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"ONE DAY AT A TIME"

Italian-American Wineries
of Santa Clara County
1890-1933

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Italian-American wineries in Santa Clara County between 1890 and 1933, the year prohibition was repealed. It summarizes the hardships that the Italian-American winemakers faced during those years including phylloxera, the earthquake in 1906, the economic panic of 1908, prohibition and the Depression. A conclusion is reached that resourcefulness, stamina and strong community ties guided the Italian-Americans during these times.

The Italian-American influence in the Santa Clara wine industry has been evident for over a century. Thanks to the Italian-Americans, California produced 80% of all the wine in the United States by 1890. Throughout the forty years following 1890, however, the close-knit Italian-American wine community faced a series of hardships. Its members triumphed over these difficult times through their resourcefulness, stamina and reliance on strong community ties.

Around the turn of the century, when Italian immigration into California reached its peak, Italy's economic conditions were worsening. The very rich controlled much of that country's land and businesses, and taxes had surpassed the average Italian's ability to pay. Many seized the opportunity to travel to America when a reduction in steerage made the trip to New York only \$40.00.^{1/}

While businessmen comprised the majority of the Italian immigrants, some agriculturists made the trip in pursuit of the same dream that had spurred many earlier immigrants to America. Abundant, inexpensive farmland presented the opportunity for a fresh start. Santa Clara County was especially attractive to the Italians because of its similarity to their homeland, both in soil and climate. In addition, they discovered what the native Indians and Mission Fathers had known before them: wild grapes grew plentifully in various parts of the county.^{2/} Word

^{1/} Mary Ann Herlihy La Porta, "Study of Italians in Santa Clara County, California", Senior Thesis, San Jose State University, 1972, pp. 1-5.

^{2/} Phyllis Filiberti Butler, The Valley of Santa Clara Historic Buildings, 1792-1920, (San Jose: Junior League of San Jose 1975), p. 186.

of the valley's agricultural conditions traveled back to Italy and new immigrants brought various types of wine grapes to Santa Clara County. At the same time, the Italian population in the area rose rapidly. Between 1852 and 1910, the number of Italian immigrants grew from 24 to 1,800, and many of them put their agricultural skills to work in the wine industry.^{3/}

During the latter years of the nineteenth century, the new grape growers faced several difficulties. As the nation entered the industrial depression of 1893, great quantities of grapes were dropped onto the market at the very low price of 3¢ per gallon. It became apparent that in order to survive the grape growers would have to cooperate, and in 1893 wine merchants formed the California Winemakers Association (the CWA). Most of the Italian-Americans, however, joined another newly-formed organization called the California Wine Corporation (the CWC). It represented the producers.

Because the two organizations worked together, they jointly controlled enough wine to regulate prices and otherwise organize the national market. In 1896, though, an unnamed "independent" placed a large quantity of grapes on the market, and the possibility of collusion entered the minds of members of both cooperatives. Shortly thereafter, the CWA filed a lawsuit against the CWC when it became apparent that certain members of the CWC were better able to move their goods. The lawsuit sought damages from the CWC for "sharp practises and reneging on contracts" and marked the beginning of the so-called "Wine War". By the time the lawsuit was won by the CWA

^{3/} Herlihy, "Study of Italians in Santa Clara County, California", p. 3.

in 1898, the CWC was all but dead. Growing discontent among its members, especially those representing Santa Clara County, resulted in defection from the cooperative and its demise in 1899. The CWA bought its remaining wine, and the wine producers continued in operation under the CWA until prohibition.^{4/}

While the end of the Wine War raised the spirits of some grape growers, many in the northern part of the county faced yet other problem. A root louse called phylloxera had invaded their vineyards. Vines which had previously produced two tons of grapes per acre did not even have leaves.^{5/} Napa and Sonoma County winemakers had been battling with this problem since the 1880s, and their experience indicated that there were only four ways to combat phylloxera: insecticides, which were too expensive; submersion of vineyards in water, which made vines susceptible to fungus; planting in sand, which produced inferior grapes; and planting resistant vines. Even though the last option required more care and drove up labor costs, planting resistant native American root stock and grafting European vinifera to them proved most appealing to the growers.^{6/}

Some viticulturists in California believed phylloxera to be a blessing in disguise. They held that the effect of

^{4/} Charles L. Sullivan, Like Modern Edens: Winegrowing in the Santa Clara Valley and the Santa Cruz Mountains, 1798-1981, (Cupertino: California History Center, 1982), pp. 83-84.

