

## Interview with Charles Kosbab

Interview with Charles Kosbab at the Hoboken Historical Museum, 1301 Hudson Street, Hoboken, New Jersey, on January 7, 2001. Lisa Sartori, a Museum trustee and filmmaker, conducted the interview, part of a series of interviews with shipyard workers for her film, *A Shipyard in Hoboken* (completed July 2001.)

The Hoboken Historical Museum was founded in 1986 to stimulate interest in the city's history, architecture, and the genealogy of its residents. The Museum offers exhibits, lectures, and walking tours, maintains a museum space in the former Shipyard Machine Shop, and publishes a bi-monthly newsletter. It also assists in the preservation of historic documents and landmarks, and acquires artifacts relating to city history. The Museum works with organizations with similar interests to create educational programs.

The Museum has been conducting a maritime oral history project since the late 1980s, to document the last surviving remnants of the industries that served the once-busy New York/New Jersey Harbor. Ms. Sartori's interviews with former Bethlehem Steel Shipyard workers add to this collection.

Charles Kosbab (born in 1915 in Hoboken, New Jersey) followed his father to work at the Shipyards, where he continued, as a rigger specialist, until he was 66 years old. He was living in Fox Hill when this interview was conducted.

Q: My first question is: When did you first come to Hoboken?

A: I was born and raised here.

Q: What year was that?

A: 1915.

Q: And what was it like?

A: It was a good town. We had mostly all immigrant people. People that came from the old country. They brought their trades with them, which you don't have now anymore. Those days are gone. Like in this type of industry here. We had Polish, Yugoslav, German, and English and Scotsman. The Scotsmen and English were mostly on hold work. The Germans were in the machine shops. Of course they were in rigging throughout the [inaudible] wherever necessary, let's put it that way. Yes, it was a long time and it takes a long time to think about what was going on. In Hoboken in them days we did have, you know, districts. We had the Italian district; we had a Polish, Jewish, German, Irish. Oh, yes you can't forget the Irish. Yes, it was quite a place. Hoboken was quite a place. We didn't have a parking problem. You could park right outside this wall, right above the sidewalk in our cars. It was a long time ago. Keep on with the questions.

Q: How did you get a job here?

A: I was about 16 years old. In them days, you had to shape up to come here to find if there was going to be any work, and when ships came in, they would come in at all hours. You never knew when they were coming in. And we used to hang out on the corner over here on 14th Street. And the employment manager, he had an office right outside the building. And when they needed men like riggers, machinists, or whatever, he'd come out and he'd start picking you out. And you would go to work. In them days we weren't unionized. Unions came in around '36, '36-'37. The unions came in around '37.

Q: Did you say your dad used to work in the shipyards?

A: My dad worked here from 1911 until he retired. He retired in the late '50's. I don't exactly remembers. But that was about it. Yeah, he put in a lot of time here.

Q: Was he the one that introduced you to here?

A: He used to bring me to this place in his arms, when I was only a youngster. In them days you could do things like that.

Q: Do you remember anything from that?

A: Oh, I was small; you know I was a little too young. But then I started to come to visit him and stuff like that; you know the place was practically wide open. To me anyway. Oh yes. It was quite a place, quite a place. Quite a place. A lot of history.

Q: Was he a rigger as well?

A: Yes, and I followed, well he worked as a rigger. I was classified as a rigger specialist. Which would allow me to expand my trade in my line. Also, as a leading man, when particular jobs came up, I had to lead the gang, which was called like a snapper. To every so many men they would assign a snapper. The leader. And like I say, I need time to think about it, I'm going off the track.



Q: That's O.K. Just say what you are thinking. That's fine.

A: In here, we did have during the war as high as 24 vessels being repaired, being converted from cargo ships to troop ships. We even had, well that was after the war later on. We had one battleship called the *Washington*. She came in. That was after she was tied up. We had to do some servicing on that and tankers galore. We had [inaudible] *Sinclair*. Oh, the Greeks owned that ship. In fact, we had Jackie O. walking right through the shop. Down to the ship.

Q: Really.

A: I believe the ship was named the *Christina Onassis*.

Q: What year was that?

A: Oh, I'm not good on dates. Yes, I remember going through here, going right down the road, it was tied up here. It was Pier 1 at that time. Oh, we had some notability here. Years ago, before the war, the United States Line, we had some of the Rockefeller family come down to supervise us or whatever they did here. Oh yes, we had quite a thing here.

Q: Did you ever meet any of these people?

A: Not really. I wasn't really interested. I had my own things to do.

Even the welding department started right here in this shipyard. On repair. We never had welding before but everything was riveted. Then when welding came, then we started to expand. It was before the war, like in the early 30's when we started welding when we only had one welding machine here. Yup. And that was on the truck.

Q: Was that by this building right here?

A: All over the yard. We used to take them on what we called "boiler repairs." The name that we call them was "outside jobs." We went all over the harbor repairing ships. That was part of the job here. You know a ship never made money laying in the shipyard. It had to be on the way. Then there was like when they took jobs, there was always like demurrage charges if we held back or we were late on the job. There was demurrage. Oh yes, it was quite a place. Then, of course, we liked the time of material jobs. They were the best. They were the money jobs.

Q: What were those jobs like? What would you do on them?

A: Well, there was like, they had to get the ships out. There was no question about the amount of men they would put on and the material they used as long as they got that ship out. One of our best customers was the Seatrain Line. They used to dock right over here in Hoboken. Go right along the side here. In fact, were the first to do their repair work right

until the day they went out of business. When they left here they went to Weehawken, rather Edgewater, then they come back to Weehawken. A lot of water went under the bridge, let's put it that way.

Q: Would you say they your favorite ships to work on? Were there any favorite lines?

