



## ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with  
Caterina "Katie" Asaro, 1910-2006

March 24, 1990



[MP3 Audio File](#) [Length: 1:00:58] (27.9 MB)

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### PREFACE

Mrs. Katie Asaro arrived in San Diego in 1916. Her parents moved the family south from San Francisco. They found the climate in San Diego more like that of their Italian homeland and became permanent residents.

The Asaros were in the fishing business. Mrs. Asaro's father had worked as a fisherman in San Francisco working on the *Star of India*, and he continued working on various fishing boats and eventually from his own boat. Later he went into repairing and making fishing nets.

Mrs. Katie Asaro also worked in the fishing industry, starting as a cannery worker at the age of sixteen. She worked as a packer but is able to describe the various processes of tuna processing.

Mrs. Asaro tells an interesting story of the adjustment of an Italian family, the problems of the fishing industry, the hardships caused by the depression, and participation in American life.

Thomas E. Walt, Editor

August 19, 1991

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## **INTERVIEWER'S NOTE**

This is an oral interview with Mrs. Katie Asaro of San Diego. Today's date is March 24, 1990 and my name is Robert G. Wright.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Please give me your full name. And where and when you were born?

**KATIE ASARO:** My name is Caterina Asaro. I was born in Mazara del Vallo in Sicily on April 23, 1910.

**RW:** How did you come to the states?

**KA:** We arrived in New York and we went to Ellis Island and from there then we came to San Francisco.

**RW:** We meaning you, your mother and your dad?

**KA:** My mother, my father, and my little brother. He was six months old.

**RW:** What's your little brother's name?

**KA:** Ignazio

**RW:** How do you spell that?

**KA:** Ignazio in Italian is I-G-N-A-Z-I-O.

**RW:** Now you said we. I thought that your dad was here first?

**KA:** Yes, my father came here first. He had made three trips.

**RW:** Before you came over?

**KA:** It must have been two trips and then when we came it was three trips with our coming here. He was here during the 1906 fire in San Francisco. And he had gone then to Alaska.

**RW:** Ah, salmon fishing.

**KA:** Salmon fishing with this Star of India. He made three trips on the Star of India.

**RW:** Did you have any documentation of this?

**KA:** No. We came here once with my son to see if we could find the books to see if we could find any of these documentations.

**RW:** After Ellis Island, did you go to San Francisco?

**KA:** We went to San Francisco. We lived in San Francisco for three years. And my father during that time fished again to salmon fishing with this ship, the Star of India. And then we came to San Diego in 1916.

**RW:** Why did you come to San Diego?

**KA:** Because my mother did not like San Francisco.

**RW:** It was a big city then.

**KA:** I guess. I don't know, but it was very hard I remember with the wood stoves that she was not used to that because my father with the American money he had a brand new home over there built for her in Italy and then he got married. So she was used to the good things. She had a nice home and so here in San Francisco there and she had a hard life. She went to work in the fruit packing companies in San Francisco. I don't know which it was, but she did the canning and packed the fruit. I remember we lived on the third story building of the what they used to call (pumio?) apartments because to occupy all the people during the fire they built these great big and huge apartments after the earthquake to get the people. So we lived on the third story and I remember when my mother used to go way down, way down to the main floor and out in the yard there and there was a lot of wood and she used to chop the wood. She would have me extend my arms and she would fill my arms full of wood. She used to chop the wood herself because my father wasn't home. And here I was having to climb all these stairs with this wood for for our stove. We had a wood stove in those days. It was very hard for her. And my little brother, the baby, that she had to take care of too. So, you know, she was very depressed in those days and she was always complaining that she wanted to go back. Then some of the fishermen started coming to San Diego and they found that the climate was more like Italy and so since fishing was kinda rough over there too, they decided to come to San Diego. And we have been in San Diego ever since.

**RW:** And you came when?

**KA:** 1916 on the Yale. I remember the Yale.

**RW:** Tell us about the Yale.

**KA:** The Yale was a nice ship. My mother got very seasick and my father used to take me and he would tour the ship and I remember the beautiful dining room. As a child, I thought it was so nice. I remember the big stairway going down to go to the dining room and the little state room there. My

mother was so sick and she had the baby by her side and stayed in bed because she couldn't get up. My father must have taken her dinner. Then he would take me out, as we were coming in, to see the city.

**RW:** How long were you on board?

**KA:** Well, I really don't remember. That I don't know because it is from San Diego to San Francisco. I don't know how long that is.

**RW:** Did you stop in Los Angeles?

**KA:** I do not know. I don't think so. I don't remember it stopping anywhere.

**RW:** It was like a day and a half trip, or something like that.

**KA:** Yes, I remember sleeping the nights on board.

**RW:** The food was good.

**KA:** As I remember, it was good. I ate, and as my father used to say that it was good on a ship.

**RW:** You were six years old then?

**KA:** Yes, six years old.

**RW:** Everything was kind of new to you then?

**KA:** Oh, it sure was. As much as I could remember. Still I am amazed how I remember some things.

**RW:** So you were three years old when you landed in New York, and it was three more years that you spent in San Francisco. So you were six when you came down here.

