

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 FIVE: BONNIE JEAN VINEYARD

Bonnie Jean vineyard, the newest source of fruit for Ken Wright Cellars' line-up of single-vineyard Pinot Noir wines, was named in tribute to Bonnie Jean Laughlin, a sweet, special-needs girl who was the delight of her parents, Robert and Dorothy Laughlin. She passed away in 1995 before her 28th birthday, and fifteen years later, when Ken Wright approached the Laughlins to plant a vineyard on the 20-acre parcel that their family had owned for generations, it was Wright who suggested the name. Situated on the eastern slope of Savannah Ridge in the Yamhill-Carlton AVA, adjacent to the Abbott Claim and Angela Estate vineyards and composed of Wellsdale soil that slopes gently down from 450 to 400 feet in elevation, the vineyard was initially planted in 2010, producing its first wines with the 2013 vintage.

Producing extraordinary wine grapes is just the most recent incarnation of a property that could practically stand as a symbol for the entire Willamette Valley's long and colorful history. If you were to make a miniseries from the people who have utilized this land, and the events that have transpired here, you would have to weave together the following elements: An influential pioneer family with deep roots that go back to the very beginnings of the Oregon territory, and Yamhill County in particular. The entire genesis and scope of a thriving orchard industry that made the Willamette Valley synonymous with world-class agriculture and orchard products like prunes, walnuts and cherries...and then practically vanished overnight. Seasons that saw great abundance followed by seasons of great destruction and scarcity. And finally, in its latest role, a world-class vineyard named after a special young woman that has returned the land to the forefront of modern agricultural use. The land that now bears Bonnie Jean Laughlin's name is a microcosm of the sweep of Oregon history, and a testament to the rejuvenation of the land on which it is planted.

In pioneer times, the land lay just to the west of the 640-acre parcel claimed by James Scott (DLC 2115), who was born in either Kentucky or Illinois in 1815 and came to Oregon with wife

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Margarette A. Payne in 1845. In the 1850 census of Yamhill County, they occupied house number 18. They would have eleven children and Scott would nearly see his 84th birthday before passing away in 1899. A year before his death, Scott had the first business dealings with the Laughlin family, which in succeeding generations would acquire a great deal of the property that had originally been awarded to Scott.

It's fair to say that the Laughlin family practically traveled in the ruts of the Scott wagon train on their own crossing of the plains to the Oregon Territory. It was in 1847 that Samuel Laughlin, then 56 years old, and his wife Nancy Doty Laughlin made the journey west with son William Wirt Laughlin, who was 17. The family settled near Wapato Lake, some eighty years before the lake would be drained and Wapato Flats became known for onions and other crops; Samuel Laughlin would receive Donation Land Claim #1576.

The young William Laughlin went off to California for two years to pan for gold near Stockton, California, returning to Yamhill County in 1851. He purchased land on the north side of Yamhill County in 1853 and traded it for another farm property in 1857, the year that he married 18-year old Phoebe Roberts. The couple would have 16 children, beginning with Charles Laughlin in 1859 and ending with Crystal Laughlin Harris, 23 years later. A photo shows William Wirt Laughlin in his later years to be a handsome, strong man with thinning white hair, a high forehead and a long, carefully trimmed white beard.

It was son Abraham Harrison Laughlin, born in 1866, who would buy the first piece of land from the Scott DLC, acquiring 115 acres in 1898, and then another 20 acres seventeen years later in 1915. The parcel of land just to the west of the Scott DLC, and just north of John F. Abbott's holdings (see Abbott Claim vineyard for info on Abbott), had been acquired by another pioneer, William Smith, who held a donation land claim to the west of the small, agricultural town of Carlton. It was Abraham's son Stanford, grandson to William Wirt Laughlin, who acquired this 40-acre parcel from the Smith heirs in 1937, and this is the land that would later become the Bonnie Jean vineyard. Together, these properties became the original tracts that would make up the 225-acre Laughlin Orchards when Stanford's son Robert, the present owner, consolidated the lands owned by his father and grandfather and created the business in 1970.

