

Elias Carrasco

He was born in Texas but came to California with his family when he was one year old. They settled in Southern California near Santa Paula but began coming to the Santa Clara Valley in 1935 to work the prune crop. In the winter of 1938 *Elias (Lee) Carrasco (EC)* settled permanently in the Santa Clara Valley. He was working on the Monte Bello Ridge before there was a Ridge Vineyards and went to work for the Ridge partners when they took over the place in 1959. He worked there until he retired in 1985.

I interviewed Mr. Carrasco at his home in San Jose on June 18, 1993.

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CS: You are one of the few people who can tell me about Monte Bello Ridge before Ridge Vineyards was founded. What was the situation that took you up there in the first place?

EC: I was invited by my brother-in-law. We used to go and hunt rabbits up there. Then, once in a while, Mr. Short would ask us to work for him for a few hours.

CS: That was William Short, the owner before Ridge was founded. What kind of work did you do for him?

EC: I cleaned around his vines, weeded them, and suckered them. And I watered them too.

CS: Had you ever worked with vines before?

EC: Yes, at the Novitiate in Los Gatos. I worked up in the vineyards behind the Novitiate and also on the other side of Highway 17, at their vineyards up there. They had quite a few places up there off Bear Creek Road.

CS: That would probably be the Alma Vineyard and St. Charles?

EC: That's right. There were others, but I don't recall the names.

CS: Was that in the 1950s?

EC: No, that was in the forties.

CS: Were those vines very old?

EC: There was a little of everything.

We would usually start working up there in the month of March and work for about three or four months. Then we would come down to work in the valley. We would hoe around the vines, and sucker and dust with sulfur.

CS: Did you ever work the harvests for the Novitiate?

EC: No.

CS: I suspect they had the brothers do the harvesting.

EC: We did get a call one time, my brother and I, from the foreman to come and help in the harvest, but we were too busy here in the valley. Everything would be coming in then when the grapes were ready.

The only person I remember up there was the foreman; his name was Lorrano, a Spaniard, from Spain. I think that I worked there for three years.

CS: When did you start working for Mr. Short?

EC: Probably in the early to middle fifties.

CS: How many vines did Mr. Short have?

EC: Not very many. Just behind the old winery there.

CS: What kind of vines do you remember?

EC: There was Cabernet Sauvignon around the winery. And up above there was some Ruby Cabernet. Just recently they plowed those vines out and replanted there. I know that he planted a lot of them, but I don't know whether he planted all of them.

I used to help him water them. He had a spring right there. He had a little jeep and he used to pull a 100 gallon tank behind it. That's how we watered.

CS: Were you ever up there when he harvested?

EC: No.

CS: I wonder what he did with them.

EC: I have no idea, but I don't think he ever got very many. The deer used to really get after those vines. I kept after him, that we should put up a fence, but he'd say, "Oh, that would cost a lot of money." He spent all that time on those vines and got almost nothing out of it.

CS: You never saw him making wine, or any winemaking equipment up there.

EC: No.

CS: What kind of a man was he?

EC: He liked to talk. But I never spent much time talking to him, the way you and I are doing now.

CS: He was kind of a mystery man. I don't know anyone who knows what happened with his grapes, if he ever got any.

EC: Yes, I think so. He liked to stay by himself, a sort of hermit. He never dressed up. He was always wearing old clothes.

CS: Did you ever meet Charles Rousten up there?

EC: No. I first met him after I started working for Ridge. He rented his ranch for grazing. He raised a lot of hay. I never saw any grapes. I used to ride my horse over the Charlie's place. I used to raise a couple of steers, and they would get out and go mix with Rousten's cattle. He had about 200 acres up there.

CS: Were you around when the Ridge people started coming up.

EC: That's when I first met them. But I don't recall who introduced me to them. At that time I was convalescing from a back injury. I didn't really work for about a year. I had to have an operation on my back. I went up there one time, just to walk around and relax. I like it up there. I still go up every once in a while to ride my horse. I still keep it up there.

Anyway, I was up there one time and Dave said that they needed someone to come up and take care of the place. There were trespassers up there all the time and at first they had me as a sort of caretaker. Those mountains up there were sort of abandoned and people went up there and would invade the place and sleep in it.

