



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with
Ralph Gano Miller, 1926-2016

August 28, 1997



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INTERVIEWER'S NOTE

This is an oral history interview with Ralph Miller. The interview is being done at his office on West Broadway. My name is Robert G. Wright. The date is August 28, 1997.

ROBERT WRIGHT: Give me your full name, please.

RALPH MILLER: Ralph Gano Miller. I used to be Ralph Gano Miller, Jr. I was Junior for many years on the waterfront. My father was Ralph Gano Miller.

RW: How did you get the name "Barney"?

RM: All his water taxis had a picture of Barney Google and Sparkplug who were big comic characters in those days. Because his water taxis had that picture on the bow, he was known as Barney for all the time he was on the waterfront. It was all water taxis to start with. They got into the sport fishing business as a way to keep their water taxis going, find some work for them.

RW: Where did you go, from the foot of Broadway to ...?

RM: Out to the ships in the stream. In those days we had a lot of Navy ships out in the stream. We went to North Island, too, but mostly to the ships in the bay and even outside. That was the only way to get to the ships as the ships' own launches were not very frequent. So we had 24-hour water taxi service since the mid 1920s in San Diego.

RW: And what did they charge?

RM: Fifteen cents. It was only a nickel to take the 'nickel snatcher' over to Coronado and 15 cents to go on the taxis. I remember being down there at night. I would be the cashier during the war, while my father was running the business. It is interesting to see. The sailors got their money's worth for their 15 cents. They were a little bit drunk sometimes and we had to sort of deliver them to the ships. And we didn't lose anybody overboard.

RW: So this started in the 1920s on up to about 1934-'35?

RM: Actually, it went on through the war. Both businesses went on during the war, the water taxis. And in the summertime they would use charter boats. Most of the sport fishing was just in the summer. We didn't have a lot of longrange trips then. Both businesses went on until the bridge went in. When the Coronado bridge went in it essentially put the water taxis out of business.

RW: The thing I am curious about is your boats weren't terribly long. They look like about 40-footers.

RM: The water taxis were only about 40-footers, anywhere from 38 to 55 feet.

RW: Then when you used them for sport fishing you just went out to the kelp beds, I assume.

RM: No, no, we went out to various places. As a matter of fact, when the albacore price was high we would put sort of a rack or cover up over the back, filled it up with ice and go out for albacore fishing. We went out several hundred miles for albacore fishing. We went on down south. The water taxis were pretty good seaworthy ships. We went a long ways. Sometimes I would have the waves break over those covers in back.

RW: Do you remember what you used to charge people for going out for albacore fishing?

RM: I think it was \$3 for the sport fishing charge.

RW: Manny Silva gave me one of the flyers that showed \$2. I don't know, but in different areas prices change.

RM: The \$2 was the half-day trip. Howard Minor ran the place after we started. He put in ladies' day on Fridays, so ladies could come free with a paid escort. So we got a lot of ladies fishing in San Diego. I met my wife that way. Her grandmother used to come fishing. She came from Texas and brought her granddaughter, my wife later, and took her out fishing. I met her when we were out fishing after I came back from the service in 1946. I met her on the *Mascot I*.

RW: We are going to go back again. You went to school here in San Diego? Let's see, you were born in San Diego July 6, 1926.

RM: I went to St. Augustine High School and I graduated in the middle of the war, in 1943. I went to join the Navy, but I was only 16 years old and couldn't get in. I went to Stanford University for a year, then came back and joined the Navy. I was in the Navy for a couple of years and then the war was over.

RW: What did you do in the Navy?

RM: I was a specialized radioman. I ended up on Guam. They had me on the island for a year or two. That was kind of a nice island and I was there most of the time.

RW: You didn't see much action then?

RM: No. Most of the time I was there, then the war was over.

RW: When you were in junior high school and high school, did you work after school and on weekends?

RM: Oh, yeah. I scrubbed water taxi bottoms and boat bottoms out in the shipyards. I painted and did things like cleaning out the aquarium.

RW: I am assuming your dad paid you?

RM: I don't remember that far; he may have.

