

Scott Knight Smith

I interviewed *Mr. Scott Knight Smith (SKS)* on July 22, 1992 at his home in Saratoga on Pierce Road, where his vineyard still stands in fairly good condition. There looked to be a fair crop of grapes.

Mr. Knight Smith was born in San Francisco in 1902, attending Lick-Wilmerding High School there. He graduated from Stanford in 1924 and went on to study law at Harvard. He practiced law in San Francisco for many years and came to the Santa Clara Valley in the summer of 1945.

CLS: I want to begin by asking you about the origins of your vineyard here.

SKS: I lived in San Francisco all my life, but we never really could sit outside in the evening. By four o'clock in the afternoon the fog is coming in and the winds are blowing. I wanted to live someplace where we could be comfortable and enjoy a warm summer day. So we came to Saratoga in 1945 and bought this place a couple of years later. At the time it was a prune orchard. It was cared for by Louie Bonnet, a neighbor up the road here about 1,000 feet. He was a Frenchman and he had a son named Frank.

CLS: Vince Garrod mentions a Bonnet family up here in the Congress Springs area who raised fruit and grapes.

SKS: That could be, but Louie lived right over here. He had a jeep and used to patrol the whole countryside here with a shotgun. He would ride down to the creek, through everybody's orchard. He was policing everything here.

CLS: What did this area look like here at that time?

SKS: There weren't very many homes then. From the Saratoga-Sunnyvale Road there was Mr. Husted and four others, including myself. Beyond Louie's place there were very few people at all.

CLS: What was the land use here mostly?

SKS: This was all prune orchards. It had all belonged to Mr. Husted and his wife originally. He lived just across the road from us here. This used to be his wife's place right here. She sold it to a man in Saratoga, a house painter, but his wife didn't want to live far out of town, so he sold it to me and my wife. There were eight and a half acres here that we bought.

CLS: And you still own the same eight and a half acres.

SKS: That's right.

CLS: When did you build this house?

SKS: In 1947 it was started.

CLS: Was there any structure on the property when you bought it?

SKS: No. It was just a plain prune orchard.

CLS: This really looks very Hispanic. Are these real adobe bricks?

SKS: Yes. They are wonderful. They keep the house 15 degrees cooler on a hot day. In the winter it's really warmer. I came to build it with adobe because after the war it was difficult to buy regular building materials.

CLS: Let's go to the vineyard. When did you plant it?

SKS: That was planted in 1949. We put in about five acres. There were four varieties. There was a bit of romance to the selection, I think. I wanted Cabernet and I liked Pinot noir. And we were very partial to Rhine wines, so we planted some Johannisberger Riesling. And there was also Chardonnay. As I say, it was something of a romantic selection.

CLS: Why did you plant grapes here?

SKS: At first the place was in prunes. Louie Bonnet kept the place for us at first. We sharecropped it with him. Frank did a lot of the work; he was the younger man. Frank pruned it and disked it. But the income dropped drastically. Prunes here in the Santa Clara Valley were on the way out. I couldn't carry the ladders around and prune it, but I thought, you know, it's awfully nice to live in a vineyard and be surrounded by grape vines. I could prune a vineyard myself.

CLS: Were you a wine drinker then?

SKS: Oh, yes. That's one of the reasons we planted grapes. But I might have left the prunes in if I'd known how much work they are.

CLS: So you weren't a fanatic wine drinker who came up here with a keen vision of being a winegrower?

SKS: No, not a fanatic, but I was a romantic wine drinker. I liked wine and I liked the idea of it. I enjoyed the sociability of it. I first drank wine in the twenties. I bought my first French wines in 1933 at the end of Prohibition. At that time the French wines, compared to now, were quite inexpensive. We used to drink all the fine French wines here. I built a little cement cellar down under the hillside to keep them in. It was a very gracious life. In the evenings after the day was over my wife and I would sit out in one of the patios around the house and have a glass of wine. It was a lot of fun.

CLS: Did you drink California wine at all in the early years?

