

Nicasio Vineyards

Dan Wheeler came to California in 1951 after graduating in engineering at Tri-State College in Indiana. He bought his 73.5 acre property in the Santa Cruz Mountains the next year after starting work for Hewlett-Packard in Palo Alto. He produced his first homemade wine in 1952 and in 1955 he acquired his bond and went into commercial production, on a small scale. He called his operation Nicasio Vineyards and his bottles were labeled "Wines by Wheeler," with the motto, "Work is the Ruin of the Drinking Class." He has produced wine in small lots ever since from a wide range of grape sources, employing technical methods of production that, in the early years of the California "wine revolution" were somewhat unusual, but which are today looked on with great favor by many premium producers.

He retired from his engineering profession in 1988, but in 1977 he bought vineyard land in Lake County and has planted several varieties. Eventually he hopes to move his production facilities to Lake County.

I interviewed Dan Wheeler several times, beginning September 14, 1992. We sat outside his two ageing tunnels, carved into a sandstone cliff that looks out over his property and at the little road that winds up to his home above. Outside stands a large, old-fashioned basket press, an old champagne corker, and dozens of five-gallon demijons ready to receive this season's wine.

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September 14, 1992

CS: First tell me about your coming to California and getting this property.

DW: After graduating from college I didn't have a job and had some interviews out here and in Washington. So I headed west with my Auburn and a travel-trailer and started working my way south and got to Palo Alto and went into Hewlett-Packard and got a job in the test department, although I was a graduate engineer. That was in 1951. I worked there a while and started looking for some country property. I drove all around the Bay Area and was looking for something that was within an hour's drive to work. I saw this place in the paper one day and got hold of the people, looked at it, said this is it, and bought it.

CS: How big was the place then?

DW: It was 73.5 acres. I really couldn't afford it but I bought it anyway.

CS: Was there anybody else living here along Nicasio Way?

DW: At that time the road down there wasn't named. It had been a summer place for some people named Kester. They owned the 73 care plot. She was a Roth. He was one of the founders of the Palo Alto Clinic.

CS: In buying this place did you have any thought about going into winegrowing?

DW: I had made home wine before.

CS: At home? Where was that?

DW: I was born in northeast Montana. But I made the wine at college, in Indiana. A friend and I had our trailers in the back yard of a little house there. We found these wild grapes growing along the fences there. So we picked some and tried making wine out of them. It turned out

pretty good. We just squeezed the juice out and fermented it and made a sort of dessert wine. If I had made it really right it would have been very foxy.

CS: So they were native grapes.

DW: I think they were *V. rupestris*.

CS: When you came here did you know about the California wine industry?

DW: Not at that time. I knew California was wine country, but that was about it.

CS: Did you know about the Santa Cruz Mountains and its wine prestige when you bought this property?

DW: No, I got to the Santa Cruz Mountains before I had researched anything about whether you could make good wine here.

CS: So your landing here in the old wine country was chance.

DW: We didn't have wine in my family when I grew up. Really, they were teetotalers.

CS: That's pretty common coming out of the Midwest. I got pretty much the same story from Bob Mullen at Woodside who started out a little after you. He was from Illinois.
So, you start out here as a home winemaker in 1952. That was your first vintage here?

DW: I went up and picked a ton of grapes at Joe Locatelli's, which is now Ken Burnap's place.¹

CS: Locatelli owned that land? The one who owned the winery over above Felton, where Sunrise Winery started making wine?²

DW: Joe Locatelli. That's a different part of the Locatelli family. That was Vince Locatelli over there. He was on the Board of Supervisors for several years in the early days here. This land David Bruce bought and grafted the vines to Pinot noir. And later Burnap bought it.

CS: What grapes were in that ton you got from Locatelli for your first vintage.

DW: Mataro.³ He had some white grapes also, but I don't remember what they were. Locatelli made wine up there, a home winemaker's blend.

CS: How much vineyard did Joe Locatelli have?

DW: I'd say ten or fifteen acres. There was also some Zinfandel. We helped pick them and saved ten dollars.

CS: How did you know how to make wine?

¹ In 1974 Kenneth Burnap purchased land on nearby Jarvis Road and founded his Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard.

² In 1976 the first Sunrise Winery began operations on the site of the old Locatelli Winery, above Felton. It has since moved to the Picchetti Ranch on Monte Bello Road.

³ French Mourvèdre.

DW: At that time a friend had given me Wagner's book on making wine.⁴ Then I bought a couple of the books from the University of California as I got more interested. I did a lot of studying as I got more into it.

CS: How did that '52 come out?

DW: It was quite good, but I bought some barrels from a neighbor up here, just beyond Locatelli, and they were really bad. Eventually they spoiled the wine. Later I got that stuff in my cellar and I had to sterilize everything.

