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Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library



CELEBRATING 175th+ YEARS OF LAFAYETTE HISTORY
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PIONEERS TRAVEL WEST: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LAFAYETTE

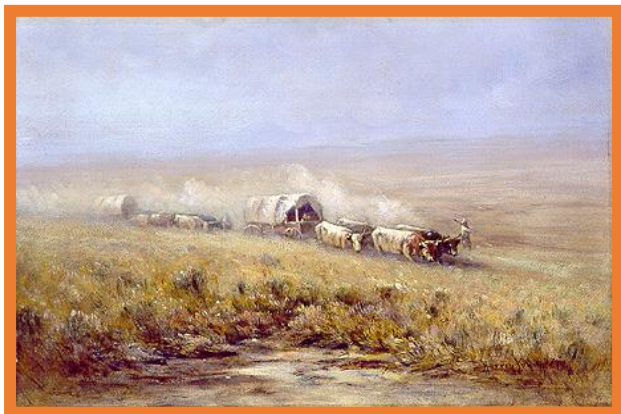
Elam Brown was born in Herkimer County, New York in 1797, to Elizabeth and Thomas Brown. In his early life, Elam lived in Massachusetts, Missouri and later Illinois. His father was a farmer who was constantly searching for better, more fertile land on which to support his family.

Elam too became a farmer. He grew up in Illinois where he met and married Sarah Allen. In 1836, Elam heard about land west of the Missouri River that had been purchased from Indians and was available to settlers.

He took his family (now a wife and four children) and made the journey to the Platte Purchase where a difficult life became even harder with the death of Sarah in early 1843.

In May of 1843, one of Elam's sons, Thomas, left his father and siblings to go west to the

Oregon Territory, arriving there in December. He was hired as a surveyor and mapped out portions of the early Oregon Country. He had written to his father telling him of the affordable, fertile land for sale in the west. Crops could not be grown on the East coast in the winter because of the cold weather, but crops could grow in the milder winters on the West coast. Elam decided he would start his life over by moving west and purchasing land. Other nearby families also decided to go west. One of those families was the



Allens who had been neighbors of the Browns in the Platte. Margaret and Isaac Allen had eleven children, many whom accompanied their parents on the journey. The pioneers travelled across the country in a group of covered wagons, large wooden boxes on wheels made of wood with metal bands around them. Only very young children and very old people rode in the wagons as they were filled with items needed to establish a new life in a new locale. Each wagon was pulled by a team of oxen. There were only dirt trails for roads and they were very dusty. Some people had horses to ride but most people going west would walk alongside the wagons for as many as 10 miles a day. The weather was often very hot and humid. The journey from Missouri to the West Coast took about six months. If the wagon train came to a river or stream, it might rest for a day, bathing and washing clothes in the water. The animals could rest too. But the wagon train needed to keep moving west as it was imperative to cross over the western mountains before snowfall.

Elam had purchased a used wagon for \$50 that he hoped would last the journey to the west coast. Wagons carried wooden barrels filled with flour for baking or dried beans for cooking in a big iron pot over a fire, oil lamps to give light at night, a butter churn to make butter from cream if there was a dairy cow on the trip, and bottles filled with medicines and other home remedies. Clothing, bedding and small pieces of furniture would also be included in the cargo carried in the wagon.

On May 1, 1846, a wagon train of fourteen families in sixteen wagons began a six-month journey from St. Joseph, Missouri to a new life in the west. Elam Brown and Isaac Allen had been chosen as co-captains of the wagon train. The Oregon Trail was the route taken by most pioneers heading west. There were U.S. Army forts along the trail where the travelers could stop for supplies, for repairs, or for medical aid. As they neared Ft. Bridger in Wyoming, many of the group were ill with Plains (Typhoid)



Fever from drinking contaminated water. One very sick person was Margaret Allen's son Andrew. He was left at the fort since he was too ill to travel. When the group arrived at Fort Hall, they met travelers coming down the Oregon Trail who told them there hadn't been much rain the winter before so there was little grass growing along the trail. This meant that there would not be enough food for the animals (oxen, horses, cows) who might then grow weak. The leaders of the group decided that it would be safer to take the California Trail to the south so the wagon train set off for California. As they travelled in Nevada, others in the group became ill. Isaac Allen died of Plains Fever and was buried along the trail. Margaret Allen also became ill but survived. Her daughter-in-law (wife of Andrew) died in childbirth so Margaret had to care for the newborn child.

