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Oregon Wine History Project™ Interview Transcript: Dick Erath

Dick Erath

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This interview was conducted with Dick Erath (**DE**) on July 8, 2010 at Erath Winery in Dundee, Oregon. The primary interviewer was Jeff D. Peterson (**JDP**). Additional support provided by videographers Mark Pederson and Barrett Dahl. The duration of the interview is 57 minutes, 42 seconds.

[00:00] **JDP:** We're interviewing Dick Erath, and it's July eighth and we're just doing a part of the oral history project for the Oregon Wine History Project™. We're really focusing on, sort of, the early years of Oregon wines. So Dick, if you would, why don't you start with telling us, you know, a little about yourself and just sort of your own personal background and then how you wind up in Oregon deciding that you're going to grow wine here. So if you want to maybe start with a little bit of background?

[01:03] **DE:** I was born and raised in Oakland, California and I guess I must have had some kind of instincts to become a farmer when I was about five years old. My dad used to tell a story: I somehow got my hands on some corn kernels and I planted them out on the strip between the sidewalk and the street and tried to get them to grow. But then I pursued a career in electronics and it seemed like I was on cruise control doing that. And then in the sixties—I got married in 1961, and wine was part of the household only on holidays, we didn't have it as an everyday beverage, which, I have come to believe, is as it should be.

But as a sidebar here, my dad came from a wine background in a village in Germany called Weinsberg near Stuttgart. In the old days, it had caravans going through the valleys, trade caravans, and they would charge a toll to pass through to raise a little money. At some point they decided the toll was getting a little bit too high, so they sieged the town and that there was a little castle on top of the hill and they sieged the place. But after, I don't know how many days they ran out of food and water and they gave up, so they told them, We surrender, what are the terms? They said, You can take whatever you can carry. So the women put their husbands on their backs and carried them down off the mountain. It's called *Wibertreu*, which means, "true woman" in German. And that's where my dad came from.

And his father was a cooper and his grandfather was a village wine "doctor." Back in the days of alchemy people didn't know why wine did certain things but they know with certain treatments they could, at least somewhat, cure wines or fix wines.

But I was never exposed to any of that, but all of a sudden I decide I like wine. This is like in 1963 or so and we'd moved out to Walnut Creek, California and that's not too far from Livermore Valley. And my dad brought me a bottle of wine that he'd gotten from a friend and said, "I really like this wine. It comes from Livermore Valley. And it comes from a winery called Ruby Hill Winery." The structure is still there. It's a really old winery building, one of the first ones put up in California, and it became a winery. I'm not sure it's a winery anymore; it's maybe fallen away to subdivisions.

[04:40] I met the owner of the winery back then, his name was Ernesto Ferraro, he was an immigrant from Sicily and he came to the United States when prohibition just fell and he lasted prohibition out and he saved enough money to buy this place he called Ruby Hill Vineyards. So we would go out there to buy wine for a dollar and a half a gallon for Zinfandel. And he had stopped making wine for a number of years and was selling grapes to Christian Brothers under contract. We got to be friends and in 1965 he agreed to sell me about eight hundred pounds of Sémillon, and a friend and I went out on a Saturday morning and picked the fruit, and brought it home to Walnut Creek, and made a barrel of wine which I've shown you pictures of; that was that barrel of wine. So that's how I got started and I've been making wine every year since.

So back then, the California Wine Institute—if you belonged to the Wine Institute in California you got access to different programs. I didn't have a winery in California, so I called them up and said, "Well I'm thinking about getting a winery and I'd like to get involved with you guys." Turns out they have a program where you can take refresher courses at Davis for people currently in the industry.

So in 1967, I took my first of many classes at Davis and that's where I met Richard Sommers who actually planted the first vinifera grapes in Oregon since prohibition down in the Roseburg area. And I remember [I was] in a class on aging of wines by Professor Singleton, and after class I said, "Vern, do you know anybody growing grapes up in the Pacific Northwest?" And he said, "Yeah, there's a guy in the class right here." And it was Richard. "And also I had a couple guys go through here last year." And it was Chuck Coury and Dave Lett. And I got their names and addresses from Vern.

