

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

Steve Darrow:  
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Martin Meeker  
in 2008

Copyright © 2008 by The Regents of the University of California

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

\*\*\*\*\*

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Steve Darrow, dated May 29, 2008. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Steve Darrow, "Oakland Army Base Oral History Project" conducted by Martin Meeker in 2008, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2008.

## **Discursive Table of Contents: Steve Darrow**

### Interview #1:

[Audio File 1]

1

Family background and upbringing—scope of career with the Naval Supply Center—working as a purchasing specialist—military evaluation of civilian work—Naval Public Works station, located in the Oakland Army Base—move from purchasing agent to contract specialist—impact of wars on work and life at the military bases—differences between the army base and the naval station—social life on the base—obtaining supplies and secret coding—evaluation of superiors—base closure

Interview #1: 05-29-2008

Begin Audio File 1 darrow\_steve1\_05-29-08

01-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is the May 29, 2008. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Steve Darrow for the Oakland Army Base Oral History Project. Okay, let's begin. And so the way that we usually begin these interviews is just get you to state your name and date and year of birth.

01-00:00:46

Darrow: Official name Steven Edward Darrow. Today's date?

01-00:00:50

Meeker: No, no, the date of your birth.

01-00:00:53

Darrow: July 11, 1949.

01-00:00:54

Meeker: Okay. Where were you born?

01-00:00:55

Darrow: Berkeley, California.

01-00:00:57

Meeker: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your upbringing, what your family life was like, those sort of issues?

01-00:01:05

Darrow: I had a mix of German on my mother's side. So I was second generation on my mother's side. And then on my father's side was Scottish. And it actually goes back. I'm the ninth generation American on my father's side, and they were active in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Continental Congress, and I'm very proud of that.

01-00:01:46

Meeker: Okay, good. Did you go to public schools in Berkeley?

01-00:01:50

Darrow: Yes.

01-00:01:50

Meeker: And what were those? What did you go to? What schools?

01-00:01:58

Darrow: Well, I guess to be specific Gay Austin was nursery school, which is now called preschool. And then elementary school, which is sometimes called grammar school, Jefferson Elementary. And then Garfield Junior High, which later became King Middle School, named for a different famous person. Then I went to Berkeley High, went to Merritt College in Oakland during the Black Panther period.

01-00:02:37

Meeker: So that would have been roughly what years?

01-00:02:38

Darrow: 1967 to '69. And then to Sonoma State in the wine region 1969 to '71, getting French degrees, an AA degree and BA from those two schools.

01-00:03:03

Meeker: I don't have a list of your full participation in the Army Base and in the Naval Supply Center. So maybe you can provide us with an outline of your participation with those various institutions.

01-00:03:19

Darrow: They were geographically very close, but all my experience, including the Army Base, were with the Navy. So May 1973 to December 1984 I was at Naval Supply Center for eleven years.

01-00:03:48

Meeker: In what capacity?

01-00:03:51

Darrow: First as a clerk typist and library technician, and then became a purchasing agent. And as I said, the Navy Base and the Oakland Army Base were right down the street from each other, and it was strange, because I was at the Navy Public Center at the Oakland Army Base. So from August 1984 to September '94 I was at the Army Base for the Naval Supply Center—I mean for the Naval Public Works Center. And it was interesting. The Army Base was in two parts. One across the street. One was the admin building, and I sometimes had some business there. So I was at four buildings at the Naval Supply Center, 311, 332—well, 332 was the personnel office—742, where I was a library technician.

01-00:05:43

Meeker: Were you also a library technician when you were at Naval Public Works at the Army Base for that ten-year period of time between '84 and '94, what work were you doing there?

01-00:05:57

Darrow: I was a contract specialist, slightly higher up from a purchasing agent. So a buyer.

01-00:06:05

Meeker: But still doing purchasing or buying?

01-00:06:07

Darrow: Yes. And I worked in Building 746 I believe, which was the admin building. And then sometimes I went to the bowling alley for lunch. And 590 in the eleven-year period between the Army Base—no, the Naval Supply and the Army Base, I went to Building 590, which was the morgue for people coming home from Vietnam.

01-00:06:42  
Meeker: So you did spend some time working on the Army Base during the first ten years, yes? Or the first eleven years?

01-00:06:51  
Darrow: Did I work at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:06:53  
Meeker: Yeah.

01-00:06:53  
Darrow: No. Strictly Naval Supply Center.

