

A 'Wet' Vacaville During a 'Dry' USA

By John Rico

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“STUFF” THAT CAME TO PASS - In the early days of the fruit industry in Vacaville, ranchers took advantage of the virgin soil and planted some of their acreages to vineyards. From these vines came luscious sun-ripened, sugar-sweet grapes which found their way to fresh market. But, many of these ranchers preserved their annual ritual of pressing some of these grapes into a quantity of wine.

It was an accepted scene to visit a ranch and see a grape crusher and press, and then go into the cellar and get a sip of one of several varieties of wines stored in 50-gallon barrels.

Everyone who has been in the fresh fruit growing industry knows full well that there are more lean years than there are those presenting a profit. So, about the only way to make ends meet was to sell some of that excess wine. This was an accepted procedure, well within the law, until that fateful day in 1919 when the 18th Amendment dictated that such wine selling practices were illegal.

The predominately Italian and Irish ranchers, who enjoyed a snort or two of wine now and then, were infuriated at the mention of a “dry” atmosphere. When Vacaville voters went to the

polls in November 1918, to indicate a preference of “wet” or “dry,” they resoundingly preferred “wet” by a vote of 344 to 188. But unfortunately, nation-wide, the necessary number of states needed to ratify the 18th Amendment proved a success.

Vacaville’s Little Old Wine Makers were geared to a way of life, and no vote of the people in other states was to change their position in Vacaville as far as making and selling wine was concerned. This procedure brought about the title of “bootlegger” to many of Vacaville’s most respected ranchers.

Behind closed doors and darkened cellars, wine flowed freely, selling at from 25 cents to 50 cents a gallon. Customers soon earned the names of winos and alcoholics. Raids by revenue agents were frequent and when the offenders appeared before Judge Ralph Platt his reprimand was a minimum fine and a word of caution. Constable Joe Stadfeldt who assisted the agents in their raids, made sure he played the role of Paul Revere by riding into the “hills” to notify his friends that the raids were anticipated for the following day.

Henry Jergen Peters, a pioneer Vacaville area rancher who had amassed 1600 acres of land along Browns Valley Road, planted some of his acreage to vineyard, and he also established Vacaville's first and only winery.

An invoice shows Peters made the delivery of 13,206 gallons of wine in 1896 to commission merchants Sandsberger & Sons in San Francisco, receiving 24 cents a gallon for his product.

The 21st Amendment in 1933 put an end to a dry USA. But those of us who experienced a "wet" Vacaville during a "dry" period can say those were interesting days.

There were many interesting periods in Vacaville's history, some making print and others kept under cover.

Today, when we read with interest the proceedings in the trial of Juan Corona accused mass murderer, it should be recalled that back in August 1928, what was at that time believed to have been the worst crime in California history, took place right here in upper Solano County.

Armed with a gun, a knife and an axe, Leong Ying, a local area Chinese laborer, went on a killing spree, butchering an entire family of mother, father and four children, and five other countrymen on the Hatch Ranch in Suisun Valley.

Pleading guilty to the crimes, Ying was immediately sentenced to die at San Quentin Prison. In November of that year, while a cellmate looked on, Ying tied a towel around his neck and hung himself in his cell. That was that.

Today's multi-million dollar City of Vacaville annual budget has key figures at city hall constantly on the alert to cut expenses. But back in the depression days of the 1930 period when a "buck was a buck" and hard to come by, the city treasury really had problems trying to stay within an annual budget of less than \$50,000. (Actual 1937 budget: \$41,000).

"Get the money," were orders from city hall. Chief of Police O. E. Alley collected monthly fees from houses of prostitution which were permitted to operate here, and Traffic Patrolman George Peters was instructed to go out to Interstate 80 (that portion within the city limits) and make arrests. He had to stay on his toes to justify a \$125 monthly salary.

Another source of minimum revenue came from legalized gambling "joints." One of the most popular being located in a room in a two-story building at the corner of Dobbins

and Kendal. In that same building was a Chinese restaurant, and in rooms upstairs were the women.

In later years, when CMF inmates came to town to tear down the building to salvage the lumber for use at the Keating Park facilities, the heavy door to the gambling den was unique, having been constructed of 2x12 planks, and specially made hinges and dead-bolt lock.

Through. a peep-hole and with proper credentials, you could get into that vault-like: gambling den. Once inside you mingled with Vacaville's elite, including most of the city's official family.

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