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John Vincent

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

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

Interviews conducted by
Judith Dunning
in 2003

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Audiofile 2

Working lifestyle—had different types of service and testing for getting products on the market in the Los Angeles area—he stayed later his whole career in Chevron—after he went to San Francisco in 1946 as the product engineer department—remembers Richmond to be a place where he can remember different projects take place-- likes the Rosie the Riveter—puts his opinion on what Richmond's future will be like—and concludes on talking about his family and kids

Interview with John Vincent:
 Interviewer: Judith Dunning
 Transcriber: Kirstin Jackson
 [Interview #1, June 25, 2003]
 [Begin audio file: Vincent 01 05-25-03]

1-00:00:06

Dunning:

Good morning.

1-00:00:07

Vincent:

[laughs] Good morning.

1-00:00:08

Dunning:

Today is June 25, 2003 and I am interviewing Mr. Jay [John] Vincent for the Rosie the Riveter Project at his home in Richmond. My name is Judith Dunning and Jess Rigelhaupt is on camera. Well, Jay, the first time we sat down together, was an interview eighteen years ago in 1985, and the focus of that interview was your family's relocation from Oklahoma to California in 1921 and the move to Richmond in 1923, when your father joined the crew of the Santa Fe Railroad. Your family lived at Ferry Point in a converted boxcar, and we produced a oral history based on your story called, "Recollections of Ferry Point." This is available at local libraries including the Richmond Public Library, and The Bancroft Library.

Today our focus will be on Richmond during World War II, and I'm hoping to record some of the lesser-known stories of the homefront. One involves the history of the Richmond Yacht Club in the late 1930s and the period between 1942 and 1945. We talked about that last week. And would you tell us how the Richmond Yacht Club had a role in the Kaiser shipbuilding enterprise? You mentioned that there was a Richmond Yacht Club annual dinner 1939 in which a guest of honor was Fred Parr, who was a business man who owned a lot of the waterfront, and also there was Steven Bechtel, Sr. who is the father of a Richmond Yacht Club member. What do you remember about that evening?

1-00:01:57

Vincent:

What I remember about it was that there was a typical word exchange between getting to know our guests and the guests telling us what their interests are. The bit of information about the Yacht Club itself—this is during the Depression time, really depressed. The club started in 1933 with just a handful of young energetic people. I wasn't one of them, I was still in Berkeley at the University. I joined in 1934 and the location we had was one of the very few spots available for a Yacht Club because—it was the objective of the Richmond City Council and planners that Almost any land possible for industrial use, would be saved for industry. If you look at some of those maps of that time, they are in dark blue for industry. It was really something, how our town was plastered with all industrial areas. We were fortunate enough to get an acre of land where the Santa Fe Channel and the Lauritzen Canal meet. One the members was actually working for Captain Lauritzen who had a delivery service between San Francisco and Richmond [Richmond Navigation Company]. He had this warehouse in Richmond and he used a motorized hay barge to transport materials across the Bay. This was all before the transbay bridges.

There was a nice relationship between Lee Conn and Captain Lauritzen and the club was able to rent that land for \$25 a month. It was at the end of a dirt road, and it was soft and muddy in the winter. As I said, in the Depression time, the club was formed and the initiation fee was \$10 and it was \$1 a month. Well, you made up the difference by just a lot of energetic people looking and scrounging for pile butts and material off of an old barge for the basic dock and crane to be able to handle the 16-foot snipe boats. We did have to buy a lumber for our clubhouse, that we built, and an interesting thing about was we had, at that time, knotty pine was considered to be infamous scrap material, full of knots, cheap, and all that, but something showed up in some publication where it started to endorse the benefits of knotty pine for interior walls. Well, [laughs] we had purchased it and I remember the lumber yard wanted to buy it back because the demand was so high. They wanted to buy our lumber back. I remember that. It was such a unique deal. It was right at the turn there of a product being recognized again.

At the time, Congress passed the housing bill. We put a lot of energy into building our club, and one of the things we learned early was that you should to get as many friends as you could in town. It would influence your future planning and that was when the Harbor Day dinner idea came along. It was during the latter thirties that we were doing that, and it was really quite pleasant. We stated our ideas and developed that a good relationship with the local newspaper in the town at the time to sponsor perpetual a trophy for those of us who had snipes.

[tape interruption]

1-00:06:22

Dunning:

Okay, well we were talking about the annual dinner in 1939.

1-00:06:47

Vincent:

We got recognition by the newspaper and they covered us well, pictures of the racing that we were doing in a small sixteen-foot boat that was designed by an East Coast publisher of the *Rudder Magazine*, who observed that people were doing racing with hydroplanes with outboard engines. Instead the idea occurred to him: just why not do that for sailboats? The snipe boat was sixteen-feet long, and it was a natural for class racing. It's an example of what we had in Richmond and what only cost me \$125 to build the boat, including the sails in those days. And many others did the same thing. So we had a fleet of well over twenty of these boats and so publicity was—one of the things we wanted was to let people know there was a competitive class of racing here in Richmond, and so the newspaper editor put up a trophy for us. A popular restaurant owner, here in town, put up another. So these dinners—it was minimally getting people involved in PR activity for recognizing that we had a going operation, a lot of energy. And I thought it was good for Richmond to have an active bay like this. It was affordable. That was the background of the time.

In 1939, we had this dinner and Fred Parr either owned or controls all of the waterfront property. Steven Bechtel, Sr.'s son—his son, Junior, was one of the owners and sailors that was with our good sailor. And so the father came over and we invited him—it seemed appropriate—and his name was a pretty big name in those days because he was involved with that big project, building of Boulder Dam. As the meeting broke up, well, Mr. Parr spoke to Mr. Bechtel, and he said, "Would you ever consider building a shipyard?" And that was not much more than that. Just a few months later, the announcement came out that there was a shipyard going to be built in Richmond right across the Lauritzen Canal from where we were located, and it was Building 0-9,000 ton freighters for Great Britain—and Kaiser was the president and Steve Bechtel was the

vice-president. The person in charge of this building was Clay Bedford who was a genius from the polytechnic college near New York, and as a young man he actually took over the responsibility of building the Grand Coulee Dam across the Columbia River. That's a major, major project and his remark was as I recall was, "It's a pretty big river," [chuckles]. So that was the beginning of the shipbuilding activity in Richmond.

