

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Cleophas Williams
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2008

Copyright © 2008 by The Regents of the University of California

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

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Cleophas Williams, dated March 18, 2008. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

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

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

Cleophas Williams, "Oakland Army Base Oral History Project" conducted by Jess Righelhaupt in 2008, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2008.

Discursive Table of Contents—Cleophas Williams

Interview #1: March 18, 2008

[Audio File: williams_cleophas1 03-18-2008.wav]

1

Recollections of first visit to Oakland Army Base for ILWU job—army base security and background checks prior to hiring—security checks becoming more stringent during Korean War, suspected communist sympathies were grounds for disqualification—union fights arbitrary disqualifications—pre-Korean War work: mostly boxcars, later, work in ships’ holds with ability to work weekends—contents of loads during Korean War: small arms and combat equipment—physical characteristics of army base—relations between workers and supervisors, Bicycle Bill—the Port Chicago blast in 1944 and OAB getting more work subsequently—comparison of OAB and the Naval Supply Center: Naval Supply Center cargo was largely food and medical supplies—details of loading/unloading hazardous military cargo—Korean War, McCarthy era security fears—more on war cargo: bodies and soldiers—Middle East oil boom supplies: pipes and other refinery items—use of CONEXEs, shipping military families abroad—integration of rail/ship transport borrowed by commercial companies from OAB—division of labor: ship scalers, clerks, “walk in” bosses—base-community relations in the 50s-60s, getting the word out about extra work—40s-50s: lean times for the port—1948 strike: “they tried to starve us out”—the 1960 contract—environmental regulations and concerns

[Audio File williams_cleophas2 03-18-2008.wav]

17

Vietnam War era’s increase in port activity—separating anti-war politics from work and duty to country—“the war was hard to accept”—ILWU’s continued anti-war stance—ILWU’s support of deeper draft to attract larger ships—closing thoughts on the ILWU

Cleophas Williams Interview #1: March 18, 2008
Begin Audio File williams_cleophas1 03-18-2008.wav

01-00:00:00

Rigelhaupt: It's March 18, 2008. I'm in Oakland, California, doing an oral history interview with Cleophas Williams on the history of the Oakland Army Base. And, from conversations that we've had, I understand you've worked there during the course of your career with the ILWU.

01-00:00:27

Williams: Yes.

01-00:00:28

Rigelhaupt: To begin, I wanted to ask you if you can recall your first visit to the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:00:35

Williams: I can't recall of my first visit.

01-00:00:40

Rigelhaupt: Was the first time you went to the Oakland Army Base for work?

01-00:00:45

Williams: It was for work, yes.

01-00:00:51

Rigelhaupt: So your first visit for work with the ILWU, and you were going to do similar—were you expecting it to be similar to other places that you did longshoring work?

01-00:01:05

Williams: Yes.

01-00:01:08

Rigelhaupt: And did that in fact hold true, that it was similar?

01-00:01:10

Williams: It was very similar.

01-00:01:12

Rigelhaupt: OK. Do you remember anything unique about going into the Army base for your first visit? Was there any extra security or anything because it was a military installation?

01-00:01:28

Williams: They inspected your pass. We had what was known as a Coast Guard pass, and they inspected the pass to see whether you had qualified.

01-00:01:44

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember how you got one of the Coast Guard passes to be qualified to work at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:01:52

Williams: Let me go back a little. We had just one pass, and that was the Waterfront Employers' Association pass when I first started to work there. And that pass qualified us for work, and only when we had special military work did we have to have a Coast Guard pass.

01-00:02:36

Rigelhaupt: And do you remember any of the procedures you had to go through to get the Coast Guard pass?

01-00:02:41

Williams: Yes. I had to fill out an application, telling where I was born, where I lived most of my life, what kind of work I did, where I went to school—just an ordinary background check.

01-00:03:07

Rigelhaupt: Were the passes relatively easy to get, or were there some members that were not able to do work at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:03:14

Williams: At first, the passes were easy to get. Then, after the Korean War, the passes became hard to get.

01-00:03:26

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any of the reasons why one of your co-workers might not have been able to get a pass?

01-00:03:32

Williams: Well, they had what was known as one's affiliation with the Communist Party, disqualified you from getting a pass.

01-00:03:50

Rigelhaupt: So that was the main reason that people —

01-00:03:52

Williams: That was the main reason.

01-00:03:54

Rigelhaupt: Do remember if you had any co-workers who weren't able to get a pass, but also were not necessarily associated with the Communist Party?

01-00:04:05

Williams: Yes. I remember that I questioned why some of my workers could not get passes. We had gone to the labor school together, and I got a pass, and some of them did not.

01-00:04:27

Rigelhaupt: So even though you guys had very similar backgrounds, you got a pass, and they didn't.

