



# *Pahrump's Hidden Treasure*

*How did Pahrump  
ever come to have  
two Wineries?*





*Photos by Rodney Camacho*



# Jack Sanders, an American Original

## Wine making success found in Pahrump

— By Genesee Martin —

**J**ack Sanders is a tall man with white hair and a robust build. His sparkling blue eyes convey a sense of humor and secret knowledge. He has been a Pahrump resident for 27 years, working quietly in the background behind some of the most influential events in Pahrump's history. Already a well-known businessman with vast experience in multi-media advertising and business consulting, Jack was sent to Pahrump on a mission that was expected to last only three months. It lasted nine, just long enough for Jack to see the possibilities in the people and the area then fall in love. From the Pahrump Valley Chamber of Commerce to the Rotary Club of Pahrump Valley along with the tourism council, Jack has been involved with both the business community and local organizations since making Pahrump his home. He helped start the *Pahrump Nevada Magazine* that is still being put out by the chamber of commerce. A yearly magazine, it just released its 23rd edition. There is moreover one, very special recognition that can be laid at Jack's feet. Jack is the founder of Nevada's first and for a time, only winery in Pahrump, the first in a state that now boasts four. Jack's first winery set the precedence for all the others that followed. While nowhere near the output of the wine country of California, Pahrump has the distinction of having two wineries in its valley in a state not known for wine or grapes, much less for growing crops. Jack is the proud founder of the second winery as well, the Sanders Family Winery.

The first winery, Pahrump Valley



**Founder and owner Jack Sanders stands with his wife Betsie in front of their latest winery, the Sanders Family Winery, located on 3780 E. Kellogg Rd. Jack is the founder of both Pahrump wineries, the first in the State of Nevada.**

Winery, is currently owned by Bill and Gretchen Loken and is located on Winery Rd., high on the hill to the east of Highway 160. The elegant white building looks like a Victorian chapel with vineyards and broad trees shading a water fountain and benches. The second is located on Kellogg Rd. between Homestead Rd. and Quarter Horse Ave. The land is still being developed, Jack says, with plans for a restaurant and other features. Sanders Family Winery is surrounded by a fence with a gated entrance and is Jack's pride and joy. Vineyards stretch out on either side of the drive as one approaches the Spanish villa style building, complete with three towers. Parking is to either side of the courtyard which is surrounded by a low wall. One tower connects the two walls and completes an angle with the entrance at its point. Visitors pass through the tower, adding to the atmosphere as one

enters the cool space inside the brief tunnel. The large courtyard has a polished stone appearance and can be filled with tables and chairs to seat 200 plus guests. The low wall comprises two sides with the building forming the other two. Twin towers rise from either end of the building. The courtyard is designed for entertaining with lighting and sound already in place for events and shows. A spot light is projected from the tower over the entrance, providing direct light on presenters. Two different entrances lead one to the inner workings of the winery building. The official entrance takes one into a lobby area with tables and chairs. A bar forms two sides of the room where wine is served, along with other liquors as well. The lobby is also a retail store for items such as t-shirts, coffee mugs and other souvenirs. Through a doorway is a large room with a high ceiling and another wide doorway



at the opposite end, leading to another room used for loading and unloading trucks, bottling the wine and storing if necessary. They have just recently released their very own blends with the Nye County brand on the bottle because they were made only from grapes grown at Sanders Family Winery. They currently make nine different wines, three of which are unique to Nye County.

"As you know, wineries are a great tourist attraction, not only in California but have become a great tourist attraction in the State of Nevada," Jack told a crowd of residents recently gathered to hear his lecture on the history of Pahrump wineries at the Pahrump Valley Museum. An animated speaker, Jack easily holds the audience's attention, proving his mastery on May 12. His deep voice and story-telling style draw the listener in, bringing to life a time when Pahrump was young and people did business with a hand shake. "I have a list of topics and I'm going to read them to you right up front and see if you can follow along," Jack began. His list included seemingly random items but as he spoke over the next hour, each one was explained. He had already covered the first item and was now on how he came to Pahrump. "All of us have our stories. My story is not any more unique than the reason that you're here. You're here for whatever reason you are here. I'm here because I was sent here by a company that had operations in California and Nevada and was involuntarily being forced into bankruptcy," Jack recalled. Charged with overseeing the wind down of facilities in Pahrump, Jack was told that he should expect 90 days to be the most time he would spend. "It didn't take three months. It took

almost nine months, so I did have words with my friend about that. But during my time out here, I got to be great friends with a lot of the town's people," Jack shared. The town at the time was small, with a population of less than 7,000 and didn't boast much. "When you did go places, if we went to the park, for example, during harvest festival, you know what was amazing? Everyone was involved. There were people who were wrapping meat to do the deep pit BBQ, who were the search and rescue. And there was the sheriff's

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department who was contributing. They used to have contests down there. And these were really fun when you would get the Murphys, the Wulfensteins and the Floyds out there with their great big back hoes, moving eggs from one place to another without breaking them. Those were the kinds of contests and that was the kind of family fun that they had," Jack explained of his favorite memories.

