

ONE

John Shafer

Up until 1973—when he was forty-eight years old—very little indicated that John Shafer was a future Napa Valley vintner. If you know where to look in his life story, you'll find some key moments of foreshadowing here and there, but it's all pretty subtle. Even now it's startling to realize how it all could have gone in such a different direction, and the story of our hillside vineyards could easily have belonged to someone else.

Dad was born in 1924 and spent most of his childhood in a small northern suburb of Chicago called Glencoe, to this day a secluded enclave of arts and affluence. His mother, Adeline, hailed from Peru, Indiana, where she was a schoolmate of music legend Cole Porter. My dad's father, Frederick Shafer, was born in 1886 in Booneville, Indiana, into a family of strict Methodists. They didn't have a lot of money, but he was an exceptionally hard worker and mechanically inclined, traits that got him into Purdue University, where he earned an engineering degree. My dad still remembers his father, a lifelong teetotaler and upright citizen, heading into the gray dawn in a felt hat and three-piece suit to attend to business at Imperial Brass Manufacturing, the Chicago brass foundry where he had worked his way up to the office of president.

My dad was born in a time of economic boom. Small investors across the country were pouring money into Wall Street. Credit was easy.

Wealth was within reach for a whole new generation. It was an era in which the phrase “safe as banks” was coined.

Then came the sickening free fall in 1929 from which the nation did not truly recover for a decade or more. Banks closed. Credit dried up. Despondent moneymen ended it all by leaping from their office windows. The national unemployment rate hit a catastrophic 25 percent.

The Depression formed my dad, as it did many of his generation. Yes, his family enjoyed a level of financial stability, but poverty and uncertainty were everywhere. Dad remembers people coming to their door begging for food. Even if the Shafer family had a bit of money, it wasn't something they spent ostentatiously. On the contrary, Frederick was well known for only buying things on sale.

Throughout his life, Dad, the Depression-era kid, has distrusted the booms and planned for the inevitable busts and has always been a fan of understatement, character over pizzazz, the solid long-term idea over short-range sizzle, qualities I would see play out later as he launched and then managed our winery.

As a teenager Dad attended New Trier High School, which was a fertile environment for a young mind. The alumni include a who's who of American public life, such as actors Charlton Heston and Ann-Margret, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, writer Scott Turow, chef Charlie Trotter, and Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, to name a handful.¹ Dad remembers a boy named Roy Fitzgerald in the class behind his, a solitary, quiet kid who hardly anyone knew. When this kid grew up, Hollywood renamed him Rock Hudson and down the road he and Dad would have their own connection to Napa Valley (we'll get to that).

During a summer in high school, Dad worked in the foundry of his father's brass works. In those torturously hot, backbreaking, dangerous working conditions he befriended men of all backgrounds from Chicago's great melting pot—immigrant Poles, Latinos, and African Americans, whose grandparents had experienced both slavery and emancipation. In

1. “Famous Alumni,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 23, 2007.

the heat and noise he learned a lifetime's worth about people whose lives were filled with struggles far different from his own.

After graduating from New Trier, Dad entered Cornell University in September 1942 and, at the urging of his father, signed on to major in engineering, a career that they both saw as a source of solid, steady income.

Over Christmas break that year, as a college freshman, Dad volunteered for service in World War II, enlisting in the Army Air Corps. His call to duty came in April 1943. Part of his flight training took place at Davis–Monthan Army Air Corps Base in Tucson, Arizona. While there, he met Bett Small, whose father owned the *Tucson Citizen*, the local newspaper.

She had attended the University of Arizona and had gotten a job with American Airlines in the early days of air travel. Dad and Bett went out together as often as possible and quickly developed a special affection for each other. Her house happened to lie on the flight path of the air base and when Dad was landing at night, coming in low over her rooftop, he'd flick the plane's lights on and off.

