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ON THE WATERFRONT:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

M. M. SNODGRASS

MEMORIES OF THE RICHMOND-SAN RAFAEL FERRY COMPANY

An Interview Conducted by
Judith K. Dunning
in 1985



M.M. "TUBBY" SNODGRASS
1986

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning

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Ferry employee

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Introduction by Jim Quay, Director, California Council for the Humanities.

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INTRODUCTION by Jim Quay

It is a great pleasure to introduce "On the Waterfront" to you. I myself was introduced to the project in September 1983, shortly after becoming executive director of the California Council for the Humanities. Both the Council and its mission of bringing the humanities to out-of-school adults were relatively new to me when Judith Dunning came to my office to talk about her proposal. Ms. Dunning wanted to document an important period in the life of the Richmond, California waterfront, but she didn't want to write a study for scholars. Instead, she proposed to interview most of the oldest surviving waterfront figures, collect historic photographs of the port and its workers, and to create from these an exhibit for the public. Would the Council be interested in supporting such a project?

Happily, the two dozen scholars and citizens who sat on the Council then were interested and, convinced of the project's importance, voted to fund Ms. Dunning's proposal in early 1984. Six years later, I now know what I couldn't have known then: that "On the Waterfront" had all the features of a typical public humanities project: a powerful subject, caring scholars, a resourceful and dedicated project director, and uncertain funding.

You can appreciate why even the best public humanities project--and "On the Waterfront" is one of the best--doesn't easily attract funding. In a state focused relentlessly on the future, the next quarterly statement, the next development, the value of such a project doesn't show up in a cost-benefit analysis. Who would care about the lives of Californians past? Who would care about a waterfront whose boomtime is passed?

The answer is: thousands of people, as Judith's project proved. First and foremost, Judith, who didn't just study Richmond, but moved to and lived in Richmond. Like so many project directors, she gave time and life to this project far beyond the amount budgeted. In the language of accounting this is called "in-kind contribution"; in the language of life it's called devotion. Those of us privileged to know Judith know that the project both exhausted her and enriched her, and she has won the admiration of those who supported her and the affection of those she has interviewed and worked with.

After Judith came a handful of interested scholars--historian Chuck Wollenberg, folklorist Archie Green, and oral historian Willa Baum--who gave their time and expertise to the project. Next, a handful of people at organizations like CCH, Chevron and Mechanics Bank, who thought enough of the idea to fund it. Finally, eventually, came the thousands of visitors to Richmond Festival by the Bay during 1985-87 and saw the photographs and read the excerpts from interviews and realized that they too cared about these people. And now, you, the reader of these interviews, have an opportunity to care.

In its fifteen years of supporting efforts to bring the humanities to the out-of-school public in California, the Council has seen two great themes emerge in the projects it funds: community and diversity. "On the Waterfront" embodies both. I think such projects are compelling to us because in our busy lives, we often encounter diversity more as a threat than as a blessing, and community more as an absence than as a presence.

"On the Waterfront" gives us all a chance to experience the blessings of diversity. The life details that emerge from these pictures and voices make us appreciate how much the people of the Richmond waterfront are unlike us, how much attitudes, economies, and working conditions have changed. Yet because the portraits are so personal and intimate, we can also recognize the ways in which they are like us, in their struggles, their uncertainties, their pride, and their fates. What seemed like difference becomes part of a greater sense of who "we" are.

In the lives of waterfront people, we can also glimpse how a community grew and waned. Busy with our own lives, we often neglect the activities that knit communities together. Judith Dunning's project allows us to see what we are losing and how communities are created and destroyed. And so, "On the Waterfront" fulfills the oldest promise of the humanities: that in learning about others, we learn about ourselves. For the gift of these twenty-six lives, we can thank Judith Dunning.

Jim Quay
Executive Director
California Council for the Humanities

March 2, 1990
San Francisco, California

PREFACE

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

"On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," began in 1985. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Bay Area residents including early Richmond families, World War II Kaiser Shipyard workers, cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers.

I was first attracted to this shoreline industrial town located sixteen miles northeast of San Francisco in 1982 while enrolled in a documentary photography class. For ten weeks I concentrated on the Richmond waterfront, often accompanying the crew of the freighter Komoku on its nightly run from Richmond to C & H Sugar in Crockett. It was then that I began to hear colorful stories of Richmond's waterfront and the City's World War II days.

The question which captivated me in 1982 and still does is--what happened to Richmond when World War II transformed this quiet working class town into a 24-hour-day industrial giant? With the entry of the Kaiser Shipyard, the number of employed industrial workers skyrocketed from 4,000 to 100,000. An unprecedented number of women entered the work force. The shipyards set speed and production records producing one-fifth of the nation's Liberty ships. By 1945 Richmond's shipyards had launched 727 ships.

There were other enormous changes. During the wartime boom, Richmond's population rose from 23,000 to 125,000. The ethnic composition of Richmond and the entire Bay Area changed dramatically with the influx of workers recruited from the South and Midwest. There was little time to provide the needed schools and community services. Housing shortages were critical. Twenty-four thousand units of war housing were built but they were soon filled to capacity. People were living in make-shift trailer camps along the roadsides and the all-night movie theaters were filled with sleeping shipyard workers.

James Leiby, professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, called Richmond a "spectacular" case of urban development. What happened to other communities over a period of decades occurred in Richmond in a few years.

Some of the questions I wanted to explore in the interviews were--who were these newcomers to Richmond and were there reasons, beyond the promise of a job, which brought them in steady streams by trains, buses, and automobiles hauling make-shift trailers? And was this destination of Richmond, California, all that they had imagined?

Other questions were just as compelling. After the war ended and Kaiser and fifty-five other industries moved out of Richmond, leaving this new population suddenly unemployed, what made people stay? And for those who left Richmond and returned home to their families in the South and Midwest, what made them come back to Richmond a second time, often bringing relatives with them?

As intrigued as I was by this new population, I also wanted to know how Richmond natives experienced these changes. In a sense, as others moved in to find new homes in Richmond, the longtime residents were losing their once small and familiar home town.

Initially, I tried to locate people who were living and working in Richmond before the World War II boom. They worked in the canneries, at the Chevron Refinery, or made their living fishing in San Pablo Bay. Most of these first interviewees were California natives, born and raised in Richmond. But the majority of the interviewees for this project came from other places--Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Utah--all to start a new life in California. Each one had a story to tell. Armed with a tape recorder, a camera, and lots of unanswered questions, I set out to record these local residents.

INTERVIEW SETTING

With few exceptions, the initial interview took place at the narrator's home. Because I was recording a diverse group, the interview setting varied dramatically. One day I might be in a neighborhood where residents, fearing stray bullets, keep their curtains drawn and their lights dimmed. Another day I would be in a home with a sweeping view of the bay, built by a former cannery owner during the Depression.

When possible, I recorded additional interviews and photographed at locations where the narrators had lived or worked. Some of these included the former Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Ferry Point, Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and the last remaining World War II shipyard structures...since torn down. I also spent many days off shore. When interviewing Dominic and Tony Ghio, fishermen for over sixty years, I accompanied them on dawn fishing trips in San Pablo Bay. However, following a turbulent twelve-hour whale watching excursion to the Farallon Islands with former whaler Pratt Peterson, I vowed to continue my research on land.

When I asked some project participants to give me a personalized tour of Richmond to see what landmarks were important to them, all too often I was shown vacant lots where a family home, church, or favorite cafe once stood. The downtown, once bustling with movie theaters, dance halls, and department stores, is eerily quiet for a city of 82,000. I found that local residents are still angry over the loss of their downtown district during the 1960s redevelopment era. Longtime residents spoke emotionally of the city losing its center. Hilltop Mall, built on the outskirts of town and accessible by automobile, was no substitute for a shopping district in the middle of town. The struggle to rebuild the downtown and to attract new businesses is an ongoing one for the City of Richmond.

After the interviewing was completed, there were photo sessions in the narrator's homes and former work places, as well as meetings in which we went through family albums and trunks. Some wonderful photographs and the stories behind them were uncovered during this process. Copies are included in the individual volumes.

PUBLIC USES OF THE ORAL HISTORIES

From the early stages of this project, both the text from the oral histories and the collection of photographs, have been used in community events. Examples include photo panels and maritime demonstrations at Richmond's Festival by the Bay, 1985, 1986, and 1987; and Oakland's Seafest '87. An exhibition, "Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers," produced in collaboration with the Richmond Museum in 1988, was developed from the oral history interviews with Dominic and Tony Ghio.

In an effort to present the oral histories to the public in a form which retained the language, the dialects, and the flavor of the original interviews, I wrote "Boomtown," a play about the transformation of Richmond during World War II. "Boomtown" was produced by San Francisco's Tale Spinners Theater and toured Bay Area senior centers, schools, and museums in 1989.

A new direction for the oral histories is in the field of adult literacy. Nearly fifty years after the recruitment of men and women from the rural South and Midwest to work in the Kaiser shipyards, some former shipyard workers and many of their descendents are enrolled in LEAP, Richmond's adult literacy program, where the students range in ages from 16 to 85 and are 70 percent black.

Our current goal is to make a shortened, large print version of the oral history transcripts for use by adult literacy students and tutors. We think that by using the true stories of local residents as literacy text, there will be an additional incentive for adults learning to read. The characters in the oral histories are often their neighbors, friends, and families speaking in their own words on such topics as the Dust Bowl, the World War II migration of defense workers, waterfront industries, family and community life.

THANKS

"On the Waterfront" project has had many diverse layers, including the University of California, the advisory committee, a wide range of financial supporters, and of primary importance, a large group of interviewees. I want to thank all of the project participants who donated their time, enthusiasm, and memories to this project.

Special thanks is due Jim Quay, Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities, who has been a source of good advice and inspiration from the beginning. The Council's grant in 1984 got the project off the ground, kicking off the campaign for matching funds. Jim Quay's counsel last summer set in motion the completion of the oral histories by introducing me to the California State Library grant programs.

Bay Area historian Chuck Wollenberg and labor folklorist Archie Green have been my primary advisors, as well as mentors, from the early planning stages. Chuck provided insight into how Richmond's transition during World War II fit into the larger picture of California history. Archie Green reinforced my belief that as chroniclers of history we must continue to document the lives of working people.

From the preliminary research to the completed project, Kathleen Rupley, curator of the Richmond Museum, has been enormously supportive. Working in collaboration with Kathleen, and Museum staff Paula Hutton and Joan Connolly on the "Fishermen by Trade" exhibition was an invigorating experience as well as an excellent example of how two organizations pooled their talents and resources to create a popular community event.

Stanley Nystrom, a Museum volunteer and lifelong Richmond resident, has been a continuing resource to me. A local history buff, with a great sense of detail, he assisted me often.

Finally, I want to thank Adelia Lines and Emma Clarke of the Richmond Public Library, Sharon Pastori of the LEAP program, and Rhonda Rios Kravitz and Gary Strong of the California State Library for their support in making possible the completion of these oral history volumes and their distribution to several Bay Area public libraries which serve minority populations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my work I am most interested in recording the stories of people who are undocumented in history and who are unlikely to leave written records behind. For me, the strength of this project has been seeing the transformation in how the interviewees view their relationship to history. They came a long way from our first contact when a typical response to my request for an interview was, "Why do you want to interview me?" or "What's important about my life?" And "Why Richmond?" With some encouragement, many became actively involved in the research and the collection of photographs, and began recommending others to be interviewed. "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," became their project, with a life of its own.

This set of oral histories is by no means the whole story of Richmond. It is one piece of its history and one effort to generate community-based literature. I hope that it will encourage others to record the stories, the songs, and the traditions of our community members. They have a lot to teach us.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

September 1990
Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
University of California
Berkeley, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

M. M. "Tubby" Snodgrass

I interviewed M. M. "Tubby" Snodgrass, a native of Blackfoot, Idaho, in February of 1985. We met at his office on Macdonald Avenue in Richmond. He was a retired employee of the Richmond-San Rafael Ferry Company who had spent a good part of his life working on the ferry. "I was a dishwasher, a cook, ticket agent, a toll collector, the commissary manager, and the Port Superintendent." He began with the company in 1924, at age twelve, and worked until the ferry's last trip on August 31, 1956.

I was interested in talking to Mr. Snodgrass not only because of his experience on the waterfront but also because he was an active member of the Council of Richmond Industries. I wanted to get an insider's view of Richmond's business scene. After the first interview session, Mr. Snodgrass acknowledged that he was in no position to speak freely about this work.

