

**Article 30**

**The San Francisco Waterfront: The Copra Dock**

**by  
Herb Mills**

## The San Francisco Waterfront: The Copra Dock.

The docker named Pete Bolotoff -- nicknamed "Copra Pete" -- who is spoken of in the document which follows was also featured on both covers and in the text (pp. 148 - 159) of Men and Machines -- for which see Article #19.



ink drawing, Robert Chang / 1995

Labor and Community in  
San Francisco Preserving

### The Pier 84 COPRA CRANE

On the Shoreline of the Islais  
Creek Community friends are  
working to create green space  
and public access in the heart  
of the old industrial section.

The Copra Crane is being restored  
and maintained as a blue collar  
preservation project by retirees  
and members of various maritime  
and building trades unions.

Copra Crane Labor  
Landmark Association  
415-775-0533

Friends of Islais Creek  
415-826-5669



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### THE COPRA CRANE-A LABOR LANDMARK\*

The words *labor* and *landmark* when combined suggest craft and cause, sacrifice and vision. Originally *landmark* meant a boundry stone at river's bank or forest's edge. Today, it designates sites from Mount Vernon to Yosemite. To such national parks and monuments, we add the structures that memorialize work itself or workers' history.



The Copra Crane on San Francisco's Islais Creek is a highly visible reminder of toil on the waterfront. It symbolizes a world-wide process — harvesting coconuts from palm trees on Pacific plantations; shipping and unloading dried copra; processing the copra for oil for food, soap, perfume, and medicine; and recycling the residue for animal feed.

Islais Creek, once the home of tanneries, canneries, and slaughterhouses, meant both welcome jobs and careless damage to a bay inlet. As factories faced obsolescence, they were abandoned. In the last decade, community conservationists and preservationists have banded together to restore the natural creek, and return wildlife to its shores.

San Francisco labor, spearheaded by the ILWU, has joined hands with citizens from Hunters Point-Bayview and throughout the Bay Area to safeguard the Copra Crane and put it to community use. An educational classroom, mini-museum, and creekside exploratorium will be housed in the crane's shadow.

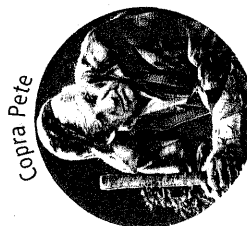
Islais Creek marks a story not yet ended. Where enterprise meets environment, the earth's fate is in the balance. The Copra Crane, a labor landmark, represents demanding work. It is also a dramatic industrial structure, as well as a signpost along humanity's road.



— ARCHIE GREEN  
Labor Folklorist, Shipwright,  
Board member, Labor  
Heritage Foundation.

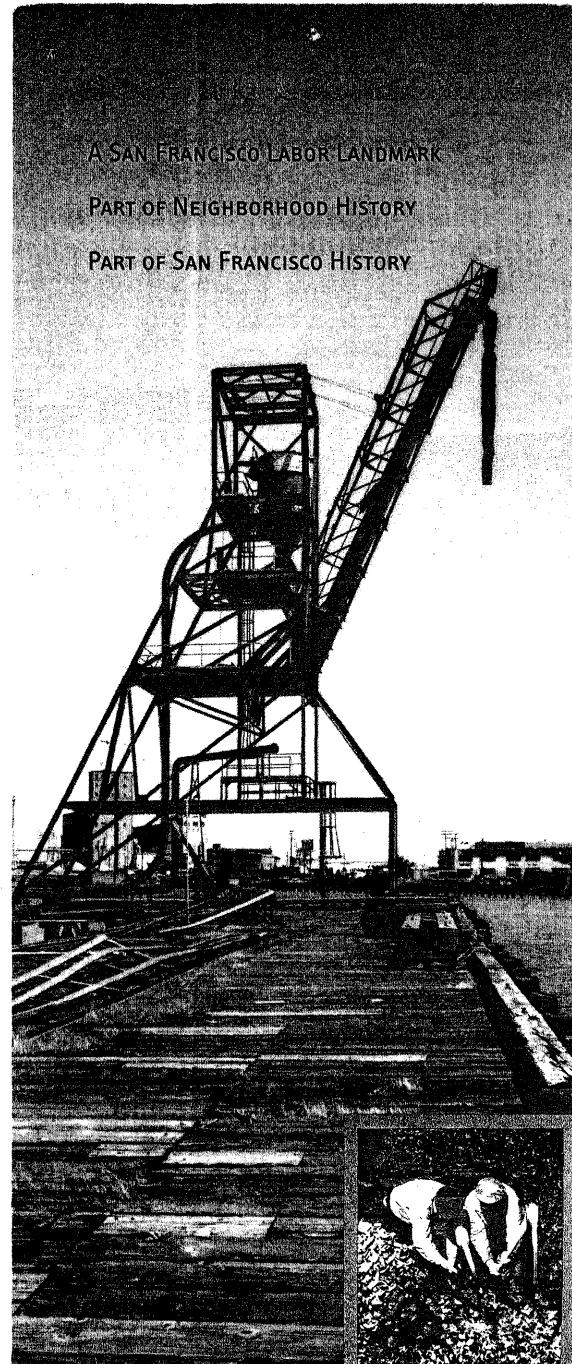
\*Copra is dried coconut.

Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association  
c/o ILWU— Bill Ward & Don Watson  
1188 Franklin St., Fourth Floor  
San Francisco, CA 94109



Copra Pete

Save the Copra Crane as a tribute to the copra handlers and a symbol for all workers.



A SAN FRANCISCO LABOR LANDMARK  
PART OF NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY  
PART OF SAN FRANCISCO HISTORY



**Why Save an Abandoned Crane at an Unused Dock?**

The copra crane at Pier 84 in San Francisco is the last remaining piece of machinery on the Port of San Francisco hand operated by longshoremen working bulk cargo.

