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University of California
Berkeley, California

Tugboat Bill Oliveri:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Ann Lage
in 2008

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Interview #1: August 21, 2008

Begin Audio File Oliveri_bill_1_08-21-08.doc

01-00:00:05

Lage: Okay, Bill, today is August 21, 2008 and I am here interviewing Bill Oliveri, if I have your name right—is it pronounced right—for the Oakland army base project. My name is Ann Lage. Bill, I'm really happy to be talking to you finally after so many phone conversations. And we're focusing in this project on the Oakland army base so I'm going to find out what you did connected with that, but your history as a seaman on the bay is really great.

01-00:00:37

Oliveri: Oh, I've done all kinds of crazy things.

01-00:00:40

Lage: So we're going to talk about that also. And then I know you have a connection with Humphrey the Whale.

01-00:00:046

Oliveri: Oh yeah.

01-00:00:46

Lage: Maybe we'll get to that at the end.

01-00:00:48

Oliveri: Everybody knows the Humphrey the Whale.

01-00:00:50

Lage: Right. We'll get to that at the end. Okay, Bill, just give me a little bit about your background. Where you were born and raised and when.

01-00:01:03

Oliveri: Okay. I was born and raised in San Francisco, what they call Bernal Heights, and born 1929 in Saint Luke hospital. And I lived over there until I was twenty-six in the Bernal Heights area—

01-00:01:25

Lage: And what about your family? Were they long time San Franciscans?

01-00:01:32

Oliveri: Well my dad and mother come from New York and they come from Sicily and New York, from New York to San Francisco.

01-00:01:39

Lage: When did they come out to San Francisco?

01-00:01:41

Oliveri: Well, before I was born I guess.

01-00:01:43
Lage: Right. [Laughs].

01-00:01:45
Oliveri: I don't know exactly.

01-00:01:45
Lage: Okay. So from Sicily to New York. And what did they do?

01-00:01:50
Oliveri: Well my dad was a stevedore and he worked the waterfront all his life. And he made that—he was a carpenter, too—I had him make that wood carving—what do you call those things like that—

01-00:02:04
Lage: The wood carving.

01-00:02:07
Oliveri: No, the chest over there with all the drawers.

01-00:02:10
Lage: Oh yeah. Did he make that? That chest? And maybe we can—

01-00:02:14
Oliveri: Well. And he was a stevedore for most of his life.

01-00:02:19
Lage: Was he in the union?

01-00:02:21
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:02:21
Lage: Which was a pretty well known union here in San Francisco.

01-00:02:25
Oliveri: Oh yeah. It still is. It's a very strong union. And that's when he used to work all the cargo by hand and he said I had pallet boards and the pallet used to go down to the cargo holds and he said, I unload it and stack it in the cargo ships.

01-00:02:40
Lage: So you come by your connection with the waterfront honestly.

01-00:02:43
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:02:44
Lage: Did you used to go down and watch him on the waterfront?

01-00:02:47
Oliveri: No. I never did that. But later on, when I was working on tugboats, a lot of times we'd have a barge somewhere and the stevedores unload it and back in those days, in the sixties, the boss used to come up and says, you want to

work, and I said, yeah. So I was at two {bayrolls?} helping the stevedores driving a forklift truck.

01-00:03:09

Lage: So you'd be driving a truck and working on the boat simultaneously?

01-00:03:14

Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:03:14

Lage: That's pretty good.

01-00:03:16

Oliveri: Not all the time but once in a while.

01-00:03:17

Lage: Yeah. Once in a while. That's great. And your family is from Sicily? Did they ever tell you stories about the old country?

01-00:03:25

Oliveri: No. When we'd see Grandma down at San Jose—and the rest of the family—every time we'd see them down there they'd say, "You speak English. Don't speak Italian," back in those days.

01-00:03:38

Lage: Right. It was a different view of how to—

01-00:03:41

Oliveri: Yeah. Everybody spoke English.

01-00:03:44

Lage: So did you ever learn Italian as a child?

01-00:03:45

Oliveri: No. I know all the cuss words. That's about it.

01-00:03:48

Lage: Right. [laughs] You couldn't hear your parents talking to each other?

01-00:03:52

Oliveri: No, they never did that. They always talked English, but when I went down to see grandmother and the rest of the relatives down there they would—some would speak Italian—but she always said, speak English.

01-00:04:04

Lage: Your mother or your grandmother said—

01-00:04:06

Oliveri: Grandmother.

01-00:04:06
Lage: Oh grandma. Wow. That's interesting. Okay, now where did you go to school?

01-00:04:12
Oliveri: Paul Revere school.

01-00:04:14
Lage: In the city.

01-00:04:15
Oliveri: San Francisco. That's what they call Bernal Heights at Cortland Avenue, they've got two names, and—

01-00:04:20
Lage: Was it primarily an Italian neighborhood? Bernal Heights?

01-00:04:24
Oliveri: Well there was nothing up there but Irish and Italian it was one of the toughest neighborhoods in San Francisco because the Irish and Italian—anybody come up there—they would have a fist fight and they would win.

01-00:04:40
Lage: You mean anybody who came from outside the neighborhood?

01-00:04:42
Oliveri: Yeah. They wouldn't allow up there. You had to live up there to— [laughs]

01-00:04:47
Lage: To be there. Now how did the Irish and the Italians get along?

01-00:04:52
Oliveri: Oh they got along fine.

01-00:04:53
Lage: Yeah. And did you yourself participate in some of this street life?

01-00:04:56
Oliveri: No. I'd seen it. I always wore glasses, they'd call me four hours—four eyes—all the time and I never did that but that's when I decided to quit school and go on job on a Merchant Marine because, most of the guys, they ended up in trouble later on in years because that's all they did was fight.

01-00:05:17
Lage: Yeah. So, it wasn't the path you wanted to choose?

01-00:05:20
Oliveri: No.

01-00:05:21
Lage: Okay, you mentioned to me that you did quit school and, what, this was World War Two time?

01-00:05:27
Oliveri: Yeah. World War Two.

01-00:05:28
Lage: So how old were you when you quit school and looked for a job?

01-00:05:32
Oliveri: Sixteen.

01-00:05:32
Lage: Sixteen, yeah. And what kind of a job did you get?

01-00:05:37
Oliveri: Working for the army—Fort Mason—and worked on a tugboats a little bit, not that long, and then I got a job on a Marine Fox and that was a troop transport bringing troops out of Fort Mason to Hawaii, Saipan, and Guam.

01-00:05:57
Lage: Oh, so you took these long journeys?

01-00:05:59
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:06:00
Lage: Taking the trip. Now how do you get that job when you're sixteen or seventeen?

01-00:06:03
Oliveri: Well they needed sailors. They needed Merchant Marine guys. There was nobody on {OL?} but my first job was I was a mess-man and people had to take care of all the airplane pilots and it was airplane pilots when they were propeller driven [laughs]. And that was my job waiting on those guys.

01-00:06:27
Lage: Oh, really? Serving them their meals?

01-00:06:29
Oliveri: Yeah. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. That's what I did when I was sixteen.

01-00:06:34
Lage: And that was on the ship traveling to—

01-00:06:36
Oliveri: Yeah, the Far East.

01-00:06:37
Lage: —To the Far East.

01-00:06:40
Oliveri: And I always tell this story, I was walking out at lunchtime or dinner—dinner time—before salad plates like this [ding] and they had swinging doors, one way in and one way out, and this jerk came in the wrong way and the salad

plates went all over the place and the steward came out and chewing my butt out and three airplane pilots got up and says, “You don’t pick on that kid, he didn’t do it. He did it.” [laughs]. They protect me. Ever since then I have a lot of respect for the pilots.

