

Ben Abatti, Sr.

2016 Farmer of the Year

Italian immigrant Battista Abatti settled in Imperial Valley in 1913. Originating in Famia, Province of Brescia, Italy. Battista had already established a home in the area when he traveled back to Italy and married Antonia; however, due to immigration laws, it wasn't until 1930, seven years after they were married, that Antonia was able to make America her home as a new citizen.

The young family lived on a small farm in Holtville with a modest dairy and rented acreage to grow their feed. They enjoyed a simple life and as told by Antonia, the family's first home had a dirt floor and a roof with large spaces between the boards. Although they could see the stars at night it was the chickens roosting on the top of the roof that made cooking soup difficult as they would often "season" the meal with their droppings. And as other families enjoyed the luxury of leaving the valley heat in the summer, the Abatti's remained because they didn't have the money, and the cows had to be milked morning and evening.

The young family quickly expanded with six children. On January 4, 1935 Antonia gave birth to their fourth child, Ben Charles Abatti.

Ben's father Battista was a hard-working man and often time relied on his wife and children to help with the ranch chores. He worked to build the All-American Canal using mules and as a young child, Ben often helped his parents distribute meals to the other workers.

Ben attended Heber Elementary School and graduated from Central Union High School in 1953. While a Spartan, Ben's activity was limited due to his commitments at the ranch. Given his love for agriculture, Ben was involved in FFA but he was only able to participate in field trips during school hours to allow his focus to be on milking the cows at home. It was one of his classmates, Efrain Cota, who at every class reunion told the story of Ben often late for the school bus because of the cows...Efrain teased Ben that he was in such a rush to the morning bus his shoes would be on backwards.

One day while attending Central, Ben was in a scuffle with another boy on the high school campus when the wrestling coach found the two wrestling in the grass. Coach Spenser grabbed Ben and told him he was on the team. Aside from a brief season of freshman football, that ended with a broken leg, wrestling was Ben's sport. Later, when his boys were teenagers, Ben tried to show off some of those high school wrestling moves while vacationing at the beach; however, not realizing the boys had gotten so strong, it was a defeated Ben that ended up with multiple broken ribs.

Soon after graduating high school, Ben joined the National Guard training every month within the valley and traveling to other regions for two weeks each year. He continued to serve until 1961 when he was honorably discharged.

As a teenager, Ben began working on farms for Jack Vessey, John Jackson and Matt LaBrucherie. It was through the influence from these men that Ben quickly realized there was more money to be made with farming than at the family dairy. And soon Ben Abatti went from milking cows to growing crops.

In 1956, Ben, along with his brother Tony formed the partnership Ben & Tony Abatti Farms. Tony was great at mechanics and Ben was the business mind acting as the grower, salesman and shipper. Sister Agnes (Poloni) joined the team around 1958 as the bookkeeper. Ben purchased their first planter, like they did back in the day, on a handshake from Emil Ferer Equipment. Together the team grew their business and through hard work developed a diversification of commodities including cantaloupe, mixed melons, onions, honeydews, lettuce broccoli, rapini, asparagus, carrots, cucumbers, cabbage, sugarbeets, grains, cotton, and forage crops. They grew tomatoes for Hunts and citrus for Sunkist. Being very proud of each crop he grew, Ben often says the plants “looked like diamonds.”

In 1958, a young Swiss girl caught Ben’s eye. He had been leasing land from her family for custom work and he was quite smitten with her. Seeing that she would be leaving for college soon, Ben finally asked Loretta Studer out to a movie. As Loretta tells the story, at the end of the date she proclaimed that she was not getting married to him. Loretta had been raised on a farm, she hated farm work, and therefore she didn’t have much use for farmers. She had a clear path to another destiny through Mt. St. Mary’s College.

It must have been those daily letters over the course of a year that Ben wrote, on perfume laced stationary, that changed her mind. On January 23, 1960 Ben married Holtville native Margaret Loretta Studer at St. Mary’s Church in El Centro. In a car borrowed from his brother Tony, Ben took his bride on a road trip for their honeymoon.

Together, Ben and Loretta worked their farm until Loretta got pregnant and gave birth to their first son, Benny just 10 months after their wedding. When telling the story, Loretta laughs at what Ben’s family thought of her because the young couple lived with his family for the first six months as a married couple. Being of very humble means, while Ben worked the farm, Loretta went to work cleaning houses to help pay the medical expenses. When they got out on their own, the family lived in a compact one-bedroom house and young Benny found his makeshift crib in a dresser drawer.

The family quickly grew welcoming Michael in 1962, Jimmy in 1963, Jennifer in 1964 and Anna in 1971.

Always driven to success, Ben worked day and night growing crops and his business finding it difficult to be at both home and in the fields. As Ben would say, “the plants are always making you money because even when you’re sleeping, they are growing”. Being the grower, salesman and shipper, working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, was difficult on Ben and the family in the early years. Often times Loretta would load up the car and take the kids down to the packing

shed just to spend some quality time with their dad. And Ben, wanting to give Loretta a break would take the kids to the fields, often times riding on tractors with him or other employees while working the crops.

