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Berkeley, California

Frank Silva

The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project

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Interview conducted by
Nicholas Anderman and Erfan Moradi
In 2019

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Frank Silva

Abstract

Frank Silva is a photographer and a founding member of the Waterfront Writers and Artists. He worked as a marine clerk on the Bay Area waterfront for 38 years, from 1965 through 2003. Silva's partner, Mimi Rose, also participated in the interview.

The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project

The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project is a collection of interviews with founding members of the Waterfront Writers and Artists (WWA), a group of longshoremen and marine clerks in San Francisco and Oakland who, in the late 1970s, organized themselves into a working-class collective of writers, photographers, illustrators, video documentarians, and sound artists. Over the following decade, the group gave public readings up and down the west coast of the U.S. and Canada and produced a significant body of creative work, much of which grapples with the impact of containerization on waterfront work and social life. Interviews document the group's founding and early history, the artistic development of its members, its eventual dissolution, and its legacy. The group's collected work is held by the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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[Audio file: Frank_Silva_interview_June_10_2019_audio.mp3]

00:00:00
Anderman: Okay, so to start, I think the way it works is you say your full name, where you were born, and your date of birth.

00:00:08
Silva: Okay. My name is Frank Silva, born in Oakland, California, September 27, 1942.

00:00:15
Anderman: And why don't you just tell us a little bit, briefly, about your early life, your parents, [and] your family history.

00:00:22
Silva: Okay. My mother is Mexican. My father was Portuguese. We lived in West Oakland, which was the place to live back in those days. And my father worked on the waterfront. That's how I happened to be there. I didn't start working there until I was about 23 or so years old. So, basically I worked out of Local 6 for a while. I did a lot of odd jobs for about three or four years before I ended up on the waterfront. And what had happened actually was I hurt my wrist on this job, and I was off for a while, and when I went back, the wrist started to hurt again. And so my father asked me, do you want to try working on the waterfront? So I said, yeah, sure, why not, I'll give it a shot, you know? When I got there, I found for my personality and for who I am, basically heaven, because you had a lot of people to work with, a lot of different personalities.

First of all, you had a unionist idea, you know, the part where you think about other people rather than just yourself. You know, you're a part of a group, you're a part of people who were looking out for you. Not only that, but a lot of the people that I had met when I was a kid were working there. They were my father's friends, you know, some of them were our family friends. So when I got there, people would come up to me and say, "Hey are you Frank Silva's son?" And I would say, yes I am. [They would say:] "Well kid, you ever need anything, you come and talk to me, we'll take care of it, you know." So I was instantly welcomed and made to feel comfortable.

And the other thing was, that the job I had was a clerk job, which is basically taking care of numbers, one way or another, you know. All the work I did before that was all labor, you know, so that was a nice aspect. I didn't have to break myself up or suck fumes or any of that stuff that you have to do in a cannery or in a factory or all the kinds of things that I did before, you know. And you're working outside, you're working with all the different cargo from all over the world. In those days when I started, everything was out. Everything was out. The whole dock would smell like

pepper or it would smell like coffee or it would smell like cashews or…I mean, it was just endless and it was just…[there was] lots of it. So it created this huge atmosphere, this whole thing. And it was a very energetic place. You know, the people were energetic; the place just had a lot of energy, you know.

And you had all the ships coming in from all over the world and the different people you had to work with there. And as time goes on, you advance, you know, and then you become the supervisor or you start dealing with the mate on the ship and you start, you know, doing what's necessary to get the proper documents worked up and all this sort of stuff. So there's a whole range of basically maturing as a worker, you know, you start out on a small job. I was there for 38 years before I finally left. So, in those years, I worked many, many different piers, many different kinds of jobs.

When I would go into the hall when I was a B-man[1], when I was trying to learn, when we had a lot of work, they would let you pick your job. When you're a B-man, you don't have that right, but when there's a lot of work, the guy that we were dealing with, anyway, he would allow you to do that. So I would pick jobs that I had not worked on, because I wanted to learn it. I wanted to know where it was, how it works, all that sort of stuff.

So, the job had tremendous variety. If you didn't like working here or you didn't like this guy, you could go work some other place. Maybe you'd want a short commute or a long—whatever it is, any kind of way a person would determine how they want things to go. And when you're an A-man, you don't have to work, you need certain numbers of hours to get certain benefits and things like that. But nobody's going to call you on the phone and [ask] you, where are you? Nobody's going to ask you if you paid your car payment, or nothing. You're on your own. You never got paid for time you didn't work. You never had sick leave. So, you were sort of like an independent worker except that you had the right of the union worker, you know, you had the support of the union and the contract and the other aspects of the union that made it really great. So, for me, it fit me like a glove, you know, it was perfect for my [*unintelligible*].

00:05:19
Anderman: Do you know when your dad started on the docks?

00:05:21
Silva: He started in the fifties. I think in the early fifties. I have a vague memory of it.

00:05:27

[1] Class "B" ILWU longshoremen have less experience than full Class "A" union members, and thus less seniority in the hall.

Anderman: Ok, so not too far ahead of you. I mean, 15 years or so.

00:05:31
Silva: Yeah, about 15 years, I think. Maybe a little bit more than that. Maybe 19––I'm trying to think of something he said once, and I don't remember exactly how it goes. But it's within 20 years, you know, it's somewhere in there.

00:05:44
Anderman: And what was your perception of the docks from what he told you, before you actually went down and started working there yourself?

00:05:52
Silva: Oh, well, actually I write about it in the book[2]. There's actually a little part in there about it in the book. He took my brother and I down there a couple of times when we were eight, nine, 10 years old, something like that. And the place just seemed so big, so noisy, so much motion. You know, in those days they didn't have walkie-talkies. So the only way you could communicate was yelling at each other, and you…when you worked down there for a long time and you're around a lot of heavy machinery, you have to learn to throw your voice or they're not going to hear you. So you literally have to figure out how to do that, you know. So that's what you heard. You heard a lot of yelling, and basically guys communicating what they want now, what's necessary now, all that sort of stuff. So, it was a big scary place, basically.

And I knew some of the men because they were my father's friends, you know, and they'd come up to you and say, "Hey kid, how you doing?" you know, and shake your hand and all that kind of stuff. And it was great, you know, cause it made you feel like you belong to something, you weren't just isolated, you know.

And at the core of all of this—and I want you to really understand this—at the core of this whole experience on the waterfront, and really from the time my father went on, was the union, was the ILWU. That's the core, that's the foundation that everything is built on. All your working days, the way you work, who you work with, how you deal with the employer, all this stuff is because of the union. It really is.

00:07:26
Anderman: Yeah. We're going to get into that. I want to talk about the union, for sure. You mentioned earlier that before you started on the dock, you worked all these odd jobs, right? And I think one of them then was building container cranes…eventually, right?

[2] Silva, Frank and Gene Dennis. 2016. *Waterfront: Longshoremen in the Era of American Labor*. Bellingham, WA: True North Editions.

00:07:38
Silva: That's correct. Well, I wasn't exactly building them.

00:07:40
Anderman: Right, right, okay. [laughter]

00:07:42
Silva: What I was doing was scraping the rust off the inside of the legs so they could red-lead [apply rust-resistant paint], you know, so they wouldn't rust. It was a horrible job. When the guy laid me off I almost kissed him I was so happy to get the hell out of there…

00:07:57
Anderman: Where was that?

00:07:58
Silva: In Alameda.

00:07:59
Anderman: That was in Alameda, at the shipyard, ok. And what other kind of odd jobs did you work? Were they all waterfront jobs?

00:08:05
Silva: Well, I worked as a photographer for a little bit, taking pictures of kids, you know, door-to-door type thing. I worked in canneries, I worked in factories, I worked as a salesman. I sold men's clothing, men's furnishing, hardware, electrical, uh, nursery stuff, which I knew absolutely nothing about it. [A customer would say,] 'have you got one of these?" And I'd say, 'Well honey, if you find it, I'll sell it to you!' (laughter]

So that's what I did. And I was working for what was called California Packing at the time, and I was doing this job and you had to pull these ropes in a certain way and it actually broke the bone in my wrist, that's actually what happened, you know. And then, you know, I got a chance to work on the 'front and I've been there ever since.