**KA:** Yes.

**RW:** So it must have been quite a change for you then to come down here.

**KA:** Well, it must have been. I remember when we first got here. We lived on 1453 India Street and we had been here five months. I had a little sister.

**RW:** You had a brother and a sister?

**KA:** She was born in San Francisco. We came to San Diego and we were here five months and she died of pneumonia. And this is how come you know from this recording because when I was over there I wanted to find out about the Catholic cemetery which is the one in Mission Hills.

**RW:** She was buried over there?

**KA:** Yes. And I remember when my mother went over there because she took me along with her and took the street car. I don't know how she did it because she was new here. I don't know how she could find the way to get up there, but she did. When I got up there, I've been going up there two or three times just to visualize how it was the day that my mother took me to visit the cemetery. It was so high and there wasn't anything around there and I could look out and it was just beautiful. The cemetery was full of those little yellow flowers, the wild flowers. The cemetery was really pretty. I have the location in my mind and that is why I've been going to see and I wanted to see if the records were still there. And this is how I got some information.

**RW:** You mean at the Historical Society?

**KA:** Yes, and also I got the information when she died from the County records.

**RW:** She was just a little baby?

**KA:** (She was not sure.)

**RW:** Your sister was born when?

**KA:** On August 20, 1915. She was born in San Francisco. She died in San Diego after we had been here for five months on March 24, 1917. She was buried at the Catholic cemetery which is now the Mission Hills by the Johnson-Saum-Mortuary. We went to church at St. Josephs. My mother used to take me there at Third and Beech Streets.

**RW:** I didn't know there was a church there.

**KA:** Oh yes, I have the picture I want to show you.

**RW:** You went to school here?

**KA:** Yes, and my mother took me to Washington school and enrolled me. I think I went to kindergarten for a short time, and then I went to the first grade. I even remember my teacher's name, Mrs. Jacoby. I can remember how she was teaching us the alphabet and the words and everything.

**RW:** This was about 1917?

**KA:** Yes.

**RW:** World War I was on then?

**KA:** Yes, World War I had just started and we had bought the liberty bonds. I remember when we had a liberty bond pasted on our front door. We had half a window on our front door and he had pasted this liberty bond on it. Also, during the flu, the Spanish flu, I remember when we all had to wear masks and if anybody was caught outside, that's why I was afraid to go outside because they would tell me, "Don't go outside because you have to wear a mask or the policeman will catch you." And it was true. Everyone had masks on.

**RW:** I understand it was awfully easy to get the flu.

**KA:** Yes, it was, but we were pretty lucky and we did not.

**RW:** Did any member of your family get the flu?

**KA:** No. It was just me and my little brother, my mother, and my father. Then we moved up to 2010 India Street and I remember that my father, on Armistice Day, took me to see the parade on Broadway. Then when president Wilson came to San Diego, he took me down to the train station to see President Wilson.

**RW:** It sounds like he was really Americanized.

**KA:** He was. He kept telling us children to go to school and learn the American language and learn about the United States. He would tell us this all of the time.

**RW:** I assume he spoke English.

**KA:** No, he did not. We all spoke Italian at home.

**RW:** Did they try?

**KA:** They tried, but my father was working all the time and my mother was working all the time. In those days it was a little harder. In fact when he went fishing here on the Star he used to use the cross every time he had to sign his name. He couldn't sign his name. He had to sign with the cross.

**RW:** Could he read or write?

**KA:** No, he could not.

**RW:** But could he do it in Italian?

**KA:** No, he could not. He didn't go to school. But yet he was very smart for not going to school. He knew so much and he wanted us to learn everything.

**RW:** It sounds as if he had a rough life in Italy.

**KA:** Oh yes. That's why he came to America. There are many things that I remember but I cannot quite remember right now.

**RW:** Was he part of a crew of fishermen. The same guys going out on the same boat?

**KA:** You mean fishing here with the Star?

**RW:** No, in San Diego.

**KA:** No, in San Diego mostly he had his own. When they came to San Diego he and his brother they got together and built a boat by the name of Ignazio Mazaro which is Ignacious.

**RW:** That was the name of the boat?

**KA:** Ignacious, yes, which is my grandfather. Their father.

**RW:** They bought the boat or built it?

**KA:** I do not know. I believe they must have had it built because I really do not know that. And they went fishing together with that. Then he, a few years after that, then he bought himself a little jig boat. They used to go jig boat albacore fishing. And that is what he had for a while and then he sold that and then he didn't go fishing as a member with anyone else. He started his own net mending business and he was mending nets for all the tuna boats. And making nets.