RW: But he had to feed you.

RM: Feeding was probably good in those days.

RW: Was business fairly good then?

RM: I think it was pretty much a small business, hand-to-mouth. It wasn't a very big business. During the war we still had water taxis out here because we had a lot of ships in the bay. I'd be the purser who would change money in the booths. The water taxi business was probably better during the war because we had so many ships here. The bad part was that the Naval service took a lot of our ships. They were condemned and became Navy ships. So we had not very good water taxis. We had to go resurrect some old ones and do other things to them because the Navy took the good ones.

RW: So my conception of it is right now that from the 1920s to the mid 1930s, and even up through the war years, water taxis were a large part of your business?

RM: Yes, it was. It was sort of the major business.

RW: So the H&M Sport Fishing means ...?

RM: Hoss and Minor, two H's and two M's: Hoss and Miller and Hoss and Minor.

RW: Who is Hoss?

RM: Bill Hoss and Tony Hoss were two other people who were in the water taxi business. Dad and Howard Minor encouraged them to come into the business so we could have enough capital to buy the sport fishing boat, the party boat. Capital was difficult to come by in those days.

RW: Was there a market for sport fishing?

RM: Oh, there was a market for sport fishing. Much of the market was from Los Angeles. We were very famous then for sport fishing here. We used to catch yellowtail off the end of Broadway pier. San Diego was a wonderful place to come to for sport fishing. A lot of that has changed.

RW: The bay was clean then.

RM: The bay was clean and it was a wonderful place. So we were very much a favorite. We used to have a lot of movie stars come down to go sport fishing here. It was a very popular thing for a lot of people in the area.

RW: I understand one of the best ways to advertise was by word-of-mouth. You gave the customers good service, almost guaranteed them a catch. Then a lot of the business came from Los Angeles.

RM: Right, because that was our biggest market. Eighty percent of our business came from Los Angeles; some from the valley and some from San Diego. San Diego wasn't very big then, remember. When I went away to Stanford, San Diego State College which is now 35,000 students, was an 800-student teacher's college. So we've grown a lot.

RW: I know the bridge was finished and opened in 1969, so you really faded out.

RM: Well, it phased out before that. When the ships were out in the stream - the destroyers, the submarines. We had two submarine tenders - they had to keep the boilers going as they had to have the electricity. That cost money. So eventually the Navy became less concerned about getting out of the bay quickly. That was the reason why they were out in the stream, to get out of the bay quickly in the event of an attack. When they became less concerned about that, they went to something what they called cold iron. They would shut down the boilers and go down to 32nd Street station and other places and tied up. So we had fewer ships that would be out in the stream. So business went down considerably after the war.

RW: So, with Hoss and Minor, did they just sort of know each others and decided to get together?

RM: The role of the water taxis, the harbor water taxis, were all water taxi owners. They were really looking for a way to have their taxis useful. In 1935 the fleet had gone away; there was hardly anything to do with them. So that is really how this thing started. All of them, particularly Minor, my dad and Bill Hoss all got hooked on marlin fishing; they just loved marlin fishing. San Diego was a wonderful place to marlin-fish in those days.

RW: You know, I interviewed Mrs. Howard (Miona) Minor. She said she caught her first marlin in 1935 and it weighed probably twice as much as she did. A fantastic lady.

RM: My wife's grandmother who had come out here a lot from Texas had a granddaughter here who kept sending her pictures. She sent her a picture of a 12 year old kid who caught a marlin on his 12th birthday that weighed the same as he did. For whatever reason she kept that picture and as it turned out, she married the kid. When she met me she still had that picture and she still has it today. We did have a lot of marlin in those days and we didn't have to go far for it.

RW: This was in the height of the Depression years, too, wasn't it? Apparently since you had the Hollywood people and moneyed people that is probably what kept you afloat.

RM: Exactly. We had the out-of-town people. Nobody else had fishing like we did. We were a great place for fishing. We still are a wonderful place for fishing, but the bay isn't quite as clean as it used to be.

RW: What did you charge people? Do you remember?