It was shut down in 1974 when the copra (dried coconut) processing plant closed next door. The seven acre property was sold to the City to build a bus repair and driver training yard.



The historic Cargill, Inc., copra processing facility that was once located next to the crane (top). Youthful sailor and future ILWU leader Harry Bridges arriving at the Port of San Francisco aboard the copra-laden vessel Ysabel in 1920 (right).



Islais Channel is a three-quarter mile man-made channel in the industrial section known as "Butchertown". East of the Third Street silver drawbridge are the Port's container docks. To the west is a waterway where the Friends of Islais Creek, led by community activist Julia Viera, have been working since 1980 to transform a trashed and toxic site into a green space people will want to visit.

The Copra Crane, rising five stories above a platform in the water, is the centerpiece for an emerging

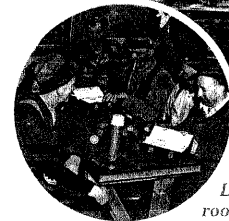
park. The Port, owner of the platform, and the Municipal Railway (Muni), owner of the crane, at first thought the structure should be demolished.

**Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association Formed**

However, Archie Green, a renowned labor folklorist, saw the importance of saving the crane as an industrial artifact. Retired longshoremen, members of the ILWU Bay Area Pensioners, many of whom worked the copra in years past, agreed with Green and organized the Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association. They won the support of ILWU locals and the San Francisco labor movement. As a result, the Port and Muni agreed not to destroy the crane, and to help preserve it.

The Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association is now planning and raising money to create a lasting tribute to the generations of waterfront workers who so far are not suitably honored elsewhere on the Port of San Francisco.

The plans include re-creation of the original Pier 84 Walking Boss shack as a mini-museum where retired dockworkers will teach visiting school children and others about the sounds, scenes, and stories of this old site. An outdoor display showing the history



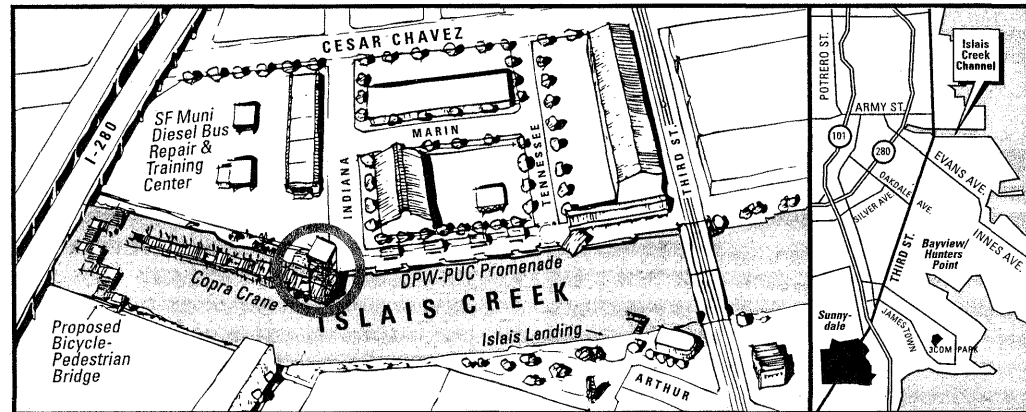
The Pier 84 Walking Boss shack (right). Longshoremen used it for years as a lunch room and social gathering place (left).

and operation of the copra plant will be an important feature of the emerging Islais Creek Waterfront Parkway.

**What's Needed:** Funds, museum artifacts, oral histories from union members who worked the copra dock, and additions to the roster of people who are interested in this project.

For information call (415) 775-0533.

To donate please make checks out to "CCLLA". Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association c/o ILWU— Bill Ward & Don Watson 1188 Franklin St., Fourth Floor San Francisco, CA 94109



The copra crane will be an important landmark feature within the Islais Creek park and recreational complex.

Harry Bridges, luncheon. ILWU library, cover crane, Cargill plant and Walking Boss shack. Dave Dawson. Copra Crane, cover insert. Otto Hegel

# The Copra Dock

Edited by Harvey Schwartz

**T**his is the first installment of a new three-part oral history series on the West Coast waterfront. The testimonies in this issue tell the human story behind the picturesque copra crane in San Francisco that labor activists and urban environmentalists are now working to preserve as a labor landmark.

Harry Bridges was a young Australian sailor when he arrived at San Francisco aboard the copra-laden barkentine *Ysabel* in 1920. Bridges, of course, went on to become a legendary labor leader. As for copra, or dried coconut meat, the source of coconut oil—it had long been worked in San Francisco Bay when Bridges landed. Later, after World War II, there would be a copra heyday along San Francisco's Islais Creek at pier 84—known to waterfront workers as “the copra dock”—that serviced the nearby Cargill, Inc., copra processing plant.

Cargill, an American agribusiness giant based in Minnesota, imported thousand of tons of copra from the Philippines between 1947 and 1974. After ILWU Local 10 longshoremen dislodged the incoming copra, Cargill's plant workers—who joined ILWU Local 6 in 1964—crushed the oil from it in a multi-step process and made what was left into copra meal or animal feed. The oil was used in soap and as “butter” for movie theater popcorn. Then, in the early '70s, an American post-World War II tax-free export agreement with the Philippines that had greatly profited Cargill lapsed. Cargill abruptly closed its Islais Creek facility.

All that remains today of Cargill's plant and the longshore equipment at pier 84 is the copra crane. The movement to preserve it, and make it a tribute to the copra handlers and a symbol for all workers, has attracted enthusiastic ILWU support. IBU and Locals 6, 10, 34 and 91 pensioners and active members have set up a Labor Landmark Association now headed by William T. Ward, President, and Don Watson, Secretary-Treasurer.

