

Legacy of Prunes: A Tribute to the Orsetti Family

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I chose to write this essay on the history of the Orsetti family mostly because it is personally important to me. Emilio Paulo Orsetti, the first generation of the Orsetti family to come from Italy to America, was my great-grandfather. Emilio Aladino Orsetti, his son, was my grandfather, and his wife Teresa Sunseri Orsetti, my grandmother. Marlene Orsetti Manzo is my mother, and my family lives on the Orsetti property to this day.

As soon as our family found out that the high-speed train from Sacramento to San Diego was cutting through Gilroy and could possibly go right up our driveway, my mom began immediately going to meetings concerning the plans for the train and advocating against the plans for it to destroy private properties. She wrote a letter to the editor in the Gilroy Dispatch, which finally brought attention to the situation. That letter inspired the Dispatch to send out a reporter to write an article on the property and its history for the featured Pride Edition. With this essay, I wanted to bring even more awareness to people about the Orsetti property and its importance, while mentioning the possible future for this land and other private properties. I am hoping to somehow make a difference to protect the hopes and dreams that my great-grandparents and other determined, hard-working people toiled relentlessly for to get where they are today.

In the essay, I first discuss the influence of Emilio Paulo and Louise Garbarino Orsetti, my great-grandparents. Next, I address the accomplishments of Emilio Aladino and Teresa Sunseri Orsetti, my grandparents. I talk about Mark Orsetti, my uncle, and Marlene Orsetti Manzo, my mother, third. Finally, I broach the topic of the high-speed train and how this project could affect the Orsettis and other families. It would be extremely satisfying for me to help someone recognize the historical and current importance of this family in Santa Clara County.

Legacy of Prunes: A Tribute to the Orsetti Family

Picture a man about five feet eleven inches, with a perfect posture (frequently mistaken for well over six feet tall), farm-tanned skin, a thick shock of white hair, and deep twinkling green eyes. He is dressed in faded blue jeans, a white v-neck t-shirt underneath a long-sleeved button-up beige shirt and old, denim jacket (sometimes layered in two), walking up a driveway in dirt-caked, brown work boots, carrying a handful of mail or newspaper from three mailboxes that line Buena Vista Avenue. The driveway is edged on both sides with beautifully blossoming prune trees and has been located on the outskirts of Gilroy, California for ninety-eight years. He waves to his daughter driving down the gravel path in the opposite direction, off to work and taking her children to school. The man is Emilio (Emile) Aladino Orsetti. The scene described is one that played frequently until early 2006. It is revisited often in the memories of Emile's descendants. Though he is gone, the Orsetti legacy lives on in what he left behind. The Orsettis residing in Gilroy have made a significant impact in Santa Clara County, although many of their influences go unrecorded. From the time Emilio Paulo Orsetti (Emilio Aladino's father) came to America from Italy, Santa Clara County has grown a lot to accommodate farmers and students especially. This growth has flourished with behind-the-scenes help from the Orsetti family. Each member of the Orsetti family who lived in Gilroy, California is an inspiring role model for great work ethics and strong familial connections. Emilio Paulo and Louise Garbarino Orsetti first established the Orsetti family in Gilroy and began the legacy with their orchard, setting an example for generations to follow and impacting Santa Clara County in ways that have survived ninety-eight years. Emilio Aladino and Teresa Sunseri Orsetti continued the family business and enhanced Santa Clara County in the areas of agriculture, education, and safety. Today, Mark

Orsetti and Marlene Orsetti Manzo continue the Orsetti heritage and also influence Santa Clara County's agriculture and education. Each aspect of the Orsetti family, while not commonly known, is historically important and means a lot to many people across Santa Clara County.

