

## FRANK SCHOONMAKER

### VISIONARY WINE MAN

by Frank E. Johnson



In Burgundy, old-timers still refer to him as "le colonel," accenting the first I. The title is apt, because he served with distinction as an officer in World War II. Even today's younger winemakers still respect *le colonel*, from his traditional importance to their region and its economy. And today, because he was one of the first to anticipate the growth of the American wine industry, he left a legacy that continues -- although he has been dead for over 23 years.

The man was Frank Schoonmaker, a modern-day Renaissance man of sorts, who, to his credit, played a major role in shaping the destiny of the American wine industry. Like many of his generation, he became of age during prohibition, but correctly judged that it would soon blow over, and already laid plans to form his own wine importing company at the time of repeal. During the next forty years, this visionary wine man would visit many of the world's major wine districts, make his selections and then identify them

with a unique green neck label: "Frank Schoonmaker Selections." This soon became synonymous with an outstanding bottle of wine, to an entire generation of American wine drinkers.

What many people do not know is that Schoonmaker never once took a course in winemaking; never went to business school, never finished college or even apprenticed in another wine importing company before founding his own firm. He was completely self taught; and landed in the wine business by way of a background in journalism. By sheer force of his personality and the originality of his ideas, he attracted qualified people to help him run his business, and he soon had many friends and business associates around the world.

Frank Schoonmaker was born on August 20, 1905, in the unlikely location of Spearfish, South Dakota. His father, whose name related to Hudson Valley, New York Dutch ancestry, was a writer who worked for the U.S. Department of State; his mother was a noted feminist and a pioneer suffragette. Although Frank was born in the midwest, he was raised in the east, and after a rigorous primary education that emphasized the arts and foreign languages, he enrolled at Princeton University in 1923.

Princeton University in the 1920s was famous as a school for well-heeled young gentlemen, with its social clubs and its genteel reputation for partying. Frank Schoonmaker stayed there only two years, then announced to his family that he was quitting college and leaving for Europe -- "to see the world," as he put it. In terms of a broad based education in the arts and humanities, Princeton seemed to offer everything Schoonmaker could have wanted, at one of the best possible times. But Schoonmaker thought otherwise. He wanted to experience everything first hand through life,



not second hand from books, and simply felt he could learn more outside of college, where his ancestors had come from: Europe.

So he embarked on a steamer for the Continent in 1925, and for the next several years wandered around Europe as a young bohemian, taking notes on places and things worth seeing. He decided to condense his impressions into a series of guide books, the first of which was entitled *Through Europe on \$2 a Day* (the original inspiration to Arthur Frommer, an entire generation later), and then several more travel guides, which described specific countries. When viewed today, despite the passage of time, these are lively, fresh travel bulletins, with a discerning eye for historical detail. It seemed as if Schoonmaker was truly destined to be a travel writer.

But soon, as the cost of researching and writing these books began to grow, and their audience only included those who actually planned to visit these areas, Schoonmaker realized that his travel writing was really an avocation, not a career. He had visited many of France's great wine regions during these trips, and while prohibition was still law in the United States, there already was a major movement underway for repeal. Making alcoholic beverages illegal had not done away with them; it had only forced them underground. Prohibition had caused other problems as well. When the U.S. went dry, European winemakers suddenly lost a valuable market, right at the time when economic hard times were already making it difficult for them after the ravages of World War I. The U.S. government lost millions of dollars of tax revenues each year from the sale of liquor, all the while spending at least as much in trying to enforce prohibition. And California wineries, who had enjoyed a minor boom of their own at the turn of the century, were essentially put out of business for an entire generation.

It was obvious to Schoonmaker that prohibition would someday be repealed; the question was when. First, he needed a network of suppliers. In France, by the late 1920s he had made a valuable ally in Raymond Baudoin, editor of *La Revue du Vin de France* in Paris. Baudoin had shaped this scholarly publication into an influential review, which eventually played a major role in creating the appellation contrôlée laws of 1935-36. Baudoin was both revered and feared by French winegrowers, as he had a quick temper and an uncompromising palate. He could cast judgment on an entire lot of wine with a quick stroke of the pen, and was not known to be bashful.

