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## Oregon Wine History Project™ Interview Transcript: Susan Sokol Blosser

Susan Sokol Blosser  
*Sokol Blosser Winery*

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This interview was conducted with Susan Sokol Blosser (**SSB**) on July 14, 2010 at her home in Dayton, Oregon. The primary interviewer was Jeff D. Peterson (**JDP**). Additional support provided by videographers Mark Pederson and Barrett Dahl, and project history researcher Dulce Kersting. The duration of the interview is 47 minutes, 17 seconds.

[00:00] **JDP:** So, we're here talking with Susan Sokol Blosser and we're talking about the early period of Oregon wine. And it is July 14, 2010. Could you maybe just start telling us a little bit of your background and how you came to be on a winery in Oregon?

[00:24] **SSB:** Well people always ask how did you get into this business? And I like to tell them that our story should give hope to any budding entrepreneur because Bill Blosser and I were two liberal arts graduates. We were highly educated, we both graduated from Stanford University in liberal arts where they told us we could do anything with a liberal arts education, and I guess we're living proof that that's true. So here you have two young, mid-twenties, liberal arts graduates who, with no agricultural or business training, who wanted to start an agricultural business. But wait, there's more! We wanted to grow Pinot noir, the red grape from Burgundy, which had never done well in the United States, and we decided to locate in Oregon, a region that didn't have a wine industry. So the fact that we survived wasn't easy, but we survived! That we are now, now the second generation is running the operation, and that we are distributed internationally, in a small way—I think it's a miracle! But as I say, it should give hope to all budding entrepreneurs.

So what happened was, Bill and I, it was actually Bill's idea, we were coming back to Oregon from North Carolina where he had just gotten a Masters of City and Regional Planning, and in the middle of our trip he said, "What do you think about starting a vineyard?" And I had no idea where that idea had come from. But we started talking about it as we drove our Volkswagen camper-bus back to Oregon, and by the time we got to Oregon we were really interested in this.

[02:20] I had grown up in Wisconsin in an urban setting with a father whose hobby was wine. So I actually grew up drinking wines that I only now appreciate: fabulous Burgundy, and Bordeaux, and German wines that my father had collected that he wanted to teach me about. So I had an interest in wine and my taste was for fine wine. Bill had spent a year—took off a year from college and lived in France and worked, attended school, and worked in a sort of a resort as a dishwasher, but had become a real Francophile by the time he left.

So there was some, you know, we liked the idea of growing grapes. And we were part of, as I look back now, part of the "back to the land" of that era. This was the hippie era and we weren't hippies, but you know, our view of that was to go back to the land. And growing corn or soybeans wouldn't have had any appeal to us, but grapes, grapes! You not only grew something, but you then added to the quality of life and that appealed to us.

So, if we had known what we were getting into, would we have done it? Probably not. But we got to Oregon. And then the question was, Did we want to be in Oregon where there was no industry or should we go to California which we knew better? Bill was from California, where there was an established industry, not large, but an established industry. And, being young and having more guts than brains, we ended up deciding that Oregon—it should work, it should work.

[04:30] And, when we got here thinking that we were unique, we found there were a handful of other people who had the same idea. And I've since found—this is so interesting, you think you're unique and then you find out your part of a social movement—that this was happening all over the world. This is when the New Zealand wine industry started, this was when the sort of Renaissance in Italy for the wine industry started. And I know that because we went to visit a winery that we liked very much years later called Avignonesi, and they had—they were located in this, you know, several hundred year old building, but they themselves had bought it; it had been an old school and they started at the same time we did. So it's just been very interesting to see that this was actually a worldwide phenomenon that we were participating in.

We did a lot of research; that was one thing we knew how to do, and Bill really led the way. We actually bought our first piece of vineyard land and had our first child within two weeks of each other at the very end of 1970, and I think of it as each of us giving birth. I spent the rest of the 1970s—between 1970 and 1979 I had three children and both of us worked. Bill taught at Portland State, taught Urban Planning at Portland State, and then joined a planning firm called CH2M.

