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ON THE WATERFRONT:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

Joseph Perrelli

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FILICE AND PERRELLI
CANNING COMPANY IN RICHMOND, 1929

An Interview Conducted by
Judith K. Dunning
in 1986



JOSEPH PERRELLI

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning, 1986

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INTRODUCTION by Jim Quay

It is a great pleasure to introduce "On the Waterfront" to you. I myself was introduced to the project in September 1983, shortly after becoming executive director of the California Council for the Humanities. Both the Council and its mission of bringing the humanities to out-of-school adults were relatively new to me when Judith Dunning came to my office to talk about her proposal. Ms. Dunning wanted to document an important period in the life of the Richmond, California waterfront, but she didn't want to write a study for scholars. Instead, she proposed to interview most of the oldest surviving waterfront figures, collect historic photographs of the port and its workers, and to create from these an exhibit for the public. Would the Council be interested in supporting such a project?

Happily, the two dozen scholars and citizens who sat on the Council then were interested and, convinced of the project's importance, voted to fund Ms. Dunning's proposal in early 1984. Six years later, I now know what I couldn't have known then: that "On the Waterfront" had all the features of a typical public humanities project: a powerful subject, caring scholars, a resourceful and dedicated project director, and uncertain funding.

You can appreciate why even the best public humanities project--and "On the Waterfront" is one of the best--doesn't easily attract funding. In a state focused relentlessly on the future, the next quarterly statement, the next development, the value of such a project doesn't show up in a cost-benefit analysis. Who would care about the lives of Californians past? Who would care about a waterfront whose boomtime is passed?

The answer is: thousands of people, as Judith's project proved. First and foremost, Judith, who didn't just study Richmond, but moved to and lived in Richmond. Like so many project directors, she gave time and life to this project far beyond the amount budgeted. In the language of accounting this is called "in-kind contribution"; in the language of life it's called devotion. Those of us privileged to know Judith know that the project both exhausted her and enriched her, and she has won the admiration of those who supported her and the affection of those she has interviewed and worked with.

After Judith came a handful of interested scholars--historian Chuck Wollenberg, folklorist Archie Green, and oral historian Willa Baum--who gave their time and expertise to the project. Next, a handful of people at organizations like CCH, Chevron and Mechanics Bank, who thought enough of the idea to fund it. Finally, eventually, came the thousands of visitors to Richmond Festival by the Bay during 1985-87 and saw the photographs and read the excerpts from interviews and realized that they too cared about these people. And now, you, the reader of these interviews, have an opportunity to care.

In its fifteen years of supporting efforts to bring the humanities to the out-of-school public in California, the Council has seen two great themes emerge in the projects it funds: community and diversity. "On the Waterfront" embodies both. I think such projects are compelling to us because in our busy lives, we often encounter diversity more as a threat than as a blessing, and community more as an absence than a presence.

"On the Waterfront" gives us all a chance to experience the blessings of diversity. The life details that emerge from these pictures and voices make us appreciate how much the people of the Richmond waterfront are unlike us, how much attitudes, economies, and working conditions have changed. Yet because the portraits are so personal and intimate, we can also recognize the ways in which they are like us, in their struggles, their uncertainties, their pride, and their fates. What seemed like difference becomes part of a greater sense of who "we" are.

In the lives of waterfront people, we can also glimpse how a community grew and waned. Busy with our own lives, we often neglect the activities that knit communities together. Judith Dunning's project allows us to see what we are losing and how communities are created and destroyed. And so, "On the Waterfront" fulfills the oldest promise of the humanities: that in learning about others, we learn about ourselves. For the gift of these twenty-six lives, we can thank Judith Dunning.

Jim Quay
Executive Director
California Council for the Humanities

March 2, 1990
San Francisco, California

PREFACE

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

"On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," began in 1985. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Bay Area residents including early Richmond families, World War II Kaiser Shipyard workers, cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers.

I was first attracted to this shoreline industrial town located sixteen miles northeast of San Francisco in 1982 while enrolled in a documentary photography class. For ten weeks I concentrated on the Richmond waterfront, often accompanying the crew of the freighter Komoku on its nightly run from Richmond to C & H Sugar in Crockett. It was then that I began to hear colorful stories of Richmond's waterfront and the City's World War II days.

The question which captivated me in 1982 and still does is--what happened to Richmond when World War II transformed this quiet working class town into a 24-hour-day industrial giant? With the entry of the Kaiser Shipyard, the number of employed industrial workers skyrocketed from 4,000 to 100,000. An unprecedented number of women entered the work force. The shipyards set speed and production records producing one-fifth of the nation's Liberty ships. By 1945 Richmond's shipyards had launched 727 ships.

There were other enormous changes. During the wartime boom, Richmond's population rose from 23,000 to 125,000. The ethnic composition of Richmond and the entire Bay Area changed dramatically with the influx of workers recruited from the South and Midwest. There was little time to provide the needed schools and community services. Housing shortages were critical. Twenty-four thousand units of war housing were built but they were soon filled to capacity. People were living in make-shift trailer camps along the roadsides and the all-night movie theaters were filled with sleeping shipyard workers.

James Leiby, professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, called Richmond a "spectacular" case of urban development. What happened to other communities over a period of decades occurred in Richmond in a few years.

Some of the questions I wanted to explore in the interviews were--who were these newcomers to Richmond and were there reasons, beyond the promise of a job, which brought them in steady streams by trains, buses, and automobiles hauling make-shift trailers? And was this destination of Richmond, California, all that they had imagined?

Other questions were just as compelling. After the war ended and Kaiser and fifty-five other industries moved out of Richmond, leaving this new population suddenly unemployed, what made people stay? And for those who left Richmond and returned home to their families in the South and Midwest, what made them come back to Richmond a second time, often bringing relatives with them?

As intrigued as I was by this new population, I also wanted to know how Richmond natives experienced these changes. In a sense, as others moved in to find new homes in Richmond, the longtime residents were losing their once small and familiar home town.

Initially, I tried to locate people who were living and working in Richmond before the World War II boom. They worked in the canneries, at the Chevron Refinery, or made their living fishing in San Pablo Bay. Most of these first interviewees were California natives, born and raised in Richmond. But the majority of the interviewees for this project came from other places--Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Utah--all to start a new life in California. Each one had a story to tell. Armed with a tape recorder, a camera, and lots of unanswered questions, I set out to record these local residents.

INTERVIEW SETTING

With few exceptions, the initial interview took place at the narrator's home. Because I was recording a diverse group, the interview setting varied dramatically. One day I might be in a neighborhood where residents, fearing stray bullets, keep their curtains drawn and their lights dimmed. Another day I would be in a home with a sweeping view of the bay, built by a former cannery owner during the Depression.

When possible, I recorded additional interviews and photographed at locations where the narrators had lived or worked. Some of these included the former Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Ferry Point, Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and the last remaining World War II shipyard structures...since torn down. I also spent many days off shore. When interviewing Dominic and Tony Ghio, fishermen for over sixty years, I accompanied them on dawn fishing trips in San Pablo Bay. However, following a turbulent twelve-hour whale watching excursion to the Farallon Islands with former whaler Pratt Peterson, I vowed to continue my research on land.

When I asked some project participants to give me a personalized tour of Richmond to see what landmarks were important to them, all too often I was shown vacant lots where a family home, church, or favorite cafe once stood. The downtown, once bustling with movie theaters, dance halls, and department stores, is eerily quiet for a city of 82,000. I found that local residents are still angry over the loss of their downtown district during the 1960s redevelopment era. Longtime residents spoke emotionally of the city losing its center. Hilltop Mall, built on the outskirts of town and accessible by automobile, was no substitute for a shopping district in the middle of town. The struggle to rebuild the downtown and to attract new businesses is an ongoing one for the City of Richmond.

After the interviewing was completed, there were photo sessions in the narrator's homes and former work places, as well as meetings in which we went through family albums and trunks. Some wonderful photographs and the stories behind them were uncovered during this process. Copies are included in the individual volumes.

PUBLIC USES OF THE ORAL HISTORIES

From the early stages of this project, both the text from the oral histories and the collection of photographs, have been used in community events. Examples include photo panels and maritime demonstrations at Richmond's Festival by the Bay, 1985, 1986, and 1987; and Oakland's Seafest '87. An exhibition, "Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers," produced in collaboration with the Richmond Museum in 1988, was developed from the oral history interviews with Dominic and Tony Ghio.

In an effort to present the oral histories to the public in a form which retained the language, the dialects, and the flavor of the original interviews, I wrote "Boomtown," a play about the transformation of Richmond during World War II. "Boomtown" was produced by San Francisco's Tale Spinners Theater and toured Bay Area senior centers, schools, and museums in 1989.

A new direction for the oral histories is in the field of adult literacy. Nearly fifty years after the recruitment of men and women from the rural South and Midwest to work in the Kaiser shipyards, some former shipyard workers and many of their descendants are enrolled in LEAP, Richmond's adult literacy program, where the students range in ages from 16 to 85 and are 70 percent black.

Our current goal is to make a shortened, large print version of the oral history transcripts for use by adult literacy students and tutors. We think that by using the true stories of local residents as literacy text, there will be an additional incentive for adults learning to read. The characters in the oral histories are often their neighbors, friends, and families speaking in their own words on such topics as the Dust Bowl, the World War II migration of defense workers, waterfront industries, family and community life.

THANKS

"On the Waterfront" project has had many diverse layers, including the University of California, the advisory committee, a wide range of financial supporters, and of primary importance, a large group of interviewees. I want to thank all of the project participants who donated their time, enthusiasm, and memories to this project.

Special thanks is due Jim Quay, Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities, who has been a source of good advice and inspiration from the beginning. The Council's grant in 1984 got the project off the ground, kicking off the campaign for matching funds. Jim Quay's counsel last summer set in motion the completion of the oral histories by introducing me to the California State Library grant programs.

Bay Area historian Chuck Wollenberg and labor folklorist Archie Green have been my primary advisors, as well as mentors, from the early planning stages. Chuck provided insight into how Richmond's transition during World War II fit into the larger picture of California history. Archie Green reinforced my belief that as chroniclers of history we must continue to document the lives of working people.

From the preliminary research to the completed project, Kathleen Rupley, curator of the Richmond Museum, has been enormously supportive. Working in collaboration with Kathleen, and Museum staff Paula Hutton and Joan Connolly on the "Fishermen by Trade" exhibition was an invigorating experience as well as an excellent example of how two organizations pooled their talents and resources to create a popular community event.

Stanley Nystrom, a Museum volunteer and lifelong Richmond resident, has been a continuing resource to me. A local history buff, with a great sense of detail, he assisted me often.

Finally, I want to thank Adelia Lines and Emma Clarke of the Richmond Public Library, Sharon Pastori of the LEAP program, and Rhonda Rios Kravitz and Gary Strong of the California State Library for their support in making possible the completion of these oral history volumes and their distribution to several Bay Area public libraries which serve minority populations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my work I am most interested in recording the stories of people who are undocumented in history and who are unlikely to leave written records behind. For me, the strength of this project has been seeing the transformation in how the interviewees view their relationship to history. They came a long way from our first contact when a typical response to my request for an interview was, "Why do you want to interview me?" or "What's important about my life?" And "Why Richmond?" With some encouragement, many became actively involved in the research and the collection of photographs, and began recommending others to be interviewed. "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," became their project, with a life of its own.

This set of oral histories is by no means the whole story of Richmond. It is one piece of its history and one effort to generate community-based literature. I hope that it will encourage others to record the stories, the songs, and the traditions of our community members. They have a lot to teach us.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

February 23, 1990
Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
University of California
Berkeley, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Joseph Perrelli

Joseph Perrelli, age ninety-one, is the last of the founding fathers of the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company. "I'm the only survivor," he told me as I began interviewing him in July of 1985. We had three recording sessions at his home in the El Cerrito hills, built by the family in 1936.

Mr. Perrelli emigrated to the United States in 1908 from the province of Cosenza in Italy. After arriving at Ellis Island and passing the medical clearance, nine-year-old Joseph and an entourage of Filice and Perrelli family members boarded a train for the seven-day journey from New York to Morgan Hill, California. They arrived at 11 p.m., and when nobody was there to meet them, they built a fire from empty valises and coal found around the locked depot, and camped the night.

Soon they were reunited with Joseph's father, who, with money saved from working on the railroads, had bought a small vineyard in the Morgan Hill area called Paradise Valley. After a year, the family moved to Gilroy where thirteen members found work in the Bisceglia Brothers Cannery. Joseph, a young boy of ten, worked alongside his mother and sister cutting apricots and peaches.

In 1913, the Filice and Perrelli families built their own cannery on the corner of the Filice ranch in Gilroy. They bought horses to plow the land, and they planted tomato seeds and grew the plants on the sixty-acre plot. They worked with very little machinery, and except for the boiling vats and belts, the process was all hand labor. Seeing an opportunity to expand their operation, the families leased the former Bisceglia Brothers plant in San Jose in 1915.

After documenting Mr. Perrelli's family background and their start in the canning business in the first interview, we shifted our focus to the establishment and operation of the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company in Richmond for the second and third interviews. The history of the cannery is important, not only because it was among the largest independent canners in California, but also because it changed the face of Richmond's Inner Harbor. It also affected the local economy. The Filice and Perrelli families arrived in Richmond in 1929 at the beginning of the Depression and remained in business until 1958.

Mr. Perrelli credits businessman Fred Parr with wooing the company to a waterfront site on South Tenth Street now called Harbour Way. Mr. Perrelli spoke of Fred Parr's salesmanship as he recalled coming to view the Inner Harbor location with his brother John Perrelli and Gennaro Filice, president of the company. "As we walked on this plant site, as you walked, your foot slipped back because it was nothing but creamy mud. After we got through looking at it, Gennaro said, 'What do you think of it, Joe?' 'It takes a lot of courage to come here,' I said to him.' And it was true. We didn't realize what was involved in coming here on that kind of soil." Joseph Perrelli described building the plant on filled ground and first having to put in piles, anywhere from fifty to seventy-five feet long, as a "terrific undertaking."

Yet there were incentives for the company to relocate their headquarters in Richmond, in addition to having access to rail and port facilities and to being closer to the wholesale houses in San Francisco. The canning operation required a lot of manual labor, especially women, and this labor supply was available in Richmond. The Filice and Perrelli Canning Company was one of the only waterfront industries prior to World War II that offered jobs to women.

In addition to hiring local residents, the company brought a nucleus of seventy-five workers from their San Jose and Gilroy canneries. The Filice and Perrelli Cannery continued to operate its plant in Gilroy, but the San Jose organization was transferred "lock, stock, and barrel" to Richmond.

The Filice and Perrelli Canning Company stayed open during the Depression, but they were lean years. The value of the merchandise dropped, and competition from fellow canners in Oakland, San Jose, Modesto, Marysville, and Stockton was tough. An emotional part of the interview came during this discussion of the Depression era. At the time Joseph Perrelli was in charge of the company finances. He remembered the dreaded calls from creditors, and periods when family members worked without a salary. At one point Mr. Perrelli asked me to turn off the tape recorder. He became very quiet then tears poured down his cheeks. More than a half century had passed but the memories of lines of women standing at the cannery gate each morning hoping to be hired still touched him deeply.

The years between 1930 and 1940 were a challenge to the company, but like many other California industries, the turning point came during World War II. The Filice and Perrelli

Canning Company received government contracts to produce canned goods for men and women in the armed services. It was the first time that the cannery was not competing in the trade world.

One of the highlights of Joseph Perrelli's career was his development of the peach-pitting machine. He worked nights on it from 1933 until 1953 when he got a patent. "I was a stubborn bulldog," is how Mr. Perrelli described himself and his commitment to inventing a machine to pit peaches of better appearance and higher case yield. An advanced invention of the peach-pitting machine led to the organization of the Filper Corporation.

In 1958, the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company was taken over by a cooperative, the California Cannery and Growers. Many Filice and Perrelli workers transferred to the new company. The cooperative operated at that site until the early 1970s when the building was purchased by the City of Richmond. Joseph Perrelli did not return to the site of the once-thriving cannery. As he told me in his interview, "I felt bad when they closed it down, because that was our number one plant. We thought it was a stellar performer."

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

April 2, 1990
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
The University of California at Berkeley

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

(Please write clearly or type. Use black ink.)

Your full name Joseph Perrilli

Date of birth Feb. 7, 1899 Birthplace Italy

Father's full name Filippo Perrilli

Occupation Steam Boiler Operator Birthplace Italy

Mother's full name Fortunata Perrilli

Occupation Housewife Birthplace Italy

Your spouse(s) Marie

Your children Joseph F. Perrilli

Marjorie Giordano

Where did you grow up? California

When did your family first come to California? 1908

Reasons for coming Opportunity to improve our future

Present community El Cerrito How long? Since 1937

Education (and training programs) U.C. Graduate - 1927 - Completely
involved in the Fruit + Vegetable Canning business

Occupation(s) Fruit + Vegetable Canning Business

continued on back page

Special interest or activities

I have business intense interest to
improve operations. also participated in civic
activities such as school board membership ^{Community}

Ideas for improving Richmond's image

I don't presume to contribute
any ideas on this subject.

What do you see for the future of Richmond?

I haven't been active
in Richmond for many years & therefore I
don't qualify to comment.

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Childhood_in_Southern_Italy

[Interview 1: July 3, 1985]##

Dunning: What is your full name?

Perrelli: Just Joseph Perrelli.

Dunning: What year were you born?

Perrelli: Oh, a long time ago. I was born in 1899, February 7. So I'm eighty-six years of age.

Dunning: I would never know that looking at you. You look in great shape. Where were you born?

Perrelli: I was born in Italy.

Dunning: Could you tell me what town?

Perrelli: I was born in a little town which is about fifteen, twenty minutes from a larger city, which is better known than where I was born, which is Cosenza. That's in southern Italy. It's in Calabria.

Dunning: Is Cosenza the actual name of the town where you were born?

Perrelli: Yes. It's also a county, or a province. It's a provincia--which means province--di Cosenza.

##This symbol indicates that a tape or segment of a tape has begun or ended.

Dunning: Do you have any memories of that hometown?

Perrelli: The little town where I was born? Oh, sure. When I came here, I was nine years of age. I have very vivid memories as a little boy who tried to go to school. They had schools, but they had no strict regulations. You went to school. You left home to go to school. But then they would never communicate with the family whether you got there or not. Therefore, we went to school, and then we didn't go to school, and then we would go play, to the creeks where there's lizards and frogs and eels. We had a lot of fun and we didn't learn very much, although I did go to school.

Dunning: You learned about nature.

Perrelli: Yes, but it was a very loose style of schooling, because they didn't have what you call regulations to see that the children were actually at school. I remember that vividly.

Dunning: Where were your parents born?

Perrelli: They were born in the same general area. There were little towns on the hillsides. I guess they were, I would say, somewhat connected with the agriculture that was over there. The agriculture there was principally fruit trees. They had olives, which was one of the bigger--, and figs, which was probably bigger yet.

They even planted wheat on the more level country. Of course, everything was planted by hand. The land was tilled by hand with big hoes. The harvesting was all done by hand. So they would have these, not bales, but shocks--I guess they call them shocks--of wheat. After it was mature, after it was harvested, they would cut it by hand with a sickle. Then they would bring it to an area which was hard soil. It wasn't rock; it wasn't a concrete slab. It

Perrelli: was some kind of a soil that was hard. I really don't recall what it was made out of, or what the surface was.

Then they would drag a stone, a big heavy stone, marble, a big hunk of granite, I guess it was, by oxen principally. They would just drag it around the wheat that was put on this hard surface. That would remove the actual kernel of wheat from the head of the wheat, from the stalk. Then they would separate the wheat from the chaff with shovels made out of wood.

Dunning: They would separate the wheat from the chaff?

Perrelli: The wheat from the chaff, by throwing the wheat material up in the air. And the wind would separate it. So the wheat which was heavier, the kernel, would fall here, and the light chaff and straw-like substance would go in the direction which the wind blew it. That's how they gathered it. This goes back a long way. Oh, God, it goes back seventy-seven years.

Dunning: Right around the turn of the century.

Perrelli: Right. I was born in 1899. I came here in 1908. So that's about seventy-seven, seventy-eight years ago.

Dunning: Were your parents involved in this kind of farming?

Perrelli: No, my father didn't own any land. My father, when he got married, of course, he was a young man, and he was more inclined to work in the building end of life rather than farming. He didn't like the hoe. I don't blame him. It was a very, very crude and heavy instrument to swing. They used to hoe to vineyards, for instance, by hand. On the hillsides or on the level. You would dig in that soil with those hoes. You know, your back is not going to be too happy very long, because it was pretty difficult.

Father's Employment in French Africa

Perrelli: After my father got married, he really couldn't support his wife, and he couldn't find work. The work that was available wasn't lucrative enough for him to make a living. So he and a cousin, or a friend of his migrated to Africa, French Africa. That's a pretty brave adventure. That goes back to before I was born, because he was just married. I think there might have been a child, the eldest brother. It must have been maybe twenty years or seventeen years before I was born. So that goes back almost a hundred years ago that he went to Africa.

My father went to work for the French government. They were there to take the bark off of some kind of a tree that was abundant in the area. I guess it was in Abyssinia, in that area. He was there for four years. They gathered this bark and they shipped it to France. The bark had some kind of a sap in it that was a dye. Apparently dye has been looked for for many, many years. Dye was the principal reason for this bark. I thought it might have been cork. But then I talked to his co-worker's daughter, and she's better informed than I, and her brother. They told me it was for a dye.

Dunning: That really goes back. Did your father, during those four years that he was in French Africa, ever go back to Italy to visit your mother?

Perrelli: Oh, no. Not during the four years. First of all, it was difficult to travel. And secondly, it cost money to travel, to go back and forth. He was there all four years.

Dunning: Did your mother have a child?

Perrelli: Yes, they must have had a child. The oldest brother. He also came to this country after many years. We came to this country in 1908. When I say we, we were four brothers and one sister.

Dunning: Where were you in the family?

Perrelli: I was the youngest.

Dunning: You were the baby of the family?

Perrelli: I was the baby. And I'm the last of the founding families of the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company. I'm the only survivor.

Dunning: Your story is important.

Perrelli: Well, I'm the last one. I'm the only one that has the story available. Although I don't know everything because memories don't store things indelibly. You forget a lot of things.

Family's Move to America, Early 1900s

Perrelli: We came to this country in waves, more or less. One family of the Filices--we knew each other in Italy. There might have been some relationship, only through marriage. My father was the offspring of a Perrelli that married a Filice woman.

Dunning: Your grandfather married a Filice?

Perrelli: Yes. Then my father, he married into another family. And Tony Spadafore's mother and my mother were sisters. We were first cousins. In 1907 or thereabouts, this Filice family came to California. My father had been in this country working on the rail-

Perrelli: roads before that time. He came to this country after he left Africa and went home to Italy. He still couldn't make up his mind about staying in Italy because he felt he could do better elsewhere. So he came to this country.

Dunning: Was that before you were born?

Perrelli: Oh, yes, long before I was born. He couldn't make a living in Italy. Let's put it that way, at least not the kind of a living that he was aspiring for. So he came to this country. He first started work, I think, off in New York. Then he got into the railroads. He may have made fifty cents a day. That was his pay.

Dunning: Do you remember which railroad? Was it the trans-continental?

Perrelli: Yes, because he got as far west as Pocatello, Idaho. Then he got as far south as St. Louis, Missouri. I don't think he was in Canada, though, but he was in this country.

I would say that he was quite, shall I say, adventurous, because in those days to leave home--and of course, he was the only son. He was the only child of the marriage, you see. His father had been married before. He had stepbrothers. His father was an overseer of somebody's land. He was kind of a foreman or overseer of the operation of a vineyard or an olive grove, or a fig--I don't know what it was. He was a man of a, shall I say, more aggressive type. He was a foreman rather than just an ordinary working man. Not that working men aren't normal human beings, because we worked all our lives with our hands.

So when we came here, my father was aware of the necessity of having a job. When he agreed to come to California because the Filices asked him to come to

Perrelli: California, he said, "Well, I'll come to California only if I can find a job." He came to California in February, 1908.

Dunning: By himself?

Perrelli: No, with the two boys.

Dunning: With his two sons?

Perrelli: The older sons, not the oldest son. The oldest son already was married. He had a child too. Naturally he was on his own, making his own life. He had a family of his own, so my father just took the next two boys.

Dunning: What were their names?

Perrelli: Frank and John. John was the oldest, and Frank was next. Our sister was older than John. When he came here, he said, "Well, if I can't find a job, at least with two boys I can move around easier than I can with a whole family," a wife and a daughter and another son. When he came over here, he could find a job in the canning business. The Filices knew a family that were in the canning business from the same area. They came from the same area.

Dunning: In Italy?

Perrelli: Yes, in Italy. But they started in the canning business in California.

Dunning: In which town?

Perrelli: They were around Morgan Hill, and then they went to Gilroy. Then from Gilroy they moved to San Jose. The plant that they built in San Jose is still there. That goes back to around 1912.

Dunning: Is it still functioning?

Perrelli: Oh, yes.

Dunning: What is it called?

