



Lafayette Historical Society

NEWS

Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California

January 2011

Vol. 38, No.1

Lafayette Historical Society's Speaker Series

Old Bones in the New Tunnel

Speaker: Our speaker will be announced later

Wednesday, February 16, 2011

3:00 p.m. in the Art and Science Room (*Mezzanine Level*)

Lafayette Library and Learning Center • Limited seating

Donation requested – **\$10** members; **\$15** for non-members

For more information see article below

OLD BONES IN THE NEW TUNNEL

You may have seen the article in the July 19, 2010 Contra Costa Times titled "Fourth Bore Bones". Dr. Lanny Fisk, principal paleontologist for PaleoResources Consultants based in Auburn, CA was quoted as saying "It's rare to tunnel through a sequence like this. It's like laying time on its side." The article went on to say that this is the first time Caltrans has hired paleontologists at the beginning of a freeway project to monitor for fossils.

The fourth-bore drilling project is carving through many layers of earth formation 9-million to 10-million years old. Construction workers have unearthed fossils from the Miocene period in previous sites in our region and now we know that bones are being discovered in this project!

We will have professionals involved with the Caldecott Tunnel Fourth Bore project speak to attendees on their findings.

The presentation will be held in the Arts and Science Room in the new Lafayette Library and Learning Center (Mezzanine level). Enter on the First Street side of the building. Donations are requested to defray the cost of room rental.

Membership Renewal

January is the month that we ask our members to continue their support for our organization. We appreciate the enthusiasm that everyone has shown our Society during the first year of being at home in the Lafayette Library. It is through membership dues that we have been able to support our Speaker Series (3) and tours (2). This Newsletter is another use we make of your dues- 4 issues. Our largest expenditure is rent which will be close to \$5,000. The reality is that we need your help to continue our work. Please support us with the generosity you have shown in the past.

Van Meter Letters Donated to LHS

Some kids pick up old letters, look at them and throw them away. Some kids pick up old letters, put them away and forget about them. Not Dave Long!

Dave is a long time resident of Lafayette. He moved here when he was young with his parents and they rented a house from the Thomson's. Dave spent much of his youth exploring rural Lafayette in the early 1940's.

About the time Carrie Van Meter's house was about to be torn down to make room for the "new Safeway store" he decided to explore the by then abandoned house and found a treasure of letters strewn about the attic. He took them home. And this is where Dave Long differed from some kids his age!

Dave dropped by the History Room this summer and told us he had some "letters that he'd found in Carrie Van Meter's house" when he was a kid, and he'd like the Lafayette Historical Society to have them. It took us awhile to make arrangements to pick up "the letters" and what a surprise when we did!

As many "old timers" may know, Carrie M. Hough Van Meter was married to a railroad guy named Connie Van Meter. He was stationed in areas as far south as Los Banos and as far north as Napa. As a result of this "long distance" arrangement, they corresponded by mail. The letters that Dave Long had been holding on to for all these years include considerable correspondence from Connie to Carrie!

The letters date from the late 1890's and are very personal and insightful into their relationship. There are also letters from Carrie's mother and her attorney as a divorce loomed. The Van Meter Collection includes other items, such as magazines from the early 1900's and a remembrance album.

The Lafayette Historical Society has just begun the archival process. We are very carefully saving the letters, will begin scanning them and then transcribing them. We hope to be able to put them on a public display some time in the future.

—*Judie Peterson*

President's Message

Happy New Year to all of our members and friends! The new year promises to be an exciting one for the Historical Society. We have already set the date for our next Speaker Series and the Board is working to prioritize goals for the year. In the last Newsletter, I listed that many activities that the Historical Society accomplished during our first year in our permanent home in the Lafayette Library. Those accomplishments wouldn't have been possible without the help and support of the Board and our volunteer members. We will be honoring them during a Volunteer Appreciation party at the end of January.

This year we are hoping to continue the many activities that we enjoyed during last year. Beginning with an informational talk on the fossilized bones found while beginning the digging of the new Caldecott tunnel. Find the details at the beginning of the Newsletter. We are already working on the



Carrie Van Meter and her daughter Pearl. Mrs. Van Meter was the City's first post mistress and librarian.

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for the Pot Luck dinner which will be held on Tuesday, May 10th. Ideas for tours are still being discussed. Your input is always welcome.

Please come into the History Room every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from 10 to 2. We want to meet you and show you the resources we have in order to answer your questions about our community.

