



## Lafayette Historical Society Field Trip Oakland Museum of California (OMCA)

**When:** *Saturday, August 21 at 11 a.m.*

**Meet:** Ticketing office on the second level of the OMCA

**Cost:** \$20 for a private docent tour of the Gallery of California History and a donation to the Lafayette Historical Society. Also included is entrance to the Museum, the galleries (Art and History), and the special Pixar exhibit.

*For further information, see article below.*

## Oakland Museum of California Field Trip Saturday, August 21, 11 a.m.

The Oakland Museum of California reopened its doors in May 2010 to great anticipation and acclaim after extensive renovations both inside and out. We invite you to join us to experience these exciting changes, and view California through the interconnected disciplines of art, history, and natural science.

The visit will feature a special docent tour of the Gallery of California History where you will learn about California's fascinating human history—including the state's indigenous inhabitants, the arrival of Europeans, pioneer settlers, and more. Containing some 3,000 artifacts and art works, the new Gallery features sections that explore the history of California from the incredible diversity of early Native American culture, to the Gold Rush and growth of San Francisco, through the rise of Los Angeles and Hollywood, to the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s. It concludes with a frequently updated and rotating gallery space that addresses current issues and contemporary perspectives.

Following the docent tour, we encourage you to explore the rest of the museum. Visit the Gallery of California Art and see an extensive collection of Gold Rush era art, Dorothea Lange photography, and paintings, sculpture, and more by California's most influential artists. Don't miss PIXAR: 25 Years of Animation, an in-depth exploration of the Emeryville-based animation studio's creative process. Conclude your visit with lunch in the Blue Oak Cafe or browse one-of-a-kind souvenirs at the Museum Store. See <http://museumca.org/>.

**Meet:** Ticketing office on the second level of the OMCA, 1000 Oak Street, Oakland at 11:15 a.m.\*\*

**Cost:** \$20— a private docent tour of the Gallery of California History and a donation to the Lafayette Historical Society. Plus: entrance to the Museum, the permanent Galleries (Art and History), and special exhibit - PIXAR: 25 Years of Animation. (*OMCA members may deduct \$5 from the cost of the trip*).

**Make checks** payable to the Lafayette Historical Society and RSVP with your name and phone number. Mail to:

**Lafayette Historical Society • P.O. Box 133 • Lafayette CA 94549**

*Reservations must be received by Saturday, August 14. Spaces are limited; members will have priority.*

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\*\*If you're not interested in driving, meet inside the Lafayette BART station at 10:10 a.m. On arrival at the Lake Merritt BART station, we will walk one block to the Museum entrance on Oak Street. If you plan to drive, the garage is on Oak Street, but parking spaces are limited; cost is \$1 an hour with museum validation.

*For information call Betsy Willcuts (925) 283-0706 or Dorothy Walker (925) 283-3303.*

## **President's Message**

It has been almost nine months since LHS has moved into our first official home in the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. We are proud of what we have accomplished during that time.

We have a consistent group of volunteers that are in our History Room Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. A special thanks goes to Betsy Willcuts for coordinating everyone's sifts. There is a hard working Archives committee that has been tasked with reviewing items that have been donated in the past and are continuing to come to us. Nancy Flood heads this group that has been meeting weekly. In March we received a grant from the Lafayette Community Foundation for the purchase of data base software. This software is being used to catalogue our collection of objects, photographs, reference books and membership. Judie Peterson has taken on the lead responsibility for entering the information so we will know what we have, and how to retrieve the information. We are also responsible for the historic displays in the Library proper next to the Tech Center.

The May Pot Luck was a great success. We want to thank Mechanic's Bank for sponsoring our event. Thanks too, to all of our members for the delicious food we enjoyed. The speaker, Tom Crews from the National Pony Express Association, was informative and a good question and answer session followed.

One of the main purposes of our organization is education and through our speaker series we hope our members learn something about our community's past. The first talk in February was about the indigenous people that were the first occupants of Lafayette. In June, we had a speaker on the electric rail road –the Sacramento Northern that passed through Lafayette. And now we are looking forward to a special docent tour of the renovated History Gallery of the Oakland Museum of California. Please read the article elsewhere in the Newsletter for all the details, and join us in mid-August. We expect to have one more speaker later in the year. If there is a topic you'd like to hear about, please let us know.

I hope this overview of what your Historical Society is doing is informative and that with your help and support, we will continue to contribute to the Lafayette community.

*—Dorothy Walker*

## **Lafayette Historical Society Hosts Annual Event in New Library**

Dozens of local history enthusiasts filled the Community Hall for the Lafayette Historical Society's Annual Potluck Dinner on May 12. This night was a dream come true for members, because it took place at the new Lafayette Library and Learning Center.

