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The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

MAKING CALIFORNIA PORT WINE:
FICKLIN VINEYARDS FROM 1948 TO 1992

Interviews with
David B. Ficklin
Jean Ficklin
Peter Ficklin
Steven Ficklin

With an Introduction by
Vincent E. Petrucci

Interviews Conducted by
Carole Hicke
in 1992

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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David B. Ficklin
1992

Cataloging Information

MAKING CALIFORNIA PORT WINE: FICKLIN VINEYARDS FROM 1948 TO 1992, 1992, xii, 106 pp.

David B. Ficklin (b. 1918): discusses establishing Ficklin Vineyards in 1948, selecting Portuguese grape varieties, building winery, assembling equipment, first crush, role of father Walter C. Ficklin, role of brother Walter C. Ficklin as vineyardist; growth of the port-making business in following decades. Jean Ficklin (b. 1920): on record-keeping, entertainment for marketing. Peter Ficklin (b. 1953): recalls growing up at the winery, present operations, winemaking duties, computerizing record-keeping. Steven Ficklin (b. 1944): on the role of the vineyardist, cooperative relationship with vineyardist, diseases in the vineyard.

Introduction by Professor Vincent E. Petrucci, Director, Viticulture and Enology Research Center, California State University, Fresno.

Interviewed in 1992 by Carole Hicke for the Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History 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 the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. DeLuca, 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 winemaking 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 winemaking 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 The Bancroft Library.

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

July 1992
Regional Oral History Office
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CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY INTERVIEWS
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- Leon D. Adams, Revitalizing the California Wine Industry, 1974
- Leon D. Adams, California Wine Industry Affairs: Recollections and Opinions, 1990
- Maynard A. Amerine, The University of California and the State's Wine Industry, 1971
- Maynard A. Amerine, Wine Bibliographies and Taste Perception Studies, 1988
- Philo Biane, Wine Making in Southern California and Recollections of Fruit Industries, Inc., 1972
- John B. Cella, The Cella Family in the California Wine Industry, 1986
- Charles Crawford, Recollections of a Career with the Gallo Winery and the Development of the California Wine Industry, 1942-1989, 1990
- Burke H. Critchfield, Carl F. Wente, and Andrew G. Frericks, The California Wine Industry During the Depression, 1972
- William V. Cruess, A Half Century of Food and Wine Technology, 1967
- Jack and Jamie Peterman Davies, Rebuilding Schramsberg: The Creation of a California Champagne House, 1990
- William A. Dieppe, Almaden is My Life, 1985
- Making California Port Wine: Ficklin Vineyards from 1948 to 1992, interviews with David, Jean, Peter, and Steven Ficklin, 1992
- Alfred Fromm, Marketing California Wine and Brandy, 1984
- Louis Gomberg, Analytical Perspectives on the California Wine Industry, 1935-1990, 1990
- Miljenko Grgich, A Croatian-American Winemaker in the Napa Valley, 1992
- Joseph E. Heitz, Creating a Winery in the Napa Valley, 1986
- Maynard A. Joslyn, A Technologist Views the California Wine Industry, 1974
- Amandus N. Kasimatis, A Career in California Viticulture, 1988
- Morris Katz, Paul Masson Winery Operations and Management, 1944-1988, 1990
- Lekh F. Knowles, Jr., Beaulieu Vineyards from Family to Corporate Ownership, 1990

- Horace O. Lanza and Harry Baccigaluppi, California Grape Products and Other Wine Enterprises, 1971
- Zelma R. Long, The Past is the Beginning of the Future: Simi Winery in its Second Century, 1992
- Richard Maher, California Winery Management and Marketing, 1992
- Louis M. Martini and Louis P. Martini, Wine Making in the Napa Valley, 1973
- Louis P. Martini, A Family Winery and the California Wine Industry, 1984
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- Otto E. Meyer, California Premium Wines and Brandy, 1973
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- Peter Mondavi, Advances in Technology and Production at Charles Krug Winery, 1946-1988, 1990
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- Michael Moone, Management and Marketing at Beringer Vineyards and Wine World, Inc., 1990
- Myron S. Nightingale, Making Wine in California, 1944-1987, 1988
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- Cornelius Ough, Researches of an Enologist, University of California, Davis, 1950-1990, 1990
- John A. Parducci, Six Decades of Making Wine in Mendocino County, California, 1992
- Antonio Perelli-Minetti, A Life in Wine Making, 1975
- Louis A. Petri, The Petri Family in the Wine Industry, 1971
- Jefferson E. Peyser, The Law and the California Wine Industry, 1974
- Lucius Powers, The Fresno Area and the California Wine Industry, 1974
- Victor Repetto and Sydney J. Block, Perspectives on California Wines, 1976
- Edmund A. Rossi, Italian Swiss Colony and the Wine Industry, 1971
- Edmund A. Rossi, Jr., Italian Swiss Colony, 1949-1989: Recollections of a Third-Generation California Winemaker, 1990

- Arpaxat Setrakian, A. Setrakian, a Leader of the San Joaquin Valley Grape Industry, 1977
- Elie Skofis, California Wine and Brandy Maker, 1988
- Andre Tchelistcheff, Grapes, Wine, and Ecology, 1983
- Brother Timothy, The Christian Brothers as Wine Makers, 1974
- Louis (Bob) Trinchero, California Zinfandels, a Success Story, 1992
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- Ernest A. Wente, Wine Making in the Livermore Valley, 1971
- Albert J. Winkler, Viticultural Research at UC Davis (1921-1971), 1973
- John H. Wright, Domaine Chandon: The First French-owned California Sparkling Wine Cellar, includes an interview with Edmond Maudière, 1992



INTRODUCTION--by Vincent Petrucci

It is with great pleasure that I introduce Mr. David B. Ficklin Esq. in this series of oral histories with California winemakers. My initial relationship with David dates back to 1948 when I was hired by Fresno State College (now known as California State University, Fresno--CSUF) to establish an educational program in Viticulture and Enology.

As a young professor this indeed was a huge assignment. The best place for me to go for advice on how to determine the grape and wine industry needs for such a program was to go to the very industry itself. I approached Mr. Walter C. Ficklin, David's father, about just what did he feel should a curriculum in viticulture and enology include to train future viticulturists and enologists for industry employment. While gathering in his advice I met his son, David, and since that time David and I have become friends as well as professional colleagues.

A few years later, in 1955 to be exact, my wife, Jo, and I along with many other guests, which included Pam and Leo Dollan (Farm Editor Fresno Bee) and Alice and Joe Heitz (then Professor of Enology at Fresno State) were invited to the Ficklin's Annual Vintage Supper of that year.

The Ficklin families hosting this beautiful vintage celebration introduced us to their celebrity guest and motion picture star, Burgess Meredith. This grand entertainer joined all who were present in sipping the freshly pressed Tinta Madeira grape juice from a "Giant" wine goblet. After each guest had sipped the juice, whose grape must (skin plus juice) would soon be fermented in the famous "Tinta Port" wines of Ficklin Vineyards, we all sat down to a wonderful vintage supper prepared by the Ficklins.

Through the ensuing years I visited with David and his lovely wife Jean at their Madera winery during our class field trip, which had become an annual affair. Among the many highlights of this particular field trip, two stand out in particular: the first was a tour of the vineyard, which featured the outstanding Portuguese varieties: Tinta Madeira, Tinta Cão, Touriga, Alvarelhao and Souzão. Also plantings of the newly introduced Ruby Cabernet (a red wine variety adapted to the warm climate of the San Joaquin Valley) and the Emerald Riesling, a white variety also adapted to warm climate because of its sugar/acid balance.

I consider the commercial introduction of these world-famous Portuguese varieties to California by the Ficklins as an extremely important contribution to the improvement of California vintage port wines.

The second field trip highlight was a tour of the winery personally given by David B. Ficklin. The students listened intently and took volumes of notes as David explained each intricate step in his red dessert winemaking procedure. He had no secrets and answered all questions asked by these eager-to-learn students.

At the conclusion of the winery tour and question-and-answer session, we would be treated to a tasting of several vintages, beginning with the youngest, thence on to some of the very earliest, a real treat not only for the students, but for the professor as well. Complementing the tasting of these delicious port wines were some very special snacks prepared by David's wife, Jean. This field trip always had a "fulfilling and happy" ending.

When mechanical harvesting of wine grapes was introduced, California State University Fresno (CSUF) played an active role in machine harvesting of wine grapes. One particular research endeavor was to evaluate mechanical damage to the grapevine, as well as determining the extraneous matter (material other than grapes, later to be known as MOG) in the machine-harvested fruit. David Ficklin learned of this CSUF endeavor and volunteered his Ruby Cabernet and Emerald Riesling vineyards for off-campus trials. About this same time, David learned of the CSUF field crusher (a take-off from what had been previously introduced by Mirassou Vineyards and Wentz Bros.). As a result of David's interest in new technology, the CSUF Viticulture and Enology Research Center (VERC) as it is known today set up trials in the Ficklin vineyards to evaluate 1) mechanical damage to grapevines, 2) MOG, and 3) machine-harvested, field-crushed grapes delivered as grape must to the fermented tanks at the winery. Needless to say, the CSUF students of Viticulture and Enology gained a new and exciting experience thanks to Mr. David B. Ficklin.

Today David and Jean have taken their proper place in the background of this prestigious winery, known worldwide for its truly fine port wines, and watch quietly with a great deal of pride and admiration as their son, Peter, carries on the responsibility as the Ficklin Vineyards winemaker.

It has been my sincere honor to have been asked to write these few words of introduction for David. David is a soft-spoken man, whose mannerism is gracious and ever caring for those who associate with him. His generosity is evident, as each year during the CSUF Viticulture Alumni sponsored celebration of wine he takes the time from his busy schedule to personally serve his ever popular Ficklin port wines at this prestigious wine tasting as well as others throughout the state.

In summary I will add that the grape and wine industry of the state and country owes a debt of gratitude to the Ficklins and David in particular for their vision in utilizing this climatic region, which is so wonderfully adapted to producing world class red dessert wine, which they have done.

I consider David B. Ficklin as one of California's premiere winemakers and I am proud to be his friend.

Vincent E. Petrucci
Director, Viticulture & Enology
Research Center

July 1992
California State University, Fresno

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Ficklin Vineyards

In the history of the California wine industry, Ficklin Vineyards has held a unique position as producer of port made from only Portuguese grape varieties. David B. Ficklin was interviewed to document his role in the history of the winery, which dates back to 1948. His wife, Jean, was included in the interview, as she has been president of the winery and made a considerable contribution to its success. Peter Ficklin, present president and charged with winemaker duties since 1978, and Steven Ficklin, vineyardist since 1975, were also included in the interview sessions as important contributors. Peter is the son of David and Jean Ficklin, and Steven is the son of David's brother, Walter C. Ficklin, Jr., who was the original vineyard manager. The interviews are part of the Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series.

David Ficklin, with his father Walter C. Ficklin and his brother, Walter C. Ficklin, Jr., established the Ficklin Vineyards in 1948 to make port. He acted as winemaker while his brother managed the vineyard, which they decided would be planted with true Portuguese grape varieties--Tinta Madeira, Touriga, Tinta Cao, and Souzao. Concentrating on making the finest possible wine, the Ficklins have attained renown and respect for their port, while remaining a small family operation. Members of the family handle most of the duties, and Peter and Steven described the close and cordial relationship between them as winemaker and vineyardist that unifies those operations.

The Ficklins were interviewed on January 16 and 17, 1992, in David and Jean's home next to the winery, and Peter took the interviewer on an explanatory tour of the winery itself. All four narrators reviewed the transcript and some minor changes were made. Jean was prompt in responding to requests for photographs and further information.

This series is part of the ongoing documenting of California history by the Regional Oral History Office, which is under the direction of Willa Baum, Division Head, and under the administrative direction of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Carole Hicke
Interviewer-Editor

May 1992
Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name David Beach Ficklin
Date of birth May 31, 1918 Birthplace Fresno, California
Father's full name Walter Colquit Ficklin
Occupation Farmer, business executive Birthplace Tuscola, Illinois
Mother's full name Mame Beach Lewis
Occupation Housewife Birthplace Fairbury, Illinois
Your spouse Matis Jean Ebelteft
Your children David Beach Ficklin Jr, Peter Ebelteft Ficklin

Where did you grow up? Madera County (rural), California
Present community same
Education Eastin Brammer School, Madera High School
Undergraduate UCLA, chemistry; UC Davis, entology (no degree)
Occupation(s) Telephone switchman, military (WW II),
winemaker (36 years)
Areas of expertise wine tasting; wine judging, California State
Fair (16 years)

Other interests or activities amateur radio, swimming, bicycling,
travel including R/Ving, photography, literature,
spectator sports, gardening
Organizations in which you are active Retired from most organizations
but still belong to the Madera County Amateur Radio
Club

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FICKLIN

V i n e y a r d s

Ficklin Vineyards Timeline

- 1911** Walter C. Ficklin Sr. brings his family to the San Joaquin Valley from Illinois.
- 1918** Walter C. Ficklin Sr., and wife Mame, buy land in Madera California.
- 1930's** U.C. Davis conducts field trials of Portugese grape varieties in San Joaquin Valley.
- 1945** The Ficklin family grafts first Portuguese grape varietals onto their vineyard rootstock.
- 1945** Walter C. Ficklin Jr. becomes vineyard manager.
- September, 1946** Ficklin Vineyards is incorporated.
- 1946** David Ficklin constructs original winery building from hand-made adobe bricks.
- 1948** David Ficklin becomes winemaker at Ficklin Vineyards.
- August, 1948** First crush at Ficklin Vineyards, 18 tons of grapes.
- August, 1949** Second crush at Ficklin Vinyards, 45 tons of grapes.
- October, 1952** Release of first Ficklin Tinta Port, with 10 retail outlets in California.
- 1959** Release of Special Bottling #1, 1951 Touriga, bottled in 1954.
- 1963** Release of Special Bottling #2, Lot #5, Non-vintage Tinta Port, bottled in February, 1957.
- 1965** Release of Special Bottling #3, 1953 Tinta Madeira, bottled in February, 1957.

(more)

- November, 1968** Release of Special Bottling #4. 1957 Tinta Madeira, bottled February 26 & 27, 1960.
- 1975** Walter C. Ficklin, Jr. retires and son, Steven Ficklin, assumes full vineyard management duties.
- March, 1978** Peter Ficklin completes enology studies at U.C. Davis and joins Ficklin as assistant winemaker.
- July, 1983** David B. Ficklin retires and Peter Ficklin assumes full winemaking duties. Jean Ficklin becomes president of Ficklin Vineyards.
- November, 1987** Release of Special Bottling #5, 1980 Vintage Port, bottled in April, 1983.
- February, 1991** Peter Ficklin appointed president of Ficklin Vineyards. He retains his position as winemaker as well.
- September, 1991** Release of Special Bottling #6, 1983 Vintage Port, bottled in May, 1987.

I BACKGROUND

[Interview 1: January 18, 1992]##¹

David B. Ficklin

Hicke: I'd like to ask you when and where you were born.

D. Ficklin: I was born in Fresno, California.

Hicke: Not too far distant. When?

D. Ficklin: May 31, 1918.

Hicke: Did you grow up right here in this area?

D. Ficklin: In this general area, yes, in southern Madera County.

Walter C. Ficklin and His Ranch

Hicke: I want to get a little bit about your early days, but first let's go back and get the story of the establishment of the winery. Can you tell me how that came about?

¹This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. There is a guide to the tapes at the end of this document.

- D. Ficklin: My father and my brother were both engaged in fruit growing, raisin growing principally, in the time period preceding World War II.
- Hicke: Let's go back even further. How did your father get to California?
- D. Ficklin: It was about the time that he was married in 1911 that they came out from Illinois and settled in the Kerman [California] area for several years on a ranch. Then he bought property in Madera County. For a brief time, while they were getting housing on the new place in Madera, they moved to Fresno, and it was at that time that I was born. We came out to the Madera property in about a year. I've been here essentially most of the time since.
- Hicke: What was your father going to do with the property?
- D. Ficklin: He developed it into fruits--grapes and that type of thing. He was fascinated by the productivity of the land in this area, the climate, and all the possibilities. He planted many different varieties of peaches and grapes and was always trying something new. He would work with the agricultural people--the farm advisors, the people from the university, and so forth. I guess he planted some things that worked out successfully financially. He really had a lot of interest and curiosity about agriculture.
- Hicke: Had he been farming before? Did he grow up on a farm?
- D. Ficklin: No, he didn't. He grew up in a small town in Illinois. Before he was married he tried homesteading in North Dakota for several years, and that didn't suit him. I guess it was quite a struggle in that area. He had always had a dream to--can you see the hawk out there? [points out window]
- Hicke: Oh, yes, I can!
- D. Ficklin: Anyhow, he always had a dream to come to California. He had his chance when he was married, and that's what happened.
- Hicke: He just picked up stakes and came out here, not sure what he was going to do?
- D. Ficklin: Oh, he was pretty certain that he wanted to farm. It is rather curious that the name of the community, Kerman, is a contraction of two names, Kerchoff and Mansar. Those families

are distant cousins, and I think that's probably the reason he settled in that particular area originally. The soil there was apparently more alkaline; it wasn't very good farm land at that time. They've done a lot of work with gypsum and different types of soil renovation, so now they can grow cotton and a lot of crops that weren't possible in those days.

Hicke: It takes a while to grow peaches and some of those things, doesn't it?

D. Ficklin: That's true, so it must have been rather a slow start for him. And of course he didn't put it all in at once. He had a 160-acre parcel at that time, and he didn't develop it all at once by any means.

Hicke: Did he have to go to the bank and get a loan?

D. Ficklin: Yes, that's right.

Hicke: Was it the Bank of America?

D. Ficklin: Let me think. I believe it was; it used to be Bank of Italy.

Hicke: I ask that because I know they had offices in various places, and they also were interested in promoting agriculture.

D. Ficklin: Yes, I recall that, too.

David's Childhood

Hicke: So you grew up on the ranch?

D. Ficklin: That's right. In the summers we would work in the fruits, drying apricots, peaches, and that type of thing. We'd work in the vineyards trying to control leaf-hopper and dusting with sulfur for mildew. It was mostly hand labor in those days. [laughs]

Hicke: And probably a lot of yours.

D. Ficklin: I did put in quite a bit of time. We would get paid something like ten cents an hour.

Hicke: Did you go to school around here?

D. Ficklin: Yes, I went to the neighborhood school, Eastin Grammar School, which I started attending when I was six years old; that was in 1924. We used to walk a mile to get to school and a mile to get home. I'll never forget the first day I attended. Everybody lined up outside in front so we could salute the flag. Above the door was a sign, "Eastin School," and then it had the date, "1919." I looked at that, and I thought, "Gee, that's a long time ago." [laughs] It's all relative, isn't it?

I went through the first eight grades there, and I had some very fine teachers. One in particular, Mrs. Fender, was an outstanding and dedicated teacher. Then I spent four years being bussed to the high school in Madera. At that time I was interested in the sciences and mathematics primarily.

More About the Ranch

Hicke: Let's go back to some of the things your father was growing. I know he was in the raisin association [California Associated Raisin Company, forerunner to Sun-Maid Raisin Association].

D. Ficklin: Yes, he helped in the founding of that, as I remember.

Hicke: What was the purpose of that organization?

D. Ficklin: It was sort of a cooperative processing and marketing idea instead of independent packers, whom the growers felt had a tendency to more or less arbitrarily set a price to the farmer which was to the advantage of the packer, really. It was quite a big problem to get participation in that organization originally because there were just an awful lot of stubborn, independent thinkers out there in that farming community. But apparently they put it together, and of course it has grown and is still going. It's a little difficult to say just how successful they have been, but certainly the growers have gotten very favorable returns, I would say. So from that point of view, I think you could say it was successful.

Hicke: What were the problems in getting some of these independent growers to join--getting them to agree on the prices or the markets?

- D. Ficklin: No, just to join and become a member and to be committed that way. Also, they couldn't be paid in a lump sum; they were paid in payments as the raisins were sold at market. So it meant that to get going initially in that organization, it created somewhat of a hardship financially for some of them. I'm not a real expert on all of the aspects of the Sun-Maid, but that's my general understanding of it. We are members; we have a little parcel or block of raisin varieties, too.
- Hicke: So you're still growing raisins?
- D. Ficklin: Yes. I'm not involved in the farming part; it's leased to my nephew.
- Hicke: Whom did the raisin association market to? Was your father involved in that?
- D. Ficklin: I'm not aware that he was. I think they hired professional people for that purpose. They didn't have chain stores in those days. There were also export markets, perhaps wholesale brokers in the East, and of course bakeries. I'm not certain how they handled it.
- Hicke: I notice that he grew currants also.
- D. Ficklin: The real name for those is Zante currants, and there's another name, Black Corinth.
- Hicke: Was that a big crop?
- D. Ficklin: It depends on what period you're talking about. At the height of the Depression, nothing was really that great. In recent years it certainly has been profitable.
- Hicke: And he grew peaches?
- D. Ficklin: Yes, several kinds of peaches, including the Freestones, which were used for drying, and some Clings that were intended for canning.
- Hicke: Was there a cannery nearby?
- D. Ficklin: Not in Madera. They had to be trucked up to the Turlock or Stockton area to the Libby plant, as I recall. During the Depression early in the thirties, the market for the canning peaches just collapsed totally. My father ended up fencing

off the orchard and putting hogs in there, just letting the fruit drop. It wasn't easy.