01-00:06:55  
Meeker: Okay, but you mentioned something about working at the morgue.

01-00:06:59  
Darrow: Later, about '94 with the Naval Public Works Center.

01-00:07:08  
Meeker: Okay. Now these positions all along—then so did you retire about '94 or thereabouts?

01-00:07:15  
Darrow: No. From 1976 to '78 I volunteered for two years of Navy Reserve. And I didn't retire until 2004. I worked for the Army and Navy at other locations outside of there.

01-00:07:38  
Meeker: So from '94 to 2004 you worked as a civilian employee for the Army and Navy?

01-00:07:48  
Darrow: Yes. Always a civilian, except for the Navy Reserve. So my time was from 1972 to 2004, I think that's—or '74? It's thirty-four years. '78. 2006. That's thirty-four years from 1972 to 2006.

01-00:08:24  
Meeker: It's a long career.

01-00:08:26  
Darrow: Yes. And so sixteen of them were with the Navy in the same area. So never with the Army exactly in my life.

01-00:08:38  
Meeker: So you were always a federal employee employed by the Navy but as a civilian.

01-00:08:46  
Darrow: Yes.

01-00:08:46

Meeker:

Okay. Well, let's talk about the first ten or twelve years when you were working specifically at the Naval Supply Station. And you said that you started out as a clerk typist and then moved into purchasing. Can you just give me a rundown of the various jobs that you did during that period of time at the Naval Supply Center as best as you can remember?

01-00:09:17

Darrow:

I'm skipping agriculture, where I was a clerk typist too, since we're just talking Navy Army. I worked a year at the Naval Supply Center in two locations. It was very boring. Typing shipping labels of red, white and blue, like from—I think SUU is Travis and then I forgot what Subic Bay is because we did a lot of buying for Subic Bay, but that got destroyed by the volcano.

01-00:09:55

Meeker:

Subic Bay, that's in the Philippines?

01-00:09:58

Darrow:

The Philippines. At 311 in Naval Supply Center I bought a lot for the foreign stations, especially Subic Bay.

01-00:10:09

Meeker:

What were you buying? What sort of materials were being transferred?

01-00:10:16

Darrow:

Millions, it seems like millions of requisitions for propeller parts, and that seems to run through my mind, only propeller parts. And it was a period where there was a scandal of Navy parts, and Caspar Weinberger ended up telling everybody to buy spare parts smart, the BOSS Program. So we only had \$1 technical comparison, and we had all these folders full of requisitions, and usually they were red, white and blue, and we had wars, buying wars, by the lieutenant commander to do the best of all the buying sections.

01-00:11:13

Meeker:

You mean to buy things cheapest?

01-00:11:17

Darrow:

Buy things cheapest. And we had a small business specialist who helped us. Like they wanted thousands of flashlights and he was trying to consolidate so we wouldn't have to keep buying flashlights all the time. I think some black brazen material, which is helpful on a ship, that sailors—I mean salesmen always came around with their materiel for us to buy.

01-00:12:04

Meeker:

How did you determine what was going to be purchased and what wasn't?

01-00:12:10

Darrow:

There was a preestablished—

01-00:12:12

Meeker:

Relationship?

01-00:12:14

Darrow:

Yes. And when I first started buying it was only \$500, which really wasn't very much, and then went to \$1,000, and then for the Defense Department only \$2,500. So we tried to get at least three. Some of the companies were price-fixing manufacturers like Pratt Whitney, because they only had—they said they had one item they would need to make, so it cost more. And I remember Caspar Weinberger said about an ashtray, "Just get a mayonnaise jar and use that." And then "Don't spend much on mayonnaise jars." Anyway, all the standup comedians always laughed about it, and I tried to defend it. I think it was San Diego that was doing more of buying not efficiently. I think Oakland was fine.

01-00:13:38

Meeker:

So was it part of your job then to keep an eye out for price-gouging on the part of the vendors and so forth?

01-00:13:44

Darrow:

Yes.

01-00:13:45

Meeker:

So you mentioned Pratt Whitney trying to do something.

01-00:13:50

Darrow:

Yes. I especially remember Pratt Whitney.

01-00:13:51

Meeker:

So what were they trying to sell at a high price?

01-00:13:57

Darrow:

Some very confusing item that there was on an engineering drawing. You didn't really know what you were buying. It took a lot, they said, to manufacture it. And my boss kept on saying, "Oh, they should release the drawings," so that the local manufacturers could make the item for less. And Caspar Weinberger finally forced them to do that. That was difficult to get started on my buying experience.

