

# UC Santa Cruz

## Agricultural History

### Title

J. J. Crosetti: Pajaro Valley Agriculture, 1927 to 1977

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## Introduction

The Regional History Project conducted three interviews with the late J. J. Crosetti, a major Watsonville vegetable grower-shipper, during March and April, 1977, as part of its oral history series documenting aspects of the ethnic and agricultural history of Santa Cruz County. Due to a lack of funds for transcribing and processing at that time, the tape-recordings were laid aside for a number of years. In 1987, Theresa M. Crosetti signed a release form allowing the Project to publish these memoirs, and over the last few years we have transcribed and edited the manuscript which is now released posthumously in 1993.

J. J. Crosetti was born in Watsonville in 1908. His parents were Genovese Italians who settled in the Pajaro Valley in the 1890s. His father rented a ranch on the outskirts of town and grew strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, string beans, and potatoes which he sold in Santa Cruz and San Francisco. As a child and young man Crosetti worked alongside his father on the farm, graduated from Watsonville High School, and after a brief stint in a travelling orchestra in 1927, began working for the T.J. Horgan Company, a vegetable growing and shipping company. Crosetti worked there briefly as a field foreman and by 1929 was in charge of their operations growing peas in Davenport and Half Moon Bay, as well as buying commodities from other contracted growers in the region—apples, strawberries, and lettuce—for shipment to San Francisco and the East Coast. During the Depression in 1932, Crosetti went to work for the Levy-Zentner Company, a vegetable shipping company located in San Francisco, where he oversaw consignments and established their packing operations in Watsonville.

He went into business for himself in 1935 when he bought their Watsonville packing operation and established the J.J. Crosetti Company, which continues operating now almost sixty years later. By this time he had numerous connections throughout the state and country among growers, wholesale

distributors, and buyers, and knew firsthand the complexities of commercial growing. During the 1930s he was involved in shipping tomatoes, lettuce and apples, was leasing several ranches, and began to buy land in the Pajaro Valley. In the 1940s, Crosetti “expanded in every direction.” In addition to his operations in Watsonville, he leased land or made deals with other growers in El Centro in the Imperial Valley and in Arizona.

Crosetti’s narration traces not only his own changing business and growing practices, but delineates major developments in Central Coast agriculture during the period 1927-1977. During this half century new packing methods and improvements in transportation and marketing transformed growing strategies and markets. Lettuce became Crosetti’s primary crop, although he continued to ship tomatoes, broccoli and other crops. His discussion of lettuce as the premiere dollar-producing crop shows how this commodity became known as “green gold,” and how the highly speculative lettuce market and its fluctuations could make or break a grower overnight. As lettuce became more lucrative, many new investors entered the market every year, eager to make a killing. The rise of chain supermarkets created new demand for the availability of year-round lettuce. These factors, along with good weather, contributed to cycles of oversupply and lower prices. He relished this gambling aspect of lettuce; the sound of ringing telephones and voices loudly haggling over lettuce prices when he arrived at the office in the morning presaged a good market and high prices; an office with no ringing telephones told him the market was down. Crosetti’s exuberant depiction of selling lettuce sounds more like betting at the horse races than farming. And that is the point: the agriculture Crosetti practiced was not family farming but commodity production for national distribution in a highly speculative market.

Crosetti discusses lettuce growing, packing and shipping practices during the 1930s and how they changed over the decades; how “shaving the ice”—filling lettuce cartons with hand-chipped ice—was replaced by vacuum cooling and temperature-regulated shipping to the market. His commentary also includes descriptions of changes in local land prices, leasing and buying land, and capital costs during this period.

Another important subject in Crosetti's narration is his discussion of the ethnic history of the labor force in Pajaro Valley and the conditions under which they worked both prior to unionization, during the period of the Bracero program, and after labor unions became a factor in agriculture in the 1960s and 1970s.

Crosetti also discusses his views on agribusiness and the changes in acreage and scale which have increasingly characterized California agriculture in the last half century. His participation in the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association of Central California and his tenure on the State Board of Agriculture gave him insight into the larger forces shaping the state's agriculture, including the increasing participation of large-scale corporations.

Although we did not have the benefit of Crosetti's own editing or corrections in preparing this manuscript for publication, his son, J.J. Crosetti, Jr., read the manuscript prior to its final printing and also loaned us the two photographs reproduced in this volume. The tape-recordings were transcribed verbatim and edited for continuity and clarity; most of the changes made were technical in nature—inserting punctuation, checking the spelling of proper names, and eliminating repetitions.

Copies of this manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and in Special Collections, McHenry Library, University of California, Santa Cruz. The Project is supported administratively by Alan Ritch, Acting Head, Collection Planning, and University Librarian Allan J. Dyson.

Randall Jarrell

December 14, 1993

Regional History Project

McHenry Library

University of California, Santa Cruz

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## Family History

**Jarrell:** I'd like to start with your family background. Where were your parents from in Italy?

**Crosetti:** My parents were from Genoa, Italy. My father came to Watsonville in 1894, as a young boy, and went to work in a farm out here . . . on the outskirts of Watsonville. When he came here he worked for \$15 a month plus board and room which wasn't very much. A couple of years later he rented the ranch there and that's where I was born on July 8, 1908.

**Jarrell:** He had gone back to Italy to get your mother?

**Crosetti:** Yes. My mother came over in 1906. She came from Italy, and then they settled down there. As a little kid I used to follow him around and even try to help him which I wasn't much help in those days when I was pretty small.

**Jarrell:** How many children were you in the family?

**Crosetti:** There were five of us; I was the oldest, and I was the only boy. I had four sisters.

**Jarrell:** Your father farmed . . . first he rented a ranch, you say?

**Crosetti:** Yes, he rented a ranch and farmed out here where the new courthouse is now . . . that used to be our ranch there just on the outskirts of town.

**Jarrell:** What did he grow?

**Crosetti:** Well, there was an apple orchard there. Then he was growing little odds and ends . . . nothing big in the way of acreage. They had strawberries,

blackberries, and raspberries, and currants, and string beans, and . . . oh, some potatoes . . . oh, other odds and ends.

**Jarrell:** Was this sold on the market in Santa Cruz?

**Crosetti:** Yes. Well, I recall a little later I used to go to town in Watsonville and occasionally over to Santa Cruz. Santa Cruz was quite a distance at that time because we had a team of horses and a wagon. So we'd come in early in the morning, and sell to the stores in town . . . and then whatever he couldn't sell here, he'd ship to the San Francisco market where they would . . . the crops would be sold up there on a commission basis.

**Jarrell:** How did your mother participate? She ran the household, or . . .

**Crosetti:** She ran a household. At that time we had . . . it varied . . . two, three, four, five, six men working on the ranch there, and she used to cook for them; it was kind of a little boarding house. She did the cooking, and once in a while she'd go out and work in the field too. She worked pretty hard too.

**Jarrell:** Roughly, during your childhood, what kind of acreage did you farm?

**Crosetti:** At this particular place, there was about fifty acres. It wasn't anything real big compared to today. In those days family farms were much smaller. It was a different way of operating than today.

**Jarrell:** At that time were there very many Italian families farming in the Pajaro Valley?

**Crosetti:** At that time there were probably more Italian families farming here than today. Other ethnic groups came over . . . the Slavonians were coming here at that time; there were quite a few here when I was a small boy and they kept coming. So they, became, well, the predominant ethnic group in agriculture here, and still are.

**Jarrell:** When you were growing up, were the Watsonville Italians and Santa Cruz Genovese close? Did you know, for instance, the Stagnaros or the Righetis, or people like that?



**Crosetti:** Well . . . we knew most of them because when the old-timers came over from Italy they would get acquainted with the other Italians and . . . kind of stick together because they didn't know other people . . . so they would have, oh, their picnics and little barbecues, and get-togethers and work together and all that.

**Jarrell:** Did you speak Italian in your home?

**Crosetti:** When I was a little boy, they spoke Italian. Then a little bit later they were speaking one hundred percent English. But it took a little while to catch onto the English language. And they would try to talk English so they could practice it. After we started going to school, then we would talk English one hundred percent from there on. But at the very beginning though, it was Italian. That's the only language they knew.

**Jarrell:** What kind of work did you do as a child?

**Crosetti:** Well, when I was just a little boy, I used to follow my father around. There was no place for me to go because although it was just a mile from the town you might say, there was no way for me to get to town. I didn't even have a bicycle until I got a little older. I didn't know anybody around. So I'd go and help him pick a few beans, and a few berries, and windfall apples and odds and ends. Of course I really wasn't doing too much at that age, but as I got older, I helped more and more as we went along.

**Jarrell:** Would you talk about Watsonville High School and your time there?

**Crosetti:** Yes. Well, when I went to high school, I kind of got away from farming. Because farming was an awful hard job, and it didn't pay very much as I recall. So when I got to high school, I got a janitor job in the school, and I thought I was making big money there at the time . . . \$30 a month, sweeping floors before school, and cleaning up after school and working Saturdays and Sundays. I kept working also at other odds and ends when I could fit them in. Then I had a little orchestra . . . I went out and played nights and different times. I made more money playing in the orchestra one night than I could in a whole week of being a janitor working around on these other jobs.

**Jarrell:** Let's talk about when you first started farming . . . but you said that you took a cruise around the world on the old Dollar Line.

**Crosetti:** Yes. That was in 1927. It was the year that I graduated from high school. The year that I got started working in this particular business. I got a job with T.J. Horgan and Company doing every kind of job imaginable, from sweeping floors and cleaning up, loading trucks and all this and that. It was a job, and I wanted to make some money to go on to college. Then I got the opportunity, also in '27, to take this trip around the world playing music on the Dollar Line. We got paid for that, and a chance to see the world. We got paid pretty good for playing in these hotels. What I was trying more than anything else was to make money to go on to school because in those days, you got no assistance from anybody. You were strictly on your own. You either worked or otherwise you got no education. But at the time, I still don't know what I wanted to do. I didn't want to farm . . . that's the last thing I wanted to do. Then when I got back from the trip, I kind of had my mind set on being a druggist.

**Jarrell:** A pharmacist?

**Crosetti:** A pharmacist. I went up to the University of California . . . in San Francisco . . . I was just about ready to go to school there when . . . I was working at T.J. Horgan and Company and I was doing just every kind of job there imaginable . . . I couldn't see that too well, so I'd better go on to school.

### **T.J. Horgan and Company**

**Crosetti:** So one day the boss came in and said, "Are you going to school?" He says, "If you are, fine, wonderful. You better go and get an education. If not, we will give you a steady job." Well, in those days, what they called a steady job was something. You had a job. In those days it was really rough. You picked up ten to fifteen cents an hour, twenty five cents an hour, and so forth. So I said, "Let me think it over." It took me a couple of days to make up my mind what I wanted to do. So then I went back to the boss, and I asked him what he had in mind. I says, "Now if I don't go on to school, what kind of a job do you have in mind for me?" "Well," he says, "we noticed that you seem to be interested here in working and

so forth, and so if you want this job here, we'll put you in more of a supervisory capacity, a timekeeper, or a foreman . . .”

They were running some peas there at the time . . . he says, “You'll run that pea deal over there and then we'll have some apples, and then you'll run the apple deal.” I was very, very young—19 or 20 years old and I was a foreman. I was looking around at some of those other kids at that time that had graduated from high school before me. Came out with a college education . . . they couldn't find a job. So I thought . . . well, I might go on to college, and come back and still not find anything. So I'd better take this . . . I'll try it. So anyway, this was how I got started there. And then one day they came to me, two or three months or so later, and they said, “Well, we'd like to have you go out in the field and buy different crops and commodities that are grown.”

**Jarrell:** Was this contract buying?

**Crosetti:** There was contract buying . . . just making deals, you know. In this thing, you make your own deals, see. I kind of scratched my head . . . I says, “Gee, what am I going to here? How do I buy? What do I buy, and how?” They gave me a car. I had a car to drive around; having a car in those days was quite something too. There were a lot of small independent farmers at that time, growing different crops. This company was handling all these commodities. They had customers that used to come in and ship by railroad all over the country. So I'd go out and I was buying some peas at that time. And apples, and berries, and everything else, and also got into the lettuce deal. It was a little different deal then. Because you went out and bought or made deals so that they would grow a certain acreage for you. Well, anyway, I went to work doing that.

Then they put me up in Davenport in 1929-30 . . . I ran that whole Davenport deal from there to Half Moon Bay. They used to grow a lot of peas. We filled a packing house in Davenport. I was in charge of the whole thing up there. Then the Steele Ranch up there . . . we developed that into our farming . . . and I took care of the farming, the acreage . . . and I was doing a lot of buying. We got the water from Waddell Creek, you know, that shale rock . . . The pipeline is still there. We got it from Waddell Creek clear up to Steele Ranch . . . it was going up

a hill there . . . it must have been five or six miles away. Today, it'd cost you so much money, you wouldn't even think of doing it.

Waddell Creek there . . . that was the Hoover Ranch, I guess it still is. And [President] Herbert Hoover used to visit there, and he was just elected President at that time. His brother, Theodore, whom I got to know quite well . . . was an engineering professor at Stanford University. Hulda MacLean, was his daughter, she was a supervisor in the county. She's still up there. Anyway, I worked up there for a couple of years and then in 1932, Depression time . . . the T.J. Horgan and Company got into financial troubles. They had to quit, go out of business. That's when I moved up there.

**Jarrell:** How would you describe the Horgan Company's operations?

**Crosetti:** They were growers-packers-shippers, as we used to call them in those days. They used to grow, then to pack in their shed before the shed in town. Then they shipped and would sell to different buyers from the East . . . Many of the buyers in those days had representatives here, who would come in and take a look at what you had . . . quality wise. They would be in contact by telephone to their companies. Then of course the salesmen here were also in contact with the shippers back there. There were no chain stores at that time to speak of anyway that were buying direct.

**Jarrell:** Did the growers have arrangements or deals with farmers down here that they would split costs or something like that? Because they didn't own land, did they?

**Crosetti:** I look back . . . I don't think they owned any land, but they used to lease land.

**Jarrell:** And then they'd have managers?

**Crosetti:** Then they had managers, and foremen. Like with me . . . I was running some of the deals here, and then I was up in Davenport. And then they would also go out to growers in the winter time when no crops were being grown. They would go and line up their deals, or make a deal out there. A joint deal, as we call

it, 50-50. We would pay half of the cost of growing this crop. When the proceeds came in, it was divided . . . they'd take the costs out and divide it up 50-50. So, for instance, T.J. Horgan and Company would get half and the farmer would get half of whatever it was.

You see, there were many different angles. There was no set program. It's like a lot of people ask me, "What makes a market? Who makes a market?" There's no such thing as making a market as individuals. It's the supply and demand that makes your market . . . if you've got a big demand, and they're running a little short, then you raise your price accordingly, and you try to get all you can get, because that's the time when the buyer is more at our mercy than we are at his.

But that's only once in a great while that that happens. Because most of the time we'd have a surplus . . . we'd have too much . . . at least up until just recently . . . now it seems to level off some. But then the buyer . . . we're at the buyer's mercy, so he comes in and he says, "What do you want for that box of apples, or lettuce?" "Well," I say, "I want a dollar." And he says, "No, I'll only give you ninety cents." "Well, I want a dollar." You come in the morning when the phones are all ringing, in every direction, and you can get the trend of the market; when the phones are ringing you know then that they want the supplies. When they're not, when they're dead, why then, then you better cut your sights down some. It's like feeling a pulse . . . you know, after so long, after so many years, you've got salesmen . . . it's just like feeling a pulse. Because the first thing in the morning they start talking to every market in the United States. You know, they start talking in New York, Chicago, Canada, and all over . . . this we do business there. And you can get the feeling, you get the feeling of just what the market's going to be. So if there is a demand, and a little shortage, why then it's our day.

**Jarrell:** You top it off then.

**Crosetti:** That's when we get tough.

**Jarrell:** (Laughter)

**Crosetti:** But then some other times when they get us a little surplus, we pay for that. So the market is created in a way of how much you can get for what you

have at a given time. And it'll vary sometimes every day . . . it'll be up and down, see, in different directions.

**Jarrell:** In 1932, you said that Horgan tapped out.

**Crosetti:** Yes, and they weren't the only ones. Things got real rough, and T.J. Horgan and Company for one thing . . . they were pretty big. They expanded quite a bit. They were in Salinas, then Holtville; they went down to the Imperial Valley. We packed lettuce in the San Fernando Valley now where all those movie homes are . . . we packed lettuce down there of all places.

In those days instead of packing lettuce I should have bought a couple of acres of land and held onto it and it would have been worth more than all the lettuce and everything else.

### **The Great Depression in Santa Cruz County**

**Crosetti:** But then they got kind of overextended . . . they were doing well . . . they were all overextended; when that Depression hit, why a lot of them got into trouble.

**Jarrell:** Now in this vicinity, in Watsonville, I've heard it said by several people whom I've interviewed that if you took the county as a whole, Santa Cruz suffered quite severely. But because of the solid agricultural base in the south county that the . . . although there were people who were hard hit . . . that generally the economic situation here wasn't as bad as you might be led to believe. How would you assess that kind of thing?

**Crosetti:** I would say that's right. Yes. I would say it's right because I can remember there at that period of time that the southern end of Santa Cruz County . . . and when I say southern end of Santa Cruz County, you have to also take into consideration the northern end of Monterey County, which is all the Pajaro Valley. It has some of the richest soil in the world . . . I've been all over the world, Russia, and every place else. This is some of the finest soil in the whole world. Over in Santa Cruz they had no industry at that time. They don't have this boom like they got now, you know, they're growing over there. I can

remember the property owners here complaining about all the taxes that they were having to pay, and that they were supporting the northern end of the county. Well, of course, whether that was the case or not, I don't know. But this area was the bright spot of the whole United States. They were still coming out and making some money. Because there's no place in the world that you can grow some of these crops like we can grow them here. Take strawberries . . . I don't care . . . you can go all over the world, we grow the finest . . . the finest strawberries. Artichokes . . . we grow all the artichokes in this area if we take in Castroville.

