

John Spezia

There are few people who can look back on the wineries and vineyards of the Santa Cruz Mountains in the 1920s and earlier. John Spezia is one of them. He was born in the Bonny Doon area in 1905 and has lived and worked in and around that district and Santa Cruz since his youth.

I interviewed Mr. Spezia at his home in the town of Santa Cruz.

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March 10, 1993

CS: First let's have some early biographical information.

JS: I was born in the Bonny Doon area on January 28, 1905. My folks were from Italy, from the northern part. It was in the Piedmont area. It was a little town called Ciliano.

CS: Did you go to school up there?

JS: Yes. I went to the old Bald Mountain School, which burned down in 1923. After I finished there I worked. We lived too far out for me to go on to the high school.

CS: What did you do in the 1920s?

JS: I worked at some of the ranches around here, farming, picking grapes, picking apples, pruning. Everything you could think of. I worked a lot in the hay fields. I was working on a hay press when I was eleven years old.

CS: When we were talking you mentioned something to me about playing the saxophone.

JS: I moved down here in 1923. First I moved to Felton and went to work on one of the subdivisions there. Forest Lakes it was called. That was a big thing, these subdivisions, in the Felton area.

But I learned the saxophone up in Eureka. That was in 1925. I was working in the evergreens up there, ferns and such, gathering them out in the woods. We also got a lot of "wild lemon." I was only up there about six months, when I came back down here. While I was up there I lived in a hotel and paid a dollar a day for board and room. I was making about \$4.50 a day. About two blocks from this hotel where we were staying, where we had to walk to get our pickups we parked, there was a pawn shop. Every day I'd walk by that place and look at this saxophone in the window. So I said to my partner, "I want to buy that saxophone." So I went in there, but they wanted \$60 for it. That was a lot of money in those days. After talking to them two or three times I got them down to \$40. And I bought it.

CS: What kind was it? I ask since I'm an old sax player from way back.

JS: It was a C Melody. It was a Buscher.

CS: I know it well. I had an E-flat alto Buscher. But, it was a C Melody. I hated that saxophone. I had a terrible time with the music.

JS: Later on I changed to an E-flat alto.

CS: That's much better. Well, I want to come back to this later, because you used to play around here in the twenties, Right?

JS: Oh, yes.

CS: What did you do when you came back here?

JS: I continued working with evergreens for a while. That was until the depression days. That was from 1925 until about 1928. During the depression I went down to Watsonville. I worked down there for about 15 cents an hour. I also worked off and on in the Bonny Doon area until the early forties.

CS: So this would be when you had the experienced working in the vineyards up there.

JS: Well yes, but I was working in the vineyards up there when I was a kid.

CS: Let's go up to the wine country and talk about some of the winegrowing operations up there. First, how about the Ben Lomond Wine Company.

JS: I remember it very well because when I was a little boy my dad worked there. And I can remember going up there with my mother in a horse and buggy and picking him up. It was on the Empire Grade, below the Locatelli place, maybe three miles south of there towards Santa Cruz.

CS: Was there another plant down below?

JS: In later years they had one on Love Creek, out of Ben Lomond.

CS: I had thought that there was a railroad line that served the main plant, but there couldn't have been a railroad running up onto Empire Grade.

JS: There was, but it was strictly a logging line.

CS: So they had to use wagons right down to the end.

JS: I think so.

CS: What did the place look like?

JS: It was in two sections, one on each side of the Empire Grade. Most of the vineyard and the cellars where they made the wine were on the west side. On the east side was quite a bit of vineyard too and the big old ranch house. All together it was really a pretty big place.¹

CS: I've read that they could hold a million gallons of wine. Does that sound reasonable?

JS: Yes it does. I can remember going into the main winery and it was pretty immense. One thing up there, you had to look out for rattlesnakes. They used to call it the "Rattlesnake Ranch."

They had lots of very large redwood storage tanks.

