

Interview transcript of Willy Neve, California Historical Society, September 19, 2022.

[This version has been lightly edited for clarity. The unedited transcript is in the records of the CFM at the California Historical Society.]

Al Bersch (00:00:02):

This recording is taking place on Monday, September 19th at the California Historical Society. My name is Al Bersch, I'm the metadata and systems librarian for CHS and I'll be conducting the interview today. The interview subject is Willy Neve.

Al Bersch (00:00:33):

Also present are Jeanne Boes, Rose Robinson and Frances Kaplan

Al Bersch (00:00:54):

Thank you all so much. So Willy, could you just start by stating your name and the date for the record?

Willy Neve (00:01:02):

William Neve.

Al Bersch (00:01:08):

Yeah.

Willy Neve (00:01:09):

9/19/22.

Al Bersch (00:01:14):

Great. Thank you so much. So let's just start by talking about your involvement in the flower business. How did you get started in the flower industry?

Willy Neve (00:01:26):

Well, my dad was in the flower business in the '20s, in the nursery business. They were producing different greenery that they used those days which was the maidenhair, plumosas, and then also they were growing plants like Easter Lily, and scilla plant and cyclamen and rosina.

Willy Neve (00:01:57):

So my dad did it up to 1929. And then in 1929, we went to Italy. I was about 11 months old. Then I had brother and a sister and we stayed in Europe for about 18 years. And then we returned to the United States. I was the first one of the family to come over with the family. And so then I went back to the nursery that my dad was partner because they still owed money from the '20s because we had depression and they couldn't pay him off. So then the guy offered us a chance to lease the nursery, but then I called my brother over and we stayed there for about a year.

Willy Neve (00:02:55):

And then he was supposed to leasing the nursery to us then he changed his mind because he started making money again. He only had three people from Napa Institution working in the nursery then, two young guys, I was 19, my brother was 21. And so we planted a lot of Easter Lily plant, first of all, and like 52,000 Easter Lily plants and he sold them all and he paid like \$0.02 for the bowl and \$0.03 for the pot and he sold it for \$1.75 each and he was paying us \$110 a month and board and room.

Al Bersch ([00:03:44](#)):

That's incredible. Where was that?

Willy Neve ([00:03:47](#)):

531 Brunswick Street in San Francisco.

Above Geneva. Above Geneva. Almost in Daly City.

Al Bersch ([00:04:04](#)):

Okay. What year was that? Do you recall?

Willy Neve ([00:04:09](#)):

I came over in 1947.

And I worked there for about a year then I quit after we couldn't come to an agreement on what he was offering us instead of the leasing of the nursery.

Al Bersch ([00:04:26](#)):

And then when did you and your brothers start your own business?

Willy Neve ([00:04:35](#)):

My brother started his own business after a couple years up in Colma growing again the same greenery and also some outdoor flowers too.

Al Bersch ([00:04:50](#)):

And did you maintain a connection or a relationship with the partner who was paying you and giving you room and board or-

Willy Neve ([00:05:01](#)):

No. We quit then I went to work for Williams Zappettini Company down the flower market. So my dad knew him, used to give him work in the '20s.

Jeanne Boes ([00:05:15](#)):

The Italians grew a lot of the greenery.

Willy Neve ([00:05:20](#)):

Yeah. There was probably about 50 to 75 growers in Colma and they're all Italian.

Jeanne Boes ([00:05:32](#)):

They were all Italian.

Willy Neve ([00:05:32](#)):

I would say all Genovese.

Al Bersch ([00:05:37](#)):

And then, so about what year did you start going to the flower market?

Willy Neve ([00:05:41](#)):

1949 in January.

Al Bersch ([00:05:50](#)):

And when you were at the flower market, what did your business look like then?

Willy Neve ([00:06:00](#)):

I worked for this company, Zappettini company and did sales and buying.

Rose Roberson ([00:06:07](#)):

Did Zappettini grow anything or Zappettini only brought in product?

Willy Neve ([00:06:17](#)):

No. Never grew any, no. Only bought flower. Then during the war, they took over the nursery from the Japanese because they got put in the camp and so then the government, they ask him if he wants to take over all the nursery and which he did, but he couldn't grow a blade of grass because he never did. And so he got one of the best grower in northern California, which was working for E.W. McLellan Company. And he gave us an interest in the operation and they ran it for about four or five years during the war and they produced everything that they were producing, all the Japanese growers.

Al Bersch ([00:07:16](#)):

And then what happened after the war? Did the Japanese flower growers come back?

Willy Neve ([00:07:23](#)):

They came back and then Zappettini Company still ran the nursery for a year. And then after that, they gave them back to the Japanese and they started growing the flower again for themselves. But then they kept giving the flower to Zappettini company from the nursery because they like what he did thanks to that grower from McLellan Company.

Al Bersch ([00:08:01](#)):

What was a typical day at the market for you back then? When you first started, what hours did you arrive?

Willy Neve ([00:08:11](#)):

Yeah, we had better hours than now. Monday, we started at 5:00 and Tuesdays, 7:00, Wednesday, 5:00 again and Friday at 4:30.

Al Bersch ([00:08:30](#)):

In the morning?

Willy Neve ([00:08:31](#)):

In the morning. Of course. We worked for about eight hours to nine hours. So we were open until about in the afternoon, like 3:00, 4:00.

And Saturday we used to come in also at 7:30 till 1:00.

Rose Roberson ([00:08:56](#)):

So then at that market there was Zappettini who was a wholesaler-

Willy Neve ([00:09:00](#)):

Yes.

Rose Roberson ([00:09:02](#)):

And were there primarily growers?

Willy Neve ([00:09:05](#)):

No, there was some wholesaler too like Kearns.

Rose Roberson ([00:09:07](#)):

Kearns.

Willy Neve ([00:09:08](#)):

Kearns was there. McLellan Company was there, then mostly growers.

Rose Roberson ([00:09:15](#)):

Was Tropical California there?

Willy Neve ([00:09:17](#)):

They had two buildings.

Jeanne Boes ([00:09:19](#)):

Yeah. Was Tropical California there?

Willy Neve ([00:09:23](#)):

Tropical California, it came in after Mas Hongo.

Jeanne Boes ([00:09:32](#)):

This is the market that's at 5th and Howard?

Willy Neve ([00:09:34](#)):

Yeah.

Al Bersch ([00:09:35](#)):

So this was before the current building on Brannan?

Willy Neve ([00:09:41](#)):

Yeah. Then after 1956, before 1950, we started moving at a temporary location on 7th street, right?

Jeanne Boes ([00:09:53](#)):

7th and what?

Willy Neve ([00:10:08](#)):

7th or 8th Street, something, I don't really remember very well.

Rose Roberson ([00:10:08](#)):

So in the interim between 5th and Howard, you were at 7th before you moved to Brandon Street?

Willy Neve ([00:10:17](#)):

Yeah, we were there probably, I don't know, a few months because the market wasn't ready.

Al Bersch ([00:10:25](#)):

In the years after the war, what was that like with Japanese American growers and sellers coming back to the market? Do you have any memories about what it was like? Was it a period of change or growth or-

Willy Neve ([00:10:47](#)):

Well, there was nothing like change because the production, while they were away, they were continued by Zappettini Company and this gentleman grower that was one of the best in Northern California. And then the Japanese took over right after the war, probably in 1945 and so there was no change in the production. So we still have the same flowers.

