

## KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

### History in the Vineyards: HIRSCHY VINEYARD

By Jim Gullo

A little over ten years ago, in 2005, Linda Hirschy was a Ph.D. chemist and husband John was a tax and business lawyer in Portland (“You’re talking to geeky people,” John warned). Their two children had grown up and moved away, and Linda turned to John and wondered aloud, “What are we going to do next? What’s the five-year plan?”

A few days later he drove her to Yamhill County to look at some land. In short order a heritage farm was purchased, vineyards were planned, plotted, and planted, and by the fall of 2010, the five-year plan had been executed, and the last piece of the 20-acre first phase of the Hirschy vineyard was complete. Several wineries came on board to purchase fruit in 2009, when the first plantings had reached their third leaf.

### **GREEN AND SOPHRONA ROWLAND**

Almost exactly a hundred years earlier, in the summer and fall of 1910, the Oregonian newspaper of Portland openly speculated about when Green Lloyd Rowland, the settler who claimed the land onto which the Hirschys would later plant their grapes, would pass away. Green was mentioned in the paper a couple of times that year, when he was 83. It was not the best press one might receive: It was reported that summer that he was visited by his old friend W.D. Stillwell, who came from Tillamook, where he lived since 1876, to visit his friend, who “for some months has been in poor health.” A month earlier, Green was named in an Oregonian article as one of “a number of pioneers belonging to this early period, who have not yet passed, yet will go soon...” One might reasonably speculate that the words “thanks a lot” were on Green Rowland’s tongue shortly before he passed in October of that year.

Six happier years earlier, in June 1904, Green Rowland had attended the Oregon Pioneer’s Association dinner in Portland, when 1,150 people sat down together for a banquet for the annual reunion of families who had homesteaded the Oregon territory. “The larder was well drawn upon before the meal was finished,” the paper said of the huge gathering. The Rowlands sat with the 1844 contingent –

remember that the Oregon provisional government, the first to be established in the western United States, had only just been formed in May of 1843 – thanks to having come west with his father Jeremiah Rowland that year. Born on May 6, 1827 in Carroll County, Tennessee, Green was 17 years old when the family struck out west from Missouri; his mother had either passed away before the journey or died in route. He received Donation Land Claim number 51 in 1846, establishing 640 acres of land in Yamhill County, on the north side of the Yamhill River, as his. Father Jeremiah Rowland claimed the 640-acre property just to the south, a property that today is delineated by Rowland Road and contains a heritage marking of Jeremiah's settlement.

Green married Sophrona Fouts in 1853, a year after she arrived in the territory from Shelby County, Indiana, and they had four daughters on the property. In June, 1901 he attended a meeting in Portland of Veterans of Indian Wars, whose principal task was to demand payment of the \$2/day for those who had fought, plus another \$2/day for the use and risk of their horses, in the 1855-56 campaigns. History does not tell us if those payments were ever made. Sophrona had died a year earlier, and Green had but a few years left before his own demise was anticipated by the newspaper.

### **ROBERT AND EFFA MAE LEIGHTON**

By the time Green Rowland passed and was buried in the Yamhill Carlton Pioneer Memorial Cemetery, only a mile or two from his homestead, the Willamette Valley had become known as a prime agricultural land. Walnut and fruit orchards were thriving, farmlands were selling for \$60/acre, and ads like this one (which tries to lure unwitting city-slickers to the idyllic rural life, at least right up to the last line) were appearing in the Portland newspaper:

“Now is coming the time when you are thinking of that little fruit farm, where you can have plenty of fruit to use and sell; have your fresh Jersey cow, with plenty of cream, milk and butter, and cackling hens, laying 50-cent eggs, and raising everything in your garden and be independent. We have just such a place in a 25-acre WILLAMETTE VALLEY FARM, ALL THE BEST OF ROLLING LAND, 19 acres of bearing orchard, 6 acres in cultivation, balance in brush and pasture; old buildings, only 1 mile of R.R. station, 4 miles of good town of 6000 people; might trade it for unencumbered Portland property.”

By 1928, the Rowland property had been split up, and the upper portion, where the Hirschy vineyard is now located, had been purchased by Robert and Effa Mae Leighton. The land just to the north of them was a commercial enterprise owned by Fairview Orchards; likewise to the west, the land was held by the Yamhill Orchards concern. Born in 1883 in Fort Dodge, Iowa, Leighton was a farmer and member of the Masonic Lodge in Yamhill, and had two children with Effa Mae. They farmed walnuts and prunes, and the house that the couple built in the '20s or '30s is still the most prominent structure on the property, and the future retirement home of John and Linda Hirschy. A prune drying shed that they built was later converted into a barn.

Their neighbors to the south were Nels and Ida Pearson. Nels had come from Sweden in 1890 and lived on the land until his death in 1940, at which time his son Emil took over the family farm. After serving in

World War I, Emil returned to Carlton and married local girl Clarice Hurner, who was distantly related to and named after Clara Barton. Besides visiting all 50 states and several foreign countries during her lifetime, Clarice would live to become the oldest person in Oregon when she died in 2009 at the age of 110. In an article written a year before her passing, she recalled attending the 1905 Lewis & Clark Exposition in Portland, and remembered the combination to a safe from a former bank building in downtown Carlton where she once worked.

