

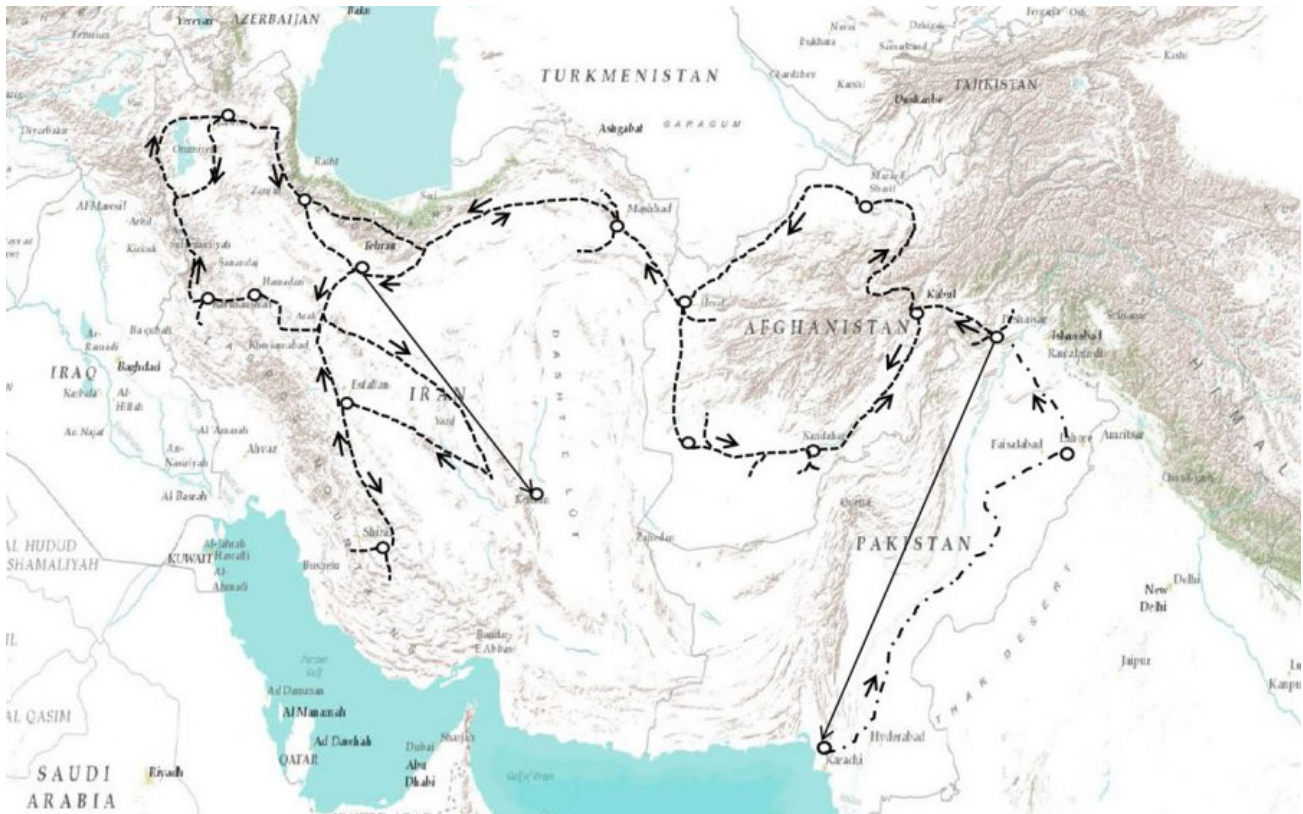
Larkmead



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REMEMBERING HAROLD OLMO: THE 'INDIANA JONES OF VITICULTURE'

JANE ANSON, DECANter, JANUARY 16, 2020



The map traces a journey taken in 1948, heading through Iran, skirting Iraq and Turkmenistan, down through Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It's covered with a mix of straight lines that represent travel by air, dashed lines for car or horse — including at times a wild horse known as a burro — and dash-and-dot lines to show travel by train.

Together they represent 12,000 miles covered by Harold Olmo in one year, while collecting plant seeds and cuttings that today form a key part of UC Davis' collection of genetically-diverse grapes. It is undoubtedly among the most impressive collections in the world.

If you had to list the qualities needed to be a vine geneticist, you might think of placing research skills at the top of the list. Patience, intellect and a working knowledge of laboratory equipment from a microscope to a computer would



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probably all be priorities.

