

## The Mikulaco Family

The Mikulaco family has resided on the Monte Bello Ridge for about seventy years. Andro Mikulaco came to the United States before World War I from the island of Rab on the Dalmatian coast of the Adriatic, about forty miles south of Rijeka (Fiume). At the time this island, and that area in general, was part of the Hapsburg lands of the Dual Monarchy (Austria-Hungary). After World War I it was part of the former Republic of Yugoslavia and is today part of the new Republic of Croatia. Mikulaco, however, was not Croatian, but an ethnic and linguistic Slovenian, whose forebears apparently moved south from what is today the Republic of Slovenia at an earlier date.

Andro settled first in St. Louis and in the early 1920s came to California where he acquired the land and buildings of the original (lower) Ridge Winery from the Torre family. There he farmed, raising grapes and making wine until he lost the land, ca. 1942, to a lawyer neighbor who held a mortgage on the property. Thereafter the property was acquired for a short time by the Picchetti family, then by William Short, and finally by the partners of the Ridge Winery. Andro stayed on the Ridge, renting property here until his death in the early 1960s. Andro's son, Sylvester (1914-1978), and his family visited the Ridge regularly in the early years and bought their property here in 1951. In 1958 the family moved here. This piece of property, approximately 18.5 acres, had been owned previously by the Picchetti family as early as the 1890s and had vineyards. In 1979 the Mikulacos planted about two acres of Chardonnay, and these grapes go into the Ridge Monte Bello Chardonnay.

I interviewed *Josephine Mikulaco (JM)* and her son, *Henry (HM)*. She was Sylvester's wife and remembers the Ridge since in the 1930s when she regularly visited the area. As a boy Henry actually lived here for a year in 1953 and attended the Montebello school which is directly across from the Mikulaco property today. The interview took place in Mrs. Mikulaco's home on November 1, 1993.

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CS: I want to talk to you about some of the people you have known and have known about in this area. First, let's talk William Short.

JM: I first met William Short through Mr. and Mrs. Figoni, who are neighbors and who we bought the property from. Mr. Short was their real estate man and had helped purchase their land up here. He had made these people very wealthy through several real estate dealings. We used to come down here on weekends before we bought this property.

CS: I never knew he was a real estate man.

JM: After we settled here we would have him down for dinner, since he wasn't married. We became very good friends.

CS: Would you consider him retired at that time?

JM: He was actually still working at his real estate business.

CS: Did he have an office?

JM: I think he had an office in Los Altos. He did a lot of work with the Croatian people in the Sunnyvale area. He even went to school to learn Croatian.

CS: Was your impression that he was a sort of scholarly man?

JM: Oh, yes. Very much so. He was always very quiet about any family. I never knew if he had children, but I don't think that he did. He may have been married previously, and I think he was from the East Coast but he never really discussed his previous life.

CS: What was it your family and he had in common that brought you together.

JM: He particularly liked my husband. My husband did a lot of little things for him. When he needed something done up there he would call down.

CS: Would you say that Short was a handy man, or not.

JM: I would say he wasn't. I remember when he pulled all the old vines out, when they were still producing, and he planted Chardonnay. That was the first time I had ever heard of that variety.

CS: When would you say he was doing this?

HM: I think in the late forties.

JM: He started right after he bought the place.

CS: Did you ever hear your husband and he talking about grape growing.

JM: Short was the kind of person who would investigate things very closely. I think he knew a lot from books about grape growing.

CS: What about the deer?

HM: He would invite us to go deer hunting up there. I remember that very well. Back then there was no fence. And he used to water the vines by hand. I would bring it down from the little spring in buckets.

JM: I recall that he bought the vines in Fremont.

CS: Yes, that would be from the California Nursery Company in Niles. That is a very historic nursery operation. That shows he knew what he was doing.

HM: I recall they plowed with a horse. Aldo Picchetti used to plow for him.<sup>1</sup>

CS: I've never been able to figure out what Short did with the grapes he was able to get off that land.

HM: I don't think that he ever made wine. And I never heard him talking about selling the grapes. To me it seemed like a hobby for him, but I'm sure he did something with them.

CS: I keep expecting to hear that Martin Ray got wind of these grapes, even if it was just a couple of hundred pounds.

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<sup>1</sup> See page one of the Picchetti interviews for the family tree.

HM: Well, it could have been Gemello. I know he used to buy from Charlie Rousten all the time.

CS: I talked to Mario Gemello and he mentioned doing business with Rousten. I wonder if perhaps Rousten took Short's grapes.  
Did you know that Short wanted to sell the place in the fifties?

JM: We knew about it. I think he talked about it.

CS: When the Ridge people bought the place did you notice anything in particular at first?

JM: After they took over I didn't go up there much. I do recall Short coming down and telling us about these four men who were buying the place. He knew a lot about them, their jobs, and their projects at SRI.

