

Donation of the Month

Object: Benton County Wine Bottles
Catalog #: 1986.31.7; 1988.19.2; 1990.16.1-2; 1998.38.1
Donor: Museum Purchase; Ray Pennock



We're all familiar with the notion of Ozarks and moonshine. Hard liquor such as whiskey was the preferred drink of area settlers coming from Tennessee and Kentucky, while beer and wine were more associated with the Germans and other European immigrants who settled along the East coast. So it is no surprise that it took a German immigrant from the Rhine River valley to bring the tradition of wine making to Benton County.

After investigating wine-growing properties in California and Florida, Emilie Starck (1836-1934) of Evansville, Indiana, came to Benton County in 1888 with her three children, Carl, Emma, and Arle. Together the family selected and homesteaded four 160-acre plots on a bluff along the White River, six miles southeast of Rogers near Panorama Point. The family's second home, built circa 1902, was a two-story, native-stone building with a mansard roof and deep, 20-foot long porches on three sides. Lined with stone, the cellar at Vinola Wine Ranch was filled with wooden barrels for aging the wine and racks for storing the bottles.

Carl Starck (1858-1939) set out to find the best red and white wine grapes for his soil and climate. He grafted a Concord varietal with a Delaware, planted 6,000 vines on 12 acres (including Cynthiana, Norton's Virginia Seedling, Burgundy, and Elvina), and tested about 100 varietals created by pioneering hybridist Professor Thomas Munson of Texas. In the end, although Starck could press 500 gallons of juice from an acre of Concord grapes, he abandoned that variety in favor of a Cynthiana, an American native that gave less juice per acre. He favored the latter grape because it was "infinitely superior in quality, being the very finest and heaviest red wine grape known to viticulturists, for medicinal uses."

With prohibition continually under debate in turn-of-the-20th-century Arkansas, it is no wonder that a 1911 souvenir booklet emphasized Starck's wine for "medicinal" purposes, describing its trade for "family use and for physicians and hospital purposes." Later accounts indicate the family sold it "by the barrel, jug, bottle, or glass. Tables were set up in the garden and oldtimers report many a pleasant afternoon spent sipping wine and listening to the strains of Johann Strauss." Starck was said to have sold little of his wine locally, instead shipping it to other states.

Vinola wines won several medals in the U.S. and abroad, including one in 1893 from the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In 1899 the Governor appointed Carl Starck as the state's first wine inspector. While he never made wine as a commercial venture, Starck believed that Northwest Arkansas could be a large wine-manufacturing center.

Arkansas has always struggled with the issue of the regulation and sale of alcohol. In response to increasing demands, in the 1880s and 1890s the state legislature passed several alcohol-related laws, including one in 1899 that separated the licensing, manufacture, and sale of native wine from other liquors, thus allowing counties to vote on each issue individually. When Arkansas passed statewide prohibition legislation in 1915, Carl Starck "gradually allowed his vineyards to die and seemingly lost all interest in the industry." He sold the ranch in 1920 to a business executive from Oklahoma.

Following the repeal of national Prohibition in 1933, wineries flourished throughout the state, ushering in the "golden age" of wine making in Arkansas, 1935-1965. At last count there have been 149 bonded wineries in the state, with about 30 known to have existed in Northwest Arkansas. These wineries operated in big towns and small —Winslow, Green Forest, Fayetteville, Berryville, Combs, West Fork, and Elkins. The Nelson Wine and Distilling Co. in Springdale had the distinction of being the first bonded (officially recognized and regulated) winery in the state; some of its products were port, apple, and claret wines.

Several wineries were located in Benton County, including one in Decatur and the Winfrey winery (bonded winery #37) in Rogers. James L. Stroud (#41) made port wine at his winery on Route 4 in Bentonville, and Clarence A.

Linebarger, one of the developers of Bella Vista, began his winery (#25) in 1935 as an additional source of income, operating the business out of small cottage next to his home.

During his first year Linebarger produced 1,513 gallons of wine which sold quickly, prompting him to tell a distant buyer that because his supply was “nearly exhausted,” he was only selling locally, mainly in Springdale, Fayetteville, Rogers, Bentonville, and Harrison. The wine was stored in Wonderland Cave and sold under the “Belle of Bella Vista” and “Wonderland” labels. One of the larger area markets was Applegate’s drugstore in Bentonville. Linebarger produced 4,098 gallons in 1937 but closed the winery the next year because it was too much work and he had a large supply of wine on hand. He continued selling the 1937 vintage until 1945.