¹ For a good photo of the winery see Michael Holland's *Late Harvest* (Santa Cruz, 1983): 11.

CS: How much do you think they had in vineyards around the place?

JS: I'd say about fifty acres.

CS: When you were young, going down Empire Grade from the Ben Lomond place were there other vineyards as you went down?

JS: The next one was the Gambotti ranch. That was a big operation, and they made a lot of wine there. That was Dr. Gambotti. I don't think he made any wine, but someone renting the property did.

CS: That was near where the airport is today.

JS: Yes. They had some big tanks there. That was before the first World War.

CS: What did Felton look like back then? Were there any vineyards?

JS: Not much. There was one little vineyard just off the Ice Cream Grade. I think that Bonnetti owned that land.

CS: I wondered if there were any vineyards there, because that was where the Hallcrest place was.

JS: Yes, it was near there. It was later the Felton Empire place.

CS: Do you remember the Quistorf and Wildhagen places when you were young?

JS: Sure. They were right next to each other.

CS: Wildhagen had a winery didn't he? Was he a German?

JS: Yes, I think so.

CS: Do you ever recall Quistorf making wine?

JS: Just for himself.

CS: That's what I figured. He mentioned a couple of barrels, but that's about it.

JS: Luis Iacopetti was up there to. He had a ranch in Bonny Doon. It was right about where the store is at now. On Ocean View and Pine Flat Road. He didn't have a big vineyard. Probably five acres, maybe ten. He made lots of wine.

CS: It figures. Quistorf sold him an awfully large amount of grapes.

JS: At the time he was buying all those grapes from Quistorf, he didn't even have a vineyard then.

CS: I see. That was back about 1910 or 1912.

JS: Iacopetti planted that vineyard himself. I'm sure of that.

CS: We haven't talked about Locatelli. Were they making wine up there before World War I?

JS: Oh, sure. There was an older winery. But I don't remember it too well. We didn't go up there

very much. I had relations with Locatelli because he was interested in hauling timber. That was Dante's father.²

Below the Locatelli place was the Renaldo vineyard. They had a big vineyard before the war. And there was another one right next to it run by Carlo Saroglia. There was a little winery there. It wasn't a registered winery, but everybody was making wine in those days.

Guiseppe Locatelli owned a big hotel in Boulder Creek. Lots of workers lived there. They did an awful lot of hauling. So that's where a lot of the wine went. They did a lot of hauling down to Boulder Creek, because the railroad used to go all the way in there to Boulder Creek. They made wine for the hotel and lots of other people in the area. But we didn't go up there much back in the horse and buggy days. That was a tough haul up that grade.

Dante Locatelli married one of the Bertolli girls. Her father owned the vineyard up on Pine Flat Road. I think Dante is about my age.

CS: He's two years younger than you.

There's nothing left of the old Ben Lomond Wine Company, is there?

JS: No, it's all gone. All there is left is a row of chestnut trees. You can still see them today. Unless they cut them down in the last few years.

CS: Good. Next time we'll talk about how it was around here in the twenties and thirties.

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March 23, 1993

CS: Was there plenty to drink around here during Prohibition?

JS: Oh, you could get drinks almost anyplace you went. But you had to know the people who had it. Most places, they just had wine, and some beer. But some places had "jackass" brandy and whiskey.

CS: Was this wine you could buy, was that being made by lots of different people?

JS: There were lots of places making it in the Bonny Doon area, on a small scale. But not the Ben Lomond Winery. They were closed down.

The Martin Winery I know mostly by hearsay. My uncle Peter Spezia ran it for a while. There was a trail from that place they used to use to haul wine over to Felton. It saved them having to go all the way around and down the Ice Cream Grade.

CS: Would you see wine and beer on the tables in Felton? There was a lot of industry and a lot of workers there back then.

JS: They had a big lime kiln up from there, one of the biggest in the area.