CS: What cellar? You mean the caves, already?

DW: I started it in 1952, the original cellar. I made the wine in the garage and I was able to get that wine in the cellar in November. This is sandstone. We have two kinds around here, one doesn't dissolve when it gets wet and the other does. This one doesn't. I started digging right after I made the wine. I probably got in about eight feet the first year.

CS: How did you do it?

DW: Pick and shovel. I did have a little black powder I used. I had a hobby of reloading ammunition for target practice and used some of that powder. Later I went and bought black blasting powder. I'd use just enough to loosen it up some. But there was still a lot of pick work after that.

CS: How big did the first one become?

DW: It's about twelve by forty feet. And there is a side room that is about twelve by fifteen.

CS: How long did it take to acquire those dimensions?

DW: That's hard to say; it was worked on over a period of years. I guess it reached the size it is now by 1955 or 1956. No, perhaps earlier. I was planning that room to be a larger room with a post in the middle. Judy is a sculptor. She and her husband were coming back to California, so we did quite a bit there in the first three years.⁵ I had suggested that they could come back and sculpt the post. That didn't happen. This second cave, right here where we're sitting, was built later. It's a round cave with a large post in the middle. It's twelve feet all the way around the post. But it looks like a thirty foot diameter room. That one was dug in 1972-73.

CS: We'll talk about that later.

Let's do 1953 and 1954; you're still a home-winemaker.

DW: In 1954 a fellow I was working with at Hewlett-Packard was taking care of an old vineyard that had been abandoned. I picked grapes there, what I could find. I got some Carignane there and it made quite a nice wine. That was up above Los Gatos, right north of Lexington Reservoir. There's a name for that area up there. There used to be an old winery up there?

CS: Glenwood?

DW: No. It was way up on the hill there. On the west side of the highway. There's a sign on the highway with the name of a road.

CS: Montevina!

⁴ Philip M. Wagner. *American Wines and How To Make Them* (New York, 1933) was the only book in print, written in English, on winemaking techniques during the early years after Repeal.

⁵ Dan Wheeler met Judy Wheeler, his wife today, in 1952. They were married in 1992.

DW: That's it. And there was the old Montevina Winery up there.

CS: So, there were grapes growing up there then. I went up there in the early sixties and couldn't find any. So, Carignane from the Montevina Road area. There had been a winery up there. I have it bonded in the 1940s.

DW: By 1953 it was abandoned. This guy was supposed to be watching the buildings up there. While he was up there someone came up with a cutting torch and cut the tracks off the tractor and hauled them away for scrap.

CS: This was 1954.

DW: No, on second thought it had to be 1953, because in 1954 I started managing the Schermerhorn Vineyard.⁶

CS: So, he was the owner then of the Vine Hill Vineyard.

DW: And his wife was Chaffee Hall's sister. He was also going to start a winery, as Chaffee Hall did, but he never got the winery built. He did have the fifteen acres of vineyard.⁷ It was planted not too long before that to good varieties. White Riesling, Sylvaner and some Cabernet. There was also a small block of Chardonnay and mixed with it was some Pinot blanc. He had gone to the University of California and got recommendations. They always recommended Sylvaner up here. Schermerhorn was a retired pediatrician.

CS: Yes I've tasted Sylvaner from that vineyard. Dave Bennion made one in 1968 that was excellent, and really aged well.

You were doing the viticultural work at Vine Hill. Where did you learn to do that?

DW: Just the way I learn everything else. I did some reading, and I did talk to Martin Ray. He gave us a few techniques. I'd already read about spur and cane pruning. So we hired some people and went to it. I also learned a lot about his ideas concerning winemaking.

CS: Most of the early wines were reds.

DW: Yes, but when I got the Schermerhorn Vineyard I started making whites too. And Champagne as well. As I said, there was Chardonnay with Pinot blanc mixed in, as well as the other varieties. I picked them one year by hand and marked the vines. Bennion got some too and I helped him mark them so they could keep the Pinot blanc from getting mixed in with the Chardonnay.

CS: Since we're getting to the end of this tape, I'll have a glass of wine now. What are we drinking?

DW: This is my 1986 White Riesling. This is from Lime Kiln Valley in San Benito County.

CS: Well, we've talked through the 1954 vintage. What moved you to go commercial?

DW: The wines turned out well. So I thought I could sell them. At first I was thinking about

⁶ Just off Vine Hill Road, this vineyard has a long history, and is often referred to as Vine Hill Vineyard. The area was probably first planted by the Jarvis Brothers, perhaps as early as 1858. For more history see my *Like Modern Edens*, 34-35. Also see: Michael R. Holland. "The origins of the Santa Cruz Wine Industry," in *Late Harvest* (Santa Cruz, 1983): 2-5.