01-00:14:35

Meeker:

Well, what role did Caspar Weinberger play?

01-00:14:38

Darrow:

He was the Defense Secretary.

01-00:14:40

Meeker:

Okay, so this would have been after 1981 when he was? Because he worked for Reagan, right?

01-00:14:46

Darrow:

Yes. I was there from '82 to '85, so closer to the end of his term. But I liked what he did. It was necessary. It helped us.

01-00:15:06

Meeker:

So were you in any way rewarded or given raises for pointing out the inefficiencies in the buying? What sort of incentives were they giving to you?

01-00:15:21

Darrow:

Oh, wait. I'm wrong in what I said about that. Really the small business specialists got incentives. We got incentives for buying carefully, buying well in spite of the problems. And when Subic Bay, the volcano erupted, I think that the people there looted a lot of the spare parts that I had bought over the years. So our great big partner was no longer, and a big waste of money. But anyway, that goes on.

01-00:16:12

Meeker:

That must have been somewhat frustrating sometimes.

01-00:16:18

Darrow:

We were mostly graded on the number of requisitions we do. So I tried to find a big folder with a lot of requisitions to buy from.

01-00:16:31

Meeker:

Well, how were you evaluated then? You said you were graded. What is the process? That's a bit different than how things work in the private sector. So I'm wondering if you can give me a sense of how employee evaluations would have been done in the context of the Navy.

01-00:16:49

Darrow:

Yes. The government is very different from the private sector. Mainly what's known as PALT, process acquisition lead time, where you buy things as fast as possible and buy it well. That was one of the big grading factors. Especially when I got to Naval Public Works Center. That was their big—we had performance appraisals, and buying as Caspar said smart and well and many items.

01-00:17:49

Meeker:

Were you working with any other Navy bases in order to get greater numbers at lower cost, partnering with maybe folks in San Diego or something like that?

01-00:18:04

Darrow:

No. That would have been a good idea. No. No, just my favorite little bases. No, I just dealt with who I was with.

01-00:18:16

Meeker:

Did you work at all with like the Naval Weapons Supply Station up in Concord?

01-00:18:21

Darrow:

Yes.

01-00:18:21

Meeker:

Or I guess was Alameda—that was a Naval air station.

01-00:18:28

Darrow:

Yes. That was all part of the Navy Public Works Center. They did do that in conjunction with each other. Some construction jobs. Oh, I have another Navy experience, but it's not Navy—Oakland Army Base.

01-00:18:47

Meeker:

Well, go for it. Tell me.

01-00:18:49

Darrow:

I worked for four years at the—oh, I did work for the Army. Four years for the Presidio in San Francisco, four years for the Navy in San Bruno.

01-00:19:09

Meeker:

When was the Army Presidio work?

01-00:19:13

Darrow:

It gets a little complicated. November '88 to September '94. And then the Navy at San Bruno September '94 to December '98. And my last time was eight years with the VA in Palo Alto. And I had two times with agriculture. I don't know if you want those.

01-00:19:52

Meeker:

Sure. Tell me about those.

01-00:19:56

Darrow:

My first job joining the great federal government was six months with the Office of Inspector General who checked on everybody from November '72 to May '73 before I went to the Army, before I went to the Naval Supply Center. And then I worked nine months with agriculture. When was that? In '94 I think.

01-00:20:41

Meeker:

It sounds like you were moved around a fairly great deal during your thirty-four-year career.

01-00:20:45

Darrow:

Yes. The worst were the San Bruno, and Palo Alto was the ultimate worst from here by public transportation two hours each way, nine-hour days, so I could have every other Friday off. And twenty-six of my years were in buying for the different agencies.

01-00:21:18

Meeker:

So would you say it's typical to get moved around so much?

01-00:21:25

Darrow:

It was typical because the bases were closing.

01-00:21:26

Meeker:

Okay. So that's basically why you were moved around so much.

01-00:21:30

Darrow: Yes, it seemed very logical to go to the VA after Army and Navy, and it was, except far away.

01-00:21:41

Meeker: Well, I think it sounds like this period of time that you were on the base working for the Naval Public Works is something that we should spend probably most of our time today talking about.

01-00:21:55

Darrow: Because it was strictly the Army Base but with the Navy Public Works, so five years.