Hicke: He made a successful living out of the ranch?

D. Ficklin: He kept food on the table. In the mid-thirties, when he went to the bank to finance the next year's crop, the bank finally said no. So he gave up the place and moved the family to another parcel he had.

Hicke: Was that also a ranch?

D. Ficklin: Yes, it was practically all vineyard.

Hicke: So the grapes were still selling?

D. Ficklin: Yes. That's where Sun-Maid came in. There wasn't big money in it, but it would keep him alive.

David's Grandparents

Hicke: Let's go way back and pick up some notes about your grandparents.

D. Ficklin: While I think of it, I might just mention that our family of Ficklins is descended from a William Ficklin who came over from England to the United States in the 1720s. We have a complete record of that, but we've never been able to get any information about his family in England.

Hicke: Do you know what part of England he came from?

D. Ficklin: Suffolk, very possibly. There are a lot of Ficklins there now. As a matter of fact, we had a young man by the name of Ficklin visit us last September and October for about a month. He came over, and we showed him around California as much as we could. It was very interesting to get to know him.

Hicke: Did he think you were a long lost relative?

D. Ficklin: I think it is very possible, yes. [laughs]

Getting back to my grandparents, on my father's side my grandfather was Alfred Colquitt Ficklin, and my grandmother's

maiden name was Emma Weiss. I never knew my grandfather Ficklin; he died before I was born. But I did know my grandmother quite well.

Hicke: Did she live here?

D. Ficklin: Yes, she came out here from the Midwest in the twenties, and she lived in Pasadena for quite a few years. When my uncle Otto retired, my father's brother, they moved to Beverly Hills. I stayed there, too, part of the time when I was at UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles].

On my mother's side, my grandfather was Dr. George Canby Lewis. His wife was Ella Beach. My middle name comes from the Beach family. They lived in Fairbury, Illinois, which is near Bloomington and Pontiac.

Hicke: How did they get out to California?

D. Ficklin: My grandfather never did.

Hicke: Did you go back there?

D. Ficklin: That's right. When I was talking earlier about my growing up, I wonder if I didn't dwell too much on the Depression and the hard times, because it wasn't all like that. We had some wonderful trips back to see my Lewis grandfather. I remember in the late twenties when we all went by train. We were in Pullman cars, and of course I slept in an upper berth and the whole bit. It was really quite a thrill. Coming back we detoured and went down to New Orleans.

In the thirties we had several automobile trips. The first one of those was about 1932, when we took what was called Route 66, going through the southern states and up into Illinois. In those days it wasn't all paved, especially in places like New Mexico; it was just graded dirt. When it would rain, the clay soil was just terrible. The car would get stuck, and we'd have to push. It was quite an adventure. We would stop and see all the national parks between here and there. We really had some nice experiences in those days.

Hicke: Your father traveled around the world, didn't he?

D. Ficklin: Oh, my word, yes--both he and his brother, but they didn't go together. [laughs] On a couple of occasions they would both be in, say, Switzerland, but they would be so busy doing their

own thing that they couldn't get together. My father had some especially nice trips, such as in France in the wine country, where he would be with friends, and they would rent an automobile and be on their own; it wouldn't be a conducted tour. He was very enthusiastic about travel.

Education and Schools

Hicke: So you were growing up in the Depression years.

D. Ficklin: That's correct, in my high school years particularly.

Hicke: What was it like here?

D. Ficklin: Rather discouraging. At that time I couldn't see any future in farming, and I wasn't interested in it. My older brother studied agriculture in high school and took it up afterward. He's retired now, but he kept at it all his life.

Hicke: He studied agriculture in high school?

D. Ficklin: Oh, yes.

Hicke: What kind of agriculture courses did you have in high school?

D. Ficklin: I can't tell you exactly, because I wasn't in them.

Hicke: You were in another course? You could choose agriculture or--

D. Ficklin: To a certain extent. There were a lot of required courses, of course. In my case, I took four years of mathematics, because I kind of liked that, and I guess I took three years of science for the same reason. We also had English, history, and so forth, that everybody took.

Hicke: Instead of math and science, your brother was taking agriculture?

D. Ficklin: Yes.

Hicke: What did you decide to do after high school?

D. Ficklin: I enrolled at UCLA as a chemistry undergraduate, but I didn't complete everything there. For a couple of years or so I was

able to get a job with the telephone company back in the Midwest in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I started out as a draftsman, and then I worked as a central office switchman, which had to do with the dial phone-connecting equipment in the central office.

Military Service

- Hicke: You left UCLA after a couple of years and took this job? About what year are we in now? Was this still before the war [World War II]?
- D. Ficklin: Yes. As a matter of fact, in March of 1941 I was drafted and went into the service in the field artillery at Fort Sill.
- Hicke: You were drafted out of this job with the telephone company?
- D. Ficklin: Yes. I started out as a private draftee, and I ended up spending four and a half years in the service in the army.
- Hicke: Where were you stationed?
- D. Ficklin: Various places. After a year or so in the field artillery at Fort Sill, I was transferred to the signal corps and went to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. After attending school there, for a time I was an instructor in telephone repair and that kind of thing. I finally decided to go to officer candidate school, so then I was commissioned probably in the summer of '42. From there I was sent across the country to Spokane, Washington.
- Hicke: What did you do there?
- D. Ficklin: I was in radio repair, in charge of a shop for aircraft radios that needed repairing. The shop had civil service employees. After perhaps a year there I went overseas, first to England. I was assigned to a signal corps detachment that was providing communications in the way of telephone cables for the air bases and that kind of thing. It was a matter of working with the English telephone company, because it was tying into their equipment as well as into the American equipment at the airfields. It was one of the early attempts for direct burial of telephone cables; at least the English hadn't been using that technique. It was a matter of overseeing the operation

to see that the cable was buried at the proper depth, that nothing in the way of damage would occur, and then to do the proper backfill.

Hicke: Where in England were you working?

D. Ficklin: It was north of London in the general area of Ipswich. Ipswich had a lot of American army air corps. We were working with the Eighth Air Force at that time--the strategic air force. As things were getting ready for the invasion of the continent, they were forming the Ninth Air Force, which was a tactical type of operation. I went to southeastern England where they were organizing these new fighter groups. When the invasion came, our unit went over rather soon after the initial wave. We weren't involved in the initial wave, but we did go onto Omaha Beach.

Hicke: Then were you in France for a while?

D. Ficklin: Yes. We were somewhat behind the lines. When we first arrived, it was just like sardines squeezed into that little area they had. Fortunately, the Germans at that time didn't have too much left in the way of aircraft, but they still had their artillery. Their artillery actually outperformed ours; those 88-millimeter, high-velocity shells kept pounding every day.

Hicke: They did a lot of damage?

D. Ficklin: Our ammo [ammunition] dump went up one time, and there were quite a lot of fireworks there.

II ESTABLISHING THE WINERY

Studying Enology

Hicke: After the war, what did you decide to do?

D. Ficklin: For a brief time I returned to the telephone company. We considered the possibility of starting a winery.

Hicke: You and your brother?

D. Ficklin: Yes, and my father. I think it really was a dream of my father, first of all. He had educated himself about wines and was fascinated. He had visited about every winery in the state by that time, so he had a lot of acquaintances in the wine business.

We were able to finalize some plans, and we officially incorporated in September 1946.

Hicke: Were you bonded at that time?

D. Ficklin: No, we weren't bonded, because we had no premises. I went to Davis and spent a year up there in enology and then came back, made the adobe bricks, and built the original building.

Hicke: You incorporated in '46, and then you went back to Davis after that?

D. Ficklin: I think that was about the time I was already enrolled. I started in the fall of '46.

##

Hicke: You said your previous work in chemistry was a big help?

D. Ficklin: Yes, indeed, it surely was. It helped me immensely. I had a good understanding of the basics. [Dr. Maynard A.] Amerine didn't mind tossing us terms of the chemicals-- hydroximethylfurfural and many others.

Hicke: What courses did you take?

D. Ficklin: Oh, gosh. It was primarily enology and that type of thing. I forget the precise names. The other course I took was bacteriology. That's one area where I was having trouble, because in high school I had never even taken biology. I had to do a lot of extra studying, but I finally put it together and got through in good shape. When I first started I had no idea what they were talking about.

Hicke: What were your impressions of Dr. Amerine?

D. Ficklin: Oh, absolutely tremendous. It was a wonderful course. He simplified things and led us by the hand on tasting--how to taste from just simple solutions of maybe sugar and water in different amounts. You were supposed to be able to find out what your threshold was for determining different degrees of sweetness. There would be other constituents that he would do the same thing with, like acids such as tartaric acid. Then he would start in with some of the aromas that develop your awareness of what to look for, such as the acetic acid, the vinegar component of wine--different levels of that in wine tastings. You were supposed to rank them and find out just how far down in dilution you could pick it up.

Then we got into actual wines themselves and evaluating them. He'd go over them and tell us what he was experiencing, and then he'd have a different sample and call on us to give our views.

Hicke: Is developing your palate and sense of smell something you could learn fairly quickly?

D. Ficklin: An older person would have more trouble, of course, but a young person who applied himself I think could learn an awful lot, yes. This was the sort of thing we were doing on a regular basis; it wasn't just a hit or miss type of thing.

So that's how we learned about wines. Then we had actual hands-on experience with crushing grapes, fermenting, and that type of thing, and then analysis afterward. It was really quite an experience.

Hicke: You worked with Dr. [Albert J.] Winkler also?

D. Ficklin: Yes. Oh, my, that was a privilege, too. His knowledge and expertise in the area of viticulture--well, there are none any better than he, I can tell you that. The other person who was quite neat was Dr. [James F.] Jim Guymon. He was in distillation. In the case of ports, for example, we had brandy, and the quality of the brandy is very important, obviously. He was teaching analysis and some of the constituents and tasting also, which is very difficult because of high-alcohol content.

Hicke: The tasting is more difficult with high-alcohol content?

D. Ficklin: Yes, judging of spirits like that is more of a challenge.

Choosing Port and Portuguese Grape Varieties

Hicke: Had you already decided on port?

D. Ficklin: Yes. I was up there studying, and my brother was getting the first early vines planted, which are right out here [indicates].

Hicke: How did you and your family decide on port?

D. Ficklin: I guess initially my brother and my father contacted the university at Davis and were finding out what the possibilities were of doing something with wine grapes in this area. Their suggestion was to look at dessert wines because of the hot summers. They showed us quite a few samples of ports, among other things--but primarily ports--that they had produced in their experimental vineyards up there at Davis, particularly from Portuguese varieties.

Hicke: Who was your contact at Davis?

D. Ficklin: Winkler and Amerine were the principal ones. That was so neat. They must have had, oh, thirty or forty different port

wines there to sample at various times. It was a matter of talking with them, tasting, and making a decision. Out of that initially we picked out four varieties. We have three of them remaining [Tinta Madeira, Tinta Cão, Touriga]; the fourth one, Alvarelhao, developed a virus in the vineyard, and we had to remove it.

Hicke: Did you ever consider anything other than port varieties?

D. Ficklin: We did experiment a little bit with a couple of Dr. [Harold P.] Olmo's hybrids, the Ruby Cabernet and the Emerald Riesling, to produce table wines. We did have reasonably good success, but we never really made an effort to distribute it. We didn't make it in that big a quantity; we just depended mostly on friends and neighbors who would come and want to buy it. There again, I think the same virus that took out the Alvarelhao got into these two varieties also, and they went downhill very quickly. That really took us out of the table wine aspect of it. I think initially Peter wanted to continue it, but the problem was that you couldn't make good wine out of the fruit.

Hicke: To go back to your choosing the Portuguese varieties--the grapes had been brought over to the University?

D. Ficklin: Yes. Back in the thirties, after the repeal of Prohibition, I guess Amerine and the enology people at the University were rather appalled by some of the dessert wines that were being made in California and were searching for ways for improvement. They were looking at all types of wine, I guess. One of the things they did was to go over to the principal wine-growing regions of Europe, searching out varieties and finding out what was going on over there, including going to Portugal. So they obtained cuttings from some of the promising varieties, brought them back, and used them to establish experimental plantings at Davis.

Hicke: How did you settle on the varieties that you chose?

D. Ficklin: It was a matter of the three of us going up to Davis and sitting down with Amerine in particular and Winkler, trying these different samples of wine that they had made, talking it over, and looking at the composition of the wines--the acidity, color, stability, and that type of thing. We finally settled on the four that I mentioned.

Hicke: So you chose them on the basis of the wines that they made; others would have done well in this climate, but you liked these wines?

D. Ficklin: Yes. Hopefully we selected some of the better of the Portuguese varieties.

Hicke: Clearly you did. [laughter]

D. Ficklin: That's what we were trying to do.

Hicke: So you knew what the wines were going to come out like, in some sense?

D. Ficklin: Yes, we had some idea of their basic character.

Hicke: All right. You attended Davis in '46--

D. Ficklin: Yes, I enrolled in the fall of '46 and spent one year there. Then I came home, and of course we were getting anxious to get started with things here.

Building the Winery

Hicke: Your brother had already been planting? [cuckoo clock chimes three times]

D. Ficklin: I'm trying to think of exactly when he started. It might have been in the spring of '46. Anyhow, in 1947 I came home in June, and immediately I and a hired man started making adobe bricks. We found an area at the back of what was then my father's home where the soil had a nice combination of clay and sand composition. Incidentally, I used the UC Extension bulletin on making adobe bricks. [laughter] That was the easy part--to read the bulletin! We had an old cement mixer, and we'd put some water in there. Then we put a waterproofing agent, which is an emulsified asphalt, in with the water. Then we started shoveling dirt in there and let it mix. We had a little wooden frame that would make, I think, two adobe bricks.

Hicke: How big were the bricks?

- D. Ficklin: They were four inches thick, twelve inches wide, and sixteen or eighteen inches long. They weighed about fifty pounds apiece. [laughs]
- Hicke: How did you know you had the right soil?
- D. Ficklin: That isn't difficult. You can take a jar of water and put a sample of the soil in there, shake it, and the sand will go to the bottom right away. Then there will be intermediate levels, and the clay will be the last to settle out. You end up with strata there.
- Hicke: Did this bulletin tell you what was the right combination of sand and clay?
- D. Ficklin: Yes. As I said, the mold for the bricks would do two of them. You were supposed to mix up the adobe material so that it was fairly stiff so that you could lift this mold off right away and it wouldn't slump that much; it would hold its position.
- Hicke: How many of those could you make in a day?
- D. Ficklin: A couple hundred of them. [laughs] After maybe a week of drying, we'd have to go along and tip them up on edge so that the underside would dry, as it was in contact with the ground. Of course, this was in the summertime.
- Hicke: Yes, the heat [helped].
- D. Ficklin: That was the summer of '47.
- Hicke: Who designed the winery?
- D. Ficklin: I was basically responsible for that. I had had a short course up there [at Davis] on farm structures, as I recall. It gave me some basic understanding of what I was supposed to be doing and how to go about it. Then I talked to the instructor and showed him some plans that I had been developing. He made some very constructive suggestions, which I followed, and off we went. We must have started in the fall of '47, and we finished it just barely in time for the first crush in 1948.

Not only did we have to finish the building, but we had to get all our permits--the bonding and authorization from the Bureau of Alcohol and Tax, which is now the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

Hicke: That was a federal agency?

D. Ficklin: Yes. I remember that before we finalized the plans I got the federal regulations on construction and waded through all of that. It wasn't clear to me whether something like adobe bricks would qualify as security protecting the revenue in the eyes of the bureau, so I went up to San Francisco one time to the bureau office to ask them about that. It was a typical bureaucratic operation up there, and they chastised me for not going to Fresno; I got nothing out of them.

So I came back to Fresno; they hemmed and hawed about it and never gave me a direct answer. I finally decided to go ahead.

Hicke: How did you do the electricity and the plumbing?

D. Ficklin: That's another thing that I had a little bit of knowledge about.

Hicke: You had done a lot of work with electricity.

D. Ficklin: Somewhat, yes. I knew how to make the circuits work and that type of thing, and I knew enough about plumbing to put in the drain lines.

Hicke: Everything you had done came in handy, didn't it? So you had the winery built by the fall of '48. Who helped you build the winery?

D. Ficklin: A couple of the ranch employees.

Hicke: Were they already working for your father?

D. Ficklin: Yes--actually for my brother, because he was handling all the farming at that time.

The Vineyards

Hicke: There was more farming than just the vineyards? He was doing the other ranching as well?

D. Ficklin: The raisin varieties, yes.

Hicke: By that time there were no more peaches and so forth?

D. Ficklin: No. That had been on the original property.

Hicke: So you had just grapes on this property?

D. Ficklin: Correct.

The First Crush in 1948

Hicke: What was it like to get the grapes in that first year?

D. Ficklin: The grapes were all picked in fifty-pound wooden boxes in those days. Since we didn't have any refrigeration for fermentation, we put the boxes of grapes under the vines when they were picked and left them overnight, because the nighttime temperatures are down in the sixties. That was some free cooling. And then we started crushing promptly the next morning. I don't know whether you've heard mention of how the crusher ran backwards.

Hicke: No, I haven't. Tell me the story.

D. Ficklin: It was a big occasion for the family, so they all gathered over here to see the crusher get started. We had the machine running, and one of the workmen put the first box in, and whoosh, it all came back in his face. [laughs] He didn't see any humor in it.

Hicke: The crusher was turning backwards?

D. Ficklin: Yes. That was a little electrical problem, and I solved it.

Hicke: Could you fix it there on the spot?

D. Ficklin: Yes, right away. Then we crushed the first lot of grapes (eighteen tons). We had one fermenter, which at that time was wooden with an open top and held maybe fifteen hundred gallons. Everything was fine; we got the yeast in there, and it was fermenting. We were punching the cap and doing everything we were supposed to do, but when it came time to draw the wine out and do the wine spirits and so forth, nothing would come out of the valve. Nothing. There was

Getting Started

Right: putting in trellis wire.
Two employees and a mule, 1948.

Lower left: bringing in the
grapes for the crush, ca 1949.

Lower right: An employee helps to
build the adobe brick winery,
1948.



nothing to do except to bucket that wine out, bucket by bucket. [laughs] The problem turned out to be that the valves were just too small. By going to the next larger size valve, why, we solved that problem. I learned that the hard way.

Equipment

Hicke: What kind of a crusher did you have, and how did you decide on it?

D. Ficklin: It was a used crusher. Martin Ray, in the Santa Cruz mountains, had been making table wines--premium Cabernets and that type of thing--and he had had this crusher built for him some years earlier, I guess before World War II. For some reason he decided to sell out his business, so that crusher became available as a used piece of equipment. I had heard Amerine mention this crusher, because it was all stainless steel, and there weren't many built of stainless in those days. When I heard it was for sale, I immediately followed up on it and purchased it. It did a reasonably good job for that time. We still have it, as a matter of fact, but it's been remodeled a couple of times; we've reworked it and improved it.

Hicke: It's the same one you started with?

D. Ficklin: Yes. We've got some antique equipment over there that I can show you. [laughs] That's another thing--the original wine press we are still using. It's been changed some, but the mechanical part of it--the hydraulic cylinder for pressing--was a used piece of equipment from a cotton gin for compressing cotton. It does the job for us. You'll see it tomorrow when you're over there.

Hicke: Did you get it from someplace around here?

D. Ficklin: Yes, one of the cotton gins over in the Kerman area, I think it was. Then the basket and the tub part came from what used to be the Healdsburg Machine Shop, which did a lot for the wineries up in that area.

We needed several pumps, such as a pump to transfer the crushed grapes from the crusher to the fermenter, and wine

pumps and so forth. Right about the time we were ready, probably early in '48, this large winery in Los Angeles went out of business and had a big auction. We bought quite a number of things at quite a saving for us, really. We still have most of it, I think.

Hicke: How did you hear about these pieces of equipment?

D. Ficklin: That auction we read about in the Wine Institute Bulletin that all the members get. They have a "for sale" and "wanted" section.

Hicke: You had joined the Wine Institute immediately?

D. Ficklin: Yes, we did. I'm not sure which year we joined.

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[Jean Ficklin joins the interview session]

Hicke: You were saying that the equipment was pretty primitive.

J. Ficklin: It wasn't only primitive, it was self-engineered.

D. Ficklin: That's right, so to speak.

Hicke: Tell me about that.

D. Ficklin: For example, I think it was in the seventies that we did the most recent modification of our crushing setup. We completely redesigned the dumping system. We had discontinued picking in boxes earlier, and we had a rather crude method of dumping our little gondolas into the crushing equipment. So that was all redone, including a much better-designed dumping arrangement, and we've been using it successfully ever since.

Hicke: What did you have to start with in the way of dumping?

D. Ficklin: It was sort of a homemade thing that just barely got the tubs up, and then you had to tug around to invert them and make the fruit fall into the hopper. Under this system, that part is all automatic.

Hicke: What about corking?

D. Ficklin: Originally we started with a hand-corker that you operate with a lever.

Hicke: You're kidding!

D. Ficklin: No, that was the way to do it in those days.

Hicke: My husband brews beer, so I know about that.