**RW:** They used the nets in those days to catch--bait.

**KA:** He used to make both. He made the bait nets, for who I can't remember, but he was making the bait nets.

**RW:** What are your father's and mother's names?

**KA:** My father Andrea Asaro and my mother's name was Maria Giacaloni.

**RW:** I know we know your brother's name. Your father fished for how long that boat did?

**KA:** With his boat?

**RW:** Yes.

**KA:** Oh, it must have been about six years I believe.

**RW:** Was he reasonably successful?

**KA:** Well, I guess they were reasonably successful. But they started to get into trouble with my uncle. Both brothers weren't getting along. So they gave it up. They sold it. I think they sold it. And this was when my father, I don't know if he went fishing with someone else as a member. I don't remember that. I don't know. But then he did buy a little jig boat for himself and he worked on that for a while. For a few years and then he gave it up and he started his own mending business.

**RW:** Do you know when he started making nets. Was that in the early thirties? The depression years were coming on.

**KA:** Yes, this is what I'm trying to think. I think he was doing his own net. He was having his net business during the depression years. It was very bad in the depression. I really suffered in the depression.

**RW:** We'd really like to know about that.

**KA:** It was very bad. I got married in 1929. It was kinda hard. That's when the fishing with my husband also. The fishing wasn't going very good there.

**RW:** You still had the fish, but I guess you had trouble selling the fish.

**KA:** It was. In the early years, 1929 to 1933, my husband had a boat in partnership with his brother-in-law called the Jennie and they fished for sardines and local fishing. This sardine business was all right but then they just didn't, I don't know if it was the Depression or what it was, but it just didn't go good at all. They fished for the sardines for the Steel fishing cannery.

**RW:** Steel cannery?

**KA:** In fact, I remember around 1931 we had our dinner on the boat with the fried sardines that we got from the cannery and had our dinner on the boat at that time. And then you know my mother also, there was a Neptune sardine cannery, and my mother went to work for the Neptune cutting the heads off the sardines. You know, the canneries of those days, the sardine canneries, they used to blow the whistle no matter what hour they came in during the night and the early morning hours and the women, a lot of women, would get up and, regardless of the time, even at two a.m. in the morning, and they would go and work at the cannery chopping the heads off the sardines getting them ready to pack.

**RW:** And had to gut them too?

**KA:** Yes.

**RW:** That must have been tedious work. In other words, you're implying that when a fishing boat came in with a load, no matter what hour ...

**KA:** That canneries used to blow the whistle and the women used to get ready and come down and go ...

**RW:** Where was the cannery located?

**KA:** The canneries were located. The Steel and the Neptune were located, let's see, I got it here. My brother had helped me with the streets. I'll read you just as my brother was telling us. It's easier this way, I'll come to that. The canneries, coming into the channel from the bay, Point Loma was the Starkist cannery.

**RW:** At Roseville?

**KA:** Was that Roseville?

**RW:** Forget the cannery in Roseville. There may not have been one there.

**KA:** The Neptune and the Steel was from Hawthorne to Grape Street.

**RW:** Down there by Pacific Highway?

**KA:** Yes, because we lived on Hawthorne Street. My mother used to walk all the way down, straight down, that's where the cannery was. Steel was first, then came Neptune, and then came Del Monte cannery. I worked ...

**RW:** Was Del Monte the one down here at Laurel and Pacific Highways?



**KA:** Not Laurel. Laurel was where the Westgate was, where I worked. That was the Westgate, but the Del Monte was on Juniper Street. Juniper Street was the Del Monte. This whole area, I think it was in 1923, somewhere in there, there was a sea wall put in and then the bay was dredged behind it. It's not the way-it is now. The way we remembered it was not like this.

**RW:** From the railroad tracks down this way--was sort of a beach.

**KA:** This waterfront, when we came here, was just like that. From where we landed with the Yale. When we landed with the Yale I remember all this walk.

**RW:** There was a walk?

**KA:** Just the way it is now. It used to be called the wharf. It still is the wharf. And the boats, this is what I was saying, the boat the Ignazio Mazara. My father they had it anchored right around there, a little bit over.

**RW:** So they came off the Broadway pier, then. This area as we call Harbor Drive, Embarcadero.

**KA:** That was not there. Harbor Drive was not there. The Civic Center was not there. That was after the Depression.

**RW:** So when you landed off the Yale, you got off the pier and walked up Broadway.

**KA:** That I don't remember. I do not remember. That's what must have happened.

**RW:** Because this area where the Star of India is laying now and Anthony's restaurant is, that was did not ever exist.

**KA:** It was there!

**RW:** There was something there?

**KA:** Yes, This was here. It was here. We used to walk, my mother and my father, they used to take a walk in the evenings here. The boat was here and that was 1918 or 1920.

**RW:** I'll have to double check on when this sea wall was put in and the bay was dredged behind it to fill in this whole area.

**KA:** That was later on when they filled in. I can't quite picture it like when we were outside.

**RW:** Getting back to your dad and then we'll pick up on your husband. Then he quit the fishing in the late 1920's and early 1930's.

**RW:** I don't want to put words into your mouth.

**KA:** No, that is before the Depression, yes.

**RW:** Apparently, was there anybody else in town that did nets?

**KA:** No, at that time I think it was my father alone that was making them. Later on, then there was another family, that got into net making also.

