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The Bancroft Library

University of California
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Robert Carson

The Waterfront Writers and Artists Oral History Project

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Interviews conducted by
Nicholas Anderman and Erfan Moradi
In 2019 and 2021

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Robert Carson

Abstract

Robert Carson is a writer and a founding member of the Waterfront Writers and Artists. He worked as a ship clerk on the Bay Area waterfront for 43 years, from 1963 through 2006.

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 artistic work is held by the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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[Audio file: Robert_Carson_interview_1_June_12_2019_audio.mp3]

Editor's note: this recording/transcription begins mid-conversation. Skip to 01-00:10:26 for a more formal introduction.

01-00:00:00
Carson: I started [on the waterfront] in 1963. Nobody had even heard of a container. Everything was done by hand, that was it, and maybe palletized, unitized… And so then there had to be a lot of clerks, which I was — well I started out doing both, the hand stuff and the clerking, so then I got into the clerks local.

01-00:00:31
Anderman: And Brian [Nelson] was a clerk, Frank [Silva] was a clerk...

01-00:00:33
Carson: Right, Brian was a clerk, Frank was a clerk, right. And then there were lots of longshoremen too. At that point, we really worked together well, and still do. So then around 1967, '69 we started seeing a container — not the visual shape, not the shape of what we see now — maybe going onto a boat. But that was a conventional — what we call — a break-bulk ship. That started going on. They would use the regular ship's gear to do that.

Then when they brought in what we might recognize now, like twenty and twenty-four foot — Matson had twenty-four foot containers — they were putting them on deck on these break-bulk ships. They still hadn't made the ships, you know. Until they got what they call cellular where they could drop those containers down into cells and build the ship just for that, it was actually quite a while. So maybe into the late seventies, early eighties before we really got all of that spread evenly across the West Coast — well across the world.

And then, of course, [came] the dawn of the computer and the data age — data manipulation, which really, in my mind, challenged who did the work, where was the work center. It kind of withdrew the longshoremen just to the ship, and maybe to the yard, in almost all cases to the yard too, but that was it. That cargo is now inside those containers, those containers are now modular. They go on rail, they go on ships, they go on trucks. So, they're not handling that anymore except handling the box itself. The data manipulation started right away to my mind. That's one of the things, in the Waterfront Writers, that we saw, especially the clerks. All of a sudden the clerks became a centerpiece of the workforce because they're the ones who were at the center of all the data handling.

So now the job of international capital is to get that work, that data manipulation, out of the hands of an organized labor force on the waterfront, period. That's their goal. They stated that goal. They stated that

goal in trade journals, they stated that goal in newspaper articles, they stated the goal in contract negotiations with various unions. They wanted to have that. So, what we had always said in the ILWU going way back to Harry Bridges and the Modernization and Mechanization (M&M) Agreements — which was highly controversial in its time — was that they can go ahead and automate things — now you gotta think, they're thinking about forklifts that go in and pick up a unitized load or something — they can go ahead and automate. But they had to guarantee our pensions and so on. And we would go by attrition, we weren't going to take anymore — the overall arch of this thing was to go by attrition.

So here we were, the Waterfront Writers, in the middle of this. Nobody understood this. No one still to this day really understands this. Although we wrote about many things in our daily work lives and working-class lives, many many things — I mean the scope was very big — there was almost an automatic focus from where we came from as workers on this issue that we just outlined. And it just fell into place in poems [etc], 'cause you were constantly thinking…there was something in a Steinbeck book, and I can't remember which one it was, where one of the characters says, "Do you know the difference between East coast and West Coast longshoremen?" And the other character says, "No." The first character says, "East Coast longshoremen move cargo, and West Coast longshoremen move cargo and think about it."

01-00:06:05
Anderman: Right, that's pretty good.

01-00:06:08
Carson: Now, I think the East Coast longshoremen probably thought a lot about it too. I think they were equally—

01-00:06:17
Anderman: [*laughter*] Yeah, it's a bit of a gloss.

01-00:06:18
Carson: —if not better…you know…it's a real gloss, yeah. But nonetheless, the perception of the West Coast longshoremen — that includes Canada as well as the U.S. — the West Coast longshoremen were always thinking in terms of what lies ahead, what the exact relationship of forces were between labor and management, how they were gonna deal with automation. So it was like this giant dome [*laughter*] over you, all the time. And you would go to work — and this is in a lot of stories that we had too — you'd go to work and you'd see people trying to come to grips with this automation, especially as the first big container cranes, the ones that handle the ship's cargo, not the ones in the yard, the ones that handle the ship's cargo — as soon as those cranes came fully into effect, it was like "Wow where are we gonna go with this?"

One of the things in *The Waterfront Writers*,[1] a guy says, "We can't lay down, nothing's gonna stop this, we can't lay down in front of the train of automation because we are gonna get run over." So how do you deal with it? It's *still* a complex thing.

[*introductions*]

01-00:09:19
Anderman: One thing I've loved talking to the waterfront [writers] — we've met Brian, Frank, and now you — everyone is such a talker. It's wonderful.

01-00:09:25
Carson: [*laughter*] Well, we're bullshit artists — everyone is.

01-00:09:35
Anderman: I think it was an important part of the job.

01-00:09:36
Carson: [It's an] important part of the thing, it's that you keep talking. It's like that character from Steinbeck said: they think about it, they also talk about it. You go to the job, you don't talk about — maybe you talk a little bit about the Giants or the 49ers or the Raiders, but that's the end of that — we're talking about automation and what's happening to us here.

[*brief discussion about the interview process*]

01-00:10:26
Moradi: Just to start, can you tell us your name and where and when you were born?

01-00:10:30
Carson: Robert Carson, I was born in San Francisco in 1945.

01-00:10:36
Moradi: Can you briefly tell us a little bit about your family, wherever you'd like to start, your parents, your grandparents?

01-00:10:42
Carson: Well, my grandfather on my father's side was a captain in the Merchant Marine. And my grandmother I guess on that side was a housewife — although they were also very good [musicians], one played piano, one played cello, and they also played in symphony orchestras. But not here — in Europe. My grandfather and grandmother both on my mother's side were from Nebraska and first-generation Irish immigrants. They owned and operated a farm — [they] had a lot of farming land. And they had probably been here for the longest time. Their immediate predecessors

[1] Carson, Robert, ed. 1979. *The Waterfront Writers: The Literature of Work*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

fought in the Civil War on the Union side. And still to this day, through the whole thing, they consider the south the Confederacy, they don't believe they're part of the United States.

And let's see, my father actually was in World War I, so when he was born, his father was about forty-five; and the same with me, when I was born my father was about forty-five. [...] And he worked on the waterfront as a longshoreman and as a ship's clerk, and my uncle did too. And my mother, after her farming years, she stayed as a housewife. I'm married for fifty…two years [*laughter*] to my wife Jeanne, spelled J-E-A-double N-E. I have two sons, both doctors, PhDs, Cal system. One of them, he's a prolific writer and just wrote a great book called *Archeology of Pacific Oceania*.

01-00:13:12
Anderman: Bob, I have to interject, I looked up that book, it's fascinating!

01-00:13:15
Carson: It's great.

01-00:13:16
Anderman: Yeah, congratulations.

01-00:13:17
Carson: It's the first time that anyone put together all that information. Well, first of all, he has all the data, but inside of the archeology world it's like a firestorm because everyone likes to have their little specialty, and this is broad but still accurate. So, in a way, in a large way, that's kind of like the Waterfront Writers and the West Coast longshore view of the world, because they're always looking forward, looking into the future and trying to see how they can steer or position or whatever…angle themselves. So that actually went through to both of my sons. And the other son lives here. The first son I was talking to you about lives in Australia, the second one lives here. I have two grandkids, lovely, brilliant granddaughter — and they're seventeen years apart — and my grandson was just born a year and a half ago. They're bright, and that whole kind of staging and positioning, you could say it's in our DNA to be *courant — au courant* — but that's just the way it is in the family, and in all the longshore families.

[*a few people walk through the union hall*]

01-00:15:06
Carson: Might have people walking through here, it’s the dispatch.

01-00:15:13
Moradi: It sounds like your family is very much tied to the oceans.

01-00:15:16

Carson: They are, that's a very good point. From my grandfather on down.

01-00:15:22
Moradi: Where did your grandfather sail in the Merchant Marine?

01-00:15:26
Carson: Actually, I'm not really totally sure because he died due to a German torpedo attack on a U.S. ship in World War I. But he had come to the United States — it's not your typical immigrant story…my mother's parents were the typical immigrant story, not my father's — my father's parents came to retire. Remember I told you he was forty-five years old when my father was born. They came to retire, and I know he was a captain for various merchant marines in Ireland — Northern Ireland — Britain, and possibly some French or Spanish [ships], but I don't know, I can't prove it.

But they were internationalists. When my father was born, there was no communist revolution, there was no anything, but his parents were real internationalists. And […] they had to leave Northern Ireland because he was a Protestant and his wife was a Catholic and they got married, it was just better if they left. In fact, I believe — this is a long story — but I believe he was thrown in jail for a while, you know, with his relative's consent. [*laughter*]

So, they came to the United States through Boston and then they went up to the Great Lakes and he went into semi-retirement up there. My father used to tell me all kinds of stories about going out with him and everything from huge ships to canoes. They were really maritime people. My father was a maritime person too: supervisor of cargo operations, knew ships backwards and forwards, and interestingly enough didn't really pass a whole lot of that on to me except for what I heard him and my uncle talking about. But when I got down here a lot of it needs made sense so I was able to —

01-00:17:59
Moradi: Were they working in the nearby ports?

01-00:18:01
Carson: Right here, right here in San Francisco and Oakland. So that's the brief history of the family.

01-00:18:09
Moradi: And can you tell us a little bit about your upbringing in San Francisco?

01-00:18:14
Carson: Yeah. I was born and raised in Hunter's Point on Revere Street. It was right at the end of the war, it was in September of 1945 and my mother worked in the shipyards, the defense industry.

01-00:18:37
Moradi: Doing what kind of work?

01-00:18:40
Carson: Well, I'm not sure if it was welding, riveting…something like that. I think [she] later died of lung cancer which I'm sure was asbestosis, when she was about seventy-eight or seventy-nine years old. Anyhow, then we moved out into what is broadly called the Sunset District and I went to first a public school then a Catholic grammar school out there. And then I went to a Jesuit high school which was at the time was kind of in the middle of the city where USF [University of San Francisco] is, and now it's not there, but that was the location at the time.

01-00:19:31
Anderman: Which high school?

01-00:19:33
Carson: It's called St. Ignatius. It took very seriously their motto which is still their motto — well at that time, it was "Men for others," and now it is "Men and women for others." So, then I continued working, I continued living in the city, met my wife, went to San Francisco State, got into the middle of all the — well if you were there, you were just in it — the timing was, all the anti-war stuff, the student strike

01-00:20:20
Moradi: This would have been the time of the Third World strike…

01-00:20:22
Carson: ...'67, '68, '69. It's an interesting thing because there were a lot of people at Cal and at San Francisco State — and I was doing both — that actually worked on the waterfront. Because there were so many people, I mean there were more people in Local 10 in San Francisco at that point then there are on the whole West Coast right now. And that wasn't the biggest local. So, we're talking about ten, twelve thousand people just in one local.

Anyhow, so I put myself through college by working on the waterfront. I managed to juggle all the time and the hours and everything else, I got an undergraduate degree and then graduate degrees, so on and so forth. Then after I retired here, I felt — which has been thirteen years ago now, is it? yeah, thirteen years ago — I had almost forty-five years, forty-four years in [waterfront work] and had seen all of this change. That's my slight biography.

01-00:21:48
Moradi: In your time at San Francisco State, did you get involved in the student activism?

01-00:21:54
Moradi: Yeah, I mean you couldn't help it. I mean there was no….there was no way around it, you couldn't even get across the campus, right? I wasn't like actively involved in tearing stuff down or doing any violent things, but I wrote a lot of articles, I put my body on the line out there for a lot of things. And then part of the involvement was that they start teaching off-campus because it was way too dangerous to do it on campus. So, there were a lot of teachers and teaching assistants that would just hold the classes in their houses. So, I was constantly out with a map of San Francisco trying to find this guy's house. One teacher lived out in the Richmond District, one guy lived down in the Filmore…it was a whole tour. And here I was, you know, trying to go to work during the day and balance that and then go to these things at night and leaving jobs, leaving my poor wife at home while I was circling around the city.

Anyhow, I would wager to say that if you put anyone from the waterfront — anyone — in a situation like that, they would be activists. There is no doubt in my mind, they would be activists. They would want to know a few things, you better be prepared to answer a lot of questions, and so on. But they would be active in it. The marches, you know, 750,000 people in the streets and all that… It was really terrific because I got to go from the student activities out, say, at [San Francisco] State or later at Cal, and then go into these massive anti-war demonstrations, but I went in there with maybe five or ten thousand of my brothers marching under the ILWU banner. That's how I got into that. I always look at it as something progressing, staging upwards and upwards and outwards and growing. It just grew like crazy.

01-00:24:32
Moradi: Were you already a registered union member at that point?