Perrelli: I think it's Sun Garden Canning Company right now. But it was Bisceglia Brothers Canning Company. It's a hard name. It's a little different spelling. It has to be that way, otherwise it wouldn't sound like Bisceglia.

So my father came over here, and then he decided he better get the family together. He wrote home and told us to make arrangements to come to California. We came with a group. There were some Filices. I thought we were thirteen as a group. We all got in the same boat. We went to Naples and we got on the boat. We landed in New York as a group.

Dunning: Let me backtrack a little. Your mother was in the group, your sister, yourself.

Perrelli: That was the Perrelli group. Then there were two brothers that were Filices. There were several sisters and first cousins that were in this group. I thought we were thirteen.

Ellis Island Immigration Center, New York

Perrelli: We landed in New York. We went through Ellis Island.

Dunning: Do you have memories of that?

Perrelli: When we got off the boat, we were led to certain rooms because they had to examine you. They examined you when you first enter, before you go on the boat.

Perrelli: They see if you have disease, and they take your blood pressure, and they give you a shot, check your eyes. That's a big thing. The greatest scrutiny was the eyes. I don't know why. We had gone to the doctors in Italy before we left, because we wanted to make sure that we could come across. We had our eyes checked and all that.

When we came here we had already been medically checked. When we got here, they even continued to check us. We would go from room to room. The men were separated from the women. Of course, I was only nine years of age, and I was with the men.

When they checked us over, they had the schedule of when we were supposed to leave and all those things. We couldn't speak any English. Well, we knew the word bread, I think. Of course, we had some food that we brought ourselves from Italy because we knew that we were going to be hard-pressed for communicating. We had little cards that somebody gave that said, "I really want bread, or I want cheese," whatever, food. Most of the time it was bread that we wanted. We did have salami that we ourselves produced.

Dunning: And they allowed you to bring that?

Perrelli: Oh, yes. And also, as we left Ellis Island, they actually demanded that we take this sausage--not sausage, it was bologna. We thought it was German. I don't know if it was German.

New York to California by Train, 1908

Dunning: Why did they do that?

Perrelli: So that we would have food. We got on the train after we left New York. I imagine because we were immigrants and dressed as we were, we always were kept in the smoking car rather than in the coach. We always were in the smoking car. There you had the vendors. They always had somebody selling trinkets and things of that nature. Because I was just a little boy, the vendors used to talk to me. They said a word, and then they would ask me to count. So I learned up to about eight when we were on the train. Of course, we slept on the seats, in the seats in the train. We were on the train for seven days, from New York to Morgan Hill.

Arrival in Morgan Hill, California

Perrelli: When we got to Morgan Hill, we got there in the evening, about eleven o'clock at night. The conductor just pushed us off of the train, because that's where we had to get off. But nobody was there to meet us. My father had gone to San Jose to intercept the train. Apparently he got mixed up somehow. He missed us so we were alone all night long. Luckily it was a nice November evening.

Dunning: You were at the train station in Morgan Hill?

Perrelli: Outside of the station. We couldn't get into the station because everything was locked. We had some empty valises that were cheap, made out of material, not leather, necessarily. So we ripped them apart. I was nine years of age. And they ripped those valises apart, and we found coal around the depot. In those days, I guess there was more coal. We built a fire even though it was November at night. So we kept somewhat warm. We were all right. We weren't uncomfortable.

Perrelli: The next morning somebody saw us, and he knew we were immigrants. He had a horse-drawn wagon, and he wanted to take us to the Filices, the family that were not too far from where we were by the depot. But we wouldn't go because we didn't know where he would take us. We sure as heck weren't going to take a chance on being hostages, as it were. Today it's very common. But he was smart enough to go the families and say there are some immigrants who must be part of your family.

The boys came over, my brothers, and the Filice boys. So we walked to their home, because it was only about three or four or five blocks.

Dunning: If you had only known that.

Perrelli: We could have gone that night. So we got together, and in the afternoon my father arrived, and he felt very badly that he missed us. But in those days, when you can't speak the language too well--my father had been here many years, but he was in the railroads, and he was with possibly all kinds of nationalities.

Dunning: Other immigrants.

Perrelli: Other immigrants. So he learned some words, but he wasn't fluent in the use of the English language. As a matter of fact, he never got to be fluent because we always were among our own nationality. You were thrown together and then you seek each other, which is normal, which is a natural thing. People of the same background would want to be together so that they would be more comfortable. The English language is not easy to learn, especially when you don't go to school.

Dunning: He mostly spoke broken English?

Perrelli: Broken English, although he was able to buy things and do things like that. We got along fine as far as that goes.

Family Buys Vineyard in Paradise Valley

Perrelli: My father, of course, was anxious to get into the farming. So as soon as we got here, he bought a little vineyard in the Morgan Hill area. They called it Paradise Valley, but it's right alongside of a creek there.

Dunning: He had saved enough to be able to buy land?

Perrelli: When he was here working on the railroad, every time he would accumulate a few dollars, he would send them home to his wife, my mother. She would put it in the bank, the national bank. Naturally they were very frugal. They had to be. So every penny that was sent there was at whatever rate of interest the bank paid. They kept it and we were able to pay for our trip and have a little money left over. He must have had several hundred dollars because he bought this vineyard. I don't know how much money he put down.

Then we had the vineyard, and we cut some trees down. We increased the acreage of the vineyard, and we thought we were going to be in the wine business. We did make some wine. The vineyard we bought did produce grapes, and we made wine. We sold it. I don't know how we ever got started to ship it to New York. We were immigrants ignorant of all the ways of commerce, and yet we were able to--we did it. Of course, I was about ten years of age by then. All I have are memories rather than knowledge of what we did.

Dunning: Did the vineyard have a particular name or label for the wine?

Perrelli: No, we just made red wine, zinfandel and carrignano were the names of the grapes that I can remember. We had different types of grapes. Zinfandel was the one that was the most common. We made a kind of a heavy red wine. But we didn't stay in the wine business, because when we worked with this Bisceglia Brothers, they moved their cannery to Gilroy--you see, we worked in Morgan Hill the first year.

Work in Bisceglia Brother's Cannery in Gilroy

Perrelli: When we went to move to Gilroy, it was just for the season. We worked over there in the cannery. I cut fruit. I cut apricots, and cut peaches. I was just a little boy, and naturally I worked next to my mother and my sister. Whereas my other brothers--Frank, he was just a kid, too. He would cut fruit. John was older and he dabbled in the mechanics of the cannery. He was inclined to be mechanical anyway. He was very good.

Perrelli: That's where we got our training. We got our training for the canning business in this cannery that the Bisceglia brothers had, that we were hired into.

Dunning: Did most of that thirteen-member family unit that come from Italy work in the cannery?

Perrelli: Yes, we all worked in the cannery. As a matter of fact, there were more of us because there were other Filices that were already here. When we got together, we were quite a good group. So we were comfortable. We were socially together. We got along fine.

Perrelli: Our activities were working. That was the thing. We worked at the cannery. My mother worked. My sister worked. The women of the other families worked. We worked for Bisceglia Brothers Canning Company. They paid us what they felt like paying us, or what the rates were, which was maybe nine or ten cents an hour, if that, like seven and a half cents on a hour, maybe five cents an hour, who knows. I don't remember. I think my brother John was getting something like seven and a half cents an hour.

The women used to cut fruit, so many boxes. They would pay you so many cents per box. A box in those days was a sixty pound box. I cut maybe three boxes in a day. I would make, say twenty-three, twenty-four cents a day. My mother would make a little bit more, possibly, but not too much more.

Dunning: This was for well over an eight-hour day too?

Perrelli: Oh, yes. We would get started at seven o'clock in the morning. We would get started when we got there. There were no hours. We just started to work as soon as we got there. The volume was small. The cannery was primitive. That's the kind of a background we have.

Mother's Background

Dunning: Before we get on anymore, I have a sense of your father, in that he was an adventurer, he was the one that came here and found work, but could you tell me a little more about your mother? What was her name? What was she like?

Perrelli: She was a little woman, small in stature. She was just a housewife, because she had no education, never

Perrelli: went to school in her life. My father went to night school. The Filices, they had the same kind of a background. They were farming. They were probably a little better off than we were, because at least they had a project. They were working for somebody that owned this vineyard. They had vineyards and they had other crops too. They lived in another little town. They didn't live in the same place where we lived. My mother used to go visit them. There might have been some relation because of the marriage. We were related to some extent.

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Perrelli: It's long and involved, and if you want to get the history of the whole family, it's over a long period of time. Shall I go back to Italy, or stay in California? We were just talking about where they lived and what they did, what the Filices did.

Dunning: I was trying to get a real sense of your mother.

Perrelli: My mother was just, as I said, a housewife. She had four boys and a girl. She had a pretty good-sized family. She had to make food available, because my father was the one who provided the few funds to keep the family together. Naturally, my mother had to be a good manager to make the money go a long way. But she did a good job because she was very frugal and wasted no food.

Our clothes were clean, but they were homemade. She made our shirts. She made our trousers. Once in a while she would go to Cosenza to buy things, especially materials to make dresses and make things for herself and for us, especially shirts and things of that nature. She was pretty good at making shirts. She could make collars, which was the difficult part of a shirt. At least that's the impression I gathered. She used to say that she put collars on

Perrelli: shirts for the women that were not exposed to that sort of a thing. They probably had to work in the farm, in the vineyards.

Everybody worked over there [Italy]. Except when they had children, of course, they had to take care of the children. The women, the young ones, especially when they were beginning to be able-bodied to work, they would have to work. If you want to eat, you have to work over there. Over here, you should do the same thing too.

Dunning: When I think of your mother, she's just married, she has one baby, and her husband leaves for four years. Did she ever talk about that when she got older?

Perrelli: No, that was a common thing that happened all the time. Everybody from where we were, not everybody, but a lot of men, they left and they went to another country. Well, my father went to Africa, but other people would usually come to the United States of America and Canada. The United States of America had a quota system which only permitted X-number of people to immigrate. Canada was a little more open.

Stories of First Family Members in the United States and Canada

Perrelli: Gennaro A. Filice was the president of the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company. He and this Carmine Filice came to Canada back around, it could have been 1906. I was about seven years of age. I could still see him going through our little town and going to Cosenza to get on the train and then go to Naples, and from Naples go on the boat and go to Canada. They worked on the railroads, on the Canadian-Pacific railroads.

Perrelli: Gennaro Filice was a waterboy, and the other boy, I guess, was a little heavier and a little older. He worked on the railroads. They were there until, I imagine, 1909, 1908, and they joined the family. They were on the East Coast. They migrated little by little, and they came to California to be with their family.

It's quite a venture. You take an ignorant person and he just goes from pillar to post and he does a job here and a job there. So you kind of migrate. You follow the jobs. My father had a different experience. My father, when he came to New York, he came in the times when they had contract labor. He was not a slave, as it were, but they were contracted. So, many bosses provided men for contractors of crews for the railroads.

There were so many men on the section that were building the railroads. Some handled the ties; some handled the rails and the spikes. He was actually under the direct control of the bosses of these crews. In those days, the Irish--because they could speak English--they became the foremen on the gangs.

My father was happy with his work because he was very frugal and he saved every penny he possibly could. He even baked his own bread, even though he could buy a loaf of bread for a few cents. He would make a little oven. He would dig a hole, say in the side of a hill and then put sticks and dry twigs and build a fire and get the little hole hot enough so he could make his own bread.

That's the kind of a life they led before the time that they migrated to California. My father, of course, he went back and forth to Italy a number of times. In other words, he was here maybe a couple of years, three years, and then he would go home to his

Perrelli: family. And the children were born as a result of this migration.

I was, of course, the last born. When we children grew up and became closer to military age, like my oldest brother of the ones who came together to California, who were in the canning business together, he was about thirteen when they left Italy. Papa thought, well, the first thing you know, they'll pull him in the army. He didn't look forward to that event. The oldest son [Pasquale] the military did not take, because he left home to help earn a living for the family.

Dunning: He was the sole support.

Perrelli: Or the father. So they didn't bother the oldest. My father never was in the military. He didn't think too much of becoming a soldier. That was another reason why he was sort of leaning towards leaving Italy to come to the United States.

Dunning: I'd like to get an idea of your impressions of America before you arrived from your father's trips back and forth. Did you have a vision of what it was like?

Perrelli: No, we didn't. It was sort of a space in some other country that you went to work to. You worked in it, that's all. I had no idea what it was like.

Dunning: You didn't have the impression of the street paved with gold?

Perrelli: No, we didn't have it, because my father had been there. He actually worked, and he knew that there was no gold on the streets. You had to earn it.

When he went to New York City, then he became part of the contract labor gang. So he was shipped or put on the railroad, or put on the places where they

Perrelli: needed to build railroads. As I said, he got as far west as Pocatello, Idaho. He was always desirous of coming permanently to this country. He was thinking of buying some land when he was around Idaho because he had a few dollars.

At that time he was with his brother-in-law, Ralph Imbrogna. They were working together. They were working in the same area. But his brother-in-law worked in the coal mines. My father didn't want to go underground. He said, "No, I want to see the sun." So he would rather work on the railroads. His brother-in-law was paid more too. He was working in the coal mines because they were paying him a higher rate of pay. My dad felt that it was dangerous to work in the mines, so he kept away from it.

My father's brother-in-law didn't buy any land because he was still a single man. He had a sweetheart in Italy. He didn't want to buy land because buying land would tie him to the country. He wanted to go back to get married.

He was a young man, unmarried. He was working the mines looking for the day when he would have enough money to go back home and marry his sweetheart. I remember her, as more like a dream. I can't place her physically.

I remember my grandmother on my mother's side. She lived with her brother, my father's brother-in-law. At that time, when I was a little boy, to me she looked like she was a tall woman. But she couldn't have been tall, because I was a little boy and everything looked big.

When we went back to Italy--this was in 1959--I visited the community that we lived in, that we left. There was a church that to me looked like it was

Perrelli: immense. When I saw it in 1959, it was a little bit of a church. Dimensions were quite different. It was quite interesting when I look back.

Dunning: Was that your first trip back?

Perrelli: Yes. We came here in 1908, in November, and we went there in '59. It was about fifty-one years that we hadn't gone back. We developed this business, we were in it for forty-four years. We sold out, really, to a cooperative in 1958. Then in 1959 we were not occupied with our working. I was free to travel. So I took my two children and my wife, and we went to Europe. We went to Paris; we went to Switzerland; we went to Italy, principally Italy. We were in Italy five or six weeks.

Dunning: Did you still have any relatives there?

Perrelli: We had relatives on my mother's side. As a matter of fact, this man that worked in the mines, his daughters were still alive. They were still in Italy. We saw her, I guess the children were there too. They were grown up children. Some of them were married, even. We only saw her for a few hours because we weren't about to stay in that little town. We stayed in Cosenza, the little hotel over there. It was a jolly hotel. They had elevators in it, little small elevators. The town was a quite big city, several hundred thousand people there. It's quite a big city now.

Dunning: Going back to the 1908 period when you were leaving Italy, did you have any real strong feelings when you left Italy?

Perrelli: No, we were anxious to come here. We were really anxious. All of our neighbors, and people that knew us, they were telling my mother that she was going to miss what she had over there. We owned our own home

Perrelli: in Italy. We owned our own furniture. When we left, we sold everything, our house, our furniture. Our cousin hired a horse-drawn vehicle to take us to Cosenza, which is about five or six miles. He escorted us to the train so we would be comfortable.

When we got to Naples, we were run through the medical examinations and all that. Our cousin made us feel comfortable when he took us from our little town to Cosenza. Then we were on our own. Of course, we joined with the Filice family. There were thirteen of us.

We were on the boat for--it seems to me we were on the boat something like eleven days.

Dunning: That seems about right. I lived in an Italian neighborhood in Boston for eleven years, and I interviewed a lot of the immigrants. I'd say the trip was about eleven to fifteen days.

Perrelli: I think it was about eleven days we were on this boat. For a little while it was pretty rough. I got seasick just for one day. It was pretty rough for a couple of days. We must have gotten to a storm. And the boat was just going like this. I thought we were going to dump over. Then it would go this way. Of course, we came steerage, the cheapest possible way.

There must have been some little tin cans in the boat, because every time the boat went this way, you could hear that little tin can roll. Where we were, we were in the bunks, I was just scared to death. I tried to go up above deck. We were down below. I tried to climb the stairs. When the doggone boat went this way, I had to hang onto the stairs, otherwise I'd have fallen back. It was really rough. But it was only a matter of a couple or three days, and then it cleared up.

Dunning: Out of that original thirteen in the group that came, did everybody pass their medical examination?

Perrelli: Yes. We all stayed together. We got to Morgan Hill together. That's where we ripped the valises to make a fire. We were comfortable. There was a peak down there. Murphy's Peak, I think is the name of it. It's still there, of course. I look at it every time I go by there. I say that's where we landed. I was wondering if we had to go over that peak. As a kid, I said, "I wonder where we have to go." But I liked it. As soon as I got here, I liked it. I really enjoyed it. As soon as we landed here, I was comfortable. I was very happy to be here.

First Impressions of America

Dunning: Do you remember some of your first impressions of this country?

Perrelli: We came across on a train. We went through, naturally, all the plains. There was a lot of grazing. We went through these farmlands and also just grazing land. We would see cows. I remember as we looked out of the windows of the car, we could see slaughtered cattle, I mean cattle that were killed by the train. There were no fences. We must have counted in the neighborhood of forty individual cattle on the one side of the train. We counted them because we were flabbergasted, especially the people a little older than me. I was the youngest. The cows must have got caught on the railroad and the train hit them and knocked them over to one side.

We also would see, as we went through on the train--What is it? It isn't a chipmunk. What is the one that sees it's own shadow?

Dunning: The groundhog.

Perrelli: The groundhog. We saw so many of those. I didn't know what they were. I thought it was a little bug. It was like a little animal, like a little squirrel. You just look out of the window and you look at the landscape and you go through. I don't remember forests. I remember just plains and ground, just fallow, no growth of any kind. I don't remember seeing even any wheat fields, to be honest with you. I don't remember those.

We must have come through Sacramento, because we came to Oakland. Then from Oakland we got on the ferry. I remember I bought a hot dog, the first time I ever had a hot dog. We went across to San Francisco. When we got to San Francisco--this was 1908, it was two years after the earthquake--we got on a horse-drawn vehicle. From the ferry, they took us on this horse-drawn vehicle, and they brought us to Third and Townsend to the train.

We boarded the train, and then the conductor pushed us off of the train at ten or eleven o'clock at night in Morgan Hill. There was no one to meet us there and everything was locked up. We pushed on the door, hoping it was open so we could get inside. But it was locked. Then we became a little frightened, wondering whether or not somebody might come out and give us the devil for knocking on the door. But it was just a little depot.

We did go towards a light and it happened to be a train coming, a big bright light. When we realized it was a train, then we scattered. We were walking on the railroad. We scattered; some were on one side; some were on the other side, because we had to get out of the way. We did.

Dunning: That's quite a story. It sounds like something out of a film.

Perrelli: Yes. After all, life is a story. It's events, day-to-day events. That's what you build. That's what history is.

Schooling in Morgan Hill

Perrelli: Then when we got to Morgan Hill, I went to school. We started school. We got here in November, so we must have started school in January.

Dunning: What grade?

Perrelli: Oh, I started from the very first grade. I was close to ten years of age.

Dunning: So you were one of the biggest kids in the class?

Perrelli: I don't know if I was biggest, because I was small. I guess I was bigger than the little kids of six years old. They started to teach me the alphabet, naturally. In those days they did not teach the alphabet very well. In my case, they gave me little cardboard alphabets, a little cardboard which had A, B, C, D, on it. One an A, one a B, one a C. Then I was to match the letters in the book with the letters in the little cardboard pieces, but they never bothered to tell me what the word sounded like. Then I found out.

One time there was a test. I don't know if it was a test in the first grade or the second grade. It could have been the first grade. The teachers said, "Write 'house,'" or another word, "can," or some

Perrelli: simple word. But I didn't know what they sounded like.

Dunning: No one ever said it out loud?

Perrelli: No, if she had said number one, number two, number three and number four on the page, I probably would have been able to write. Because she said the word, the sound, it didn't mean anything to me. All I knew was the sequence of the letters. So it didn't mean anything to me. I never forgot it. To me it was kind of a shock. I became panicky because I knew that I couldn't do it.

Dunning: Were there other immigrant children in your class?

Perrelli: No, I don't think so. I was the only one there. I had a brother. Frank must have been with me. Yes, we were together. We were in the same "boat." We didn't know anything.

Dunning: The other children, were they mostly American children?

Perrelli: They were mostly American children. To us they were American children.

Dunning: They spoke English.

Perrelli: Yes. When we were out in the schoolyard, we were Dagos. They made us feel inferior. We stuck by our guns. After a while we got so we could tell them to go fly a kite. We would talk to them in Italian. Sometimes we would even fight with them, because kids, you know, are kids. Then as we got along a little further on, we learned a few words. But we learned more from the children in the schoolyard than we did from the teachers in the class, to be honest with you. At least we had the sounds.

Dunning: Yes, because children are always talking.

Perrelli: They talked and the sound was there, whereas when the teacher gives you those little cardboard pieces to match the words, it was just like nothing. There was absolutely no education there at all. I criticize that severely now, and before when I became aware of what it was. I was really put out, because I was at a complete disadvantage.

As we got along in school--we weren't the dumbest in school either, because we were very ambitious. We wanted to learn. We were just as alert as the next guy. As a matter of fact, in a lot of places we used to be at the head of the line.

They used to put on a spelling match. I was at the head of the line. We had a teacher that had a New York accent. She was completely a New Yorker. I was at the head of the line and she gave me the word "mark." She didn't pronounce it "mark." I'll never forget this, because it was a little country school, there were four classes in each room. And she says "mark." And I hesitated, so I couldn't spell it. I said, "Mock? M-O-C-K, or something?" So I missed it.

I went at the lower part of the line. From the top I went down to the bottom. You know how they rotate you. When the other child spelled it M-A-R-K, "Oh," I said, "mark!" She didn't like it, see. But I was angry. It was about third grade. At that time I had first, second and third; I was educated. I felt that I was given a bum steer because she didn't know how to pronounce it. [laughs] I've never forgotten that.

Then I went back. It must have been about 1911. We went to a little school they called the Machado School, which was in this Paradise Valley, where we

Perrelli: had the vineyard. The three of us would go to school, John, Frank and Joe. We were all in the same grade.

Dunning: So you all started off in the first grade?

Perrelli: Sure. There were four grades in each room, because there were only about four or five children in each class anyway. Maybe five, it depended. So one teacher had four classes. It was a country school. It was right near a little creek. We were given a twenty-five minute recess once a day. Once in the morning, once in the afternoon. So we could have a pretty good period of time outside. We could play. We played baseball. After a while I got to be catcher at the baseball. I got a ball in the chin and that knocked me out because the guy at the bat just tipped it. I had the mitt here, and it went over the mitt and hit me in the neck here. That was one of the experiences of a child.

Dunning: Did you work in the vineyards after school?

Perrelli: Yes, we did in the springtime. We had a pronged hoe. We were to dig around each individual vine. Of course, we didn't like that very well. But my father needed help, so he would ask us to--he wouldn't ask us, he would tell us to do it. We had to work. But that didn't last too long.

Dunning: Was your father working in the vineyard full time?

Perrelli: He worked in the vineyard. He had a horse with a plow. He would plow the vineyard. Then we had to dig around to get the dirt loosened around the vine, because there were weeds in there so the growth would be better. We worked from the very beginning, besides working in the cannery.

Beginning of the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company
[Interview 2: July 18, 1985]##

Dunning: During our last meeting we talked about your family's emigration from Italy to California, your early schooling, and work in your family vineyard in Morgan Hill. I know you did want to wrap up in this session, so I thought we would start with the Filice and Perrelli Company. I want to ask you how the family first began the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company and where it was first located.

Perrelli: The Filice and Perrelli families were three families really. The two Filice families were very closely related. They lived on the same piece of property. They had a little orchard, a little ranch in Gilroy. They purchased the property and then they planted some trees. I think they must have been prune trees. We had been working in the cannery since the time that we came to this country.

The first year we worked in Morgan Hill, because that's where these people were located, Bisceglia Brothers Canning Company. We were exposed to the different jobs that were available. I was not working because I was too young, although I was cutting fruit. I didn't work on any machine--the machinery in those days was practically non-existent. It was all practically manual labor except the machines that sealed the cans. They were supplied by the can companies. In our case it happened to be the American Can Company, which is still in existence. It's a strong company. So we learned something about the canning business as we were exposed to it at this Bisceglia Company.

Then they moved from Morgan Hill to Gilroy and enlarged the operations. I think they went into an existing building, which was right near the railroad

Perrelli: track. That made it more convenient for them to receive fruit. In those days fruit was shipped, peaches were shipped from Modesto and Marysville in boxcars, in cattle cars because they were open so the ventilation was there. It wasn't the best way to handle it, but that was the only way we could do it because there were no motor trucks then.

There were no tractors in those days. As a matter of fact, when we first started to go into farming and canning, we did the farming. We planted the tomatoes, and we harvested the tomatoes, and we canned them all in the same ownership, practically. There was no one outside of our family that planted tomatoes for us. We planted our own tomatoes.

