

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

Eleanor McCrea

STONY HILL VINEYARDS:
THE CREATION OF A NAPA VALLEY ESTATE WINERY

With an Introduction by
Jack Davies

An Interview Conducted by
Lisa Jacobson
in 1990

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Introduction by Jack L. Davies, Schramsberg Vineyards, California.

Interviewed in 1990 by Lisa Jacobson for the Wine Spectator California Winemen Series. The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstated as The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed is made by a committee consisting of James D. Hart, director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Maynard A. Amerine, Emeritus Professor of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis; the current chairman of the board of directors of the Wine Institute; Ruth Teiser, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and wine making that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial wine making did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of James D. Hart, the director of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Winemen
Oral History Series

June 1990
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University of California, Berkeley

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INTRODUCTION -- Eleanor McCrea

Recollections about the McCreas and Stony Hill are warm and easily come to mind.

Before we had ever made the decision to come into wine, we were under the influence of Fred and Eleanor. I have the clearest picture of the two of them at a tasting of the Wine & Food Society in the Palace Hotel, sometime in the early '60s: Fred with that commanding smile, always present courtesy, and clear thinking. And Eleanor looking right at you and being concerned about what you had to say and what was on your mind. We thought these would be marvelous neighbors! Is everyone in the wine business like this?

And the wines! Stony Hill Chardonnay, from those lovely mountain vineyards. How they helped open the way to what was possible. How they appealed to the consumer and showed us that there were people out there who cared. That's an overlooked thing. We make wine for consumers. We need an audience. Eleanor and Fred always knew that.

Eleanor and Fred were an indomitable pair, and Eleanor remains an indomitable lady. Fred was a fact-oriented man. Was this the right way to do something? Was this problem overstated? Was that really necessary? This, of course, led him to the earned reputation of being careful with a dollar. But it was never an issue of being tight. It was always the point of not being foolish. And he never was, to my knowledge.

Eleanor has always raised the questions about whether this was "right" to do. What are the bigger concerns? What's good for the community, the environment? And she has always been among those who have guided fools with no nonsense. Thank heaven for that. Over the years Eleanor became my most reliable book buddy. She always had a good book to pass along, and her taste in this regard is always just right. (I don't mean politically, of course!)

When we first moved to Schramsberg, we didn't really know many people. Eleanor called us almost at once and asked us over to dinner. That was so knowing and welcome, and it made us feel quickly part of things. It was the first of many evenings with the McCreas, sometimes in their home, sometimes in ours, very often at the opera together in the City. Fred was a super opera buff. He really knew his opera but,

as in all other things, had very clear views. "Opera is for the solo voice. We really don't need the chorus lumbering around, or those dancers cluttering up the stage."

Stony Hill has done many things for all of us.

Eleanor and Fred proved that lovely Chardonnay could be made in Napa. They helped prove that consumers would pay a fair price for a fine, personally made wine. They proved that one didn't need every bell and whistle in the world to accomplish things. They proved that one could maintain personal integrity, enjoy life, and keep the checkbook balanced all at once. They proved that innovation and experimentation are open for everyone.

And now Eleanor carries it on with the same vigor, discipline, and humanity that have marked things on that mountain from the beginning. Dealing with the visitors, guiding Mike Chelini and the muchachos, getting out the orders, fighting the Wine Train, going to tastings. Now she's even accepted computers! For God's sake, what are things coming to?

The flag is flying high. Who could ask for more?

Jack Davies, Managing Director
Schramsberg Vineyards

August 1990
Schramsberg Vineyards
Calistoga, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY -- Eleanor Wheeler McCrea

Eleanor Wheeler McCrea was interviewed in three sessions in her lovely home overlooking the Stony Hill winery, vineyards, and Napa Valley. The interview documents the evolution of Stony Hill Vineyards, a Napa Valley estate winery recognized by many as the epitome of the extremely small, fine wine producer. Mrs. McCrea and her husband, the late Frederick McCrea, began their enterprise in 1948 when they first planted grapes on their 160-acre property. "A dozen California winemakers were feeling their way towards quality in the late '40s and early '50s," wrote Hugh Johnson in Vintage: The Story of Wine, including Stony Hill Vineyards--"an estate that was to become a miniature jewel, a secret first growth for white wines."

Stony Hill Vineyards' production of approximately 4,000 acres is sold in select restaurants and to those lucky enough to be on the winery's mailing list, for which the waiting list is four years long.

Mrs. McCrea discussed viticultural practices, merchandising, winemaking, and small winery management. Always one to credit others for their help and advice, Mrs. McCrea made particular note of the cooperative spirit that characterizes the California wine industry. The third interview includes a walking tour of the winery, vineyards, and grounds.

Mrs. McCrea carefully reviewed her transcript and was most helpful in providing photographs for inclusion in this volume.

Lisa Jacobson
Interviewer-Editor

August 1990
Regional Oral History Office
486 The Bancroft Library
University of California at Berkeley

I EARLY YEARS, EDUCATION, WORK, AND MARRIAGE

[Interview 1: March 13, 1990]##¹

Siblings

Jacobson: Why don't we start at the beginning with where and when you were born?

McCrea: I was born in Buffalo, New York, on the 9th of December, 1907. And I'm a twin. My twin sister is still alive, too. She lives in Santa Rosa.

Jacobson: What was it like growing up with a twin?

McCrea: Wonderful! You always have somebody to play with your own age. It's hard on the other siblings in the family, though, because you are always a unit. It was particularly hard on our older sister, because she had been the first grandchild on either side of the family, so she was Madame Queen. Then to have the two babies--and, you know, they're really quite dramatic when they're little. [laughs] It was fun, though. My sister and I lived together always, even at college. We went to college together, and we lived in the same room. One year, our junior year, we decided that it was foolish and soon made one room into a bedroom and one into a study.

Jacobson: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

McCrea: We had an older sister and a younger brother, both of whom are now dead. Just Mary and I are left.

¹This symbol (##) indicates a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes, see page 62.

Family Timber Business

Jacobson: You spent your childhood, then, in Buffalo?

McCrea: We lived there until I was ten. My father's family were in the timber business. They came from a little town in western New York, right where it tapers down and is above Pennsylvania. It's on the Allegheny River. They timbered the lumber in that part--you know, it's hard to believe there were lots of trees back there, but I guess there were--and also in Pennsylvania in the early days. They used to make them into log rafts, and they would float them down the Allegheny to the Ohio to the Mississippi, and all the way down to New Orleans, and sell the lumber down there. Then they would buy a horse down there and come back.

Jacobson: You must have gone for long periods of time without seeing your father.

McCrea: No, no. This was long before my dad. My father was a lawyer in Buffalo. The older members of the family followed timber across the country, and eventually my father was sent out here to take charge of their timber interests in California. So we moved to California in 1916.

Jacobson: How did the business move to California?

McCrea: They bought timberland. Except in New York and Pennsylvania, they really didn't do much milling; they just owned timberland, and then they would sell it to interests who wanted to use it for lumber.

Childhood in California, 1916-1924

McCrea: We spent a lot of our childhood, after we moved out here, going with our father up to the timber that they owned in California and Oregon, which was fun. They don't have any more timber interests, but in those days they had lots in both Oregon and California.

It was a very interesting childhood. It was so hard in those days to drive. The only way to get around, up the coast and into Oregon, was to drive. Compared to the way cars are

now--you were always having to stop and fix a flat tire and things like that. It was kind of horrendous. My mother really didn't like the outdoors very much, and I've always thought back to it that she was really a heroine, the way she went along on these trips [laughs].

Jacobson: Did you develop a great love for the outdoors?

McCrea: Well, I guess so. You just do. You're used to being outdoors a lot. My father was really a lawyer, but we were outdoors a lot. We lived in Piedmont and went to a private school there, but we were outdoors a lot.

Jacobson: Did you learn how to repair cars?

McCrea: Oh, no. I don't think my father was very good at it, either. We usually had to go find somebody to do it.

Schooling

Jacobson: You went to a private school in Piedmont?

McCrea: Yes--Miss Ransom's and Miss Bridges' School for Girls--known always as Ransom's. It's not there anymore. It was a nice school, and a really good school. We got good training.

Jacobson: Was it very small?

McCrea: I can't remember how many people there were in our class. I would think maybe about thirty-six in our graduating class, so there were two or three hundred people in the school. It went from kindergarten through high school, and the high school part of it was about half boarders. We had a lot of boarders from Southern California, and also there were quite a few people from Portland and from Seattle. It was a WASP school.

Interests

Jacobson: What sorts of interests did you have, growing up?

McCrea: Athletics a lot. We had our own tennis court. We rode horses a lot. In those days there was a stable in Piedmont, and the guy who ran it, Joe, used to arrive at our house on Saturday mornings with three or four horses behind him, and we would all get on and ride around in the hills right behind where we lived. Because there weren't any houses up there then, or down in Trestle Glen, where it's all built up now.

Our house in Piedmont, on Crocker Avenue, was the first house on that block. There was one house in the block behind us, and everything else has been built up since then. It's a lovely area now, but the main thing you notice--even more than the way the houses have gone up--is the way the trees have grown up. That's one of the things you notice here [Stony Hill], too. You don't expect the trees to change the landscape the way they do. But over a period of thirty years, they do.

Jacobson: Has it changed considerably?

McCrea: Yes. We have to keep at it all the time to keep the brush down.

We mostly lived a restrained, old-fashioned, ladylike life when we were kids, because that's the way you did in those days.

Wellesley College, 1925-1929

McCrea: Then we went to college. Both my mother and father were easterners, you see--my mother came from Ohio--so it never occurred to them that we could get a decent education at the University of California, for instance. We had to go East to school, so we went to Wellesley--my twin sister, my older sister, and I.

Jacobson: Were you happy to go East?

McCrea: Oh, yes, we loved it. Of course, in those days it was quite different from the way it is now. My two grandchildren are back East in college now, and goodness, they come home about three times a year between September and June. We never came home between September and June. You couldn't do it, because the only way to come was on the train and it took too long, besides being expensive. So we left home in September and came

home in June. They didn't have things like family weekends and stuff like that. You were really on your own, as soon as you left until you go home.

Jacobson: Did you ever get homesick?

McCrea: I don't ever remember being homesick, actually. Wellesley's a lovely place, and we had good friends. We spent a lot of our Christmas vacations, particularly, in Buffalo, where we'd been brought up originally. We spent one summer vacation while we were in college on Lake Erie, right across the lake from Buffalo, with Mother and Daddy's friends, really, but their children were good friends of ours. We had a good time. And we always had a good time on the train, coming and going, because you always have to change trains in Chicago--and you still do; there's no way you can go through without going to Chicago. The people we knew from Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley, would all meet in Chicago and come out together on the train, so we had a very fine time.

Jacobson: A great way to see the country, too.

McCrea: It really is. The only other thing that I've ever seen that made you have a feeling of what the whole country was like, like going on the train was that--you probably never saw it, but they had a perfectly wonderful movie that was taken from an airplane, but flying very low all the way across the country. They had it at the 1939 World's Fair, and it was just wonderful. Ordinary flying, you're just flying above the clouds most of the time, so you don't get that feeling of the vastness of the country, and how different it is from one part to another.

Jacobson: What did you study in college?

McCrea: I was very eclectic. I did a little of this and that. I really wanted to go to medical school, but I didn't concentrate entirely on science courses. I took a lot of philosophy and history, and obviously you had to take zoology, chemistry, and physics. Then I didn't go to medical school because I got sick the summer after my junior year in college, and I didn't go back to school until so late that I got way behind and couldn't finish up my pre-med courses. Which was probably fortunate, because I graduated in 1929, just before the stock market crash and just before the Depression, and we really didn't have enough money by then to send me to med school. We just went to

work right away when we got out of school; we were lucky we got jobs.