01-00:24:36
Carson: Yes, yes I was.

01-00:24:38
Moradi: What was your introduction to waterfront work and to the ILWU?

01-00:24:43
Carson: Probably through my father and my uncle, I mean just socially. This is hard to comprehend — I tell kids this nowadays and they just can't believe it: anybody could walk into the clerk's or the longshore hall and they needed people. They needed more and more people to handle all this break-bulk cargo. And if you had some kind of, you know, not much grilling or anything, as long as you're willing to put in an honest day's work, you could go to work. And then as things went on if they saw that you were doing pretty good and you got good reports or whatever, kept your nose clean, then up the scales you went.

And that particular scale was for what they called a "permit man," where you were permitted to work, to B status, and then to A status. B status was registration — you were registered [in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union] — you had a West Coast registration: you could work anywhere on the West Coast. But B was limited, you had to do — I forget what it was — like eight hundred hours or something a year, maybe more, maybe it was twelve hundred a year, I can't remember. You had to put in that much time, you had to show commitment. You couldn't just get registered and then fall out. And you couldn't have too many grievances that went against you in the formal grievance procedure.

So then after a while, as needed, the various locals would elevate their B to A registered status, which was like — that was just nirvana. You could just walk in, you worked whenever you wanted. You just walked in like right here [the dispatch in the union hall] — they project the jobs on the board there and you just pick your job, and the way you were dispatched was by hourly rotation. So, if I had a ton of hours and Frank Silva had very few, well he'd obviously go out ahead of me. So you went out by hours. That was a nice equalized system. And you just picked your job. The B workforce and the permit workforce was really there at this juncture and from the dispatcher's point of view to fill the jobs on ships and the jobs that nobody else wanted.

01-00:27:37

Moradi: And what kind of jobs would those be?

01-00:27:38

Carson: Those were much more menial jobs, like what they call "down the hatch" where you climb down the hatch or whatever, or later when the containers came in, there were "climb" jobs, where you have to climb up a ladder into the crane. Now they have elevators, but they don't work very often. And at that point we would be throwing break-bulk cargo, freezer [cargo] — there were lots of down hatch freeze [jobs], that was that was like an hour on or two hours on, two hours off, something like that so you didn't freeze up. Those are the jobs at the B men and the permit men would get.

The A guys would just take the jobs [that]…maybe they knew they would get a call back or they could stay there all week or whatever. It was just great. And then you could, you know, like I had to do certain things at Cal and I would take jobs in the East Bay. There were plenty of jobs in San Francisco at the time, but I'd take jobs in the East Bay that I knew I could get to my destination in the East Bay that night. On the San Francisco State side, earlier on, I spent a lot of time in San Francisco so I could get out there.

01-00:29:22

Moradi: Were there any days where you were going between work and class in the same day?

01-00:29:28
Carson: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Night classes. Day class, night class. Or, fortunately for me, I got my A book in the end of 1966 — I'm sorry, my B registration in 1966. So, I was able to get those required hours in and still like go do maybe a Tuesday-Thursday [class] or a Monday-Wednesday-Friday, whatever I could do, I could juggle it so I could work two or three days a week and then do that, and then catch a weekend. So, it was pretty much work and school.

01-00:30:22
Moradi: And what were you studying at the time?

01-00:30:25
Carson: That was English — well, what they finally called creative writing and then English-language arts. And then I always a penchant for what finally became engineering, so I took a lot of math, a lot of engineering classes. You know, when you're an undergraduate — you don't know [*laughter*], you're probably one-third my age — there were certain electives that you could take to fulfill your general requirements, so I took these really hardcore math, science, and engineering classes which really paid off later on in my life. So, did that answer the question?

01-00:31:19
Moradi: Yeah, absolutely.

01-00:31:22
Anderman: Bob, when did you get into writing? I mean obviously this is a big part of the Waterfront Writers.

01-00:31:26
Carson: All my life.

01-00:31:27
Anderman: All your life.

01-00:31:27
Carson: All my life.

01-00:31:28
Anderman: You said in high school, you wrote for the local newspaper, is that right?

01-00:31:32
Carson: Yeah, I wrote for the local newspaper. I wrote a lot for myself, of course. I tried various poetry journals, I can't even remember the names of them, you know, local ones, and I got a few things published in there. I was a voracious reader — I really did all of my reading when I was in high

school — I didn't have time to do it after that — and absorbed hopefully a lot of that. It's funny because there are literary longshoremen, not just the ones that are in the Waterfront Writers. You can carry on a massively brilliant literary-artistic discussion with them, [and] then it's back to work. Because they were so well read, most of those guys. Even the drunks. Even the drunks and the junkies and everything else, they were really well read and tried to educate themselves. It was really something.

01-00:32:45
Anderman: And that was an exciting time in the city, right? In San Francisco in terms of literary output…?

01-00:32:50
Carson: Right, and I lived in North Beach in 1969. My wife was born and raised in North Beach, and I moved to North Beach then. I lived in the Sunset and in the Mission District where I would visit my aunt a lot, up to that point. No, I'm sorry — '67 I moved into North Beach. We stayed there, had our sons there, and moved out around '72 or '73. But she had been there all her life. I could walk [to work], I didn't even need a car. This is like a paradigm for the future […]. I didn't need a car. I walked down to the hall on Monday morning 'cause it was close by — it wasn't here [at 4 Berry Street], it was closer. I could walk to the hall, grab a job on that end of the waterfront, work there all week, sometimes even walk home for lunch, but always walk home to have dinner.

The produce market was still up there early on — about that time it moved to its present location. So, we had the produce market abutting the waterfront right there. You had North Beach, you had what was left of the beatniks, of course City Lights, Ferlinghetti. It was an active, *active* community that went back and forth with each other. It was dialogue back and forth, it wasn't cut off. So, you had that there, you had that in the Mission District, and anywhere that was close to the waterfront, you had active communities. You had social activists, you had literary giants in terms of Ferlinghetti and the rest of them. You know it's just, "Oh you work on the waterfront, wow," it was no big deal but it was a great thing.

In fact, when we got Harper & Row to publish *The Waterfront Writers*, I just happened to mention to the editor, "Oh Ferlinghetti's just finished…" — because I knew him and I knew what he was doing — I said, "He's just finished a manuscript with Nancy Peters that nobody's done before, I think it's gonna be good and I think he's gonna have City's Lights publish it. It's called *Literary San Francisco*." So they go, "Oh my god," he goes running up there — the editor — he goes running up to City Lights the next day. He gets a thing with him, "Come here, sign this, we're gonna publish *Literary San Francisco.*" I'm sure they talked about it, it wasn't that quick, so that's how that got published. But that was the dialogue, just a small part of the dialogue that was going on at the time.

So, it was all interconnected, there was a great social fabric, and it went all the way back to at least — in the waterfront workers' terms — it went back at least to the 1934 general strike. It was a through line. There wasn't any doubt in anybody's mind that that's what it was. And of course, we had the gold rush in 1849 and everybody knew the story about how San Francisco started. So, how did this thing happen in 1934? Harry Bridges went and organized and got all the organized labor — the teamsters, the longshoremen, everybody — to get to do that [the 1934 general strike]. And we also knew that people in society at the time asked Roosevelt to send a cruiser or battleship into the Bay and lower the guns and blast away on the longshoremen. That's a fact. So, we knew where we stood, and we had a history that was totally just not told. Either not told at all, told very little, and usually not very well. But we lived it. We didn't live the 1934 strike, but we sure lived in that through line.

01-00:38:08
Anderman: So, you came out of St. Ignatius and you went to SF State right after, and you immediately started working on the waterfront at the same time, basically, right?

01-00:38:20
Carson: Right, right.

01-00:38:21
Anderman: And how long did it take you to get your B book?

01-00:38:24
Carson: From '63 to '66 — late '66, almost '67. Then from '67 to '69, I got my A book in 1969. So that was also while all of the student strikes and anti-war stuff was going on.

01-00:38:46
Anderman: Is that a pretty standard timeline in terms of acquiring the A book, say six or seven years?

01-00:38:50
Carson: At that time, yeah. At that time it was. Sometimes even a lot quicker. But now, I don't have any idea what they do now. I know it's slowed. There was another massive and quick [wave of registrations] like that that happened…see, I was in a continuum, they had a B list in '63, in '67, in '69, and I think maybe in '71 because they were thinking they were going to get work in the container freight stations. And that's when we had the big strike in 1971, it went on for a hundred — well depending on how you count it — 134, 135 days. It was over whether we were going to be able to capture that [work at the freight stations], and it was over automation's part in that.

So naturally, you can see we've been thinking about this for a long time. From '71 through '77, approximately six years, I was talking to people like Frank Silva and saying, "It would be a great idea if you went down there, smuggled a camera in there and took some pictures, 'cause this thing is changing so fast we're not going to have any idea."

There were a lot of other writers, and we used to write things. One of the writers was Lew Welch, a famous, very famous, very excellent poet; was part of the Ferlinghetti [scene], was there when *Howl* was first read, and all the rest of that stuff. But on his own he was a great writer. He was a clerk, he became a clerk on the waterfront. In fact he was on my B list. Frank Silva was on my B list — a great photographer.

So, one day I was talking to him while he was still alive — to Lew Welch — and I said, "You know, I think we have a responsibility to put this down in writing." I was thinking more like Frank Silva, I told Frank Silva you have a responsibility of taking pictures. I think we've gotta talk about this and we have to write about it, and we have to do it from our point of view, you know, the rat's eye view of history. And he [Welch] thought, "Wow that was amazing." He had never really codified that. He said, "What do we do?" and I said, "Why don't we have a group? We got tons of writers down here. Why don't we just get a group of writers and put on a show, so to speak?" He said, "That's a great idea but we need a name," and I said, “Ok well…” He came up with different names, and I said, "I think the most succinct thing is the ‘Waterfront Writers’," and he goes "That's it, Bob!" [*laughter*]

01-00:42:24
Anderman: Do you remember some of the names he came up with? Were they…more elaborate?

01-00:42:27
Carson: They were a little more elaborate, yeah. Not quite so elaborate, but not as succinct, you know, he was just tossing stuff out. One of them was kind of close, it was like "Maritime"… — he would always throw a joke in it — "Maritime Musings" or something like that, I don't think that was it, it was something funny, really funny. So, you know we would walk up to — just to give you an idea, we'd be working on the northern end of the waterfront, he and I. We would walk up Broadway to City Lights, we'd get something to eat on way, maybe talk to Ferlinghetti, maybe not, look through the books. He was always recommending, "You gotta read this one and you gotta do that, make sure you reference this thing and..." "Okay Lew." [*laughter*]

He was a great guy. There was one time we were at Pier 35 and there was this East Indian family that came off the boat, and it looked like the grandmother [was] very old and frail and possibly sick. Lew came into the

scene later and he says, "What the fuck is wrong with you guys, look at this poor lady, give her a chair!" And he throws his chair over to them, almost knocked her down — I think I was the one who stopped it — and he goes "Listen lady, what do you want? Do you want some water? Do you want anything?" [To the guys:] "You guys don't have any fucking respect for life! You don't have any respect for people other than your own, you're probably racist," and he went on this complete rant, which was only maybe about half true.

That's just the kind of guy he was. He saw the situation as it was, for what it was, all the time. I think that's why he walked away from life and never came back. So, I believe that — I'm not sure — but I believe [Lew's suicide] was around 1971, '72, something like that. People were speculating where he went. He knew Gary Snyder, we thought maybe he went off to Gary Snyder's place and walked off into the Sierras and all that. One of his last poems was about carrion being eaten by vultures, it's in his last poem called "The song Mount Tamalpais sings," so a very Zen — which he was always into — a very Zen, very Buddhist way of looking at life going on. So, the birds eat the carrion, and I'm sure that that's how he set himself up, and that creates more life and then life goes on, maybe in a totally different way.

So anyhow, part of the beginnings of the Waterfront Writers, besides the dealing with automation, the job, the working-class, the rat's eye view of history, so on and so forth, was just to give him a kind of obituary. And so, George Benet and I had written, totally separately at different times, poems about Lew Welch, and they're really different.

So, one day I was working down hatch at Pier 17, and they were building the Transamerica Pyramid, which we could see as we went up on deck we could see over the bow of the ship, we could see this thing rising and coming up to a point more and more, right? And so, I think it was Lew but I can't swear to it — oh, and the first container…this is a huge metaphor in my life —this really happened: one of the first containers with the ship's gear came across our point of view on deck, right? And it looked like a block that would be put up into the Transamerica Pyramid — a building block, right? It was Lew or someone, but I'm pretty sure it was Lew who said, "You know what this is? We're still building pyramids for the pharaohs. That's what this is!" Can you imagine how fraught that statement is? You know, the work slaves, the galley slaves, the Jews, the years and years of slave labor. And there it was, it was like "Holy Christ." The whole work gang stopped when he said that, and looked up, because it just crystallized everything…lots of our life.

01-00:48:22

Anderman: Was that the first time — I was going to ask you if you remember the first time you saw a shipping container? You said when they showed up on the

docks originally [that] no one knew what they were…it's all break-bulk at that point.

