

DOWDELL WINE SAGA: A STORY OF WINE GONE BAD

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James Dowdell was born in Ireland in 1845 and came to America in 1868. After traveling around and marrying Elizabeth Corbely in Philadelphia, the couple came to California via Panama. His first job in Napa Valley was at Edge Hill Winery on Sulphur Springs Avenue. After saving his money James eventually acquired 61 acres on the east side of St. Helena near the street named for him. He was a pioneer hop grower, but also grew wine grapes.

By 1891 James was producing wine in bulk for sale

The Cloverdale Wine Company bought 320,000 gallons of his product that year. Business grew and in 1892 Dowdell & Son leased the Greystone Winery, largest in the state at the time. In 1895 a snap decision cost Dowdell & Son their wine production business.

To finance their operations, James took a loan from the Bank of St. Helena secured by wine

Owen Wade, an officer at the Bank of St. Helena, conferred with Dowdell and gave consent to sell the wine, though it secured the loan. The loan was guaranteed by the California Wine Association (CWA) and Charles Carpy. The loan repayment was overdue. Dowdell had a contract to sell all his wine to CWA. When CWA offered to pay less per gallon than contracted, Dowdell viewed it as a breach of their contract and in bad faith. Chevalier & Company offered a higher price and in early April 1895 Dowdell sold the wine to that firm. Chevalier immediately sold the wine to dealers in the eastern US, but the wine was still stored in St. Helena in six railroad cars.

Charles Carpy immediately filed a lawsuit against Dowdell in Napa Superior Court

He sued to collect on the loan he had guaranteed for \$27,000. He also sued Dowdell for breach of contract. W. A. Mackinder was appointed receiver by the court, and took possession of the wine in dispute. Six carloads of wine, which were at the station ready for shipment to Chevalier, were unloaded by the receiver and hauled back to the cellar. All shipments of wine stopped.

The judge ruled in favor of Charles Carpy and CWA

On June 17, 1895 the wine was sold at a sheriff's sale to satisfy the judgement on the foreclosure of a chattel mortgage amounting, with costs, to \$530,000. The first lot of 44,000 gallons of claret was bought by G. Migliavacca, of Napa. A. Lachman, of San Francisco, bought 195,000 gallons. Fortune Chevalier bought 18,000 gallons and others bought the rest. The total of 363,000 gallons brought \$41,234, a good price at a forced sale. The wine was sold in the cellar for cash, and was to be taken away at the buyer's expense.

Dowdell appealed to the California Supreme Court, which heard his case in January 1897

It is an action to foreclose two chattel mortgages executed by Dowdell & Son to the Bank of St. Helena upon a lot of wine to secure two promissory notes given to the bank which were assigned to Carpy immediately before Dowdell sold the wine to Chevalier. Bank of St. Helena officer Owen Wade assigned the notes to Carpy without Dowdell's knowledge. The court agreed with Dowdell and reversed the decision of the lower court.

In April 1897 Dowdell & Son sued Charles Carpy, Owen Wade (Bank of St. Helena), California Wine Association, J.H. Wheeler (officer of the CWA) and the California Winemakers Corporation.

Dowdell & Son alleged conspiracy by the defendants, which resulted in their financial ruin. It was alleged that plaintiffs owned 450,000 gallons of wine, their production of 1894, which was mortgaged to the Bank of St Helena for \$27,500; that plaintiffs, with the consent of Owen Wade, cashier of the Bank of St. Helena, negotiated with F. Chevalier & Co. for the sale of the mortgaged wine; that the consummation of this sale was prevented by the fact that the Bank of St. Helena pressed the claim for foreclosure of the mortgage.

Dowdell & Son demanded \$50,000 damages

This foreclosure, the plaintiffs allege, was brought about through the conspiracy of all the defendants, led by Mr. Carpy and the corporations represented by him. Dowdell & Son set forth that because of these acts they lost their credit and business and were unable subsequently to buy grapes or make wine. Holding the defendants to be directly responsible for their misfortunes, Dowdell & Son demanded \$50,000 damages.

On May 12, 1899 Superior court Judge Belcher of San Francisco rendered Judgment in favor of James and Arthur Dowdell to recover the value of 368,000 gallons of wine sold at the sheriff sale and the judgment was subsequently reversed. Dowdell & Son still had the wine. They never made wine again, but continued to grow hops.

James Dowdell died in 1902 and is buried at St. Helena Cemetery in the family plot.