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University of California
Berkeley, California

Gene Benedetti

FOUNDER OF CLOVER STORNETTA FARMS

With an Introduction by
Larry Maes

Interviews Conducted by
Judith Dunning
in 2001

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Introduction -- by Larry Maes

For the past fifty years I have known Gene Benedetti as a California dairy industry leader, an active director and officer of the Northern California Milk Dealers and the Dairy Institute of California, and as a personal friend. Our families, wives Avis Maes and Evelyn Benedetti and a brood of active youngsters, enjoyed many visits to Sonoma County.

As general manager of Petaluma Cooperative Creamery, Gene effectively represented the economic interests of his North Bay producer members -- the dairymen, dairy product manufacturers, and processor-distributors of fluid milk products.

Gene was an important leader on matters of common interest to producers and processors. He was a consistent advocate for high quality standards both at the dairy farm and for finished products. Other quality-related matters on which Gene was active were component pricing and composition standards for fluid milk products.

The period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s was a time of major transition in the economics of the California dairy industry. Major events included the enactment of the milk pooling legislation; the Knudsen--Todd litigation; consumer activism in opposition to milk price regulations; and the de-regulation of minimum wholesale and retail milk price controls. Gene understood these issues and he consistently joined his fellow processors in developing administrative and legislative responses.

On a personal note, in the 1950s, Gene and I negotiated a North Bay labor agreement with Bill Grammi, the Teamster business agent. I recall Gene and Bill Van Dam visiting my Sacramento office to evaluate the pending transition from Clover to Clover Stornetta Farms. Gene, an original founder of Clover Stornetta Farms, helped build one of California's most successful independent dairy processing businesses. Today, Gene's two sons and two grandsons continue his work at the Clover Stornetta plant in Petaluma, California.

Larry Maes
Retired Dairy Economist

September 2003

Interview History -- Gene Benedetti

Mr. Gene Benedetti is the first narrator for an oral history series sponsored by the California Dairy Museum and Education Foundation. The purpose of the project is to record the oral histories of people who played a key role in California's dairy industry. Mr. Benedetti, a founder of Clover Stornetta Farms in 1977, began his dairy career in 1946 as a field man for the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery.

The project advisory committee was interested in the life story of Gene Benedetti and hoped to learn more about the man behind a successful business. Between January and July of 2001, I tape recorded six sessions with Mr. Benedetti at his office and his home. We enjoyed each other's company, and our conversations were more informal than many of my other interviews. I'd been told that Mr. Benedetti calls women “dolly” but he always called me “darling.” Often Mr. Benedetti turned the interview around to question me, especially about politics and education. We continued many conversations off tape, including lunch at the Petaluma Rotary Club, and at his family home in Cotati.

The first four interviews were recorded in Mr. Benedetti's office at the Cover Stornetta plant in Petaluma. His office was within earshot of the loading dock and the reception area. As we talked, the sounds of a bustling business were captured on tape -- telephones rang, a steady stream of employees greeted each other in the hallway, and delivery trucks were loaded with fresh dairy products. I appreciate the transcriber's patience for hearing Gene Benedetti's words above the sounds.

These initial recordings were noisy but I chose to continue meeting there because Mr. Benedetti was so comfortable in this setting. The sounds of a thriving operation seemed to energize Mr. Benedetti. Although retired, he enjoyed the routine of coming to the office. He told me how his grown children always say they want his office but he tells them, “You'll carry me out. You won't get it.”

When I asked Mr. Benedetti about Clover Stornetta's organic branch, he invited me to tour Saint Anthony's Farm, an organic milk producer for the company. Saint Anthony's is a residential drug and alcohol program in which participants work in the daily operation of the 315-acre organic

dairy while in rehabilitation. Mr. Benedetti helped the late Father Alfred Boeddecker of the Saint Anthony's Foundation set up this innovative program.

Many people wanted to know what made Clover Stornetta Farms so successful when other independent dairy operations have gone belly up. As Gene Benedetti said, “Ethically and morally we've tried to keep our company a niche above everybody else, and it worked.” The company's marketing program, North Coast Excellence Certified, set high standards based on quality, ranch appearance, rBST hormone-free, and a commitment to sustainable agriculture.

Mr. Benedetti was enthusiastic as he talked about Sonoma County's natural resources for dairy farming. “We're in an ideal production area. We've got a beautiful climate, never too hot, never too cold. We've got pastureland that the cows are on; they're not penned up. We've got a totally different ambiance for the cows. It makes for better milk.” In 2000, Clover Stornetta Farms was the first dairy in the country to be awarded the Free Farmed label for humanely produced animal products.

During the course of the interviews I heard many stories that illustrated the way Gene Benedetti lived his life. Three descriptions come to mind--hard-working, determined, and committed to community. Gene Benedetti was modest about his personal contributions, telling me, “I should never emphasize the I, because there's a lot more than me involved in the success of this business.”

I want to thank Gene Benedetti for agreeing to this series of interviews. He talked to me about many aspects of his life from growing up on a chicken ranch in Cotati, to the strong work ethic he learned from his immigrant parents. One compelling story is the founding of Clover Stornetta Farms from the ashes of a devastating fire that destroyed the California Cooperative plant in 1975. Mr. Benedetti is a person who makes decisions and takes risks. As he told me, “Sometimes I'm wrong; sometimes I'm right. I don't like to waffle and think about it and go crazy over it. I think it over quickly, and I try to put the pros and cons to it, and I go.”

Special thanks go to project advisors and the Benedetti family for their guidance and support. I am grateful to Dan Benedetti and the staff at Clover Stornetta for carefully reviewing the transcript. Everyone I met

during my visits to the Clover Stornetta plant, from the receptionists to the drivers, was exceptionally courteous and friendly.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart, Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Judith Dunning
Project Interviewer and Editor

September, 2003
Berkeley, California

INTERVIEW WITH GENE BENEDETTI

I FAMILY BACKGROUND IN ITALY AND THE UNITED STATES

[Interview 1: January 25, 2001] ##[1]

Dunning: What is your full name?

Benedetti: Gene M. Benedetti. The M was for Manuel. My godfather was named Manuel Traina. That's how they got Manuel.

Dunning: So you were named after your godfather. What year were you born?

Benedetti: In 1919.

Dunning: Where were you born?

Benedetti: I was born in Sonoma County. Never left it.

Dunning: What part of Sonoma County?

Benedetti: I was born right by the railroad track. A train brought me at seven o'clock in the morning, my mother tells me.

1.## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Dunning: Do you know where your parents were born?

Benedetti: Sure. They were born in Italy. You know where Lucca is?

Dunning: Um--

Benedetti: Do you know where Florence is?

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: Well, Florence is here [demonstrates with hands], Lucca is here, and Pisa is here. So it's kind of a triangle. Lucca is a walled city, and a big portion of the city is out of the wall. At that time that's where they lived. But my family lived up in the hills, you might say about fifteen minutes, twenty minutes from the main part of town, up in the country.

Dunning: Did your parents tell you stories of the old country?

Benedetti: Oh, they sure did.

Dunning: Any that you recall?

Benedetti: Well, many of the hardships they had. That's why they came here. They came in 1913, I believe, and my sister was born here, and my brother was born. My sister was born in San Francisco; my brother was born in Sonoma; I was born in Sonoma. We moved when I was eight years old to Cotati, and I'm still in that old place. I bought some acreage from my mom and dad. We built a house there, and we're still living there.

Dunning: So you're a long-time Cotati resident. Are there relatives in Italy that your family has kept in contact with?

Benedetti: Oh, absolutely. My wife and I try to go back about every five years to see the family. All my cousins are there.

Dunning: Oh, all your cousins.

Benedetti: Sure. I have nobody over here as far as just family--

Dunning: Immediate family.

Benedetti: My immediate family, my sister's family and my family, but that's it.

Dunning: That's a little unusual, isn't it, because often one family member would come over, to be followed by many others.

Benedetti: But they came over. My dad came over in about 1912 and worked for about two years down in Bishop. Of course, he couldn't speak English, and there were some Italians down there, and he knew one of them. That's where he went to work. They were very busy at that time. Bishop was building the power and the water system for L.A. at that time, so jobs were easy to get.

Dunning: He was able to get work there.

Benedetti: Yes, as a laborer. That's where he went. After a couple of years, he went back, and he was courting my mother beforehand. They corresponded, and they kept in touch, and so when he made enough money to go back, he went back and married my mother and brought her back. But he wouldn't bring her back to Bishop. It was all men down there. He felt that she'd kind of be lost, and so they went to San Francisco. There are a lot of Italians in San Francisco. They rented an apartment in North Beach. That's where Mil [nickname for Emily] was born, my sister. They only stayed there for two years, roughly.

My mother got an epidemic of influenza, and she was hit pretty hard by it, so the doctor told my mother and my dad that she ought to get out of San Francisco because of the dampness and everything, and move and get to some place that's warmer. So they said, “Do you have a place that you suggest?” He was an Italian doctor, of course, and he said, “I love Sonoma. I've been there. There are a lot of Italians there.” So that's where they moved, to Sonoma.

He went to work on the railroad as a railroad hand, putting up the railroad, as a laborer. That's where I was born. I was born right by the railroad.

Dunning: Right by the railroad.

Benedetti: Yes. That little house is still there.

Dunning: Did your parents ever tell you about their childhood, what life was like for them when they were younger?

Benedetti: Yes, they did. They didn't really want to talk about it too much. They left there because it was so hard. It was so hard to make a living. In fact, they never wanted to go back. They had family there, and they would send money to the family all the time, what little money they had, but money to them was a lot of money for them over there and for my mom and dad. But they never went back.

Dunning: They never went back even for a visit.

Benedetti: No, not even for a visit. Now, we've gone back, my sister and I. She's gone back many times, and I've gone back many times. And most of our children have been there, too. In fact, I want to bring my family back there and see the whole family; I want to do that in the next year or so.

Dunning: That would be wonderful. That would be a very good reunion.

Benedetti: Yes, it would be.

Dunning: Do you know how old your parents were when they came to this country?

Benedetti: Dad was born in '85, and Mom was born in '88, and they came over here--let's see--Dad came over in 1912, I believe, and then went back and married Mom, and they came back probably in 1914.

Dunning: So they were in their twenties, late twenties.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: How many brothers and sisters in your family growing up? Were there just the three of you?

Benedetti: Just the three of us.

Dunning: Three.

Benedetti: Just the three.

Dunning: You said your sister's name is?

Benedetti: Milly. Emily, actually. Milly is what everybody calls her.

Dunning: And then?

Benedetti: And then my brother Dan, who was killed in World War II. He was a marine pilot, and he was killed in Guadalcanal. And myself.

Dunning: What was your place in the family? Your sister was older.

Benedetti: My sister was the oldest. Dan was the middle. I'm the youngest.

Recollections of Mother and Father on Cotati Ranch

Dunning: I'm going to talk a little bit about your mother. Can you describe a typical day for your mother when all the children were living at home? Things you remember her doing the most?

Benedetti: She did everything. My dad had to work out--this was during the Depression, and we had a small little ranch,

fourteen acres. We had about 10,000 chickens. We milked about twelve to fifteen cows, by hand. And we had about twelve or fifteen sows, pigs. Of course, Dad bought this little ranch thinking that he could make a living off of it. Well, in those days you couldn't make a living off it, so he had to go out and work.

My mom pretty much took care of the family. He'd come home on weekends. He became a winemaker, worked for Sebastiani, and he worked during the wine season, before and after. He worked about seven months in the winery. He'd come home on weekends. So Mom had the total responsibility of running the show, and my brother and I, of course--my brother was older by three years than I was--he did a lot of the chores, and I did a lot of chores. I started doing the chores when I was ten, twelve years old.

Our day would start about five in the morning, five-thirty, milking the cows, feeding the pigs, separating the milk. Then we'd have breakfast and go to school. We'd come home from school, and start doing the chores again. The same thing all over again. We'd get through about eight o'clock, eight-thirty, and then we'd come in and have dinner. My mom was a great, great cook.

My mom and dad had very little education. The most they went to--I think Mom went to the second grade. Dad, I don't think even finished the first grade. They had no skills. My mother, before she married, was a cook in one of the more affluent families in Lucca. They had a little mansion, and she cooked there for them for about three years. That's where she was when they got married. That's where she came from. It wasn't far from where they lived in Convalli.

So she was a great cook, just a wonderful cook, and I have recipes. I still do.

Dunning: Well, maybe we can add some of those to the appendix of your oral history.

Benedetti: Oh, she was amazing. She insisted that everybody--all the kids would bring friends home. She wanted to meet all of our friends, whether it was a girl or a boy or whoever it was. She wanted to see them. She wanted to talk to them. She'd want us to bring them over and stay overnight and the whole bit. And so our house was always full of kids.

Dunning: That's wonderful.

Benedetti: And we had no money.

Dunning: But you had a lot of good food.

Benedetti: Well, we had a garden. We had the pigs. We killed three or four pigs a year. We had the cows. We had butter. We had cheese. We had milk. My mom would make butter and cheese. We had eggs from our chickens. And we had a great garden all year 'round. So we always had food. We were never short of food. She knew how to--

Dunning: How to make do, yes.

Benedetti: We very seldom went to the store, very, very seldom. My dad would even go after olives up in St. Helena, and he'd have them make olive oil for us, and then he'd cure green olives. I still do that. I still cure the green olives. We just did everything, because we had no other choice.

Dunning: But it sounds healthy. Very healthy.

Benedetti: Oh, it was healthy. My God, it was healthy.

Dunning: You had the fresh air and good food.

Benedetti: And we worked. Yeah, it was great.

Dunning: What was your mother's name?

Benedetti: Pia.

Dunning: How would you describe her? What did she look like?

Benedetti: She was a beautiful woman. She was about 5'-7". She was fairly tall. She was just as tall as Dad, a little shorter than Dad but not much. She had a great ability to talk to you for about ten minutes, and after she'd talked to you for ten minutes, she knew just everything about you. She knew whether you were good, bad, or indifferent. And she'd let us know. That's why she wanted everybody to come in.

Dunning: She was a good judge of character.

Benedetti: She was a great judge of character, one of the very best. And I mean what I say, ten minutes. And she'd tell me--"Shorty" --my nickname was Shorty--"Shorty," she says--this was always in Italian. When I went to school, we couldn't speak English. None of us. We always spoke Italian at home.

Dunning: So you spoke Italian at home.

Benedetti: Always.

Dunning: You're still fluent in Italian?

Benedetti: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. Oh, yes. Read it and write it and speak it, yes. But when these kids would come over, whether it was a girl or a boy, she'd talk to them, and after they'd leave, she'd say, "Shorty, Steiny is a nice boy. I like him. He'll be a good friend." Then she'd say, "But Bill"--whatever his last name is; she wouldn't remember-- "I wouldn't trust him. Don't make an enemy out of him. Keep him as a friend, but you be careful." That's how analytical she was, and she was never wrong. Never. I couldn't believe it.

Dunning: Did you accept it from the time you were little?

Benedetti: Oh, yes. We sure did, yes.

Dunning: What was your dad's name?

Benedetti: Giocondo. George is what it would be translated in in English. At least that's what English speakers did. He was happy-go-lucky, never worried about anything. My dad was always smiling, always happy. We were poor as church mice, but we made do, and he'd be concerned. We'd have to sell a cow to pay the taxes or whatever it was. We made our own wine, and we had a little still. Produced about a gallon of alcohol in about a twelve-hour period, and he'd make his own grappa from that. When I say his own, he'd make two or three gallons of grappa that came directly off the still. When we crushed our grapes, we'd make our own wine.

And when he crushed the grapes, we'd take the juice from the vat that flows freely, and then the squeezing--see, you take and put the stems in and everything, put them in a press, and you squeeze. He never drank that wine. He'd keep that separate, and then he'd distill that for his grappa. Like I say, he'd make maybe two or three gallons, but he'd treasure it. And anybody who came in, of course, had to have a shot with him in the morning. That was automatic.

Dunning: What was the word you used, grappa?

Benedetti: Grappa. That's whiskey that's made from wine.

Dunning: Okay.

Benedetti: It's very similar, but it's got a little different flavor. You can buy it. It's in the stores now. But, you know, when it came off this little still--I used to watch the still. One of us used to watch it, because you had to check it every once in a while, and he'd make maybe three gallons after the wine was fermented and he got the squeezings, and that's all he'd make. But he'd treasure that, and he'd use it on a very limited basis. It came off the still at about 180 degrees--180 degrees!--180 [proof] alcohol. He'd cut it in half with distilled water, and that's what he drank. Every morning he'd have a little shot in his coffee.

Dunning: Get him going for the morning.

Benedetti: Yes.

Working from a Young Age

Dunning: Do you feel there were certain things that your father tried to pass down to you? I will ask you the same thing about your mother.

Benedetti: Well, my dad was a very firm believer that if you didn't work, you didn't eat. And so consequently this was pretty much his ritual. We worked. And if we didn't--I'll never forget one time my brother Dan wanted to go to high school in Santa Rosa so he could play football his freshman year, and he said, "Well, if you go to Santa Rosa, you're still going to have to do all the work you're doing now." Because he'd have to hitchhike up there. There was no bus. Because our school was Petaluma High School. They had buses to come down. So that's what he did. But he'd have to do the same--

Dunning: All the same chores.

Benedetti: All the same chores, no different. So he was a stickler for work. We started work, and we had to work. We started working outside in the Cotati seed farms. There used to be the Rohnert Seed Farms, where Rohnert Park is now. Rohnert Seed Farms was on the right as you went north. Mr. Rohnert owned those, and the Sherwood Seed Company was on the left of the highway. The highway ran right where it's running today, and they were big seed farms--flower seeds, onion seeds, lettuce seeds. The fields were beautiful when the flowers were in bloom. The rows were about a mile long. We worked there every Easter and Christmas vacations, summertime, seventeen and a half cents an hour.

Dunning: How old were you when you started?

Benedetti: I was thirteen when I started there.

Dunning: Did you want to do that, or were you expected to?

Benedetti: We were expected to, yes. And we never got any money. We got paid, but all the money went to my mom.

Dunning: Went back into the household.

Benedetti: Into the household. My mother took care--when we wanted a pair of jeans or a pair of shoes, she would take us to the store. She'd take us to the store and get us a pair of shoes. Or after we got a little older--even in high school, same thing. When I was in college also. When I went into the service, all the money went home. Yes.

Dunning: Did you ever rebel against that?

Benedetti: Never. No. No, we had a wonderful--people don't realize, we had no money, but we had more fun, because the house was open to everybody, and we'd sing. We made our own entertainment, and we just had a great time, yes.

Dunning: Was your social life among other Italians in the area?

Benedetti: Well, when we were real young, sure. My dad and mom didn't know anyone else but Italians, because they couldn't speak very good English. Very broken English. So consequently they traveled--I say they traveled. They went to someone's house, Italian people. Now, we had a lot of Americans that would come to the house, because they loved to come and eat Mom's food. Friends, good friends, very good friends. But they would speak English to them, but not very well.

Benedetti Family During World War II

Dunning: Did your parents ever learn to speak English, or was it mostly broken English?

Benedetti: It was mostly broken English. They never learned to read or write. Funny story about Mom and Dad. When I came back--I didn't realize that during the war--my brother, of course, was killed right at the beginning of the war, in October of '42. I was overseas, in the African invasion, and I get this letter from my mother, saying that this was supposed to be the happiest day of our life. We'd always wanted to pay off the ranch. We had a mortgage of $3,500. That's what we paid for the ranch. And we never paid a dime on the capital; we paid interest and that's all. We had a feed bill that was about $3,800, and the people were just great. Normally, a feed company would take over the ranch and say if you can't pay it, we'll close you up. But they were great, and they had a lot of faith in my dad and mom. They carried us.

So these two bills were big things in our life. Dan and I both sent our money home. Our sister was a nurse. She sent her money home. So during the war, after the Sicilian invasion, the mail caught up with me, and I got this letter from Mom, in Italian. Of course, they were aliens. I didn't give it a thought until I got back home and found out that they couldn't travel more than eight miles during the day. They couldn't leave their house at night. They could go to Santa Rosa and Petaluma, and that was the extent of their traveling.

So I got this letter, saying this was supposed to be the happiest day of our life. We paid off the mortgage and the feed bill--this is what the war did. My dad stayed home, took care of the ranch, the cows, the chickens, and the pigs, and in about two years, they paid off the ranch, they paid off the feed bill, and they put some money down on a neighbor's ranch which they finally bought. Yes, that's what the war did to the economy.

I didn't realize that my parents were aliens, because Mom never said anything to me in the mail, but when I got back, I found out, so I was real upset. Go ahead.

Dunning: You and your brother were in the military.

Benedetti: My brother Dan was killed in the military, and I was overseas in Europe. I made all the invasions in the European theater, starting with Africa and moved all the way through to Normandy. I was in the navy. He was in the marine corps. I couldn't get in the marine corps, although I wanted to. But I had a football injury in my leg, and they wouldn't take me, so I went into the navy.

But anyway, when I got back from the service, I found out my parents were enemy aliens because they were Italians, but not citizens of the United States. So I went to see this judge I met when I was in college. He was a judge in Santa Rosa, Judge Don Geary, a wonderful man. I told him my plight. He said, "Gene, I'll take care of it." He said, "You have your mother and dad go to school." I said, "Don, I can't. They can't learn anything in school." He said, "I don't care. Just go and have them register for their immigration test. They have it in school. They have it in Cotati." He looked at his calendar, such-and-such a day, and it's once a week, and he said, "Have them go. Don't worry if they learn anything. I don't expect them to, but I want to be able to say they'd gone through this." And he said, "And I'll take care of it from there on."

And so they went to school, and it was embarrassing for them. They didn't want to go, and after they went, they didn't want to stay, but they did. It was two nights a week for about four or five weeks. But they wanted to become citizens in the worst way. They loved this country. They finished it.

Dunning: Was it mostly an English class for immigrants?

Benedetti: Immigrants, yes. That's all it was. And the class was entirely in English. So then after it was done, we went up to the judge, and he--they had a regular class of immigrants that came from different places, probably about forty or fifty of them. I told Don, "They can't answer any questions." He

said, “I know that.” He said, “Gene, don't worry about it.” My dad was the first one to get up on the stand. The examiner started to ask him questions, and my dad couldn't answer. So the judge interfered. He was on the chair. He said, “I would like to intervene and ask you as a favor to let both of these people, Mr. and Mrs. Benedetti, become citizens.” And he said, “And the reason for it is that they have lost a son in the war, and the other son was in the service.” He said, “I will vouch for them. I personally will be responsible for anything. I know nothing will ever happen to them in this country.” But he said, “If they do have something happen, I will be responsible for them.”

So the examiner said, “This is very unusual.” And my parents were the first ones. There were all these other people who were going to have to go up and take that same test. But he did it. They became citizens. And that was a big, big thing. Big thing. This was in 1945.

Dunning: Your parents' life must have changed quite a bit when your brother was killed.

Benedetti: Oh, it killed my mom, yes. She expected him to come home. He was reported missing, because they never found the body. So she kept saying her prayers and expecting him to come home anytime. When I came back from the service, when I came back from overseas, it was about two years, three years that he'd been missing--

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Benedetti: Mom had high expectations that he was going to come home. By that time, all prisoners were freed. Japan was just being invaded, not invaded but occupied, so there weren't any more prisoners. So when I got back from overseas, I went to Washington, to the marine corps, to find out what the situation was. They said, “Well, we're still reporting him as missing because we have no proof that he's otherwise.” And I said, “Well, I'll appreciate it if you'd send a letter to tell my family he's dead. I'm going to be home on such-and-such a

date." So they did. And that was a real blow. But it had to be. There was nothing that could be done.

But anyway, Dad took it hard, but my Mom--in fact, it wasn't a year later she got cancer of the breast.

Dunning: Really.

Benedetti: Yes. But she lived for another--I'd say--she died when she was eighty-four, yes. And Dad died when he was eighty-five. He died first.

Dunning: It sounds like you've had a very rich family life.

Benedetti: Oh, tremendous.

Dunning: Do you think there are things that are unique about your family?

Benedetti: Well, yes, unique from this standpoint: They were intelligent --don't get me wrong, as far as people, as far as common sense, but they were not schooled. They didn't have an education. But they were good, basic, sound people. They would do anything for anybody. People would come over to that house; they never left without something. I don't care what it was, but they had to take some home with them. And here they were, poor as church mice, but they still shared everything they had.

So no, it was very unique. The family--my mother and dad--my mother was kind of the molder of the family. My dad was the provider, but more than that, he kind of set the policies, if you know what I mean. He was good about it. Don't get me wrong. He was never hard. I was never spanked in my life. Of course, I think he knew better, too. If he had spanked me, my mother would get up in arms. But he was tough. He was sound. Fair, fair as can be.

Of course, work was a prerequisite with him, because we had to, in order to live.

Emphasis on Hard Work and Education

Dunning: Do you think there are things that your parents tried to instill in you when you were young?

Benedetti: Yes, very definitely.

Dunning: Definitely hard work has come up.

Benedetti: Hard work was one, of course. The other thing was that my mother used to preach to us that whatever we did in our lives, to be sure that we gave back to this country what it gave to us. They couldn't thank this country enough. That's what we lived by.

Dunning: What do you think were some of the dreams your parents had for their children?

Benedetti: Oh, I think they were happy. We all--and this was a sacrifice for them--they didn't have any money to send us to school. My sister became a nurse at St. Luke's and trained. She became a nurse, and after she became a nurse, she went to work in Santa Rosa at the old community hospital. She then started helping the family. We were still in school. Dan, just before the war, he graduated, and he went to USC for a fifth year to get his teacher's credential. He graduated from University of San Francisco.

Now, mind you now, we all had an education. My mother insisted that we go to college, if we could go without them having to pay for it. Fortunately, my sister didn't have to pay. She got her education. My brother and I both got scholarships for football, to go to school. We had different schools we could go to. We both chose USF. He chose it, and I was down there and saw it, and liked it. I followed him to USF. So we both got scholarships, and we both graduated.

Dan got his general secondary and taught one year, and then he went into the service. I graduated from USF, and I went directly into the military. I graduated about three months early in order to make a class in the navy, back in Little Creek, Virginia.

Dunning: It sounds like your parents were very encouraging. I mean, your mother, with her instinct, knew that you needed an education.

Benedetti: Yes. My mom insisted that we go to college if we could afford to go to college, if we could take care of our own way. My dad, of course, would have liked us to go to work to help pay off our bills. She said no. She said, "As long as it doesn't cost us anything, they're going to go to school." We went to school.

Dunning: Because of the football scholarships.

Benedetti: Because of the football scholarships, we were able to go, yes.

Dunning: Were you naturally inclined to play football, or would it have been in the back of your mind, getting a football scholarship?

Benedetti: My brother was a great football player. He was bigger than I was. He was about 6' or 6' and a half.

Dunning: And this was public high school.

Benedetti: Petaluma High School. We went to junior high in Cotati, and we went to Petaluma High School. Dan graduated, and I went in to go to high school. We would play on the lawn, so I just got to where I loved football, and I wanted to play it also in high school. I used to take my dad, and my dad used to love to see the game.

So I went to USF. Got a scholarship. So it didn't cost the family anything. We weren't earning any money, although we always worked, and all the money went home. But we

worked at USF, and we worked when we were in high school, and all the money went home. We worked when we were at USF, and we worked when we were in high school. That's the way it was.

Dunning: You mentioned USF. Did you choose that, or did your family choose that in addition to getting the scholarship because it's a Catholic university?

Benedetti: No. Dan had the option to go to Santa Clara, Cal, USF--I don't think Stanford. I think Stanford wanted him, but he didn't have the grades for Stanford. So he got a scholarship right out of high school. I was pretty small, compared to Dan. When I graduated from high school, I didn't get any offers for scholarships, so I went to Santa Rosa Junior College and played football there, and that's when I started to grow a little bit and fill out, and that's when I was offered a scholarship also.

Dad said, "Look, you go wherever you want to go." He said, "Where do you want to live after you're out of school?" I said, "Right here." He said, "Well, if you do, go to USF, because you'll make friends. They'll be lasting friends," and he said, "and they'll be from the area, San Francisco, or from here, and you'll be a lot better off." So I did.

Dunning: It seems like there's a lot of good common sense running through your family.

Benedetti: Totally. That's all we had. We didn't have any brains, but we had a lot of common sense, believe me, yes.

Lessons from Childhood

Dunning: I have a few questions I like to ask people. As you look back on your childhood, are there things you learned then that you still value today?

Benedetti: By all means. All of my basics--they're my mom's and dad's teachings, yes. You know, they lived by the Golden Rule. We learned that Golden Rule, and it wasn't a Golden Rule in Italian, but it was the same idea. They insisted that we be a part of anything that we could be a part of. If we could help anybody, we're going to help them. If we could encourage anybody to do something, do it. Mom would talk to people, talk to kids, and she would advise them about something. She would spend hours with them, yes. But she had a great, great ability to--insight, to see what people were made of and what they could do and what they couldn't do, yes. So I was very fortunate. We were very fortunate.

Dunning: As you remember yourself as a child, what do you see yourself doing that reflects who you are now? Maybe some of the seeds were there when you were young. It seems like the service and hard work--

Benedetti: Well, the community activity that I've done--and I've done only a little of that--a lot of that, I guess.

Dunning: Actually, I brought a sheet of paper, and there was a whole list of all the boards you're on.

Benedetti: That was part of their upbringing. I think I told you that they wanted us to give back to this country what this country gave to us, and Mom drilled this into us. She said, "Whatever you do, you sacrifice and give back to this country because this country has just been wonderful to us." And so that was basically our foundation that was given to us, and we did it. And Dan would have done it the same way, yes. And my sister, the same way. She did it, yes. She belonged to everything.

Dunning: Well, it seems like you have your parents to thank for a wonderful foundation.

