Livermore Heritage Guild Oral History

Interviewee: Louis Gardella

Interviewer: Merilyn “Tilli” Calhoun

Date: 2/24/1981

Length: 0:32 (MP3)

Description

Louis Gardella describes his 32 years in the grocery business in Livermore. He began in 1924 in a store (Beck-Beatty) located in the Foresters Building at Second and J Streets. He bought the interest of Chester Beck in the store and several years later changed the name to the Del Valle Mercantile. He sold home utensils, farm tools and equipment, groceries and "just about anything else."

Biographical Information

Livermore mourns ex-Mayor Gardella
By Joan Boer
Staff writer

LIVERMORE - Flags are flying at half-staff this week for Louis Gardella, longtime city councilman and mayor, who died Sunday at his son's home in Virginia. He was 87. Mr. Gardella was a City Council member for four terms, but in 1954 failed to win re-election by one vote. Nevertheless, he always maintained his enthusiasm for politics and his interest in the city's future. In an interview last year, he said he still liked to discuss issues with current City Council members, and was glad to give advice when he asked. City officials held him in high regard, naming the community park next to City Hall "Gardella Greens" in his honor.

A Livermore resident for most of his life, he ran Livermore Mercantile, a grocery and hardware store on J Street, for many years. He was proud of the brown-shingle house on Sixth Street that he and his wife built in 1920, after coming up with $2,700. He enjoyed

backyard gardening and its rewards, such as the shade of the 15-foot avocado tree he planted from seed many years ago.

Mr. Gardella was honored as "Livermore Citizen of the Year" by the Livermore Eagles in 1963. More recently he was proud to receive his 50-year membership pin from the Native Sons of the Golden West, according to his friend Ione Holm. He loved young people, many of whom affectionately called him "Mr. Lou," Mrs. Holm said.

He was married for 59 years to his wife, Grace, who died four years ago. He was lonely without her, and decided several months ago to move to McLean, VA., to live with his son, Louis Jr. ...

Excerpted from: The *Herald*, 13 June 1984, p. 13, col. 3

Interview started at 00:00

MC: Interview February 24th, 1981, with Louis Gardella. We would like you to tell us about your 32 years in the grocery business from the time that you joined Beck Beatty[1] in 1924.

LG: I joined Beck Beatty on February 1 of 1924, and I bought the interest of Chester Beck, who was a partner at the time. The company was formed in about 1920, and Mr. Beck retired in 1924, and I became an active partner and also an employee of the company. The place of business was located at Second and J in the Forester's building, constructed in 1914, actually, for the purpose of housing George Beck and Sons, the original founder of the business. And we proceeded with the business along the same lines as Mr. Beck did. Mr. Chester Beck, who was one of the partners of Beck Beatty, retired and I assumed the ownership of his end of the business, and then later on Mr. Beatty became ill and had to retire, and Mr. Hearn, Sr., came into the business, and his son came out from Florida after his father became ill, and his son came out from Florida and took over the interest of his dad. Then we carried on the business as Beck Beatty for a while, and then after there was just two of us remaining, Mr. Ray Hearn[2], who at one time was treasurer of the city of Livermore, and I took the business and we changed the name from Beck Beatty to Del Valle Mercantile. I don't recall just the year, but I think it was around 1930 or thereabouts. I guess that's about the basic operation of the place. We were involved in groceries, hardware, farming implements, housing utensils, and almost any commodity that we could sell.

Time=03:00

MC: Did you take orders by telephone?

LG: Yes, our major-- We had a delivery business and actually our major—biggest volume of business came over the telephone and we delivered. We had delivery wagons and we delivered to our customers in the city of Livermore, and we did at times go out into the country for farmers with large orders who were not able to get in, particularly in the summer months when they had harvesters and hay pressers and whatnot, and we delivered out there to them. Also, there were a large number of large sheep farms, the McGlinchey's, the Kelly's, the Connolly's, and we serviced them. Their farms were out in the Corral Hollow area, and we would bring groceries out there to their employees, sheep herders and whatnot, sometimes as much as two or three times a month.

Time=04:20

MC: Some of your business was credit business.

LG: Yes, that's true. The major portion of our business was credit. We had a large group of farmers, and the local population, and we operated supposedly on a 30-day basis and most of our accounts were 30 days, but some of them would run to 90 days. After 90 days,

[1] Beck, Beatty, and Co.
[2] Hearn, F. Ray

we would kind of get rough with them. But the farmer clientele was run almost on the basis of an annual payday—one payday a year. And it entailed large sums of money and the farmer generally, his crops and his harvest, was done by the first of October, and his money was in and so they would come in and pay up their grocery bills or whatever we had hardware and almost everything on that the farmer needed, and they would come in and make their payment on about the first or the middle of October, which would clear them up. Of course, the local populus we would try to hold them as near as we could to a 30-day basis, but that didn't always work out. So that was the basis of our credit operation, and actually the major portion of our business was credit. Our cash intake was not too large. The whole business predicated based on our credit, and fortunately over the period of years we were able to manipulate without borrowing any money. I was in the business 32 years, and in order to carry our load I never at any time borrowed any money. The business paid its way all the way through.

