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Regional Oral History Office

California Wine Industry Oral History Project

Victor Repetto — A CAREER IN THE WINE INDUSTRY IN NEW YORK AND CALIFORNIA

Sydney J. Block — SELLING CALIFORNIA WINES IN NEW ORLEANS

Interviews Conducted by
Ruth Teiser

Copy No. 1

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PREFACE

The California Wine Industry Oral History Series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969, the year noted as the bicentenary of continuous wine making in this state. It was undertaken through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, and under the direction of University of California faculty and staff advisors at Berkeley and Davis.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and wine making that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some wine making did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

Three master indices for the entire series are being prepared, one of general subjects, one of wines, one of grapes by variety. These will be available to researchers at the conclusion of the series in the Regional Oral History Office and at the library of the Wine Institute.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, the Director of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
California Wine Industry
Oral History Series

1 March 1971
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California Wine Industry Oral History Project

Victor Repetto

A CAREER IN THE WINE INDUSTRY IN NEW YORK AND CALIFORNIA

An Interview Conducted by
Ruth Teiser

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Victor Repetto at time of interview, 13 March 1970

Photograph by Catherine Harroun

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

The interview with Victor Repetto was held at his home at Redwood City, California, on March 13, 1970. A preliminary discussion had been held in San Francisco at the interviewer's studio the previous week; a mutual acquaintance brought Mr. Repetto there to reminisce about Joseph Di Giorgio and other wine men of his period.

Mr. Repetto, then aged 75, was still in fairly good health at the time of the interview and, although unprepared to answer some specific questions about matters long past, enjoyed recalling his part in wine industry affairs over the years. By the time the transcript of the interview was sent to him some months later, however, his health had declined, his eyesight was poor, and he was unable to undertake a careful reading of the text. He indicated, however, a desire to delete certain sections which he had intended as simply informal conversation with the interviewer. A shortened version was then prepared by the interviewer, but his health prevented its being read to him. Finally, following the death of Mr. Repetto on August 31, 1973, his attorney and friend Angelo Scampini made the final editing of the interview as it appears here. He made a few minor changes and formalized some of the wording.

Victor Repetto had, as he indicated in the interview, played a part in industry negotiations and operations that are discussed more fully in Horace O. Lanza and Harry Baccigaluppi, California Grape Products and Other Wine Enterprises, a Regional Oral History Office interview in this series completed in 1971. Mr. Repetto also mentioned in this interview his early experiences with Italian Swiss Colony, an organization discussed at greater length in Edmund A. Rossi, Italian Swiss Colony and the Wine Industry, another interview in this series completed in 1971. Other matters upon which Mr. Repetto commented and shed light are discussed in other interviews and can be traced through the series index.

Following Mr. Repetto's retirement from the wine industry he was active for some years in the real estate business in San Francisco.

Ruth Teiser
Interviewer-Editor

3 March 1976
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

Obituary Notices, Victor Repetto

From San Francisco Chronicle

REPETTO, Victor — In Redwood City, August 31, 1973, Victor Repetto, beloved husband of Myrtle Repetto, Redwood City, loving father of Mrs. Elena Gannon of Tempe, Ariz. and Victor Repetto of Santa Clara; also survived by nine grandchildren and four great grandchildren; a native of New York City, aged 78 years; a member of San Mateo County Sheriff's Mounted Patrol; Redwood City Elks Lodge No. 1991 B.P.O.E. and II-Cenacolo of San Francisco.

Funeral services will be held from the SNEIDER & SULLIVAN FUNERAL HOME, 977 So. El Camino Real, San Mateo, on Tuesday, September 4, at 10:30 a.m. thence to St. Matthew's Catholic Church, San Mateo, for a Requiem Mass commencing at 11 a.m. Recitation of the Rosary Monday evening at 7:30 o'clock. Private entombment, Holy Cross Cemetery, Colma.

VICTOR REPETTO

Victor Repetto, 78, of 839 Blandford Blvd., Redwood City, died yesterday at Sequoia Hospital in Redwood City. He was the former owner of the California Grape Products Co.

A native of New York City, he had retired some time ago.

Repetto had lived in San Mateo County for 33 years.

He was a member of the San Mateo County Sheriff's Mounted Patrol, the Redwood City Elks Lodge No. 1991, andII-Cenacolo, a San Francisco organization.

Surviving is his widow, Mrs. Myrtle Repetto of Redwood City, a daughter, Mrs. Elena Gannon of Tempe, Ariz., son, Victor of Santa Clara, nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Services will begin at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday from the Sneider and Sullivan Funeral Home. A Requiem Mass will start at 11 a.m. at St. Matthew's Catholic Church. The Rosary will be recited at the mortuary chapel Monday night at 7:30. Private entombment will follow at Holy Cross Cemetery.

(Date of Interview - March 13, 1970)

CALIFORNIA GRAPE PRODUCTS COMPANY

Teiser: We are looking at a California Grape Products Company brochure you had made up after Repeal* and it shows the various locations of its wineries and New York facilities. Was the "Victor" label named after you?

Repetto: Yes. It was an easy name to remember. My partner, Horace Lanza, said, "That means victory." This [referring to photograph in brochure] was our little lab in San Francisco. This was our bottling operation. Of course, now they've improved bottling operations, but this was at that time already partly mechanized.

This was in 1933. This picture** is in San Francisco, on Third Street. This was in New York. We had oak casks. We used to move wine then by barrel. This was really before the tank car operation. These pictures are in Elk Grove and Ukiah.

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*Victor, The Pride of California. A Good Guide to Good Wines. California Grape Products Company, San Francisco and New York. A copy has been deposited in The Bancroft Library.

**Photograph with caption, "San Francisco General Office and Warehouse.

Teiser: And here are your bottles.

Repetto: The Owens-Illinois Company made these molds for us.

Teiser: They're special molds, with the state and grapes in relief. Here's a clipping headed "Repetto Sells His Winery Interests." December 1, 1942. Let me just read it, may I?

"San Francisco, California - Victor Repetto, one of the best known figures in the American wine industry, announced the sale of his interest in the California Grape Products Company to Horace O. Lanza, President of the company. Repetto, who has been Vice President of the company since 1921, is taking over the ownership and management of a 640-acre vineyard from the California Grape Products Company. It consists of choice wine grapes and is located in Southern Tulare County near Delano. For the past three years Repetto has resided in California. During eighteen years prior to this he managed the New York branch of the California Grape Products Company, dividing his time equally between the New York and California offices. He is a member of the board of directors of the Wine Institute, and was the organizer and chairman of the New York chapter of the Wine Producer's Association, predecessor of the Institute, in 1935. His start with the grape and wine industry came in 1915 when he joined the Italian Swiss Colony. He was also one of the organizers and a director of Fruit Industries, Ltd."

Teiser: I think you told us when we met the other day the date of your birth.

Repetto: December 27, 1894.

Teiser: And how did you happen to go into the wine business?

Repetto: Well, I started with Mr. Louis Profumo, assistant manager of the Italian Swiss Colony, New York City branch. It was on Washington and West Eleventh Street. Earl Severance was the manager. He was a nephew of [Andrea E.] Sbarboro.

We had a five or six story building there, and Mr. Sbarboro used to come there maybe two or three times a year. He was Secretary of the Italian Swiss Colony under P.C. Rossi. He would visit us unexpectedly. He was a very agile individual. I remember him coming up the steps two at a time, without any one of the management knowing that he was showing up.

Louis Profumo later went with Cella Brothers, and I also went with him to Cella Brothers. The Italian Swiss Colony had decided to close its New York headquarters.

Teiser: Did you have a special interest in the wine industry?

Repetto: No, it was just a job. I had had business school training. In the Italian Swiss Colony I was credit manager.

Teiser: Do you speak Italian?

Repetto: I understand it. My association has been with Italians, but we did business with many Germans, and there were a lot of German-

Repetto: Jewish people back in the East through Pennsylvania, and New York. We had a number of salesmen that represented that line. In those days they used to travel around and had their certain areas and territories. In fact, Congressman Emanuel Celler's father was a salesman whose territory was parts of New York and Pennsylvania. He lived in Brooklyn. Emanuel Celler himself was then a young man going to Columbia University, and when his father died he took over his route to put himself through NYU. When he finished studying law and started practicing, he became the attorney for the Italian Swiss Colony, New York branch.

Teiser: After Italian Swiss Colony ceased business in New York, you were with Cella Brothers two or three years?

Repetto: Not for long. Mr. [Mario P.] Tribuno, who was one of the owners of the California Grape Products Company, offered me a better job. That was in 1921, and California Grape Products was started only in 1920, so it was rather a young organization at that time. Before that the name was Tribuno and Garrish. Garrish separated from it and Tribuno took it over.

International Grape Products Co.,Inc., packing plant. Inspection and selection of the trays in sanitary conditions before packing the "SALVADOR"

International Grape Products Co., Inc., Porterville plant.
Packing "SALVADOR SEMI FRESCA PAK" in barrels.

THE PROHIBITION PERIOD

Repetto: The company had the vineyard in Ukiah, and we brought over Professor Monti from Conegliano, Italy, who had a vacuum pan process for making concentrate, which we called "Caligrapo." It would not ferment. People could put back three parts of water to one part of concentrate and ferment that. The law at that time* permitted an individual to make in his own household two hundred gallons of wine per year.

Teiser: In what kind of containers did it go out?

Repetto: It was sold in little oak kegs of five and ten gallons. In the beginning, though, before that, we had Continental Can make a number ten tin from re-enameled sheets, and sold it in cans.

Teiser: When did you become associated with Mr. Lanza?

Repetto: In 1929. Business was in trouble all over the country, you remember. Mr. Mario Tribuno wanted to get out of the company and asked me to go to California. I did, and got in touch with Horace Lanza. I said, "I think I've got something to offer you that's a bargain: Mario wants to get out of this business." I invited him to come in as a partner. He finally agreed to come into the California Grape Products Company, and then I had to go back and complete the deal with Mr. Tribuno. That's

---

*During Prohibition.