Dunning: Always?

Perrelli: Just the first year because we only canned a few thousand cases. We leased a hundred and twenty-five acres of land, but we only planted maybe fifty or sixty acres of tomatoes.

To go back to our experience, we worked for Bisceglia Brothers in Gilroy until 1912, I believe. Then the Bisceglia Brothers decided to move their cannery to San Jose on South Tenth Street. The cannery is still there but under a different name. Later on, after 1913, they also added a winery adjacent to the cannery. They were ambitious and apparently they were financially able to do it.

But the canning business was in the doldrums. It wasn't very good. We got started in 1914. In 1912 and '13, we worked for them. The last year we worked for them, we worked in San Jose.

Dunning: The whole family?

Perrelli: The whole family.

Dunning: Did you still keep your land in Morgan Hill?

Perrelli: Oh, yes, we still kept the land in Morgan Hill. Because San Jose was twenty-odd miles from where we lived in Morgan Hill, we felt it was too far to travel to go, just like gypsies, bringing all our furniture and things to go into a rented home. So we felt that we couldn't carry on like that. We decided among ourselves that maybe we ought to go in the canning business ourselves, on our own.

We decided in late 1913. We got together the three families, two Filices and one Perrelli. We were about evenly divided. We were three sons in the Perrelli family. In the Filice family there were four sons. They were a little older than the Perrellis. But it was just a matter of maybe a year or two. We were all young people. Our parents, as I said before, they were not really in the management of the business, or the starting of the business because they couldn't hardly speak English, although we were always talking things over and they expressed their opinions.

We decided in 1913 to build a cannery. The cannery was built on a little piece of property which was on the corner of the Filice ranch. They had this prune orchard. We cut a few trees down which were only three years old. They were just beginning to grow, to branch out. We cut a few trees down, and we put a cannery there.

Dunning: Where exactly was the Filice ranch?

Perrelli: It was on Orphans Home Avenue. At that time it was in the northeast part of Gilroy. We built the cannery there. We did everything ourselves. We built everything. We bricked our own boilers. My father was a bricklayer and my brother John was also kind of a bricklayer. Mr. Filice, Mike Filice, Sr., he was pretty handy too with carpentry and bricklaying. It

Perrelli: was all native ability. You do it and you do it. In other words, if you don't try, you'll never do it.

So we built the cannery. It was only a small one. It was sixty by sixty. We didn't need too much equipment because in those days everything was hand labor. There was nothing but belts and boiling vats. The only thing we had that was somewhat mechanical was a hoist that lifted up the full cans and set them into the boiling water so that we could cook the tomatoes that were canned in those boiling vats. There was very little machinery. The only machines, that we had were for sealing the cans and they were supplied by the can company. And we paid rent on the use of them.

So we started. We canned in the neighborhood of twenty thousand cases of tomatoes.

Dunning: How many would be in a case?

Perrelli: Twenty-four cans. That's the basic measurement of a case, a two-and-a-half can, there's twenty-four cans in the case. Then, of course, we would can some large cans, which was the number ten can. In that case, there's six cans in the case. Those were for restaurants and hotels.

Gennaro Filice, the Company's First President

Perrelli: But we didn't have any trade. We didn't have any place to sell it to. We had no customers. So Gennaro Filice was the president of our company. He was only in the neighborhood of twenty-one, twenty-three years of age. He ventured forth to San Francisco. Luckily, we connected with a very fine broker, a fellow by the name of M. H. Turner. Through him we made contacts with the wholesale houses in San Francisco, one of

Perrelli: which was the William Kluff Company. That outfit discontinued business after World War I, I think. I know that they disappeared from the horizon. So they must have decided to quit business. I don't think they went broke. They just quit.

That was the starting outfit. I really don't recall names of other local buyers, because it's so far back. I was too young to be in any department.

Dunning: You were still a young teenager.

Perrelli: I was only about fourteen or fifteen. But Gennaro became very close to this Mr. Turner. Mr. Turner took a liking to Gennaro. He was sort of an adviser to us, too, especially in the sales end of it. He made contacts for us as time went on. As the years rolled by, he connected us with brokers in other parts of the country, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, St. Louis, Kansas City. We had a tremendous, a very fine chain of brokers. That's how we sold our merchandise, through brokers all over the country, as we grew bigger and we could supply the trade.

Dunning: But it really started off with that connection with Gennaro Filice and Mr. Turner.

Perrelli: That's right, Gennaro and Mr. Turner. Mr. Turner liked Gennaro, and Gennaro was just a young man.

Dunning: Speaking of Gennaro's youth, how was he chosen to be president?

Perrelli: Well, he was older and the more aggressive of the younger generation that could speak a little better English. Frank Filice, who was older than Gennaro-- and they were brothers-in-law--he couldn't speak English. He was less able to speak English. Gennaro had been in Canada. He was a little boy that left Italy a couple or three years before that. He and a

Perrelli: relative who was probably a year older, they went to Canada. They weren't allowed to come to the United States because the quota was filled. So they went to Canada and they worked on the railroads.

Gennaro was a waterboy and Carmine Filice worked on the railroad. He was older. I guess they worked for the Canadian Pacific Railroad. They came clear across Canada and they finally stopped at the Pacific Coast, and from there they migrated to California. By that time, I guess the quota was available. Or maybe the fact that they came from Canada made it easier.

Dunning: He seems like an adventurous and ambitious soul.

Perrelli: Oh, yes. And he had a nice personality. He was well received. That's the very beginning.

Dunning: Was it still very much a family operation? Did you hire anyone from outside the family at that point?

Perrelli: The first year, the plowing of the land that we had leased, and the planting of the seeds, and then making the tomato plants, and growing the tomato plants as small plants, that was all done in the family. We didn't hire a soul because we didn't have any money to pay anybody. We couldn't afford to have anybody on the payroll. Besides, we were enough in the three families to take care of everything. We bought horses when we leased this land, because tractors weren't in use in those days. There weren't any tractors.

That goes back quite a way. When you think about that you realize that we were pretty basic and we were pioneers in a sense. So we bought horses to plow the land and cultivate. We planted our own tomato seeds, and we grew the plants, and then we planted them in this area. I don't know, about fifty or sixty acres. That might have been about right. Then we cultivated them and we watered them or irrigated them.

Perrelli: When time came to harvest, that was the time that we had to hire outside help, because we had to harvest the tomatoes, and there weren't enough of us. So we hired help and, of course, we also had to hire people to work in the cannery proper to peel tomatoes, because in those days, they were peeled by hand. To quite an extent they still peel tomatoes by hand. But they have developed this new tomato which is smaller and round.

Cultivation of a Thicker-Skinned Tomato at the University of California, Davis

Dunning: Does it have a thinner skin?

Perrelli: No, it has a thicker skin. You see, the University of California developed this tomato. We're not on the tape, are we?

Dunning: It is, but this is okay.

Perrelli: They developed this small round tomato specifically to allow the industry to mechanize the harvesting of the tomatoes in the fields, because California produces more tomatoes than the all the other states put together. We practically raise all the tomatoes for the United States. We ship a lot of tomatoes to other parts of the world. But Italy and Portugal and other countries also ship tomatoes to New York, and they can do it cheaper than we can ship to New York because of the labor cost differences. Italy, I guess they're pretty well up-to-date on canning tomatoes. They have big factories over there.

I'm kind of digressing now, but the University of California developed this tomato so that today, because of this development of this little round

Perrelli: tomato, they plant the tomato plants closer together, in rows. In the olden days, we used to plant them in rows, but they were six to eight feet apart in squares. So we had the horses go right through the tomato plants, or the horse would walk on either side of the tomato plants when you cultivated. So there's a tremendous difference.

Harvesting the Tomatoes

Perrelli: For several years now there's been a tomato harvester in use. The tomato plants produce a lot of little small tomatoes, and they ripen approximately at the same time. They've developed a tomato that will do that, which is quite an accomplishment. When approximately eighty percent of the tomatoes on each plant are ripe, they are harvested.

They don't do any stoop labor anymore. They have a machine that cuts the vine, lifts it up off of the ground and puts it on the conveyer belt and goes into sort of a wagon, a truck, that has people on either side of a belt. Then they pick the tomatoes that haven't fallen off, take the greens ones out and throw them out and the vines. Through conveyor belts the ripe tomatoes go into a bin and then they go on trucks. The trucks, you see them on the highway. Those tomatoes have not been touched by hands. Everything is mechanized.

When the tomatoes come to the canneries, they dump these bins of tomatoes, which have several hundred pounds, into conveyer belts. Then they go into water, at the same time they are washed. Then they are inspected somewhat. They go so fast that the inspection is very slight. But they don't need it because the tomatoes are in good shape anyway.

Perrelli: Then they go through what we call an automatic peeler and corer. I wouldn't say they are a hundred percent efficient, but they are pretty high up in efficiency so that it's a practical equivalent of machinery to human.

I haven't been too much exposed to that because I retired from the industry before this thing really developed. I really can't speak with authority in describing the process through which the tomatoes are now canned, although they've done a terrific job. They're constantly trying to improve the quality of the tomato. The University of California at Davis is constantly at work on that project to develop a better tomato, a more solid tomato, with fewer seeds and all that thing. It's a service to the industry and to the consumers.

Early Process of Canning Tomatoes

Dunning: Can you tell me the process at that early stage that your tomatoes would go in, from the first years?

Perrelli: How far back can I go? I have to kind of visualize. In those years, the tomatoes were scalded. [tape stops] I do recall where the tomatoes were placed in containers, large containers of sorts. I don't know if they were in baskets, and were dipped into hot water.

Dunning: Who would actually pick them off the vine? Would that be one of your jobs?

Perrelli: No, that was done by professional pickers.

Dunning: Would they be hired seasonally?

Perrelli: They were hired by the farmer himself. We did it ourselves because we happened to be farming and growing and canning. That was one of those rare occasions. After that we had farmers who specialized in growing, and we purchased the tomatoes from them. At the time that they planted them, we purchased the crop that would be produced on those vines. We would buy them by so many acres, when we know approximately how many tons would come out of those acres, and we would buy them at a price per ton, so many dollars per ton. Then, of course, they delivered through their own trucks or through a commercial trucker to the cannery.

Dunning: Do you recall how soon after your cannery started that you went to outside farmers?

Perrelli: The next year or so.

Dunning: About the second year?

Perrelli: Yes, about the second year. I should go back now. The tomatoes that were there were scalded by some method. The tomatoes were put in baskets, and then we scalded them either in water or in steam. I don't recall that because it's too far back. Then we had women at tables. We either dumped the baskets on the table and the women picked the tomatoes manually and took the core off and took the skin off and whatever blemishes there might be there. Then the tomatoes were put into another container and were brought to the canning tables, at which point they were put into cans, either the large cans or the smaller cans. In those days, we only had two size cans. We had the number ten size or we had the two-and-a-half size.

Dunning: Would these be tin cans?

Perrelli: Oh, yes they were tin. They were metal. The sheet metal was covered by tin, which was supplied by the

Perrelli: American Can Company. They were tin. The tomatoes were placed in them by hand and we filled the spaces between the tomatoes. The tomatoes were round, there's always spaces in between. We put some tomato sauce in there, tomato juice, as it were. With the two-and-a-half cans, we put what we called solid pack. We actually used to squeeze the tomatoes into the cans. Even there we put a little tomato sauce to fill up the spaces, because there's always spaces in between the tomatoes. They were the large tomatoes, big tomatoes.

Then those tomatoes in cans were put through what we called an exhaust box, which heated the tomatoes in the cans, after we had put in this sauce and the cans were full.

Dunning: Would they already have a cover on at this point?

Perrelli: No, they were not covered at that stage. Then as they came out of the exhaust box, they went into the seamer, which was supplied, as I said, by the American Can Company in our case. They were sealed while they were hot. After they were sealed, then we put them into vats, where they were dumped into boiling water. Or they were dumped into water and we put the steam on to make it boil. They were cooked X number of minutes, depending on the size of the can. The number ten cans cooked longer than the two-and-a-half size can. After they cooked, then we would cool them down so they wouldn't continue to cook in the can, to prevent over-cooking. We cooled them, and then after that when they were cool enough, we would stack them in the warehouse.

They stayed in the warehouse until they were sold and shipped. In our case, which was the first year in 1914, our cannery was located on this ranch, this prune orchard, and we had no railroad siding. So we

Perrelli: had to use our horses with wagons and carry those tomatoes to the depot area where the railroad cars were situated.

Dunning: How great a distance was that?

Perrelli: It wasn't too far. It was only from where they were situated on Orphan Home Avenue to the depot, which couldn't have been more than a mile or a mile and a half. But it was very awkward. As a matter of fact, we had an awful lot of trouble with the roadbed because it wasn't solid enough. We had a heck of a time pulling the wagon off of the mud with horses.

Acquisition of the Bisceglia Brothers Property

Perrelli: We realized that we were in the wrong location. As I said, the Bisceglia Brothers were operating in San Jose in 1913. So their plant, which they vacated, was available.

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Perrelli: Their plant was available for occupancy by someone else. In that case, we were the ones that were desirous of acquiring it. There was resentment on the Bisceglia Brothers' part because we as the three families moved out of their employ. We left a void in their organization to some extent. Not that we were irreplaceable, but we were experienced. Therefore it caused them some management problems because they had to hire new people and promote some people that were less experienced. We were important to them and they were resentful of our leaving. They weren't too keen about leasing us the plant, or selling us their plant.

So we had to use devious means. We went to a local banker who knew us, and they purchased the plant

Perrelli: for us. I don't know if it was known to Bisceglia Brothers, but they should have been suspicious of it. Anyway, we acquired the plant.

We left the plant that we built ourselves. After one year we had to tear it down, and we went to the new plant, the plant that was located on the railroad siding. From that point on, from 1915 on, we started to pack apricots. We started to enlarge our operations. That continued on for years and years and years until 1930, when we moved to Richmond.

Moving the Operation to Richmond, California, c. 1929

Influence of Fred Parr

Dunning: How was Richmond chosen?

Perrelli: We had not chosen Richmond to begin with. We purchased four or five acres of land near Ninety-eighth Avenue, I think, in Oakland, not too far from the present freeway, which was not too far from where the airport is now. When Mr. Fred Parr found out that we were going into Oakland--he had been very active in developing the Richmond port, Parr Terminal No. Three. Everything was Parr Terminal this and Parr Terminal that. Fred Parr, I don't know whether he personally came over to see us, or whether someone else came, a fellow by the name of Tom Goodrick. They approached us--

Dunning: Was Goodrick associated with Parr?

Perrelli: He apparently was associated with Parr. I don't know in what capacity, whether they were partners--I don't think they were partners. I think Parr was the big

Perrelli: wheel. He was quite a promoter. Fred Parr was really a promoter, personality plus. He really was something.

So he convinced us. We would be right near the port, just a few hundred feet from Parr Terminal Three. And, of course, we visualized ships coming into the terminal. We thought, "Well, we will cut our shipping costs by a tremendous amount." We used to ship through Oakland. Port of Oakland, of course, is very big, bigger than what San Francisco has ever thought of being.

Anyway, we had enough tonnage one year for a ship to load.

Dunning: Were you located in Richmond or Oakland at that point?

Perrelli: We were located in Richmond. We never scratched the ground in Oakland. As soon as Parr contacted us and we recognized what we thought were advantages, we entertained the idea of coming to Richmond. We came over to physically look at the plant site, where it was located in relation to the terminal. We were, I think, a little naive, too, because we didn't realize at that time, even though we knew it was filled ground, pumped in from the bottom of the bay, and it was pretty soft material.

We looked at it, Gennaro Filice and I, and I think John Perrelli. I've forgotten who else might have been there. There might have been someone else with us. As we walked on this plant site, as you walked, your foot slipped back because it was nothing but creamy mud. After we got through looking at it, this was on the side, Gennaro said, "What do you think of it, Joe?"

"It takes a lot of courage to come here," I said to him. I just made that comment. And it was true. It was absolutely true, because it really was courage.

Perrelli: Maybe it was a little naive, because we didn't really realize what was involved in coming here on that kind of a soil. When we started to build, we realized. I know the Southern Pacific Company put in a spur. That was the first thing they put in in the area. It's a track.

Dunning: Is it still there now?

Perrelli: Oh, it's still there, yes. It's between the U-shaped building. You see, we had a U-shaped building. We had the warehouse side, the operating side and then the office in front. I think it's still there, although I haven't been there. I don't know why. Since we left, I have never been there. We realized that the Southern Pacific Company, or the Santa Fe, I forget which one of the railroads did. They had quite a lot of trouble stabilizing the rails on the ground. As a matter of fact, at one time they lost an engine. The engine actually flipped over on the ground. They had quite a time lifting the engine. The rails were just flipped over too. I don't know how they stabilized the rails after that. They must have put a lot of rocks in there, big boulders, no doubt, they put. I don't think they put any piling there.

Then when we started building, of course, we realized we had to put in piling. So our plant is on piles, piles that were anywhere from fifty to seventy-five feet long. It was a terrific undertaking for us.

Dunning: Did the city subsidize anything, or did Fred Parr?

Perrelli: No, we just had to do it all ourselves.

Dunning: No investment came from the city of Richmond or the port?

Perrelli: No.

Dunning: Did you have to pay anything for the spur being put in by the railroad?

Perrelli: No, that was the railroad undertaking.

Dunning: With the influence of Fred Parr?

Perrelli: I don't know. I imagine it was because of the potential shipping business that they were going to get from our being there, which we did. We shipped a lot of railcars out of there, and we took in a lot of cars that came into the siding, as we operated there from 1930 through--well, we sold in 1958. The people that took it over operated for several more years. So the plant was operating for over thirty years.

We made the best of it. We complained to no one, as far as that goes. We knew it was our own decision. It was at Fred Parr's super-salesmanship.

Supply of Labor in Richmond

Dunning: Did you stay on amicable terms with Fred Parr?

Perrelli: Oh, yes. We were friends. He came over to see us many times after that. We realized that we were there on our own. We decided to move over to Richmond because we felt we were the only cannery in Richmond. In those days, the canneries needed an awful lot of help, a lot of manual labor. We felt that we had a supply of labor, which was important, especially the women help. We hired several hundred employees.

Dunning: It certainly had an effect on the whole economy of the Inner Harbor.

Perrelli: Yes, we did, because we were the only kind of a business that supplied labor in the summertime. The first day we opened up, people were registering for work, especially women, and men too. When we came to Richmond early in 1930, we were at the beginning of a very severe depression, referred to as the Great Depression. And it was the great depression. Things were tough for everybody. Wages were way down.

Dunning: Do you remember those beginning wages for the cannery workers?

Perrelli: Yes, I remember, because we paid the men in the neighborhood of twenty cents an hour. The women were paid thirty-three and a third cents an hour, as a minimum, because the women labor was controlled by the Welfare Commission.

Dunning: How did that work?

Perrelli: They actually controlled it. You couldn't pay below thirty-three and a third cents an hour, because it was under the labor laws of the state of California, I guess it was. I'm not really too familiar with it.

Dunning: That was the minimum that you could pay?

Perrelli: Yes, the minimum. But in the cannery, there was a system of piecework. Each one worked as fast as they could cutting fruit, and also canning, putting the fruit in the cans. If a person was fast, the women especially, why they made more than thirty-three and a third cents an hour. So there was no problem.

Dunning: That thirty-three cents an hour would be basic, whether they were on piecework or not?

Perrelli: If they worked piecework and they fell below, you still had to make it up.

Dunning: They had to make it up?

Perrelli: No, the employer. But if they made more, they kept it. It was their money. And of course, it was better for us too, because they were faster and the plant was more efficient. So we were better off. The men labor, it was twenty cents an hour.

Dunning: Now, this I don't understand. Why did the Welfare Commission affect only the women's wages?

Perrelli: That Welfare Commission was only to protect the women. There was no law protecting the men's wages. Men were supposed to be able to negotiate their own labor rates. But in those days, there was no such thing as negotiating, because it was what the industry could afford to pay for men's labor, and still stay in business. It was hard for both the employees and the employer. We barely made it through the eight to ten years from 1930 to 1940.

Dunning: But you always stayed open?

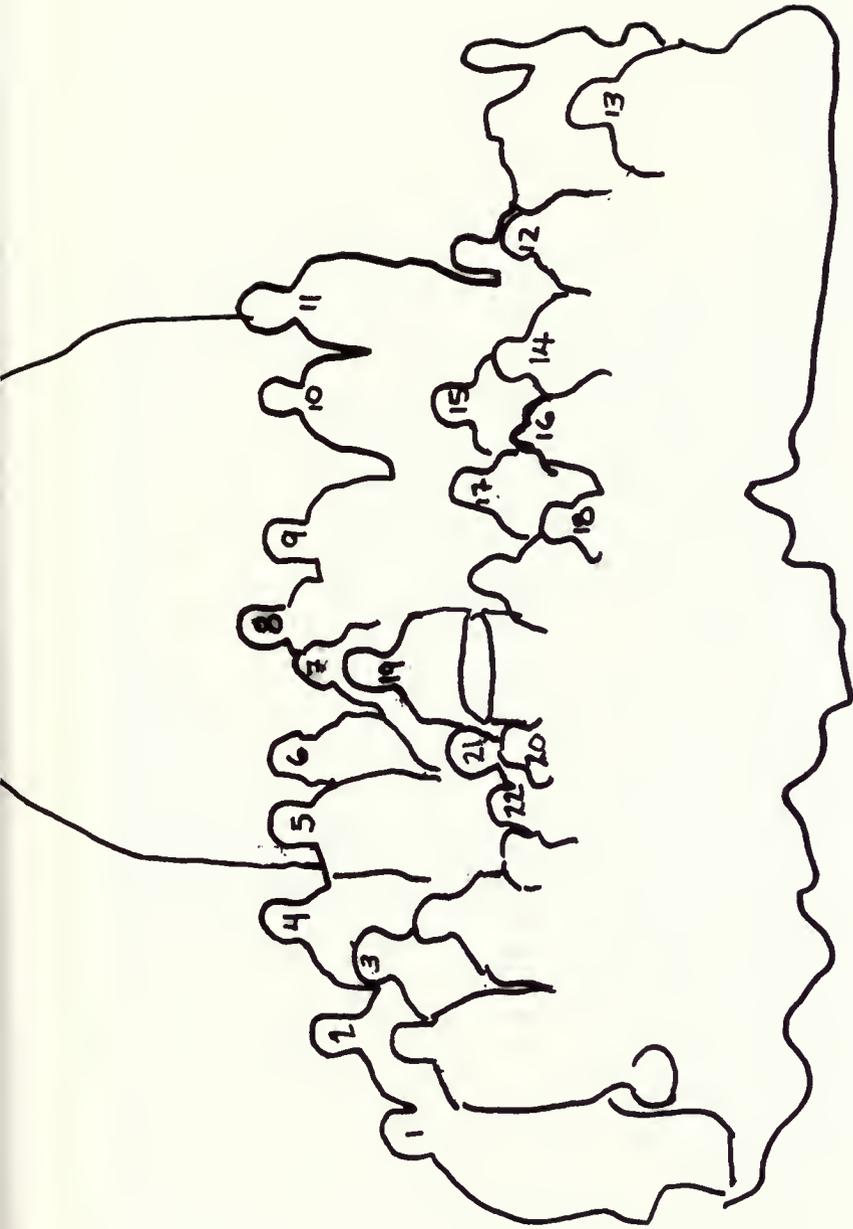
Perrelli: We stayed open. Every year we operated. But it was very difficult because the value of the merchandise was very low. The competition was so keen that we barely--there was many, many years we didn't make a profit.

Dunning: Where was the competition coming from?