You see, in those days (I'm talking back way in the early '30s) Davenport was a big artichoke growing area. Castroville was just coming in because a lot of the old timers didn't like Castroville because they were more susceptible here to frosts . . . see it's lower . . . over in Davenport they're a little higher, closer to the ocean, and frost free. Not that the frost hurts the artichoke that much. The same thing applies to sprouts. When I was there, sprouts and artichokes were the bright spot there for northern Santa Cruz County. Around Santa Cruz itself, there was no industry there to speak of. They were having some problems. Well, we all were. But what happened to the Horgan Company, getting back to that a little bit again, it's not the fact that they went broke on account of being here in Watsonville; it's the fact that they expanded and went to some of these other areas and just got a little bit . . .

**Jarrell:** Overextended?

**Crosetti:** . . . overextended is the word. Some other areas there . . . when the thing hit hard, and you got all your money out there in crops, and in buildings and in trucks, well, when you're doing business there, you've got to have cash due there. Because your payroll comes up, and they don't want a truck of something. They want the cash. This area is still the finest area for growing certain crops in the whole world. And again, I've been around the world; I've been all over and checked.

**Jarrell:** You've had your own operations in other locations?

**Crosetti:** I've had my own operations in other locations. I traveled around to see if there were other locations that looked better than what we have here, especially when I was younger. Because I was very ambitious. I wanted to conquer the world. Or at least I wanted to be doing something anyway. But it's hard to beat this area. The only bad part of it is that this valley is very small.

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Crosetti:** See . . . it's limited here. But for this bottomland, prime land, you can't beat it.

### **A. Levy and J. Zentner Company**

**Jarrell:** Now maybe you could talk about A. Levy and J. Zentner.

**Crosetti:** A. Levy, J. Zentner Company. I went up to San Francisco. I think it was in '32 . . . I had already a thought that I knew everything. (Laughter) In '32 I was only 24 years old. I went up there and I immediately got a job with them, with no hesitation. Because I got to know A. Levy, J. Zentner Company; working for Horgan Company I got to know them because I was doing direct business with them. I was kind of representing them here through the T.J. Horgan and Company, so they knew me. I went up there and immediately got a job. They gave me a new car . . . that was right in the Depression times and . . . not too many people had cars; here I had a company car to drive around in. Well I went out and bought pretty near all over California, I was following different crops and different things. I always work day and night . . . there was no fooling around. I enjoyed it.

**Jarrell:** Now what was their primary business? Could you describe their operations? They were all over the state.

**Crosetti:** Yes, all over the state; they're still in operation. They're still going. Their business is principally distributing. They had certain customers . . . well, take San Francisco . . . they supplied a lot of those stores up there. See they didn't have chain stores like they have now. Chain stores were just coming in, you know, . . . Piggley-Wiggley, and to the market and buy . . . If they needed two or



three cartons of lettuce or seven or eight boxes of apples and bananas . . . they handled everything . . . oranges and all that.

They had just a little bit of everything. And these stores would come down in the morning with a horse and buggy at first when I was up there; then they'd come down with a pickup . . . with cars and trucks. But they would come down and load up there and just take five boxes of this, and two, three packages of that, and one package of this. They'd come down every morning. They supplied these different people. I was out in the field covering these different areas for produce that they might need . . . like sometimes they'd want strawberries, that was always a good seller even in those days. Earlier in the season I'd go down to Santa Maria and buy berries or solicit consignments. I'd say, "Well, ship them up to my house there." And we'd charge the brokerage, see, for it.

**Jarrell:** Yes. So Levy and Zentner was a wholesaler and distributor?

**Crosetti:** They had small packing houses where they shipped East. They were just getting it started into that. They had a place over in San Leandro and they shipped a lot of peas and cauliflower out of there. Later we came to Watsonville, and I started to ship out of here for Levy-Zentner Company; I started it here. We parted company due to the fact that they were more of a distributor relying on consignment, and buying these different commodities they could sell immediately. Shipping was more of a gamble and I was out making deals; we would ship a lot of tomatoes out of here and some apples and lettuce. But they were very conservative and they didn't want to take the chances that this business involved.

Because I'd be shipping to New York, and it'd take seven or eight days to get to New York and by that time maybe the market would change and maybe there'd be a loss. Well, if you want to stay in this business, you got to take some losses. Well, they didn't particularly like that. So anyway that's when I finally left their camp, we parted good friends . . . and so then I took over the packing end here. In fact I bought this packing house here at that time.

**Jarrell:** Which used to be theirs?

**Crosetti:** They were leasing it here.

**Jarrell:** I see.

**Crosetti:** This packing house used to belong to T.J. Horgan and Company, and then a fellow by the name of Neilson I went to school with, his father had a mortgage here; when they had problems he took it over. So one day Jim Neilson came in and he says, "I'd like to sell a packing house. If you want it, I'd like to see you have it." I said, "What do you want for it?" He said, I'll never forget it, he said, "\$27,500" you know for this whole deal there. (Laughter) I said, "Gee, the deal sounds fine but I don't have any money." "Well," he says, "have you got \$500?" I say, "Yeah, I got \$500." So he tore off a piece of paper, it's right here, and he says, "Received \$500 on \$27,500." I said, "When do I pay you the balance?" "Oh," he says, "when you get it, pay me the balance." Before too long, I paid him off. I did a lot of business with Levy, Zentner Company. Then I started going every direction on my own.

**Jarrell:** Now this would have been about . . . oh 1935 . . . that you quit Levy, Zentner?

**Crosetti:** Yes, around that time. Yes, around '35, '36, along in there, yes.

**Jarrell:** Now you had worked for two companies, you'd been up and down the state, made many contacts, learned a lot . . .

**Crosetti:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** . . . I'm sure that pushed you into this particular direction?

**Crosetti:** Yes. Well, that's . . . see I was just a young kid when I first started out with Horgan and Company. I'd go out to some of these farmers, you know, who'd been farming for 40 to 50 years and they'd look at me, "Who are you?" you know. (laughter) They'd shy away. They'd just give me a dirty look. When I'd say I was working for T.J. Horgan and Company since he was quite a big man at that time here, they would stop and listen a little. "Oh, Tim Horgan, yes sure we know him." Then I started getting my foot in the door, and I got acquainted

with a lot of these people. Some of the kids that I went to school with. I went around to see them and they would take me to their father and I started to get acquainted little by little. As time went on I got to know an awful lot of people here, and even people all over the United States; I used to talk on the telephone, do some selling. That's what counts in this business is knowing the people who you're doing business with. It's like today now, we're known for good and bad, I don't know what, but we're known all over the country, Canada, because we've been in business a long time. People will call here out of a clear sky we never even heard of. We have what they call a red book and a blue book; it lists all the growers and the shippers and their receivers and all that. It gives you your ratings and tells you . . .

**Jarrell:** Like your credit rating, you mean?

**Crosetti:** Credit rating and all of that. People sometimes want to buy something, and they look down in the book there, and they run across my name or somebody else's name, and they'll call them out of a clear sky. But in most cases now we're known. We're just all over.

### **Starting the J.J. Crosetti Company**

**Jarrell:** When you quit working for Levy, Zentner you said in our interview last week that you didn't have the money to actually buy any land, so you leased land, or you bought land on time.

**Crosetti:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** You put a little bit down. Would you talk about that aspect?

**Crosetti:** Well, see when I started my own, and even before Levy, Zentner Company, I had a couple what they call field men. You know people that go out in the field, supervisors, we'll say.

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Crosetti:** I would depend on them for a lot of that work. Maybe a man that just took care of the farming, and another man that took care of the buying. I always

had a salesman here when I started out, and of course I'd pitch in too, 'cause I was trying to cover overall, because even then I was shipping quite a few commodities.

**Jarrell:** What crops were you growing?

**Crosetti:** Well, right away, when I got on my own, I was in the tomato deal pretty strong at that time. They used to grow a lot of tomatoes here, and they had tomatoes down in Greenfield, King City . . . Salinas and all over. We were packing tomatoes here. In fact . . . oh in the '30s there, we were packing so many tomatoes here we worked day and night. We had trucks strung from clear to the bridge here and this side . . . then at the same time we packed lettuce and apples. I was buying odds and ends too. I shipped an awful lot of apples out of here. I had foremen who would be running the shed, somebody watching the field.

At first most of these were deals. I didn't have the money to go out here and start a big farming operation. Even in those days you could get in pretty reasonable. But when you don't have the money, and when you're new, if you owe somebody money, they're on you right quick, because they don't know whether you're going to be in business tomorrow . . . (laughter) So you're almost on a cash basis. I'd be very careful not to get overextended because I had learned a pretty good lesson from the previous deal.

I leased a couple of ranches; then I started to buy some land. In those days, land was much cheaper. Sometimes I'd go out to somebody that wanted to sell land—you can't do it now because there's a big demand for land—but at that time, sometimes a farmer was having problems and he needed the money. So I'd go out and put so much down with them, maybe 10%, then pay interest, 'cause you see he wanted to get his interest sometimes. He'd rather get his interest then get all the money, and then have to put it in the bank.

So that's when I started to accumulate a little land. Then I bought some more land. As I kept going ahead, I bought more land. I leased more land; I expanded in every direction; I went down to Imperial Valley; I started down there in 1940 in El Centro. And then I went over in Arizona, Phoenix, Glendale, Talas, Wilcox,

and that was a sad deal because in those days I was still looking for a better spot than here where we could grow better crops so we could get the jump.

So anyway this Wilcox thing, I happened to go down there. I heard about what good lettuce they had one year; it was an exceptional year as we found out later. (Laughter) I took a quick ride and I came back and said, "Oh boy, that's the place to go. I never saw lettuce like that . . . so beautiful." I said, "Well, I think we're going to have to get out of Salinas and Watsonville and move down there." So I went down there and in that particular deal, there were four of us that got together. See this deal here [in Watsonville] all belongs to me, I have no partners here at all. I've got the kids and that's it. So four of us went down there, man and we were gonna really go.

We took out a lot of land; first it snowed in the winter time and that summer we got off to a bad start. Then the summer got so hot the lettuce burned. We lost our shirts there. So then about that time, I said, "Hey, let's just get out of here. I've had enough. Let's go back to good old Watsonville and the Salinas area."

**Jarrell:** You had a lease and purchased land both?

**Crosetti:** We bought one ranch down there . . .

**Jarrell:** How many acres was it?

**Crosetti:** One ranch was about 400 acres; it was pretty cheap considering everything, but still it amounted to a lot of money. Then we took an option on 5,000 acres I guess.

Some of that land was raw . . . you'd have to go in and develop it, see. And so we were down there; we were really going to set the world on fire. Well, we caught fire, and had to leave and get out of there. (Laughter) But this has happened other times too. I've taken a lot of those beatings. In Arizona one year down there and everything's looking fine, looking good, and we're going to get started packing in a few days. I'm out there in the field looking at this lettuce with one of my field men. All of a sudden I see a cloud coming in the distance. So I says, "That doesn't look too good, maybe we'd better get out." So by the time I got out

of the field, I just barely got out of there, we had a downpour there and two hours later all the lettuce was under water. And we lost the whole thing.

But this is the way this game works and the way it operates. See now they talk about droughts. Well, I've gone through all that. I've gone through weird places that didn't have water or had too much water. I made the rounds all over. I used to like the challenge or something . . . different. I figure well maybe I'll hit the jackpot over here, or something. Well, you're still not going to beat this area here. Just take it every day as it comes. For the long haul, this area is still the best.

### **The Lettuce Business**

**Jarrell:** Now when we talk about lettuce, do you mean iceberg lettuce?

**Crosetti:** Well, you might say it's all iceberg lettuce. Around here, that is the big crop. I've gone into romaine . . .

**Jarrell:** Romaine and butter lettuce?

**Crosetti:** Butter lettuce and red lettuce. But that's a limited market. When labor was cheaper and you could move people around, maybe to cut . . . oh a couple hundred crates of romaine or this other lettuce . . . it wasn't too bad. But now if you got to move around too much, and these people working, you've got to pay them, and it's pretty hard for me, in other words to compete with somebody who specializes in that.

There are some people who have all these different kinds of lettuces, all these radishes, and all this, and . . . so they've got their crews built up around that, then they're all on one ranch and they can move around quick.

See, my operations are scattered around all over here. Now iceberg lettuce, which is head lettuce, that is almost unlimited. See we go in one day and we'll cut twenty to twenty-five thousand head a day in one field. Well, you've got your whole crew there . . . maybe not only in the one field . . . but you cut one field and make one quick move; you've got a lot of volume. But as we're working there on this volume and then out of a clear sky, somebody calls up and he wants

a 100 romaine, and maybe my romaine is in another field. Then I've got to take some of the crew over there.

**Jarrell:** So it's not worth your while?

**Crosetti:** It's not worth my while. We got our deal built up with volume.

Where we've got volume maybe we don't make as much per package as the one that's got these little odds and ends, but they're in a better position to do it than I am. If this particular man is in this business, and he's out there himself, and he's moving the crew himself . . . all of which I can't do. I got too many other things going on. I can't. So I don't deal with that too much.

Now our main crops here are lettuce and apples, celery, broccoli, cauliflower, zucchinis, and maybe some odds and ends that farmers bring in to us to sell for them. Then of course we're expanding our frozen products . . . we have a frozen plant back here which we're doubling up on hoping to have it going in about a month or so. That is, a new plant. We're working day and night back there right now. So we're covering an awful lot of territory now. Then we have our own vacuum cooling here. We have our ice boxes; we hardly depend on anybody for any services. We have our own setups, and I have people to take care of this whole thing.

### **Tomatoes**

**Jarrell:** Could you go back to the '30s, when tomatoes were one of your big crops that moved through here. What was the operation like in your packing shed? Would you describe what you did with the tomatoes?

**Crosetti:** Well, originally we would bring them in, and we had a washer and a waxer. They would wash the tomatoes, and then put a little wax on there for shine, or a gloss. The wax would preserve the tomato from breaking down. See, we used to ship mostly green tomatoes in those days. We would ship them East and all over because by the time they got back there they would be ripening. The ripe ones we would ship locally. At that time we had another packing house in the back. We used to have 65 or 70 packers who used to wrap pack tomatoes in

those wrapping papers, you know. You've seen them in the stores. They don't wrap too much any more now because it's a little too expensive, so they ship them out loose. But we would run that belt 24 hours a day. The people working there would work as long as they wanted; they got paid so much a box. So if they wanted to work eight or ten hours, or twelve hours, and then they'd go home and go to sleep and then there'd be an open spot. At night maybe a policeman or somebody working in town, he'd come out here and work, fill in for 2-3 hours, and . . . From the very beginning here . . . in the '20s we shipped the first green tomatoes . . . I think they started shipping the first green tomatoes around '27, and this is how I got my start too was shipping tomatoes for the Horgan Company. We didn't have those machines then; they just sorted by hand and put them in a little bin and then they would pack them . . . just a little deal.

So that went on until just about the time I got out of the thing. Then they did away with the wrapping. When I got out, I was wrapping some and I was putting some loose in boxes. It was much cheaper because those packers were making quite a bit of money, and then you had to put a lid on there and nail it. Today, you don't see any wrapping, I don't think, anyplace. We shipped a lot of tomatoes until around the '50s, then I got out of it.

### **Ethnic Groups in Agricultural Labor**

**Jarrell:** Would you describe your labor force in tomatoes? Who were the ethnic groups you had in your fields?

**Crosetti:** If we go back before the turn of the century . . . the Chinese came first, then the Europeans; then around the turn of the century, the Japanese came in, the Europeans weren't coming in . . . In the '20s a lot of Filipinos came. They were good workers, too; they worked in the fields. During the war, a lot of local people did the work for us. Schools were out, and they had teachers and people down Main Street; on Saturdays, or a day off, they'd go out and work in the fields. I had an awful lot of them. On the other hand, we needed the food to fight the war too. Then we brought in some Jamaicans. They were pretty good when it



came to picking apples. But when it came to stooping, in those days, they were too tall. They didn't turn out too good for that kind of work.

**Jarrell:** Now who brought the Jamaicans here? Because I read about that.

**Crosetti:** We did.

**Jarrell:** Who? The growers associations?

**Crosetti:** Well, the grower-shipper associations we had. I was very active; I was the president in a lot of these associations. They're the ones who would bring them in. Then we would have camps for them. During the Korean War we were again short of farm labor . . . and a lot of people just don't like to work at farms.

### **The Bracero Program**

**Crosetti:** They just can't do that field labor. A Filipino or Japanese . . . when it comes to stooping, they're used to it. They've done that, you know, they can do it. And so . . . what was it . . . Public Law 78?

**Jarrell:** Yes. The Bracero Program.

**Crosetti:** The Bracero Program. Truman during the Korean War, made a deal with Mexico to get the Bracero Program in here. Actually it was a good program. Everybody says this, that, and the other thing . . . but see, again, there, it costs the taxpayers not one penny. 'Cause I was very active at the time 'cause I was a president about that time of the association. We had people who worked for the association, who would go into Mexico and recruit people. Most of them who came up here came through El Centro . . . they had a great big camp, a processing place there . . . they'd check them over. Then they would distribute them from there. Say I would need a one hundred people in July, so I'd put my order in; they'd bring me a one hundred people for July . . . I'd need them for three weeks, five weeks, six weeks, whatever. Then when we didn't need them anymore, they would go back. But we'd pay all the expenses—bringing them in, bringing them up here, sending them back, and taking care of them and the whole thing—we paid all the expenses there. And then . . . well, if we had a bracero working out

there in the field, and a local, say an American citizen came out, and he wanted that job, and we had to give him the job, and . . . lay the bracero off, or give him another job. If we laid him off, we still had to pay for his board and room and 3/4 of his average; in other words, if he made \$10 a day, we'd have to pay him \$7.50. We'd have to pay him 3/4. And if this American citizen would come out there . . .