**RW:** Mrs. Asaro's son, Andrew Asaro, is going to tell about different nets his father built.

**AA:** Well, my grandfather basically built bait nets for the tuna boat industry when the tuna boat industry was just beginning. At that time, there were different kinds of nets. There were nets for, gill nets for bottom fishing, which in Italia they used to call (Trimagie?) which meant free mesh. And then there were half-ring nets which they used for barracuda and also bluefin tuna and also for the sardines.

**RW:** They just dropped the nets in the water and then pulled them in. Not like a purse seiner, but just a... but a gill net the fish just swam into and got caught in.

**AA:** Right, the gill nets would be anchored in gangs and there would be a whole line of them and then they would go around and pull them up. The half-ring nets were similar to a purse seiner net that was much smaller.

**RW:** Was he pretty successful at it?

**AA:** Uh, I don't know. You'd have to refer to my mother about that.

**KA:** The net making? Yes, he was successful at it. He had quite a few fisherman, boat owners, and others; those that sold the bait. He was making also bait nets for them.

**RW:** Did he buy the line and then he tied every knot?

**KA:** Yes, he did. He worked everything by hand. My mother was an expert net maker just making the net, all kinds of net. The big wide ones, the little small one, the real tiny mesh. She was really an expert.

**RW:** How about you?

**KA:** I did in my young girlhood I did. I made a lot of net, too I don't know if I could do it now.

**RW:** You bought the line and then, in skeins?

**AA:** My grandmother would send me down to Nuttall-Styris down on Broadway and State Street and I'd buy of No. 6 medium, white cotton twine and then I'd bring it back and then my grandmother would have me put it on a lazy-susan type stand where we put the skein over it and then we'd take one end of the twine and start rolling it up into a ball until you have size of a ball, and then from the ball my grandfather and uncles were able to fill the needles with the twine. One of the other jobs that they used to do when making nets was they used to have to buy coils of rope in order to put the lead lines and cork lines on the rope so what they would do was take this manila line, would be roughly 3/8 to 1/4 inch in diameter, soak it over night. You had to soak the manila line overnight and then stretch it and iron it out.

What they would do was to take one end of the line and tie it around the telephone pole. Generally, this telephone pole was located at the corner of India and Ivy and drag a line all the way down to across Kettner Street down to the train tracks and then one person would be on the other end of the line, kinda holding it, tailing it, and then one person would take the beginning of the line up by the telephone pole on India Street and with a burlap

sack run and hold it fairly tight and walk down with the line going through the burlap sack and it would take out all of the kinks and the curls in the line. In the meantime, we would be stretching after it had been soaked in water. This was called stretching the line. In Italian it was called (stirra la corda?) which meant stretch the line. So after it was soaked and shrunk it would be stretched and unwound.

**RW:** So this was manila line, wasn't it?

**AA:** This was manila line. This was before the advent of nylon. I can recall doing this in the early 1940's.

**RW:** So you said needles. I thought all the lines were tied by hand?

**AA:** Well, they were tied by hand, but you had to have a needle in order to do it. So you'd have a wooden form which would be the size of the mesh that you wanted and you had a needle which was generally hand made either out of wood. It was carved out of wood, or else out of a brass wire. You'd cut it down the center and split it open so that it would accommodate the line. The brass needles were for the fine line, generally No. 6, 9, and 12, real find line. Then for the larger twine, they would use a wooden needle which was about eight inches long and it would... it is hard to show without a picture.

**RW:** Yeah, I can imagine.

**AA:** We could have brought some needles. We had a bunch of needles.

**RW:** Maybe that's something that you might want to donate to the Maritime Museum or the... if you don't, that's something to think about.

**AA:** That's an idea

**RW:** We talked about canneries, how about boat yards?

**KA:** Those two boat yards were there because those boats were small in those days.

**RW:** What were the names of the boat yards?

**KA:** The Rask boat yard and the Robbins boat yard.

**RW:** And where were they located?

**KA:** They were located, both of them, right off the county building.

**RW:** North of the county building?

**KA:** North of the county building. There were no paved streets or anything. Everything was dirt and sand.

**RW:** I vaguely remember a boat yard in 1941 was up here where the health center is at the foot of Grape Street.

**KA:** Yes, that's it. That was the Robbins I think. The Rask was along side of it on the other side.

**RW:** They mostly built. They were building small boats. Taking care of the fishing boats. Pull the boat out of the water and work on it.

**KA:** I think so, yes. And they were repairing the boats, too. They needed painting, or whatever. They went there. Those were the small boats in those days.

**RW:** That's true. That's interesting. Well, staying with your father for a few minutes. How long did he continue working on the nets?

**KA:** Well, until he died in 1945.

**RW:** Yes. And he really worked. He worked until the last day that he could.

**RW:** He died of natural causes?

**KA:** October of 1945. Yes.

**RW:** How did he die, then?

**KA:** Cancer. Within three months.

**RW:** What about your mother, then?

**KA:** Well, she got along and she was making net all the time because my brothers were also in the fishing business. They were fishing. After my father died. And so they, should I go into that, too?

Answer his question.

**KA:** They had also built a boat, my three brothers. My father was still alive and they wanted a fishing boat and so he helped them out with this fishing boat and so that's how my mother continued making the nets to help them out, also. Then they sold the boat and they got out of fishing.