CS: I remember Rosen and Crane talking about people getting into the upper winery before you took it over.

EC: I remember that very well. I was there when they took over the upper winery.

CS: So, did you work every day there at first?

EC: No, I was more of a caretaker at first. I couldn't do any work at first because of my back. Then Dave Bennion asked me one day if I thought that the vines up there could still produce. They were in very bad shape, but I told him they would produce. Those were the vines right behind the lower winery.

He asked me if I was ready to tackle them. So I agreed, but, oh, what a jungle it was! In some places the St. George rootstock had taken over. Some of the runners that had come up from below were about fifteen feet long.

CS: I remember years ago Dave telling me that he couldn't get St. George rootstock out with dynamite.

EC: Some of those canes from the rootstock had taken root right in the middle of the row. Just to cut the root with a mattock we would have to go about eighteen inches deep, just to cut them.

CS: So the vines had actually layered from the rootstock. But this is an interesting point. I guess all of Short's vines were on St. George rootstock.

EC: I believe so.

So I worked on those vines and pruned them back. I'm not sure whether Dave thought I knew what I was doing.

CS: This was dormant pruning wasn't it?

EC: Oh, yes.

CS: So this was probably the 1959-1960 dormant season.

EC: I think so.

CS: That makes sense. He made just a little bit of wine from a few grapes there in 1959 and he liked it, so he has you go ahead and give them a real pruning.

EC: After I was finished pruning them they really looked terrible. But I told him they'd come out

fine. He wasn't sure, you could tell. I don't think he'd been around vines much. But he said OK and we waited. But the next spring they started coming out just fine. But I kept talking to him about the deer. They had been the big problem with Short's vines.

But I remember Charlie Rosen saying, "Oh, deer aren't going to come in here. Look at all area they have to feed on. Why would they come in here?" So I told him, "You don't know deer like I do."

I remember that next year, what a nice crop we had around the winery there. And you know, believe it or not the deer were not bothering them. So when they were just about ready to start the harvest, everybody was going to come up, the kids and the women and everyone. My brother and I came up first, and I had my boy with me. We were going to start picking the grapes before they got there. My boy liked to hunt rabbits too, so I let him have the .22 and told him to be very careful. In a few minutes he came back and says to me, "Hey Dad, you know what. Somebody came and stole the grapes." I couldn't believe it. At first I thought maybe someone did come up and take them. So I went up there with my boy and told him, "Son, nobody picked those grapes. The deer ate them." Then later here come all the people, and they were all ready to go. But I had to tell them that almost all the grapes were gone. At first they thought I was kidding. So I took Dave up and showed him. So pretty soon he says, "Well, we are going to have to do something about this."

CS: Did Short do anything to keep the deer out?

EC: The only thing I ever saw was all those dogs he had. He would turn them loose at night to chase off the deer. I guess he had a good dozen of them. They were those little wiener dogs, dachshunds. They ran all over the place. But it didn't work very well. They couldn't keep the deer out.

Anyway, Dave decided that they had to fence, but I wasn't there when they did it. I was in an automobile accident and I ended up having my back operated on again. Some lady rear-ended me.

So when I went back they had fenced the place. It looked as if they were going to raise cattle. It was a barbed-wire fence. I thought they were kidding me when they said it was to keep the deer out.

CS: You can't keep deer out with barbed-wire.

EC: It was maybe five feet high with about ten strands of wire on it. But I told them, they had to have a solid fence of the deer would come right through. And it had to be higher.

Charlie Rosen said that when they go through that fence they are going to feel it. But I told him, "They're still going to go through."

CS: Deer will work at it until they find some way to get through. They don't give up.

EC: So finally, after I started working again, Dave told me to stop by the hardware store to buy a couple of rolls of chicken wire. They were going to hang it on the barbed-wire. But I told him that if he didn't hang it solid all the way around it wouldn't do any good.

Finally he arranged for me to get all the wire I needed. That's what we did then, made it solid. And that helped a lot.

But then pretty soon that wire started going and the deer started punching through. Deer will only respect solid wire and height. They will even go underneath if they have to.

CS: Tell me about working on the Picchetti place.

EC: Dave arranged to buy the Picchetti grapes. For a couple of years they did their own picking and delivered them up to us.

CS: How much.