D. Ficklin: Well, we didn't have an awful lot of bottles in those days. A number of years later a used power corker became available, and I bought it. It's been worked over a number of times, and that's what we're using today. It's still one bottle at a time. The girl on the bottling line takes an empty bottle out of the carton and puts it on the filling machine. Then she takes a full bottle from the filling machine and puts it in the corking machine. The second girl drives the cork, takes the corked bottle, and puts it into the carton. It gets the job done.

Hicke: How many bottles did you have the first year? Do you recall?

D. Ficklin: I should have looked that up. Maybe Jean will remember.¹

Marketing

Hicke: What did you do with the wine the first year?

D. Ficklin: Now we're getting into marketing. Of course, nobody had ever heard of us; we were brand-new. This is where my father came in. He was a natural-born salesman, you might say, and he had become acquainted, for example, with the wine manager of Verdier's Cellars, which was in the City of Paris [department store] in San Francisco, plus locally in Madera and Fresno and I think a couple down south. The Balzers were one of them, and Lord's & Elwood. There, too, Jean can give you more details, because she was doing the bills of lading.

That's essentially how we started out.

Hicke: Are these distributors?

¹Early articles indicate the first crush was eighteen tons of grapes; 150 cases of Tinta Port were bottled.

D. Ficklin: No, they're all retailers. Initially we shipped direct to the retailers.

Hicke: Was there any such thing as wine writers?

D. Ficklin: Yes, and we began getting very favorable reviews of what we were doing. That built gradually.

J. Ficklin: John Melville.

Hicke: Was he a writer?

D. Ficklin: Yes. And I guess Bob Balzer himself--.

J. Ficklin: Yes, with his newspaper. And, of course, Leon Adams--[brings out Adams' book, Guide to California Wines].

Hicke: When was that published?

D. Ficklin: About mid-fifties.

Hicke: Fifty-five.

D. Ficklin: That was a good guess, wasn't it? [laughs]

J. Ficklin: And John Storm.

Blending

Hicke: Did you blend the varieties?

D. Ficklin: Yes. We used what is technically called a fractional blending system. It's similar to a Solera-type of aging, whereby you have a block of wine barrels that represent your product. When you bottle, you take out just a small portion from each container and collect that for bottling. Previously you have put together a blend of younger wines that was used to go around and refill all of these containers; so it's a sort of a perpetual aging system. Theoretically there would be some of the very first wine that you ever made within that system, but it would be infinitesimal, of course. We like to think that the younger wines going into it add a freshness and a fruitiness. The older stock wine has the finesse, the age

character, and it's a matter of getting a pleasing combination of those.

Hicke: How do you go about getting that combination?

D. Ficklin: As I say, in the aging process. The nature of fractional blending accomplishes that for us.

Hicke: Every year do you use the same fractions, or do you have different ideas?

D. Ficklin: We can vary the composition of the younger wine going in if we choose to, and I think perhaps my son has been doing a little bit of that for the past several years, but I don't think he's made any drastic changes.

Hicke: When you were doing the winemaking, you established the general idea for the blending, and then you didn't have to change it from year to year?

D. Ficklin: No, not really. After a few years we gradually built up a pretty good stock of aged wines that we could choose from to put together this initial blend in whatever available tank there was. After the bottling had been removed from this block of barrels, the cellar man would go around and refill each one. If you are thinking of a fifty-gallon container, ten or twelve gallons might be withdrawn each time.

Hicke: Can you talk a little bit about the difference between the blended port and vintage port? What are the differences in the goals and so forth?

D. Ficklin: What we would call our regular port, or Tinta Port or blended port, will certainly improve with aging in the bottle, but I think it's basically meant to be used at a younger age. The nature of the vintage port--the tannins and such in it--call for longer aging to really develop and acquire bottle age. It's rather curious. We still have a little bit of the very first ports that we made in 1948. I haven't tasted it recently, but the last time I tasted it, the bouquet was just magnificent; it just came up in the glass. There's no way you can imitate something like that; it's just time and nature.

Hicke: Have you ever made vintage port?

D. Ficklin: Yes. The last one that I bottled was the vintage of 1957. Incidentally, we kept some of that back, and just this last

Christmas Peter released about a hundred cases of that. Of course, it sold for a very nice premium.

Hicke: Does it keep getting better and better?

D. Ficklin: Oh, yes.

Hicke: When will it peak, if ever?

D. Ficklin: He had to recork, because the original corks were starting to deteriorate. I wouldn't ask it to go many more years. You could, for curiosity's sake, but as far as improving--that's thirty-odd years old. If you want it at its best, I think it's real close to that right now.

Hicke: So about thirty-five years?

D. Ficklin: Yes. That's relative; it depends on how it has been stored and all of that.

Hicke: Is it true that when you're starting a winery, you really can't afford to make wine that requires a lot of aging, because it would take so long before you could sell it?

D. Ficklin: What a number of the vintners are doing now is vintage-dating certain bottlings and then letting the customer do the aging in the bottle. That way they can sell it at a more modest price.

Hicke: The customer can get a port at a reasonable price and save it. It would be very expensive if you waited and bought it thirty years later.

D. Ficklin: You can think of how much money and time we have tied up in that '57 vintage.

Hicke: Do the grapes change from year to year so that you have to take that into consideration?

D. Ficklin: There is some variation, yes. Some years everything goes just right, and that's what Peter watches for. He's been bottling several vintages on that basis. For example, if you get an extremely hot spell right at harvest time, that is a pretty severe condition, and you have to get right in there and harvest. Our vintages were relatively short anyway, and when we start crushing, we just keep going until it's all taken care of.

Viticulture: Soil, Rootstocks, and Disease

- Hicke: Could you tell me a little bit about the soil and how that affected your choices?
- D. Ficklin: It's a curious thing. This valley has compacted clay, and here it's about three to four feet below the surface, which sort of acts as a seal for moisture--irrigation and so forth. The vine roots will grow down to where that clay is, and the irrigation water goes down there, too. The irrigation water doesn't continue percolating down and down indefinitely, so that's beneficial in conserving water, you might say. The soil itself above that is in this area a sandy loam, which the vines seem to like. It promotes vigorous foliage growth for protecting the fruit from sunburn. We get good sugar, favorable acid and pH; so we're pleased with the way the vines respond.
- Hicke: Is it similar to the soil in Portugal where port is grown?
- D. Ficklin: My father did all the traveling over there--around the world, as a matter of fact. I think it is not identical. I think they have more of a rocky condition where their vines are growing. They don't get the abundant foliage, for example, that we experience.
- Hicke: Did you do a soil study before you chose your varieties?
- D. Ficklin: We didn't do the soil study ourselves; the soil conservation people mapped it out.
- Hicke: I have down here that you made 150 cases in the first lot. Would that be about right?
- D. Ficklin: That's possibly true. I saw that, and I wanted to check it. You'll have a chance to check that with Jean.
- Hicke: It was called Tinta Port?
- D. Ficklin: That's right. That's still our main label.
- Hicke: How did you decide what to do the next year, 1949? Did you decide to do the same thing?
- D. Ficklin: Essentially. We had corrected the problems with the fermenter; of course, we did that for the second batch in '48.

Let's see, somewhere along in there we got more fermenting capacity, I remember. I'm not sure whether that was '49 or '59. Basically, yes, we continued on, because we were pleased with our first year's wines. We had more grapes as the vines got a little further along in development.

Hicke: Your brother continued planting, apparently.

D. Ficklin: Yes.

Hicke: How long did it take to get it all planted?

D. Ficklin: Oh, I would guess he spent three years or so. That's my recollection.

Hicke: Did he have any major problems with pests or disease?

D. Ficklin: Early he didn't, but later on they began showing up. It ended up to be quite an expensive proposition to straighten it out.

Hicke: What were the problems?

D. Ficklin: There was the fan leaf--a virus type of thing that wasn't picked up by the people at Davis. If they had known about it, they would never have sent wood from those vines out at all.

Hicke: It came on the vines?

D. Ficklin: Yes, on the scion wood. The vines are planted on a rootstock that is resistant to nematode, and then they were grafted using scion wood from the port varieties that you want to establish.

Hicke: This pest was actually on the cuttings that you got from the University?

D. Ficklin: Yes, and eventually we just had to abandon those varieties--pull them out. It involved the soil, too, and they didn't know what to do about cleaning up the soil originally. My brother was working with the University on that, too, and I think they finally came up with some kind of treatment that would rid the soil of the problem. It was quite a setback for my brother.

Hicke: When did this take place?

D. Ficklin: In the sixties and seventies.

Hicke: So it took a while for this to appear?

D. Ficklin: Yes, that's right. It went downhill rather gradually. My brother knew something was wrong, but he didn't find out immediately what it was.

Hicke: Did it affect other varieties besides the Alvarelhao?

D. Ficklin: It got into the Ruby Cabernet and the Emerald Riesling later on.

More on Marketing and Packaging

Hicke: How did you decide what price to sell your wine at?

D. Ficklin: I guess we looked at our costs, but even that wasn't too good because our volume was so low. We also considered what would be reasonable in the marketplace, looked at other wines and how they were priced, and tried to fit in. We didn't want to go too high. We could look at the imports and different wines that we thought we would market with.

Hicke: There weren't any other California ports made from Portuguese varieties, were there?

D. Ficklin: L. K. Marshall up at Lodi had a planting of Tinta Madeira, I think. I think originally they were using it with other varieties, but at some point they did produce some of that variety solely. It wasn't anything that was promoted that much in the marketplace. That's the earliest one I can think of.

Hicke: So you really had a unique product?

D. Ficklin: Essentially, yes.

Hicke: Did you have to differentiate it from other wines that had been called ports but really weren't?

D. Ficklin: Are you thinking in terms of the inexpensive ones?

Hicke: Yes, the ones that really were just sweet wines.

- D. Ficklin: Our label, our packaging, and our price would be a clue to customers. We were trying to get the word out the best we could. We had a little brochure that we had prepared that told about our operation and how it worked, and we had another folder that had suggestions for serving it and that type of thing. That's the way we went about that.
- Hicke: Who did those and the label and packaging?
- D. Ficklin: [laughs] It was all our own effort. I sketched out two or three ideas for labels, and we finally settled on one of those. Then I went up to the old Grabhorn Press. The brothers came up with what we're using now, of course, and the very first labels they printed were remnants from book pages that they had printed and torn off. That was kind of interesting.
- Hicke: I think your label has gotten some very favorable reviews.
- D. Ficklin: Yes, we're quite proud of it. We had always used a plain metal capsule on the neck, but recently my son came up with the idea of a black capsule. The first time I saw it, I realized that it made the label stand out quite neatly. I think he did an amazing job on that.
- Hicke: How did you happen to go to Grabhorn?
- D. Ficklin: I heard about Chaffee Hall, who was an attorney in San Francisco with a little winery in the Santa Cruz mountains named Hallcrest. Grabhorn printed his labels, and I liked what I saw.
- Hicke: How much was your father involved in the winery and in the decisions?
- D. Ficklin: His area of expertise and where he spent most of his time was in the sales end of it.
- ##
- D. Ficklin: He was quite an outgoing person and had quite a few friends in the industry in retailing. He was very much interested in wines--intensely interested--as a consumer, and over the years he acquired quite a fine personal cellar. He was very generous with us, and we had many fine dinners and experiences.

Hicke: Where did he get his interest in wine?

D. Ficklin: He was self educated, really. At the time when I was up at Davis, he found out when some of the wine tasting classes were being held and managed to be allowed to attend some of them. I'd almost forgotten that. He got an awful lot out of that.

Wine Judging

D. Ficklin: In my particular case, an experience that was extremely educational to me was my serving as a judge at the California State Fair.

Hicke: Oh, tell me about that.

D. Ficklin: I served sixteen years, from 1953 until 1967, under the old original system. Then the whole structure of the fair changed, and they had a different arrangement for wine judging. There were some very fine people whom I worked with, including a number of the University professors. I remember that after a number of years of serving, they decided to hold qualifying tests for the judges, where there blind tastings of young varietal wines, both red and white. It was a matter of identifying what variety each one was from the aromas and the taste. There was quite a large group of prospective people who were hoping to be chosen, and I was one of them.

I went through the testing, and I think I got a score of 87, which turned out to be the highest score. Everything was just right that day, I can remember. I wasn't nervous or worried; I felt very confident and was able to concentrate. I felt pretty good about that.

Hicke: Did you have to identify the variety and the vintage?

D. Ficklin: They were all young wines, chosen right out of the cooperage. The enology people at the University put this test together, and they were chosen to exemplify the good examples of the different varieties--all the high-quality samples.

At that time the red table wines were the most popular, and I was chosen to head up the red table wine committee.

Hicke: What are some of the challenges of being a judge?

D. Ficklin: Of course you had to be objective and try not to let your prejudices get in the way. It does take concentration, and at the end of the day you have put in a pretty strenuous session.

Most of the time I was on the committee judging brandies. The committee chairman was Dr. Guymon. He had trained himself and was so sharp. The samples were just coded for identification, and he'd start sniffing. He'd put a little on his tongue, roll it around, and the whole bit. After the tasting was finished, he'd proceed to tell you which winery produced it and who operated the still. [laughter] He was unbelievable. He was a marvelous instructor, too, so very patient and thorough in explaining things. I admire him very much.

Relationships With Other Wineries

Hicke: Did you have relationships with other wineries?

D. Ficklin: Not really. You mean productionwise?

Hicke: In any way--business or trade associations?

D. Ficklin: There were certain business arrangements. Our winery doesn't operate any distillation. In order to get the wine spirits we purchase it from another winery.

Hicke: Who do you buy that from?

D. Ficklin: We've been getting it for quite a few years from Vie-Del [Company]. They're southwest of Fresno, out in the country.

Hicke: Who did you get it from originally?

D. Ficklin: It was a place in Fresno called California Products. Al Paul was the owner.

Hicke: Did you ever buy grapes from anybody?

D. Ficklin: No, we've always used only our own production. In fact, for us to put estate-bottled on our label, it has to be that way. I think at one time my brother sold some grapes to other wineries, but that was quite a while ago.

III GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF THE WINERY

Growth

Hicke: Once you got your grapes planted and your winery going, did you ever think about expanding it a lot?

D. Ficklin: We started out with the original adobe-brick building, and I believe it was in the early sixties that we added on a second building that gave us more storage space, facilities for bottling, and that kind of thing. Then we had a third building that was put up in 1978, about the time that Peter decided to come into the business. So we really have a pretty good capacity for aging now.

Hicke: Might I ask how long it took before you were breaking even?

D. Ficklin: I went through the old ledgers, and I couldn't pick it up. It must not have been too big an event, and I don't think the first profits were that much. [laughs] I would have to guess it was in the late fifties or very early sixties, because we were able to put money aside for the second building, which went up in maybe '63.

Participation of Other Members of the Family

Hicke: It's always been a family operation?

D. Ficklin: Oh, yes. From the very early days Jean helped out with reports, correspondence, and all of that kind of thing, which

was a big help, especially during the vintage--keeping track of the grapes that were crushed. We were responsible for reporting all of that to the government, of course. When you're running the crusher and pressing, you don't have time to do a lot of record keeping.

Hicke: Were your son and your nephew always interested in the business?

D. Ficklin: My nephew, Steve, stepped into his father's shoes and is now responsible for growing the grapes. Peter, after he finished his studies at Davis, came home and was initially the assistant winemaker. In 1983, I believe it was, I stepped aside, and he became the winemaker.

Hicke: Did you have to twist his arm?

D. Ficklin: No, he was anxious to have responsibility.

Hicke: I mean to come into the business.

D. Ficklin: That's an amazing thing. He was originally in ag[ricultural] engineering at Davis, and after a couple of years, on one of his visits home, out of the blue he said, "Mom and Dad, I'd like to go into the winery." That was pretty neat.

Hicke: It was a surprise, then?

D. Ficklin: It was a total surprise.

J. Ficklin: David had never pushed him in this direction, so this was something that he really--. I think one of the things that was a real influence on Peter was that David had had many of the professors up at Davis, and when Peter went up to Davis in ag engineering, some of it sort of drifted over; he was running into professors and different people who wanted to know why he wasn't in viticulture or enology and why he wasn't going into the wine business. I think he heard a lot of that up there. But we had decided that the boys had to go their own directions. We hadn't pushed Dave to come in, and he'd gone off into electronic engineering; and Peter was off in ag engineering, so it was a real surprise--a most pleasant surprise--and it has worked well.

Background of Jean Ficklin

- Hicke: Let's get a little background on you, too, Jean, and start with when and where you were born and grew up.
- J. Ficklin: I was born in Lake Park, Minnesota, a very small town.
- Hicke: What part of the state is that in?
- J. Ficklin: It's up in the lake country, about two hundred miles north of Minneapolis. I lived in Lake Park until I was about seven, when my family moved to Frazee, Minnesota. Dad bought a drugstore; he was a pharmacist. Both my mother and dad were graduates of the University of Minnesota. Mother was an English teacher.
- Hicke: Did you go to their alma mater?
- J. Ficklin: No, I went to North Dakota State. This was when times were pretty rough, and I had a brother who was going to start at Minnesota. We had relatives in Fargo, where North Dakota State was located, and I was invited to live with them so that I could go to college. I had my fees waived because I was in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corp]; I played flute in the ROTC band. So my college expenses weren't that much.
- Hicke: There must have been other women in ROTC?
- J. Ficklin: Yes, there was another flute player. Most of the band were fellows, though. I think they were short of flute players, which is the way I really got in. My first year in college I sat solo chair, and I was scared to death.
- Hicke: I happen to know that you majored in home economics.
- J. Ficklin: That's right.
- Hicke: After you graduated, what did you do?
- J. Ficklin: I taught a year in the little home town of Frazee, Minnesota. I was qualified as a Smith-Hughes vocational teacher, and they had a Smith-Hughes vocational department in Frazee; but they couldn't get a teacher, and they would lose their federal support if they didn't have a teacher who was qualified. The superintendent whom I had started school under in Lake Park and then graduated under in Frazee was the superintendent

there, and he asked me if I wouldn't take it for a year. I said I would. I really wanted to be out on my own and doing something else, but it was a good year, and I enjoyed it.

Hicke: How did you get to California?

J. Ficklin: I told them I could teach for only one year, and I put in my application for the Red Cross and the Bureau of Home Economics in Washington, D.C. Then I had a friend who had come to Hawaii, so I put my application in there. I was accepted at all three, and it was a matter of deciding which one I wanted to do. Hawaii drew me, and it was a great adventure. I loved it, but I was ready to come back to the mainland.

Hicke: You were there a couple of years?

J. Ficklin: About two years. I stopped and visited relatives in Berkeley on my way home, and they had friends who were connected with Ag Extension. They said, "Why don't you put an application in here?" I think my family had talked to them about trying to get Jean to stay on the mainland instead of going back to Hawaii.

I was accepted at [UC] California [Berkeley], and eventually, after an orientation period up there, I was assigned to Madera County. That's where David and I met.

Hicke: When did you get married?

J. Ficklin: We were married in November of '49.

Hicke: Right after the second crush?

J. Ficklin: Right. We were courting during the first crush. [laughter]

Early Sales of the Port

Hicke: Did you go right to work keeping track of the grapes and so forth?

J. Ficklin: I think I was helping David with reports and doing different things for a few years. I don't remember exactly when I started doing more of it. I know that when we started selling things--when we began to market in '52--I was at that time



David and Jean Ficklin in their Madera home, 1992.

very much involved in the invoices, bills of lading, and so forth.

Hicke: He said you could tell me about some of the people that you sold to. Do you recall?

J. Ficklin: Yes. On October 20, 1952, we shipped out our first load of wine, which was twenty-five cases. It went to ten retailers in the state of California. The reason that I remember that is because it was our oldest boy's birthday, and everybody had been working, trying to get the foil capsules smooth. We had a birthday dinner for Dave, and that night everybody's thumbs were so sore. [laughter]

We shipped to City of Paris in San Francisco, Albert Balzer Company in southern California--this was the company the Bob Balzer's father had founded and that he inherited--Lord's & Elwood, and Jurgensen's. Locally we had a couple of stores--M & B and A. Franchi Company in Madera, three Sherry's Liquor Stores in Fresno, and Jim Dermer's. Anyhow, the twenty-five cases were divided around among ten retailers.

Hicke: How did you sign them up?

J. Ficklin: David's father had done a lot of scouting for us. He had some friends, and I think the City of Paris took five cases to begin with. He had a very good friend who was up there in Verdier Cellars, I think it used to be. A five-case order was marvelous.

Hicke: How did it go from there?

J. Ficklin: Then David's father was on the road quite a bit, trying to introduce the wine and find more people. David and Walt did a little bit of that, but it was really Gramp who was the promoter and the salesman. He had a personality for it. He was just a wonderful guy.

Hicke: Did he take around bottles and offer samples?

J. Ficklin: Yes, he'd sample it to people. He belonged to the French Club in San Francisco, and some of his cronies and friends up there began to ask for it. So just by word of mouth and some nice articles by some of the wine writers, and it gradually spread. In those early years we never really had any great, big sales; but it was growing.