For our second meeting I asked Mr. Snodgrass to accompany me to the former site of the Richmond-San Rafael ferry landing near Point Molate. We met at the Richmond Plunge in Point Richmond early one morning and drove out to the old ferry landing. The sign read Red Rock Marine Harbor, and the area was run down with heaps of abandoned cars, boats, and wooden piles jutting out of the water. Except for a few people fishing off the pier, the area was abandoned. I shot some photographs while Tubby chatted with the fishermen.

We continued our waterfront tour by car with Mr. Snodgrass pointing out landmarks along the way. We drove past the Winehaven buildings, and to the site of the old whaling station and the still-operating rendering plant. I found this informal tour helpful. Mr. Snodgrass was relaxed and talkative off-tape.

Mr. Snodgrass was very supportive of the project and interested in helping out. He advised me on fund-raising and made several phone calls on the project's behalf. Often he would call me early in the morning and if he happened to catch me at home, he asked me why I wasn't swimming at the Richmond Plunge. If he reached me at the office on a sunny afternoon, he asked why I wasn't out enjoying the day. I enjoyed his sense of humor.

Tubby Snodgrass is eighty years old now, and is on the Board of Directors of the Richmond Museum. Because there was a lot left unsaid in this oral history I hope that Mr. Snodgrass will add to his story. He could offer us some valuable insights into the political and business scene in Richmond.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

June 1992
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly or type. Use black ink.)

Your full name Marion Myers Snodgrass

Date of birth December 24, 1911 Birthplace Blackfoot, Idaho

Father's full name Howard Bertram Snodgrass

Occupation Merchant Birthplace Shambaugh, Iowa

Mother's full name Edith Marion Howell

Occupation Homemaker Birthplace Albion, Idaho

Your spouse(s) Marie Louise Snodgrass

Your children Kathryn Marie Snodgrass Peterson

John Thomas Snodgrass (Deceased)

Where did you grow up? 1-12 Blackfoot, Idaho then Richmond, CA

When did your family first come to California? 1924

Reasons for coming Land of opportunity - Father opened Variety Store

Present community El Cerrito How long? 51 years

Education (and training programs) High School - Armstrong Business College

Accounting - La Salle Correspondence School - Various training program

Occupation(s) Richmond San Rafael Ferry Company

Public Relations Consultant

continued on back page

Special interest or activities Government and community activities
Home and family

Ideas for improving Richmond's image Continue to clean-up City -
Bring in JOB PRODUCING INDUSTRIES - Help in every way possible
to educate citizens, both young and old

What do you see for the future of Richmond? Nothing but good!

Family_Background

Growing Up in Blackfoot, Idaho

[Interview 1: January 24, 1985] ##

Dunning: Mr. Snodgrass, where were you born?

Snodgrass: I was born in Blackfoot, Idaho.

Dunning: What year were you born?

Snodgrass: In 1911, December 24th.

Dunning: Where did your parents come from?

Snodgrass: My mother came from Utah and my father from Iowa.

Dunning: When did they come to Richmond?

Snodgrass: In 1923.

Dunning: Do you know what brought them here?

Snodgrass: Yes. My dad opened a store here, a variety store.

Dunning: Did they know anyone else in Richmond?

This symbol indicates that a tape or segment of a tape has begun or ended.

Snodgrass: No, they didn't. Not a soul.

Dunning: Do you know how they happened to choose this part of the country?

Snodgrass: No, except it was sunny California. That's about all. I know how disappointed we were when we got here to see what it looked like.

Dunning: What did it look like?

Snodgrass: When I came, I came with a fellow in an old Model T Ford. When we crossed the Rodeo-Vallejo ferry into Contra Costa county, the hills were all brown. It was in July, see. We expected to see all green grass and orange trees, which of course we didn't see.

I'll never forget the first Fourth of July parade we saw downtown. I was here with my dad before the rest of the family. I remember very well how the wind blew that day, and how cold it was when I first came from Idaho. In Idaho it was real hot by the Fourth of July.

Dunning: You and your father, were you sent out to California as scouts?

Snodgrass: No, my dad was already here, and I came with a fellow who was going to be his partner in the store. Then I was here maybe a month or two with him before the rest of the family came.

Dunning: How many sisters and brothers did you have?

Snodgrass: One sister and one brother.

Dunning: And where were you in the family?

Snodgrass: In the middle.

Dunning: What was your hometown like that you came from in Idaho?

Snodgrass: There was a very small town right next to the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, so we had a lot of Indians walking around, of course in blankets in those days. I can't remember the population, but it was less than five thousand, I know that. Everybody knew everybody in town. It was a little farming community. Mostly Mormon people lived around there.

Dunning: Was your family Mormon?

Snodgrass: No. My grandmother was a Mormon, but she was the only one in the family, although I attended the Mormon Church with her for a long time back in Idaho.

Dunning: You were eleven years old when you came. Was that difficult for you to leave?

Snodgrass: No, it wasn't difficult for me to leave. I know that I started at Roosevelt Junior High School, and that would be in the seventh grade, so I would have to be twelve years old.

Dunning: Do you recall the first home you lived in in Richmond?

Snodgrass: Yes.

Dunning: Where would that be?

Snodgrass: At 724 Ninth Street. I remember the number very well. As a matter of fact, I've been by to see the house lots of times since.

Dunning: Could you describe it?

Snodgrass: It was a little white house with three bedrooms, one bath. I remember it pretty well, yes.

Dunning: What was the neighborhood like at that time?

Snodgrass: Across the street was a kid with the name of Ray Byers. I remember him very well. Next door was a Portuguese family with a couple of real little kids.

When I came here, in Idaho we didn't have Portuguese or Italian people, and half the people here were Italian and Portuguese. We had Indians instead of foreigners--so-called foreigners. I remember that some of the names were amazing to me when I got to school at Roosevelt, Baciagalupi and so forth.

And of course the schools were very much different here. I know I talked to the kid across the street, and he was talking about machine shop and wood shop, which we didn't have in Idaho at all. As a matter of fact, I was in grammar school in Idaho, and here I started in Roosevelt Junior High School.

Snodgrass: Also, the kids in those days, there were guys seventeen, eighteen years old going to junior high school. As a matter of fact, they had an A and a B football team and baseball team. They had some real big kids going to school then.

Dunning: Do you know why there were seventeen and eighteen year olds?

Snodgrass: No, except that that was in days you didn't have the opportunity that you have now to go to school. I suppose some of those kids--I remember some of their names, but I don't know why they were so far behind.

Dunning: Were some of them first generation immigrants?

Snodgrass: I doubt it very much.

Description of Parents

Dunning: I was going to ask you a little about your mother. What was she like? Could you describe her?

Snodgrass: I don't know how I would describe my mother, except that she was not very big. I remember, of course, exactly how she looked naturally, but I don't really know how to describe her.

Dunning: Could you describe a typical day for your mother when the children were young? Things that you remember her doing the most?

Snodgrass: No, I can't remember that, except that I know that she always took awfully good care of the kids. We never left without breakfast. Of course, I left without breakfast when I started to work at the Richmond-San Rafael ferry because of the fact that I got there at five-thirty in the morning, and I worked in a restaurant, so I didn't have to wait to eat at home. But my father, when he had to get up early, she got up early and got his breakfast.

Dunning: Do you consider that there are important things that your mother tried to teach you?

Snodgrass: I'm sure that one was honesty. And everybody in the family worked. I remember very well that she never would buy anything on credit. I've always been the same way. If you didn't have the money, you didn't buy it.

One of her favorite things was she never believed in paying for something after she had eaten it, which I've never forgotten. Of course, things are exactly the opposite today. I would say that we had a very good bringing up and a good home life.

Dunning: Did your mother ever work outside the home?

Snodgrass: No, she did not. No.

Dunning: Did she ever earn money at home? I know a lot of people took in boarders, or did sewing, or--

Snodgrass: No, she didn't do that.

Dunning: What kind of work did your father do?

Snodgrass: Well, he had this variety store for a good many years. Then he was a store manager for a grocery store chain, Pon Honer. Later, he was a ticket agent at the ferry, the same place I worked.

Dunning: Could you describe a typical day for your father when you were growing up? His usual schedule?

Snodgrass: I can't remember his usual schedule, but I remember when he owned the variety store. He was there early in the morning and stayed there all day until closing time at night, except to run out and get some lunch. I would say he was a very hard worker. He was very thorough, and very neat, and everything had to be just so. I'm exactly the same way.

Dunning: Taking after your father?

Snodgrass: That's right.

Dunning: What kind of work did he do in Idaho?

Snodgrass: He had been a railway mail clerk, and then he was in the bank there. He had worked in Stanrod Bank in Blackfoot.

Dunning: Were there many other people, or any other people, in your town that also left for California?

Snodgrass: Yes, but none that came right here. They went to Southern California. I don't remember anybody coming to Northern California.

Dunning: Do you consider that was a brave move on your family's part to leave and relocate?

Snodgrass: Yes, I would say that, yes. Of course, I don't remember all the investigation that was done before he did that, but I know there was a lot of work done before he ever decided to come here.

Dunning: I am trying to get an idea of the whole California dream. What brings people here?

Snodgrass: Well, if you lived in a little town in Idaho, there really at that time wasn't very much opportunity unless you wanted to be a farmer. The winters were bad, the snow and freezing, and summer is hot. I guess that California then was the land of opportunity.

Dunning: But you say it was kind of disappointing when you first arrived.

Snodgrass: It was very disappointing, but it didn't take very long to get used to that. I personally would never want to leave here.

Marriage in 1938

Dunning: Did you ever go back to Idaho?

Snodgrass: I think it was 1955 before I ever went back. It so happened that the young lady I married [Marie Louise Snodgrass] was also born in Blackfoot, Idaho. We

Snodgrass: took the kids and drove back in '55, because her grandmother still lived there. I've been there twice since.

Dunning: How did you happen to meet your wife who was also from Blackfoot?

Snodgrass: Well, her family moved away and we moved to California. They moved to Spokane, and then ended up in Portland. One year--the year was 1932 because I remember it was the first year I ever voted, and Roosevelt was running for president--I was going on a vacation in the fall.

I was going to drive up to Canada all by myself. My mother told me to be sure and stop in Portland and see the Quillins. So I did, and that's where I met the young lady that later became my wife.

Dunning: Then you brought her down to this area?

Snodgrass: Right. In 1938 we were married, and she came to live here. As a matter of fact, we bought our first home in El Cerrito in 1939.

Presbyterian Church in Richmond

Dunning: One area I was going to ask you a few questions on is the church. I know there are so many different churches in Richmond. Did your family attend a particular church?

Snodgrass: When we first came to Richmond we went to the Presbyterian church.

Dunning: Where was that located?

Snodgrass: That was located on the corner of Twelfth and Bissell as I recall it. We went there for quite a while. But I worked on Sunday morning, so there was very little church that I ever got to go to. Because in the ferryboat business, the biggest business was on weekends, so we always worked on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays.

Dunning: So that cut you out of church and Sunday school?

Snodgrass: Right. It did, yes, because I got up at five o'clock in the morning to go to work and didn't have the opportunity to go. I attended other church functions in the week, but not on Sunday morning.

Dunning: Have you continued to be associated with the Presbyterian church?

Snodgrass: No, after I was married we started going to the Congregational Church in El Cerrito, and we're still there.

Education and Teenage Ambitions

Dunning: We touched a little bit on your education, but I'm curious about what schools you went to when you arrived here.

Snodgrass: Well, I went to Roosevelt Junior High School, and then to Richmond Union High School, and graduated from Richmond High. Then I attended Armstrong Business College for a couple of years.

Dunning: Where was that?

Snodgrass: That was in Berkeley. Then I took a correspondence course in accounting from LaSalle and that was the end of my education. I was working at the ferry all that time. As a matter of fact, I worked nights out there in the ticket office when I went to Armstrong in the mornings.

Dunning: You must have been a pretty busy person.

Snodgrass: That's right.

Dunning: Did your parents want you to follow a particular occupation?

Snodgrass: Not necessarily, no.

Dunning: As a teenager, do you remember some of your ambitions, what you wanted to do in your life?