CS: Ah, there are many mentions in the Quistorf journals about sending grapes to Lime Kiln. So I guess they made wine for the workers right on the spot.

² Guiseppe Locatelli bought the McLaughlin homestead and winery near Eagle Rock in 1898. His son Dante was born there in 1907 and later became the winemaker. See *Late Harvest*, 33.

JS: Sure. Lots of places like that would have a little place where they could make wine. All you needed was about three fifty gallon barrels to handle a ton of grapes.

CS: Did the Wildhagen Winery continue making any wine?

JS: They sold some wine. As long as you were small you could do it. Everybody could make two hundreds gallons of wine legally. So from that there would be plenty of wine around.

CS: Right, and nobody could tell which two hundred gallons you had at any moment.

JS: And lots of people were making wine now who had never made wine here before. And prices for wine at first jumped way up, to about a dollar a gallon. So there was some good money to be made selling wine at those prices.

Carlo Saroglia was running a winery near the Renaldi place, below where the Christmas tree farm is today on Empire Grade. Prohibition agents busted up his casks there. He was trying to make wine on a big scale. He thought he was going to make a fortune. Instead of selling all those grapes he had on the place he was going for the wine. But even if it got to a hundred dollars a ton you can still do better making wine if you get a dollar a gallon and can get 150 gallons a ton. And with some water and sugar you can get 200 gallons.

CS: Who bothered people most up here, Federal, state, county officers?

JS: Mostly it was the state. But it was the biggest racket you ever saw in your life. If you paid off the right people, if there was going to be a raid, whoever was doing it, you'd find out.

CS: I know the Bargettos and Locatellis were busted. Ralph Bargetto's cousin has clippings. It was embarrassing but they saved them anyway.

Did Iacopetti keep making wine?

JS: He was making wine. But I never heard that he was busted.

CS: But I know that there were a lot of grapes sold and shipped out. Did you see much of it?

JS: I saw a lot of that. I saw it in Felton when my uncle had the old Capelli place. That was the vineyard that sat back on the hill there. But this was a different uncle. That was Dominic Bogiatto, on my mother's side. Bogiatto married a Capelli daughter and he ran the place. Mrs. Capelli was still alive and she actually still owned it.

Living in Felton at that time I saw a lot of that shipping of grapes. I helped my uncle pick his grapes. We put them in smaller boxes, maybe 30-35 pounds.

CS: They made up the boxes right there? Brought in the wood shook for them?

JS: Yes. Right there. He had about 15 acres. It was all on the hillside. They'd take the boxes down to the Felton depot. At that time the train ran all the way through there. They hauled them there in wagons. A few had trucks, but mostly wagons. They came in from all around.

CS: So Felton was the shipping point for all this area around Bonny Doon. That makes sense. Why take them into Santa Cruz? But what if you were in the Vine Hill area?

JS: Then you'd have to take them down to Santa Cruz or Soquel.

CS: Did you know anything about how they worked the deal to sell the grapes for shipping?

JS: It was all arranged in advance, but I don't remember very well, if I ever knew it. I was only a teenager then. But I can remember my uncle taking the grapes down to a box car that would be sitting on a siding there. And everybody did that. They'd go up to the Bay Area, to the Oakland side and San Francisco side and sell them out of the box cars to home winemakers. But some of it went east, all over.

CS: What varieties did you see most being shipped out?

JS: Mostly it was Zinfandel and Charbono. There was also some Sweetwater, Verdel, a little Muscat. And there was Grey Duchess (Grey Riesling). Quistorf and Wildhagen had a lot of that.

CS: Jim Beauregard still has one of those sitting up on the ranch; it's getting on to close to 100 years old. Did you ever hear of any Cabernet?

JS: Yes, but very little. What they called Carbenet.

CS: Quistorf had some and that's the way he spelled it in his journal.

JS: Charbono made more wine. It was really juicy. That's why it was so popular. You could get at least 10-20 gallons more per ton. Zinfandel here was also pretty juicy.

