

Oral History Center  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

John Shafer

*John Shafer: Caring about Quality Wine and Community Health*

The Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Martin Meeker  
in 2018

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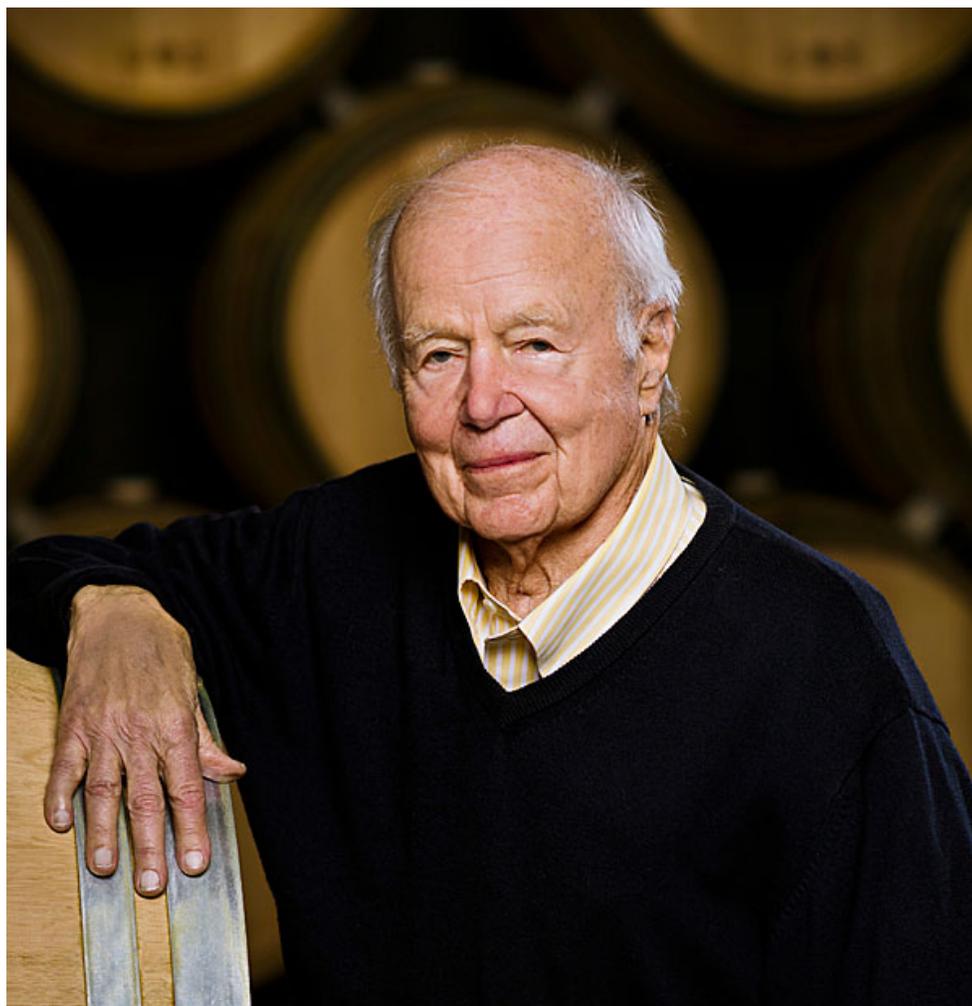
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John Shafer

Photograph courtesy of Shafer Vineyards

**John Shafer** was the founder of Shafer Vineyards in Napa Valley. Shafer was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1924 and raised near Chicago. After college and military service, Shafer returned to Chicago where he worked and raised a family before making a major midlife change. In 1972, he purchased land in the Napa Valley that would by the end of the decade become Shafer Vineyards, which now produces widely-collected varietal wines. In this interview, Mr. Shafer discusses the origins and early decades of Shafer Vineyards; the social milieu of Napa Valley in the 1970s and 1980s; his introduction to Napa Valley Vintners and its fundraising auction; the auction's support of community-based organizations; and his own service to community health organizations in Napa County. John Shafer died on March 2, 2019, shortly after this interview was conducted.

**Table of Contents — John Shafer**

Napa Valley Vintners Project History by Martin Meeker	vii
Interview 1: November 27, 2018	
Hour 1	1
<p>Born in Detroit, Michigan in 1924 — Father’s career in brass manufacturing — Father’s abstinence from alcohol — Service in the Air Force and developing independence from family — Dissatisfaction with job in publishing — Appreciation of wine starting in the 1960s — Informal study of wine in the 1970s — First visit to Napa Valley in 1970 — Real estate search in Napa Valley with help of Jim Warren — Purchase of land owned by Hanns Kornell — Family’s move from Chicago to California — Figuring out the workings of a vineyard with employee Alfonso and taking classes on pruning — Working with tractors in the vineyards — Hiring Laurie Wood and others to do vineyard work — Sale of first crop to Mike Robbins in 1977; decision to grow Cabernet — Memory of Nathan Fay’s 1976 homemade wine — Using budwood from the Eisele Vineyard— Initial 1978 Cabernet production at other wineries prior to building own winery — Aging wine in barrels — Marketing strategies — Managing of grapes during a heat spell with winemaker Elias Fernandez — Character of 1978 Cabernet — Approval of the Stags Leap District appellation</p>	
Hour 2	17
<p>Popularity of 1991 Hillside Select wine</p>	
Interview 2: November 28, 2018	
Hour 1	19
<p>Auction of 1978 Cabernet in the Napa Valley Vintners’ first auction in 1981 — Producing Zinfandel and Chardonnay — Michael Broadbent at the wine auction — Collaborative and friendly nature of Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) during the 1980s— Traveling to England, Germany, Japan, France and more with NVV — Promoting Napa Valley wine at international wine-tasting trips — Serving on the international marketing committee of NVV — Serving a chair of the auction committee — Robin Williams auctioneering Napa Valley wine in 1999 — Auction proceeds and the funding of health and education non-profits — Involvement in civic activities, such as teaching and serving on OLE Health board of directors — Funding the Napa Valley Vintners Community Health Center — Serving the Latino community of Napa Valley — Involvement with VOICES Youth Center and helping foster kids</p>	

Hour 2

34

Different entities within OLE Health — \$180 million raised by NVV auction —  
Linda Reiff's contributions to NVV

## **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: November 27, 2018

01-00:00:01

Meeker:

Today is Tuesday, November 27, 2018. This is Martin Meeker interviewing John Shafer at Shafer Vineyards, and this is our first interview session, and this is for the Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project. So, first off, thank you very much for agreeing to sit for this interview today and tomorrow. I appreciate your time, and the contributions you've made, which is the reason that I'm here today. We begin these interviews the same with everyone, and that is, just tell me your name, and date and place of birth.

01-00:00:42

Shafer:

I'm John Shafer, and the date today is November 27, 2018.

01-00:00:56

Meeker:

And the date you were born.

01-00:00:58

Shafer:

Date I was born was October 11, 1924.

01-00:01:07

Meeker:

Okay. Where were you born?

01-00:01:09

Shafer:

In Detroit, Michigan.

01-00:01:12

Meeker:

Can you tell me a little bit about the family that you were born into, the kind of work your father did maybe?

01-00:01:20

Shafer:

Well, my mother and father had been married a number of years before, and their first child was a girl, and she became my older sister. So in our family, after I was born, we had a family of two children—

01-00:01:50

Meeker:

Your father, what kind of work did he do?

01-00:01:52

Shafer:

Well, he went to Purdue University, and got a degree in mechanical engineering, and he was very much inclined that way, so he, oh, I think he started working at automobile startup with—he went to Detroit and went to work for a brass manufacturing company, and after, I don't know, three or four years, he ended up being hired to come to Chicago, and continue the same type of work, so he worked for a company called the Imperial Brass Manufacturing Company, on the west side of Chicago.

01-00:02:49

Meeker:

And he worked at that job while you were going through school?

01-00:02:53

Shafer: Yes.

01-00:02:55

Meeker: I think I read it in the book that your son wrote, that your father was a teetotaler, is that right?

01-00:03:01

Shafer: That's correct.

01-00:03:02

Meeker: Was there never any spirits or wine or beer around the house when you grew up?

01-00:03:07

Shafer: Never.

01-00:03:08

Meeker: When were you first exposed to those libations?

01-00:03:12

Shafer: Oh, I'd say probably as a junior in high school, yeah. It'd be beer, and it'd be with friends, and groups of kids.

01-00:03:27

Meeker: Did your father ever explain to you why he avoided alcohol?

01-00:03:32

Shafer: Well, he didn't need it. He was very religious. He was raised by a Methodist mother, and she was very strict, and he subscribed to that, and followed in her footsteps.

01-00:03:52

Meeker: Well you kind of veered off that path.

01-00:03:55

Shafer: Well I did, yeah, I did as a teenager, later.

01-00:04:00

Meeker: And also the idea of picking up the family and moving out to California showed a bit of independent spirit. Where do you think that came from? Did that come from your mother, or was that something that was on your own?

01-00:04:18

Shafer: I think it was pretty much on my own.

01-00:04:22

Meeker: Have you thought about why you were able to be so independent?

01-00:04:35

Shafer:

Not really, although it may be associated with my Air Force experience, which started age eighteen, and that was a sharp departure from living in a family at home. In fact, I never came home again.