**Jarrell:** He'd still get paid the \$7.50?

**Crosetti:** Yes. There were very few American citizens that ever wanted to work in the fields. Even today you have the Mexicans doing field work, and that's all.

But then, I don't know, the public gets all excited about these braceros being there. They were treated they said in a bad way; food was not good. I used to eat with the braceros all the time; I liked their Mexican food. There's nothing wrong with it, but they got that movement going. Then they said, well, they take a lot of money back to Mexico. Well, they took nowhere near the money back to Mexico they're taking now. Now they got everybody here. Many of the same braceros that were here, now are over here with a green card. See, they got a green card, so they're still here. But now we have to support all their programs and what have you.

**Jarrell:** I definitely want to get back to talking about the Bracero Program later, but could you talk about the character and the makeup of the shed workers, let's say in the '30s. Did you have a lot of Okies here?

**Crosetti:** They were almost all Okies. I remember when they started to come from Oklahoma and Arkansas. We used to grow an awful lot of peas in Watsonville up there where the golf course is, you know, going towards Moss Landing. On all those hills there, we had peas. I was a foreman out there and sometimes we had five hundred or seven hundred peapickers there. What a sight . . . they'd come in broken-down old cars and a few frying pans hanging here and big pots over there. And the blankets and what have you. They'd stop and go to work. We had an awful lot of them picking peas. They were camped all over; they were right down in the river in the summertime . . . and they were down

there having a ball. They'd drink their old booze that they had, and play guitars, and sing. I used to go down there just to sit around. John Steinbeck worked for me in one of those ranches picking peas. Now I didn't know him. But after a while, reading his books, about picking . . . *Grapes of Wrath*, picking the peas, and how he'd described where he was out there, he worked up there when I was a foreman there. But of course he was very young at the time, and I didn't know him at all. But . . . then he started to get into the sheds . . . they were mostly the Okies there at that time.

**Jarrell:** Now I've heard it said that the Okies in the packing shed were very highly skilled people, especially in the lettuce.

**Crosetti:** In the lettuce, I guess that in the shed, as far as lettuce was concerned, I guess they were about the best, yes.

### **"Shaving the Ice"**

**Jarrell:** Do you remember how they packed the lettuce?

**Crosetti:** Yes, I can recall that, vividly. They used to get the 300-pound blocks of ice . . . they didn't have the crushers like now . . . we put them in a crusher, and it goes through, and comes out all crushed. I recall the time that Tommy Rowan, who later became the city manager of Watsonville . . . he died a couple of years or so ago. He was what we call "shaving the ice," at that time for the Horgan Company. They had these icepicks, you know, and they'd shave it, you know, they'd keep chopping. They would shave it, and then you'd have just little pieces of ice. At that time they used to put it in a wheelbarrow . . . I don't think we even had a conveyor then . . . on a wheelbarrow . . . and then you'd wheel the wheelbarrow to the packers there who were packing the lettuce, and then they would pack one layer of lettuce, and get a scoop of ice and put the scoop of ice in the crate . . . then one layer of lettuce, a scoop of ice, another layer of lettuce, and another scoop of ice. Then they would put the lid on, the paper, they had a paper there would hold the ice in, and lid the crate. Then they would truck those crates into a reefer car . . . and there the loader, he would load the ice, and there he would chop the ice into little blocks like this, and then he had these tongs, and he

would pick the ice and throw it on top. He would put the ice on top of the crates. Inside the crate, the ice had to be shaved.

**Jarrell:** Now there were no forklifts . . .

**Crosetti:** No, they had handtrucks, and those crates were heavy. I guess the crates would weigh maybe seventy or eighty pounds or more . . . maybe one hundred pounds in some cases.

**Jarrell:** Now these were shipped mostly by railroad car?

**Crosetti:** Yes, in those days it was mostly by railroad cars. There weren't too many trucks. There were very few trucks . . . going East . . . not too many anyway.

**Jarrell:** Where were the railroad cars in relation to the packing shed?

**Crosetti:** Right alongside.

**Crosetti:** They would when they got through packing, the crates of lettuce, or any other commodity, they would put it on this roller and the roller would take it into the car. In some cases they would truck it in. It's a big change now. It's all cartons, no more ice. It's all changed.

### **Vacuum cooling**

**Jarrell:** When did vacuum cooling come in?

**Crosetti:** Vacuum cooling started here . . . around '48 to '50. In a small way, they were experimenting. Then in the '50s it started . . . and it took over.

**Jarrell:** Would you describe how it changed the whole operation . . . from the time you harvested the lettuce. Now that you had vacuum cooling, what difference did that make? I understand that it lowers the temperature of the lettuce very rapidly?

**Crosetti:** Well, it's an altogether different process now. I mean, it's like night and day, the process of packing or shipping lettuce. What it used to be is so different.

We pack it in the field, in a carton . . . about two dozen [heads] in a carton. Then the carton comes in, it goes into the vacuum-cooler. It goes in there for about twenty minutes. The reason I guess they call it a vacuum is it isn't so much the cooling, it takes the heat, it draws the heat out of the lettuce clear to the heart. To the core of the lettuce head. When the lettuce comes out usually they put a thermometer in there and get the temperature. It's very quick. Sometimes, on a cool day, fifteen minutes will do it. If it's a hot day, it may be twenty minutes . . . takes maybe a little bit longer. Then it comes out, and it's loaded into the refrigerated truck, or car, and . . . there's no ice put on lettuce anymore. They maintain the temperature, see. When we ship we put a Ryan thermometer into the truck or into the car. When it's shipped and it gets back to say New York, or wherever, it will show how much the temperature varied. Like a little graph. Sometimes these truckdrivers, they take off from here and stop someplace and see some gal over at the coffee shop . . . and then they go in and they forget, you know . . . maybe they turn the thing down or off . . . and then a lot of times, before we had this thermometer, the car'd get back there, and it was spoiled, it wasn't any good, and . . . oh, well, you'd have all kinds of trouble . . . and then they would blame us for shipping poor lettuce. Now you put that thermometer in there, and it'll show.

**Jarrell:** There's a record.

**Crosetti:** You got the whole record the whole time, and that thing will show every variation . . . so I think it costs us about \$25 a car to put that thermometer in . . .

**Jarrell:** Is that pretty cheap?

**Crosetti:** Well, that's cheap when you've got thousands of dollars in there. So you just set the thermometer in there. Otherwise, you'd have no way of telling. Lots of times, the temperature can go up, you know, if they don't have the unit going right. But then, to get it down, they'll speed that thing up, and get it level, so then it gets to its destination, they say, "Well, lookit here it's cool enough in here." Well, without that Ryan thing, you had no comeback.

**Jarrell:** You have proof for it, yes.

**Crosetti:** Yes. This way, though, the thing just fits . . . it's funny. You have to do those things there . . . otherwise you're in trouble.

**Jarrell:** We're almost done here for today. Just a couple more questions.

**Crosetti:** Okay.

**Jarrell:** How did the introduction of vacuum cooling alter the picture that you had for lettuce?

**Crosetti:** Well it revolutionized the whole industry, if we can put it that way. Because until then practically all the lettuce was packed in a shed to go East. They used to have little what they call dry pack crates, you know, which in those days everything was crates. So they'd pack dry pack crates for local consumption, you know, for not too long a distance.

But then when this came in, it closed down all the sheds and then all the packing was done in the fields. Actually it's a better way, because you're cutting the lettuce there, and you're packing right away, bringing it in to the cooler right away . . . where before you'd bring it in . . . well, what they call those big baskets, and then it would sit out there in the sun for a long time, see. But you'd have to start early in the morning because you had to have a big crew to pack, and if you ran out of lettuce, you'd have to pay them. Then if you got too much lettuce in there, it would wither down, see. It would heat. Then the ice couldn't take the heat out. Well the way it is now, all you do is you pack it down there, they have a forklift that takes a whole load right off the truck, sits it down, then they put it through the cooler right away, it goes out, and is loaded right into the trucks . . . right in the trucks, or whichever way it goes . . . it changed the whole thing around.

The way we grow lettuce here . . . and we try get it down to a science, although it's not that scientific, I guess. But to fertilize it right. So that we get a head a little bit bigger than what we're going to ship, you know. When you cut it, you cut it on the ground . . . we don't put it right smack into the carton . . . they pick it up

and they cut the butt off and take some of the outer leaves off. Then when it goes into the carton, it's perfectly clean excepting sometimes when you get into some rain, you see. If you get into some rains, then mud will splatter in there.

**Jarrell:** I have the agricultural extension service pamphlet on lettuce here . . . Can you tell me how yield has changed over the years? I know that there has been a much more scientific approach to the growing of crops. Do you use any special techniques when you grow the lettuce, like plastic mulch?

**Crosetti:** We don't use plastic mulch in lettuce because it's not necessary. With strawberries if you get a little rain, especially if it's sitting in the mud, immediately it'll rot . . . where lettuce, if you do get a little rain, it, you usually *don't* get too much decay, you might get a little in there . . . but it'd be too expensive for the volume of lettuce. Now you take a strawberry grower, for the most part they're small growers. Even though you see some big fields. They might belong to one person, but they're broken down into different small plots where each little grower has a plot. For lettuce, when you've got thousands and thousands of acres, why . . . and then also, you put that thing in there, it's good for all year around . . . the berry . . . where lettuce sometimes is 60 days. We get rid of it, of course, and then in the summertime it very seldom rains here. But the strawberry is different.

**Jarrell:** Do you consult with the agricultural advisors?

**Crosetti:** Oh yes.

**Jarrell:** How much do you have to do with state and county agents who inspect your crops or . . . control your use of pesticides?

**Crosetti:** We work very closely with the county inspectors. They're the ones that are on the ground floor here. They check everything. We read up on these things; we experiment, and they check us. In fact, you know, we can't ship anything out that's off grade because the inspectors can pick you over.

Oh they kick the whole thing over on you. In lettuce, we have an inspector in the field every day. Before we can go into a field tomorrow, we have to call the

inspector and tell him that we're going to be in this field down here tomorrow starting at 7 o'clock. If it's in Monterey County, we call the office here. If it's Santa Cruz County, we call the other side. So then they come out, they inspect so we don't ship anything that's not right.

### **Lettuce Marketing**

**Jarrell:** On another subject, first of all, how common has contract buying been in your experience? And then, as a second part of that, how prevalent have marketing orders been in lettuce? Do you participate in marketing orders?

**Crosetti:** We had a marketing order here in effect a few years ago, it's like anything else. When you get a group of rugged individualists (laughter) as some of them like to call themselves . . . hardheads . . . the business goes along fine for awhile . . . and then there's always somebody who gets unhappy and dissatisfied, and then you got problems, and . . . so that was kicked out, this marketing order we had. There's one being proposed now.

**Jarrell:** I read that in 1971 the U.S. Department of Agriculture had one for the allocation of lettuce onto the market.

**Crosetti:** Well, they've had several here, but there's none in effect right now, here. I believe there's one in Santa Maria; I think they have one amongst themselves down there.

### **Leasing and Buying Land**

**Jarrell:** Today's our second interview. First of all, would you continue discussing your early years as a grower and how you leased or bought land here and in other areas?

**Crosetti:** Yes. I started out originally making deals with growers because I was commercially packing out for them, and then I wanted to go into the farming end on my own. I started to lease some land during the Depression days, and nobody really had much money. I started to buy different land from the owners that in some cases had owned this land for many years. The only way I could get started



was to put a little bit down and pay off so much a year and pay them interest and this is how I started to lease them. I started to buy a little later on.

**Jarrell:** Now, what kind of acreages are you talking about?

**Crosetti:** My first few deals were around forty acres and even smaller, and then later on I increased the acreage some. But in this area we don't have what you might say great big farms or big ranches, like they do in the San Joaquin Valley or even the Salinas Valley.

**Jarrell:** When did you start expanding your operations out of the Pajaro Valley and into other areas of the state?

**Crosetti:** Well, in 1940, I went to the Imperial Valley, and one of the reasons I went down there was the fact that I wanted to keep growing all year round. Of course, in the winter time up here you can't grow lettuce and just a few winter crops, so I wanted to get into the lettuce business down there so we'd have lettuce just about every day of the year. Then again I went down there making deals with some of the growers, and then I leased some land, then I even bought some land. A couple of years later, I went into Arizona; I was in the Phoenix area, and we operated out of there for a few years and in the Glendale area, too. Then we got out of there for a while, because it overlapped. It overlapped into our Watsonville deal and El Centro deal, and I had to do a lot of running around, and at that time airplane facilities weren't too good, and we had problems going back and forth, had to drive a car down there. A lot of driving. Later on I went into what they call the Wilcox area. That was right close to New Mexico. That looked like the bonanza there for a little while.

**Jarrell:** You mentioned that last week.

**Crosetti:** Yeah. Four of us went in together and we bought land down there, and then we put money down on some more land, but then it turned out that it was this kind of flash in the pan, and it didn't turn out so good, so we took a little bit of a shellacking there. Then I came back. I was still in Phoenix for another couple of years or so. Then I got out of the whole Arizona deal and just concentrated here in California, which is the Pajaro Valley, Salinas, and the Imperial Valley.

Then we went into Blythe, for two or three years, too. Some of these deals are short, they're fast, and . . . we'd go in and sometimes they didn't look as good as we thought. So we started to back away and concentrate more on this particular area here.

**Jarrell:** Can you give me some notion over the years of what kind of acreage you control and own, in all of these vicinities? I mean, in any one year, let's say.

**Crosetti:** You mean the farming, what I farm there?

**Jarrell:** Yes, and in the Imperial Valley. I'm just interested in the kind of scale that we're talking about.

**Crosetti:** Well . . . I'm just kind of guessing a little bit, because I don't have all the figures here. We've figured out though that we were in the neighborhood of ten thousand acres.

But we don't have that now since I got away from those other areas down there. And 'course, I'm talking about the land that I own, which is not nearly that much. And what I lease and then the deals that I had with other growers. I'm talking about the crops we handled . . . the crops that, that were handled in the course of a year.

**Jarrell:** It seems to me from the reading that I've done that the difference between now and say forty or fifty years ago is that it used to be quite common that either someone owned land or leased land. And now it seems that in these other kinds of deals, as you call them, that land ownership is not as important or as predominant now as it used to be—among grower-shippers. You want to control the land but . . . who actually owns it . . . isn't the key question.

**Crosetti:** Yes . . . not so much now. See, of course we're going back thirty some odd years ago, and there was more land available. They were developing more land in the deserts and you could get land a lot easier. You could buy it very reasonable. But today here, I guess all over California it's awful hard to buy land here now. Anybody's got a piece of ground, why they're going to hang on to it,

unless they get a real big price or something happens that they do have to sell. Otherwise they're going to hang on.

**Jarrell:** Is it just as preferable for you now to be able to lease land or to make deals with growers, as it is to own it? I mean, would you prefer to own it?

**Crosetti:** If I could buy some good land right now, I wouldn't mind buying some more. But actually, around this area I don't know where you could buy one acre hardly, and because everybody's hanging on to land, and the only way, maybe that you could buy some, and I still say maybe, is by paying a lot of money for it. Maybe more than its value, than you think it's worth today.

I've bought land before that I thought I was paying full price, but meanwhile the values have gone up, so some of those deals turned out to be pretty good. See when I have deals with a grower, I don't have to worry too much about growing then.

### **Making Deals**

**Crosetti:** We handle many different crops and process them, and the grower, he's out there and he takes care of the growing, so then we have a joint deal. Maybe split a fifty-fifty, and he does the growing and we do the packing. And Imperial Valley, that's mostly where our deal's now, because it's so far away and I can't get around like I used to, to go down there and check on everything all the time. So that I'm better off to get somebody with an interest . . . himself in . . . in what we call the deal . . . so that he's going to do a good job because he has an interest there.

**Jarrell:** Because there's a stake in it.

**Crosetti:** Right. And if you got to depend on somebody that you're hiring, especially nowadays, if you get somebody that's good and there are some good ones, that's fine. But if you get someone that's not too good, he can lose you an awful lot of money in a hurry. Actually, I now prefer in those deals far away like that, to have somebody take care. We'll go down in the winter time, and then we move our operation down there, because we don't have much to do here. Our

office force goes down, and in the winter time we can get away. But down there, they start planting lettuce in July, and that's when we're real busy here, and then you have all the sending and the hauling and all that. See, here we start planting in December. So you have different seasons . . . it's an altogether different kind of a deal.

**Jarrell:** Can you talk about taxes on agricultural land? In this area specifically, and in Imperial Valley, and how that has changed over the years?

**Crosetti:** Well, our taxes, as everybody knows . . . everybody's taxes have gone up, and ours are going way up too. The valuation of the land in this particular area here, the Pajaro Valley, has gone up and consequently the tax assessor, why he takes that into consideration, and he comes along and he raises you . . . We're up now where our land, the good land around here—just farmland I'm talking about—we're paying around a hundred dollars an acre in taxes. Well, it wasn't too many years ago that that's what we paid in rent for the whole thing, including taxes. Then I go quite a while back and in some cases you can almost buy some of this land for what you're paying for taxes now. But the Imperial Valley . . . the taxes down there are not quite like they are up here, even though they have good land down there and lots of it. Land is still cheaper down there than it is here. I guess the reason for that is because of where it's located. It's way down the desert right on the border of Mexico there, and it's kind of isolated. Where around here . . . it's real close here, you might say; San Jose and these big urban areas where people're coming in looking for land all the time.

### **Crops**

**Jarrell:** Now, to shift to crops. In your deals and as an independent grower, how do you decide what crop to grow? If you could trace that from the '30s. How did you decide . . . to grow tomatoes or lettuce?