Repetto: how Horace Lanza and I became partners.*

Teiser: By the time that Mr. Lanza came into the company then, the company owned quite a few properties besides the Ukiah one?

Repetto: Yes. We had Ukiah and Delano, as you'll see in the booklet, and Windsor, St. Helena and Napa; a little distillery up in the city of Napa. St. Helena was the old Schilling ranch. Beautiful location. They grew all of the white grapes.

Teiser: Let me ask you--I have no idea what Mr. Mario P. Tribuno looked like, or acted like or was like...

Repetto: He stood about 5' 8" to 9". He was born in Asti, Italy, and his uncle, Pietro Rossi, had him come over as a young man, and put him to work at Asti. Mario was a chemist--not by schooling, but by experience. He developed one of the very well-known vermouths on the market today, the Tribuno vermouth.

That vermouth was developed at our West Broadway address in the Pisano-Montresor Building. He would come in the little lab there, and he would say, "Victor," (he called me out of my office) "Come in and taste this. See what you think of this." He would import these different herbs to make these various types of vermouths, and he would keep making mixtures. Mario always liked to blend different things together. He also developed the "Americano." They tell me that in Italy they've also got what they call the "Americano, with Campari."

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*Horace O. Lanza and Harry Baccigaluppi recalled the year the agreement was signed as 1932. See that interview, pp. 9-10.

JOSEPH DI GIORGIO AND THE GUASTI FAMILY

Teiser: You were acquainted with Joseph Di Giorgio?

Repetto: Oh sure.

Teiser: When did you first meet Mr. Joseph Di Giorgio?

Repetto: I met Joe Di Giorgio when A.P. Giannini started with the Bancitaly Corporation, around 1920 or 1921. I think that was my first contact. I know A.P. came to New York to set up the Bancitaly Corporation, and asked different prominent Italians to buy stock in the company. Di Giorgio was a great friends of A.P. Giannini. He introduced A.P. To many prominent Italians back east.

Teiser: Was Mr. Di Giorgio a commanding man, dominating?

Repetto: Oh, yes. He was very domineering, but he knew what he was talking about. He had set up the Di Giorgio Fruit Company and he took his two or three brothers into it. He didn't have any children, and he schooled all of his nephews, who are prominent in the firm today.

Mr. Di Giorgio had a terrific business sense. He usually got what he went after. He had a home in Bakersfield, and one in New York, and then he would always have a suite at the Mark Hopkins.

Teiser: Did he always speak with an accent?

Repetto: Yes.

Teiser: Was he difficult to understand?

Repetto: No, he wasn't.

Teiser: Did you know any of the Guasti family?

Repetto: Yes, Secondo was the father. They had their summer home down at San Bernardino. It was a beautiful one that they built there. Their other home was in Los Angeles. I went there a number of times. He had marble shipped over from Italy, from Ferrara; I remember especially the center hall--it was so fabulous.

Mrs. Guasti's name was Louisa, and after Mr. Guasti's illness she ran the business. I was at her home with Dr. A.H. Giannini, A.P.'s brother, who was then head of the Bank of America*in New York. A group of us came out from New York with Will Hayes, who was the head of the motion picture industry association, and Eddie Robinson, the actor. We had a private railroad car all the way from New York City. It was during Prohibition. We were all invited by Louisa Guasti to a dinner party, and it was a very swanky affair. Believe it or not, the table service was solid gold!

I remember one thing especially. She said, "Victor, I want you to take this jar of olives." She prepared green-ripe olives each year. She'd do it herself; she enjoyed doing those things.

I always called her "Mother." She was just a charming lady. She handled the office details and negotiations down at San Bernardino and also ran the house after her husband became ill.

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*Then still (until 1930) the Bank of Italy. Dr. Giannini headed a New York bank owned by Bancitaly Corporation.

Teiser: You mentioned that you called Joseph Di Giorgio "Uncle."

Repetto: I always called him "Uncle." All of his nephews would call him "Uncle," so I told him, "Joe, I'm going to call you Uncle. I seem to get along better with you calling you Uncle than calling you Joe." We used to go out together socially a lot. He liked movies, and the theatre, and liked going to good restaurants whenever he was in town.

Teiser: In New York?

Repetto: Sometimes in New York, but mostly in California.

Teiser: He must have been good company.

Repetto: Yes, he was. He was very much alive and he liked good company.

Teiser: You hear of him as a businessman, but you rarely hear about him as a social man.

Repetto: I enjoyed him socially as much as I did as a businessman.

California Grape Products owed his Earl Fruit Company which later became the Di Giorgio Fruit Company, a substantial sum, so I came out to California and sat down with him, and he was very fair. He said his directors were criticizing him for keeping this debt on the books; that not enough was being paid against it. Well, we made a deal to liquidate the debt at a reduced figure.

Di Giorgio left the next day for New York, and he called up Mr. Tribuno and said, "That young man that you sent down there--he's a little quicker than I am!" [Laughter]

Repetto: Then I went to the Bank of America* and I saw A.P. Giannini and one of the executive vice presidents. He was the reception man at the time. A.P. said, "Show him in." He brought me into his office, and I suggested a plan to pay off our loan to the bank. (This was in '29, during the Depression period.) A.P. said to me, "I'm very glad to go along." A.P. had an ability of judging the human individual, and he apparently did that very plainly with me. He called in Bill Blauer, who was executive vice president, and said, "Bill, anything this young man wants, give him." Just like that! All I could say was, "Thank you."

THE REPEAL PERIOD

Teiser: We mentioned the other day Donald Conn, and you said that you had known him.

Repetto: He was a very fast-moving individual, very alert, and a very good politician. I think he might have been good material for the governorship of the state of California. If I saw him today I wouldn't be able to place him, but I was quite impressed with him in the associations that I had. He brought Harry Caddow into the picture, and Walter Taylor. We had a terrific freight car tie-up, and Donald Conn was sent out of Washington by the government to undo this scramble, and he did the job. After that he became very active in the grape industry.

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*Then still the Bank of Italy.

Repetto: We had a lot of problems with Repeal. That's why I started the Wine Institute, New York Chapter. I started it up in our office at 26th Street. I had a meeting of the California grape growers and wine producers that had offices in New York. Harry Baccigaluppi was then in California on a business trip; he was then associated with Colonial Grape products. I said, "We'll make him the Chairman of the Board." When he came back, I said, "I would like you to take over the chairmanship." He agreed, and we set up our offices, and that's how we established the Wine Institute, New York Chapter.

We would meet about every week at lunch. Some of the boys felt that they had been in a financial bind for all of the Prohibition years and they wanted to set up a good price. But A.P. Giannini told me, "With Repeal, don't you fellows price yourselves out of the market." So I told them, "We want to keep up our production. If we raise the price too high, we'll make it impossible for ordinary people to buy wine."

Teiser: Did you know Mrs. Willebrandt?

Repetto: Yes. Mabel Walker Willebrandt was an assistant U.S. Attorney General during the Hoover administration. After she left that job she became attorney for Fruit Industries Inc. She was a very intelligent, charming lady. I had dinner with her at her home. She lived in Alexandria, across from Washington, and she had an office in Los Angeles and one in Washington. When we

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INTERNATIONAL NEWSREEL PHOTO
SLUG(MRS. VILLEBRANDT)

MRS. VILLEBRANDT VISITOR AT
WHITE HOUSE ON MYSTERIOUS
MISSION.

WASH.D.C...MRS. MABEL WALKER
VILLEBRANDT, FORMER ASSISTANT
ATTORNEY GENERAL IN CHARGE OF
PROHIBITION, PICTURED AFTER
HER CONFERENCE YESTERDAY WITH
PRESIDENT HERBERT HOOVER.
NEITHER MRS. VILLEBRANDT NOR
WHITE HOUSE OFFICIALS WOULD
DIVULGE THE NATURE OF HER CALL.
R-9-14-29 AB.AM.

Repetto: had meetings with her at her office, she was just as mannish as any man could be--I mean in her appearance, her dressing. But socially at home, she was the most feminine person that you'd want to meet. She had a very charming home. When she would come to New York, she would call up and we would go out to dinner, and she would be just charming company. Very interesting girl. She was a pleasing person to look at, a very personable woman. She also had a date ranch down at Indio, and her father then lived with her there. He was a very fine gentleman.

I remember President Hoover was an ardent Prohibitionist, but his sons owned a large ranch down at Wasco, southwest of Delano, where they had vineyards, and we would buy their culls for making high-proof. We had a Prohibition Department permit, of course.

SINCE 1942

Teiser: You continued with California Grape Products until 1942?

Repetto: Yes.

Teiser: This clipping I read in the beginning says that you were taking over management of a 640-acre vineyard from the California Grape Products Company.

Repetto: That was part of the assets I received when I sold my share to

Repetto: Lanza. He paid me so much in cash and I took the 640 acres of vineyard down in Delano which, after a few years, I sold to Schenley. They still call it the Repetto Vineyard.

Directly after that, I helped Schenley buy the Di Giorgio Vineyard in Delano. It had also purchased the Roma Winery. I said to Uncle Joe, "I think they are interested in some of your vineyard, because 640 acres is too small for it." So he sold to Schenley, I forget how many hundreds of thousands of gallons of wine, plus the Delano acreage. It was a cash deal. Later I helped Schenley arrange some financing with the Bank of America, and Fred Ferroggiaro became a director of Schenley. He was executive vice president of the bank at that time.

A little before that, A.P. Giannini was having dinner one night with the group of us, and he said I was too young to retire. He asked me to come into the Bank. This was on a Saturday night, and he said, "Monday morning come in and I'll have an appointment set up with Mario."