00:09:00
Anderman: Were you still living at home then?

00:09:03
Silva: No, I'd gotten out of the service in 1963. And I was with my dad for probably three months, I think. And then I bunked up with my cousin and then that was it, you know, I was on my own.

00:09:17
Anderman: Let's go back and pick up the photography line—I want to make sure we start at the beginning of that and trace that all the way through. So, you said you started shooting photos in high school. How did you get into that?

00:09:26

Silva: Yeah, actually, so again, it had something to do with my dad. In your senior year you had an elective, right? […] So we were looking at this list together and I didn't know what to take or anything. And my father says, well, you know you like to take pictures, why don't you take photography? So I said, yeah, okay. So I took it and he was right. I did like it, and I liked the dark room and it was just fun, you know. So that was in 1959 when I started that.

00:09:57
Anderman: Did you have friends who were also into photography? What kinds of things were you shooting at the time? Did you look at other photographs elsewhere, like in books…?

00:10:04
Silva: Oh yeah, oh yeah, absolutely. […] Once I started in photography, it woke something up in me, and all of a sudden, now I'm really interested in trying to understand things and stuff like that. And then a family friend of mine—I was just using a little Brownie camera, it's in the book too—and my father's friend, Ernie, gave me his old Ciro-flex camera, which is a twin-lens reflex camera. You know, it's a real camera, it's not just a snapshot camera. So, from that sort of began the whole idea of learning what photography was about. And it just becomes more and more fascinating really. So, I would shoot pretty much anything that was around me… I like to do things in motion. I know it's still-photography, but it's fun to do things that are in motion, you know, with a still camera.

00:11:04
Anderman: Alright, so then you took the camera with you when you went into the service, as well…

00:11:07
Silva: Yeah, somebody stole it.

00:11:09
Anderman: Really? Tell that story.

00:11:12
Silva: Well, I don't know, I mean I was dumb enough—I was 18 years old, 17 years old actually, when I went in—but I was dumb enough to put it in my locker, which didn't have a lock on it or nothing. And one day it wasn't in there anymore.

The first actual Navy job I had was a hospital corpsman in Long Beach on a ship called the *Haven*, which is actually in an old television series called *Hennesey*. They'll show a backdrop... [the show] is about a hospital ship… they'll show a backdrop, they'll show a white ship with a red cross on it, and that's the *Haven*. That's the ship that I was on.

It never went anywhere. It was always at port, but they had a darkroom on the base. So when I found that out, I started to fool around and I would go in there for four or five hours, just totally forget where I was. You know what I mean? Like, "Where am I supposed to be now?" Because you'd just get wound up. I did that for...

00:12:14
Anderman: Why was there a darkroom on the base?

00:12:18
Silva: Well, military bases have a lot of facilities. It's basically a small town. And not only that, it was all film then. So, for the Navy, all the military, they shoot tremendous amounts of film.

00:12:32
Anderman: Of course, of course. They're documenting everything.

00:12:33
Silva: And they have to have some place to do it and all that.

00:12:37
Anderman: So in that darkroom then, was it you alone most of the time?

00:012:39
Silva: Yeah.

00:12:40
Anderman: Or were there other military photographers around?

00:12:42
Silva: Maybe one time there was one other person, but 99% of the time I was by myself. The paper was really cheap. You didn't have to spend a lot of money. First of all, you weren't making anything anyway, but it was still cheap even then. So, you could work. You could just keep doing it. You didn't have to worry about running out of money.

00:13:01
Anderman: Seems like a dream.

00:13:02
Silva: It was. It was.

00:13:03
Moradi: What were you taking photos of back then?

00:13:05
Silva: Of the ship, the base. Just oddball stuff. I really didn't have a defined body of work or a defined thought on the thing. Actually, when I started doing the waterfront stuff, I didn't even own a 35-millimeter camera. So, I

borrowed one from a friend and then [later] I managed to get a really good camera. But I didn't hardly ever use a 35-millimeter camera before then. So, the first day I went out with the camera at work, and I shot a roll of film, and I came back, and I had five of them that I still keep. And I said, "Shit, I can do this." You know what I mean?

00:13:56
Anderman: That's pretty good.

00:13:58
Silva: I know! Your brain just goes, "Ooo, I can do this." It was really exciting, and I kind of went nuts after that really. My kids were little at that time, so I didn't have to have as much money as I needed when they got older. So, I could still afford to…basically, I taught myself. It's all self-taught. I could do that because I didn't have to worry too much about money at the time.

[*brief conversation about how Frank and Mimi Rose met*]

00:18:28
Anderman: Right, so you got out of the service.

00:18:31
Silva: '63. July of 1963.

00:18:34
Anderman: Right. Your camera had been stolen, but you acquired another one. In the service or not?

00:18:38
Silva: No, no. I didn't have another camera for a long time. I didn't actually start thinking about it at all until my son was born. Then, yeah, I didn't really have one. I didn't have a 35-millimeter camera, or I didn't have any camera other than the little snapshot camera or something like that. Then I got started with Waterfront Writers, so I realized I had to get a camera. I borrowed my friend's and went out and shot that first roll, like I told you. So I started saving money and bought a really good camera. I used it for 10 years. I carried it every day for 10 years.

00:19:29
Anderman: All right. Well, let's go back. So 1965, you started on the docks. You've done a bunch of odd jobs, didn't like them, then got started on the docks. You were a clerk initially right out of gate. Is that right?

00:19:38
Silva: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

00:19:39
Anderman: Describe to me what a clerk does, exactly.

00:19:42
Silva: Well, a clerk is the guy that's keeping track of all the numbers, the ports, what has to be done *when*, and how it needs to be organized. You're basically an organizer. You keep track of figures. You're constantly dealing with the longshoremen, with the company people. You're sort of the guy in the middle. You're dealing with longshoremen on one side and the company people on the other side, and you're sort of the liaison in between them, because longshoremen don't even have to talk to a superintendent if they don't want to. They go to another union guy, which is me. So you just kind of have to learn how to get along with everybody, basically. I liked the whole thing. It was really good for me. I learned a hell of a lot about people, about working.

00:20:36
Mimi Rose: Wasn't part of your job to figure out where containers should be to keep the ship balanced, like you can't put all the heavy stuff on one side? Or some things are going off the ship sooner that have to come on later. Someone has to have a plan.

00:20:57
Silva: Yeah. The thing about the waterfront in the old days, there was a number of different types of jobs. Now, the last 10 years I would say, they're probably the most boring of my... That's mainly because of containers. I mean there's very few clerks on the dock anymore. You're probably in an office banging on a computer somewhere. That's nothing as much fun as being on the dock, in the hole of a ship, talking to people from the different parts of the world, talking to the longshoremen and working stuff out, making things work. You're just sort of [an] isolated little thing. You're just dealing with figures. That's just cold as hell. I mean, I talk about it in the book, but did you see the slideshow?[3] Did you watch it?

00:21:43
Anderman: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

00:21:44
Silva: Okay. Did you see the way we constructed it? So that you had this idea of what it was like in the beginning? Then the transitional period, then the way it ended, and then our reverence for what it was to work hand-to-hand with each other. That's the reason why that thing is in there at the end. That's actually from a 16-millimeter film that Brian Nelson had made. We just took certain frames from it and then we choreographed it to that music so that it would end at the proper time. We chopped the living hell out of

[3] Nelson, Brian, Frank Silva and Michael Vawter. 1979-1994. *Longshoremen at Work*. Dual-carriage slideshow projection. Shown at readings presented by the Waterfront Writers and Artists through the 1980s and early 1990s. The slideshow spans roughly 25 years of Bay Area waterfront history, from 1969 to 1994.

that thing, I'll tell you. We must've worked on that thing for like 16 hours just to get it to where it would look right.