1-00:10:34

Dunning:

And that was called the Todd-California Shipbuilding Corporation?

1-00:10:37

Vincent:

That's right. And the interesting thing about that was I had the opportunity to go over and visit Clay Bedford, and I waited to see him, and many of engineers were waiting out in the waiting spot there, and they had, in their arms, bar charts that I had never seen before. They had to coordinate the building of the ship and set it to when the steam engine came in because it was going to be used for propelling it. It had to be coming in at the right time. And everything else had to be on the right time. I recall that they, in order to get underway, had gotten or drafted the head person who had done the shipbuilding out of England or in Scotland, on the Clyde River. There was a limited number of expert builders here, and so they had the guy who—they had expert help, and here were people building a ship that never built a ship before, actually building it!

1-00:12:11

Dunning:

Well, where did these people—because I heard that there were about 6,000 people recruited to build those first thirty ships—

1-00:12:16

Vincent:

That's right.

1-00:12:17

Dunning:

Where did they come from? Were they local?

1-00:12:20

Vincent:

No, they wouldn't have been local. There would have been probably a lot of local people, but they would extend with that, or with people that had backgrounds. I recall one person who worked at Shipyard, or one of the others, who remarked about seeing a cluster of people around someone, and he was curious and he went over to see. Well, the person that was bringing the curiosity was that there was somebody who could understand a blueprint and these others were other there learning how to read a blueprint. So, there were a lot of people who desperately wanted jobs and so they were learning on the job, kind of training.

1-00:12:59

Dunning:

Well, this was in 1939. Did you have a sense that this was a preview of something huge that was going to come?

1-00:13:08

Vincent:

I just thought, well, we'll be a shipyard and I never thought at all about the building of four—they had four different shipyards going at the same time. I think there were 115,000 people working in the shipyards at one time.

Dunning:

Yes. After '41.

Vincent:

After '41. Where these four yards, plus this big prefabrication place where they were building sections of the ship and then moving them over and lifting them with cranes and dropping them into place. One of the fastest times building one of these ships was less than four days. That was a record in itself. So here are people that are learning on the job and I recall going over and talking to the launching the engineer who was responsible for launching that first ship—and he hadn't had any previous experience launching a ship. Well, he made a rotating table and connected it to the launching cradle. Then he had a moving camera so that when the ship was launched, he would have some idea just how fast it started picking up in the whole thing. So learning on the job—that was their thing, just learning on the job. I recall, we had a great long table hooked up to the first ship that launched, we were all watching it. Oh, we were gosh, probably about a block away. There was a tug waiting out there because they didn't know how just really how far that first ship was going to go.

1-00:14:53

Dunning:

Was this in the first operation or the second?

1-00:14:56

Vincent:

This was the first ship that was built.

1-00:14:57

Dunning:

The first.

1-00:15:01

Vincent:

This Todd Operation.

1-00:15:01

Dunning:

And the Richmond Yacht Club, was that on South Second Street, right across from there?

1-00:15:09

Vincent:

Yes. And to give you an idea how the club was low key, and how poor, not in the sense of money—. One proposal that came along was to install individual lights on top of our chandelier which was a large steering wheel from a windjammer. The press went out and held up how much it would cost them to sell that. Lee Conn, the electrician, came out and said it would cost around \$3 and a half. That's it. That was the same family, that younger brother, said, "How much money do we have in the bank?" He asked the treasurer, and we had \$7 and a half in the bank. That gives

you an idea of when you say “yacht club,” the images of a yacht club are big time spenders and all that is part of something that may have been somewhere, but not RYC (Richmond Yacht Club). I remember by just working together, we did a lot of things with very little money.

1-00:16:19

Dunning:

And you had quite a vantage point being right across from Todd.

1-00:16:22

Vincent:

Yes. Well then though, the thing that happened at the club was that instead of \$25 a month, it was boosted up to \$50 a month, and that seemed outrageous, for some, double our rent. And so we decided that’s enough of that.

So we took off and started looking and about a mile toward the Inner Harbor we found a place in the middle of niche behind the hill, a nice sun spot. A really nice place. So we made arrangements to have our building plus this fireplace moved, and that was done by a house mover, [laughs] who for \$625 picked up this club which was probably—oh I’d estimate was at least sixty or seventy feet long and probably thirty-feet wide, forty-feet wide. It was a pretty good-sized building. They moved it down the channel and put it ashore, set it all up for us. Then we worked diligently getting the place stretched, and one of the members had a friend in the judging company and so we had the right price for that. It was done for almost nothing. And we built a new dock and we just were doing fine getting all set up in that business and then one day a person from the Maritime Commission came by and he said, “Well, you have to move.” And we said, “How much time do we have?” He said, “Just last week it would have been fine.” [laughs]

So, we picked up this chandelier wheel, a couple of benches, and a piano and moved out and it wasn’t long after that the club was just completely destroyed. There was a new shipyard, number three was being built there, where they had the basins, I think five basins, so they could build the ship right in the basin and not have to launch it like the typical launching operations where you slide it down the ways. So, that was the end of the yacht club. After those activities, the war was on, and the city allowed us to use the city basement for our meetings. And so we kept our *flying jib* monthly newsletter. And we had issues, news going throughout the war and letting people know that so and so was in certain areas or just keeping up the best we tried with what was left of the club.

1-00:19:20

Dunning:

And how many members were there during that time, because it seems that you probably lost a lot of—

1-00:19:25

Vincent:

We did.

1-00:19:26

Dunning:

—young men going off to the military.

1-00:19:28

Vincent:

We did. We did. We had, oh how may you describe it. Most of us—we had twenty people that were left. It was just, we just were, well, keeping alive during those next five years.

1-00:19:42

Dunning:

And would you say the Richmond Yacht Club was mostly local people?

1-00:19:47

Vincent:

No.