01-00:05:03

Meeker:

Tell me about your service in the Air Force.

01-00:05:06

Shafer:

Well, I started Cornell in '42, and at Christmas, I enlisted in the Army Air Corps, and in April, I was called to duty, and I went through that whole routine. You started with basic training, and then going through all the tests that you went through to become a pilot.

01-00:05:39

Meeker:

And you ended up flying bombers in the war, right? You flew a bomber.

01-00:05:46

Shafer:

Yeah, I had no choice. Well, I did have a choice. The end of advanced training, the commander called me into his office and he said, "We'll give you an opportunity: you can be an instructor, or you can go into combat," and I went to combat. I chose that.

01-00:06:07

Meeker:

Why did you choose combat?

01-00:06:09

Shafer:

Because I was imbued with the war and patriotism, and that's uppermost in my mind.

01-00:06:20

Meeker:

Where did you serve? Where did you fly the planes?

01-00:06:23

Shafer:

I ended up in England, in the Eighth Air Force, flying in a bomb group, one of the many bomb groups flying over Germany, and I had twelve missions. It was in the last four months of the war, so by that time, we had all kinds of air superiority, but we still had dangers. We had flak, and the famous German 262 jet plane, you know, they were the first to do it.

01-00:06:59

Meeker:

Mm-hmm. And did you ever encounter any of those when you were flying?

01-00:07:04

Shafer:

Once they came through our formation, but for the most part, we weren't bothered by them because by that time, they had very few pilots, and fuel. We had worked on that for a long time.

01-00:07:25

Meeker:

What do you suppose it was about the experience in the Air Force that influenced your life trajectory?

01-00:07:37

Shafer:

Well, I think the notion of not staying around town where I grew up and so on, which happens to a lot of people. Many people, I believe, tend to stay there, they remain there, and although I went back to the Chicago area, lived in other communities, the notion of leaving or not living there never bothered me.

01-00:08:15

Meeker:

So, I'd like to fast forward a little bit, if that's all right, and I know that you worked for Scott Foresman Publishers while living in Chicago, and worked in sales.

01-00:08:34

Shafer:

I started in the sales.

01-00:08:36

Meeker:

Okay, and then, how did that progress?

01-00:08:39

Shafer:

Well, the woman that I married, her grandfather had been one of the founders of the company, so, I was offered this job, after I worked in a machine tool company, and got imbued in education and teaching, but I worked really in marketing and market research and promotion.

01-00:09:26

Meeker:

Was this something that, as the years went on, you learned your heart wasn't in?

01-00:09:33

Shafer:

A little bit. It really had to do that I wasn't fulfilled with the work that I was doing. It was a great company. It was the premier elementary publisher of schoolbooks in the United States, and great people, but I wasn't satisfied with what I was doing.

01-00:10:07

Meeker:

So I'm wondering if you can walk me through from some of this feeling of dissatisfaction to coming up with a pretty out-of-left-field solution. [laughter]

01-00:10:20

Shafer:

Well, I was pretty satisfied, and I had been promoted beyond what I should have done because of the nepotism, and it bothered me that I wasn't making more of a contribution. So that played into it. I became aware of wine in the late sixties, with being invited to dinner and having it served, at different events or picnics. So that was my first exposure, having grown up in a teetotaling family.

01-00:11:16

Meeker:

The wine you were drinking then, was it all French?

01-00:11:21

Shafer:

It was both, both American wine and French wine.

- 01-00:11:26  
Meeker: Do you recall any of the American wines that you were drinking back in the sixties?
- 01-00:11:32  
Shafer: Well, there was like Lancers Rosé. I don't remember ever drinking a Cabernet.
- 01-00:11:44  
Meeker: So you don't feel like you were exposed to any of the fine California wines.
- 01-00:11:48  
Shafer: I was exposed to the cheaper wines, yes.
- 01-00:11:52  
Meeker: I understand that you, by the late 1960s, start to go on a program of really educating yourself more about wine and grape growing.
- 01-00:12:07  
Shafer: Yeah, it was about in 1970 when I really wanted to learn more about it. So I read a lot of books, and that was really the pre-runner of my—1970, and I left in '72, so I had a couple of years where I read a lot about wine and learned things.
- 01-00:12:36  
Meeker: Were you reading mostly wine criticism, or wine history, or winemaking?
- 01-00:12:43  
Shafer: I would say wine history, and some of the simple books that were dealing with winemaking at the time, that were published. There weren't very many.
- 01-00:12:55  
Meeker: Do you remember any particular books that were influential to you?
- 01-00:13:00  
Shafer: I don't.
- 01-00:13:04  
Meeker: Do you recall anything, like, what was it about all of this that really started to attract your attention and inspire you?
- 01-00:13:16  
Shafer: Well, my concern about not making a contribution, it bothered me, because I had a lot of perks. I had expense account. I traveled. I was involved in an acquisition or two, and the project on early education that I came up with and started never came to fruition, partly because it was ahead of itself, the notion of having parents work with small children to do things, and so, that was part of my thinking. I wasn't doing what I wanted to do. I wasn't succeeding, and so, when I encountered wine, and learned about it, and the more I read, the more I became intrigued with it, and so, with the notion of doing something different and leaving the company, that was uppermost in my mind.

01-00:14:40

Meeker: Tell me about the first time you came to Napa Valley.

01-00:14:44

Shafer: The first time we came to the Napa Valley was in about 1970 or so. I came out. We had sales conferences, and I attended some every now and then, and so I attended a sales conference in Palo Alto, and after the two days that the conference went on, I decided that I would stay here in California, because I had read about the wine, with vintners, and had rent a car, and decided to go up in the Napa Valley—

01-00:15:30

Meeker: Were you by yourself?

01-00:15:31

Shafer: Yes.

01-00:15:33

Meeker: Did you spend the night up here?

01-00:15:37

Shafer: No, I drove back that day.

01-00:15:41

Meeker: Did you stop by any of the wineries when you came up here that visit?

01-00:15:46

Shafer: Actually, I didn't, on that first visit. I was just trying to get the lay of the land, what things looked like. So I spent my time driving and driving around before returning.

01-00:16:04

Meeker: Some people, when they first see Napa Valley, have a transformative experience in terms of how beautiful it is, and—

01-00:16:17

Shafer: Well, I was greatly impressed with that, of course, and the more I saw, the more I traveled, the more I liked it.

01-00:16:33

Meeker: I know that you, on one of these visits, were guided around by Jim Warren, who is a real estate agent.

01-00:16:44

Shafer: Well, there were two real estate firms when I came up. One was Jim Warren—today, there must be fifteen or twenty—and I knocked on his door, and he proceeded to drive me around to see different places. I can't quite remember; I don't think that I called on him that trip. I had made a second trip to Napa Valley, that's when I knocked on his door, and started going around looking at vineyards. And not knowing anything about grape growing or winemaking as I did this, I realized that I probably needed to become

associated with somebody who was familiar with it, and at that time, a wine broker—maybe it was through Jim Warren—got in touch with me, indicated that Hanns Kornell, maybe, was for sale, and I should go and visit it when I came back up, and I wanted to say hi to Kornell, and there was nothing to that at all. It was just the brokers trying to work up business.

But, we proceeded, and I, from the beginning, told Jim Warren that I was interested in a hillside vineyard, and he proceeded to show me many others, including spots that were for sale. Sterling was doing something, but there wasn't hardly anything available. So, when I went back a second time, finally after traveling with him and visiting wineries, he said, "Oh, there is a grower down in the Stags Leap area, who's had his vineyard on the market for three years, and so he may be willing to take an offer, and two or three different vintners looked at it, and turned it down."

01-00:19:35

Meeker:

Do you know why others didn't bite?

01-00:19:38

Shafer:

It was because it was planted in 1925, and there were walnut trees growing in it, and there was very little level ground. The hillside came down to the parking lot—and they had a big ditch running through this, which was really easy to fix with putting pipes in, but it was run down. He had a very modest house, and he'd built a little house up in the hills where he gave a couple of pickers their board in place of their working at the vineyard. He was a very frugal guy, and he didn't pay these people anything. So, I looked at it with Jim, and as you know because you're familiar with it, driving in, it's a spectacular view, and only about thirty acres were planted, a little bit on the sunny spot hillside, but not the rest, but the hills were there, and the exposure for south and west was there, which was important, I thought, and with that, I made an offer.

01-00:21:19

Meeker:

And was the first offer accepted, do you recall?

01-00:21:23

Shafer:

Yes.

01-00:21:26

Meeker:

The owner was looking forward to unloading.

01-00:21:29

Shafer:

Well, he'd had it for sale for quite a while.

01-00:21:38

Meeker:

So then, I understand you break the news to the family that the family is heading out West.

01-00:21:45

Shafer:

Well, my father, he died when he was eighty-one. There wasn't any problem with that. My wife, who'd grown up in Chicago in the Southside, had many friends. She really surprised me that she was willing and excited about moving away, going to California.

01-00:22:31

Meeker:

Had she joined you on any of these visits out to Napa yet?

01-00:22:37

Shafer:

No. No, she didn't. And so she trusted me, so, I had bought it. I had resigned in the meantime, or resigned in, I guess, June, and drove out here in July, it's in August, and moved in August.

