

Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Robin Daniel Lail

Robin Lail: Legacy and Engagement in Napa Valley

The Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Martin Meeker
in 2019

Since 1954 the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library, formerly 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 method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in 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.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Robin Lail dated March 2, 2019. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://ucblib.link/OHC-rights>.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Robin Daniel Lail. "Robin Lail: Legacy and Engagement in Napa Valley," Napa Valley Vintners oral history project, conducted by Martin Meeker in 2019, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2019.



Robin Daniel Lail

Photograph courtesy of Napa Valley Vintners

Robin Lail is the founder of Lail Vineyards, and co-founder of Dominus and Merryville Vineyards in Napa Valley. Lail was born in Oakland in 1940, grew up on the Inglenook wine estate in Rutherford, California, and was educated at Stanford University. Her great-granduncle was Gustave Niebaum, the founder of Inglenook and one of the early leaders of the California wine industry. Lail's father, John Daniel Jr., sold Inglenook in 1964 but he remained an inspiration to Lail, who eventually established her own wine estate in his honor. In this interview, Lail discusses her father's innovations; the role of numerous women in the wine business and philanthropic aspects of the wine industry; her key role in establishing and managing the first Auction Napa Valley in 1981; the Napa Valley Vintners; the effective branding of Napa Valley wine; and climate change and environmental stewardship by vintners in Napa Valley.

Table of Contents — Robin Daniel Lail

Napa Valley Vintners Project History by Martin Meeker	vi
Interview 1: January 18, 2019	
Hour 1	1
<p>Cherishing father’s legacy and involvement with the Vintners with Lail Vineyards — Father, John Daniel Jr., not permitted to talk about wine at the dinner table — Father’s sale of Inglenook — Great-grand uncle Gustave Niebaum — Participation in Vintners meetings — Robert Mondavi’s success — Father being the first to put Napa Valley on wine bottle labels — Purchase of family’s home by the Von Lobensels family and giving tours of home — Working for Robert Mondavi as an assistant for five years — Becoming a part of a wine tasting group and learning terminology — Exposure to VIP events and traveling for Robert Mondavi — Margrit Mondavi’s event planning and hospitality — Origin of Auction Napa Valley idea, influence of Pat Montandon and Robert Mondavi — Helping in the renovation of the Meadowood resort property owned by Bill Harlan — Leader of the auction planning committee comprised; planning the auction — Trip to Burgundy to see the wine auction at the Hospices de Beaune in 1980</p>	
Hour 2	16
<p>Attempting to pattern Auction Napa Valley after the Hospices de Beaune — Advertisements for the wine auction in Marvin Shanken’s <i>Wine Spectator</i> — Mel Dick from Southern Wine and Spirits in Florida bid for the first auction lot — First barrel auction trials due to exposure of wine to the sun — Recognizing planning mistakes made from barrel auction — Auction Napa Valley setting off wine auctioneering across the US — Wine auctions selling out and generating large donations — Desire to bring small wineries into the big auction to generate more donations — Criticisms of the auctions — Concern about climate change and the need for the wineries to take environmentally-friendly actions — The Porto Protocol — Success of Napa Valley wine because of Napa Valley Vintners</p>	

Napa Valley Vintners Project History

The Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) Oral History Project was initiated in 2018 following a series of conversations between representatives of NVV and UC Berkeley's Oral History Center. In anticipation of the NVV's 75th anniversary year in 2019, the NVV agreed to sponsor an oral history project documenting the contributions of the organization to the growth and improvement of the wine industry in the United States; the establishment and protection of "Napa Valley" as a place known worldwide for the quality of its wines; and the people who made all of this possible.

The oral histories in this project were designed to be rather brief two-hour interviews; in these the narrators were asked about their interest and engagement with the wine business in general before turning the focus to their participation in and observations of the NVV. Interviews in this project are wide-ranging, touching on a number of issues and topics going back to the very beginning of the organization in 1944—in fact, two of the first project narrators were children of NVV founders (Michael Mondavi is the son of Robert Mondavi; Robin Lail is the daughter of John Daniel, Jr.). Narrators describe the growth and transformation of the organization in the 1970s and 1980s; during this time the NVV ceased being a small group of vintners who viewed the organization as a social club as much as an industry group and changed into something much more consequential. Narrators, including Bob Trinchero and John Shafer, tell how the NVV grew into a large and influential organization that impacted the law, policy, trade, and marketing of wine in the United States and abroad. Other narrators describe the organization's emerging and expanding interest in protecting the environment, limiting urban growth, preserving agricultural lands, and advocating for sustainable practices in the vineyards and cellars of Napa Valley. Key people and projects of the organization are touched upon in most interviews, with special attention paid to Auction Napa Valley, the country's premier charitable wine auction that was established in 1981 and now raises millions of dollars a year for community health and education organizations in Napa Valley.

The Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project builds upon decades of interviews conducted by the Oral History Center that document the history of wine in California and, in some cases, the specific history of the NVV. These oral histories date back to the late 1960s and include interviews with NVV founders Louis M. Martini and Robert Mondavi, as well as Eleanor McCrae, Joseph Heitz, Dan Duckhorn, and several other NVV leaders.

Martin Meeker
Charles B. Faulhaber Director
Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library

Interview 1: January 18, 2019

Meeker: Today is the 18th of January, 2019. This is Martin Meeker, interviewing Robin Daniel Lail, for the Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project. This is our first session together. We are here at Mole Hill—is that correct?—

01-00:00:32

Lail: Right, exactly.

Meeker: —the name of the Lail estate, up in the hills above Napa, near Angwin. So I begin these interviews the same with everyone, and that is just tell me your name and date and place of birth.

01-00:00:48

Lail: So my name is Robin Daniel Lail. I was born in Oakland, and immediately transferred to Inglenook. My birth date is March 31, 1940.

Meeker: Great. Thank you. So yesterday was a pretty special day in the history of Napa Valley. That was the seventy-fifth anniversary meeting of the Napa Valley Vintners, an organization cofounded by your father, John Daniel, Jr. I'm wondering if you can just let me know if you were in a reflective mood yesterday and what might've been on your mind when you were at this celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of this organization.

01-00:01:37

Lail: Well, actually, Martin, it started before I went to the meeting. I have a habit of writing every morning. So I was writing about my dad and telling him, just documenting in my own little writing, about the occasion. Then I was thinking, honestly, about what it would be like if Dad would appear in the chair across the table from me and I would begin to describe to him what was going on in the wine business today. I made notes of some of the things that have happened and changed so, so amazingly. I'm quite sure he would be totally flummoxed. Not in a good way, because it's too big and it's too sort of ostensibly out of control. It's just going and going. So it was a lovely moment. Then of course, more of that when I went to the cellar and picked up the bottle, and more at the meeting. There were some wonderful photographs and they touched my heart. That's, I think, the best thing to say. My dad was such an important contributor to the vintners, to the industry, that it was just fun to see him. One of the reasons that I started this project, Lail Vineyards, one of the real driving forces was that I wanted to bring my dad's name out of the dustbin of history, because he had sold the winery in 1964 and the business had really taken off long after that. So it was a touching day for me. I loved it. I did, I loved it. And I loved David's presentation. I think it was spot-on, just excellent. So it was a fun day.

