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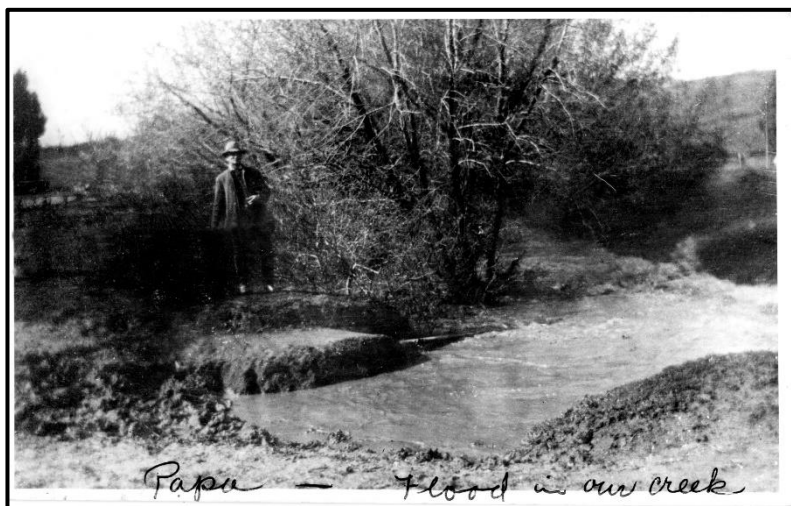
**CELEBRATING 175<sup>th</sup>+ YEARS OF LAFAYETTE HISTORY**

## **TORRENTIAL RAINS NOT NEW IN COUNTY HISTORY....AND NEITHER ARE DROUGHTS**

The weather of the last few years has been of not enough rain and then too much rain. Past years included similar weather patterns. Here's a look at some history of Lafayette weather.

The January 15th, 1965, Lafayette Sun took a look back at the rainfall records left from the California Mission era: "That rainstorms in 1805 created statewide havoc was verified by the records of Southern mission padres. Proof of the record-breaking 1861-62 deluge was corroborated later when water marks were found in trees in the San Joaquin Valley, showing that a former flood had been fully six feet higher.

"The padres recorded a rainfall in 1819 so great that rivers changed their beds. Historians mentioned the winter of 1825-26, 1840 and 1846-47, when great numbers of stock were lost by drowning."



*Papa — Flood in our creek*

From the same sources we learn of extremely dry years. In fact, the Native Americans told of a year in which no rain fell at all—the drought of 1824, which caused cattle to die by the thousands. And the year 1831 was so dry that Historian William Heath Davis wrote, that rancheros killed thousands of horses to preserve what little feed there was for their cattle.

Official weather records were kept beginning in 1849. From that year to 1914, Contra Costa County experienced 11 floods, and there were 21 drought years.

A 1970 history of the Municipal Utility District reported that the winter of 1850-51 had been unusually dry, a mere 7.1 inches of rainfall, and by summer the springs and creeks carried far less water than before. “Few at the time might have guessed, but the problem of water was to become the most vexatious and turbulent the area was to have over the next 60 years. It only grew more complex as communities expanded and natural water sources disappeared.” And 1860 was a short rain year, as well, and what water there was quickly ran off the denuded slopes, where trees had been clear-cut to provide lumber for the fast-growing Bay Area.

But according to William Brewster, in his journal *Up and Down California* in 1860-1864, “Between November 1861 and January 31, 1862, 102 inches of rain fell in the Central Valley, which was one vast lake 250–300 miles long and 20–60 miles wide. The winds made high waves of the cold, muddy waters that beat to pieces farm dwellings that had withstood the flood waters.

“The course of the river itself could be told only by treetops. River steamers were used to get to ranches 14 miles from the river. Isolation from the east, where the Civil War raged, was complete. Bridges and roads were destroyed, so that the Overland could not operate. [Beginning in 1857, the Overland Mail Company carried mail from St. Louis to San Francisco twice a week.] Even the telegraph was not working, for in the Sacramento Valley, for some distance, the tops of the poles were under water. An eye-witness account of the view from Mt. Diablo was that the San Francisco Bay appeared small compared to the muddy sea to the east.



“Warehouses along the waterfront and their contents of wheat were swept away. Recurring floods brought more mud and silt from upstream that filled the slough and overflowed into the town.”

And one additional peril: “In 1862 the Bay Area was issued a rattlesnake warning, as the rattlers were washed down from the mountains on floating debris,” Brewster reported.