01-00:22:03

Meeker: Can you tell me what the Naval Public Works Station is? I have no idea what this is. Maybe you can describe it to me from the physical building to what went on inside of it.

01-00:22:15

Darrow: Right inside the Army Base was I think either Building 794 or 796 was the admin building. So straight in. And they were a conglomeration of all of as you said the Concord Navy Base of Mare Island Naval Shipyard, who else?

01-00:22:41

Meeker: Alameda?

01-00:22:43

Darrow: Alameda. There used to be Oak Knoll in Oakland, which is now closed.

01-00:22:52

Meeker: It was a hospital.

01-00:22:54

Darrow: Yes, a hospital. And also Travis.

01-00:23:02

Meeker: So they were all brought together at this one—

01-00:23:07

Darrow: Yes. The Navy took care of them. The Naval Public Works took care of them. Providing services like cutting trees and getting rid of skunks in Hamilton in Marin County. Right after the money was turned in for the years, the stupid skunks came out. But I got money and a commendation for getting the skunks taken care of.

01-00:23:44

Meeker: So from what it sounds like you're telling me, the Naval Public Works really was an administrative headquarters for services that then would have been provided to Naval stations and hospitals throughout the area.

- 01-00:23:58  
Darrow: Especially Alameda. They had NADEP, which was inside the air station. You know where the air station is?
- 01-00:24:09  
Meeker: On Alameda?
- 01-00:24:12  
Darrow: On Atlantic in Alameda. Everything closed. Now it's Point Alameda. Who could figure?
- 01-00:24:21  
Meeker: It's changed quite a bit. The whole military configuration of the East Bay has changed.
- 01-00:24:27  
Darrow: Yes, everything. And they had housing at Hamilton in Marin County, and it was technically closed. But like they took care of the skunks and everything up there.
- 01-00:24:40  
Meeker: Where was Hamilton in Marin County?
- 01-00:24:43  
Darrow: It's on the way to Petaluma and Santa Rosa. Have you seen it?
- 01-00:24:50  
Meeker: No. I don't know that I know it. I've probably seen it but not knowing it.
- 01-00:24:54  
Darrow: Up from the center of the Frank Lloyd Wright—
- 01-00:25:03  
Meeker: Up San Rafael, yeah.
- 01-00:25:05  
Darrow: Yes, the civic center. Oh, I wanted to say that—so I bought supplies. I bought services. I bought construction. Everything that was needed.
- 01-00:25:24  
Meeker: So everything from construction materials to people who would come and remove skunks.
- 01-00:25:32  
Darrow: Yes. More than construction materials. Actual doing roofing, which I did at the VA, and remodeling buildings and—
- 01-00:25:47  
Meeker: Why do you suppose this naval administrative building was located on the Army Base as opposed to the Naval Base?

01-00:25:55

Darrow:

I always made a joke of it. I'm not sure why the Navy on the Army. But it was. And somehow it seemed centrally located to everything. Oh, and I got mugged once in the area, because I was going early in the morning to get overtime, and because the Army Base and the Naval Supply are in a bad location, they got me, so I went to work bloody. And so I was very dedicated to get my overtime, but I didn't get it that day. That was during the Oakland Army Base period. There's a little tunnel that goes to the base, and so anyway my boss said, "You're not going to work now, looking like that." So I went to Kaiser.

01-00:27:13

Meeker:

So I guess this sounds like you took public transportation to work all the time.

01-00:27:15

Darrow:

Yes. To Army Base it was generally the West Oakland BART station. Or there was a bus to—and somebody made a joke that well, if he had money he wouldn't be walking there, so that the people were stupid to try and mug him.

01-00:27:39

Meeker:

Well, where were living during this period of time?

01-00:27:42

Darrow:

For twenty-two years I've always lived in El Cerrito even when I went to San Bruno and Palo Alto. I guess I could have forced my wife to move. But we liked it, and I couldn't help it that the bases were closing all around me. But I managed to get as I said thirty-four years in spite of the closing. And now I would like a part-time job though.

01-00:28:19

Meeker:

I assume they're giving you a pension of some sort.

01-00:28:21

Darrow:

Yes. It's not big enough I don't think after thirty-four years. I think I deserve more. But I always felt a very dedicated employee, always buying for someone for all these things, even though as my mother says, "You don't know what propeller parts are."

01-00:28:48

Meeker:

So when you were buying at the—so you never really got an explanation about why this naval administrative center was located on the Army Base?