And at the same time, we had hired an engineer from Tektronix to work for us out at Beaverton. And after a couple years it didn't work out for him so he went back to Tek and he called me up and said, "You know, turn around is fair play, how would you like to come and work for us? We're starting a high-speed digital design group and we need somebody." So I came up in the fall of 1967 to interview for that job and at the same time stopped by to see Dave Lett. And he was out selling books and I talked to his wife and they were looking to rent a place. And then stayed with Chuck Coury one night and were up until four in the morning talking about grapes, and why are you growing grapes in Oregon? And then he told me about the Masters Thesis that he had done at Davis, which basically was sort of questioning the rationale that was the current wisdom up until that point, and why do you choose a grape variety to grow in a certain place?

[08:30] In California the common thought was, Don't bother us with that because it doesn't make any difference. We're warm enough to grow anything. But that notion doesn't always produce the best wine; the best wine comes from when you pick the variety to fit the window and time that Mother Nature has given you. And that's really true of Pinot noir. It's not so much true with other varieties that are more adaptable, but Pinot doesn't adapt very well. It's a very ticklish, feminine—they call it a feminine variety because it's very demanding and it wants to be treated in a certain way in a very small place on this earth.

When you look at Coury's paper, one of the things he's talking about in there is looking at agro-climatic analogs. Where would grapes grow well? Whatever crop you're looking at, what's the climate they're growing in? And then you look for a climate that's similar if that's the kind of

crop you want to grow. If you want to grow Pinot noir you look for a similar climate like Burgundy or Alsace has and you come up with Western Oregon. It's not a dead ringer but it's fairly close. Total heat summation and rainfall come at different times but the variations in temperature are reasonably the same and the length of the growing seasons is pretty close. That's why all of us, Dave Lett, myself, Chuck, Ponzi, Myron from Amity,¹ we all came to this area because this was a place that we figured we could really do a good job with Pinot. I don't know if that gets you where you want to go—

[10:24] **JDP:** So you meet with Chuck Coury and you talk with Diana Lett and probably David at some point and you—Did you come and work for Tektronix then?

[10:36] **DE:** Yes, I accepted their offer and they moved me and the family up in February of 1968. I incurred the biggest moving bill they ever had until that time because they called my wine barrels “paraphernalia.” We said, Thank you, mother Tek.

We had a flying club; I didn't fly, but one of the guys in our design group did. And so we would go up, I would take a coast and geodetic survey map, seven and a half degrees quadrangle, and start looking at what's a good location elevation-wise and exposure-wise and go in a plane, start flying over these places. And then if they looked good in the air, then on the weekends I would jump in the family car, a little old Ford Station Wagon, I can't remember the model, it had many miles on it. I would drive around and start knocking on doors and saying, “I'm looking for—I've got a great nursery,” which I had down in Dundee. I found a place here in town; a fellow let me use a piece of his farmland to start the cutting—to start the plants. So I would knock on a door and ask, “Any ground around here?” Never ask a farmer in Oregon, “Is your place for sale?” That's certainly insulting. You say, “Do you know of anything around here?”

So after doing this for several months, I found six acres in the Eola hills, which I purchased—twelve actually, two six-acre lots. And then, almost at the same time, a forty-nine acre piece popped up over off of Dopp Road, off near Newberg. And it turns out it had been in the family forever and was homesteaded. The crop that was on the place at the time was a walnut orchard but the walnut orchards were severely damaged in 1955. Between the freeze in '55 and the Columbus Day storm, it pretty much took them out.

I had seven thousand dollars from a retirement fund from Shell Development Company where I had been working, and I bought that first fifty acres. And the idea was to put a mobile home on it and start a vineyard.

Coming from California to Oregon—and it rains in Oregon, so it's got to be easy to get water; you just make a hole in the ground, just how far down do you have to go? There's a thing called an aquifer, and aquifers over there were pretty poor. What little water there was, was perched; it was sort of stagnant. It wasn't stagnant but it had a high salt content and it wasn't worth it. It was a gallon a minute at two hundred fifty feet and there wasn't going to be anything beyond that. So we had to give up on the idea of the mobile home.

