

KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

History in the Vineyards: THE FREEDOM HILL VINEYARD

By Jim Gullo

One hundred and forty years of history allow for considerable hindsight, and many remarkable events and people have come and gone from the farm land that lies just to the south of a benign, 865-foot Polk County hill called Mt. Pisgah. But one would be hard-pressed to come up with a better couple of years than the ones that young Kenneth Alton Bursell enjoyed here from 1913 to 1915.

With his older siblings, Homer and Hazel, 10-year old Kenneth started by raking in the agriculture awards at the annual Oregon State Fair of 1913. Hazel took first prize in the state in class A Musk melon, while Homer and Kenneth won first and second prizes in class B watermelons, respectively. (Frank Alsip, a neighbor and classmate at the Mistletoe School, came in third.) The green-thumb Bursell kids brought home more than 20 ribbons that year, from beets and carrots to field corn and parsnips, all grown on the family farm in the shadow of Mt. Pisgah. Their reign of triumph would continue for years: In 1917, Homer Bursell took first place in Class A Pie Pumpkins, with Kenneth grabbing a 3rd in Class B watermelons.

CHAMPION PIG FEEDER

But it was in the spring of 1915 that Kenneth really hit it out of the park. He seized on the specialty of pig feeding, and in March, at the Mistletoe School that he and his siblings attended, he wrote and entered an essay entitled "What I Have Done," explaining in great detail how he fed his pigs and followed to the letter the instructions given to him by his father, Lewis Isaac Bursell. (Neighbor Russell Alsip gave a similar presentation on raising his White Leghorn chickens.) Two months later it was announced that because of his sheer prowess in pig-feeding, Kenneth Bursell would be one of just ten Oregon children to win scholarships to the Panama Pacific Exposition, a kind of World's Fair held in San Francisco to celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal. "I do not think any ten-year-old boy like me could have won a trip to San Francisco if he had not followed the instructions," he told the paper when they came to take his picture, and put it on the front page. On June 25th it was reported that the ten prizewinners

were staying in the Oregon building at the fair and having the time of their lives. The visit was “...being made especially pleasant by Commissioner C. L. Hawley, who is deeply interested in the development of children along practical lines.”

\$450 IN GOLD

Those practical lines stretched back to the 19th century, when Lewis Bursell purchased the land for the farm on August 2, 1899 for \$450 in gold from a pioneer settler named William Clay Douglas Gilliam. A Clarence Bursell, presumably Lewis’s brother or uncle, bought two adjacent properties. Gilliam was representing the estate of his parents, Andrew Jackson and Sarah J. Thompson Clay Gilliam, who had met and married in Missouri in 1839 when Sarah was seventeen and Andrew twenty-one. They joined a wagon train heading west from St. Joseph in the spring of 1847, saw their entire flock of sheep destroyed by wolves along the way, and wound up, afraid and dispirited, at the Whitman Mission on the Willamette River in October of that year. Sarah didn’t like it there and they quickly moved on, settling on the land under Mt. Pisgah and eventually receiving a donation land claim to the property (two of their early neighbors were the magnificently named Nimrod McCracken and Parmenius P. Hooker).

Sarah had good intuition: A month after they left, an Indian massacre occurred at the Whitman Mission, killing mission founders Narcissa and Marcus Whitman, along with eleven other white settlers, and burning down the mission. One reason given for the massacre was a measles outbreak that was centered around the mission that would spread and almost completely decimate the tribes of Luckiamute Indians who had lived off these lands for centuries.

Sarah and Andrew would have 13 children and live into their 70s; they are buried together at the Polk County cemetery in Dallas, as is son William, who would live in the area for another 48 years after selling pieces of the family lands off to the Bursells.

Lewis Bursell was another pioneer who was born in 1870 in Iowa, married a Minnesota girl named Lula Belle Gordon, and made his way to Oregon. They settled on the land with their three children, farmed and made improvements. In December of 1906 it was reported that Lewis and a friend completed the first phone line to Dallas from the Mistletoe region. In 1915, Lula Belle was named Chairman of the Mistletoe School PTA. As members of the Mistletoe Industrial Club, Kenneth and Homer built birdhouses for charity, and Hazel married in 1923, with brother Homer standing as best man. Kenneth would marry his wife, Irene, four years later, and they would have four children. Lula Belle passed in 1942, and in March of 1947, Lewis registered his last will and testament, dividing his property among his children; he died a month later.

PERFECT FOR PRUNES

The prune business centered between the towns of Dallas and Monmouth in Polk County was going so well – more than 750 prune orchards active in the county by 1927 – that the Bursells’ neighbor, Thomas Jefferson Alsip, 62 years old and a member of the Polk County Cooperative Prune Growers, decided to try something new that today’s Oregon winemakers can appreciate: He would try to direct-market his fruit. With two sons and a load of freshly dried prunes in the car, he set off for the South Dakota town

where he had lived into his mid-30s. On the way back, Thomas's car crashed outside of Hermiston, Oregon. The sons survived, but T.J. Alsip did not. It was July of 1930. The Alsip Prune Dryer that he built in 1909 lasted until 1924, when it burned down. Another that they built in Monmouth outlasted T.J., burning down in 1939. His sons would turn their farms' focus to cherries, tearing out the prune orchards and growing the Maraschino cherries that became big hits on ice-cream sundaes and big-city Manhattan cocktails.