Meeker: His presentation was, from where I sat, focused in part on the value of history and of the accumulations of generations of knowledge and expertise helping

to create a place that's valued, like Napa today. As a historian, I value that, too.

01-00:04:08

Lail: As do I, obviously. My roots are way back there, at least in terms of California. I value, for our industry—not just for me and my project, but for our industry and for the vintners—very much the fact that we have this behind us; that we're not just kind of, "hello, we'll go into the wine business."

Meeker: So you were born in 1940; the Vintners is established—again, cofounded by your father—in 1944. At what point in your upbringing did you realize what Dad's business was, what his job was?

01-00:04:52

Lail: What an interesting question. So in my upbringing—. I think I probably knew pretty early on. There was the winery, after all. In terms of his position in the business, no. We had a lovely estate. My dad was my hero. He was my hero. In terms of the wine business, it was ubiquitous. I was surrounded by vineyards, which I loved, and used to hunt for Indian artifacts. I had a treehouse overhanging one of the vineyards, and used to stop by the winery on my way home from school and have a glass of water, and then walk up and down the stairs and pester everyone. Wine was on our table every night. My sister and I were not allowed to taste the wine, because my mother had been gone for a number of years, and when she came back, she opted for us to become members of the Mormon Church—which is a grand religion, but certainly does not embrace the concept of wine. So no wine for us. But for me, the great tragedy of my childhood—and I mean this with all my heart—is that there was this fabulous man who was never really allowed to talk about his business at the dinner table. So it wasn't until he sold the winery, which was in 1964, it wasn't until that point in time—. I made a really wonderful album, a fabulous album for him. But how to write about his contributions in an intelligent way? So what I did was, I sent out a letter to leaders of the business, both in San Francisco and the Gallos, all the right people, so-called, and the wine writers, and asked them if they could make a comment about my father and what his contributions were. It made me so sad.

Meeker: Because his contributions were so widely-appreciated or—?

01-00:07:26

Lail: They were. They were. His own persona was so widely-appreciated. He was raised by Susan Niebaum, because his mother died when he was a young boy. So he was very Victorian, in many ways, but such a man. I remember one man said, "I would trust John Daniel, Jr. with my most secret secret. I would trust him even with my wife." I thought it was such a darling, sweet, heartfelt statement. So why I was sad was that I'd been cut out, if that makes any sense. There's no arrogance or anything there. It was just, I missed something that I didn't want to miss. Then he died in 1970. When he sold the winery, that was it for me. It was over. I was sad about that, too, because he had been so good

about communicating and involving and bringing my sister and I into this tradition, and now it was just truncated. But Inglenook had been the Lafite of Napa Valley, and how could I, in one generation? It was ridiculous. Without any money or any property or any anything, how could I possibly put back that together? So I threw away all his files. [she gasps] What a fool! So now I'm bleeding a little inside right this minute.

Meeker: Well, you said that he communicated the business to you. When and how was that done?

01-00:09:20

Lail: It was done a lot. For instance, we used to go for Sunday drives. I would be in the pickup with him and we would drive through the vineyards. The progress was extremely slow, maybe two miles an hour. He would be talking about the vines and noting the shape of the different leaves for the different varieties and so forth, and talking about the beauty of the property. We used to have picnics up on Mount Saint John. He would talk a lot about Captain [Gustave Ferdinand] Niebaum and about this legacy that we were born into, and how special it was, and that we were basically unique because we were fourth generation, and that that was a big responsibility.

Unfortunately, on the other side of the coin, he used to say, in his marvelous, grand way, "I see myself as a caretaker, and all this will be yours in the future." Then my mother got into the mix. It wasn't mine or my sister's; it was all gone. So that's a very dangerous thing to say to a child or a young person, because the devastation it leaves behind if it doesn't happen is palpable. So it took a little while to get over that.

To go back to your question, Martin, it was a conversation. It was an ongoing conversation. It was by leadership, by role model, by his passion and his intensity for everything that he did that was connected with the business. He used to write these back labels on the wines that were humorous, because he wanted to demystify wine for people. He was trying to build this business back, and it took what? So 1933, and when did the business really take off? It was in the nineties. It was a huge uphill climb. But he was there, he was there. He was the chairman of the Wine Institute, chairman of the Wine Advisory Board, chairman of the Medical Friends of Wine, chairman of the Napa Valley Vintners, again and again He testified in Washington. Even as a child, those things kind of penetrate. You don't really know it; at the time, they don't. The love of wine—*chh*. How about the perfume after harvest? How about that? It's not replaceable in any way. And the crescendo, the energy of the harvest itself as the apex of this growing season. It was a wonderful business. So it got me, and I didn't even know it got me. I didn't.

Meeker: I believe your father was born in 1907; is that correct?

01-00:12:44

Lail: Yes, he was.

Meeker: I don't know what year Captain Niebaum passed away.

01-00:12:50

Lail: 1908.

Meeker: 1908. Okay. So they had an overlap, but not a cognizant overlap.

01-00:12:55

Lail: That's exactly right.

Meeker: What stories survived of your great-grand uncle?

01-00:13:00

Lail: Well, stories survived. One story of him being out on the property and the director of the veteran's home came onto the property. Niebaum was out there in his work clothes, kind of rummaging around, apparently. So here comes this fellow and he says, "Oh, my man, I love this property. I've heard so much about it." Niebaum said to him, "Well, would you care to see the property?" So he took him for a drive around the property and then put him back in his buggy, and that was the end of that—without ever telling him who he was. Niebaum gave no interviews, ostensibly, in his entire life. There's some writing about him by Eunice Waite, I think her name is.

But his stories—a couple of stories, little ribald stories from Alaska, his days in Alaska. One of them was that some fellow came into a bar one night, and he was telling people how he had gone farther north than anyone ever had gone before and blah-blah-blah. Niebaum said to him, "Well, you're right to a point, but beyond that is the," da-da-da-da-da. Because he had been there. From what I'm able to understand, Niebaum was a man who really enjoyed the company of his friends; but other than that, was quite reclusive, quite private. So there're stories. There are stories of his white-kid-glove inspection tours of the winery. Clearly was an obsessive man. But oh, boy, did he do great things with his obsessions. He was an Oddfellow, if I remember properly, so his funeral service was taken care of, the Oddfellows. There was no mention of the winery in any of the obituaries. None. Zero. Isn't that so odd?

Meeker: That's fascinating.