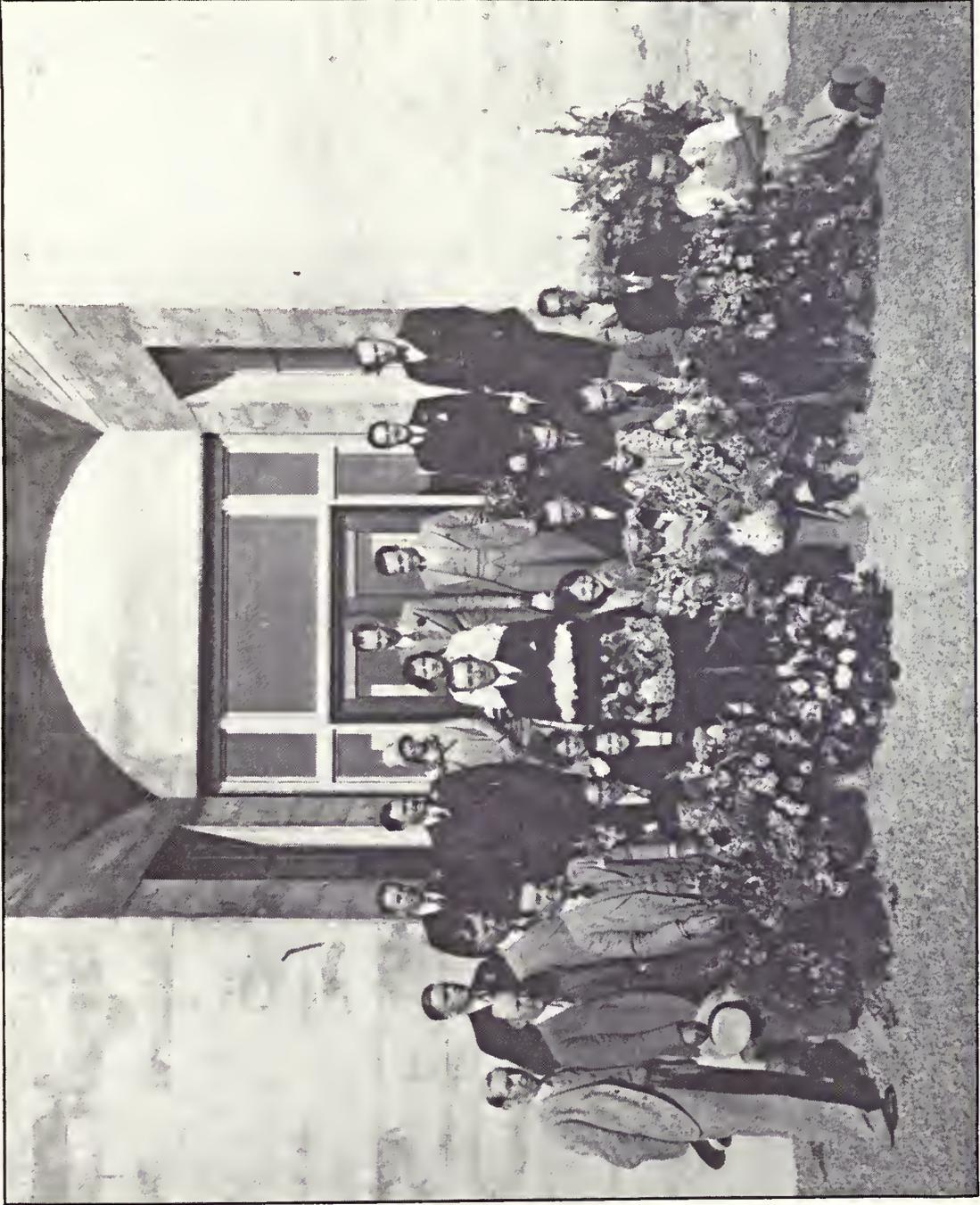
Perrelli: From our fellow canners in Oakland and San Jose, and Modesto, and Marysville, and Stockton. There were canneries all over northern California. It was inter-cannery competition. San Jose was the big cannery center, probably still is.



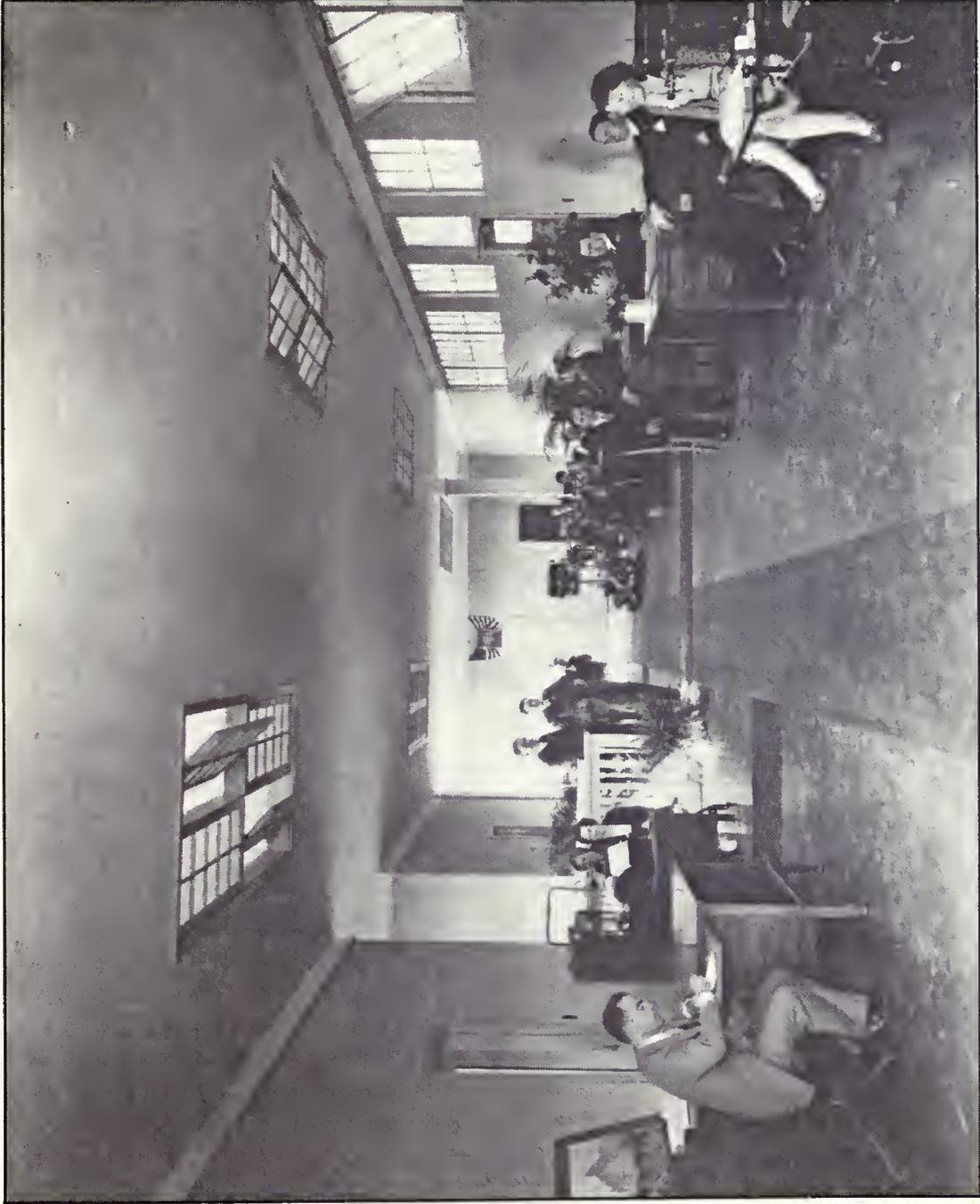
Main entrance to offices at Filice & Perrelli plant, Richmond, 1930.



1. Jack Galvan, owner & publisher of Richmond Independent; 2. Vic Peterson, F&P sales dept.;
3. Mr. E. M. Downer, senior founder of Mechanics Bank; 4. Frank Estes, F&P sales dept.;
5. Walter Harcourt, F&P sales manager; 6. Mrs. Ralph Filice, head forelady;
7. Antoinette Filice, p.r. office; 8. Tom Goodrick, Parr Terminal representative;
9. Joe Perrelli, secretary and cashier; 10. Mr. Harry Pettit; 11. Jim Nethercott, accountant;
12. Michael Filice, father of G. A. Filice; 13. John Perrelli, superintendent of all operations;
14. George Thornton, the Mechanics Bank top executive;
15. William E. Harcourt, grower relations and fruit buyer; 16. Eilene Robinson, stenographer;
17. Dave Reynolds, accountant; 18. Ralph Filice, superintendent Richmond plant;
19. G. A. Filice, president F&P Canning Company; 20. Miss Kelly, telephone and switchboard operator;
21. Kay Montesano, accounting department; 22. William Zickenberg.



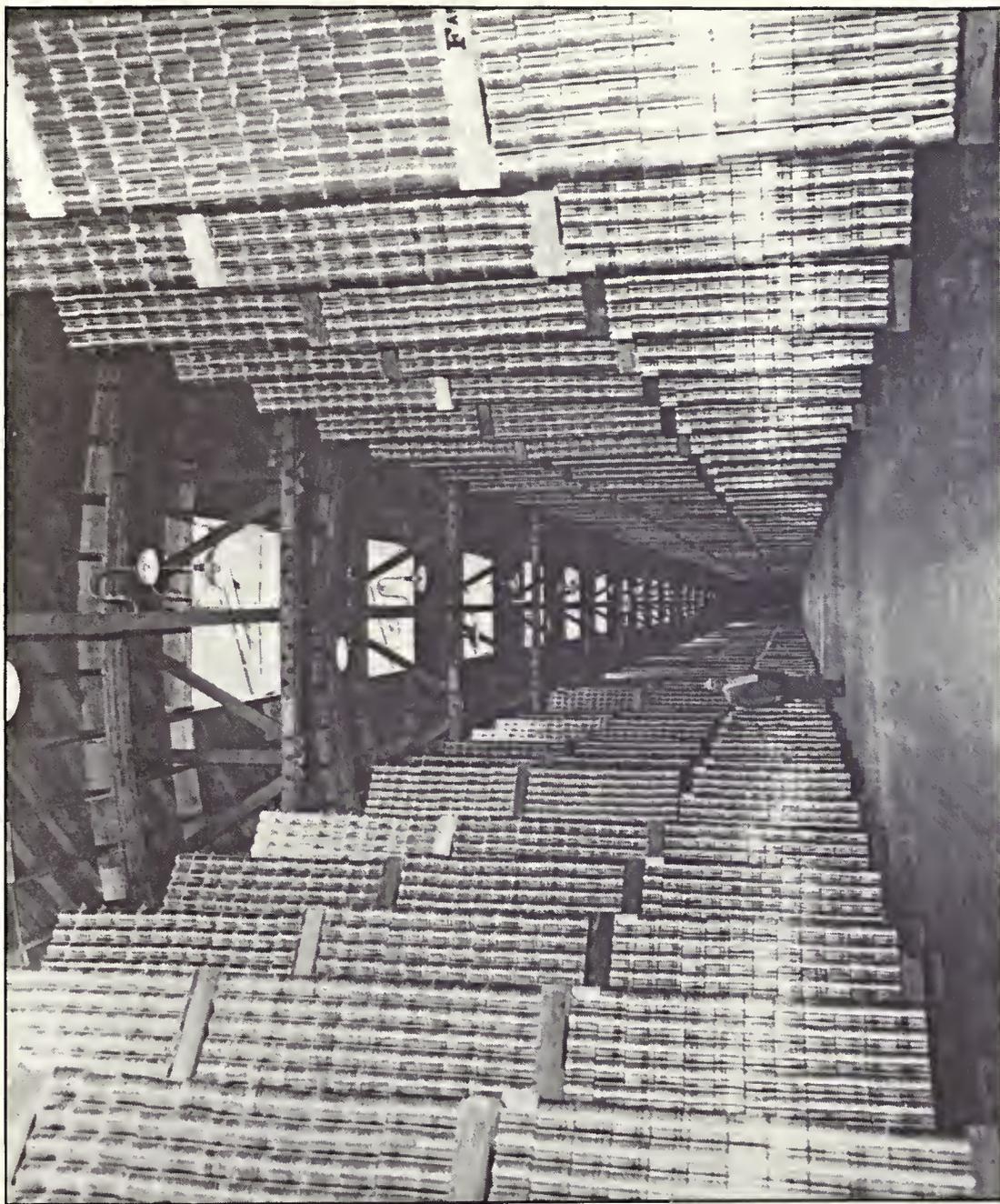
Opening ceremony, Filice & Perrelli Canning Company, Richmond, 1930.



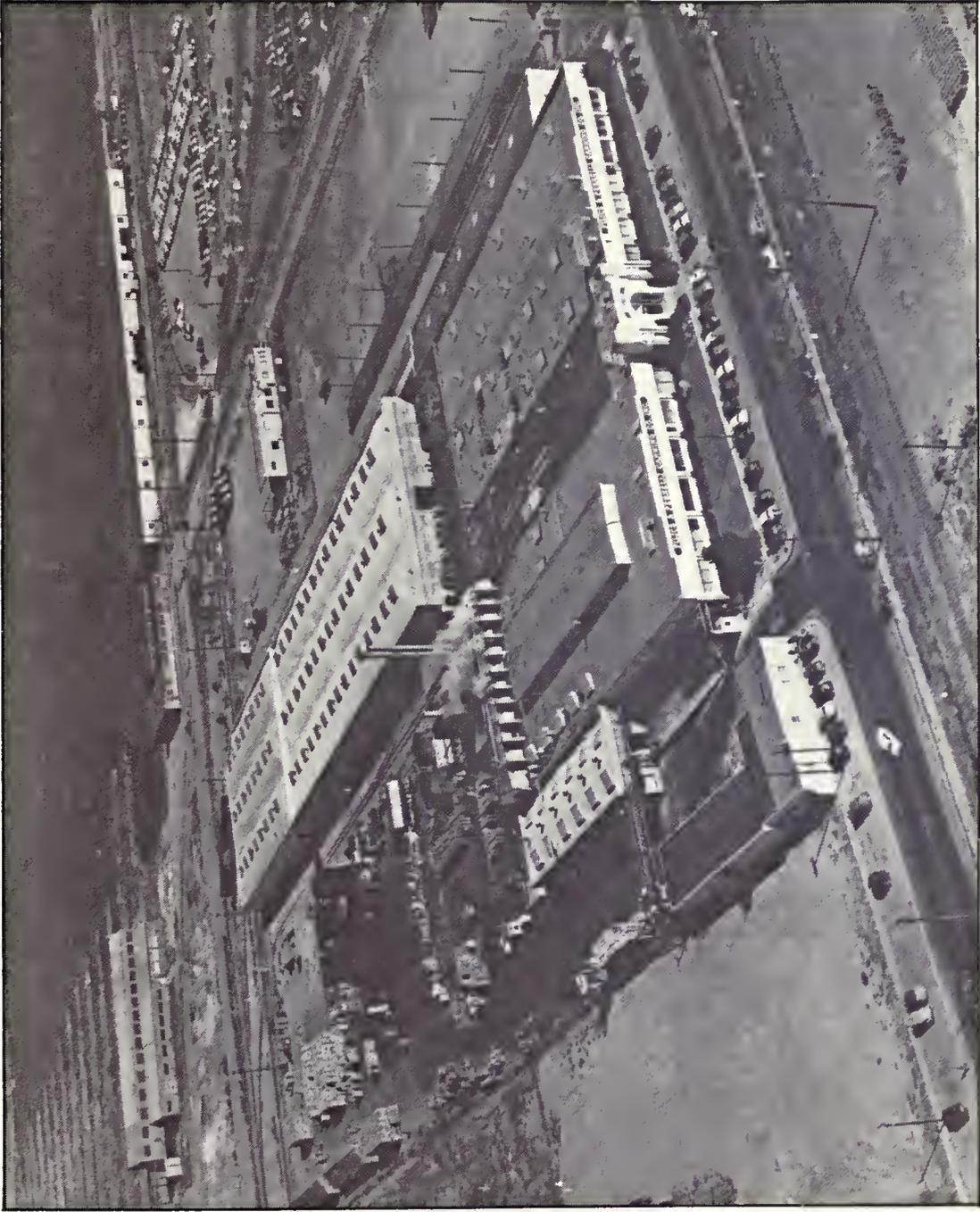
Front office staff, Filice & Perrelli Canning Company, Richmond, 1930.



Filice & Perrelli cannery workers stacking cans of fruit, twelve to a tray, Richmond, circa 1940.



Storage warehouse for cans of cherries, pears, peaches, and plums. Filice & Perrelli Canning Company, Richmond, circa 1940.



Aerial view of Filice & Perrelli Canning Company, post World War II.



Joseph and Marie Perrelli

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning, 1986

Recruitment of Labor: Employment for Women

Dunning: One thing I did want to ask you is how did you go about recruiting your labor when you first got to Richmond?

Perrelli: It was known in the papers, of course, The Richmond Independent, which was under Galvin in those days. Mr. Galvin, naturally, announced our decision to come to Richmond. And the Chamber of Commerce, no doubt, made a lot of announcements. They also made it known that we were coming in, which was a big thing because we were the only industry that provided employment for women. And also young people. They didn't have to be really experienced. We hired a lot of high school boys. Some of the high school boys that started with us were with us clear through our whole cannery life in Richmond.

We had a fine organization. All were hard-working. They were enthusiastic. We had sort of a team. It wasn't something that we planned on, or actually psychologically tried to influence the people. It just grew because it was a relationship between managers and our laborers there, that we were friends. We called each other by our first name.

Nucleus of Workers from the San Jose and Gilroy Canneries

Dunning: This goes beyond the group that you brought with you?

Perrelli: We did have a nucleus, of course, from San Jose, principally. Very few from Gilroy, because Gilroy needed its own organization, because we continued to operate in Gilroy. You see, we had a San Jose cannery

Perrelli: from 1924 to about '29. That was the plant that was dismantled because it wasn't our plant. It was on a lease basis. So that organization from San Jose was lock, stock and barrel, as it were, transferred to Richmond. We brought in quite a few people here.

Dunning: How large was the nucleus of people that you brought with you?

Perrelli: It was the heart of our organization. But I don't recall how many. I would say there could have been as many as fifty to seventy-five people.

Dunning: That you actually brought in?

Perrelli: Yes. I would say. I couldn't really put a number on it because I was not involved in San Jose. I was in Gilroy. And then when we moved to Richmond, we moved our headquarters to Richmond, because we wanted to be closer to San Francisco. Therefore, our sales organization and bookkeeping organization and payroll organization, which was just a few people, we moved them from San Jose to Richmond. And then, of course, our office force from Gilroy was moved to Richmond. So we had our office crew all move to Richmond. Our operating crews and payroll, they moved from San Jose to Richmond. So we moved quite a few people.

Dunning: Did you have to use special incentives for those people outside your family? Or was it basically, you won't have a job if you don't come?

Perrelli: That's what it was, really. There were some that couldn't come, but very, very few. Practically all of them came over with us to Richmond. There were some men that couldn't because of their family ties. But on the whole we had quite a few people that made up the nucleus of our organization, both in the operating and the office. The sales force was all from Gilroy.

Perrelli: We bought a lot of new desks. So we had quite a good-sized office.

Dunning: Was the nucleus predominately of Italian descent?

Perrelli: No, in the office they were not. They were mixed, everything. We had to have people that spoke English fluently. There were Harcourts, and there were Estes, and Peterson, and Petit. Those kind of names. And Nethercotts, and Reynolds. Those were all English, American personnel, people that came to work with us and were with us for many, many years. We had a fellow by the name of Hollywood that came with us. We had an international organization.

Available Housing in Richmond

Dunning: Did you help in relocating these people in terms of finding them housing?

Perrelli: It wasn't difficult because Richmond was starving for more people to occupy the houses that were already here. The real estate people that were located here, like M. A. Hays Company, and Mr. Bull, who was a very active real estate operator, they were just thrilled to have us come into Richmond. They all supplied us with houses. We had homes. I was still single. I didn't marry until I moved to Richmond.

Dunning: You must have been approaching thirty.

Perrelli: I was thirty-one. As a matter of fact, I got married on June 1, 1930, and I was thirty-one years of age. I was an old man. So we had ample housing. They were all available, and they were happy to have us come in. There were a lot of empty houses around here.

Dunning: In what section of Richmond?

Perrelli: We came to a section of Macdonald Avenue. We, the families of Filice and Perrelli, and the nucleus of the management group, we were located to quite an extent in the Mira Vista area, which at that time was the flower of Richmond. And it still is a good section. We lived on the east end of Macdonald Avenue. Gennaro Filice lived kitty corner from me across Macdonald Avenue. My brother John, and Ralph Filice, they lived on Center Street in the same area. Then as we stayed here, we all moved to other locations as we thought we would improve our housing. We wanted to be in a little different district. But nevertheless, they were all nice houses. Mr. Filice moved into Berkeley. He liked that area better. And he had three sons.

Dunning: He moved immediately to Berkeley?

Perrelli: Yes, he went right away. That was his next move, from Richmond into Berkeley. We built this house in 1936-37, and he built his house in 1934. He built quite a nice home there on the Alameda, for a song more or less. I built this house here too, for.

Dunning: And this is a huge house in one of the most desirable areas. [On the Arlington in El Cerrito]

Perrelli: Yes, I guess this is. I looked all over. I looked in Berkeley for a house. I wasn't satisfied because the price of the land was too expensive.

Dunning: Which today would probably seem like pennies.

Perrelli: Then I came over here and I was told by a man who was planning on building my house. I was starting this up with a builder. He told me where there were some lots available. A fellow by the name of George Friend, who lived right there at the Y of Arlington and Betty

Perrelli: Lane. I don't know which one it is. I built this house cheaply, and I bought the land very cheaply. I have two-thirds of an acre. Of course, naturally the trees over here had to be cut down. They were all eucalyptus trees. I just cut a few down at first.

Then of course, I realized that I couldn't live under them. So I had to cut all the trees down. At first I cut the ones that were to the west of me. And then several years later I cut the ones that were to the east of me. The ones to the east of me interfered with my view and also with my windows, as far as keeping my windows white-washed with the fog.

Dunning: They can be quite a fire hazard, too.

Perrelli: And then they were a fire hazard. As a matter of fact, I put in some pine trees, and I don't know if I'm too happy with them even today, although they're pretty far from my house, except for two that were put in by my neighbor. That goes back to 1938, about, or '37.

The Depression Era

Dunning: You must have been doing fairly well in the cannery to even stabilize in one area.

Perrelli: We were having a tough time. We had a few dollars saved up individually. But we were tied very closely to our salary. And during the Depression, there certainly were no salaries that you really could retire on or even live on. We were very meagerly paid, actually. We just held it way down. Especially the family. We had to keep it down because we

Perrelli: couldn't afford to draw any money out of the company, because the company didn't have any money to supply. We had to borrow every cent we used from the banks.

Using Mechanics Bank of Richmond for Capital

Dunning: You used local banks?

Perrelli: We did use the local Mechanics Bank for what they could handle. After all, banks are restricted by their capital. Therefore they couldn't give us too many millions of dollars. You see, the canning business needs an awful lot of capital because all the canned goods are stored in the warehouse in one season, at the time when the fruit ripens. You build up big inventories. You have to carry them for the benefit of the buyers who distribute them throughout the year.

We are the warehousemen, the financiers of "their" product which we expect to sell them, or it will belong to us, or most likely belong to the banks, because the banks loaned us about sixty-five percent of the manufactured value of the merchandise, or canned goods. We applied the value against our bank loans. During winter months we repaired our machinery and improved our system where needed. There was a lot of expense involved in improving our system.

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Dunning: We were talking about the necessity of a lot of capital.

Perrelli: We naturally needed an awful lot of capital, and we didn't have it. No canning business, not even Del Monte, I don't believe, operated entirely on their own

Perrelli: capital. It wouldn't be fiscally wise anyway, because you couldn't afford to carry that much money around, to have it in the bank during the off-season, because it would be very expensive. So therefore you borrow money from the bank and you pay rent on it during that time that you use it. Therefore you are paying rent on the money, interest, for the time you have it. Therefore it's very convenient. When you pay it back, the rent stops, the interest stops. Therefore you can afford to borrow money. If you were lucky enough to operate profitably, you were making progress.

But during the thirties, we did not operate profitably every year. We barely made it. We made a few thousand dollars and then we lost a few thousand dollars, depending on the market. Our worst year was really 1937 or '38. Then the war broke out and that changed the picture completely.

Description of Richmond's Inner Harbor in the 1930s

Dunning: Before we get into that World War II period, which is so important, I want to backtrack to when you first came to Richmond. Could you tell me what it visually looked like at that Inner Harbor area where Filice and Perrelli cannery was located, and what other operations were going on in that area.

Perrelli: In the location where we were, right at South Tenth Street, the only building that was there before we moved in, was the Parr Terminal No. Three. The Ford plant was not there. We knew that the Ford Motor Company owned that property. They had purchased that property. Naturally a big thing was made of that because it was an important move by the Ford Company to come to Richmond. It was a big thing for Richmond. But we built our plant before Ford did. There was

Perrelli: nothing there for quite a few years, except the Ford plant that came in after we were there.

Dunning: They came in about '34, was it?

Perrelli: They were there a couple of years, or three years later than us. So there was nothing there. Then there was another plant that came right on the same side of the street, of South Tenth Street. I'm sorry; I can't think of the name of the company. They were in the fish oil business, fish livers. They handled big fish, even sharks and things of that nature, fish of that type. They made some kind of a fish--vitamins, or oil.

Dunning: Like cod liver oil?

Perrelli: Yes, that sort of a thing, which I'm not too familiar with. I can't even think of the name right now. They had the plant right next to us, right north of us.

They also later on built an office on Fourteenth Street right adjacent to our plant site. That was the extent of it. But they came after Ford.

Now we've just been jumping around without any idea of proper sequence.

Dunning: I'm trying to get an idea of what was in the area when you came, what it looked like visually, and whether there was transportation in that area.

Perrelli: It was like a desert. There was nothing there. It was nothing but a filled area. There was nothing but mud. Even to walk on it, you would have difficulty. We tried to put materials in the location. We had to put planks on the mud, plenty of them, to allow the weight of a truck to be supported. It was a very difficult period. How those pile drivers got in I can't tell you. Of course, they're on tracks. Even

Perrelli: then it was difficult. They had to put in some substance, planks or something to stay up. Naturally they put their piles down and they became the stabilizing items, I guess, although I'm not an authority on that.

It was a very difficult period that we went through.

Dunning: How much time was it before the Filice and Perrelli plant was completed?

