

BERINGER BEGINNINGS—A START IN 1876

By Mariam Hansen-St. Helena Historical Society, April 24, 2016

Celebrating the 140th Anniversary of the First Crush

Germany's city of Mainz has been a wine growing region since Roman times

From this incubator came Friedrich and Jacob Beringer, sons of Ludvig & Maria Beringer. Ludvig was a vintner. The older brother, known as Fritz to his friends, was born in 1840. Younger brother Jacob was born in 1845. Jacob apprenticed as a cooper and learned the wine making trade. He spent two years in Berlin working as a winemaker. Returning to Mainz, he became cellar master at the winery where he had learned the trade.

Meanwhile in California the government of Mexico, via the local commander Mariano Vallejo, granted almost 18 thousand acres to Dr. Edward Turner Bale in 1841. In 1848 part of the land was sold to David Hudson, who built the home that we see today in 1850, the year California was admitted to the union.

Fritz: Off to France to learn about wine business

Fritz was more interested in the business side of winemaking, so his parents sent him off to study in France. After traveling for a while, Fritz arrived in America in 1862, establishing a prosperous business in New York. Fritz was malting barley for the German breweries and becoming well connected to the German community there

Jacob followed his brother to America in 1868 and met his new sister-in-law Bertha

Jacob got a job at a German wine firm in New York as cellar master. Soon he was enticed by the opening of the transcontinental railroad and a land rush in the west. In 1870 he took a train for San Francisco. Taking a ferry across the bay and the new railroad up the Napa Valley, his destination was St. Helena as he heard the climate was ideal for wine grapes.

Jacob became cellar master at Charles Krug

Visiting the winery of Charles Krug, a fellow German, Jacob was soon employed as cellar master there. Meanwhile David Hudson sold his land to the Daegeners in 1872. The couple continued to grow grapes as Hudson had and improve their vineyard. Health issues forced the Daegeners to sell in 1875. The buyer was Jacob Beringer, who bought two parcels of 55.49 acres and 160 acres plus water rights for \$14,500. Later he deeded half interest to his brother Fritz.

In 1876 Jacob tended his vineyard and made his first crush

At age 31 Jacob was anxious to start his new winery, though he continued to work for Krug. During the spring and summer of 1876 Jacob tended his vineyard and made his first crush. 1876 was a historic year for many reasons. The city of St. Helena was incorporated on March 24. April 10 the first city elections were held. The first mayor was Swiss Henry Pellet. The vine disease Phylloxera was recognized and solutions were being sought. Early remedy was to place iron filings around the roots of the vine. A crop report showed progress in the year's grain, corn, grape, cherry and hops production.

America celebrated its Centennial in 1876 with grand celebrations across the country

Jacob traveled to the east coast on a two month trip and attended events. A grand festival was held in Napa for the whole county with a wondrous parade. In St. Helena flags waved in profusion. A continuous roar of every known type of explosive was heard, from Chinese firecrackers to a six pounder cannon.

A September 1876 vintage report showed seventeen cellars making wine locally. It was estimated that 848,000 gallons of wine was made. Most of the labor for winery and vineyard development was performed by Chinese men. St. Helena had a thriving Chinatown on West Charter Oak Avenue. The men lived in groups in wooden shacks, leading to conflicts among them. An 1876 murder occurred there when one man shot another over a gambling debt. The killer escaped into the hills.

December saw the excavations begin for the new Beringer Winery

The laborious work was done by Chinese men. The March 30, 1877 *St. Helena Star* reports on laying the cornerstone of the new winery, saying *"Tuesday witnessed an important event in the history of St. Helena, the inauguration of one more of those great enterprises which make us strong and prosperous, the commencement of another of those great factories which turn the wealth of nature into the wealth of artifice and spread the fame of St. Helena..."*

The chief product of all Napa is her wine

The center of this business for Napa- for all Northern California we may say—is St. Helena. Her vineyards have given employment to a large number of persons. Her cellars have turned out nearly a million gallons of the purest native wines every year. About a 100 of the leading citizens of St. Helena and Calistoga had assembled to do it honor. The center of the attraction was the stone neatly chiseled out by Mr. Baillie, appropriately inscribed "B.B. 1877". Laid inside were a copy of the SH Star, carte de visite of those attending, photos, a \$20 gold piece, and bottles of native wine and champagne were also interred here for future generations to sample. A fine lunch with wine and champagne followed, with many speeches."

St. Helena Water Company filed articles of incorporation in July 1877

They would supply St. Helena with water from the new Upper Reservoir on York Creek. Jacob was on the board of directors, along with Charles Krug, Seneca Ewer (a neighbor), John York (an early pioneer) and George Gluyas (another neighbor). Joe Straus went fishing in York Creek and caught 105 trout in one day.

