



Lafayette Historical Society

NEWS

Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California

April 2020

Vol. 47, No. 2

Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library



**COMING SOON:
A PROGRAM ON THE SACRAMENTO NORTHERN
RAILROAD.....STAY TUNED!!**

Before BART connected Contra Costa County with Oakland and San Francisco, electric trains carried people and freight down the Sacramento Valley and through the towns of Contra Costa and Alameda Counties. A speaker from the Western Railroad Museum will present a program about trains and transportation in the early 20th century and the history of the Sacramento Northern Railroad. We'll contact you when more specific details are available!!

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2020

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their memberships:

David Ogden
Betsy Willcuts
Peter Frazier

Judie Peterson & David Clark
Downing & Judith Exley
Todd & Betty LaPorte
Kathy & Allen Hopkins

Laura Torkelson
Sharon Fraetis
Nancy Flood

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Membership is very crucial to our organization, especially in recent times. Despite the fact that the Library, and consequently the History Room, are closed indefinitely due to the coronavirus pandemic, LHS will need to continue to pay rent to the City of Lafayette for our space. We are unable to sponsor programs which, in addition to membership, are the ways we have to produce revenue. If your mailing label was printed in **red**, your membership has expired and we would greatly appreciate a renewal. Life Members are indicated by a red **L** on their address label (though any additional donations would be appreciated). Individual memberships are \$25/year, family memberships are \$50. In return you will receive four quarterly newsletters and a reduced admission price at our programs. I hope that you might consider renewing your membership or making a donation to assist us.

Please send membership or donations to LHS, PO Box 133, Lafayette Ca 94549. Thank you.

Mary McCosker, President

IN MEMORY

Lafayette and the Historical Society have lost two wonderful historical figures in the last month, Bill McNeill and Theron Nelson. Both of these gentlemen will be greatly missed!!



Bill McNeill was the grandson of Robert Elam McNeill, proprietor of the general store in Lafayette from 1902-1935. As a young boy, Bill would spend time in his grandfather's store which had a dirt cellar ("a hole dug under the floor") with a trap door at the entrance which could be raised to access the cellar. Barrels of corn syrup were stored in the cellar and the syrup was sold in bulk. Bill enjoyed sampling the syrup, but on one occasion he left the spigot on the barrel open and the syrup ran onto the dirt floor until it was noticed by his grandfather who was very unhappy with Bill.

One of the barrels from the grocery store found its way back to the Historical Society and reminds us of Bill and his family's part in Lafayette history.

Theron Nelson, a long-time Lafayette resident recently passed away. He was a member of Laffrantics for thirty years and compiled an incredible history of the group in a series of six binders. Priceless information about Laffrantics, including shows presented, music and lyrics, and rosters of all the actors, can be found in his binders, available to view in the History Room.....a cultural gem of Lafayette history. The monies brought in by the productions of Laffrantics were used to establish Buckeye Fields, as well as to support other organizations and worthy causes in the community. Theron was a Lafayette resident for 70 years and was selected as Lafayette Man of the Year in 1957. He will be missed!!



DINING, DANCING AND YES, EVEN GAMBLING: LAFAYETTE'S STRIP

Considering the understated, sophisticated restaurants of Lafayette today, it may come as a surprise that the eating establishments of Lafayette's recent past were almost racy by comparison. Yes, racy!!



In the 1930s and 40s when Mt. Diablo Boulevard was still Old Tunnel Road, Lafayette's restaurant row was known as the *Tunnel Strip*. People drove from Oakland and even San Francisco to dance at the El Nido Rancho on the west side of town or eat at the Curve (where Celia's was located) and Planter's Dock perched high on the hill (now the Jewish Community Center). Alsam's (today site of Walgreen's) was named for owners Al and Sam Morterra, and Jay Bedsworth,

owner of the Tunnel Inn (today Pet Food Express) clipped dollar bills with thumbtacks onto the ceiling. And of course, Lou's Roundup restaurant and bar has been on the south side of Mt. Diablo Boulevard since 1935.

Lou Repetto, another longtime Lafayette resident remembered, "The most important place to eat in town was El Nido Rancho continental restaurant, which was demolished with the coming of the freeway. There was a tropical restaurant called Planter's Dock that moved here from Oakland that was also pretty fancy."

Tom Courtright of Orchard Nursery recalled, "As you look up toward the Jewish Temple you can still see a little of the waterfall that was on the grounds of Planter's Dock. The restaurant had tiki god statues lining the drive all the way from Mt. Diablo Boulevard up to the parking lot."



Many old timers remember the original Petar's (then in a wooden building on the north side of Mt. Diablo Boulevard). Ned Robinson, former mayor, summed it up. "Petar's was very popular because the food was good, and he also had very attractive blonde, buxom hostesses." Tom Whitten, property developer and retired engineer, added, "Petar was quite a character in the old European style. He'd kiss all the ladies' hands. He was very charming and always well-dressed. He was the former maître d' at Bimbo's in San Francisco. When I was a kid, Bimbo's was famous for what they called *the nude in the fish bowl*." Somehow they projected a rather fuzzy image of a supposedly naked mermaid swimming around in a giant fish bowl."

And, of courses, in the 1930s and 40s, everybody who was anybody – including Boston Red Sox's all-star slugger Ted Williams (whose father lived in Walnut Creek) – ate at



Bill's Place. Edward and Marie Bill's restaurant was located behind the Flying A service station at the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

There were family style restaurants too. In the 1950s, the local teens' favorite hangout was Chaps Drive-In, next to the Chevron station at the corner of Happy Valley Road and Mt. Diablo Boulevard. "They had this big neon sign with a cowboy wearing chaps," former mayor Ann Grodin remembered.