**RW:** What were your brother's names? You said you had three.

**KA:** I was the oldest in the family. My brother, Ignazio, was the one after me. Then, a little sister, the one that died here in San Diego which was born in San Francisco and here in San Diego my sister Anna, then my brother, Vito, and then my brother Leo. They were all fishermen, my brothers.

**RW:** Did they fish, but did they sell nets.

**KA:** They worked a little helping my father with the nets.

**RW:** Making them?

**KA:** Making them and then selling them, yes. Then when my father died, they continued with my mother, as my son said. It was her source of income that she was making the net. They used to put them together, my brothers.

**RW:** Did your mother and father ever learn to speak English?

**KA:** Broken English, very little. Not too much.

**RW:** Well, getting back to 1929 when you got married. What was your husband's name?

**KA:** Andrew Asaro.

**RW:** Love at first sight?

**KA:** His name is from my father, though, not from my husband.

**RW:** So it was love at first sight?

**KA:** Well, no it wasn't quite that way. In those days, it was more of an arrangement.

**RW:** Maybe it was some money under the table, too.

**KA:** No. And he was a fisherman, too, from the same town. And then, of course, as the Depression started in, I went to work the first year I got married and then my...

**RW:** Doing what?

**KA:** At the cannery, packing tuna.

**RW:** Which cannery was that?

**KA:** At the Westgate. I worked also. I started packing tuna when I was sixteen years old.

**RW:** At the other canneries?

**KA:** No, at the Westgate cannery, yes.

**RW:** That was back in 1927?

**KA:** 1927.

**RW:** I didn't know it went back that far.

**KA:** Yes.

**RW:** Where were they located?

**KA:** The Westgate was located on Laurel Street.

**RW:** Laurel?

**KA:** Laurel. Way up there on Laurel. Yes

**RW:** Where Solar is now?

**KA:** Yes.

**RW:** That was Westgate.

**KA:** Yes. That was all bay. That was all water. There was no Harbor Drive.

**RW:** No airport, either.

**KA:** No. I remember the airport when Lindbergh flew across.

**RW:** Did you ever see his plane?

**KA:** He used to walk in front of our house when we lived on 2010 India Street. He was building the plane here, and he used to go and have lunch at the Hughes Cafeteria which was across the street from us from where we used to live.

**RW:** On India Street. Did you talk to him?

**KA:** No, I didn't. My brothers used to see him and once in a while they used to... and he used to talk about building an airplane but they didn't know that he was an expert that he was going to fly across like that.

**RW:** I understand that he was a tall, lanky guy

**KA:** Yes. He was a tall, lanky guy. And then, of course, when he flew over, they had a big party down there where the field, Lindbergh field, right there and I remember we went. I was seventeen years old, I think.

**RW:** I thought there was a little field down here somewhere on take off of.

**KA:** Right here?

**RW:** Further on down where the post office is now on Barnett was a field.

**KA:** In those days, I couldn't tell you anything about that. I didn't go further than just our area.

**RW:** But there was no air field anywhere around Laurel and Pacific Highway?

**KA:** Not that I can remember, there wasn't.

**RW:** Well, the Ryan Air had his plant, wasn't it, down here?

**KA:** Ryan was up there, too.

**RW:** Down by Westgate.

**KA:** Somewhere around there, yes.

**RW:** You got to give those fellas who built the airplane credit to smell all that cannery.

**KA:** Well, when you get used to it then it didn't bother us because we were all in the fishing business. I don't know we were in it, it doesn't bother you.

**RW:** Also it was putting food on your table.

**KA:** Right.

**RW:** What was it like to work in the cannery in 1927? It was hard. We used to work as long as ten in the evening at night.

**RW:** When did you start?

**KA:** We started at... well, I was a packer and so I started at eight in the morning. The cleaners would clean the fish so they had to have enough trays of clean fish for the packers to start working on them. So we started at eight. It just depended upon the fish, how much fish they had in the cannery. When the boats came in, sometimes there would be two, three, or four boats at the same time and the cannery would be flooded with fish and it had to be packed. So we used to work as long as ten in the night. There was no break for supper, for eating at night.

**RW:** They didn't supply you with anything?

**KA:** No. We ate lunch, but we didn't have a break for dinner. We worked straight through. It was pretty hard, but we did it? And sometimes there was only two or three hours work, just depends on how much fish the cannery had, how many boats would come in. The summer time was a real full time. The majority of the time we worked until five, six, or seven in the evening. It was rare when we did work until ten, but we did.

**RW:** Did you get paid by the hour?

**KA:** When I started in to learn how to pack, we were paid by the hour. Then we were on piece work. The faster we packed, the more trays we packed, the more money we made. We were only paid 33 1/3 cents an hour. And the trays, I don't remember what the trays were, 32 cents I believe or 30 cents a tray, I don't remember. The more trays you packed. . .

**RW:** Let me go back a little detail because this is interesting. The fish would be cleaned, but they were not cooked before?

