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Berkeley, California

Beth Novak Milliken

Beth Novak Milliken: The Pursuit of Environmental Sustainability in Napa Valley

The Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Martin Meeker
in 2019

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Beth Novak Milliken
Photo courtesy Napa Valley Vintners

Beth Novak Milliken is the president and CEO of Spottswode Estate Vineyard and Winery, which has been owned by the Novak family since 1972. Novak Milliken first joined the board of Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) in 1995 and served as president of the board in 1998; she was reelected to the board in 2018. In this interview, Novak Milliken discusses: the long history of the Spottswode estate and her parents' purchase of it; upbringing in Napa County, college education, and early career as a professional; the establishment of Spottswode as a winery in addition to a vineyard; family engagement with Napa Valley Vintners; moving into a leadership role in organization in the 1990s; role of women in NVV; tourism, land use, and the environment; public policy and politics in Napa Valley.

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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 Trincherro 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: February 8, 2019

01-00:00:07

Meeker: Okay. Today is the eighth of February, 2019. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Beth Novak Milliken at Spottswoode in Saint Helena, California. And this is our first session together for the Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project. We begin these interviews the same with everyone, and that is just tell me your name, in your own voice, and date and place of birth.

01-00:00:34

Novak Milliken: Okay. My name is Beth Novak Milliken. I was born on March 24, 1961 in La Jolla, California, which is in San Diego County.

01-00:00:43

Meeker: Well, I'm going to fast-forward a little bit. Your family then moves up to Saint Helena in 1972. Is that correct?

01-00:00:50

Novak Milliken: Correct.

01-00:00:53

Meeker: There you were, basically a ten- or eleven-year-old. Did the parents just come in and say, "Hey, pack up. We are going to move to the country"?

01-00:01:03

Novak Milliken: Basically, that was how it happened. My dad was a doctor with his own medical practice in San Diego County, and he was a general practitioner. And, at age thirty-nine he decided that he wanted to raise his five children in a more rural environment. He had been born and raised in a place called Rancho Santa Fe. He didn't like what he saw happening in terms of just what was happening in Southern California and didn't feel like it was a place that he wanted to raise his kids. He and my mom were both Southern Californians but had met at Stanford so had a familiarity with Northern California.

And, some good friends of theirs from Stanford had moved up here just prior, in the late sixties. We came up and visited. We had just built a new home in Rancho Santa Fe, and the next thing you know we are moving to Saint Helena in June of 1972.

01-00:01:51

Meeker: You said you have four siblings?

01-00:01:52

Novak Milliken: Yes.

01-00:01:53

Meeker: Where are you in the mix?

01-00:01:54

Novak Milliken: I am right in the middle. So, I have two older sisters and two younger brothers.

01-00:01:57

Meeker: And, you said that your father and your mother were not happy with what was happening in Southern California. Did they ever explain what they meant by that to you?

01-00:02:06

Novak Milliken: I think it had to do with development, and it had to do with the sense of wealth around this little community called Rancho Santa Fe. I think Dad looked at it and just didn't think that it was where he wanted to spend the rest of his time. But he was thirty-nine. The thing that's crazy, and I always say, thankfully, he was a doctor, right? And, this is not a criticism. It's an observation. They don't look at things necessarily by sitting down with a yellow pad and sort of penciling out, does this make any economic sense whatsoever? It's more this attitude of I can do it, right?

And so, it was just this idea that he would sell his practice and sell their home and move up. And my mom said, because my dad died so soon after we moved here, that they really made the decision to sell everything because they weren't going to go back. They made this decision. They were coming north, and this was where we were going to be for a while.

01-00:03:05

Meeker: There were a lot of people at that point in time, in essence, picking up and moving back to the country.

01-00:03:11

Novak Milliken: Yes.

01-00:03:12

Meeker: But your father was a physician. Would it be appropriate to see your parents move in that kind of 1960s, early seventies, "back to the land" context?

01-00:03:23

Novak Milliken: I think so. I just re-listened to that book *Napa* by James Conaway, the initial one, on Audible. And, I think it was fascinating because I think with all the upheaval in the sixties, which I was here in the sixties but I wasn't aware of it due to my age, I think people were just sort of looking at, wow, there's a lot of upheaval. And there's a lot of things that are happening. And maybe there's a simpler way, right, where we want to raise our children. That's all I can really think of. It is a fascinating notion. And, if we hadn't moved here when we did—we ended up with this forty-five acres and this beautiful old estate that was already called Spottswode that was built in 1882—we wouldn't have been able to—it was just by pure luck.

The land prices at that point in time were \$4,000 an acre. Today they're \$400,000-plus an acre if you can find it. So, it was strictly right place, right time. And my parents didn't know anything about grape growing or winemaking, so this desire to move was a lifestyle choice. And so, all they really needed was a house large enough for five children, which they found here. It needed a lot of work, but they found it. My dad wanted to drive a tractor in a vineyard, and my mother was an avid gardener. My dad found this property on a solo trip up here looking at properties and apparently called my mom and said, "I think I found a place you'll like." And she came and looked at it and agreed, and we moved. It was pretty quick.

01-00:04:43

Meeker:

What did you think of the decision by your parents? Were you happy about it?

01-00:04:48

Novak Milliken:

I was good with it. I was eleven, and I was really along for the ride. I was fine with it. I know my oldest sister, Lindy, was not too fond of the idea. And Kelley was somewhere in the middle. And then my two brothers, Mike and Matt, I think, were just along for the ride, too. It's just what we were doing.

01-00:05:04

Meeker:

Was this the actual house?

01-00:05:05

Novak Milliken:

This was the actual house. When we moved here we bought Spottswode. And it was already named Spottswode—it was property that was developed, or I should say established, by a German immigrant named George Schonewald in the late 1800s, 1882. He was a hotel manager in Monterey at an old hotel called the Hotel Del Monte, which was built more or less at the same time, say, as the Hotel Del Coronado. He managed the Del Monte Hotel, which was, of course, one of those hotels that was built after the intercontinental railway was built. And then spur lines were built, and then they would build these large hotels where people would stay for a long period of time.

He built what is now called Spottswode as a summer residence. And, the Hotel Del Monte, unfortunately, is no longer here. It was built. It burned. It was built again. It burned again, and then they moved out to Pebble Beach. But, this house has a lot of architectural elements that are similar to what the Hotel Del Monte was—the porch in particular with the arches and the round circles. But anyway, he built this in 1882, or established it in 1882. And he named it Esmeralda. The stone wall was not here with the name above, but it was called Esmeralda. He planted a lot of the plants here, so the grounds are in part what they are because he brought a lot of historic plants from nurseries, presumably, from Monterey.

01-00:06:22

He and his wife owned it through 1906, and it was sold to a family who named it Stonehurst. In 1908 it was sold to a family who named it Lydenhurst, and then in 1910 it was sold to Mrs. Spotts, who named it Spottswode in her late husband's memory. By then the stone wall had been built. There was a name above. So, when we moved here, that name Spottswode was here. Which is to say, it was already known as Spottswode when we bought it sixty-two years later.

01-00:06:49

Meeker:

Your parents do pretty quickly go into at least growing grapes, not making wine.

01-00:06:53

Novak Milliken: Growing grapes, correct, exactly.

01-00:06:57

Meeker:

Do you remember the decision-making process around that?

01-00:07:01

Novak Milliken:

What I remember around that is the first summer we moved here in 1972, my dad and some friends of his got the house ready for us to move into. So, we lived in the guest house that's on site for the first summer. It's the old tank house to the main house. The house needed some work to move into it — as an example, the attic was unfinished and three bedrooms needed to be built in the space. They spent that first summer getting us moved in here, and then the next year started replanting the old vineyard. What was out there were post-Prohibition vines. And it was a combination of, on the white side Green Hungarian and French Colombard. And on the red side it was Petite Sirah and Napa Gamay [Valdiguié].

I think some of the reds were actually inter-planted. It was all old head-pruned vines. And everything back then was going to what was then the Napa Valley Cooperative. And, that was really controlled by Gallo back then. So, Mrs. Spotts, actually, by the time we bought the property, she was deceased. But she had passed it on to a niece, and so that niece, who was ninety years old by the time we got here, and her daughter, who was sixty at the time, were living here. And they sold the grapes to the co-op. And at that time it was two or three hundred dollars a ton. Is it white or is it red? And how much tonnage do you have? There was no sense around what's the varietal. It was just a very different time, all old vines, just head-pruned vines. So, it was a very tough go financially.

01-00:08:19

So, for the first couple of years we sold what we did have to the co-op. and then, we started replanting the vineyard. There's forty acres out back. It's a forty-five-acre parcel total. We ultimately put nine acres into sauvignon blanc and then nine acres into zinfandel and then the back twenty acres into cabernet sauvignon.

01-00:08:37

Meeker: When they first replanted it, was it their agenda to eventually make wine themselves?

01-00:08:43

Novak Milliken: I think that was what they had in mind. The idea was to plant this vineyard and to make these wines, yes.

01-00:08:51

Meeker: As you mentioned in passing, your father died at a young age, shortly after moving here, a few years. I think it was 1977.

01-00:09:00

Novak Milliken: Yes, exactly.

01-00:09:01

Meeker: Can you tell me how that impacted the family?

01-00:09:04

Novak Milliken: It was very unexpected. He was, what we thought, a healthy man. He was certainly robust and kind of did everything—he was somebody that you just thought would always be here, was strong. And, it turns out he had something called cardiac arrhythmia. And, he knew of it because I remember coming home one day from school, and he had electrodes all over his chest. And it's like, Dad, what are you doing? Oh, I'm just checking my heart rate, blah-blah-blah. But he had something, and he would feel his heart get a little bit out of sorts, apparently. And he would take a run and recalibrate it, and he would be fine.

And then, obviously it must have been getting worse. It's not like this information was shared with us. And I don't even think my mom really knew what the extent was. The question I've always had is, were there pacemakers at that time that could take care of that kind of stuff? I'm guessing that they were fairly rudimentary at the time and that there weren't, but I don't know that, and I don't think doctors always take the best care of themselves.

01-00:10:00

At any rate, he ultimately was out in late October of '77 playing tennis with a friend, and he got an emergency phone call. So, one part I didn't tell, so we replanted the vineyard. And then, ultimately, my dad had to go back to work as a doctor because we were spending so much money, and he was making nothing. And he had to go back and actually earn revenue again, right? He had to bring home income. So, he was an emergency room doctor, which I think he quite enjoyed. I think he liked re-engaging with that.

But, he was out playing tennis, and he got an emergency phone call. And at that time it was a beeper, and you'd come into your land line and take the call. So, he came inside to take the call and went out to tell his friend that he had to go to the emergency room. And apparently he grabbed his chest and said, "Oh

no, not me,” and he fell. And, so he had a massive heart attack. And, Tony Holzhauser, a good family friend who was the one playing tennis with him, attempted to revive him. I was upstairs doing homework, and my brothers were here. My two older sisters were off in college.

01-00:11:01

And, ultimately the ambulance came to get him, but it turns out he had been nine minutes without oxygen. So, in essence, he was in a vegetative state. And so, he went to the hospital, obviously, to the ER, and ended up in the ICU. And then, ultimately my mom had to make the decision to take him off of life support, which was the only humane decision that could be made. And then, he died shortly thereafter. So, it was about three weeks between heart attack and his death.