01-00:29:00

Darrow:

No, I just figured it was geographically located.

01-00:29:07

Meeker:

Did you do any buying for the Army Base? Or was it only for naval installations?

- 01-00:29:13  
Darrow: Oh, no, I bought for the five years at the Navy Public Works at Oakland Army Base. So yes I bought for there too. I got a promotion from purchasing agent to contract specialist, which—
- 01-00:29:33  
Meeker: What's the difference between purchasing agent and contract specialist?
- 01-00:29:36  
Darrow: Purchasing agent is primarily buying supplies and contract specialist is buying services and types of construction work.
- 01-00:29:50  
Meeker: Okay. So you were engaged in making contracts then.
- 01-00:29:54  
Darrow: The only promotion I really got was as a lead purchasing agent for agriculture, and I liked that. I got a small \$25,000 warrant, and enjoyed that.
- 01-00:30:13  
Meeker: That's all right. So the difference between purchasing and contracts of course is that contracts involve personnel and you have to deal with subcontractors and hiring.
- 01-00:30:22  
Darrow: Long-term.
- 01-00:30:24  
Meeker: Yeah. So did you play any role in helping institute like affirmative action policies or making sure that certain federal requirements were abided by?
- 01-00:30:35  
Darrow: Those were already put in the contracts always as a standard boilerplate.
- 01-00:30:43  
Meeker: So these weren't things that you necessarily had to concern yourself—
- 01-00:30:46  
Darrow: No. But I did negotiate modifications and whatever, like in construction sometimes there's unforeseen site conditions, and I made changes, and sometimes stopped work when it was necessary.
- 01-00:31:07  
Meeker: So when you were working during this period of time, were most of your superiors, were they mostly civilian employees? Or were some of them also enlisted men? Were they members—
- 01-00:31:23  
Darrow: The only place that there were military was at the Naval Supply Center. As I said, there was a military officer who gave us these war games to see who

would get the most items. And since it was a military facility, war is good. And we did win.

01-00:31:56

Meeker: Okay, your team won.

01-00:31:59

Darrow: Yes.

01-00:31:59

Meeker: Well, speaking of war, I'm wondering since you were involved in civilian work with the Navy for nearly thirty-five years, you saw I guess several wars, but at least two major wars, the Vietnam War and the first Gulf War. And I'm wondering if you can describe the difference in the work that you did during wartime versus during peacetime or relative peacetime. Or was there a difference?

01-00:32:34

Darrow: Well, I joined the Navy right at the end of Vietnam. So it was a quiet period, but there was a little bit of Yom Kippur War—Six Days, something like that. And let's see. I guess I did have Iraq.

01-00:33:08

Meeker: Yeah, the first Gulf War.

01-00:33:09

Darrow: Well, we just went about our business the same, buying and doing what we—and supporting the troops and supporting the vets.

01-00:33:18

Meeker: Well, did you notice any difference, say in the volume of work that you were doing during wartime or during peacetime?

01-00:33:29

Darrow: I would say at Naval Supply with the number of requisitions and also helping Subic Bay that there was an influx of work. But generally I didn't have that influx. But it always seemed like it. Like buying for Naval Supply all the time. So anyway it was a lot of work all the time in other words.

01-00:34:12

Meeker: All right. I wonder what happened when you worked on the Army Base, if you can make any comment on maybe the different work culture between the people on the Naval Station versus the people on the Army Base. Or did you feel like it was pretty much working at the same institution?

01-00:34:41

Darrow: Same institution. There wasn't much—

01-00:34:42

Meeker: So there wasn't much different. They were basically the same thing.

