

President:
Tom Titmus
299-2030



NEWS

Lafayette, California

April 2004

Vol. 31, No. 2

LHS Annual "Pot Luck" Dinner

- Date: Tuesday May 11, 2004
- Time: 6 pm Social Hour
7 pm Dinner
8 pm Short business meeting to elect officers, followed by –
- Speaker: Betty Maffei – The history of the Norton Coal Mines
Director of the Contra Costa History Center
- Place: Lafayette Veterans Hall, Mt. Diablo Blvd. At 1st Street
- Price: \$5.00 per person to help defray LHS costs. PLUS
Your favorite hearty salad or casserole (please bring serving utensils)
Membership dues will be collected if you have not already renewed
- Questions: Call Dick Johnson (283-0100) or Ollie Hamlin (283-6822)

Betty Maffei to be Annual Dinner Speaker

Long time Contra Costa resident, and Director of the Contra Costa Historical Center Betty Maffei is to be the guest speaker at our annual potluck dinner. Her topic will be the history of the Norton Coal Mines. Ms. Maffei's family were early pioneers in East County having come to the area in 1876. She is a graduate of University of California where she majored in History and Journalism. She has been with the History Center as director since 1985.

The Tuesday May 11th meeting begins with doors opening at the Veterans Memorial building at 6:00. Time to get reacquainted is scheduled 6:00 and 7:00 with a no host bar of wine and beer available. Dinner begins at 7:00. We ask that members bring either a salad or a main dish. (Board members bring dessert and coffee). A short meeting to vote for our board will follow dinner. Our guest speaker's talk should begin about 8:00.

"We believe in the power of history to ignite the imagination, stimulate thought and provide enjoyment. Through our collections and programs we strove to link Lafayette's history to the lives of people."

President's Message

It really is springtime now! For a while there I was wondering. Now it's time for renewed growth and revitalization of Lafayette's new residents and seasoned veterans alike.

The Lafayette Historical Society has had a recent spurt in growth and we look forward to continuing expansion. We all welcome the new members and invite you to join in LHS activities, such as helping prepare the archives in anticipation of our impending move to the new library (otherwise known as the Lafayette Learning Center), interviewing or writing for the newsletter (or stuffing envelopes if that's your pleasure), repairing and refurbishing our Model T fire engine, or doing historical research. Or you may want to create your own local historical specialty.

I urge you to attend the LHS annual meeting/potluck, which is set for Tuesday, May 11, 2004 6:00 p.m. at the Veterans Building on Mt Diablo Blvd. Come down and meet us! Bring your friends and neighbors! Jop Van Overveen has assured a great program, as always, and has a speaker who will get and keep your attention. The Vets Building is a piece of history in the making. In two years it will

be replaced by a new library of national stature. Become one of the oldtimers who'll be saying, "I remember when...."

Plans are also well under way for the Lafayette Art & Wine Festival, set for September 18 and 19 of this year. Old Betsy, the famous Model T fire engine, will be on display. Her health and wellbeing are under the supervision of Dr. George Wasson (well, he is a doctor of jurisprudence). He has help caring for Betsy, but can and will welcome new enthusiasts. You may be able to tell us things about our Model T that we never knew. There are very few of us left who know how to put a Model T into reverse by using that third pedal. And does anyone know someone who can adjust an interplanetary gear, whatever that is?

Please don't hesitate to ask questions, make suggestions, commend, or even criticize (nobody's perfect). After all, the political season is building up steam and freedom of speech and assembly are in force. Join in with us. The more the merrier, and bless you all, every one.

—*Thomas Titmus, President*

New Lafayette Library/Learning Center Update

We will have a model of the new Lafayette Library, with copies of the floor plans, at the annual Lafayette Historical Society potluck dinner on May 11, 2004 for everyone to inspect. Mary McCosker and I will be able to answer your questions. We feel that LHS has fared very well with respect to the location and space allotted to the LHS display areas for archives, a work area and research room, a separate storage room, and, especially, a prominent display area for Old Betsy.

Because the new library will be built on the present site of the Lafayette Veterans Building, the timing of the "New Vets Building" will determine the

schedule for construction of the new library. Bids for the New Vets building were recently received by the city and the successful bidder was issued a contract. A date for the groundbreaking ceremony will be announced soon (probably before this newsletter is published). The target date for the Vets to move into their new building is Veterans Day, 2005. Then the old Vets building will be demolished and the new Lafayette Library will be started, with a projected completion date sometime in 2007.

