

Alice McNeil Russi  
Speech to the Orinda Historical Society  
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Intro: The Robert McNeil family owned the Pioneer Store in Lafayette from 1902 to 1936. Alice McNeil Russi is one of five McNeil children, all of whom were reared in Lafayette. She has been most generous in sharing her memories and pictures of early Lafayette with the Lafayette Historical Society,

Mrs. Russi:

I'll start with my family: My mother and father were both born in Lafayette, and they spent their lives there. My father, Robert Elam McNeil, was a farmer, and after his own farming was done, he had a hay press which he'd take around and work on other farms. He went out to Moraga, over to Orinda and over into Walnut Creek. They moved around quite a bit.

They were very young when they first married. My mother, Gertrude Thomson McNeil, was 17. And it seemed to me in their early days they went around from place to place before they finally got settled. Then while he was farming up in Happy Valley, he also worked on the first tunnel. At that time, he had set up a camp for the family. There were four of us then, Chester Stuart, Ruth, Alice and William McKinley and it was on the Buckley Ranch, which is mentioned in Muir Sorrick's book. It was very comfortable, my mother told me. He brought out the old iron cook stove and had the kitchen sort of partitioned off, and he had several tents put up.

When the men worked in the tunnel, the horses they worked with got very muddy and dirty. There was a creek running beside the camp, and they used to run the horses through the creek to wash the mud off. I recall hearing of one young man who decided he would take off his shoes and stockings and just wash his feet while they were washing the horses. There were lots of things that went along with the work on that tunnel that were remembered after.

After the tunnel was completed (my mother was probably the first lady to go through it before it was completed), they bought the Lafayette store in 1902. By that time there was another one in the family, Bertha, making five of us. And when we went to the store, it was a very small building, but it looked large at that time. However, looking back, it was a very small room, and my father remodeled the building twice.

The town was very small at that time. There were two what they called hotels, but were really saloons, the Wayside Inn and the Lafayette Hotel, and there was Peter Thomson's Blacksmith Shop. And at the time we bought the store, the Post Office was in the store and the only telephone in town. Well, it seemed like they thought they could handle the telephone, but they felt the Post Office would be too complicated. So a gentleman by the name of William Boardman took the Post Office and put it in a little building about where the theater stands now. In later years Mrs. Carrie Van Meter took it over and handled the Post Office for many years.

The store at that time was mostly dried beans and prunes and rice. I know at first they didn't have vegetables and my father went to Oakland for produce. That was a long ride into Oakland. He had a heavy wagon and large dray horses, big animals that could carry the load through because the roads in the winter time were very muddy, full of chuckholes and mud holes, and in the summer time, chuckholes and dust. So it was pretty rough traveling.

Then there were quite a few things that he had shipped to Walnut Creek. And he'd have to pick up this freight in Walnut Creek. Even then there were several hills you had to go over on the trip to Walnut Creek, and it was, again, a very rough road.

And we carried mill feeds. People of course had chickens then. And flour, everyone made their own bread, of course, so they would buy at least 50-pound bags of flour. And he got that at the Pacheco Mill. At the time he didn't realize he was doing business with his future son-in-law, Theodore Russi. My husband's father (George Russi) bought the Pacheco Mill in 1881, where my husband grew up. There were three boys, and my husband stayed there at the place of business with his father.

I'll describe the Pioneer Store a little bit. It was a very small building, as I've said, and as you went in, there was a candy case called a counter. It was sort of a blind front with a top, and underneath were barrels of things. It was pretty roughshod. Then back of the counter was tobacco, and the tobacco cutters, for Star Tobacco that men chewed. And the merchandize was sugar and mostly staples. We didn't have bread in the store, but finally there was a bakery shop (Sellik's) in Walnut Creek, and the lady that carried the mail (Mrs. Bronson) would stop and she would bring us sacks of bread. You see it was all very sanitary, she'd bring this big sack of bread.

Then of course in later years, we did have vegetables, but at first people had to just grow their own vegetables. We didn't have the things in the store that we're accustomed to now. In the back of the store we did have a little hardware, too. And then there was sort of a little lean-to where he kept the mill feeds. And he had nails and a few things like that. There were men's work clothes, men's Napa Tan shoes, work shoes, (I'll tell you a story about that), men's shirts, and then on the other side there were dry goods, some lace, ribbons, and up in another corner a few drugs, the kinds of things people would get, like paregoric for children, things people used in those days.

Now, let me tell you about the Napa Tan shoes. I think they still probably make them. They were shoes that had a sort of yellow dressing when they were new, very vivid in color. But then as they were worn, they got a rough weathered look, like work shoes. But one night, some people wanted to come into the store after it had closed. They thought nothing of coming to the door and asking to be waited on, which we always did. Of course, the store was open for long hours and even on Sundays.

Well, one evening, the folks weren't there and I was still pretty much of a kid, and this man came to the door and wanted a pair of shoes, so I took him in and waited on him. Now, the safe was in back of the counter, and when you opened the safe, your back was turned to the customer. Well, he gave me \$20 and I had to get his change out of the safe, and I thought nothing of that at the time. Well, it happened that that night the hotel was robbed, and the only thing the man that was robbed remembered was the bright yellow shoes the robber wore! So it dawned on me afterwards that this man had purchased those Napa Tan shoes. I don't know why he bought a pair of brand new shoes to go and rob the saloon, but now I never hear the word Napa Tan but what I think of that. Mr. Wemmer was the owner of the Lafayette Hotel Saloon at the time.

