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**Anne T. Kent California Room**

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**INTERVIEW WITH RALPH GROSSI**  
by Carla Ehat & Genevieve Martinelli  
September 22, 1982

**INTERVIEWEE:** Ralph Grossi (RG)  
**INTERVIEWERS:** Carla Ehat (CE) and Genevieve Martinelli (GM)  
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**TRANSCRIBER:** Marjorie Hoffman

**CE:** Today is Wednesday, September 22, 1982. Continuing our oral history project for the Anne Kent California Room, Mrs. Martinelli and I are out in Novato in a most beautiful setting at the dairy farm of Mr. Ralph Grossi. He is a young man, about thirty three, Ralph?

**RG:** Correct.

**CE:** And he and his family have been in the dairy farming business since 1896. He is going to share with us today a little bit of the history of what brought his family to Marin County from Switzerland and the growth and involvement of this most successful farm. It is known in Marin as the Marindale Dairy, has approximately three hundred Holstein cows on about nine hundred acres, and it holds an enviable reputation in Northern California. Ralph, it's very kind of you to have us here today. I've interviewed quite a few ranchers over the last eight years and I'm surprised how many Swiss there are. Where do all these Swiss come from? I mean, what brought them to Marin? Do you have any idea on that?

**RG:** Well that's a long time ago and it's hard to understand what brings people to another country. But it's not atypical for a group of people to come from a country and all settle in a given area. And I suspect the lure of California brought them to the Bay Area, but the hills and scenery of Marin County may have been very familiar to them having come from Switzerland. So it could be that they just felt quite at home coming here and so that was one adjustment that didn't have to

- be made, so they took a liking quickly to the scenery and rolling hills of Marin County.
- CE: It is interesting to me, no matter if you talk to a family of Portuguese, Italian, French heritage, each of them always says that it just looks like home. So I think in a way Marin must be kind of a microcosm of Europe, don't you agree?
- RG: That's probably true. In addition, though, Marin had a tremendously large dairy industry supplying dairy products to the city of San Francisco. At that time there were approximately three hundred dairies in Marin County around the turn of the century, if not more. And having come from a dairy background in Switzerland, that also, you know, that might have been an additional incentive to stay in the area.
- CE: I remember interviewing Nellie McIsaac and she said her father sort of ran an unofficial Swiss consulate on their farm. He'd write home to Switzerland and somebody would need a hand here or there and they'd stay at the house.
- RG: Yes, it's interesting, those families, how well they've, how they have stayed here over the years. The McIsaac family, the younger members of the McIsaac family, is one of the, two of the outstanding dairies in the county right now.
- CE: Would you estimate how many dairy farms are functioning today, as opposed to the turn of the century?
- RG: Well, there are still about sixty five dairies operating in Marin. Probably milking more cows today than they were seventy or eighty years ago.
- CE: Do you attribute that to the invention of the milking machines?
- RG: Well that in great part. It certainly helps to milk cows with machines rather than by hand I'm sure, although I don't remember the hand milking days. And like other businesses, the economy of scale is important and you have to be a little larger to make a living because there's less margin to work on.
- CE: That's true. Well tell us a little – I understand from Mrs. Martinelli, driving out here, that your father, James, is one of eleven children?
- RG: That's right.
- CE: Your grandfather who came from Switzerland, give us his name again. Domingo, is it?
- RG: Domingo.
- CE: And his wife, your grandmother, was?
- RG: Teresa.
- CE: Domingo. Large families, of course, were never unusual at the turn of the century, but that's quite an extraordinary thing, and all are living?
- RG: Yes, all but one of the youngest children died when she was three years old in an accident. So, the ten that were raised are all still living and very interestingly, all of them within about twenty miles of the home place here. And all of them eventually either went into the dairy business or were involved in some way in the dairy business.
- CE: Ralph, with the creation of the Golden Gate National Recreational Area and also the Point Reyes National Seashore some sixty thousand plus thirty thousand acres were lost in a sense, how did this affect you?
- RG: Well it had a substantial impact on our family because the Grossi family had a number of ranches in Marin operating dairies and some of those were in the area

that was purchased by the Federal Government for the Point Reyes National Seashore. I have an aunt, two uncles and a cousin which all had operating dairies in the Point Reyes Seashore. Of course, they no longer own the land because the Park Service bought it from them, but they do continue to operate ranches within the Park.

CE: Do they take a leasehold back, or what is it?

RG: They have a leasehold interest.

CE: I see. For their lifetime perhaps?

RG: No, only for twenty years from the date of the sale. So, they now have about ten years left on their leases. So there's some concern within the community as to what will happen to those leases in ten years.

