



KEN WRIGHT CELLARS VINEYARD HISTORY PROJECT:

History in the Vineyards: SHEA VINEYARD

By Jim Gullo

How is it possible that the property which is now home to Dick and Deirdre Shea's vineyard has become -- in practically no time if you consider the context of the last 175 years or so -- one of the most wildly successful places in Oregon for growing fine-wine grapes? How could it be that this land which has been kicked around for generations, logged, ignored, litigated and left behind, could be so valuable now? Well, given the improbable series of events and people who have lived on or alongside this land -- the bankruptcies, the divorces, the triumphs, the unbelievable historical quirks -- it's hardly a surprise at all.

One lumber baron went broke here. But then another lumber baron got his start here, thrived and became something of a local legend. A dentist got rich here, not from pulling teeth, but by speculating on land values and getting it right.

If that's not enough, a descendant of Martha Washington, the first First Lady, lived out her days here. A man who was so famous and revered that the businesses of Salem closed on the day that he died, and people wept in the streets, was a neighbor. Another neighbor was a railroad engineer who lived and worked hundreds of miles away, yet whose very acrimonious divorce was splashed across the front pages of Portland newspapers.

Even more: The people who first lived here were delivered to Oregon by Captain Joel Palmer himself. There is a nice restaurant in Dayton at his former home that still bears his name.

And that was all before New Yorkers Dick and Deirdre Shea turned the land into a vineyard that Ken Wright knew, practically before it was planted, would become a sensational producer. He was right: One of the first vintages from Shea became an overnight sensation when it received one of Oregon's highest scores ever, and put the Yamhill-Carlton region on the wine map.

ROBERT CROUCH KINNEY AND HIS BROTHER SAMUEL

In the summer of 1847, Robert Crouch Kinney and his older brother Samuel, along with their wives Eliza and Maria, respectively, set out for Oregon from their homes in Iowa. Their leader was Captain Joel Palmer, who was making his second journey to the territory, this time with nearly 100 wagons and hundreds of people under his care. They needed it, because there were numerous encounters with hostile native American tribes along the way that the Palmer party fought off. They arrived, intact, in October of that year, and shortly afterwards the Kinney brothers settled on the land that is framed today by Highway 240 and North Valley Road.

Robert Kinney was surely one of the most dynamic and accomplished men to ever make his way to Oregon. Born in Illinois on the 4th of July, 1813, he had already fought in the Black Hawk war of Illinois, personally founded the town of Muscatine, Iowa and served in the Iowa Constitutional Convention before deciding to move west. He tried his hand at gold mining in California, and he and Samuel homesteaded, and then received donation land claims to their neighboring properties. Samuel's land is where the Shea vineyard now sits and Robert's claim was just to the east. Samuel would live out his days on his land, but Robert, after successfully farming for ten years, became a member of the State Constitutional Convention in 1857 and a member of the Territorial Legislature. In 1858 he moved to McMinnville and started a flour milling business that would become hugely successful, at one time handling a quarter of the Oregon wheat crop and shipping flour overseas. He was also an important benefactor to McMinnville College, now Linfield College, in its early years. When he died in Salem on March 2, 1875, "at twenty minutes past two o'clock," as the papers reported, businesses closed and people wept in the streets. Hundreds of people attended the funeral.

Samuel Kinney, who had five children with Maria, would pass away seven months later; he is buried in Lafayette.

LUMBER BARONS AND RAILROAD ENGINEERS

Robert Kinney's property was then owned by Matthew W. and Marie Patton, who were members of the pioneering family that gives nearby Patton Valley its name. A logger by trade who wound up working for the Weyerhaeuser Company, Matthew's last fifteen years were spent growing filberts, which are still an important crop in Yamhill County, and are commercially grown across the street from today's Shea vineyard. He is credited for developing machinery and systems for pollinating and harvesting nuts.

Samuel's property and neighbors seemed to attract controversy. In 1906 a newspaper headline proclaimed, "Ferbrache Sued Again," because Lincoln R. Ferbrache's logging business, the Oregon-Idaho Company, was going down in flames. He was bankrupt by 1911, but maps show that the Samuel Kinney property was owned in the 1920s by Nellie Ferbrache, Lincoln's second wife, and one wonders if the title had been put in her name to avoid creditors. There is no record of her ever actually having lived there; Lincoln died in Portland in 1938.

Another absentee owner, Orville O. Jennings, just to the north of the present Shea property, was also in the news for the wrong reasons. A railroad engineer who worked out of Roseburg and had thirty-five years running trains from that southern Oregon town before passing away in 1935, just a few months after retiring, Jennings' name was splashed across the Portland papers of 1904 . . . because of a lurid divorce. His wife Helen Cynthia Jennings was found "openly consorting with one John S. Seed, a character of a notoriously adulterous disposition," (and possibly the original "bad Seed"), as the paper reported. She had been seen riding with him and going to public places of amusement, and "Seed's wife assaulted her several times for keeping company with Seed." A judge awarded Jennings \$5,000 damages from Seed and a divorce, and he later remarried and had children. The farm in Yamhill was either an investment or a vacation property for him.