Benedetti: Totally, totally, yes. My mother had the insight of people more than my dad, so she helped us a lot more from that

standpoint. But my dad--he was good as gold. He couldn't do enough for people. That's what he wanted us to be.

Dunning: Was religion an important part of your childhood?

Benedetti: Very, yes. My dad very seldom went to church. He would go maybe Easter and Christmas and maybe a few other days. My mom would get so angry. But she had faith like no one would ever know. We went to church, as soon as I can remember. And I still go to church. Still believe there is someone up there looking down on us. And since the war, I really have the faith, even more so, yes.

Dunning: Have you been going to the same church?

Benedetti: Same church.

Dunning: What church is that?

Benedetti: St. Joseph's in Cotati. It was a little teeny church, and now it's a big one, built right alongside the freeway. You'll see it when you drive by. But a little church--that's where I had my first communion, and that's where Ev[elyn] and I got married, and I had my confirmation there. A great little church.

Dunning: Well, you certainly have your history right in this area.

Benedetti: Oh, totally, totally. I've traveled a lot--don't get me wrong--but I've never veered from here, ever. When I was working at the co-op, they wanted me to go run this plant in the Midwest, and they offered me a lot of money, and I said, "Thanks. I'm not about to go. I'm staying right here." And that's the reason.

Dunning: That's a good decision, too.

Benedetti: Yes. Oh, absolutely. And our children--my two sons are here at the company with me, and they're doing great. And then I've got another employee here who's just like a son, our

CEO. I hired him right out of high school, and he's just a brilliant kid. So, you know, you reap a lot of things if you've got a good foundation.

Dunning: Yes, and it sounds like you and your family are very grounded.

Benedetti: Oh--

Dunning: Almost from the time your parents landed in Sonoma.

Benedetti: That's right. Exactly right.

Dunning: I'm going to go back just a little bit and ask you more specifically about your schooling. Do you remember the first school you went to?

Benedetti: Oh, I sure do. We moved to Santa Rosa for about three years, but I started school, Hearn School, south of Santa Rosa. We lived on a little farm there. I went to first grade there. Then we moved back to Sonoma for a year, and I went to the second grade there. And then my third grade I started in Cotati. We moved to Cotati. My dad was in the middle of --he couldn't get anything to work. We had this little ranch south of Santa Rosa, but he just couldn't get anything out of it, and he couldn't get work, and so he moved back to Sonoma because he could work at Sebastiani's Winery. So we moved back for a year, and then this ranch opportunity came up in Cotati, so he bought that. Didn't pay for it, but he bought it. So my third grade was in Cotati. So yes, I covered a lot of schools in the first three years.

Dunning: In the first three years, yes.

Benedetti: And then from then on--

Dunning: You stayed in Cotati schools.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Through middle school? Though junior high school?

Benedetti: Through the ninth grade. I went to ninth grade in Cotati; they had seventh, eighth, and ninth grade junior high, which was attached to the grammar school. And then in my sophomore year I came to Petaluma. I wanted to go play football in the ninth grade, too, but nobody was home then. You know, when Dan went to high school, I was there to do the chores, so he was able to do it, but there was nobody at home, so I had to stay home. When I went to Petaluma, I had to do all the chores when I'd come back.

I used to do the chores. We practiced football, too. That was the only sport I could play. My dad said, "You can play one sport." In fact, he didn't even want us to play that, but my mother kind of said, "They have a right to that."

Dunning: Were your chores pretty much the same? You mentioned that your parents had the sows and the cows.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: You said 10,000 chickens?

Benedetti: Yes, that wasn't very many, but for us it was a lot.

Dunning: It seems like a lot!

Benedetti: But now you talk of farms with 300, 400,000 chickens.

Dunning: Then would your parents sell the eggs and chickens?

Benedetti: We'd sell the chickens and the broilers. We'd sell them, say, in about three months, and then the chickens--in those days, sexing wasn't in vogue yet, wasn't invented yet, and so when you bought baby chickens, you bought the regular mix, and they were usually half and half. You'd get half broilers and half chickens, hens. They were pullets, of course. And you raised them until they lay eggs, and then you sold the eggs, of course. And then with broilers, you'd

raise them until they were about--you'd get them out as fast as you could because they were eaten, so you'd sell those as fryers. You'd sell them in a bunch. We'd have maybe a thousand or two thousand at a time. We had a brooder house, and my mother used to take care of all the chickens.

Dunning: Well, you learned a lot about business.

Benedetti: We sure did.

Dunning: From sort of a grassroots view, really hands-on view.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Which has probably served you well.

Benedetti: Oh, there's no question, no question, yes. Yes, we did.

Dunning: Well, I was going to ask you if you earned money as a child, but I think we already covered that.

Benedetti: I earned money as a child.

Dunning: You were working for the seed farm.

Benedetti: But we never kept any money. The money all went home. It went to Mom. And that, by the way, continued until after the war. All my money from the war, when I was paid, came home.

II PETALUMA COOPERATIVE CREAMERY: MEETING GEORGE DONDERO

Dunning: Do you think your parents had a certain idea of what your occupation would be? Did they encourage you in any particular area?

Benedetti: No, they didn't, no. They didn't know, really. My mom wanted us to go to college.

Dunning: College, yes. That was great.

Benedetti: Yes. Then we made up our own mind from there. I taught for one year. When I got back from the service in '45, I went to work in a junior college as a coach and taught some classes in P.E., and I taught boxing and I coached football. I did that for a year. Then I was down at a banquet, speaking in Petaluma, to a sports banquet. They'd asked me to come down because I was a native of Petaluma. I wasn't from Petaluma, but Cotati was considered Petaluma because of the school, so they asked me to come down to this sports banquet.

I sat next to this gentleman, George Dondero, who was manager of the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery. I didn't know him from Adam's old fox. We sat next to each other. We introduced each other, of course. And after I was done

talking, we were saying goodbye, and he said, “By the way, Gene, I want you to come and see me Monday morning.” He was one of the bang-bang guys who never went to school. Brilliant guy, just brilliant as could be. Knew more about the dairy industry than anybody I've ever known.

He said, “I want you to come and see me Monday morning.” I said, “What for?” He says, “I want to hire you.” “Hire me? I'm not interested, Mr. Dondero.” I said, “I'm happy with what I'm doing. It's exactly what I went to school for, and I'm really happy.” I was married, and we were having a child--we were expecting a child. He said, “You give me the courtesy of coming down. That's the least you can do. To see me Monday morning. Ten o'clock.” “Well, that I'll do,” I said, “But I'm not going to go to work for you.”

He got me into the office. We started talking, and he said, “What are you making?” I said, “I'm making $2,200 a year.” He said, “That's very good. Probably you'll make $2,500 next year.” “Probably,” I said, “I don't know yet.” He said, “I'll tell you what,” he says, “I want you to come to work. You can speak Italian”--and there were a lot of Italian dairymen--“I need a field man to go out and buy milk.” In those days, it was right after the war, and they were short of milk. Everybody was up here, looking for milk. Foremost, Bordens, Golden State, Christopher--you name them, they were all there. A whole bunch of them. It was hard to keep a producer, and it was hard to get a new one.

Mr. Dondero said, “I'll pay you $85 a week, I'll give you a car. I'll move you from Santa Rosa to Petaluma,” and he said, “I'll give you all of your expenses. Whatever you spend on the job, I'll reimburse it.” I said, “Well, that's very nice of you, George. I don't think I’ll accept.” “Are you all right?” he said, “You're going to have a family, I'm tripling your benefits.” He said, “Your car is yours. You can use it for your family, for anything.”

So anyway, to make a long story short, he said, “Who do you know that's a dairyman? Do you know any dairymen?” I

said, "I know John Watson real well. He's like a second father to me." "Well, you go talk to John," he said, "Tell him what's been offered to you. Then go talk to your president at the junior college, and then talk to Dick Blewett." Dick was our athletic director. He knew I was working for him. And he said, "Then come back and see me." He said, "You call me. And talk to your wife."

So I did all those things, and every one of them said, "Gene, you're crazy. Take it. You can always come back to teaching," because there was a shortage of teachers in those days. "Hell, if you don't like it in a year, a year and a half, you can always come back to teaching." So I took it.

Dunning: And that was the beginning.

Benedetti: That was in '46. May of '46 I went to work, May 15th.

Dunning: Well, I think this is a good place to stop for today. During our next session I'd like to ask you about some of the significant milestones in your career in your twenties and thirties, and it sounds like maybe we can start off next time talking about the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery and how you actually started work there.

Benedetti: Okay.

Dunning: Thank you very much. I'm really excited about this interview.

A Job Offer

[Interview 2: February 8, 2001] ##

Dunning: At the close of our last session, you were telling me the story about a job offer you received that changed the direction of your career. After you came back from active duty in World

War II, you were teaching and coaching at Santa Rosa Junior College, and you were very happy in your position at Santa Rosa.

Benedetti: Very.

Dunning: Had no intention of leaving. You mentioned that your wife was expecting your first child, and in 1946, out of the blue, you received an offer from the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery. I'd like to begin our session today with your decision to accept the position at the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery. My first question is: why do you think you were recruited for the job?

Benedetti: I don't know. I think the old gent that hired me was a wonderful, wonderful mentor for me. And I didn't know him --I knew the name, because I went to high school in Petaluma, and had been there for years. In fact, he went there in 1922.

Dunning: What was his name?

Benedetti: George Dondero. A wonderful man. I don't think he had any education beyond maybe the second or third grade. Brilliant, by the way. Brilliant dairy person. But brilliant, period. He could add and subtract in his mind faster than you could do it on a calculator. This used to amaze me. But anyway, I was at a sports banquet, speaking in Petaluma. They had asked me to come down. I had just returned from the service, and I was working at the junior college, and this was a Petaluma city-sponsored teams that they had: softball, baseball, basketball. They had different leagues. And so I came down.

And I sat next to Mr. Dondero. And so after we got through--we were sitting next to each other--he said, “By the way, Gene, I want you to come down and see me Monday morning.” And I said, “What for?” He said, “I want to hire you.” I said, “Mr. Dondero, I appreciate your offer very much, but my life is totally dedicated to teaching. I want to

teach. I want to coach. And football has been a big part of my life, and I like it, and I think I can do a job coaching."

And so he said, "Well, give me the courtesy of coming down." I said, "Fine, I'll do that. I appreciate it, and I'll come down." I was making $2,200 a year at the junior college at that time. So I go down there, ten o'clock in the morning. He was waiting for me. Tells me all about what he wanted to do with me. He wanted to hire me to go out to the ranches and buy milk. It was quite a competitive thing right after the war because milk was in short supply, and everybody was fighting to get this milk: Bordens, Foremost, Christopher Dairy. There were a number of dairies at that time in San Francisco and the Bay Area.

We were supplying a lot of them with our own milk, and they were taken into plants and bottled and pasteurized. So I said, "Mr. Dondero, I appreciate this. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. But," I said, "I'm just really not interested." He said, "How much are you making?" And I said, "Well, I'm making $2,200 a year. In fact, I just met with the president, and he's going to increase it to $2,500 next year." He said, "Yeah? That sounds about right. You know what? I want to offer you $85 a week. I'll give you a car for your general use, a car that you'll go out and call on the dairymen, but you can also use it for your private use. All the expenses on that car will be ours."

And he said, "I'll give you whatever it costs you if you take somebody to lunch or anything else. [voices in background] Keep an account every week of what your expenses out of pocket are." And he said, "I'll move you down here from Santa Rosa. I'd like to have you live down here."

So I said, "That's a great offer, but I still don't think I'm interested. I really don't think I'm interested." He said, "Well, whom do you know in the dairy business?" And I said, "Well, I know a lot of people in the dairy business." He said, "Do you know John Watson?" John Watson, by the way, was a very famous agriculturalist at that time, graduate

of UC, by the way, and a brilliant man. He was chairing at that time, when I first met him, the Department of Agriculture's advisory board, and he was on the agricultural committee.

So Mr. Dondero said, "Good, and who else do you know?" I said, "I know quite a number of them." I named some of the others. He said, "Do you still speak Italian?" I said, "Yes, I do." "Well, that's great. I'm very interested. I want you to come to work for us."

Anyway, he says, "Go talk to John and go talk to your president [at the junior college], and talk to the man in charge of P.E.," which was Dick Blewett, and he knew him--at the junior college. And he said, "And then talk to your wife. Come back and see me next week." I said, "I will do that. But I don't think it's going to make any difference." He said, "Okay. I'll see you next week."

So I went and saw John Watson. John Watson was sharp as a tack, and he said, "Gene," he says, "I know that fox." He said, "He hasn't got anyone there to replace him. He's probably sixty-two, sixty-three now. He's looking for someone young to come in and eventually take his place."

Dunning: And you were about twenty-seven at the time.

Benedetti: I was about twenty-six. We were married when I was twenty-five, and we got married in December of that year before. And John Watson said, "I'd take the job." He said, "I know what he's going to do. And if you don't like it, you can always go back to teaching." Teachers were in short supply then. So we ended that pretty much.

Then I went to see Bailey, our president at the junior college, and a wonderful guy, and I knew him real well.

Dunning: What was his first name?

Benedetti: Floyd.

Dunning: Okay, Floyd Bailey.

Benedetti: He had been the president for years. Was only the--I guess was the second president at the junior college. Been there for a long time. And a very famous person in the education system. So anyway, he said, "Gene, I don't want you to leave. I want to keep you. But, I think you'd be doing the wrong thing if you didn't accept that job." He said, "You know, our wages are not going to be very high. You're going to have a family. If I know you, you're going to have a large family." He said, "I would take the job. You can always come back to teaching. And if you do come back," he said, "I'll be the first one to want to know about it."

And so anyway, then I went to see John Watson, and John told me what I told you that John said. And then I talked to Blewett, our head of our department, and he said the same thing. Dick said, "Take it. You're crazy," he said, "if you don't take it."

Then I talked to my wife Ev, and Ev says, "You do what you want." She said, "You do what you want, and I'll follow you wherever you have to go." She said, "Don't worry about it. It doesn't bother me." And she said, "I like what you're doing, but"--and I was working part time. I was working at a nursery to make ends meet.

Dunning: Oh, okay.

Benedetti: I had just gotten married, I bought a car, and--

Dunning: You were expecting a child.

Coaching Petaluma Leghorns, 1946-1951

Benedetti: Expecting a child. So I would work at the junior college all week, and then on Saturday and Sundays I'd work in the

nursery, just doing everything for them, whatever they wanted. So then I thought about it and thought about it, so finally by the next week I went and saw George, and I said, "You know," I says, "I think I'm going to try it. I have one condition I want to give you, and if you'll accept that," I said, "I'll take it."

Mr. Dondero said, "What's your condition?" I said, "I want to keep my hands in football. I love it, and I love coaching it. I want to start a town team in Petaluma." I said, "I've got a lot of kids coming back from the service who asked me to come down and do this." While I was doing that up there, they wanted me to do this on the side. And they'd been interrupted in their education, and they were coming back from the service, and they were going to go back to education, but they still wanted to play football.

So anyway, I said, "I want to keep my hands in football. I want to keep my name there. Just in case this doesn't work out, I want to tell you that I want to be able to go back to it." He said, "When are you going to do this? Is it going to interfere with your work?" I said, "Don't worry about it. It won't interfere with my work. We'll practice a couple of nights a week, and we'll play on the weekends, either Saturday or Sunday, and we'll play at home, so we don't have to travel."

He said, "Well, I have no quarrel with that. I think that's great." He asked, "How much money do you need to start this team?" I said, "I don't want any money. We want to do this on our own. We think it'll work." And he said, "Great. Do it."

So I started the Petaluma Leghorns, which was a new venture up in Petaluma. And you've got to remember it was right after the war. No television. People were starved for--

Dunning: Recreation.

Benedetti: Recreational activity, yes. So I started in '46 at the creamery, May of '46. I took one game--I called a bunch of guys, and we practiced, and we played on Armistice Day of that year, '46, because I just wanted to see what kind of reaction we'd get from the public. Well, we drew a packed house, and we had a lot of fun. So everybody said, "Let's have a team." So we did.

I coached through '51, I believe it was at that time, and we were very successful, by the way. We would be sold out every game. We were able to pay the kids. We'd divvy the pot up. We charged a dollar. A lot of those kids went on to college, so we had to be careful that they kept their amateur standing, so we treated it as expenses. And we'd cut the melon up at the end of each week, whatever we made. We'd give a guarantee to the team that came up here. And they loved to come up here because we sold out all the time. If we went someplace else, it was $250 or something like that. Well, we were able to give them $1,000. We gave them a percentage of the game.

Dunning: That was a big deal for that time.

Benedetti: It was a big deal, is right. And so they wanted to come up here. I had all kinds of teams begging to come up and play us, a lot of these town teams in the northern part of the state.

Dunning: Was it mostly in the county?

Benedetti: No, no.

Dunning: Or different parts of the state would come?

Benedetti: Oh, sure. Yes. We had Eagle Rock from Los Angeles came up twice, and we had teams from the Bay Area, of course. They had the same type of teams. And so we played a schedule of about eleven games, either at nighttime on Saturday night, or Sunday afternoon. It worked out fine. We just had tremendous reactions. And we'd divvy the pot

up. Each week we'd have a meeting at night, after one of our practices. We'd practice on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and we'd have a meeting afterwards, and we had a business manager, George Norwin, and he'd tell us what we made, and there were thirty-three kids playing, and myself and George Norwin, and we had an equipment manager, Shorty--I can't think of the name, but anyway, he was involved in the division of the money. And so we got $35 apiece to $40, which in those days was very good.

Dunning: And you were having a good time and meeting probably a tremendous number of people.

Benedetti: That's right, yes, absolutely. I insisted that we had good insurance for each kid, because these kids were all working.

Dunning: How old were the kids?

Benedetti: The kids were all practically my age.

Dunning: In their twenties.

Benedetti: In their twenties, yes. And so we had good insurance for them. We had good equipment. Bought the very best. The first year, I went down to the first game we were scheduled to have uniforms, because we never practiced with uniforms; we just practiced in gym clothes. We never scrimmaged. The only scrimmage we had was when we played.

So anyway, why, I went down to--two brothers had a sporting goods shop, and I said, "I need uniforms for thirty-three kids." He said, "Great, Gene. What are you going to do?" And I told him. "Well," he said, "how are you going to pay for it?" I said, "I have no idea, but you'll get paid. Somehow we'll pay you." He said, "Are you going to co-sign this?" I said, "Yeah, I'll co-sign it." "With who?" I said, "George Norwin will be the other. And Bob Acorn will be the other." He was kind of our publicity man, and he also played.

Anyway, we got the uniforms, and we paid him that first year for the whole bit, so we had no problem with that. So we started playing. We sold season tickets, by the way.

Dunning: Oh, boy!

Benedetti: We sold season tickets for I think it was six dollars for the season. We used to charge a dollar a game, so we gave them quite a benefit, because if they went to every game and paid a dollar, they'd be paying roughly eleven dollars. We'd get enough from the season tickets before the season started to take care of our insurance. We had good insurance, because these kids were all working, and if they got hurt, I wanted to be sure that they were taken care of physically.

We also had injury insurance. We also had a payment as long as they were off. I don't know what it was, thirty dollars, forty dollars a week or something like that. And it was an expensive insurance. I think we paid something like $2,800, $3,000.

Dunning: For the season.

Benedetti: For the season, yes.

Dunning: Now, was this team unusual for that period of time? Did you have a town team that you'd sell season tickets?

Benedetti: No. Well, it was unusual they did that, but there were town teams all over, but they were kind of not as well organized as we were. They had teams in San Francisco, they had teams in the East Bay, they had teams in San Jose, one team in San Jose, and they had a team in Santa Cruz, they had a team in Sacramento, a team in Eureka. These were all the same reasons why we had them. These kids were coming back and wanted to participate and so forth.

They wanted to come up here because they could make more money coming up here than if we played at their places. So

we never left. We stayed in Petaluma the whole time that I coached. So it worked out fine.

Dunning: But it didn't interfere with your job.

Benedetti: Not a bit. In fact, George became our biggest booster.

First Job at the Creamery, 1946

Dunning: Well, that's great. What was your first job at the creamery?

Benedetti: I was a field man. They called them field men in those days. And they still do. They still have field men that go out and take care of the farmers that are shipping--that are members. Ours was a co-op, Petaluma Cooperative Creamery, they called it at that time. Now it's still a co-op. But anyway, I would go out and call on mostly new customers.

Dunning: You'd go right to the dairy farms.

Benedetti: Dairy farms, yes. And then I'd also go to some that we were already shipping to if they were having a problem. And I didn't know anything about this.

Dunning: I was going to ask you that. You didn't know very much about the dairy business.

Benedetti: I didn't know anything.

Dunning: How did you learn about the dairy business?

Benedetti: I'll tell you how I learned. I used to milk cows when I was a kid at home, because at home we had something like fifteen cows we used to milk by hand, so I knew that much, and I knew what cows were, and we separated the milk, and we sold the cream. We had some hogs, about twelve, fifteen

hogs. We'd use the skim for the hogs. And so when I started with Mr. Dondero, I said, "I don't know anything about this." He said, "I understand. Don't worry about it. You go out and call on these dairymen. They all know your name. They all know who you are."

Well, it didn't take long to learn. Like, the first day I went out, I went to see people that I knew, who would understand that I didn't know anything, and so--"You will not be able to answer a lot of their questions at first," he says. "And you tell them you don't know. Don't lie to them. Tell them you don't know and that you'll get the answer and you'll either get back to them in person or you'll call them. And you come into the office every day. At four o'clock you be back in my office, and we'll spend an hour each day, and we'll go over all the questions that come up."

Dunning: But they trusted you.

Benedetti: Yes. So they asked me questions about this or that, what are we paying, and all of this, and why should we belong, and how many shares--in those days, they had shares. It was in a revolving fund. And so it worked out fine. I had no problem. And so I stayed on that close to two years. Mr. Dondero raised me about every six months or every three months he'd give me a raise. So I was getting along fine. My wife was happy.

Dunning: You had had your baby, first baby.

Benedetti: We had our first baby, yes, exactly. In fact, we had another one very shortly thereafter, about a year and a half. We had six children. So anyway, he kept me out there for about a year and half, doing this, and then he calls me in one day. He said, "Gene, I want you to break in a new field man. And I want you to come in, inside the plant, and I want to put you through every department in the plant." I said, "What the hell are you trying to do?" And he told me, "I want you, eventually, to take this thing over."

Dunning: He had a lot of confidence in a young man.

Benedetti: But he was a great, great guy. And he never had any education, but he had depth to his common judgment, and he knew people.

Dunning: Right. Sounds like your mother.

Benedetti: Very much, very much, yes. So anyway, I broke in a man in a month, I think it was, and then I came into the plant. He told me, "I'm going to start you off in the butter room." In those days, we made everything. We made butter, we made cottage cheese, we separated milk, we bottled milk, we pasteurized, of course, and we received milk. And we were receiving it in cans in those days. We didn't have tankers then.

So he started me out on the receiving dock, dumping cans. This was in the spring of the year. We had cans--

Dunning: How big were the cans?

Benedetti: The cans were twice the size of this. That's a five-gallon can.

Dunning: Okay, so about ten gallons.

Benedetti: Yes. Full, they weighed about eighty-eight, eighty-nine pounds. I was picking those up and dumping them. It was work! But I stayed out there. And he said, "Now, look, you go out there, and everybody knows that you're a trainee. I got the union to accept this. You don't have to join the union." He said, "And I had a couple of meetings with the people, and I told them that this is what I was doing. I was going to put you in each department. So don't shy away from the work. You've got to be part of them."

And he said, "I don't want you to get too close to them. I want you to be friendly and go out with them, but don't make it a practice, because if you do, you'll lose your home life and you'll lose, not only that, but your outside friends."

He said, “I want you to keep your outside friends.” He was a very thoughtful person like that.

So anyway, I went to each department. It took me about a year, a year and two, three months, I guess it was. So then he called me in after I'd been to each department, and said, “Okay, I'm going to have you come in the office.” And he said, “I'm going to give you this office over here.” In fact, they made an office for me. Not a very good one, but--

Dunning: It was yours.

Benedetti: It was mine. And so he said, “I want you to just basically take some things off of my lap. I want you to start meeting people. When I go to meetings,” he said, “I'm going to be taking you to meetings, and I always take Frieda when I go, and if we go to Monterey or Los Angeles, I want you to take Evelyn.” So that's how I got my education. And I mean it was an education. It was better than any college education I could have ever got.

Dunning: Well, it sounds it. He was really your mentor, completely.

Benedetti: Oh, completely, totally, totally.

Dunning: Had you ever had anyone believe in you so much?

Benedetti: No, no. Well, my mom and dad.

Dunning: Other than your mom and dad.

Benedetti: No, Mr. Dondero was just amazing, just an amazing guy. He died shortly--he retired when he was sixty-four, I think, and he stayed on to come in when I needed him, when I wanted to ask questions, as a consultant. He made me assistant to the manager first, then assistant manager, and then I was made manager. And he still would come in, just when he felt like it. I didn't take his office over. And then he finally retired, and he had a heart attack, and he died shortly thereafter. He died when he was about sixty-four.

Dunning: He was a young man.

Benedetti: He was a young man, yes. It was a sad--and then I really missed him out there.

Dunning: Oh, I'll bet.

Benedetti: Because I was still--even when I was manager, I was still calling on him to give me some answers to certain things. As an example, I knew nothing about labor negotiations, and he did all the union labor negotiations. And he hated it. He wanted to get out of that. So that was one of the first things he put me on. Took me to the meetings, to the negotiations the first year. I sat down with them. I didn't say much, but I listened. I got the drift of what the hell was going on. From there, he just day by day got me pretty well entrenched.

I was still coaching at that time. So then he called me in, just about, oh, I'd say a year after when I went into the office. "Now, Gene," he said, "I'm going to make you assistant manager. You've got to make a decision." I said, "What's that?" "You said that you wanted to keep your hands in football," and I was still coaching. He said, "You've got to either coach or give me the commitment that you're going to be here, because I can't spend any more time with you than what I spend." He said, "I'm still going to spend time with you--don't get me wrong, but I've got to have an answer."

He had a board, and I'm sure that they wanted to know what the hell was going on. We were very successful as the Leghorns, and they knew that I could go out and get a job anytime I wanted to. So anyway, why, I said, "George, there's no question. I'm tickled to death with what I'm doing. You've been so good to me. There's no way that I could leave you. I'm here for life if you want me." And he said, "Well, I want you, but you're going to have to stop coaching, because your time now is going to be too valuable for me."

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Benedetti: My last year was '51, I believe it was. Yes, '51. I gave up football totally. I did a little scouting for them occasionally, but nothing as far as hands-on.

Dunning: That's when you were really in the business.

Benedetti: I was in the business, yes, totally. And so then about a year, a year and a half later, he made me manager, and he retired, and he stayed on as a consultant, and he died probably three years after that, yes.

Dunning: So it's almost like he knew unconsciously that he needed to get someone in place.

Benedetti: Yes, there was no question.

Brief History of the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery

Dunning: I'm going to backtrack just a little, because I think a number of people will be curious about the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery. Could you tell me a little bit about the organization when you started: its purpose and did you know much about the history of it when you started?

Benedetti: I knew nothing about anything when I started. [laughs]

Dunning: For someone reading this and not knowing what a cooperative creamery is, could you describe that a little?

Benedetti: Sure. When I first started, we had about 1,400 members throughout the northern part of the state: Sonoma, Mendocino, Lake, Marin, Napa. We bought milk from members. When I first went there, we had a very bold way of basing the membership to their equity in the creamery, because they owned the creamery. It was a cooperative. They had to own a share of stock for each cow that they milked on April first. Well, you can surmise that this wasn't

very fair to start with, and April first, of course--it used to be, in the springtime, is when you had the flush of your milk, and that's when they milked the most cows. So that's why they picked April first.

You had to take the members at their word, and some of them were really playing games. They had maybe fifteen shares of stock and maybe milking forty cows. So when I got into it with George, I said, "You know, this isn't fair."

We were banking with the First National Bank down in San Rafael. They did a lot of work with farmers. Mr. Murray was his name, and he was a wonderful gentleman. We were borrowing money, and we had to borrow as we got bigger and grew more, why, we'd have to borrow money for expansion, things of that type.

Mr. Murray said, "You gentlemen have to do something. The equity that you have in stock is not enough to cover what you're borrowing." I said, "Well, what do you recommend?" He said, "Well, I don't know. I have never dealt with a co-op, but I would go to Davis and find out"--I said, "Well, I know just the person." I said, "Alice Jewett [aka Alice Lowry]." I don't know if you've ever heard that name. She was the agricultural specialist up at University of California at Davis, and a wonderful woman and brilliant woman.

So I called her, and I asked her, "What can we do to get the equity equal?" "Well, the only way you can do it, Gene," she said, "your system is not fair, what you've got now. The only way you can do it, is have a revolving fund. Deduct two cents, three cents a pound fat from their check each week or each month or however you pay and revolve it over a period of five years or four years, whatever you need for that equity, to get to the equity that you need, to satisfy the bank and to have enough cash flow."

So I came back and told George. This was just before George retired. "George," I said, "I want you to meet this lady, and I want you to talk to her. This is what she's proposing." And I

said, “How do you feel about it?” He said, “It can't be done.” “Well, what do we do?” I said, “We got to do something, and she says this is the only fair way of doing it, that everybody has their assets according to how much milk they're producing, and their liquidity in that company is going to be fair.”

“Okay,” he said. “I don't know how we're going to sell this.” “Well, I don't either, but you're going to have to be a big part of it,” because there's still a lot of old-timers, and George Dondero was kind of a god to them. I said, “We'll have area meetings, and we'll have about twenty at a time, twenty people or thirty people at most, and we'll have Alice Lowry come talk to them. I want her to talk to you first.”

Dunning: Alice Lowry?