I did some work at The News Register as a reporter; I was an adjunct professor at Linfield College where I taught American History, American Revolution, and History of Women in the United States. I loved that, and it became a luxury I couldn't afford because I wasn't paid very much and I really was needed at home. So we worked nights. I did most of the tractor work because I could put Nick, the baby, on my back and do the tractor work, and Bill could do the heavy handwork. And we moved out to a rented house and lived in a rented house for three years until we were able to—actually close to four years—until we were able to build. We looked for a house to buy and couldn't find one; we finally ended up building a house on the corner of our property where the grapes wouldn't grow. You know, our priorities were: the best land goes for the grapes.

Where would you like me to go from this, there's a lot of directions I could go—

[07:53] **JDP:** So what year was this when you were coming back from the East Coast, that you were having this conversation?

[08:00] **SSB:** That would have been 1970. That would have been summer of 1970 and things happened actually quite fast because by December we had not only made a decision, we had bought property. And the property that we bought, you know, how do you know what land is going to be good for grapes? Well, there was no way of knowing because there were, you know, no producing vineyards at that point. What we looked for was orchards that had been successful, because orchards bloom in the early spring and we knew that that would be a frost-free spot.

So we ended up getting a dilapidated prune orchard; prunes had been very big in the Dundee hills and this orchard had been destroyed by what was locally famous as the Columbus Day Storm. What we would think of if we were in New Orleans as Katrina, the hurricane. It had been left dormant, all the trees had been knocked down by the storm, and it had just been left, waiting for us. So it was overrun with blackberries and vetch, and the first thing we had to do was clear the land. But it was a great piece of land. It had this southeast slope that we have found was the best. And the reason for the hillside is that the hills, the mid level hills, had a few degrees—were a few degrees warmer than down on the flat. The cold air would come in, and it would go down and settle in the valley. So the hillsides, where you had good airflow, were the frost-free pockets. So all the early vineyards ended up on these hillsides.

[10:15] And the interesting thing—there's a number of serendipitous events. Nineteen seventy-two the State legislature passed Senate Bill 100, which mandated land use plans for the counties. This was happening, the county had designated the hillsides as view property, not good agricultural property, and had slated it for residences. Well it was not only serendipitous that this land use planning happened at the time that the wine industry was starting, but it was also serendipitous that Bill Blosser, his specialty was planning.

So, he became active, he and Dave Adelsheim and David Lett, especially, worked with the county because each county had to decide how it was going to use its land. And they were able to preserve the hillsides—which had been assumed to be residential—preserve them for agriculture for this budding new industry. And otherwise, they would all be probably trailer parks today. So this was a very serendipitous event, and we look back and we think, If there had been much more urban pressure, we wouldn't have been able to do that. But we were successful. And I like to think that Bill's credibility as a planner helped. You know, he knew what arguments to make—what would be convincing. So that was very special and it's no accident that it's Yamhill County that has the best preservation of the hillsides because that's where David Lett, and Bill Blosser, and David Adelsheim happened to be.

[12:33] **JDP:** And that's very much what David Adelsheim was saying, that it was sort of Bill's capability in that respect that was really sort of a big driving force in being able to kind of speak that language that was part of this larger conversation that was going on in Oregon under Tom McCall.

[12:49] **SSB:** Right, right. That was very serendipitous. The other thing was that the pole bean farmers were switching to bush beans. Now, you wouldn't think this would make any difference to the grape industry, but here's the connection: we were able to buy all their used poles for our trellising. And what you have to remember is that none of us came into this at this point with any money. We were able to substitute time and labor and we were always looking for bargains. We went to so many farm auctions. That's where Bill got our first tractor and he had to drive it home from Canby, where the auction was, at ten miles an hour or so. That took a long time. It's only maybe thirty miles away but it took hours. And the poles would be a good example; we were able to buy used wire as well.

So all these things—and the interesting thing is that the existing farmers were so skeptical of what we were doing and there was really a lot of opposition on a number of fronts. Most of the existing farmers weren't in opposition to us but many of them were so skeptical they weren't helpful. But a few were. And I treasure the memories, some really good people.

[14:38] **JDP:** Are there any in particular that helped you guys out?