01-00:07:11

Lage: Oh great. That’s great. Do you remember any other things that you saw on those transport ships that you’d want to tell about?

01-00:07:19

Oliveri: Oh, that’s all I can think of right now.

01-00:07:20

Lage: That was a long time ago.

01-00:07:23

Oliveri: Oh yeah. But that was something that I never forgot.

01-00:07:27

Lage: Yeah. And how long did that phase of your career last?

01-00:07:31

Oliveri: On a troop transport?

01-00:07:33

Lage: Yeah.

01-00:07:34

Oliveri: Oh. That was about two months and we were back in San Francisco again.

[pause in recording]

01-00:07:42

Lage: Okay. Now, we were talking about that you had just months on this troop transport. Then what happened? What other wartime activities did you have?

01-00:07:52

Oliveri: Then I got a job working out of the SUP.

01-00:07:56

Lage: SUP.

01-00:08:00

Oliveri: That’s a union. It’s still over there in San Francisco. SUP is—[laughs].

01-00:08:06

Lage: It’s a seaman’s union?

01-00:08:07

Oliveri: Yeah. And I got a job working out of them and my first job with them I went through—ended up going through the Panama Canal and somewhere and

ended up in New York and my first trip to New York was sixteen—at seventeen—and, I'll never forget this, when I went in the local bar with the guys—they're older guys than me—and here's a bunch of kids in there playing basketball and I just got done playing basketball and back in those days you had to be eighteen to drink back in New York.

01-00:08:47

Lage: Right. Still the case, I think.

01-00:08:49

Oliveri: No, they changed it.

01-00:08:50

Lage: They changed it?

01-00:08:51

Oliveri: But that was my first trip. Went through the Panama Canal and ended up in New York.

01-00:08:57

Lage: And were you a mess-man then, also?

01-00:08:59

Oliveri: No I worked in the engine room as a wiper. A wiper is somebody that cleans up everything and messes and you're just a cleaner-man. Then, from there, I went to a fireman water tender, that's the guy who makes steam, and when he makes—

01-00:09:16

Lage: Fireman water—

01-00:09:17

Oliveri: Tender. And that's when you make steam for the steam boilers and it makes the turbines go or the {restroopicating} engines, like the tug—the ship Jeremiah O'Brien—

01-00:09:31

Lage: Yes, over at the maritime museum?

01-00:09:33

Oliveri: Yeah. I worked on ships like that, too. But from fireman water tender I went up to oiler, that's the next grade up, then, from there, I went to deck engineer.

01-00:09:47

Lage: And what's a deck engineer?

01-00:09:49

Oliveri: Deck engineer, on steam winches, they take care of all the steam winches that works the booms and works the cargo booms.

01-00:10:00

Lage: So you're helping move the cargo from the ship.

01-00:10:02
Oliveri: Yeah. From the ship to the dock and from the dock to the ship. And I did that and I did engine maintenance. Engine maintenance I liked the best because you worked eight hours a day and when you work oiler and fireman you're four hours on, eight off, four on, eight off, four on, eight off, but when you work [chiming] a deck engineer or a engine maintenance man you work just eight hours.

01-00:10:27
Lage: Yeah. What does the oiler actually do?

01-00:10:30
Oliveri: He oils all the machinery. Make sure everything is working. He checks this, checks this. The engineer makes sure they do that.

01-00:10:39
Lage: Yeah. More of a supervisor?

01-00:10:40
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:10:42
Lage: Yeah. And did you just learn everything on the job?

01-00:10:45
Oliveri: Yep. I learned it from the school of hard knocks.

01-00:10:47
Lage: Right. I'll bet. Now since we're doing this project about the Oakland Army Base, I'm going to [laughs] try to draw you back there. Did you have any connection to the Oakland Army Base in the course of this course?

01-00:11:00
Oliveri: Yeah. I went ship out of there—we had to get the tugboats out of—worked out of tugboats—and they get through the army base through the gate—they get on the docks, it took an act of congress to get somebody through those God damn gates.

01-00:11:19
Lage: Now how is that? Tell me how it was set up.

01-00:11:21
Oliveri: Well they had gates and you had to show identification, drivers license and all this stuff to get through the—

01-00:11:27
Lage: To get from land out to the gate.

01-00:11:29
Oliveri: Yeah. They get through the main gate in the army base to the tugboat.

01-00:11:33
Lage: I see.

01-00:11:34
Oliveri: Yeah, so it was a pain in the ass.

01-00:11:37
Lage: And that was during the war?

01-00:11:38
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:11:38
Lage: So you did something on the tugboat even then?

01-00:11:42
Oliveri: Yeah. Before I went to sea I worked on tugboats for the army—army base.

01-00:11:47
Lage: Okay, well tell me more about that. What you remember. That was before you actually went out to sea as the mess-man and all of that.

01-00:11:54
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:11:55
Lage: Okay. Was that your first job then?

01-00:11:56
Oliveri: My first job working on tugboats for the army.

01-00:11:59
Lage: Okay. Do you remember much about that?

01-00:12:02
Oliveri: No.

01-00:12:03
Lage: You remember how hard it was to get [laughs] get there.

01-00:12:06
Oliveri: No. Well, I was living in San Francisco then and the way I got over there was by—by that time they had trains coming across the bay bridge and I took the train and at some place I got off and they had transportation to the main gate to get on through the main gate to get to the tugboat.

01-00:12:37
Lage: And then what did you do on the tugboat?

01-00:12:29
Oliveri: I was a deckhand.

01-00:12:32
Lage: And help take the ships out beyond the—

01-00:12:35
Oliveri: No, just take them away from the dock.

01-00:12:36
Lage: Just away from the dock. You wouldn't accompany them on out to the golden gate.

01-00:12:39
Oliveri: No. Nobody does that. And we had barges back then those days and we'd put barges alongside the ships with cargo, then the stevedores would unload the barge, then we take the barge away and bring it someplace else.

01-00:12:55
Lage: I see. And you're talking about at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:12:57
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:12:58
Lage: Yeah. Okay. So that gives me a bit of a picture of some activity there. Do you remember anything about how busy it was or what the atmosphere was?

01-00:13:06
Oliveri: Oh it was very, very, very busy. The army base was very busy.

01-00:13:10
Lage: I bet. And mainly transporting cargo from there, I understand.

01-00:13:15
Oliveri: Yeah. Bringing cargo out there. Leaving out of there and going to the Far East for the GIs.

01-00:13:20
Lage: Yeah. Yeah. Somewhere I read the troops went out of San Francisco and the cargo more out of Oakland.

01-00:13:27
Oliveri: Yeah. The army base. Yeah. They both about coming out of their army base, but at Fort Mason they did have docks over there where they unloaded cargo for freighters, too, but Oakland was bigger.

01-00:13:44
Lage: Yeah. Closer to the rail lines and all. Right. [laughs]

01-00:13:50
Oliveri: You got that one right.

01-00:13:52
Lage: Okay. Well, any other memories about that? You were a young kid.

01-00:13:56
Oliveri: I was only sixteen and I don't think I can remember.

01-00:14:01
Lage: Okay, [laughs] good. Okay, so, when you got—at this phase—were you a member of the Merchant Marine?

01-00:14:10
Oliveri: Yeah. I had to have a seaman's papers. I'll show you my license over there.

01-00:14:14
Lage: Okay, we'll look at that. How did you go about getting a member—becoming a member of the Merchant Marines?

01-00:14:20
Oliveri: Well that's, when I went to work for the army, I had to go down and do that.

01-00:14:25
Lage: At the Coast Guard, you said?

