KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

History in the Vineyards: LATCHKEY VINEYARD

By Jim Gullo

In 1889, Jesse Hobson was a Portland land speculator and agent who tried to convince well-heeled city people of the virtues of owning a little country orchard property. That year he advertised the sale of thirty-eight five- and ten-acre parcels of land that were “especially adapted to fruit raising and well-watered by a spring brook,” just two miles from the Quaker community of Newberg. The nearby village that would become Dundee wasn’t even mentioned, but Hobson’s Fruitland became a fixture on maps, just north and west of downtown Dundee, for the next sixty years. Unbowed if not well-compensated, by 1909 Hobson had moved on to land near Hillsboro, and was promising epic returns to those willing to plant cherries and berries, with the pitch of, “What is more enthusing than the fact of the ownership of a little farm right in the border of a great and growing city?”

In the case of Hobson’s Fruitland, he was 110 years too early and on the wrong side of the road. Cherries and nuts had modest success in the Willamette Valley, but it was on the west side of the gravel and dirt Red Hills Road, on hilly land that rises up steeply into the Dundee hills, where the real fruit jackpot lay hidden for more than a century. In 1999, Pam Walden and husband Aron Hess bought seventeen acres of wild, overgrown forest land opposite of Hobson’s Fruitland. It took them another nine years before they could afford to plant grapes on this slice of prime Oregon real estate that is now known as the Latchkey Vineyard. The pinot noir grown here is world-class, and chardonnay just might be too.

By that point the land had been supporting families for over 150 years, although it didn’t seem to capture any interest from the early pioneers to the Oregon Territory. The spring brook to which Hobson referred in his ads is still called Harvey Creek, almost certainly named after an Andrew Harvey whose name appears on many maps, including Yamhill County’s official database today, as the donation land claim holder of the land east of Red Hills Road. But this must be an error, because no Andrew Harvey exists in official DLC records or in the many stories of Oregon’s early pioneers. The closest match is an Andrew Jackson Harvey who was born in 1828 in Virginia, presumably traveled west as a young man in the late-1850s, possibly homesteaded or purchased the land in Dundee, staying long enough to lend his name to the creek, and then died in Portland in 1903. Besides that, Harvey remains an enigma to history.

The hilly land across the Red Hills track was never claimed by any enterprising pioneers, but its history is much better documented. It starts with Francis Tilden Keyes, who was born in western New York in 1830, and headed west to seek his fortune in California gold in 1853, arriving in San Francisco in May of that year. Finding neither treasure nor work, he made his way to Oregon two years later, where he homesteaded the land that is now the Latchkey vineyard and opened a flour mill; the property became known as “The Maples.” His wife, Mary Ann Corzine, was a granddaughter of the pioneering Kaiser family which lent its name to the town north of Salem, and the couple had seven children. She passed away in 1886 and he in 1913, a handsome old man with a magnificent long, white beard. They are buried together in the Dundee cemetery.

The property then was passed along to son Frank T. Keyes, who was born in 1870; his sister Laura Hardwick received the adjacent land to the north, which is now owned by the Thistle Vineyard. To the south was land purchased by Henry Ernist Holzmeyer, who was born in Germany in 1869 and made his way to Yamhill County. Frank lived there for over 70 years, and he and his wife, Louisa Belle Goens, had one child, Bernice; in 1934, they built the house that still stands on the property, and Bernice was given the home and land when she married Percy Elmer Barbour. She lived in the house well into her seventies, and died in McMinnville just shy of her eighty-fourth birthday.

This information came from Joyce Barbour Beasley, Bernice’s granddaughter, who visited the house in 2016 when it had a brief incarnation as a tasting room. Her father, John Percy Barbour, had also grown up in the home. In-between her grandparents and present ownership of the land, the property was owned by a Cheryl Wright for a number of years, a curious coincidence of history in that Ms. Wright is not related to Ken Wright or his son, Cody, who enter the picture shortly.

In 1996, Pam Walden, who grew up in Leicester, England, had been laid off from her TV production job in London and was working for fun at an *auberge* in the Dordogne region of France when she met an interesting guy. Aron Hess, who had grown up in State College, Pennsylvania, was on a lark in Europe, running with the bulls in Spain (where he separated his shoulder) and then washing up in France. They met over Sunday lunch and he talked her into coming to Bordeaux with him and his friend to sample wine and have an adventure. He bought her the nicest bottle of wine that she’d ever had and their romance began. In 1997, with barely enough car fare to make the trip, they took a driveaway car from Philadelphia to Seattle, stopped in Oregon and liked it (outside of a night spent at a cheap Sandy Boulevard motel), and decided to settle here. He took a job as a cellar rat in a Rickreall winery while she worked in advertising in Portland. Over the next couple of years, Aron moved up the winemaking ladder to become the oenologist at Rex Hill under Lynn Penner-Ash, taking her spot as winemaker when she moved on to start her own business. In 1999, he and Pam bought the house and property on Red Hills Road from Cheryl Wright for $246,000, but couldn’t afford to do much more than clear away the maples, doug firs and blackberries over the next few years – the bonfires were huge, Pam recalls. The hillside was becoming known for the quality of fruit it could produce: That same year, the Willakenzie Wine Company bought the Holzmeyer property to the south and planted their Joryhills Vineyard. Two sons were born in the creaky Keyes house – one hot summer they traded wine for air-conditioning -- and the couple began their own wine labels, Daedalus and Jezebel, with Pam helping with punchdowns and the barrel work when she returned from her day job in the city.