^{5/} Ibid. at 85.

^{6/} Vincent P. Carosso, The California Wine Industry, 1830-1895, (University of California Press, 1951), pp. 115-116.

checking overproduction, which resulted in lower prices, also eliminated the mere speculators from the wine industry. The fact remains, however, that phylloxera spelled disaster for many stable, competent winemakers.^{7/}

While battling with phylloxera, a number of growers found themselves having to deal with another misfortune. On April 18, 1906, a massive earthquake rocked the vicinity around San Francisco. For the most part, the Santa Clara Valley experienced only minor building damage, but the railroad that ran between Los Gatos and Santa Cruz sustained damage which made it necessary for some area winemakers to find alternative methods of hauling their grapes for two years. Also, a great deal of the sulphur used by the county grape growers to prevent spoilage was stored in San Francisco. The fire destroyed much of the sulphur, forcing some growers to do without it that season. As a result, a number reported losses due to spoilage.

John Pedrizetti, a retired winemaker near Morgan Hill, recalls his father telling him of the curiosity about the earthquake felt by many in the community. His father, Fortona Pedrizetti, traveled with his brothers by ferry to San Francisco to witness the devastation for themselves, and upon arriving were immediately put to work fighting the fires. They were not able to leave for a week.

The earthquake and subsequent fires also affected the Italian wineries in another way. The destruction of all but three of the major wine cellars in San Francisco and the loss of approximately fifteen million gallons of wine caused a

^{7/} Ibid., p. 119.

sudden shortage of California wine, forcing prices higher. As a result, local winemakers experienced a brief period of prosperity. In 1908, however, the nation experienced an economic panic, ending the local growers' hiatus. Unemployment among Italians rose rapidly.

Having found employment in the local fruit canneries and in farming, a large number of Italians had settled in Santa Clara County. It was this sector of the population that supported the Italian wineries in the area. As economic conditions worsened, many of these Italians became sufficiently frightened to return to Italy thus affecting the local market for wine produced by the wineries.

This impact was important, because local Italians were accustomed to having wine available in their homes at all times. It was not uncommon for an Italian family to consume a half of a gallon of wine with its meal each day. Pedrizetti recalls that local families consumed between 70,000 and 80,000 gallons of the wine he produced each year. He had a regular schedule whereby he delivered three or four cases of wine in gallon containers to families in the community twice a week.^{8/}

Despite the economic downturn, many Italians remained, their sense of community strengthened by regular social gatherings at places such as "Winehaven," near the San Martin wine finishing plant. Winemakers and their families would gather there on weekend afternoons to socialize and sample the wines that had been produced there. Adults and children alike would enjoy an afternoon of games and conversation.

^{8/} John Pedrizetti, interview by author, Tape recording, Morgan Hill, California, 4 March 1989.

Preservation of their culture was important to them, and Winehaven gave the older members of the community an opportunity to pass on the culture brought with them from Italy.^{9/}

Amadeo P. Giannini represented another part of their culture: a strong sense of community support. Giannini, a first generation Italian-American born in San Jose, founded the Bank of Italy in 1904 and went on to build the Bank of America empire. He believed in helping the Italian immigrants to become established and often loaned them money to acquire land and farm equipment. Many of the immigrants tended to be suspicious of banks, but Giannini did his best to make the Italian community feel comfortable. His bank offered not only Italian-speaking tellers, but a wide variety of free services, including assistance with filling out applications for employment or naturalization and the translation of letters. It is said that he offered loans of up to \$25 on the basis of "no better security than the calluses on the borrower's hands."^{10/} In fact, Pedrizetti recalls obtaining a loan in 1926 from the Bank of Italy for \$65,000 to buy a winery (complete with truck and tractor). No mortgage was ever entered into; all that the bank required from Pedrizetti was a personal note.^{11/}

^{9/} Ibid.

^{10/} Patrick J. Gallo, Old Bread, New Wine: A Portrait of Italian-Americans, (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Company, 1981), pp. 74-75.

^{11/} Pedrizetti, Taped Interview.