—Dorothy Walker

Tour of Western Railway Museum

Member and friends of the Lafayette Historical Society had a private tour of the Western Railroad Museum in Suisun on October 26. The museum is run by the Bay Area Railroad Association and their mission is “to preserve and interpret the regional heritage of electric railways in northern California and the western United States”. The museum is located at an actual stop on the Sacramento Northern main line, Rio Vista Junction.

The group boarded an old Key System train for an introduction to the activities for the day and saw photos of the stations and tracks which ran through Lafayette and Moraga (now the bike trail). We then climbed aboard a 1904 “inter-urban” car for a trip through the Montezuma Hills on five miles of restored track of the original main line. We saw the beautiful rolling hills, old fashioned and modern windmills, Shiloh Church which was built in 1876, even rabbits and a wonderful red fox which decided to “race” with the train. What an exciting ride!

After enjoying a picnic lunch, most members of the group toured one of the car barns with cars in many stages of restoration. The highlight of this car barn was the beautiful inter-urban car #1005 which has been completely restored in a project that took over ten years and cost \$250,000. The interior of the car glowed with light fixtures in the style of the original lights, beautiful brass fittings and red velvet seat covers. It must have been a very comfortable ride through Lafayette over the 28 years the car served the area.

Another highlight of the visit was a tour of the Museum’s new 37,000 sq. ft. display barn. The barn cost \$2,500,000 to build. It is completely enclosed and has all of the latest equipment to maintain the trains in the best condition possible.

—Nancy Flood

So, What’s A *Reliez*, Anyway?

“So, what’s a *Reliez*, anyway?” I idly asked my Mexican-American friend, although I already knew the answer. Armando exploded like a firecracker. “That’s an English word!” he blurted, as if piqued by the question. “Ah,” I said backpedalling furiously. I had always believed that *Reliez* was Spanish for “landslide.”

It was generally accepted that two roads: *Reliez Valley* (5.2 miles long) and *Reliez Station* (0.9 miles), were named for the landslide. The slide, it was said, could be seen from the east side of Pleasant Hill Road if one stood in front of Acalanes High School. I had checked that out long before my conversation with Armando and had, at that time, no problem spotting the distant slide. For years after that, I glanced up at the slide whenever I drove past the high school. Tree growth had begun to cover part of it, *but our slide was still there*. After the conversation with Armando, it occurred to me that I had not checked on the slide for a very long time, and that I also had an exciting new method for locating such things as landslides: *Google Earth*.

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Upon logging in, I thoroughly searched the area where I believed the slide to be. *It was gone!* How could that be? Dismayed, I broadened my search, circling round in an ever widening circle. *Suddenly, there it was!* Much farther west than I had supposed, but I had no doubt! *And, on a hill top just above the slide, a Cell Phone Relay Tower!* It was not even close to Reliez Valley Road, but was much farther west, on Table Top Road in Briones Regional Park! Had I been looking at the wrong slide all along? I wondered.

I grabbed my binoculars, jumped into the car, roared down to the High School, found a parking place (quite an amazing feat of itself) and raced up the walk along the east side of Pleasant Hill Road. I looked to the northwest, and, to my great delight, immediately spotted the cell phone tower glistening in the sunshine! I lowered my gaze; and there, thank goodness, was the faithful slide! But, I wondered, why would a road named for the slide be so far away?

I raced back to my office, then hauled out my most current topographic map. I immediately found the answer. Reliez Valley, clearly labeled, pointed like a finger to the slide's location. And there, hugging the easterly line of the valley: Reliez Valley Road. Things were falling into place. However, not fully satisfied with that first observation, I pulled out a 1915 version of the same map. The valley was still there, and the road. But on this map, the words spelled out "Reesley Valley." Some cartographer, I assumed, couldn't spell. I drew out another map. 1910. Now it was spelled "Relies Valley." 1878. This time, "Raliez." 1861. Ralise.



The railroad marker shows one of the many ways 'Reliez' is spelled in our county.

Back to Google. To the word translators. Type in "Reliez." No response. *Reliez* wasn't a word! *We'd been euchred!* Relies? Nah. Raliez? Nah. Ralise? Nah. Google was about to choke from linguistic asphyxiation. We were getting serious, now. Time to resort to good old-fashioned research.

Back to the books: *California Place Names*: "Mexican Spanish *reliz* 'landslide' was repeatedly used in place naming and has survived in at least two places. *Reliez Valley* (Contra Costa County): This is the local spelling for the valley west of Walnut Creek; the name is elsewhere spelled *Raliez*. *Reliz Creek* (Monterey County) has sometimes been spelled Release Creek by popular etymology."

Monterey County Place Names: "*Reliz* is Spanish for 'landslide.'

