



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with
Peter S. Rask, Sr., 1902-1978

February 9, 1963



[MP3 Audio File](#) [Length: 00:45:19] (20.7 MB)

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INTERVIEWER'S NOTE

A taped interview with Peter S. Rask, Sr. of 391 Elm Avenue, Imperial Beach, California, 9 February 1963, by Larry Freeman for the San Diego Historical Society.

Larry Freeman: When did you first begin building boats?

Peter Rask: I was about 10 years old when my apprenticeship as a boat builder began in 1911. As a small boy, I spent my time learning my trade, which I admired very much, and I wanted to be like my stepfather, Manuel Madruga, a good mechanic.

LF: What was your family background?

PR: My dad, George Christensen Rask, was from Copenhagen, Denmark. His family and ancestry, all the way back, had been boat builders. They lived from the sea, and they died at sea. Every one of my ancestors passed on and were laid out at sea by some misfortune or another.

LF: Did you work during World War I?

PR: Yes, I was down at the yards working at the time of World War I. During the troubles of the war, I had the opportunity of working with my stepdad. Also, my uncle, myself, and many, many others worked (during 1917) at the Hercules Powder Company in Chula Vista, which was then supplying potash for the government. It had to be made from kelp. I worked there for several months until I became ill, hurt my right arm, and got blood poisoning. I was laid off for that one reason. I almost lost my arm and my life.

LF: What did you do after the war was over?

PR: After it was over, we got back to boat building. In the period before the war, there were several boats built along the waterfront. My stepdad started out venturing, that is, he built boats for different buyers that wanted him to build boats.

LF: What kinds of boats did you build?

PR: Those were commercial fishing boats. Four boats were built a little below Five Points by his home - one 50-footer and three 45-footers for a Jap fishing fleet. The first boats that were ever built for Manuel Medina, I mean Joaquin Medina, one of the old-time fishermen here who was one of the top notch tuna boat owners. The name of that boat was the *Pacific*. It was a 50-footer. It had a 35 hp Hicks gas engine. They were a prominent engine of that day. There were three major engines - Hicks, Standard, and Union. Oh, and some Imperials, all *Pacific* coast engines.

LF: Were there other buyers?

PR: There were three 45-foot boats built there for the Japanese fleet - *Naka*, *Nikata*, and *Ais*. Previous to that, south of this area, there were two more boats built for M. F. Prioste, 45-foot fishing boats. One was called the *Maine*. Prioste was the agent for the Hicks gas engine. He was a Portugee and pretty well liked by the fishermen. He was also in fishing himself. There was also a little boat built for another Jap called the *Sun*, about a 38-footer. It also had a Hicks, 20 hp engine. That was for a "coming on" fleet - a new fleet that was coming out (for the first time). This was just after World War 1.

During the war - there's a step that we've overlooked - starting from the latter part of 1915 to the latter part of 1917 - a few boats were built at Point Loma at La Playa at the foot of Cannon Street. The first boat built there was the *Princess* for the Silveiras of La Playa, a 55-footer. Then there was the *Roseville* built for the Mitchells, Frank Mitchell, of Point Loma. We had the *Alpino*, built for an Italian, Canepa, a 48-footer, and then there was the *Superior*, which was built for M. F. Silva and his brothers of Point Loma. My stepdad and my uncle were sort of affiliated in building these ships. My uncle was Fred Romero. They proceeded to the best of their ability until they went broke due to the fact that the war had caused tremendous high prices. We had intended then to establish a boat yard at Point Loma, which was way before Kettenburg.

Our yard was at the foot of Cannon Street a couple of blocks away from Kettenburg's Boat Yard (present location). So, really, it was the first boat yard in Point Loma. Manuel Madruga and Fred Romero - they just used their names. They didn't have a trade name at the time. I was then a young man of about 16. I was still serving my time and going right along. I made the sum then of maybe \$1 or \$1.25 per week. I was happy as a clam to go

downtown and take in the penny arcade. The shows were only five and ten cents, (but I) didn't need much money. The pay then was small for men's salaries. Then, after that, the business blew up, and that's why we turned to work for the Hercules Powder Company.

LF: What was your connection to Campbell's Boat Yard?

