



ST. HELENA  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY

# THE ELECTROLIER

January 2014, Volume 12, Number 1

ILLUMINATING ST. HELENA'S HISTORY

## Lin Weber Gives a History of the Nichelinis Before and During Prohibition

*Below are excerpts from Lin Weber's recently published book, Prohibition in the Napa Valley: Castles Under Siege. These passages, here and on page 2, discuss some of the history of the Nichelini family and its winery leading up to and during the Prohibition years. Italic headings and bracketed material were supplied by the editor.*

### *Immigration, settlement, and establishment of various Nichelini businesses*

Another to migrate from the southern Alpine slopes was Secondo Nichelini, a Swiss, who settled in Sonoma and opened a bakery and pasta business. His brother Francisco [Francesco] joined him there sometime around 1880 [1878], soon followed by Francisco's son Anton. It would be Anton Nichelini who would father a winemaking family in the Napa Valley. Anton trained in France as a stonecutter and builder. While working in his uncle's business, he became friends with Henry Chauvet, whose father was a pioneer Sonoma vintner. Henry introduced Anton to another Italian Swiss, Caterina Corda, whom Anton married after a brief romance.



*Catarina and Anton pose for the camera in their later years. Courtesy A. Nichelini Family.*

Anton and Caterina were eventually able to homestead land in Chiles Valley, in the untamed hills east of St. Helena once owned by pioneer and whiskey maker Joe Chiles. The land, it turned out, had significant deposits of two minerals: magnesite and chromium. Anton developed a small mining company to capitalize on this convenient and valuable resource.

He also planted grapes. He erected a

**Author Talk & Book Signing**  
**Thursday, January 23rd, 7:00 pm**

**Local Historian Lin Weber Will Tell All About Prohibition in the Napa Valley.**  
Books Available for Purchase & Signing.  
Featuring Nichelini Wines in Library's Speakeasy!  
Co-sponsored by St. Helena Historical Society.

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temporary winery on the slopes of a hill and used a Roman lever press to crush his own harvest and that of his wine-growing neighbors, weighing their grapes at the mine's scale. With his stonecutting ability, he was able to build a small, expertly crafted winery down slope from the first, which was completed in 1895 and is still in use today by his descendants.

He worked hard and without pretense, made good wine . . . and prospered. He further augmented his bottom line by establishing a mobile culinary service (mainly wine and bread) for his own miners and the workers in other Napa County mines to sustain them during their labors. The manufacture, sale and delivery of wine, all of which would eventually become illegal, helped the Nichelinis develop deep roots and many connections in the Napa Valley despite the remoteness of their location. (pp. 45, 47)



*Nichelini wines will be served at the event noted above.*

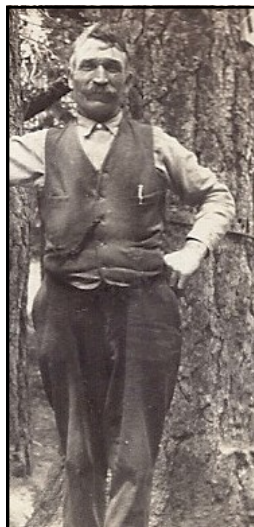
## The Nichelinis During Prohibition, continued from page 1

*During Prohibition, bootlegging was big business, and some residents were unhappy about this open practice. A letter in 1920 provides an example.*

Clifford Clark, a resident of Monticello (now under Lake Berryessa), was miffed that men gathering at the town's hotel took breaks from their meeting to quaff from a bottle labeled "Nichelini." He complained in a letter to Sheriff Harris, "If the revenue men would get busy, and put the lid on him, I am satisfied that drinking would end here." (p. 89)

*It wasn't always smooth sailing for bootleggers. In 1923 and 1924, Sheriff Harris was a busy man trying to bust a big bootlegging ring.*

Also arrested in this ring was the Italian Swiss vintner Anton Nichelini. The Nichelinis were still very much in the business of making, transporting and selling wine. Their remote eastern hills location was so far off the beaten path that they had no telephone (no electricity either), so they lacked the advantage of the warning call from Punch Cavagnaro or others who knew about busts in advance. To conceal their illicit product from the law's prying eyes, Anton had taken to crushing grapes at the old wooden winery up the hill, fermenting and storing the juice there and conveying it, in limited quantities, down to the larger stone building below, using pipes in the



*Anton shown in 1923. Courtesy A. Nichelini Family.*

ground. A water pipe ran in conjunction with the wine pipe, and if a Volstead emergency arose, he could turn a valve so that water ran from the pipe and not wine.