Salinas Weekly Index: "...*Reliz* Canyon. The *Reliz*, as it is called, is rather a valley than a canyon...This '*Reliz*' which gives the canyon its name, is a narrow cleft, clear through a rocky ridge, caused, no doubt, by some convulsion of nature, and is quite unique in its way."

Unclassic Myths of California: "...I was puzzled by the name of a stream 'Release Creek.' Later, when I neared this stream, I saw a sign: 'To *Reliz* Creek,' and just beyond it the clinching answer: a huge rock formation that is known in Spanish as a *relis*..."

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Some California Poppies: "...that high hill is called 'Reliz'... The search to determine how the spelling... became *Reliez* and its meaning failed to find a completely satisfactory answer... in oral depositions set down by those unfamiliar with the California idiom ... spelled in innumerable ways... it is postulated here that the California Mexicans frequenting the area spoke first of 'the hill of the landslide' for which the Spanish words are *cerro del desliz*... Somehow the ear of the American heard the name ray-liz and it became so named. Those knowing Spanish speaking people (sic) pronounced e as a in ray spelled it with an e; others spelled it *Raliz*..." We had now come full circle. The notion about the road naming for the landslide had been confirmed. But: Why *fifteen different spellings* of the word *Reliez*?

I had one remaining arrow in my quiver, saved for the final assault.

There was a Land Case in Federal Court to resolve some conflicting claims in the descriptions of several Ranchos in the vicinity. Some of the claims, originally granted to Mexican citizens, had been sold to Americans then beginning to settle in the area. The transcript of the trial, all 508 pages, had been written by various hands (typewriters hadn't been invented yet), and available only on microfilm (not the very best way to read a 508 page book.) The reading by itself was eye-glazing. To complicate matters, claimants and witnesses were English-speaking Americans and Spanish-speaking Mexicans. Different interpreters were called in from time to time to help. Finally made in English by various scribes each with different styles, the reading of the transcript was another trial by itself. One can imagine the confusion in the courtroom. One can also imagine the confusion as I read it, some one hundred and fifty years later.

Much was made of the *relis*. And the *reliz*. And the *raliez*. When the Americans testified in English, the word tended to be spelled as a variation of *raliez*. When the Mexicans testified in Spanish, it tended to be spelled as a variation of *relis*. And this was testimony taken in a single trial! I began to wonder how we had managed to keep the list of spellings to merely fifteen. Dorothy Mutnick had said, "...in oral depositions set down by those unfamiliar with the California Mexican idiom and even Spanish was the written name located but spelled in innumerable ways....the ear of the American heard the name ray-liz and it became so named."

Armando was right, of course. *Reliez* isn't a Spanish word. So it must be English, filtered through the tongues of the English-speaking. And that's OK. The language has changed a great deal since Shakespeare's day. And it's still changing. I'll drop a line to Google.

In the meantime, watch this space for new spellings.

2011 Directors

President: Dorothy Walker	283-3303
Vice President: Marechal Duncan.....	283-6812
Treasurer: Paul Sheehan	284-1287
Recording Secretary: Mary McCosker	284-5376
Corresponding Secretary: Oliver Hamlin.....	283-6822
Fund Raising: Judie Peterson	876-0628
Photo Retrieval: Mary Solon	283-7335
Program Development: Keith Blakeney	284-2221
George Wasson	284-4603
Tom Titmus	299-2030
Nancy Flood.....	283-3409

2011 Committee Chairs

Historian: Nancy Flood	283-3409
Walking Tours: Mary McCosker.....	284-5376
Fire Engine: George Wasson	284-4603
Potluck Dinner: Oliver Hamlin.....	283-6822
Newsletter: Dorothy Walker	284-2221
Volunteers: Betsy Willcuts.....	283-0706

—Ray Peters



Lafayette Historical Society Membership Application

(Please photocopy form for additional names)

Name: _____

Spouse: _____

Address: _____

City-Zip: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Membership Categories and Annual Dues

(Please check one)

- Student Membership \$10.00
- Individual Membership \$25.00
- Family Membership \$50.00
- Sponsor Membership \$500.00

Please indicate areas of special interest

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Publicity | <input type="checkbox"/> Data Base Entry of Photos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research-Genealogy | <input type="checkbox"/> Photo Collection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Telephoning | <input type="checkbox"/> News Clippings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Displays | <input type="checkbox"/> Fire Engine |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Oral Histories | <input type="checkbox"/> Walking Tours-Outreach |
| <input type="checkbox"/> History Room | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |

Please mail this application to:

Lafayette Historical Society

P.O. Box 133

Lafayette, CA 94549