Dad received his wings in June 1944 and turned down an offer to become a flight instructor, choosing combat instead. His crew went to southern England, where they became a replacement crew flying B-24 bombers in the 445th Bomb Group with the 8th Air Force. Once there, he discovered that film star Jimmy Stewart was wing commander, in charge of a number of bomber groups. Dad remembers how surreal it was to hear that unmistakable voice from Hollywood in his headphones, conveying commands as they flew over the dark English Channel on missions to Germany.

At the age of twenty, Dad was the oldest of his flight crew. All the other crew members—the radio operators and gunners—were draftees with just six weeks of training under their belts; many were fresh out of high school. Here he was in a similar position as in the brass factory: thrown in with guys of every background and disposition—this time under even more dangerous and stressful circumstances. Dad not only



John Shafer, 1945, with the B-24 bomber he piloted while stationed in England.

had to do the job right, but also had to protect the lives of these men, kids really, who looked to him for leadership.

I think a person finds his or her moral center under these conditions. In short order he was faced with the issue of doing what was right versus doing what was expected. During a practice flight exercise with the squadron in the skies over England, one of his crewmen got violently sick, and Dad made a judgment call—he pulled out of formation and returned to the air base to get his crew member emergency medical attention. His superiors soundly dressed him down for this, but Dad held

firm. It was an exercise, not the real thing, and his first duty was to the well-being of his crew.

After the war he returned to his engineering degree program at Cornell and before his senior year married Bett. And I'm glad he did because, among other things, she became my mom. She was smart, opinionated, straightforward, and classically beautiful (in my completely unbiased opinion).

After graduation Dad and Mom moved to Cleveland, where Dad was hired as a college trainee in a machine tool company, Warner and Swasey. Within about a year it became clear to him that his heart wasn't in it, and he began to review his options.

Some fortunate family connections helped him on a new path. My mom's grandfather, William Coates Foresman, and her grand-uncle, Hugh A. Foresman, had been founding partners in 1896 of the Scott Foresman publishing company in Chicago, which specialized in educational materials (most people know them as the publisher of the "Dick and Jane" basic readers). My mom's family still owned a one-third stake in the privately held company, but no family members actually worked there any longer. After some inquiries Dad was offered an entry-level sales job with the publisher where, in spite of his connections, he'd again have to earn his wings.

His initial territory was northern Ohio, but within a couple of years and after he wore out a lot of shoe leather, his sales territory moved to the Chicago suburbs of Cook County, where he sold and promoted school-books and teaching materials.

While selling and marketing weren't in his background, he took to these things readily, absorbing all he could of their key concepts. Dad came to understand that there is no good substitute for meeting with your customers face-to-face. Besides, he was, and is, a gregarious guy—he loves meeting people and has an easy, gracious way with those to whom he's just been introduced. He traveled extensively, meeting with hundreds of teachers, principals, and school staff members. The company was an educational innovator, producing newsletters for teachers all

across the country that focused not on Scott Foresman products, but on the latest trends and techniques in education. The concept behind this was to act as a real resource for teachers with the hope that, long-term, educators would be more likely to turn to Scott Foresman when it came time to purchase classroom materials. A favorite maxim of the company's president was "a good book seldom mentioned is soon forgotten"—a motto that Dad would adapt years later, substituting the word "wine" for "book." Indeed, much of what he learned in this period would reverberate decades down the line when he transferred a lot of his marketing smarts regarding selling textbooks to the art of selling Cabernet Sauvignon.

In the summer months when schools were closed, Dad had extra time on his hands, which always drives him a little batty. One year before he and Mom had kids, he decided he wanted to work outdoors, get his hands dirty, and feel the wind in his hair. So he drove out to western Illinois and stopped at a farm. When the farmer came out, Dad said that he wanted to work. He told the guy, "You don't even have to pay me." The farmer probably thought he had a kook in his driveway, but eventually saw that my dad was sincere. For the next five or six weeks the city boy from Chicago built up some calluses tossing bales of hay onto the back of a truck.

