

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Stanford's Wine Ranch**

No. 10 in the Book Club of California's series for 1955, which is entitled "The Vine of Early California", is probably the most historical in the series because of the names that are described, the final disposition of the land upon which the grapes were grown and the winery established.

Among the great names in California's past history connected with this number are Peter Lassen, Gen. John Sutter, Leland Stanford, and the Trappist Order of the Roman Catholic Church. The comments for the number were written by F.T. Robson.

"In the Spring of 1843, Peter Lassen was sent by Gen. John Sutter northward through the Sacramento Valley in pursuit of strayed or stolen livestock," Mr. Robson wrote in beginning his review of the Stanford-Vina number in the series.

The beautiful countryside so appealed to him that upon his return Lassen applied for and received as a grant five Spanish leagues (22,500 acres) along the Sacramento River from Deer Creek southward, in what is now Tehama and Butte Counties. Part of this site eventually became the headquarters of the Stanford-Vina Ranch.

Instead of grapes Lassen planted on his Bosquejo Rancho crops of wheat and cotton and left only two acres for the crop for which the land later became noted. The first vines were brought by pack mules from Los Angeles. It was here, according to Robson's story, that Lassen often entertained Fremont during the days when discussions leading to the formation of the Bear Flag Republic were held under the rancho's "Council Oak."

Finally, so the story develops, Lassen lost the ranch. Part of it was acquired in 1852 by Henry Gehrke, a German immigrant, who held a mortgage on the entire grant. It was on this land that Gehrke planted 75 acres of grapes, and from these he produced claret, angelica, sherry, Riesling, muscatel, and brandy.

But Gehrke did not complete the major development of the vineyard. In 1881 it was bought by former Gov. Leland Stanford, who first saw the land when he was inspecting the railroad that was being built to Oregon. Mr. Robson writes: "With Lassen's original holdings as a nucleus, Stanford busily added adjacent lands until he

owned more than 60,000 acres. To this newly named Vina Ranch Stanford attracted many French families, employed during his visit to Europe, and to it he sent grapevines or cuttings from French vineyards, until in time he had nearly 3,000,000 vines on the 3,570 irrigated acres whose long alleys were lined with fruit trees. Here he raised some 14 varieties of grapes from which the large Vina Winery in 1883 made 100,000 gallons of port, claret, white wines and brandy."

Our researcher into the history of the Stanford winery also disclosed the fact that at one time about a quarter of this liquor distilled in the state came from Vina, to be shipped to all parts of the globe. But, he further declares, Stanford was never able to reproduce the fine mild table wines of France. The soil and the water is probably responsible for this failure, the richly fertile soil of the Sacramento Valley, its hot sun, the elaborate irrigation system combined to produce a grape containing far more sugar or alcohol than its French ancestors had.

All these difficulties notwithstanding, the winery continued in production long after the death of Leland Stanford, the founder, with Mrs. Stanford, of Stanford University. The property passed into the hands of the trustees of Stanford, like the majority of his estate. On July 24, 1915, the central building of the ranch, the Vina Winery itself, burned to the ground, and the trustees were faced with the problem of whether they should remain in the wine business. "Finally the high cost of labor, and materials, during the World War, the criticism of prohibitionists and others that a university should not be run on money from the sale of alcoholic beverages, and the lack of profit from the sale of grape juice led the trustees to decide against rebuilding the winery," the editor states.

To end the story of Stanford-Vina we must repeat the last paragraph in the No. 10 in the Keepsake Series of the California Book club with this story: "During the 1920's the property was sold in several parcels, and its many buildings, including two acres of wine cellars with thick brick walls, have since been variously used. But just this year, on July 1, 1955, the original Bosquejo Rancho of Peter Lassen has passed into new hands. Now this land has become the property of the Trappist order, which will make of it a farm and a place of seclusion in keeping with the Trappists' ages-old monastic tradition."