



Lafayette, California

January 2022

Vol. 49, No. 1

Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

OLD BETSY & HER HOLIDAY ELVES

On Sunday, December 5, Old Betsy, Lafayette's 1919/1920 Model T fire truck made her annual appearance at the Lafayette Plaza Park for the "It's a Wonderful Life" Holiday celebration. There were over 300 children and their families there to greet Santa as he arrived aboard Old Betsy. Many thanks are due to Larry Blodgett and Mike Raffo, Santa's elves, who not only drive Betsy to local events but take care of her maintenance and general appearance. The Lafayette Historical Society is appreciative of all of time and love these two gentlemen give to this special part of Lafayette's history.



Mike & Larry



Old Betsy delivered Santa to Plaza Park

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2022

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Judie Peterson	Downing & Judith Exley	Thomas Edwards
Diane Sasser	Todd & Betty LaPorte	Sarah Blumenfeld
Amy Anderson	The Van Etten Family	Joan Bruzzone
Terry Saltiel	Paul Joseph & Melissa Chen	Jay Lifson
Kelly Daggs	Roger & Jeane Samuelsen	Mary Lou Till
Patrick Kikkert	Peter & Sharon Lingane	Meredith Meade
Carolyn Alderette	Richard Whitmore	Sande Hubbs
Adrienne Rogers	Mike Raffo	Marrino Berbano
David Gerson	Leonard Holmes	Judith Jordan
Caren Armstrong	Peter & Robin Frazier	Nancy Goodmiller
Stu Swiedler	Dick & Lisa Cohen	Sharon Fraetis

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. If you have a **red dot** on your address label for this issue, your membership is up for renewal in the next month or two. If you have a **red L** on your address label you are a Life Member and do not pay dues so if you'd like to make a donation it would be appreciated. We have made a small increase in membership fees effective July 2021.

Student Membership is \$15

Individual Membership is \$30

Family Membership is \$60

Additional Donations are always appreciated

Please send to LHS

PO Box 133, Lafayette CA 94549

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral Histories, which date from the 1970s, 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. 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 tell about early life in the area of Reliez Creek. The committee continues to work to make additional tapes available.

George Blodgett: George Blodgett was twelve years old in 1946 when his father Kermit founded Blodgett's Linoleum. His father also purchased land off Reliez Valley Road,

then put in Vaughn Road, and developed homes for his family and others. Eleven years later George joined the business, expanding it to offer carpeting in addition to other floor coverings. Today, after nearly eight decades of growth and change in Lafayette, the business still thrives under the management of George's son Larry, an architect with experience in building construction.

Excerpted from "Voices of Lafayette" by Julie Sullivan. This book is available for purchase in the History Room.

Ken and Marge Cusick: Ken and Marge Cusick, long time residents of Lafayette, tell stories of their neighborhood and local area which has changed dramatically since they came here. The Cusicks moved to the Springhill Valley in the early 1950s. Ken had a dental practice in Berkeley that attracted many of his Lafayette neighbors. Marge taught at Montecito Elementary School for 5 years; during her first year she had over 50 students in each of the two kindergarten classes she taught each day. They raised three sons who attended Lafayette schools and were involved in Boy Scouts.

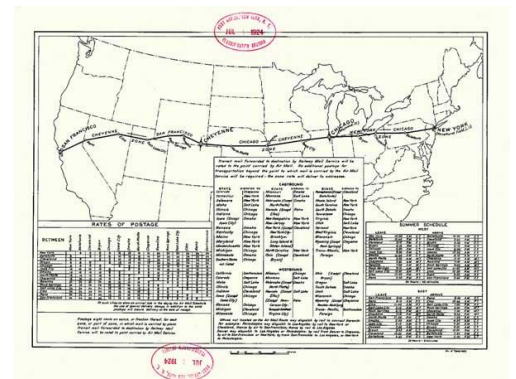
AIRMAIL, ARROWS AND BEACONS

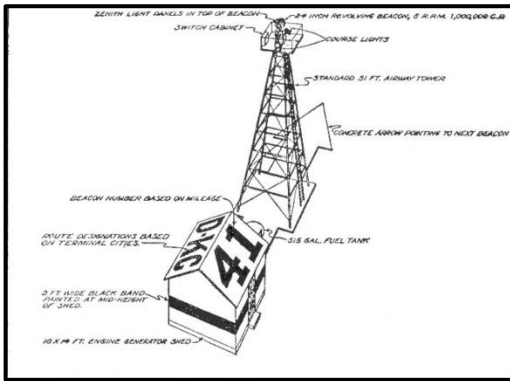
On a ridgetop behind Acalanes High School on the Lafayette/Walnut Creek border are two large concrete arrows embedded in the ground, each pointing in a different direction, each arrow with a head and a tail.



These arrows were installed across the United States in the 1920s to help direct airmail planes. Each arrow had a metal radio beacon nearby. The towers are mostly gone now, torn down in the World War II years, the metal being used in the war effort, but many of the concrete arrows remain pointing their way across the country from the East Coast to the West. Many of the arrows, originally painted yellow to be more visible from the air, are now cracked and covered in graffiti.