First Jobs

McCrea: This is how different it was in those days. It just about killed my father that we had to go to work, because it never occurred to him that his young ladies should go to work. [laughs] My grandchildren just take it for granted that they're going to go to work. So it's different. It's better, too.

Jacobson: Did you enjoy working?

McCrea: Yes, I did. Except for a short time on the first job I had, when I worked in the chamber of commerce, and a short-term job I got working on a political campaign as a paid stenographer, the rest of the time I was working I worked in two different law offices as a legal secretary. I really enjoyed that, because they were small offices where you got to really know what was going on. It was really interesting. I liked it very much.

But then I met my husband [Frederick Hoyt McCrea], and it never occurred to him that I should go back to work [laughs], even though we really didn't have very much money. But he had a good job, and it was right at the end of the Depression when nobody had very much money. We had a wonderful time. We really enjoyed our early years, and all our years together.

We lived in San Francisco for a couple of years, and then we built a house down the Peninsula and lived down there until after we bought Stony Hill. When we bought this place, we came up here every weekend, and it was just that little extra too far to go, to go down the Peninsula, besides the fact that we had almost an acre of garden. You couldn't be away from it every weekend and keep it up the way you wanted, so we moved back to San Francisco.

Marriage to Fred McCrea, 1934

Jacobson: How did you meet your husband?

McCrea: [laughs] It was really kind of interesting. I went up to Tahoe for a summer vacation when I was working at a law office in Oakland, and it was really pretty lonesome, because I was all by myself. Some way or other up there, I ran into one of the best clients that we had in the law office, and she took me under her wing, took me back up to Tahoe Tavern. Other people that she was seeing up there were very good friends of Fred's, and they kept talking about him all the time: "Oh, you've got to meet him. He's in Hawaii now, but when he gets home, you've got to meet him."

They followed through on it and had us to dinner together, and that was all they had to do [laughs].

Jacobson: You hit it off immediately?

McCrea: Yes. Well, we played bridge that first night. My husband was a very good bridge player, and I really didn't know how to play bridge at all. But nobody had such good cards as I had that night. Then I didn't play with him again until after we were engaged [laughs]. He was very nice about it after we were married. He sent me to a wonderful teacher to learn to play, and I did. I really was pretty good for a while, but I'm not any more because I don't play very much.

Fred's Career in Advertising

Jacobson: You husband was in the advertising business?

McCrea: Yes, he was with McCann-Erickson in San Francisco. He was one of the few people in the advertising business who, for his whole career, worked for the same firm.

Jacobson: What was it like for him, working in the advertising business?

McCrea: It's a very interesting business to be in, if you're doing the plotting and planning. Fred wasn't the manager of the office when I married him, but he wound up being the manager of the office, so he had all the managerial end of it to do. It's kind of a unique business that way, because it uses all of your creative talents as well as your managerial talents. I think it's pretty cutthroat now, compared to what it was in those days. I know it is, because, for instance, in those days it was frowned upon to name your competitor. You couldn't say,

"Ford cars are better than Chevrolets because--." You just had to say, "Fords are the best." The nasty things they say about each other now--that was not the way we did it in those days. It was much more fun in those days, I must say, but everything was smaller. There weren't so many people in the world.

It was interesting, and you knew an awful lot of bright people. I guess maybe that was thing that was the most fun about it. There were a lot of awfully bright people in the business, and they were interesting people to be with.

Jacobson: How did the Depression affect the advertising business?

McCrea: By the time I got married, the Depression was beginning to be over. I have no means of knowing how it was during the worst part. The office that Fred was in was always thriving when we were married. He was the account executive for the packing corporation, Del Monte. That was a big account in those days. His office also had Standard Oil and three or four other big accounts. It was fun. [doorbell rings; tape off]

II STONY HILL VINEYARD, 1943-PRESENT

Discovering the Property, 1943

Jacobson: Why don't we turn to the story of how you discovered this property?

McCrea: We were living down the Peninsula during the war. During the war, one of the tough things was getting enough gasoline if you wanted to go out of town over the weekends. We had an old car that Fred had had before we were married, and we kept it up here. So we got extra gas rations because we had two cars. We didn't use the one up here very much, but we sure used the coupons!

Because of being so difficult to get gasoline, nobody went very far for vacations. There were fourteen of us at the Greenfields', on the top of Spring Mountain, with our children, just sort of half-way camping out. They had made a really quite habitable, nice, one great, big room with a couple of little rooms off the sides, out of the old winery that was up there. We were all there together. The men were putting a roof on the shed; there were lots of chores to do, so we had a good time.

We had several friends who had places up here: John Gantner, the Greenfields--they were the ones we were staying with--and some others. We just loved this valley; we always had.

Jacobson: Had you taken vacations up here with your family prior to the war?

McCrea: No, but Fred and I did a lot of our courting up here. We used to come up here and just drive around. We had great affection

for this part of the world, and we just liked the idea of having a country place, so we came down. I told you we came down twice--the road from here. Actually the road that comes down here, Bale Mill, was the road that came from Sonoma to the mill, you see. I think it was there before Spring Mountain Road was built. It's just a rough dirt road now, but it must have been the main road over the mountain. The road going over on the other side is only about that good now; it's not very good.

We came down and just absolutely fell in love with this place. Our friends had said, "You can go down and look at the old goat farm if you want to, but you feel just as if you're falling off a cliff." That's the way they felt about it. We sat up on the top flat up there twice, and just fell in love with it. So we came down and talked to the people who owned it. It was an elderly gentleman and his sister who lived here, and they decided that they were getting too feeble to live here alone, so they wanted to sell it. They absolutely fell in love with our little boy, Peter, who was an enchanting little boy.

Negotiating the Purchase

McCrea: We did always think that we would grow grapes here, because we had Herman Hummel, who was a good farmer up on Spring Mountain, come over and look at it and see if he thought it would be good grape land. He did, and he told us he did. But he brought his cousin (they were both Germans), who was known as Big Herman, with him when they looked at it. In front of the people who owned the place, they said in German to each other, "Well, if Mr. McCrea doesn't buy it, you buy it." But the man who owned the property understood German, so he heard them say it, and he told us that.

They wanted \$7,500 for it, and I guess Fred offered them \$6,000 or something, and they wouldn't take it. So then Fred said, "Maybe we better wait until after the war."

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McCrea: He was just so morose afterward that he had given up living here, that I finally said, "That's absolutely ridiculous; you know we have the money. Why don't you just write them a letter and tell them you'll take it?" He sat down and wrote the

letter, and I took it and put it in the mailbox. If he hadn't mailed it that day, he wouldn't have gotten it, because somebody else made him an offer the same day. They really let us have it because they loved Peter so much. [laughs]

The War Years: Weekends and Summers at the Stony Hill Farm

Jacobson: When you first bought the property, did you make any changes to it?

McCrea: There wasn't anything you could do during the war. You literally couldn't get any machinery or anything to work with, so all we did was to have a caretaker on the place so that it wouldn't get burned up or anything. There wasn't anything on it at all, except there were a few peach trees up on the top flat, and there were about four apple trees in this area here [demonstrates]. It had been a diversified farm; they raised fruit, and in the field that's down to the right of the cattle guard where you come in, they had raised wheat. We found this out, how it had been. There wasn't anything on it when we bought it; they raised a few goats and a few chickens, and that was all.

When we were up here one of the early summers, and out on the terrace--we used to live in the little house further down the hill, which was a lot littler than it is now--we saw walking up the road this absolutely wonderful looking, great tall Norwegian woman. Her name was Mrs. Cedargreen, and she had lived up here in the early days, and she told us what it was like. They evidently lived here for quite a long time. She was the one who told us where different things were planted. She came back several different summers, and then she stopped coming, so I guess maybe she died. She was an awfully nice lady. She never even let us take her back down to the highway. She came up on the bus, got off at the bottom of the road, and walked up the hill. She'd walk off down the hill. She was wonderful.

Jacobson: She was the one who told you about the wheat?

McCrea: Yes. And that house down below originally used to be out here under the eucalyptus trees. She told us that they moved it down to where it is, and you cannot imagine moving a house in those days, when they had no kind of power except horses. But

they did it, and they did it because there's a bank of clay that goes across toward the bottom of this hill right here, and they couldn't get through it in the winter with horses when it was raining. So they put the house on the other side of where the clay was.¹

Even when we first came up here, the road wasn't paved, obviously, and we just automatically stopped in St. Helena and put chains on if it was raining, because you couldn't get up the hill without them.

Jacobson: You had a caretaker who was taking care of fruit trees--?

McCrea: He really was just living on the place because we wanted somebody to be here. He had uses--he used to light fires in the house before we came up on weekends so the house would be warm, and that kind of thing--but it was mostly just to take care of things.

We were the city slickers that the country bumpkins liked to fool. We got stuck with absolutely the worst pair of plowhorses. [laughs] They were wild! We thought it was a good idea, because we could plow up some of the land. During the war, we did have a cow up here, and we raised some sheep and chickens, because you needed to do it for food. If you had a place, you raised a lot of food, and we needed to plow up some of the land to make a garden. So we got the horses, but they were not very successful, believe me.

Jacobson: How often did you come up during the war years?

McCrea: Well, we came up every weekend that we could, but of course we were limited by the amount of gasoline we had. I came up in the summer with the kids as soon as school was out, and stayed all summer. That was another reason for having a caretaker on the place, because Fred didn't want to leave me alone. He came up weekends, and once in a great while he came up once during the week.

Until the war was over, it was a little bit--I can't ever remember being lonesome, because I was too busy. If you cook on a wood stove, and you have kerosene lamps, and you have two kids to look after, and no electricity, it keeps you busy. But it was fun. My two sisters used to come up. They were both

¹See also pp. 44-45.

working, but they'd come up weekends a lot. And we had friends up here. It was always pretty gay over weekends. Somebody would have a barbecue or something like that.

McCrea Children at Work in the Vineyards

Jacobson: Your children must have loved it.

McCrea: They really did--they still just love it. I remember we replanted that field right over there [demonstrates] about two or three years ago, and Peter said it made him gulp when he first saw the vines being pulled out, because he had helped plant them. We had two older boys, Wally and Don, who were my husband's nephews who came to live with us after their father and mother died, and they fitted right on top of our family. All three of the boys worked in the summers up here.

Nowadays, when your vineyard is in pretty good running shape, there really isn't an awful lot to do in the middle of the summer, but in those days, when we were planting, it was busy in the summer. We had a vineyard foreman who planted the vineyard and then looked after it, and the boys used to work for him; Fred just turned them over to him. We have a daybook of everything that's been done on the place ever since we have had it.

Jacobson: You must have huge records, then.

McCrea: Mike [Chelini, the foreman] carries his around with him. They're regular diaries. There's a whole shelf of them in the library, and there's another shelf of them over in the lab. They just noted down every day what they had done, and what the temperature was, whether it was raining, and who worked that day. When the boys were young they used to be graded--whether they were "A" workers or "B" workers--because they got paid according to how well they worked.

Jacobson: Who decided what grade to give them?

McCrea: The foreman.

Jacobson: Who was the foreman?

McCrea: The first foreman we had was Frank Martin, and then Ed Bernard, who became quite a figure in the valley before he got through. He was very good at trading property, and he really wound up with quite a bit of property here in the valley. He died quite a while ago. Charlie Thompson was after Ed, and then Jim Pavon, who had been one of the vineyard foremen for Beaulieu for many years and then had gotten into some kind of dispute with them about one of the vineyards, and they let him go. Right then was when Charlie Thompson decided to leave. All our friends, like Joe Heitz, who had worked at Beaulieu, said, "Oh, get Jim Pavon. He's just what you need." So he worked for us for about twelve years.

Jacobson: When did he come on?

