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University of California
Berkeley, California

Leo Robinson:
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2008

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Discursive Table of Contents: Leo Robinson

Interview #1: June 5, 2008

[Audio File 1]

1

Birth in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1937—migration with mother to Richmond in Second World War—education at Oakland Technical High School—first memories of the Oakland Army Base (OAB) and childhood in West Oakland—enlisted in the Navy in 1954—joining the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) in 1958, working in San Francisco initially—then begins working for General Motors until 1962—rejoins the ILWU—obtaining stevedore jobs at the OAB through the union dispatch hall—shipping, “from cornflakes to tanks”—break bulk cargo process—port work in comparison to OAB work—union and civilian “territory”—increase in shipping traffic during the Vietnam War—elevation from a “B” status to an “A” status in the mid-60s—anti-war protests and changing political outlook—dock work during wartime—changing labor characteristics and technology of dock work in the 60s

[Audio File 2]

29

Pallets of whiskey story—generational transition in the ILWU and impact of containerization—union social service programs—decline of work at the OAB through the 1980s—places of residence—“when women came to the waterfront”—politics—elected to union leadership positions—strikes and shut-downs—other union actions—Oakland as an integrated city and reflections on the Black Panther Party

Interview #1: 06-05-2008

[Audio File 1]

01-00:02:52

Rubens: So, gosh, I want to thank you so much for letting me come out and talk to you about this.

01-00:03:03

Robinson: No problem.

01-00:03:05

Rubens: And what this is the story of both the Port of Oakland and the Redevelopment Agency who were in charge of ultimately the dispersal of the property that was the Oakland Army Base. They have each put in money to hire the oral history office, that's where I come in, to do a study of the Oakland Army Base. And we've really only gotten some men who go back to World War II. Men who went through the base, men who taught on the base.

There was an army officers school. And I have one African American man who grew up in an Oakland, and Gordon Coleman is his name, and fascinating story. I'll tell you another time. Earl Warren came to his grandfather, who was a kind of politico in the city even before his grandfather was allowed to vote. Should have voted, but of course, there was de facto, you know, removal of rights to vote. So then we have a few people who were involved in the West Oakland Community Action Group, WOCAG, that not so much opposed, but really wanted to have a say about how that base was going to be used for the community, because they had already gone through the experience of—

01-00:04:32

Robinson: West Oakland?

01-00:04:34

Rubens: —the freeway going down.

01-00:04:36

Robinson: Down, right.

[irrelevant conversation cut]

01-00:05:49

Rubens: So I've come to you because I know that you were a longshoreman for many years, and in fact, at times that you worked on the base. So let me start. Would you start for the record what's your name?

01-00:06:02

Robinson: My name is Leo, middle initial L, Robinson. R-O-B-I-N-S-O-N.

01-00:06:08

Rubens: Just L? You want—

01-00:06:10
Robinson: Oh, my middle name?

01-00:06:12
Rubens: Yes.

01-00:06:13
Robinson: Lythel. L-Y-T-H-E-L.

01-00:06:14
Rubens: Was that a family name?

01-00:06:17
Robinson: Yes, yes, yes.

01-00:06:17
Rubens: And where were you born?

01-00:06:18
Robinson: I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, May the 26, 1937.

01-00:06:23
Rubens: No kidding?

01-00:06:25
Robinson: Yes.

01-00:06:25
Rubens: Wow. Huey Long, Huey Long.

01-00:06:28
Robinson: Didn't know anything about him until I was in high school, I believe.

01-00:06:33
Rubens: Did your family talk about him at all?

01-00:06:35
Robinson: No, no.

01-00:06:36
Rubens: Yes, yes. And how'd you get out to California?

01-00:06:40
Robinson: During the Second World War, my mother came out first, got a job in the shipyards.

01-00:06:45
Rubens: No kidding. In Richmond?

01-00:06:47
Robinson: No, in Oakland, at Moore's Ship Yard, where what we call the foot of Avalon is at present.

01-00:06:57
Rubens: What was the name that you mentioned?

01-00:06:59
Robinson: Moore's Ship—

01-00:07:00
Rubens: Moore. Moore, sure, sure. Yes.

01-00:07:02
Robinson: She was a welder. She learned to weld, rather. My mother's profession was—she was a seamstress, and a damn good one, at that. My father came—brought us out after she came out and secured a place for us. And then we moved into the projects in 1943, I believe. Forty-two or forty-three we moved into the projects.

01-00:07:42
Rubens: You were about seven?

01-00:07:45
Robinson: Yes, I was—yes.

01-00:07:48
Rubens: Do you have a vivid image of the move from Louisiana to Oakland?

01-00:07:52
Robinson: In part.

01-00:07:55
Rubens: How'd you get—how'd you come, literally?

01-00:07:56
Robinson: We came by train and I was dressed up in a little soldier suit, and my younger brother, he was dressed up in a little sailor suit. You know, came out on the train and got off in Oakland and started to make a life for the family. And we stayed in the projects until 1950.

01-00:08:21
Rubens: Where were the projects, literally?

01-00:08:23
Robinson: We didn't stay in Cypress Village. We stayed across the street in an annex of Cypress Village and we just called it the Village. It was only about eight of the apartment blocks, if I remember. Let me see. I can count them. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Seven apartment blocks at approximately—let's see. One, two, three, four, eight, twelve—twelve to fifteen apartments in each apartment block.

01-00:09:10
Rubens: Now, you called this Cypress Projects, but it was literally—what streets were they?

01-00:09:16
Robinson: Cypress on the south end, Center Street on the north end. Eighth Street on the east end and Seventh Street on the west end. Yes.

01-00:09:33
Rubens: So you said only until 1950. Then where did you really grow up? Where'd you go to high school?

01-00:09:37
Robinson: I went to high school Oakland Technical High School.

01-00:09:40
Rubens: You did?

01-00:09:41
Robinson: Yes. Woodrow Wilson Junior High, Prescott Elementary, and then this is where it gets a little tricky. I had an aunt who was childless and I was a favorite amongst the children.

01-00:10:04
Rubens: Were you the oldest of—

01-00:10:05
Robinson: No, no, no. I have—

01-00:10:06
Rubens: Of your mother and father? Were you the oldest?

01-00:10:08
Robinson: No, no, no. I'm the third oldest. I've got a sister and a brother. My sister is the oldest. I've got another older brother. And I've got two younger brothers.

01-00:10:22
Rubens: You mentioned just the two of you came out on the train. That's why I was asking.

01-00:10:25
Robinson: Oh, well, we all came out on the train, but that's what we were wearing.

01-00:10:29
Rubens: Got it. Sorry. Sorry.

01-00:10:30
Robinson: I don't know—I don't remember what the others were wearing.

01-00:10:33
Rubens: Right. So this aunt, she loved you?

01-00:10:36
Robinson: This aunt—yes. And so during the winter months, during the school year, from about the third grade until my going into the eighth, I stayed in Los Angeles with her, and then during the summer months, I would come back up

here. And then when—oh, when I was going into the eighth grade—I never did like Los Angeles in the first place.

01-00:11:07

Rubens: What did she do? Never mind. Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter.

01-00:11:14

Robinson: Yes, my aunt, she was an unusual woman in that—she was a professional gambler. Yes. She used to run crap games, card games, the lottery.

01-00:11:29

Rubens: Did you learn the business?

01-00:11:30

Robinson: Huh?

01-00:11:30

Rubens: Did you learn a little bit of the business?

01-00:11:32

Robinson: I learned as much as I needed to, in that she told me never to gamble on anything unless you know how you—you know, how you're going to win. So I've never been a gambler, as such.

01-00:11:45

Rubens: But you didn't get a real—what part of LA was this?

01-00:11:47

Robinson: This was on the east side. 1156 East Santa Barbara Avenue. Yes. One and a half blocks from Jefferson High School.

01-00:11:57

Rubens: Oh, I know where that is. I know just where that is.

01-00:11:59

Robinson: Uh-huh. I went to George Washington Carver Junior High.

01-00:12:01

Rubens: Oh, no kidding.

01-00:12:03

Robinson: Yes. And I went to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Elementary School.

01-00:12:07

Rubens: Not too many schools named after black men in your era.

01-00:12:11

Robinson: No, no. That was unusual.

01-00:12:12

Rubens: That's interesting, yes.

01-00:12:14
Robinson: But the unusual thing about Carver Junior High School was the school motto.

01-00:12:21
Rubens: Yes?

01-00:12:23
Robinson: It went—it came from Hendry Wadsworth Longfellow, and it goes thus—and I've never forgotten it. The school motto was, "A man educated is easy to lead but impossible to enslave." And that goes with me everywhere I go. It's just—it's stuck to me like glue, you know. And so—

01-00:12:54
Rubens: Well, let me cut through a little, because they'll be angry at me if I don't focus on the base. I want to ask you one more thing about being at Oakland Tech. Well, or up to—up through Oakland Tech. If you had ever been on the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:13:10
Robinson: Yes.

01-00:13:11
Rubens: A lot of kids snuck onto it and did fireworks and this—

01-00:13:12
Robinson: Oh, yes, and during the war years.

