MARTIN RAY: A CON ARTIST, EVEN A CROOK?

by *Barbara Marinacci*

Our Editor, Gail Unzelman, suggested, perhaps somewhat slyly, that I undertake to write a commentary with a provocative title like this one—spinning off from Roy Brady's delightful reminiscence about his amicable association with vintner Martin Ray in the late 1950s. The piece is among five dozen selections in *The Brady Book: Selections from Roy Brady's Unpublished Writings on Wine* [Nomis Press for the Wine Librarians Assn., 2003] whose introduction by Thomas Pinney provides a fine overview of Brady's life-in-wine.

The *W-TQ* has already presented, in the April 2004 issue, Bob Foster's enthusiastic review of this winsome assemblage of Roy Brady's wine writings, most of them written between 1950 and 1998. (This same issue also contains Pinney's intriguing portrayal of Brady as a "born collector.") *The Brady Book* is handsomely designed, illustrated, and printed. It features tipped-in reproductions of colorful antique wine labels that once had been Brady's and now belong to Special Collections at U.C. Davis. (The book's 14 are a miniscule representation of some 50,000+ in the total Brady bunch. Among them is the notorious label Martin Ray used on a 1936 Paul Masson "still dry red" wine that had lifted the artwork of an old Schloss Johannisberg label!)

Taking up the subject of Martin Ray, about midway in the book in a section called "The New California," Roy Brady started out in this manner:

> Martin Ray was a crook, or, better, a con artist. I don't think he conned people primarily to make money, but his deepest satisfaction came from conning them carefully, thoughtfully, and exquisitely; it was an artistic performance. He was also, at his best, a great winemaker. Perhaps he could have been as great a winemaker as he painted himself to be, but the joyous scalawag kept breaking through. His motto might have been, I could not love thee wine so much, loved I not conning more.

I should now tell readers who don't know me, or of me, that I'm "Rusty" Ray's stepdaughter. Contrary to my own disposition (MR and I were *never* compatible), even before Eleanor Ray's death in 2000 I became the primary gatekeeper, even promoter, of MR's durable reputation as a wine purist. In the early 1990s I helped my mother prepare and publish her memoir/biography, *Vineyards in the Sky*. Then in the late '90s I spent a year going through the Rays' extensive and amazing correspondence, as well as other materials—mainly post-1952, since two fires had destroyed most previous records, including those from MR's Paul Masson-ownership period. These materials are now housed within Special Collections at U.C. Davis as the Martin and Eleanor Ray Papers. Currently, I'm writing a series of articles for *W-TQ* focusing on MR's own writings, particularly his letters to friends. Therefore, I surely qualify to comment upon Roy Brady's assertion regarding MR's character, whether in concurrence with or in irate denial of his blatant allegation.

Brady indicated his view of MR in his review of Eleanor Ray's *Vineyards in the Sky*, printed in *Wayward Tendrils* in April 1993 as "Martin Ray Reviewed."

> Her well told story captures his joy of everyday life, his ebullience, his constant rising above setbacks, and his extraordinary ability to flame enthusiasm in others. He was also a visionary, a showman, and a con man....
>
> Was Martin Ray a great winemaker? I think he could have been, but other circumstances apart, his imp sometimes caused him to make a point rather than a great wine.

For years, many of Martin Ray's wines had been so vibrantly authentic, especially compared with other California wines, that their reputation sold them. After the early '50s, aided by Eleanor Ray's publicity efforts, MR effectively promoted his wines, and wine aficionados eagerly sought and bought them, willing to pay whatever he asked for them. Made in limited amounts, they didn't need to be widely distributed or mass-marketed. For a long time their prices seemed outrageous; then the Wine Revolution's new "boutique" wineries began following suit.

Was MR a con artist, as Brady maintained (though humorously so)? In the past he had been a super-salesman of advertising and then of stocks and bonds, whether by inclination or circumstance. He had the salesman's gifts for banter, spotting and charming potential customers or cajoling current clients, then moving in for the sell and to close the deal. After he became a vintner, he'd still do selling well, though saying that he hated it and got sick after doing it.