**Crosetti:** Well, that's a good question . . . and a hard one to answer, because a lot of times I wonder myself just how did I do that. I was in the tomato deal, I just accidentally got into it when I was working for the old T.J. Horgan and Company, and then . . . they just started to ship tomatoes . . . green at that time, it

was something new, a novelty. So I went into tomato growing and packing. But the lettuce, if I can put it this way, was the glamour crop of the crops growing around here . . . Well, when you make money there, when they first started out in the lettuce business here, I think the first lettuce was shipped around 1917 . . . and in the '20s they started to ship quite a bit of lettuce. There was a lot of demand, and some of these people became millionaires overnight. So everybody wanted to get into the lettuce business. Even today the lettuce business is very fascinating, because when you make money in the lettuce business you make a lot of it. But by the same token . . . when you have too much lettuce, then you can lose your shirt. I've seen a lot of people during the past years that got into the lettuce business, and they didn't last any time at all— because when they hit a bad market, they were out of business. By the same token, some of them got in without too much money and they were lucky the patch of lettuce came off at a good time . . . and the next thing you know, they're big shippers. Well, I always wanted to get into the lettuce deal. Of course I got into it rather early. And then you have to diversify some too. I planted cauliflower and celery . . . broccoli, and . . . you get into these things 'cause you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket. Anyway, if you're playing the field there with different crops, you might lose your shirt over here and then this one over here might bail you out, see. So it's a hard thing to say, "Well, how do you do it?"

Now, I got some fellows working here . . . I lay out the schedule of plantings, and they say, "well, how do you do that?" Well, Huh!—I don't. Yeah, I don't. This is something that you have to try to figure, and I'm not going to say that I'm right all the time, because I've been wrong many, many times. Now you take lettuce. We try to handle lettuce every day. When we start here, and then we go to Imperial Valley, . . . we have customers that depend on us every day. So I try to plant so many acres, so many acres a week. So that I'll have a continuation from the day we start lettuce. So, when I get these people who depend on us for lettuce, they know that I got lettuce today, tomorrow, the next day, and the following day . . . those are the people they like to do business with. They don't want to do business with somebody that has one patch a week, or some like that, because then they got to go find somebody else. They want to depend on somebody. I'm talking especially about the big buyers that buy thousands of

cartons a day, and they'll buy from me and from somebody else. So, that's the way I try to plant. I'm planting right along. We start planting here . . . around the first of the year in December. Then we plant every week, give or take a certain amount of acres there, until pretty close to the first of August. Then it's too late because, after that, when that crop goes off in the winter time, frost and rains . . . And these other areas come in, the desert areas, and they come with good lettuce and then we have trouble. I'm only talking about lettuce now, but that's more or less the same with the other crops.

**Jarrell:** When you make up a planting schedule for the year do you have a really good notion of what your buyers want? They want so much every day, let's say?

**Crosetti:** Well, we have a fairly good notion, but it doesn't always come out the way that we figure. Because the buyer . . . sure he's depending on us, or somebody else. As long as you have the quality that he wants . . . and the price is right. But if he should come in here and our quality is off, and he can go over to some other shipper and he has better quality, well he'll buy over there. And the price by the same token, has to be the same. But most of the time our quality is comparable to the other fellow. Sure, when the weather's right and everything is good, everybody has good quality more or less, we'll say. When you get some bad weather, or real hot weather then the quality is off. But everybody has more or less that same kind of weather. Because most of us farm about the same.

Of course, you get in somebody new and his quality isn't quite as good; well he better be careful because then he's going to be in trouble, because he's not going to be able to sell, at least for the price that the others are going to get. If he can't be competitive then he's going to be in trouble.

**Jarrell:** When you're planting every day, and harvesting in succession, how many acres do you plant a week?

**Crosetti:** Well, I try to plant between seventy-five and a hundred acres a week.

**Jarrell:** This is from December through August?

**Crosetti:** This is from the first of January and it might be a little . . . in December, but let's go from the first of January until the first of August, or the latter part of July. Then of course, there's no more planting in there. But during that period of time we're planting this acreage. See, when I say seventy-five, a hundred acres a week, in the winter time maybe we get some heavy rains and we can't plant for maybe a couple of weeks. We don't plant the same. And then we try to make up for it when it clears up by planting a little bit more. But our program is set out to be that way. But it will vary on account of the weather.

**Jarrell:** Do you take into account how much your competitors are growing as well? Do you kind of keep your ears open, and you know what so and so is doing . . . or does this figure into your determination?

**Crosetti:** Well, it's pretty hard. It's pretty hard to go by what your competitor is doing because, you know, over in Salinas there are an awful lot of shippers, and they'll plant at the same time, and their crop'll come off . . . at the same time. Watsonville, we can tell pretty close. Maybe to a degree we can tell a little bit and regulate ourselves some. But we try to go on this schedule as close as we can, unless we're sure that the others are all planting real heavy. Then we try to hold back. But usually we're set up to go. It's strictly a gamble. Your crop may come off there and you may not get a thing. You may not get a penny back. We've piled up a lot of lettuce and even last year wasn't a bad year, but I had a couple of patches that I had to plow up because of the markets, sometimes your market fluctuates so much it's way down. It doesn't pay to go in and cut it. Well, maybe you might have labor . . . troubles, and so you've got a lot of elements, of things to contend with.

**Jarrell:** Last week you discussed, rather briefly, marketing lettuce. I think you said that generally in the lettuce industry in this area that those sorts of cooperative arrangements have not been successful. You said on paper they might look good, but in practice they often were less successful.

**Crosetti:** Yes. We've had problems. One reason is that we've had these co-ops and this prorate shipping, in the past in California, where we voted in California. But you take in the summer time, oh, almost every state in the Union's going to

have some lettuce at one time or another. And consequently, if they hear that we got this marketing order in and we're going to curtail our shipments and they're going to plant heavier, and so if they plant heavier, then we're putting them in business and putting ourselves out.

**Jarrell:** So they would take advantage of your cooperation and your expense.

**Crosetti:** At our expense. Now see in the winter time, in the Imperial Valley we have Yuma, right here, fifty miles away from the Imperial Valley, and they come head on with us. We ran into that trouble here a few years ago when we were pro-rating our shipments, and they were going a hundred percent, so we were holding the umbrella for Yuma . . . and so that's where sometimes you have little problems in the . . .

**Jarrell:** Would you explain pro-rating?

**Crosetti:** Well, pro-rating the shipments, in other words, when we had these marketing orders in, the state comes in. Then they have meetings. They say, "Well next week is going to be too much lettuce, a price right now is way, way down, and let's only ship maybe seventy-five percent . . ."

**Jarrell:** Right. And then they'll allocate?

**Crosetti:** Yeah. Seventy-five percent of what you have to ship there. But this is the state; we can't do it alone because the state won't let us. We had some problems there. However, they're in the process now of starting, trying another co-op. Personally, I think if a co-op was run right, it probably would be a good thing, but it's awful hard to control.

**Jarrell:** How is the grower's price determined in relation to the total cost of production? Now, if you had a deal with a grower here or in the Imperial Valley, what are the factors that determine your price?

**Crosetti:** Well, to try to explain that right from the start, I go down to El Centro—that's where we mostly have deals and . . . So I have growers down there and we determine the price of growing an acre of lettuce. The price we now



figure is around \$750 an acre or, \$800, depending who you're dealing with. Let's take \$800, and if I take one half, I put up a full hundred dollars and he puts up the balance.

See, he does all the farming . . . he farms the whole thing out. Then when a crop comes off . . . I do the packing, I do the shipping, and I charge a packing charge per carton, based on the actual cost, plus maybe fifteen or twenty percent that we have . . . so we'll either make the profit or take our overhead. Then when the proceeds are in we split that fifty-fifty. The net proceeds.

**Jarrell:** So let's say Safeway is one of your buyers; when they buy it from you, then everything that's net you split with your partner.

**Crosetti:** Yeah, we split with the partner whatever is net. We have an accounting there and every day we give them the price that we sold it for. And there's market news, now, that you can call up anytime. They can tell you what market is, and so forth. So, at the end of the deal whenever the patch is completed, whatever the proceeds are we go fifty-fifty.

**Jarrell:** Would you say that over the years, since the '30s, that this process has become more complicated or predictable? You said lettuce is a speculative, glamour crop. Would you say that you have a better idea of what your cartons of lettuce were going to sell for now than you used to have? Before they're actually harvested and everything?

**Crosetti:** Well, that's pretty hard. I've been in this business for fifty years, and to be able to predict ahead is awful hard. If I was able to do that, I could retire pretty fast. (laughter) I'd be out of business . . . I mean I wouldn't have to be in business, I'd have it made. We can predict, to a degree, when we find out how many acres are planted, ones we can break down, each month—how many acres are planted . . . And then we can tell pretty well. We can't tell in advance. When you're planting, it's pretty hard.

You just have to close your eyes . . . because you might have some big plantings, big supplies come off at a period, acreage-wise, but maybe you might lose part of your crop by bugs, insects . . . So instead of having that big production you think

you were going to have, your production's cut down. And any time your production is down, your price goes up. Supply and demand.

### **Labor Force**

**Jarrell:** I would like to talk now about the labor force—both the field workers from the '30s on—the field workers—and then we talked last week about packing shed workers. But I have read some articles in the *Watsonville Register-Pajaronian* in 1965 in which you were quoted at the end of the bracero program, and you sounded like the voice of reason, because a lot of the growers were in a total panic. You were saying that the government wasn't going to let you starve, that the growers were going to have labor . . . I would like to talk about the labor force from the middle '30s up to the present . . . especially your views on the bracero program. If you could start with the '30s.

**Crosetti:** I'd like to go back to the '20s there—I could go back further—but in the early '20s we had mostly Filipinos; then we had . . . some Europeans coming over and some Japanese doing the work . . . Then in the latter '20s, we had these people from the Dust Bowl, from the Midwest . . . coming out to California because they lost everything and they were miserable there. It was a pathetic thing, as I recall, because I was a foreman in the fields at the time. Saw them coming in and they were picking peas and trying to get any kind of a job they could. In the '30s we still had a lot of those people coming in, or people who stayed here. The Filipinos were still here and they were pretty young at that time, not too many Filipinos came over later. I don't know whether it was the immigration laws or whether they decided not to come. So, there was a combination of Filipinos working in the fields and these other people working in the packing sheds. They come in to work . . . because lettuce was all packed in packing sheds in those days, what they call ice pack.

**Jarrell:** You gave a very excellent description of that.

**Crosetti:** Yeah. I think I've already covered that. We've always had this labor situation, wondering just where we are going to get our labor from. And of course in those days we required more labor than we do now, because we have

mechanized a lot of crops. See, in those days, sugar beets, for instance, they used to have to top sugar beets by hand. Now they've got a machine that goes in and takes care of the whole thing, so all you need is an operator and a couple of other people, so you don't need the people on the fields there like we needed at that time. Tomatoes, especially the cannery tomatoes, have become mechanized, too.

Many other crops have become more and more mechanized. So of course then we come into the '40s. I think we've covered a little bit of that before, through the '40s. We were short of labor because of the war. We brought in Jamaicans and we had the local people in town who would come out and help work. When schools were out we'd have schoolteachers and kids working. For the most part, they were pretty good. Then the war was over, and then the Korean War came along. I believe it was '51 or '52. That's when Truman made the agreement with Mexico for Public Law 78 where we got the braceros coming in here. And that lasted until sixty . . .

**Jarrell:** '64-'65.

**Crosetti:** '64, '65, in there. Well, you ask me my opinion of the bracero program, well I thought it was a very good one. Of course a lot of people had different ideas. A lot of people said that they were brought in like slaves, and so forth. But we had good camps as I recall, and they were inspected all the time, and the food was real good. A lot of people in town—bankers and other people would say, "Hey, how about going down and eatin', eating at your camp . . ." So we'd walk in out of a clear sky and sit down and eat with these people. Then out in the fields, they used to bring the food out to the fields there and I'd eat with my field men . . . The program wasn't actually that bad. Some people said, "Well, they're making money here, and they're sending it to Mexico." Well, they didn't send too much money to Mexico. At that time they weren't making that kind of money. But they were spending money here. When they left they would buy television sets and clothing. But we just couldn't sell the program there. We would try to get just as few workers as we could here. Sometimes we'd only need him here for a month, or two months or six weeks, or enough for a quick crop . . . And then they would go back. And we paid all the expenses. A hundred percent. The tax—it cost the taxpayers absolutely nothing.

**Jarrell:** Here in Pajaro Valley in Watsonville, when you need “x” number of workers—where do you get them?

**Crosetti:** We call the grower-shippers association over here in Salinas. We had a man and a crew there . . . a man that was in charge of the deal, but had his crew, so he would call El Centro . . . that’s where these people would come from, Mexico. They worked with the Mexican government and Mexican people down there, so they’d say, “Well, we need a thousand men,” or, “We need two thousand.” My case, of course, probably the most I ever had was two, three hundred, four hundred. So I would call him, now, I would say, “I need fifty men here for two weeks. Okay. I got some beans coming off. All right, well get them over.” We put them up in the camp here, and then when the two weeks was up, well they probably had somewhere else . . .

Here somebody else has got some other kind of a crop. He needed them for a month or two months. In lettuce, of course, we could keep them here pretty near all year. Because they start to thin here, in January and February. They would thin and then pack. So they were here for a long period of time. With some of these shorter crops, they’re only here for a short period of time.

**Jarrell:** As for their accommodations, were there labor camps that you owned? Or did the grower-shippers association have a labor camp for this area?

**Crosetti:** No, most of us had our own camps. But they used to have camps that were run, not exactly by the grower-shippers, but by maybe some association. Some association that would allocate them men to whatever grower that was a member of the association that would allocate as many men as he wanted. We had our own camps, and most of them we would rent. Then we had a cook [who] would take care of the cooking and the buying and the food. But there was actually nothing wrong with it. Except that people didn’t understand it. And then there were some that just are opposed to almost anything, and they kept bringing up, you know, the fact that there’s many thousands of American citizens that want these jobs and want to work. Well, they’re just not cut for that, it’s pretty hard for somebody to do this kind of work. Now, I don’t say that the work itself is hard, if you’re accustomed to it.

See, there's a lot of these people, that's all they want to do. They're used to it. But if you've got to send somebody out from town to do this kind of work, it's awful hard. We try to tell them that, try to explain . . . So anyway, they did away with the braceros. Huh! But then we came in with that green card . . . And so many of the same braceros came back on the green card, they brought their families back and then they're settled down here . . .

Anyway . . . so then they came over with the green card and so ever since then it's been a lot of problems of illegal aliens coming in and these cards are easy to make or to copy because anybody can get a social security number. All you got to do is write it in. And now they want to make the farmers responsible for hiring these people. There's no way we can tell . . . how do we know? Somebody comes in for a job, in the first place I think the law says we're not supposed to ask anybody their color or religion . . . because this is in the law. I know specifically that you can't ask them. They come in and the first thing, "Do you have a social security card?" That's what we ask anybody, everybody, I don't care who it is—whether he's local, or a United States citizen, he's got a social security card. So he's got a social security card . . . and then if you ask them if they have a green card. "Yeah, I . . ." "Are you an alien?" "No." If they show you a green card, well what are we going to do? They say they're going to fine us . . . if we hire illegal aliens. . . Well, I don't know whether he's here legally or illegally, there's no way. I can't tell—even the immigration people who are pros and experts have a hard time, and they get into trouble too. They say they're harassing and all this and that. So, it's an awful hard proposition there. The way these people are coming in, they're coming in so fast it's creating quite a problem here and I don't know the answer. We need the help, but the thing is not handled right. I just don't know what we're going to do. I don't have any answer to that question.

### **Labor Organizing**

**Jarrell:** I'd like to ask you about labor organizations in this area and Salinas since the '30s . . . how you feel about the historical efforts of field workers and packing shed workers to organize, and specifically if you remember the lettuce strike in Salinas in 1936.

**Crosetti:** '36—I was right in it.

**Jarrell:** I'd like you to tell me—first if you could just talk about that strike? What were you doing? What was your position at that . . .

**Crosetti:** Well, of course, historically farmers haven't been too friendly with labor. I'm going back to years ago. That has changed now; I mean our relationship with labor now has changed a great deal. We get along for the most part, get along pretty good. But at that time people came and . . . I was quite, quite young. I didn't know exactly just what was going on, but they [the organizers] came in and some of the old shippers said they were agitators and they created lots of problems and a lot of troubles there. But they never gave up, and then in the '40s I guess we started to recognize labor for what it was and is now. See at that time, why I didn't have one union contract. I don't think anybody did in the growing, shipping, packing . . . there were no union contracts. Today I have seven. I have seven union contracts, which actually is too many, because we no more get through negotiating one, then we got another one.

**Jarrell:** They don't all come due during the same time?

**Crosetti:** They all come due at different times. So they keep coming, most of them for three years, so every three years you're negotiating for another one. Well, when you've got seven you got one every few months.

**Jarrell:** Do you participate in the negotiating yourself?

**Crosetti:** I used to but I don't anymore. I got out of some of these things. But at one time I was active in everything that went on as far as agriculture is concerned. But we belong to different associations and they have people who negotiate with these union people . . .

**Jarrell:** And then the organizations which represent you and other growers . . .

**Crosetti:** Yes. We belong, they represent us. And then I have people who sit there . . . and we're in the midst of negotiating one right now. That's our shed

contract down there with the AFL-CIO. Our fresh broccoli contract has expired, about a month or so ago. And we're negotiating that. Of course when the deal is made, then we have to pay retroactively.

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Crosetti:** But nowadays it's altogether different than the first negotiations that we used to have. In those days they'd come in and want five cents an hour and settle for two and a half cents, or they'd want ten cents an hour and that was it. But now their demands are much higher, and you have dental care, health care, vacation times, and pensions . . . And there's a million and one things that have to be worked out. I guess I just don't have the patience any more to sit around, and sometimes they go late at night. I think I've had enough of that part of it. So I let somebody else take care of it.