So, how it impacted our family was very large. Obviously, nobody expected it, including our mom. But what we are lucky for is that our mom was incredibly strong—sorry, because she’s gone now, too—and just very pragmatic. She was the same age. And she looked around and said, “I’m here.” She had never worked before, but she knew she had a livelihood because we had this replanted vineyard now. And even before my father’s death they had sold grapes to some others. In fact, Robert Mondavi bought some of the Napa Gamay back when.

01-00:12:01

We had also sold to Frog’s Leap and to St. Clement and to a handful of other wineries. So, my mom realized, well, I have a way to make an income. I have this vineyard. She’d already fallen in love with St. Helena and Napa Valley. At the time this was such a small community and she had made good friends. And so, thankfully she made the decision to stay and to keep us here in this house and on this property. And she continued to sell the grapes.

And I think one of the things that might have really—I was here. I remember this really distinctly, is that not long after my dad’s death—I can’t tell you how long. Was it two months? Was it three months? Was it six months? I don’t remember. But, a realtor came up the stairs and knocked on the door and said, “I understand that you might be wanting to sell.” And my mom was very strong but kind of quietly strong. Yet she was furious. She said, “Get off of my porch.” And this is not how she talked to anybody. She said, “Get off of my porch. If I had died and my husband was still here, you would not be up here asking this question. I am not selling.”

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And, she was really furious, just because sort of the audacity to make an assumption that because you’re a widow and you’re a woman left in this house that you certainly have no possible way forward. So, she was already determined to stay, but I think that just solidified her determination somehow. And, she stayed.

01-00:13:24

Meeker: Where do you suppose that drive and that confidence in your mother came from?

01-00:13:29

Novak Milliken: Gosh, it's a good question. I think it just was internal. She had immense internal strength, and she was realistic and pragmatic. And she was quite independent. My dad was a very strong personality, but my mom was not a pushover. She was a partner in their relationship. You consider that they got married in, what, 1956, I think. So, that was a time when it was a different world. But, I think she just had that spark, and she just was not going to be pushed around, I don't think.

01-00:14:15

Meeker: Well, this is the 1970s. Did she ever express any sort of formal interest in feminism or ever talk about that?

01-00:14:21

Novak Milliken: She did not, which is interesting, which really is interesting. She didn't. She just kind of went along with how—she made her points, but no. I think that stuff probably confused her a bit. She was at Stanford in the early fifties. But she did go to college, and not every woman went to college back then. And she wanted to. And she wanted all of us to. So, it's a really good question. I think it just came from an internal place where she just had some core belief in herself somehow.

01-00:15:02

Meeker: Up to this point in time, had you played any role in the emerging family business? Did you start to learn anything about it?

01-00:15:10

Novak Milliken: No. So, their idea had been to make wine, as alluded to earlier. And we actually had bought a property down the street with this intent—it was an old winery, an old pre-Prohibition winery. And my dad unfortunately alienated some of our neighbors by some of the decisions he made, which were not good, on some things that he did down there, just in terms of taking out a pretty, old fence and putting up a plywood fence, for example. Why do you do these things? I can't answer these questions. But he did not exactly make friends with the neighbors, three of whom were on the city council, one the mayor.

So, when he went to get approval for this project, for a winery, he was turned down because he had not exactly gone about it in the best way. And I think that could have been a factor toward stress for him.

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Meeker: But the context here is also, I assume, that you're subject to county regulations but also city.

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Novak Milliken: It's actually just city here. The city of Saint Helena. So, it was just a city permit that we were seeking. And we did not get it. And that came, I think, in '76 that we didn't get it, probably '76. And so, I think that added stress. But really, in a lot of ways, he brought that on himself. This is me speaking with now hindsight. But that was brought on—that was self-inflicted, in a sense. So, the winery, so that didn't work out. After my dad died, my mom sold that. Actually, her brother stepped in, thankfully, and bought it. And he was fantastic because he took it off of her hands because we were left with debt, obviously, when my father died, and now no visible means of support. So, she had to really consolidate things and bring things together. And it was a little dicey for a period of time.

There was no guarantee, in other words, that we would stay here from a financial perspective. She pulled it all together and kept us here. And then, any idea for a winery was kind of just put on the back burner. Just, we're just going to sell grapes, just kind of figure all this out. And then, ultimately, as my mom was selling grapes, she started selling grapes to both the Duckhorn families and the Shafer families, who were really good family friends and had known my dad also.

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In particular, they liked the cabernet. They started to encourage her to make wine. So, finally in 1982, ten years after we moved here and five years after my dad died, we hired Tony Soter. I say "we." It was her. Tony Soter was hired. He had been up at Chappellet and started his own brand called Etude the same year, which has since been sold to Beringer. He's up in Oregon now making fantastic pinot noir. But he came on board with us at that point in time. Again, I say "us," but it was my mom. And we started making wine in 1982.

That cabernet wasn't released until 1985. My college years, just to get back to your initial question, were '79 to '83. I was at UCLA. I had gone to junior high and high school here in Saint Helena, and I was not coming back because it was a really small town. There was not much going on here. I never would have envisioned a return. But I spent my junior year abroad in Salzburg, Austria. And, through that time in Europe you somehow, living in Europe, think you're sophisticated, even though I was not. I could legally drink. And I sort of started to think, well, wine is kind of interesting.

01-00:18:24

So, when I came back, I graduated in '83, and I got a job with a wine broker in San Francisco selling wine. Again, we still hadn't released anything from Spottswoode. And I was not thinking of Spottswoode because that was up in Saint Helena. But I just got in the wine business because I liked it. And so, I did that for about two and a half years and sold wine for a broker, barely made ends meet. It was an interesting time, but I learned an awful lot. And it was such an exciting time in San Francisco—Stars had recently opened. Chez

Panisse had been up and running for a little bit, Santa Fe Bar and Grill. Opera Plaza was being developed. Things were happening around good food and wine. People were talking about it. And there was a greater interest. So, by pure luck, it was just a great time to get into the business.

Then I met the man who is now my husband, and we decided to take a summer and hike and backpack our way through the Pacific Northwest and on through the Rockies and come back three months later. So, I quit that job, came back, did a little bit of computer work, some temp work for different people, like an advertising firm and different things, and then ultimately was thinking, how am I going to get back in the wine industry? And my mom gave me a call in fall of '87 and said, "Would you like to come up and help out a couple of days a week?"

01-00:19:35

John and I were living then together in the city, in sin, as she used to like to remind me. And, so I said sure, I'd like to come up. I'd love to come up a couple of days a week. And I think literally within two weeks it turned into full-time. It was like, it just needed so much. And so, I was just in on the ground floor – in 1987 we were releasing our third vintage. So, I just, by happenstance, ended up being the one who came up and started working with my mom, and I've been here ever since.

01-00:20:04

Meeker:

A few follow-up questions. So, I know that you studied economics at UCLA. Were you hoping to teach and become a professor?

01-00:20:12

Novak Milliken:

No, I think I was more thinking of business, and there wasn't a business undergraduate degree. Obviously, UCLA has a very good graduate program. But there wasn't an undergraduate business. I mean, I didn't even know what I was going to do, to tell you the truth. When I first went to UCLA, I thought that I might be a doctor. And then my dad's friends were like, "You don't want to be a doctor." And after they talked me through it I'm like, "You're right. I don't."

So, I just looked more toward what UCLA did have, which was economics. And there were really good classes. I found them really interesting. I liked it. Yet I had zero vision of what I was going to do or what I was going to do in business until I got a job in wine. And then I thought, well, I know I like this. Now, what role am I going to fill in it, because I knew I didn't want to keep doing sales. Sales was fine for two and a half or three years, but it wasn't as if that was my long term. And I just got lucky that my mom had started this up and that she needed some help. And I came up and just jumped in with both feet, and I've never looked back.

01-00:21:13

Meeker: So, you said a wine brokerage. Is that basically like a wholesaler who then goes to the—

01-00:21:16

Novak Milliken: It's a wholesaler. So, the difference between a broker and distributor is the broker never takes ownership of the wine. A distributor actually buys the wine from the winery, stores it in its warehouse and sells it. A broker is an intermediary. It never takes ownership of the wine. So you're still selling wine just like you would if you worked for a distributor. It's just a different model.

01-00:21:34

Meeker: So, you basically had a list that a wholesaler, of what they were carrying?

01-00:21:37

Novak Milliken: Exactly, and it was amazing what we had. I mean, at the time, oh my gosh, I mean, in 1983 we had Joseph Phelps, in the days when they made more wines than you could count, right, I mean, they made late-harvest Johannesburg Riesling, early-harvest Johannesburg Riesling, Scheurebe, different types of zinfandel, a carbonic maceration one, another. I mean, it was crazy. It was funny. But we had Phelps. We had Pine Ridge. We had Saintsbury. We had one called Rosenblum, which, you know, Kent Rosenblum, who just recently passed away, which is a shame. Balverne, which is no longer in existence, but a man named Doug Nalle was the winemaker there.

We just had some really interesting brands, and it just opened up a lot of—oh, Caymus was another one we had in the days when Caymus made fantastic, classic Napa Valley cabernet from Rutherford. And, what we had was amazing. I learned a lot from that, from what I was selling and what I was doing and the people that were presenting to us, from Bruce Neyers at Phelps to John Skupny, who was at Caymus at the time, Dick Ward from Saintsbury. I learned a lot from those people because they were passionate. They were new into what they were doing. It was a time when it was all sort of new.

01-00:22:51

Meeker: What were you learning, I'm curious, from these people?

01-00:22:53

Novak Milliken: About wine and its qualities and what actually went into it, the passion of wanting to grow these grapes and then make this wine. And, in a sense, if you think about it, it's almost tilting at windmills at that time. Josh Jensen's always my—we didn't sell Calera. Josh Jensen's just a good friend. But I think of him as sort of the greatest tilter at windmills. To go down to Hollister and do what he did, and he made a success of it. But even up here in Napa Valley, at that time it was new—Dick Ward graduated from Davis and was a philosophical person. Tony was a philosophy major from Claremont and somehow got interested in wine because there's the intellectual side. There's the philosophical side. It's ever-changing. You can never know everything. You're always learning. And, I don't what it was, but there was just

something about the whole thing and the personalities that were, to me, compelling.

01-00:23:57

Meeker:

Were you also engaging with your family brand at that point? Were you tasting the wines here? Were you comparing them to what else you were drinking around the valley?

01-00:24:08

Novak Milliken:

They weren't in bottle, really, at that time. So, our '82 would have been bottled in 1984 and released in 1985. I worked with Bruce Macumber Wines from 1983 through about '86. It's really hard for me to remember. If we had put a Spottswoode cabernet in one of our tastings, it would have been an '82 or an '83 vintage in '85 or '86. I don't know if we were doing it. I'm not sure I had a sense of what the potential might be. I can't say that I had a broad enough view at that time.

01-00:24:46

Meeker:

What was your production like back then?

01-00:24:48

Novak Milliken:

We made, the first two years, 1,200 cases a year. All the barrels were right here in our basement. And we custom-crushed from 1982 all the way through 1998. And the barrels up through the 1990 vintage were down here in the basement. And then we were finally able to get our barrels up to our new facility—an historic facility, a post-Prohibition stone winery building that's our barrel cellar, and then an office building. But, for a long time we custom-crushed.

01-00:25:21

Meeker:

So, you joined the staff in 1997.

01-00:25:23

Novak Milliken:

Eighty-seven.

01-00:25:24

Meeker:

I'm sorry, '87, correct, thank you.