The purpose of these arrows and beacons was to help early pilots navigate transcontinental flights at night. Before radar was invented, pilots used ground-based landmarks during the day but night flights were not possible without some form of guidance. A system of beacons was established across the United States to guide airmail pilots day and night. Later when radar and radio communications became standard in airplanes, the beacons became obsolete.





In 1926, the beacon system was initially managed by the Department of Commerce and expanded until 1929. More towers with stronger lights were built 10 miles apart and visible up to 40 miles in clear weather. By the 1930s, technology had improved enough that land-based visual guidance systems were no longer needed. The beacon program continued to operate until 1933 when advanced technology and the cost of the Depression ended the program. Low Frequency Radio Range (LFRR) systems replaced the visual-based systems although some beacons continued to operate into the 1940s.

The early towers used acetylene-gas powered lights to power the beacons which would flash every ten seconds. The lights could be seen for 10 miles in clear weather. To identify the beacon to pilots, a second set of red and green lights would flash a Morse Code letter.

Today, most of the towers have been taken down but hundreds of the arrows remain. A hike to the top of Acalanes Ridge will give you a panoramic view of the area and a chance to see a bit of history.

To see the arrows, park at the end of Bacon Way, take the trail to the right. Follow the trail uphill for about half-mile to a short trail that leads to the left.

THE ROSSI FAMILY STORY

If you've ever driven down Reliez Valley Road, you may have noticed two interestingly named streets: Rossi and Angelo Streets. Some locals may be familiar with the immigrant pioneer Rossi family, but Angelo Street owes its name to the son of the Rossi family named Angelo. The history of these streets is also the history of this family.

Angelo's story is a classic tale of hard work and success in early 20th century California. His father, Serafino Rossi, came to California from Giustina, Italy, in 1906 after his older brother Tony had earned enough money washing windows in Oakland to send for his brother. After a year of work at a candy factory, Serafino heard about another Italian immigrant, Joe Ghiglione, who had land in Happy Valley. Serafino came to help Ghiglione work his land.

After two years of working for Ghiglione, Serafino moved to Reliez Valley and became one of three families living in the area. He built a house for about \$100 on his neighbor Ed Rowland's land near where Springhill School is today and share-cropped for Rowland. Serafino saved money to buy acreage a few parcels at a time, and eventually his estate comprised 152 acres growing corn, tomatoes, potatoes, pears and peaches, as well as a three-room house with indoor plumbing. He was joined by his wife, Mary, whom he married in 1916.



Serafino continued farming and in time he and Mary had three children, Frank, Serafine, and Angelo. The family sold produce in Oakland, delivering it by wagon after a 4 or 5-hour trip up Fish Ranch Road or through the very narrow, recently opened Kennedy Tunnel. Avoiding wildlife such as coyotes which Serafino remembers shooting with his rifle, the family became well known in the area for their sugary pears and heads of beef raised by Mary.

All three children attended local schools and Angelo graduated from Acalanes High School in 1941 in the first graduating class. Angelo was drafted into the army during World War II as a member of the 27th Infantry Division. He courted his future wife, Gloria, whom he met at a Frank Sinatra Show at the Sweets Ballroom in Oakland, via letters for the entire 3½ years of his deployment. He returned to his family in Lafayette



after he received a Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts, married Gloria, and moved into the house they were to occupy for 56 years. Serafino stopped farming and opened a furniture store, which was staffed by his sons. The store stood for almost 30 years on Mt. Diablo Blvd. near where the Lafayette Park Hotel is today and featured handcrafted furniture by the Rossi family.

Eventually Serafino began to sell off parcels of his land to developers. While the Rossi homes on Reliez Valley Road and Hilltop still exist, they are no longer in the Rossi family. However, both Rossi and Angelo streets proudly bear the names of the family who helped to settle Reliez Valley.

WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA



Each December on National Wreaths Across America Day, the mission to Remember, Honor and Teach is carried out by coordinating wreath-laying ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery, as well as at more than 2,500 additional locations in all 50 U.S. states, at sea and abroad. This year, wreath laying again took place at the Lafayette Cemetery, in conjunction with the Acalanes Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Boy Scout Troop #284, VFW Post #8063, American Legion Post #517, current and retired members of the various branches of the Armed Forces, local dignitaries, and family members of military veterans buried at our local cemetery. Three members of the Lafayette

Historical Society were privileged to attend the ceremony: Nancy Flood, Janet Nadol, and Mary McCosker. It was a wonderful opportunity for those who were there to pause and appreciate the sacrifices made by so many in the service of our nation. It is hoped that this ceremony will continue as an annual celebration.



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LHS

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Return service requested

Thank you to Christine Raymond for sponsoring this issue of the LHS Newsletter:

LafayetteSocial.com

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is a proud sponsor of the Lafayette Historical Society

*"The more you know about the past,
the better prepared you are for the future."*

~ Theodore Roosevelt

Please join us in supporting our local historical society and
contributing to a stronger and better informed future.