01-00:14:26
Oliveri: Yeah. At the Coast Guard. There was a Coast Guard station in San Francisco somewhere, I can't remember where the hell it was, but every three, four year, or four years or something, you've got to renew your Merchant Marine license.

01-00:14:40
Lage: And did they make much of an inquiry into your past or ask a lot of questions or what is pretty pro forma?

01-00:14:48
Oliveri: Well the first time—as long as you've got your first time—and then you just renew them.

01-00:14:52
Lage: Yeah. Pretty easy. I'm just surprised that you were so young and—

01-00:14:57
Oliveri: I was not the only one. A lot of guys were sixteen, seventeen, going to seas because—

01-00:15:04
Lage: You didn't have to lie about your age or anything.

01-00:15:08
Oliveri: No. You couldn't lie about your age about the Coast Guard. No, no, they [laughs], they're very strict, the Coast Guard. They still are today. That's good.

01-00:15:16
Lage: So they just accepted the young guys?

01-00:15:18
Oliveri: Yeah they had to have somebody deliver cargo.

01-00:15:21
Lage: Yeah. That's right.

01-00:15:23
Oliveri: Yeah. And one other thing. When I was working Merchant Marine and, after I got to the East Coast, I joined the SIU, {Seafirm?}, well, SIU, it's another union, but it's—

01-00:15:36
Lage: Seaman something Union, I'll bet.

01-00:15:38
Oliveri: Yeah. I can't—

01-00:15:40
Lage: International? No. Anyway we know SIU. I can look that up.

01-00:15:45
Oliveri: All right, then, I went over back east, I called up home and my dad—I talked to my dad—and he says—they were in the Korean War—and he says, you better come home now, he says, the army wants you, and he says, they called twice. They want to know where you're at. So, I quit the ship and I forget if I flew or took the God damn train or bus, it's been so long, but after I come home, I found out where I had to go in San Francisco and—

01-00:16:18
Lage: And you had a draft notice?

01-00:16:19
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:16:20
Lage: Yeah. [laughs]. Okay.

01-00:16:20
Oliveri: Yeah. I had a draft notice and when I went down to build it where they had the draft notice, where I was going to go, I went down there and it was three guys I went to school with and—I went to Balboa just for about six months.

01-00:16:37
Lage: Balboa High.

01-00:16:38
Oliveri: And six months and I quit. So that was the eighth grade. But, anyhow, when I went down to take the physical I passed everything and I was talking to my three friends of mine I haven't seen in years and, whatever, [chh sound] and all of a sudden, the sergeant says, "Mr. Oliveri, get over here now!" I shook. I thought I was going to poop my pants the way this big guy—all the stripes

and the medals and I went over there and I said, “Yes, sir. What can I do for you?” He says, “I understand you’re an American Merchant Marine. You’re a rated man,” and, “Yes, sir.” He said, “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do for you. They’ve got ten ships sent out in Anchorage,” in San Francisco Bay, “loaded with cargo. It’s got to be delivered to the Far East for the GIs.” He says, “I’ll give you two weeks to get on one of those ships as a rated man, otherwise if you’re not in a ship in two weeks, you’re in the army.” And, I got out of—if it wasn’t for that I would have been in the army. They had ten ships sitting out in the bay waiting to go, loaded down with cargo, and no crews.

01-00:17:53

Lage: Amazing. So he saw where you were most needed. Now what’s it mean to be rated?

01-00:17:59

Oliveri: Well, rated in the engine room. Like an oiler, fireman water tender, deck engineer, engine maintenance, and that’s your rated man.

01-00:18:07

Lage: So it wasn’t difficult for you to get on the ship.

01-00:18:10

Oliveri: I went down to union hall, a week later I was gone.

01-00:18:14

Lage: Was that a relief? Were you glad that you didn’t—

01-00:18:19

Oliveri: Yeah. I looked at it this way. I was doing more for the GIs than me going in the army and doing nothing because we were taking cargo over to the Far East and in Saipan and Guam and all those places over there where the guys needed food, tanks, yeah.

01-00:18:37

Lage: Right. And you knew how to do it.

01-00:18:39

Oliveri: Oh, yeah, we knew how to do it, yeah.

01-00:18:41

Lage: Now did any of those ships load up at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:18:45

Oliveri: No, I don’t know.

01-00:18:46

Lage: Because they were already loaded?

01-00:18:47

Oliveri: They were already loaded sitting out in Anchorage. They probably come from there.

- 01-00:18:51
Lage: They probably did because that's what they were doing then.
- 01-00:18:53
Oliveri: Because Oakland didn't have nothing—well they had a few docks in Oakland—and Alameda had some docks, too, but the army base—and they had the army base and navy base over there—the navy base, they closed it down and filled it in.
- 01-00:19:07
Lage: Right. Crazy. Okay, let's see what else we want to talk about here. So how long did you work during the Korean War in that capacity as a Merchant Marine?
- 01-00:19:24
Oliveri: Merchant Marine I worked for twelve years during World War Two and the Korean War altogether. Twelve years.
- 01-00:19:31
Lage: So how long? Just Korean War?
- 01-00:19:34
Oliveri: Well, until the Korean War was over.
- 01-00:19:36
Lage: The whole three years. And were you just constantly back and forth on ships?
- 01-00:19:41
Oliveri: Yeah. I come home and we—sometimes I quit the ship and go down union hall and get another ship going someplace else. You see new world this way.
- 01-00:19:53
Lage: Yeah. Where all did you go in that period?
- 01-00:19:56
Oliveri: Everywhere in the Far East. Singapore, Bangkok, Saigon, oh, God, I can't remember all the places in the Far East.
- 01-00:20:06
Lage: Japan.
- 01-00:20:07
Oliveri: Japan, China, yeah. And China was—China. I was in Hong Kong and the exchange was \$5 million to one dollar back in the—what the hell year was that—I can't remember what year it was, and I still got a lot of thousand dollar bills and I cashed a five dollar bill, I had this much money, I went in the cabaret and started to drink and buying the girls a drink and in a half an hour—well, it was an hour—it was almost gone.

01-00:20:47

Lage: [laughs] Now the life of a seaman can be kind of wild, I would guess. Was that your experience?

01-00:20:53

Oliveri: Oh Yeah. Yeah. And the means of transportation over there, that was fifty, forty-eight, forty-nine, and the means of transportation was rickshaw like they've got in San Francisco and these guys pulling you, that's what they had over there. The only way you traveled around. They had automobiles but most of the people traveled was like that.

01-00:21:21

Lage: And did you, yourself, in Hong Kong?

01-00:21:24

Oliveri: Yeah. It's the only way that you traveled up from the ship to the cabarets and the bars and the nightlife. [laughs]

01-00:21:32

Lage: Now, if you were there around forty-nine, that's just about the time that the Communists took over Mainland China.

01-00:21:43

Oliveri: Probably.

01-00:21:44

Lage: Do you remember anything about that?

01-00:21:46

Oliveri: No. The only thing I can remember was the exchange.

01-00:21:49

Lage: Yeah. The important part, the money and the cabarets. Right. Okay. What about during the Vietnam War? Did you get all involved in Merchant Marines?

01-00:22:00

Oliveri: No. Before the Vietnam War the shipping went downhill and a friend of mine, a guy Herbie, he says, let's go get a job working on tugboats in the bay, and, so, I got a job working {in the lugboatman?}

01-00:22:18

Lage: Say that again.

01-00:22:19

Oliveri: {End of lugboatman?} there in San Francisco at the SUP building that's on first street and they're still there.

01-00:22:26

Lage: Now, is that a company—a tugboat company?

