



Lafayette Historical Society

NEWS

Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California

July 2018

Vol. 45, No. 3

The History Room is Open Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 10-2
Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library



Lafayette Historical Society's *Speaker Series*



Lafayette-Moraga Trail
and Trail Marker

"Tales About Trails"

Speaker.....Stu Swiedler has a new program and will share Fact Versus Fiction on the Creation of the Lafayette-Moraga and Iron Horse Trails

Dates.....Sunday, August 12, 2018

Time.....2:00-3:00 p.m. – Registration begins at 1:30 p.m.

Place.....Lafayette Library & Learning Center - Arts & Science Discovery Center (located on the mezzanine floor)

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) 283-1848 or email Lafayette.History@comcast.net

Please join us for another interesting and informative program presented by Stu Swiedler, local historian and transportation aficionado, who will speak on how local walking trails, once railroad rights of way, came to be. For more information and photos about local railroads of past eras, please visit www.eastbayhillsproject.org.

Coming later this summer: photo exhibits in the Lafayette Library about "Snow in Lafayette" and the "Pony Express in Lafayette"

Wanted: Volunteers to learn to drive Old Betsy, our Model TT Fire Engine. Please read her life story on page 2 of this issue and please contact us if you'd like to be trained to drive this historical vehicle

OLD BETSY

Old Betsy is a Model TT (Ford truck). The body of Old Betsy could be from 1919 and the engine is a 1920 model. She was originally outfitted with a water tank, a CO₂ canister of about 50 gallons, and a manifold for connecting to a fire hydrant for fighting fires.

According to a document from July 3, 1918, with the letterhead of the Contra Costa County Farm Bureau and with the title “Officers of Contra Costa Rural Fire Companies”, the first fire chief for Lafayette was L.I. Starks and the assistant was Ed. J. Allen. Although there was a Lafayette Fire District then with horse-drawn equipment, it is thought that Old Betsy was acquired sometime after 1920 as Lafayette’s first motorized fire engine. How she got her name is unknown.

Old Betsy served Lafayette in the 1920s and 1930s with Fire Chief Ed Morrison as the only paid employee. The fire truck was kept in Chief Morrison’s garage. Sometime after the 1930s, Old Betsy was used by the Lafayette Junior Chamber of Commerce (the Jaycees) for parades and other special occasions. She was sold and eventually resold to Earl Sanko of Pleasant Hill where she sat for some years in his barn.

In 1977, John Kallio discovered Old Betsy at Sanko’s barn and a group of Lafayette citizens organized a fund-raising effort for its purchase. The Lafayette Historical Society pledged \$1775 to be matched by clubs and citizens. The purchase price was met June 17, 1977, and the engine known as “Old Betsy” was given to the city for housing and display. It remained in George and June Wasson’s garage for many years.



The engine has been completely overhauled including pistons and rings. New tires, tubes, wheel hub bolts and nuts, tire rim bolts and nuts, and wheel bearings were special ordered and installed. Big O Tires removed the old tires from the old rims by hand. New wooden spokes were installed at Vintage Wheel Shop in Sonoma. The remounting of the tires on the rims was done by Alhambra Garage in Martinez. Old Betsy received a new Waterford Transmission and drive shaft, providing three gear ratios. All her exterior metal parts have been powder coated by West Coast Specialty Coatings in Concord.



Besides the original group of Hub Anderson, Mike Rogers, Lee Volquardsen and John Kallio who oversaw Old Betsy’s first renovation, there have been many people and organizations financially involved in the renovation of Old Betsy. The list includes the Lafayette Historical Society, The Lafayette Community Foundation, other clubs and organizations, skilled (amateur) workers, and the Boy Scouts. David Truckner rebuilt many of the wooden and metal parts of the understructure. Many other people graciously donated money and time.

Through the years Old Betsy has been in numerous parades and civic events, often including rides for young and old. She was shown many times at the Concours d’Elegance Lafayette. She is now on view at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. Please stop by for a visit!

Mary Solon and George Wasson

RAY PETERS

The Historical Society recently lost another longtime member and supporter when Ray Peters died on June 3, 2018. Ray was a Board member, LHS President, and History Room volunteer. His love of Lafayette history and especially the life of town founder Elam Brown led to the recent publication of his book, *Thirty Cents an Acre*. Ray's humor and knowledge will be missed by those of us in the History Room. An article Ray wrote in 2011 follows:



SO, WHAT'S A RELIEZ ANYWAY?

"So, what's a Reliez, anyway?" I 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.