Benedetti: Well, Alice Lowry Jewett. She got married later on, but at first it was Alice Lowry. But she got married and became Jewett. So anyway, why, we had scheduled meetings. We had Alice come first to talk to George and to the board, tell them why we have to do this, and I told them already, but I wanted to reinforce it with somebody who knew--

Dunning: You wanted an expert.

Benedetti: An expert, yes. And so they all bought it. It was going to be hard to sell. I knew that, because it was going to mean more money out of their check, because the way it was then, they didn't take any money out of their check; they bought the stock, which wasn't very much, and some of them were really screwing us on the stocks--excuse me!

Dunning: That's okay.

Benedetti: We can take that out. But that was the main reason why we did it. So we had these meetings, and we had a vote on it, and it passed. So that's how we got the equity built up in the plant to satisfy the bank, and it allowed us to do some things that we couldn't do because we didn't have money.

Dunning: You said you had about a 1,200 membership?

Benedetti: We had 1,400 when we started, and then it started to dwindle because, as you know, we had a lot of small dairies. Some of them were just separating some milk and shipping the cream, but they were members. As the dairies got bigger, we had more milk, but fewer members, to where now they've got probably--oh, they've lost a lot of them now, but when we left, I think we had about 300 dairymen.

Dunning: When you left. When?

Benedetti: I left in '77.

Description of Small Dairies

Dunning: When you first started going out as a field manager, was there a typical farm, a typical dairy farm?

Benedetti: Oh, sure.

Dunning: Could you describe that for me?

Benedetti: Well, in '47 there weren't any real large dairies. They were small dairies. They were milking maybe thirty cows at the most, maybe fifty, at the very outside.

Dunning: So that would be about an average size?

Benedetti: No, fifty would be a big dairy. We had one that was milking about a hundred, but that was one. So they were smaller dairies, yes. And, of course, as they went out of business, the others got bigger, because we had more milk--as the numbers reduced, with less cows, and better production, we had maybe four gallons of milk, average per cow, and by the time I left it was up to eight or eight and a half gallons. Not because of me, but because of the breeding and feeding and

management. A lot of the kids were starting to come back from college that went to Davis or went to Cal Poly, and they got all these new ideas, so they started modernizing, and so they started buying out the smaller dairies.

Dunning: Was that happening right from the beginning, when you first went in in the late forties? Or was that something more in the fifties?

Benedetti: It started probably in the late forties. Yes, I'd say in the late forties. But it took a long time. It didn't happen overnight.

Dunning: Over a few decades.

Benedetti: No, it wasn't even a few decades. I'd say by--let's see, I left in '77, and I'd say by '60 it was pretty well down to the numbers that were there when I left in '77. It didn't take that long. But the smaller dairies just couldn't make it, just like everything else in the good world. Why, they got bigger.

Dunning: Did you get to know your dairy people?

Benedetti: Oh, I knew them all by their first name, sure.

Dunning: Was there a particular ethnic group when you first started coming in?

Benedetti: Very much so. There was a lot of Swiss-Italians, Italians, Portuguese were the bulk of them.

Dunning: In this area, in your region.

Benedetti: In this region, yes.

Dunning: Would your region go from the coast and the inland valley all the way up toward Oregon?

Benedetti: No, no. We never went past Mendocino, no. And we never went further south than Marin. In those days, before I left,

we started down in the valley, picking up milk. They still do, of course, now. We widened our scope.

So anyway, why, that's how the co-op--how should I say it? The co-op started small, with a lot of dairies, but we got big with a lot fewer dairies.

Dunning: Do you know about how many dairies there were when you left in '77?

Benedetti: Yes, I'd say we had about 250, yes. About 250. Now I don't know what they have. Probably about eighty, I guess.

Agricultural Changes in Marin and Sonoma Counties

Dunning: So you were in a position to see the whole landscape change also.

Benedetti: Oh, tremendously, yes.

Dunning: Could you tell me about what Marin and Sonoma Counties--the rural areas looked like when you started working in the forties?

Benedetti: When I first started working, it was chickens and cows. This area, Petaluma, was the egg basket of the world. That's what they called it. I don't know if you realize that or not. But there was nothing but chickens, and cows were secondary. Then it just flip-flopped, and cows became the big thing and chickens went way down, yes.

Dunning: Now, why do you think that happened? People wanted more dairy products?

Benedetti: No. I think there was a lot of things that happened in the chicken industry that caused this to happen. They were bringing eggs in from out of state. From the Midwest and I

don't know where all, but they were coming from out of state. And so consequently, the need for the chickens here was going down, down, and down. I'd say in a period of fifteen years, maybe twenty at the most, the chicken industry went from way up here [demonstrates] to way down to here. There was hardly anything left, just like there's hardly anything left now of chickens. Very few commercial chicken ranches left in this area.

Why? Because the valley became a big chicken area. They could ship in from out of state. Even down in the southern part of the state, they got large chicken farms. I don't know if they still do. I've kind of lost track of that side of it. But yes, that was a big move. And they're practically extinct up here. At one time, you'd go through this area, and you'd see nothing but chicken houses, with chickens outside, and they had the house. They had fences, and the chickens would go in and out, like, a corral.

Dunning: Your family was the same. You said your family had 10,000 chickens in Cotati.

Benedetti: Sure, sure, sure.

Dunning: Which to an outsider seemed like a lot.

Benedetti: Ten thousand was small.

Dunning: For a chicken farm.

Benedetti: For a chicken farm, yes. We did a little bit of everything. We had chickens, we had cows--we had a few cows. We had, like I said, about fifteen cows that we milked year 'round, and then we had hogs, sows, and we raised pigs. We used to kill four or five pigs a year. This was during tough times.

Dunning: Well, as the bigger dairies bought out the smaller dairies, what did the smaller dairy people do?

Benedetti: Well, that's a good question.

Dunning: Would they sell their land?

Benedetti: Some of them sold their land. Some of them subdivided. The ones close by in here sold their land for high prices. In those days, there wasn't too much regulation about zoning and everything else. And then there were a lot of grapes. All of the northern part went into grapes. Healdsburg, Cloverdale. We used to buy milk from all those areas. It's all grapes. And down to Sebastopol. Sebastopol had apples, but there was also some pretty good-sized dairy farms there, and now the apples are practically gone. They're all grapes. And Sonoma is all grapes. And we had some big dairymen over there. So that's what happened.

Dunning: So you witnessed this transformation from dairy to grapes.

Benedetti: Basically grapes, yes.

Dunning: Were there many casualties in this process?

Benedetti: Oh, sure, there was. No question about it, yes. No question about it. You know, the smaller dairy couldn't compete. That was one casualty. Some of them went into some other things, but they just couldn't make it on milk, and they couldn't get bigger because the farm wasn't big enough, so it was a tough period for a lot of dairymen, yes. Like, you know, you reduced your numbers from 1,400 down to a couple of hundred, and--

Dunning: It makes a big difference.

Benedetti: It makes a big difference. You're darn right. Now the difference is down to probably eighty dairies in this area. But they're big. But we just had one sell out, and he's going to put grapes in. Herzog Dairy out here in Lakeville area. Beautiful ranch. Sleepy Hollow Dairy. You probably have gone by it.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: Herzog is the name, Max Herzog, and as he died and his son had it, and--by the way, an ex-Cal man. Max, the father, went to Cal. The son went to Davis. Great dairymen. Probably one of the better known herds in the whole world. He used to ship semen and bulls everyplace, around the world. Holstein cows. Probably the greatest Holstein herd that's ever been had in the whole United States, whole world. His cows--his semen and the bulls were in demand, yes.

Dunning: Now, why do you think his cows and the semen were so much better?

Benedetti: He bred. They always had a purebred herd. A lot of people didn't--only the real good dairymen had purebred herds, and usually the ones that went to school and were educated better, for the farming end. And I don't mean education was the only reason. There was a lot of dairymen who went into purebreds. He didn't have a son that was coming along that was interested in the business, and he was getting along in years, so he sold his herd to someone down in Chino, California, which is a big dairy area now. They had a purebred herd, and, of course, this herd here was really a buy. I mean, I don't know what he paid for it, but he got one of the best herds.

Dunning: Do you know how large his herd would have been?

Benedetti: When he sold it?

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: Oh, I'd say he was milking 300, 350.

Dunning: Did they transport all those cows down?

Benedetti: By truck. One day. It's a big, big thing.

So anyway, the dairy industry has changed dramatically. We used to have--as an example, when I first came in the industry, we used to have twelve or thirteen dairies that

bottled milk in Santa Rosa and sold milk in Santa Rosa. And they had an ordinance in Santa Rosa that said if you sold milk in Santa Rosa you had to bottle it within the city limits.

Dunning: Oh, really?

Benedetti: Yes. That's right. I know, because we wanted to go to Santa Rosa, and we had to put a little plant in Santa Rosa.

Dunning: Do you think it was because they wanted to keep the business right there?

Benedetti: Sure.

Dunning: Right in town.

Benedetti: It was a very unfair ordinance, and I'm sure it would have been whipped if somebody took them to court, but then when we got in there, we bought a lot of them, and that's how we got our size, is by buying in the distribution business. We bought a lot of small bottlers and bottling in glass and selling at the door and also delivering door to door.

Changes in Bottling and Milk Delivery

Dunning: Now, would this be a good time to talk about that, the move from home delivery to people buying it at the store?

Benedetti: Yes, yes. You know, pretty much everybody bought their milk either delivered or they went to the little dairies that were bottling and bought it there. There was some milk in the stores, but the glass bottles--stores didn't particularly like them. Never did, because of the handling of them. So when paper came into being--let's see, paper came into being about 1950, '51?

Dunning: That early?

Benedetti: Yes. In fact, we had one of the first Pure Pak machines put in at our plant in Petaluma, and, of course, we took this thing by storm, because people wanted paper. They didn't have to worry about washing the bottle and returning it.

Dunning: And breakage.

Benedetti: Breakage and the whole thing, yes.

Dunning: Do you think that the breakage and the convenience were the biggest factors in the reduced glass bottle usage?

Benedetti: Yes. When paper came out, why, glass bottles just [claps hands] were gone, not right away, but over a period of three, four years, they were gone.

Dunning: So by the mid-fifties.

Benedetti: By the mid-fifties there was very little glass left, yes. And we were one of the few that had a paper machine, so we--like, in Santa Rosa, we ended up with the bulk of the business. Of course, we had competitors from outside. We had Foremost, we had--in those days it was Golden State, and then we had Bordens, we had Challenge, we had--you name it--Ardens. They all sold milk up here, from the Bay Area. Now there's no one left, yes. Berkeley Farms just sold to Deans. There are no independents left in the northern part of the state. It's a very amazing thing.

Dunning: Why do you think--when you say the independent, like Clover Stornetta, that's a whole huge story that will probably take a whole session, but I'll ask you just a little bit of a teaser: why do you think Clover Stornetta survived where all the other independents died, went under?

Benedetti: We took a little different approach. We always felt that--we did this years ago. We decided that we were not going to be just a regular bottler of milk. We were going to take the

upper road and process as good as possible milk that we could bottle, that we could get from a ranch, and we were very particular about that, and we still are.

We have probably the greatest quality of milk from our producers. We have fifteen producers now. But even then, we demanded pretty strict standards. So we kind of took a higher niche, and we took that niche and gave them a better bottle of milk. We did a lot of community activities, a lot of advertising with our billboards. I don't know if you've seen our billboards.

Dunning: Oh, yes.

Benedetti: Well, our billboards are a big factor. We never put a hard sell on the billboards, if you noticed. It's always a play on words, and they're funny, and people look for them. But Clo Cow is there, on all of them, in some way, shape, or form. So that's basically why we're still here and most of the others have faded, either sold out or we bought a lot of them. We bought a lot of them, for example, Stornetta's Dairy. Stornetta's is over on the way to Napa, right on the turn there as you're going towards Napa. I don't know if you remember seeing it. They've still got their name out there. And the old gent that used to run it--he's still alive. He's ninety-two. But he didn't want to take that name down. Of course, that was one of the conditions when he sold it.

Dunning: When he sold it, that he would get to keep the name.

Benedetti: Yes. Now, we bought the name, but we're letting him use the name, yes. Not for any other product, but just the sign on the ranch, yes. No, it's a totally different picture now. We're one of the few independents left in the state of California. There's ourselves, there's Foster Farms, and there's Producers Dairy in Fresno, and Crystal in Sacramento, and who else? No independents. I think that's it, in the northern part of the state.

Dunning: Really only a handful in the northern part of the state.

Benedetti: Exactly, yes. And why we're still here is because we took the position that we weren't going to try to match the lowest price out there, in effect. We were going to put a little niche above that, and if they wanted their milk, they were going to pay for it and pay what we had to get, so that we could give a premium to our producers. We paid our producers a premium over and above what the state price is. But our demands are very stringent, and have been, and will continue to be.

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Dunning: As I said, I think we'll probably spend maybe even the next session on the success of Clover Stornetta and what makes it stand out. Before we go into that in detail, are there other things you'd like to tell me about the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery? Were there up times and down times?

Benedetti: Oh, there certainly were.

Dunning: Any that really stands out in your mind?

Benedetti: Well, the one thing that stands out in my mind was when we converted from a stock co-op to a revolving fund. That was a big, big move.

And the other thing that stands out in my mind is the board was very aggressive. We sold bulk milk to buyers in the Bay Area. That was our main concern when I first got there. And then we started to develop our distribution business. We bought up small dairies. I don't know how many. I guess I can go through my mind and figure that out, because it won't be long before we won't know, unless I do it, I guess. But we bought any number of dairies. We'd buy their little plants--

Dunning: The co-op itself?

Benedetti: Yes, the co-op itself.

Dunning: The board members would have the decision?

Benedetti: Oh, sure. Oh, absolutely. I'd bring it to them, and I'd negotiate the price, tell them what we were going to pay, and we bought a dairy in Sebastopol, we bought something like four or five of them in Santa Rosa, and then the others just went out of business. And then we bought Healdsburg Sanitary Dairy. It was a big one in Healdsburg. We bought that. We bought two dairies in Ukiah. We bought one in Willits, the only one in Willits. It bottled all the milk. We bought one in Fort Bragg. We bought two of them in Lake County, and others.

If you ask why did you do this? First of all, they were having a hard time, most of them. They could see themselves dwindling, because of our aggressiveness and our quality that we had and our advertising and everything else. I guess they just decided to sell.

Dunning: They could see the handwriting on the wall.

Benedetti: They could see the handwriting on the wall. That's right, yes. We had a good relationship. I knew them all. I didn't want to hurt one of them, but I was hurting, because I was taking a lot of their business. But, you know, that's the American way. I guess.

Dunning: So when you bought the business, you'd have all the cows and the land--

Benedetti: If they had cows. A lot of them didn't have cows. Like Stornetta's. He kept the cows, and we bought his milk. But we bought the name, we bought the bottling plant--we didn't buy the bottling plant; we leased the bottling plant, and we bought the equipment, the trucks and the bottling equipment that they had. We bottled there for about three, four years, and then when we built this plant, we moved everything in here. So we don't have any other plant now but this.

Dunning: This is it.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Right here.

Benedetti: Right here, yes. And we used to have a plant in Marin County. We used to have a plant in Santa Rosa. We had a plant at Stornetta's. We had a plant in Ukiah.

Dunning: So then you needed a manager for each plant?

Benedetti: That's right. We had somebody to run it, yes. So we consolidated it all, over a period of time. We bought Lucas Valley, which is a good-sized dairy in Marin County. We paid Bob Grady to run it. I think it was around $600,000 for Lucas Valley. And he was worth $600,000 because he was a brilliant guy. He knew everybody down there. He stayed and ran the place for us. And then we shut the plant down, but he was still--

Dunning: He was still running the business end of it.

Benedetti: Yes, for what?--six, seven years, and then he retired.

Dunning: Would this have been in the fifties?

Benedetti: No, no, this was in the sixties when we bought him. It was about '61 or '62, if I remember correctly. You're reminding me that I should do this.

Dunning: I'll jog your memory a little. That's why I think sometimes when you go chronologically you can get a sense of what was happening then, and also--what was happening for Petaluma Co-op? Were you seeing it happen all over the state?

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: You know, where a co-op would be buying out dairies?

Benedetti: Yes. Yes, and not just co-ops. Bigger dairies would buy out the small ones, yes. So, you know, the co-ops--there are not too many co-ops that did what we did. Most co-ops would make butter and powder and sell milk, bulk milk, in those days. We were one of the few co-ops--in fact, I think maybe there was one other one; I don't know, but we were one of the few that physically bottled milk and sold it, competing against the people we used to sell bulk milk to.

And some of them would complain about it. And I said, "Well, look, we're not bothering you down on your territory. You're coming up in our territory. If you want to come up, there's no gate down there, but I suspect we're going to continue bottling." Now, of course, there's nobody left, so now we're in the Bay Area, we're going all the way down to Fresno.

Dunning: So you've seen your area really expand.

Benedetti: Oh, yes. No question, yes. Tremendously, tremendously. But, again, it's because of--you wanted to know why we were expanding. I'll cover it just briefly and tell you that quality is number one, service is number two, and that smile on your face is number three, I think. But basically that's the reason.

Dunning: And you never found that quality and service were ever compromised.

Benedetti: Never, never. Right from day one, as long as I was involved, yes. We insisted, and not just me. My partners and sons are running it now.

Dunning: You have one son involved in the business?

Benedetti: Two sons.

Dunning: Which sons?

Benedetti: Dan Benedetti and Gene Benedetti. We call him Herm. That's what he's known as. And then I have Gary Imm, who's like a son. He's been with me since he was eighteen, when he graduated from high school, and he's fifty-four now, I guess, fifty-five. He's our CEO. He has a son Kevin working here. I have two sons, and two grandsons working here. So we hope to be able to perpetuate it over a long period of time. I don't know. They might decide to sell the damn thing!

Dunning: It wasn't your original plan when you started that it was going to become a whole family.

Benedetti: No. No, no, no, no. When I was at the co-op, the board had a rule that you couldn't hire any relatives.

Dunning: Oh, really?

Benedetti: Yes. When we bought this in 1977, that was the first rule we took off the boards. You know, I have always felt that if you have a good family member working here and there's another one that wants to come to work here, I'm going to take him because I know what the other one can do.

Dunning: Right, and you know the history.

Benedetti: Know the history.

Dunning: The loyalty.

Benedetti: Right, yes. Not just I, we. I shouldn't say I. I should never emphasize the I, because there's a lot more than me involved in the success of this business.

Dunning: You had six children altogether.

Benedetti: Six.

Dunning: And they were basically raised in the dairy business. Their father was always in dairy.

Benedetti: Always, yes. And football at the very beginning, but that was only a sideline, yes. But yes, the whole period of time I've been in the dairy industry, since '46, May of '46.

Dunning: Would you say you're one of the long-time dairy people in the state now?

Benedetti: I guess I would be, yes. One of the few. Larry Shehadey is older than I am.

Dunning: Where is he?

Benedetti: He has Producers Dairy down in Fresno. He started after us, but he's been very successful and has done a good job, and his son is also now running it. But Larry is still alive. Larry's got to be--I'm eighty-one; Larry's got to be about eighty-six, maybe eighty-seven.

Differences in Taste of Milk

Dunning: Let me just look over here to see if there's anything else at the moment that I want to ask you about the co-op creamery. I think we've covered quite a bit. A couple of general things: from the reading I've done, it said that the dairies in different parts of the state are quite different, depending on the climate and the geography. How did you see the climate and geography of Marin and Sonoma Counties as being suitable for the dairy?

Benedetti: I think it's a fact, and I think everybody would acknowledge the fact that I think this area, climate-wise, is probably the best area that you can produce milk in. First of all, we have a very temperate climate. We have pasture land that the cows can go out and graze. The cows can be much more happy and contented.

Dunning: Almost year 'round.

Benedetti: Almost year 'round, exactly. In fact, there are very few days when they have to keep their cows in. It has to rain four or five days at a time, where they'll keep their cows in a loafing barn. Otherwise, they're out. So they have the grass. The cows are more relaxed, I'm sure, than living in pens. So I think that's a big, big plus for both the cows, for the production, and for the quality of the milk. And I think we probably have--I say "we"--I think this area probably has the best quality milk. Maybe other people will never acknowledge that, but I very strongly feel, probably in the country, in the United States, and probably in the world, because nobody has very good milk. I've traveled pretty much around the world, and sometimes you can't drink it. Australia is one, and they're famous for their dairies. And New Zealand. Boy, I'll tell you, the difference between night and day.

Dunning: Why do you think it's different?

Benedetti: Well, let's take Australia as an example. I can get a flavor out of the milk that shouldn't be there, feed flavor. I don't know what they were doing, whether they were feeding their cattle before they were milked just right away. You know, we have a rule that you can't feed the cows three hours before milking.

Dunning: Oh, really?

Benedetti: Yes, because--

Dunning: Because you get an off flavor?

Benedetti: Sure, sure, sure. Now, that could be--but I don't know enough about their industry down there to know, but that could be one thing. The other thing could be that they just are not taking care of their animals as well as they're taken care of here. So there's a lot of factors that contribute to it. But I do think--and we've had people from--who's the guy who writes for the *Milkweed*? That's a national dairy paper. He has always said that the best milk comes out of this area,

in the United States. I can't think of his name, dammit. But anyway, he's always said that, to this day.

Dunning: You taste milk wherever you go?

Benedetti: Well, if we go for any length of time, I take whatever I can take, yes. But it's cumbersome to carry a lot of milk. We'll carry seven or eight quarts, or half gallons, but then we'll end up buying milk. But there's a difference, a big difference. The kids--you know, young kids have the best taste buds you can get. And they'll tell you what's good and what's bad, faster than anybody will. And they know. I'll have families tell me, "Why is it that kids don't like such-and-such a milk?" Because it's different.

Dunning: I know. I've heard some people say they can't taste any difference, and I can taste a real big difference.

Benedetti: Big difference. There's no question.

Dunning: Some of the supermarket milk tastes like water. I mean, it isn't even skim milk. But it has no flavor.

Benedetti: Has no body. See, here in this area, we have high solids in our milk because of the weather, because of the conditions. We'll average about an 8.8 solid. In the valley, because they have to drink so much water, the solids are much lower. And the solids are the key; the nonfat portion of the milk is the key to good-flavored milk. Did you understand what I'm saying? The fat is not the important part of the flavor in the milk; nonfat is the most important part. If you drink just our nonfat, as an example, against somebody else's that's not produced up here, you'll notice a tremendous difference. You think you'll be drinking, like, water compared to ours. Not just ours, but any milk that's produced from this area.

And the reason is because the cows don't drink as much water here, because it doesn't get that hot.

Dunning: Oh, I get you.

Benedetti: Do you understand what I'm saying?

Dunning: Yes, yes.

Benedetti: And so consequently--we're in an ideal location here for milk, yes. There's no question about it. My competitors are going to give me hell for saying that, but it's the truth.

Dunning: Well, this is what we want.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: You get to tell your side of the story.

I think I'm going to stop here for now, and we'll pick up next time?

Benedetti: Sure.

Dunning: Does that sound good?

Benedetti: Sure.

Thoughts on Education and Government

Dunning: And maybe next time one of the things--we'll go into some of the safety issues and quality control. And maybe some of the regulations that you saw coming in, the government regulations.

Benedetti: [chuckles]

Dunning: If you want to talk about them.

Benedetti: Oh, I don't mind talking about them.

Dunning: Okay.

Benedetti: We learned to live with them. But they're getting to be more and more. Government is not for the people anymore; it's for government. I look at our country, and I look at my father and mother, and look at my generation, and look at the next generation, and, you know, I keep telling the kids, "We're just going downhill, going downhill fast." Honesty and ethics and everything was a must, was preached by the family. We learned it in school. I took ethics. It was compulsory. I don't know whether it was at Cal, but at USF, when I graduated, we had to take six units of ethics: three in our junior year and three in our senior year.

But I already had had the ethics at home, in effect, because in those days, right was right and wrong was wrong. There was no in between. And if you were wrong, then you paid for it. And so you tried to be right as much as you could be. And I'm seeing this compromise more and more and more. We're condescending to so many things that we shouldn't condescend to. I see it in families. I see it in schools. I'm just sick about our education.

Dunning: We talked about that a little last time.

Benedetti: And you're in education, and I hate to tell you this, but I'm really, really, really--you know what? Did I tell you that I had a Jesuit priest in college, Father Fealy, who was our dean of men at USF, a brilliant man. He was a lawyer before he went into the Jesuit order, and was probably the outstanding authority of communism in the United States. He'd made it a lifelong study. They used to call him from all over the world. We'd always try to sidetrack him and get him to talk--because this was before the war, just before the war. In fact, I graduated and went directly--I graduated early and had gone into the service.

So we were all kind of anxious about what was happening in the world, and we tried to sidetrack him and ask him questions and get him off of ethics. The question was asked him one day, "How do you feel about communism? You're supposedly a scholar of communism. How do you feel about

its lasting power, and is it going to continue to grow?" And at that time communism was growing. Russia, of course, and Spain and Italy. And then also, "What do you think about our democracy? Do you see anything that troubles you?"

So he said, "Those are two good questions. I'll take fifteen minutes out of ethics, and I'll give you my response, and I'll give it to you in a nutshell." He said, "Communism basically will not last over a long period of time. When our communication systems become more open to the general public, to the masses"--and he said, "and they will--I don't know what it'll be, but something will happen in communications that everybody is going to know what everybody else is doing almost instantaneously." He said, "When that happens, communism will fail, because then they're going to find out that they're the peasants and there's 10 percent of the people up there that are the leaders and living high on the hog." And he said, "It won't work. It just isn't fair."

"Now, about our democracy--" he said, "We've got the greatest form of government that's ever been devised. We've got more freedoms, more liberty, more of everything. That's been built into our system. There's nothing ever been like it in the world, and there's nothing going to be like it." He said, "But I think I see one thing that concerns me. Our democracy is founded on an educated populace, the masses. If ever our education starts to falter, our democracy will falter."

And I've never forgotten that. And I'm watching this happen. I'm watching what's taking place in the last, oh, ten, fifteen years of con men running our government, selling a line that nobody would believe thirty years ago. Now they're being believed, and being voted for. And I'm not a staunch Republican. I was a Democrat up until about three years ago. Well, more than that. About five, six years ago. And I'm not saying the Republicans are any better than the Democrats. But I'm saying that they can sell, and they are

selling, and these people are buying it, and I'm saying it's because of education.

Dunning: Well, I think on that note, we'll stop today.

Benedetti: I want to hear it. I want to hear what your response is, because you're an educator.

[conversation continued off tape]

III DAIRY RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

[Interview 3: February 15, 2001]##

Dunning: We have a number of topics today. We'll just start firing away. I'm going to start off with what in your opinion is the true dairy cow?

Benedetti: [laughs] Well, you'll get a different answer from everybody.

Dunning: Well, that's good.

Benedetti: Well, when I first started, there were three breeds of cows that were formidable at that time. There was the Holsteins, the Jerseys, and the Guernseys. There were a few Swiss Jersey cows, but mainly it was those three. A Holstein cow is a big cow, big compared to a Jersey, compared to a Guernsey. The Guernseys and the Jerseys gave a lot more fat, more solids in the milk, but a lot less milk. The dairymen were paid by butterfat basically in those days, and butterfat is still a factor now, in the payment of milk.

Dunning: Now, “in those days”--which era?

Benedetti: This goes back in the forties.

Dunning: When you first started, forties, fifties.

Benedetti: Yes. The dairymen could keep these Jerseys and Guernseys at a much less cost because they weren't as big and they didn't eat as much, but the recovery after they turned them over to the slaughterhouse was much less because they were much lighter in weight and size and everything. So the breeding became a very big thing. The education that was taught at the universities were teaching the people how to breed, using the proper bulls and the whole bit, getting purebreds and the best bulls, and artificial insemination came into being.

Dunning: Was this in the fifties?

Benedetti: This was in, I would think, about the fifties, yes, late fifties. Before that period of time, you bred with the bulls you had on your premise.

Dunning: Naturally.

Benedetti: Naturally, yes. And so if you were in the Jersey breed, you kept a Jersey bull; if you were in the Holstein breed, you kept a Holstein bull or two or whatever they kept, depending on the size of the herd. Artificial insemination came along.

Education came along to where a lot of the Swiss dairymen and the Italian dairymen, the Portuguese and whatever dairymen--those were the bulk of the dairymen--they had very little education. They were hard workers, and they were very successful, but their kids, their children were sent to Davis or Cal Poly or Oregon State or whatever, to where they improved the knowledge of dairying, so when they came back on the farm, which they did, most of them, they started--they were taught and they were shown what they could do with their breeding, and artificial insemination became a factor. You no longer had to have a bull on the premise; they had regular breeding labs, and got the semen from every which place. Whatever the breeding semen they could get, they'd get it, for Holsteins, for Jerseys, so that you could get a cow inseminated with the top bull in the United States or whatever.

So you started getting a greater production from this, but more than that, the Holstein breed became a very prominent factor, because they used to have very low solids. They gave a lot of milk, twice as much milk or more than the Jerseys. But they didn't have the solids or the fat in it, and they used to pay by fat at that time.

What happened was that the dairymen--two things happened: They became educated. These new things were taking place. The insemination, all of these things were new. The kids were well educated, and so they started breeding for the Holstein cows. They were getting bulls that had higher solids, that would give them higher solids. They got the top pick of the bulls in the United States, and so eventually they could get the higher solids and get twice as much milk, so the Holstein cows have practically taken over the volume of milk that we have in California today. And probably in the country, I would imagine.

Dunning: Well, that's a question that one of the dairy advisors asked, Mr. Gary Sabatté from Berkeley Farms. He wondered what led to the decline of the Ayrshires.

Benedetti: Ayrshires.

Dunning: Swiss Guernseys and Jersey cows. And he was asking specifically about Marin and Sonoma County.

Benedetti: But this is all over.

Dunning: But it seemed like it was throughout the state. Is it mostly Holstein throughout California now?