- 01-00:04:32
Williams: That's right. Some people got them, and some didn't.
- 01-00:04:36
Rigelhaupt: Did you and other union members have a sense that the passes were given somewhat arbitrarily, that —
- 01-00:04:43
Williams: Yes.
- 01-00:04:47
Rigelhaupt: And what was the union's response?
- 01-00:04:50
Williams: We fought it. We tried to get passes for everyone. Sometimes we won, sometimes we didn't.
- 01-00:04:59
Rigelhaupt: Thinking back, I guess, to the years just before the Korean War—and that sounds as though you had already done some work at the Army base —
- 01-00:05:08
Williams: Right.
- 01-00:05:09
Rigelhaupt: — before the Korean War.
- 01-00:05:09
Williams: Right. That's correct.
- 01-00:05:11
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember what you were loading and unloading at the Army base in the years before the Korean War?
- 01-00:05:17
Williams: I mainly loaded boxcars. I like car work because I could get a car job at the early part of the week, and I could work on it for all the week. It was like going back to the hall. And I lived on this side of the Bay. That made it easier for me. And car work entailed, anything that would come in, might be delivered by those freight cars.
- 01-00:05:51
Rigelhaupt: So, did you do more work around trains and the freight cars than with ships, loading and unloading at the Army base?
- 01-00:06:00
Williams: I did a large amount of car work. And then, after—there was a certain point in my life that I needed to work on weekends, and I went back to the ship hold. And that gave me a latitude to work weekends, if there was work on weekends. I needed the work.

- 01-00:06:35
Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any specifics about the cargo that was coming on or off the boxcars at the Oakland Army Base?
- 01-00:06:45
Williams: Small arms and almost anything that a soldier might need, and it was listed. No heavy ammunition.
- 01-00:07:08
Rigelhaupt: Did you have any sense that any of the cargo, thinking specifically about the years before the Korean War, was any more dangerous to handle than any of the cargo you might have handled at a regular longshore job site?
- 01-00:07:25
Williams: I didn't have any sense that it was any more dangerous, no.
- 01-00:07:30
Rigelhaupt: So there were no big weapons coming through.
- 01-00:07:31
Williams: No, no.
- 01-00:07:32
Rigelhaupt: OK. If you could take a minute and try and describe your impression of the Oakland Army Base, if you could describe, thinking about your early years working there, what it was like as you drove in, if you could think about what you would see to your right and your left, and if you could give a physical description of the Army base, from your perspective.
- 01-00:08:03
Williams: The Army base, you had streets and a gate that led into the base, near the bridge toll. That was the main entrance. It was parallel with the bridge toll. We had Pier 6, Pier 6 1/2, Pier 7 East and Pier 7 West. Those were the main piers, and then we had Pier 4—4 later became a big commercial area, but the main piers in those days were Pier 6 and Pier 7.
- 01-00:09:12
Rigelhaupt: And what about the buildings at the Army base? What were the warehouses like, if you could just—?
- 01-00:09:17
Williams: The warehouses were separate and apart from the ship terminals. We had very little reasons to go to the warehouses. Sometimes we'd go over to the cafeteria to eat—to have to go outside the gate, in order to go to the cafeteria. And it was a nice change of scenery, to go to the cafeteria.
- 01-00:09:52
Rigelhaupt: So, again, staying with the time period in the late 1940s or so, in your years working there before the Korean War, how many ILW co-workers would you estimate that were working with you at the Oakland Army Base, on most days?

01-00:10:09

Williams:

Oh, we had probably, that worked regularly in the car gangs, if there was plenty of work at Pier 7, there were fifty to sixty fellows who were called back from day to day to finish the job. And the boss that—we called him Bicycle Bill because he rode a bicycle around all the time, and he was very strict, but he wasn't fair, and he was called back, so he was called back or replaced. And we knew that, but we had to accept it. Most of us were car men, and we didn't think we had certain right, and we didn't push our rights too far. And we didn't want to become too controversial. Those of us who did become controversial, we seldom got call backs.

01-00:11:46

Rigelhaupt:

Your boss, Bicycle Bill, who did he work for?

01-00:11:49

Williams:

He worked for the stevedore company, and we worked for the stevedore company.

01-00:12:03

Rigelhaupt:

I've read that one of the issues that came up later on was related to workers who were employed by the Civil Service.

01-00:12:13

Williams:

OK. Civil Service workers worked there prior to the Port Chicago blast. They worked there, and they worked at Fort Mason before they—And after the Port Chicago blast, we got a great deal of the military work, both at the Army base, Fort Mason, and at the Navy Supply. We contended that we—and I think we fairly contended—that we were more skilled than the workers that they had used prior to Port Chicago. And they evidently accepted our contention, and we got lots of the work, most of the work at that time.