01-00:23:11

Meeker:

A big part of our conversation today and tomorrow is going to be about the Napa Valley community, and the vintners, and all the work that they've done around the Valley. When you first arrived here, how did you meet people, how did you get involved in the community?

01-00:23:31

Shafer:

Well, the wife of my real estate guy, Maggie Warren, and I'm sure they did this with their customers, she introduced my wife to other women that she knew, and they had a bridge group, but aside from that, I didn't really meet a lot of people, because I was really absorbed with trying to learn about a vineyard. The first year, I had a vineyard company harvest the grapes and do things, but then as I got into it, I hired a guy who would work there, but not in the wine business—he worked as a florist—Alfonso, who's still with me, and he and I tried to figure out how to run a vineyard.

01-00:24:41

Meeker:

How did you do that? Did you take any classes at Davis Extension, or Napa Valley College, or—

01-00:24:48

Shafer:

Well, I did take classes early on in pruning, because the guys were pruning; that was the first thing that we got involved with. There was the old tractor here, which, with a mechanic, I learned how to run. There were some old French plows. Do you know what a French plow is?

01-00:25:16

Meeker:

I don't, no.

01-00:25:18

Shafer:

Well, I have one around here. There were two. It had a disc to go into the ground, then it came up in a Y, and there were two handles. In the years before, before the tractors, they had used a horse, and there was a little platform, that he pulled. So you had a man on one side and another man on the other side, and they would come to the vine and go like this, to get rid of the weeds. So, that went on early on.

01-00:26:00

Meeker:

Did you plow the vineyards with a horse then, or was it attached to a tractor?

01-00:26:03

Shafer:

No, by that time there was a little tractor. There was an International Harvester tractor, so I drove the tractor and Alfonso worked on that. We didn't do that very long. [laughter] It was hard work for him, yeah.

01-00:26:21

Meeker:

Well, and I know by '74, you're planting Cabernet, so there must have been a point at which you were introduced to this grape that has made this valley so famous.

01-00:26:33

Shafer:

Well, I knew early on about Cabernet, and neighbors, Manuel Barboza through Stags' Leap, but other people that I had talked to, would say, "Oh, that's what you should be planting, you see." And, I didn't know at the time, but Nathan Fay, in this valley in 1961, was the first to plant Cabernet. It was actually this area, and so, I had that in mind, but I hired Laurie Wood and some other people to test the soil, and we did it, dug holes in the hillside and everything, and that all worked out. So, with that, I did the vineyard work through those first few years. I was delayed one year because the deer ate the root stock down, all those kind of problems you have, but in 1976, my neighbor, Winiarski, did his thing, which of course, as you're familiar, made a huge impression everywhere, and—

01-00:28:25

Meeker:

Well, he won the Judgment of Paris in 1976 with Stag's Leap. Wine cellars cabaret.

01-00:28:29

Shafer:

That was it, and, I realized that the growers, certainly at that time, didn't make the money that the wineries did. So, I, for the first time, thought about getting it all in a winery, which I had decided not to do. I decided I was just going to be a grower, but because of the difference in regeneration, and because of the promotion of the Stag's Leap, I decided that I would, in 1978, get into it. We had our first crop in '77, off this Upper Seven. Meantime, I was pulling out old vines, but not all at once, for accounting purposes. So in '77, I sold the first crop off of the Upper Seven to Mike Robbins, to another winery, and he came back and he wanted to have a ten-year contract. [laughs]

And so, meantime, I was making some homemade wine. My neighbor, Ernie Van Asperen, was also a B-24 pilot out of Italy, and I had met him socially, and then he came to me. He said he was going to make some homemade wine, and he wanted me to join him. So I took some Zinfandel grapes over, and I made some wine. I got that bottle around here somewhere. We got an old Mondavi bottle, but it was with very small equipment, so I made, there'd be two five gallons, or proof. So that was my first experience in winemaking.

01-00:31:02

Meeker:

A lot of people refer to the Judgment of Paris in '76 as a real turning point, but sometimes, those turning points become much more evident decades later. Did it really feel like that at the time? Did you feel like you just kind of lucked into Stag's Leap—

01-00:31:22

Shafer:

Well, it influenced me in thinking about making wine, in addition to growing grapes, and then I sold that first crop to Mike Robbins and that was '77, then between that and the next fall, or '78, I made the decision to make a wine.

01-00:31:58

Meeker:

Did you ever taste that Warren Winiarski's Stag's Leap Cellars, I guess it was '73?

01-00:32:07

Shafer:

Well, no, I never tasted the '73, no, I didn't. What I did taste was, and this was a little later—this was three or four years later—Nathan Fay, who had been growing grapes all this time, made wine. He made homemade wine, and he invited me and Joe Heitz and our wives to dinner. He explained he was making wine, so he brought out his '76 homemade wine. Now in the meantime, I had tasted. I had gone to some tastings, and I was in a tasting room with some guys. We didn't really know a lot what we were doing, but I had been exposed to that. When I sat down, tasted that wine—in the meantime, I had taken no tasting classes early, so I really didn't know a lot about wine, but that wine blew me away. I, without being able to—for lack of come up with different words, but it was by far the most delicious wine I had ever tasted, and I was wowed by it. What I've learned, years later, that Warren Winiarski tasted that same wine, and after he tasted it, he bought the property next door, and ended up buying Fay's property. It was that good. You didn't have to know a lot about wine to realize that it was very delicious.

01-00:34:10

Meeker:

Did you ever find out from Fay how it was that he made the wine?

01-00:34:15

Shafer:

No, I didn't, and I should've. He made it at home. My assumption was, he made it like everyone else, and like I had made it.

01-00:34:26

Meeker:

Probably pretty low tech.

01-00:34:29

Shafer:

Very much so.

01-00:34:30

Meeker:

When you start making your wine, do you have that early Fay homemade wine in your mind as a benchmark?

01-00:34:41  
Shafer:

Yes, and, the interesting thing was this story: I decided to make wine and I decided to make it the seven-acre vineyard that I had planted. When we, well I got the growers in to plant the rootstock, after a few months, most of the rootstock had been eaten down by deer who had gone through the deer fence, and my neighbor, Carl Doumani, he had a hole in his deer fence. So I couldn't use that. I was working with John Piña and Sons, and so just, they still work here, and have their own business, and meantime, I had gotten my teaching credential, because I wanted to teach underprivileged kids, and so, as part of my intern experience, I taught in Napa, and then I taught in St. Helena, two days a week, and then the third day, I'd fuss at the vineyard.

Well, when I realized the vineyards, I had decided that we had to start over on replanting, and John Piña came in, and meantime, I was teaching school, and I had really forgotten—this was then that pre-period—I had forgotten about getting into wine—this was earlier—and so I wasn't paying any attention to it, and I wasn't paying any attention to where he got the budwood. So, on his own, he went to Milt[on] Eisele's vineyard and got some budwood, and budded it. I learned later that he didn't know about it, and he was really pissed off, [laughs] and he came in and complained, and I said, "Milt, I didn't have anything to do with it. I was teaching. I told you I don't know whose vineyard it was and I didn't care." So, that's where the budwood came from.

01-00:37:39  
Meeker:

So you ended up with an Eisele clone—

01-00:37:41  
Shafer:

Yeah, and I think that, along with our exposure and vineyard, had a lot to do with the wine because when I made the first wine, I hadn't built the winery yet, so I had it crushed over at Markham Winery, and then I borrowed some trucks and I bought the barrels. There were no American barrels, so I bought bourbon barrels, and the consultant who, by the way, died, quickly, advised me to use citric acid and soda ash, and put a little in and overnight and so on. So I did all that, and I had two-thirds French barrels and one-third American, and my wife and I would top them in our garage. I had moved the gondolas out, and it was wintertime, and I had no way of heating the wine to go through malolactic, so, I went up into the house and I got our electric blankets and put them over it, and some tarps. So, people often refer to the '78 Cab as "our electric blanket vintage."

01-00:39:41  
Meeker:

Did it work?

01-00:39:41  
Shafer:

It worked, but it took me till May to have it go through malolactic. Usually it occurs February or March.

01-00:39:51

Meeker:

Do you think it didn't go through it because of that treatment you had to do on the bourbon barrels, or—

01-00:39:57

Shafer:

No, I think it was because I couldn't have any heat. It was just cold.

01-00:40:04

Meeker:

There's a lot of great wine that was being produced around Napa Valley in the late seventies into the early 1980s, and in order to sell the wine, I don't know that you went on the road and you represented Shafer to restaurants and to wholesalers, but in order to do that, you have to have quality wine, but you also need to kind of develop a story, like something that sommeliers and wine buyers can identify with. How did you develop the Shafer Vineyard story? What was it that you would tell people?

01-00:40:45

Shafer:

The wine was bottled. It was aged. We aged in those little barrels that I told you how I got it through the malolactic, and in the fall of '79, no, fall of '80, it had been bottled, and I thought I would release it in '81. From the very beginning, I was going to age the wine longer in barrels than most people. So I started aging it at twenty-five and thirty months. We now age it thirty, thirty-two months. When I was doing the fermenting and punching down, my friends would come over, people I knew, and they'd taste the wine out of the tank. And they were very complimentary, which I didn't know enough, whether it was good or bad, [laughs] but I thought they were just being polite, obviously. So I didn't pay any attention to it.