The thing about the other way, the older way [of handling cargo], is it was all about people. It was all about dealing with the guy on the other end of the sack, the person you have to talk to, or the mate you have to go up on the ship and argue about lost time or whatever it is. It was all about dealing with people and finding a way to get your day done and get everybody what they needed, basically.

00:22:59
Anderman: What were the shifts? What were the hours that you worked generally?

00:23:03
Silva: Well, there's basically three shifts. There's 8:00am to 5:00pm basically, and then there's 6:00pm or 7:00pm to 4:00am in the morning. And then 4:00am in the morning till 8:00am in the morning.

Most of the time I was a supervisor, a union supervisor, not a superintendent. There's a difference—a gigantic difference. [As a supervisor] you're basically working 10 hours a day. You're there an hour early and you're there an hour late because you're setting everything up in the beginning so that when people come in, you get them going, get the job done. Then at the end of the night at 6:00pm or 5:00pm or whatever time the ship is going to finish up, you have to get all this information in, you have to process it all, and create a log and a plan so that the next guy that's going to be in the next port, he has to be able to read that plan and figure out where things are, how things are, because you need certain gear and everything. If you read the book, I address…how my day would start out. It's pretty busy in the morning because you got to get everybody going.

00:24:30
Anderman: These plans that you're talking about, are these hand drawn…?

00:24:34
Silva: Yes, they are. They don't do it now, but they did then. It's basically, it's a sheet of paper. It's about this big and it's got the number of hatches on the ship. There may be five, six or seven or whatever it is. And when a piece of cargo is stowed, it's either in one of the decks—it's usually three or four decks high—and so you have to put in that little section—where that hull of that ship is in that deck—you have to draw a little line that separates it from the other cargo telling what it is, how much it weighs, how big it is in terms of cubic feet. Then you also—if it's something odd—then you want to say something about how it's stowed or maybe how it's put on a pallet, or if it's on a pallet or not on a pallet. You're trying to give the guy that's on the next port an idea of what he needs to do to set the job up for his part

of it. Then there's all the figures, which can be thousands and thousands and thousands of figures.

When I started in 1965, the Vietnam War was just getting rolling, and so it went for 10 years, right. There was enormous amounts of work at the Army base, the Navy base and the reefer dock. The reefer dock is where they had all the refrigerated cargo for their ships that they were sending to Vietnam. Working in those facilities was completely different than working in any other facility. Because it's military, it's way more complicated than it needs to be, but that's the way they do things.

00:26:22
Anderman: And it was still ILWU longshoremen at all of them?

00:26:24
Silva: Yes.

00:26:25
Anderman: So, would you pick and choose on a daily basis? Or as a clerk were you assigned? Or did you wake up every morning and decide where you were going to go that day?

00:26:36
Silva: Well, you could do either. You could work "steady," and you would do the same job all the time and maybe work for the same company at different places all the time. Or you could go every day…and just go in there every day and get a job and work a different place. When I was doing the photography, when I was trying to create a collection, trying to create something to work with and my kids were small and I didn't have to worry too much about the money, I could go in and pick a job I hadn't photographed yet. So that's what I would do.

For me there wasn't any job I wouldn't do. I mean, there were jobs I didn't like, but if I needed money and I went to the hall, and if it was a shit job, I took it. I was there to make money. Some guys were the exact opposite. If they go to the hall, if they couldn't go to the pier they wanted, or get the job they wanted, they wouldn't go to work. Well, it's nice to have that freedom. You know what I mean? But to me it just didn't make any sense. To me, I wanted to do whatever I could. It was a lot more fun.

00:27:42
Anderman: At what point did you formally join the union?

00:27:47
Silva: November 1966, I got my B book.

00:27:50
Anderman: Got it. So, it was more than a year of training basically?

00:27:54
Silva: Yeah. It is. Then I got my A book in 1969. We were three years as B-men, which you spent probably 99% of your time at the military because nobody wanted to work it. It wasn't the best work, right? So all the B-men would end up over there. Then when you got to be an A, we'd say, "Fuck the Army, I'm going over here."

00:28:21
Anderman: Well, so okay, sorry I have to ask this, but what was the work at the military base? What made it so horrible? Describe to me a day working in the military base.

00:28:27
Silva: Well, it wasn't horrible. It was just work, basically. But they would have tremendous amounts of paper. I mean you would have a pallet board, say it's as big as this square here. They were pretty close to that.

00:28:39
Anderman: Are these pallets like you see all over the place now, just like-

00:28:41
Silva: Well, the Army pallets were different. They're bigger. They're bigger, stronger. Military, right?

00:28:47
Anderman: For heavy materials?

00:28:48
Silva: Or anything. It was military. They could spend all the money they wanted, right? So they might put 40, 50, 60 boxes on there. Every one of them is going to have a tag. The tag has the ship's name, where it's going, what it is, whose company, blah, blah, blah. You have to collect them all. You have to write them down. You have to log them all in.

And then other times you would have a job that had…like, for instance, they used to send a lot of beverage over there, beer and stuff like that. There were literally piers just full of beer. I'm serious, just all it was, was beer.

00:29:29
Anderman: Wow.

00:29:30
Silva: Right? You could go in there and you'd take a lot, and you'd sit down for two hours and... There was nothing to do because it was a big lot. All you had to do was count what was left. You didn't really have to work very hard at it at all.

00:29:43
Anderman: Right. It was all the same stuff. What kind of beer was it? Do you remember?

00:29:44
Silva: Oh, every kind of beer.

00:29:44
Anderman: Oh, it was just a mix. Okay.

00:29:45
Silva: Every beer. Every beer you could think of. Every beer.

00:29:48
Anderman: Was it all American beer?

00:29:49
Silva: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

00:29:51
Mimi Rose: Of course, beer wasn't what it is today. This whole microbrew…

00:29:56
Silva: Yeah, there was no microbrew. It was all Lucky and Schlitz and all that kind of stuff. God, there was a lot of it.

00:30:04
Mimi Rose: Well, I remember…because one of the things about Highland [Hospital] is they're in a union, which is not true of most hospitals anymore. But our union, no one ever went to union meetings. It was only when there was some big issue that people got involved. But the longshoremen, they're required to go to the union meetings. They're required to be more involved. I think that's a great idea myself.

00:30:35
Silva: It's amazing that it's actually survived as a really solid democratic institution all this time. And it's really because they educate the youth. They tell them what it's about. They show them what it's about. You know what I mean?

For me when I went down there, I had an instant sense of respect for it. I'd heard stories about the waterfront and about unionism and all that stuff my entire life. So when I went down there, it was something you had respect for right away. Not only that, you were earning a living. And I did plenty of shit work before that, so I knew it was a good job. Because I didn't go to college. I was not a very good student in school and stuff like that, so it was just a matter of what I could find. Luckily enough, this was nice and close.

00:31:46
Anderman: Yeah. The ILWU is a force to be reckoned with for sure. It's an amazing institution. So your dad was obviously a union member and held the union in some reverence, I gather, right?

00:31:55
Silva: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

00:32:00
Anderman: Okay. I want to get into some detail about…so you worked as a B-man, you worked on the Army base a lot and it was dull work, it sounds like, it was repetitive?

00:32:10
Silva: Well, no. It's hard to tell...it just wasn't the best work. It was work that, like I said, one day could be a total pain in the ass and the next day it could be like free money, all you got to do is be there.

00:32:29
Anderman: Just sit there, yeah.

00:32:30
Silva: Pretty much. It was off and on. But a lot of people didn't want to do it. They'd rather go someplace where they could go eat lunch someplace with their buddies or have a softer job some other place. I mean it was just, you have to understand too, in San Francisco in those days every one of those piers was working. There was a *lot* of work. In Oakland, it was the same thing. So there was a lot of people, a lot of work. The Vietnam War created a tremendous amount of work. Like I said, we worked out of the hall as extra men. There were times where they would send a hundred *extra* clerks to *one* pier, to *one* pier…pier six or seven at the Army base, because it was so busy. It was incredible. […] It [the Army base] just wasn't top of the list for a good job.

00:33:53
Anderman: But when you went over there, you'd still work with other clerks, with other longshoremen, right?

