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Lafayette Historical Society

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NEWS

Lafayette, California

September 2004

Vol. 31, No. 3

President's Message

The summer of 2004 is drawing to a close, and the weather is becoming fantastic. That's been the pattern for the more than 60 years that I have lived in Contra Costa County. September and October are always beautiful: football season gets under way, the World Series approaches, and the kids are just "longing" to get back into school and continue their educational pursuits. (Who is kidding who here? Or is it whom?)

In any event, the Lafayette Historical Society is back in full swing after the lazy summer. We are eager to welcome new members, particularly new or old Lafayette residents who would enjoy helping to maintain and improve the treasures of our charming city.

One immediate job is the inventory of artifacts and the scanning of photographs, both of which will need to be entered into our computer system before the move to the new library. We're looking for your help with art, cataloguing, and computer skills. Many hands will make light work, and we expect this to be an enjoyable ongoing volunteer pastime during the coming months.

The Lafayette Art and Wine Festival is set for the weekend of September 18th and 19th. Our designated location will be on Lafayette Circle with the Friends of the Library and on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, our classic fire engine "Old Betsy," who is working better than she ever did (thanks to George Wasson, Marechal Duncan, Lee Vollquardsen, and the generosity of our members) will be on display under the watchful eye of "chief" George Wasson, along with other volunteers from LHS.

Now - back to the future - Ralph Waldo Emerson once stated "the creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn." You may be the acorn that creates the forest of volunteers need to continue and expand the legacy of LHS. You are hereby challenged to bring one new member to your society.

—Thomas Titmas, President

LHS Annual Meeting and Pot Luck

On May 11, 2004, sixty-eight members of the Lafayette Historical Society and guests met for the annual meeting and potluck. The featured speaker, Betty Maffei, spoke about early Contra Costa County days. Members also had the opportunity to view architectural models of the Veteran's Building and the Lafayette Library and enjoyed the potluck at the Veterans Building in a room decorated by Dick Johnson and Ollie Hamlin. President Tom Titmus was pleased with the turnout and hopes many of the guests will return as members. Erling Horn, the present mayor of Lafayette, two previous mayors, Bob Fischer and George Wasson, and City Attorney Charlie Williams joined in the festivities.

Ms. Maffei, director of the Contra Costa County Historical Center in Martinez, gave a multi-media presentation on Nortonville. Her grandparents emigrated to the United States in the 1800s and settled there, where her grandfather worked in mining.

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

Ms. Maffei noted that in the 1870s Nortonville, a “company town” for the Southport Land Company, was the largest city in the county, with a population of 1,500 people. At the time, California was in the midst of a great expansion, which heightened the demand for coal, and coal was the catalyst for Nortonville’s prosperity. The company owned the local coalmines and the land on which the city was built. As time passed, the mines became depleted and petroleum-based energy became more available. Californians started using oil and gas as their main resources for fuel.

Marechal Duncan shared architectural models for the Veteran’s Building and Lafayette Library with members. LHS has been a major supporter of the development and construction of the library. Bob Fischer gave a stirring speech on the importance of the community’s enthusiastic support for the new library/learning center. This is one of the most important projects the city has started in the new millennium.

George Wasson gave an update on “old Betsy,” the Society’s fire engine. Special recognition was given to Marechal Duncan for his help in restoring and painting it. We also thanked Lee Volquardsen, “The Model T Whisperer,” for his continued and untiring efforts.

Mayor Erling Horn presented the Society with a special case that contained two flags: one is hand sown, the product of a competition for the design of a banner to celebrate the city’s incorporation. The second flag is the official successor to the first. Both flags will be displayed in our History Room in the New Library.

If you are interested in Nortonville, or other subjects in the county’s history, visit Betty Maffei at the Contra Costa County Historical Center, 610 Main Street, Martinez, 229-1042.

—Paul Sheehan

Lafayette Cemetery: Guardian of History for 150 Years

It was in 1979 that members of the Lafayette Historical Society clustered at the gate of Lafayette Cemetery to dedicate an historic plaque. This was fitting, since 125 years before the first recorded burial took place on this then-grassy knoll.

David Hodges had lost his thirteen-year-old daughter, Henrietta, to tuberculosis and asked his neighbor, Medford Gorham, for permission to bury her on Gorham’s property. At the top of this site; looking out to Mt. Diablo, she lies under a tree in the Hodges family plot.

It is believed there probably were earlier burials, perhaps of Indians, and other interments which were not recorded. Historian Dorothy Mutnick writes of one:

Uncle Med Gorham give that cemetery off of his ranch for the cemetery. Now there was a man killed in Moraga Valley with wild cattle and nobody knew who he was and they couldn’t find out who he was

or anything and so he gave that to the cemetery and they buried that man there. He was the first person buried in the Lafayette cemetery... that was before we come here. (Adelaide Gerow Allen, in Dorothy Gittinger Mutnick’s, *Some California Poppies II*: 580.)