Then when the buying of the bottle, I took a bottle and I decided I was going to be selling it, and I drove down to LA and I got the names of eleven retailer shops, and I went in, despite who I was, or I felt I'd like to have a try at this. I didn't have a story, except that I was brand new. Every one of those people bought that wine, all eleven. And I only had about that much. I only gave them a little bit. But to show you what was going on, I had asked Joe Cafaro, another winemaker, how he handled his marketing, and I wondered if he would show me. "Tell me how you do your marketing." He said, "Well, I get up in the morning, and I have breakfast, and I go down, I go over to the winery, and I wait for the telephone to ring." That's how he sold it.

01-00:43:27

Meeker:

How about you? Is that what you did too?

01-00:43:29

Shafer:

No. No, I didn't have to, because he had obviously brought a way but I'd be—that goes to show you how little wine there was at that time. With a lot of people, there was a lot of pressure and demand. I was amazed at that, but it goes to show you. So, was I surprised? Yes, because I was asking them to tell me about the wine, and the guy from the San Francisco Vintner Club called me, he said, "We do these tastings, and," he said, "there are like so many

meets, you do heats, and then you take the winner of each heat and put them together.” So, I put the wine in that. It survived and it, this is the ’78 Cab, and it survived that, and it won that. So all of a sudden, [laughs] I decided that gosh, I don’t know, maybe that’s something here, because this response was so unusual, I thought. The wine was good. In a way, everybody may have—Heitz or—what’s his name, wine that I tasted at his house?

01-00:45:01

Meeker: Oh, Fay.

01-00:45:03

Shafer: Anyway, so, from that point on, there was a British guy that came over, and I sold some wine, and I sold a few bottles to him, and he put it in the Savoy Hotel and other places. That was my first international experience. I just thought it’d be interesting to do that.

01-00:45:33

Meeker: When was the last time you tasted your 1978 wine?

01-00:45:37

Shafer: Oh, several months ago.

01-00:45:39

Meeker: Months ago? Okay.

01-00:45:41

Shafer: Oh yeah.

01-00:45:41

Meeker: What do you think of it now?

01-00:45:42

Shafer: It’s, well, it’s remarkable. It’s a much older wine, obviously, but it still has fruit, it has held, and it’s very, very smooth.

01-00:45:53

Meeker: Right. Fortieth anniversary this year.

01-00:45:55

Shafer: Amazing. Oh, it’s just amazing. Nobody was more surprised than I.

01-00:46:02

Meeker: Well, I appreciate it. It’s interesting how there are a lot of people now who come to market, and they know they have to have a story even better than just the wine, or at least as good as the wine, but you had the wine, and it sounds like that it really sold itself. Stags Leap District, as an AVA, was still a few years away. Were people aware of this—

01-00:46:30

Shafer: I’ll get to that, because I started it. Did you know that?

01-00:46:33

Meeker: Right, yeah.

01-00:46:35

Shafer: Along with Dick Steltzner—but anyway, when I picked the grapes—this is an interesting story that not many people know about—I was new. We were in a heat spell, and I knew a few people but not many, and I couldn't get any pickers, and I was at twenty-two Brix, on a Friday. I couldn't get any pickers that day. I couldn't get any pickers on Saturday, or Sunday, or Monday. Meantime, Davis and everybody said, "Well, you pick at twenty-two and a half." Well I was picking at twenty-six to twenty-seven, and I thought the wine was ruined. This is before I went out.

Now, what? Then my own winemaker, and Doug and Elias, after we'd released the '78 and gotten the accolades and all, went back to making wine the way they did before, and I was selling it, and it was damned difficult. They'd gone back and one day, Elias says that, "Let's go look at John Shafer's notes," because that's the one thing I learned—I took a semester course in winemaking—and they realized that they'd had this heat spell and I couldn't pick and I didn't pick it till much later, and beginning in the late eighties and starting 1990, they started leaving the grapes on the vine longer, and we hit the jackpot. We were, the decade of the nineties, we're making—was just beautiful. A lot of people were because they were great vintages, but we changed from that point on, so the boys now are picking higher sugars. Isn't that interesting?

01-00:49:02

Meeker: That is interesting, and there's so much that goes into that as well. The way in which the row spacing starts to change when you're planting the grapes, I mean, that impacts, and doing green pruning in July and all that kind of stuff, all of that plays into this too, right?

01-00:49:22

Shafer: Yeah.

01-00:49:23

Meeker: I know that your son came along and your winemaker, Elias, really started to participate in it, but was there a point where you felt like there was an event horizon, where so many new, interesting ideas are coming out, and the wine is increasing in quality at a clip that goes off the regular curve?

01-00:49:51

Shafer: Oh, it was. We had all of those things. We had the vineyard spacing, and on all the different rootstock, all those things were going on, you're right, at that time. It was sort of a revolution in winemaking. But so far as I know, most Cabernet producers in Napa are letting their grapes hang on the vine a little longer, to get the ripeness. See, the '78 was ripe, and as a matter of fact, you would think you would be overripe, and in some ways, I think, you're almost getting to a port-like character, but that was a remarkable thing that happened.

01-00:50:41

Meeker:

Yeah, people were, I think, described the '78 as "sometimes port like," maybe took it too far.

01-00:50:48

Shafer:

Some of them did.

01-00:50:57

Meeker:

Let's talk about the Stags Leap District AVA.

[Side conversation deleted]

01-00:51:24

Shafer:

When the '78 Cab was out, released, and people were talking about it and so on, people referred to it as having a Stags Leap character, and if you would ask people to define that, they would say, "Well, it's enjoyable earlier," but people, more than one person noticed this, and at that time, there had been two sub-appellations developed here in Napa, and I was talking with Dick Steltzner one day. He said, "You know, other people notice this too. We should get a sub-appellation, a Stags Leap appellation." So I went around and talked to neighbors. We raised a little bit of money, and I hired Richard—

01-00:52:55

Meeker:

Mendelson.

01-00:52:55

Shafer:

Yeah. Ours was his first experience, I think. I think he did this first, and with that, we got people together. We had hassles over the border line, and like you'd expect, and that went on, and it took four years. I think it was four years. They actually had a meeting and brought the ATF people out here in Napa. People were giving speeches and so on. The ATF, whatever, after going through this, and I understand why, they decided they needed to simplify it. So instead of having a peak-to-peak line, another line, they just took the Yountville Cross Road, and then they took the river on the west. So we got through that, but that occupied a lot of people [laughs] at one time.

So, with that, we raised the money. We made the submission. We had the hassling going on, and it was approved, and I think it was declared maybe third or fourth sub-appellation approved, and for the most part, people didn't pay attention. A lot of the neighbors didn't even know what I was talking about, [laughs] but over the years, it's grown. We had committees and we did things, and went all through that, and now there is, as there are with other appellations, a very active committee and group that works on it.

01-00:55:11

Meeker:

What does the committee do?

01-00:55:14

Shafer:

It's mainly promotion. They promote. The Stags Leap District has a day in the spring where they invite people out. Oh, they'll have dinners at different

wineries, and the people will go from winery to winery, and that's what it is. It's really a promotion.

01-00:55:40

Meeker:

Does it, looking back on it, and having, I imagine, tasted your neighbors' wines over the years, in comparison to other sub-appellations in Napa Valley, does it continue to make sense for you? Do you think there really is something that's unique and different here?

01-00:56:04

Shafer:

Well, I like to think so, or at one time with our wine, there was a group—I don't know who that was, this happened several years ago—where somebody made this comparison. They took the grapes of each of these and made wine, and tasted them, and the one thing that came out of it was that the Stags Leap wines were more consistent than the others, but you never had a sharp, the difference between, although those early years, we felt there were. I think it might be because other wineries have changed, but we were pretty distinctive, because we didn't come up with any wine—they did, with the name, where they say "Stags Leap character." So, that's the tough thing, because other wineries who do and other appellations do very well and I don't think they particularly have a story. It's promotion they all do.

01-00:57:25

Meeker:

There's a human dimension to an appellation or to a terroir, right?

01-00:57:31

Shafer:

There's a what?

01-00:57:32

Meeker:

A human dimension, like I think about in Burgundy, you have Pommard and Volnay. They're right next to each other, some similar soils, yet one is always described as very feminine, and one is always masculine, and if you taste the wines, you can see that, but the winemakers might be making the wines to kind of be like that, too, because there's an expectation. I kind of wonder if, as the decades go on, winemakers are trying to make a Stags Leap wine.

01-00:58:10

Shafer:

Well, I know they're trying to make a wine that's riper, because they're leaving their grapes on the vine, but I think there are too many other options, too many other things that go into it, your different things that take all the different operations, and everybody will work out their own. Some of them are more tannic, and you can affect that, and all of anything in your winemaking.

01-00:58:49

Meeker:

So, here we are in 2018, forty years after your first vintage of 1978, and the way you described it, 1978 was an important vintage for you.

01-00:59:03

Shafer:

Well, it was a very good vintage, so it's nice to have a wine coming out in a good vintage year.

01-00:59:12

Meeker:

Was there a point at which you felt like Shafer Vineyards had really achieved what you thought it could, its potential?