Snodgrass: I remember at one time I wanted to be an architect, but that never worked out because I actually never stopped working at the ferry. When I worked in the restaurant, I worked for a fellow who owned a concession, and then later I went to work in the ticket office on a temporary basis, and I was there

Snodgrass: permanently for a long, long time. Then I became the first commissary manager, and then the superintendent, so I really had a good job.

Beginnings with the Richmond-San Rafael Ferry Company, 1924

Dunning: Let me trace that back a little more closely. What was your first job on the ferries?

Snodgrass: My first real job was a dishwasher on the boats.

Dunning: Could you give me the full name of the company at that time?

Snodgrass: The Richmond-San Rafael Ferry and Transportation Company.

Dunning: What year did you join up with them?

Snodgrass: 1924.

Dunning: Not too long after it was organized in 1915?

Snodgrass: I don't remember exactly when it was organized, but it was something like that. It wasn't too long afterwards.

Dunning: How old were you?

Snodgrass: I was twelve years old, because I would have been twelve on the 24th of December, 1923.

Dunning: My real question is, how did you happen to get that job at age twelve?

Snodgrass: Well, because a kid that I went to school with told me that he had a job there as a dishwasher. So I went out and met the boss, and talked to him. It was about two weeks after that that he called me to go to work. I remember it was a Sunday morning, and as I recall, it was March 28th, 1924.

Dunning: To be exact.

Snodgrass: Yes. Eight-twenty in the morning, the first time I went to work.

Dunning: What were your hours?

Snodgrass: There was no such thing as an eight hour day in those days. I used to go to work, and generally we worked at least eight hours. I would go to work at six o'clock in the morning, and be off at two in the afternoon. Six to two-twenty, I think would be the exact hours, as I remember it.

Dunning: Where did you fit in school?

Snodgrass: I only worked Saturdays and Sundays after that, and holidays, and the summertime. When I was in high school, I was the afternoon cook on the same place. I got out of school at two o'clock and went out there and worked until ten, six days a week. So in my high school days, I had very little opportunity to participate in any school functions.

Dunning: Do you remember your first salary?

Snodgrass: As I remember, it was about two dollars a day, which was really good pay. I remember when I was the afternoon cook, I got \$3.50 a day. On Sundays I used to work a double shift, and that would make it seven dollars. For the last year that I was a cook there--that's when I worked the double shift on Sundays--and on Monday, on payday, the boss would come around and hand you a check, and then he put a \$20 bill in my hip pocket for working so much extra on Sunday. That made me \$27 for one day's work. That was more than most men were earning in a week then. That continued all summer long.

Dunning: You must have felt like a wealthy young man.

Snodgrass: Right. I was a wealthy young man.

Dunning: What did you do with your money?

Snodgrass: Put it in the bank.

Dunning: Did you put any back into your household? Did your parents ask?

Snodgrass: No. I furnished the car for the family, but I never paid board and room. They never asked me to. They wouldn't let me as a matter of fact. But at one time I had two cars. I had one good car and an old junk that I used to drive to work. Neither my mother or dad could drive a car, but my brother and sister could both drive. So I furnished the transportation.

Dunning: That was quite a contribution. How did your father's grocery store do?

Snodgrass: It was a variety store.

Dunning: Variety in that was it like a five and dime that had everything?

Snodgrass: That's right, yes. It didn't actually set the world on fire. I can't remember how long he kept it. He finally sold out though. It was a lot of work for the amount he was making on it.

Description of the Ferry

Dunning: Can you tell me anything about the first ferry that you worked on?

Snodgrass: Yes. I remember the City of San Rafael was the name of it. It was an old sidewheeler paddlewheel boat. I think it held about thirty or thirty-five cars. Of course, the cars were a lot smaller then they are now.

The Kitchen

Snodgrass: I remember exactly what the kitchen looked like. I remember that the cooks were Chinese, and we washed dishes. They had a coal and wood stove, and we

Snodgrass: heated water with steam and washed and dried the dishes all by hand.

Dunning: You were working with one other person as the dishwasher?

Snodgrass: With the cook, yes. Just me and the cook.

Dunning: Oh! That was it?

Snodgrass: The cook and the dishwasher, right.

Dunning: You said that you remember the kitchen. For someone who's never been inside a ferry kitchen, could you describe it?

Snodgrass: I could describe it all right, because it had a big old coal and wood stove with a grill on each side that you could cook hotcakes on. We had a big steam table, where the soup and the mashed potatoes were, and the steam table was full of water and all heated by steam.

Then off the kitchen was a little anteroom with a refrigerator, ice of course, and a long metal sink that was really not very large, because I know we would have to put part of the dishes on the floor in buckets and wash part, and then refill the sink. That about does it as far as the kitchen is concerned.

Steaks and Chops in a 30-Minute Crossing

Dunning: I'm trying to get an idea of what people ate on board. Did they have full dinners, or snacks?

Snodgrass: Yes. We did have dinners then. It took a half hour to cross, or a little bit more.

Dunning: To cross from Richmond to Point San Quentin?

Snodgrass: Right. Then maybe, if you were one of the first ones aboard, you would have five or ten minutes while we were loading the boat, so you maybe had forty minutes at the very most, so we had to work fast. But we had complete meals then. Even steaks and chops.

Dunning: All in a half hour people would have their meal?

Snodgrass: You would have to eat pretty fast.

Dunning: I guess so. Did most people that took the ferry come on with their automobiles?

Snodgrass: Right. It was an automobile ferry.

Dunning: Were foot passengers also allowed?

Snodgrass: We had foot passengers too, yes.

Dunning: I don't quite recall whether you mentioned the capacity for the automobiles. How many?

Snodgrass: I can't quite remember how many those little boats carried. But it must have been around forty, because as I recall it, we had a seating capacity for about sixty people in the dining room, and it used to fill up.

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Fees and Schedules

Dunning: Do you recall what the price was to bring your automobile over?

Snodgrass: Yes. It was seventy-five cents for the car and seventeen cents for each passenger. I remember very well the car and driver was ninety-two cents, and the car and two passengers was \$1.09, three was \$1.26. That's been quite some time ago.

Dunning: Did many people use it every day as a commuter?

Snodgrass: Later years they did. A lot of people did, because many people worked at the Standard Oil and the Standard Research then.

Dunning: They would be coming from San Rafael to Richmond?

Snodgrass: Right.

Dunning: How about the reverse?

Snodgrass: Not so much the reverse. We had sales people that went over with bread trucks and this, that, and the other thing every day. But really the commuters came to Richmond.

Dunning: How many runs did it make every day?

Snodgrass: Well, we operated from six o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night. For a couple of years we ran all night. Then we cut that back until two o'clock in the morning. But in later years, when I got to be the boss out there, we quit at ten twenty-three at night except on Saturdays and Sundays. Then it was twelve o'clock.

Dunning: Which of the years did it run all night?

Snodgrass: It must have been in 1929, 1930, because it ran all night at the same time I was going to Armstrong College, because I worked there at night.

Dunning: Did they get enough passengers and automobiles?

Snodgrass: Not really to pay. No, not enough.

Dunning: Do you know why at that point they chose to go all night? Was it an experiment?

Snodgrass: It was more or less an experiment. People claimed they were going to use the boat later, but it didn't work out quite that way.

Dunning: What was the ferry called?

Snodgrass: The Richmond-San Rafael ferry.

Dunning: It didn't have any other name?

Snodgrass: No.

Dunning: Where did the ferry leave from in Richmond?

Snodgrass: Right out where the old dock is still out there. It would be just a little bit north of where the Richmond-San Rafael bridge is now. If you would go out past Quarry Products, and around the hill, the dock is still there. [Point Molate exit]

Dunning: But it's not used for anything at this point?

Snodgrass: No, there's some little yacht harbor in there now. Last time I looked there was a couple of big old boats at the end of the dock.

Rules of the Workplace

Dunning: Were there certain rules at your workplace about smoking, or eating, or breaks?

Snodgrass: No. There was no such thing as a break.

Dunning: You just worked straight through?

Snodgrass: That's right. And there was no such thing as a work permit or anything for kids. You just worked. No, there was no rules about smoking or anything, because

Snodgrass: all the cooks smoked. As long as you didn't get it in the soup, you see. I don't recall any rules, although the place was spic and span and clean. We kept it very clean, I know that.

Dunning: How about the noise? Was the noise level pretty high?

Snodgrass: No, not bad. Not bad.

Dunning: You probably got used to it real fast, too.

Snodgrass: Yes. You mean the engine room noise?

Dunning: Yes.

Snodgrass: No, it wasn't. It didn't bother you on the upper deck at all.

The Crew

Dunning: Who was the superintendent when you started?

Snodgrass: Well, they really didn't have a superintendent then. As a matter of fact, the main office of the ferry was in San Francisco, and all we had then was--I don't even believe they called him a port captain, but we had one captain and a crew that used to do a lot of repair work, like putting new buckets in the wheels and things like that.

Snodgrass: Then finally one of the captains was made port captain in later years. Then they moved the main office from San Francisco over to Richmond and had it right out at the point where we were. The president of the company was there.

When I was the commissary manager, they had the commissary manager and the port captain who actually was a licensed captain. Then when he left, instead of calling it the port captain, they called it the port superintendent. Then I was both the port captain and the commissary manager. At the time we had a port engineer who was in charge of all the repair work and the engines. But I did all the crew assignments and everything like that for him, too, for everybody.

Dunning: When did you get your first promotion from being a dishwasher?

Snodgrass: I was only a dishwasher a couple of years until I was an afternoon cook. Then, for a couple of years, I was a relief cook in the summertime. That meant that I relieved the other cooks and I did all the cooking. That was on the morning shift. It really wasn't very long that I was a dishwasher.

Dunning: That was your jumping off point?

Snodgrass: Right, yes. I was a dishwasher, a cook, a ticket agent, a toll collector, the commissary manager, and then the port superintendent.

Snodgrass: When we quit, I had been the president of the Kiwanis Club, and they gave me what they called a "This Is Your Day." I remember the president of the company saying that if we had had another year, I would have probably had his job. But that was in 1956. I still have this. August 31, 1956, was the last trip we made on the ferry.

Dunning: So they gave you this piece of marble?

Snodgrass: The officers did that, the deck officers. Then the waitresses and the cooks gave me that.

Dunning: They gave you the clock and the calendar.

Snodgrass: Yes, and I've had them ever since.

Dunning: Was that kind of an early retirement for you? How old were you when you left?

Snodgrass: In 1956 I was forty-five years old. I was too old really, to get another job, and besides that, when I was made the superintendent of that ferry, it was just like owning your own business. That's when I spent the money, like it was my own. I could come and go as I please, except that as the superintendent of a ferry boat company that runs seven days a week, you're on call twenty-four hours a day. It's not any eight hour day job necessarily.

Accidents

Dunning: Are there any particular stories or incidents that were connected with the ferry that stand out in your mind that you think should be documented?

Snodgrass: Not that I can think of. I think of a few things that happened, like the first and only time we really had a real bad accident, by the boat coming in full speed ahead and knocking the place down.

Dunning: Knocking what place down?

Snodgrass: Knocking the dock down, the slip. That happened. You would have an accident every once in a while and break a few piles, or something like that, but this particular time there was a new engineer and he got mixed up in the signals. Instead of going full speed astern, he went full speed ahead. No one was injured. It was just lucky. But it did take a little doing. We had to get a crane in order to get the cars off.

The other time that I'll never forget was one Sunday night in the fog, where the captain of one of the boats got stuck in the mud and was there with a full load of cars for more than six hours. This was in way later years when we had the big S.P. [Southern Pacific] boats.

One of the deck hands had a heart attack and they had to bring him ashore in a lifeboat. That was quite an experience, with the coast guard, and

Snodgrass: everybody and his brother, and all the newspapers out there on that. That took a little doing on a Sunday night.

Dunning: Did he survive?

Snodgrass: Yes, he did.

Dunning: Did you ever have to use the lifeboats other than then?

Snodgrass: I think in all the years that I was there I can only think of a couple of times that they ever lowered the lifeboats. Once when somebody fell overboard. You see, it's only three and a half miles across the bay. Actually, you could run into the mud if you got off the course in some areas.

We were inspected by the steamboat inspection service just like we were a ship going to sea, so they had lifeboat drill all the time, boat drill, fire drill, and so forth. When they had the boat drill, they just swung the boat over the side. They didn't lower it all the way down and get in or anything except twice a year when the steamboat inspectors were there. Then they had to do that. But no, we never had any bad accidents.