The Association is working closely with Archie Green, the nationally-renowned labor folklorist, and Julia Viera, the crusading leader of the Friends of Islais Creek who has worked for a decade to clean and beautify that waterfront resource. Together they have forged a unique and pioneering alliance with officials of various government agencies and a small army of volunteer architects, environmentalists, and community activists. Their goal is to create an urban park along Islais Creek with the crane as its trademark, complete with recreational facilities and a museum dedicated to San Francisco waterfront labor history.

The ILWU veterans quoted here are Joe Amyes, a former Local 91 President; Donald R. (Bud) Riggs, Local 91; Don Ruth, a retired Local 6 Business Agent; Willard (Will) Whitaker, Local 91 Assistant Secretary-Treasurer/Dispatcher; and Ralph Zamacona, a Local 10 pensioner.

## JOE AMYES

When I started at the copra dock in 1948, the method of

removing copra, which was a bulk cargo, was by means of a vacuum situation. We had these things they called pumps, which are actually big vacuum cleaners, with about a ten inch diameter pipe that we rigged and brought into the hold. The copra had been in the ship for a while and it got solid in there. So it was a pick and shovel job. It was hard work with a 20 cent an hour premium.

We had 18 men gangs, with 12 men in the hold, and two pipes that were removing the copra. There were six men on each pipe. You worked 20 minutes with a pick, 20 minutes with a shovel, and you had 20 minutes off. We were working in pairs. Copra at the bottom, where moisture collected and it rotted smelled like hell.

The copra was full of copra bugs. They'd get in your nose, in your mouth, in your eyes and down your neck. It could be kind of uncomfortable 'til you got used to it! But the damn things don't survive once they leave the copra. A couple of days after the ship was gone you couldn't find one.

I had a partner who was absolutely incredible. His name was Pete Bolotoff. He was an old Russian who was about 60, but what a hard worker. I worked with him until my transfer to ILWU Local 91, the foremen's union, in 1956.

## BUDD RIGGS

I started on the longshoremen's B list in '63, but I was actually with my dad at the copra dock from '61 to '63 learning about the future of what I was going to do. My dad, Armand Riggs, was a walking boss at the copra dock for years. When we got our A books later in the '60s, I went to the copra dock whenever I could get the job.

“Shit Creek,” that's what we called it. The water was black and bubbling. I believe the sewer was draining in there. Besides the copra, the creek itself smelled. Yes, there was a copra smell, like smoked coconut. But when you work, it's like anything else; you work 15 minutes into it and you don't smell it anymore until you went home and your wife or mother or whoever you went to said, “What the hell's wrong with you? You stink!”

The copra beetles—we called them copra bugs—were there when you opened the hatch. We insisted they open the hatches at sea before they got here to let the bugs get out. If you didn't, when you opened the hatches millions of 'em come out. If one crawled on you and you got it under your armpit and pinched it, it would bite you. But it was nothing serious.

The flurry of bugs went by; after the first day, there was very few of them. The coldness of the area would kill 'em. We used to have fun with it. New people would come by. They'd be scared; you could see it. We'd say, “Oh, only two or three people have died of these bug bites, don't worry about it.” And that would be the end of them!