So I went there, and A.P. ushered me into the office and Mario offered me a desk on the eleventh floor [the officers' floor of the Bank of America] and a vice presidency. He said, "You'll start with so much, and you'll be in charge of wine, liquor, and kindred industries--cooperage and other things that pertain to the wine business." And I said, "Mario, look, if I accept this job at this salary, it's going to send my tax bracket

---

*L.M. Giannini

Repetto: up. I'm very grateful to you and your dad for this offer, but let me make an offer. I'll take the job for one dollar a year." And he said, "Victor, you think this over for a few days, and come back and we'll talk it over again." So I went back to the second meeting, and he said, "Have you changed your mind?" And I said, "No, I'm still the same." I couldn't figure it out any other way. He said, "Then, Victor, that won't work out." I said, "Why? All you have to do is pay me my expenses for my traveling and one dollar a year." And he said, "No, we've got one man at a dollar a year, your good friend A.P. [laughter], and we don't want any more." I said, "Well, I appreciate that, Mario. You can rest assured that I will always work for the Bank of America." In fact I've just finished seventeen years on the Advisory Board of the A.P. Giannini Branch down here in San Mateo.

Teiser: Well, you've certainly had an interesting career.

Repetto: It's been a wonderful life. I mean there have been no heartaches with it. If you think right, and handle things right, the right thing has to come.

Transcriber: Helen Kratins
Final Typist: Keiko Sugimoto

california grape products company

SAN FRANCISCO
NEW YORK

VICTOR WINES

CALIFORNIA GRAPE PRODUCTS COMPANY are owners, growers, producers and bottlers.

Our vineyard properties are ideally located in the State of California. From the vineyard pictures you will notice the great difference in the typography of the land.

In the northern part of the State the soil and climatic conditions are ideal for the production of dry red and white wines. This area is mountainous and depends entirely upon the natural elements. Our northern vineyards are located at UKIAH, Mendocino County, WINDSOR, Sonoma County, LA PERLA and SPRING MOUNTAIN, Napa County.

In the southern part of the State, through the San Joaquin Valley, the vineyard properties are ideal for the production of sweet wines. This area is as flat as a billiard table and mostly irrigated; the climate is warm throughout the year. Our southern vineyards are at DELANO, Kern County.

The CALIFORNIA GRAPE PRODUCTS COMPANY has imported wine-grape cuttings from the vineyards of the most famous wine producing areas in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Austria, and consequently has in its vineyards the varieties of grape which produce the individual types of wine that are recognized in this country.

At our vineyards we have located six wineries with a total storage capacity of FIVE MILLION GALLONS and two distilleries for brandy production. These wineries are located at UKIAH, WINDSOR, NAPA, ST. HELENA, ELK GROVE and SAN FRANCISCO—the distilleries at UKIAH and ELK GROVE.

At UKIAH we produce dry red wines as Claret, Burgundy, Zinfandel, Barbara, etc.; also brandies. At WINDSOR, dry red wines; at ST. HELENA, dry white wines as Sauterne, Riesling, Chablis, etc.; at NAPA, dry white wines; at ELK GROVE, sweet wines as Port, Sherry, Muscatel Angelica, Tokay, etc.; also brandies; at DELANO, sweet wines, and at SAN FRANCISCO we have our storage winery warehouse, bottling plant and general offices. At the latter location our wines are stored, blended and bottled for the world's markets. In New York a quarter of a million gallon storage winery warehouse, bottling plant and branch offices are maintained.

In the preceding pages we have tried to give you a brief set-up of the organization of the CALIFORNIA GRAPE PRODUCTS COMPANY.

We believe the method to be fundamentally sound for serving the public the finest types of each variety of California wine produced. BECAUSE EACH WINE IS FROM ITS NATIVE REGION.

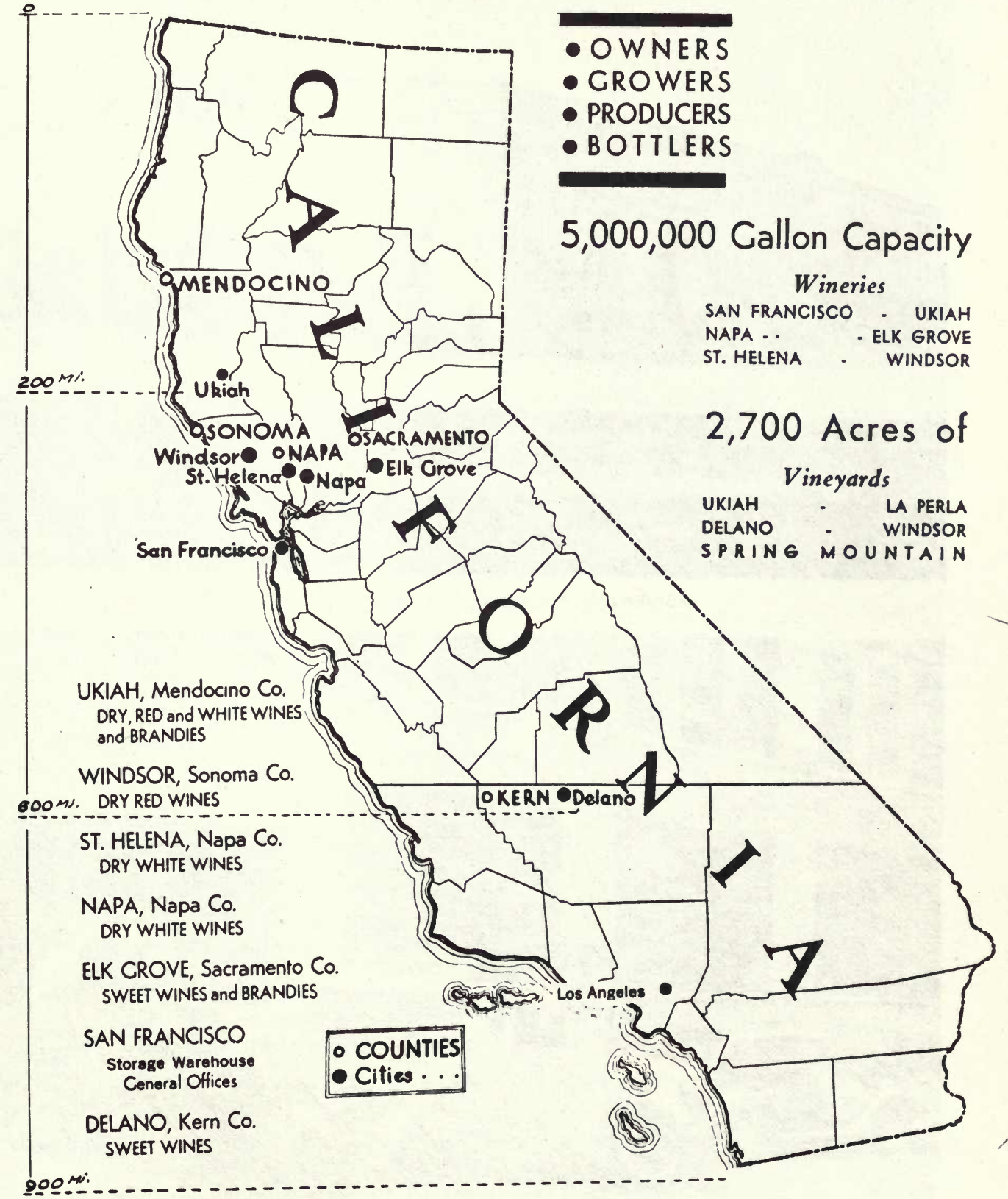
Glance at our wine awards since repeal:

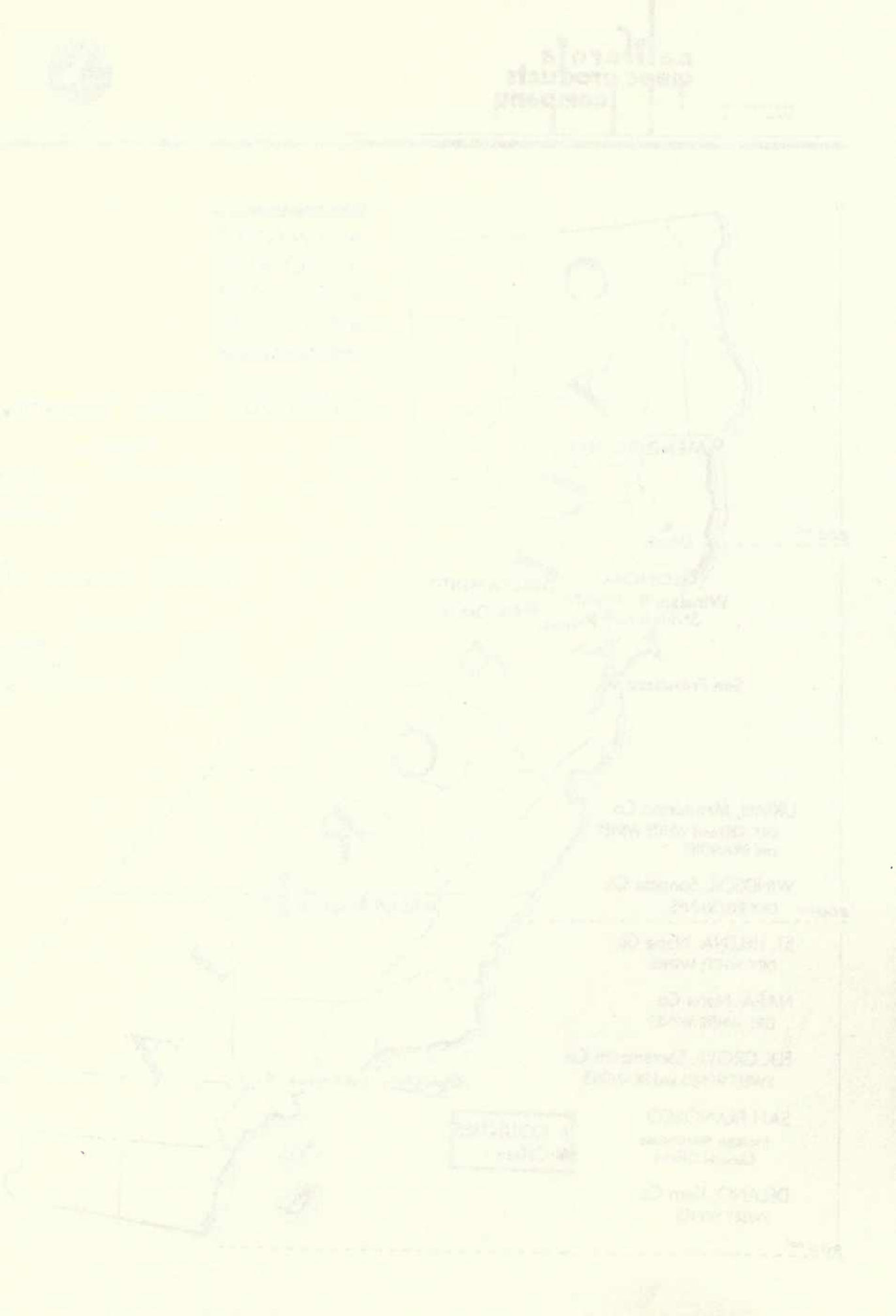
1934	GRAND PRIZE AND GOLD MEDAL	Florence, Italy
1935	GRAND PRIZE AND GOLD MEDAL	London, England
1934	GOLD MEDAL	Sacramento, California
1935	GOLD MEDAL	Sacramento, California

