

To New York — For Religious Purposes

An interview with Angelo Charles Signorelli

Conducted by Linda Jones

My grandfather, Joseph Signorelli, brought his family from Italy via Minnesota, where my father, Charles Signorelli was born, to San Francisco. The family eventually settled in Sonoma on their own ranch and vineyard. The following story took place on the ranch, when my father was 22. (Note: The interview was conducted in 1963 and collected in the papers of the late Sonoma State professor Hector Lee.)

It was during Prohibition in the early fall of 1928. The rains came early that fall. Too early — for the grapes were still on the vines. We were only allowed to make 200 gallons of wine for the family. The rest of the grapes were sent to a bonded winery.

Our outlet was in New York. Supposedly the wine was for use in religious ceremonies. (They sure must have had a lot of religion in New York.) Pa Joe [Joseph Signorelli] and I knew the grapes would spoil before they ever reached their destination. And what winery would buy them then? Our whole crop, a year's work and wages, would be gone. It was then that Pa Joe decided we would become a bonded winery. Make the wine now and apply for a bond later.

During Prohibition, a new winery must first be bonded and identify its outlet market before it could go into

production. Realizing how difficult it would be to get a bond, Pa Joe went ahead illegally and crushed the grapes, making 10,000 gallons of wine.

After all the wine was made, we went to the Internal Revenue office to apply for a bond. I can remember filling out the forms for Pa Joe. The sheet of instructions asked us to locate the "winery" in relation to the closest known survey monu-

A county official told Pa Joe that for \$200 we could forget our little problem.

ment and to give the exact dimensions of the structure including all niches, nooks, and crannies. We could see that these forms were not made with our basement in mind as a winery.

But I was going to do my best to meet each and every specification. The man in charge of the office severely criticized us for our very unorthodox way of going about getting a bond and doubted that he would be able to help us.

After a couple of months of making out forms, rewriting rejected specifications, and visiting government officials, it became obvious to us that we were in for a shake-down — in fact, the amount of money was even mentioned. A certain county official told Pa Joe that for \$200 we could forget about our little problem, and he would have everything taken care of. However, Pa Joe did not believe in parting with his money — particularly where corrupt officials were concerned.

When the latest application was again returned to us with certain

specifications marked "inaccurate" and "incorrect" and with no further explanation, I was through with the whole burlesque. I put the complete file representing several months' work into a large envelope and addressed it to: "The President of the United States of America, Washington, D.C., U.S.A."

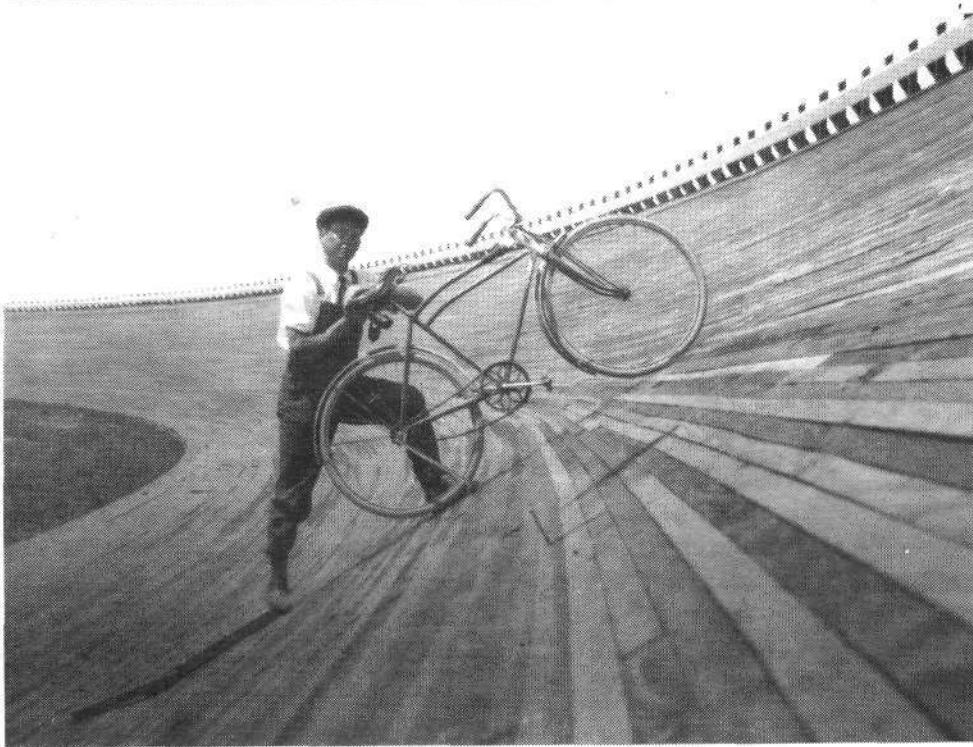
A letter enclosed suggested that if the plank in his [Herbert Hoover's] campaign with regard to aid to the farmers was sincere, this was his opportunity to prove it. And if the bureaucrats had told us how we had failed to answer their questions rather than telling us we were wrong, we could have supplied all necessary information. It would have taken a lawyer to interpret those forms.