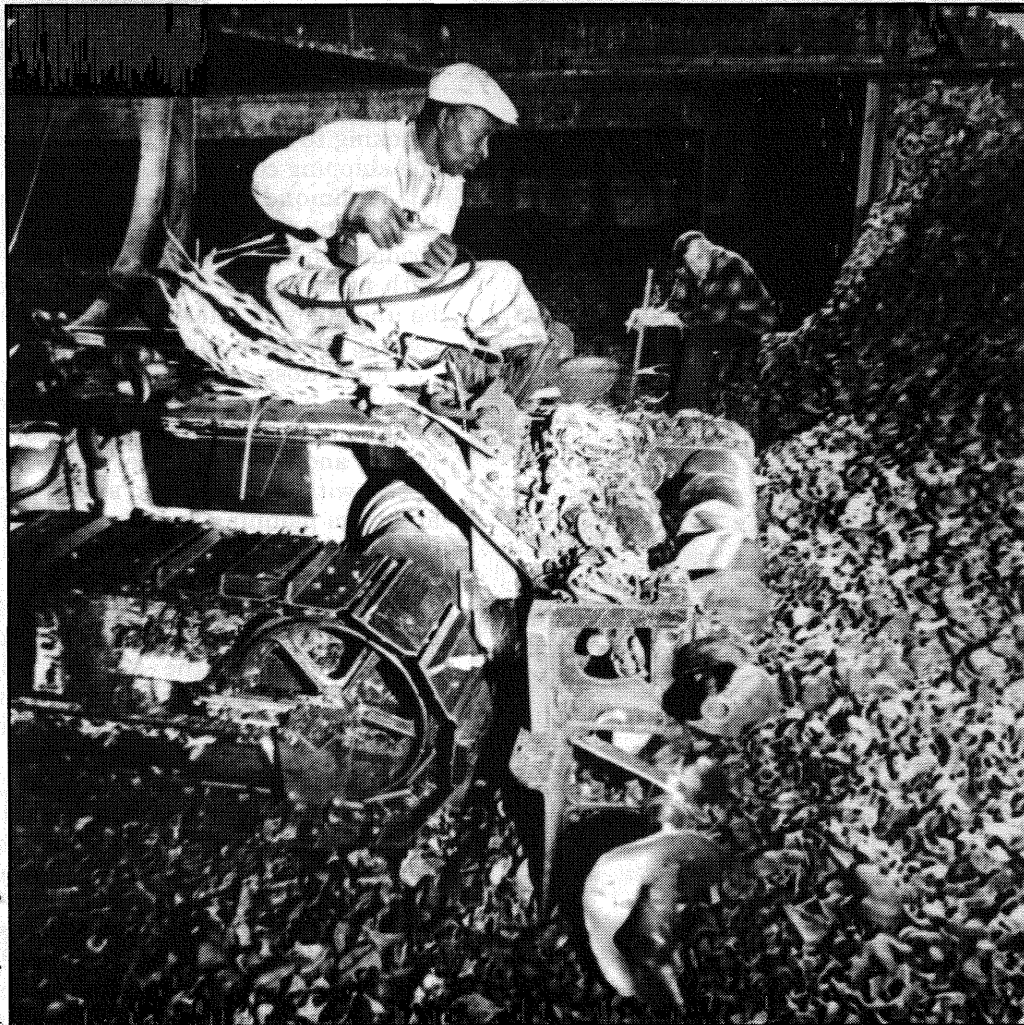


photo by Otto Haged

An ILWU longshoreman runs the specially rigged tractor that breaks up the copra at the bottom of the ship's hold. Copra Pete rests in the background. "It eat nine times the copra a man could pick." —Will Whitaker

## RALPH ZAMACONA

I was born in Mexico in 1919, but I grew up in San Francisco and was in the 1936 longshore strike. I joined the shoveling gang and worked at pier 84 in the '50s and '60s because they gave you more money per hour. I liked nights—more money too, time and a half overtime.

There was about five or six night shovel gangs. Everybody was shooting for that pier 84 hour time because there was always ten, 14, 15 night jobs. Instead of callin' up the hall every day for orders, you'd say, "Well, it's good for about ten or 15 nights. You don't have to worry about calling the hall."

## WILL WHITAKER

My father worked on the waterfront; he came down in '43. So it was a family thing. I came on the waterfront in 1959 as a B man and

often worked copra. Copra is very strange. A lot of people didn't like to work it. They had a odor to it, they had bugs. But as a B man you didn't really have much choice. You had to work where you could.

I found it very appealing. The work wasn't that hard if you applied yourself. There was a gentleman who was a regular class A longshoreman named "Copra" Pete. He saw that I was interested in what I was doing, so he took me as a partner when I could come out there. He showed me the ropes and all the little tricks he had learned. So every time a ship came in and they'd give a B man a job, I went out there. Most of the guys wouldn't go.

There were mostly Blacks out there on the copra dock. Pete was one of the few that wasn't. I had a partner later on who was of Spanish descent that I worked with for years. But most of the rest of the fellas were Black. I was one of the early Blacks to become a Local 91 walking boss. I started walkin' in 1973.

## BUDD RIGGS

Around 1960 we got mechanized. My dad had ideas for the machine. They put it together with the people at Cargill. They took a small Caterpillar tractor, gutted it out, and put electric motors in it. It still had the tracks. On the front it had a couple of screw blades, one up and one down, that ground the copra up as it went into it.

Underneath it there was two big eight-inch diameter suction pipes that went to the back. Then these big metal hoses went all the way to the blowers that were on the dock. We called them blowers, but they were sucking.

The machine would drive around on top of the copra, eat it up, and let the blowers suck it up and out to the dock. A belt would cross it over to the Cargill plant. The driver ran the machine with a joystick like an airplane. He would ride it. Your feet were hanging down on the augers—we didn't like that, but you did crazy things in those days.

## WILL WHITAKER

The tractor machine was real tricky, but once you learned how to control it, it was very efficient; it eat nine times the copra a man could pick. It definitely changed the manning. The only time the shovelers would have to get in there and shovel is when you'd get down to the corners, because you could get that machine to clean the floor to what there wasn't anything there. So it really reduced the number of men.

# at Islais Creek



The Islais Creek copra crane in 1996.

© David Dawson

## BUDD RIGGS

The tall tower they're calling the copra crane now was put up in 1972. It was done to load copra meal that was going on ships. There used to be a warehouse where they stored the meal from Cargill. When we needed it for the ship, it would come out of there. They would blow it upward, and it would free-fall down the tower's spout into the ship.

## WILL WHITAKER

The only thing the tall copra crane did—we called it a tower—was deliver the after product, after they had squeezed the copra, got all the oil out of it, and they made what we called “rabbit pellets” for feed. That crane put the pellets onto the ship. To load the ship you had to put what we called a trimmer in the hatch. The trimmer would throw the pellets into the corner. So you had to do what we called “shoot the corners.”

Being a copra man, my thing was mostly with the dock-side blowers that sucked the copra out of the ships. I thought that's the focus of the copra. The tower, the copra crane, whatever you call it, gives me a feeling that, OK, it's remembered. Even for people who hated the smell and the bugs, it's something that will be there for a while and will be preserved. It's gonna remind people that OK, there was an operation that went along out here.

## DON RUTH

I'm Scotch-Irish and part Cherokee Indian. I was raised in Eastern Tennessee. In 1958 I went to work at Cargill. By the mid-1960s I was a foreman operator. I could operate the copra crushing plant where the oil expellers were, I could operate the solvent-extracting plant that washed out remaining oil, and I could operate the refinery. There were just a few of us who were that flexible.

# 1947-1974

In 1958 we were in the Seafarers International Union (SIU), in a little off-shoot union called the Fish Cannery Workers. They weren't an aggressive, people-minded union like the ILWU. It was a company and union official relationship instead of a membership of the union relationship with the employer. And SIU had a goon squad that tried to keep people in line.

I became a shop steward for Fish Cannery in a matter of months after I became employed. We had no Blacks working in that plant and I complained. It was all white people, and most of the people hired were from places like where I came from, like Tennessee and Alabama. But I said they should hire Blacks, maybe because I was from East Tennessee, which is more tolerant than Alabama or Georgia. We were taught not to discriminate.