Two photos from the LHS archives demonstrate the yin and yang of local rainfall. The circa 1910 flood scene shows Henry Toler Brown (“Papa,” according to writing on the photo margin) near the flooded Lafayette Creek at Oakland Ave. and Mt. Diablo. The other picture is of Dick Francis water witching during the drought of 1977. Water or lack thereof will probably continue to be part of our local history on into the future.

~~Excerpted from an article by Ruth Bailey

## **A DAM CLUB IN LAFAYETTE?**

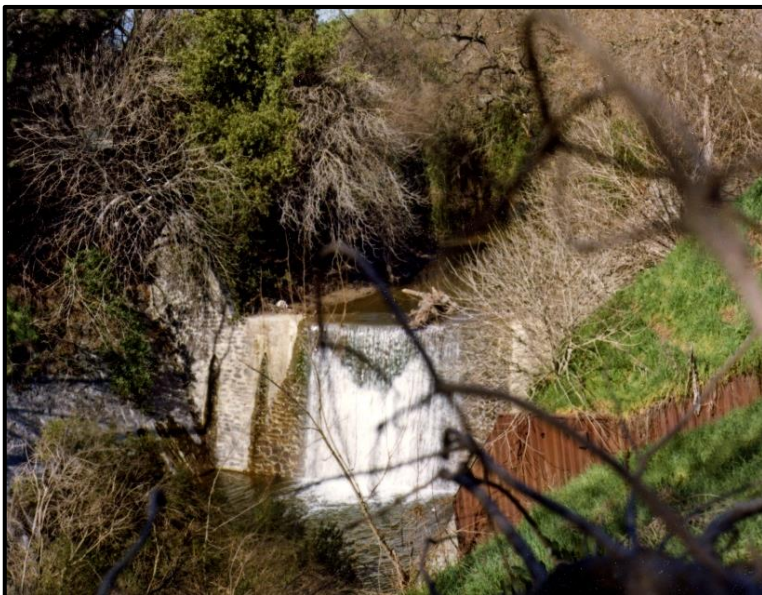
An inquiring Lafayette resident recently dropped into the Historical Society with the closest we’ve ever gotten to an aquatic engineering question: when was the Weir at the end of Fourth Street built and why? The Weir at Fourth Street not only has a story, it has a partner at Victoria Court. Weirs, which are a variety of dam, are built to alter or regulate the flow of rivers and creeks. In this case, the two weirs in Lafayette came into being after two very wet winters in 1938

and 1939. Log jams caused by tumbling black walnut trees widened the course of the creek, and land on both sides was reclaimed by water. Something had to be done.

The flooding got so bad that the bridge at Moraga Boulevard and Fourth Street had to be rebuilt by the city in order to prevent its demise. With rising water, the county quickly realized a weir at Fourth Street would be a good solution to moderating the creek in the long term.

Some local resident living in the Lafayette Manor Tract (just down the creek from Victoria Avenue) got wind of this and formed the Las Trampas Dam Club in 1940 to advocate for a second weir near Victoria Court. The Dam Club was motivated with good reason: rising water had encroached on several owners' properties, sometimes even coming up onto the back porch of hapless residents.

Meeting in Earl Wise's garage, the club had five members: George Williams, Mr. Van Es, Bud Blamy, George Gelhaus, and the owner of the "clubhouse," Earl Wise. Each member donated \$300 to build the second weir, and solicited nearby residents for donations and pledges for the betterment of the community.



With the money collected, the group shopped for materials, hired government surveyors to make plans, and petitioned the county. By winter 1941, the two weirs were under construction, with the County furnishing the labor for the Victoria Court weir. Most of the materials for the construction were local, with rock purchased from Clayton, and cement from Burt & Lloyd in Lafayette.

The impressive structures were built and completed by the next wet winter, where they proved their merit in protecting life and property in the area. Both weirs still stand, regulating the creek and preventing any residents from flood damage.

## **RAIN AND FLOODING IN OCTOBER 1962**

Emergency aid for storm-ravaged Contra Costa County was being given this week, and more was being sought as a massive clean-up campaign continued to clear debris brought by wind, flood, and landslide last weekend.

Representative John Baldwin urged President John F. Kennedy to declare a federal disaster area to cover Solano, Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. Baldwin described the storm as "torrential" and told the President that as much as 10 inches of rain struck "certain portions" – notably Orinda – of this area in two days.

The American Red Cross reported that ten families had asked for and received rehabilitation aid and estimated that some 50 homes in the central county area had been damaged. Assistance includes food, clothing, repair, and rebuilding of homes, essential furnishings, and medical care.

It all began for central county residents on Thursday, October 11, when gales of 45 miles an hour



slashed through the area. Rain brought a power failure here, a lack of phone service there.