Benedetti: Throughout California.

Dunning: For dairy.

Benedetti: For dairy, yes. Commercial dairy, yes. Probably someone's got one or two cows to milk to make cheese, and they have probably Jerseys, but there are very few Jerseys left. I don't

know--up here I think there's probably one Guernsey farm left.

[California is the leading dairy state in the United States. The trend is for large Jersey herds to supply milk to a growing number of cheese plants in California.--Dan Benedetti]

Dunning: That's in Sonoma County.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: And is that one of your farms?

Benedetti: No, it's not. No, it's not. I think all of our farms are Holstein. All of them are Holsteins. But for general purposes, Holstein milk is the milk. It's better for the producers. They get more milk. They've increased the solids in the breeding so that they're getting higher solids. Where you used to get 8.3 solids or 8.2 solids from a Holstein cow, they're now getting 8.7, 8.8, which was almost what the Jerseys gave you. But that took a lot of breeding.

Dunning: A lot of breeding and a lot of research.

Benedetti: A lot of research.

Dunning: Do you think that much of this research happened in California, or were there different parts of the country--

Benedetti: I think probably most of it happened in California, early. California was pretty much the leader in that. I could be wrong, but this is the way I remember, yes.

Dunning: And you mentioned that there were a number of second-generation dairy people.

Benedetti: Oh, and that's what changed all this. And most of the second generation were kids that went to college.

Dunning: Any names that stand out in your mind?

Benedetti: Oh, yes. There's Gambonini. G-a-m-b-o-n-i-n-i. Big family. And their children went to school. Oh, God, there's any number of them. I can't think of all of them offhand, but--

Dunning: Well, maybe in the next few weeks, just jot them down.

Benedetti: Okay, I will.

Dunning: If some of them are still in the business, it might be nice to talk to them.

Benedetti: They're still in the business, yes.

Dunning: Now, did you ever encourage any of your children to go into that field?

Benedetti: No, but I encouraged them to go into the business, because they both worked for me when I was manager at the Petaluma Co-op.

Dunning: Dan and Herm?

Benedetti: Yes. During the summertime. They had a rule at the creamery that we couldn't hire relatives, excepting for vacation relief during the summertime, and we could hire kids from school. And so I would hire Dan and Herm. They went through the working part. They didn't get anything easy, I'll guarantee you. But neither one of them went to any--they went to short courses at Davis to learn some of the basic things, but they were just three- or four-day courses, and they still have them, I think.

Dunning: But having grown up in the business, they probably learned an awful lot from you, and seeing the day-to-day operations.

Benedetti: [voices in the background] They grew up with it because at the co-op we had all these various departments, and they worked in all the departments, making butter and making powders.

Dunning: Now, how many sons and how many daughters did you have?

Benedetti: I have four daughters and two sons.

Dunning: Okay, so that explains--your daughters weren't inclined to go in that direction.

Benedetti: No, no, no.

Dunning: Okay.

Benedetti: And in those days it wasn't--

Dunning: It was pretty atypical.

Benedetti: That's right, exactly, exactly. Women were not--the girls wouldn't want to do it, number one, and it just wasn't a practical thing to do. They give me a bad time now, saying they should be involved. But no, it was not part of it. They all went to college, and they all did their thing, what they wanted to do, of course.

IV AN ADVERSTISING LEGEND: CREATION OF CLO COW, 1969

Dunning: We may get back a little bit to the whole education thing, but one of the things I'd like to ask you about is the creation of Clo the Cow in 1969. Clo became your official mascot. Certainly, I know for myself, even before I knew Clover Stornetta milk, I knew Clo the Cow. Were you involved in that?

Benedetti: I sure was. I'll never forget it. We had a board. We were a co-op then, and our board was made up of--we had nine men.

Dunning: At that time it was called the California--

Benedetti: It was called the Petaluma Cooperative Creamery. We had a board, a nine-member board. All farmers. Great people. Hard workers. But they never had any outlook about selling. They produced the milk, so I brought up the fact--we had an advertising agency, which started in 1952, I think it was, '52 or '53, somewhere in there, with our first advertising agency, which was Levinger--

Dunning: Which was it?

Benedetti: Lee Levinger's, the Levinger Advertising Agency in Santa Rosa. And we're still doing business with Levinger Advertising Agency. It's not called that anymore, but it's the same agency. Levinger died, and Mr. Benefield took over, and then he's retired, and now there's two young women that are running it and doing a great job.

So Lee came down to me one day, and he was a brilliant, brilliant man. Small stature, Jewish, and had a very positive--a real salesman. And he said, "Gene, I want you to look and see what I want you to do." He said, "I want to make sort of a mascot eventually, but to start with, I want to put a comic cow together and use it. I'd like to try putting a billboard up." This was--I don't know what year it was.

Dunning: According to your website, it was 1969 that it was official.

Benedetti: That it was official. So this was some time in between there. So I said, "Lee, what are you thinking about? I can't quite grasp what you're trying to get at." He said, "Well, you know, I've got the idea of making a funny cow, something that's not a cow." And he said, "But it'll look like a cow in some respects." "You know, I can't quite grasp what you're trying to show me here." I said, "You go ahead and show me anything, but what are you trying to tell me?" I said, "Why don't you go back to your office and show me what you want to do?" He said, "I want to start putting up a billboard with this animal."

Dunning: Was that done at the time, that dairy people advertised on billboards?

Benedetti: Yes, there were some of the large companies that did it, yes.

Dunning: But not with this approach.

Benedetti: No, no, no. It was all hard advertising. I mean, you know--and this was the other thing. He said, "If we put up a billboard, I want to use a play on words, and I don't want to have a hard sell on any of the boards," he said, "but I think it

would work." I said, "Well, look, it sounds good, but I have no idea what you're--"so he said, "Well, let me--I'm not an artist. I've got an artist hired that comes in." He said, "I'll have him work on it and bring you down an idea."

So about a week or two later, he came down, and he had this Clo, almost like she is today. Very, very close to it. He picks it up and shows me. He said, "This is what I'd like to use as our cow." I looked at it. "Lee," I said, "my dairymen will never buy that. If we're going to have a cow, they're going to want a real cow."

Dunning: Want it to look like a cow.

Benedetti: Yes. "Well," he said, "I'll come to your board meeting. I think I can sell it." I said, "Lee, you're not coming to the board meeting. They'll throw you right out the front door." So anyway, to make a long story short, he said, "Well, how do you feel about it?" I said, "Well, I like the idea." And he told me about not having a hard sell; it was to be strictly a play on words with this cow, and it would be a fun thing.

And in those days--I don't know if you remember or not; you probably don't--in those days, billboards were taboo. Marin County had already passed an ordinance that they can't--in fact, they still can't have billboards in Marin County. You haven't seen a billboard in Marin County. And a lot of the people up here were very conscious of the fact that they didn't want to see any more billboards, but they didn't pass any ordinance.

I said, "You know what? We sell milk to everybody. We sell it to the people that are against billboards, and we sell it to people who wouldn't argue with it." I said, "I don't want to agitate these people." "Look," he said, "I think everybody will like this because it's going to be a play on words. It'll be a fun thing, and people will kind of look for them."

The guy had a great imagination. Great, great advertising man. "Well," I said, "I like it. I like it very much. What's it

going to cost me to put up a billboard?" And he said, "Well, I've got the figures." He says, "I called"--in those days--gosh, I can't think of the name, but they had all the billboards up and down the highway. They were out of San Francisco, I believe, if I remember correctly.

And he called them and asked them for the prices. He said, "I want a large board. We'll be paying about $1,500 a month, and then you'll have the paper and the cost, and you'll have the cost of putting the board up. He said, "It'll be roughly--to start with, the first month, it'll be probably close to $3,000."

I said, "Well, that's a lot of money. I don't think I'll be able to sell that." And that's when he said, "Well, let me come in." I said, "No, no, no, no, no. You're not coming in. If it's going to be sold, I'll try to sell it, but I don't want you specifically, because I know you too well, and they won't buy this kind of salesmanship." I said, "I like it, but they won't."

I took it to the board. The first billboard was here's Clo out in the field, in front of an oak tree, with "Outstanding in Her Field." It looked good, and I loved it. So anyway, to make a long story short, I went into the board. I got the reaction. I had this thing, and it was about the third item on the agenda. And I had it under my desk, about that size [demonstrates one dimension] and about that size [demonstrates another dimension].

So after the first two things came up, this was the third item. And I said, "Now, look. I want you all to try to take this in a proper vein." I said, "We want--Levinger and myself both are convinced, and we want to do this to broaden our scope and broaden our name," because we were going into Santa Rosa, we were going into other territories that we'd never been in, and we were competing against Bordens, Foremost--you name it, they're all there. And Challenge, Ardens. I can't think of them all.

Dunning: You had some big--

Benedetti: Big players. Awful big. And so I said, "Now, just remember this cow is not a cow as such. It's a caricature of a cow, but it's a fun cow, and it'll be strictly a play on words, on the board." And I said, "It'll never have a hard sell on the board. People will, I think, like them, and I think they'll look forward to seeing them. And I'm recommending them highly, and I'd like to try one. And the cost is this." I told them what the cost would be a month, and that was a lot of money. Not a month, but for the initial month would be that, and then of course you would get a repaint every three months, a re-paper.

So they were listening. The president was Mr. Dei, Jack Dei, who was a farmer in Sebastopol. He's still alive, and we're still very good friends. And a great guy. Never had too much education, but a brilliant guy. Had good common sense. He was the chairman. And so I discussed this thing with him, told him what it was, and then I'd bring up the board and show him. Oh, boy. All hell broke loose. I'll never forget. Frenchy Mazza--he's dead now, God bless him--

Dunning: What? Frenchy?

Benedetti: Frenchy Mazza, M-a-z-z-a. Wonderful guy. He was our secretary. "Gene"--and he swore. "God damn it," he said, "Gene, I don't know what you're trying to do. If we're going to have a cow, we're going to have a real cow." Of course, everybody else chimed in, practically. I said, "Well, this is the whole point of this thing. We want to do something that's different, and we want something that is funny and something that'll be fun."

And Jack was listening. Jack never said a word. I said, "I'd like to try it for three months. It's going to cost us"--whatever it was, $3,000 or $3,200 for the three months. No, it would have been $3,000 for the initial and the other months would have been--I think the rental was something like about $1,400 or $1,500. So we would have a total bill of roughly $7,000, as I remember, for the three months.

So Jack never said a word. These guys were just really against it, every one of them. So Jack finally said, "Look, I'd like to interrupt this whole thing. We don't know anything about advertising. We're paying this man to do our advertising for us. He's got an idea. Gene likes it. He's done a lot of selling." And he said, "I think we have to give him a fair shake and let him try it. We've blown away that much money many times. It's worth a try."

I said, "I would suggest, Jack, and I agree with you, it's worth a try. And I would suggest everybody keep a record of all the complaints they get about the billboard and all the good things they get about the board, and then I'll have our switchboard here keep track of every pro and con that we get. And you people will get it"--they go downtown, and they all knew each other, and they'd be talking--"

They finally came around, and we put the first board up. Of course, we didn't get one complaint, not one. And they didn't get one complaint. So the next board meeting, I asked, after the board was up, I said, "Did anybody get any reactions, good or bad." Sheepishly, they said, "No, it was all good." And, of course, at the office all the people I talked to said the same thing, of course.

So that's how Clo got on the billboards, and she's become a real legend to us, and she's been a tremendous, tremendous asset to us.

Dunning: Oh, I know.

Benedetti: You have no idea what she's been for us, yes.

Dunning: Well, she's known nationwide.

Benedetti: Well, we won the international award in New York.

Dunning: International advertising award?

Benedetti: International advertising award. This was in maybe the eighties. Yes, with Clo, the billboard, international billboard award, in New York. Jim Benefield sent it back, thinking what the hell? And nobody went back to the show. So they had nobody to present the award to!

Dunning: It was kind of a longshot.

Benedetti: Oh, sure, it was a longshot.

Dunning: And you won.

Benedetti: We won the first prize, yes.

Dunning: That's amazing.

Benedetti: And we got national acclaim. It was in the newspapers and everything, of course. So yes, it's been a fantastic--

Dunning: And once it was started in 1969, you never stopped.

Benedetti: Never stopped. It kept growing. We started with one billboard. Billboards are hard to get. Now we've got about four, I think, four or five throughout the county. We've got one in Lake County, and we got one in, I think, Mendocino County, but the rest are all in Sonoma County, yes.

Dunning: But what you have--

Benedetti: They won't let you put up any. We could put them up in the Bay Area. In fact, Dan is considering it now. But the cost is just phenomenal.

Dunning: Well, you mentioned when you began in '69 it was probably going to be about $1,400 a month just to rent the billboard. What do you think it is now?

Benedetti: Oh, now it's over $3,000, $4,000, yes, just for the rental space. That doesn't take into consideration the art work and the paper and everything else.

Dunning: But now you have your big trucks.

Benedetti: This was my next comment I wanted to make, is this happened in the last three, four years, that we have to paint the trucks, repaint the trucks about every three, four years. And so we decided we ought to try this on the large trucks. And we even got them on some of the smaller ones.

Dunning: In fact, I saw a smaller truck this morning for the first time, and it looked great.

Benedetti: Yes, it looks great.

Dunning: This was only three or four years ago that--

Benedetti: That we started on the trucks. I'd say about four years ago.

Dunning: That's better than billboards.

Benedetti: Oh, sure.

Dunning: It moves everywhere.

Benedetti: It goes everywhere. That's exactly right.

Dunning: They're very recognizable.

Benedetti: Yes.

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Dunning: [Mr. Benedetti presents Judith Dunning with a book] We were talking about the wild success of Clo Cow, and then you just brought me out a book called *The Wholly Cow,* and it's a retrospective of Clo's billboards, thirty-one years, 1969 to 2000.

Benedetti: Those are all the billboards that we produced. It was put in book form. It was done because of so many people wanting them. We're putting these books out. We're selling them,

and we're utilizing the money that we make off the books, will go to some charity of some kind. We haven't designated that yet. Maybe they have and I don't even know about it!

[note inserted after interview: The first printing of 5,000 sold out. Proceeds go to the Sonoma County Community Foundation Ag Fund.]

Dunning: Are they in bookstores, local bookstores?

Benedetti: They are now in some stores, yes. I don't know how much placement they've got, but they're getting placements in different stores, yes.

Dunning: My guess is they'll move pretty quickly.

Benedetti: They'll move. Yes, it's starting to move, yes.

Dunning: It's really nice.

Benedetti: And I want you to know you're not being charged for it.

Dunning: Okay! Thank you. I think I would probably even pay for it. It's kind of a neat thing. It's still the advertising firm? Did they come up with the design?

Benedetti: Still the advertising firm. Surprisingly, dear--you'd be surprised how many we get from the public.

Dunning: Oh, really?

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Not a lot, but a good number. One of them was "Supreme Quart." One of our drivers gave us that idea. But we get them from different people. We had a contest about ten years ago, about twelve years ago, I guess, the contest. We expected to get about 800, 700 entries, because we only advertised it on our half gallon panels, and we got something like 8,000 entries. Nobody here could judge them, so we had

to send them back to New York to judge them, to get them judged.

Dunning: So you sent them to an advertising agency in New York?

Benedetti: Yes. That's all they do, is judge these type of things. (International Advertising Festival, New York, 1991)

Dunning: That's amazing.

Benedetti: The winner was "Tip Clo through Your Two Lips." That was the winner. This was a woman--and I don't know what the prize was--I think the first prize was either $1,500 or $2,000, and then it went down for second prize, third prize, fourth prize. I think there were four prizes. We got a tremendous reaction on that. We've used a lot of those ideas. Some of them we haven't used, of course, but we did get quite a few.

Dunning: And then you have to go get permission from the person.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Now, I know there was a bit of controversy about the Jacques Cousteau. Do you want to talk about that at all?

Benedetti: Well, all I can tell you is that we've never had a problem. His lawyer--we never talked to Mr. Cousteau, but his lawyer called me and said they were going to sue us if we didn't take the billboard down. So I said, "You know, I think you're making a mistake. I think this is good for Jacques Cousteau. He's going to get a lot of reaction from this." And the lawyer said, "No, you can't do it. It's illegal, and we're not going to let you." And I said, "Okay, if that's how you feel, we'll take the boards down." And we had to take them down. But I tried to talk to Mr. Cousteau, but they wouldn't let me talk to him.

Dunning: Was he in France at the time?

Benedetti: He was in France at the time, yes.

Dunning: Well, I guess out of thirty-some-odd years, that's not too bad, having one problem.

Benedetti: No. And now we're very careful, of course.

Dunning: I know it made *The New York Times*--it made all the papers.

Benedetti: All the papers. International papers.

Dunning: Right. So you probably got fantastic coverage.

Benedetti: We got tremendous coverage on it, yes, actually.

Dunning: Did it have to go to court?

Benedetti: No.

Dunning: Or you settled it all outside.

Benedetti: Yes, we settled it. We figured there's no sense fighting the damned thing. We thought we were doing a good thing for him, but I guess people have different values and different ideas, so no, we didn't want to go to court on it. We probably could have won, but our attorney said, "The chances are that they will win," but he said, "We possibly could win."

Dunning: Possibly, but it might be four or five years, and a ton of money, and a hassle.

Benedetti: Not only that, but we might even get some bad publicity out of it, so we decided the hell with it.

Dunning: Right. And Clo Cow has basically only got good publicity.

Benedetti: That's right, exactly, yes.

Dunning: Do you think Clo Cow is one of the most successful advertising figures in the dairy industry?

Benedetti: I don't know about the total industry, but I'd say it's one of them, yes. Bordens used to have Elsie, when Bordens was alive, and they were quite successful with that, too. But I don't know that the others now are doing it with a cow. They probably are, but nothing on the scale that we did.

Dunning: Well, it seems like a real success story.

Benedetti: Oh, it is. There's no question. And she's been a tremendous asset to us. People automatically enjoy seeing billboards. They look for us.

Dunning: Well, they always make you smile.

Benedetti: They make you smile. And they're happy. And that was the original intent. And people look for them. We have people still call us and say, “We just saw your new board. It's great.”

V 1975 PETALUMA FIRE: LOSS OF BOTTLING PLANT

Benedetti: In 1975 we had a fire, monstrous fires, one of the largest fires they've had in Petaluma. All of our bottling plant was just totally wiped out. The rest of our plant--this is at the co-op.

Dunning: Was this called at that time--

Benedetti: The California--

Dunning: California Co-op, okay.

Benedetti: We made butter and powder. And we had a condenser that we leased out to another company that condensed the whey from the cheese, from the cottage cheese, and made condensed whey. Those were all intact. They were not touched. All of our receiving departments were not touched; we could still receive the milk. But the bottling, the physical bottling plant, where we bottled all of our milk, was just totally, totally destroyed.

Not Missing a Delivery

Dunning: The processing and bottling was destroyed?

Benedetti: Right, yes. This was at two o'clock in the morning. I got a call from the night supervisor. I lived out in Cotati, where I'm living now. And he said, "Gene, you better come in. We've got a real bad fire going." So I came in. Of course, the thing was just completely--just terrible. So I went into the office. There was no danger--they had it contained in this one area. I went in the office, and I started calling--because we had milk--this was on a Tuesday night. Wednesday we're down. We don't sell on Wednesdays. Maybe some few customers, but very, very few.

And so I started calling, and I called Crystal, the fellow, Bud Roberts, who was controller of the company.

Dunning: Of Crystal?

Benedetti: Crystal Cream and Butter Association in Sacramento. They were three brothers, great people, Hansen family. They're the ones--well, that goes a little beyond, but they're the ones that we started the company finances, because we didn't have any money. But anyway, I'll get to that when we talk about it.

But I called them first. I called Bud Roberts at home and woke him up. I said, "I hate to bother you, but we've got a monstrous fire going, and the total bottling plant is going to be destroyed." And I said, "I don't want to lose any business over this if I possibly can. Can you handle"--and this was during vacation time--

Dunning: Because this was in August.

Benedetti: This was June, July--August.

Dunning: August of '75?

Benedetti: Yes. I said, "Can you handle bottling milk for us? We'll bring up the cartons today."

Dunning: This was the night of the fire or the morning of the fire?

Benedetti: Well, the fire was at two o'clock, this was about 3:30, 4:00. So Bud said, "Gene, I think we can." He says, "Up until the time school starts." He said, "And then you'll have enough time to put something together someplace else." I said, "Gee, that would be great, Bud. Can we send up the bottles so we can get them loaded so you'll have them for bottling tomorrow?" That was "today," actually. That was Tuesday. He said, "Have them come up."

So he called his plant people and told them what was happening, and we'd have to have this milk out by a given time. We had trucks running back and forth from Sacramento, but we never missed a beat, we never missed a delivery, and we never lost a customer. Of course, everybody felt bad about it and tried to help us as much as they could for us, but we never lost anybody.

Dunning: Well, this made a lot of people wonder why your company survived. Specifically, they knew you were at the helm, and I think maybe a perfect example is what happened after the fire or during the fire. You did not stop. You were thinking of your customers--

Benedetti: Oh, sure.

Dunning: --and your clients, and you just moved. You didn't get immobilized. You kept walking.

Benedetti: Yes, we kept walking. Walking slow, but we walked, yes. And they were great. They were just great. Maybe there would have been others. Foremost might have done it for us, but--in fact, Foremost did do it for us after school started, because we still weren't ready to do anything.

Dunning: What was the relationship between school starting and--

Benedetti: Well, when school starts, you've got a lot of milk goes into the schools.

Dunning: Oh, so they're too busy.

Benedetti: They're too busy. They didn't have the machines. They had the capacity to do it with. So I got Foremost then to do it. And we did it. We kept doing that for--well, we had insurance. The board kept delaying about rebuilding the building, and finally the board decided at a meeting in '77--now, this is a delay of two years--

Decision to Buy the Business, 1977

Dunning: So you'd been doing this makeshift operation for two years.

Benedetti: Two years, yes. And we didn't lose any business. We kept all our business. And I kept hounding the board. I said, "Now, look, we've got to make a decision on this, whether we're going to rebuild or what we're going to do," because the newspapers--after each board meeting; we'd meet monthly--the *Press Democrat* (multi-county paper) and the *Petaluma Argus Courier*--would be here, waiting for me at the front door, wanting to know whether the decision was made to rebuild, because this was a big thing in the area.

And so I told the board finally, "Now, look"--after all this stalling and everything, I said, "We've got to make a decision. We just can't stall this any longer, both from the standpoint of the publicity we're going to get out of it, the bad publicity. I can't keep delaying this thing." And I said, "They're good enough that they want to help us, and they'll put anything in the paper we want, but they're not going to help us if we just keep running them around."

So anyway, they talked about it, and they said, "Well, we're going to sell the business."

Dunning: This was the board of the California Co-op.

Benedetti: Just right out of the blue. Just like that. Someone made the motion, somebody seconded it, and it passed. So we broke for lunch, and we always had lunch served in the board room: sandwiches and different things. And I always would go down and check my phones in the office. The board room was upstairs. I'd go down to my office and check my calls, if any were important. So on the way down--it's a little walk, not far, but it was enough for me--my wheels were turning a little bit. *If they're going to sell*, I said, *this is my life*.

When I first went to work at the creamery, we sold milk just in Petaluma, and when I got into sales, I developed a whole area of selling milk. I wasn't totally responsible--don't get me wrong--but I was kind of the pusher of the thing, to get more sales.

Dunning: And you were twenty-six when you started, and you were in your fifties.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Which would be kind of a hard time to start all over again in a new business.

Benedetti: Without any money.

Dunning: Right.

Benedetti: So I thought to myself, *I'm going to see if I can't talk them out of this, or if they're not going to be talked out of it*--and they were going to sell it right then and there.

So when I came back, we finished our lunch, and then we convened a meeting. And I said, "You know, I'd like to make a suggestion, and take it for what it's worth. I think you'll be making a mistake to--the newspapers are going to be down here waiting for me today, to make a decision, what decision did we finalize, and I want to tell them we're going to sell the

business." I said, "You won't have any business to sell in two weeks. The competition will just wipe us clean, and our loyal customers will leave because there's no reason for them to stay."

I said, "I think you ought to rescind the motion and state that you're going to consider doing different things, but you're going to not make the decision to sell. And in the meantime, if you still want to sell, then I'm sure you will." I said, "Let's put the word out very gently, and let's get somebody that's interested."

So they did. They rescinded the motion. So that's when I said to them, "Would you consider selling this to some people in the company?" And I hadn't talked to anybody, because I didn't have time.

Dunning: You didn't know that was going to happen.

Benedetti: No. No, no, no. And they said, "Well, who do you mean, Gene, yourself?" And I said, "Yes. You're not going to need me here. Anybody can sell butter and powder. They can sell to the government if they can't sell it on the market," because that's the way it worked in those days, and still does. I said, "You're not going to need me. Would you consider selling it to some people?" "Who, beside yourself?" And I said, "I have no idea. Whoever would want to take the jump with me." I said, "You're not going to need them, either, because all the people involved in bottling and the sales people and bottling--you're not going to need them."

So they thought about it, and one person said, "I think it's perfectly all right, but we'd have to set a value." And he said, "We have to set something that would be a competitive value that we could justify to our producers." And we'd gotten a bid about six months or a year before from Carnation, who wanted to buy us, when we were having our milk bottled out. And I think it was $700,000, if I remember correctly, for the distribution business. I said, "Why can't you use the Carnation bid. It was a good bid. We considered it very

carefully." I said, "If you want to use that as a competitive bid, I'd be willing to pay that kind of money for it. I don't know where I'm going to get it yet, but this is all I know."

Collaborative Effort to Raise the Money

Benedetti: I said, "I'd like to continue. And the people I would take would be involved in that side of the business, so you're not going to need them, so I won't be hurting you." So they thought about it and said, "Great. It's yours. If you can raise the money. We'll give you two weeks to put this thing together."

I said, "Two weeks?" They said, "Yes." And I said, "Fair enough. I'll see what I can do." And they asked, "Are you going to still be working here?" "Sure, I'm going to be working here." I said, "I may be working here. If I can't swing this thing, I'll be working here after this thing is all over, unless you don't want me." "No, no, we want you, but we're just trying to figure out during those two weeks what you're going to be doing." I said, "I'm going to be trying to raise money. If you want to take that out of my vacation, that's fine. I don't care." And they finally decided, "No, you go ahead and do what you have to do."

The board was a great board, and I'm not trying to belittle them in any way.

Dunning: No, no, no, that's not coming through at all. I mean, just the fact that they listened to your idea, it's obvious they respected you.

Benedetti: Yes. And so anyway, why, I went to all the banks. Well, first of all, this was on a Friday. Mr. Al Stornetta and I were very close friends. He had his dairy over in Sonoma.

He was a wonderful man. He's still alive. He's about ninety-two now, ninety-three. And his wife is still alive. I see them quite often. He'd always told me, "When you get your plant built, I'm going to sell you my business." You know, if you build the plant. And I knew he wanted to get out. He was getting old, and his brother wanted to get out. They wanted to keep their cows, but they didn't want to keep the dairy.

And so I called up Al and told him I'd be over in the morning, if I could come over and see him. I said I had some things I wanted to discuss with him, and I'd like to have Charlie Stornetta there too. He said, "Okay, be here at seven o'clock." He was always up real early. I said, "Fine."

That night I had a meeting at our house, and I'd asked my two sons if they would be interested.

Dunning: Dan and Herm.

Benedetti: And Herm couldn't make it because he was down at San Francisco State, and so he came up a little later, but he wanted to be included. Gary Imm was my purchasing agent, who's our CEO now. He's been with me since he was eighteen years old, and a brilliant guy and a great guy. He's like a son to me. I hope I'm like a father to him, too, but that's beside the point. I asked him. He said, "Gene,"--he thought about it, and he thought he would become manager of the co-op, thought he'd have a shot at it, at least. And I said, "Well"--and he had two young children in school, and he said, "I don't think I can afford to take that break right now, but, if it changes, I'll let you know." He said, "I'm going to ask them about the job and see what they tell me." I said, "Absolutely. You go ahead."

So I asked John Markusen, our sales manager. And I asked Paul Ross, who was our production manager. All this was over on the Grade A side. These people--Markusen was the only sales manager for bottled milk. He didn't have anything to do with the selling of powder or anything like that. These are all people who were tied to the bottling operation.

Paul Ross, I asked, and he was a great guy. He'd been with me since he'd graduated from college. He went to USF. I brought him up here to play football for me. I used to have the old Leghorn football team, and I put him to work because he needed a job, and he stayed with us and was a great guy. And still is alive. He's retired now.

And let's see. The boys, John, Gary--

Dunning: Was there a Bill Van Dam?

Benedetti: Bill Van Dam. How'd you know that?

Dunning: Well, I was looking at your website.

Benedetti: His family comes from up near Placerville. He moved down here with his wife and his two children at the time. So he came.

And let's see, Bill Van Dam--there were six original partners. [Gene Benedetti, Bill Van Dam, John Markusen, Paul Ross, Gary Imm, and Dan Benedetti]

Herm didn't come on right away. So anyway, that was the nucleus of everybody. We met at the house, and we talked about it, and I asked everybody how much money they could come up with. And nobody had any money. So everybody hocked their houses, like I did.

Dunning: People remortgaged their houses?

Benedetti: Yes. And we came up with $200,000. Well, we needed $700,000. We needed actually $1.3 million, total. And I said, "Well, I'm going to go over and call Crystal and see if I can get more money from them so we can swing this thing." I went to the banks first, and we had no equity, and they all knew me and said, "Gene, if you get it, you'll make it, I'm sure, but"--

Dunning: "We can't help you."

Benedetti: "We can't legally do it." And so that's when I went to Crystal and met with the three brothers, the Hansens: Vern and Kenny and Gerald. I met with them, and Bud Roberts was also there. He was the chief financial officer. Bud Roberts was a great guy and a good, close friend. They were all close friends of mine. I did a lot of business with them. We did a lot of business, not I; the co-op did. And so anyway, I went up there and visited--called them and said, "I'm coming up. I've got something I want to talk to you about."