- Hicke: How much of each year's production would you sell, and how would you decide that?
- J. Ficklin: That wasn't part of my record keeping.
- Hicke: Does someone decide how old it is going to be before you sell it?
- J. Ficklin: I think this is a decision that David and his brother and Dad had worked on. I was not involved in that decision.
- Hicke: Have you developed your palate?
- J. Ficklin: Yes. David has a very fine palate, and I think I have learned a lot from him.
- Hicke: Can you tell from year to year if there is a change, or is it the goal to make it not change?
- J. Ficklin: I think the goal is to make it a consistent quality product. Peter has tried some new methods, and I think there have been some changes as a result of that. He can tell you about that.

Early Days and Changes

- J. Ficklin: One of the early memories I have of those years when we were just starting out is the little thing of developing the yeast culture. Dave would start it out in a six- or eight-ounce prescription bottle. I'll have to ask him the name of the stuff he put in there--agar perhaps--and then he would inoculate this with a little bit of the yeast. That would develop, and then he would take a larger jug--this was all done in my kitchen [laughter]--and put a little more grape juice in it. Then he would perhaps go to a larger one, and go from one to the other as it developed. [David re-enters the room] What did you put in that prescription bottle to start it out?
- D. Ficklin: The start was the agar, and then under sterile conditions I would just remove some of the yeast that was growing on the surface. You'd put it in a small container of sterilized grape juice.
- J. Ficklin: Until we got up to a demijohn.

- Hicke: What was it like raising your children and having all of the family here in the business?
- J. Ficklin: You know, as I look back on it now, it was a pretty happy time. It got a little confusing at times, but I have good memories of it all. The boys were a great help in the winery, especially when it came time to grab the hoses and hose down equipment.
- Hicke: That's a big part of winery operation, isn't it?
- J. Ficklin: Yes. There were some terrific water fights, I remember.
[laughter]
- Hicke: Did you build this house yourselves?
- J. Ficklin: Yes.
- D. Ficklin: About fifteen years ago.
- J. Ficklin: Yes, in 1976. Our other house was right on the same spot here. We had developed the trees and the pool, so we decided we would rebuild right here on the same spot. The old house was torn down, piece by piece. It was a good decision, because as we saw it being torn down we realized that we couldn't have done much more to it. We had added on, refurbished, and done different things, but it had had it.
- We had the little guest house out there, which originally was the boys' bedroom, and a twenty-one-foot trailer parked around behind it with a little patio in between. We lived in that for sixteen months while the house was being built. But we were so busy with the winery expansion that we didn't have time to be unhappy about it.
- Hicke: So the winery was undergoing expansion at the same time?
- J. Ficklin: Yes.
- Hicke: You had your hands full.
- D. Ficklin: In the summertime we would spend our evenings outdoors, of course.
- J. Ficklin: We ate outdoors quite often, too, because we had a picnic table right outside the door. There wasn't room for the

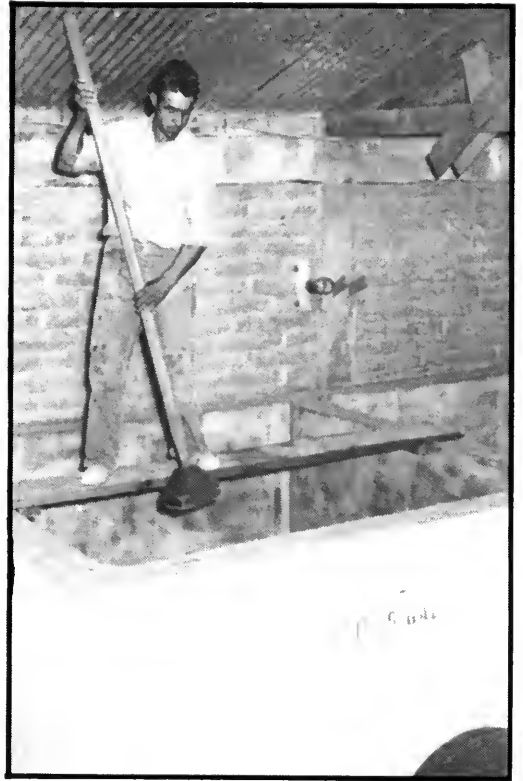
microwave in the trailer, so that was on a platform right outside the door of the trailer. At that time we had a basset hound and a pussycat who had to be with us, too. With the house being torn down, they were a bit upset.

Hicke: You gradually got more and more involved in the management?

J. Ficklin: I've really been involved in the office part of it, and I've been a director for a number of years. When Dave retired I became president, and in February of '91 Peter became president and I stepped down as an officer. I'm still a director, and I haven't found a replacement in the office for me yet. [laughter] The computer has helped tremendously; it has really cut the workload. Peter has been so very clever in the way he's been able to put things into the computer that it has reduced much of the--I no longer do invoices or bills of lading; he's got all of that computerized: the monthly records--the 702, which every winery has to do.

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Early Days



Clockwise from top left: bottling, 1951; An employee punching cap, 1951; David Ficklin at the barrel racks, 1951; David Ficklin at the wine press (still in use), 1950.

IV INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN FICKLIN, VINEYARDIST

[Interview 2: January 19, 1992]

Background

Hicke: Would you tell me when and where you were born?

S. Ficklin: I was born in Fresno, California, in 1944, and have been in the area ever since, outside of a small stint in the service that lasted about eighteen months.

Hicke: So you grew up with the winery here?

S. Ficklin: It was kind of separated; my father did the farming, and David was the winemaker, but, yes, we were all together in a sense.

Hicke: Your father took over your grandfather's ranch, didn't he?

S. Ficklin: Yes, he was farming that. In my lifetime it has just been all grapes. When Dad was getting started here, they had some open land, and he was growing some cotton, sweet potatoes, and that sort of thing; but the only thing I remember is grapes.

Hicke: What did you do when you were growing up here?

S. Ficklin: Followed my dad around in his pickup a lot, I tell you. I really enjoyed being on the ranch and liked the freedom we had. I helped Dad out as much as I could when I was smaller, and after I got out of the service my dad and I formed a partnership. That was in about 1972, and I got more involved at that point. I was having a problem making up my mind, "What do I want to do?" But after being overseas and going through the Vietnam war--when I was over there and people were shooting at me--I finally decided, "You know, that ranch really looks pretty darned good." That kind of pushed me in

this direction, and I'm really glad; I don't have any regrets about anything. It was really a great decision; I thoroughly enjoy what I'm doing.

Hicke: What did you father draft you to do around the ranch?

S. Ficklin: Irrigating, driving a tractor--that sort of thing.

Hicke: Did you have to prune?

S. Ficklin: Oh, yes. Maybe I should back up. When I was in high school I belonged to Future Farmers of America, and I had little acre plots of vines that were my project. I guess that was a start. I had to keep track of all the expenses, do all the pruning, tractor work, and irrigating. He left it entirely up to me: "Either make this work and make money or you're going to lose. It's going to be a good experience for you to kind of get your feet wet and see what the business is all about."

Hicke: Dare I ask how your plot turned out?

S. Ficklin: He gave me the worst piece of vineyard on the ranch. [laughs] I think this was some kind of a test or something. But it turned out very well, and I learned a lot by having a piece of ground that was very marginal. The vines were very old and so forth, and there was a lot of work involved, trying to build it back up. I really learned a lot having to farm a bad piece of ground, rather than something that was handed to me, had been established, and there weren't any problems with it.

Hicke: Your dad was pretty smart.

S. Ficklin: Yes, very smart.

Grape Varieties

Hicke: What kind of grape varieties were on your plot?

S. Ficklin: They were Thompson Seedless.

Hicke: What were the rest of the varieties that your father had?

S. Ficklin: All of the port varieties that we're now using plus a couple of other raisin varieties.

Hicke: He was still growing raisins when you were growing up?

S. Ficklin: Yes.

Hicke: Do you still have some raisin grapes?

S. Ficklin: Yes, we still have raisins, all the port varieties, and I've gotten into a few table grapes for the fresh market, too, so we're involved in all phases of vines.

Diseases and Other Problems

Hicke: David was telling me about some problems you had in the seventies with diseases.

S. Ficklin: Yes, in the early seventies. Frost was the main thing; we lost pretty much all of our crops during that one year. I can't remember the exact date, but it was in the early seventies. It was ironic, because I think it was the first year my dad and I formed the partnership. Here I go, thinking everything was great, and all of a sudden the freeze hit and we lost all of the crop. I would guess that we lost 75 to 80 percent that year.

But that's just part of the business. If you can't understand that, you don't belong on the farming end of this. On the whim of Mother Nature--and all the diseases and things; there's always something new, and you always have to stay on top of all these things. But thank goodness for the University, I'll tell you. Without them, I don't know what we'd be doing. A lot of people don't appreciate all the work and trials and so forth that they do. We've got test plots for the University pretty much on every ranch. For each specific problem, we work with them and have our trials out so that we're always learning and trying to overcome whatever they are--soil-borne diseases or anything like that.

Hicke: Can you tell me about one disease as an example?

S. Ficklin: We're working on one now in one block not too far from here. We have a soil-borne disease called fan leaf. It's not the same as phylloxera, but it is a soil-borne disease. We have two or three different rootstocks out there with all of our port varieties on them, and we're seeing which rootstock is going to do the best for our varieties. The University is constantly testing, two or three times a year, to see if these particular rootstocks are picking up the viruses that are in the soil. Hopefully we'll come up with one where Peter will be satisfied with the quality of fruit, plus the vine will be

able to grow under these circumstances. That's just one that we're working on right now.

Without the University, we wouldn't even have the trial rootstocks, because they're the ones who developed them. They've been a tremendous help to us.

Hicke: Whom are you working with?

S Ficklin: Mainly with the Madera County farm advisor, George Leavitt. Mike McHenry, a nematologist down at the Kearny field station, is involved, and Jim Wolpert I think is out of Davis. Between the three of them, they are coordinating this, and hopefully we're going to learn something.

Hicke: Do you work with or have associations with other growers in the area?

S. Ficklin: Not any more than social associations, because we're so specialized with the different varieties we have. If Peter can't use all the grapes and I sell them outside, I have to spell the names. They say, "What is that?" because there just aren't that many acres of these Portuguese varieties. The cultural practices and so forth are so different from what most people are doing. Primarily in this area here there are the generic French Colombard, Thompson Seedless, and that sort of thing, and we don't have a lot of those varieties. So, no, I don't have a lot of interaction with other growers.

Differences in Grape Varieties

Hicke: What are the differences in cultural practices with your varieties?

S. Ficklin: It just depends on which variety you're talking about. On some we have bunch rot problems. Typically, Tinta Madeira is our worst one, and we go in and thin them and pull leaves. We have to really be careful of our irrigation practices; over-irrigate, and the berries swell. You get one berry that will break in the bunch, and then you've completely lost that bunch. It's just a combination of things. Whereas if you're farming a Thompson, you can irrigate it all you want and do what you want to do; you don't have these little problems that we have to contend with.

Hicke: You have to keep rather careful records, I would think.

S. Ficklin: Everything I do. Like I told Susie, my wife, "If the house ever burns down, grab my little black book and leave everything else there." I have a diary I keep, and every day I enter what I do in it. Records are very important, because I'll even go back sometimes three, four, or five years, trying to figure out what I did to try and produce better fruit for Peter. If I run into a problem, that's what I do; I go back and look at what I've done, and maybe I'll change something and try that for a few years. It's constantly making adjustments.

Hicke: Yes, there are so many things you could do.

S. Ficklin: It's very interesting. If I just had to farm one variety that was easy, I don't think I would be as interested. It's really a challenge.

Hicke: Because of each variety being different?

S. Ficklin: Yes, and all the problems you encounter trying to grow that. I think one of the biggest joys is to be able to produce the fruit, and then Peter makes such a great port. To be able to see the end product--most people just throw them in a truck, go to a winery, get their check, and they're done with it. But I can follow this all the way through, and it makes it a lot more enjoyable.

Hicke: Do you work with Peter closely?

S. Ficklin: Absolutely. Especially closely when it comes to harvest time, because Peter is out checking the pH and acid once or twice a week. When he figures that day is here, we don't wait, whereas most wineries will put you off for a week or two, depending on their schedule. When it's time, it's time, and we go. So we work very closely, especially at harvest time.

Hicke: Can you tell me a little bit about the characteristics of each variety and how it differs from other varieties? Is that a fair question?

S. Ficklin: I really think Peter will be able to answer that better as far as acid, pH ratios, and how he does his blending. As far as the cultural practices, all four varieties are light producers; we don't get anything more than probably six to seven tons to the acre. But of course we're holding that production down with what we're doing now with our pruning, because we don't leave a lot of spurs, stations or buds on the vines, which ultimately gives Peter a better quality of fruit.

Hicke: More flavor per grape?

S. Ficklin: Yes. Typically speaking, the more fruit you have the more junk you're going to have. If you can limit the amount of fruit that vine has to mature and work with, you're going to end up with a better quality grape, which will hopefully result in a better quality wine.

Diseases of the Vineyard in the Seventies and Eighties

Hicke: Can you tell me a little bit about the seventies and how the vineyard evolved into the eighties? Were there changes?

S. Ficklin: I think cultural practices were probably the biggest change. We finally realized that--Dad planted this vineyard here, the original planting, in 1944. The fan leaf, for example-- finally, after all these years, we picked up that we had some infected wood, and so we had to deal with that. Also, George Leavitt was instrumental--in fact, he's writing a paper on it now--in our discovering that we have an air-borne fungus called Eutypa that comes from the north down here. In the seventies we didn't even know we had this, and then all of a sudden, after all these years, we have spur stations that are starting to die. So we have to cut the vines off below the infected wood and retrain the vine. These were things we didn't know about in the seventies. Again the University--I would have the farm advisor come out here, and we'd look and look, but we couldn't figure it out. Finally, after all these years we've found what it is, and now we know how to deal with it and how to cope with it.

Hicke: What do you do?

S. Ficklin: We go through in the springtime when the growth on the vines is three to four inches. In a vine that's infected, you can see the shoot actually start to shrivel up, so we mark that vine. When we get done pruning, we'll come in and start cutting on that vine. What you see on an infected vine when you cut it is that it is all good tissue except for one pie-shaped wedge.

Hicke: You're looking at a cross-section?

S. Ficklin: That's correct. We start cutting on the vine until we get down to clean wood. From there we let the vine sucker out, and we will retrain it. We're losing probably a year and a half of production on that, but if you just let it go you'd eventually have to pull the whole vineyard.

Hicke: That's very interesting that you've been able to develop a technique for dealing with it.

S. Ficklin: Like I say, we work with the University, and they develop the techniques. But anything they would like us to do or any way we can learn, we're more than happy to do it to find out how to cope with these problems.

The Portuguese Varieties

Hicke: Do you know anything about these varieties as they grow in Portugal? Do they grow in a similar climate?

S. Ficklin: I can't answer that. David and Jean have been to Portugal. I have yet to have the privilege to go, and I'm really looking forward to it. I've grown up watching these vines, and I really think I understand the varieties very well; but I'd really like to see them in another country and to see how they deal with these problems and if they have the same problems.

Hicke: Have you ever looked at any of the other Portuguese varieties that the University has besides the ones that your father originally started?

S. Ficklin: Yes. In fact, we've still got a few here. My dad had what you might call a library, and at one time there were ten to fifteen different varieties. They weren't in large blocks but maybe twenty vines of each. Uncle David would take a few of those and possibly make a little bit of wine, and that's how they decided whether we wanted to plant more of those or have less of that. But that was a little bit before my time. We're working mainly now with rootstocks and that sort of thing.

Hicke: Which varieties are you working with now?

S. Ficklin: Tinta Madeira, Touriga, Souzào, and Tinta Càò.

Hicke: What are the differences between these varieties? Maybe I should ask Peter.

S. Ficklin: I think that would be more on his end. As far as culture goes, one of the main differences--going back to talking about the diseases--are that some of them have harder wood, and this Eutypa for some reason does not affect them. Some of the varieties have a softer wood, and that spore enters the softer

wood. It's in the first four or five rains that we get it, and it is just tremendous then. I think the Tinta Madeira is probably the most susceptible to the Eutypa, because it seems to be just about the softest wood we have.

As far as the tonnages of the different varieties, they're pretty much all similar. They're right around six or seven tons. Some, like the Souzao, can be down to five, and the Touriga can be maybe up to seven. But six or seven tons is pretty much the average tonnage on them. I think Jean and David have some pictures of the different sizes of the clusters; that's another thing, too. The cluster size really varies between the different varieties.

Hicke: Does that vary the amount that the vine produces?

S. Ficklin: Not really. The only problem we get into with the smaller bunches is that it's a lot more difficult and a lot more expensive to pick the grapes. It's just twice as much work on a variety with a small bunch versus a big bunch to pick your tons.

Picking the Grapes

Hicke: How are the grapes picked?

S. Ficklin: They're picked all by hand, and we're very, very particular about the way we pick. Peter and I have a deal. They're picked in gondolas, and there are two tubs on each trailer, which is two tons per trailer. I take care of the outside of the gondolas, and Peter takes care of the inside. On the inside he paints them every year with food-grade paint, so there's no rust; they're absolutely clean. After every day that we're done picking, Peter cleans each individual gondola out. I take all the picking pans, and they're cleaned every single day. So every day that we pick, we're starting with everything absolutely clean. I don't know if you've ever watched other people pick grapes, but it's not a pretty sight at times, I'll tell you. We are very particular about our cleanliness.

Hicke: I do know that cleanliness is extremely important in any kind of winemaking operations.

S. Ficklin: It is. I think that's one advantage to being smaller growers in a smaller winery. We have a lot more control over that. Just take Gallo as an example: if he calls somebody up and

says, "I want you to pick a hundred acres of grapes today," they kind of lose control of the cleanliness and so forth. It's really an advantage to be small, and we can keep tabs on it very closely.

Anyway, the grapes are picked, and we bring them in. Peter weighs them, and he crushes them. The next day we're back doing the same thing again.

Hicke: How many days does it take to pick them?

S. Ficklin: It depends on the year, but normally I would say three weeks would be just about the length of it. Most of the time we only pick half days. We pick when it's cool in the morning so Peter can get the grapes crushed before they get too hot. Then I'll take our crews from here, and we'll pick raisins for the rest of the day. In the morning we'll come back and pick the wine grapes again. It works out really well having the raisins and the wine grapes, because you can't hire somebody for a half a day; it's just absolutely impossible. We can go back and forth, and pretty much whatever Peter wants, we can move out of one block and come back in. However he wants them picked, we can do it almost down to the hour.

Hicke: That gives you a lot of flexibility.

S. Ficklin: Yes. You asked earlier if Peter and I worked closely. We're always on the phone to each other--he needs this, and we're going back and forth--coordinating everything.

The raisin grape can wait; if you pick it today, tomorrow, the next day, or the next week, barring any rains, you're okay. But for Peter and what he's trying to do, it's so important that we pick the grapes exactly when he wants them in the coolest part of the day. Really, you couldn't ask for anything better in that respect, because we can keep our crews busy. Labor, as you've probably heard, is becoming a tough situation. People don't want to come out and do this type of work. For us, as small as we are, to pick mechanical would almost be cost prohibitive. To spend \$175,000 on a machine is--we'd have to stretch the heck out of our budget to do that.

Employees

- Hicke: How many full-time employees do you have in the vineyards?
- S. Ficklin: It just depends; we're really seasonal. As far as the ranch goes, I have about one and a half employees--one full time, and another person will come and work, he'll leave, and somebody else will come and work. Except when we're doing our seasonal work. When we're picking for the winery, we probably have about thirty people. During this part of the year, when we're pruning, we probably run a crew of fifteen or so. Usually our harvest lasts thirty days overall--raisins and everything.
- Hicke: When you first started working in the early seventies, was the number of employees about the same?
- S. Ficklin: I think it was pretty much the same.
- Hicke: You've got the same amount of vineyard?
- S. Ficklin: Yes. We're really fortunate in the employment aspect, because there are still people who worked for my grandfather and my father who come back and work for us seasonally every year. Now their children are coming back, and even some of their children are starting with us now. We're really, really fortunate that we don't have a different crew every year. When they come out to pick grapes for the winery, they pretty much know what we want them to do, which is really important, because when they pick there are no leaves in the gondolas; it's all clusters. And there are no clusters that are rotten; they have to throw them out. So it helps to have the same people every year.
- Hicke: These are local people?
- S. Ficklin: No, most of the people who work for us will come here seasonally, and then they have homes and families in Mexico. They'll come up for two or three months, pick grapes here and maybe move north and pick elsewhere, and then they'll go back to their families. When pruning comes, most of the same people and families come back and prune for us. We've been blessed with having good labor, but we treat them well. They never ask, "How much are you going to pay me? It's not enough." When they go in a field, they know we're going to be fair with them, and it really makes it a lot easier.
- Hicke: If they haven't been here before, do you have to spend some time training them?

S. Ficklin: Not really, because usually they're either a family member or a friend of a friend, so we'll put that person with a person who has been here. They teach themselves and work along with each other. We don't really have to worry about that too much. In fact, it's almost nonexistent now. We always have to be out in the field, because everybody gets a little lax, and maybe they want to make a little bit more. We just mention to them that they're putting too many leaves in the gondola, and they'll straighten right up. We have a very good rapport with our workers. My philosophy is, if we didn't have them, I don't know where we would be. We all are in this together.

Hicke: So they contribute a lot to the [success]?