CS: But did you see very many of those white grapes being shipped out.

JS: No. Not very many.

CS: How about Grenache, Grenachio? Carignane, Carignano?

JS: Sure, but not around here. They would be over in the Santa Clara Valley.

CS: How about Alicante Bouschet?

JS: Yes, but that didn't go over very well. It wasn't any good except for color. Lousy grape and good color. But it had a lot of juice too. But you could cut the wine with a knife. You couldn't drink it.

CS: Did you ever hear of people grafting over other varieties to the Alicante?

JS: Yes, very well. Charlie Saroglia grafted most of their vines over to Alicante.

CS: No one has been able to tell me anything specific before. But I'm reading these Quistorf journals and suddenly they're talking about Alicantes. Where did they come from? Now I know.

I noticed in the Quistorf records that suddenly during Prohibition he's selling lots of one and two ton lots to many different people.

JS: Sure, lots of people are making their own wine now.

CS: Mostly Italians?

JS: Mostly, but there were others. The Germans made their own wine too. And also the Portuguese here. They made a lighter colored wine, and pressed it right away. But it was just as strong. But it didn't keep as good. There were a lot of Portuguese people around here. We Italians used to let the red wine sit about 21 days on the pulp.

CS: You made wine too.

JS: Sure. During Prohibition and before. And I helped my uncle make his wine. He had a crusher. But when we were kids we'd take our shoes off, wash up, and jump right into the washtub full of grapes. Then we'd dump it into a barrel, with the head off, to ferment. We had these big puncheons that would hold about 170 gallons, so that would take care of about a ton of grapes. There would be a spigot on the bottom and you'd draw the wine off into a 50 gallon barrel. Then it would go through a settling process. We'd leave it for one year. The following spring we'd rack it off into new barrels. Then you washed the barrels out again and get ready for the next year.

This would be a mixture of grapes. My dad wouldn't make a barrel of wine unless he had at least three different kinds of grapes. We had our own little vineyard when I was a kid. Once in a while, when we didn't have enough white grapes, he'd go and buy some.

CS: That's the Tuscan thing, putting the white grapes with the red.

How about the wine at your uncle's? That's different from a couple of kids jumping around in a tub.

JS: As I said, he had a crusher, and a bigger tank. At the Capelli ranch they always made wine and sold a lot of wine. I didn't drink a lot of wine in those years. But my father would drink a gallon a day. It got to be too much. And my grandfather Bogiatto, he never drank water.

There was always a second crop of little bunches of grapes that you didn't pick the first time through. So after we made the first crop you wouldn't press it real hard, and we'd put in those second crop grapes. Zinfandel and Charbono both give good second crops here. And you could put in some water and we'd make an extra 50 or 75 gallons of wine, what we'd call "second wine." In Italian "pichetto." That's the wine they'd take to work with them, instead of drinking water. My dad used to say that water was only good for frogs.

But wine was not the big thing of my uncle. He had cows and sold milk. There was a lot more on the Capelli ranch. I don't think he was making much more than the regular 200 gallons per year. He had a thousand gallon tank, but he used it for water.

CS: So the Capelli place had been a real winery.

JS: Well, not really. Lots of people made plenty of wine, but lots of them didn't have a license to sell it. That thousand gallon tank was probably his fermentation tank, and it would hold maybe five tons of grapes. So he'd end up making maybe 700 gallons of wine.

CS: What about brandy? And whiskey too?

JS: There were lots of big stills. I had one almost next door here in Santa Cruz. I didn't know anyone who made a whole lot of brandy or grappa. Lots of the people in the hills had little stills they'd make brandy with. And lots of them made their own grappa from the pomace after they made the wine.

CS: What did those stills look like? Were they these little single coil models?

JS: That's right. My wife's dad used to make them; he was a plumber. They'd hold about five gallons or so. But I'm not an authority on making grappa or brandy.

