

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Brothers Korbel

One of California's most prosperous industries and certainly one with a romance built around the state's history since the time of the coming of the Padre Junipero Serra to establish the chain of missions, is the making of wine. So we feel that a review of the Book Club of California's series on "The Vine in Early California" is worth giving to our readers.

No. 11 in this fascinating series was edited by Joan Goodlett and concerns the history of the Korbel brothers and their winery in Sonoma County. These brothers – Francis, Anton and Josef – arrived in San Francisco in the early 1860s from their native Bohemia, not with ambition to make wines, but to establish themselves in their various trades. Francis had been working in the tobacco industry, the two younger brothers as master mechanics by training and by trade, Miss Goodlett informs us.

Francis soon was convinced that there was need for a cigar box factory, from which it was only a step into a thriving lumber business. So the brothers established a sawmill in Sonoma County and thereby came to own 6,000 acres of rich, rolling hillsides stretching from Rio Nido to Guerneville. The original "patents" or grants as they are now called, for this land, signed by President Polk, are in existence today.

It was 15 years before the fertile meadows and surrounding hills were cleared, after which the brothers consulted the University of California and had intensive tests made. It was then determined that the soil and climate were "ideally suited to the cultivation of grapes." Vines were planted among the enormous redwood stumps, many of which can still be seen in the vineyard today.

In 1881, the first crop was harvested. But in the meantime the market price on grapes had dropped and the brothers changed from marketing grapes to the production of wine. The same painstaking care which had been typical of their former adventures in California went into the making prize-winning wines, and soon they were forced to expand the business.

In 1886 the first unit of the present winery was built on a knoll overlooking the Russian River, with the wine cellars dug into the hillside. The brothers made their

own brick for the building; they designed the machinery for pressing the grapes; they supervised the building of the magnificent oak cooperage for the storage vaults which are in use today; they even made the huge, hand-forged hinges on the doors of the winery. They recalled the flavor of castles in Bohemia as they worked and today the turreted buildings are an echo of the Old World set in Sonoma slopes.

An old photograph of the Korbel ranch as it looked in 1880 is reproduced in the Keepsake, showing a railroad track which later became a highway. At first the brothers produced only still wines and brandy. But when a Bohemian compatriot came to join them in 1896, they expanded into other products. Franz Hasek, a graduate of the famed Melnik Viticulture School near Prague, began experiments in the production of champagne, using the original European techniques of bottle fermentation, Miss Goodlett learned in the research on the history of this early day winery.

Choice cuttings of grapes were imported from Rheims and Epernay in the heart of the champagne district of France. In 1911 Jan Hanuska another graduate of the Melnik School came to join Hasek and the Korbel brothers. He supervised the development of several kinds of champagne, including the Brut of the connoisseur, the popular Sec, Rouge or sparkling burgundy and a romantic pink, or Rose champagne. Hanuska remained with the firm as cellar master and champagne maker until 1954, when he retired and turned the reins over to Korbel's new owners Adolf and Paul Heck.