Rose Roberson ([00:11:22](#)):

Different quantity, anything change, or it was all-

Willy Neve ([00:11:28](#)):

Roses, carnation mostly and guardian, that's what the Japanese grew.

Jeanne Boes ([00:11:34](#)):

And mums?

Willy Neve ([00:11:35](#)):

And mums, mostly on the Chinese. All the Japanese growing in Redwood City, they called the Hogan Ranch. There probably was about four or five top growers that grew beautiful stuff. We used to buy a lot of mum from them.

Al Bersch (00:11:58):

How has the market changed since then? I mean, I'm sure it changed quite a lot over the years?

Willy Neve (00:12:07):

Big, big change. If you want to compare now to those days, we had probably 50 different type of flower, now we probably have a thousand different type of flower, at least. So the big change of the availability of flower increased so much, it's unbelievable. I would say probably grew about 500% from those days.

Rose Roberson (00:12:40):

Is that because of international flowers as well-

Willy Neve (00:12:45):

Yes.

Rose Roberson (00:12:45):

... coming in?

Willy Neve (00:12:46):

Yeah. A lot of flowers coming in from Holland, first of all. Even now that's the biggest supplier to the American market, then Central America started, like Colombia was the first one growing carnation then also they started growing mums and roses. That started about, I would say, let's see 1961, '62, that's when the local growers start to get in trouble because the carnation from Colombia. They were very good quality at a cheaper price because they grow a little plastic covering. Instead, here you grow in greenhouses and you have to have heat and then labor was much higher than in Colombia, so very tough competition.

Rose Roberson (00:14:06):

How many carnation growers now in the United States?

Willy Neve (00:14:09):

None.

Willy Neve (00:14:11):

No carnation grower left and what we have about three or four rose growers also.

Willy Neve (00:14:19):

You got my nephew. You got John Furdum and-

Rose Roberson (00:14:29):

Is Green Valley still?

Willy Neve ([00:14:31](#)):

Green Valley?

Jeanne Boes ([00:14:33](#)):

Euforia?

Willy Neve ([00:14:35](#)):

Euforia?

Jeanne Boes ([00:14:37](#)):

That's it.

Willy Neve ([00:14:40](#)):

Oh, we used to have in the Bay Area alone, probably had about-

Jeanne Boes ([00:14:42](#)):

In the West Coast.

Willy Neve ([00:14:42](#)):

... 50 of them.

Al Bersch ([00:14:46](#)):

I'm sure it wasn't easy for the growers, but how did they react when the market shifted towards South American flowers?

Willy Neve ([00:15:00](#)):

Well, quite a few of them went out of business because they couldn't compete. So, they didn't like the competition. And so that was good and bad. There was more flower available than before so there was enough for the florists. And then the reality too, we used to run short so when the imports started, then the florists they had more flower available for themselves.

Jeanne Boes ([00:15:34](#)):

Did it cause a change in what local growers had to grow?

Willy Neve ([00:15:40](#)):

Yeah. I mean, the quality of the flower?

Jeanne Boes ([00:15:43](#)):

The kind of flower.

Willy Neve ([00:15:45](#)):

Yes. So then they start to grow different product. We had probably about 15, 20 growers that used to grow outdoor flower then little by little they switched over to some better crop like sunflower. We never sold one sunflower before. And then they started to grow a lot of sunflowers and gladiolus, delphinium, iris and dahlias, larkspur and so many different flowers that they started growing, so as to take care of the local market

Willy Neve ([00:16:35](#)):

And also there was quite a few shipping houses in the area. They used to send flower all over the country.

Rose Roberson ([00:16:45](#)):

Were those type of flowers being grown before?

Willy Neve ([00:16:51](#)):

No.

Rose Roberson ([00:16:54](#)):

Why did they think to do that other than it was easier to grow in this climate? Who was growing that before?

Willy Neve ([00:17:01](#)):

Well, they started with gladiola. They saw that the gladiola they grew was really, really nice. There was one grower down Stanford University, Hugo Tevi and then there was the Marcevini brothers starting, and then Joe Luki, we had three gladiolus growers and they never switched to anything else, just gladiolus. And then some of the grower that had greenhouses, then they saw that the outdoor crop, it was growing very well so they started to diversify.

Al Bersch ([00:17:45](#)):

So when you were working for Zappettini-

Willy Neve ([00:17:49](#)):

Zappettini, yeah. I became a little member of the company.

Al Bersch ([00:17:53](#)):

Okay, and for the duration of your time in the flower market, did you just work for that company, or did you start your own?

Willy Neve ([00:18:06](#)):

No. Then we started our own with my brother in Colma, California. We started growing carnations in 1960 till 1970 then Colombia came in. That's it. And then also they sold the property to the DMV and so that was the end of us.

Willy Neve ([00:18:35](#)):

Then my wife she was a retail florist for 40 years.

Al Bersch (00:18:41):

And did she work with you at the flower market?

Willy Neve (00:18:44):

No. She had a little warehouse that she was using, then she used the garage. We have many florists doing that to cut expenses because the public doesn't go to the flower shop anymore like they used to. They go to Costco. They go to Trader Joes and then all the other supermarkets which they carry a wide variety of product, not as good, like the one we have in the flower market, but passable. A lot of people don't know the different from quality. And then they there, they see the flower when they buy other things. They buy flower too, put a flower in the basket.

Al Bersch (00:19:37):

Was your wife selling flowers that you were growing in Colma or-

Willy Neve (00:19:42):

I used to give all the product to Zappettini Company of course, I was working there so I made sure I sold my carnations.

Rose Roberson (00:19:53):

When did women come to the market?

Willy Neve (00:19:56):

Women started to come probably 1975. Before that we had maybe about three or four women customers.

Willy Neve (00:20:11):

It was all men.

Jeanne Boes (00:20:12):

And they owned flower stores that-

Willy Neve (00:20:17):

They owned flower stores. We had a bunch of gentlemen coming to the market with a suit, tie, hat sometimes, not like now. We don't have anymore, not even one left.

Rose Roberson (00:20:39):

Were there any women that would come as growers? Mojo's mother would come, right?

Willy Neve (00:20:49):

Yeah. Most of the mothers, yeah.

Rose Roberson (00:20:51):

Yeah. It was the mothers of the growers, the few of them that worked in the market.

Willy Neve ([00:20:56](#)):

Yeah.

Al Bersch ([00:21:01](#)):

Would come and operate a resale business or did they have a stall selling the flowers?

Willy Neve ([00:21:12](#)):

Yeah, they had a stall selling the flower in the market. But we had maybe two, three women doing the growing.

Al Bersch ([00:21:21](#)):

Where were they located?

Willy Neve ([00:21:25](#)):

South San Francisco in Colma.

Al Bersch ([00:21:30](#)):

And did they own their businesses?

Willy Neve ([00:21:32](#)):

Yeah. Some they owned their land and their business. Some, they leased the land.