⁷ Hall founded his Hallcrest in 1941. It was located in Felton. After 1969 it became the Felton-Empire Winery. Today it is again Hallcrest.

making some jug wines, but I realized that I had a class of wine that deserved a lot more than that.

CS: Had you planted any vineyard here up to that point?

DW: No. That came later. But I was managing that vineyard and I also had to sell grapes, as well. That was part of the deal. I sold grapes to Mondavi (Charles Krug, that is) and to Mirassou. I found some Pinot noir and I traded it for some of their Cabernet. It was grown in the Woodside area. I was getting a little Pinot noir from Scott Knight Smith, just up Pierce Road from Martin Ray.

CS: What was the first Champagne you made?

DW: Probably in 1954. I made two lots. One was Chardonnay and the other was Riesling.

CS: How did you get the formula for the second fermentation?

DW: From a University of California text book. Amerine and Josslyn. It went through very well. We got some old racks from Fred Weibel at Mission San Jose. I also bought bottles from him. The racks have since rotted away. Judy for Christmas one year had her niece's husband build me another one. This Champagne corker here also came from Weibel.

CS: I like to follow equipment around. It gives a sense of continuity.

DW: This press came from a winery up near Mountain View. And then I had a smaller one that I sold to David Bruce when he started up.

CS: We're out of tape.

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September 10, 1993

CS: One year later. Let's talk about the 1955 vintage.

DW: In 1955 I started managing the Schermerhorn vineyard on Vine Hill for the crop. I managed the vineyard from 1955 to 1957. I took the grapes I needed and sold the rest to Bob Mondavi at Charles Krug. During those three years I also sold to Bargetto, Christian Brothers and to Mirassou, and to a few home winemakers.

CS: So at this early date you're not seeing any Ridge people yet.

DW: But in that time Dave Bennion did come up with some friends, and helped work at the winery.

CS: That was Ridge before it was Ridge.

DW: And we had dinner at David Bruce's place.

CS: That would be his mother's place nearby here that we talked about.

What did you make in 1955?

DW: Riesling, Sylvaner, and Chardonnay from the Schermerhorn place, and some Cabernet, also.

And some Zinfandel which we bought from Bargetto.

CS: I wonder where they got it; they didn't have any Zinfandel vines.

DW: I think it was from the Santa Clara Valley.

CS: And when you talk about Cabernet, you mean the vines around the house at Vine Hill?

DW: Yes, they were by the house, on a hillside, but they had Pierce's disease, I found out later, so they didn't produce very much. And close to the house there was a lot of spring action, so the grapes didn't want to get ripe. And the deer worked on that end, too. I let them hang until November 11 in 1956 before I picked them. They were nice and ripe then, but about half of them had fallen off. I'd say there was about an acre of Cabernet. Also, I planted some Pinot noir there. But I don't know how they did because it was soon after that that I wasn't managing the place anymore. It was about an acre.

CS: I wonder what happened to the vines. No one ever talks about them.

Do you know when Dr. Schermerhorn died? I think he was alive when Vine Hill was sold.

DW: I don't think he was. His nephew inherited the place.

CS: Was the wine you made in 1954 a commercial wine?

DW: No, but I was bonded in 1955, just before the vintage. I was able to transfer 400 gallons from the home wine to the bonded cellar, and then about 1200 gallons total. I actually had 400.2 gallons, but I only had two home winemaking permits. So I had about one bottle more than the permits covered.

CS: What did you do with all this wine?

DW: We started selling to individuals we knew. But it was about that time that John Melville wrote me up in his book.

CS: That's right. It was just at that moment he was writing his book. You were one of three Santa Cruz wineries he discussed. (The others were Bargetto and Hallcrest.)

DW: I was fairly active in those early years in the industry, so he would have picked up on my operation before he visited us. And I knew Irving Marcus very well. I even stayed up at his cabin on the Russian River one time.

CS: He wrote about you then.

DW: Here's an item in my journal: on 9/4/56 I went to an industry tasting in Sacramento and I was invited to submit a case of wine for the tasting and the dinner afterwards. I took six bottles of Riesling and six of Zinfandel. Marcus liked the wines and wrote about them.

CS: Did you do anything else to publicize the place to sell those 1200 gallons?

DW: People used to come by here pretty regularly. Melville's book had something to do with that. There were people then who were really searching out small wineries to find better wine. I have quite a file of people who came by and bought wine.

CS: I bought Melville in 1959 and saw you name first there.

DW: I had just started making some Champagne then and when I went to Melville's place to have dinner with him, I brought Champagne along, and he told me he was going to recommend some of my wines. He also said he was going to recommend Mirassou's Champagne.