PR: We came back again after everyone was laid off (at Hercules). There wasn't much to do. We decided then to make plans for some kind of a yard. While processing this (idea), Dave Campbell got wind of the situation, and Dave personally called at our home. At that time, he used to drive a white roadster, a Stevens-Duryea, which, I think, was the forerunner in which he won the race to Arizona. He made us a good proposition. He wasn't too happy with the automobile industry the way it was going. He had some other irons in the fire. He made us this proposition that he would (convert the) yard he had in back into a boat yard. At that time, he had a Japanese who wasn't doing too well. He wanted him out of there. So we took over the boat yard. I pleaded with my stepdad that we should try it and take it over. We had nothing else to lose; we had everything to look forward to, to gain, and that was the beginning of the Campbell Machine Company boat building yard at the foot of Eighth Street right opposite the gas company there. It became quite a famous company. So it was at that time that we started out. We built a number of boats and did quite a lot of repair work there. I would say that, well, that was the very beginning of the tuna fleet which was being born then, because the albacore fleet was beginning to taper off into the tuna fleet.

LF: How did it go for you?

PR: So after the building of several boats or many, many boats, I decided that I should probably try and go in for myself. At that time I had marriage obligations, and I couldn't see my way with the money I was then earning. I was earning the sum of \$7 per day, but some of the workmen then were getting \$8 - yet I was one of the bosses and supposed to be one of the owners.

After that late date, the Campbells, Dave and George, Manuel Madruga, myself, Peter Rask, decided we'd form some kind of a partnership company there, by word of mouth. Nothing was written, and we continued to build boats.

LF: How did things go for the new company?

PR: At that time, we (sought) a contract for ten boats, 65-footers, being built for the Mathewson Company, a big fishing syndicate out of San Francisco. It was being formed by men in San Francisco and San Diego. Finally a contract was signed that ten boats would be diesel-powered. Dave Campbell went to San Francisco to try to get the agency for the Atlas Imperial engine. At that time West Coast Gas Engine had it, and they weren't very successful. It was quite a situation when Dave returned. He returned as Union Diesel Engine's agent. Due to the fact that he wasn't very happy with the reception or whichever way he was received in San Francisco, business transactions weren't very satisfactory. It was the beginning then of the era for the diesel engine, the Union, which was a very good engine. It proved itself to this day (to be) a very good engine. We were still together at Campbell Machine in 1922 when the (contract was) not consummated. Three of the ten were built, and one of the boats is still in this harbor called the *Balboa*.

LF: You mean she is still fishing?

PR: Yes, today. She is used for tuna. She was sold to Joe Monise of Point Loma, and he sold it to Judy Zalezzi. We built her around 1922, and she's still in operation.

LF: What happened to the contract for the remaining boats?

PR: The balance of the ten boats weren't built. Three only. But several other boats were built for different individuals. At that time I decided to sever my relationship with the Campbell Machine Company and my stepfather due to the fact that I wanted to go into business for myself. In 1923 I had an awful lot of doctor bills and family responsibilities, and I couldn't make out with the money I was earning. That caused me to leave.

LF: What boats did you first work on?

PR: I started out with three boats to build, three small fishing boats. I took over the shop on Pacific Boulevard which then was known as Charlie Langell's Boat Shop. Later on it became known under Vinyard Overhead Garage Doors. Langell got killed when working on a dredger. He had also built the fire boat, the *Bill Kettner*, there on Columbia Street for the fire department. That was his pride and joy. Well, anyhow, I started out and built my first boat, the *Little Francisco*, a 30-footer, (then) built the *Jenny*, about a 30-footer also, and I built one for the Portuguese fleet at Point Loma. I believe she was about 42 feet, named *Mary Grace*. They all worked out all right.

LF: Then your yard moved ahead?

PR: Except that I was tight for room, and I needed more space. A. R. Robbins made me a proposition to take over his yard. Then in 1924, I think, I moved over to Robbins and Bill Batten (who had) some other young men running the yard. They weren't very pleased with them, so I then took over the yard and developed the yard to the point where we started building quite a few of the commercial boats.

LF: Where was the Robbins-Batten yard located?