00:33:57
Silva: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

00:34:00
Anderman: But then you'd also be interacting as a clerk with military folks, right? You'd be working interface between those two groups. Is that right?

00:34:07
Silva: Well, you did as a supervisor, but not as a basic clerk. Now when I was a B-man, I was a basic clerk. Later on, when you become an A-man and you start doing supervisory work, which is dealing with other clerks, dealing

with other longshoremen, then you start dealing with company people. You start dealing with the military brass and that kind of stuff.

00:34:30
Anderman: Right. So, explain the longshoremen hierarchy to me. How many steps are there from the leadership of the union—I mean this is a union hierarchy, right?

00:34:40
Silva: Yeah. Well, there's a typical sort of Robert's Rules—you have a president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, board, blah, blah, blah. But the highest paid longshoreman is what they call a walking boss, which is a guy who was a longshoreman who becomes basically the same thing as a supervisor would be, [but] as a clerk. He's working with the superintendents and he's telling the longshoremen what to do, how to do it, what to do, when to do it, blah, blah, blah. Then there's a whole panoply of different categories of work. Crane drivers, lift drivers, hull men, lashers. I mean it's a whole lot. Guys that drives cranes for bulk and guys that drive cranes for containers, and there's a lot of stuff. Their training, it's all done by ILWU people. It's all controlled by the ILWU.

00:35:47
Anderman: Okay. So, then you become an A-man. Did you start to shoot photos on the docks when you were a B-man still?

00:35:55
Silva: No. I got my A book in 1969 and I started shooting photos in 1978.

00:36:01
Anderman: Okay. So it was a while after—you worked a decade there, basically.

00:36:04
Silva: Yeah. Actually, I mention that in the book too, that when I started using a camera, I went to places—sights and scenes is what I wrote—that I had been a part of for a long time. When I started to do it, I knew where to be when, how to construct the photograph basically. At first, people were a little wary because cameras scare people, right? You know, the insurance––I mean it goes on and on and on. I had a few run-ins here and there. I got thrown off a couple of ships and stuff like that. I just kept doing it. I think finally they just gave up. They knew I was going to be there tomorrow. They knew it was my job. I wasn't somebody that was going to be there for four hours and never come back. They knew I had my place. So, after a while, I think they just left me alone and let me do what I want.

00:37:00
Anderman: When you got kicked off ships, was it the captain of the ship that kicked you off? Who was the-

00:37:06
Silva: It would be a mate of the ship or something. Yeah. One of the ships I got kicked off, there was one of the, you know what a rack is? Basically, it's a container that's just a skeleton. They put steel and stuff inside of it. In one of the cells of the ship one of the racks collapsed.

00:37:24
Anderman: Oh, wow.

00:37:26
Silva: So, what it did is it took the whole cell and went like this with it, and it just took all this stuff and just smashed it into the side with a bunch of other... It was a huge mess. I heard about it, so I went up there…

00:37:37
Anderman: You got to get some photos.

00:37:38
Silva: …and shot some photos of it. This guy saw me doing it and threw me off the ship.

00:37:44
Anderman: But didn't take your film?

00:37:46
Silva: No. First of all, he was not going to get my film. I can tell you that right now, that's not going to happen. But there were other times, other superintendents and guards and stuff like that. You know, at first, I started out, I was going to be a nice person, [I was] going to say, "Can I take photographs?" Be nice… “No, no, no, no.” So, I go, "Well, fuck this. I'm going to do this." Everybody's going to say no. Nobody wants the hot potato. Nobody wants to be responsible, right? So I'm going to do it, so then I did it.

It worked out good. It was good. I think people respected me after a while. They started to realize what I was doing. Then we had some shows and some recognition of what we were doing, so I think basically people started to understand that we were there for them. We were there for the worker, not for any others. It worked out good.

00:38:45
Mimi Rose: What about the wall?

00:38:47
Silva: Oh, the wall. There was this pier, actually right where the [new] ballpark is going to go—you know, the A's ballpark, the Howard Terminal. Well, there used to be this wall, it was on the dock, facing where the ships were. When the sailors would come in, they’d almost always be painting the side of the ship because the saltwater just eats them up. So not only that, but in

those days the ships would be there five, six, seven, 10 days. Now they're there five, six, seven hours. So, the guys would be there, and they would be painting the ship, and they would go over to this wall and they would write on the wall maybe their hometown, their girlfriend's name, the name of their ship. They were from everywhere.

00:39:35
Mimi Rose: The dates.

00:39:36
Silva: The dates and stuff like that. So I did a whole series on that wall, and I also photographed it when they tore it down.

00:39:47
Anderman: Interesting. Wow, that's quite a document.

00:39:49
Silva: Yeah. It is actually a bit of a document. It really is. And I have lots of other photos of other piers being torn down, because this is all happening right in this huge transitional period.

00:40:08
Moradi: I was wondering how other longshoremen and ship clerks—what did they think about you being there with your camera?

00:40:15
Silva: Well, most of them were completely fine with it. Sometimes, guys, they didn't want to be photographed or something like that. First of all, I never went up and started photographing people without them knowing it. If it was lashers or something like that, then I'd go up and say, "Hey brothers, I'm going to do a little photography today. What do you think?" If they go, "Leave me alone." That's fine. I mean, I don't give a shit, there's 500 people. I don't need... Not only that, but you could razz them or tell them, "You're going to break my camera anyway," or something.

One thing about longshoremen is that they're very loose and graceful with each other, about race, about everything. It's great because it just knocks all the barriers down, so you could just talk to each other. You didn't really have to dance around each other. You could be very direct with each other. It was straight. There wasn't hiding or anything like that. Then I gave away many, many pictures of guys. I would say, "Hey, I want to do some photos of you doing this or something," and they would say, "Yeah." I said, "Well, I'll give you one. Next time you see me, you talk to me and if I forget, you talk to me again and we'll make sure it happens." Because you're doing a lot.

00:41:29

Anderman: Would you actually be working a shift while you were taking photographs?

00:41:33
Silva: Yeah.

00:41:34
Anderman: You would. Okay, right. So you'd be doing some work and then you'd take them while you were in the midst of it.

00:41:37
Silva: And I'd take advantage of some good friends. [laughter] Like, "would you watch this for me, pal. I know what they're doing up there…" I did that to Brian [Nelson] all the time, right. Brian and Tom, my buddy Tom Lucas. Yeah, they knew what I was doing. You know, you don't desert your job, you know what I mean? And not only that, but you have a responsibility to the people you work with. You know what I mean? I never neglected my job. There were times I had people watch it for a little bit while I did something, but it was always—take care of business.

00:42:13
Anderman: Were you working in both Oakland and San Francisco at this point?

00:42:15
Silva: I was working in both, but 99% of the time was in Oakland. Because when the containerization came, that's when San Francisco left because they didn't have the land space. They didn't have the railhead. They didn't have all that. Oakland had all of that, and that's why it came over here. Just like Manhattan and Jersey, same thing.

00:42:34
Anderman: Right. Talk about how the Waterfront Writers got started then. I mean, so you worked for nine years, 10 years, took no photos. Then you said Bob came up to you…

00:42:43
Silva: Well, I never knew Bob. He was a San Francisco guy. I was an Oakland guy. I didn't know him. I was working one day at Sealand [Terminal in Oakland] and this guy asked for me. I said, "Hi, who are you?" And we started chatting. He said he wanted to make a movie about the waterfront because he was going to get into this stuff. He knew that I had done some movie work, very rank and amateurish, but I did do some of it.

00:43:10
Anderman: Talk a little bit about that. What was your movie work previously?

00:43:17
Silva: [Laughs] Okay. All right. I'll tell you. I was going with this girl, and she had this idea for a movie where a cavemen would–

00:43:28
Anderman: I love this. This is so good.

00:43:32
Silva: [Laughing] I'm not showing to you, so don't ask me.

00:43:33
Anderman: You still have it?

00:43:34
Silva: No, I'm not showing it to you.