SKS: My favorite was Georges De Latour's Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. It was a delightful wine. We bought that one by the cases. Around here we drank everything. We drank Almaden. We drank them all; we were very interested in wine. We liked to see what they all were like.

CLS: When you decided to plant grapes, who did you talk to?

SKS: I had met Martin Ray. He is the source of some of my advice, which was not much. I went up to Davis and talked to Dr. Winkler and went out in the vineyards with him. He had the scions cut for those grapes that I mentioned, except the Cabernet. There really wasn't much advice at all. I did read the University's pamphlets on viticulture. Martin Ray had said to me, "If you'll plant these varieties, I'll buy them from you." The one I was really interested in was the Cabernet Sauvignon. So we went up to the old Rixford Vineyard in Woodside. A friend of mine was Henry Rixford in San Francisco. He was a cousin of the people who had the vineyard. But I didn't know the ones who were making the

wine there in the thirties.

CLS: You wouldn't have met Emmet H. Rixford, then.

SKS: I knew a young Emmet Rixford, but I never knew the originals down there, unless I met them at Dr. Rixford's place in the city. But I don't remember them. As a side light I recall that I bought a lot of Rixford Cabernet from Mario Gemello in those early days.

CLS: From Gemello. It was La Questa, from the Rixford place?

SKS: Yes. I had a friend who had a bottle. We drank it together and I said THAT'S GOOD. So I went up there to Gemello's and bought a number of cases. It was rather inexpensive. It was very tannic. This was after 1947, but I am not sure of the year.

CLS: I have to make sure to ask Mario Gemello about that. You think he got that wine from the Rixfords.

SKS: I was under the impression that this was wine that the Rixfords had made, or was made at the Rixford place. Gemello sold it as La Questa.

CLS: Bob Mullen made wine from grapes up there and sold it as La Questa. But he started in the sixties.

SKS: He came later.

CLS: Well, I know that the Rixfords made wine up there in the thirties because I have an empty bottle of 1938 Rixford La Questa Cabernet. We drank it in the seventies. The Gemellos must have bought that.

SKS: That's what I think. I once bought fifteen cases at one time. I kept it for years. We'd drink it every day. It was wonderful.

CLS: Well, you were a fanatic.

SKS: (Laughs)

CLS: Let's get back to your vineyard. So you got the budwood for your Cabernet from the Rixford estate in Woodside.

SKS: Right. We went up there one morning and just cut it.

CLS: Well, then you must have had it budded onto rootstock, didn't you?

SKS: Yes. It was St. George. Rupestris St. George. I think we hired someone to do it for us. Martin Ray knew someone who could do it. There was an Italian down in San Jose who knew how to do it. And he planted them, also, on ten foot centers.

CLS: I see they are head-pruned now. Were they originally that way?

SKS: We ran them up six foot at first. Then we cut them back.

CLS: You didn't put them on trellises.

SKS: No. We'd loop the cane back to the trunk.

CLS: So you started out with that looping cane approach very early.

SKS: Well, I didn't originate it. I read about it somewhere.

CLS: That's one of the first things that attracted me to your vineyard here when I used to ride by on my bike in the early sixties. I'd never seen that before, the looping cane without using a trellis. But then I hadn't seen a lot then.

SKS: We did that from the very beginning.

CLS: There are still a lot of the original vines out there?

SKS: Yes. Most of them left are originals.

CLS: What kind of yields to you get today?

SKS: I'm not sure, but I'd say about a ton and a half. The best we ever got was about two and a half tons per acre. I'm not sure if we ever got three tons; I do know that one year we really got a lot.

CLS: Has it always been dry-farmed?

SKS: Yes.

CLS: Who got your grapes.

SKS: Martin Ray said he'd buy them. He did for a few years and then one day just as we were getting ready for harvesting he came by and said that he wasn't going to take them. So we were stuck.

CLS: He hadn't given you any advance warning.