01-00:25:25

Novak Milliken:

That's okay. These decades are hard to keep track of. They go by quickly.

01-00:25:29

Meeker:

Yes, 1987.

01-00:25:30

Novak Milliken:

Yes.

01-00:25:31

Meeker:

And, was your mom and Spottswoode a member of the Napa Valley Vintners Association by that time?

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Novak Milliken: Yes, I'm 98 percent sure that we were. And pretty much right when I got here—I got here in the fall. I have to think that in '88, we were part of it, and I would have started to get engaged back then. And I think my first real engagement was with the auction, because people were talking about it. It was a relatively new time. The auction, I have to remember what year it actually started. I can't remember that now.

01-00:26:08

Meeker: Nineteen eighty-one.

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Novak Milliken: It was '81? Okay. So, I would say that our first engagement was with the auction, and we participated in the auction. I started volunteering, and I chaired for years. And I can't remember what the years were, but we could look in the records. I chaired the silent auction, which in that day was magnum bottles on a table with clipboards. We'd have them out on the lawn at Meadowood and people would bid and that kind of thing. And, that was probably my earliest engagement. And then, just through making friends and through doing that, I would have gotten more involved in more of the vintner activities.

There was a lot going on then in the community with regards to different measures, Measures J [1990] and P [2008]. And I had a cursory—I shouldn't say cursory awareness. I had awareness of them. So, I was going to meetings to learn about them and to know more about them. And we were always more on the environmental side because in 1985, thankfully, Tony was very farsighted. He had brought the notion of organic farming to my mom way before anybody was even talking about that. And she trusted him so much that she agreed to do that. And we've been farming organically ever since.

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We were the first (in Napa Valley) to start farming organically, from what we've been told. And, we were the second to get certified. But, regardless, we already had this sense of our natural environment and trying to be good stewards of a historic property. And I think that that sort of tone and that passion for this property and place came through my mom because she had committed so deeply to it after Dad's death. I think it just sort of flowed from there.

01-00:27:47

Meeker: I think now there are over 500 members of the Vintners. And clearly there's a culture around Napa that if you are a vintner, meaning that you own a winery, you join this organization and pay dues. But, people have different levels of engagement and involvement. And I'm sure that changes over a life course as well. In the beginning, what did you know of the organization, and what did you think of it when you first started engaging with it?

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Novak Milliken: When I first started engaging in it, I liked it. It consisted of very nice people. It was a lot smaller than it is today. Linda's running a bigger organization. There's so much more to do, and she's so good at what she does. It was a smaller organization. It was engaged with bringing people together around a common cause. There were fewer of us back then. Discussions were around how do you define what is a winery? Who can be a member? Is it bricks and mortar? Those were the types of discussions that happened early on. And then it was like, well, it can't just be bricks and mortar because, in a sense then, Spottswode wouldn't be part of it because we didn't have a winery back in the early days.

John Skupny was instrumental because he was on the board and was a board president one year. I think they call it chairman now. He helped bring me onto the board. And, when did I get on the board, in the late eighties? No, late nineties, I'm sorry, mid to late nineties. And, there were a lot of important discussions around how do we define ourselves, and who are we? It's opened up a lot more because it's had to. So, when we say there are 500 and—it's actually something like 540, I think, members—many of those do not have wineries. We don't have 540 wineries in Napa Valley. But we do have 540 winery brands, if you will.

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And that's generally a very good thing because the more people making wine, if they make good wine, that raises all of us. That elevates the whole area. And I think that's a positive. But definitions like that were not easy to come by. You could imagine people who had been here who were bricks and mortar, for them to sort of open it up to, okay, we can accept these upstarts. It was different. And now it's easier to become a member – it's pretty clear. But the other good thing now is that when you sign up and become a member, you fill out a pretty simple, two-page form, but you do have to promise to engage with the organization in some way. And, that's basically through donating either through Premiere Napa Valley or through Auction Napa Valley.

So, at a minimum you have to participate in one or the other. But what people find is that most people want more engagement. And, I'm sorry I'm talking too much, but one other reason to join the vintners is that it's good social connection. If you're new to this valley, they do nice social activities. It's a way for you to meet people who are also in the industry with you. So, that's another reason to want to be part of the Napa Valley Vintners.

01-00:31:00

Meeker:

Please keep talking. This is your interview. The less that I talk, the better. It's interesting. I had the opportunity to interview Bob Trinchero a few weeks ago. Interesting guy. His memories, of course, go back to the 1940s in the valley. He talked about the vintners of, I guess, that era, the sixties in particular, when he started to get involved. It was invitation only, and there were just a very

small handful. And those were probably all, I would guess, wineries that had a real brick-and-mortar presence.

01-00:31:37

Novak Milliken: Absolutely, yeah. That would have been. It would have been Martini, and it would have been Charles Krug, presumably Christian Brothers, Beringer, Beaulieu, Inglenook – you think of the old houses. I don't think Raymond was there yet because Roy Raymond was at Beringer for so long. It's hard to remember when people opened their own wineries. Robert Mondavi certainly had a presence when he built that classic winery.

01-00:32:03

Meeker: What were the arguments that people like you would have made on behalf of opening it up to a broader definition of what a vintner would be?

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Novak Milliken: I think that with Napa Valley, which is really an unusual thing in growing regions, we've always been more about inclusion than exclusion. And so, the arguments in favor of allowing people who were really—the idea is, are you committed to Napa Valley? Are you committed to doing the best of what you can do here? And if you are, then we should welcome you in. And, everybody can't realistically own a winery. And, by the way, if we want to protect agricultural land, we don't want everybody to have a winery because if everybody had a winery on their land, we'd have a lot less vineyard, right?

So, I think looking at that bigger picture of saying we're here to protect agriculture in Napa Valley, we're here to do the best thing for this amazingly unique place that, it turns out, by pure luck, is just a fantastic place for growing, in particular, the Bordeaux varietals in the northern part of the valley. Of course, in the southern part of the valley, in the Carneros, we have pinot noir and chardonnay, which is good. It's just this amazingly unique place. So, I think it was that coming together. And I'm sure Bob Trinchero spoke to that well because of his deep history of recognizing that together we're stronger than apart.

01-00:33:22

When people think of California, a lot of people think of Napa Valley first. We have 4 percent of the grapes. I think that's the statistic. And Linda will know that better than I. But 4 percent of the grapes produced, or the wines produced, come out of Napa Valley. In California, that's it, 4 percent. But our name and our reputation is much greater than that. So, I think there was an early-on recognition that if we're just inclusive and bring people in and foster that sense of innovation and people making wine, that's a positive because if you look at all the people that have come in and done really amazing things, it's helped all of us because the reputation of the whole is great, and it helps everybody who's here.

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Meeker:

When you first started to get involved in the late eighties and early nineties, what was the organization itself like?

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Novak Milliken:

It's hard for me to remember. It was a lot smaller. The meetings, I think, were mostly held at Meadowood, to my recollection. There were maybe four general membership meetings a year. Maybe there were six. There weren't all of the subcommittees that there are today because that structure hadn't been put in place. There were groups that certainly got together to talk about particular issues. But when things came up in these general meetings, they brought up important things. Now that's changed. A lot of that important discussion has gone to committees. And then there's an annual general meetings, which you participated in because it was in January down at the Lincoln Theater in Yountville, where I met you.

And then, there's one fall event where all the vintners come together around harvest. And then, sometimes there's a holiday event. And that's basically it because we are also coming together for Premiere Napa Valley. We are coming together for Auction Napa Valley. But most of the actual work and decision making is done in the different committees and then at the Board level, if that makes sense.

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Meeker:

When there's something big that happens, does it go to a general membership vote?

01-00:35:35

Novak Milliken:

If it goes to general membership vote, it would go through email now, because getting everybody together to vote on something is impossible. So, the way that it would now work, I think—and again, correct me with Linda, but the way that it now works, for example, is we're currently discussing the natural environment in this post-Measure C climate, which was an environmental initiative to protect our watershed, because without our watershed in this time of climate change the future of Napa Valley is in jeopardy. We need water to grow grapes.

In all of this, there is a group called the Community and Industry Issues Committee (CIIC). I was just in a meeting of the CIIC yesterday morning. And, at that level that's where things materially are discussed. Right now what's being discussed is what's happening at the Board of Supervisors, vis-à-vis an ordinance that will be put forth to address the issues that were raised in Measure C. Measure C lost by a very slim margin, and therefore the county understands that these issues are important to a lot of people.

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I happen to be among those vintners and growers who are in favor of these environmental protections because I believe our environment needs to be

protected. At that meeting yesterday, what was decided was that a subcommittee would be created to comment on the proposed ordinance. People were engaged, which is great. There's going to be three members of the Napa Valley Vintners Board that will be part of this, and I plan to be one of those.

We'll come together to talk about the draft ordinance. Let's go through all of these things. What do they all mean? What's going to be our response? Then that group can bring it back to the CIIC. The CIIC can look at what the subgroup is recommending. CIIC then can make a recommendation to the Vintners' board. Does that make sense? So it's more of a process, but it has to be that way because these are super-important issues, and people need to feel they're being heard. They need to be heard.

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Meeker:

Yeah. And you're not going to win anything if you just come up with an idea and put it forth. It needs to be worked out.

01-00:38:05

Novak Milliken:

It needs to be worked out. It absolutely needs to be vetted, yes.

01-00:38:10

Meeker:

It's interesting that you brought it up to this point, so maybe let's turn the clock back and walk through some of this, because there's a really interesting environmental policy history in the valley that actually is influential well beyond the valley. If you go back to the ag preserve in 1968, and clearly you weren't around here in the valley at that point in time. But, I think it was 1990 that the Winery Definition Ordinance is passed.

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Novak Milliken:

Yes.

01-00:38:38

Meeker:

Can you do your best to look back? That would have been about the time you were first getting involved in the organization. Do you recall the kinds of conversations that were being had about that and if there was much debate?

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Novak Milliken:

Oh, there was a lot of debate. It was extraordinarily controversial, the Winery Definition Ordinance. There were a lot of people, of course, as still happens to this day, who were just like, leave us alone. Let us operate our businesses. Let us do what we want. We know what's best for Napa Valley. We'll take care of Napa Valley. But the reality is that as competition grows, private enterprise generally can't regulate itself because there will always be one person that does something, and then somebody else needs to do something else.

So, the Winery Definition Ordinance was extremely controversial. It is thanks to Jim Hickey and some people in the county who really understood that we have something worth protecting here. The Ag Preserve was in place,

obviously. But there were more wineries here in 1990. With more wineries were coming more impacts. It had to be defined. Even today there are still issues with that. The Winery Definition Ordinance was adopted in 1990, you told me. Unfortunately, in 2008 it was loosened up a bit because, “oh, the economy was bad,” and, “oh golly, we need to open it up a little bit because we can’t make it without the ability to welcome visitors to buy our wines.”

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Initially, when the WDO was passed, a main tenet was that any hospitality activities were subordinate to the main activity, which was agricultural in nature – taking an agricultural product, wine grapes, and making them into wine. Anything that you did in terms of hospitality or to sell that wine was very much secondary to what you did to grow grapes and make wine. That was your primary purpose as a winery, to produce wine.

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Meeker:

Sorry to interrupt, but just for me, thinking about this, it’s important. It only made sense when I remember when I would drive up to my grandparents’ house in Auburn. My grandfather would stop at every place he possibly could, and it would usually be like a little farm stand attached to a big field.

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Novak Milliken: Where were you coming from?

