After Otto Teller, owner of the Old Hill vineyard in Glen Ellen, California, died at the age of 90 on December 1, 1998, a memorial service took place at the red barn that serves as the center of Oak Hill Farm. Admitted by invitation only, 150 people showed up. Obituaries had been published in California and Montana, and excerpts were read from letters that had come in from around the country at the request of Otto's widow Anne. Even for those who didn't know him, the portraits evoked a singular human being — a big, irascible, and exasperating figure who was generous to a fault, prodigious in his creative and generative energy, and uncompromising in his devotion to the natural world and the quality of life.

"Mose," as Teller was known to his friends, was an environmentalist and organic farmer decades before those pursuits became politically correct. That was fitting, since Teller made a kind of career out of being impolitic. Independently and unapologetically wealthy, he was a self-proclaimed “country slicker” who always wore a tie to dinner, insisted on being served, and made regular trips in his Jaguar to the Pacific Union Club for 'luncheon.' He also funded several conservation and alternative-energy organizations, donated money to the homeless and disabled, supported an extended Mexican family, and established a 1,300-acre wildlife refuge in western Montana. And that's saying nothing of his personal generosity to friends and acquaintances, frequently delivered with verbal barbs about their ethical or stylistic shortcomings. In short, Teller was a confounding and commanding figure in a grand old style of eccentric American outdoorsmen whose like has now largely passed from the earth. As Chris Miller, his great-nephew and manager of the Teller Refuge, summed up: "He was a bear."

Otto Teller was born on a farm outside Cleveland, Ohio in 1908. His father, who loved opera and made cough syrup from horehound and onions, had a vineyard on Lake Erie. Not inclined to stick around, Otto left the Midwest for the University of California at Berkeley (rumors also place him briefly at Princeton and Stanford), after which he worked for the Pope & Talbot steamship line, which transported lumber around the world. Teller circumnavigated the globe a couple of times as a young man, passing the months at sea by reading the classics. When he returned to San Francisco, he supported himself as a salesman for the Hastings clothing company. "It was always a joke that Mose sold ties during the Depression," says Anne.

When World War Two started, Teller entered the Army Air Corps, where he insulated cargo carriers and trained pilots and navigators. He was stationed in Africa, Burma, and India, but was sent home when he came down with dengue fever. When the war ended, he served as a public

relations officer at the international peace conference at Hamilton Air Force Base that established the United Nations in 1945.

At the beginning of the war, Teller had married Eleana Folger, heiress to the coffee fortune of the same name. Afterwards, the two divided their time between the San Francisco suburb of Hillsborough and the Valley of the Moon. They bought Magnolia Farm on Eighth Street East in Sonoma, an experimental garden for semitropical plants like palms and figs, and later acquired Oak Hill Farm in Glen Ellen, which had previously produced charcoal, Black Angus cattle, and illegal gambling profits (the preceding owner was indicted). The Tellers raised sheep and pears, later switching to flowers and shrubs for the wholesale market. Far ahead of their time, they eschewed the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers on the farm.

Like Otto, Eleana was an outdoor enthusiast. The couple made frequent trips to Montana, where Otto pursued the purist pastime of dry fly fishing. On his way to the Gallatin River one day, he saw a bulldozer plowing a new logging road and pushing the dirt into the river. From that moment on, Teller became a devoted conservationist. He was the first California member of the environmental group Trout Unlimited, pushing for forest management reform and frequently funding it from his own pocket. He had a lot of rich and influential friends, including the singer Bing Crosby and Walter Haas of Levi Strauss, and he recruited several Fortune 500 executives to his cause. He even lobbied President Richard Nixon with a letter beginning "Dear Dick." Ultimately, in 1976, Congress passed the National Forest Management Act, which limited clearcutting and called for public participation in long-term forestry planning.