california grape products company

SAN FRANCISCO
NEW YORK

VICTOR WINES





california grape products company

SAN FRANCISCO
NEW YORK

VICTOR
WINES

San Francisco General Office and Warehouse

New York Office and Storage Warehouse

california
grape products
company

SAN FRANCISCO
NEW YORK

VICTOR
WINES

A Comprehensive and Dependable Line of Wines

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Shipping Activities At Ukiah, Calif.

Shipping Activities At Elk Grove, Calif.

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California Wine Industry Oral History Project

Sydney J. Block

SELLING CALIFORNIA WINES IN NEW ORLEANS

An Interview Conducted by
Ruth Teiser

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INTERVIEW HISTORY

Sydney J. Block of New Orleans was interviewed during a visit in San Francisco in 1969 at the urgent suggestion of a California wine industry consultant who had known him for many years. An affable southern gentleman, who enjoyed recalling the past, he took time during that visit to meet the interviewer at the Wine Institute, which allowed the use of a conference room for the taping, on the afternoon of August 11.

As Mr. Block indicates in the interview, he is a third-generation member of a New Orleans family that started selling California wines there in the early 1880s. He himself had been in the business for 61 years at the time he was interviewed, having started working with his father at the age of sixteen. Thus he knew the entire span from the pre-Prohibition period to the present, for he has continued working actively as a New Orleans sales representative for California wineries.

In September 1974 a decision was made to transcribe the tape, which had remained on deposit, and after preliminary editing, mainly deletion of minor repetitions, it was sent to him to check. Questions regarding clarification of certain points were sent with it. On July 17, 1975, he returned it with replies to the questions, and in the following month the editing was completed with the aid of some further correspondence.

Ruth Teiser
Interviewer-Editor

3 March 1976
Regional Oral History Office
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University of California at Berkeley

(Date of Interview - August 11, 1969)

THREE GENERATIONS OF BLOCKS

Teiser: To begin the interview, Mr. Block, when were you born?

Block: August 12, 1892.

Teiser: And where were you born?

Block: New Orleans.

Teiser: And your occupation is...

Block: Sales representative for wineries.

My grandfather brought his first barrel of wine into the city of New Orleans approximately in 1880, and my father continued as a winery representative after my grandfather's death, and I am the third generation--I having started in 1908. That's approximately sixty-one years.

Teiser: Did your grandfather import wines from Europe?

Block: No. California. In those days the name of the firm was Eddinger Brothers & Jacobi, later changed to Lachman & Jacobi.*

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*The Blocks were apparently dealing with the New York affiliate of Lachman & Jacobi, Eddinger Brothers & Jacobi, which was bought by the California company in 1891.

Teiser: And your grandfather was their representative in New Orleans?

Block: That's right.

Teiser: He represented them exclusively?

Block: Oh yes, exclusively.

Teiser: I see. How did he come to make that connection? Do you know?

Block: No, I don't, except that I think in 1878 we had the yellow fever in New Orleans, which was quite an epidemic, and a few years after that someone I think suggested, due to the malaria we had in the New Orleans area, that he bring in some wine from California for drinking purposes, as well as pleasure, naturally.

Teiser: Was wine supposed to be a protection against yellow fever and malaria?

Block: Yes.

I can recall the names of various firms that were in business here in California, like George West & Sons. They were a wine company here, shipping east. And B. Dreyfus & Company. And Eddinger Brothers & Jacobi were shipping to the New York market as well as to the New Orleans market.

Teiser: This is your grandfather's time?

Block: That's my grandfather's time.

Teiser: I see. Do I remember that the New Orleans market was the second largest in the nation (outside California) for California wines?

Block: Yes, it was at one time. That's correct. In the New Orleans market, when we represented the various wineries, just on one brand

Block: we sold over two million gallons of wine.* In those days it was mostly claret and burgundy and white wine, and not so much of the dessert wines because of the predominantly French and Spanish extraction of the people there. For that reason they were drinking a lot of the low alcohol wine in those days.

Teiser: Did your father and grandfather feel themselves to be very much in competition with European wines?

Block: Yes, at that particular time. That is a very good question because you must remember that we had a lot of the French and German immigrants who settled in New Orleans, and there was a great deal of wine brought into New Orleans from Europe in hogsheads in those days.

Teiser: How much do hogsheads hold?

Block: Sixty-one gallons. And the wholesaler would bottle for the wealthy French families. So there was competition--a great deal--with the sale of California wines in that particular time.

Teiser: The buyers wanted wine bottled?

Block: Yes. Well, the wholesaler would bottle it for them free, you see, and then send it to the home in those days.

Teiser: Were California wines bottled also?

Block: Yes. That's very interesting, because we had what we call family delivery services. To my memory there were approximately seventeen companies that were delivering wine to the homes that had standing orders every day or every week for their red wine and their white wine.

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*Each year. See p. 26.

Teiser: Not in barrels but in bottles?

Block: It would be brought in in barrels, and then it would be bottled by the wholesalers into the gallons, half-gallons and fifths--well, I should say quarts. In those days we didn't have fifths.

Teiser: Were both European and California wines handled this way?

Block: Yes.

Teiser: When did the fifth come in, incidentally?

Block: Well, the fifth came in at the time of the war, of the last war,* by the distilleries, and we finally followed suit, so as to conserve the sale, frankly, of wines due to the shortage.

Teiser: You were starting to say how your grandfather happened to get in business with California wine.

Block: Yes. I'm pretty sure (and I heard it said) that due to the yellow fever which we had a lot of trouble with--mosquitoes and malaria down in our section due to the poor sewage--someone recommended that he get a California wine account for drinking purposes instead of the water being used by the families. And that's how he got into the business.

Teiser: What was his name?

Block: Leopold Block. My father was Joseph Block.

Teiser: What was your grandfather doing before that?

Block: Well, he had come over from Germany and was with my father's father-in-law in the clothing business. And my other grandfather, Calme

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*World War II

Block: Lazard, came over from France. So I am really French and German descent, you see.

Teiser: And he found that there was a good trade for California wines...

Block: Oh yes.

Teiser: Were they cheaper than European wines?

Block: Yes, they were. And frankly, competition was very keen. I would like to step up a little bit to tell you about the competition not so much from my grandfather's time but from my father's time, because in 1906 (if my memory's correct, that was the time of the earthquake here) I can recall this vividly, that wine was selling very, very cheap. Extremely so.

Teiser: In New Orleans?

Block: In New Orleans, out of California. In those days we had competitionfrom a firm called French-American Wine Company, which I don't know whether you've heard about, from Oakville.

Teiser: Yes. Louis M. Martini rented the building in the early '30s.

Block: Then Arthur Lachman finally went into the business--Arthur Lachman & Company--who was a relative of the Lachman & Jacobi's. And then we had in competition companies like the Seven Brothers--I don't think you've heard of them--that's the Rosenblatt brothers. They were doing business in New Orleans from here.

Teiser: Did they produce wine here?

Block: Oh yes, yes, the Old Abbey brand, and shipped it into New Orleans in barrels, incidentally, right from California here. And they

Block: also produced cordials.

Teiser: Where were their vineyards?

Block: Up north. And they were very active.

THE CALIFORNIA WINE ASSOCIATION'S SECRET DOMINATION

Block: I think I better tell you about the time between that period of 1906 and Prohibition, which I think is very interesting. Finally the firm was changed from Eddinger Brothers & Jacobi to Lachman & Jacobi.* My father was the agent for Lachman & Jacobi, and I worked with my father starting in 1908. Now we had as competitors Italian Swiss Colony, C. Schilling & Company, Brun & Chaix, and also the California Wine Association, which had their own brand. (What I am going to say to you after is about these firms.) Then our main competitor was Secondo Guasti down at Guasti, and also Mr. A. Mattei down at Fresno, who was quite a competitor of ours, and I should say of all the winery representatives in the New Orleans area. Now, I am telling you this as I see it in an informal way, and I think that's the way you'd like to have it.

Teiser: Exactly.

Block: Well, this is going to sound...well, it's realistic in its sense and at the same time, why it's hard to understand: I didn't know who I was working for. I had Lachman & Jacobi, but frankly Mr. [A.R.]

See note page 1.

Block: Morrow was my superior officer; we were all in a combine in those days and I did not know it!

Teiser: Oh, yes! The California Wine Association!*

Block: [Laughter] I don't know whether you would like to hear a few incidents that happened to me about that.

Teiser: I certainly would. Do you mean to say that this was after the California Wine Association was formed but you were not informed; you didn't know about it?

Block: Well, we were informed and we were not informed, because of a trust deal, let's put it that way. Now, there was Swiss Colony, and C. Schilling, and Brun & Chaix (incidentally the name of their winery, Nouveau Medoc, was very interesting; they copied it after the French commune. I don't know whether you knew that or not. They shipped from Oakville.) Well, frankly, we were all in this deal, and all acting as independent brokers in the New Orleans market, and everybody out here as well.