- 01-00:34:45  
Darrow: No, the only time we noticed that was when we went across the street to the admin building, and it felt more Army.
- 01-00:34:58  
Meeker: What does that mean? What does it mean for it to feel more Army?
- 01-00:35:04  
Darrow: As I said, I mostly had Navy and I worked at the Presidio for almost four years, and we had administrative units called directorates, and we had a colonel of logistics, a colonel of different things, and I didn't really like colonels. I just enjoyed the captains I dealt with. And one captain almost gave me a promotion. So I liked him. But not so much the Presidio. That was my least favorite. Does that answer your question?
- 01-00:35:53  
Meeker: Well, you said that when you went to the administration center on the Army Base that felt the most Army. And the implication was that it felt different than the Navy. So I'm just trying to figure out how was the Army—how did it feel different than the Navy?
- 01-00:36:16  
Darrow: Because it was specifically Army, and the Navy was a tenant there. So I especially felt that I was a tenant and sharing their space.
- 01-00:36:33  
Meeker: Okay, so that you were maybe not an entirely welcome guest or something like that.
- 01-00:36:36  
Darrow: And that's why it's a little strange to have a Naval Public Works at the Army Base. Like we shouldn't quite be there.
- 01-00:36:45  
Meeker: Did you socialize at all or—
- 01-00:36:45  
Darrow: The Army did have a lot of transportation called MOTBA, Military Overseas Transport, that seemed to be its main function, to ship materiel. Did I have friends?
- 01-00:37:05  
Meeker: Yeah, I mean did you socialize with anyone on the Army Base? Did you get to know anyone there when you were working at the base?
- 01-00:37:15  
Darrow: Stayed in my building. No. So don't really know what they're like.
- 01-00:37:23  
Meeker: Okay. You said also that you did sometimes go and have lunch at the bowling alley or something like that.

01-00:37:28  
Darrow: Yes, which was down the street. And that was the active place to eat I guess pizza and bowl.

01-00:37:41  
Meeker: Did you participate in any bowling leagues or bowling team or anything like that there?

01-00:37:45  
Darrow: No.

01-00:37:46  
Meeker: No, you would just occasionally go there and have a hot dog or something like that.

01-00:37:52  
Darrow: I drank at Naval Supply Center.

01-00:37:55  
Meeker: Where? Was there a certain facility there?

01-00:37:57  
Darrow: Yes, and then they stopped doing it because it might be like you might get a DUI, drink too much.

01-00:38:05  
Meeker: What was it called? Was it an officers' club or something?

01-00:38:09  
Darrow: Galley, something galley.

01-00:38:14  
Meeker: But it was I guess a civilian bar on the Naval Supply Station?

01-00:38:18  
Darrow: Yes, it was down from the civilian personnel.

01-00:38:25  
Meeker: Do you remember the Army Base having anything similar to that?

01-00:38:28  
Darrow: The bowling alley.

01-00:38:30  
Meeker: The bowling alley, okay. They served beer there?

01-00:38:32  
Darrow: Yes, yes. Why shouldn't anybody want to drink with all this buying? Oh, I know where it was. It was close to the back gate in the whatchamacallit, the Naval—it's confusing. Naval Supply Center. So I worked at 742. Towards the back of one of my buildings, when I was a purchasing agent, and they had a bar right near. And it was a closed-off building. Well, I guess I can talk about

it now. You know about BDU, or bomb dummy units. So they had constant pictures of bombs falling from the sky, and the sailors who were working there were all in that kind of business. So they talked about the Soviet era, about spies. So be careful when you go to the bar that you're not drinking with somebody who wants some information. And I had confidential coding books that I took care of. So those were the days of the Cold War.

01-00:40:19

Meeker:

Well, what sort of confidential material were you working with? What were some of the more sensitive items?

01-00:40:26

Darrow:

I never understood why this was confidential. It was just coding, just numbers. And that must be useful to someone. But I was supposed to shred it and didn't really know what it was about. But did it for six years, six and a half years.

01-00:40:47

Meeker:

Okay. You said also that you spent some time I guess doing ordering for the morgue or something like that.

01-00:40:52

Darrow:

No, it was the building was a morgue for the soldiers coming back from Vietnam. No, I didn't order. That's the only thing I didn't buy.

01-00:41:05

Meeker:

Caskets and that kind of stuff?

01-00:41:08

Darrow:

Yes.

01-00:41:08

Meeker:

Interesting. Why do you suppose that is?

01-00:41:08

Darrow:

I don't know. I bought the incinerator platforms for animals, the research at Presidio, that everybody was complaining about, all the animal rights people.

01-00:41:24

Meeker:

What sort of research was going on there? I don't know about this.

01-00:41:30

Darrow:

I don't know. They don't usually pick on poor dogs. Usually mice. But they must have after they worked on them sliced them. So since I needed to buy everything, I wasn't particular in what I was buying. So that was one of my services.

01-00:41:55

Meeker:

Well, what were some of the more remarkable or strange items that you were asked to purchase?

