



Bodega Land Trust

Newsletter

"...When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect". — Aldo Leopold (1886-1948), *American Forester*

The Grape Grower

Interviews by Anne Greenfield

Warren Dutton, as a young boy, discovered his "love for doing things with soil" by joining the workers out on his Dad's prune and hops farms.

In 1964, in the midst of his Junior College studies, Warren was able to lease land from his Dad (the current Dutton Ranch near Graton) and put an entrepreneurial hand to the soil of his childhood. He put in 15 acres of French Columbard grapes and a good harvest launched his career as a vineyardist. Today Warren owns or leases 800 acres of grapes and is the largest grape grower, among approximately 75, in western Sonoma County.

Most of Warren's vineyards lie around Graton, with one property on Taylor Lane, Occidental, and one in Santa Rosa. "This soil west of the Laguna," Warren's chest fills with pride, "is some of the best growing soil in the nation. It's classified Gold Ridge, a sandy loam."

Warren's commitment to the land is evident from his serving currently as President of the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District (GRRCD). GRRCD is a special district with a volunteer board of directors who provide technical advice and educational programs on nat-



The Dutton Family (left to right): Joe, Gail, Warren, Steve, and Bogie.

ural resources, and local direction for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's farm programs. Right now GRRCD is involved in restoring fish habitat in Dutch Bill Creek endangered by over-sedimentation caused by run-off from residential development. The GRRCD includes land from the Estero Americano to the Russian River and from the Laguna to the Pacific.

In trying to secure the

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future for agriculture in Sonoma County Warren, like an increasing number of farmers, has created an agricultural conservation easement on part of his land. The easement on 68 acres of apple orchard is now held by the Sonoma County Ag Preservation and Open Space District and will guarantee retention of the parcel's open space and agricultural resources in perpetuity.

So what's it like to grow grapes in the West County? "Ripening grapes," Warren sighs, "in our cool growing season is always a challenge. A heavy rain in September will destroy the fruit. And our temperatures are near perfect for the growth of mildew—the low 70s." Two new technical advances, however, are exciting to Warren: new mildew sprays which are fish and wildlife safe (Bayleton, Rallye, Flint) and an electro-static sprayer which can hone the spray of pesticide into the vine, allowing for minimal drift. The amount of pesticide needed is 1/3 that of sulphur or more traditional chemicals and water needed for dilution is only 15 gal/acre. Dutton still sprays sulphur in the spring but uses the new chemicals every three weeks once fruit begins to grow. The new chemicals work by interrupting cell wall formation in mildews.

Warren finds other pest damage insignificant (bugs, deer, birds) and rarely finds protection necessary. "Birds gotta eat too." He will spray once a year, maybe, for leaf-eating insects. Gophers on the other hand, Warren says, can kill whole vines and occasionally require gopher poison. He would love to see more owls, and he has created a few owl roosts to encourage them. Weed control is often a problem and then herbicides are applied with, again, a new spray device: infra-red sensors which allow only green to be sprayed. "I want reduced chemical input," says Dutton. "I want to be better than sustainable."

How much water do vineyards use? Warren claims they use much less than apples. With drip irrigation he keeps water consumption to 30,000 gal/year/acre or less, whereas apples being watered overhead (as is usually done) use

500,000 gal/acre two or three times a year. Warren will use overhead sprinklers on grapes only in the spring when frost threatens. Water then becomes a miraculous freeze protection for the young vines: as night temperatures descend to 35°, computer thermometers telephone Warren and crew who then rush out to the vineyards to await 32½°, at which point overheads are turned on. The water spray either forestalls the formation of ice or maintains a 32° ice/water envelope on the young leaves. Under 32° the first crucial leaf growth is destroyed. Wind machines, which Warren has been researching, are sometimes being used to the same effect.

Another part of being a vineyardist is dealing with public opinion. Occidental Town Hall Meetings were created as a forum for discussing the conflicts between residents and the rapidly growing local wine industry. Attending his first Town Hall meeting Warren was shocked, however, to see a large poster decrying himself: "Dutton Ranch poisoning our wells with toxics." Warren says "the woman responsible had never before spoken with me and now refused to speak with my son. And in general the meetings were disheartening, hearing comments about what terrible things 'all' vineyards do. All I can do is say to myself I feel good about what I do. I don't destroy redwoods or tear down hillsides. I don't even use toxics." In a county where currently only 5% of land is in grapes, Warren feels the public wrath is overreactive. He works in concert with the Russian River Winegrowers Assn. and the Sonoma Wineries Assn., "trying to find ways to convince the public we're okay."

Warren would like people with grievances to come talk, listen and work it out. A couple of landowners did come to talk with Warren blaming him for their dried-up wells. "If I pumped water out of someone's well I feel bad, but I don't think I have. Their wells were only 20 ft. deep. People don't always have the facts and they won't listen to one word I say."

When asked about the use of methyl bromide, a fumigant for soil prior to vine plantings, Warren feels it's not

generally needed in the Sebastopol area and he only once allowed its use. "I don't like it. I think keeping the soil's organic matter high keeps lots of things in the soil which not only get the nematodes but also give the soil better water holding capacity."

Warren applies a compost of dairy manure, grape pumice and skins and cover crops between vine rows, tilling some in or just mowing, depending on the need for erosion control.

Grape growing is successful agriculture. The price of grapes was good in 1998, has been rising and promises to be up slightly in 2000. Warren has been able to draw his two sons, Steve and Joe, into his vocation. They work with Warren and also have their own vineyards. The high quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grown by the Duttons becomes wine labelled by the Dutton sons' wineries: Dutton Goldfield Winery (Steve's) and Sebastopol Vineyards (Joe's). And the agricultural inactivity of wintertime allows Warren vacations on the desert, which he loves.