Emilio Paulo Orsetti arrived in California in 1902 after leaving Italy at age sixteen (around 1893) in search of a better life. Once in San Joaquin Valley, near the town of Firebaugh, Emilio began working for Miller and Lux, once the largest cattle producer in California (Orsetti). He was later transferred to another ranch belonging to Miller and Lux over Pacheco Pass, in Gilroy. He worked for ninety-six cents a day, from sunrise to sunset, and earned a reputation as a good worker (Orsetti). In Gilroy he met Louise Garbarino, who was thirteen years his junior (Manzo). They married in 1905, and vowed to overcome poverty together ("Calloused Hands"). In 1911, the couple was encouraged to purchase 11.75 acres of land on Buena Vista Avenue for \$175 an acre. They gave a down payment of \$50 in a gold piece (Orsetti). The purchase required that the land be planted with prune trees; thus the Orsetti prune orchard was established. In 1920, they bought the ten acre homestead next door for \$300 an acre (Manzo). Emilio built a house and a barn, and dug a well for water while expanding the orchard by planting more prunes (Orsetti). At this time, Buena Vista was merely a dirt road, and nearby Llagas Creek didn't have a bridge. Emilio, being a "real pioneer of the era," petitioned the supervisor to build a bridge to make transportation into town more efficient (Orsetti). His petition passed, a bridge was put in place, thus making it easier for people to buy and sell goods in town. Also during this time, Emilio and Louise raised their nephew Aladino until he was eighteen years old (Orsetti). In 1924, Louise gave birth to their only son, Emilio Aladino Orsetti, Emile for short. During the Great Depression, the Orsettis wanted to withdraw their saved money from the bank, but found that

this was impossible as they would not be given full value for the money they had deposited. The bank instead paid them back with four houses that the Orsettis later rented out: three in Gilroy, and one in Alum Rock (Orsetti). They still had a few thousand dollars to spare. The Orsetti property became a total of about thirty-five acres in 1939 when Emilio purchased 11.75 more acres for \$3,250 (Orsetti). These events marked the beginnings of the Orsetti heritage.

Some may argue that these accounts do not tell much of the Orsettis' influence in Santa Clara County; however, it was previously stated that much of the Orsettis' impact goes mostly unnoticed. If it wasn't for Emilio, Llagas Creek would not have had a bridge, and the Orsetti family would not have a source of income nor a place to live. Also, Aladino Orsetti would not have had the same opportunities as he did with his uncle and aunt had they not been around to support him. The major achievement that affects Santa Clara County is the fact that the orchard is still around today. It is one of four or five remaining prune orchards in Santa Clara County; its harvest is delivered to Sunsweet, who distributes the fruit all over the country. Today the family farms five acres of prunes, and throughout the years, people slow their cars by the orchard to take pictures of the mustard flowers blooming or the prune blossoms ("Calloused Hands"). Some people even stop to pluck a few fruits from the trees for their own enjoyment. Bringing those small joys to people's lives is one of the significant ways that the Orsetti history has impacted Santa Clara County.

The Orsetti orchard probably would not exist today if it weren't for Emilio Aladino (Emile) and Teresa Sunseri Orsetti. At one point in time, Emilio Paulo suggested possibly selling the land because, in his old age, it was getting difficult to raise prunes on so many acres. He didn't want to burden his son with the job, but Emile opposed this idea and pleaded with his

father to keep the land and family business going. Emile balanced orchard work and school, eventually going to college at San Jose State. Shortly after beginning college, he was drafted to the army as a meteorology officer. After his return, on January 1, 1949, Emile signed a lease contract to take care of the entire orchard for one-third of the growth income (Lease Contract). In 1953, he met Teresa Sunseri and decided to pursue a teaching career so he could continue farming. He worked at Eliot Elementary School in 1956 and was transferred to Brownell Middle School in 1957, teaching 7th grade CORE and math. This was the year he and Teresa married. Emile had a house built for his family behind his parents' home. After his first ten years of teaching, Emile devoted his work fully to math and influenced a lot of students, many of whom describe Emile as having been their favorite teacher. James Unruh, a retired park ranger in New Mexico described Emile in a letter to Teresa after Emile's passing,

Mr. Orsetti was the perfect teacher to ease my apprehensions. Even as a vulnerable youth, I always regarded him as a non-threatening adult. With maturity, experience and time, however, I came to appreciate him more and more as a fine, competent, professional teacher, a fair man with a grand gift to impart knowledge to young minds.

Emile taught accelerated math, one and two level 7th grade math, and low level 8th grade math for fourteen years. Over the course of his time as an educator, Emile accomplished many things. In 1959, he and Teresa had a son, Mark. Two years later, Emile received his Master's Degree; his thesis paper called *A Study of the Development and Experience of the Greenbelt and Related Legislation* is housed in the San Jose State Library. In 1963, Teresa gave birth to a daughter, Marlene. During the course of his career, he taught both of his children at Brownell. Until he