¹Correction by Dick Erath: and Blosser,

There was—about a mile away on Kings Grade Road, there was a loggers cabin that was not inhabited. Turns out the fellow that owned the loggers cabin went to the same high school I did in California, in Oakland, and he was working in the Naval Air Station. And I got to talk to him and he said, “You know, Dick, it would be great if you could live there, I can’t get any insurance on the place because no one is in it.” So it was a win-win situation, you know, if you can call a logger's cabin a win. It was 24x24, and built on four rocks with timbers. Over the years the whole thing had listed towards the Northwest, I guess. And the kids were just small—they were like one and three or something like that. I remember they could get on their tricycles and accelerate across the floor and crash into the stove at the other end because of the slope in the floor. And it had no heat. We opened up the oven at night to make the place warm. And no insulation, so it gets cold. So I finally put in a little Coleman oil-burning stove. The oil would drip into this little pan where it ignited and it worked fine until the east wind would come up over the top of the Chehalem Mountains and go into a turban of flow rolling down and blow the fire out and the whole house became filled with smoke.

[15:51] **JDP:** So did you plant that first fifty acres, then?

[15:55] **DE:** I planted in 1969, four of fifty acres. I had twenty-six varieties planted because back then we were using the best knowledge we had what varieties were going to do well. Besides Pinot, we planted other white varieties that are still around. You know, Riesling and Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, and Pinot Gris, and I planted other things too that didn’t work. I planted Merlot, and it theoretically should ripen but it has other problems, it doesn’t like the wet springs we have. So it was like an experiment. But eventually we increased the acres up to around thirty-two acres.

Then I went through a divorce in 1987 and ended up selling that vineyard, and in the meantime I had purchased the property we’re at now with the friend from Tektronix who basically asked me to come and work at Tektronix. We bought the ground together and I started to plant a vineyard here too. And then in 1990, I purchased his interest out in this vineyard and became what’s now known as Prince Hill Vineyards.

[17:25] **JDP:** You plant all of these different varieties, and then you just took a few years to see what did better over time, and then you just started adding to those?

[17:40] **DE:** Well, we did add Pinot Gris, which was the one we had only planted a little bit to begin with and I saw how well it did and planted more. I had already planted quite a bit of Pinot noir and Chardonnay and Riesling. So the other varieties were—I planted some French hybrid varieties, which were introduced back in the days when the phylloxera was overwhelming Europe and devastating and killing the vineyards. One of the solutions was to come up with a resistant plant, and they did this by hybridizing different varieties. The hybrids basically carried the breeder’s number for a long time, now they have names. But there would be Seibel 13053, Vidal 5497, and now a lot of those varieties are grown back East and in the Midwest because they are very tough; they are resistant to disease, they take winter’s cold. Unfortunately, they don't make the best wine.

[18:54] **JDP:** So tell me a little bit about the first wines you make in Oregon. When we were here the other day you talked a little bit about—you're living in a cabin, but then on top of that you're, there's a lot of "by hook and by crook." You were finding things from cherry growers. Could you talk about, how do you go about putting—it seems like now there're so many wineries and people arrive with all the equipments here—

[19:23] **DE:** Equipment's here, the vineyards are here, the grape sources are here, so back then—Well, we had a small organization called the Wine Grower's Council of Oregon² and we'd meet in a fire hall up in Tigard several times a year and talk about what's going on. We didn't even have our own wine to serve at those meetings; we would get a bottle of CK Mondovi, a jug of CK Mondovi and a block of Tillamook Cheese, and those were our appetizers.

I ended up getting—Richard Sommer and I remained friends and so I would drive down to Roseburg and buy Riesling from him so I could make some real wine up here, but I didn't have any red varieties that I could get my hands on, so that's when I went into making cherry wine. And it was an experience with what you had to do. And I fooled a lot of people after I put it in the French barrels. They thought, This is a nice grape wine, what is it? And I said, "Well, this is a cherry called Black Republican." So happens Watergate was going on at the same time too, so Black Republican was a pretty good name.

[20:58] **JDP:** How do you go about when you start making your own, like the first—What are the first reds that you start making then? And where do you get that? You were telling me something about, you had a forklift, and you were borrowing stuff—

[21:20] **DE:** Finally, what happened in 1971, Cal Knudsen called me at work and said, Would I be interested in helping him establish a vineyard? At the time he was a Vice President at Weyerhaeuser in Washington. So he came down and visited and showed me the property where the winery sits now and we basically made an arrangement where I would develop his vineyard and then I could leave Tektronix because I didn't have to depend on that income; I had the income from developing the vineyard. At the same time, we shared the same equipment so I was able to expand my own vineyard. And then in 1972 I had enough Pinot noir to make the first couple barrels, I think 204 barrels of Pinot from my grapes and from Jim Maresh's grapes. And Jim Maresh is a neighbor up the hill here; I think he'll probably want to talk to you at some point.