While he was in Pahrump, he became friends with the owner of the Saddle West Hotel, Casino and R.V. Resort, Bob Huffman. Referring to it as the Joint then, Huffman asked Jack to help him figure out what was wrong with his flagging business. The town was growing

and so was business. Huffman was the only major casino in town besides a few bars that had limited gaming licenses. After putting him off for some time, Jack finally agreed to take a look at the business and showed up for a tour of the inner workings of a casino. Explaining that he had to use the restroom, Jack recalled, "I remember walking in there, standing at the urinal, pardon me, ladies, and the urinal was a corrugated tin piece of roof that had been bent into a U shape, about six foot long trough, tack welded at the end. Such a tremendous slope that when you did relieve yourself, you didn't have to worry about any aromas, it was gone. Then he had a steel beam across the top with a damned doorbell that you rang. You hit the door bell and something would activate. The water would come down into urinal, to flush it. The urinal waved off into a waterfall into a floor drain and then on to God knows whatever sewer system existed." Huffman didn't take Sanders advice about renovating the restrooms and called Jack again in 1986. Jack spent six weeks going over the business, including renovating the restrooms.

By this time, Jack had researched the area and discovered that the only place to stay was the Charlotta Inn, constructed of barracks moved and converted to motel rooms by the Floyds, Ron and Charlotte. Together with Ray Wulfenstein, Jack helped build the Starlite Motel which is now the Best Western in Pahrump and offered 20 rooms, making it a total of 35 rooms to the town. Things changed when Jack went to a meeting with a Valley Bank employee to ask for a loan for the Saddle West to expand. The loan would build an addition to the casino, a hotel and convention center. Asking what capacity they



expected to reach, Jack queried how much would they need to get the loan. With an answer of 20 percent, Jack reported that they saw 62 percent capacity upon reopening the casino. Because they were able to bring large groups for conventions, they co-marketed with other local businesses to enhance visitors' stays. With the loan secured, they built the hotel, the convention center and renovated the casino, enlarging it from 46 slot machines to 176, with more tables and bar space. After the finishing touches, they sold the property to the first of many owners, a project that took many years.

"During this time, in 1985, I found out that grapes used to grow here and still grow here. I found that there used to be a winery here in town. I found out through history, through verbal history and through McCracken's books. McCracken hadn't written many books at that time but in one there was a story that Joseph Yount had grown six different varieties of wine grapes on the ranches here. Doesn't say anywhere that he was producing wines, he may or may not have been producing wines. But it does indicate that varietal grapes, which are wine making grapes, were grown in this area. This was in the late 1800s, by the way," Jack noted. In order to tell the story, Jack explained that he had previously had a client while working for Discoveries Institute, a self-promotion, market training and business consulting group. They had a small winery on the Russian River in Sonoma County, CA. Going up to help them during harvest, what Jack saw was lush, beautifully sculpted lawns and landscaping. From his perspective, Jack says, they spent very little effort, granted hard labor, for a few days during harvest and then there

was the bottling. The idea of owning his own vineyard appealed to his ego and laziness, he liked the idea of building something great and the sophistication of wine making. What he had figured was roughly 30 days total of hard work between harvesting and bottling a year with the rest of the time spent relaxing and enjoying the fruits of his labors. In 1985, when he discovered that grapes grew in Pahrump, he already had an idea of building a facility that

would then become an attraction to bring people in, one that would support the community.

Getting together with Tim Hafen, Jack bought the land for the first winery, up on the hill. The land was on the end of a street called Valencia that was a dirt road with no power or water. With more than 35 residents filling the room and hanging on every word for his lecture, Jack wanted to impress upon them how different the community and