01-00:15:29

Lail: Because he had built this amazing business that was so on the cutting edge. He was the first vintner to package in glass. He was the first vintner to double sort. He was obsessed by Louis Pasteur and the concept of cleanliness, and the winery was spick and span. He was the first vintner to really develop a brand. How many wineries were there? 120, 200, somewhere in that range. There were a lot before the turn of the twentieth century. He developed this

marketing plan. He hired a marketing company and did this fabulous advertisement of all the thinking behind and the process of making wine, and the whole thing was such an impact. It was so fabulous. He was selling wine all over the world. So go figure. He was many things. Apparently, he stayed active in the whaling business and he was the Russian vice-consul to San Francisco, and the consul was not around much, so he was acting consul most of the time. I had this fabulous thought the other day, Martin, that probably, he had the opportunity to be in the court of Nicholas and Alexandra, which is just amazing. It's very fun in life, I think, when you see people—you're a historian, you love history, and I'm sure you've experienced this—that people that were two-dimensional, that you've read about in history, for some reason—. Like [David] McCullough's book, for instance, about Adams and so forth. They become three-dimensional; they become flesh and blood. So Niebaum, over the years, in the research that I've been doing about him, has become that for me. So it's lovely. It's really great.

Meeker: I had the opportunity of interviewing Michael Mondavi. Of course, his father, Robert, was also one of the cofounders of the [Napa Valley] Vintners. He talked a little bit about the role that that organization played in his upbringing. He knew about the organization and would occasionally go to meetings. Most of his father's friendship circle was other members of that group. Is there any parallel to your experience? Or were you more cut off from that because of the domestic situation?

01-00:18:21

Lail: Well, I wasn't cut off from the people, but I was not going to the Vintners. That wasn't a possibility. Of course, I knew my dad went there. And Bob Mondavi was a really dear friend of his, and so the Mondavis would come over to play cards, from time to time. But no, I didn't have that great pleasure. The first time that I really, really got involved with the Vintners was at the time when we had spawned this idea—. I'm the onlooker, but Bob and Margrit and Pat Montandon had spawned this idea of this wine auction. Bob used to send me to the Vintners, because the Vintners had a tendency to think that he was a loose cannon. He knew that, and he was just a man on a mission. He was so ahead. He was no loose cannon. So he would send me to the Vintners meetings to represent these thoughts.

Meeker: Why do you suppose the other vintners thought of Robert Mondavi in that way?

01-00:19:38

Lail: Because he was a renegade. First of all, he was ousted from his family business. Oh, shocking. Then that crazy guy managed to scrape together some money and start a new winery. People didn't do that. It wasn't that it was a bad thing, it was just crazy. He was so alive. And he was wine. I remember him telling me, "Robin, you're a flibbertigibbet. You're focusing on all these different things. You've got to focus. You've got to focus." This is when I

was working with him. I said, “Mr. Mondavi, in the world today, you are an apple. You think about only one thing, and that is wine. You are wine through and through, start to finish. Wine and food, art coming on. I, on the other hand, am a fruit basket.”

Meeker: Which included some grapes.

01-00:20:55

Lail: Definitely, yes. Bunch here, a bunch there. So it’s interesting. I think that he [Mondavi] was just such a forward thinker, and he was able to do things that were really uncanny. Imagine his partnership with Rainier, when he got into financial difficulty. At that time, he owned 27 percent of the company, and he still had control. Who could do that? Oh, he was a marvelous, marvelous man. Very, very driven, but in a really good way. I never really understood that kind of—.

01-00:22:01

Lail: He and my dad were very active in trying to find something that would promote the Napa Valley. Dad put Napa Valley as an appellation on a bottle of wine for the first time. He and Bob tried many different things, lots of different projects to try and promote Napa Valley wine. When we had lunch that fateful day, and Pat [Patricia] Montandon was talking about having an event and an auction at her home, Margrit said, “Well, it could be like the Hospices de Beaune.” Bob said, “That’s it! That’s what your dad and I were looking for all these years, something to do good things for the appellation here.” It was thrilling. It was really exciting.

Meeker: So you were at this meal?

01-00:22:57

Lail: Oh, I was. Yes, absolutely.

Meeker: So it was Margrit who made the connection to the Hospices de Beaune?

01-00:23:01

Lail: It was, yes.

Meeker: Fascinating. I’d never heard that bit of the story before.

01-00:23:05

Lail: Yeah.

Meeker: I want to come back to the auction, but I want to fill in a couple key bits of your own story. So you were, I believe, working in San Francisco.

01-00:23:19

Lail: I was, yes.

Meeker: Yeah. Then you moved up here with your husband, Jon Lail.

01-00:23:24

Lail: Yes. Jon was hired by the Von Lobensels family, who had Oakville Vineyards, which is where the Napa Wine Company is today. They hired Jon as their marketing director. I ended up giving guided tours through my home. They had purchased my family's home and the back property. They had 400 limited partners. But at any rate, that's why we came back to Napa Valley. I was fully of the mind that Thomas Wolfe was absolutely right and you cannot go home again. So we were living in a little house at the edge of Oakville, on the highway. It was very strange. Then being kind of the tour director in my home, my real home.

Meeker: Right. What was that like?

01-00:24:28

Lail: Very odd and off-putting. No, not off-putting. The real word is humbling. So humbling. The phone would ring and my knee-jerk would be to pick it up. One day a friend, a contemporary of mine, came up from Pebble Beach. I was showing him through the house, and I got up to the third floor, and there's a lovely little balcony up there. We walked out on the balcony and I said, "Oh. Oh, Bart, isn't it beautiful?" He said, "Oh, for heaven's sake, just forget it and start your own thing." It was brilliant. Of course, nothing happened for a while, but I remember that comment. That's maybe like [Joe] Jacob said yesterday.

Meeker: Oh, oh, about the—?

01-00:25:30

Lail: The 49ers, yeah.

Meeker: Yeah, the 49ers and the Warriors and everything, right. When you were giving these tours, where those on the tour knowledgeable of your position vis-à-vis this house?

01-00:25:44

Lail: I think so. I think so. "So here's the former."

Meeker: It's a little bit like those stories you hear of going to a manor house in England.

01-00:25:55

Lail: In England. Exactly. It's a very kind of peculiar position. That stopped when the Coppelas came. Then it was an entirely different thing. I don't know why, but first of all, I wasn't doing guided tours through the house. But just from the get-go, their innate passion about the property was so sweet. It was lovely.

Meeker: Well, so how did you then get connected with Mondavi? I guess you had already known him because of your father?

01-00:26:38

Lail: I was working for him.

Meeker: Okay. Right. So how did you get into that role, and what role was that? Can you describe that job?

01-00:26:46

Lail: Oh, yes. So Robert Mondavi came to me on an afternoon and said, “I’d like you to come to work as my executive assistant.” Secretary. We know what that means. I said, “Oh, thank you so much, Bob. I can’t possibly do that because I’m the executive director of the volunteer center. I’m management.” So I went right to work for Robert Mondavi as his secretary, and it was an amazing—. I was there for five years. You mentioned that you know I’m writing a book. One of the things that’s interesting about writing memoirs is that you have epiphanies along the way. So this particular epiphany was that I realized why Bob Mondavi came to offer me a job. It wasn’t because he needed a secretary, because there were lots of them available. But rather, Robert Mondavi and my dad—. My dad was his mentor in the business, and Dad had bought the first case of wine off the bottling line at Mondavi, Robert Mondavi Winery. When Bob found out that Dad had sold the winery, he was devastated because he said he would’ve moved heaven and earth to buy that property. And we all know that he would’ve done it somehow, because he had such an amazing grasp, appreciation of these roots going back in time, and the story behind that winery. So my epiphany was that he hired me to train me and to give me a boot in the tail section and get me going again. Believe me, I wanted *nothing* to do with the wine business. The only reason that I got involved was that I liked Bob Mondavi. I’d known him since I was four years old. So what a gift.