1-00:19:47

Dunning:

I'm wondering if any newcomers to the shipyard—

1-00:19:49

Vincent:

Yes.

1-00:19:51

Dunning:

Did they join the Yacht Club?

1-00:19:52

Vincent:

No, they didn't join. No, none of those joined. I remember. They were mostly local people all the way from Berkeley to Richmond and so we had a lot of fun during the time it was an active club. Working together, you sure accomplish a lot if you are dedicated to the same objective. So we actually did after the war was over, well, we thought we would be reimbursed—we wanted \$23,000 so that part of the building was wiped out and it was the appraiser that determined that it should be around \$16,000, and then the judge signed it and said, "You are going to get \$20,000." [laughing] Well, so, we gave a thousand dollars to the lawyer and we had \$4,000 left to start out business all over again.

1-00:20:53

Dunning:

This was the settlement from the Maritime Commission?

1-00:20:55

Vincent:

Yes.

1-00:20:57

Dunning:

You didn't have a choice then.

1-00:20:58

Vincent:

No, it was just—we didn't have receipts for almost anything. Almost everything was second-hand or leftovers.

1-00:21:11

Dunning:

Right. Sweat equity.

1-00:21:13

Vincent:

Yeah. [laughs] Sweat equity, that's what it was. Then we found a place that was on the end of the basin by the Richmond Boat Works area and that was very difficult to get because the Santa Fe only wanted to lease property to those or sell it to people who manufacturing something. But we didn't qualify for that for sure. But finally, some way or another, we were finally able to get a spot there. And we had a twenty by twenty-foot tool room from—it was left over from the ship building operations—and put that on the barge and towed it down and that was the beginning of the second-life club.

1-00:22:06

Dunning:

Well, tell me how your sailing was restricted during those war years. You had some big competition with the—

1-00:22:16

Vincent:

In order to be able to sail during those times, you had to get your boat registered with the Coast Guard. You had to have your crew registered and you had to have an approved permit, all of you. Then in order to identify your boat, you had to have one-foot high numbers on the side [laughing]. There were boats that were going down the way with these large numbers down the side. You had to stay away from the bridges. You didn't want to get near a shipyard because they were trigger-happy in those days. Everyone was really scared about what was going to possibly going to happen after Pearl Harbor. People had the jitters, they would do anything they could think of to try to be sure that it didn't happen here.

1-00:23:14

Dunning:

Now who was trigger-happy?

1-00:23:15

Vincent:

Oh just, I think, everyone that had a responsible job. They were supposed to do something to see nothing happen. They had guards. They had restricted areas in the bay where we couldn't sail. And so, but there was ample room, we just had to be sailing out in the middle part of the bay and not getting close to anything resembling something that might be—

1-00:23:47

Dunning:

And probably no sailing at night.

1-00:23:49

Vincent:

No night sailing.

1-00:23:51

Dunning:

Yeah.

1-00:23:52

Vincent:

No cameras [laughs].

1-00:23:55

Dunning:

Right. Well this might be good time to talk about what we were discussing the other day, homeland security, and in recent times we hear a lot about homeland security and the governments effort to protect citizens against terrorism, but what security measures where in place during World War II in Richmond? You mentioned a couple.

1-00:24:17

Vincent:

Yes. Well Richmond—there was a real concern then about protecting against any airplanes flying over and so if you an artillery base like a telephone pole, a lot being held up at an angle by sand bags and all. That could possibly, letting people know that we had these around the shipyard and the area. That was armament, just with a fake.

1-00:24:48

Dunning:

And did the public know it was a fake?

1-00:24:55

Vincent:

Well, nobody really—most people didn't even realize it was there.

1-00:24:56

Dunning:

Oh.

1-00:24:58

Vincent:

They were just [laughs]. It was amusing to see those. And a lot of those were just installed and—

1-00:25:07

Dunning:

Then where would they be installed.

1-00:25:07

Vincent:

Well, in the proximity of the shipyard.

1-00:25:09

Dunning:

Oh okay.

1-00:25:13

Vincent:

Yes. Homeland Security at that point—the boldest thing was to ship all the Japanese out of California. Or not out of California, but in the backside of hot, inhospitable places. There were ten different ones, all the way from Utah from California. There were camps that were set up and the Japanese were all sent there.

1-00:25:38

Dunning:

And do you know Richmond residents that you grew up with that were left—

1-00:25:42

Vincent:

Yes. Yes. There was a very nice member of our class that was very, very, unhappy about it, because he said, “We have all these hothouses.” His family had a lot of hothouses growing flowers. He said, “We should grow tomatoes and grow vegetables. We should do something that would be supportive.” But he was Japanese, and he was just sent out and that was one bold move that they did.

1-00:26:21

Dunning:

Do you recall his name?

1-00:26:22

Vincent:

Fred Oshima.

1-00:26:24

Dunning:

Oshima.

1-00:26:26

Vincent:

Oshima. And— [takes a drink of water].

1-00:26:36

Dunning:

At the time when they began taking people for internment, was the public aware that this was happening?

1-00:26:45

Vincent:

Yes, yes.

1-00:26:46

Dunning:

What was the reaction?

1-00:26:47

Vincent:

I don't recall at that time. I don't recall the public reaction except that I know that there were those who were speaking out against it, but it's hard to picture, to explain, to understand how jittery people were. They were just scared to death that somebody would sabotage something, and people were just edgy. I had, let's see, just a moment here. Getting the Japanese sent away, and then there was a very nice, a large yacht. A 127-foot yacht to be maneuvering the Golden Gate looking for submarines and that was one of the things that seemed so ridiculous. And then they also had a lot of guns on both sides on the entrance that go way back to the—way, way, back, and they were primarily just being used as, well, something to show the public, but they activated all those or most of them. There were a lot of them, thirty of them were activated, and that was another bold move to try to stop submarines. We hadn't heard it stop submarines though.

Somebody got the idea of, “Well, why don’t we have a wire net in the bay across from San Francisco up to Angel Island so that if a submarine came in, they would run into this steel net.” And this operation was housed in Marin County in a place called California City—

1-00:28:42

Dunning:
Right.