01-00:59:25

Shafer:

Well I would put it the other way: it's far exceeded anything that I thought we would do. Now, I've been successful in other things, but it's very interesting. We got good reviews, but it was interesting. When we put out the '91 Hillside, my neighbor had the group over and he said, "Bring a wine over," and there were about six or eight people, and we were tasting it and it was just beautiful. We still talk about it. And so part of that is the ambiance that we do, of course. But no, although I work hard at perfecting things, I really had no idea. I think it was partly the critics. I should tell you a story.

The first year I was selling wine, I met some guy in the east, he said, "You know, there's a guy down in Baltimore who puts out a weekend sheet," and I said, "Well, what's his name?" "Well it's Robert Parker." So I looked him up, and I called him up, and I went down, and I had lunch with him, and I poured the '78 Cab, and he's been here several times since, done a vertical [tasting], and we talk about it. He was very complimentary. I don't think he'd come up with his numbering system yet, or the name—the *Wine Advocate*. It was that early. He and his wife did it on the weekends. But I got to know him early on, in fact, and then later on we've kept up, but he's carried on now that he's done it all this time and he's responding to wines in a very nice way, as you know, but he's out of it. I think he works at it a little bit but he sold it. He sold the operation.

So early on, we got nice reviews from him—not overwhelming, but decent—and then as we brought out more Hillside, Hillside picked up a character. I used to work at it. I mean, I've done all these things. I used to take photographs of the vineyards, frame them, and give them to people, and we talked about Hillside as being a wine of the place. This was partly marketing, which I had done. I used to try to communicate with all the salesmen, and even write to them in their homes. So I did a lot of promotion like that, and marketing, but I think it's sort of caught on, but people will like it. There was a few years where we had some open-houses, invited people in and tasted, but we didn't do it for very long, because we got too many people getting drunk, because it was a freebie. But it's very surprising. Now the interesting thing: that Elias has carried this on. He's a perfectionist, and has an innate sense for grape growing and wine—his father was a picker, by the way—and I think today he's one of the outstanding winemakers in the Valley.

01-01:03:55

Meeker:

Mr. Shafer, why don't we stop for today, and I think this is a good spot where we can then pick up tomorrow with the Napa Valley Vintners story, and you can talk about joining and all the good work you've done in and around that organization. Does that sound good?

01-01:04:12

Shafer:

Sounds fine.

01-01:04:13

Meeker:

Excellent.

[End of session]

## Interview 2: November 28, 2018

02-00:00:02

Meeker:

Today is Wednesday, November 28, 2018. This is Martin Meeker interviewing John Shafer for the Napa Valley Vintners Oral History Project. We are here at Shafer Vineyards, and this is our second interview session. So, thank you again for joining me. What I'd like to do is first talk about the roles, your engagement, with Napa Valley Vintners, your chairing of the auction, and then I'd like to talk about the other organizations that you've worked closely with over the years. I know that there's some overlap, particularly in terms of the Vintners, through the auction, have helped fund the activities of a number of these organizations.

02-00:01:23

Shafer:

Yes, I can fill you in on that.

02-00:01:25

Meeker:

Great. So, well let's start with the Vintners. When you first arrived in the Valley in 1972, when did you learn about this organization, and what did the organization mean to you?

02-00:01:39

Shafer:

Well, we arrived in 1973, and I purchased this fifty-year-old vineyard, and so I became absorbed in that. I had known there was a trade association, but I'd also realized that there was no way to belong to it, until you had a product that was sold to the public, so, I arranged to have the wine made at other wineries, which is common, while we built ours. So, our first wine, the '78 Cab, was released May 1 in 1981, and a month later, by coincidence, in June of 1981, the Napa Valley Vintners put on their first wine auction. It was oh, I don't know, twenty or so vintners. We didn't have many vintners those days, and I put in our '78 Cab, which brought a fair amount of money. There was a couple of wineries that raised larger sums, but all told, I think there was only about \$360,000 raised, or something in that range, in contrast to what's been going on since. And so that summer of '81, in the fall and going on, I went out and tried to behave as a wine salesman, and often at the very beginning, I didn't do the talking. I let the prospective buyer talk about the wine, so on, and learned about it that way, because these are people who tasted wine all the time, and—

02-00:04:30

Meeker:

So maybe even developing your own tasting notes based on what the somms and other experts said.

[ed. note: paragraph deleted by narrator]

Did you actually attend the first auction in 1981?

02-00:05:39

Shafer:

Yeah, I did.

02-00:05:40

Meeker: What are your memories of that?

02-00:05:43

Shafer: Well, my memories are—I wonder if that’s the one that—what’s the British wine writer?

02-00:05:56

Meeker: Hugh Johnson?

02-00:05:57

Shafer: No.

02-00:05:58

Meeker: Michael Broadbent?

02-00:06:02

Shafer: Yes, he’s very well known. He came and became the moderator, and it was so hot that he took his shoes off and put his foot in a bucket of water, and I think that was that year. It was either that year or the following year.

[side conversation deleted]

There were very little celebrations and a lot of the things that go on today and have gone on since. They didn’t have the time to organize the tent or anything. It was a very modest beginning, but that was the first auction.

02-00:07:00

Meeker: When you attended, did it have a good community feeling, I mean, to see all of the different vintners together in one place? This must have been a pretty rare occurrence.

02-00:07:13

Shafer: Yes, I think it did. It was the first time for everybody, but soon all the vintner luncheon meetings that led up to it, all we talked about was the auction. We’d never done it before, and we were trying to figure out all the angles and all the things that might help it to be successful.

02-00:07:40

Meeker: Who was really heading that up at the time? Was it Robert Mondavi? Was he really taking the lead on this, or—

02-00:07:46

Shafer: Well, Louis Martini was the auction chair of the first auction, and then later on, as you know, it alternated. It went from different people, and at first it was one person. Today, they make a family out of it, or a husband and wife. And during that interval, all the things that we used to do always had a theme, and we used to have to have a painting made, which became a poster—all those things nowadays I think are basically done by the staff of the vintners. In the early days, it was the vintners who were struggling with it.

02-00:08:42

Meeker: Right, because there probably wasn't much staff for the organization.

02-00:08:45

Shafer: Well no, there wasn't much staff, and all that developed later.

02-00:08:50

Meeker: In different wine regions, sometimes you hear the group of vintners can be very competitive and secretive. In other places, you hear that there's a lot of friendship and willingness to share ideas and information. What was Napa Valley like around 1981?

02-00:09:13

Shafer: The Napa Valley to other industries had an unusual reputation of collaborating, and we took pride in that. When we went to tastings, we would pour each other's wines, this and that, and so, it was not dog eat dog. It was a very pleasant relationship that we had. That was especially true in the early years. Now as we got to be 500 people, I don't think as much of it went on as before, because so many of us don't know and haven't met the new vintners.

02-00:10:05

Meeker: It's hard to know 500 other people, right?

02-00:10:08

Shafer: Yes.

02-00:10:10

Meeker: So in these early years where you talk about a good deal of collaboration and engagement in the vintners group, was that one of the main ways in which this collaboration happened, to help each other.

02-00:10:27

Shafer: Well, often, because you'd been on a committee, and you've gone on trips together, in that way you got to know each other, and there was a lot of very strong collaboration, and as a result of being on a committee.

02-00:10:54

Meeker: Did you go on any of these trips? Can you tell me about those?

02-00:10:57

Shafer: Yes, I was head of the international committee. I went on a lot of them, from the very beginning.

02-00:11:06

Meeker: Where did you go?

02-00:11:08

Shafer: Well, we went to England. We went to Germany. We went to Japan. Those are the major ones. Now since that time, since I've been involved, I think they've gotten bigger. I think they've gone to China, and other countries. We would go to France. We'd go to the famous tasting there, Vinexpo. In any

event, working with other vintners on projects like that brought us together, and we socialized and had a good time.

02-00:12:09

Meeker:

Do you remember any of these trips particularly fondly? Are there any visits that you thought were especially productive?

02-00:12:19

Shafer:

Well, I remember most of them fondly. It's a little hard to know how productive they were. You know, you come in town, you do tastings, talk with a group, and then you leave, and you don't really get any feedback from it; it's hard.

02-00:12:41

Meeker:

Was it a balance of learning about the place you're going as well as trying to represent Napa to those people?

02-00:12:49

Shafer:

Oh, we were very much into talking about and promoting Napa. Well when we talked, we had themes and did things, it was really about promoting Napa and not the individual wineries.

02-00:13:11

Meeker:

How did you promote Napa? What were you talking about when you wanted to—

02-00:13:17

Shafer:

Well, we were talking about the Valley, and its characteristics, and why it was great for growing grapes, and the different varieties and where they grew best, and all the details that go into that.

02-00:13:40

Meeker:

Do you remember any questions that people would have in those places that they would typically ask about, of your visiting group?

02-00:13:52

Shafer:

Well, the questions really came relating to Napa and other wine-growing areas, and so we talked, and we had questions about that, why were certain grapes grown in certain places, and all of that, so that was all part of the pitch.

02-00:14:31

Meeker:

And, did you guys bring Napa wines along for people to taste?

02-00:14:36

Shafer:

We each had our own wines, and when we did tastings, we would have them all out together.