CE: Could they not be renewed? Because it seems to me the working ranches preserve the land for the park system.

RG: Critically important.

CE: Terribly important, isn't it?

RG: That the ranches in the park continue to operate and function as ranches for two or three reasons. One is of course it's important to the social economic structure of the farm community. We need to have a certain number of operating ranches to maintain the kind of base that you need, the number of operating dairies, so that we have our support facilities, our feed mills and so forth staying in business. But, in addition, out there on the Point Reyes Seashore there is a lot of brushy undergrowth that takes over on those ranches if they're not cared for and grazed properly. And that's happened in other parts of the park that are not grazed, particularly down in the Limantour area, where they are no longer accessible even by horse because of the growth.

CE: So what good is that, if the public can't get in there?

RG: That's right. So, keeping them in agriculture in production is important and I hope that the families who have been the guardians of that land for the last forty or fifty years would have the opportunity to continue to be guardians.

CE: Well if this is brought to the attention of legislators –

RG: Well, you hate to blame everything on politics, but that will be probably a political issue. It'll depend a lot on what particular administration is in power at the time and their particular feelings about use of publicly owned lands; whether the public has a more critical need to use the land, or private enterprise, and that will be something that will come up over the next few years.

CE: Well, is some groundwork being laid now, to your knowledge?

RG: I think there's a little work being done. This is a good time to do it. The Reagan Administration is very much concerned with utilizing parklands to their highest productive use, and so this is a good time to be discussing that.

CE: Well, I should think that the conservationists, including the Sierra Club, would take a realistic approach. It's going to have to be a re-education.

RG: We have had outstanding support in the county from the conservation environmental community. Going back to the early seventies when the West Marin area was down-zoned to sixty acre minimum parcel size, wasn't a particularly popular move with the ranchers because they saw their value going out the window. But, the environmental groups, conservation groups followed up

- by showing a great deal of support for continued agriculture, not just for protecting open space but for continued agriculture. And they've supported us in milk price hearings in Sacramento; they supported us in getting our pollution-control facilities built during the drought when we had to haul water. So we've developed a very good working relationship with these environmental groups and they clearly understand the need to protect agriculture, and so we expect support from them.
- CE: And you, I understand, have spoken to these groups and have addressed the problem frequently. How can the public help you in this effort? Just to be educated?
- RG: Well, education is critical. We refer to the rest of Marin as the people over the hill, on the eastern and southern part of the county. But we try to get over there as often as we can, talking to service groups and different organizations to let them know what's out here and what our real concerns are. And we have also, as you know, formed a land trust which hopes to bring together the support of the public with the agricultural community to try to protect agricultural land over a long period, in perpetuity in fact.
- CE: Well I notice by this press coverage you received this spring over your digester that there is a considerable group of people totally unaware that these wonderful things, innovative things, are going on. So you are not adverse then to showing the people from the other side of the hill what a real dairy farm is. And it might require a little more of that PR.
- RG: We've instigated a program within the Farm Bureau where once a year we have what we call "Farm Day" and we invite people to come out and tour one or two ranches and each year we try to move around to different kinds of farming enterprises. And have lunch with us and talk about various issues that are facing us and we've been doing that for about four years now and it's been highly successful. We've had a hundred to a hundred and fifty people come out from East Marin and that's been a really good way of communicating with our urban neighbors.
- CE: Very good. I see one of your youngsters has just walked in the room and is sitting on her Daddy's lap. Who is this?
- RG: This is Erin. Erin is waiting to go to kindergarten. She goes to the old one room school just up the road here, the Lincoln School.
- CE: And we've just had the pleasure of meeting your wife, Judy, and your other daughter is at school?
- RG: Amy, yes.
- CE: Ralph, let's get back to your family a minute now. Tell us a little bit more about your background and your father's generation, James and his brothers.
- RG: Well, when my grandfather came here, he worked in the dairy community, worked out at Olema and out on the Pierce Point Ranch as a cheese maker when he first arrived here. He made cheese that was shipped across Tomales Bay and then into San Francisco by rail. Some time in the early 1900s – 1905 or 1906, in that range – he bought into a partnership on a dairy and at some point after that, within the next five or six years, he was able to buy his partner out and move his small dairy to what is now the Ryan Ranch, where Stafford Lake is, Stafford Lake

and the Indian Valley Golf Course. And had the dairy there for a few years and my father was born there in 1912, at the Ryan Ranch. And when my Dad was six years old, they moved to this property here on Novato Boulevard and that was in – I guess when he was five, that was in 1917. And established the dairy here in a partnership with the Corda family, and –

CE: They have a ranch across the road?