[14:40] **SSB:** Well, yes there were. And we bought land—we started out with this parcel of eighteen acres. And I need to say that we bought it for eight hundred dollars an acre, this is land which has been appraised, maybe in 2008, at thirty thousand dollars plus an acre. So, huge value increase. We sort of bought our way down the hill from Ted and Virnie Wirfs who were old farmers in this area. And they were a fabulous help. Conventional farmers, they had peaches, and Ted used to say to us that he just hadn't been able to get a good crop of peaches since arsenic was banned in the 1950s because peaches actually are very hard to grow, they're very susceptible to a lot of diseases and so forth, and he really valued that arsenic. And I look back and I think, Geez, he never even used any kind of protection. He lived an amazing long time knowing the kind of pesticides he used. But as we bought the land, they were producing orchards. We had cherries, we had Italian prunes, we had Brooks prunes, we had walnuts. That's pretty much what the commercial crops were. We also had a few apple trees, and pear trees, and so forth. But we had a real fruit cocktail. And we slowly took out these orchards and put in grapes.

[16:33] **JDP:** So you mentioned the arsenic and the use of pesticides, and you guys are part of this, you know, going back to the land movement. What was your view, back then, of the use of pesticides and kind of this issue of sustainability?

[16:50] **SSB:** Well, *sustainability* was not a word in our vocabulary at that time, but the concept of being good to the earth was and Bill, when I married him, was a lifetime member of the Sierra Club. So we were horrified at the idea of arsenic. It's also a time when *organic* was very, as a term used in raising crops, was not well thought of. *Organic* essentially equaled wormy; you know if you bought an organic apple, you could be pretty sure you would have to cut out the worm. But the idea—and you know it's so interesting, people can hold conflicting ideas in their mind and not see any problem with that. Farmers saw themselves as stewards of the land and yet, and they talked about at that time, and I'm sure they still do, talked about their connection to the land and how important that was, and yet they thought nothing of coming in and spraying things which we know now killed all the life in the soil. People didn't understand the concept of ecological balance and life in the soil. So it wasn't that people were overlooking that, which they tend to do now, because now we know that—so you're making a conscious choice. We just defined things a little differently.

So we wanted to, you know, follow the Sierra Club and be as good to the earth as we could. We also, because it was tradition to use a number of chemicals, while we were horrified at arsenic, we were conventional farmers. We did what Ted told us to do, what was approved under all the, you know, USDA. And slowly over the years, as we learned more, discarded those. We started out using pre-emergent herbicide, for example, which you put on before and it kills the seeds so that you don't—you actually don't have anything growing. And we sort of realized, This is really awful stuff, we don't want to be using that. So we stopped using that. And I see it as a process

over the years of slowly understanding all the interconnections and peeling the onion, so to speak.

In 1996, Dan Kent from the Pacific Rivers Council came to me and said—this is past the time that you're interested in, but I want to give you an example of how this works—and said they were introducing a concept called Salmon Safe, which they wanted to be a marketing concept that—for consumers to understand that the products that were Salmon Safe were produced without harm to salmon, based on the old Dolphin Safe tuna promotion. And I said to Dan—he came to me first, we were the first winery to be certified Salmon Safe—and he came to me and I said to him, “Why are you here? We're up in the hillsides, how do we affect salmon?” And he said, “Runoff. The runoff from your vineyard, from any hillside, goes into the rivers and eventually gets to the salmon.”

That was kind of an aha-moment for me, to realize the connections. You know, here I'd been not using chemicals and using cover crops and everything to prevent runoff for other reasons but I realized how ecologically we were all connected. And it's just been a process since we started of learning that. And eventually we, after the national organic standards went in, we actually went to the extent of becoming organically certified. But we started out as conventional farmers learning from our neighbors.

[21:34] **MP<sup>1</sup>**: You know, in your book you talked about kind of a cosmic, or maybe a mind shift for you, from treating the plant to caring for the soil.

[21:44] **SSB**: Yes, conventional farming, one of the big differences—and I actually did a spreadsheet that compared conventional farming, to sustainable farming, to organic farming, to biodynamic farming and the big difference is between conventional and all the others in mindset, how you look at the crop. And that is conventional farming looks at the soil as the way to hold up the plant: you feed the plant, not the soil. It's like a patient on life support: you feed the patient, not the metabolism. Sustainable, organic, biodynamic farming looks at feeding the soil, feeding the digestive system, so that the person—plant—can take up the nutrition as it needs it. And this reflects what scientists have learned, really, relatively recently about the very complex life in the soil, the soil food web, and how the ecology starts in the soil.