McCrea: He started in 1970. When he died, Mike took it over, and Mike has run it ever since.

Jacobson: Did the grading system really encourage the boys to work harder?

McCrea: I don't know, I think it made them hate Ed [laughter].

Jacobson: Were some of the managers tougher taskmasters than others?

McCrea: I think Ed was. He was the one the boys worked for the most, because by the time his time was over they had pretty much gone out doing other jobs, and they were away at school. But Peter and Don still just absolutely love this place. Don lives down in Southern California, in the Malibu Mountains, and he told me it took him about fifteen years before he found what he wanted down there, because he wanted it to be a little bit like Stony Hill.

Jacobson: That's a tough thing to try to replicate.

McCrea: He did surprisingly well. He really did. It isn't really like this at all, but it has little things that remind you of it. It has a running stream that goes through it, and it has a knoll of oak trees like the one out there.

Jacobson: Did your daughter Mary work in the vineyards?

McCrea: No. She mostly rode horses and swam.

First Planting, 1948

Jacobson: When did you first plant grapes?

McCrea: We started our planting in '48.

Jacobson: So that was a few years after the war had ended.

McCrea: Yes, because you couldn't get any equipment. We finally got a tractor from Fred's boss, who parted with it when he got a bigger one. It was a little bitty Caterpillar.

Jacobson: Was Fred's boss also--?

McCrea: He had a big cattle ranch over in Sonoma, that now has grapes on it--Kenwood.

Jacobson: Did many of Fred's colleagues in the advertising business have summer properties away from the city?

McCrea: I don't think so, no. They all thought we were kind of crazy, but they used to like to come up here [laughs].

Jacobson: So once you got your first tractor--

McCrea: In the meantime, we'd gone up to [UC] Davis and talked to them about what kind of grapes to plant, and gotten them to come over and look over the situation here. They all agreed that it was going to be a good place for grapes, but they didn't want us to do what we wanted to do, which was to plant the whole thing to Chardonnay. You know, Chardonnay was not a very well known commodity in those days. There were only 225 acres of vineyard that were planted to Chardonnay in the whole state! They said, "Oh, you might have a total crop failure, and you couldn't survive that, so you better spread your risks a little bit."

Originally we planted some Riesling and some Pinot blanc, as well as the Chardonnay, and we had a little bit of Sémillon. Later we planted some Gewürztraminer.

Jacobson: How much later did you plant the Gewürz?

McCrea: It seems to me we planted it in 1959, 1968, and 1969.

Jacobson: And the other three you started off with right away?

McCrea: Yes, I think so. We pulled out the Pinot blanc eventually and replanted it to Chardonnay. You see, we sold practically all our grapes, to start with. We sold the Riesling to Lee Stewart at Souverain, and the rest of the grapes we sold to Christian Brothers for many years. [laughs] Then Fred asked Brother Timothy to pay us a little bit extra for mountain grapes, and he wouldn't do it, so we sold them to Joe Heitz.

Learning about Grape Growing

Jacobson: How did you go about learning about grape growing?

McCrea: One of the things that was really wonderful that they had around here in those days was the Soil Conservation [Department] people. I guess they still do operate. But they came up here and laid out the vineyards for us--told us what direction to plant them, and actually surveyed the terraces. They were very helpful. They told us there were areas where we shouldn't plant, and they were quite right, we shouldn't have, but we did anyway in some places.

The big fields had all been cleared for farming before, so generally speaking, all we did was to push the edges out. There are a lot of things that we now probably would have done differently, that we didn't know enough about. Like which varieties would do best in which places, and this field out here [demonstrates] should have had drain tile in it--things like that. But neither did anybody else know a lot of the things that we know now, either.

One of the things that's almost unique about this business is the way people love to share their knowledge. They really are wonderful about it. And it intrigued the older guys, like Louis Martini, Sr., and Herman Wente, and those people, that there was somebody who was just going to have a little, tiny winery and do what they wanted with it themselves. Because both of their operations were big, you know, and were pretty much controlled by the demand for the wine, and, I'm sure, what the banks told them to do. Of course, there are a whole lot of little wineries now, but this was the first one ever in this valley.

Jacobson: Did the people at Davis tell you to plant Pinot blanc, Riesling, and Sémillon with the idea that those would be the

grapes that would grow best, or with the idea that they would diversify--?

McCrea: Both. Actually, they've all done very well, too. The Sémillon is the one that was planted where it is because it was a very hot spot. It was too hot for the others.

Development of Interest in Winemaking

Jacobson: How did your interest in wine develop?

McCrea: Well, when you live in the middle of a whole bunch of people who talk about wine all the time [laughs], and you drink a lot of it, you naturally get interested in it. Then after while--nobody could have made a better Riesling than Lee Stewart did, but you begin to think that it would be fun to see if you couldn't make it that good. After we saw what happened to our grapes--not at Lee's, and not at Joe Heitz's, but when you sold it to Christian Brothers or to Charles Krug, they just dumped all the white grapes in together. It sort of hurt your pride that your babies weren't being treated with a little more respect, so you began to think that maybe you could do it yourself.

We started really slowly. My remembrance is that you had to make fifty cases to put your wine in the state fair (maybe it was a hundred), so we must have made that many in--I know we got a gold medal in '55, and we got a gold medal another year [1960]. We had to have gotten up to that much by then. We sold most of the grapes and just kept enough to see what we could do with it.

We built the winery in '51 so that we had a place to do it. It was '53 that we put it in the state fair the first time. In those days, that was the only place where there was a competition. We never have put it in anything else, and we don't do that anymore, now.

First Winery Equipment

Jacobson: What kind of equipment was in your winery when you first started it in '51?

McCrea: One thing you find is that somebody is always wanting to discard his equipment for something a little bigger, so that if you're little, you get discarded small things. We had a basket press, and we had a crusher made for us over at Rafanelli's Foundry up in Healdsburg. It was very primitive, but also very efficient; it worked very well. We had the crusher on a platform and dumped the grapes into it, and they came down by gravity into the basket press, which, when we first got it, was a hand press; we did it by manpower. Then we eventually had a hydraulic cylinder put on it, and eventually it gave up. I'm sure that somebody probably is still using it. When we began to get bigger quantities of grapes to put in it, we had to get a bigger press, but we still use the same crusher, except that it has a bigger hopper added to it. But the crusher is the same one.

Jacobson: What about barrels?

McCrea: In the days when we first started, barrels were hard to come by. That's one of the things that's really different now from what it was in the early days. You had to hunt around to find things, and we used barrels that we got from a barrel importer down at San Francisco. The first big casks that we have down there are Yugoslavian. Then we began to get French oak barrels. I guess the first time we got those was around 1958. We got them ourselves over in Bordeaux.

Jacobson: Were you making trips to France or Europe during this time?

McCrea: No. The first time we went over was in '58. As a matter of fact, I guess the first time we went to Bordeaux was in '62. I'm not sure whether the first French barrels we got were ones we got ourselves or whether we got some here. I really don't remember.

Learning about Winemaking

Jacobson: How did you learn about winemaking?

McCrea: Fred went up to Davis. One of the things they do up there that's wonderful is that they have what they call "short courses" that are very intensive. They used to put them on when the students weren't there, like in spring vacation and times like that. Both Fred and I, and Peter and his wife later took the course.

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McCrea: I think Fred probably learned more by going and working with Lee Stewart and Joe Heitz.

Jacobson: Was it an open invitation to him?

McCrea: Well, I'll tell you--Lee, his wife, Glenn, and Fred and I kind of lived in each other's pockets for several years--many years. Because they bought their place the same year we bought ours. We just kind of worked things out together. Of course, Joe didn't have his place till quite a bit later, because he was working for Beaulieu when we first came up here. After that, he went down to Fresno for several years. My guess is that he bought his place in the sixties, but I'm not sure.

You know, it was so different in those days, because there really weren't a lot of wineries. It wasn't until the middle seventies that the mad enthusiasm for wine and grapes happened. This valley was very diversified farmland when we first came up here. There were walnut orchards, prune orchards, chicken farms, horse ranches, and cattle. It wasn't until maybe ten or fifteen years ago that the actual agricultural income for this valley wasn't more from cattle than it was from grapes.

Jacobson: How did you and Fred envision your winery when you first started in '52?

McCrea: We built our winery in '51. It was '52 when we got our bond; you can't produce anything to sell without a bond, but you can play with your winery [laughs] as long as you wanted. In those days you could build anything you wanted, as long as you had five acres of land so that you weren't bothering anybody else. Of course, now you can't turn around without getting a permit. We couldn't add to our winery now without getting a permit, but we didn't have to have one when we built it.

Jacobson: When you first did build it, did you have a particular vision of what Stony Hill would be?

McCrea: Maybe Fred did. If we'd thought a little harder than we did, we should have done it quite differently, because it's right over there in the trees. The only possible place that we could have put a reservoir is right there, so it probably would have been smarter to have had it someplace else. But it just seemed like the natural place for it, so that's where we built it.

I don't think that Fred had any idea, really, that Stony Hill would achieve the reputation that it has. It was all the work that he did, and the care that he gave it, and the philosophy of winemaking that he put into it that made it have the reputation that it has. But was really after he died that it began to get so famous.

Selling Grapes

[Interview 2: March 15, 1990]##

Jacobson: Before you built the winery, when you were selling the grapes that you grew, how did you establish prices for the grapes?

McCrea: I'll tell you [laughs], in the early days everybody got the same for all their grapes, and it was \$40 a ton. Isn't that incredible? Now, this year both Chardonnay and Cabernet in the Napa Valley averaged out to about \$1,450 dollars a ton.

Jacobson: At that time, most of the grapes were blended.

McCrea: That's right. They didn't really make varietal wines until a little later than that. Of course, when they began to make varietal wines, you got more for the Chardonnay, and more for the Riesling, too. All the varieties that we grow are known as "shy bearers"; you don't get enormous tonnage per acre. We get about two and a half tons to the acre up here in this rocky soil, and down on the floor of the valley they get between five and seven, from the same varieties.

It's kind of hairy, trying to make ends meet, at first. That must have had something to do with our decision to make wine, because we really couldn't make ends meet, just selling the grapes. The money's in the wine, not in the grapes.

Developing a Clientele

- Jacobson: Once you had built your winery, then you started crushing all the grapes and selling wine?
- McCrea: That's right, just to individual people. I noticed one of the questions on your outline was how did our mailing list grow. Actually, we served it to all our friends. We were young, and we used to entertain a lot, and we'd serve our own wine. Our guests would say, "Oh, can we buy some?" Then they would serve it, and their guests would say, "Can't we get some?" That was really the way it grew. There's literally nobody on that list who hasn't asked to be on it. So that's the way it started.
- Jacobson: This was from the fifties on?
- McCrea: Yes. I have the original old order books, right from the very beginning, of who ordered what. Quite a few of the people who are on the original order books still buy wine from us.
- Jacobson: Did you establish any sort of policies about minimum amounts of wine that had to be bought? Or were there any limitations?
- McCrea: Actually, we had so little wine that it was inconvenient to ship less than a case. We still don't ship less than a case, but we'll sell less than a case, if people come up here to get it. The same thing--you can't sell a mixed case where the bottle sizes aren't the same. Riesling and Gewürztraminer are bottled in what are called "hock" bottles that are tall, skinny bottles, and the Chardonnay is bottled in Burgundy bottles. They don't match in size; they match in content size, but not the shape of the bottles, so that you can't mix them in a case for shipment. You can if people come and pick them up.
- Jacobson: Were you also selling the wine as bulk wine to other wineries?
- McCrea: No, no. We've never sold bulk wine.
- Jacobson: So always, from 1951 forward, it was completely your own operation?
- McCrea: Oh, yes. It is truly estate bottled wine, because it's all right from here.

