

Jackson Vineyard Story

By Dr. Austin Goheen, emeritus USDA, ARS Plant Pathologist, with an introduction by Susan Nelson-Kluk

If you take the time to scan the “Foundation Plant Services Registered Grape Selections” you will notice that “Jackson, CA” is shown as the source for 29 of the registered selections (Table 1). The story of this vineyard from a letter written by Dr. Austin Goheen in the 1980s is published here for the first time.

Dr. Austin Goheen was a USDA, ARS Plant Pathologist assigned to the UC Davis campus to work on grape virus diseases from 1956 to 1986. He was one of handful of scientists who held a federal permit for importing grapes into the U.S., and so facilitated legal importation of many foreign grape selections during his tenure. For 30 years he conducted all the virus tests and virus elimination treatments (heat treatment) used to qualify foreign and domestic grape materials for Foundation status in the California Grapevine Registration and Certification (R&C) program as part of his USDA research program. He also served as a technical advisor to Foundation Plant Materials Service (FPMS), now known as Foundation Plant Services (FPS). His work resulted in a collection of hundreds of registered mother vines documented with meticulous records of tests and treatments used to evaluate them. These materials and records still form the backbone of the grapevine clean stock program at FPS.

One of the early projects Goheen worked on with Dr. Curtis Alley of the UC Davis Viticulture and Enology Department, was locating grape materials in old vineyards. They theorized that the use of phylloxera resistant rootstocks may have contributed to the spread of grape viruses. If their theory was true then vines planted on their own roots before rootstocks were used would be more likely to be free of

virus. When the Jackson Vineyard was found in Amador County, Goheen saw it as a way to test out this theory and collect more varieties for the California R&C program. Below is a letter Goheen sent to Mrs. Susan French on December 9, 1982 about the Jackson vineyard to help her write a history of Sauvignon blanc/Fume blanc for the Robert Mondavi Winery.

“Dear Ms. French:

I am sending you copies of some of the notes and records that I have gathered concerning the Foothill Experiment Station of the University of California. I have especially selected those that mention Sauvignon blanc. The station and my involvement in its history make an interesting story.

During the early 1960's one of my objectives was to find healthy plants of California cultivars. Many commercial plantings were badly affected by virus diseases when I arrived in California in 1956. Along with Professor Hewitt and Dr. Curtiss Alley we identified the diseases present and sought out sources of healthy materials. An early lead came in 1961 from the owner of a small plot of Mission grapes in the town of West Point, California, by the name of C.T. Smith. Mr. Smith's vines were free from leafroll, which was unusual when we compared the health of these vines with totally leafroll-affected vines in many other locations in California.

Upon checking closely with Mr. Smith, we learned that his vines came from a mysterious planting in the woods of Amador County. This planting appeared to have been a variety collection, which had been abandoned shortly after the turn of the century, but Mr. Smith was not

Table 1.
FPS Varieties/Selections sourced from the Jackson Vineyard

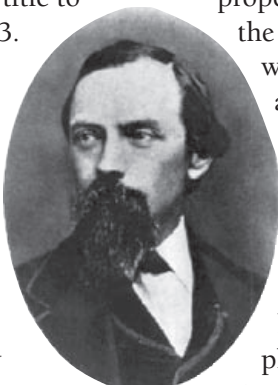
Aramon – 02
Bonarda – 02
Cabernet Sauvignon – 06
Cinsaut – 03
Freisa – 01
Freisa – 03
Grenache noir – 03
Lagrein – 03
Mission – 11
Mission – 13
Mondeuse – 01
Negrette – 04
Petit Verdot – 02
Peverella – 04
Pinot gris – 01
Pinot noir – 09
Pinot noir – 16
Pinot noir – 106
Riesling Italico – 04
Sauvignon blanc – 29
Tinta Amarella – 01
Tinto Cao – 03, 04, 05, 04
Traminer – 01
Trousseau – 08, 09
Valdepenas – 03

sure whether any vines still existed there. If they did, he was not sure of the origins of the planting.

I next checked with Mr. Lee Brown, Agricultural Commissioner, and Mr. Bob Plaister, Farm Advisor, Amador County. Both were very helpful, especially Mr. Plaister. I learned from him that the planting was an abandoned Experiment Station of the University of California, and the owner in 1963 was a Mr. Fantozzi, who was a stone mason in Jackson, California. Plaister introduced me to Mr. Fantozzi, who was very suspicious of my motives when he learned that I was associated with the University of California.

The reason for the suspicion was not apparent to me at first because my intent was purely to check whether any vines might still be alive in the mystery plot. The story unfolded that Mr. Fantozzi had inherited the land upon which the vines had been grown from his parents, who in turn had obtained title to the land through squatter's rights. The site had indeed been an experiment station of the University. The University had held title to it from about 1889 until November 1, 1903.