1-00:28:44

Vincent:
One of my friends was in charge of that. That was a clumsy operation because if you have a net there, how is a ship going to go through? And so you had to have some way of getting these ships—it was a sad question of whether there was ever any positive benefit. But, “Do something, don’t stand there and do nothing, do something”—that kind of attitude.

1-00:29:08

Dunning:
Did they ever get a submarine coming in there?

1-00:29:10

Vincent:
No. No submarine ever came in there, but at Pearl Harbor it was so devastating that it just—you didn’t have to be too rational to be scared [laughs].

1-00:29:27

Dunning:
Well, do you remember your sensation when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

1-00:29:31

Vincent:
Oh, I just—I was shocked. I had just come back from being in Southern California for a couple of months then. I remember when I came back going to the bay and the radio was talking all about it. I just couldn’t believe it. But I had come back from an area where people had been working like mad to build airplanes and the whole California, Southern California basin, was just loaded with airplanes and people making parts for airplanes. That’s where I saw a lot of women working with these rivet guns. And the rivet guns were running so hot and wearing out that they had a whole box full of them, and they wanted to know if we had anything that might make it work. We tried one particular—

1-00:30:24

Dunning:
At Chevron.

1-00:30:25

Vincent:
At Chevron. And it didn’t work and then they actually went up to a heavier duty machine that would let these ladies who were really, oh gosh, they were really working. Gosh. First time I saw so many women working in a factory, and they were these rivet guns making, putting the wings on together.

But the only thing where I came in, so far, was the local homeland defense. They gave me a helmet and a ratchet maker, a noise maker that was made out of wood—

1-00:31:05

Dunning:

You were a block warden?

1-00:31:06

Vincent:

Yes. I was a block warden and I had sign up in the window over there that I was a block warden. And it was never clear what I should—on what signal would I go and wake up all the neighbors to get them out in the street. So when I got them in the street what was, I suppose to tell them? I remember we were thinking about that all along. I never had to use it.

1-00:31:33

Dunning:

Well, were you recruited, or did you volunteer?

1-00:31:35

Vincent:

Sometimes. I was just made a block warden because I think every block was supposed to have a block warden. So I'm not just sure what was behind the idea of getting people awake or getting them into the street, but that was, rather amusing to me. But we survived.

1-00:31:57

Dunning:

Well, you talked just a small bit about the Japanese going off to internment, were you aware of any Italian Americans or German Americans from the area?

1-00:32:09

Vincent:

No.

1-00:32:12

Dunning:

I know they had to register.

1-00:32:16

Vincent:

Actually, I—with respect to the Japanese, I do recall that one of the very, very, good groups formed and they participated in the war in Europe. And I think in Italy they performed very, very, well at it. They were recognized by it, given special recognition. And here the rest of their neighbors are here stuck out in the desert somewhere. So, that was a mixed-up time.

1-00:32:53

Dunning:

And do you know who cared for the nurseries, or did they shut down?

1-00:32:56

Vincent:

They just shut down.

1-00:32:59

Dunning:

And of the people that you knew that left for internment, do you know many that came back to this area?

1-00:33:06

Vincent:

The Oshima's did. Remember, my friend did. He eventually got back and missed us. But it was quite a bit of Berkeley reactivated these hothouses and get them in shape. Lots of damage had occurred to them.

1-00:33:29

Dunning:

I'd like to backtrack just a little bit while we are talking about the war years, because you were here for, since 1923. Would you tell me what Richmond looked like before World War II? Who lived here, and—

1-00:33:47

Vincent:

Well, I can tell you about as an example, Macdonald Avenue was a delightful street, and that's where most beverage shops in town was located. It started out in one end with a grocery store and a bakery, and there was a JC Penny and there was an upper-class merchandiser right next door. Across the street was a butcher shop. There was a movie house. Right next door to the movie house was a nice candy store. Right next door. That was a nice place to go. Then there was a hardware store, then there was a plumbing store, and a radio store was in at that time— before the war. There was just an electrical supply place where I recall getting my parts for making a crystal set in my early days. There was a jewelry store. There was a bank and probably the most popular place in town, a little place called Martins, and that was an ice cream parlor. During those Depression days, you could get an ice cream cone for a nickel and that included taking the cone, putting chocolate inside of it, ice cream on top, and then dunking the whole thing. So you had [laughing] something that would really be enjoyed for five cents. That was one of the most popular places in town, that for twenty-five cents you could get a banana split, and then they had a restaurant behind there. Martin's was the most popular place in town.

1-00:35:53

Dunning:

So it sounds that Macdonald Avenue was the place to shop.

1-00:35:58

Vincent:

People met people, you did in the barbershop—it was just a nice, comfortable, little town. A little lovely town, not what you would expect.

1-00:36:10

Dunning:

Well who lived here?

1-00:36:12

Vincent:

Oh just, people just sort of grew up here. A lot of Italians moved in toward Albany, towards that way. And under many of those houses you could see a garage underneath the house, there was a place were they had their vats to make their wine. In that area you could smell the wine during the harvest season. And there was quite a few Italians that came in to Richmond. They were just getting here one way or another, hearing about Richmond. Richmond had a lot of labor jobs. When you think of an industrial town you tend to scoff at it on one hand. On the other hand, that's where people had jobs. Trying to find a balance between industry and some recreational activity.

1-00:37:06

Dunning:

Right. It was a real working town.

1-00:37:09

Vincent:

It was a working town.

1-00:37:12

Dunning:

What do you think Richmond's image was before the influx of the Kaiser shipyard workers? If people described Richmond, what would they say?

1-00:37:25

Vincent:

It was a nice little town. We had schools that we were proud of, and once we built the Plunge right early. Those were the days where plunges were a swimming place to meet, it was socially recognized as a thing that you did. Swimming was in and that was what we enjoyed. You invite some friends and went swimming.

1-00:38:08

Dunning:

And then the population went from around 23,000 before the war to almost 125,000. Well, we have talked to a lot of people that came from the South and Midwest, but I'm always very interested in what was the reaction of long time residents? How did it impact you?