**KA:** Oh yes, they baked before. They were baked. The cannery had huge trays on racks and they would stick them in the ovens.

**RW:** Baking them sorta dries them out, wouldn't it?

**KA:** Yes, it would cook the fish. And so then they let it cool and then they were ready to clean. So they had huge tables for the cleaners...

**RW:** I would assume the cleaning would be done first.

**KA:** That was when they were raw, but ready to can, yes. The boats would come in and they had the conveyors there where the fish would come down.

**RW:** What kind of fish were they?

**KA:** The tuna and albacore. We didn't pack the albacore, though, at the Westgate I don't remember packing albacore. I guess they did at some time, but it wasn't too much. But it was mostly albacore, tuna, skipjack, yellowtail.

**RW:** Let's say the tuna came in by conveyor belt, and then the heads cut off, the fins cut off.

**KA:** Yes, the men did that work before the tuna got into the cannery. This work was done outside of the cannery as the conveyors were outside. Well, they weren't outside, there was a big cover room, and then they would clean them up like that and set them in the trays on these stands and then they would roll them into the ovens.

**RW:** It seems to me that that would dry them out?

**KA:** Well, not when the fish is whole. Then they would cook them and get them cool and then they would be ready to be cleaned by the women. They would take off all the skin, break the fish open in four, take the skin off, and then take the bones, they would take the skin off and then open the fish up in half and take off the bone and then quarter it, the fish would split in quarters then. We would move all the blood from the side and just pack them into trays. The trays were about two feet wide and about three feet long. So that two half fishes would fit in. There would be about three or four wide and two in length. Then they would go into, after the fish was cleaned that way, they would have the machinery, with the whole tray and all, would go under the cutters, and the cutters would cut them to the size of the can. There'd be the pound can, the half pound can, and the quarter size can.

**RW:** You sorta take a round chunk out of each.

**KA:** No. So then the piece... here's what we did. We used to get the fish in chunks like this and stick it in the can by hand. It was hard.

**RW:** I can see that.

**KA:** It hurt. The arms hurt, especially in the beginning when you were learning. But then you begin to be an expert at it, and then it would go down the conveyor. We used to pack it and then put it in the belt, on the conveyor belt and it used to pass the other machine where the oil would drop into it. Salt and oil. And then it would go on and then the lid would go on, all by machinery. And then they'd put it back in the ovens. They'd cook them again.

**RW:** So the fish were right in front of you and the conveyor was on the other side.



**KA:** The conveyor was right in front of us, like this.

**RW:** But the fish was directly in front of you.

**KA:** Yes, the fish was on our side here, and we were working here, the train would be here, we would pick out fish here, and we would pack it and from here we would get it and put it on the belt.

**RW:** So you didn't have to make any lengthy moves.

**KA:** No, it was all our hands. We were standing still. The machinery did everything and all we did was automatically just pack it and put the can on the belt. You'd pick up the fish with your right hand, put it in the can, and then put the can on the conveyor belt. Then it went right on up to where the oil went in and it was sealed and then cooked some more and then labeled. This was all at Westgate. All the canneries were the same way. The sardines were the same way, also.

**RW:** How long did you stay at that job?

**KA:** Well, let's see. I worked about three years single, then I got married and I worked another year and a half without children then I had my son, Frank, the Depression came on and I went back to work in 1933 and I worked until 1935.

**RW:** You said earlier that the Depression was bad, why was it hard on you?

**KA:** Why? Because my husband went fishing. They couldn't sell the sardines. They couldn't sell whatever fish they caught. Either the canneries refused them, they couldn't use them anymore, they weren't being paid for them right. It caused a lot of trouble in those days. I can't remember just what it was but I know that a lot of times they came in and they couldn't sell fish to the canneries. This was when the sardines stopped. There wasn't anymore sardines packed here. They quit running because also the sardines seemed to have dried up here in San Diego. The tuna boats used them also for bait and they used to go out for bait. This was just a couple of years later then when the sardines actually all dried up here in San Diego.

**RW:** The cost of living. Was it cheap to live?

**KA:** Everything was cheap, but there was no money. I had bought one pair of shoes for one dollar and that pair of shoes lasted one whole year and I couldn't wear them. I was keeping them and keeping them for when I went out. You weren't exactly bare-footed, but these were dress shoes.

**RW:** Well, you were having children about that time.

**KA:** Yes, I had Frank and then I had Andrew in 1936.x`

**RW:** You only had two children?

**KA:** Yes, two sons.

**RW:** Well, after 1935, you had Andrew then in 1936, yet you weren't working then.

**KA:** I didn't go back to work because then I got sick. I got sick and then I just didn't go to work anymore.

**RW:** You were seriously ill that you couldn't?

**KA:** I was for those days it was seriously ill. I was in the hospital... well, I had two surgeries. My son, Andrew, was six months old when I had the first surgeries which was the appendix and then in those days they kept you ten days in the hospital just for the appendix. Then, in 1942, then I had the big surgery which took me 17 days in the hospital.