PR: That was at the foot of, well, at the present Civic Center site, right in front of Robbins' old shop.

LF: What were your duties in that yard?

PR: I took over quite a responsibility all alone, planning, managing, and running the boat yard including the repair work. (I reached a point) where I had an average of 50 to 60 men working. It kept me up long hours half the night making drawings - I made them part at the yard, part at home. And most of my modeling would be roughed out at home or the yard.

LF: Do you know the story on the *Atlantic*?

PR: At that particular time (1925-1926) the large (boat) tuna fleet started coming into the 100-foot class. Joaquin and Manuel Medina (the ones that the *Pacific* built by my dad many years before) started out with the idea of having a large tuna boat built along his ideas. It was (to be) 112 feet, I believe, in length when fully equipped and geared up as of that time. It was known then as the *Atlantic*, and it remained the *Atlantic* for many, many years. When they started that particular project at Campbell's (in 1926) about a week or a couple of weeks later, I was contemplating the same type of boat, same length, 112 feet, for the Silvas, Frank and his brother, or brother-in-law. I finally got the contract in December 1927. The boat was built and completed as the *St. Theresa*, that's the one in the painting over there on the wall.

LF: What innovations came in at this time?

PR: That made my stepdad and me the first two men on this hemisphere to start off a tuna fleet, which we developed over a period of years. (In regard to) the mechanical background, a lot of thanks go to Dave Campbell and his machine company, because they helped with an awful lot of the equipment. We developed brine tanks and brine wells that were then coming in but they didn't call it brine - they called them "live bait tanks."

"Sunken" bait tanks would be a proper name for them. They had big valves in the bottom of the boat. You'd open or close them, use them for all kinds of refrigeration, or even try to chill the water if you had time. If you didn't, you'd go ahead and fill them anyway. It was quite a problem over a period of years to develop something that was new in the coastal operation since the areas of operation were flexible as well, as the beginning of coast business with South America. Naturally everything had to be tried out, worked over, and developed. (This included everything) from the anchor winches on up to cargo winches as well as steering gears, and all else. In those days nothing was available (for a) particular size. Everything had to be made and experimented on. There were no boats of that size (100 feet). Equipment available was either too big or too small.

LF: How did it finally work out?

PR: It was an awkward stage. We went on from there developing what the tuna boat finally ended up to be. The years rolled by. In 1929 right at the peak of the depression or the beginning of it, I pulled away from Mr. Robbins. He had passed on and Ira, his son, had taken over the yard. It seemed like there was little change of ideas immediately. My deal had been made with Mr. Robbins, Sr., and, of course, Ira Robbins wanted me out of there. Immediately after I had developed as much of the place as I did, he gave me two weeks' notice to move out. In that period of time, I had to move over next door. Joe Brennan came to my aid, and he saw to it that I was located nearby.

LF: Where was your new yard located?

PR: I continued then at the area between the present Civic Center and Grape Street on the waterfront. There was quite a few boats built there by myself. I had had 20 to 30 men working for me, but during the depression it got down to practically nothing. There was a time I had to leave. I was absent from the waterfront a little over two years. Due to the fact that I had a contract with the Mexican government and during the change in their administration and parties, I got left holding the bag for \$20,000; (I had) about \$5,000 in bills to pay and I couldn't meet them. The contract was a job for the Coast Guard, and when the change took place, the boat wasn't done. The new regime wouldn't take over the responsibility of paying it. I was rebuilding it there in my yard and installing a new engine. Finally, I ended up in complications because I wanted my money or I couldn't release the boat. They put up a bond and it lasted in court for three years. In the meantime this set me up high and dry with no money, no capital - I was shipwrecked with a lot of hard luck additions to the cause.

LF: You were bankrupt? What did you do then?

PR: So I went to Los Angeles for a couple of years. In the meantime, I hung onto the yard. Joe Brennan (was) harbor master or port director (of) the Harbor Department as of that time. I'm very grateful to him and the Department. They cooperated 100 percent. They gave me all the help and all the assistance I could possibly ask. I got in about \$600 to \$700 in the hole to the City for the rent. Well, I got back and finally things were paid up. The bonding company paid up after close to three years. I paid up all the bills and the rent, and out of \$40,000, I had \$44 left to start my business with again.