A 1929 property map shows that the portion of the Bursell property that is now occupied by the Freedom Hill Vineyard was owned by Homer Bursell et al, with another large chunk to the east – now the Firesteed vineyard, held in the name of Kenneth and Irene Bursell. Prunes and cherries were phased out and were just a small part of the operation by 1971, when Kenneth's son Phillip applied for a special assessment for the 200-acre farm. He broke it down as 40 acres in prunes, 10 in cherries, and the remaining 150 as sheep pasture, although according to Iris Bursell, his widow, the family had gotten out of the sheep business years before after roaming dogs killed 20 of their flock in one night, and came back many times to pick off more. The family had their prunes dried at the nearby Elliott Farms drying shed, but that business also seemed to vanish overnight as if eaten by wild dogs. Phillip reported farm income for the prior five years as \$500/year, every year. Phillip, who was born in McMinnville in 1940, leased out the upper lands to farmers who raised grain products – mostly wheat and oats – while he conducted his business as a commercial carpenter. He and Iris would raise three daughters on the property.

The property would change ownership three more times between 1977 and 1981, when native Oregonian Dan Dusschee – “A real novelty in the '70s, to meet a native Oregonian,” said his wife, Helen – was looking for a change from his job in the Linn County Juvenile Corrections system. He and Helen, who grew up in Ohio, had met and married there and worked as counselors. Interested in wine and agriculture, “we just sort of took a leap of faith,” as she recalls, and purchased the first 60 acres of vacant farm land from Donald and Marquita Walker, and then an adjoining parcel with a house from a Western Oregon University professor named Frank Nelson, who had purchased his land from the Walkers just two years earlier. By 1982 they were ready to plant and grow grapes on their now 140-acre property. By that time, only remnants of a home that the Bursells had owned remained on the property, and the Mistletoe School up the hill, which had been built in 1900, had long since been decommissioned and turned into a private residence for several decades.

Thankfully, the land had been cleared of all but 30 prune trees by that point – “We wouldn't have known how to do it,” says Dan now. When, a few years later, bees hovering around the remaining prune trees began to sting their kids, those trees were removed, too. There was some wheat and oats growing on the land, and curiously, Amity winemaker Myron Redford recalled a 2-acre site that had once been planted in wine grapes but had been torn out before the Dusschees arrived. “It felt like freedom when we walked to the top of the hill,” said Helen, and thus was born the name of Freedom Hill Vineyard as both a business and a haven for the Dusschee family, just as the land had been for the Bursells.

So they began to lay out the vineyard and plant grapes, becoming the first in the area to join the fledgling Oregon wine industry that had begun some 30 miles north in the Dundee Hills. “We were the

first ones here,” says Helen with some pride, and Dan nods his assent. They finish each other’s sentences and check with each other to confirm the memories. He went to work as a cellar rat at Bethel Heights that first year to see if he had the passion for making wine...and quickly realized that he didn’t. He would stick to growing. The first crop that was ready to sell came in 1985, and not finding any ready buyers, the couple had the Pinot Noir grapes pressed and fermented. In the winter of 1986, bottles in hand, they pulled up to the little train station in McMinnville, where a new winemaker named Ken Wright had just started his Panther Creek Winery. He loved the wine, they hit it off, and Ken Wright Cellars has been making a Freedom Hill wine ever since, and the Wrights and Dusschees have been fast friends ever since.

Years passed and they all grew up, just as the Alsips and Bursells had done before them. The Dusschees had three children, and now Dustin, who was five months old when they bought the property, is the vineyard manager and lives on the property with his wife Katie and two sons. McKenzie helps with bookkeeping and Courtney stops in from her home in Hawaii with her toddler. When they were kids, the whole family would pile into the pickup truck, just for fun, and drive to the top of the vineyard to see what the deer were up to. The Bursells’ daughters would come up the hill to babysit the Dusschee kids.

The land, which one Oregon State extension agent once told the Dusschees had been the single best prune-growing land in Polk County, is now planted mostly in Pinot Noir, with Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay and a little Tempranillo added to the mix. Ken’s son Cody Wright of Purple Hands, who grew up with the Dusschee kids, is also a client now. Some vintages were tougher than others (“It was 28 degrees and dark when we picked 2011,” remembers Dan) and in 1995 a load slipped out of the flatbed delivery truck and tipped out all of the grapes, which Dan and a winemaker pitchforked back into the truck for most of the ensuing night. Both he and Helen joined professional and social organizations, held and judged events at the state fairs – just as the Bursell children had entered their prize-winning produce in state fairs a century earlier -- worked the vineyards together and enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) long relationships forged in the wine community.

On August 9th, 2008, 300 of their friends and family convened at the top of the hill to celebrate McKenzie’s marriage. There are pictures from that night of Ken and Karen Wright dancing under the stars. Mt. Pisgah looks over the setting, as it has always done. And presumably, always will.

What’s next for this little corner of Oregon? If a recent application by the Dusschees and their neighboring vineyard growers goes through, this area will soon be christened as the Mt. Pisgah-Mistletoe AVA, the newest sub-AVA of the broad Willamette Valley. It’s nice to think that somewhere in time, Lewis Bursell, Andrew Jackson and Sarah Clay Gilliam, and four generations of their relatives would be pleased to see what has become of their land.

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