01-00:48:36

Carson: The first time I saw a shipping container... I think I saw one on the road and thought immediately, "Wow this is like…" — I think it was a SeaLand container — and I thought, “Oh boy...” I automatically knew this was going to be transferable from one mode to the other — that's why they call it intermodal. I said, "This is it, this is coming." And I think it was an experimental thing at the time that I just happened to coincidentally be on the highway to see. I think that was 1967, '68, possibly a little later. Now remember I'm driving all these roads all day long going to different schools [*laughter*] and working, so I'm always all over the Bay Area, so I got lucky to see that.

01-00:49:38

Moradi: And when did you start seeing containers be more prevalent on the docks?

01-00:49:44

Carson: Probably the seventies to the early eighties. It just all of a sudden went that way.

01-00:49:55

Moradi: And how did the work start to change?

01-00:49:58

Carson: Well first of all, it didn't take anywhere near the amount of work gangs to do it. That was the main thing — the numbers. The death quotient went way up because you're not going to stop, you're going to die if that [a container] hits you. If a coffee sack hits you, it might break your leg or something at the most, but if a container hits you, you're dead. We just had a lot of problems like that. I maintain that of the guys who retired, we all have PTSD from thinking about, "Hey, this thing's going to hit me. Hey, I can't drive under the crane, I have to go around the crane. I have to go into the yard, I have to be careful of this, I have to do that." So, you're constantly being pounded day in and day out with a high, high stress factor. And that wasn't there when you were throwing coffee sacks or in deep tanks somewhere.

[*radio noise in the background*]

There's the dispatch. What was the question again?

01-00:51:27

Moradi: Yeah, how did the work start to change when the container—

01-00:51:29

Carson: Well, the main thing was that [the numbers]. Then there was the constant stress level, then it was the high production level all of a sudden. You know, a body can throw break-bulk cargo only so fast because you have to pace yourself over a six- or eight-hour day, right? But a container, I mean I've seen these crane drivers move these containers like twenty, twenty-five an hour, thirty-five an hour… If they're empties and they're doubled and all the rest of that. I've seen guys do sixty an hour. That's not a norm – – that's abnormal — but it can be done.

Which brings me to an interesting [point]. It's really a conclusion on my part, and I can tell you all the stuff that went into it. The next level of automation — I think you mentioned it a half hour ago — are the totally automated terminals – and how you deal with that. First of all, there's nobody there. There's big, deep concerns in my mind about how they [the ILWU] let that get that far. And I'm not a Luddite, I'm just saying… First of all, I know because of my education that it's scientifically, technologically impossible for any group of algorithms or AI, artificial intelligence, to do this massive movement. Could you imagine, they're trying to tell the workers, "When you walk through the gate for work in the morning, everything's done. It's all automated." I know [about] all the specifics — believe me, I actually have a patent on one of the things. That's where I went off into this engineering bit. But I know for a fact [it can't be fully automated].

So, who's doing that work? Who's programming that? Is there any interface possible, through AI or any other way that anyone can think of, that can run an entire terminal with that much permutation? You've got loads, you've got empties, you've got ports, you know, different ships, different ports, different weights. There's a lot of calculation — and that's never going to change — into how you load a ship for just flotation principles. So, who's doing that work? Who's changing that?

I read an article… I had to laugh, and I showed it to the guy who's a maritime guy on the other side — he's a boss, he hates us. He hates the clerks and the longshoremen — and I said, "Ted, look at this." And so, we're reading it, it's in a trade journal. [It said:] "We have these algorithms and so on that make the Long Beach Container Terminal completely automated, we don't need anybody." He [Ted] said, "That's impossible." Even he said that's impossible. They're threatened, the employers are threatened by that, 'cause somebody's doing that work and they sure as hell are very suspicious that it's some bean counter somewhere that can do it. And of course, in our modern data transfer world, the person could be anywhere, and *they're* being exploited like crazy. So we've moved the exploitation level way up the line. I don't know. It's still the same question, it's still the same question: who's doing the work and let's get it organized.

Anderman: Yeah, I mean you're seeing all of these walkouts at Google, you're seeing all of these tech workers attempting to organize right now. I think that's *that*. That's exactly it — people realizing that the exploitation is happening in white-collar work as well.

01-00:56:30
Carson: Yeah, I shouldn't say this, but one of the guys [who] lives on my block in San Francisco. Who can afford to buy a home in San Francisco, right? Well, he's the head engineer for a massive tech company. And I ran this stuff past him — he's just fascinated with the waterfront, and the containers, and the patents that I had on how to track containers automatically. And even he said, "Yeah, no, you're right, this is impossible," and I said, "I guess the only answer is it has to be organized." And he said, "No, that's anathema where I come from," and all that, but he said [*whispering*] "But you're right."

01-00:57:26
Anderman: What were the conversations that were being had — I mean you sort of alluded to this — as containers became more and more common? Presumably there were diverse reactions to them.

01-00:57:44
Carson: Oh yeah, there were a lot of Luddite reactions. They didn't go trash anything or do anything but just said, "Hey forget it, fuck it, let's just go back to the other way. Let's negotiate going backwards."

01-00:58:01
Anderman: Right, let's tear it all down.

01-00:58:02
Carson: What won out was what one character in the book, in *The Waterfront Writers*, says, "We can't lay down in front of this train, it's going to run us over. We have to deal with it." That's what won out, but it took a long time.

But remember, it's in the context of the M&M agreements, before containers existed. In 1959, there were five — I think the big rub was — there were two five-year agreements, so a lot of guys felt it didn't give them enough [time]. It gave the employer too much time and we didn't have enough time to react. That was one point. That meshing with containerization is what blew up in 1971. And then I think that it just resolved itself into working with the situation as long as we got ours, so to speak. To be that simplistic about it. So, what we [the ILWU] were basically saying also was, "We'll have attrition. This existing workforce, Mr. Employer, you're going to take care." We got pensions, we got medical, we got wages, so on and so forth. We got good conditions, we got a safety code that we're going to enforce. Lots and lots of contractual things. And then, in return for that, you get to introduce the automation.

There are some caveats in there. But in return for that, the general slope of things was, "You take care of us, we'll take care of you, we're one big happy family and as we go out we'll talk about how we're going to be replaced or not right."

01-01:00:13
Anderman: So, we'll slow hiring too.

01-01:00:14
Carson: Right, so that slowed the hiring way down. But containerization had its own thoughts about this because all of a sudden there's many more ships [and] many more containers per ship. Now you have these gigantic megaships, they call them: twenty-two thousand containers. They're almost challenging the Archimedes principles of flotation. Really, really great engineering feats.

But what are you going to do when three of those show up at your terminal? First of all, you have to have a totally new terminal. You've got to have people to run around. No automated crane — nothing's going to take care of grooming that yard. You've got all of that in and out. You've got a lot of clerks checking out, you know, checking in and checking out containers. So, all of a sudden the growth rate of the jobs started coming back. And the growth rate in the union, the organized part of the union — I mean the A [list] part of the union — all of a sudden had to get bigger and better. Remember I told you there was that big drop, and then all of a sudden it came back up again? It came back up again in the early 2000s, late 1990s, early 2000s. And then all these megaships started.

Here's the picture: 2002, I'm flying with a guy from this local here down to southern California because we were on what was called the Technology Committee. Now this is a joint committee between the employer and the union; we were two of the union representatives to that joint committee. The employer had decided to lock out the longshoremen. This is another first. They decided they were gonna lock us out. We said, "Okay fine," but we put up pickets everywhere to make sure that none of that cargo was moving. So, they pretty well played into our hands, dumb fucks that they are. And they wanted to continue the lockout. We didn't see how that was going to really punish us without just geometrically punishing them. We can hold out because we're tough.

So, I'm flying down for this Technology Committee meeting and I'm telling you, sure as I'm sitting here, the planes banking over that whole L.A. harbor to come in. The ships out there, they couldn't get in because whatever was there on the dock couldn't get out. So, the ships couldn't get in because there was nowhere to unload them, so the ships kept piling up, piling up, piling up. The day I flew over there, there were 110 ships — and they're big container ships — out in the L.A. harbor and the outer waters.

It looked like the Normandy invasion. When I saw the Normandy thing last week, it looked exactly like that, only they were huge container ships. It was like there was almost no space between them from the air. But that'll give you an idea of [how] all of a sudden the volume just took off in amazing proportions. So that's gonna pull along more workers to have to do it.

01-01:04:34
Moradi: And so you worked as a ship clerk in the early seventies, right?

01-01:04:37
Carson: Yep.

01-01:04:38
Moradi: Was the tension of automation felt differently by ship clerks than by longshoremen? What were those conversations like across [workers]?

01-01:04:50
Carson: Well, the clerks knew that there would probably be a move, which in a way turned out to be true, that our jobs could be — remember, we didn't have massive digitalization and information sharing, but we felt like that was somewhere in the near horizon and that data [was] our strong suit at the time, because *we* were the data.

01-01:05:28
Anderman: And this is the era of by-hand: ledger books and…?

01-01:05:32
Carson: Yeah, ledger books, clipboards, pencils, chalking the container, all that kind of stuff. But we could see that somehow that could be automated in the distant future, or somebody would get a big grip on that in the distant future. Longshoremen had the problem of all of a sudden they'd go from a — I don't know, at the time the break-bulk gang, I can't even remember what the size of it was, twelve, fourteen men I think — gang down to a guy driving a crane and a guy lashing containers. That's it. They had a massive problem. Remember, it just kind of moved in that direction slowly before it really, really picked up in the late seventies and eighties.

01-01:06:42
Anderman: So, as a result of the M&Ms, the PMA [*Pacific Maritime Association, which represents shipping interests on the Pacific coast*] agreed to continue hiring normal-sized gangs despite containerization early on. Does that mean that there was just a lot of downtime? [Did] you have these big gangs who were [idle]?

01-01:07:05
Carson: Well, no, wait a minute, let me back up. [At the time of] the first M&M agreements, there was only break-bulk. But the focus of modernization

and mechanization was that they got to do things… So when the first contracts came in, they still didn't really mention "containerization" that much, even though there were containers. Well, they did, but they said that this is an agreed-to amount of work, and that's certainly not as large, anywhere near as large, as the break-bulk gang.

So, what finally happened… For instance, the San Francisco port came from [being a] gang port which had its genesis really [in] an arbitration that helped settle the 1934 general strike where they said the work gangs then could go to a rotary dispatch system and work in a work-gang fashion. That's where it had its genesis. Well, the employers always wanted to get rid of that. Containerization was an excuse for them to try to get rid of a whole lot of work practices, data transfer, data management. I think that some of the more bright ones — and there's a whole lot of dumb ones, employers — woke up to the fact around this time, [the] late seventies, early eighties, and beyond, that the clerks controlled the point of production. They didn't control it. They didn't control it. The clerks did. And the longshoremen of course did not want to hear that the clerks controlled the point of production because they had always controlled the point of production.

So, there were various things that we did internally in the ILWU to take care of that. One of them was the policy where longshoremen would be elevated to clerks. Clerks would not hire any people… any relatives, anybody off the street, any of the old ways that they did a permit, B list, and all that. They would take any new union members from the local longshore local.

01-01:10:05

Anderman: The idea to ensure that all of the political practices that were going on inside the union stayed inside the union.

01-01:10:11

Carson: Absolutely, that it stayed intact. You know, there was a whole lot of rancor about that, but I think it was a good move. And I certainly supported it at the time and just for what you said. I remember right here [in the union hall] making a big speech about it, and saying, you know, these are the guys that busted their backs, we need to support them. We need to support them.

01-01:10:40

Anderman: That's interesting. So, by the "point of production" here in terms of the clerks, you're talking about data, you're talking about this giant question of data transfer. Clerks are still around, but obviously there are far fewer of them, and they're entirely digital, is that right?

01-01:10:57

Carson: Yep, that's right.

01-01:11:01
Anderman: But the data is still held inside the union.

01-01:11:04
Carson: No, not now. That's the problem. That's what they had to move out. That's what the employer had to move out. Obviously, it's a knee-jerk reaction on their part to try to do it, but they didn't even understand what was happening to *them*. That [the data] got moved out of their control again! And so, like my friend Ted who hates us [the ILWU] said, "You're right, I don't think these guys know shit, they can't even protect their own fucking job."

01-01:11:42
Anderman: That's interesting. Let's get back to the Waterfront Writers. So, you guys started at some point organizing readings, right? Talk about how the first reading came together.

01-01:11:54
Carson: Alright. We got to give my wife Jeanne kudos for this because she said, "I've been listening to you for two years" — she's a very good artist, she really understood the humanities and art groups as an off-shoot of that — "I've been listening to you for two years talk about this. On your birthday," — this was in 1977 — "I rented this hall around the corner from us and you're gonna give the reading, so get all the guys over here." So, I had a month or two, I guess two months maybe, to work on that. [We] did have the organization because we had the Waterfront Writers coming together as kind of a group with some kind of definition of who we were and what our goals were.

01-01:12:56
Anderman: So you had already started meeting as a group before?

