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**The Lafayette Historical Society   The Moraga Historical Society**

**The Orinda Historical Society**

**invite you to attend a program on**

***“Building the Caldecott Tunnel”***

**presented by Mary Solon and Mary McCosker**

**Sunday, November 6 at 2 pm**

**Garden Room, Orinda Community Center**

**Admission is free/Donations accepted**

**Refreshments and a Free Book Raffle**

**Town history books available for purchase**

**RSVP: [lafayette.history@comcast.net](mailto:lafayette.history@comcast.net)**

## **CULTURE IN EARLY LAFAYETTE**

### **Town Hall**

Although not the cultural hub of the East Bay, Lafayette has had its share of community theater and cinematic entertainment over the years. Much of the community theater was presented at Town Hall, a community gathering place which was built in 1914. Various theater groups gathered, rehearsed and presented plays and revues in this iconic building.

In the Fall of 1941, the [Lafayette Playshop](#) offered its first program at the Lafayette Grammar School. The group, which had been organized in the Spring of 1941 as part of the Forum, welcomed members who were interested in dramatic work (costume, scenery, play reading) and selected and presented various plays with a cast that included local actors. For



eight years the Playshop used Town Hall for its productions. Later the productions were moved to Acalanes High School.

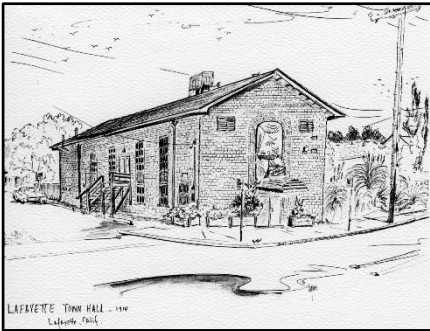
In the summer of 1946, a group of eager young actors and actresses, looking for a place to perform, found the Town Hall in Lafayette and named it the “***Straw Hat Theater***” after the summer theaters of the East Coast circuit. A Berkeley native and graduate of the class of 1941 at UC Berkeley, Elizabeth Berryhill, had been very active in Little Theater on the Berkeley Campus. After service as a WAC in World War II, Elizabeth returned

to Berkeley and to Cal where she and a group of dedicated friends decided they wanted to start a theater company. This wish turned into the “Straw Hat Theater” when they located the Lafayette Town Hall and turned it into a summer theater. There they could perform, rehearse, build sets and generally conduct most of their activities for the first of many summers. At the first performance there were only 27 people in the audience, mostly loyal family members, but they sent out the word. The drama critics from the San Francisco Chronicle and the Examiner wrote very favorably as well, and within two or three weeks all 300 seats were sold out. People came from all over the Bay Area for the next twelve summers. At the end of that time the acting company changed direction and Elizabeth Berryhill and others from the original group formed the Festival Theater which moved from Berkeley and Lafayette to San Anselmo in 1960.

First organized in Orinda in 1944, the ***Dramateurs*** gave performances there and in Berkeley. Three plays were given “in the round” in the Summer of 1955. The following Summer two more productions were played “in the round” as the stage at Town Hall was in need of repair. In 1958, a new era began when the Dramateurs acquired a permanent home in the Lafayette Town Hall. Plays previously impossible because of difficulties in staging were added to the repertoire. Town Hall enabled the cast to strive for perfection in every show...and they achieved it in most. It also enabled them to offer more performances. Over the years, plays presented included “Sunrise at Campobello”, “Blithe Spirit”, “Separate Tables”, “The Rainmaker” and “Plaza Suite”. The Dramateurs not only brought fine dramatic fare to the community, but afforded interested people the opportunity to pursue their artistic ambitions. Prior to Lafayette becoming an incorporated city, a group of citizens, organized as the Lafayette Community Center, had located a site and were raising funds to build a facility for community use. The site was 11+ acres located at 711 St. Mary’s Road, which was later donated to the City of Lafayette after it became incorporated in 1968. The City has since developed the property and it is now known as Buckeye Fields. In 1956 the then “Lafayette Community Center” Board of Directors were seeking money to pay for the site and construct a building for groups to use. They started a fund drive called SPRING FERVOR. The intent was to encourage those in the community to create their own “do-it-yourself” fund raising events to benefit the project....and some residents did. By far the most successful event was started by Jeri Burnside and Betsey



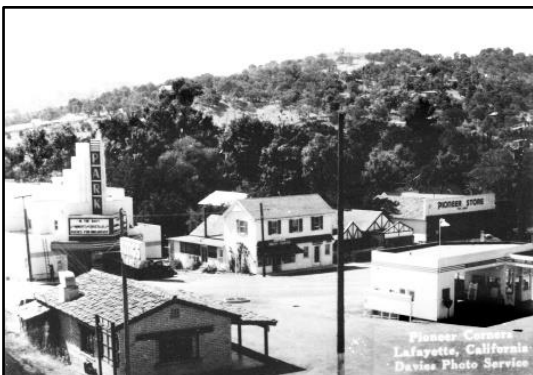
Young. Betsey was a local dance instructor and Jeri one of her dancers. Jeri's reaction was "Let's rent a barn and put on a show" and they gathered a few friends to discuss how to accomplish this. The group met and agreed that they would like to do a show. Auditions were held, a cast selected, and a name chosen for the show and thus **Laf-Frantics** was created. The first performance opened on October 5, 1956, at the Town Hall using the format of old-fashioned melodrama followed by an olio (a series of variety acts (relying on yet unrecognized local talent)). The show was sponsored by the Lafayette Suburban Women's Club, the Lafayette Suburban Junior Women's Club, the Lafayette Junior Chamber of Commerce, and the Lafayette Community Center. No one dreamed the show would continue as an annual production but it did. Most shows such as this one had a life expectancy of seven or eight years but Laf-Frantics went on and on and on for 31 years! In all there were 238 performances using that same format (except for 1958 and 1965). The curtain came down on the last show on April 19, 1986.