00:43:35
Anderman: Incredible. Go on. [laughter]

00:43:38
Silva: Anyway. The idea is that he's making a fire. And when he blows into the fire, a whistle comes out, a sound, like a flute sound comes out of the fire, from the wood. Then his whole reaction to this sound in a cave-like setting and the thing is supposed to end where he's playing this for a girl. That was the idea.

00:44:05
Anderman: And you shot it?

00:44:06
Silva: I shot some of it.

00:44:07
Anderman: Who played the caveman?

00:44:08
Silva: Me. [All laughing]

00:44:09
Anderman: Oh, amazing. […]

00:44:34
Anderman: This would've been reel to reel, right?

00:44:36
Silva: It was Super 8.

00:44:40
Anderman: So, Bob heard about this somehow.

00:44:42
Silva: Yeah. I guess I was talking to somebody about it or whatever it was. He heard about it, so he asked me if I wanted to try to make a film. And like I

said, it's just so much work and you have to have so much money and help. It is fantastic—if I could've done anything other than working, I would've been a director. I would've done it in a minute.

But I was working in a renaissance fair at the same time, and I saw this other person do this with a couple of [slide projection] machines and a dissolve unit. So, after I said no, I started thinking about it. So, I called him [Bob] up and I says, "You know, I might have a way of doing something that we could…actually make something that would be something like a movie."

So, when we met, that's when I first met Mike [Vawter]. I knew Brian. We met at one of the readings, and literally we had five slides. I mean, literally. We decided we were going to go ahead and try to do it. That's when I borrowed the camera and the three of us just started shooting. We meet a couple times a month, maybe more, and we spent many, many hours in Brian's house. Then I finally got the two machines and got the dissolve unit and started learning how to use it and how to make the thing work and then learning how to shoot for it. Because you have to shoot a certain way, you can't just take a picture and hope that it's going to fit. You have to think about where you're going to put it and how it's going to work and stuff like that.

00:46:23
Moradi: And this is all 1977, right?

00:46:25
Silva: Yeah—we started in 1978. We started in 1978. We worked on [the slideshow] for probably six, seven years. Something like that, maybe more. Because you can't get everything you want right away. You have to wait and sometimes things don't happen. You're trying to tell an encompassing story, so you have to have a lot of information. You have to sort through it all and figure it out. When we finally got it to where we liked it, it felt like we had said—and I think all of us felt this way—we felt like we had got it to say what we wanted it to say. We were satisfied with the way it looked, the way it worked and that kind of thing.

00:47:22
Anderman: [The slideshow] is an impressive document… When Bob pitched it to you, was his idea initially to document the shift to containerization? Was that the initial pitch? Was he motivated, do you think, by this change that had been happening at the waterfront?

00:47:39
Silva: Oh, god yes. Absolutely, absolutely.

00:47:42

Anderman: He was like, this thing is happening; we need to document it and talk about it.

00:47:44
Silva: Right. We were all very, very aware of this. We were living it. I mean you would go into the hall, for instance, and look for a job that maybe you had done or wanted to meet somebody or have lunch with them or something like that, and that job might not be there because they eliminated the job. You're watching your work dwindle and dwindle and dwindle and dwindle. We were young men then. You're thinking about, am I going to make it to retirement? Things like that.

00:48:15
Anderman: Sure. So that process started soon after you started on the docks, right?

00:48:20
Silva: Yeah. You know who Malcom McLean is? You must know who he is.

00:48:22
Anderman: Sure, yeah.

00:48:23
Silva: Okay. Now, I think—I'm almost positive this is true—the real original container's called a Conex and it's a military container that's eight foot square. It's got four hooks on it and you pick it up. That's what they used to put the plunder in. Remember, I told you about the boxes. They had five million boxes on this stupid thing. You had to write them all up. Well, they would put all that shit in…going to one place, they'd put it all on this one Conex and they'd pick the whole Conex up and ship it. Then McLean started in New Jersey, with the idea of putting the whole truck on, which they do do in some cases now, called the roll-on/roll-off ship. Then eventually, it got going to the point where they had cranes on the ship…what they called a self-sustaining ship, had its own crane. And Sealand was going to Puerto Rico at that time. They were using that system. Then as time went on, they started to develop more and more dock-side cranes, and that changed the configuration of the ships. The ships got bigger and all that sort of stuff. It's quite an evolution, really.

00:49:36
Anderman: Right. And Oakland was at the very beginning of this.

00:49:37
Silva: Yes, it was.

00:44:39
Anderman: The box was there early—1965. I mean it was–

00:49:40

Silva: First of all, the military bases were in Oakland. Right? And the land space was in Oakland. The railhead is in Oakland. None of that stuff was in San Francisco. There was some military in San Francisco, but it wasn't supplies and the stuff that they needed to support the troops, basically.

00:50:04
Anderman: Do you remember the first time you saw a container on the docks?

00:50:07
Silva: On the dock, oh god.

00:50:12
Anderman: Would it have been at the military base or would it have been...

00:50:14
Silva: No. It would've probably been in Alameda. In [U.S. Naval Air Station] Alameda [Encinel terminals], yeah. It's all gone now. The whole thing is all gone. I'll tell you a funny little story though, about Alameda. It was a big place. There were two, three piers and then there was another pier farther down. It was big. They had this PA system that would sing out guys' names. When they sung out the guy's name, the guy was supposed to go to the phone and get the message, whatever message they had for him. But they had all these fantastic names, and they had this crackling little PA system. It'd go, "Rah, rah, rah, rah," like this. They had names like Otto Roop, Percy Perty—I'm not kidding you now—Joe Johnson. I mean it was hilarious to sit there and listen. Sometimes they would say all of them in a row because they all had a message. So, you sit there and you're listening, "Percy Perty, Percy Perty, Otto Roop, Otto Roop, Amiel Benedetti." It would just go on and on. It was so funny. God, we used to laugh like hell over there.

And that was all canned goods. Actually, if you go where the pier is now, you see the old Del Monte plant, I think it was 1948. Then Alaska Packers was farther down. That all fed into that stuff.

00:51:48
Anderman: Del Monte being pineapple?

00:51:51
Silva: Well, everything. In those days, Del Monte was a huge canner, huge.

00:51:59
Anderman: Got it. I was going to ask about that. Were the docks organized in such a way that different cargo would come into different docks?

00:52:06

Silva: Yes. Yeah, you had steel docks. You had break-bulk docks and some docks, like Pier…I think it's Pier 15 in San Francisco…it was all liquor. Can you imagine a pier full of liquor?

00:52:26
Anderman: Was theft a thing?

00:52:28
Silva: Oh, Christ. You didn't have to steal it. Shit, it was everywhere. You didn't have to steal it. The only thing you had to do is try not to drink too much. It was so easy. The whole pier full of liquor. You know how much liquor that is, man?

00:52:43
Moradi: Was there a lot of drinking on the job?

00:52:45
Silva: Oh, sure. Sure. Yeah. They'd say, "Longshoremen don't drink a lot of booze. They just sip a little coffee." [Laughing] No, there was drinking on the job. Sure there was.

00:53:00
Moradi: How did they get away with it?

00:53:02
Silva: Everybody drank. The superintendents drank. The longshoremen drank.

00:53:04
Anderman: Right. There was no getting away with it. It was just the culture.

00:53:07
Silva: It was the culture. You could argue with one guy over some labor rule or something like that, and two hours later you could be sitting there having a drink with the guy. One of the things about the waterfront and the union and all that that was so sweet is that no matter how difficult things got, and believe me, things can get difficult because you're talking about large cargo and people getting hurt. It was not funny. It was serious stuff. But the basic attitude of most people was…today is a new day. So tomorrow, you let go of yesterday. We're going to deal with today now. So, if you had a bad day yesterday, you didn't carry it to the next day. You tried not to. That's what the old timers would teach you. They had been doing it for 20, 30 years or whatever it was, and they had their philosophy about it. A lot of it was really quite good. You know who Eric Hoffer is?

00:54:13
Anderman: Yeah.

00:54:14

Silva: Okay. He was a longshoreman. He was a San Francisco longshoreman. I've read a couple of his books.