01-00:22:28
Oliveri: No, it's a union.

01-00:22:30
Lage: Oh, it's another union. So the tugboats are under a different union?

01-00:22:33
Oliveri: Yeah.

01-00:22:34
Lage: I see. So was that difficult to get into?

01-00:22:37
Oliveri: No. Back in those days, especially the first job out of the union into the boat {menu?} was in a tug Hercules and I had a fireman water tender {dorsmant}—oilers at {dorsmant?}—and [snap] I got a job two days later when I was down there and got a job working on that thing.

01-00:23:00
Lage: I kind of want to take a picture of that but I'll do it later. I'll get a still picture.

01-00:23:03
Oliveri: There's a lot of pictures. I'll show you another picture that I—it's still a museum piece and it still runs at the museum.

01-00:23:10
Lage: Yeah, the tugboat Hercules, your first tugboat, is now at the maritime museum.

01-00:23:15
Oliveri: Yeah. On High Street Pier in San Francisco.

01-00:23:17
Lage: And you were saying that some of the guys that you worked with were quite a bit older.

01-00:23:22
Oliveri: Oh, under tug Hercules, yeah. That's why a year ago they had a luncheon, I belonged to a maritime museum, and we had a luncheon or a dinner or something and we started the hook about the tug Hercules and I said, yeah, I got all the answers, and ever since then I went down in history. Because, I'm the only guy left. And I gave them names, time, this and that, when I took off at—pay stubs—and, like I said, I think I—and I was working for ninety-eight cents an hour. [laughs]

01-00:23:56
Lage: That's incredible. Now you said that shipping was down so there weren't a lot jobs but, then, what did the tugboats do? Because aren't they involved with shipping?

01-00:24:07

Oliveri:

Well, yeah, but tugboats, the way they do, it's either feast or famine, either you work two or three days steady, then, if you're not working steady, you're working on a tugboats repairing it, painting it, and maintenance. Maintenance.

01-00:24:22

Lage:

So was it a pretty steady job or was it a day job?

01-00:24:26

Oliveri:

No. From the tug Hercules I went to a company they call Berkeley transportation, where I worked out of pier three, and we had barges—we used to run over to Emeryville where the roof and company over there—what's the name of that—{roof and annoleum?} and—I can't remember the company—we used to come over there with a barge and drop everything off before there was a freeway.

01-00:24:58

Lage:

Oh really? Yeah. So give me a picture of what this traffic on the bay was like. You started this job in the mid-fifties, would you say, after the Korean War?

01-00:25:10

Oliveri:

No. Well, after the Korean War, yeah. It was pretty good. There was a lot of shipping. I had to take care of the tankers, the cargo ships—

01-00:25:23

Lage:

And what did the tugboat do? I mean, I'm a naïve—I don't know a lot. So tell me, what was the purpose of the tugboat? What did it do?

01-00:25:29

Oliveri:

Helps park the ship because they just can't go up to a dock and park themselves like an automobile. They're too big. And when a pilot is aboard, and he's in a wheelhouse, and they're telling you, okay, push half speed on the bow, push the bow into the dock. Or, pull the ship away from the dock, push it in, do this, do that.

01-00:25:56

Lage:

So the ships' captain is kind of in charge?

01-00:26:00

Oliveri:

Yeah, the pilot. It's a pilot out of San Francisco and—whatever they call them—but they call them a pilot.

01-00:26:10

Lage:

The story about the pilot came up when we had the accident—

01-00:26:14

Oliveri:

On the Bay Bridge? Oh, God. Okay.

01-00:26:17

Lage:

So a pilot will get on the ship?

01-00:26:18
Oliveri: He'll get on outside of San Francisco by the furlongs and comes in and—

01-00:26:25
Lage: And he's the one that knows the bay?

01-00:26:27
Oliveri: Yes. He knows it. Captain don't know the bay. And as soon as the pilot gets on he takes over and Susie comes in the bay about Fisherman's Wharf or Alcatraz and he'll say, "Okay, guys. We're going here, we're going there, we'll meet you up there," or, "Put a line up, now."

01-00:26:44
Lage: He'll tell you that?

01-00:26:45
Oliveri: He tells us what to do until the job is finished.

01-00:26:51
Lage: How did you communicate?

01-00:26:52
Oliveri: Radio.

01-00:26:53
Lage: Radio.

01-00:26:54
Oliveri: Yeah. Oh, when I first worked there—

01-00:26:57
Lage: Yeah, when you first worked there.

01-00:27:00
Oliveri: We used to get on and holler at each other. Yeah.

01-00:27:04
Lage: They didn't have the radio.

01-00:27:04
Oliveri: No.

01-00:27:05
Lage: Wow. That must have been something.

01-00:27:07
Oliveri: Yeah. They holler at each other, "Stop. Go five," ["bop" sounds].

01-00:27:11
Lage: Now did your job change over time on the tugboat? Tell me what various jobs you had over the years.

01-00:27:17
Oliveri: Well, I always worked on deck.

01-00:27:22
Lage: Not in the engine, anymore.

01-00:27:23
Oliveri: No. When you work on deck you take—sometimes they have an engineer and sometimes they don't—but when you work on a tugboat you've got to be a jack of all trades and you've got to learn how to run the tugboat, you've got to be a deckhand, you've got to be a cook, you've got to be an engineer. And a lot of times, because there's only four or five guys on it and if he wants to take a break—take a little snooze—because sometimes we'll work around the clock.

01-00:27:48
Lage: Oh, I see. Just bring in one ship after another.

01-00:27:51
Oliveri: Yeah. There's no such thing as eight-to-five. Our hours are crazy. The only time you work is when the ships come in and a lot of times they all come in at one day and you're really busy.

01-00:28:07
Lage: And is there a captain on the tugboat?

01-00:28:10
Oliveri: Yeah. He's in charge.

01-00:28:12
Lage: I see. And does he do any of the heavy-duty work or just be in charge?

01-00:28:17
Oliveri: He's in charge. He runs the wheelhouse.

01-00:28:19
Lage: I see.

01-00:28:22
Oliveri: Take your time.

01-00:28:23
Lage: Yeah. [laughs]. I have to think what I was going to ask you. Did you help the ships get away from dock, also?

01-00:28:30
Oliveri: Yeah. We pushed them into the dock and we pulled them away from the dock.

01-00:28:35
Lage: Now was this all before the era of the container ships?

01-00:28:38
Oliveri: Yeah. Oh yeah. And the container ships.

01-00:28:41
Lage: Do they still need tugboats?

01-00:28:42
Oliveri: Well. Yes and no. Because, today, they've got bow thrusters and stern thrusters.

01-00:28:49
Lage: Now, what's that?

01-00:28:50
Oliveri: At the bow of the ship and the stern of the ship they've got a big whole for— on one side they'll have a side with propellers and it pushes the water— pushes the ship away from the dock. Pushes it into the dock.

01-00:29:06
Lage: So a little more fine control of the—

01-00:29:08
Oliveri: Yeah. And it's like a tugboat. And a lot of times they use them—it all depends where they're at [chiming], but in San Francisco Bay, the tides are so swift, they always have a tugboat standing by or using them because, basically in San Francisco, the tides, they really come and go like ambushes.

01-00:29:29
Lage: You really have to know your bay, don't you?

01-00:29:32
Oliveri: Oh. I know the bay like the palm of my hand.

01-00:29:35
Lage: I'll bet.

01-00:29:36
Oliveri: I always tell the stupid—

01-00:29:36
Lage: Tell me. Tell me about that.

01-00:29:38
Oliveri: Stupid story just before I quit. I worked for Crowley Maritime. You ever hear of them?