01-00:42:05

Darrow:

Well, I still think of the skunks that kept coming out when they shouldn't have. What other things? Well, I guess I'm not too happy about the incinerator platform. But I didn't see it. So anything else? Well, everything was kind of regular, as long as you understood what you were buying. Some of it was just strange, as I said for the bases. Oh, and some of the bases were sixteen to eighteen hours ahead when we did these OCR messages to order materiel. It says, "In reference to Reference A, Reference B is hereby ordered for Reference C," and that's whatever materiel the Japanese or the Filipinos wanted.

01-00:43:13

Meeker:

What does that mean? I guess I don't understand.

01-00:43:15

Darrow:

It's a perfect message where it's coded that in order for them to understand the materiel has been received they say, "In regards to Reference A, the Materiel B received. If Materiel B not received, please explain why you have not received this in a timely fashion." So that was fun.

01-00:43:54

Meeker:

It sounds like it was a little bit of cloak-and-dagger sort of work that you were doing too.

01-00:43:59

Darrow:

Yes.

01-00:44:00

Meeker:

Yeah, interesting.

01-00:44:03

Darrow:

And as I said the one place we—"Don't talk to anybody in the bar, they're going to—they might be Communists."

01-00:44:14

Meeker:

Was there ever a point during your career working for the military that you were interested in looking elsewhere? That you thought that it was time to leave the military and go into the private sector? No? So you looked upon it as a satisfying career?

01-00:44:34

Darrow:

Yes. It was kind of interesting. I had both military and civilian agencies. So now I've worked for five agencies, and I liked the military, because they had more advantages. They had the higher buying threshold. And it seemed like they were buying more interesting things, and they had more money.

01-00:45:05

Meeker:

Who were your bosses throughout this period of time? They were mostly civilians I'm guessing.

- 01-00:45:08  
Darrow: All of them.
- 01-00:45:10  
Meeker: All of them were civilians.
- 01-00:45:10  
Darrow: Except for the Presidio, where the head guy was a colonel. Everybody else was a civilian. Shared men and women. I think the men are nicer.
- 01-00:45:25  
Meeker: Why do you say that? How did their styles differ?
- 01-00:45:32  
Darrow: The women are more intense and more controlling and more hard to satisfy and trying to do as well as men, and don't do as well as men, but don't get me started. Especially my last boss before I retired, called the ice princess.
- 01-00:45:57  
Meeker: She was difficult to work for then.
- 01-00:46:00  
Darrow: Yes. So it's quite interesting what I've been through, isn't it? A lot of different places.
- 01-00:46:14  
Meeker: Yes indeed. So do you have any overall thoughts you want to offer about your career working for the Navy mostly, but also observing the Oakland Army Base? Maybe is there anything else that we should know about the Oakland Army Base? Maybe some little trivia or just something about life on the base that people who never saw it might be interested in knowing?
- 01-00:46:49  
Darrow: I was trying to do that with the Oakland Army Base, saying that the main building I worked in was 796, and then I forgot the number of the bowling alley and the former morgue, which did feel freaky. And I liked the Navy much better than—I've been comparing and contrasting, and I like the Navy. I had three experiences at San Bruno, Oakland, Oakland—was I felt much better than Presidio, but I've already said that. And I've always felt myself as a civil servant, and I might have bought some weird things that some people might think are not good, like the incinerator platform. But it was interesting to see how we could get rid of the skunks. And the Army said, "Behead them." And so I think that's what happened with them. And so I have always felt myself as a good civil servant. And as I said, the Navy was good, even if it was at the Army.
- 01-00:48:24  
Meeker: Were you ever involved in purchasing of weapons or ammunition at all?

01-00:48:30  
Darrow: No. That was something we didn't do. They have depots that do that, like in Ohio.

01-00:48:39  
Meeker: What about things like uniforms and that sort of stuff?

01-00:48:45  
Darrow: They buy themselves. So it was a lot of requisitions for like flashlights and all these other things.

01-00:48:58  
Meeker: Did you buy food or rations at all?

01-00:49:04  
Darrow: No. I don't know where they got that.

01-00:49:06  
Meeker: So it sounds like the—

01-00:49:08  
Darrow: Equipment.

01-00:49:11  
Meeker: Equipment mostly is what you were buying, okay. Why did the position at the Public Works building, why did you move from there? Why did that end?

01-00:49:25  
Darrow: Everything closed. That closed.

01-00:49:28  
Meeker: So that was when the base closed.

01-00:49:30  
Darrow: And then the Army Base itself closed. And then the Port of Oakland took over a little fence at a time. I think they started at Naval Supply, because it felt weird.