01-00:13:14
Rubens: Yes. What'd you go?

01-00:13:15
Robinson: We used to go over there, and when the soldiers would get through eating, we'd go through the chow line. They'd let us go through the chow line.

01-00:13:22
Rubens: How come?

01-00:13:23
Robinson: I don't know. I have no idea.

01-00:13:24
Rubens: Because you were kids? Cute little kids?

01-00:13:27
Robinson: I guess.

01-00:13:28
Rubens: Did your mom do that, too?

01-00:13:29
Robinson: No. Just the kids. All the kids from around the West Oakland neighborhood, and particularly us in the projects, because we all used to travel in a little

pack. You know, we sort of stuck together because we were isolated from the larger projects. Then there were the neighborhood kids, as well. And we used to all go down there to the army base, you know, when school was out or when it was a holiday or something like that. Or just in the evening when we got out of school because of the proximity of the army base to Prescott. We used to go over there and eat.

01-00:14:09

Rubens: That's great.

01-00:14:10

Robinson: And play, because they had a large storage area out there across the street from the Sixteenth Street railway station. They had a large storage area out there and they used to have the nets, the rope nets that they used to come over the side of the ship. They had those things bundled up out there. They had all kinds of things that a child would find useful in play.

01-00:14:43

Rubens: Great. And those are pretty good memories, I would think.

01-00:14:51

Robinson: Yes. Oh, yes.

01-00:14:53

Rubens: And then also, what about—the other thing that I've heard and not been able to follow-up on—and so now maybe you can help me—is that Oakland Tech and McClymonds but particularly Oakland Tech, was a feel feeder ground for work on the army base. I was told that there were even recruiters that came from the base to the school and talked about that there were jobs. And people told me that there were good jobs available for high school graduates on the base.

01-00:15:22

Robinson: Oh, yes. I didn't have direct knowledge of it, but I'll put it to you like this. Later on in life, and doing an analysis of the difference between my father's generation and my own, was my father was basically an uneducated man. He went to the third grade, right. And manual labor was what he was trained for. Hard work. You know, backbreaking, bending work. My generation is the first of the urbanized generation of African Americans, in that we were taught certain things. You know, like I could read a ruler. When I was in, what, third, fourth grade, I could, you know, read a ruler. Read, period, you know, without any difficulty. In other words, they had a need for us.

01-00:16:24

Rubens: Oh, sure. Now, did your father get work, by the way, though, when he first came to Oakland?

01-00:16:27

Robinson: Yes. Oh, he went to work at the shipyards.

01-00:16:31
Rubens: Uh-huh. At Moore's.

01-00:16:31
Robinson: And then after the war was over, he went on the waterfront. He got on the waterfront.

01-00:16:37
Rubens: So in terms of, though, actually remembering if anyone came and recruited, or if any of your friends in your graduating high school class went to work for the Oakland Army Base, do you have any—?

01-00:16:47
Robinson: Oh, yes. Yes. Oh, yes.

01-00:16:50
Rubens: You do?

01-00:16:50
Robinson: Yes, yes. See, I went into the Navy after I got out of—after I quit high school. I didn't finish.

01-00:16:56
Rubens: What made you go into the Navy?

01-00:16:59
Robinson: Well, me and my hoodlum friends. I could see the handwriting on the wall and I didn't like it, so I asked my mother if I could join the Navy.

01-00:17:12
Rubens: What grade were you?

01-00:17:13
Robinson: I was in the eleventh grade, finishing the eleventh grade, going into the twelfth, which I knew I wouldn't have made it.

01-00:17:21
Rubens: So you were in the Navy how long?

01-00:17:22
Robinson: Three years, seven months, twenty-two days, eleven hours, and forty-five minutes.

01-00:17:27
Rubens: And did you serve in any conflict?

01-00:17:29
Robinson: Combat?

01-00:17:30
Rubens: Yes.

01-00:17:31
Robinson: No. There was the potential for it when the Chinese started shelling Quemoy. I was at a training school in Oklahoma and that was the mantra then. You know, you're marching around out there in the snow talking about going to Quemoy and all that sort of stuff. The Korean War was over. I'm a Korean War vet, but it had been over a year. Let's see. 1953 the Korean War ended. In 1954, I went into the service.

01-00:18:00
Rubens: Ah, I see.

01-00:18:01
Robinson: So I qualified as a Korean War vet by about six months, I think it was. Anyway—

01-00:18:11
Rubens: But of your high school friends, did anyone go to work directly at the base?

01-00:18:17
Robinson: Yes, yes, yes.

01-00:18:18
Rubens: I'll have to ask you about that later.

01-00:18:20
Robinson: Yes. I don't know who they were, but I know that during the course of my working on the army base as a longshoreman, I ran into quite a few of them that had graduated from Oakland Tech, you know.

01-00:18:33
Rubens: So let's get there. We'll get there pretty quickly. You're in the Navy for three years, three and a half, seven months—

01-00:18:40
Robinson: Twenty-two days, eleven hours and forty-five minutes.

01-00:18:43
Rubens: And what do you do when you come back? We're now talking about fifty-seven, fifty-eight?

01-00:18:46
Robinson: The first jobs I had when I came out is—I got out on May 7, 1958, and I got married in August of fifty-eight and I went to work out of Local Two over in San Francisco. But that was not going to take care of a wife and a child to be. So then I went to work—

01-00:19:19
Rubens: Local Two meaning restaurant workers and—

01-00:19:21
Robinson: No, no. Local Two ILWU, shipsalers union.

01-00:19:28
Rubens: No problem going to work there? Could get in—could get jobs?

01-00:19:33
Robinson: Oh, yes. I think it was eight dollars for a permit. And then you hung around over there all day waiting on a job. Like I said, that wasn't going to cut it for me, so I went to work for General Motors in November of 1958, I went to work for General Motors and I worked there.

01-00:20:04
Rubens: And it was located?

01-00:20:05
Robinson: On Seventy-Third and Foothill in Oakland. I worked for Fisher Body Division of General Motors. There's a distinction that's made between General Motors and Fisher Body, you know. They were both crap.

01-00:20:26
Rubens: So how long—I'm trying to get you back to the longshoreman. So you're there fifty-eight until?

01-00:20:31
Robinson: From fifty-eight until sixty-two. Yes.

01-00:20:37
Rubens: And what happens in sixty-two?

01-00:20:40
Robinson: I got fired.

01-00:20:43
Rubens: That's not really what I meant, but I see. Okay. Was that a good thing?

01-00:20:47
Robinson: Absolutely.

01-00:20:48
Rubens: Get you out of there.

01-00:20:48
Robinson: Yes. If there's one thing I'll never do again in this life, it's work on an assembly line. It's the most mind-numbing, spirit-killing thing a person can do.

01-00:21:03
Rubens: Well, I'd love to hear more about that but I'm going to have to move you on.

01-00:21:06
Robinson: Okay, go ahead.

01-00:21:06
Rubens: Did you—then what'd you do?

01-00:21:09
Robinson: For a year, I worked odd jobs. And then there was another opening of the rows on the waterfront. The books opened again in 1963 and so I applied and I was chosen.

01-00:21:27
Rubens: And when you joined, did you join a specific local?

01-00:21:32
Robinson: I joined Local Ten as a B man. Yes.

01-00:21:36
Rubens: And so was it in that capacity out of Local Ten, a longshoreman, that you—

01-00:21:44
Robinson: Got jobs at the army base?

01-00:21:46
Rubens: Yes.

01-00:21:46
Robinson: Yes, yes.

01-00:21:47
Rubens: Tell me how that happened. How would one get work on the army base?

01-00:21:52
Robinson: Well, you'd get it out of the dispatch hall.

01-00:21:55
Rubens: Out of Local Ten?

01-00:21:56
Robinson: When jobs came—yes, out of Local Ten. You would—I mean, jobs all over the jurisdiction. And jurisdiction of Local Ten runs from Benicia in the north to Redwood City in the south, so everything in between belonged to us, as well as—there was work also on the navy base. Now, there's a little difference between the army and the navy. But the army base was part of our regular dispatching when we had ships there. And then there were certain guys who worked there all the time, steady lift drivers and stuff like that.

01-00:22:41
Rubens: How did they get that position? Or did they want that position?

01-00:22:44
Robinson: They worked for the stevedoring companies.

01-00:22:46
Rubens: Ah. That the army hired?

01-00:22:48

Robinson: Yes. See, we didn't work directly for the army, we worked for stevedoring companies as subcontractors to the army. They did the actual work. I mean, they secured the actual work, provided the machinery that we needed, the equipment that we needed to work the ships, and then—

01-00:23:08

Rubens: So then the stevedoring companies could pick people that were their steady men and that wasn't any conflict with how the union operated. They allowed a certain number of—

01-00:23:17

Robinson: Well, not steady men in the sense that people know them today. They came back to the hall every Friday and then they were redispached back to that job every week, on a week to week basis, you know, as they needed them. They would call them in. And they were mostly lift drivers, because they would—like the trucks and the flat cars, the stuff that came in there. That was their job, to unload that equipment, set it out there in the yard, and prep the dock for a ship that's coming in, either to discharge and load or to load—or to discharge and load, yes.