01-01:12:59
Carson: Oh yeah.

01-01:13:00
Anderman: Where would you meet for that and what were the meetings like?

01-01:13:02
Carson: Well, it could be on the waterfront somewhere, it could be a rump group or something in a bar or restaurant at lunchtime. But I had formal meetings at what turned out to be the place that my wife rented. It was a hall, I knew the guy who owned it. So that's how it happened. And interestingly, I had to tell everybody, and we all had to agree, you know, that "There's x amount of us, we only got this amount of time." So, we went at it like a work-gang. We said, "This is what you do, if you go over your twelve

minutes" or whatever the figure was "we're going to yank you off the stage because we need to hear from the next [person] because everybody is equal in this." And right from the get-go, we had a social-political problem because there weren't any women. We didn't have any women. So right away, we started inviting longshoremen's wives and maybe some political people who were good writers, who had done good things for us, and supported us when we were in strife on the waterfront. And that's how we got some women readers in there. It was probably, you know, way overdue and yet way ahead of its time.

So, in 1977 I guess we gave that first reading. It just blew [up]. You know, I was expecting like ten people to show up, or fifteen or something. I think sixty or seventy showed up at the first reading. We had some readings that had over a hundred, two hundred people. All of a sudden it was just like, "who the fuck" — [it evoked] all kinds of emotion there from the audience, "You mean longshoremen can really write?" all the way up to, one guy said [in response to] this picture that Frank Silva took, he said, "That's the *Pietà* of the working-class!" [*laughter*] So we had all this gamut of emotion, and a curious media, they just couldn't get enough. They just couldn't get enough.

We had to keep putting our foot on the brake a lot, because we didn't want to lose the internal structure. And we wanted to make this thing progress organically, not have them defining it. But nonetheless, over the next couple of years, there was national [and] international press. The thing I'm going to give you, which is two *Today Show* NBC documentaries on us. In fact, I remember when the book came out — Tom Brokaw was still alive — Tom Brokaw and Jane Pauley were there, Harper & Row got a copy of the book over to them in New York. They said, "You remember that thing we showed you guys a year, this is their book!" and Tom Brokaw is holding the book out, like that, like that! Not just like this, but like that, squared into the screen.

01-01:17:08
Anderman: Right in front of the camera.

01-01:17:11
Carson: And then they did another story, a follow-up story on us. The guy who came down and got it for NBC was a guy who lived in San Francisco and knew the longshore workforce. His name was Rick Davis, he just died. He was an international correspondent, and it just blew his mind that — he always told me, "I was never gonna miss this local story because it was almost per force an international story." So, he did it.

And then God, I don't know, we got anthologized here or there and everywhere. I wanted to get — after the first reading or two — I really wanted to get more forum for different parts of the arts, not just writing,

not just literature. So, I asked Frank and Brian — of course I knew them all — and I said, “Why don't you bring your line drawings, your photographs, your whatever.” And we had people who worked on the waterfront who weren't necessarily part of the Waterfront Writers group that were also great artists, and they would come and hang their pictures on the walls or maybe show a video that they made or something. One guy made a movie and it was fabulous.

And then, you know, one thing leads to another, as they say. Shortly after all this stuff was going on, the San Francisco Art Institute — I blasted the San Francisco Artist Institute because they didn't call us, they didn't call any workers, they didn’t call anybody. They had a forum one weekend on the transformation of the Northern Waterfront. [They] assumed a whole lot of stuff that was incorrect. So, I called up the person there and they felt, oh man, by the time I got finished with them, they were so guilt-ridden, it was unbelievable. So, they said — I'm getting to a point here — so they said, “Come up here.” I said, “You know what, let us come up there and show you our pictures and some of the video that our guys are just starting to do, and we'll do a little reading. Give me an hour or two.” So, they did. And they packed the place too.

And the woman who was in charge was crying at the end of the thing, and apologizing all over the place. And I said, “You know, maybe we can get a little interaction going here especially with the photographers and the guys who are trying to get all the audio.” So she gave us two guys from the Art Institute who were grad students who later on became very famous photographer, audio people, and all the rest of that — and all that equipment. And I said, “Here, go talk to Brian Nelson and Frank Silva.” So, they helped. They didn’t help organize those shots, but they’re the ones who gave them the equipment and some professional advice about how to use the sound equipment. And Nelson has got all of that sound that doesn’t exist anymore.

01-01:21:04

Anderman: I know, that’s a core part of [the Waterfront Writers and Artists] archive, I think. That’s one of the things I’m most excited about, is the sound. It’s amazing.

01-01:21:08

Carson: The sound of the break-bulk, and then the sound of the containers, and the background dialogues going on between the workers.

01-01:21:17

Anderman: And the readings, right, he recorded the readings?

01-01:21:19

Carson: I think he did some of the readings. […] Yeah, some of them are really funny. So, that's how that got started. I was out there pitching and bitching all the time to keep the thing rolling and to go off into... I understood art. I think some of the guys might have personally not understood what that motive was, but they went along with it when they saw the results. And I was by no means the leader of the pack. I was not the leader. It was more like an old fashion work-gang. People rose and fell from the gang boss, so to speak. It was a democratic [process]. It was a *soviet*, that's what it was. That's what it was. It was a total, hundred-percent democratically-run thing. And at some point I felt like, "You might have objections — you want to do it, somebody else could do it." So, another guy did it and then another guy after that did it.

01-01:22:47

Anderman: What was the reaction within the group, inside the group, to things like the Harper & Row contract? I mean, there were some big things happening, like all the major media coverage…?

01-01:22:59

Carson: A lot of it was an anchor drag, which was called for. You know, you throw an anchor out when you're maybe in a storm and you don't have any power and that will right the boat and keep you in the proper position. We had to do that with the media stuff. We had to slow it down because it was a deluge. It was a deluge. I had people calling me up from all kinds of newspapers I never heard of — journals and international things, that *Us Magazine* thing.

One photographer…what was his name? Nick Allen, he was Woody Allen's — great photographer! And he took pictures for different magazines — he was Woody Allen's cousin or something, he was closely related to Woody Allen. He was just an incredibly smart, facile guy and he wanted to get pictures of the work as we were doing it. So, I got him in, but he wanted to do it for a story that he was going to pitch. He didn't have [a full story]. I said, "Fine." So, he thanked me. We did it one day. He thanked me and then he pitched it. He had I guess a connection, I'm not sure, with *Us Magazine*, that's how that got in *Us Magazine.*

Lots of crazy stuff. [In] 1980, I guess, a guy calls me up and goes, "This is Bob Anderson." And I said, "Am I supposed to know you?" And he said, "No," but he laughed and he said, "I'm the film director for something or another."

01-01:25:06

Moradi: He was on KGO-TV, right? [editor's note: KGO-TV is an ABC-affiliated news station based in San Francisco]

01-01:25:08

Carson: He was on KGO, right. He said, “I want to do a thing on the changing waterfront because, you know, your book really set this off on me. I think this is something that people in San Francisco need.” But he worked for KGO and all kinds of different [outlets], he was more or less independent at this time. So, I said, “Yeah, well what do you need?” And he said, “I got a guy” — he told me a lot about [how]… Well, he had this thing like all figured out, how he was going to do it, frame by frame. And he said, “I don't want to interview you. I need you to take some of your poems and work with this musician and see if you can fuse some of these images together and we'll see what happens.” Well, that's an interesting thing and I had a lot of music in my family and that's something we [the Waterfront Writers] really didn't explore.

So, I said, “Yeah, I'd be fascinated to do that.” I never met the musician, I gave him like four stanzas, and the guy freaked out, “Man, this is, I've never, this is great poetry!” And he was performing here, he was a well-known musician in San Francisco. So, Anderson put that music and my words together and he says, “I think this is brilliant, I'm going to try like hell to make this the theme song for this.” So, then it got so big, it went beyond KGO and it went into an ABC documentary that they showed, I think, two or three different nights. And that was the theme song, and part of the music and part of the lyrics that he would intersperse in the frames.

So, a year later, this guy calls me up and he says, “Are you Bob Carson?” “Yeah.” “Jesus Christ, I’ve been trying to find you. You're really hard to find.” “Well, I’m going to work and I'm going to school.” He says, “Where are you?” and I told him where I was, he says, “Stay there! Can you stay there like fifteen, twenty minutes?” I said, “Yeah, fine.” So, he comes in…it was like a rented limo or something. And he comes out and he says, “I’m so-and-so from ABC, and this is a ticket for you and your wife to go to the Emmy awards because you've been nominated for an Emmy.”

01-01:28:13
Anderman: Wow, crazy!

01-01:28:14
Carson: [*laughter*] So I said, “Oh wow.” And I said, “Well, how long do I have to get a tuxedo or whatever?” He says — this is Tuesday, right? And he says, “You have until Saturday.” And it was a thing, now I won't go into it, but it was hilarious.

01-01:28:35
Anderman: Did you go to the Emmys?

01-01:28:36
Carson: Yeah, I went to the Emmys, and I won it!

01-01:28:39
Anderman: Amazing. Really? That's incredible.

01-01:28:44
Carson: Yeah. And the musician… I'm not going to tell you what happened to him, but he got a little carried away beforehand with all the [festivities]. So, they had drink tickets or something, and I'm not a big drinker, but I guess he was. So, the guy who was the president of ABC says, "Are you so-and-so?" "Yeah." "Oh man, this thing is great. I think we might win this one." He was stoned, he took a big roll of tickets and he goes, "here!" and this thing goes halfway across the bar. Now this is the first time I ever met the musician, and he was stoned out of his fucking mind. And so then we go in and I remember Francis Ford Coppola's father was the musical director —

01-01:29:38
Anderman: Is this in LA?

01-01:29:40
Carson: No, there was a split, it was between San Francisco and LA. It was a format they were trying. So anyhow, they start doing the nominees in my category and I said, "Oh wow, I recognize these other people's theme song. There's no way we're going to do this!" Blah blah blah. Then they call our names. The guy [the musician] couldn't get up. They put the camera, the light on him. I think he fell over the seat that I had just vacated in front of him. So, I got the whole thing all by myself, walking down the thing, making this speech, you know.

01-01:30:29
Anderman: Oh man, we've got to find this footage.

01-01:30:31
Carson: And naturally what did I say? "This is for all the tugboat operators, sailors, longshoremen, clerks," blah blah blah, "It's not for me, but collectively we really appreciate this," and I walked off. Now he finally got his act [together], his sister got him up and got his act together and got him down there, but it was too late.

01-01:31:02
Anderman: Right, they played him off.

01-01:31:05
Carson: Yeah. I knew even then there was pressure to get people on or off. So, I thought, wow if I ever went, that's an easy [task], I'll just thank everybody and get the hell out of there. So, oh man…

There was a big ball afterwards, you know, a big dance floor thing, tons of food. Lots of crazy people who…were self-aggrandizing and self-important, you know? News people there and all the rest of that…

01-01:31:41
Anderman: What a scene.

01-01:31:42
Carson: [*laughter*] It was so beyond, so different.

01-01:31:46
Anderman: I had no idea that an Emmy came out of the Waterfront Writers. That's incredible.

01-01:31:55
Carson: And then, I really wanted to go off in some different directions. 1984 was coming up very quick, and that was the fiftieth anniversary of the 1934 general strike. I knew no one wanted to put up with me writing a musical. And I think the photographers and the artists [in WWA], I think they really wanted to perfect that slideshow that they had. They stayed with what they had. They had this massive amount of data at this point, and they needed to perfect that. They couldn't just hear the same old poems and look at the same old pictures all the time. So, we just kind of dispersed.

But I think there were some times where we were identified as the Waterfront Writers or the [Waterfront] Artists and, you know, like a few people would show up, maybe do a reading, these guys would take their artwork here, there and everywhere. Fine. That was fine.

So, in 1984, I found a guy who was a fabulous musician and composer and lived right up here in Bernal Heights. His name was Bill Young, and he was also socially active. I used to drive up there from Pier 80 and have coffee at lunchtime with him. We'd talk about finally refining… that we could write a musical, how it would work for the fiftieth anniversary. Totally self done. We kind of figured it out. He got some great musicians, I wound up getting some astoundingly great actors and actresses. Some of them are still very famous, like Dennis Dun, and [we] almost got — oh, what's his name? He was with the [San Francisco] Mime Troupe, and I just saw him last week as well…

01-01:34:27
Moradi: How did you gather all of these people?

01-01:34:29
Carson: I knew some, Bill knew some. But it was the fabric, it was still that connected fabric in San Francisco. It was still prevalent. It was like, it wasn't one hundred percent containerized on the waterfront and it wasn't a

hundred percent dispersed in the city. All that was still going. So, we did it. And all of the dialogue that I wrote for this musical was done as poetry. And it wasn't about the leadership of the 1934 general strike, it was about the individual workers, so kind of *à la* the Waterfront Writers to, right? That paradigm.

