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**Louis Fantin**

**Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project**

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,  
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by  
David Dunham  
in 2002

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## Discursive Table of Contents—Louis Fantin

00:00:03

Born in Sopris, Colorado which was a coal mining community with many Mexican and Italian immigrants. -- Daily activities of a family in a coal-mining town. -- Aspirations to become a truck driver and first experience seeing military planes. -- Beginning to play the clarinet. Father was a musician from Italy and emigrated to begin a band and teach music in the coal-mining community. Mother played the mandolin and siblings played the violin, piano, and brass instruments. -- Racial dynamic of the band that his father began at the local high school and in the community in general. Stigma about interracial marriage. -- Reasons for moving to California. Working the railroads in Santa Fe, working at the Ford plant, working at the Pullman shops, and finally working at the shipyard. -- Applying for a job at the shipyards and getting the necessary training at Richmond high school to become an electric welder. Wage differences between clerk work and work at the shipyards. -- Did not join a union, there was little pressure to do so. -- Welding hauser pipes. -- Women working in the crew at the shipyard as burners or welders. -- “Oakies,” at the shipyard. -- Being Italian during WWII. Father was pro-Mussolini. Fights within the family between the younger men wanting to go to war and fight Italians and the older relatives feeling strong loyalty to Italy.

00:15:30

Italian relocation away from the coast. -- Staying with sister for a month then renting a room. -- Importance of public transportation to work and the shortage of gasoline during the war. -- Sister-in-law worked in the office at the shipyard. Impressions of women working in the office or in the yard. -- Playing in the shipyard band. Playing whenever a ship launched. Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters sometimes played these launching events. -- K Kaiser’s college of musical knowledge: a broad-casted series of musical concerts. -- Entertainment in San Francisco and Berkeley. Renting boats at the marina, going to museums and movies in San Francisco. -- Housing shortages and conditions during the war. -- Very little criminal activity during the war. -- Major League Baseball. -- Women in the shipyards. Rumors of sexual activity. -- Sexual harassment and sentiments towards female workers. The foreman, in particular, made rude comments. -- Feelings about African Americans working in the shipyards, and later as fellow military men. Segregation and overt racism in the military, particularly with Southerners.

00:30:30

Stereotypes about Richmond and racial relations in the area. -- Feelings about the great migration during the war. -- Graduated from high school in 1942. Being drafted in 1943. Disappointment and concerns about dying. -- Serving in the army. Training in Maxie, Texas. Travelling to New York and then, by ship, to Cardiff. Training in England for three months. Arriving at the beach and remaining stationed there for a month. The start of the Saint-Lo breakthrough. -- Memories of the end of the war. Informant was in southern France near Marseilles. -- Visiting Italy after the war. Trying to learn the language. -- Life after being discharged from the army. Going to Junior college in Sopris for an AA in engineering and then moving back to California to find work. Worked at Standard Oil. -- Richmond after the war.

00:45:16

The G.I. Bill allowed Fantin to go to college. -- Buying a house in Richmond in 1947. -- No African Americans in the neighborhood at the time. -- Informants wife stayed at home to raise the family. Some shipyard workers were childless but not all. -- Ideas about Catholicism and anti-Catholic sentiment. -- First impressions of California. The ocean, palm trees, and the bridge. -- Negative feelings about interracial relationships. -- Dangers while working in the shipyards. Impetigo skin infection and “welder’s flash.” -- Joining the band.

Tape 2

Time code adjustment: interview begins at 00:05:36

01:01:19

Working on the Liberty ship. -- Wife's work in the shipyard office in Long Beach. -- UC Berkeley researcher in biophysics who went blind at age 13. -- Raising children in Richmond. PTA involvement. -- Changing views on race after years living in Richmond. Children's racial experience at school and in the community. -- Roles in the Army. Combat engineers, water supply. Description of duties. Battle of the Bulge. Trapped in Bascogne for ten days. -- Jobs in Richmond after the war. Drafting, house-plans, working in a liquor store.

01:15:08

Rationing during the war. -- Working at Ford in the mailroom for a short time – didn't work out. -- The effects of the shipyards closing after the war. Getting the job at Standard Oil. -- Feelings about the Vietnam war. "dumbest thing we ever did." -- Father's changing feelings about Italy over the years. Father's pro-union loyalty. -- Informant's union sympathies. -- Traveling with his wife after retiring. -- Traveling to Japan and connections with the Richmond-Shimada.

**TRANSCRIPT**

Interview with Louis Fantin, November 12, 2002

Interviewer: David Dunham

Transcriber: Sarah Wheelock

Audited by Shannon Page

1-00:00:01

**Fantin:**

I was born in a little town in Colorado called Sopris, in southern Colorado. The county seat is Trinidad, but Sopris is a little coal mining community, mostly Mexican and Italian immigrants.

1-00:00:18

**Dunham:**

Okay. And I know you've written quite an engaging entire memoir of your childhood and all, and growing up there, which I really enjoyed. Thank you for sharing it with me. In a couple of minutes, could you just tell us some of the more significant aspects of growing up in Sopris?

1-00:00:32

**Fantin:**

My father was a coal miner, got up and went to work at four o'clock in the morning. My mother would get up before him, light the old coal stove in the freezing weather. It was cold in the wintertime. My brother and I slept together, and we could see Mom in the kitchen, lighting this coal stove. That was her job; get up first thing in the morning, make breakfast and get ready. Then my dad would get up, and she'd have breakfast for him, and at four-thirty his ride would be there, and out he'd go to work. Every day. I look back at his coal mining days, boy, what a life that was. But that's the way things were.

1-00:01:15

**Dunham:**

As a young child or early teenager, do you remember what you wanted to be when you grew up?

1-00:01:22

**Fantin:**

Funny thing, I can remember wanting to be a truck driver, of all things. I remember as a kid wanting to be a truck driver, but I do remember one time these four airplanes flew overhead, army airplanes. They were low. We waved out in the street, and they actually waved back at us as they flew over. Really amazing. I used to imagine, "Gee, wouldn't it be something if they had to land on our baseball diamond or our ball field, and we could see those planes? Oh, that would be great." So then the idea came to me, maybe I'd like to be a pilot someday. My brother used to talk about that all the time. He wanted to be a pilot himself, too. He never did make it, because he had a little heart glitch. He was in the army and he never made it, so he became an air force radio operator.

1-00:02:21

**Dunham:**

How many siblings did you have?

1-00:02:24

**Fantin:**

I had an older sister, Amelia, the next older sister, Caroline, and I was third, then my brother was younger. My brother was thirteen months younger than I. We were pretty much twins. We just did everything together, just grew up together. Really, when I think about it, it was a wonderful relationship we had, the two of us.

1-00:02:42

**Dunham:**

Are you still close with him?

1-00:02:44

**Fantin:**

Still close. I talk to him almost every other day. He lives in Seattle. He's a retired engineer for Boeing.

1-00:02:53

**Dunham:**

How did you first come to play the clarinet?

1-00:03:01

**Fantin:**

My father was an Italian musician, a musician that came from Italy. When he came to this country, he came here because his cousin wrote him a letter and said they're looking for a music teacher to organize a band in this little coal mining community. My father was musically inclined and could teach music, so he came over here and got this job in this coal mine. The mine superintendent was like a mayor; he'd run the whole town. He talked to my father's cousin and said, "Where's that cousin of yours that you said was coming from Italy?" He said, "Well, he's here, he's working in the mine." So my father got started teaching music that way. He organized this band for the little town there.

1-00:03:52

**Dunham:**

Did other members of your family play instruments, too?

1-00:03:54

**Fantin:**

Yes, my mother played the mandolin; my oldest sister played the violin; Caroline, my middle sister, played the piano; my brother played the brass instruments; and my father played the brass instruments. We were kind of a family band. [laughs] Once in a while, we'd sit out on the porch and entertain the neighborhood.

1-00:04:17

**Dunham:**

What a neat thing. And your father led a band then, as well.

1-00:04:20

**Fantin:**

And of course, my father organized a band, taught all the kids how to play. In fact, when they organized this high school band--see, the school board decided to have a school band. They asked my father if he'd organize a band, so they offered to pay him thirty dollars a month, and

they agreed that each kid would pay fifty cents a month for their lessons. The total came to about fifty or sixty dollars a month, so my father took turns: every night he'd have a couple of students that he'd teach music, and organized this band. He took these Italian immigrants, the parents of these kids to town, bought instruments, did the whole thing. In fact, had the uniforms built. In fact, my mother sewed some of the uniforms. That's how we started the school band. So that's how I got started playing clarinet.

1-00:05:07

**Dunham:**

Did it happen that it was only the Italian Americans who did play in the band, or did any of the Mexican Americans kids--?

1-00:05:14

**Fantin:**

I've got a picture of the band members, and I think almost everyone's Italian in it, except for two or three kids.

1-00:05:20

**Dunham:**

Were they Mexican American, or other whites?

1-00:05:26

**Fantin:**

One was Mexican American, and the other one was some other--I think he was English. In fact, it turned out that the English kid was a clarinet player and his father was the principal of the high school. He was a friend of mine, actually. He and I chummed around together.

1-00:05:46

**Dunham:**

So what was the racial dynamic?

1-00:05:48

**Fantin:**

I would say I guess it might have been forty-forty-twenty. Forty percent Italian, 40 percent Mexican--from Mexico, Spanish Americans, as they call themselves--and maybe the others were a mixture of English, or Scotch, Irish, whatever.

1-00:06:04

**Dunham:**

Was there much socializing between the different races, or were they pretty--?