A: There were no favorites. They were all handled the same, we had to work. The job was to get them out. And, of course, we did have, during the war, we had the bigger ships like the *Queen Mary*, [inaudible], *Aquatanian*, *Mauritania*, which were carrying troops. And the *Queen Mary*, we had her tied up for 30 days over at a pier in New York. We had as many -- maybe more -- men working on these outside jobs, than we had in the yard at one time. Because we were doing all kinds of...we were putting up armaments, anti-magnetizing, you know, to prevent the magnetic mine. Oh, we had quite a thing going here. We even had a minelayer here. We converted a minelayer.

Q: What did they do? What did the minelayers do?

A: They laid the mines, in the passages, you know. How would I put that now? The shipping lane. And they were all controlled by a box. Any men.....would release these mines to a certain height or I would say a certain depth below the surface. So when a ship was going by, usually the larger ships they drew about 38 feet, most of them drew about 20-28 feet. So we had quite a thing there. I believe that was done at the time the *Normandy* was on fire. When the *Normandy* went up in a blaze, we were doing - she was on Pier 2. We had, oh, a tremendous amount of work there. You couldn't imagine what was going on.

Q: It was before the war?

A: It was after. Before and after.

Q: Did you see that ship when it caught on fire?

A: We could see it right from the end of the pier. And that was quite a thing.

Q: How did everyone react? Was it right on the pier or what?

A: No, No, there was no danger of that. None whatsoever. The only thing we worried about was the ammunition or oil or something like that.

Q: Was there a lot of danger around the shipyard? Was it dangerous to work there?

A: Well it was, with the heavy industries, it was but I believe we did average one to two fatalities a year. In this line of business, in this yard alone, you always had a fatality. But then again we had people coming that never worked in the shipyard. You had to break these people in. You had to teach them. It was pretty on some of them. Pretty hard.

Q: Did you train a lot of people?

Well we did that. We had a school here for rigging, ship fitting, whatever. You had the machine shop and so forth, electrical work. It was one of the most interesting industries -- anywhere. If you did a line of business here, you know, in the heavy industry, you know pipe fitting, electrical work. Ship fitting, riveting, welding. It was a very interesting business. Very interesting.

Q: How would you describe your job? What does a rigger do?

A: My profession was... We were like a service trade. When machinery had to be moved from a ship after a machinist... whatever, we had to come in and get it out. And it could be most anything. Pistons, crankshafts, when I say crankshafts, I'm talking 38 - 40 ton pieces of metal. One of the most interesting ones was what we called wheel jobs. That was removing propellers, drawing the tail shaft. That was all riggers' work and machinists'. Because in that operation, the reason for that was wear down. Most of these stern jobs... A stern tube, that was mostly a wood that they used for a bearing called lignum. They were very heavy. They used to nickname it "ironwood." But then, in the later years, after the war then they went into metal bearings. It was a little bit -- much -- easier. Our limit here on propeller work was approximately 38 tons. Or they were much heavier. I handled them up to 72 tons. But not here. That was shipping

Q: You used to work with Jim Traynor. He was a crane operator.

A: Yes he was a crane operator.

Q: Did the riggers and the crane operators work close together?

A: Oh, yes. We needed the crane operators to make the lifts. We pulled gears out of ships. They averaged at least up to 42 tons. That's what I've handled. Up to 42 tons. And then they had to be shipped up to New York State to Westinghouse, I think it was Westinghouse, and what we had to go through was to prepare them for shipping. And you couldn't hoist them because the gearing was so fine, very fine. In fact our machinists sometimes had to smooth them out. It took days. And there was quite a few fouls among the gears. Oh yes. You can still [find] one down in Perth Amboy. They have one in the scrub yard cut in half. They have it as a sort of a glide getting in and out of the place. Further back in years we had some amazing.

We also did work for the World Trade Fair. We built that floating gas station. Octagon shape for Sinclair. It weighed 85 tons. Built right here at the head of Pier 5. On a platform. From there it went into the water and then over to the World's Fair. We did quite a bit of construction here. Oh yes, we did a lot of work on [inaudible] but we were not too -- very successful because our dry docks were not capable of handling that kind of a job. It was sectional in order to cut a ship you had to have a solid platform. That's when we started to take our ring walls out of the dry dock and replace them with steel ring walls that made them solid. Then right here on Pier 4 when we had the [inaudible]. Yep, the *Opleford*. When she

turned over going to dry dock. There's pictures of that somewhere. I don't know where. Oh, one of the crane operators was taking pictures. I wasn't here at the time. I was up at the Fruit Line in Weehawken where they were and when I come back well then I was stuck over here. With that job.

Q: The ship turned itself over?

A: Over on its side. And the dry dock, they were up on the pier. I tell you when you went in between that dry dock, it was like going down a canyon. When you are between, looking up at them things. We were doing a job jumbalizing that would be one, two, three, four, yes, three dry docks, when they were cutting the stern loose from the rest of the boat when she snapped and you want to see something here. See the stern end of the ship rolling. And we had a tremendous amount of work, we were shipping some of our dry docks off to the west coast. It was a mad house. We had jobs believe me.

Q: Was this during the war or after the war?

A: After the war. Most of our jumbalizing was done after the war. When they brought back transport. You know arms transports. We converted them back into what they were. It was quite busy here. Quite busy.

Q: Did you enjoy working here during the war?

A: I liked my work. I did enjoy my work. I didn't like some of the people I had to work with. You'd be surprised.

Q: You told us that you liked to work on the journey ships because they cooked really good food.

A: Oh, years ago when we had the German ships coming in here, they were always good for food. You know the German food, herring and stuff like that. We did a tremendous amount of work here. Holland American Line. I didn't mention that. We did a lot of work with the Holland American Line. I know we were down on a job there. We had a job on one of them. It was the *New Amsterdam*. That was at the time they were making that movie *On the Waterfront*. Yeah, that was along time ago. I can go back to the *Leviathan* when she was tied up on Pier B. That was her last voyage. It was tied up before that. We reactivated the boilers. We had to take down so many feet off each funnel. She had three. Then we had to take down the top mast from the main mast they had to be taken down so that we could get under the bridges in England going up to where she was scrapped. And I tell you that was some operation. That was all high work.