That same year, Teller founded the Sonoma Land Trust, deeding it the development rights for his farm. It was also the year that he met Anne. Eleana had died in 1973, leaving Otto in charge of their holdings; Teller ran Oak Hill as a kind of benevolent despot, providing employment and living quarters for "everybody fresh off the boat from Zacatecas," as Anne recalls. "When an airplane flew low over the farm, twenty-five people dove for cover." Jesus ("Chuy") Soto, who eventually became the foreman after growing up on the farm, had a son named Benny who often went barefoot. One day Otto gave Benny a hundred-dollar bill and told him to tell his father to buy him some proper footwear. After that, Benny took off his shoes whenever he saw Otto coming.

Anne, a landscape gardener, had grown up in Palo Alto, a descendant of a Danish family that had settled in Petaluma in the 1800s, dairy farming on D Street. Some of her fondest childhood

memories were of milking cows, feeding pigs, and cleaning out chicken coops. Later, however, her father forsook family travel north of the Golden Gate Bridge, claiming that there was "too much country" there. Anne's mother crossed him up by purchasing 300 acres on Hood Mountain in the Mayacamas Range. Anne raised her own family in San Francisco when it was "an uncomplicated but sophisticated place. You could take the bus anywhere — the opera, the movies, the park, the library. We never locked our house." They did spend their summers on Hood Mountain, which they reached by way of Sonoma Valley. Driving on Highway 12 past the geese and peach blossoms of Oak Hill Farm, Anne always thought it seemed like an interesting place.

Anne met Otto at a dinner party given by friends who thought the two might get along. "We did, right off the bat," she says. "We were both interested in bees and honey and Mexicans and growing things. And we shared a deep interest in wildness and unmanaged places." Still, she wasn't quite prepared for the unmanaged nature of Oak Hill Farm: "I could see that I was stepping into a maelstrom. Otto had always been in charge because that's how he was, but he didn't know any more about farming than anybody else. He didn't have an especially green thumb, or any real scientific know-how. Mose was a 'taster': Some days he'd think about farming; some days he'd fix his cars; some days he'd work on his inventions. He built composting nonflushable toilets, and he had the whole house piped with water-jacket radiators for passive solar heating. Other days he'd drive into San Francisco. We had luncheon every day, which was different from lunch. We always had wine, and we never had a sandwich in our whole lives together. During the day, Mose would go around in muddy farm clothes, but at night he'd always dress for dinner. To him, dinner was a celebration of the day.

"The farm was a way of life more than anything else," Anne says. "It was a great, beautiful place to live, nine-tenths of which was for wildlife. It wasn't commercial, but I knew it was a great concept, so bit by bit I jumped in where Mose really didn't want me to be. He had started with spring flowers, but there was no crop in summer, and the Mexicans all went away. So we started growing vegetables and summer flowers, and put up a stand on the highway. Nobody stopped, so we moved into the red barn and shipped a lot of flowers and greens. The first year, we broke even, and we made money in the mid-Eighties when we discovered dry flower wreaths and pepper ristras and garlic braids. People were knocking each other over to get to them — we had lines at the barn,

at least until competition came in and took away some of our business. But little by little, we managed to equalize things year-round."

Gradually expanding as Teller acquired adjoining properties, Oak Hill Farm consisted of about 1,000 acres in 1981. Just across Highway 12 was another available 40-acre parcel, half of which had Zinfandel vines planted in the nineteenth century. "It had a 'For Sale' sign on it for years," Anne remembers. "It was a dumpsite for the owner's junk. I'd never seen anything like it — it was covered with old porcelain bathroom fixtures and pipes, and the vineyard was let go to wild plants and rootstock so you couldn't even see the grapes. The owner didn't care about agriculture, and she was offering the place for a bargain basement price. I encouraged Otto to buy it.

"It was a good project for him. He took out the blackberries, atriplex, and poison oak with a dragline and remodelled a couple of houses that were on the property. U.C. Davis's advice for the vineyard was to start all over with methyl bromide." Teller, however, applied the same standards to the vineyard that he did to his farm. Instead of spraying it with herbicides and fertilizer, he stimulated growth with foliar kelp and left a natural cover of grass, depending on ladybugs and praying mantises to take care of pests. The deep-rooted, 100-year-old vines produced less than a ton of Zinfandel grapes per acre. But what grapes! The Old Hill Ranch (as it was named, after the person who planted it in the 1800s) conferred wine that was staggering in its deep, dark complexity.

