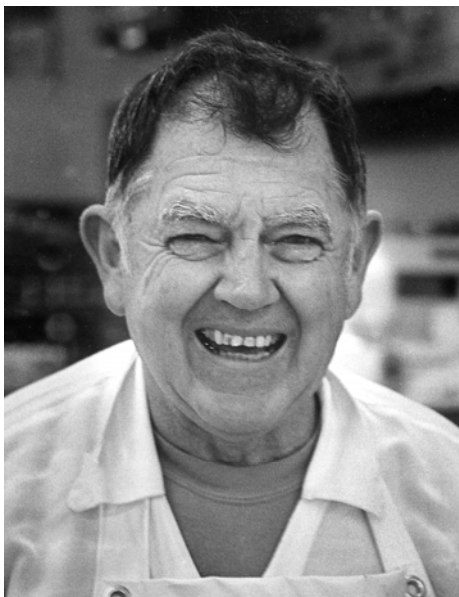


In Memoriam: Ernie Navone

1923-2007

The following is from an interview with Ernie November 9 and 10, 1998 at 789 Fulton Lane, St. Helena



Photograph courtesy of John Sorenson

Ernie Navone and his sister Evelyn were born in a large frame house on a twelve-acre parcel on Fulton Lane that Ernie's dad, Joseph "Joe" Navone, bought in 1915 (or '14 or '16). However, the house is in a slightly different location because Joe insisted on keeping its old basement for making house wine when friends finally persuaded him to build a new house. In 1939, Harry Thorsen moved the old house a little ways off, a brand-new tiled roof house was built on top of the old cellar, and Joe kept making a house red at home.

Joe was involved with grapes most of his life. He was born and raised in Asti, Italy and first came to America in 1903. Joe went to work at Hercules Powder Company in Pinole and lived in Oakland. After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Joe went back to Italy. Ernie's mother, Maria "Mary", was a native of Torino. She had dreamt of coming to America. One day there was a big funeral in Torino, which Joe attended. Mary's family pointed him out and Mary started thinking. A year later she and Joe were married and on their way to California. Joe again got a job at Hercules Powder Company, which made Mary very nervous. She worried Joe might be blown up, so Joe looked for other work. His cousins, the Valentis, had bought property on Taplin Lane in St. Helena with vineyard and a winery (Joe Heitz now owns the property). They knew their cousin Joe knew about winemaking and were eager to

have him manage their vineyards and make wine. Joe moved there with Mary and little Emma. Joe did a good job, but Mary didn't like living there. She had to feed all the hired hands. Although they slept in the barn, Mary would have to feed eight or nine men at every meal. It seemed like all she did was cook and clean up and then turn around and cook and clean up all over again.

The Navones had become friends with the Blake family in St. Helena. Judge Blake, who was also involved in real estate, showed the Navones property after property. He finally said, "I've got one more place to show you and if you don't like it I'm not going to show you any more." With that he turned his buggy onto Fulton Lane and when he and the Navones rolled across the railroad tracks, Mary said, "We'll take it." The property consisted of a house, barn and vineyards. Joe continued to work for the Valentis but got tired of traveling by buggy from Fulton Lane to Taplin Lane every morning, so he looked for work in a winery closer to home. Joe found work at Greystone with the Visalia Brothers about the time things kind of fell through for the Valentis. During Prohibition, Joe had also bought what is Markham Winery today. Joe worked at Greystone and other wineries until things got going at his own winery.

Ernie spent much of the summer in the Napa River. In those days the Silverado Trail didn't run alongside the river between the

Pratt and Pope Street bridges. On a stretch of land near the river the Lewellings raised watermelons, which lots of boys in St. Helena stole, even relatives of the Lewellings. When Ernie and his friends got hot swimming and playing in the river, they'd sneak up and take a melon, slice off the ends with somebody's souvenir bayonet from WW I, run the bayonet right around the inside, take out the heart and toss the rest in the river. They might go through as many as four, five or six melons in an afternoon. Oh, those melons were good.

Another thing they'd do was get a scrap of liver from the butcher's, take it and a couple of five gallon oil cans they'd gotten from the garage and scrubbed out good, and go down to the river, picking corn along the way. At the river they'd build a fire, fill the cans, and put the water and corn on to boil. Then they'd stick the liver in the river and pick off the crayfish as they came to eat the liver. Then throw the crayfish into boil, too. Ernie and his friends could eat crayfish and corn all afternoon.