Throughout the county towering oaks lost branches or crashed to the ground. Roads were slick and hazardous. But there were roads. By Friday morning over five inches of rain had fallen in some areas. Minor slides threatened highways and roads throughout the county, but traffic still flowed. Grayson, Las Trampas, San Ramon, Murderous, Tice, and Walnut Creek creeks began to rise as saturated soil took less and less rainfall. Drains began to clog with leaves, twigs, branches, stones and mud. Local football games and other events were cancelled.



Rain let up slightly Friday night, but then increased early Saturday morning. By 8 am Saturday, Orinda-Moraga, hardest hit, had had well over 10 inches of rain since Thursday.

Then on Saturday, what had been a severe storm turned to tragedy and disaster. A seven year old boy died, buried in a mud slide behind his parent's Orinda home. Suddenly the area was cut off to the west as Fish Ranch, Bear Creek, Wildcat, Redwood and San Pablo Dam Roads were hit by mud slides.

Mud cascaded into control rooms of the Caldecott Tunnel, cutting the area's main artery to the west when tunnel lighting and ventilation were knocked out. The few cars that made the last trips through the tunnel Saturday were turned back at the east portal when more mud flowed across Highway 24 and falling power poles sent hot high-voltage lines snaking through the debris. By this time slides had cut down western access to the tunnel.

Cut off, the area turned in upon itself to face what might have been the worst flood in its history. Several Orinda homes were islands in seas of mud. Only streets on high ground in cities were not flooded. More homes in Pleasant Hill and Walnut Creek were invaded by up to a foot of water. Creeks rose dangerously close to flood levels, washed out all bridges and tore down huge trees on their banks. Power and telephone lines were down or shorted in many areas. Downtown Walnut Creek was evacuated. The Red Cross set up evacuation centers at Walnut Creek Recreation Center, Las Lomas High School in Walnut Creek, Pine Grove School in Orinda, Oak Park in Pleasant Hill and elsewhere.

As Walnut Creek threatened to go over its banks, the county disaster office considered proclaiming an official county-wide state of disaster. Creek discharge had reached record levels set in the floods of 1955 and 1958. But the \$500,00 channeling project recently completed on Walnut Creek averted floods that could have caused several millions. This and the relative dryness of the ground before the rains prevented worse flood damage than in prior years.



And then, as suddenly as they began, the rains stopped. Orinda and Moraga by this time had received over 20 inches during the storm, while Walnut Creek registered over 10 inches.

*~~Excerpted from the Lafayette Sun, October 1962*

## **IN MEMORIAM: MARIANNE MALLEY MILLETTE**



Longtime Lafayette resident Marianne Malley Millette passed away in April. She was a part of the Malley family who lived on land purchased by her grandfather in 1910 that was east of Upper Happy Valley Road, south of Lower Happy Valley Road, and north of Los Arabis Drive. Their summer home, located on this property, was called Peardale, now the name given to the area of North and South Peardale Drives. The family ranch grew pears, peaches, walnuts, and had a grape vineyard. During the Depression her family moved from Oakland to Lafayette when she was two years old so her parents could oversee Peardale Ranch. Marianne and her

husband Red raised their six children in Lafayette and were an important part of our community. (Marianne is shown with her family in the photo....she is in the front row on the right).

## **DONATIONS IN MEMORY OF MARIANNE MILLETTE**

Mary Chandler  
Hilma Johnsen  
Raymond Millette  
Betsy Baum  
Patricia Sober  
Joanne Kovely

Virginia & John Pankau  
B Hallenbeck  
Gail & Jerry Gabriel  
The Pierucci Family  
Robert & Sophie Wing

Paul Pringle  
John Lonergan  
Val Baugh  
The Laurin Scola Family  
Shirley Singer  
Julie Glascock

## **MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2023**

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

Sue Nurock  
Wayne Lawson  
Elizabeth Rustigian  
Blake Hedlund  
Louis Cosso

Susie & Ray Parker  
Eric & Margaret Schreiber  
Stuart Collett  
Kim Bertolero  
Aggie Malanca

Robin Rudderow  
Mary Ann Hoisington  
Patricia Howard  
The Grodin Family  
Joan Evans

**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 but if you'd like to make a donation it would be appreciated.

Student Membership is \$15 ~ Individual Membership is \$30 ~ Family Membership is \$60





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**LHS**

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**Return service requested**



*This Lafayette Historical Society  
Newsletter issue is dedicated to  
Larry Blodgett and Mike Raffo,  
two wonderful volunteers who  
care for Old Betsy, the City's  
Model T Fire Engine.*

*Thank you both for keeping her  
up and running and for sharing  
her with the community!!*

***Thank you Larry & Mike!!***