Having moved last November into its new home in the LLC after years of working toward this goal, holding the potluck in the new library facility was a well-deserved and fitting celebration for LHS. The Community Hall is one of the finest meeting facilities in town, beautifully designed with state-of-the-art equipment for every conceivable event.

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An enthusiastic group of 75 members and guests enjoyed a busy social hour before the program. Dinner followed with enticing gourmet dishes provided by every guest, a true old-fashioned potluck dinner. Attendees cleared their palates with a platter of delectable desserts, gelato, and coffee provided by board members.

Dorothy Walker, President, was master of ceremonies for the program, which featured speaker Tom Crews of the National Pony Express Association (an article on Crews and his research can be found elsewhere in the Newsletter). He thrilled the audience with one of the great legends of the expansion of the United States, the tale of the Pony Express, which marks its 150th anniversary this year.

“This was an exciting event for us,” Walker said. “The Community Hall provided a wonderful location to again meet with our members and new people interested in Lafayette’s history. The speaker’s talk was timely and informative.”

Crews told the riveting story of the first time the Pony Express traveled overland between Sacramento and Oakland through Solano and Contra Costa Counties. On April 23, 1860, the incoming rider missed the direct steamer between Sacramento and San Francisco, so Thomas Bedford stepped in as a first-time rider to carry the mail on an alternate route. Once Sam Hamilton arrived in Benicia to hand off the mail pouch, called a mochila, Bedford and horse dashed onboard the ferry Carquinez bound for Martinez.

“The ferry had just left its berth when Thomas discovered to his dismay that his horse had lost one of his shoes,” Crews said. “[But] as fate would have it Casemoro Briones, who had a blacksmith shop in Martinez, was also on board. He agreed to lend Bedford a horse so that the trip could be continued.”

The route continued through Pacheco, Walnut Creek, and Lafayette, over the Oakland hills and down Telegraph Avenue into Oakland, where a ferry to San Francisco waited. Bedford reached the boat just in time, completing the 24-mile trip from Martinez to Oakland in 1 hour and 40 minutes.

Lafayette may not have had a place in Pony Express history if riders had not missed the boat connection between Sacramento and San Francisco so often. Bedford’s run that day was the first of 20 times that the Pony Express stopped in Lafayette, on the southwest corner at Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Moraga Road.

“This first ride by Sam Hamilton and Thomas Bedford came at an incredible time when the Express had to prove that a scheduled delivery of news and mail could be maintained,” Crews said.

A private enterprise, the Pony Express was established by freight-shipping business partners, William Russell, Alexander Majors, and William Waddell to improve communication between the eastern part of the country and the West.

The 1966-mile central route between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California was established to avoid interruption in the South. With political tensions increasing between the North and the South and the Civil War on the horizon, the Union government needed to keep communication between the Golden West and the eastern part of the country flowing and under its control.

The Pony Express fulfilled this goal, reducing mail delivery time from the 24 days it took by stagecoach to just 10 days on horseback. The first Pony Express rider headed west from St. Joseph on April 3, 1860 and service continued only until October 1861, when the transcontinental telegraph line between California and Missouri was completed. Once instant communication became possible, there was no longer a need for the Pony Express. Despite its short run, the adventure of the Pony Express continues to captivate American imaginations.

Crews invited questions from the audience to which guests responded with enthusiasm. The 2010 LHS potluck was a resounding success, satisfying appetites and minds alike.

—**Melanie Anderson**

## Tom Crews and the Story of Pony Express Rider Thomas Bedford

Who knew that a family vacation would inspire Tom Crews to become a historian?

While planning a road trip in 1992, he discovered that Fort Churchill, Nevada was formerly a Pony Express stop. That gave Crews, who spoke at Lafayette Historical Society's May 12 potluck, an ambitious idea. He and his family would follow the 1966-mile trail from Sacramento to St. Joseph, Missouri, as close as they could by car.

Over 10 days, Crews, his wife, and two children visited monuments and museums along the way. Despite his family's fatigue, Crews persuaded everyone to visit the National Pony Express Museum in St. Joseph. "I said, 'Listen to me. We've driven 10 days and 2000 miles to get here, and we are going to the Pony Express Museum,'" Crews said. "So that was the beginning of it."

Eighteen years later, Crews, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and photography instructor, is a Pony Express expert and maintains a Web site on the topic. After the road trip, Crews learned of the National Pony Express Association's annual re-ride, and went to Fort Churchill to witness it. He became a NPEA member, and researched the Sacramento-Oakland overland route, which included Lafayette as a station, for the Contra Costa County Historical Society in 1994.