(I think a lot of people at some time in their lives must develop a craving to get outside and get dirt under their fingernails. Many summers later a successful attorney from San Francisco asked Dad if he could do the very same thing at the winery.)

In spite of Dad occasionally disappearing into farmland, things were going well on the home front. My parent's first baby was my sister Libby. Two years later my brother Bill came into the picture. I was born in 1955, and finally our youngest brother, Brad, joined us in 1960. By this time we lived on Oak Street in Hinsdale, Illinois, in a three-story Victorian with a big screened-in porch and a sloping green lawn.

We enjoyed a noisy, rambunctious life with snowball fights in winter and coasting our bikes down the lawn in spring and summer. My memories are filled with water fights, sleepovers, ping-pong on the front porch,



Shafer family home on Oak Street in Hinsdale, Illinois.

catching fireflies, and watching Dad and his friends practice chip shots and knock back gin and tonics on the lawn. There were always one or two black labs in the mix.

During the school year, we benefited from Dad's career, which bridged education and salesmanship. In the bedroom I shared with my brothers, Dad created a system of sliding blackboards. In the evenings, we would "play school" with him. With chalk in hand he would make up fast-action math and word games that were such fun we had no idea he was teaching us key concepts and ideas.

By the early 1970s, after two decades of applying himself full-bore at Scott Foresman, Dad had worked his way to the office of Vice President of Long-Range Planning. He took the "long range" part of the title seriously and advocated that the company invest in experimental educational tools, such as video and other technology that were barely out of the starting gate. His proposals were apparently viewed as a bit radical

and became mired in subcommittees, meetings with consultants, endless cost-benefit analyses, and countless other tools the corporate world uses to kill ideas. Working in that top-floor office, which sounded impressive, had turned as gray and uninspiring as the old machine tool job in Cleveland.

Around this time Dad read a newspaper story that struck a chord. It said that if you were going to embark on a second career you needed to start by the age of fifty. The wheels started turning.

Soon afterward he read an intriguing investors' report from Bank of America called "Outlook for the California Wine Industry." The document laid out a compelling case for the future of wine in the Golden State in just twelve pages, beginning with its opening paragraph, "The strongest growth in wine markets ever recorded will occur during the next ten years. Annual U.S. consumption will approach 400 million gallons by 1980..."² (The actual consumption in 1980 was, in fact, even higher than predicted at 480 million gallons.)³

The report cited a number of factors that would contribute to this unprecedented rise. One was the anticipated growth in disposable income and the fact that 40 million new young adults, who favored wine, would reach drinking age during the 1970s. They weren't calling us the baby boomers yet, but our numbers were already reverberating throughout the business world.

A change of fortune was already being felt in Napa Valley, where in the five years from 1964 to 1969 the value of the annual grape harvest had soared from \$2.9 million to \$8 million.⁴ Other areas of the state were doing well too, as my dad would learn.

2. Bank of America, Economics Department, *Outlook for the California Wine Industry*, 1970, p. 1.

3. Wine Institute, *Wine Consumption in the U.S.*, accessed August 1, 2011, www.wineinstitute.org/resources/statistics/article86.

4. Aldo Delfino, Agricultural Commissioner, *1964 Napa County Agricultural Crop Report*, Napa County Department of Agriculture, Napa, CA, 1965, and *1969 Napa County Agricultural Crop Report*, Napa County Department of Agriculture, Napa, CA, 1970, accessed June 28, 2011, www.countyofnapa.org/AgCommissioner/CropReport.

Several dots connected for him, including that itch to work outside. Mind you, his agricultural background until then had only included tossing hay bales and growing flowers in our backyard. The other element that ate at him was the idea of being his own boss. No matter how hard he worked or cut his own path at Scott Foresman, he was still there as the result of family connections, and it seemed that every long-range proposal he put on the table was getting torpedoed. A move into the wine business would be a venture purely of his own creation. It would sink or swim based on his ideas, drive, and resourcefulness.