Q: When they were filming *On the Waterfront* did you see some of them?

A: Yes, we could look right down on them. They had a little barge there where they used to meet. You could look right down on them. The weather was kind of bad then I remember. I think it was raining. Oh yes. Oh we had a lot things going on.

Q: You mentioned not liking some of the people you worked with. You said The union didn't come in until 1936.

A: Well, actually we never gained recognition until 1937. We did go out on strike for 6 months prior to that. And when it was settled, they recognized us. But that was only Union recognition. But later on come conditions and so forth. '47 we had another big one. That was another 6 months. And we had another one in 1960. That was another big one. See we had to get around to make a living.

Q: Did you feel that you were treated unfairly? Were you all treated fairly here or unfairly?

A: We were looking for better conditions. Seniority was a big question here. Then you had, if you were a trade man, like a carpenter, or a ship-fitter, you stood in that trade. You couldn't work out of it. Which was good during the war.

Q: Did you ever work in this building? The machine shop.

A: Whenever there was something special going on I was here -- anything heavy. Like we had standup propellers. To put them in, we had to put them in a pit in order to fit the shafts -- we called them pear shafts -- into the propeller. They had to be blued, the tapered end of them had to be blued, and we used to ram them into the propeller that they would show the color. They would call that a percentage. The higher the percentage, the better the fit. It was the same as doing it down on the dry dock, only up here. Oh, we had them in the pit here up to 30-some-odd tons. And that was capacitating our cranes. We only had 25-ton cranes. You can only use... Then later on when they got the big lathes in here they went to the 50-ton crane. That was tough. Oh, that was tough.

Q: Did you say there was an iron beam in here?

A: Way up on the top. There was a beam. I don't know if they took it out or not. They had a big iron beam on top. And we used to hang out our rigging on that for lifting up the line you know. Of course, the shafts had to be put in the pit. The cranes lifted up to 27-28 tons. In fact we did have shafts in here that we put liners that weighed up to 38 tons. But we were doing that outside, later on, because it was too much for the beam. These liners, the heaviest were about 5 tons. That's a lot of weight up there. That's what this building stood. She took the weight. To be on the safe side, we tested it. Accumulated a bunch of weights and we made a test run of it. To make sure. It would be awful embarrassing. We had to be safe you know. It depended on men's lives you know. A lot of it. Especially with rigging.

Q: You talk about men working here. Did women ever work here?

A: In later years. After the war we did employ, we had one working in the rigger department. We had a crane operator here. There's still one here that served her apprenticeship. She lives over in the building. I can't remember her last name. In fact she only walked in a few minutes before you came in. But she came as an apprentice here.

Q: What's her name?

A: I don't know her last name. All I know is her first name, Mickey [Michelina Fontana]. I Forget her last name.

Q: Did you work with her?

A: Yes, I worked with her. We worked right over there. After the war, we got a contract. The company got a contract. Gifts and cups with the name. It's hard to come to my mind.

Q: Was it the builder?

A: The architect. They were the main one. And we were the contractors. We put up a building. It was about 45 foot high and one hundred and some odd feet long. And we built this destroyer. A destroyer escort. A model of it. A section of it. Made from wood and cardboard. Machinery that looked like it should be on a ship. And that building stood for 5 years, but then it had to come down on account of tax problems. Quite a thing, quite a thing here. That was Gibson & Cox. They were the prime contractor and they subcontracted us for doing the work. We had quite a few things going here. Then the City of New York, they were thinking of containerizing their garbage. That was over there on Pier 5 and Pier 6, where we set up there where we built these containers and then loaded them with weights.

Then we had a crane over there. We had to drop them to see how much abuse they could take. Because the garbage, the garbage scows as we called them, were being heavily damaged. They used to drop the buckets and they were putting holes in the deck here. So we come up with this idea, this experiment but that didn't work out that well. Well, we ruined the crane, that's one thing. We were outside contracts. They were 100-ton cranes. Now we had to lift that thing up and mostly rigging ton buckles quick release, release them and then drop them. I figured we were going through the pier over there. What else is there that was very interesting? Oh, there was so much going here. It's hard to go back. It's tough to get old.

Q: When did you start working here?

A: I started working here when I was 16.

Q: And when did you stop?

Q: When I was 66. But don't forget, this wasn't the only source of employment. You had to move around to the bicycle shops, when there was no work here. You had to go to Todd's. You had turbine engineers, condenser servicers, and you had another one down there.

Hudson engineer. We had quite a few. We called them bicycle shops. You had to move around. Right after the war we weren't that busy. But someone in this line of business, had to have foresight. They knew what was going to happen.

Q: When you started working here was it W. & A. Fletcher or ?

A: Schuster. They went out. You see Fletcher went bankrupt. They had a ship here that nearly sunk, capsized. I think her name was the *Ponce de Leon*. And they had some hold work on it. And they took some plates off. Close to the water line. Somehow or another she took a list during the night. She down-sided. Oh, we had so much here.

Q: And that's when Bethlehem Steel came in? After.

A: It became United Shipyards, United Dry Dock, Bethlehem Steel, Ltd., then Bethlehem Steel, but then they picked up most of the shipyards, what we call the 27<sup>th</sup> Street yards, 56th Street Losses, I forget the name of 27th Street. And you had Staten Island. They did ship building, ship repair, they made propellers. They had quite a thing going. It's all gone. Gone by the way of the dinosaur.

Q: When you left here was it still open?

A: About a year after that it went. I even stood by my 65th year. I worked here a year over that. And they told me it was going to close what was here then. That's when I got out. So the last couple of years I was stuck what was to be pier loft. My job at the time was maintaining the chain hoist. We had chain hoists here up to 50 tons which had to be serviced. And looked at. And tested. Because they are handling heavy material. If anything happens, we used to use them on what we called the wheel jobs. Removing propellers and stuff like that. They had to be pretty good.

