

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California Vineyards

Parts five through eight of the 1955 Keepsake series of the Book Club of California have arrived and been enjoyed by the membership. The series is entitled "The Vine in Early California," a history of the wine industry in California from the time the first grape cuttings were imported from Europe. The grapes were then grown here and made into wine by experts in the art of making the very choice varieties of the fashionable drink.

The series was edited by Joseph Henry Jackson prior to his death on July 15. He also planned the remaining four parts plus a title; folder; these will be completed under the direction of the Book Club's president, James D. Hart.

The fifth winery in the series to be discussed is Buena Vista located near Sonoma. Agoston Haraszthy, who is often referred to as "the father of viticulture in California," was the founder of this winery. He was born in Hungary in 1812 of an ancient family. He left that country during some political troubles, did some wandering and finally arrived in New York in 1840.

He came to California with his family in 1849, settling first in San Diego where he initiated his first California grape-growing experiment with imported vines. Harold H. Price, who did the research for this number in the series, reports that Haraszthy next decided that San Francisco was more suited to his adventurous spirit, so in 1852, on property which he purchased near Mission Dolores, he planted grapes. Later he moved these to Crystal Springs in San Mateo County. But this climate did not please him, so he moved again in 1857 and bought 560 acres of hillside land near Sonoma. Within a year he had 85,556 vines and 462,000 rooted cuttings of which 14,000 were foreign varieties and by 1857 his vineyard embraced 165 varieties. Thus, Buena Vista became the largest vineyard in California and the experiments carried on there, changed the whole course of viticulture within the state.

In 1861, in accordance with a resolution of the legislature, Haraszthy was sent to Europe to report on the various methods of wine making. While there he purchased 100,000 vines and other fruits which were distributed throughout California. He also wrote a book,

"Grape Culture, Wines and Wine Making," which contains many piquant and amusing observations.

The Buena Vista vineyard was destroyed by the 1906 earthquake which caved in its storage tunnels and buried 30,000 bottles of finished champagne. Some wine is still marketed under the original label names.

Jean Louis Vignes became California's first commercial vintner of importance. His vineyard and winery were on the land which is now the downtown section of Los Angeles. The winery itself was named "El Aliso" after the large sycamore tree which stood near the entrance to the property. He imported vines from his native France and set out 140 acres in the best quality grapes. By 1833 "Don Luis" was well established.

In 1840 Vignes sent his nephew, Pierre Sainsevain, with a shipload of wines up the coast to Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco, where the wines brought an excellent price—\$2.00 a gallon for white wines and \$4.00 for brandies. In 1842, Vignes presented a cask of Aliso wine to Mrs. John Paty, wife of the ship's captain, who was leaving for a voyage to the Sandwich Islands on her husband's ship. It was then the custom to age and mellow wines by sending them on extended voyages.

Philip S. Brown, who prepared the facts for this Keepsake, writes that Vignes assured Mrs. Paty that the wine would be much improved by the time it reached Honolulu. However, according to William Heath Davis, the assiduous attentions of Capt. Paty and his officers to their precious cargo prevented it from reaching its destination.

Capt. Paty, whose famous bark was known as the Don Quixote, and Capt. Clapp of the Alciope were the men in charge of a group of young boys from Monterey, ages from eight to 11 years, including Thomas O. Larkin, a lad of six and the son of Thomas Oliver Larkin, first and only American consul at Monterey. They were being sent to the Oahu Charity school in Honolulu to be educated. This was in 1840, two years before the wine episode.

El Aliso must have been a charming place in the 1840s and '50s. Situated where the Los Angeles Union Station now is, it lay in quiet seclusion behind an adobe wall, and a beautiful grape arbor extended for a quarter of a mile from the house to the river. Here many gala events took place. Vignes died in Los Angeles in 1862 at the age of 83 years. His great friend, William Heath Davis, said:

“It is hoped that historians will do justice to his character, his labors, and his foresight.”