Bring your questions and comments to the Potluck or telephone Marechal Duncan at 283-6812.

—*Marechal Duncan*

Pioneers Journey West

Elam Brown was a farmer who was born in New York in 1797 and lived as a child in Massachusetts. He moved to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois searching for good land for farming. When Elam was 49, his wife died, leaving him with four young children. In 1846, having heard stories of fertile lands to the west, he headed up a wagon train that left from St. Joseph, Missouri, to cross the plains and head toward the western territories.

The wagon train was made up of 14 families in 16 prairie schooners (wagons) pulled by oxen. These wagons were made of wood, with wood and metal wheels and large canvas covers to keep out sun, rain, and wind. The wagons were only large enough to carry food and a few family possessions, so only babies, small children, and the elderly could ride in them.

Because adults and older children had to walk alongside the wagons, the wagon train could travel only about 10 to 12 miles a day. During the six month trip west, the wagon train dealt with many dangers and hardships along the way: bad weather, illness and death, and hostile Native Americans who felt their lands and traditions were threatened by the pioneers. Elam Brown's group passed over the Sierra Nevada Mountains only weeks before the Donner Party attempted its crossing and met with an early snowstorm.

Elam Brown's wagon train party had originally planned to go to the Oregon Territory, but after grass for the animals and water became difficult to find, the group decided to head to the California Territory.

On the way west, Elam Brown met Margaret Allen. Margaret, whose husband Isaac had died during the journey, was left a widow traveling with five of her children. Elam and Margaret were married on July 1, 1847, after their arrival in California.

Upon arriving in our area, Elam Brown spent the summer of 1847 cutting redwood trees near Moraga. In the fall of that year, he purchased the

land of Ranch Acalanes, along with 300 head of cattle, from William Leidesdorff for \$900. A portion of the money used to purchase the Rancho had been hidden in an eight-day clock that Margaret Allen Brown had carried across the plains in her wagon.

Elam and his family first settled in the Happy Valley area in February of 1848, where they built a simple shelter. Later, they built other houses, the final one being in the downtown area of Lafayette, constructed from redwood boards that Elam had cut in Moraga. Elam Brown raised cattle and planted grain, which grew easily in the soil of the area. Spring and summer days were warm, and with adequate amounts of rain, his crops were successful. Elam and Margaret were the first citizens of Lafayette and only the second non-Native Americans to settle in Contra Costa County.

Nathaniel Jones, who had also traveled overland to California in Elam Brown's wagon train, married one of Margaret Allen's daughters - Elizabeth - and came with Brown to the lumber mill in Moraga. Jones was the first person to buy land from Elam Brown in Rancho Acalanes, paying \$100 for more than 300 acres in 1847 in the Happy Valley area. He became a farmer at "Locust Farm", named after the black locust trees that he planted on his property. Today, these trees can be seen along the banks of Lafayette's creeks. Jones also became the first sheriff of Contra Costa County.

—Mary McCosker

*Excerpted from **A Town Called Lafayette** by Emily Haas and Mary McCosker. The book is available for purchase at the Lafayette Book Store and The Storyteller.*

Elam Brown Reacts to the Squirrel Nuisance Abatement Law

To suburbanites, local squirrels may be frisky tree-dwellers that raid bird feeders and tease family pets with their antics. Ground squirrels, on the other hand, cause economic losses to farmers and others and sometimes carry vectors for bubonic plague. Following the Great Flood of 1862, when the Central Valley became a vast inland sea and the state was drenched by record rains, “myriads” of ground squirrels starved to death or drowned. They were not entirely wiped out, however, and concerted efforts were undertaken to kill these rodents, which were “threatening to strip the pastures and grain fields, and make a desert of the fruitful Land.” For instance, the new Farmers’ Club met in Walnut Creek and sought the most effective way to control them. In spite of the danger of starting fires in dry fields with gunfire, shooting was one option. One shooting match took place in Pacheco, when two teams competed to see which one could kill the most ground squirrels in one day. The prize was a “strawberry feast” for the winners. The winners killed 824, and the losers only 604, with the average per hunter about 60. Still, in spite of the efforts of hunters, hawks and coyotes, rodent damage continued, leading to the Squirrel Nuisance Abatement Law (1874).

