

Standing in the cellar of an old Victorian home two miles north of St. Helena, Chris Tilley points out a section of concrete block construction. "There used to be a staircase that came down here from the main house," he said. But, there was a fire some 30 years ago and the staircase was blocked off.

The rest of the stone basement looks as it did many years ago when it served as a wine cellar for a man named August Hersch, a German immigrant from Milwaukee, who came to St. Helena and with his wife, Frederika, and bought part of the Lyman tract in 1881.

Chris and Pauline Tilley have owned the eight-acre property since 2001, but until an

Bringing New Life to a Ghost Winery

By David Stoneberg
Napa Valley Register Staff Writer

winemaker Chris Dearden released V Madrone's first wine, a 2004 vintage 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon made from the vineyard's first crop. Seventy cases of wine were produced. The Tilleys planted 3.25 acres of vines in 2002, a year after they bought the property and renovated some of the cottages on the property at 3199 St. Helena Highway North, across from Ehlers Lane, near the St. Helena Marketplace stores.

About four years ago, Chris Tilley hired a well-known Napa historian, John Kelly, who poured through microfilm pages of The St. Helena Star at the local library to find out all he could about the property.

Kelly said the information he found was very interesting. "Originally the research covered the overall property," he said, including the fact that it had been the Madrones Restaurant. He said the search through the

newspapers wasn't as hard as one might believe, because a pretty good index system exists. For example, he was able to look up the name of the owner, August Hersch, and found out quite a bit of information, including the fact that he had been a witness to a murder on the property. "Chris and I were fascinated by the story, which was mostly covered by the Napa newspaper, since the courts were in Napa," Kelly said.

After Hersch died unexpectedly in 1894, his widow, Frederika sold the

property to Carver National Bank in St. Helena. The deed to the property listed "20,000 gallons of cooperage and wine-making equipment."

That was the first inkling that Hersch had used the property for a pre-Prohibition winery.

1887 article in the St. Helena Star was discovered, they couldn't confirm their property had once been a winery.

The Tilleys plan to reopen the "ghost winery" renamed V Madrone Winery in June 2008, after the last of their four children graduate from high school. On Oct. 1,

An old resort and lodge

When the Tilleys bought the property they knew it to be an old resort and drive-in lodge that operated in the 1930s and 1940s. At the time, eight or nine cottages surrounded a main house. Also on the property was an old storage barn. Tilley said a Hungarian couple operated the resort and restaurant.



In mid-2004, Kelly found proof. According to an April 22, 1887 article in the St. Helena Star, after buying the property, Hersch planted 12 to 15 acres in vines. He built a “modern country cottage of nine, large, hand-finished rooms, conveniently arranged and elegantly furnished. A wide piazza extends along the front and two sides, forming an inviting place to lounge away the long summer afternoons.”

The article continues, “Extending underneath the entire house is a large cellar with stone walls, having a storage capacity of 20,000 gallons. Mr. Hersch being an experienced vintner makes his own grapes into wine, the yield last year aggregating 5,600 gallons. He has on hand some very choice white wine and claret, from which store he supplies a number of metropolitan customers regularly at stated intervals, receiving good prices.” Hirsch shipped his wine to New York.

The author ends the article, “Mr. and Mrs. Hersch are much pleased with their home, and have no reason to regret locating in the beautiful Napa Valley.” After Hirsch died, the property passed through several different owners. Its history as a winery was lost. Tilley said Kelly found additional articles from the same period, one in 1883 that told of the name of the contractor who built the house, another that listed the production of wine at 7,000 gallons.

Armed with this definitive information, Tilley went to the county and applied for a use permit for his ghost winery. It was granted in October 2005 and before the Tilleys open V Madrone Winery — named for the numerous madrone trees on the property — they have to meet a number of conditions, including putting in a left-hand turn lane on Highway 29, moving the barn from next to a stream that runs through the property, designing and installing landscaping, restor-



ing the cellar to its original condition and refurbishing the farm house into a tasting room.

It is this last task that’s likely to be the most troublesome. Looking at the wood-frame building today, it appears two square boxes were joined together. The front box is wide and squat, while the rear box is, well, square and taller. The Tilleys suspect the owners enclosed the front porch and changed the roofline after the fire that happened 30 years ago. Currently, they are working with Mary Sikes and her St. Helena architectural firm to restore the original house. “We have to re-create what it was years ago,” Tilley said.

Since 2001, the Tilleys have spent a lot of time, money and effort on their property, mostly in the vineyards and researching the property. They found out about the fire in a tile store in Berkeley when they ran into a man who was a grandson of one of the

owners. He said he spent summers with his grandparents and remembers running from the cellar up to the main house before the fire. After the fire, the grandson said the stairway was closed with concrete blocks.

In the next few months, the Tilleys will spend even more time and money on their efforts to reopen the ghost winery ... and to return to their roots. Pauline, who was born in Dublin, Ireland and Tilley, who was raised in St. Helena, now live in New York. Chris, a member of the St. Helena class of 1973, has worked in the insurance industry since his graduation and was transferred to the East Coast from Novato a few years ago. After seeing the Tilleys’ enthusiasm for the winery project, it’s clear they can’t wait to return to their roots — both figuratively and literally.

“...the ghost winery [will reopen] in June 2008.”

To contact them, visit V Madrone’s website, www.vmadrone.com.