1-00:38:29

Vincent:

Well, I know that probably the most important impact was that the schools got so overcrowded and our first son went to school and in kindergarten there were about sixty people in a class. The schools were working a double shift in order to be able to cope with the large number of young people, the youngsters and all who had moved in. So it had a tremendous impact upon the opportunity to enjoy your schools. It was really bad. Just the town itself became so crowded. People, when they're off duty, just walking up and down the street and it was just very, very busy. A lot of places, people like to chew tobacco, used to be spitting a lot [laughs], you had to be careful you didn't get next to someone chewing tobacco because they chew the tobacco and then they spit out. And there wasn't—the whole town got upset really.

The people are doing well over [at] the haberdashers. People had money for the first time. They were getting dressed up for the first time and those that were salespeople in those stores did very well because, when people came in, they thought they were just getting one pair of pants or something, but by the time they left they were usually outfitted from top to bottom. Because they had money to spend and they went there or to the movie. That was about it. And the movies were just crowded. People slept there because there was no other place to sleep. It wasn't uncommon for many places to have the same facility used on a three-shift basis so people would actually sleep their eight hours and the next person would sleep eight hours. It was desperate here to find a house.

1-00:40:50

Dunning:

Did your parents or did your family ever take in boarders?

1-00:40:54

Vincent:

No. No. The town was—just really, just changed. It has never been the same since.

1-00:41:11

Dunning:

Yes. What about the war housing? Did that go up pretty suddenly?

1-00:41:13

Vincent:

Oh they really got hit early and they started filling in the basement lots all along Cutting Boulevard, and there was a lot of war housing, and that helped to take care of some of the problem. They had a luxury train that went all the way to Oakland to pick up people in Oakland and bring them out to the yards. One thing that was very messy was that the shift change; the people who did have cars were driving down Fourteenth Street toward Cutting Boulevard, but there was no synchronized lights or anything—it was all stop and go, stop and go. So many people wanted to get on Cutting Boulevard, they used to just cut out across at an angle, go over the curb, and over the sidewalk and head off and get back on Cutting Boulevard. That was finally stopped by putting in a lot of telephone poles along the street to keep that from happening because it was destroying a lot of property, private properties [laughs].

1-00:42:33

Dunning:

Well, it seemed like the police, the fire department, and the social services would be pretty overwhelmed during that time.

1-00:42:42

Vincent:

I didn't have enough close enough contact with any of the police people or fire people, but they were busy.

1-00:42:56

Dunning:

Did they have a—do you know if they had a police department or fire department within the shipyards? Or was that just the city of Richmond's?

1-00:43:08

Vincent:

Well, I know they put in a firehouse over on Cutting Boulevard to be were close to the shipyards. I think the city maintained that responsibility.

1-00:43:19

Dunning:

Oh okay. We hear a lot about the lines, there were lines for meat and butter and sugar and shoes and gasoline.

1-00:43:34

Vincent:

Yes.

1-00:43:34

Dunning:

A lot of people I have spoken to from the shipyards talked about the long lines for cigarettes. Do you remember those lines?

1-00:43:41

Vincent:

I don't recall those, but I was—I just don't recall those lines, but I do recall we had a limited amount of gasoline to cope with and that was a nuisance.

1-00:44:01

Dunning:

Listen, are you doing okay? Do you need a break?

1-00:44:05

Vincent:

I'm doing fine.

1-00:44:06

Dunning:

Okay. Well, I know during the shipyard period you were working at Chevron.

1-00:44:19

Vincent:

Yes.

1-00:44:20

Dunning:

And you mentioned the other day that, Chevron had a certain role in the war effort and I wanted to ask you how the research and development at Chevron of which you were involved in, how that changed during the duration of World War II.

1-00:44:41

Vincent:

Well, the demand for, from the company's standpoint, was that they wanted to be sure that they were able to stay in business with without losing—being able to make certain products that you got from the East Coast or overseas and that was one of the minor things but the R and D department [research and development] that I was with for quite a few years had a very dynamic impact on the products that were used by the government. One of the products that were very popular and very much in demand was a compounded motor oil that could be used in diesel engines. This problem was a severe problem because the Caterpillar Tractor Company had designed these diesels that were actually running hotter than the gasoline-powered engines that they used to have. The life of an engine would be like 200 hours. It would be in that order. That's practically no time at all with these caterpillars! So the drive was on for two years, and I was involved in that before the war for two years, working on this compounded motor oil. I was in the testing laboratories involved with the engines and seeing that they were ready to run the next experimental product; there were many of those. So that was a very active two years prior to the war itself. The product that came out, actually stop pad engines been getting stuck rings and loosing their power. And the [inaudible] had a comparative specification that would provide that they used lubricating oil like RPM Dello, which was the name of it.

1-00:46:59

Dunning:
RPM Dello?

1-00:47:00

Vincent:

Yes. That was in high demand in the government to put it in their submarines. There was a large demand for that oil, so the company got an approval to build an additional plant to de-wax the base oils, and it was all put together, and I was involved in recommended the lever to be used. It was a proper recommendation but the problem developed that they didn't have proper equipment gauges and all to know just how to operate their compressors. So they actually were operating them in a way that actually froze the lubricating oil lines from the—oil was getting into the cylinders and this compressor just, just wore out. The rings were making a lot of noise and all that and so that was a major deal just getting that on the production line, just getting it going. So I was involved in that.

1-00:48:08

Dunning:

And you were involved with the lubricant for launching ships?

1-00:48:11

Vincent:

Yes. That was the one that we were particularly—that the case of supplying launching greases, launching actual wax. The launching technique requires a basic coat of wax and over the base coat of wax you put grease and that's the way that ships are launched. So, we had wax and we thought, "Well, that's the thing to do," and so we starting doing as much as we could about our wax and how it was used and I was involved in testing some that would help with the shipbuilding in Southern California. And one point we said that—there was a crystalline-type of wax, and in order to remove it off of the way, you had to use a lot of manpower, the scraping. The product they had been using was sort of like—it was a long, waxy type of material that was like you could actually role in up afterwards, like a carpet, and so it just took very little time. So our product worked, but it was not competitive because it required more time to apply. But I learned a lot during the testing of that product and that came in to be a very important thing to do, to know about.