In the 1880's the University established seven experimental grape vineyards around California under the guidance of Professor Hilgard. Professor Hilgard is probably the first scientific viticulturists in California, and he may well be the first viticulturist anywhere in the world, who held a scientific interest in comparing cultivars in a systematic way. One of the early test plantings was in Berkeley, another was at Cupertino, a third was near Paso Robles, and a fourth was the Foothill Experiment Station near Jackson. I did not locate the other three plantings, and I was never able to find the station at Paso Robles.



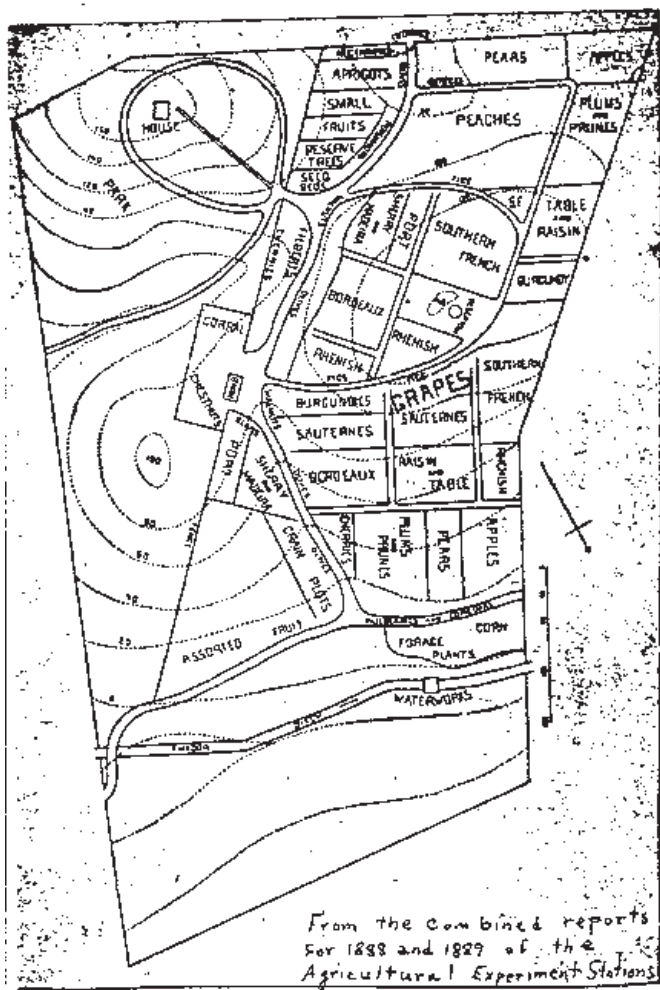
Hilgard

Professor Hilgard was apparently a successful grantsman and his efforts were supported by members of the California legislature. I do not have the details of the early financial records of the main experiment station, but I did research the Foothill Experiment Station. It seems that this station was established to test the feasibility of grape production in the foothills area when the Placer mines were beginning to play out and the argonauts were turning from mining to farming. Professor Hilgard appreciated the changing times and brought the need to know farming potential to the attention of the legislature. Two state senators, a Mr. A. Cominetti and a Mr. John Roggs along with a Mr. McKay and a Mr. Trabucco, donated land to the University for a test planting near Jackson.

This land belonged to the University as long as it was used for scientific experiments. If the University did not keep it up, the land would revert to the heirs of the donors. Hilgard obtained operating funds, hired a station superintendent, and planned facilities for the station. Grapes along with other fruit crops were first planted in 1889. The plants grew and the observations obtained by the station personnel were published in the annual reports of the California Agricultural Experiment Station from time to time. It became apparent, however, that the foothills of Jackson were less desirable for agricultural crops than the land on the valley floor nearer to Lodi and Stockton. The station was consequently abandoned in 1903.

The station with its crops and buildings stood idle for a space and at some point the Fantozzi family moved into the empty buildings and made some sort of living from the old farm. They were eventually awarded title to the property. In the meantime the heirs of the original donors became aware that the University had abandoned the station and they instituted a claim against the property. A legal battle developed, pitting the heirs and the University against the Fantozzis. The Fantozzis won their claim and in their eyes the University was among the "bad guys".

The legal battle was not the only action that the donors' heirs resorted to. In a vindictive action someone raided the property and burned the buildings. These marauders did not destroy the trees or vines but the Fantozzis were forced to leave the property and move into Jackson. The plants were abandoned as far as cultivation or irrigation and the native vegetation of the foothills area gradually encroached to reclaim the land. Bushes and



Map of the Foothill Experiment Station at Jackson, Amador County, from the combined reports for 1888 and 1889 of the Agricultural Experiment Stations.

trees grew at random among the vines and fruit plants, but the outlines of the vine rows, the roads, the reservoir, and foundation of the buildings remained.