01-00:13:20

Rigelhaupt:

Were you already working at the Army base when the explosion took place at Port Chicago?

01-00:13:25

Williams:

I was already working as a longshoreman. The night that it occurred, I was working up at a place called Richmond Long Wharf. I worked very few nights, but I was working nights on that occasion, and we hear the roar, and we later learned what had happened.

01-00:13:48

Rigelhaupt:

What did you think had happened at first, when you first heard the roar?

01-00:13:54

Williams:

I just didn't know. I just thought a ship had blown up. And we'd learned about it over the radio.

01-00:14:09

Rigelhaupt:

So, after Port Chicago, there was a change in who got military work.

01-00:14:15

Williams: Right. We got more of it.

01-00:14:19

Rigelhaupt: And was that something that the union had been advocating for, even before the explosion at Port Chicago?

01-00:14:24

Williams: Oh, yes. We'd been trying to get all the work. By getting all the work, we could employ more people.

01-00:14:40

Rigelhaupt: Well, staying with those early years, still during World War II, did you work at other military bases besides the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:14:47

Williams: Prior to World War—?

01-00:14:48

Rigelhaupt: During World War II, or just after.

01-00:14:52

Williams: I didn't do any longshore work before World War II. I was hired as a longshoreman on the 15 of February, 1944. I had no longshore experience prior to that.

01-00:15:17

Rigelhaupt: So, in those few years after you started longshore work, you know, from '44 till, say, 1950, did you work at other Army bases or naval bases besides the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:15:35

Williams: I worked at all the military bases.

01-00:15:38

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe any differences you saw between the Oakland Army Base and other military bases you worked at?

01-00:15:47

Williams: The Army base was closer, where I could work there. I liked to work there because it was close to where I lived. The Navy Supply was more militaristic. They were more strict than their—the Navy was very strict. The military people did their work, but they didn't push you as hard as the security people at the Navy base.

01-00:16:34

Rigelhaupt: And you're talking about the Naval Supply Center, just next to the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:16:37

Williams: That is correct.

- 01-00:16:40
Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about the cargo you were loading or unloading at the naval base?
- 01-00:16:47
Williams: It was mainly supplies to sustain personnel. It wasn't combat supplies. It was food and medical supplies.
- 01-00:17:21
Rigelhaupt: Did you do any work in those years out at Concord?
- 01-00:17:26
Williams: Concord was not—no, because I did not. Immediately after the blast, or shortly after the blast, we began to get the work up at Port Chicago. We called it Port Chicago. Later, it was called Concord Weapons Depot.
- 01-00:18:06
Rigelhaupt: Now, am I right to understand that a lot of the cargo being loaded and unloaded at Port Chicago was more weapons-based?
- 01-00:18:18
Williams: Yes.
- 01-00:18:20
Rigelhaupt: Were there any special safety regulations that the union asked for, in working with the weapons up at Port Chicago?
- 01-00:18:29
Williams: I don't know. I wasn't—The only thing I know is that we were required, not to have certain things in our pockets, and we were required to use certain gloves. I don't know the kind of negotiations that went on.
- 01-00:18:56
Rigelhaupt: But, as a worker, you didn't have a sense or a feeling that the cargo was any more dangerous to handle than other cargo?
- 01-00:19:07
Williams: No. When we had to handle very dangerous cargo, we went off shore. We went out in the Bay, so that if there was a blast, it didn't harm anything on the shore side.
- 01-00:19:32
Rigelhaupt: Could you describe how that would work, going out to the Bay, and loading, unloading? I'm having trouble picturing it.
- 01-00:19:41
Williams: A tugboat would take us out in the Bay, and, alongside the ship, there would be tugs—I'm trying to get it correct. So much {stress?}. I remember, but I can't explain lots of things. This cargo would come in and would be towed by the tugs, and we would handle it out in the Bay. We'd have to have special gloves, and sometimes we'd put socks over our shoes, and we'd work in those

all day. In addition to the civilian security people, the military had its own people there, just as double security, and we were told how to handle cargo in a safe manner, not to drop any of the cases. We handled dynamite, and we also handled certain arms out in the Bay, the heavier arms out in the Bay. As I remember, we even handled some bombs. The bombs were handled up at Benicia. We had that work then. It was a port that handled lots of—because of its distance away from things, and the way that the terminal was built. We handled lots of explosives there.

01-00:22:52

Rigelhaupt: Was there anything that came through the Oakland Army Base where you had to load and unload out in the Bay because it was dangerous in a way that was similar to Benicia or Port Chicago?

01-00:23:05

Williams: No, no.

01-00:23:09

Rigelhaupt: And were there ever times at the Oakland Army Base that there was the double security that you described, that you would have civilian security and military security?