Coming from a modest background, Giannini instilled a sense of pride in the Italian-American community. The Italians respected him because he had achieved his success through "guts and hard work". He appeared to them to be a common man, someone whom they could trust. One Italian expressed his feelings as "I was only a dago before Giannini. Now I am an American."^{12/}

Despite Giannini's economic support, however, the wine community faced a larger threat which the Bank of Italy could not forestall. As early as 1911 the idea of prohibition was growing and hard to ignore. That the government might outlaw wine bewildered Italian-Americans, especially since the issue of prohibition centered around morality. Methodist and Baptist leaders declaring that anyone who was against prohibition must also be against God did not win much support from the predominantly Catholic Italian community.^{13/} A first generation Italian-American in the area remarked that the Italians "did not feel as if they were doing wrong. They were good citizens. They had wine all their lives and didn't see why they couldn't have a little wine for their friends. Wine to them was like coffee to Americans, that's what it was. It was very hard to do without."^{14/}

^{12/} Felice Bonadio, A.P. Giannini, Banker, Philanthropist, Entrepreneur, (Washington, D.C.: National Italian-American Foundation, 1983), p. 41.

^{13/} Herbert Asbury, The Great Illusion: An Informal History of Prohibition, (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1950), pp. 300-303.

^{14/} Quoted in Michael R. Holland, The Late Harvest, Wine History of the Santa Cruz Mountains, (Santa Cruz: The Late Harvest Project, 1983), p. 32.

Before long Ed Scgliotti, Vincent Pichetti and other Italian-American winemakers assumed leadership roles and formed organizations to fight against prohibition. One such organization was the Grape Protective Association (the GPA).^{15/} While supporters of prohibition stressed the importance of temperance, speakers representing the GPA traveled around the area in an attempt to educate the voting public about the long-term effects that prohibition would have the local wineries and the surrounding communities. Andrea Sbarboro, the founder of both the GPA and the Italian Swiss Colony in Sonoma County, spoke many times in Santa Clara Valley on the subject of wine and prohibition. People in wine-drinking countries, he said, were accustomed to taking wine with their meals and did not have alcohol-related problems. In fact, he argued, many Italians considered wine drinking to be morally superior to the consumption of other forms of alcohol, and that, in effect, wine was actually a temperance agent.^{16/} Sbarboro's speeches motivated other Italian-Americans in Santa Clara County to join the fight against prohibition. Signs reading "prohibition would destroy this winery" began to appear along the roadsides bordering vineyards.

As the possibility of prohibition loomed before them, many of the grape growers looked for alternative uses for their grapes. William Cruess, a university professor, spoke to valley growers on alternate products, including a grape syrup

^{15/} John R. Meers, "The California Wine and Grape Industry and Prohibition", California Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. 46, March 1967, p.21; and Sullivan, Like Modern Edens, p. 114.

^{16/} Ibid., p. 21.

for desserts. Several of the Italian-American winemakers, such as John Conrotto, did produce the syrup, but the product never gained much popularity.^{17/} The CWA investigated alternative outlets for the grapes such as wine vinegar and grape juice, but these ideas were never successfully developed. Consideration was even given to a series of "floating wineries" that would crush the grapes on the way to Japan, but again the idea never reached fruition.^{18/}

Frightened by the possible effects of prohibition, some of the grape growers began to plant fruit trees between the rows of their grapevines as a sort of insurance, a practice similar to what had been done during the phylloxera years.^{19/} This unwillingness to uproot their vines eventually paid off. As the eastern part of the United States became more and more dry, the demand for grapes for use in making homemade wines rose. Families could still legally produce 200 gallons of wine for strictly home use, and many of the European immigrants in the East who were skilled in the art of winemaking took advantage of that fact. The growers actually received excellent prices for their grapes. The average price received between 1909 and 1913 had been \$10 per ton, but by October of 1917, the price had skyrocketed to \$60 per ton.^{20/} Wine could also be produced legally for sacramental purposes, and at least one Italian-

^{17/} Ibid., 118.

^{18/} Meers, "The California Wine and Grape Industry and Prohibition", p. 28.

^{19/} Sullivan, Like Modern Edens, p. 122.

^{20/} Meers, "The California Wine and Grape Industry and Prohibition", p.21.