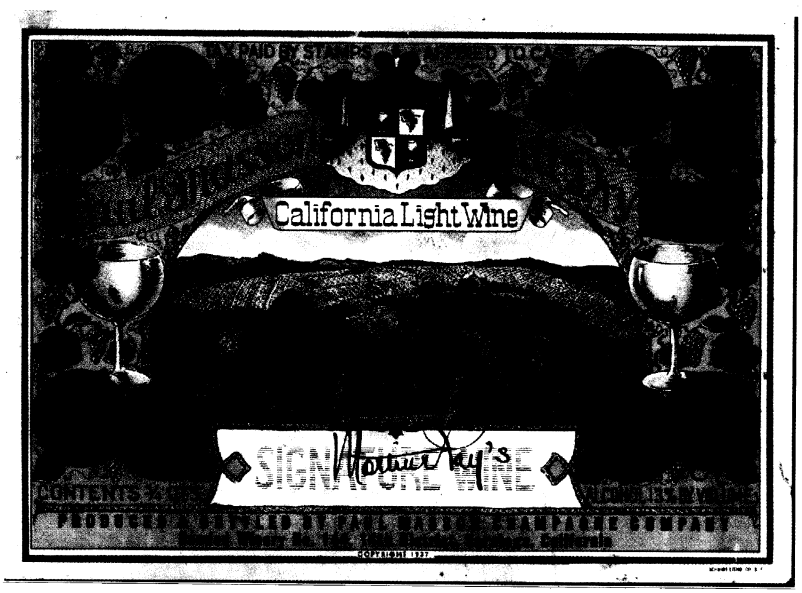
There's a difference in intentions, of course, between skillful salespeople and con artists. The former, to radiate honest enthusiasm, like to believe that the product they're trying to sell is the best or, if not, that it has good value for the price. Con men, on the other hand, are poised to commit a fraud when they prey upon gullible people, to sell snake oil or the Brooklyn Bridge. They often succeed because confidence schemes' victims are usually greedy themselves; they think they're getting a terrific bargain.

Basically, Brady knew MR in a social context, when his skills as a "showman" host—spellbinding raconteur, robust gourmand, and indefatigable wine drinker—were at their prime and in impressive display. This

theatricality combined with his fervent belief in California's potential for producing great wines and his savagely critical perspective on its wine industry's mostly dismal history and drab current status, to convey to visitors a vision of possible future glories in the making of wine. Several accounts of MR's powers of enchantment have found their way into books—notably that of Jack and Jamie Davies' inspiring "conversion experience" that eventually took them to Schramsberg, as told at the start of James Conaway's *Napa*.

But the entertaining "imp" that Brady found in MR sometimes acted less like a mischievous child who played too many pranks and talked too grandly, and more like a malicious fiend. He'd get outraged and insulting whenever anyone dared to challenge him in his opinions and facts, authoritarian stance, or the claimed perfection of some wine of his. He also worked to manipulate and control the people around him. Banishing those who resisted coming under his spell, he thought and behaved like a cult leader. Brady doesn't seem to have experienced this darker side of MR, though he doubtless heard about it. And like numerous others, he was fascinated with MR, even if ambivalent. He hoped to capture some of this personal history for the record:

> Everyone, and they were many, who had any dealings with Martin Ray had stories about him. I thought to collect them, and was promised copies of letters and notes, but to the last person they fell mute. The reason, I surmise, is that after thinking about it they felt used and abused by Martin, and in consequence felt foolish. Not a few were overtly hostile from the start. I am certainly not particularly wise in the ways of the world, but I never had any illusions about Martin. I thoroughly enjoyed him; he is a splendid character to have in one's memory, but he was not one to have business dealings with....



It's regrettable that Brady failed in this anecdote-collecting endeavor. He'd have done better by taping conversations while interviewees were imbibing wine, gathering up their colorful tales about MR, whether first-hand, second-hand, or beyond. There was a legion of them, some of which are still circulating. Some people surely described MR's antics, diatribes, or other prodigious behaviors in journals or in letters to friends. But have any survived? What *is* extant, though, are hundreds of copies of letters that Martin and Eleanor Ray wrote to or received from friends, strangers who became loyal customers, wine industry or media people, academics, and detractors. Carbon copies were routinely made, then filed away, of letters or even short notes they sent out. These report on events, proclaim MR's opinions, and describe his interactions with people—which often terminated badly, in mutual disaffection.

Thus both sides of the Rays' correspondence with Roy Brady were preserved (in a folder now at UC Davis). ER even sent out an effervescent letter from him as a publicity release after retyping it as a "master" for her duplicating machine. (This was pre-computer time, as well as prior to copyright law holding that letters are the property of writers, not recipients.) Here's some of what Roy told the Rays in his letter of July 7, 1958:

> At a blind tasting of Champagnes held by the Wine and Food Society last fall I put a Krug 1952 first and Devaux Brut 1952 second. Having the latter on hand I decided to try it with Madame Pinot 1953. Well, I have to admit that the result surprised me. I expected the Devaux to win. Not only did it come in second but a distant second. The remarkable character and vigor of your wine outclassed it completely. A little after I put Madame Pinot against Piper Heidsieck Brut 1952. Same conclusion! (It is only quite recently that I have felt affluent enough to drink two bottles of Champagne once in a while.)

