

KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

History in the Vineyards, A Genesis Tour of Ken Wright's Yamhill-Carlton Vineyard Sources

By Jim Gullo

PART THREE: ABBOTT CLAIM VINEYARD

The land on the flat top of Savannah Ridge was a complete mess fifteen years before Abbott Claim became the crown jewel in Ken Wright Cellars' vineyard holdings. The property that Ken and Karen Wright purchased in the late-'90s, their second personally owned vineyard property, was "an eyesore," as Ken puts it, adding, "but we loved the location, the consistency of the soil and the super-gentle slope." The 50-acre parcel had been left to the whims of nature, which included the devastating, 1962 Columbus Day storm that wreaked havoc on the Willamette Valley landscape. After subdividing the parcel that began on the flat, 475-foot top of Savannah Ridge and spilled down its eastern flank, it took Ken and vineyard manager Mark Gould an entire year to clear the 16 acres on top and prepare it for planting grapes. They named the vineyard after the original Donation Land Claim owner, John F. Abbott.

The history of the land on which Abbott Claim vineyard is located is dazzling, with many prominent Oregonians having resided on or adjacent to the property. They included pioneers who crossed the plains, war heroes, cattle breeders and influential citizens from the early days of Oregon's territorial history. It starts with John F. Abbott himself (DLC 945), a larger-than-life figure who blazed his way through Oregon and Washington during a long, colorful life. According to the excellent "History of Walla Walla County" by Professor W.D. Lyman from 1901, Abbott was born in Rome, New York on March 25, 1823, where he spent his childhood. He made his way to Wisconsin as a young man and started his first stagecoach business. Like any number of other young men of the time, he left to try his

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hand at gold mining in California in 1849, and then came north to Lafayette, Oregon in the fertile Willamette Valley, two years later. There he married Susan Snyder Creighton and had the first of their three children. He homesteaded the land on Savannah Ridge and also started a stagecoach line business that ran between Lafayette and Portland on an overnight itinerary.

He petitioned the government for title to the land in 1856, and four years later, Oregon Donation Certificate No. 945 was awarded to Abbott on May 27, 1860. His neighbors, Abijah Hendrix, James Green and Absalom J. Hembree all vouched for him to the territorial government, verifying his homestead and denying any claims to the land themselves. His 164.22 acres on the slopes of Savannah Ridge were awarded as part of the great Donation Land Claim Act that predated the Homestead Act in the rest of the U.S., whereby single men or married couples could claim land that they had diligently farmed and on which they lived.

But Abbott apparently had left town before the land claim was finalized. Records show that he moved to Walla Walla, WA in 1859 and started another stagecoach business, as well as a livery business. He would live the rest of his life in the Washington town, and on April 21, 1866, he sold the Yamhill County land to Benjamin E. Stewart for \$1,600. In 1873, at the age of fifty, he sold off his business interests and turned to farming and acquiring real estate, becoming a major landowner in Walla Walla County for the rest of his life. He passed away in Walla Walla on the 14th of March, 1896, leaving his farms and property in the hands of his son, John H. Abbott.

Back on Savannah Ridge, Abbott's neighbor to the west was Absalom J. Hembree, who was Oregon's first war casualty, and its first war hero. Born in Tennessee in 1813, he and wife Nancy (nee Dodson) farmed in Missouri for several years before joining a group that was crossing the plains to Oregon in 1843. Their daughter Nancy was born during the journey, which reached Oregon City on November 13th of that year. They moved to Yamhill County the following spring and homesteaded the property east of present-day Carlton, building the first cabin of hewn logs in the area when the other homes were all made of rough logs. They had ten children.

Hembree was elected to the Oregon Legislature in 1846 for the first of two terms. Nine years later, at the age of 42, after organizing a corps of mounted volunteers to fight in the Indian Wars, Hembree was named Captain of Company E. On April 10, 1856, in a battle in the Yakima country near what is now the town of Toppenish, Hembree was killed and scalped. His body was returned to Lafayette, where one of the largest funerals ever held in the county took place, and he was laid to rest on the family farm. A monument to Captain A.J. Hembree was erected in 1902 at the site of his death. Nancy lived for another thirty years on the property, which passed to the Hembree children, and then to Emma Jernstedt, who was born in 1882 and lived to be 99 years old.

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Abbott's property, meanwhile, stayed in the Stewart family for some years. Benjamin E. Stewart, who purchased the land, had come to Oregon from Newark, Ohio in 1845. He died from injuries received in a fall in 1877. His granddaughter, Grace (nee Fox) Trullinger, would later own a part of the land, a few miles north of the Abbott land, that Ken Wright's Savoya vineyard now occupies. Another later owner of some of the Abbott claim land was Delmar Perkins, who was born in 1861 on the Ely Perkins land claim just south of the Abbott property, and became known as a prominent breeder of Jersey cattle, which he undoubtedly grazed on the Savannah Ridge hillside until his death at the age of 79.

A photograph from 1887 shows Delmar Perkins – a robust, square-headed, bald man with an Abraham Lincoln beard -- and wife Isabella standing before a towering frame house that he built. For the sake of perspective, in the week that he died in 1940, cornflakes were selling at two packages for nine cents, there were lemon-rolling and cracker-eating contests at the "Gay Parade [that] Marks Start of Friday's Festivities," per the Telephone-Register newspaper, and the Vinton & Larsen Shell service station on the corner of 3rd & Baker in McMinnville was touting its new "Syncrograph, to check the intricate operations of your car accurately."

After clearing the land, Ken Wright planted the Abbott Claim Vineyard in 2001 in Pommard, Dijon 777 and Dijon 115 clones, producing wines right from the beginning that were darkly colored, dense and lush, with characteristics of dark fruits like plum, black cherry and cassis. In 2006 he sold off the lower, undeveloped part of the Abbott Claim property to Antony Beck of Gainesway Farm in Lexington, Kentucky, and then contracted with Beck to clear and plant what is now the Angela Estate vineyard. Wright continues to make Angela Estate's wines under a private arrangement with Beck, and Mark Gould manages the Angela vineyards. In December 2012 the properties were rejoined under the same ownership when Beck purchased the 16-acre Abbott Claim vineyard from Ken Wright, with the provision that Wright retains rights to enough fruit to make 100 cases of Abbott Claim wine under the KWC label each year. Angela Estate is presently the only other winery to utilize fruit from the Abbott Claim vineyard.

The wines from Abbott Claim were quickly embraced by consumers and the press, and in December of 2014, after receiving 97 points earlier in the year, the 2012 Ken Wright Cellars Abbott Claim Pinot Noir was awarded the ranking of Number One Wine in the World by Wine Enthusiast. It was the first time ever that an Oregon vineyard or winery achieved that honor.