01-00:23:23

Williams: At the Army base, or—?

01-00:23:25

Rigelhaupt: At the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:23:26

Williams: Oh, yes, there were time when we'd have both.

01-00:23:29

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember what would have —

01-00:23:33

Williams: I never knew the reasons.

01-00:23:36

Rigelhaupt: Did it increase during the Korean War?

01-00:23:42

Williams: The Korean War brought an area of suspicion that we didn't have prior, where everybody—When I say an area of suspicion, we didn't know who was— They had created a situation to make you think that you didn't know who was faithful, and who was not. This was part of what was known as the Joe McCarthy era, and they were very, very, very skillful in the way they did this, to make you suspect the person who was next to you as being someone who was not faithful to the country.

01-00:25:12

Rigelhaupt:

Did you get a sense there was more suspicion when you worked at military installations than when you worked, say, at the Port of Oakland, or the Port of San Francisco?

01-00:25:27

Williams:

Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. When you were at the commercial bases, you were much more relaxed. When you were at the military bases, you always wondered why certain friends of yours could not work there, same guys you came up with.

01-00:26:08

Rigelhaupt:

Did the work increase, as far as the amount of cargo coming in and out of the Oakland Army Base, during the Korean War?

01-00:26:17

Williams:

Oh, yes. The work increased, and we also held bodies that were shipped back. After a while, we became indifferent to them. It was just cargo.

01-00:26:45

Rigelhaupt:

Do you remember having any conversations with your co-workers about what it was like to handle the bodies of returning soldiers?

01-00:26:55

Williams:

Oh, yes. We talked about it a lot. The soldiers' names were on the caskets, and their rank, and their serial number, and we knew that we couldn't be able— After a while, you handled so many that it was just cargo, but somehow, you knew that you were handling the body of a human being.

01-00:27:39

Rigelhaupt:

And so, you took the bodies of returning soldiers off ships?

01-00:27:47

Williams:

Yes.

01-00:27:48

Rigelhaupt:

And did they go to a rail car?

01-00:27:53

Williams:

Yes, rail cars were specially outfitted to take so many bodies.

01-00:28:07

Rigelhaupt:

Do you remember if soldiers were shipping out to Korea through the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:28:15

Williams:

Yes, I remember their shipping out. They'd come there, and that would be the last port before they, their exiting port. Sure. This area was a very sensitive and key area to things that were going on in the Far East, mainly. And also, we mustn't forget how we prepared for the Middle East oil explosion. We handled, in this area, lots of the pipes that were used for improving the Middle

East as a vital oil area. It was very quietly kept. It didn't go through the Army base, but it came through this port.

01-00:29:45

Rigelhaupt: Was that because there were companies in the region that were —

01-00:29:48

Williams: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. For several years, we shipped pipes and everything that was related to refinery work.

01-00:30:18

Rigelhaupt: Well, staying with the Korean War again, for a moment, how would you compare the activity at the Oakland Army Base to other military installations in the region, from, say, Benicia, to Port Chicago, to the Naval—? What were the different activities going on at them?

01-00:30:36

Williams: It was a little larger. It handled more cargo than any of the other bases, much more cargo, the Oakland Army Base did. I don't know whether it's the draft of the ships, or what, but it had more cargo.

01-00:31:13

Rigelhaupt: Staying with those early years that you worked there, I mean in the 1940s and fifties, who else worked at the Oakland Army Base besides the ILW? What were the other types of jobs that you saw going on at the Army base?

01-00:31:31

Williams: Civil Service jobs. We were always trying to organize the workers, but we were told to keep hands off, but we wanted those workers in the union. And many of the workers had heard about the ILWU, and they wanted to know how they could improve their benefits. They had what was known as—I'm trying to think what it was called, but for workers who did the same work as union workers did, they were to get similar pay, and the government did that for a long time. First we got it. Sometimes we got it through struggle. Sometimes we got it through strikes. And after we got it, it was a me, too thing.

01-00:32:46

Rigelhaupt: So, the Civil Service jobs that were also at the Army base, were they mostly dealing with supplies?

01-00:32:56

Williams: Yeah. They were dealing with supplies. They were processing them in some way before we got them. They did most of the paperwork.

01-00:33:20

Rigelhaupt: How did your work at the Army base differ, if it did at all, from some of the commercial ports you worked at, in the sense, did the military use different technology? Did they employ containerization earlier than other job sites? What are some of the things you could describe?