1-00:06:11

**Fantin:**

When I grew up, it was kind of a stigma to be married to a Mexican. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if for the Mexicans, it was a stigma to be married to an Italian. But when I remember the first one or two people married Mexicans, when they crossed that line, so-called, to us it was kind of a stigma. But now, it's a very common thing. In fact, I have a lot of nieces who are married to-- three nieces are married to Mexicans. They have a wonderful family.

1-00:06:44

**Dunham:**

We may return to talk about Sopris a little later, but now let's move on to talking about what led to your coming to California and to Richmond, specifically. What was that journey like?

1-00:06:53

**Fantin:**

My sister Caroline--that's the sister older than me--her husband came out here and went to work on the railroad, Santa Fe. We lived at 617 Third Street. Still remember it. In fact, I drove by that little house the other day. They came out here, and so my sister invited me to come out, after I got out of high school. There was all kinds of jobs. Everybody could get a job. So I came here right out of high school and went to work for the Ford plant. I worked there for about maybe three weeks as a mail boy, and then from there I went to work, left there and went to work for the Pullman shops, because it was a little bit of raise. I went to work in the Pullman shop in the storehouse, as a clerk. I was rooming with my sister. When I lived on 617 Third Street, my sister had her sister-in-law come out and live with us, so there wasn't room for us all there. So she found me a room up the street, Mrs. {Bardett's} house. I roomed there with a couple of guys. They were the ones that said to me, "Hey, come and work in the shipyards. Anybody can get a job in the shipyards." So that's when I decided to go to work in the shipyards.

1-00:08:02

**Dunham:**

How did that go? What was your first day at the shipyards like?

1-00:08:07

**Fantin:**

Well, I went to work in the shipyards, I went to apply for a job, and they said, "What can you do?" And he said, "Tell them you're a burner. Anybody can run an acetylene torch. They'll hire you to do it, no problem at all." So I said I was a burner. So they sent me out in the middle of the yard, where they have a fellow that tested you, and so he handed me a torch. There was a bench there, and I couldn't even light that torch. So he lit the torch. He was a kindly old fellow, and he lit the torch for me and said, "Burn this plate." The idea was, with the torch, you cut this plate in half. So I proceeded to start to cut this plate in half, and I was making a mess. Metal bubbled over and I wasn't getting anywhere. He finally came over and tried to give me a hand on it, and finally says, "Young man, you know what I think? Maybe you need a little more training," in other words, get the hell out of here, kid. [laughter] So I went and heard about this Richmond High School having a craft training program where they're teaching you various fields, different crafts. I decided, well, I'd be an electric welder. So I went to school at night there, and every night went to a welding class. In about a month training I passed this test, and from there I was able to get a job in a shipyard as an apprentice welder.

1-00:09:37

**Dunham:**

Were you still working in the days at the Pullman shop?

1-00:09:41

**Fantin:**

I was still working at the Pullman shop at the time. As soon as I got to the point where I passed the test, I told my boss at the Pullman shop that I was going to go work at the shipyards. "Oh,"

he said, “don’t do that. I’ll give you a three-cent raise.” I was making a dollar and twenty cents an hour, I think it was. Maybe it was ninety cents an hour; that’s what it was. I was going to get a dollar-twenty in the shipyards, so the difference was enough to go to the shipyards. He was going to give me a ninety to a ninety-three-cent raise, so I went to the shipyards, started at a dollar-twenty an hour. In about six weeks I passed the journeyman’s test, and then I went to a dollar-thirty an hour, I think it was.

1-00:10:20

**Dunham:**

Did you join a union?

1-00:10:22

**Fantin:**

I didn’t join the union. In fact, there was no pressure to join the union. I think it might have been voluntary, but I really even didn’t pay attention to the union. Wait a minute...I might have joined the union without realizing it.

1-00:10:36

**Dunham:**

From what I’ve read, it was common to be in a union, depending on your trade.

1-00:10:41

**Fantin:**

Yes, I joined the CIO, come to think of it, but I didn’t attend any union meetings, I just paid my dues. It wasn’t compulsory, as I recall, or closed shop.

1-00:10:53

**Dunham:**

So once you got your training, you felt very qualified at the work you were doing?

1-00:10:58

**Fantin:**

Yes, I had no problem. I had a good touch. Welding requires a little bit of a touch, as I recall. Before long, I was welding what they call a {Hauser} pipe. That’s the huge pipe that comes out of the side of the ship, where the chain comes out. That’s called a {Hauser} pipe. My job was to weld that {Hauser} pipe to the shell. It was attached to the shell. Of course, this was done out in the yard, on the ground, where they built what they call the forepeak. The prefabricated forepeak out on the ground, and then that portion was picked up with a crane and brought to the ship. So I sat on a box and welded {Hauser} pipe day in and day out. It was kind of an interesting job, actually. You look back at it now, I would have been bored probably now, but in those days I found it interesting.

1-00:11:55

**Dunham:**

Did you get on-the-job training as well as your night classes? Or how did that work?

1-00:12:02

**Fantin:**

No, the training I got as an apprentice in school was enough to tide me over so that I didn't need any additional training. Welding just became a matter of becoming proficient in what you did, by just doing it.

1-00:12:19

**Dunham:**

Did you train any others, then, once you were working there?

1-00:12:21

**Fantin:**

No, I wasn't required to that. I worked for a foreman, I'll never forget his name was Mario {Mellini}. He had a crew of about eight or ten. He was called the lead man, and there were about eight or ten of us in the crew, a couple of women worked on our crew.

1-00:12:42

**Dunham:**

What role did the women have on your crew?

1-00:12:43

**Fantin:**

Same as mine. Some were burners, some were welders.

1-00:12:45

**Dunham:**

Did you have any hesitancy about their working with you? How did they do? How did it go?

1-00:12:52

**Fantin:**

No, I just minded my business, they minded theirs. I was just eighteen years old at the time. Most of them were older than myself. I was probably the youngest kid in the crew.

1-00:13:06

**Dunham:**

Were there different races within your work team?

1-00:13:08

**Fantin:**

I don't remember. I know there were a lot of so-called, quote-unquote, "Okies," they called them in those days. Okies and Arkies. When I look back on it, I was probably one of them, because I came from Colorado. There were a lot of people from out of town, from out of the state, that worked in the crews.

1-00:13:26

**Dunham:**

Do you remember what that felt like, then? How did you feel, having come from Colorado? Did you feel like an outsider? There were so many. Did the out-of-staters kind of hang out together, or did everyone come together?

1-00:13:39

**Fantin:**

Pretty much all of us were out-of-staters, so it didn't really make any difference to me. I never gave much thought to the fact that I was an outsider. I was conscious of the fact that I was Italian, I remember. Where I came from, all my family and all my friends were Italian, everybody was Italian. I thought that that was it. Every once in a while I'd hear some comment, anti-Italian talk, you know. If you weren't Italian...but I was aware of that.

1-00:14:10

**Dunham:**

Since it was during the war, what was it like? Even in Sopris, was there any issue, was there any split in the Italian American community as war approached?

1-00:14:19

**Fantin:**

My father, having been born in Italy, was pro-Mussolini. He was a loyal Italian. His heart was still with Italy. Of course, there was some anti-Italian talk, because we were fighting against the Italians. So my brother and I would make comments to my dad about Italy: we were going to fight the Italians. That bothered my father. I can remember him saying one time, "You mean to tell me if you were in the war and you'd see my brothers or my relatives over there, you'd kill them?" My brother and I popped up, "You better believe we would!" [laughs] He didn't want to hear that. He thought that was terrible. He used to visit with his Italians at night. At night, they'd sit around and chew the fat around this tree. They talked about how things were back in the old country, and Mussolini was the greatest thing since the wheel, in those days. He made the trains run on time in Italy, my father would say. You know, this sort of stuff. So there was that fact that we were at war against Italy. My brother and I didn't have any loyalty to Italy. [laughs] We were born here.

1-00:15:26

**Dunham:**

It wasn't an issue for you. Did you ever know of any Italian Americans who were imprisoned or interned for loyalty issues?

1-00:15:33

**Fantin:**

No, in that part of the country, there was no...I notice, here in California, they were moved away from the coast if they weren't citizens. I know several families that they did that to, but back there where we were, there was no talk like that at all.

1-00:15:58

**Dunham:**

In terms of the different races in Richmond, either in the shipyards or socially, what was your feeling since you had grown up in this—there had been the Italian American and Mexican American community? What was it like, coming to a more diverse community?

1-00:16:17

**Fantin:**

It really didn't bother me. I didn't feel any feeling, one way or the other. I didn't have any difficulty in that respect at all. Of course, when I was a kid in Colorado going to school, I socialized, I had a very good friend who was a Mexican kid. He used to try to learn to speak

Italian and I'd try to learn to speak Spanish. We socialized together; I didn't have any feeling one way or the other.

1-00:16:44

**Dunham:**

So when you first came, you stayed at your sister's. How long did you stay?

1-00:16:54

**Fantin:**

I stayed there about a month until she found me this room up at Mrs. {Bartlett}, which was a half a block away. Then I went up there and stayed with her. She had a two-story house and she had rooms downstairs. I stayed with Paul Brown, who was my roommate. He was from back East somewhere. He's the one that talked me into going up there and said, "Tell them you're a burner."

1-00:17:22

**Dunham:**

He worked at the shipyards himself?

1-00:17:23

**Fantin:**

He worked in the shipyards. In fact, I rode to work with him and his dad in the morning. We'd go up to Macdonald Avenue, to Rosie's Café and have breakfast, and then we'd go to work. I was fortunate enough that I got a ride with him.

1-00:17:36

**Dunham:**

Yes. How did most people get to the shipyards?

1-00:17:39

**Fantin:**

Well, there were a lot of buses. People took public transportation. During the war, of course, gasoline wasn't that available, and so a lot of people rode public transportation.