Schoonmaker traveled around France with Baudoin several times, and visited many winegrowers, particularly in Burgundy's Côte d'Or. Baudoin introduced him to some of the best, and Schoonmaker soon followed Baudoin's lead in selecting only certain lots, or casks, of a particular *cru* in a given vintage – writing everything down methodically in a little black notebook. In addition, Baudoin was emphatic in getting the growers to bottle their wine themselves and sell it under their own label, as opposed to the traditional method of selling it in cask to the shippers in Beaune for blending, under their label.

This was the beginning of a new concept in Burgundy, which Baudoin and Schoonmaker took to another level: estate bottling. The practice was only a few years old even in Bordeaux, where a few Médoc properties started the practice of bottling at the château in the 1920s. In Burgundy it was much more revolutionary, because of the greater role played by the shippers or *négociants*, who drew from the fragmented nature of most Burgundy properties, and used different sources to blend their production, for consistency. Any concerted means of bottling at the estate meant that, in the long term, the *négociants* would lose their traditional power in the Burgundy wine trade.

Over the next few years, with Baudoin's assistance, Frank Schoonmaker carefully put together a network of leading domaines in Burgundy (Pierre Gelin in Gevrey-Chambertin, Jean Grivot in Vosne-Romanée, Georges Roumier in Chambolle-Musigny, Mugneret in Vosne-Romanée, Ramonet in Chassagne-Montrachet, etc.), and added an extra measure of expertise. On semi-annual visits, Schoonmaker could always visit these properties himself and make his selections; but when back in the

States, he needed someone who lived in Burgundy and would be available to broker the shipments and arrange to consolidate them for inland transport, once orders were taken. Over the years, Schoonmaker steadily entrusted these responsibilities to the Marquis Jacques d'Angerville of Volnay, who became Schoonmaker's major liaison in Burgundy. (Coincidentally, Jacques d'Angerville became one of this writer's first contacts in the Côte d'Or, in 1971.)

Finally, in December 1933, the twenty-first amendment formally ended prohibition in the U.S., and the way was now clear for Frank Schoonmaker to realize his dream. He incorporated his business, Frank Schoonmaker Selections, in the summer of 1935, and announced to his family that "he was going into trade." On paper, it looked easy; but in practice, America in 1935 was woefully ignorant about wine. Largely because of prohibition, but also because of prevailing choices in drink, there was practically no literature available on wine. Thus, coincidentally with his new company, Schoonmaker wrote a general interest book about wine, with *New York Herald Tribune* columnist Tom Marvel, called *The Complete Wine Book*. Short, concise and to the point, it was written in narrative form and was regarded as a minor classic in its day, although Schoonmaker later confessed that it was not until many years later "that I realized just how incomplete it was." Nevertheless, there were few wine books little like it on the market, and even fewer were as up to date.

The 1930s were growth years for new wine import companies in New York; Frederick Wildman had begun an association with Bellows & Company, that would later result in his own company, under his own name; Julian Street and George Sumner were assembling their European contacts, and Schoonmaker was beginning to realize one of his own biggest shortcomings: he could select wine much better than he could sell it. Then along came a young Russian émigré named Alexis Lichine, who had likewise dropped out of college (the University of Pennsylvania) because he felt he wasn't learning anything by studying economics. Lichine was an entrepreneur who had supported himself by running guided bus tours through Paris; he spoke several different languages and was already quite knowledgeable about wine. Schoonmaker interviewed Lichine for a job as national sales manager, and hired him shortly thereafter.

Thus began one of history's greatest alliances – and, for a while, it seemed like a good one. Here were two bright, energetic young men, fluent in many different languages, forging new ground for wine in America. Lichine was an ideal salesman – glib, urbane, easily skilled in the art of technical talk and thoroughly sure of himself. Schoonmaker's personality was different; animated, a bit volatile, speaking in a high-pitched voice that made him sound younger than he was. At first, they seemed like a perfect match. Lichine opened up valuable new markets all over the country for the firm: he liked business travel and seemed to enjoy speaking to big audiences. Their travels ultimately brought them to California, where in the late 1930s the industry was only just beginning to recover from prohibition. There was talk of war in Europe, and if that proved to be true, Schoonmaker's business would ultimately have to draw from another source.