RM: I think it was \$2 for a half-day, then it was \$3, but it was \$9 for an all-day trip. That was a long trip.

RW: And this was all before the war years? So when December 7th [1941] came along, where were you?

RM: I was in San Diego here and I was going to high school.

RW: How did you feel when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

RM: I remember that I was down at my aunt's place. She lived in Logan Heights where my uncle had a garage there. We went to the drugstore to get an ice cream cone and there was this newspaper saying, "Pearl Harbor [Hawaii] attacked."

RW: I was on 7th Avenue, three blocks behind the El Cortez Hotel, down by Date Street. There was a young fellow staying with us and he heard it on the radio. I was 13 years old and I asked, "Where is Pearl Harbor?" Then he kept talking about the invasion and that there was a Japanese under every bush. It was panic around here for awhile. It was interesting.

RM: It was a tough time.

RW: Now, being more sophisticated, I realize that that really wasn't the case about the Japanese being around here. We had a lot of very good Japanese-Americans around here.

RM: Well, we probably had to do what we had to do. Some people were probably unfairly treated, but no doubt at the time it was a reasonable decision [to transport them to camps in the desert].

RW: After December 7th, did the Navy take over your boats?

RM: Yes, we lost the *Barney Google IV* at that time. A number of the better boats were taken over by the Navy. So we had less good boats, smaller, but they were very busy at that point. We still had the *Barney Google III* and we had the *Miss California*. We had to sort of scrounge around to find boats that the Navy didn't pick up.

RW: Did the Navy use them for shore boats for themselves?

RM: Shore boats and they were supposed to service the facilities on shore. They were kept here in San Diego; they didn't leave San Diego. So we could look out and see what used to be our boats out there.

RW: That means your sport fishing business went to pot?

RM: Yes. They closed the harbor. They had a boom across the harbor and they closed it down. We just couldn't go out of the harbor. They had a submarine net and a boom across the harbor.

RW: The only ones who could really go out were the commercial fishermen?

RM: The seiners. They thought they were taking a great chance of getting sunk by the Japanese submarines.

RW: But they were also given orders to watch out for anything, weren't they?

RM: Oh, yeah. But they really were worried about it in those days.

RW: That first year was really trying. I can remember that. You were just sort of in limbo.

RM: My dad was in the water taxi business then and we were making a living. Sometimes when the fleet went out the water taxi people would take their boats up to Long Beach and run out to gambling ships.

RW: Were they still running?

RM: That was before the sport fishing came along. So that was another thing that the water taxis did when business got low here - would run out to the gambling ships anchored three miles offshore.

RW: Oh, I forgot about that. In fact, there was one that ran aground at Coronado shores, onto the beach. That was big business, too.

RM: Earl Warren was the attorney general. There was this gambling ship that was anchored about three and a half miles off the coast and it was outside of the three-mile limit. He kept being frustrated about it. It was in the Los Angeles area where the land curves in. He got the legislature to declare that from Point Conception to San Diego here was a harbor and therefore it was within the three-mile limit. He went out and arrested everybody who was on the ship and closed down gambling.

RW: Legally it could never be resurrected having gambling ships off the coast?

RM: I don't know about that. A lot of states have gone to gambling ships on the rivers and other things, and I think in some of the other countries where it is legal, they have gambling off the coast. So I think it could happen again. It is just so much easier to have gambling now here.

RW: But it is so much more charming to go out on a boat. Did sport fishing take off quickly after, say, starting in 1946?

RM: Yes, I think so. I came back and was a deck captain on the *Mascot I* where I where I met my wife.

RW: What is your wife's name, by the way?

RM: Jeanne Watkins Miller. That was in the summertime. I would go back and start at Stanford again. I ran marlin fishing charters after awhile. Things were different in those days. You didn't have two radars and other things. You had a compass, a chart and a watch. If the fog was out there you went to a certain spot and turned. You kept track of where you were by the compass and the chart and your watch. It wasn't too bad. Sometimes you wouldn't really know where you were. If you had a marlin strike everyone would sort of forget and get all excited and forget how long it had been. Suddenly, when it was time to come in we didn't know where we were. Radars were things we couldn't afford in those days.