02-00:14:44

Meeker:

What kind of response did you typically get, do you recall?

02-00:14:53

Shafer:

Well, basically, very good. People were seeing vintners and hearing about wines that some had never heard of before. That made it very interesting to answer their questions then.

02-00:15:21

Meeker:

I've always wondered: European wine regions have a very historic reputation, sometimes associated with châteaux, and in some ways, maybe kind of conservative socially. California in the 1970s and 1980s was the opposite, right? It was a land of innovation, of hot tubs, [laughs] of beaches, and were people you meeting, were they expecting like a California verve, like a California kind of energy?

02-00:16:08

Shafer:

Some may have been, but the trips we took were really well planned, and well organized, and the people who came were often in the wine business, sometimes consumers, and it was very orderly.

02-00:16:40

Meeker:

So these were serious affairs. They weren't bacchanalian festivals.

02-00:16:44

Shafer:

No.

02-00:16:44

Meeker:

Okay. [laughs] You had mentioned service on committees with the Vintners. What committees did you serve on?

02-00:16:56

Shafer:

Well, I think the one that I served on longest was the international committee, which, in, I don't know, in the late eighties, we started for the first time—they didn't have one—and the Mondavi international man who was in charge of that, he sort of headed it up, and we had six or seven people. That later grew, but at the beginning, we started off and we went to England, we went to London, we went to Scotland and we went to France, later Germany, and Japan. Those were the major markets and they still are today, for international sales.

02-00:18:29

Meeker:

One thing that happens in wine in the United States is a kind of constant comparison to the great wines of France. If you're growing Pinot, you're always going to be compared to Burgundy. If you're growing Cabernet, you're always going to be compared to Bordeaux. Did you, when you were on the international committee, did you guys talk about this and figure out a strategy, whether that was something you wanted to do or something you wanted to get away from?

02-00:19:05

Shafer:

No, I think for many of the places where we went, they were tasting California wines for the first time. So, we told them. We got involved with our climate,

and the fact that so many different varietals can be grown in Napa. It was an educational experience.

02-00:19:39

Meeker: Tell me about the time that you chaired the auction committee. You chaired the auction, and that was, I believe, in 1999.

02-00:19:48

Shafer: Right.

02-00:19:50

Meeker: Tell me about that job description. [laughs] I imagine it's an honor, but maybe also a burden.

02-00:19:57

Shafer: Oh, no, no, everybody was sort of taking their turns, and they asked me, and we had to come up with a poster, those days, and we had to come up with a theme and our theme was "a sentimental journey"—it was the end of the decade—and as you know how it works, you get different vintners, and they come in and they each take a piece of the operation, one doing the decoration, one arranging for all the wines, another for the entertainment. The food was a big part of it, getting a chef or chefs, and working out all those plans, and all of those individual subcommittees did that work and then we'd get together once every three or four weeks and share our experiences.

02-00:21:06

Meeker: Was it your job to select and appoint those people to those committees?

02-00:21:12

Shafer: Yes.

02-00:21:12

Meeker: Who did you like to work with? Who did you select, do you recall?

02-00:21:16

Shafer: Oh gosh, I'm not sure I can remember.

02-00:21:19

Meeker: Okay. I'm sure it's in the records, but I would imagine you probably selected people to work with who you would have liked to work with.

02-00:21:27

Shafer: Yes. I know we got the famous chef who has Chez Panisse, in San Francisco. Alice Waters, we had her as one of the chefs, and featured her, and did a great job. So it was a collaborative thing. We all pitched in, and people were great in how they took hold and were willing to do it, and they weren't promoting their own wines. We were all promoting the Napa Valley.

02-00:22:18

Meeker: Did you make an auction lot donation that year, from Shafer Vineyards?

- 02-00:22:24  
Shafer: Oh yes, we made auction lots every year. Do you want to know what it was?
- 02-00:22:30  
Meeker: Sure! Do you remember?
- 02-00:22:37  
Shafer: Well, by then—what year are we? Oh, we're on the very beginning. I think we put in a couple of lines off of our wines. We hadn't brought out our Hillside Select until '83, so, in '81 and '82, we were just doing large-format bottles.
- 02-00:23:06  
Meeker: But when you were chair in '99, do you recall what the Shafer donation would have been?
- 02-00:23:16  
Shafer: Well, it was, and no question about it, it was a large-format bottle. It was a three liter or a six liter. By that time, when we're just getting started, we were making three liters and six liters, so, that's what it was.
- 02-00:23:39  
Meeker: What is the responsibility of the chair of the auction on the day of the event?
- 02-00:23:50  
Shafer: Oh. Well, the chair would often be sort of the moderator. He'd get up on the platform and welcome people, and then direct, you know, get a few remarks like that, and then you'd turn it over to the auctioneers and to staff who would carry on.
- 02-00:24:19  
Meeker: Were you in charge of inviting special guests or engaging with VIPs or—
- 02-00:24:25  
Shafer: Well I did on one, yes, when I was auction, I had met—what's his name, the comedian who just died?
- 02-00:24:40  
Meeker: Oh, Robin Williams?
- 02-00:24:42  
Shafer: Robin Williams. His half-brother was my sales manager.
- 02-00:24:49  
Meeker: Oh really? Okay.
- 02-00:24:50  
Shafer: So I had met Robin just once, and so I had the idea of having him attend the auction, and even be an auctioneer for a lot or so, and he first turned me down, his assistant, and then later, ten days before the auction, they said, "Well, he's free after all, so he's going to come," but we weren't supposed to advertise it or promote it. So the day came, and I asked him if he'd take a paddle and

enjoy the auction as he wanted to. That had never been done before, and not since, as far as I know. So anyway, he got up, and there was a huge do. This was about 4:00 in the afternoon, and people were getting a little drowsy, but when he came on, everybody snapped up and gathered on the grass in front of him, and we gave him a lot to talk about, and what he did was ad-lib. He took an auction lot and went all around, and halfway through, he raised his paddle, as the auctioneer, and bid, [laughter] which was really different, exciting, and it was a highlight. It worked out well and was a good auction.

02-00:26:39

Meeker:

So, I've never been to one of these auctions. With a lot of lots, it probably runs a long time, right?

02-00:26:46

Shafer:

Well, yes, some of the early ones went four plus hours, and then they tried hard to cut it back. It was getting too long.

02-00:26:58

Meeker:

Well what, other than inviting a famous comedian, what were the strategies for keeping everyone engaged and awake?

02-00:27:06

Shafer:

Well, just making a big do about each successful lot; in other words, we had all kinds of noisemaking devices, and when someone won the auction, people would gather around them, and they would have a photographer, and they would make a big deal, and three minutes later, they were on to the next lot.

02-00:27:35

Meeker:

So, you've got to wake people up.

02-00:27:37

Shafer:

Yes, but not until later in the program.

02-00:27:38

Meeker:

I've always wondered, how do you select the wine that will actually be served at the auction?

02-00:27:46

Shafer:

Well, each vintner really selects and submits the wine, and they were often the ones that—not quite sure how they divided that up, but they would put the vintner's wines on the table where he was sitting, along with others, and so that's how that worked.

02-00:28:36

Meeker:

Are the tables, are they preassigned seating, typically?

02-00:28:39

Shafer:

Yeah.

02-00:28:41

Meeker:

So, there will be people who are coming, and want to sit at John Shafer's table, I guess.

02-00:28:47

Shafer:

Well, no. People were assigned tables before the auction began.

[Side conversation deleted]

02-00:29:07

Shafer:

—[the auction] grew and grew and grew, and you had all the necessary things: the music, colors, and decorations, and huge tents. Had you ever attended one?

02-00:29:26

Meeker:

No, I haven't had the opportunity to. I've seen pictures.

02-00:29:32

Shafer:

And you know, people would come, and they had the price broken down, but if you attended every event—you attended a Thursday night event, and then a Friday luncheon, and then a Saturday night or the auction itself, and maybe a Sunday farewell breakfast—you had a fixed sum, and then you could break it down: if you went to just the Friday night, it was a lesser amount. That kind of thing.

02-00:30:06

Meeker:

I know, I believe, one thing that happened during the year that you were chair of the auction: there was a change of bylaws, so that the funds raised at the auction could be donated to a group of organizations.

02-00:30:25

Shafer:

Yeah, I guess so. I wasn't on the board at the time, but the result was that there was a period where we had all kinds of nonprofits, and I was on the lot review committee for several years, that reviews the requests for auction funds, and they changed those people around. I did it for a few years, now they have another group, and then up until about two or three years ago, they had all kinds of people and organizations receive funds, and then it was decided to narrow it down to health and education. So we carefully stopped giving to some of the people who had been receiving funds. It went off without a problem.

02-00:31:48

Meeker:

What was the reason for doing that?

02-00:31:52

Shafer:

I think they felt that there were some areas that had very, very strong demands, and we were trying to be something to too many people, and so they identified education and health as the two primary needs, and so today and for the last three or four or five years, they've primarily given to organizations that [narrator addendum: are associated with health and education].

02-00:32:39

Meeker:

So, you had said yesterday that you got your teaching credentials so you could help with education of underprivileged kids here in Napa Valley. What was it that you learned by working with kids in Napa Valley as a teacher?