### **WALTER AND DOROTHY SKUZESKI**

In March of 1940, unbeknownst to the Leightons and across the state in Heppner, Oregon, a teenager named Walter Skuzeski played two accordion numbers at the Lexington Grange meeting as entertainment for the attendees. On the same page of the Heppner Gazette Times that day was an ad for the tailoring and dry-cleaning business of his father, John Skuzeski. A few years later, in 1943, the musically inclined Walter helped with the war effort by “supplying the entertainment feature” of a meeting that announced the \$2,100 that was raised in a Red Cross drive. He also played a baritone horn solo in the 1944 “Beginners’ Band” at the Heppner school, because so many members of the senior band had gone off to fight in the war that the musical director had to draft underclassmen. A year previously, Walter passed along a letter to the local newspaper that had been sent by his friend Sam Sato, who had been sent to a War Relocation camp at Tule Lake, California. Sam reported that it wasn’t so bad, and the food was pretty good, and plentiful. In 1944, Walter was named Prom King at school; he just missed the war, graduating in the spring of 1945, enlisting in the Navy and going off to radio school in San Francisco before shipping off for an overseas tour.

At the same time, not far from the Leighton/Rowland/Hirschy property, Dorothy Laughlin was growing up on the land that is now the home of the Willakenzie winery outside of Yamhill. She was the eldest child of Carrie Matilda Laughlin, born in 1905, and C. F. “Sport” Laughlin, born in 1903, who quickly became a Paul Bunyan-esque character thanks to his prowess at logging the area. A Sport Laughlin equestrian arena is still in operation on Laughlin Road. Walter and Dorothy met at Oregon State University, graduated, and married in 1950. Sport needed help with the logging business, so the young couple moved to Yamhill County, where Walt worked as a bookkeeper and businessman in the family business and Dorothy taught school until she began to have children. They lived in a mill shack and on the Laughlin family property for a couple of years, and then bought the farm in the early-’50s from Robert and Effa Mae Leighton, who would move to Eugene for the remainder of their lives. The Skuzeskis would live there for more than fifty years.

“We picked fruit and prunes at first, but could see that we weren’t going to make much money in farming,” recalled Dorothy recently. They leased the land out to be farmed, removed several trees themselves, and then the horrific 1962 Columbus Day windstorm knocked the rest of the trees down, ending the orchard business that Green Rowland had begun a century earlier. The land was turned over to small grain and pasture, mostly barley, but by then, Walt had acquired a few vending machines and talked Dorothy into starting a small business. S & S Vending was headquartered in an outbuilding on

their property, and grew to include dozens of machines that were scattered throughout the area, dispensing candy, cookies, Hostess baked goods and even fresh apples in schools, which Dorothy would stock on her rounds throughout the valley.

They now spend their elderly years at a home in Yamhill. Afflicted by dementia, Walt can no longer play music, but Dorothy is as sharp as a tack and looks after him every day at their home.

### **JOHN AND LINDA HIRSCHY**

Which brings us back to the present owners of the property on NE Yamhill Road, which is now surrounded not by prune and walnut farms and orchards, but by Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vineyards. The Savoya, McCrone and Tanager vineyards are all on the same ridge, and the Hirschys happily joined a present-day community of fine-wine growers and winemakers when they plotted their retirement escape to the country.

Like the Skuzeskis before them, John and Linda met in college at Miami of Ohio. Linda was from Chicago, John from Indiana, and after graduate school in Florida they headed west when Linda was offered a position with Tektronix in Portland. John began working in business, real estate and tax law, and counted many Oregon winemakers in his group of clients and friends. Ken Wright, Dick Erath, Paul Gerrie and others walked the property with them in 2005 when the Hirschys bought the 20-acre farm from the Skuzeski family. Sixteen acres of Pinot Noir clones were planted in 2007, followed by three more acres in 2008 and the last parcel of the original block in 2010. Two years later the vineyard property expanded when the Hirschys acquired an adjacent 65-acre parcel from a trust established by Joe Austin, a Carlton businessman who had owned the property since the early-1990s. Joe and his wife Barbara are buried on the property. By that time, much of the former orchard and farm of Green Rowland was either overgrown, in deep woods thick with oak trees, blackberries and poison oak, or in pasture. When the Hirschys took over, cut banks were fixed, gravel roads were built, cattle fences were removed and deer fences were installed, and twenty-three acres of additional Pinot Noir were planted. Irrigation systems helped the vineyard get on line quickly – in 2015, when the first vines reached third leaf there was a list of winemakers who were eager to acquire the fruit of a new, world-class YC AVA vineyard.

Why turn towards farming grapes in their retirement? “Because you can,” says John Hirschy. “Because you have an interest in building something.”

“Because my husband tells me that boys need projects,” adds Linda with a grin. “But also because it was a lifestyle choice. We want to live in this community, and on this property. We will retire here. It’s a tight little neighborhood.”

And has been ever since a wagonload of Rowlands made their claim here, 172 years and many memories ago.