Not much more than a year later, Brady's friendship with MR began petering out. He had declined the lure of investing in Martin Ray's plan for the Mt. Eden Vineyards Corporation. Member-shareholders—a prospective two dozen wine-loving married couples—were to sign up to contribute monthly installments of $100 apiece, eventually adding up to an investment of $10,000. They'd thereby acquire a piece of the great new wine estate to be created on Rusty Ray's mountain acreage above Saratoga, overlooking Santa Clara Valley.

Brady's instincts probably warned him of perils and conflicts ahead. He must have felt that MR was "conning" him into investing in a dubious empire-building

proposal. As his summary goes in *The Brady Book:*

> I initiated the acquaintance because of what I heard of him as a great wine maker, and he brought it to an end when he finally realized that I was adamant about not investing in his Mt. Eden scheme—I last saw him when he showed me the site of the Mt. Eden "Chateau." I spoke to him a few times after that and got occasional pronouncements for some time after, but I was not to see him again in the remaining sixteen years of his life.

Eleanor Ray, when making up a list in the 1980s of "oldtime contacts with MR," including ones who would surely have negative things to say to a researcher, made Roy Brady #2 (after the Wine Institute's Leon Adams). She must have picked up on Brady's disapproval of the Mt. Eden Vineyards (MtEV) venture, for she noted:

> He's writing quite a bit these days about wines; we were friends in early period thru '50s; after forming MtEV no time for old friends or new outside MtEV. I recall last time he phoned wanting to come up having to tell him how it was; no contact ever after. He might have opinions anti.

True, Martin Ray as a conversationalist could often sound like a confidence man. But as a winemaker was he also a deliberate con artist, as Brady seemed to see him? I don't think so, because he himself *believed* in the supreme value of what he was selling—whether his handcrafted, pure-varietal wines or his vision of a splendid wine *domaine* atop Mt. Eden. He didn't intend to hoodwink or cheat customers when he sold his vintages at much higher prices than the market's standard ones for California wines ... *or* when he solicited shareholders for MtEV, which he and Eleanor had founded in 1960 as a means to expand considerably the vineyard acreage in their half-section of 320 acres. Using both the corporation and the value of his land as collateral, MR secured a large bank loan so he could create vineyards and also to build a commercial wine cellar, with a chateau above it intended as a social center that could provide special lodging for MtEV members—whom he initially regarded as privileged acolytes rather than cold-eyed investors.

MR's early invitation to Roy Brady to buy into MtEV wasn't a deliberate attempt to engage him in a confidence game. Both Rays hoped, genuinely and intensely, for the success and longevity of the organization they were launching. They were delighted with the prospect of welcoming people they were fond of into their winegrowing home, to partake of both celebrations and hands-on work (though few, in fact, ever did the latter). Moreover, it should be pointed out that when MtEV shareholders wished to withdraw from membership, MR sought replacements to buy up their shares, so that their investment thus far could be fully returned.

Over time, however, a number of the shareholders became disenchanted—disturbed by MR's variously autocratic, erratic, duplicitous, and offensive behaviors. He had begun, in stages, to distrust some of them, believing them conniving and rapacious, or simply unsuitable as members. The Ray letters of the period provide ample evidence that MR was becoming physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted from the strenuous work he had undertaken on behalf of MtEV, and this condition exacerbated his intrinsic paranoia.

MtEV shareholders also questioned the soundness of wines MR was making, comparing them unfavorably with others' wines—for by the mid-1960s the aim of achieving high quality in California wine, which MR had championed almost alone for 30 years, was catching on with both consumers and vintners. MR was simply unable to recognize, or admit, that any of his wines were inferior, defective, or downright spoiled. And he adamantly refused to accept the proposed assistant winemaker for MtEV—young Dick Graff, of eventual Chalone fame.

In 1967 the Rays, outvoted by dissident shareholders, lost control of the corporation they had started, so they exited it. The whole complex, long-enduring drama, including litigation, of Mount Eden Vineyards' early years, both during and after Martin Ray's reign—and with a tragic outcome as far as the Rays were concerned—is yet to be told, through both documents and personal remembrances. In desperate attempts first to hold onto power, then to regain or retain as much of his mountain as possible, MR engaged in real estate finagling that some people regarded as swindling schemes, for he customarily locked land buyers into purchase agreements that wouldn't convey title deeds until he was fully paid. Such convoluted and disputatious ploys rarely if ever ended in his favor. If indeed he had once had talent and success as salesman or con artist, he'd now lost it.