American winemaker in the area, Conrotto, capitalized on that privilege by securing substantial business dealings with Jewish rabbis in New York.^{21/} In addition, certain permits allowed some commercial wineries to produce wine for use in medicines, cooked foods (such as Campbell's soups) and in the flavoring of some tobaccos.^{22/}

Despite the efforts of the GPA, prohibition went into effect nationwide on January 16, 1920. It became illegal to produce commercially any intoxicating beverages, but a federal officer observed shortly after the law went into effect that residents of Santa Clara County appeared to have a compliance problem. It seemed, he remarked, that the local Italian population simply had to have its wine.^{23/} Indeed, illegal stills were being set up all over the county, and soon bootlegging, hijackings, poison liquors and arrests became commonplace.

Many Italian names were among those listed on the arrest records during prohibition, and the San Jose Mercury News made much of that fact.^{24/} However, Harry Giretti, who made wine during prohibition, made no excuses: "We had property taxes to pay and children to feed. The 'revenooers' knew it and we knew it and everybody got along the best we could."^{25/} Except for

^{21/} Ibid., p. 123.

^{22/} Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun, Winemaking in California, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983), p. 177.

^{23/} Sullivan, Like Modern Edens, p. 121.

^{24/} Ibid., p. 121.

^{25/} Richard Paul Hinkle, Central Coast Wine Tour. (Vintage Image, 1977), p. 182.

arrest records, documentation of winemaking in Santa Clara County during prohibition is difficult to find. Following prohibition, many of the more successful bootleggers went on to invest their substantial profits in "respectable" ways such as the stock market and real estate. Today some of their children and grandchildren are prominent members of the community, active in both civic and social affairs. Thus, those who witnessed this period are still a bit reluctant to talk freely about their experiences because of the lingering stigma of illegality.

Pedrizetti, however, was quite open in describing his recollections. He saw prohibition as "the big crooked deal", a time when a person could produce bootleg wine or brandy for a large profit provided they stayed out of trouble.^{26/} Often staying out of trouble meant bribing the local enforcement officials. Corrupt prohibition officials made enforcement a particular problem in Northern California. Bootleggers who did get caught, though, found themselves assessed stiff penalties of up to \$800 per incident. These penalties were meant to discourage them from producing wine illegally; but most bootleggers were unwilling to give up their share of the huge profits and continued to produce and sell wine.

Italian-Americans also produced other kinds of liquor during prohibition. Peaches and other fruits, harvested from the trees planted between grapevines, could be distilled to

^{26/} Pedrizetti, Taped Interview.

produce a brandy which some called "jackass". Prices for a gallon of this brandy reach \$29.00 during prohibition.^{27/}

Pedrizetti recalls a large still operated by two men near his property for several years during this time. When federal authorities, commonly called "feds", discovered its existence, they contacted the local constable, who agreed to meet them at the property in question. (Applicable law required the feds to have a local officer with them when raiding property.) The constable, Pedrizetti claims, stopped at a phone on the way to the site in order to warn the still operators. As a result, the operators fled and witnessed the destruction of their casks from a nearby hillside. The constable, also the owner of a trucking company, volunteered to dispose of the still. He had the still loaded onto one of his trucks and driven to a nearby dairy; but within six weeks the still had disappeared and many believed it to be back in operation.^{28/}

From time to time, bootlegging wineries had to account for wine missing from their stock. When pressed by law enforcement officials, some winemakers could be quite imaginative. Stories ranged from claims of broken hoses which resulted in the spilling of hundreds of gallons to mysterious fires that destroyed wine-laden casks.^{29/}

Hijackings, legal and illegal, presented a further annoyance to bootleggers. Men eager to capitalize on the huge profits to be made would devise systems by which three armed

^{27/} Ibid.

^{28/} Ibid.

^{29/} Teiser and Harroun, Winemaking in California, p. 180.

men would stop a truck carrying the illegal alcohol, steal all they could carry, and let the truck pass. Other times, the feds, informed by spies and armed with search warrants, would stop trucks and confiscate all the liquor on board. The Bonesios were among the Italian-American winemakers who experienced these legal hijackings.^{30/}

According to Pedrizetti, prohibition hurt many local Italian-Americans in other ways. Most wineries closed their doors and area families began to buy the illegally distilled wines being produced by underground winemakers. Some of the spirits produced were toxic and a number of people became ill and some even died. In addition, accidents plagued some still operators. A father and his son who lived near the Pedrizettis suffered crippling burns when their illegal still exploded in their home. Pedrizetti recalls that the family had brought the coil from the still to him for repair of a leak. The cork used to test the coil afterwards had not been removed before the still was put back into operation and, consequently, the explosion occurred.^{31/}

In spite of the dangers, though, the Italian-American wineries succeeded in providing a substantial amount of the alcohol consumed by those who continued to drink during the "great national mistake". Older citizens of the community attest to the fact that a shortage of wine never occurred in the area. Some producers claimed that people who "had never touched a drop before prohibition became enthusiastic

^{30/} Pedrizetti, Taped Interview.

