

# HAMILTON INTERVIEWS

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**SYDNEY HOLMES HAMILTON**

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**ROBERT F. HAMILTON**

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**BRIAN BARRY**

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Lynne Arnold talks with Mr Sydney Hamilton who comes from one of South Australia's best-known winemaking families for the Now in Retirement ABC radio series, broadcast on 15 July 1973.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

Now in retirement, our guest today in the series comes from one of South Australia's best-known winemaking families. He is Mr Sydney Hamilton who was born at the Ewell Vineyards in Glenelg, educated at private schools as a young child and later at Pulteney Grammar School. While still a teenager, Mr Hamilton decided to try life at sea and signed on as an ordinary seaman gaining much of his maritime experience on ships still trading under sail. However, in 1916 he gave up the sea and next year entered the family business and thereafter for more than three decades was actively concerned with winemaking. In retirement he has acted as a general wine consultant and is at present at work on a history of the Hamilton family and its vineyards.

**Mr Hamilton, when were the first Hamilton vines planted in South Australia?**

As far as I know 1840. They were planted in Richard Hamilton's property near his cottage in an orchard.

**Whereabouts in Adelaide itself?**

Bordering the Sturt River near Glenelg.

**Well your family must have been one of the first to ever be involved in winemaking here in South Australia – at what stage was the business when you came into it?**

When I came into it, the business was – had about 150 acres of vines and a turnover of 10,000 gallons of wine a year.

**What were the sorts of wines that they were made in those days – I believe this was about 1916 by the way?**

1917. The types of wine made in those days and preferred by the public were all sweet wines, fortified sweet wine. Nobody drank table wines except with pulling a wry face and perhaps on gala occasions – weddings and so on. Any really good wines that appeared on the table didn't get beyond the bride's and bridegroom's table.

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Well you became a winemaker at this stage, but were you looking forward to entering the business right from the start or did you in fact have some other sort of career in mind when you left school?

Oh, when I was very young I always wanted to go to sea largely the product of reading romantic stories of island nights entertainments and Robert Louis Stevenson's and poetry and things like that. And I actually did go to sea after my father died in 1914 but I realised that that was not a profession that had any future in it. In fact it was a dead-end sort of profession to my mind so I went back and found my way home.

I believe you were on a sailing ship and you said it was pretty 'dead end' so it sounds as if the romance didn't eventuate (laughs) but what sort of conditions did you work under as an ordinary seaman on a sailing ship towards the end of the days of sailing ships?

Oh, very comfortable, you were always wet with ice water - seawater frozen - and the food you couldn't bear to see it brought out of the ...because it smelt so nasty. That's about the romance that was attached to sailing ships but I always did like the sea and still do.

Well you came back to the family business again and you set up as a winemaker - now how did you train as a winemaker?

Well, I more or less trained myself I think. I probably was a little bit lucky but I could tell you later what is necessary to be a good winemaker and in later times in 1930 I had a lot of useful experience with John Zake who came to us from Reynella when things were financially very bad in that company.

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Nowadays, of course, becoming a winemaker involves many, many years of study and a great deal of scientific technique. I understand that you belong to the winemakers who think that it's something of an art and that there are other reasons for becoming a very good winemaker. What were the sort of things that spurred you on?

Well perhaps to answer that question, I was always - from the time I started in winemaking - I was an idealist. I could tell any young aspiring winemakers

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what's necessary. It's easy to make wine; there's nothing easier. All you need to do is empty the bathtub and put the grapes in it and get your girlfriend or your wife to wash her feet and jump in and tread them all out. She doesn't need to be dressed for the occasion at all and in eight or nine days it's wine – you might have trouble in selling it.

**But this surely wasn't the way you made wine? (laughs)**

No, we didn't actually. To make wine properly then, it's only necessary – you don't need any intelligence at all. All you need is a very good grounding in ag. science, in chemistry, a master of the art of yeast culture. You must have a very discriminating palate, a long memory for wine, perfect health and you're to be an expert fitter and turner, a very practiced welder in various metals and an engineering designer and draftsman and of course you must be a good cooper. Its very nice to have the nose for business but now you mustn't overdo that because it might bend you ideas when you're making blends of your pricier wines and you put some unworthy ones in the brew.