The first of twenty-two sections made its intent clear:

“Sec.1. Squirrels infesting lands in the counties of Contra Costa and Alameda are hereby declared to be a public nuisance TO BE DESTROYED BY LAND OWNERS - IN CASE OF THEIR NEGLIGENCE, BY PUBLIC AGENTS - EXPENSE TO BE A LIEN TO THE LAND....”

Implementation of this legislation brought forth strong reactions, including that of highly respected Squire Elam Brown. In a lengthy letter to the editor of the *Gazette*, part of which follows, he stated his objections to the provision of a tax of thirty cents on the dollar and continued:

“I confess entertaining an objection to a law that gives a right of coming on my farm and into my field with a company of irresponsible men, with their poison and shot guns, to straggle at will through my

stock and stubble field, where one spark of powder, or on match carelessly or accidentally dropped, may convey destruction to my house, barn, fences and all provender, and, consequently to the stock. This is no visionary description. Three times last summer my fields were fired by powder for shot guns; and only [by] the greatest exertion of twelve to fifteen men each time, my property was saved from a wide spread conflagration. It may be argued that they will be careful. That supposition is all we have for protection. The law gives them possession of our farms, but no provisions of protecting us in the law. . . . How glad I would have been if that fund could be applied to squirrel scalps, at 2_ cents each. The objection was that it would impoverish the county. It would have paid for twenty-four scalps to one under the old law. The \$30,000, or 30 per cent, whatever it may be, is not to pay for squirrel scalps, is not to pay for poison or powder or shot; but the money is to pay off thirty-two additional officers in our county; to oversee us, to tell us what and when and how, we are to manage our affairs. Thirty-two almost doubles the number of our county officials. These are to have \$3 dollars per day - with the unlimited power of hiring any number of aids [sic] as their honesty or dishonesty suggests; they are to have \$2 per day; and this is at the people’s expense, in addition to the tax. If this does not prove a far worse scourge than squirrel nuisances I shall lose my reputation of guessing. All arguments sustaining this law that I have heard are based upon the necessity of compelling men to kill squirrels on their own land. This is the palliation for the enormous expense of thirty-two more officers. Far better to have made provisions in the trespass law; and our magistrate and constables could have executed the law. The Marshall power is made absolute, but magistrates and courts are governed by constitutional laws. In other counties rabbits and quails are protected; but in this county, cows and colts are not. How arbitrary the man is who objects to giving over his farm to a marshal and his hirelings.

Yours truly, Elam Brown”

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By the end of the century a more effective means of control was developed by E. W. Hilgard, eminent dean of UC's Department of Agriculture. This was gassing by carbon sulphide sent into squirrel holes. The ground squirrel population declined, but gnawing and tunneling continued.

Today the county no longer plays a major role in eradication. Private landowners, railroad companies, BART, Caltrans and other entities hire contractors for this purpose, the contractors using smoke bombs and poison grain. Crop lands, railroad embankments, levees, and rights-of-way suffer much less damage than they did all those years ago. Would Elam Brown be pleased? Probably.

Ruth Dyer

(Most of this article is based on information from the Contra Costa Gazette found in the Mutnick papers at the CCCHS History Center. Larry Yost at the CCC Department of Agriculture graciously supplied additional information).

2003/2004 Directors

President: Tom Titmus	299-2030
Vice President: Marechal Duncan	283-6812
Treasurer: Paul Sheehan.....	284-1287
Recording Secretary: Ruth Dyer	283-8312
Corresponding Secretary: Oliver Hamlin	283-6822
Archive Retrieval: Mary McCosker.....	284-5376
Archive Database: Dorothy Walker	283-3303
Programs: Joseph Van Overveen	283-3650
Keith Blakeney	284-2221
George Wasson	284-4603

2003/2004 Committee Chairs

Potluck Dinner: Richard Johnson	283-0199
Walking Tours: Mary McCosker	284-5376
Newsletter: Dorothy Walker, Charlotte Robertson	
Fire Engine: George Wasson.....	284-4603
Membership: Oliver Hamlin	283-6822

Old Betsy — Everybody's Favorite Fire Engine

I am often asked, "How is your fire engine?" I always respond that Old Betsy is not my fire engine. Her title is held by the City of Lafayette, and she is maintained by the Lafayette Historical Society, although, to be sure, she has resided in my garage for more than twenty-five years.