RW: Also, you had to account for drift, tides and all of that.

RM: Oh, yeah. So as we got closer in we kept going slower and slower and slower because we weren't quite sure where the Coronado beach was.

RW: Coming in at Point Loma and the jetty there, it is pretty narrow.

RM: Once you got to where the buoys were you felt pretty good. In the fog you weren't quite sure how far you were out and exactly where you were. You could fight a marlin for two hours and in that time you could lose track on how long it had been. It was interesting. It is nice now to have two radars knowing where you are.

RW: Apparently you knew that you were not going to make a living at that because you are an attorney now.

RM: Yes, I went to Stanford and got a masters degree in business school. After I graduated I came back down here and went to law school. I got my CPA [certified public accountant] certificate when I went to law school. I worked as a tax attorney most of the time. When my father died I took over his interest and bought out the interests of the other people. So, for fun I ran H&M Landing for awhile.

After awhile two of my five children, Robert Miller, who is now manager of a Toyota [automobile] agency in Huntington Beach; and Catherine Miller ran the office while Bob ran the boats. Catherine sort of is still in the business. She is in the public relations business. She has sort of shepherded the San Diego Sportfishing Association together. It was very difficult.

Sport fishing people never got along very well; they always fought. So Catherine got them all together and formed the San Diego Sportfishing Association. She manages that and she puts in a day at the docks. She is the only one still in the business now. She knows how to manage well and get along with people.

RW: That is critical because I imagine these people are pretty much individualists.

RM: Very much so. You look at a person and they say, "Why didn't you stay in the sport fishing business as a business, because you knew it?" The problem is that the sport fishing business is sort of like the opposite of carrying garbage. You've got to pay people quite a bit to carry garbage. It is not very pleasant. Being in the sport fishing business is fun. So when you look at your competitors some of them are not making money but they don't want to quit because they are enjoying it so much. So it may not be the best business for making money. But it is a lot of fun.

RW: From what I understand business is so good you really don't have to look for customers and you can meet your costs.

RM: This year you can, but it has been tough for people to hoe that row in the last few years. Phil Lowbread, the man to whom I sold the Landing with other partners, has had tough times in the wintertime. While I was there and owned the Landing we developed these trips to Scammons Lagoon, the whale watching trips, as a way to use the boats for longer trips. Actually, with the whale trips and various excursions to Cedros Island, San Miguel Island, and other islands, we began to have long-range trips as something to do in the wintertime. Fishing was still good down there, so if it wasn't good here around San Diego we would go long range in the wintertime. Now we have some boats that just do long-range trips - that is all they do.

RW: There is one question in the back of my mind and this is getting out of sequence, of course. But what caused you to leave the foot of Broadway where you were from 1935 on?

RM: It wasn't voluntary. The port [Port Authority] forces said, "You go over there [to Shelter Island] and we won't let anybody else in the sport fishing business." It turns out that it really didn't work out that way. We ended up with other companies in the sport fishing business. It would have been much nicer to have stayed at the foot of Broadway, but they wanted to do other things with it.

RW: They gave you a home over at Shelter Island, then?

RM: The port controls the bay and they thought it was the best interest of the bay to push us over there. We did have smelly fish and things while at the foot of Broadway. So now it is off of Scott Street at Point Loma where it has been since we moved from the end of Broadway.

RW: I had the feeling that the Halls wanted to take over down there for the harbor cruises.

RM: That's right. Ed Hall and Bud Hall did. For a short time I had a harbor cruise here in San Diego and the guy with whom I had the contract gave out and I finally had to sell my lease on the building to Star and Crescent. They have had the harbor cruises since then. It is a good business. Bud was the son of Ed Hall. Ed Hall is the one who started the business.

RW: I've heard that Bud Hall is living in Las Vegas.

RM: The Star and Crescent Company was a water taxi company. They were just one company; they had one owner. All these others in the water taxi business went together and had the United Water Taxi Company. So Ed Hall took his boats and put them on Lake Tahoe, Lake Powell, and other places to try to find something to do with them up there. So he actually moved his boats up there. So he went out of that business down here.