### **Salinas Strike of 1936**

**Jarrell:** How did you see the 1936 strike? How were you in the middle of it?

**Crosetti:** Well, at that time I was involved in shipping, and they came in, they started picketing. They picketed everybody, and different ones started to pool together, so we didn't have to go to many different packing houses. We had central places where we would bring our produce to pack down on Beach Street. We'd bring everything in there. We had a big, big set-up, and we had the people that lived right there on the premises, and we had different facilities for them to stay in. Trailers and what-have-you and cooking, and everything . . . They would stay there day and night because some of them were considered strike-breakers and if they got outside there'd be fights and so forth. That went on for quite a while, but then I guess the thing blew up, and we went back to the same way of doing business then. But later on . . . well, the handwriting was on the wall, you could see it coming. There's no use to . . . fight them. And after all, if you're dealing with a good responsible union it's not that bad. They come in, sure their demands are tough and sometimes they get a little upset and all, but our relationship with these union people now is fine. Well, we maybe get in and fight like hell at the meeting, but after that you go out and have a drink together. See

we visit together, it's part of the deal, but . . . when you talk of so many years ago it was a communistic thing and everybody was taking about them . . .

**Jarrell:** Did you believe that, or do you believe that now?

**Crosetti:** I believed it more at that time because it was something new. It was something I'd never seen, and again I was young. I could hear the old-timers, saying, you know, "the communists are taking over," and it wasn't only in agriculture. Communism was something that . . . people just would shudder even at the word. Actually I was a little concerned. At that time I thought maybe some of those people were communists. But I can't say that they were. There probably were some that were indoctrinated with that kind of thinking. I would say that most of them weren't people who were trying to do something for the working people. And like today, I can't call the people we're doing business with, I don't think they're communists.

Again, they can always run into somebody who might have to think a little bit like that, but I know that the AFL-CIO, even [George] Meany and the top people, they're as anti-communist as can be. No, nothing to do with Russia. And I know the Teamsters are okay. It's something that we all got carried away with at that time. Sure, if you didn't have a union there'd be a lot better for the employer, I guess, because he'd be in full control of what to pay and everything else and then you would hold it down. As long as they're reasonable, as long as the union is halfway reasonable, there's a place for them, and we can get along with them.

### **Negotiating with Unions**

**Jarrell:** Do you subscribe to the notion of collective bargaining, generally speaking?

**Crosetti:** Generally speaking, yes. With responsible people. Our relationship with the unions, for the most part, is good. There we have one union. I'm not going to mention the name, you'll probably know it. I think it's . . .

**Jarrell:** You can say it.



**Crosetti:** I don't want to antagonize, because we have a contract, and it's the UFW [United Farm Workers]. The Chavez deal, you know. The hiring hall. See, we can't hire anybody. We got to go through their hiring hall.

**Jarrell:** To hire the field workers.

**Crosetti:** . . . that's strictly field workers. So we can't fire anybody, I don't care what he's doing, without three warnings, and then you've got to have hearings, and then it's awful hard to get anything done. And you know we're going to be held responsible for hiring illegal aliens. And we can't even hire, this particular union we can't even hire them. We got to go through there. So, if they send me an illegal alien out there, I got to put them on.

**Jarrell:** So you're caught in a bind?

**Crosetti:** Yeah. So I'm caught in here with a bind. See what's costing a lot of money, a lot of headaches, a lot of problems too . . . was this jurisdictional fight between the Teamsters and the UFW. They're fighting each other and we're in the middle. We get blamed for everything. They say, "Well, he's the one." Well, I had a contract with the Teamsters there. Then the UFW came in, and there was a lot of harassing going on. Well then they had an election, I think it was a little phony to start with. I went UFW, which I am now. So when it comes to getting back to this alien problem, if I can't hire who I want there, how can they blame me? It should be screened. If they're going to send me a worker out there, see you got to put them on. They should do the screening then. But no. No, we're responsible for everything. There's a lot of things people outside don't know. 'Cause I don't think we're quite as bad as we're made out to be. Maybe we might be a little bad, but some of these unions aren't the best either.

### **Grower Association Activities**

**Jarrell:** You said that in the past you were quite active in the Grower-Shippers Vegetable Association of Central California until recent years.

**Crosetti:** Yes. Well, I was a director for many years. I was a president in '62, when the bracero program was going hot and heavy. I was going back to

Washington, D.C. and meeting all over the country. The Secretary of Labor Willard W. Wirtz, at that time, he seemed to be the one that wanted to get rid of the bracero program more than anyone else. At the same time I was on the State Board of Agriculture, [Governor Edmund G.] Pat Brown was there; he was a good friend of mine. So I was in Sacramento meeting all the time there. I was in the Western Growers Association—there were all kinds of associations—and the California-Arizona Growers Association so . . . I spent an awful lot of time. In those days we were just meeting all the time. It's a wonder I still had a business after all that. Oh, I was active until three, four years ago. And I kind of pulled away. Well I'm still not out completely. Once in awhile they call me up . . . Well, I just can't give all my time. Some of these younger people . . . they have better ideas now, or different ideas. The trend is moving more in their direction . . . I had my day, you know. So . . . I still try to do what I can.

**Jarrell:** Now, in relation to the Grower-Shippers Association, in 1961 Bud Antle signed the first labor contract with the Teamsters. Can you think back now on how that struck you?

**Crosetti:** When we heard about it, we were in a meeting over in Salinas, one of those grower-shipper meetings. It came as a complete surprise to all of us. Because at the time there had been no indication that anybody was going to sign with a union, of any kind. It came as a surprise, and I just didn't know what to say, what to do. He'd signed and so I . . . for a while there I wasn't too happy about it. After I got thinking about it, well after all, it's up to him. He can do what he wants and he'll have to live with it. It kind of opened the door a little bit there . . . for the unions to come in. But I was always friendly with Bud Antle at the time.

Yeah, he made headlines all over the country, the fact that he was the first one to sign with any union on the mainland here. In Honolulu, I guess they had organized in the sugar industry with Harry Bridges and the ILWU [International Longshoremen and Warehousemens Union]. But as it turned out maybe we might have been better off if we'd all gone in at that time. We could have maybe avoided a lot of these problems that came up later.

**Jarrell:** Why do you think that Antle signed with the Teamsters?

**Crosetti:** It's pretty hard to say. Antle, I can say I knew him for many, many years, and he got into business after I did, and he had all kinds of ideas, and some worked, some didn't. But he was very progressive, very independent. So I don't know whether he had some problems there with the Grower-Shippers Association too. But he was quite independent and that was the . . .

**Jarrell:** I have heard rumors . . .

**Crosetti:** I know what you're going to say. Money? Yeah. Well, he did borrow. See I didn't want to bring . . .

**Jarrell:** No, I think since it's so rumored that I ask. A number of people are interested in these things . . . I don't know if it's true or not.

**Crosetti:** Yeah. See, he did. It was a matter of record. No. I'm not surprised that you know so much about all this agricultural business here. The reason I didn't bring it up is because I didn't want the thing to go back to Antle's or the boys. Sometimes these things are not handled just right. I'd just as soon not have it even brought up, unless it's handled just right, somebody will say "Well, the union bought him." You know, I've heard that the union bought him off, which I don't think is right. 'Cause I don't know enough about what went on behind the scenes. But I knew it was a matter of record that . . . he borrowed . . . this amount of money. There's no secret about the thing.

**Jarrell:** And whether this was a quid pro quo, or not . . .

**Crosetti:** Yeah. That I can't answer. It happened at about the same time. So anyway, that was probably one of the reasons that he signed, I guess.

**Jarrell:** Do you think that other members of the association read this signing with the Teamsters in a negative way? Were they really angry?

**Crosetti:** Oh yes. There were some there that were very upset. Extremely upset.

**Jarrell:** Do you think in the sense that he had broken rank? You said he was very independent, that he had gone off and done his own thing at the expense of his fellow growers?

**Crosetti:** Well, I don't know whether he actually harmed anybody in any way. It was the fact that . . . I'm speaking more of the real old-timers around there, a lot of them were anti-union. The fact that he signed, they could see whether maybe this could open the door, for the whole industry to . . . go union. There was some bitterness. Then were some that said, "Well, it's up to him," you know. My part, well first I was a little upset. Then I got to thinking, "Well, let him run his business and I'll run mine." I was always quite friendly with Bud. I used to see him all the time and we always got along okay, even afterwards . . . it didn't bother me that much. There's narrow-minded people, and I don't care what you do, they're going to get upset regardless.

**Jarrell:** Could you characterize what Antle did as a way of rationalizing his operation in terms of modern industrial practice? You sign agreements when you bargain with people, and that's how benefit accrues to the grower, or to the owner, just as it accrues to the worker. Do you think he saw it? I'm trying to understand why he signed.

**Crosetti:** Yeah. Well, he might've been far-sighted enough to realize what was coming. In fact, I think all of us knew that eventually we were going to have to go this route, I'm sure of that. I think he felt the same way, and he probably figured, "Well, I might as well get in on the ground floor here and avoid a lot of these problems that are surely to come up," because a lot of us were being struck when he was working. See, then he was working, because he had a contract. He may have been just far-sighted enough to do it. Because I don't think he talked to anybody about signing or after he signed. I know I used to see him occasionally after he signed, but this never came up, and I never brought it up. It was his thing to do, and he did it. That's all.

## Agricultural Labor Relations Board

**Jarrell:** Would you comment on the Agricultural Labor Relations Board<sup>1</sup> and what you think of it?

**Crosetti:** I can lay it on the line here. I don't care. But the whole trouble there is the ideas for this are probably okay but they're stacked against us. Against the farmer. We only have one farm represented on the Board. All the others have been identified with labor and some of them have worked right along with [Cesar] Chavez and organizing his different programs. So you can't tell me that there isn't some prejudice towards Chavez, because after all, if you have worked on one thing, you're naturally going to lean a little bit, maybe even not too intensely, but you're going to lean a little bit in that particular direction.

Just about every decision that's come up they ruled against us. I know I had some problems come up, a few small deals came up here, and we [were] ruled against. We had hearings—took a drunk home one day from the field and he was so drunk he couldn't stand up. He never showed to work for a long time, and he came back and he sued us for back wages and sued us on the grounds of discrimination. We had a hearing . . . couple of years they ruled against us, finally we had to pay back wages, we didn't pay him the full amount. We made some settlement there, had to give him his job back and his seniority back. And if we hadn't done that and he'd got in some kind of trouble, we'd have been to blame because he got in trouble. You know, we knew that he was drunk, why keep him on the job? He was harassing some of the other workers there. And then he says discrimination. Well I don't know on what grounds, he was a Mexican, the foreman, the whole crew was Mexican. The man who replaced him was a Mexican. Where's the discrimination coming in? But of course we are to blame for just about everything. In any ruling that comes up we're [seen as] the villains. We're the bad guys. So that's where this Agricultural Relations Board is a little too much one-sided.

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<sup>1</sup>Known as the ARLB, the Board was established by the Legislature in 1975, as a means for stabilizing agricultural labor relations and recognizing the rights of agricultural workers to form unions.—Editor.

**Jarrell:** What do you think of the jurisdictional dispute between the Teamsters and the UFW?

**Crosetti:** Well, personally, regardless of the union, if they only had one union we'd be better off than having *two*! Where they're fighting each other all the time, the jurisdictional deal, so on and so forth. Supposedly they got together secretly, and they chopped up the deal between them . . . says, "Okay, now you take the agriculture worker and we'll take the canneries, we'll take the freezers, we'll take this and that." Well, now there's this disgruntled faction of the Teamsters Union that are going on in a row, to try to keep the contract that they have made. Now you got some that are really bitter and fighting the whole thing. So we don't know. I just can't answer what's happened. But all these things are done behind the scenes. I would rather have one union because that way you'll give the Teamsters my processing plant here and UFW will have our field. Then, okay, we're only dealing with one. Up until now we think we got a contract with one, and then out of the clear sky the other union comes out and starts picketing, and then we got troubles out here. We go out and our crop is blowing up, being spoiled. Far as I'm concerned . . . I hope they got it settled.

### **Changing Economics**

**Jarrell:** I'd like you to talk about economics now. If you want to adhere to one of your planting schedules . . . How much money do you have to have up front—what kind of cash are you talking about, and where do you get it, and how has it changed now compared to back in the '30s?

**Crosetti:** Of course, you go back to the '30s . . . for a very small amount of money you could start a business and it didn't require nearly the amount of money it takes today. Now, today it takes an awful lot of money. It depends on the size of your operation, but your payrolls now run into a lot of money. I venture to say my whole payroll here will run right around fifteen thousand dollars a day. The whole payroll. Whereas, in the olden days when I first started—of course we weren't nearly as big for one thing, but the payroll didn't run me less than ten percent of that, or five percent. Of course now our business has grown. You just can't make a comparison.

It takes a lot of money now. And, strange as it may seem, I have in my whole lifetime in business borrowed very little money. A lot of people will say, "Well, how'd you do it?" Well, I tried not to overextend myself, because I know how treacherous this business is, and if I get myself clear out on the limb there, and something happens, I can crash. Because this kind of business that we're operating here, sometimes it's hard to get money. You know when things are a little tight, you go down to a bank, and they kind of look at you, and they're very cautious, because they know the pitfalls. Yeah, because they have been hurt in the past too, by these things.

I have never ever received a government subsidy. I mean, a lot of people accuse farmers of getting all these subsidies. Well, there's a lot of them that do, but most of them are in the Middle West and then in California for instance, the cotton growers. Cotton [subsidies] are number one, I believe and rice . . . and of all other crops—tobacco. The government comes out and says, "Don't smoke, it's dangerous." Then they subsidize the tobacco growers. So sometimes that doesn't make sense either. I've never seen any subsidy, or any kind of payment from the government, or loan, or anything else. I just try to run my own business, and not to get overextended. I want to go home, sleep at night because tomorrow morning I go down to the bank, and I'm a director of a bank. I'm director of the Valley National Bank that we have . . . some branches there. I know how banks feel, because I happen to be on the inside a little bit there. But a banker, when things are going good, he always says, "Why don't you come in and see me sometime, borrow some money? We've got to loan some money out!" Well that's when you don't need the money. But then when you need it, you go down there, "Oh, well just a minute now. Let me see, now, let me see, now." Well then they say, "Bring a statement. Now what's this, what's that," and so forth. I've seen those things; they can knock you out of the box pretty quick.

**Jarrell:** Is credit harder to get now than it used to be?

**Crosetti:** I really can't answer that, because I haven't borrowed money, but it probably isn't a great deal of difference. Because, a lot of time the banker will loan you money because of you more than your statement. You know, because if he knows you're good, and you're going to do your best, and you don't squander

your money, and you're a conservative operator, he will loan money quicker than he will on a statement when he figures, "Well, this guy's been up and down, and . . ." So I don't think there's a great deal of difference there. I don't.

**Jarrell:** I recently read an article in the Watsonville *Register-Pajaronian* in which lettuce costs were about three hundred dollars an acre just a few years ago, and now you've just told me it's something over seven hundred dollars an acre.

**Crosetti:** Yeah.

**Jarrell:** I see that inflation and a variety of costs have affected your per acre costs in lettuce. Then, there was an article in yesterday's *Santa Cruz Sentinel*: "Farmers concerned about securing loans for planting." Then they enumerated many of the problems in raw materials and drought conditions that were affecting farmers across the board, not just lettuce in particular. For instance, they said a sack of fertilizer has climbed sixty-four percent since 1973.

**Crosetti:** Sure.

**Jarrell:** Some chemicals have risen fifty percent in the same period, within three years.

**Crosetti:** Yeah.

**Jarrell:** How have these factors affected your ability to put up however many acres you want to plant? Have they really cut into you?

**Crosetti:** Oh, yes. Very . . . because everything has gone up. They don't say anything there about the labor part . . .

**Jarrell:** They just mentioned it in passing.

**Crosetti:** Yeah. Today I would say that our cheapest labor, these field workers with their benefits, now the minimum is about four dollars an hour. You see, with the wages and all . . .

**Jarrell:** And all the benefits in the package.



**Crosetti:** . . . these other benefits in the whole package—about four dollars an hour. Well, it wasn't too long ago it was a dollar and less an hour. And now I remember, quite a few years ago it was twenty-five cents an hour, the old-timers say, "Oh my God. This country is really in trouble now." Now, it's up and up in *rents*. Rents have gone clear out of sight. Now, a good piece of land, just to rent that land will run you right around five hundred dollars an acre. Close to four, four-fifty, or five hundred dollars, because most of the land, a lot of the land is being rented for three hundred dollars an acre, plus the taxes. You pay the taxes.

**Jarrell:** Oh, you pay the taxes.

**Crosetti:** Now the thing is reversed, changed around. WE pay the taxes. So he can add on a round figure, there a hundred dollars. So let's figure four hundred fifty. There are some lands that are even higher than that. So you can see how this thing has gone up. So that's why the consumer has to pay more money. Otherwise we'd go broke, that's all, we just can't make it.

**Jarrell:** It's still worthwhile for you, although everything is going up?

**Crosetti:** Oh, absolutely. You've got to pay . . . you have to. Otherwise, if we're going to sell for the same prices that we sold even ten years ago, why we're going to go out of business, and then there will be no food, unless the government takes over, or something. We can't operate.

### **Risks in Lettuce Growing and Shipping**

**Jarrell:** What are the most serious risks that you've faced as a grower-shipper? What's the scariest thing that you face and the most overriding negative set of circumstances?

**Crosetti:** Well, the most uncertain thing that we have right now is our labor. 'Cause we're having all kinds of problems here . . .

**Jarrell:** Are you talking specifically about field labor? Or also packing?

**Crosetti:** Well, I'm talking more about field labor, but also packing shed, because their demands are going up and up. Now, I have people here making over a

hundred dollars a day on piecework in the cooler down there. Well over a hundred dollars a day. We have people making seventy-five, eighty dollars a day, packing lettuce. And then we have people who stitch cartons and make over a hundred dollars a day. This is piecework, you know . . . But we have people that are making more and more money and their demands are more and more. So we just don't know where, just how much they're going to want, when another contract comes up. Besides that, our whole growing program has picked up now. I just don't know which one is the most serious, because you could get a weather condition . . . it could wipe out your crop. Like, you could get cold, cold weather . . . like if you get a heavy frost now, it could knock your apple crop out. Because the apples would bloom . . . and it would hurt them. Later on if you got real hot weather it could hurt your apples again, and also your lettuce. It could burn your lettuce. So there's so many things that can hurt; all the elements that come along here; it's pretty hard to pinpoint one that . . .