retired from teaching in June 1981, Emile split his time between his family, his teaching, and his orchard work. In addition, he was the landlord of two houses in Gilroy left over from the Depression, which gave people places to live. After retiring, Emile devoted his time to his family and the orchard. He continued to sell the crop to Sunsweet, where it still goes today. One influence he made around Gilroy was changing the speed limit on Buena Vista Avenue from fifty-five to forty-five miles per hour. He said he didn't want to get run over while walking to pick up the mail. Whenever he felt injustice was occurring in California, he thought nothing of pulling out a pen and immediately addressing his concerns to current officials at the county and state levels. He also asked for a short easement off of Buena Vista to be named "Orsetti Court" after his father because Emile had to give up an acre of land for the small street to be constructed. The land adjacent to Orsetti Court belongs to the family today, but is rented out to another grower. Emile was supported greatly and whole-heartedly by his wife, Teresa. She was a great influence on the family with her loving personality and her acceptance of everyone. She helped Emile out immensely in minor ways, such as taking the time to type his thesis paper as he was not very comfortable using a typewriter. She would also work in the orchard, doing things such as driving the equipment, picking up prunings or "brush", walking the irrigation lines, and measuring the ripeness of the fruit with a sugar meter. One particular contribution Teresa made to Santa Clara County benefited all California farmers. At the time Proposition 13 was on the ballot, she would get on a bus to the county offices and address the entire Board of Supervisors concerning the rewards of it passing. Prop 13 was the suggestion to lower property taxes on homes, businesses, and farmland by 57% ("What is Proposition 13?"). This would benefit farmers due to the fact that their incomes are inconsistent; unlike most other workers, growers

are at the mercy of the elements. If Proposition 13 did not pass, many farmers, including the Orsettis would have lost their land to the cost of high taxes. Luckily, Prop 13 passed, and because of Teresa's and others' devotion to the cause, the Orsettis and other families were able to keep their farm businesses going. This impacted many people across California, not just Santa Clara County. Even as she got older and became disabled from severe arthritis, Teresa continued to be a role model and inspire people. In a letter written in December of 2006, her nephew, Ron Stefani, commended her strength and determination.

All my life you have always showed support for me, encouraged me, praised me, and made me feel special. . . . You have somehow found time to support and shore up others when you were struggling with your own problems. You have survived the deaths of loved ones, fires, illness, disability, disappointments concerning your land, good crops and bad crops, the losses of [relatives] Don and Betty Lou, sisters and brothers, the ups and downs of raising children; and the many years you gave of your youth taking care of your parents.

While someone may point out that Teresa was not part of the Orsetti family by blood, she was still legally an Orsetti and made a huge influence on the lives of people in Santa Clara County. Ron also told her, "What a brave and caring person you have been, a powerful example to our family and to others. You are and have always been my hero. You and uncle Emile have been a role model for loyalty, love, and generosity for your children, your family, and your community." Teresa was a great example of hard work and dedication, and she was a fantastic role model to her family and friends because she was always polite, considerate, and eager to

help people. She accepted everyone for who they were and tried to make the best out of hard situations. When a person spent time with her, he or she would feel like the most important person in the world. After Emile's retirement from teaching, Teresa supported him in continuing the orchard work he loved for as long as he could, and she was there for him in his last months, when cancer prevented him from working any longer. She emotionally supported others while raising two children, Mark and Marlene.

Mark and Marlene are the third generation of Orsettis in Gilroy, California. They continue to farm the orchard and run the family business, while maintaining teaching professions and raising their families. Mark is a teacher at Brownell Middle School, like his father before him. He taught 7th and 8th grade Social Science, Math, and now teaches Physical Education. He is also a disc jockey for special events, such as school dances and weddings. In addition, he helps out with the orchard work like moving sprinkler pipes and driving equipment. Marlene began her teaching career at the original Las Animas Elementary School, where she worked for one year. She currently works at Rucker Elementary School, where she has been for twenty-three years. Marlene taught sixth grade for eleven years, until 1997, before switching to the fifth grade self-contained gifted program. She and her friend Teddi Oteri had their own business called M.O.S.T. Enterprises (Manzo and Oteri Smart Teaching) from 1993 until 2000. The goal of their products was to make teachers' lives easier by providing curriculum to follow, lesson-plan software, and other teacher resource materials. They traveled the state giving presentations, holding workshops, and selling their products at trade shows. In addition to her teaching career, Marlene finds the time to farm the Orsetti orchard with her husband Don Manzo, who is also a great part of the continuation of this legacy. The Orsetti property was recently the subject of an article in

the Gilroy Dispatch Pride Edition that was published on March 26, 2010. Marlene and her family spoke to reporter Sara Suddes about the family history and what the orchard means to them. In February, Marlene had written a letter to the editor of the Gilroy Dispatch addressing the pending future of the Orsetti orchard, as it is right in line with a possible route for the high-speed rail system. This has brought awareness to people about the high-speed train and the possible routes that it could follow, warning Gilroy citizens that her property is not the only option for the train to go through. Marlene is a proponent for family heritage and determination, and has influenced many people throughout Santa Clara County.