- 01-00:33:41
Williams: They employed containers in a way that was different, in boxes that they called CONEXs [container express, military shipping containers]. These were small containers in comparison to the containers that we have now. We call them CONEXs, and we had a way of stowing them across the ship like we would in other cargo, except that we used the {jinnies?} to bang them in place sometimes. But they were the onset of the containers.
- 01-00:34:46
Rigelhaupt: Did the military have any other technology that made longshoring work at the Army base than other places?
- 01-00:34:53
Williams: They shipped supplies for families. A family would go overseas, and that family would have their whole kitchen, or household supplies, stored by {beacons of?} some of the storage companies. And they would ship them overseas through the Army base. The military would pay for it.
- 01-00:35:38
Rigelhaupt: So, if they were being stationed at Okinawa, or —
- 01-00:35:40
Williams: Wherever.
- 01-00:35:42
Rigelhaupt: — you shipped a lot of the family supplies all over the world.
- 01-00:35:47
Williams: Yes.
- 01-00:35:55
Rigelhaupt: Now, the integration you've described, of rail and ship cargo, and that they were moving together at the Oakland Army Base, was that going on simultaneously at other job sites, commercial ports, that the rail and ship would be close together, and that you would move cargo between the two?
- 01-00:36:19
Williams: Not as much. At the commercial ports, it was right down the middle, clear-cut. They didn't integrate it as much as the Army base did.
- 01-00:36:45
Rigelhaupt: Have you seen that change since—?
- 01-00:36:48
Williams: We don't know what's in those containers now.
- 01-00:36:53
Rigelhaupt: But is the rail component of the transportation, is it more closely integrated with what comes on and off the ships?

01-00:37:06

Williams: Oh, yes. Very much so. Many times, it's the same companies. And we have fought for our share of that work.

01-00:37:22

Rigelhaupt: Do you think that's something that commercial shippers perhaps learned from the transportation systems at the Oakland Army Base and from the military, to integrate ship and rail cargo and its ability to move?

01-00:37:40

Williams: I'm sure they have. We were very efficient at what we did. It didn't take long for us to teach our longshoremen and clerks how to do the work. That was most advantageous to us.

01-00:38:08

Rigelhaupt: From your perspective, having worked in both the military and commercial ports for decades, is it a good thing that ships and rail are closely connected with one another now, and that cargo can move between the two pretty quickly?

01-00:38:27

Williams: Well, yes, this is a good thing. We're having problems with that, and the ports that have integrated those systems are the ports that get most of the work. You take containers having to go through—what's the, {to do on a summit?}? They don't have that kind of problem down in the L.A./Long Beach area. And then, if they get through some of the {tunnels?}, some of the {tunnels?} are not designed to take care of those {fuse?} containers on the freight cars now. It's a lot different.

01-00:39:33

Rigelhaupt: So that's part of the reason there's more longshoring work at Long Beach and San Pedro.

01-00:39:37

Williams: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

01-00:39:39

Rigelhaupt: Because the trains can take the cargo east —

01-00:39:41

Williams: Much more easily.

01-00:39:46

Rigelhaupt: So the ports —

01-00:39:47

Williams: And they don't have to go through the mountains, like the Tehachapi. They don't have to deal with Tehachapi, like they have here.

01-00:40:04
Rigelhaupt: Well, actually, one of the things I'm not clear on, and maybe you could explain to me, is that both Local 10, which was longshore, worked at the Oakland Army Base, and then Local 34. Were they ship scaling?

01-00:40:20
Williams: Were they what?

01-00:40:21
Rigelhaupt: Ship scaling? Is that right?

01-00:40:22
Williams: Ship scalers.

01-00:40:23
Rigelhaupt: Ship scalers.

01-00:40:25
Williams: Yeah. Well, they were never a part of the contract. They cleaned the ships and scraped them down, but they never were a part of the contract.

01-00:40:42
Rigelhaupt: At the Army base?

01-00:40:43
Williams: They were never a part of the ILWU big contract. See, we have the contract that takes care of the clerks, the longshoremen, and the {walk-in?} bosses. We all work together. The {walk-in?} bosses are not in our contract, but they are related to us.

01-00:41:14
Rigelhaupt: Could you describe what a {walking?} boss and all the different positions you've just described, what they do on each given day of work?

01-00:41:25
Williams: A {walk-in?} boss sees that the work is done by the men and women efficiently. And the clerks take care of the logistics of the work. And we handle the physical cargo. They don't. And we're constantly telling them to keep their hands off it if they put their hands on it.

01-00:41:56
Rigelhaupt: So, do a lot of the clerks work at job sites alongside—?

01-00:42:03
Williams: Oh, yes.

01-00:42:04
Rigelhaupt: OK. So they're not mostly at the hall near Fisherman's Wharf?

01-00:42:11
Williams: Oh, they don't work out of our hall. They have a hall of their own. Local 34 is down near the ballpark.

01-00:42:27

Rigelhaupt: Now, did members ever move between the two?