Dunning: That seems pretty incredible. You mentioned that somebody went overboard. Was that just a one time occurrence, and how did that happen?

Snodgrass: I don't even remember. See, if something like that would happen, I would be up there cooking. I was on the boats then. I wasn't out looking out the window.

Dunning: You would hear about it after the fact.

Snodgrass: I would know about it because the boat would have to stop. But I didn't happen to be on the boat the day that that happened anyway.

Storms

Snodgrass: I know that you would normally think that there would be a lot of things happening in thirty-four years, but not really. They didn't. We had some bad storms. We had to tie up a few times, not because the boat couldn't go back and forth, but because you couldn't load and unload the cars. We had a lot of foggy weather, though really not as much of that as you would think.

Dunning: I know you would think that there would be quite a bit of fog in the bay.

Snodgrass: But in the wintertime there was some times when it was real foggy. I can remember a few times we did tie up in the fog, too.

Dunning: When you say tie up, you just tied up to the dock?

Snodgrass: Right. We ceased operations, but generally only for two or three hours at the very most, because they

Snodgrass: steered with a compass anyway. But you didn't have all the fancy equipment that you have nowadays. There was no such thing as radar or anything like that. All you had was a whistle, and listening to the foghorns and the fogbells.

Dunning: You must have seen a lot of change in the equipment and in the machinery over those years.

Snodgrass: No. We never did have any of that equipment, because I don't think any of the ferry boats in the bay ever had any radar. It wasn't available at that time.

Ferries: Woodenhulled to Steelhulled

Dunning: How many different ferrys did you work on?

Snodgrass: I worked on the City of Richmond, the City of San Rafael, the Sonoma Valley, and the Charles Van Damme. That was in the days when I was a cook. Then in 1939, or 1938, the company bought three of the Southern Pacific boats that were a lot larger, steelhulled boats. Ours were old woodenhulled boats. They weren't sidewheelers; they were screwboats.

Dunning: Could you differentiate between a sidewheeler and a screwboat?

Snodgrass: Yes. A sidewheeler had side wheels and buckets, the wheels going around and around, and the screwboat had a propeller on each end. The screwboats were much larger boats. That was after they opened the Bay

Snodgrass: Bridge. The Southern Pacific ceased operations in a couple of years, in the automobile ferries, that is.

Dunning: Was the Richmond-San Rafael ferry about the last ferry in the area?

Snodgrass: They were the last ferry actually in the bay. They still had some little ferry up in Martinez, the Martinez-Benicia ferry. But I would say that we were the last of the ferry boats.

Dunning: Did the construction of the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge begin in 1953?

Snodgrass: I think it was '52, because I know that when we had a six month strike at the ferry, and that was what really started the movement for the bridge. Then I had been there for so many years that I told the president of the company that I would stay and see him through until the bitter end if they would let me open this public relations office.

Normally, I was supposed to be off on Wednesday and Thursday. I was still on call, but those were supposed to be my days off. So I had two jobs for just about five years. I got up every morning at four-thirty and went down to the ferry. After eight o'clock, after the maintenance people came to work, I could be free to do whatever I wanted to do. I had an extension of my downtown office telephone at the ferry.

Snodgrass: So I actually had two jobs, and I was working seven days a week then all the time. I would always work Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays at the ferry.

I know 1955 was the first time that I ever got three weeks vacation. That's when we did that trip back to Idaho, in the summertime. With the ferry, I never got a vacation in the summertime. I always had to have wintertime vacation. Summertime was when we did all the business at the ferry.

Labor Disputes

Dunning: You mentioned very briefly about the strike. Could you talk about that?

Snodgrass: Well, they went on strike. The Fourth of July was one of the biggest days we had in the year, the weekend, the three day holiday. The guys went on strike on the First of July.

Dunning: What guys?

Snodgrass: All the crew. Actually, we had two or three unions. We had what was called the Inland Boatmen's Union. That was a part of the Sailor's Union of the Pacific. Then we had the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association, a union for the engineers. The captains and the mates belonged to the Masters, Mates and Pilots.

Snodgrass: All the deckhands, the firemen, the waitresses, and the cooks belonged to the Inland Boatmen's Union. If they went on strike, of course, the others were out too. They all went out on strike. I think it was some time in December when they settled that strike.

Dunning: December of which year?

Snodgrass: I can't remember for sure, but it must have been 1950. That's what really pushed that bridge ahead.

Dunning: What were the issues of the strike?

Snodgrass: I don't even remember now, but it would be more money and--I don't really remember, because I really never had anything to do with the unions, except for the working conditions, not the pay.

Dunning: Who would?

Snodgrass: The president of the company.

Dunning: Okay. It was the president, then the superintendent? I'm just trying to get an idea of the hierarchy.

Snodgrass: My boss was the president of the company.

Dunning: And you were right below him?

Snodgrass: Right. Well, he had a secretary, whose father used to be one of the main owners, but really I reported to the president of the company.

Dunning: What was his name?

Snodgrass: Oliver J. Olson, Jr.

Dunning: Were you also a member of the union?

Snodgrass: No. I was always on the other side.

Dunning: Was that difficult, at certain points, being on the other side?

Snodgrass: No. I hired and fired everybody, and I was their father confessor and friend. I never had any problems like that. We had a few problem people, just like you have every place, but by and large I would say we were more or less a happy family. Not quite that in 1950, but--

Dunning: Right. A few unhappy members.

Snodgrass: I used to go up and have coffee with the pickets on the picket line, and no real problem.

Dunning: Were there women working also?

Snodgrass: We had waitresses.

Dunning: At what point did the waitresses come to work on the ferries? Was it right at the beginning?

Snodgrass: Yes. As I recall it, we had about thirty-two women working there as waitresses. We had two on each shift. In later years, we even had a couple of women cooks.

Dunning: Were they also members of the Inland Boatmen's Union?

Snodgrass: Yes, they were.

Dunning: Do you know if any of them are still around?

Snodgrass: Yes. I saw one about a month ago. I was with my wife out in Macy's, or one of those stores out there in Hilltop, and we were going to go in and have lunch. I walked in there and here was one of them I hadn't seen for twenty-five years sitting at the counter eating. She spotted me before I spotted her, but I stopped and talked to her for a while.

Most of the old-timers at the ferry, the officers, are all dead now. As far as the deckhands and the crews, there might be a couple of them around now, but most of them were older people then, so they're all gone. But not the waitresses. There's still a couple of them around.

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Recollections of Strikes

Dunning: Was that 1950 strike the only strike that you recall?

Snodgrass: No, we had quite a few strikes, but never for any great length of time.

Dunning: Any that particularly stand out in your mind?

Snodgrass: No, except that I remember one where I was the commissary manager, because we had a port captain and

Snodgrass: a port engineer, and the three of us had to take care of that place. It was in the wintertime, and there were some bad storms. We were having an awful time, the three of us, trying to get a steel cable out to a dolphin, and the wind was blowing so hard you could hardly stand up. I remember that very well.

But that strike didn't last very long. I can't remember how many, but we had several strikes that didn't last very long at all. Of course, we didn't operate at all.

Dunning: Everything would just shut down?

Snodgrass: Yes. I can't remember how long the strike lasted, but I remember that the guys went out on strike, and in the end they got a five cent an hour increase in pay. I figured it would take the captains seven years to get back the money they lost on the strike. Of course, they didn't want to go on strike, but they couldn't do anything about it.

Dunning: Would the public get involved in the strikes at all?

Snodgrass: No, except to do a lot of squawking about it, because it was a great inconvenience for them. Especially those who worked on this side.

Dunning: How would they get across? Would they have to go all the way around on the Bay Bridge?

Snodgrass: Right. Either that, or go across the Carquinez Bridge and come around that way. Otherwise they would have to take two bridges. Some of the workers

- Snodgrass: at Standard Oil had a charter boat that they came back and forth in for a long time during the six month strike.
- Dunning: Did the police ever get involved in the strikes? Was there violence?
- Snodgrass: No, there was no violence at all. They had a picket line, but they didn't cause any trouble.
- Dunning: Are there any strike leaders or organizers that stand out in your mind?
- Snodgrass: No, not many. I can remember a couple of guys who were the ringleaders. A fellow by the name of Mike Maloney, I remember him just like yesterday. Another one, Steve Traverso was his name. Those two guys I remember very well as being what we call troublemakers, naturally.
- Dunning: What were their jobs normally?
- Snodgrass: Both of them were deckhands, able seamen. They all had to have certificates, just like the guys going to sea.
- Dunning: Did you ever fire someone after a strike?
- Snodgrass: No. The only thing we did, on the last strike, we had three or five days to report. One guy, actually I can't remember his name, but I remember him just as well as anything. I remember that he had bought a bunch of baby chicks and was raising chickens. He also was a ringleader in the strike and was up in the

Snodgrass: streets of Richmond popping off his mouth. I don't quite remember how that happened, but I remember knowing all about it.

He was supposed to be a good friend of mine, and he called me and told me that he couldn't leave those baby chicks. He would have to take care of them for a few more days, would it be all right if he didn't show up on time.

I told him, "No, if you're not here on the morning that you're supposed to be here, you will be unemployed as far as I'm concerned." He was. He was unemployed.

In later years, I had the office down on Tenth Street. He didn't get mad at me. He used to come in and see me all the time. We would sit around and talk. He was the only one that I can ever remember that didn't make it back after a strike. The guys were all very friendly. It wasn't a case of taking out any spite on them or anything like that. We didn't do that.

Dunning: About how many people were working at the height of the ferry?

Snodgrass: In later years, in the summertime, as I recall, we had somewhere between one hundred and thirty and one hundred and fifty people. We were running five crews each day, so you had to have quite a few people.

Dunning: Would they change crews for every run?

Snodgrass: Yes. They changed crews every eight hours. Twice a day. Then we had a maintenance crew that did all the repair work, and toll collectors, so we had about one hundred and fifty people.

Dunning: Was there an ethnic mix? What was the composition of the group?

Snodgrass: I can only remember, in all the years that I worked at the ferry, there was only one black sailor that ever worked there, because there were very, very few black people that were sailors. Mostly there were a lot of Portuguese that came from the old Southern Pacific people. Swedes, just all Americans, you know, a general mix of people.

Chinese Cooks

Dunning: You mentioned when you started as a dishwasher that the cooks were Chinese. Was that fairly common? Was that a usual position for the Chinese?

Snodgrass: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, we had a house out there, and the Chinese cooks lived there in the house. Even up until we ceased operations they were still living there. They had the best job of anybody because they got their board and room and laundry, and all their earnings, and they were paid on the minute basis just like the crew, time and a half over eight hours, and all that. Their money was all clear.

Dunning: Are any of the cooks still alive that you know of?

Snodgrass: I don't know. Every time I used to go to Chinatown in San Francisco, I would run into one of them, but I haven't been there for years. That was twenty-five years ago. Fifty-six is longer than that, see.

Changes in the Ferry

Dunning: Did you see changes over the years in the atmosphere or the mood of the ferry from the time you started working?

Snodgrass: Sure, because when I first started working the crew consisted of a captain, a mate, three deckhands, a fireman, and an engineer. Then when we got the S.P. boats, the crew size increased. In those days, that's when they used to call that the happy family, because everybody knew everybody.

Then, there was no union that ever I heard of, and there was no eight hour day, so there was no such thing as overtime. All of that changed when they got to be unionized.

Dunning: Approximately what year was that?

Snodgrass: It must have been the early thirties that the Inland Boatmen's Union organized the deckhands and firemen. Later, just like every place else, the unions got a little stronger and feeling their oats. Times changed, so you had certain troubles. Other than

Snodgrass: those little strikes, we really never had too much union trouble.

Impact of World War II on the Ferry Operations

Snodgrass: During the war, we couldn't compete salarywise. We had to hire people. We used to say if they were warm we would hire them. We could always send them over to the steamboat inspection, over to the coast guard, and get them an ordinary seamen's certificate. You made a lot more money in the shipyards, and we couldn't compete with them, so it was tough to keep a crew going.

Dunning: You must have lost a lot of people during the war.

Snodgrass: Well, we had a lot of changes. During the war, that's when I started getting up at four-thirty in the morning, because I had to get out there, and in some cases pick up some of the crew in order to get them there at all because it was that tough to get people. Sailors, of course, over the years, have been a bunch of drunks, or are noted to be. It was a rough go to keep the boats going.