01-00:23:59

Rubens: What was the stuff that was literally coming in?

01-00:24:02

Robinson: Everything that the military uses, from cornflakes to tanks, we loaded it. Yes.

01-00:24:11

Rubens: And so was this a good job? Was this something even as a B man, you would want to do, to be dispatched to the army base?

01-00:24:18

Robinson: I liked it. I liked it.

01-00:24:20

Rubens: Why?

01-00:24:22

Robinson: It was the variety of cargo. You didn't see—you might see—for an hour, you might see cornflakes. The next hour, you're, what they call, connexes, trucks or tanks. It was always—and then, what did they call those things? Van packs. That's the—a van pack is the household furnishings of military personnel that's being shipped to or from wherever they are, yes. Coming back to the states. They were about, oh, three and a half, four feet wide, about eight feet long, about seven feet high. And you'd be surprised at what they could put in something that size. You know, couch, television, dresser, all that stuff's packed up in there. You know.

01-00:25:22

Rubens: So this is pre-container? This is —

01-00:25:25
Robinson: Yes, this is pre-container.

01-00:25:26
Rubens: You pull this pallet?

01-00:25:28
Robinson: Oh, a lot of break bulk. What we call break bulk.

01-00:25:30
Rubens: I see.

01-00:25:31
Robinson: Everything was palletized or in a connex, or in the case of some military cargo, you got these canisters that might have aircraft engine in them or bomb components in them. You never knew what was—and I never bothered to look, really. But, I mean, it was—I mean, everything that the military uses, we loaded it or we discharged it.

01-00:26:59
Rubens: So would you—would you say that this—you're saying you liked the variety. Would you also say—could you say that the work process was more modern or efficient than what you were seeing—?

01-00:26:12
Robinson: No, no. No, no.

01-00:26:13
Rubens: Okay. In San Francisco or Oakland. That's all.

01-00:26:14
Robinson: No, no.

01-00:26:15
Rubens: About the same?

01-00:26:16
Robinson: About the same.

01-00:26:17
Rubens: Yes, okay. But just more variety.

01-00:26:18
Robinson: Because everything was break bulk, you know. But in working at some of the other commercial docs, you might get one commodity all day long, hides or dried fruit, you know what I'm saying. And that, to me, was boring to look at the same thing all day long, you know. At the army base, you got—or at the military facilities, you got to work a variety of cargo. Often got the Alameda Reefer Dock. That was also military. I guess you could say that was—because everything there was frozen, you know, from sides of beef to eggs. That was—

- 01-00:27:05
Rubens: Did you work that dock, as well?
- 01-00:27:06
Robinson: Oh, yes, I worked that dock, as well. Yes. I didn't like it because it was cold. As a matter of fact, I avoided it like the plague. Yes.
- 01-00:27:15
Rubens: Well, did you have any interaction with people who were on the base or were you pretty circumscribed to the {inaudible}?
- 01-00:27:28
Robinson: Some of them you got to know. I guess you would call them—they weren't super cargoes. They were representatives of the military who worked aboard the ship like ship planners and stuff, I guess, they would be. And some of them you got to know quite well. Then, when I started driving heavy equipment, such as the cranes and winches, and stuff like that, you had the military—the one thing that we did not work as longshoremen—we did not drive the dockside cranes. Those were civil service jobs. And so—but you would work with them. Like you'd be on deck giving them signals or stuff like that. And so you got to know them in that sense, you know. As a matter of fact, one of them was my next-door neighbor. He lived across the street from me. So we had a relationship on the job, as well as off the job.
- 01-00:28:31
Rubens: You had mentioned earlier that you sometimes ran into people that you had known in high school.
- 01-00:28:36
Robinson: Yes, yes. They went to—
- 01-00:28:37
Rubens: These were not longshoremen. These were people who had jobs.
- 01-00:28:40
Robinson: That worked in the offices over there at the—I don't know what those offices were.
- 01-00:28:47
Rubens: PX or the—they had a lot of—
- 01-00:28:49
Robinson: They worked all over the places. You know, whatever.
- 01-00:28:50
Rubens: Well, there was a gas station there for a while, and the commissary, as you know, where you ate.
- 01-00:28:54
Robinson: There was a cafeteria, big cafeteria there.

01-00:28:56
Rubens: Right. Did you guys get to eat in the cafeteria if you were working the docks?

01-00:29:00
Robinson: Yes, yes, yes. We had access to the cafeteria. The only thing we didn't have access to was the PX, but everything else we had access to.

01-00:29:12
Rubens: Well, now, tell me a little bit—since you mentioned you couldn't drive the cranes. If there were jurisdictional issues. I mean, when—

01-00:29:21
Robinson: No.

01-00:29:20
Rubens: —longshore contracts came up, did they—

01-00:29:25
Robinson: No.

01-00:29:26
Rubens: I know the longshoremen were always trying to dance with the teamsters about, you know, who came onto the docks and—

01-00:29:30
Robinson: Everybody's territory was clearly defined. Over at the navy base, for instance. The navy had civil service longshoremen, but they only worked like the MSTS, Military Sea Transport Vessels. These were navy vessels. They worked those. We did not work those. We only worked the—

01-00:30:07
Rubens: Commercial.

01-00:30:08
Robinson: The commercial ships that, you know, for the various lines.

01-00:30:12
Rubens: Let me restate this. So you never unloaded military boats?

01-00:30:19
Robinson: No, no. Not at the navy base. If they'd come to the army base, we would get them.

01-00:30:25
Rubens: Oh, okay. Those were—I see, I see.

01-00:30:27
Robinson: Yes. Or if they would come over to the Alameda Reefer Dock, we would work them. But not at the navy base.

01-00:30:32
Rubens: So how come? Did the longshoremen ever make an effort to try and get that?

01-00:30:36
Robinson: I have no idea. I didn't ask and they didn't tell.

01-00:30:39
Rubens: And as far as you knew, there wasn't a grumble, a discontent within the union?

01-00:30:42
Robinson: No. No.

01-00:30:44
Rubens: That the guys wanted to get those jobs.

01-00:30:46
Robinson: No.

01-00:30:47
Rubens: There was enough work?

01-00:30:48
Robinson: There was enough work there.

01-00:30:49
Rubens: Yes, okay.

01-00:30:50
Robinson: Particularly during the war years, yes.

01-00:30:51
Rubens: Well, that's – I want to get to that in one minute, so we define the war years. Well, maybe we should go to there. So you're there in sixty-three and you start to see the build up for Vietnam.

01-00:31:03
Robinson: Yes. Sixty-four, sixty-five. By sixty-five, it was humming.

01-00:31:07
Rubens: Yes.

01-00:30:07
Robinson: Yes. I mean, you got sick of the army then, because they'd have, sometimes, five ships over there, six ships.

01-00:31:19
Rubens: To be unloaded?

01-00:31:20
Robinson: To be loaded and unloaded? We did both simultaneously. As fast as you would empty the ship, they'd have something out there for you to put back on it and away it would go.

01-00:31:30
Rubens: And this stuff was?

01-00:31:33
Robinson: Everything.

01-00:31:34
Rubens: They needed to support that way.

01-00:31:35
Robinson: Everything that an army or a navy or the Marines who were in combat needed, we sent it. We loaded and unloaded it.

01-00:31:44
Rubens: Now, what about troops? Did you see troops get on these ships?

01-00:31:47
Robinson: No.

01-00:31:47
Rubens: These are the container supply—

01-00:31:50
Robinson: These are commercial ships. Yes.

01-00:31:54
Rubens: Yes, not the—yes.

01-00:31:55
Robinson: Yes.

01-00:31:55
Rubens: So you're there during this buildup, sixty-five. How long did you work as a longshoreman and how many of those years—how many of those years included at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:32:10
Robinson: I think—when the army base closed down, that's when we quit working.

01-00:32:14
Rubens: Really?

01-00:32:15
Robinson: Yes. All of those years—

01-00:32:16
Rubens: That's in the nineties. I don't have a date in—

01-00:32:19
Robinson: Eighties and nineties. Late, late eighties.

01-00:32:22
Rubens: So you saw it rise, get really big—

01-00:32:24
Robinson: Big and then fold.

01-00:32:25
Rubens: And then you saw it shrink up.

01-00:32:27
Robinson: Yes.

01-00:32:28
Rubens: But you kept getting jobs?

01-00:38:29
Robinson: Yes.

01-00:38:29
Rubens: You moved at some point from a B man to a—?

01-00:32:32
Robinson: I moved to an A man status in 1966—yes, sixty-six. Sixty-six, sixty-seven. Somewhere.

01-00:32:39
Rubens: Did you ever see bodies coming back from Vietnam?

01-00:32:42
Robinson: No. We'd see—we'd load the caskets to take them over, but we didn't load them—we didn't—they flew the bodies back.

01-00:32:52
Rubens: And also, I had talked to you—

01-00:32:55
Robinson: All 54,000 of them.