Harold Hoskins is fifth generation on the 70 acre Dry Creek farm in Healdsburg. He watched his father and grandfather, his neighbors, and himself, go through decades of prune farming. Grapes started coming into the area in the 50s, expanded through the lowlands in the 60s and 70s and now are vining up into the hills. With the trials inherent in producing prunes, farmers have eagerly converted to grapes.

"Prunes are a lot like the apple business," states the middle-aged Harold. "They were easy enough to grow but it was always a buyer's market; the buyer would always beat you down somehow and the farmer would only stay about even." At this point grape growers and wineries are enjoying a balanced symbiotic relationship and a farmer can "get a grape contract at the drop of a hat." The apple industry has been seriously threatened by the big buyers actually leaving the area.

After growing prunes for 22 years, the Hoskins family tried other things: a retail nursery, vegetables for restaurants. But Mrs. Hoskins has also held

down an extra job without which the farm would not have survived. "Finally," says Hoskins, "after transitioning to grapes 15 years ago, we now stand a pretty good chance as farmers to have something extra left over and we don't go to bed fretting every night. We could live without my wife's job (though the bank still wants to see her employment papers before they give us our annual production loan)."

Economic concerns, the intuitive farmer intelligence, and an openness to new ideas keep many a farmer, like Hoskins, learning, growing and constantly changing their methods. Harold used to be "right out of the chemical company's back pocket (see a bug - spray it)," until he observed a leafhopper spray lasting only 8 hours, costing a lot, and putting workers at risk. He did some research which suggested opening up the canopy to get more light and air to the vines; experimentation yielded success. He was also able to use information gleaned from an Alliance of Family Farmers newsletter: an experiment showed that leafhoppers avoided plants sprayed with kelp or fish emulsion. Hoskins began applying 6-7 times a year a sea spray containing fish emulsion, ground seaweed and natural plant hormones, while discontinuing all chemical sprays. His vines remained healthy; one year in which he failed to spray an area of Chardonnays resulted in a huge leafhopper problem and convinced him that his program was working. "Most people say you can't control bugs that way, you're crazy," Hoskins sighs. "But it works."

For several years Harold worked for Bob Sisson, at the Farm Advisor's office, in the process devouring information on beneficial insects. Harold talks learnedly, and still excitedly, of the white vineyard spider that will parasitize the eggs of insects injurious to grape vines, or the green lacewings

that are the "best friend you can have." He allows his cover crops to go high and dry before mowing, thus leaving not only a mulch habitat for beneficial insects but also roots in the ground which when dead will create pathways for air and beneficial nematodes.

Perhaps the best source of information for farmers is each other. Harold learned from Gallo, for instance, of a new "miraculous" spray: AQ10. It is itself a mildew which parasitizes the mildew harmful to the grapes. With just 2 applications, usually in July, AQ10 stays on the fruit and vines protecting the grapes through harvest, overwintering on the vine and coming forth in the spring to help protect again.

Harold continually does soil and petiole (leaf) analyses, to determine what natural amendments are needed. He follows the transpiration rates in the newspaper; knowing that his 30 ft. of topsoil (!) holds 60 inches of moisture he can then gauge when he needs to water his vines.

"Feeding the soil prevents most problems. But I'm my own boss. It's not so easy for corporation managers to risk their job by trying new methods or by disregarding the advice of the corporation's Pest Manager (usually a chemical company employee). I wish I could convince them that my methods work," says Harold.

Harold holds two fears for the future of viticulture: that it could go wild, with so many growers that the supply/demand balance is upset, and that in monocropping an area a serious disease problem can easily spread miles. He holds no resolution, however, since his trials with multiple cropping proved financially unfeasible. And he believes "everyone's got a right to land ownership and to do what they want with their land."

Harold sits relaxedly through our in-

terview and in general seems to have an easy attitude toward all the sides in the current grape controversy. Small farmer though he is, he doesn't resent the big guys. "If we didn't have the big corporation growers and wineries, we smaller growers couldn't maintain our place on the shelves."

"Things are changing—everyone's got to realize that. I don't like government regulations, but there'll be more. There are some bad people and then we need regs." Harold understands the resentment growers may feel towards the industry critics who are militant and don't have all the facts straight. He has actually experienced the resolution that can come from two parties sitting down to talk, as when years ago he suffered a \$50,000 loss due to the organic farm practices across the road from him. A mildew had been allowed to develop on the organic grape vines and it spread horribly onto his land, carried by the wind and wafted along by every large truck going by. Harold, at that point a dedicated "chemicals" man, tried everything to save his crop. Furious in failure, he was ready to take his neighbor to court. Instead they tried talking and were able to compromise: he agreed to stop using harsh chemicals on his vines and they agreed to move their one roadside row of grapes to a back part of their land. "Now we're pretty good friends," says Harold.

"Growing grapes is a 'philosophically' pleasing way of life," Harold smiles warmly. "There's romanticism in it—vineyards along the highway... grapes going to wine... wineries, good food, and excellent restaurants." ✱

Anne Greenfield, a past BLT Director, currently grows and raises her own food.