1-00:17:52

**Dunham:**

Was rationing happening with gasoline, do you recall?

1-00:17:58

**Fantin:**

Yes, I remember the old A-card. A-card, B-card, C-card. Each of those cards allows you so much gasoline for various commodities or foods that were scarce.

1-00:18:06

**Dunham:**

Were there any ways around that, do you know?

1-00:18:10

**Fantin:**

If there were, I weren't aware of them, but I do remember a story when my brother-in-law back in Colorado got into a fisticuffs with a filling station operator who offered him some gas under

the table, illegally. Of course, my brother-in-law, who had a bunch of kids and couldn't go into the service and was loyal, rah rah rah, you know, patriot; well, when this guy offered him that, hey. That's when the fighting started. He thought that was very unpatriotic.

1-00:18:39

**Dunham:**

Yes, well, that's quite a stand. Your sister, and then your sister-in-law that came; did they seek jobs as well?

1-00:18:51

**Fantin:**

My sister had a little boy, the one child at the time. So therefore she stayed home and took care of him; and my brother-in-law, of course, was on the railroad. He would come and go because his route was between here and Fresno and here and Bakersfield, so he'd be here one day and gone two. While he was gone, there was a bed for us. [laughs]

1-00:19:13

**Dunham:**

And your sister-in-law, did she come and work?

1-00:19:19

**Fantin:**

She was actually my sister's sister-in-law. My brother-in-law's sister, Ann. She worked in the shipyards, too, when I was there, at that same time. She worked in the office.

1-00:19:32

**Dunham:**

She was an office worker. Were there more women who were in more traditional roles of office workers, or more who were actually doing the kind of work you did?

1-00:19:39

**Fantin:**

I have really no feel for that, because I never went and saw the offices. I passed by this office. In fact, I'll tell you what: on my way to work at my job, I'd see this office and it was lighted up all the time. I'd see these drawing boards, people working there, like engineers or draftsmen. It kind of stuck in my mind. That's where Ann worked, in that office. In fact, Ann and I chummed together because we were pretty much the same age. In fact, we got involved in some of the festivities that took place in the shipyards, because by playing the clarinet, I joined the band in the shipyard. I would go play for the launchings. The band played for the launchings, so every day when they had a launching, three, four, five days apart, I would take my clarinet and go over the bandstand and play with the band, play for the launching and go back to my job, with my clarinet. [laughs]

1-00:20:37

**Dunham:**

Did that give you a little break, or was that your lunch break?

1-00:20:39

**Fantin:**

Yes. Well, it was most of the time during the lunch, but sometimes a little earlier than lunch. It was kind of interesting because I saw some notables doing that. I saw Bing Crosby, I saw the Andrews Sisters, various people that were involved in the launching, who were involved in breaking the bottle over the keel of the--.

1-00:20:57

**Dunham:**

Did they perform as well, at the lunchtime? Play concerts, kind of thing?

1-00:21:00

**Fantin:**

They sang, yes. In fact, one night Ann and I went to--I don't know where we got the ticket, but we went to a program at the shipyards, it was a radio program. It was on the air. It was called K. Kaiser's College of Musical Knowledge. It was a regular weekly show. They did a launching there, and it was on the air.

1-00:21:26

**Dunham:**

What other kinds of things did you do with Ann or others, for socializing and for fun?

1-00:21:39

**Fantin:**

Well, Ann and I, on Sundays I remember we went to the Berkeley marina. They have these little sailboats that you can rent, sailboats, and we went sailing on the marina there one time. My roommate's sister came to visit one time, I think from Wyoming. I took a liking to his sister, but she wouldn't give me a tumble at all. [laughs] But I remember that we went sailing on these little sailboats on the marina. Of course, we went to San Francisco. Occasionally we'd go to various museums and things like that.

1-00:22:11

**Dunham:**

What was the dating life at the time like?

1-00:22:13

**Fantin:**

Well, it was wartime, and working as much as we did, there weren't all that much time, but we did go to the movies occasionally, as I recall. That was something else, too. The movie houses had people that lived in them, slept there, because the housing was so severely short. People would go to movies and sleep in the movies.

1-00:22:41

**Dunham:**

The place that you and Paul Brown stayed at, did it get overcrowded, or was it limited, how many tenants they had?

1-00:22:49

**Fantin:**

It was a two-story house, and this woman had about four or five rooms downstairs and about two upstairs. One of the fellows that lived there actually shared the kitchen with her. We didn't; we

had to go out and eat at a restaurant. We just had the room there. But the house is still there. I just drove by it the other day.

1-00:23:08

**Dunham:**

How else did people find housing in those days, since it was so scarce?

1-00:23:14

**Fantin:**

That was interesting. I wondered; you just knew somebody or just happened to be lucky. People slept everywhere. It's amazing how well people got by, considering there was such a shortage of housing. There were a lot of people in the shipyards and in the town. The population of this town was a hundred thousand. It jumped from about twenty-five to a hundred, as I recall, overnight.

1-00:23:37

**Dunham:**

Yes, absolutely. What other effects did you feel that might have had on Richmond? Did you notice things, criminal activity around that? I mean, it's hard to support an infrastructure when there's that much growth.

1-00:23:48

**Fantin:**

Actually, the criminal activity was nil, it seemed to me like, in those times, during wartime. People were just busy working.

1-00:24:00

**Dunham:**

Did you go out to music clubs and such at all?

1-00:24:03

**Fantin:**

No, I didn't really get involved with any outside social activities in the town at all, that I can recall. Mostly it was within the family.

1-00:24:14

**Dunham:**

With your sister?

1-00:24:17

**Fantin:**

With my sister and brother-in-law.

1-00:24:22

**Dunham:**

Did you play sports at all, or any other activities like that?

1-00:24:25

**Fantin:**

No, when I was out here I didn't. Of course, when I was back in Colorado in high school, I played basketball and softball.

1-00:24:32

**Dunham:**

Were you aware of some of the sports leagues and stuff they had?

1-00:24:37

**Fantin:**

Oh, I followed the baseball. Man, I followed Major League Baseball. To this day, I still follow Major League Baseball. In fact, the DiMaggios were playing in those days, Joe and Vince and Dominic, all three of them played in those days. My father was kind of interested in the DiMaggios, since they were Italian. But he wasn't much for sports. In fact, he thought sports was a waste of wearing out your shoes.

1-00:25:06

**Dunham:**

Yes, as a music man, that was his preference. So did you follow the Yankees growing up, with the DiMaggios? Nowadays, are you an A's or Giants fan?

1-00:25:14

**Fantin:**

I'm a Giants fan. I would have loved to see Barry get that diamond World Series ring, which he didn't do.

1-00:25:24

**Dunham:**

Back at the shipyards, with the women who were working, did you know women who did have children who were also working?

1-00:25:33

**Fantin:**

No, you know, I didn't know any of the women. I never got to know any of the women personally, just because I was on the job, but I do know that there were a couple of occasions where I noticed that there were some things that weren't quite social. There was some fooling around going on among the crew. Of course, I think that's only natural in any of those situations, but I remember seeing signs of sexual activity having taken place during the night there, you know.

1-00:26:04

**Dunham:**

How did you come to realize that?

1-00:26:07

**Fantin:**

Just plain and simple: we see condoms once in a while, lying around.

1-00:26:11

**Dunham:**

Oh. What shift did you work?

1-00:26:17

**Fantin:**

I worked day shift, and of course, these things must have taken place on the graveyard shift, the shift prior to that. There was three shifts, you know, graveyard, middle afternoon. There were three shifts around the clock.

1-00:26:31

**Dunham:**

Was there much playfulness or kind of hijinks on the job?

1-00:26:31

**Fantin:**

No, occasionally you'd hear some guy make a pass at some woman, some kind of a comment, but generally it was pretty on the up and up. In fact, my lead man wasn't very sympathetic towards the women in the crew, I thought. I noticed that, but I was just a kid, I didn't say anything. It was none of my business, but I wasn't very excited about that. I thought that was kind of unnecessary.

1-00:27:06

**Dunham:**

What kinds of things did he do?

1-00:27:09

**Fantin:**

Would make comments to other men about how dumb these women were, how they weren't performing, they weren't up to stuff. I didn't pay much attention to what they were doing; I was just doing my job.

1-00:27:25

**Dunham:**

Did you notice many other men who shared that view, though?

1-00:27:28

**Fantin:**

No, I really didn't, but I'm sure it wasn't all that uncommon.

1-00:27:38

**Dunham:**

What about the same kind of thing towards different races? You had said you experienced some of that towards Italian Americans sometimes, sort of especially because it was during the war. What about particularly towards African Americans and others who were there?

1-00:27:52

**Fantin:**

Well, I had never been around a lot of African Americans where I came from. It was very prevalent here, so I was just a little bit prejudiced, I guess you might say, because I wasn't that comfortable with them being around. I did get to know one fellow there a little bit in the shipyards, and he and I got along fine. I had no difficulty with that at all.

1-00:28:17

**Dunham:**

Was it a changing experience, or did you pretty much retain the prejudice?

1-00:28:24

**Fantin:**

It was strange. I just hadn't been exposed to black people before, so I wasn't that comfortable. Of course, then when I went in the army, then I saw much more of that racist feeling.

1-00:28:40

**Dunham:**

You observed much more racism?

1-00:28:42

**Fantin:**

Oh, yes. We weren't integrated, blacks and whites together. We were in separate organizations, but occasionally you'd see some black organization marching by. You'd hear guys in the white group, in my group, make outlandish—make cracks at these black people. You know, Southern guys, for example. It was kind of a shock to me, you know.