In his review of *Vineyards in the Sky*, Brady showed empathy for MR in his sorry fall from grace:

> In some ways Martin Ray resembles Agoston Haraszthy a century earlier. Both were promoters and enthusiasts. Martin was the better practitioner of his art and, I have no doubt, a great deal more fun. Haraszthy went to Nicaragua and was eaten by alligators; Martin stayed on his mountain and was eaten by his disciples. Both bitter ways to go.

MR's ability to captivate wine lovers and his dark, Machiavellian side were only two parts to his multifaceted and paradoxical character. Whatever the explanations may be for Martin Ray's fixating in the mid-1930s upon making the best wines that California, and therefore America, could produce, his was a unique dedication and enduring passion. Sometimes in his letters he expressed how he found his truest and deepest satisfaction in the painstaking, mostly solitary toil required in vineyard and cellar. At

such times he was removed from the noisy social interactions that elicited the inveterate salesman in him. Under stress while playing the role of a forceful and voluble host, he would overindulge in wine drinking and then act like a buffoon or tyrant. Adverse outcomes in people's experiences with him were apt to give him the reputation of being a con artist, even a crook.

MR wasn't a charlatan or a showman when as a winegrower he worked quietly among his vines. But that fellow wasn't the inimitable and legendary Rusty Ray.

[EDITOR NOTE: *Our on-going series by Barbara Marinacci,* **Vinaceous Correspondents: Martin Ray's Friendships with Eminent Oenophiles**, *will resume in our January 2005 issue, when we will enjoy a further look into the Martin Ray – Maynard Amerine relationship.* — Ed.]

OREGON VITICULTURE
A BOOK REVIEW
by *Will Brown*

Oregon Viticulture by Edward W. Hellman, ed. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2003. The book is new, and available at many booksellers. $45.

This is the long awaited revision of the fine series published by the Oregon Winegrowers Association. The fourth edition (1992) was reviewed here in October 2002 (Vol.12 No.4). This iteration is being called a first edition but is the fifth of the series. New editor Edward Hellman, Ph.D., of Oregon State University, also authored a number of the articles within. Dr.Hellman has since moved to Texas A&M and Texas Tech universities.

This has always been a signature publication by the Oregon Winegrowers Association. It was originally issued at a time in the history of Oregon wine grape growing when it became the bible in the field. This had much to do with the fact that there was no other place to turn for the intrepid few who were the pioneers of that industry. The standard in the field, Albert J. Winkler's *General Viticulture* (Berkeley: U.C. Press, 1962), focused on California conditions, and had little relevant to say about cool climate viticulture. So the Oregon growers wrote their own book.

The edition covers virtually every aspect of vineyard planning, development and management. Authors are drawn from the community of wine grape growers as well as academic and extension specialists from Oregon State and other Oregon universities. Viticulture, agricultural economics, entomology, plant pathology, geography, climatology and enology are all represented.

Rigorous editing has resulted in strong efforts by most authors. I found the entries on economics, site assessment, wine growing regions, varieties and clones, and evaluation of wine grape maturity to be particularly well done. Some of the features of earlier editions are gone, but have been updated with more current thinking.

The book is directed at individuals growing or planning to grow wine grapes in Oregon, but it would serve as well a wider audience of those planning to get into the wine production business anywhere. Just reading the chapter on economics might discourage the faint of heart from proceeding.

Oregon Viticulture should be mandatory reading for anyone in the business of wine production in Oregon, but it might appeal to students of viticulture and enology, wine consumers and connoisseurs of Oregon wines as well.

Since the last edition of Winkler's *General Viticulture* is now thirty years old, and the other standard works in the field originate in France and Australia, this publication moves to the head of the list for American books on viticulture; but it will be most relevant in the northwest, where cooler conditions prevail. It cannot be more highly recommended to the target audience.

Two publications by Gregory V. Jones, Ph.D., of Southern Oregon University might appeal to collectors of viticultural esoterica—although they remain valuable resources to the wine industry in southern Oregon: ▪ *Site Characteristics of Vineyards in the Rogue and Applegate Valley American Viticultural Areas* (2001) and ▪ *Umpqua Valley AVA: A GPS and GIS Vineyard Mapping and Analysis of Varietal, Climate, Landscape, and Management Characteristics* (2003).

Jones, a geographer and climatologist, has done a superlative job and provided a valuable service to the industry. Climatic factors, soils, vineyard surveys and grape varieties are identified in each of the AVAs. By using Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and grower surveys, the author was able to develop an in-depth Geographical Information System (GIS) database, which can and will be expanded to accommodate changes over time.

Funding for both of these projects was provided by the local chapters of the Oregon Winegrowers Assn. and the Oregon Wine Advisory Board. Persons interested in obtaining these publications might contact Dr. Jones at Southern Oregon University, Department of Geography, Ashland, OR 97520. ■