Upon logging in, I 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 hilltop 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 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. Back to Google. To the word translators. Type in "Reliez." No response. Reliez wasn't a word! 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*... The railroad marker shows one of the many ways 'Reliez' is spelled in our county. 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.

Ray Peters

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.

Mabel Bowbeer: Mabel and her husband Earl moved to the Daley Ranch in Lafayette in 1928. The entrance to this ranch was located near El Charro Restaurant. The Depression hit soon after they settled here and Mabel recalls there were usually "extra children", those whose families were without food, seated around their table in those years. In this interview she recalls shopping when there were two stores in town, selling pots of chili bears at the Lafayette Horseshows to raise money to build the town's first tennis courts, and volunteering with the PTA, Garden Club, and the Women's Club. In 1941 the Bowbeers purchased a ranch on Deerhill Road where they lived for many more years.

Lou Cosso: Lou moved to Lafayette from Oakland in 1951 at the age of 9. His uncle owned and operated a fruit farm on 55 acres in Happy Valley. People in Oakland considered Lafayette, with its small size and lack of commercial offerings, to be a remote outpost. As Lou describes it, it was a perfect place for a boy to grow up with plenty of creeks, hills and valleys to explore. He also kept busy with farm and family activities. Lou played football and baseball while attending Acalanes High School and returned to the area to continue his career in banking later in life.

Sheila Seagrave: Sheila was one of the many extraordinary talents who made up the Straw Hat Review, a group from the UC Berkeley language arts department circa 1947. They performed three different shows during the summer months at the Town Hall in Lafayette.

Catherine Sinnott: Catherine was born in 1924 and moved around California for most of her life. She grew up on a sheep ranch in Sonoma County, studied nutrition at UC Davis, worked as a food researcher in Albany, and served with the Marine Corps Women's Reserve during the latter stages of World War II. In 1956 she settled down in Burton Valley, part of the influx of people who moved to new housing developments that were built in Lafayette in the post-war years.

Sophie and Robert Wing: Sophie and Robert Wing brought together two old Lafayette families when they married in 1961. Born in 1930, Sophie was the youngest of eight children of the Machado family that operated the Alta Crest Dairy in Lafayette. She describes the dairy operations and in particular the roles assigned to her from a very young age. Bob also grew up on the pear and apple farm which was run by his grandparents the Oliveiras. He worked from a young age selling fruit from a stand on the main street. Bob and Sophie describe life during the years before, during and just after the completion of Highway 24, and during World War II.

LOCAL STREET NAMES

History is all around us. We live on streets and see their signs every day, but generally we have no idea why they are named as they are. At the Lafayette History Room some of the stories behind street names have come to light. One of my favorites is from Happy Valley. Dr. Leo Musser, ear, nose and throat doctor, lived on Pine Lane and owned the land around there. He was an Arabian horse rancher! The neighborhood children called him Uncle Leo and were allowed to freely ride his horses. Several of the streets in that area are names for horses: Timothy, Natasha, Rahara, and of course, Los Arabis. A winery by that name is now on the land where horses once roamed.

Another animal that has been immortalized in a street name was a dog named Topper. In the early 50s a family moved into the old house that was at the junction of St. Marys Rd. and what is now Topper Lane (the house is gone). The county asked them, as they were the only residents, what the road they were building should be called. The little boy of the family said Topper.

Lesser known people also have streets named for them. If you drive along Glenside Drive, you will pass Augustine Lane. Down that lane is Buzzie Court. These names are from the Lobo family that owned the land. Portuguese immigrants Rose and Augustine Lobo bought the land in the early 1920s. Rose Estates was begun in the 1950s and Augustine Lane ran down the middle. Buzzie was his great nephew. Buzzie's cousin still lives nearby. Larry Cody is living on the last bit of the Lobo land in the little brown house at Glenside Drive and Michael Lane that his grandparents built. Wave to him if he is on his porch! Augustine, Rose and their four children lived in that two-bedroom house!

We all know Briones Park, but who were the Briones? Maria Manuela Valencia de Briones (1796-1884) was one of the only single mothers to receive a Mexican land grant. She and her husband built a home near the Bear Creek staging area in 1829. They applied for a grant, but Filipe Briones was killed in a bloody dispute over stolen horses in 1840. In 1842, Maria was granted Rancho La Boca de la Canada de Pinole (13,316 acres).

There is so much more. We have binders of neighborhood stories in the History Room and a list of some street names. If you know any other street names and their history, please come in and let us know.

Laura Torkelson



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