01-00:49:48  
Meeker: Now were civilian employees informed of the process by which the bases were going to close or not?

01-00:49:55  
Darrow: Really not too much. One could see that it was happening. But the Port of Oakland never talked to us. And if they say they did, then it's not true.

01-00:50:11  
Meeker: Well, it sounds like though the military did try to make provisions to keep you employed despite the closure of the bases.

01-00:50:27

Darrow:

Oh, one example—which agency was that? Oh, the Navy gave me two options, of either staying on the mezzanine—I don't know what that—or go to environmental. So I went to environmental. And then from there I moved to—where did I move after that? San Bruno I guess.

01-00:50:57

Meeker:

What was going on at San Bruno? What was the work being done there?

01-00:51:00

Darrow:

That closed too. That was an engineering facility. And the government likes to call itself by different names. It used to be Engineering Field Activity West—or Western Division. And then it changed. Then EFA, and then—it had been there fifty years, and all of a sudden the Navy Commander said, “We're drawing down by Fiscal Year '06. We're going to draw down by such-and-such by '07.” And he sped it up. And he didn't try to help us, anybody too much. He just said, “We're drawing down here.” Oh they had wonderful little displays of the next commander. But they never knew what that commander had done. So I like going to the—but I like to think that he was good, but he didn't seem that way.

01-00:52:10

Meeker:

What? The next commander of the base?

01-00:52:10

Darrow:

The next commander of the place.

01-00:52:15

Meeker:

Were you doing purchasing work at San Bruno as well?

01-00:52:19

Darrow:

Yes, everywhere.

01-00:52:21

Meeker:

And at the VA too?

01-00:52:22

Darrow:

Yes. From '82 to 2006.

01-00:52:39

Meeker:

So it looks like the tape is almost done. So I think we should probably wrap up. But I want to give you an opportunity to say any final words or thoughts or again anything that you think people might be interested in knowing about the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:53:00

Darrow:

I think that they so effectively closed everything one after the other, which was very hard for me to do, and I wish they hadn't done that, because I think that was the most logical place to keep. And I don't think the public knew about that, all the bases that were being closed, one right after the other. First Army Base, then Navy Public Works, and then San Bruno, Mare Island, Oak

Knoll. And that was very disconcerting, and I'm glad I was able to keep a job. That's the main thing.

01-00:53:53

Meeker:

Was this a unionized position that you were in? Were you a member of a union?

01-00:53:58

Darrow:

Only in Palo Alto. My bosses were very antiunion. I'm wondering who negotiated with the Port of Oakland to close the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:54:19

Meeker:

Well, that's part of the study that we'll be doing. We'll be interviewing some of the public policy people.

01-00:54:25

Darrow:

Can that be shared?

01-00:54:27

Meeker:

Yeah, that will be shared once we do the interviews.

01-00:54:29

Darrow:

Because I never saw these mysterious people.

01-00:54:33

Meeker:

Well, I think from what I understand Dellums, Ron Dellums, had a big role in that.

01-00:54:37

Darrow:

Oh, awful person.

01-00:54:39

Meeker:

Why do you say that?

01-00:54:39

Darrow:

Well, he was the head of the Armed Services, and the two federal buildings in Oakland were named for him. But he was only interested in South Africa, and he wasn't interested in all of his constituents, which were mostly black, and I never quite understood that. So him, okay.

01-00:55:01

Meeker:

Yeah. I don't know for sure but—

01-00:55:04

Darrow:

Well, now he's back as mayor of Oakland.

01-00:55:07

Meeker:

Yes. And you live in El Cerrito still.

01-00:55:10

Darrow:

Yes. So anyway as I say, what I mainly liked is the Navy. And it was kind of nice to be down the street from another Navy and to be—I don't know why Navy at the Army.

01-00:55:28

Meeker:

Well, this is good, because this will add a missing piece in the story otherwise that people will be able to learn about the participation of the Navy at the Army Base.

01-00:55:40

Darrow:

There's a lot of people involved. So I don't know if you can get them.

01-00:55:46

Meeker:

Well, do you still keep in touch with any of the people you used to work with?

01-00:55:50

Darrow:

Oh, I tried that. I might be able to.

01-00:55:56

Meeker:

We're always looking for more people to interview.

01-00:56:43

Darrow:

Okay.

01-00:56:43

Meeker:

All right? Well, thank you very much.

[End Audio File 1]

[End of Interview]