

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

December 2, 1955

Italy in California

Frank Norris has written the comments for the last number in the series entitled "The Vine in Early California," published for its members by the Book Club of California. This number concerns the history of the Italian Swiss Colony in Sonoma County.

Norris begins his comment with this line: "Last Friday I went to Italy. I went, I saw, I returned in one day. It cost me three dollars." Now let us see the why and wherefor of that remark. He goes on to reveal that Italy in California means: "Asti, the Italian colony at the head of the Russian River Valley, not much of a town, as far as one could see, but acres and acres and acres— miles for all I know—of grape vines inundating low, rolling hills and the lower slopes of little mountains, with here and there a white painted house far away, just a dot, rising out of the rolling sea of green something like a ship under all sail, or clumps of trees, bunched closely together, that can look for all the world like islands, if you put your imagination to it."

Norris also expresses this— his impression of the Italian Swiss Colony—better than we can, although we have seen it many times from the highway going through the beautiful Sonoma Valley, so we will quote him again: "The transition from sand-dunes about San Francisco to hillside, in the neighborhood of Sienna is almost too brusque. Two or three hours of the jar and dust of railroad come between, and then, long before you are prepared for it, a bit of landscape and environment of the Old World is under your eyes, real and vivid and unexpected. It is almost flippant, this rapid change of scene. It is a 'coupe de theatre,' a shifting of flat and flies in a comic opera. You miss the stage carpenter's whistle."

Another entertaining and well-expressed paragraph written by Frank Norris we have chosen to repeat here because it so well describes what he wishes us to visualize through his description of the Asti Colony.

"The Italian Colony planted here in Western America, working at its native industry, with native laborers and native habits, and customs and manners is curious enough. Probably in no other country than the United States could such a thing be witnessed. The best of it is that the colony is not on exhibition. Asti is not acting a

part, for the instruction or amusement of the seer of sights, like some traveling colonies that one visits at times. There is nothing Midway-Plaisance about Asti. That's what makes it so interesting. There is no artificiality about it, no pose. The colonists do not care whether you are interested and amused or not. There's no effort at imitation. It's the true thing, it's real life, it's business and bread and butter for all that. It's a little piece of Italy, with live Italians on it, cut out of a map, as it were, and taken up and transplanted to a congenial soil."

This text is written by Frank Norris, the noted author of "McTeague" and "The Octopus," was published in The Wave, October 24, 1896, in case you were wondering why the author of these comments went to Sonoma County by train instead of motoring through this beautiful country. Although Norris does not mention the scenery we believe that that day the leaves on the vines and the trees were turning to brilliant shades of yellow, red and bronze and the countryside looked much as it does today— almost 60 years later. The colony we have discovered was established at Asti in 1881, with the wine-making skill handed down from father to son by the pioneers who brought the art from their native land.

A familiar sight as the traveler motors through Sonoma County on his way to the north country, is the El Carmelo chapel in the Italian Swiss Colony Vineyards. It has been there for many years as we remember years. The architecture is not unlike a Quonset hut of modern times set among the grape vines of the vineyard. There is a welcome sign at the entrance inviting those interested to visit the winery.