**RW:** I understand that Andrew had a little problem, too.

**KA:** They were out playing in scooters and the driver of the truck saw the other boy on the scooter and tried to prevent hitting him. He said that he did not see Andrew and Andrew was, as he was trying to prevent the other one, Andrew was coming up and hit the truck. Andrew got hit by a truck. Oh, he was very seriously hurt.

**RW:** When did this happen?

**KA:** This was on Saturday, January 3, 1941.

**RW:** Where did it happen?

**KA:** On Kalmia and Kettner Blvd.

**RW:** Did he turn out all right?

**KA:** Oh yes, he's fine. But it took a long time.

**RW:** Where that accident happened was right down by Standard furniture?

**KA:** Yes. He lived on India Street there, right up above.

**RW:** Your husband kept fishing though.

**KA:** Yes, he kept fishing up until 1943, was it 1943 when he stopped fishing. He sold the boat...

**RW:** But didn't he work at the WPA at the park?

**KA:** Oh yes, you know, he was working up here at the park. He didn't work for the civic center. He worked at the park with the WPA in the early years of the Depression.

**RW:** So he got off the boats for awhile.

**KA:** Yes, They weren't doing anything fishing. He worked with the WPA and...

**RW:** What did he do at the park?

**KA:** He was cleaning

**RW:** Did he build anything?

**KA:** No, he didn't build anything. I don't believe he built anything. They were working at the park, anyway. They found jobs for all the unemployed. And we couldn't get welfare. It's not like today that everybody's living on welfare. They would not give us welfare. We couldn't get anything. All I remember is that I stood in the bread lines with my son, Frank. I had him on my arms and a block long line of women, and men, standing in line for a loaf of bread.

**RW:** What part of town was that at?

**KA:** In San Diego. Here on India Street.

**RW:** Down on where?

**KA:** On Kalmia and it was one of the, I don't know if it was a grocery store, I don't know. One of the corners it was a Safeway. On Juniper there was a Safeway in those days and I think before the store there was another office. It was vacant and so they were distributing the bread there. Free for a loaf of bread.

**RW:** Is that all you got was bread? Didn't they give you anything else?

**KA:** Once or twice we got a can of meat and that's all that I got from welfare. We had to work our way. I had to work my way on welfare. I didn't have a washing machine. That's when I went back to work in 1933 so that I could buy a washing machine. A washing machine back in those cost me only 33 dollars.

**RW:** That's a big, big money.

**KA:** It was then.

**RW:** I thought perhaps that your husband would help your dad with the nets.

**RW:** Not enough money for both families?

**KA:** No. At that time my father's business wasn't that big. It was the Depression, they were barely making anything, too.

**RW:** Your husband and brother-in-law built a boat?

**KA:** Salvatore Sardo, his brother-in-law's name was Salvatore Sardo. They built this half ring boat by the name of Electra and they fished with that. That was built in 1936 and then they started fishing with that but they didn't do well with that at all. In 1940, they sold the boat and then he went into tuna fishing. He was employed by the tuna boats.

**RW:** Do you remember the boat that he went out on?

**KA:** Well, the *Pacific Queen* was the first one.

**RW:** And what were some of the other boats that he went out on?

**KA:** The *Pacific Queen* was the first one, then after the *Pacific Queen* went out on the Madalena and then the people who owned the Madalena sold it and purchased another boat which was a YP. It was a converted purse seiner from San Pedro. YP meaning that it was used by the navy during WWII. It was taken by the navy in WWII then reconverted back to a fishing boat. That was called the *Sea Giant*. He fished on the *Sea Giant* for a few years and then the owners of that boat had a boat built by the National Steel and Ship Building which was steel and it was called the *Mary Barbara*. It was 106 feet in length and 24 feet wide and it carried 160 tons. Following the *Mary Barbara* in 1955, National Steel developed a new sized boat of which the *Corka Bianca* was the first one and then they followed down with several other boats and one of these was the Independence.

**RW:** How did the war years affect you personally?

**KA:** Well, my brother, Leo, was in the war. He was in the navy and on the aircraft carrier *Shamrock Bay*. It was an escort carrier. One of the Kaiser escort carriers that Kaiser made.

**RW:** What about your other brothers?

**KA:** My brother, Vito, he couldn't make it on account of his back. And my brother, Pete, that's my brother Ignazio. His nickname was Pete and so we all called him Pete. He was going in but then he was, I don't know for what reason, but he didn't go into the army.

**RW:** Were you an American citizen? You were born in Italy.

**KA:** I became an American citizen in... 1942 is when I became an American citizen.

**RW:** Why did you take so long to become a citizen?

**KA:** As I say, because my father used to tell us that we were American citizens because we came in so young and he thought that. I don't know how it was, but we didn't... I know it was too late to start in. But he also became an American citizen then, too.

**RW:** I understand there was some sort of a story about the FBI and...

**KA:** Oh yes, we had a short wave radio and so we had to declare whatever we had. So once we knew we had the short wave radio we...