Q: So after you left here were you noticing if they tore the buildings down. Were you around to watch that?

A: Right to the very end. When Mr. Grant ripped the wall down here, oh boy.

Q: Do you remember when this building started to get damaged? When they started to try and tear it down?

A: I been here all my life. In fact my hangout after I even retired, was Pier 16, when we had the Palace. Fishing boats coming in. That's where I always was. I did my little fishing out of there and I always went out on the boats if I wanted to. You know I had a good thing going there. Well, of course, I still had my wife to take care of. Yeah, it was quite a thing. But I can't think of anything more.

Q: Was it hard to watch these buildings go down? Did it bother you?

A: Well, at the time what could you say? When Del Aquila picked up, well, he was the first to grab it. Well he did wonderful here. Just alone the wiring, oh boy. Plenty, plenty money there.

Q: What do you think about how they restored the building now?

A: Yeah, I'm glad something like this is happening to preserve the memory of the shipyard. I'm surprised that they don't one of the roads here named after Fletcher. You should suggest that. That's a good idea. Well one of them. Somewhere. Even the pier. Fletcher Pier or something.

Q: What do you think of Hoboken now?

A: Well, I tell you. It leaves a lot to think about. I believe it's being over-developed. There's an over development here. I don't think we are going to be able to control it. You can't control parking in this city. You can't shop here anymore. I know I can't. I can't walk like I used to. I miss The Avenue. Can't go up there with the car. I went down here to the new pier he put in and I tell you he did a wonderful job. A wonderful job. He really made that some place out of that South Pier.

Q: Can you take a few more questions?

A: Well, O.K., while I'm here.

Q: While you were talking about the crane operators, and how important he was...

A: Very important.

Q: How did you communicate?

A: Signals. With signals. The only communication we had was with our one floating derrick that we had. Here. We had the high-powered telephone. Of, course, you couldn't see him when you wanted what with our floating rig, what with our derrick, our floating derrick. We had two here. One was the advance and one we called the *Clyde*. Which was originally the *Kingston*. In fact she laid over here on Pier 1 on the south side and the berth sunk there for quite awhile. Lot of work, a lot of work.

Q: Do you remember some of the signals?

A: Well you had whistle signals. One up, one stop, two down, everything was done by voice or hand. If you could see the operators. Like on our steam cranes. Like on Pier 2, we used the pier cranes. We used steam cranes for a while until we got the gantries. Pier 2 never had gantries. Pier 3 we installed gantries. We didn't need them anymore. But Pier 1, if I had to



signal, if I had something going in the hold of a ship, I had to have a signaller near the rail, so that he could see the engineer.

Q: So physically you had a whistle?

A: Whistle, mostly and hand signals. On crane operations. Oh yes. A lot of truck you had to have with the guy in the crane. They could see you pretty good. They are all. The only problem was like at night they had to use flashlights. You know it depended.

Q: During the war years, did you work?

A: We worked right around the clock here. Seven days a week. We had ten-hour shifts. That was the law at the time. And I believe it still is. You couldn't keep anyone going longer than ten hours but in emergencies.

Q: So were the ten-hour shifts right through the night? During the war years and a little bit after?

A: That was only the war years, then later on, we went on to the regular [shifts]. But even during the war, when we finished shifts here, we had to go with them on trial runs. You know to finish uncompleted work that had to be done. And I tell you we went away and sometimes we didn't come home until at least two weeks.

Q: Really?

A: Yup

Q: How far did you go out?

A: Off shore. But then you had to be under escort too. Because at the time there the subs got so bad out there, that we had to use the Long Island Sound for trial runs. And stuff like that.

Q: And was security a lot tighter while working?

A: Oh yes.

Q: When you came on the yard would there be...?

A: Oh yes. All your guards, they all carried arms.

Q: Were there ever any incidents on espionage?

A: No, not really. I did have an experience right here on 14th Street. And someone mentioned to me that was during the war that there was a man up on our roof taking pictures and at the time I remember we had a convoy in the harbor here that was going overseas. That

convoy was quite large. It went from the bridge all the way down to the narrows. One of the largest convoys ever to leave here. That was a little before D-Day. And this guy was up on the roof. Taking pictures. And one of my neighbors told me about it. I did something I wasn't supposed to do. I had a weapon; it was legal. I went up and I took him down and I handed him over, there was a cop there, Pat Kelleny and I told Pat what it was all about. He took him down. From there I never heard no more about it. But what was he doing on the roof taking pictures of the shipyard and the convoy. But outside of that we didn't have too much. We had false what do you call, warnings. We had one here where they emptied the yard out. To report they were bombing Boston. And that was around, that was in the afternoon. And then the Superintendent, he tried to get the guys back in. They got out to the bars. Oh that was something.

Q: What was the bar of choice? Was it right here on 14th Street?

A: Oh yes. You had about 20 bars on Washington Street. Rowalds, Frank Crawford's, I can't think of his name, you had Romano's, your Liberty Bar, then you had the Madison. Across the way where I lived there was a bar down there. Two on the next corner of Bloomfield Street. You had about 18 bars. Now how would you expect them guys to come back in again. And I tell you when the whistler used to blow here at dinnertime and supper-time, there was a stampede on to 14th Street. Getting into the restaurants you know. Oh, there's a lot of memories here. A lot of memories, good and bad.

Q: When you talk about bad: Were there fatalities? People who died. What would be a common accident?

A: We had one welder right here on Pier 3 had a damaged job, burning a section of plate and the plate went, he was a burner and it took him with him and he drowned. Then we had welders coming up out of the double bottoms and after doing their jobs, they were electrocuted. What else, oh then we had riggers. Were working in the tanks putting in stages, plank come down and he was gone. And there was a welder, they found him dead. I don't know what happened to him. The machine shop wasn't bad at all. I don't think they had any fatalities. Accidents but no fatalities. The fatalities were outside on the job.