The only complaint Ernie ever really had about the Navone place was its lane of olive trees. There were about thirty-five trees in all and Ernie hated those trees with a passion because he had to pick the olives on them every year. It took about a week. The trees produced enough olive oil to last the family six or eight months, but Ernie had to pick out every leaf and twig from

the olives, once they were down, before they could be pressed. Each fall, when the olives were ripe, Ernie and others would lay out old rugs under the trees and beat the trees with long poles. They let the fall breeze blow off the leaves. Then the olives were tipped into boxes and taken to the crusher in the Navone barn.

After the olives were crushed, pulp was shoveled into feed sacks Ernie had washed and scrubbed, and then set into a big wine press. The press could handle about eight sacks at a time. The sacks sat in the press until they quit draining oil. That oil went into a sawed off wooden tank, a puncheon. Once the sacks stopped dripping, Ernie would muscle them over to one side of the press. Meanwhile, Ernie's dad got a fifty-gallon drum of water boiling. Ernie would pour a bucket of hot water over a couple of sacks, pull two others on top, pour on another bucket of hot water, pull two more over until he reached the top of the press. Then he put on the top boards and screwed the press down as hard as he could. Hot water took out just some of the remaining oil. The whole process generally had to be repeated three or four times to get out all the oil. Water and oil from these pressings was poured into another puncheon, oil would rise to the top and the water was drawn off the bottom. The olive remains were taken out and dumped in the vineyards. The oil sure came out fine and Ernie never minded the crushing; it was all that picking

he minded. He really had no idea what kind of olives they were, but “they sure were little tiny ones.”

When Joe first bought the property, its grapevines were planted in rows 5' x 5' so they could be worked by horse-drawn farm equipment. The more northern part of the vineyard was planted in Carignane, Barbera and Petite Sirah and the southerly in Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon Vert, Green Hungarian, Petite Sirah, and Grenache. That first year Ernie said the harvest was so fantastic it almost paid for the whole place. The grapes were all on St. George rootstock and head-pruned. Joe regularly worked his vineyards with a pair of Belgian mares. He used horses for a long time. Ernie remembered two pair of horses growing up; the second pair were “George” and “Dolly.” No one in his family had been allowed to go near the workhorses. They couldn't touch them. Only Joe handled these horses until his first granddaughter was born and then she even got to ride one. There's a photograph to prove it: Ernie's little niece Carolyn riding big grey Dolly.

The only thing Ernie ever rode was a bike. He taught himself to ride with an old beat up one he found in the barn. First he took it all apart, cleaned and oiled it and put it back together. Then he learned how to ride. As he was coming down the driveway on the bike his dad and the team of Belgians were coming out of a vineyard row to make

a U-turn and go down the next. Ernie was on a bike that had no brakes on a collision course with his father's precious Belgians. They drew closer. Ernie didn't know what to do but he knew whatever he did he couldn't touch his dad's horses. If he crashed into them he knew his dad would kill him. So he dumped the bicycle and slid right between the horses' legs. Oh, his father was hopping mad. He started bawling Ernie out. “But, Pa,” Ernie said, “I never touched the horses!” And, he hadn't, so he got out of it that day.

Although Joe had bought a winery before Prohibition, it took a while to get it going, after Prohibition. Joe would buy wine from lots of different growers. He'd offer \$3 or \$4 a ton for the grapes on the vines, get the pickers, make the wine and then try to sell it. In 1937, Joe and a dozen other grape-growers formed St. Helena Coöperative Winery, the “Little Coöp,” in the winery on the highway near Deer Park Road. The older “Big Coöp,” the Napa Valley Coöperative, had been formed in 1934 on the highway south of St. Helena. The Little Coöp sold out to Allied Grape Growers and its members joined the Big Coöp. The Big Coöp later sold out to Golden State Vintners [now Hall Winery].

In the old days, blending wine was done right in the vineyard. A vineyard block behind the public library is still planted the old-fashioned way: each vineyard row in

five varietals: Zinfandel, Grand Noir, Alicante, Petite Sirah and Carignane for a red wine and Golden Chasselas, Sauvignon Blanc, Burger, and Green Hungarian for white. “You have to remember,” Ernie said, “that back in those days there were only three wines: Claret, Burgundy and Sauterne. Zinfandel and Gamay came in after the 1930's.” At the Jackse place, over where they made the red barn into a winery (across from St. Helena Public Library), they sold a wine in glass gallon jugs blended in the vineyard. Ernie's dad made a house red every year this way, too, as well as grappa and olive oil. Ernie's dad picked twenty boxes of one grape variety, ten boxes of another and crushed them together for his blend. All the Navone family helped pick grapes. There was also a family in an old truck, a man, his wife and six or seven kids, ranging in age from diapers to ten, who'd come pick, for about \$2.00 a ton. They'd stay out behind the barn. They came and picked until World War II. After the War a crew of five girls picked the vineyard for six or seven years. They were Ernie's sister-in-law and four girl friends, and they went around to lots of the vineyards and picked.