EC: Not much. Maybe one ton. They hardly took care of the place. The weeds weren't cleaned out

and they didn't prune them properly. And in some places rootstock was taking over. One day Dave and I went up there, and I told him, "Gee Dave, what a shame. These vines could really produce if they were taken care of properly." But we would still have to fence it. The deer really hit them too.

So Dave arranged for us to fence the place and take care of the vineyard. That's what we did. We fenced it and I pruned it myself, and they started to produce very well.

CS: Those were pretty old vines, weren't they?

EC: Oh, yes. I think they were older than the Short vines. Some of those trunks were really huge.

CS: All Zinfandel?

EC: Yes.

CS: Had the vines been let go, or were they pruning them some.

EC: They were pruning them a little bit. They had a man who worked for them, and he would do it. But he didn't really do it right.

CS: How big was it then?

EC: Maybe three acres.

CS: When you were pruning it properly and getting a better crop, what would you get off it?

EC: I remember one time we got four tons. I think that was the most.

CS: Just a little over a ton per acre, tops. No wonder they got such powerful flavors from that vineyard. Your first couple of crops, one ton for three acres, most people would say that there weren't any grapes.

Did you ever plant any there?

EC: No. I think one time we tried to replant for some missing vines. But you had to have a backhoe to dig that St. George rootstock out of there.

CS: Let's talk about Jimsomare.

EC: It was about the same thing. It was all Zinfandel then, maybe five acres. I don't know what they were doing with those grapes before we came.

CS: I'll ask Elmano Homan. He was there from the beginning, I think.

EC: We also took over that vineyard and repaired all the fence. I started pruning the vines, along with my help.

You know they had a place also up on Vine Hill Road.

CS: Oh, yes. But did you work over there?

EC: I'm the one who took care of that vineyard.

CS: Then we'll have to talk about that.

Back to Jimsomare. Did you ever hear anything about Cabernet grapes when you first went in

there?

EC: Later we planted Cabernet. But there were no Cabernet vines there at first.

CS: So those Zinfandel vines were probably planted during Prohibition. Pierre Klein had owned the place years earlier and planted Cabernet Sauvignon and other red Bordeaux varieties up there. But I guess they were all gone by the sixties.

Tell me about Vine Hill.

EC: When we first went there those vines were pretty sick also. They were pruned a little different. We hired Paul Masson's foreman to go up there and show us how to prune those vines. Some were head pruned but most of them were umbrella pruned. That's where you take the long cane and tie them together over the top.

CS: Yes, I've seen that occasionally here. The Knight Smith vineyard in Saratoga used that method for some years. They do that in Burgundy. You see it in the old books.

EC: There they had White Riesling, and up above some Chardonnay, and Sylvaner. We never planted anything. They were all there already.

CS: How about red grapes?

EC: Not there.

CS: Mrs. Bennion told me she thought there were some red grapes around the big house.

EC: Yes, at the house, across the road, they had these real old vines. I think they were red. That was Dr. Schermerhorn's place.

CS: So, when they had Vine Hill you were in charge of the vineyard?

EC: That's right. I had to drive all the way over there and back. I was sure glad when they sold that.

CS: Were you living in East San Jose at the time?

EC: Yes. It was a long haul.

CS: How did you harvest at Vine Hill?

EC: I hired the pickers. I'd take my sons and some of the kids on their ball team. We never really had steady adult help up there in the early days. They'd work at Ridge too. These were teenagers. My boys worked up there several years. We'd water vines up there on weekends.

Some of those vines up there almost didn't get through. Water was essential. But what we did was go over to a spring on the Park side. Where Paul Draper lives. Back up there is a spring. I took a tank up there that held maybe 4,000 gallons of water. I dragged it up there with a tractor. We would fill it at the top from the spring down below, we'd pump it up.

CS: And then gravity to take it down to the vineyard.

EC: Right. Dick Foster got us some of those rubber fuel tanks that they used to use during the war. They looked like a great big rubber sausage. They were about three feet high and about thirty feet

long. And we put a couple of them up there too and we'd fill them.

Then in the vineyard I put one inch plastic pipe with risers and a faucet and I would pump the water from the tank. Every fifty feet we had a faucet and we'd put on a hose and water them that way.

CS: That was pretty exciting. Who thought that up?