Other families from Taylor Valley and down the road at La Fayette came together and bought undivided interests in this land, which the 1856 Road Record called the “Grave Yard in Taylor Valley.” In reality, the property did not belong to Gorham after all, but was on Manuel Valencia’s Rancho Boca de la Canada del Pinole. However, Gorham was able to buy it and add it to his farm. In 1874 he then sold 4.5 acres of the property to the cemetery for \$100 in gold coin.

The northern boundary of La Fayette Cemetery was Oakland Road (1877), at the wye where the road to Martinez curved off to the northeast and

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the road to Walnut Creek curves to the southeast. This gave the northern border a point which the State of California later bought for a highway which became today's Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

Having bought the property, residents formed the Cemetery Corporation of La Fayette (1874). The six directors set the price of a plot at \$ 4, later \$5. The cost could be worked off at the rate of \$3 a day for a man and horse. Members marked the boundaries of this pastureland and located the avenues, while owners of individual plots planted trees and shrubs. Work parties were formed, but few people appeared to perform their tasks. Unsold plots were neglected. Grass fires swept the site, destroying wooden markers.

After a man was interred in the cemetery without permission, the corporation posted a notice prohibiting such burials. In recent times, it is said, a beloved cat, Lingling, was buried secretly, while beneath is own bronze marker Jaeger ("hunter"), devoted friend and hunting companion, keeps vigil beside his master. The dog appears in cemetery records simply as "Jaeger".

Maintenance became increasingly difficult, and Alamo Cemetery was experiencing similar problem. Therefore the Alamo-Lafayette Cemetery District was established as a special district by the Board of Supervisors in 1937, with its office in Lafayette. Within its boundaries are all or parts of six communities, based on 1937 school attendance areas. At present, there are four part-time employees and three trustees who are appointed by Board of Supervisors. The Supervisors have no direct control over the trustees' actions, but the County collects minimal taxes on a contractual basis and holds the District funds in a special account. Source of income include the taxes, income from sales and fees, and interest on the endowment fund.

When Fales Cemetery in Walnut Creek was abandoned during freeway construction, the Board of Supervisors ordered the remains of 37 people transferred to a common grave in Lafayette. An impressive marker bears such family names as Tice, Shuey, Fales and Stow.

Visitors are welcome to drive into Lafayette Cemetery. The most historic areas are around the summit and on the west lawn. One will see

important names on the markers: Hodges, Allen Brown, McNeil, Doré; and Donner, cousins of the ill-fated emigrants; John Standish, Justice of the Peace in Crockett and inventor of the steam plow; Peter Thomson, Lafayette's popular early blacksmith; Benjamin Shreve, teacher, storekeeper and first postmaster of La Fayette; Margaret Jennie Bickerstaff Rosenberg, early teacher; Nathaniel Jones, first Sheriff of Contra Costa County and Happy Valley landowner. Elam Brown, owner of Rancho Acalanes and founder of Lafayette, and his wife Margaret Allen Brown, are not there, but in the family plot in Martinez.

LHS volunteers provide guided tours of the cemetery to all third grade Lafayette school children. If you would like a tour, please contact Mary McCosker at 284-5376.

Ruth Dyer originally wrote this article for the Contra Costa County Historical Society.

The Early Settlement

In 1853, the first business in Lafayette was established by Elam Brown. A local grist mill was necessary for the farmers to have their grain ground into flour. Until the opening of Elam Brown's grist mill, local farmers had to travel to San Jose. The round trip took several days to complete. The grist mill was located on the creek in the center of the new settlement of Lafayette. Other businesses would soon follow as the little community became established.

Another important member of the community at that time was the blacksmith, who made plows and farming tools for farmers and shoes for their horses, as well as tools for the local lumbermen. John Elston established the first blacksmith shop in Lafayette shortly after the arrival of Brown's grist mill.

Peter Thomson, a Canadian who had purchased an acre of land from Elam Brown, worked for Elston in the blacksmith shop. In 1863, he bought the business from Elston and served as the town's blacksmith for the next 50 years. He located his blacksmith shop and his home on the northeast corner of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Moraga Road.

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Peter Thomson's anvil played an active role in many towns celebrations. A hole in the end of the anvil was filled with gunpowder and lit with a 30-foot rod that Peter heated in the forge; the result was a loud and visible explosion. Such a celebration took place in 1865, in recognition of the end of the Civil War. As a result of a particularly large blast during the celebration, the anvil cracked in half. It had to be repaired with a metal patch. That anvil, with its patch, can be seen today on display in the Lafayette Library.