SKS: No. But my wife was up at her club in San Francisco one day and afterwards she dropped in to Louis Benoist's office there and talked to him. He said Almaden would take the grapes. So he took the grapes that year and cared for the vineyard, as well. He sharecropped it. He did it a few years in the fifties. Then I sold them to Ed Mirassou over at Evergreen. We had been over buying some of his wine and told him we had some grapes and he said that, sure, he'd love to buy them. That was in the late fifties, maybe the early sixties.

CLS: I used to go over and buy wine there in the late fifties and early sixties. They sell you the wine for a dollar a bottle, and then give you another bottle you chose free. The vintner's dozen.

SKS: That's right. I still have some of that dollar a bottle wine in my cellar.

CLS: Since you sold to both Benoist and Mirassou, am I right in thinking that these grapes, particularly the Pinot and Chardonnay were going to sparkling wine?

SKS: I have no idea. He took care of the place; it was the same as with Almaden.

CLS: In the early days did you do a lot of the work yourself?

SKS: Yes. I did the pruning and the disking. Then later, after Mirassou, Mario Gemello came along and took care of it and I sold the grapes to him. He sharecropped it for many years. He put this Cabernet into some of his wines. We sold to him for many years.

CLS: Who gets the grapes now?

SKS: After Gemello they went to Dan Gehrs up at Congress Springs. We sold them all to him. He sharecropped with me also. Then after Dan there were about three or four years when we had a couple of younger fellows take care of them.

CLS: I wonder if one of them was Rick Anzalone. He used to do that a lot. He was a former student of mine in Almaden. His dad grew grapes there.

SKS: I'm not sure. I don't recall the names. It was for a short time.

CLS: Who gets the grapes now?

SKS: Katherine Kennedy.

CLS: But does she take the White Riesling also?

SKS: Oh, the Riesling is all gone. The deer killed them. Same with the Chardonnay. We haven't had any for some years. They just cleaned them out.

CLS: Do they go more for the white varieties? That's strange.

SKS: No. They just have been working in this direction steadily and got the Riesling and the Chardonnay first. But we don't have Pinot noir anymore either. I just have the Cabernet. I budded the Pinot to Cabernet. We're all Cabernet now.

CLS: So, Katherine Kennedy's Santa Cruz Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon has Knight Smith fruit in it.

SKS: I'm not sure, but they've taken beautiful care of the vines.

CLS: In the old days where were there other vineyards around here?

SKS: There was the Pourroy place, Congress Springs later. Old man Pourroy had those vineyards and made wine.

CLS: When you were here?

SKS: Sure. I used to talk to Mr. Pourroy. It was really nice there.

CLS: Now that was Pierre Pourroy. Peter. Did you call him Pierre or Peter?

SKS: I called him Pierre.

CLS: Anyone else.

SKS: Well, I remember when they planted the Ridge Vineyard. Mr. Short. I went up there when he was planting the vineyard. That was after I had planted this place. He planted it up there on a contour basis. He had a member of the crew take an iron crowbar and he'd whang it down and make a hole and then stick the rootstock in that hole. It was a pretty big operation then.

CLS: You actually met Mr. Short up there.

SKS: Oh yes, we spent a whole morning up there.

CLS: Did you ever go up there other times?

SKS: Oh yes. I used to go up there and buy wine. I bought it from Ridge then, in the sixties. And I knew the Picchettis, but just to talk to. But I never bought wine from them.

CLS: Did you ever have much to do with Martin Ray after he decided not to buy your grapes?

SKS: He never told me why he didn't want them. That was in the late fifties. We didn't see him much after that.

CLS: Did you know him very well?

SKS: Well, I've been to his house for dinner.

CLS: I wonder, in those early years, did he seem to you to be a fairly stable person? People talk about him changing, when he was going through all those law suits.

SKS: He seemed pretty stable to me. But in the later years I never saw him at all. He was self-centered, but pretty stable.

CLS: What is going to happen to the vineyard eventually?

SKS: It will cease to exist. Either the deer will obliterate it or the place will be turned into houses.

CLS: Do you still drink wine?

SKS: Not as much. There comes a time when you don't want to drink quite as thoroughly as formerly.

CLS: I know what you mean. Many thanks. I think we made a good tape.

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