01-00:32:59
Rubens: I had talked to you earlier about—off camera, we were talking a little bit about the amount of protest that was going on in Oakland. And, of course, one of the big, big protests was the attempt to stop the draft week and to stop the troop trains from coming into the—not only the army base but—

01-00:33:17
Robinson: Concord. Mostly at Concord.

01-00:33:19
Rubens: Yes.

01-00:33:20
Robinson: That's where the weapons station was. We didn't work that at that point.

01-00:33:23
Rubens: Yes.

01-00:33:23
Robinson: That was civil service.

01-00:33:25
Rubens: But were you aware of that going on in Oakland, the—?

01-00:33:26
Robinson: Yes. Oh, yes. They had—Maritime Street was blocked off when we were coming there one morning. I won't—I'll never forget it. And they had these—I guess they were college-aged students and what would be termed the left old people. Why, they blocked off that whole street protesting the war. And we just drove on around them and went into the parking lot and went on the ship.

01-00:33:57
Rubens: How is it you were able to do that? Did the police create a—

01-00:34:00
Robinson: No.

01-00:34:00
Rubens: You just—?

01-00:34:01
Robinson: They weren't—I mean, they were blocking traffic, but they didn't block it.

01-00:34:05
Rubens: I get it.

01-00:34:05
Robinson: It just slowed down.

01-00:34:07
Rubens: They wanted to make their point.

01-00:34:08
Robinson: They made their point. And they were out there, what, for four or five days, I guess. I don't know. I don't really remember. You know.

01-00:34:16
Rubens: Now, what I do remember—and I wanted to ask you about this. I remember Harry Bridges threatening—you know, he was opposed to the war, {inaudible} and he threatened we're going to shut down the whole coast. You know, we're going to shut down San Francisco. But to my knowledge, there were never—

01-00:34:32
Robinson: It never happened.

01-00:34:33
Rubens: Nor—were there work shortages? Work stoppages?

01-00:34:37
Robinson: No. No.

01-00:34:38

Rubens: So tell me about that a little. Did you guys ever talk about that? What was it like to be—?

01-00:34:42

Robinson: Oh, we talked about it constantly. That's what changed my political outlook, was the war.

01-00:34:50

Rubens: Oh, tell me about that.

01-00:34:50

Robinson: We were over at Pier 35. Not 35, Pier 33. I'll never forget it. I mean, we were working on a PFEL ship. That's Pacific Far East Lines. The Aliotos bought it later on. And we had worked our way out and we were on the upper deck and we had worked our way out into the square and we were coming on up. In other words, when we got through, there would have been no more room in that hatch to put anything. And we were talking about the war and being an ex-Navy man, you know, with the rah-rah-rah business. One of the young brothers asked me a question and this is the way he posed it. He says, "I want to ask you a question and you don't have to answer it now, but I want you to answer this question. Of what kind of a threat do the Vietnamese pose to you?" And of course, you know, you got to have one of these snappy rejoinders.

01-00:36:17

Rubens: He was a younger guy?

01-00:36:18

Robinson: Yes, he was—I mean, he was younger than I was. I was about twenty-six, twenty-seven at the time, maybe a little older. But he was much younger than me.

01-00:36:29

Rubens: He was draftable, I guess, too.

01-00:36:31

Robinson: Yes, I guess. And to this day, I can't remember what he looked like. I don't know who he was, to this day. But we were working together. It was all of us working. There was four of us working in the square of the ship. It was eight men in the gang, but when you get into the square, you only work four. So when he asked me that question, you know, you went, "Ah, but, ah—" and that's when something in your mind says, "No, that's not going to work." And so the more I kept thinking about that question, the more I got drug into it in terms of trying to explain it, the war itself.

01-00:37:15

Rubens: What year is this about?

01-00:37:17

Robinson: This was in about—maybe sixty-six, sixty-seven. At any rate, he asked me another question.

01-00:37:27

Rubens: You continue. I'm going to just check we're getting this.

01-00:37:29

Robinson: Okay, all right.

01-00:37:32

Rubens: Perfect.

01-00:37:34

Robinson: He then asked me—he says, "What's imperialism?" A word that you heard every day, you know, the Russian imperialists, the Chinese imperialists, the Japanese imperialists. But I'd never—I didn't know the meaning of the word as such. The meaning—the actual meaning of the word imperialism, I did not know what it meant. Then he said, "Do you know what a communist is?" And again, it was the, "Ah, blah, blah." You know, and so I went home that evening and I did the basic research. I looked up imperialism in the dictionary.

01-00:38:18

Rubens: Yes, no Google.

01-00:38:19

Robinson: No Google in those days. Didn't even—the word computer was not even around. And then I looked up communism and a couple of other words and I started to—I mean, it starts to turn over in your mind, you know, that what you believe could actually be wrong, you know what I'm saying. And so one thing leads to another. In addition to the fact that the ILWU, itself, had a history of leftist politics, one of the first things that happened to me on the waterfront was I came down to the pay window like everybody—every Friday you come running to the pay window, right. And here's a fellow by the name of Archie Brown, the "communist," known communist, selling the People's World, okay. So I haul back to the hall and I want to know from the old timers why you guys were allowing this fool down there selling this communist newspaper. And they said, "Because it is a newspaper and he's a member of the union," you know. And that was the end of it. And then I'd have to jump way ahead to tell you my relationship to Archie Brown and what developed from it.

01-00:39:53

Rubens: Yes, I'll get that a little bit later. But there you—you know, the height of the war, sixty-six, sixty-seven, this is really the height of the war. It's the height of the protest against the war, Martin Luther King in sixty-seven is going to come out against the war. So I just wonder if you have any observations. Does anything change at all about what it is for you guys, you yourself, to be working on the army base or at the naval supply center or the Alameda—

01-00:40:23
Robinson: Reefer Dock.

01-00:40:24
Rubens: Reefer Dock, yes.

01-00:40:25
Robinson: No.

01-00:40:26
Rubens: But particularly the Oakland Army Base, since that's our focus, you know.

01-00:40:30
Robinson: You have to understand—

01-00:40:31
Rubens: Was the culture getting more tense there? Well, let me ask you this. Was there security? Were you aware of a kind of—yes.

01-00:40:40
Robinson: You mean like Homeland Security is today?

01-00:40:43
Rubens: Yes, yes.

01-00:40:43
Robinson: No.

01-00:40:43
Rubens: Or concern for any kind of sabotage.

01-00:40:47
Robinson: No, no. In those days, we were issued—when we first came on the waterfront, a—what's called a Coast Guard pass. In other words, the Coast Guard, I guess, had scanned your background and seen that you weren't a threat. Then some guys refused—some of the old timers had refused to apply for a Coast Guard pass or because of their past association with the party, that is, the Communist party, were denied Coast Guard passes. People like Archie Brown couldn't have got on the army base, you know, if they'd have dropped him out of an airplane. He would have landed somewhere else. He wouldn't have landed on the army base. So there was no question about security in that sense. All you had to do was, when you got ready to go through the gate, was have your Coast Guard pass. Or if you'd forgotten it, you'd go over to the Provost Marshall's office and you'd get a temporary one. So there was never any question about that in terms of somebody going to blow up a ship. No. Uh-unh.

01-00:42:02
Rubens: It was at the perimeter that maybe there was some concern.

01-00:42:07

Robinson: If there was, I wasn't aware of it. You know.

01-00:42:11

Rubens: Now, you're seeing the land start to fill in more, too, right? I mean, now they're doing containers and the whole—that whole—

01-00:42:18

Robinson: Oh, you mean the way the waterfront was changing?

01-00:42:21

Rubens: Yes.

01-00:42:21

Robinson: Oh, you could see that in the jobs that came in. At one time, the predominant—for unskilled longshoremen, that is, a hold man, basic hold man, at one time you'd look up on the gang board and you'd see the amount of jobs for that day and you'd see what category they were in in terms of a hold man versus a lasher. Well, there's no difference between a hold man and a lasher except for the nature of the job. You got paid the same thing and the work was interchangeable. But there were specific jobs that were hold jobs, say, with a gang where you knew you wouldn't have to lash. Right. See, I hated to lash. Oh, that was my furthest thing from my mind, was getting a lashing job. Oh, no, no, no, no. Not going in that direction. Because it was repetitious. There was no thought involved in it. You went there, you grabbed the cable, you grabbed the chain, you grabbed the turnbuckle and you tightened it up, you know, and that was your job, and it was greasy and dirty. And I didn't like that. So when I'd look up on the board—and at one time, the preponderance of jobs during the mid-sixties was hold jobs. And then, as you crept later on into the sixties, late sixties, early seventies, the preponderance of unskilled jobs were lashing jobs. Now, the difference between lashing and doing hold work was under the contract, that was what they called a 10.2 gang. A 10.2 gang had numerical requirements for the number of men to do a certain job. They hired lashers as needed. So you might be two lashers as opposed to eight hold men, you know.

And so I had already moved away from both hold work and lashing work, in that I liked driving winches. I became a winch driver before I got on the board. As a matter of fact, there was a little group of us, about ten or twelve of us, maybe more, whom the chief dispatcher, when he would start dispatching, wouldn't allow us to go get a hold job. If he had an excess of skill work, he made us go over into the skill line and we'd get winch jobs, crane jobs, stuff like that. You know, and you're young, full of vim, vigor, you know, you wanted to shine, you know what I mean.