CS: Do you think he liked the idea of selling the place to them?

JM: Yes, he did. He was very interested in the work they were doing, their projects.

CS: How long did it take for people like you on the hill to learn about the wine they were making?

HM: It was quite a while. Probably not until the seventies.

CS: It's not some revolutionary thing that explodes on you.

HM: No. It was gradual.

CS: Let's talk about Charles Rousten.<sup>2</sup> I never knew anyone who knew him very well, except perhaps Dave Bennion, but we never got around to talking about him.

JM: He was not born here. He had a brother, who died early. I never knew his father in my time.

HM: Charlie told me that his father bought his place here in 1903. He had worked at the winery down in Monte Vista before Prohibition. He found that De Anza plaque when he was working there.

CS: That's right, I've heard that elsewhere. He was working at the big Doyle winery down there across from the D'Amico place. Where did you hear that story?

HM: Charlie told me. His father had a regular little winery up here before Prohibition, and a vineyard. They had a lot of grapes up there before Prohibition, and they took most of them out and planted prunes.<sup>3</sup>

JM: We knew Charlie before we moved onto this property. I recall he came over with his shotgun one time. We originally were going to build up where Henry has his house. We were getting ready to clear the land and he came down and told us we couldn't do this and that, that we couldn't go on his road. He and my husband had a few words and they didn't speak for several years after that.

CS: You bought this land without an easement for access?

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<sup>2</sup> For William Short's (1889-1979) obituary see *San Jose Mercury*, 4/2/79. For Charles Rousten see *San Jose Mercury*, 3/6/90.

<sup>3</sup> The Rousten Winery was BW 180. In a 1938 industry directory Rousten listed his capacity as 25,000 gallons. He maintained his bond up into the 1960s.

HM: We had it. We go all the way down to the road. Half the road that goes up to Rousten's place is on our property. We could actually use his road if we wanted.

JM: But he brought out all these papers to show how the road was built for him and nobody else was supposed to go on it.

CS: Well, he could have an easement on it, but if it were your property you could use it too.

JM: Later the boys started going up there and they'd bale hay with the Fellom girls. And he would talk to the kids, but he wasn't talking to us. Eventually things mellowed down.

HM: He was a bachelor and a hard worker. He'd climb up that mountain when they were sulfuring with a fifty pound bag on each shoulder. He was very much to himself. He was really different. But he did open up more as he got older.

CS: Rousten reminds me very much of what we hear about Elisha Stephens, the original settler down there in Cupertino.

HM: Charlie was much the same.

JM: He never owned a TV set. He always cooked on a wood stove; it's still there.

CS: How big was the Rousten vineyard.

HM: Originally he had about 75 acres of grapes, before Prohibition. He had a quarter-section and later added to it. He also raised some cattle, and hay. But his main income was from prunes. In recent town he had between six and ten acres. They were Mission and Zinfandel. He made wine, bottled and sold it. He would bring a bottle down here for dinner.

CS: Did he have a label?

JM: I never saw a label.

HM: He sold juice to Gemello for years.

CS: Did you ever hearing about Rousten having any business with the Picchettis. They weren't sure.

JM: He didn't have much to do with them.

CS: Are there any grapes still up there?

HM: No. Everything's gone now. He tore them out maybe fifteen years ago. I think he planted hay up there.

CS: What's the old winery like?

HM: It was a real winery. On the bottom it's concrete and there are two levels. All the big barrels are on the bottom. All wood upstairs, with a tin roof. He had a couple of big vats.

CS: What happened to the property after he died?

HM: He left it to a friend of his and she has it now.

CS: I was told that that was an interesting story, but he didn't really know anything about it.

JM: She was a girl who used to go up there. She is a teacher Mountain View, at a Christian school there. Lois Ortman. She was into horses and used to go up there and board her horses there. She became good friends with him and would go up and help him with the horses. He started to depend on her as he got older and he left the place to her. She lives there now. She's a nice woman; I think she'll talk to you.

CS: How about Jimsomare?

JM: When we first came down here my brother-in-law was working there. The Schwabachers owned it then. I never knew Mrs., but Mr. I did. He was always buying Eskimo Pies for the children. They had some interest in that.

CS: That would be James, senior.

JM: Yes. Things were a lot fancier back then than they are now. Mrs. Schwabacher had beautiful flowers all over back then.

CS: Did you ever hear any ghost stories about the property. There have been some lively tales told.

JM: No.

CS: What about the Fellom family?

JM: I've known them since before I was married, since the thirties. They were friends of my husbands. I think you should talk to Bud, that's Roy, junior. He's the son, but his mother is still living. His grapes are eight or nine years old.

HM: There may be some old vines in there that go back some.

CS: I'll call him and see if he can fill in any more pieces in the Monte Bello puzzle. You two certainly have, and I thank you for your help.

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