Perspectives on Grapes

The articles in this issue represent many different perspectives on grape growing and the wine industry; we are publishing them without making judgments. They do not comprise the whole story, of course, but we hope you'll find in them an interesting range of ideas. —Editors

Re-Thinking Convention

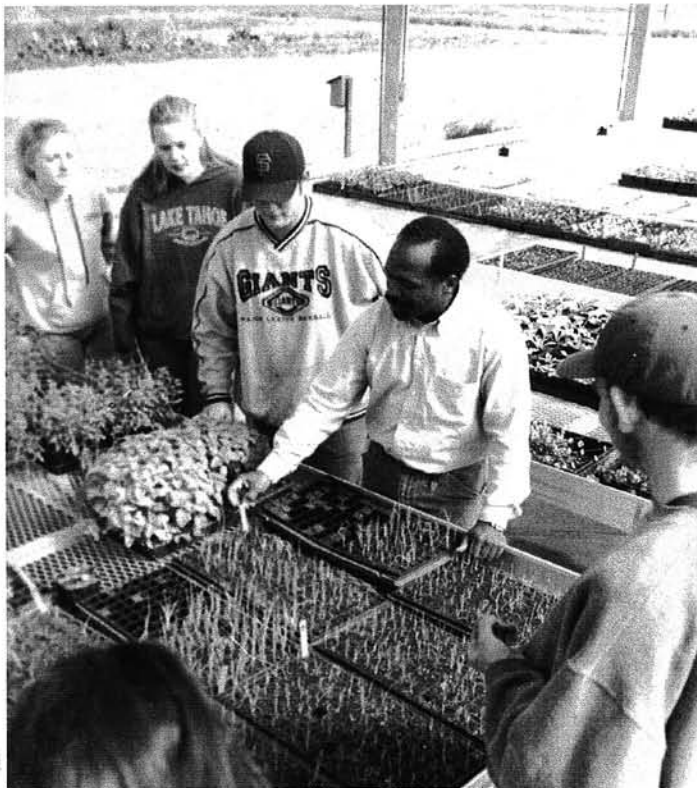
A Conversation with Leonard Diggs, Farm Manager at Shone Farm, Santa Rosa Junior College

by Michael Presley

Leonard Diggs has been farming and teaching farming in Sonoma County since 1989. His current role as Farm Manager for the Shone Farm exemplifies his ability as leader, teacher, innovator and businessman.

Leonard begins a discussion on the organic viticulture program by telling the 30-year history of the SRJC's Agriculture and Natural Resources Program, which has led to the Sustainable Agriculture Program of today. Now in its third year, this program is evolutionary in its nature, continually deepening in ecological, social and cultural perspectives. The program includes the organic production of grapes, vegetables, and flowers.

The Shone Farm is a living laboratory and an interactive classroom designed to bridge science and practice for farmers, landowners and students of farming. Totalling 365 acres, the farm includes 120 acres mixed forest, 100 acres pasture, 60 acres vineyards, 25 acres oat and rye hay, 5 acres intensive organic gardens and learning center, plus an additional 25 acres to be developed into organic fruit and vegetables. Livestock (sheep and cattle) and farm equipment programs are taught from the farm's core area.



Leonard Diggs (center) teaches farm-nursery practices to students at the SRJC's Shone Farm.

Students at Shone Farm are encouraged to increase farm contact hours through special study programs, student employment and eventually an enterprise system (creating a small scale business).

Ten of the 60 acres of wine grapes have been converted to organic production, with additional acreage in transition. Rich Thomas, Vineyard Manager, teaches all aspects of vineyard development and care for 9 major varieties. In being able to demonstrate conventional, transitional, and organic techniques, the Shone Farm vineyards become a viable teaching tool for local growers.

Leonard explains the "conversion of convention" through the historical context of farming during the 20th century when cultural farming practices, a system- and community-based approach gave way around 1930 to a technological- and commodity-based approach. Farmers accepting technological solutions from land grant colleges and corporations became dependent on a new convention of price fixing and production maximization. Currently, we see ecological and social "failures" of conventional agriculture reaching a threshold and thus bringing on a new era of sustainable agricultural solutions and contexts with which to address problems.

Cultural innovations in cover cropping, soil management, erosion control, water usage and disease/pest management of grapes are rapidly evolving, but implementation has its financial costs. Growers need to be rewarded with premium prices from wineries and consumers alike for organically grown grapes. Public pressure on government to support research and development of organic practices will aid farmers in transitional periods. Leonard states: "It's difficult for us humans, and farmers especially, to change convention—it needs to be a dynamic team effort."

Finding the right combination of healthy land management practices for vineyard development is a parcel-by-parcel endeavor. Leonard sees a future where there will be satellite learning and teaching centers sprinkled throughout the county which can address the site specific possibilities in sustainable agriculture. Soils, slope, weather, native wildlife, human community and business approaches vary greatly from region to region. Communication is what will reinvent a sustainable convention.

For more information on agriculture or viticulture classes offered by the Santa Rosa Junior College call (707) 527-4408 (AG office) or (707) 887-1187 (Shone Farm). ✱

Michael Presley is farmer/manager of Occidental's TaylorMaid Farm.



Grapes To Bloomfield

by Lois Pearlman, writer, Argus-Courier

With the wine industry quickly becoming one of the most profitable businesses in Sonoma County, and with prime land in the Russian River and Sonoma valleys already covered with vines, grape growers are exploring the possibilities of using land once considered marginal for grape production—the Petaluma area, west Marin, Cotati, Two Rock and Bloomfield.

New growing techniques that make it easier to bring in a crop in less than ideal climates, the increasing popularity of Pinot Noir (a grape that prefers the cold), and the relatively low price of this marginal acreage—\$10,000 an acre in Petaluma compared to \$40,000 or more in Sonoma or the Russian River area—all combine to make these marginal areas a good investment for both large companies and small-scale farmers.