And I had met Jim—he's an ex-navy guy like me. The way I met him, one story I haven't told you, Jeff, is back in 1970, reading these books on French grape varieties and there was an author named Puyat who indexed the varieties in Europe on their growing periods, when they ripened. And they had five ripening periods plus one called Prucoutch, which was very early. And he did something pretty clever: he took a grape variety called Chasselas Dore, which is a white variety, grows all through Europe, actually grows in Oregon here, called Sweetwater. When the wagon trains came west they brought Sweetwater with them, and that was probably one of the first vinifera that came to Oregon. I actually found a wild Sweetwater grape growing down in one of my vineyards, up in the trees where there had been a family orchard there, a long time ago.

² Correction by Dick Erath: the Oregon Viticulture Development Committee

Anyhow, they take Chasselas Dore and you know when it ripens in Belgium, Luxemburg, Germany, France, and Italy. And then along side of it are growing other varieties like Cabernet, and Chardonnay, and Pinot noir, and Gorge meanour, and you can look at the time difference between the picking of the Chasselas Dore and these other varieties. You can predict what would grow in another region knowing what Chasselas Dore did in that region because it's already there. So I said, "That's pretty clever."

So what I did is I planted in 1968 in the nursery row quite a bit of Chasselas Dore, with the idea of taking plants around. So in 1969 I started driving around to different areas up north of Forest Grove, all the way down to the Eola Hills, looking for friendly farmers to, would they try planting a few grapes in their backyards? If they said yes, I gave them some plants. One of the friendly farmers was Jim Maresh. He planted the Chasselas Dore behind his barn and I came up in 1970 to check on how it's doing and he said, "My hired man ran the disk over it." So long Chasselas Dore. But in the meantime, he was growing cherries and prunes, and the market conditions weren't the best in the world. He saw in me, I guess, a savior—I was coming with grapes, you know, so we got him started planting a vineyard. So in 1972, we harvested his grapes and my grapes and made the first barrels of Pinot.

[25:48] **JDP:** When we were talking with David Adelsheim, he was also talking about running into you on the side of a road at some point.

[25:56] **DE:** He came by the infamous logger's cabin one day and he found me repairing the engine of my BMW on my kitchen table, I think. You had to do what you had to do.

[26:14] **JDP:** One of the things he talks about is just—even how—even at that time in the 1960s, how pretty much the view of land, you're just looking for south slopes and his—what he communicates now is much more nuanced in terms of higher maybe on one side, lower on the other side. It seems like you guys have learned a lot in that period from the midsixties.

So I'm wondering, how does your view of, you know, as you look at the land now and you're looking at grapes, your view of—you've got the French and how they view land influencing grapes and how you guys were doing it here. How has that changed for you over time in terms of how you look at land and say you're advising someone on what to grow? What's changed in your time?

[27:14] **DE:** Well, like David said, back in those days, to ensure our success you look for a south slope no higher than six hundred feet and no lower than four hundred to make sure you got away from the cold bare frost problems in the spring, and maximizing the heat in the summer—not getting too much. But since that time we know that the south and east slopes now are particularly good for Pinot noir, which seems to like the early morning sun and not the afternoon sun, so an east slope is actually more favorable than a west slope. And then I think the thing that we're really learning more now is the terroir influence, which is mostly the soil but also wind speed, direction, rainfall, the whole growing environment. And you can start to taste those things in the wine.

Back then we weren't even concerned with that. We were just: Let's grow some good grapes to make some wine. It's really evolved a lot in where we choose to grow the grapes now; it's a much wider latitude, but you also have to be careful in what you select, what varieties. And what is your goal? Are you trying to make regular every day wine? Do you want to make high-end wine? You have to figure out where you want to be. And then the soil influences something we're getting. And we start tasting—grape's really an interesting thing because it seems to really take on nuances from its environment.

A Swiss professor, Dr. Eggenberger told me once about in Switzerland, they put a new vineyard in and they used creosoted wooden poles to hold the trellis. And for five years after the grapes were in production, the grapes tasted like creosote. They were just picking this up; they're very sensitive that way. That's why the world of wine is such a fascinating place, even. Because Pinot noir grown in one place tastes really different from another place, all around the world. You don't find that with carrots, bell peppers, you know.