Rose Roberson ([00:21:41](#)):

Willy I've seen pictures of, for example, Jean Mojo's mom.

Willy Neve ([00:21:46](#)):

Yeah.

Rose Roberson ([00:21:47](#)):

But I didn't see any of your pictures with any of the Japanese wives or mothers coming. Did they come to market?

Willy Neve ([00:21:57](#)):

No, they didn't come to the market. No, really. Mostly the men, sometime, maybe for the holiday and that's about it so as you remember Ken Kiwate, never saw his wife.

Willy Neve ([00:22:12](#)):

Ben Tanizawi never saw his wife.

Willy Neve ([00:22:16](#)):

It was a man's world in the flower business from growing to selling retail.

Al Bersch ([00:22:34](#)):

How was the nursery? Were the nurseries different or did more women work in nurseries?

Willy Neve ([00:22:42](#)):

Yeah, but there were a few women, not that many. Then when they changed, then the women started taking over all the retail business.

Jeanne Boes ([00:22:56](#)):

Most of the retailers and the growers were family businesses?

Willy Neve ([00:23:02](#)):

Yes. They owned the property.

Jeanne Boes ([00:23:06](#)):

Yeah. So typically, one person went to market and the rest were at the farm or one went to the market and the rest were designing flowers, right?

Willy Neve ([00:23:18](#)):

Yes. Right. Since then, then they bring the designer to see what's available in the market and what's different. And so-

Jeanne Boes ([00:23:26](#)):

Were the designers, male or female?

Willy Neve ([00:23:31](#)):

There was a lot of male designer, but then the women start coming in pretty strong. Now they took over.

Al Bersch ([00:23:47](#)):

When was that that more women started to become involved?

Willy Neve ([00:23:54](#)):

Strong, very strong, I think, in the '80s. In the '70s, they started a little bit because of the hard work in this business. And you can't make that much money like you do in other business because very, very intense work. Actually, too many people work for you, another way you can't make any money. And then hard to get the price. It was hard for the designer and new flower shop to get paid for their talent. People don't want to pay for their talent. They think the flowers are right there right now doesn't take any work to produce it and then import it from other country, which you have also quite a bit of dump because it's hard to gauge what you really need 100%. It's always 3, 4, 5% spoilage.

Jeanne Boes ([00:25:22](#)):

Willy, who were the famous San Francisco floral shops?

Willy Neve ([00:25:28](#)):

Podesta and Baldocchi.

Al Bersch (00:25:30):

The Italians.

Willy Neve (00:25:31):

Yes. Then on the peninsula are Ah Sam then also Maiden Lane, Sheridan and Bell. And then also, I think there were down Union Square Belli and Belli.

Al Bersch (00:25:55):

Were the shops, the different retail shops, did people socialize at all amongst those different businesses?

Willy Neve (00:26:07):

Yeah. Socialize a little bit, once in a while. Not that much.

Willy Neve (00:26:16):

Once we had a crab dinner with the group of florists of Oakland, they put it together and not much of anything else.

Jeanne Boes (00:26:32):

Did the Italian growers have picnics?

Willy Neve (00:26:35):

Yes. They had little picnic.

Then also there's still some of those growers, they have a group like the Podesta, Gregoire and all that. They still-

Jeanne Boes (00:26:51):

The Florist Club?

Willy Neve (00:26:53):

Florist Club. Then they go to different restaurant all the time. There's a group of maybe about 40, 50, 60 people.

Al Bersch (00:27:03):

How often do people get together?

Willy Neve (00:27:06):

Once a month? So they go to different restaurants, mostly Italian. That's the best food.

Al Bersch (00:27:19):

Did the Italian American and Japanese American and Chinese American communities that are part of the flower market socialize much together.

Willy Neve ([00:27:30](#)):

No, they didn't socialize. They're pretty busy working and come to the market with their projects and it took most of the time available, so...

Al Bersch ([00:27:44](#)):

Do you have memories about what it was like working together with three immigrant communities in one place sharing the market? I've heard people describe it as different sides?

Willy Neve ([00:28:01](#)):

Yes. We used to have the Italian side. Then in the back we used to have the Chinese side and then the main building too, we had the Japanese side, which there's no more left. Not even one grower.

Jeanne Boes ([00:28:20](#)):

Oh, Oku.

Willy Neve ([00:28:21](#)):

Oku, yeah. That's what? One left. Which the family, they're still growing flower. Probably the only Japanese growing flowers. Let's see what else we have.

Rose Roberson ([00:28:40](#)):

Salinas?

Jeanne Boes ([00:28:41](#)):

Anybody down in Salinas or Watsonville? Oh, the Kiriymas.

Willy Neve ([00:28:47](#)):

The Kiriyma. Yeah.

Jeanne Boes ([00:28:47](#)):

Yeah, the Kiriyma brothers.

Willy Neve ([00:28:47](#)):

And then they got the Mount Eden that-

Jeanne Boes ([00:28:51](#)):

But they're not growing anything.

Willy Neve ([00:28:52](#)):

No, they're not growing anything anymore. They sold the greenhouses that they had and Salinas and over in Mount Eden off the San Mateo Bridge.

Rose Roberson ([00:29:09](#)):

What about in the Italian American community? Have you seen many family growers pass it on to the next generation?

Willy Neve ([00:29:19](#)):

Very few. I have my nephew. Then I have my grandsons. They are in the flower market.

Jeanne Boes ([00:29:32](#)):

You have Repettos.

Willy Neve ([00:29:36](#)):

Repetto, his father was in the flower business. Louie Figone, his father was a grower in Millbury.

Jeanne Boes ([00:29:41](#)):

Filipelli.

Willy Neve ([00:29:45](#)):

Filipelli, that's third generation.

Rose Roberson ([00:29:49](#)):

Who else is in there?

Jeanne Boes ([00:29:54](#)):

Torchio wasn't-

Rose Roberson ([00:29:55](#)):

No.

Jeanne Boes ([00:29:57](#)):

No, Torchio was first generation

Willy Neve ([00:29:58](#)):

First generation

Rose Roberson ([00:30:04](#)):

Oh, the Camicias

Willy Neve ([00:30:04](#)):

Oh the-

Al Bersch ([00:30:13](#)):

Why is that funny?

Willy Neve ([00:30:15](#)):

Because they're kind of two young men that didn't fit in the flower market. You go to the place and try to do some business, they practically never said good morning to you or smile. I think Jeanne, she got one of the brothers to smile one time. And I said good morning, one time, because we both went to the Chronicle paper dispenser. So he was in my face, he said, "Good morning." I was going to say, good morning, but he did.

Al Bersch ([00:30:56](#)):

What did you do to get him to smile?

Jeanne Boes ([00:31:00](#)):

Their father was a sweetheart and the happy, funny guy. And they would only complain all the time. And one day I walked in there, I said, "Jesus Christ didn't Sammy rub off on one of you at least a little bit?" Then after that, it was all great after that.

Willy Neve ([00:31:23](#)):

Yeah. And the mother, she was a little conservative too. So she wasn't too friendly.

Willy Neve ([00:31:30](#)):

But the father was great. He was in the market for quite a few years, maybe about 30 years.

Rose Roberson ([00:31:40](#)):

What about Passanisi?