A 1920's map of the region shows the proliferation of orchards and related businesses that had totally transformed this part of the valley since Henderson Luelling set out from Iowa in 1847 on an ox train with his wife, eight children and 700 grafted, one-year old fruit trees that included 18 varieties of

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apple tree and eight pears, as well as cherry, quince, peach and black walnut starts. Luelling and his brothers John and Seth established their nursery in Milwaukie in 1848 and soon populated much of the Willamette Valley with their fruit trees. To the north of the Laughlin property were vast tracts owned by Newberg Fruit Orchards; to the east were the Dundee Orchard Homes, Chehalem Orchard Homes and Hobsons Fruitland subdivision.

Also nearby, the Prince walnut grove of Dundee was one of the finest and largest nut producers on the west coast in the early years of the 20th century – “[It] thrills the soul of the onlooker with its beauty, present fruitfulness, and great promise,” wrote one William McMurray, General Passenger Agent of the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company in a 1910 report on walnut-growing in Oregon . “Lying on a magnificent hillside, the long rows of evenly set trees – healthy, luxurious in foliage, and filled with nuts – present a picture of ideal horticulture worth going many miles to see.” Professor Lewis of the Oregon Experiment Station, agreed, adding, “In establishing walnut groves we are laying the foundation for prosperity for a great many generations.” All the way up through World War II, the children who lived and worked on the family walnut farms would try to hide their hands, stained black from walnut pods, from the other kids. There was no way to escape the physical markings of growing up on a walnut farm.

Hops, the bitter, dried flower used to flavor beer, were thriving in the valley in the early-1900’s – Wirt Laughlin was credited with building one of the first hop dryers in the county in the Stag Hollow area, and by 1910, Oregon led the nation in hop production. A pamphlet published by the Yamhill County Development League, circa 1920, gave a fine overview of how important the valley had become for growing food products. “Yamhill contains the largest apple orchard on the coast, the largest prune orchard in Oregon, the largest walnut grove and one of the largest cherry orchards in Oregon,” the publication revealed. “It has the largest evaporator on the Pacific coast and its hop yards are among the largest in the country.” Land in the foothills, it added, was selling for \$30 to \$40/acre; the brushlands were even cheaper, at \$15 to \$20.

The lands that would become the Bonnie Jean vineyards rode the tides of the orchard business. Prunes were a hot product in the 1930s, and most of the Bonnie Jean hillside was planted in them at that time. Abraham Laughlin built one of the first local drying sheds for both prunes and walnuts, and Stanford Laughlin doubled its size. Cherries, particularly maraschino cherries, came into vogue in the ‘40s, and half of Bonnie Jean’s prune trees were replaced by cherry trees. All three crops – cherries, prunes and walnuts – thrived on the property, but the 1962 Columbus Day wind storm damaged many trees, especially walnut trees that had suffered a blight and were knocked flat by the severe storm. Deep, unusual frosts in the early-’90s were the death knell of walnuts in the valley and on the Laughlin properties, and the trees were ripped out and replaced by fields of grass seed and the red clover that stains these hillsides bright red in the spring when the plants bloom before going to seed. Cherries

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lasted until the early years of the 21st century, when market conditions and labor shortages made commercial cultivation untenable. The last Laughlin cherry orchard was torn down in 2005; the company now operates divisions that supply wholesale feed and transport products. Bob and Dorothy Laughlin are now in the process of transferring the business and property to nephew Larry Kubes, with an eye towards continuing the family tradition into the next generation.

A tradition that now makes the Bonnie Jean vineyard synonymous with fine wines from the prestigious Yamhill-Carlton AVA, and continues the agricultural heritage of this incredibly fertile area. On bottles of Bonnie Jean vineyard wine from Ken Wright Cellars, original artwork depicts a bluebird nestling among cherry trees as a tribute to what has come before on the land.

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