

A Bay Area vintner's fascination with the way things were inspires a passion for both ancient maps and creek restoration

Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer

Saturday, January 31, 2004

©2004 San Francisco Chronicle | [Feedback](#) | [FAQ](#)

URL:

sfgate.com/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/01/31/DDG054L2EV1.DTL



In 1540, the Spanish explorer Coronado ventured into what's now Arizona and New Mexico, searching for the fabled seven golden cities of Cebola. He never found them, but he met an Indian on the banks of the Pecos River who said he came from a rich, civilized kingdom called Quivira. Naturally, Coronado insisted that the man take him there.

They trekked east to the Texas Panhandle, then north across what became Oklahoma and Kansas, finding a great deal of buffalo but no cities paved with gold. Under torture, the Indian confessed he'd concocted the story, presumably to lure the Spaniards away from his ancestral lands. But the legend of Quivira persisted, spread by members of Coronado's expedition upon their return to Mexico City in 1542, the year their countryman Cabrillo sailed off to explore the California coast. At the mouth of a river north of the point he named San Francisco and south of Cape Mendocino, Cabrillo saw shapes he took to be Chinese ships and, surmising that the natives were trading with the Orient, thought he'd found Quivira.

"Quivira started to appear on maps, and it was tied into the belief that there was a Northwest Passage," says Henry Wendt, the Healdsburg vintner whose splendid collection of antique maps -- exquisitely etched, detailed and often fantasy-filled documents from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries -- is on display at the Sonoma County Museum in the exhibition "Mapping the Pacific Coast: From Coronado to Lewis and Clark, the Quivira Collection."

"If the English or the French could find the Northwest Passage, they'd open a new trading route to Asia, break the Portuguese monopoly on the spice trade and everybody would make a lot of money," says Wendt, who has a passion for history, navigation, conservation and good Zinfandel.

The retired chairman of the board of the pharmaceutical giant SmithKline Beecham, he's a wiry, witty 70-year-old with the means and energy to pursue those passions. He and his wife, Holly -- "He married a much younger woman," she says with a laugh when asked her age -- are the founding owners of Quivira Estate Vineyards and Winery in Sonoma's lush Dry Creek Valley.

They make claret-style Zinfandel, Sauvignon Blanc and a blend of Rhone varietals (Petite Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre), and are restoring the creek that bisects their 90-acre property so the steelhead and Coho salmon that once spawned there in profusion -- and in the other tributaries of Dry Creek, which flows into the Russian River -- can do so again.

You might say that Wendt, a lifelong sailor who has navigated some of the Pacific waters whose shores were charted by Drake, Cook and others, has water on the brain.

"There's certainly a water theme in my life, that's for sure," says Wendt, walking along Wine Creek

on a beautiful Sonoma winter morning, gazing at a trio of silvery-brown steelhead idling in the clear, sun-dappled stream.

"I was a water rat when I was a kid," says Wendt, who grew up on Long Island swimming and sailing, and was on the swim and crew teams at Princeton, where he studied history. A "corporate gypsy" who lived with his wife and two kids in Philadelphia, Tokyo, Montreal, Palo Alto and other locales, he oversaw the worldwide marketing of the ulcer medicine Tagamet, the first pharmaceutical to break the billion-dollar-a-year sales mark, as SmithKline's chief operating officer in the late '70s.

Wendt, who doesn't take Tagamet -- "I'm pretty relaxed," he says wryly -- got hooked on antique maps while browsing in a vintage book and map shop in Tokyo in the early 1960s. He paid \$16 -- a tiny fraction of what he later paid for rare maps -- for a 17th century map of South Asia by Herman Moll, a Dutch cartographer working in London.

He loved the amount of detail it contained, and "the stories that emerged from those details," says Wendt, who has gone on to buy more than 60 maps from dealers in London, Paris, Amsterdam, New York and elsewhere. "They show the state of knowledge of this new world at the time the map was made. They have historical significance. And aesthetically, they're great to look at. That's the other part of the appeal: They're works of art."

Etched on copper plates, printed in editions of several hundred and compiled in atlases that were sold to wealthy noblemen, church and university libraries, these maps were made by men who were master draftsmen and calligraphers. Using information gleaned from previous maps and reports from early explorers like Vespucci, Magellan and Verrazzano -- some containing erroneous assumptions that weren't corrected for decades -- 16th and 17th century cartographers

often used their imaginations to fill in gaps in geographic knowledge, and to depict animals and sea monsters described by returning sailors.

"This strange creature is what de Jode thought a buffalo might look like," Wendt said the other day at the museum, looking at "Quivirae Regnu" (Kingdom of Quivira, in Latin), created by the Flemish cartographer Cornelis de Jode in 1593. The first map devoted exclusively to the west and northwest coasts of North America, it also features the mapmaker's vision of a Chinese junk, Indian tepees and amazing sea creatures. A unicorn with a fish tail cavorts off Cabo de Fortuna (the name Cabrillo gave Point Arena on the Mendocino coast). A big, scary beast with a bird's head, reptilian body and whale's tail swims toward the south Pacific.

Other singular critters appear in Dutch cartographer Jodocus Hondius' beautiful "Septentrio America" of 1606. Hand-painted after it was printed, the map depicts red-winged flying fish, a weird multi-horned beast swimming off the coast of Argentina, Spanish ships, tropical birds and Brazilian natives adorned in pink feathers, one with a blowgun, cooking up some local brew.