01-00:45:30

Rubens: Now, crane jobs means what in this case?

01-00:45:33
Robinson: A crane job is just what it said. Crane job.

01-00:45:34
Rubens: All right. You could have all these jobs at the Oakland Army Base, but not driving the crane.

01-00:45:39
Robinson: Not driving the dockside crane. The dockside crane was restricted to civil service.

01-00:45:46
Rubens: But there was—

01-00:45:46
Robinson: If there was a crane on the ship, we could drive.

01-00:45:50
Rubens: Ah. And as—how would you talk about what—go on.

01-00:45:53
Robinson: Sea Train had two cranes on their ships and we drove them. Let's see, who else had cranes. There was one other line that had cranes, I just can't think of who they are.

01-00:46:09
Rubens: We can add that.

01-00:46:10
Robinson: Huh?

01-00:46:10
Rubens: We can add it.

01-00:46:12
Robinson: Yes. But any rate, we did that, and then there were the whirlicranes that later on started coming in. They got—started getting away from winches and started going to whirlicranes, the newer ships.

01-00:46:28
Rubens: And all of this, you're doing as well, at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:46:32
Robinson: Army base and anywhere else they had a job.

01-00:46:33
Rubens: How many—okay, let's look at the years sixty-seven to seventy-five, about. How often would you go to the army base? What governed whether you went there or not.

01-00:46:45

Robinson: Well, that's a peculiar period, because in the mid—oh, let's see. No, that's the latter part of the sixties. Into the early seventies, the Port of San Francisco became a low work opportunity port and a lot of the guys transferred out of Local Ten up to Seattle, Portland, and down to LA. Most of them down to LA. So our work opportunity was very restricted. Okay. So whatever was available, you took it, you know. Then the other part of that equation is called the Pay Guarantee Plan, where a lot of us took ourselves out of the active competition for the jobs by getting on a board that was called Slow Moving Category. That board might only work one day or four days or five days a month, and then the rest of the time you were on pay guarantee. A lot of people don't understand that to this day, but it's very complicated. I think Danny was around at that time. I was one of the leaders in that field, let's say.

01-00:48:15

Rubens: It's an adaptation to diminution of work.

01-00:48:19

Robinson: In other words, it was a response to both the diminution of work and a person's ability to live on a fixed income.

01-00:48:27

Rubens: So what I'm trying to get at for this interview's purpose is did the number of days a week or a month start to decline at the Oakland—

01-00:48:37

Robinson: Oh, yes. Dropped.

01-00:48:39

Rubens: At the Oakland Army Base, as well.

01-00:48:40

Robinson: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. When the war started winding down, then the work started winding down.

01-00:48:45

Rubens: Sure, yes. And the war goes on until seventy-five, but the actual physical loading and unloading, I think, must decline in seventy-four and seventy-three.

01-00:48:57

Robinson: Well, by that time, they'd also brought in a new type of ship called the roll-on/roll-off. That affected us, as well.

01-00:49:04

Rubens: When does that start?

01-00:49:06

Robinson: Oh, that started in the early seventies, I believe.

01-00:49:09

Rubens: Okay. And how does that affect?

01-00:49:11

Robinson: Well, it was mostly rolling stock. And whatever other cargo that was brought on there was brought on in bulk, along with containers. The army had its own containers by then. So that it didn't take as many men, because everything was either containerized or it was rolling stock. And, you know, if there was rolling—sometimes the rolling stock—like if they put one of the—what'd they call these? Four by four army trucks. I guess that's what's they called them, four by four. Something like that. Deuce and a half or something. At any rate, they would bring those trucks up there. Well, when they brought that truck up there, instead of the bed of that truck being empty, they'd pile cargo on top of it and just drive it right up on the ship, so that there was nothing for a hold man to do except lash that truck down.

01-00:50:16

Rubens: Who literally drove the truck?

01-00:58:19

Robinson: Longshoremen. Yes.

01-00:50:21

Rubens: Did you ever drive any of those trucks?

01-00:50:23

Robinson: Very little. By then, I was too sophisticated for that type of work.

01-00:50:28

Rubens: Okay. And when this transformation of the work process took place, did it also mean that you were having less encounters with people on the army base?

01-00:50:40

Robinson: Very little.

01-00:50:41

Rubens: By then. Is the cafeteria—

01-00:50:43

Robinson: Because they laid a lot of those people off. See, during the height of the war, they were—I mean, there was people running around there. You know, their job was to hold wastepaper or something like that. Then, I mean, it's like chicken—it's like hogs at the trough.

01-00:51:02

Rubens: Right. There was a lot of jobs.

01-00:51:03

Robinson: Yes. Lot of jobs. And then as the war started winding down, they started laying people off. I remember when we first went in—when it really heated up, we had carpenters galore. On our ship. Stan Flowers, he was the

contractor. He had carpenters running—sometimes, on the ship, you had as many carpenters as you did longshoremen.

01-00:51:28

Rubens: What were they doing?

01-00:51:29

Robinson: Shoring up the cargo. Building false decks, that kind of stuff. Building a runway—walkways. When you load cargo on deck, you know, you don't want to be jumping up and down off of something. So they'd build a walkway a hundred or more feet long. Two hundred feet long. They'd build a walkway. And those were carpenters. That was work that the longshoremen gave away at some point. It used to be longshore work and we gave it away during the good times. That's when we always give away work.

01-00:52:10

Rubens: Was there ever an effort to get it back?

01-00:52:12

Robinson: No. No.

01-00:52:15

Rubens: But then it all changes. Then there's just not—well, how many longshoremen would be dispatched at a time when it started winding down?

01-00:52:24

Robinson: Oh, I've seen as many as ten in one ship dispatched and I've seen as many as they could get, you know, bring people in off the street and put them to work. We used to give our spill—what we'd call excess work, we'd give some to Local Six, some to Local Two, to the unemployment—or not the unemployment office. There was a community center out there in Hunter's Point. To other striking workers. Sometimes we'd find some group of workers who were out on strike and we'd call them up and give them some of our excess work. Yes. So it could be feast and famine. You know, one day you come to the hall and you can still there and take your time and pick your jobs, the next day you come in there, and the first thing that comes down, bam, you eat it up. Yes.

01-00:53:28

Rubens: So regarding the Oakland Army Base, let's just look at that.

01-00:53:32

Robinson: Concentrate on the base.

01-00:53:31

Rubens: Well, no, no. We'll go back to that. Let's—in one minute, I'll change this tape. Any outstanding images you have or stories? Now, this is just random. Anything that comes to mind? One story that I love, actually, is Lowell Jenson did ship out of the Oakland Army Base for Korea and he said that he was standing on the deck waving goodbye to his family and a kid dove off the

ship. That was it. He wasn't going to go. But they went and got him, put him on the ship, and took him all the way to Korea to put him in jail. So, you know, I don't know if you just—you know, I mean, when I asked about work—

01-00:54:14

Robinson: The waterfront is—

01-00:54:15

Rubens: Work stoppages or—

01-00:54:18

Robinson: The waterfront, in and of itself, is better than anything they could possibly put on television in the way of comedy or human foibles, you know what I mean—it was a daily thing. I remember we were loading whiskey on the ship at the army base, over six east—seven east, seven east, rather.

01-00:54:46

Rubens: Seven east means?

01-00:54:47

Robinson: That was the east end of the pier. See, they could dock three ships there at that—just at seven and there was an equal amount at six, then there was six and a half, and then there was shed five. Shed five only could accommodate one ship because it was cut off by sea land terminal. But at any rate, we were working—we were loading some pallets of whiskey and we had these steam winches. What do they call them? It'll come to me in a second. They were fast. You know what they would do is they'd come there and when they'd turn the steam on, they'd open them up and bleed them out, right. Bleed all the water out of the line and then you'd shut it off to where you just had enough steam to get them going. Because if you opened them all the way up, from the dock to the hold of the ship was like instant. Just—I mean, fast. You had to have reflexes to drive them. And one of the bosses, he got drunk because, of course, when you load whiskey around longshoremen, they will find a way to get into it. I don't care how many guards they put on it. There was always a way. So he got drunk and he decided he wanted to relieve his winch driver. They hooked up this pallet of whiskey and he comes over, picks it up off the dock and he comes over the hatch and because of the way the ship is rigged, you got a boom that goes all the way inshore where you can reach the dock, and then you got another boom that hangs almost at the edge of the rail on what we called the offshore side. That's closest to the water. He comes up and he just goes right over the hatch, goes out to the extent of the wire, and throws this pallet over out into the bay, reverses himself, goes back to the dock, lands on the dock, says, "Hook me up another one." They hooked up another one. He did the same thing. Threw it out into the bay.

01-00:57:16

Rubens: Now, was he hoping to retrieve this? What is—

01-00:57:18
Robinson:

No.

01-00:57:18
Rubens:

He's just being wild and—

01-00:57:21
Robinson:

That's the way—the longshore way. That's what we do in those days. I mean, even until today. The last real big kick I got on the waterfront—this is just my personal thing. I was out in Richmond and we were loading these prize—

01-00:57:42
Rubens:

Why don't we stop and we'll do this story on the next—the next—

01-00:57:45
Robinson:

Okay. Go right ahead.