[23:21] **JDP**: Well it seems to fit nicely with that whole concept of *terroir*. You know, of the, I've asked different people to explain how they view that and it seems like that kind of fits in with that whole notion of, It's not just the grape, it's a lot of factors.

[23:39] **SSB**: Well, I think the best definition of *terroir* I've heard is, “sense of place.” And I think of it as in our case, the Dundee Hills. You know, people say, Why are the Dundee Hills so special? It's because it's having everything right. It's not just the particular grape you plant, it's not just the slope of the soil, it's not just the kind of soil, it's not just the amount of rainfall—it's all of these things coming together in just the right way that make the perfect *terroir*. But the *terroir* is also the taste of the place.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Pederson

So one of the big things in the wine industry now is that people talk about the globalization of taste that this wine could come from anywhere because what people are trying to do is get a taste that will appeal to judges rather than reflecting the land, the soil, the slope, the terroir, if you will, that it came from. And that's what I think is something that's special about Oregon, it's special really about all really high-end winery's, but that tends to be what Oregon is, is that the goal is to have an expression of the place.

[25:13] **JDP:** So, you know we've talked about there was just a few people when you arrived, and now to remember, Dulce, how many wineries in the database?

[25:28] **DK<sup>2</sup>:** The USDA counts 835, I think, for 2009, for all of Oregon.

[25:37] **SSB:** Wow, I was going to say 400–450.

[25:41] **JDP:** That's for all of Oregon, but Yamhill County I think, has by far the most...

[25:46] **SSB:** Yes, the largest number, and really the heart of the Oregon wine industry or, as one Associated Press writer said that I love, "The epicenter of the Oregon Wine industry." So, one last thing, in talking about how many wineries there are in 2010, we all used to meet in each other's living rooms, you know, the whole wine industry fit in our living room of our rented house. So there was good camaraderie and more in the sense that, We're all in this together and can we help each other? So when we would get together, things like, Who's selling used stakes? Who's selling used wire? were important topics of conversation. And I think this idea of collaboration, which began because we were all underdogs, has carried on and that is another hallmark of the wine industry.

And I think it is very much—the three people or four people that I would really ascribe giving that sense to are David Adelsheim, Dick Erath, Bill Blosser, and Dick Ponzi. Bill Fuller also, but I mean the people that really, they were able to override. Dave Lett was much more of a loner. But these other four really, We've got to stick together. Dick Erath's role was, he was such an experimenter, was always doing all kinds of experiments, and quite the scientist, and was very helpful to us, very helpful because he had been here just a few years before and we went to him a lot.

So in terms of chronology, when we arrived and started our vineyard, Dave Lett was here, Dick Erath had planted, and Dick Ponzi had planted. And at the same time—well, I can't remember when the Campbell's started, they started their winery at the same time we did. We did not start a winery right away; we sold our grapes to Dave Lett and to Dick Erath, and finally were able to get the money together to start a winery. And one of the differences was that we actually hired a winemaker. We, you know, Dave Lett made his own wine, Dick Erath made his own wine, Dick Ponzi made his own wine. We knew we were not professional winemakers and we went to California and found somebody that we thought would help us.

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<sup>2</sup> Dulce Kersting

[29:18] **JDP:** Well, you sort of anticipated my question about that, you know, what was that early community like? I've seen some pictures, I think Jason Lett showed us a picture of basically everyone meeting in Dick Erath's kitchen at one point and there are these different pictures of sort of the same core group of people meeting in the early '70s to talk about these things and also I think Dick also was talking about using some of the—in the same spirit of the poles that you were talking about—going to the cherry orchards and there were buckets that they would be done using that he would then borrow for a period of time. So it sounds like there was a real just trying to make it, you know, however you could with whatever was available. And so there was sort of a network that you guys would kind of use amongst yourselves to get stuff done in that way.