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Meeker: The Bay Area.

01-00:41:00

Novak Milliken: Okay, the Bay Area up to Auburn. I’m just trying to get your path.

01-00:41:01

Meeker:

Yes, through the Central Valley. And, there would be a farm stand. They would sell produce. But they’d also sell some other things usually. But, it was a small little operation, on a dirt road. And that’s kind of a model here where it grew out of this same thing. Trincherro talked about how they basically sold their wine. You come and fill up your own jug out of these big vats.

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Novak Milliken: Probably an old redwood tank—who knows what it was in exactly?

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Meeker:

Yeah. But all of a sudden, people start to do a lot more. It’s, in essence, the same thing. But in practice—

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Novak Milliken: Exactly. It’s a hard one. And I would say I would attribute, in a good way. I would say Robert Mondavi had a lot of positive impact on this valley because he was just such a believer in this place as a quality place. But he really, with that tasting room and everything that they did there, that was the first time when—I don’t know when Dario Sattui started selling wine out of Sutter

Home on Main Street. I can't remember those dates. But Robert Mondavi was like, okay, we're going to bring people in. We want to educate them. We want to show them what wine is. We want to make wine a part of life because it really wasn't a part of American life.

So, when that all started, it wasn't so much looking at it as a profit center or as a main way of selling wine, because obviously Robert Mondavi sold most of his wine through distribution networks all around the country and the world. It was more to educate people when they did come up so that they could learn more about grape growing and winemaking and engage more with not just that brand but with the whole. And, that was successful. But over time, people saw that model and realized, wow, we need to educate people about what we're doing, too, which makes sense.

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But what also happened is that there's been a convergence of a lot of things with more wineries. It's relatively easy, depending on your financial situation today, to either grow or buy grapes, hire the name vineyard manager, make wine with somebody who has a name, hopefully get some press, which is your intent so that you get some notoriety and visibility. But then, guess what? You have to sell your wine. And the selling of wine is very difficult, and the reason is that as the number of wineries have exploded, and they have, not just in Napa Valley (we're now at five hundred and thirty or forty members), but elsewhere. There's great wine being made in Santa Barbara County, Santa Maria, Paso Robles, which you mentioned earlier, Sonoma County, Mendocino County, not to even mention Oregon, Washington, and then talk about the whole world. There's great wine being made all over the place.

What's happened is there's been a massive consolidation of distributors. When we even started out in the early, mid-eighties by the time our wine was released, there were a lot of small distributors in these markets that you could work with to sell your wines. Today there's, like, four big ones. I mean, we have Southern, we have National, we have Glazer's, which has become something else, and I'm missing—Sunbelt, Charmer Sunbelt? I can't remember the names of all of them.

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But there are four large ones. And there aren't small distributors coming in behind them. It used to be that when consolidation would happen, smaller distributors would open up with new creative ways to sell wine. And small producers would move to those people. That doesn't seem to be happening as much. So, if you're a new winery, if you come and you make Meeker—well, you can't do Meeker because there's already a Meeker in Sonoma. But were you to make wine here in Napa Valley and name it whatever you want to name it, how are you going to sell it? You're going to have to sell it direct. You're going to have to sell it direct to consumer, not just because you don't have a route to market otherwise, which you really don't. But, from a

profitability standpoint, you would like to realize that margin, the full retail margin, rather than the wholesale price.

So, what's happened in Napa Valley is that everybody is competing to sell their wines to people that come and visit here. The opening up of what is allowed hospitality-wise is something that we absolutely need to address again because when we opened it up in '08, the camel got the nose under the proverbial tent. Since that time, what's happened in our Ag Preserve is that activities are taking place, whether it's weddings, whether it's wineries that have de facto restaurants, wineries that are de facto hospitality centers, there's a lot happening that shouldn't be. If we care about the integrity of our Ag Preserve, there is a question that we have to answer, and I say "we" as an industry. I know where my values stand. I value the integrity of our Ag Preserve. But as a group we're going to have to come together and say, "What are our values?"

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If we care about protecting our natural environment and protecting the integrity of grape growing and winemaking in Napa Valley, we have to be willing to give up some of the things that we're currently doing that are undermining that integrity, because if you're overdoing hospitality at your winery, you're bringing people into the Ag Preserve, and you're just, by definition, undermining its integrity. You can't have it all ways.

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Meeker:

This is so interesting. You bring up a really interesting issue that has multiple ramifications, different ways in which people might engage with it. Oftentimes, these kinds of things get worked out in the political sphere, in the public sphere. And they are. But there is also this quite powerful organization where all of the same players would have a place to discuss and debate.

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Novak Milliken: The Napa Valley Vintners, yes.

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Meeker:

So, from your vantage point, how has the Vintners dealt with these issues as they've emerged and evolved?

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Novak Milliken: I'd say for the most part the Vintners have done quite well by creating these different subcommittees that address these issues. These are challenging issues. And emotions run high oftentimes, and as we can see in our current political environment, emotion can prevail over reason and practicality. It's more reactionary rather than considered thinking about a topic and what the actual ramifications of certain controls would be. A lot of it is still the, "It's my land, I should be able to do what I want" mentality.

These days, in my opinion, we can't just do what we want on our land. We have forty-five acres right here in the city limits of Saint Helena. Just because

I own the land, does it give me the right to burn my trash on this land and smoke out our neighbors? No. Does it give me the right to do really anything? There's a lot of things that I'm not able to do. And that's okay because it makes it better for the whole. So, it's the societal view versus the what's-good-for-me view. And that's why I'm talking about our collective values. We're going to have to gather around our collective values.

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Everybody has a slightly different set of values. And everybody's not going to agree with what those values are. But we're going to need to define this because Napa Valley, not only is it a national treasure. It's beautiful here. You know that. You've been here, and we're lucky enough to be here. It is a beautiful, beautiful place, naturally, just in terms of what Mother Nature gave us. The grapevines that grow here are, for the most part, lovely. There are some scarred hillsides from planting, which is why certain regulations were put in place, to keep things like that from happening again.

But for the most part, we've done a great job at protecting what we have. And what we have is amazing. We're very fortunate. So, now the question is, are we going to keep protecting what we have? Because, the reality is that we can't just keep developing it. And I don't mean just vineyard development. I mean large houses in the hillsides. I mean all of that. When/what is enough? And, you can apply this to wealth. You can apply it to land use. You can apply it to a lot of things. Obviously I'm a believer in capitalism and laissez-faire because I run a small family business. Yet we operate in an environmentally and socially sensitive manner.

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I do believe in Capitalism with a conscience, I believe in some restraints and restrictions because, for the greater good and for the long term, we need to be looking at that. And, we also need to be looking realistically at climate change, which is such a large issue that I think people are like, well, what can we really do about it? It has to be a bigger response. Well, it does need to be a bigger response. But, can't we set a good example by what we do here in Napa Valley? Napa Valley was a leader in agricultural land protection and, in a sense, environmental protection. Why can't we be a stronger leader in environmental protection today? California always leads.

So, if Napa Valley led, would that make California lead even more? If we led and said this is what we're going to do, other wine regions might look at us and think, wow, if Napa's doing that, we can do that, too. And then that might go broader. So, I feel like we're in a unique situation based upon the overall prosperity of this region to take this on and to do the right thing. I hope that that's the value system that we'll adopt.

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Meeker: I want to get to a lot of these issues you're bringing up in just a second. I'm curious about something you brought up—and this might be a little bit into the weeds, but about the creation of this Community Industry Issues Committee.

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Novak Milliken: Community and Industry Issues Committee. It's difficult, correct.

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Meeker: And, I do want to try to get a little bit of the history of the evolution of the organization itself. And so, it sounds like you had said that used to be larger committees.

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Novak Milliken: As I recall, and again, check with Linda on this, but my recollection is that issues like this were all discussed at the general meetings. There were more general meetings than there are today. And these bigger issues were discussed in that format. Clearly, over time, that proved to be not an efficient way to address these important issues. Thus, subcommittees were ultimately formed from that. And then they were more formalized. So, now the Community and Industry Issues Committee, as an example, meets on the first Thursday of each month, at 8:30 a.m. until about 10:00. They usually don't end in an hour and a half, but it's the first Thursday of every month. It's a set meeting.

Everybody who's a member of Napa Valley Vintners is invited to attend. Again, to go back to that inclusion, nobody is excluded. So, if you're interested, you're invited to be a part of it, just like if you're interested in the international marketing committee, you're invited to be a part of that. If you want to participate in Premiere Napa Valley, you're invited to be a part of that. I still work on Auction Napa Valley. You're invited to be a part of all and discussions happen on that smaller level, which they have to. And then, like I said, even today, it was like, okay, we need to get a smaller group of the CIIC together, a subset, so that we can sit down once the ordinance language comes back and go through it so as to bring a position back to the CIIC.

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The CIIC can then vote on it and then offer its recommendations to the Board of Directors. And then the Board can then have a Napa Valley Vintners position that it can then share with, say, the Board of Supervisors. So, it's a process. And it has to be that way because otherwise, if you circumvent the process, then everybody's voices aren't heard. It doesn't allow you to be as nimble as one can be in a different type of a situation, but I think it's necessary.

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Meeker: Well, thank you for that explanation. I think it's helpful, especially when you go back and you hear Eleanor McCrea's description of it as a men's marching and chowder society.

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Novak Milliken: She was awesome.

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Meeker:

Yeah. To this point now, where it is clearly very sophisticated and deeply engaged with these kinds of issues that animate you so much, and so it's so good to hear that. This is just a comment. I guess there have been grand jury reports that find that, in fact, so many wineries are out of compliance with the Winery Definition Ordinance. I think it was probably Wine Business Monthly just this month reported on one. I can't even remember the name of the winery, but a winery that has been fined or something.

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Novak Milliken: Oh yeah, that's The Prisoner that's owned by Constellation. They took the old Franciscan facility. It's like, what are they doing to this? And you can't imagine what they had going on in there.

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Meeker:

What did they have going on in there?

01-00:54:48

Novak Milliken: What I read, they had craftspeople making things right there in front of you because they were, of course, trying to tie the crafting of this wine to the crafting of these goods. I don't know if it was furniture, candles, kitchenware, whatever, but it was so far beyond what was actually allowed. They've also hit another winery because that winery is much more of a hospitality center than a true winery. They've been kind of a poster child. It's called B Cellars on Oakville Cross Road. I've never been there. But I've heard forever that they sort of opened as a winery, but it's really a hospitality center, because if you can rent out a place in the middle of Napa Valley Ag Preserve, in the middle of vines, and say we can host your board meeting, we can host your rehearsal dinner, we can host your this, then that is bringing commercial/hospitality activity into our Agricultural Preserve.

And so, that's what people are doing. But it's not what's supposed to happen. We could technically open up this house and this property. I would imagine somebody would love to get married here and would pay us handsomely for that. I would not do that, not only because it's my family home, but also because it's not the right thing for our neighborhood. It's not the right use in our residential neighborhood. It just can't be straight-up capitalism at all costs. I believe in what I call Capitalism with a conscience.

01-00:56:22

Meeker:

What are the conversations like in terms of revising those regulations? I can see someone like B. That was the one that I was thinking of. And again, I've never been there or think about it.

01-00:56:32

Novak Milliken: I haven't been there either.

01-00:56:33

Meeker:

But, I would presume that they could say yes, we're a winery because we are buying bulk juice from this custom crush operation and putting our label on it. Therefore, we are a winery.