Later on, as shipbuilding took place in Portland, they were building ships there and as the winter came on they kept being harder and harder to nudge to get them to go into launch, as they got colder. They wanted to get a softer grease to put on it, and I contended that they didn't really need a softer grease, they should have a thick, harder grease. Or a greater grease. They said, "Well the marketing department knows what they want, and they are involved with our budget, and we just better get them what they want." And so a soft grease was sent up there to Portland, and I remember going through that launching when they had that soft grease. I had a stopwatch in my hand, and I was lined up watching to see when the ship was going to start to move, and I could hear them talking about, "Try to cut one, cut two." There were steel plates that had holes drilled in them, and they were all numbered, and there were two of them to hold the ship in place before it launches.

They finally got through cutting all of them and I just stood there and kept waiting. I stared at my watch then, and pretty soon it was time that was involved was longer than they had had before. I remember my head started shaking and the watch fell. The case fell off and I never figured out how much time it really took [laughing], but we looked at the launching way afterwards and I was able to prove my point by demonstrating that, in the wintertime, that wax is harder and harder and

it's rough. You can't get a nice smooth finish and it's—. So, what you really need is something with heavier grease that would actually make it possible for the sliding way to be up above these little rough spots and all this wax and all that. You would have the best chance. So I recommended a heavier grease, and after that they didn't have any problems there, but that was a technical service that was operation and development project that I felt pretty good about because I was—my recommendation was finally confirmed.

1-00:52:13

Dunning:

Right. And were you involved in the no-squeak grease for submarines?

1-00:52:17

Vincent:

Yes that a little later— before the war was over, a request came in to get a non-squeaky, something to eliminate the squeaking of the cruiser when the propellers are idling. But they squeak, and so they wanted to figure out how to remove the squeak. Well, in my department, we tested the machine and worked it out so that we could actually demonstrate that we had something that would work—at least in the lab. But we didn't have the opportunity to try it under a submarine, and by that time the war was dropping off to the point where it just was too late for it to used. But at least we developed the no-squeak grease by the time grease. Kind of an odd request. But the toughest thing though, the toughest thing of all was that we had to figure out how to make a rust inhibiting turbine oil for the destroyers.

1-00:53:24

Dunning:

A rust inhibiting?

1-00:53:26

Vincent:

A rust inhibiting turbine oil. We were able to get one that met the specifications, and in order to pass the specifications, there was a test. There was a beaker about so big, and there was a steel rod that was polished thoroughly, and you could hold the steel rod down into this beaker and the beaker contains salt water and the test oil. They were in that for twenty-four hours and it had to be free of all rust. Well that worked out to be the biggest headache and time-consuming project. I think we had—the test results were so erratic that you could have, in the same machine, four different beakers. In the same one, you could have some of them rust and some of them wouldn't rust. The inspector used to just—we were trying to figure out how to decide if this was a passable product that we could go ahead and ship or not. Because you had some that rust and some that don't rust. Well, how do you handle that? And that was hard. Oh, a lot of time, and very special techniques they were trying to use, trying to analyze every possible thing, whether it was rods that were from a different steel or whether the sandpaper was somehow affecting it, if it passed or not passed and that went on!

They actually had an inspector that had a magnifying glass, see, with an electric piece, and so that was one of those deals that never really got resolved and the war was over and it still went back to the ASTM, which is the American Society for Testing Materials. That was probably one of the most aggravating parts of being in the R and D and trying to figure out how to develop a test method that was actually reliable.

1-00:55:45

Dunning:

Oh, go ahead. Oh, we are going to change tapes. Are you okay for just a few more minutes?

1-00:55:50

Vincent:

Oh sure, I'm fine.

1-00:55:52

Dunning:

Because I'm actually just wrapping up.

[Begin audio file: Vincent 02 05-25-03]

2-00:00:16

Vincent:

I find it fun to just go back through the oral history that we did. It's kind of fun going back t It's surprising how many years have sneaked by since then.

2-00:1-00:29

Dunning:

I know, I know. I'm going to close up with a few questions about Chevron and then I have a couple of other questions. Was Chevron really—did you get a feeling that you were involved in the war effort during that period of time?

2-00:00:47

Vincent:

I felt I did. I did different types of service and testing and getting products on the market in the Los Angeles area were they needed cutting oils. I was involved there for two months. I learned a lot and was able to develop two different cutting oils that did their job. They were having bearing failures and I was asked to go and check up on that and by chance the research department had been working on a higher performance grease and I was able to take over a sample of the grease. They did a test in the lab—[to self] or not in a lab, just in their place—and put the experimental grease on one side of the mushroom motor and on the other side they had the product they were using. We were able to measure the temperature of these bearings and found that the experimental one was actually cooler than the other one and that went for quite a while. Then we dismantled it, took the bearings out, and then cleaned them all up and then changed the greases from one side to the other just to see by chance if there was some mechanical difference, if it would make any difference. But again, the experimental grease came out really cooler. So we were able to manufacture some of this grease and they adopted that grease. And then that was a pleasure.

I think one of the early pleasures I got was taking care of the Fontana's Steel Works. They had taken a mill from Saint Louis and brought it to California in order to build a big steel plate for the shipbuilding. They were having a serious problem with the foaming taking place in this great big—about half the size of this room—filled with circulating oil that went up to the bearings, then there were some grease required in this filling operation. Well, somehow there was this mill was apparently low so that there was actually leaking a little bit of grease back into the circulating oil. Well, when it got back in the circulating oil, it started making it foam. It was a persistent foam that was building up to the top of this, and it was actually pushing it up somehow through the hatch that where you put in pressure oil. It was just coming out and they had to have a man actually there using something to swat down this foam, and he had to keep on doing it. Otherwise, it was just spilling over and the whole floors were just oily; it's dangerous to walk on. They asked if I could do anything for them, and I recall going to all the different chemists that were in R and D and asking them what they would recommend. I came up with quite a group of possibilities and there was one in that was recognized as—for sure it was okay and they set up samples from the

problem system with the foam to see if any of these would work. None of them showed any promise in these laboratory tests. So at that point, we just didn't know what we could do about it.