Q: What kind of medical services were here?

A: We had a dispensary here with a doctor and a male nurse. Both here around the clock. Well I think they had to do that by law. They could [fix] mostly anything. The doctor that we had here, I think Hamilton was his name, he was an army surgeon when he came here and he still was in the reserve. Maintenance men greasing their trucks they had to use their hands to put that black stuff in among the green and somebody motioned and somebody motioned come ahead. Took his fingers off. And they amputated them. And they sewed them up right here in the dispensary. Years in the old days all we had was a little cubby hole. The rest room that was our dispensary. And that was only a nurse that we had here. Her name was Mrs. Jennings. And then we had a doctor come in and you know and then on Pier 11 he had an office. We used to get sent up there.

Q: Would the company pay for all those medical services?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: In the shipyard you probably worked with a lot of dangerous materials? These days maybe some of those materials you couldn't even use because they would be dangerous to your health.

A: Asbestos was our biggest. And then don't forget we did tanker work. We worked on oil, we had sulfur ships coming in years ago, carrying sulfur. And that was highly polluted. Some of these tankers coming, they carried all kinds of chemicals. In fact we had some of them go on fire here, but luckily not too much damage was done.

Q: Can you remember about some of the workers? You know some of the characters around here?

A: Characters, we had plenty of them. We had [inaudible] he worked mostly in the rear gang. Chain Four Willy, he was the snapper, he was a leading man. Oh we had so many of them. Texas Jack. They're all gone. They all died, mostly all of them are gone. Most of the men you knew here, you only knew their nickname, you never knew their... you didn't know their last name. You wouldn't know their last name. Go get "Money Bags." Oh that was something.

Q: Of all these names, did you have one?

A: Well, they used to call me, I always smoked cigars, so they called me Sweet Cigar Charlie. You'd always see me with a cigar. I think that might have saved my lungs a little bit. You know we worked on asbestos where I wouldn't be able to see you from here. When you got into an engine room job where you had turbines all them cases you had to raise up and they were covered with asbestos and that had to be ripped away. All your pipes were covered with asbestos. And the pipes, when you removed the pipe you had to remove the asbestos too.

Q: And you didn't wear a mask or anything, they didn't then.

A: We didn't know in them days what we know now. Things have changed. In fact we had a ship on Pier 1, it was one of them baby flattops after the war which they were reconverting back to student exchange ships after the war. She was one of the few diesel-operated ships that the Americans ever built here. They didn't go too much in for diesel, always turbines and fellows ran torch ships under the flight decks. And they were all encased in asbestos blocking. But we had to remove [it] because they were all going back into the original shape that they were in, you know the original and when we took them off, they underestimated the weight. I think Jimmy Traynor could have been in on that when we made that lift. And the night before it had rained and the asbestos soaked up a lot of this moisture which caused an overload. They thought we could have handled it, they estimated it weighed 15 tons but

when we started to pick it up, the cranes were straining too much so we had to put on 2 cranes. When we got it down on the pier and all that asbestos, there must have been tons of it. It was all in the system. We always had so much here.

Q: During the war years, what was the primary work that you were doing?

A: My work was –

Q: Yes, the work in the yard. Were you taking ships and converting them for the military or – during the war, was it mostly converting over to attack transports? What would be involved?

A: Reconverting, rebuilding the ships into crawlers for crew, for the soldiers into stuff like that, into bunks, sanitary systems. Everything had to be done just right. We had supply ships that carried supplies for troops and ships at sea. Our Navy tankers, refueling ships. We worked on them.

One terrific job we had here was the *Salome*, her name comes to me, where the type of fuel they were using on these planes and stuff was a very high test and it was deteriorating the bulk heads, you know, the hull. And they were Saraning the tanks. It was Saran [a tough, flexible thermoplastic resin, ca. 1940] but it was put on hot, trying to avoid, I don't know how that turned out, but that was highly explosive. When that was going on, when they were spraying this stuff, you couldn't have no change, no watch, anything that created sparks. The cranes had to stop on the piers. Because of, you know, the explosive condition. If one of them ever went, oh boy. We would have been...

We had ships right in the harbor here. I was on one, we had a bow job, it was a luxury ship. They had some accident down here in the narrows, in anchorage, you know you had ships down here by the dozens, well you know they loaded in ammunitions. She came here in ABC, she laid in ABC. And the only way we could get up on her and do our job, was by a ladder up from the pier. They wouldn't let us enter what we called the "focsal," the far end of the ship. We couldn't get up after that "focsal" because they had a guard right there at the gangway, with a nice big machine gun.

Oh, we had some Russian ships come in here. Forty-seven we had one come in to – load it with machinery, among other things, She had a problem with her engine, a liberty ship. A Russian crew. I had a man working with me, he was Russian, a white Russian, Rex, Harry Rex, the names come back to me. Quite a boy. And when we were tying her up, we naturally have to put up the gangway for all the people and stuff like that, and he was talking to one of the watch, the gangway watch you know and he offered the man a cigarette, one of the crew, well he said I can't accept that, can't accept that, I can give you one of mine but I can't. Oh, we had them, we had them. We had all denominations here. Yeah, Harry Rex, he was quite a guy.

Q: In terms of the different, you mentioned in the beginning there were many different immigrant groups in Hoboken. Was there one primary group in Hoboken?

A: No, all denominations. Usually in the hold work, the hold work department, a lot of Scotch. Then we had Irish, mixed up with them. Then like I say, in the machine shop, the primary man, I never forget his name, Dickman, a genius, The man was a genius, believe me and he was a shop foreman. A wonderful man. Then, let's see, oh, we had all denominations here. The carpenters, most of them were Yugoslavians, and Polish, you know. And they were good men too. Of course, you had carpenters. Then you had the Germans, they did the fancy work. Inside work on the ships. You know the cabinet work and so forth.

