



Papa's Ranch

George H. Charles, Papa, as he was eventually known to his eight grandchildren, was third generation sheep rancher on the wild Sonoma Coast. The Charles family began its history in Sonoma County during the Homestead Act in 1860. Along with his 5 siblings, George had been born and raised in the small house built in 1896. The Home Ranch House had no electricity or plumbing, and was many country miles away from the nearest neighbor. He helped with farm chores at a very young age, as rural children of that era were expected, often getting right under foot of the womenfolk wearing long skirts sifting in the dust. His favorite game was to chase the chickens and throw rocks at them until his father got home., also grew up on the back of a horse. Actually his first steed was a very ornery donkey that he rode to school when he was 6 years old, carrying his lunch in a bright yellow 'Prince Albert' tobacco can. The hills were steep and the ridges and canyons were adorned with thick groves of, redwoods, madrone, various oaks, buckeyes, bay trees, firs, just to name a few. The freezing cold South Fork Gualala Creek wound its way along the narrow canyon floor, housing fresh water otter, steelhead, waterdogs, polliwogs, turtles, and traveling snakes. The roads were muddy and very slippery in the winter time, so the children attended school February through November. The boy who grew up here on the rugged Sonoma Coast eventually became a man of the land. I can still see him as he strode high in the saddle in his white cowboy hat and big brown boots, in command of 2,000 head of sheep, a small herd of bison, cattle, and even wild pigs. He loved to take his grandchildren down to the creek and show them the art of fly fishing, and in the early spring mornings he would take us abalone fishing along the rocky Pacific shores.

George Charles became a pioneer of grape growing in this remote coastal region. He planted the '*Charles Ranch Chardonnay*' vineyard 25 years ago when he was nearing 70. His three grown daughters had tried to talk him out of planting the steep 14 acre vineyard. They were hoping that their elderly father would slow down, but the men in our family don't retire as long as there is still gasoline in the tractor. Papa loved his land and the animals that went along with it. He loved pouring big sacks of grain out for the wild turkeys to eat. Early each morning his feathered friends would wait for him to deliver their breakfast out behind the old barn. Papa, being truly a livestock man and not a farmer, was originally under the assumption that sheep would not eat grapes and often left the vineyard gate open so the flock could browse amongst the vines. The first year at harvest of the *Charles Ranch Chardonnay* disproved his theory. A row of full bins sat in the deep shade of a lofty tan oak, ready to be loaded onto the gondola. It didn't take long for 6 old ewes to discover the sweet buffet laid out for them. Standing happily on their hind legs, little cloven hooves resting delicately on the edge of a bin, they began to munch contentedly until they were spied by their Shepard.

Papa incorporated his old black Quarter horse, Cricket, came in mighty useful when it was time to sulfur vineyard. The mare was a very calm and experienced old saddle horse. These two had been through a lot together out in the rugged terrain over the years and their chronological ages had begun to match each other, so both were rather slow going. He'd saddle up and sulfur the vineyard from the back of the mare. Papa's problem was

getting into the saddle. It became difficult for him to fit his foot into the stirrup and then pull himself up onto the horse. To accommodate his now elderly frame, he'd lead Cricket alongside a redwood stump where she'd stand dutifully while he climbed onto the stump and then swing his leg over and into the saddle. With sulfur bag strapped to his back he'd guide the ol' black mare down the long vine rows. Dismounting was no problem as gravity was the tool. As a young girl I remember watching him hit the ground with a very steady thump. But there was no stopping the man.

Since Papa planted the first grapevines here 25 years ago, his daughters and son-in-law have added to the collection, planting the *Blue Slide Ridge Pinot Noir* and the *Three Sisters Vineyards Pinot Noir & Chardonnay*. The Charles Ranch rests on the second ridge inland from the Pacific Ocean, approximately 1 ½ miles as the crow flies. It is the ideal spot for growing these two Burgundian varietals, hence in house we call it the '*Goldy Locks Ridge*': the first ridge is too cold, the third ridge is too hot, but the second ridge is just right.

Cheers, Julianna Martinelli Fall 2004