S. Ficklin: Absolutely.

Hicke: For the rest of the year you have one other employee and somebody coming in part time?

S. Ficklin: Yes. I call it an employee and a half, but really on the ranch I only have one full-time salaried employee. He and I pretty much take care of everything.

Hicke: It keeps you off the streets, I guess!

S. Ficklin: Well, we have our seasons that are a little bit slower than others, like usually we figure on the month of November, after we get everything wrapped up from harvest. We usually don't start pruning until the first week of December, so we've got that month. He disappears, I disappear, everybody gets refreshed, and we're back at it for another eleven months.

Hicke: You would need that time, I would think.

S. Ficklin: I think so. My wife especially tells me that I need it. [laughter] I can get a little bit hard to live with during harvest time. It's just the pressure, but I thoroughly enjoy it.

Grapes, Varieties, and Other Wineries

Hicke: The winery was expanded in '78. Did that affect your vineyard out here?

- S. Ficklin: It really helped our vineyard operation because of fact that Peter was able to use more of the fruit. In other words, he had more capacity. You asked about interaction with other farmers--most of them don't know what the varieties are, and even wineries, if they don't what they are, are not willing to pay anything for the grapes. So the more Peter can use in our production, the better off everyone is. The expansion definitely helped.
- Hicke: What were you doing with the extra grapes before?
- S. Ficklin: When I first started farming, they were going to Christian Brothers. Then Christian Brothers planted some of their own port varieties. I think it was in '74 or '75 when they no longer took our excess. They planted some varieties, and I think for a time there they kind of got out of production of dessert wines.
- Hicke: They were making port?
- S. Ficklin: Yes, they were. I think it was a Ruby Port, but I'm not sure.
- Hicke: They weren't just tossing your grapes in with other varieties; they were using them as a variety to make port?
- S. Ficklin: No. They wanted these varieties.
- Hicke: How did these Portuguese varieties compare in price with other Valley grapes per ton?
- S. Ficklin: That's one of the problems with selling them outside; you don't get anything for them. You can cover your cost of production, and that's about it, because people don't realize what they are. Plus, we use a majority here and have such small lots to sell outside that it's not really beneficial to anybody to take such a small lot--a couple of truckloads--and expect them to start producing a bottle of wine.
- Hicke: Are there other vineyards or wineries that are planting Portuguese varieties?
- S. Ficklin: I just looked at the acreage report for the state of California, and it seems to me that in the past few years very few Portuguese varieties have been planted. The production is pretty stable right now.
- Hicke: Quady [winery] makes port, don't they?
- S. Ficklin: Yes, they do.

- Hicke: They don't use Portuguese varieties?
- S. Ficklin: I have heard that they've planted some, but I can't really answer that. They planted them up north. When they first started--and Peter would be the better one to ask about this--as I recall he was using Zinfandel to make his port. Peter and Andy know each other. I think his emphasis now is more on muscat-type wines.¹ I don't know what his production is or anything.
- Hicke: The reason I ask is that it is interesting to me that you have been so successful here with your vines and wines that I would think people would come along and try to imitate you.
- S. Ficklin: I think some people probably have tried to, because when I was growing up we had the only plantings of some of these varieties. Dad made a tremendous amount of cuttings, because people would come to him. In fact, Gallo was one of them; they would come here to get the cuttings because they wanted to get into port production. Whether they were trying to imitate or not, I don't know.
- Hicke: Duplicate, perhaps?
- S. Ficklin: Yes. There was a big interest in it there for a while, but it seems to have leveled off now. We haven't had anybody come to us for cuttings for ten or fifteen years at least. Plus we're not really anxious--
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- S. Ficklin: We've got some disease problems, first of all, in some of these--like the Eutypa. You don't want to sell somebody a piece of wood that they're going to have a problem with. That's just not ethically proper. And after all these years of blood, sweat, and tears that David, Dad, and my grandfather put in, we're not anxious to just give away all our ideas and cultural practices. If someone asks--don't get me wrong--we'll tell them, but it's been a long process to get to where we are today.
- Hicke: You've developed something very special, and obviously the benefits should stay within the winery.

¹Quady began producing vintage port from Zinfandel grapes, then added another dessert wine, "Essensia," a 15-percent Orange Muscat, and a Black Muscat wine named "Elysium."

S. Ficklin: To a certain extent, yes, I believe that.

Hicke: How about the eighties? Did anything particular develop?

S. Ficklin: No, it's pretty much year to year. Like I say, we might find a new problem or something, and we cope with it and deal with it and maybe put in another test block. We've got some new rootstock out here now that we're trying to develop as far as the Souzao and Tinta Cao goes. Every year there's always something, and we're dealing with it as it comes along. Specifically in the eighties, no, I can't put my finger on anything.

Hicke: What about the differences in the climate from year to year? How did that affect your vineyard operations?

S. Ficklin: Mother Nature is always watching. In another couple of months we'll be having to be careful of frost so that it doesn't freeze the new shoots that come out in the springtime.

Hicke: Do you have some kind of frost [prevention]?

S. Ficklin: The only thing we do now is run water. We pump underground water and run it every three or four rows, and that will change the temperature two or three degrees. So if it's going to be twenty-nine or thirty degrees, we can pretty much make our way through it. Any colder than that, we're going to have a little bit of a problem. This past year, not necessarily affecting the port varieties but some other varieties, we had some non-typical cool weather, and then we had a heat wave of 105 [degrees] for about a week. It was a problem keeping up on irrigation and so forth, because the vines were really stressed because they weren't used to the warm weather. With Mother Nature it's always something. Maybe just before a harvest some years, we'll get a rain, so then we're worried about mildew and the grapes holding up. Then we really have to push and get them off before we do run into a problem.

I don't make a big deal out of it, because I've learned that you just have to learn how to live with that. Some people get so excited, which I do too, but it's just one of those things, and you never know what's going to happen from one year to the next. But it makes it interesting. One of my philosophies, too, is that maybe it keeps some other people out of the vineyard business who shouldn't be in it. If you can't accept the fact that Mother Nature is a big force, then maybe you shouldn't be in the business. It's another challenge that you have to overcome, and you have no control over it. [laughs]

Vineyard Operations: Irrigation, Trellising, Soils

Hicke: What kind of irrigation system do you have?

S. Ficklin: We have surface water, which comes from a lake up in our foothills here--which hasn't been the greatest for the past five years, since we've been in a drought. We're typically pumping more underground water, which we don't really like to do. We're in a very good water stratum here. We feel that the underground water strata follow the San Joaquin River, and we happen to be on a good one. Ours will deplete at a lesser rate than somebody maybe twenty miles north of here. Also, even during light-rain years, our water replenishes itself a lot faster and a lot better. So we've got good underground water, but if there is surface water available, our first priority is to use that. It's a lot less expensive, of course, than pumping from underground because of the PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric Company] rates.

Hicke: So the drought affects you mainly in the price you have to pay for water?

S. Ficklin: In the pumping of the water, yes.

Hicke: You haven't had to curtail watering?

S. Ficklin: No, absolutely not. The blessing is that we have a good underground stratum here. We're pumping here from probably eighty-five or ninety feet, and if you go twenty miles north from here, they're pumping from three hundred feet. So you can see that the water from the Sierras just doesn't filter in, and it really affects them. The farther down you go, the more it costs to pull that water out of the ground. We've been very fortunate.

The surface water comes in canals. You drove past some canals when you came in. It comes out of our reservoir at Lake Millerton through the canals. That's what I call surface water.

Hicke: When were those built?

S. Ficklin: I would guess '55, because we moved into my mom and dad's house in 1950, and I know that when they were digging the canals Dad had the guy come over and dig a wine cellar for him. I can barely remember that. David would remember. It's a strange thing to look back at it now, because a lot of the

farmers around here didn't want the canals: groundwater was plentiful and this and that, and, of course, you were taxed to build the canals. But now nobody says a word. They think, "What a blessing that we do have surface water." Because if we were solely dependent on underground water, it would just be a disaster I think.

Hicke: Good foresight.

S. Ficklin: Absolutely. It really was.

Hicke: What about trellising?

S. Ficklin: There again we've got a number of trials out and are working with the University. We're constantly trying new trellising methods. Going back to the bunch rot problems that we have on some of the varieties, trellising is very important. If you can open a canopy up and get more air circulating in under those vines, your bunch rot problem is going to go down by 50 or 75 percent. So it is absolutely crucial, plus on some varieties it even affects the tonnage; vines will produce more if they are raised up and spread out more instead of just having them on a single wire. With the rootstock problems we've got, which I mentioned earlier, we've also got some trellising trials mixed in with them; we've tried different stakes, different widths of cross arms, and that sort of thing, too.

Hicke: How long does it take before you can tell what is working?

S. Ficklin: I would say it would take us five years, because you don't get a crop until the third year, and then the vine needs a little bit of age on it to see how everything is going to work and to produce the quantity and quality that Peter would want for the winery. This last plot that we planted out here is three years old, so it will be another year or two before Peter would take any samples off of it to see if he thinks one rootstock is better than the other. It's very expensive and time consuming, but it's the only way we're going to learn.

Hicke: Then does he have to make a little wine out of that one sample?

S. Ficklin: Yes, he'll take a small amount, crush it, and follow it along. We haven't quite reached that point yet, but I think that within the next year or two we'll be there. He'll make a small lot of wine and see what he thinks. Eventually we're going to have to do some planting, and I want to make sure he's happy with what I'm doing. If I just plant this rootstock and think it looks great, but he doesn't get the

quality of grape, that comes back to communication again that we always need to have. That's why we have the small test plots, so we can make our decision and branch out from there.

Again, I say it's all a lot of fun. You're always learning something. Somebody who thinks he knows it all is showing his ignorance as far as I'm concerned, because I will never know it all, and I don't think anybody will ever know it all. Every year you are learning something new and trying to apply it.

Hicke: What are the differences in soil in your vineyard?

S. Ficklin: Even on this ranch here, a forty-acre block of grapes, if you start from the north and work south, these are deeper, better soils than if we go to the south, where we get into some streaks of hard pan and so forth. We plant different varieties on the different soils from past experience, knowing that one does better on a shallower soil than on a deeper one. Generally speaking, all the port varieties are on very good soil; we've planted them on the best soil. They seem to do better on a deeper, sandy, loam soil.

A soil map is very interesting. In any given area there is good soil and less desirable soil. That's just the way Mother Nature created it.

Hicke: Can you tell from the vines what the differences in the soil are?

S. Ficklin: Yes. Typically, on a shallower soil you will have a weaker vine and a lesser quality fruit. We work around those areas and maybe plant raisin grapes in them, which aren't quite as critical as the port varieties.

Walter C. Ficklin

Hicke: Let me go back and ask you for some recollections about your grandfather.

S. Ficklin: Oh, he was a great guy, I'll tell you.

Hicke: Did you follow him around?

S. Ficklin: When I was starting to get into the business, and even before that, he traveled quite a bit.

Hicke: Yes, he was doing some of the sales and marketing.

S. Ficklin: Exactly, and he was having a great time doing it. I don't know if anybody has ever met a better salesperson than he was. He could get along with anybody. He was just a grand, grand guy. When I got into farming, he was getting a little more elderly, and it was probably just before he first went into the convalescent hospital. He always had a smile on his face, and I can still remember him walking around with a cane. Dad had just bought a machine that we picked raisin trays up with, and I was standing in front of his house, making sure everything was going okay. Here came my grandfather with his cane, and I'll never forget him pointing that cane at the machine and saying, "Why do you need that? Why do you need that?" [laughter] He was used to the old-style way.

When Dad first starting farming, he and Grandpa used all the old--there were no tractors or anything, which I can't even remember; I just remember the stories. You can imagine somebody getting a little bit older and seeing this machine going through the field, doing the work that you used to do when you used to bend over and pick each individual tray up.

Hicke: Does some of your philosophy about farming derive from your father?

S. Ficklin: I think from the whole family, really. If I had been around when they started it, I don't know if I would have had the foresight to even think that something like this might work. I think the family as a whole has brought it all together. David made the wine, my dad grew the grapes, and everybody worked together. That philosophy just came through, and I hope I picked some of it up.

Hicke: You've given me a lot of information.

S. Ficklin: I'm not that involved with the actual making of the wine; that's Peter's expertise. We have a great relationship, and he's really appreciative of the fact that he knows he can't make good wine without good grapes. So everything gels together. It's very enjoyable.

I wish I could give you more insights about Grandfather. Without him, I don't know where any of us would be. I'd probably be on the end of a shovel somewhere. [laughs]

Hicke: How about your grandmother?

S. Ficklin: I don't remember her that much. She was ill quite a bit. I just remember going down there, and she had a jar of pennies that she'd give to the grandkids. She was a great cook, and they enjoyed food. I can remember some of the great dinner parties I attended when I was about that [indicates] big. I always got a little bit of wine with a little bit of water, and I got to sit up with the big folks for a while. I have very, very fond memories.

Hicke: Do you taste the wines?

S. Ficklin: Peter makes all those decisions, but, yes, we are always interested. We're interested in wine, period. I don't know that much about it, because I don't have the education or the expertise that Peter has, but we thoroughly enjoy tasting wine. When Peter comes out with something new, he'll bring a bottle over and we'll taste it. It just goes back to--here are the vines, and we're just pruning and starting a new season. At the end of the season there will be something in a barrel and eventually in a bottle. I'm fortunate to be able to follow it through like this.

Hicke: It's a wonderful story and a wonderful family. Thank you very much.

V INTERVIEW WITH PETER FICKLIN, CURRENT PRESIDENT AND
WINEMAKER

[Interview 3: January 19, 1992]###

Growing Up at the Winery

Hicke: Let's start with when and where you were born.

P. Ficklin: I was born here in Madera on May 19, 1953.

Hicke: Obviously you grew up here.

P. Ficklin: Yes, right here next to the winery. This house that we're sitting in was not always here. My father had a house that was more or less on the same property, and I grew up in that one.

Hicke: What kind of work were you drafted to do around the winery?

P. Ficklin: Well, I wasn't really drafted; I think there was a lot of interest there. There were always exciting things to do. It's hard for me to remember the first time I actually went over and poked my head into the winery, but I remember going over there after school and seeing what the people my father had hired were doing as they were repairing barrels, pumping wine, or when they used to package the wine--capping and wrapping. I remember going in and talking to the ladies who were hired to do that occasionally. I would just sit and talk with them, and they would do their work. Maybe I would do a little bit of something or other and watch the things work. So I kind of hung around.

I remember climbing up in the barrel racks--I'll show you through the winery in a little bit--and hiding up in there, watching people go around and do their work. I used to play out in the vineyard, and I had a little tree house up in the tree where we could spy on all the tractors going back and forth. It was an interesting life.

Hicke: I have to admit that I have a little prior knowledge here; I know you used to wash down the wineries and have water fights.

P. Ficklin: Oh, yes. My brother and I used to get into all kinds of trouble. I remember being fired once by my father because we were spending more time squirting each other than we were actually doing the job we were supposed to do. [laughs, sounding just like his father!] Most of this was summer work, and during the harvest was the most exciting time because there was so much going on; and, of course, that's when my father's patience was right on the edge.

I was nine or ten before I started doing things that really accomplished anything and was paid ten or fifteen cents an hour back then to get me started, and I'd work up to a little bit more. In late grammar school and during junior high and high school, I'd work on Saturdays and on other days when work needed to be done, I could really help out and do things that were perhaps more worthwhile than just hosing my brother off.

Hicke: What things would you be doing?

P. Ficklin: When we were crushing, the most exciting thing to do was drive the tractors. At the end of the harvest day there are all the stems and skins from the pressing, and those needed to be taken back out to the vineyard and spread in the vineyard rows. That was the most exciting job, as far as I was concerned, to be in the right place at the right time so that I could be the one to take this out. After a while we'd trade back and forth, and we'd have to figure out whose turn it was to drive the tractor. When grapes would be delivered, we'd have to weigh them and drive the tractor for that. That was the most exciting thing to start with.

There were a lot of the other things--pressing, helping shovel the skins out of the vat, unloading the press, hosing down the cement at the end of the day, and things like that.

Hicke: Did you ever have equipment breakdowns or crises?

P. Ficklin: Yes. Perhaps I wasn't as aware of that in my younger days. That wasn't my responsibility at that time; I just did the jobs I was assigned. I remember at bottling times helping to bin the bottled wine; we used to bin bottles up in the back. The bottles would go in a cart, and we'd hand them up by hand. One person would be on the ladder, and you'd hand two bottles up at a time as they got stacked higher. It would work out that I could help do those things. After the bottles had aged, we'd get them down here. We had a large piece of pipe with a little tube on the end, and we'd slide the bottles down, one by one.

As far as equipment malfunctions, the first that I remember is when the crushing area was redone--

Hicke: Was this in the seventies?

P. Ficklin: Yes, I believe so. The electric hoist that lifts things up and down to dump grapes had broken down, so we borrowed the forklift from Steve that had the bin dumper on it and finished crushing that day by coming in at an angle with the forklift, with the bins, and dumping them with the big forklift. There were things like that. After I finished up at Davis in 1978, then I became more aware of things breaking down. It was a little more my responsibility then. [laughs]

Hicke: Let's back up a little bit. What did you do in the summers? Did you work in the winery?

P. Ficklin: Yes. Lots of little things in the summer. It was more day-to-day stuff in helping to bottle and bin wine, get wine down, and wash bottles. When we used to bin them up, they would collect a lot of dust. If you had a bottle up higher in the bin that would push a cork out, this sweet wine would spill over the rest of the bottles. The alcohol and a lot of the moisture would evaporate, so you'd have this caramelly, sticky, honey-like material that would be stuck to the bottles. I remember washing bottles, getting bottles down, putting bottles up, and driving the forklift when we'd have the big, glass truck come in to deliver glass. Also at bottling time I'd use the forklift to bring a pallet of glass over and take out the empty pallet.

Some of the summer work involved cleanup around the winery--weeds and trimming things. I believe when the concrete building was put up in 1967--

Hicke: Is that for storage?

P. Ficklin: Yes, it's the second winery building. The original adobe building was built in '46 or '47. We got too big for it, so we'd stack all of these barrels and empty glass that we weren't using outside and cover them up. In 1967 we put another building up. We were going to put a tank in there, some barrel racks, pallet of bottled wine--actually, bins of bottled wine; we had bought some bins--and of course the empty palletized cartons of bottles that were emptied as we got them off the truck.

My brother and I were in 4-H [Club] at the time, and part of our 4-H project was to do the electrical wiring in this building. I was fourteen, and he was about sixteen. It was a summer project, and it was a lot of fun.

Hicke: How did you learn to do that?

P. Ficklin: We had a lot of help from my father. He helped us put together basically what he wanted in the way of electrical equipment. We'd both been in 4-H since we were ten years old. We put together what the final product would be, and then talked to our father about certain things he wanted. He helped us put together a bill of materials and sketched out some drawings on how to do it. Of course, from the drawings you can easily determine what you need. He helped us get started by showing us where he wanted things and how to do it. Then it was a matter of putting the conduit up, pulling the wires through, and doing all these things. It worked out really well.

That was one of the earlier summer projects. There's a big metal building out there and perhaps one of my earliest memories is when we had a railroad car. You used to be able to buy old refrigerator cars, and this was an old Pacific Fruit Express, wooden boxcar. It was before they had refrigeration units on them, and it was an ice car, basically; they would drop big ice chunks in the ends, and air would circulate as the car was driven along. I think my father bought this for storage; I don't have a date on that. This went on the south side of the adobe building, and I remember when it came in. Some house movers brought it in, and they had to lift it up over the vineyards. Then he had these big, fifty-five-gallon drums that this thing was set down on, and a

cement truck came in and put cement in the drums and kind of settled it in.

This was originally for storage of empty cartons and glass, and they built a little loading dock on it. That was always fun. There were always interesting things. It was painted orange over the letters of the railroad. My brother and I had a train set and built a little train table up in the storeroom--a small shop area. We would go out and trace out the letters on the old boxcar; you could easily see the difference in the paint of the markings and number of the boxcar.

To make a long story short, when we eventually put the steel building up, the boxcar was moved over to my father's eighty acres to be used as a storage shed. A number of years ago it became empty, and when some people came in to cut up some junk metal for Steve at some point, they left some hot metal next to it, and the thing burned down. [laughs] So all of these things come and go. Fortunately there wasn't anything else around it, so we just let it burn down to nothing and then cleaned the metal out.

There were always things like that. There were always leaves to rake in the fall with the big ash trees, there was the harvest time, the different bottlings, binning the wine, washing the bottles.

Hicke: Did your family drink port after dinner?

P. Ficklin: Yes. I remember getting a little taste now and then when I was young. We'd get together for a family birthday or something, and the adults would sit around the table and the kids would all be playing or reading or doing something together. I always enjoyed going over to my grandfather's house, because he had all of these interesting things to look at.

Walter C. Ficklin

Hicke: Tell me about your grandfather.

P. Ficklin: He was quite a guy. I always remember his beret; he always used to wear a beret. He was involved with a lot of different

people. He was somebody who was involved not just locally but internationally. He used to go to the French Club in San Francisco and be involved with people. When he would travel overseas, he would always come back with some spare pocket change from the different foreign currencies, and he would divide that up between my brother and me. We had a coffee can or a cigar box with all these coins from all over the world that he'd bring back. He used to travel to Japan and all these different places. I can't even remember all the countries he had traveled to.