**Cargill screwed up big time back in 1963.** In our contract negotiations they wouldn't even give us a nickel or a dime raise. Ten cents an hour would probably have bought peace. Then I found out through government agencies that Cargill was makin' nothin' but big-time money. And here Cargill was cryin' poor-mouth—they couldn't give us a nickel raise.

We were able to get 'em to bring in filtered breathing masks—I was instrumental in that—and to put up signs about what some of this sulfuric acid and water and oil mixed together would mean breathing in them fumes. And I got medical data to post on the bulletins boards.

That company was really getting upset over me. And the union was warning me to back off, that I was endangering my job. I said, "I'm not quitting. If they want to fire me, fine, but in the meantime I'm going to tell the people the truth."

So I was in trouble. Then Clarence Paton, a pier 84 worker whose brother was a former president of ILWU Local 6, introduced me to LeRoy King, an organizer for the ILWU International. LeRoy led me along and helped me.

I'd organize one or two people at a time, and tell 'em, "We're gonna change unions, we're goin' to ILWU Local 6." I was able to keep everything secret, and that was hard to do with 80 or 90 men. This is after the '63 negotiations. It took us almost a year of underground work, but we got everybody signed up. After we filed for a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election, the SIU came in big time. First

they offered me a job as Secretary-Treasurer of Fish Cannery if I'd back off. I said, "I don't want a job like that. I want a job that's elected by the people, not appointed."

I had phone calls and threats. I walked right into their office and said, "If you blow me away, I've already notified all my family in Tennessee, and they have your address. You better hope the f—k nobody else bothers me, 'cause they are gonna come and get you, your dogs, your chickens, and your family."

They called the dogs off me. LeRoy King and Harry Bridges said, "You got a lotta guts there, boy. You did good."

During the election period, the copra dock longshoremen gave verbal support: "If this company messes with any of you, we'll shut the dock down." It gave our people a feeling of strength where they could stand up and talk to the boss on an equal basis without fear.

Local 6 won the election hands down, and in '64 we got our first contract. Our maintenance men got \$2 or \$3 an hour increase overnight. On the warehouse rate, everybody in that plant got a raise. Now the company had to pay decent wages. Before that, we—myself included—wanted to work overtime

so we could take more money home, 'cause a straight time pay check wasn't enough to survive on.

Remember the company's policy of not hiring Blacks? A few days after the NLRB notified the company of the pending election, they hired two Black people. Then they hired some more Mexicans—they'd had one—and another Black person. So I broke their trend down there. I'd been agitating about this for a long time.

I was the chief steward under SIU in '64, and I continued my leadership after the NLRB election. We had a reconfirmation election and an election where I got a good solid committee to back me up. We were under the ILWU program, not the SIU appoint this, appoint that program.

In 1965 we had a wildcat strike—a strike in the middle of the contract. The company had instituted a ten-four operation: ten days on, four days off. But they manipulated

the wording of the contract and the schedule so they could work people into the four-day rest period. We said, "Wait a minute. We're supposed to have four days off; if we work any of those days after working ten days straight, it's overtime."

It was abused so bad we had a work stoppage that became a full-scale strike for ten days. Chili Duarte, the Local 6



President, told me this was not an arbitration issue. But he said we still gotta straighten this company out because they abused and misinterpreted the contract intent. "It's gonna be up to you guys," he said, "to stop work until they pay you." The longshoremen supported us; they walked off and left a copra ship sittin' there at the dock.

Finally, the company decided to back up and pay the money. They also said, "Everybody can come back to work except Don Ruth." The men stayed out extra days for me, but I felt bad; a couple of guys, their kids were gettin' hungry. I told Chili and George Valters, Local 6's Secretary-Treasurer, "Put everybody back to work and take me to arbitration." We went before Sam Kagel, and he ruled against me. He said that as the shop steward on the job, it was my responsibility to defend the company and order people back to work. Well, who the hell is gonna do that?

Soon Local 6 established penalty pay so harsh on the employer that Cargill didn't make slave labor out of the workers anymore. The company quit makin' 'em work so many hours and hired more people. And when I was fired, Armand Riggs and the longshoremen passed the hat and got me some grocery money 'til I got down to the Local 6 hiring hall. The Cargill people who had been on strike and went to work all kicked in a couple of bucks. I got dispatched out right away, worked at several places, and was elected Business Agent in '72. I served the union that way except for two years until I retired in 1989.

## BUDD RIGGS

I became a Local 91 walker in '72 or '73; Consolidated Stevedoring Co. at the copra dock made me a walking boss. Then, in '74 when the dock closed, to me it was just "bango," just that quick. It put lots of people out of work. There was a lot of lost longshore jobs and a lot of jobs in that factory, too. Everyone involved in the copra crushing division went down real quick. It was all over.

## WILL WHITAKER

I remember why the copra dock closed. Ferdinand Marcos, who was in charge of the Philippines, decided he wanted to put his people to work, because all they was doin' is gathering the copra and shipping it over here. So they built factories over there to squeeze the copra and get the oil out. He said, "Ok, you can still take copra out," but he put a tax on the copra that was so high that it was cheaper to just bring the oil in. So that's what happened to the copra dock. If you don't have a product to squeeze, you don't have a job.



photo by Otto Haged

Two ILWU longshoremen break up the copra by hand. The picks were specially designed for copra work. Budd Riggs has donated a pick to the Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association. "You worked 20 minutes with a pick, 20 minutes with a shovel, and you had 20 minutes off." —Joe Amyes

## Building a Labor-Community Alliance

### San Francisco Unionists and the Coalition to Save the Copra Crane

Harvey Schwartz

*International Longshore and Warehouse Union Oral History Collection; Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University*

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San Francisco, “the City by the Bay,” is world famous for its charm, its landmarks, and its symbols: Fisherman’s Wharf, North Beach, Chinatown, old-fashioned cable cars, and the Golden Gate Bridge. Over the last decade, a movement has been afoot to add a new and different edifice to San Francisco’s collection of icons. The aim of this movement, spearheaded by a group of unionists and community activists with compatible goals, is to save an outmoded waterfront copra (dried coconut) crane as a labor landmark and a monument to the workers who built the city.