By the 1940s, Jennings' property had come into the possession of Charles F. "Sport" Laughlin, who became a successful logger in his own right and owned a great deal of the land that has now become prominent vineyard and winery properties. Sport Laughlin died in 1987, but the Laughlin Logging Company is still in business today, as is a Sport Laughlin equestrian arena. His daughter, Dorothy Skuzeski, lives in Yamhill and was formerly the resident and owner of the property that is now the Hirschy vineyard outside of Carlton.

And the Ferbrache land? It became the property of Alfred Mayo Jensen, who was born in 1882 in Nevada and lived most of his 74 years on the land, supporting himself by working for twenty-three years at the Roberts Hardware Store in Yamhill. His wife was Ora Cezel Farmer Jensen, who passed away in 1981 and whose mother, Rachael Jane Farmer of Harlan, Kentucky, claimed to the day she died to have been descended from Martha Washington. So a small piece of American Revolutionary history passed down, quietly and without fanfare, to Yamhill County.

DICK AND DEIRDRE SHEA, AND A CLOSE CALL WITH A CONFUSING NAME

When Wall Street trader Dick Shea wanted to invest in Oregon land in the late-1980s, the property was owned by an investment group headed by Sherwood dentist William Edell, who had snapped up 700 acres of Sport Laughlin's land. Although the young Oregon wine industry was almost entirely based in Dundee at that time, with some activity in the Eola hills, Edell figured out that the Yamhill-Carlton area would also become prime vineyard land. Besides selling to the Sheas, the Edell group flipped a huge chunk of land to Bernard and Ronni Lacroute to form the Willakenzie Estate Winery.

Dick Shea grew up in Queens, Deirdre in Huntington, Long Island and, like another Long Islander named Trump, he attended the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania in 1968. Unlike Trump, Shea was drafted that year and served two years in the Army, one of which was in Vietnam, returning to get his MBA at Wharton in 1972. He went to work in Manhattan for an investment banking company named Dillon Read & Co., whose owners had purchased the Haut-Brion vineyards and winery of Bordeaux in 1935 (and still own it). It was his introduction to fine wine. Deirdre was a lawyer and underwriter for an aviation insurance company that was founded by WWI ace pilot Eddie Rickenbacker.

With a fascination for Oregon wine and some money available for investing, the Sheas partnered with two friends, one of whom didn't even drink wine and was quickly bored by the wine industry. Dick came looking for land to buy in 1988, when he met vineyard manager Mark Benoit, who, as Dick said, "had a genius for the whole thing, and said this land makes sense as a vineyard," and bought the first 160 acres of what would become four purchases of 285 contiguous acres of land. It was essentially a cow pasture, cleared of trees for the most part and growing little more than the magic mushrooms that high school students would later tell Shea were the most potent in the valley. The name of the investment group was Chehelam Creek Ranch, and that was to be the name of the vineyard.

The first blocks of the vineyard were planted in 1989 and the first useable crop, in 1991, was sold off as bulk wine. In 1992 Shea had grapes that he didn't even bother to pick, "because nobody wanted them."

But also in that year, Ken Wright, who had founded Panther Creek Cellars in McMinnville six years earlier and built it up to be a top producer of premium, single-vineyard wines, liked the Shea fruit that he purchased so much that he proposed bottling it as a single-vineyard designate.

But what to call it? With the deadline for printing labels looming in 1993, Shea decided to buy his remaining partner out and give the vineyard his own name, averting a huge conflict that would have arisen with the Chehalem Mountains AVA wineries of Newberg, a few miles to the north. Shea Vineyards was born. (Another nickname for the property, Rancho Grande, was given by Mexican workers who did the planting and tended the land, and for many years, Shea has unofficially been called that by many industry people.)

By 1994, Ken Wright had sold his interest in Panther Creek and moved to Carlton, where he started Ken Wright Cellars with a plan to focus almost exclusively on single-vineyard wines. Shea Vineyards would be a major part of that plan, and still is. A year later, Robert Parker gave 94 points to the 1994 Panther Creek Shea Vineyards Pinot Noir, at the time and for many years to follow the highest score ever given to an Oregon wine.

After that, Shea fruit was sold out, “and has been ever since,” says Dick Shea. “It was Ken’s curiosity and willingness to try something new that was the key.” The vineyard grew to 140 acres under cultivation, making it one of the largest vineyard properties in the state. He began to make wine under his own label in 1996 and now holds back enough fruit to produce 5,000 cases of premium Shea wine a year, with the rest of the crop parceled out to 21 eager producers, with Ken Wright Cellars at the top of the list. Four of the producers are based in Napa, one is in Washington state and the rest work (and many of them live) in the hills surrounding the vineyard. Dick and Deirdre moved to Oregon full-time in 1999, and now their son Peter, who was born in 1989 as the vineyard was being planted, works with them and expects to carry the business and the property into the future. Another second-generation member of a prominent wine family, Cody Wright, who is Ken’s son, also now sources Shea fruit for his Purple Hands winery.

A future that no doubt will continue a rich history, full of surprises, that this land has produced as consistently as it produces some of the finest Pinot Noir fruit in the world.

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