



J. Crosetti Sr. in early '80s photo.

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Community leader J.J. Crosetti Sr. founded produce empire

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Joseph J. Crosetti Sr., whose name was synonymous with agriculture and public service in the south county, died Tuesday morning at Dominican Hospital after a long illness. He was 80.

Mr. Crosetti was born July 8, 1908 in Watsonville, and built an empire based upon the fertile soils and agriculture of the Pajaro Valley.

In his prime, his influence in the Pajaro Valley was pervasive. He was well-known in political circles, and hosted the state's powerful in fabled feasts and outings at the Crosetti ranch near Watsonville. His guests over the years included former governors Edmund G. "Pat"

Brown and Ronald Reagan, as well as a host of other state politicians.

He founded Crosetti Frozen Foods, of which he was president until it merged with Norcal Frozen Foods in 1987.

He had picked apples and thinned lettuce on his father's farm. After graduating from Watsonville High School, he was preparing to attend St. Mary's University on a football scholarship when he was offered a job playing with the orchestra on the S.S. Harrison, a ship that was touring the world. Crosetti was an accomplished saxophonist who later helped found the Watsonville Band.

He decided college could wait, and joined the shipboard orchestra.

On his return, while waiting for college to start, he accepted a job with T.J.

Horgan Co., a firm whose history was entwined with the pioneer beginnings of agriculture in the Pajaro Valley.

Crosetti had found his calling. After five years with T.J. Horgan Co. he stepped up into a position with the San Francisco-based produce firm of A.A. Levy and J. Zentner, where he learned every aspect of the produce business including buying, shipping and supervising.

In 1938 he returned to the Pajaro Valley and bought out his former boss. He changed the name of the company to J.J. Crosetti Co. and continued to ship produce under the Horgan "Golden Rule" brand as well as adding his own "Gold Bond" and "Papa's Pride" brands.

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Crosetti produced and shipped apples, lettuce and other row crops and over the years the operation expanded into the Salinas and Imperial valleys and later into Arizona. His children joined the business, and his son, J.J. Crosetti Jr., continues in the family business at Norcal Frozen Foods.

Crosetti, in a 1969 interview, said he considered himself mostly a farmer.

For others, it was more difficult to pin a label on him. Although over the years he was referred to as "Mr. Pajaro Valley" and "Mr. Agriculture," no moniker covered the myriad services he gave to the community.

By 1967, the walls on his study had run out of room to hang all of the plaques and commendations he had received. He seemed to be on the board of directors or a contributor to every organization in the county.

"Everyone in the community respected him. He was generous with

his time and money," said Watsonville Mayor Betty Murphy. "He was involved with every aspect of the community, whether it was the fairgrounds, agriculture, social agencies or politics."

He had served as president of the Santa Cruz County Cancer Society and of the Watsonville American Red Cross, and was director of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture, among others.

For 48 years he served on the board of directors of the Santa Cruz County Fair, being appointed by then Gov. Culbert Olsen, who like Crosetti, was a Democrat. The board dedicated a building in his name in 1969 and honored him for a lifetime of contribution when he retired from the board in February.

He was also appointed to the State Fair Board in 1958 by then-Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown.

He was a member of many organizations, including the Santa Cruz County Democratic Committee, the Watsonville Elks Lodge, the Watsonville Lions Club as an

honorary member, The Western Growers Association, the Central California Growers and Shippers, the California-Arizona Growers Association and the state Board of Agriculture. The county Farm Bureau named him Farmer of the Year in 1979, and the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce chose him Man of the Year in 1966.

He is survived by his wife, Theresa Crosetti; his son, Joseph J. Crosetti, Jr.; his daughter, Jeanette Crosetti, all of Watsonville; two sisters, Mary Scarbrough of Watsonville and Irene Thompson of Visalia; and six grandchildren. His daughter, JoAnn Gerber, died in October.

Services will be at noon Friday at St. Patrick's Church, 712 Main St., Watsonville, with burial at Valley Catholic Cemetery, 66 Marin St., Watsonville. Friends may call from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday at Mehl's Colonial Chapel, 222 E. Lake Ave., Watsonville.

Contributions to a favorite charity are preferred.