I met with Stornetta's the following morning, on Saturday morning. I met with Charlie and Al. They said, "Gene, if you're going to be involved, we'll sell it to you." I said, "Do you have any idea what you want for it?" They said, "No." I said, "Well, this is what we're going to pay the co-op. This is what the co-op wants." They wanted $700,000, and that's for the name--

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Benedetti: I said, "We're going to pay the co-op $700,000, and they have about almost twice the milk that you sell." I said, "Would you be satisfied with $500,000 or $600,000?" And they said, "Well, Gene, you're going to lease our plant." That was part of it. I said, "Yes, I'm going to lease the plant. I'm going to have to have a plant to bottle in." And I said, "That's a separate thing. I don't know what you're going to charge me for that. I'm sure you'll be fair with that." But he said, "Well, then, we may want to sell the equipment that's in the plant, so that we want to get our hands washed of that plant. We're not going to go back to bottling again."

I said, "Fine, we'll buy it, and that will be part of the $600,000." And so we worked on it, we shook hands, and I said, "If I can raise the money, I'll let you know inside of a week, or a week and a half."

Dunning: So you needed to raise another million dollars.

Benedetti: Yes. Well, I worked out an arrangement with the Stornettas that we would buy all of their accounts receivable, all their payables, and we would keep them as advisory, so that we could pay them--I think we paid Al $100,000 a year, and we paid Charlie $50,000 a year, and that was for their work, if you follow me.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: So that we didn't have to come up with that money all at one time, and then we could also treat it as a different factor, if you follow me.

Dunning: But you still had to pay them the $500,000.

Benedetti: No, we only paid them what?--$200,000, I think, a down payment.

Dunning: Oh, okay.

Benedetti: And then the rest was going to be paid out on the salary. Follow me?

Dunning: Okay, perfect. Yes, I do. I didn't know whether you were paying them a salary *and* then you'd have to pay them.

Benedetti: No. So it was a great deal because we took in, under accounts receivable, almost as much as what we paid for the business, so it worked out real good for us over a long period.

I went to Crystal. I told them we'd buy all of the byproducts from them because we couldn't put up byproducts: butter, ice cream, cottage cheese, sour cream, anything that was not bottled.

Dunning: You could only do the bottling part.

Benedetti: We could only do the paper. That was all paper. And so I said, “We'll buy all of the byproducts from you, buy all the

milk that we can't bottle at Stornetta's." Stornetta's can't bottle it all; their equipment wasn't big enough. We can bottle a little more than half. And "we'll pay you"--I asked this as a favor, "if I can pay you on a forty-two day basis, down to thirty days, because we're going to need a little cash flow." I said, "And I'd also like the additional loan of $700,000 so that we can have cash flow immediately, and we'll pay you that, whatever you tell me your interest in whatever period you want."

And they said, "Gene, it's a deal. We can't go wrong." They said, "Will you consider that if you don't make it, then we get the benefit of taking over your business?" I said, "Absolutely. That's no more than fair." So we had their attorneys write up--

Dunning: And who was this, exactly, you were dealing with?

Benedetti: Crystal.

Dunning: Okay, Crystal. And you mentioned--who was the specific person?

Benedetti: All four of them.

Dunning: I have the Hansens, Vern, Kenny, and Gerald.

Benedetti: And Bud Roberts.

Dunning: Roberts? Okay. So you had your lawyers, they had their lawyers--

Benedetti: We didn't have any lawyers.

Dunning: You didn't.

Benedetti: Hell, no.

Dunning: You couldn't afford lawyers.

Benedetti: We had nothing. But their lawyers were straightforward people.

Dunning: It seemed like you knew them so well, and they knew you.

Benedetti: They knew me, and we did business with them when I was at the co-op. If they needed milk, I would sell it to them.

Dunning: You were a known commodity.

Benedetti: Oh, yes, absolutely. They knew me--and I was on the California Dairy Institute board. I was on the Dairy Council board with them. Different boards. So they knew who I was. They knew what I stood for, so there wasn't something like--so I said, "When you asked that question about holding that out, if we don't make it, you get the business. It's absolutely no more than fair." So they wrote it up. We looked at it and signed it, and we got our money, and off we went.

Dunning: All six of you.

Benedetti: All six of us. We had $200,000.

Dunning: Was that a big sacrifice for your family?

Benedetti: We had to put up our house.

Dunning: It seemed like some of the other people were a little younger.

Opening New Bottling Plant, 1991

Benedetti: Yes, some, but they still had--we divided the shares up, if I remember correctly, of the company, according to what our salaries were at the co-op, so I had the most shares and so on down the line, but I didn't have control. But I knew all these kids, and I had nothing but respect for them. So we

never had a problem, never a problem, no. And the company has done well.

Dunning: It was 1991 that you opened this new milk bottling plant?

Benedetti: We opened this plant in I think it was '91, yes.

Dunning: Had that been in the works quite a while?

Benedetti: Well, you know, we were growing, and we just couldn't continue. The more milk we were selling, the more we'd have to get from Crystal. And we were making a profit on that--don't get me wrong--but not as much as if we were bottling it ourselves.

So then we went to the banks and said, "Look, we have to fish or cut bait now." We paid off everybody, but it was seven years. Let's see, seven years would be--we paid off Crystal in seven years or thereabout, and we paid off the co-op in something like three years, so we were out of debt when we built this plant, but we had to go into debt again, of course.

Dunning: Because you went from a hand bottling operation or--

Benedetti: No. We had a bottling machine, but it was just an old Pure Pak machine that bottled quarts, and another bottling half gallons. So when we built the plant, when we decided that we had to build, we'd lease this present location from Mr. Bill Brody. He was a wonderful guy.

He had the plant become available. He used to process chickens, and then he sold out and sold the business to somebody else, and he shut this down. And so just about the time that we were looking for a plant, someone told me, "Bill's going to move. He's going to move out of that plant. It's going to be available to rent." So we're still paying rent to the Brodys, right now.

Dunning: Oh, really.

Benedetti: For this site. And we're still paying rent for the property, for all the site. But we got in it that all the additions that we've made--and we've put in a lot of additions, a lot of money--and we've got in the lease that all of those, if ever we have to sell, will be treated as ours, but they'll keep the lease. They will not sell the plant, the parcel.

Dunning: So how many sites does Clover Stornetta have now?

Benedetti: Just this. We have a lot of distributors throughout northern California that buy milk from us, and they have their own little refrigerators--not little; some of them are good-sized, depending on their size.

Dunning: But this is the main one.

Benedetti: This is the only plant.

Dunning: I haven't had a tour here.

Benedetti: And you should have.

Dunning: And I would love to sometime, but can you tell me, what happens here? Everything?

Benedetti: Everything happens here, with the exception of butter, ice cream, cottage cheese and yogurt. Let's see, anything else? Hard cheeses, of course, we always bought. All of those we buy. They're bottled by someone for us, to our standards and our label. Most of it is done by Crystal still. We do all the fluids, if you follow me.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: All the milks, all the different sizes and everything else. We have a bottling operation that does all that. In fact, we're looking at having to expand our whole operation because we're growing out of it.

Dunning: You're growing so big. Well, it's a success story, and it's pretty amazing, considering it really started again in 1977.

Benedetti: Yes, it is.

Dunning: And that's the question that the advisors kept asking: Why did Clover Stornetta become so successful and survive when others have gone belly up? I think just hearing how you talk, that you're a real survivor, and it seems like you're a real fighter, and you're honest.

Benedetti: Honest as the day is long.

Dunning: And energetic, and have vision, and are not afraid of taking a risk.

Benedetti: No, we certainly did! But I would say--and it's not all my doing, believe me. The kids that I have with me have been just fantastic. And then our employees are fantastic. But we treat our employees like we want to be treated, so that we have a great family. I mean, we treat them as family. We make money--now, this year, they got a pretty good little bonus, over and above their pay.

Dunning: How many employees do you have here, at this site?

Benedetti: We have about 180.

Dunning: Does that include the drivers?

Benedetti: That includes the drivers; 180, 185, something like that. And then we have a lot of distributors. They're in their own business.

Dunning: They're independents.

Benedetti: They're independent. Now, most of them, we do their bookkeeping for them on our computers, so that they--

Dunning: You have one system.

Benedetti: One system. Some of them do their own, but very few. We charge them a slight amount. It's better for them. They get all their statements, and they get everything done quickly. We treat them like--when we have our dinners and our picnics, they're all part of our family.

Dunning: And some of them, it sounds like, have grown up here.

Benedetti: Oh, sure. Some of them. In fact, one of our employees right now is going to buy one of the distributors out, yes.

Dunning: So people have possibilities when they work here.

Benedetti: Sure, sure. And we never--like, if we have a sales job open, we bring them up from our ranks.

Dunning: From within the organization.

Benedetti: From within the organization. The only person we didn't do that with was Bob St. Clair. He did not come through the ranks.

Dunning: And what is his position?

Benedetti: He's in sales and public relations for us. You know the name, don't you? He's the Hall of Famer that played for the 49ers. He's a big guy. He's about 6'-8", 6'-9", and he's a great guy. He's in the Hall of Fame, National Football League Hall of Fame. And he's well liked. He's a very common person, and he's opened a lot of doors for us down in the Bay Area.

Dunning: The Bay Area is his area?

Benedetti: One of the areas, but he goes wherever we want him to go. If he knows somebody someplace, we say, "Bob, do you know So-and-so?" And he says, "Yeah, yeah, I know him."

Dunning: It probably doesn't hurt that he's 6'-8", either.

Benedetti: Oh, no.

Dunning: And a Hall of Famer.

Benedetti: That's right. Oh, no. There's no question. And they all know him. They all have seen him and recognize him, yes. And he gets a lot of publicity. In fact, he was in the paper.

Dunning: Let's see here. You're handing me an article, and here's a picture of Bob St. Clair, and Kezar Field now has his name.

Benedetti: It's going to be named after him.

Dunning: That's something else.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: And how old a man is he now?

Benedetti: I'm eighty-one. Bob's got to be about seventy, I would think. I don't know for sure. I can find out.

Dunning: One of the things I've heard: This plant became fully automated, and so you were able to do three times as much with a lot fewer people.

Benedetti: Fewer people.

Dunning: I'm not sure we're going to have time to go into all the changes in equipment, but had you been thinking for many years, if you had an opportunity to get new equipment--how did you go about that?

Benedetti: When we did this?

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: Well, Gary went and visited a lot of plants, and we all had different ideas, but we picked the brains of a lot of people. It's a good little operating plant. But now we're outgrowing

it, so we've got to expand it. We're going to have to spend a few dollars.

Dunning: At this site? Do you have room to grow?

Benedetti: At this site, because we bought the property next to us, about four acres.

Dunning: Okay, so you own that.

Benedetti: We own that, but the Corps of Engineers is straightening out the river, and they've rented it from us up until June of this year, to put their dirt there and everything else, so as soon as they move out, we've got plans--in fact, where are they? I had them here on the desk. Anyway, it's just a rough sketch of what we're planning to do with it, yes.

Dunning: So you're growing and you're moving still.

Benedetti: Absolutely. I'm not. The kids are.

Dunning: So right now you're what? You're the chairman of the board still?

Benedetti: I'm just chairman of the board. I don't interfere in anything. Sometimes they'll ask me some question, but very seldom. They're doing a great job. Better than I could ever do.

Dunning: And you usually come in every day for a few hours?

Benedetti: I come in because I'd go crazy if I didn't--my kids always say they want the office, and I say, "You'll carry me out. You won't get it."

Dunning: And probably your wife, Evelyn, is accustomed to your leaving every day.

Benedetti: Yes, yes. We've got a great family. We've been married fifty-five years, and we've got a wonderful marriage. She's a wonderful woman.

Dunning: Well, maybe I'll get to meet her sometime.

Benedetti: Yes, I hope you do, yes.

Dunning: I don't think I'm going to start a new topic now because--this has worked out really well. It must be going on noon?

Benedetti: I guess. Is it that time, really?

Dunning: I think so.

Benedetti: Oh, gosh, I have to get going.

Dunning: So we'll just continue the next time, if that's okay with you.

Benedetti: Fine, sure.

Dunning: Thank you very much.

Benedetti: Not at all.

VI RECENT EVENTS AND IMPACT ON THE DAIRY INDUSTRY

[Interview 4: March 22, 2001] ##

Recollections of Dairyman, George DeMedeiros

Dunning: Today we had planned to talk about St. Anthony's Farm, which I had toured with you a few weeks ago and the organic movement in Clover Stornetta, but there have been a number of things that have happened in California recently that I would like to bring up with you. One is we lost an old-time dairyman, George DeMedeiros, who was a colleague and a good friend of yours. He actually was the next person to be interviewed, but sadly it didn't happen.

So I would like to talk to some of his colleagues, and I wanted to get your impressions of him. How would you describe him?

Benedetti: Well, I would say that George is probably one of the sharpest people that I've ever known in reference to the dairy industry. He was a self-made person. He knew the dairy industry from all aspects of it and managed this large co-op

down in Tulare. Actually, I don't know what the hell they call them.

Dunning: The Dairyman's Cooperative Creamery?

Benedetti: Dairyman's Cooperative Creamery. But he was the chief executive officer and ran the show and ran it well. I became real close to him when I was at the co-op here, and we had a lot of things in common. He was a brilliant, brilliant person, and he never hesitated, if you asked him a question, it didn't take him but a second to give you a straightforward answer, and it was always a good answer. I was always impressed with his reaction. He knew the answer before you finished the question.

But he did a lot of things for the dairy industry. He was closely associated with education. I don't know if you knew that or not.

Dunning: Well, I knew that he promoted a lot of research at Cal Poly and Davis.

Benedetti: Cal Poly and Davis. He was real close to Cal Poly and he was close to Davis, both. He had a firm belief that the dairy industry needed more kids to go through these schools, to be back on the farm after they completed that educational process, and he did everything he could to help kids get in and get out. He spent a lot of time in the educational field.

Dunning: Do you think he hand-picked people that--

Benedetti: No. Well, he may have, in his own area, but in other areas, like, if I had someone that wanted to go to Cal Poly and I know Cal Poly well--have been involved with it for years--but if it got down to some specific thing, I'd say, “Get a hold of George DeMedeiros, and he'll straighten you out on it, and he'll tell you just exactly what you have to do.”

Dunning: You were talking about George DeMedeiros being such a good advocate of education.

Benedetti: Education. He, himself, spent a lot of time with the various schools, especially Cal Poly, for one. But he also did a lot with Davis, more so than I've done. I know I did a lot--I've been associated with both of them, but he was much closer and much more into it than I was.

Dunning: Was he into it in terms of changing the technology?

Benedetti: Well, yes, to some extent I would say that's true, yes. Davis was the same type of school as Cal Poly was at one time in the agricultural department. I don't know if you realize that or not.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: And then they changed and went to the theoretical side of it, and Cal Poly took the other avenue, and of course their avenue was always the same. They do things with the students, with the animals, and the whole thing.

Dunning: It's more hands-on.

Benedetti: More hands-on. Now, Davis was the same way, but they felt that they needed a theoretical school to cover agriculture, which Cal Poly wasn't doing and neither one of them were doing, and so Davis went that route. They used to have cows there. They used to have everything there. Now they're pretty much limited, and I don't think they have too much. They have some fields, but otherwise it's pretty theoretical.

So he watched that change. He probably was involved in that change. I'm not sure. But I would think he was. He followed education very closely.

Dunning: His right-hand man, Jim Grueble, said that Mr. DeMedeiros had the talent for choosing the best and the brightest and bringing that person on board, and that really impacted the Dairyman's Co-op.

Benedetti: No question about it. No question about it. You're only as good as the people you've got. If you don't have good people, if you don't pick them right, why, you're going to suffer, and he did a good job in that. But any company--I think that applies to anybody. I think your people are the key ingredient. But not only was he interested in education, he was interested in the research of the education portion of it. That's why he liked Davis because they could do a lot more research than Cal Poly could. And he was happy about it--I wasn't happy when Davis went to the theoretical side.

Dunning: Davis was a lot closer to you.

Benedetti: Closer to us, that's right.

Dunning: So you'd have to go all the way to Cal Poly?

Benedetti: Exactly. And Cal Poly's a wonderful school. I love it. Don't get me wrong. But it's just that when this change happened, it was quite a big change.

Dunning: Which decade was that? Or was it a gradual kind of change?

Benedetti: It was gradual, but it was pretty much pronounced and announced. I'd say probably what?--fifteen, twenty years ago. Maybe more. Maybe more, yes. Probably twenty-five years ago that this change took place. And it worked out fine because we had two schools, then, that covered agriculture.

Dunning: Were they the only two schools in California that really devoted themselves to agriculture?

Benedetti: Yes. Well, Fresno State does, too, somewhat, especially the wine section of it. But otherwise, I think Davis and Cal Poly are the real hub of agriculture, yes. So we all kind of felt bad up here that Davis was getting away from the hands-on thing and going to the theoretical side of it, but as it worked out, it worked out fine, yes.

Dunning: And would you and George DeMedeiros belong to the same organizations?

Benedetti: Oh, yes. Yes, yes.

Dunning: Could you name examples of some of those?

Benedetti: Well, Creamery Operators was one. We had--what did they call it?--it was a co-op group, and we all met together, just to discuss general problems. We served also on--I think he served with me or I served with him--I don't remember now--on the Dairy Council. I don't think he was ever a member of the Dairy Institute. I was on that board, but I don't think he was. I don't think he ever joined that because he wasn't in the fluid milk end of it. He was on the fluid end; he sold Grade A milk to various companies in bulk, but he never bottled, if you understand, like we do here and like we did at the co-op. We physically bottled our own label and sold it, and that's when we spun off, when we bought Clover and we bought Stornetta's. We put them together, and this was their label, Clover's label, and we were selling it to the North Bay counties, and so we just progressed on that.

But he didn't do that. He just sold bulk milk and made butter powder and was very efficient. He was probably the most efficient operator in the state, by far, in that field.

Dunning: I had heard that he was very instrumental in bringing more money into the co-op by changing the grades, changing the label to Grade A milk?

Benedetti: He did that. There were a lot of things, like when they went to half-and-half to increase the fat in the half-and-half. Same thing on milk. We had just the regular 4.2 [percent fat] milk, maximum. Then we went to a lowfat milk, and he was very instrumental in that, going to the 2 percent. He never bottled it, you understand, but he just knew that the consumers wanted a lighter product. He was one of them, and I was involved in that, too, but he was kind of the ringleader of some of those things, yes.

He was probably the largest butter manufacturer at that time, and dry powder, too.

California Energy Crisis, 2001: Rolling Blackouts

Dunning: Well, thank you. I'll probably be talking to some other people about Mr. DeMedeiros, too.

A couple of other current things that are going on. I don't know if they've impacted Clover Stornetta yet, but one is the rolling blackouts in California. Is that a big worry right now?

Benedetti: Oh, big, big worry, that's right. We're deeply concerned. So far we have not been affected. I think we're in a different category than a household. As an example, we've already had a blackout in the homes, but we weren't affected on that here. Now, if we're affected, if we become that and I'm sure we will, I don't know what will happen to us.

Dunning: What I've read is that some of the dairy farmers in the Central Valley are having to just dump the milk.

Benedetti: Sure.

Dunning: Because they still pump the milk--

Benedetti: They can't cool it, yes. And not only the dairies but the plants that receive the milk; they're going to be down, if you follow me.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: Let's say that we're shut down. We can't bottle. We can't receive milk from our producers.

Dunning: So everything stops.

Benedetti: Everything stops. Everything. And our clean-up, our sterilization, everything.

Dunning: Impacts everything.

Benedetti: Everything. It's going to be--and, you know, it's such a sad commentary to think that we in California could ever be put in this kind of position.

Dunning: Exactly.

Benedetti: We've had ten to twelve years that they've absolutely done nothing to enlarge our system, our power system: lights, gas, the whole thing. And, you know, in the state of California we have I don't know how many people a month or year increase in population, but it's got to be what--a couple of million?

Dunning: Yes, and it's still growing.

Benedetti: And still growing. And here we do nothing. Absolutely nothing. Now, these people are going to use power that comes in here. And we're still not, to this day, doing anything about saying we're going to build some dams or--they won't let them build dams, in any way, shape or form. So they're saying now we've got to go to the wind power, and some of the people are resenting that and they're fighting that. So I don't know where we're going to get our power. I really don't.

Dunning: In your tenure in the dairy industry, has anything like this happened before?

Benedetti: Never. Never. Now, we will have--if we have a big storm and power is out, we've had that, but that's out for two hours.

Dunning: Temporary.

Benedetti: It's temporary. And so yes, it hurts, and we lose some products, but when you're out and you're going to be down for a day, I don't know what's going to happen. I really don't.

We're deeply concerned. There's a lot of things that we're concerned about. This is our major concern right now.

Dunning: Is the energy.

Benedetti: Is the energy, because we see no light in the tunnel at all, that they're doing anything about it. Still to this very day they're not doing anything. They're talking about it. Talk isn't going to do anything. So somebody's got to have the guts to say, look, we're going to float a bond or whatever we have to do, but we have to get X number of kilowatts going and get them within a period of time, and get it done. But I don't see that. I haven't heard that, and I haven't read that or anything else.

Dunning: Is there anything that Clover Stornetta is doing to prepare? Do you have generators?

Benedetti: We have generators, but we can't run on our generator for any length of time, because it's diesel, and, you know, there's a certain amount of diesel that you can get, but--there's not a shortage of it; I don't mean that--but it's just not--

Dunning: It's not going to work.

Benedetti: It's not going to work, that's all. It'll work--generators are considered fine for three or four hours, five hours, and we've got a big one, and it can carry the major part of our plant. Now, we can't do a lot of the little things that we do, but--

Dunning: But you certainly couldn't do that every day--

Benedetti: No, no way. No, absolutely not. So we are deeply concerned. We're deeply concerned about a lot of little things that are happening. Not little thing, big things. That's a big one, and that's the biggest one that we're concerned about.

Threat of Foot-and-Mouth Outbreak

Benedetti: But we're also concerned about the hoof-and-mouth [aka foot-and-mouth]--

Dunning: That's my next question, because these are two major things: hoof-and-mouth disease in Europe, and it already seems to be impacting California. Now, from what I've read, it hasn't touched the animals yet, but they're stopping the tours of some of the dairy farms.

Benedetti: We've stopped all the tours.

Dunning: It was probably a good thing we went to St. Anthony's Farm when we did.

Benedetti: We couldn't go to St. Anthony's now.

Dunning: Everything is closed.

Benedetti: Totally. And nobody--I say nobody can go on those ranches. So yes, you've got--

Dunning: One of the last tours for now.

Benedetti: Exactly. So we are deeply concerned about that. And that's something that we can't do anything about. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: We're on the sidelines looking at it, just like with the power. We can call our assembly people or our senator and whatever, but for us to physically do it, we can't do anything about it. I never like to be put in a position--and I'm not running the show anymore, believe me--but when I did run the show, I never liked to be put in the position that we weren't determining our future.

Dunning: Your own fate?

Benedetti: Fate, yes.

Dunning: There's an element of no control--

Benedetti: No control.

Dunning: --that must be very threatening.

Benedetti: That's what I see, and there's nothing we can do. You know, I've never been concerned about our company growing and prospering, even when we bought it and it was small. I felt that we had a place as long as we could produce a quality product, give the service and ethically be sound. I was never concerned about the large ones taking business from us. I felt the bigger they got, the better we could survive. But now--

Dunning: These are external factors--

Benedetti: Exactly.

Dunning: --that are pretty big.

Benedetti: Yes, exactly. And we have no control over them, none at all.

Dunning: Other than doing the obvious, like keeping people off dairy farms, but that's minor, really.

Benedetti: That's minor. Yes, we'll do those things, but the big things we can't control.

Dunning: Right.

Benedetti: And so our destiny is no longer in our hands any longer. We totally controlled our destiny, if we were going to be a success or failure. Nobody else had anything to do with it. If we were going to be a failure, it was going to be my fault or whoever was running it. My son's fault now. But I never

was concerned about that because I've always felt that if we did the right thing, treated people the right way, like we want to be treated, and have a good product, top product on the market, that we would succeed against anybody. And we have. We're the only independent left in the North Bay. Foster Farms is the closest competitor we have, and they're down in Modesto. And we used to have a lot of--we had all kinds of competitors, but they're all gone.

Dunning: Now, in the past, when you've been working, have there been other health crises, disease crises among the cattle?

Benedetti: Yes, a long time back we had the TB situation. [TB outbreak in 1940s] You wouldn't remember that, I don't think.

Dunning: When was that?

Benedetti: Oh, gosh.

Dunning: What decade?

Benedetti: You're taxing my memory pretty good now. But that had to be back when I first came to work, I guess.

Dunning: So the late forties, fifties?

Benedetti: Yes, middle forties and probably the late thirties it started, yes, yes. And that was a serious problem. But, again, it was in the hands of the producers to take care of, and they could do something about it, if you follow me.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: It would cost them some money. They had to kill some cattle. They had to move them out, but they could make that determination, and they could make the determination of whether they wanted to stay in business and how they had to do it in order to survive. But these things now, it's not in their hands. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?

Dunning: I do.

Benedetti: So these are things--I've never been concerned about our company surviving, but these are things that you have no power over, and they could do a lot of damage. Not just to us but to everybody. So we are concerned. We're deeply concerned. But what we can do about it, I don't know.

Dunning: Hopefully ride out the storm.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: And come out the other side.

Benedetti: Let's hope that someone starts reacting positive to do something, yes.

Dunning: Okay. As I said, since we met the last time, these are things that--we've had a lot happen.

Benedetti: Exactly.

Dunning: So I wanted to start off with something that's real current that's impacting the industry.

VII BEGINNING OF CLOVER STORNETTA'S ORGANIC BRANCH

Dunning: Now we're going to go back into the topic that we were going to talk about about a month ago. I wonder if you could tell me the story of how and why Clover Stornetta developed an organic branch.

Benedetti: Well, as you know, quality with us has been first and foremost, in every respect. My son, Dan, has watched the organic movement closer than anybody has, and he felt it was becoming a real strong, positive thing at the marketplace. So he's the one that said, "Look, we've got to get into organic. It's growing by leaps and bounds, and it's not going to stop. People are going to get more and more conscious of what they're eating, what they're drinking. We've got to be on top of it."

So we converted St. Anthony's. It takes roughly about a year to convert a dairy from a normal dairy to an organic-qualified dairy, and they qualify them. They have people to come out.

Dunning: You have to be organic certified.

Benedetti: Yes. It's not just something that they say, "Well, do this and that." They tell them they have to do it, and then they come out and check and see that it's done.

Dunning: Right, because the feed has to be organic--

Benedetti: The feed has to be organic.

Dunning: --for a period of time, the pasture.

Benedetti: Pasture. The cows can't be injected with anything. So if you get a sick cow, there's only one thing you can do, is get rid of it.

Dunning: Would you get rid of the cow or maybe bring it into your nonorganic branch and treat it more traditionally?

Benedetti: It would be pretty hard if you've got an organic, total organic unit to treat it. You couldn't use that milk for a long period of time. So they usually now just cull the cow out, get rid of it. So the management on the herds end of it is very, very changed.

Dunning: On the which end of it?

Benedetti: On the herd end of it. Yes. It's not like it used to be. It used to be when you got a cow that had a little something, why, they'd inject it with something, and off it would go. They'd hold the milk out for three days and then it would be fine. That can't be done anymore. When you say a dairy is going to go into the organic field, it's a big decision.

Dunning: You have to sort of think two, three years down the road.

Benedetti: Exactly. And not only think that but your whole management scheme is totally changed. Your line of thinking, if you're an old-time dairyman, is just changed from night to day, and you've got to be--

Dunning: With it.

Benedetti: With it. That's exactly right. And you can't fight it. You can't fight it.

Dunning: Were you a supporter of this?

Benedetti: Totally, yes.

Dunning: At the beginning?

Benedetti: Yes. Yes, I think it's a movement that's getting bigger and bigger and bigger. People are more conscious of what they want to eat and what they want to drink. And getting more and more conscious.

Dunning: So you had St. Anthony's Farm, and that's about 230 in the herd, something like that?

Benedetti: There's about 300-and-some-odd cows, yes. We're getting about what?--5,000, 6,000 gallons of milk a day. But we're now developing another herd.

Dunning: Oh, okay. In the same location or in another place?

Benedetti: A couple of other places, yes.

Higher Production Costs for Organics

Dunning: Oh, okay, so you're going to be expanding.

Benedetti: Oh, we're right on the cusp right now, yes. It's just growing by leaps and bounds. Now, you got to remember the dairyman has to be paid more money for that milk because it's costing them more money to produce it. Now, we're talking, I think--and I'm not up to date on a lot of this; you should really be talking to my son on this field, but I think we're paying around $4.00 a hundredweight, which is a lot of money to get the organic milk produced properly, to be qualified properly. It's not cheap. They've got a tremendous cost, and we've got this cost, have to pay it.

Dunning: Do you have extra costs?

Benedetti: We have to keep it separate in our plant.

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Dunning: Your organic branch. You still have to pay for the milk pooling fee and all that?

Benedetti: Oh, sure. But we also have to handle it in the plant separately so that we can't commingle that milk with ours in any way, shape or form. So we have to have down days where--not down days so much as we have two down days on a normal run of milk. Of course, we do our organic then, but that's not enough, so then we have to get our short day, if we have a short day, and we do--we take that short day and then clean everything up and then run our organic for four or five hours or three hours or whatever it is.

Dunning: So you do all the organic processing here.

Benedetti: Processed here.

Dunning: But it isn't in a separate building?

Benedetti: No, it doesn't have to be a separate--as far as we're concerned, it doesn't have to be a separate building, but we have to sanitize everything.