SHV Label

McCrea: The one variation on that is that for the last two years we've made a second label Chardonnay, called SHV, and we've bought the grapes from across the valley from Bancroft Vineyards. But we had to do it for financial reasons, so we could keep the cash flow going while our new vineyards came into bearing.

Jacobson: Oh, so you've planted more vineyards?

McCrea: Well, we planted some more, and we've had to pull a lot out because they were getting too old. Last year and this year-- what was the '87 and '88 vintages--we had such a small amount of our own Chardonnay that we really had to have something else to sell. So we've been making a second label wine, which a lot of people do. It's interesting, because it's quite different from ours. It's Chardonnay, and it's made the same way, but it comes from a much more assertive fruit over on Howell Mountain.

Jacobson: Did you search for a vineyard that would have grapes most closely to yours?

McCrea: There isn't anybody, really, right near here who grows Chardonnay. We did buy some Riesling this year--this past harvest--from our neighbor, Smith Madrone, whose property adjoins ours up on top. We picked that on purpose because it is very much like ours, and we blended it with our own wine.

Jacobson: Is this the first time you've gone to others to get more wine?

McCrea: Yes, except that we tried twice before. I guess both times it was with Gewürztraminer. When you buy some outside grapes, you ferment them separately so you can see how they're going to come out. When they were all through fermenting and we were ready to bottle, we put together what you call a triangular tasting, which had two glasses that had all Stony Hill, and the third glass had the mixture in it. You could pick the mixture out every time, so we just sold it separately.

Jacobson: Under a different label?

McCrea: No, that we really did sell bulk wine. I'd forgotten that. That was one time that we did sell bulk wine.

Jacobson: You mentioned a second instance.

McCrea: We were trying to do the same thing in another year.

Jacobson: Was it a case of not having enough grapes that year?

McCrea: We never did have very much Gewürztraminer. We wanted to have more, but it just didn't work, so we abandoned that idea and just got along with a small amount.

Wine Production in the Fifties

Jacobson: What was your production like in the early fifties, both in terms of volume and by varieties?

McCrea: We grew Chardonnay, Pinot blanc, and Riesling, but we sold the Pinot blanc, and we sold most of the Riesling. We made probably between 100 to 200 cases of Chardonnay, and maybe 150 cases of Riesling. We really didn't ever make an awful lot. We didn't make all of our own grapes into wine until 1962, when we came up here to live.

Jacobson: The other grapes you were selling all along?

McCrea: Yes, to Lee Stewart as long as he was there (I've forgotten when he sold out), and to Joe Heitz.

Jacobson: They had to find other sources after '62.

McCrea: Oh, yes, but they understood. There were getting to be more and more vineyards planted, too, so it wasn't as hard to find grapes.

Jacobson: Were the prices still fixed through '62?

McCrea: Oh, no. They began to go up--I'd have to research that in the books to see how much they went up. They didn't really get to be at all high until the late seventies.

Jacobson: Did they begin to be distinguished by variety?

McCrea: Yes, by '62 we were making all varietal wines.

Jacobson: And the pricing, therefore, was differentiated?

McCrea: Yes. [laughs] I have all the old price lists in there someplace; I could look them all up for you.

Winemaking Philosophy

Jacobson: Why don't we talk about the evolution of the Stony Hill winemaking style and philosophy?

McCrea: You know, I think that Fred's whole idea was to make the wine taste like the grapes as much as possible. We really were lucky that we just happened to find a piece of property that made Chardonnay so distinctive. One of the amazing things is--it's got to be the soil that does it, because all the different varieties of grapes are totally distinct from each other, but they all have this underlying Stony Hill quality about them. I really can't describe it. You recognize it right away, but I can't describe it; it's so subtle. I think that's the thing that enchants people about our wine.

If you have a very small place like this, your wines do vary from year to year, because you have nothing to blend them with. In a winery the size of Joe Heitz, for instance, the Chardonnay is made out of grapes from a whole lot of different vineyards. They probably ferment them all separately, originally, and then if there's one that they don't like, or if there's one that doesn't match up with the others, they can discard it. But they can blend them together and sort of blend out a poor one. You can't do that if you've got a little tiny vineyard; you've just got what you got that year.

So they do vary from one year to another, but they have that underlying Stony Hill flavor about them. Last summer the International Wine and Food Society of Marin County had a tasting where they tasted Stony Hill wines from 1962 to 1986. It was absolutely amazing how they had held up. One of the funny things is--you know, when you have a vertical tasting like that, everybody votes on which ones they like the best--they never all like the same one the best. It's a totally subjective thing. It was a lot of fun.

Jacobson: Have you, or has anyone ever been able to describe what the Stony Hill flavor is?

McCrea: I don't think you can put words to it. The best wine writer that I know, as far as doing that kind of describing of flavor, is Hugh Johnson, the British wine writer. He somehow gets the flavor of wine onto the page better. But it's a very hard thing to do, because wine is awfully complex. There are so many different little components--it tastes differently in different parts of your mouth, and the way it goes down your throat. One thing that's very distinctive about Stony Hill wines is that they have a very long finish. And if they don't, then that year hasn't been a good one!

Grape Harvesting

Jacobson: Are there certain qualities each year you use as a yardstick to measure other years by?

McCrea: The principal thing that you start out doing is trying to get the balance right in the beginning. That's one of the things that is an advantage to having all your own grapes, because you can pick them exactly when you want to. You go along, starting in about the first part of August, and you taste them and also measure the sugar and acid in them. The acid goes down all the time, day by day. The sugar goes up, but in fits and starts, depending on the weather. So you can't just say that if the acid is like this on this day, the sugar will meet it on that day. You have to keep track of it every day when it's getting toward the end, and you pick them at exactly the moment that you like their balance. That's one of the real advantages of having estate wine.

Lots of times we've begun to pick--when you just make a little test, it isn't always accurate, but when you begin to get boxes in and put them in the press and measure the juice that comes out, if it's not the way we want it, we'll stop picking until it gets the way we want it. That happens quite often, actually.

Jacobson: You really do it in stages.

McCrea: Quite by luck--this was not good management; it was just by luck. For example, just as you come in, the field on the lefthand side of the cattle guard is Chardonnay. And there's some up here at this level, and there was some right across from Mike's house, which is pretty well gone now. We have it

planted at different levels, so it gets ripe at different times--just subtly different, so that you don't have to pick it all in one day. That is a tremendous advantage.

Jacobson: Did you use the gradual picking approach when you first started out?

McCrea: Yes.

Jacobson: Did you have any models of wines that you thought were made that particularly reflected the taste of the grapes?

McCrea: We were very fond of White Burgundy, but really we didn't have any other models. We didn't really try to make it like White Burgundy; we just tried to make the best wine we could out of our own grapes. We weren't trying to imitate anything. It turned out to taste quite a lot like Corton-Charlemagne, but that was incidental.

Wine Tasting

Jacobson: What about wine tasting: did you take courses?

McCrea: Oh, yes, we did. The wine library up here in St. Helena--I guess they still do it--gives wine tasting lessons in the summer. The one that Fred and I went to was extraordinary, because almost all the people in it were people who made wine up here. Dr. [Maynard A.] Amerine taught it. We had a fine time. The little schoolhouse you can see down there, off Lodi Lane--that's where they had them, and it was lots of fun.

I'm not really a very good taster. Fred was wonderful. Mike is wonderful; Mike has just a wonderful palate. I'm not really that good. I belong to a ladies' tasting group where all the people are connected with the wine business in one way or another, and I find that they can taste things in wine that I can't taste at all [laughs].

Stony Hill Winemakers

Jacobson: How did you and Fred share in the responsibilities for the winemaking process?

McCrea: He really did practically all of it. From the time we really were starting making wines, Jim Pavon was our vineyard man. He knew quite a bit about making wine, too, because he'd worked down at Beaulieu, and he helped Fred in the vineyard. First we had high school kids, and then it dawned on us that, because Davis didn't start until October, we could get a senior in the wine school at Davis to come and help, and they loved doing it. We paid them, of course.

Do you want me to give you their names? It really is kind of exciting, I think, when I look at it. Jed Steele, who is now the head winemaker at Kendall-Jackson; Greg [Gregory] Bissonette, who is not any longer in the wine business, but he used to own Chateau Chevalier; Rick Forman, who is known up and down the valley as one of the really good winemakers; Hank Wetzell, who is Alexander Valley Winery, up in the Alexander Valley; John Scharffenberger, who is over in Mendocino, makes champagne and is now partners in the French Bollinger; John Konsgaard, who's at Newtons; Casey McComish, who's a friend of ours (he's not in the wine business any more; I think he sells insurance or something now); and Bruce Streblow, who has his own winery up here on Spring Mountain. Some of them worked for us for two years, and some of them just for one year, but it was quite a group.

Jacobson: You were lucky to get them.

McCrea: And I think they all learned a kind of integrity of winemaking from Fred that really was kind of the basis for their own winemaking, because it kind of shines through in the wines they make.

Jacobson: What were their responsibilities?

McCrea: In a very small winery like this, everybody does everything, except that Fred was the boss. Fred was telling them what to do. There's an awful lot of pumping and moving things around and tasting, and a tremendous amount of washing [laughs]. They did most of the dirty work, I'm sure.

We're very lucky now. It was 1962 when we hired Bruce Rogers, and he was here for about two years, I guess. Mike came to work for us, actually as the replacement for Jim Pavon in the vineyard, when Jim died. Mike had been living in the house that he's living in now. When Jim died, we were going to have to have that house back, because we needed a house for our foreman. Mike was working in the cellar at Sterling [Vineyards], and he decided that he wanted to come and work for us. So he ran the vineyard, and Bruce helped with the winemaking. Actually, they all three did, you know. During the harvest there isn't anything to be doing in the vineyard, so everybody works at the winery.

When Bruce quit, Mike took over both the vineyard and the winery, and he's been here every since, which I'm sure is a record for the wine business. Next year will be his twentieth harvest. He was making wine with Fred for five years before Fred died.

Jacobson: From '72 until 1977.

McCrea: Fred died in the first of January, 1977, so '77 was our first year to do it without Fred--and Mike's little boy was born that day! That's a day I will never forget [laughter].

Eleanor's Responsibilities

Jacobson: Did you work in the winery?

McCrea: Not very much. I really didn't work in the winery very much. Until Fred died, I really didn't do an awful lot of work except cook and entertain people, and that kind of thing. I didn't do an awful lot with the winery--except the tasting; we used to always taste everything together, and Mike and I still do that, only it's enlarged now. My son and his wife, and Mike and his wife, and I all sit around the table and taste the wines before we bottle them. Because there are things you can do. You can add acid to the wine at the end if you feel you need to, so you make samples of different levels of acid. We taste each variety blind, and everybody writes down adjectives that they think describe them, to help write the mailer. The last two years my daughter-in-law has written the mailer, and she's really good at it.

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Jacobson: You were always involved in tastings before bottling, and in writing the mailers?

McCrea: Well, yes, and I did some of the office work. But Fred really loved to do it [make the wine], so it was his baby, really, more than mine until after he died.

Profitability of a Small Winery

Jacobson: When did you turn to the wine business full time?

McCrea: In '62, because he retired from the advertising business. He was sixty-five then, so he had to retire. That's when we came up here to live full time.

Jacobson: So he's had two careers, and very different ones.

McCrea: Oh, yes. It was just wonderful that he did that, because he just enjoyed it so much. Most of the big capital expenses were taken care of, you see, before we came up here to live. The winery was built, the house was built, the vineyards were all planted. Of course, we've had to do a lot of replanting lately, and this is really hideously expensive. But aside from that and buying new equipment for the winery and things like that, we haven't really had huge capital expenses. We don't make a lot of money, but we make some; you know, we get by. And we support two other families and five individuals, plus Sally in the office. It's well worth doing, and it's a wonderful way of life.