Old Betsy is an artifact of Lafayette's early days. When she became a part of the Lafayette Fire District in the 1920s, she was the first motorized fire engine of the volunteer fire district. Her history since her active duty days is unclear, but she was rediscovered in an auto collector's yard about 1974 and was acquired with donations from the Lafayette Historical Society, the City of Lafayette, and many Lafayette citizens.

The Historical Society agreed to maintain Old Betsy and make her available for activities within the city. This means that before she is moved into her allocated quarters in the Lafayette Learning Center (Library and Historical Center), we have a responsibility to get Old Betsy into good working condition and to make her look her best. As we may have mentioned before, the new space at the

Center will permit Old Betsy to be viewed by the public from street level on Golden Gate Way, and we want her to feel proud of herself.

Several years ago, a group of Historical Society members removed all of her metal work (fenders and hood) and had them straightened and painted a nice, bright fire engine red. That took care of her appearance at the front end. The rest of the vehicle, from the windshield to the tail running board, is mostly wood—wood that is probably 80-plus years old. When we acquired Old Betsy, some Lafayette citizens repainted most of the body but did nothing to restore the underlying wood.

Now Old Betsy needs reworking in several areas where the wood has deteriorated badly. Some refurbishing can be done by amateurs, —maybe you and some friends will join in—who can remove and replace boards. This past winter Marechal Duncan cleaned and repainted the ladder and the ax. Now they both look absolutely first rate. Other "small" jobs can also be done at someone's leisure. The toolbox that fits on the running board

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needs to be cleaned, sanded and painted. A fire extinguisher and holder need to be cleaned and reinstalled on a running board. These are just a couple of the touches that will benefit from the tender loving care of someone who is willing to give a little time. Much of the needed work can be accomplished a little at a time, but with the opening of the Lafayette Learning Center scheduled for 2007, it's time to start planning.

Even with lots of help, some work will have to be done by professionals. The wooden spokes of the wheels, for example, will need skilled work. Each wheel can be rebuilt for about \$500. We got a good start on the funding for Old Betsy's restoration last month, when the Lafayette Women's Club

contributed \$500. We are looking into additional grant sources for some of the remaining funds. We also regularly receive contributions from LHS members for this cause.

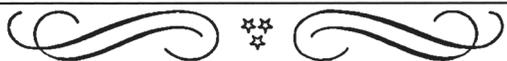
And this is all as it should be. Old Betsy is one of OUR connections to Lafayette's past. She is yours and mine, and we all need to help in making her look her best. Your calls to me or others in the Lafayette Historical Society will be appreciated, and contributions are always appreciated.

—George Wasson



Lafayette Historical Society

POST OFFICE BOX 133, LAFAYETTE, CA 94549



Lafayette Historical Society CALENDAR

ANNUAL POT LUCK DINNER MEETING

- Date:** Tuesday, May 11, 2004
- Time:** 6 pm Social Hour
7 pm Dinner
8 pm Short business items,
followed by....
- Speaker:** Betty Maffei, *Director of the
Contra Costa County History
Center.*
- Place:** Lafayette Veterans Memorial
Hall • Mt. Diablo Blvd. at 1st
Street • lower floor (on 1st St.)

May 11th will be the date of our **Annual Pot Luck Dinner**. It will be a nostalgic time, as it is our last time meeting in the Veterans building. (*See the article on the new library*). The speaker for the event will be **Betty Maffei, Director of the Contra Costa County History Center**. More information will follow in our April Newsletter.



Lafayette Historical Society Member Information (Please photocopy form for additional names)

Name:

Spouse:

Address:

City/State/Zip

Daytime Phone:

Evening Phone:

Membership Categories and Annual Dues: *(please check one)*

—— Life membership \$100.00 (one time fee) —— Family membership \$10.00

—— Business membership \$50.00 —— Student membership \$2.50

Please indicate areas of special interest

—— Annual dinner —— Archives —— LHS Online —— Displays

—— Photo collection —— Programs —— Oral History —— Fire Engine

—— Landmarks —— News Clips —— Research —— Telephoning

—— Walking Tours —— Other