Meeker: Why did you decide to return to Napa in the seventies?

01-00:29:07

Lail: Well, because my husband came here. It was a good job and I was a nice wife, and my work at the time was part-time.

Meeker: When did wine become a part of your life, given that it was forbidden at the home when you were raised?

01-00:29:38

Lail: La, la, la. Really, I would say starting when we were living in Mill Valley. There was a tasting group that had wine luminaries in it, including Belle and Barney Rhodes and Ben Ichinose, and the Petersons and Dickersons. We had this tasting group, and so we were tasting fabulous wines. So that became a part of life. Before that, I’m horrified to tell you that we had probably killed half our brains by drinking gallons, when we’d go skiing, of this thing called Mountain Red. I’m sure it was chemical. I’m absolutely sure it was chemical. In terms of the wine, it’s horrifying.

Meeker: Was that Almaden?

01-00:30:38

Lail: No, no, no. Unknown. Unknown producer. I have no idea who it was, but I know it was chemicals with red dye.

Meeker: Yeah. It was an industrial product.

01-00:30:48

Lail: It was an industrial product, in very large jugs, yeah. So that started it. Then when we came back up here, we were involved with friends and you just start—. Wine becomes part of life. In terms of fascination with wine, probably when I started with Mondavi.

Meeker: Well, what did you learn? What did he teach you, and how did he go about doing it?

01-00:31:19

Lail: Well, it was by example, basically. For one thing, we would go out to lunch and he would order five bottles of wine. Just the two of us. Then the exercise was to taste each of those bottles of wine and make a comment about what I found in the wines. Which was very, very intense for me at the beginning, because I just didn't have that language available. There was always a Mondavi in the middle of these five bottles somewhere, so you know what had to be best. That's not true.

Meeker: Was he blind tasting them for you or—?

01-00:32:00

Lail: No. By label. They were just all there. So then in addition to that, I was invited to all the winery tastings of the management. Those tastings were fascinating and we were tasting the best Bordeaux and Burgundies, and comparing them. So that was just an immersion, basically. I was also able to go with him to the lab when new wines were being tasted, experimental wines were being tasted, so that was that. I was also invited to mostly all of the VIP lunches that took place in the vineyard room. Of course, there was a good deal of wine at those lunches, and a good deal of conversation. Eventually, I could lip sync some of Bob's comments. I loved his take. I loved the way he presented Robert Mondavi Winery. How he did that was always by presenting the great quality of everyone else first; and then as a kind of finale, and we're presenting this lovely wine. He would rave about wines of his competitors and wines of the Napa Valley. He always promoted the Napa Valley, he always promoted the quality of wine that was being made here. That is a driving force in my life. It is exactly how I am today, and it really stuck. I also had the opportunity, mind you, to see how a medium-size winery works from the top down, with no risk. Right? So I just was included. I went on the first what we called the Robert Mondavi Odyssey in Europe. That was three weeks in 1978. We went to Paris and then to Bordeaux and then to Burgundy and then to

Chablis and then to Champagne and then to the Rhine and the Mosel. We were tasting about 100 wines a day at that time. I knew more about European wines, when I came home, than American wines because of this intense, beautiful immersion.

01-00:34:49

Then there was Margrit. Margrit was a large part of that, also. She was, and is today—I always want to grow up to be like Margrit—so amazingly hospitable. This is a woman who could make the janitor feel like a king, not the king feel like the janitor. But she involved children. She would invite the third grade to come down to the winery, and they would have a little visit and then she would serve grape juice and cookies. It was very, very sweet. But a way to reach out to the community. Then her innovations. The summer concerts and then The Great Chefs of France and then The Great Chefs of America. And Michael James and Billy Cross, who were their interior designers that did these tables for these cooking classes that were to die for. They were so fabulous, so brilliant. There was all the element of design, and there was the element of music, and there was the element of— She had art shows and she had people like [Richard] Diebenkorn, and all kinds of people who were just getting started showed there. Just her zinging zest for life. She just had this fabulous zest for life. I remember when they were older. At Christmas time, they probably would go to 100 Christmas parties. It would be, “Oh, I’m so sorry, we have—.” They’re at party A, and “Oh, I’m sorry, we have to go because we have to go to B.” But there was still C and D. I finally said to her, “Margrit, why do you do this?” She said, “Because it’s fun!”

01-00:37:06

There were 400 employees at Robert Mondavi Winery, and we were a family. It was an entirely different business at that time than it is today. We were on the cutting edge, but the business has become so businesslike, if you will, and the art has kind of gone to the side. It’s still very much there, but these are businesses, and the bottom line has to work. That was the case then, as well; but there was room for fun. There was room for some fun. For instance, the harvest parties that we used to do were fabulous. They were potluck parties. Margrit would make these huge vats of soup and then there would be beer and wine, because every good wine is made by a beer. So all those elements and many more. Just it was a brilliant time for me. Not easy, for a lot of reasons, but brilliant. And I’ll just be damned if he didn’t absolutely succeed in causing me to fall in love with the wine business.

Meeker:

Well, it’s so interesting the way that you’re describing this educational experience. Because if I would ask somebody else, they might walk through sort of business parts of it and then maybe what happens in the cellar and what happens viticulturally. But you talk about this, it’s like this cultural education. Wine’s at the center of it, but there’s so much more that wine provides meaning to and culture than provides context to the wine.

01-00:39:07

Lail: I think maybe the subtle communication was, wine is about people and wine is about passion. Shopworn word? No. Passion stands on its own forever. If you have it, you have it; and if you don't, you don't. But yes, it was all those things. And it was really business, as well. I went to all the board of directors meetings. I was lucky. Incredibly lucky. By the way, as the executive director of the volunteer center, when I went to my first board of directors meeting, I had really a lot to say. Can you imagine? The secretary. "Oh, well, I think that perhaps you could do this." Bob used to, for all the time I was there, from time to time, he would say, "I can't believe you spoke at the board of directors meeting."

Meeker: The volunteer center.

01-00:40:09

Lail: No, that had been my previous job.

Meeker: Oh, your previous job.

01-00:40:12

Lail: Yeah. So I was in the I'm-the-executive-director mode. "No, you are the secretary; shut up."

Meeker: Right, secretaries don't typically speak at board of directors meetings.

01-00:40:24

Lail: No, they do not. No. But I wasn't there to take notes, either; I was just there. Isn't it amazing?

Meeker: Do you remember the issues that would've inspired you to speak up?

01-00:40:34

Lail: No. No, I'm sure there were many.