Dunning: It would probably be easier for you if you did have a separate building.

Benedetti: Oh, it would be easier, sure. But our size--it would be pretty expensive to do that. But eventually yes, that's exactly right, when we get bigger in the organic field.

Dunning: Is the organic--

Benedetti: It's growing. It's growing.

Dunning: Can you talk about the evolution of that? You know, when you first started seeing people talking about it? Was it the health craze of--

Benedetti: I don't know when. I would say it's been about five, six years, maybe a little longer. Now it's getting real popular, more so than it's ever been, even when we first got started. People are aware of what they're eating more so than they've ever been.

An Aside: Making Buttermilk

Dunning: Do you drink organic milk sometimes?

Benedetti: I don't drink milk; I drink buttermilk.

Dunning: Okay, you're from the buttermilk generation.

Benedetti: Yes, I love it. I drink it every day. I don't know if you know how buttermilk is made, but buttermilk is heated to about 190 degrees, held there for a period of time, and then the culture is added to it while it's there so that it grows. Then you stir with an agitator in a vat, and you get it all mixed properly, and that's how buttermilk is made. It used to be buttermilk was what you got off the churn, and that's how I learned to drink it.

When I first went to work at the creamery, they put me up in the churn room, making butter. The outfall--when you make the butter--butter gets hard, the fat part of it, and then the outfall is your buttermilk. It's the whey and all that makes up the buttermilk. I used to drink that as it came off the churn. And that's how I started liking buttermilk.

Now, of course, we don't use that buttermilk anymore. In fact, I don't think anybody uses buttermilk off the churn anymore because it varies.

Dunning: You get a good batch and a bad batch?

Benedetti: That's right. So now what they do is they put the skim milk --not the skim milk; it's about 1 percent fat, I think, if I remember correctly, and they put it in a vat and they pasteurize it, bring it up to a certain temperature, add the culture, and mix the culture. It's a buttermilk culture. And let it sit and then they stir it up, and your buttermilk is done. That's how you make buttermilk now, and I think everybody does. I don't know of anybody that takes it off the churn.

But after you acquire a taste for buttermilk--I don't know if you've ever tasted it.

Dunning: Oh, I have. My father was a big fan of buttermilk.

Benedetti: Was he?

Dunning: Oh, yes, that was his favorite.

Benedetti: I drink it every night. I drink it at lunch; I drink it in the evening, at the meal, yes. We have wine and everything, but I drink my buttermilk. Yes.

Dunning: I think it is an acquired taste.

Benedetti: Oh, it is. No question. No question about it. I don't know if you remember the old Nut Tree going to Sacramento. Remember how the curve used to go around?

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: And the Nut Tree was right on the curve. I used to hitchhike a lot--I guess it was during college. I was working up in Winters summertime, in the fruit sheds. I'd hitchhike. I'd come home sometimes for a day or two, and then I'd hitchhike back, and I'd always stop at the Nut Tree. They had this big, oh, I guess it was a twenty-five-gallon barrel of

buttermilk refrigerated, and they had--just like you pour beer, you know?

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: And they used to give you the buttermilk, all you could drink, for a nickel, for five cents. And, boy--

Dunning: You looked forward to that.

Benedetti: I'd look forward to that, yes, yes.

Transition to Organic

Dunning: Let's see. I'm going back a little bit to the organics. We talked a bit about the feeding requirements. Most of the organic grain that the cattle eat at St. Anthony's--is some of that grown right there on the farm, or is that brought in?

Benedetti: It's all brought in.

Dunning: So that's brought in. And that's probably--

Benedetti: Now they've got pasture there, and that pasture--they can't fertilize it. I mean, they can fertilize it with natural fertilizer, but they can't put any--

Dunning: Pesticides or--

Benedetti: Pesticides. They can't put any fertilizer that's not a natural fertilizer, if you follow me. They can't buy the fertilizer in 100-pound sacks and dump it out there. They can't do that.

Dunning: It's an operation.

Benedetti: It's a separate, separate--totally--operation, yes. Totally different. And the dairyman has to be very careful, yes.

Dunning: From your observation, are the cattle healthier or different?

Benedetti: Well, I think the cattle are healthier because they're more regimented in their feeding styles and all of that, and their care. They're not lolling around in a lot of water or mud. They try to keep them in--if you saw at St. Anthony's, they have those loafing barns.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: That's the bulk of their time, unless it's springtime and they're out in the field.

Dunning: They're out in the pasture then.

Benedetti: Yes, yes, but otherwise they're in those loafing barns. And those loafing barns are cleaned all the time. So there's quite a difference in the way the cattle are handled, yes.

Dunning: Are there special veterinarians that have remedies that you can use for the organic cows?

Benedetti: Oh, I'm sure they do. [Homeopathic solutions are used by vets and managers to treat their animals] I don't know who their vet is, but they can't shoot.

Dunning: They can't give them antibiotics.

Benedetti: They can't do anything. Now, like I say, if the cow is real bad it gets culled right now. They just can't do anything with it. If it's a minor thing like--I think there's a treatment for the hoofs. They'll sometimes get infected or something. But very little that they can give them, yes. It's a different ballgame for the dairymen.

Dunning: The herd at St. Anthony's--is it known as fairly healthy?

Benedetti: Oh, very.

Dunning: Very healthy?

Benedetti: Very, yes. Very. But this is what it takes. It takes real management. And I'm not saying other dairies don't manage properly, but they don't have to be concerned about these aspects. If a cow gets a little upset about something, they just shoot it with something and that's the end of it, if you follow me.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: And I'm making that sound simple, but--

Dunning: You're simplifying it, but I get the point--yes, there's something that can be done.

Benedetti: Something that can be done. In this case, nothing can be done. You have to get rid of the cow. It's that simple.

Dunning: Okay. One of my questions was what are the constraints faced when a dairy transitions from conventional to organic. I think we've touched on that in that it takes a period of years.

Benedetti: It's a period of three years for pasture. I think it's full time for the year on pasture, where if they were putting any kind of fertilizer out there that was not proper, why, they had to stop. And in order for the land to get cleared, they let the land sit for three years, only using organic fertilizer. And so they had to stop doing that for three years, and then the cattle could graze on it.

[It is a-one year period for the cow to transition. For one year, she needs to consume organic grain and feed: 80 percent organic for nine months, and 100 percent organic for the final three months. Organic grain and pasture must be clean for three years.--Dan Benedetti]

Dunning: So they'd milk the cows but they couldn't--they didn't sell the milk.

Benedetti: They sold the milk, but not as organic. It takes a year to make the conversion, and during that year they're milking regular milk. I mean, the milk that we receive from them is received just like any other milk that we take.

Dunning: But probably after a certain number of years the cows that are brought in--they're ready to go organic right from the beginning?

Benedetti: Only if they raise all of them from calves.

Dunning: We actually witnessed a bull being born at St. Anthony's Farm.

Benedetti: Well, I imagine they probably buy some calves occasionally, but not too much, not if they have a real bad run of bull calves versus heifer calves. Usually it's a 50:50 thing, but sometimes it'll run for six months or so, where they'll get 75 percent bull calves instead of heifers.

Dunning: Well, the day we were there, there had been four born within twenty-four hours, and they were all the bull heifers.

Benedetti: That's right, exactly. Exactly right.

Dunning: And so what happens to the bull heifers? They sell them?

Benedetti: They sell them for beef. Some farm will raise them till they get up to about, oh, 300, 400 pounds.

Relationship Between St. Anthony's Farm and Clover Stornetta

Dunning: St. Anthony's looks like a pretty amazing place in that it's also a residential drug and alcohol recovery center, with a working dairy. I'm curious how the relationship between St.

Anthony's Farm and Clover Stornetta began. It seems like an unusual relationship.

Benedetti: I don't know if you've ever heard of Fr. Alfred Boeddecker.

Dunning: Yes. Oh, yes.

Benedetti: He's a famous, famous man. Of all the people that I know in the Catholic religion, if there was ever a saint, this guy was a saint. He could get money from--it was just amazing. I got to know him quite well. He wanted to build something up here, get a ranch. I was managing the co-op at the time. Someone gave him my name. He wanted to do it up here in the North Bay. So he called and said could I come in to see you, so we made an appointment. I'd heard of him.

So he came up, and he told me his mission. He's got these people that are on rehab that he wants to take them out of the city and wants to put them on a ranch and get them away from all aspects that might tempt someone to get off the wagon and get on the wagon again. So he felt that this was the way to do it. He said, "I'm looking for a small ranch to start with. I'd like to have you help me." In fact, he said, "I want to have a farm board up here. I'd like you to tell me who we should put on this board. I'd like five or six people, because I know nothing about farming, and, nobody else down there does." And he said, "We're going to rely on that board."

So I gave him five or six names, and he said, "Would you mind calling them for me?" He said, "Then I'll talk to them, but"--

Dunning: He wanted an introduction from you. He was a smart person.

Benedetti: Oh, he was. He was an amazing person. So anyway, we got five people, good people. In fact, we got the first cows for nothing. They went out and got the cows given to them, donated to them.

Dunning: Do you know approximately what decade this was?

Benedetti: It was probably in the seventies.

Dunning: 1970s?

Benedetti: Late sixties. No, it was earlier than that. It was probably in the early sixties, yes. The early sixties. And so anyway, why, we got him a little ranch, and he bought the ranch, out by the little town of Hessel. They could house, I think, about fourteen or fifteen men there. Well, they outgrew that inside of two years. So we had a meeting with Fr. Alfred every two months. The board would have lunch together. And he pretty much relied on this little board of ours. We had some good people. We had John Watson, who was probably the outstanding agriculturalist in northern California at that time, a graduate of the University of California, by the way. Famous, famous man. And a wonderful man, brilliant man. We had John Watson, we had Leroy Lounibos, who was an attorney here in town. He was an outstanding attorney. He's passed on now, but probably the best attorney in this whole area. But he liked the farm, liked the agriculture part of it. Not that he was in agriculture, but he knew enough about agriculture.

But anyway, I can't remember all--my brother-in-law, Lucien ("Red") Libarle was on that original board. And who else? There was Lounibos, myself, Watson, Libarle. There was one other. Gosh, I can't think of who it was. But anyway, we got them together with Fr. Alfred, and we got this little ranch out there.

Dunning: Who bought the ranch?

Benedetti: Fr. Alfred bought the ranch.

Dunning: From his fundraising.

Benedetti: From his fundraising. He was the greatest fundraiser of anybody I've ever seen. I'll tell you the story. This was a

minor-sized ranch. He probably needed at that time, I don't know, $100,000 probably. He raised that in no time. When we went to the big ranch out there, what you saw--

Dunning: On the Petaluma-Valley Ford Road?

Benedetti: Yes, the one we visited. This was after two or three years that he outgrew this, and he said, "Gene, I've got to get something bigger." I said, "Well, that's fine, Father, but how are you going to pay for it?" "Don't worry, Gene, I'll get the money." He said, "I want you to come down and explain to these people"--and I had this meeting with them--"what we're doing and why we're doing it and what's the value of this ranch," and it was realistic and the whole bit. "When you find one."

So Lounibos found this ranch that he used to take care of the elderly people that were there. They were clients of his, and they wanted to sell. They were getting along in years. So he called me and he said, "Gene, I think we've got the natural for him." So Father and I went out, and I knew the people because they used to ship us milk at the co-op. Great people.

So Father says, "I like it. How much do you want for the ranch?" I don't remember what he paid for it, something like $500,000 or $600,000. It had about--close to 250 acres. After we got all done making the deal with--gosh, I wish I could think of their name; I will--

Dunning: We can always add that later, when you see the transcript.

Benedetti: He shook hands with him. They were good Catholics, by the way. That helped. And so on the way home, back to the creamery, I said, "Father, how in the hell are you going to raise this kind of money?" He said, "Well, Gene, next week I'm going to have a group of people in, about fourteen or fifteen, and all the top people in San Francisco, some widows and some heads of companies." And he said, "I want you to come down when we have it, and I want you to tell them

about this ranch, that it's a good buy and that the whole thing is going to be a good thing for the St. Anthony's Farm."

Dunning: The meeting was in San Francisco?

Benedetti: San Francisco. We always did everything properly. You know where the Fairmont is?

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: They have a big room up on top, meeting room. So anyway, I go down, and he had these fourteen, fifteen people sitting around the table. We had lunch. So he had me talk about the ranch and the whole thing, what the cost is going to be. After it was all done, he said, "Now, I'm going to need that money, and I'm going to need it real quick. I'd like to do it today if we can. And some of you can do it today. If you can do it, let me know by tomorrow," he said. "That'll be fine."

So anyway, these people got their checkbooks out, and he had the money.

Dunning: You watched that.

Benedetti: I watched it. I'll tell you, it was an education for me. I'd been involved in fundraising all my life. You know, with Boy Scouts and all these other city things and county things. But I never saw it done like that. Ever. But he had S&W Foods there, the head of that. It was just all key people. And about three old maids that were left a lot of money--

Dunning: And probably if they saw one person take out their checkbook--

Benedetti: Exactly.

Dunning: There's a little bit of peer pressure.

Benedetti: You're exactly right, yes. So anyway, that's how they got that ranch, yes. And, of course, he's done an awful lot with

it, or he did. But then even after he died, they had housing --it was not like the housing is today. They had enough housing, but it wasn't very good. So he started--he had the plans all done and everything--to build the housing that's there. He died, but they went ahead and built the housing, and it's beautiful housing. [tape interruption] He was one of the most amazing people I've ever seen, bar none. And if ever there was a saint, he not only was a money collector but he was a saint, literally a saint.

Dunning: So right from the beginning, did Clover or Stornetta use the milk?

Benedetti: Yes, we bought the milk--

Dunning: At the co-op.

Benedetti: At the co-op, yes. We started right away.

Dunning: And was it always St. Anthony's Farm?

Benedetti: Oh, sure, yes. It was always St. Anthony's Farm. And the herd was small. By the way, we got a bunch of cows donated for that herd. I think he started out with about thirty-five, forty cows milking. Now, of course, it's up to about 250.

Dunning: Was there ever any resistance to the residents having drug and alcohol--

Benedetti: Never. Not one. We never got a peep out of it.

Dunning: Doesn't that--

Benedetti: It's amazing.

Dunning: It seems unusual.

Benedetti: Yes. But he--let me tell you--

Dunning: Ran a tight ship?

Benedetti: He ran a tight ship. And they still do. If there's any question, out they go. But they get previous treatment down in San Francisco before they send them up to the farm. They just don't come up there cold. They've already been through what do you call it?

Dunning: Drying out?

Benedetti: Yes. So when they come up here, they've already had their month, month and a half, two months, probably.

Dunning: I think the manager of the farm when we were out there said that the average stay is about four months.

Benedetti: That's right.

Dunning: Something like that.

Benedetti: Now, up here at the farm, yes. That's amazing. They may get a lot of them down there, but the turnover--and they do a good job. You'd be surprised. They keep track of how many come back, and the percentage is good.

Dunning: That stay dry or detoxed, yes. Well, I remember the manager telling us that for some of the people, this is the first time they've ever been on a regular schedule, and you really have to be on a schedule with the cows.

Benedetti: Oh, sure.

Dunning: There's no question.

Benedetti: No question, yes, yes. It's a good program, an outstanding program. Of course, Fr. Alfred started all this. You know, he always had that kitchen.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: For years.

Dunning: St. Anthony's Kitchen.

Benedetti: Yes. He started that. And that's when he brought in these characters they got off either on booze or drugs, and so he decided he was going to do something about it. So he took care of them down there, but then he needed the balance of it someplace else where he could put them, and that's when he thought of having a ranch. He started out with the little ranch, and then got the bigger one. But it's a good working arrangement.

Dunning: It seems to be.

Benedetti: Yes, there's no question about it.

Dunning: And Clover Stornetta has been affiliated with them right from the beginning.

Benedetti: All the time, yes. Yes, right from the very beginning. He was a wonderful man. I can't tell you. You'd have just fallen in love with him.

Dunning: Well, he has quite a wonderful reputation.

Benedetti: Yes, no question about it. Someone wrote a book on him, and I have it at home. I wish I could get it for you. I'll find out.

Dunning: I could probably get it from the library.

Benedetti: You can probably get it from the library, yes, yes.

Dunning: Oh, was the book just on St. Anthony's Farm?

Benedetti: It was his life.

Dunning: His organizations.

Benedetti: Mostly about him, but it also said what he did, yes.

Dunning: Well, it's quite a story. For years, when I'd drive down that road, my eyes would always go toward St. Anthony's Farm, and I'm really happy that I was able to see it.

Benedetti: You're lucky you went to see it because you wouldn't be seeing it now [because of the threat of foot-and-mouth disease].

Dunning: Right.

Benedetti: We just got under the wire.

Dunning: Now, Clover Stornetta's organic milk has been called "the milk of human kindness." Do you think Clover Stornetta's association with St. Anthony's Farm reflects some of the values and attitudes of your company?

Benedetti: Well, the attitudes and the way of doing business is the same, yes. But I don't think St. Anthony's--I think we were that way before.

Dunning: And that's probably why you had the connection initially.

Benedetti: That's right, yes, yes. We've always kind of tried to stay--how do you say it?--ethically and morally we've tried to keep our company a niche above everybody else, and it's worked. It's really worked. But we treat people--we have a regular family here. We've got about 180 people, and we treat them as family. If someone is sick or something else and they need money, we'll loan them the money or will give them some to start with and we'll loan them some more, or whatever. But we have very little turnover. But we try to get good people to start with, people that we know.

Dunning: You probably had generations of families working there.

Benedetti: Oh, yes, we have had.

VIII CHANGES IN CALIFORNIA DAIRY INDUSTRY

[Interview 5: April 5, 2001]##

Dunning: Good morning.

Benedetti: Good morning. How are you?

Dunning: I'm fine, thank you. How are you?

Benedetti: Fine.

Dunning: Today we're doing our interview up in Cotati, right close by to where you grew up.

Benedetti: I moved here when I was eight years old.

Dunning: So it's kind of nice looking out and seeing the whole view.

Benedetti: Yes, it's great. It's wonderful. It's kind of a dream come true, yes.

Dunning: I'm going to move right into some questions that were suggested to me by the advisory committee for this project, and so I'm just going to start right off. The first is how did competitive conditions change in the California dairy

industries between the buyers and sellers during your tenure at Clover Stornetta?

Benedetti: Tremendous, tremendous change, I'll tell you. When I first went to work in '46 at the creamery, the co-op, we sold milk --we had some routes in Petaluma--but we mainly made butter. We didn't make powder at that time; we didn't have a powder mill, but we made butter, and we had a condensory plant next to us, and we'd send the skim down there. We had about 1,400 producers that were members of the co-op, but they were very small. Very few of them were big. In fact, I guess the biggest producer we had was probably around 200 cows. Now I'm sure that the co-op--I don't know what they have today, but they're probably getting more milk today than what we got with 1,400 dairymen. And now we're selling the bulk--I say the bulk; not the bulk of the milk, but I would say yes.

Dunning: For this county, definitely.

Benedetti: Yes, for this county, yes. Even in the Bay Area now, we're strong.

Captive Dairies

Dunning: Have you seen the power change between proprietary milk handlers, the dairy co-ops, and food chains, over time?

Benedetti: Tremendous, yes. We were almost all independent stores. Some of them maybe had two, three stores, but most of them, one store. Now you look at the store make-up, and if you have one or two independents in a town--like, in Petaluma I think we have two, two or three, and I'm excluding the little mom-and-dad stores, but a large store. In Santa Rosa we have a very limited number. There's Safeway, with their Lucerne milk. There's Sunnyside Farms

from over here in Vallejo. Albertsons has their own milk. Lucky's and Albertsons have merged.

Dunning: Well, this would be a good time--I keep hearing the word "captive dairy." Safeway was the first captive dairy in California?

Benedetti: As far as I know, Safeway was.

Dunning: Would you explain what that means, to be a captive dairy?

Benedetti: A captive dairy is a chain of stores that decides that--we used to sell milk to Safeway until probably around 1952, '53. And they decided to build their plant and bottle their own milk and sell their own milk. They did it, Lucky's did it, any number of them. So that's what captive is. They only sell their own milk to themselves, if you follow me.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: Now, how they work the inner workings of that, I don't know. What pricing they do or anything else, but I'm sure they stand on their own feet. The plant has to stand on its own feet, and the stores have to get a competitive price, I'm sure, because otherwise they'd be hollering that they're not competing with the other people. So they've been very successful. It has become a big, big thing. We're the only ones left that's not a captive. That can tell you. And there used to be all kinds.

Dunning: Right. I know sometimes you go to the supermarket and you can only find the Lucerne.

Benedetti: Exactly.

Dunning: And you really have to dig around for the organics or Berkeley Farms or another brand.

Benedetti: Exactly, exactly.

Dunning: I can see why they're doing it, but it's frustrating for the consumer.

Benedetti: But they've been able to do it.

Dunning: They've been able to do it, absolutely, with the cheese and--

Benedetti: Now, they're getting a little more reaction than they used to, I think, because we've gotten into some of the--not the Safeway stores; we're not in--but we've got in some of the captives with a little bit of milk: Albertsons stores, we've gotten.

Dunning: Are you in Andronico's yet?

Benedetti: We're in Andronico's, yes.

Dunning: How have the captive dairies affected your company?

Benedetti: Well, so far we've been able to grow, but it's because of all these other companies going by the wayside, yes. But this is a good question from the standpoint of our future. I personally am an optimist and don't feel the concern, but there has been some concern about how we're going to be able to continue to exist. So far we have.

And the reason we're concerned is that the captives are getting stronger, and the independents are getting weaker. I'm talking about the marketplace. Now, we're starting to see a little bit of change in this, and we hope it continues. We hope to see the independents get stronger and develop more markets, small little chains of their own, three or four markets. And they're doing this now. There's a few of them doing this, like the Andronico's and some of the others. So we think that the trend is good for us and I think for the people, too.

Dunning: Well, good. I had kind of a vague idea of the captive movement, but it was definitely an insider's term, so thank you for explaining that.

Benedetti: They're very strong, I'd say. The captives have been very, very strong. And they're very faithful to--and I guess one of their best returns in their store is the milk, because they've got cheaper delivery costs, they've got no case loss like we have--there's so many things that are in their favor. And we can't possibly compete with them because they've got a total control--they don't have to bring the milk in and put the milk in place or anything else.

Dunning: Yes. Where are the dairies that feed into the captives?

Benedetti: Well, Safeway has a big plant down at--going from Oakland to San Jose, just a little ways out of Oakland. Safeway has that, and then Raleys has a plant over in Vallejo, and it has one other one too. In Turlock they had a byproduct/ice cream plant. Dean Foods is now supplying all of the Albertsons stores. It's like a captive to them. What the arrangement is there, I don't know. Berkeley Farms--Deans has taken over their plant, so consequently it's all wrapped in together.

Clover Stornetta Producer Standards

Dunning: Where does the milk originate?

Benedetti: The milk originates in different areas, but mainly out of the valley which has the biggest amount of milk produced that goes into the Bay Area, and up here. But up here it's getting smaller and smaller in production. Producers are falling by the wayside. Not falling by the wayside. They think they can make more money in grapes, and some of them have gone into grapes, as an example.

So we've got sixteen producers that ship to us direct, and they're our producers. I say “our” producers. We have a contract with them, is all. We don't own them. They're separate and apart from us. But they're very loyal and

they're very good, and they produce the type of milk that we want.

Dunning: And you make sure that--you have certain standards?

Benedetti: We have standards that are way and above anybody else's standards, believe me.

Dunning: Could you elaborate on that a little bit? I think you have touched upon it in the past. I know that Clover Stornetta cows don't use the bovine growth hormone.

Benedetti: No, we don't, no. And that's one of our policies with the producers, that they have to understand that. Now, we have to pay them a premium because the BST hormones produces a little more milk from the cows. Now, what that damage does to the cows is still not proven, although there are some concerns now. So in order for our people to be competitive and not use the product, why, we have to pay them accordingly.

To answer your question, we get milk from this area--I say "we." The industry. This used to be a big producing area, the North Bay, and it has been probably the best milk because of the climate, because of the pasture. The cows aren't corralled in small lots. And it's far superior to the milk in the valley, I think. A lot of other people feel the same way. Of course, the valley doesn't feel that way. And they produce good milk. Don't get me wrong. They've got some beautiful herds down there. But their milk goes to all the dairies that are left now, and some of the milk from up here goes to some of those.

But Safeway has a few producers up here in the North Bay, as an example. They have their own producers, and they have some down in the valley. Albertsons. I don't know where Albertsons is getting their milk from right now; I'd say probably the bulk of it from the valley. They're probably getting a little bit from up here. But the milk up here is dwindling and getting harder and harder to get.

I see the continuation of that dwindling. I don't see it changing. And I don't know how we're going to hold the producers active up here. It's going to be tough.

Dunning: Now, when you have a producer that contracts with you, do they solely sell the milk to Clover Stornetta?

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: That's in the agreement.

Benedetti: Yes, yes. And we have a yearly contract. I believe it's a year; I'm not sure what it is. They have to produce to our standards, and we have very specific standards, and they have to keep their dairies to our standards. It has to have the looks of a dairy and the whole thing.

[tape interruption]

Dunning: We were talking about the higher standards for your producers, and you were going to talk about that a little more.

Benedetti: As an example, the state sets standards for milk produced. They have inspectors that go out and inspect the dairies, and they have to meet these standards. Now, our standards are so much higher than the state standards that there's no comparison. [1. rBST free 2. Ranch appearance 3. Sustainable agriculture] We have a much lower somatic cell count. That's from cows that have mastitis, if they have mastitis. Our regular count that we have is much lower. Our pasteurized count, after we pasteurize the milk, has to be much lower. We don't specify the feed that they have to feed, but we're very careful about feed flavors so that if they're on pasture, we ask that they take them off of pasture before milkings, certain hours before the milking.

There's a lot of little things, but they're all very important in creating a quality milk. The producers know this, of course,

when they ship to us. And there's nothing wrong with the other milk, believe me.

Dunning: Right, but as you said, you've always tried to go one step above.

Benedetti: That's exactly right.

Dunning: And have higher standards.

Benedetti: Exactly right, yes. We've got a little niche of our own, because we don't look at prices, our competitors' prices. We know what it costs us, and this is what we have to get for our milk, and we get it.

Dunning: And people are paying for it.

Benedetti: And people are paying for it. You usually find that our milk is higher in the stores. I don't know if you notice that.

Dunning: I usually buy the organic for our family. When I go to the natural grocer, I can find your milk. I can't find it where I usually shop, so we find Horizon. And that's definitely a lot more expensive than the other milk, the non-organic milk, but I find that organic milk tastes better.

Benedetti: I've sampled milk all my life, and I don't get it, but some of the kids--you know, kids have got the greatest taste buds in the world. I'm talking about kids from the age of seven or eight years old on up. The younger they are, the better their taste buds, and they are very cognizant of the quality of milk that they're drinking. Not the quality but the flavor of the milk. The quality as far as bacteria count and all that--they wouldn't pick that up, but they certainly can pick up the quality from the standpoint of flavor.

I think a lot of things factor into that flavor. We're in an ideal production area. We've got beautiful climate, never too hot, never too cold. We've got pasture land that the cows are on; they're not penned up. And there's many more things.

We've got a totally different ambiance for the cows. It makes for a better milk. You say "contented cows." Contented cows do, I think, better than cows that are penned up and are like machines.

Growth of Big Dairies

Dunning: Well, you probably had a lot of contact in the dairy industry with some of the huge factory operations. And that seems where there may be 10,000 cows.

Benedetti: Oh, I guess there are a couple of places that have 7,000, 8,000 cows, yes. More than that down in the valley and down in southern California. We don't have that up here. Our largest ranches would be probably around 1,000, at the most. But that doesn't mean that the larger ones are not producing good milk. I don't want to infer that in any way, shape or form. But there's a difference. There's no question. The cows are treated differently. The amount of land that they're on. All of this--it all has a bearing on the quality of milk. And, like I said before, the temperature, the area makes a big difference.

Down in the valley it gets much warmer, so the cows have to drink a lot more water, and that makes a difference. There's a lot of small things, but they all mean something. I'm not saying that the valley milk is bad. The valley milk is good milk. But it's a lower fat and lower solids milk mostly, because of the water that they drink. Our solids up here will average about 8.9, 8.8 all the time. Down in the valley I'm sure they're around 8.3, 8.4, 8.5. So there's a big difference in the solids in the milk. Everybody thinks it's the cream that gives the flavor to the milk, or the fat; but you'd be surprised the difference the solids makes in the flavor of the milk. If you drink skim milk, as an example, and compare our skim milk to anyone else's skim milk, I'm sure that

you're going to see the difference and tell the difference immediately, because of the solids.

So the area here is a great area for production. Our concern is we can't compete with some of the production that's making more money for the farmer than what they can do at the dairy, if you follow me.

Dunning: Right. When did you first start seeing the huge factory operations for cows, the change from the small dairy farms?

Benedetti: Oh, I guess that was probably thirty years ago? Twenty-five, thirty.

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Benedetti: I'd say a good twenty years ago or longer, probably, maybe thirty years, that the growth of the dairies became bigger and bigger and bigger. There's some real large dairies today, down in the Chino area in southern California. And those areas don't have any pasture at all. Most of them are strictly penned cows. In the valley, I don't know what the largest dairy is down there, but they've got to be 4,000, 5,000 cows, I would imagine.

Dunning: In your career, have you visited a lot of them?

Benedetti: I used to, but I don't anymore, no. But yes, I used to just--you tried to keep up with what was going on, and I knew everybody in the industry, so I could call and say, "I'd sure like to see such-and-such a dairy" because you'd hear about it. When they first put in the mechanical circular milking barns, they had them down in the valley and so I went down and saw those. But I'd even go see herds, just to see the size of them. It was just amazing, yes. Because we didn't have that up here.