I think, beginning next year, in '91, we'll really begin to make a lot more money, because we have enough more of our grapes coming into bearing so that it's really going to pay off in a big way, I think. Not in a big way--not as Donald Trump thinks of it [laughter].

Jacobson: There's a rule of thumb that when you start out in the wine industry, it takes about ten years before you break even. Does that rule of thumb apply to your situation?

McCrea: I would think easily it was at least ten years. I'd have to go back and look it up in the books--which we have, all of them but it's a terrible job.

Jacobson: It may be harder to measure in your own mind because you started off so small.

McCrea: That's right. We've just built it up so gradually. But we never owed any money; we did it all on what we earned, so we never borrowed any money to do it. That's such a controlling factor in so many people's business. We've just been lucky that we haven't had that to cope with.

Jacobson: Because it had all been paid for before Fred retired?

McCrea: That's right. And we've always gotten along from one year to another. It's really not comparable to most people's business.

Merchandising

Jacobson: Did Fred ever compare in his mind the world of advertising and the world of wine?

McCrea: Oh, yes, he did, indeed. He really didn't enjoy a lot of the advertising business. A lot of it he did, but a lot of it he didn't. He didn't like a lot of the people he had to deal with, and he just enjoyed his relationship with the people in the wine business very much. I think that if this were a lot bigger place, and he had to go traveling around selling his wine, the way a lot of people do now, he might not have liked that very much. On the other hand, he was a very good merchandiser. Actually, the way we sell wine grew out of his knowledge of merchandising. I never really had to think very much about it. Although we now make a lot more wine than we did before Fred died, I just went on with it the way it was, and it worked. So I'm not about to change it if I don't have to.

Jacobson: Can you describe for me the way he set up the merchandising?

McCrea: Just by word of mouth, really. I think he must have realized that he had a product that made its name, and that's really what it all goes back to, you know. People come up to see me all the time and discuss how they should sell their wine, and I

really can't tell them, because the situation is so different now than it was then. There really weren't very many wines, and we were lucky that a small but choice number of restaurants and clubs asked if they could buy our wines. That in itself is a wonderful way of making contact with people. But we didn't have to go around and peddle it to them; they called us up and asked us if they could have it.

But this is no longer true if a small winery starts. You really have to go in person with your wine and get them to taste it, and ask them to put it on their wine list, and hope that they'll reorder. It's loads harder to break in. You have to go to Liquor Barn or Safeway. A lot of people have wholesalers or brokers who theoretically get it into the retail stores that you want it in, but unless you keep some control over the stores that it gets into, the wines don't always get into the stores you wanted.

In a very small way, we have a small problem that way. We pick out the restaurants and clubs that we want to be in very carefully, because we want it to be comparable in class to what we think our wine is. There is a certain gray market--or black market, if you want to call it that; it's against the law, actually, for individual people to go into a place like John Walker's, for instance, with a case of wine under their arm and sell it to them. You're not supposed to sell wine if you don't have a license, but they do it all the time. So sometimes it gets into stores where you wish it weren't, but there's nothing you can do about it. And you particularly wish it weren't there because they charge terrific prices for it.

We do have a distributor in New York, but he understands and he gets us into exactly the places we would pick ourselves.

Restaurant and Club Placements

Jacobson: What percentage of your revenue comes from restaurants or clubs?

McCrea: I would think about a third, maybe.

Jacobson: Were these restaurant owners who happened to have tasted your wines?

McCrea: The very first one that approached us was Trader Vic [Victor Bergeron]. He probably did more to put California wines on restaurants wine lists than any single person, because he believed in California wines long before most restaurants did. He sought them out, and he pushed them. He said, "These are California wines, and they are The Best." He was wonderful. Another one of our restaurants is one I'm sure you've never heard of. It's called the Imperial Dynasty, down in Hanford, near Fresno. They called us up and wanted to have our wine, and they've bought it every since. It's a Chinese restaurant, but it has a French side to it, too. I have never managed to get there, but it's the kind of place where people go out of their way to go to, and Hanford surely is out of the way [laughs].

Jacobson: How did Trader Vic find you?

McCrea: I honestly don't know. He may have just have seen that we got a couple of gold medals at the fair. In those days, getting a couple of gold medals at the fair was very helpful. I don't know how helpful it is now, because there are too many competitions now. We don't go into any of them anymore. We'd rather sell our wine than waste it on them [laughs], because you have to send them quite a lot.

Jacobson: When was the last time you entered a fair?

McCrea: Oh, I don't know, way back in the sixties sometime.

Jacobson: What are some of the other restaurants that you have wines in?

McCrea: We don't have them right at the moment, you understand, because this last year and this year we aren't selling any wholesale wines because of the situation in the vineyard. We're keeping it all for our retail customers. But it's in the Bohemian Club, the Pacific Union Club, the Carnelian Room at the top of the B of A [Bank of American Building], Stanford Court, and Trader Vic's. I guess that's all in San Francisco. Down in Los Angeles it was in Scandia; Peppone, which is a restaurant out in West Los Angeles; the California Club; and the Los Angeles Country Club. I guess we've sold some to the Menlo Country Club, down in Menlo Park, too.

Jacobson: Was Fred a member of--

McCrea: Funny enough, he wasn't a member of any of those clubs, though lots of his friends were. I don't know, he didn't join clubs.

He was quite the opposite from our son, who is a great collegial friend.

Entering Markets in New York and England

Jacobson: How did you decide to go into the New York market?

McCrea: Actually, Mr. [Mario] Daniele came to us. He comes out here on a buying trip every year--I guess twice a year he comes out. Wonderful, wonderful guy; he's just darling. He was just tickled to death when we said we would send him some wine. He gets it in just absolutely marvelous places in New York. It's at the American Place, and the place that I love the best is the Oyster Bar, because whenever we went to New York, the first place we lit out for was the Oyster Bar. I thought that was neat, that Mario put it in there. And it's in Windows on the World, Four Seasons, River Cafe. I don't know all of them, because it varies from one year to another, I'm sure.

And it's in the French Laundry up here in the valley, and I guess Knickerbockers has a little, too.

Jacobson: You're also in England.

McCrea: Only one year. Mr. Ronald Avery, whom I met at lunch at Belle and Barney Rhodes', persuaded me to send them a couple of cases. It's a terrible nuisance to ship anything into the Common Market because you have to have different labels, a lab analysis, and so forth. Unless you're doing it all the time and in a big way--the way Robert Mondavi does, for instance--it's too much bother to do it with just a case or two.

Pricing Philosophy

Jacobson: How did you decide how to price your wines?

McCrea: Oh, I don't know, we've tried very hard to keep it down as much as we could. I felt it was really quite unfortunate that we had to raise it this last time, but we had to do it, just to keep going the last few years. Also, there's the fact that comparable Chardonnays were selling for quite a lot more than

ours. You can't get too far behind your competition, or it looks as if you don't have much pride in your product. But I have always hated to raise it, partly because we have this list of old, old customers that we've had for a long time, and for a lot of them it's their one big treat of the year, and I do not want to price them out of the market.

I'm sure we could sell our wine--our Chardonnay, anyway--for \$25, but it gets in the wrong hands then, as far as I'm concerned. I like to have it go to people who really just love that wine. The minute you make it too expensive, you then get it in the hands of wine snobs, who really buy it by price, not by the wine. So we try to keep it as low as we can, and still not look as if we were denigrating our own wine.

Jacobson: Sometimes I would imagine that gets hard, because the price of Chardonnay, in particular, has just--

McCrea: Oh, yes. Can you imagine this, now? Joe Heitz reluctantly gave a taste of his '85 Cabernet Sauvignon to a wine writer, who was not supposed to say anything about it because it had not been released. But he did, and he said it was absolutely super wonderful. His salesroom is down past Louis Martini's. I just happened to be at the bakery across the way on a Saturday, the day that they released it, and there was a line about four blocks long down there! It was selling for \$50 a bottle, and if he'd been selling it for \$100 a bottle it would have been just the same line. They were just people who were bound that they were going to get that wine.

There is a demand among a certain group of people who have a lot of money. They literally will pay anything for something that they think is exclusive and special.

Jacobson: Is that a problem for the industry?

McCrea: It's a small problem for a small bunch of really good winemakers. But it's really a small problem. The things that they put at such terrific prices, there never is very much of. So it's a problem maybe for a few weeks, and then it goes away. Then your problem is selling the rest of your wine [laughs].

Jacobson: The prices at the upper end don't necessarily drive up prices in the middle range?

McCrea: No. If anything, they tend to keep them down, because there's just too big a lake of what you might call non-premium wines.

Those are the ones that people have trouble selling, and it's all over the world. There are just an awful lot of extra wines floating around in Italy, Chile, Spain, France, Australia--everyplace. The premium wines are not really difficult to sell; it's the middle class ones that are.

Size of Stony Hill Production

Jacobson: Did you and Fred every think about expanding?

McCrea: There's really no place we could expand. The last big vineyard we planted, we planted since Fred died. It's over on the other slope. We did it with great trepidation, because it faces northwest, and all the rest of the vineyard faces southeast, you see. We weren't really sure it was going to make comparable tasting wine. The first year that we got any grapes off of it, we were almost scared to taste it, but it tasted like Stony Hill; it's lovely. It really has been very successful. But that will be the last place we can plant anything, I think, because this is really very rugged land, you know. Even that vineyard is very steep.

Jacobson: By how many cases would that vineyard increase your entire production?

McCrea: Let's see. We got twenty tons off of it last year, and I don't think we'll ever get very much more than twenty tons off of it. Oh, me [figuring]--you get about 150 gallons per ton, and there are roughly two and half gallons in a case. It makes about 1,200 cases, so it isn't a tremendous amount.

Jacobson: What's your production now?

McCrea: It's right up about 2,500 cases of Chardonnay. I think we have about 800 cases of Riesling, and we have less and less Gewürztraminer because a lot of it has Pierce's Disease and we've had to pull it out. We haven't figured out a place to replant it yet. Hopefully, we'll keep it going a little while. This last year we only got 22 cases of Sémillon, because it's in a rugged place and it's gradually dying out--not from any diseases; just getting old. We haven't decided whether to replant it or not. We really just make it because we like it. It's one little wine that you might say really is a hobby, because we've never made money on it; it doesn't even break even.

Sémillon de Soleil

Jacobson: How did the Sémillon come to be?

McCrea: When you come up the road where the Stony Hill sign is, it's at the very bottom of that field. It's terribly hot down there; it was too hot for Riesling, so we just planted some Sémillon in there. We just picked it and sold it with the rest of our grapes, originally. Darrell Corti was up here one day [in 1971], and he said, "Why don't you make straw wine out of it?" It's a dessert wine, but what we do with it is to pick it at about 26 sugar, and then we put it on prune trays in the sun, out in the driveway, and raise the sugar to about 36. Then we stop fermentation when it's about 8 percent sugar, and it's delicious.

Jacobson: Does that get onto your mailing list?

McCrea: Not any more, really, because we have so little of it. I said to Mike, when he told me there were only 22 cases, "Maybe we better divide it three ways: you get one third, Peter gets one third, and I get one third." There are a few people we know who really love it, so we just let them have it. I don't know, it just sort of gets sold by itself. Originally we made the whole thing for Corti Brothers in Sacramento. That was why we made it, and we used to sell it to them. Then they decided they didn't want it any more; I guess they didn't have as much luck selling it as we did.

Jacobson: Did they ask for such a product?

McCrea: Oh, yes. Well, Darrell's a good friend. He was the one who suggested it. They've always carried our wine, too, up in Sacramento.

Viticultural Practices

Jacobson: Have your viticultural techniques evolved or changed over the years?