In 1967, Ben and Tony formed Abatti Produce, Inc. Having become a major employer in the Imperial Valley, the brothers farmed over 24,000 acres and over the years employed in excess of 7,000 people in the fields and their seven different packing sheds. The company remained productive during the turbulent labor shortages and difficult rail car transportation in the 1960's. The company found great success during this period but it wasn't always easy. Agricultural Labor was gathering a larger voice during this time period. Ben and other growers were being challenged to protect their investments and their futures. Ben helped lead the unifying effort that kept the harvest moving, got Produce to the market, and kept people employed.

Over the years, Ben has been a key spokesman for the Imperial Valley ag industry meeting with both Governors Pete Wilson and Jerry Brown on important issues impacting our farmers and ranchers. Ben reluctantly agreed to Tom Nassif's request that he sit down with Governor Jerry Brown, during his first term, to discuss labor issues. As Ben walked into the Sacramento office, he was not a bit happy to see Cesar Chavez sitting in the room having a conversation with the Governor. Well, you can only imagine how this conversation quickly turned. Governor Brown pleaded with Ben saying if he, a major ag employer in the Valley, would sign with the Union, everyone else would surely follow. Let's just say the meeting ended pretty quick when Ben said "NO!" with a bunch of bleeps in three different languages. Everyone in this room that knows Ben knows all too well that he has strong opinions and is not afraid to say exactly what they are.

In 1971, Ben Abatti was the first grower to plant trial seedless watermelons in the Imperial Valley with a 10-acre plot. It was Ben that took a leap of faith to invest in one of the first cantaloupe factories and transition from packing in wooden crates to cartons breaking records by processing 1 million packages in 6-weeks. And working toward better efficiency on the ranch, Ben introduced the Imperial Valley to the 1-ton baler being the first farmer to utilize the new technology in his operation. Being an equal opportunity employer, Ben bought three...One for each son to operate.

All of his children, at one time or another have worked along their father in the business. He would pay the kids 5 cents per tail for catching gophers in the fields. As a toddler, Anna talks about riding on her dad's lap driving him through the fields. By the age of six the boys were driving the trucks on their own and by nine they had graduated to driving the tractors; although Ben would send someone out to help them cross the highway. Being an animal lover, Ben once gave mouth to snout resuscitation to Jennifer's new born pig. And when the boys, as teenagers decided to form their own Triple A Farms, it was Ben who gave them a shovel and a ride to the bank to get their first loan.

Ben has been a valued resource to many of his peers and generations offering guidance and advice on challenges he endured personally with the unions and other difficulties as a farmer. Not to say they only talked business. The daily progressive coffee tour generally started at 5 am at Ben's office, headed west to Chris Jackson's ranch and concluded at various third and fourth stops along the way. At each stop a gathering of farmers and salespersons would gather, the subjects discussed were wide and varied. Opinions would clash, egos would be bruised, jokes would be told and maybe on special days a morning eye opener might be enjoyed. In the end everyone shook hands and Ben would rush off to the next stop.

Aside from his farming operations, Ben has been a contributor of countywide youth programs. Ben was instrumental in forming the annual Imperial County 4H BBQ in 1976 that has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the program over the years. Along with his sons, Michael and Jimmy, Ben continues to organize fundraising BBQ's for a variety of organizations each year.

Ben's dedication and support to the Catholic Church was key in the planning and construction of St. Mary's Church in El Centro. Ben had the honor of being appointed as one of the first Eucharistic Ministers in Imperial Valley by Father Vidra. Along with contributing to his home church, over the decades Ben has been a supporter to Catholic Churches throughout Imperial Valley. Those who enjoyed morning coffee with Ben would often be approached as he would arrive with a stack of tickets for all types of fundraisers and tell everyone to pull out their wallets.

Aside from his family and farming Ben is an avid hunter of all game having hunted in some 7 states. All of his five children and most grandchildren have enjoyed hunting expeditions with Ben. Beginning with bird hunting at the age of 9, the kids were allowed a big rifle for game hunting once they turned 16, with dad being their biggest supporter and instructor.

In 1995, Ben Abatti Farms, LLC was formed. With sister Agnes retiring, Loretta, with the children fully grown, went kicking and screaming to join him in the office.

Above all of the many activities and business dealings Ben Abatti is involved in, it is his love of family that trumps all. When the Abatti family has a gathering it is quite an event. There are more stories about Ben, as told from his kids, to fill a book and as they are told the tremendous love they have for their father is evident.

At the age of 81, Ben still has not lost his passion for farming and continues to work 7 days a week growing his little diamonds. And although he has endured many ups and downs in business, his one great success is that Ben has shared his love of farming to his 5 children, Benny, Michael, Jimmy, Jennifer and Anna who have all continued the Abatti farming tradition in the Imperial Valley.