Time=06:26

MC: What about the Depression? What effect did that have on the business?

LG: Well, we were very fortunate on the Depression. We probably were the best fortunate of anybody in the state. At that particular time, during the Depression years, the Hetch Hetchy was in here with a large payroll, and we were very fortunate in acquiring a lot of that business. It helped carry us over the Depression years. They were here four or five years and had a tremendous payroll, and then the city of San Francisco would even buy supplies from us for their shops that they had here, and so we were-- This area was considered at the time, a very fortunate area in regards to the Depression.

Time=07:22

MC: Your business was one of the first businesses in town to have a cash register?

LG: Well, I wouldn't say we were the first business in town that has one. Everybody had a cash register, but not the type that we had. There were 3 cash registers sold in Livermore at one time, in 1914, purchased by George Beck, McKown and Mess, the druggist, and the Livermore Commercial Company. It stood about 6 feet tall, had a drawer for all clerks, individual drawers for all clerks to operate out of, and it was, at that particular time, it was the elite of cash registers. And we used it all through the years, clear up to the time that we decided to go out of business—that was from 1914 to 1956, and they were as efficient as you could get them. Of course, entirely different than what they are now.

Time=08:28

MC: You said that you had three sets of scales in the store.

LG: Yes, we had three sets of scales. They were the Toledo-type scale, and we had one in the grocery department, one in the hardware department, and then we had one in the meat department (cold meat department). And these scales were tested regularly by the

Bureau of Weights and Measures from the state of California, and rigid inspections at least twice or three times a year and they were always, if they were the least bit out, everything would be done to correct them and put them back in good shape. As a matter of fact, as the inspectors would do a lot of that, unless the scales were too far out, then we would have the Toledo people come in and rectify and straighten it up. Now, these scales were accurate but not like the modern scales that are predominantly used by the chains of today. They measure right down to the last half ounce. And ours was just plain ounces and pounds, that's all. And of course, each scale had the chart that showed what price to charge, whatever price it was. If it was, say for instance, it was 50 cents, we'd use a 50-cents chart on the scale. It was on a big roller, and this thing would roll around, and we could figure exactly what the thing cost without any trouble at all.

Time=10:23

MC: What did you weigh in the hardware department?

LG: We had nails, and then we had—There was a lot of-- In those days, there was a lot of paint powders that the farmer would use to paint his tools, and the different colors, and we weighed them, and we weighed the nails, and then the horse shoe. We had horseshoes, probably they were sold by weight. We had all kinds of nails, horseshoe nails, regular nails for building homes, and horseshoes. It was interesting because there were very few stores in the Bay Area that carried them. And we had customers come all the way from Palo Alto, San Mateo, and way points to buy horse shoes from us.

MC: That was in the later years?

LG: Yeah. And we sold quite a number of them. We operated with clerks waiting on each customer separately; they would take the order from the customer and then put the order up. It isn't like today where you help yourself and then check out at the cash counter, but we wrote the orders up on regular sales books, and then we filled the order, and then either delivered it or the customer would take it with him. No one waited on themselves, we did all the waiting ourselves. And as far as produce was concerned, we had the full line like fruits, vegetables, oranges, potatoes, everything. It was all shipped in from the market in Oakland. It was a man who was in the vegetable business or the delivery business of vegetables, and he would come up three times, sometimes four times a week, to bring us fresh vegetables. And by fresh vegetables: we had carrots, turnips, beets, and everything in season; potatoes, melons, fruits of all kinds, strawberries, all kinds, berries. And they were all purchased on the produce market in Oakland by this dealer, and he would take orders each day, he would take his orders from all the stores in town, and then he would go on the produce market the next morning and buy up the orders and then deliver them the same morning. It was a job that entailed early rising at two, three o'clock in the morning, and he would be here in Livermore at half past eight with the orders for all the stores.

Time=13:51

MC: You had a coffee grinder and ground coffee for customers.