CS: He did, but he gave you about twice as much print in that early edition. I started going over to Mirassou's in 1858 to buy wine and got quite an education from their winemaker, Max Huebner. He was a fanatic about sparkling wines from strange materials, like coffee and oranges.

Did you sell all the wine you wanted to?

DW: In those years I did.

CS: Anything new in 1956?

DW: It was pretty much more of the same. Let me look at the journal. Here's something. 11/20/55 I picked a half ton of Cabernet at 20 degrees Balling.

CS: So you were having a little trouble getting that Cabernet ripe.

DW: 1956 was pretty close to 1955 as far as gallons go. And we sold them the same way. But remember, these wines are being sold three to five years later. So the wines are accumulating through the years. I liked to sell my whites at about three-and-a-half years.

CS: One of the things about Wheeler wines, so far as what people have said of them, is that they have a sort of rustic character; they stay in barrel and demijon for a good while. There were none of these wines out in February of the next year. Let's talk about that. Did you start with this view from the beginning?

DW: I had tasted enough fined and filtered wines to know that you had to strip a wine quite a bit to get a bright young wine that was going to be out early and be nice with luncheon. But I aged my wines in five gallon jugs, white and red. In the cellar it takes quite a while for the wines to settle down. It doesn't really warm up in the cellar in the spring very much; maybe two degrees. So to avoid filtering after they come out of the barrel I put them in fine gallon jugs for about a year-and-a-half. I had learned from Amerine and Josslyn that when you store wine at about 65 degrees or less in a reducing atmosphere for that amount of time, the wine will stabilize.

CS: In the early years in California that's the way good winemakers got white wine to market in stable condition. That was Charles Lefranc's approach, "I will sell no wine before its time," and Paul Masson picked that up from him. That way they could leave a little residual sugar if it was kept cool enough while it aged.

DW: I used to get a few little bubbles in the early days, so that the wine inspector warned me about it, until they started allowing a little more in still wine. In the early days the law said ZERO so far as carbonization was concerned. But you can't make a wine with absolutely none, so they changed it to allow a tenth of an atmosphere.

CS: That 's so they can come out with these "crackling" wines. But they are well below the atmosphere level we associate with Champagne production.

So, you wouldn't be selling any 1955 wine until 1958.

DW: Well, in the early years I did sell some wine a little earlier. But I think that my first main

bottling was in 1958.

In August 1955 we bottled up some Zinfandel in tenths to pass out at work, instead of cigars, when the twins were born.

I can see here that in May 1956 we bottled some wine and put the rest in five gallon jugs for further aging. So it was about then that I was deciding to follow this method of aging wines. So later we would say that the 1960 Riesling would be ready for bottling in 1963 or 1964.

CS: You left Vine Hill in 1957, but did you get grapes there for that vintage?

DW: Yes.

CS: What were your new grape sources?

DW: I had already bought Zinfandel from Pourroy, so I bought more from him now. And I found out from Martin Ray about the Knight Smith vineyard in Saratoga and I bought Pinot noir from him.

CS: Was the Zinfandel you bought from Pourroy from those old vines in front of the house there?

DW: They had replanted some of them, but yes, there were old vines there. And he had Grenache and Carignane up on the hill. We had learned to identify the vines and went in and picked the Grenache separately. That was some of the best wine I ever made. I first got grapes from Pierre Pourroy in 1954. I bought from him until he died. But in the later years they weren't very interested in the vineyards and didn't keep them up very well. Prunes were more important, and the sisters were more interested in what the land was worth. I have records here of buying from him through 1961, basically Zinfandel and Grenache.

CS: Did you ever hear them talk about having Cabernet franc there? Gehrs found some and made wine from it, but it was on a piece of land to the east that they had already sold off.

DW: That belonged to a man named Felix. It was right next door, due east. One time he was using his tractor to help haul grapes and he left it standing idling and it rolled off the vineyard down into the canyon. I risked my life getting the battery cable off before it started a fire. To the west Pourroy had had that hill in vines. That's where he had his Grenache.

CS: Since you were there they found a photo of that hill taken before Prohibition, all in vines. Now it looks as if it were the original forest. I've seen that sort of thing on Spring Mountain in Napa where you'll be what appears old forest with huge trees, and there will be old grape stakes in a line, probably back from the beginning of the century.

DW: I recall another incident from the fifties that is interesting. Martin Ray knew this home winemaker in San Francisco and we both sold him Chardonnay grapes one year, from his place and from Vine Hill. And he was going to make them up the same way in separate lots to see how they came out. But then he mixed them all together instead.

CS: When did you first use Knight Smith grapes?