01-00:56:47

Novak Milliken:

Therefore, that makes us de facto a winery. I'll be interested to see what their arguments are, because everything I've heard is that they're pretty egregious. They came in with the business model, probably, and we have to assume that the business model was definitely around getting people there in large groups to buy their wine and rent their facility. I don't know that for sure. I have not read their use permit, so I'm sort of speaking a little bit off the cuff.

But, it means that people are driving through our Ag Preserve to go to a board meeting. And we just have to be careful of that. Again, what is our value system, and what is our Ag Preserve worth? Well, I think it's worth a lot. And if we, who are here, don't protect its integrity, who's going to?

01-00:57:39

Meeker:

Has Spottswode ever had to deal with those restrictions that come with the Winery Definition Ordinance?

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Novak Milliken:

We have not because we're in the city limits. Having said that, we have a use permit with the City of Saint Helena and we're restricted in what we can do. And, we are happy with the restrictions. When we first got the permit for our winery up the street, we hardly used to accommodate visitors at all. We moved our offices there in '92. From then until 2015 we were allowed twenty visitors per week. We offered one tour on Tuesday and one on Friday, each for ten people maximum. And then it just got to a point where we were saying no to more people, a lot more people, than we were saying yes to.

Our direct sales had grown. People do want to visit and for great reason, because they love to see where the grapes are grown. They love to see the winery. They love to see where it all comes from because you get so connected to the wine that way. So, we expanded that to sixty visitors a week. We're right here in a residential neighborhood, as you can see. We're six blocks off of Main Street in St. Helena. And we make sure that we have really good communication with our neighbors. We have a Garden Party every year, a late summer garden party in August. We invite all of our neighbors. We make it a point to communicate with them.

01-00:59:09

And, we listen to them if there's ever an issue. We usually write a spring letter. Hey, the wind machines may be coming on again. And we talk about what to expect in the spring, and our organic farming. We have an email list of neighbors who have opted in that allows Aron Weinkauff, our vineyard

manager and winemaker, to communicate our spraying schedule and what we are spraying for mildew, all organic products.

Our feeling is that we're part of this community, and we are as heavily invested in taking care of it as anybody else. And, we don't want to alienate our neighbors. We don't want to undermine the residential integrity of our neighborhood. We want to be good neighbors. We've been here for forty-seven years, and we're a part of this community. It's in our core and in our DNA. That's not true of everybody that's here now. And I'm not saying anything bad about people who have come more recently, not at all. It's just that somehow or another you have to ultimately internalize the specialness of this place, not as a business opportunity, but—sure, there is a business opportunity. But you have a sort of a moral obligation to take care of it, to be a steward, to be a good neighbor.

01-01:00:38

Meeker:

There just aren't many places like this anywhere. I was going to say United States, but really the world.

01-01:00:45

Novak Milliken:

True. Burgundy is absolutely beautiful. Bordeaux is lovely. A lot of those really pastoral wine regions are absolutely beautiful, and Napa Valley is one of those. We've taken care of it, yet we need to do more. We defined what could be done in the Agricultural Preserve, which frankly should apply to all in Napa Valley. We need to tighten hospitality up and be willing to live with it. There will be those who will say, oh, we want to be grandfathered because this is what we have been doing. But, no, just because you were doing it doesn't mean you can keep doing it. When the WDO was adopted, there were wineries that had been here doing certain things, and many were grandfathered in.

But if you even look at that – and I don't think that's going to change – I don't think it would be on the table. Yet it is patently not a level playing field. If you can have a lot of people at Sutter Home having a picnic, buying wine, which has been there for a long time, it's a business model. It's very successful. If you can do that, is it fair that somebody else can't? Well, I guess a part of me says yes, Sattui has been doing it for a long time. And when he started doing it, it was completely allowed. And that is what his business model is based on. So, you can't just take away somebody's whole business model. But, where's the balance? That's always the hardest part.

01-01:02:21

Meeker:

I'm curious where this ethos comes from. And I'm wondering the degree to which the actual location here that you are basically just right off—you have neighbors across the street.

01-01:02:32

Novak Milliken: Exactly.

01-01:02:34

Meeker:

Has that been a constant acknowledgement and guiding principle in the way in which you do your work here?

01-01:02:41

Novak Milliken:

I think so. And I also think—I touched on it earlier—I was young when all of this happened. But something about it stuck with me when my dad tried to get that winery through, and he alienated basically every one of our neighbors by just doing what he wanted—it wasn't like he was a malicious person trying to do something bad. He just was not sensitive toward his neighbors. For example, he put a fence up. He didn't even think about whether he should or should not ask. There was no malice. There was nothing intentional on his part to be not a good person, because I believe—I didn't know him that well. I was sixteen when he died. But I believe he was a good person. My mother wouldn't have married him if he wasn't.

I think from that I really learned it's better to be kind and neighborly than it is to push your way around. And if you do something to alienate people, it's so hard to get people you alienate back to working with you. And if you just don't alienate them to begin with, it's a lot better. So, I think it came from that and, of course, from our neighborhood location. We are right in a neighborhood. There are homes right on the other side of Spring Creek. There are homes right out here in front of us. We are part of a residential neighborhood.

01-01:04:11

The people with homes along Spring Creek understandably want to have a view of the Spottswoode Vineyard. They love their vineyard views. But there are times of the year when things are noisy and you have to put up with farming. Luckily we're organic, so that's not an issue. But there is the sound of spraying. There's the sound of wind machines, if they have to go on. And, those are things that it's a right to farm. People on Madrona Avenue have to deal with that, too. We technically don't have to let our neighbors know what we're doing, but we like to because then they feel engaged.

01-01:04:54

Meeker:

Your environmental consciousness, where did that come from? Was that solely an impact?

01-01:05:00

Novak Milliken:

It's a good question. Clearly, some of that came to us through our organic farming. When Tony recommended this to my mom in 1985, I think it must have sounded like voodoo to her. Nobody was farming organically then. So, when I got here it was kind of like, really? Organics? And you start thinking about it. I have always had a love of the outdoors. I'm happiest outdoors. It is odd that I work in an office, but I get outdoors as much as I can, hiking, mountain biking, walking, skiing – all of it.

And I just have a good sense of Mother Nature. I've done a lot of hiking and backpacking, and I love being in the mountains. And, I just strongly feel that we have a moral and ethical obligation to take care of our natural environment. We're doing such a poor job in the main, and it's such a shame. I think most everybody would like to do the right thing. It's just leadership is not what it should be, and it's hard to get people to rally around it. We're not going to have a choice. We need to do something. And we need to do it quickly, in my view.

01-01:06:03

I'm a really strong environmentalist. My sister Lindy and I are both strong in terms of environmentalism. But, my other siblings are certainly aware of it. And, Matt, my brother who lives in Oregon, is very, very aware of it, too. We're lucky enough on our relatively small parcel to be able to do everything. As an example, we spearheaded the restoration of Spring Creek, a little creek between us and our residential neighbors that had been urbanized for so many years it was just becoming channelized. And so we partnered up with a group and got some grant funding and came in and replanted the non-natives with natives, put in rock weirs, put in rock walls held up by willow walls, not cement rock walls, and did a lot of restoration.

We just decided to really—everything that we can do here to steward our land well, we will do. Beyond this, we give money to environmental causes and a lot of community causes. Our donations are focused. We're part of a group called 1% For the Planet, which was started by Yvon Chouinard at Patagonia. We give a minimum 1 percent of gross revenue every year to environmental organizations. We give more than that, and we've been doing this since 2007. I can't remember when the organization started. I deeply admire Yvon Chouinard and everything he does with Patagonia. It's just an ethic. It's just what I believe in. And my mom believed in it, too.

01-01:07:40

Meeker:

Did you ever participate in the Sierra Club or any organizations like that?

01-01:07:44

Novak Milliken:

We support it, and we give money to it. When our sons were younger, we participated in a lot of trash cleanup days and Earth Day activities. I still constantly pick up trash. I work more than full-time, and I've been raising two children since 1999 and 2001. So, as far as being a part of going out and doing things with the Sierra Club, no, I have not had a chance to do that yet. But, I love what they do. We support the Yosemite Conservancy. We support Land Trust of Napa County. It's a huge one for us because holding aside land in Napa County, perpetually open space, is crucial. For us it's just doing everything that we can to live by what we believe in.

01-01:08:23

Meeker:

You said something super-interesting, and that was that when Tony Soter came to your mom in 1985 and says let's take this organic, you said she might

have thought of it as like voodoo because it was so strange. Did you ever speak with your mother about why she decided to take that risk? And it would have been a risk.

01-01:08:44

Novak Milliken: It was a risk. Again, my mom was just one of those who could make a decision pretty quickly. And she kind of went by what she thought was right somewhere in her gut. Tony had been making our wine since '82, so now they had known one another for over three years. And he had made these wines, built trust. And, my mom really respected him. I think when he came to her, she was probably surprised. In that day, the vineyard didn't have a weed in it. What was considered nice then was just dirt. There was no life in the soil. There were no worms. There were no micronutrients.

We really just had taken from the land since the inception of it being farmed—"we" meaning everybody who had farmed this vineyard over many years. So much had been depleted. I think my mom, when we took organics on, took it on with the attitude of, okay, well, we'll give this a try and see. And it worked. So we stuck with it. But I think when she took it on she probably wasn't thinking, well, I've committed to this for the lifetime of the vineyard. She probably thought, okay, we're going to try this and sort of see what it is.

01-01:09:55

We're biodynamic now, too. Aron has taken on that a lot more since he's been here since 2006. It's all about the resilience of the soil and the vines. Technically, if we as humans take care of ourselves and take care of our health, we should have more resilience toward disease and things that might move in. This is the same principle around organic and biodynamic farming – building resilience into your system. And, with climate change, we need this more than ever.

We've been doing different irrigation regimens, longer, deeper irrigations, using less water ultimately, but they're longer and deeper to send the roots deeper. We start our irrigations a bit later in the growing season. We've invested in shade cloth. We have our trellising system. So many people went to this vertical trellising system where the fruit is so exposed. Well, we want the leaf canopy. We want to protect the fruit from the heat. We want to have leaves out there to protect the vines from the heat and direct sunlight.

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In the winery, we've invested in optical sorting equipment so that in a hot year we can process fruit more quickly and, in fact, better. And in '17 we used it for our Sauvignon Blanc. It was so hot in '17 when it hit 117 degrees that one day. That whole week was over 100. So, the reality is that we're living in climate change. We're not waiting for it. We're not waiting to see the effects. It's here, and we're living it. So it just gives us even more of a reason to do the right thing and to think a little bit longer term.

01-01:12:01

Meeker: In addition to Tony Soter, are there any other individuals, thinkers, writers, who have been influential in your commitment to this?

01-01:12:12

Novak Milliken: I've read so many, from Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*, which I just listened to again on Audible, but I read it in my youth. I read a lot of Wallace Stegner, some of the Edward Abbey, of course, *Monkey Wrench Gang* years ago and just listened to *Desert Solitaire. West of the Hundredth Meridian*, that's Wallace Stegner and all about John Wesley Powell's travels down the Colorado. I just find the issues around water and the American West to be really, really fascinating and interesting. And, if we had listened to John Wesley Powell, where would we be today? I believe would be in a much better place than we are.