Teiser: You mean there were other brokers in the New Orleans market representing all these other wineries which were all actually part of California Wine Association?

Block: Yes.

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*The reference here and in the account that follows is to the fact that the wine companies mentioned had, without making public announcements, become part of or dominated by the California Wine Association. A.R. Morrow was general superintendent and later general manager of the California Wine Association. See material on file in the Wine Institute library and also Ernest Penihou and Sidney Greenleaf, Wine-making in California, III, The California Wine Association, [San Francisco]: The Porpoise Bookshop, 1954.

Block: Well, as I say, Mr. Morrow was my superior officer, and we had a little disagreement one time relative to an amount of money. Instead of calling Mr. Morrow or sending him a wire, I waited until I got to Lafayette, Louisiana, and I sent him a wire that I was on my way to San Francisco. And when I got here, Mr. Morrow said, "They're very sore at you, Syd. You'll have to go over to see Mr. Sutro at Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro."

So I said, "Well, who is Mr. Sutro?" I had never heard of Mr. Sutro.

"Well, he's the chairman of the board."*

I said, "Well, all right. Have you got an appointment with him?"

And he said, "Yes."

"What time?" I went over the next morning and I walked into Mr. Sutro's office. Mr. Sutro looked at me and he said, "You've come a long ways."

And I said, "Yes. There's a little disagreement about money--commissions strictly, and frankly I'm ready to leave you."

So he said, "Where are you going?"

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*Alfred Sutro was for a time a member of the board of directors of California Wine Association and may well have been chairman for a period; the organization's records for this period are incomplete. Pillsbury, Madison and Sutro were its attorneys during the years under discussion.

Block: And I said, "Well, I'm going with Mr. Guasti.* In fact he saw me before I left New Orleans."

And he said, "Wait a minute." And he rang Mr. Morrow and he said, "Give that kid $2600 and send him back home." [Laughter] Actually that's the way it happened. He said, "Never mind about Guasti. You stay right where you are." Well, I was doing a tremendous business, as I say, for Lachman & Jacobi.

Teiser: About what year was that?

Block: I don't recall exactly the year. But anyway, I went home, and it wasn't very long after that when this other incident came up. I was in my office. My father had passed on,** and I was representing Lachman & Jacobi--you really want to hear these various incidents?

Teiser: I do indeed.

Block: ...and the government man walked in and he said to me, "You Mr. Block?"

And I said, "Yes." He showed me his credentials, and he said to me, "I want all the letters that are in your possession that were written to your father and to you by Lachman & Jacobi," and so on and so forth.

I said, "Why?"

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*Secondo Guasti, head of the Italian Vineyard Company in the Cucamonga Valley, Southern California.

**Joseph Block died August 5, 1914.

Block: And he said, "Well, I don't know. You'll have to see the district attorney."

I said, "Well, let me get in touch with my lawyer."

He said, "No, this is supposed to be incommunicado."

So I said, "Well, what have I done?"

He said, "I don't know."

So I went over to the district attorney's office and they asked me some questions: "Why is it that you had the same price as your competitors on such-and-such a day?" I said I couldn't answer, which was true. And finally they paid me a dollar and a half for being a witness against my own firm, [laughter] which made it very embarrassing. So I rang Mr. Morrow, and I said, "Mr. Morrow, I've got a dollar and a half in my pocket and I'm scared to clear the check." [Laughter]

So he said, "Syd, what's the trouble?" And I told him. And he said, "Sit down and don't worry about it."

I said, "Well, I <u>am</u> worried about it. They got all my letters. They got my father's letters, copies of my letters over in the district attorney's office." Well, it wasn't long after that when the barrels were all marked "capital stock owned by California Wine Association, Lachman Jacobi Brand," "C. Schilling & Company Brand," or "Italian Swiss Colony Brand," and it was all clarified. And I don't mind telling you I felt very good.

Teiser: I'll bet so. They finally acknowledged C.W.A. ownership of them.

Block: We continued right from there, and I represented Lachman & Jacobi until the time of Prohibition.

Teiser: Did you then continue representing them in competition with the other labels of the California Wine Association?

Block: Yes. However, one or two pulled out of the market, but C. Schilling remained; Italian Swiss Colony remained; and California Wine Association remained in the market. And then we had, as I said before, Mr. Guasti and Mattei, who were very large factors in the market, very large competitors.

Now we were shipping in those days naturally in barrels, and the fifty gallon barrels were costing in those days $3.75 per barrel.* We used to ship a lot of wine from Petaluma, Lachman & Jacobi. And then we had a depot over here at Winehaven,** and very often we shipped by boat until we had trouble with fermentation due to the wine being placed by the boiler. So, you see, we discontinued the use of the boat. I can recall one shipment we had fifteen hundred barrels of wine that just absolutely fermented. As you know, an oak barrel is very, very hard--oak is very hard wood--and it just blew the heads right out of the barrels.

After that we went into tank cars.

Teiser: About when was that? When did you go into tank cars?

Block: Well, the California Wine Association formed a company called the

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*Freight charge

**At Richmond, California

Block: California Dispatch Line--CDL-- and these were very improvised cars. It is very interesting, because they were very hard to unload. They originally had placed six tanks, one thousand gallon each, in a PFE (Pacific Fruit Express) car in which the tanks were very close to the sides of the car, and we had a very hard time coupling the hose to the tanks to unload.

Teiser: The CDL cars were better?

Block: No. They were nothing more than the PFE cars under another name.

I was a manager of this line at a dollar a year, which enabled me to get on the trains for nothing and to come out here, you know, which made it very nice. But anyway, we used those tank cars for many years.*

Frankly, the wine business--and I'm giving you this primarily for the New Orleans market--has always been very good.

"SWEET VINO"

Block: We had a wine that is now just beginning to find its way around the country in proper form, or, I should say, in its true state--as to the real name of the wine. Many years gone by at Petaluma, Mr. Sam Ciprico,** who was the manager of the Lachman & Jacobi plant

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*See also p. 40.

**Eugene S. Ciprico

Block: up there, had some wine up there that he didn't think possibly could be used in other sections of the country. He sent us down a sample, and it was a light pink wine. It resembles the Italian wines that we used barrel brands on such as "Vino Sicilia," which is Sicilian type, and "Wino Scelto," which means good wine, and "Vino d'Asti." We sold these to the Italian trade for years and years. And, funny as it may seem, and I want to say this about my good friend Leon Adams--he came to New Orleans one trip (he was making a survey for Mr. Ernie Gallo) and he came to my office and he said, "Syd, I'm making a survey for Ernie Gallo on rosé."

And I said, "Well, Leon, I'd be very happy to bring you a rosé that I've been selling down here for years and years and years and years."

He said, "You have?"

And I said, "Yes."

He said, "What is it?"

"Sweet vino." And when I brought it to him, he was amazed at the sample. He was amazed.

He said, "Well, I'd never have believed it." Now this vino is practically the same as the blend of rosé that's made today. I don't mean the high premium wines, now; I'm talking of vin ordinaire. So I've been selling that, and we're still selling it in the New Orleans market.

Teiser: And you're still calling it...?

Block: "Sweet vino."

Teiser: It was being blended here all the time?

Block: Yes.

Teiser: But never coming onto this market?

Block: Oh, no. Not only that, but frankly, 99 per cent of the markets of the United States don't know "sweet vino." However lately Mr. Gallo has started a "sweet vino" label in my market. However, he's got a different wine. And Swiss Colony's got a "sweet vino." But the "sweet vino" was really primarily a New Orleans deal that was sold to the Italian trade sweetened up a little bit, and it was the equivalent, really--if you were drinking rosé today you couldn't tell the difference. In fact Leon was surprised.

Teiser: Was it sweeter than our ordinary rosé?

Block: Well, just about one degree in sugar sweeter, that's about all. Not very much.

Teiser: Do you think that it's a wine that goes well in warm climates? Has that had something to do with it?

Block: Well, yes, I think so, because being light in those days... They're now saying rosé is an all-purpose wine; it's a light wine. And we sold that as far back as pre-Prohibition days. So Leon Adams thought that was very interesting, and he said, "I can't believe it," when I brought into my office two bottles to show him.

Teiser: Have you historically had other wines in the New Orleans market that have been peculiar to that market? That haven't been distributed here?

Block: No, no. That's the only one, frankly. We had been predominantly a red and white wine market before the Prohibition era. And we sold a lot of muscatel. Of course since Repeal, why it's changed somewhat. We're selling a lot of white port now, and muscatel isn't as popular, but the "sweet vino" still continues to go, and I think it's a matter of being predominantly a New Orleans deal which has been handed down.

LACHMAN & JACOBI AND OTHER PRE-PROHIBITION SHIPPERS

Teiser: And Lachman & Jacobi had...

Block: They were the ones that started it. So I really say openly that I think Lachman & Jacobi, while they didn't call it rosé, they turned out a wine which I'd say is the next thing to rosé.

When Prohibition came into effect, I came out here to buy the L&J label, Lachman & Jacobi label. And Mr. Jacobi said, "Syd, don't do that. Buy the common stock of the California Wine Association." Because it controlled the land and so forth. And the stock did go up. But I did make a mistake that I didn't buy the L&J label. I wanted to a great deal for sentimental reasons--my family put it into the New Orleans market. And, too, I thought maybe one of these days (and that was the purpose of my visit) that Prohibition would come to an end. But he talked me out of it, in a very nice way, I don't mean anything distasteful; and naturally it became a part

Block: of the Fruit Industries.* So when Repeal took place, the first thing they did at Fruit Industries (I did not go with Fruit Industries; however Mr. Morrow did want me to associate myself with them, but I went with Mr. Rossi** and the Swiss Colony) and the first thing that they did was to place that old Lachman & Jacobi, or L&J label, back into the New Orleans market, and it's still a good seller. [Laughter] Isn't that very interesting?

Teiser: I should say.