00:54:22
Anderman: What kinds of cargo did you like working with? And then I'm going to ask you the other question, what kinds of cargo did you hate the most?

00:54:29
Silva: Oh, well. Hate the most? Well, the two top hate-most cargoes...is hides. You know what hides are?

00:54:38
Anderman: Yeah.

00:54:39
Silva: You ever been around them?

00:54:40
Anderman: Please describe them. No, no.

00:54:42
Silva: Okay. First of all, it's basically a hide of a cow that's got salt on it, a lot of salt. There's no cleaning. There's no nothing. It is as raw as it can get. They put them in containers and load them in ships and it just stunk like hell.

00:54:59
Anderman: What kind of containers were they loaded into?

00:55:00
Silva: Well, a regular container. They would use that container only for hides or something. And the other one was fishmeal. Fishmeal. It was in sacks. They'd throw the sack and it'd puff up—whole piers full of this stuff. It would stink like hell. Then when you went there, you only could wear your clothes one day, and half the time you didn't even wear them again because it stunk so bad your wife would never let you in the house. You know, stuff like that. Most of the times it was the extra guys getting these jobs, like I said. Because you're at the bottom of the totem pole, right? Or B-men or something.

What the dispatcher would do, if you would get a fishmeal job or something like that and then you'd go in and you'd complain to them—which is not a smart idea—[complain] to a dispatcher. He said, "Well, okay. That's all right. That's fine. I'll take care of it." So you'd go, and the next job would come up, and it'd be fishmeal or something. He'd send you, right? Then he'd send you the next day and he'd send you the next day and send you the next day. Pretty soon you learn to shut up. And the other thing was, is that you just made sure that you had... In other words, you could completely destroy five sets of clothes in a week. So you made sure

you didn't use your good clothes or didn't go to the hall with your good clothes on if you thought you were going to get fishmeal or something like that. Oh god, yeah.

00:56:34
Anderman: Was there a uniform of some kind?

00:56:35
Silva: No.

00:56:36
Anderman: What did you wear to work on the docks?

00:56:37
Silva: Just anything.

00:56:39
Anderman: Did guys wear... I mean presumably you need heavy boots of some kind?

00:56:42
Silva: Well, yeah. A lot of the guys did. I didn't. I didn't like them. When hardhats came out, that was a bitch. I hated hardhats.

00:56:49
Anderman: When did hardhats come out?

00:56:51
Silva: Middle ‘70s, I think.

00:56:53
Anderman: But they weren't required ever?

00:56:55
Silva: Oh, yeah. They're required now.

00:56:57
Anderman: They're certainly required now, I know. Yeah.

00:56:58
Silva: They were required then too, but you did the best you could not to wear it [laughs]. I never did like hats of any kind, but some guys wore them all the time. They'd go to lunch and they'd be sitting there eating lunch with a hardhat. Whatever.

00:57:17
Anderman: Can you talk about security on the docks? I know now you need a TWIC card [Transportation Worker Identification Credential]. There's all this stuff…

00:57:21

Silva: You need everything now, but before 9/11 you could go on any pier you wanted.

00:57:26
Anderman: Just walked right on, right up to the ship?

00:57:28
Silva: A lot of my photography is done after work, before work, on the weekends, lunch hour, all that kind of stuff. A lot of it is done then because that's when I have the time. Not only that, but when people know you're doing this and they're asking you about it and stuff like that, they come up and tell you, "We're going to be doing this tomorrow over there. That might be kind of interesting for you. Why don't you see if come over there?" So I'd either show up earlier in the morning or go over after work or even stay late. I did a lot of my night photography when I wasn't working at night. I would just stay late, go eat and come back and find something to shoot. It was fun.

00:58:17
Anderman: So, Bob comes and asks you to make this movie because things are changing on the docks, right? What kinds of reactions were longshoremen having? What kinds of conversations were you having with other longshoremen about the container, about the way that the work was changing? I mean there was fear, presumably, that all the jobs were going to disappear, that the whole thing was going to be automated at some point, right? Was that happening as early as the 60s? You were reading the tea leaves…?

00:58:45
Silva: Yeah. Well, most of this would come up at a union meeting. Now, when I first joined the union, there was 800 and something clerks, right? You would go to the meeting and there'd be 500, 600 guys there.

00:58:59
Anderman: Wow.

00:59:00
Silva: Right? And all of these issues came up—containerization, what it meant when you didn't have... One of the things you're always fighting with the employer about is hiring enough people. You have a contract, the contract states if you're doing this work, you need this [number of] people. You signed a contract. I signed a contract—we abide by the contract. Well, the employers look at this as an avenue for them to feather their own cap by hiring fewer people.

It's up to us to say, "We're supposed to have another man here. Let's get the other guy over here," or the different structures of the job. Like I said, there was a *lot* of work, a lot of different kinds of jobs, jobs that I didn't do

but other people were doing in San Francisco or in Richmond or in Redwood City or wherever.

In the meetings all these changes were discussed and basically run through the apparatus of the union to see what they could do about getting changes made, or where they had to have job actions where you wouldn't work or slowdowns or whatever it is. It was a constant battle, because the superintendents, the company, they're vested in hiring as few people as possible, spending as little money as possible. And you're standing between them and what they want, right?

It's a constant thing. It's every day, everybody—not everybody but every day we're all aware of how many people are there, who's doing what job, what job should be done for this particular type of work. It's…the foremost thing on your mind, is having the right manning. Manning is at the heart of everything.

01:01:15
Anderman: Before the box came, you talked about, I mean there were obviously other... There were technological developments happening all the time, right? There were these new cranes that were first on the ships and then later were obviously moved to shore and then became the cranes we see today, right?

01:01:27
Silva: Sure.

01:01:30
Anderman: All of those things were presumably cutting into the manning, right? [They] were reducing the manning that was required. How did those debates play out and then work their way into the union contract? Because obviously they couldn't just install a bunch of new cranes and then hire fewer people because the contracts say that you needed X number of people, right? So there were debates playing out between the PMA [Pacific Maritime Association] and the ILWU, right?

01:01:56
Silva: Right. Well, I've never been a part of the negotiating…or know exactly how it goes tooth and nail, but as I said before, the best reflection of how things are going in terms of manning and enough people being hired is what's on everybody's mind, right?

So when you go to the meeting, when they go into negotiations and all this sort of stuff, this is what they're trying to do. They're trying to get as much manning as possible, trying to get as many people to work as possible. That's the goal of the union…is to put people to work, and the employer it's the opposite, right? They're trying to do the opposite.

01:02:53
Anderman: I guess my question, then, is at some point obviously the union has to start pulling back on that, right? I mean, necessarily, because the container shows up, right?

01:03:00
Silva: It's negotiation. It's negotiation…

01:03:03
Anderman: And then they have to communicate that to you, the longshoreman, right? How did that communication play out? What was the reaction among the workforce?

01:03:12
Silva: Well, you know in 1971 we had a 135-day strike. That's [Pacific Coast Longshore Contract Section] 9.43, which was [about] the right for the employer to have steady men instead of everybody coming out of the hall every day. Now, the old way is the no-steady-men thing, right? But, because of mechanization, because you had to have skilled crane drivers, skilled people to drive large machinery and all that sort of stuff, the employer wanted the right to take some of the longshoremen and offer them training and then keep them as a part of their steady crew. Well, that was the big argument.

Now, Harry Bridges at that time knew the reality of this—this is going to happen whether we want it to or not because it's global. It's not San Francisco or [just] West Coast. He was in favor of 9.43, which was to instigate the thing. Now, all the particulars is another issue. This is a basic framework. A lot of people were against it. So, when they had the vote whether or not we would go on strike, it was still the major body of people that voted against it, so that put us on strike. It was 135 days. We worked the military cargo because it was during the Vietnam War and we didn't want to have the government jump down our throat, basically. So, we did work the military cargo. So basically, it's worked out in negotiation.