It's going to be really interesting to see what happens with water. You said your parents have a place in Paso Robles. Paso is suffering deeply from water issues. And, people with money can drill deeper, and all the straws are going into the same cup. It's just if your straw is deeper you can suck more water up, and the people above you then don't have the water. That's going to have to change because that shouldn't be—just because you have the land and that allows you to drill a well, you don't technically own the water underneath. But if you're taking it, it's yours. You've taken it from somebody else. It's a shared resource.

01-01:13:30

So, I guess it gets back to that sort of notion of shared and community. When are we going to realize that we need to be more community-minded for all of us to continue to prosper and to do well? We have to think beyond what's just good for us to what is good for our community, which goes to the Saint Helena community, which goes to the Napa Valley community, which goes to California, which goes to US, which goes to the world. We have one world. It's a closed system, our planet. So, I don't know. It'll be interesting.

01-01:14:10

Meeker: The Vintners established, I believe, a green task force in 2000.

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Novak Milliken: Correct.

01-01:14:19

Meeker: Did you participate in that early on?

01-01:14:22

Novak Milliken: I need to remember that. How did that whole—so, early 2000, Sean, my oldest son, was born in '99. I was the board president—I think that's now called chairman—in '98. So, I would suggest that when this was all coming along, I had stepped back a little bit from the Vintners because I had Sean in '99 and then Liam in '01. So, I would not have been as engaged in that process.

01-01:14:52

Meeker: Well, actually, let me turn back then, because yeah, you're right. I have down here that you were president of the Vintners, so that would have been chair in '98.

01-01:14:58

Novak Milliken: Ninety-eight.

01-01:15:01

Meeker: What is the process by which you become president?

01-01:15:04

Novak Milliken: I was on the board. And, as I said, it was really John Skupny, as I remember it, who got me interested in being on the board.

01-01:15:09

Meeker: Who's John Skupny?

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Novak Milliken: John Skupny worked at Caymus for a long time. Then he worked at Inglenook, and he and his wife Tracey have a brand called Lang & Reed. They make a really interesting cabernet franc based on the wines of Chinon in France.

01-01:15:23

Meeker: Oh, really? Interesting.

01-01:15:24

Novak Milliken: They're very, very nice people. So, I got on the board.

01-01:15:28

Meeker: I'm sorry. What was that called?

01-01:15:29

Novak Milliken: It's called Lang & Reed, L-A-N-G, and then Reed, R-E-E-D. They make a really nice cab franc. And then they also make a Chenin Blanc, which is a really nice wine, well-structured and nicely balanced. So, anyway, I would think that I got on the board probably in '95, so I was probably there for three years. And then, when '98 came along, the presidency was open and was a one-year term.

So, it came up as a possibility for me in '98. And, there were definitely people on the board, one in particular who I don't need to name, who really did not want to see a woman be president of the board. Ultimately, Tom Shelton, who is now deceased, unfortunately—he died of brain cancer at the age of fifty-three—he was a great person. He was working at Joseph Phelps, and he was also on the board with me. He was being asked to put his name in the hat in front of mine, even though he had gotten on the board after me. And then, he and I spoke, and he just said, Beth, you take it. I'll take it in '99. It's all yours. I don't want it. And I said, I'd love to it. It was an opportunity.

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So, I put my hat in the ring, and I was elected. I was the first woman, and I was the youngest to have served as president. I think I still am probably the youngest one to have served. But, it was a great year. That was in '98. I learned a lot. Linda was there. We had a lot of fun and a lot of laughs. I would say there were a lot of good memories from that year. But one of the more memorable ones was, this was when the Winegrowers had started, which is a group you've probably heard about. I don't know exactly when they started, but Jack Cakebread was a pivotal part of starting that group.

And, I remember Linda and I were invited to an early morning, a 7:00 a.m. meeting of the Winegrowers, because they took on—so, they came on. Their whole reason for forming was that they felt they needed to get involved in county politics and advocate for what was best for them. They didn't think the Vintners could do that. Therefore, they were going to get engaged in county politics, and ask the Vintners to step aside.

01-01:18:06

Well, we didn't step aside as the Vintners, but that was their hope. The weird thing about the Winegrowers, and this is still my issue with it, is that it's pretty much all white male, and it's invitation-only. So, now maybe there's a female in there. I'm not sure. I don't think so, but there might be. But at the time, it was an invitation-only group of men who owned larger wineries who felt like they should dictate the direction of politics in Napa County.

So, Linda and I went down to a meeting to which we were invited at 7:00 a.m. and they opened wine early in the morning. Would you like a glass of wine? I was like, no thank you. I really don't want a glass of wine. And, we didn't feel any need to posture. It was just going down to listen to what they were doing what they were recommending, which was that we sort of step aside and let them take the lead, which we decided not to do.

01-01:19:00

But, I remember a vintner coming up to me and saying, "You have a mole in your operation." I said, "I'm sorry. We have a mole?" And he said, "Yeah, Volker Eisele. He's a mole," because Volker Eisele was a great champion of the environment. He worked so hard within the Farm Bureau. He unfortunately had a stroke and passed away a couple of years ago. He was this amazing man who had a lot to do with Measure J and Measure P. He worked with the county. He was passionate for protecting our environment. A German man who came here, with a vineyard and winery out in Chiles Valley.

Anyway, that was a pivotal time when you're like, I see. So, they're going to try to—they want us to step back because they don't think that we can manage these things in terms of the politics in Napa Valley. That was just one of those learning experiences where you say that's not what we're going to do. In fact, we're going to double down and do our job better because we represent more people than you do. So, that was a time when I thought, wow, just to be in that

place where they were thinking, well, we have these larger wineries, and we really know what's best for our county. But we didn't agree with that viewpoint.

01-01:20:11

Meeker: It's a competitive election to become president.

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Novak Milliken: Yes.

01-01:20:17

Meeker: Did you have to campaign? Did you have a platform?

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Novak Milliken: I didn't have to campaign because when Tom said, "I'm going to hold off until next year. I'm voting for Beth, and I'll be there in '99," everybody just fell in line. The one person who hadn't wanted me to run, he may or may not have voted for me. But, all the rest of it just fell into place. So, I didn't have to go out and campaign. I honestly don't even remember exactly who was on the board at that time, but I was elected.

01-01:20:49

Meeker: Did you start with a particular kind of agenda?

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Novak Milliken: That's a good question. How long had Linda been at the Vintners then? When did Linda Reiff come to work for the Vintners? We're in '19 now.

01-01:21:07

Meeker: I should know that.

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Novak Milliken: I know. I think she started in—we could, of course, text her, but we won't do that. She might have started in the mid to late nineties. Maybe she started in '95, '96, not '97 because I was president with her. But she hadn't started much before that. So, I think she and I were both sort of figuring things out. There were things that were coming up vis-à-vis the environment and the WDO and other things. And I remember we even had to go down to a Wine Institute meeting in the city and listen to—I feel like there's a memory about Two-Buck Chuck just having launched and what that was going to mean. The guy who had Two-Buck Chuck, what is his name?

01-01:21:55

Meeker: Freddy Franzia?

01-01:21:57

Novak Milliken: Thank you. He was speaking at the meeting, and I can't remember. That was the days when John De Luca was still president. It was still such a man's world. I'm trying to remember why we were there. I think it was about protecting the Napa Valley name, something around that. And it was just,

there were just a lot of interesting things going on that we were navigating. But I really need to look at that binder which, of course, I had promised you that I would do, and I completely forgot, and I apologize. I've been extremely busy. But, I would really need to look at that to remember what are the issues, because I've kept my binder from that year.

01-01:22:35

Meeker:

Well, it sounds like whatever issues you might have been interested in going into it, maybe some of those were overtaken by the events of the Winegrowers and maybe these other things happening during that year.

01-01:22:47

Novak Milliken:

Right. The Winegrowers wanted to take on county politics. They wanted us to step back. And, as an organization, we were not going to step back because the Napa Valley Vintners is a trade organization. Again, it's inclusive. You're invited to become a member if you wish to. You fill out an application. And if you're accepted, you're accepted for membership. And so it's a very inclusive organization. The Winegrowers is not inclusive. I've never been invited to be a part of it. I wouldn't want to be a part of it, but I've never been invited.

So, who's in it, and why? The Grape Growers, on the other hand, is a trade organization. We're a member of the Grape Growers also. We're not currently a member of the Farm Bureau. We chose to drop because the views that they're currently representing are extreme - private property rights, and nobody stepping in their way. They're not in sync with what I view as evolved thinking about managing our natural environment and the balance between that and agriculture.

01-01:23:49

Meeker:

Was it a big deal at the time that you were the first woman chair or president of the Vintners?

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Novak Milliken:

Yes. I think it was.

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Meeker:

Your mother was a big figure in town, right, in the community. There were a few other leading women as well.

01-01:24:08

Novak Milliken:

Yes.

01-01:24:09

Meeker:

Did you engage with them much? Were you mentored by other people, other women? Can you tell me the culture of women in Napa, I guess?

01-01:24:17

Novak Milliken:

I was probably more mentored by, likely more accurate to say influenced by, my mom. But she wasn't really an engager in terms of getting involved in politics and getting involved in the Vintners. That just wasn't her thing. How

would I say who a mentor was? People like, again, John Skupny. People like that were helpful. I knew a lot of women in the industry. I knew obviously Nancy Andrus, now Duckhorn but at the time Andrus, and Dawnine Dyer and Margaret Duckhorn, who was a really good friend of my mom's. And Paula Kornell, whom you obviously know.

There were other women who were in it who were doing interesting things, but I can't say that we ever came together as sort of a group of women to sort of support one another. So, I guess I never thought it that big of a deal, being a woman in this man's world. I just felt I was one of the—I wish I could explain it, but I just never felt, except for by that one person who really didn't want me to take that role on, I didn't feel like there was that much of an anti-woman attitude or any real barriers to it. I don't know why no women had stepped up to be president of the Board until that point. I just don't think women had gotten—there hadn't been that many women on the board. Women just hadn't run for it.

01-01:26:00

Meeker: Did you have people like Mrs. Duckhorn coming to you after the election saying, "We finally have a woman?"

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Novak Milliken: Yes, I think people were pretty excited about it. And then later on, she actually was a board president. So was Paula. Did Dawnine Dyer fill that role? Since that time—Emma Swain. There's been a lot of women since then.

01-01:26:26

Meeker: Dawnine has been president.

01-01:26:27

Novak Milliken: Okay, Dawnine has been, too, great. So, I think it kind of opened that door to, like, oh, hey, all of us have an opportunity at this. And I think that was a good thing. But yes, I think people were happy about it. It seemed like it was positively received.

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Meeker: And also Linda Reiff being executive director.

01-01:26:43

Novak Milliken: We had a lot of fun. And she was a great mentor. She's a very smart person. She's very directed, very smart, great focus. I admire her very much.

01-01:26:55

Meeker: You had said that you would want to look at your notes to see what other issues came up that year.

01-01:26:59

Novak Milliken: Yes. I'd be happy to do that.

01-01:27:02

Meeker: You can always add an appendix or something.

01-01:27:02

Novak Milliken: I apologize for not having done that earlier.

01-01:27:04

Meeker: Don't apologize. You don't have homework here. Let's see. How are we on time?

01-01:27:09

Novak Milliken: I don't know.