Harris was certain that the 1923 arrest had failed to dissuade Anton and his Italian and Italian Swiss friends from their lives of crime, and he was right. Rumors were circulating that Anton's son Bill was serving as personal bootlegger to San Francisco's booze-swigging Mayor, "Sunny Jim" Rolph. . . . [Until] repeal, Rolph's limousine found its way to the Nichelini winery. The wooden floorboards were removable, providing plenty of space for the temporary storage of contraband between Chiles Valley and San Francisco. (pp. 99, 101)



*Bill in 1923. Courtesy A. Nichelini Family.*

*Finally, the inevitable: the sheriff was determined to catch Anton in the act of selling wine and arrest him.*

Sheriff Harris and his federal counterparts continued to keep an eye on Anton Nichelini for the next several months. A federal agent's notes reveal that Operator J.W. Payne had come by at 1:25 p.m. on January 8, 1924, with a "friend" (another agent) and purchased some wine from Caterina Nichelini. He came again at 2:20 p.m. a few weeks later with a different friend and bought again from Caterina. He visited at 4:40 p.m. with a third friend a few days later and bought again from her. He showed up again at 6:00 that evening, and this time Anton was home and sold him some wine. The agents may have been milking Catarina for information; their real target, however, was Anton. They arrested him and took him to the St. Helena jail, located on the site of today's St. Helena Parochial School.

The 1924 arrest of Anton Nichelini was part of a major bust that netted twenty-two people in all, some of them very well-known names. . . . (pp. 102, 104)

*In spite of crack-downs, business continued as usual, even with door-to-door service.*

Despite all the busts and arrests, business was still brisk. It became local practice for residents to sign up for regular wine deliveries, just like milk. Empty jugs would be carried away and replaced with full ones.

With their background in bringing wine to thirsty miners, Nichelini family members continued to provide a similar service for selected customers. Bill Nichelini, Sunny Jim's friend, had a distribution company and drove shipments of sacramental wine for Beaulieu and Beringer's. Unholy Nichelini products found their way onto and off his truck of holy wines. (p. 113)

*At last, repeal on December 5, 1933 (just 80 years ago)!*

Fifty-four Napa Valley wineries opened for business on December 6, but few people came to buy. Prohibition and Great Depression it helped create destroyed most of what was once a vibrant industry. By 1962, there were only twenty-six wineries left, among them Nichelini, which is now the only surviving privately run winery in Napa County to have remained in business before, during and after Prohibition. (p. 131)



*The Nichelini Winery is located at 2950 Sage Canyon Road, St. Helena. Established in 1890, it is the oldest winery in Napa Valley continuously owned and operated by the same family. The website is [www.nicheliniwinery.com](http://www.nicheliniwinery.com).*

## A Short History of Flora Springs Winery and the Komes Homes

By *Mariam Hansen,*  
*Research Director*

### On the Trail of Part of Ana Bale's Land

What is now Flora Springs Winery and the Komes family homes began as part of Dr. Edward Bale's land grant, Rancho Carne Humana. The Bale family lived nearby on Whitehall Lane. After the doctor's death, Mrs. Bale needed money to support her six children, so she began selling pieces of her land in 1868. She also gave one piece to her daughter, Ana Bale; after Ana's death, this land was sold in 1869 to James M. Thompson, who then sold a large portion of it to Captain George Gluyas in 1874.

We know that Gluyas owned the Sutter Iron Works in San Francisco from 1854 to 1861. By 1867 he was chief engineer for a shipping company, in 1868 he was president of the Mechanics Institute, and in 1875 he worked for the Central Pacific Railroad. An 1876 map shows that he owned 210 acres, and in 1885 he owned shares of the Bank of St. Helena.

Gluyas sold the land to Martin Furstenfeld in 1881; it included 80 acres in grapes, 15 springs, an orchard, a farmhouse, and a stable. Furstenfeld owned a successful business in Vallejo, which he sold to move here.

William and James Rennie were the sons of a prosperous Scottish iron manufacturer. The brothers emigrated to Australia and then to Napa Valley. In 1887 they bought the Furstenfeld property, building the winery in 1888 with a 90,000-gallon capacity. Half the barrels they used were made of oak and half of redwood. In 1893 the brothers began bottling their wine (unusual for those days).