Block: Yes. I think it is, because it shows you that that brand was embedded in the minds of the older people who handed it down to the children, and the label is still good in New Orleans. And Perelli-Minetti of California Wine Association, who owns it, is still shipping L&J wine into the New Orleans market.

This will be of interest to you. I think it is. Mr. A. Leonard Jacobi, the son of Jacob J. Jacobi, used to come down to New Orleans. In fact he spent about a year with me in New Orleans. Lennie now lives over at a place across here called Belvedere now.*** I was here on one trip and I wrote him that I was at the St. Francis, and I felt sure he would call me, but I didn't hear from him. He was a son. He was in the business, and as I say, he spent a year

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*Fruit Industries, Ltd. was the successor to the California Wine Association. It is discussed in other interviews in this series. The name was later changed back to California Wine Association, which has been owned by the Perelli-Minetti family since 1971.

**See p. 23.

***He died in 1968.

Block: with me and I enjoyed it. The reason he spent this year down here is that Mr. Jacobi thought it would be a good idea to have him in the New Orleans office with me--I was a young individual--and between the two of us we'd hold business after my father passed on. I was very happy to have Mr. Lennie Jacobi with me. I'll tell you who he was related to--I know him so well--the MJB Coffee...

Teiser: Oh, Brandenstein.

Block: Yes. I think it was the brother-in-law. Jacob was a man with a sort of full beard, and a very excellent gentleman and looked upon me like a second son.

Teiser: Was he primarily a distribution man?

Block: Well, I think there for a while Sam Ciprico, up at Petaluma, handled most of the business for the blending and the handling of the wines. That's where we shipped from for L&J. Now, with the California Wine Association, as I told you, I had wines shipped from Winehaven, which was over by Richmond.

Teiser: But the one in Petaluma was their winery?

Block: Yes. That's right.

Teiser: And Mr. Jacobi, then...

Block: ...was in San Francisco.

Teiser: Did they have storage facilities in San Francisco?

Block: In Petaluma. I don't recall any here at all. No, they didn't.

Teiser: Did you know Mr. Abraham Lachman also?

Block: No. No, Lachman wasn't active. I never did understand that. And frankly, I think Arthur Lachman may have been the son, and maybe there was a little disagreement there. All my dealings were with J.J. Jacobi.

Teiser: Did the New Orleans market make up a large part of his total volume?

Block: Yes, it did. That and the New York market. And of course from New Orleans I used to go to Tampa, Florida, and I did business down there. But primarily the New Orleans market and the New York market were the best markets that he had.

Now, [Italian] Swiss Colony did business a little differently around the country.

Teiser: Yes. Let me ask you a little more about these early people that you mentioned.

Block: Yes, go ahead.

Teiser: B. Dreyfus. Did you know them?

Block: No, that is my grandfather's time--B. Dreyfus & Company. I did not know them.

Teiser: Did you know Arthur Lachman?

Block: I met him only once. I don't recall. He came into New Orleans one time looking for someone, but I don't recall even what he looked like, frankly.

Now, there was another firm that I forgot to give you that just came to my mind. Possibly you've heard their name mentioned--it's Gundlach-Bundschu.

Teiser: Yes, I was going to ask you about them.

Block: Yes, they did business down in New Orleans, and they were very good. Had good wines too.

Teiser: Did you know the people in that firm?

Block: No, I did not. I knew their agent pretty well in New Orleans, Mr. Armand Desangles.

Teiser: How about the Rosenblatt brothers? They sound fascinating.* I never heard anything about them.

Block: Well, I had a very peculiar thing happen. I have been a collector of wine decanters for many, many years, especially Baccarat crystals, and I went into an antique store on Sutter Street on one trip, and I made a purchase. And a gentleman said to me, "I see you're sending this to New Orleans." I said, "Yes." And he said, "I used to do business in New Orleans." It was one of the Rosenblatts. He was the gentleman who waited on me, and he was working in this store. But they were in business here, and they did very good. They did all right.

I think this is very interesting. We never had any trade barriers in those days, so if Mr. Rosenblatt decided to ship five barrels of wine to a hotel or a tavern or a retailer, he did it right from here. So their business was not with a wholesale distributor. Rosenblatt did his business with the retailer.

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*See p. 5.

Block: Hotels, restaurants and taverns. Entirely different. No, my business was with the wholesale distributors.

Teiser: Where was the Rosenblatts' winery, do you know?

Block: I never did know, frankly. I know they shipped from here, and they were very active in my market.

I thought you were going to ask me one question about prices, which you haven't as yet.

Teiser: Well, answer it, will you?

Block: I sure will. [Laughter] Well, it's very amazing. I was down in the valley recently, and I said, "I've seen grapes out here at six dollars a ton, and I've sold red wine for eight cents a gallon, and I have sold port wine, when we took one item in a little fight we had going on in the dessert wine business, for twelve and a half cents a gallon, which is hardly believable. Eight cents a gallon for good red wine!"

And I want to say this to you that I think is very interesting. The wines that French-American and Brun & Chaix and Lachman & Jacobi turned out in those days--now we're talking primarily of red wines, not dessert wines--were just par excellence, really and truly. They were matured without pasteurization. There was no refrigeration. It was strictly by nature. And I think that the body of the wine was really far superior to possibly some of the wines we get today. Now, not that the wines are not good today, but they are using all kinds of methods and maybe stretch it a little bit. Well, in those

Block: days the people didn't do that. They went out to establish a name, and they tried to sell wine, and frankly I do think the wines were a little bit better. Now, we're not talking about varietals; we're not talking about premiums; we're talking about the low end of the deal.

So, at the time, wine was shipped into my market at $3.75 for the barrel, 7 1/2 cents freight a gallon, to the wine sellers as we called them in New Orleans. There were seventeen that delivered to the home. Wine was also sold to the grocers in barrels. You'd come with your bottle and turn on the faucet and pay ten cents a quart. It was very interesting. So my days have been wonderful, and frankly I'm very happy to be able to tell you this.

Teiser: You remember details that nobody has written down.

Block: Well, I've had the experience, and frankly when I came back from school, I got the experience. My wife complains bitterly because she says everything costs us double. My father laid the law down that I had to be home for dinner at six o'clock, and eight o'clock in the morning for work. He handed me a bottle of wine, and he said, "Here it is, the price is so much." And I said, "Where am I going?" And he said, "I didn't send for you. You said you wanted to sell wine. The city is large; there is a lot of wine being sold, so take the bottle and go out and sell." And that's how I started in the wine business. Now, when I said my wife says everything costs us double--my father never gave me anything but a

Block: wine bottle, never a saw or a hammer or a chisel, so I can't do anything with my hands. [Laughter] And my wife sometimes gets a little provoked about it. It sounds funny, but it's really true. But I've been in the wine business ever since.

Teiser: Lachman & Jacobi wine was comparable in quality to what wine we have here now, would you say?

Block: Well, I don't think I'd like to answer that question properly, but I'd say this--that I think the wines that we had in the barrel in those days, like claret, which was primarily the wine that was sold in the New Orleans market--I think that the red wine was heavier bodied than we're getting today. And the reason for it is, you must remember that in the New Orleans market we had a lot of the French that settled in New Orleans and we had a lot of the Spanish. We've gone through two periods there, French and Spanish, as you know. And I think for that reason instead of the light-bodied wines that they're calling for today we had heavier-bodied wines, which to my way of thinking is better because we're accustomed to it, that is all. You can get accustomed to the light-bodied wines as well.

Teiser: You said that at the time of Prohibition you bought some stock in the California Wine Association. Did you go into the shipping and receiving of grapes during Prohibition?

Block: No. No, I did not go into that. At that time a lot of the land was sold to K. Arakelian down at Madera, which was the old Swiss Colony

Block: deal, and he made a lot of money out of raisins, because they were being used for making wine. But I did not go in. And then the Fruit Industries was formed,* and they had the Guasti juice for home making purposes, but I didn't handle it. I didn't go in at all. I did try to do one thing which I wasn't successful in doing in the New Orleans market, and that was to handle wines for various members of various congregations, and the government didn't give me any permit. Now in the Chicago market and New York market, a good many individuals did go into that and followed right on through. But I didn't; I wasn't able to get a permit in the New Orleans market. So I really had to get out of the business.

THE ROSSI BROTHERS AND A. R. MORROW

Teiser: You just waited it out until after Prohibition?

Block: Well, I did and I didn't. I'll tell you what happened. I waited it out for many, many years, and then finally I knew something was going on, and I had written to Mr. Rossi and also to Mr. Morrow, and when I came out here, which was prior to 1933, Mr. Rossi said to me, "Well, Syd, I hope you'll go with us and be associated with us."

Teiser: Which Mr. Rossi are you speaking of?

Block: Oh, Ed and Bob both. They were starting to make the "tipo" bottles in a little corrugated shed in San Francisco. And they had some

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*In 1929

Block: wine up at Asti. And I just waited, and on December the sixth they sent me down a good many cars of wine for distribution, and I had their power of attorney so I could sign checks for rents, labor and my entire operation in New Orleans, and I was with them for many years. Fine people, excellent. I enjoyed my association with them.

Teiser: What was Mr. Morrow like?

Block: Morrow? Oh, I thought Al was a very fine gentleman, and of course I knew Al when he got older, and I knew him as a young man. He was very, very active and very progressive, and I thought he was an excellent wine man and a good sales manager. I thought he was a very good man.

Teiser: He was said to have had a very precise and perceptive ability to taste wine.

Block: Oh, without a doubt. I think that's right.

At that time I came out here (at the time of my experience with Mr. Sutro) they were selling a champagne put out by Italian Swiss Colony, and it was just excellent champagne. And, frankly, I stayed around for two days extra enjoying myself, and then finally Al sent me home. You couldn't travel by air in those days, and we had to go by train, which took quite a while.

Teiser: They didn't put out champagne after Repeal, did they?

Block: No.

Teiser: This was before Prohibition?

Block: Before Prohibition, yes.