01-00:29:45
Lage: Sure.

01-00:29:47
Oliveri: Well we had a brand new port captain, he was about thirty-two, thirty-four, something, young guy, and he asked—I went by his office, he says, "Bill. I've

got to ask you some questions,” I said, “Not now I’ve got a job to do where I’m making money for the company,” so, three times I went by his office and he hollered at me and I said, “No,” I said, “I’ll catch you later,” I said, “I’ve got to make money for the company.” So one day I would walk by, and this one seated dispatcher, and I walked by and he says—I say, “What do you want?” He says, “How’d you guys manage without radar and depth finders?” I said, “None of your Goddamn business,” and I walked out of his office. And he says, “Tell me,” and I said, well, then a couple days later, I went by and I told him, “What I was taught by the old-timers, every dock along the San Francisco had a bell or a whistle and when it got foggy, foggy, foggy, the bells of the whistles would sound off and you would know your bells and whistles and you knew where you were at.

01-00:30:50

Lage: They all had a different sound.

01-00:30:51

Oliveri: Yes. And depth finders, I said, he says, how did you guys—I says, “We went by landmarks. We didn’t go by radar or anything. We went by landmarks.”

01-00:31:03

Lage: And what were the important landmarks.

01-00:31:04

Oliveri: Well, some mountains or some—something on a land and you head for that and then you head for this and then you head for that. That’s what the old-timers told me. And, hey, it ain’t going to disappear. Yeah, so I told this and he thought it was [laughs], he thought it was interesting.

01-00:31:27

Lage: Yeah. What was it like working for Crowley? Did you work for them for a long time?

01-00:31:31

Oliveri: Twenty-eight years.

01-00:31:32

Lage: So you were actually employed by them.

Oliveri:

Yeah. I got a job out of the union hall.

01-00:31:38

Lage: And just stayed—

01-00:31:40

Oliveri: Well, no, I got a job—when I was working at Berkeley Transportation they went down the drain and Tom Crowley, the senior Tom Crowley, we were working at the same dock—pier five or pier three—pier five I think it was—and every time I was down there he’d drive his car down—a Buick—and he

would see me and he says, “Park my car.” And I wasn’t even working for him and he said, park his car, all the time.

01-00:32:07

Lage: Was he kind of haughty or—

01-00:32:10

Oliveri: Well it was really funny, every time he walked in the office everybody would disappear. They would run down there on the side of the dock and get out of the office because he was—that Irishman was tough.

01-00:32:20

Lage: Yeah. Tough guy.

01-00:32:21

Oliveri: And out there, Crawley—Berkeley Transportation went out of business—I went to see the dispatchers at Crawley and I got knocked off about ten o’clock Berkeley Transportation, at twelve o’clock I was working again at Crawley Maritime.

01-00:32:43

Lage: Wow, that’s something. Did you know a guy named Les {Bedian?}

01-00:32:47

Oliveri: Les {Bedian?}

01-00:32:49

Lage: Does that ring a bell?

01-00:32:49

Oliveri: Rings a bell—a little bit—what’d he do?

01-00:32:52

Lage: Well it’s somebody we’ve done an oral history with who worked for Tom Crawley and I thought he worked on the tugboats, but.

01-00:32:59

Oliveri: Unless—

01-00:33:01

Lage: {Bediant?}

01-00:33:02

Oliveri: —unless he worked in the office.

01-00:33:03

Lage: I’ll try to find out more about it. We also interviewed Tom Crawley, Junior and Senior—big, thick oral histories about the business.

01-00:33:13

Oliveri: Oh yeah I knew that Junior, the Senior, the Junior, and the Junior.

01-00:33:20

Lage: Oh there's another junior [laughs].

01-00:33:21

Oliveri: Well there's a junior now. Yeah. He's about in his forties, late forties.

01-00:33:27

Lage: Now how did the tugboat business change over this period of time, say, when you were with Crawley. Things changed on the bay a lot.

01-00:33:43

Oliveri: Well the junior junior—the third Tom Crawley—he got mad at the unions and pulled out of town and he was out of town but he's all over the world. He works out of New York, Port {Abogalda}—

01-00:33:59

Lage: But not here in the bay.

01-00:34:00

Oliveri: Well now he's back in the bay again. He's back in the bay.

01-00:34:02

Lage: But is there as much tugboat business as always?

01-00:34:06

Oliveri: Oh yeah. Because every time these container ships come in there—like the liberty ship, that's about 550 feet long. These new container ships are 1,100, 1,200 feet long and when that ship—when that guy hit the Bay Bridge in the last November—they shouldn't have left the dock. It was foggy-foggy-foggy-foggy-foggy-foggy-foggy-foggy, it's a foggy Goddamn day, they shouldn't have left the Goddamn dock. Stupidity. Stupid. The pilot and the captain but somebody was telling me, I was talking to a friend of mine, he says, the captain wanted to be on a regular routine and they wanted to leave then. If he had waited until noontime, the fog always lifts by noontime, he would have made it. He would have been over at China unloading them and loading them and been back to the Oakland container dock. It was a big hurry and it cost them millions of dollars because he hit the Goddamn Bay Bridge. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Now, the Coast Guard should have stepped in and said—the Coast Guard should step in and tell everybody and the pilots and if it's foggy, you can't see the bow of the boat, don't leave.

01-00:35:22

Lage: Right. They think it's going to cost them money, but in the long run.

01-00:35:27

Oliveri: What's two hours? The fog always lifts by noontime.

01-00:35:30

Lage: Did you know that pilot?

01-00:35:32
Oliveri: Somebody told me I worked with him for years but I can't—it's been twenty-three years since I retired it's hard for me to remember these guys.

01-00:35:41
Lage: Now tell me more about what the tugboats did. They also worked with barges and—

01-00:35:45
Oliveri: Yeah. We had to supply the barges—had to supply the ships with bunkers like diesel oil and {bunker sea?}. Diesel oil is for merchant ships that got diesel engines and {munker c?} is the one's that have got steam engines.

01-00:36:05
Lage: And do they still have steam engines?

01-00:36:07
Oliveri: Few. Not too many. They're all diesel today.

01-00:36:10
Lage: Yeah. But weren't a lot of good transported by barge on the bay?

01-00:36:19
Oliveri: Oh, at the bay, a lot of times, yeah. When you sat out in Anchorage over by—before you pass the Bay Bridge over by United Engineering Shipyard—out that way and in that area.

01-00:36:35
Lage: In the San Francisco side?

01-00:36:36
Oliveri: Yeah. You see the ships over there and then you'll see a tugboat pulling a oil barge and they're refueling them. Or they sit out there, wait for them, there, where they're going if the dock is clear. And a lot of times they sit out there [chimes] because a lot of the ships go all the way to Sacramento. A lot of travel goes up to Sacramento. Oh yeah.

01-00:37:00
Lage: And does the tugboat have a role in that?

01-00:37:03
Oliveri: Yeah, they've got a tugboat up there.

01-00:37:05
Lage: I see. Did you ever work out of there?

01-00:37:06
Oliveri: Yeah, well, more or less. Now I used to tell this stupid story where Crowley had a barge going up to Sacramento, wherever, and we had four tugs pushing it up—it was a big barge—I forget what we had on it—but, all of a sudden, my partner was up there—he was a pilot on the barge—and he tells me all of a

sudden he says, “Hard right full ahead,” and I go, what the hell are you doing? And the levy broke open and if it wasn’t—he wasn’t paying attention—he didn’t have four tugboats on him—we would’ve ended up in a cornfield with four tugboats and a barge. That was—I can’t remember what year it was—but it was—and the barge—and the levy just broke open and when the levy breaks open the water just rushes out and this guy—oh I can’t remember his name—and he knew what he was doing. And it was really, really funny. Jesus Christ, could you imagine being in a cornfield?