With dreams of their own winery estate, they laid out the vineyard in 2008 under the direction of Stirling Fox and planted a dozen clones on seven acres. But the marriage dissolved before the plants reached their second leaf, Pam bought out Aron’s share of the property in the divorce, and by the time the vineyard reached maturity she had learned winemaking at the community college and created her own brand, Willful, under the tutelage of mentors like Chris Berg. She pruned the vines herself, and when her boys were little she lured them outside with the promise of a “candy tree” on the property where they could find treats while she worked. She figured out how to craft a tricky 2011 vintage when Aron took the boys to Legoland.

On January 14, 2013, Pam went to pick up the boys at Aron’s place in Dundee. They weren’t there, and she found his body, the victim of an accidental drug overdose. His ashes were scattered at the vineyard. She took her sons to Pacific City shortly afterwards, where they rolled down the sand dunes and she contemplated working the vineyard by herself for years to come versus having adventures together with her boys. She came home and put the vineyard up for sale, and moved her wine production to Portland, where she continues to make wines under the banner of the Willful Wine Company.

While all this was happening, Cody Wright was growing up nearby with a unique winemaking pedigree. His father was Ken Wright (whose Tyrus Evan label is coined from the middle names of Cody and his brother), and his mother and step-father were Corby and Rollin Soles of ROCO and Argyle wineries. Besides receiving a degree from the University of Oregon, Cody had worked at both of his parents’ wineries as well as studied his craft in New Zealand and Australia. When he married his wife Marque, two of the people in attendance at the wedding, with a reception held at Ken Wright Cellars, were new friends Scott and Michele Campbell.

Michele was from the Sunset district of San Francisco; Scott had grown up all over the world with his traveling family, attending high school in Singapore and settling in Portland after receiving a business degree at Oregon State. They both had long, successful careers in high tech when they met, fell in love and married. The first and closest friend that Michele made when she moved to Portland was Marque Wright after a chance meeting at the hair salon where Marque worked. On one of their first dates, Scott took Michele wine-tasting at Domaine Drouhin Oregon in the Dundee hills, where she rendered him speechless by buying an expensive case of wine and throwing it into the car. He was used to six-dollar Chianti, but she had grown fond of Napa wines and elegant tastings. He caught up. When his software company went public in 2011, the influx of funds allowed them to think about a weekend home in the country that would nurture the family’s (Scott brought two kids to the marriage) love of growing and the outdoors. A century earlier they would have been Jesse Hobson’s perfect client profile.

At the same time, Cody Wright’s Purple Hands Winery, founded in 2005, was getting accolades for its fine, single-vineyard wines, and he was looking to expand his business. An investment deal was struck and in June of 2013, the Campbells bought the vineyard property from Pam Walden, house and all, and became business partners with Cody in Purple Hands. John Hirschy, another Ken Wright Cellars vineyard owner, provided legal advice. “We want to live an interesting life.  We didn’t want to wake up at sixty-five years old, retire, and think 'gosh, we probably should have started this 20 years ago,’” said Scott. He and Michele and kids promptly began to camp out in the meadow at the top of the vineyard property where Pam Walden had once kept her candy tree; Scott’s son now wants to study viticulture. Four more acres were planted and the old Keyes home was transformed that year into a tasting room for Purple Hands, which has since built a production facility and tasting room on the main drag in Dundee.

In 2014, Ken Wright signed a ten-year contract to purchase half of the Latchkey fruit, with Cody’s Purple Hands keeping the other half, a rare father-and-son professional combination that makes for an awfully interesting comparison when the two wine brands are tasted side by side.

With the tasting room moved off-property, the old Keyes house is once again being used as a country home for Scott and Michele Campbell and their kids. They hope to expand it in the coming year. They also want to plant chardonnay and expand the vineyard.

For this, we imagine, Francis Tilden Keyes – and perhaps four succeeding generations of his ancestors -- is stroking his long, white beard in approval. Heaven only knows what Jesse Hobson, who chose the wrong side of the road for his orchard investment, would make of the current state of affairs at Latchkey Vineyard.

# # #