01-00:42:31

Williams: Oh, yes. We still do. We started off exchanging work, but now we have continued that there would be a one-doorway entry, that you come in as a longshoreman, and you're promoted to become a clerk, rather than starting off as a clerk.

01-00:43:08

Rigelhaupt: Again, staying with the early years of the Army base in the forties and the fifties, and from your experiences coming to work, did you get a sense that a lot of people in West Oakland were connected to the Oakland Army Base, either through jobs—?

01-00:43:29

Williams: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they were connected, quite connected.

01-00:43:34

Rigelhaupt: Well, how would you describe the base/community relations in the early years that you worked there?

01-00:43:40

Williams: They knew if a person lived in West Oakland, and there was extra work, they knew they had a chance to get it. And when they got it, they were paid longshore wages. And they came in. The pay was not tiered. They got the same as everybody else, and they were happy to get a day's work, and they were hoping at one time the {books?} would open so that they could get in. There was always a good relationship.

01-00:44:19

Rigelhaupt: How did people find out if there was going to be extra work on a given day?

01-00:44:26

Williams: In time, we communicated with their social system. The warehouse had a hall, and we'd send extra work {through?} the warehouse. And these workers would go through a warehouse, either go through ship scalers, or they'd go through their union, {or we'd ship to?} call the jobs directly to their union. Perhaps the carpenters. The carpenters, they had men in the hall, and they wanted to do longshore work, and most of them would take the jobs if we would call the jobs over to them. If we had fifteen jobs, and carpenters who had fifteen who didn't go out and wanted to do longshore work, they'd come to the hall. I mean, they'd come to the job directly from their hall, with a slip that said they had been dispatched through this system. And in time, that relationship became a good relationship. It built itself into a good relationship. Other unions would be on strike, and when we had extra work, we'd ship it out.

- 01-00:46:02
Rigelhaupt: And so, when there was extra work at the Army base, the ILWU would go seek out extra help, rather than the Army or the Civil Service.
- 01-00:46:11
Williams: That's right. That's right.
- 01-00:46:14
Rigelhaupt: Did you ever contact local churches or other —
- 01-00:46:17
Williams: Oh, yes. Contact any—wherever men might hang out. First you'd go through the union system, and if you couldn't get the men through the union system, you'd get it wherever men might hang out. And they would process the jobs. I'll tell the men where to show up, and we'll handle it from there.
- 01-00:46:46
Rigelhaupt: Well, on a typical day in the forties and the fifties, how much extra work and extra workers would have come from the West Oakland community to the Oakland Army Base?
- 01-00:47:00
Williams: In the forties and fifties, these were hard times here, hard times at the port. We didn't have any extra work until the Korean War. We struggled to keep the union going because the port, after the '48 strike—see, they tried to starve us out.
- 01-00:47:38
Rigelhaupt: Was there a cutback at the Oakland Army Base as well after the strike in '48?
- 01-00:47:43
Williams: I don't know. I don't know what the Civil Service people did. I know we tried to get all those workers in through our union. In time, we got a lot of them in.
- 01-00:48:05
Rigelhaupt: You said the forties and the fifties were hard times. When would you describe a period of expansion or growth in waterfront work in the Bay Area?
- 01-00:48:21
Williams: It came along with the 1960 contract, the container contract. That's when things changed. You had a change in leadership with the employers. That change of leadership, where the—some of the employers at the high levels, you could talk to them, and it created a—you didn't see yourselves as adversaries. You saw yourselves as the same people in the same industry, trying to get along. Prior to the '48 strike, and prior to Korea, everything seemed so adversarial, and that changed, to some extent, after we had new leadership in the—the ship owners had new leadership. I don't remember their names because it's—and they negotiated the container contract that the men in this area didn't like because of the insertion of steady men. We had always

been against steady company men, and this became a new look. The company contended that they had to have steady men in order to be competitive.

01-00:50:49

Rigelhaupt: When you say steady men, what do you mean?

01-00:50:52

Williams: Men who worked regularly for the company, instead of coming out of the hall.

01-00:51:00

Rigelhaupt: Did the use of steady men also take place at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:51:06

Williams: I don't know. That's a different ball game, but what happened there, because the certain companies, when they had their work, they'd take these mobile cranes into the Army base and do that work where needed. These fellows went where the companies wanted them to go, and they were good at what they did because they worked steady for the company. They're on the same equipment day after day, and when they weren't working so much, they were helping the mechanics to—They were kind of helping the mechanics, too, spot what was wrong with the equipment. It became a relationship between the companies and the steady men that the union didn't like because men became somewhat loyal to the company, more loyal to the company than they were to the union.

01-00:52:56

Rigelhaupt: About that time in 1960, with the contract that led to containerization, did you see a parallel increase in containerization at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:53:11

Williams: I don't know. I really don't know what was going on there because I saw Pier 4 become a commercial pier. That company—I've forgotten the name of the company, but they went into Pier 4, and they became a real contender. You had shipping.