^{31/} Ibid.

customers."^{32/} In May of 1929, in fact, a state prohibition administrator brought national attention to San Jose by issuing a statement out of his office in Washington, D.C. which read: "There have been more stills in operation in Santa Clara County than in any other county in the state."^{33/}

The Italian-American wineries were getting by the best they could, but the hard times continued. In 1927 the grape market dropped out and half of that year's crop remained in the Santa Clara Valley where it was used by legitimate winemakers and bootleggers. After the 1928 crop also turned out to be a disappointment, the CWA was reborn with the intention of taking advantage of predicted federal assistance under the Farm Relief Act. The already disheartened grape growers received more bad news when the nation entered the worst economic depression of its history in 1929. Funds eventually received under the Farm Relief Act did little to help the average grower in Santa Clara County.^{34/}

Most of the Italian-American winemakers, a number of whom had already been forced by prohibition to find other lines of work, experienced financial hardships. As more businesses and farms failed during the depression, employment became harder and harder to find. Some of the Italians accepted work with the Works Progress Administration (the WPA) helping to build

^{32/} Hinkle, Central Coast Wine Tour, p. 182.

^{33/} Harry Plate, "We Had The Stills!", San Jose Mercury News, 11 January 1970.

^{34/} Sullivan, Like Modern Edens, p. 126.

bridges, roads and irrigation projects. The WPA paid 50¢ an hour, a wage higher than most could earn elsewhere.^{35/}

Pedrizetti recalls having an interest payment become due during this particularly hard time. The Bank of Italy, now called the Bank of America, agreed to accept cord wood that Pedrizetti and his wife cut from three oak trees as the interest payment. With a certain amount of pride, Pedrizetti summed up the views of his friends and neighbors: "We did what we had to to get by . . . one day at a time."^{36/}

By 1932 the Italian-American community had a reason to believe that better times were ahead. Pressure was beginning to mount for legalization of light wine and beer, and the grape growers suspected that there would not be another dry vintage. In anticipation of this, local growers formed the Grape Growers League in San Francisco, with Fiore Cribari representing Santa Clara County. The League lobbied for the repeal of prohibition, and it reached its goal in 1933 when Congress voted to legalize spirits with an alcohol content of 3.2% or less.^{37/} The winemakers were back in business.

Many of the older wineries, including Cribari, Puccinelli, Gemello, Bonesio, Scagliotti and Giretti, started production in their old facilities, and a number of new Italian wineries began to spring up in the county. Once again the Italian-Americans had weathered a troublesome time, and the Italian-

^{35/} Ibid.

^{36/} Pedrizetti, Taped Interview.

^{37/} Sullivan, Like Modern Edens, p. 127.

American influence in Santa Clara County winemaking continued to be noticeable.

Throughout the years between 1890 and 1933, the Italian-Americans exhibited an unwillingness to surrender to the burdens they faced. Today, deserted wineries can be seen throughout the southern part of the county, but the majority of the wineries that remain in operation are those started by Italian immigrants who came to the United States in the early part of the century.^{38/} Getting started had proved difficult for those who had emigrated without the benefit of a large amount of capital. Many faced the effects of phylloxera, and later prohibition, just as they were beginning to make a profit. Then, while trying to establish themselves in industries other than wine, depression hit and unemployment soared. But they had come to this country and to this area to succeed in a way that had become impossible in their homeland. Resourcefulness and stamina passed down to each generation proved to be especially helpful during the hard times. They relied on the family-like community they had established and as a result could be assured that their culture would continue as times changed. If success can be measured by the Italian influence still felt in the winemaking industry in Santa Clara County, they have indeed succeeded.

^{38/} The Gilroy Daily Dispatch, 17 October 1969.

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