In the same year James married Nellie Warren of St. Helena and built a home for her—a two-story house on a slope with a great view of the valley. Sadly, Nellie died in 1895, leaving two children. In 1900 the winery was damaged by fire and all the winery equipment was destroyed.

The property then changed hands three times: sold to Dr. Reinhold Bauske (1904), J. Mitchell Innes (1906), and J. Y. Eccleston (1912). The 200 acres had 60 acres of phylloxera-resistant vines, land in pasture, a newly renovated house, and a forested hill in back.



*Jerome Komes saw the property advertised in the Wall Street Journal. He and his wife, Flora, bought it from the Martini estate in 1977 and moved into the home the Martinis had built. Their son, John, and his wife, Carrie, then converted the old Brockhoff Winery into their home. The name of the winery combines Flora's name with the many springs on the property.*

## Holiday Dinner at Flora Springs Winery



*Members of the Historical Society had the pleasure of attending the annual holiday dinner at Flora Springs Winery, hosted by board member John Komes and his wife, Carrie. The chilly evening began with a reception in the tasting room, where everyone received a glass of wine. A tour of the winery building, built by James and William Rennie in 1888, followed. Inside, the long cave extending into the hillside is visible. John gave us some history about his family and the winery. Dinner followed in the beautiful home of Jerome and Flora Komes, which was originally built by Louis M. and Assunta Martini. The food was delicious and the wine flowed liberally. Many thanks to the Komeses for hosting this sold-out event and to all those who made this evening a magical one, including food prepared by Oak Avenue Catering, desserts by Susanne Salvestrin, and wines from Flora Springs and other local wineries.*

### Ana Bale's/Thompson's Land Reunited

In January 1879, James M. Thompson sold his remaining 100 acres to Charles Brockhoff, who planted 13 acres of vineyards and built a new home. In 1881, Brockhoff sold 45 acres to H. W. Helms. By 1885, Brockhoff had built a hillside winery, making the ground floor of stone and the upper story of wood. He served on the local school board and was a delegate to the county Republican convention. His wife, Emma, died in 1908, and their son, Charles, took over the winery in 1912.

J. Y. Eccleston bought the property in 1917 (now 54 acres), along with the Rennie property, thus reuniting most of Ana Bale's original acreage. Unfortunately for him, Prohibition became the law in 1920, so no wine was made. Eccleston gave up and sold both the Rennie and Brockhoff properties to Louis M. and Assunta Martini in 1933. Louis was born in 1887 in Italy and came to America in 1906. He knew the end of Prohibition was near and bought the property so he could age wine in the cellars and make sherry. He replaced the Rennie home with a new stone mansion. Louis died in 1974 and Assunta followed soon afterward. The Martini estate lay vacant until 1977. The rest is Komes history (see the caption to the left).

## Thanks to 2013 Members & Donors

On behalf of the Historical Society, the Membership Committee wishes to acknowledge the generosity of those members and other donors who gave \$100 or more during 2013. Thank you!

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## February's Program

Tuesday, February 18th, 4:00 pm

### Historical Tour of the Hall Winery

See the newly restored Bergfeld-  
Peterson Ghost Winery,  
built in 1885.

Call early to reserve your spot:  
707-967-5502.

## Donating Through Cooking!

Here's a creative and yummy way to donate to the Historical Society: Susanne Salvestrin is offering her services as a chef in exchange for donations to the society, to be set aside for a facility kitchen in the Historical Society's future home. Chef Susanne has already baked a dessert and given one of two cooking lessons. Another donor has signed up for Susanne to cook one meal a month for an entire year! Please contact her at [susanne@salvestrin-winery.com](mailto:susanne@salvestrin-winery.com) for more information or to sign up.



*Chef Susanne poses with Stephanie Menegon at the end of her cooking lesson, where she learned how to make cream puffs and French vanilla custard.*

## Coming in March: Museum for a Day

Sunday, March 23rd,  
10:00 am-4:00 pm  
at the Catholic School Gymnasium  
For the entire community!

Watch for details about this  
fabulous event—family collections,  
equipment exhibits, food & fun!  
Volunteer opportunities available.



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## A Fond Memory Shared



*Pictured here are Helen Nelson, Bonnie Thoreen, Sandra Learned Perry, and Susanne Salvestrin on an outing at McCormick Ranch in fall 2013.*