Willy Neve ([00:31:42](#)):

Oh yeah. Passanisi, Joe, that was one generation.

Jeanne Boes ([00:31:46](#)):

Oh, okay.

Willy Neve ([00:31:48](#)):

I think probably his sons did a little bit at the end.

Jeanne Boes ([00:31:54](#)):

Ruggeri?

Willy Neve ([00:31:57](#)):

Then Bob Ruggeri, the father, they were growers. They used to grow carnation, beautiful carnation and snapdragon and then the boy came to the market, Mr. Robert Ruggeri and then they built some greenhouses down Pescadero and they grew carnation and the cousin went down there, Richard.

Jeanne Boes ([00:32:32](#)):

Gaddy.

Willy Neve ([00:32:33](#)):

And Gaddy. That's part of my family. So now we've still got the third generation in the flower business. My children's son is fourth generation.

Al Bersch ([00:32:50](#)):

That sounds very rare from what you're saying.

Willy Neve ([00:32:52](#)):

Yeah.

Al Bersch ([00:32:53](#)):

What happened to the farms and the growers that didn't continue, that didn't pass it on?

Willy Neve ([00:33:01](#)):

Sold the land. The kids sold the land. The old generation, they didn't. They worked, worked well all the time and they produce flower all the time, but then the kids they saw the old generation working so hard and not making that much money, so that's it.

Jeanne Boes ([00:33:24](#)):

Willy, your brother, John-

Willy Neve ([00:33:26](#)):

Yes.

Jeanne Boes ([00:33:28](#)):

When did he move to Petaluma?

Willy Neve ([00:33:31](#)):

1967.

Jeanne Boes ([00:33:33](#)):

So when the nursery ended in Colma for you guys, he went to Petaluma?

Willy Neve ([00:33:40](#)):

Yeah. So he had the nursery by himself and then the one we grew carnation was finished. And so, he started building greenhouses in 1967 and he started to grow carnation but there was a tough market because of the imports coming in very strong and the cheaper price. So, for a few years he struggled, then he switched over to roses. Then things got a little bit better for him. Then the three boys got into the nursery business with him, and they started expanding a little bit. Then the brother, they start moving on their own. So, then my brother still had the old nursery and then the oldest boy started to build these greenhouses and the middle son started to build his own greenhouses too. And then the younger boy starts to grow some outdoor crop like hydrangea, garden roses, stuff like that and then from there, from Petaluma, he move up by Mount Shasta area. And now he's growing peonies and some winterberry, which is very popular for the Christmas and then some snowball viburnum.

Jeanne Boes ([00:35:29](#)):

Lilac.

Willy Neve ([00:35:31](#)):

Lilac. Yeah.

Al Bersch ([00:35:33](#)):

And this is your nephew?

Willy Neve ([00:35:35](#)):

That's my nephew, my brother's kid.

Al Bersch ([00:35:38](#)):

And which brother is that?

Willy Neve ([00:35:41](#)):

Johnny.

Jeanne Boes ([00:35:53](#)):

And Johnny passed away when?

Willy Neve ([00:35:56](#)):

Johnny passed away probably about 15 years ago. He was the oldest one.

Jeanne Boes ([00:36:04](#)):

And so his great grandsons are still in it, right?

Willy Neve ([00:36:10](#)):

Yes. Yeah, yeah, the third generation.

Al Bersch ([00:36:15](#)):

Okay.

Willy Neve ([00:36:16](#)):

Well, you can call fourth generation too.

Jeanne Boes ([00:36:20](#)):

Yeah, because your father.

Willy Neve ([00:36:21](#)):

Because of my father.

Al Bersch ([00:36:23](#)):

So, what do you think what was different in your family that people wanted to keep the business going?

Jeanne Boes ([00:36:31](#)):

What's different about the Neves?

Willy Neve ([00:36:40](#)):

I guess it was in their blood. They saw only the flower business and they didn't go. One of them went to [University of California] Davis, one of the nephews and the other one, they didn't go to any school for growing flower, anything like that. They learn on their own. And so now they have a big operation up in Petaluma and then one of the brothers passed away, it's about 12 years now, I think, yeah. And he had a nursery himself and grew a little bit of outdoor crop and any foraging, also.

Al Bersch ([00:37:27](#)):

Foraging

Willy Neve ([00:37:28](#)):

Foraging

Al Bersch ([00:37:29](#)):

For flowers?

Willy Neve ([00:37:30](#)):

Flowers, yes and greenery. Any product that there was the demand in the market. And he passed away like I said, we think about 12 years ago and the wife continued the business. One of my grandsons went to work for her for about 10 years, try to keep the operation going and then she wasn't making that much money down the flower market, so she decided to sell the business to my grandson. And then they're still growing now some outdoor crop and summer roses. And then they sell their products in the farmer's market. They go like Sacramento. They go to San Francisco and over in the Marin County, so they got better price than selling at the flower market.

Al Bersch ([00:38:38](#)):

When did they stop selling at the flower market?

Willy Neve ([00:38:41](#)):

Probably about seven or eight years ago.

Al Bersch ([00:38:50](#)):

Was your sister involved in the business?

Willy Neve ([00:38:53](#)):

No, my brother-in-law was a little bit involved with the carnation operation. It was the maintenance man. He was a mechanical man. So we needed him too, a little bit. But then he was managing a big delicatessen down the produce market in San Francisco so he kept on going with that.

Willy Neve (00:39:20):

Then they had a son. He didn't get involved in the flower business either, so he was a lawyer and he passed away last year at age 62. He was involved with the lot of the producer of olive oil and parmesan cheese and wine. And he used to go to Italy about 10, 15 time of years. And he ate at the best restaurant, there was one of the companies that took him to the best restaurant, then they gave all the names to my granddaughter. She went to Italy. She majored in Italian at Santa Clara University. She stayed there for three and a half months at Bologna University and then my daughter went over there to pick her up. So they stayed here for about three weeks that they went over to the best restaurant. They never ate so unbelievable. Like risotto, they carve with parmesan cheese, they make risotto out of that.

Al Bersch (00:40:48):

Sounds delicious. I wanted to ask you if you have any fond memories or stories that just come to mind about the flower market that we didn't really get to, about some of the people involved or anything that happened over the years?

Jeanne Boes (00:41:10):

Talk about the gambling.

Willy Neve (00:41:12):

We went gambling.

Jeanne Boes (00:41:18):

So the flower market really was everybody's social life, right?

Willy Neve (00:41:23):

Yeah.

Jeanne Boes (00:41:23):

Because when they went home or back to the nursery or the florist, they worked. So when they were at the market-

Willy Neve (00:41:32):

They used to gamble in the back of [inaudible] and then Pacific Coast Evergreen, they used to play cards.

Jeanne Boes (00:41:45):

And then it moved to the football pools.

Willy Neve (00:41:47):

Football pool. Then we had a football pool every year for all season for every game. But now the guy has got a job and he doesn't come down to run the pool anymore.

Jeanne Boes (00:42:03):

What about the old cafe after market? Did everyone end up in that cafe at the end of market?

