



Excerpt from *Tangled Vines: Greed, Murder, Obsession and an Arsonist in the Vineyards of California.*

Prologue

A Fire is Set

The 300-pound man walked slowly up the steps to the mezzanine area of the cavernous wine warehouse, pausing to rest on a cane when his breath grew short. It was a warm fall afternoon in October 2005, right in the middle of the grape harvest, and the black sweatpants and t-shirt that were the man's signature look clung damply to his heavy frame.

As he hobbled down the hallway leading to his storage locker, the man could look down onto the main floor of Wines Central, which was packed with millions of bottles of California's finest wines. Pallets stacked forty feet high stretched the length of two football fields, with wine as varied as that from Beaulieu Vineyards, one of state's oldest wineries, to cases from boutique wineries like the one owned by the Italian racecar driver Mario Andretti.

The man, however, did not pause to consider the vast array of wine below him. He was in a hurry. And he was angry. He regarded this enormous warehouse in Vallejo, fifteen miles south of Napa, to be his domain. But he was soon to be an outcast.

The man stopped in front of Bay 14, a 2,500-square foot area he had been renting for the previous eighteen months. The space had once been filled with wines from the great chateaux of Burgundy and Bordeaux, as well as from the cult wineries of California like Sine Qua Non and Harlan Estate. But now it was almost empty. Wooden pallets perched haphazardly on the floor. Cardboard boxes and

Styrofoam inserts leaned against a chain link fence. Just 4,700 bottles, seven pallets of shrink-wrapped wine, remained, a bitter reminder of how the man's business had fallen apart during the previous year. While he had once been sought out for his knowledge of wine, asked to join boards and commissions, and invited to Bacchanalian feasts around the world featuring gourmet food and rare vintages, the man was now a pariah, ignored by his longtime friends and under investigation by police.

The mezzanine was quiet, the sound dampened by the three-foot-thick concrete walls that had been constructed to hold Navy torpedoes. The man wiped his sweaty brow and took a final look around. The area was empty. He unlocked the gate into his storage area and went inside. There was no one to see him reach into his canvas bag and bring out a plastic bucket filled with gasoline-soaked rags. He removed a propane torch and pulled its trigger, which sent a small flame surging from the brass tip. The man held the torch against a piece of cloth until a flame took hold.

As the man clamored down the stairs towards the warehouse's exit, the flame flickered, and then flickered some more, before it leapt up and caught on a nearby pile of cardboard. The tongues of fire grew as they gobbled up the wooden crates and Styrofoam nearby. Within a few minutes, the fire had spread up to the ceiling.

At 3:34 pm, about nineteen minutes after the man had rushed out of the warehouse, walking faster than any of those inside had ever seen, fire alarms started to blare. The lights flashed. A piercing alarm went off. The warehouse manager and three workers ran to the front door and struggled to get out. Then an enormous

explosion rocketed the building, shattering thousands of windows. A railway portal toppled. The sudden rush of oxygen created a fireball that consumed everything it touched, scorching shrink-wrapped pallets of wine that fell upon one another like rows of dominos. Glass bottles shattered everywhere.

The firefighters from Vallejo who rushed to the scene would later comment that there was so much black smoke it looked as if a 747 airliner had crashed. For eight hours they fought the blaze, bringing in companies from around the San Francisco Bay Area as the fire grew larger. By the time the flames were out, the warehouse was a smoky, soggy mess. More than four and a half million bottles of premium wine stored inside, worth more than a quarter billion dollars on the retail market, were now worthless. It was the greatest crime involving wine in history.

Mark Anderson - the man in black - was nowhere to be found.

Introduction

Mark Anderson was wearing prison orange, not black, when I looked at him through the glass of the jail's visiting room window. Under the glare of a harsh fluorescent light, his skin was sallow and his once luxurious blond ponytail had turned an undistinguished gray. Anderson was sitting down so I couldn't see his enormous girth, but the jowls around his face hinted at his size. Anderson's manner was mild, and his face almost cherubic, but, as I would soon learn, that openness

was deceptive: he didn't care anything for others. He was the kind of man who thought and talked only about himself.

Anderson had asked me to the Sacramento County Jail to prove his innocence. He had been accused of a heinous crime, one that cost the California economy hundreds of millions of dollars. There was plenty of evidence to suggest he was guilty, but Anderson had been spinning tales about his life for so long he never knew when to stop. Maybe this reporter would believe his version of events, would take the clues he hinted at and go out and uncover the government conspiracy he was sure was after him.

We only had twenty minutes to talk. I didn't have either pen or paper, as I had been ordered to leave my purse in a locker after I had shown my driver's license to a sheriff's deputy ensconced behind bulletproof glass. I then joined a long line of women and their children, mostly Mexican or Black, who were waiting to see their loved ones too poor to make bail.

How do you cram months' worth of questions into a few minutes? How do you steer a man you have never met into a conversation about what might have motivated his crime when he has no intention of admitting anything? Even though I had spent years writing about gruesome murders, cheating husbands, and shady politicians, when I sat across from Mark Anderson I found I couldn't pounce with the hard questions when I needed to. I didn't have any true killer instinct, it turned out.

