

KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

History in the Vineyards: THE BRYCE VINEYARD

By Jim Gullo

Three young dogwood tree starts, their nursery tags still attached with ties, were planted recently at the top of the Bryce Vineyard on Ribbon Ridge. Below the trees, the manicured, five-acre vineyard falls away in a gentle, south-facing slope towards North Valley Road, far below, but just a few feet away to the west, a high deer fence appears to be barely holding back a forest of oak, cherry, maple and Douglas fir trees, with a ground-cover that is a wicked tangle of blackberry, bracken fir and poison oak. Inside the fence, where the ground is cleared, the dogwood trees surround a simple slab of concrete that appears to have an upside-down five-gallon bucket resting atop it, but closer inspection reveals that the bucket is made of bronze, with one word, "Bryce," etched into the side. The top of the bucket has a small hollow where water collects; a dog comes over to drink from it.

The overturned bucket is the same image that graces the labels of Ken Wright Cellars Bryce Vineyard wines, for the bronze bucket and slab mark the final resting place of Bryce Bagnall, a handsome and talented man whose last years of a short life were spent here creating a dream with his wife, Marcia. Together, they turned this land that has been so many things over the years – grazing land, timber land, pioneer land, prune and cherry orchard, wild forest land – into a vineyard that now produces world-class Pinot Noir wines.

In her Salem office, Marcia Bagnall laughs now when she remembers a season, 18 years ago, when she and Bryce began their vineyard project by putting up the half-mile deer fence themselves. And it nearly ended their vineyard dream before the first grapevines were planted. "A deer fence," she says, "is a marriage wrecker. I don't recommend it."

The Bagnalls joined a procession of families who have been put to the test by this rugged, beautiful land over the last 150 years. The first couple who were recorded to have lived here were John and Hester Marble, who came overland on the Oregon Trail from Iowa in 1845 and homesteaded the land, "One mile North of John Perkins' house," as the land claim attests, that became known as the Salt Spring Claim. Marble, who had been born in Chittenden County, Vermont, was thirty-five years old, Hester twenty-five, and they came with three Iowa-born sons, who would be joined by two siblings, Francis and Elizabeth by the time the 1850 Yamhill County census was taken. The house they built was number 181 in the county, and when Marble applied for his Donation Land Claim in 1852 – attesting that he was a white settler who had occupied the property prior to 1850 – one of the neighbors to

vouch for him was Lewis Franklin Rogers, who had been born to a Revolutionary War hero in 1798, came to Oregon at the age of forty-eight and would sit as one of the first three judges in Yamhill County. A road on Ribbon Ridge is still named after him.

The Marble land claim encompassed 633.98 acres on a southeast to northwest orientation that would later be split by North Valley Road, creating a flat, wet area on the floor of the valley that rose up the steep sides of the hills where the Bryce vineyard and others, like Dewey Kelly's Ribbon Ridge Vineyard, now lie. The Etzel family's Beaux Freres Winery, as well as Patricia Green Cellars, are also neighbors on the former Marble property. But those success stories wouldn't happen for another 140 years, and the land wasn't apparently so hospitable to John and Hester Marble. They vanish from local records shortly after the 1850 census, as do their children. Maybe moved to California, maybe back east, with the land parceled off to buyers.

Seventy-eight years pass, and records show that in 1928 the south-eastern section of the Marble lands were owned by the Baker family, Harry and Daniel, who were farmers. According to the hand-lettered, go-to Metsker Map of the time, the northwestern section of the property, where the Bryce vineyard is now located, was said to be owned by an O. and H.J. Heffler, but this is one of the rare cases where mapmaker Chas. F. Metsker was mistaken. The land was actually owned by Otto Leffler, not Heffler, and his son, Hans John Leffler, and the neighboring parcel was in the name of Otto's wife Anna Gaertner Leffler. Their ownership of the property – and the misspelling – continue on the 1942 Metsker map.