Perrelli: It was started around 1929, around October, We finished it sometime in late June.

Dunning: Were you already in this area, or did you still work in the South Bay?

Perrelli: No, we moved here in time to operate it. The people that actually put the machinery in the building, after it was built, they moved here before. They moved here probably in March or April. They had to be here early. They had to be here in sufficient time to plan the equipment location. Oh, we had a tremendous job to accomplish.

Making the Payroll During the Depression

Dunning: Who made those decisions?

Perrelli: It was between Gennaro Filice and John Perrelli and Ralph Filice, the family organization.

Dunning: Where were you in that hierarchy?

Perrelli: I was in the office, although I participated also. But I don't think I contributed too much, because I

Perrelli: was strictly in the office. I was worried about the financial end of it. And I had plenty to worry about. We had a very difficult period during the thirties. We were lucky that we pulled through. There were quite a few canneries that didn't pull through during that period, like other industries, other businesses that didn't survive the Depression.

Dunning: Why do think Filice and Perrelli survived it?

Perrelli: The only thing I can say is we kept our cost down. We did not have big salaries. And to be honest with you, there was a period of time when the Filice and Perrelli members did not draw salaries. We just lived from hand to mouth. It brings back too many memories. It got to a point where I couldn't sleep at night. Don't put it down.

Dunning: You can take it out afterwards if you want.

Perrelli: I was so concerned. We were involved in operating under-capitalized. I couldn't even pay my bills as they were due. I was even reticent, I didn't even want to answer the telephone when it came to me because I knew what it was. But I always talked to them. I talked to them and I gave them the story about the financial situation and that all our money was tied up in inventory. When we shipped the merchandise, then our share of the value would be distributed to the many creditors we had.

I told them that we would pay them; eventually we would pay them. You have to have patience with us, and don't worry, we're going to pay you. I assured them, and luckily, we were able to keep our promise, so that by 1940, '41, or thereabouts, we were able to clean all our debts, outside of the banks. And I began to discount my bills. So I was on Cloud Nine, I was the happiest man in the world.

Dunning: After a decade.

Perrelli: After a decade. It's hard to talk about it because I relive it.

Dunning: That's important in a way, because most people don't have an idea of what it was like, or of the operation.

Perrelli: Nobody can understand it, because unless you go through it, you don't know. You can't know.

We finally overcame it, because of the demand for canned goods as a result of the war. The military purchased a tremendous percentage of our products for the military. We were subject to the military as to what we could sell to our own trade. We didn't have enough left over.

Dunning: Did they come to you immediately before the war, or right when the war started and set these regulations?

Perrelli: Yes. I don't recall the real regulations. They would ask us to bid on their needs to feed the army as far as tomatoes and fruit was concerned. We were competitive. We had to bid against each other. We bid against our fellow canners. But the percentage that the military allowed us was much greater than what we could get in competition with our fellow canners. Naturally we made some money on the sales that we made to the government, to the military. They allowed several percentage points. I don't recall what it was. I thought it was in the neighborhood of ten or eleven percent, which is unheard of. If we made one percent under competition, we were doing well. We didn't do that well most of the time.

So we had a very difficult time during the Depression, but we had to make the best of it. We

Perrelli: carried on and we made believe we were in good shape. I guess I must have been the weakest.

I was the one that had to pay the bills. I was the one that handled the money. I was the one that borrowed the money. I had to keep myself liquid.

Talk about kiting, I never had heard about this float. You make checks without having the money and then you hope to cover the checks before they got to the bank. I became an expert in that field, but it wasn't because I wanted to. It was because that was the only way I could keep my bills paid.

World War II Period

Producing Canned Goods for the Military

Dunning: This was mostly pre-World War II?

Perrelli: It was pre-World War II. After the war, then I didn't need to. After the war, when we became whole and we made profits, I would clean up the banks. I would pay all my loans by the first of June. When I had to borrow again from the banks, I was more demanding. I could make my own terms to some extent.

Dunning: You had a very good credit rating.

Perrelli: Sure, we had money. We had no debts because we had paid everybody, including the banks by that time. We had inventory in the warehouse on which I could borrow

Perrelli: money to pay more people. So I was in pretty good shape then.

Dunning: Did that happen right after the war? Could you see results almost immediately?

Perrelli: We could tell immediately by the time 1939, '40 started to roll around, we were doing very well. We were making profits. There was more money available for us to handle. So therefore I was able to carry a balance in my checkbook so I didn't have to resort to the float.

Dunning: What about your supply of workers? Did you lose a lot of people to the shipyards and also to the armed services?

Perrelli: Yes, there were a lot of people that went to the shipyards. But some people worked both places. Some people had night shift operations in the shipyards and then they worked at the cannery during the day.

Dunning: Men and women?

Perrelli: I don't think women did that. I think mostly men. They were able to do it, because, as one fellow put it, "We don't want to work too hard in the shipyards, so we can work here." Which was, of course, not a very good picture to paint.

Dunning: Because you were under government contract, would the men get deferments for working in the canneries?

Perrelli: They might have in some instances. But it was very rare. I don't think it was too common. It wasn't very common, no, because the canning industry was not highly skilled labor, except the people that were the very top in operations. Otherwise there wasn't too many deferments. We were in a vital industry because we were producing food for the military. So we were

Perrelli: considered a vital industry. So we could have, and we may have had some, but I don't recall specifically if that happened.

As I said, we were fortunate. We were able to pull through, because that made it possible for us to then command more of our making decisions. We had more power. We had more say in our policy of selling and buying. In other words, we were more on our own; we could call the shots to some extent.

Dunning: You were able to be more autonomous, too.

Perrelli: Yes, we were able to make our desires known. Of course, there was always buy for less and sell for more if you could.

Changes in Richmond

Dunning: What about that area right in the Inner Harbor? The change must have been unbelievable in terms of the activity in the shipyard.

Perrelli: Oh, yes. Richmond was a relatively small community.

Dunning: Twenty-three thousand.

Perrelli: I thought it was in the neighborhood of eighteen to twenty thousand. By the time Kaiser came in and all the shipyards moved in there, we were over a hundred thousand. It was a tremendous thing. You couldn't believe it. People were all over the area. There were people that worked both places. There were night shifts in the shipyards and day shifts in the cannery, for men. There was a tremendous demand for help.

Perrelli: People lived all over. I don't know where the devil they lived in town. But Richmond was just full of people. Men and women. A lot of women were working the shipyards too. I'm sure you know that. They were riveters and they were welders. There were a lot of jobs that did not require physical strength. There was a lot of room for help. Richmond was really a beehive of activity.

Dunning: How did you like that change?

Perrelli: At that time we didn't like it, really, because we had all kinds of people. People from all over. It was then that San Francisco emptied their jails to supply help to the Richmond shipyards, which was not a very nice thing to say. Maybe it did happen, I don't know. We were a community that wasn't really the most desirable. We had all kinds of industry that came in, which helped of course, besides the shipyards.

Dunning: There were something like fifty-five other war industries.

Perrelli: Sure, there were a lot that came in that helped. I just can't remember some of those. I wish I could. I used to be pretty active in those days. We used to have the Council of Richmond Industries here. We used to meet monthly, I think, and we would discuss the problems of Richmond and things of that nature, which exposed me to other members of the industrial area of Richmond. The Standard Oil people were there, the shipyards, and other auxiliary industries to the shipyards that supplied parts or whatever they did. I'm sorry that I can't remember the names. My memory is pretty dulled because I can't go back and pick up all those names.

Dunning: Some of those I can fill in through old records.

Perrelli: You probably can. I'm not giving you very much of a history of Richmond, except for the very beginning where we came into this mudflat. It was a very slow progress as far as building in the Inner Harbor area, except because of the war. Then it wasn't a normal industry that came in. It was industries that were related to the war and to the shipyards.

Dunning: They weren't stable industries.

Perrelli: No, and there weren't very many that came right by Richmond. They were all on the fringe of the water, where they needed shipping facilities of that nature.

Dunning: I heard that even the laundries were involved. They did some of the service uniforms, the army uniforms. There were sailmakers and people doing all sorts of things related to the war effort.

Perrelli: There were all kinds of different industries that came here. We were naturally not exposed to them because we had no business activities with those people because we were only exposed to growing of fruits and vegetables, canning of same, and then buying those commodities that we needed to put the fruit in cans. The labor that we needed was plentiful here in Richmond. Even during the war we didn't suffer.

Dunning: It never was a problem?

Perrelli: It wasn't really a big problem for us. Definitely when we first came. Then we were just flooded by different kinds of people that would stand at the gates for us to hire them. It was very disturbing to me, because of the unemployment. I felt badly, but that didn't do them any good. That was just my own feeling. I used to see a lot of people, all the women waiting in line at the gate to hope to be called for labor. And they were there until noontime, hoping that maybe there might be a little job open in the

Perrelli: plant. By the time eleven or twelve o'clock came along, they all disappeared because there was no point in them standing there.

Dunning: Was this just at the beginning of a season? Or was this on a weekly basis.

Perrelli: It went on especially at the beginning. Then as the season increased in volume, naturally that made more jobs available in the plant. The more fruit you handled the more help you needed and therefore the more jobs would be available.

Dunning: What was the size of the workforce right at the wartime?

Perrelli: We must have had in the neighborhood of seven hundred to a thousand people all together.

Dunning: How many would work on one shift?

Perrelli: We didn't go to shifts too much. I don't recall if we did go into the shift work. We may have, but not for very long.

Dunning: I remember talking to one woman who worked in the cannery who said that she would go in in the morning and she wouldn't know what time she would get out at night. She would work until the job was done.

Perrelli: That would happen anyway. Sometimes we would work overtime. We would work ten hours a day or eleven hours a day. Then of course we had to pay overtime to the women, but not to the men until we were organized, until the labor unions came into being.

That didn't come into being for quite some time. We had quite a big strike one time in the cannery [c. 1936-1937]. When the cannery was organized, from that point on there were unions, cannery workers unions.

Perrelli: They had different rules for the canning workers union than they had in other industries where they worked on metals. They had to be more lenient to the industry where we handled perishables. We had to have more leeway, which we got.

Dunning: I don't know if you want to get into this today, because it's a big issue, the beginning of the union there. Or would you like to have another short session? We've gone about an hour and a half on tape right now.

Perrelli: Well, I didn't give you very much, did I?

Dunning: I think you did. But we're just covering a long time period.

Perrelli: We just shot from pillar to post more or less. Maybe we can have another session.

Dunning: One short one and then we can talk about the beginning of the union and any other thoughts that you think should be recorded about the cannery specifically, and any stories of particular people. I think you've given me an excellent overview of your coming to Richmond, and why you came to Richmond.

Supply of Women Labor

Perrelli: Our basic thing was our supply of labor, women labor. In other places we used to compete, especially in San Jose, women were scarce. Experienced help was very desirable, naturally. It produced more per hour. Naturally when we realized that Richmond didn't have another cannery, so we would be the only cannery here, we would have a better pick of our women help. We knew we would have plenty of men help because there

Perrelli: are bound to be husbands of women around here that needed jobs. Men were very easy to get. But we didn't pay very much, twenty cents an hour.

That didn't mean that we were better off. All it meant was that we kept our cost down so we could sell our merchandise at a lower price. A dozen of peaches was sold almost for what you pay for one can today, what we sold it to the buyers. It was terrible. For a ton of peaches, we only paid the growers in the neighborhood of from five to seven and a half dollars a ton. They couldn't even pick them for that price. Then it was terrible. Now they get more. But the industry in the fruit line is not good because our population is so conscious of sugar and being overweight. People don't want sweets, or at least a big percentage of them don't. They are conscious of what they eat.

Leasing Property to Kaiser Company##

[Interview 3: July 25, 1985]

Dunning: Our last session you mentioned off tape about how Kaiser Industries tried to acquire some of the land that the cannery possessed. I was wondering if you could talk about that?

Perrelli: When we acquired the property through the exchange that Fred Parr arranged for us, for the property that we had bought in the area of Ninety-third Avenue [Oakland], of course, we were enticed by the fact that we were getting more acreage than we were giving up, and therefore more chance for growth without acquiring more property. As I said, it was this area that had been filled from the bottom of the bay. Our property

Perrelli: extended from Tenth Street, which is now Harbour Drive to Fourteenth Street, which is also another name.

The property that was unoccupied was idle and therefore available for use. But we weren't about to grow that fast, especially during the war, we couldn't grow. First of all, there were restrictions on buildings, and secondly we didn't have the capacity to grow. Besides that, the government had begun to requisition a good part of our production. Therefore we did not need production for the general market.

Dunning: You were basically out of the trade market?

Perrelli: Yes, practically. We were just allotting some of our merchandise to the buyers that were on our books. And we only could give them X percentage points of what they had before. There was no salesmanship involved. It was merely a case of keeping in contact. Naturally, we knew that eventually we were going to have to sell again. We wanted to be always in the minds of the buyers, that eventually we were going to be available for a source of supply.

That land was idle, and the Kaiser Company needed space to store their steel, big plates. The metal must have been almost a half-inch thick. They were very heavy. We told them at the time they wanted to acquire it that they could use it without any rent or anything. They could use it because we were at war, and we didn't want to make any money on the war effort, because that wasn't our philosophy. So we offered it to them. No, the government said they had to have it in fee, buy it. Of course, I was the only one in the office. Mr. Filice was on a sales trip in Pittsburgh and New York. He became ill. He got the flu in Pittsburgh, and he was in the hospital for a few days. That scared the devil out of me, because

Perrelli: naturally he was the leader and I depended on him for everything. So I had to go on my own to fight this takeover.

So I contacted Tom Goodrick, who was with the Parr Terminal. We went over to see some governmental czar, as it were. I think it was someplace in Oakland. I explained to him what our ideas were. I told him we did not intend to make any money on the use of the property, because as I said a little while ago, we thought we didn't want to profiteer or make money on that sort of an operation. Little by little they finally saw our point of view. I told them that eventually we were going to need that property for our growth. That's why we have that acreage. Because of our arguments, and Tom Goodrick was there to help me with our arguments, we were allowed to keep the property. But we gave them a lease for the duration of the war. I said, "You can have it without rent. We don't care about it."

He said, "No, no, we have to pay you rent."

I said, "Okay, well, pay us just a few dollars."

They paid us. I don't remember the dollars, but they paid us a figure. We had to enter into contracts that must have had eleven pages or so. I remember the young man that was our attorney, who was involved. We just had a long contract, and we finally signed. That was the end of the deal. When they stored this steel on the property that was available, that property had stayed there a few years from the time it was filled in. But we had done nothing with it.

Description_of_the_Soil

Dunning: There were no pilings?

Perrelli: No, that was just the plain soil. It was a little drier.

Dunning: Was it pretty soft?

Perrelli: Well, it wasn't that soft. It had dried up some as time went on. We looked at it in 1929-30. This was 1937, or '38 or '39. It must have been about that time. That was seven or eight or nine years. That had a crust on top. They were able to go in there with a kind of a lift truck, with the rubber tires, not the solid tires, but the air tires, regular tires. And they put the steel plates there. They stayed there for quite a few months. Pretty soon the soil, because of the constant weight, began to tilt. If they hadn't begun to remove the steel plates from there, they probably would have sunk clear down to the mud. They would have lost all that steel. But luckily, they took them out of there.

Then, in order for the Kaiser Company to use that area for their storage of steel plates for the future, they came in and hauled in a tremendous amount of fill, which was mostly made up of rocks and heavy stuff that would replace the mud and make the area more usable. As far as we were concerned that was more than the rent we received, because that was a very expensive operation. Therefore we gained from the activity of the Kaiser Company in that we were able to use that area later on. We were able to store canned goods out there during the summertime, before we transferred them into the warehouse. We were really lucky that we could use that area.

Dunning: So the land was more valuable.

Perrelli: It was more valuable to us than it was before, because we could go on the surface with lift trucks without fear of breaking the crust on top.

Dunning: Once you leased that land to Kaiser, did you have any say about the kind of fill they put in? Did they consult with you?

Perrelli: No, we didn't do it. When we saw what they were putting in, we were perfectly satisfied with what they were doing, because we knew that was beneficial to the future use of the property. Then we did build a warehouse after the war. The plant was built, and the floor of the building that was there then was about three feet above the surface of the land, which was on piles. But the additional warehouse we put in that extended from the end of the building to Fourteenth Street was on piles also. The flooring was set on the same level as the ground that was there without any lifting up of the floor, which made it easier to truck with our lift trucks.

Dunning: Is that still standing?

Perrelli: Oh, yes.

Cooling Area

Perrelli: There was an area between the old building, the one that was above the ground level, and the new one. There was maybe thirty or forty feet. That was used for what we used to call a cooling area. When the cans are cooked and they came off of what you call coolers, they're still warm. They're still probably a hundred and ten, a hundred and fifteen degrees Fahren-

Perrelli: heit. If that continues to stay that way for too long a period of time, then your fruit in the cans will overcook. In other words it will continue to cook. Even though the cans are cooled down from the cooker-- when it's cooked, they're over 212, which is the boiling point. Then they go through a section of the machine which is similar to the cooker, which contains cold water. That water is circulated and continued to be kept cool. That cools the cooking process to a point where we feel safe that the merchandise is not overcooked.

Then we also leave the cans out in the open during the night. As they cool off completely, then we stack them in the warehouse for storage and awaiting orders from the buyers to ship them during the rest of the year. That's one of the bad things about the canning industry. We have to produce during the harvesting season. But we don't ship, except for a small percentage of that merchandise that's packed during the summer. We have to hold it for several months. And all that inventory has to be paid for.

Dunning: Yes, I think you mentioned that a little bit last week.

Perrelli: To carry merchandise for the buyer's needs, cost us a lot of money in interest, and also insurance, and regular handling, which you do anyway. You have to do it. So it's an expensive operation to carry merchandise for the buyer. But then we can't expect the buyer to take merchandise as we pack it, because then they would have to store it in their warehouse. It's a process that has to be done by somebody. We being the original owners, it's our responsibility to carry it for the benefit of the buyers and the consumer.

Dunning: Before we leave the wartime period, I have a couple of questions about Kaiser. Do you think it was an unusual position for your industry to take, not to want to charge them too much rent, or to sell off your property? It seems like most people were trying to profit from it.

Perrelli: We had a different philosophy of life, that's all. We knew we were at war. We had several of our young men in the army, in the service. We had two in the navy; two were in the marines. One or two of them were in Okinawa. One of them was in Iwo Jima. He was right there as it happened when they raised the flag. He happened to be on the island. He says he sure dug a hole fast to protect himself from bullets. Of course, he was lucky. Right now, he's up at Tahoe. But anyway, he was in the military. He was in the Orient, fighting in the Japanese zone.

The other young man was in Okinawa.

Dunning: This is family?

Perrelli: Family, yes. Members of the family. That was the time that all the foreigners, the Japanese, principally, were forced to leave the area because of the danger of attack, that they might participate in the war effort in favor of the enemy, like the Japanese.

Dunning: You're referring to the internment.

Perrelli: Internment of especially the Japanese. There were others that were non-citizens that had to move from the immediate area, too.

Dunning: Do you have any specific recollections about that? We can't get into it in too much depth.

Perrelli: We wanted to mention it because it happened to our family too. The law was for everybody.

Dunning: I don't understand.

Perrelli: Well, a member of our family had to move from here and go into the Berkeley area.

Dunning: From El Cerrito to Berkeley? Why?

Perrelli: Because she was a non-citizen.

Dunning: A recent immigrant from Italy?

Perrelli: Not recent. She had been here for a number of years. She had three boys in the war. So you can't say that--

Dunning: Why did she have to move from Richmond to Berkeley?

Perrelli: The law, the regulations, military regulations. It was silly, but it was effective.

Effects of World War II on the Canning Industry

Dunning: Are there any other influences that you felt the war brought to your industry, other than you were able to pay off your debts?

Perrelli: It helped the industry because we were in over-production because of the depressed conditions created by the Depression of 1929, '30, and so forth. Everybody was in bad financial straits. Practically all the canneries. The possible exception might have been Del Monte. Even that company was no doubt affected the same way. After all, they were also producing and shipping. Even though they had a greater supply of capital, that capital cost money regardless of who has it. Whether you have it in your bank drawing the low interest--in those days interest rates on savings were

Perrelli: three percent, three and a quarter percent, four percent at the highest. So that cost money. Regardless, whether you have your own supply or you borrow it, when you borrow, of course, it costs you more, as it happened in our case.

Of course, compared to today's rates, it was nothing. But we were paying seven percent interest on our loans. That was a big load for us. We had to borrow millions of dollars, and we had to pay interest monthly. That's the same as compounding it twelve times a year. That makes it a great deal higher than seven percent.

So to produce and warehouse is a very expensive operation.

Dunning: But you were able to square off most of your debt during the war.

Perrelli: We were able to live through the Depression. Unfortunately, there were some that did not make it, that actually went under. I mean they are no longer in existence.

Dunning: Some of the canneries?

Perrelli: Yes, some of the canneries that couldn't carry on, they had to stop operations. But we were fortunate. Of course, we probably worked harder. We watched our costs more closely, because we were a family organization, and the supervising portion, the management was probably a little more on their toes and more alert, because it was their own money that they were watching, their own costs. I don't mean to say that other companies weren't alert, too, because after all, they had to stay in business.

Family Management of the Business

Dunning: Generally, how did the family negotiate problems or come to decisions about the industry? I had asked you how Gennaro became president, and you mentioned that he was young and he spoke English.

Perrelli: He had an accent, too. He spoke English. And he was the type of person that was more of a leader. He had already had jobs that were of a supervisory nature. We worked for, as I told you, Bisceglia Brothers, and he, because of his personality, I guess, became a foreman in operations in the farming, for instance. Because he did a good job, then he was more or less assigned to these supervisory jobs, which entailed managing of people's activities, and handling workers. Therefore, he had sort of a training. Unconsciously, he was trained. And that stayed with him.

So when we decided to go in business, there were nine of the younger generation of the three families. We were pretty well balanced as far as that goes. I happened to be the youngest. Because I was the youngest, I was still going to school, so I actually got an education. I went through a couple of years of the College of the Pacific in San Jose [before it moved to Stockton]. Then I transferred to Cal in 1921, or '22. I was to graduate in 1924, but then I became ill. I had appendicitis. I had to have that taken care of, so I was laid up for a few months. Then I just kept on working while I was out. However, I was determined enough to finish up. I went back to school and I finished in one semester in 1927, I believe it was. I did that.

Dunning: Which was quite an accomplishment.

Perrelli: You see, I was home about two and a half years without going to school. That makes you want to stay and work. But I felt that I was so close to finishing, so I went back to school and got my diploma in 1927. I don't know where it is. I lost it as soon as I got it.

Dunning: What were some of the advantages and disadvantages of working with your family? Could you talk about that a little bit. I'm just wondering how the Perrelli family got along.

Perrelli: The strange thing was that we got along wonderfully well. But we had to have strong management. And Gennaro was the leader and he was a strong manager. We constantly talked things over. We had meetings, formal meetings, but we also had discussions during the day. If a small problem came up, it wasn't something that we had to call the board of directors together to have a conference. Two or three of them got together and we discussed it so that it was mutually feasible. And they went ahead and corrected the problem if there was a problem.

Naturally, John Perrelli was a good mechanic and he had good ideas on planning equipment and putting it together. We had really a good crew of men that were exposed to the mechanical end of the business.

You know, in the cannery you've got a lot of machinery. They were crude machinery. They weren't any real fine stuff. But you had to put it together and make it work. We created a lot of ideas too, which in some cases were adopted by the industry. We were not the tail end of the industry. We were up with the rest, at the very top.

Dunning: Did the hierarchy within the family business stay pretty much the same for a long period of time?

Perrelli: Oh, yes, practically all the way through.

Dunning: Gennaro remained the president?

Perrelli: Yes, Gennaro was president of the company clear through the whole existence, from 1914 roughly. We were working together, but we knew there was a leader. It's automatic. In other words, someone takes the lead and the followers accept his leadership. Therefore you have a crew, you have a nucleus of management. We were together all the time. And when we had a problem, we discussed it right on the floor of the plant. We were always solving problems if there were any problems. The big thing was that we were congenial. We respected each other. Naturally, the head man, who was more forceful, put his point over. There were disagreements; don't misunderstand me.

Dunning: You couldn't get along all the time.

Perrelli: There were disagreements because there were arguments about methods. Eventually the one that was the most logical was adopted. Whether it was adopted by the president or the vice-president, it was adopted by the management.

Dunning: How about the role of the Filice-Perrelli women? Where did they fit in?

Perrelli: The women did not take part in management. It must sound like the old Roman ways. The women just took care of their families. Although some of them did work in the cannery, became floor ladies, and became heads of the women's departments, like Mrs. Margaret Filice. When we opened up our plant in San Jose, she helped because she was a very capable woman. She became an influential member of the management in the operations of the women's department.

Perrelli: It was a big department because in those days there were a lot of women in the cutting department. There were quite a few women in the canning department, because everything was done by hand. The fruit was pitted by hand. I'm talking about cling peaches now. The apricots were cut by hand. Tomatoes were peeled manually. All the operations were manually performed. It was an important segment of the operation. I remember that Margaret Filice was even active here in Richmond.