02-00:33:02

Shafer:

Well, I learned that Napa has a 25 percent poverty rate, and getting involved with the one organization that was dealing with battered children and mothers, and what I learned was that we have a lot of very serious problems, and in many cases, they weren't being taken care of.

02-00:33:59

Meeker:

So, I know that one of the organizations you became involved with, by the 1990s, was Clinic Ole and later, OLE Health. What did they do?

02-00:34:14

Shafer:

Well, here's what happened. In my first ten or twelve years, I was so busy that I did not get involved with any civic activity, but Doug had come with me after six years and he was doing more and more, so I realized that I had time to do some civic work if I wanted to. So I had heard about an outfit called Clinic Ole, and I knew the lady who was the chair—she was the wife of a vintner, Kathy—and so I communicated with her and told her that I'd like to be on the board, and that was '88 or '89. And so, when I went on the board. They had no fundraising—well, they sent out a card in the spring for fundraising for people to buy some flower cards. They had a Hispanic gal who was supposed to be keeping track of things, and they had a representative from the Queen of the Valley, and also from the St. Helena Hospital, and two or three others, but there wasn't much there.

02-00:35:57

Meeker:

What were they doing at the time? What kind of services were they providing?

02-00:36:01

Shafer:

They were providing primary care, but the first facility, it was they were doing primary care in the Luna office next to the Luna Market in Rutherford, and they had a nurse, who in a few hours a day, and they were concerned with field workers. Well then, out in Lake Berryessa there was a restaurant, and on the days that they were there, they used the kitchen to treat people out there, and as I got into it, we got a medical director, and I was involved in trying to figure out how to raise money, and went around and asked people for money, and it worked pretty well, and then within a few years, Clinic Ole was renting rooms down in Napa, and we were getting more and more patients, so the board, of which I was a member, decided that we should have our own building, and I was the only vintner on the board and was asked to head up building our own building.

So I agreed to be the chair and raise the money for a separate facility. They were renting facilities in different places, and that was in about 1998. And so,

I tried to get a committee of different people, and got names and went around and talked to people. Now, a lot of those people I had talked to about just giving money to the clinic, but now, I went back and said, “Well, the clinic is going to be built and we would like to use funds from the Napa Valley auction.” I talked to the executive director, Linda Reiff. Linda said, “Oh, we’ve got all these people we give to. You can’t single out one.”

02-00:39:29

Meeker:

Oh, the problem was that this was going to require a lot of money?

02-00:39:34

Shafer:

It would be a lot of money, and how do you do that for one of twenty-five or thirty nonprofits? So then I came up with an idea, and I had gotten this idea from a doctor who had done something in Italy, and I said, “Linda, suppose we had four or five of the recipients of the auction, all health related, and suppose we were able to get them to work together and share in a building?” and she said, “Oh, that’s different.” So that’s how I got started. It started with Clinic Ole because that’s who I was with, but then we had abused women and children, we had Sister Ann’s Dental Clinic, care for babies, and they’re all health related, and they were all recipients of the auction funds, but they’re all independent with their own boards. They all agreed to share in a new building—with a shared waiting room, lunch facility.

02-00:41:09

Meeker:

How did you manage to convince them?

02-00:41:10

Shafer:

They were thrilled to have a new building and pay lower rent, etc. We built a building, and the first person I went to was Walt Disney’s daughter, who lived here and was very fond of the field workers. I had gotten money from her before, and like \$10,000, but I went over and I asked for \$100,000, and she gave it to me. And the funniest story of all is, I went to another wealthy man who I didn’t know very well, but I called him up to make an appointment, and he said, “Well, what do you want? What do you want to talk to me about?” I said, “Well, we’re involved with this building we’re going to build for several nonprofits who are involved with the auction.” “Well, has anybody else given?” and I said, “Yes.” “Well who was it?” “Well,” I said, “it was Dianne Disney.” He said, “Well how much she give?” I said, “A hundred thousand dollars.” He said, “Well put me down for that,” and hung up. I never got a chance to talk to him, or give my pitch. Well that obviously only happened once, but I got people to help and we got money from [Congressman] Mike Thompson; we went to the county and succeeded—so we ended up with a lot of donors—they’re all on the wall down there—with nine million dollars, and we hired an architectural firm and went off and by the time we were finished, we spent eight, but we never borrowed, and we needed that extra million dollars because we had to buy the house next door to get enough room for parking. Over the years, we’ve dipped into that. I think there’s about \$200,000 left, but it’s part of the capital campaign.

02-00:43:32

Meeker:

What you're talking about is the Napa Valley Vintners Community Health Center.

02-00:43:38

Shafer:

The Napa Valley Vintners, yes. I added the word "community." I thought "community" was appropriate. And so it opened in 2002, and it's been going strong ever since. It is now dealing with 35,000 patients a year.

02-00:44:11

Meeker:

Was there an awareness, in the late eighties and early nineties, when you first started working with Clinic Ole, of the need that there were 35,000 people out there who really needed these services?

02-00:44:28

Shafer:

No, there was no feeling about that, and most of the vintners didn't know about it, and one of my goals was to make people aware of it, and have the vintner, the wine association group, because a huge percentage of those people are Hispanic, and many of them are fieldworkers, and their families, so, when I made my pitch to these people, I said, "These people who are going to be attending this are people who have allowed you to live your lifestyle, so we need to take care of them."

02-00:45:21

Meeker:

How did people respond to that?

02-00:45:22

Shafer:

They responded very well.

02-00:45:24

Meeker:

One of the things about Napa that's interesting and sometimes difficult is, they talk about it as an Up-Valley, Down-Valley divide, where the City of Napa is where the majority of people live—it's where the more affordable housing is—and then you go Up Valley and you have more expensive housing and you also have all the vineyards. It seems like this was maybe a good opportunity to link those two. Were you thinking about it in those terms?

02-00:45:56

Shafer:

Well, they did, yes, and there would be most of those people, a lot of them gave their money to the St. Helena Hospital, because they went to the hospital. When you give your money to Clinic Ole, you don't go to Clinic Ole, basically. So, it became very successful. We opened the Pear Tree Street building in 2002, and I had to have a board of directors, because it's a legal aspect, but we were sort of the supplement to the Vintners. We named it the Napa Valley Vintners Community Health Center, and it turned out to be so successful that, beginning about three years ago, the board at that time decided that we should try to do another building.

So they didn't do what I did so much, because I took off a couple of years to raise that money, going around to people, but they had put on a gala, every

year, and raised money, and then arranged to borrow money, and they've been working on that for a year and a half. It's going to be finished in six months, and it's another building. They were intrigued with the fact that the Gasser Foundation donated a half of an acre right down by the new movie house, and so the land was taken care of, so all the money they raised was for the building, and it's a two story, maybe it's three, but it's very different, and I've walked through it, but they're not open yet, but they hope to open, I think, in another three or four or five months, and so they will, and I'm sure they'll have everyone on board and so on. So they're in the process of figuring out how they're going to handle both buildings, the original building and then this new one. So, it's been a very successful operation.

02-00:49:02  
Meeker:

What services are at the new building?

02-00:49:05  
Shafer:

Well, they've added services along the line. They have the dental services. They have eye exams. They have all the general things for primary healthcare. Diabetes, they do work with that. So that it's really, it's close to being a hospital. We don't have beds, but, it's been a powerful thing for the Valley.

02-00:49:46  
Meeker:

And, do most of these services, do they mostly all focus on the Spanish-speaking population?

02-00:49:54  
Shafer:

Yes, well they are taking in some English-speaking people, but I'd say 95 percent or more are Hispanics.

02-00:50:10  
Meeker:

Has there been any study or any knowledge you know of about the effectiveness of these institutions that you've helped gain new homes? Are the health outcomes here improved since the late eighties?

02-00:50:34  
Shafer:

Yes. That's a very good question, because I'm sure that many, many Hispanics have gone and are getting care that they didn't used to get. Now, it'd be a good project, research project, in a way, but the word got around, fast, and I know some people who are not Hispanic, and they're not involved in farming, and they've gone down there and they have accepted them. How many of those I don't know. When I was involved with them, they wouldn't do that. I know because I tried. The medical director said, "I'm committed to the underserved. You can afford to go to a private doctor."

02-00:52:02  
Meeker:

Have you had the opportunity to have conversations with any of the people who were served by Clinic Ole or the other outfits?

02-00:52:14

Shafer:

Yes, from time to time, and they are, I think, they're all very, very grateful to have it on hand, and the attention they are getting, because there simply wasn't anything before that. There wasn't much.

02-00:52:37

Meeker:

You said that when you first brought this idea to Linda Reiff at the Vintners association, she was worried about too much support for the four organizations, and not enough for the other nonprofits.

02-00:52:49

Shafer:

My first thought was to build a building for just Clinic Ole, and I couldn't get any money for the auction to do that, but when I broadened it to say, "We're going to share the building with four nonprofits"—each deal was a very unusual thing. Each organization had their own board of directors, but they shared the conference room, they shared the lunchroom, they shared all those things, and Linda said, "Okay, that sounds good." Now, I got a million dollars from the Vintners to pay for the land to start going, and then, when I went back to them and said to them, "We're going to call this the Napa Valley Vintners Health Center, and I'd like two million dollars more," which is what organizations do all the time—Stanford does it, everybody—they said, "Okay." So, out of that nine million raised, three million came from the Vintners, which came from the auction, and six million from the community.