Willy Neve (00:42:16):

Well, we had one little coffee shop at the end of the market that everybody went there for breakfast. You ate at the little counter and then they had some window, a little table that you ate there standing. Then we had a bar, the M&M bar that they serve breakfast once in a while, mostly the people who go there after work to have a few drinks.

Jeanne Boes (00:42:59):

What time of day was that, usually?

Willy Neve (00:43:02):

Well, right after the market, like 10:00, 11:00, but the stores there were still open, but it wasn't that busy so sneak out, go to the bar for maybe an hour, two hours and then play the pinball machine.

Jeanne Boes (00:43:23):

Willy, when did the market start letting the public in, when was that?

Willy Neve (00:43:39):

Oh, probably, let's see, about 15 years ago.

Willy Neve (00:43:49):

In the '80s, right? Wasn't it in 1980? When did Silver Terrace?

Willy Neve (00:43:54):

Only Silver Terrace.

Jeanne Boes (00:43:55):

Yeah.

Willy Neve (00:43:56):

It was the only one that's selling to the public.

Jeanne Boes (00:44:00):

When was that?

Willy Neve (00:44:02):

When was that? You should know because you worked there.

Jeanne Boes (00:44:06):

Was that 1980s though, right? I think when they were painting on the building Mas Hongo's Housewife Market. It had to have been in the '80s-

Willy Neve (00:44:20):

You're talking about 45 years ago now. No, it was later than that.

Willy Neve (00:44:27):

Probably in the '90s.

Rose Roberson (00:44:30):

Because it was already Tuesdays and Thursdays were open when I started.

Willy Neve (00:44:36):

What year had you started?

Rose Roberson (00:44:36):

'96.

Willy Neve (00:44:40):

'96, yeah. So I think the '90 was the beginning, selling to the public.

Al Bersch (00:44:48):

And so before that the customers were all-

Willy Neve (00:44:53):

Florists, or people that had the badge like some decorators come in and they'll cater, they did their own flowers so they came into the market. But now, not that much public, I think one Trader's Joe store has more public than we have.

Jeanne Boes (00:45:22):

What about the old shows they used to put on at the market?

Willy Neve (00:45:27):

Oh yeah, that was very nice too. We had top designers designing inside the market there and then we used to bring different new product, introduced as for florists and we did pretty good sales on that.

Jeanne Boes (00:45:47):

How many people would go to those?

Willy Neve (00:45:50):

Oh, we used to probably get 800 to a thousand people, I mean, florists.

Al Bersch (00:46:01):

That's a large amount of people.

Willy Neve (00:46:02):

Yeah, so you bring in a lot of people from all over and then the people with different products, they came in the market and they get a little space.

Al Bersch (00:46:16):

Okay. And did this happen at the flower market?

Willy Neve (00:46:19):

Yes. At the flower market.

Al Bersch (00:46:21):

How often?

Willy Neve (00:46:22):

Probably started the late '60.

Al Bersch (00:46:27):

Was it an annual event or-

Willy Neve (00:46:29):

Annual event, yeah.

Al Bersch (00:46:32):

And people would come from all over the United States or worldwide?

Willy Neve (00:46:36):

Well, some from out of state and mostly from all over California, Los Angeles area and some Northern California up to Eureka, California, a few from Oregon too, to see what's new and see the new designing.

Rose Roberson (00:47:04):

The mayors would come to those shows. The mayors of San Francisco would come to those shows.

Willy Neve (00:47:06):

Yeah.

Frances Kaplan (00:47:09):

What was the name of the shows?

Rose Roberson (00:47:11):

Every year was different.

Jeanne Boes (00:47:13):

Yeah, I think they would pick a theme, but what were they called? They were just design shows, right?

Willy Neve (00:47:19):

Yeah. We used to call them... Can't think of it right now.

Jeanne Boes (00:47:27):

What's your favorite thing over the years? What's the piece of the flower market you love the most?
What keeps you coming there every day?

Willy Neve (00:47:44):

Okay.

Rose Roberson (00:47:45):

Besides money.

Willy Neve (00:47:47):

Money. And I love flowers. Still love flower after so many years and then I love people too. I've made many friends and so it keeps me going.

Al Bersch (00:48:02):

How often are you there at the market?

Willy Neve (00:48:11):

Only five days a week.

Jeanne Boes (00:48:14):

Because I don't have it open six days a week.

Willy Neve (00:48:17):

Right.

Jeanne Boes (00:48:19):

Or seven days a week or he'd be there seven days.

Willy Neve (00:48:22):

That's right. I hope it'll be six.

Al Bersch (00:48:28):

Can you talk about some of the friends that you've made at the market?

Willy Neve (00:48:35):

Oh, I've made one of them that is really, really, famous, Nancy Pelosi.
I met mayors and met some opera stars from Italy.

Rose Roberson ([00:48:55](#)):

Martha Stewart.

Willy Neve ([00:49:00](#)):

Martha Stewart.

Al Bersch ([00:49:02](#)):

How did you meet Martha Stewart?

Willy Neve ([00:49:04](#)):

She came down the market and then she come to talk to me and tried to get information about the flower market.

Rose Roberson ([00:49:12](#)):

She did a big hydrangea article and did like a little film, and a photo shoot and then found all the beautiful product.

Willy Neve ([00:49:21](#)):

Yeah.

Jeanne Boes ([00:49:23](#)):

And she had a TV show at one point.

Willy Neve ([00:49:26](#)):

Yeah, she had.

Jeanne Boes ([00:49:27](#)):

And she filmed a piece of an episode.

Rose Roberson ([00:49:31](#)):

She actually made all those blue hydrangeas super popular.

Willy Neve ([00:49:37](#)):

Also she was the one that talked bad about the carnation. For years you couldn't sell the carnation. The public, they wouldn't buy them.

Frances Kaplan ([00:49:50](#)):

That brings me to a question. What about the customers? what are the big changes you've seen over the years from what they want?

Like you said, carnations are in and then carnations are out.

Willy Neve ([00:50:05](#)):

Now the carnations are back in.

Frances Kaplan ([00:50:07](#)):

They're back in?

Willy Neve ([00:50:08](#)):

Yes. Pretty strong. Then we have still lots of Asiatic florists that they use for funeral. Then there's they last better than any other flower, practically. You can keep a carnation some time from one to two weeks. Roses you can keep maybe a week to 10 days so the carnations... Then they have a beautiful variety that we never had before. We probably have about 25 to 30 different colors that we never dream of they're going to be around, some purple and some by color that are really beautiful. And so people, they're going back a little bit to the carnation.

Jeanne Boes ([00:51:05](#)):

What's your favorite flower, Willy?

Willy Neve ([00:51:09](#)):

Oh, peonies are my favorite flower. And how they're becoming available practically about 10 months out of the year, before we used to have the season from May 1st till about May 30. And there was two or three different variety. Now we got maybe about 30, 40 different variety and color.

Al Bersch ([00:51:36](#)):

And is that because they're grown elsewhere?

Willy Neve ([00:51:42](#)):

They are hybridizing more color and so which is very popular now, we sell more peony than ever before. A lot of the peony they use in the wedding bouquets which they never did years ago, because we didn't have enough, and we didn't have the desirable color like we have now.

Jeanne Boes ([00:52:12](#)):

Refrigeration too.