They had the 'nickel snatcher' going over to Coronado but we had to stop that when the bridge went in. We couldn't be in competition with the bridge. As an attorney I was able to get the state to recognize the condemnation. It was called inverse condemnation, that they put us out of business by putting the bridge in. So we were able to get a settlement from the state for the water taxi business, what was left of it. I bought it and ran it for awhile. It was sort of fun. I was brought up on the waterfront and I kind of enjoyed it. It turned out that after the ships went down south there was nothing out in the bay to really run to. So it was not too practical to hang on.

RW: I have a feeling that sport fishing is going to go on indefinitely.

RM: Locally, we are depleting the stocks of fish from a commercial point of view. And I think we are in real danger of losing some species. Even the sharks, for example, we are in danger of losing.

RW: Because we are eating them now?

RM: Or just cutting the fins off of them and throwing them back in. But I think San Diego is in a position where, with the ships we have now, the boats can go further, they are faster. So we are not just stuck with the Coronado Islands. We go out to other places.

We are trying hard to preserve the fishing out at the kelp beds. I think the Mexican government is trying hard to keep the commercial people off of their islands. That is a major thing. If we can keep the commercial people off the Coronado Islands then I think we are always going to have good fishing there.

RW: When I interviewed Manny (Manuel Silva) he said that sport fishing is really healthy for fishing. In other words, you fish out some areas and then you are chumming and things that are more ecologically sound.

RM: We've had ups and downs. At one point in time most bait was good-sized sardines. Then the people, mostly up in the San Pedro area, were seining the sardines for fertilizer. It just about wiped out the sardines in California. We then went to anchovies for our bait. Sardines are coming back now. We've had some of these practices for conservation and it has helped. So then we will be getting the sardines back and using anchovies for bait. In the long run I think we are doing some good things now. The local fishing is going to be protected; we are taking care of the kelp beds; and the Mexicans are doing a pretty good job of taking care of their islands. Also, they get money from people because we have to buy a permit for everybody who goes to the islands. So it is sort of a commercial thing for them.

RW: Do you go fishing at all now?

RM: Sometimes, but not often. It is kind of fun, but I think I equate it now as work more than I do as fun. I'd kept back the rights when I sold the boat to have the use of the boat a couple of times a year to take clients out. When I would go out I would go out as a deckhand. I think I had more fun being a deckhand than if I was fishing.

At one time H&M Landing had 12 sport fishing boats. It was the biggest landing in the United States. Do you remember when they had the oil spill in Santa Barbara? At that time they called us and asked if we would go up there as all of their boats were out of action and we could run sport fishing in Santa Barbara. We sent a couple of boats up there. That was an interesting interlude.

The Santa Barbara City Council was interesting. We had a very, very straight and even city council here compared to Santa Barbara. It was an interesting experience and we did sport fishing in Santa Barbara for a couple of years. It turned out that the fishing did come back up there after the oil spill, so there is good fishing there now, too. You know they have the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara so that is where the good fishing was.

There are the long-range boats now that go out for five days or twenty days. They are getting more and more well-equipped and a little more expensive. I bought boats for \$20,000-\$30,000. The long-range boats now cost a couple of million dollars and more, depending on how well it is fitted out. It is going to be a capital-intensive business again.

RW: And then fuel costs have skyrocketed and you use many, many gallons. Do you use diesel?

RM: Yes, everything is diesel. You just get more calories of fuel per gallon and your engines last longer. You just get more efficiency when using diesel. Also, you won't have fires the same way.

RW: Can you name off the boats that H&M had from the beginning?

RM: Ohhhh. The *Mascot I* was the first party boat that we had. Then after the war we got another one, the *Mascot II*, and we had the *Mascot III*, then the *Mascot IV* after that, sort of in succession. We had *Miss California* as a charter boat, the *Warrior VII*, Bill Hoss' boat. We always had two or three charter boats like that.