CS: Did you see much real brandy.

JS: No, not much. But there were a couple of guys up in the Bonny Doon area, they made brandy

out of regular wine that had soured a little bit. That went on all the time, Prohibition or not. There are still people who make it.

I was talking about Santa Cruz. We were living in town, and there used to be a brewery there before Prohibition. I remember coming down before then with my dad when there would be special doings up at Bonny Doon and get a half a keg of beer there. And on the side of the building there was a place where a brass pipe was, and it had a spigot on the outside. Anybody could walk right up and have a drink of beer. Us kids weren't supposed to use it, but my cousin and I would go over there and hijack a glass of beer or two.

We moved there after we came from Felton. They had a big still in there where the bottling works were. That place was never busted. They'd close down from time to time, and then they'd reopen again. We were living right there. My brother-in-law had a hotel here down by the wharf. And they'd sell booze over the bar. They'd get the booze from this still at five dollars a five gallon jug. And they'd cut that. The house we were living in had a big basement. They put the whiskey down there in barrels. Charcoal lined. They wouldn't touch it for six months. We could get all the liquor we wanted, and it was very good. And they'd let us have some, just to keep us quiet.

CS: When Repeal came did you see Bargetto wine here?

JS: Yes. Their wine was in town.

CS: Did you see Locatelli wine as a brand then.

JS: No. Mostly they sold in bulk. Later there was that little winery over in Felton, Hallcrest.

CS: When he started up, did you know, people around here know, what he was doing?

JS: No. We thought he was crazy to be selling wine at that price, so high.

CS: After Repeal, who do you think of in the Bonny Doon area who are still growing grapes, other than Clinton Quistorf.

JS: Iacopetti still had a vineyard in the forties. I worked a lot of those vineyards in the thirties, disking and working there. I worked for Iacopetti.

CS: What did he do with his grapes?

JS: He had a small vineyard. Mr. Gai had a vineyard there too. He bootlegged his wine too. He was right next to the Iacopetti place. In fact, he used to run the Iacopetti ranch. That was before Repeal. He went on into the thirties. Bertolli had vines there too. Wildhagen was still there, but the Cerps had bought that ranch later. He was from the city. He was the one who split the Wildhagen place up.

CS: What happened to the Gombatti place?

JS: The Ottavianos ran that ranch for Dr. Gombatti. Gombatti was a sort of absentee owner. Carlo Saroglia married one of the Ottaviano daughters. Saroglia left the Gombatti place in the forties. This is the place that is today the airport up there. Where the airport is was all vineyard. It was a good sized vineyard. I'd say it was thirty or forty acres.

Listen, why don't we just take a half day and we'll go up there and I'll show you where all these places were.

CS: Great. We'll do it. I'll drive and I'll make up a big map of the area and we'll put all these

places on the map. It's perfect. We'll make up a John Spezia map and put it right in the Bonny Doon section of this thing.

When does the Gombatti place stop being a ranch? In the forties?

JS: Yes, that's about right. Late forties and early fifties.

CS: How about the Saroglia place?

JS: Eventually they just let that vineyard go. Same thing with the Renaldi place, where the Christmas trees are.

Now the Iacopetti place is a turkey farm. When Luis Iacopetti died his son ran it, and then they put in a big turkey farm.

And there was the the Le Roi place. Eventually they sold it to Morelli, the one who had the cash store in Davenport.

CS: What happened to the Gai place? Is that part of the turkey operation now?

JS: No. That's on the other side of the hill. They sold it years ago.

Dan Studemann had a vineyard, about ten acres, back in the thirties. That is on that old road they used to call Ocean View Drive.

My grandfather Bogiatto had a small vineyard off Smith Grade in the Bald Mountain area, about three acres. That was Dominic's father, Guiseppie Bogiatto. There's a new vineyard in there now, that went in just a few years ago. Jim Beauregard will tell you about it.