To battle for the crane’s preservation, local unionists have allied themselves with a group of urban environmentalists, a city architect, a marine engineer, and even a troupe of performing artists. This united effort of various actors has made significant progress in the long-term project to repair and stabilize the aging crane. The endeavor already stands as a model for the rest of the labor movement at a time when organized workers clearly need allies to overcome their increasing isolation within the American social and political order.

#### The Copra Crane and the Cargill Plant

The mechanism in question is a fifty-four-ton, five-story-tall structure with a conveyor boom that weighs 16,000 pounds (see Figure 1). It is located at Pier 84 on Islais Creek, close to where that stream enters San Francisco Bay along the city’s south waterfront. The crane was abandoned in the mid-1970s by Minnesota-based

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**Author’s Note:** Research for this article was supported by a grant from the Institute for Labor and Employment (ILE), University of California. Professor Emeritus David Brody at the Institute of Industrial Relations (IIR), University of California, Berkeley, directed the research as lead investigator. The author would like to thank Professor Brody, Professor Emeritus Archie Green, and former ILE Associate Director Peter Olney, now International Longshore and Warehouse Union Director of Organizing, for their sustaining interest and encouragement.

Figure 1  
The Copra Crane at Islais Creek



- 10 -

Source: David Dawson.

agricultural products giant Cargill, Inc. But between its plant opening along the creek in 1947 and Cargill's curtailment of its Pier 84 operations in 1974, the company enjoyed great prosperity, processing copra from the Philippine Islands into coconut oil and copra-based animal feed (*Cargill News* 1947, 1958; Boone 1948; *The Dispatcher* 1974; Broehl 1992).

The crane was used by longshore workers to load tons of the company's livestock feed in the form of pellets into outbound vessels. The animal food was an after-product of Cargill's crushing of copra to extract that commodity's highly marketable coconut oil (*Cargill News* 1967). Veteran Pier 84 longshoreman Bud Riggs has pointed out that Cargill built the crane in 1972. It replaced an older dockside structure near the

end of the company's quarter century of lucrative copra processing in San Francisco and was only used for a few years (Riggs 1996). However, in the wake of the container revolution of the 1970s and 1980s that drastically altered cargo handling, the crane has become something of a museum piece. It is the last example of hand-operated bulk cargo longshore gear left on the San Francisco waterfront.

### The Movement to Save the Crane

More important, though, is the crane's symbolic value. As a monument to work and workers, when refurbished, it will stand for the generations of San Francisco-based laborers—longshoremen, warehouse employees, sailors, building trades artisans, and others—who made the city a great metropolis between the Gold Rush of the 1850s and the recent past. Archie Green, the renowned folklorist of work culture and advocate of labor landmarks, has been a driving force for the preservation of the crane (Green 1995, 2001). A decade ago, he alluded to its symbolism: "The Park Service has some old ships moored at the Hyde Street Pier," he said, "but to have an object in place where work was done would provide a resonance that is missing on the waterfront" (Green 1998).

In an era when gentrification is increasingly obscuring the waterfront's historic working-class origins, the crane's preservation would be especially pleasing to labor and trade union enthusiasts such as Green. Professor Green, who worked as a shipwright on the San Francisco waterfront before World War II, was the crane advocate who pioneered labor's alliance with environmentalists and others. In the early 1990s, he suggested the idea of saving the crane to Julia Viera, an influential San Francisco environmentalist and leader of the Friends of Islais Creek, an important urban conservation group. Viera had served on a number of city boards and committees. Over time, her connections, experience, and knack for drawing public attention to causes she upheld proved extremely valuable to union crane enthusiasts (Green 1998; Viera 1998).

When Green first contacted Viera, she had no prior contact with organized labor. She and the Friends were only concerned with the process of reclaiming the creek from years of pollution and neglect. Initially, the crane held no importance for her or for the environmentalist group she headed. But Green convinced her that the crane's prominence on the waterway could provide an eye-catching emblem for the Friends' creek restoration project.

Besides, Green argued, the labor movement would become a valuable ally of the Friends if the environmentalists championed saving the crane. He even gave the structure its popular name, "the copra crane." From this beginning, the effort to save the crane as a monument to San Francisco workers developed into a labor-community partnership (Green 1998; Viera 1998; Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association and Friends of Islais Creek 2002).

## The Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association

After consulting with Viera, Green sought aid from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in setting up a formal labor institution dedicated to saving the crane. ILWU Longshore Local 10 members had done the arduous pick-and-shovel labor required to remove Cargill's copra from ships in the 1940s and 1950s. When the copra removal process was mechanized by Cargill with the introduction of a tractor-driven grinder in 1960, Local 10 members ran the machine. After 1964, ILWU Warehouse Local 6 members performed Cargill's factory work, turning the copra into coconut oil and livestock pellets. Local 10 members used the copra crane to load Cargill's animal feed into vessels. So it was natural for a group of regional ILWU pensioners to help Green found the Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association (CCLLA) in 1996 (*The Dispatcher* 1974, 1996).

Two ILWU stalwarts, Bill Ward and Don Watson, became the new organization's long-serving president and secretary-treasurer. As head of the Friends, Viera personified her group's partnership with the CCLLA. From the beginning, she participated actively in all of the CCLLA's meetings and decision-making processes. So did Robin Chiang, a city architect with an interest in urban environmentalism and a member of the Friends. Rex McCardell, the chief marine engineer for the Golden Gate Bridge District's ferryboat division, soon joined the labor-community coalition. As plans for preserving the crane were developed over time, McCardell, who designed some of Cargill's Islais Creek equipment in the 1960s, gave freely of his technical expertise, as did Chiang on numerous occasions (Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association 1996, 1998; McCardell 2002).

