

Transcript of Oral History Tape #40 Transcribed by Tina Kraemer 9/18/03.

Interview with Bart Bernacchi - October 26, 1977

History of Bernacchi Business and Family

Mr. Bernacchi: The business was founded by my father, Angelo Bernacchi, who was born in 1892 in Luca, Italy. And by the way he passed away in 1969, so he has since been dead 8 years. He emigrated to the U.S. from Italy alone at the age of 15 years old with approximately \$25 to his name. He landed in New York and stayed there approximately a week. He did not like that. From there he went to Chicago, stayed there approximately a week or two, did not like that. He was very home sick at that point. He met a fellow by the name of Mr. Bartz who took him to LaPorte, Indiana. He couldn't speak English, you've got to remember this, and at that time he was very home sick so Mr. Bartz said he'd take him to a place which might remind him of home so he brought him here to LaPorte, Indiana right here at this particular spot. And he worked in woolen mills for maybe a couple three months, he worked a cleaning sweeper, a night man in taverns at nights, and from there he kind of wanted to go in business for himself so he decided he wanted to get into the vegetable and fruit business. So what he did is he went to this little . . . first of all he started working for this fruit market, it was called Line . . . let's see if I have the information here . . . Line and Rosenthal Fruit Market. Now what he would do he worked there too, after he had his push cart made at the Wagner Wagon Works, it was called, or blacksmith shop located on Monroe Street in the 600 block, he would buy the bananas and so forth on a consignment basis from Line and Rosenthal Grocery and go out and peddle them on the streets, mainly Indiana Avenue, Michigan Avenue and around the school areas. Many of the older people remember him very well, the people who are up in their 80's and older and I'd have them come down here quite often and remind me of the fact.

Interviewer: So you bought them on consignment?

Mr. Bernacchi: Bought them on consignment and paid for what he would sell you understand?

Interviewer: Do you know how much you would pay or sell?

Mr. Bernacchi: He was selling them something at that time like a nickel a dozen.

Interviewer: Bananas?

Mr. Bernacchi: Bananas, right.

Interviewer: What would he do in the wintertime then?

Mr. Bernacchi: In the wintertime he would work at the mill, he would plow snow for the City, he worked any job he could find he would do. And at that time when he first came to town he was living on the corner of Lincolnway and Michigan which was right above now is Zelden Shoe Store.

Interviewer: You said that this Mr. Bartz brought him to LaPorte because he thought it would remind him of his home in Italy?

Mr. Bernacchi: Well, he realized that he came from a very small city in Italy, that he might like this better and he really did. He kind of liked it very much so. So then he peddled bananas for probably 2 or 3 years with his cart, then he acquired a horse and a wagon from that stage and started peddling more fruits along with the bananas. He was doing pretty well at that point. Then he come upon this piece of property out here which was all woods of course and many rocks. And at that time he probably was about 18 and he was out here, as the story was told to me, removing these rocks by hand and on crowbars and such things as that. And some lady come walking by here and says, "Is this your ground young man?" Remember he didn't understand too much English. And he says, "No." She says, "Why are you working so hard if it doesn't belong to you?" And he said, "Well I want to farm it. A fellow told me if I take the rocks out and clean it up I could farm it and grow some vegetables that you could sell." So, this lady just took it upon her own to sign a promissory note for him to buy the ground.

Interviewer: How much acres was this?

Mr. Bernacchi: Oh, at that time probably about 8 to 10 acres. Mind you, the lady did not know him and she knew him a little bit from the way he had worked peddling bananas down the street (by the way she was one of his customers), I said did not know him - she did for a degree then she had seen him work for 2 years. Obviously realizing that he was a hard working man, see, so she went to the First National Bank. I don't know if it was the First National at that time or not, but she went to the bank anyway, signed a promissory note for him to get his feet on the ground to buy the property. And that woman happened to be Mrs. Fox who was one of the owner's wives at Fox's Woolen Mill, a millionaire family in LaPorte which donated the golf course, Fox Civic Auditorium, Fox Park, many donations they gave to the City of LaPorte. But anyway she got my father started by financing him at a very young age. So that was the beginning of this piece of property here. Then he went into the vegetables a little larger and larger and eventually put in irrigation, then his brother followed from Italy. He wrote for his brother and that was Gino, who is now dead, and he came over.

Interviewer: What year did he come?

Mr. Bernacchi: Gino came over, let's see, Gino followed in 1909 at the age of approximately 20. Then his brother Victor who runs the fruit markets followed in 1920. So Gino came 3 years later than my father and Uncle Vic came approximately 14 years later.