Dunning: Would the floor ladies--is that what you called them?

Perrelli: We called them fore ladies at one time, but then they became floor ladies.

Dunning: Did they sit in on the management meetings?

Perrelli: That was strictly the men. Then of course, we used to have sales meetings too, when we included the men that were in the sales department. When we were talking about buying fruit, for instance, we had the men that did the buying of fruit in the field. We had Mr. Harcourt, he was the head of the buying department. We also had a Harcourt in the sales department. He was the head of the sales department until he left. In the late thirties he went into business for himself. He went into some sort of a brokerage business.

Perrelli: We had a good organization. We had sales. We had production. We had buying. All those different departments were manned by men who showed leadership, who showed ability to sell, who showed ability to make decisions on buying, and also in production. Of course, production was more in the hands of the Filice and Perrelli families. We had Frank Perrelli in Gilroy, Ralph Filice in Richmond, and my brother John Perrelli was general manager of the operations in both

Perrelli: Richmond and Gilroy. So we had a pretty well-rounded organization.

Then as the young people began to grow, these young men I mentioned went into the military. Then, the war ended and they came back to work. They began to get into different departments. One of them went into buying. A couple went into sales and then production. We had a young crew coming in--

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Perrelli: Naturally, our own group couldn't possibly handle all the managing duties of the total organization because we had more jobs to do than we had people to do it. So we had to depend on people from the outside, as it were. But the outside people became the inside people. We had a lot of people that had non-Italian names, as I mentioned last time.

Dunning: Peterson, Nethercott, Petit.

Perrelli: Two Zickenbergs. A woman was in charge of the Gilroy office. Her name was Duus, Freda Duus. She was a terrific individual. She was a sister of the Zickenbergs. We had a good crew. We had a very fine bunch of people from outside of the families.

Piecework_Rate_Before_the_Union

Dunning: Before we talk about the strike and the beginning of the union, I'd like to get some background information. Were there certain rules of the workplace, inside the cannery, about smoking or drinking or breaks, things like that.

Perrelli: What do you mean breaks?

Dunning: Like you take a break.

Perrelli: That became a formal operation after the unions were established.

Dunning: Let's talk a little about what it was like before the unions were established?

Perrelli: Before the unions, the canning industry historically worked on the basis of piecework, which is contract labor, if you will. The term isn't really right there. In other words, the work was so handled that there were units of production. The fruit came in lug boxes. The lug boxes, of say peaches, cling peaches, which for us was the biggest production unit, they came in lugs that weighed around forty-two to forty-five pounds.

We knew that there were approximately so many pounds of fruit in a box or lug, so that the women would cut and pit a box of fruit in so many minutes. We knew that because they were women that were protected by the Welfare Commission, which had ruled that the women were guaranteed a rate of thirty-three and a third cents per hour. If they made more, that was to their benefit. That thirty-three and a third cents an hour, during the early thirties, that was more than what we used to pay the men.

After a while, as the industry began to increase in sales and production, then the rate of pay was also improved. The general pay was higher all over the country. The Depression was loosening its grip on our economy. Therefore we were better able to pay more because we got more for our merchandise, or our efforts.

The women canners were paid so many cents per hundred cans that they filled with fruit. We had

Perrelli: mechanical means to count the cans for each individual canner. Therefore we knew what they produced. The one that produced more got more. So piecework is really fair, because if some people are more energetic; some people are stronger, they don't tire as easily, so they're worth more to the employer, and therefore they are paid more. That was one of the things that the unions were against, was this piecework. They felt that we were driving the people to work harder. We didn't have a whip over them. They worked harder because it was to their interest to earn more, which is a normal human trait, ordinarily.

So that was the thing that was in canning as far back as I can remember. When I cut apricots, and I was at that time about eleven years old, I was getting seven cents a box. The boxes in those days were sixty or sixty-five pounds in weight. I cut three boxes a day, so I earned twenty-one to twenty-two and a half cents. That goes back to 1910, '11, '12.

Union_Activities_Before_1940

Perrelli: The piecework has been part and parcel of the canning industry operation as far back as I can remember. The union activities really started during the war. But it started before 1940. There were a few workers, young men, that felt that they weren't getting enough. Probably they weren't getting enough, but we were paying as much as any other cannery was paying. Therefore they were trying to put us in a different category because we were on the waterfront. We were exposed to the teamsters and to the longshoremen. Naturally these men that visited with the teamsters and visited with the longshoremen, they would talk

Perrelli: about wage rates, and how little they got and how much the other guys were getting. They did different kinds of work.

Naturally they began to agitate. These young men wanted to pull us into the Longshoremen's Union, or into the Teamster's Union. I think it was the longshoremen that they wanted us to get into. There they would be getting more per hour. Well, if they had been successful, we would have been out of business, because we couldn't possibly pay that kind of pay, as against the rest of the industry that paid the regular cannery worker's wages.

So we strenuously objected to it.

Dunning: Was it just the men at this point?

Perrelli: That was the men, only the men.

Dunning: What were their jobs primarily?

Perrelli: Just general cannery work, which was manual labor, pushing handtrucks around with cans, or handing boxes of fruit to the women so they could have a next box to cut. Then also trucking fruit from the cutting department. The fruit was cut and then put in another box. They had to be trucked to the peeler. Then someone dumped a box of cut peaches into the peeler. The peeler was nothing but a big steam box that spilled lye water over the fruit as it went through this big box. The lye dissolved the skin, and also part of the peach. The peaches went through pretty fast so that it was a matter of seconds that the lye was exposed to the fruit. Then immediately it was washed by clear water, hot water and then cold water, so that the fruit wasn't damaged. Just the skin was taken off. But it was much faster than doing it by hand. I remember when I was a little boy, we used to do it by hand. It was very wasteful. It did

Perrelli: did a fairly good job but it was a very difficult operation to peel a peach by hand.

Dunning: In terms of the men beginning to agitate, how long a period did this go on?

Perrelli: As these people were getting more active with the longshoremen idea, there was another group of workers, that involved the women too, that didn't want to have anything to do with the longshoremen. They finally organized their own committee or group of workers, or ex-workers, and they applied for a membership in the Teamster's Union. It was a canner's workers union, a branch under the leadership, or under the umbrella of the teamsters. They were successful. We were much more in favor of that than the longshoremen. That agitation for unionizing the canning industry spread out pretty much in California. Then we didn't feel so badly because then we would be one of the canners that were in the union, and therefore, we would be under the same rules and regulations, and we would be at approximately the same rates.

Dunning: You didn't want to be the only ones?

Perrelli: We didn't want to be the only ones, so we fought it. This was in the winter time. We actually ran the operation, ran the cannery for shipping and also repairing during the winter, with men that were loyal to us. We had quite a time, because then they were getting a little rough, trying to scare our men when they went home at night. Then of course, there was harassment. It became pretty severe for a time.

Dunning: Now, who would be harassing whom?

Perrelli: The people that were trying to put us into the longshoremen's union. Then of course, those people never did get a job with us because the group that wanted to go in the Teamster's Union weren't in favor of those agitators. So these people never got a job back in the cannery. They worked in other places. They worked, probably, as longshoremen.

Dunning: Did you have many people from outside come in to organize?

Perrelli: There were a few that were from the outside.

Dunning: Any names that come to mind?

Perrelli: No.

Dunning: Someone did mention a woman, Margaret something, who was very active in organizing the union.

Perrelli: I wouldn't remember that. I can see the people that were there; I can see in my mind's eye, but I forgot the names. We had nicknames for some of those fellows, but I'll be darned if I can remember them by name.

Dunning: That's okay if they come to you later. Were there confrontations and violence coming out of this strike?

Perrelli: There was really no real violence. There was just an harassment. When some of the fellows were going home at night in a car with somebody else, they were followed with cars by these people that were known to be from the longshoremen group. But there was no actual conflict. It was just harassment. But it was disturbing. It wasn't pleasant. There might have been some name-calling and stuff like that.

Dunning: Can you tell me what you remember about the first strike? You had said that it was a little bit before the war.

Perrelli: You really can't call it a strike because it wasn't a hundred percent; it wasn't unanimous.

Dunning: Did people stop working?

Perrelli: Not at that time. Those people that wanted to stop us from working were a faction against the ones that wanted to work. Therefore you can't call that a strike. But it was labor activity that was inimicable to our interests at that time.

Cannery Workers Union

Dunning: But you didn't have any kind of a total shutdown at that time?

Perrelli: No, that was after the Teamster's Union accepted the membership of the Cannery Workers Union as a unit of their large organization. They were affiliated with the teamsters. But the teamsters as teamsters never interfered with our management, with the union. The Cannery Workers Union, who were affiliated with the Teamsters Union, had their own organization, had their heads. They did work with them to become advised by the teamsters, because they had a longer history of labor relations and so forth.

They did influence them all right, but it was unified in that they handled it industry-wide later on. It tended to increase our costs, but at the same time it was uniformly higher. Therefore the industry had similar costs. The only difference in the cost is how efficient one management was as against another

Perrelli: management that was less efficient. That was management's responsibility. Labor was pretty uniform because we had different classifications of labor.

The men and the women had different rate bases. They had rates for truckers, mechanical truckers. By that I mean lift trucks. The cannery workers were divided into classifications, so that each class of labor was rated at so many cents per hour. That was okay, because we were competing with people that had the same costs we did, except for one's efficiency in the operations and the management.

Dunning: How did having cannery workers belonging to the teamsters change the operation?

Perrelli: There was a common front. We talked to the leaders, the representatives of the unions when there was any discussions to be had. That part was changed. They had the committees, although I never participated in any of those labor confrontations, or conferences, as it were. As a matter of fact, we had a floor lady in Richmond. At that time she was representing our company. Later on she became involved in labor, and she switched over and represented the Teamster's Union, that is the Cannery Workers Union. She was quite aggressive and quite a leader.

Dunning: What was her name?

Perrelli: Her name was Mrs. Mitchell.

Dunning: Okay, she's the woman somebody mentioned.

Perrelli: Yes, Mrs. Mitchell was her name. But, at first, she was the head floor lady as our employee, the company employee. Later on for some reason or quirk--she was a leader and she became involved in discussing things. She used to be quite tough, too, when she was working for our industry. She was a leader and she was

Perrelli: forceful. Then she became the cannery workers' representative, and she was equally forceful. She was quite a leader in the field of labor relations.

Dunning: Do you have any idea what happened to her?

Perrelli: She got older. She was accepted in the Teamster's Union, representing our cannery, for instance, at least in Richmond. We were still friends, though. She was friendly to us. There was no enmity. We respected her because she tended to be fair. She was fighting for the interest of the worker, which was her responsibility. Naturally we felt different about her than before. At one time she was part of us, and then she became part of them. So naturally it was a different attitude. But nevertheless, we worked out all right.

Dunning: Did working conditions change?

Perrelli: Oh, yes. There were regulations and hours of work.

Dunning: Could you give some examples?

Perrelli: Well, eight hours, and then after eight hours you paid time and a quarter or time and a half. I forgot what it was. However, there was a give and take, because in the canning industry, when you worked with perishables, the clock does not stop. The fruit has to be processed. So we had to have leeway in the number of hours we could work at a certain rate of pay. I don't recall now whether there was a change after eight hours in the rate, or after ten hours. But there was a leeway that was allowed in the industry. Because of the perishability of the things that we handled, we had to be given some leeway. We worked that out.

Then, of course, night work. There was a time when we had two shifts, night shift and day shift.

Perrelli: There was a differential in pay for the night shift operation as against the day shift operation. In other words, there were more formal regulations adopted by both the employer and the employees. That was the big change that took place when it became unionized.

Naturally, there was also the union's position and the employer's position. That was more defined, abruptly. There was a division there, whereas years back the dividing line was pretty flexible. When we became organized, then there was a more definite cleavage in the relationships, period.

Dunning: Did any members of the family join the union?

Perrelli: No, because, you see, the members of the family, when they worked in the organization, they were more apt to become part of management. Therefore they didn't belong to the union.

Dunning: I was just thinking of some extended family members that would be in canning and packing.

Perrelli: There were no members of the family, the women's side of the family, say, that worked in the cannery any more. We all worked in the cannery when we first started. All the women worked in the cannery when we first started. It was a necessity. Then because they were members of the family and they were owners of the company, they gravitated towards becoming supervisors, management. That was before the unions. Therefore, if there were members of the family that worked in the cannery, little by little they became supervisors or management oriented. It's just a natural operation.

Safety Regulations

Dunning: Were there changes in any safety regulations because of the unions?

Perrelli: They might have been more well-defined. But I don't believe there was any real black and white changes. The Welfare Commission also inspected the plant for the women's safety. The women, according to the Welfare Commission, could not lift more than so many pounds weight. That was right. That was fair. It should have been that way. But the weights that we had that had to be lifted, they were below regulation.

I don't know what the number of pounds was, whether it was thirty-five pounds, or forty pounds, or less. But there were definite regulations in that respect. Also, there was the length of the day. That was also somewhat determined by the Welfare Commission, for the women. For the men they had no regulations.

Dunning: When I was inside the cannery recently, I was pointed out the nurse's station. Did you have an industrial nurse from the beginning?

Perrelli: Oh, yes. We had a nurse. From the very beginning, we had someone which we called the nurse.

Dunning: Was she a nurse?

Perrelli: She was a nurse. I think we had the same thing in Gilroy. We had a nurse. We had a little better arrangement in Richmond because when the plant was built, provisions were made for that.

Dunning: There was a nurse's station you can actually still see today.

Perrelli: That's right. Anybody that needed a band-aid for a cut finger or something, or became ill, they went into the nurse's room, and we had a little cot and they rested, if one became ill. That happened once in a while. If one was ill, they usually didn't come to work. On the whole, if a person became ill during the working day, she was taken home if she couldn't be handled by the nurse.

Dunning: Do you recall accidents on the job? I would think with all the machinery and heavy lifting, there were bound to have been some.

Perrelli: There might have been some accidents.

Dunning: Any major ones that stand out in your mind?

Perrelli: Well, there seemed to have been some, I recall. I don't recall the details. I know there was--I just better not try to describe it because it's too vague for me to really describe. But there had been some. I don't recall anybody losing any fingers. I think there was some damage, especially when they got tangled up with belts. Flowing hair was prohibited. The women always had to have their hair enclosed in a cap, because they could have been caught in a belt. I don't mean they could scalp them, but they could cause some terrible damage.

When we built the Richmond plant here--I think I mentioned somewhat before, in the olden days, machines were propelled by shafts that were placed up in the rafters of the building.

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Perrelli: Then these shafts had pulleys on them. The pulleys had belts on them which propelled the pulleys that were attached to the equipment itself, to the machinery. Those belts were a constant pain because they became loose with the temperatures. Always somebody had to be climbing to the rafters to take care of the belts. Then when we built the plant in Richmond, we had the same idea of putting these shafts that traversed the rafters of the buildings. Then belts would be propelling pulleys on the floor level to operate machines, to make them rotate and accomplish the movement of the machines.

The J.D. Christian Gear Box

Perrelli: Luckily, we had a man calling on us. This man was a fellow by the name of Joseph D. Christian. He had an idea. What it amounted to was a gear box. With each piece of machinery that you installed in the plant, you would put a gear box. There would be no belts, you see. You put in shafts, and those shafts would have chains on them that would be turned by this gear box. The gear box was a unit that was small. That was attached to each machine.

When we built the plant here in Richmond, that's how we planned it. We had this gentleman come in, and he gave us ideas how to do it. We accepted it. It was a godsend, because there were no more belts getting loose. And it was safer, too, for the help. The Richmond plant was the first plant in California that had this system, the J. D. Christian system of turning the machinery that we had all over the plant. That was a big thing.

As a matter of fact, I have a letter that I wrote to Christian years later. His son somehow contacted

Perrelli: me through Peter Filice. He had this letter on that beautiful letterhead, you know, with all that color. I remember writing this letter to someone. I was extolling the virtues of this gear box. This man kept that letter for I don't know how many years. I still have it someplace in the family. I think my son might have it. I was really happy to see that letter because it was a well written letter, even though I'm talking about myself now. This man prized it. His son had it and showed it to me, and I made a copy of it and sent a copy to my son. That was really an interesting sideline of this gear box. It was a gear box that eliminated the use of belts.

Dunning: Since we're on the topic of machinery and advancement, what other ones really stand out in your mind? You said when you first started in the cannery, all the machines were so basic.

Perrelli: I don't know what you mean by basic. The first operations were all done manually. Then Food Machinery Corporation was a very large corporation. It actually supplied practically all the equipment to the canning industry, the cooker, the exhaust boxes, the peelers, the pitting machines, which were something that could have been improved on a great deal.

Development of the Peach-Pitting Machines

Perrelli: Of course, those pitting machines--I really shouldn't step into that field because it was what started me out. They had machines to pit peaches. It was the best they could do with the knowledge and the way they attacked the problem. The Food Machine Company built a machine that sawed the peach in half. Then it pitted the peach with a pitting spoon that was the

Perrelli: same size for all peaches, and took considerable flesh away from the peach and remained on the pit. In addition to the sawing of the peach in two, there was a tremendous loss. It was a messy job anyway.

The percentage, the number of cases per ton that was garnered from the fruit that we bought from the growers was only forty-three to forty-six cases per ton. Then the peach pits also had to be hauled away. Of course, you had to haul all peach pits away regardless of how they were pitted. But there was a lot of fruit left on the peach pit. There was a loss of around forty percent of the fruit. That's a tremendous percent. It made the cost of the finished product more expensive because you got fewer cases per

Dunning: This gets into two more interviews, although I am going to ask you about your own design.

Perrelli: That's why I'm going to stop here, because that was the reason for my desire to go into the peach pitting endeavor. I worked on different types for many, many years. I mean many, many years. I started to try and improve on what was being done around 1933. I didn't get a patent on a peach-pitting machine until 1953, twenty years. I was a pretty stubborn bulldog.

Dunning: You were determined.

Perrelli: I was determined and I could see the benefits. I just felt there was another way to do it.

Dunning: I would like to talk about that machine.

Perrelli: I was dissatisfied with how they pitted peaches, because I could see the loss. I didn't like it at all. All I could do was just look at it and become dissatisfied. The next thing that you should do, and what I happened to be forced into doing, was to see if

Perrelli: we could improve on what was being done. I tried it. I was successful to a point. The machine that I did come up with, with the help of a man that was mechanically able--I couldn't do it myself because I was an office man. I couldn't run a lathe. I couldn't do anything that required mechanical skill. I couldn't depend on my brother because he was too busy with his own responsibilities. Therefore I had to do it on my own.

Dunning: Who was this man that was helping you?

Perrelli: I hired a fellow by the name of Smiley. He helped me because he could build the little gadgets that demonstrated what we could do. He was quite handy at that. But I didn't have time either in the day time, so I had to do that at night time. I used to come home, and then I would go to this fellow--he had a little shop above his rooms, his sleeping quarters.

Dunning: In Richmond?

Perrelli: No, it was around Albany. I used to work with him. I would get ideas, and he would try to put them into mechanical devices. We worked nights every night. I used to come home ten, eleven, twelve o'clock at night, sometimes even later than that. My spirits when I got home, either they were up in the skies, or they were down in the dumps. It depended on what kind of results we got. I had those experiences for many, many years.

But we finally put a little machine together that copied the Food Machinery Corporation [FMC] machine that sawed the peach in two by splitting the peach in two, but not with a saw. We did it with a guillotine knife. Somebody from the Food Machinery organization told me that you could not split a peach, cling peach, except with a saw, because you couldn't split it any other way.

Perrelli: Well, we did it. We did it with a guillotine knife. We had two knives. One was a stationery knife with a blunt blade, which I called the anvil. The upper part was just a guillotine knife that came down to the pit and then gave a second crack. First the blade came down to the pit, and then immediately it gave it another crack. While the peach was being held with claws, we cracked the pit. So therefore we didn't lose the position of the peach. Then those claws transferred the peach from the cutting anvil, or the splitting anvil, to a little box that we called the pitting box. There was a pitting spoon that engaged the pit right near the edge, as best we could do it. It wasn't perfect by any manner or means.

We also had to cut some flesh off because you had to get behind the pit. We tried to have that pitting spoon follow the pit. That made some variation in the size of the hole that you cut into the peach. That helped a lot. But the machine was far from perfect. We did organize a company, and we built several hundred of them, not too many. We built a few, but one company put up the whole plant that way. Then they got in trouble because the machine wasn't substantial enough. They had quite a trouble. So then they had to go back to hand pitting.

But that proved that the machine wasn't really dependable. So we fooled around, and then that machine was put in the hands of another manufacturing company. They tried to improve it, but instead of improving it, they made it less efficient. This company we had organized became disorganized too. We finally had to dismantle the company.

Dunning: What was that company called?

Perrelli: It was called Cannery Service Company. That was a debacle because the cannery felt that we were responsible for it. We were not, Filice and Perrelli

Perrelli: wasn't selling that machine. The Cannery Service Company built the machines, and they made them available to the canner that wanted to put them in their plant.

Dunning: Did you have them in the Filice and Perrelli plant?

Perrelli: We were cautious. We only put it in the Gilroy plant. We were a little skeptical about it too. And besides that, that machine only increased the cases per ton by three cases per ton, as against Food Machinery. You see, Food Machinery was the bellweather as far as we were concerned, or as far as the industry was concerned. They were the standard that determined how many cases per ton was good or was bad. Their machine produced--if you were careless, you got forty-three, forty-four cases per ton. If you were good, and you were very careful, you could get as many as forty-six cases per ton.

Eventually we had to dismantle the company. The people that had stock in the company were dissatisfied, and they were a little bit unhappy with us even though Filice and Perrelli was not selling that machine. We had organized another company to do that. They were part and parcel of this new company. But nevertheless, the finger was pointed to Filice and Perrelli.

That disturbed me, too, because I wasn't happy. In the meantime, poor Smiley became ill. [tape stops]

He died. Then I began to think about peach pitting. I was still worrying about peach pitting, because I knew that what was being done was not satisfactory. So I began to think about twisting the peaches from the pit. It was being done manually by people out in the fields. When they wanted to look at a peach to see if it was ripe, they would cut a ring around it--they call it "ring it"--cut around the

Perrelli: circumference of the peach to the pit. Then by hand they would twist the peach, if you're strong enough. You have to have a lot of pull on it. You had to pull like a bulldog to twist the peach. As you twisted it, one half of the peach came loose from the pit, and it was clean as a "whistle." There was no flesh left on the pit.

So I began to think about that method. I told my brother John. I said, "John, we've got to build a machine."

He said, "How are you going to build it?"

I said, "We'll build it. You do this." I told him what I wanted done. He was quick at doing things. Right away he put a little gadget together. We were pitting a peach with it. But that was done in complete secrecy. There were only four of us that knew what was going on. As we were progressing on the idea, we started to work at night, so nobody was around. There were only four of us that knew about this idea.

Dunning: Did you keep it a secret because you felt you were on to something good?

Perrelli: We kept it a secret because somebody could have copied us. We didn't have a patent on the idea. Besides there was a question as to whether we could have gotten a patent. We worked on it, and as we improved it we pitted more peaches. Then we began to can the peaches at night. We would cook them and process them the same way as the industry does. Naturally, those cans were separate. We knew where they were. So we would take those cans and hide them, and the next morning we would open them up to see what the fruit looked like. They were far superior to what we were doing before, so much so that we couldn't even get over it. Naturally, we would open up the cans and we

Perrelli: would destroy the peaches by hand. We would squash them all to pieces so nobody could tell what they looked like. That was quite a game.

Of course, we kept it away from everybody, even from Mr. Filice, the president of the company. I think he was hurt because we didn't tell him. But we showed him one morning. When we thought we had something, we said, "Gennaro, we want to show you something." We went into the sample room. Nobody was there except three or four of us. We opened up the can of peaches and he said, "You can do that?"

I said, "Yes, we can do that." [laughs] That was a day. That was some excitement. I want to make that certain. What we did was done separate and apart from our canning operations. This canning operation was not involved in it. It was done by us as individuals. We did not spend any money. In other words, we did it on our own time, so that there was no connection between Filice and Perrelli and this new company, whatever it was going to be called. We had no name for it, we didn't know what to call it.

We went into this carefully. We canned a few more peaches. The thing that it was so efficient on, was on the small fruit, because if you take a small fruit and you cut a big hole in it, there was nothing left, nothing but a little shell of flesh. Those were useless, practically. But with this method, you twisted the pit from the half peach, and the half peach was a half peach. It had something to it. It had a lot of flesh to it. You had a nice looking peach, small but nevertheless, it was good quality. That was where it had the biggest results.

Anyway, as we did this, we determined that at that time, with the method that we had, the new method, we could get thirty-seven percent more cases than the old style, Food Machinery was using. We

Perrelli: though that thirty-seven percent was a tremendous saving. And it was. Now they get around forty percent or more, because they've improved everything.

The Filper Corporation

Perrelli: So we pursued that and we organized a new company. It was called Filper Corporation, because someone suggested--not a member of the family, he was in the sales department, a fellow by the name of A.P. McCollough. He said, "Why don't you put the both names together, Fil, for the first three letters of Filice and Per for the first three letters of Perrelli." That made sense. It was easy to pronounce. Filper. It was Anglo-Saxon.