And for some reason or another I went to bed that night and I woke up early and I just—"why don't we just use hydraulic means instead of someone there." And, "Oh yes, use a hydraulic oil under pressure and let that do the job." So I made a sketch and went to the plant that day, I asked them if that would wake up this T-headed system of [inaudible] holes in this hatch, have holes in it so it could be just high pressure sending oil out and they put it together. We just installed it in the hatch and put it at an angle so that it was hitting the oil and it made the oil started moving because of this hitting oil on the other side. It just started moving and it came on by where this was. Well this just tore it apart. In a matter of just—no time at all, all this foam that came was just obliterated by this high pressure. It was a touch-up and service job, but it made them so happy they wanted to order a boxcar load of oil. So I was—I mean I was involved.

2-00:06:40

Dunning:

Right, well that's important.

2-00:06:43

Vincent:

And those kinds of technical service agencies to customers and oh, I was involved with steel mills and liberty mills and paper mills. I was in the companies that presented it for—whenever there was a failure that had to be investigated to find out if it was due to the product or whether it was due to the misuse of the product. I rather enjoyed those because I like to make people happy [chuckles], and I was just lucky or something, but I seem to be successful many times. I just had a reputation of being—of them asking for me.

2-00:07:34

Dunning:

And you stayed your whole career in Chevron.

2-00:07:37

Vincent:

Yes. Yes. I went to San Francisco 1946 and I was in the product engineer department and after that the whole wide world. I've been down from all the way from outer reaches of Alaska to Cape Town, South Africa.

2-00:07:56

Dunning:

Well, I'm hoping someday someone can get that story. Right now, we are going to be closing during the World War II periods, but I want to go back a little bit to our interview in 1985, when I remember you saying your wish was to reopen Ferry Point to the public. Now this has happened thanks to yours and Barbara's efforts, and today there is a park dedicated to you and Barbara. Does that just make you feel great? [laughs]

2-00:08:35

Vincent:

Sure does. Yeah. We have been a team a lot of years. Team effort and we just enjoyed doing what we were doing. She had twelve years on the Planning Commission and she has twenty-one years on the board of Save the Bay, so she had a lot of contacts that way. She was recognized by the Soroptimists one year and by the PTA one time and so it's has been a lot of enjoyable things. At Ferry Point, I recommended that a pier be built and that the whole section of the pier be thrown in

drive and the Ferry Point buildings be made available to the public with a trail. So that came to pass last year when they finished building the pier. That is such a great pleasure to see people enjoying it, it's just all walks of life—people old and young, well, just everyone. You can sit on a bench and just see this parade of happy people. This is very—at one time it was keep-out territory.

2-00:10:05

Dunning:

I remember that.

2-00:10:06

Vincent:

And here it was all those people enjoying it.

2-00:10:09

Dunning:

Well, remember the day that we walked it, there was a worker from Richmond Public Works who was putting in barbed wire and—

2-00:10:16

Vincent:

Yes. There was the remnants though. The pier that was used by the Golden Gate Ferry Company—as a car ferry. People could go to San Francisco in that and then it finally came to a conclusion, to an end, but this dock kept on falling apart and falling apart so there was just the remnants of it, and people just loved to go down there. I'd interview people about that, or whatever one calls it, "This is the only this I can afford to do, is fish." And there was a young couple who had their youngster, remember, with a little short pole and fishing line, and they had what looked like sandwich bread and a bottle of 7 UP, and that was their lunch. And they were just enjoying themselves with so little. It was—you get the feeling that there are just a lot of people who love to get where there is water. Whether they walk on it, or try to walk on it, or fish. So that is one of the great pleasures of seeing public access being recognized and being pushed so hard.

I think we have fourteen miles of public access in Richmond now. It's still an active project for our group. They are very well organized, able to get funding, and able to get the approval. There is just a whole group of them. There were a variety of us, not as well organized as this, but we got a lot done. A ten-year project at the Marina Bay was quite a time, but there was a developer that wanted every square inch of that park, really, to get his hands on, and you had the problem of wanting to say, "Look, we got to have some view quarters, people should know that they are at the bay." You shouldn't fill it all in, they wouldn't even know that they are out in the bay, or just out in the foothills somewhere." And I remember fighting for view quarters was a hassle and also to have adequate width for a standard trail instead of wanting to shorten it up and have more space for the back of homes. It's got to be wide enough so we can have what's recognized as a standard width of a trail. It was on and on. It was a hassle.

2-00:13:10

Dunning:

Well, it sounds like you have never stopped fighting for those causes, for public access.

2-00:13:18

Vincent:

I enjoy it.

2-00:13:20

Dunning:

Now do you see Richmond as a historical place? Or I should say maybe I'll add another question—what do you think Richmond should be remembered for?

2-00:13:39

Vincent:

Oh, let's see. Well, I think of the different projects where a lot of people, when they returned from the war, some of the younger enthusiastic people that wanted to have something done, and I remember deciding that the Civic Center should be built. It replaced that old building that we had, our town hall or town building. That was, I remember the dynamics of these young people that were just out of the war and wanted to see something happen. I recall that. That was, that was a passing thing, but it was quite a long time. The pressure of this younger group, not too young, but people who were dedicated to try to make the town a nice town and a lot of the planning that has been done is an attempt to upgrade our town. There was a lot of very successful deals that you could see in town, and, I think, the park out in Marina Bay though, with that new—I love that sculpture that they developed.

2-00:15:12

Dunning:

The Rosie the Riveter?

2-00:15:13

Vincent:

Rosie the Riveter. I think that's a nice, nice. That's really just nice. I think Richmond is establishing some things associated with—as a result of the war, like putting in this sculpture and museum, someday, hopefully, for the remnants of World War II.

2-00:15:44

Dunning:

Now, was there ever a time where you and your family considered leaving Richmond?

2-00:15:48

Vincent:

Never.

2-00:15:50

Dunning:

Now what made you stay?