DW: The first record I have was in 1959. That was Pinot noir. There weren't very many. Then 1960, but not in 1961. I didn't have a vintage in 1962.

CS: Why was that?

DW: The cellar was pretty full and I was running out of good sources for grapes. I did sell quite a

bit of wine in 1961 and 1962, That's when I really started marketing it. People were still coming from all over, even from back east. I think it was in 1961 that Burt Lasker came out.

I was once in Montana visiting my folks and I met a winemaker there who had Lasker's catalog; that was in 1986, and he still had some of my 1961 Cabernet on his wine list for \$65 per bottle. He runs Bern's Steak House in Tampa, Florida.

CS: *Wine Spectator* has given his wine list an award.

Anything else in 1962 that might have discouraged you from making wine?

DW: I was divorced in that year from a ten year marriage. I had been living in a house with five kids in it, and suddenly nobody. Part of the settlement was that I would keep the winery and she would get 800 gallons of wine and some Champagne. A And another 68 acre piece we had, she got that. Then she moved off to Mexico. Her attorney in San Jose was John Thorne, who collected the wine. He drank some of it too. The judge said I could give it to her in five gallon jugs, because that was the way I used my wine for home use. I had to make the Champagne before I could give it to her. Later she came back to Tucson but there was no way to get the wine down to her. Finally I delivered the last load to an apartment she had in Capitola here. I learned later from my kids that she stored the Champagne in a closet next to the heater and one day one of them let go and there was a chain reaction. I caused a lot of damage.

CS: Were there other years when you didn't make wine?

DW: By myself I kind of lost interest in the winery for a few years. From 1964 to 1968 I didn't make much wine, and one year I didn't make any at all. There was a lot of wine in the cellar and I was trying to figure out how to sell it.

In 1968 I really started going out and buying grapes again.

CS: But were you doing any real marketing then?

DW: No.

CS: Didn't you have any retail sales other than at the winery?

DW: We were retailing through the Best Wine Shop down in Aptos.

CS: What kind of volume are we talking about in the sixties?

DW: Still about the same. About 700 gallons each vintage.

CS: If we went in the cellars now, could you show me three vintages still sitting there today?

DW: Sure. Some back to 1988. The 1987 Chardonnay has taken some time to stabilize. It went through a long malo-lactic. I do have wines in barrel, as well, but it's all old oak, just for aging. I buy used barrels from other wineries who think they're too old to use. But that's exactly how I want them. Most of the last ones I've bought are French oak.

CS: Why don't we put the airplane story here. Everybody talks about that one.

DW: I started working for Hewlett-Packard in 1951 and I bought this place in June 1952. At first I was commuting by car. That was until 1962, and then I commuted when I could by airplane. I kept the plane in Scott's Valley. I'd drive there and the fly to the Palo Alto airport. And I had an older car there that I could drive to work. Later I bicycled to work. It was about seven miles. Then in 1964 I

crashed the airplane.

I had moved the airplane up here and had a little air strip. There was a ridge up here on my property. It had about 300 feet of 4% grade and another 300 feet. The plane was a Cessna 140. I had first soloed in 1962. I had been interested in flying for a long time.

So, I was taking off one morning at full power and I had flying speed and had used the air strip and suddenly everything went quite. I lost power; it just went off. I was close to the ground all the time. Next thing I knew I was on the ground, upside down. I landed in my back yard, but it wasn't a really dangerous landing. The fuselage is still sitting up there.

CS: Did you get another one?

DW: Well, I did, in 1973. And I still fly.

CS: How about the commute?

DW: I didn't commute for some time because I was later working for Stuart Engineering in Scott's Valley, for five years. I was vice president and chief engineer there. Later I went to work for Wiltron in Palo Alto. They're in Morgan Hill now. I was with them for twenty-one years before I retired in 1985.

CS: What's up at the air strip today? Do you still own the property?

DW: Yes, but it's all gone.

CS: How has your property changed in size over the years?

DW: It's now 37.5 acres. I've sold off three parcels. But there isn't a home on any one of them yet. I think that there is going to be building on one of them now.

CS: How about the little vineyard you put in up here?

DW: That was in 1955. There was between a quarter and half acre of vines. There was Pinot noir and Riesling. The deer and the birds on that small vineyard made it impossible. I had a fence but the deer kept getting in anyway, crawling under it.

CS: Let's pick up now in 1968 when you start going strong again.