It may not be completely clear how Emile's children have impacted Santa Clara County, as no formal recognition has ever been given until the Pride Edition of the Gilroy Dispatch from March 2010. As teachers, Mark and Marlene continue to influence students, contributing to the successful futures of many children of Santa Clara County. As farmers, they sell to Sunsweet and share their fruit throughout California while inspiring people who appreciate the last surviving prune orchards. Ron Stefani praises them in his letter to his Aunt Teresa, saying,

You have raised two very loving and caring children in Marlene and Mark who will be there for you in difficult times. Because of your generosity towards them they are able to live in their own houses next to yours on your compound. What a blessing. . . . They have grown into the honorable and respected profession of their father; they have become good parents themselves; they have become role models for others as teachers, as he was. . .

Emile and Teresa's children still live on the property today. Marlene and her family built a third

house behind Emile's, and Mark lived in the newly replaced first house until Teresa's passing in 2009 (the original house where Emile was born burnt down in 2002). Now Mark and his family reside in Emile and Teresa's house, because he has a strong desire to "be home." Currently, the first house on the property is rented to a family friend. Mark and Marlene are still landlords of two houses in Gilroy from the Depression and continue to run the orchard's five acres of prunes. Just as Emile chose to keep Emilio's dream alive, Mark and Marlene have chosen to keep things the way Emile and Teresa would have wanted. This in itself is a testimony to the Orsettis' great determination and respect for one's history.

The Orsettis have impacted people throughout Santa Clara County in minor ways that have made a major difference in the lives of many hard-working, family-oriented people. The reason this family's history needs to be taken into account at this time has to do with the people of California voting on a \$40 billion high-speed train that will go from Sacramento to San Diego ("Gilroy Residents"). It has been decided that the train will definitely go through Gilroy, but the different configurations and designs of its route are still obscure. "Plans for the project range from a 28-foot elevated platform running over Gilroy's downtown to an underground, trenched configuration, and the various configurations would create radically different effects, said Councilman Perry Woodward" ("Gilroy Residents"). Woodward also states in Suddes' article about the high-speed train, "There's a lot of private property that would be impacted." This concerns the Orsetti family because with the people of Gilroy agreeing to let the track cut through their town, the Orsetti property is vulnerable to being some of the private property that would be affected. "In particular a route that ran east of Highway 101 appeared to run less than five hundred feet east of Carolyn Court and Garcia Lane and cut through a property on a rural

road off of Buena Vista Avenue” (Partridge). This proposed track is actually plotted to travel right up the driveway where Emilio used to walk to get the mail and check his crop every morning. The committee in charge of the high-speed train plans believes that their possible track simply travels down a “rural road” off of Buena Vista Avenue. While this is technically true, the reality is that if this track is chosen, the train will completely demolish ninety-eight years of Santa Clara County's history that can never be replaced. Yes, this is only one of many families that could be affected by the up-scale urbanization that is destined to happen; however, this family's worry is a minuscule representation of the disruption that is yet to be made, and this should be taken into more consideration.

Overall, the Orsetti family's impact on Santa Clara County has been very significant. Emilio Paulo Orsetti came to America 108 years ago, and it is amazing that the fruit of his hard labor still thrives today. The influence the Orsetti family has had on Santa Clara County has made it possible for farmers to keep their land, students to become responsible adult members of society, educators to be more efficient with their teaching tactics, and for people in general to live more safely. They have also personally influenced many people through their work ethic, determination, kind hearts, and desire to make a difference. A high-speed train could possibly be obliterating all of the progress and hard work they have made in achieving their dreams, which seems extremely unfair. The Orsettis and other Santa Clara County families should not be made to experience the repercussions of this vote as a tragedy; instead, all Californians should rightly be able to appreciate the technological advancements that are being made. If, in fact, the route up the Orsetti driveway is chosen, this family should ultimately be recognized for their sacrifices and successes regarding the impact they have made on Santa Clara County.

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