RG: And they now have – In fact, this was one ranch, almost a two thousand acre ranch. And as their individual families grew they split the two ranches, each having their own dairy here about three quarters of a mile apart. And so the family developed primarily here on the ranch that we're on today. During the depression years and early war years, around the thirties and forties, as the children grew up, all ten of them, they started to purchase some additional property so that the family could branch out and form other dairies. So eventually the family ended up with a number of ranches in Marin, but it just happened that my father was the last one to be left on the ranch, so he was here on the home place, and so we had the opportunity to in fact live in my grandfather's house for a number of years.

CE: And that is the home just up the road here?

RG: It's just up the road here, yes.

CE: You mentioned your father, James. What is your mother's name?

RG: Rose Halter was her maiden name, and she was from a family that had a poultry farm up in Penngrove. Her parents had moved here from Switzerland to the Hollister area where she was born and then to Penngrove shortly thereafter.

CE: We want to get in shortly to what life is like on a ranch. What is your earliest recollection, Ralph, growing up on the home place here? Did you, as soon as you were tall enough, strong enough, get out and do the chores?

RG: Oh yes. I think probably when we were four or five years old you start being allowed to go out around the barn with dad you know, following him around, so I can remember some of that. I think probably when we were about seven or eight years old we got our first chores to do, feeding some calves or taking care of some small livestock.

CE: Well is that just yourself? Do you have a brother?

RG: I have two brothers and a sister.

CE: So there's three.

RG: My own immediate family is an older brother, Jim Junior, who is a civil engineer and works in Fairfield. My younger brother is Ed who manages our hay farming operation over in Rohnert Park. And I have a sister Beverly.

CE: And the hay is to supplement the feeding for your stock?

RG: We feed some of the hay that we grow over there here at the dairy and then he sells quite a bit to other dairies around the Marin and Sonoma County area. The operation today is a partnership between my younger brother and my father and I.

CE: Who gave it the name Marindale, your Dad?

RG: Oh I don't remember how it came about. About twenty years ago or so we thought the place ought to have some identity. Partly because we were beginning to get into the breeding cattle business, the sale of registered cattle, of which

about a third of our herd is today. And so you need some kind of an identity for your own operation so that people remember the cattle that came out of your herd.

CE: I see. Where did you have your schooling, locally?

RG: Well I went to Petaluma High School partly because they have an outstanding vocational agriculture program at the high school level there. And then I got a Bachelor of Science degree at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

CE: Cal Poly, famous for agriculture.

RG: It's a wonderful school. I'm prejudiced but I think it's a wonderful school.

CE: And then you came home. Of course, in the summer you were part of the establishment. Now there are only three boys. Your father must have had other help?

RG: Yes.

CE: Did you have difficulty finding help as many ranchers told me?

RG: Finding good, competent help is difficult, and I suppose it is difficult in any business but probably more so in the dairy business because of the nature of the work. There's difficult hours. You don't get off on Friday night and come back on Monday morning. You work weekends. You work holidays. You try to trade the work around a little bit so that people can be off on weekends and so forth, trade the holidays and so forth. But still, the milking starts at two o'clock in the morning and there aren't a lot of people who like those kinds of hours and so we have a difficult time getting good competent help.

CE: Any particular nationality come to the fore to help you?

RG: Well it's interesting because over the years that has changed a little bit.

CE: Has it?

RG: Yes. Currently the most predominant workers in the dairies in this area are Mexican-Americans. Many of whom have come here to make money to send back to their families in Mexico, so they're interested in working and working hard and –

CE: What is your responsibility to them? You have to house them?

RG: Oh yes, we have to provide housing particularly because of the housing situation here in Marin, the outrageous cost of housing. We provide housing and give them other amenities, of course an insurance plan, beef and milk and a lot of other little things. We try to make them feel as much at home as possible.

CE: Have some of these men stayed with you over the years?

RG: Yes, currently we have two men that have been here three years or more and a couple of others that have been here about a year and a half. So generally they'll stay anywhere from one to five years.

CE: What minimum do you require now in staffing in order to function?

RG: A minimum is really four employees. We like to have five on hand at all times to make sure we can cover all the bases.

CE: And are you involved daily in this whole operation yourself, I presume?

RG: Yes.

CE: And the reason we're doing this at this hour of the day, you have completed your chores, from two a.m. –

RG: Yes. We complete the morning work around seven thirty or eight.

CE: When do you sleep? In between?