[29:45] **JDP:** So you mentioned this idea of what you want to do. I've talked some with Jason [Lett], and heard some about how David Lett saw what he wanted to do. David Adelsheim had some ideas. What for you, as you are growing wine, what was your goal? Did you have a philosophy of what it is you wanted to do or did you evolve into one?

[30:15] **DE:** "I think it was—I tasted my first bottle of really good Pinot noir in California probably in 1966 or 1965 or something like that. That's when I really got interested in the variety, and that's when I started looking at California. Where can I grow this grape in California? And every time I looked, I came up with Box Canyon. The only places were way up in the Santa Cruz Mountains where there's no dirt, it's hard to find any amount of soil there, or go up to the Anderson Valley, which was a cool place, a nice place to grow grapes but it was so far away from any—I couldn't get a job as an engineer there. I'd be fixing TV's or something was about the best I could do.

So that's what was really nice about when the idea of Oregon hit me. I had driven through Oregon, as a kid I had lived for a few years in Washington with a family. I went back to Europe as a teenager after World War II and it seemed to me that just the feel of, you know, Europe and Oregon were so much closer. You know, you put your geraniums in, you can't leave them out in the winter here—they'll freeze. Same thing over there. It's just, a lot of things are the same and that doesn't happen to be always the grapes.

My philosophy about making wine is—I was doing it and not knowing that it was what people came to call it was like minimal handling. It just seemed to make sense to me not to beat the fruit up when you're trying to make the wine. We do a lot of things now to enhance the fruit quality that we didn't do back then. Working in the vineyards, taking off the extra clusters, extra leaves, extra shoots, training the shoots—things that we didn't do before. So we've improved the quality of the fruit in the vineyards and we're still doing a lot of things at the vineyards. I think that, we did a lot of work with clonal selection; I think Dave probably told you about his work with that. We started that in '74; we were in Oregon growing grapes, but by God, when they picked all these varieties from California, they were picking what worked well for them and that didn't work well for us. So we started a clonal testing program and Dave was very instrumental in that,

bringing material over from France. And we became—Oregon State University became the center for all these new clones of Pinot noir, Chardonnay, other varieties.

I like to make a wine that's complete, that is balanced. I don't like wines that are down to one ton of the acre where the fruit is really intensified because I think it doesn't do well for Pinot. I'd rather have a more elegant style where all its complexities are there to be explored. What we found early on is that, because we didn't have a lot of clones growing at one vineyard—we had the same clones growing at different vineyards—the response of the same clones at different vineyards gave different fruit profiles, flavor profiles. So we found that the best wines were found by blending different vineyard fruits together. And we still do that but now we also have different clones to work with. It's like a painter getting many more chunks of color to work with out there to do his painting.

I always thought that every year we're delivered, we get whatever Mother Nature gives us in terms of the fruit quality and flavor profiles. It's like a musical score and it's up to the winemaker when he brings that fruit into the winery to conduct that score. How are you going to interpret that score? Where are you going to go with it? And that's why you'll see different stylistic wines coming out of the same vintage, but they taste different because they were done stylistically different.

[34:04] **JDP:** So the winemaker sort of becomes part of that equation as well in terms of one of the variables. You mentioned David bringing stuff over and it sounds like when I've talked with, and you've shown me some pictures, but I've talked with different people already. It sounds like there was a really interesting early community already going on. During our meeting I think there were a couple pictures you were showing me, or maybe it was David showing a picture of a meeting in your kitchen, I think, where they've got a bunch of you guys. Could you explain what that early community was? Because now there are so many, it's difficult to get all in the same room, but what was that like early on for you all?

[35:59] **DE:** Early on I guess we were all pretty much idealistic, sort of romantic about what we were doing and those early pioneers, those early growers. We didn't think we were doing this to make a ton of money. We were doing this to pursue a lifestyle and also to see if we could evolve an industry that would really be great for Oregon, and great for the world of wine.

And so, we would meet collectively, one of the first things over at Dave's house, and we would meet and we introduced label laws for Oregon. We basically hammered them out. Five or six of us sat down over the course of a couple years and said, This is what we should allow to be put on a label of a bottle of Oregon wine. And in 1977 that became law. I don't think you could do that today; too many people have too many different ideas and no one would agree. It was bad enough with five guys.