Meeker: Okay. Well, let's go back to this luncheon, because to have a recollection of the birth of Auction Napa Valley, I think, is pretty useful. Can you tell me about when and where it was?

01-00:40:58

Lail: I can. It was in the summer of 1979. Bob Mondavi had been recruited by the St. Helena Hospital to do a \$7 million capital campaign drive. Mind you, at the time of the first auction in 1981, there were just thirty-six vineyards. So to raise \$7 million out of the thin blue, basically—. Because no one had done a capital campaign of any sort, really, and now you're going out to raise big money. You make a pyramid, always, in a capital campaign. One of our top targets was Al Wilsey and his wife, Pat Montandon. So we had invited Pat to come for lunch. The object of the lunch was to ask her to make a donation. Well, Pat came with her own agenda, as fate would have it. She had done a

party the previous year, a very big social party, and many people had been left out, and there was a lot of ill will.

Meeker: Was it at her home in San Francisco?

01-00:42:24

Lail: No, it was at their home on the Rutherford Cross Road. So there were people with their noses out of joint, so she wanted to do another party. She figured if she connected it to the Napa Valley Vintners and made some money happen for the Vintners, that that might be a good thing. So she came with the idea of having a party and then having a little auction at the end of the party. Lots and lots and lots of people would be there and it would be so much fun, at her home. So we're having this lovely conversation and before we ever get to the business of asking her for a donation to the hospital, the party comes up. We were sitting outside the vineyard room, on the south side of the building—it was just a lovely day—and having one of the unforgettable lunches that happened all the time there.

Meeker: So this was at the Robert Mondavi Winery?

01-00:43:30

Lail: It was at the winery, right. So that's how it happened. That's how it started.

Meeker: How did it move from perhaps being at Pat Montandon's home to being elsewhere?

01-00:43:43

Lail: Well, basically, the vintners were very skeptical about this idea to start with. We had a meeting at the Wilsey's. [she laughs] I'm sorry I'm laughing, but this was a time when short dresses were in mode. There was this huge daybed. The meeting was in the kitchen-slash-day room. So there was this huge daybed that stuck out as far as this table. During the course of this meeting I had gotten so nervous that I had edged my way all the way to the back of this day bed, and now it was time to go home and I was stuck. There was no way, without being obscene, to get off this thing. I couldn't imagine how I'd do it. I finally did it, of course, but—.

Meeker: Slowly, probably.

01-00:44:50

Lail: Slowly. Very slowly. But there was a meeting at her home and it became very apparent that she was going to be in charge. The Vintners felt that if it was going to be a Vintner event, that they should be in charge. So then we said, "Thank you so much," and started down a little bit different path. All good will, but it just wasn't going to work quite right that way.

Meeker: Well, it ended up being held at Meadowood.

01-00:45:25

Lail: It did.

Meeker: Which had relatively recently been purchased by Bill Harlan and his business partners.

01-00:45:31

Lail: 1979, yes.

Meeker: Yeah. How did that place become the home for it?

01-00:45:39

Lail: Well, I like to believe that that's my fault. I had met Bill and his partners when they first came to the Napa Valley—that's not the first time they'd ever been there, obviously, but just after the purchase of the property—and just liked them so much and just *loved* the energy and the excitement and the vision and the whole—. It was kinetic. It was fantastic.

Meeker: How did they express that to you? And what was the vision at that time?

01-00:46:17

Lail: Well, the vision was to create a world-class destination. That was a big deal, considering what it was at the time, which was a run-down, half-baked resort that had fallen on hard times, on a beautiful piece of property. They were fun and lively, and so I started working with them on the side. No payment, just working on the side. My job was to invite movers and shakers to our home for dinner. And then oh, my, Bill Harlan and Peter Stocker would be at the dinner, or Bill Harlan and Peter Palmisano would just happen to be guests at the dinner. So it was a business of kind of, once again, from the bottom up, just being able to communicate in a forthright way, what they were trying to do, what they were trying to create. Bill's vision always was to create a center for wine. It always was. So when the topic of the auction came up, basically, it was obvious to me, and certainly something that Bill wanted to have happen, that that's where it should be. Because it was a neutral place and on its way to being very beautiful. So basically, that's how that happened.

Meeker: What do you recall about the planning process in actually making this first event happen in 1981? It sounds like this was in your bailiwick.

01-00:48:09

Lail: Well, Bob and Margrit made this plan, and then they just started traveling actively. Suddenly I sat up and thought, oh, boy, we've got to do something here; time's a 'wasting. That was in 1979. So I grabbed the ball. Louis Martini was the president of the Vintners at that time. So basically, what happened was that I set up a committee. The committee was populated principally by wives of vintners. Now, these women—it would not have happened without them, period. So there was Molly Chappellet and Martha May and Priscilla Upton and Lila Jaeger and Sue Cross, and I could go on and on. And Margrit Mondavi, of course. But we also had “a few very good men” — Bill Harlan,

Peter Palmisano, and Herb Schmidt. These men were very important in our planning work. We put together this plan. We would meet with the vintners, with Louis and Chuck Carpi—. Well, infrequently, to begin with, and then as time went on, more and more frequently. Then we eventually hired someone as a director, Shirley Knudsen, as the director of the auction. But I would say to you, my baby. My baby, not at all. It was these amazing women. Oh, my goodness, they were so fabulous. There was so much energy and so much passion and such a shared vision that we could do something that would really be great on three levels: one, to promote the Napa Valley appellation; two, to raise money for local charities—local charities; and three, to integrate more fully with our community. Those were very, very important factors, all three of them. They're still there today.

[Content redacted by Narrator]

[Narrator addendum: In putting a plan together for the first Auction Weekend we decided to have a candlelit dinner in the tent the night before the auction and we would sell 500 tickets. The dinner was at Meadowood.]

Meeker: Did you hit any roadblocks, or were there people who were doubtful?

01-00:52:50

Lail: Oh, a lot of doubters, yeah. A lot of doubters. A lot of people were really concerned that we were going to look like a pack of fools, I think. But that was mostly on the male side of the equation. We didn't know how it would work out, but we knew it would be properly put together. So it was very exciting.

Meeker: Were there any substantive roadblocks or challenges that you hit along the way that you recall well?

01-00:53:21

Lail: Mother Nature is so kind to us, honestly, Martin. So whatever roadblocks were there are now gone, and it was clear sailing. Of course, it wasn't. There were so many roadblocks and so many things to stop us along the way. Bill and I have a little bit different recollection of the past, but actually, I was still working for Robert Mondavi, and I thought it would be great for us to go to Burgundy and see the Hospices de Beaune, and I thought that it would be important to take Bill, since it was going to be on his property. [Narrator addendum: It was the basic travel agent building in our itinerary and Mondavi opened doors for us.]

[Content redacted by narrator]

Meeker: Right. Tell me about this trip then, because it was instrumental, I think, in this overall story.

01-00:54:49

Lail: Well, the trip was quite marvelous.

Meeker: It was in—?

01-00:54:53

Lail: November.