1-00:29:05

**Dunham:**

Because although you had felt prejudice because of your inexperience, how did you feel at that time? Did it feel more comfortable to be that way, or had the Richmond experience changed you at all at that time? I would assume, not necessarily--I mean, you had the one friend, but--

1-00:29:20

**Fantin:**

Well, I heard it, and I knew it was prevalent. I just pretty much kept my mouth shut, because I knew those people from my group that were from the South, North and South Carolina, for example, who would make these racist remarks. I didn't want to have to get into a hassle with them, but I didn't like it. I felt a little bit of, Gee, why does that have to be? I was just a little bit uncomfortable with it, but I didn't say too much about it. I certainly wouldn't have done something like that, you know.

1-00:29:58

**Dunham:**

But at the shipyards then and in Richmond in general, you didn't feel you saw that much of that?

1-00:30:05

**Fantin:**

No, I never saw much of it. I knew that it existed, but I never saw much of it. Of course, I kept my nose out of it and kept my nose clean.

1-00:30:19

**Dunham:**

Right. But you did know that it existed and it was clear, the separation.

1-00:30:21

**Fantin:**

Oh, yes.

1-00:30:22

**Dunham:**

How about through the history of Richmond, since you've been here '47 through--how do you feel that that relations--?

1-00:30:31

**Fantin:**

Richmond comes across negatively to other parts of the country. In this area, Richmond's got a bad name for being a high-crime town. But I've always felt, in my way, any way I could to improve the image of the city, if I could in any way, I would have done that. We have some wonderful, wonderful black organizations, black people, in the country. I know some wonderful black people. We've got a wonderful neighbor. He'd come over; we're neat, you know? I've got a black neighbor across the street; we're very good friends. We get along just beautifully. So I have no--I just think that Richmond's a nicer town than the image portrays, because it's a wonderful city.

1-00:31:22

**Dunham:**

I guess and part of it, since there was this tremendous boom, if you had any impression of the lasting impact of that, if it has much to do with some of the negative--which may be exaggerated; I'm not trying to just emphasize that; I think that there is a lot of great qualities in Richmond--but do you think that had any lasting impact? And the fact that there was such tremendous migration at that time.

1-00:31:53

**Fantin:**

Yes, I think it was the good thing for the city, the fact that it came like it did. It helped integrate this country. A hundred years from now, it's going to be even more integrated, and in the long run it's going to be just fine. You take South America, for example. Now, the Spanish settlers settled South America, and they integrated beautifully down there. You take the country down there that's black and white, mixed in South America beautifully. Why? Because the Spanish settled the south. The English settled North America, and that's where that division is. That's where that racist separation is, so it's a lot easier down there than it is up here.

1-00:32:37

**Dunham:**

Isn't there still quite a bit of hierarchy down there, too?

1-00:32:39

**Fantin:**

Probably is. But there seems to be a blend of black and white down there a lot better than it is here.

1-00:32:50

**Dunham:**

Interesting. Okay, you mentioned you started at a dollar-twenty and then got up to a dollar-thirty. When did you start, in '42?

1-00:33:05

**Fantin:**

I graduated from high school in May of '42, I came out here in May, worked a month or two in the Pullman shops, and so that I would say about August or September I was working in the shipyards. I would say August, September of '42 I went to work in the shipyards. I guess I worked there for a year before Uncle Sam grabbed me.

1-00:33:40

**Dunham:**

How did you find out you had been drafted?

1-00:33:48

**Fantin:**

I got this notice in the mail from my draft board. I had to go register, and {Clair Horner,} Judge {Horner} was the head of the draft board. When I got called to go in the army, I went up to the draft board and I said I was born and raised in Colorado, was there a chance I could go back and visit my parents before I got drafted? He said, "Young man, you go home, we'll send your papers back there." So I went back to Colorado, I was there a month or two, I thought, Hey, they forgot about me, this is great. I was just killing time, doing nothing, and one day I got this notice and that's how I got drafted. Uncle Sam, "We Want You."

1-00:34:25

**Dunham:**

So what were your feelings about being drafted?

1-00:34:28

**Fantin:**

Well, I was disappointed. In fact, I was quite really a little bit uncomfortable about the fact that I was eighteen years old and going in a war, may or may not make it, you know. The fact of that occurred to me. But when I got drafted, I went up to the reception center, where we got drafted, went up to Denver, Fort Logan, Colorado, and I could have got a job as a welder. They offered me a job in the Seabees as a welder, third-class petty officer. But being on the water and being in the navy didn't excite me. I thought, I'll take my chances in the army, so just I decided to go in the army.

1-00:35:14

**Dunham:**

How long did you serve?

1-00:35:17

**Fantin:**

Just short of three years. Went to {Camp Maxie}, Texas, for basic training, and from {Camp Maxie}, Texas, we went by troop train to New York, from there a four- or five-day trip across the Atlantic in a terrible storm in March of '43. Landed in Cardiff, Wales. I knew Cardiff from geography for some reason or another, because some of my buddies said, "How do you know we're in Wales?" I said, "Cardiff is in Wales." "How do you know that?" "Well, I just know that." So from there, we trained in England for about three months before the invasion, and then from there went across the channel about I would say two weeks after the initial invasion, something like that. We went across with barrage balloons attached to our ILSTs, flying overhead to keep airplanes from blowing them. It was the idea of protecting the planes. As we

got near the beach, I noticed there were guys playing football on the beach. [laughs] Things were pretty quiet. I was tickled pink to see that. [laughter] They were playing catch, yes.

1-00:36:43

**Dunham:**

Did that stay? Was most of your time relatively quiet, as you say?

1-00:36:47

**Fantin:**

Well, we got off the ship, the old LST pulled up to the sand, dropped her door and opened the door while there was still water there, and as the tide came down, we drove right off the LST and to the sand. We went about five miles to a bivouac area and there we stayed. We must have stayed there a month, until the breakthrough. They call it the Saint-Lô breakthrough. One morning I was in my foxhole, I was doing something. I heard this noise, this drone. I looked overhead and all of a sudden here come these airplanes. The sky was covered with planes from horizon to horizon. It went on for hours, I swear. That's when they bombed the German lines and started to break through on the peninsula of Saint-Lô. The town was called Saint-Lô on the Cherbourg peninsula. That's when the drive started towards Paris.

1-00:37:58

**Dunham:**

Do you remember where you were when you heard the war had ended?

1-00:38:01

**Fantin:**

Yes, when the war had ended, we were in southern France, getting ready to go to the Pacific, near Marseille. We were going to go to the Pacific, and all of a sudden somebody said, "There's a big bomb. They used a big bomb. The war's going to end; the Japanese are going to surrender, this bomb was so big." Something like that. Little by little, we got this information, and they changed our plans. So now we didn't go to the Pacific, because of that. Whew. I was tickled pink. In fact, at the time I was in southern France, in Marseille, I was trying to get to go to Italy. I was hoping I could go visit my father's relatives. I had applied for a chance to go to Italy, a pass to go to Italy. My company commander was trying to get me that pass, but when I found out we got orders to go home, I said, Naw, I'm not going to take it. As it turned out, my company commander told me, "I'm not so sure I'd go to Italy at the time, because you may have difficulty. They're having trouble in northern Italy with Communist partisans trying to take over the government." So I thought it'd be a little bit risky doing that, so I didn't go. I was sorry I didn't go, though. Decided to go home.

1-00:39:27

**Dunham:**

Have you visited? Did you get a chance later in life to visit family in Italy?

1-00:39:32

**Fantin:**

Yes, I've been to Italy three or four times, got relatives in Italy. Each time, my Italian gets a little bit better. When we went to Italy to visit relatives, their language is Italian, so I was forced to speak Italian. I don't speak—I can make myself understood.

1-00:39:55

**Dunham:**

When did you get discharged from the army?

1-00:39:59

**Fantin:**

Let's see, when did I get discharged? Well, if I went in the army in March of '43, I guess it would be '46, about the middle of the year, March of '46, but I'd have to look at my discharge papers. But that's when I think it was.

1-00:40:26

**Dunham:**

Then you went back to Sopris?

1-00:40:30

**Fantin:**

Yes, I went back to Sopris, I went to junior college, spent two years in junior college there. Got an A.A. degree in junior college. Studied engineering. My wife and I were going together at the time, and instead of going on to two years more, I decided to come to California again. Talked my wife into coming out here, so we came out here to California.

1-00:40:59

**Dunham:**

What made you decide to come back to California?

1-00:41:04

**Fantin:**

I just was antsy to get to work. I wasn't that anxious to have to spend another two years in college, which was a mistake, I think. I wish I'd have done it, now.

1-00:41:18

**Dunham:**

There weren't work opportunities in Colorado?

1-00:41:22

**Fantin:**

There were not work opportunities in Colorado. That's another reason I came out here. I had been here before, I knew the work opportunities were here. I had been to Richmond before, so I was kind of anxious to come back to here, in Richmond. Of course, the shipyards were closing at the time, so I came to Richmond, but I was able to get a job at Standard Oil, I applied for a job at Standard Oil. Of course, I studied blueprint, drafting engineering at the junior college. Applied for a job as a draftsman at the refinery, and was able to get a job at the refinery.

1-00:41:58

**Dunham:**

Did you know that before you came out, or you came back and took a chance?

1-00:42:02

**Fantin:**

No, I took a chance when I come out here. I almost went to work for a venetian blind company that had a job possibility I had heard about, but I decided to go to the refinery.

1-00:42:18

**Dunham:**

What was Richmond like when you returned? How did it compare with your time here during the war?

1-00:42:24

**Fantin:**

Well, it didn't seem like the town, as far as I could tell, as far as the population goes—well, it was pretty much the same, near as I could tell. My sister, of course, had a place that she rented, that she was buying on Pennsylvania Avenue, which was not too far from where we lived originally. My wife and I came out there and stayed with my sister for--oh, I know what it was. It was a two-story house, an apartment upstairs. The people upstairs were going to move, and we moved into that apartment. So we rented that apartment from my sister. So when I got this job at Standard Oil, I was driving, it was a very close distance to the refinery. So I was able to drive to the refinery.