Bonnetti had a vineyard on the Smith Grade also. It was a big vineyard. And he had a place above Felton with a small vineyard. They sold it to a guy named Peter Rocchi. And there was William Rossi. They must have had ten acres of vines. All those vineyards were close together, in a sort of cluster. And John Moretti had a vineyard, which Rossi eventually bought. They had about five acres of vines. That's about all the vineyards up there.

CS: I recall Fritz Quistorf writing about the Moretti place in his journals, and that would have been before 1920.

Let's talk about your musical life during the Prohibition years.

JS: During those years there were little bars all over the place. I played in all the little honky-tonks, from here to Salinas.

CS: Up and down the coast. How about back in the mountain? Were there many back there?

JS: Oh, yes. There was Mt. Madonna Inn, up behind Watsonville. That was what they called a "respectable place."

CS: Yes, but I've heard you could get a drink there. Right?

JS: Sure. But most of the places I played were up the coast, above Santa Cruz up toward Davenport. There were little hotels with bars. They'd have dances up there. And all those big farms up there had a mess hall and a dormitory. I'd say that 90% of them were Italians.

After working six days on the ranches they had to have some entertainment.

CS: Bargetto told me that was an important part of their trade. They'd haul barrels of wine down

there.

JS: There would be dances every Saturday night. I also played down at Moss Landing. And this side of Watsonville on the old highway. The Laguna Inn was a little hotel on the coast road. That was up toward Davenport toward Half Moon Bay.

CS: Where did the girls come from?

JS: They came from all over. If they couldn't get enough of them they'd go over to Watsonville and get a bunch of prostitutes. But nobody really would know that they were prostitutes. That was a big thing for me, playing at those dances. We'd get five dollars a night.

CS: When I was in high school in the forties I played alto sax in a dance band and we'd make five dollars a night too. But your five dollars back in the thirties were worth more than ours in the forties. But five dollars was a lot of money.

JS: I'll say it was, when you were making 15 cents an hour.

CS: People could not believe that I was making five dollars for working three or four hours. You were cleaning up. When I was doing it minimum wage was fifty cents. And when you were doing it it was two bits.

JS: There would be two of us. I'd have drummer, or an accordion. And when midnight would come they'd say "You can't quit now." And someone would pass the hat. We'd end up sometimes making fifteen dollars a night. In the summer months sometimes they'd have barbecues. And these clubs, like the Moose and the Eagles, would have dances too.

CS: What were they drinking?

JS: Mostly wine, and some beer. And there'd be moonshine whiskey. Sometimes these things would go on until 4:00 in the morning.