Benjamin Shreve found his way to California from Kentucky hoping to strike it rich in the Gold Rush. He traveled through our young town in 1852; during a later visit, Elam Brown convinced him he should stay. Shreve established the community's first school house. He taught in the settlement for a year, then gave up teaching to open Lafayette's first general store, located near Lafayette Plaza. The store served not only the settlers of the community but the lumbermen who worked in the nearby redwoods.

On March 2, 1857, Shreve petitioned for a post office, planning to name the community Centerville. When he discovered that the name was already in use in California, he chose the name La Fayette, because of the respect Americans had for the Marquis de La Fayette, a French statesman and officer who assisted George Washington and the American Army during the Revolutionary War. The original spelling was later changed to Lafayette. Shreve served as general store owner and postmaster for 33 years. In addition, he farmed 250 acres that he had purchased from Elam Brown.

Another pioneer who traveled to California in search of new opportunity was Milo Hough. Hough settled in Lafayette in 1853 and built the first hotel with a tavern. This was a very popular stopping place for the men who drove the wagons and hauled lumber from the towns of Canyon and Moraga. The hotel later burned to the ground, and Milo Hough relocated to Walnut Creek. A new hotel, the Wayside Inn, was later built in the same area

—*Mary McCosker and Emily Haas*

Lafayette and the Politics of the Civil War

While California was still part of Mexico, its politics revolved around personalities and family ties. Under the American system, however, the party system prevailed. Unregulated as they were in those days, political parties were similar to private clubs. Each party had a platform and its candidates were expected to campaign on it. Each party printed its own ballot, distributed the ballot at the polls, and stationed watchers there to keep track of who was voting for whom. In effect, there was no secret ballot, and the parties made it difficult to split a ballot. It was easy for corruption to flourish in these circumstances.

The situation was aggravated by the issue of slavery in the years beginning around 1850—just after California became a state—and 1870—just after the Civil War. A great many Californians were recent immigrants from either the North or the South. Their loyalty to the Union was tested by their hot feelings about slavery, the nature of the Union that California had just joined, and the growing power of the industrial Northeast. These new political parties were in absolute turmoil. The Whigs and Know-Nothings, who had been the dominant political parties, were dying out. California Democrats were divided. One faction backed U.S. Senator David C. Broderick, an Irish Tammany Democrat whose machine controlled northern California cities and state conventions. He was removed from the field by his death in a duel with California Supreme Court Chief Justice Terry. Others supported the state's senior U. S. Senator William M. Gwin, originally from Tennessee, who was pro-slavery and controlled federal patronage. Some Broderick supporters joined the splinter group Union Democrats, and others joined the new Republican Party. Called Black Republicans and Nigger Lovers by others, they were forced to meet secretly.

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In the bitter 1860 presidential race, Union Democrats nominated Stephen A. Douglas and Southern Democrats chose John C. Breckinridge. Whigs and Know-Nothings merged into the Constitutional Union Party, standing for preservation of the Union without mention of slavery. John Bell, Senator from Tennessee and former Secretary of War under Wm. H. Harrison, was their candidate. The Republican platform opposed slavery in the territories and proposed economic ties between East and West. After much debate, Abraham Lincoln became the Republican candidate.

With a slate of such unappealing choices, whom would little Lafayette support? Many local settlers had moved here from slaveholding border states that remained loyal to the Union. Forty-five votes were cast for Breckenridge, 15 for Douglas, and 53 for Lincoln. Bell received 26 votes. Countywide, Lincoln did better, winning 607 votes to Douglas's 415. Breckinridge had 321 votes and Bell 136. Statewide, the vote was closer. Lincoln won with 37,391 supporters, and Douglas, Breckinridge, and Bell received 36,513, 32,161, and 8,281 votes, respectively. Nationally, Lincoln received only 40% of the popular vote but 59% of the electoral tally.

The Deep South reacted violently to Lincoln's election. President Buchanan, the lame duck incumbent, opposed secession but held that the federal government was not empowered to prevent it by force. Last-minute compromises failed in Congress, and South Carolina seceded. The arsenal at Charleston was seized. Reinforcements for Fort Sumter turned back under fire. The Confederate constitution was adopted in Montgomery, Alabama. Newly inaugurated, President Lincoln determined to relieve Fort Sumter by sea, and Charleston fired batteries in retaliation. One of the world's fiercest and most costly wars began.

Here in California, Lincoln's election and the South's secession created new alignments. In the 1861 gubernatorial election of 1861, 65% of Lafayette voters supported the Republican winner, Leland Stanford. For Assemblyman the race was closer: Lawrence M. Brown, a Union Democrat, received only three votes fewer than the winner, Republican Charles B. Porter. Nathaniel Jones, an early Lafayette settler from Missouri and Tennessee who was listed as a National Democrat, placed a respectable third. Pro-Union and loyal to the U.S. Constitution, he nevertheless had to defend his loyalty. Porter, who had bested Brown, later became editor of the *Contra Costa Gazette*.