01-00:38:10

Lage: As you say you’ve always worked on the water. This would have put you on land. [laughs].

01-00:38:12

Oliveri: Yeah. Never worked on the land in my life. And, let’s see, that was the only time we took in barges up there.

01-00:38:21

Lage: But you did mention to me before we started recording something about loading rail cars onto barges.

01-00:38:31

Oliveri: They took Hercules, we’d use to leave out of Alameda and Oakland with boxcars, they’d put them on a barge, we had a—the barge we had a—we used to get twelve or thirteen boxcars on it and, otherwise, if they didn’t put the boxcars not his barge with the tugboat taking him across the bay, they might have to go all the way down to San Jose and down to San Jose through the avenue—I mean, south San Francisco—through the waterfront. And we used to take them over there in forty-five minutes or a half hour.

01-00:39:05

Lage: And this would all be with the tugboat providing the power, so to speak.

01-00:39:11

Oliveri: Yeah. And we did that for years until the company decided to have a barge with an engine in the middle and it got rid of that thing and they had a—

01-00:39:22

Lage: Got rid of Hercules?

01-00:39:23

Oliveri: And got this barge that would carry twenty-four boxcars. So it was a lot bigger—progress—but it was in business three or four years and it went out of business.

01-00:39:34

Lage: Well, I guess the containerization kind of put the barges out. Would they, or not?

01-00:39:40
Oliveri: Well, yeah. The first container dock was in Alameda at Matson dock.

01-00:39:46
Lage: In Alameda not at Oakland.

01-00:39:48
Oliveri: In Alameda. It was the first container dock where they had the crane. Alameda was the first—

01-00:39:55
Lage: Oh I didn't realize that. So you saw that all come to pass here on the bay.

01-00:40:01
Oliveri: Oh, yeah. Now, when I first worked—when I first worked at a—well the first ship I got out of there was {ship Peehall?} and I just happened to think it was a liberty ship or—I forget what kind of ship it was—we used to take lumber from the east-coast to the east coast and unload it and load it and load up the ship with steel, all kinds of steel, rods, bah-bah-bah-bah, and take it back to the West Coast. And I was on a ship for about six, seven months—or six months—and went through the Panama Canal about fifteen times.

01-00:40:41
Lage: And was this wartime transport?

01-00:40:44
Oliveri: No. After the wartime.

01-00:40:45
Lage: After the war. Wow. Is that an interesting experience as a seaman to go through the—

01-00:40:51
Oliveri: Panama Canal? Me and Betty went through the Panama Canal about five years ago and before we went down to—before I was on a ships—they had all kinds of room on either side of the ship. The ships were narrow. And I went through it one time and the pilot was not paying attention and we rubbed alongside the dock and I said, “What’s this guy doing?” I says, “He’s rubbing alongside the dock,” and then he pulls away and the pressure of the ship alongside the wood as soon as he pulled away it busted out in flame. I must have jumped about six feet in the air. [laughs] It scared the shit out of me.

01-00:41:26
Lage: Was it the ship or the dock that burst into flame?

01-00:41:29
Oliveri: The dock. Just for a few minutes. And it burst into flame because the pressure of the ship—

01-00:41:35
Lage: The friction.

- 01-00:41:36
Oliveri: Yeah. And it busted out in flame. Oh it was so funny.
- 01-00:41:40
Lage: Now this was when you were going as a tourist?
- 01-00:41:43
Oliveri: No. When I was working.
- 01-00:41:45
Lage: When you were working, oh, okay, but you did, again, go through the Panama Canal as a tourist?
- 01-00:41:49
Oliveri: Yeah. Me and Betty, we went on a cruise ship, and, when we went on the cruise ship I was running from one side to the other. She says, what are you doing, I says, we've got this much room on either side, I says, and the last time we went through we had, I don't know how much room.
- 01-00:42:04
Lage: That must have been really interesting for you.
- 01-00:42:05
Oliveri: Oh, God. I went crazy. Everybody was saying, what're you doing, so I says—I told them my story.
- 01-00:42:10
Lage: [laughing] That's great. Now I want you to tell me, your house here in Alameda is kind of a story. Tell me a little bit about—this is an old Victorian—a duplex, really.
- 01-00:42:24
Oliveri: Like I said during World War Two, it was—during World War Two they had four shipyards in Alameda, and they had to have a place for the shipyard worker and Rosie the Riveter to live. And all this house, that house, this house, and the other house—these three, here, I know of—but they had a lot more in Alameda where they—each room had a lock on them and they had a—everybody had their own room but they had a shared bath and a shared kitchen.
- 01-00:42:57
Lage: So they turned these old Victorian houses into rooming houses, basically. Yeah. And was that the way it was when you bought it?
- 01-00:43:04
Oliveri: Yeah. More or less. More or less. But I remodeled the hell out of it over the years.
- 01-00:43:11
Lage: And you said there was someone actually living here. Was the person who was living here at the time someone from that era?

01-00:43:20

Oliveri: Oh. Let's see. You make me stop and think.

01-00:43:24

Lage: You bought it in the early sixties?

01-00:43:26

Oliveri: Yeah. No I think that house was empty. I forget who the hell moved out of it. It was empty when I bought it. But this house has got history. I call them George. We had a ghost down here. They went to the backdoor and downstairs and downstairs, where I used to go down and it used to be the laundry and the furnace, and over the years I—that's what it was—and when I changed everything—

01-00:44:00

Lage: Now, over the years, what? I didn't get that.

01-00:44:01

Oliveri: Well, over the years. Well, after—there was somebody living downstairs.

01-00:44:08

Lage: Okay. Now is this George the ghost?

01-00:44:11

Oliveri: Well, he was living down there but I didn't know it until this guy moved out and after he moved out then I didn't rent it out anymore I just wanted it for myself, but every time I went downstairs to go to the rumpus room, I had two doors I had to go through and they always were open. Every time I walked through these doors, George would slam these damn doors and I used to turn around and look it was a back here and there was nobody back there but why would these doors shut by themselves? There was no wind down there and I always say it was George down there shutting these doors and I talked to the Alameda Museum people and they says, "You're not the only one that had ghosts in their house."

01-00:44:59

Lage: [Laughing]. Do you really think it was a ghost?

01-00:45:01

Oliveri: I was the only one living down here by myself by that time. Oh that's history down there.

01-00:45:10

Lage: Now when did you marry?

01-00:45:12

Oliveri: Well I married down here—me and Betty had been going together about sixteen, seventeen years.

01-00:45:18

Lage: Oh, I see. Were you married when you were going to all these foreign ports?

01-00:45:23

Oliveri:

No. When I was a Merchant Marine I wasn't married. When I bought this place I was married. Every time I went to work I was—I was working crazy hours, I mean, she was out screwing around.

01-00:45:38

Lage:

It's hard to have a domestic life, it seems.

01-00:45:41

Oliveri:

Oh yeah. A lot of the guys who had worked on tugboats, the divorce rate was about ninety percent. Yeah.

01-00:45:49

Lage:

Really? Because of the long hours and the—

01-00:45:52

Oliveri:

Yeah. Long hours, crazy hours. You never knew when you was going to work and you never knew when you was going to come home.

01-00:45:57

Lage:

Now, did you like that kind of work?

01-00:46:00

Oliveri:

Yeah. It's better than working from eight to five.

01-00:46:03

Lage:

Now. Tell me what's the attraction of working on the sea or the bay, I guess, in this case.