**RW:** Because you were licensed to have it?

**KA:** I don't know. No, this was just a regular radio. Short wave radio.

**RW:** You weren't transmitting?

**KA:** No. Just receiving. The new ones that had just come out at the time.

**RW:** And the FBI was nervous about that?

**KA:** Yes. They came and they took it and then sent to Los Angeles and, of course, after the war we had to go and pick it up. It was a new thing, we weren't going to do anything about it.

**RW:** Did you have any problems because you were considered an alien?

**KA:** No. No problem at all.

**RW:** Did you go back to work at the cannery during the 1940's?

**KA:** No, I did not.

**RW:** You never went back to work?

**KA:** I never went back to work.

**RW:** What about your husband, what did he do?

**KA:** He became an American citizen shortly after we were married in 1930 he became an American citizen. On account of the work he became an American citizen. It was just the same.

**RW:** The point that I'm leading up to was that he worked with the WPA during the 1930's because the fishing was bad and everything wasn't too good. But when the war years started up, did he go back to fishing?

**KA:** He went back to tuna fishing. He started tuna fishing on the other boats, yes.

**RW:** What happened later on? Did he keep on doing that?

**KA:** Until he retired from fishing and then he went and worked for Convair; he worked for convair for a few years, and then then he was laid off by Convair because they were laying off so many people at the time. From then on, he didn't go to work anymore. Then he also used to work for about three years he went summer fishing, albacore fishing, on local fishing boats and then he Also repaired nets. That's what he did.

**RW:** The chronology is that he retired from fishing. The last boat he fished on was the Independence and then he left that in late 1956. From 1956 to 1962 he worked at Convair. Doing what?

**KA:** At Convair, he was a maintenance, doing general maintenance at the plant. Then after 1962, he went fishing during the summer times with the boat Guise ina. It was a small boat, roughly 25 ton for albacore and then during the winter times and when he stopped fishing that was about 1973. That was the last trip he made with the Guise ina. We would work for the purse-seiners when they would come in. The purse-seiner nets would need mending and they would hire a lot of the old timers to mend their nets, and he would work right down here at the embarcadero or else down on G Street or even farther down in National City at the 24th Street pier down there and they would mend nets either here at the Embarcadero or at the other two places.

**RW:** I understand he died?

**KA:** No, he's very much alive

**KA:** Oh, my yes.

**RW:** The interesting thing I don't think I asked you, but you told me that your mother destroyed all your father's papers and photographs.

**KA:** All the souvenirs that he had from Alaska and a few of his, he had, when he was in the Italian navy, he had his clothes, his Navy suit, and his hat, and she just destroyed everything after he died.

**RW:** No explanation for doing it?

**KA:** No, they all did. Most everybody did that as I understand in Italy they just got and destroyed all souvenirs when a person passed away.

**RW:** I wonder if that's a good psychological move?

**KA:** I guess that's what it is. I don't know really, but it kinda irritated us a little bit because we did want them. The trunk that he had with all his salmon labels, salmon cannery labels, he had made this trunk in Alaska, and he had all his clothes and everything in it and he had the lid, the top of the trunk on the inside full of all the labels of the canneries.

**RW:** And that one got rid of, too?

**KA:** Yes, We don't know. That's one of the things that...

**RW:** Well, is there anything else we could add to this interview that you can think of.

**KA:** There are a lot of things that a person could add too, but really I can't think right now... it's kinda hard. It's hard.

**KA:** Probably when I'm home, I'll think "Oh my goodness, I could have said that..."

**RW:** We could add on to it, there's tape left

**KA:** Well, should we add about the brick ovens? How all the Italians, you know about the Italian people. The Sicilians made their own homemade bread and baked them in the brick oven.

**RW:** Down here on India Street?

**KA:** Yes. When we first arrived here, my father and two others got together and built an oven, a brick oven, and there was three or four families living in the area and they all used it. Everybody made their bread there every week. We used to make ten to twelve loaves of bread a week and we had, in every house that we lived in, which was the one when we first came on Indian Beach and then on 2010 India and then we moved on California Street. We had an oven there, also.

**RW:** During the Depression, you could have gone back to baking bread, too.

**KA:** We were. We all were baking our own breads. I can remember during the Depression back in New England you didn't buy too much. You bought everything from scratch. You bought the flour... We always bought a 100 pound sack of flour. That's how we kept our flour.

**RW:** And all the fish you want to eat.

**KA:** Yes, that's true. All the best of the fish. The lobsters, the crabs, the clams, everything and anything. All fresh. Did you hear about the (gipinos) and all that?

**RW:** How expensive they were and all that?

**KA:** Now, yes.

**KA:** And when we were kids we were "Again fish, main fish."

**RW:** Did you ever exchange fish for vegetables or things like that?

**KA:** No. We used to have a garden. We used to grow our own vegetables.

**RW:** Some of the other families did that. Before I forget it, you said that you went to school. Did you go to San Diego High or Roosevelt?

**KA:** No. I went to Roosevelt for one year, but that's all. I did not go to high school.

**RW:** Thank you very much for the interview for the Historical Society and the Maritime Museum.

**KA:** Your welcome.

**RW:** Thank you, and thank you Andrew.

***END OF INTERVIEW***

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