August 1877: The winery was finished and ready for crush

The building was 40 X 104 feet with walls of cut stone and two stories high. There were no partitions inside, each story being a single room. The ground floor was of cement, slanted for drainage. The second floor is built like a ship's deck-regularly caulked and water tight. It had watertight baseboards, so it could be filled with water for cleaning. Jacob estimated that 20,000 gallons would be made in 1877.

At the same time Jacob was the official storekeeper for the St. Helena US Bonded Warehouse, keeping grape brandy on which tax had been paid separate. Until Bonded Warehouse building was finished in 1878 on Church Street, Jacob kept the brandy in his cellar.

In February 1878 Jacob quit his job at Krug and was replaced by another German, Karl Memminger. The Star reported "Mr. Beringer, long the popular foreman of Krug's great cellar

and vineyards... has at last resigned that position to attend to the growing interests of himself and brother in the magnificent property of the Beringer Brothers., whose growth it has been so often our pleasure to notice.”

Made time for public service and was elected to the city council in 1878.

Jacob was working hard improving the winery and adding to the vineyard. He was described as “*a kindly hospitable man, who had many warm friends*”. His property was always open to visitors and hospitality was dispensed lavishly on many occasions.

The crush of 1878, described by the Star

Grapes were transported by wagon to a road behind the winery on level with the roof. After being crushed there, the must (or juice) flowed down to the middle story for fermentation. Finally the new wine is stored on the ground floor for aging. It was the method used in Mainz, Germany and in many other regions before pumps. The whole cellar was operated by 6-8 men, who crushed more grapes in one day than most other wineries. Production in 1878 was 100,000 gallons.

Jacob contracted to build 100 feet of tunnel into the hillside behind the winery

Chinese laborers with picks, shovels and blasting powder set to work. These excavations would expand the tunnels over many years. In December a magnificent cask ordered by Jacob and carved with the monogram “BB” within a grapevine wreath arrived.

At the end of the year excavations began for another winery building. At the end of January 1879 construction was underway. A new distillery building site was laid out and equipment from Sonoma was brought in. Two wagon loads of heavy distillery machinery came through town, including a steam boiler 14 feet long, weighing four tons. The new distillery had a castle-like façade, but collapsed in the 1906 earthquake.

On April 5, 1879 Jacob married Agnes Tscheinig and the couple would have six children. They settled in the Hudson House with their Chinese cook. Fritz’s wife Bertha came to visit and liked what she saw: A thriving business that was already profitable. The couple began planning to move to St. Helena. The winery shipped 14,000 gallons of wine. Fritz opened a wine store in New York and was selling all the wine his brother could send him. A St. Helena employee went east to manage the new enterprise.

“Willkommen wer mit herz und Hand sich je in Freundschaft begegnet.” Translated: Welcome with hand and heart whoever shall meet here in friendship. So says the inscription lining the ceiling of the Rhine House entry hall and uncovered during a restoration.

From the St. Helena Star on May 13, 1883

“Frederick Beringer exhibited to friends plans for a fine large dwelling in the Gothic style.. and which we hope to soon to see built...as a fitting home for the friends whose enterprise and public spirit we are all so much indebted to”.

The architect was a German from San Francisco, Albert Schroepfer, who also designed the Odd Fellows building on Main, the Sutter home Victorian, Miravalle at Spring Mountain Winery and the Niebaum home at Inglenook. Jacob had his home moved 200 feet north because his brother wanted the better site, and because Fritz had put in most of the capital for the winery.

The Italian stonemasons built the foundation

Mariano Bale (son of land grantee Dr. E.T. Bale) did the carpentry work. In September 1883, while Fritz was in New York, a cornerstone-laying ceremony for the house took place. Jacob invited a large crowd, who gathered in the cellar for a wine reception. A friend of Fritz's gave a fine speech. In the cornerstone were placed coins, photographs of the family, local and regional newspapers, business cards of those present, wine bottles, and grape wood. After this, a fine meal was enjoyed and the party celebrated until night.

Construction of the house took much longer than anticipated. Due to the intricate architectural details, wood paneling, intricate stained glass windows and the distance materials had to be shipped, the house was not completed until late in 1884.

The Beringer estate was a palatial showplace for two families

The completion of the Beringer brothers' second home was complete: Fritz and Bertha in the Rhine House and Jacob and Agnes in the Hudson House. While winery and vineyard improvements continued, it is a magnificent winery estate all these years later.

Sources:

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- *The Rhine House at Beringer Vineyards*, by Chuck O'Rear, Wineviews Publishing, 2009
- *Napa Wine-A history* by Charles Sullivan, Wine Appreciation Guild, 1994
- St. Helena Star, various issues