**Workers hook up empty bottles to a machine that then fills them with a certain amount of finished wine. The bottles are then sealed and labeled for storage and sale.**



business attitude had been. They brought in a specialist to test the soil before they closed the deal on the land. The specialist needed three holes, 10 to 15 feet deep, dug at different intervals of the property. Jack recalls that they had called Jim Thorne, who according to Jack, was the manager for the Central Nevada Utilities company in Pahrump, asking for a back hoe. Jack was told that the back hoe was on its way, no charge. Six months later, they decided to put in a road sign at the corner by the Shell Station with phone poles donated to the winery and moved them to the corner but had no way of sinking them into the ground. Jack called Russ Dolan who was an official at Valley Electric Association. "The next thing, they're digging the holes and setting the poles for us. No charge. Community service. Things were done that way," Jack stated. The land deal was finalized in 1988 along with the filing with the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms as a wine producer. "This is Nevada's oldest bonded winery. On June 15th, 1988 an application to operate a winery in the State of Nevada was submitted to the BATF. The permit was issued with the effective date of September 29th, 1989. Jack Sanders began wine making operations shortly thereafter under bonded winery permit VWNV-4.' This is a copy of that document," Jack said, holding up the framed permit. He had brought it with him to the lecture at the museum. They started construction in 1989 and had their grand opening on St. Patrick's Day, 1990. "We did not have a soft opening. And for your information, for our new winery, we have not had our grand opening yet and we've been opened almost a year. And we aren't going to have a grand opening until I'm damned sure we're ready for a grand opening," Jack



**Two workers use leverage to insert corks into the recently filled bottles of wine. With both corking the bottles at the same time, the process is faster with only the foil seal and label left to do.**

stated. Going back to the story, Jack shared that they had hired a prep cook for that day who was to prepare a special dessert involving Grand Marnier. Taking a drink with every shot meant for the desserts, the woman soon passed out. Jack informed the already laughing crowd that guests arriving for the evening at the restaurant were greeted by emergency services vehicles and bodies coming out of the kitchen.

The first vines weren't planted until 1991 in the area that is now the R.V. park, Charleston Peak. Plant cuttings of Symphony wine were in the ground and had irrigation lines laid out to water them. "We came up one morning, about 7, 7:30 a.m. as accustomed and as we drove up the driveway, we saw something very strange. We saw seven critters up there. They were wild mustangs that had smelled the water and came down. We had no fence," Jack said. He went on to say, "So, therefore the Bureau of Land Management, BLM, told us that we had invited those people, and they were people, we

got to know them by first name, we had invited them onto our property. 'Meanwhile, Mr. Sanders, those are protected animals. Do not do anything to harass or injure them.' I wanted to know what harass meant," Jack explained. The BLM forbid them from throwing rocks, sticks or shooting pellets at the wild mustangs. The man told Jack to go out where the horses were and clap his hands loudly and they would run away. Jack recalls that they did run away, about 300 yards up into the desert and stayed there for about two hours. Eventually, it got to the point that Jack would walk right up to the mustangs and clap with no effect, completely ignored by the wiser horses. The BLM eventually came and removed the mustangs. "If anything bad can happen to you, there's a song from Monty Python's Spamlot, always look on the bright side of life. It's a wonderful song and if anything bad goes wrong in your life, always try to find the brighter side and the bright side of the mustangs were ABC, NBC, CBS,



I'm talking about the networks, they were there with television crews. *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, you name it, we made every major newspaper about the troubled tragedy of a young upstart winery out in the middle of the desert with these wild mustangs," Jack shared.

During his lecture, Jack told the audience the story of his predecessor, Joseph Yount. Mentioning another man, Frank "Pop" Buol, Jack asked if anyone knew where Buol Rd. was. Many residents did with Jack explaining what he had researched. "If you take Buol Rd. from 372, straight north, does anybody know where it runs right into? It runs right into the Binion's Ranch," Jack informed the group. The gate into the ranch is slightly offset from Buol Rd. and if you look through the salt cedars that surround the old ranch, owned by famous hotel and casino tycoon Ted Binion, "You will see a concrete building over there that is half in the ground and half out of the ground. That was the original winery. So, Sanders Winery or Pahrump Valley Vineyards, Inc. was not the first winery in the State of Nevada or even in Pahrump. Chateau Buol was the very first winery in Nevada," Jack stated. It was a bonded winery with Jack noting that Nevada law prohibited bond numbers to be reissued. Bond numbers one through three were unknown, probably because they were applied for and granted but never activated. The records on the first two do not exist, Jack noted with the third an unknown. Chateau Buol is the only known winery to have functioned in the state and ceased operations just before Prohibition. "We are bonded winery number four, the oldest, continuous operated winery in the State of



**Owner Jack Sanders pours wine for several customers to sample at his latest winery, Sanders Family Winery. The sheet of paper on the bar is a list of the different wines, with customers being offered a taste of the different varieties.**

Nevada. From our little beginnings of the winery here, we now have one up in Minden, Gardnerville and Churchill Vineyards which is now bonded winery number six or seven and Bill and Gretchen Loken are also either six or seven."