EC: I don't exactly remember, but I was part of it. We had to get water someplace. Those vines could really hurt up there during the summer.

We were watering around the clock during the summer.

On the newer vines that they planted afterwards, then all of them had drip irrigation.

The first vines we planted were up behind the old winery. And I planted Dick Foster's place. And then we planted all around the upper winery, all at one time.

CS: Were you involved with the upper winery when they moved up there after 1969?

EC: We cleaned up up there. We disked the whole place.

CS: Did you ever work in the upper winery?

EC: Sure, to start with. At first I would catch people sleeping in there. Little by little we got them out. I'd come up on Saturday morning and the winery would be full of them sleeping. There were sometimes maybe a dozen up there. And they didn't have cars. They'd just hike up there.

I'd tell them, "Hey fellows, better get out. The boss is coming pretty soon." We didn't have a telephone up there at first. Once in a while they'd get mad at me. I told them that there was a big crew coming up and that we were going to make a winery out of it. Little by little they left.

So we started improving the upper winery. We put cement in the bottom part.

CS: Did you know the people who owned the old mansion that looked out over the valley across the road.

EC: People used to call it "the castle." I knew Mr. Garbuglio real well.

CS: It was built by a Perrone, I think in the twenties.

EC: I used to hear quite a few stories about that place during Prohibition. They say the only way you could go up there then was with a horse and buggy. I heard that it belonged to a wealthy doctor from San Francisco.

CS: That was Dr. Osea Perrone, but it was his nephew that built it. They had the same names.

EC: I guess during the bootlegging days that had liquor up there and had some wild times. I think the sheriff never got that high on the mountain.

CS: What was it like working up here in the early days for Dave Bennion.

EC: We got along pretty well. He was a good boss. But it took an awful lot of my time. It wasn't too good for my marriage.

CS: Do you think Dave was a good manager?

EC: In some ways yes, some ways no. Some of the things he did made me mad. Like the sulfur. He didn't want sulfur on the grapes. He was afraid it would get into the wine. But you have to sulfur up

there or the mildew will ruin them. There's lots of mist and fog and drizzle and you can't wait til you smell the mildew or it's too late. I finally had a showdown with Charlie and Hew. Eventually we got it straightened out. But when I would need twelve bags of sulfur up there, Dave would want me to use four.

There was also lots of problems with equipment. I remember one time Dave bought three old tractors, but only one would run. The others we were supposed to use for parts. You couldn't turn it without the tracks coming off. Finally they bought an International 500-- what a relief.

Another time we had this old pump and the motor kept conking out. I'd pull the cord on that thing until my hands bled. One day Charlie saw what was going on and in a few days I had a new pump.

When the new president took over in 1985 he got rid of a whole yard of old equipment that was collecting up there.

Sometimes it could be kind of tough working for Dave.

CS: When did you retire?

EC: I retired in 1985. Part of it was my divorce. Dave was leaving about that time as president. So I got a leave of absence for a while. I was really depressed. I had been the vineyard foreman. But I was not the foreman at the time of my retirement.

CS: Let's go back to the seventies when Paul Draper came. Did anything change as far as your work went?

EC: He made it easier for me in the winery. I had been working too much in the winery. I had told Dave that I couldn't keep up the vineyard and be in the winery so much. I'm telling you I was going batty. I was on the phone all the time with him about things to do in the winery. When I started there the agreement was that I was going to have the vineyard. But more and more I'd be up there on weekends washing barrels and things like that.

When Paul came I still did some things in the winery, some supervising. And it also helped that Paul could speak Spanish very well. We had a lot of fellows up there who had come from Mexico. It was hard to get regular workers from the valley in those days. They didn't want to go all the way up there. They were good workers. I hired a few of them myself.

CS: How was it working for Paul.

EC: Good. We got along fine. But the young fellow at the upper winery who was in charge there, David Noyes, he was the one I worked with most.

CS: You mean if David Noyes wanted something done he told you, more often than you'd hear something from Paul.

EC: Paul was in charge, but David Noyes was the foreman of the winery there.

CS: So that's what you and the other workers would see. David Noyes was running the main winery on a day to day basis. I have to make a tape of Noyes.

EC: He was there an awful long time.

CS: So were you. I certainly thank you for your help on this project.

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