DW: I called the Agricultural Commissioner's office in several counties looking for grapes. I had run out of sources. So eventually I got grapes from Redwood Valley in Mendocino, Chardonnay and Pinot blanc. And I bought Sylvaner from Alfred Hitchcock's vineyard over in Scott's Valley, about two tons. It was north of the highway at the east end of the valley. Also on the road going to Soquel Barney Oliver, when I planted my vineyard, planted one too. He was eventually vice president at Hewlett Packard. That was in the fifties. He planted about an acre and fenced it. It was just south of the Seventh Day Adventist place, north of town. I got the vines for him to plant the vineyard. Then I managed it for him, but the birds ate all the grapes. So in 1969 I tried a bird alarm, but they came in anyway. And I tried covering them for a couple of years. So finally I put a total cover over the chicken wire. It was a big bird cage with the birds outside. A few years later I decided I didn't want to manage it anymore. I got grapes for managing it, but I wasn't making anything off it. I think I stopped that in about 1973.

In 1969 I bought Cabernet in Hollister from Don Wirz. I was just past the old Almaden winery. Later I found out that it was Cabernet Pfeffer. I had been making it and selling it as Cabernet Sauvignon.

CS: I did a big research study for Almaden to support their putting out Cabernet Pfeffer under that

term. I don't know anyone else who knows the history of that vine in California.

DW: Also in 1969 I bought Petite Sirah from John Roffinella in Gilroy. And I also picked Pinot bland then at Vine Hill from vines that were mixed with Chardonnay. Dave Bennion let me have them.

In 1970 I started buying grapes from Bud Beauregard in Bonny Doon. I bought Zinfandel and Riesling.

CS: The Zinfandel was probably from the old Quistorf vines.

DW: I helped him find out where to get vines to plant some more, some Chardonnay and some Pinot noir. But at that time he just had Zin and Riesling. I bought more from him in 1971 and Sylvaner from Hitchcock. I also bought Chardonnay and Cabernet from Darrell Edmeades up in the Anderson Valley. That was in 1972.

CS: This would be a good time to talk about your new partner.

DW: Ed Hilscher wanted to go into the wine business. I got to know him through a mutual friend. He was quite interested in wine. So I told him that I wouldn't take him into my winery but that I'd help him start his own. I'd expect him to dig a cellar here and outfit it and buy grapes for the first years, and I'd make the wine. We signed an agreement and eventually we actually formed a corporation. That cave was on a piece of the land that I had earlier sold, with the understanding that I could lease it back with enough room to dig another cave.

CS: So this second cave here, right in front of us, was to be another winery.

DW: That's right.

CS: So how long is the lease?

DW: Well, I probably have proscriptive use of it now, because when he died I didn't pay more lease money, and that was a long time ago.

CS: Ah, you have an easement through adverse use. Maybe. So what about when you move up to the Lake County property?

DW: I'd like to keep it. And I have a two acre easement here that was granted me, just like what you give the PG&E, in exchange for a rightaway across another piece of my property.

CS: Well, these are historic caves. But let's get back to the Hilscher deal.

DW: Well, he finally gave up and dropped out. It lasted a couple of years. He dug about two-thirds of the second cave and I finished it.

In 1972 and 1973 I made his wines in my cellar and got totally overcrowded. But he never bonded his place.

CS: So what interest did he have in the physical property?

DW: None. When he pulled out it was mine. He was one of those guys who kind of runs out of gas before he finished a project.

CS: There are lots of people who are now outside the wine industry like that today.

What's the course of Wheeler wine for the rest of the seventies?

DW: In 1974 I got 800 pounds of Pinot noir from the Oliver vineyard -- I guess I had the bird cage up by then. And I got Riesling and Zinfandel from Beauregard. Same thing in 1975. But that was the last year I got Oliver grapes. In 1977 and 1978 I bought Cabernet and Zinfandel from Dr. Hoy in Paso Robles. Then there was no vintage in 1979.

CS: I guess you had a lot of wine stored up here by then.

DW: I had too much wine in the cellar, and some of it wasn't all that good. Some of it I couldn't sell and some I didn't want to sell. Also, I was looking then for someone who might take over. I got started again in 1981 and 1982. Meanwhile in 1977 I had bought the property in Lake County. That's another reason why I cut back here. If I had applied for a bond there when I bought the place I would have had the first winery in Lake County in recent years.

CS: I'll have to look that up in my bonded winery data base.

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In the third session we were joined by *Judy Wheeler (JW)*.

November 15, 1993

CS: Since we Met last I see that you have gone through your journal and made some notes at spots of interest. So I'll just let you go through them in chronological order.

DW: On 11/22/52 I have the first entry. We picked a ton of grapes at Joe Locatelli's place. They were \$70 a ton. It was one-sixth Zinfandel, one-sixth Semillon, and two-thirds Mataro (Mourvèdre). We kept them all together.

--12/21/52 we finished putting the door on the wine cellar. I had dug in about ten or fifteen feet by then into the cave.