A: Years ago, before the war, when we had the Fruit Line coming in every... Like this time of the year they would lay up because of it, fruit, they was all in the banana, orange trade, you know, and we did all their servicing. Some of them were beautiful inside though. The workmanship, the mahogany, everything was mahogany. The work that was going here, especially with the Germans, oh. Then we had where the carpenter shop was, a top floor, I remember with the mold loft where we had, they made all the molds, for whatever had to be formed. In the foundry, you know, then they all mold propeller blades, whatever it was, casings, engine casings stuff like that.

Q: You had pattern makers?

A: Exactly, pattern makers. But there were quite a few, but it's all gone.

Q: Could explain a little bit how a dry dock worked?

A: In a way, yes. They were actually pontoons. The lower pontoon was divided into 6 sections. Individual sections. Three on one side then taking the individual pontoons. The ring walls were separated. Three sections on each side. Now they had pumps on the top ring walls that would pump out the water when you put a ship on the dry dock. And you would pump out the water. They had gauges, in later years they came out with the gauges, before that it was all hand signaling up there too, you know, controlling the motion of the pumps. You know pumping these sections out that they come out even. See when this *Osleford* went over, she shouldn't have been on the dry dock in the first place. She was much too heavy. But they took the job anyway, and when they opened up the floodgate, to see if all the pontoons were empty, the pressure must have been too great on the one side and it went over. Then later they came out with the indicator system. They had them up ahead of the dry docks like thermometers. And that would tell you how much water was in each wing wall.

Q: [inaudible]

A: An excursion name after him, that's right in Seaport, that's right, you see that.

Q: We were talking a little bit about the dry dock, and I was hoping you could sort of take us through, the ship comes in to up the river here, at that point and would they submerge the dry dock?

A: They would submerge it to let it go down. Of course, they would be given a little time on that. You know to sink her down and they brought her in and they had a man at the head of the dock. With the wind she would have the head line even in and you had the dock hands on the wing wall with (some kind of) lines checking her with spring so she don't and then of course, tow boats helping along too. There were times here in the winter time when it was very scary on the dry dock with the ice coming in. It took us days some times to get our work done on the dry dock, where we had to do hold work, the bottom jobs, with the ice that used to come with them. And I mean ice. Some of the ice was as thick as this. And I'm not kidding. We stood on the piers for days with the cranes -- the steam cranes -- and hosing down with steam and then everything breaking up and picking it up. And then we even had tow boats tied up at the end of the pier turning over their engines to try to keep it out from going on to the docks. Then they rigged up air lines at the end of the docks on the apron and they kept air coming in but it still came in.

Q: How many dry docks were there?

A: We had four. Originally there was only one. That was on Pier 2, the south side of Pier 2. Then they got another one. They put her on Pier 3. The second one come in and then later on we got the ones from the war when they were built three and four. We had four dry docks all told. Then we reconverted some of them after the war. We took the wing walls off, the wood wing walls. And oh yes, the one on dry dock 2, that was the one I came over from [inaudible] 56<sup>th</sup> Street Yard. She came over in the later part of 1800's. And we also took the wooden wing walls off that and installed metal wing walls. I worked on that, removing the wing walls with the floating rigger we had and, of course, the claims. And when they cut that wood, it was like the day it was put in. The pine, you could smell that all over the place. And we had to take the old section up by Edgewater where the Seatrail Line is. They were pulling in some place there. They got the job, well it cost the company to pull them up there. And put them where there was an operation. It was amazing what we went through here. Once the tugboats left, it was your business to get in there. We had to heave ourselves in on power, you know drop an anchor line on the way so we could out. And then you were worrying about whether if you would put a hole in the barge and our derricks, you didn't know what you were laying on. There was a lot of that stuff up there.

Q: With the dry dock in process, it must have been ----

A: No, No, they were laid up. On day we had the wing wall, the dock had to go out of service. And it was done on pier 4, yeah 5, 5. Five can't be used anymore now. I think that is all down now. One of the good piers too. I can't understand why the whole batch, the river end went down like that.

Q: Would there have to be a lot of blocking done on the vessel that was in dry dock?

A: A lot of blocking. Oh blocking, Of course, yes. Bilge blocks, Keel blocks and sometimes the docks hands where you had damage on the bottom. The plates, you know. These blocks, the keel blocks were in the way. They had to ram them out. We had a young fellow years

ago was electrocuted on that. The ships that came on the dry dock, they had to be grounded. What they would do, they would run a heavy cable down into the mud with a plate on it and that would take whatever current on the ship down and ground it. But it seems that at this time they weren't welding, they were wedging and somehow it got knocked loose. And the dock master who was there, he was with the gang that a big ram, a big wooden and steel ram that they used to knock these blocks out with. They were built like a wedge type where you could knock them out in case you needed them. Also on the top of the block, you had a steel frame built which was loaded with, in between with sand when a ship hit them it had something soft to stay on a little bit. Different things you know, and this young fellow, they were knocking the blocks out using that ram, knocking the blocks out and something happened with this grounding cable and he got the whole charge through him. He knocked them loose, the guy was black when he fell down. That's why I say, fatalities here was nothing strange to us. Different things. There was a young fellow, he come from down around Monroe Street somewhere. They had a, I can't think of his name anymore, they had a barrel place down there. Some kind of a barrel place where they made barrels and stuff like that. Oh, yes, we had them.

Q: Did the people who worked in the yard live in the community?

A: No, we had them coming in, well later on in the later years, we had them coming in from Point Pleasant to here. From Long Island all the way up, coming down, from Long Island. There was only a few from locally here. Compared to what was working here. Because we had quite a few people working here. When things were booming here you know.

Q: How many people do you think worked here during the war years? Roughly.

