

KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

History in the Vineyards: THE CANARY HILL VINEYARD

By Jim Gullo

Canary Hill may be one of the older vineyards in the Eola Hills of the Willamette Valley, but its modern history is fairly easy to summarize. Ken Wright liked the vineyard so much that he bought the property outright from Dick and Nancy Daniel in 2006. Twenty-four years before that, in 1982, Nancy and Dick cashed in their Arizona home for the rugged, beautiful property high up in the hills, with a view west towards the Coast Range. They thought that growing grapes might be a good idea, even though “I didn’t know spit about wine,” says Nancy now. The farmers who were their neighbors thought they were nuts for paying \$3,500/acre for the 21-acre parcel that was little more than a sheep pasture. How did Canary Hill get its name? “When we arrived there were thousands of little yellow birds on the property,” she recalls. “People told us they were canaries. Well, turns out they were Western Goldfinches.” Too late – they had already named it after canaries, and the name stuck.

Dick designed and built a barn, and then prepared the land for planting – he always said that driving a tractor allowed him to look back and see what he had accomplished – and Nancy planted gardens and fruit trees. After the vines went in – Chenin Blanc originally, along with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay -- they built a house, enjoyed an active retirement and learned how to grow and sell grapes. After Ken bought the property, Dick and Nancy moved to a house in a golfing community north of Salem, where he would pass away a few months later. Nancy still lives there.

Simple and quick, but winegrowing is a relatively new phenomenon in the history of Oregon. Dig deeper into history, and the land reveals much more. The community where Nancy now lives is called McNary Estates, and if we peel back time, her being there completes a loop, in a way, that began over 150 years ago. It turns out that all sorts of things, both historic and prosaic, occurred on the land that would be mistakenly named after canaries, and its neighbors. A vice-presidential candidate came from there. The first sheep to ever arrive in Oregon landed there. Add an award-winning farmer, fur trappers and Civil War veterans. Add the extinction, horrifying in retrospect, of a tribe of people who had occupied this land for millennia, and then practically vanished overnight. Finally, add some of the best wine grapes in the world that continue to be cultivated at Canary Hill.

The native people were the Kalapuya tribe of Native Americans, who, evidence shows, inhabited the Willamette Valley all the way back to 3,500 BC. In the early years of the 1800s, there were 15-20 separate bands throughout the valley; the Luckiamute occupied the lands surrounding today’s town of

Dallas, including the banks of Luckiamute River and Rickreall Creek. They gathered camas and wapato, hunted for deer and were a relatively peaceful people outside of keeping slaves whom they mostly captured from the Chinook tribes. A fur trader named Alexander Henry who encountered the tribes in 1814 described, with typical largesse of the time, “a wretched tribe, diminutive in size and with scarcely any covering...their wants are few, deer are numerous [and] roots, which abound, constitute their principal food. These people preserve their camas much better than any others; they make it up in cakes of about ten pounds’ weight, three inches thick, in which state it keeps fresh and moist.”

Thirty-five years after he wrote that, they were nearly all dead. In forty years, malaria, smallpox and influenza brought by ships, missionaries and settlers wiped out a civilization that had thrived for millennia. Visitors to Kalapuya villages reported scenes of utter devastation – bodies, dying people too weak to move, and babies crawling on their mothers. Handsome baskets and stone Kalapuya artifacts are on display at the Polk County Historical Society.

The tragedy of the Kalapuyas was one reason why there was little if any opposition to white settlers arriving in the region and claiming land from the mid-1840s. One such pioneer was Joshua “Sheep” Shaw, who with his son Alva Compton Rigg Shaw drove the first flock of sheep across the plains and mountains from Missouri to the Oregon Territory in 1844. Joshua was born in 1795 in New Jersey and listed his occupation as shoemaker. With wife Hannah and son A.C.R., who was born in New Jersey in 1817, the family was granted a land claim of 640 acres, the northern section of which contains the land that would become Canary Hill, and would become a fine place to establish the first flock of Oregon sheep.

Alva married Sarah E. McNary, who had been born in Illinois and came to Oregon in 1845 with her parents. They would have seven children, and when there was an Indian uprising in 1847, she sewed the flag that the volunteers took into battle. “It was the first flag raised in the defense of our state,” said the Oregonian’s obituary of her in 1901, adding, “She was a noble type of the pioneer women of Oregon, to whose unfaltering courage, industry and self-denial our state owes so much.” The couple moved to California in 1867, where Alva died in Berkeley in 1880.

McNary is a name that resonates in the area ever since more of that family made their way to Oregon from Kentucky and Missouri, beginning in 1845. Just east of the Canary Hill property sat the McNary Orchards for many years, and just south was the McNary junction for a rail line that delivered Polk County produce and goods to Salem. There is a McNary dam on the Columbia River, a McNary High School in Keizer, and Salem’s airport is McNary Field. That’s because the most prominent McNary of all was Charles Linza McNary, born in 1874, who would serve in the U.S. Senate from 1917 to 1944, and was Wendell Wilkie’s vice-presidential running mate in the 1940 election. The upscale, golf-course community where Nancy Daniel now lives was once a 112-acre farm gifted to Charles’ mother and father for their wedding. It grew during Charles’ lifetime to include a 250-acre arboretum, orchards that helped establish the hazelnut and prune industries of Oregon, and a home that was described as the Monticello of the west.

Maps show that in the 1920s, ownership of the land that would become Canary Hill had passed to W.J. and Thomas Cromley, not to be confused with Thomas Crowley who was a veteran of the Civil War and also had local landmarks, including nearby Crowley Road, named after him. The Cromley's left few traces: Although buried in Salem, their gravestones contain only their names and no dates of births or deaths, nor are there any obituaries on file. Their neighbors to the south were E.C. and D.E. Brunk, who lived at Brunks Corner, and whose Brunk House from 1861 has been restored and transformed into a museum by the Polk County Historical Society.

The land would then pass to the Primus family, beginning with John M. Primus and presumably, his brother Theodore Joseph Primus, both of whom were born in Iowa in the 1880s and made their way to Oregon in the 1920s. Theodore lived to be 81 years old and just missed seeing his son Clarence Primus, who lived on the family farm for 54 years with wife Mary, get named the 1974 Polk County Livestockman of the Year. The farm was 700 acres then, and Clarence ran 135 ewes in the hills where grapes grow now, as well as raising wheat, barley, ryegrass seed, oats and peas. Clarence would pass away in 1991 after parceling off 20-acre chunks of the farm – “The farmer’s social security,” as one person put it – to the Daniel family and others. He and wife Mary raised five children on the property, one of whom, Joe Primus, still lives in the family homestead, from which he commutes to his job as manager of a Salem Safeway. The trout pond that Clarence loved to fish continues to reside on the property.

Dick and Nancy Daniel met as undergraduates at Washington State University; they were both from towns in eastern Washington. Dick became an electrical engineer, Nancy a master gardener as they raised their kids in the Phoenix area. A careful search of west coast cities revealed the Salem area as the place to which they most wanted to retire, and a meeting with the Casteel family of nearby Bethel Heights Vineyard cinched the decision to grow a vineyard during their retirement. When area growers decided on a protocol for low-impact, low-chemical vineyard practices, it was Dick who coined the term L.I.V.E. – Low-Input Viticulture and Enology – that exists as a standard today.

The label created for Ken Wright Cellars Canary Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir shows a young, robust Dick and Nancy in their vineyard, planting a new grape vine, with the sun setting over the Coast Range. There isn't a canary in sight on the label, but then, there never were canaries on Canary Hill Vineyard.

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