--10/9/53 picked grapes at the vineyard of the old Montevina Winery. It was above the Lexington Reservoir. I got some Carignane and some Alicante Bouschet. While we were there the man's son came by and said that there was some Pinot noir, so we tried to figure out which vines they were. The winery was no longer being operated. A friend I worked for named Claude Fricke was the caretaker there. I bought some picking boxes there. I almost got bit by a rattlesnake while I was picking grapes.

--10/25/53 I had just met Martin Ray and went up to taste his wines. We had some Schloss Johannisberg, some of his Cabernet, a Corton-Charlemagne, and a Graacher Stablay.

--7/8/54 I bought the first grapes from Dr. Schermerhorn's vineyard on Vine Hill and started managing the place. There was Sylvaner, Riesling, Chardonnay, and Cabernet Sauvignon. The Cab was down by his house, not in the main vineyard. He had a lot of prune trees down there and he pulled them out. I planted that part to Pinot noir.

--9/12/54 We had the cellar twenty feet deep.

CS: We should mention here that these were the first caves dug for winemaking in California after Prohibition, perhaps the first since the turn of the century. We read a lot about these new North Coast caves that have been dug in the last twenty years, and Far Niente 's are supposed to be the first modern ones, but they are actually the second.

--7/24/55 I made the first good sized batch of Champagne. I had made some test batches but this was the first we sold.

CS: I see that you have chemical data there for calculating the amount of sugar to be added for the second fermentation. You knew you had to be careful and precise.

--8/15/55 I passed out tenths of wine at work, instead of cigars, after the twins were born.

--9/24/55 Bob Mondavi came down and got grapes from me at the Schermerhorn place. And he did a complete chemical analysis for me on my wines. He bought grapes from us for two years.

CS: That figures. At that time in the 1950s he and his brother Peter were intent on finding really good white wine grapes for their Charles Krug operation.

-- 9/20/55 a friend and I went up to Grape Day in Oakville and had dinner at Bob Mondavi's.

-- 9/4/56 I was invited to a tasting of the award winning wines at the Sacramento State Fair. We were allowed to submit a case of wine for the dinner afterwards and I took six bottles of Riesling and six of Zinfandel. And they were very well received. In fact, Irving Marcus, the publisher of *Wines & Vines*, put a piece in the magazine.

--8/10/59 is when we first went to the Knight Smith vineyard in Saratoga. We bought Pinot noir from them a couple of times. We picked them that year 8/23.

--9/18/60 we picked grapes up there at the Knight Smith place and Carol and David Bruce helped me. I think he was doing his residency then.

CS: In the years to come, and get old and feeble, don't let anything happen to that journal. It is an outstanding and almost unique historical record. Somebody will come around to clean up and throw it in the trash can. It's been happening at wineries in California for over a hundred years. And we are left with virtually no manuscript collections like this. It should be in the Shields Library at UC Davis.

--10/25/64 I talked Dave Bennion into selling me 500 pounds of grapes up at their place on Montebello Ridge.

CS: And you bought some earlier. I was giving a talk to the Viticultural Association at Ridge last week, and David was there. There was some mention of his taking the Cabernet grapes in 1961, and he said that you got some too.

--9/24/68 I took a sample of grapes at the Alfred Hitchcock vineyard in Scott's Valley. Sylvaner. I bought those for two or three years.

--10/1/69 This is the first time I bought grapes from Don Wirv in Cienega, off Lime Kiln Road.

--10/4/70 I bought grapes from Bud Beauregard. It was Riesling and Zinfandel.

--10/5/72 I bought grapes from Darryl Edmeades in the Anderson Valley, Mendocino. Chardonnay and Cabernet. I made some exceptional wine from those grapes.

-- 9/25/73 I bought grapes from George Nyland at Davis. He wasn't growing grapes, but rootstock, with various vinifera varieties grafted on, which made some grapes.

-- 10/15/77 I bought Zinfandel, Merlot and Cabernet from Dr. Hoy in Paso Robles.

-- 9/11/86 I bought grapes from Ed and Bobbie Mayers. They have a little vineyard up off Rodeo Gulch Road. It on Chardonnay Road. I got their grapes from two years. I made very good Champagne from their 1987 Chardonnay. We had it for our wedding. They have about an acre of grapes.

-- Here is our 35th Anniversary Celebration in 1990. David Bruce was there.

-- Here we had a blind tasting, two mystery wines: Cabernet Pfeffer Rosé and Cabernet Pfeffer. No one got it, even with a couple of hints.

-- 10/20/91 Now we're up in Lake County. Here we got grapes from Charlie and Dolly Simpson at Upper Lake. And we also bought Chardonnay and Zinfandel from Agostine Alanso up there. He has a vineyard and takes care of other people's.

