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## History in a Bottle

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# HISTORY *in a bottle*

If it weren't for Oregon's early wine grape growers, Yamhill County and the Willamette Valley might look vastly different today.



During the early 1970s, the founders of today's wine industry played pivotal roles in preserving Willamette Valley land for agricultural use. The sloped hills that are now dotted with vineyards were then considered "secondary farmland" not worth preserving. Without their farsighted determination, Oregon's wine industry probably would not exist at its current level.

The story of a handful of people who launched Oregon's world-renowned wine industry is being recorded and preserved at Linfield College. This past summer students and professors walked the vineyards, sat in living rooms, dug through boxes of photos and papers, and recorded the stories of early winemakers.

The work has been captured in an exhibit, "Bringing Vines to the Valley," funded by a grant from the Erath Family Foundation. The exhibit is part of the Linfield Center for the Northwest's Oregon Wine History Initiative that will chronicle the growth and development of Oregon's wine industry.

More than 40 years ago, David and Diana Lett believed that the Willamette Valley was the perfect climate for growing pinot noir. Despite the derision of some and doubt of others, the Letts became the first to plant pinot noir and pinot gris grapes. Others followed including Dick Erath, Dick and Nancy Ponzi, Susan and Bill Sokol Blosser, David and Ginny Adelsheim and Myron Redford. Their vision and hard work launched what has become a \$200 million industry.



The first phase of the wine history project includes oral histories from those early visionaries. Diana Lett, the Ponzis, Erath, Redford, the Adelsheims, Bill Blosser and Susan Sokol Blosser share stories of the challenges they face, the mistakes they made and the community that formed around a common goal of producing high-quality pinot noir.

Led by Jeff Peterson, associate professor of sociology, Lissa Wadewitz, assistant professor of history, and Keni Sturgeon, adjunct professor of anthropology, Barrett Dahl '11, Dulce Kersting '11 and Sara Juergensen '11 got firsthand experience delving into archives, capturing oral histories and mounting a major exhibit.

While the work was largely collaborative, each member of the team had specific duties. Dahl produced the four videos that tell different aspects of the story, learning how to shoot and edit video along the way.

Having the opportunity to talk to the individuals about their personal lives and struggles was fascinating, Dahl said.

"It was a challenge to be in the field and out of the safety of the classroom and apply some of the skills we have learned," she said. "The most interesting part was getting to know the people

we talked to and hearing the stories of how they got started."

Kersting has completely changed the focus of her senior thesis as a result of the experience. She was fascinated with the work of Lett and Adelsheim during the land use planning process in the early 1970s, which helped protect prime Yamhill County farmland from development. Her senior thesis will examine the effects of Senate Bill 100 on Yamhill County.

"Yamhill County has 300-plus vineyards, whereas Washington, Multnomah and Polk counties all have less than 100," she said. "That's because here so much land was set aside in the '70s for agricultural use."

The egalitarian nature of the project gave Juergensen broad experience in research, designing a museum exhibit and collecting documents and photographs.

"As a history major, you have to do a lot of research online because archives are on the other side of the country or the world or there aren't people around to interview," she added. "It was very cool to get our hands on the documents and talk face-to-face with these people as part of a history project." 🍇

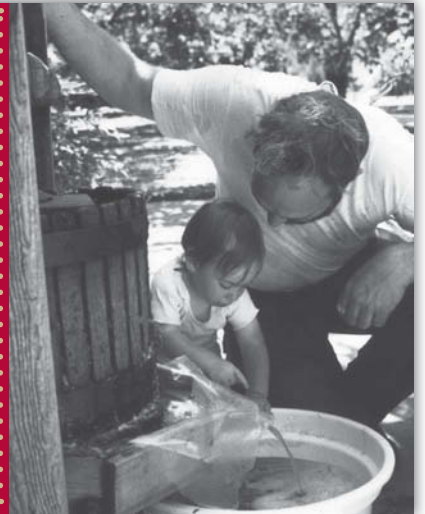
– *Mardi Mileham*

## Facts at your fingertips

While the exhibit, "Bringing Vines to the Valley," was on display at Linfield this fall, all of the information that was collected is online and easily accessible through Linfield's new Digital Commons. [http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/wine\\_project/](http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/wine_project/)

Video interviews with the winemakers, photos, land use planning maps and other historical records are available with a few key strokes. Fact sheets about the wine industry and various winemakers are also featured.

Linfield's Digital Commons is an online archive that will feature work by Linfield faculty, students and staff. [DigitalCommons@Linfield](mailto:DigitalCommons@Linfield) promotes the discovery, sharing, and preservation of the intellectual and creative works of the faculty, students and staff of Linfield, as well as the history and development of the college.



From top left, Eyrie 1975 South Block Reserve Pinot Noir; David Lett christens the first Willamette Valley planting; David and Diana Lett during the 1970 harvest; Susan and Bill Sokol Blosser, along with their son, look over design plans for their winery under construction; the founding members of the Yamhill County Wineries Association; and Dick Erath. (First three images and group photo courtesy of The Eyrie Vineyards and Jason Lett; third photo courtesy of Sokol Blosser Winery and Susan Sokol Blosser; top right photo courtesy of Erath Winery and Dick Erath.)