That research project led to another. "When I was looking into the overland route that went through Contra Costa County, much of the known information was based on newspaper articles from that time that specifically mentioned Thomas Bedford," Crews said. "I became interested in finding out who this Thomas Bedford was."

Over three years, Crews spent countless hours uncovering details of Bedford's life, and even met one of his descendants. He perused microfiche, newspaper articles and public records, and recalls the excitement he felt whenever Bedford's name appeared. "I accumulated his whole biography all the way from when he was born in Kentucky to when he died in Los Angeles," Crews said. "And everywhere in between. It was an amazing story."

It seems Bedford, born in 1826, was destined to be a Pony Express rider. Although he was not an official postmaster, he handled mail for customers at his trading post in Iowa in 1848. An adventurous man, Bedford went to the California Gold Country in 1849. The next year, he returned to St. Joseph, Missouri where he married. In 1852, he traveled back to California by wagon train. He was living in Benicia as a livery stable keeper on April 23, 1860, when he was needed as a stand-in Pony Express rider to carry the mail overland to San Francisco after the incoming rider missed the boat in Sacramento.

Although he moved frequently, Bedford spent most of his remaining years in the West until his death in 1906. Crews even located his grave at Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles.

"You think the Oregon Trail was so arduous, but these guys commuted back and forth between California and Missouri," Crews said. "It was a thrilling adventure just to track him down."

If Crews hadn't had his own adventure in 1992, he may never have discovered the allure of the Pony Express or experienced the personal satisfaction of completing an ambitious research project. For more information about Crews' research, visit [xphomestation.com](http://xphomestation.com).

—Melanie Anderson

### *Remembering Alice Breckling*

Long-time Historical Society member **Alice Breckling** passed away this Spring. We send our sympathy to the family. Alice was one of the early members of our organization and wrote many remembrances of her early life in Lafayette which we have in our files.

In her memory, her friends sent donations to the Historical Society. We want to thank Dorothy and Steven Stuckert; Richard and Margaret McPartland; Betsy Young, Esther Sutch, Adrienne DeVillers, Turis Rikshiem and Susanne Perez for their generosity.

## Some Reflections on the Pioneer Store Part I

*Excerpted from a talk by William McNeil (June 1963)*

It seems appropriate that a discussion of Lafayette's Pioneer Store be divided into the following areas: (1) The brief ancestry of the long-time owners of the store, (2) the evolution of the store and its diversified contents, (3) a few of the happenings and activities of the people who visited this landmark.



Exterior of the Pioneer Store c. 1910 with the McNeil family standing in front.

The original store, a general merchandise establishment and the first in the settlement of Lafayette, was built by Benjamin Shreve. Shreve was born in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, on August 2, 1828. In 1852 he started from Smithland, with a company of Kentuckians, to cross the plains to California. After six months he arrived in Placerville, pressed on to Contra Costa County, and remained a short while in Ygnacio Valley. After a trip to Oregon, he returned to Contra Costa County and taught school in Lafayette from 1853-1854. Shreve was the first teacher in Lafayette, receiving the sum of \$150 for six month's work.

In 1855 a store was constructed on Golden Gate Way, and Shreve began his life as a merchant. The store was later moved to its present location adjacent to the plaza. Shreve, after petitioning the United States Congress, was appointed Postmaster in 1857 and maintained the first post office in the general store for twenty-four years. He named the post office La Fayette after the French nobleman. Previous to this, the community was known as Centerville until it was realized that another settlement near Fremont already had

claimed that name. Shreve had two sons, Fred and Milton; the latter managed the store until its sale to Henry Sweet. Subsequently, Robert Elam McNeil purchased the store from Sweet in 1902.

Robert Elam McNeil's mother was born crossing the plains at Reno, Nevada. She was Jane Allen, the daughter of Andrew Allen, a member of the Elam Brown wagon train. It is interesting to note that this train camped on occasion with the Donner Party and crossed the Sierra shortly before the Donners experienced their widely-known difficulty. Robert McNeil married Gertrude Thomson, daughter of Robert Thomson who came to Lafayette from Canada in 1869.

Shortly after acquiring the store, the name was changed from Robert E. McNeil General Merchandise to the Pioneer Store. The merchandise was not too different from any small town store of that time. Such items as drugs, groceries, dry goods, harness, shoes, hardware, fuels (including gasoline, stove oil, and coal), and large barrels of syrup and molasses were always in stock. Syrup barrels were kept in a cool cellar below the store which was reached through a trap-door in the floor. On one sampling tour to the cellar, Wm. McNeil left a spigot slightly open, and when it was discovered "more syrup than I've ever seen had covered the floor. My grandfather was not amused".



Interior shot of the Pioneer Store c. 1920's showing Mrs. Gertrude McNeil waiting on a customer.