Willy Neve ([00:52:14](#)):

Yeah.

Jeanne Boes ([00:52:16](#)):

The market never had, didn't have much refrigeration.

Willy Neve ([00:52:19](#)):

Oh, not that much

Jeanne Boes ([00:52:22](#)):

Because it was just farmers, right?

Willy Neve ([00:52:24](#)):

Yes.

Al Bersch ([00:52:27](#)):

What do you have now for refrigeration?

Willy Neve ([00:52:31](#)):

Well, typical walking box, we call them.

Temperatures between the 38 to 42, that's a desirable temperature for flower so we can preserve a few extra days.

Frances Kaplan ([00:52:49](#)):

When did refrigeration come into the market?

Willy Neve ([00:52:57](#)):

Okay. We started the Zappettini company in 1956. We had two refrigerators, one for the rose that was with different coil that kept the moisture dryer because roses don't want too much humidity. And then we had another refrigerator we put all the other flowers at night after the market was over, which sometimes was 4:00, 5:00 sometimes even 6 o'clock.

Rose Roberson ([00:53:36](#)):

Who else had refrigeration other than Zappettini?

Willy Neve ([00:53:42](#)):

McLellan Company and Kearns, you know my Kearns. Well, then there was Neven and company. They had little bit, but we had the more advanced one, really, really, nice. Pellegrini Refrigeration company built it.

Frances Kaplan ([00:54:09](#)):

Did that make a big difference to the business?

Willy Neve ([00:54:11](#)):

Oh yes. Yeah. Then we have a control because sometime the temperature went too low and froze the flowers. So the one with the rose, we never lost any flower, but in the other refrigerator, sometimes it froze too so we'd come back on Monday.

Jeanne Boes ([00:54:39](#)):

How about the way the market works now that's different than when the growers had the market, what's different?

Willy Neve ([00:54:51](#)):

You didn't have that much product so you kind of got better money, I would say. And right now you got all those imports, it's some kind of an overabundance of product all the time in the market. I think it was too many vendors. Then also, a lot of the florists, they go direct to the grower in Ecuador and all over the world. So they got their own product. They don't buy from the market. Also, we used to have some

supermarket business now we didn't have that much supermarket business now, like Trader Joe's and Costco and Safeway and Whole Foods that all go direct to the grower then some, they have their own farms too in Central America.

Al Bersch (00:55:50):

So, some of the people who sell flowers at the flower market, they are affiliated with farms in South America.

Willy Neve (00:56:01):

Oh yeah, but not any interest in the company.

Al Bersch (00:56:28):

How do you manage to keep the business going?

Willy Neve (00:56:35):

Well, to try to also buy a diversified product, better product, different product, and service, and try to be nice to the customer.

Al Bersch (00:56:55):

Who are some of your customers now?

Willy Neve (00:57:03):

Oh, like a Mayesh Company, Torchio and Rafa.

Jeanne Boes (00:57:14):

Who buys the most from you right now?

Willy Neve (00:57:18):

Yeah. We have some florist from Santa Rosa area which has about five shops. Then we have some local one. I'm not going to tell you otherwise-

Frances Kaplan (00:57:47):

What is your favorite time of year at the flower mart? I know you have Valentine's day, you have Christmas, you have Mother's Day-

Willy Neve (00:57:54):

I like May and June very much, very active, two most active months out of the year. Christmas is a kind of drag and it starts early with all the Christmas products. We start in the beginning of November, we go through couple days before Christmas, and then we have Valentine's nice, which is about two weeks. You sell a lot of different flowers, but the one you sell the most variety is Mother's Day, the biggest volume.

Al Bersch (00:58:46):

Looking through some of the photographs that are part of the archive for the flower market and one of the photographs, and I think it's from the '80s at some point, there's a billboard and it says Zappettini and then a radio station, like call letters. Was there a radio show?

Willy Neve ([00:59:10](#)):

Yeah, he had a... yes, a radio show probably about three or four times a week.

Jeanne Boes ([00:59:18](#)):

What did they call him? The flower man?

Willy Neve ([00:59:21](#)):

The flower man.

Al Bersch ([00:59:21](#)):

And this was Bill?

Willy Neve ([00:59:23](#)):

Bill.

Willy Neve ([00:59:31](#)):

He passed away last April, 27th.

Rose Roberson ([00:59:39](#)):

On his radio show, he'd say what was in season, what to buy that day.

Willy Neve ([00:59:43](#)):

Yeah. Well, he used to try to get information from me too and everything else. And then the last few years, actually, we've been friends for about since 1949, but I'm only 49. And he used to call me in the last few years three or four times a day. He wanted to know still what's going on the market and have somebody to talk.

Jeanne Boes ([01:00:14](#)):

Willy, did he do that radio show from the flower market or did he go to a studio?

Willy Neve ([01:00:18](#)):

Yeah. No, I don't know if he went to the studio.

Rose Roberson ([01:00:19](#)):

He said he went to the studio.

Jeanne Boes ([01:00:22](#)):

Did he?

Willy Neve ([01:00:25](#)):

Yeah, I think so. I think he did. I'm not sure, really. I never knew how he did it.

Al Bersch ([01:00:32](#)):

Did he have guests on the show frequently or-

Willy Neve ([01:00:35](#)):

No, he never had any guests at all. Just himself like Joe Carcione, The Green Grocer. I don't know if you guys have... No. That would be before your time.

Jeanne Boes ([01:00:46](#)):

Zappettini was his own show.

Willy Neve ([01:00:53](#)):

Oh yeah. His own show, yeah.

Al Bersch ([01:01:01](#)):

I'd love to hear a recording of some of the show, if it's ever been recorded.

Willy Neve ([01:01:07](#)):

No, probably not. No. We never record anything years ago. We never think about the future that people wanted to know what's going on. So we just did your work and tried to get more customer and more product, which it was a task and more money.

Al Bersch ([01:01:36](#)):

What was the competition like amongst the different vendors and growers?

Willy Neve ([01:01:42](#)):

Not that bad. They were good competition because everybody maintained their price. We had all the same level. And so it was a good competition. Now, forget it.

Al Bersch ([01:01:56](#)):

What's different now.

Willy Neve ([01:01:58](#)):

So much different. So much product then we have different florists than we had years ago, different nationality and they're all looking for price. And they go around and around to different vendors till they find the best price. So they try to wear you down and to lower their price they can pay but very, very tough competition.

Jeanne Boes ([01:02:39](#)):

What's something you've seen in your lifetime that you thought you'd never see something like this?

Willy Neve ([01:02:49](#)):

The availability of flowers, we'd never seen anything like it. Years ago for Valentine, one year I had one bunch of iris left. We sold everything. Probably I would say one day 25, \$30,000, which it was good money. Now, we saw that for Mother's Day, what? Three years ago.

Jeanne Boes ([01:03:20](#)):

During COVID.

Willy Neve ([01:03:23](#)):

COVID. We sold out, the whole market sold out. That was the last time and the first time in about 25 years.

Jeanne Boes ([01:03:32](#)):

So, the market has survived an earthquake, COVID-

Willy Neve ([01:03:39](#)):

COVID, yes.