01-00:57:46
Rubens:

I don't want to lose this story. We're going to—

01-00:57:47
Robinson:

Yes.

[Audio File 2]

02-00:00:00
Robinson:

Got some more to say about the army base in its present configuration.

02-00:00:02
Rubens:

Fine, I want you to. Let's just finish that story, though. We were saying that that is a funny story about the guy throwing the pallets—

02-00:00:11
Robinson:

Of whiskey, yes.

02-00:00:12
Rubens:

Yes. And off—while we changed the tape, Danny Beagle, who used to be the editor of the Dispatcher, was saying there are a lot of stories about drunkenness.

02-00:00:21
Robinson:

Oh, I'm saying to you—the waterfront—even if I knew I wasn't going to go to work, I would go to the hall because it was better than sitting at home watching television.

02-00:00:33
Rubens:

But I wanted you just to tell me about the culture changes in large part coming out of Thirteen, because a lot of their kids were coming in. They were the second generation.

02-00:00:45

Robinson: Second, third generation longshoremen. Well, that's not the story I was telling, but I'll skip to that. In the, what, late seventies, I think it was, the accident rate started going up. It started going out of sight, as a matter of fact.

02-00:01:06

Rubens: Even with containerization? You would think that would—

02-00:01:09

Robinson: Even more so with containerization.

02-00:01:11

Rubens: Because there was a larger scale.

02-00:01:13

Robinson: Yes. Once it became the predominant way to work—see, what containerization did, it isolated the individual longshoremen. In the old days, when you worked with a gang, there was at least four men, to eight men, to six men that you worked with, and you—during the course of the work day, there was constant conversation about anything and everything. Containerization took that away. The crane driver, he's 118 feet up in the air, so he's not talking to the hold men or the men on deck. There's no gang boss. There's a walking boss, and his only concern is production. They've got him tied to how many cans can you move in an hour. So he's not interested in conversation with you about what's going on in the world, or anything else. I mean, he's trying to get that bonus check at the end of the year, right. So the tractor driver, he's sitting up in a tractor out there by himself for eight hours or for five hours, depending upon the shift that he's working. He's not talking to anybody. He can't talk to anybody. You know, he might have a little conversation with the hatch tender when he comes up under the hook, but that's only a minute, two minutes at the most, and then he's gone to get another container. So there's no cohesion. All of that was taken away.

Then {inaudible} when we came down on the waterfront in sixty-three, you had to work with the old-timer. And he wasn't going to let you do something that was unsafe, because if you get it, he might get it. You know, if the boom breaks, if the preventor snaps, there's nothing that says he's going to be safe, you know. So they were always there to counsel us, to tell us what the waterfront was all about. The newer longshoreman, he comes in, he doesn't suffer any hard times like losing a house because of the work opportunity. When he comes in, the work is booming, and he can drive anything and do anything he wants to do, so he takes it for granted that all of this fell out of the sky. He doesn't realize the struggle that the longshoremen who preceded him went through to get what he's getting, you know, from four on/four off, to the money that he's making. You know what I'm saying?

Now, the biggest thing—and I think Herb Mills described it best in that pamphlet that he wrote about what was going on on the waterfront. There was

a pamphlet by Herb Mills. He was the secretary/treasurer of Local Ten, then he transferred over to the {clerks?} when he was—before that, I think he was a college professor. And that’s one—that’s another thing about the waterfront. You look at a longshoreman and the clothes he wears, doesn’t mean that that represents the man. We’ve had guys who have passed the bar who became longshoremen and said, “I don’t want—you know, practicing law is not half as much—I mean, it doesn’t involve the hassle that it takes to be a lawyer, right?” So they quit practicing law and they come on the waterfront. We had one guy—we used to call him foot doctor. He quit medical school to come on the waterfront. You know, I mean, several lawyers. I knew several lawyers on the waterfront. Most of them wouldn’t talk about it unless you said something or got close enough to him to find out what his background was.

02-00:05:23

Rubens:

But just tell me that thin line of the story where you’re saying—kind of out of Local Thirteen and you’ve painted the picture of this isolation and change.

02-00:05:31

Robinson:

Yes.

02-00:05:32

Rubens:

So what kind of comes out of Thirteen that—?

02-00:05:35

Robinson:

Thirteen—because of the employer’s concerns for safety, they started threatening to deregister guys for drug usage. We didn’t have drug testing, as such, but they still wanted you to take a leak in the cup after serious accidents, you know. And so Local Thirteen, to protect their sons and daughters, insisted on this drug and alcohol screening program pre-employment, not during employment. I don’t know whether they’ve changed it or not since I left. But before I left, they had not changed it. It was always pre-employment. So that created a situation where a lot of people who came off the streets and onto the waterfront—because I don’t care who you are and what you are, the waterfront will definitely change you. You know, you can come on the waterfront as a preacher and end up being, you know, anything but that. And on the other hand, you could be the biggest drunk in the world and come on the waterfront and end up a preacher. That’s just the nature of the job. Nobody comes off the waterfront unscathed in terms of their life, the way they look at the world, or the way they look at society. The waterfront changes all of that. It’s a culture unto itself.

02-00:07:17

Rubens:

There was a change, though, that you had pointed out about the more free use of alcohol and drugs.

02-00:07:29

Robinson:

No, it lessened.

02-00:07:32

Rubens: It lessons, okay.

02-00:07:32

Robinson: It lessens after the drug and alcohol program, which started in Local Ten, oddly enough, by one of the brothers who went to McClymonds High, George Cobb that you mentioned. George Cobb and a couple of other brothers started the drug and alcohol program and the employer saw the benefit of it and started it coast wide.

02-00:07:55

Rubens: I see, I see.

02-00:07:56

Robinson: It saves people's lives. It saves people's jobs. Yes.

02-00:07:58

Rubens: Sure, sure. Now, you had said, though, you had a few more stories about the Oakland Army Base. So I wanted to get back to that by asking a little bit more about how the culture at the army base changes. There are less jobs. That's what you're saying, I think.

02-00:08:14

Robinson: Less jobs, yes.

02-00:08:15

Rubens: You're going there less and less.

02-00:08:16

Robinson: Yes.

02-00:08:17

Rubens: And when you go there, you're seeing less take place on the surrounding—in the surrounding areas?

02-00:08:23

Robinson: Yes. Well, I guess you could say it like this, to describe it. During the Reagan years, and during the end of the Nixon years, and the Jimmy Carter years, the shift that was taking place in the overall society, that is, the attacks on the working class itself, that started to manifest themselves. And the shift in wealth, or the unequal division in the shift in wealth has started to take place. I mean, this is in hind—some of this is through hindsight, some of it's through observation at the time. The people who at one time thought their jobs were safe, civil service jobs, everybody that was civil service, said, "Oh, man, they can't touch me," you know what I mean. "I'm working for the government."

02-00:09:35

Rubens: Well, it was civil service to be on the army base.

02-00:09:37

Robinson: Yes, it was all civil service.

02-00:09:39

Rubens: Yes.

02-00:09:41

Robinson: And when the economy started to shrink, of course, the workforce starts to shrink in terms of civilian jobs. Now, the waterfront—

02-00:09:56

Rubens: That's what leads to the conversion of the—all of that land. Dellums really takes the lead in that.

02-00:10:01

Robinson: Yes, yes. Well, for years, the business development interest had always had an eye on the—

02-00:10:07

Rubens: On the port land, yes.

02-00:10:07

Robinson: —all of that port land. And then the port itself had big eyes for that land. They absorbed—the carnation used to have a big operation right there on the waterfront, although they never had the big ships to come into it. But it was jobs for warehouse. That was a warehouse job. Then, where you now see an {inaudible}—well, I don't know whether they're still there. We used to call it the Japanese yard. All of that property along there, there were warehouses there. You know, and all that down there where—what the hell is the name of that line? Let's see, Maersk, all of that area down in there was warehouses. So that involved thousands of jobs. The Navy base, all of their warehousing jobs went up in smoke, you know. So there's this lessening of work opportunity for everybody, you know.

02-00:11:31

Rubens: One of the things that really changed that West Oakland area is in eighty-nine when the earthquake happens and the Cypress Freeway collapses.

02-00:11:39

Robinson: We kept working.

02-00:11:42

Rubens: You guys kept working, yes.

02-00:11:42

Robinson: Yes, we went right on working. There were some yards that were a little messed up. I mean, were really damaged, you know. You know, like the rails that the cranes sat on. Some of those—a couple of the cranes jumped off the tracks. But it only took them a few days to get those back up on the tracks and then the yard itself was, you know—

02-00:12:05

Rubens: So even into the early nineties, you're still being dispatched to the army base? There's some work? Not much, but some?

02-00:12:12

Robinson: I don't—by the early nineties—let's see, what was I doing in the early nineties?

02-00:12:17

Rubens: Yes, because eighty-nine's the earthquake.