One such company, the international family-owned Kendall-Jackson Wine Estates, has recently purchased the Carillo Ranch in Bloomfield, a 494-acre former cattle and dairy ranch, where the company is preparing to plant some 290 acres of grapes, primarily Pinot Noir. The property is located on Bloomfield Road, just west of Canfield Road.

According to Kendall-Jackson spokesman James Caudill, the company plans to prepare the future vineyard this year, and plant the vines over the next two years. The reason the process takes so long, Caudill said, is that "we do an incredible amount of research beforehand, so that we put the right stuff in the right place." By the right stuff, he means planting vines that have been bred and grafted to provide some natural resistance to pests and diseases, in order to limit the amount of pesticides needed. In response to public concern over pesticide use in the industry, Kendall-Jackson has voluntarily agreed to eliminate four common pesticides—methyl bromide, Omite, Simazine and Karmex.

Caudill said the ban covers all of Kendall-Jackson's vineyards, including those from Mendocino County to Santa Barbara in California, as well as those in Chile and Argentina. The Bloomfield vineyard could even be completely organic, as are some of the company's holdings, but that has not yet been decided. However, at all of its vineyards the company follows practices designed to keep environmental impact to a minimum, according to Caudill.

These practices include: putting up fencing in small blocks of vines so that wildlife has passageways across the property, creating escape hatches in the fencing for deer who manage to get inside, and revegetating parts of the property with native trees and grasses. Caudill said the Bloomfield land should be in better shape as a vineyard than it was as a cattle and dairy ranch. "We are already gathering acorns to plant seedlings," he commented.

The Bloomfield ranch is one of Kendall-Jackson's latest acquisitions, among holdings that total over 11,000 in California alone. The first Kendall-Jackson vineyard was a ranch in Lake County that Jess Jackson, at that time a lawyer in Burlingame, purchased with his family in 1974. By 1980 the family had more grapes than they could sell, so they decided to make their own wine, which they produced and bottled at a nearby winery. It was labeled Chateau du Lac, in honor of nearby Clear Lake. Soon the Jacksons were producing premium wines under two different labels, and beginning to build their winery empire.

Other Kendall-Jackson holdings in Sonoma County include La Crema and Hartford Hall (the former Domaine Laurier) both of which are in Forestville. The company has also recently purchased an old ranch on Lakeville Highway in Petaluma, which it plans to convert into a vineyard. ✱

Has anyone ever tried, or know of anyone who has tried, using livestock (sheep, ducks, geese, chickens) to graze underneath grapevines for weed or insect control? We're curious.

—Please write BLT

Dams Keep Water in Creeks

by Sharon Welling

I am concerned about the negative attitudes I have been encountering recently towards dams. What the spotted owl has been to the timber industry the dam has become to the grape industry. Like in many agricultural issues, the opponents of dams do not seem interested in educating themselves with facts, in this case regarding dam placement.

Let us not confuse valid criticisms of the grape industry, in regard to chemical use and erosion if proper practices are not followed, with unfounded objections to dams. If vineyard owners were encouraged to build dams to catch winter runoff for their summer water needs, instead of having to meet excessive obstacles when trying to build a dam, they would not need to pump so much water from the creeks in the summer. On-site water storage has many environmental benefits for fish as well as waterfowl. Dams in winter creeks and eroding areas will check erosion and retain sediment.

An argument I often hear is that dams interfere with fish migration and spawning. This is simply not a valid concern; dams are not placed in year-long streams except in rare and extenuating circumstances. Permits would not be given.

Many of the dams I am familiar with were constructed with Coastal Conservancy or other government funds for erosion control to help the fish population by reducing sediment in creeks. Most people seem unaware of the amount of sediment that can come down a watercourse in a very short time. This is usually a result of extreme precipitation on already saturated soils, and this can sometimes be aggravated by human activity. Failure to mulch or covercrop after any activity that creates a soil disturbance, especially in steep areas, can result in soil loss in the next rainy period. The "March Miracle" of a few years ago deposited six feet of silt in one day in some areas along creeks.

Most dams in this area are typically built in a canyon or swale that does not have runoff after the rainy season. The dammed reservoir fills with winter runoff and sediment collects behind the dam, instead of on a spawning bed.

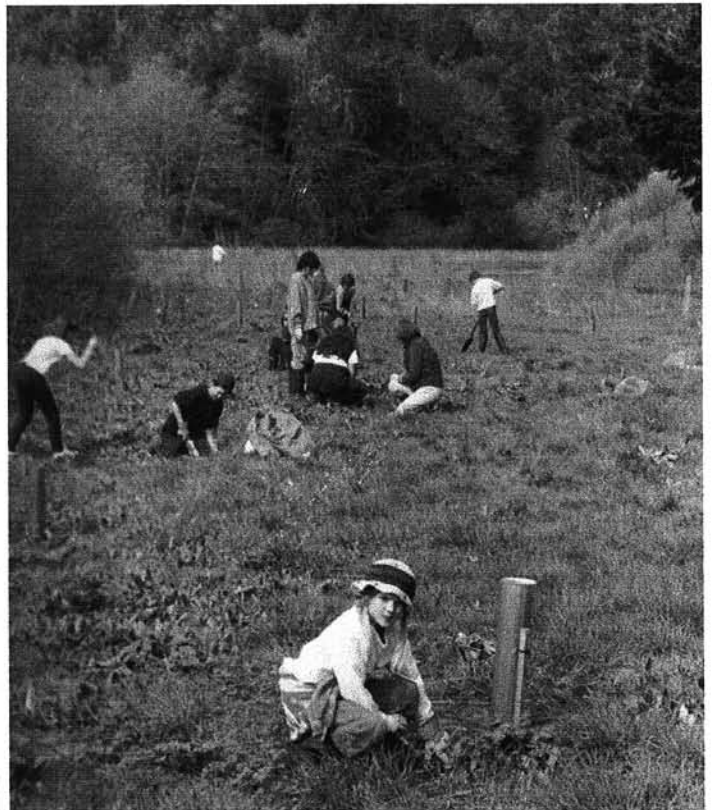
An understanding of the seasons in relation to water can have environmental benefits in other areas also, without additional economic costs. In timber operations consideration should be given to using heavy equipment early in the dry season so that the naturally occurring "mulch" falling from remaining trees has more time to cover disturbed earth before the next rainy season.