Schoonmaker and Lichine visited several California properties, most notably Wente and Concannon in the Livermore Valley, and convinced the owners to label their wines after the informing grape variety, not with a generic name like "claret," "chablis," or "burgundy," which had been the practice for over a century. They reasoned that only the better estates in California were planted in these noble varieties, and as they proliferated, so would the need to identify them without generic labeling. There was just the question of what to call these wines. Schoonmaker and Lichine decided to call them "varietals" – although it is not clear which of the two actually thought up the term. Wente was the first success. By changing the name of their best white from Graves to Sauvignon Blanc, Schoonmaker sold several times as much wine as before – and now they were being distributed in the east, an entirely new market.

In September 1939, just as Schoonmaker's marketing plans for California wines were taking hold, war broke out in Europe. Lichine, who was in Beaujolais at the time, caught the last American ocean liner out of Bordeaux, the S.S. *Manhattan*. Schoonmaker, who correctly assumed that the U.S. would eventually enter the war, further strengthened his connections with California. After Pearl Harbor, he was introduced to Colonel William ("Wild Bill") Donovan, who was in the process of creating a whole new division of U.S. Army intelligence known as the Office of Strategic Services, or O.S.S. for short.

Nothing like it had ever been devised before – O.S.S. brought in highly educated men to act as secret agents overseas, where their skills in foreign languages and cultures would be invaluable in securing information about Hitler's war plans. The challenge was to obtain the information on a continuous basis, without getting caught. As spies, O.S.S. agents had neither the official knowledge nor the protection of the U.S. government. If caught by the enemy, they would be treated as spies and summarily shot: and in fact, many were.

In 1942, Frank Schoonmaker headed for Lisbon on a Boeing 314 Clipper flying boat – one of the few safe ways of crossing the Atlantic that year. From Portugal he made his way to neutral Spain; ostensibly with his wine business as a cover. What Wild Bill Donovan really wanted to know was whether the Germans were going to invade Spain. Schoonmaker went to Madrid to find out. Generalissimo Franco, although a fascist sympathizer who had benefited considerably by Nazi intervention in the Spanish Civil War, had in fact no intention of taking sides just years after many thousand Spaniards had died, in battles between Republicans and Loyalists.

But later that year, with allied landings in North Africa (*Operation Torch*), Spain still offered a safe haven to agents infiltrating France and Italy. Schoonmaker stayed on, using the American embassy as a base while making forays in the country to help supply the French Resistance. Pretty soon the Spanish police caught on to what was happening. Schoonmaker was arrested, brought back to Madrid and had his head shaved to identify him as a marked man. But it didn't stop him. With other agents acting on his behalf, he was still able to regularly report on developments in Spain that would ultimately affect the outcome of the war.

Then came the joint Anglo-American invasion of Sicily (*Operation Husky*) in 1943, which pushed the Germans back onto the Italian mainland; followed by the difficult Italian campaign, which lasted two more years. Schoonmaker's biggest concern all during this time was preparing for the possibility of a second front in the south of France. First, the allies landed in Normandy in June, 1944, and within two months reached Paris. Simultaneously, a second invasion was planned for the fall, and from his nearby base in Spain, Schoonmaker was right in the middle of it.

His outfit was part of the U.S. Seventh Army that invaded southern France in September 1944, advancing in the Rhône district. All seemed to be going well, until one day, as Schoonmaker was travelling in a jeep near the city of Lyon, the jeep hit a land mine, blowing it off the road sideways in a ditch. Dazed, Schoonmaker discovered he had broken several ribs, and was in great pain. He summoned help and tried to get the best painkiller he could think of: a bottle of Cognac. Even that didn't work. Finally, he was taken to a nearby hospital.

The invasion of southern France helped save hundreds of American and French lives by isolating German positions in southern France, and in his earlier position in Spain, Schoonmaker sent back valuable information that helped decide the entire course of the war. From southern France, he was able to visit many of his former suppliers, and at war's end was ultimately discharged with the rank of colonel -- hence his nickname in much of Europe.

