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Amazing Grapes Part 1 *Unlocking the door*

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A fortuitous combination of geology and climate, along with an ability to draw off of Sedona's tourist business, is leading many people to believe the Verde Valley could one day become a world-class wine destination.

There is a growing belief that the Verde Valley will one day become a world-class wine destination. Geographically, geologically and climatologically, it possesses many of the attributes found in the great vineyard regions of the world. This three-part series explores where that vision is now, where it has been and where it is going.

In the spring of 1867, William Abraham Bell and a party of surveyors employed by the Kansas-Pacific Railway Company visited the Verde Valley while searching for a practical rail route to the west coast.

Bell, an Englishman by birth, astute observer by training and member of the Royal Geographical and Geologic Society of London, chronicled his trip in the book "New Tracks in North America: A Journal of Travel and Adventure."

Of the Verde Valley he wrote:

"The soil is rich, water permanent, and sufficient for all purposes of irrigation, the elevation being only 3,000 to 3,500 feet above the tide, Snow is unknown; and the valley having a deep sandy soil, is richer than the valley of the Rio Grande; it is mixed, like the latter, with the detritus of lava deposits, and, being admirably sheltered by mountain-walls on each side 1,200 to 2,400 feet high, is especially adapted to the production of wine and fruits. Wild grapes are everywhere abundant."

Bell may have been the first person to see the Verde Valley's potential as wine country, but he was not the first to note that the valley was an inviting place for grapes.

That honor goes to Diego Perez de Luxan, whose visit to the valley preceded Bell by 284 years. Luxan chronicled the 1583 expedition of Antonio de Espejo, a Spanish conquistador who came looking for gold.



Of the party's first stop in the valley, believed by Museum of Northern Arizona historian Katherine Bartlett to have been somewhere on the banks of Beaver Creek, Luxon wrote:

"The river is surrounded by an abundance of grapevines, many walnuts and other trees. It is a warm land and there are parrots. The land is warm rather than cold. This river (believed to be Beaver Creek) we named El Rio de las Parras (The River of Grapevines)."

In spite of glowing reports, the idea of growing vines in the Verde Valley was years taking root. As is the case in most pioneer settlements, early agriculture

amounted to little more than subsistence farming.

Credit for planting the first grape vines, at least with commercial intent, goes to Henry (Heinrich) Schuerman, a German immigrant who showed up on the banks of Oak Creek in the 1880s.

Schuerman had come to Arizona, via Canada, to escape being drafted into the Kaiser's army. While in business in Prescott he assumed ownership of a farm downstream from Sedona's Red Rock Crossing as repayment of a debt.

When attempts to sell the farm failed, Schuerman and his family become farmers.

"Henry came from Europe where growing grapes was a common thing to do," says Sedona historian Janeen Trevillyan. "He and his wife were portrayed as being city kids but somehow or another they figured out how to do it,"

In time Henry Schuerman and family's winery became prosperous, largely because of the burgeoning market offered by the Jerome mines.

According to his grandson, Sherman Loy, Henry and his sons would deliver wine by the barrel to Jerome, -- wagon loads full of barrels.

"They also bottled their wine," Trevillyan says. "There are stories of local cowboys breaking away from the herd, making a run to the Schuerman place and taking bottles of wine back to their camp."

But Henry's prosperous business venture and the valley's first commercial winery hit a snag that would take years to recover from. On Jan. 1, 1914, the newly formed State of Arizona enacted its own prohibition.

"Being an old German he just couldn't swallow that prohibition business," Loy says. "Not long after prohibition was enacted he got arrested for selling wine to someone and went to Prescott where he was kept under house arrest at a private home."

Henry's previous charitable work establishing the first schoolhouse in Sedona eventually helped secure him a pardon from the governor.

But about the same time as his arrest, Oak Creek changed course. Over a period of about three years the creek ate away at Henry's house and his red rock stone winery building.

The combination of disappointments proved too much for Henry, who died in 1920. It effectively put an end to the valley's first commercial winery.

Despite the Schuerman family's proven success, no one picked up where they left off when Prohibition ended in 1933.

Not for 70 years.

That's when Jon Marcus, a disenchanted attorney with his eye on a better life, bought 32 acres along lower

Oak Creek near Page Springs and took a gamble. He had originally thought of buying land in Napa Valley, Calif., but decided it was too crowded.

"I'm not so sure if I chose the Verde Valley or the Verde Valley chose me," Marcus says. "I just saw Echo Canyon as a unique micro-climate."

He closed the deal on the property in 1993. In 1994 he got in touch with one of Arizona's pioneer vintners from Sonoita, Kent Callaghan. In 1995 he quit the legal profession for good. And in 1996 he moved here with his family and began building Echo Canyon Vineyard and Winery.

Marcus' presence eventually drew the attention of others, including Rod Snapp, a Sedona businessman with a love of wine and winemaking, and Eric Glomski a skilled winemaker who had been fermenting the idea of making world-class wines in Central Arizona for years.

The three worked together at Echo Canyon for a brief period before Snapp and Glomski went on their own.

While working at Echo Canyon, Glomski met Maynard Keenan, a reclusive rock star with a passion for making great wines, who was just then planting vines in Jerome.

At the same time Ray and Ray Freitas were planting Cabernet, Syrah and Merlot vines on a couple of acres of rocky hillside outside Cottonwood.

Snapp started Javalina Leap Vineyards & Winery in 2001. Glomski started Page Springs Cellars in 2004.

Ignacio Mesa, a construction manager by day, was also planting grapes along Clear Creek in Camp Verde in anticipation of the future Clear Creek Vineyards & Winery.

In 2005, Bob and Barbra Predmore began Alcantara, the first vineyard and winery on the [Verde River](#).

Glomski, Maynard and Page Springs Cellars were the first to grab national attention, and with it has come more interest in Verde Valley wines.

The Verde Valley will never become a Napa Valley. It is not a vision shared by those who are unlocking the door. The topography is not conducive to growing acre upon acre of grapes and few, if any, want to see that.

Those who are investing in Verde Valley vineyards are doing so because of an unshakable belief in the valley's potential to produce quality, not quantity, world-class grapes, the basis for world-class wines.

As Glomski is fond of saying, "Great wines are made in the vineyard, not the winery."

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