LF: What shape was your yard in after those two years?

PR: So then I started out (and) took over the place again. It was completely run down. I worked seven days around the clock from sunrise to sunset including Sundays, rainy days, and every other kind of day. Finally I got a good sized job from Standard Dredging Company for the hull of a barge. Well, if I had to do it again today with the equipment I have now which is about ten times as strong as then, I don't know how in the name of God I ever got this barge out. But I got it out. I made several thousand dollars out of that job, which gave me a little capital to get started again. I can't recall who the manager for the dredging company was in this area, but he was awful nice. He knew my predicament and he knew my ability. He had faith and confidence in me.

LF: Did you ever get back into boat building again?

PR: From then on I started to build more boats again. My credit had been damaged a lot. From then on we started out raising a family. Not only our, but I had to raise four boys besides my own four ... (there was) nephews and nieces, too. I had to take care of my mother-in-law and father-in-law. During all of this shuffle, I lost my home. It was in Shell Town and practically paid for. We stayed with the old folks until they decided they wanted to be alone, so we moved out and rented a place out toward Logan Heights. From there we moved to Kearny and bought a house there right across from the old fire department on 3264, I believe, or 65, on Kearny. The freeway goes through there now. The good Lord was good to me. In the meantime I had acquired a job from the Mexican government again. (This was) a new contract for the coast guard's new 83-footer, which was the beginning of a series they wanted built. I built the boat, and I think we made close to \$20,000 out of it. By that time my son, Peter Rask, Jr., had already finished high school. He then became the executive of the office and I became the leader in the yard. That began to change the picture of the whole situation. Sometimes my daughter would come down and help out, so the struggle was all worthwhile.

LF: Did you expand the Grape Street yard then?

PR: In 1941 when World War II broke out, the very Sunday that the papers were being sold on the street, I had already acquired a lease from Joe Brennan. On this particular Sunday we began moving some of the equipment from Grape Street (in the) Civic Center area to our new location where National Steel is now, close to Martinolich's (yard) - (although) at that time Martinolich wasn't there. The only yard available then was the Lynch yard. Then it was under another name. And there was another small yard next to mine, but they didn't last long. We started out at the foot of 26th Street. We had been moving two big truck loads. I arrived at the area - there was nothing there but creosoted timber - and paper boys were running all over. (They were yelling) that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I'll never forget it.

LF: How did you manage to deliver the Mexican boat?

PR: I wanted to get it released because it was still on my hands. I couldn't sell it to the Mexican government because I couldn't deliver it without the proper release from Washington. Finally the release came. In the meantime we had to bring the boat around to the new location by the foot of 26th, where National Steel and Shipbuilding is now. We anchored the boat there until (its) completion. When we got the release we delivered the boat out at sea. It was a boat like a subchaser with depth charges, machine guns, and the like. The Mexicans had a crew of 16 men and officers for it. A gentleman named King Mitchell, an old-time skipper here, myself, and Albert Keck, an ex-Navy man too, (were all) representing the American government making delivery to Mexico. We got out to sea at 3 p.m. We pulled the American flag down and raised the Mexican flag. After it was all over, we had a couple of snorts. (Just) then the sea decided to give us hell, and that Cedros Channel gave us a bad time going and coming. But I had a few bugs to get out, so I hauled her back to the new area. I made all the repairs I needed to make; none were major. I did it on my own. I had a very good standing with the Mexican government and to this day, I still represent the Mexican government here. Up to this day I do a lot of work (for them) including checking documents.

LF: Did you do federal work after the war started?

PR: We operated up until the time we sold out to National Steel in 1943 or 1944. They needed the room and wanted to expand, so Joe Brennan asked us to sell, and he said he would see we were taken care of, which he did. He did a very good job. He gave us a location at Point Loma where the Harbor Boat and Yacht Company is located now. They filled in and gave us all the help we needed to get started. In the meantime, the war had taken my son overseas including most of my crew. I was kind of a lone eagle trying to keep things going.

LF: What were conditions like after the war stopped?