01-01:27:11

Meeker: We've got another, say, twenty minutes or so. Maybe it does make sense to go up and talk about Prop C because I think that's a really interesting—it's something clearly that you were deeply involved in. And it's also an interesting case study for the Vintners and how they can deal with, or not, and issue for which there's widely divergent opinions. And, here you are on the side that was in the minority, but you're still involved in the organization. And so, I think that's—

01-01:27:48

Novak Milliken: Well, and here's the question. You just made an assumption, and I'm not sure it's true. Was I in the minority? I think a lot of Vintners were hesitant to speak up about their support of Measure C because how they might be perceived by other Vintners, because it was such a charged issue. As an example, I had somebody pull me aside during the auction and say, "Thank you for taking this on. I am completely with you. But we haven't been here long enough. I can't really take this on because I don't want to alienate anybody in this community.

So, I don't know. I honestly don't know if I held a minority view overall. What I will give is that I definitely held a minority view in the Community Industry Issues Committee meetings, because the reason that a lot of people were coming to those meetings is because they were charged up about this issue. Many of the people who are there are engaged in these land use issues. So, in that meeting, I chose to express my support of Measure C, even while many in the room were opposed to it.

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Novak Milliken: I haven't lost friends on it. Have I made enemies on it? No, I don't think so. But I was willing to put forth my feeling that I was for it, and to explain why. Along with that, there is a group called Growers/Vintners for Responsible Agriculture, of which I'm a primary member. In fact, we just had a meeting this morning. Members include Randy Dunn, Andy Beckstoffer, Warren Winiarski, Cio Perez, Tom and Laurie Clark from Clark-Claudon, and Julia Levitan, who works with Christian Moeux.

So, it's a really broad, diverse group. Joyce Black Sears, a woman who's lived in Napa Valley, born and raised here, is also a member. She's amazing. So, we wanted to come together as a group in this industry who supported protecting our forests and our watershed. For me, this is what Measure C was all about – recognizing that there is a limit to what we can do, and just because we are the primary industry in this community, that doesn't mean we can just do whatever we want. It means that we actually have an obligation to take care of our natural environment.

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I obviously have a view that some others don't hold, but that others do. The issues around Measure C are still quite emotional, which I find interesting. What happened is the Vintners—and I thought this was absolutely the right thing to do—worked with the authors of Measure C because they recognized from polling—I should say “we” now since I'm on the board again. I should always say “we” because I've been part of the Vintners for so long. There was a strong cognizance that this would come out as an ordinance—I'm sorry, as an initiative. And, if it came out as an initiative, it would likely pass.

So, instead of fighting it year after year, why don't we be part of the process and come up with something with which we can live? So, members of the Board and staff sat down with Mike Hackett and Jim Wilson to come up with a compromise on an initiative.

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They had this small group to keep it smaller and more effective. They did this together. And, as I understand it, the Grape Growers were aware that meetings were happening, but maybe they didn't know how far along they were. The Winegrowers were also aware that something was coming along but didn't know exactly what it was. So then, when the Vintners announced that they had worked with the authors to come up with an initiative they felt would make most people happy – it was a collaborative process, a compromised position – the backlash was swift and harsh. We wanted to be proactive, but for whatever reason, the board got attacked for it.

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Meeker:

Was this a meeting?

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Novak Milliken:

I think it was just on the phone and emails. The compromise initiative was announced in an email blast that went out from the Vintners to its members, which in hindsight was not the way to do it. One thing that is important to put in here is that, during most of this time, I was not a member of the Board, not that that would have made any difference. Linda was not there all the time because her husband, Dick Ward, was ill and ultimately died. It is my firm belief that, had Linda been there, a lot of this, or none of it, would have happened because it would have all gone through the right processes.

So, it was more procedure than substance. Does that make sense? My sense is that when it came out that the Vintners had done all this, had done this negotiating, the Grape Growers were like, well, we're not in agreement with that, and we weren't included. And the Winegrowers had the same reaction. Why do we deal with the Wine Growers? I don't know. That's a question for another day, because they're not a membership organization. And, the Farm Bureau was opposed to it, and they're a membership organization. So, I suppose that they have a voice.

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So, that happened. And then the Board just got overwhelmed, so then the Board made an about face. They had initially come out in favor of it. They had voted four times unanimously—we're supporting it, we're supporting it, we're supporting it—along the way and then in the end they thought that maybe they hadn't really understood what they had signed off on. I wrote them letters saying—I think just really one letter, but I think two, saying, okay, how can you go from helping create the initiative and supporting it to opposing it?

I said, if you want to change your position, the only realistic option to me that you have is to be neutral on it. Just go neutral on it. You don't have to oppose it. Why they chose to oppose it, I don't know. But to me that was like, are you kidding me? So, you guys helped write this. You were in favor of it. And you didn't just say, okay, we're going to go neutral on it. You opposed it. How did they get there? This I will not understand. I do not understand it.

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Meeker: So, this would have happened in a board meeting?

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Novak Milliken: Yes, it would have happened in a board meeting. And when would it have happened? I suppose—when did the election happen, in November?

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Meeker: No, June.

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Novak Milliken: Oh, that's right. It was June, June of—

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Meeker: Eighteen.

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Novak Milliken: Eighteen, that's right.

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Novak Milliken: So then the Vintners came out in opposition to it, which I think was a mistake. Still, to this day, I think it was a mistake. But that's what they did. So then a group that got behind "No on C" created a lot of misinformation in their campaign. While this is typical of any campaign, there was a lot of

misinformation like, “No on C—will increase traffic in Napa Valley.” How does protecting our forest increase traffic in Napa Valley? There were eight ludicrous points made that were just not true.

Basically, every municipality passed Measure C. American Canyon voted against it for who knows what reason. But, it lost by less than 400 votes. It was a teeny margin of loss. So, that’s why people are coming back to the table now, because the community has spoken and we need to listen. And so, at this point in time, where is it? What we’re all doing, including Growers/Vintners for Responsible Agriculture at our meeting this morning, is that we’re supporting the efforts of the Supervisors and the Planning Commission to go through their process and to do the right thing.

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They are working on an ordinance because no one wants another initiative. None of us does because we’d like to move beyond these environmental issues that are really important and deal with the issues of what’s happening in our Ag Preserve – maintaining its integrity – and deal with issues of hospitality and some other really hard issues that we need to address, such as traffic and housing. For now, we have to wait for the draft ordinance to come out. And then we can really start studying what’s there, and try to educate our Planning Commissioners to basically stop deforestation so as to protect our watershed through this ordinance.

It’s all about our watershed. The Napa River is listed as impaired. It is an impaired body of water because it has high sediment loads, and it has other things because of development, not just vineyard development, but some of it is clearly vineyard development. It’s also housing and road development that impacts our watershed. Everything we do as humans impacts the planet, of course.

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It’s just a matter of looking for that balance and that sensitivity. Right now everybody’s in the mode of let’s support the supervisors and the commissioners, and let’s let them actually show leadership and do what they need to do as elected representatives to respond to the concerns of their constituents and not just listen to powerful forces in this industry who just want to keep things as they are. It’s not just going to be status quo.

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Meeker:

So, something we should have done at the beginning of this conversation is actually define what Prop C is. And, in doing so, maybe you can do it by kind of walking me through those very early conversations with the environmentalists who initially wrote it, to what it became in the compromised format.

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Novak Milliken: Measure C came out in 2016. At that time, I was asked by Mike Hackett to be involved, but I kept a little bit of distance because I wasn't quite sure what it would actually mean. I was keeping my distance a little bit. And then, through a technicality in how it was written, the Napa Valley Vintners got it thrown out. It got the signatures that it needed, but there was some technicality in the language that allowed them to actually get that initiative disqualified

So, Mike Hackett and Jim Wilson went back to the drawing board with their attorney, Perlmutter, and got a new initiative written and put it on the '18 ballot. When they started drafting the initiative, they sat down with the Vintners.

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So, the people that I mentioned earlier, plus NVV Board representatives and one staff member, and Tom Adams from Dickenson, Peatman & Fogarty, who's their land use attorney, sat down together and hashed out a compromise. Everyone felt good working with the Vintners. We've got a compromise. I was then supportive. I was fully in on it. This was something that I absolutely could get behind.

That's when I got engaged in support of this compromise initiative. And then the fact that we supported it went out as an email to NVV members. When I received that email, I sort of said to myself, uh-oh. I don't think this is going to go over well the way that it was presented. It ultimately didn't. And, like I said, the Board got incredible backlash. What I haven't mentioned yet, and the real elephant in the room, and truly, in many ways, the cause for all of this, is Walt Ranch, which I'm sure you've heard about.

Kathryn and Craig Hall bought a large piece of land east of Napa in a very rural area. Their ambition is to develop a big vineyard out there in this rural area that's just full of beautiful oaks. I've flown over it with Randy Dunn. And then, around that would be forty-acre housing sites. They haven't revealed this yet. But clearly the parcelization out there exists for that. So, the reason for Measure C was this egregious development and people rallying around saying, "We don't want this." At the same time you had Davis coming in here north of Saint Helena off of Silverado Trail, applying for permits to cut down forest on steep hillsides right up against the Wild Lake Preserve, to plant a vineyard. He wants to rip out beautiful old trees right on the edge of this amazing preserve to plant a vineyard. Where's the sensitivity here? Okay, you own the land. Technically, I guess you can do this. You can get a timber conversion permit from the California Department of Forestry, and you can do that. But should you? Is it the right thing?

So, all of these threats to our natural environment are coming up, and that was the impetus, really, for Measure C. Napa Valley has a very strong name. The

Napa Valley Vintners has done a very good job establishing Napa Valley as a preeminent name, as you and I talked about. Four percent of the wine in California comes from Napa Valley. And yet, when people think of wine in California, they think of Napa Valley.

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So, everybody wants a piece of the Napa Valley action, if you will, because anything with Napa Valley on the label automatically has a higher value. And so, the reason for Measure C is to protect our forests and watershed. We've created something special in the Napa Valley name. And now there's a business opportunity here. We're going to need to recognize it as finite. We cannot keep planting more vineyard and building more structures. You take out what Mother Nature gave us, you put in vineyard, you bring in irrigation, so you've taken out the natural water holding capacity of the land, soil and root systems that feed the watershed.

There is a limit. I had an interesting lunch with Jennifer Putnam Kopp, who I really like, and she is the Executive Director of the Napa Valley Grape Growers. I really respect her. She's really passionate. The Grape Growers came out against Measure C, and she said, "I'm really worried – what about the young people who want to get five acres to plant a vineyard and to make their own wine? How are we going to keep that innovation?"

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And I said, "Jennifer, that's a nice dream that you have. But that's been gone for a long time." I mean, I said, "Spottswode can't afford to buy five acres or ten acres or twenty. We've been priced out of Napa Valley for the last twenty years." And I said, "I don't begrudge that. That's not an issue. It's just the reality of what's happened around us." I can't go out and justify buying Napa Valley land. It's too expensive. So, those days are, for all intents and purposes, over. As Austin Powers said, "That train has sailed."

And so, it's just one of those things where we have to recognize that it's finite. We can't just keep growing. I have two sons. If they're interested in this business, that would be wonderful. And if they're not, they're not. There's no obligation. There's no entitlement. But they would work with what we have here. And if we're going to invest in land somewhere, it would be highly unlikely we would buy in Napa Valley for two reasons —price and, with climate change, we don't want to have all of our eggs in the Napa Valley floor basket.

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But, we just can't keep growing. We just can't plant out all of Napa Valley. Obviously, a lot of it's unplantable and I'm exaggerating to make a point. But if you have a five-acre parcel and you wish build a big house and/or plant a vineyard, you rip out forest and now you have either an irrigated crop and/or structures, it impacts our environment. It impacts the health of our watershed.