Then we began to get boats that were made not as water taxis, but for sport fishing. We had the *Island Sabre*. And we had the boat *Challenger* which my son, Bob, bought. You know these great things that fly up into the heavens? The CHALLENGER [space ship] was one of those things and we named the boat *Challenger*. And then the CHALLENGER crashed. But Bob kept the name. After a while we had bigger boats - the *H&M 65*, the *H&M 85* for the length of the boat. The *H&M 85* was still going for a long, long period of time.

We had the *Phenalista* which was a 95-foot boat. That was a very good boat. It turns out that that boat was up in northern California fishing albacore in the wintertime. Even though this was a diesel boat, apparently one of the fuel lines had a very, very small leak which atomized the fuel. It sprayed out on the manifold. Diesel fuel doesn't start fires very easily, but once it starts it is hard to put out. The fire started and the crew did an excellent job. They got everybody off with life jackets on and nobody got hurt except one person who dove in with his life jacket on. You don't dive in with a life jacket on.

It is interesting to find out about our liability insurance. I had a million dollars worth of liability coverage on that boat. Suddenly everybody's camera became a Leica and everybody's belt buckle was gold instead of brass. Two girls had stowed away and they had nightmares afterwards. I had a million dollar policy and the insurance company ended up paying exactly a million dollars. Nobody got hurt; it worked out well. But we did lose the *Phenalista* up there. It was a nice 95 foot boat.

RW: You said you bought out Mr. Howard Minor?

RM: Yes, Mr. Minor and the two Hosses. I sort of inherited my father's part.

RW: How did you buy them out?

RM: They weren't really involved in it anymore and I was taking more risks. I was buying more boats and putting more capital into the business.

RW: You mean, you were more hands-on?

RM: Well, I wasn't much hands-on. I turned in my license because when they had a boat full of 60 people and wanted to go out (the captain was there) I didn't want to have to make a decision - do I take that boat out or go down and practice law. So we had to get two hands-on. I bought them out because they weren't really interested in putting in more capital into the venture. It worked out well. Howard Minor, who was really involved with the operation of the business until I bought him out, and I did other things. We had these sport fishing piers in San Diego. We had the Imperial Beach pier, the Shelter Island pier, the Ocean Beach pier. It was just a pier concession. So Howard and I did that for quite awhile.

RW: I know about the piers and I've fished off the piers, but I never thought about somebody having to fund these places and make things happen. So that's what you did?

RM: Right. Howard and I did that for several years. Howard knew more about sport fishing than anybody in San Diego, all the lore as he was really operating the thing all the time. He was a source of wonderful information; he was just a wonderful person. Everybody really loved him; he was a great man.

RW: He didn't have any other business interests?

RM: Not too much - sport fishing then the pier fishing.

RW: I cannot think of anything else to ask you.

RM: I think what you are going to find is that San Diego is going to continue to have good sport fishing opportunities because they are taking care of the fish locally. They are going further and further out. You have opportunities to have longer and better trips and see other kinds of fish. I think you are going to find that sport fishing is going to continue to be an important facet of tourism and attraction for San Diego. And I think it is getting even better now as there are some beautiful boats coming on now that it is just going to keep getting better and better.

RW: What do you think it adds to the San Diego economy overall, like supplies and so forth?

RM: Catherine has the dollars on that. Particularly it brings people from out of town. They come and bring their families, go to Sea World [aquatic park]. Some of them go fishing and bring their families to motels. We bring a lot of dollars into San Diego from people who go sport fishing.

RW: Just in round figures, would it be a ten million dollar industry?

RM: Catherine tells me it would be bigger figures than that, but I don't know exactly what the figures are. We bring a lot of people into San Diego to the motels and for meals. You see, the families see other attractions while dad is out fishing.

RW: I want to say thank you very much for the interview.

RM: I enjoyed seeing you - tell a little bit about what happened to sport fishing in San Diego for the last, I guess, sixty plus years, the history of San Diego since about 1935. So we have something like 62 years of sport fishing in San Diego that I know about. Before that, there was another boat company here. We've had sport fishing in San Diego a long, long time. I have really enjoyed the interview. Thanks a lot.

RW: Thank you, again.

END OF INTERVIEW