01-00:54:00

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any specific environmental issues that came up at the Oakland Army Base? And I ask in the sense that, at least from my understanding, the military has slightly different environmental regulations they have to follow, compared to commercial enterprises. And I'm wondering, as a worker—and especially through the ILWU has been very aware, environmental issues in the port. Was there anything you remember at the Oakland Army Base?

01-00:54:30

Williams: Not any more than any other place in the port. We were always trying to have clean air and not to disturb the habitat of fish too much.

01-00:54:52

Rigelhaupt: So it wasn't anything all that different going on at the Army base?

01-00:54:54
Williams: No, no more than other places.

01-00:55:10
Rigelhaupt: I'm just going to pause and change tapes.

01-00:55:14
Williams: OK.

Begin Audio File williams_cleophas2 03-18-2008.wav

02-00:00:00
Rigelhaupt: This is tape number two with Cleophas Williams on March 18, 2008. I want to jump forward a little bit in your recollections on the Oakland Army Base. How do you remember things changing during the Vietnam War?

02-00:00:33
Williams: I know we handled a lot of cargo during that time. Our position against the war had nothing to do with our responsibility to load the ships, which we did. And we had, to some extent, the same problem of bodies that we had with Korean vets. But I don't remember too much, too many changes in the handling of cargo.

02-00:01:45
Rigelhaupt: Did the base get busier, just with troops getting ready to ship out to Vietnam?

02-00:01:50
Williams: It got busy. It got busy.

02-00:01:55
Rigelhaupt: Did you meet any of the soldiers?

02-00:01:58
Williams: No, I didn't.

02-00:02:00
Rigelhaupt: So your work was pretty separate from —

02-00:02:02
Williams: Right.

02-00:02:04
Rigelhaupt: Where soldiers might only stay for a few days or a week before shipping out to Vietnam.

02-00:02:08
Williams: Right.

- 02-00:02:11
Rigelhaupt: And was that pretty true for most ILW workers, that you didn't interact with any of the soldiers coming in and out?
- 02-00:02:19
Williams: I don't know. I don't think that that was true. Some of the men had more interaction than I did. I was getting older at the time of Vietnam, and I didn't have the interaction that some of the younger men probably had.
- 02-00:02:45
Rigelhaupt: What was it like working there, in the sense that the union was pretty vocally opposed to the war?
- 02-00:02:59
Williams: Well, we didn't have too much trouble because our responsibility to our country was greater than our opposition to the war.
- 02-00:03:23
Rigelhaupt: Do you recall any conversations that you had with any of your co-workers about—?
- 02-00:03:30
Williams: Not to load the ships? Oh, no. We talked about the war, and we debated our position and opposition against the war at union meetings, but that had nothing to do with our handling the cargo. When the allocations would come to the hall, we would take them and fill them.
- 02-00:04:04
Rigelhaupt: And you said that soldiers who died, their bodies were also coming back through the Oakland Army Base during Vietnam.
- 02-00:04:16
Williams: Um-hum.
- 02-00:04:19
Rigelhaupt: Did that have a different feeling to it than the Korean War, in the sense that there was more opposition to the Vietnam War in the U.S.—I mean, back home, as a whole, than, say, the Korean War?
- 02-00:04:35
Williams: I can't say. I really don't know. The times were changing, and I wasn't too in step with what was going on. I heard the debates, but I didn't participate in those debates like I had participated in earlier debates.
- 02-00:05:06
Rigelhaupt: Did you have a sense that, as opposition to the Vietnam War grew in the United States, and that there was a sense that maybe this was an un-winnable war, that it became harder and harder to see the bodies of young men and young women coming home in that context?

02-00:05:39

Williams:

I don't know. I just have to say, I don't know. Things were changing. Things were changing in my life. Things were changing in the world. Vietnam was—the war was so hard to accept. It was hard to accept at the union. It was hard to accept period.

02-00:06:14

Rigelhaupt:

What were some of the reasons you thought it was hard to accept, and the union thought it was hard to accept?

02-00:06:24

Williams:

Well, at that time, you had a draft, where you don't have a draft in this war, and during the draft, things are so unequal in how men are drafted {to it?}. In this war, it's different. I'm against this war, but we never had a draft. The men elected to do what they're doing, either through the Army, or otherwise they were a part of some military structure. When their companies were taken over, they went. They had to go, but not as individuals, as had happened in Vietnam. This war really tells you about how poor soldiers, poor people, seek employment rather than—where there's no employment, and they go into the military. The other was just drafted, period. And those who could beat the draft, beat it. Those who couldn't, didn't. But the draft went on.