01-00:46:12

Oliveri:

It was different. Every day was different. Every day. You went to work out at San Francisco and you'd end up—you was going to go down to Hunter's Point, go up to Martinez, or go to {Sheyolal?}, or go to Alameda, you never knew where you were going to go. One of the dispatchers says, "Okay, guys, go here," that's where you went and did the job.

01-00:46:32

Lage:

Now is that even true after you worked for Crowley?

01-00:46:36

Oliveri:

Yeah. Crowley did the same thing. You never knew what time he was going to go to work.

01-00:46:39

Lage:

I see. Even though you had the same employer day after day.

01-00:46:42

Oliveri:

Yeah, of twenty-eight years at Crowley. Oh, yeah, I'll show you something I got over at Crowleys. Crowley threw a picture away of the San Francisco waterfront, 1906. A big picture of San Francisco's waterfront and with a picture of him on it and the guy threw it away and I took it out of a dumpster.

Oh, yeah, it's worth about \$3,000. I had a party over the house here one time and the lady was {in on its step?}, she says, you've got about \$3,000 you got out of a dumpster.

01-00:47:15

Lage:

Wonder why he threw it away. Now I know one of your moments not he tugboats had to do with Humphrey the Whale. Tell me that story. That was in eighty-five.

01-00:47:30

Oliveri:

Yeah it was about twenty-four years ago, twenty-five years ago, well, we were pushing a ship into the army base about four o'clock—three o'clock in the morning—and as we were going over there, we kept seeing this thing, like this, out of the water, in the water, and I told my partner, I said, "What the hell is that?" And he said, "I don't know," and "It looks like a sea serpent. I don't know," and we watched it for about a half hour while we were pushing—we were alongside the ship pushing it into the dock—and I hollered up to the pilot, I says, "What do you think that is?" And he says, "Bill, not now, I'm busy parking a ship," so, we parked the ship and the pilot says, "Okay guys you're all through," and we're looking at Humphrey and he didn't know how to turn around. Army base you've got to make a u-turn and go back out again and he kept running in on the pylons, hitting it with his head, and I said, oh, oh, oh, I told my partner, oh I feel so sorry for this guy he don't know how to turn around. We watched him for about fifteen minutes and I says, he kept running into the dock all the time whacking his head.

01-00:48:40

Lage:

And by this time you knew it was a whale?

01-00:48:41

Oliveri:

Yeah. Oh yeah. After a fashion he blew and then we knew it was a whale. And I said, "Give me the radio," and I called the Coast Guard and I told the Coast Guard, "There's a whale over in the army base. He don't know how to turn around and leave. He's whacking himself on the head and he's going to do damage to himself," or whatever, and he says, "Okay, we'll take care of it." That morning at about seven o'clock or eight o'clock the army—the Coast Guard—come over with the animal people and they escorted—they started to escort him out. They got him turn around, they had him past underneath the Bay Bridge, past Alcatraz, and almost had him out the Golden Gate, that's when he says, the hell with you, and he went up to the delta. And he went up to that town, what the hell, I forget the name of the town up there, and he was up there for a month and a half.

01-00:49:31

Lage:

I know it was quite a time.

01-00:49:33

Oliveri:

Oh. I used to love to come home and watch it on TV.

01-00:49:37

Lage: And you were the one that got him out of the Oakland Army Base, there.

01-00:49:41

Oliveri: Well, we didn't have to do with it. We called the Coast Guard. We called the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard got the animal people because they know what they were doing but I felt sorry—me and my partner—we felt sorry for him. He kept whacking his head against the pylons, you know, and he didn't know how to turn around.

01-00:49:58

Lage: Yeah. He really captured people's imagination, didn't he?

01-00:50:00

Oliveri: Well there was only three of us on the tug and he kept whacking his head all the time and the pilot, he got off the ship and went by automobile back to San Francisco, but we just felt sorry for Humphrey the Whale and we didn't realize how much history went down in the—I didn't know how much history I made for him. Well, it was just being nice for to Humphrey the Whale.

01-00:50:28

Lage: Well having some connection with him [laughs]. Now you mention that there you were at the Oakland Army Base, so you must have had a continuing relationship through your tugboat work.

01-00:50:39

Oliveri: Oh, well, a lot of times—anytime we had a ship down there and Crawley says—the dispatcher says, “Okay, go to the army base,” we went over to the army base. When I was working with Crawley, the army got rid of all their tugs. Just Crawley was in a bay and two other companies and that's all.

01-00:50:59

Lage: And previously the army had their own tugs?

01-00:51:02

Oliveri: Before that. Before that. During World War Two.

01-00:51:05

Lage: So they would call on the commercial?

01-00:51:08

Oliveri: Yeah. After World War Two was over, Crawley took over the whole Bay Area. Yeah.

01-00:51:15

Lage: So you did help ships dock over there.

01-00:51:18

Oliveri: Oh yeah. We always put ships in and dock and there was—what's that out there you made with the—right off to the side he used to make—it was some company. It was not the army but I can't remember.

- 01-00:51:31
Lage: Oh, something adjacent to it—near it.
- 01-00:51:34
Oliveri: What the hell they used to make over there? I can't remember. They used to make some Goddamn thing.
- 01-00:51:40
Lage: That you would deliver?
- 01-00:51:41
Oliveri: Well we used to park ships over there.
- 01-00:51:43
Lage: Yeah. Was the Oakland—were the terminals there—anything unique about them, or—
- 01-00:51:48
Oliveri: No they weren't modern. Yeah, they were all deep-water channels. Just like the army base the deep water channels and then they filled it in after the war [laughing].
- 01-00:52:00
Lage: Okay. Any other major moments on your tugboat that you'd want to talk about?
- 01-00:52:03
Oliveri: Well. We're over at San Francisco and we had to push in a ship onto the dry-dock—that's a {ham?} shipyard—and we're waiting for the captain to tell us, okay guys, you're all through, you're all finished, and I looked at the—staring at the tugboat—and there was a sea lion on the back of the tugboat and sitting there. And I told my partner, "Go chase him off," he says, "You go chase him off," and I said, "Okay, I'll chase him off." So I went outside and one of the fan taillights and said, "Come on, get off." And he turned around and chased me up the deck. I didn't know they could move that Goddamn fast. And I ran inside the house—
- 01-00:52:45
Lage: I'd like to have a picture of that.
- 01-00:52:47
Oliveri: Yeah. I ain't got a picture, it was in the evening. And I slammed the door and my partner says, "What you slam the door for?" I says, "That son of a gun chased me up the deck and then he bit me in the butt," and he was that close to me. I didn't know they could move that fast. Then I looked out the window and jumped over the side. We wanted to get rid of him because we didn't want him to jump over the side while we're running because the propeller would suck him in and he'd be hamburger. And I thought that was funny. Oh yeah.
- 01-00:53:21
Lage: Well that's great. Any other memories that we should record here?

01-00:53:26

Oliveri:

Well, let's see, when I was a Merchant Marine I always told the story—I went to Ireland in eighty—fifty-eight—no, forty-eight. Forty-eight.

01-00:53:38

Lage:

Just World War Two era. Even after the war. What were you doing in—

01-00:53:47

Oliveri:

Well we were up in Portland, Oregon with ten thousand tons of grain on a cargo ship, took thirty-two days to get to Dublin. Thirty-two days. And when we got there, that afternoon, everybody wanted to—there was only two guys on a ship. The fireman water tender who kept the steam up and the generators going and the gangway which kept the people from going off and on. And we all went ashore and got stink ass drunk. Next morning went back with hangovers and I'm having coffee in the morning and ham and breakfast about eight o'clock or seven thirty and I'm looking out the porthole and here on the dock there was a horse and a wagon, a horse and a wagon, a horse and a wagon, so I went to Charlie, I said, "Take a look," and he said, "Don't bother me I've got a hangover," so we had breakfast and went down to the engine room because we were out there for thirty-two days and had a lot of repair work to do. So we come up for a ten o'clock for a coffee break and a snack and the stevedores are working and they're taking one scoop of grain and putting it on the wagon and the {army's?} going, giddy-up. It took twenty-nine days to unload that ship.