1-00:43:13

**Dunham:**

So you had your own car at this point?

1-00:43:21

**Fantin:**

We drove a car out here when we came out here, packed all our belongings in this '38 Chevrolet, all week long in that car, stuffed to the back to the gills. Which weren't many--we didn't have much; just got married, you know, not many things.

1-00:43:38

**Dunham:**

Yes. I wanted to ask you actually about, with your military experience, how would you compare just how well people worked together, say at the shipyards, versus in your military experience? Could you kind of contrast that?

1-00:43:52

**Fantin:**

I really couldn't tell you that there was a heck of a lot of difference in the way they got along. I thought they got along just as well, I suppose. In the military, of course, there was a bunch of young kids in the military. A bunch of young guys in there, and in the shipyards, there were a lot of older people, people much older than in the military. The military was all young guys, full of vim and vigor.

1-00:44:19

**Dunham:**

Did you feel like they were equally efficient, or were there other issues in either the military or in the shipyards?

1-00:44:30

**Fantin:**

Of course, at the time, I didn't think in those terms. I was just trying to get along as a soldier. I had no way, or didn't even think about those things, you know.

1-00:44:48

**Dunham:**

Yes. I was just wondering, thinking back, if you could see any distinctions.

1-00:44:54

**Fantin:**

I'll tell you what: it was a wonderful experience, that military experience. It was worth a million dollars. I wouldn't take a million dollars to go back, but the training was--I was full of energy in those days. I found it kind of interesting.

1-00:45:14

**Dunham:**

How did the G.I. Bill work for you? How were you able to use that?

1-00:45:24

**Fantin:**

I went to school with the G.I. Bill. I was getting, I think it was, sixty-five dollars a month. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have gone to college if it hadn't been for the G.I. Bill, like most of the G.I.s like myself, you know.

1-00:45:38

**Dunham:**

How long did you rent when you came back here?

1-00:45:43

**Fantin:**

We rented this apartment for a year or two, and then we went shopping for a house. I'll never forget: I came home from Standard Oil after having gotten this job. Two hundred dollars a month, plus twenty dollars cost of living. Or was it forty dollars cost of living? I went home and told my wife, I said, "Guess what? I got a job." I tell her how much I got--that was a ton of money to me. We danced around in the kitchen. We were tickled pink about the job, because I had worked part-time at Montgomery Ward's while I was going to college in Colorado. I was getting thirty-five dollars a week, I'll never forget, \$140 a month, and now I'm getting \$240 a month; I thought that was fantastic.

1-00:46:32

**Dunham:**

Sure, and this is the house you bought then in '47?

1-00:46:40

**Fantin:**

This is the house we bought.

1-00:46:41

**Dunham:**

What year was that?

1-00:46:43

**Fantin:**

1947, I guess it was.

1-00:46:45

**Dunham:**

So you've been here fifty-five years.

1-00:46:53

**Fantin:**

More than that—sixty-five years.

1-00:47:04

**Dunham:**

What was the immediate community around here? You say you have your black neighbors here and there--

1-00:47:09

**Fantin:**

No, there were no black neighbors here.

1-00:47:10

**Dunham:**

At that time, there were not.

1-00:47:12

**Fantin:**

None whatsoever. This house belonged to a Standard Oiler, and he was moving out to El Sobrante. We paid \$10,000 for this house. They had built it for \$8,500, and they sold it for \$10,000. It didn't have a garage, didn't have this extension on it. I built that all myself. I worked with these guys in the drafting room there as a draftsman, and we had a ride group, we took turns driving once a week. They'd pick me up in the morning, seven-thirty, go to the refinery, drop me off at home. My wife stayed home and raised kids. In fact, we had just had our first child when we moved here. Paul was born then, so she stayed home and took care of the family. In those days, it wasn't both man and wife working. It was more men working and wives stayed home.

1-00:48:26

**Dunham:**

Well, with some noticeable exceptions, I guess, during the shipyard period or during the war. It was more, you feel, single women who were working for the most part?

1-00:48:36

**Fantin:**

In the shipyards?

1-00:48:39

**Dunham:**

Yes.

1-00:48:41

**Fantin:**

No, I think it was a combination of both.

1-00:48:43

**Dunham:**

Do you know how children were taken care of, if women did have children?

1-00:48:50

**Fantin:**

How they were taken care of didn't enter my mind. Later on, I found out they had childcare centers. People took care of each other's children.

1-00:48:56

**Dunham:**

So when you came back in '47, was there still a lot of overcrowding? Was housing still a challenge?

1-00:49:03

**Fantin:**

Not that I was aware of. Not that I was conscious of.

1-00:49:09

**Dunham:**

You were aware that there was racial segregation in ways, when you came back. How did you feel about that? Did you have any impression of that?

1-00:49:18

**Fantin:**

Since it didn't affect me, and since I steered clear of it--I didn't have any black friends in the neighborhood--so I wasn't conscious of it. I knew that there were generally black people living in one part of the town, and the whites in this town, but it didn't affect me. I didn't give it too much thought one way or the other.

1-00:49:45

**Dunham:**

Do you subscribe to a particular religion?

1-00:49:53

**Fantin:**

Yes, I'm Catholic. I was born and raised Catholic. As a kid we went to catechism, went to school; we didn't think there was any other religion at all. We thought it was the religion, you know. In fact, it wasn't until I came out here or in the army, and I would hear anti-Catholic comments. A lot of Southern Baptists I was in the army with. One of these so-called home-grown preachers--guys would get on a soapbox and preach. These Southerners were that way, some of them were. But I just minded my business and my religion, and that was it. But I've been a Roman Catholic ever since, and I go to church every Sunday.

1-00:50:36

**Dunham:**

So when you came in '42, did you go to church?

1-00:50:38

**Fantin:**

No, there was a long period in my life, eight or ten or twelve years, where I didn't really go to church. Wasn't involved that much, but I went back, and now my wife and I are pretty active in our church.

1-00:50:56

**Dunham:**

Were you aware much of the presence of religion and churches when you were here in '42-'43? Or it was kind of off the radar for you?

1-00:51:06

**Fantin:**

No, I heard of it, but I wasn't exposed to it, to speak of.

1-00:51:16

**Dunham:**

Just want to go back again, you had just graduated from high school and when you first came out here, what were your first impressions of California? What did you expect coming to California?

1-00:51:28

**Fantin:**

Well, first of all, when I saw palm trees for the first time, man, that excited me. I thought that was fantastic. I thought this California was the greatest place in the world, you know. To see palm trees, and the ocean. I'll never forget, the first day I got here, my sister and brother-in-law drove. We drove to San Francisco along the water, across the bridge. God, I was just thrilled with the place. I thought it was just great. To see the Spanish architecture for one thing was another thing that was kind of interesting to me. It was quite interesting to me. I was quite thrilled to be here.

1-00:52:11

**Dunham:**

Did that feeling stay?

1-00:52:14

**Fantin:**

Pretty much, yes. I think California's a great, great state. The climate here is the greatest in the world.

1-00:52:23

**Dunham:**

What about the contrast of your small town of twelve hundred, coming to a boom town with all the overcrowding? What did that feel like?

1-00:52:34

**Fantin:**

It was different. In some respects, it had kind of a negative feeling, but I adapted to it very easily. I love it. Doesn't bother me. My wife still thinks it's too fast, too furious. Get on the freeway, traffic gets slowed down, but I think we're living in the best part of the country.

1-00:52:57

**Dunham:**

Not to dwell on it, but what were the sort of negative feelings? Were there things that you saw for the first time in your life? Anything that just sort of surprised you, socially or otherwise?

1-00:53:10

**Fantin:**

Once in a while, I'd see a black and a white cohabiting or commingling and it bothered me. It bothered me for a long time, but now I look at it: that's life. It's their business, that's it.

1-00:53:30

**Dunham:**

Did that issue play itself out in any specific ways?

1-00:53:36

**Fantin:**

No, I never got directly involved with it in any way, that I had anything. But I just didn't feel comfortable with it.

1-00:53:47

**Dunham:**

Sure. You had talked about the shipyards and finding the condoms in the morning. Just in general, too, was there much of a transition socially with how people were dating, or even if they were casually sleeping around?

1-00:54:09

**Fantin:**

Quite frankly, as an eighteen-year-old, I was not exposed to it. Didn't even see it.

1-00:54:14

**Dunham:**

So it may or may not have been the case.

**Fantin:**

Right, it may or may not have been the case, but I wasn't aware of it.

1-00:54:23

**Dunham:**

You were aware to some extent of the interactions of the shipyards, from having come in in the morning sometimes and seeing residue or what have you, but in general, it wasn't something that you were aware of.

1-00:54:32

**Fantin:**

Right.

1-00:54:39

**Dunham:**

Okay. With your position in the shipyards, was it very dangerous at all? What did you see of injuries? How were injuries handled?

1-00:54:55

**Fantin:**

I don't recall. I'll tell you what, I wasn't injured per se, but I got impetigo. You ever heard of impetigo? It's a kind of a skin disease, kind of a skin infection. Because of it, I had to go to the old hospital on Fourteenth and Cutting every other morning, and they'd peel these scabs off and

put this blue medicine on me. It was just kind of a skin infection from dirt, I guess. I had no trouble getting treated properly; I just went there, the boss sent me there every morning when I had to go there, because the nurse at the hospital would tell me when to come back.