I have been concerned for years about the increasing length of dry creekbed where Bodega Bay Public Utilities

district has their Salmon Creek pumping station, although this situation may have improved some. This is a situation where it seems obvious that a reservoir for summer water usage would be environmentally preferable to summer pumping. If there is not an area with sufficient winter runoff to fill a reservoir, the water could be pumped from the creek in the winter with little harm.

It is important to keep moderation and common sense in mind. We need to consider all the consequences of building, or not building, a dam. ❄

Sharon Welling is Vice-president of the Bodega Land Trust. She and husband Ron Harston currently run a cattle and sheep ranch in the Freestone area; they both come from Sonoma County families that have been in agriculture for many generations.



Country Charter School students are involved in the ongoing restoration project at Fay Creek. Arielle Lehmer, of Bodega, pulls up weeds in the foreground. To find out more about Country Charter School, call 874-1994.

The Organic Way

by Jeremy Sharp

Imagine you're a bug and you've just flown into a lush garden paradise filled with nothing but your favorite tender and juicy morsels. And imagine that the benevolent god who created this garden even took the time to carefully eradicate every predator you have ever feared, and every possible competitor. What do you do with this delightful garden of eatin'? Exactly what comes naturally—dine to your heart's content while creating as many progeny as time will allow. That is the scenario in most vineyards after a general pesticide like methyl bromide has been applied.

The pest population, after an initial decrease, immediately explodes, causing the viticulturist no small concern. "My goodness," she is heard to exclaim, "Just look at all those bugs! We better spray again quick!" Which she does, adding an herbicidal formulation for good measure. The chemicals have taken the place of the natural balance, and she is now locked into the chemical cycle. To break it would be to ensure defeat, for she is hooked like any junkie, her entire enterprise now chemically dependent.

Chemical dependence has been the watchword of the agricultural industry for the past 70 years, and is only now being called into question by the average grower. Like any chemical dependency, pesticide use increases with time—more and more is required to achieve the desired effect—and the costs associated rise commensurately. Add to that the public outcry that happens when a schoolyard has been

infiltrated by toxic gas from the neighboring vineyard, and you ask yourself, why does the vineyardist do it? Isn't there another way?

Of course there's another way, a way which has been practiced for centuries and proven quite effective. It goes under many names, but the underlying principle is the same: feed the soil and let nature do its work.

Michael Topolos, of Topolos Vineyards near Forestville, has been farming without chemicals since he planted his first grapes 30 years ago. According to Topolos, "Chemical farming puts strain on plants just like there is [chemical] strain in our lives. You may get two or three productive cycles, but in the end you are undermining the basic health and balance that should prevail."

Five years ago, Topolos adapted the principles of Rudolf Steiner to create

Anytime you throw nature out of balance, you are putting yourself in the position of doing her work for her—not a wise course.

what he calls New Biodynamics—"enhancing and balancing the soil using compost, manure, companion planting, herbal sprays and cover crops." The idea behind New Biodyn-

amics is to return to the soil the nutrients taken out by farming. (Steiner was fairly dogmatic, insisting that the farm maintain one horse to manure each field. Topolos does not find it practical to keep that kind of menagerie on site; he imports his manure from other farms.)

While his practices utilize elements of Integrated Pest Management (a system designed to reduce pesticide use) and can certainly be deemed sustainable, Topolos doesn't care for either of those terms. "You can say you're practicing sustainable agriculture or Integrated Pest Management and still be harming the soil through the use of pesticides. From my point of view, you are either farming naturally or you are not. There is no middle road. We, as farmers, are responsible for leaving the soil in better condition than we found it."

His methods seem to be working, as certifying agencies regularly show the organic content of his soil at over 6%, a remarkable figure indicating healthy, friable humus. As proof of his success, Topolos offers the example of a 1.7 acre plot first planted to Merlot in 1963—one of the oldest Merlot plantings in the state—which yielded 2.5 tons in 1994. After five years of biodynamic soil conditioning, the same plot of land produced just over 8 tons in the last harvest, or 4.7 tons/acre. "There has been a definite impact on our bottom line," Topolos says.

Topolos doesn't monitor the pest populations in his vineyards, barring an occasional adhesive strip, relying instead on the beneficial predators whose habitats he has helped establish by cover cropping, planting insectary plants such as plum trees for wasps, and creating forested areas for birds. He has never had a severe pest problem.

