



Lafayette Historical Society

NEWS


Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California

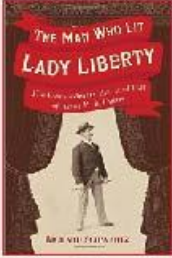
July 2017

Vol. 44, No. 2

The History Room is Open Tu Th Sat 10-2



Lafayette Historical Society's *Speaker Series*



A Conversation with Richard Schwartz

Author and historian Richard Schwartz will deliver an illustrated talk about the fascinating life story of Jewish immigrant actor M.B. Curtis.

Date.....Sunday, July 16, 2017
Time.....1:30 to 2:30 p.m.
Place.....Lafayette Library & Learning Center - Community Hall
Donation Requested-\$10.00 LHS members; \$15.00 non-members requested
Kids under 14 Free with paying adult

For questions or reservations please call (925) 263-1848 or email Lafayette.History@comcast.net

As the Statue of Liberty stood unlit and unloved by American politicians in 1886, one of her saviors was creating a theatrical sensation at New York's Fourteenth Street Theatre. Actor M.B. Curtis, the immigrant, jumped up to become the only private citizen in our nation's history to pay for lighting the Statue of Liberty's torch while Congress dodged the funding issue and international embarrassment.

Richard will reveal how the San Francisco Bay Area became the actor's home base from the 1870's through the 1906 Earthquake as he toured the country and how it almost ended his life.

Richard Schwartz is a historian and the author of *Eccentrics*, *Heroes*, and *Cutthroats of Old Berkeley*; *Earthquake Exodus, 1906*; *Berkeley 1900*; and *The Circle of Stones*. Originally from Philadelphia, he graduated from Temple University with a bachelor's degree in English Literature. An outdoor enthusiast and animal lover, Schwartz worked on a Pennsylvania Dutch farm for two years before heading west to find higher mountains. He now lives in Berkeley, where he works as a building contractor and documents early Native American sites in the Bay Area. *The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty* is his fifth book.

(Your donation supports the work of the Lafayette Historical Society as well as the ability to offer knowledgeable presenters who speak on local history.)

MY MEMORIES OF EL CHARRO.....60 YEARS!!



El Charro! A symbol of simpler times. A place for families to gather with kind, friendly staff. Fond memories!!

I grew up right next door! The cooking aroma of wonderful Mexican food never became tiresome!

My mother and father moved to Lafayette in 1937. They lived in a little Cape Cod cottage next to the property that would become El Charro. I was born there in 1945. It was farms, walnut and fruit orchards and creeks...wonderful!!

My grandmother developed Lafayette Garden Estates which would become Dyer Drive....where Starbucks Coffee now stands on Mt. Diablo Boulevard and behind. In 1950 we moved into our

new home next door. If you were in the rear parking lot of El Charro facing west, this is the home we lived in until 1967...with a huge oak tree in the backyard.

The Garcia family who owned El Charro were wonderful neighbors...kind and generous in every way. Charlie the cook loved to greet me standing at the rear screen door of the restaurant: "Oh, Susita!" And he would give me some chips or tacos. I was 7 years old then. He would save the colorful wax from the "free-flowing" candles in a big box for me. We would use it as clay and let it soften in the sun to create things. My sister used to melt it down and reuse it to make Christmas candles to sell!

Most New Years, birthdays and special occasions were celebrated by four generations....now five! I was most proud when my 4th grade class studied Mexico which included a trip for lunch to El Charro! It was a special sharing of "My Place" with classmates and friends.

In the 1950s my sister decided to plant a cactus garden. She planted many species in our rear yard. In time it grew and got out-of-hand so my Dad chopped up the prickly pear cactus and threw it over the fence. Well.... the biggest plant emerged from that! So Dad went over to see if the restaurant wanted it. They came over and retrieved the prickly pear cactus. Years later I saw it on their rear patio....it was huge!!

The most colorful "uniforms" for El Charro staff were in the 60s and 70s. The ladies wore bright, colorful skirts in blue, orange, yellow and green with white peasant style blouses. I wish I could remember all of their names....but one of them, Patsy Sullivan, was a neighbor. My father was a Lafayette fireman for many years and inspecting restaurant kitchens for safety was part of his job. El Charro was one of the very few places that my father would eat! He always ordered the hamburger steak with chili beans on top and fries! The Garcia family sold the restaurant to their employees over time. The HOT plates are still unique and appreciated!