2-00:15:52

Vincent:

Just because it's—we like the weather here, and we like the challenge here. I was working closely with the city for a long time, the Planning Department. I was getting every set of plans that were submitted to be built out at Marina Bay. Where the Marina Bay is has really developed into being a rather attractive place.

So there are not nice things that we keep on having. We could stop having murders here so often [laughs]. It would make life easier.

2-00:16:37

Dunning:

And you have been in the same houses for over sixty-five years?

2-00:16:42

Vincent:

Yes [laughs].

2-00:16:45

Dunning:

How has your neighborhood changed? You definitely look like you have the oldest house in the neighborhood.

2-00:16:52

Vincent:

Yes, we have the oldest house. Well, it's one of these deals where it's hard to know your neighbors and some people do a good job of keeping up their places and yard out in this area—not too bad. But I'm proud to say I'm from Richmond. I feel that Richmond has a lot of good things going for it.

2-00:17:19

Dunning:

Now, what do you see for the future of Richmond? You have been living here for over eighty years now.

2-00:17:30

Vincent:

Let's see. [pause] That's a hard one.

2-00:17:41

Barbara:

Jay—

2-00:17:43

Vincent:

Yes?

2-00:17:45

Barbara:

Tell her that it is going to have very difficult times.

2-00:17:50

Vincent:

Well, it will be difficult, anything that we try to do now—we are going through another one of these depression periods where you can't pass anything that's—

2-00:18:01

Dunning:

In the city government?

2-00:18:03

Vincent:

Yes. I heard them talking recently about the status of their funds, and they had hoped to have like a \$5,000,000 reserve. Well, they have been working down now by \$1,500,000. They were working off of their reserves in order to meet their budget requirements for the year. So that isn't good. To keep on working when you don't have any reserves. So it's going to be very difficult to pass any bonds or anything for quite a while because there are so many people that are

unemployed. I heard one figure that there is two and a half million people unemployed and you think there must be all these technical people—actually they said two million of them worked at various levels and only about five million of these, of those that are the scientists and working the hard tech operations—it would be difficult to turn this around.

I have my misgivings about the way they are going on about it. You can't keep on spending money as if you are Santa Claus bailing out somebody else. How about our own people?

2-00:19:40

Dunning:

Well, is there anything else you would like to add today?

2-00:19:44

Vincent:

I think you covered it the main points. Let me just think of it for a moment. [pause] No, I think you have done very well.

2-00:19:57

Dunning:

Okay. Let me ask you one more question. There was such a tremendous change in the population in terms of numbers and in terms of different ethnic groups coming in. How have you found that blend during the years since the war? Ups and downs, or—?

2-00:20:20

Vincent:

I think, well the number of black people are picking up, but then the Spanish or Mexican have just really moved into town. You notice that when you are on Twenty-Third Street, that I think that you see a grocery store about every two blocks [laughs]. It used to be you think driving a mile or two, to a Safeway or somewhere, but now they have got stores all up or down the street. So, the town is changing— its complexion. It's hard to tell how this will—

2-00:21:08

Dunning:

Now you have—you and Barbara have four sons and two live in Richmond. Do your other sons live around here?

2-00:21:18

Vincent:

Yes. David, our third boy, lives at home at he has his office in Point Richmond.

2-00:21:25

Dunning:

Oh, he still does, okay.

2-00:21:27

Vincent:

Yes, he was building it. He is very proud of it. He just got though replacing the bricks in his walkway because the tree roots grewed up and there were bulges and places, and that is hard, so he just finished doing that, which he has done himself. He is very proud of his little place. He has landscaped it nicely in the back and it's worth seeing. And so he's very involved with the theatre, Masquers Theater, and he puts a sandwich board on and sells raffle tickets for every show and this is developing funding for retrofitting the Masquers someday. They just recently completed

the mortgage on the warehouse that they purchased about ten years ago. So they have got that behind them and now anything they can raise will be going toward the retrofitting of the Masquers.

And one of our sons is in San Francisco. He is working with The Bancroft [Library].

2-00:22:55

Dunning:

Oh that's right.

2-00:22:58

Vincent:

And he is reviewing the project of all the different things that are being done at the UC [University of California] in the different areas. This year they are trying to actually catalogue in such a way that they know what's available.

2-00:23:28

Barbara:

Jay—

2-00:23:30

Vincent:

Yes?

2-00:23:33

Barbara:

Did you tell her about Earl?

2-00:23:35

Vincent:

Earl?

2-00:23:37

Barbara:

I think I have to tell you. We have a grandnephew, granddaughters, who are very tall. And one of them is now, oh not quite—she's over six -feet tall [laughs]. And when she gets around other people here this beautiful dark-haired girl stands out over them and then there is another one who is not our granddaughter, but she is the granddaughter of one of our sons, and she also is over six feet tall.

2-00:24:26

Dunning:

Well you have some tall genes in your family.

2-00:24:28

Vincent:

Super.

2-00:24:31

Barbara:

[laughing] You know when you see all these very tall people then you see this short, squatty ones like me, and you wonder where I came from!

2-00:24:40

Dunning:
[laughing]

2-00:24:42

Vincent:
I think what I'd like to do is invite you to have lunch and just a simple one.

2-00:24:47

Dunning:
We would love to do that, but actually Jess has to get back to UC, and my son is not in camp this week, so I have to check on him, but we really appreciate it. That was really nice of you to ask. But thank you very much. So I guess we would like to close now, and I do have some of those papers that you gave me and so I'll keep those at UC.

2-00:25:18

Vincent:
Yes. And I gave you the one about—

2-00:25:27

Dunning:
You didn't give it to me, but you said—oh, is this an extra one?

2-00:25:32

Vincent:
Yes.

2-00:25:34

Dunning:
Oh, okay that would be terrific. I'll put this in your file. But I want to thank you both for having us this morning. That was great.

2-00:25:39

Vincent:
It's fun.

2-00:25:42

Dunning:
And keep on truckin'. [laughter]

2-00:25:44

Vincent:
Do you want to take a picture of this?

2-00:25:49

Dunning:
Yes.

[End of Interview]