A: Roughly I would say anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000. Depending on what we called outside jobs, pier side jobs, where we made pier repairs. Ship repairs had their pier. See whatever they had to be done couldn't be... They didn't have time to take them into the yard or it wasn't that important but they had to have it done outside.

Q: So there were three 10-hour shifts?

A: Usually it was 2 shifts.

Q: Two shifts?

A: Two shifts. A night and a day shift.

Q: A night and a day?

A: But they always worked overtime. Sometimes, like I said, sometimes you would go out on a job, you'd be there for a day or two. Depending. Like I said, during the war, I was on a few trial runs, after we completed some of the work here but we had to go along with the boat to finish the repairs.



Q: Did you cap propellers here in the yard?

A: Yes.

Q: Were they made here in the yard?

A: No, no. Usually Ferguson or Staten Island Yard or other places. Mostly from Ferguson or Staten Island. Depending. And then, of course, a lot of them carried spare propellers. Every ship had a spare propeller on it. And if it got so bad, they were sent to Ferguson. It took some time to rebuild them we would take the spare off the ship and use the spare.

Q: Were you ever sent out to sea to repair a propeller at sea?

A: At sea it couldn't be done. It was very rare that they ever done anything like that at sea because it took too much balance, you know. It was rough. We did a lot of work, like harbor work going down to the anchorage and down off Staten Island, places like that. We had quite a bit of work down there. Scary work too.

Q: How was it scary?

A: Well you had to board tankers carrying gasoline. We laid alongside with our derricks. And whatever happened in our engine room, our exhaust went up higher and here's a ship loaded with gasoline.

Q: A part of your job was just rigging up propellers?

A: Everything. Engine room. Whatever came along. Anything heavy was rigger's work. Plus we did the rigging on ships as well. Cargo booms, heavy lift booms, stuff like that. We had a heavy lift shipment here we did for the government. I can't think of the name. Especially built below the motor. 150 ton they could handle. We had to test all their sheaves, wiring. The Navy, well the government, was very strict when they did any work like that. Repair work all had to be weight tested. You had to use a dynamo and whatever. The same with life boats. All life boats, at least once a year, had to be tested to meet Coast Guard requirements, or the Navy, whatever. Where you loaded them with weights, and rolled them down to about a foot above the water and then released them. They had releasing gear on them which you released to see if that releasing gear went over. Here if they went into trouble at sea, they would make sure that they would release them. Also when you had the weight in them, it tested out the wiring, the foundations for the gavots, the motors and so forth.

Q: What the most interesting rigging job? The most type of rigging job?

A: They were all interesting. It all depended on the person doing the job how well you liked your work. To me everything was just interesting. I was connected with a lot of heavy stuff.



Heavy, I always did a lot of that. Testing was one of the things. Testing boats, weight testing for the government and so forth. One of them we had was the *Tanner*. Never did her either. Right here on Pier 5. She had a couple of boats. They were beautiful boats. Where you suspended them between the cranes to see how long, you know where the grips were that they would hold, to see how long they would hold. You know that they wouldn't break. It was interesting, very interesting. Then, of course, you had 3 different weight tests. You had dynamics, static and working load which had to be altered to suit tests. And it had to be planned in a sequence. Everything here had to be planned. Then in the later years they come up with... They developed a planning department. I'm trying to think of... Oh, I can't think of it. He's passed away too. So many things gone over the years.

Q: And you were talking about different women who worked here. Did Lucille Haack work here?

A: Yes she worked as an operator on one of the heisters here. For quite awhile. I knew her very well. Oh, I knew her before she was married even. Yes, she worked here, Lucille. She was the only one on the heisters I think.

Q: What kind of equipment was that?

A: Oh, we had another one. What was that?

Q: What kind of equipment was the heisters?

A: Portable cranes.

Q: They are small?

A: Yes, 5-ton limit. That's if you knew how to use them.

Q: From memory, could you talk again about the different department that were here?

A: Well, let's start with the machinists. You had inside machinists, then you had outside machinists. That worked on the ships outside. Wheel gang machinists -- inside working on turbine pumps and whatever. Then let's go to pipe fitters. Then you had the pipefitting department which handled all the pipe work on the ships. Also, they serviced the ships coming with air and water. Then you had the electrical department. They did all the electrical work on the ship. Plus servicing the ships when they come in, hooking up shore lines and temporary light. That was a branch on the side. They called it the temp light department or air and water. That was all part of their work. Then you had the carpentry. Then you had, of course, like I mentioned before the carpenters, the ship's carpenters. Then you had the joiners, and also upstairs, the mold [inaudible.] Now, let's see now, am I forgetting anyone? Oh yes, then you had the dry dock department. Am I forgetting anybody? Maintenance was a big department. Maintaining cranes and so forth. Like that.

Q: Plate shop?

A: And plate shop. Oh yes, that was a big department, Plate Shop.

Q: What would they do there?

A: They would do all the laying out of the plate work, whatever had to be done was built in there, and then sent out. But mostly plate work and stuff like that. The hatch work and a lot of plate work going on.

Q: In the Plate Shop was there a loft there on top?

A: They had them well on top. That's where this Mickey that I was telling you about, she worked out of the loft up there. They had a loft man. I can't think of his name either. Oh, getting old and forgetting is embarrassing. Frustrating.

Q: What would they do in the loft?

A: That went way out, where they would work off prints. And form the layouts for the different... You had a damage job, especially a shape print, if it was damaged, say, like on the starboard side, they would take it off a print to see what the shape looks like on the starboard side for the port side. And then start them in the shape, laying them out, bending them, shaping them, whatever had to be done. And then brought back to the ship after the damage was ripped out and reinstalled. Or sometimes, they had the ship fitters going down there and making templates of the shape and taking it back to the shop or plates, when we ripped out plates, where they couldn't take the plate and send it up to the shop and make a copy of it. They made templates. Which they laid out, punched a hole, whatever, had carpentry, and back to the shop with it. Oh yes, it was quite an interesting business. That's if you took an interest in it. You could learn an awful lot here. Just working with the trade, and as I say, with my trade rigging, we were like a service trade. We serviced the pipe fitters, the electricians, everything, whatever had to be moved we came in on it. Plus our own work. Work the ships rigging, that was our work.