"We loved Freddie's Pizza, which was originally in the brick building where Pizza Antica is today," Miler McGrath of Diamond K Supply added. "When I was a little older, I used to love the Refectory, a great steak house, behind where Walgreen's is now."

Scotty Loucks, insurance broker, saved a menu from the Whirlybird Inn, perhaps the singularly most unusual restaurant in Lafayette's colorful recent history. It was located on the hill near the Lafayette heliport, which was across the street from Sunset Village (above today's Veterans Building). For a few years from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, a helicopter service ferried passengers to and from SFO and Oakland airports, before noises complaints from nearby residents plus economic necessity led to the service's demise.

~~~~~This article is excerpted from *Voices of Lafayette* by Julie Sullivan (available for purchase in the History Room at the Lafayette Library).

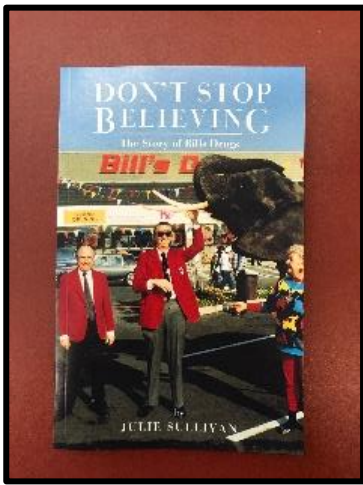
## **ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral Histories which date from the 1970's have been stored on tapes and discs in the History Room. Many of these tapes have recently been digitized and are available for viewing on the Historical Society Website – [lafayettehistory.org](http://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.

**Teresa Gerringer:** Teresa was interviewed by Brenda Hepler on September 2, 2009. She was already serving on the Lafayette School Board when she was asked to be part of the steering committee working on the new library. At the time she joined there was limited enthusiasm for funding this project within the community. That changed after Teresa became involved with this effort, as she gave presentations to groups living in all parts the city, helped identify prospective major donors, and became co-chair of fundraising when the Public Campaign was launched. She saw the new library as an opportunity for partnership between the City, its schools, and the community with its lifelong learning needs.

**Bill Eames:** Bill was interviewed by Brenda Hepler on November 9, 2009. He opened a pharmacy—first called Acalanes Pharmacy, later renamed Bill's Drugs-- in Lafayette in 1959. For the next thirty years Bill actively supported numerous community organizations while he was building Bill's Drugs into a large regional pharmacy chain. He was actively involved in the early planning and fundraising for the library as a member of the Lafayette Community Foundation board. He also sponsored the publication of "The Voices of Lafayette," a collection of interviews with local business owners and other notable residents.





## **“DON’T STOP BELIEVING”**

Bill Eames has written a book about his life and the story of his store, Bill’s Drugs, once an institution in Lafayette. Bill’s business goal was “to give good service, and for the pharmacy to be the central part of his stores because he was proud of being a pharmacist”. If you are interested in purchasing a copy of Bill’s book (or looking at a copy of it), please come by the History Room when we are once again open.

## **A LITTLE HISTORY FROM “ABANDONED RAILS: THE SACRAMENTO NORTHERN RAILROAD”**

The Sacramento Northern Railroad, a subsidiary of Western Pacific, came into existence around 1929, and was composed of the Oakland, Antioch & Eastern Railroad (also the San Francisco-Sacramento Railroad, originally the Oakland and Antioch Railway), and the Northern Electric Interurban; each of these former lines were in service as early as 1900. Originally electrified, the line converted to diesel in the 1960s. The Sacramento Northern disappeared when Western Pacific was merged into Union Pacific in 1982. When the Bay Bridge opened between San Francisco and Oakland, the Sacramento Northern trains used tracks on the lower deck. The tracks on the bridge have been gone for decades, but the subject of rebuilding a transit line there is raised from time to time. Meanwhile, most of the mainline and branches have been abandoned; some segments are still in use or were rebuilt for new uses:



- Yolo Shortline runs the line from Woodland through West Sacramento south of Tasco.
- Sacramento’s Light Rail line was rebuilt over the right-of-way of the Swanston branch northeast of downtown Sacramento.
- The Western Railway Museum has acquired 20 miles of the former right-of-way between Sacramento and the Bay Area. The volunteers of the WRM rebuilt the track, and restrung and energized overhead trolley wires along the way, allowing them to run excursions using vintage streetcars and interurbans.
- Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rebuilt a section through the hills east of Oakland, between Walnut Creek and North Concord.
- The bike trail that runs through Lafayette was the route of the Sacramento Northern trains.

Thanks to Richard Vantine for contributing information about this route.



Lafayette Historical Society  
PO Box 133, Lafayette Ca  
94549

925-283-1848

[www.lafayettehistory.org](http://www.lafayettehistory.org)

**LHS**

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2020

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Return Service Requested

Thank you to the Dana Green Team for sponsoring this issue of the LHS Newsletter.

COMPASS



## Together we are Lamorinda Strong

During this unprecedented time, we hope you are finding magical moments with your family and community.

Follow us on Facebook and Instagram (@DanaGreenTeam) to read Lamorinda love stories that bring us pride and remind us of why we love this community.

In addition, enjoy virtual tours of our residential real estate listings.

**DANA GREEN TEAM**

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