Dunning: And you never had a desire to go in that direction?

Benedetti: We never really had any say in that because the producers pretty much do it. If more of our producers out here wanted to milk 10,000 cows, whether we'd keep them or not, I don't know, because that's never happened. But if it did happen, why, we couldn't stop it, if you follow me.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: Farming up here is totally different, so we haven't been confronted with that kind of a problem. Now, they're getting bigger up here. There's no question. We used to have an average-size dairy that was probably fifteen cows when I first started, and now I'm sure they're probably an average of 300 to 350 cows up here, so there's much less dairies, but the same amount of milk is produced--with far less dairies.

Environmental Concerns and Farmland Preservation

Dunning: Well, there's certainly been a lot of attention for the last many years about some of the dairy industry's impact on environmental concerns. I was reading this one statistic, and it may be different up here because, as you said, the cows here don't need to drink as much water, but this little statistic got me. It said, "Each day a 1,400-pound Holstein cow produces up to nine gallons of milk and requires 100 gallons of water or more for drinking and washing, and that same cow passes 100 pounds of waste each day."

My question is, what is Clover Stornetta's position on environmental issues?

Benedetti: Well,--

Dunning: Have you tried to do it differently?

Benedetti: You know, first of all, this goes back many years, when they first set up the first water quality control boards. They had

one in San Francisco; they had one that handles the North Bay. Wherever the stream, wherever the water goes to, there's a North Coast Water Quality Control Board. But when they first started, when they first came into being, they came up and said, "Look"--

Dunning: Was this in about the 1970s?

Benedetti: This was in the 1970s or late sixties, yes. Maybe late sixties. They came up. I was managing the co-op at the time and they said, "Look, we've got to get everything out of the water. Wherever there's a stream, we can't have any output from the dairy cows that goes into that stream." And I said, "Well, that's fine. That's great. How do you expect to do this?" They said, "Well, we're just going to make the demands on the dairymen. They can't let their outflow go off into the streams, creeks or whatever it is." So I said, "Well, you know, you've got to realize that all these dairies that were started here--and all over, I think--but up here I know were built alongside of a creek, for the drainage."

Dunning: For that reason.

Benedetti: For that reason. There wasn't one of them that's not alongside of a creek, that I know of. And I said, "Now, you're going to go out and tell them they can't be alongside that creek or if they are alongside that creek they've got to bottle all that outfall or do something with it that's not going to go into that creek." I said, "I don't know how you expect to do that." Because he was talking about doing this over a period of a year. And I said, "It's impossible. First of all, if you go to a dairyman and tell him this, they're going to laugh at you." And I said, "And sure, you can arrest them and you can do whatever you have to do, but still milk has to come forward."

So anyway, to make a long story short, why, they realized that they couldn't do it over a short period of time. I said, "You've got to work with the dairymen. Give them time, and work with them. And I think you can get them to do stop doing a lot of things that they're doing now that they

shouldn't be doing, but it's going to take a lot of effort and it's going to take a lot of time."

So they accepted that. They asked if we'd help them, and I said, "We certainly will." We had our field men go out with them and introduce them to the dairymen and stuff like that. They changed.

Dunning: Who's "they"?

Benedetti: The producers. They changed over a long period of time. I say "long period of time," over a period of three or four years. They built holding ponds. They built holding barns for their cows so they could control the manure. Instead of being out in the field, waiting to be milked, they go in--well, you've seen the big sheds where you were out at St. Anthony's. They can control that. They do all their business there. But it's controlled, and it goes into a pond, and it's fine. When they're out at pasture, they can't control it, but they can control everything else.

But you just don't change, make those changes overnight. They realized that and worked with us in great fashion. Some farmers took two or three years to get them converted. The farmers did this. They realized that they had to do something about it. So they built these large holding barns, and they did a lot of things. They put dams in and things of this type to control the water and control the outfall, and it worked out fine. They're better for it, I think, and certainly our society is better for it in the long run.

Dunning: And what happens to the holding ponds?

Benedetti: Well, they have to go in and take the solids out, and they do that either yearly or whatever the period of time it takes. I don't know. I've never been that close to it. But otherwise, there's no problem. And the holding ponds--you're saying when they get full. They do get full, and they have an overflow. But that water is pretty well--you'd be surprised. It's amazing.

Dunning: In what way?

Benedetti: It's not pure. You couldn't drink it or anything, but it's in darn good shape.

Dunning: Is it used--does it go back into the fields?

Benedetti: Most of it goes back into the field. Up here it does, yes. Where we have the land that they can use it for irrigation. But down in the valley, it's pretty tough to do that.

Dunning: That's what I was reading, especially in the Chino Valley, where there's been so much development that there's no place for anything to go. Even if they composted all the manure, there's not enough farmland.

Benedetti: That's right. That's exactly right. I don't know what's going to happen. But they've got a problem. There's no question.

Dunning: It's a big problem.

Benedetti: It's a real big problem.

Dunning: Well, it seems like it's a problem, the dairies and the development coming at the same time, and that's a pretty complicated area.

Benedetti: It is. They passed a lot of laws. You know, farming up here is pretty well protected now, from the standpoint of infringement from city or from housing or whatever. The cities, of course, have got limitations, pretty much, where they can move to and how much they can expand. But the counties have also now taken hold, and they say, "Look, this farmland is going to remain farmland." So they've done a pretty good job, and they've worked hard at it.

So the infringement is not as great as it was, because we've had people that would buy two or three acres out here, somebody's property, and build a house and thought nothing about it, and it was fine. Just like right here. This

is all country right here. This all happened over a period of about ten years. They just started buying the land and building houses. And so this is kind of limited.

Now, in these areas--we're in the Cotati area--there's a limitation of how much acreage you have to have before you can build a house on it. I think here it's three acres.

Dunning: Oh, okay, so this whole area, everyone has to have three acres.

Benedetti: Three acres, yes.

Dunning: Well, I'm not sure you read the [*San Francisco*] *Chronicle* this morning, but it seemed very appropriate. The editorial was: Save Marin Farmlands.

Benedetti: I didn't see it. I looked at it, just glanced at it, but I didn't read it.

Dunning: It was talking about Marin Agricultural Land Trust [MALT] buying up conservation easements on farm property.

Benedetti: They've been very active, by the way. And very successful. They are maintaining some ranches, keeping them alive just by doing this, because they'd be out of business, so it's a good thing.

Dunning: Do you think this is also happening here? I can see where it would be happening in Marin County.

Benedetti: It's going to happen up here too, dear.

Dunning: Right.

Benedetti: Because--Marin County was a big producer of milk. I mean, a large producer of milk. Now there's, I'd say, what?--twenty dairies, twenty-five dairies left?

Dunning: They don't really break it up here. Well, they say there's forty-six dairies in Marin, which is 20 percent of the Bay Area's milk supply.

Benedetti: That's probably about right. Forty-six?

Dunning: Yes. And--

Benedetti: Because they've got quite a few out at Point Reyes. Yes, that's about right.

Dunning: It said twenty working farms, but that's wine grapes, vegetable, shellfish, feed crops.

Benedetti: But they've done a good job of maintaining those farms, of keeping them, yes.

[Minimum acreage in dairy country is sixty-160; three acres in Cotati; and five acres in other ranch areas.--Dan Benedetti]

Dunning: Now, have you seen the developments, the housing developments impact some of the farms that you work with?

Benedetti: Not anymore. We used to, yes. But not anymore. These ordinances have been--mostly the county and the cities of course--tied that thing down pretty well. They just can't go out willy-nilly now and buy two or three acres and build a house on it.

Dunning: Or build ten or fifteen houses on it.

Benedetti: Ten or fifteen houses. Yes, exactly. The farmers fought this, and they had a right to fight in one respect because this is their land. We're in the United States. We came here. Nobody told my parents where to go and how to go. Nobody told me where to go and how to go. But things are changing, and I guess we have to change with it. So the land preservation is now being handled in a different way. There's no question. Some people don't like it, and some of

the farmers don't like it, but actually it's protecting the farmers right now, I think.

Dunning: Is there some tension among the farmers, that some farmers are ready to sell for development and others are wanting to preserve the farmland?

Benedetti: Oh, sure.

Dunning: Have you been at all--in the middle of that?

Benedetti: No, I've stayed out of it! No, we stayed out of it. It's pretty well cut and dry now. If they've got a farm--if they want to farm that land, they're pretty well protected. I don't think we've lost a dairy. I say "we." Not we, but a dairy in the county that was alongside the boundary line of Santa Rosa city limits. It was a good-sized dairy, and he finally sold, they put so much pressure on him. But now that wouldn't happen. That couldn't happen. [Sonoma County has a ¾ of 1% sales tax for open space preservation.]

Dunning: Who was putting the pressure on?

Benedetti: Developers. And there was no ordinance then that stopped them.

Dunning: And then we're talking about a lot of money, too.

Benedetti: Oh, absolutely, yes. In one thing we're saying it's good that we can keep the farms, but also the farmers say, "This is our land, and we've got a right to do whatever we want with it." At least that's the way America was built originally.

Dunning: But you'd hate to lose all your family farms.

Benedetti: That's right, exactly. It's a two-edged sword.

Dunning: It's complicated.

Benedetti: It's very complicated. There's no stance that you can take that you feel right about, because if you take one side of the story, it's fine; but if you take the other side, it's fine too. But it's hurting somebody.

Dunning: Yes. Well, then, also if there's a development really close to some farmland, a lot of people moving in--they're not accustomed to the smells--

Benedetti: Oh, no doubt about it.

Dunning: --and a lot of other things.

Benedetti: No question about it. And that's still a problem, still a problem, both with chickens--of course, chickens aren't a big factor here anymore, but it used to be a big factor. We had probably the largest concentration of chickens in the world right around this area. [phone rings]

Milk Pooling Bill

Dunning: We're now going to shift gears a little bit and talk about some of your connection with the Dairy Institute. When you were with the Dairy Institute, do you remember some of the legislative bills that you worked for?

Benedetti: Well, a lot of them.

Dunning: Any that really stand out?

Benedetti: Well, our pooling bill was one of the big ones for the farmers. I was at the co-op at the time. But we were still members of the Institute. We were the only co-op that was a member of the Institute. Because we bottled milk and we were allowed to do that, but otherwise--this was a big, big change of philosophy in the selling of milk from the farmers to the processors.

Dunning: Before we go on, pooling milk is getting a lot of the producers--to pool their milk, basically.

Benedetti: They pool their milk. That's what they're doing, and they get the statewide price from this pool that's developed by the state Department of Agriculture. It used to be that we were considered the elite up here and the valley were the ones who were begging for Class I usage. Class I usage is the highest-paid usage. Then there's Class II for ice cream, and then there's Class III and IV for butter and powder and things like that.

So we always had a fair market share of the Class I milk--we always had a large portion of the milk that went to the Class I because we had two things going for us: We had our location, which was close to the marketplace, closer than the valley; and we had a different kind of milk, so that we enjoyed the Class I marketplace probably three or four times more than the valley producers were able to do. And so they were getting a lesser return on their milk, although it was the same milk, in effect. It was Class I milk produced by Class I standards.

There was always a battle going on, just a continuous, continuous--we'd go to meetings, and it was always bang, bang, bang.

Dunning: Who was battling whom?

Benedetti: Well, the have-nots versus the haves. We were the haves, and they were the have-nots. It wasn't a battle; I shouldn't say a battle. But it was--

Dunning: There were some strong feelings.

Benedetti: Strong feelings, and everybody was totally aware of where it was. So that's when we said, “Look, let's try to do something about this so that we can all share, try to share together on this Class I usage.” That's when we put pooling into being. Passed it. We failed on the first go-around. In those days,

the senate and the assembly met on a two-year basis, every other year, so we had to wait two years, and then we tried it again, and we finally got it passed.

The reason we didn't pass it the first time around was Los Angeles was strictly 100 percent Class I because the producers down there had all that Los Angeles market, San Diego, and they were riding the crest of the wave. We were next, and then the poor people in the valley were really suffering. So that's when we decided that we were going to try to put a pool together so that we could pool all the milk in the state.

Dunning: Do you remember approximately the years or even the decade? I could probably look this up.

Benedetti: Oh, I'm sure you could. I can't--let's see, this would be about in the late sixties, I think.

Dunning: Okay. It was before Clover Stornetta.

Benedetti: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I was at the co-op. And it was probably around '70, '71, maybe '69. I don't know. Somewhere there. I can't remember when the pooling bill went through. I should, because it was a big, big thing. We all went out and got drunk.

Dunning: After it passed.

Benedetti: Yes. And it was a big chore getting it passed because, again, the people up here that had it didn't want to share, and the people in Los Angeles didn't want to share with the people that didn't have the Class I. But it's worked out fine.

The pooling rights also gave them the right to sell those quotas. In other words, you had a quota for Class I, and that's the highest paid, and then you have Class II, III and IV. Well, that's lesser paid, of course, each one of them. So Los Angeles had all Class I. All the producers got Class I. Up here we got probably around 75, 85 percent Class I.

So here's the poor valley down there, sitting there, just having a helluva time. And they were always the have-nots. And it was a continuous, continuous fight, and nobody would want to give in. It was a hard one to develop. Nobody likes to give up anything when they're making money at it. And that's still a pretty normal thing today, I guess.

But we did finally get--after the second go-around at the legislature, we did get the bill passed to put this pooling order in so that we pooled all the milk in the state, and then if it was 70 percent Class I, everybody got paid 70 percent Class I or 60 percent or whatever it was, and everybody got the same usage in Class II, III and IV, so that we all were equal as far as our usage was concerned.

Dunning: But you wouldn't literally pool the milk.

Benedetti: No, we didn't physically pool the milk, but we pooled it by our reporting. The state handled the whole pool, and still does. And they determine how much is Class I, how much is--

Dunning: Is that the state Department of Agriculture?

Benedetti: Agriculture, yes. That put on a few people, almost a new department within the state Department of Agriculture.

Dunning: How did this bill affect the California milk market? Was there an impact?

Benedetti: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I'm trying to think. That's a good question. It must not have because it didn't make any impression on me, and I would have been aware of it because we were selling milk, of course. I do feel that it certainly leveled off the playing field, if you follow me, so that the prices became a lot more--there's a price for the Bay Area, there's a price for the valley, and there's a price for southern California, and then those are blended together.

Dunning: Oh, okay.

Benedetti: No, I don't think it had any effect on the retailer or on the consumer, if that's what you're asking.

Dunning: Now, does this also have to do with the establishment of state-controlled producer prices?

Benedetti: I don't know if you realize this or not, but the state also controlled our retail prices at one time.

Dunning: No, I didn't.

Benedetti: This goes back about twenty-seven years. They used to control what we could sell milk for, on the retail, door-to-door delivery, and to the store, and what we had to pay for the milk to the farmers. We, as bottlers, as processors. So it was all totally controlled at one time. That was totally done away with. Now the only thing that's controlled is the price to the farmer.

Dunning: To the what?

Benedetti: Producer. That's still controlled.

Dunning: What was the industry like when there was no state control over producer prices?

Benedetti: Well, this goes way back, before my time, even. The reason why that became a factor and they put the state-controlled pricing in, I guess they got in such a battle, producers, that in Los Angeles they would sell milk to a store and give them a penny to have them take their milk. That's how bad it was. And the farmer wasn't getting paid, because they weren't making any money, if you follow me.

Dunning: Because the prices were so low?

Benedetti: So low. In fact, they were giving it away, in some cases. So it got to a point where it just became ridiculous, and that's when we went to the state and said, “We've got to do something about this.” And that's when they set up total

controls. This was before I was really active, before my time by about seven, eight years.

Dunning: Before you came aboard the co-op.

Benedetti: Co-op, yes. And then it got to the point where they were controlling the price to the producers, they were controlling the price to the store, they were controlling the price on retail when we delivered home delivery, and so everything was controlled. And, boy, I'll tell you, it was a real headache. Some of the people liked it; some of the people didn't like it. The consumers were against it.

Dunning: Because the prices went up.

Benedetti: Sure. And so anyway, we finally got them off of all controls. This was a consumer, not producer, mostly consumer and processors put this together. But the producer price remained controlled. It still is today. The state dictates the price that we pay to the farmer, by cost studies and the whole bit, and the area. A lot of things--

Dunning: And does that work?

Benedetti: I think it works fairly well, yes. So everybody that's in this area pays that price, if we're processing. So then it's up to us how we want to sell it. If we want to go out and give it away, we can give it away as long as we don't sell below cost. If we want to charge more--

Dunning: Okay, so those rules have--

Benedetti: Those are gone.

Dunning: Those are gone. Can you put any price on your milk that you sell?

Benedetti: Any price, excepting this: There's a below-cost provision in the Fair Trade Practice Law.

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Benedetti: There was a provision in the Fair Trade Practice Law that does not allow you to sell below cost, and that has not changed, so if I wanted to go out and sell below my cost, I'd be breaking the law, and they could take me on without any problem. So we have to have I think it's 10 percent, if I remember correctly--there's a percentage in there, above our cost. Now, if we want to sell for 10 percent above our cost, I guess we could. I think that's legal. But you can't operate a business on 10 percent and cover all your expenses. But that was a minimum, and I think that's still in effect. The minimum is still in there. But that's all that's left of it, of the law.

Refrigerated Tanks

Dunning: Any other bills? You mentioned that you worked on a few bills when you were at the Dairy Institute.

Benedetti: I worked on a lot of bills.

Dunning: Any that stand out in your mind that you'd like to be remembered for?

Benedetti: One of them that I think I probably initiated was--I say "I"--we at the co-op initiated: We put tanks in. We used to have cans, then we went to tanks, where we pick up milk in tanks. The tanks have to be refrigerated today, but in those days [phone rings]--

[tape interruption]

Benedetti: But anyway, what were we talking about? I forget.

Dunning: We were talking about some of the bills that you were involved with.

Benedetti: Oh, yes. One of the bills--when we first went to tanks, we had to refrigerate the milk that went into those tanks. We didn't at the time; we could put it over a water cooler, and if the milk went in at 50 or 60 degrees, there was no law. We got into a real jam. One of our tanks of milk was real hot. We had some milk that went out that really gave us a problem, from the standpoint of quality and from the standpoint of we had two or three people that got sick from it.

Dunning: This is with the co-op.

Benedetti: This is with the co-op. So I just got up in arms, and I said, "Look, we can't have hot milk coming into this plant. We've got to have something done." We were members of the Dairy Institute, and they were mostly all processors, so they would be totally in favor of this. And I belonged to Creamery Operators, and I belonged to all the other manufacturing people's organizations. This was going to be a costly thing for producers. We didn't do it overnight, but we did change the law that milk had to come off at certain temperatures, and when it went into the tank it had to be cooled to between 42 degrees and 38 within a given period of time. So that meant that they had to add refrigeration, either above the tank or they had to have refrigeration in the tank, in the walls of the tank at the farm. That meant new tanks for everybody. It was a big cost. So we got that passed, and that was a big, big thing because quality just changed from night to day.

Dunning: And was that statewide?

Benedetti: Statewide. And that was a big job.

Dunning: Was there a lot of resistance--

Benedetti: There was at first.

Dunning: --from the producers?

Benedetti: Yes, there sure was. It was a big change, a big cost. But a lot of the dairies helped the producers, and we did. We helped. If they needed financing, we helped finance it, and they paid it over a period of time. But it was a big cost, yes. So, you know, it was a lot of things that took place.

Dunning: That seems a very important one.

Benedetti: That was an important one, yes.

Dunning: So you have the prices, the refrigeration. Any others that stand out?

Benedetti: There's all kinds of them I can't think of. I was in Sacramento at least once a week at that time, yes. We were always trying to do something to change the laws or make it more practical, yes. But I can't remember specifically right now.

Dunning: Well, that's something we can also add in an appendix.

Benedetti: Right.

Dunning: There's probably a time line that somebody has already done.

Benedetti: We can reconstruct that, and we can check with--the Dairy Institute to give us all this, I'm sure, of all the bills that went in that changed different things.

Role of the Dairy Council and the CMAB

Dunning: What was the role of the Dairy Council and the California Milk Advisory Board?

Benedetti: The Dairy Council of California basically had the primary responsibility of contacting and making contact through the

schools with the kids. They still do, and that's still their major factor. Then they got into some advertising, and they still do a little of that, but not so much because the California Milk Advisory Board started later, and they pretty much filled the gap there for the advertising. And the farmers pay for this. You understand that, don't you?

Dunning: They pay a certain percentage?

Benedetti: They pay a penny or two pennies. I forgot what it is now.

Dunning: According to the size of their herd?

Benedetti: No, according to the volume of milk.

Dunning: The volume of milk, okay.

Benedetti: So they're paying for that, and they're paying for the Dairy Council, through this deduction.

Dunning: And that's mandatory?

Benedetti: That's mandatory. And the Dairy Council mainly works with schools, but they also have other functions, but that's their main function.

Dunning: Is it on education?

Benedetti: Education, with teachers. They start in the second grade, yes. And it's a good thing.

Dunning: Are they trying to get more kids to drink milk or just teach them about where the milk comes from, the whole thing?

Benedetti: Both, yes. There's no question that it's helped sales of milk. There's no question about it. But there was a lot of things being said about milk that had to be countermanded and honestly countermanded, not--

Dunning: For instance?

Benedetti: Oh, I don't know. There's been the tax on milk and different things as long as I can remember. The fat was no good for you. It's changed in so many ways. Now we started drinking nothing but skim milk, and now we're starting to go back a little bit.

Dunning: You've seen it all.

Benedetti: Yes, yes. So I drink what I like, and that's it. I drink buttermilk.

Dunning: Right. You mentioned that the last time.

Benedetti: It's been a kind of a seesaw, yes. Different generations have something to do with that too, I guess.

Dunning: Are you involved in any dairy organizations now?

Benedetti: No. I go to the meetings, still, but I'm not involved. My son, Dan, is on the board of the Dairy Institute, and Herm is on the board of the Dairy Council, and Gary's on the board of Creamery Operators.

Dunning: So they're all representing--you stepped aside and you can give them advice and watch.

Benedetti: No, I don't even give them advice anymore. I leave them alone, because they're doing a better job than I could do. No, I never bother them. No, they're fine. But I was on all three of the boards, yes. For a long time. It was fun. I keep telling them--they complain about all the hard work they're doing. I say, "Hell, I used to do it all by myself."

Dunning: Right. You would do all the meetings and the business.

Benedetti: I was gone all the time, traveling all over, yes. My wife, thank God, accepted it. But I wasn't gone too much at night. I would be home.

Dunning: You'd be making a lot of trips up to Sacramento.

Benedetti: Oh, I was making trips to Sacramento. I'd make trips to L.A., but L.A. would be a day trip, too.

Dunning: Really?

Benedetti: Fly down and fly back. Occasionally--if I had to stay--and I had this arrangement with the co-op when I was managing the co-op, I told them very clearly, the board, that if I was to go to meetings, if I was going to stay overnight for any length of time--maybe one night I wouldn't worry about--I was going to take my wife. They'd have to pay for her. They agreed. They did. Of course, with our company, that's our own rules, and we make those up ourselves. But at the co-op you're dealing with a board of directors and farmers, so they agreed, and there was no problem. Yes.

Dunning: Before we start any brand-new topic, I think this is probably a good place to stop for today.

Benedetti: Okay.

Dunning: Anything you'd like to add today?

Benedetti: Not particularly, no. I think as far as--getting back to laws--I think you ought to get a hold of Dairy Institute, of what happened during the period of time to the laws that affected consumers and affected the processors and the farmers. They'd have them--I went through it all, but I can't remember all of them.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: It would be very interesting to document that, and they could do that. I'm sure they've got the records.

Dunning: Right, yes.

Benedetti: And also the Dairy Council. They do some lobbying occasionally, too, for certain things.

Dunning: Yes. As I said, I think that kind of information can also be put in the appendix.

Benedetti: Exactly.

Dunning: We're not trying to get the whole story from one person, just a piece of it. And then it'll all fit together.

Benedetti: And you've got to remember, I'm getting old and I don't remember all the things anymore.

Dunning: Well, you've remembered quite a bit, though.

Benedetti: I try to. But I'll tell you, I notice it. I'll forget things in the course of a day. If I don't write everything down now, I'm in real serious trouble, yes.

Dunning: Well, from the transcripts I've read so far of the interviews, they seem really quite together.

Benedetti: Good, good.

Dunning: They make a lot of sense. Well, thank you very much.

Benedetti: Not at all.

Dunning: I think the transcriber will be very happy not to hear the trucks.

Benedetti: [laughs]

Dunning: Thanks very much.

Benedetti: Not at all.

IX BENEDETTI CAREER AND FAMILY LIFE

[Interview 6: July 3, 2001] ##

Dunning: This is our last session together, although I hope we'll get to see each other again.

Benedetti: We will.

Dunning: We've covered many topics, beginning with your family background in Italy, your parents' immigration to the United States, your childhood in Sonoma County. We also traced your lifelong career in the California dairy industry. Today I want to ask you about your role as husband and father and how you managed a busy career with a family life. I remember when we drove out to St. Anthony's Farm, you began to tell me the story of meeting your wife, Evelyn, during World War II. Would you tell me how you first met your wife?

Benedetti: You want me to start answering some questions. You just ask the question--

A Wartime Meeting and Courtship

Dunning: Okay. Tell me how you first met your wife.

Benedetti: Well, that's a good question. You're going to get a long answer. And it wasn't during the war; it was right after. Well, the war was still on, but I'd already come back from overseas. This mutual friend of mine--we were in the navy together--Jim Bly was his name, and Betty was his wife--anyway, we were down stationed at Little Creek, Virginia, in the amphibious force when we came back. I had some ships along the East Coast, training ships that I was in charge of. So I'd stop in and see Jim up in Washington, D.C., when I was going Solomon's Island, Maryland. That was a naval base there.

He insisted that I should meet Evelyn because Evelyn's husband--they were married for about two weeks or three weeks before he went overseas, and he was killed in the invasion of Anzio [Italy]. He was in the navy. He was in the SEALS. It's like the SEALS are today. They go into the beach before the invasion to check the soundings, check mines and check everything, and then they come back out. Well, somebody evidently spilled their guts, and they were waiting for the whole group. There were about forty-eight of them, and just about all of them were killed, and he was one of them that didn't come back. They never found the body, of course, so he was reported missing.

So Jim wanted me to tell Evelyn what I knew about it, and I said, "I can't tell her anything. I don't know whether he's still alive." Because at that time the prisoner camps weren't --they hadn't capitulated yet. I said, "I really don't want to get into that, but I can tell her that I saw him and that he was fine and everything else."

So he brought Evelyn down. They were only married two, three weeks before he left, and she became pregnant right away. She had this beautiful child, Michelle, who is my

oldest daughter. Not my oldest daughter, but my adopted daughter. And she came down with Michelle to spend a weekend down at the Blys' in Norfolk, Virginia.

So we went out to dinner, to the officers' club. She was a beautiful woman. I was really amazed. But there was nothing. We just talked and chatted, and told her what I knew about Cuz [Carmen Pirro] and how often I'd seen him and everything, and we used to play softball and basketball and volleyball together, in between invasions. So that was the end of the thing. I didn't think anything more of it. And he was still reported as missing at that time.

She came down again for another weekend about, oh, a month or two later, and we did about the same thing: went to dinner. Jim asked me to come over. And so we--nothing was in my mind, and nothing certainly was in hers. The next time that she came down, Cuz was reported dead--they'd taken all the prisoners. And by that time, he was not in the list, so she felt a little better, but she was really down at the mouth, but felt better that she had an answer.

So we went to the officers' club, and we had a dance together, and, again, nothing outstanding about it in any way, shape or form. So on the way back, she said, "Well, when you come up to Washington, come in and meet my family." She said, "I live in Silver Springs, right outside of Washington, D.C." And I used to have some ships at Solomon's Island, Maryland, training ships. And that's only a short distance. I don't know if you've been there or not, but it's, I'd say, twenty-five or thirty miles, something like that. And I'd go into Washington all the time.

So I did. I called her, and I said, "I'm up here. Do you want me to come over?" And she said, "Yes, I do. I want you to meet Mom and Dad." She was living with her mother and dad, and so I went over. I brought a bunch of food off the ships. You know, everything was rationed. I had my duffel bag and I had it filled with meat and butter.

So her mother was real happy to get all the food--but down at the bottom I had a quart of Christian Brothers brandy, so I gave that to Tope [Gordon Birrel].

Dunning: You gave that to?

Benedetti: To her father. We called him Tope. So his eyes just brightened right up. I didn't know this, but she wouldn't allow liquor in the house.

Dunning: The mother.

Benedetti: The mother was a very strict Southern Methodist. [phone rings] I didn't know there was no liquor allowed in the house, and so we didn't drink any liquor. But he enjoyed it. He kept his bottle, and I don't know what he did with it.

Dunning: He enjoyed getting it.

Benedetti: Oh, yes. He loved to have a drink, and we used to all the time when we'd go out or something. And she didn't mind that. She was all right. So that was how I met the family.

And then we started getting a little more serious.

Dunning: How old were you both at the time?

Benedetti: I was probably--let's see, when I was overseas I was twenty-two, twenty-three, so I was about twenty-three, and Evelyn was probably twenty-two. So I came back down to Little Creek and did my work, and I got to thinking about the family, and I got to thinking about her, and I got to thinking, *Gosh, she's such a pretty girl, and she's such a nice girl. She's really charming.* And I said, *But I'm really concerned about her having been married and having a child.* It was just something that just didn't ring a bell with me.

Discharge from the Navy and Return to California

Benedetti: But the more I got to see her and the more I got to know her --and I'd go up, and she came back down to see the Blys again, and I went up two or three more times, so we got to where we were--nothing from the standpoint of talking about getting married or anything, but when I got my orders to go home--and that was kind of quite sudden--I'd gotten a Silver Star during Normandy, and I was young, and I wasn't married, had no children, and they started to set up separation, to separate people. You have to have children, you have to have combat, and you have to have so many invasions, the whole thing; but the children were the key, and marriage.