Established in 1944 as the Dramateurs and reorganized in 1992 as the **Town Hall Theatre Company** of Lafayette, Town Hall Theater Company is the oldest continuously active theatre company in Contra Costa County. The land and the labor to build the historic Town Hall building were donated by the community. Construction was completed in May 1914 on land donated by Frank and Rosa Ghiglione who also contributed \$200 towards building costs. The first event held in the building was a Grand Ball, and subsequent Town Hall events

were so well attended that the Sacramento Northern Railroad provided a special train from Oakland to West Lafayette. Often the festivities would begin around 9pm, with dinner at midnight, followed by dancing and more partying. One train reportedly left the Lafayette station at 5:30am. Lafayette Grammar School used Town Hall as an auditorium until its own auditorium was built in 1944. Town Hall also hosted community meetings, church services, movies, and basketball. During World War II, Town Hall was used in the war effort, housing aviation cadets who were being trained at St. Mary's College. The Dramateurs reorganized as Town Hall Theatre Company in 1992, and the company has since delighted audiences of all ages and won numerous local Shellie Awards for its work. Live theatre continues in Lamorinda because of the generosity of its citizens, and the existence and use of the Town Hall building for this purpose over so many decades is a testament to this spirit.

## The Park Theatre



On August 26, 1941, the Park Theatre opened in Lafayette. Flowers, music and all of the fanfare that attends a gala premiere turned the theater into a blaze of light and color when the newly constructed showhouse opened its doors to the public, with Abbott and Costello's newest funfest "Hold That Ghost" selected as the opening attraction. The opening of the new Park Theatre heralded a fall

season of outstanding motion pictures which brought to Lafayette a galaxy of film favorites. Following the opening Abbott and Costello film came “Pot O’ Gold,” a musical starring James Stewart and Paulette Goddard. Bette Davis and James Cagney starred in “The Bride Came C.O.D” which followed several weeks later.

The theater was a monument to the confidence that Elwood Laws had in Lafayette and its surrounding communities. He had long felt that Lafayette was a thriving community, one that was capable of maintaining a theater of its own and he had spent many thousands of dollars in building and equipping the new Park Theatre. Laws, who was well known locally, came to Walnut Creek when he purchased the Ramona Theatre. In 1937, the El Rey Theatre was constructed to keep pace with the growth of the community. The prospect of a real theater dedicated to showing movies from glamorous Hollywood enthralled the citizens of Lafayette and the fact that the new theater had been designed by the preeminent cinema architect, William B. David, designer of over 25 successful cinemas up and down the West Coast, made this town very proud. David’s distinctive designs had an appropriate austerity that reflected the economic hardships of the time but still held hope for the future. These theaters were relatively inexpensive to build because there was little labor-intensive ornamentation. Exteriors tended to be concrete or stucco; interiors comfortable but serene. The Park Theatre’s façade beckoned moviegoers into a showcase of the latest and greatest Hollywood films. Seats were custom designed for comfort, lighting in the powder room was designed to flatter the ladies. Furniture, drapes and carpets in the new theater were chosen with the idea of upholding the original theme expressed in the simple, classic lines of the architecture and location of the theater. Heavy, thick-pile carpet especially designed for the Park Theatre, was in a smart blue and ivory design. A modernistic type lounge, and elaborate occasional chairs made up the furniture in the lobby. The interior of the auditorium was tinted in shades of blue and maroon. Drapes were in harmony, and a deflected lighting scheme of glass wall fixtures gave the theater a distinctive warmth and radiance. The ladies’ lounge was certain to delight women patrons for it was both comfortable and artistic. The walls were tinted a soft peach tone, and the carpeting was carried in the same tones of blue and ivory that distinguished the entire theater. A full-length French plate mirrored wall and indirect lighting made it more than inviting.



Though few records remain, the Park was a community draw for decades until it shuttered in 2005. Today, the Park Theatre remains an important representation of a regional theater style: a straightforward, exterior design incorporating retail shops integrated into the façade; signage of the shops as well as the theater’s logo part of the architect’s design and in Art Deco or Art Moderne typefaces. The neon marquee of the Park Theater is particularly unusual in its distinctive tubing of Novial Gold glass and its trapezoidal shape instead of the standard box. The cinema adds texture to Lafayette’s architectural landscape and binds the community in treasured memories.

~~Excerpted from the Lafayette Sun, August 21, 1941 and other sources.



To support the efforts to restore and reopen the Park Theatre, please support the Park Theater Trust and visit their website [www.parktheatertrust.org](http://www.parktheatertrust.org).

## MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2022

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

Sue Cross  
David Ogden  
Linda & Richard Staff  
Carol Ries & Philip Tringale  
The Eznekier  
Barbara Sinclair  
James Cervantes  
Andrew Parrott

Stan Pedder  
Dan O'Leary  
Lynn Hiden  
Mark Harrigan  
Marianne Monagle  
Diane Barbera  
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Caren Armstrong  
Lynn Houser

Susan Mott  
Catherine McLin  
Tyler Higgins  
Lauren Deal  
Margaret Franz  
Matt Rees  
Molly Gleason  
Andree Hurst

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  
PO Box 133, Lafayette CA 94549**



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

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