The merchandise handled in the store was obtained in several ways. Heavy freight was originally shipped via Southern Pacific Railway to Walnut Creek where it was picked up by wagon and brought to Lafayette. Hitchhiking was not uncommon in those days. In fact, it was

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## Division of Highways Maps - Mt. Diablo Boulevard circa 1930

*Ed. note: Ray Peters has been working to organize the map collection that the Society has accumulated over the course of our existence. He has reviewed and catalogued these maps, some interesting and some not so relevant and ordered them so that interested people can locate what we have. Below is his report on a set of maps in the Society's collection.*

The highway maps were created in preparation of the re-alignment of the old "Road from Oakland to Walnut Creek." That road, referred to in countless documents, has almost completely disappeared, due to the reconstruction indicated on these drawings, the subsequent freeway construction, and the freeway reconstruction to provide for the insertion of BART into the median.

That old road existed from the earliest pioneer days of Lafayette. The road changed little until the 1930's, when it was widened and re-constructed to provide for the anticipated traffic increase that would accompany the completion of the "Broadway Low Level Tunnel" (now the Caldecott Tunnel). The road can be easily identified on the drawings, usually by a pair of broken parallel lines.

In addition to the road itself, the then existing topography includes houses, buildings, orchards, and the creeks as they were when the Browns fished them; all that existed in the heyday of Lafayette before the swirl of traffic erupted from the new tunnel in 1936. Numerous historically significant structures are accurately plotted, including Jennie Bickerstaff's house, Peter Thomson's house and blacksmith shop. The "Church on the Hill" is readily identifiable

The maps in our collection extend from Bryant (now Orinda) through Lafayette to Saranap (Walnut Creek). Although the limits go well beyond Lafayette, they were chosen because so many historical references are shown for those areas.

Each map can be identified by a number given by the Division of Highways (now Caltrans). All maps are recorded on disks. Hard Copies are available in the Lafayette Historical files for viewing in the area most pertinent to central Lafayette.

—Ray Peters

## Can You Help Us?



Periodically we are going to ask our readers to help us investigate something (a picture, an article of clothing or a mystery object) that we have found in the History Room that we are unable to identify.

In our last newsletter, we asked if you knew the Brunk Family. We did not hear from anyone. But we hope that you can help us identify this very unusual circular metal stand.

This is a photo of an unidentified object that the Society has in its archives. We have no idea what this is or where it came from. It's approximately 24" high and 15" in diameter.

If you can help us please get in touch with the Lafayette Historical Society by giving us a call at 925.283.1848 or send a note to [office@lafayettehistory.org](mailto:office@lafayettehistory.org).

—Judi Peterson

## Old Betsy on the Road

There has been little to report about OLD BETSY since the grand opening of the Library and transfer to her now prominent place on Golden Gate Way at the Library. For some weeks there was a full coat of dust on her due to the continued construction activity at the Library. Eventually, Paul Sheehan and I were able to get her out of the storage area and give her a bath. The Library custodians will continue to clean-up the dust in her stall.

She was invited to appear at a Day Care School in Danville in June and all was set to go. In taking Old BETSY out of the garage, however, somehow the starter gear got stuck in the flywheel. I was stranded with a vehicle that did not want to move! I had to cancel the visit to Danville. But with the help of Lee Volquardsen and John Kallio, the problem was corrected and we are now back in “running” business.

The next invite was to appear at the Lamorida Sunshine Rotary Club Motorama in the parking area of Postino Restaurant. It was a great show of many new and old cars, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles and anything moving. There were three Model Ts (Old Betsy, John Kallio’s Depot hack [formerly owned by Lee Volquardsen] and another partially restored Model T truck. I understand that the club will try to do the same thing next year. It is a good car show and worthy of being visited.

I intend to add some more displays to our OLD BETSY viewing area with old tires and tools that are for Model T cars. Do drop by and view them on your way to the Historical Society Room, the Corner Book Store, the Library, or the many other events that are held at the Library and Learning Center.

—George Wasson

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welcomed by many drivers who were glad to have the company. R.E. McNeil used to laugh when he recalled a hitchhiker whom he had transported to Walnut Creek on numerous occasions. He later learned that the man was making the trip to buy groceries in Walnut Creek. Perishable items and groceries were usually hauled from Oakland. Journeys were made to Pacheco where grains and flour were obtained from a concern called Russi and Sonner. This business was later run by Frank and Theodore Russi. It is doubtful that R.E. McNeil could have known that the young man waiting on him was to be his future son-in-law, Theodore Russi.

—Mary McCosker

### 2010 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

### 2010 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: Keith Blakeney .....	284-2221
Volunteers: Betsy Willcuts.....	283-0706



# 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
- Life Membership \$250.00 (one time fee)
- 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