Dunning: Where would you pick them up?

Snodgrass: At their homes. Out in the war housing in Richmond is where a lot of them lived temporarily. Then for a long time they had a training center to train sailors

Snodgrass: that worked on the ships going to sea. Those fellows would get their training, and then they would have to wait for a ship.

I could call up and order three guys, like ordering some bread or something, and they would send three guys over, or whatever I wanted. They had sailors who looked like the real sailor, little white cap, and a duffel bag, and so forth. I would have to find them a place to live, a room, in the Point, and finance them, because they didn't have any money, and take care of them like they were kids. They were all nice guys really, but they used to get drunk and get in trouble.

Dunning: Were they pretty young?

Snodgrass: Young, yes. They would be early twenties. So I had to advance them money and just about be like their father and take care of them. But that's how we used to keep going, by hiring those people. They might be there a couple or three months, and then they would get a call that they would have to go.

They would go to sea then, so I would have to replace them. It was a tough go in those years trying to keep the boats operating.

Dunning: Did many of the ferry people join the armed services, or did they go to work in the shipyards?

Snodgrass: There weren't very many of them that went in the service, because they were all older people. They had better jobs. Of course, they could make twice as

Snodgrass: much in the shipyards counting overtime. After all, there were at one time over one hundred thousand people employed in the shipyards here.

Dunning: That must have really increased the traffic on the ferry also.

Snodgrass: Yes, it did. We got a lot of business, a lot of business. And a lot of trouble trying to keep things going.

Dunning: It must have been pretty hectic.

Snodgrass: It was. Every time that telephone would ring, something had happened.

Dunning: Were you ever tempted to work in the shipyards yourself?

Snodgrass: No, not really. I was married and had a daughter. As far as the draft was concerned, I was the boss of an inland waterways transportation company, and they didn't bother me.

I sometimes think that I would have been better off had I gone into the service, because I would have been able to get a job as a port director or something. So they told me. I would have had certain pensions, and of course at the ferry, when we ceased operations, we got dismissal pay. You got so much, a certain percentage of your month's pay for every year that you had been there.

Snodgrass: Of course, there was only one guy that had been there longer than I had. He was a firemen. A lot of people thought I got paid off with a lot more money than I did, but I did get what was then quite a chunk.

I already had a pretty good business built up. I knew that I would never be satisfied to go someplace and sit behind a desk for eight hours a day. I had been doing a lot of this public relations business for free, so I was urged to open this office, which I did. I had the opportunity of course. I was being paid at the ferry all the time too.

As a matter of fact, the first retainer I got in the public relations business was more than they paid me for a month's pay at the ferry. I still have the same retainer.

Dunning: What do you mean by a retainer?

Snodgrass: I got a retainer from a company for so much money to take care of certain things for them.

Dunning: For the P.R.?

Snodgrass: Right.

Dunning: Have you been in the public relations business from that point on?

Snodgrass: In 1952 I opened up.

Dunning: Did you feel that the ferry was going to be ending?

Snodgrass: I knew. They had already started building the bridge. I knew it was limited, because the day they opened the Richmond-San Rafael bridge was the day we ceased operations. There was nobody that would ride a ferry boat if they could go over that bridge, that's for sure.

Dunning: Was there any public outcry against the bridge?

Snodgrass: No, not really.

Dunning: No controversy?

Snodgrass: There's a lot of people that always said afterwards that they wish we had the ferry boats, because they used to ride back and forth once in a while. If you had to wait two or three hours in San Quentin over there on Sunday night, or any holiday, you would have to wait on both sides, see. We used to move them pretty fast in later years, but I can remember when there would be a line of cars from Point San Quentin back to San Rafael on Sunday night.

Dunning: All waiting their turn.

Snodgrass: Right. We kept running until we got them all over, too.

Dunning: Was that the agreement usually?

Snodgrass: That's what we always did, yes, pick the last one up if it was midnight or one o'clock. That's when they usually gave up, midnight or one o'clock.

Changes in the Richmond Waterfront

Dunning: What did the waterfront look like in the early years? I'm wondering if there were visible changes in the Richmond waterfront that you saw.

Snodgrass: Sure there's a lot of changes. You would never recognize it now, the way it used to be.

Dunning: Can you describe it when you were so very young and started on the ferry?

Snodgrass: When I started on the ferry the slip had just moved from the old quarry up to where the dock is today. The dock is there, and the old office building, and the toll gate was there the last time I looked down there. That was around past the Blake Brother's Quarry then.

The street went through the Standard Oil, and the streetcars ran out there then. That's all changed now. You can't even see where the old street used to be. It's all Chevron's property now.

Then later in the war years, the navy built a big dock, and it's still there too. Then on out farther is Winehaven, and it's still there. But

Snodgrass: there's nothing there now except the navy and some industries farther north.

But that was all--Blake Brothers used to have tow boats. They used to barge gravel up the river, so the barges and tow boats went into the Blake Brothers. That's long since ceased too, of course, but it still looks about the same as it always did out there now.

Dunning: Do you ever go out there?

Snodgrass: Once in a while I ride out there and take a look around, see what's going on, but not very often anymore.

Background on the Richmond-San Rafael Ferry and
Transportation Company

[Date of Interview: February 19, 1985] ##

Dunning: Would you describe the organization of the ferry company?

Snodgrass: It was a private company, actually owned by the major stockholders, who were Oliver J. Olson Sr. and Andrew F. Mahoney Sr. They, along with Captain Ray Clarke, organized the company. Then, for many years after-- Charles Van Damme was in there too. He was actually one of the major stockholders.

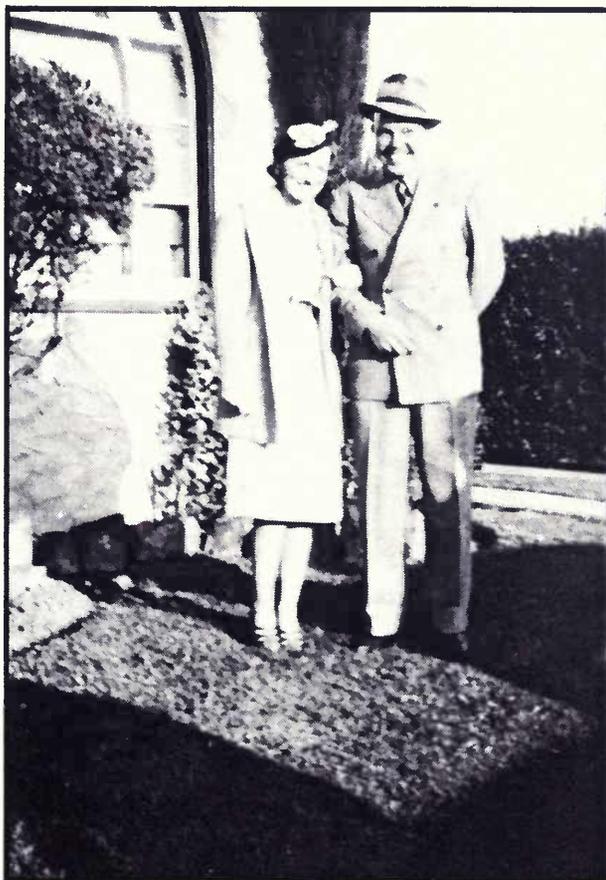


Tubby Snodgrass and co-worker, circa 1930.



Left to right:
M. M. "Tubby" Snodgrass,
Edith M. Snodgrass (mother),
Howard B. Snodgrass (father),
Kathryn L. Snodgrass (sister).
Circa 1931.

Marie Quillin (now
Mrs. Snodgrass) and
Tubby Snodgrass. Circa
1935.



Snodgrass: But after Van Damme passed away, then Mahoney was president one year, and Olson was president the next. They just took turns at being president of the company. Their office was in San Francisco. Actually, both their sons, Andrew F. Mahoney Jr., became secretary of the company, and Oliver J. Olson Jr. was the company president until it folded.

Dunning: Why was their office in San Francisco rather than in Richmond or San Rafael?

Snodgrass: Because they were both in San Francisco, Olson and Mahoney, and so was Van Damme. They finally moved their office from San Francisco over here to Richmond. In fact, the building is still out there, where the office was. That was long afterwards. That was I think maybe about 1930, or '31 that they moved from San Francisco over here.

Captain Raymond Clarke

Dunning: The story goes that Captain Clarke was the one who conceived of the idea of the ferry. Did you hear that too?

Snodgrass: Yes, I heard that story many times.

Dunning: Did Captain Clarke have a version of it that he liked to tell?

Snodgrass: Oh, yes. He would talk about it in a minute. Captain Clarke was with the ferry for many, many years. As a matter of fact, I ended up being his boss. He didn't stay until the bridge was built. I can't remember when he left the company, but he had other interests. He had the Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and I don't know what else he had, but he was pretty well off too.

Dunning: Would you tell me what you recall of the story he told you about why he started the ferry?

Snodgrass: No, I can't even remember the story of why he started the ferry, except he was a deckhand or something when he first started on the ferry. They had the old Ellen. I think it was all in the book. [Harlan, George H., San Francisco Bay Ferryboats. Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1967.] Did you read it in the book? That's the boat they started with.

Of course, there was no other way to get from San Rafael to Richmond except to go around by either crossing, go up and go across the Martinez-Benicia Ferry, or go to take the Sausalito ferry, and then come back to Oakland on the ferry. So it was a link, the shortest distance between two points, between Point San Quentin and Point Richmond.

Dunning: The Van Damme was really the first ferry specifically built for the Richmond-San Rafael line. The Ellen was only in commission a few months?

Snodgrass: Right. Then they had the Charles Van Damme, and then after that the City of Richmond, and after that, the

Snodgrass: City of San Rafael. Then they bought the Sonoma Valley.

Dunning: Was the Sonoma Valley the old San Jose?

Snodgrass: Yes. Then, in 1938, they bought three of the Southern Pacific boats, the old steel boats, and renamed them. Then they bought the Western Pacific boat, the old Edward T. Jeffery, which was supposedly the fastest boat in the San Francisco Bay. They bought that one afterwards too.

Dunning: I had heard that when the Van Damme was designed, that pedestrians had really not been taken into consideration in terms of the design. Mostly it was for cars. Also, cattle was not taken into account. Is this true?

Snodgrass: No. I know that they used to take cattle on the hoof. It was designed as an automobile ferry. All of the boats were automobile ferries, but there was nothing to keep foot passengers from boarding too. [phone rings].

They had an upper deck, and all they had to do was walk up the stairway to get to the upper deck, and on the Charles Van Damme too. As a matter of fact, the Charles Van Damme even had a barroom up there, and had two little cabins where some of the crew, in fact the cook, used to sleep at one time.

Dunning: The bar was separate from the dining area?

Snodgrass: It was all in together, but it was a separate room really, right off the kitchen.

Dunning: What would they serve?

Snodgrass: I suppose they served booze at one time.

Dunning: During Prohibition, was the selling of wine and liquor completely out on the ferry?

Snodgrass: It was, yes.

Dunning: Did the bar close down, or did they sell other things?

Snodgrass: When I went to work there in 1924, the bar was never used. The room was there until they remodeled it later on. It was right off the kitchen, and it was never used at all.

Dunning: Do you recall when it was resumed? Was it immediately after Prohibition that the bar opened again?

Snodgrass: No, it never did open.

Dunning: Never did open again?

Snodgrass: No. We sold beer and wine on the boats after '32. We served beer for a long time, and finally we served wine too. But the Van Damme was no more then. They had already discontinued the use of the Van Damme.

Dunning: Back to the cattle. Were pens constructed?

Snodgrass: No. I don't remember ever being on the boat when there were any cattle. I don't really believe that in my time out there they did take any aboard, but they hadn't had pens before. They just had to hold them, put chains up on both ends of the boat. There was a chain up there anyway.

Dunning: Where was their destination? Were they coming from Richmond, or going to Marin, or--?

Snodgrass: I imagine they were coming from Marin to Richmond.

Dunning: And then do you know where they went?

Snodgrass: Probably to the slaughterhouse out in Oakland.

[phone rings]

Snodgrass: It could be a busy week.

Dunning: I've heard that some of the local ferrymen came from Portugal or the Azores, and some of those who didn't choose to be on farms or ranches became ferrymen.