Before long, new labor unions joined the CCLLA, which began to bid for widened support as well as funding to refurbish and stabilize the crane. Pile Drivers Local 34 volunteered its highly skilled workers, who made temporary repairs to the crane's platform. Eventually Carpenters Local 2236 and Iron Workers Local 377 began to host the CCLLA's quarterly meetings, which were once held exclusively at ILWU halls. Several other labor organizations started to send their representatives to these meetings to observe and participate (Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association and Friends of Islais Creek 2002). The interest generated made it appear probable that the crane would ultimately be preserved as a labor landmark.

- 11 -

## Copra in Historic Perspective

The long history of copra in the San Francisco Bay Area lent a significant measure of credibility to the crane advocates' position. South Pacific islands copra was a leading import into the bay region from the mid-nineteenth century through Cargill's heyday at Islais Creek. In 1880, nearly all of the West Coast's ninety thousand gallons of coconut oil consumed annually came from copra imported into and processed in the Bay Area.

Even in 1950, copra was second only to coffee in San Francisco import value (Hittell 1882; Board of State Harbor Commissioners 1951).

The raw coconut product was so omnipresent that for years a great many commercial seafarers arrived in San Francisco aboard copra vessels. Harry Bridges, the famous Australian-born leader of the 1934 West Coast maritime and San Francisco general strikes, first saw the bay port when he was a nineteen-year-old sailor on a copra-laden barkentine in 1920 (Bernstein 1970; Bridges 1974).

For decades, thousands of tons of imported copra were crushed in Bay Area plants for oil used in toilet, laundry, and marine soap; shaving cream; shampoo; cosmetics; medicine; and various foods, including ice cream, baked goods, candy bars, and even theater popcorn "butter." The post-crushing residue, of course, was manufactured into valuable animal feed (Grady and Carr 1934; Boone 1948).

Cargill itself gave up its lucrative copra processing business at Pier 84 only because raw coconut became too costly to import from the Philippines. Nearly all of the company's copra came from that Pacific island country. Unfortunately for Cargill, a United States preferential trade agreement with the Philippines lapsed during 1973-1974, and the Manila government drastically increased its export tax on copra going to America (*Cargill News* 1966; *The Dispatcher* 1973, 1974; Hawes 1987).

## Longshoring at Pier 84

The work procedures involved in removing the copra from ships and processing it in Cargill's factory are an essential part of the copra crane story. The CCLLA envisions a museum by the crane highlighting this work as well as other aspects of precontainer waterfront and marine labor. Although such a museum is a long-term dream today, if built, it would differ greatly from the more traditional Maritime Museum near Fisherman's Wharf five miles to the north, which features ship models and navigation company lineage rather than the history of workers, unions, or labor processes.

Bill Ward worked copra ships as a longshoreman at the Los Angeles Harbor in the 1940s (Ward 1998). Recently, he outlined the CCLLA's goal: "This crane gives younger workers a chance to look at some of the equipment we had to work with, and we plan on making a pictorial museum," he said. "It gives them a good idea that the work we used to do wasn't just running machines. It was hard manual labor that really wore a fella down after a few years" (quoted in Price 2006).

Joe Amyes, a longshore worker whose experience on the Islais Creek dock went back to 1948, noted that the raw coconut was sucked out of ships' holds by vacuum pumps and pulled into Cargill's processing plant located just behind the waterfront. From 1947 to 1960, before the tractor-driven grinder came in, hardened copra in a vessel's hold had to be broken up by hand. "It was a pick-and-shovel job," Amyes remembered. "You worked twenty minutes with a pick, twenty minutes with a shovel



and you had twenty minutes off. Copra at the bottom, where moisture collected and it rotted, smelled like hell" (Aymes 1996).

Aymes also recalled that newly arrived copra contained irritating beetles, which the longshoremen called "copra bugs." "They'd get in your nose, in your mouth, in your eyes, and down your neck," Aymes said. Fortunately, they were nontoxic, and they disappeared a few days after a ship docked (Aymes 1996).

### The Copra Crane and the Animal Feed Loading Process

On the factory side, Cargill employed one hundred workers during its Islais Creek peak. Some of these workers were highly skilled, like Don Ruth, who ran complex equipment that crushed the copra and extracted and refined the coconut oil. Other workers turned the copra residue into animal feed (Ruth 1996). The after-product animal pellets were blown upward and allowed to free-fall down the copra crane's spout into a waiting ship's hold (Riggs 1996). Unfortunately, the blowers and all of Cargill's in-plant processing machines were sold off in mid-1996. Only the crane remains of all the copra operations equipment that once existed on Islais Creek.

Will Whitaker was a Pier 84 longshore worker in the 1960s and early 1970s. He thoughtfully evaluated the aims of the copra crane preservationist movement that had recently emerged when he was interviewed in August 1996. Then he offered his blessings: "The tower, the copra crane, whatever you call it, gives me a feeling that, OK, it's remembered," he said. "Even for people who hated the smell and the bugs, it's something that will be there for a while and will be preserved. It's gonna remind people that, OK, there was an operation that went along out there" (Whitaker 1996).