02-00:12:19

Robinson: No, I was away from that work. I don't know what went on at the army base. I saw it and didn't see it. There might have been one or two ships a month that came in there, but by and large it was not part of our economic dependency, let me put it to you like that.

02-00:12:36

Rubens: So you had said to me earlier that you did have an opinion and observation about then what happened to the army base. And I'd love to hear that. Were you living in Oakland, by the way? Where did you live when you were—?

02-00:12:49

Robinson: From the projects to Fifty-fourth Street. It was a long and circuitous journey, because after I went in the navy and I got out, of course, like everybody else, I was out there renting an apartment somewhere, me and my wife and my child. And bought my first house. As a matter of fact, I moved into my first house. I came on the waterfront October 7, 1963. I moved into my first house that I bought on October 6, 1963. Well, in February of 1964, I was moving out of that house because the work had slowed down all of a sudden.

02-00:13:37

Rubens: And that first house was where?

02-00:13:40

Robinson: In East Oakland. What was it?

02-00:13:44

Rubens: That's all right.

02-00:13:45

Robinson: I—I—

02-00:13:46

Rubens: That's okay. East Oakland is—

02-00:13:47

Robinson: Yes. It was off Seventy-second and Hamilton. I know where it was, just can't remember the address right off hand. But at any rate, then I bought a succession of houses.

02-00:14:12

Rubens: Oh, the politics and stuff. I'm asking you about where you lived.

02-00:014:16
Robinson: Oh, okay.

02-00:14:17
Rubens: As you saw the decline in work at the army base. But you said you basically ended up at Fifty-fourth Street.

02-00:14:25
Robinson: Yes, back on Fifty-fourth Street.

02-00:14:27
Rubens: What I'm asking is whether you—I thought you had wanted to tell me you had an opinion about the conversation of the military bases.

02-00:14:38
Robinson: Okay. Well, I knew that sooner or later, that that conversion would take place.

02-00:14:42
Rubens: Because you had said earlier about people having designs on—

02-00:14:45
Robinson: Yes, yes. The part that—what I was looking at was strictly from the point of view of a longshoreman and what we could get out of it, okay. One of the things that I wanted to get out of it was—because women had finally come to the waterfront.

02-00:15:11
Rubens: When was that about?

02-00:15:12
Robinson: Huh?

02-00:15:13
Rubens: When?

02-00:15:13
Robinson: Oh, the first woman—I know who she was. I know—I remember her dad, but what year she came on.

02-00:15:21
Rubens: Real roughly. Just roughly.

02-00:15:22
Robinson: Yes, somewhere—

02-00:15:22
Rubens: Post Vietnam?

02-00:15:23
Robinson: Oh, yes. It was after Vietnam.

02-00:15:25
Rubens: Yes. Okay, fine.

02-00:15:26

Robinson:

At any rate, when women came onto the waterfront, there were certain changes that I knew were going to have to be made on the waterfront, Okay. So I was ready for that and I advocated it. But one of the most pressing needs for women, and especially the younger women who was of childbearing age is childcare. And I had put forth a—I had gotten a hold of a couple of the women on the waterfront. And I didn't do it for them. I made them do it. Write a resolution on the establishment of a pilot childcare center on part of the old army base. They had the perfect setup. It was already there. It was—you know, it was a childcare center already there. And my vision of that was to take that and make it a pilot project where not only could the women on the waterfront take their children twenty-four hours a day with competent staff, professional staff, but to open it up to other unions, as well. You know, it's easier for a women who's living—working in San Francisco to detour off and come to the army base, drop her kid off, and get on the bridge and go to work, right, then it is for her to run—I remember my daughter-in-law, she lived over on East Seventeenth Avenue. She had to drive from East Seventeenth Avenue over to Eighth Street to drop my grandson off to childcare and then go out to Concord where she worked. You know, no childcare. So I saw that as one of the possibilities for a longshoreman, to do that sort of thing. And unfortunately, there was Neanderthals in Local Thirteen. Well, "We're longshoremen, we'll pay for our childcare." Oh, okay, you do that, you know what I'm saying.

There was another issue that I had. Because as we get older, you know, and we retire or we get ill and we leave the waterfront, we lose track of one another and you end up with longshoremen being in a rest home and nobody knows they're there. There's no way to keep track of them. So I said, "We should have our own rest home, you know, our own convalescent home." You know, army base, perfect place. Convert one of the old barracks over, or two, and at least you're with people that you have something in common with. You're not sitting up there looking at some stupid program on television all day long, not even checkers or anything, you know. And it just made sense to me that we should do that, even if it meant, say, taking a nickel away from our pay package on an hourly basis to fund it with. That's the way you fund it. You know, if you get—reach a certain level of funding, you cut it off until you drop below that, okay. You would have the advantage of being with people you know and you could take a busload of them up—that are ambulatory, you could take them up to Tahoe, Reno, or up here to Yosemite. I mean—

02-00:19:21

Rubens:

Right.

02-00:19:22

Robinson:

But, unfortunately, the brothers, they didn't see the advantage in that, you know.

02-00:19:30
Rubens: Now, were you ever working with or did you have any contact with Oakland community groups. I had mentioned—there was something called the West Oakland Community Action Group, and that got set up in response to the—

02-00:19:46
Robinson: I knew who they were, but I didn't do anything with them. My forte was hardball politics—you know, messing with the president.

02-00:20:03
Rubens: At a higher level.

02-00:20:05
Robinson: At a higher level, yes.

02-00:20:05
Rubens: Yes, okay. Okay. I wondered if you were willing to say—you know, you mentioned—and another time, we'll get in more detail with talking about your work with Archie Brown and all the other trade union you went on to do. But just simply vis-à-vis your politics and the army base, was there any change in that? Did the longshoremen or any of the associations you have, did they want to make an issue of the army base itself?

02-00:20:36
Robinson: No.

02-00:20:36
Rubens: Of the army, of its wars?

02-00:20:39
Robinson: No.

02-00:20:40
Rubens: Iraq. Did the Iraq War—?

02-00:20:43
Robinson: Oh, the Iraq War is different.

02-00:20:45
Rubens: Yes?

02-00:20:46
Robinson: Because the—

02-00:20:49
Rubens: The first Iraq War we're talking about? Because nothing goes really through the Oakland Army Base, right?

02-00:20:56
Robinson: There was some. Yes, they opened it back up for that. Yes, for the first Gulf War.

02-00:21:02

Rubens: Did they?

02-00:21:03

Robinson: Yes, But all of that, again, is the automated—most—ninety percent of it was the automated type cargo work that we have now, loading containers, roll-on, roll-off ships. Very few break bulk operations came through. Yes.

02-00:21:23

Rubens: But in terms of any—seeing—well, you've given me an example of trying—of proposing an old folks home, of proposing a childcare center. The union wasn't going to take a position on how to affect the conversation of the army base or, I assume, the navy base or any of the other parcels of land that were—

02-00:21:42

Robinson: No, they didn't get involved in it. I'm going to say this about my local. I can't say it about every other local because I'm not in the other local. Is run by individuals like myself who have a group of individuals who look to a certain individual for leadership, okay. They'll tell you—like on my board, I was on the—let's say the winch board. I'm on the executive board. Something that's going out on the waterfront—on the winch board, that people are beginning to complain about it. They won't get up on the membership floor and say anything about it, or they won't come to the executive board and say anything about it, they'll come to me and they'll say, you know, put a stop to this little group over here that's doing some things that aren't cool, right. And so I could do it, you know. Or to take on any issue. You know, I remember one night I was up in Crocket. We were working sugar. And so I was during the aftermath of Proposition Thirteen. And so I made mention of the fact that my street was still being swept, you know. And so after the conversation was over, I was getting ready to go back to work and one of the guys walked up to me and he asked me—he says, “Your street is being swept?” I said, “Yes, my street's being swept,” you know. He says, “How did you do that?” And I said, “Well, I went down to the—whatever department it was in the city, and I told them that I represented XYZ neighborhood association and that we wanted our streets swept, so they started sweeping it.” And he says, “It was that easy?” I says, “Yes, that's what this organization—this is what this union is for. You know, you're not an individual, you're a part of a union, and you got influence if you know how to use it.” You know.

02-00:24:19

Rubens: So is that the point you're making? I wanted to make sure I understood the point of the story you had told just before, where you say the guy won't get up on the membership floor, but he'll come to you. You're saying he's got someone who can advocate for him.

02-00:24:30

Robinson: Well, right, right, right. There's, I mean, there's little cliques. You know, guys that are on the winch board are a clique unto themselves. Guys on the line

board. If you want to see a clique, you have to look at the line board. See, the guys were waiting on me to get promoted to the lines board, because they were working under an archaic system and contract, and so when I got on the line board, two weeks after I got on it, they had a meeting of all of the linemen. There were about fifty of us. And all of the guys that were in position of authority on the line board resigned, and then they made me the leader of the line board, and I got to pick who I wanted to assist me.

02-00:25:23

Rubens:

And tell me, just for the record, what the line board represents.

02-00:25:28

Robinson:

The line board represents the older and or disabled worker, and all his job is is to go and tie up ships and let them up.