Snodgrass: No, I don't think that was right. I never heard of that. The Southern Pacific boats had a lot of Portuguese deckhands and captains, but I never heard of them handling any cattle on the boats. During my time--I started in '24--I never remember seeing any cattle on the boats. The only thing that we handled on the boat was milk in cans, because they had regular trucks, hand trucks, that they used for that. That may be what somebody was talking about, I think, but not cattle.

Snodgrass: Marin County, of course, was full of dairy farms, and still is to a certain extent. I remember that big old hand truck that they used. It was like the trucks--which you've probably never seen--around the railroad station when they were putting mail bags on the mail trucks, like the railway mail clerks used.

Dunning: You call it a hand truck?

Snodgrass: Well, it was a long four-wheeled truck, on iron wheels, with a tongue to guide it. It was just pushed on and off. The crew took care of that.

Dunning: Do you recall any other unusual freight? What kind of freight was the most common?

Snodgrass: The most common freight would have been on trucks. A lot of grapes, apples, other fruits and vegetables, and lumber were hauled through there from up the Redwood Highway. But just everything you could think of, including cattle, but in a truck, not on the hoof.

Dunning: So there may have been cattle after you joined up, but it was always on the trucks?

Snodgrass: Oh yes. Right.

Ferrying Prisoners to San Quentin

Dunning: Okay. That was sort of unclear to me. It makes sense. Harlan also mentioned in his book, and I have

Dunning: heard this from Stan Nystrom, that San Quentin Prison brought additional business, and deputy sheriffs from all over California would bring prisoners to San Quentin via the ferry.

Snodgrass: Yes, they came on Saturday mornings. They came up on the train known as the Owl. They unloaded at Sixteenth and Macdonald and put them all in taxis and brought them to the ferry. Then we fed them all going over, ham and eggs. On the San Quentin side they were picked up and taken up to the prison.

We had some very famous guys. I'm trying to remember the guy that threw the salt shaker through the camera, at the guy trying to take his picture. I was on that boat that Saturday morning too, working in the kitchen. Who was it? Some murderer, I can't remember what his name was.

They would bring along up to fifty prisoners with the deputies. What they had for deputies though, were guys that wanted to come up and spend the weekend up here. They would just deputize them and use them, see.

Dunning: So some of them were actually civilians? They weren't sheriffs?

Snodgrass: Oh sure, yes. There were a couple two or three of them that were the gun-packing guys, the deputy sheriffs from Los Angeles. These were all Los Angeles prisoners, really.

Dunning: Most of them came from Southern California?

Snodgrass: Right. They all came together.

Dunning: Would they always come in large groups?

Snodgrass: Right. Every Saturday morning. We used to be all ready for them.

Dunning: How would you prepare for them?

Snodgrass: Well, we would have some ham already cooked, and the minute on the dock we would see the taxis, we would start cooking, because we had to feed them all going over. They got first choice. They came in and actually filled up the dining room.

Dunning: Any particular prisoners that stand out in your mind?

Snodgrass: There are, but I can't remember their names now.

Dunning: I heard a quote from Captain Raymond Clarke that "I've dined with the most desperate of criminals."

Snodgrass: Yes, that's no lie.

Dunning: Would he just sit down and join them?

Snodgrass: Yes. He would be sitting in there eating breakfast, probably.

Dunning: Did anyone try to escape as far as you know?

Snodgrass: I never remember anybody. But they had no place to go, you see. They couldn't get off the boat unless

Snodgrass: they jumped overboard. They were all handcuffed anyway, but they took the cuffs off while they ate.

Dunning: They weren't shackled at all?

Snodgrass: No, not really.

Dunning: Do you think a few would have tried over the years?

Snodgrass: I don't recall. They had a lot of help along with them. I think they had about one deputy for every two prisoners, something like that as I remember it.

Ferry_Safety_Record

Dunning: I had also read that statistics have proved that there was no safer place to be than on a ferry boat; ferry sinkings were startlingly few, and in the hundred year history of Bay navigation, loss of life on the Bay Area was less than one millionth of a percent on the ferry.

Snodgrass: I would imagine that's right. I've never heard of a ferry boat sinking. They did have one, the old Yerba Buena I think it was, that was a Key System boat, a passenger boat, where they had tanks on both ends. When the people all rushed to one end, they would fill the tank on the other end. Somebody fouled up and they dipped down going across. Some of them, I don't remember how many, lost their lives. They got pretty wet. That's in the book too, I think.

Dunning: Did you feel like you were out in the sea in that short crossing, thirty minutes?

Snodgrass: Well, in rough weather you would, because a lot of people used to get seasick. Some of the waitresses used to get seasick. It got pretty choppy out there, especially with the old first boats we had, paddlewheel boats. With the wind and the tide, in a real rough sea, sometimes the boat actually stopped and you would hear a loud noise when the wheels stopped for a second or a minute. It used to bounce around quite a bit. After we got the big boats it was not bad.

Dunning: How about you and seasickness?

Snodgrass: I never was seasick.

Dunning: You couldn't have kept your job for so long?

Snodgrass: It never bothered me.

Dunning: Pretty amazing. This is sort of a morbid question, but before the Golden Gate Bridge, did people ever jump off the ferry for a suicide?

Snodgrass: They might have jumped off the Golden Gate Ferry or the Southern Pacific Ferry. I can only remember one ever going overboard on our ferry. I guess it was on purpose, but they picked him up. He didn't drown.

Dunning: I suppose people--in order to hit the water--would have to jump forward of the paddles so that they

Dunning: wouldn't get crushed. It would be rather tricky just jumping clear into the water.

Snodgrass: It would have been easy enough because the paddles were in the center of the boat, in the middle. You could either be fore, or you could be aft, and clear that easy enough. It would be no big problem to jump. The big problem would be the same as on the other boats; they would be out to pick you up. It wasn't any comparison to the bridges.

Fog

Dunning: Did the tule fogs occur often?

Snodgrass: Well, they call it a tule fog, but the worst fogs we ever had were in the times when we had the lowest tides. It was a problem with us because in those low tides, all you had to do was get a little ways off the course and you're going to be on the mud.

I think we talked before about the time that one of our boats did go on the mud and was there for six hours. Of course, they got on the mud several times, but never for any great length of time. Maybe two or three times in all the times I can ever remember did we ever tie up on account of the fog.

One time I remember, that was even after the two bridges were built, it was so foggy you couldn't go across to either bridge. The cars just lined up out

Snodgrass: there. Our boats were steering by the compass anyway, so they could still go in the fog.

Dunning: The compass was really the only instrument?

Snodgrass: That and the horns.

Dunning: Yes, the horns and the whistles. Would the ferrymen have to memorize those sounds to know what they were avoiding?

Snodgrass: No. For a long time we had a bell on the dock. After the navy came into Point Molate, they had a big foghorn on their dock. There was a bell on Red Rock, and of course we had a bell on the San Quentin pier. The other horns you would hear would be other boats going up and down the San Francisco Bay, so there were a lot of whistles blowing.

Dunning: I would think the ferrymen would have to know exactly what whistles were for what to know what to avoid in the fog.

Snodgrass: Well, they would have known about the Brothers Island and the horn on the other dock there, but those were the only horns that they would have to know the sound of, because the other horns would have been on the boats.

Dunning: But it seems like they would have to be able to recognize some of those sounds from the boats too, to know what they were coming up against.

Snodgrass: No. I think that when you start hearing those whistles you start slowing up. You don't know who it is, or what it is, unless it was somebody like maybe the ferry boat that used to run from San Francisco to Vallejo. But there were lots of boats, and tow boats, and freight boats in those days, in the early days.

Changes in Bay Traffic

Growth of the Trucking Industry

Dunning: How does the traffic compare to what you see out there now?

Snodgrass: You don't see any. Of course, I'm not out there enough to see any traffic now, but there's no traffic now compared to what there used to be, because the trucking industry has now taken over.

[phone rings]

Snodgrass: You don't see barges going up and down the bay like you used to see. So that's a lot of traffic out. And you don't see freight boats going.

The only thing that you're going to see now is a Standard Oil tanker, or a tanker going up to Union Oil, or boats going up to the sugar refinery. There's still a lot of traffic, but not like it used to be.

Dunning: Was that change gradual?

Snodgrass: Yes, but slowly but surely the trucks took over all the freight lines. The boats were too slow. That phased out pretty fast.

Dunning: Were holidays special on the ferries?

Snodgrass: They were special in that that's when we did a lot of business. That was the only thing special thing that I know of.

Dunning: In Harlan's book, he mentions a couple of incidents of commuters being given a gift, or Santa Claus being on the ferry.

Snodgrass: That might be. That would have been on the other passenger ferries, because people commuted there all the time. We didn't have that kind of traffic. We had some commuters, but not to that extent that they had.

Dunning: So it was business as usual?

Snodgrass: Right. All it meant was more business, much more.

Work Schedule

Dunning: I think I perhaps asked you last time about your schedule. Did you get many vacations?

Snodgrass: Yes, I got two weeks vacation a year, but never in the summertime. I had to wait until the busy season was over before I got a vacation. And only once, I think, did I get off at Christmas, because that was another busy time. Well, I got off twice at Christmas, because one Christmas I got married, and I was married in Portland.

Dunning: They had to give you the holiday.

Snodgrass: I was pretty anxious to get up there then. A couple of times after I got married, we did go up to Portland for Christmas or Thanksgiving, because my in-laws lived in Portland. Never in the summertime.

Dunning: Were you working a forty hour week? How were your hours?

Snodgrass: When I first started to work there, there was no such thing as a forty hour week or an eight hour day, even for kids. We were probably one of the last companies to go to a five day week.

I was supposed to work five days, but I was on call all the time. There was no such thing as a forty hour week for me, because I was there on Sundays for fourteen or fifteen hours, and weekends or holidays. Whatever, if there was any trouble I had to go.

Dunning: It sounds more like a fifty or sixty hour week.

Snodgrass: That's right, or more.

Dunning: How did your family appreciate that?

Snodgrass: Not too well, but you can't have your cake and eat it too. I had a good job in those days. That was a real good job.

Dunning: I have been running into some people that have been exposed to health hazards. Was that a problem on the ferry, like lung problems?

Snodgrass: No, nobody paid any attention to anything like that. That would be no problem on a boat anyway. Nothing like that in the ferry boat days. In those days, the old-timers at the Standard Oil Company said that the bad odors smelled like ham and eggs to them.

Dunning: Was there a social life connected to the ferry?

Snodgrass: I think the crew members used to socialize together, but I don't think you could call it any social life. They just happened to be friends.

Dunning: Were there any athletic teams?

Snodgrass: No. We came to work, not to socialize.

Dunning: Would you describe your work as exciting?

Snodgrass: I wouldn't exactly call it exciting. Some people might have thought it was romantic or exciting, but as far as I was concerned, it wasn't very exciting.

Dunning: You mentioned the last time that you still dream about the ferry. Are there any dreams that stand out in your mind?

Snodgrass: Not really. I still dream about it. Not as often as I used to, but I still do. Every once in a while I'm back out on that ferry boat.

As a matter of fact, I've been known to say to my wife when I was coming down here to my current office, "I'm going down to the ferry."

I did that for a good many years. I still dream about a lot of things.

Other Recollections of the Ferry

Dunning: This is an opportunity to record anything that you think should be remembered about the ferries. Is there anything that you would like to add about that?

Snodgrass: The ferry boats were really, for most people, sort of a romantic thing, if you want to call it that. The kids loved to go on the boats, and it was a real treat to go on a ferry boat and be able to go up in the restaurant and get something to eat.

I had a lot of good times. A lot of trouble, but I had a lot of fun or good times, because I knew everybody. We were all good friends.

Snodgrass: Not that I was not glad to be finished, because I was. Like I told you before, I had two jobs the last few years, so it was like having a vacation for me to be able to go home Friday and not have to worry about going to work until Monday morning.

People still ask me about the ferry boats, and tell me how much they enjoyed going on the boats, even if they had to wait for hours sometimes. They still liked it. It's not very romantic to go across that bridge.

Dunning: BART is even less romantic.

Snodgrass: Yes, but very handy. I would have to say that I had a good job, and all during the Depression, I never missed a day's work all that time. I had a good time, so I have no regrets about the ferry.

People say to me every once in a while, "I wish the ferry boats were back." But if they were back, they would only use them when they wanted to use them.

Dunning: They wouldn't have to use them.