[30:21] **SSB:** Well, and one of the reasons, my guess is, that the pictures were all guys, because most of the women were probably home with the kids, unless the meeting was at their house.

[30:35] **JDP:** And so it sounds like, from what I've heard, you know—yes, the pictures are of the men, but I haven't run into a situation where the women don't seem to be pretty active. I mean you're talking about you working on the tractor, Diana Lett talks about on her honeymoon she's planting grapes. So it sounds like the women were actually very active in—

[31:00] **SSB:** Well let's put it this way: there's only one single man that I can think of that survived in the wine industry and that was Richard Summer down in Roseburg Hillside. They couldn't have done it without the women. And there were not many women who necessarily became decision makers, I think in most cases the men took the lead, but they were a critical part of it.

And I think that one of the things that is distinctive about Sokol Blosser is that I was in charge of the vineyards from 1980 to 1990; I managed them, I worked in them everyday, I was the decision-maker there. And I was really proud of that because partly my upbringing; it was like, Look Ma, I'm on the tractor! And in my book I have a picture of me on the tractor holding Allison—at the end of pounding posts or something she climbed up with me—juxtaposed with a picture of me in my debutante gown; so it's a nice contrast. And then later, I also took over the winery and was the decision-maker of the winery.

So you have, I guess, three different scenarios. One in which you have couples where the guy makes all the decision and the woman does some of the work—sometimes most of the work. The second scenario would be where it's more equal. And the third scenario would be you actually have a woman taking over. And in my case that happened. I took over the vineyards when Bill was able, in 1980, he was able to quit his job and come in full-time to be president of the winery. And I didn't want to be working for him, so I was running the tasting room at the time. And we looked for an arena that I could have and it ended up being the vineyards. That really was the start of my taking emotional ownership of this project, which had been his up until then. But I really connected with the land. I've never been a winemaker, I have no ambition to be a winemaker; I'm a farmer. And then at the end of 1990, Bill was really burnt out and went back to work—we say he got a real job—and I took over as president.



[34:08] **JDP:** So, I've talked with David Adelsheim, their story sounds a little familiar. They were kind of looking for a way of life and kind of wanting to get back the land as well, but you know he sort of openly admits just really not knowing what they were doing. There's one point he's talking about they just didn't know to weed. And someone, I can't remember if it was David Lett or someone comes up and says, "You know you're going to have to find those vines." So they literally had to go through and find—

[34:46] **SSB:** We had a year of that, our first year, where we didn't—The vetch particularly had been so abundant in this abandoned prune orchard and the first year when we were farming nighttimes, pretty much. One day we looked out and we couldn't find the vines. The vetch had totally overgrown it. I mean it just, it happened very fast, and what you have in Oregon, when the ground is wet in the spring, as soon as it warms up, the growth is just phenomenal. And, you know, it didn't happen overnight. We just probably let two or three days go by before going out there and we had a big job, a big job. And you know, we didn't know what to do. So yes, there's a lot of adventures like that; it's called on the job training.

[35:48] **JDP:** Yes. So you know, you kind of do all of this. Is there a moment where you sort of have that aha moment when you finally feel like you've made it? I know with the Letts, they talk about winning that award, the first award that they won in '75. And you know, you've got this dream and you've come out. Is there kind of a time when you—

[36:18] **SSB:** Well it depends on what you mean by, You made it. There certainly were moments of affirmation, which is different from making it. The affirmation for the Lett's came then. You know, we had early on—I think it was in 1979, so it was very shortly after our first vintage—we won some amazing number of medals at the International Wine Competition—like six, something like that—which was in England. Well, what an affirmation! That would be one.

The big affirmation, which came for the whole wine industry, was the Pinot noir challenge that happened in 1985, somebody probably has talked about that. Where the Oregon wines in a blind tasting did better than the Burgundies of the 1983. Then when Robert Drouhin in 1988 came and said, "There are only two places in the world that I would grow Pinot noir: one is Burgundy and one is Oregon," and located right across from us! That was affirmation. When he put out his first bottle of wine and sold it for the ungodly sum of twenty dollars—it was either twenty or thirty, I can't remember—we said, Go Robert!