02-00:25:40

Rubens:

That's the line they're using to tie up—

02-00:25:41

Robinson:

That's the line. As a matter of fact, isn't it on this cap?

02-00:25:45

Rubens:

I can't see. It says, "LWU," but maybe it—oh, line board at the—

02-00:25:50

Robinson:

Line men at the top.

02-00:25:50

Rubens:

At the top, yes.

02-00:25:52

Robinson:

Yes. Well, this is my line board cap. At any rate—and so, when you get into these positions like that—see, for years—the first time I ran for office, I think, was in 1969, something like that. I—that was the first and only time I ever put out election material, you know, "Vote for me. I'm your guy," that kind of stuff. That was the first time and the only time that I ever did it. After that, I never put out any campaign literature. I never stood outside in the cold and in the rain because it seemed like every election day it rained and it was cold, and I wasn't about to stand out there from six o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night to hustle votes. I used to tell the guys, "If you don't know what I stand for when you hear me stand up on that membership floor, then I don't need your vote." And that was my policy and I got elected to—

02-00:27:02

Rubens:

Yes, tell us, Leo. What were your positions? I want to make sure we have that.

02-00:27:05

Robinson:

First, I was a member of the executive board for more years than I can remember. I was elected at least ten times to the caucus and convention. I was elected vice-president of the local.

02-00:27:20
Rubens: Who was your president when you were vice-president?

02-00:27:22
Robinson: Larry Wing. That's a story we won't put on tape, but I'll tell you about it later. Let's see. Executive board, caucus and—I was also the co-chair of the strike trial committee when we went out on strike in seventy-one. Nobody escaped. Let's see.

02-00:27:53
Rubens: And that contract had—

02-00:27:55
Robinson: I was on the promotions committee. What else. Damn.

02-00:28:03
Rubens: When did you finally retire?

02-00:28:05
Robinson: I retired on July 1, 1999, 12:01 am.

02-00:28:13
Rubens: That seventy-one strike, by the way, was over the contract, but nothing that would have reflected on or bore on army or navy? Any military?

02-00:28:25
Robinson: No, no, no.

02-00:28:26
Rubens: There was no contest over—

02-00:28:27
Robinson: No, I think by contract and by tradition, during a contract dispute, we worked the army and the navy and passenger vessels. And, well, now that we've got containers that are actual freezers, we don't—it also mentions perishables. But—

02-00:28:57
Rubens: Did we get an answer? Let me just hear it one more time. But despite what Harry said, you know, we're going to shut down these protests, just—it never happened?

02-00:29:02
Robinson: Never happened. The first time that we shut down a port over the year was this past May Day—this past May Day when we shut down the coast, yes.

02-00:29:12
Rubens: And this was over this current Iraq War?

02-00:29:14
Robinson: The current war, yes.

02-00:29:16
Rubens: Why do you think it didn't happen over Vietnam?

02-00:29:23
Robinson: I really don't know.

02-00:29:26
Rubens: That's fine.

02-00:29:27
Robinson: I really don't know.

02-00:29:28
Rubens: Yes, yes. [M1: Did it cross your mind back then that, wow, what we could do here?]

02-00:29:34
Robinson: No, no.

02-00:29:35
Rubens: Nobody was talking about doing that.

02-00:29:36
Robinson: Nobody was talking that I remember. There were some debates that took place over the war, but there was even a split between the Harry forces over the war. Joe Mosely and Harry had a big debate over support for the war and that was highly unusual. You know, I remember that. See, when I came in to the—I wasn't that political to the degree that I was taking part in the greater issues of the day. My issues were all local and it was only later that it came to me—that it occurred to me that everything that's local is also national and international. So those kinds of revelations don't come to you overnight.

02-00:30:41
Rubens: You know, Leo, I think you've been so wonderfully descriptive. It's what we needed about what the work process was really like on the docks. And I'm just wondering if there was anyone else. I think we really don't have the need to talk to any—

02-00:30:59
Robinson: Have you talked to Cleophas Williams?

02-00:31:00
Rubens: No, I don't think so.

02-00:31:02
Robinson: You need to get a hold of Cleophas Williams.

02-00:31:04
Rubens: All right, all right.

02-00:31:05
Robinson: Probably the most articulate, knowledgeable person of the whole waterfront that's left.

02-00:31:09
Rubens: All right. And he worked on the Oakland Army Base?

02-00:31:12
Robinson: Yes, he worked all over. Cleophas Willimas.

02-00:31:14
Rubens: Where is he?

02-00:31:15
Robinson: He's here in Berkeley. Yes. Or Oakland. Somewhere. Just call the Pensionaires Association and they'll give you his name and number.

02-00:31:27
Rubens: Is there anything—I mean, we'll chat. Is there anything else you want to say about the army base, or anything, or you think we've done it?

02-00:31:35
Robinson: Depend upon what you want to know.

02-00:31:38
Rubens: Well, how about the army base? Anything else?

02-00:31:41
Robinson: Well, no, there's not really that much to tell, because from my point of view at that time, I was doing the job.

02-00:31:53
Rubens: Yes, I think you did—

02-00:31:54
Robinson: And like I said, until that day over at Pier 33—

02-00:31:57
Rubens: I love that story.

02-00:31:57
Robinson: That—I mean, none of that crossed my mind. Except to say that—let me say this. When you ask me what offices did I hold. I also created a committee called the Southern Africa Liberation Support Committee, which was the first of its kind in the country, which ultimately led to the boycotting of South African cargo. Started in the Bay Area and then spread around to a few places. I guess that's what people know me for. But I had other interests. I wrote the ILWU's policy position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that was adopted in—what caucus was that? Because Curtis McClain was still secretary/treasurer. Jimmy Herman was president. They pulled their resolution on it in favor of mine. I wrote in conjunction with Carl {Yunita?}. I wrote the

reparations resolution on reparations for the Japanese internees. I wrote the first resolution on police brutality. Of course, they didn't pass it. That was in Hawaii.

02-00:33:27

Rubens: I was about to say—now, this was an examples of you working at a higher level, but then police brutality is, you know, at a local level. And they didn't pass that?

02-00:33:38

Robinson: Well, it was at a national level, because the incident that triggered it took place in Philadelphia when I was there at a Coalition of Black Trade Unionists Convention. And while I was on the plane coming back, I wrote the resolution calling for the establishment of government oversight of police incidents involving civilians. You know. And when it got to Hawaii—by the time it got to got to Hawaii, they was claiming they didn't know what the hell I was talking about. Then some years later, we get the Rodney King thing.

02-00:34:13

Rubens: Yes, 1980 was Hawaii. I remember that.

02-00:34:16

Robinson: Yes, well, that's when it took place.

02-00:34:18

Rubens: Well, by the way, that reminds me to ask you. So sixty-eight is Martin Luther King's death.

02-00:34:26

Robinson: No.

02-00:34:26

Rubens: Well, no. Sixty-seven. Sixty-eight. Sixty-eight is King's death and Oakland is—

02-00:34:33

Robinson: Quiet.

02-00:34:34

Rubens: Notorious for its quiet. You know, that there had been this kind of rapprochement with the Panthers and with Wilson Riles—I mean, with Lionel Wilson and with the churches. I don't know.

02-00:34:50

Robinson: At that time, Oakland was known as the most integrated city of its size in the United States, which meant that blacks were not confined to the “ghetto.” So whose house are you going to burn down and where are you going to burn it, you know what I mean. It didn't say anything at all about the black business establishments in Oakland because most of them were mom and pop shops and wig shops and that sort of—you know, head shops, that kind of stuff. So

there was nothing really to attack. The businesses—the big stores, except for Sears, it all moved out of Oakland. Even the auto franchises started moving out of Oakland. So there was nothing—you know what I'm saying?

02-00:35:33

Rubens: Yes.

02-00:35:53

Robinson: But the main reason was that blacks were no longer confined to the ghetto. What we call the ghetto. To me, it's the neighborhoods or a community, but for general society, they speak of it as the ghetto.

02-00:36:08

Rubens: My train of thought had come from how important the Black Panther for Self Defense was in creating a consciousness about police brutality and of really going after the Oakland police for what had been brutal.

02-00:36:25

Robinson: But that didn't mean that they reached the entire community.

02-00:36:28

Rubens: No.

02-00:36:29

Robinson: What that meant was they politicized some of the younger generation. You have to understand that the most conservative group of people in the United States when it comes to law and order are African Americans. By and large, they support the death penalty. By and large, they're the ones that, in terms of the overall society, are disproportionately scooped up, you know, and incarcerated. But they—when it comes to the criminal justice system, there's an ambivalence.

02-00:37:15

Rubens: What do you think accounts for that? I actually didn't know that about supporting the death penalty.

02-00:37:22

Robinson: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I can remember when Bill Clinton first ran for office and there was a group of us inside of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists that were criticizing Bill Clinton for his application of the death penalty in Arkansas. And the leadership didn't want to hear it, you know. They were more interested in democratic party politics than they were in drawing attention to the disproportionate number of black people who were subject to the death penalty. And in this particular case, we were talking about, I think, a seventeen or eighteen year old mentally retarded young man that Bill Clinton sent off to his great reward.

[End of Interview]