Tractors came into common use in the vineyards in the 1930's. However, the 5' x 5' planting in the Navone vineyard was too narrow for a tractor, so every other row was pulled to make rows 10' x 5'. A friend disced the 10' way with his tractor and Joe

worked the 5' way with his horses. Joe did this until well after World War II, by which time he had his own tractor. Ernie was in the Navy from 1942 until 1946 as cook aboard the minesweeper, USS CHIEF (where he cooked three meals a day every other day for 103 men). While Ernie was away in the service, Joe pulled out the Traminer, Barbera and Green Hungarian and replanted in 10' x 7' rows with Grenache, Carignane, Sauvignon Vert (not as good as the Blanc), Napa Gamay, and Petite Sirah. Joe called Petite Sirah the poor man's grape. "It always made a crop, no matter how bad the weather," he said. "Why, if it got frosted it threw out suckers and still made grapes." Sometimes Joe made a straight Petite Sirah for his cellar.

Before the War, about all the Navones did to the vineyard in the way of chemicals or fertilizers was to get manure from a sheep ranch in Pope Valley and spread it on the vineyards in the fall. They'd get firewood from Pope Valley at the same time. In the spring they sulfured, of course. The first time they tried anything like a cover crop was when Ernie came back from the service and went to work for Keller Brothers in 1949. The Kellers used to feed up their cattle on peas over in the feedlot of their slaughterhouse on Silverado Trail. The peas came in sacks on railroad cars. As Ernie was unloading peas from the cars one day, he looked in and saw three or four inches of loose peas on the floor. He was told that

if he wanted them he could have them, so Ernie talked things over with his dad and got the peas. He must have shoveled eighteen sacks full. They were spread in the vineyard and after they came up, they were ploughed under.

Until the 1960's Ernie worked most of the vineyard with his brother-in-law, Louis Parnisari. They did almost all the pruning. Ernie would work five days a week at Keller Brothers in the meat department as a butcher and two days a week in the vineyards. After his dad died in 1961 and his mother in 1963, Ernie shifted around how he did things, but didn't retire from his butcher's shop, later called Ernie's Meats, until 1991. Until his death, Ernie continued to do most of the work in his vineyards himself. If he had a problem he couldn't solve he went to his neighbor Ed Beard for help. Ed is in the vineyard management business and he's really good at solving problems. In 1979, Ernie replanted two acres of vineyard to Petite Sirah on new St. George rootstock. He put in Petite Sirah as much out of loyalty to his dad as anything. The Cabernet Sauvignon is thanks to Virgil Galleron. Ernie didn't want to mess with wires, or get into any of that stuff; he just wanted to continue head pruning. But Virgil kept after him and kept after him to plant Cabernet. So when Ernie pulled the vines he said to himself, "Dammit, Virgil," and decided to plant Cabernet. The Sunday after he'd decided

but not yet done anything, Justin [Meyer], coming out of church, stopped and asked Ernie who he was going to sell his grapes to; Ernie said he hadn't even planted them. "Well, can I still buy your Cabernet?" asked Justin. "Heck, yes," Ernie said, "why not?"

Ernie sold his Cabernet to Silver Oak for almost twenty years and his Petite Sirah to Caymus. He thought it lucky Frank Emmolo persuaded him to try SO-4 rootstock for his Cabernet in 1985. It works just great, is resistant to phylloxera, and the grafted vines bear well. So, with the good ground and the root and grape stock Ernie got good results. He said, "There never really has been any problem getting good crops with a high sugar from these vineyards." The Navone property was part of the old Jackse place. St. Helena Public Library is also on Jackse land. Vineyard on another Jackse parcel owned by the City and the Wine Library's "Barney's Backyard" are both planted to field mixes and both managed by Turley Wine Cellars. Each year Turley designates a portion of wine made from those vines for the Wine Library. Ernie was most supportive of the Barney's Backyard project and donated budwood for it. The red barn where field-blend jug wine was sold still stands (on what is now Library Lane) and Ernie is still bright in our memory.