LG: Yes, of course we carried all the canned coffees. I think we had four brands at the time: Hills Brothers, MJB, Folgers, and Schilling. But we also had coffee in bulk. We'd buy it in hundred-pound bags, and it was a little cheaper than the canned, and we sold a considerable amount of that. And we had a grinder. We'd grind the coffee for the people who purchased it. Some wanted it fine, some wanted it kind of coarse, and there was a graduated scale on the coffee grinder that ground the coffee as you wanted—the style that you wanted it. And we did sell a considerable amount of bulk coffee, what we called bulk coffee. And we had an element—the European element, particularly the Latin people, like the Italians, the French, Spaniards, Greeks—they wanted chicory in their coffee, and we wouldn't mix it for them, but they would buy the chicory. We had the-- It used to come sacks, in hundred-pound sacks, and we had a bin for it, and they would buy a pound or two pounds, or whatever they wanted, and then they'd get it home and mix it with their own coffee that we ground for them. We were a general merchandising store, and we had everything in stock that we could sell. Anything that people were interested in, we would buy and we would stock it. We had a tremendous variety of articles, and so many people would remark when they came in there, how could you find these things, but we knew where everything was and so that was part of the merchandising plan at that particular time.

Time=16:02

MC: Now the things went up to the ceiling, didn't they?

LG: Yes, our shelves went clear up to the floor to the ceiling. And on three sides on the grocery side, we had a traveling ladder that we would get up on the top shelves for, and likewise on the hardware and household utensils. We had them on shelves along the wall, and to get the things on top of the shelves clear up to the ceiling, why we would have these traveling ladders. And on the household side, we had lanterns, we had lamps, we had chimneys, and-- (MC: Kerosene? Did you sell, too?) Kerosene, we sold kerosene. At that particular time, before the advent of gas into the city, we sold a lot of kerosene cook stoves—the Perfection, as they called them in those days. And we had quite a run on kerosene. We sold a lot of kerosene each day because that was the only source of energy to use for cooking. Of course, later on, as gas came in, those commodities kind of faded out of the picture.

Time= 17:30

MC: Could you tell me about your refrigeration? How did you keep things cold?

LG: Well, at first, prior to the advent of mechanical refrigeration, we had what they call ice boxes. We had several of those; I forget how many. And the ice man would come around maybe every other day. There was a bin in these boxes where they kept the ice, and the ice man would come around and check on the amount of ice they needed and kept the portion that held the ice, kept that packed with ice all the time. And then of course, when the advent of mechanical refrigeration, we did away with all of that, and we put in the mechanical refrigerators, meat cases, displays for frozen foods. Frozen foods were just beginning to come in, and so of course they weren't as plentiful as they are

today, but I believe the first frozen foods we had was Birdseye. They had a limited amount of frozen foods, and then of course ice cream came along. We could handle it because of refrigeration. Up to that time, the only way you could handle ice cream was by having ice cream in bulk, because then you could pack them with ice and that kept them frozen overnight, but it wasn't very successful until the advent of mechanical refrigeration.

Time=19:18

MC: What kind of meat did you stock?

LG: Well, we had all cold meats, hams, bologna, various types of sliced meats. We had no fresh meats. Wieners, we did sell a lot of lunch meats, particularly for people that were working that took their lunch. I don't know, we had seven or eight or ten different kinds of meats that we sliced. We had electrical slicers, and we sliced it for them, any which way they wanted. Of course, since then, the advent of packaged meats now that you see in the stores which makes it much handier. But we did all of that. We sliced all of that and weighed it and wrapped it up in nice style and sent it out to the customer.

Time=20:11

MC: What kind of dish patterns did you carry, or dishes?

LG: Well, we had a good pattern. It had a gold—I believe there are some of them still around—it had a gold, 14 kt gold trimming along the dishes and the cups and so forth. (MC: Was that a creamed-colored one?) White. And then it had gold; it was 14kt gold. It was really nice. And then we had a cheaper one that— Everybody couldn't afford the gold; they were quite expensive. And then we had the cheaper for other families that couldn't afford the good ones. And then later on, like everything else advanced, we always kept the good pattern, but then the manufacturers came out with, say sets of six plates, and things like that came in packages, came in regular boxes, and that was very handy, and they were inexpensive so anybody could have them. But the other ones, the one with the gold rim, they were quite expensive. I don't just remember what they were but they were high. And, of course, we had large platters and many of those things. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot those things are in use yet.

Time=21:51

MC: You mentioned that you carried pots and pans.

LG: Yes, we had all types of pots and pans and buckets, and also we had Pyrex ware, which was used quite freely in later years. And we had—it was quite interesting—in the pots and pans, all the pots and pans had covers, and the covers were taken off with a wooden knob, all the covers had wooden knobs. [unclear] I imagine you could find some down at the Holm's place. Of course, the transformation of that has been terrific. It's been your Revere Ware with your brass bottoms, and your Pyrex ware, the opaque and then the clear type, and they were used for baking, for making casserole dishes to be used in the ovens, and they became very popular because they were easy to keep clean. And the pots and pans, most pots and pans were an enamel, baked enamel, and they chipped, and

if you banged them, they would chip, and then maybe in the course of time they would spring a leak. Then we had a commodity there that they used to buy to put in the hole to keep them from leaking. They'd put the—a little round thing about the size of a dime—they put it over the hole and then there would be a little screw that they would screw it on the inside to keep it from leaking. It's a wonders there wasn't more people injured with them because the enamel was baked just like glass, and in the process of cooking they would hit it or bust it off, and it would go into the food. But everybody survived.

