

MEMOIRS OF AN OLD TIMER, ALPHONSE BELL

As told to the St. Helena Star April 9, 1953

In May 1879 I had the first glimpse of St. Helena after coming across the country on the Overland Emigrant Train. My brother, who was living here, met us at the train station and escorted us to Otto Rampendahl's hotel.

My brother Ben was working at the Taplin Dairy Ranch (Joseph Phelps Vineyards). After a day of visiting with him I had to find work of any kind. I was a greenhorn at farm work, but ended up in a hayfield in 100-degree heat.

I had worked the mules late and the job was done

The man I worked for was living alone in Conn Valley—just Mr. Rodgers and I with livestock, two milk cows, saddle horses and work mules. It was the haying season and I knew a little about mowing machines, so Rodgers told me to hitch up the mules. It all worked well.

The two of us helped round up a herd of cattle to drive to market

It was my first bronco ride, but the horse knew more about herding cattle than I did. One of the cows made a wrong turn and my horse turned with it, spilling me onto the road. No damage done.

Rodgers was not a good cook, but we had plenty soda crackers and fresh milk. He returned from the cattle sale with a big round steak. After a week of chewing on that I got hungry and wanted to visit my brother at Taplin's over the hill. He told me of a shortcut through the woods (between Conn Valley Road and Taplin Road) which would end at the Milk Ranch. I got lost and finally got there hungry and tired.

After a splendid dinner with the Taplin family and a good night's rest, I left town.

Returning in the fall, I helped Matthew Vann (on Zinfandel Lane) with the grape harvest

I then secured a job with Dimsdill B. Carver in his general store as a delivery boy. After a few months I had my first promotion. Mr. McGeorge was demoted to delivery and I was to be shelf stocker. Mr. Carver was pleased with my changes and told me to fix things as I thought best. I also boarded in his home.

In 1882 Carver sold to Townsend & Anderson, but I kept my job. In 1885 the Greenfield brothers and I bought the store and renamed it Bell & Greenfield. In 1887 I bought out Greenfield and took my brother William as partner, thus was Bell Brothers formed. The store moved from the Carver Building (1269-1289 Main) to the Richie Block in 1893 shortly after its completion (Goodman's today). In 1920 my brother sold his share to Otto Jursch and Fred Rossi, so the firm became A.N. Bell & Co. In 1933 the store was sold and dissolved.

I remember the friendship I have received from the old pioneers

I am writing these lines May 1944, sixty-five years after my arrival in California. I knew many of the pioneers of the 1840s—they were great people who settled in Napa Valley. When they gathered before the fireplace and recalled their past experiences it was better than reading a book. The fireplace in the Townsend & Anderson Store in the winter was the gathering place for

the covered wagon pioneers to warm up while waiting for the mail and tell tales of their trek across the plains.

Napa Valley experienced a great boom in vineyard planting in the 1880s

The beautiful oaks that dotted the landscape were being cut down. Hundreds of Chinamen were employed and Daniel Hunt was the wood king. After the wood was cut up it was hauled, stacked along the railroad tracks at shipping points and sent to San Francisco and Oakland. They got the land in shape for vine planting and the boom was on. Side hills almost too steep to plow were cleared and planted to vineyard. Up and down the valley was planted, especially from Yountville north.

Charles Krug was the big man of the grape and wine industry

Everyone looked to him for advice on how, where, when and what kind of vineyard to plant. In Charles Krug's business life he was a charitable and liberal man. In fact it was his only fault, if he had one. If anyone was looking for work, they were sent to him and Krug found something for them to do. Under the beautiful oak grove that surrounded his home, Sunday was a day of fellowship and feasting. Nothing unusual for a northbound train on Sunday morning to drop a special car at the Krug siding. Forty or sixty visitors from San Francisco spent the day feasting on good things provided by Mr. and Mrs. Krug. It was my pleasure and privilege to spend many beautiful Sunday afternoons at their table.

Misses Linda, Anita and Lolita Krug and a Miss Dixie Chiles were the magnets that drew a few of the young men to the Krug home. On several occasions we helped serve or wait on the guests from San Francisco. The famous Turnverein German Club of San Francisco was often entertained by the Krugs.

After the southbound train left late in the afternoon and all the guests had departed, we home folks had a great time. Singing, other than the great food, was the principal entertainment.

Vineyard planting boomed for several years –grapes selling for \$30 to \$35 per ton

Wine cellars (except the few which aged and bottled their wines) sold to wine merchants of San Francisco. Some wineries sold wine locally at .30 to .35 cents per gallon and cleaned their cooperage for next year's crop.

A few of the big wineries in the upper Napa Valley, of which St. Helena is the hub, were: Charles Krug, Beringer Brothers, John C. Weinberger (William Cole today), John Thomann (Sutter Home), James McCord, R.M. Wheeler, Giaque Brothers, Brun & Chaix (Oakville) and Gottlieb Groezinger (Yountville).