Hicke: Was this because he was interested in travel?

P. Ficklin: He loved to travel, yes. He'd go to France and many other places. He used to write such interesting letters, and we'd all sit down while my mom read the letter to us about where he had been.

Apparently when his house was built in about 1948 or '49, it had an adobe floor, and it had heating wires underneath the bricks. Every now and then, because of the contraction and expansion of heating this floor, one of the wires would break. I remember when he'd be gone on a trip and the heater wasn't working, Dad would go over to fix it. He'd made a special electrical box to detect where this break would occur, and he'd dig up the brick, patch the wires back together, and put the brick down again. I remember going over there and horsing around while my father was doing those kinds of things.

Hicke: Had your grandfather built the house?

P. Ficklin: Yes, he had it built. It was an adobe house; well, it's still there, as a matter of fact. When I was married in 1978, my wife and I rented it for almost ten years. He had a local architect design it, and I think my father did a lot of the wiring and some of the work on it.

Learning to Be a Winemaker

Hicke: When you got older, did you get involved in the blending or the tasting of the wine?

P. Ficklin: Not really, not until I was in college at Davis. I had made a decision at that point to get a degree in enology and come

back into the family business. Most of what I did up until that point was the physical labor in a cellar. I did organize things in a supervisory sense, so that if we needed to rebuild the scale that we weighed the grapes on, I would see that we had the materials and the labor so that it could get done. I worked on layout of barrels. I worked on the design of the new building quite a bit. I was involved in enology at Davis, so I had some background on that. And I worked on rearranging the crush and the fermentation area out there a little bit. So I did a few projects like that, and I started to get involved more and more in those kinds of decisions.

I learned all about winemaking at Davis, and it's a wonderful program. I was thrilled to be able to go up there and have some of the same professors whom my father had studied under--Dr. Guymon, Dr. Amerine, and people like that.

Hicke: How did you decide to take enology?

P. Ficklin: I started out towards engineering. I had always been pretty good in math in high school, and when I hit college math was not as easy as I thought it would be; it was different than I expected [laughter], and I struggled with that. I think I went about two years and then took a break from school. It was quite a struggle. It was at that time that I came down and worked here at the winery for about a year. I really got a sense of what was going on at the winery and seeing how things were done. I worked on bringing records up to date for my father and things like that, and working for that year really stimulated an interest in it. It was at that time that I thought about going back and writing my own program between engineering and winemaking--winery design and winery layout from an engineering standpoint.

When I went up and talked to the people in the enology program and in the engineering program, there really wasn't any program that was done that way. I had a pretty good engineering background at that point, a good sense of it, so I just decided I would go ahead and get a degree in enology instead. One thing leads to another. [laughs] So here I am.

So it took a little longer to graduate. I started at Davis in the fall of 1971, and with the period of in and out and changing majors, it wasn't until the end of the winter quarter, in March of 1978, when I actually finished up. The five-year plan--or six, or seven. [laughs]

Hicke: Tell me about some of the professors you had.

P. Ficklin: My first class was the introduction to enology, and that was taught by Dr. Amerine. That was a lot of fun; I really enjoyed that. There were lectures and discussion groups, and the discussion group that I was in at that time was led by Andy [Andrew] Quady. He was the T.A. [teaching assistant] in the course. I had absolutely no idea who Andy Quady was, but he somehow knew all about the Ficklins, of course. It's funny how it goes around and comes around.

Hicke: Was he from this area?

P. Ficklin: I'm not real sure about that, but I know that when he finished up at Davis--and he finished up before I did--he came down and worked for United Vintners over here. So he was established in the Madera area several years. He started making a little bit of wine on his own when he was down here and then started his own winery in the mid seventies.

Hicke: While we're on the subject, Quady makes port, but doesn't he make it out of Zinfandel?

P. Ficklin: It's only recently--and I can give you a copy of an article--that other port producers are starting to produce ports using Portuguese varieties in California. Andy Quady's first vintage was in '85 or '87, using Portuguese varieties. He's got a fellow in Amador County growing a few acres of Portuguese grape varieties for him. Also Tim Spencer at St. Amant winery in French Camp has just started doing some Portuguese varieties. There are a few others who are starting to experiment with it. It's something only very recent.

Hicke: They see what's happening here.

P. Ficklin: Yes. Some wineries make a wonderful port from Cabernet, Zinfandel, some of the Sirahs, and varieties like that, but I don't think it comes up to what people expect in a Portuguese-style port. They're wonderful wines, but it's kind of like comparing apples and oranges.

You were asking about the professors at Davis. I also remember Dr. [Vernon L.] Singleton, Dr. [Ralph E.] Kunkee, Dr. [Cornelius] Ough, [Dr.] Ann Noble, and Roger Boulton from Australia. And there were also several of the viticulture people--Lloyd Lider and Dr. Olmo.

Brandy

- Hicke: Were they all people who had known your dad?
- P. Ficklin: Oh, yes, and it was so interesting to chat with and get to know each of them. You'd get off the beaten track of just enology classwork and talk about their experiments and projects they had in the experimental winery. Dr. Guymon and his brandies, all the different things we did there--I took a distilled spirits class from him, and it was a tough, tough class. He had information on how the continuous stills work and how to calculate all these various things. That was tough for me. But what I learned beyond that--what goes into brandies, tasting, and all of the other things--was absolutely marvelous.
- Hicke: That's something you have to know quite a bit about, isn't it?
- P. Ficklin: Yes, because of the brandy that goes into the port. I really enjoyed that class tremendously.
- Hicke: Your dad took a course from him, too.
- P. Ficklin: Yes.
- Hicke: He was telling me that it is a lot harder to taste distilled wines because of the higher alcohol.
- P. Ficklin: Yes. There are different ways to get around some of that. You can get a general feel or ballpark idea just by putting a little bit of a high-proof on your hands and rubbing them together. If you're not wearing hand cream or shaving lotion, you can get a sense of some of the aromas. Another thing that works out real well for me is to dilute the brandy sample down to the level at which it would be in a port--down to about 20-percent alcohol. Then you can get a real idea for what you're going to have in a wine.
- Hicke: What are you looking for?
- P. Ficklin: There are a lot of different aspects to brandy. Certain components add to or detract from a brandy as far as I'm concerned. Different people like different things in a brandy. For instance, alcohol has a sense of heat in your

mouth, and some that will vary with the higher alcohols present. So you want a little bit of heat to give a sense of the alcohol there, but you don't want so much that the whole balance of flavor of the finished product in your mouth is overwhelmed. I'm looking for certain characteristics in the final picture.

Some of the fusel oils, which come off in a still at a different level, have a desirable character in a small quantity. Others can give you some very disruptive odors-- things that you might start thinking of in descriptive terms like turpentine and kerosene type aromas. Of course, you want to keep those kinds of things out of your wines.

Hicke: How much does the brandy contribute to the final wine in flavor?

P. Ficklin: Quite a bit. The brandy that I use is obtained through Vie-Del Company, which is down south of Fresno. I work with Eric Lin down there. The company is owned by Mike [Massud Shahim] and Diane Nury, father and daughter, and they've managed the business down there for years. I work quite closely with Eric on the brandy, and he knows more or less what I'm looking for. When he sends me a sample at the end of spring or in early summer of what kind of brandy he has available, I don't have to sift through twenty samples and come down to two or three that are real close. He can send me a couple of samples, and usually they're pretty much right on the money. He knows the characteristics I'm looking for.

The brandy has a sense of the grape in it. Usually it's just under 170 proof. The laws and regulations state that it's considered neutral spirits above 170, so it's distilled just under that and is still considered a grape brandy at that point. Brandies that are distilled above 170 proof still have a character of the fruit it was made with, but there's a legal limit involved there. I usually get it at about 168 or 169 proof, and, yes, there is a definite sense of the grape there, no doubt about that.

Hicke: Does the brandy change every year?

P. Ficklin: A little bit. It depends on the crop year and the varieties. I think they're using consistent varieties that go into it. I'm really pleased with the consistency and the quality that I get from them.

Assistant Winemaker, 1978

Hicke: Let's go back to '78, when you started actually working. What were you doing?

P. Ficklin: I was the assistant winemaker. What did I do? I did everything, in a sense. Instead of working on a specific project, such as rebuilding the scale or painting equipment, I started learning about how the blending is done; how the paper trail from the grapes to the finished wine was laid out as far as weight tags, work orders--work orders every time the wine is moved. Of course we keep track of the gallons in, the gallons out, what containers, et cetera, who initials it and why, and how that's recorded in the system. Also inventory reports from doing inventories twice a year and filling out the forms. It was kind of a gradual move as I started coming into the whole operation.

Once or twice a week I would sit down with my dad and say, "Okay, these things are done. What is the schedule for bottling? Do we need to schedule another one?" If the answer was yes, we'd go ahead. He'd say, "The first thing when you're doing a bottling is that you need to blend some wine to replace the wine in the solera system, you need to collect the wine," and so forth. So I'd go and organize the work, and we'd go over it. Then we'd go on to the next step.

After doing that for a period of time, I gradually worked to the point where I was handling it, anyway. When you work through the whole process, eventually you're doing it yourself. There are a number of areas like that which I worked up through and became the winemaker.

Hicke: Have your goals as winemaker changed since you took over the winery?

P. Ficklin: I'm not sure I knew what goals to set when I started out.

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P. Ficklin: My priorities at that point were to learn how to make the port with the consistency of quality that my father did and to learn the techniques and all of the surrounding paperwork that goes into it--things that you need to know in order to keep

that consistency. From that point I think my goals were still short term, and then I began developing some growth. One of the things that I wanted to do was to reinstate the program of doing vintage ports. That was something that had been kind of rolling around in the back of my mind for a while.

Hicke: Why were you thinking about that?

P. Ficklin: My father and I had talked to various people about it. We took Parrott & Co. on as a distributor--or they took us on--in '78, about the time I finished up at Davis. So all these things were happening at once. I got married in 1978, started work here in the winery, got Parrott & Co., and we were putting up a building. [laughs] The first time the group came down from Parrott, that metal building was nothing but an open dirt field. We took them out there and said, "This is where it's going to be."

Vintage Port

P. Ficklin: My goal then was to learn the style and development of what was in the non-vintage Tinta Port program. There had been only four special bottlings. There was a period of growth in the sixties, and there just wasn't the cellar space to lay down additional wines for a vintage program. So now I've got this beautiful, new building over here, and it was half empty. It was great; I had all this room to handle special wines.

The other aspect of it is that you need to look at the cost, because to lay wines down for a period of time, you have an inventory cost, and you need to balance that. I remember looking in '81 at the harvest of the 1980s and the '78s, and I decided I was going to go with a 1980 vintage port. This is something I was starting to get into when doing my own blends for the non-vintage, checking with my father and what he thought, and things like that.

So I put some trial blends together of the 1980 vintage. I went back and forth, talking to my father, and we all tasted. The final blend was then finalized; I made the final decision on that.

Hicke: So the vintage port is a blend of varieties, but nothing from the previous years?

P. Ficklin: Right. For instance, Special Bottling Number Four was a 1957 Tinta Madeira.

Hicke: Is that the one you just released?

P. Ficklin: Yes, I released a hundred cases of it. Not only is it vintage, but it's all one variety. Rather than try to do that the first time out of the chute, I wanted to use the different varieties together, to blend them to bring out some of the different characteristics. Each of them has some outstanding characteristics that they contribute to the wine, and I wanted to use those in a little different way.

I bottled about a thousand cases of the 1980 vintage port. Meanwhile, I was thinking about what I was going to do next. My focus at that time was some growth in the non-vintage program and developing a quality vintage style. I'll be very candid with you: I told myself that when I bottled the 1980 vintage, I would wait a full year before I tasted it, because I had certain things in mind that I knew I wanted the wine to be like. I figured that in a year it was going to settle down in the bottle, the flavors will come together, and it will have a chance to get started.

So I waited a full year, and then came the big moment. I opened the bottle of '80 in the lab and was really disappointed. [laughs] It just wasn't what I thought it should be at that point. You have to understand that this was the first vintage I had made, and I did not have experience making vintage ports. So I forgot about it for a while, and I went back in another year or year and a half later, and--surprise--the flavors were really coming around to where I hoped they would be. I was really excited.

Hicke: There was an article in the *Wine Spectator* about vintage ports, talking about when was the right time to drink them.¹

P. Ficklin: Yes, I've seen that article.

Hicke: When is the right time?

¹Steve Heimoff, "When to Drink Vintage Port," *Wine Spectator*, January 31, 1992, p. 64.

P. Ficklin: I think it has to do with the consumer's palate, period. This is a whole other topic we can pursue here--the American palate. I have a name for it; I call it the "drinkability" quotient for wine. I think this is why tawny ports and the non-vintage port is so popular, because it is very drinkable. It's smooth, it has some distinct flavors, it comes through--the balance, the finish, and the whole nine yards--all on what you taste. But it's the drinkability of it.

I think some of the young vintage ports coming out of Portugal--and even some of the California ones that are really big, thick, and tannic, and people say it's going to last fifty years into the next century. Well, that's all well and good, but the consumer has to take that bottle and stick it somewhere for twenty-five or thirty years before he can really enjoy it.

My philosophy is to make the port perhaps a little lighter in style than the Portuguese, but at the same time, instead of releasing the '80 port in 1983 or '84, to release it a little later, so it's got more bottle age on it and is starting to come around as far as age in the bottle and developing the character that you're looking for. It's something that can be enjoyed a little bit more than a young, tannic, big port. Again, that's why the non-vintage is so popular, because it's a wine that will age for ten or twenty years as well as something that can be used the evening the person purchases it.

I had a lot of short-term goals. The vintage port program is, I think, successful. My second vintage release, of a 1983, is out now, and I'm really excited about that. I'm holding back about three hundred cases for another twenty or twenty-five years; I'll do a fancy release on that. I've got an '86 in the bottle and an '88 that's going to be a fiftieth anniversary port that I'll release in 1998. The chemistry on the '91 crop was excellent, and the '90s show a lot of promise. I usually wait until the spring, so it'll be March or April before I taste the '91s to evaluate whether I really want to do a '90 or a '91. There will be some more vintage port there.

I'm about seven and a half years into a tawny port program. I want to start out in another three years, in 1995, to release a ten-year-old tawny port. Of course, that's a wood-aged port. I'll start out at about a thousand cases a year and will grow from that. Again, this goes back to the

drinkability, because tawny ports are ready to drink when you buy them, and they're very popular. I think it's going to be a very successful program and is one that can be built up over a period of time. I'll hold a few barrels back from that and develop a twenty-year-old tawny. We'll see how long this goes. [laughs]

Those are my plans right now. I see a lot of possible growth domestically in the non-vintage market, and I see a lot of potential in the tawny program. I want to keep my vintage bottlings special and not do more than fifteen hundred cases at a time. I'll look for exceptional lots of wine from exceptional years, set those aside, bottle them younger, bottle age them longer, and then release them.

Hicke: Do you market the vintage port as something that has to be laid down for twenty years or so?

P. Ficklin: The '83 is very enjoyable right now. It was bottled a little bit later, early in 1987, and it's been in the bottle five years. It's really nice, and the wine opens up in the glass and develops this marvelous, almost coffee-mocha aroma, with a little bit of a prune and berry flavors from the Tinta Madeira that come through, and a nice, lingering fruit finish--a little bit of heat from the brandy but almost a caramel, lingering finish. Everybody loves it, and that's why I want to lay some extra down for the long run and release it in the future.

Hicke: That's a great investment for the winery.

P. Ficklin: Yes. As far as my goals for the future, I would like to see growth; I want to maintain the market, build the market, and develop a full line of ports.

Hicke: In numbers, you mean?

P. Ficklin: Yes, a little bit. The family has extra grapes, so I don't think I'd want to grow to the point where I am buying grapes from somebody else. But we have enough to grow a bit and build a tawny port program up, and that's where I see a lot of this going into. I want to maintain quality and develop a full line of ports, keeping the winery specializing in that rather than trying to do a whole line of wines--red wines, white wines, dessert wines, sherries, et cetera. I want to focus on the ports.

Hicke: Was the vintage that you just released, the '83, a single variety?

P. Ficklin: No, it was all four port varieties. All of my vintage ports so far are blends of the four grape varieties.

Marketing

Hicke: Have you thought about going into something besides port? Has there been any pressure in that direction?

P. Ficklin: Not at this time. With the market the way it is, there are literally hundreds of Chardonnays and Cabernets out there. There are some absolutely marvelous ones and some very good ones, and there are some great buys. There are a number of mediocre ones, too. To try and break into a market like that, especially from the Valley here, that's not the kind of venture that I want to get involved in.

Hicke: And you're so successful with just port.

P. Ficklin: I think there's an excellent foundation that is built on the non-vintage ports as far as the name is concerned. I don't think I can go wrong by maintaining the quality and marketing the name a little bit to get it back out there so that people are a little more aware of it. And stay special, so that people know that they can buy a bottle, and it's going to be good; they can rely on the quality.

Hicke: Speaking of marketing, there was a Safeway ad for a special on port. Does that come from the winery? Is there a discount for specials? How does the pricing work?

P. Ficklin: I can't keep track of everything on that. I sell to Parrott & Co., and they set aside a certain amount of money from each case that's sold to go into promotions such as case discounts and "shelf-talkers" that you see on the shelves. For example, the current recipe folder that's on the non-vintage was put together with this kind of money.

They use the promotion money in different ways. They're going to be helping on some of my travel expenses for me to get out and do some marketing. It's working out really well. Parrott is able to work out deals with the people they do

business with, the people who buy the wine. When you see that a chain store is selling it for less than somebody else, it's usually because of a quantity discount.

There are some stores I don't want to have the port in because of the marketing image I want to build. I think it would undercut what I'm trying to do as far as retaining the quality. If you go into a fine wine shop and see the wine for a certain price and then also see it at a heavily discounted price in a close-out type store, it doesn't build a quality image, and it hurts the retailer who really works hard to sell your product.

Numbers of cases are important in what you sell in a year, but I think the image and the quality that you build are much more important than that. It's nice to have good numbers come in, but if we're a little bit down one year, I can live with that. For example, a year ago federal excise taxes got hiked, and the wine market went down. I could have sold another five hundred cases to a chain store at a real discount, and the numbers would have been perfect for the year. But I don't want to sacrifice what I'm trying to build as far as the brand image.

Hicke: I guess I never realized that the distributor actually buys the wine, so you are paid at that point.

P. Ficklin: Yes. It's interesting to look at differences in the sales figures. When I talk about case sales--when anybody buys wine from me, that's a case sold as far as I'm concerned, and that goes on my sales record as done. Parrott looks at depletions quite differently. If they sell to a distributor in Fresno down here, and the distributor in Fresno sells four cases to a wine shop, then that's four cases depleted. Parrott is tracking the numbers from distributor to retail. This not only gives you total numbers, but specific regional information. They use these monthly depletions, so there's a lag time between the figures that we talk about. You've got this whole pipeline, you might say, of wine that shifts every time a case is sold, and you've got to take that into account, too.

Hicke: Do they negotiate every year as to how much they're going to take?

P. Ficklin: Not as much as some, perhaps; but, yes, there are goals set. When I look at my costs and what it is costing me to produce a

bottle of wine, I'll discuss price with them and the effect of any price changes.

There are price barriers in the retail market, actual psychological blocks in paying more than a specific amount. You try to fit your product in so that you are under one of the major ones. But every now and then you've got to do what you've got to do [laughs]--bust through one of them.

Tour of Winery

P. Ficklin: [time lapse] [walking through winery] This is the original adobe building. It's changed over the years. There used to be a row of poplar trees out here, and there was a little concrete apron a little bit bigger than that large door. The crusher was back against the building. This is the original crusher, and it wasn't until later that we expanded and started taking more grapes in. We'll crush about twenty tons a day, and they'll all go in two fermentation tanks. The next day we'll go ahead and crush again and fill the other two. Then we can go back to the first two that we filled and do the pressing, add the brandy, and all of that.

This is our press. It's an older one, an original basket press. It used to have a redwood tub, but since we've changed to these outdoor fermenters, I need a larger juice capacity. We can roll this thing underneath the tanks and use a little bit of the juice to wash the skins down into it from the bottom of the tank. It takes three or four loads in this press to get two of those tanks emptied. The original three fermenters were in a big row up here, made with about eight- or nine-inch thick concrete walls, and this is just a little sump here. They were wax lined, using a beeswax coating on the walls. Since they were removed, all that remains is the back wall along here. The grapes were crushed, and we could use a hose and a pipe to select which one they went in. They were an open-top fermenter, and we used redwood cap-punchers to get up and punch the cap down. I remember doing that as a kid.

With the development of the outdoor fermenters, we no longer needed those. They were just taking up space, so I took them out. That was another big project. Then I built

the foundations and bought these other tanks to go in here, using the floor space more efficiently.

Hicke: Are these oak?

P. Ficklin: Yes. These are Yugoslavian oak. They're relatively neutral as far as the flavors go. I'm not looking for flavor from them, but I use them as an initial settling tank. I don't try to over-process the wine. My philosophy is to allow everything to just settle out gradually. Each tank has a bottom valve and a side valve and a manhole. So the wine can be pumped down to the side valve, and the manhole is opened up. At that point a small float apparatus on the end of a small hose is used to pump the remaining clear wine off the sediment.