By the early 1960's one would really have to know the history of the place to make much sense of it. It was like many abandoned homesteads in the back country of California where the local family could not make a successful living, resulting in a move to town where jobs were more readily available. At this point when I found the Fantozzi heirs and requested permission to visit the site, I was greeted with considerable hostility. As soon as Mr. Fantozzi learned that I was associated with the University he bristled.

At this juncture I thought I would not be able to visit the old site. Mr. Brown, the Agricultural Commissioner, interceded with Mr. Fantozzi and finally convinced him that I had no design on the property, that I was not going to renew the vendetta, and that my interest was purely scientific. I was permitted to visit the place where I found the outlines of the rather elaborately set-out plots. I even found numerous vines still growing in spite of the fact that deer had browsed them for almost 60 years.

On my first visit in March 1963, I mapped one of the areas where vines were still rather neatly growing in rows, and I obtained cuttings from a number of them. These I brought back to Davis where I propagated them. I also began to search the old experiment station reports in the Davis library. In these I found several references to the Foothill Station and I even found a map of the station plan, which had been published in the 1890 report.



Dr. Goheen (left) is shown checking grapevines with Susan Nelson-Kluk in the mid-1980s.

The 1889 report gave a list of grape cultivars planted or planned to be planted for all seven of the University grape trials. You will see that Sauvignon blanc was one of the cultivars listed as a Sauterne Type for inclusion in the tests.

I could not believe that the records of the Foothill Station had been abandoned and destroyed along with the buildings at the site. I therefore checked with the archives of the main University library in Berkeley and found that the record of plantings at the Foothill Experiment Station were preserved and still available for study. I visited the Berkeley library and poured over these old records. I made copies of the planting plans, which I still have [see figure #1—map of vineyard from Berkley library via Goheen's files]. I would sometime like to return to the library and make a photocopy of the record book, but I have never had time for this latter project.

I was able to reconstruct the row by row planting scheme of the old station and identify the blocks by comparing with the plan published in the annual reports and individual vines from their relative position. Some of the blocks were so well preserved that this was no problem. The vines that I have gathered in 1963 were without doubt the same as the vines that were set during the period 1889 to 1892. This was not as easy to do for other blocks where the forest encroachment had been more aggressive. One of the later type of planting was Block S, which contained 10 vines of Sauvignon blanc in row 15.

I did locate the periphery of Block S, and on a subsequent visit to the site I collected as many vines as I was able. In what I thought was row 18 of Block S, I collected a vine, which the records indicated should be Herbe-mont. Herbe-mont is an American bunch grape of Professor Munson, an early grape breeder from Texas. The grape that I obtained turned out to be Sauvignon blanc. My collection was apparently three rows off from the original plan, an easy mistake when one considers the abandoned state of the planting at the time of my visit.

All together, my assistant, Mr. Carl Luhn, and I identified 132 grape cultivars still growing in the old station. We obtained cuttings from a good number of these. We tested these for diseases and found that in general these were markedly free from viruses. I interpret this to mean that the cuttings used in propagating Hilgard's vineyards came to California at a date before viruses became so widespread as they appear to be in modern European vineyards.

The Foothill Experiment Station record book indicates that Sauvignon blanc was planted at the site in February 1890. I am sure the cultivar was called by that name at that time. The planting stocks were cuttings that came from Berkeley. Hilgard must have had vines at Berkeley with sufficient age to obtain cuttings, or he may have imported the cuttings directly from France and carried them to Jackson and the station. The record does not show this fact, so I would imagine that mature vines of Sauvignon blanc were growing somewhere in Berkeley in 1889.

Sauvignon blanc appears in the Foothill Experiment Station records from time to time, but it was not recognized as a superior cultivar. The sophistication of the early viticulturists was probably not very high. In 1895 the station reported promise from Burger, Follo blanche, and several others for producing dry white wines, but the author made no mention of either Sauvignon blanc or Chardonnay. The latter appears on the list of cultivars planted in the early stations but we did not locate Chardonnay among the samples that we collected from Jackson.

I have copied only those records from the Foothill Station that might bear on Sauvignon blanc. In these copies I have highlighted some of the important reference items. I have also tried to include any mention of Sauvignon blanc that might have been made. I have highlighted these references also.

Sincerely yours,

A.C. Goheen

Research Plant Pathologist”

In December 1970, Goheen and his assistant Carl Luhn published an article in the Plant Disease Reporter entitled “Viruses in Early California Grapevines.” They reported that leafroll virus was present in 20 out of the 110 (18%) Jackson Vineyard vines that were tested. Fanleaf and other viruses were completely absent. They compared this to the 80 to 100% of leafroll infection they were finding, at the time, in commercial vineyards and concluded that rootstocks were contributing to the spread. We know now that mealybugs are also responsible for spreading leafroll. We are grateful for all the work Goheen did to rescue the Jackson selections and tell the story. 