The Museum has wine bottles from three different wineries in its Permanent Collection:

J.F. Fagan (#21), Bentonville — Arcadia Blackberry Wine, Arcadia Arkansas Apple Wine, & Wah-Hoo Dry Arkansas Port Wine

Samuel A. Broome (#35), Bentonville — Broome’s Ozark Light Wine

W.L. Hinton Winery (#94), Rogers — Pleasant Hill Arkansas Grape Wine

A check of available phone books shows that Broome is listed as a winery owner in the 1939 Bentonville city directory. Hinton shows up as a winery owner with an office on north First Street in the 1943 to 1949 Rogers city directories. (According to Goebel family history, Hinton had an orchard and built his winery sometime between 1934 and 1939, when Otto Scholze was foreman.) Hinton’s listing in the 1950 directory does not include the winery designation, so perhaps he had gotten out of the business by then. Fagan was a well-known Bentonville apple grower with a large, “heavy bearing” orchard. Based on the design of their labels, Fagan’s blackberry wine bottle is likely the oldest, probably dating back to the early 1930s; his Wah-Hoo port wine likely dates to the 1950s or early 1960s.

Unlike today, during the mid-20th century, Americans in general were not looking for fine table wines. In his book, *The Wines of America*, wine historian Leon Adams notes that in the past, American wine consumption was more about alcohol than taste. In the 1950s, 20% of wines had additional alcohol added to fortify them. Two-thirds of the wines being produced were sweet, high-alcohol dessert wines, many of which were shipped in railroad tank cars to bottlers nationwide.

It’s unclear if any of the wines bottled locally were made outside of the area but perhaps there was no need as Northwest Arkansas had numerous fruit farms. A review of bottle labels shows that wines were made from apples, blackberries, and raspberries as well as grapes. And there were plenty of grapes in the area; in 1938 approximately 1,000 growers harvested 4,320 tons of grapes in Washington, Benton, and Madison counties.

There is some evidence to support the theory that a number of area wines produced during Arkansas’ wine heyday were probably made to provide a cheap high. The Shiloh Museum of Ozark History has a “Pink Elephant Arkansas Port Wine” bottle in its collections from the Nelson winery in Springdale. Three of the five wine bottles in the Rogers Historical Museum’s collection are small (4/5 pint), and were intended as single servings. Three of the wines had alcohol contents of 12-14% by volume which is typical for a table wine; two of the Fagan wines have been fortified and have alcohol contents of 19-21%. The Shiloh Museum has one port wine bottle from the Stroud winery in Bentonville that lists a content of 24%.

According to Bob Cowie, director of the Arkansas Historic Wine Museum in Paris, many of the wineries started because of economics (as a way for a farmer to get more from his crop) or because of the wine maker’s ethnic tradition (such as the large Italian community in Tontitown, Arkansas). Returning WWII servicemen also brought back an appreciation for wine, gained during their service in the European theater. But some citizens had their own ideas about alcohol. According to Cowie, Michael Flynn’s winery in Fayetteville was shut down after the wife of Senator J. William Fulbright wrote a scathing article against it. In 1944 Benton Countians voted the county dry; residents have not been able to purchase beer, wine, or liquor in the county since then, except as members of clubs and restaurants.

In recent years a new era in Arkansas wine making has begun in the Arkansas River valley, in and

around Altus. Today five bonded wineries operate in the state and some are making wines with the same grape varieties that Carl Starck used at Vinola, such as Cynthiana and Norton. Not only are the wines winning awards, they are turning the spotlight on lesser-known American wine regions, and, in the case of Norton, reintroducing Americans to one of the country's oldest native grapes.

CREDITS

"Vinola Wine Ranch," unknown newspaper (early 1890s?); "Vinola Wine Ranch," *Rogers, Arkansas — Souvenir* (circa 1911); "Vinola Wine Ranch Sold," unknown newspaper (6-10-1920); "Grape Marketing Plan Killed," *Rogers Democrat* (2-23-1939); "Question of Liquor Sale Always a Burning Issue Among County Residents" and "Carl Starck Pioneered Wine Grape Growing in Hills of North Arkansas," *Rogers Daily News* (7-1-1950); Dorothy Mitchell, "Arkansas Showplace," *Oklahoma Ranch and Farm World* (2-12- 1967); "Carl A. Starck," *Rogers Daily News* (2-24-1974); Ruth Muse, *History of Rogers to 1929*, unpublished manuscript (mid 1970s); "Goebel, G.L.S.," *History of Benton County, Arkansas* (1991); Gilbert C. Fite, *From Vision To Reality: A History of Bella Vista Village, 1915-1993* (1993); Cowie Wine Cellars, "Arkansas Historic Wine Museum" (www.cowiewinecellars.com/museum.htm); personal communication with Bob Cowie (April 2005); information from the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History (April 2005); Margaret Dornaus, "A History in Wine," American Profile www.americanprofile.com/issues/20030427/20030427_2992.asp); "Interstate Shipping Proposal to California Legislature," Bill Maclver, Wine Trader (www.wines.com/winetrader/r6/r6gw2.html); and "History of Grape and Wine Industry in Arkansas," University of Arkansas Viticulture Research Program (www.uark.edu/depts/ifse/grapeprog/history.htm)