That just about brings us up to date, so far as the journal is concerned.

CS: You retired in 1985. How are things different at the Wheeler place since then?

DW: In the early eighties there was a young woman who was going to get involved in the winery. We made a lot of wine that didn't turn out well. We were going to start a partnership and then she got married and decided she didn't want to. So I slowed down then, but since 1985 I've been making a lot more.

CS: What are you producing now?

DW: About 700 gallons. In 1985 I started spending a lot of time in Lake County.

CS: Have you any grapes crop on your place yet?

DW: No, not yet. This is just their second year.

CS: What have your primary grape sources been in the last few years?

DW: In 1987 I had four tons of Chardonnay off the Mayers' place. After malo-lactic goes through that wine makes a good champagne. We've made some from it, and we're going to make some more.

In 1988 we got Riesling and Zinfandel from Wirz. And I got a little Cabernet Pfeffer, but it was from a poor part of the vineyard.

In 1991 we started buying from Lake County. This year we got all Lake except just a ton from the Wirz place. He died after the 1992 vintage.

CS: What part of your production do you figure you and your friends drink?

DW: About 200 gallons a year.

CS: Just like a good American family during Prohibition.

Tell me the story of the Lake Count operation.

DW: I bought 170 acres at about 3500 feet elevation in 1977. Very picturesque with a lot of room for vineyard. We have a micro-climate there which is really more moderate than down by the lake. We hardly ever get a frosty before Thanksgiving. Summer days there is no fog, such as you might get in the Napa Valley. The sun is out all the time, but the temperature rarely go over 90 degrees. On a summer day we'll usually be 16 degrees cooler than Lakeport. We have a good exposure on a hillside facing about south-southwest.

CS: What grapes have you put in?

DW: A half acre each of Riesling, Chardonnay, Grenache, Pinot noir, Zinfandel, and a little Cabernet Pfeffer. We like that for rosé. I've made rosé from Cabernet Sauvignon, but I didn't care for it. I use a cool fermentation and don't get that peppery flavor from the Pfeffer.

So we have over three acres planted. This is experimental now. I have great hopes for Pinot noir up there. The soil is about neutral, 6.8 pH. I think it will be OK.

This year when I went through I took all the little bunches off. It helps the vine get started. It's pretty dry up there, and some of them are struggling. We have to keep the weeds down. The soil is very deep-- thirty feet in some places.

CS: How was the land used before?

DW: It was forest.

CS: Are there any other vineyards at that elevation up there?

DW: Not there.

CS: What's going to happen in 1995 when you get five tons of grapes off that land?

DW: We may have a facility up there. But we want to build a house first. There's a little mountain cabin and bunkhouse up there now.

CS: What about birds of there in the forest?

DW: We'll have to see, but there aren't very many birds up there now. But that may change.

CS: Down near the lake it can be like something something out of Alfred Hitchcock. I've never seen such birds.

So in the future, if you had your way, Wine by Wheeler would be in Lake County, and you'd be living up there and making the wine there.

DW: That's it.

CS: What happens here?

DW: I may have a way of keeping the caves. But they aren't on my property. I did lease them. And I have a lean on two acres here.

CS: These are sort of historic. There may be other caves in the Santa Cruz Mountains, but none

like these with their history.

Tell me about the 1993 vintage up here. When I got here today there were the remains of a party out here, and there has obviously been a lot of red grapes just pressed, from the number of plastic bags full of pomace.

DW: 10/4/93 Picked up a ton of grapes from Alanso in that little red truck. When we got to Lower Lake the engine started making bad noises. So Dave Howard came up and towed it home, grapes and all. They were Chardonnay. On 10/9/93 we picked up a ton of Riesling. 10/30/93 Judy and I hauled down a ton of Cabernet from Upper Lake. The next Sunday Dave came up and got the Zinfandel from Kelseyville. So we had four plus tons. Yesterday we pressed the Cabernet and the Zin.

You can see from all these bottles here why sometimes we get into 200 gallons a year. The Zin is in the garbage bags and you can see the young lady over there breaking up the Cab pomace from the press.

CS: How many people were up here yesterday?

JW: Seven.

DW: We usually have a big lunch towards the end of the day.

JW: Everyone has some specialty they bring. It ends up being a feast.

DW: Dave Howard and Sherry Martin are really interested in the operation here.

CS: None of this wine will go into regular retail channels?

DW: Not any more.

JW: Friends and word-of-mouth.

DW: We haven't sent out a brochure in years.

At this point Wheeler goes into the lower cave and brings out a bottle of sparkling wine, which he disgorges on the spot. It is from the 1987 Chardonnay. He uses no dosage. He pours four glasses around and we drink it down. The flavor of pure Chardonnay is remarkable.

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