[*brief discussion of potential future ILWU contacts to interview to learn more about contract negotiations*]

01:06:52
Anderman: So the longshoremen though, the bulk of the longshoremen voted against [9.43]…

01:06:57
Silva: In ‘71.

01:06:58
Anderman: ... in '71, so you went on strike.

01:07:00
Silva: That's all the way up and down the West Coast and Hawaii.

01:07:02
Anderman: Yeah, that was a huge strike, for sure.

01:07:04
Silva: Yes, it was.

01:07:05
Anderman: What was sentiment on the Vietnam War at this point, in '71, among the longshoremen?

01:07:10
Silva: Well, the ILWU was one of the first people to ever come out against [the Vietnam war]. It's also one of the few unions—I don't know of another union to tell you the truth—that has its own foreign policy. Do you know about apartheid and what they did for apartheid and all that? Refused to work ships from South Africa.

01:07:30
Anderman: Yeah, I've heard this.

01:07:33
Silva: Right. When Nelson Mandela was here in Oakland, he mentioned the ILWU and Local 10. He said that they were the match that struck…they started the whole idea of not working ships from South Africa that the companies were not divested from…from apartheid.

01:07:55
Anderman: That's very impressive.

01:07:56
Silva: Right. And they've done other things like it. There's more than that. It just shows you where their heart is.

01:08:02
Anderman: Absolutely. Yeah. So they did come out, the union came out publicly—which was presumably the result of a vote by the membership—against the Vietnam War. Had that started in 1971 yet? I'm just wondering–

01:08:16
Silva: It started earlier than that. It started in the ‘60s. Do you know the name Mario Savio?

01:08:24
Anderman: Yeah, of course.

01:08:25

Silva: All right. When Mario Savio was here doing his stuff for free speech and all that sort of stuff, one of the ILWU's presidents—Local 6, the warehouse division, [his] name is Charlie Duarte, everybody calls him Chili—he was a president of Local 6. He would be up there speaking right with Mario Savio on free speech, because the idea is that the union has an obligation to defend the democratic ideal because we're a democratic institution.

01:09:05

Anderman: Right. But so then the politics in general among the longshoremen as you experienced them at least were fairly radical then, right?

01:09:10

Silva: Absolutely.

01:09:15

Anderman: Did people not want to work the Army base, for instance, because they were not in support of the war? Was that ever a thing that-

01:09:20

Silva: There were probably a few. There were probably people that did that. I don't know of anybody in particular, but one thing about the union, too—I also mention that in the book—you don't have to be anybody. You don't have to be a certain color. You don't have to have a high education. You can be short, tall. You can be rich or poor. They just hire people. If you're willing to take care of the union and do your job, that's fine. That's it. They don't tell you how to dress, what language to speak, what company song to sing, none of that stuff.

01:10:00

Anderman: Okay. Let's turn to the Waterfront Writers a little more explicitly. You start making the slideshow, and you said you had a meeting about it at one of these readings that they were doing. Now, the readings were organized also by the Waterfront Writers, right?

01:10:15

Silva: Yes.

01:10:18

Anderman: So he was sort of leading the charge. Who else was he pulling in? Did you know any of the... I mean you knew Brian obviously before, right?

01:10:23

Silva: Oh, sure. Well, there were actors, a number of people. But anyway, George Benet was a big name. Have you guys read anything of George's?

01:10:34

Anderman: Yeah. We have the Harper & Row book.[4]. Actually, we have a couple of the books.

01:10:39
Moradi: I think we've got *Place in Colusa* here.[5]

01:10:42
Silva: Did you read—is that *Place in Colusa*?

01:10:44
Moradi: Yeah.

01:10:45
Silva: Did you read the one…the thing about the restaurant? I love that. And the daughter thing. Oh god, it's so great.

01:10:56
Anderman: Yeah. That's a good one.

01:10:58
Silva: And then it was Herb Mills. Herb Mills was a secretary-treasurer for the union for a long time. He had a PhD in political science from Cal. He just died. We just went to his thing a little while back, not very long ago. There was a guy named Ken Fox. Norm Young.

And then there were other people that would contribute from other unions. We had some people come down from Canada and they participated in a couple of our events. Gene Dennis. Gene Dennis is in my book. He's the guy that I chose to put in my book. He was one of the writers. His work always rang very true to what it was like to be on the front and what it meant. He was a major guy. Brian Nelson wrote some stuff, and he also drew and photographed. Brian's a very, very talented guy.

01:12:13
Anderman: And recorded a bunch of sounds.

01:12:14
Silva: And recorded a bunch of sounds.

01:12:15
Anderman: Which we've heard…Brian's lovely.

01:12:22
Silva: Yeah.

01:12:23

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[4] Carson, Robert, ed. 1980. *The Waterfront Writers: The Literature of Work*. New York: Harper & Row.
[5] Benet, George. 1978. *A Place in Colusa.* San Pedro: Singlejack Books.

Anderman: So what were the readings like? When did the first reading happen, do you remember? How many were there? How many people were there? I'm curious about the scene there.

01:12:28
Silva: Well, I don't remember. I don't know if I saw the first one. I can't really remember. But anyway, there would be 70, 80, maybe a hundred people if it was a big reading or something like that.

01:12:38
Moradi: Wow.

01:12:39
Anderman: That's pretty good.

01:12:41
Silva: Well, first of all, you had a lot of people on the waterfront, right? Then you had people that were interested in the work because they were poets or photographers or writers. At one time Bob was actually on television. You listened to the podcast [*Containers,* produced by Alexis Madrigal], right?

01:13:02
Anderman: Yeah, Sure.

01:13:04
Silva: Well, you hear those old television things in there. Somehow Alexis got ahold of that. I have no idea how he found that.

01:13:09
Anderman: Well, Bob tells me that he has some archival television footage that no one has ever seen before. So we're going to get that and put it in the archives.

01:13:15
Silva: Good, good, good, yeah.

Yeah. I can't remember. There was seven or eight or 10 people depending on what it was… It went on for a long time, so you had people coming and going and stuff like that. Then the press was around quite a bit. Not necessarily the big press, but other smaller press people were around. Then when we put the book out for Harper & Row, that created a little buzz.

Alexis, in my mind, is kind of like a savior. Because when you do this stuff 30, 40 years ago, you're hoping that somebody will find it way down the line and see that it has some relevance.

01:14:06
Anderman: And he found it, and here we are.

01:14:07
Silva: And he found it.

01:14:08
Silva: Exactly, exactly. Right. So I'm very grateful to that guy.

01:14:15
Anderman: Yeah. He's wonderful.

Right, what were the readings like? I mean were they raucous? I mean we've heard some of the recordings from some of them, and there are some pretty bawdy stories being told, right? It's a fairly bawdy scene. Did families come to them?

01:14:32
Silva: Oh, yeah. Everybody came. Anybody came. You know, it's a bunch of guys, right? Longshoremen. And you're telling stories and relating stories and stuff like that. Have you read Gene Dennis's work?

01:14:50
Anderman: Yeah. I mean I've read it in the book, in the Harper & Row book.

01:14:53
Silva: Oh, okay. Anyway, there were a lot of great stories and then a lot of it was just storytelling, telling stories about interesting characters that we knew over the years. The guys that were particularly good at it was George Benet, who was just, he was just dead perfect for the thing. You know what I mean? First of all, he's a wonderful writer and a great heart, and had an eye for the wonderful absurd or however you want to put it. You know what I mean? Something like that. No, George would tell great stories. You heard the one about Snookie, the cat? You must've heard that.

01:15:43
Anderman: Yes. Classic. That's a classic. That's in the audio recording. That's a good one.

01:15:48
Silva: And there's lots of other ones. He tells the stories about Strong-Arm Louie, which is a big old Italian guy. There's probably a recording of it anyway, but I'll tell you a little bit of the story.

Strong-Arm Louie was famous for going in bars, and he would go, "When Strong-Arm Louie drinks, everybody drinks!" And he'd slam the thing down. Then they'd give everybody a drink. Then he'd take a dollar out of his pocket and he'd say, "When Strong-Arm Louie pays, everybody pays!" [laughter].