**So all in all it seems as though you just about have to be a superman to be a winemaker? (laughs) This of course is looking back on your career as a winemaker that brings you to these conclusions I gather? (laughter) Well now, here you were working in an industry where sweet fortified wines were the marketable wines - where did you get your grapes from in the early days?**

In the early days we got them all from our own vineyards. Later, as time went on we gradually bought grapes more and more as years went along.

**How did you feel, for instance, after the First World War when the Government set-up soldier settlements, up on the Murray in particular, and suddenly there must have been an influx of enormous quantities of grapes within about five years?**

Yes well, we felt concerned – quite a lot. We felt that there was going to be trouble as a consequence. The authorities said 'no – it could all be absorbed' and things were booming in 1920's and 1921. There was a little bit of a set back towards - during 1922 – but Christmas 1922 and early January things

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were booming again. Everybody in the wine trade bought everything they could lay their hands on. By the middle of March there was an absolute collapse in wine, people had cut out drinking and another thing that probably helped a lot was new grapes started from new plantings started to come in and make themselves felt. And things were very, very bad in 1924 and 1925. In 1926 to save the Industry, the wine trade bounty – wine export bounty – was invented.

**What exactly was this export bounty?**

It was a bounty as they called it, of four shillings a gallon subsidy paid on every gallon of wine exported – fortified that is to 34% of proof spirit.

**Was there much of an export trade then?**

There was none at the time, there used to be in the 80's, 90's and 1900 but that had all disappeared and there was an immediate revival and the wine trade was saved with the exception of about eleven companies who couldn't quite make the distance.

**How did you go about promoting the sale of wines in say, the UK, the countries you were exporting to?**

In our case my brother Eric went overseas in 1926 and he was overseas (coughs) eight or nine months a year from thereon till the next war came along. While he was over there in 1927 he sent many cases of foreign wines – French and Portuguese and Spanish wines and amongst them some cases of French champagne. I happened to be particularly intrigued by the similarity of the taste of the French champagne to certain vineyards we possessed of Dalo and Pedro. These vines were grown on an alluvium of gravel, which was obviously one time, the bed of the course of the Sturt River in ancient times. Now this – the grapes were acid and light on sugar – unsuitable for making sweet wine and I thought that we could do - make a wine of a champagne style which we set to work next vintage 1928 to do and it was a great success. The

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wine was fermented in small casks under pressure; it finished up with a sparkle like champagne and was very light and pleasant to drink. It took a while for the public to become acclimatised to it and then it went like wildfire. The wine trade viewed it – with rather – with amusement for the time but it was not until about 1940 that one of them woke up that there was money in it. It didn't take any - cost a penny to sell. And from there came the tremendous influx of crackle wines as they call them, pearl wines, sparkling wines, spritzig wines which, I think, had a very big impact on the wine trade of table wines – white table wines – in Australia.

**This must have been a tremendous breakthrough because I understand from you that it was only very heavy sweet fortified wines that people were buying up until then and suddenly onto the market came a nice dry white. Now, did you have to work hard to get the market to accept this?**

No, we didn't actually - we didn't have enough to make it necessary and we never could produce enough. We were always short of it from the day it went on the market. It started slowly, that's true, but bit by bit people realised that it was, it was very good article to drink.

**And this of course was something that you developed yourself, so you must have felt very proud about it. What does it feel like to make a wine and then to find that it's a good wine?**

Well, it is, it is very gratifying really, that's one of the privileges of being a winemaker because one must know that it's better to have a pat on the head than a kick in the back.

**Did you ever get many kicks in the back?**

Occasionally. (laughs)

**And what affect did this have on you as far as winemaking is concerned?**

It infuriated me to think I was such a damn fool as to make mistakes.

**And then you went on ... to make ...**

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... Making up my mind of course at the same time that I wouldn't do the same thing again which one inevitably did.

Well things changed of course, particularly the pattern of supply of grapes and as these upper Murray vineyards became more established and of course the supply of their grapes continued even though apparently it did cause some disaster in the twenties with regard to winemaking. What were the sort of patterns that emerged from then - did big winemakers still continue to grow their own grapes?