The very fact that wine can be sold in the State of Nevada is also something that is solely due to Jack. "We had one little problem, in 1990, I went up to Carson City because I read something in the Nevada Revised Statutes. And in those statutes, it says that no alcoholic beverages may be consumed or sold to the public without first being, catch this word, imported into the State of Nevada," Jack recalled of the now famous hurdle and its result. The winery could operate to its heart's content, making as much wine as they wanted but that little

pesky law, as Jack said, restricted them from selling it. Meeting with the department of tax and revenue, liquor excise tax division, Jack asked how they felt about his winery and the production of wine. Jack then asked them about the NRS and how they interpreted it. They read it the same way Jack had and got on the phone with the director of the department of taxation, Perry Comaux. Once the situation was explained to him, Comaux jokingly replied that they should give Jack an import license and told Jack to load his wine onto trucks, drive them into California and then back again. Jack carried the joke farther when he told the crowd at the museum that they had operated that way for a year. He then explained that Comaux told him that if he would commit to writing legislation to change the law,



they would allow him to operate. The next step resulted in working with a legislative writer and lawyer, who wrote the very first legislation concerning wineries in Nevada. "This says, 'On January 23, 1991, Assembly Bill number 203 was introduced to the state assembly, allowing wineries to operate in the State of Nevada. Sanders and Company, received the very first wine makers' license, issued by the State of Nevada. Prior to this time, alcoholic beverages that were sold in the state had to first be imported into the state. In essence, it appeared that wines being produced in the State of Nevada were not legal to sell because they were not imported, but in fact produced within the state,'" Jack read from the framed declaration. He went on to say that they tell him that it was the fastest bill that ever went through the legislature, introduced on March 29 of 1991 with a legislative session that runs from February to June. Normally bills get passed in the last weeks of the session, but this one was passed in six weeks. Once introduced, it was sponsored by every single member of both the state assembly and state senate. It had no choice but to go straight to the governor's office for his signature.

With things going beautifully, the restaurant a success and the winery in full production, it begged the question as to why he sold it. After the lecture at the museum in which he told the audience he sold the winery in 2001, I sat down with Jack over coffee to ask that one question. He paused, just for a moment, and said, "My intention was never to sell that winery. We had an incident that occurred that was not so funny." Jack explained that the Town of Pahrump had always, and still does, entertain a

group of individuals known as the Bar Stoolers, a group of air force pilots that have come to Pahrump for many years. During their visit in 2000 or 2001, they had arranged for an A-10 Wart Hog to fly by, wagging its wings over the Calvada golf course in tribute to the group. The plane lost control and crashed about 150 yards to the east of the property and the Symphony Restaurant where the ladies of

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the pilots were having lunch. So close had the plane come to hitting the building that Ben Smith, the winery's CPA and director of Valley Electric Association, approached him about insurance coverage. In their steady development of the winery and the land, they had not updated their insurance. They were covered for the land, materials and labor but not as a fully operating winery, producing wines. With the land purchased from Jackie Hafen and everything done locally, from buying materials to labor, the value was low because of the low cost. Ben suggested that they bring in an appraiser who could give them a value that the insurance company would accept. The land had gone from the purchase price of \$800 an acre to \$40,000 which included the original 10 acres plus what Jack had added later on. The building had a book price or construction

price of \$600,000 and went to \$1.7 million after the appraisal. The appraiser told them that they needed a comparison price to give the insurance company. Jack replied that they were the only winery in the state, there was no comparison. Ben suggested putting the winery on the market for 30 days with an exorbitant price and see if they got a bite in an effort to set market value. "We figured nobody would, we figured someone would inquire but that nobody's going to go through with it. About three or four days later, Western Horizons, the R.V. park people bang on our door and say 'We're willing to pay the price.' Well, a contract is a contract," Jack shrugged. He says it took them a long time to get back to where they were but he never lost the company, Pahrump Valley Vineyards Inc., and was able to rebuild, taking everything he has learned from the first go round and using it to improve his second attempt.

The new winery has already made a splash, opening its doors to the community in a big way. The location of comedy shows, plays and art shows, the winery is also the host of the Art and Sol event, held every year by the Pahrump Arts Council. Partnering with several organizations in Pahrump, Sanders Family Winery has become a known hot spot. Jack says that there's 10 acres of his new property he has plans for. When asked if there would be another restaurant, Jack replied that there will be, when the timing is right, along with a formal grand opening. The most beautiful and touching moment that he recalls is still the harvest festival and the community working together. He has taken that philosophy and practices it today, to benefit of the community. (L)