These other tanks are redwood. I don't know if my father told you, but they were originally built in railroad boxcars.

Hicke: No, he didn't.

P. Ficklin: You're going to have to find out who he bought the tanks from. A lot of the equipment here is used. For instance, the crusher and the press were used when he bought them. These tanks were originally built in railroad boxcars to transport wine cross country. They're redwood, so they're very, very neutral, and I use them for settling tanks.

Hicke: A tank would just be built inside of the boxcar?

P. Ficklin: Yes. Of course, they had to be disassembled to take them out. They each have a heavy beam across the top and the extra hoops on the bottom to hold the thing together because of the vibration as they went rattling down the tracks.

The press has a hydraulic ram, similar to an automobile lift in a garage, and it was part of an old cotton-baling unit at one time. Some of this equipment has been gathered together over the years and is still used today.

Hicke: What are these small barrels?

P. Ficklin: These are what I call half-barrels, about twenty-five gallons each. When wine is pumped from tank to tank or barrel to barrel, sometimes there is a little bit of leftover, so I have some extra barrels to put the remainder in. These aren't normally kept here, but a couple of tanks were racked into

barrels, and these have the extra wine in them. I need to move them over to the other building, but I wanted to finish pumping down; it was a late Friday afternoon. [laughs]

Back here is some of the barrel storage. These racks are the ones I used to climb around in as a kid. I remember I'd be in the back and make funny noises, and people would come and look for what the sound was. As the winery has grown over the years, all of the barrels in here have become part of the fractional blending, or the solera system. There are 256 of these fifty-gallon barrels. When it comes time to collect wine for bottling, about a quarter or a little less than a quarter of the wine from each barrel is removed and collected in a tank. Then a similar percentage of wine is pumped out of each of the puncheons to top off the barrels; there are sixty-seven puncheons in this building.

Hicke: What's the difference between what's in the puncheons and what's in the barrels?

P. Ficklin: This [in the puncheon] is a little bit younger. The wine from the barrels is partially removed, and then all of these barrels are topped off from the puncheons. Then a blend is put together in a tank. This is where I'll take wines from the different varieties and various years that are in the cellar for this blend. Different barrels of different wines come together and are blended to produce a non-vintage blend. This blend in turn goes through and tops off these puncheons. There's a diminishing proportion in these barrels of some of the first wine that was ever made here by my father.

These puncheons--all the different shapes and types. There's an old port pipe up there, and these are sherry butts. As a matter of fact, one of these has "Guimarãens" branded on the end of it, and the second one in has "ruby" stamped on the end of it. These are old Duff Gordon sherry butts here. Of course, there's no more of that sherry flavor in there, but they're very neutral and allow the wine to come together properly.

There was a young man from the Guimarãens family who was over here visiting the winery once--David, I believe--and he spotted that puncheon and climbed up there with his camera. He was really excited to see that I had some of his old puncheons here.

It's kind of an odd collection of cooperage, but it has served very well. I'm not looking for a lot of wood flavor in the wine, so the older oak is relatively neutral. These oak casks, similar to the tanks in there, serve as a settling tank. They allow the wine to settle slowly. Then it is racked off the sediment. I usually like to rack it two or three times before I put it in a barrel and allow it about a year in the barrel to really settle down before I'll consider using it in a blend. From that point it goes through the solera system, is racked one more time after that, and then it's bottled. Really, it's all racking and settling, because the only time the wine is filtered is right before it's bottled, with a light polish filtration to remove any particulate sediment that might have gotten picked up.

Hicke: Do you use the same fraction of blending every year?

P. Ficklin: No, it varies with what I have in the cellar. In different years the chemistry of the individual varieties varies somewhat, and I take this into consideration. Maybe I've got some exceptional Souzão one year that has a rich aroma and a beautiful color, so I won't need to use as much and will be able to set aside the rest for a vintage port. There is kind of a window or a range of things that I look at.

It used to take quite a while for a blend to be together. First of all, all the records would have to be brought up to date with respect to all the work orders for pumping and so forth. It would take a day or two, doing it by hand. Then all those records would be gone through to determine which wines were ready to blend. Then a trial blend could be put together on paper, looking at the different grape varieties and chemistry--the alcohol, the sugar, the pH--and then a decision is made regarding what is going to go in. You have all of these numbers and quantities, and you calculate this out on paper. I remember my father used to use a slide rule for a lot of this. It took literally a week or so of paperwork to get this far.

I feel almost guilty, but I've got it on a computer now. [laughter] I use a data base program to maintain my inventory. Of course, in there are the characteristics that I'm looking at and the ranges. I enter any needed information--bring it up to date, which might take only thirty minutes, sort it based on the characteristics that I want to go into the blends, and there--voilà--is a list of wines to use for blending. Then it's exported into a spread sheet

program I wrote. With the spread sheet it's easy to change one number, and it changes the whole thing--and it does it quickly. So it takes much less time to put a blend together. I can put it together on paper and then go grab samples and start doing some analysis and tasting. If I'm not satisfied, thirty minutes at the computer, and I'm back in the lab again. I've gone from weeks to hours, basically.

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Hicke: I'm really interested in how much paperwork is involved and how important all these records are.

P. Ficklin: It's been interesting, over the years, to see the changes. If you produce a wine and label it a 1989 Vineyard XYZ Chardonnay, eventually somebody may come in and ask for proof that the contents are, indeed, what the label claims it to be. So you have to go back and show the bottling records for this bottle--that it was bottled out of a certain tank--and that the wine collected for that tank came from certain barrels, and the wine from those barrels came from other barrels, and the wine from those barrels came from certain fermenters, and these fermenters were filled from grapes that were delivered on a certain day; and show the weight tags on the delivery of those grapes and the varietal certification certificate.

Hicke: These are federal regulations?

P. Ficklin: Yes, basically. It's also been interesting over the years to see the changes in the BATF. I remember as a kid that my father would have an inspection by the BATF, and that was a very big, scary thing. It was after Prohibition, there were people who were looking for ways to cheat, and there were agents who were out to try and find people who cheated. So it was almost as if there was an assumption that you were doing something wrong, and it was going to be found.

Over the years that has changed, and the people at the BATF now are wonderful. A number of them have gone through enology courses and they know the kinds of things that are involved in winemaking. They're not assuming that you've made a mistake, but if you have, they're willing to work with you. If they find in this paper trail that maybe you don't show the weight tags, they'll help you work out forms and a system to fill in the gaps.

The BATF used to conduct annual inventory inspections, where they would come around and go through, checking all containers with you and measure everything. You'd produce an inventory on how many gallons you had, and that more or less correlated with what you were supposed to have and carry on your monthly records. Some losses occur normally, due to evaporation and such, and anything out of the ordinary would be looked into.

But their focus has changed so much in the last couple of years. Of course, they don't have the money they used to because of federal cutbacks; but at the same time, with all the gang-related things that are going on, there is such a change from alcohol to firearms. So people who were originally trained in winery, distillery, and other alcohol-related inspections are being shifted over to the firearms aspect, where they're learning about the different kinds of sales of weapons, what's legal and illegal, and all of the regulations involved. I've got to knock on wood, but I haven't seen anybody for two or three years. [laughter]

[walking around] Originally all the bottling took place out in the front room of the adobe building. Now I've got a specific room to keep all the equipment together. These are some of the fittings, different tools and odds and ends that are used.

Speaking about the BATF, the brandy that came in was brought in and bonded about 170 proof. This is something that they watched over like a hawk, because there was a tax revenue associated with this. If any disappeared, there were taxes to be paid, and that was tax revenue that was lost, as far as they were concerned. Here we have the wine spirits storage room, and originally the brandy was purchased in fifty-five-gallon drums and was put in here, locked up tight, and the BATF had the key.

I don't know if my father explained about the original wine spirits additions.

Hicke: No, he didn't.

P. Ficklin: When port is made, of course you are halting the fermentation using brandy. You want to be able add it at the right time, because if you add it too late you won't have enough sugar, and if you add it too soon you have too much sugar; it's too sweet. During the original days of the winery--and I don't

remember that much about it except some of the complaints that my father lodged when he would come home.

As you are aware, many government organizations only work so many hours a day, Monday through Friday. My father would have grapes in the tank, and perhaps the fermentation would be running a little quick. It could be a Sunday night, and he would need to get brandy on them to halt the fermentation. I think he would use every trick in the book to slow them down. I remember he would take an empty fermenter and fill it full of dry ice and then would use heat exchangers to cool the fermentation. He tried many different ways to control the fermentations, and many worked out quite well. When the BATF agent finally showed up Monday morning and unlocked the door, my father was ready to go and do his wine spirits addition. The BATF wanted to actually watch the brandy going in the tank and oversee the calculations.

This tank, because of its straight sides, was very easy to gauge the wine and how much brandy would be added. This is the original wine spirits addition tank. When all the fermenters were in use and we were pressing, all the juice came right in here. As soon as all the wine was pumped in, it was immediately gauged to determine the volume. My father would do some calculations on how much brandy he would need to add to that, and then the brandy drums would come out and would be pumped. It was immediately mixed to halt the fermentation. So time was a very critical element on this.

There was an experimental program established--I don't know the dates--at several wineries. It must have been hard for the people at the BATF to accept; it was unsupervised wine spirits additions, which meant that they gave the wineries the keys to their wine spirits storage rooms. As long as proper records were kept and it was tracked correctly, the program remained in place. That took some of the pressure off, but the paperwork had to be there to be able to establish exactly what was done. If you were off a couple of gallons or so, you had to be able to explain exactly what happened. Due to the success of this experimental program, which Ficklin Vineyards took part in, unsupervised W.S.A's [wine spirits additions] are a common operation now.

That's the way it goes. I can crush on Thursday and Friday and do wine spirits additions on Saturday and Sunday, This is possible now, whether at nine o'clock at night or at six o'clock in the morning, all depending on the grapes and

fermentation needs. I still have to keep the paper trail going, but that's not the problem it used to be, either.

Hicke: Was the supervision still in place when you were here?

P. Ficklin: I vaguely remember the inspectors being around while the harvest was going on.

Hicke: But the change took place before you came in as winemaker?

P. Ficklin: Yes. Even since then there have been some changes in the way you can vinify the wine, and it makes it much easier as far as getting the characteristics and the quality out of the wine.

This barrel rack wasn't always here. This is where all the capping, wrapping, and packaging were done. I remember we used to stack the cases on these little wooden flats, about five or six cases high, and the freight truck would back up out in front; this was before we had any of the other buildings. We had a small hand cart, and we'd get an order for several hundred cases. Well, they were stacked five high on about sixty or so pallets in here, and it was necessary to go back and forth, one stack at a time, hand stacking them in the back of the truck. It wasn't too long after that when we got a fork lift.

This was the original corking machine. At bottling time there would be three or four people working. One would control the fill on the bottles, another would put the bottles on the filling machine and take them off. Yet another person would cork them and place them in the cart to be binned.

Hicke: So it was one bottle at a time and one cork at a time?

P. Ficklin: Yes. The corking machine that I use today is basically this unit. It's almost exactly the same as this except that it has been modified over the years. It doesn't have a handle, but it has a hydraulic cylinder mounted up on top and a couple of control buttons. You push a button, and it's moved hydraulically, but it's basically the same machine.

This room has the bottled wine library and some more of the barrels that are in the solera system. There's a mechanical barrel lift over there which makes it easy to get the empty barrels up and down from their racks. This is where the wines were originally binned after bottling, and you can see how they were laid down here. There are several little

pieces of lathe, and the bottles were stacked in here after they were bottled. Of course, when they get up high like this, you need somebody up on a ladder. One person would take two bottles out and hand them up to the other, and he'd lay them down on the lathe. It was almost the same thing getting them down; you had to hand them down, two-by-two. They would be binned up, and then they'd be allowed to bottle age for a period of time. Then you'd start taking them down, and they'd get washed, labeled, capped, and wrapped.

The wines that are in this room are a library of some of the earlier vintages and special bottlings, as well as many of the non-vintage lots--the regular non-vintage Tinta Port--from some of the early years. A while back I went through and recorked a lot of these. We lost a few bottles here and there, but all and all they are holding up really well.

Hicke: They don't have caps?

P. Ficklin: No, this is the way everything has been, just a bottle, the wine, and the cork. You can see that they are getting kind of dirty after being in there for a period of time.

Hicke: Are they labeled?

P. Ficklin: No, not yet, but each bin is separate and has a bin record with it. For instance, this is lot No. 17--twenty-nine bottles of non-vintage lot No. 17. This other one is a 1948 Tinta Cão, which is the single variety but all from 1948. This was the first vintage varietal wine that my father made, from the first crush. So it's a library of a lot of the old wines. The '57 that we're re-releasing was originally down in the last bin on the left. That's empty now; the bottles have been taken to be washed and labeled. I've got cases that I'm saving from each of the non-vintage lots that I've done, so I want to add more bin shelves in here so that these wines get binned up properly.

Among the other vintages that I've done--this is what I have left of the thousand cases of the 1980, my first vintage lot. There are about thirty cases here just for the library. This other one is a 1982 vintage. There are a little over forty cases here. My son was born in 1982, so this is wine strictly for him. My daughter was born in '86, and I've got a regular vintage bottling of that year that I will release, about a thousand cases; so I'll set aside some for her, too.

Hicke: What's the temperature in here?

P. Ficklin: Right now it's probably about forty degrees. [laughter] It varies. In the summer it's wonderful in here. It'll be fifty degrees, since the roof is well insulated. With the volume of wine and the thick adobe walls, it stays nice and cool in here. It makes a big difference, I'll tell you. If you get a little moisture in here, it just penetrates and makes it seem very cold.

Hicke: What variation does the wine allow?

P. Ficklin: Ten to twenty degrees is not a problem, especially in barrels. If it varied much more than that, I would have some problems with corks getting pushed out.

Hicke: [going out the back door] This is the cement block building?

P. Ficklin: Yes, we'll come back over here in a bit. This is the wine spirits storage tank. I no longer get the brandy in drums; it is delivered in truckloads now. I can get about 95 percent of what I need by truck, and then I can take the pickup down and get a couple of drums to finish out. It works out really well, no longer having to break your back moving five-hundred pound drums.

This is a lab and office. When this building was put up, I wanted to be able to have a little more room rather than working in the old lab in the adobe building. It was about half this size. At least I have a place to keep everything together and in one spot to do my lab work.

Hicke: I just read in *Wines & Vines* about someone who has come out with two new glass shapes, one for tawny port and one for vintage port.² I'd like to know what you think is the best shape.

P. Ficklin: I like a glass that looks like this three- or four-ounce glass. It's a little smaller for port use than the basic five- or six-ounce tulip-shaped glass. It's closed, yet it's open at the top enough. It's not as tall as some of the traditional, Burgundy-style glasses that you see. I like it because it holds less of a serving, which is perfect with

²Each tulip-shaped glass hold about 8.8 ounces and is 6.75 inches high. *Wines & Vines, January 1992.*

FICKLIN

Vineyards

Ficklin Vineyards Special Bottlings

Special Bottling #1 The 1951 vintage was made from the Touriga grape variety. Bottled in 1954 directly from the puncheons, its aging potential was enhanced by the use of an extra long 2 inch cork and sealing wax. With only 5.5° brix, it is an excellent choice for those who prefer dry port.

Special Bottling #2 Lot #5 of Ficklin Tinta Port was bottled in February, 1955. This non-vintage port is a blend of Tinta Madeira, Touriga, Tinta Cao, and Alvarelhao.

Special Bottling #3 1953 Tinta Madeira was bottled directly from 3 puncheons in February 1957. This particular wine is a fine example of how the Tinta Madeira variety can "stand alone" as a port. Rich and flavorful with a beautiful nose, its response to bottle aging is most gratifying.

Special Bottling #4 1957 Tinta Madeira was bottled directly from the puncheons in February of 1960. It has a distinct and complex character which reflects the use of pot still brandy made from our own Tinta Madeira grapes.

Special Bottling #5 Made from three exceptional lots of the 1980 vintage. The blend of Touriga (about 40%), Tinta Medeira (about 40%), Souzao (about 15%), and Tinta Cao (the remaining 5%) was aged in selected 50 gallon American oak barrels. In April of 1983, the wine was bottled and laid down in the cellar. It was released in November of 1987.

Special Bottling #6 Slightly fewer than 1000 cases of this 1983 vintage port were produced and only about 700 have been released. Each of the four Portuguese grape

(more)

Ficklin Vineyards Special Bottlings

2-2-2-2-2

varieties used contribute flavor components that complement each other to build a unique structure. Souzao (42%) is aromatic, full in flavor, and rich with deep, resplendent color. Tinta Madeira (35%) has a rich chocolate flavor with hints of raspberry and spice. Touriga (19%) is noted for its concentrated fruit flavor and distinctive aroma. Last, Tinta Cao (4%) has a soft and subtle flavor with delicate overtones.

ports, and it has a nice, open vase shape so that you can swirl the wine. Sometimes people use an aperitif glass or a liqueur glass for port, and there's not enough room to allow the wine to open up. This has room at the top for your nose, yet it's closed a little bit so that you can hold the aroma in.

This building was built in the late '70s. Some of the stainless steel tanks here are used initially for wine spirits additions. Wine is pumped from the press and the fermenters over to here, the brandy is added, and everything gets mixed. It's also here that the initial lees sediment settles out that has a lot of the yeast material. I usually rack the wine off that kind of material within about a month. I don't like to let it sit too long on the yeast, because the yeast will degrade and cause some odor problems, especially in a stainless steel tank.

This tank was originally over in the concrete building and moved over here when this building was completed. The other two hold about forty tons worth of wine, and these others will hold about twenty tons. These smaller two tanks are used for blending and bottling. I draw wine from barrels and pump the blend together, the different years and varieties, and it all goes into this tank.

Hicke: One of the smaller ones.

P. Ficklin: Yes. This one is a little bit bigger than that one. When I collect wine out of the other building, it goes into this tank to bottle, so it gets mixed and is then bottled. I schedule bottlings about six or seven times a year, and I keep all the equipment together here.

Here's the filling machine for bottling. There's a filter; it's a plate and frame filter that uses a cellulose pad on it and a paper backing sheet. The wine is filtered and goes directly into the filling machine; it's a syphon unit, so by maintaining a level in the reservoir it's easy to control the fill in the bottles.

The bottles are taken off here--there's the corking machine--they get corked, go back in a case; the case rolls out, gets stacked on the pallet, and goes over to the other building. The pallets of empty glass stacked up in the corner are brought in here, and then the cases with empty bottles are stacked on this conveyor. On a good day it's possible to do

about four hundred cases, so it takes about four days to bottle this tank of wine. If it takes four or five days of collecting wine and pumping it, another four or five days of actual bottling, several days of blending and refilling tanks, et cetera, it's easy to see where the time goes. So every time you bottle, there is work to get ready for it and some to finish up afterwards, too.

Hicke: Does it take about three weeks then?

P. Ficklin: Yes, roughly. The empty glass over here comes in on a truck. I just got a load of glass in, so the overflow is stacked in the aisle here.

Hicke: Can you use recycled glass for bottles?

P. Ficklin: I have, and it's more expensive than new glass. I think if the recyclers could deal with a larger quantity and encourage everybody to recycle, they could hold costs down. There are two different recycling methods. A lot of the glass that is made today is from recycled glass. It's broken up, melted, and they make new glass out of it. But actual bottles that people set out in bins for the recycling centers to be washed and refilled, that's quite a bit more expensive.

Also in here are all the barrels of different wines that are sorted by year and variety, and these are the wines that I blend from. For instance, these five barrels here are 1990 Tinta Madeira, Lot No. 2--designated as 90 TM2. Those five barrels are from racking one tank to another, and there was an extra 250 gallons of wine.

This wine is a 1990 Touriga/ Tinta Càò, when two varieties were picked and crushed together. I try and keep the varieties separate as much as possible, but there are a number of times that I do crush them together, especially with the Touriga. I only take a few tons of Tinta Càò, so usually I put that in with another variety. Souzaò is a difficult one to crush because of the very thick skin on it, so I like to add a little Touriga into that when it's picked, and it makes everything go through the crusher quite a bit better. So there are good reasons for it, and you might say it's a little bit of a field blend.

Hicke: What are the characteristics of the different varieties?

P. Ficklin: Tinta Madeira tends to be very fruity, with raspberry flavors--very, very nice; Souzao has a lot of color, depth, and richness to it; Tinta Cao has a nice, delicate aroma, very soft flavors; and the Touriga has a little bit of a spiciness to it and perhaps a brambly character. All of these different characteristics come together and enhance each other. That's the way I like to describe it.

I work closely with Steve on getting the fruit when it's ready. The family has raisins, currants, and table grapes, but when it comes time to pick the port varieties, everything else stops. Usually it takes about half a day to pick the twenty tons, and then the crews can go finish the day with work on the raisins or do whatever needs to be done. It makes my job so much easier to get good, sound quality fruit. I can't emphasize that enough, because I'm not spending my time trying to blend for the deficiencies or to cover up aspects of the fruit that are detrimental. I can work more on the positive end of things, bringing things together to enhance each other rather than work with a variety where the pH went up too high and the color isn't there. Getting clean, sound fruit makes my job a whole lot easier.