RG: Well I try not to have to get up every morning at two o'clock. If the men who have that morning shift are on time and nothing goes wrong, then the rest of us don't have to get up until later in the morning, say five or six o'clock.

CE: Okay, now, let's get back to sort of a typical day. You have the cattle that are all over these hills I presume?

RG: Yes.

CE: And what do you have to do first? Do they automatically come in to be relieved of milk, or do you have to go get them?

RG: Of course the dairy industry has changed a lot over the years. The cattle that are actually milked, except in the spring months, don't go out of the immediate barn area. They're kept in close and are fed high energy feed, high protein feeds, and they get maximum milk production. Except in the spring months when the pasture is green and then they can go up in the hills. So, about quarter to two in the morning the first two men get up, get the cows into the milking area and start milking. The third man gets up around four o'clock to assist them and to do some of the feeding and the rest of us get up between five and six and help finish up the morning chores, the rest of the feeding and the health work and so forth.

CE: I'm curious, I don't know how large your milking shed is, but if you have a herd of three hundred, they all can't go in there at once. It's a series of shifts, is it?

RG: That's right.

CE: How many do you do at a shift, for instance?

RG: Well we bring in about a hundred and fifty cows into the milking barn. We only have eight machines, so they're only milking eight at a time. But they can move through them very quickly and that's what the other men are assigned to help with.

CE: Now these cows as I understand it all have identification by number?

RG: Yes. The dairy industry has really evolved considerably over the years.

CE: You don't call them by name: Dear Old Bess, or something?

RG: A few of them have names, but they all have a number and they have a number that is specific to that individual cow nationwide. They have a number that no other cow in the nation can have. Every cow that's on a dairy herd is part of the Improvement Association Program. And all of our production records, our health records for our herd are sent in to a computer center in Provo, Utah. And that information – Various kinds of management information is sent back to us each month to utilize here at the dairy. But, additionally, all that information is sent to the USDA in Beltsville, Maryland where they summarize the information for us.

CE: It's all fed into the computer, I presume, and comes back.

RG: Yes.

CE: Is it a fair question to ask you, how much milk does a good Holstein cow produce? I know it must vary.

RG: Our herd averages about seven gallons per day for the year. A good cow at her peak production will give fifteen gallons of milk a day.

CE: You have a holding tank where all of this wonderful milk is put. Is that aluminum, stainless steel?

RG: Stainless steel, a two thousand gallon stainless steel tank.

CE: Now, once a day that has to be drawn from that by –

RG: We belong to a co-operative, a marketing co-operative, that brings a truck by once a day in the evening and picks up our milk supply for the day. It is usually about eighteen hundred to two thousand gallons of milk per day that we ship out of here.

CE: Now if you – I understand cows have to be milked twice a day?

RG: At least twice a day.

CE: Okay, so if you start at two a.m., then do you wait until what?

RG: Two in the afternoon. So our milking hours are from two to six, morning and evening.

CE: Seven days a week.

RG: Some dairies have gone to milking three times a day now and so they would milk at two and again at ten and again at six.

CE: What's the advantage of that?

RG: The advantages are they give more milk if you milk them more often. In fact they'll give about fifteen percent more milk, total. However there is a big debate over whether or not that additional milk makes up for the additional labor that's required to milk them that extra time. So it's a controversy within the community.

CE: In your judgment is the Holstein the quality cow from which you get the milk that you want?

RG: Well, it depends on individual taste and the consumer taste today is for low fat milk and the Holstein produces a low fat, high solids milk, so that's the one that's most in demand. And we have all Holsteins and yes, I prefer the Holsteins.

CE: After milking the cows do they just go all over or do they stay –

RG: We have – For a number of reasons, we built housing sheds for them over the last ten years; partly because the water quality control board requires you to contain the waste from the cows from getting into the stream. So all the milking cows have what we call free stall barns that they can go into. They each have a four by eight cubical that they can lie down in at their own wish or they can get up and walk to the feed trucks. So they're kept in those barns most of the time except –

CE: Then they don't get out to pasture?

RG: Not at this time of the year.

CE: Back in the spring?

RG: Yes. They have an exercise corral that we let them out into in the mornings to just walk around and get some exercise. But, in the spring of the year, they go out to pasture and pasture in the hills.

CE: Of course, that is when the grass is there too.

RG: And that's a very important part of dairying in Marin County, because the pasture that grows in these hills is, for one thing, very good pasture. It's among the best in the state in terms of native pasture and it's relatively low cost to us and so it helps us make up the difference in having to bring in feed from the San Joaquin Valley and the Sacramento Valley the rest of the year.