Interviewer: Did your father emigrate to make his fortune by himself?

Mr. Bernacchi: By himself, yes, he came by himself. Worked his way over on the boat.

Interviewer: It must not have been very common such a young boy by himself.

Mr. Bernacchi: Well, I don't know whether it was or not really, but something that he was dissatisfied and he wanted to come over here. He had an itching under his feet until he came over. And of course then his brother Vic came

over in 1920 and they went into business together - in the vegetable business. They were together for approximately since the early 40's. Then they split up and each went their own way. My Uncle Vic is in the vegetable growing business and my father and we boys branched off into the greenhouse business. That was the early 40's. We both went on our separate roots.

Interviewer: When your father first bought this land and started irrigating vegetables did he still peddle them or did he open up a . . . ?

Mr. Bernacchi: No, he peddled them. He peddled them from store to store: the A&P, Krogers, National, to any stores like that he was into then. But he used to go from home to home. When he had the horse and wagon he went from home to home. When he had the first truck which was an old Dodge he went from home to home and eventually they'd gradually build up a bigger business and the people in the general residential area could not buy what he grew so he had to go into the marketing to Chicago.

Interviewer: When did it turn into where everybody goes to them, when did he stop peddling totally, open up like a commercial retail?

Mr. Bernacchi: Commercial retail? Well we opened up retail in about 1940's. But now my Uncle Vic he didn't get into, who runs the fruit markets mind you - one in Michigan City and one here in LaPorte, he didn't get into the retail until about 5 years ago.

Interviewer: Before that he was doing . . . ?

Mr. Bernacchi: Strictly growing vegetables on the wholesale level. We've been in the retail business since 1948, here with potted plants though. Are you following the story?

Interviewer: Yes. A lot of relatives.

Mr. Bernacchi: There is a lot of Bernacchis in LaPorte now, but they've all started from my father. He had seven boys, I'm the seventh son.

Interviewer: You are the seventh son yourself - you have been very lucky.

Mr. Bernacchi: He was the seventh child, but not the seventh son. Supposedly [indecipherable]. But anyway he had seven sons and of course we all had families and his brother, all of his three brothers came here see. He came with Gino and Uncle Vic. Uncle Vic had five children, Gino had three and we've all had children so this is why when you look in the phone book you approximately see maybe 20 different listings then. They all started with him coming over here when he was a boy.

Interviewer: What kind of changes have you seen just in this type of business since you've started?

Mr. Bernacchi: Oh my goodness. Many. Changes I've seen - number one . . .

Interviewer: When did you first come into the business?

Mr. Bernacchi: Well, I was born and raised into the business. I went to college, I went to service and I came back into the business, so basically I was here all my life. I was in the Navy 2 years and in college down at Purdue. But other than that there has been many, many changes to the road, so-called, what you drove on was much tougher sitting wise at the present and it's kind of God's momentum now in going along pretty good. This is one thing that the next generation will fail to have had the experience to be growing up in a business from rock bottom to the top. See this is sometimes why I believe they say third generations often fail. This is my personal opinion because they have not come up that real rocky road. They got onto that road when it was at the top and going along. They'll either level off or go back down. Personal opinion of my own.

Interviewer: Well you could fail and then the third generation could not.

Mr. Bernacchi: But, my opinion is I will never fail because of my father. Something in the economy, that's different, but this is the way I feel. I've been brought up that way and I've seen times when business people had come here that want to sell us things but they had to get the money first before they sold to us. My credit was not good. I mean, it's not that we cheated people - we didn't have the money. If we wanted something and we didn't have the money so they'd always check first. But now it's so, well, I discount all my bills because we're in a position where we can. But these are things that they will miss, the next generation. I've discussed this with many people and I really feel sincere.

Interviewer: It makes sense. [indecipherable] third generation, I mean if you always have things . . .

Mr. Bernacchi: You've seen many changes. All right for instance, the changes. When I came home from school after school there was a little Model A Ford truck sitting in this driveway (at that time there was no going to the [indecipherable]) waiting for me to go to work. Changed my clothes, jumped in the truck and would go to work. We'd work out in the fields until dark and leave at dark, my mother would have some sandwiches for us, we'd take sandwiches, go into the packing sheds and work until 10:00 or 11:00 at night.

Interviewer: You originally had vegetables too right?