I did get occasionally, you know the welders get what they call welder's flashes, if you happen to stare at the arc as it takes place, it will blister your eyeballs. I'll never forget the first time I got a welder's flash. I woke up in the night and my eyes were just killing me. I couldn't understand what was going on. Well, then I found out the next morning it was a welder's flash. So when you're watching somebody weld, you don't look directly at it, because it can damage your eyes. That would happen accidentally, off and on, but you go to the infirmary and get drops for your eyes. That's about all they could do, but it would heal by itself.

1-00:56:28

But I never saw anybody get hurt real bad. I did see a couple of cranes topple over, one time. Fortunately nobody was injured or killed. But all in all, from what I understand, Kaiser had a good plan for people who were hurt in any way. They had their own hospital here.

1-00:56:53

**Dunham:**

Do you know when that was built?

1-00:56:57

**Fantin:**

The hospital? It was built in World War II, so I would say it was probably built 1941, '42.

1-00:57:08

**Dunham:**

This skin ailment that you had, was that very common, do you know?

1-00:57:10

**Fantin:**

Not that I was aware.

1-00:57:14

**Dunham:**

I think that since there were so much migration, a lot of people had not necessarily physical injuries but a lot of other ailments that kind of happen. Were you aware of many people with other sicknesses?

1-00:57:22

**Fantin:**

No, I wasn't aware of anybody brought any disease or ailments or whatnot because of the migration.

1-00:57:29

**Dunham:**

Or just coming here, being exposed to different things, almost the other way around could happen, too. Also, because of the difficult housing circumstances and all of those factors.

1-00:57:44

**Fantin:**

It didn't see like it was really a problem because of the fact there was such a shortage of housing, as far as ailments, sickness, cleanliness. Life went on.

1-00:57:53

**Dunham:**

So you said there was that one, your sister-in-law's cousin that came out who you were kind of interested in, but other than that, you said that dating was pretty limited for you.

1-00:58:06

**Fantin:**

Pretty limited.

1-00:58:12

**Dunham:**

You more hung out with your family.

1-00:58:14

**Fantin:**

Of course, I was pretty shy in those days.

1-00:58:16

**Dunham:**

Yes. I would be as well, most likely. Were there ever any interactions at work with your manager or others that were just difficult, or tough times if something went wrong?

1-00:58:39

**Fantin:**

No, in general it wasn't at all. I had no problems at all. I remember one night, having stayed up all night playing poker, and I couldn't stay awake that day on the job. So I'd be welding, and all of a sudden I'd screw up the job I was welding and have to have somebody clean it up for me. I was able to cover it up enough that my boss wasn't even aware of it. But I couldn't stay awake on that day because I was sure sorry I stayed up all night. But I've never been able to stay awake all night without going to sleep. [laughs] But that was about the only incident I can think of. Other than that, I got along fine with my boss. I did what I had to do. He didn't bother me and I didn't cause him any trouble.

1-00:59:24

**Dunham:**

Were you aware of issues with any other workers, or other workers having the problem of being tired?

1-00:59:30

**Fantin:**

No, not in my crew, that I was aware of. Of course, I was pretty much exposed just to my crew. Didn't get exposed to other organizations, but there were just all kind of swarms of people doing all kinds of things. Generally, it was just a lot of work. People minding their business. It was very productive.

1-00:59:45

**Dunham:**

When you're talking about all kinds of different things, you're talking about at the shipyards?

1-00:59:48

**Fantin:**

The shipyards, yes.

1-00:59:49

**Dunham:**

What about within the band? Did you meet a lot of folks?

1-00:59:54

**Fantin:**

No, in fact, I didn't even meet too many people in the band. I just went up there and just offered, I volunteered to play in this band, and they accepted me. I played in the band and that was it.

1-01:00:05

**Dunham:**

How did you get in the band?

1-01:00:10

**Fantin:**

I think I saw a notice or something on the bulletin board saying they were looking for band players to play in the band. I thought that might be something interesting, so I went in and applied, put my name--I don't remember exactly where I went and applied, but I did. I joined the band because of it and went to these launchings.

1-01:00:35

**Dunham:**

Were they only at launchings that the band played?

1-01:1-00:38

**Fantin:**

Only at the launchings. That's the only time I get involved.

1-01:00:43

**Dunham:**

Were there other lunchtime events that took place?

1-01:00:48

**Fantin:**

Not that I was aware of. One of the forepeak assemblies that I was working on, I noticed that the crew came in and painted the name. They were doing something different on this forepeak, and I could see the ways up there. There were ways of working. Here's what they did; the crews went from one way to the other. So this ship, they would start building this from the water up, and then went down to the next one. By the time this one was finished, they were just getting started on this one. It was a continuous cycle. It got to the point where they would launch a ship about every three days. Every three days, they'd launch a ship. Well, this one particular ship called the--I can't think of the name now. It was a world-record ship; it was built in four and a half days.

1-01:01:54

**Dunham:**

The Liberty ship?

1-01:01:57

**Fantin:**

Yes. Anyway, they painted the name on it. That's where the name was, on this part of the ship I worked on. And they painted it upside down, because we were building this part upside down. That was the world record four-and-a-half-day ship. So, I welded a Hauser pipe on that world-record ship.

1-01:02:25

**Dunham:**

I see. There you were.

[tape interruption]

1-01:02:36

--Richmond, the second time; was it in '47?

1-01:02:37

**Fantin:**

'47. We drove cross-country, drove from Colorado to California. Stopped in Salt Lake City because my wife's got an aunt and uncle there. We spent a couple of days there.

1-01:02:43

**Dunham:**

Did your wife Jenny have any--had she been to California before?

1-01:02:46

**Fantin:**

Oh, she'd been to California during the war. She worked in the shipyards in Long Beach with some friends, family friends that she lived with. But she had never been to Richmond.

1-01:03:02

**Dunham:**

What did she do in the shipyards?

1-01:03:06

**Fantin:**

She worked in an engineering office as a clerk. She was just a young girl like I was. We came to Richmond, though; I'll never forget it. Richmond had this sign across San Pablo and there was a big arrow: "Richmond." Lighted sign. It was somewhat negative for her. She had never been here before and she didn't have any family, so it wasn't positive as far as that goes for her. But my sister took her in, and they got along just fine, and they still get along, they are very close. To this very day they are very close, like real sisters. So that made it kind of easier, that my sister kind of took her in. [telephone rings]

[tape interruption]

1-01:03:57

**Dunham:**

How did he lose his sight, then?

1-01:03:58

**Fantin:**

He was thirteen years old when he lost his sight, but he went on to get a Ph.D.

1-01:04:07

**Dunham:**

At UC Berkeley?

1-01:04:09

**Fantin:**

Yes. So he does research.

1-01:04:11

**Dunham:**

What did he study? What is it in?

1-01:04:16

**Fantin:**

Biophysics. Biology and physics. He's mostly biology. He did his research in corn. Corn research.

1-01:04:22

**Dunham:**

Now, was that on the coast? What's he doing down the coast?

1-01:04:24

**Fantin:**

He was born and raised here and he went to school at Berkeley, because Richmond and Berkeley have a reciprocal program. The Anna Head School here in Richmond takes the Berkeley students, which were cerebral palsy students, and the blind program in Berkeley takes the Richmond kids. He went to school over there by cab every morning. Went to the Berkeley schools, learned mobility, went on to study science and got a Ph.D. in biology and physics, doing corn research. Right now he's doing some research in building molecular models for blind students to feel. I'm talking about college students who want to go into research. He's putting together these models for them. Where you and I see the models; they feel the models. So he's building these things, these samples. In fact, I do a lot of work for him, helping him out, doing drawings for him.

1-01:05:32

**Dunham:**

How long have you done that for? Since you retired?

1-01:05:34

**Fantin:**

Off and on, I've helped him ever since I retired. I've been retired almost twenty years. But I've done it for maybe ten or twelve years, various things to help him.

1-01:05:57

**Dunham:**

Well, we were talking about when you and Jenny first came back. What were her initial impressions of Richmond?

1-01:06:07

**Fantin:**

She was homesick for one thing. Being away from home, for one thing, and a strange town. It took a little while for her to get a feel for it.

1-01:06:17

**Dunham:**

How did it compare to Long Beach for her?

1-01:06:18

**Fantin:**

Of course, she lived with Nadine, her friend, and they were like sisters. We were married, of course, at the time we came here. Right away, our oldest daughter was born not long after she got here. So she was busy raising children. The transition was easier for her, because she had children.

1-01:06:45

**Dunham:**

What was the experience of raising children here? You've spent a lot of time thinking about your specific childhood in Sopris--

1-01:06:55

**Fantin:**

She got involved with the PTA, and she was a room mother for a long time, so that made it nice. She was at Woodrow Wilson School here, so that helped. Then Dennis came along, and he started having eye problems right off the bat. She was busy attending to him. That kept her pretty occupied. It's been a tough thing for her as far as him goes, because losing your sight is tough.

1-01:07:35

**Dunham:**

As a whole, did you ever have second thoughts about having left a small town and being here in Richmond, or in the decision to raise your children here?

1-01:07:44

**Fantin:**

No, I didn't have any second thoughts about it. I was very content here. I enjoyed it, quite frankly.

1-01:07:52

**Dunham:**

Did your feelings about race sort of evolve over time?

1-01:07:58

**Fantin:**

I guess you might say it did change. Initially when I came here, I wasn't used to being exposed to different races. The longer I stayed here, the more accustomed I got to it and the more I felt

comfortable with it. So it doesn't bother me to see a black man and a black woman on the street nowadays. Doesn't bother me at all. That's their business.

1-01:08:28

**Dunham:**

Was there any significant marks in your transition of feeling, or just gradually the exposure--?

1-01:08:32

**Fantin:**

No, it just gradually evolved into my feeling that way. Little by little.