CE: Well you have to do supplemental feeding then.

RG: Yes.

CE: Hay and alfalfa, you use?

RG: Alfalfa hay.

CE: That's not cheap today, is it?

RG: No, it's extremely expensive.

CE: What's alfalfa, over a hundred dollars a ton?

RG: Yes, a hundred and twenty five to thirty dollars a ton today. We do grow some silage that we make from oats, clover and vetch and rye, that we ensile and ferment. We put that in a big pit and that's grown by my brother over at the other hay farm. In addition, we buy a tremendous amount of corn, of barley, and protein supplement for the herd.

CE: When is this, these goodies, so to speak, given to the cows? When they're feeding, being milked I mean?

RG: They get fed about seven times a day. They get fed when they're being milked, they get rolled grains, usually barley and corn. Right after they're milked they get some alfalfa hay. A little later on they'll get some silage with some more grain mixed in with it. So we try to feed them approximately every four hours, three to four hours, so they can have the maximum intake and give the maximum amount of milk.

CE: I have a concept, it's probably erroneous, of somebody on a horse going over the hills rounding up the cows.

RG: Oh that's not erroneous. It still happens.

CE: In the spring?

RG: In the spring it happens for all the milking herd. Every afternoon someone has to get on a horse and go and round up the cows for milking. That's kind of the romantic part of dairying-past, really, but it still occurs in the spring of the year. And of course in addition to the three hundred milk cows, we raise all our own replacements, all the heifer calves that are born are raised here.

CE: That's what I want to get into. I know that you're involved in breeding and though I don't know much about cows, I know they have to calve in order to continue to give milk. Then you're trying to improve your stock and get into registered cattle, I understand.

RG: Yes. One of the biggest areas of gain in the dairy business in the last ten or fifteen years has been in the area of genetic improvement. Because of the computer system I described earlier where all the information is sent to USDA in Maryland, they're able to tell us which bulls are siring the daughters that are giving the most milk. And so they summarize that for us twice a year and so then we can go to the various breeding organizations and buy semen from those bulls and use in our herd so we can make rapid improvement. And so through artificial insemination we've been able to make tremendously rapid improvement in the genetics of the herd.

CE: Do you have any bulls of your own?

RG: We do. We are into the breeding business to the point that we have been selling some bulls to other dairymen and to some of the breeding organizations.

CE: A naïve question, Ralph: what do you do with the male calves? Are they of any value to you?

RG: Only the ones of the superior cows; those are raised for breeding stock or for sale to other dairymen for breeding stock. The rest of the male calves are sold to other

ranchers in the area that are in the veal business, and those calves are raised for veal or beef.

CE: Good. Well, I think we should touch on a subject which kind of drew my attention to you Ralph and that is the subject of your digester. And I notice this spring you received quite a great deal of press coverage concerning this innovative means of converting cow manure into power. Would you explain it to us in its simplest terms? How is this done? And how is the PG&E involved in it?

RG: The concept of methane production is nothing new in terms of the concept and even the development of methane production. Other countries in the world have done a lot more than we have here in the United States. Probably because the energy costs in those countries are higher. In China and India they've been doing it for a great number of years. But here in the United States we've had relatively cheap energy until the last ten years and so there was no need to explore these other concepts. Our energy bill was beginning to go up rapidly on our dairy, and I read about some work that was done at Cornell University regarding the extraction of methane from cow manure. So I followed that for some time and then we came across a group here in the county that was interested in doing a project, basically a pilot research project. They were able to get some initial funding from the San Francisco Foundation to help research the project. We visited a dairy that had a successful project on the East Coast. There weren't any here on the West Coast yet. And so we began to design a system and built it and put it into production last fall. Basically what it does is this, because of the containment of the cows we're collecting a great deal of manure anyhow each day. What we were doing with it is putting it in a large pit and using it for fertilizer in the summer months. Now we scrape all this manure into a tank and mix it up and then pump it into this anaerobic digester which basically is a big hole in the ground with insulation around it like a long trench.

CE: How big is this hole?

RG: It holds a hundred thousand gallons of cow manure.

CE: It's bigger than a breadbox.

RG: We have about five thousand gallons a day from the herd and so it takes twenty days to fill it up. Picture it as a long trench in the ground and then each day we pump in a daily supply of manure into one end of the trench and take an equal amount out at the other end. While it goes down this trench, the trench is covered by a balloon-like cover, it looks very much like a swimming pool cover. As it goes down this trench the manure is heated to ninety five degrees and then the bacteria that are in there digest a lot of the nutrients that are left in the cow manure that the cow did not digest. Those bacteria give off methane gas. The gas comes to the surface and we pipe the gas into an engine and the engine runs twenty one hours a day and turns a generator. The electricity we produce is sold to PG&E.