Dunning: You would never connect it with Filice and Perrelli.

Perrelli: No. So Filper Corporation was easy to remember, and it was accepted by everybody. It became quite a nice thing. So we organized Filper Corporation. We actually did it through our lawyers and made a company that had stock and everything. Everything was legally correct. Naturally, the members of Filice and Perrelli were the ones that had the privileges of investing into it. And so we did. We kept it pretty much as individuals, we became stockholders of this company. After that we kept it all the way through. Mr. Harcourt was permitted to buy stock into it, too.

Dunning: Was this the most advanced invention for peach pitting?

Perrelli: Definitely. Of course, I had invented another little machine. I invented a little apricot cutting machine. I got my patent on that one in 1948. My brother John also helped me build the prototype. That was

Perrelli: successful too, until such time as someone came along with a big machine, that you dump the fruit into this machine and then it would cut it and pit it. I didn't have too much of a chance, although we had several hundred machines in use. They're used today in the dry yards. During that time we sold this little company. That was called the Perrelli Free Stone Machine.

Dunning: Perrelli Free Stone?

Perrelli: Because it was only used for fruit that had a free stone, had a stone that was not attached to the fruit like the cling peach is. That was then, of course, taken over by Filper Corporation because we had no personnel in our company. There was only one person running it.

Dunning: How soon after the patent did you change the machinery inside your cannery?

Perrelli: The Filper? Well, as soon as we proved the machine to be commercially acceptable.

Dunning: Which was around '53?

Perrelli: It was before '53, because we got our patent in '53. We were building machines before that. We had a local engineer build a machine. It was a very crude thing, based on one unit that we had built ourselves, that we used to demonstrate to ourselves. With that machine we canned several hundred cases of peaches. That was a big clumsy thing that we were able to use. That was also under cover, secretly built under lock and key. Nobody ever saw it except those that were permitted to see it, that were part of the family or that were trusted. Also, anybody that looked at that machine had to sign a paper that said they understood the working of the machine. It was a protective measure for patent purposes.

Perrelli: When we were satisfied that the machine was commercially feasible, then we canned several hundred cases. We displayed the product itself at a big convention in San Francisco called the Cannery Convention. The industry called it a "cutting" when they cut open cans of all kinds of fruits, from berries to tomatoes, and everything else, spinach, everything. The industry still does it. I haven't attended them for years, because I've been out of the canning business for so many years that I--nobody knows me anymore, so I don't even go. Some go yet. We asked the Cannery League of California to allow to us to have a table where we could display, show this new idea.

Dunning: With the machine there?

Perrelli: No. Just the product. We didn't have the machine there. We didn't have a patent yet.

So after some negotiation--it was an unusual thing to happen--they did permit us.

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Perrelli: They allowed us to have a separate section to show what we had. We cut cans of the fruit and put them in dishpans that were just for that purpose, like all the other fruit was being shown anyway. When we showed our cling peach pitting results and they saw the quality of the fruit, they were just amazed. All the industry was just flabbergasted. They couldn't believe that was possible. Everybody was talking about it. We stole the show that year in that convention. Everybody was talking about that. Those little peaches that were just as beautiful as ever.

So that introduced us to to the industry. Then, of course, after some negotiations with the patent office, a fellow by the name of George Kilner and I went to Washington to rush the issue of the patents.

Perrelli: Of course, you don't have too much say so. But at the same time, we did talk to the examiner, and we showed them what we meant, and what we wanted. Actually, as far as we were concerned, except for the knowledge that we were protected, we would have been better off if we had delayed the issue of the patent, because then we would have a longer life. After a patent is issued, you only have seventeen years protection, which was a good number of years, but the longer the better. We felt more secure in spending all that money in building the machines. Without a patent we would be worrying about it. When we got the patent, we felt more solid. Our patent attorney gave us an assurance that we had a good patent.

And it was a good patent. Food Machinery couldn't touch us. As a matter of fact, the commissioner of patents, I think, told Food Machinery that they had no chance at all because there would have been a monopoly. If they had the machine, there would have been a monopoly. They were not going to put Food Machinery in a monopoly position. They had monopolies anyway. Therefore we had quite solid protection from the Patent Office. Then we felt much better. After we got the patent, Gennaro felt more at ease.

So we organized a company, and we made contact with a very fine manufacturing company in San Francisco and they built the machines for us.

I want to back up here. During the time that we had exposed the results of our efforts to the industry, then we hired a man who had been an engineer with Food Machinery Corporation.

Then we had this man see what we had in mind, what we did with the crude machine. Because of his

Perrelli: background, we worked with him. I went over to see him, and we talked about this thing. George Kilner, who was more mechanically inclined than I was, was with me too. We dealt with him back and forth many, many times. He designed a machine which would be commercially feasible, and I think, still is being used more or less in that form.

That machine could pit, after it was speeded up, we could pit sixty peaches per minute, which is not really fast. But then you couldn't go much faster than that, because when you handle fruit, you've got to be gentle, too, in handling it. If you go too fast, then the movements are so violent that they will damage the fruit rather than to handle it gently. So you have to hold down your speed so that the movement of the pieces that come in contact with the fruit are gentle in its motions and therefore not damaging to the fruit. We settled for around fifty-five to sixty peaches a minute. Tom did a good job and we manufactured these machines in San Francisco.

We got a good price at that time. That was early in the history, so therefore the cost was reasonable. We were able to put the machines in the industry. We had two companies that were so anxious to get the machines that they were willing to pay for the manufacture of the machines as long as we put the machines in their plant. Of course, then we gave them a lower rate per ton, because they invested the money, and therefore they got credit for their money's use.

That showed you how it was accepted in the industry, except for the people that were a little envious. Everybody came in to see our machine. We just covered the industry in no time at all, except for the time it took to manufacture the machines. Of course, we had to also build up an organization to

Perrelli: service the machines after we installed them in their plants.

Dunning: So you didn't have to worry so much about competition?

Perrelli: We had no competition.

Dunning: I know you didn't in terms of the machine, but in terms of the quality of the fruit.

Perrelli: Yes, absolutely.

Dunning: But, you had a separate company for the peach-pitting machine?

Perrelli: We were absolutely separated. Filper was completely separated from Filice and Perrelli. Even in the people themselves, there was quite a difference. Naturally, the founders of Filice and Perrelli were stockholders of this Filper Corporation. But we were separate, legally separate. We had no competition because the buyers, after they saw the difference in appearance, they demanded the Filper pitted peaches. It was really a tremendous success as a small operation was concerned. It was not a big thing. It was just pitting a few thousand tons of peaches, that's all it was.

It was international in scope, because we had peaches and peach operations in Australia. We had them in South Africa. I was in South Africa. We had them in Europe and Italy and in Greece. Later on they had them in Rumania. The machine is internationally accepted, and it's still being used.

We really were very fortunate that we got into that end of that field, and we did very well financially. Then we sold our company when we thought we had a good offer.

Selling the Filper Corporation to DiGiorgio Corporation, 1970s

Dunning: You sold Filper?

Perrelli: We sold Filper to DiGiorgio Corporation around 1976, or '77, I believe. They operated for several years, and then in the last three or four years, they sold it to some investment group in New York. Of course, I don't know how that thing operates now. I'm completely divorced from it.

After we sold it to DiGiorgio, I was on the payroll for a year or two, in an advisory capacity. As far as advising is concerned, there wasn't too much needed because the machine was developed and the thing was going right. I was just there; it was just as window dressing, more or less. I didn't contribute anymore, although during the time I was there as chairman of the board, I did make some suggestions that were beneficial to some of the things.

When you see something that isn't satisfactory, or doesn't appeal to you, then you try to see if you can do it another way that is more satisfactory and more practical. I happen to be lucky enough to have been able to make those suggestions. Like the pitting machine itself, as far as I'm concerned, was a big thing. That's the only thing I can say that I accomplished in my lifetime that was really of benefit. Year in and year out we saved a tremendous tonnage of fruit for the industry.

Dunning: How did you happen to sell the Filper Company to DiGiorgio?

Perrelli: As it happened, our attorney, who was practicing in San Francisco--he lived on the peninsula--he and another man who worked for DiGiorgio Corporation, they

Perrelli: used to see each other on the train. They used to travel back and forth, and they talked business. And of course this attorney was very much excited about this Filper Corporation. In conversation, he mentioned it to him. Then as we made progress we thought maybe it was time to sell it while it was at the top, and we had the industry pretty well in our hip pocket.

So this attorney mentioned that we were thinking about selling. He was an accountant, but he changed his job and went with DiGiorgio. He was interested in looking into it. So he came over and looked at our operations. Little by little, DiGiorgio became seriously interested. When we felt we had what we thought we would want to sell for, we made a deal with them and they paid us in cash. They actually paid us in cash, because they had sold a company, which was S & W Company. They sold it to somebody for cash, so they had that money. So they bought our company for cash, and we sold it. And that was the end of it, although the organization stayed with the DiGiorgio Corporation. As I said a little while ago, I stayed with them too for about a year on an advisory basis. But I think that was more of an honorary position that I occupied. That was it.

Dunning: Once you got really involved in the Filper Corporation, how did your role change with the Filice and Perrelli Cannery?

Perrelli: Well, it didn't change because I didn't do anything for Filper Corporation anymore.

California Cannery and Growers

Dunning: After the patent in the early fifties, you weren't associated with the Filper Corporation to a great extent?

Perrelli: I was interested because I was a stockholder, and it was my baby. But, legally and practically, we had a man that--Gennaro Filice's son, he used to work for Filice and Perrelli. He resigned. He completely separated from Filice and Perrelli. There was no connection whatsoever. He became president of Filper Corporation. And then when I quit--oh, by the way, when that happened, when Filper was about to be sold, then Filice and Perrelli Canning Company was also taken over by a cooperative, which was known as California Cannery and Growers. That company was made up of growers who were interested in getting in the canning business. They attempted several times to interest us, Filice and Perrelli, in selling. But we were not interested for several attempts. Then they made it interesting enough so that we thought maybe we should look at it.

Then Mr. Filice was getting older, and he wasn't too well. He began to get in not good health. When there are changes, and you are changing from one generation to another, you're thinking changes too. So we thought maybe while we were at it, we might as well get our affairs into shipshape. We became part of, that is the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, became part of California Cannery and Growers. The organization as such, was actually transferred into California Cannery and Growers. I was not involved. I didn't want to be involved. I was separated.

Dunning: When did Filice and Perrelli become part of California Cannery and Growers?

Perrelli: We started to negotiate with this group of growers and financial people, I guess, in probably 1957 or so. By June 1, 1958, we completed our negotiations and sold. Practically all the people that were in our organization transferred to California Cannery and Growers.

There were other companies. Filice and Perrelli, Richmond Chase were the two basic companies that went with them first. Then they also took in Thornton Canning Company, which was located in Thornton, near Stockton. Then they took over San Jose Canning Company. They did that as months went by and they became pretty large. As a matter of fact, I think they grew too fast. It was a big operation, because they had a number of canneries. They had three canneries with the Filice and Perrelli, and two canneries with Richmond Chase, one with Thornton, one with San Jose Canning Company.

So they went quite extensively into the canning business. Unfortunately, when you become top heavy, it's not a very good operation. You become less efficient. It became so much so that the company didn't live forever. They went out of business just three or four years ago, which was very sad, because it was a big organization. Now, of course, their operation has been taken over by another company, also in the cooperative field. Their fruit is being processed and marketed through this new organization. Not new organization, but another company that was in existence which was also a cooperative. They're operating, but there were some plants that were closed down.

Dunning: But California Cannery and Growers actually took over the Filice and Perrelli plant itself, because that's the sign that is still up. How long has it been since there was any canning activity over there?

Perrelli: In Richmond?

Dunning: Yes.

Perrelli: That was sold to [the City of] Richmond several years before. I felt it was the wrong thing to do, because I felt that that plant was a good operating plant, low cost. Because of it being a little bit out of the way in so far as the growing of the fruit--you had to transport the fruit here, and then from here, after you processed it, then it had to be shipped. But that goes on all the time. California Cannery and Growers had canneries in Stockton. They had two plants in Stockton. They had one plant in Gilroy, and two plants in San Jose, big plants. They had a big operation. They had a big plant in Sunnyvale. They were a big organization.

Dunning: When did they actually stop operating at that site in Richmond? Was it in the sixties? Going in there today it looks like it must have been closed for at least a decade or more.

Perrelli: I think it was in the late sixties or early seventies. They sold it to the City of Richmond. The City of Richmond was going to go into shipping. They made it part of the terminal, but I understand it hasn't really panned out that way, unfortunately.

I really felt bad when they closed it down, because that was our number one plant. We thought it was a stellar performer, and we felt badly. But that's the way things are. They were running it. It was their own affair.

Perrelli: There was one of them that stayed practically until the end. There were a few that stayed. There was a Mike Filice that stayed until the end. He was superintendent. They all had good responsible jobs because they were capable young men, they were hard workers, they were used to it.

Closing Remarks

Dunning: Was this the end of an era for the Filice and Perrelli families?

Perrelli: Yes, from that point of view, but we still see each other and talk to each other, and are still practically the same family. But we're scattered. Imagine the new generations. Older people die. As a matter of fact, I'm the only one of the founding fathers left. The rest of them are all gone. Gee, whiz. Of course, I happened to be the youngest, and therefore it was logical because of my health that I'm still kicking around.

Dunning: How old are you now?

Perrelli: I'm 86. I was 86 in February, so I'm getting close to 87. You have a history behind you and you dream once in a while. So naturally we still see each other. As a matter of fact, once a year, although this year we kind of skipped it, we used to have a picnic every year in September or August. We would call it the Perrelli picnic, but it was really mixed up because it was Filice and Perrelli. And even some of the relatives that were acquired through marriage, like my daughter married a Giordano, and my son married a McBerney.

Perrelli: Then also the sons of the original founders, they're all grown up and old enough to have families. They're grandfathers themselves now. All those people participated in the picnic. Therefore it was a United Nations more or less. We were all kinds of different people from all kinds of nationalities, like we are today. There's no more single European element. We're all intermarried. We've got Irish or Scottish and we've got Germans, and everything under the sun. They're all mixed. My daughter-in-law is Irish. Her name is McBerney. Her mother has a Slavic background. So you see it's international. The barriers are down. There's no longer this idea that you have to marry an Italian. You marry whomever you fall in love with. The family of Filice and Perrelli are Americans, truly.

Dunning: Do you have any special ambitions--things that you would like to do or places that you would like to go?

Perrelli: No, we get enthused about things when we talk about going someplace we think we want to go. Then we consider the minuses and we haven't gone anyplace. We went to Italy two years ago. That was the last trip. My wife and I talk about going someplace, and then we reconsider and we don't go. We're getting to be stick in the muds. My grandson is going to college. He's going to Harvey Mudd College. They sent me a brochure on a group trip that they're sponsoring. We get excited about it, but we haven't done anything. The cost isn't very much, but we kind of cooled off. But we still have it in the back of our minds.

When you're old and you feel it, disabilities can happen, you become a little bit more conservative. So that's why we haven't gone anyplace. I'm probably more at fault than my wife. Of course, I'm older than my wife by several years, quite a few years.

We're still here, anchored in El Cerrito.

Perrelli: I guess you got everything.

Dunning: We could have probably gone on for many more sessions, but considering the limits of this particular project, I think we covered quite a bit of ground.

Perrelli: I think that we covered it pretty well. The real sad thing was that after we sold, Mr. Filice--we sold in June 1, and by April of the following year, Gennaro passed away. So there you are.

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APPENDICES

CANNING • AGE •

TIN ~ GLASS

*Peter M. F. W.
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The American Can Company sends its best wishes for a joyous Christmas to every member of the canned foods industry. ^ ^ For our New Year's resolution let's renew our pledge—quality cans—and quality in the can. On quality rests largely the record of canned foods for 1931.

AMERICAN CAN COMPANY 





Top—Part of first shipment by water (1930) over Parr-Richmond Terminal, 250 feet away from plant.

Center—The fourteen-car receiving track built in court in center of plant.

Bottom—Exterior of plant on part of Richmond piers. Concrete will be painted with enamel paint.

Filice and Perrelli's New Plant at Richmond Harbor

By CHARLES F. A. MANN

Field Editor

size cans of fruit and vegetables is to continue to retail in chain-stores for 9 cents a can, and the hard-riden packer ever expects to make a profit on this class of business.

Around San Francisco Bay canneries with a production capacity in excess of twelve million cases per year are already located. Four brand new plants were opened within the past year, and another late in 1929, representing an investment of about \$3,000,000. Raw material supplies for these plants are grown and shipped in by high-speed overnight rail service from a producing area stretching northward from the Bay area for about 200 miles—eastward 130 miles, and southward for nearly 300 miles. Old Man Sunshine and the winds from the Pacific Ocean balance the growing seasons in this vast growing area so as to synchronize the ripening of raw products over the widest possible period of time, annihilating one of the worst troubles of the packer as much as possible—that of avoiding a season of complete idleness alternating with one of hopeless glut, even during the middle of a season's operations—while a crop of peaches ripens at Merced and another somewhere north of Sacramento.

One of the most interesting illustrations of the new tidewater plants is that built this Summer by the Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, on an 11-acre site in the heart of the newly developed Richmond Inner Harbor area on a Northeast arm of San Francisco Bay, just north of Berkeley and Oakland.

A few years ago this whole area was an odoriferous mud flat, typical of the vast area of muddy, shallow semi-exposed area bordering the whole east side of San Francisco Bay, in which has sprung up the most intensely developed industrial area of the Pacific Coast. The citizens of Richmond, and Contra Costa County voted to create a Port District and forthwith brought in a fleet of dredges and began pumping mud out of the sheltered bay and soon there sprang up a fine area of flat land, with deep water all round and rail terminal connections handily accessible along with fresh water, natural gas, electricity and broad highways leading from the north, east and south, known as the Richmond Inner Harbor. Henry Ford sent his representatives to select a site for his new \$5,000,000 plant on San Francisco Bay and with little delay saw what Richmond was doing to help industry and would do to bring in more industries, and selected a remarkable location on the end of the new tract, with deep water on three sides. Rivet hammers will

THE most significant trend in the production end of the canning industry so far as this writer can determine, is the slow, but steady migration of canneries to tidewater, or to the banks of navigable bodies of water, and away from the middle of a sizable garden patch.

It is natural that a favored few plants will always be strictly land propositions, the nautical end of the plant location playing a small part in the development of these plants. Favorable rail rates and warehousing conditions will keep the factors favoring inland locations ahead of those near tidewater, but in general the canning business is rapidly moving to tidewater. This has a direct bearing on production costs which must be lowered if the ever-increasing volume of portion

Nautical Advantage Plays Big Part in Cannery Location

Illustrations by Courtesy
of Filice and Perrelli

continue to buzz throughout the winter on the giant layout of buildings for the new Ford plant, while just across the street, the energetic and rapidly expanding canning industry of Messrs. G. A. Filice and John Perrelli will continue to finish their plant hurriedly erected for the 1930 season. Finishing, does not mean that the plant was half assembled and hastily built for the first season's run, it means that a coat of lime, cement and water will give the exterior a brilliant, washable glaze, and white paint and cement coating will make the interior as light as day, items helpful in the canning of peaches, beans, tomatoes.

THIS firm began in Gilroy in 1914 and developed a plant rated as about the largest in the Santa Clara Valley, a 14-line plant capable of producing a million cases per year. Continued growth of the company's business finally demanded wider selection of raw materials and another big cannery in a new area. Summarizing all the factors that make for economical operation in an industrial, tidewater area, near a large labor market and handy to a variety of shipping facilities, it was finally decided to locate a plant somewhere in the San Francisco Bay area, on the east side near the rail terminal and on suitable deepwater frontage. The new Richmond terminal development was selected above all others and in April of this year the pile foundation, mostly 65-foot piling driven to hardpan below the mud, was speedily laid down near the center of the 11-acre tract.

The plant itself is of one-story design, containing about 130,000 square feet of floor area on a single floor. The foundation is of heavy reinforced concrete construction, carried to the floor level. Above, a heavy timber and frame serrated roof is carried out from the tops of concrete side walls, with timber supports running from bearings of the roof trusses to the floor level. Steel sash windows are used on the sidewalls and roof and by dividing the plant in the center, making a large sheltered court with two 7-car railroad tracks, light on three sides and the roof is afforded every part of the plant. Floodlights below the level of the roof girders spaced close together make night operations as easy as the day.

The North wing of the plant is the main cannery. Raw materials enter from the north side of the court where cars are unloaded directly to the floor level of the cannery. A light steel bridge-type truss platform can be swung across one track to the open doors of boxcars at any point, thus affording direct connection with cars on both tracks from either wing of the plant.



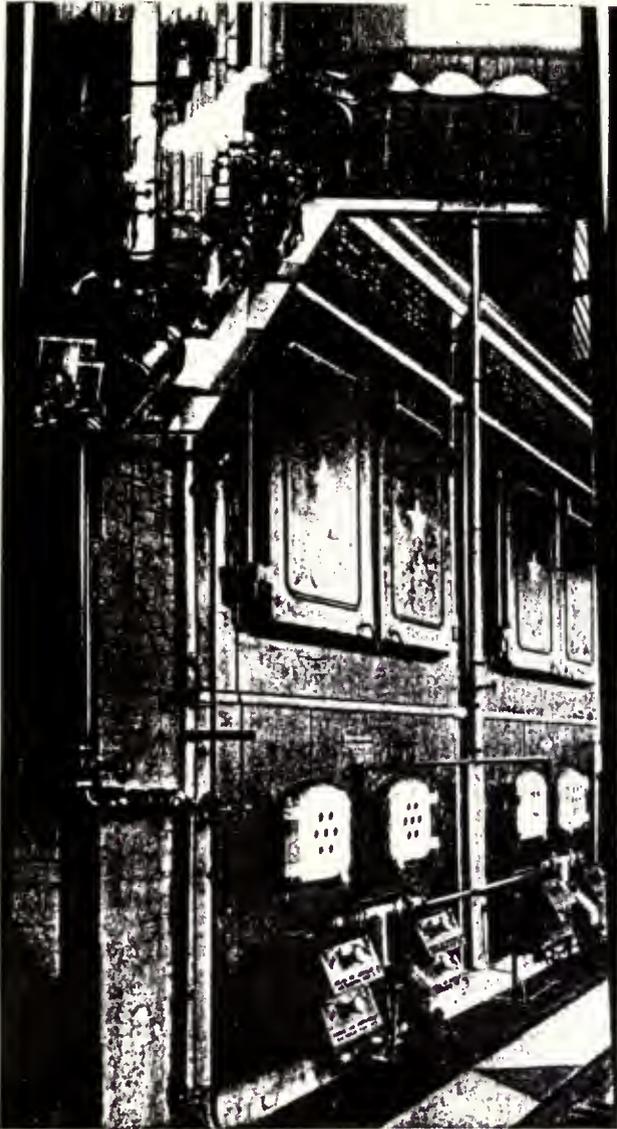
Top—Corner of girls' washroom. Note the three brand new fountain type circular wash basins with soap containers in the center.

Center—General view of Corporation Headquarters at Richmond plant. Note layout and lighting.

Bottom—Girls' locker room has 250 steel lockers with individual keys for each worker.

The South wing is the labeling room and general finished products warehouse, of sufficient size to house an entire season's pack of a million cases. A large roomy space is partitioned off with shelving marked off into sections for the labels. Portable labelers are used and the pack is warehoused in the can stage, in closely packed tiers.

The front wing of the plant houses the roomy office in the center, laid out across the central part of the front of the plant, facing the main road that runs through the center of the Richmond Port terminal property. Skylights and lights from east and west and pleasing arrangement of desks make this office, now the general headquarters for the Corporation, ideally suited to represent the company's business with the public. A



Above—Pumping system and lubricating oil storage service tanks in gas-fired 1000 hp. steam boiler plant.

Below—Face of two 500 hp. gasoline steam boilers. Note four high-pressure burners under each boiler.

completely equipped hospital room with a trained nurse in attendance at all times is a part of the front portion of the building, while at the other end of the space is located the large testing laboratory where constant check on the pack is made; a large locker room where individual lockers with keys are provided each worker free of charge and, best of all, one of the best laid out women's rest rooms and wash rooms the writer has had the privilege of seeing in a long time. The wash room is unique as it has three large fountain type wash basins, made of terrazzo cement. The warm water sprays out in a dozen different streams from a central fountain made of chromium plated metal. Liquid soap is dispensed from a glass and metal fount with four outlets above the top of the fountain and operated by a light push on the plunger beneath. The water is turned on and off by anyone near the fountain by merely pressing the round iron valve ring from any side of the fountain, thus affording accommodations for 36 workers at one time and providing a method

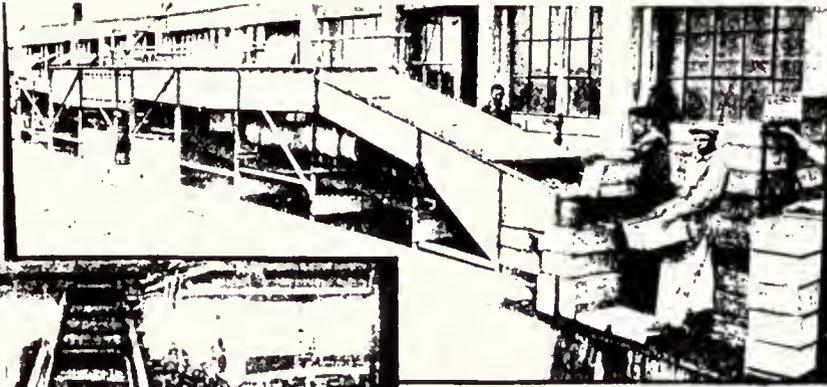
whereby standing in line for use of individual washbowls is done away with. This system operates on the old chicken-roost psychology of everybody just crowding around the water trough and eventually shoving one another out of the way. Speed is the wash-word here! Towel dispensers, mirrors, etc., are located round the room making for dispatch in handling the 400-odd women workers who are employed during the full busy season. The fountain-type wash basins were made by the Bradley-Washington Company.