Most winemakers buy as much or more than they grow. Any of the bigger winemakers have always bought more than they grew and now the pattern is changing because in the last few years big winemakers have been planting enormous areas. These are just coming into fruition. What the result will be I wouldn't like to contemplate. Maybe that there'll be a flood - but then maybe all absorbed.

Well it almost sounds as if the wheel may have turned full circle as far supply of grapes is concerned. Well to get back now to the earlier days, let's talk about the depression. One tends to think of wine as something of a luxury and so therefore one would have expected that the depression would have a bad effect on wine production. Did it in fact?

In Australia, yes, but didn't seem to in Britain. The consumption of wine grew actually during the depression and in Australia it didn't to any appreciable extent - not until the Great War came. The last Great War, I mean by that of course and by that time stainless steel was appearing and people raised their eyebrows at the prices but it grew and grew and everybody spent everything they could muster up to buy it. It saved them so many complications of wines not keeping their condition.

Were there particular problems in making wine in Australia?

Oh yes, there were plenty of problems. One is unfavourable pH readings, hot climate in summer, in the vintage period and soil that isn't ideal for the purpose.

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**Well then how have we developed such a good wine industry where we turn out very good fair average quality wines and some very good top class wines?**

Oh, there are plenty of intelligent people, although I always say it doesn't need any intelligence at all to make wine. It doesn't actually. It depends on the wine ... the end product, but there are plenty of intelligent people in the wine trade and I think most of them are very anxious to get good results and it's very gratifying.

**And so you overcome it with skill and with technical help. When wine was first thought of in Australia anyway I believe it tended to be called 'pinky' – why was this? (laughter)**

Well, some wine with a pink colour or rather a light red colour was a very cheap wine on the market in those days and the gentleman who had only a couple of shillings to spend would buy a flagon of it and retire down to the Torrens in the park areas and drink it and lay in a very beautiful swoon for about a day afterwards and that was called 'pinky'.

**Now what about 'plonk'? When did 'pinky' become 'plonk'?**

Oh 'plonk' was post last war. It never was 'plonk' before that to my knowledge.

**Well then during the Second World War what happened to wine?**

We all thought that was curtail for the wine trade but strangely enough people had plenty of money and nothing else you could possible spend it on and wine trade instead of dying out grew like anything – grew at a great speed.

**What about the competition from beer – this has always been considered the national Australian drink and yet here we have a booming wine industry.**

Yes beer hasn't any snob value. Beer is beer and wine has a snob value and that probably accounts for a lot of it.

**What's your own taste in wine?**



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Rolls Royce every time. Top grade French wines thank you. (laughs)

**That almost sounds like a betrayal of your own industry.**

Well it isn't because I drink mostly our own. Chateau La Feit is \$60 a bottle -  
is enough to stop me even.

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**The wine industry to outsiders always seems to have had something of a family atmosphere about it - it's a very self contained industry - did you always feel this in your years in the wine industry?**

Oh yes, and I think it's suited to family companies entirely - I don't think it's suited to big public companies.

**Looking back on your long career what is the thing that has given you the most pleasure as a winemaker?**

I think producing Moselle really - it would have undoubtedly turned many many people, thousands and thousands from sweet wines - fortified wines - to table wines.

**This moselle process seems to have been very much your own particular formula.**

Well yes that's so. Every one of the wine trade have always cherished secret processes. - spent much of their time spying on each other trying to find each other's secrets but it's rather like Mr Pickwick in his law case - when the case was opened there was nothing in it.

**Well at times there must have been a case there but there must have been other developments too that remain in your mind as being landmarks in the development of wine in South Australia?**

Well one that I can call to mind was the making of - the introduction of sherry. Mr Zake in 1923 or '24 brought me down a sample of sherry yeast, which he got from Dr Harris of the Rutherglen. Dr Harris had brought it from Spain and we tried our luck making a Spanish type of sherry with some success and plenty of failures but the yeast carried on, we were able to keep it alive and it's still there.

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**One thing about being in the wine industry must be a tremendous sense of continuity – is this so in your case?**

Oh yes there is continuity in the wine trade and I sincerely hope that the old families will not all go out of it because I think that it is suited to family institutions.