CE: To supplement the needs of the community.

RG: We sell enough currently for approximately sixty homes, average use, from the three hundred cows daily production.

CE: And this will be a continuous operation as long as you have the dairy and the input of the cows.

- RG: Yes. We see it as a significant part of our income down the road as energy costs become greater and greater.
- CE: What are basically your energy needs? You have to provide electricity naturally for the milking machines, and heat?
- RG: Some heat. Mostly refrigeration, milk pumps, vacuum pumps, and creating the vacuum for the milking process, and light. Those are our electrical needs. Then of course we have a great demand for hot water because of the sanitation necessary. We hope to capture heat from the engine that turns the generator to provide our hot water and also maybe even supply some space heating for our houses here on the dairy.
- CE: Would you touch on the subject – Mrs. Martinelli was telling me on the drive out that not too long ago, maybe within this decade, that many regulations were made to stop the manure from getting into the streams. And some farmers and dairymen could not come up with the necessary means to accomplish this and they had to give up their dairies.
- RG: In the early seventies, a bill was passed that many people are familiar with, the Clean Water Act. And the Regional Water Quality Control Board had the task of making sure that a lot of pollutants didn't get into the streams. Well if you understand the evolution of the dairy industry, and this was before there was concern about the environment, before people realized that putting waste products into the stream was a harmful, particularly organic waste products. Many of the dairies were built right next to a stream, for a number of reasons. One of which was the water supply being close to the dairy and the other was an easy way of cleaning using the stream as a flush system. Those dairies that were right near streams had a very difficult time constructing the facilities to keep that manure out of the stream. A number of those went out of business in the early and mid-seventies and that was unfortunate but it was one of those things. People decided, we all decided, that the environment is a concern of ours and we need to clean it up. And it was unfortunate some of those had to go out of business because they couldn't afford the cost, which was substantial, to put in the facilities to collect all the manure.
- CE: Well that's an interim step between a digester. So what sort of a facility are you talking about? Some kind of a concrete compound that –
- RG: Well it depended on the dairy. Some dairies, the smaller dairies, got by with just putting an earthen berm around the dairy and collecting all the runoff during the winter, storing it in a large pond. That was relatively inexpensive. Inexpensive meaning maybe twenty or thirty thousand dollars. And then some of the larger dairies like ours and a number of the others –
- CE: What did you do to relieve that problem?
- RG: We had to put in what are called free stall barns, where we could confine the cattle during the winter months inside barns and collect all the waste in pits and on a three hundred cow dairy they cost anywhere from fifty to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. So that was a substantial expense.
- CE: Ultimately what happened to that residue?
- RG: Well ultimately it becomes fertilizer when it collects so it can be used. That happened to be an interim step as you say to the development of this digester

- industry. Now that we have a collection system in place and are collecting all this manure, the logical thing then is to utilize it to its highest value. And its highest value appears to be producing gas and making electricity. Because, after it's been through the digester to produce the gas, it is an even better fertilizer coming out than when it went in, and so we still have the fertilizer value left and in the meantime we've gotten off a considerable amount of energy.
- CE: Does the average dairyman today know that he has available no interest money from some source to borrow to do these improvements?
- RG: They're aware of the interest free or low interest loans that are available. Unfortunately, they are loans and it still means they'll have to be paid back at some point and a digester today costs about a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. So it's still a tremendous capital investment for a dairy.
- CE: So yours is the first in this County?
- RG: Ours was the first west of the Mississippi.
- CE: Have all the other dairymen been to see your operation?
- RG: Quite a lot of dairymen have been here and there's a great deal of interest. In fact, when we completed ours nine months ago, there have now been five more built here in Northern California.
- CE: Any more in Marin though?
- RG: Not yet. I would expect within the next three or four years we're going to see probably hundreds of digesters in California. We were fortunate enough to have the support of the San Francisco Foundation to cover what we call research and development costs, the study part. So this digester of ours, even though we have to pay the construction cost, is an ongoing research project and so every day we're learning something about future digesters.
- CE: Was your father excited about this?
- RG: Well he was excited, but a little apprehensive, too, wondering what I was getting us into.
- CE: Well, it's your generation, of course, and with your education and exposure you're moving toward the future and that's wonderful. Let's move on a minute to the Marin County Farm Bureau. I understand, Ralph, you are past president. What is the function of the Marin County Farm Bureau? How do they serve you?
- RG: The Farm Bureau is a co-operative service organization. Each has an affiliate to a state wide organization, the California Farm Bureau Federation, which is an affiliate itself to the national organization headquartered in Illinois. The function, really, of the Farm Bureau is to try to represent as a group of farmers our mutual concerns. They may be legislative issues that may come up; it may be issues here in the county that have to do with planning, land use. They may actually be issues of production nature. Originally the Farm Bureau was involved in the milk testing program, providing a service to the ranchers in the county. Maybe even bringing in at times expert speakers, seminars and so forth to assist the community.
- CE: To bring the farmers up-to-date with what's going on in your field.
- RG: Yes.
- CE: Then it's been a most beneficial thing?

