

# E. Daneri Otay Winery and Distillery

By Mike Bryant

It was the fall of 1915, and San Diego was still basking in the limelight of the Panama California Exposition which had opened on April 9th and was to run until January 1, 1917. Throngs of visitors attracted to the area by the Exposition were delighted by San Diego's climate and variety of exotic plants.

The rainfall for 1914-15 had been above average, but a severe drought from the preceding years had left many of San Diego's reservoirs extremely low. Fresh from a successful rain-making engagement in Los Angeles, Charles Hatfield was approached by the San Diego City Council to do his magic and fill Lake Morena. A \$10,000 price was finally agreed upon, and on January 1, 1916, he set up shop on Lake Morena in San Diego's East County.

Born in Geona, Italy in January of 1944, Emanuelle Daneri and wife, Rosa, immigrated to the United States in the 1860s and settled in Old Town San Diego in 1870. Emanuelle's brother, Paul, owned a liquor store there. In 1878, Emanuelle bought 900 acres in the Otay Valley with dreams of starting a winery. With a lot of hard work and determination, Emanuelle, Rosa, and children, Flora, Amelia and John built a very successful business in Otay, and opened a wine and produce store at 532 5<sup>th</sup> Street in San Diego.

No one paid much attention to Mr. Hatfield at first, and, in fact, he was the butt of many a joke. All that changed on January 5,



**Jugs came in three sizes: quart, half-gallon, and gallon. Embossed on bottom: Macomb Pottery Co. Macomb, Ill. Pat Jan 24 1899 (M. Bryant Collection)**

1916 as it began to rain. And rain it did. Lightly at first, it became heavy from January 10<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup>. Dry riverbeds began to flow, and the county's reservoirs became filled to capacity. Downstream in Old Town, the San Diego River overflowed its banks, taking out bridges, railroad tracks and closing roads. The rain was sporadic after the 18<sup>th</sup>, but a severe storm hit on the 25<sup>th</sup> that would add insult to injury as already overly saturated ground



**Charles Hatfield, the "Rainmaker."**

and reservoirs could take no more. About 6 p.m. on January 27<sup>th</sup>, a 90-foot section of the Lower Otay Dam gave way. Witnesses reported that a wall of water between 20 and 40 feet high was unleashed, taking out everything in its path as it made its way seven miles through the Otay Valley to San Diego Bay.

Two miles from the dam, Emanuelle Daneri was coming up the steps from his wine cellar when he noticed a wall of water said to be four feet high at this point heading towards his direction. He yelled for his family to run to higher ground, but three of his employees were not as fortunate. They, along with the daughter of one of the employees, drowned. The flood had destroyed everything the Daneris owned in the Otay Valley, and they were left broke and homeless. Of the 24 dwellings in the valley, only one survived. It was estimated that up to 50 people drowned that night in the Otay Valley flood. Debris from the flood was strewn everywhere along the shore of San Diego Bay and Imperial Beach. In fact, the only other known E. Daneri jug was reported by its owner, Rurik Kallis, to have been found on Imperial Beach after the flood.

Charles Hatfield felt he completed his part of the agreement, and wanted to be paid the \$10,000 owed him. The city refused to pay him, unless he would accept liability for the damages, which were said to be in the millions of dollars.

In 1917, Emanuelle Daneri filed a lawsuit against the City of San Diego, claiming the dam was poorly built, and that the city should be held liable for the damages caused him from the flood. The court ruled that the flood was an Act of God and the city was not liable for any damages. The family moved to San Diego, and Emanuelle died in 1931.

Charles Hatfield twice sued the City Council to collect his fee, but citing the E. Daneri ruling of 1917, the rain was ruled an Act of God. He continued until 1938, but his case was thrown out of court. In 1956, the movie "The Rainmaker," starring Burt Lancaster, was released. It was inspired by the story of Charles Hatfield, and he attended the premiere in Hollywood. Hatfield passed away on January 12, 1958.

I wondered if anything remained of the Daneri Winery in the Otay Valley. With the help of member Carol Serr, I was able to pinpoint the location of the winery using maps and archaeological reports. It didn't look promising. Civilization and large housing tracts had encroached on the area, along with the real possibility that the winery site had been covered by development. The only way to find out was to visit the site and check it out for myself.

The area had indeed been built up. I was able to drive on surface streets fairly close to where I figured the winery site was located. I had to park a distance away and hike into the site. The area was heavily overgrown with brush, which made the going a little tough, especially when trying to watch out for ever-present rattlesnakes.

Using a photo from a 1990s survey, I was able to identify a tree that was located not far from the wine cellar. Making my way to the tree, I was pleased to see the remnants of the cellar's rock walls now covered in dead grass.

The winery site remains, at least for now. It looks like another large housing development is planned very close to the site. Let's hope that lessons have been



learned from this experience and history doesn't repeat itself. It is not a good idea to build in a flood plain. What happened here in 1916 is a good example of that.

Mike Bryant  
4214 Tacoma St  
San Diego, CA 92117  
(858) 581-2787 email: SDMike@san.rr.com

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