Within two weeks we received a letter from the President's secretary acknowledging our letter. He informed us our file had been sent to the San Francisco Office of Internal Revenue and that an official from that office would soon call on us. Within another two weeks an official of that office did stop by and assured us that our bond would be issued.

Not very long after we were told our bond would be issued, our "friend" from Santa Rosa dropped by to help — that is, to help himself to \$200. Upon hearing the happy tidings concerning our bond, he left wishing us luck.

A few days later, Pa Joe received a postcard in the mail, supposedly from the federal court in Sacramento, accusing him of running a disorderly place. The very next day the same "friend" called at the house to find out what was new. He was obviously shocked to find that nothing was new.

Someone else in the neighborhood received one of the postcards
see *First Person*, page 15



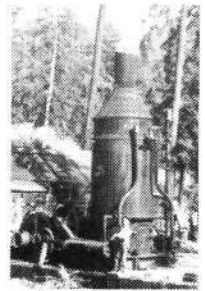
Two more photos of the Cotati Speedway turned up after our previous issue went to press. The top photo gives an impression of how tilted the track was. The lower one provides a close-up look at the wood used to build the track: 2X3's laid on edge. The track was built in 1921 and torn down in 1922, after only two racing seasons. Some of the wood from the track is now in the floor of Cotati's Redwood Cafe. Photos courtesy Harry Lapham.



Sturgeon's Sawmill History & Steam in the California Redwoods

This videotape produced by Oso Publishing was the Winner of the SCHS 2002 Editor's Award

This lively documentary, shot by filmmaker Boone Morrison, shows the history of Sturgeon's



Mill on Green Hill Rd. and features interviews with mill founders Ralph Sturgeon and Jim Henningsen. It explains the work of the Sturgeon's Mill Restoration Project, which returned the mill to running condition, and includes rare 1928 film footage of Ralph and Jim running their operation.

The SCHS has a limited number of videotapes for sale for \$25, including tax. Call Harry Lapham at 707-539-1786 if you wish to purchase a tape.

First Person from page 14

and came to Pa Joe. The neighbor told Pa Joe that he knew Mr. M____ could fix everything for them for \$200. Pa Joe in turn told him he was a sucker. We were later told that that this conversation was related to the

slightly miffed Mr. M____, but we had no more trouble from him.

Pa Joe thought it might be wise to send someone to Sacramento to check out this suspicious postcard. Since the court date and hour of the hearing were noted on the card, it

would not be hard to verify its authenticity. We found, as we had expected, the epistle was a fraud.

Our wine was sold to a local winery which in turn sold it to the New York market — to be used for religious purposes, of course.