Elam and Margaret spent a short while in the Sacramento Valley and were married in late 1846. They spent time in the East Bay where Elam worked as a logger. They purchased Rancho Acalanes (a Mexican land grant) from William Leidesdorff for \$900 (with 300 cattle included).

Elam and Margaret came to this area to see the land they had purchased. It was February of 1847 and the weather was cold and rainy. They drove their wagons up today's Happy Valley Road and found a flat piece of land near a creek where they set up their household, living in a very primitive shack. A marker on Happy Valley Road shows where they built their first home. While Elam built the shelter, Margaret cooked a pot of stew over the fire. They lived there for a year or two while Elam started the first business in Lafayette, a grist mill, where farmers could have their grain ground into flour. Elam decided that he wanted to live closer to the growing downtown area as the small community was at the crossroads of the Road To The Redwoods, The Road To Oakland, and The Road To Martinez. When he told Margaret they were going to move, she replied, "I'm not moving unless you build me a house with wooden floors." A marker near today's Lafayette Public House shows the location of this early home.

Elam Brown later became an Alcalde of the district, prior to California becoming a state, was a member of the State Constitutional Convention, and acted as a State Assemblyman in California's first two legislatures.

The first schoolhouse in Lafayette was built near where the library is located today. It was a one room school house as there were not many children in early Lafayette. As the town began to grow, a second schoolhouse was built. It was a larger one room school. In 1893 there were many more children living in Lafayette and an even larger school was needed. The Third Schoolhouse was built in front of the Second Schoolhouse and those two buildings were used until 1927 when Lafayette Elementary School was built across the street. Then the Second Schoolhouse was moved around the corner to Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Today that building is a downtown store. The Third Schoolhouse is now the Lafayette United Methodist Church on Moraga Road.



In 1864, Elam and Margaret decided the town should have a small park for community gatherings on weekends and holidays. They donated a piece of land in the middle of town for this purpose. Most of the early businesses were built around this park. The park is still there today, named the Elam and Margaret Allen Brown Plaza Park (but usually referred to as Plaza Park)it is in the center of town and still used today for community gatherings.



Early businesses were built around the Plaza Park. The Wayside Inn was a hotel where one could spend the night or purchase a meal. The first grocery store in town was built by Benjamin Shreve, the man who named our town Lafayette, and is located near the Plaza Park. Later the store was called the Pioneer Store and today the same building is the site of Sideboard Restaurant.

There was a small building that served as a meat market. Before the town had electricity, there was no way to refrigerate meat to keep it fresh. To have fresh meat you would speak to the butcher in the market and arrange a time to pick up your order.

Peter Thomson was the town blacksmith for over 60 years. He came to California from Canada. As there were no hardware stores in Lafayette at this time, Peter would fashion

horseshoes for horses, make metal tools for farmers as well as square nails to be used when building with wood. Peter's anvils are today in the Historical Society at the Library. His blacksmith shop was located across the street from the Plaza Park at the site of the Bank of America.

The first post office in Lafayette was located in the general store. Later when the town had become more populated, a small post office was built where the Safeway parking lot is today. Carrie Van Meter was the first postmaster. She had sixty books in the post office so this building was also the first library in Lafayette and she was the first Librarian.