Meeker: Of 1980?

01-00:54:56

Lail: November of 1980, yes. We did an extensive trip. So we went to Bordeaux, and then we went to Burgundy, and then we went to Champagne, after that. In Burgundy, I had a friend, Robert Drouhin, who was the President of the Joseph Drouhin Company in Burgundy. His hospitality was the best. So we were very well treated, and invited to all the elements of Hospices. The day before, there is a tasting in the bastions of the Hospices, of these wines that are mostly in malolactic fermentation and very tough [she makes a gurgling noise]. Mrs. Lail, not being very bright, wore a light-colored suit, not understanding that the tastevin, the lovely little silver cups, the tastevin were the vehicles that people were tasting with for real. When they were finished, two things happened: They would toss the wine out of the tastevin and they would spit. [makes spitting noise] It was very crowded, so I was very, very attractive, by the time I got out of there.

The Hospices de Beaune happens on three levels, which I love. It happens on the social level, and there is the dinner at Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin in the Clos du Vougeot, which is fabulous. Then there's the dîner aux chandelles, which is the night before the auction. And then la Paulée de Meursault on Monday in Meursault. La Paulée de Meursault is really fun. It's after the auction, and you are meant to bring a bottle of your favorite Burgundian wine to that event, and then the wines are all shared. So the dinner, the tastevin dinner at Clos de Vougeot is beautiful. The dîner aux chandelles is in the bastions of the Hospices de Beaune, and is quite, quite something. And then this luncheon in Meursault. So that's the social level. Then there's the business level, which is the tasting I was just mentioning, followed by a presentation to the press by the head of the trade association, who happened to be Drouhin that year, talking about the vintage. Then the actual auction itself, which is quite amazing because unlike most auctions, you are responsible for removing your barrel right now. You pick it up within the week and take it away. So you can imagine that it's a lot of professionals that are involved in that auction. If it's an individual, he certainly is tied to a professional. The auction is fascinating and completely different. I don't even remember it that well, but I do remember that the first barrel that is sold has a great deal to do with the pricing of the Burgundian wines that year.

01-00:58:31

Then there is the everyman level. During this period of time, during the Hospices de Beaune week, if you work in a winery, you are able to invite your family and your friends to come and see your winery. Which is very lovely. Then there is entertainment in the street every night. There're plays and music and all kinds of fun things. So I love that tier effect. I had wanted to do a kind of everyman kind of thing in the Lyman Park, in St. Helena, because there's that little bandstand there. You couldn't sell wine there, or even pour wine there, but the mortuary was right next door, and I knew I could get the runner to help us. I thought that would be so much fun, and invite the community. Now what's happened is that there's the Friday barrel auction, so people are able to buy tickets. My original take was free. Just going for free and having the opportunity to taste wines from the vintners. Now, of course, it's so big that that's just silly. But at the time, we only had thirty-six vintners, so it wouldn't have been so unwieldy. So that just going there and seeing that was illuminating. It really was. So the Friday dinner was patterned after the *dîner aux chandelles*, only it wasn't anywhere except at Meadowood. That's kind of a funny story. So now the dinner, round tables and chairs fill the tent, and 500 people, and then everybody gets up and leaves and I'm kind of there cleaning up, and I realize that we have not made provision to reset for the auction the next day. It wasn't going to be tables; it was going to be theater seating. So now I'm on the phone to Bill Harlan. I think it's eleven-thirty at night, and he's asleep. I said, "You have to come. You have to come, because we have to reset this tent." And he did. He was not so happy. Not so happy. So we reset the tent for the auction the following day.

Meeker: Moving all the tables out and resetting the chairs.

01-01:01:23

Lail: Moving all the tables out and resetting the chairs.

Meeker: Your description of the Hospices de Beaune and all the different events surrounding it is interesting. When you returned back to the United States after experiencing that, what parts of it did you really want to emulate or translate to the Napa context?

01-01:01:49

Lail: Well, we wanted to translate all of it, basically. Just the way things worked out, I was not allowed to—. Because remember, we were starting from square one. So there was a huge overcoming-inertia issue, so having the thing in the street or anything like that got to be bigger than a breadbox. It was just too much. The committee couldn't absorb that and put it together. But it became, I think, really patently apparent that it was going to be very different, because there was no historic building there; there was no anything. We were, in that first year, supporting the hospitals, that was it. I can't remember if Clinic OLE. No, I think it was just the two hospitals the first year. So that was patterned after Hospices de Beaune.

Meeker: Did you play a role in the marketing and the enticing people to buy tickets and then bid on the various lots?

01-01:03:08

Lail: To a certain extent; but basically, that was in my position as a secretary. We were writing to a number of people and inviting them to come, from the trade, all over the country. That was part of the committee. Then Shirley Knudsen was responsible for a lot of that, as were the vintners. So not really, no. Although I remember we had a meeting with Marvin Shanken, Bill and I—and maybe some other people, but I don't remember anyone else. Marvin was just starting the *Wine Spectator* at that time. Marvin ran a full-page ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for the auction, which was a huge show of support. So that was something.

Meeker: How did you get Shanken onboard? What was that conversation like?

01-01:04:07

Lail: Oh, I don't remember exactly, just we were both nascent. He's just rolling with the *Wine Spectator*, and he's a guy who has a lot of vision, also. He could see that this could be really something exciting, and that it would be very beneficial to him at the *Spectator* to be involved in the launching of this thing.

Meeker: Was it relatively easy to get donations of wine to be auctioned?

01-01:04:36

Lail: Yes.

Meeker: Yeah? I believe this was also the debut of Opus One, or it hadn't even been called that yet, right?

01-01:04:46

Lail: It was. It was called that, and it was the debut, yes.

Meeker: How purposeful was that? Was it just a happy coincidence?

01-01:04:57

Lail: It was a happy coincidence, it was. So that was sold as a barrel lot. So {one, five, ten, and ten?} cases. But the real sizzle was over the first case, obviously.

Meeker: Which was—?

01-01:05:18

Lail: Just the first case of wine.

There's a wonderful story, actually. A tiny bit off-color, but nonetheless. I can't remember the name of the fellow who had come from this wine shop in New Jersey. I can't remember. Darn, that makes me crazy. At any rate. Then Mel Dick had come from Southern Wine and Spirits, in Florida, and both of

them wanted to buy this first case of wine. You must remember that there were no wine auctions in the United States. Nothing like this. So the bidding started, and the bidding went and the bidding went. Finally, Mel lost the day and the fellow from New Jersey bought the first case—I know you’re going to cut this, and this is fine—I found Mel Dick wandering around on the golf course, looking really dazed. I said, “Mel, I am so sorry you were not able to get that case.” He said, “You don’t understand.” He said, “Most guys can’t get it up, and I couldn’t get it down.” [they laugh] Oh, dear. Sorry, you can cut it; it’s fine.

Meeker: No, I don’t think so. It’s on tape now.

01-01:06:49

Lail: No, you cut it. [interview interruption]

Meeker: So back to the auction. Just as you were about to take a break, you had mentioned to me there was more that could be told, more detail.

