



JOIN US FOR A PRIVATE TOUR OF THE WESTERN RAILROAD MUSEUM

Tuesday, OCTOBER 26

**Tour includes rides on an authentic 1906 interurban railcar
and tour of new \$2.5 million display barn**

Cost: \$25 for or Historical Society members; \$35 for non-members. Send checks made out to:
LHS, P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, CA 94549

Meet: Bus leaves Lafayette 'Plaza' at **10:00** sharp, returning at **3:00 p.m.**

For more information call 283-1948 or 283-3303

Space is limited. *See additional information in article below*

Train Museum Excursion

Tuesday, October 26, 10 a.m.

On Tuesday, October 26th the Historical Society has arranged for a private tour of the Western Railroad Museum in Suisun. This is a follow-up to the very successful talk by John Krauskopf in June of this year. John has agreed to lead the tour for us and act as engineer for our 45 minute ride on a 106 year old "inter-urban" car. This will be over the five miles of restored Sacramento Northern track that is now in service. We will also tour the Museum's new \$2,500,000, 37,000 sq. ft. display barn. This tour led by John lasts about 35 to 40 minutes. There are displays in the main hall of the Visitor's center which our group members may also peruse. There is an additional car barn where people can walk through on their own. In particular, we can view the Sacramento Northern inter-urban #1005 which has just completed a ten-year \$250,000 restoration and which ran regularly through Lafayette for 28 years in service. Go on the WRM web-site to see a video of the first time this car moved under its own power in more than 15 years. If some find there is too much walking and standing for their comfort, there are benches in the visitor center and various places on the grounds where people can rest and join the group again when ready. The train ride is not currently handicapped accessible. There is a picnic area on the grounds for us to have lunch. No food will be sold as this is not one of the regular days the Museum is open.

The cost of the tour is \$25 per person if you are an historical society member; and \$35 per person for non-member.

We will meet in front of the Whole Foods store (*formerly Albertson's*) at 9:45 and leave promptly at 10:00. We will return by 3:00 in the afternoon.

Please send your check made out to: LHS to P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, CA 94549

If there are questions please call 925-283-1848 or 925-283-3303

President's Message

I hope all of you will be able to join us at the end of this month for our trip to the Western Railroad Museum. This trip is part of the Historical Society's effort to provide opportunities for our members to learn about the City's past.

We were so pleased by the 50+ people that attended our June Speaker Series on the Sacramento Northern railroad that we felt a follow-up visit to the railroad museum might be just the right thing for our members and friends. The Museum has just finish restoring rail car -#1005 that rode through Lafayette. And we have pictures to prove it!

Taking members on tours and having regular speakers are part of the Society's plans for our future. Now that we have somewhat settled into our space in the Library, the time feels right to expand our programs. We have been able to do so this year with two speakers and two trips along with our annual dinner/potluck. Old Betsy has done her part too, showing off at the recent Art and Wind Festival. We want to continue with level of activity into next year. Also planned are four Newsletters a year.

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A Lafayette Farmer: The Story of Nat Martino



Nat Martino picking plums at his Springhill Ranch

They called him "Natale" (Italian for "Christmas") because he was born on Christmas Eve, 1893. The Martinos lived in a stone house on a little farm about thirty miles east of Genoa, Italy. They raised their own potatoes, wheat, vegetables. To supplement their sparse income, father sometimes found work as a stone mason in an area where all the houses were made of stone.

And, of course, they made their own wine.

Tales of America were abundant. It was easy to get work there, it was said: others had gone there, done it. Families pooled their money to send one of their members to golden America in order to find a job and send money home. When enough *lira* had been accumulated, a second relative would go, until everyone eventually found themselves in magical, golden America.

In 1907, when Nat was fourteen, his older brother Jim traveled all the way to California, which people said was so like Italy that *people even made their own wine!* Jim worked for the Southern Pacific, a name with a good American ring. He was only a laborer in Oakland, but he still earned enough to send money home each month. *Imagine making so much money!*

On one hot day, while working on the local schoolhouse, Nat's father keeled over from sunstroke and died. Nat was devastated. Suddenly, he had become the man of the family, and was responsible for the care of his mother and sister. He was nineteen. Work around Genoa became scarce and money short. California beckoned. Jim's letters had pleaded with Nat to come over as soon as possible. His mother agreed. With some help from the relatives, they cobbled together enough money for his passage.

He sailed in *The Big Boat* (as they called it) to New York in 1912, a frightening place so unlike tiny Genoa. Unable to speak English, he almost used up his entire storehouse of perseverance just to find Grand Central Station and a train to Oakland.