Teiser: Mr. Edmund Rossi told about how they happened to make that champagne.*

Block: Oh, did he? I never did know. It was excellent champagne, very very good.

Teiser: Compared to today's champagne?

Block: Oh, I think so, yes, I do. I think up at Asti they made that wine special. And Mr. [Enrico] Prati was a wonderful production man, who I knew very well.

Teiser: What was he like?

Block: Well, Prati was a dynamic individual, and I think he was a man who I wouldn't say wanted his own way, but he knew what he wanted, let's put it that way. And I always thought that Prati was a man that was quality-minded. And frankly, to my way of thinking, he was an excellent production man, especially on the dry wines. Very, very good.

NEW ORLEANS CUSTOMS

Block: Now I want to tell you those were very interesting days, because frankly, there was a lot of loyalty, a lot of friendship, and in my market particularly, the New Orleans market, wine was a by-word.

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*Edmund A. Rossi, Italian Swiss Colony and the Wine Industry. A Regional Oral History Office interview completed in 1971.

Block: I don't think there was a table that didn't have a bottle of wine for dinner, for the youngsters as well as for the elderly people. The only way I can express it--in that New Orleans market with just Lachman & Jacobi, we used to sell over forty thousand barrels of wine a year. That is over two million gallons.

Teiser: How much of the total market in New Orleans do you think you had?

Block: Well, we were the leading brand there--L&J. I have no way of telling you that.

Teiser: Do you have any of your old labels, incidentally?

Block: No, I don't, frankly. I don't have any labels at all. But, you see, we were not so much in labels in those days. We were shipping in bulk, and everything was sold out of the barrel into bottles.

Teiser: When you bottled it, did you put a label on it?

Block: I didn't bottle. They bottled, the retailer.

Teiser: What did the retailer put on it?

Block: Oh, people would come in with an empty and they'd fill it up for ten cents; no label, just a cork in the bottle. But there was a lot of wine sold.

Teiser: How did you establish the name, then, of Lachman and Jacobi, if you didn't have a label?

Block: Well, that's a very good question, and frankly, I can only answer that one way. My father and my grandfather were instrumental in putting a lot of people in business, as, for instance, Uddo-Taormina

Block: which just sold out to the Canadian tobacco company that bought S&W. My father put Mr. Uddo in business; he put the Taorminas in business. We had approximately fifteen Italian wholesale houses who were distributing wine, especially this vino that I was telling you about--the "sweet vino." And then the wholesale grocers used to handle wine. And of course in those days travel was very hard for a salesman who had the old drummer's buggy, who would go up and down the river. And they would ship barrels of wine by Southern Pacific all through the state--they had the railroads, you see.

There were no other wholesalers up in the northern part of the state of Louisiana at all. They were all concentrated right in New Orleans. And the brand became very popular. They never called it Lachman & Jacobi; they called it L&J. And the brand is still good in New Orleans--L&J. It's rather remarkable that it's gone right on through all these years.

Teiser: During Prohibition nobody stopped drinking very much in New Orleans, did they?

Block: [Laughter] You're right. That's a very good question. You're right, of course, there was a lot of liquor that came in from the Bahamas, you know, some good, some bad. But they continued to drink, that's true.

Teiser: Did the Mafia have a hold on the liquor bootlegging in New Orleans at that time?

Block: Well I wouldn't say the Mafia. However, let me say this to you, (I was going to leave this out) we had a lot of murders in our town with the Mafia in those days, which possibly you heard about.

Teiser: It's where it first came into notice in the United States...

Block: That's right. And there was a firm there that was making wine out of raisins, by the name of Giacona. I used to sell them a wine for Lachman & Jacobi. We called it a Mokelumne blend. I think it was named after the Mokelumne River. They took any name and called it a blend. It was very, very dark wine, and they blended it with this raisin wine which was very light, to give it color. I used to sell them this wine. And the Giaconas had trouble with the Mafia. And incidentally, at about that time they killed six Italians at the dinner table, and after that I was frightened to go down to sell, and I was frightened to go down after I sold to get the money. [Laughter]

Teiser: Were the Giaconas connected with this killing?

Block: Yes. It was really rough. So I had some very peculiar experiences. And it was in New Orleans quite a deal at one time, which evidently you're acquainted with. I think that's where they started, through the Sicilian crowd that emigrated from Italy. But that experience with the Giaconas--I had never carried a gun, but they gave me a permit to carry a gun. I have never shot a gun right now in my life, and I was carrying a gun, and really and truly if anybody had said, "Boo," I'd have jumped, because I was really frightened. But

Block: I was selling a lot of wine to the Giaconas, and they were dangerous, and the other people were dangerous as well, so we had a lot of trouble in New Orleans in those days.

Teiser: That was before Prohibition?

Block: Oh, that's what we're talking about--pre-Prohibition days.

Teiser: I believe the Mafia had some connection with bootlegging in the rest of the country.

Block: Well, not too much in New Orleans during the Prohibition era, no. We had it before, and they used a lot of muscle there before Capone ever thought about the word muscle, which was a word that was used in our territory. And they were pretty rough. But frankly, it was all among themselves. The killings were among themselves. Frankly, I enjoyed going down to see Mr. Giacona; I was scared, I don't mind telling you, because I had to go through an alley to get to his office and he had a guard right there watching. I had everything but a password. These things, when you look back, they're all very interesting, because they become a part of your experience of an industry. Don't you think that way?

Teiser: And they become part of a whole tapestry of history.

MORE CALIFORNIA WINE MEN

Block: I think Mr. [Edmund] Rossi has been in it a little bit longer than I have, and I don't know about Mr. [Antonio] Perelli-Minetti.

Teiser: We have interviewed them. They have different points of view though, you see.

Block: Well, I was in a different end. I was at the selling end and they were in the production end, which made a lot of difference. And I tell you, I always found out the two very interesting people at a winery were the chemist and the production man, and the president should only tell you what to do. I've always managed to get next to the chemists. I'd go up there and spend a few days with Mr. Prati* and find out from him what I wanted to know when I was with [Italian] Swiss Colony, and the same way with Mr. Ciprico up at Petaluma to find out what was going on up there. Because, after all, they sell you the finished product, and in those days they didn't educate the man in the field like they're doing today. You were on your own. You had to sell it. You had to tell them what it was all about--either the wine was good or it was not good. And frankly, it was up to you to go out and produce.

Teiser: You said that Secondo Guasti had come to talk with you in New Orleans, is that right?

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*See also p. 25.

Block: No, his agent, Mr. Harris.*

Teiser: Oh. Did you ever meet Mr. Guasti?

Block: Yes, I did.

Teiser: What was he like?

Block: Very nice gentleman. And I used to know...what's his name?

Teiser: James A. Barlotti, his general manager?

Block: Barlotti. In fact, I knew them all down there. Yes, they wanted me to go with them when they found out I was having a little trouble. His New Orleans agent was a man by the name of Tom Harris, and this is interesting, I think, while it's a little bit off the subject. Mr. Harris had a beard, and he always wore a Prince Albert suit and a derby to call on the trade. [Laughter] For the Italian Vineyard Company, which <u>was</u> Secondo Guasti. That's a fact. In the New Orleans market he was a very distingué individual. Don't you think that's interesting?

Teiser: <u>You</u> didn't have to dress that formally?

Block: No, no. But he did. I just think it was a part of his make-up. That was always my thought. Every day I'd meet Mr. Harris, and that time when he knew I was coming to California, knew I was having a little trouble, he said, "Wait a minute; I'm going to New York." And he finally went into the New York office, and he wanted me to

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*See p. 9.

Block: go with Mr. Guasti to replace him as New Orleans sales representative.

Teiser: What was Mr. Guasti like?

Block: I thought he was an excellent gentleman. He handled himself very, very well. He used to come to New Orleans.

And Mr. Mattei. I've been down to his plant, and by the way, that's where I first met--what's his name?--he used to be a United States gauger. Jones.

Teiser: Lee Jones?

Block: Yes. He was a gauger. That's where I first met Lee Jones. I used to go into the Fresno area. I used to come out here and make all the wineries. I'll tell you why I made all the wineries. Everybody was my friend. And even today, I'm very happy to be able to tell you, that I don't think there's anybody that comes to New Orleans from here that doesn't give me a call. And I'm very proud of it. And I feel like I get the welcome sign when I come out here. It makes me feel very good. Now ask me any question you want.

Teiser: I'd like to know your impression of people. What sort of a chap was Barlotti?

Block: Well, he was more of a reticent individual, because I think he was more of an office man. And for that reason I think he wasn't prone to do too much talking, in my book. I'd say that he was on the

Block: reticent side. But I thought they were very wonderful people, and I thought Mr. Mattei was as well. And the wines were good. However, we always had a little expression, "Well, they can't produce wines down at Guasti like they can up north." But that didn't hold water, because he did turn out good wines, equal to those produced in Northern California. He did; he really did in those days.

Everything was done by nature in those days, and he let the wine age and the wine was good. The wine was all right. He was making it down at the Guasti plant, and everything was fine.

Teiser: Did you ever know Horace Lanza?

Block: Oh yes. And I know Harry Baccigaluppi and all of them, yes. Of course I didn't know Mr. Lanza as well as I knew Harry. I've seen Harry around more, and I've been at meetings with Harry. An excellent gentleman, by the way. I'm very, very fond of him. I've never sold for him, but he's an excellent individual. He's very fine. And I'll tell you, he's a very brilliant man. When he gets on the podium I think he knows what to say, when to say and how to say it. I've always enjoyed listening to Mr. Baccigaluppi; I think he's very good.

THE POST-REPEAL PERIOD

Block: I was a very intimate friend of Hugh and Hall Adams. When they used to come to New Orleans they were with the Virginia Dare Company--Garrett. And frankly, when this Fruit Industries was formed down here and Garrett went into it, and then when Repeal took place, I had written Hall and Hugh. Then Al Morrow got in touch with me. And I came out here and I decided to go with Mr. Rossi. But I had nothing to do with the CWA* whatsoever after the Repeal, nothing, because I had gone immediately over with Rossi.