01-01:07:08

Lail: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Meeker: What am I not asking about? What, about leading up to the auction is worth recalling now?

01-01:07:19

Lail: Well, so let’s just go to the auction weekend, all right?

Meeker: Okay.

01-01:07:27

Lail: So I have decided that it would be great if we can start to promote future sales in Napa Valley. Looking at Europe, and it’s been going on for years. So I thought, why don’t we—? That’s when I promoted having a barrel auction, which we did. That was one of the great screw-ups, if you will, of the first auction, because we put all the barrels down along a kind of wooded area. The woods were above them, and they were set on the flat. Well, they were fully exposed to the sun. We did this auction in the afternoon. Nightmare. The wines were hot. They were really hot. That was a disaster. So that was that day. That was the day before the auction. Then we had the dinner that night and that little flummox. Then oh, I forgot to tell you about the dinner that night. So now, one of the reasons the wines were so hot was that it was 110 degrees. We just hadn’t planned on that one bit. So now the dinner. Everyone’s come to dinner. It’s just blasting hot, and there’s no air conditioning. There are a few fans, but not much. I think, our guests, they have to have water. There’s no water. So I’m flying up to the restaurant. Came back with some beautiful plastic pitchers. Went flying out to the golf course, filled these pitchers, came in, gave them to the waitstaff, and the waitstaff poured water for everybody. Not very attractive. Just as they’re finishing up

pouring, it occurs to me that the water that they are pouring is recycled water, for the golf course only, not potable. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do. I just thought, what's going to happen? There's going to be a cholera outbreak. I just couldn't imagine what to do. I was literally sweating bullets. Someone came and said, "Oh, it's all right, dear. That's the one potable faucet that you were using on the golf course." I lost forty pounds, I'm sure, right at that moment. So that was fun.

The next day it was, again, 110. Now, what are you going to do? So of course, we had all these wines on the table. Well, nobody wanted to drink wine. It was too hot. It was horrible. So we were flying all over the county, trying to find bottled water. Bottled water wasn't so much a thing at the time. It just wasn't. I bet we bought every little bottle of water that we could find anywhere. So that was something. Then Michael Broadbent was the auctioneer, and Michael is so elegant. Is just elegant, in addition to being very intelligent and a marvelous gentleman. But elegant. It was so hot that behind the skirt of the table—Michael had his feet in a bucket of ice water, because it was so brutally hot. So we did rather well. Or before the auction we had lunch? Anyway, it was a great event. Like every new event, perhaps there were a few hiccups.

Meeker: Was there a postmortem after it? Did you guys meet and talk about—?

01-01:11:37

Lail: Oh, of course.

Meeker: Do you recall some of the things that might've been said at that recap?

01-01:11:46

Lail: Well, people were very happy. They were extremely happy. Basically, we talked about doing the next one. Obviously, things that were humorous—I've already touched on some of them; and all of them that I can remember right at the moment—and some things that needed to be tuned up. There were little things, in terms of the food presentation, and what kind of food did we want to do, and who would do it? Should it be multiple chefs? Et cetera, et cetera. Then just kind of trying to figure out who would take on this behemoth the next time. So it was positive, though. It was really, really positive.

Meeker: Did you continue to work on the auction afterwards?

01-01:12:40

Lail: I worked on it again the following year, but not nearly at the same level. Like the hoop and the stick a little bit. Shirley basically took over the management of the project, which was good. Yeah. So a bit, but not a lot.

Meeker: It's interesting. One of the things that vintners often talk about, in terms of the auction, was a realization of what the market would bear, in terms of the higher end of what bottles and cases could sell for; whereby prior to the auction, you had a wine that was retailing for a certain price; but at the

auction, it would sell for a hell of a lot more. Vintners talk about this being kind of a realization about the market being able to bear more than it was being asked to.

01-01:13:47

Lail:

Hm. That's very, very interesting to me. Robert Mondavi is singlehandedly—here we go again—responsible for getting rid of that ceiling. That was his whole purpose in starting Opus, was demonstrating to the world that the Napa Valley wines were good enough that the Bordeaux—. One of the great growths would come here and partner with someone. I remember when he released his first wine at fifty dollars, people said he was crazy. Again, crazy. But that was the starting point of all of this. In terms of the auction—. There are a zillion auctions where that doesn't really happen. As a matter of fact, things are very often undervalued, which is just heartbreaking. But this auction has always focused on people who are competitive, let's say, by nature, and who have a good deal of discretionary income, and that's fun. So it becomes a little bit of a contest, which is why the prices tend to go so high. Everybody feels nice about it, because it's for charity. It's an amazing vehicle.

Probably, Martin, most probably, the auction concept has peaked and has gone down the other side of the bell curve. People may be a little tired of hearing the auctioneer standing up there yelling. Maybe there are other ways to do it. For instance, in the commercial world now, things are all done digitally. So yes, you still have an auctioneer, but it's a lot calmer, and very fast. That's never going to work in the charitable auction, that kind of format. But people have never been able to figure out, universally figure out, something that would be so successful in raising money. It just is a fabulous vehicle. One of the beauties of this auction is that it spawned thousands of wine auctions around the country. One of the beauties that I'm able to crow about in regards to that is the generosity of these vintners. We have the most generous vintners, period. Because not only do they put up for the events here, for Napa Valley Premiere, which is a barrel auction, and Auction Napa Valley, but for so many auctions around the country. 99.9 percent are all really valuable charities and really doing really important work. So it's a beautiful gift. The gift that keeps on giving, I guess, to the United States. I think it's really special.

Meeker:

Have you been involved in any more recent conversations about the current status of the auction and how to keep it relevant?

01-01:17:23

Lail:

Well, I'm sitting on the steering committee this year. Yes, I'm actively engaged in planning for the auction this year.

Meeker:

What are people talking about? What are people concerned about?

01-01:17:32

Lail:

Well, I think it just follows on what I was saying earlier. That is, that people that are guests are saying they'd like to see something fresh, something new.

So we talk a whole lot about what we can do that's fresh and new. What tends to happen is that the tried and true keeps pushing through. So the tweaks, if you will, are minimal. But I think, honestly speaking, that there's a real awareness—certainly here—that it's time to make changes. In both auctions, as a matter of fact. We've been very lucky, so we keep selling out and selling out and selling out, and making huge amounts of money. Can you imagine something so successful? Oh, \$15 million in three hours. Really? Okay. Sign me up. Right?

Meeker: Right. Why try to fix something that's not broke, I guess, is probably what a lot of people are saying. No?

01-01:18:47

Lail: No, I think there's an awareness. I do. I think there's an awareness that—. Yeah. Change is inevitable. You know very well in business, if you think you've arrived, you're in trouble. You have to stay fresh. So I'm hoping that we will be more fresh. We're working on it.

Meeker: What are your recommendations? What are you thinking personally?