01-00:55:03

Lage:

And you're waiting on the ship the whole time?

01-00:55:06

Oliveri:

We had a vacation for twenty-nine days. I was out dancing and partying every night. I used to kiss the blarney stone. And I nearly missed the ship. I owed the company money, and nearly I married twice.

01-00:55:23

Lage:

You did get married twice?

01-00:55:26

Oliveri:

Almost.

01-00:55:27

Lage:

Almost. [laughing] Two Irish girls?

01-00:55:28

Oliveri:

Yeah, the Irish girls wanted to come to the United States. They wanted to come and all the other older guys says, come on, Bill, we're going back to the ship. [laughing] Thank God for the older guys, they knew better. It took twenty-nine days and the people outside of town, you know what they lived in, what kind of houses back in those forty-eight or forty-nine it was, they had dirt {porch?}, dirt walls, and grass roofs.

01-00:56:00
Lage: So you were seeing a part of the world that surprised you.

01-00:56:02
Oliveri: Oh, I couldn't have—and here we had in San Francisco we've got—everybody's got everything for Christ's sakes. And people outside of town didn't have nothing. But people in town they had apartments, you know, buildings, you know, but narrow streets.

01-00:56:15
Lage: So these horses might have been taking grain out to some of the people.

01-00:56:19
Oliveri: Whatever they did with it, I can't remember that.

01-00:56:22
Lage: So was this an army ship, then?

01-00:56:24
Oliveri: No.

01-00:56:25
Lage: But you were still Merchant Marine.

01-00:56:26
Oliveri: Merchant Marine. I don't know who the hell I was working for at that time. I got my papers there but I had to dig them up, I can tell you, but it was a Merchant Marine ship. Twenty-nine days to unload. Horse and wagon to discharge it.

01-00:56:40
Lage: Oh my goodness. So your career spans quite a change of technology.

01-00:56:44
Oliveri: Well, I was in Haifa and the same thing, we bring cargo when we're in Haifa when they're fighting the Arabs over—

01-00:56:52
Lage: Now when was that? In ninety-one or two?

01-00:56:56
Oliveri: No that was before that. That was in the forties.

01-00:56:58
Lage: Oh, in the forties. You were there?

01-00:56:59
Oliveri: Yeah. We were there only a week—a couple days.

01-00:57:02
Lage: And what were you delivering then?

01-00:57:04

Oliveri:

I can't remember what they delivered, but it was up at a bar—and another thing, we had gone to the same bar all the time drinking and partying.

01-00:57:13

Lage:

In Haifa.

01-00:57:14

Oliveri:

Yeah. One of the girls latches on to me and says, marry me, take me home. Thank God for the older guys who said, come on, Bill, we're going back to the ship. They all wanted to come to the United States.

01-00:57:25

Lage:

What other places did you go as a Merchant Marine?

01-00:57:24

Oliveri:

We went to Bangkok, a first time a ship went up the Bangkok River after the war, and we're delivering cargo up there, whatever it was, and we're going down this river with the cargo and—when the war was going on no big ships went over there—and the trees grow were like this—and we were going up the river and we kept hitting these trees and breaking them and we hit one tree and three monkeys come down and we adopted three monkeys for a week.

01-00:58:07

Lage:

You kept them on the ship?

01-00:58:09

Oliveri:

Oh yeah. We kept them on the ship. We fed them like little—like little monkeys, you know, and everybody took care of them like crazy until we were leaving about a week later and the captain says, "Get rid of the monkeys." Everybody got pissed because they wanted to keep the monkeys.

01-00:58:26

Lage:

You wanted to take them home?

01-00:58:26

Oliveri:

Yeah. [laughs] But we had to get rid of them. That was so funny. Three monkeys and everybody was feeding them all the time. They ate like little pigs and I thought that was funny.

01-00:58:36

Lage:

So were all the port towns pretty much alike? You mention the bars and the girls and was there always sort of an area where you went to?

01-00:58:44

Oliveri:

Yeah. They had a place for the—

01-00:58:46

Lage:

For the seamen—the sailors. We have about two more minutes so tell me if you—

01-00:58:58
Oliveri: Let's see. I was in Brooklyn and that's the age of, oh, well I told you about that, the age of eighteen.

01-00:59:06
Lage: Going to New York for your first time.

01-00:59:08
Oliveri: Yeah. And I would try to go out to Coney Island and every time I asked somebody how to get to Coney island they didn't know how to get there but the only thing they knew was how to get from their point to their point and the only time I went to Coney Island [chiming] when I got lost I went out to Coney Island. I wanted to see what it would look like because I used to go to the San Francisco Ferryland—what the hell they call it—

01-00:59:35
Lage: What was that called? Well, right out there at Ocean Beach.

01-00:59:39
Oliveri: Yeah. I used to go down there when I was a kid and I wanted to see what Coney Island looked like.

01-00:59:43
Lage: So did you get there?

01-00:59:44
Oliveri: Yeah, one time.

01-00:59:45
Lage: How did it compare with our San Francisco amusement park?

01-00:59:48
Oliveri: Oh. Coney Island was bigger.

01-00:59:51
Lage: Yeah. It's pretty big. Okay, I think we should close off because we're just about to finish our tape up and—

01-00:59:59
Oliveri: I don't know what else I can think of but I did all kinds of crazy things.

01-00:60:02
Lage: I'll bet I've already gotten a picture of that. [laughing] It's quite a life.

01-00:60:08
Oliveri: If I had to do it again, I would do it. I wouldn't change it for the world.

01-00:60:12
Lage: That's what I wanted to ask you.

01-00:60:14
Oliveri: I would do it again because I got an education and every time I came back to the United States I kissed the ground I left because the only thing you've got to do in this country here is go to work and go to work and you got anything you want.

01-00:60:29
Lage: You have an opportunity. Right.

01-00:60:30
Oliveri: Yeah. Overseas they didn't have nothing. Nothing, nothing.

01-00:60:34
Lage: So that's interesting, that's what you drew out of your experience of going to so many places.

01-00:60:40
Oliveri: Yeah. Especially the Far East, they didn't have nothing. Jesus Christ. Like in Singapore and Bangkok and I went to—when I was in Bangkok we wanted to see the palace and me and my buddy went there and we were walking around and they had all kinds of gold around the mountain—around the buildings—and we were starting to walk over this place and I said, let's go over there, and the guard goes like this and I said, oh, let's go over there, and the next thing you know he's got a gun pointing at us and I said, what the hell did we do wrong. We found out this means go away. Just the opposite. That means come.

01-00:61:18
Lage: Oh how funny.

01-00:61:19
Oliveri: Funny? I'm telling you, when you see a gun pointing at you—

01-00:61:23
Lage: Not too funny, then.

01-00:61:24
Oliveri: What the hell we'd do wrong, I told my partner.

01-00:61:27
Lage: Did you get out of it easily?

01-00:61:29
Oliveri: Yeah. Well, we find out somebody came by and said, no, don't go over there, that's private property.

01-00:61:35
Lage: Yeah. Okay. I have to shut off now but thank you very much for your memories.

(End of Audio File)