That was the spirit of, you know, I came back from Europe in 1977 and say, "Hey look, they have conditions like we have. They need to get more light and heat exposure to the leaves and so they use catch wires to keep the chutes going up straight and everything so we all started doing that because we saw it was a good thing. We shared all this kind of information. Collaboration has been a very key thing for us and that still goes on. I think that's one of the reasons why

Oregon is where it is today in the wine world, is because we have come up very quickly because of that collaboration in making world-class wine.

[38:02] **JDP:** Sounds like there was a fair amount of foresight too. David Adelsheim was talking about also going around during the early Tom McCall days—

[38:17] **DE:** Land use, planning, and all. Yeah, I remember getting on TV because they weren't going to put a—Washington County wanted to use Yamhill County for a garbage dump up off of Dopp Road in the valley there. There's a lot of stumping against that sort of thing.

[38:39] **JDP:** What about—one of the things I've noticed in the last few years, which is getting away a bit from the early years, but there is a lot of emphasis on sustainability and bio-dynamics. Was there any sense of that back in that period? Have your practices changed over time as well, in terms of those views?

[39:07] **DE:** Some people are 100 percent organic or biodynamic. I'm not. The weather here in the fall can be nasty, and you have to shoot silver bullets out there sometimes to protect your crops, but we try to impact the soil and the environment minimally. We don't use fertilizer; we use cover crops to generate that. The program is called LIVE: Low Impact Viticulture Ethnology. It's not purely organic, it's not totally inorganic, it's using best practices. That is a direction everyone has gone to and we probably had that seed in us, but it hadn't germinated back in the old days. The first thing was, Let's get some fruit and lets make some wine.

[40:06] **JDP:** When was it that you felt that you guys were wanting this sort of a lifestyle? And you were growing for those reasons, but when was it that you first felt that you had made it? Jason Lett was kind of talking about how some of their early labels just had "Oregon" because that was the smallest possible unit people were going to be able to find on a map. Over time it starts getting to be "Yamhill County," and then it starts getting to be "Dundee Hills." As Oregon becomes more recognized generally for wines, you guys have become more specific. When was it that you felt you guys really started to get on the map in terms of having a national and international profile?

[41:00] **DE:** In terms of the appellation of Oregon, Oregon was something, as Jason indicated, we were just—To get recognition, we made wines in Oregon. And I guess the next thing was, the federal government allows you to use political appellations without any petitioning. So you could say, "Yamhill County," and you could say, "Willamette Valley," but it wasn't a defined appellation; we had to petition for that appellation.

And so as people focused, it's just like picking out the better spot to grow grapes. It's like, Okay, do the Dundee Hills have a certain terroir that you can detect in the wine? And you could define that by drawing a circle around an area. You can, but it's also because of the winemaker's influence. It's also hard to distinguish, I think, because the winemaker's fingerprint is there too, and so his wine is going to taste different than my wine even though the grapes were grown in the Dundee Hills. So I think we are still evolving that. As I taste wines that are older and made by different winemakers, I think I can maybe taste—there's a terroir effect. In the youth of the wine I can't taste it so much.

[42:39] **JDP:** So how would you—I hear that word, *terroir*, quite a bit. How would you—what is your understanding of that term? What does that mean, exactly to you as a concept? David was talking a little bit about it as well because it sounds like that Burgundy area that was one of the similar—that’s been a big part of the discussion. What’s your take on that? How does that get interpreted for you?

[43:08] **DE:** What it means is your immediate, your total growing conditions. They change year in and year out. They’re different and so there should be—My understanding of *terroir* is that there's going to be a core in there that you can identify from year to year to year that says, “This is my particular *terroir*.” And I think it’s fairly subtle.

[43:45] **JDP:** Do you guys have any questions or anything you think maybe I forgot?

[43:57] **DE:** Have you covered the phylloxera quarantine and the quarantines we established back in the old days?

[44:06] **JDP:** No, why don't you talk a bit about that?

[44:10] **DE:** Back in 1969, at that point here in the valley it was Chuck Coury, David Lett and myself had grapes in the ground and there was a nursery in Southern Oregon that was growing a lot of grape starts. And we knew the source of the wood that they were using, and we knew that it had virus in it. Back then there were no real controls, and we saw this as a real threat because virus-infected grape vines tend to reduce the ripening because they restrict the flow of sugars at the time when the grapes are getting ripe. So it’s important in Oregon to have virus-free stock. So we went to the state, and first we went to the nursery people and said, There’s this nursery that’s doing things that’s not going to be good. And we got them to tear it out.