Now that the die was cast for war, would Lafayette's people support the Union cause? That is the subject of a future article.

(In the preparation of this paper, the Mutnick Papers in the CCCHS History Center were of great help).

— Ruth Dyer



Good News about Old Betsy

Many of my recent reports on Old Betsy have described her troubles or mechanical failures. This is a Good News report!

After many laborious months redoing the entire internals of the engine, we completed the job. Betsy is in fine shape now and she's running again. Lee Vollquardsen was our expert on this job, and with his help the most recent repair work has been well done and complete. Nothing ever goes exactly as expected, and we had some worrisome moments when the starter didn't work well, but after trying many correction routes, we finally discovered that the ground connection was faulty. A simple correction with a new ground connection solved the problem.

Now the good news: Old Betsy made the trip to the Potluck Dinner - where she was on display for all to see - and back home without a hitch. Even the last stretch up my driveway was negotiated without failure.

On Fourth of July Sunday Betsy was in the Orinda parade and went from Lafayette through Moraga and to the staging area without mishap. The parade was a great success, and Old Betsy was greeted warmly by all her admirers. Then the drive back to Lafayette went without a whimper or stutter, and the drive up my driveway went well again. Several neighborhood areas had their own Fourth of July celebrations, as well, with plenty of children wanting rides. There's always one child who can't get enough of ringing the bell during a ride. That is fine for a short time, but after a while the driver needs relief from the bell ringing.

All in all, Betsy now runs well and is mechanically ready to be moved to the space provided for the Historical Society in the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. We still need to rework her wooden exterior and wheels and install the Warford Transmission, however, so we won't be without occupation in the interim. Those jobs are our next order of business. With the assistance of many kind LHS volunteers, we will complete the restoration and be ready for display and other duties.

— *George Wasson*

Cataloguing of LHS Artifacts

Recently Dorothy Walker, Ruth Dyer, and Keith Blakeney visited the Contra Costa County History Center in Martinez. The purpose of our trip was to begin the process of photographing and cataloguing the LHS collection of artifacts, which has been stored there. Although the actual work is a bit tedious and repetitive, the job is still interesting because of the many unique pieces in the collection. Never having seen most of the items before, we were intrigued at how humorous and obsolete some of them appeared:

a glass milk bottle that looked more like a chemistry flask

a very rusty horseshoe unearthed during the rebuilding of the Elam Brown Plaza. Back when horses were the best means of locomotion, the plaza was the site of many an impromptu horse race between Lafayette youth and betting gentlemen

a pair of spectacles that appear to be over a hundred years old. Very small, with fine wire earpieces which wouldn't be sturdy enough today

ornate articles of clothing which remind me of clothing exhibits I've seen at Sutter's Fort (Sacramento)

an air raid helmet, remember those? An artifact of a more recent vintage

a gallant felt fedora, unceremoniously marked up to commemorate "Lou's" (?) and the "First Lafayette Fiesta & Horse Show, 1935"

We plan to make these photos and their descriptions available online when our website becomes more functional. The website is still several months away, but we feel sure the site will be of interest to all of you.

—*Keith Blakeney*

First Steps toward the New Library

You’ve probably noticed the digging and building at the west end of Lafayette, the future site of the new Veterans Memorial Building. The Veterans are looking forward to the opening of their wonderful new building on Memorial Day’05--that’s less than a year away! Then construction will begin on the new Lafayette Library and Learning Center on the corner of First Street and Mt. Diablo Blvd.

As we have reported, the award-winning architectural firm of Kellefer Flammang has been selected to design the new library. Their “almost final” plans and model were recently submitted to the Planning Commission, the Design Review Commission, and the Library Building Committee for review of final details. The plans and design incorporate the suggestions of Lafayette residents, the Friends of the Lafayette Library, the Lafayette Historical Society, and Lafayette Juniors (who researched Bay Area children’s library areas throughout the Bay Area to find good ideas for the Lafayette library building). Killefer Flammang has won 28 major design awards in the last 12 years and was named “Firm of the Year recently” by the Los Angeles Business Journal. The firm was selected after a weekend-long community open house to give feedback on the four finalist firms. K F’s design was particularly sensitive to the traditional outdoors-oriented small-town feel of Lafayette.

Members of the LHS Board met several times to discuss the features that would be needed the history room of the new Library. Mary McCosker and I then met with Ann Meridith, city liaison with the architect, to present our findings. They were well received and we are very pleased with the resulting plans for the history room, the storage room, and the “Old Betsy” display area. if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call me at 283-6812.

—*Marechal Duncan*



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