Otto Leffler was a German who was born in 1863 and left his homeland in the early years of the 20th century. He tried Texas and California, where he met and married Anna, and then made his way to Yamhill County, purchasing and then adding to the property in the late-'20s and early-'30s, according to grandson Donald Leffler, who still lives in the area. Otto and Hans began a dairy business, grazing their animals on the hillsides and floor of the valley, and cutting and selling timber from the rugged hillsides that are now such excellent vineyard lands. The family was strong and long-lived – “Good old tough, German blood!” exclaimed Donald Leffler – but Otto broke his arm badly in his later years, couldn't work, and died relatively young (for a Leffler) at the age of eighty-seven. Anna passed five years later, in 1955. Son Ernie Leffler continued to run the dairy business into the 1980s alongside his brother Rudolph Donald “Rudy” Leffler, who was born in 1908 and lived to be ninety-five years old. In 1937, Rudy purchased the property on the corner of Ribbon Ridge Road and North Valley Road, next door to brother Hans and his wife Harriet's property. Many of the Lefflers are buried in the Noble Pioneer Cemetery a few miles away on Ribbon Ridge; Rudy's son Donald Leffler has been the caretaker there for many years.

County records show that on October 8, 1958, a new well permit was granted on the Bryce property to Oris Milo Herigstad, who owned the land and with wife Carol raised five children on an adjacent farm. According to a funeral record, Oris was born in 1923 in North Dakota to Norwegian immigrants Ole and Mable Hergistad. After serving in the Air Force during WWII, where he was stationed in England as a radio operator on a B-17 bomber, flying many missions over Germany, Oris went to work for Boeing in Seattle in the late-'40s, where a mutual friend introduced him to Carol, a typist in the Bremerton shipyard. In the mid-'50s, the couple moved to the Chehalem Valley to farm pole

beans with Oris's cousin Arnold before buying their own farm and the property that one day would become Bryce. "Dad farmed cherries, wheat, hay and prunes," recalled son Byron Herigstad, but it was tough to make a living at farming, and Oris made ends meet by working at a paper mill, as a machinist for 15 years, and then as a custodian for another 10 before he and Carol retired to travel, raise a garden, and play his harmonica and guitar. "He was a jack of all trades, like his father," said Byron. Carol passed away in 2009, three years before Oris, who was 88. They too were laid to rest at the Noble Pioneer Cemetery.

Like many others in the area, the Herigstad farm was devastated by the Columbus Day windstorm of 1962, which brought hurricane-force winds that uprooted and destroyed his prune trees, essentially putting him out of business. Neighbor Russell Baker, who had been born in 1908 to Ida and Harry Baker, the owners of the south-eastern half of the Marble land claim, was hit especially hard. The vicious winds destroyed his silo and dairy barn, with no insurance to cover the losses. A devout Christian, Russell prayed for guidance and had an inspiration to clear and dig out a 15-acre lake with his tractor on the property. In 1970, he would donate 77 acres of the Baker farm, including the lake, to the Northwest Meeting of Friends, which used it to create the Camp Tillikum family retreat that continues today. At one time, the camp came under the auspices of George Fox University in Newberg. In 1977, Oris Herigstad sold off his property, too, to Portland attorney Jeffrey Austin.

Austin dug a well on the land in 1978 and hoped to build a house there, but decided instead to divest the property, which was wildly overgrown with trees and brush. It was purchased by Dr. Donald Olson, a Portland neurosurgeon who owned (and still owns) the Torii Mor Winery in the Dundee hills. "I thought it was a great property," he recalled recently. He planned to turn it into a vineyard, and undertook the huge task of clearing the forest from five acres of the hillside. "It was very difficult," he recalls, "all mud and trees and standing water in places." It would have been the prime vineyard for his winery, but a divorce forced another sale before he could plant vines, a sale that he regrets to this day. "The day it went, there was a tear in my eye," he recalls now.

