



Tempered Vines

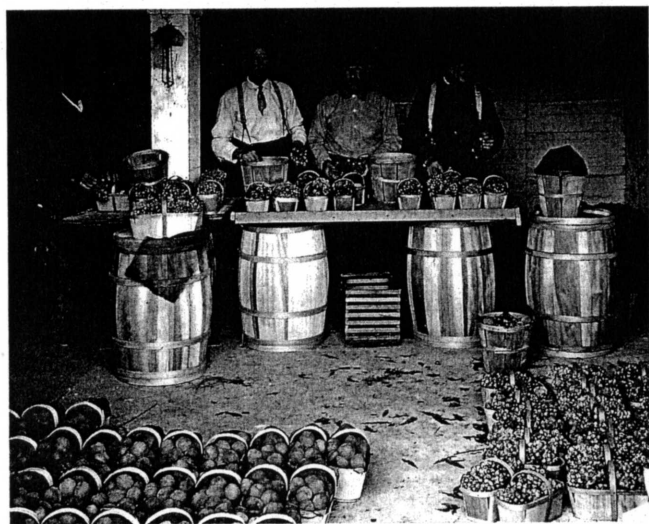
BY MICHELLE HENRY

After the Civil War, Thomas Welch, a staunch Methodist and temperance advocate, set out to produce a grape product that would be the “fruit of the vine instead of the cup of the devil”—and built a multi-million-dollar company in the process.

Chautauqua County’s “grape belt” stretches ninety miles along the southern shore of Lake Erie, across the county’s entire northern border. An escarpment created during the last Ice Age rises behind the belt, and with the lake it helps regulate the growing season by delaying spring budding and prolonging moderate temperatures for an autumn harvest.

Grapes have been grown in Chautauqua County since 1818, arriving during the first decade of the county’s formation. They were used to produce wine that was sold locally. In 1849, the Concord grape was developed in Massachusetts and was soon discovered to be a variety that was ideally suited to the climate and soil of Chautauqua County’s unique grape belt.

By 1859, there were twenty acres of Concord grapes in the county; by 1864, there were



Niagara grapes and peaches ready for market, 1911.

over 400. But local farmers struggled to find a larger market for their produce. Attempts to promote the dark purple grape as a table fruit were largely unsuccessful because consumers were unfamiliar with it and confused it with a plum, and the ripe grapes didn’t survive the long trip to major markets in New York and Philadelphia.

Juice, Not Wine

At the same time, in Vineland, New Jersey Dr. Thomas Welch began experimenting with Concord grapes in an attempt to create a sweet, unfermented juice that was shelf-stable. Welch, a staunch Methodist and supporter of temperance, believed that churches should offer the “fruit of the vine instead of the cup of the

devil” for communion. In 1869, Welch successfully bottled a sweet grape juice that did not ferment and began selling “Dr. Welch’s Unfermented Wine” to churches in and around New Jersey. Welch’s son, Charles, a dentist (and teetotaler like his father), took an interest in the juice business, and the two promoted the drink as a health tonic as well as an alternative to standard communion wine.

Charles Welch understood the power of advertising. Welch’s was the only non-alcoholic fruit juice on the market—but in order to make unfermented wine a viable product, he knew he must create a demand for it, educate the public about its qualities, and overcome prejudice against it. In 1893, samples of the juice were distributed at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and by 1896 the



Boxes of grapes are delivered to the Welch’s Grape Juice plant in Youngstown, New York in 1935.

business had outgrown the Vineland grape supply. So both Thomas and Charles visited several locations in New York State where grapes were grown, including the Village of Westfield, located in the heart of Chautauqua County’s grape belt. According to the *Westfield Republican* of July 19, 1922, the village had a great deal to offer in 1897: 3,000 acres of grapes, good water, a Methodist church, a municipal electric plant, rail service, a pretty village, and friendly residents. It also offered to donate a lot near the rail line for the Welches to build a factory, and a local bank offered to help finance the construction.

On April 19, 1897, the Welch’s Grape Juice Company was incorporated in Westfield. Thomas and Charles, determined to complete the factory in time for the fall harvest, supervised every aspect of construction and managed to complete the building in three months, installing the pressing equipment as the grapes were ready to be picked. That year,

288 tons of Concord grapes were pressed. By its tenth year in Westfield, the Welch’s factory had quadrupled in size and was pressing 4,500 tons of grapes annually.

The Fruits of Advertising

In 1901, Welch’s Grape Juice Company sponsored five booths at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, substantially increasing exposure. In 1903, Thomas Welch died and the company was rechartered, making Charles its sole owner. Charles was intimately involved with all facets of the business, as were his four sons. Because of his religious convictions, no part of the business was permitted to operate on Sundays. But he continued to expend a great deal of money on advertising, placing ads in religious, temperance, health, and medical journals, as well as in women’s periodicals and national magazines. In 1910 the company spent \$170,000 on advertising and sold \$1 million worth of juice; by 1913, sales had doubled. Around that

time, the company sponsored a national contest to see how many words could be made from the phrase “Welch’s Grape Juice,” and a top prize of \$10 was awarded to the winner (for 1,366 words).

Welch’s Grape Juice Company was a “full-service” company: buyer, processor, seller, employer. Welch’s consistently paid more than their competitors for grapes; between 1897 and 1922 it paid growers over \$7 million for their fruit and demanded quality and loyalty from them. But wages for factory and office workers were below the state average. However, interviews with former Welch’s employees mention job security and a sense of family that helped the company retain a steady labor force. An annual summer picnic for all employees was held on the Welch estate. The Welch family was also active in the community, supporting their church and serving on the boards of many local organizations.

In 1927, the Lake Erie grape belt stretched over

Sources include the definitive history of the company, *Welch’s Grape Juice: From Corporation to Co-Operative* (Syracuse University Press, 1977) by William Chazanof; local history files at the Chautauqua County Historical Society in Westfield; incorporation and Surrogate Court records held by the Chautauqua County Archives; and H.C. Taylor’s 1873 *Historical Sketches of the Town of Portland*.

60,000 acres. But production would gradually decline as yield per acre improved and grape prices dropped. Charles Welch died in 1926, and in 1928 the company was sold to a corporation in Nashville, Tennessee, diminishing the strong sense of family and community involvement. Welch’s was sold again in 1945, and then in 1952, this time to the National Grape Co-Operative Association, an organization of grape growers. By 2002, corporate headquarters had completed a move to Concord, Massachusetts, and although a grape processing plant still remains in Westfield, the administrative building built by Charles Welch in 1909 remains empty. But Chautauqua County is still the largest producer of grapes in New York State, with 15,500 acres dedicated to grape production. ■