Well, I wasn't going to get out in two or three years. I made all the invasions over there, but that didn't mean a thing. But because of the Silver Star thing, why, the U.S. Navy said that anybody with a Congressional Medal of Honor, the Navy Cross, or the Silver Star could get immediate discharge, no questions asked.

And, boy, I just couldn't wait to get out.

Dunning: You were ready.

Benedetti: Oh! Ready. And I had a job waiting for me. I had been talking to the coach up at junior college. He said, "If you can get back by September first, you've got a job, coaching and teaching." "There's no hope for that," I said. "I won't be home probably for another six months or a year." Well, when this came out, I was on board ship, one of my training ships, talking to the skipper of the ship, and the kid up in the booth was listening to the radio, and he heard this all-nav come over the wire, saying that this was the case.

So he came down, and he said, "Skipper"--he called me "skipper" because I was kind of in charge of all the LCTs. "You'd probably be interested in this," he said. "This all-nav

such-and-such just came over the wire." And he said, "It says that anybody with [one of] three medals could get immediate discharge." I said, "You're kiddin' me." He said, "No." I said, "Did you get the number of the all-nav?" He said, "Yes." "Good," I said, "I'll go down to the communications officer and find out what he knows about it."

So I go down to the communications officer, and he looked up the all-nav that came in, and he said, "Yes, it did." So I said, "Let me have it." He gave me a copy of it. So I go up to the captain, up to base, who was in charge of this training flotilla that I was in charge of. And he put me in charge. A great guy. Captain Matthews was his name. I'll never forget him. Little guy. Stood about here [demonstrates] to me, and tougher than nails. He was navy, came out of Annapolis. He was a captain, and he'd pretty much done the same thing I did, but he was over in the Pacific, and I was--he'd been over there a long time, just like I was in Europe.

I go into his office, and I said, "Skipper, I'm leaving. I'm going home." And he said, "What the hell are you going home for? Somebody die?" I said, "No. Pick up the phone and call communications and ask for all-nav such-and-such." And he was one of these bang-bang guys, so he picks up the phone and calls, and they read him the all-nav. He bangs the phone down and says, "Goddamn you. You can't leave. I just put you on this job. I want that thing finished." I said, "Skipper, I love the navy. I love my country. But the navy's not my cup of tea," I said. "I want to go home. I've got a job waiting for me." This was about August fifteenth.

So he said, "You're serious?" I said, "I'm dead serious. I would enjoy staying here, working with you, but, I'm just gonna go." He said, "I can't give you your separation papers." I said, "Just mail them to me. I don't give a damn, I've got enough." I said, "How about some money? Can you help me?" "Yeah, I can get you some money," he said, "I'll give you your advance."

So I went down to the pay officer and got my money, packed my clothes, and was gone. So I called Evelyn, and I said, "I'm going home. I plan to leave for Washington, D.C., because I can get a plane there, a navy plane, and fly to Treasure Island." And so I stayed two nights in Washington with family, and we went on, and we talked about this at length. I asked, "How serious are you about me?" And she said, "I'm serious. I really enjoy your company. I'm not ready to say that we want to get married." And I said, "Well, neither am I, but I feel likewise, and I want to go home and see how everything shapes up. When I get home, we'll keep in touch." So that's what we did.

I called just about every week, called her, and the more I was away from her, the more I wanted to see her. I guess she felt the same way. So I went through the football season, and at the end of the football season I called her and I said, "Well, I don't know what you want to do, but I'm ready."

Dunning: So this is two or three months.

Benedetti: This was two or three months, yes. So she said, "Well, I am too." I said, "Well, I can't come back East to get married. You're going to have to come out here." She said, "Well, that's all right. I'll get Mom and Dad to come with me." And I said, "Fine." So that's what we did. We got married in December of '45. And it's been--what is it?--fifty-five years? Fifty-six years this year. And it's been a wonderful fifty-six years.

We had Mickey, of course. She was two years old.

Dunning: That's Michelle.

Benedetti: Michelle. Beautiful girl, brilliant girl. She was the most brilliant of the family. She lives in Santa Rosa with another friend of hers, and the others are all married.

Dunning: I'm going to go back just a little bit. I am going to ask you about your children, but I had a couple of questions. From

the time you had dinner with Evelyn at the Blys to the time you got married, how much time elapsed?

Benedetti: Well, I came back from overseas in '44, and I met her almost immediately, so it was about a year and a half.

Dunning: Oh, okay. So it sounds like you really developed a friendship first.

Benedetti: Oh, yes. Sure did. Before. Yes, absolutely, yes. And I enjoyed her family. Of course, she'd never met my family. She came out here cold.

Dunning: And she isn't Italian.

Benedetti: No, she isn't Italian.

Dunning: What's her background?

Benedetti: Her background is she's Scotch, English, and a little bit of Indian. How much Indian? She thinks about a quarter. She doesn't really know what that Indian thing is, but it's on her mother's side.

Dunning: How was she received by your parents?

Benedetti: Very good question. You know, the Italians--my family was from the old country, and they never believed that you marry a person that's got a child and has been married. So at first, when I told them I was going to do this, of course, Mom sat me down and said, "Well, you know what you're doing." I said, "Yes, I do." She said, "You know you're taking on a big responsibility. You don't know how you're going to get along with that child." And I said, "Oh, I'll get along with the child. I'm not worried about that." So anyway, to make a long story short, she said, "Well, you're three times seven." She didn't say it in those words, but that's what she meant. And she said, "If you want to do it, you've got my support. We'll do everything we can."

The boss--he was indifferent. He didn't care.

Dunning: Your dad.

Benedetti: My dad, yes.

Dunning: And they didn't mind that she wasn't Italian.

Benedetti: No, they minded about that, but they minded more about the fact that she had been married.

Dunning: Right, and they thought probably it was a big responsibility for a twenty-three-year old.

Benedetti: Yes.

Marriage and Six Children

Dunning: Now, you adopted Michelle soon after you got married? And then you had five more children.

Benedetti: Five more children.

Dunning: Would you tell me the names of each of your children?

Benedetti: Sure. Bonnie was our first child of mine.

Dunning: And their birth dates, if you remember. We can fill that in later.

Benedetti: Yes, we'll fill that in later.

Dunning: Okay.

Benedetti: I can't remember them.

Dunning: Bonnie was--

Benedetti: Bonnie was born in--I don't know, but it was quickly after, probably a year, year and a half. Then we had Donna. Bonna and Donna.

Dunning: Bonna?

Benedetti: We call her Bonnie, but it was Bonna.

Dunning: Oh, okay.

Benedetti: And Donna. And then we had Dan, my oldest son, and then we had Herm. Herm is Gene, actually, but--it's so confusing.

Dunning: His birth name is Gene, like you.

Benedetti: Yes, but everybody knows him by Herm, and he goes by Herm. And then we had a little respite, and as an afterthought came Gina. Gina was about six years younger than--let's see, five or six years younger than Herm, yes. Now, they all live--the furthest away is Donna. Donna lives in San Francisco, but we see her all the time. She comes up at various times. She'll be up for the Fourth for two days. So yes, we have a real close-knit family, and we'll have about thirty-five people here for Fourth of July.

Dunning: That's great. When you think back to your children when they were young, are there stories that come to your mind about them?

Benedetti: Oh, there's a lot of stories. The kids used to dress up--they'd dress Dan up in girls' clothes, and Hermie, when he got a little older.

Dunning: The girls did that, the older sisters.

Benedetti: It was funny. The funny part about all of this was they all went to public school for kindergarten. We lived in Petaluma, and then they went to St. Vincent's for the first grade. We had a hard time at first with the first child because she'd made friends in kindergarten, and they were

all going to go to the public school, most of them, but then after that it was automatic that everybody--and she loved St. Vincent's.

Dunning: Was this Michelle?

Benedetti: Michelle, yes, after she got started.

Dunning: St. Vincent. That's in Petaluma?

Benedetti: That's in Petaluma. It's a very good school. It's a private school.

Dunning: K through 12, or K through 8?

Benedetti: K through 12, yes. They're separate schools. The physical school is separate.

Dunning: They all went straight through, though.

Benedetti: Yes, yes, mm-hm. And most of them went on to college and did well for themselves, yes.

Dunning: Now, what were your children like? Were they different, real different personalities from each other?

Benedetti: Well, each one of them was very different, yes. They all had a mind of their own, I'll tell you that! And, of course, I've got a mind of my own, so Mother was kind of the level-headed compromiser.

Dunning: She had quite a brood. She'd almost have to be.

Benedetti: And she was. She was fantastic. She was a great--[phone rings]

[tape interruption]

Dunning: You were telling me how level-headed and what a great mom Evelyn was.

Benedetti: Oh, she was an outstanding mother. We moved out here in '64.

Dunning: Out to Cotati.

Benedetti: Out to Cotati, and we built the house and moved out here in December of '64, and there was a lot of driving to be done.

Dunning: Back and forth to Petaluma.

Benedetti: Back and forth. Petaluma and then to the games, and Evelyn--you know, I was managing the co-op at the time. I had very little time to devote to the family. I would on weekends. I made it a practice that I wouldn't tie anything up on Saturdays and Sundays or a holiday, but during the week I was going all over hell, and traveling a lot. In those days, it was just myself. We didn't have a lot of help, and the co-op was a pretty good-sized co-op. So I didn't have a lot of time to spend with them. I couldn't even go to some of their games. I'd go to the night games, but when they were younger they were going to day games. And so Evie would pick them up, take them wherever they had to go. She'd make sometimes two or three trips a day to Petaluma.

Not only was she great from that standpoint, but she was great from the standpoint of being a mediator.

Dunning: I imagine things could get kind of heated with all those children.

Benedetti: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Of course, they all stuck together. [laughs] They took Dad on occasionally. And Ev would step in and say, "Now, wait a minute. We can do this and we can do that." And she'd work it out.

Dunning: So she made it easier for you to do your job.

Benedetti: Oh, no question. We've had a very close family. Of course, we were raised that way in my family. You always came home. When we were at USF, why, we'd come home, bring

friends, and the door was always open for whoever we brought. We'd bring six or seven guys home with us. And this house is the same way.

Dunning: Well, you have a nice big house and a lot of children, and they probably had lots of friends.

Benedetti: Oh, they did, yes. And some of the friends stay here. In fact, I got my grandson living with us now.

Dunning: Oh, really?

Benedetti: Yes. And it's wonderful.

Dunning: One of the ones that works at Clover.

Benedetti: At Clover, yes. So it's great.

Dunning: Oh, that's nice.

Benedetti: He's half black. Bonnie married a black person when she was up in Washington, and they had two children. Great kids, both of them. He went to M.I.T. He's brilliant.

Dunning: Your grandson.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: And what is his name?

Benedetti: Mkulima [pronounced em-COO-lih-muh]. We call him Em. Everybody knows him by Em. But he's a brilliant kid, sharp as a tack, and got a good, laid-back way--but does things. He doesn't waffle on anything. And Yana is different.

Dunning: Yana is his sister?

Benedetti: His sister, yes. She's a--what can I say?--she's a beautiful girl. Not married. Neither one of them are married.

Dunning: They're in their twenties?

Benedetti: Yes, they're in their twenties. But she is sharp, very detailed. Everything's got to be so precise. But she's a good kid, and she'll do fine. She's working, of course. She went to junior college. She didn't go on to college. She went to Sonoma State, I think, six months or a year and then she decided to go to work.

Dunning: How many grandchildren do you have now?

Benedetti: We have thirteen. No great-grandchildren.

Dunning: And do you think that's it for the grandchildren?

Benedetti: I'm giving them hell. I think that's it for the grandchildren, yes.

Dunning: Unless you get a surprise.

Benedetti: Exactly.

Family Values and Attitudes

Dunning: Now, how did you raise your children to be good people?

Benedetti: Well, the same way my family raised me. I don't know whether I'm a good person or not, but we were taught right and wrong real young, and I've tried to do the same thing. I think if you're right, you're right; and if you're wrong, you're wrong; and if you're wrong, you're punished. The punishment doesn't have to be severe, but they have to be aware that they've done something wrong. That's the way basically how we raised the family. And a lot of love, and a lot of togetherness. We did a lot of things together. Always did, yes.

Dunning: I'm going to turn this tape over.

##

Dunning: Have you found that there were certain ways that you raised your children that were different from the way your mother and father raised you?

Benedetti: I don't think so, no.

Dunning: Same values.

Benedetti: Yes. We were very poor when the children were young. We're still not much richer, but at least we've got something that we can show for it, and we don't have to count every penny, but when the kids were young, let me tell you, it was tough. I mean, real tough. Financially. Because they came -

Dunning: Really quickly.

Benedetti: Really quickly, and so, you know, you have hospital, you have doctors, you have everything. We had insurance, but it wasn't insurance like we have today. So it was a real tough struggle. My paycheck wasn't that big to start with.

Dunning: When you were at the creamery.

Benedetti: Yes. I became manager of the creamery, and even then I wasn't making that great a pay, but it was much better. For me, it was a lot of money. For us. Not me, for Ev and I. And Ev never worked.

Dunning: She never worked outside the family.

Benedetti: Never worked outside the family, no. That was the rule. My mother always told us, “Whatever you do, if you're going to have children, keep your wife home to talk to those kids because those kids have to be talked to every day.”

Dunning: And did Ev agree with that?

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Right straight along.

Benedetti: She never questioned it, no.

Dunning: Have you changed your mind about that somewhat in this economy?

Benedetti: I think it's one of the biggest problems we have in the country today, is family, and the lack of mother supervision. My mother always used to say, "When the children come home from school, they want to talk to somebody, and if Mother's not there, they're not going to talk. They won't talk to you; they'll talk to their mother." And that's true. No, I firmly feel that this is one of our biggest problems today.

I shouldn't say this publicly, but I feel strongly that women's lib has done a bad job for our family life, because women now wanted to be treated like a man. And I don't mean that in the sense that we're any better or any worse; that's not the point. The point is that they want to do and want to be treated like a man, and I've always put a woman on a pedestal. I was taught that, that they're very special, special people, and whatever happens, they've got to be taken care of.

Dunning: Some of your daughters and probably your daughters-in-law work.

Benedetti: Exactly.

Dunning: Do you have good discussions about that with them?

Benedetti: Oh, we certainly do, yes. But, of course, their children are pretty much raised now. But when they were younger, they didn't work, no. They were pretty good about that. But now, like, Bonnie's working. She's a nurse. She used to work on

a part-time basis occasionally but never on a full-time basis. Now she's in charge of a department up at Memorial Hospital, doing real well.

Donna has no children. She's in San Francisco. She's working, and her husband is retired. [laughs] I give him hell all the time.

Dunning: Retired young?

Benedetti: No, he's a little older than she is. And then Dan and his wife--Dan and Gary Imm are running Clover.

Dunning: Dan is president.

Benedetti: He's president of Clover. Doing a great job, by the way. And his wife--they have three children. They're all grown. But she stayed at home the whole time, and she's gotten now--like, in the symphony, she's on the board, and she's doing some work, I think, with the symphony, even. But there's no children at home now.

Dunning: I thought you told me a story about Dan's wife, though, that before they joined up with Clover Stornetta they had a milk route in Sonoma County?

Benedetti: In Marin County.

Dunning: So did she work right along?

Benedetti: No.

Dunning: Or that was mostly Dan?

Benedetti: But she would take out specials to Dan. If he ran out of something, he'd call Annie, and she would come.

Dunning: She was on call.

Benedetti: She was on call, and she'd come down and pick up whatever he had to have in the creamery and then take it out to him. She's a great gal. All of our daughter-in-laws and all of our husbands that are involved are very good, yes. We've have a great relationship.

Gina's husband is an engineer. She's an engineer. Now, she works. When she has to go pick up the kids or take the kids someplace, she does it.

Dunning: She has a more flexible schedule?

Benedetti: Yes. She's an engineer also. They kind of let her go whenever she has to go. I don't know how she does that. We couldn't do that with all 180 employees at Clover but we are as flexible as possible.

Dunning: Did you have certain ambitions for your children?

Benedetti: No, not per se, no. All I wanted were my children to be straight up and good, honest citizens. I hoped that they'd all go to school, and they did, and went on to school. So no, I think my expectations were more than carried out, yes.

Dunning: Two of your sons followed in your footsteps, so to speak, at Clover Stornetta.

Benedetti: I just have the two sons.

Dunning: Yes, that's right. Did that surprise you, or did you expect that it might happen?

Benedetti: No, it kind of surprised me, although when they were kids in school, they worked in the creamery, at the co-op, on summertime and all. We had a rule at the creamery that you couldn't hire family excepting for kids. You could hire on a part-time basis. And they worked from the time they were probably fourteen or fifteen years old, so they got to know the business pretty well. That's how Dan got this thing opened up.

There was a route for sale out at Bolinas and Stinson Beach and Point Reyes. Of course, I knew about it because they were dealing with me. So I called--Dan was working up at Fort Bragg, and his wife was with him, of course. They had their first child up there. Annie had her first baby, Niessia, up in Fort Bragg.

So I called them, and I said, "Listen, this route's available, and I think it would be a good one for you, and I think you'll make some money. And it's a good price." So he came down.

Dunning: It was a distribution job.

Benedetti: Yes. It was a route that went out to Bolinas, Point Reyes.

Dunning: Did your daughters ever consider going into the business in any way, or did you encourage that?

Benedetti: No, never encouraged it. I always kind of felt badly about that, but I hope that I could make amends in that respect at some future date, yes. But no, we have a tight-knit group that bought this business, Clover and Stornetta--we put them together; they were two separate businesses--and that all happened in '77, suddenly. We had a fire.

Dunning: Yes, I think we got a pretty good accounting of that.

Benedetti: Okay. So that's how. And so the six of us--

Dunning: That's when Dan and Herm came on, at that time.

Benedetti: Yes.

Dunning: Are there ways that you wanted your children's lives to be different from yours?

Benedetti: Not particularly, no. No, I just wanted them to be good citizens and good people and have some moral responsibilities, and I think that's all you can expect of a

child now. Now! Ever. That's all my mom could expect of me.

Dunning: You've always been very involved in community organizations. Did you pass that on to your children?

Benedetti: Yes, I have. Very much so. I told them, "You've got to give back what they give to you and give them all the time you can possibly give them," yes. My mother used to preach that.

Dunning: I remember. I remember you telling me that during our first interview.

Benedetti: Yes.

Thoughts on Raising Children

Dunning: Well, this is a pretty broad question, and you've probably answered it: How have your children changed your life?

Benedetti: That's a good question. Well, I guess they certainly mellowed me a lot. I was pretty determined and pretty straight-minded--not only straight-minded but had definite opinions, and I still do, but certainly not like I used to, so they've changed my life a lot, and to the better, I'm sure. I would say that basically the kids kind of--they always enlarge your life. There's no question. If they don't, there's something radically wrong.

But they did more than that with me because each one of them were different, and each one of them is an individual. I couldn't see through that at first. I finally learned. Ev kept telling me, "You can't deal with Dan like you dealt with Bonnie or Gina"--not Gina, but Mickey, the older one. But I found out that that was very positive. So each one has to be treated on a separate basis.

Dunning: And you learned that over time.

Benedetti: And I've learned that over time, yes. Sometimes the hard way. But Ev was a great mediator, can I say?

Dunning: It seems like she had some real good instincts.

Benedetti: Instincts, yes. Yes, just a great gal. And she helped a lot in calming me down sometimes, yes.

Dunning: Did you find the creamery and Clover Stornetta family friendly? I think we talked a little bit about this earlier, that mostly your work was real separate from your family, but if there was an emergency or something like that, you could go.

Benedetti: Oh, absolutely. No, even at the co-op we had a very family-style company, and I kind of insisted on that. Of course, when we brought Clover and Stornetta together, why, we all six of us said, "Look, we want to treat these people like we want to be treated, and our help is the most important people we got. We're only as good as how good they are, so we're going to go overboard and take care of them." And we have. So we've have a great relationship and good feeling, good vibes with the people.

Dunning: Were there times when it was pretty challenging to balance your career with your large family?

Benedetti: No question about it, yes. No question. And you've got to remember: I first got married in '45. When I went to work at the creamery--I don't know if I told you this or not, but I was coaching football, and that was my whole life. And teaching. But football--I used to spend hours making plays when I was in the service. I came back with a play-book about that thick [demonstrates], because I had a lot of time on my hands, and I just loved the game, and I made up my mind that's what I was going to do, and I did.

But then, when this job was offered to me--and I think I went through that--I left football, but in getting hired, I told Mr. [George] Dondero that I wanted to start a town team, and so I kept my hands in football until '51. So I had practices, I had games on weekends, and the kids eventually came to games, but some of them never did because they were too young. But Ev would always come and bring whatever kids that she could. We never traveled. We always played at home, because people--they'd want to come up to play here, because we could guarantee them more money.

So anyway, I had a full slate. I didn't have a lot of time.

Dunning: Right. Sounded like things were pretty hectic.

Benedetti: Yes, they were hectic.

Dunning: Well, looking back, what do you think has been the happiest times in your life?

Benedetti: Gee, I can't think of a bad time in my life.

Dunning: Really!

Benedetti: No, I really can't. We've had a great life. I really can't. I think all of my life has been great. We worked hard when we were young kids, but we had a ball, and my mother and dad were always loving and caring, and I mean we worked, from the time I was thirteen. And so--no, I can't--there isn't a thing I would want to change.

Dunning: It seems like a major turning point in your life occurred when you accepted the job at the cooperative creamery.

Benedetti: That was a big change.

Dunning: Were there other significant decisions that changed the course of your life?

Benedetti: Well, that was a big change. And then the second big change was when we bought Clover Stornetta, without any money. [laughs]

Dunning: It was a big leap of faith.

Benedetti: Oh, boy. I'll tell you! [laughs] For the first couple of years, we were really sweating it out, but it's worked out great.

Major Accomplishments in Life

Dunning: What do you think have been some of the major accomplishments in your life?

Benedetti: My family. That's probably the most major accomplishment. And I think the dairy business has been good to me, and I've enjoyed it. I never thought that I would, but I did. And it didn't take long for me to enjoy it. I think basically those are the two--our company now is a big, major thing for us. For me it was, when we started it, because it was a real challenge, and it worked out. Could have failed, very easily.

Dunning: It succeeded where a lot of the independents have gone belly up.

Benedetti: Oh, no question, no question. There's no more independents.

Dunning: You were doing something right. A lot of things.

Benedetti: Yes. Not I, the company.

Dunning: The group.

Benedetti: Yes. I never like to single myself out.

Dunning: Now, don't be modest. I'm going to ask you what do you think your strengths are?

Benedetti: Well, I guess I make up my mind quickly about something. I make up my mind quickly about people. If I can talk to a person for ten or fifteen minutes, I think I've got him pretty well pegged and know what kind of a person they are.

Dunning: That's like your mother, too.

Benedetti: Mm-hm. Yes, I think I have a lot of that. She's given me that. Aside from that, I hate to dilly-dally about anything. If I've got a problem, I like to say, "This is the way we're going to do it," and we do it. Sometimes I'm wrong; sometimes I'm right. But most of the time it's been right. I don't like to waffle and think about it and go crazy over it. I think it over quickly, and I try to put the pros and cons to it, and I go.

Dunning: You're a man of action.

Benedetti: Well, I don't know if I'm that or not, but I do like--I hate to even talk to people who give me this waffle business. I just--

Dunning: What, like going back and forth, discussing?

Benedetti: Yes. I like an answer.

Ongoing Concerns about Education

Dunning: Now, at this time in your life, if you were to give advice, any advice to your children or grandchildren, what would it be?

Benedetti: Well, same advice that I got, I think, is to have a family, take care of that family as best you can, and then take care of your country like it's taken care of you. I don't think there's anything else that could be asked of anybody. Pretty basic, I think. But that's what we were told. You know, we've got a

great country, and so many people have no idea what a great country it is and how many freedoms we have. Our forefathers gave them to us. Sometimes we overlook what they've given us, and start breaking them down, and that concerns me a little bit, about where our country is going. I'm not a pessimist. I'm an optimist from day one.

Dunning: Yes.

Benedetti: But I really am concerned. I'm concerned about there's no right and wrong anymore. We compromise everything. We compromise decisions, big decisions, and that's not right. At least, I was never taught that, and I've never lived that way. But otherwise, you know, I have some concerns about our country, but I'm not sure that we can't overcome some of the problems we have, if we come to our senses. But if we don't come to our senses, then I see our country going downhill fast, and I'm real concerned about that.

Dunning: We talked about that earlier, your concern about education.

Benedetti: I'm deeply concerned about education. You know, our country is based on an educated populace. Our democracy is based on that. If we don't have an educated populace, they can pull us by the nose, whoever wants to pull us by the nose, whether it's a dictator, whatever it is. They can sell you beans when they're telling you they're selling you ice cream. So education to me is the key. I don't think that we're educating properly any longer.

We get kids who come in for jobs with us. Did I tell you this?

Dunning: Yes, who can't read or write?

Benedetti: That's right. And have graduated from high school. Now, to me this is a tragedy. It's a tragedy for them, but it's a tragedy for our country, because those kids can be led. They can be led. And that worries me. So I don't know what we do about education. I think--from my experience with education, and I've had a lot of it--I think the biggest blow

we've had in education was the union. I think the union has weakened the structure of our people, because they have tenure; they have all the protection they needed; they didn't need anybody to come in and negotiate for them. I think that's really been--from that point on, I think our education system has gone downhill.

Now, you may not agree with me, but I feel strongly. I really feel strongly. And I'm not against unions, believe me. But I treat teachers, and I've always felt--and I was a teacher--I always felt teachers were in a class of their own: doctors, teachers, lawyers. And I have a quarrel with lawyers today because they'll lie about anything now. But they're professionals. They're not union people.

Teachers don't need anybody to guide them. They're smart. Some of the greatest influences in my life were teachers. And I mean that, from high school, grammar school on, and college. And I still look at them as next to my mother and dad, they did more for me than anyone.

Dunning: That's significant.

One of a few closing questions: Looking ahead, are there things that you want to do with your life?

Benedetti: No, there's not particularly anything. We've done some traveling. I'd like to do some more traveling if our health is available for us. If Evie gets strong again, we'll do a little more traveling.

Dunning: Where would you like to travel to?

Benedetti: Well, I'd like to go back to see the folks in Italy again. Ev would like to go to China. Her dad was born in China. We'd like to go to China and visit the area where he came from, where he was born. He was born in a missionary family. So there's some things I'd like to do.

Dunning: You're sort of semi-retired. You still have an office.

Benedetti: Oh, I still have an office, but I'm retired.

Dunning: And you're on the board at Clover Stornetta.

Benedetti: I'm still on the board, but I don't interfere with them in any way, shape, or form. Unless they ask me something, why, I don't bother them in any way, shape, or form. And they've done a great job. They're doing a great job, yes.

Dunning: Now, you've spent your career, almost your whole career in the dairy business. Do you have a vision for the future of California's dairy industry, where you see it's going?

Benedetti: Yes, I do, and I'm not too happy with where it's going. We're getting bigger and bigger and bigger. The farms are getting bigger and bigger and bigger. The dairies are getting bigger and bigger, buying out everybody. And I think that makes for a totally different concept of business. I don't like it. Of course, I was raised as a fighter, and I like competition, and we're almost eliminating competition.

Dunning: With the mega-dairies?

Benedetti: Yes. And certainly in the distribution business and the bottling business. There's none left, excepting a handful. And that's not good. It's not good. Of course, maybe I'm a dreamer, and I don't see what's good about being big and big and big. But I don't.

Dunning: Do you have disagreements with other people in the field about this?

Benedetti: Yes. And they know it.

Dunning: [laughs] And that's all you're going to say about it. I'm trying to get it out of you. You're very diplomatic.

Benedetti: No, I'm not. [laughs]

Dunning: Well, any other thoughts that you'd like to add about--anything?

Benedetti: No. I think we covered--

Dunning: We covered a lot.

Benedetti: A lot of bases here, yes. No, I don't think there is. I've enjoyed it.

Dunning: Same here.

Benedetti: I don't know whether you did or not.

Dunning: I've enjoyed it tremendously.

Benedetti: When somebody picks your mind, a past, why--you know, I've never given it a thought, and the family wants me to sit down and do something about writing or putting it on tape or something.

Dunning: Well, this is a head start.

Benedetti: A head start.

Dunning: Definitely. Well, if at a later time anything amazing comes to your mind, you can give me a call.

Benedetti: I sure will.

Dunning: And you can write it.

Benedetti: I sure will.

Dunning: We'll talk about it. But it's been a real pleasure, and I'm really thrilled that you were the first person in this dairy project to interview.

Benedetti: Well, you'll probably find a lot better as you go along.

Dunning: I'll be surprised. It's worked out real nicely.

Benedetti: Well, it has. I've enjoyed it very much. I certainly enjoyed your ease and your kind of fall-back--not pushy or anything else, and I appreciate that.

Dunning: Thank you.

Benedetti: I don't like people that come forward too fast, and you certainly did it in a fine, exemplary way. That's important if you want to get the most out of something, I think. At least that's the way I feel.

Dunning: Well, thank you very much.

Benedetti: Not at all.

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Judith Dunning

Judith Dunning is an oral historian with a specialty in community history. Among Dunning's projects are interviews with Italian immigrant women in Boston's North End, shipyard workers at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston, textile mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts, Kaiser shipyard workers in Richmond, California, and cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Dunning was writer and photographer for exhibits, *Lowell: A Community of Workers*; and *Fishermen by Trade: Fifty Years on San Francisco Bay.* The materials collected by Ms. Dunning are available in many public libraries throughout the United States and are used in interpretive exhibits in former textile mills, on a World War II ship converted to a museum, in traveling exhibits, dramatic productions, and adult literacy books.

Currently, Dunning is interviewing in the area of California agriculture.