02-00:54:06

Meeker:

Do you see the need expanding? Do you continue to discover new areas of need in the Valley? I guess housing might be one of those, right?

02-00:54:21

Shafer:

Well, housing is big and housing was included in the original group when they started, and they cut it out when they decided to go to only education and health, and it's too bad, because housing remains a serious problem.

02-00:54:44

Meeker:

Have you done any work in that area?

02-00:54:45

Shafer:

No.

02-00:54:48

Meeker:

So your focus has mostly been on health, right?

02-00:54:52

Shafer:

Well, we have this little other organization called the Health Center. There's another board of directors of which I'm the head of which, we've taken care of all the things that people have to take care of with buildings. We process the tenants' pay, and we have all the repairs made, and all of that kind of stuff.

02-00:55:28

Meeker:

What organization is this?

02-00:55:30

Shafer:

It's called the Napa Valley Vintners Community Health Center.

[side conversation deleted]

I'm part of a group and we do the repairs. When things go wrong, we take care of the building.

02-00:55:55

Meeker:

I know that you've also been interested in foster care and helping move kids out of the foster system.

02-00:56:07

Shafer:

Yeah, I got involved with an outfit. What do they call themselves? Oh, they call themselves VOICES, and it was organized by two ladies, one, in particular, who has done this type of work all her life. And I had read a lot about foster kids, and then when I talked to them, I realized that they were doing something here in Napa, and later in Santa Rosa. They'd rent a home, a house, and they were concerned about the foster kids who were turned away after their term, and all the figures show that it's a disaster, the guys end up in jail or the girls end up pregnant, and this organization, VOICES [Youth Center], had this building, and they welcomed any of these foster kids. They could walk in off the street, and they have a kitchen; they can get a shower. Clinic Ole goes over once a week, a nurse to treat them, and I wanted to expand it, big time, and we went down to Salinas and we opened one, down there.

But the problem, it's the one thing that I've tried to do and I've failed, and it bothers me, because it's a huge problem: there's over 100,000 foster kids who graduated as foster students. They've gone through the parent thing, now they're on their own, and to me, that's a shame, and something ought to be done about it, but nobody—I wanted to have our group here in Napa expand and organize people, but to do it, you have to have the collaboration of the community, the mayor and the local people, and every town is different, and it's almost impossible, because you'll get people who are excited about it, say, and then it goes nowhere, because you have to get the collaboration of the local people in that community, and the VOICES people and I haven't been able to do that.

02-00:59:28

Meeker:

It's hard, even with a unique place like Napa County where you have an organization like the Vintners that pumps millions of dollars a year into services, it seems like there's always more need.

02-00:59:48

Shafer:

Yes. Well, but you see, to deal with these foster kids—they're all over. They're in all these different communities, and there's no way you can push one button and have all—I never even heard from the lady down in Springfield, or here in the state, Sacramento, there was a black lady who was

in charge of this that I wrote to her and I never heard back from her. But I think it's, unless there was a huge effort, which is almost like an autocratic thing at the federal level to say, "All these people, we'll give you money, this, but you have to do"—that kind of thing, I don't think it'll ever work, because you're reliant upon these local people. They're all different. They need to be collaborating with you.

02-01:01:20

Meeker:

This question about collaboration is interesting, particularly around the community health center, where you have many different nonprofits coming together. How did you manage to convince those different groups that it was best to combine—

02-01:01:38

Shafer:

Oh, it was easy. The dentist's, within a year, came to us and said, "Look, we're all dentists and we don't want to do this administrative work and everything else. Would you take us under your wing?" We said, "Sure." Healthy Moms and Babies said the same thing. They wanted someone else to do the administration work so, Clinic Ole was by far the largest. So, right now, except for one organization, all of them had come together under Clinic Ole.

02-01:02:24

Meeker:

Ah, so, that probably helps with administrative costs.

02-01:02:27

Shafer:

They changed the name. It's now called OLE Health, but it's the same organization, and they do very well, and they're treating many more families.

02-01:02:51

Meeker:

Thinking broadly about labor and about the labor and population in Napa Valley, one thing that some vintners are starting to do is employ their field workers year round.

02-01:03:10

Shafer:

Oh, I see, yes, I know they do. Well, we do too, and they live in Napa. So we have about six or eight. We have a different group coming in to harvest and so on, but yes, I think there's quite a few wineries that have permanent people who live in the valley.

02-01:03:38

Meeker:

Do you think that that's impacted the health and culture of the region, having more field workers be full time, and full-time residents of the Valley?

02-01:03:51

Shafer:

Yes, I think so. All of a sudden, they have to learn the language, they have to learn the laws, the things that are going on. It can't help but bring the people together.

02-01:04:06

Meeker: Do you still go to the auction?

02-01:04:09

Shafer: Yes, I do.

02-01:04:11

Meeker: What do you think of it these days?

02-01:04:13

Shafer: Well, it was very successful, and they have managed, it's very—well, they've had, there was a period where I remember we had some of our lots for a million dollars and so on, and some of that's come down. So it sort of varies. I think it's an established thing. Our friends from Sonoma, of course, they have always been pissed off that we have such a successful auction. They tried their own, and I don't know if it's still going or how successful it is, but— [laughs]

02-01:05:16

Meeker: Well, it's still going but it's not as successful, so. Well, the Vintners, 2019, I believe, is their seventy-fifth anniversary. Looking back on the years that you've been in the Valley, what do you think its greatest contributions have been to Napa Valley?

02-01:05:51

Shafer: Well, I think the greatest contribution is the money that's come from the auction. It's \$180 million, something like that, and to have that come from one community is—you know, and it's the winery; it's the fact that wineries are very popular, ever more so, and there weren't many people drinking wine in 1970. Then people started traveling. They'd go to Europe where they'd experience wine, and it gradually has taken off, like nobody expected. I think for the foreseeable future, it's going to hang in there. I don't see people dropping wine and picking up something else. Long term, you never know what might happen from the standpoint of people's tastes, but the contribution made by the Vintners money that they got from the auction is by far the greatest contribution they've made. The people who have come here, I'm talking now primarily about the vintners, have come from all walks of life, and in many cases they're retired, in some cases they aren't, but they've brought a whole level of sophistication to the Valley that wasn't here.

02-01:08:00

Meeker: Do you see any challenges ahead for the Vintners, as a group?

02-01:08:08

Shafer: [added by narrator: The impact of the environment—including climate change will be a challenge for vintners.]

02-01:08:13

Meeker: A lot of people talk continue to talk about worries about the environment, and climate, and those kinds of issues.

02-01:08:22

Shafer:

Well, the business of, if they think from a farming standpoint that we need to be more diversified and everything, I can see that. I can see that as coming up as an issue, but otherwise, everybody's moving here, they've heard about it, when I came here, nobody. When I left, people I left, they never heard of the Napa Valley. "What's that?" [laughter]

02-01:09:04

Meeker:

It is world famous now.

02-01:09:05

Shafer:

Yes, that was forty-two years ago.

02-01:09:09

Meeker:

I mean, sometimes places can be loved to death too, right?

02-01:09:13

Shafer:

Right.

02-01:09:15

Meeker:

Do you see any new opportunities ahead for the Vintners? If the organization's success continues, what should the opportunities be?

02-01:09:31

Shafer:

Oh, I really would need to think about that. They already give money for education, health, and this foster children. You're talking about institution. It's a good question, and I'd have to think more about it. Linda Reiff is very competent. She's gone out of her way to enlarge things, and done a good job at it. They work hard at bringing in new vintners and acquainting them with everything that's going on. They spend a lot of time and money on that.

02-01:11:32

Meeker:

Fair enough. You're always welcome to add to the transcript when you receive it. Well, I guess, one final question. So tell me about, what's the future for Shafer Vineyards?

02-01:11:47

Shafer:

Oh, well, that's a good question. I have thirteen grandchildren, and none of them are interested in the winery, working at the winery.

02-01:12:02

Meeker:

Do you know that for sure? [laughs]

02-01:12:04

Shafer:

Well, we think so, and so right now, Doug has taken over, but he's sixty-ish, and what would probably happen: I'm going to die, maybe Doug's going to die, and then we're going to have to have some outsiders on the board, and hire a president, hire someone to run it.

02-01:12:47

Meeker:

When I talk to a lot of vintners, there's an understandable ambition for what they establish to be in the family for many generations. It's the European model.

02-01:13:02

Shafer:

Yes, and I dealt with that. I told my kids that they make that decision. I don't want to make it for them, because I mean, you'd run that risk of getting somebody in the wrong job, and their unhappiness that comes with that. I've got three kids who are very smart and very savvy, and I think they can come up with a solution, that it should be them. It shouldn't be me.

02-01:13:38

Meeker:

Do you have any final things to say? Is there anything I didn't ask that you would like to talk about?

02-01:13:54

Shafer:

I don't think so. I think you've covered the waterfront very well, and I appreciate meeting you, it's great, and wish you well, your project.

02-01:14:05

Meeker:

Thank you very much, and I appreciate the time that you gave to this, and to the work that you've done here in the Valley. So thank you very much.

02-01:14:13

Shafer:

You bet Martin.

[End of Interview]