Snodgrass: And they wouldn't wait like they used to have to wait. You know how people are today, they don't even want to wait to get across the bridge.

Dunning: I was going to ask you a little about World War II and the ferry. Did you have to change your operation at all?

Snodgrass: No, not really. We didn't change our operation, but we had an awful time keeping people working to run the ferries.

Dunning: Everyone went into the shipyard industries, or the services?

Snodgrass: That's right. The scale of pay to be a deckhand on the ferry didn't compare to working in the shipyard. We had to have licensed people, so it was nip and tuck. We had a lot of part-time people, because there were a lot of guys that worked, for instance, at the Standard Oil, who had seaman's papers. We used to hire them on their days off, Saturdays and Sundays.

It was real tough to keep the boats going during that time. That and the problem of buying enough food to keep the restaurants going was all part of the problem.

Dunning: It seems like you probably would have had more business then, too, with the shipyards going.

Snodgrass: Yes, we did have. We paid a lot of overtime during that time. But we kept the schedule all the time.

Dunning: You didn't cut back on the schedule?

Snodgrass: No, no.

Dunning: Was it running on a twenty-four hour at that point?

Snodgrass: No. The first boat in the morning was five-forty, and we tied up at ten twenty-three except Saturdays and Sundays, and then it was twelve o'clock.

Dunning: Would the swing shift have already started at the shipyards at that point? Did you coordinate with that?

Snodgrass: Not really, no, because the only shipyard workers we had were the people from Marin City, and they were all day workers as far as I remember.

Dunning: Were there blackouts?

Snodgrass: We had some blackouts, yes, once in a while.

Dunning: How would you describe that?

Snodgrass: I don't recall we ever had a blackout to bother the ferries at all. I remember blackouts, but the boats were easy to black out anyway, because all they had to have were the running lights.

Dunning: Is there anything else you would like to add about the ferries at this point?

Snodgrass: No, I don't think so.

Dunning: Well, if there's another time, or even during the rest of our discussion today anything comes to your mind, just let me know.

Snodgrass: Okay.

Dunning: One question I did want to ask. Were logs kept?

Snodgrass: On the boats?

Dunning: Yes.

Snodgrass: Yes, daily logs.

Dunning: Are they still around?

Snodgrass: I don't imagine that they're around. I can't remember, but I think everything was destroyed like that.

Dunning: I just think it would be interesting to--

Snodgrass: Have an old log book?

Dunning: Just go through a month, or see what was jotted down. Maybe the Maritime Museum might have some of the logs.

Snodgrass: I don't think so. I don't know. But they kept a log of the courses and everything like that.

Dunning: Were there ever any songs or poems written about the Richmond-San Rafael ferry?

Snodgrass: Not that I know of, no.

Dunning: If you ever hear of any, I would love to hear them.

Snodgrass: I'm afraid that's out.

Richmond as an Historical Place

Dunning: Well, I think I'll switch gears a little bit. Do you see Richmond as an historical place?

Snodgrass: I would imagine that Richmond is about as historical a place as a lot of other places that are around. Go back to the early days of the Standard Oil Company and there are some historical spots around here, yes. I don't remember anything. Of course, they made history during the war right out here in the shipyards, building all those boats. I imagine that you could call that an historical event.

Dunning: That was really a whole transformation in a two year period.

Snodgrass: Right.

Dunning: I think I will talk about that, but first I wanted to ask you about your memories of what Richmond was like when you were a child when you first arrived here, what it looked like, and who lived here.

Snodgrass: Well, I think the population then was eighteen or nineteen thousand, or something like that. It was just a quiet little city. I remember you didn't have to worry about locking your front door or anything like that in those days. I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning and walk from Ninth and Pennsylvania up to Macdonald Avenue and think nothing about it, you know, in the dark. As I recall it, it

Snodgrass: was just a real nice place. Everybody knew everybody.

Dunning: What was the ethnic population pre-World War II?

Snodgrass: Well, there were a lot of Portuguese and Italian people. That is, a lot of the people that I went to school with were of Italian descent. The only way you would know it was by their name. There were very few black folks here then. As a matter of fact, in school, the only ones I remember were Walter Freeman and the Ellison family. They all lived out in North Richmond then. Other than that it was just the usual mix of people.

Dunning: What is your ethnic background?

Snodgrass: Well, I guess I'm part Scotch and part English, really. My grandmother was born in Nova Scotia. My mother was born in Idaho, and my dad was born in Iowa.

World War II Transforms a City

Dunning: When did you first start seeing changes in Richmond?

Snodgrass: Really, the war is what changed Richmond, because just about overnight the shipyards started. There were one hundred thousand people working in that shipyard out there. That really changed things around.

Dunning: Was there any preparation for that? Were people in the town consulted on any of the planning?

Snodgrass: They might have been, but I wouldn't know anything about it. They just really started to go to town here. It just about happened overnight.

Dunning: What were the first changes that you saw?

Snodgrass: When they started the shipyards you saw all kinds of people here. A lot of business. People were working around the clock and sleeping in the shows, in the theaters.

Dunning: Because they had no place to live?

Snodgrass: That's right. They had no place to live. Then they built the war housing.

Dunning: Where exactly was the war housing?

Snodgrass: It was on the Southside, starting on Ohio, down to Cutting, and all the way out to Gerrard, and all the way to Twenty-third Street. Then on the other side of Cutting they had some more housing too, as I recall it. But that was all taken up with the shipyards out there anyway.

Dunning: Did you feel any loss of that small town feeling?

Snodgrass: It didn't take very long, I'll tell you, until you did.

Dunning: It must have seemed like a whole different city.

Snodgrass: Oh, yes. It was a different city. It was nothing like it used to be at all. That happened very fast. Schools were crowded, everything was crowded.

Dunning: Had you already moved to El Cerrito by this time?

Snodgrass: I was married in 1938, just at the end of the year, and we moved to El Cerrito in '39. That was our first home as a married couple, in El Cerrito.

Dunning: Were you glad that you were out of Richmond?

Snodgrass: No. I've never been out of Richmond. I have been here for years and years. I just happen to live in El Cerrito. There's no difference between El Cerrito and Richmond, really.

Dunning: Suddenly, with the shipyards, there were groups of Midwesterners here, and Okies, and blacks from the South. How did everyone get along?

Snodgrass: Oh, there were a lot of fights and so forth around, but I can't remember that they didn't get along. The friendliest people in the world were the Okies and the Arkies anyway.

Dunning: You hear lots of stereotypes about Okies. How would you describe an Okie?

Snodgrass: I don't know how you would describe them. They would call each other Okies if they wanted to kid a little bit. "Hey Okie."

Snodgrass: At the ferry we had some Okies and Arkies that were the salt of the earth, really nice people. The only thing, in all the time that I was on the ferry, there was only one black fellow that ever worked there. It just so happened that there were no black sailors. This guy was a marine fireman.

Dunning: What about as deckhands, or in the kitchen, or--?

Snodgrass: Never had any.

Dunning: Was that discrimination?

Snodgrass: No. The deckhands had to have seaman's papers, and I don't recall even anybody in the kitchen. We hired Chinese people, who actually had their own home right there, because we had a house for them on the dock. So we never had any black folks out there at all.

Dunning: What about the Asian population pre-World War II? I've heard that there were a number of Japanese living in Richmond before the time of internment.

Snodgrass: Yes, we had quite a few Japanese. I remember quite a few Japanese kids going to school. They came from San Pablo Avenue and vicinity where there were a lot of hot houses, and several Japanese nurseries. The Oishi family, the Saki family. I remember a lot of kids that went to school with me, and they're still around.

Dunning: They came back after internment?

Snodgrass: Those that were interned, yes.

Dunning: What about the post-war years--during the war years people had the jobs, so that there was money coming in, and then right after the war Kaiser shipyards and fifty-seven other war industries left.

Snodgrass: It got tough. That really changed things around.

Dunning: Were there visible changes? I'd like to hear your impression of those times. For an outsider it seems like the changes would be incredible. I mean, just very dramatic.

Snodgrass: Well, I don't remember too much about what happened, but all of a sudden there were a lot of people and not enough jobs to go around. Of course a lot of people left, too.

Dunning: Where would they go?

Snodgrass: I guess back home. But a lot of them stayed here. There were a lot of black people here then. Of course, you know that in Richmond the blacks are the majority now. And there are a lot of other minorities around here now too.

It's easier for me to remember fifty years ago than it is to remember twenty-five years ago.

Dunning: Actually, a number of people do say that.

Snodgrass: I can remember a lot of things that happened at the ferry, but I'm having a hard time right now remembering just what happened after the war and how things changed, because 1956 was the end of the ferry

Snodgrass: boat days for me. After that, things are harder to remember than they were before.

Loss of Downtown Richmond

Snodgrass: I remember how Richmond was still a nice place and still had a good downtown and all that, because my office was down on Tenth Street, across the street from where the Hotel Don is. Then gradually, when the redevelopment agency started taking over, the downtown started going. When Hilltop opened, that was the death knell for downtown. We're trying to bring it back now, but not too successfully so far.

Dunning: Was the downtown supposed to be redeveloped?

Snodgrass: That was the plan, yes.

Dunning: This was in the fifties and sixties?

Snodgrass: Right.

Dunning: And then Hilltop was built in the early seventies?

Snodgrass: I don't remember the dates. I moved out of downtown in about '68 or '69, I think, right here to this building.

Dunning: Were the same planners involved with the so-called renovation of downtown and Hilltop, or were they two totally different groups?

Snodgrass: Totally different.

Dunning: Who were they? Who was involved in the downtown?

Snodgrass: The Hilltop was built by--I can't even remember the name of the people that actually put that thing together out there. Now Chevron Land is out there running the show. If you haven't been out there to look around, it's worthwhile to look at.

Dunning: I have. There's quite a bit happening. Do you think there can be a thriving Hilltop Mall and a thriving downtown?

Snodgrass: I think that the downtown would come back never to like it was before, but it would come back if we could get one big building started, like the Camino West that they're working on now.

Dunning: Is that a residence?

Snodgrass: No. That would be an office building. If you got the one building started, maybe that would be the thing that would trigger a come back. It'll never come back all the way like it was before though.

Dunning: I heard that there were three or four movie theaters right in downtown.

Snodgrass: I think it was one, two, three downtown. The old Fox Theater is still downtown, I mean the building is there. Maybe they tore it down the other day.

- Dunning: What about the development on the waterfront, like Marina Bay? There seems to be quite a few empty condos at this point.
- Snodgrass: Yes, they've had a problem selling those condos. I know the bank is taking it over now, and they've got some kind of a sales program going on out there to try to sell land. I think they've still got over a hundred of them to sell.
- Dunning: Do you have any notions of why it's so difficult?
- Snodgrass: I have a lot of notions about a lot of things around here now, because that's part of my job, but I don't have any notions I want to put on that tape.
- Dunning: That's it. I feel like you're holding out.
- Snodgrass: Yes.
- Dunning: You will have a chance to read over your transcript and take out anything.
- Snodgrass: Yes, I know, but there's some things you just really don't talk about on tape.
- Dunning: I'm just looking for the fullest story.
- Snodgrass: I know, but there's probably a lot of difference of opinion about what the problem in Richmond is.

Dunning: Well, I hoped to document that difference of opinion too. Thank you for telling me what you could. If at a later time, some things come to mind that you want to record, please feel free to call me.

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The Oldenrod Families and the Oldenrod Families

APPENDICES

The Oldtime Ferries: Golf and 12-Slice Toasters

BY HARRE W. DEMORO

Before the great bridges were built, the world's largest ferryboat fleet sailed San Francisco Bay.

Since 1850, when the little Kangaroo inaugurated San Francisco-Oakland steamer service, about 110 ferries have worked the Bay, including the small fleet running today.

More than 60 million passengers and 7 million motor vehicles rode the ferries in 1930, the peak travel year.

The largest system, operated by Southern Pacific Golden Gate Ferries Ltd., had 27 automobile-carrying boats on seven routes in 1930.

SPGG ferries ran from San Francisco's Hyde Street terminal to Sausalito and Berkeley, and from the Ferry Building to Alameda, Oakland, Richmond and Vallejo.

Southern Pacific also ran huge paddle-driven passenger-only ferries from the Ferry Building in San Francisco to piers in Oakland and Alameda, where they met a network of red-colored electric commuter trains.

