

# Agricultural histories



Courtesy of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association

Joseph J. Crosetti inspects a head of lettuce at the Crosetti Ranch off of Riverside Drive in this 1976 photograph.

## Agriculture University publishes additions to regional project

By ROGER SIDEMAN  
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

The personal stories of farmers and others in the Pajaro Valley unfold in a series of interviews with growers, workers and labor contractors now available at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

The UC Santa Cruz Library's Regional History Project recently published seven oral histories to complete a series documenting the ethnic and agricultural history of Santa Cruz County. The project began when the university was founded in 1963.

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ty," director Irene Reti said. "When the university was built, the founders didn't want to just arrive into a vacuum, so they set out to document the history of the region."

Oral historians Randall Jarrell and Meri Knaster conducted all the interviews in 1977. Reti edited them.

The entire series consists of 18 oral histories published intermittently since

the mid-1980s, Reti noted.

A brief selection of the histories is listed below.

### J.J. Crosetti: Lettuce Farmer, Pajaro Valley, 1908-1988

J.J. Crosetti was the founder of the J.J. Crosetti lettuce growing company along

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## HISTORY

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the Pajaro River in 1936. It is still in operation today under his son J.J. Crosetti Jr.

A biographer describes Crosetti's exuberant depiction of selling lettuce as sounding more like betting at the horse races than farming. That is the main theme: The agriculture Crosetti practiced did not fall into the classic image of family farming but rather was commodity production for national distribution in a speculative market.

Crosetti grew and shipped lettuce, tomatoes, broccoli, apples and other crops primarily in the Pajaro Valley, but also in Arizona and the Imperial Valley.

In his oral history, Crosetti describes labor operations and packing and shipping methods, including the details of the development of vacuum cooling. He discusses the Bracero Program and ethnic changes in the agricultural labor force from the 1930s to the 1970s. He describes the development of labor organizing and negotiations beginning with the Salinas worker strike of 1936.

His discussion of lettuce as the premiere dollar-producing crop shows how the crop became known as "green gold," and how the highly speculative lettuce market and its fluctuations could make or break a grower overnight.

When asked where the lettuce market would be in the upcoming week, Crosetti replied, "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,

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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."

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 foretold a good market and high prices; an office with no ringing telephones told him the market was down.

### José Galvan Amaro: Mexican American Laborer, Watsonville, 1902-1977

The interview with José Galvan Amaro, a Mexican-American fieldworker, was conducted in Spanish at his home in Watsonville. It focuses on Amaro's extensive experience as a laborer in California from the 1920s to the 1970s. It has been published as a verbatim transcript in Spanish as well as in English translation.

### Frank Barba: Filipino Labor Contractor, Watsonville, 1898-1977

Born in 1898 on the largest of the Philippine Islands, Frank Barba came to Watsonville in 1927 to take over the management of a Filipino labor camp that was originally established by his aunt. He worked as a labor contractor, first independently, and then for the Birbeck Company of Aromas, which grew lettuce, string beans, broccoli and sugar beets. At the time of the interview in 1977, Bar-

ba was 78 years old and semi-retired, supervising schoolchildren in the fields for various growers in the area.

### Apolonia Dangzalan: Filipina Businesswoman, Watsonville, 1896-1992

Apolonia Dangzalan's oral history provides a history of Filipino immigration to California from a female perspective. In 1927, she joined her nephew in Watsonville and opened a boarding house for Filipino agricultural workers on Bridge Street, where she became known as "Mama" Dangzalan.

Dangzalan served as a labor contractor, hiring men to work in the Gary Company's fields, and was one of few women engaged in labor contracting. During World War II, she owned a house of prostitution on Union Street in Watsonville. In 1950, she went into business for herself as a farmer, primarily growing strawberries. She died in 1992, at the age of 96.

### Mary Ann Berina Radovich: Croatian Apple Farmer, Watsonville, 1918-1991

This account focuses on Radovich's extensive experience as an apple farmer in Watsonville from the 1930s to the 1970s. It is a rare contribution to the ethnic history of the Croatian community in the Pajaro Valley. Radovich owned Berina Orchards from the 1940s through the time of the interview in 1977.

Radovich discusses her family's

history and immigration to the United States. She describes the early apple industry in Watsonville and the changes that took place over the years in terms of labor, mechanization, irrigation, crop varieties, pest control, harvesting and land use.

### Alvin Richardson: Family Farmer, Watsonville, 1908-1977

Alvin C. Richardson was born on Beach Road in Watsonville in 1908. His grandfather arrived in the Pajaro Valley in 1858, where he began the family farm on Beach Road. Richardson grew up in Watsonville and spent his entire life in the Pajaro Valley. At the time of the interview in 1977, he had lived at his farm on Buena Vista Drive for 43 years. He primarily raised bush berries.

Richardson discusses in detail the varieties of berries grown throughout the years, the labor and capital requirements of farming and the challenges of marketing and distribution.

Photocopies of all 18 oral histories can be ordered from the Regional History Project by calling 459-2847 or via writing to [ihreti@ucsc.edu](mailto:ihreti@ucsc.edu). They are also available for viewing at McHenry Library's Special Collections, UC Santa Cruz, and at Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, or can be checked out from McHenry Library. In addition, the complete text of the oral histories can be viewed at the Regional History Project Web site: [library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/](http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/).

The project's next undertaking will be a book about the impact of The UC Farm and Garden on the development of organic farming worldwide.