**Jarrell:** You said there's a whole array of risks.

**Crosetti:** Yes. From the day you plant, it's a risk. Then when you get your crop off, then you hold your hat and hope that the market is up there. Because if the price is down, and you've got all your money out there . . . well, if I ever told you some of the shellackings that I've taken in all . . . anybody in this business has taken just in a matter of a few days, it'd be hard to believe. So that's one reason, as I said earlier, that I don't like to get myself up to here with the bank. 'Cause the bank can call me in and say, "Say, I want that money." And then I haven't got it and at least if I'm in pretty fair condition and I needed some money I could go down, maybe borrow, and then if I'm solvent, with a little security and what-have-you. But the elements are . . . every one is a factor.

**Jarrell:** What happens to the grower who overextends himself?

**Crosetti:** He's taking a big risk, sure. Because the bigger he gets, and if he's overextended, he doesn't have the cash, and any creditor can come in and demand his money, for fertilizer, insecticides, for cartons, rent when it's due, and labor goes on all the time. He's got to pay that every week. If he doesn't pay labor he's through. If he's overextended and runs out of cash . . . and then he

goes down to the bank, the bank says, “Well, I have this and that and the other thing.” “Yeah. But how much do you owe?” So, if he’s not overextended, least he can go down there and maybe get some money, because he’s been conservative about the thing. That’s the big problem.

**Jarrell:** Do you know people in this area, or in Salinas, the Imperial Valley, who’ve gone broke?

**Crosetti:** Oh . . . golly sakes.

**Jarrell:** Tell me how they’ve gone broke.

**Crosetti:** Well, over the years they just couldn’t pay the bills. You know, a few years ago there were a lot of them. Again, some of them were a little overextended, then they hit a bad lettuce market, then they owed everybody there. They owed the fertilizer people, they owed the insecticide people . . . maybe they had some money borrowed from the bank . . . they owed even insurance. So all it takes is one small creditor who says, “I want my money.” “I haven’t got it.” They come back next week. Well the guy might say, “Okay. I’ll be back next week. You’d better have it.” He comes back next week, and you don’t have it at all. “Well, listen, I want the money here.” So he can throw you in bankruptcy. By that time there’s all kinds of rumors going around, anyway. Because there’s no secrets; everybody knows when you’re slow in paying.

I’ve got caught in a few deals myself. I helped some friend or grower and what-have-you, and the next thing I know, they’re having a creditors’ meeting. Then you’d be surprised by how many people show up; the creditors—the gasoline man, the oil man, the insurance man and people you don’t even think about. They’re all there at the meeting. So they sit there and then they appoint a creditors’ committee to go over all your records and everything else, and then if you’re really insolvent, they say, “Well, there’s no hope’s there. Let’s fold this thing up and maybe get ten or fifteen cents or twenty-five cents on the dollar, or something back,” and that’s it. Because they won’t give you any more credit. You can’t operate, see. See you’re not going to figure . . . of course they cut out your gasoline. You can’t go out in the field there. And if they cut out your water that’s

a big item too, the PG&E and those big utilities, they don't fool around at all, you know. They come in . . . they turn your water off, and, well there's no way you're going to operate. So I've seen a lot of them go in the past many years. Many of them. I'm not talking so much here in Watsonville, but in the Salinas area and Imperial Valley.

**Jarrell:** Do we have transient speculators in lettuce or strawberries or in Salinas very much? Or would you say most of the farmers are people who've been around for a long time?

**Crosetti:** Right now it's awful hard for any new person coming in here, because if he goes out here to a landowner and he's not known they're not going to give him the time of day. Unless he pays them way more than the local. Then they're going to make sure they're going to get the money. Everybody knows everybody in the business here. Well, I'll take myself or any other shipper. Well, 'specially the Watsonville area, there isn't hardly a soul in the whole business here that I don't know, or a piece of land that I don't know right down to the inch. Because it's not too big a valley. By the same token, in Salinas. See now, we're known all over the United States, because we talk all over the United States. But you take somebody trying to break in now; it's very, very difficult.

**Jarrell:** Were you known when you first went to Arizona or Imperial Valley? Did your reputation precede you?

**Crosetti:** Well, when I first went to the Imperial Valley, then to Arizona, things were a little easier than they are now.

**Jarrell:** More open?

**Crosetti:** Yeah, more open; it was easier then to get in. Even at that time we were pretty well known; we had our Dun and Bradstreet rating and what-have-you, and what they call a "red book" and a "blue book" and it gives your ratings, and they're going to check my ratings—how much money we're worth . . . it's not exact but we have been. So you become known, and then after you're down there for a while—like Imperial Valley, I go to Imperial Valley and now we've been

down there for thirty-seven years, and although I don't spend much time down there anymore, they all know us.

**Crosetti:** [We're known] even to some extent in Arizona. But you take anybody coming in just cold, walking in here or Imperial Valley, who says, "I want to do some business, I want to rent land, I want to buy land," they're going to give you the once-over. See the first thing they do, they find out where you're from, and they call the banks . . . they call the banks and they check you out. It's pretty hard; now I'm not saying it can't be done, but it's pretty difficult.

### **Growing in Mexico**

**Jarrell:** How does the growing of vegetables and fruits in Mexico tie in with the California . . .

**Crosetti:** Well, of course the Mexican crops down here come off in the winter time. We have no competition from this area up here. But the Imperial Valley—yes they do have some competition from down there. Especially tomatoes. I can remember quite a few years ago, when I first went down there . . . they used to grow an awful lot of tomatoes in the Imperial Valley, especially around the Calipatria area. But Mexico got going around that time, and now on account of the cheaper labor that they have . . .

**Jarrell:** That would have been about what year?

**Crosetti:** Well, I first went down in the '40s, and up until probably the '50s, but the Calipatria area, they used to grow an awful lot of tomatoes there. Sweet peas, string beans, also around the El Centro area and Brawley. They still do but not that big an acreage. I went to Mexico many years ago and I could see the potential down there. It's there. They have an awful lot of fine land, virgin land, it's beautiful, flat. But at that time they were having an awful water problem there. But now they put dams down there, and they developed an awful lot of land. When I was down there I met with the governor of the state of Sonora and his father, his name was Obragón. We had a ball down there you know. They live like kings. I had an airplane; I used to fly down there and visit. But then I checked around and things are not so easy when you go down there from here

because you have to have a Mexican partner down there. He owns fifty-one percent, see. Or you can marry a Mexican gal. So anyway, I looked a little, then I went back again two, three times. They were having problems down there. See, as long as you put the money up down there, everything is fine, and when the deals are making money everything is fine. Then when it starts to make money, the Mexican partner—he's got fifty-one percent, you know . . . He's the boss there. So they've had a lot of problems with that. Anyway, I didn't go into it, but the place has grown down there.

When I was there with the Obragóns, they had their children and other young people up here at Cal Poly . . . and UC Davis, learning agriculture. They came up and learned agriculture and now they're doing a pretty good job down there on their own. There are some Americans that live there, and they can get by okay, and some have married Mexican women. But they're growing an awful lot of commodities down there now. They've developed a lot of that land down there. Especially coming through Nogales, there's just thousands of trucks coming through all the time. I was in El Centro, in Lower California. It's not a real big area. But the good crops are there too. I just didn't feel like I wanted to get involved down there with all the problems. They're hurting our winter deals. Not so much in lettuce; lettuce is too bulky and I guess they have to pay a little duty and they can't compete with the lettuce part of it. But tomatoes and strawberries, they really cut in. See, last year we had a pretty good strawberry deal here. Because Mexico had a lot of bad weather, frosts and what-have-you. So they wiped out a lot of their crops. But otherwise, they're coming in with a lot of strawberries. They've hurt our strawberries—especially the frozen. Where they freeze them, and then bring them in.

**Jarrell:** Do the crops that're imported from Mexico meet our [USDA] standard pesticide levels?

**Crosetti:** Yes, just about everything, like . . . for instance, insecticides and dirt and bugs and all that. On account of that water business they have down there, and you can get awful sick. They have to pass an inspection when they come across. I think it's a little more lenient than ours . . . as far as I know. Because I've heard some of the growers on this side complain that [produce from Mexico] can

get by a lot easier than we can, but they do have to pass an inspection. But even then, I wouldn't take a chance on the Mexican produce without washing it down really good. With imported crops you have to be real careful, because I understand—now, this has never happened to me, but sometimes the fruit itself is contaminated inside. Because of the water . . . that water deal down there, it's the worst thing you can do is to drink the water. So that's why I drink beer. I never drink water down there.

### **Comparing Pajaro and Salinas Valleys**

**Jarrell:** Is there regional competition between Santa Cruz and Salinas? Would you compare these two areas?

**Crosetti:** Well, I don't think there's exactly a lot of competition between the two regions. I think we grow the same kind of crops in about the same kind of way. Now, getting back to lettuce again, the Salinas area, especially south there, they will have maybe a little better lettuce in early spring . . . when they start here now any day. But in the summer time our lettuce here is superior most of the time to theirs.

**Jarrell:** Is that because of the weather?

**Crosetti:** It's a little cooler. Especially when we get down there by the ocean. We plant this side first. If you drive around the area you'll see a lot of lettuce all out here . . . at all stages. Some will be this big, some just out of the ground. Then you go down to what they call the mud flat down there on Beach Road and you'll see very little planting and they're just starting to plant them, maybe just about coming out of the ground. See, it's later . . . 'cause it's warmer here. When it gets hot . . . then we keep moving further, and well then I don't start planting anything on that side of town or on the west side of Main street. I haven't planted a thing down there, yet. But I'll plant there in about another week or ten days because I have to get two crops a year, we have to have it planted by the fifteenth of May at the latest. So I'll start planting any day down there. But over here, now, I'll have lettuce in a couple weeks. So that's why here in Watsonville

we have better lettuce in the summertime. And by the same token, our cauliflower, broccoli, and cabbage, too.

**Jarrell:** So you don't consider these two areas as competitors?

**Crosetti:** No, I would say we work together. We belong to the same association and everything else. Now you take right here where we are; this is not Santa Cruz County, you know.

**Jarrell:** Oh, I know. We're on the other side of the Pajaro river here.

**Crosetti:** As far as your lettuce growing is concerned, Santa Cruz County is quite small . . . If it wasn't for the fact that we had this northern Monterey County, which is the Pajaro area here, why we wouldn't have hardly enough over there to . . . I think we probably grow more lettuce here [in this area] that we call Watsonville.

**Jarrell:** Yes.

**Crosetti:** We call this Watsonville, but it's grown here; I'm in Watsonville, but actually I'm in Monterey County. All this land here is in Monterey County. The river is the dividing line. So just a few hundred yards or so here, I'm in Monterey County. I live up here over in the country there, just a little ways, in Santa Cruz County. I own land in both counties. So on the land I own in Santa Cruz County I pay taxes in Santa Cruz, and the land that I own here like this building and other lands here, I pay it over here.

### **Rise of the Chain Supermarkets**

**Jarrell:** Would you talk about the rise of chain supermarkets and how that has affected your business? You told me that in the '30s there was a movement to limit the supermarket chains to no more than five stores. Before the chains came in, almost everything was shipped up to the commission markets.

**Crosetti:** In San Francisco, or Los Angeles, or wherever, but practically everything went to San Francisco. Then all these little stores around the area would come in early in the morning and pick up whatever they wanted to pick



up. There were a lot of small stores in those days. Well, then the chains got started in the '30s, and after they got started, well, they got bigger and bigger. Then they started putting their own people out here, to buy, right here.

**Jarrell:** Right at the point of production?

**Crosetti:** Right at the source. Well, you take Safeway, we sell them lettuce and they say, "Well, we want so many cartons of lettuce to go to this division or that division, or Richmond," or they have a big store in Colorado, and in Portland . . . So they buy here and it goes direct. It's distributed by their trucks to their own stores. They come here and they pay within a week or ten days, I think. They're pretty good pay. Whereas before a lot of times you would just ship to a commission merchant and you were at his mercy . . . whatever he sold it for.

**Jarrell:** You wouldn't know when you shipped it off what the fate of that load would be?

**Crosetti:** Had no idea. He could sell it for whatever he wanted, then he took for himself . . . many, many years ago it was ten percent, and then it was fifteen percent, that he would take for selling . . . But the chains have revolutionized that, and the markets; I remember in the early '30s, they were fighting the chain stores, and there was a move on to limit them and I think there was even an election there in the '30s where it was defeated, but they were trying to hold the chain stores down to . . . about four or five stores. So that took the business away from the commission people there. They're still operating, because there're still some Mom and Pop stores . . . but not . . .

**Jarrell:** But even the independents have gotten together and formed their own association.

**Crosetti:** Yeah they got their own . . . buying people that will buy for all these little stores. They get together and they got certain buyers out here that will buy for all of them.

**Jarrell:** Would you say that the fact that you have the chain supermarkets is taking you away from being at the mercy of the commission houses? Is that true?

**Crosetti:** Yeah . . .

**Jarrell:** Is there much more predictable marketing of your things?

**Crosetti:** Yes. Because when you're selling for cash here, every day, you know what you're getting. But when you're consigning, you're sending it to a commission market to sell for you, you don't know . . . maybe like San Francisco, you'll [know] the next day but years ago they were consigning to New York and Chicago and back there. You wouldn't know for maybe ten days or two weeks what you were getting. You were always on pins and needles. This way you got this chain store buyer and you know where you are. You can dicker with them right here, see. And if the market looks like it's picking up a little bit, well you become stronger then, because of supply and demand. When you have more demands than supply, then . . .

**Jarrell:** Then your price goes up.

**Crosetti:** Of course when you've got too much supply, the shoe is on the other foot.

### **Agribusiness**

**Jarrell:** To start out for our third interview. During our first interview we discussed your feelings about the large conglomerates who have increasingly become a part of California agriculture.

**Crosetti:** Yeah.

**Jarrell:** I don't know to what degree they are in this area, but I would like you to talk about large-scale agribusiness. From your own experience, and certainly in the Imperial Valley, we're really talking about a real force.

**Crosetti:** These conglomerates have been coming here in the past several years, but in the last six, seven, or eight, ten years they've gotten very big, especially in the San Joaquin Valley, Imperial Valley and even in the Salinas Valley. You take the Tenneco Company, which is one of the largest corporations in the world, I

guess. They make their money mostly in oil, and other businesses they happen to be in. Then they come into agriculture, because they have so much money, and they can come out here and outbid us, who have no other income coming in from anywhere else. Then they buy up other companies in other corporations, and I've had a chance to sell mine several times, but I kind of like to keep it . . . in the family. What's happened, is that many of the smaller operators have gotten out. Because they're pretty hard to compete against, because if you're just depending on agriculture, you take a big loss . . . well, that's out of your pocket, and you're having problems. Whereas, they can bring money in from the outside . . . and they're getting bigger and bigger.

Then you have another kind of conglomerate that is made up of professional people; people like doctors, attorneys, and dentists—that make money in their profession, and they have a little extra money, so they want to get into agriculture. Consequently, again you have big holdings, and some of these big companies control twenty-five, thirty-thousand acres and more. So that the farmer, he just can't compete. Because they can buy big equipment, they can go ahead and improve the operation. And they can do . . . probably a better job than a small farmer who has to depend entirely a hundred percent on his farming operation there.

**Jarrell:** We hear about the efficiency of large-scale farming. How do you think that the capital available to the conglomerates makes a difference?

**Crosetti:** Well, one of the things I'm trying to bring out too, is the fact that some of these big conglomerates have an unlimited amount of money behind them. So if they take a loss in farming and agriculture, they can get money from some other venture that they happen to be in, or they can go down to the banks and it's easier for them to borrow money than the small farmer who is just barely able to get by. Consequently, if he can sell out, come out a little money he figures, "Well, I better get out here while the getting is good, because I don't know what's going to happen with these people coming in," because they can afford to take some of these big losses, where I can't—I'll put myself in the same category there.

**Jarrell:** Now you say that this kind of corporate farming has made inroads in the Salinas Valley?

**Crosetti:** Yes, it has, in the Salinas Valley.

**Jarrell:** Looking at the whole configuration of farming operations in Salinas, what percentage, or what kind of force are we talking about, in terms of the total, that conglomerates like Tenneco can claim?

**Crosetti:** Well that's pretty hard to say, because when you talk about a corporate farmer, or anybody of any size at all, he's incorporated. Yes, it's like with me. Now, I finally incorporated a couple of years or so ago, because of tax reasons, and because of the fact that I'm getting older and I'd like to pass some of these things down to the children. And it's easier doing it that way . . . giving them stock or selling them stock . . . than just to say, "Well, here . . . I'll give you part of this or a percentage of this and that," so it makes it really easier to operate . . . So that's why it's hard to answer, because there are some pretty large operators in Salinas, who are not the kind of conglomerates that I am talking about that . . . These are people who have made money principally in agriculture. Maybe their father or grandfather started a business many years ago, and now they're pretty large. Not as big as these conglomerates with thousands and thousands of acres, but . . . it's hard to make a distinction.

**Jarrell:** Okay, I shouldn't say corporate, I should say conglomerates whose income is derived from sources other than agriculture.

**Crosetti:** Yes. Well, it'd be pretty hard for me to give a percentage unless I checked further. I could make a guess, but I just don't want to get off base one way or another. But there are some conglomerates in Salinas that are pretty large. Not as big as the ones in the San Joaquin Valley . . . The San Joaquin Valley, they've got them all, they got real tremendous corporate deal oil companies and these professional people, too have put in a lot of money there; they have a manager and somebody that runs the deal there for them. Oh, they haven't been too successful, but they're able to keep going, so someday it could pay off.