SP subsidiary Northwestern Pacific Railroad operated ferries decorated with a huge redwood tree painted on their paddle-wheel boxes. NWP boats steamed from the Ferry Building to Sausalito, where commuters boarded electric trains for Mill Valley, San Anselmo, Fairfax and San Rafael.

There also was the Six-Minute Ferry from Crockett to Morrow Cove and the Nickel Ferry between Oakland's First and Broadway and the Ferry Building, which opened in 1898 and was one of the busiest terminals in the world until the mid-1930s.

So many ferries jammed the Bay that when the fog was thick, the boats ran at 40-minute intervals rather than the usual 20 minutes to minimize the risk of collision.

Some fast-hour schedules called for commuter boat departures every 15 minutes. Automobile-carrying ferries departed as soon as they were filled with vehicles when travel was heavy on weekends and holidays.

Almost every ferry had a distinctive-sounding whistle so captains navigating without radio or radar could find their way across the fog-shrouded Bay by listening for familiar sounds and echoes.

SP and its subsidiaries painted their ferries white for visibility in the fog. But the upstart Key System, formed in 1903 to challenge the SP's monopoly of East Bay commuter service, put the same orange on its ferries as it did on the electric trains that met the boats at a terminal at the end of a wooden trestle near Yerba Buena Island.

To soothe the nerves of commuters, Key put potted palms in upper deck passenger cabins. For years, the Key System's Christmas parties on the ferries were spectacular and the company president, Alfred J. Lundberg, would dress up as Santa Claus.

The Alameda-San Francisco ferry was a political and social institution because the island city was small and its power structure close-knit. For decades, Alamedans of any importance rode the same boat each morning and Chamber of Commerce and City Hall business was conducted over coffee and doughnuts.

Occasionally, an Alameda ferry's lower deck was rearranged so commuters could drive golf balls into the Bay, allowing commuters to practice before tournaments at the city-owned links on Bay Farm Island.

Richmond-San Rafael ferries had slot machines and were painted a bright red and displayed a chain symbol to emphasize the transbay link. Before it merged into the

Southern Pacific system, the Golden Gate Ferry Co. painted its boats yellow.

Ferries had a transbay transportation monopoly. During the week they carried commuters and on weekends and holidays the boats were gateways to recreation.

Northwestern Pacific ferries and connecting electric trains at Sausalito took pleasure-seekers to the steam railroad that ascended Mount Tamalpais from Mill Valley. NWP steam trains rolled along Tomales Bay en route to Duncan's Mills and Cazadero and rolled through the redwood country to Eureka. For many years the NWP steam train was the only route to the Russian River.

The San Francisco-Vallejo "Monticello Line" ferry carried automobiles to Vallejo, the entrance to the Napa Valley. But a rider didn't need an automobile. He or she could walk a few steps from the Vallejo ferry dock to the electric trains of the San Francisco & Napa Valley Railroad, which ran to Napa and terminated near the geysers at Calistoga.

Zepheniah Jefferson Hatch was so enthusiastic about his Monticello Steamship Co. that he named one of his sons, who became the Vallejo ferry's lawyer, C. Ferry Hatch.

Besides connecting with electric trains for Oakland, Berkeley and Piedmont, Key System ferries also met the swift electric interurbans of the Sacramento Northern Railway, which ran to Walnut Creek, Pittsburg, Sacramento, Marysville, Yuba City and Chico.

Graybeards generally agree that the best ferry food was on the Key System boats although SP retaliated with fare prepared by its railroad dining car chefs.

Since the Key System ferry crossing took only 18 minutes, waiters had to be prompt and passengers chewed quickly. The most popular Key System dish was corned beef hash concocted from a secret recipe (forgotten today) and served

on genuine china service with a cup of coffee brewed from a blend made especially for the Key System by MJB. A total of 121,162 orders of the famous hash were consumed during 1924.

Some Key ferries had electric toasters that could toast 12 slices of bread at once. Commuters considered that to be a culinary and electrical wonder of the age.

The ferries were too successful; they generated so much business they made bridges financially possible. But in most cases, the boats hung on for a little while after the bridges opened, often because ferry fares were lower than bridge tolls and employees hoped they could survive until they qualified for pensions.

The first major ferry abandonments occurred in 1937 and 1938, when Hyde Street-Sausalito and Hyde Street-Berkeley runs were discontinued along with service from the Ferry Building to Richmond, Vallejo and Oakland-First and Broadway. SP and Key System commuter ferries to the East Bay were abandoned in 1939 when their connecting electric trains switched to the new Bay Bridge tracks.

Alameda auto ferry service was discontinued in 1939 and the Oakland-San Francisco automobile service, the last to be operated by the once huge Southern Pacific Golden Gate system that was now bankrupt, was discontinued on May 16, 1940.

Then on March 1, 1941, the commuter service to Sausalito was discontinued and the electric trains replaced by buses.

SP kept a passenger-only ferry run until 1958 from San Francisco and Oakland to handle baggage, mail and passengers for its transcontinental trains. Richmond-San Rafael boats were abandoned in 1956 when the new bridge opened and in 1962, the last of the automobile-carrying ferry routes, was replaced by the Martinez-Benicia Bridge.

Although the big, traditional ferryboat disappeared from the bay in 1958, the Ferry Building was not without ferries for long. The first new ferries to appear were tourist boats operated by a Crowley Maritime subsidiary to Tiburon. When a strike temporarily shut down the Crowley boats in 1970, the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District took over the service temporarily. In the same year, the bridge district bought the Golden Gate, a rebuilt San Diego tour boat, for Sausalito service.

Then in 1977, three gas-turbine-powered (since rebuilt with diesel power) ferries inaugurated San Francisco-Larkspur service under the flag of the district.

However, the longest-lived ferry line was one almost nobody knew about — the Vallejo-Mare Island run. Service began in 1851, two years before the Mare Island Naval Yard was established to repair wooden sailing ships.

Standard steam-driven ferryboats made the run until after World War II. Last month, the small, diesel-powered launches that shuttled back and forth on the bay's oldest ferry route, suspended service.

Richmond's voice of industry to step down

By Lynn Kidder
The Tribune

RICHMOND — Friends call M.M. Snodgrass "Tubby," but to most people he is "Mr. Industry."

Snodgrass is the first and only executive director of the Council of Richmond Industries, formed in 1965 to promote the interests of refineries and smokestack industries lining the waterfront.

Every Monday night Snodgrass takes the same seat at city council meetings — back row, far left. Only illness keeps him away.

He never speaks. He's there to observe and report back to industrial leaders.

But his stolid presence is a visual reminder of industry's influence.

Snodgrass, 74, will resign his post at the end of the year. The square-jawed, plain-talking lobbyist has been increasingly troubled by chest ailments in recent months.

It is time to slow down, Snodgrass reflected.

It is also a time of shifting power. The resignation of

the man who was the voice of Richmond industry for more than a quarter century symbolizes to many political observers a changing in the guard.

The 32-member Council of Richmond Industries has seen its influence ebb.

Fewer workers in the heavy industries lining the waterfront live and vote here.

And as development gobbles up shoreline around the Bay, Richmond's waterfront property becomes increasingly desirable to commercial and residential developers.

Industry lost two key battles on waterfront interests last year. First, the City Council defeated in a 3-2 vote a proposed expansion of a Petromark tank storage depot. Located on the posh Point Richmond waterfront, the tank farm is a tantalizing spot for housing and retail development.

Then commercial developers spent heavily in the 1985 elections to defeat the two council members who supported the tank expansion.

This is not a forewarning that industry will disappear, only that it has to live with new development, observers say.

Snodgrass was philosophical about the recent defeats during an interview in his modest Macdonald Avenue office where he works alone, without even a secretary.

"This is not the first time we lost an election. But things will level out after a while. And I'd say this council is not against industry.

"They had to be real careful to get elected," Snodgrass continued. "Everyone is so concerned about the environment these days, about toxics," he said.

"Once candidates are elected and sit on the other side of the council table for awhile, they start to see things differently."

Marion Myers Snodgrass. (with a name like that, it's no wonder most people preferred "Tubby") was born in Blackfoot, Idaho. When he was 12 years old he moved here with his family. His father opened a variety store on Macdonald Avenue and Sixth Street.

Before graduating from Richmond High School, Snodgrass had started working on the Richmond-San Rafael ferries as a dishwasher and a cook. He moved up in the business until he became a superintendent, a job he held until Oct. 30, 1956 when the new bridge made the ferries obsolete.

Two years before, Snodgrass had set up a public relations business. He worked both jobs, starting at 4:30 a.m. and not finishing until after the gavel had run down on late-night council and advisory commission meetings.

From the start, most of his clients were industries and as-

piring City Council candidates. He is proud of the years he spent directing the local United Crusade charitable fund-raising drive.

Interestingly, while building his reputation in industry and at City Hall, his brother, Woodrow Wilson Snodgrass, was gaining influence in Richmond schools.

First a teacher at Roosevelt Junior High, W.W. Snodgrass eventually became superintendent of the Richmond Unified District, and still negotiates teacher contracts for the district.

Tubby Snodgrass works best behind the scenes. He seldom allows himself to be quoted in the news. It is even more unusual for him to speak during public meetings.

In part, his success was based on strong personal ties with the top men in business, politics and newspapers. Equally important, Snodgrass made sure to know what was going on. He read and clipped newspapers, attended all meetings and traded information with those in power.

Writing press releases was hardly necessary when Snodgrass started his days with morning coffee with Chick Richards, the late editor of the Richmond Independent. The now-defunct Independent was "the Bible" as Snodgrass fondly recalls.

He phoned and met with individual council members regularly, slipping in information about industry's stance on the latest city proposal during comfortable conversations about families and jobs.

He was especially close to the late Mayor Tom Corcoran, who

died last summer.

"People criticize me for talking to Tommy (Corcoran) everyday. But he was a friend of mine, not just the mayor," said Snodgrass. "We'd discuss a lot of things, hash things over."

In Richmond, if you wanted to run for office, if you wanted to learn about industry's position on any subject, you went to Snodgrass.

"There's no question about it. If you wanted to reach an industry, particularly an oil company, you had to talk to Tubby," said Bert Coffey, a Democratic Party leader who has helped put several Contra Costa politicians into office.

"It was always wise to talk to him before deciding to run for office," said Don Greco, a two-term Richmond council member who lost his seat last year.

"He knew who was running. He knew what kind of backing candidates had. He could tell you whether you would be wasting your time," Greco said.

For instance, Snodgrass correctly predicted a defeat when Greco made an unsuccessful bid for the Brookside Hospital Board of Directors.

Greco also worked on the campaigns of Council members John Ziesenhenné and Lonnie Washington, former Council member John Sheridan and former Supervisor James Kenney.

Snodgrass does not believe that candidates owe him favors after they are elected.

"I always told them that I did not want to own them. I just want the right to talk with

them," Snodgrass asserted.

He downplays the notion that industry used to control Richmond.

"I know it sounds corny but industries are not interested in running the city. All they are interested in is a fair shake and good government."

Snodgrass has agreed to see the industrial council through an organization overhaul.

It will become a regional organization, changing its name to the Council of Industries of West Contra Costa.

Snodgrass envisions all the refineries and heavy industries along the waterfront up through the C&H sugar plant in Crockett becoming members.

It will strengthen industry's hand with the numerous regional agencies that now exert control such as the Bay Area Conservation and Development Commission and the Regional Water Quality Control Board, said Snodgrass.

He is not disappointed that he will not be part of the move.

"It's kind of a relief. For years I've been trying to keep close tabs on what happens. Now I can go home at 4 p.m. and relax."

Although Snodgrass happily describes plans to spend more time with his wife, Marie, in their El Cerrito home, he is tight-lipped as ever about current business.

His public relations practice will continue. But the identity of his clients will remain a private matter between Snodgrass and those who pay him.

Judith K. Dunning

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Previous oral history projects: Three Generations of Italian
Women in Boston's North End; World War I and II shipyard workers
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Lowell, Massachusetts.

Photography exhibitions: "Lowell: A Community of Workers,"
Lowell, MA 1981-1984 (travelling).
Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers"
Richmond Museum, 1988.

Play: "Boomtown" based on the oral histories of shipyard
workers, produced by San Francisco Tale Spinners Theater, 1989.

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Currently adapting Richmond community oral histories into large
print books for California adult literacy programs.

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