In 1983 Joel Peterson dropped by the vineyard with his mentor, Joseph Swan. He must have made a decent impression, because the following year Otto called and asked Joel if he wanted the grapes. Anyone who's followed Ravenswood that long recalls 1984 as the first in a long line of stunning Old Hill Zins. Since quality was Teller's top priority, he saw no need to "improve" the vineyard when such wine was coming out of it. On that score, he and Joel saw eye to eye — so much so that, when Ravenswood was looking to move from its 5,000-case warehouse on Broadway, for a time there was talk of building a winery on the Old Hill site. In Anne's view, it's probably best that that didn't happen. "It would have been hard to be on Otto's property and adhere to his admonitions," she says.

Teller's health deteriorated in the late 1990s. When his ranch manager quit, Anne put in a call for help to one of her four children: Ted Bucklin, who had been living in New Mexico since

1978, doing carpentry, getting a master's in social work and laboring for the state department of human services. "I don't have a farming background," Ted says, "but I love working with dirt, making it rich and healthy." Ted now serves as Oak Hill Farm's general manager and chief salesman, driving into San Francisco for the midnight shift on the wholesale flower market several times per week. Anne does the seeding, propagating, and pruning, while the crew performs planting, weeding, harvesting, and maintenance. Their collective and somewhat wistful goal is to be competitive in the now-burgeoning business of organic farming.

"Our thrust has been to keep things as agricultural as possible," says Anne. "It's a losing battle, because this place isn't high-tech. We're old-fashioned farmers, dawn to dusk. The ranch is unusual because of all the different varieties that we grow. Most farms have four or five little things, but his one has about a hundred. That's a huge number of plants. We hedged our bets by diversifying, probably too much. There's a lot of appeal to monocultural crops like grapes and olives. Simplification is one of our goals; ultimately, we need a young educated person with a scientific background who can operate equipment and grow lettuce. I can't; it's too delicate. I can grow tomatoes, corn, peppers, and beans. Those are easy."

"There's something very attractive about doing only one thing," Ted concurs. "Even with different grape varieties, your practices are all fairly similar. And this area is set up to do wine grapes. Still, the vineyard often feels like a major distraction from the other things that I have to do."

"But it's our largest single planting," says Anne. "People are always asking us why we didn't plant more grapes when the boom was on. Maybe it was because of nostalgia, or a desire to be different, or because we were trying to develop what we already had. I miss Sonoma Valley, really, the way it used to be, with other crops like prunes and walnuts. Another pocket of grapes on the ranch might be nice, but I'm not philosophically for that kind of culture. Those of us in environmental circles have a kind of disdain for vineyardists. There's a lot of carelessness involved in practices like strip spraying, watering, and hillside cultivation. I heard somebody say that a vineyard is just one step up from a subdivision. But it sure would be nice to have all that income. Think of the equipment you could buy!"

For now, Anne and Ted are limiting themselves to adjustments at Old Hill. Six nonproductive acres were taken out in 1998 and replanted with budwood that Joel Peterson

selected from old vineyards (including Old Hill itself) that exhibit characteristics he prizes, such as loose clusters and low vigor for intensity of flavor. Phil Coturri has now been brought in to manage the vineyard organically, consistent with Otto's legacy and philosophy.

"Mose was a very unconventional man," Anne says. "He had such a grasp of what was really important to him. He couldn't stand excesses or decorations or the distractions of modern life. He knew what was good, elegant, and classic, and he absolutely eschewed anything that didn't meet his standards. He wouldn't tolerate mediocrity. He didn't waste his own time. He was careful to surround himself with things he enjoyed and people he respected. He worked out a special recipe for life and he stuck to it."