The smaller farmer, if he doesn't make a little money almost every year, why he's going to be in trouble, because he's got to pay his taxes at the end of the year. Now this year they're closing out a lot of tax loopholes that the farmers used to have. When I say loopholes, I mean deferring money from one year to the next. If we go down to the Imperial Valley and you start putting money into the ground down there say, in July, and the crop doesn't come off until the first of the year, well, by the first of the year, you have written the money that is in the past . . . that you have put into the ground, and then the first of the year, whatever comes in, why . . .

**Jarrell:** That goes on the next year's taxes?

**Crosetti:** Yes. So, sometimes even if you lose money, you can come out ahead for the year. Of course, eventually it's going to catch up with you. You're not going to beat Uncle Sam, because he's dealing with you all the time, but this way it's going to curtail some of these operations, hold them back a little bit, because sometimes you figure, "Well, I might as well go down and have so many acres in the Imperial Valley in the winter time, because I can write it off. If I lose some money, well it's Uncle Sam's money." Well, 'course now, starting this year, that's out. You can't do that anymore. So, if anything, it's going to hurt again, it's going to hurt the little farmer more than the big farmer, because the big farmer, or the big conglomerate there can bring money in from the outside. He can go down to the bank, and he stands a lot better chance of borrowing money than some poor little farmer who goes down and the banker puts him through the old grind. So that's a bad part of a lot of our agricultural problems, but 'course it's legal. It's free enterprise. I mean, you can't say, "Well, we're going to cut you off, you can't do this." The only thing is by closing off some of these tax shelters maybe they might think twice on some of those.

**Jarrell:** With the large-scale farmers in Salinas Valley that have come in, let's say in the last ten years or so . . . Do they come in and buy land there, or do they lease land?

**Crosetti:** Well, most of them come in and lease the land . . . over a period of years and lease the whole operation; they'll take the operation over and maybe

pay something for the name, to operate. But see it's only been in the last ten years or so that these conglomerates have come in there. They come in, they buy out companies. Like one . . . well, two came here I think seven or eight years ago, and they came in and bought out these companies that were already in operation, had been for years, and they went in and just bought them out . . . lock, stock and barrel. But when I say bought them out, they bought the operation, but not so much the land. Now, they haven't bought very much land. They've bought some, but most of it's on the lease deal, so if they ever want to get out, it's easier to get out, you know when the lease expires you can get out. Whereas if you owned the land, you're stuck there. 'Course they would have been a lot better off . . . as you look back now, if they'd bought that land, because the land valuations have gone up. But you can't always see ahead. But they have taken over some pretty big operations over there.

**Jarrell:** You said several long-time very established outfits were bought up. Were they in the range of what, ten thousand acres?

**Crosetti:** Yes I would say that the ones they bought up were probably in the range from five to ten thousand acres, which is a pretty good-sized operation in itself. But the original operation was built up over a period of many years. So they come in here and of course if you have enough money, you can buy anything, and apparently they had enough money to take over, and they bought up quite a few of the old operations. They've approached many other companies to buy them out too, but some just won't sell. They want to keep it there. It's like my operation here. Now, if it wasn't for my children, the kids, I'd have probably sold out a few years ago. But they seem to want to continue, they seem to want to go on, so it's up to them. I'm not going to worry about it too much longer. And if this is the way they want it, why this . . .

**Jarrell:** You're going to hang on?

**Crosetti:** . . . this is the way, because after all, even if I do get some money at this stage of the game, what am I going to do with it? Of course you can always find something to do with it, but it isn't like quite a few years ago when you had all kinds of ideas of traveling around and doing things, and maybe getting into

another business, but that's out as far as I'm concerned. And that's the way some of these other companies feel. They feel the same way.

**Jarrell:** Why sell?

**Crosetti:** Why sell? We got a nice going little business here, and the kids like it. But some that sold out were getting old; they either had no children, or the children weren't interested in the business. See that's something else now. Like with me here, if it wasn't for the kids, well what would be the point of me trying to carry on, because this is kind of a goofy business. Anyway, if something happened to me—not that it wouldn't be able to go on without me—but without some people who are directly involved like the children, it'd be pretty hard to get somebody on the outside to run something like this. It's kind of a loose business, you know, because every deal is on its own. Sometimes you make a deal in the afternoon and you think it's a good deal when you made it. By the time you get home, you get to thinking; then you can't sleep for a few nights, "Gee, I wonder why I did that? Maybe I shouldn't have done it." Well, maybe it turns out okay, maybe it doesn't, so . . . Big conglomerates got into Salinas, of course the San Joaquin Valley is much bigger there . . . And around Bakersfield, and that whole area there, there's a lot of oil wells there that some of those people—all they have to do is sit on a rocking chair and watch that thing go . . . go up and down, and there's the money right there, you know, in the bank. So they take on farming operations. They have something else to do, because this romance with agriculture, what do you say, he wants to see something grow. Or he wants a cattle ranch, and these cattle, you know. So if you've got a lot of money you can do an awful lot of things.

**Jarrell:** Do the conglomerates in Salinas join the Grower-Shippers Association?

**Crosetti:** Yes. They are members now. Because they're a major factor in the business and of course they pay so much a package for what they ship and the [Association] wants the money. But at first . . . right at the beginning they weren't. When they first came in, some of the old-timers, they says, "No, we don't want these people in here. They don't belong in agriculture." But now they're all members and for their own image, too; they try to put on a good front

and try to go along because they want to be accepted by the community, so they lean over backwards to try to get along. Actually, the local people who are the ones that I know who are operating these so called conglomerates are basically pretty nice people; in some cases they're local people that we have known here for a long time. You take the so-called big shots, big wheels, why in many cases we never see those people here but we see these local people that we have known and everybody has known and . . . managers . . . and foremen . . . who run the businesses.

**Jarrell:** You imply that there was some sense of resentment or hostility at the beginning?

**Crosetti:** Yes, there was. Especially about seven years ago, when the unions were trying to organize down there . . . some of these conglomerates signed up immediately, or not exactly immediately, but they had to sign up because they were being picketed and boycotted and they had other businesses, see. So they signed up, and that got a lot of people worked up. In fact the local people were even picketing these conglomerates there for awhile. But like everything else, those things, after awhile, they die down, and now they're accepted. I guess it's like anybody else. So you can't just isolate somebody, say, "well, you don't belong." Because after all, actually they've broken no law.

**Jarrell:** And economically they're becoming a force that has to be dealt with?

**Crosetti:** Yes, economically they're becoming a force. Well, some of these people have so much money that if they decide to really take on more and more land, you know they can monopolize a lot of this. And especially if they start making money in agriculture, which, I guess, probably they are now, and they start expanding . . . well, they can buy a company like mine and not even miss it, you know. You know for the amount of money . . . So that's the thing I don't particularly like, is that tendency towards a monopoly, where they get so big.

**Jarrell:** How do you feel about the tendency towards monopolization?

**Crosetti:** Well, I can't see any solution. Again, as long as we have free enterprise, I don't see how the government can come out here and draw the line, and say to



one of these big corporations, “Now, you can’t get any bigger.” Because, where do you draw the line? But I mean, where’s the government going to draw the line there, just what do you mean by *big*? Because you have other companies who are pretty good-sized, and they’ve been in the produce business for many, many years. That’s all they have . . . is growing of crops. And so it’s just like, where do they draw the line, when it comes to a family farm? You hear “family farm.” Where do you draw the line? I was on the State Board of Agriculture for eight years . . . They were always talking about . . . saving the family farm. Sure, I think it should be saved, but . . . I used to ask, “Where do *I* fit in?” see.

**Jarrell:** You’re talking about organizations that derive their incomes from other fields. They view agriculture as just another industrial sector of the economy; just another place to make money. So we’re talking not only about size but about industrial agriculture which changes the nature of agricultural production.

**Crosetti:** You’re absolutely right there. Because when these people come in here, and they have so much money to draw from or go to a bank, it’s awfully hard to come out and say, “Well, you don’t belong in this thing here.” But if this continues the way it’s going now . . . well we could all remember many years ago before the chain stores came in, they had all these little Ma and Pa stores, a corner grocery store. Well, now the big chains have taken over. Those little stores are gone. Not that the chain stores should’ve been held down, but it’s just a case that they got more money and they run a good efficient deal, so . . .

**Jarrell:** And a very large volume.

**Crosetti:** And large volume, so everything is going to big, big, bigger. I can remember many, many years ago when we had automobiles, when they first started to come out. We had, I don’t know how many different kinds of cars, cars you don’t even hear about anymore. All these cars they don’t even make any more. So now, now it’s concentrated in three big corporations, see. So is that good, or is that bad? I mean, I don’t know. I’m not here trying to make a point of what is good or what is bad, but when you see what has happened in these other industries and banking the same thing, and then agriculture’s just about the only thing that’s left that’s not strictly controlled by big corporations. But it’s headed

in that direction. Just where it's going to stop, or if it's going to stop, I don't know.

### **State Board of Agriculture**

**Jarrell:** Can you discuss your activities on the State Board of Agriculture?

**Crosetti:** I was appointed I believe in '59,<sup>2</sup> when Governor Brown went in. I was appointed to State Board of Agriculture Commission, and also he appointed me to the California State Fair and Exposition. But the Agriculture Board, I think there were thirteen on the State Board. We were acting as advisors and consulting the Governor, and advising what we thought we felt we needed in agriculture. We would meet with him every so often there, and go over different problems that were coming up.

**Jarrell:** How long was your tenure?

**Crosetti:** Eight years on both boards.

**Jarrell:** Now, there were about thirteen members . . . Could you describe the backgrounds of some of the other members you remember? Your personal observations?

**Crosetti:** Well one of them was a retired Bank of America president, Jesse W. Tapp. He was chairman at the time I was on. Then he died. Later on there was Allan Grant, who is now president of the Farm Bureau. Then there was Lionel Steinberg who was from the Coachella Valley—had a lot of grapes there. Then a fellow by the name of Leo Geobetti, he was over in the valley. Eric Thore, now he's a consultant, I believe, to the Bank of America on agriculture. I think at the time he was with the University of California. Then later on they had the Chancellor of the University of California at Davis, he was a member . . . they were all people in agriculture . . . but your State Board . . . now a couple of years after I went in, you had to have two from the schools they're related to . . . agriculture schools and now I think you have to have a consumer . . .

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<sup>2</sup>Crosetti was appointed to the State Board of Agriculture in 1962 and served until 1969—Editor.

**Jarrell:** Advocate?

**Crosetti:** . . . advocate or one or two, which at that time we didn't . . . didn't need or have to have, and they were all people who were identified with agriculture in one way or another, either directly involved or through banks and the University, and what have you.

**Jarrell:** How long were the terms—was that two terms that you were on?

**Crosetti:** Yes. Term was for four years.

**Jarrell:** Would you say that the membership or the interests represented on the Board tended more to represent large-scale agriculture?

**Crosetti:** No, I don't think they were really representing any one segment of agriculture. They were just representing agriculture.

### **Imperial Valley**

**Crosetti:** I know that we voted against the 160-acre limitation, we voted against that. And that was on account of the Imperial Valley, which . . . was a little different deal than they have over here, because the people there in 1902 or 1903, they put up a canal from the Colorado River and brought water into the Imperial Valley. Then the government went in later and helped put the canal in. Then these growers appealed to . . . Washington, to the Secretary of the Interior, who was responsible. Many years ago he ruled that the Imperial Valley was different, was an exception . . .

**Jarrell:** An exception to the law.

**Crosetti:** . . . an exception to the law like they had over here in the San Joaquin Valley. Outside of that, I don't think there was anybody there that was for large farming or small. Although the family farm kept coming up all the time. They kept bringing up they wanted to save the family farm. Everybody's been talking about that for years, but nobody's done anything about it.

**Jarrell:** I see a contradiction. If you're against the 160-acre limitation, how can you be for the family farm? It seems like the two are very connected issues.

**Crosetti:** Well in a way yes, and in a way no, because actually if you look at a 160-acre farm operation today alongside a farm . . . thirty or forty or fifty years ago it was a lot different, because 160 acres today, it's awful to make. In fact, that's hardly a family farm. Because to be competitive you have to buy big in that, and it doesn't pay for 160 acres to operate.

**Jarrell:** It doesn't pay down there?

**Crosetti:** Not down there, But you also have problems over here, too. But down there especially because you can't grow crops down there all year round like you can over here, because it gets so hot there in the summertime. Well you can grow alfalfa and hay and cotton . . . things like that. But when it comes to lettuce and cantaloupes, watermelons and all these other kinds of crops, you can only grow them during . . . a certain time of the year, because it really gets hot over there. But the 160-acre limitation . . . I don't think that's enough. But see, down there it wasn't so much the fact that they were trying to hold to 160 acres, the ones who were against the present law there. It was the fact that it was a different deal. The Secretary of the Interior . . . up until '32 at least, ruled that that deal was different down there, because the farmers originally went in and had their own canal. You could follow that canal down there, even now, what's left. I mean it's pretty hard to see it, 'cause it's covered up with sand. Because now they come into the All-American canal . . . and it's a beautiful job. Well, that's a government job there. But for some technical or legal reason, they kept ruling that down there was different than over here. When I first went down there in 1940 to the Imperial Valley with an operation there, the irrigation district down there would give you land for free if you would develop it, so you could use the water. 'Cause they had so much water, so much money invested, and that place down there was a desert, you know. Originally it was all desert, completely. I go down every year, although I don't spend as much time down there as I used to. But I've seen some of that desert, just pure sand . . . turn out to be just a paradise when it comes to growing crops, beautiful, as long as they had water.

But people weren't interested in going in the Imperial Valley at that time, because the weather down there is so hot. They had no air conditioning when I first went down there, and you would practically die in the summertime. Getting down there was a problem too, because they didn't have the freeways. We used to wind our way down there, and I used to wonder what am I going down there for? Well, I was young, and I wanted to get out of here, wanted to keep going, and I was a little ambitious, so down there I would go. I bought some land down there. I paid two hundred dollars an acre, for land. Everybody thought I was crazy. And this was developed land. Developed! Everything is right and it was already leveled off and they had the canals coming in and everything else there. Then like a fool, I kept it for two, three years, and I figured, "Well, maybe I'll get rid of it." I sold it for about what I paid for it, and today you go down and try to buy it today, the thing has changed now. Today it'd be twenty-five hundred, or three thousand dollars an acre, which, see at that time, good land here was around two thousand dollars an acre.

**Jarrell:** In Pajaro Valley?

**Crosetti:** Yes, in Pajaro Valley, and maybe in Salinas—maybe fifteen hundred, two thousand. Well, down there you could buy a lot of land for a hundred dollars, with all the water available from the Colorado River going into the Salton Sea. And who cared at that time because they had too much water. Now 'course it's a little different, although they have plenty of water there . . . and I don't think they'll ever have a problem. But these are the things that were available there, and people wouldn't take advantage of it. After the war they gave a lot of land there to the GI's. People came back 'specially around the Parker Dam, you know on the other side of Blythe there . . . and the government just gave them the land . . . nothing down—I don't know whether they even paid for it, give them a 160 acres for very little cost anyway. Now of course, it's a paying proposition, and everybody wants to get into the act, and they say, "Well, they want to limit the water thing." I don't own any land down there, so it doesn't affect me. I don't own land any more; I do some leasing. I own some property; I have a cooler down there. The way I see it, because I know when I was down there, everybody was broke down there. You know, I guess broke up here, too,

but . . . *broker* down there . . . So they were looking for us to come down to invest some money with them so they could keep going. Some of those people worked pretty hard; they work day and night in that heat down there. I don't know whether you've ever been in the Imperial Valley. But in the summertime it'll kill you. Now it's worse than it was years ago, because of the humidity.

[There is an inaudible portion in the tape at this point—Editor.]

### **Japanese-Americans in the Pajaro Valley**

**Crosetti:** The Japanese couldn't own land.<sup>3</sup> It was a racial thing. You see Italians and Germans, they assimilated, they were intermarried, so where would they draw the line now? See right here in Watsonville I know the Italians that . . . way back in 1850s and '60s—you know like the Scrivanis and some of the Rossis . . . they'd been here at that time just about a hundred years. But the Italians, after the first generation, none of them speak a word of Italian—never been over there, could care less, see . . . A lot of people complained about the Japanese. They had their own schools down there. Well I see nothing wrong with that. You talk about a bilingual thing. But they paid for those schools themselves.

**Jarrell:** They paid for their children to learn?

**Crosetti:** They *paid* for it! That's it. See today we have a bilingual deal, but . . . we've got to pay for the bilingual [Spanish-English language program]. I think if you're over here, you should try to learn the English language. The Japanese at that time . . . some people just didn't like every little thing that they did, which was very minor. After Pearl Harbor they raided somebody's house, and they'd find a camera. They'd find a camera in there . . .

**Jarrell:** And they'd say they were spies?

**Crosetti:** That they were spies taking pictures or if they had binoculars they'd say they were going to land down here, and lead them in. Well, a lot of phony

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<sup>3</sup>The California Anti-Japanese Land Law of 1913 denied to all persons ineligible for citizenship the right either to own or lease agricultural land in the state—Editor.

stuff. That was the thinking here of the local people, not only here but all over California. Finally, they sent the Japanese to the concentration camps; they called it relocation. It wasn't the local people who did this; it had nothing to do with us here at all.

**Jarrell:** Can you tell me, once everyone knew that the Japanese were going to be relocated to the internment camps and that they would not be able to sell their stuff for more than what, ten cents on the dollar, if that, a total loss in many instances . . . Did people start eyeing their land?

**Crosetti:** Oh, yes. They were eyeing the land, the buildings, and their equipment and everything else. But some of the Japanese were smart; they didn't sell the land. They hung onto the land. They had an attorney look after their land, or they had somebody to oversee it while they were away. They knew they would have to sacrifice if they sold it, so they hung onto it, and they came back and some were still operating in good shape. See when they first came back, I think I was one of the very first ones that started hiring Japanese right away when they came back. And they came feeling out of place and what have you.

