

# KEEPING DISASTER

# AT BAY

**On Saturday 21 December 2019 Vinehealth Australia will turn 120. While you're enjoying a pre-Christmas drink, raise a glass to the organisation that has been working hard to protect grapevines in South Australia since before you were born.**

**“W**hat am I going to do now?” Tears appeared in the eyes of the big man as he was forced to contemplate his future now that he had phylloxera in his vineyard. He had no idea where it had come from. Inexplicably, some vines had begun to yellow and look as though they would die. He called in the experts, and phylloxera was found on the roots. Their advice was that the insect would spread outwards slowly year by year, colonising fresh vines which would, in turn, yellow and die over a period of two or three years. Eventually the whole vineyard would be killed, and there was no way of stopping it. The only course of action was to grub out the vineyard and replant it on phylloxera-resistant rootstocks. But, he had exhausted himself planting the first time. He had neither the resources nor the will to begin again. He was finished. Such is the power of phylloxera! It affects people as well as vines.

Those stirring words are the introduction to Wally Boehm's book *The Phylloxera Fight* (1996).

Phylloxera has been called many things: the world's worst agricultural pest, the grapevine scourge, a deadly bastard. Phylloxera's ability to wreak havoc on wine regions is famous. There remains no cure for phylloxera-infested vines.

Some people say the absence of phylloxera in South Australia is down to luck. But few argue about the role Vinehealth Australia has played in helping to keep phylloxera and other grapevine nasties out of the State.

So where did it all begin, and why? The story started in Europe in the 1800s. Phylloxera was introduced into France on American vine cuttings and reported in 1865. Its presence was quickly felt. As a measure of the devastation phylloxera caused in France alone, it's been reported that 2 million acres (810,000 hectares) of vines were destroyed by phylloxera between 1868 and 1888. And 400 million sterling in lost revenue was calculated

in France between 1868 and 1884, directly due to phylloxera (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1890).

Many believe at least two-thirds of all European vineyards were destroyed, and some think the number is closer to 90 percent. European wine production plummeted around 75 percent overall between 1875 and 1889.

In the face of the growing international phylloxera threat (Figure 1), the South Australian wine industry persuaded the State Government to establish the *Vine Protection Act 1874*, prohibiting importation of vine material into the state.

The unrelenting advance of phylloxera through Europe was watched nervously by the Australian wine industry. Then in 1877, phylloxera was confirmed in vineyards in Geelong, having been reported undiagnosed two years prior (Figure 2).

Prevention efforts intensified in South Australia. *The Phylloxera Act 1899* established The Board – now Vinehealth Australia.

That first phylloxera board included some famous wine industry names: Thomas Hardy, George Fullerton Cleland, Henry Maydwell Martin, William Patrick Auld, Herman Büring, Benno Seppelt, Maurice William Holtze and Arthur James Perkins.

*The Phylloxera Act 1899* was a progressive piece of legislation which:

- Made provision for registration of all South Australian vineyards;
- Imposed a quarantine area of approximately 40m beyond any vines where phylloxera was found or suspected to be;
- Set levies for grapegrowers, winemakers and distillers;
- Compensated for plantings removed in eradication programs;
- Named six districts with one grower from each appointed to the board plus two;
- Prohibited replanting to vines for 10 years on phylloxerated land except with the sanction of the board; and
- Described a vine as living or dead.