Teiser: Did you stay with Rossi until...

Block: Oh, until he sold out. I managed all their businesses in the New Orleans deal, and I stayed with Mr. Rossi and I enjoyed my association with him until he sold out to the National Distillers.

Teiser: When you had to reestablish the market after Repeal, did you start selling immediately, or did you have a lot of preparation to do, to build up again to where you had been?

Block: Well, let me say this to you. I was very fortunate, I think, having lived in New Orleans, and the name of Block being so well known in the wine business. And when I came out here, Mr. Rossi had agreed to let me--I think I put about ten cars of wine into a warehouse...

Teiser: Are you speaking of Robert Rossi?

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*Fruit Industries, Ltd. took the name California Wine Association after it purchased its remaining assets.

Block: Robert and Ed.

Teiser: Which of them did most sales?

Block: Well, Bob did most of the handling of sales. And I must have placed about ten cars of wine in a warehouse in New Orleans that arrived so that I could sell it on December the sixth, 1933, which was the day of Repeal. So I established myself right away with wine, you see, and I had the Italian Swiss Colony then.

Teiser: And was there a waiting market?

Block: Oh, yes. I went through the state, and I established my various connections, and people were waiting for me. That's really so. I had one experience, and I think this is a cutie.

I walked into Dave Schuster. He was in Shreveport, Louisiana, at that time in a wholesale house. And Mr. Schuster knew I was coming up there and he knew all about me from the Schenley Distillery. And he said to me, "Mr. Block, I want to go into the wine business. Send me whatever you think I ought to have in the way of barrels of various types, so many barrels of this and so many barrels of that."

And I said, "Mr. Schuster, I really don't like to do business that way. I'd like to have a confirmed order. You tell me what you want."

So he said, "Well, Mr. Block, I want to tell you, since your reputation is very good and I understand you're very honest, whatever you got in mind to ship me, you cut it in half." [Laughter]

Block: I'll never forget that story. It kind of took me off my feet. He put me right on the defense. And it actually happened. I sent him whatever I thought he ought to have in the Shreveport market. So you asked me how I got established--I'll tell you that's one of the many incidents in my establishing myself. [Laughter]

Those are the things that have always been very dear to me, and frankly, it's been a wonderful experience, and I can truthfully say that my business has been good. It's been a good business. I just wish I had someone with me to continue, and I am very unfortunate that I don't have anybody. I'm a one-man deal. And I was saying downstairs to a friend of mine that I should incorporate and get a young man to continue because I think we're in our infancy, and I think people are going to drink more wine--premium wines especially, good red and whites. And when I see all the improvements taking place out here--like I was at Krug--my gracious, they're building a plant up there that's terrific, the Mondavis. I just think that they're looking for the future, and I do, too. I just hope I live long enough to see the wine sales just double, because frankly, we're going up and up and I think it's wonderful.

THE NEW ORLEANS MARKET IN 1969

Teiser: Have you increased sales as much in New Orleans as in other parts of the country?

Block: Well, we have... Of course, don't forget this today--formula wines have come into our market pretty strong, which is a little bit away from the regular wines.

Teiser: You mean special flavored wines?

Block: Special flavor wines.

Teiser: Do people drink them there?

Block: Yes, they do. Now in the northern part of the state--I don't know whether you want me to mention names or not--well, the Thunderbird is a very good seller. And I go over to Georgia and Ripple is a very good seller. And then in the New Orleans market, in Baton Rouge, tokay fourteen per cent (we never heard of tokay being less than twenty) is a very good seller, and it's flavored with a little Concord I think. I'm not a production man; I think according to my taste, so I don't want you to hold me to that. But frankly, they're taking away from a lot of the conventional wines. Then Bali Hai was in our market--very big--from Swiss Colony, a tremendous seller. So, frankly, they've taken away a great deal of the sales.

Teiser: Do you really think they're replacing table wines?

Block: Well, I won't say table wines. Dessert wines. Now, let me say this

Block: about table wines: table wines are going up and up, and the youth is drinking table wines. When I say youth, I'm talking about young couples, young married couples. And it's wonderful. And I think any retail store that doesn't make a specialty of selling tenths is making a big mistake, because it's a good size for two--husband and wife. And I have a relative in the business. My nephew has a very fine store, and I made him put in a lot of tenths, and he's selling a lot of them. I think dry wine is on the increase, no question about that. The future of the business is in the dry wine field.

Teiser: I keep wondering if the flavored wines aren't replacing whiskey or rum or brandy.

Block: You mean hurting the sale?

Teiser: Yes. I wonder if some people aren't drinking Thunderbird instead of whiskey.

Block: I think you're right. I think you're absolutely correct. Of course, the colored in my section are drinking the flavored wines, and they're not drinking the bourbon. They're drinking Scotch, and they're drinking Canadian. So it's bound to hurt the bourbon sales.

Teiser: Is that right?

Block: That's what's happening in my section, yes.

Teiser: I've heard here, too, that Negroes here are drinking these flavored wines.

Block: Yes, flavored wines, and Scotch, and V.O. or Canadian Club, the Canadian whiskeys and not so much the bourbon whiskey.

Teiser: Why Scotch?

Block: It's very unusual, because it has an unusual flavor and taste. But don't forget this now, that as they say down my way, in the New Orleans territory, you know, it's a snob bottle--a bottle of Scotch--and they like to spend, and that's it.

I think this is of interest to you--something that I think has happened in the New Orleans market--and I'm bringing you up to date now. This nephew of mine who just erected a hundred and fifty thousand dollar building for his retail store, and a magnificent store, I've succeeded after all these years in having him to set off a part of his space for American wines with a large sign "American Wines." And he has all the varietals and all the wines from out here, and he handles approximately, well, I'd say his inventory on imports is about ten to twelve thousand cases, which is a lot of wine for a retailer. But since he erected this particular store, the sale of his American wines has just gone up threefold. It's really amazing. And people now are beginning to drink a lot of California wines down our way who formerly drank a lot of imports.

You must remember, you see, we've got a lot of French restaurants in New Orleans, and for that reason they push the French

Block: wines. But we're gradually beginning to make a lot of headway with the restaurant trade.

WINE MERCHANDISING

Teiser: Do you see any change that's taken place as a result of the national companies taking an interest in the wine business?

Block: I don't think so, up to now. I think they cannot do anything but good. I don't think they're going to destruct. I think if they destruct it's going to be merely for the purpose of constructing instead of destructing. So they may pull out here, but eventually I think they will do a lot of constructive work toward merchandising, pricing, quality, and I think they will possibly make sure that their sales organization is good, which is essential and is one thing that I have found that so many salesmen in the Eastern market, even with my wholesalers (and I hold sales meetings very often). I never tell a man how to sell wine; I usually say, "Ask me the questions so I can give you the answers about wine." And so many wholesalers don't know anything about wines, and they don't know how to impart that information to the salesmen. But I think that's what's going to take place from here on in, myself.

Teiser: Gallo seems to have built a new kind of sales organization.

Block: Oh, yes. I didn't mean winery organization. I mean a wholesaler's organization. Mr. Gallo has been very successful with his method. He has the manpower and the advertising, so he's doing a lot of

Block: good.

Mr. [Kenneth C.] Bertsch down there, the sales manager, is a very good friend of mine. Mr. Joiner,* one of the vice-presidents, is a good friend, and Ernie and I have been good friends for many, many years, and I admire him and I admire his tactics.

I think he's done a magnificent job. Wonderful. Wonderful. And I think that all the wineries out here are profiting a little bit by what he's been doing, because they realize--I think a lot of them that I've spoken to in the last two years--that they've got to do something if they want to stay in business, whether it be sales organization or advertising, to see that that merchandise with demand is put on the shelf. Because after all if it isn't exposed, how can you sell it? So he has really followed, I would say, from the time the wine leaves a winery to the wholesaler to the retailer, he has really followed each bottle. Let's put it that way. And I don't think I can describe it any better than that. It's been wonderful, and I admire him for what he's done.

One of the things that I always remember vividly, when those tank cars first came into New Orleans, they just took the six one-thousand gallon redwood tanks on the old PFE car, Pacific Fruit Express, and they were so close together, I couldn't get my man hardly to pass the hose to unload the wine.** And now I'm selling

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*Lloyd Joiner

**See also p. 12.

Block: jumbo tank cars of twenty thousand gallons that are so accessible and so easy to handle, you know. And when I think back on those cars, really and truly, it...

Teiser: Did you ever have any wine spoil in those tanks?

Block: No, I didn't. The only trouble was that the men had to get on the top to clean them out, and the manhole was so small to get in them to make sure that the redwood was clean by the time it got back to California. And as I say, when I draw a comparison between those cars of those days and today! We use the jumbo tank cars today because I do sell bulk wine too.

Teiser: They couldn't ship anything back in them, could they?

Block: Oh, no. They came back empty. And the same thing here today. They come back empty. But that's one thing I've often thought about. And then the ten cents a quart for wine down in my section, which was amazing.

Teiser: Of course, nothing cost too much in those days. The whole scale...

Block: Well, we didn't have any tax on the wine, don't forget that.

Jeff Peyser saw me today, and he said to me, "Well, what do you think is going to happen at the next session?" of the Louisiana state legislature. Well, we didn't worry about that in those days. No taxes. The only thing we had was the wine, the freight, and the price of the barrel, which made a lot of difference.

We're still very fortunate down there. Mr. Peyser's lawyers get in touch with me all the time, and we still have in effect (and

Block: I was instrumental with Mr. Huey Long in getting this tax) only ten cents on dry wine, on table wine, and twenty cents on dessert wines. Whereas in certain sections, take Florida, $1.60 a gallon on dessert wines and $1.15 on table wines. So we've been very fortunate in the New Orleans area. And the cooperation out here has been very good as far as the Wine Institute is concerned. Any time we were in trouble we can always call on them.

Teiser: Thank you very much. This has been an interesting interview.

Block: Well, it's been a pleasure.

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Ruth Teiser

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