### The Cargill Shutdown

In 1974, the Philippine government increased its tax on copra exports bound for the United States from a token \$3.75 to \$75 a ton. Cargill abruptly ceased production at its Islais Creek facility. Will Whitaker described Cargill's end: "Ferdinand Marcos, who was in charge of the Philippines, decided he wanted to put his people to work, because all they was doin' is gathering the copra and shipping it over here," he explained. "So they built factories over there to squeeze the copra and get the oil out. He said, 'OK, you can still take copra out,' but he put a tax on the copra that was so high that it was cheaper to just bring the oil in" (Whitaker 1996). Bud Riggs later recalled his shock at the time. "When the dock closed," he said, "to me it was just 'bango,' just that quick. It put lots of people out of work" (Riggs 1996).

For a few years, Cargill continued to handle coconut oil that it shipped to Pier 84 from the Philippines. But in 1978, Marcos, who held dictatorial power, nationalized Cargill's substantial facilities in the islands. Cargill then sold the San Francisco plant

to the Marcos government, which closed the plant completely in 1984. Not long after the plant closed, Julia Viera began working toward reclaiming Islais Creek, which had become badly polluted from the years of industrial activity that had taken place along its banks.

### The Port of San Francisco and the ILWU Come Through

During the 1990s, Viera and her Friends organization cleaned up Islais Creek and turned the adjacent terrain into an inviting recreational area. In 1999, with the cooperation of the CCLLA, with which the Friends were now closely partnered, Viera put on a massive festival at the creek that featured a series of breathtaking performances on the crane by Jo Kreiter's acclaimed modern dance troupe, "Flyaway Productions," which uses industrial structures as its stage. A year later, Kreiter's group repeated its "copra dock dances" over a three-day period at Pier 84 (Nolte 1996; Folger 2000; *The Dispatcher* 2000; Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association and Friends of Islais Creek 2002).

The partnership with Flyaway Productions was temporary and essentially "event specific," whereas the coalition that involved the CCLLA and the Friends was permanent and ongoing. But the well-attended Flyaway Productions performances were important because of the attention they brought to the crane movement. This attention helped overcome a serious obstacle that faced the CCLLA-Friends coalition. Between 1996 and 2000, there was an unresolved question as to who owned the crane, the Port of San Francisco or the city's Municipal Railway, which was planning to build a training facility near Islais Creek at some future date. The question of ownership remained unanswered until shortly after Viera's festival and the two sequences of "copra dock dances" staged by Flyaway Productions.

The major breakthrough occurred during 1999–2001 when the port began to take the crane's popularity seriously. Green, Viera, and the rest of the CCLLA-Friends activists were especially encouraged when port officials declared emphatically that the port owned the crane. It seemed of symbolic importance that the port began to host CCLLA meetings. Port officers also contributed toward stabilizing the crane in the short run (Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association 2001a, 2001b). With the port's power and influence enlisted on behalf of the CCLLA and the Friends, long-term protection for the crane seemed likely, although the structure still needed much expensive restoration work.

In May 2006, the ILWU provided another important boost when representatives of its longshore division meeting in caucus voted to contribute \$35,000 toward the crane's preservation. That money was to be used to repair the pilings under the crane. Additional funding was still needed to repair the crane's platform and to sandblast and paint the structure.<sup>1</sup> But it now seemed only a matter of time before the extra money would be secured to fully restore the crane (Price 2006).

## Some Perspective on Coalitions

It is useful to consider the particulars of the crane movement in the broader context of coalitions. There is a large body of scholarly literature that addresses the difficulty of building and sustaining labor-community coalitions. A comprehensive summary of that literature is located in an article by Bruce Nissen that appeared recently in the *Labor Studies Journal* (Nissen 2004).<sup>2</sup> There, Nissen thoroughly reviews the obstacles to lasting and meaningful labor-community coalitions but on balance remains optimistic about their potential. The experience of the CCLLA-Friends partnership, which is now entering its second decade, would seem to support Nissen's conclusion.

Nissen argues that all coalitions need "bridge builders" who can bring together labor and nonlabor partners. Interestingly, in the case of the CCLLA-Friends association, Archie Green played such a role perfectly. As a long-time Sierra Club member as well as a labor folklorist and a former union shipwright, Green shared the viewpoint of the labor activists as well as that of the urban environmentalist Friends. Thus, he was able to bridge whatever cultural gap existed and to enlist Viera and the Friends in the crane preservation cause.

Professor Nissen also submits that the most successful labor-community partnerships have been "common-cause" coalitions that focused on converging interests and emphasized equal participation and decision making by all parties. He contrasts "common-cause" coalitions with less successful "vanguard" coalitions in which community partners are told to be subservient labor-supporters and to unconditionally back unilateral decisions by unionists. The CCLLA-Friends partnership, it seems clear, has always been of the common-cause variety. Perhaps this helps explain its success and its longevity.

## The Meaning of Allies

The CCLLA's alliance with the Friends of Islais Creek gives it strength and influence in the community beyond what it would have acting alone as a perceived labor "interest group." What has been achieved thus far by an ongoing project dedicated to honoring workers could never have been approached without labor's outreach to sympathizers and allies.

The crane, it seems, will be saved, despite the sobering reality that considerable work and fundraising still remains to challenge the CCLLA and its community supporters. As a model of what can be accomplished with allies, though, the project has a far wider significance for labor than even its regional importance might suggest. As Archie Green put it recently, "Our project shows that labor can work with the whole community—environmentalists, government officials, architects, engineers, artists, and academics—to produce a cooperative effort that benefits us all" (Green 2006).

## Notes

1. Donations to help preserve the crane may be sent to Don Watson, Secretary-Treasurer, Copra Crane Labor Landmark Association, c/o ILWU, 1188 Franklin Street, San Francisco, CA 94109.
2. For an important book that postdates the Nissen article's review of the literature in the field, see David B. Reynolds, *Partnering for Change: Unions and Community Groups Build Coalitions for Economic Justice* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004). Thanks to John E. Rieber for bringing this and other publications to my attention.

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**Harvey Schwartz** is the curator of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Oral History Collection and an oral historian at the Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University.