PR: When the boy returned from the war in 1946 we found out that things weren't exactly as cordial and happy as we'd like to have had them - we found the fishing industry kinda going to pot again, like the different cycles it goes through. We decided that big boats weren't a safe investment any more. I reMained clear of the big heavy stuff. We went in at the new location strictly for yachts, the recreational stuff, and small commercial (vessels). We put in a fuel dock. (We) did quite a lot of repair work and sold gas engines at Point Loma.

LF: What led to your move to Coronado?

PR: We weren't quite satisfied, so we decided to sell out. My son and I decided to leave. I left first, and I was cleared away. Then he left, and we (obtained) another location at Coronado. In 1948 (we put in an application for the location in 1947) - on 8 January 1948 - we started driving pilings in Coronado for the new location. It was kind of awkward for fisherman (to reach) but there was no choice at that time. We had planned for the Tenth Street area, but they were uncertain what they were going to do there, commercial, or what have you. There was quite a controversy; and (then) Brennan left. When he left, I lost hopes of anything else. So that's why we took Coronado. The address is 1511 Marine Way.

LF: How well did the Coronado yard do?

PR: At that time we had quite a commercial trade. The industry wasn't hurt yet by Japanese imports. But, as the years rolled by, money became (scarcer), and it seemed like credit was going to eat up the whole waterfront. So after struggling under that condition, we completely cut out commercial and went in strictly for naval work or (any) other work, pleasure craft, anything that would pay bills. And we have been very successful. We are grateful that we've had such wonderful trade. My son and I make a wonderful team.

Ninety percent of our work now is naval work for the U.S. Navy, small craft (such as) major repair, rebuilding, refitting, engine building, engine installation, and the generalities of naval requirements. We have also worked on some of the large ships at the Naval Base. We have done several thousand dollars in work on big ships. The only thing that became quite rough on us (was observing) safety requirements, so we thought we'd stay away from (large ships). We're right in the area of operation we fit best, which is the generalities of smaller jobs. We have at this period done work for the U.S. Navy in that small yard close to \$500,000 for the year 1962.

LF: Considering the number you have built, what is the state of affairs for boat building now?

PR: I have tried to count the total I have built - this boat we're building now I call a prototype job. It's a pick-me-up deal from where we left off, or, better, from where the waterfront left off. All up and down the coast, there've been few small boats built, just a few. They're not a full-fledged boat like a boat builder would say. They're kind of a half-breed deal.

But this round hull type, in other words, is a miniature tuna boat.. She's 53 feet overall and she's going to have all the qualifications of a big tuna boat. She'll be self-sustaining (in) refrigeration and everything else, (truly) a general all around job. It's more or less an order; but we do not yet want to accept it as an order because we are on our own. There's possibilities of two or three more boats on the same line of thought. We feel that this boat will be able to operate between San Diego and La Paz. She'll return to San Diego without refueling. Considering that total - well, this is number 138 as far as I can figure it out. I knocked off at the 112-foot mark. It was just too much for me beyond that. The *St. Theresa*, built in 1928, cost \$80,000 or \$90,000 then. It would cost today close to \$2,000 a foot or a quarter of a million dollars, or better than that if they put in radar and other highfalutin stuff. Incidentally, that *St. Theresa* there came into Manus when my son was in the Navy. He said she was all shot to hell. That was a Navy Base in the South Pacific. They spent two or three months working on her. Several fellows were killed on her - machine gun holes (were) all through her.

LF: What are the fondest memories of your career?

PR: My fondest memories? I think the second tuna boat, the *Stella di Genova*. Jerry MacMullen attended the launching. He was on the (San Diego) Union. It was during prohibition. We had wonderful cooperation from the police department and everyone else. The booze was flowing in all directions. All (the) launchings were nice; they were well attended. (On that topic) I was the only one launching like regular fish boat style - on skids. The others didn't do that. Campbell had trouble with his *Atlantic*. He was two weeks launching it. The Harbor Department (helped), but it was a mess and he couldn't operate freely as under normal conditions.

LF: Who is building boats now?

PR: Now? National Steel has a small boat department. Then you have Martinolich but under National Steel now. San Diego Marine, Campbell's, ourselves, Fogerty, Kettenburg, and Harbor Boat.

END OF INTERVIEW