Jeanne Boes ([01:03:39](#)):

World War II.

Willy Neve ([01:03:42](#)):

Yeah, and I survived too.

Willy Neve ([01:03:49](#)):

The first time we had the big one, the market building, it was making wonderful noise like it was falling down. I was there with Mr. Zappettini. He was upstairs in the office. He ran down, which he never walked fast or anything like that. And then he was like, "Come on. Let's go outside that way, the building going to collapse on us."

Willy Neve ([01:04:21](#)):

And then also the road in the market too. There was some cracks there too.

Al Bersch ([01:04:29](#)):

How long did it take before the repairs were made to the building?

Willy Neve ([01:04:33](#)):

Probably about a couple weeks. Yeah. There was not major problem. Few cracks in there.

Jeanne Boes ([01:04:43](#)):

Willy, remember when the AIDS epidemic hits San Francisco? That changed all the customers, right?

Willy Neve ([01:04:51](#)):

Yes.

Al Bersch (01:04:52):

Can you talk about that? How did it affect the market?

Willy Neve (01:04:56):

I don't remember too, too, too much about that,

Jeanne Boes (01:04:59):

But the customers were dying, right?

Willy Neve (01:05:01):

Yeah. Some of the customers died, a few.

Jeanne Boes (01:05:09):

I think that changed things. I think that also brought more women in because a lot of the designers in San Francisco were gay men.

Willy Neve (01:05:26):

Yeah. And so then the men, they didn't want to come in the business anymore. So the women started to come in droves and so many of them, which is nice. I enjoy talking to women, especially these two.

Al Bersch (01:05:53):

What was that like, the transition to having more women in the market? What was it like for the men?

Willy Neve (01:05:58):

Well, they started looking for different product and then made the vendors look for different product. Then they were more creative than men and so there was a big benefit for the flower market to have women come in. And also they're not price conscious of the product. They pay more or less what the products is worth not like the customer that we have now that they're looking for a bargain all the time.

Al Bersch (01:06:45):

Were the women that worked in the market paid fairly. Were they paid the same as their male counterparts?

Willy Neve (01:06:52):

No. A little bit less. I would say maybe 10% less. For sure.

Jeanne Boes (01:07:08):

There used to be a lot of posters hung up around the market before the women came, right?

Willy Neve (01:07:16):

What kind of poster?

Jeanne Boes (01:07:19):

Remember?

Rose Roberson (01:07:20):

There were still some.

Jeanne Boes (01:07:21):

Yeah.

Willy Neve (01:07:22):

The what?

Jeanne Boes (01:07:23):

There were still centerfolds, by the cooler, and the dirty jokes the men used to tell.

Willy Neve (01:07:31):

Yeah. We used to have a lot of... Yes, they'd have some fun.

Jeanne Boes (01:07:35):

Yep. That was their fun.

Al Bersch (01:07:43):

Thanks. It's interesting to hear about that history of women becoming more involved and often there's a struggle for equal rights and things like that in the workplace and so yeah, that's kind of why I was asking some of the... what that process was like. And was there ever tension around the posters or around-

Willy Neve (01:08:12):

No.

Al Bersch (01:08:13):

No?

Willy Neve (01:08:14):

No.

Al Bersch (01:08:15):

So then what happened that they started disappearing and they're not here anymore?

Willy Neve (01:08:20):

When Jeanne came over.

Frances Kaplan (01:08:22):

Jeanie said, "Take them down."

Jeanne Boes (01:08:24):

It was Bob. Yeah. Bob came in and he was the younger generation, right?

Willy Neve (01:08:30):

Yeah.

Jeanne Boes (01:08:30):

The younger generation always changes things even now. Younger generation.

Willy Neve (01:08:39):

And too, the gay individual, they are very talented, and they really forced us to look for other products and the florists benefited from that. And there was some really fantastic designers that we had on the show every year. We used to call it the Open House.

Jeanne Boes (01:09:10):

Oh, okay. All right.

Rose Roberson (01:09:12):

Yeah.

Jeanne Boes (01:09:13):

Okay.

Willy Neve (01:09:13):

I don't know if they had any other name.

Jeanne Boes (01:09:17):

I know. We didn't really do many of them when I was there.

Rose Roberson (01:09:23):

We did when I first started every year.

Willy Neve (01:09:27):

So probably in the '70s, there's more women started to come in when we had those open houses. So the florists used to bring wives and their designer to learn more about different product and different designing, improve their design. They improve a lot. Right now they make fantastic designing that which you have never seen before. The flower business grew quite a bit, I would say maybe 500% and we didn't have the product years ago. Like I said, we couldn't do the business. For the holiday, well, it was short. Now there's flower all the time.

Jeanne Boes ([01:10:27](#)):

Do you think Americans buy more flowers now?

Willy Neve ([01:10:30](#)):

Yes, they do. Way, way more.

Jeanne Boes ([01:10:33](#)):

Than in the '50s, right?

Willy Neve ([01:10:37](#)):

In the what?

Jeanne Boes ([01:10:38](#)):

Than in the '50s.

Willy Neve ([01:10:39](#)):

Oh yeah. Then like the florists, they don't come 100 percent to the vendor in the market, like I said, they go direct to the growers themselves or, I mean, look at how much product we got in the market which we don't sell them all. But for, I would say what, 2, 300% more than we used to sell.

Jeanne Boes ([01:11:13](#)):

And the way that stalls they lay out are different than-

Willy Neve ([01:11:16](#)):

Yeah, different too. Well, because-

Jeanne Boes ([01:11:16](#)):

They feel like they have to put everything out.

Willy Neve ([01:11:21](#)):

Yeah. Everything, that's right. Then there used to be maybe three or four vendors that they had new products all the time. Then this other grower and then they start to copy from you and bring the same product and that's when the competition got really bad.

Jeanne Boes ([01:11:45](#)):

Willie, do you remember when they used to come film The Streets of San Francisco in the flower market?

Willy Neve ([01:11:50](#)):

The streets?

Jeanne Boes ([01:11:53](#)):

You know the TV show?

Willy Neve ([01:11:56](#)):

Oh yes.

Jeanne Boes ([01:11:57](#)):

They would film sometimes at the market.

Willy Neve ([01:11:58](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. They did. I don't remember the year though.

Jeanne Boes ([01:12:05](#)):

You see the flower market in some of those.

Willy Neve ([01:12:08](#)):

You know, now everybody keeps information, what's going on all the time.

Jeanne Boes ([01:12:20](#)):

Yes, exactly.

Willy Neve ([01:12:22](#)):

Yeah. So it's all together difference. It's much better in a way, except the competition.

Al Bersch ([01:12:32](#)):

Can I ask another question about gay men, gay designers?

Willy Neve ([01:12:37](#)):

Yes. Yes.

Al Bersch ([01:12:39](#)):

Was that always the case since back in the-

Willy Neve ([01:12:42](#)):

We had maybe, let's see ... maybe it was about 10 or 12. They were already starting to make a new design and using different product that we had available. Like sunflower they were all over before. We never sold one bunch of sunflower till, probably 1990 before that we had them available, but nobody sold them. And now they sell a lot of the branches, different type of branches, like fig branches, almond branches that we never sold before.