Time=24:20

MC: Did you have the old black metal pots and ovens?

LG: Oh, yes, and they are still in use. The fry pans, they're so heavy, though, and so awkward, but they are still in use. You can get them in the stores, and they're very, very expensive, but once you get them hot, they're hot, they stay hot. So, that was good for frying meats.

MC: Well, they also recommend them now because you can get iron from them, so you don't have to take iron tablets if you use the old black-iron cooking utensils. (LG: Oh, really. That's something. I never knew that.)

Time=24:57

MC: What about the window glass and auto glass department?

LG: We had a department of window glass. We had quite a department there. It didn't take up much room because you stand it up on edge, and we had all sizes, from I think 10 x 12 was about the smallest one and then it went up to 44 x 50 or something like that. Of course, then if they got too large, we'd have to order for them because we had no place to keep them, and then we would cut them to size if we had them. And so, then we did a lot of window glass. A lot of people would bring windows in there to repair. We never went out to do repair work, they would have to bring it to us because it's too-- We didn't have the equipment to do that with. Now they'll come right out and put it in for you. There was a lot of glass sold and most of the glass at that particular time was imported from Belgium. For some reason or another, there was very little glass manufactured in the United States, and all our glass that we got came from Belgium. It was distributed by a distributor in the Bay Area, and it was Belgium glass, but later on I think that the American ingenuity got involved, and I think they were producing glass here now of their own and much better glass.

Time=26:23

MC: What about the cleaning supplies? Now we have Cheer and so many different kinds of things. What did women use to scrub with during those days?

LG: Well, the most popular scrubbing powder was Old Dutch Cleanser. Everybody wanted Dutch cleanser and there was hardly anything else sold. We had other ones there but never sold any. And then soap powders for-- They were really made out of, I guess,

tallow or fat, and there'd be trucks come around and pick up the tallow from the restaurants in town here. And the most popular one at that particular time up until the time I left was White King, and that's made by White King Company in Los Angeles. And then the Palmolive people came out with what they call a peach washing powder, and that was about the only thing. And then, of course, when Oxydol, and Vel—I don't know whether there's any Vel on the market now or not—but when Oxydol and Vel came out, that was the first synthetic washing powder. And then, of course, now it's branched off into myriads of things, but in those days that's all there was.

Time=28:03

MC: For a time there, didn't they give dishes or cups?

LG: Yes, they were inside the package. Like, maybe you'd have a—They'd put a bunch so it would keep you buying. So, you get a cup and then you want a saucer, then you might buy ten packages before you get the saucer. And also the cereal people, they came out with a product that had dishes in it, but before you got a set of dishes, you probably have to buy a ton of cereal. Of course, that was all the [women?]. That was clear up to the time of the War. And then they eliminated that, and I don't think they've ever come back to it.

Time=28:53

MC: Did you carry the printed flour sacks?

LG: Yes. Of course, we used to buy all our flour from—well not all of it. We bought flour from Sperry's (Sperry Flour Co.), and we bought-- Oh, there was another one—I think, the Globe A1 Flour—we bought that, and there was a lot of flour bought in those days, particularly amongst the Europeans, and there was a special flour called the La Pina for the Mexican trade. They-- I don't know what there was about it but that was their flour. They wanted La Pina, and we had it. And, of course, then the flour sacks were of very good material, and the people I know-- My mother would take the flour sack—we used to buy flour in hundred-pound bags—and she'd wash them and strip them and then she would make towels out of them, and as a matter of fact is, a lot of the girls' intimates were flour sacks, made by flour sacks. So, I guess that's about it. My mother would make their panties, you know, and things like that out of flour sacks.

Time= 30:32

MC: Now, you used to do some advertising?

LG: We had an advertising. It wasn't too much done, but actually it was just advertising to show the people we were in business and where we were located, that's all. There was no specials or anything like that. The ad would probably be about six by four, about that big. (MC: In the *Herald*?) Yeah, in the *Herald*, and then they had the *Livermore Echo*. You don't remember the *Echo*, do you? We had an ad running in there all the time, every week, never ever change, always the same format.

Time=31:17

MC: You belonged to the unions.

LG: Yeah, we belonged to the same union that is in operation today with all the grocery stores and drugstores and whatnot. Everybody was under the same contract. And that was about all. (MC: United Grocers?) Yeah, United Grocers was a buying organization.

Recording ended at: 31:42.

Note: This recording had numerous stops and starts.

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