RG: It's been an outstanding program here in the county, I believe. We've had active participation from the agriculturists and it goes back many years to when Al Bianchi, a dairyman from Pt. Reyes, was the president for many years. He built the foundation within the Farm Bureau. Some of the leaders of the county were strong Farm Bureau members who helped build this service organization for Agriculture.

CE: You mentioned earlier that sixty percent of the Bay Area's milk comes from Marin County and Sonoma, is that true?

RG: Yes.

CE: What is the tie-up with Sonoma? Is that where the milk is processed?

RG: We have a very important inner relationship with Sonoma County in our agricultural community. We have about sixty-five dairies here and there are another hundred or hundred and twenty five in Sonoma County. Many of the support facilities that we require, the feed mills, the milk processing plants and so forth are located in Sonoma County. So are many of the lending institutions that are active in the agricultural community. We have some feed mills and dairy supply hardware stores, and so forth, here in Marin, but many of them are over in Petaluma and Santa Rosa. So it is important to us that agriculture thrives in Sonoma County, too, because that's where a great deal of our –

CE: I understand from other ranchers that when you go shopping, people don't come into San Rafael. They go up to Petaluma. And you have a closer compatibility with Sonoma than perhaps over the hill people.

CE: Well particularly as you get farther out into West Marin, because it's actually closer to Petaluma than it is to come in to San Rafael or Novato.

CE: That's true. What is the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, MALT, as you called it? Is this a recent creation?

RG: It is very much a recent creation.

CE: Is this a spin-off of the Marin County Farm Bureau?

RG: Well the Farm Bureau was important in getting the Land Trust started. During the mid- to late seventies there was a growing concern about the future of agricultural land in Marin County. As you know, there is a great deal of pressure to build houses because –

CE: Developers all the time.

RG: It's a great place to live and everybody wants to live here. Unfortunately everybody – If everybody is allowed to live here that wants to, it won't be a great place to live. That's an unfortunate situation but that's what happens.

CE: And it can't all be park land. There's enough park land.

RG: That's right. I think the government is pretty much done with buying park land in Marin County. A third of the county is now in parks. The money is running out, too. So we have in the agricultural community we have this concern about protecting enough land so that we have the land necessary to support the dairy and beef and sheep business that go on in the county. So we tried to develop a different system for protecting land. We're not real satisfied with the political method, meaning zoning and county boards of supervisors, because as you know on any given day three votes changes your zoning. And so you could be going along just great for a few years and then the political nature of the county changes

and we're in trouble. So we wanted to move away from that political area in trying to protect agricultural land. We knew that the government wasn't going to come in and buy any more and so we had to develop a program to try to protect the land and yet try to be equitable and fair to the land owners. A great deal of work has been done in open space protection in parts of the country with land trusts. Trusts for Public Land is one of those that's done a lot of work. Nature Conservancy is another. And our concept was to try to use those techniques that they used and apply them to agricultural land. And so the Farm Bureau and two of the environmental organizations got together, made an application to the San Francisco Foundation for some initial funding to set up the Marin Agricultural Land Trust. The Land Trust has members of the agricultural community, members of the business, and environmental community on the eleven member Board of Directors.

CE: You are a non-profit, incorporated –

RG: It is a non-profit, private corporation, tax exempt corporation. So one of the things the Land Trust, as a trust, can do is accept donations of easements. In effect, if a land owner wants to give away his rights to develop his property and keep it protected for agriculture only –

CE: He can do that?

RG: He can give away the development value thereby putting an easement over the property much like an open space easement but it's a conservation easement that we put over the property. And take a tax deduction from his federal income tax for the value of that donation, donating it to the private non-profit organization which the Land Trust is. And so to some land owners at least, he can still protect his land and still recapture some of the value through the tax benefits of the donation. Unfortunately, a lot of the ranchers aren't in the tax bracket that really, that makes any sense to them.

