

The Clair House Winery: the Slow Fade to Black, Part 2

by Richard A. Jarrell

The decade spanning from about 1865 to 1875, under the direction of De Courtenay and White, was the high point in the history of Clair House. White appears to have sold a variety of products and maintained production at a high level but eventually threw in the towel. He had run unsuccessfully as the Conservative candidate for Peel in the provincial election of 1873. By 1876, he had sold out and returned to the Windsor area, where he is said to have grown grapes. His future, colourful career did not involve wine. White had already taken on new investors, chiefly the Toronto wholesaler Cramp, Torrances and Company. With Toronto and Montreal offices, the firm had better distribution and began touting its wines for their health benefits. By the 1880s, however, there was competition from wineries in Niagara and Pelee Island.

The Winery's Last Days

The CVGA was still operating under George Torrance's direction until 1887 when the property was sold to Benjamin Murray. He was still producing wines under the Clair House brand by 1891 but sold out to cattle breeder Andrew Aikens. In September 1903 Aikens, in turn, sold the vineyard to a French immigrant, Achille Roumegous (b. *ca.* 1846), who had operated the Lakeview Hotel on Parliament Street in Toronto. Roumegous operated the vineyard and handed it off to his son Leopold (d. *ca.* 1942). When prohibition was legislated, Leopold Roumegous wrote to the federal Department of Justice, concerned that he would be ruined if "our Canadian vine industry were abolished"; he was brushed off and told to contact his solicitor. In 1929 and 1930, he wrote rather incoherent letters to the Department. He had evidently been charged in a criminal case because, he claimed, he had been framed by a disbarred lawyer and accomplices trying to steal his property. In the event, the CVGA appears to have stopped producing wine about 1925. When the wine business failed, another French immigrant purchased Clair House and turned it into a "rabbit ranch"; Admiral Parker's house burned to the ground in 1932.

The CVGA's original charter expired in 1926. In September of that year, five female stenographers from Toronto formed the board of a newly-incorporated CVGA and intended to make wine, grow grain and vegetables, undertake canning and chemical manufacturing to produce liquors, brandies, perfumes, flavourings, chemicals, etc. Cooksville was to be the headquarters. In the paperwork for re-incorporation, the new owners' lawyer noted that the original company was formed in 1865 with the property in trust – De Courtenay as trustee – and that the CVGA was incorporated in 1866 and chartered until 1878. Wilfrid Mactavish, a Toronto engineer, searched the records and, in an affidavit noted that the vineyard was established in 1865 and "a large wine plant was built, vineyards planted and large wine vaults, extending in length close to one quarter of a mile underground were established, which are still there."

The CVGA's Last Days

With a new board, charter and an ambitious programme, the CVGA's future looked promising. However, by September 1932, the federal Department of the Secretary of State had noticed that the CVGA had not filed with it for three years and warned the company that it had better respond within a month or the company would lose its legal standing. The company's lawyer, Helen

Currie, responded in November that the CVGA has sold its assets in August but had not really been in business since 1926. Another attempt to resuscitate the company by three Toronto lawyers came in November 1932 when one of them, Edward Warner Wright, filed an affidavit showing that the 1926 firm was defunct. Helen Currie disclosed that a director, John A. Currie, had sold off the company's stock and equipment some years earlier. Wright visited Cooksville, where he could find no directors nor anyone who knew a director.

Within three years, all the shares, except for that of the directors of the CVGA incorporated in 1932 were purchased by Jordan Wines. By the 1950s, Jordan, controlled by the Torno family and headquartered in Mimico, decided to surrender the charter and the company was dissolved in 1956.

The Clair House Legacy

The Canada Vine Growers Association had survived, at least on paper, for ninety years, but had not produced wine in Cooksville since at least 1926. By then, the Clair House brand was long forgotten but its succession of owners had produced wines from native grapes for more than sixty years and had launched a sustained industry. Today, the site of Clair House, at the intersection of Dundas Street and Confederation Parkway, is unmarked. The central part of the vineyard is now a park but if you look carefully along the fence, you will find native grape vines still flourishing.

Note on sources:

Roumegous' correspondence with the Department of Justice is in the Library and Archives of Canada, RG13-A-2, Vols. 222 and 334. Records of the incorporation and re-incorporation and dissolution of the CVGA are in the Library and Archives of Canada, RG95-1, 1926/09 - 1955/05, and 1932/10-1956/03.