Out of that came rules and regulations in the Department of Agriculture that determines what kind of nursery stock you can sell and it has to be virus-free. And then for phylloxera, it has to be rooted in a sterile media. Phylloxera is a soil-borne pest, which back then we didn’t think we had. Now we have it. How long have we had it? We don’t know. The first confirmation was in 1990, it was probably here for some time before that. It was probably here on some of the native grape varieties that came in that coexist with it. That was the other solution to the phylloxera problem: we talked about hybrids, the other solution is the bred rootstocks so that you can graft. And now you can maintain Pinot noir on a rootstock and it’s resistant to the phylloxera. And it has other benefits too because the rootstock can modify the growth cycle, and you can use that in your favor. But anyhow, we got those two things passed back in 1970.

[46:38] **JDP:** Sounds like it at least delayed maybe some of the—what could have been the earlier impact on that?

[46:45] **DE:** It really brought everyone’s attention to the fact that you really needed to have clean stock and when you see those photographs of red vineyards in the fall, and you say, “How beautiful,” we all cringe because we see that’s all disease out there. That’s probably leafroll virus making diseases. Not desirable.

[47:14] **JDP:** That's funny how that's something that people think is part of the beauty of the wine industry and you all are thinking completely to the contrary. So have you had phylloxera issues on some of your vineyards?

[47:28] **DE:** The vineyard that was confirmed is less than a mile away. And eventually we had phylloxera here in the hills, and all the vineyards, all the wines you see around here now are on resistant rootstock. There are still some that aren't, but they're gradually being changed out. It's a slow process because people not only now need to change because of the phylloxera, but also now they're thinking, Did I really space the vineyard the best way? And now they can introduce some new clones that weren't available back then. So there's some silver lining in these black clouds.

[48:13] **MP³:** Do you remember the first time that you tasted one of your wines and went, "Yeah, we're going to make excellent wines here," or was it just a gradual thing?

[48:21] **DE:** Yeah, what do they call it? Defining moment? It was in 1977. I was in Burgundy and I had just finished making the '76 vintage—which was a really respectable vintage, one of the best vintages since we've been making wine. One of the better vintages. And I had taken as many small little bottles as I could pack in my luggage to Europe with me, and I was with a grower and a negociante lady in Burgundy and she was trying to get—

In Burgundy, the wine business is controlled by large houses that buy from small growers, and do their own blending and putting things together, and they have their own vineyards in addition. And a small grower who wanted to have his own label has a tough time. So this gal provided a marketing channel to do that, and she was getting those wines and exporting them to the United States, where they were imported into the Bay Area.

It was a wonderful time because I was six weeks in Europe, and I tasted like twenty-two hundred wines. I was in heaven. We'd go through cellars in Burgundy and taste these wines out of the barrel, and this was in spring of '77 so I'm tasting '76 vintage out of the barrel, and all of sudden I was like, "Holy! I have the same thing at home! I know I'm doing the right thing. We can do this!"

[50:27] **JDP:** That's got to be a nice moment.

[50:32] **MP:** Wasn't that the same vintage that David Lett sent to France and won the wine taste test?

[50:35] **DE:** He sent '75 vintage over, which was another great vintage.

[50:47] **JDP:** Ok, I think that's good for now, it's been almost an hour so that's great. Thanks! So we actually managed to, although with a little bit of reluctance, I think Diana Lett is going to do an interview with us tomorrow. She's not quite as enamored with the idea of being in front of

³ Mark Pederson

a camera, but I did point out that Jason was not at the first planting while she was, and I think it was a hard one to dispute.

[51:28] **DE:** I remember helping Dave plant the south block, I was living in Beaverton at the time in a rented house, and I had my nurseries down here, and Vic Victoria's nursery in Dundee. We'd go help Dave plant. He had an old [Ford] 8N tractor, and he'd run the auger. I had a bucket of vines behind him, putting them in the ground and patting them in, and then we'd break for lunch. We'd sit, and even back then we'd watch the traffic going down Highway 18—99, I mean. We'd sit underneath the flowering cherry trees and eat our Fig Newtons.