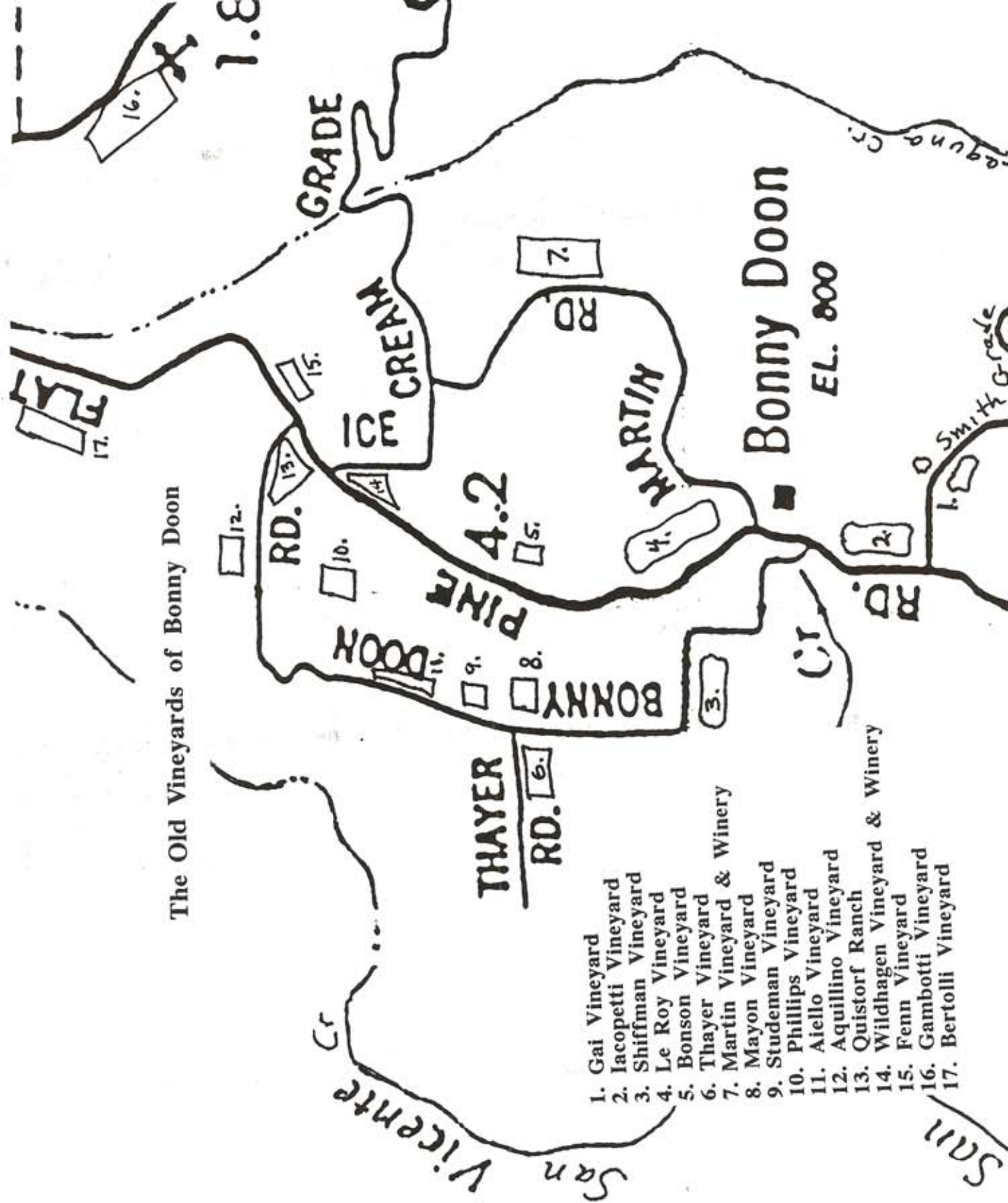
CS: Did you ever go back up to Ben Lomond or Boulder Creek to any dances?

JS: Yes to go to dances, and to Felton, but I didn't play up there.