The Benziger Family Winery of the Sonoma Valley was able to reduce their chemical input once they realized that the harvest doesn't suffer just because the vine leaves are imperfect. Manager Barry Shone related how "in the summer of 1997 our decision to tolerate pest damage that would not reduce crop production or quality was put to the test during several heat



Mushroom drawing by Eric Andersen.

waves. Spider mite populations began to rise, and so did visible damage. Every day we were in the vineyard anxiously checking pest numbers, but we held off spraying because we felt the damage was cosmetic and not actually affecting vine health. Finally the weather cooled, mite populations dropped and we survived with only superficial damage—and without spraying once.”

The knowledge upon which organic methodology is based is far from new. In fact, before the factories began spewing forth chemical amendments in the 1930’s, organic was the only way to grow.

“All we did was to borrow old-world wisdom and blend it with modern scientific techniques,” says Mathew Frey of Frey Vineyards. Frey has farmed organically since he began growing grapes 35 years ago. He was instrumental in showing other growers in the area what could be done without the use of chemicals. “And now Mendocino has the highest percentage of organic vineyards in the country,” notes Frey with justifiable pride.

The principles of organics are relatively simple, even elegant, yet apparently difficult for our pioneer spirits to accept. The underlying concept is one of non-interference. By stepping aside, for the most part, and letting nature take charge, we allow processes inherent in the life cycles of the planet to maintain the requisite balance of predators to prey, pests to plants. The implications of this are basic, yet far-reaching.

“If you kill everything, by using DDT or something, then you’ve killed off the balance of the insect world,” points out Frey. “You have created an environment which is out of balance and hooked yourself into continued pesticide use. Like the current situation with antibiotics, which create super-viruses, pesticides are becoming obsolete because of super-pests. As the old saying goes, if you try to fight nature, it will find a way around you. Balance is the key.”

Indeed, that is the note sounded most often by viticulturists who rely on natural processes—balance. Any time you throw nature out of balance, you are putting yourself in the position of doing her work for her—not a wise course.

“Plant borders and leave forested areas to harbor beneficial insects,” recommends Frey. “If you understand the life cycle of the pests and their predators, you can leave helpful habitat, such as plum trees and some blackberries, while planting legumes to provide nectar. In this way, you can provide food for the predators at key times in their life cycle while adding vital nutrients and tilth to your soil.”

Taking planned ecosystems to their logical conclusion, Hampton Bynum of Davis Bynum Vineyards (Healdsburg) is working in conjunction with Sonoma Permaculture to “explore how lessons derived from natural ecosystems can be applied to the business of winegrowing.” Together they are planting a vineyard along the top of large berms set on contour lines, known as “swales,” and adding companion plants, insectary plants and topographic elements to create a fully functional, self-sustaining agricultural system.

“Botanical species are interwoven creating an environment in which grapes, olives, capers, oranges, plums, pomegranates, pineapple guavas and hearty kiwis thrive harmoniously,” explains Michael Collins of Sonoma Permaculture. The above market crops are complemented by dozens of additional food, medicinal, insectary and native species.

Animals find their way into the patchwork as well, grazing excess plant material; “tractoring” the soil and

depositing fertilizer liberally. Scattered ponds and constructed vernal pools provide water and habitat for beneficial predators and add to the overall functionality of this complex system, not to mention the aesthetic value.

“The focal point of the Permacultural Food Forest will be an educational and picnic area where food, wine and community converge,” says Hampton Bynum, with a noticeable gleam in his eye. “Our philosophy in terms of change is to be gentle in our dealings with the environment, to educate ourselves by doing, and all the while asking our community to join us.”

Some may consider these extreme cases, but the principles they embody not only follow the dictates of common sense, but have proven effective over the course of millennia. And they are once again taking hold in the vineyards, due in part to outside pressure from educated consumers, in part to the costs of continued pesticide use, but mostly because they just plain work better.

“If you have healthy vines and healthy soil,” says Mathew Frey, “the plants seem to do fine. Managed properly, vineyards make fine neighbors.” ✱

Jeremy Sharp was a founding member of Sonoma Permaculture.

A community organization, Californians for Alternatives to Toxics (CATS), published, in 1997, *Time for a Change: Pesticides and Wine Grapes in Sonoma and Napa Counties, California*. The pamphlet details pesticide use for premium wine grapes, discusses the environmental and health impact of pesticides, and provides information about alternatives. For a copy contact CATS, P.O. Box 1195, Arcata, CA 95518; (707) 822-8497.

Development: Wine and Telecom

by Dr. Shepherd Bliss

Excerpts from September 1999 talk given at the Town Hall Meeting, Occidental Community Center.

These beautiful hills that I drove through to get here from my small farm off Bloomfield Road are full of liquid gold. Beneath the redwoods, oaks, and diversified forest is a rich soil, built up through centuries of landed and airborne wildlife, and before that a great inland sea—the Merced Sea. A corporation, ironically called Coastal Forestlands, wants to convert thousands of acres of Sonoma and Mendocino forest to vineyards. The coordinator brags, “The best grapes in the world can be produced in this area.” What about the best and few remaining redwoods in the world?

Today’s booming wine market will soon bust again, according to trade publications. Or Pierce’s Disease or Phylloxera will strike the growing monocrop, again. What then? Redwoods and oaks already gone. Without their roots, the soil on our hillsides will erode. Abandoned vineyards are prime for landslides.

Big industrial wine companies re-contour hills. They literally move the earth off the hills, taking as much as 80% of a hill—one of many ways to get around the new Hillside Ordinance. A gold rush is on—full speed. Like the California Gold Rush of the last century, this one attracts speculators from afar. Today’s wine industry is an extractive industry. Its owners are increasingly corporate and global. Sonoma County is becoming more a part of the global economy, which means the loss of local control and decision-making on important land use issues. Globalization and localization are contrary trends.