02-00:08:36

Rigelhaupt:

How much a role did the ILW play in the anti-Vietnam War movement in the Bay Area?

02-00:08:43

Williams:

I don't remember that now. You're talking about 1967, '65, and it was a war when people—The ILW spoke out. Many unions spoke out. Civil rights leaders spoke out against it. It was a different, different—If I can say it was different, it was just different in how it struck our union. This war is—but I was glad Vietnam was over. And I'll be glad when this war is over. It's just destroyed so much in this country.

02-00:10:09

Rigelhaupt:

Part of my asking about the ILW's involvement with the anti-Vietnam War movement is that, from what I've read, the union was very involved with, say, the Civil Rights Movement in the Bay Area.

02-00:10:24

Williams:

Right.

02-00:10:26

Rigelhaupt:

Am I correct in understanding that the ILW certainly was vocally, if not with members, supported the protests at the Sheraton Palace Hotel?

02-00:10:42

Williams:

You're taking me back to an area that I could really say something that I'm not prepared to speak. My memory is not there, and I'm thinking about my years, the years of my life during Vietnam, and the Palace Hotel struggle. See,

we were involved in so many struggles in the ILWU that memory just doesn't serve me correctly. I know we were just out there. We fought, and we struggled. We fought, and we struggled, and that's the story of the ILWU. It's been involved in the struggles of anti-war movement as long as I've been in the union. As long as I've known anything about the union, it's had a position against wars. And we've preached that position from the podium as long as I've been in the union—had an anti-war attitude. As poor as—as much as we needed work, we still were against war.

02-00:12:33

Rigelhaupt: And was that true with the first Gulf War in 1991?

02-00:12:38

Williams: Same is true all over. I've never known a war that this country has been in that we have endorsed.

02-00:12:49

Rigelhaupt: Except for probably World War II.

02-00:12:52

Williams: I wasn't here during World War II. And they were against—yeah, that was a different kind of war. Yeah, they were against the Japanese imperialism and also against Hitler. But I wasn't here. I knew so little about unions then, so little about unions, and I came from a right-to-work state. Everything I read in the newspaper was against unions.

02-00:13:46

Rigelhaupt: To go back to the first Gulf War in the early nineties, did you notice an increase, as far as what went on at the Oakland Army Base?

02-00:14:02

Williams: I was retired. I don't know.

02-00:14:04

Rigelhaupt: I was going to ask, what year did you retire?

02-00:14:07

Williams: In 1991—I mean, '81, 1981.

02-00:14:11

Rigelhaupt: But you didn't hear much about anything changing?

02-00:14:14

Williams: No.

02-00:14:21

Rigelhaupt: Well, those are largely my questions on—Well, let me ask one more question on the Army base. Did you have an opinion on the decision to close the Army base in 1995?

02-00:14:41

Williams: They closed it and put a school there.

02-00:14:50

Rigelhaupt: And, I think, some of the land went to the Port of Oakland, as well.

02-00:14:52

Williams: Yeah. I didn't have an opinion on it. I don't remember what the union's position was. I really don't remember what the union's position was because that area, we wanted the port to enlarge itself, and we wanted the draft to go deeper, and we were fighting for a deeper draft, moreso than the expansion of the port. And we're still fighting for a deeper draft.

02-00:15:29

Rigelhaupt: And the deeper draft is so larger ships can come in?

02-00:15:33

Williams: Right. If we get larger ships, we can get some of the work, and we can get some of the cooperation between the railroads and get it across country. That means more work for us in this area.

02-00:15:56

Rigelhaupt: Is that one of the things that might be good for the Port of Oakland and ILW workers, that some of the rail lines coming into the land at the Oakland Army Base could be pretty closely integrated to the Port of Oakland operations?

02-00:16:12

Williams: Right. We need that. We need that integration. We don't need the containers to stack up and just stack up. Containers are supposed to move, in and out, in and out, all the time.

02-00:16:38

Rigelhaupt: Well, as I said, those are largely my questions on the Oakland Army Base. How I like to end is, is there anything that I should have asked about the Army base that I didn't, or is there anything you'd like to add?

02-00:16:55

Williams: I never worked Civil Service. I just observed, and I know the workers down there who are not in a high position of Civil Service wanted to become ILWU members when the books opened. And whenever they did ask me about things that I had no power to assist, and that is when the books would open, and how they could become longshoremen. And they still ask those questions. We think we have the best union. As small as it is, we think we have the best union in the world because we protect our men across the board, and women across the board. They are protected equally, and we couldn't ask for more. Even in retirement, they are protected. It's a union that has done so much for the people, in and out of the union. Sail the banner high.

02-00:18:24

Rigelhaupt: I think that's a nice place to end.

02-00:18:26

Williams: Thank you.

02-00:18:27

Rigelhaupt: Thank you.