01-01:19:30

Lail: Really, I don't have the perfect answer. I don't. I think part of the answer is, part of the issue is, being able to involve smaller wineries in the big auction. You know very well that the size of the lots and the expense of some of those auction lots for the donor is really substantial, huge, and no small winery can do that. But we're talking about, of course, packaging wineries together, which is a really fun idea. I like it a lot. Gives people an opportunity to get into the big game, versus the e-auction—which is great, by the way; it's really good. [Content redacted by narrator.][Narrator addendum: Since our interview I did come up with an idea which might be exciting. I was thinking of the Kentucky Derby and what a huge tradition the day it. The day before the Derby there is the most lucrative race for fillies run at Kentucky Oaks in Lexington. I am thinking perhaps we could establish a Friday auction for our smaller vintners as a precursor for the auction in Napa Valley.] So I think that we were perceived very, very often, by people outside, as being arrogant because the level of this auction is so high. I don't see us as arrogant in any way. I don't. It's just something that has evolved and evolved. I think that some of the people I've spoken to outside have said, "We'd love to see more kind of a looser structure, a more relaxed structure, not so hoi polloi." Which sounds great, until you try and figure out what that looks like. So I think it's a work in progress, and I love that. At least it's in progress. I think it's really important, because it needs to stay alive until somebody comes up with some other idea that's going to be as effective. I think people realize that. I do. I think there's enough competition left in the world that people will show up and flex, flex.

Meeker: So we should probably wrap up. I want to be respectful of you getting down to your important meeting. Why don't you just tell me where you're headed right now and why?

01-01:22:23

Lail: Where I'm headed right this minute?

Meeker: Yeah.

01-01:22:25

Lail: Oh, I'd love to. I have been interested in the issue of climate change, and personally wanted to get involved in some way that had some kind of broad impact, hopefully. I am a small person without a big checkbook, so how to do that? I've been thinking and thinking. The last IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] report that came out was really frightening. Things that they had projected happening by 2050 and then 2040 are now at 2030. It's tomorrow. It's tomorrow. We're out of time. So I thought, how can I sit in my house and be concerned and fearful? I need to do something. Then I ran across the Porto Protocol. The Porto Protocol was established last year, in July, in Porto. Barack Obama was the keynote speaker. Taylor Fladgate was the leading house in this initiative. They are building a coalition, if you will, which they hope to be worldwide, of growers and wineries who are not only aware of climate situation, but willing to pitch in—even in the smallest way; it doesn't have to be huge, just something—to make a change in what they're doing. What's really exciting about this to me is that it's an option for me maybe to make a change that is—. Because I believe that the broader the voices yelling for—. Not only yelling for action at the higher levels, serious action, but also contributing to action, taking action, demonstrating their concern by what they're doing on their properties and in their businesses. The thing that just really tickles me, excites me, is that companies like Marks & Spencer and Toyota have joined the Porto Protocol. So potentially, this is a very loud worldwide voice. And not only a voice, but an action. Somebody doing something, not just going, oh, my God, oh, woe is me. I'm so thrilled with this opportunity.

So today I'm going to see David Pearson, who's the president of the Napa Valley Vintners, to talk to him about two things. One, about the possibility of the Vintners, who already are doing things as a body, with green certification—. They're underway, so they're obvious members of this protocol. So that's my first target. The second target potential is for him, as the president of Opus One, to join for Opus, as well. I know that right now, that Coppola has joined, and they're doing some really exciting things there. I found that out in two different levels. One, I had lunch with Eleanor Coppola, and she was telling me about some things that they were doing that are very exciting, including having electric cars now, and electric tractors. So when employees get on the property, they park their gas guzzlers, and all the movement that's done on the property or in connection with the property is

done in electric vehicles. Very exciting. So that's what I'm doing today. I hope that if I can be successful here—and I'm obviously right at the outset, kind of like the little girl trying to get into the jump rope—then I'd like to take it to Sonoma, and then to Carmel and then the Central Valley and down south. Then if that all works—and even if it doesn't—then I'd like to go on to Oregon and Washington, Bordeaux and Burgundy, and Germany and Italy and Champagne, and see what I can put together. When I say I, I know my target is not me, but to put together a working group that's really fascinated and excited about it. They'll be the movers and shakers. But at least in my little heart of hearts, Martin, I'll know that I have made and am making an effort on my own part to do something that might help, might move the needle a little bit. So that's what I've been doing.

Meeker: Well, I wish you luck in that most worthwhile pursuit.

01-01:28:20

Lail: Thank you.

Meeker: As you know, the Vintners have made progress in this direction, but there's certainly always more to be done. I'm curious. This is my last question. We started today by talking about some reflections on the seventy-fifth anniversary. I'm wondering, looking back at your participation in this organization and your family's key role in establishing it, do you have any thoughts on what the main contribution of the Vintners has been over that period of time?

01-01:29:00

Lail: I do. I absolutely do. My first thought is unity of purpose. Unity and vision and goal. One of the things that I think has made Napa Valley so successful as an appellation is the Vintners, and the fact that as a body, as a trade association, we are combined. We're combined in a purpose, in a direction. I think that when you look at other areas in California, for instance, there's a lot of kind of looking around about, what are they doing, and what are they doing? We don't do that. We're on a path. I feel that way about my own business. I don't do that. I'm focused on what we're doing, what we're about. What are our goals? What's our mission? What are we trying to do? In addition to that, the Vintners have been brilliant in promoting and protecting this national treasure. I would love very much—and that's another pipe dream of mine—to see this set up as a world heritage site, because Napa Valley, it's a national treasure. It really is. There's been protection of this national treasure, through the business of the Ag[ricultural] Preserve and all the things—the WDO [Winery Definition Ordinance]—all the things that have followed. We're good stewards of the land here. We are. We value—. Here, it's a very finite resource. Only 9 percent of the valley is planted to grapes. You look out and you think, no, that's not true, everything is; everything's planted to grapes. But it's not true. Just about 45,000 acres. But it's very important to our grandchildren that we take really good care of that land,

right? Because if we don't, there's nothing. Then there's a lot of satiated dirt out there. So we care, we pay attention. I think we do it as a body. If you're not in the body, if you're not a Vintner, there is the halo effect that incorporates most everybody. So yeah, it's a very valuable organization. It's protected our brand worldwide. It's been very helpful in pushing out and expanding our business. Not too long ago I was sitting down with Bob [Robert] Parker. He said, "Robin, I want to tell you something." I said, "Well, what's that?" He said, "I believe I'm qualified to say this, and I think that Napa Valley is making the best wines in the world." I could not help but think about Robert Mondavi and John Daniel, Jr., who set out in 1937, with the belief that Napa Valley could make among the best wines in the world. So very thrilling, yeah.

Meeker: Why do you date it to '37?

01-01:32:38

Lail: Because that's when Bob got out of school, out of Stanford; and my father took over the actual ownership and management of the winery in 1936. He'd been working there for three years, but Susan Niebaum said, "Not yet." So he became the managing director in 1936.

Meeker: Well, that's great. Thank you very much. I do appreciate your time.

01-01:33:05

Lail: Martin, it was so much fun.

[End of Interview]