Instead, Mark and I had a conversation that wouldn't have been out of place around a nice dinner and a glass of wine. Of course, it being Mark, who fancied himself a wine connoisseur, it would have to be an old Bordeaux or hard to find

Burgundy. I inquired about his living conditions. He described them in detail. I asked about his health. He went on to explain his various physical ailments. He had a back so contorted he spent many hours of each day lying on the ground. He was recovering from prostate cancer. He had sleep apnea. According to him, the jail was a pit, "akin to a prison ship in the 1600s." (A reference, it seemed, designed to impress me with his erudition). From there our conversation meandered to his travels in France, the incompetence of his lawyer, and how I really should track down this particular lead. His role in the crime barely came up.

Mark Anderson wasn't the only person lying. I had gone to him under the pretense of objectivity, a reporter interested in better understanding why he had set such a destructive fire. That was cover enough for me to write an article.

But I obscured my personal motivations, the real reason I wanted him to confess. Yes, I was after a story, like most reporters. But I was also there for myself, to understand a chapter from my family's past, rather than for any scoop I might have scored.

The fire in the Wines Central warehouse in October 2005 had destroyed 175 bottles of Port and Angelica wine my great-great grandfather had made in 1875. The wine had come from a vineyard forty miles east of Los Angeles, in Rancho Cucamonga, from grapes that had been planted as early as 1839. California was part of Mexico then and the area around Los Angeles, not Napa and Sonoma, produced

the bulk of the state's wine. The Cucamonga Vineyard was widely lauded as producing some of the best wine in California.

Numerous wooden boxes of the wine had been handed down through the generations. I hadn't owned the particular bottles that were destroyed in the fire, although I had a few at my home in Berkeley. Another branch of the family had inherited most of the wine and a cousin had sent the bottles to a winemaker friend in St. Helena for assessment. He had kept the boxes of wine in his caves tunneled into the Mayacamas Mountains for months, but got worried that the humidity would ruin the labels. So when he moved his own wine cases to the Wines Central warehouse, he moved her historic wine as well. He had been convinced that there was no safer place for the wine than the old Navy bunker with its thick, earthquake-proof walls.

That must have been one agonizing phone call to make, the one to my cousin, telling her that all her wine had been destroyed.

To me, the loss of the wine felt like the severing of my past, something I had been trying to grab onto for as long as I could remember. I came from a pioneer California family, but had been ripped from its embrace after my parents' divorce when I was two. In hindsight, I spent much of my life chasing after the security I imagined an intact home would have provided; when the wine burned I felt like one more link to my father, who had died when I was 16, and his side of the family had disappeared.

It's not that I didn't seek ways to dig deeper into my roots. I researched the life of the man who made the wine, my great-great-grandfather Isaias W. Hellman,

and published a book in 2008 about his rise to prominence. He had been a poor Jewish immigrant when he immigrated to Los Angeles in 1859 and had eventually become a successful banker and financier, even assuming control of Wells Fargo Bank. My research meant that I became the family historian and genealogy expert, the one everyone called to figure out how we were related to this person or that.

The loss of the wine prompted me to think harder about what it had taken to make wine in the 19th century when there were no stainless steel tanks or packaged native yeasts or Facebook to connect with customers. Where was Rancho Cucamonga, the place the wine was produced, anyway?

I started to do research and found that the Franciscan fathers, the men who trekked north from Mexico to start the mission system, were the first to produce wine in California. They essentially enslaved the Native Americans to plant the vines, pick the fruit, and then stomp the grapes suspended in cowhides. The *Californios*, the native-born Mexicans of the state, as well as the earliest American settlers, were no kinder to the Indians.

The wine in California was not particularly good in the 19th century. It was made with Mission grapes, brought here in 1778. The wine was a deep red, but was low in acidity, making it taste flat and dull. It was livened up with sugar and brandy and on occasion, more ominous adulterants.

Making wine back in California in the 19th century was a fool's errand, an easy way to lose money fast. Yet believers had stuck with it and carved out a respectable industry despite the boom and bust cycles that seemed to hit every decade. But winemaking also brought out men's avarice and search for power. In the

late 1880s and 1890s, a group of men, including my ancestor, had created the California Wine Association, a long-forgotten monopoly that bullied small wineries into submission. The company eventually controlled more than 80 percent of the wine production in California and constructed the largest winery in the world on the edge of San Francisco Bay. Prohibition put it out of business. It took decades to rebuild American interest in wine and create one of the largest wine economies in the world, worth an estimated \$23.1 billion in 2013.

What, I began to wonder, drove this passion? What kind of determination did it take to make something wonderful from a bunch of grapes? Why were people so passionate about something that was, at the end of the day, one liquid among millions? Why did they go to great lengths to chase down rare bottles or push their way onto the waiting lists of cult wineries? Was it the search for prestige, for status? There was no shortage of Japanese corporate titans and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who reinvented themselves as country vintners, spending millions on prime Napa Valley real estate and the best vineyard managers and winemakers they could afford. What prompted them?

I found myself on a quest of sorts, one to comprehend why someone would knowingly ruin that much wine, and to better understand the drive it took to make a good bottle of wine. I realized that the journey those particular 1875 bottles had taken was a microcosm of the history of wine in California, and began to think that if I really understood what went into the making of that wine – the history of the land, the stories of the men and women who owned the vineyard, and those who worked to ensure that California wine culture flourished - I would know more about what I

had lost. Was it only a liquid? Was it a heritage? Was it a link to anything that mattered?