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He was again devastated when he found no work for him in Oakland. He formed a window-washing partnership with some other Italians (“a few boys”), he called them. On one happy day in 1914, he met Mary Poggi, then employed at the Hale Brothers department store. She spoke both Italian and English; he married her the same year.

In the autumn of 1919, he rode the electric train to Lafayette to visit his cousin John Scramel, who lived on the property of Dr. Hunsaker (now Acalanes High School). *The green hills in the area were so like Italy! And he was so sick of washing windows!* When he heard that a nearby hundred acre property was for sale, he immediately scrambled to look at it.

What a perfect farm it was! It even had an old house that an Italian might have built!

Mary loved the house as much as he did. They borrowed money from a lending society and closed the deal on November 29, 1919. They moved in and raised a good Italian family: Louie, Victoria, John, and Jim. They also raised apples, pears, plums, and peaches, as well as hay for their cows. And grapes, of course. *They made their own wine.*

In 1934, Nat was again sorely devastated when he lost Mary. But, fortunately, he found Louise Lavazolla, who, like Mary, was of good Italian stock. They were married in 1937.

Then followed a good twenty-five year run, ending when another devastating blow struck him down. In 1962, Nat had a heart attack. A pacemaker set him right, and he was happy to again work the farm. When that first pacemaker began to show signs of failing, they planted a second one in him. But the third pacemaker dealt the final devastating blow when it stopped entirely on November 12, 1977.

Even the good Italian red couldn't fix him that time.

Based on interviews with Nat and his sons Louie and Jim.

—Ray Peters

Some Reflections on the Pioneer Store

—Excerpted from a talk by William McNeil (June 1963).

Part II



Pioneer Store when it was owned by George Hinckley...after Robert McNeil's death.

McNeil and his family camped near this site while he and many others helped in its construction. Gertrude McNeil became the first woman to pass through the tunnel when it was just a few days from completion. The

Other items clearly in my mind [in the Pioneer Store] are the two weapons sometimes seen by the children in the family — and always viewed with interest. One was a large single action revolver which made its home under the safe at the rear of the store. The other was a small pearl handled revolver which was sometimes carried on wagon trips to Oakland. There were holdups occasionally along this route as a considerable amount of cash was carried on these buying trips. The trip to Oakland was later made through the old tunnel. In this connection, R.E.

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Excavating the Tunnel

bore was situated rather high on the hill which led a workman, known as “Bum Lamp”, to remark that if they had gone much further up it would have been necessary to haul dirt to the spot in order to have something through which to tunnel.

On one occasion after the tunnel’s completion, Gertrude McNeil was driving a team to Oakland through the dark, timber-braced structure, when suddenly a man leaped out from behind a piling directly in her path. This so startled her that she accomplished a complete turn and galloped back to Lafayette!

For many years the Pioneer Store was the only general merchandise store in Lafayette, but it provided the community with more than syrup and horse collars. In the afternoon and evenings the store became a gathering place for many. The various forms of amusement included pitching horseshoes, baseball, foot races, wrestling, and listening to a contraption

called a gramophone. On certain occasions a lone bagpiper would make an appearance complete in kilt and the usual regalia. Much to the amusement of the townspeople, he would march around the plaza, in and out of the local saloon, and in front of the store. The identity of this person is not known, but his presence was very much a part of the local scene.

R.E. McNeil was especially fond of wrestling and stories about his leaving the counter to engage in this sport in the dirt in front of the store were common. Among those who loved to wrestle with McNeil was a Japanese wood cutter who came to Lafayette around 1900. Another incident which helps paint the picture of life in Lafayette around this store concerns Hugh Fraser. Fraser taught school in the community and boarded at Peter Thomson’s home. He loved to engage in the various activities and sports around the store in the evenings – especially the foot races and wrestling. Fraser had no transportation home on weekends, and before leaving the store it was sometimes dark. Undaunted, he would strike out over the Lafayette ridge and through the hills to his home in Martinez.



Robert and Gertrude McNeil

R.E. McNeil was quite active in civic projects. He, George Meredith, and George Smith were instrumental in the erection of the Town Hall which still stands on Moraga Road. Also, Gertrude McNeil and Margaret Rosenberg saw the need for the perpetual care of the Lafayette cemetery, and its beauty today is largely the result of these early efforts toward its improvement.