Serving in Army Intelligence instead of O.S.S., Lichine had also taken part in the landings in southern France (although in a separate division); and with the European war soon over, they tried to reactivate

the firm. Feeling somewhat bolder after his war experiences, Lichine asked for a full partnership in the firm: the question was whether to call the company Schoonmaker-Lichine, or Lichine-Schoonmaker. Schoonmaker refused; it was **his** company, after all, and he did not want the concept of his Selections diluted with another name. So what might have been a highly successful alliance was not to be. Lichine left the company, contacted a number of venture capitalists, and ultimately found his niche as a winegrower and shipper in Bordeaux.

Schoonmaker's place was not there, because unlike Lichine, who enjoyed trading in wine on the open market, Schoonmaker believed in exclusive agencies. To get an exclusive château in Bordeaux, you had to write a contract to buy most of that estate's production, in good years and in bad, over a period of several years. Very few firms had that sort of money, or the necessary leads to wholesalers around the country to be capable of buying that kind of volume.

Instead, Schoonmaker specialized in Burgundy – where he had begun with Baudoin twenty years earlier, where he already had his brokers in place, and where he could make his annual selections from a core of top-flight suppliers. This was not to say he neglected Bordeaux – he went there often, and did represent a number of estates over the years – but commercially speaking, Burgundy was his principal domain. Schoonmaker also represented several Champagne houses (like Philipponnat), ranged up and down the Loire, and represented Domaine Mont-Redon in Châteauneuf-du-Pape. He capitalized on his extensive knowledge of Spain in introducing several select lines of Sherry to the U.S. And, across the Rhine, he worked with a team of highly skilled brokers (Otto Dunweg, Hans-Josef Becker) to reestablish top German estate wines on the U.S. market once again.

It was time for Schoonmaker the journalist to show his credentials. Following the German *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic recovery, Schoonmaker detailed his observations on postwar German wines and assembled them in book form, writing the final draft at his home in Spain. His book, *Wines of Germany*, was first published in 1956 and in a short period of time became a minor classic. It was soon praised by many as a definitive work on the subject, and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's celebrated gift to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, of several cases of Bernkasteler Doktor Riesling Auslese from Dr. Thanisch, was said to have been directly linked to Schoonmaker's great appreciation for this wine and this famous producer.

Thus began a long association by Frank Schoonmaker with a small Westchester County, NY publisher, Hastings House, who did not seem concerned with his trade affiliations (as some publishers do) and drew from his considerable expertise. After *Wines of Germany*, Schoonmaker's first project was to distill his overall knowledge of wine into an encyclopedic dictionary, *The Encyclopedia of Wine* – an amplification of the original *Complete Wine Book*, but much more complete and up to date. Writing it essentially on his own, using only a few researchers to assist him while he attended to his import business, Schoonmaker completed it in 1964. Like *Wines of Germany*, it was a small, affordable volume that was packed with useful information, maps and statistics about the wine business. *The Encyclopedia of Wine* was an instant success, went through several successive printings, was revised several times by Schoonmaker, and still endures to this day.

The 1960s were both thrilling and frustrating for Frank Schoonmaker's business. Thrilling, in that the volume of wine being sold was many times that of the 1950s; thanks in part to the fabulous 1959 vintage, the first one generally reported in the American wine press, and highly publicized for its quality and abundance. Thrilling, in that Frank Schoonmaker Selection labels were being seen all across the country, and Schoonmaker was rapidly becoming America's foremost wine expert. But frustrating, in that sustaining the necessary lifestyle of an American wine importer, Schoonmaker found it difficult to keep a wife and raise a family. He did have one daughter, Christina, to whom he dedicated *Wines of Germany*; but that is all.

Also frustrating was the nature of his business, and the way he managed his income. Frank Schoonmaker Selections was an importer, but not a wholesaler; in order to bring in his wines, a customer had to order them through an area wholesaler, who would add his markup. At the top end of the scale was the producer; he arranged to sell the wine to Schoonmaker through a broker, and Schoonmaker would add his profit before selling to the informing wholesaler in the U.S. Not only did this system add greatly to the cost of the wine, it also meant that Schoonmaker's profit margin had to be slim.