1-01:08:37

**Dunham:**

How about with your children? Were their classes--

1-01:08:43

**Fantin:**

Oh, my children never had a problem with integration. In fact, Paula has this catering business with forty full-time people, and a good many of the people that work for her are gay. Wonderful people; I know a lot of them. Never been any problem there at all. There's a lot of blacks that work for her, too. She got black people working for herself. In fact, Patty's her dear, dear friend; is married to a black man, Albert. We get along with Albert like he's just a member of the family.

1-01:09:10

**Dunham:**

Did they go to public schools in Richmond?

1-01:09:14

**Fantin:**

They're from Berkeley.

1-01:09:19

**Dunham:**

Oh, okay. But your children?

1-01:09:20

**Fantin:**

My children went to Woodrow Wilson. They went to public school here, and then they went to the university, Berkeley. Paula and Dennis are both graduates of the university.

1-01:09:34

**Dunham:**

Are there any other particular things--you started to tell me about the Battle of the Bulge. What was your role there?

1-01:09:41

**Fantin:**

In the army, I was in the combat engineers. One of the things in the headquarters company was the water supply. One of the functions they did was water supply. We had four water supply teams in our company. I ran a water supply team with two other fellows. What we'd do, we'd purify water for the troops, whether it was from fire hydrants or whether it was from lakes, or

from rivers or streams or whatnot. We had portable equipment that we trained them to set up, and in about fifteen minutes we could be providing water. That is, pumping the water out of the stream, purifying it, chlorinating it, issuing it to troops. I happened to be operating a water supply unit in the town of Bascogne when the Battle of the Bulge took place. Lo and behold, the area became surrounded and we were trapped there. So we were trapped there for ten days probably, as I recall, the Battle of the Bulge took place, while the Germans pounded us from all sides. They eventually broke through into us and got us out, so that's what the Battle of the Bulge was about. That was kind of a harrowing experience, but fortunately we got out okay. It was the middle of winter, December '44. It was cold.

1-01:11:11

**Dunham:**

Wow. So all through your military experience, it was the reality of hoping, wanting to get home and hoping. Was this a consistent feeling, you'd say?

1-01:11:20

**Fantin:**

Oh, I couldn't wait for this war to end.

1-01:11:22

**Dunham:**

Was that the most common of your fellow soldiers, you feel, too?

1-01:11:27

**Fantin:**

Oh, sure, very common. That's all we ever talked about. It was tough on some of the other guys; some of the older guys were married. I felt for those guys.

1-01:11:38

**Dunham:**

And your brother also served during the war?

1-01:11:43

**Fantin:**

He was in Saigon, French Indochina. Served in the air force as a radio operator.

1-01:11:52

**Dunham:**

So he went straight from Sopris to join the army.

So when you came back to Richmond--you're a member of a lot of organizations now, were those organizations available to you in 1947?

1-01:12:17

**Fantin:**

In '44 when I first came here, I wasn't really that interested at all in organizations. Now, of course, I belong to more organizations, but in those days I wasn't involved in organizations. I did a lot of moonlighting. At times, I'd get a part-time job. I always was anxious to get ahead. I worked in a liquor store, I did drafting whenever I got an opportunity to do drafting. I'd do house plans.

1-01:12:50

**Dunham:**

This was in the late forties, early fifties, when you came back?

1-01:12:52

**Fantin:**

I would say in the fifties. People would get—the word got around that you could do house plans, you know, and I'd do house plans for various people, additions to houses and did various things like that. They could get by cheaper by hiring somebody like me to do house plans. Of course, I would do it for lesser price than you could get an architect to do it. I've always had a--I should've probably been a carpenter, contractor, because carpentry work is another love of mine. I've done a lot of carpentry work. I built a home at Lake Tahoe, I built the addition on to my house. I've always liked woodworking. Whenever I get a chance, I do that, too.

1-01:13:43

**Dunham:**

You've mentioned your love of cards and games, and I just thought if back to the day you mentioned where you were a little tired from having stayed up playing poker all night, the night before. What was the group that you were playing poker with?

1-01:13:56

**Fantin:**

With Paul Brown, my roommate at the apartment house where we lived, and a couple of the guys there. We played poker all night long.

1-01:14:04

**Dunham:**

Did you do that very often, maybe more on non-work nights?

1-01:14:07

**Fantin:**

No, no. Didn't do that very often, just happened to be an occasion that I remember that it happened, that I couldn't stay awake the next day at work. Generally I didn't get off of the right path, in other words.

1-01:14:27

**Dunham:**

Were there other folks who were getting off the right path?

1-01:14:31

**Fantin:**

No, not that I was aware of. We were just busy making a living, struggling to get along.

1-01:14:39

**Dunham:**

Struggling in terms of making a living. I was going to get back to how folks from different places were getting along, literally again, but you didn't have a clear sense of that, how people did or didn't cooperate.

Okay. We talked a little bit about rationing of gasoline. I know you didn't have your own car, but what about recycling or rationing of foods and other items? Do you have much memory of that?

1-01:15:12

**Fantin:**

Well, I'm aware that there was a ration board, that you could get ration stamps, this sort of stuff. In those days, there wasn't a lot of excess money, so you just pretty much spent your time making a living. Now there seems to be more social things, more entertainment, more money for things, for fishing and hunting and these kind of things, entertainment. But in those days, your life wasn't as broad as it is now. It was more narrow. You just spent your time getting and making a living, getting along. That's the way it was for me, anyway.

1-01:15:46

**Dunham:**

So when you weren't working, what things did you do?

1-01:15:49

**Fantin:**

When I wasn't working, if I had a chance to get my hands on some tools, I was always a tinkerer, always a player, always doing this sort of stuff with my hands. I like to do things with my hands; I was always trying to build something.

1-01:16:12

**Dunham:**

Did you travel much around the Bay Area, other cities?

1-01:16:15

**Fantin:**

I like to fish. When I was in Colorado, I used to trout fish. Whenever I'd get a chance, I'd go fishing up in the Sierras. That's one of the things I did do. Didn't do all that much of it, but when I got an opportunity I would.

1-01:16:34

**Dunham:**

Were you able to in '42 and '43?

1-01:16:36

**Fantin:**

No.

1-01:16:38

**Dunham:**

Just after the war.

How long did you work at Ford?

1-01:16:50

**Fantin:**

Oh, just a short time, couple of weeks. I got laid off, is what happened. I guess I wasn't cutting the mustard. I guess they didn't think I was qualified for the job, which wasn't a very complicated job, was a mailman. Some kind of mail work, but I guess I just didn't fit in the crew. I don't know exactly how it was. I was quite disappointed, quite hurt. I felt slighted. Why would they lay me off? I thought I was doing my job, you know. I was new and green, and shy. I wasn't very mature at all, I guess you might say.

1-01:17:32

**Dunham:**

But you don't know why.

1-01:17:34

**Fantin:**

To this day, nobody ever told me why I left. They told me, "We don't need you any more," or something to that effect. I think that was probably the best thing that happened; I ended up learning a trade.

1-01:17:46

**Dunham:**

Sure. How long did you work at Pullman?

1-01:17:51

**Fantin:**

A couple of months, I think. Not much more than that.

1-01:17:58

**Dunham:**

Do you remember much about that?

1-01:18:01

**Fantin:**

What I did was, I was in the storeroom and I would deliver material to the shops. The material was out in the yard, and I delivered it to the shops. Various things like steel rods and plates to the various shops where they fabricated their own bolts and this sort of stuff. So I delivered the stuff to the shops and watched these guys working in these furnaces and forges, doing this various kind of stuff where they built stuff. They build their own material; they built their own bolts, for example, huge bolts and other material for the inside of the railroad cars and this sort of stuff.

1-01:18:44

**Dunham:**

When you came back, did you have any sense of what people had gone through with the shipyards closing?

1-01:18:51

**Fantin:**

When I came here, I kind of thought I was going to go back to work in the shipyards. That's what my intention was. And all of a sudden, hey! There was nobody working--just a few people working in the shipyards. You know, there were four yards here. I thought I would be able to get a job at the shipyards, so I was quite surprised when I couldn't get the job at the shipyards. I was little bit uncomfortable about the fact. What am I going to do? I'm married, I've got a child coming along. How am I going to get along? Of course, my brother-in-law was a brakeman on the Santa Fe and he said, "By the way, Lou, there's an opportunity to get a job in the railroad in the Harvey House, where you go on the railroad cars traveling and you sell stuff to people, fruits and vegetables in the cars," as a salesman, you know. But I was pretty backward and shy and I kept hedging and hedging. Finally I went up to the employment office, and that's where they sent me to the Ford job. So from there I went to the Ford plant and got this job at the Ford plant. So that's why I didn't go to work for the Harvey House. It's another thing that's the best thing that

probably happened to me, because when I look back at it, there wouldn't have been much future in the railroad.

1-01:20:07

**Dunham:**

Yes. This was in '47, that you went?

1-01:20:10

**Fantin:**

This was in '42.

1-01:20:13

**Dunham:**

Okay, so you're talking about '42. But even when you came back in '47, you initially thought you were going to get a job in the shipyards. What happened then, from there?

1-01:20:23

**Fantin:**

Oh, I know what it was. Ann, my sister's sister-in-law, she was married at the time, and her husband worked at Standard Oil. He said to me, "My God, Lou, you ought to go to Standard Oil and get a job. I bet you could get a job out there. Why don't you try that? I know a guy by the name of Fred Howard. He's the employment guy. Why don't you go see him?" So I went out there, applied for a job. Went to see this guy. He said, "Hey, you say you studied drafting engineering?" "Yeah," I said. He said, "Let me send you upstairs to meet this guy up in engineering."