Al Bersch (01:13:37):

When did gay people start being out at the flower market?

Jeanne Boes (01:13:42):

Openly gay.

Al Bersch (01:13:43):

Openly gay.

Willy Neve (01:13:43):

Oh, I do like to, right off the bat, probably in the '50s they were there.

Jeanne Boes (01:13:56):

But did they say they were gay or did they get married?

Willy Neve (01:14:06):

Yeah, probably some got married, but they were very nice friends, they were great. We were friends for over 50 years.

Jeanne Boes (01:14:19):

So, did the Japanese and the Italians during the market interact with each other or did the markets stay separate when the market was on-

Willy Neve (01:14:30):

They have different product. They had the gardenia, the carnation, the roses, the Italian, the other side, they have mostly outdoor crops except the greenery made in there and plumosas.

Jeanne Boes (01:14:45):

Leatherleaf.

Willy Neve (01:14:48):

Leatherleaf, so they start a little bit but not that much.

Jeanne Boes (01:14:52):

Ferns.

Willy Neve (01:14:53):

Yeah.

Jeanne Boes (01:14:56):

Mojo's grew fern, right?

Willy Neve (01:14:58):

Yeah. Well maidenhair fern, that's what it is. And plumosas, with the plumosas, asparagus plumosas.

Willy Neve (01:15:06):

It's a greenery, yeah. Mostly those two greenery. It was about, like I said, 50 growers, mostly Genovese.

Rose Roberson (01:15:17):

Did you all run the same gambling pool at least? Or-


Willy Neve (01:15:23):

We had two pools.

Rose Roberson (01:15:24):

Two pools? Yeah.

Willy Neve (01:15:25):

Yeah. ky Watsoldeg, the guy... They work for him, I forgot his name.

Rose Roberson (01:15:45):

Is that how you mixed, was the gambling? Is that what brought you together?

Willy Neve (01:15:48):

Yeah, we mix and put us together with that too. We didn't have any gardenia, we had to go get the garden from them and the carnation because there were the grower in the area and then all the grower, they disappeared from the Bay Area. Then the Japanese, they started down Salinas. There was probably about 50 growers all out of business. So nobody grows practically anything down. There's only-

Jeanne Boes (01:16:23):

Kiriyama.

Willy Neve (01:16:25):

Kiriyama and the Evergreen... What's her name?

Jeanne Boes (01:16:33):

Oh, Green Valley.

Willy Neve (01:16:34):

Green Valley. And then, what's the name, the phalaenopsis grower?

Rose Roberson (01:16:45):

Matsui?

Willy Neve ([01:16:45](#)):

They just passed away. Matsui, yeah. Big producer of orchids. Last year, I think he passed away. I think now the daughters took over the business, but they ship out of state a lot. They don't come to this market.

Frances Kaplan ([01:17:10](#)):

You said that the Italians started growing specific flowers and that the Japanese Americans would grow specific flowers, is that because of where their farms were located-

Willy Neve ([01:17:21](#)):

Yes. Yes.

Frances Kaplan ([01:17:21](#)):

... and what it was better suited to?

Willy Neve ([01:17:24](#)):

Yeah, because the Japanese, so in Japan, they grew carnations and roses. And so they come over here, the family then they start greenhouses and grow gardenias and roses and carnations.

Frances Kaplan ([01:17:39](#)):

And the Genovese?

Willy Neve ([01:17:41](#)):

Yes. The Genovese, they grew outdoor crops and the fern.

Frances Kaplan ([01:17:47](#)):

And back in Italy, they were known for that as well?

Willy Neve ([01:17:51](#)):

No, I don't think so because we only have one major producer of carnation it's called Sanremo near France. And those guys didn't come over. So they were doing very well. They were actually practically the only one growing carnation in Europe.

Willy Neve ([01:18:17](#)):

Everybody has to depend there. Now they have other greenery, the Italian Ruscus, which is very, very famous all over the world and very lasting. The fact I went to visit the greenhouses in the Italy by Sanremo and they had one greenhouse is full of stems. I said, "How come you don't cut those stems now?" Said, "We going to keep it here about three months and then we start cutting when the market's better and we get better price." That's one new greenery. Maybe they came out probably about 25, 30 years ago before we never used them, we never knew there was existence. They probably existed, but we never knew about it.

Al Bersch ([01:19:25](#)):

Thanks. I want to be mindful of our time because we've been going for a little bit about hour and a half now. But is there anything else that the three of you wanted to talk about?

Jeanne Boes ([01:19:41](#)):

I will say that if you say you work at the San Francisco Flower Mart, someone will always say, oh, I know Willy.

Willy Neve ([01:19:51](#)):

I've been there a few months.

Jeanne Boes ([01:19:57](#)):

This is our flower man, pretty much everyone knows Willy in the Bay Area.

Willy Neve ([01:20:02](#)):

Oh thank you. Hope they say I'm good.

Jeanne Boes ([01:20:08](#)):

Well, the ones that knew the truth died already.

Al Bersch ([01:20:15](#)):

It's been such a pleasure talking with you.

Willy Neve ([01:20:19](#)):

Thank you. Nice talking to you too.

Jeanne Boes ([01:22:26](#)):

Were most of the Italians and the flower industry in this area, all from the same part of Italy?

Willy Neve ([01:22:34](#)):

Oh yeah. Within the floors, then we got some different areas some Tuscany too.

Jeanne Boes ([01:22:42](#)):

Yeah.

Willy Neve ([01:22:42](#)):

Few from Rome, not that many.

Jeanne Boes ([01:22:46](#)):

Yeah. There's a few from Piedmont too, right?

Willy Neve ([01:22:50](#)):

Yeah. A few from Piedmont and from Lombardy, North Milan area. Few from Venice, but mostly-

Jeanne Boes ([01:23:02](#)):

Genovese.

Willy Neve ([01:23:02](#)):

Genovese.

Willy Neve ([01:23:04](#)):

Well, actually we call ourselves Genovese if you are from Geneva. We are from the province of Geneva, but the region, like California, Liguria. That's the state and actually a region. And then Genoa is the capital.

Frances Kaplan ([01:23:29](#)):

When did most of the Italian families working in the flower industry immigrate to the U.S.?

Willy Neve ([01:23:40](#)):

A lot of them came in the '20s.

Then a lot of them too in the '30s, then during the war, nothing-

I was stuck in Italy during the war, really bad. Then few came over again after the war and now the immigration from Italy practically gone. No more labor comes to this country. They go to European country, European nation. They go there for four days and then they go home. They don't have to leave the family like I did and everybody else did. Italian community, little by little is going to disappear. The only one that comes over now, they all goes to Silicon Valley, like engineer, doctor, whatever scientist. In fact, they had a club there. My nephew that passed away was the president and they had about 1500 member.

Frances Kaplan ([01:26:36](#)):

Well, thank you. Thank you again so much.

Willy Neve ([01:26:39](#)):

Oh, a pleasure. Thanks.

Names to confirm

Willy Neve ([00:02:55](#)):

And then he was supposed to leasing the nursery to us then he changed his mind because he started making money again. He only had three people from Napa Institution working in the nursery then, two young guys, I was 19, my brother was 21.