**Jarrell:** Were these many of the same Japanese who had left Watsonville?

**Crosetti:** Yes. Quite a few of them. Some didn't come back. But I was one of the first that hired them, and they were real good workers. But there were a lot of people who wouldn't hire them at all. When they came back, they would have nothing to do with them—still wouldn't have anything to do with them.

But some of these people were so narrow-minded, they got so bitter and narrow-minded they couldn't see it. I know that when I wanted to hire Japanese to work for me, I had a young fellow, a good friend of mine, say, "I can get you a crew." "Well that's what I need," I says, "I need Japanese workers, 'cause they're good." See, but there's one thing about a Japanese worker; he works for you for just so long, and then he . . . goes on his own, because he's ambitious enough to work hard and go places, see. When I gave them the job there, I noticed some people kind of shook their head at me. But the funny thing is . . . it only took a few years . . . that these Japanese came back and behaved so well, then the people got to

thinking, you know, what a mistake it was, and they're much more respected today than they ever were before the war. You know, the Japanese today, they belong to all kinds of clubs, and everything else in town. They became highly respected and I even had a Japanese tell me he says, "You know, maybe that was a good thing, that we were sent away," he says. "At least now," he says, "we're more respected than we ever were."

**Jarrell:** Senator [S.I.] Hayakawa, said something to that effect during the election—and was just received with howls of protest—he said that. He was in Canada during the war. But it was quite a startling statement . . . many members of the Japanese community statewide and not only here were very upset by that remark.

**Crosetti:** Yeah, well I can understand where a lot of those Japanese would feel that way. [One Japanese fellow and I] we were talking one day about the war and what a rotten deal it was . . . and he come out and, "Well, you know, after you think it over," he says, "I can recall years ago . . . when I was there," he says, "we weren't treated so good," He says, "Now, well they're citizens and everything else." At that time the old folks couldn't become citizens, years ago, although their children were citizens.

Because it was a racial thing. Actually, like this Japanese told me, he says, "Now, we're more respected; we're accepted." Of course this was just personal opinion. I'm sure that many others still resent, naturally, what happened. I don't blame them.

**Jarrell:** From my own research into the state's agriculture history . . . the Japanese have made a tremendous contribution to the development of this valley.

**Crosetti:** Oh yes. They're real good farmers. You come right down to it, they're probably the best farmers of all because they're very conscientious, and they're hard workers, and they're very smart. They're out there watching. They got a crop growing and they'll watch that crop almost every minute of the day. They know exactly how it's growing, how fast it's growing, if it needs any fertilizer . . . or if one little bug shows up in there, they're right there! They're good farmers.



When it comes to irrigating and running water—and irrigating is very important to agriculture—I think they are the tops.

### **Grower-Shippers Vegetable Association of Central California**

**Jarrell:** My last question—would you discuss the Grower-Shippers Association in Salinas. When and how was it established?

**Crosetti:** It was established in the early '30s. See, your lettuce business started here . . . the first lettuce was shipped, I think, in 1917 by Hutchings. I think he shipped one car load. Foster Hutchings' father; he was a supervisor here for many years. Then in the '20s, they started to ship lettuce from this area, and actually most of the lettuce at that time was shipped out of Watsonville. Watsonville was where they were coming in then. A little later Salinas came in; they came in with a bang and put . . . little Watsonville way in the back there. But the Grower-Shippers started then, and they're still operating.

**Jarrell:** Why did they all get together and start the organization, and what was its purpose or function?

**Crosetti:** Well . . . as I understand it's like any other association, you know. You have problems that come up in your business. I don't care whether it's a real estate business or what. So anyway, there were only a few shippers, and they got together over in Salinas, and they started this association to go over some of the problems they were having, like with the railroads, you know, freight rates, and they watch that. At that time labor wasn't so important, but there was some labor dealings. They exchange information and work together. It's been going on ever since. Of course labor is today one of the big problems, or big things they talk about, over there. Well, I would say it's one of the major concerns and then the railroad freight rates . . .

**Jarrell:** Trucking?

**Crosetti:** . . . oh trucking and a lot of other things that come up like this OSHA problem. They go into that and the spraying; they go into research and it's a

general thing over there that they do, but they're doing a lot more now than they did in those days.

**Jarrell:** It's more active on more fronts?

**Crosetti:** Yes. It's grown now into a big, big thing. There's more problems today than there were then. See there's more government controls now; fifty years ago you were free to do almost anything you wanted. If you wanted to spray . . . anytime you sprayed and dusted and whatever you wanted to do, you could do without the problems you have to contend with today.

**Jarrell:** How was membership assessed?

**Crosetti:** On the basis of volume per package . . . per carton; it'll vary from celery to lettuce, and broccoli. It's not very much. I don't have all the breakdowns . . . so whatever you ship you pay for that much. So you're paying your share.

**Jarrell:** So you get the benefits of cooperation for a minor fee. Now, is promotion a part of this as well?

**Crosetti:** Oh, yes. A certain amount of that.

**Jarrell:** And lettuce is the primary crop?

**Crosetti:** Yes, as far as the Grower-Shippers Association is concerned, yes it is. Lettuce is our number one crop.

**Jarrell:** What kind of membership does it have? I know each crop has its own outlet. The strawberry groups have their thing, and would you say that almost everyone that's a major grower is a member of that outfit?

**Crosetti:** Just about. Yes. I can only think of one or two that aren't members. Fact, there's a lot of small farmers too. Because they have little problems come up . . . and this is like a clearinghouse you know, for them to get on the telephone and call . . . over there and find out what is going on. So they have a lot of small farmers too. The big ones—just about all the big ones belong.

**Jarrell:** Now in the 1930s, did you know about the Associated Farmers? They were active here in the valley?

**Crosetti:** Yes.

**Jarrell:** What was their purpose? Was it primarily dealing with labor problems?

**Crosetti:** Well, they were primarily into labor at the time. See, getting enough labor here has always been a problem for these stoop crops. They were identified or working to try to get more labor in here. And that was their number one project.

**Jarrell:** Right. Because I was reading about them, that they were interested in the labor problem, but they were also, at any cost they did not want field workers to be unionized. It seems to have been quite a notorious organization. I really would like to hear something first-hand about it.

**Crosetti:** As far as I'm concerned, I don't think I ever belonged to the Associated Farmers. I can't recall ever belonging to it. But they were interested in the labor end of it there. Of course all agriculture throughout the years has been somewhat opposed to unionization. Because when you got a crop ready to harvest that's usually when they pull a strike. With these perishable commodities, it's one or two days, you lose your whole crop, you lose the whole year's labor. Just like up here . . . when they pulled a strike in the apricots up here and the peaches, and here just recently up there in the cannery. . . So this scares the farmers so much, because we don't have much time to negotiate. Because tomorrow if you got this crop to harvest and they're all sitting there and you look at it, and you owe the bank some money, and the bank says, "Hey you better make a deal," and so we're very vulnerable there to almost any demand they might want to make on us. Today the unions wield a big club.

**Jarrell:** You said that at the present time you have seven different labor contracts. What are the unions you deal with?

**Crosetti:** My truck drivers are Teamsters. The packers here in the shed are Teamsters. My fresh operation down here . . . we pack broccoli. It's right

alongside there . . . it's AFL-CIO. Our vacuum cooler is AFL-CIO. Used to be Teamsters, but they voted there several years ago so now it's AFL-CIO. My apple pickers are AFL-CIO which is Chavez, the UFW, which . . . is identified or tied in there. See, then here's Teamsters in the shed. The freezer is Teamsters. Does that cover them all? I don't know.

**Jarrell:** I think that's six.

**Crosetti:** That's six. Well, there's one more.

**Jarrell:** You didn't include lettuce at all.

**Crosetti:** Oh yeah, the lettuce, that's right, that's the main one—I forgot. That's UFW, now. That's the seventh.

**Jarrell:** When did you sign your first contract?

**Crosetti:** I think I signed my first contract sometime in the '40s there.

**Jarrell:** Was that Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers Union?

**Crosetti:** Food, Tobacco, yes. And then they had a big jurisdictional fight here. So I would come down here in the morning. We used to pack lettuce in the packing house in the shed, and they'd all be sitting down. "What's the matter?" "Well," somebody said, "if you don't get rid of so-and-so over there, you got to fire so-and-so, otherwise . . . otherwise we're not going to work." "Well, I can't fire so-and-so because the other union says if you fire him, we're going to sue you back pay," and so on and so forth there. Then I signed with the tomatoes, too. Yeah, about that time . . . with the tomatoes too. That was AFL-CIO, the Tobacco workers, they were all . . .

**Jarrell:** They were CIO.

**Crosetti:** They were CIO. It was AF of L and . . .

**Jarrell:** Were separate then.

**Crosetti:** Yeah, separate, that's right. There was CIO with the Tobacco . . . Then the Amalgamated Butchers Union, they were in the act, too. They got in the act. So I've gone through the whole thing. I've gone right from the very beginning, all this labor deal. From no union at all, to seven contracts now. Everybody is union. They're all different contracts, you know, and they all come due at different times. You know, if you had a master contract, then everything would be the same. But some [unions] have certain paid holidays; some can't work after five or six o'clock, and then at five o'clock Saturday the AFL-CIO—they shut down. The Teamsters will work on Saturday after 5 o'clock if you pay them time and a half. Then they got different hours and a different calling time—they're guaranteed four hours, guarantee two hours, for sick benefits, eye glasses, teeth. Every contract is different. So I got people to take care of.

### **The Future of Agriculture in the Pajaro Valley**

**Jarrell:** What advice would you give a young graduate in agriculture—let's say from UC Davis who comes to you and says, "Mr. Crosetti, I want to go into farming. What do I do? Or what don't I do?" What kind of advice would you give somebody?

**Crosetti:** Well, the funny part of that is that I do get a lot of people that come in to see me and ask about how this business operates, and they're interested. I get them from Davis and just the other day one from Santa Clara. Santa Clara now has an agricultural school. A young fellow came in. So the only thing I try to tell them is, okay, now you've got an education as far as agriculture is concerned, better than I ever had. You know, when you're speaking of an overall fundamental education . . . Now when you want to get into this business, the best thing for you to do, of course, is to get a job. I mean, get a job, and try to go through every phase of the business that you can. In the field, try to find out about the growing, the irrigating, fertilizing, because everything is important. Then the packing, the shipping, the selling—the selling is very important because you've got to be able to sell, otherwise you can grow anything you want, but you have to sell it. You need to know about marketing. You ought to go out and learn; in a way, forget what you learned in college. I don't mean to discard it altogether, because you've got it in your head anyway. It's already there. But

don't come here with the idea that maybe you've got a degree in agriculture, that you're going to come here and conquer this business because you got a degree. This is not like going to work for a bank where everything is cut and dried, and so forth.

This is where you're making decisions every day. Every day you got to make decisions. Somebody says, "How about the market? What do you think the market is going to be next week?" Well I really don't know. But after you've been in this thing for so many years, you're like a doctor feeling a pulse. You just get a feeling, you think this thing is going to maybe pick up or maybe down. Well, you're not always right, but after you've been in it a long time, well, you do things that you yourself don't know why you did.

The first thing I tell them is, "Don't come down here with a degree and think you know everything. It's wonderful that you have it, because you got a lot of fundamentals. You got to start there, and it's wonderful. But now you got to start from scratch all over again." I do lots of business here. I don't tell my wife anything about what goes on in my business. In this business you've got to try to work on an average and take the whole period of that crop.

Meanwhile I sit and think . . . I do most of my thinking when I go to bed at night, because I don't sleep too good, but I got no phones, no interference, and I just go and mull things over—every night I mull everything over. So then I come down the next day and make decisions. But again now, my decisions haven't always been right either. Because if they had of been, I wouldn't be around here. I'd be a conglomerate. It's a hard thing for me to teach anybody, just talking to them, about how to grow a crop or how to sell because there's really no set pattern.

**Jarrell:** It's not a textbook subject?

**Crosetti:** No, it's just something that pretty quick it goes around in your head. When we get busy after awhile in the lettuce, you ought to come down here, and then we're really wheeling and dealing. I can come in in the morning, I can tell you right away if the market looks good or doesn't . . . all I have to do, I look at my salesmen there, and if they got big smiles then things are fine. If they're kind

of sour, well, then it's not so good. Or, when the phones are ringing . . . wide open, you know, we have all kinds of lines come in—some don't even ring here—but . . . when I hear all these phones ringing, things are good. See the demands coming in, they're calling from all over. When the phones are not ringing, things aren't good.

**Jarrell:** They're ringing from all over the country?

**Crosetti:** From the West Coast, Washington, D.C., and Denver, Colorado . . . Now Safeway—they're good customers. but of course we don't depend on them a hundred percent, because here's the thing: although our relationship has always been good and fine, they could make a change sometime, and if we depended on them too much, it wouldn't be good.

When the demand is good and everybody's looking for lettuce, then a lot of people we haven't sold anything to for a long time, they remember us, you know. Then they want to buy, because you know they want to get into the act. So they're on the telephone calling here, and not only here . . . but all over . . .

### **Pricing**

**Jarrell:** How is price arrived at?

**Crosetti:** Well let me put it this way. Usually you dicker on the price. But when the demand exceeds supply . . . when they want the lettuce, then we're going to dictate our prices more, more than they're going to tell us. But we got to be careful there, too, that we don't overdo it. But we're very seldom in that position. Most of the time . . .

**Jarrell:** They tell you?

**Crosetti:** They have the upper hand on us. So we're talking there, and we'll use any kind of figure. A guy'll say, "Well, what do you want for it?" We'll say two or three dollars. He says no. Then I say "dollar seventy-five" since he says someone else is selling for that price. Now, if we're in a good position here, pretty well sold out, and we don't need him too bad, we'll say go ahead and buy

it from somewhere else. Because maybe he's only fooling you, see. But if we're in a weak position, and we haven't done too much selling that day, and we got quite a few cars that we have to move, well we put up a little argument . . . say, "Well, let's make it a dollar eighty-five." Now we dicker, and they'll dicker. He wants the dollar seventy-five, just make it a dollar ninety, maybe you settle at a dollar eighty-five. But this is all bargaining.

**Jarrell:** Horse trading . . .

**Crosetti:** Yeah, it's horse trading, and it goes on everyday, see. A lot of days we ship twenty, twenty-five carloads in one day. When we're going like that, we better be pretty well sold out today, because there's tomorrow again, and the next day again more. If you don't look out, and this backs up on you, then you're completely at their mercy and then run into trouble, you may get into some big trouble. So it's hard to explain. These are the things that you can't learn in a book, that take the old experience to analyze the market, to get that feeling—as we use that term, get that feeling of what you think. Then you go from there. Again it depends on what position you're in. If you're selling pretty good and you're not going to cut your price, you're going to say, "Well, I want two dollars, I won't gamble—I won't even take a dollar ninety-five."

But on the other hand, if you haven't done too well and you got quite a few cars there, well then you better dicker, and then maybe you better unload some at a dollar seventy-five cents, to strengthen your hand for the others, see. Because then you get a little tougher on the other, because if you wait too late, by the afternoon you're dead. The selling is done in the morning here. By noon it's three o'clock back East and they've already bought back there. So we have to make the decision here in the morning. It's up to the salesmen, you see. Now, when you're dealing in frozen, that's a different deal. Because you can hold down to the frozen. You can put it in storage, see. But you say, "Okay, I'm not going to take under thirty cents a pound. I'll store it. I'll keep it." Well, you can gamble a little bit. 'Course you don't want to get caught.

**Jarrell:** For too long.



**Crosetti:** Yes. You can hold it, but lettuce and some of these other perishables—celery and the fresh commodities—you got to move and move fast. You got to move fast, because tomorrow's another day and coming every day. These are the things that are hard to teach . . . We have people sometimes that just want to come and listen to the salesmen when we're real busy. They find it fascinating . . .

**Jarrell:** I'd like to come and listen.

**Crosetti:** Oh, absolutely. When we get going in the lettuce which should be around the first of May, then you can sit, the lettuce salesmen, are right here next door . . . you can sit there, and then listen to the frozen deal. That's altogether different. But you'll find this thing very interesting. Sometimes the language they use on the phone, they call each other some names.

**Jarrell:** That's all right. I can handle that.

**Crosetti:** You know, because they call each other names—they're friends, but you know how they . . . So-and-so . . . I'll get you without . . . get you next time, you know. But it's interesting just to listen. About the first of the month there. About the first of May. Let me know. We got a little broccoli now, but that's a slow deal . . . lettuce is a fast deal. That's where you got action. Big moneymaker, big money loser. Both. It works both ways. You can make money and they think, boy I've got it made; two weeks later and you're losing your shirt . . . But meanwhile on the phone, oh they scream at one another. It's a different kind of business. Now the frozen end is a lot tamer. I mean, they just say, "Okay, this is it." They're much more quiet. This thing here they go on, they go on right now. Bang, bang, bang.

**Jarrell:** I think you like that part of it a lot—I mean, I can tell. The way you talk about it.

**Crosetti:** Oh, yeah.

**Jarrell:** That's it.

**Crosetti:** Well, that's why I can't wait to get down here early in the morning—especially when they're going on the lettuce—and really get the drift. Well, it's like a game. Sometimes you come in in the morning and you can't sell a thing.

**Jarrell:** Really?

**Crosetti:** And you know, everything is dead. You know, for some reason, it's not moving. Then you get in there a couple of hours later and that thing has taken fire—away it goes. You know, it just takes off, and that's when you have fun. That's when you're clobbering the other guy on the other end. "Ayy! So-and-so now wants so much here." It's very interesting.

**Jarrell:** Well, Mr. Crosetti, thank you very much. This has been very enlightening.

**Crosetti:** Well, thank you. I enjoyed it very much too, and any time we can answer some questions we'd like to.

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