CE: It doesn't benefit –

RG: That's right. It's just not enough benefit there. So we had to go, try to go a little farther and develop other techniques. The next, obviously, would be to try to raise enough money to buy these easements. And there's good reason for that. We believe we can buy easements over property for less than half the value of the property and thereby protect it in perpetuity very much like the park does with land, without having to pay as much for it. And keeping it in private ownership, which we think would mean there would be a better custodian for the land. Knowing that the rancher knowing that he still owns the property that he's operating on. And so, we are making an attempt at least to raise large sums of money to purchase easements from properties that are either endangered from possible development within the agricultural community or in situations where a family has a critical tax, estate tax problem; where they need to raise some cash to pay the taxes so they can hold onto the farm. So, if we can purchase that easement from them. Sure, they give up their development rights, but they come up with the cash, the capital they need, to pay the taxes and keep the ranch and it goes on in the family to the next generation. So that would be the second thing the land trust is doing, and in fact, we have a fund raising committee that is now

trying to identify potential donors of large sums, large and small sums of money. We're looking for support from the public, from the Marin Community –

CE: Over the hill.

RG: Over the hill, sure.

CE: Because it's to their advantage.

RG: It's to everyone's advantage to have, not just to have all this open space, which is so beautiful, but to have production going right here.

CE: Without destroying the beauty of it.

RG: Yes. So that's an effort we're making now. In addition to those two techniques we have embarked on some that are considered rather innovative and creative techniques. One is called a transfer of development rights. We have convinced the County to embark on a trial program whereby a land owner in a critical agricultural area could transfer his development credits the number of units he could potentially build on his ranch, to another area, to a ranch that's more suitable for development. And Nicasio Valley right now is working on that program. So the transfer development rights is a program that could protect some agricultural properties. In addition the Land Trust is working on a project up in the Marshall area where the development potential from three different ranches will be clustered on one of the ranches thereby leaving the rest of the three ranches available for agriculture. That particular project is about fifteen hundred acres and the development will end up occurring on less than a hundred acres so we'll have protected fourteen hundred acres of agricultural land if we're successful. That's called a limited development project. That then raises the money from within the project to protect the agriculture land that's involved. So we are trying to do some of these things that are maybe just a little different than it's been done in the past, but what's been done in the past hasn't been too successful in most areas if you look at the San Jose, Santa Clara area or certainly you get into Southern California; zoning was the only method and it failed.

CE: This kind of erodes the omnipotence of the Board of Supervisors and their controls, which I think is necessary.

RG: Well land use issues should be a local issue but we believe it also should be probably removed from the political arena as much as possible. That's difficult to do. We enjoy support from the Board of Supervisors currently but that doesn't mean we will always have support from the Board. The political climate changes over a period of years.

CE: How large is your Board of Directors?

RG: Our Land Trust Board of Directors is eleven members.

CE: And you were Chairman last year and re-elected?

RG: Yes.

CE: Are all of them members of the dairy industry?

RG: No. We have a few dairymen on the Board, a beef person, we have an attorney; Rod Martinelli is on our Board of Directors. We have three people from the environmental community representing various environmental groups. And so it's kind of a coalition of the people of the county, really.

CE: May I ask, is there any literature available on this as yet?

RG: Yes, we have a brochure that we've printed up that describes the Land Trust and tells a little about what we're doing.

CE: Do you have one of those available in your home?

RG: I believe we have some here yes.

CE" We'd like to put that in your folder. And how – I realize you have to take your daughter up here to school. In closing, how can we be of help in this area, to the lay person? How can the lay person be of help to you?

RG: Well, I think we need to get the word out to the lay person about our activities. And I think when the word gets out to them about what we are trying to do to protect agricultural land from development, then we will get support and a response back.

CE: Because you're fortunate in having a county that has been conservation-oriented for a long time, but just unaware of the agricultural facet of it.

RG: And once people realize the importance to conservation that agriculture has, I think the people could respond in a couple of ways. One is when the opportunity arises to make sure that their elective representatives know that they are concerned about the future of agriculture in Marin - - - that's important. So that the people who are making decisions know that there is concern in the community. And secondly of course and the most obvious of course is that we could always use financial support for the Land Trust to help us carry out our activities.

CE: Well Ralph, I want to thank you so much for giving up an hour of your time this morning from your busy schedule to enlighten us on this –

RG: Oh, it's my pleasure.

CE: It's been an extreme pleasure for me, and I'm sure for Mrs. Martinelli to be here today. Sometime we'd like to return and talk further.

RG: Sure, love to have you come by.

CE: Thank you.