01:16:24

Anderman: That's pretty good.

01:16:28
Silva: George would tell this story that he [Strong-Arm Louie] lived in the Mission with his mother, and he had this propensity for stealing toilet paper. So, you can just imagine Strong-Arm Louie's basement full of toilet paper with his little mom in the Mission District.

01:16:43
Mimi Rose: I knew someone who stole toilet paper too.

01:16:46
Silva: Oh, really?

01:16:47
Mimi Rose: What is that?

01:16:48
Silva: I don't know. A little fetish of some sort. [laughter]

Yeah. They were fun to begin with because we were all very happy to be there. When you work with a bunch of people for a long time and then you do what we were trying to do, there was just a certain sense of fulfillment about the whole thing that just gave it this lighthearted thing even though you talk about very serious stuff, people getting hurt and killed and lost. There's still this sense of brotherhood and the human communication aspect that makes it very heartwarming. It was great.

It seemed to me that most of the audience just loved it because they were stories that they were never going to hear any other place. It was an interesting place, so it was fun. It was pretty much lighthearted, I would say. There were times when it was very serious, but mostly it was about telling great stories and having the guys read their work and stuff like that.

01:17:57
Mimi Rose: I remember there was one show at La Peña, which is still around.

01:18:05
Silva: Yeah, in Berkeley. You know about La Peña?

01:18:07
Anderman: Sure, yeah.

01:18:09
Mimi Rose: How about in San Francisco, where…?

01:18:10
Silva: At Taraval. We did it at Taraval a number of times.

01:18:13
Mimi Rose: Is that still around?

01:18:15
Silva: It probably is because it's just a hall. You'd have a little wedding reception there or something like that. Yeah. A couple of the odd places that we've shown the show, the slideshow…We did it once in the abandoned operating room at the Shriners' Hospital in San Francisco.

01:18:42
Anderman: Really? How did that happen?

01:18:45
Silva: Well, I think Brian or somebody knew an old Shriner or something like that and they were talking about the waterfront and whatever. The guy said, "Yeah. Some of my buddies would love to see that thing there." So, we took it over there and showed it to them. The room was still green inside, the big lamps and all that kind of stuff. We showed it at a chiropractor's office one time.

01:19:08
Anderman: What was the setup for showing it? What was the projector situation?

01:19:12
Silva: Well, you have two carousel projectors. Then you have a dissolve unit in the middle. And then you'd use a stereo system. One has the bleeps that changes the setting and then the other one has the audio on it. So we would run in there and set it all up.

01:19:29
Anderman: So, you had to carry the stuff around, right? It was a bit of a setup.

01:19:34
Silva: Yeah. You did. Over the years we made pretty much all the mistakes you could make and after a while you figure out, "let's not do that one, let's do it a different way."

01:19:46
Anderman: Do you remember the first time you showed it in one of these meetings, in one of the Waterfront Writers meetings, and what the reaction was like?

01:19:54
Silva: Well, yeah. It went through a lot of changes and evolutions. I think the first time we showed it, people liked it. I don't remember anybody thinking it wasn't very good or something like that. I mean first of all, you'd have to a pretty goddamn bad photographer to take a bad photograph down there. I mean visually it's-

01:20:23

Anderman: It's just a really stunning place.

01:20:25
Silva: It's a fantastic place to take photographs. So, if you're relatively competent, you could make something that looked pretty good, really. But people responded to it, and then you had family members that would come.

One of the stories—you're probably going to meet Mike Vawter—one of the stories he'll tell you, I'll tell you a little of it but I want him to tell you the story, is we did one of these shows. And this little old black lady comes up to him and says, "You know, my husband worked on the waterfront for 40 years and he would come home and tell me all these stories and stuff. And I never knew what it was like, and he died five years ago. And now I've got a chance to see what it's like."

01:21:10
Anderman: That's really cool.

01:21:11
Silva: Yeah, it is. A lot of the photographs that I gave away over the years and stuff like that, I know they're in family albums and stuff like that. It's great. It's really the best of it, I think, the history.

01:21:25
Anderman: So the group started publishing at some point, right? And that was Bob pushing to publish things and collecting [the book] and editing it, I understand, right? And running the show in terms of publishing?

01:21:38
Silva: Right.

01:21:39
Anderman: What was the reaction? I mean, were there people who wanted to be in the book and didn't get into the book? I'm just wondering about the politics of all the publishing.

01:21:46
Silva: Oh probably. I didn't have a lot to do with the writing. It was all photography on my end. We had contributors from lots of different areas. 90% of it was the waterfront, but it was still from a lot of different parts of the waterfront. How Bob made his selections I honestly don't know. […]

01:22:35
Anderman: How did the group dissolve? What happened to the group?

01:22:41
Silva: I don't know. It just...

01:22:44
Anderman: Kind of ran its course?

01:22:46
Silva: Yeah, I think so. I think so. I think by that time all of us were getting older. Most of us started, I think, in our middle 30s, somewhere like that. I don't know exactly how long we did it, but 10, 12 years.

01:23:07
Anderman: That's a good long time.

01:23:08
Silva: Yeah. Something like that. Bob will know all that stuff. He'll know the ins and outs. He was the header-upper and he was the one that pretty much drove everything. We did the photography, but he was the one that was organizing it most of the time.

01:23:31
Anderman: And you had meetings…once a month? Was it a regular thing?

01:23:35
Silva: About once a month, yeah.

01:23:36
Anderman: For 10 or 12 years, that's huge.

01:23:39
Silva: Well, it got less and less as time went on.

01:23:41
Anderman: I see, right.

01:23:45
Silva: Yeah. We would meet once a month and then we had readings a couple times a month sometimes. We'd have to get together for that. It was pretty active there for a while. For some time.

01:24:01
Anderman: All throughout this time, of course, the waterfront continued to change, right? So presumably, that also means the union was getting smaller, right? The labor force was just shrinking right down?

01:24:11
Silva: Yeah. I told you there was about 800 and something guys doing my job. There's probably less than 150 now.

01:24:18
Anderman: Wow. In the whole sort of area, for the whole ILWU.

01:24:20

Silva: In this Local 34 area. I can't see 200, but maybe, I don't know. I've been retired for 15 years, so I'm pretty far away from it now. […]

01:25:55
Anderman: So Alexis then sort of discovered the slide show on the Internet, and since then you've had a couple of shows…?

01:26:05
Silva: Well, it all kind of happened together. I was a pretty avid golfer. I mean, I've really worked at it a lot. And then I got hurt and wasn't doing very much, so I was sitting around looking for something to do, and I thought well, shit, I might as well start with photography again. So actually, I was photographing rugby on Treasure Island, and my wife had gone to see this exhibit and she told me about this place in the Hayward [Area] Rec[reation and Parks] Department called PhotoCentral. And it's an outreach program for people that are interested in photography.

So, I mentioned this to one of the guys I was photographing with at Treasure Island, and he says, "yeah, I know about the place, I'm going here tomorrow night, as a matter of fact." So, he invited me to one of the classes that he was taking there, and then they were going to do a book thing, and so I thought, well, why don't I try to just come to him with what I have… So I talked to the guy that runs the thing and he didn't know me from Adam, and so he says "well, usually we have people, you know, they go to this class and then that class, and then we, you know…" And I said, well, I've done it before and I'll show you a slideshow that I did. So, I showed it to him.

So as time went on, I ended up doing a show there. They helped me digitize everything. They're printing the whole schmear. So, I did a show there. and I did a show at San Francisco State at the labor library [the J. Paul Leonard Labor Archives and Research Center]. That was last year. And then I did one in New Jersey, at the American Labor Museum in Jersey. It's going to be at the University of Washington. That's why I'm going to be going up that way in October—it will be there from October until December. It's not going to be just my work. It's going to be involved with something else. I don't know all the particulars about it…but it's going to happen there. Then I have some work that's going to be going into the Maritime Museum in San Francisco, you know, and then something with you guys. So, it's great.

[*the interview concludes with a brief discussion of Frank's plans to redesign and re-publish his 2016 book*]