Mr. Bernacchi: Right and worked until 10:00 or 11:00 at night you see. Never knew what a time clock was. There wasn't such a thing. We were just glad to work and be able to have a place to live and eat, but our folks is home, believe me. Then some other changes, well for instance, getting back a little later in the years the greenhouses when it was coal each of us had a watch at night. We'd get up, there was four of us brothers here in the business and one would get up maybe at 2:00, one would maybe get up at 4:00, one would get up at 6:00 and check on the boilers because they were coal fired and you had to get in there and make sure they were fired and take the clinkers out. And after you'd get back from that with all that sulfur fumes in your nose you wouldn't go to sleep. I did this for many years. We could not afford a night man so we had to do it ourselves but today we have two or three night men on duty. It is just some of the things that have changed along the road. The method of merchandising has changed so much and the bedding plant industry especially. In the spring we grow petunias, geraniums and everything was dug out of little wooden boxes called flats, wrapped in newspaper with a rubber

band around it. Today they all are prepacked in plastic containers. The customer picks the pack up and away she goes. So, I can sit here for hours and go on and on and I remember we had horses to do all the work in the fields, back in the fields and before the greenhouse days.

Interviewer: How much acreage did you have then?

Mr. Bernacchi: Well, out on Monroe Street where my uncle has a fruit market that was my father and his grown together, it was 40 acres there and we farmed a lot of rental ground there. We would probably farm maybe 75 to 100 acres most of the time, which was a lot of acreage in those days when we did it by hand. I went through the era where we pushed cultivators by hand. You've seen them I'm sure in the garden little rakes in the bottom. We'd push these all day long from 7:00 in the morning till dark. Of course we'd go home and eat. Today they wouldn't think of doing these things, no one would. And of course I went through that era then I went into the tractor, when we got a tractor finally that did the same that put eight rows at a time like carrots, onions, small rows you know with little tillers in between each row, something like this that just took the place of many people. All these things went up a long line and in the greenhouse we used to water all by hand probably 85 to 90 percent of it is all automated - done automatically.

Interviewer: When did automation come in?

Mr. Bernacchi: Automation came in about the time my father was dying, or died, in the 60's about 65, middle 60's. It was a little bit around here and there, but people weren't sold on you know when something new comes in. People aren't always sold on these things and I wasn't either at first behind a lot of it, but now I don't know how we'd do without it. A little spaghetti-type plastic thing about this size that goes into each pot. In fact I will show you that if you are interested in seeing it.

Interviewer: The greenhouses that were built - what was the really early greenhouse - what did it look like? Were they like plastic or glass?

Mr. Bernacchi: These are original. Yes. These are original greenhouses. These were built in 1948, these first three right here. That was our original greenhouses and maintained very well of course, we'd paint and keep them up very well and they're wood, steel and glass. Now they've gone to all aluminum and glass. Now they're getting a lot of fiberglass and plastic so it's the trend that it went from wood, to wood and steel, to aluminum and glass, glass was in all of them, went to wood, to wood and steel, and aluminum and now it's plastic. The plastic doesn't take the place of glass, it's only in addition to it.

Interviewer: The old Line and Rosenthal Fruit Market that your father consolidated - they didn't own the greenhouses, did they?

Mr. Bernacchi: No, they ran a fruit market downtown.

Interviewer: Farmers [indecipherable] and then they'd sell to them?

Mr. Bernacchi: Right.

Interviewer: Okay, so when is the idea of greenhouses all around . . .

Mr. Bernacchi: Greenhouses idea started when my dad was in the vegetable business and we were all, at the youngest age, we were all in the vegetable business really. And greenhouses . . . we started building these like I told you in 1948, which was what . . . 50, 68, 78 . . . nearly 30 years ago we've been in the greenhouse business as such, but we've been in the growing business all our life.

Interviewer: I just wondered when the greenhouses just sort of came into the county because it would have been a very big switch for the agricultural area.

Mr. Bernacchi: That's right.

Interviewer: Actually growing year round now and you're not relying on the weather anymore.

Mr. Bernacchi: And we are one of the largest now in the Midwest under glass. We are proud of the fact starting from nothing. We shipped probably within a 200 mile radius - Lafayette, some stuff goes to Ohio over to Chicago area, Ft. Wayne, Mishawaka, Benton Harbor. So that's just a 200 mile radius. Our blooming plants we made them bedding plants. We grow a few cut flowers also. Four of us here in the business. My father had seven sons. There are four of us remaining in the business.

Interviewer: A nice family tradition.

Mr. Bernacchi: Right.

[End of tape]