And, of course, you wouldn't be too far out; former UC Davis professor Carole Meredith, who took over as Olmo's successor three years after his retirement in 1977, recalls that during her tenure (from 1980 to 2003) technology was essential for the pioneering work she undertook to uncover, among other things, DNA sequencing of grapes.

But the most important tools for her predecessor were (and I quote from an interview in Grape Collective) 'his own eyes and a pair of vineyard boots'.

They certainly helped Olmo build up a reputation as one of the world's most formidable and fearless researchers.

Born in San Francisco in 1909, Olmo got his early education in horticulture at the University of California, Berkeley, then earned his doctorate from Berkeley in plant genetics.

He began working in the field during Prohibition, making his first grape cross in 1931, and his work was essential to rebuilding the wine industry in the country after Prohibition was repealed in 1933.

He joined UC Davis as assistant professor of viticulture in 1938, and remained there until his retirement, by which time he was professor emeritus.

He created, among other things, a grapevine quarantine facility for imported vines, the highly-prized Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon clone and a wide range of Chardonnay clones, all aimed at unlocking the best flavours and complexity within the Californian climate.

And through it all, he continued to travel widely, becoming consultant to the UN for more than 20 years, as well as a Guggenheim Fellow and a Fulbright scholar. He died in 2006 one month before his 97th birthday,

I had heard of Olmo when UC Davis contacted me about writing this story, but only in the most general of terms. And then a few days after I had been sent some of his research papers, I met up by coincidence with Bonny Meyer, wife of Justin Meyer and co-founder of Silver Oak Cellars in Napa.

Within a few minutes of chatting it turned out that, while writing her PhD (in a non-related field), her desk was stationed in Olmo's office, and he had become a firm family friend.

'I remember he had filing cabinets full of research lined up against his office walls,' said Bonny, 'with the drawers labelled Book One, Book Two, Book Three and so on. He was too busy to ever sit down and write those books, and I



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often wondered if that was why he wasn't more widely known outside of the industry.'

Today the contents of those drawers, in the form of correspondence, research files, slides on grape varieties, grape variety reports by county, and materials from various symposiums, conferences, and advisory boards, are held at UC Davis, under file collection number D280.

The papers are recorded as covering '100 linear feet', which in non-library-speak means they would stretch 30 metres if laid out in standard archive boxes end to end.

That's a lot of information. Compare it, for example, to 33.4 linear feet that UC Davis holds from Jancis Robinson MW, or 47.6 linear feet from Robert Mondavi, or 64.5 linear feet from Maynard Amerine.

It's information that, to date, had only been accessible to visitors to the library.

But a recent bursary from the owners of Larkmead Vineyards, where Olmo established a research plot in 1939, will preserve and digitise the collection so that it can be shared more widely.

The first serious records should be available to consult online over the next 12 to 15 months, with archivist Beth Forrestal and head of special collections Kevin Miller currently working through them.

'The first step is to organise and describe the material in the collection down to item level. Right now it is described down to folder level,' said UC Davis' Axel Borg.

'The problem with Olmo's papers is that he would put several different items that he was working on into one folder. Let's say that he was economical.'

Once this process has taken place, we can expect to find invaluable information about a range of topics, including suggestions of varieties and clones that can thrive in the face of drought and heat issues, or that are resistant in the face of disease.

But it's not just wine scholars and grape growers who should be lining up.

Aspiring screen writers might want to take a browse also. It turns out that Olmo was called the 'Indiana Jones of viticulture' for a reason.

He spoke five languages, plus sign language, and was able to pick up local dialects within 'hours of being in an area',



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according to his daughter, Jeanne-Marie.

She tells of one story when, while searching for wild grapevines in the Kashmir Pass, the Afghan government insisted he take an armed escort of 20 soldiers because local warlords were fighting each other.

Another time his driver ran their car off the road in an accident, and abandoned him. Olmo was eventually found by Nomads who cared for him and nursed him back to health. And then there was the arrest following an unfortunate fatal collision between donkey and car, which led to him being held in a local jail until he could buy a replacement donkey, with a little help from the American consulate.

And he never stopped working, patenting his last grape aged 96, just a few months before his death.

'As soon as one question was answered, he was off to another,' as Jeanne-Marie puts it, still clearly taking great delight in talking about her father almost 15 years after his death.

And when the rest of us get to comb through his travel diaries, I'm thinking we're all going to be doing the same.