You know, in 1985, when we had this big tasting in New York, we, Bill and I—the tasting was in September 1985 and before Bill went to that tasting he and I were trying to decide if we actually wanted to pick our Pinot noir that year because we were sitting on a two year inventory at that current rate of sales and the price was \$7.95 a bottle. So, as it turned out, our wine, Sokol Blosser Wine, was the number one rated wine of that tasting and it sold out in two months. Our two-year inventory sold out in two months! So that was affirmation.

Now as far as "making it," I think the moment when I really felt that we made it happened in 2008 when the Portland Business Journal listed Sokol Blosser Winery as one of the most admired companies in Oregon from a vote by state-wide CEOs. The fact that we were on the radar of other businesses to the point that they would admire us just really—that was making it.

So it took that long. You know the old saw, It takes twenty years to be an overnight success? Well, it took us closer to forty.

[39:52] **JDP:** Well I think that's about what I have. Is there anything you'd like to add or any other questions?

[40:00] **BD**<sup>3</sup>: I actually have a question. I'm curious, what words would you use to describe your winery today and where would you like to see it head in the future?

[40:11] **SSB:** Well the words that I would use to describe the winery, the words that come to mind are: family owned and operated by the second generation, good to the earth, wines of elegance and ageability. Well I'm sure there's more, but let me think about—In a business that is operated with the triple bottom line: people, planet, profit. Where this goes in the future is only partly my decision because I have relinquished day-to-day decision making to the co-presidents, Alex and Allison, two of my children. And the third, Nick, who is the oldest, who has his own little business in Portland, is chairman of the board. So the board is still just a family board, with the five of us. My inclination is probably to keep the winery smaller than they would want; I think they have ideas of expansion. So I'm really not willing to speak to where it goes. But I think they will keep, wherever they go, they will keep the family values because to us, *how* we operate is maybe even more important than where we're going.

[42:39] **JDP:** And how many employees are there now?

[42:41] **SSB:** We have twenty-five.

[42:45] **DK:** I've actually got one thing that I'd really like to hear you talk more about. In your book you talk about how difficult it was to, kind of, come up with a lot of conservatism that still resided in Yamhill County, especially when you were looking to get licensed to open a winery, and how they feared that people would be stumbling drunk out of the tasting rooms and causing a scene. Could you just talk a little bit about that?

[43:12] **SSB:** Well, yes. We came up against a lot of opposition when we had to get our winery license, our conditional use permit to cite a winery on agricultural land. And we fought a battle that winery's today don't have to fight. So we paved the way. The opposition was irrational and fearful, and if I had of believed all the things that they believed, I would have been against it too. So, I look back and I think I could have—What I should have done was gone around to each of the neighbors and explain. Done a lot of PR in other words. We didn't realize how important that was.

And over the years, because we have been the first to do a lot of things, we have had to pave the way. You know, we've taken the heat, so to speak. We are in a farming—this is a rural area, primarily, and rural people tend to be more conservative and there was also a lot of just anti-alcohol sentiment at that point. And you know, in our mind, wine is the beverage of moderation. It's part of a healthy, balanced lifestyle and wine in moderation. So that is what we promote. And

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<sup>3</sup> Barrett Dahl

we don't want drunk people drinking wine, just the liability of that from a business standpoint is awful. So, you know, and that's just one aspect. There's the health aspect. So our goal is to educate people, to have a glass of wine with dinner, and to drink carefully and only the best.

[45:47] **MP:** One of the most painful things in your book was when you discovered that you had phylloxera and how do you—I mean, to me it feels like losing your children, right?

[46:00] **SSB:** Well, right. And once you get over that, you do what you have to. We have now totally replanted. The only vines that are not on rootstock are right outside the tasting room, what we call our walk-through vineyard, which are now the oldest vines. So it was really hard to face that and we tried everything we could to slow it down and try to get rid of it. We thought, We're going to learn how to live with this and we're going to try to find an ecological balance so that we keep the phylloxera in check, and that kind of thing. We were not able to do that. And I don't know whether it would have been possible if we had been better farmers, you know, just what the issue was. But when you see the vines suffering the way they were, you want to take them out.

[47:09] **JDP:** Okay, thank you.

[47:11] **SSB:** Well, thank you.