So here the Coppola family and I just kept crossing ways. One of [Francis Ford] Coppola's brothers — just died a couple of years ago — he became the head of San Francisco State's Drama department. He saw us rehearsing [and] they gave us space to rehearse. Bill was a great musician and composer, he's now living in France. A great jazz musician, and also very close to the mime troupe and all the rest of the social, active drama people. [He] got us in for a reading at ACT [American Conservatory Theater]. And so, one thing after another, now the thing goes on, we put it on at San Francisco State. [This] guy came who was a friend of a friend who turned out to be a historically great producer-director, his name was Ed Devaney. [He said,] "Can I see the script?" "Okay, fine." I still have this script — in fact, this should probably go in there [the archive]. I still have the script with all of his annotations and edits. And he took it back east, and he put up productions all over back east.

01-01:37:12
Anderman: Amazing. Ed Devaney, you said?

01-01:37:14
Carson: D-E-V-A-N-E-Y. And then we had people saying, "I'm doing a story about such-and-such worker thing or labor person, could I have the music or lyric or whatever?" And this went on and on and on. In fact, it still goes on. Somebody called me a year ago and asked for permission to release that to him for this theater performance.

01-01:37:51
Anderman: What was the show called?

01-01:37:53
Carson: *34*.

01-01:37:54
Anderman: *34*, okay.

01-01:38:05
Carson: We almost got Danny Glover. We almost got Danny Glover. This is how things worked at the time in this city. Bill knew Danny Glover when Danny Glover and he were around the Mime Troupe, the San Francisco Mime Troupe. And Danny Glover is of course a tremendous social activist, total, one hundred percent, go down with guns blazing for the longshoremen. He was in the middle of making one of whatever famous film he was doing at the time.

01-01:38:47
Anderman: I was gonna say, like the eighties, this is Danny Glover's time… *Lethal Weapon*, right?

01-01:38:54
Carson: Yeah, this was Danny Glover time. I talked to Danny once because I guess he wanted to see if I was a goofball or something. And Bill worked with him, cajoled him, and Danny said, "I got no problem," — I think, from what Bill told me, I got it second hand — he wanted to do it in the worst possible way and… he really wanted to do it, but he was just tied into this film and he couldn't get out of it. He actually tried to leverage his way out or open up a little space so he could do at least the premier of this thing. But he couldn't do it contractually.

But I believe he sent a lot of people to see it. And then you had this funny thing because you had a lot of left-wing, socially active people in the audience who wanted to see how we treated that strike. You had theater-goer people that just wanted to see a good drama, which it was. And you had like a guy who identified himself at the end of the thing as a Teamster forklift driver on the waterfront and he said, "I've never seen my life," — the thing you want to hear — "This is exactly the way it was. Nobody's ever done anything from our point of view," and all that kind of stuff, which is just stunning to hear that. It was great.

01-01:40:34
Anderman: That's really exciting, what an experience.

So, there were all of these other people on the waterfront who were making art — who were writing, taking photographs, doing whatever — who were not formally part of the group, but they would occasionally come to the readings. Are these people still around? I'd be very interested in tracking down as much of this work as we can.

01-01:41:03
Carson: Maybe. I'd really have to think about that because most of them aren't. Actually, one guy was in *The Waterfront Writers* under a different name. He was a Teamster lumper, which means he threw heavy cargo, all the way up through the nineties and 2000s. A lot of this stuff, the coffee [for example], had to be de-vanned — taken out of the container, it's called de-vanning — taken out of the container by longshoremen. And then when it would go on trucks, it would have to be transferred and that's what this guy did all the way up until the late nineties. But it ruined him. He was an extremely powerful guy, went to the same high school I went to. He went to Cal, he got a graduate degree from Cal in philosophy, but he stayed doing this on the waterfront and he just killed his body. He just killed his

body doing that. It finally got so painful and so bad that he just committed suicide last month.

01-01:42:23
Anderman: Really? Who is this?

01-01:42:25
Carson: Yeah. Well, his real name is Lee Olds. In *The Waterfront Writers*, he went in as J. Price. It's a thing called "Ridiculous Secrets," that's the title of what I put in for him. And then he had some Mexico poems in there too.

01-01:42:47
Anderman: Okay, got it. Well, we're very interested. We've got a little bit, a very small amount of funding this summer to work on this project. We've only talked to three people so far, right, and every time we talked to someone new it seems like there are new avenues to pursue, and new kinds of art to try to collect and put into this archive. And it seems like it could be a pretty giant project —

01-01:43:11
Carson: Oh, it's giant.

01-01:43:12
Anderman: — which I'm excited about. I think it has real legs, that's exciting. It's going to take a lot longer, which is fine. So, if you could potentially take some time, think on it passively, about whoever else you might be able to find.

01-01:00:14
Carson: Well, I'm thinking, Vas Arnautoff [Vasily, son of Victor Arnautoff] and those guys, they were great, they were really well recognized artists, well they're dead. A guy like Lester Cole, who was one of the Hollywood Ten, a great screenwriter, I went to him in the city. Bill Shields as a guy in charge of a thing called, at the time, Labor Theater. I said, "Bill, I haven't really written more than one or two plays. Can you give me somebody?" He goes, "Oh yeah, I'll hook you up with Lester Cole." I said, "Lester Cole, the guy who was part of the Hollywood Ten?" And he goes, "Yeah." He lived right up here in Potrero Hill. Well, he's dead, obviously. Ira Sugarman, another guy that I knew, he's dead. These were mostly older guys who did their art — did it very well — but did it kind of in their own way. And then all of a sudden, here comes this magnet, this core thing of the Waterfront Writers, and it's like they got a whole new lease on life. But they were already a generation or even two older than us. But I think there's a couple of them around and I will get them, I'll get them for you.

01-01:44:53

Anderman: Well, even just having the names — I mean we can go look up their work too, and see if there's any of their work that's still around that we could potentially get versions of into this thing [the WWA archive].

Have we missed anything? We're pushing up on two hours here.

01-01:45:14
Carson: You got a two-hour tape in here?

01-01:45:16
Anderman: No, it's digital. We've got like five hours left, we could go on and on. But I don't want to wear you down. Probably what we'll do is call it today, I think, and we can go sort of get this thing written up and we will very likely come back to you at some point this summer or in the fall with more questions, follow-ups, things like this. And I'm still talking to the Bancroft Library about what kinds of formats they want and everything for this archive. So, I will also come back to you with that. And we'll actually start piecing it together. So don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any thoughts or questions

01-01:45:51
Carson: It sounds like one of your core things is to talk about containerization and automation. I got a whole other life involved with that. I'm just going to throw this out there before we go.

01-01:46:09
Anderman: Please.

01-01:46:10
Carson: It happened just as I was retiring and all the way up to the present. Engineering, breaking into the algorithms for positioning containers, developing that. Tracking and positioning. Making patents about it. And a whole story of mean and evil capitalism. [*laughter*] That happens. Stolen right off the page, but they didn't have the source code and they didn't have anybody who could understand how to build the algorithms. But the main thing was the GPS/INS [global positioning system/inertial navigation system] invention…global positioning. Well anyway, I'm not going to go into it. But that's how I know that these assholes are pulling the wool over even the employer's eyes — internationally! Internationally. I know it because I've done it, and I know what an incredible amount of math and permutations goes into moving those containers, either on the ship or in the yard. And of course the idea always was, if you could set it up to do that, then you can start doing trucker pickup times and all this and that because you know where everything is, right?

01-01:47:53
Anderman: All the time.

01-01:47:55
Carson: First and foremost — and this will be the last thing I'll say — I've been working on this for twenty years basically, and actually built the invention, you know, put the invention together, dealt with a lot of big companies who wanted it — there's a whole story there. But I knew exactly where that automation was going to go. And one of the interesting things is the difference between what the workers think robotics is and what the employer thinks robotics is. That's a great inside story.

01-01:48:46
Anderman: Can you gloss that? I'm very curious. Can you give me a summary?

01-01:48:50
Carson: The workers think robotics is just all unmanned automated vehicles. The employer calls robotics *à la* their models in Amsterdam and Rotterdam —

01-01:49:10
Anderman: Rotterdam, yeah. I've seen the port at Rotterdam.

01-01:49:13
Carson: — [What] the employer calls robotics, there's still a man there running a robotic piece of equipment in the yard. Now that's a whole other digital interface, it's a whole other ballgame altogether. The workers think that robotics is a total unmanned terminal. That's not — that's a fully automated terminal. And what I'm saying is, they can't even do the robotics thing without having human interference, and there's no fucking way they can do [full automation] because there's not enough AI. There's not enough computer power. There's not enough algorithm in the world that can make that happen.

01-01:50:02
Anderman: Yeah, I believe that. It's one of the most complicated systems...

01-01:50:05
Carson: Well, but that's where the ILWU is right now. I've been out of it for a long time, but we knew that's where it was going, and that's where they're at right now. So now they're trying to tell — this is kind of a Luddite way — they're trying to tell Maersk Line, "No you can't put in this automated terminal with all these other terminals for rent."

01-01:50:29
Anderman: This is the Long Beach debate that's going on right now.

01-01:50:32
Carson: That's right. It's huge. And the ports are basically — the Port of Long Beach, the Port of LA — are basically trying to say, "Hey, can't we find some middle ground or do something else?" because it's a huge political issue. If they lose the ILWU voting block down there, they're in huge

trouble. So, they're going to try to do something to try to find middle ground. It's impossible.

01-01:51:05
Anderman: Do you know, is there art being made on the waterfront today by longshoremen?

01-01:51:11
Carson: Is there what?

01-01:51:12
Anderman: Is there art being made? Do you have any feelers out in terms of the current…?

01-01:51:16
Carson: I know there's a lot of guys who still write poetry and occasionally get it published here and there. I think they're mostly either just retiring or have retired.

01-01:51:29
Anderman: I mean, the culture has obviously changed a lot.

01-01:51:32
Carson: Right. I know there was a thing in — yeah, you're right — there was a thing down in Long Beach and Los Angeles about five years ago.

01-01:51:41
Anderman: Oh really? Interesting. Okay. I'll look that up.

01-01:51:43
Carson: And they did some film and they got a big theater in — god, what's that big working-class longshore town down there — San Pedro, they got a big theater in San Pedro. And they drove up in like 1930s and ‘40s cars and low-rider cars and everything because there's a big Latino component to this, and [they] packed that theater. They had two things going: they had a film that they did and they had a guy — god, I can't think of his name, he actually looked a little like Harry Bridges, and when Harry Bridges died way back in the nineties, this guy, Ian... I'll think of his name. He was a Shakespearean actor, he's a Brit. He dropped everything in Hollywood and came over ‘cause he was so fascinated with [the waterfront]. He'd read some of the Waterfront Writers stuff but he was fascinated with the waterfront and the longshore component of the working class. “Anything I can do to help you.” He made plays, one-man plays, and that’s been put on over the years, mostly in southern California but some up here in union halls and in small theaters. He's a great guy. Great guy. He married a woman who was a longshoreman too, eventually. But the guy is a great actor, and he was a stage actor and a film actor. He just freaked out when he saw…

To us [longshoremen], this isn't a big surprise, but it is to the general public — that somebody would get so involved in this, that they'd drop everything because it's such a new horizon for them and they want to explore it. It's almost a sense of freedom and release, you know, and going off on a completely different path that's much more parallel to what they always wanted to do or what they learned in school or whatever.

01-01:54:04
Anderman: Yeah, and just the integration of progressive politics with art making. I think that blows so many people's minds when they hear about this.

01-01:54:13
Carson: That's right. Yep.

01-01:54:16
Anderman: All right. We've got a lot of threads to pull here.

01-01:54:20
Moradi: This is amazing.

01-01:54:21
Anderman: Thank you so much. This has gotten so much richer, I think, today than it was before in my mind. This is great.

01-01:54:27
Moradi: I did have a lingering question. We've been chatting with Brian and Frank and have a sense of where some of the remaining Waterfront Writers are, but I still don't know: do you know if or where Dave Ramet [*pronounced with a hard T sound*] is around?

01-01:54:44
Carson: Yeah, I know him very well. I've known Dave for sixty years. Yeah, he lives in the East Bay.

01-01:54:50
Moradi: Oh wow, great!

01-01:54:52
Carson: PhD in Comparative Literature from Cal. And, he pronounces his name Ramet [*with a silent T sound*], but everybody calls him "Ram-it" for another reason: because he's a great speaker and he'll really jam stuff.

01-01:55:13
Moradi: [*laughter*] Good to know.

01-01:55:15
Anderman: I mean, this initial list of everyone has been our guide thus far. We might ask you to put us in touch with Dave Ramet, if you don't mind.

01-01:55:26
Carson: Well, you know Benet is dead. I'm still here.

01-01:55:30
Moradi: Gene is in Seattle, right?*

[*correction: He still resides in California]

01-01:55:32
Carson: Gene Dennis is Gene Vrana. He only worked [on the waterfront] a little bit — he was registered — and then he became the ILWU librarian.

01-01:55:44
Anderman: That's right. And he's involved with the labor library at the University of Washington [the Labor Archives of Washington State]. I think Erfan is going to go up there.

01-01:55:52
Carson: Ken Fox, dead. Hamilton — god, poor guy, he died a few years ago. Aw man! What a great… Worked with us and around us and a fabulous film writer.