The local vineyardist with a

few acres and dirt under his or her nails is not a problem. They make the wine that I support—like Topolos, Wild Hog, Porter Creek and Hop Kiln. But huge alcohol companies are buying Sonoma County land. Their owners never even set foot in our county, which they increasingly control from afar. Their only concern is return on investment, not our hills, forests, and streams, or people.

Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry notes, “Rural America is a colony... it is in the power of an absentee economy once national and now increasingly

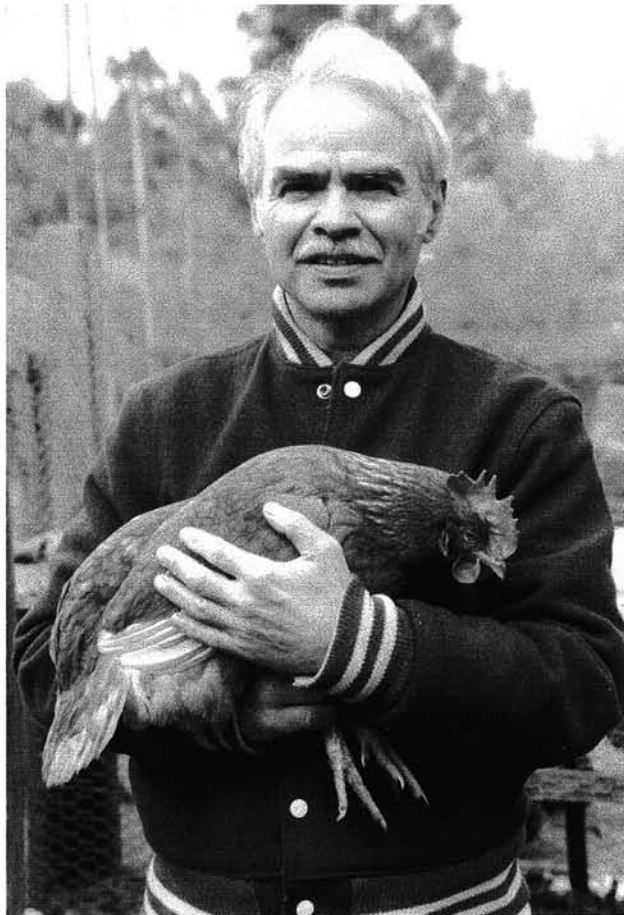
international. The voices of the countryside, voices appealing for respect for the land and for rural community, have simply not been heard in the centers of wealth, power and knowledge.”

Food farming in Sonoma County is being replaced by alcohol farming. Ninety percent of Napa County’s agricultural revenues come from wine. Ten years ago only 30% of Sonoma County’s was wine. Today it is already 50% and will soon equal Napa’s. Sonoma County recently surpassed Napa as the most financially lucrative wine county in the nation. Wall Street has discovered

Sonoma County’s liquid gold. So much for buying local. Though the growth of farmers’ markets in recent years has been encouraging, in the future we can expect more of the food at farmers’ markets to come from the Central Valley. We will import more and more of our food.

I own Kokopelli Farm, which specializes in organic berries and free range chicken eggs. I am on the Farm Trails and a member of many agriculture groups, including Community Alliance with Family Farmers. As a CAFF member, I am particularly concerned with how the expanding wine industry impacts small family farms, which are at risk. I could never afford to buy a farm today. Good farming land now sells for up to \$50,000 an acre, which excludes young and new farmers.

Whereas this region has been known as the Redwood Empire, a natural description, this language is being replaced by another description—Wine Country. Perhaps the *Press*



Shepherd Bliss

Democrat will change the name of its local news section from "Empire News" to "Wine Country News."

If current trends continue, what can we expect in the future? I see five things:

1) The continued degradation of our natural resources to get to the liquid gold. Large buildings are being built, even in the country, to process, store, and market wine. For example, France's Allied Dominecq Wines is building a six and a half acre building in Windsor.

2) A changed human population here, with the arrival of more wine barons—aggressive people seeking to mine the liquid gold. Our base of support is old-timers and people already living and loving here. That base could erode as the wine industry changes the local population.

3) A widened Highway 101, so that the land's plundered natural resources can get out of the county faster, as the wine industry expands into West County, Cazadero and into Mendocino and Lake counties.

4) The weakening of local agriculture, local farmers, and farmers' markets.

5) The further globalization of our local economy by the wine industry meaning that decisions about this land will increasingly be made in board rooms in financial capitals of the world by people who may have never even seen redwoods or this coast.

I do not mean to present a pessimistic picture, but I do want to be realistic as we enter a protracted land use struggle. Perhaps from this small corner of the county a citizen's movement can grow that would restrain the wine industry. The stakes are high—these tall redwoods that surround us here and all that they are a part of, including the quality and ways of life that we humans have crafted here in the West County.

Postscript:

As I look over this speech that I gave six months ago, I feel the need to add a postscript. Last year there was not much of a movement to challenge the wine industry. Thanks to the Town

Hall Coalition, there is now such a movement that is causing positive changes within the wine industry.

Another major development since this talk (and one perhaps even more threatening than that of viticulture) has been the huge growth of high-tech companies, especially telecommunication companies. Silicon Valley's wealthiest corporation, Cisco, bought out Petaluma's 3-year-old Cerent for \$7.2 billion during 1999 and JDS Uniphase finalized its buyout of OCLI for \$6.2 billion in February of 2000. Critical mass has been achieved in the so-called Telecom Valley; other spinoffs, startups, buyouts and mergers are in process. Petaluma has become a capital of the global economy.