Hicke: You're talking about the ability to pick whenever it's exactly ready?

P. Ficklin: Yes. Steve and I discuss crop size, and early in the year we talk about bloom, the weather, and all the other factors.

As barrels are emptied in here, they're refilled from the tanks, and then I can rack the tanks from one to another. If there are seventy barrels to blend into a tank, then I've got seventy barrels that may be refilled from two or three tanks; I like to keep all my wood cooperage full as much as possible so that it doesn't dry out. Stainless steel can be empty and it doesn't have any problems, but I like to keep all my wood tanks and barrels full.

That's about all there is in here. We can step over to the concrete building and see where it goes from there. The sales tend to be seasonal, so right now in the winter we're spending more time getting wine ready to ship, doing a few bottlings, and those sorts of things. In the spring when it warms up a bit, more time can be spent doing some winery maintenance, work on shipping, and getting equipment ready to crush. In the fall, of course, we will be doing our crushing and things like that.

Hicke: Why are the sales seasonal?

P. Ficklin: Port tends to be a winter drink for a lot of people. They associate cold weather, a fireplace, and a glass of port. I'm working on that, too. I'm trying to get more people to use wine for different things in the spring and summer, but it still tends to be quite seasonal. The biggest sales months are October to February.

This is where the bottled wine is aged and then prepared for shipping. When the wine is bottled, it is brought over here and stacked up on the pallets up in the back. This is where it bottle-ages for about a year. When it's time to ship, the bottles need to be labeled, capped, and wrapped. It takes about a day to label 170 cases. A tin cap is spun on each bottle over there, then the bottles are wrapped in tissue paper, put in a case, the case is stacked on a pallet, and those pallets are ready to ship to Parrott & Co. So this is the final step.

Hicke: Did you have to change from lead caps?

P. Ficklin: Yes. That's something I changed about six months ago. The lead capsules are tin coated inside and out, and it's a very malleable metal alloy. Of course, the tin capsules are more expensive. There are some new aluminum ones out that I'm going to look at, and they should be coming out with some new alloys that will also be safe.

Hicke: What about corks? Do you ever have any problems with corks?

P. Ficklin: Yes, every now and then you get some corks that cause problems. You try and get the best corks you can, especially important for a port that may be in the bottle longer than other wine. They're expensive, too. You just kind of go with what's available as well as knuckling down and paying the going price.

There's the labeling machine over there. I've got another one over in the other building that I traded a couple of cases of wine for. It was in southern California, so one time when I was down there with the pickup, I took this man some wine and he gave me his old labeling machine. I've got some spare parts now, you see.

That's basically it, unless you have any other questions I can answer.

Hicke: I'm interested in the image of port that you're creating. I just finished reading some [Charles] Dickens, and I'm reading the Forsyte Saga by [John] Galsworthy. Those characters always have this huge, long dinner that ends with a sweet, a savory, and fruit, and then there's port. It's wonderful, because they sit around drinking their port. What kind of image are you trying to or would you like to create for port?

P. Ficklin: From the image that port had in the fifties, there needs to be a tremendous change, and I think it's occurring.

##

P. Ficklin: [back in his office] There was a real problem with the image of port for years. My father was encouraged to produce a premium port in California, and so here we are today.

I think the image of port is changing slowly; it's become much more acceptable as many people aren't as aware of the alcoholics and cheap ports. That's really neat as far as I'm concerned, because I'm seeing a lot more younger people who are interested and want to know more about it. Especially when I pour it at different tastings and charity events, they're interested in other wines as well. That's exciting to see.

Rather than just sell to the masses, I'd like to see some education go along, too. What could be easier and simpler at a dinner party with some friends, rather than having a big, rich dessert afterward, than to sit around and sip on a glass of port with a little fresh fruit? The conversation lingers, and people enjoy it. Sip on a little port, and nobody will have that full, burdened feeling when they're done. That's what I'm trying to get across.

ESTATE BOTTLED IN OUR C

FICKLIN
Vineyards

MADERA
CALIFORNIA

Five Star Port

California

PORT

ALCOHOL 18.5% BY VOL.



Ficklin Vineyards Tinta Port

Ficklin Vineyards has produced Tinta Port since the winery was founded in 1946. In the tradition of European wine estates, all of the grapes are grown in the Ficklin's own vineyards that surround the hand-built adobe winery. Only the classic Portuguese grape varieties are used in the blend which includes Tinta Madeira, Touriga, Tinta Cao, and Souzao. Ficklin Vineyards produces about 9,000 cases each year. To ensure consistency, the Ficklins have developed a unique solera system that blends a portion of each port the winery has ever produced into each new blend.

VI CONCLUDING INTERVIEW WITH DAVID AND JEAN FICKLIN

[Interview continues with David and Jean Ficklin]

More on Walter C. Ficklin

Hicke: You started to tell me a story.

D. Ficklin: This was quite a few years ago for me even. One time I was delivering a case of wine to a customer in Fresno. Of course our wine cartons have our family name, Ficklin, rather prominently printed on the outside. The case was there, and a total stranger came up to me and asked me if I were related to Walter Ficklin. I said yes, that he was my father. This stranger looked me in the eye and said, "He saved my life." It turned out that he had been in farming during the Depression, and at one point he had no place to turn for financing, so he approached the production credit [Fresno-Madera Production Credit Association] people, my father included, and was given a loan.

Hicke: So your father was in this association which actually loaned--

J. Ficklin: He was the manager of Production Credit Association.

D. Ficklin: Yes, in the Fresno office.

J. Ficklin: And very well thought of.

Hicke: This was in the thirties?

D. Ficklin: Yes.

Marketing: Parrott & Co.

- Hicke: Jean, I wanted to ask you about the marketing entertainment.
- J. Ficklin: We used to do it at least once a year. People would be brought in, generally to the Livermore area or the Bay Area, and then they'd come down here one day.
- Hicke: Where is the headquarters for the distributors?
- J. Ficklin: Now it's at Livermore. The Wente family own Parrott & Co. When we first went with Parrott, it was owned by several other families.
- D. Ficklin: Including the Martinis.
- J. Ficklin: Yes, Louis [P.] Martini, the Wente Bros., and then there were some other individuals. Eventually the Wentes bought them out and now control the stock. They handle all the marketing for us all over the country. It was neat to get to meet some of the people and have them come in. They'd have a tour of the winery, see the vineyard, and get to know the family. Then we'd have a luncheon for them, and a couple of times we had dinners for them. We'd have some good wine with it and lots of sociability. It was fun.
- D. Ficklin: One big family type of thing?
- J. Ficklin: Many times we prepared everything ourselves, and then the group got to be pretty big, so we would get part of it catered. We always had Armenian sarmas, the stuffed grape leaves. We had them the first time the group came here, so every time afterwards we had to have them; they'd say, "Now, be sure you're going to have those." [laughter] Another favorite was guacamole.
- D. Ficklin: Oh, yes.
- Hicke: How did you happen to select Parrott to start with?
- D. Ficklin: Louis [P.] Martini approached me one time about whether I might be interested. It sounded good to me.

thirteen wholesalers, and we were dealing with each individual wholesaler, trying to get them to pay on time, trying to keep in touch with them. That was sort of my responsibility, and it got to be a little much. So when we had this opportunity to go with Parrott--they would send a truck down and pick up the wine here. Their headquarters were up in the Bay Area at that time. They would warehouse the wine, and then they would take care of the shipments going out from up there. There would be one invoice for the truckload, and they would handle all the rest of the invoicing, collecting, and everything up there.

Hicke: So they actually buy the wine from you.

J. Ficklin: Yes, and then they go ahead and distribute it. They have the licenses to go out of state into a number of the other states, so that's how we've been able to do that.

Hicke: What other states do you sell in?

D. Ficklin: In the major markets around the country, like New York, Chicago.

J. Ficklin: Peter is going to be heading off to Boston and [gets copy of schedule and shows it to Carole]. This schedule is all worked up for him by Donna Wilcox, who is a member of the Parrott organization. She's our brand manager.

Hicke: [looking at schedule] It's a good thing I caught him when I did. [laughter]

D. Ficklin: This will be his first major experience like this. He's done some tastings within the state.

J. Ficklin: And dinners. On Monday he's going to go up to a very fancy restaurant in Sacramento. He and Phil Wente are doing a winemakers' dinner. They're going to have Wente wines through the meal, and then the dessert will be Ficklin port with three different types of chocolate desserts. They'll get a chance to talk about the wines. This is offered through the restaurant, which will have maybe forty people who will buy this dinner. He's done several of those. Well, David has done these, too.

Hicke: Do you get people calling you after that? Do you have any idea of what kind of impact this has?

- D. Ficklin: They work through Parrott, of course, if orders are generated, so it's a little difficult to evaluate.
- J. Ficklin: The interesting thing about this one that Peter is going to be doing Monday night is that they have gotten permission--and I guess this is through alcohol and beverage control (ABC)--to actually sell wines after the dinner.
- D. Ficklin: This is a dinner with the winemakers, and the people pay their own way.
- J. Ficklin: Yes. I think the charge for this dinner is forty dollars.
- Hicke: Part of the fun is meeting the winemakers.
- J. Ficklin: I think so. This is a dinner that has been arranged by another of the Parrott people, Jack Clara, who handles the Sacramento area.
- D. Ficklin: One time when Jean and I were in southern California doing this type of thing, we had these gourmet dinners three nights in a row. [laughter]
- J. Ficklin: It was too much. Instead of making the trip up and down and up and down the state, we did three of them.
- Hicke: [looking at pictures] In this picture I can see that when you were first bottling you stood them straight upright afterwards. For how long?
- D. Ficklin: Oh, just overnight.
- J. Ficklin: Then they would be binned up in those bins that you saw over there. This is an old one of about the same time, showing the data at the barrel racks. [tape off]
- Hicke: We were just talking about some of the images that port projects.
- J. Ficklin: We think there's a definite trend for young people to be appreciating ports now. We've experienced going to tastings where years ago we would have older, middle-aged people coming up and trying the port, but we would have young people coming by and saying, "Oh, I don't like port," and "Oh, port! Oooh"--this kind of reaction. Today we're having young people bringing their friends over to taste it, saying, "I know that," or, "My grandmother drinks that." [laughter] I do

think there is an appreciation for a quality port today, and I think it's growing. We certainly have experienced that, and we've done a lot of tastings.

Computerizing the Record-keeping

Hicke: Jean, can you give me a little review of how things have changed, particularly from your viewpoint?

J. Ficklin: Seeing the expansion, the modest increase in production that we've had has been very, very gratifying. With Peter coming into the business, this has been tremendous from both of our standpoints. He has computerized so much that it has helped my responsibilities tremendously, so I'm spending much less time. I'm trying desperately to retire. [laughter]

D. Ficklin: I can add a thought here. Jean is really the glue that holds everything together around here. An important part of this story is the key role that my wife, Jean, played from the time we were first married in November, 1949. It seemed that she was always available, volunteering to help in any way that she could. I remember one of the early occasions where she found me trying to put order into the storage of a collection of hardware, spare parts, etc. I quickly learned that this was "right up her alley." In no time we had everything neatly sorted and labeled on shelves.

At vintage time her help was especially appreciated. In the early years the vintage was particularly busy for me. The grapes for crushing were picked in fifty-pound boxes; I was the one who dumped these boxes into the crusher. Then, in preparation for pressing, the pomace had to be shoveled by hand out of the fermenter into the press. If I had any spare time, I could always punch cap, again by hand.

You can see that I might be very grateful for Jean's help, tracking down figures and recording them for reports, answering the telephone, opening mail, answering letters-- whatever needed to be done. These things she did very efficiently and unobtrusively. At the same time, she was operating our household: three meals a day, rearing two little boys, the whole bit. As time passed, she assumed responsibility for bookkeeping, records and reports for wine taxes, payroll and payroll taxes, etc., etc. She proved that

she was equal to this and more by preparing lunches or dinners for important visitors as well.

Perhaps now you can understand why I speak of her as "the glue that holds everything together."

- Hicke: Peter talks a lot about the necessary paperwork, and I assume that was part of your job. I had not realized how important that is.
- J. Ficklin: Well, you know, we're a permissive industry, meaning that we depend upon operating within the code of the government forms and the bureaucracy of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Anything that we do really has to be pretty much approved by them, so we have a code of regulations that we operate within. We can only do certain things. For example, some states allow wineries to use sugar in wine. California does not. You have to keep track of every bit of grapes and brandy coming in; your quantities have to be recorded. Then you have to show in your records that you have used the grapes and the brandy to produce a certain quantity of wine. There's an estimate in there, and if you can't account for your beverage brandy, you're in trouble, because it comes in in bond.
- Hicke: Peter told me about keeping it under lock and key, which David had to deal with when he wanted to stop the fermentation.
- J. Ficklin: That goes back to when David would get up in the middle of the night and put yeast in sometimes in order to have the wine ready at a certain point. It is much, much better today. I think our government inspectors are more knowledgeable. The paperwork has gotten to be pretty heavy, but at least--let's just say that some of them can add better than they could before. [laughter]
- Hicke: One of your jobs was keeping all these records?
- J. Ficklin: Yes. Dave would do the fermentation and the production record, and then I would take it from there to get it into the daily and monthly reports. We would work together to make sure that everything was balanced. Now Peter is doing much of this on the computer.
- Hicke: A daily report would summarize your daily operations, and you had to submit a monthly report?

J. Ficklin: Yes, and we had to have the backup papers. For example, we would have a still wine record, and that was on a daily basis. If you sold wine, if you made wine--all of this went on this sheet; if you bottled wine it went on another sheet; if you removed so many bottles, if you took out samples or anything--this all had to be marked down on these reports. Then you had to summarize them at the end of the month and submit them.

Twice a year we used to have to take an inventory, and we would actually have to count the bottles and figure the total quantity, count the barrels--submit so many barrels, so many puncheons, and list all of them. The bottled wines were summarized; you didn't have to list individual bottles. When you bottled in, say, November and then had shipped out from earlier wines, you had to be able to show when you took a December inventory that you could account for that.

Hicke: Were they worried about selling on the black market?

J. Ficklin: I think things going out the back door and so forth. They wanted to protect their revenue. The minute that the wine comes out of the winery, it's subject to tax. We were paying 67 cents a gallon on dessert wines. Perhaps you've read about how they are increasing the tax. We were going to have to pay \$1.57 for every gallon in taxes, but because we're a small producer, meaning that we produce less than 500,000 gallons a year, we get a credit of 90 cents. We still have to submit the form at \$1.57 and then show the deduction of 90 cents a gallon, which brings it right back down to the 67 cents that we were paying previously. That's federal.

For the state it used to be 2 cents a gallon, and that had to be paid monthly on any wine removed, unless it was removed in bond. That has just gone up to 20 cents a gallon.

Hicke: And you don't get a credit on the state tax?

J. Ficklin: No. That's one of the new state taxes.

Hicke: How does that affect you? Does Parrott handle that?

J. Ficklin: No, we pay the taxes.

Hicke: Does that just get added to the price of the bottle?

J. Ficklin: Yes. When you have an increase in the price of wine that is going out, you figure what your taxes are, what your cost of

production is, and so forth and then have a modest increase. We've tried to keep our prices modest.

Our first wine that went on the market in 1952 was \$1.90 a bottle.

Hicke: What does it sell for now?

J. Ficklin: Approximately \$9.00 a bottle.

Hicke: What is your production now?

J. Ficklin: We're just under nine thousand cases.

Hicke: Do you recall what it was when you started the winery?

J. Ficklin: David will know.

Hicke: It has obviously increased some.

J. Ficklin: Oh, yes. It was much smaller. Our first crush was approximately ten tons.

Hicke: Your first bottling was in '52?

J. Ficklin: No, we bottled it earlier and released it in '52.

This past year was just a little smaller; we crushed 99.6435 tons. The reason that I know that is because I was just figuring taxes on it. [laughs] I came off very lucky on that, because a certain grape crush assessment starts at 100 tons, and we didn't have to pay it this year. [laughter]

Many of the things I was dealing with in all of these reports have now been computerized. Peter and I have been checking each other's work back and forth, getting the bugs out of this. I could help him where I knew what had to be done, he could do the computer operations, and then we could check it against--we kept some duplicate records in some places until we had really gotten the confidence. But now our required government forms are computerized.

Hicke: Do you know what kind of computer and software he is using?

J. Ficklin: In bookkeeping we're using Solomon, and for the rest of the winery records, he writes his own programs with dBase. The computer is a Compaq. Several years ago, under the new

federal tax laws, they decided that we had to capitalize our inventory. Because we had inventory that we were aging, we had to go back to about 1970 and re-figure the values of that inventory. The accountant worked with this, and it was just when we were getting into the computer aspect. Peter was able to do a lot of it by going back and figuring it out. You could only take so much of someone's time; it wasn't completely deductible any more. Part of it had to go to inventory, and part of it had to go to--this was a whole new ball game, and because we had these old, old wines we had to go back that many years. We ended up having a terrific financial tax that we had to pay, but we were given five years to pay it.

Hicke: That was the new '85 tax law?

J. Ficklin: Yes. It was a real burden. It boosted our inventory value; it did that, and we do feel now that we have a very honest appraisal of our inventory. But wait until they change the tax laws again!

Hicke: Do you get some help from the Small Business Administration? Do you have any dealings with them?

J. Ficklin: No, we haven't. We have had a very fine CPA firm that has been absolutely outstanding in helping us through some of these problems.

Hicke: Is that a local firm?

J. Ficklin: It is Stoughton Davidson in Fresno. They're a financial accounting firm. John Stoughton is an old friend of the family. In fact, his wife was one of David's father's staff in production credit. So things go back and are all sort of tied together.

Port Glassware

Hicke: [David re-enters] I have an article here about two new port glasses that have been developed, one for tawny port and one for vintage port. [See footnote 85] You showed me the glass that you liked. Do you think these are going to have any advantage, or are they just something for people to have fun with?

- D. Ficklin: [looking at pictures of glasses] It's a little difficult to say. It's a whole new concept almost, isn't it? It's a generous size, 8.8 ounces.
- Hicke: One would assume, I guess, that one wouldn't fill it all the way up.
- D. Ficklin: I guess I'm more of a traditionalist and prefer something more modest in size.

Winery Expansion in the Mid-Seventies

- Hicke: One of the things we didn't get to talk much about is the expansion that took place in the seventies. Why did you decide to build another building?
- D. Ficklin: The market for wines in the seventies seemed very favorable for the wine industry, and then with our son Peter coming into it, that was a big factor, too. It was something that he could build on.
- Hicke: Before that you hadn't thought about expanding?
- D. Ficklin: I was approaching the time when I wanted to think about retiring.
- ###
- D. Ficklin: If Peter hadn't indicated his desire to be in the business, we probably wouldn't have gone ahead and put up that third building.
- Hicke: Had you ever been approached by someone who wanted to purchase the winery?
- D. Ficklin: Oh, I guess so. That crosses Jean's desk. A number of people have made inquiries. We haven't ever given selling serious consideration.
- Hicke: I suppose one of the advantage of having a big corporate owner or even another owner is investment of capital. Nevertheless, you expanded without that. That's a bit more chancey for a small business.

Expansion of the Winery

Right: cleaning out old barrels, 1980.

Lower left: putting in the tank pads, 1978.

Lower right: installing the storage tanks for settling the new wine, 1978.



D. Ficklin: Oh [laughs], a little bit of everything. There's always gardening to do, and we have property to oversee. That's what this chimney sweep came for; we have a house over there that we're getting ready to rent. We both like to swim in the summertime, we both ride bicycles, and we have a motor home for taking trips. We keep busy. And I have my amateur radio station.

Future of Port

Hicke: What do you see for the future of port, Jean?

J. Ficklin: I think there's quite a future for it. I see people using port as an after-dinner drink and as a dessert. I think the liqueurs and cordials are being used less and less. I think people are using port.

Hicke: How do you account for this?

J. Ficklin: I think part of it is the emphasis on less alcohol consumption.

Hicke: Are liqueurs higher in alcohol content?

J. Ficklin: Yes, they are.

Hicke: The port we just had is so rich tasting. It makes a wonderful and satisfying--

J. Ficklin: It's a sipping drink. It isn't something that you drink in any great quantity. That's one of the things that I think is an indication that port is going to be successful. More and more people are going to be drinking it, because they don't need to drink that much wine to have that pleasant feeling.

Hicke: What do you see for the future of port, Dave?

D. Ficklin: I go along with what Peter says, and I'm an optimist. I think that if people have an opportunity to taste quality ports, they will develop a liking for it. So I think we are going to see it be more important in the marketplace than it is right now.

Hicke: Do you see it becoming more popular in restaurants as well?

D. Ficklin: We do see that already. I think Jean mentioned Marrisotti's and the Vineyard Restaurant. They have a daughter who lives up in the Bay Area, and on one visit they were going to this very nice restaurant (I don't recall the name). I guess they visited with the owner of the restaurant, both being in the same line of work. Someone mentioned that she was a new grandparent, so after they had their meal, the proprietor of the restaurant brought them a glass of Ficklin port. Yes, we hear more about it all the time.

Hicke: I think that's a good note to end on. I thank you so very much for the time you have spent telling us about Ficklin port.

D. Ficklin: It was my pleasure.

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