Submitted by Susie Wallace

A REQUEST FROM OLD BETSY



Old Betsy, our 1920s Model T fire engine, is searching for an old style fire hat that might be displayed on her front seat. If anyone has a fire hat or knows where we might locate one, please let us know. Email us at lafayette.history@comcast.net or leave a message at 925-283-1848.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral Histories which date from the 1970's have been stored on tapes and disks in the History Room. Many of these tapes have recently been digitized and are available for viewing on the Historical Society Website – lafayettehistory.org. In the top row on the website you will find Archives/Oral Histories which will take you to the oral histories. Below is a list of the tapes that have recently been added to the website. The committee continues to work to make additional tapes available. Coming soon an oral history about the founding of the LMYA (Lafayette Moraga Youth Association) baseball program.

ORAL HISTORY: BETSEY YOUNG — APRIL 28TH, 2014

Betsey was a dancer all her life. In 1956 she co-founded the Laf-Frantics, a local Lafayette community theater group that put on shows at the Town Hall. Betsey choreographed and performed in the Laf-Frantics shows for the next 30 years.

ORAL HISTORY: LOUISE CLARK — OCTOBER 14TH, 2010

Louise and her husband Johnson lived in Berkeley before moving to Lafayette in 1952. She was the founder of the Parent Participation Nursery School on 1st Street. She raised her family in Lafayette where she was active in many important causes over the years.

ORAL HISTORY: DOROTHY WALKER — AUGUST 5TH, 2015

Dorothy's family moved to Lafayette from San Rafael in 1956. Their home was located on Yorkshire Court bordering what is now known as the Trail Area. At that time the railroad was still running.

ORAL HISTORY: SHELDON COOK — MAY 16TH, 2014

Sheldon Cook was a pediatrician in Lafayette for 28 years. He made house calls from 1953-1981. He treated all conditions including newborns, dressings, measles, polio, and spinal taps. After his retirement he was a school volunteer at Springhill School.

The Oral History Committee

A LOOK BACK IN LAFAYETTE HISTORY

Many people have inquired about the origin of the name for Lafayette's Middle School. It was named after Matthew Howard Stanley who gave many years of service to Lafayette: he

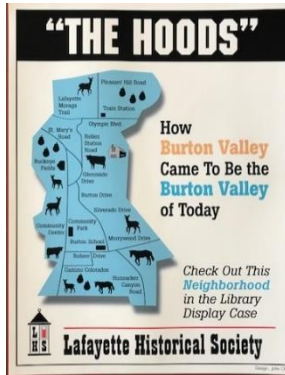


was a member of the Lafayette School Board for 25 years; he was a member of the Acalanes School Board for 16 years; he was a Commissioner of the Lafayette Fire District for 20 years; he was Secretary of the Water District for 25 years; he was Lafayette's "Man of the Year" in 1955; he was a member of the Lafayette Church Board and a Director of the Lafayette Improvement Association. And he was instrumental in the formation of the Acalanes Union High School District.

From the Lafayette Historical Society Newsletter November 1978

THE “HOODS” OF LAFAYETTE

In the Lafayette Historical Society History Room, on Golden Gate Way, there are four binders relating the history of Lafayette’s “Hoods” with pictures and stories. The project came about because many people were asking questions specific to their own neighborhoods, so a research project was undertaken. Lafayette was divided into four large areas, loosely based on elementary school attendance areas. Each area has a binder.



The Downtown neighborhood was the first to be developed. The groundwork for our town was laid there. Do you want to know what Plaza Park looked like in the 1800's? Why do we even have it? What about the building that houses the Sideboard Restaurant? Why did Moraga Rd. and Mt. Diablo become the central intersection of the town? What's the story with Elam Brown?

The other neighborhoods are Burton Valley (who was Burton?), Happy Valley (do you want to see campers in long dresses who came over the hill each summer for the sun?), and the Reliez Creek Neighborhood. Reliez Creek runs through the Reliez Valley and Springhill neighborhoods before joining and running to Olympic Blvd. to join Las Trampas Creek. What does Reliez mean? What's with Reliez Station? Who was Rossi Street named for or Martino Street? Each of the neighborhoods have stories.