So I went upstairs to engineering to see this guy. His name was Art Ramel. He was head of the drafting department. He sat down with me and asked me some questions and said, "By the way, can you type?" "Yeah." He said, "Print something. I want to see what your printing is like." So I printed Standard Oil Company. Just printed Standard Oil Company. He turned to his assistant chief engineer, he kind of nodded his head forward like he liked it. So he says, "Come back tomorrow." So I went back the next day, and the fact that I could type, they put me to work on a typewriter. It was really a monstrous typewriter where they typed specifications on drawings. He said, "We'll start you out doing this here." Every chance I get, I look over at people doing drawings on drawing boards. So sooner or later, a week or two or three went by, and I finally said to him, "I wonder if there's a chance I could do some work on the drawing board." He said, "You interested in that?" I said, "Yeah." So that's how I got the job, starting out as drafting. I ended up running the place in four years. Anyway, ran the drafting department, which is a department of about twenty-five people, little by little.

1-01:22:23

**Dunham:**

How long was it from when you first came back in '47 until you went over to Standard Oil? Was that very much time?

1-01:22:30

**Fantin:**

When I first came to California to when I went to Standard Oil? Not very long. A couple of weeks, a week or two.

1-01:22:41

**Dunham:**

Not too long, okay. I just wondered. So not too much nervousness about, once you found out the shipyards weren't happening?

1-01:22:48

**Fantin:**

Oh, no. I was plenty nervous. I was nervous, but I'm glad of the fact it didn't last very long.

1-01:22:53

**Dunham:**

How about for just other folks around? Did you feel very many other people who were struggling to find work?

1-01:23:00

**Fantin:**

No, it didn't seem like there was that much struggling. It seemed to me everybody was working. Certainly wasn't much unemployment, that I could tell.

1-01:23:10

**Dunham:**

I think maybe one of the hardest times was right after the war.

1-01:23:14

**Fantin:**

Of course, a lot of people left here and went back to the farm or wherever they went. The population dropped off.

1-01:23:20

**Dunham:**

But a lot of people stayed, too. And even came back, in your case.

1-01:23:26

I was thinking about just kind of military and war in general. What have your feelings been-- what year was your son born?

1-01:23:38

**Fantin:**

1950.

1-01:23:41

**Dunham:**

So because of his eyesight problem he wouldn't have been drafted, wouldn't have been subjected to the draft, but how would you have felt, or how did you feel about the Vietnam War per se?

1-01:23:59

**Fantin:**

Initially, I thought it was a good thing. We were going to keep communism from spreading around the world. I look back at it now, that was the dumbest thing we ever did. Jesus Christ; why'd we go over there and tell those people how they should run their country? I followed the Vietnam War pretty closely from the French being in French Indochina. We go over there and help them and they decided, let's get out of here. We ended up taking over to try to save that

country from communism. When I hear about all the things that those Viet Cong did to fight us and what they did with what little they had, that's an amazing thing they did. We should have been on the other side. That's the way I feel about that Vietnam War. That's a bad mark in our history.

1-01:24:51

**Dunham:**

Your father's feelings around Italy; did they transition as well?

1-01:25:06

**Fantin:**

I think he slowly became more Americanized as time went on. Of course, especially when we went in the service, I think he became a little more--we didn't speak anything anti-American, to speak of. It was just his loyalty towards his family back there. But he became very Americanized.

1-01:25:35

**Dunham:**

As you were joining, as you had been drafted, did he express any hesitancy?

**Fantin:**

No. In fact, I remember when I went to work at Standard Oil--my father was a strong union man. He thought the sun rose and shined on John L. Lewis, who was the head of the United Mine Workers, so he was a very staunch union man. When I came out here in '47 right after I went to work--it hadn't been very long—they had the big strike at Standard Oil, and I didn't go to work. They were picketing the place, and I stayed home. The next day, I went to work real early before there was any picket lines. I went to work, and my boss said to me, "Where were you yesterday, kid?" I said, "I was home." He said, "Why?" I said, "Well, there was pickets outside." He said, "Pickets? You got nothing to do with pickets. You better come to work or you're not going to have a job. You can't do that." I said, "My father would not be very happy if he knew I went to work and went through a picket line." Of course, he didn't sympathize with that at all, so each morning I'd come to work very early in the morning. I wasn't very comfortable about the fact that there was a strike, that I went through that picket line. I felt a little bit guilty, you know. Then I realized hey, you got to do your job. You're not a union man, you're not obligated in any way. Morally, you may be, but actually, if you're going to save your job, you better come to work. So I came to work.

1-01:27:05

**Dunham:**

Was that specific situation anything you ever discussed with your father?

1-01:27:14

**Fantin:**

I don't know that he ever really knew that I went through that picket line. Not that he could have done much about it or would have done that much, but it's just one of those things. I didn't communicate that with him too much.

1-01:27:25

**Dunham:**

And you weren't active in terms of the union, during the World War II? You probably were in it, but it was probably wasn't much.

1-01:27:35

**Fantin:**

No, it wasn't at all.

1-01:27:37

**Dunham:**

Because I think that was a major issue too around both race and gender and in terms of the whole transition of the shipyards. It may have been a lot before you got there, even, but probably ongoing, that they really resisted. The unions made it hard to get nonwhites and then also women into the different positions. So it kind of played a major role in that. That history is kind of interesting, and of course somewhat disturbing, but it's part of reality of the history.

1-01:28:08

**Fantin:**

Yes. In fact, I've always been a little sympathetic towards unions. My brother, on the other hand, I swear, he belongs to the John Birch Society [laughter] because he's a staunch conservative Republican, and I've always leaned the other way, towards liberalism. I'm sympathetic towards union people. I think this country is so wealthy; there's so much wealth in this country, I think it ought to be distributed a little better, that's all. I generally kind of feel that way. How it comes about, how you do that, I don't know. Free enterprise and all that sort of stuff, but every time I read in the paper of all these guys making all this money at the top of the companies: why? Why do they have to make so much money? You can't stop it, it's a free country, they've got the right, but somehow the wealth is not distributed right.

1-01:29:05

**Dunham:**

So how do you dialogue with your brother, or how did he dialogue with--

1-01:29:09

**Fantin:**

Oh, we argue all the time about it. [laughs]

1-01:29:11

**Dunham:**

Did he argue with your father as well?

1-01:29:15

**Fantin:**

No, he was younger than I, he was thirteen months younger than I, so he didn't. Although he was a little more vocal with my father than I was. I was a little more afraid of my father. My brother would stand up to my father. Of course, we were just little kids, you know, young people at the time, so we didn't argue too much with him. Of course, we didn't get involved in the politics or political talk with him that much, either, except for the fact that his talk that he generated pretty much about Italy and how things were in the old country. *Il vecchio paese*, "old country" in Italian.

1-01:29:59

**Dunham:**

So are there any other things that we haven't really covered, particularly about the shipyard time but any other time that come to mind, that you have in your mind?

1-01:30:18

**Fantin:**

I've always loved to travel. When I retired, I joined a retirees organization, became chairman of the travel group in my service organization. My wife and I organized travel trips for about ten years, so we've been to a lot of places in this world, free, because when you organize trips through organizations, deal with a travel agent, they will always give you two free trips for every thirty people you get. You'll get fifteen for one; so these so-called "comps," free trips. So my wife and I have traveled many, many places by organizing trips. We've done all that for nothing, practically. It's amazing how many places we've been to in the world. Don't do that anymore; done enough traveling, but that was wonderful.

1-01:31:16

**Dunham:**

That's wonderful. It's certainly a goal of my wife and mine to find ways to travel. I think teaching abroad is one thing we may do to facilitate that and to have those kind of experiences. But finding a way to do it reasonably is definitely a goal. We did a free trip, took fourteen eighth-graders to Maui this past summer for a week, and that was a way to do it and it was quite a good experience.

1-01:31:46

**Fantin:**

We also belong to the Richmond-Shimada, it's Richmond's sister city program. We went to Japan with the sister city organization and spent three weeks in Japan, which was a wonderful, wonderful three weeks. We did a lot of traveling. Traveled the three big islands and lived with a Japanese family. The Japanese family, their son came over to live with us for a couple of weeks, so we had a nice relationship with them.

1-01:32:17

**Dunham:**

Did they speak English, or did you speak any Japanese?

1-01:32:18

**Fantin:**

English. Our communication took place in English, because {Takemi}--that was his name--he spoke English enough to get by. So we'd communicate in English. Of course, he lived here with us, with the kids, and so we got to know {Takemi} very well.

1-01:32:33

**Dunham:**

On that trip, did you visit Hiroshima or Nagasaki?

1-01:32:37

**Fantin:**

No, not Hiroshima. We went to Hokkaido, the northern island; we went to Honshu, the main island; and then--I don't remember. I think that was the only two islands. But this town, Shimada, was where we spent one week.

1-01:32:52

**Dunham:**

How did you come to be involved the organization that had that?

1-01:32:58

**Fantin:**

At work, the manager of the refinery asked me if I'd consider serving on this commission, because the refinery had an in with the city. They would submit names to the city for these kinds of things. He asked me to serve on it. He actually asked me to run for city council, and I told him, "I don't have any connections to the city. I don't have any base." In those days, I didn't have that much involvement with the people of the city and public officials, so I begged off. I found it kind of hard to say no to him, but I said, "I'd like to be on the planning commission." That's what I would have liked to have done. He said, "Okay, we'll keep that in mind." So then one day he said to me, "By the way, there's an opening in the sister city program. Would you consider serving on that? The guy that's on it wants to get off." So I said, "Yeah, I think that would be fine." So that's how I got involved. I got appointed to the Richmond-Shimada Sister City, on the board of directors. That's how we got to go to Japan.

[End of interview]