THE timekeeper's roomy office occupies the north front corner and is so arranged that workers enter the building directly past his office from the outside, without entering the front of the building. Parking space for workers' autos is provided to the side, which runs clear to the water front to the rear of the plant. Eventually the whole front of the building, cast in concrete in attractive design will be coated with the special new brand of cement and lime mixture that gives a glossy appearance easy to clean, and applied directly over the rough concrete surface. The narrow front "yard" will be landscaped this Fall making it one of the most attractive new plants in the Bay area.

Rail facilities are excellent and unusual for industries of this kind, considering that its raw material must be assembled from a widely scattered area and done in the shortest possible space of time. The Southern Pacific and Santa Fe both have direct rail connections with a spur run into the center of the plant. Of interest too is the fact that eventually river-boats ascending the Sacramento and American Rivers to the rich delta lands lying at the confluence of the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys, will be able to land at the water side of the tract and bring in raw materials from the countless island farms in this reclaimed swamp land that grows early fruits and vegetables and is the home of the world's largest asparagus fields. Already in this delta region many canneries are located, mostly near the navigable canalized parts of the river system, all of which drain their finished products down to San Francisco Bay points for shipment. Frontage along the east part of the harbor tract is about 300 feet, giving ample room for Filice and Perreli to expand. Shipment of finished products either leave by rail, truck or ocean steamship, as the Parr-Richmond Terminals are across the street from the plant, 150 feet away, where intercoastal and European ships from several lines land.

GETTING to the main part of the cannery, where the tomatoes, string beans, peas, peaches, plums, pears and apricots are converted from raw fruits into merchantable tins of prepared food, we find one of the best examples of high-speed cannery layout on the Pacific Coast. There are six high-speed Anderson-Barngrover lines of machinery, complete from the raw materials preparation tables, clear through to the coolers. It is claimed that six of these lines are equal to twice this number of the older type slow lines. The only non-A-B part of the lines are the Canco cappers. Arrangement of the lines provides plenty of space at the raw products end.

Fruits and cans are metered in specially de-



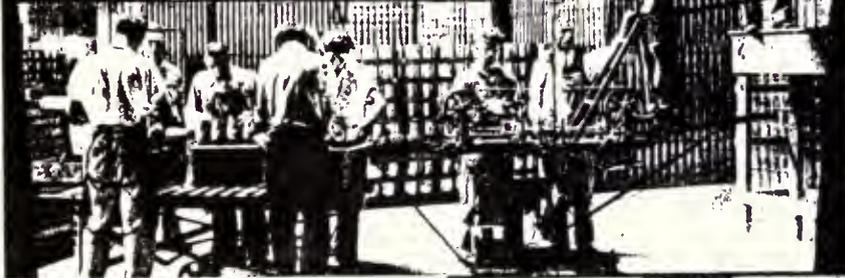
Left—Worker on raw product platform.



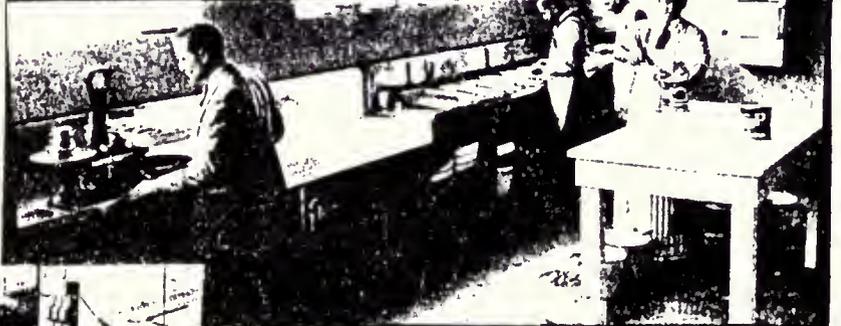
Above—Syrup room on second floor (filter in background).



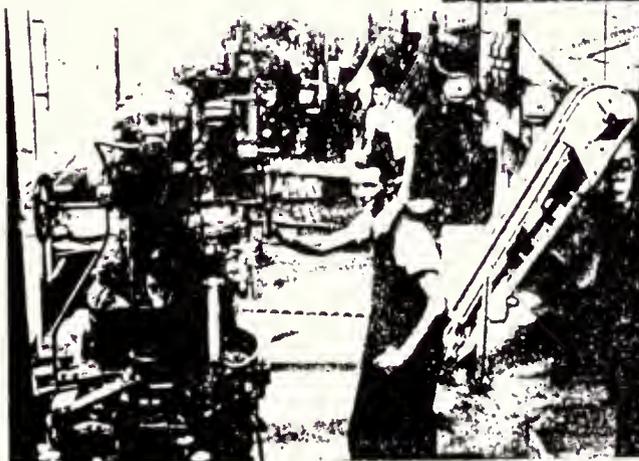
Insert above—Peach-grader for eleven different sizes.



Above—Portable labelling machine in warehouse.



Below—The pack-test laboratory.



Six Canco seamers set between A-B cookers and A-B exhausters.



Filling lines. Note the individual motor drives, enclosed conveyors, white rubber belting.



signed meters so that the production manager has but to read his meters and Tag gauges and he can watch production with an eagle eye that produces a record on paper of every operation in the plant. White rubber belting and enclosed gearing and chain drives eliminate bother and delay at these points, while every single moving part except the seamers are lubricated with the Alemite system tended by a special employee.

A fruit washer on the opposite platform outside handles excess fruit during rush seasons while one long grader placed crosswise in the plant handles the peaches for all lines—and peaches are a large part of the season's output.

TO the rear of the main production lines is one of the neatest boiler rooms in existence. Here two 500 hp. natural-gas fired boilers, made by the Erie City Iron Works generate the steam and hot water for the entire plant. Burning natural gas in a cannery boiler is the nearest thing to perfect steam generation one can imagine. Here the boilers are fired by simply igniting four specially designed natural gas burners under each boiler, made by the Natural Gas Equipment Co. of San Francisco, and watch the water level and the steam pressure. Gas comes into the plant at 80 lbs. pressure from the central line of the Pacific Gas & Electric Company's System and is metered out by a regular gas meter. Individual control valves regulate the flame for each burner, and a long, hot voluminous blue flame results that delivers much heat to every single tube, yet does not leave a single trace of soot nor develop small areas of intense heat to wreck the furnace lining.

The writer nearly fell on his noodle when given permission to crawl inside the boilers after one season's operation and noted that not a single bit of mortar had turned "runny" nor a brick burned up. The tubes were absolutely devoid of soot and not a bit of ash or even dust was noticeable anywhere—just like the home gas range—only on gigantic style. Gas costs but 15 cents per thousand cubic feet, and it is reported possible to fire the two boilers for about 45 per cent less actual cost for fuel than with oil or coal. Coal of course in California is very expensive.

The pumping layout—two Worthington pumps, one a water pump and one a boiler feed pump and a small double-unit emergency fuel oil pump carried as a reserve against failure of the gas system—reposes in a polished and painted room with bright floor decorations and ferns about to make it look like a neat greenhouse. Dust from stacks is not blown into the cannery nor does smoke obliterate the view from the windows nor smudge the landscape. This method of firing is especially noteworthy to packers in the Midwest and industrial areas where natural gas is available or where it will soon be available with the long lines of new transmission pipe being laid from Texas and Oklahoma oil fields to the Chicago area.

It has been predicted that some day coal will be converted to gas at the mines and fed into these pipe lines and coal burning will be a thing of the past. Gas and electricity will come from the mines, leaving the dust, ashes and smoke and bulky fuel right at the mine entrance. The wise packer also notes lowered costs in burning natural gas. Commercial rates on city gas may be

available soon. Such developments are worth noting.

THE plant throughout is equipped with individual drive, eliminating shafting and belting and loose parts that spray dirt and noise over the plant. Over two hundred U. S. motors are used in the plant, each equipped with G. E. Control panels. Stainless steel vessels and metal trays are used and white rubber belting only throughout the plant.

Ideal location, successful plant design, and efficient method of organizing has made this rapidly growing company one of the leaders of the West Coast Canning industry. Filice and Perrelli control one of the largest fruit orchards in the State of California, and this means the country, near their original 14-line plant at Gilroy. The new Richmond plant represents an investment in plant and equipment of over \$500,000 and is the finest plant on the West Coast to be built during 1930.

the founders of Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Inc., were born in Donnici, Province of Cosenza. Members of the two families immigrated to the United States in the early 1800's. Fillippo Perrelli being the first to set foot in America and after working a few years returned to Italy to persuade his family and near relatives to join him in establishing a new home in the States.

In 1906 Gennaro Filice then 16 and the eldest son of Michael Filice, life-long friend of Fillippo Perrelli with his Uncle, Carmen Filice, set sail as the vanguard of what later became a colony of about 50 members and relatives of the two families, to settle in California.

These two ventured first into Canada and worked their way to the West Coast of the States, arriving a year later to join young Filice's parents and other members of his family who had arrived in the meantime. In 1908 Fillippo Perrelli came to America again, this time bringing with him his wife with their three sons and a daughter. The group settled in a farming area in Santa Clara Valley. Fathers and sons worked on farms through the winter and became acquainted with fruit and tomato canning working in a cannery operated by a cousin in a nearby small town. By 1913 they were ready to venture into business for themselves, forming a partnership to grow and can tomatoes. Michael Filice undertook purchase of a six acre tract and to help pay for his land planted tomatoes. A small building was erected in one corner of the plot, and this building was equipped with only the most necessary equipment; a machine to seal the cans and a boiler to provide steam for processing.

With their carefully raised crop safely canned, this inexperienced group now faced the problem of trying to sell the products of an unknown packer to the wholesale grocery trade. Not to be defeated at this early stage of their ambitions, Gennaro Filice, now 23 years old, took off his work clothes, put on a white shirt and his Sunday suit and went by train 80 miles away to San Francisco, to try to sell the first pack. This was a new and not an easy experience for a stranger in a new country, without any knowledge of American business ways and handicapped by the difficulties of using a new language.

The next year, with the proceeds from selling the first tomatoes packed, the partners planted more acreage and undertook buying a building in the nearby small town of Gilroy, where the equipment was moved. From 1914 all the men and women of several families of relatives, recently arrived from Italy, worked in the cannery. The next few years, all working together, and taking for their wages, only enough money to buy the bare necessities of life, the partners were able to add more machinery to their cannery and now instead of packing only tomatoes they began also to can fruits which were raised in the Santa Clara Valley.

From this very modest beginning the business has grown to become one of the best known fruit and vegetable packing companies in the United States. There are six of the original partners in the management group. Gennaro Filice, at the age of 27, became President of the organization when the company was incorporated in the 1918 and John Perrelli, four years younger, was elected Vice-President. There has never been a change in management from that day. Ralph, brother of Gennaro Filice, and Frank, brother of John Perrelli, are plant managers of the two large and very modern canneries which the company now owns. One is located on the site of the original plant at Gilroy, in the Santa Clara Valley, California, and a second plant built in 1930, is located on San Francisco Bay in Richmond. Joseph Perrelli a younger brother of the Vice-President is Secretary and Treasurer of the company. These officers and other members of the founding group have sons who now also have joined the company, after graduation from universities and several years of military service during World War II. There are five junior members in this group.

The company now employs up to 2,500 men and women during the summer and fall canning seasons. Beginning with Spring spinach which is canned in April, the canned products of the company now also include sweet cherries, apricots, green gage plums and egg plant, boysenberries, Elberta freestone peaches, clingstone peaches, fruit cocktail, Kadota figs, Black Mission figs, pears, prepared prunes, tomatoes and various tomato products. A new line of fruit nectars has been added, and in 1953 a third large canning plant, located in the heart of the vast San Joaquin Valley at Merced was acquired.

This Merced plant has been completely renovated and redesigned, and with new improved canning lines and equipment, is now one of the most modern up-to-date canneries in the state. Acquired with the plant were 1,200 acres of orchard and farm lands, including some 100 acres of Kadota figs, 90 acres of Elbertas and the rest in bare land. The Merced operation specializes in Elberta Peaches and Kadota figs and the proximity of the plant to the orchards enables the on-the-spot orchard-to-plant control so necessary to pack the highest quality of these delicate fruits. Eventually, other items too, will be packed at Merced to utilize the facilities to full advantage.

Already, Filice and Parrelli are probably the largest independent canner in the state, packing a wide assortment of California items. They are the country's largest packer of Kadota Figs and Green Gage Plums, and put up an assortment of Apricots equaled by no one. Actually they pack over 130 separate grades, styles, varieties, can sizes and counts of apricots. In addition to their reputation as quality and custom packers, they are also known as leaders in the development of canning methods and machinery. Years ago they developed an improved machine for pitting peaches by the spoon method and invented a very simple but amazingly effective machine for halving and pitting Apricots, that is now used by nearly all of the major Apricot canners in the U. S. A., and even in Australia and South Africa. Recently they devised an entirely different method of segregating and handling the finished product as it emerges from the cookers ready for the warehouse. This system, for which a patent is being obtained, greatly simplifies the normal operation, increases the efficiency of the workers and cuts down their physical energy output. But the latest and most revolutionary achievement is their development of the Filper Peach Cutter. This machine removes the pit from Yellow Cling Peaches by twisting the halves free from the pit. The result of this invention from the production point of view is increased grade and case yield and from the sales and consumer point of view is a greatly enhanced appearance, texture and improved flavor. Reactions of the distributors to the samples have been very enthusiastic.

These are just a few of the examples of F & P's constant efforts to provide for their customers the best possible quality of product and service.

The 40 year history of the company has been one of persistent hard work for all members of the founding group and even to the second generation, with many disappointments along the way, and many obstacles to overcome through the depression and other bad years, but it is a great satisfaction now for these same men who head the management to look back on the years of struggle from the highly respected position they and their company hold in the national business fraternity today. They have all become naturalized American citizens and were proud to have their sons who were born in America serve in the uniform of the Armed Forces of their adopted country. They have earned prominence through community service in their home localities, and while proudly proclaiming their Italian origin, they also acknowledge a deep gratitude to their adopted country to which they have given many years of hard work, but have in turn been rewarded generously in freedom of enterprise which now permits the older generation to enjoy the satisfaction that comes with achieving a goal set many years ago.

ROBERT COUCHMAN
ROUTE 4 BOX 63
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

January 12, 1956

Mr. Gennaro Filice, Sr.
Filice & Perrelli Canning Co.
1200 So. 10th St.
Richmond, Calif.

Dear Mr. Filice:

Mr. Ralph B. Bunje, General Manager of the California Canning Peach Association, wrote you recently of plans for the Association's Annual Report, in which a major part will be devoted to sketches about its canner customers. He has asked me to prepare the article material about each of the canners to be represented in the report.

Accompanying this letter is a draft of the material I have prepared about your firm. I would greatly appreciate your checking the information given as well as the general nature of the presentation. Please feel free to make any suggestions or additions that will assure a more accurate presentation about your firm.

Would you kindly return the draft, with your comments and suggestions, to me at your earliest convenience.

Yours very truly,

Robert Couchman

Robert Couchman *B*

RC/b
encl.

A handwritten signature, possibly "RC/b", enclosed in a hand-drawn oval.

Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Inc., is unique in that ownership and management of this expanding concern remain almost wholly in the hands of those who founded the business 43 years ago as a small partnership enterprise in Gilroy. The firm now packs a full line of fruits and two vegetables in three modern plants at Gilroy, Richmond, and Merced. Its gross sales are estimated to approximate \$20 million dollars annually.

Through its sponsorship of and participation in the development of the Filper torque-type Cling Peach Pitter, Filice and Perrelli recently have made a significant contribution to cling peach canning. This pitter, which has been made available to all canners by the Filper Corporation, pits peaches of better appearance and higher case yield than do other similar machines.

Packers of a large volume of cling peaches, Filice and Perrelli also put up ^{one of} the largest packs of canned apricots and kadota figs. Other products packed are cherries, plums, freestone peaches, fruit cocktail, boysenberries, spinach, tomatoes and tomato products, bartlett pears, and prepared prunes. Principal house brands are "F and P" and "Yosemite." Distribution is largely through brokers and covers the entire United States, Puerto Rico, Cuba, England and other foreign countries.

Filice and Perrelli began as a partnership operation in a rented plant in Gilroy in 1913. The Richmond plant was built in 1930 and has since been periodically enlarged and improved. In 1953, the firm bought the Bear Creek properties at Merced, completely renovating and making new additions to make it one of the largest and most modern up-to-date plants in the State. Included in the purchase were 1200 acres of land partly in peaches and figs. In addition to the cannery, this plant included food freezing and cold storage facilities.

Principal officers are Gennaro Filice, president and general manager; John Perrelli, vice president; and William E. Harcourt, who supervises purchases and field activity.

Filice and Perrelli buys substantial portions of their cling peach requirements from the California Canning Peach Association year in and year out.

Old cannery finds a new future

Effort augments redevelopment in Richmond

By Simar Khanna
staff writer

RICHMOND — The cannery building in Richmond's industrial area south of Cutting Boulevard was abandoned and left for dead when the food processing operation shut down in the early '70s.

Operated by Filice & Perrelli Cannery for many years, the operation was owned by California Cannerymen and Growers at the time closed.

Like most old industrial buildings, the cannery didn't have much going for it. Broken canning equipment had been left dangling from the ceiling, the roof leaked, exposed rusted wires lay everywhere. At first glance, it was an ideal candidate for a bulldozer.

But when developers Moses Libitzky of Oakland and Tom Merrill of Los Angeles visited the building for the first time last year, what they saw was a solid foundation, a sturdy shell and a prime business location with easy freeway access on one side and San Francisco Bay on the other.

He said he saw history not to be forgotten and character that couldn't be reproduced.

In July the developers bought the property at 1200 Harbour Way south from the city of Richmond for \$2.965 million, according to Paul Richardson, the city's spokesman.

The city purchased the site in 1976 and intended to use it for a proposed port expansion project which never was begun, Richardson said. The city leased the buildings as a warehouse to various tenants over the years.

Libitzky would not say how much money he invested to refurbish the buildings, which contain



DEVELOPER Moses Libitzky in the cannery building he renovated.

235,000 square feet.

"There are a lot of old buildings like this. The first instinct of developers is to tear them down. That loses historical character," Libitzky said.

The building's character wasn't the only thing that persuaded Libitzky. Construction of the Knox Freeway and the city's on-going redevelopment of its old industrial areas gave the building a potentially good economic future, he said. The building is a few blocks south of the Knox.

In November the city adopted the Shoreline Study which sets out an aggressive policy to redevelop the industrial zone near the Ford Building into a research and development area.

"What has been done here is a microcosm of what's happening to the whole area," Libitzky said.

The cannery property, now known as Marina Center, is about 60 percent leased and is being used mostly for warehouse space and a distribution center, Libitzky

said. He said these uses are temporary, and expects to have long-term tenants within three years. Those long-term tenants will determine the future use of the site, Libitzky said.

He said the buildings could be used by many kinds of companies — research and development, retail or as a corporate headquarters. He said some major retailers and corporations have inquired about the site.

Economics aside, the building had a certain charm that Libitzky said he couldn't pass by. It told a story.

"I like things with stories. Everything I have in my house has a story," he said.

The story goes back to the 1930s when two Richmond businessmen opened a cannery on what then was South 10th Street. The cannery eventually merged with other produce packing companies, making it the fourth largest farmer-owned co-op in the

state. Mostly peaches, peaches and apricots were packed there.

Co-founder Joseph Perrelli, who now lives in El Cerrito, said the building was built in 1930 and he and his partner operated the cannery from 1930 to 1970 and sold it to the California Cannerymen and Growers Association.

According to an August 1976 newspaper clipping, the cannery employed 1,200 people during the peak of packing season. It had a full-time staff the rest of the year and about 800.

Its owners announced in 1976 that the cannery would be torn down. At that time, it had a full-time and 700 seasonal workers.

The building is Libitzky's project in Richmond, but he has restored other historical buildings in the East Bay. In Oakland, he converted a creamery into a storage lot and in Emeryville, he converted a former steam car factory into a space serves as artists' work space.

Times/Daily

Richmond cannery was a family affair

By Marilee Smeder

Correspondent

RICHMOND — The fruit was off the vine and in the plant. It was ready to pack. But where were the workers? Building ships and off to fight — it was Richmond during wartime. But ripe fruit waits for no one, and it too was needed in the war effort, adding vitamins and needed taste to K-rations.

In desperation, Filice and Perrelli Cannery of Richmond put out a cry to the community and the community responded resoundingly. Former cannery president, Peter M. Filice, 73, speaks with emotion when he recalls how Richmond came to the company's aid.

"Off-duty firemen and policemen, shipyard workers (on their off-shift) and many others came a few hours each day to help keep the plant going. We are forever grateful to the entire community for this response."

The cannery, a Richmond landmark since the 1930s, was thus able to stay in business.

Filice and Perrelli had its origins in Gilroy. Rosina and Francesco, Peter Filice's parents, came to Gilroy from the province of Calabria in southern Italy in 1908 on the advice of friends who said this was the "land of opportunity." The Filices worked as farm laborers, in a cannery and finally shared ownership of a small farm with relatives.

Filice recalls the post-World War I economic slump that necessitated self-sufficiency on the farm. "We raised hogs, which we butchered ourselves, chickens and rabbits and made our own bread and pasta. They were difficult times, but we always had enough to eat," Filice says.

The Perrellis were from the same province in Italy. The Perrellis and Filices began a modest food processing plant in 1914 in Gilroy.

The cannery was a family affair, Filice and his two older sisters pitching in equally. "It is the only place I have ever worked," Filice says. He began by sweeping in the warehouse, and he remembers many a cold winter's day spent this way.

His other duties included heading home before noon to reheat Mamma's spaghetti and casseroles from the night before so the family could have a hot meal before the rest of the day's work.

"For a few years, it was a one-product plant — tomatoes," Filice recalls. In subsequent years, the company added other commodities. By the mid-1920s, the cannery was prospering and the decision was made to expand. A building was leased in San Jose for five years.

In 1930, the plant moved to Richmond. The building is still there, on Harbour Way across the street from the old Ford plant.

"It was all marshland. It took a lot of imagination to picture a food processing plant there," Filice recalls, referring to the plant's waterfront location. "The only thing there at the time was the Ford Motor Company and the Parr Richmond Freight terminal."

The terminal, which provided a way for F and P to get its product via steamship to the eastern seaboard and gulf seaports, was a prime factor in the cannery's choice of location.

With drainage and piling added to imagination, the cannery emerged: 160,000 square feet of space on 14 acres serviced by railroad lines — a modern, efficient facility with up-to-date equipment.

During its peak years, the plant employed 1,000 workers per day seasonally in two shifts, producing 2 million cases of cherries, apricots, peaches, pears and fruit cocktail a year.

When the Richmond branch opened, Filice's family stayed on in Gilroy, managing their facility there. Filice studied business administration at the University of Santa Clara. He moved to the East Bay with his mother in 1939, two years after his father's death.

Seasonal work at Filice and Perrelli gave jobs to many college students, helping them pay for their studies.

In 1958, the cannery was purchased by Cal-Can, a grower's cooperative. F and P remained as a division of Cal-Can, and remained as a distinct label into the mid-1960s.

The company's original president, Filice's Uncle Gennaro, died in 1959. In the early 1960s, Filice became the division's president until his retirement in the late 1960s.

"Everyone always marvelled at how well we got along as a family. We all respected the 'Boss,' Uncle Gennaro, as well as other seniors (in the company). We all worked for the good of the overall company," Filice says.

One of the original founding members, Joseph Perrelli, a past president of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, is still active in the community at 90 years of age.

Filice decries the trend current in business of undercutting long-standing employees by bringing in management from the outside: "They should properly train people in the company to rise to the top rather than hiring outsiders," he says.

Filice was appointed foreman of the Contra Costa County Grand Jury in 1975-76, and was a member of the board of the San Pablo Salesian Boys Club for 17 years.

He enjoys his retirement with his wife of 47 years, Lena, and continues to stay active in St. John's Church in El Cerrito and as a member of the board of directors of Brookside Hospital Foundation.

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Photography exhibitions: "Lowell: A Community of Workers,"
Lowell, MA 1981-1984 (travelling).
Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers"
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Play: "Boomtown" based on the oral histories of shipyard
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