The first flush of big telecom money on an environmental issue has been Measure B's highway widening. Measure B's largest donors after the construction industry were from the telecom industry. High tech companies want a quicker Telecom-Silicon Valley drive. Information superhighway architects also apparently want an actual superhighway. Telecom is catapulting Sonoma County into the global economy, with all its dangers and threats to a land-based local economy and local decision-making.

One impact of the movement of billions of dollars into the county is the making of hundreds of new millionaires. Some of them become good stewards of the land. The risk, however, is that more will buy small acreages to build castles, thus taking land out of

agricultural production or making it too expensive to buy for farming. Sonoma County's diversified agricultural base is at risk. As Chet Stephens, a vice-president of Nokia, a Finnish telecom company with a Petaluma office, notes, "Sonoma County used to be agriculture-driven. Now it is about growing technology companies."

Telecom has no relationship to the land. It can happen in many places. Sonoma County's leading industries—e.g., dairy, apples, wine, poultry—have historically had a direct relationship to this particular place. Telecom can move on short notice and is based on short-term gain, rather than long-term sustainability.

It is important for conservationists to develop more allies within the wine industry to keep land in agricultural production. Since more growers are moving away from pesticides, including methyl bromide, committing themselves to not cutting native vegetation, and practicing more sustainable, and even organic methods, it is important to work together with grapegrowers to preserve land in agriculture in Sonoma County. Merely embracing the high-tech explosion will displace Sonoma County's historical use of land for agriculture and for natural habitat. ✱

Dr. Shepherd Bliss, a former college teacher, owns Kokopelli Farm, which specializes in organic berries and free-range chickens. He can be reached at PO Box 1040, Sebastopol, CA 95473 or shepherdb@mail.com.



Woodcut by Serge Etienne

Hiking the Franceschi Ranch

by Andrea Granahan

The sun was shining, the ground was dry, and the bulls were temporarily gone. So 25 people took advantage of the invitation from the Franceschi family and the Bodega Land Trust to hike the lovely stretch of land from Highway 1 to the Estero Americano. Robert Franceschi was host and guide, as his family has owned the property for three generations.

He showed us a grove of Monterey Pine trees, some very old for the species, some just seedlings. Robert explained that sheep had decimated the middle generation of trees, until the family shifted to cattle—primarily dry dairy stock and adolescent bulls.

The hike took us to a pond that provides water for the livestock. Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District, with the help of Circuit Rider Productions, Inc., built the pond. It replaced springs and laborious, erosive hand watering operations. The pond, surrounded by reeds and populated with birdlife, was fenced off from the cattle which it watered via pipes and troughs.

In a dry stream bed we saw the nest of either a muskrat or wood rat (expert identification needed). Robert also

pointed out a large tree beside the creek which had been a sapling when he was growing up. Our footsteps startled a Burrowing Owl from its underground home. It fluttered away indignantly and waited for us to pass to resume its nap.

At last we reached the lovely Estero, a haven for wildlife, especially a wide variety of birds ranging from pelicans and seagulls to occasional eagles, according to our host. It also provides a nursery for baby Dungeness, crabs whose molted shells could be seen everywhere along the shore.

After lunch on the banks of the Estero, we headed back. We topped a hill, the highest point on the ranch above the Eden-like pond. Suddenly a 360-degree view opened up with Mt. St. Helena on one side and rolling meadows and the Estero on the other.

The Franceschis are proving to be generous and conscientious stewards of a unique piece of our environment. We offered our thanks and left inspired by the excursion. But don't try it on your own. The bulls are back in their pastures and definitely in a grouchy mood. ✱

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My special interests are:

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Announcements

BLT needs Volunteers to help at Bodega Bay's Fisherman's Festival, April 8 - 9, or for set up on April 7. Call 876-3422.

BLT Evening Talk and slide show: "Archaeological Perspectives on the Sonoma Coast," by Breck Parkman, State Parks archaeologist. April 12; 7 p.m., at the Bodega Fire Hall.

BLT Nature Walk: "Native Plants and Native Uses of Them," led by Master Gardener Nancy Kissam. Saturday, May 20; 10 a.m. - 12 p.m.; meeting 9:30 a.m. at Bodega Post Office; call 876-3422 for details.

Community Alliance with Family Farmers presents public forums with invited speakers, to be held in the Merlot Room, Luther Burbank Center, Santa Rosa. Neighbor/Grower Conflicts, April 10, 7-9 p.m. Visions of a Healthy Vineyard/Farm, April 25, 7-9 p.m.

Surfrider Foundation Water Monitoring program: if interested please contact Cara Keister at Cara.Keister@mhn.com.

The Rural Heritage Initiative (RHI) is intended for the November ballot and volunteers are urgently required for obtaining signatures and serving as regional Petition Coordinators. The RHI, put together by an ad hoc group of Sonoma County citizens, with backing from many environmental groups, supports the 1989 General Plan policy of "community-centered growth" and would prevent intensified development in rural, scenic, agricultural and wildlife habitat areas of the county. Future development would be steered to within Urban Growth Boundaries for a period of 30 years. 22,000 signatures are needed by May; if you can help, call (707) 575-4218, or www.ruralheritage.net.

Salmon Creek Watershed Council meets again, Sunday, April 30, 10:30 a.m., at Ocean Song, 19999 Coleman Vly. Rd., Occidental. For information call 876-3422, or 874-2014.

SPECIAL VINEYARD ISSUE



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