McCrea: Yes, I'm sure they have. We had about three years that were very lucky years for us; when we were awfully busy in the winery, Mark Oberschulte took care of the vineyard for us. He

had taken care of vineyards up at Sterling. He planted Sterling's mountain vineyards, so he knew about mountain vineyards. He really helped the vineyard a lot, and in a way taught Mike a lot. But then Louis Martini hired him away from me. Well, we couldn't say no to it, because the Martini's have vineyards all over, you know--they have them in Sonoma and so forth--and he wanted Mark to be head of their vineyard operations in Pope Valley, which was a big job, and he got a house--

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Jacobson: You were saying that Mark got a house and a truck--

McCrea: And just about double the salary, so you couldn't very well stand in his way. He is a wonderful guy.

One of the things that's wonderful about this valley is the way all the young guys know each other so well, and they exchange enormous amounts of information. Mike has several sources of really good knowledge about the vineyard, and he gets people to come over and look at it when he thinks he'd like to know a little more about something. He's very good at this. So I think our viticultural practices have changed quite a lot.

My son works for Chevron, and he wound up being in charge of all the fertilizer department, so he's gotten very interested in it, too. Between them, I think they probably have changed some of our viticultural practices.

One of the things that we can't do, because we don't have enough water, is irrigate up here. So this is all dry farming.

Jacobson: Have there ever been years when it hasn't rained enough, where you--

McCrea: Well, this is the fourth year, now, with a lot less water than we'd like to have. Though, strangely enough, we got by very well last year, and I think we probably will this year. While the rain hasn't been good for the general water supply in the state, it's been very good for the farms as they stood because it all sank into the ground, instead of a lot of it running off. If you have what is referred to as a "gully washer" around here--a long, steady, three or four days of rain--by the end of the second day, it's all running off, so it doesn't really do an awful lot of good to the immediate place. The

rain has come very well that way this year, so I think we'll get by all right--as long as our well doesn't run dry.

Jacobson: Have you ever experimented with drip irrigation?

McCrea: You have to have the basic water supply for drip irrigation. We do drip irrigate the new vineyard when we plant a new vineyard. We can do it for a short time, but we can't do it all summer long, the way they do down on the floor of the valley. That's one reason we get a small tonnage, but it's also one reason why our grapes are so concentrated in flavor.

Jacobson: Have you discovered better places to plant certain varieties that deviated from your original plan?

McCrea: Gradually, while we are doing the new planting, we have switched some of the vineyards, but it's largely been to try and get the Chardonnay away from areas that were susceptible to Pierce's Disease more than any other reason.

Planting of Pinot Noir, 1972

Jacobson: There was one year, 1972, I believe, when you planted Pinot noir--your first experience with reds.

McCrea: [laughs, pointing] That's it, right down there. We only have four rows of Pinot noir and four rows of Zinfandel down there. We make one barrel of Pinot Noir Blanc, and one barrel of red Pinot Noir, and a couple of barrels of Zinfandel, but we don't sell those. The Pinot Noir Blanc is our swimming pool wine; we all drink it all summer. It's like a nouveau--it's good when it's young--and we drink it all summer, and it's gone by the end of the summer. The other two, I don't know, I guess Mike and the Mexicans and Peter drink it, because I never get any [laughs]. When we bottle it, I just pay the tax on it right then, and then we don't sell it.

Jacobson: Did you ever try to sell it?

McCrea: No. We haven't got enough.

Jacobson: Why did you decide to plant the red grapes?

McCrea: I'll tell you: Mike is of Italian ancestry, and he needs a certain amount of red wine in his diet [laughs].

Jacobson: Was it Mike's idea, then?

McCrea: Pretty much, yes. I noticed that when they planted that field where you come around the corner there, he planted about four rows of Cabernet in there, just to see what they would do. You know, you get interested in seeing what things will do.

Present Division of Winemaking and Management Responsibilities

Jacobson: After your husband died, you resumed more responsibilities. What were they?

McCrea: Well, I had to run the office. The government keeps your office quite busy with reports and correspondence of all different kinds. Before Fred died I had started doing all the reports because he didn't like doing stuff like that, and I didn't mind doing it. And you have to keep track of the books. We do have a bookkeeper, but I don't know, it seems to me that either most of the morning or most of the afternoon I spend in the office, even with a girl helping me.

We now have a computer, so a lot of the stuff is on it. We didn't particularly want a computer, but we store our wine in the Wine Service Co-op, down in the village, and they went over to a computer, so we had to, because you had to give them your orders by computer. It works very well, except that I can't see well enough to read the screen, so I have to have somebody do it for me. That kind of irks me some of the time, because I can't find things when I need them. When somebody calls up and asks if he has paid his bill, I have to look in the computer, and I don't know how to do it. Before Sally went away this week, she made me a list of all the people that I had paid [laughs].

Jacobson: Did you become more involved in the winemaking itself?

McCrea: No. Maybe I drop a word of advice here and there. When it comes to making decisions about new equipment and things like that, Peter really does a lot of it now. He's a big help. He comes up here, oh, at least every two weeks and spends the weekend. He and Mike always go all over the vineyard together

and discuss any problems. I think, in a lot of ways, it's easier for Mike to talk to him than it is to me, though Mike's and my relationship is wonderful. But I think Peter is a help, too. After all, he's had an awful lot more managerial experience than I have.

Jacobson: Working at Chevron?

McCrea: Yes. He worked in Arabia for three years, and then he worked in Holland for three years. He's worked his way up the ladder in Chevron. He's now the head of all the agricultural products that they make. He was just fertilizers, but now I think he's in charge of all those things that say Ortho.

Jacobson: What about the actual winemaking? Is that all Mike's?

McCrea: That's really all Mike's. Peter's hardly ever even up here during the harvest. It's pure luck whether he can get up here during the harvest, because he really works very hard and travels a great deal.

Trips to French Wine Country

Jacobson: I forgot to ask you about your trips to France, particularly the one you made in '62.

McCrea: That was the longest trip we made. We were over there in '58, '62, and we took our daughter over there before she was married. That must have been in the seventies. I think we went to London in '76. I think we were over there the summer before Fred died. I think we've been over there four times.

Jacobson: Did you go over there with the view to learning more about winemaking?

McCrea: Well, we had a lot of fun. One of the things that's wonderful is that if you get letters from your friends, like Dr. Amerine and various other people that have connections over there, you really can just get handed on from one winery to another. When we were in Bordeaux, it was actually one of our own personal friends who got us started there. He had family there, so he gave us a letter to his family, and we just went from one chateau to another. It was just wonderful. Naturally, you

learn a lot. That was very rewarding. It was in '62 that we went to Bordeaux.

We left here after the harvest, in the first part of November. We were in Bordeaux, with one of the professors from Davis who was a good friend, Dinny [A. Dinsmoor] Webb, who was over there on sabbatical. We just happened to be having lunch with him that day, and we looked at each other and said, "Today is Thanksgiving!" When we went to Chateau Yquem it was after Thanksgiving, and they still had this real old-fashioned, enormous hydraulic wooden press, and they still had the pressure on it. About once every five minutes a drop would come out. [laughs]

Jacobson: Did Fred learn things in particular from that trip?

McCrea: You just always absorb stuff, you know. He was a great learner. That was really a great trip; we had a wonderful time.

Jacobson: You started out with a crusher which you still have today?

McCrea: Yes, we still have the crusher, but we have a different press now.

Jacobson: What kind of press do you have?

McCrea: We have a Howard press. It has two steel plates on a screw that come together and squeeze the grapes. I should take you over there to see those.¹

¹See p. 46.

III TOUR OF WINERY AND VINEYARDS

[Interview 3: March 28, 1990]###

Vineyards

McCrea: [walking through the property] This is among the first plantings that we did. I think this was planted in '48.

We started planting from up above there, and came down this way. I guess it was probably the second year that we were planting that we did this field. Everything above here we had already planted, and then the ones down below we did a little at a time.

Jacobson: How many acres is the top field that you planted first?

McCrea: I don't know, because we did about four or five acres a year. We're right in the middle of replanting now. There's a field that goes from over behind those trees to way over behind those [points] that is the biggest Chardonnay field. It's almost ten acres. Then there's another one over the hill--see the way you can see it through the trees along there? It's behind there, and there are ten acres cleared. We planted that about four or five years ago. We're now getting grapes off of it. The one over there, where the terraces are, was replanted--this is its third leaf, I think, so we'll get a little off of it this year.

These have not been replanted yet. This is Riesling, up to the place where there's kind of a break in the hill up there. From there, up over the top, is Gewürztraminer.

Jacobson: Are you planning to replant this area?

McCrea: Eventually, yes. Gradually they just go downhill after a while. You keep getting a smaller and smaller crop, and as they get old they also get very susceptible to disease. You can see where there are blank places, where there aren't any vines. Usually, if a vine dies you replant it right away, but we stopped replanting this field--filling in--because it was getting too old.

Jacobson: How many acres to you replant at a time? Is it at increments of four or five acres?

McCrea: No, not particularly, because we just take a field and do it. We've just done one at a time, and when we do it we try to push it out a little bit and get maybe a few more vines in it. We bud it to our own budwood, and select what we think are the best vines to take the budwood off of, so theoretically it ought to get better all the time. They usually come out in April.

Winery Tours

Jacobson: Do you walk down to the winery daily?

McCrea: By this time of year it's usually at least daily. I think we've had visitors every day this week.

Jacobson: You take visitors by appointment only, right?

McCrea: That's because I take them around, and you can't just drop everything you're doing. You have to know ahead of time when they're coming. The most aggravating thing they do is make an appointment and then not tell you that they're not coming. You hang around and wait for them, and then they don't show up.

Oh, I wanted to show Mike something over here, if he comes.

Jacobson: Hopefully it doesn't happen too often that people don't show up.

McCrea: Surprisingly, it happens quite often.

Problems with Deer

McCrea: There, that's what I wanted to show him. That's a deer track, and it was wet yesterday. If there's a deer in here, we want to get rid of it. They may have gotten rid of it; I heard somebody shooting up the hill a few days back. Maybe I should go back and show him that. No, I can tell him. [humming]

Jacobson: What kind of damage do deer do?

McCrea: The buds are just about to come out, and they're just tiny, fragile things, and the deer love them. They're just like caviar to them, and just one deer can clean a field like this in an hour. Usually you then get another shoot that comes out, but it doesn't have any fruit. So this time of year is the worst time to get a deer in.

Jacobson: You just have to keep your eye out for them?

McCrea: It's all fenced off, so theoretically they can't get in. Everybody thinks that they jump over the fence, but what they really do is to go underneath, or to find a hole in the fence. Usually somebody patrols the fence all the way around at the beginning of the spring to rock it in at the bottom if it's washed out, or to mend any holes there are in it.

Jacobson: It's almost hard to imagine deer scrambling underneath a fence.

McCrea: But you should see them do it! I've seen them do it. There was a place right down here--see, the fence is just on the other side of the driveway there, back in the trees--where you could see the way they worked, just the way a feisty little dog will do. They work a hole in gradually, and once they find out they can do it, then the whole group comes in. They're not as big as they look when you see them, and they can slide through the most amazingly small holes.

Scenic Vistas

McCrea: Isn't that a heavenly view? Isn't it just lovely? This is where the house was, originally, evidently. You see, this was a homestead, and the original homesteader's house was right here. They moved it down to where Mike lives; part of Mike's

house is the original house. They moved it down there because there's a band of clay that goes across between here and there, and they couldn't get through it in horse and buggy days in the wintertime. So they moved their house on the other side of it. But can you imagine moving a house down this hill, with no modern mechanical equipment at all? I don't know how they ever did it. But I'm sure they did, because the lady who lived here at the time that they did it, came up and told us about it.

We used to live down in Mike's house before we built this one, and one day up the road came this very striking, tall Norwegian lady. She came on the bus and walked up the hill.

