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Oregon Pinot Noir: Who Planted First?

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Oregon Pinot Noir: Who Planted First?

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We know the first President of the United States was George Washington, right? Well, not exactly. The first President of the United States was, in reality, John Hanson. In 1781, this Maryland native became the first President of the United States under the Articles of Confederation. The members of the Congress assembled, including George Washington, unanimously chose John Hanson to be the first President of the United States. George Washington became the first President under the Constitution of the United States of America in 1789.

There is ambiguity, as well, surrounding the birthplace of Pinot Noir in Oregon and in Oregon's heartland of Pinot Noir, the Willamette Valley. A brouhaha erupted last year when the economic development committee of Forest Grove, Oregon, in an attempt to attract business and tourists, adopted the slogan, "Forest Grove: Where Oregon pinot was born." The claim is displayed on the Forest Grove website: www.forestgrove-or.gov/visitors/wine-country-getaways.html).

Forest Grove, located 35 miles south of Portland in the Willamette Valley, is currently the home to twelve notable Oregon wineries including Adea Wine Company, Elk Cove Vineyards, Patton Valley Vineyards and Tualatin Estate Vineyards. Among a list of "Forest Grove Firsts" on the City of Forest Grove website (www.forestgrove-or.gov) is the claim, "Pinot Noir was first planted in a Willamette Valley vineyard by Charles Coury in 1965 at the present-day David Hill Vineyard." In the website's Wine Legacy Information Sheet, Forest Grove asserts, "The original idea that Willamette Valley would be ideal for the production of Pinot came from Charles Coury, who purchased the vineyard now known as David Hill Winery on September 30, 1965. Coury immediately began planting his vineyard in October 1965."

The Wine Legacy Information Sheet incorrectly details the first plantings of Pinot Noir in the Willamette Valley and unfairly and incorrectly relegates David Lett's historical role to secondary status behind Coury. In addition, the Wine Legacy Information Sheet fails to recognize the first planting of Pinot Noir in Oregon by Richard Sommer at HillCrest Vineyard in the Umpqua Valley, although Forest Grove officials have in recent months orally acknowledged Sommer's contributions to Oregon wine history.

This misinformation has caused consternation and even outrage among the folks in the Umpqua Valley of Oregon who are jealous of their history and rightly claim that their region is the birthplace of Pinot Noir in

Oregon. Lett's family, as well, has been dismayed, since they can provide documentation that the first plantings of Pinot Noir in the Willamette Valley, long considered the heartland of Oregon Pinot Noir, should be attributed to David Lett.

The lineage of Oregon Pinot Noir has been plagued through the years by misguided and unintentionally inaccurate oral histories, along with misinformation and misunderstanding in the wine literature. To provide credible clarification and documentation, I interviewed Dyson DeMara, who assumed ownership of HillCrest Vineyards from Richard Sommer in 2003, and Phil Gale, Sommer's long time vineyard manager and assistant winemaker. Unfortunately, a significant portion of Sommer's personal records were destroyed after his passing, and the remaining material has yet to be catalogued. I also enlisted David Lett's son, Jason Lett, the current proprietor, winemaker and vineyardist of The Eyrie Vineyards in the Willamette Valley, and David Lett's spouse, Diana. They were able to provide archival documentation of David Lett's legacy.

My research will show that although Forest Grove and its favorite son, Charles Coury, played an important role in Oregon Pinot Noir history, Forest Grove is not the birthplace of Pinot Noir in Oregon or the Willamette Valley.

To begin, I will review what we know, what we have been led to believe, and what has been widely reported in the press and literature over the last fifty years regarding the modern era of plantings of Pinot Noir in Oregon. I will present new information corroborated by first-hand knowledge obtained through interviews and supported by archival documentation. After a brief overview of pre-Prohibition winegrowing in Oregon, I have split the main discussion into two parts; the first details the earliest modern era (post-Prohibition) history of Pinot Noir in the Umpqua Valley and the second, the modern era history of Pinot Noir in the Willamette Valley.

There is no documented evidence of Pinot Noir vines in Southern Oregon or the Willamette Valley in the 19th or early 20th century, although it is well known that Oregon winegrowing and winemaking predated Prohibition. A good amount of pre-Prohibition research has not been vetted properly, but the following information has been published.

Paul Pintarich in *The Boys Up North* (1997) credits Henderson Luellen with planting Oregon's first wine grapes in 1847 in the Willamette Valley. The first commercial vintner in Oregon Territory was probably Peter Britt, a well-known photographer of the time, as detailed by Lance Sparks in *Eugene Magazine* (winter 2008). Sparks culled the journals, records and photo plates of Peter Britt preserved by the Southern Oregon Historical Society and concluded that Britt planted his first vineyard adjacent his house overlooking Jacksonville in what is now the Applegate Valley AVA of the Rogue Valley of southern Oregon. He pressed his first wine from Valley View Vineyard in 1858, and received recognition for his wines from local newspapers by 1866.

Britt later acquired more land and planted two major vineyards called The Farm and The Ranch. He obtained cuttings from California missions, traveling salespersons and mail order. An undated note from Britt's writings reveals that he bought Grosser Blauer, Bourchet Hybrids, Gamay, Johannesburg Riesling, Black Burgundy, Trousseau, Mataro, Gutedel and Malbeck. He may have eventually planted more than 200 varieties of wine grapes.

Britt sold his wines to neighbors and to the Catholic Church for altar wine. An 1889 exhibition of wine at the California State Viticultural Commission meeting lists one of Britt's wines as 'Burgundy.' Whether this wine was made from Pinot Noir grapes will probably never be known. The book, *Photographer of a Frontier: The Photographs of Peter Britt*, is currently out of print but is in the libraries of the Oregon Historical Society in Portland and the Southern Oregon Historical Society in Medford.

Several German immigrant vintners including Edward and John Von Pessi and Adam Doerner planted wine grapes and made wine in southern Oregon by the 1880s. Ernest Reuter established a reputation for Klevner (a Germanic term for Pinot Blanc) in the Willamette Valley in the 1880s, made from grapes grown on Wine Hill, west of Forest Grove, the eventual site of Charles Coury Vineyards, and today, the David Hill Winery.

The wine industry in Oregon was devastated by 1919 due to the Temperance Movement and Prohibition.