The images, Wendt says, "derive primarily from Magellan's 1527 voyage. It was a fantastic adventure with a rather high casualty rate: 226 men set out in three vessels, and one vessel returned with only 18 men. They reported seeing all these sea monsters. The oceans were exploding with life -- giant whales much bigger than their ships, huge octopuses and squid."

He looks admiringly at all the details. "Look at the place names. Every little cove and town is shown here, from Tierra del Fuego all the way up the coast. This is a Japanese ship that relates to Quivira." Wendt points to the Strait of Anian, a polar-region passage separating the Asian and

American continents, renamed after the Danish-born Russian explorer Vitus Bering discovered it in 1741. "This suggests that there really is a Northwest Passage, and if you're the king of France, and you can find it, the Quivirans will lead you to this trading route to Asia."

Of course, Quivira turned out to be a myth and vanished from maps by the late 1700s. And the northern passage connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans is mostly ice and can be traversed only in a shallow-draft boat.

That maps consistently showed the Strait of Anian two centuries before any European saw it "is the greatest mystery of cartography," Wendt says. "How did they know the continents were separated? Nobody knows."

The strait appears unnamed in the oldest map in the collection, a rare 1544 woodcut by Sebastian Munster. It shows Florida, the Caribbean and the east coast of South America fairly accurately. But based on bad information from Verrazzano's voyage of 1524, it depicts the nonexistent Sea of Verrazzano. And because navigators miscalculated the Earth's circumference, Japan was placed too close to what they speculated was the west coast of North America.

After the Russian voyages of the mid-1700s and Cook's third expedition of 1776-78 -- the Harrison chronometer, invented in 1762, allowed Cook to accurately measure longitudinal distance -- mapmakers had a proper picture of the American coast up into the Arctic Circle. The exhibition contains Wendt's first-edition, leather-bound copy of Cook's journals (the third was written by his officers after Cook was killed in Hawaii in 1779), and the engravings of landscapes and people of Nootka Sound and Unalaska Island that illustrated them.

The prints were done from drawings by John Webber, a British artist on Cook's third expedition. He made marvelous portraits of a young Vancouver Island man with braided hair, tattooed forehead and nose ring -- two centuries before punk rockers took up the look -- a woman wearing a conical hat woven from cedar-root bark and Aleuts with their kayaks and drying fish.

Then there are the journals and maps of two pathfinders whose journeys across America fueled President Thomas Jefferson's decision to commission the Lewis and Clark expedition: Jonathan Carver and Alexander Mackenzie.

A Scottish-born fur trader, Mackenzie was the first European to cross the continent, from 1789 to 1793, raising Britain's claims to the Pacific Northwest. Carver was an American-born British army officer who set out to do it in 1766, but got only as far as southern Minnesota before a war between the Sioux and Chippewa stopped him. The first to use the word Oregon in print, Carver mistakenly thought the Pacific could be reached by river from the middle of the continent, with a short portage from the Missouri River to a lake flowing into the River of the West (the Columbia). He didn't factor in the Rockies.

"I know that Lewis studied a number of these maps, and Jefferson had access to almost all of them," says Wendt, whose collection focuses on "the accumulation of knowledge available to Jefferson when he decided to commission the Corps of Discovery." He's showing it publicly for the first time as part of the bicentennial celebration of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Two hundred years ago, Pomo Indians lived on the fruitful land the Wendts bought in 1981 and built their winery on six years later. Near the barn is a registered historic site where the Pomos pulled salmon out of the creek, smoked and dried them.

In the 1880s, the stream was called Grape Creek. According to local legend, it became Wine Creek during Prohibition, when the feds raided a winery upstream and broke open all the barrels, and the creek ran red for weeks.

"It could be true," says Wendt, smiling. Chickens and goats feed near the creek. Wendt doesn't eat them, but his farm manager might, he suggests. Sometimes he notices that one of the goats is missing, "but I don't ask too many questions." He's walking along the path above the oak- and bay tree-lined creek whose habitat he and some upstream neighbors have been restoring with the help of state Department of Fish and Game biologist Bob Coey and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

It's one of several Russian River spawning streams that have been degraded from decades of gravel mining, agriculture and other human activity. Much of the gravel in which the salmon and steelhead lay their eggs was washed away or covered with silt.

The Wendts put up \$45,000, matched by government funds, to restore their part of the creek. The pilot project, which was done with labor from the California Conservation Corps, involved peeling back the bank and putting in big rocks to keep it back, planting native grasses, shrubs and trees and creating a series of low-fall rock dams.

"They slow the water down, and the gravel drops behind the low-fall dam and starts to build up. And then downstream of the dam, you get these deeper pools of water where the fish can hide from predators (osprey and raccoons)," says Wendt. He's on the board of the Trout Unlimited's Coldwater Conservation Fund, which is restoring waterways around the country, including the silt-laden steelhead streams in the redwood forests of Mendocino.

Seeing steelhead return to Wine Creek is a source of pride and pleasure for the Wendts, who plan to release a wine in a few months that will appeal to fisherman "and will reflect, in its packaging, labeling and perhaps even its flavor, the conservation effort," Henry Wendt says.

He walks back toward the winery, looking east across rows of gnarly old Syrah vines on a carpet of green grass, the rolling Sonoma hills and Mount St. Helena set against luminous blue sky. He's found his Quivira.

E-mail Jesse Hamlin at jhamlin@sfgate.com.

©2004 San Francisco Chronicle | [Feedback](#) | [FAQ](#)

Page D - 1