better, or not at all, or maybe for the worse?

NU: The change has just been enormous, and everything is so fast paced. The terminals are huge and very impersonal. So, back from the days of when there were small sailing ships and it's just a huge difference.

MS: For you personally, though, there were more women coming in. Do they come to you and

look to you to be a mentor or to give them some support? Do you find yourself in that position as young as you are being an old timer?

NU: Well, thank you. But I'm not so young. I don't feel that way because there are so many women and everybody does their own thing. There's just not that much. Basically, I don't think anybody knows who I am. [laughter]

[end of transcript]