01-01:56:13
Moradi: Yeah, he worked on a Sam Peckinpah film?

01-01:56:16
Carson: Yeah, that was the least of what he worked on… He wrote for that [the Peckinpah film], he was one of many writers for *Cross of Iron*. But as you can see in here, I give excerpts for his longshore play. He also wrote a film script that got all the way to the top and then politically got smashed — [at the] top in Hollywood. His agent had it all the way up there and it was on [William Dudley] "Big Bill" Haywood. And if that script is still around, I'd [intelligible] that.

Asher Harer died.

01-01:57:04
Moradi: He died just recently, right?*

[*correction: Harer passed away in 2004].

01-01:57:05
Carson: No. Herb Mills just died this year. J. Price is Lee Olds who committed suicide. Dave Ramet we talked about. Leonard Malliet, I'm not sure if he's [around], I think his brother died but he's still alive. I forgot he was even in there. Now he was one of the guys —

[a friend of Carson's walks into the union hall]

Hey, you still pounding your mochi? [*laughter*] All right bro.

He [Malliet] was one of the guys who showed once or twice, did a little bit with us, got some stuff in here. But really in terms of the formal meetings or whatever we would have, he came a couple times, he was kind of in and out.

01-01:57:54
Anderman: So, you don't know if he's around still or not?

01-01:57:56
Carson: I'm pretty sure he's still around, but I don't know where. Brian, you know. Frank, you know. And Mike Vawter — have you talked to Mike Vawter?

01-01:58:06
Anderman: Not yet. We have his contact. I think Brian has even reached out to him.

01-01:58:09
Carson: He lives right up here. He's a very, very funny guy, a great guy, a talented guy. I'll let him tell his story. You're going to love his story, his story is fabulous.

01-01:58:22
Anderman: And he's got photographs.

01-01:58:24
Carson: Oh yeah.

01-01:58:27
Moradi: Do you have contact with Lee Olds' family? Do you know if they'd have any material or if they'd want to talk?

01-01:58:34
Carson: Lee Olds left Dave Ramet and I all of his writing for the last fifty years. It's an unbelievable amount of novels, poems, incredible stuff. The first thing that he ever wrote was — what was it called? — *Too Much Sun*, and it sold seven hundred and fifty-thousand copies.

01-01:59:03
Anderman: That's a pretty good debut.

01-01:59:06
Carson: Right. But that was way back in [the] early sixties maybe, something like that. Let's see… Yeah, about '63, '64, something like that. It was a major publisher, I forget who. He got his MA in Philosophy from Cal. He went off on this philosophical bent and he started writing what he called philosophical novels, and Dave and I have all of that. Lee called me up, let's see, the week before he committed suicide and he said, "Carson, I'm

really hurting and I want you to come. I want you and Dave Ramet to have all of this stuff." And he did, he had it arranged and we got it. And he said, "I want you to come to a party." And I said, "What kind of party?" He says "Next Saturday," which was May the fourth, "I'm going to commit suicide, but I want to have some of my friends…"

I said, "Lee, look. I got big problems with this. One: you sound to me like you're able to live. Two: you've been fascinated with suicide for the fifty-five years I've known you. Yeah, I know you're hurting and you're in trouble. I'm not a doctor, I can't really tell what side of the equation you're on here. So, I can't support this without at least having some more information." But Dave did.

01-02:00:42
Anderman: He went to the party?

01-02:00:43
Carson: He went to it. And it wasn't really a party. By this time, Dave said, he was so bad, [Ramet] hauled [Olds] out of [the] advanced care unit that he was in in San Rafael and drove him up to Novato and Lee spent his last four thousand bucks or something to get this death cocktail put together. And I said, "Dave, how in the fuck could you do that?" And he said, "You know, I think it was a real, real relief for him. A real release." And he gave me all the regular stuff. And then later on he told me, "You know what Bob? You might have been right. I can't tell. I really can't tell." He [Ramet] has a PhD, I mean, he's gonna go through all the permutations. [Ramet] I think was fascinated by what was in the various cocktails that they gave him [Olds], how it progressed and how it killed as it went along. And the fascinating thing to me was that — I think, and I might be all wrong about this — but I think the reptilian part of our brain is the first one to develop, it's the last one that they could kill.

So, you know, that's that story. All right guys…

01-02:02:14
Anderman: Thank you so much, Bob. We'll be in touch.

Interview 2 — August 2, 2019
[Audio file: Robert_Carson_interview_2_August_2_2019_audio.mp3]

[*The first ~45 minutes of this interview were spent reviewing the materials Bob brought to donate to the Waterfront Writers and Artists archive. The transcription picks up after this initial discussion.*]

02-00:44:59
Anderman: In the first interview, we were talking about how after the M&M agreement, hiring dropped off, obviously. But then after that, subsequently, there were periods during which hiring still went through some other jumps, the late nineties for instance…

02-00:45:14
Carson: Right, it was all boom and bust.

02-00:45:16
Anderman: Boom and bust, right.

02-00:45:17
Carson: Because of the changing nature [of the waterfront]. So, the cargo all of a sudden disappeared, off dock, then some of that came back. So, they made a supplementary agreement called a container freight station.

02-00:45:32
Anderman: And that was my question: what is the container freight station?

02-00:45:36
Carson: Okay, so that was the stripping and stuffing [of] containers right on the old docks. So instead of putting [these activities] a hundred miles inland or fifty miles inland, you know, and going out to a trucking firm or whatever to get them out from our jurisdiction, we had a supplemental agreement. And now we needed more people because we had to — that was like 1960, 1969 or so? I think it was 1970 —

02-00:46:15
Anderman: So, this was really early.

02-00:46:16
Carson: It was really early, yeah. Each thrust of technology was of course used by the employer, you know? The major one being containerization — I mean, that was just massive. But there's always a backwash, sometimes a major backwash, where they haven't got it all figured out yet and you've got to have more people. And the workers decided, “Hey, wait a minute, we're not going to let you take that, just take it out of here.” So, we wanted to stuff and strip those containers.

02-00:46:59
Anderman: By stuff and strip — what exactly does that mean?

02-00:47:01
Carson: Well, what was break-bulk before is now individual things inside the containers, and we would load them and unload them.

02-00:47:11
Anderman: So the containers are actually being opened and closed on the docks.

02-00:47:14
Carson: Absolutely. So that required customs agents on every dock and all that. And, you know, they weren't like the gun-toting, customs and immigration guys that you have now. They were just nice, old, non-teetotaling guys who wanted to work with us, look over the manifests, look at this stuff, maybe flag some things and we'd put it out for them.

02-00:47:41
Anderman: Interesting. But that didn't last then, because they sorted out the container system on a larger scale?

02-00:47:47
Carson: Right. They got the container system going directly to the shipper or the consignee. We couldn't touch those. These were more like consolidated loads, so those consolidated things just shrunk and shrunk and shrunk, right? And then there were some legal maneuverings [that] I don't think we came out too well on, but I can't really remember exactly how that happened.

02-00:48:11
Anderman: You talk about the employer a lot, and when you're talking about the employer, I assume that you're referring to the PMA?

02-00:48:19
Carson: Yes, Pacific Maritime Association.

02-00:48:21
Anderman: Okay. Got it. And the PMA, I know some people at the PMA, they’re a group of all the shippers basically, right.

02-00:48:29
Carson: Correct.

02-00:48:31
Anderman: Just to be clear on all of that.

02-00:48:32
Carson: So, they are, by the way — I didn't find this out till way late in the game — I was wondering what their legal thing was, so I looked it up and they're a *not*-for-profit organization. […] So they band together: no one knows outside of the PMA — I certainly don't — who gets what votes,

what it's balanced on, how they tax their individual members, how that's all balanced. No one knows that. But they are a not-for-profit organization that elects their own officers, and those officers and boards are the ones who negotiate with the ILWU.

02-00:49:19
Anderman: Who are presumably shipping company reps, the officers.

02-00:49:21
Carson: Right.

02-00:49:26
Anderman: Okay, cool. I'm just going through all the simple things here first. At one point you mentioned that someone — maybe it was you — brought down some [San Francisco] Art Institute students to —

02-00:49:37
Carson: Yeah.

02-00:49:38
Anderman: — that was you, right? Okay, you knew some Art Institute students. And so my question was: did the Art Institute students just come down and train Brian and other people to use the equipment? Did they lend the equipment? Or did they actually shoot the photos themselves?

02-00:49:49
Carson: I think they did both. They took pictures themselves. And I don't know whatever happened to those.

02-00:49:58
Anderman: Yeah, that was going to be my next question. Do you remember their names?

02-00:50:01
Carson: Brian should know them because the way that all came about, I went up to the Art Institute — this is the one in North Beach. They had given I guess a forum or something on what to do with the northern part of the waterfront. This was in the late seventies, mid- to late-seventies. In fact, it was the impetus of one of my poems, right? One or two of my poems. Some of the guys in Waterfront Writers were really upset that that culture and work and history was going to be slashed and burned. In fact, one of the consultants that was talking at the forum said — they're from [an] L.A. consultancy firm — they said "slash and burn." They used the terminology, [slash and burn] this thing and just totally rebuild it. So that gave a lot of impetus to the Waterfront Writers. It really did.

So, I went up there [to the Art Institute] and I harangued them a lot and they were duly embarrassed. [...] I said, "What I want to do [is] I want to

come here and give a reading and I want you to get your students in here and hear what we have to say about it." You know, they were grovelling by this time and so they said, "Oh yeah, sure." So, we gave a reading and this person — I think her name was Jan Butterfield, a very nice person — she said, "Well, I got these two guys..." I think they were graduate students, and I was bemoaning the fact that a lot of the sights and sounds and everything were disappearing [so] they said, "We have the sound equipment. We got these two guys who are [inaudible]." I totally believed her. They were the best art photography students that she had, and she gave us to them, and I got Brian, Mike, and Frank.

02-00:52:28
Anderman: So they took photographs and they also were sound/audio people.

02-00:52:31
Carson: Right, and they gave us the sound equipment. I don't think they took the [sound], I think it was Mike Vawter and Brian and Frank. Then those two guys, they kept in touch with us and with Brian as kind of the head artist guy. I think one of them wound up in Portland and I don't know where the other one was — this is something to ask Brian Nelson.

02-00:52:58
Anderman: Yeah, we will.

02-00:53:02
Carson: So that's where they got the great sound equipment to record all of those sounds, which did disappear — everything that we were talking about — but showed up in that wonderful film that the Waterfront Artists did.

02-00:53:18
Anderman: Right. So, you were talking about this plan to tear down the North Beach – –

02-00:53:29
Carson: The northern end of the waterfront, which would be like from Fisherman's Wharf down to the Ferry Building.

02-00:53:35
Anderman: Right. So, I've been thinking, since our last interview, and in talking to other people, about the impetus for the launch, [or] the creation of this group [the WWA].

02-00:53:43
Carson: That had a lot to do with it.

02-00:53:45
Anderman: That's one, clearly. But then you also [said] at one point that you saw the group as almost an obituary for Lew Welch, who disappeared on you.

02-00:54:00
Carson: Yeah, right. That's another one of the things in the past. But we wanted to also go towards the future, and we knew the future was dealing with automation. Now that was a slam dunk, that that's where all this was going. You know, the containerization was only the beginning of it.

02-00:54:21
Anderman: Yeah, we're going to get to automation. [But first] a few other, I guess, simpler questions: on the docks, before and during the Waterfront Writers, you obviously were all chatting all the time as you were working among the clerks, but also the longshoreman. And you talked about literature, right?

02-00:54:41
Carson: Yes you did.

02-00:54:42
Anderman: What kinds of things were you reading? Were there books being shared, recommendations being made? Were things being read out loud? I'm just trying to get a sense of what it was actually like. You were obviously doing work, so it was hard to sort of...

02-00:54:55
Carson: Yeah. Well, we would be talking about the poetry scene and the now-defunct Beat scene, you know, Ferlinghetti and all the rest of the dead Beats — well he [Ferlinghetti] is not defunct, in fact, he's a hundred years old this year.

02-00:55:10
Anderman: Wow.

02-00:55:13
Carson: And Lew Welch of course was part of that, so that was kind of our in. So, we'd be talking about work, we'd be talking about what writers did, you know, the pen being mightier than the sword, and what writers did do to understand and just tell the truth about what was going on. Truth was a real big thing. The truth about what was going on, politically, socially, that whole dynamic — at least with the guys that I talked with. And anybody, lots of people would join in because it was a nice way to — as you were working — it was a way to understand what the hell you were working for.

And like I said before with that great Steinbeck quote about the difference between East Coast and West Coast longshoremen, which I'm sure is inaccurate, but it was the understanding that people had or wanted to have — not us, but the public — wanted to have. This [the West Coast longshoremen] was the forward-thinking group of workers. These guys really thought about where all the economic change was, what was going

on, guns going to El Salvador. And way back when, they boycotted Japanese ships in the late thirties, because of the armament build up and everything — they knew there was going to be a war. Longshoremen on the West Coast were the ones who did that.