And that ultimately impacts the health of the Ag Preserve and all the vineyards in it. It's all connected. That's the thing. It's a holistic approach.

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Meeker: So, when that initial draft was, or the compromised draft was approved, and then it—

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Novak Milliken: Then it backfired.

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Meeker: Then it backfires, and then it actually does make it to the ballot, the crux of it was to prohibit the removal of trees, correct?

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Novak Milliken: Yes. The crux of it was protect our watershed. It was the Oak Woodlands and Watershed Protection Initiative. The idea was you protect the watershed by protecting the flora, the trees, the forest. It was based on oaks because obviously if you had tried to include all of the natives (among them Oak, Toyon, Bay, Madrona and Manzanita, Redwood, and Douglas Fir), people would have gone ballistic. So, the focus was on one of the main tree species. In California, oaks are part of our natural heritage.

So, they decided to work on protecting oaks, which is why Mike and Jim made a lot of compromises with the Vintners and felt like it was a good initiative.

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If the Vintners had stuck by their guns or even remained neutral, I think we'd be in a much better place right now. The Board was under intense pressure, I know, yet when they realized that they couldn't remain in favor, they should have gone neutral and not opposed.

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Meeker: From where I live in West Sonoma County, it's a little different. It's not quite a hothouse. But there's emerging and simmering, maybe, is the way to describe it, cultural dislike between those who are involved in the wine industry and those who see it as a symbol of everything that they detest.

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Novak Milliken: Yes, the lamentation of their pastoral, rural lifestyle being undermined.

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Meeker: Yeah, but there's also a kind of Bernie Sanders dislike of those who've been successful and wealthy. And so, I came across, I think it was Mike Hackett, and some of his quotes could have very easily been interpreted as just hating on the wine industry overall.

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Novak Milliken: Absolutely true. I've had many conversations with him about that.

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Meeker:

I could imagine why some Vintners would maybe be supportive of it but unwilling to support the way in which it was sold. I don't know. Do you have any thoughts on that? It sounds like you noticed this.

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Novak Milliken:

Oh, I noticed it. And I continue to edit things that are written because I've had to explain, you guys, we are Growers/Vintners for Responsible Agriculture. We are not anti-agriculture. We're in agriculture. We are a part of this. So, we're not anti-ag. We are pro-watershed, pro-forest. And really, so if we're pro-watershed and pro-forest, then we need to include restrictions on all development, right? It's just being mindful of and thoughtful toward our natural environment. And I don't believe that what's being asked is truly that hurtful to landowners in this county. Will it actually stop somebody with a five-acre piece from developing it? How viable is a five-acre vineyard, anyway?

Let's just say you owned that unknown five-acre piece that was on slopes that are plantable that you could get a permit for. And let's say out of those five acres you could plant two of them because you need to have a driveway and maybe you want to have a little house or a garage for your car. Who knows what you need. Let's say you even get three acres out of it. Then let's say you get four tons to the acre when it's fully productive. You're getting twelve tons. So, if it's cabernet, assume sixty cases per ton. So, you're looking at about 720 cases of wine, if you use every drop of wine you make.

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Well, how viable is that as a winery? If you can charge \$500 a bottle and sell it all direct to consumer, maybe it's viable. But, it's really not that viable. That's the point, that these are like toy wineries or toy brands. I may be wrong. I could really be offending somebody with what I'm saying because I may not know what I'm talking about. But if I looked at it and said, what would be the reality of doing that, and could I make money? After I invest in developing this vineyard, bringing these vines to maturity, getting the grapes, making wine and trying to get out there and sell it, could this be something that is ever going to make money?

I don't look at it and say that's a good business model, because a lot of people have gotten into it and then they're like, oh wow, selling wine is extremely difficult. It's easy enough to grow it and make it if you have money. But it is very difficult to sell. That's kind of the crux of it. Napa Valley is so worth protecting. And those of us who are here are going to have to be the ones to protect it. And that means protecting its integrity and making sure that the natural beauty remains, and that agriculture remains viable. There will be increased development pressure. There will be more vineyards planted. But we must manage how much more vineyard is put in and do it in the right way, and recognize that it's not just going to keep going on.

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Meeker: So, after all of this went down, if you will, you decided to remain active in the organization and then also, I guess, run for the board of directors.

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Novak Milliken: Correct.

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Meeker: Tell me about that decision-making process and why you didn't just throw up your hands.

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Novak Milliken: Because I believe in the cause, and I think the cause is right. And I think, again, it's going back to sort of that ethical or moral obligation to act. I feel that is my core. So, running for the board was really—you know, Linda has wanted me to come back on the board for a long time. I had said that I really wanted to wait for my kids to be a point where I felt I could dedicate that kind of time again. One of my sons is off in college, and the other is a junior in high school.

And the time just seemed right, so I threw my hat in the ring. Why have I stayed involved with the Growers and Vintners? Because going through this, I really want to see the board of supervisors in Napa County pass a meaningful ordinance, because nobody wants another initiative. Our group does not want another initiative. It's been really hurtful to our community, and that's recognized. And yet, it's the only way that people who care about our environment have been listened to. Otherwise they just would have been completely dismissed. It was the only way to make their voices heard, our voices heard. So, I want to follow it through. And I think I can help do that. That's my ambition. It's just so important to be involved in what you care about.

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Meeker: One of the things about it that I also found interesting was that if an initiative like this did pass and it did severely limit further vineyard development, that doesn't make everyone's vineyards that much more valuable that exists today?

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Novak Milliken: I guess it does. But they're already extremely valuable. Is it a bubble? Is it not a bubble? I don't know. Putting in the Ag Preserve made Napa Valley land more valuable. And some people thought it would do the opposite. If you're asking, and it's a fair question, if I'm truly acting out of altruism or if I'm working to increase the value of my family's land, the answer is no, I'm not working to increase the value of our land. I deeply and truly care about the environment.

I already feel like land here is valued so high. I do not want to sell. My ambition is to give the next generation the same opportunity that my mom gave me, and to run this business because what we have here is irreplaceable.

It is amazing. That we're even sitting in here, I just always look around and think I can't even believe I'm fortunate enough to be a part of this.

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And, so that argument could be made, but guess what? Let's just say you developed another 20,000 acres in the hillsides around here. Let's just say, just to throw out a number. Is that going to bring down the value of what I have? No, it's not, because we're still right here in the Ag Preserve, on the alluvial soils, on the west side of the town of Saint Helena, and that land has value. It's not going to bring it down. So, I don't think it's going to have any impact.

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Meeker: I didn't mean to link you with it.

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Novak Milliken: No, that's a fair question.

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Meeker: It wasn't so much about your motivation. It was more about the motivations of those who opposed it. People do often act in their own economic self-interest.

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Novak Milliken: That's true.

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Meeker: Aside from those who have, like the Halls, a clear plan, you can see why they would be opposed. But, for others who own fifty acres in the valley—

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Novak Milliken: You'd think they'd be about caring about our environment so as to preserve agriculture in Napa Valley for the future.

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Meeker: I did bring up that question about the way in which some environmentalists talk about wine in general. How do you respond to that? How do you engage with Mike Hackett when he does say things like that?

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Novak Milliken: I just say, "Mike, we just have to stop. That's not who we are." That kind of rhetoric does not help our cause. I know why he's angry. He's passionate about what he's doing and he feels like he's been betrayed. And, in fact, he was. Jim and Mike worked in good faith with the Vintners. They developed trust through the process. He still feels trust for the individual people with whom he worked. But not with the organization that did an about face. And so, I think anger can set in. And when you're that passionate about something, it's hard to keep that in check.

The reality is, there's a lot of anger about Walt Ranch. There should be. I'm angry about Walt Ranch. I don't want that. I don't think that should be

allowed. I don't think that's a good use of our land. I think it's a terrible development. That's my own personal opinion. And I hope it's stopped. But that doesn't make me anti-agriculture, and it doesn't make me anti-wine business. It makes me pro-natural environment and pro-doing the right thing.

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And, some people you're just never going to be able to get that through to them, that doing the right thing is actually better than—again, how much do you need? The Halls have a lot here already. Why this drive to have to have more and more and more? People are driven. And I don't want to go into any psychology because it's just, they have a lot of great stuff. So, it's like just be happy with where you are. And when something like this is that controversial, why wouldn't you think of a way to work around it and say, wow, the community is really not behind what we're doing here. What could we do to make this more palatable? What if we gave X amount of it to the Land Trust?

Look at other options with this land that you bought. Yeah, you had this whole development—I don't want to use the word “scheme.” See, there I go—the whole development idea on it. But, that's not what the community wants. That's not the will of the community. So, just because it's your property, does it give you the right to do it? Well, if your community doesn't really want it, in a way, no. Your rights have to be kind of balanced with the rights of those around you to continue to enjoy the pastoral lifestyle that they've enjoyed out in this really remote part of our county.

01-02:01:07

Meeker: So, we should probably move toward wrapping this up.

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Novak Milliken: Yes, I would agree, especially because my dog is crying.

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Meeker: Oh, poor guy.

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Novak Milliken: I could go bring her in here.

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Meeker: If you'd like.

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Novak Milliken: Yeah, is that okay with you?

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Meeker: Absolutely. I love dogs.

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Novak Milliken: Let me unhook just for a moment. She's been very patient.

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Meeker: Yeah, she has. I know that we're already a little over, so I appreciate the time.

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Novak Milliken: No, I was late for you. I apologize again.

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Meeker: So, just last month, the Napa Valley Vintners celebrated their seventy-fifth anniversary and had a really interesting and fun event and an annual meeting to acknowledge that. I'm wondering, looking back on the years that you've been involved in the organization—is that twenty or thirty years? Thirty years now.

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Novak Milliken: Eighty-seven, '98, I just was doing the high math on my fingers.

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Meeker: Do you have any thoughts on what its greatest contributions have been?

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Novak Milliken: Oh, I think its greatest contribution has been really doing such a great job at keeping everybody aligned and together and offering community among the vintners, a good reason for people to come together, to work together. Auction Napa Valley is a perfect example because of all the unbelievable things that we do for our community. I think the number is something like 180 million that we've put into the community since its inception.

I think the Napa Valley Vintners offers that sense of camaraderie and collaboration and that place to come together. I think the Vintners has done that extraordinarily well while still offering strong leadership. I think without it, we would be rudderless. We wouldn't have a direction. We have great marketing initiatives, and they're meaningful. We have great charitable initiatives, and they're meaningful. You were at the meeting, so you were able to get a sense of trying to bring people together and just talking. And, you saw all those wines out on the table and people bringing older vintages and sharing, people sharing and just being part of that. I think that's just a huge value. I think it's really important.

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Meeker: To what extent do you think the organization is one of the main factors that makes the industry and the valley so unique compared to other regions?

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Novak Milliken: I think what makes Napa Valley really unique is how well we do work together for the common good. We jointly participate in panel discussions. We all bring our wines to an event like this. It's about everybody doing well. It sort of puts everybody's own personal ambitions at the door a little bit and gives people a sense of something a bit greater, sort of a greater good.

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Meeker: Do you have any final thoughts or anything that you'd like to add that I didn't ask you about?

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Novak Milliken: I don't think so. We've talked about a lot of things. We've covered a lot of ground.

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Meeker: All right.

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Novak Milliken: Thank you.

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Meeker: Well, thank you so much for your time today. I appreciate it.

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Novak Milliken: Absolutely. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

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Meeker: That was great.

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Novak Milliken: Okay.

[End of interview]