In the spring of 1998, 152 years after John and Hester Marble arrived in Yamhill County, Bryce and Marcia Bagnall entered the scene, purchasing 44 acres from Olson. The price was \$280,000.

They had met as college kids at Occidental College in California in 1981 at about the time that Bryce had seen a list of unusual careers and thought that winemaking might be fun to try. He graduated from the oenology program at U.C. Davis in 1985, where a classmate was Lynn Penner-Ash, who would later establish her own vineyard and winery within a mile of Bryce's. "We were all passionate about wine, but I remember Bryce being the most articulate about it," she recalls. The Bagnalls were 25 years old when they married in 1986, and it was during a Rotary-sponsored year of study at the University of Burgundy in Dijon that he had another chance meeting that would change their lives. The couple met Mike Etzel, tasted his Beaux Freres wine, and realized that great wines were coming out of Oregon. They decided to stake their winemaking claim in Oregon, and moved here in the fall of 1994 with a young daughter. The goal was to purchase land and make pinot noir, and Bryce was offered a harvest job that season at Beaux Freres.

He landed a job as winemaker at Witness Tree Vineyards, but the Bagnalls wanted to start their own wine company, and in 1998 a realtor friend called about the Olson property that was about to go on the market. “We just fell in love with it,” recalls Marcia about seeing the hillside. Thirty acres were heavily forested, five more were overtaken by blackberries, but the remaining acreage had been cleared by Dr. Olson, with no rocks or stumps. The marriage-wrecking deer fence was the first thing they put up, and then together, with Bryce standing on a bucket pounding trellis posts and Marcia holding the level, they laid out and planted their vineyard in the spring of 1999.

They planted Wadenswil, Dijon 115 and Pommard in four blocks and spent their spare time over the next two years cultivating the vines. There was a small harvest in 2001 that was too green to use, and another small yield in 2002 that launched the Bryce label. With Lynn Penner-Ash, Tony Soter, Andrew Rich and others, the Bagnalls were founding winemakers at the Carlton Winemakers Studio, and imagined a long future of producing exquisite pinot noir under their own label while being a part of an Oregon wine boom that would see Ribbon Ridge placed in the ranks of the best wine-producing regions in the world.

But in the same year, 2002, just when his first wines were in barrel, Bryce felt something wrong with his leg, a weakness that couldn’t be explained. The weakness got worse, and a year later he was diagnosed with ALS – the dreaded and incurable Lou Gehrig’s disease. “A death sentence,” says Marcia, simply. He was forty-three years old.

“We had to pivot,” she says. “It was not going to be our 40-year dream after all.” Bryce made wine in 2003 and 2004, and in ’05 his friend and colleague, Patrick Reuter of Dominio IV, assisted. They designed and built a handsome house at the top of the property, overlooking the vineyard. Bryce died there on November 13, 2006, a month before his 46th birthday. His father, Jim Bagnall, a professor at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, created the bucket tribute as a marker for his son.

Marcia Bagnall is meticulous and organized. She has been the director of the Small Business Development Center for Chemeketa Community College for seven years, and has worked for the college for 17 years. After Bryce died, she pruned the vineyard herself – every single one of the 11,000 vines – for two years before deciding to turn the property over to outside management. She couldn’t bear to continue to live in the house that she had built with Bryce, so she and her daughter moved out and leased the home. To find a home for the grapes, she prepared a list of questions and interviewed winemakers, and Ken Wright quickly rose to the top of her list.

“Ken’s a standout,” she says now, halfway through a 15-year lease that he received to manage the Bryce vineyard. “In honoring Bryce’s legacy, in his business practices, his reputation in the community and in the marketplace. He told me he would make a vineyard designate from our land – it was a legacy for me.”

And for Bryce Bagnall, whose resting place will be shaded by three dogwood trees as time and history grace this land for the next hundred years.

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