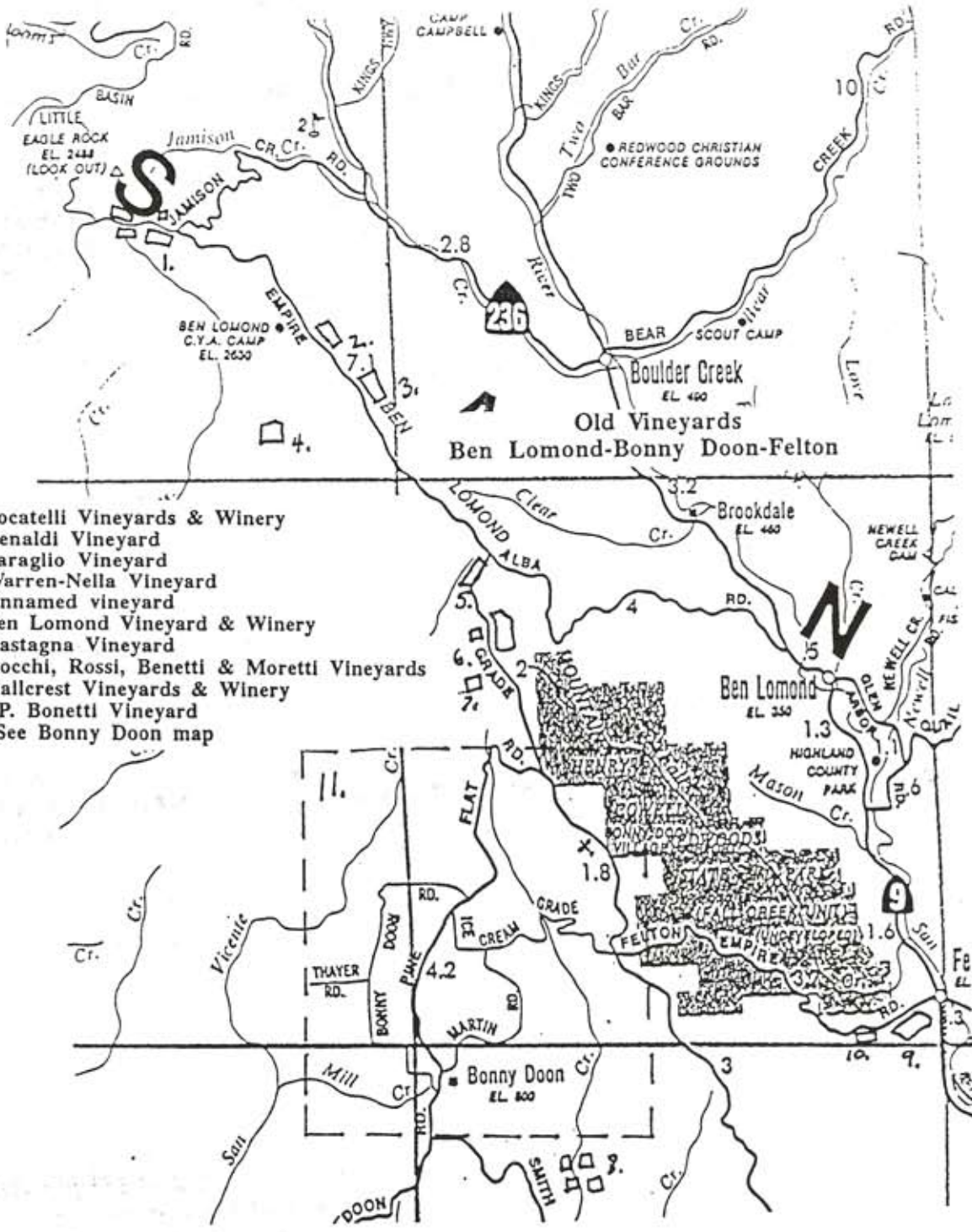
CS: Well, the next thing we have to do is go out and make that map.

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The Old Vineyards of Bonny Doon



1. Gai Vineyard
2. Iacopetti Vineyard
3. Shiffman Vineyard
4. Le Roy Vineyard
5. Bonson Vineyard
6. Thayer Vineyard
7. Martin Vineyard & Winery
8. Mayon Vineyard
9. Studeman Vineyard
10. Phillips Vineyard
11. Aiello Vineyard
12. Aquillino Vineyard
13. Quistorf Ranch
14. Wildhagen Vineyard & Winery
15. Fenn Vineyard
16. Gambotti Vineyard
17. Bertolli Vineyard



1. Locatelli Vineyards & Winery
2. Renaldi Vineyard
3. Saraglio Vineyard
4. Warren-Nella Vineyard
5. Unnamed vineyard
6. Ben Lomond Vineyard & Winery
7. Castagna Vineyard
8. Rocchi, Rossi, Benetti & Moretti Vineyards
9. Hallerest Vineyards & Winery
10. P. Bonetti Vineyard
11. See Bonny Doon map