In essence, Schoonmaker had very little capital. He overcame this in two ways: first, right after the war, by drawing on his presence in California and by becoming general sales manager for Almadén Vineyards, a Los Gatos-based winery then in the process of expanding their production and increasing national distribution. Drawing from his experience in the Rhône valley, Schoonmaker helped launch Almadén's highly successful dry Grenache rosé, said to be the first time this varietal had been used for that purpose in California.

Schoonmaker put one more finishing touch to his marketing plan. Realizing that most people who knew only a little about wine always associated hillside vineyards with higher quality, he decided to use the word "mountain" in connection with his California selections. A "mountain burgundy" sounded much more appealing than a plain burgundy, even if it was in fact grown on the floor of the Central Valley; it was the equivalent of a Hollywood makeover, and the term helped sell a lot more wine. His original application of "mountain" labeling was used on a celebrated series of affordable, quaffable Almadén jug wines, whose squat flasks could soon be seen all over the nation. No question about estate-bottling here; these were clearly wines for the masses.

But the wine world was rapidly undergoing profound changes. More and more, by the 1970s big corporations were attracted to the wine business. For major liquor producers like Seagram's and Schenley, this was a logical extension of their existing portfolio; but now the big food producers, like Heublein, R.T. French, Crosse & Blackwell, Seneca Foods, and Pillsbury all wanted a piece of the action. By 1972, Schoonmaker was 67, and was ready to take life a little easier. He was approached by Pillsbury to be the central part of a major wine division of the Minnesota-based firm, in connection with the Souverain Winery of Napa Valley, originally begun by his old friend Lee Stewart.

Schoonmaker agreed to the offer, provided that he retain his town house on 14 East 69<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, where he had conducted his business for many years, and keep his existing network of European suppliers. Pillsbury agreed.

The link with Pillsbury was both a blessing and a curse. Although it did bring in some vital capital to his operation, Schoonmaker soon found himself talking to marketing types that knew nothing about wine. Two major California wineries were constructed: one at Rutherford, which became known as Souverain of Rutherford (now Rutherford Hill), and the other in Geyserville, Sonoma County. The Geyserville operation was much grander, had more production capacity, and went through many name changes. Under construction in 1972, it began as "Ville Fontaine," but within a year was changed to "Château Souverain." When the Rutherford facility was completed in 1975, Château Souverain became known as "Souverain of Alexander Valley," to avoid confusing it with the Napa property.

From a marketing standpoint, the whole operation was total confusion. Directives were issued from Minneapolis and discharged in California, only to be changed and redirected by a different team a year later. Schoonmaker's direct role in the whole Souverain operation was unclear to begin with, since each facility had its own winemaker and was a separate operation. Then came the final blow: a cost analysis of the whole winemaking unit of Pillsbury, done in Minneapolis, concluded that, even if they sold every drop of wine they had set out to produce, it would only be one-fifth as profitable as their self-rising baking products.

This was after the fact; but to those accustomed to scrutinizing the bottom line, it might as well have doomed Pillsbury's wine operation from the start. In 1975, Pillsbury put their entire winemaking business up for sale – including Frank Schoonmaker Selections. Only a few wines from Château Souverain had even made it to market; many of the current vintages of Frank Schoonmaker Selections were old, dating back to the 1970 and 1971 vintages. Not only was this a function of sales, but of the quality of interim vintages; and furthermore, when Frank Schoonmaker turned seventy in August of 1975, he was clearly not the man he was only a few years previously.

Time had taken its toll on *le colonel*. In that year, he had gone into the hospital to have a pacemaker installed, to correct an irregular heartbeat; but when I last saw Frank Schoonmaker in November of 1975, the change in his expression was ghastly. His piercing dark eyes had turned glassy; the color was gone from his face, and he already looked like an old man.

He barely lived out the year. In January 1976, at his home in New York City, his heart finally stopped beating. The wine world had lost a great protagonist, but it had gained considerably from his many contributions.

In the memory of all who knew him, *Le Colonel* lives on.