For me it all started with Inglenook…growing up surrounded by magnificent vineyards and bulwarked by Mt. St. John. I really did walk home from school through the vineyards every day and the winery was on my path. That was a must stop for a drink of cold water in the mysterious oak tasting room and a trip up the stairs to see what was going on with the wines. The smells were exotic and exciting. Wine was on our table every night. I played in the vineyards in the mustard in the winter, tasted the grapes when they were almost ready with their little berries and too many seeds. My treehouse was in a giant maple tree that hung over an Indian burial ground under the vines, and the mountain was rife with my secret places. Oh yes, and I used to pretend I was Barbara Stanwick riding through the vineyards in my high boots and breeches on my horse, Rex. On Sundays, my father would pop me in our ancient pickup truck and we would drive through the vineyards at one mile per hour with him pointing out the differences in the leaves of the Cabernet and Chardonnay vines.

My dad was the legendary John Daniel, Jr., third generation owner and manager of Inglenook Vineyards which was founded by my great-granduncle Gustav Niebaum in 1879. Talk about role models: Niebaum was a great innovator in the wine business whose wines were winning gold medals in Paris in the late 1800s. Under dad’s leadership, Inglenook was considered comparable to one of the Great Growths in France. His passion for the land and the legacy that he inherited was contagious and kinetic. Both these men shared the motto of “quality not profit”. Among other things, dad was Robert Mondavi’s mentor and the two of them shared the vision that Napa Valley could produce wines second to none. In 2001, The Wine Spectator said “But those who have had the opportunity to taste Daniel’s Inglenook Cabernets know that they are among the greatest red wines ever made.”

While doing a brilliant job of restoring and carrying forward the reputation of the winery following repeal of Prohibition in 1933, my father told me that he saw himself as the caretaker of it, and that one day it would all belong to my sister and me. However, even though the wines were highly acclaimed, the winery struggled financially, and dad sold it in 1964. His Inglenook Cask Cabernet was selling for $2.46 a bottle. Legacy gone, and most all of the remaining beautiful land gone when sold by my mother following dad’s death in 1970. How to rebuild?

What followed was a long path, and learning so much the hard way. Five years at Robert Mondavi Winery with my mentor Bob Mondavi, co-founding Dominus in 1982 and then Merryvale in 1983 with 10 years as president. All big learning years, but the family tradition kept pulling me, kept insisting that I bring John Daniel and the family legacy out of the dust bin of history and carry on.

Going forward was not optional. In 1995, my family sold our interests in Dominus and Merryvale, and started Lail Vineyards. Our holdings included 2.66 acres of Merlot in Yountville that had been part of Inglenook, very limited funding, and a mission to produce wines equal to those made by Niebaum and Daniel. Another driving force was to bring forward this fourth generation legacy into the 21st Century. I was 55, the exact age my dad was when he sold Inglenook. We hired Philippe Melka as our winemaker, who was just 28. We were his first consulting client. Today Robert Parker has called him “one of the nine most influential winemakers in the world”. We have been together for twenty vintages.

Our first wine was J. Daniel Cuvee, a Cabernet named in honor of my dad. No pressure involved in that nomenclature. The wine had to be brilliant! It had to be ranked among the best. It had to be somehow a celebration of his name and legion accomplishments. This was going to be an uphill climb.

The ensuing twenty years were exciting. Sometimes much more exciting than we would have liked. Financial consultants said often that we were not going to make it. But I am stubborn and determined if nothing else, and we continued to dodge the hail of bullets. Meanwhile we were farmers very much under the control of Mother Nature. In 2005 we did not bottle our flagship Sauvignon Blanc as it did not meet our standards. In 2011 when we tasted through the lots of young wines we had just harvested, I actually despaired as I did not think we would be able to produce any red wine due to the quality. Luckily, thanks to Philippe’s extraordinary talent, we had a happy ending and lovely wines.

To be honest the wine business is really tough, and every small compliment, every sale, every perceived victory is magnified and signifies making progress. Over the years the critics have been kind, and their reviews consistently excellent. And, I suspect you know that like it or not, scores do sell wines.

Throughout the years, I liked to think that dad was keeping an eye out to see how we were doing. That was underscored this summer when I had a bike accident in Sun Valley. I had gone for a ride without my cell phone or any money and I crashed in the weeds and heard my wrist snap as I hit the ground. I was all alone, and there was nothing to do except hitchhike to the hospital since I couldn’t ride the bike. I caught a ride with a man who introduced himself as Dan who kindly drove me to the hospital, picked up my bicycle, and could not have been more kind. When I got home I sent him a bottle of wine and a thank you. He responded by signing up on our mailing list with his full name – John Daniel.

On October 31, Robert Parker gave the 2012 J. Daniel Cuvee Cabernet Sauvignon 100 points. I was reminded of Jimmy Valvano’s quote, “don’t give up, don’t ever give up.” For me it was an affirmation that we had been making outstanding wines for years. It was a public acknowledgement of making wine that was up to carrying my dad’s name. It was a confirmation of sorts that we have been successful in bringing the excellence of wines of our ancestors into the 21st Century. It was a dream. It was Cinderella at the ball.

Scores? They come and go. But just this once I am embracing the 100 point rating as a “bravo” for twenty years of unwavering vision and dedicated work of the Lail family and team.