And that just kept going, it just kept going. There was always that interaction with what socioeconomic things were happening. And then when we had to deal with Nixon, you know, the Vietnam War — that really had a lot to do with it. Everybody's up for the draft…[they had to decide] what they're going to do, had to make the decision. I never did it, none of our guys did it, but they loaded napalm in Redwood City. Not a real good thing, but they did. And there was an effort, I think maybe to try to stop — maybe they did stop that, I don't remember. But I absolutely refused to go work there, refused to work at the Army base, or any of that. Most of us did that and just worked the regular commercial docks.

02-00:57:56

Anderman: And being aware of the fact that they were loading napalm, for instance, was completely premised on the fact that that stuff was not containerized, that you could see what it was about.

02-00:58:03

Carson: Correct, you'd know exactly what that was.

02-00:58:06

Anderman: Right, and now with the box you don't, you don't know what's inside it.

02-00:58:10

Carson: We don't, *and* it isn't touched by professionals, which would be the longshoreman. Oh God, I could tell you stories that make your hair crawl. I was taking a class to get myself up to speed on the code of federal regulations for hazardous cargo, and the guy who taught it was a former Coast Guard guy. This was like one of the worst stories I remember. And he said, "the reason we like to have the longshoremen do this is because this other type of stuff he's going to tell you about is what happens." I think it was in Southern California, but be that as it may: some longshoreman or clerk reported something leaking out of a container. We were always getting poisonous crap leaking out of containers, some of it mixes and blows out the doors of the containers. So, the Coast Guard is who has the jurisdiction to come down there. So the Coast Guard goes down, [and] they carefully open up the container. There was a complete nuclear warhead on a mobile launching trailer inside this forty-foot container.

02-00:59:35

Anderman: Jesus.

02-00:59:36

Carson: And I guess they squeezed it in, or got it in real quickly and the wrong way. It was radioactive and there was this stuff leaking out [*laughter*]. Anyway, he told us this [story], the guy who used to be with the Coast Guard. There's all kinds of crazy stories, there's so many hazardous products that come across there. And longshoremen used to work ships that were totally loaded with asbestos, you know, up and down the walls. A lot of guys died of asbestosis, a significant number of guys did, especially if they were around in the World War II and beyond era. Then it finally got to the point where I was supercargo, I think, on a ship. We opened up this hatch, and I told the employer, "I want you to tell me what that stuff is on the side of the hatch." It was a ship from South America. And he freaked out, he knew it was asbestos fibers. Closed it up, shut the ship down — the employer did — shut the ship down, sent everybody home, and paid them. And sailed the ship, got it out of there. […] So that was all due to the diligence of what we were doing. In some places that would just go on, it would just happen.

02-01:01:10

Anderman: At one point you made a reference to— you talked to Frank, this is early on, at the very beginning of the Waterfront Writers — and you maybe suggested to him that he should perhaps smuggle a camera into work. I'm stuck on the word "smuggle" and I wanted to ask: what was the response — we talked to Frank about this too, but I wanted to hear your perspective — what was the response of people when Frank held a camera up and took their picture? Like were your colleagues skeptical of this whole thing? Were they skeptical of you making their lives into art?

02-01:01:36

Carson: No, not that I ever saw or ever heard. In fact, they grew to like it very quickly. You know, I don't know what Frank said, but that's probably what my experience was.

02-01:01:47

Anderman: That's about what Frank said. He said basically sometimes guys would be like, "Ah, don't take my picture," and so he wouldn't and that was it.

02-01:01:53

Carson: Yeah, that's it. You know, the pictures were almost instantaneous. It took a while for the stories and the poems and the films and so on to reach into that consciousness. But it did and it really got rooted, really got rooted very strong.

[*Here begins a technical discussion of Bob's forays into engineering. The transcription picks up again ~20 minutes later, when conversation returned to waterfront topics.*]

02-01:20:38

Moradi: In our last conversation, you spoke about the social fabric that was developing along the waterfront and North Beach and the Mission,

etcetera. I was wondering how you and the Waterfront Writers kind of thought about and conceptualized the relationship between these social spaces and containers. I know there's an implicit connection, but what was the relationship between the places that you lived and hung out in and [the places you worked]?

02-01:21:09
Carson: Well, you know how people like to watch other people working? On a construction project or whatever? People were interested to know how we dealt with containers because it was a big deal. They knew implicitly, to use your word, that it was a big deal and they wanted to know. We would talk, we would give readings — it could be poetry, it could be stories — the DNA, so to speak, of what had come before us was there [in the work]. And we were able to get the holistic understanding of what it did to the neighborhoods. People came from all kinds of neighborhoods to work on the waterfront.

02-01:21:59
Moradi: Well, what did it do to these neighborhoods?

02-01:22:03
Carson: To this day, I couldn't really answer that. I think what it did is, it [the WWA's readings] provided a much fuller understanding that helped people not be bullied and run over by real estate interests and people trying to manage them politically or manage their votes, you know, that kind of thing.

02-01:22:31
Moradi: So, there is this sense of class —

02-01:22:33
Carson: Of community.

02-01:22:34
Moradi: — and political antagonism.

02-01:22:35
Carson: Definitely. Political, class, neighborhood, individual, self, something bigger than the individual.

02-01:22:48
Moradi: There's this one great line in one of your poems [where] you describe being pushed to the thirteenth floor of a twelve-story building — and like the disappearance of or the changes to the Eagle Cafe and so on and so forth. Did you see these [changes] as either directly or indirectly related to the container?

02-01:23:11

Carson: Oh yeah, absolutely. Because the container changed that northern waterfront especially, but the whole San Francisco waterfront. It got pushed all the way down to the foot of Cesar Chavez, the street, and Pier 80 and Pier 96, [those] became the container terminals, and all those other piers were not going to be converted [to container terminals. [They] were going to be converted to real estate or business, you know, small business things. There is a passenger terminal up there [James R. Herman Cruise Terminal, Pier 27] because it still has that romantic thing: right under Coit Tower, walk up to North Beach, Fisherman's Wharf, that kind of thing. But that gentrification was going to happen. And those piers — as a matter of fact, it's just something we had to deal with — they stuck out into the Bay. That's not the configuration that you need for a container terminal. You need it alongside [the shoreline], you need the city property backing it up. And that would've had to have been all torn down and maybe filled or whatever. So that's why it went to Oakland. Oakland, they had that geographic advantage and a lot of federal money poured into Oakland to do it.

02-01:24:29
Moradi: I mean, Ben Nutter, the Port of Oakland director, [said] the space didn't exist in San Francisco.

02-01:24:39
Carson: That's right.

02-01:24:40
Moradi: And he talks about this conjuncture of warehouse fires in San Francisco and rising real estate prices as part of the push to Oakland.

02-01:24:49
Carson: Yup, I'd say so. I mean, the old — not farmer's market but — produce market used to be… just across the street from the Embarcadero and up into North Beach–Chinatown. Not that far up, but it used to be right there. That got moved down to where the container terminals are, Pier 80 and Pier 96.

02-01:25:18
Moradi: What did the loss of the produce market mean for that part of the waterfront?

02-01:25:21
Carson: Well, that was all those workers, it was a lot of blue-collar jobs. But they automated too — they had to deal with their own automation. But all of that went down south [to] the southern part of San Francisco, the southeastern part of San Francisco.

02-01:25:45
Moradi: Like out by Hunter's Point, Bayview.

02-01:25:47
Carson: Hunter's Point, Bayview, right — where a lot of the longshoremen came from to begin with. So it was an easy thing for them to do.

02-01:25:55
Moradi: But mostly black longshoremen, right?

02-01:25:57
Carson: Right. Well, but the whole time I was in the ILWU, it got bigger and bigger and bigger in numbers, but it was always fifty, sixty percent black. Either Oakland or San Francisco, Richmond — it didn't matter, that's who made up the ILWU at the time. The local ILWU — Local 10, Local 34 – the rest of the coast was different.

02-01:26:28
Moradi: Last we spoke to Gene, he talked about this transformation of the ship clerks' composition from like a… I don't know if he would quite describe it as majority white, but more and more black longshoremen were starting to become ship clerks in… I think he said, the late sixties or the early seventies.

02-01:26:55
Anderman: Yeah, he said for a long time the clerks were primarily white and the longshoremen were primarily black, and then at some point the union made a decision to allow longshoremen to become clerks, whereas before they were pulling in clerks off the street, right? And I think it had to do with one of the M&M agreements…do you remember this?

02-01:27:17
Carson: Yeah, I know it quite well. The clerks at least had to have a high school education, I mean, way back in the thirties and forties. And they had to be fairly good with numbers and so on. But there were a significant — when I started anyway, in 1963 — there were a significant amount of blacks in that local [the clerk's local]. This is something I think you've got to peel the layers back a little more than that. That's probably a perception that they [longshoreman] have. But it was only per force that more black longshoremen became ship clerks, so now I think the ship clerks' [local, Local 34] is probably about the same racial [composition] as Local 10 is, as the longshore local.

Yeah, there was probably some racism there. There always is in the workplace, and there was reverse racism also. But boy, I'll tell you, when it all comes together and everything's unified, it's a powerful thing. It is one powerful thing. Everybody needed each other. I don't think it really came down to a real strict black-and-white thing. A lot of people would like to make it that, but it didn't in my estimation. I'd go into a big sociological diatribe about it. I mean, just given the fact that there were

blacks there and given the fact that way back in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, that influx just kept rolling into the clerks' local.

Now that's here. You've got ethnic things going on in L.A. where it's all Mexicans, and a lot of them not even U.S. citizens, but they belong to the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union. There were guys up here who weren't citizens but were working on the waterfront, but nobody [opposed it] — who cares? So there was a lot of mix going on there, but the strategy was that everybody was the same. Harry Bridges got paid the same as a longshoreman, like Lenin I guess did when he got paid [...] whatever a common worker was paid, that's what he got paid. That's what Harry Bridges did too. So, it was all one. Even the people who came on the waterfront who weren't registered but were hoping to be registered and were part of this bigger workforce that was needed: same wage, same conditions, same backing from the business agents. Whatever it was, it was all equal. It was all equalized.

02-01:30:45

Anderman: Ok, this is a question about automation. You said at one point that you saw as a clerk […], that as the controllers of the data, you were potentially the future. But then automation happened, or mechanization or, whatever you want to call it — digitalization.

02-01:31:05

Carson: Well, when that first happened, that gave us the control.

02-01:31:10

Anderman: That gave you *more* power in fact. That empowered you.

02-01:31:13

Carson: Now to be probably overgeneralized about it, now the employer's job would be to get that data control out of the clerks' hands.

02-01:31:24

Anderman: —out of your hands, right. So that raises [the question], what is a clerk's day like today on the waterfront? Are they actually on the waterfront?

02-01:31:30

Carson: Yeah. They're there on the waterfront, but they're in the terminal operating building and they run the terminal operating system in there. They do go in the yard, they do go on the ships to work the ships and count the containers, circle them up. But I mean, that could easily be automated, but they need a lot of things that I could enunciate —

02-01:31:58

Anderman: The clerks do.

02-01:32:00

Carson: The clerks, yeah, they need […] training. They're not going to get it, in my estimation. They need to have a workforce that demands that, I'm not sure they have that anymore. I don't know, but from everything I hear from people who are still working there, it doesn't sound good.

02-01:32:24
Anderman: With regards to the organization and the power of the union, you mean?

02-01:32:28
Carson: No, just with the training and getting trained on this. They're thinking, this was a blue-collar job which became a super blue-collar job in control of that digital thing. Well, they lost that, that got eroded. And it got moved a little further out and a little less under their control because things are done outside [the union] — the whole thing could be done outside.

02-01:32:56
Anderman: Right, it's all outsourced.

02-01:32:57
Carson: Right, but you still have to have somebody there. I remember being at an [ILWU] meeting or a caucus or a convention or something, and they were all discussing this automation thing and where we're going to go with containers and all the rest of that. And Harry Bridges — I don't know if he was drunk or what — he got up to the mic and he said, "We just have to deal with it and we got [these] M&M plans to deal with it," so on and so forth, "with all this dire stuff that's going on, if there's one job left that has to be done by a longshoremen, there's going to one longshoremen there." That didn't go over very well.

02-01:33:48
Anderman: Yeah, I bet not. [*laughter*]

02-01:33:49
Carson: Everybody said, "What the hell are you talking about?" But it was a stark prediction of what was going to go on. He knew where that was going.

02-01:34:01
Anderman: Well so that's my final — I mean we have some other questions about some other of the Waterfront Writers and stuff that we'd like to follow up on — but that's my final question: what's going to happen? I mean you just said, I think, it's still a complex enough system that it's impossible to fully automate it at this point. And you think that's perhaps going to be the case for some time to come?

02-01:34:23
Carson: No, I would have said — in 2002 when I was on the union's technology committee, you know, I was asked by people, "What do you think? How long is this [automation] going to go on?" And I said, "The employers are

so fucked up, they're not going to be able to do this for [another] maybe five or ten years." Well, it turned out to be twenty, you know, almost twenty years, right? And then they imported the thing and my whole question — and I really know the technology, I don't know everything about engineering, but I know what I know. My whole thing is [this]: they said, "Well, this is a fully-automated terminal so we don't need longshoremen and we got robots and we got blah, blah blah." Is it? How are we going to prove that it's a fully-automated terminal?