—Mary McCoster

A Museum Adventure

Early Saturday morning, August 21st, a group of twenty Lafayette Historical Society members and guests met at the Lafayette BART station to begin our adventure to the recently reopened Oakland Museum of California with several more of the group meeting us at the museum. Many of us had been long time visitors to the museum which opened its doors in 1969 and wondered what we would find in the History and Art galleries. These galleries had been closed for two years to undergo a transformation. Would we miss our old favorites and lose our way in the sparking new galleries? To our delight three History Docents guided us through the spaces introducing us to an exciting new place with many of our long time favorites back but in a new setting or to new exhibits including an additive map table, films from Hollywood and much, much more. (The Natural Sciences Gallery reopens in the spring of 2012).

From comments following the visit, tour members were excited about the interactivity in both the History and Art Galleries. Comments such as - “What a fabulous museum”; “it is so interactive like Disney Land”!; or “I loved all the things you could push and pull and best of all the drawers which held fascinating objects throughout”. And the person who had taught for 36 years commented on the museum as “a wonderful teaching experience for young and old”. Lunch in the museum restaurant, the Blue Oak Cafe and a visit to the special exhibition, PIXAR: 25 Years of Animation, rounded out a special day.

—*Betsy Willcuts*

We Want You



Actually, we need you!

Now that our History Room is up and running, we are looking for volunteers to help in many ways with the organization of all the materials that we have in our collections:

photographs – identifying buildings and people; scanning and recording

articles – clipping and filing

files – organizing and recording

letters – transcribing historical letters for preservation

oral histories – transcribing taped interviews, interviewing interesting people who have lived in Lafayette and have interesting stories to share

Are you interested? Please give us a call at (925) 283-1848 or send an email to lafayette.history@comcast.net
– please ask for Betsy Willcuts, *Volunteer Coordinator*.

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 and are unable to identify.

In our last newsletter, we asked if you could identify an unusual circular metal stand. We heard from Mary Ann and William Hoisington, who believe it to be a compass gimbal, an object used on a ship to keep the compass face horizontal while traversing roiling waters.

This is a photo of an object that we have in our archives. We do not know much about Agnes Hatch, beyond her date of death on June 1, 1899 at age 58 and that her resting spot is in Lafayette Cemetery according to findagrave.com.

What do you know about Agnes Hatch?

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 our new email address: lafayette.history@comcast.net.



Travels of Old Betsy and the Services Performed

The Lafayette Chamber of Commerce has a regular gathering of members at various locations. The most recent was at Blodgett Floor Covering. The theme of the meeting was a showing of restored and refurbished vehicles. Larry Blodgett invited Old Betsy to participate and we gladly accepted. It was a short drive from the Library Garage to the Blodgett store on Mt. Diablo Blvd. beyond the cemetery. Soon after arriving and parking in a prominent spot, someone noticed an almost flat tire on the left front wheel.

We don't carry (or have) a spare tire and really don't carry the equipment to replace or repair a flat tire. It appeared that the tire was really slowly leaking pressure and, if fully inflated, we could make it back to the library garage. We had a compressor at the garage and a friend agreed to bring it to us. After fully (and over) inflating the tire, we made it safely back to the garage. The next day we filled the tire with a sealant and inflated it again. All now is well.

Just to inform those who don't know, a modern tire repair service station usually doesn't have people experienced in repairing "old fashion" car tires. In the case of a Model T Ford - first the tire and rim are removed from wheel rim and then the tire is removed from its rim with tire irons. Then the tube inside the tire is removed and the source of the leak is found by inflating the tube and putting it in a water

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bath. Then a patch is put on the tube and the tube is reinserted into the tire and the tire is worked back onto the tire rim and inflated. Care must be taken not to pinch the tube when replacing it on the rim inside the tire. For that reason, the use of a sealant was selected and the best way to correct the leaking tire.

All of this brought back fond memories of a trip my pal and I took in his model T from Ocean City, New Jersey to the New York Worlds Fair and back to Philadelphia in 1940. On that trip we had 23 flat tires and became very skilled in doing the things that I have outlined above. Old cars are fun but sometimes have trying times!

—George Wasson



President’s Message—Continued from page 1

Our web site will take on a new look in the near future with more information about the History Room and the happenings of the Society. We have already updated the site by making many of our Newsletters available. They go back to 2003. If you haven’t already been to the site, please do – LafayetteHistory.org. All of our plans need your help. Please support us with your membership dollars and by volunteering. We can use you help for many activities. Come and join us Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 – 2.

—Dorothy Walker

2010 Directors

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| 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
- 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 |
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| <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