If you want to know how your neighborhood was started, or just to appreciate Lafayette more as you drive through, come and read / see the stories! The history room also has wonderful pictures. How about the motorcycles that took part when the 1916 Gypsy Motorcycle Club chose Lafayette as its western rendezvous? Lots of interesting and whimsical information awaits you about Lafayette. It enriches our lives to know what led up to the town we see now.

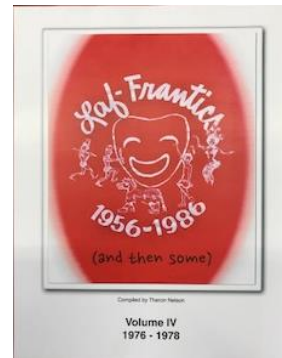
Laura Torkelson

**PLEASE VISIT OUR NEWEST LIBRARY DISPLAY ON THE
FIRST PEOPLES OF LAFAYETTE.....Main Floor of the Library**

LAF-FRANTICS

Prior to Lafayette becoming an incorporated city, a group of concerned citizens, organized as the “Lafayette Community Center”, had located a site and were raising funds to build a facility for community use. The site was 11+ acres located at 711 St. Marys Road which was later donated to the City of Lafayette after it became incorporated in 1968. The City has since extensively developed that property and it is now known as Buckeye Fields.

In 1956 the then “Lafayette Community Center” board of directors were seeking money to pay for the site and construct a building for groups to use. They started a fund drive titled SPRING FERVOR. The intent was to encourage those in the community to create their own “do-it-yourself” fund raising events to benefit the project. And some residents did.



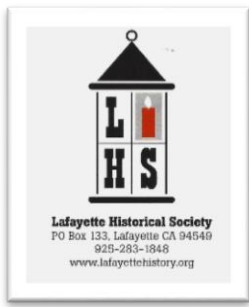
By far the most successful such event was started by Jeri Burnside and Betsey Young. Betsey was a local dance instructor and Jeri one of her dancers. Jeri’s reaction was: “Let’s rent a barn and put on a show”; and they gathered a few friends around the Burnside’s kitchen table to discuss the possibilities. The group included Marge Adams, Theron Nelson, Betsey Young, Angus and Jeri Crocker, and Dick and Jeri Burnside. Each was a member of one or more local clubs. Betsey knew of Dan and Louise Welty in the nearby town of Alamo who produced and directed Melodramas and Olios (variety acts of song, dance and skits), sometimes called “The After Show”. The group met with the Weltys who indicated an interest in doing such a show, but it was up to the group members to contact their clubs and propose collaboration in sponsoring a show. All the clubs agreed.

Auditions were held, a cast selected, and a name chosen for the show; and thus “Laf-Frantics” was created. The first performance opened on October 5, 1956 at the Lafayette Town Hall using the Welty’s format of an old fashioned Melodrama followed by an Olio which was a series of variety acts (relying on yet unrecognized local talent). The show was sponsored by the Lafayette Suburban Women’s Club, the Lafayette Suburban Junior Women’s Club, the Lafayette Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Lafayette Community Center,

No one dreamed the show would continue as an annual production, but it did. In the Welty’s experience, such a Melodrama type show might have a life expectancy of seven or eight years. But Laf-Frantics went on, and on, and on for 31 years. In all there were 238 performances using that same format (except in 1958 and 1965). The curtain came down on the last show on April 19, 1986.

Theron Nelson has created five binders that chronicle the history of Laf-Frantics from 1956-1984. He has included information, programs, photographs, and other memorabilia from the history of this wonderful troupe of actors. The Historical Society is so appreciative of the incredible work that Theron did to compile this compendium of Lafayette’s cultural history.

“Laf-Frantics 1956-1986 (and Then Some)” by Theron Nelson



LHS

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Return Service Requested

YOUR ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MATTERS:

Your Name _____
____ Student Membership \$10 (thru high school only)
____ Individual Membership \$25
____ Family Membership \$50
____ Donation \$ _____

Thank You

How to donate: • By mail in the enclosed envelope
• In person at the History Room
• Online: www.lafayettehistory.org

Make checks payable to the Lafayette Historical Society

Please mail this application to:

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

