

THE DOWDELLS: FROM THE EMERALD ISLE TO ST. HELENA IN 1869

By Mariam Hansen

James Dowdell was born in County Louth, Ireland, August 29, 1845, where he resided until he was nineteen years of age. He then moved to England and found employment in a rolling mill, which lasted for nine months. New Zealand was his next stop, where farmed for three years. We next find James on board a schooner bound for California. His boat docked at San Francisco on July 28, 1868. He remained but a few months in San Francisco. On the move again, James headed for Philadelphia, arriving November 7, 1868. He was united in marriage there to Miss Elizabeth Corbally, a native of County Monaghan, Ireland.

In February, 1869, the couple headed for the Golden State via Panama

The couple boarded a ship to Colon, Panama. Early travelers had to cross Panama jungles by mule, but the Dowdells took the train, which was available after 1855. From Panama City, ships departed for San Francisco.

James first worked in San Francisco

Afterwards he was in the employ of Civil War General Erasmus Darwin Keyes, on his ranch near St. Helena, *Edge Hill*. This property is on Sulphur Springs Avenue, where the winery, distillery and carriage house (known as "the White Barn") of the estate still stand. James worked for the General for three years.

During this time 1869-1872, having saved his earnings, the Dowdells purchased ten acres of land from William and Frances York. After one year they sold it and bought twenty-five acres from Dr George Crane. In 1875 they added thirty-six acres more to his estate, making sixty-one acres. James was now engaged in hop and grape growing. By this time they had three sons: James W. (1869), Arthur B. (1870), and Edward (1874). Four more children joined the family: Walter (1875), Albert (1877) Joseph (1880) Katherine (1883).

A disastrous midnight fire occurred at the farm in June 1885

A new fine cellar, two large barns, two hop houses, and a wagon shed were destroyed, together with large quantities of hay and 118 bales of hops. Losses were set at more than \$7,000, one-half of which was covered by insurance. "The fire was probably the work of an incendiary" the newspapers surmised. James hired many Chinese workers to pick and process his hops. The fire may have been a message from locals opposed to foreign labor.

"All the hops raised in Napa County are grown in or near St. Helena within the limits of five yards" So reported the St. Helena Star in 1886. "The yield this year was light, not averaging much more than half a crop. The figures as given us are as follows: James Dowdell, 15 acres, 13 tons; David Cole & E. Simpson, 12 acres, 10 tons; R. F. Lane, 16 acres, 8 tons; P. Elting, 12 acres, 8 tons; Storey Bros., 30 acres; 8 acres at St. Helena, and 22 at Rutherford, 10 tons. Total yield from 85 acres, 49 tons. A ton of green hops makes about 650 pounds dried and pressed. Chinamen are paid at the rate of \$1.02 per lb. for picking green hops, which makes the cost of picking alone average about \$15 per ton for dry hops."

During the grape harvest in October 1889 disaster struck

Walter Dowdell, then a fifteen-year-old boy, had his hand and arm injured by a grape-crusher. Blood-poisoning set in and the boy died. James blamed the doctor, who sued for defamation and damages of \$25,000.

In 1891 James made 320,000 gallons of wine, which he sold to the Cloverdale Wine Company to be delivered after January 1st. Dowdell & Son (Arthur) leased the large Bourn cellar (later Christian Brothers, now Culinary Institute of America). The firm purchased all of W. B. Bourn's grapes at \$14 per ton, which all conceded to be a fair price.

On April 13, 1895 a lawsuit was begun in the Superior Court

C. Carpy vs Dowdell & Son--- which would end Dowdell's winemaking career. Carpy foreclosed on a mortgage of \$27,000 on certain wine which Dowdell & Son had, it is alleged, contracted to sell to the California Wine Association (CWA). After being offered too low a price, James sold the wine to Fortune Chevalier of San Francisco (founder of Spring Mountain's Chateau Chevalier). W. A. Mackinder was appointed keeper of the property in question, with bond fixed at \$15,000.

It was true that James sold 400,000 gallons of the wine to Chevalier & Co. of San Francisco

Chevalier immediately sold the wine to dealers in the eastern US, but the wine was still stored in St. Helena in six railroad cars, ready for shipment. James asserted CWA has not kept good faith with him and therefore the alleged contract was void. W. A. Mackinder, the receiver, ordered the wine to be unloaded and hauled back to the cellar. All shipment of the wine was stopped and negotiations were under way for a compromise.

C. Carpy & Son won the case and the court ordered a sheriff sale of 363,000 gallons to satisfy the judgement of \$530,000. The sale brought \$41,234, an average of 11.34 cents per gallon, which was considered a good price at a forced sale.

James appealed to the California Supreme Court, which heard his case two years later in January 1897. The decision of the lower court was reversed. James was not done—two months later he sued Carpy and CWA for damages of \$950,000. The result of the litigation was carefully watched vintners throughout the State.

Dowdell & Son charged the defendants with conspiracy

This resulted in the financial ruin of the plaintiffs. 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 demand \$50,000 damages. James won—but never operated his winery again.

Instead, Dowdell & Son expanded their hops business to 55 acres. In 1899 they had a large crop of the best quality. However finding laborers was a continuous problem. Women and children were used in that year. They raised the price of picking from 16 to 20 cents per barrel, or \$1.25 per 100 pounds. Free transportation to the grounds was furnished.

When the hops was gathered it was placed in four large cars adjusted over the same number of furnaces and then covered by large pieces of canvas, a system of sulphuring patented by Dowdell & Son. After the hops were sulphured, the cars were pushed along an elevated track to a building 10 feet high, and there the hops were stored for curing. In about two weeks the crop was baled and ready for market.

Another solution to the labor problem was tried in 1901

Father Crowley, of the Youths' Directory of San Francisco, brought thirty-two boys to pick hops. The boys are from twelve to eighteen years of age. An experienced cook came with them and three meals were prepared daily. In February 1902 Dowdell & Son sold 38 tons of hops to buyers who said it was the finest hops they ever handled.

James Dowdell died on March 31, 1902 of typhoid fever

His funeral was held on April 3. Elizabeth Dowdell died in 1931. The entire family is buried in St. Helena Cemetery.

Today Dowdell's home, winery and brandy house still exist

The owner since 1971, Charlie Crocker, grows fine quality wine grapes on the same terroir. With partner winemaker Pam Starr, the grapes are crushed at Crocker-Starr Winery on the lane named in Dowdell's honor. [More information.](#)