Q: Would that be a loft rigger? Doing the ship's work?

A: Riggers were riggers. But they used to specialize you know. They would use the same men all the time for that certain kind of work, like the engine rooms. They would like to keep the same men that were familiar with the job, like removing [inaudible] opening up turbines. That's all pretty tricky stuff you know.

Q: If you started as a rigger, you pretty much stayed in that branch of it?

A: When I started here I started as a laborer, and from a laborer, I worked with the laborers about a year, and then I got in with the riggers. We had two rigging departments. We had the hull riggers, and the machinists riggers for the inside work. Most of the riggers had sea

experience. The deck work like the booms, and so forth like that. They would take them from that.

Q: And how many years did your father work here?

A: About 1911, I forget when he went out. He went out before the war.

Q: And so you worked side by side with your father?

A: No, not really, no. He was inside mostly. He took care of the gear coming and also he did time keeping work. Like we were talking about. He was the timekeeper here.

Q: And what does the timekeeper do?

A: Make out your time, time cards. You had to punch in a card in and out you know. Then, of course, there was traveling time. When you were outside and you had to back overland, by train or whatever it was. You know they take care of your expenses that way. There's a lot to it.

Q: And what changes took place once the union was recognized? What kind of changes did you get?

A: Just union recognition. Later between 37 and 47, we were looking for better conditions.

Q: Did you get them?

A: We did some, we did some. I think we improved quite a bit in our pension systems when Bethlehem came out. We improved quite a bit. I'm not complaining at all.

Q: Do you have any questions for us or anything else?

A: No, not really. Is this going to be publicized on television or just kept here?

Q: We don't really know.

A: Well, it doesn't matter.

Q: What we probably will do is edit.

A: Once before, we had to go down on a job down the bay, where ships anchored. Quite a job that was. A tanker, she was a French tanker. An anchor, they had one on each side. The anchor that they had one was broke. They couldn't pull in the anchor. They had to go down at night, and cut the chain, with a [inaudible.] Then the next day we went down with the derrick, and had to retrieve the chain with the anchor on it, and take it back to the port they were in and they were televising us. Pulling out the chain, we had to have a tug on us holding

us while we was pulling this chain up out of the water. And I tell you she had some chain. We did a lot of that work here. Like when it come into dry dock and one of the things they always did was raise the anchor chain. And taking the chain right off the lockers completely. And Coast Guard or American Bureau -- one of them insurance outfits -- examined the chain and made sure there was no flaws. Then we even did the *Queen Elizabeth* or the *Mary* over there. We were into all kinds, we had links like that. On the barge we had to do it. Then they disconnected all the patent links -- that's the connecting links between the shocks -- and they packed them with Vaseline so they could take them apart if they had to in a hurry, you know. It was quite interesting here.

Q; Did the *Queen Mary* or *Queen Elizabeth* come in here?

A: No, no. The only place she came in here was in Bayonne.

Q: What was the difference between a graving dock and a dry dock?

A: A graving dock is stationery, it's a hole in the ground. And a dry dock is floating. And I tell you this one down here in Bayonne, I've been down there a few times. In fact, we took the yard -- not we, but the people who took over the business down there -- and prior to that I had been down quite a few times. And that was a big dock and big hole in the ground. I seen 6 destroyers during the war at one time in dry dock there. Then, of course, you had the *Queen Mary*, and the *Liberty* went down for dry dock.

And then a lot of other ships had to go down there for what they call depermanenting. Demagnetizing. Whatever was created by electric welding and so forth. Then I remember when you went down there, when they were doing that you had to give up your watches. They held them because the magnetism would knock them off you know. Oh, yeah, we did quite a work. Guns, about 100. 20 millimeters, 3 inch, 5 inch. The heaviest I ever had was a 6 inch, on the *Mary*, I think. Yeah, the *Mary*. An old naval gun they put on the stern you know.

I used to kid the gun captain, we had to raise the gun with the trillion bearings so she could swing easily. And if you ever got hit with thing, you said you would go out in the middle of the river in a barrel. Oh, yes, we had them. We had, I don't it was the *Lizzy* or the *Mary*, it was one of them trips, they had three 3-inchers, heavy sea, knocked them down. We used to have go down and stand them up again. We secured them to the deck. Then on the forward bridge, I remember we had Beepers (ack-acks) 40 millimeters. They put up twins, took the single barrels off. Put doubles up.

And then paravane work. Those were what they used for sweeping for mines you know. They looked like little airplanes. You had a little problem with one of them on a dry run you know, our supervisor that went along, he was a naval architect, Mitchell, Peter Mitchell. I had to go up and rig out the paravane. I know as much about paravanes as the man in the moon. Then I had about instructions on it. And what to do and everything. Well I found out that the paravane that we put on, the vanes we called them, they had to be shortened up. The faster the ship, the shorter the wings. The slower the ship, the wider they were. And then you had down haul wires, in haul wires which were the releasing wires. You had to get them over the side, trip them and then they went out and on the bow they had a

wire or a chain which went all the way down to the skin on the fore part of the ship. Down at the keel, they had a hole and that wire went through there. And that pulled the wire that held the paravane off the ship. You know at a certain depth. It went down as deep as the ship would go, you know her draft. And then when they were cut loose, they would draw on this paravane. The paravane went along the wire you know. It would cut that and then there would be up on the bridge with rifles, popping up. It was quite a drifting. Oh different things over the years. I wish I could write a book. And remember. An autobiography, yup. A lot of work done here. Yeah, the shipyards all over. But this was a real compact shipyard. This was an ideal. I've been in a lot of them. You know in my travels, I've been in a lot of them.

-End of Interview-