

Memories of Old Hill Ranch: an interview with Patrick McMurtry, longtime resident and assistant to Otto Teller

Old Hill in the 60s: hippies, hedonism and homemade wine

1960s San Francisco was the epicenter of a countercultural movement that reimagined everything from politics to agriculture. And Old Hill Ranch, just 45 miles to the north, saw its fair share of fun.

In the years between the original William McPherson Hill dynasty and the ranch's eventual takeover by organic pioneers Anne and Otto Teller, the land became something of an eco-farming commune – complete with bacchanalian revelry fueled by homemade wine and a communal spirit emblematic of the age.

There to bear witness was Patrick McMurtry, an artist who followed his high school girlfriend to the ranch and ended up living there on and off for more than 20 years – eventually becoming Otto Teller's driver and assistant. His memories form an important oral record of the ranch's transformation from historic vineyard to hippy hideout, eventually falling into disrepair before being resuscitated by Otto.

The year was 1969, two years after the Summer of Love, and Patrick had followed his heart to the ranch. "I was dating a girl in high school and she and her grandmother lived there," he says. At the time the ranch had a number of houses on it; some had even been transported by train from San Francisco by McPherson Hill himself. "We paid a whopping \$60 a month in rent for a two bedroom farmhouse."

At the time the land belonged to a local character "whose claim to fame was owning a rowdy bar called the Rustic Inn", a popular haunt with local motorcycle gangs. The older generation of tenants were a storied bunch, says Patrick, who often swapped tales about Jack London and other figures of the time.

For the younger folk, the ranch became a place to rediscover a way of life more connected to the land. "There was a feeling of going back to a simpler time," he explains. "We had all come from middle class suburban lifestyles and the world was getting more and more complicated. Now we were living here, going back to how our grandparents used to live."

Wine making was, naturally, a big part of the scene – and the ranch dwellers often enjoyed the fruits of their labor. "We would all get together and pick the grapes, which was very good zinfandel. Some were sold to Sebastiani Winery but some we kept. We had these parties that went on for days, it was very Dionysian."

Good wine mingled with psychedelic drugs, fueling conversations that ranged from the Vietnam war to organic farming. "There was a lot of revolutionary thinking in that day, trying to get rid of the draft, ending the war, becoming more organic and connected to the earth. We were all young and likeminded and the ranch was the perfect environment for it." Many

of the young people who made wine at Old Hill eventually went on to have successful careers in the wine industry.

But those halcyon days came to an end when the property was bought by an unpopular woman who raised rents and “basically proceeded to ruin the scene”, says Patrick. “It was like paradise lost. Everyone left and I moved up to a commune in northern California.”

The 1980s: Otto and Anne rescue a forlorn property

Patrick might never have returned, had it not been for a dream years later. It was 1982 and he had moved back to Sonoma. One night he dreamt of walking through his old house at the ranch, and it prompted him to go and visit the place. “I went out to check on the property, and the house was empty. But there I met Otto and Anne, who had just taken over. And they rented the house back to me. I stayed for nearly 20 years.”

The arrival of Anne and Otto was like a breath of fresh air after years of neglect. Blackberry bushes and poison oak had overgrown the vines, and the previous owners had left a mess of plumbing equipment lying around. The couple had been eyeing a “for sale” sign hanging on the forlorn property for years, recalls Anne. “The land needed a wise owner to bring it back. It needed loving,” she says. So buy it, and love it, they did.

Patrick remembers how the pragmatic Otto set about tackling issues one by one. The first was drinking water – the ranch’s only well was shallow and loaded with sulfur and iron. “The first thing Otto did was sink a 250ft well that brought up gorgeous drinking water. Then he went from one house to another and fixed them up. And he got a crew to clear out the vineyard.”

Otto was stubbornly progressive in his approach to farming, and refused to use chemicals to get the vineyard in shape. Patrick recalls how Otto sprayed the vines with liquid kelp to feed and remineralize them. “Otto was an agriculture genius,” he says. “Within three years that vineyard was judged as the best zinfandel in the world by [Someone named Parker? I need to check on this more. Can’t find any online record but great detail to include]”.

Otto’s brilliance as a farmer was matched by his uncompromising commitment to quality in all areas of life, whether he was making wine or building a house. “Otto approached things matter-of-factly, and he understood quality,” says Patrick. “I remember one day talking to him at length about a screen door on my house – it was an original, probably build in the late 1880s, and it had all this wonderful moulding. We talked about the quality of the workmanship and how that was disappearing. Everything is just slapped together these days. Otto understood and had a great appreciation of art – the art of design, the art of farming.”

Patrick worked as Otto’s driver and assistant, keeping oversight of his busy schedule. Otto, an active conservationist, was often meeting with local government to discuss his latest gripe. A well-connected and passionate defender of the natural world, Otto was an agitator who “could get the secretary of agriculture on the phone” if he needed an influential ear.

One of his biggest grievances was water and the wastefulness of neighboring vineyards. “Otto never irrigated because it depleted the watershed,” says Patrick, something he also cared about, having grown up in the area and watched the Sonoma river shrink as agriculture boomed. “Otto dry farmed but he also did work to protect the Sonoma Watershed, including founding Trout Unlimited and the Salmon Foundation.” [Can you confirm what these are called? Not sure I found the right websites]

Looking back today

Sonoma has changed a lot since those days, and for Patrick, Old Hill Ranch represents a set of lost values as wine making becomes ever more corporate.

“Will Bucklin is one of the last individuals in Sonoma with grape vines that haven’t been bought out by a giant beverage company,” he says. “Everything around here is big fish gobbling up little fish.”

Patrick mourns the “death of community” that has come to Sonoma as a slower, more personal way of existence has been replaced by money, technology, and big industry. “Downtown Sonoma used to have businesses for local people – a hardware store, a market, a place to get a cup of coffee. But now it’s all fancy tasting rooms. There is a sense that the community has been demolished.”

Against this backdrop the history of Old Hill Ranch takes on a profound significance. Here lies a home for hippies, a haven for those with new and progressive ideas, for those seeking a simpler, more beautiful way to live. That’s how it was, and how it remains today.