02-01:35:17
Anderman: Right, what is fully automated?

02-01:35:18
Carson: What does this mean? What the hell does this mean? Did you guys see the big thing that went on in L.A. that just got kind of settled?

02-01:35:27
Anderman: Yeah, the Maersk thing.

02-01:35:28
Carson: Yeah. Well, Maersk was right. The ILWU gave up the robot thing in 2009. That was something that in 2002, it was one of the many things that we fought back [against] from the technology committee standpoint inside the ILWU. And then the joint technology [committee], which was the employer and us. We deliberately put in that 2002 contract — remember, this is after Bush put the Taft-Hartley [Act] on us and everything else, they went down the tubes so bad on that, it's a hilarious story — we deliberately put in there that longshoreman — in other words, it says, and I forget the exact page — if there's longshore equipment then longshoreman [*inaudible*]. That took out the so-called automated terminal idea like they had in Hamburg and Rotterdam and everything else, right?

In 2009, we weren't around, we were retired. I just ran into a guy yesterday right here, right out in front of this cafe, and I said, "Did you know what you were voting on in 2009? It says on page nine of the contract that the union recognizes the employer's right to put robots on there." He said, "No, was that in there?" And I said, "What the fuck's wrong with you? What the hell happened?" So the employers' attitude was [that] they gave up $800 million or $800 billion, or I don't know what the figure was, for future wages and pensions for the retired guys —

02-01:37:26
Anderman: They're just grinding away via attrition.

02-01:37:30
Carson: Yeah, via attrition. So, I've been talking to people up and down the coast — I haven't talked to anybody for ten years or so — so I've been talking to people, I said: "What did you do about this? How'd this come about?"

[They respond,] “Well we didn’t think…” They give you various reasons which are all excuses, bad excuses. I said, “From my point of view, I would be going in there and demanding through the machinery that you have in the contract to look into those terminals and see who’s really doing it.” Because it's very simple, they’ve had to make it very simple: there's no way you're going to show up on a terminal at seven or eight o'clock in the morning to go to work and that whole thing’s done, that whole thing has cooked already for this twenty-four hour period. It won't even happen for an hour. It won't even happen for a minute. Yeah, you can have an automated crane or something —

02-01:38:34
Anderman: You can have components of it that are automated...

02-01:38:35
Carson: Right. So, if you look at it from a technological standpoint, the tracking is about — and I'm going to say this from a guy from Cal, a fabulous engineer, and he told me this twenty years ago and I believe it, I still believe it to this day — the tracking is the toughest, toughest part. The machines really cannot do that in an automated fashion. They have to be programmed. There has to be all kinds of fail-safes put in place, all kinds of stuff, massive amounts of computing that they don't even have the power to do. He said, in theory, maybe seventy [or] eighty percent of the problem is getting the tracking done so it's three-sigma accurate, the next twenty or thirty percent he said is relatively simple. Anybody can automate the controls. Automating — we're great at that. I'm talking about U.S. production, we're great at automating controls. It's the brains behind that.

So, the employer’s excuse to me many years ago was… I said, “That's not fully automated,” — this is way, way back — and they said, “Well how do you know?” I said, “Well, it just stands to reason, blah, blah, blah...” And they looked at me and they wouldn't answer. Finally, one guy said, “Well we'll have, eventually, artificial intelligence.”

02-01:40:16
Anderman: Right, and in the meantime, you’ve got humans sitting somewhere running stuff.

02-01:40:21
Carson: Right, and I said, “You mean to tell me you can develop the algorithms for artificial intelligence that can run the most complex Rubik's cube in the world, which is the waterfront.” They said, “Well, I guess so if that's what you're telling us.” I said, “No, it's not going to happen. It's just not going to happen.”

And lo and behold, about two weeks ago, I ran into a guy who is very, very smart, an engineering guy too. He's now not working on the waterfront, but he used to work for two or three big employers. He really liked what I could do, and he liked my ideas and all the rest of that. He actually worked with me, gave me a lot of breaks. And so I ran into him — he's not working anymore, and I'm retired too — I ran into him at a restaurant. So, we sat there and he said, "Do you know what they told me, these fucking idiots?" I go, "What?" And he said, "They think this is all artificial intelligence! How the hell are you going to develop an artificial intelligence that's that massive? That can make all of those different moves all of a sudden, and you've got three ships working, and all these cranes and all that. And it's gonna make a decision like a human being." He said, "They could [take] their AI and run it through their ass and get a better resolution than they can from this." He said that this would take hours just to make one move. And in fact, that's what's happened.

That's where it's at. I'm happy I did what I did. I'm happy I'm retired. But you know, if they're going to go anywhere, that's going to be the direction they're going to have to go.

[*The transcript concludes here. The remaining 15 minutes of the recorded conversation concern the logistics of the archival project.*]

Interview 3 — December 20, 2021
[Audio file: Robert_Carson_interview_3_December_20_2021_audio.mp3]

03-00:00:00
Anderman: Alright, Bob, so we're in the midst of a supply chain crisis, it appears.

03-00:00:06
Carson: Oh yeah. [*laughter*]

03-00:00:08
Anderman: And I gather that you have something to say about how the work of the waterfront writers might contribute to our understanding of that crisis, right?

03-00:00:19
Carson: Yes. Well, it's a simple thing and it winds up being a bookend kind of thing for the waterfront writers and for the U.S. economy and the world economy.

The waterfront writers were nothing if they didn't try to talk about work exactly the way work happened: rhythms, routines, continuities, so on. And to try to understand that. That was something fairly new, and certainly not as well thought through and exercised as the waterfront writers did it. So, it [the group] took strange twists and turns. You know, people would say in the first couple of years, in the beginning of the waterfront writers, they would come to one of our readings and frequently, audaciously, you would hear people say, "We didn't know wharf rats could write — we didn't know longshoreman could write, we didn't know ship clerks could write, or, furthermore, were such good photographers, good artists and so on. So, the waterfront writers kept that core direction and kept moving, and even into the present.

I'm gonna tell you something that's gonna blow your mind. If you read the newspapers about the supply chain thing — pick one up today, and you'll find an article and it'll say, 'We interviewed these people who worked on the waterfront,' — this is either east coast, gulf, or west coast — and what is their [the newspaper's] first statement from the workers? "We can't find any of the boxes. We don't know where they are in our container yard. I spent all day looking for a box for a box, for a container." Right? Well curiously, we've adopted all these European models [i.e. European port automation models] and they don't work. If they worked, we wouldn't have had this supply chain thing. [It's] very simple.

Tragically, as a result of the waterfront writers' intense focus on work and how work happened, some of us created a tracking system, which would be for the containers in the yard, 20 years ago. It was patented 20 years ago. It was demonstrated in a major port 15 years ago. It made no

mistakes. And I think there's a simple solution to it — all the algorithms and all that aside. It was programmed [by] people who worked on the waterfront and knew how the work routine worked, and every single move that a container could possibly make in a container yard, period.

So now let me buzz back to the thing where people were saying, "we didn't know longshoreman could write." Now, it's like, there's no way we're going to let maritime workers — wharf rats — create the solution to our problem, right? This speaks volumes to the class distinctions in the United States. It [the tracking system] was there, it was proven, we have the data. It was never implemented for class reasons. And therefore you got what you got in 2021. It's a mess. If you can't find things in the yard, you're not going to turn trucks around, and you're not going to turn rail around, and so on. That's it. It's very simple. I think it's a[n…] awful circumstance to have happened, but nevertheless, that's it. And I still feel a sense of triumph in the fact that we did it and no one else did.

03-00:05:13
Anderman: Yeah. Can I ask you to say a little bit more about that patented algorithm, or that patented piece of technology that you implemented? Like you said, it was tested, but no one ever took it up, right? Can you say a little bit more about the testing and what people said when you showed it to them, etcetera?

03-00:05:40
Carson: Absolutely. Well, first we got a big break — I got a big break — in getting it down to a major port, a major port — the third, well, second or third largest port in the United States. [We] implemented it as a pilot program, but it was a major pilot program where we took up an enormous amount of their yard, [and] put the equipment in on their equipment…

03-00:06:07
Anderman: Can I ask which port that was?

03-00:06:09
Carson: Um, I probably shouldn't say it, but it was Savannah […], which is enormous. And then then after we did the trials, which didn't take too long, because everything worked so well, the port and ourselves asked major steamship lines, major terminal operators, major stevedoring companies — [we] gave them an open invitation to come. And they all came. And we treated them one for one — like for instance, we didn't mix two steamship lines together. It was over months, but we let them come and play with it all day long, [we let them] try to make an error in locating. It had a very simple but efficient location [system] and [it fed] right into the terminal operating system, which, these other things [terminal operating systems] are just kerflooey. They just don't work properly on that level. [Our trackers had] a very interesting communication system to

communicate these locations and these movements. [They had] some real good geometry for crashes because we were tracking also the movement of the container handler. So, the machinery itself, we were tracking the movement. We could see if somebody else was coming around the corner. It could be retrofitted to any forklift, any side-pick, top-pick, trans-tainer, top-handler — any piece of equipment they had around to move containers, we could retrofit our system to it.

So it was truly amazing. It did it all with a digital interface on a map. You could see the whole yard you were working with. You could see sections of the yard, you could see the equipment, you could identify where it was, who it was. And first and foremost, you could see where the container was moved to, and who it went with. If you loaded it on a truck, you knew who it went on; on a rail car, you knew who it went on and what position on the rail car it went on. So, it was a full and complete system. It focused on the one single thing that no one's ever gotten under control. And that is to know in full time, real time, both — full time [and] real time — the position of a container in the yard, [and] whether it's being moved with a handler, moved with a crane or in a stack or on a chassis.

03-00:09:19
Anderman: What's the distinction between full time and real time?

03-00:09:23
Carson: Well, full time is it's going all the time, right? Real time is where you kind of get in trouble, because lots of different inventions say, well we're real time. What does that really mean? Are you talking about 20 minutes or a half hour or two seconds or what are you talking about? Usually, you know, they'll wind up with some long [process], but still call it real time. Full time means it's running all the time. So, at any instant you can freeze it and see [where things are].

We reported two to three times a second, we reported a location. Nobody's done that to my knowledge. Nobody can do that.

03-00:10:14
Anderman: Information density.

03-00:10:16
Carson: Right. And we had various ways of cutting down some of the power and all the rest of that. And we maintained […] – this was big deal 15 years ago, it was cutting edge — we maintained a store and forward capability so that if the terminal operating system — that's not us — if the terminal operating system went down, which they frequently do, all of the memory was stowed on our various pieces of equipment. And all the interactions that happened while the terminal operating system was down [were] stored on our equipment. And when the terminal operating system came back up,

we forwarded all that information to them […] from our storage, you know?

And we used another cutting edge system to make sure, in case one of our pieces of equipment went down, other pieces would take that up. […] So we had redundancies, and we had backups, and store and forward capabilities, and so on and so forth. Now, that's led me to a whole new technical way of doing this, but that's for another discussion — which is, which [that] this one works based on the old system, but it uses no energy whatsoever. […] Zero. It's totally green — but that's another thing.

They [the terminal operators] will never get there. It's not going to happen. And it's really because they have their class values in there. And there's no way — and we knew this from way back when, right? [We knew] that that system was going to destroy… that they were going to destroy themselves with it, because they're totally inflexible and incapable, and not capable of doing it. So, everybody came to this major port — steamship lines from around the world — really just to gather intel probably. […] And I think the biggest takeaway from that was that they said, "If these fucking clowns can do this, then what's with our engineering department," right?

So, what happened? [To] make a long story short: they never used anybody who truly knew the movement of a container in a yard. They never did. They thought they could solve it with software. They thought they could solve it with interactive software, and so on and so forth. But [they] never really got complete, total, right algorithms for [tracking the] movement of a container in a yard. And to this day, they still don't know. They don't know where this stuff is. It's obvious, right? All of this supply chain stuff would have been obviated if that system was in.

03-00:14:01

Anderman: […] One thing capitalism does is it divides up intellectual labor [and] manual labor, right? It says that we have manual workers on the one hand, and then we have all these other guys who do the thinking. What's so great about the waterfront writers — one thing that's so great about the waterfront writers — is that you guys push back against that, right? You said, "no, look — longshoreman think too." Right?

03-00:14:26

Carson: [*laughter*] Right. […] That's a very succinct statement of what I've been rambling about. And I'll go back to that original thought, you know. People say, "how come these longshoremen…" — "we didn't know longshoreman could write." [They] used to call us wharf rats — that's something that goes back to the 1934 general strike. And that was still [the case] today. Same thing. But knowing it [i.e. anti-working class sentiment], recognizing it — you don't have to build defenses for it. You just have to be yourself, and go forward, and go into the dialogue and see

what you can do. You know? Put yourself forward in it. It's almost like a civil rights movement or something, you know? That's the way I feel about it.

03-00:15:25

Anderman: Yeah. That was great. Thanks Bob.