Jacobson: Which is about two miles?

McCrea: Yes. Oh, I've done it lots of times. I can't do it anymore, but I have done it. She told us about living up here. It was a subsistence farm. She told us that they had wheat in that field that's to the right of the cattle guard down below. When we bought the place there were remnants of apples up here, and then up on top, where the Chardonnay field is, they had peaches. In between they had vegetable gardens and animals and stuff.

Jacobson: How does what was planted here before affect your vineyards?

McCrea: I don't think it affects it at all. There hadn't been anything for a long time. After the Cedargreens moved out, I think it probably was a Prohibition hideaway, because it kept changing hands during Prohibition, all with kind of mafia-sounding names.

Jacobson: Do you swim in the pool here?

McCrea: Oh, yes. It just got cleaned up this weekend. We have a lot of young people around here. Mike has three kids, and I have two grandchildren who live in San Francisco who bring all their friends up here.

Jacobson: The deck is wonderful.

McCrea: You can't really see where it was now, but we added all of this part and the benches from the lumber that we got when we cleared the new field up above. We weren't allowed to clear-cut it at that time; they wouldn't give us a permit to clear-cut it and sell it, so we moved a mill in and used the lumber ourselves.

Winery Equipment

McCrea: This is the scene of the action during the crush. You can see where that hopper has been added to--the cornucopia part; that was the original one down below, and we just added to make the hopper bigger. In the old days we used to just dump boxes into it. It was up on a platform, and we used to dump boxes into it, and then the grapes came right down into the press from where they were up high. We've only done it one year like this. We now pick into those large plastic bins--that's upside down, of course. You can pick it up with a forklift. The workmen pick into what look like small washbasins, and then they dump them into those bins.

Jacobson: How many grapes can that hold?

McCrea: It holds half a ton. We bring two of them down on a little trailer behind the truck, and then pick them up with a forklift and put them into that contraption up high that fits into the hopper--and then they turn it, and it up-ends and goes into there. You can't see exactly how it works, because part of it isn't there. There's a device that comes out to guide the grapes, and they go into kind of a sump pump that pumps them up into the press.

Jacobson: This is a new press?

McCrea: Actually, we've only used it one year, but we had one just like it for three or four years that was smaller. It works just fine. It has two round steel plates that are just as big around as that cylinder, and they come together and squeeze the grapes. Then it relaxes--it's programmed so that it lets go--and the whole cylinder turns over, and then it does it again, as many times as you want it to. We're very pleased with it.

The juice comes out all those little slots into the pan underneath. You can see that there's a hose bib on the end of it, and that goes into that little door there in the back of the winery, and that's the way it gets in the winery. Obviously this would not work with red wines, because you have to leave the skins on the red wine. This is, for all intents and purposes, just a little bit more pressing than free-run juice.

Jacobson: What equipment did your husband use when he was making Pinot Noir?

McCrea: When we made Pinot Noir we'd just do it in a plastic container, or a stainless steel barrel. You have to leave the skins on the red wine, so then you keep pushing them down and recirculating the juice over them. But you don't have to do that with a white wine, thank goodness.

After the juice has been in the setting tank inside the winery overnight, we pump the Riesling and Gewürztraminer, and about two thirds of the Chardonnay back out to the refrigerated tanks and ferment them out there. Two thirds of the Chardonnay we do in the winery.

Jacobson: Have you had the tanks from the beginning?

McCrea: Oh, no, they've been added. As a matter of fact, that fat one we just got--we haven't used it yet--to get ready for next year.

Jacobson: What were you using before?

McCrea: Just the barrels in the winery. It didn't matter so much when you didn't have very much, you know, but as soon as you have a fairly big amount of wine it builds up an awful lot of heat during the fermentation. With the Riesling and Gewürztraminer, particularly, you don't want it to do that because their bouquet is so delicate that it kind of boils it off. The Chardonnay, on the other hand, you want to ferment cold, but you don't want it to get so cold that it gets stuck, which it does very easily.

We've always fermented the Chardonnay in the winery. But except for the last two years, since we haven't had as much as we wanted, we've had too much to do it all.

Inside the Winery

McCrea: This is it! [opens door to winery]

Jacobson: I always love the smell of wineries.

McCrea: Have you ever been up here during the crush? That is when it smells just wonderful. The whole valley smells of grapes.

The juice comes in through that little door, right behind that little barrel, and it comes into here, and also into here, overnight, just to settle out the--

Jacobson: You have both an oak container and a stainless steel one?

McCrea: Yes, but that doesn't really make any difference at that point. It's really only when it's aging that it matters. I know that fermenting it in new oak makes a lot of difference, but we don't do that because we don't like it. You pick up too much oak too fast.

Jacobson: How often do you change your oak barrels?

McCrea: You can see that some of these have been here for a long time. We've had those since way back in the sixties. The little ones are the ones that we change more often. Some of those are the original ones that we got. The first ones we got were in '62, I think, or maybe it was in '58. We ordered them when we were in Europe. Those dear things used to be \$50 apiece, and now they're close to \$400. Those are all French, and these four are French, too. These are Yugoslavian, and there are four big ones like this in the adjoining room that are German.

Jacobson: When you get a brand-new oak barrel, do you ferment in it for only a short period of time?

McCrea: I think we used it for fermenting some wine. Fermentation doesn't take very long, anyway; it only takes about ten days to two weeks. If you ferment it in any of the newer barrels, Mike would take it out of them right away when the fermentation was over and mix them with something that had been fermented in one of these neutral barrels. Eventually, it all gets mixed together. How he does this, I have no idea. It's just a miracle to me. He keeps a record--his book isn't here; it's usually under his arm--of where every single drop has been, and he knows which ones are in which barrels now, where they've been before. He really does do all of it in his head until the very end, when he's trying to figure out how to make the blend and have it ready to be bottled, because you can't bottle it all in one day. I'm sure that in the big wineries they do this all mathematically, but it just comes out of Mike's head.

Jacobson: It's like a game of Concentration, where you're trying to remember where the last card was.

McCrea: You're absolutely right. That's the nearest thing I've ever thought of. [laughter]

We built this room first. It was the only room we had, and there was a bench along this side that was the lab. I guess there weren't any barrels along this side, but gradually, over a period of time, as we changed the amounts of wine that we have, we had to add barrels and whatnot. We added another one over here. The original winery was built in '51, and I don't remember when this adjoining room was built. It used to be really spectacular. We keep our Chardonnay for a year after it's bottled, in the bottle, and that whole wall used to be binned bottles, so that when you opened the door and came in here it was really smashing. It was just beautiful. But we needed the extra room for tanks.

Bottling Operation

McCrea: We used to do all our own bottling in here [the adjoining room]; we'd move all these center barrels out and do the bottling right in here. We can use that stainless steel tank for a mixing tank--which we still do. But now we bring in a mobile bottling line that parks outside and does all the bottling. It does the bottling and the labeling all at the same time. We used to do the labeling after the year was up. We then candled every bottle to see that it didn't have any odd bits in it, and then labeled it.

Jacobson: That's a painstaking process.

McCrea: Oh, I know it. The widow of the first vineyard foreman that we had, Jim Pavon--her name is Lorenza--has labeled every single bottle of Stony Hill wine. I feel just terrible about it now, because we're really depriving her of half her income by having the labeling done automatically. But you can't combine the two things--well, I guess you could. It's a whole lot cheaper and more efficient to do the whole thing at once, so I have to think of other ways of taking care of her, by doing things like paying for her automobile insurance and her health insurance, and all that kind of stuff.

Jacobson: When did you get the automatic bottling operation in?

McCrea: The bottling line? We've only done it two years. This will be the third year. It works awfully well. It would take our guys about two weeks to do the Chardonnay, and they do it in about three days. The same guys will be working--they all work on it--but only for three days, and then we can use them for something else.

Label Design

Jacobson: How did you come up with the design for the label?

McCrea: Long before it became fashionable, which it is now, to use dead-leaf green bottles for Chardonnay--they didn't make them in this country; that's what they use in France. That's where it got its name; it's called feuille morte in France. We used to get the scavengers in San Francisco to save the bottles from the clubs and hotels.

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McCrea: The label was originally designed to go on that color bottle. I'll show you what it was like. Fred was in the advertising industry, and there are artists all over the place in an advertising office, happy to do odd bits like that for you, especially if you're the boss [laughs].

Jacobson: You said the scavengers collected the bottles from the clubs in San Francisco?

McCrea: They did that for, I suppose, ten years.

Jacobson: How did you manage to get them to do that for you?

McCrea: Oh, they sold bottles on the side. But we got them to separate out the ones that we wanted. Oh, they made a regular business out of it.

Last year, maybe a little bit later in the year than this, when I was walking along here, I watched a snake come out of the wall. It was evidently just surfacing for the spring. It took him a long time to pull himself out.

There are fantastic birds around this place. Have you ever seen a pileated woodpecker? They're the only ones that

have a crest. They're about that [about a foot and a half] long. When you see one, like up on the telephone pole, they're just huge. They're just gorgeous birds. There are a lot of them around here. They must have nests up in the canyon.

Jacobson: Are they noisier, being bigger?

McCrea: They're terribly noisy! They clatter! That's how you first notice them, because they clatter so. You run out to look and see what goes on. I didn't see any last summer. I hope they'll be back this year.

We got snowed in once. When you come around the turn down there, that part of the road never gets any sun in the wintertime. It had frozen first, so there was ice underneath it, and then it snowed about six inches. It just wasn't safe; you didn't dare try and do it. Eventually Mike got the jeep up to it and made ruts, and after that it was all right.

IV STONY HILL VINEYARDS AND WINE INDUSTRY AFFAIRS

Spirit of Cooperation

Jacobson: One of the things you talked about was the spirit of cooperation in the industry, and how that really typified your experience. I'm assuming it worked both ways--where you received help and you gave help. I was wondering if you could give some examples of that.

McCrea: I suppose the two people who really helped us the most, as far as learning to make wine goes, were Lee Stewart, who started Souverain, and Joe Heitz. It was just incredible how happy they were to share their knowledge. They were such good friends, too. Then one time, when Ambassador Zellerbach died, Joe bought all the white wine that was in barrels--in other words, all the Chardonnay that was in barrels. He didn't have any place to put them, so he put them in our winery, and we bottled them together.

Fred had a heart attack right after that, and Joe bottled all of our Riesling; everything was all set up, so he just went ahead and bottled it. But that's the kind of thing that people do for each other all the time up here.

I remember one time when--this doesn't have anything to do with Stony Hill--some place was going to do some bottling for Schramsberg because he [Jack Davies] didn't have the equipment to do the bottling. It just happened that the feds--the BATF people--came by, and they heard somebody say that those grapes were being delivered for Schramsberg. He said, "I hope he knows you can't put a vintage label on the bottle unless it's bottled at your own premises." By the next morning everybody had gathered together enough equipment so that Jack could do it

on his own premises. So that's the kind of thing people do all the time.

Jacobson: Did Fred's experience in advertising ever come in handy to others in the wine industry?

McCrea: Yes. I had totally forgotten this, but Joe Heitz reminded me of it not very long ago.¹ I was talking to somebody else in his presence about the fact that he'd done so much to help us, and he said, "Well, don't forget that Fred's merchandising ability helped me an awful lot, too." I had forgotten that Fred used to write his mailers and brochures and things for him.

Jacobson: As the wineries have become more competitive, has that spirit of cooperation eroded at all or changed?

McCrea: I don't think so. One reason that I don't think so is that the group of guys who are Mike's age and at Mike's level in the business exchange information and help each other all the time, just the way we did. So I really think it persists.

Waiting List for Stony Hill Wines

Jacobson: Leon Adams has a theory about wineries that he thinks are successful. He says that the way to be successful is to have customers come to you. How well does that theory hold when you think of your experience, and then when you think of the experiences of other small wineries?