At some point in 1970 Dad started reading everything he could find on winemaking and grape growing. In early 1972 he flew to California and scouted vineyard property in Edna Valley, Monterey, and Santa Maria. At one point he was chatting with an old-timer who owned a roadside winery outside of Gilroy. When the man learned that Dad was interested in the wine business, he said, “Well if you’re interested in wine, what’re you doing here? There’s nothing happening here. You need to be up in Napa.”

Dad eventually did make his way north to Napa Valley, where he worked with real estate agent Jim Warren (whose stepfather, it turned out, was the Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren). They toured quite a number of sites Dad found unpromising. Most were located in the center of the Valley with deep fertile soils, drawing lots of moisture from the nearby Napa River. Dad’s goal was to find a dry, rugged hillside, having read that grapes from terraced hillsides were favored for centuries throughout the Mediterranean world. A saying that dates back to the Roman Empire, “*Bacchus amat colles*,” which translates as “Bacchus loves the hills,” illustrates the idea that the Romans believed their god of wine had a special affinity for wine sourced from hillside vines.

Finally, Jim mentioned a remote site in an area known locally as Stags Leap. He warned Dad that it had been on the market for three years and a number of knowledgeable winery owners had already seen it and turned it down.

It seemed foolish not to at least lay eyes on the site, so they drove out, and Dad has often recounted being awed by the beauty of the hillsides and the huge rock outcropping beyond called the Stags Leap Palisades, which soars some two thousand feet. Even so, he understood Jim's warning. Once you got past the scenic magnificence, this was not an obvious gem to the eye of a Napa vintner of that era. Besides a rundown house and outbuildings, it was a rambling 209-acre site, with steep, boulder- and rock-choked hillsides on the eastern and northern flanks. A full three-quarters of the property was unplantable, thanks to the steepness of much of the terrain. The 30-acre vineyard established on the flatter, western portion sported a hodgepodge of red and white grape varieties, interspersed with walnut trees, and last planted in 1922.

But rather than view those steep, wild hillsides as a detriment, Dad was thrilled. The site was almost a photograph of what he had been searching for, chiefly, those south- and west-facing hillsides composed of thin layers of volcanic soil, ensuring that grapevines would struggle for survival, holding out the promise for producing rich, opulent, concentrated fruit.⁵

Dad returned to Chicago having completed his research and a year's worth of property hikes—he had all the data he needed—but ultimately it took something gut-based to push him to the very edge of the decision. He put together a business plan, in which he projected his costs and profit, and drove it over to his accountant's office.

The accountant sat at his desk and reviewed Dad's figures. Then he took off his glasses, shrugged, and said that frankly it was impossible to

5. Our hillside vineyards have a soil depth of eighteen to twenty-two inches before hitting weathered bedrock. Both the steep slope and the permeable soils offer quick drainage, meaning that grapevines are never awash in moisture or nutrients. A variety of factors also creates a beneficial mix of long hours of sunlight—thanks to southern and western slope exposures—and overall cooler temperatures due to the site's location in the southern end of the Valley, which places it in the path of late-day marine breezes from the northernmost portion of San Francisco Bay, located just eighteen miles to the south.

gauge if Dad could make a success of running a winery. “Anyone can put together numbers that make a great-looking projection,” he said.

It wasn’t what Dad had hoped to hear, but he appreciated the frankness. As Dad headed for the door, however, the accountant stepped out of his role as financial analyst, and he said rather wistfully, “You know, John, you only go around once.”

Years later Dad told me that’s what did it: the featherweight of those words finally tipped the scales. Dad knew he wanted—needed—to make the leap into this new life in Napa Valley. He didn’t want to live in Chicago for the rest of his life, drinking gin and tonics and playing golf while wondering what if—*what if* he’d purchased that hillside? *What if* our family had pursued the dream of making wine?

Not long after, one night in November 1972, Dad stunned us all by announcing that we were moving to a place we’d never heard of called Napa Valley.