

## 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 FOUR: MCCRONE VINEYARD

In the autumn of 1979, shortly after Don and Carol McCrone moved to Seattle and Don joined the political science faculty of the University of Washington, the couple made a trip to McMinnville to visit Oregon wine country for the first time. They had dinner at Nick's Italian Café and watched the local hot-rodders "drag the gut" on Third Street. They instantly fell in love with the rolling hillsides and agricultural lands, the small-town ambience and, of course, the wines that were just becoming known on the international stage. It was that year that David Lett's Eyrie Vineyards pinot noir wine, from the 1975 vintage, placed second at a French Wine Olympiad, putting Oregon wines on the map.

The McCrones returned every year, meeting winemakers like Ken Wright and Myron Redford in the '80s, and Don began to have the idea of looking for a vineyard property that would serve as a retirement home and income for the couple after their sons grew up. He looked for five years, always with the provisions in mind that the land absolutely had to be a premium location for growing grapes, and that he had to have a sense of who his market for the grapes might be before he invested. There was one thing of which he was certain: "I was going to grow Pinot Noir," he said. "It was my favorite wine by far."

The property they found was a 9.8-acre hazelnut farm with a house in the hilly, agricultural lands between Yamhill and Carlton, with a sweeping, expansive, south-facing view. A former working hazelnut orchard, the property was overgrown and in disrepair, and tree blight had begun to take hold. Saving all but a few hazelnut trees and Carole's prized pear tree, McCrone cleared the property – "We had the biggest bonfire the county has ever seen," he laughed, recalling the final act of cleaning up all of those hazelnut trees.

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In their place went, first, a small test plot of 438 Dijon 115 clone grape vines, direct-rooted, because grafted stock was harder to come by in those days when everybody was suddenly planting vineyards in the Willamette Valley. They purchased a tractor and a spray pack, and Don and Carole used those vines to experiment with making homemade wine, and with learning more about vineyard management.

By 1993, they were ready to sink everything into the vineyard. They got their hands on 3,000 grafted Pinot Noir roots, and 1,500 of Chardonnay, planting them on the gently sloping south face of the property. The fruit was all sold to Ken Wright once it reached maturity, and in 1997, when the McCrones were ready to complete the vineyard, Ken asked them to graft over the Chardonnay with even more Pinot Noir, because it was so good. He has been the sole winemaker to source McCrone fruit since the vineyard's inception in 1995. The McCrones now have 7.5 acres of the former hazelnut orchard under cultivation, producing about 700 cases of wine every year that shows deep, dense colors and powerful qualities of dark fruits.

The McCrone property lies in the heart of the land that was originally claimed by William D. Clark (DLC 975), a farmer who was born in New Jersey in 1808, and with his Connecticut-born wife Phebe, came to Oregon with daughters Clarissa and Nancy. Their land claim encompassed 640 acres that stretched from west to east between the present-day towns of Yamhill and Carlton. Clark was handy: One historical document gives him credit for building the first blacksmith shop in the county – “a tanned deer skin was used to make a bellows” – on the property of James Johnson, who built the first house in the county.

Clark had many influential neighbors and contemporaries. To the south of the McCrone property were the lands claimed by the Rowland family: Jeremiah (DLC 25), from North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri before coming to Oregon in 1944, and son Green L. Rowland (DLC 935). Jeremiah was appointed by the governor to be a probate judge of Yamhill County for seven years; he passed away in 1879 and with his wife, Mary Ann Rowland (1820-1905) is also buried in McMinnville. Green, who married Sophronia Fouts, lived to be 83. A few miles southwest of the property was the land claim of Robert Merchant (DLC 119), who was born in Scotland in 1797 and stowed away on a ship crossing the Atlantic at the age of 16. He worked in New York as a shoemaker, moved to Ohio and married his wife Lucretia Stewart in 1838, and crossed the plains with three children, arriving in Oregon City on September 27, 1847. They made their way to the valley and began to homestead the land that would lead to his 640-acre donation land claim. He was both a farmer and the first shoemaker in Yamhill County. The family lived in a dirt-floor log cabin until 1856, when Merchant constructed a frame house for \$3,000. He served on the first jury in the county – the first court session ever held in Yamhill County was conducted at his house -- and was a Justice of the Peace for several years before passing in 1862. Lucretia passed away in 1890.

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Their lands became part of the agricultural belt that made this part of Yamhill County a prime producer of tree fruits – from prunes to apples and pears – as well as hops and nuts. Metsker maps from 1928 and 1942 show the McCrone property owned by a business concern called Fairview Orchards, with Yamhill Orchards tracts just to the west. By the mid-'50s, the property had come under the ownership of Anthony Harmon, a landowner and farmer in the region whose property extended east to the present-day Savoya vineyard. A local man who attended Carlton and McMinnville high schools, Harmon raised fruit and sheep and drove a log truck after serving in the U.S. Navy during the Korean conflict. His property was divided after a divorce with wife Toriko, and it was from Toriko Harmon that the McCrones acquired the property.

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