Town Hall was built in 1914 as a place for community meetings and parties. Upstairs there was a dance floor that bounced when people danced. Party goers would take the train from Oakland or Walnut Creek and sometimes the dances would not end until 3:00 am when the trains would take them home. Today Town Hall is a theater where plays and other programs are presented and where children can take drama classes.

Years before BART was built, the Sacramento Northern Railroad came through Lafayette. These electric trains came down the Sacramento Valley from Chico to Benicia where the trains were put on ferries to cross the water, then the trains came through Concord, Walnut Creek, through Lafayette, Moraga, and Canyon to Oakland. There were four stops in Lafayette. After World War II, cars became more available and affordable for people to drive and the passenger trains were taken away. By the 1950s, trucks had replaced the freight trains. The tracks of the Sacramento Northern were taken up and the route was paved over and has become the Lafayette Moraga Trail that is used for walking, jogging, and biking.



CARL JENNINGS AND EL DIABLO FORGE



You may have noticed this unusual building on the east end of Lafayette near Brown Avenue and wondered about its origin. It was built by C. Carl Jennings (1910-2003), renown California artist-blacksmith, who was born in 1910 in Marion, Illinois. Both his father and grandfather were blacksmiths. When Carl finished high school he moved with his father to San Francisco where they worked as blacksmiths at Pacific Gas & Electric beginning in 1928. During the 1930s, Carl also pursued an applied art degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts) in Oakland.

After graduation, while working as a journeyman blacksmith, he completed an apprenticeship under John Forester, a Hungarian-trained blacksmith, providing his first experience with "art smithing". During World War II, Jennings worked as a welder and metalworker at Naval Air Station, Alameda. In 1947 he used retirement savings from the military to buy land in Lafayette. It was here he established his own blacksmith shop,

El Diablo Forge. The building was designed and built by Jennings. He found the thick adobe blocks at an old adobe works in Pacheco and the hand-made roof tiles from an old Stockton area tile shop. He set into the building heavy wooden beams, supporting the tile roof with his own special iron stress work. During this period, he worked on various equipment including tractors and lawn mowers, but he found it more rewarding to work with decorative metal. He made mostly functional work for clients such as lighting fixtures, grilles, fire screens and tools, and gates, but he also made more abstract, sculptural works on his own time. His works include the railings and lighting fixture for the Chapel of the Chimes in Oakland, the lighting fixtures for the Church of the 49ers in Columbia, and the gates for the Christian Brothers Winery in St. Helena and Mont La Salle. Starting in the 1950s, he began participating in group exhibitions in Northern California, mostly centered on studio craft. He sold his land in Lafayette in the 1960s, closed the Forge, and semiretired. In 1968, Jennings and his wife purchased land in Sonoma County, and his first retirement project was to begin constructing their dream house. He handmade many elements in the home from the toilet paper holder and door hardware to the large repoussé fireplace. Jennings passed away in May of 2003 at the age of 93.

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2023

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

Kathy Biro	Gloria Duffy	The Van Etten Family
Thomas Edwards	Becky Jenkins	Ashley Battersby
Amy Anderson	Carol Ward	Janet Nadol
Kelly Daggs	Jay Lifson	Sharon Fraetis
Robbin & Fred Kroger	Betty & Todd LaPorte	Patrick Kikkert
Diane Sasser	Mike Raffo	Carolyn Alderette
Marrino Berbano	Caren Armstrong	Jennifer Russell
David Ogden	Downing & Judith Exley	Peter Frazier
Lauren Deal	Spencer & Tracy Brog	

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.

Student Membership is \$15

Individual Membership is \$30

Family Membership is \$60

**Additional donations are always appreciated. Please send to LHS
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LHS

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Return service requested

Thank you to Lauren Deal for sponsoring this issue of the LHS Newsletter.

FIRMLY ROOTED IN LAFAYETTE

I was fortunate to grow up in this amazing community and now I am honored to raise my children and work here. If a change of address is on your 2023 to-do list let me put my local knowledge to work for you.



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