McCrea: That's certainly been our experience. I told you the way we built up our mailer, and I don't suppose a day goes by that we don't get either a letter or a telephone call or something, asking to be put on the waiting list. It's a four-year wait now.

Jacobson: Have you always had a waiting list?

¹For mentions of help given to Heitz by the McCreas, see Joseph E. Heitz, Creating a Winery in the Napa Valley, an oral history interview conducted 1985, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1985.

McCrea: Oh, no. Originally we didn't. We've only had one for about the last five years, and it keeps getting longer and longer. We only take off people who don't pay their bills, people who die, and people who don't order for two years we just assume have lost interest or have died. The dying business doesn't work anymore, because their children call up and say, "Hey, we want Dad's wine." [laughter] So really only the other two work. Sometimes the reason they haven't ordered for two years is because we find that an awful lot of times when people move they forget to let us know. Then they haven't gotten the mailer, so they can't order. But we have no way of finding them unless they call us, which they frequently do, and of course we put them back on again.

Jacobson: Do you do tastings when people come for a winery tour?

McCrea: No. The way we're listed in all the tourist things is "visiting by appointment only, no tasting." We do sell them wine if we have it, but most of the time we don't have it. Right now we have some of our second label wine, the SHV, but that's all.

More on Label Design

McCrea: I was going to show you our label. They did this to get the color on the label to match the color of bottle. After a while it just got to be a real pain in the neck, because it was so hard to get the colors right. As you can see, it was four colors, so that meant it had to go through the press four times. It's simplified down now, and this is the way it looks.

Jacobson: It's still very nice, and goes with the bottle.

McCrea: I like it. I think it's good, too. That's one advantage of having somebody in the advertising business [laughs].

Jacobson: I see here on the label it says, "Grown, produced and bottled 600 feet above the floor of the Napa Valley."

McCrea: Yes, we've always had that. That's the only thing that's different about our SHV label. Instead of having Stony Hill, it says SHV, and you have to leave the "grown" off; it has to just say, "Produced and bottled," because if you say, "Grown,

produced, and bottled," it has to be 100 percent your own grapes.

Succeeding and Surviving in the Industry

Jacobson: What do you think it takes to survive and succeed in the wine industry?

McCrea: Making good wine, I guess. I don't think you could ever really stay in business very long if your wine wasn't very good. I'm sure you couldn't. But there's also a lot of luck in the timing of when you got started and that sort of thing. I'd absolutely hate to start a winery right now. I think there's still plenty of room for small wineries, but if you went into the wine business with the idea that you were going produce something big--it boggles my mind that people do this still. But look, there are at least four or five wineries that started just this last year in the valley that I would call very good sized.

Jacobson: What's a very good size?

McCrea: Probably 100,000 cases. I don't know where the exact break-even place is that makes it difficult, but I would say that if you're very small, I would say up to 10,000 cases, if you really work hard at it, you probably could do it--granted that you always make good wine. I think the people that have real difficulty now are the ones that make between, say, 25,000 and 50,000 cases, because they don't have enough wine to generate enough money to have their own distribution system, or do any very expensive advertising, or anything like that. They really have to go out and personally sell it, which is very expensive to do. When you get up into the size of Beringer or Beaulieu or Mondavi, or anything like that, you really can have your own distribution system, and you can do a lot of advertising. They're big enough so that they can do fine. It's the in-between people that have a hard time.

Napa Valley Vintners

Jacobson: Have you had a membership in Napa Valley Vintners?

McCrea: Oh, yes, always, from the beginning.

Jacobson: How was that a valuable organization?

McCrea: In the really early days it was nothing but a men's marching and chowder society; they had lunch once a month and had a good time together. It was very small, and even after Fred died there were maybe fifty people in it--not any more than that, anyway, and maybe less. I think probably less. They let me come. Actually, I think Carolyn Martini broke the ice, because she was running Louis's operation. He was still running it, but she managed the office and managed most of the selling and whatnot. She's the president of it now. She had come to some meetings, I think, before I was thrown into it.

They made me very welcome. Well, they were all old friends, mostly. Now it's so big; I know there are well over a hundred members now. I walk in and I don't even know three-quarters of them. It's more of a trade association now, and it needs to be. One of the things that's very important about what they're trying to do is to make our joint necessities known in local politics, and in the county, and in state politics, and in Washington. One person just can't do that, but a group of over a hundred people working together can.

This doesn't help me very much, but it helps that group of people that I was talking about--in the middle number of producers: they do a lot of promotion, and they have joint trips, two or three a year, that anybody who belongs to the Vintners can go in on. They don't pay all your bills, but they make all the arrangements for it. Those are very valuable things that they do.

Jacobson: How did the Napa Valley Vintners function before it became more like a trade association?

McCrea: [laughs] They just used to have lunch together once a month. And they did talk about their various problems and whatnot, but now they have a paid manager and a couple of secretaries, and they run the auction. Actually, the auction is run by a separate group, but they're under control of the Vintners. It's just different, but the whole ambience of the business is

different now. There's so much money involved in it now, and so many people involved in it, that it's not just a clubby little group, the way it used to be.

Jacobson: What are the most critical issues that the Napa Valley Vintners are addressing?

McCrea: The thing we've been agonizing over for, I suppose, three years is the Napa County Board of Supervisors--this is a long, complicated situation. They control what we do unbelievably. One of the things they wanted was to have a definition of a winery, and it took them three years. The vintners and the growers and the Board of Supervisors' staff just haggled over this for three years. They finally passed the new ordinance just in the last month or two, and it has unbelievable restrictions on the wine business. We fought, bled, and died over it, but we really didn't win.

The whole floor of the Napa Valley is an agricultural preserve, which is just an ordinance that is put in by the supervisors. We really fought, bled, and died to get that in about twenty years ago. If we hadn't, it would be like around Santa Rosa. The growers aren't the least bit cooperative with the vintners. You would think they would be, because, after all, the vintners buy what they grow, but they aren't. They got up on their hind legs--one thing that is part of the agricultural preserve is that you cannot have any business that isn't agriculturally oriented, and they didn't like the idea that the wineries were having all these extraneous things like concerts and big tastings and culinary schools, and all that kind of stuff, on the side. But actually, that was one of the tools for selling their wine, and you could not get this over to the growers. "What good is it going to do you to cut back on this, as long as it doesn't bother anybody?"

I think what started the whole thing was that all of a sudden--you wouldn't believe how quickly, probably within nine months--that corridor of Highway 29, between Oakville, Rutherford, and going up about to Whitehall Lane, was just suddenly lined with wineries. That all happened within a year. I think it really bugged everybody that there were too many wineries too close together. And, of course, there isn't any question about it that it brings an awful lot of tourists to the Valley. The tourism bit is a whole lot at the bottom of it.

Anyway, that's the main battle we've had for a long time, and it's not over, believe me.

Jacobson: Did the Definition of a Winery committee come up with a solution that was fair to both small and large wineries?

McCrea: Yes. What we wanted was fair to both of them. I think, myself, that it's a little tough on small wineries now. It doesn't affect me at all, practically, but it affects the people who are trying to break into the business. What they really did was to kind of grandfather in everything that everybody was now doing, but they made the rules really strict for new wineries and also for anybody who wanted to add to their winery. That's where we're going to get caught--if we ever wanted to add to our winery.

Jacobson: So it really divided between the established and the new.

McCrea: That's right.

Wine Institute

Jacobson: Have you held membership in the Wine Institute?

McCrea: Oh, yes, everybody belongs to the Wine Institute.

Jacobson: Have you found that a valuable membership?

McCrea: Well, I suppose so. I think it's valuable for the industry; I don't think it's particularly valuable to me as an individual--to Stony Hill as an individual winery. But anything that's good for the wine business is good for us, too. The Wine Institute has done yeoman service in Washington. They really are the effective voice in Washington.

Wine Industry's Greatest Problems

Jacobson: What would you say are the greatest problems facing small premium wineries?

McCrea: The greatest problem facing the wine business, per se, right now, is this unbelievable neo-Prohibitionist, anti-alcohol stuff that goes on and on and on. It's all these terribly conservative fundamentalist people, and they make absolutely no distinction between alcohol and the abuse of alcohol. It's bound to have an effect on the wine business, even if it doesn't go as far as real prohibition, the way it did before. The sale of wine has gone down, except for premium wines like ours. The sale of ordinary table wine has gone down a lot.

That, and the new phylloxera bug are the things that hang over our heads. Those two things, really--two big "p's".

Jacobson: Should premium wine be differentiated by regulatory agencies from low-end wines?

McCrea: No.

Wine Industry's Greatest Strengths##

Jacobson: What would you say are the wine industry's greatest strengths today, and how have small wineries contributed to those strengths?

McCrea: I think the wine industry's greatest strength is that they're making better and better wine. It's loads better than it was when we first went into the wine business. I think that's probably one thing that the small wineries helped on. Just as a matter of competition, they were making such good wine that the big guys said, "If they can do it, we can do it." And they can; there's nothing inherently better in a small winery. In fact, there are lots of things a big winery can do that a small one can't, because they can afford more delicate equipment. If they're big they can blend out a mistake, or some grapes that didn't get harvested at the right time, or something like that. They can conceal them in a big batch of wine, which you can't do in a small winery. If we make a mistake, we made a mistake.

Jacobson: What do you do with the wine?

McCrea: If it's really terrible, you throw it away. You certainly don't sell it under your own name. If it's only not quite up to your standard, you can always find somebody who will buy it as bulk wine, and they would blend it in with something else.

Not so easy to do now as it used to be, because there used to be so little Chardonnay that you could always get rid of it. We never have gotten rid of it, but I know it's easy to do. You don't get them around this time of year, but around harvest time you get requests, asking if you have any bulk wine for sale, so there's still a market for it.

Jacobson: Is there equipment that you would like to purchase for your winery that you haven't been able to?

McCrea: No, I don't think so. We're perfectly satisfied with what we have. Well, we would like a new tractor [laughs]. You have to allot your capital pretty carefully. Especially we're having to, this year and last year, because we've had so little Chardonnay for two years, and we still have re-planting to do.

Long-Term Nature of the Business

Jacobson: There's really a lot of long-range planning that you do.

McCrea: That was the trouble--that we didn't plan it quite long enough ahead of time. That was why we planted that big new field, because we knew we were going to have to, but we should have done it two or three years before we did. Then we would have come out all right. But we'll make it.

Jacobson: Do you think the newer wineries understand what a long-range business the wine industry is?

McCrea: I don't think that very many people in this country understand about making a long-range commitment to a business. They expect to make money right off the bat. It takes a long time before you make any money. I think that's probably one reason banks are so reluctant to lend to the wine business, because they know what a long time it takes to get the money back.

Jacobson: Are there things you have learned over the years that you wish you had known starting out?

McCrea: Oh, yes, of course there are. But that's really part of life. You always know you made mistakes that you wish you had known more about. We've been awfully lucky, I must say, but the first time we really stubbed our toes was the planning ahead on the replanting, which I don't suppose there was any way of

knowing about. We really didn't realize that we were going to have to replant that soon. I was talking to Bernard Portet, who's French. He runs Clos du Val down in the valley, and I was complaining to him about having to replant so soon. He said, "That's par for the course. You know you're going to have to, especially up in such a hard place to grow grapes as yours is." The vines just have to work too hard; they get tired.

Bob Travers at Mayacamas--which is right down at the other end of these mountains, at about the same elevation that we are, but clear down back of Napa--is replanting now. Their vines were planted just about the same time as ours were, because Jack Taylor used to own that property at that time, and they were good friends of ours.

Jacobson: Thank you very much for this interview.

Transcriber and final typist: Judy Smith

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