Of course, life was so entirely different then. Seeing the town as it is now, I'm amazed. When I go into downtown Lafayette, I can't even find a place to park. It used to be so quiet, you could hear everything. For instance, you could hear the ring from the blacksmith shop, voices. There was even a time when you'd see bands of cattle going through town, and you could hear them coming. You could hear the cowboys whooping and hollering, the dogs barking, and the cattle bellowing. You had to run out

and close gates because the cattle would get into everything and go all through the yards. That was a very common thing.

I think about the last time there was a herd of cattle through town was in 1938. The reason I have a date on that is, I talked to my brother, William, and also his son to get some dates that they might remember, and at that time my brother helped this man drive the cattle. They took them from the Briones Valley down through Saranap to Alamo. They had quite a herd. My nephew, who was just a lad then, drove the truck because the calves would give out, and they'd pick them up and put them in this truck. When I was talking to him, he said the amazing thing was that the little calves couldn't travel very far, so they were put in the truck. Then, he said, the cows gave out next. But there were a number of big heavy bulls, and they were the ones that withstood the trip beautifully, all the way.

They went down through Happy Valley and right through Lafayette. Then when they got to Saranap, they cut through there and went right into Alamo. He said they didn't have water all that distance, and they got very thirsty, and then they'd get to where they were near water, there was an absolute stampede.

It was a very common thing in those days to see tramps through the country. I don't think they were dangerous at all. They'd sometimes go into places and ask for something to eat, and sometimes they'd offer to work, but as a rule they weren't anxious to work, they'd just ask for something to eat. And then there were the Arabian peddlers who carried huge bundles on their backs. They were stooped over carrying them and they would go through the country peddling their merchandize. That was a very common thing to see.

And the gypsies, once in a while there'd be a band of gypsies. At first my folks would let them in the store. But then they'd get in there with their big skirts, and you never did know what they were doing. So finally they got to the point that when they'd see the gypsies coming in their covered wagons, they'd lock the doors. Well, they'd bang on the door and bang on the windows. And one time when they were out there, there was a farmer that came down from Moraga Valley. He was on a big hay wagon, with the seat way up high, and this gypsy woman climbed up there and right away started telling his fortune. Well, there was an awful lot of laughing and talking going on, but when the gypsies left, and the man came in to do his shopping, he found he didn't have a wallet.

My mother used to go to San Francisco to do the buying for the dry goods. That was quite a trip. She would drive into Oakland to a livery stable where they'd put up the horse down on 11th Street. Then she'd take the Key Route and go to San Francisco, an all day trip. One time I went with her and was quite fascinated because she went into this big building on Mission Street, Walton M. Moore, Dry Goods, I think. I was probably pretty nervous about the whole thing, going to San Francisco was quite an ordeal. There was a desk in the front, where a gentleman would take her list and he would take her to the department she wanted, and in that department another man took her to do the shopping. I thought it was all handled very nicely, and my mother, I thought, took care of it beautifully.

My father always had rather fractious horses, he liked spirited horses. And I recall one trip I was making into Oakland, this was during a particular time when there had been some holdups in the tunnel. This was the old tunnel which had no lights, and when you'd get into it, it was very dark and you could see just this tiny little square of light in the distance, and several people had been held up in there. There was one man named Bing Galloway who hauled freight to Walnut Creek, and one time he stopped to

tell my father, very excitedly, that he'd been held up in the tunnel. Well, that went on and people were very nervous about going to Oakland.

My mother started out on this particular day in the buggy with this rather spirited animal. The tunnel was very narrow. You could just barely pass comfortably in there. Well, she thought that she saw a shadow at the other end in that little light and thought maybe someone was in there. She was frightened and she turned around in the tunnel and got out the way she'd come in. They never could figure out how she could do that, but she turned around in the tunnel and went home.

There, was a man who lived in Happy Valley who dressed very well and seemed to be a very wealthy man for the country at that time, and we always felt that the robbers were probably watching for him.

Q: Tell us about the water.

A: Oh yes. Now this recycling of water isn't such a new thing after all. Years ago, before the water company came out here, there was a shortage of water. People had to depend on wells and wind mills, and it wasn't very good quality. I know when we were youngsters, the bath water was always saved because my mother liked to have some petunias and things in the garden, and when the wind wasn't blowing we had to watch very carefully, because the water supply would be very low. The country didn't change greatly until after water came to town.

In the early days, when we first opened the store, we didn't have electricity, either. We just had lamps. And there was some sort of a light that my father had in the store, I don't know what it was called, but it sputtered and spit a lot before you could ever get it lighted. It was a long time before we ever had electricity. So, it was a very primitive little community, but it was a lot of fun.

Q: Tell us about the telephone.

A: Now that was really something. There was just the station there, and then when people wanted to get a message to anyone, they would call. And some of the youngsters would deliver the message or would go and call them to the telephone. So we could always charge for a messenger service that was one of the things my brother told me. He remembered one time riding his pony out to Moraga, for Sadie Moraga. That was 25 cents, he was into money. I remember going around town, close in, sometimes messenger service would be 5 cents. Of course, that was quite a bit of money in those days. Then after more people moved in, the telephone company decided they should have some sort of an exchange there, and the folks felt they couldn't handle that in the store. For years our telephone number was number 1.

Q: How about the day of the 1906 earthquake?

A: Well, I remember jars of pickles and things like that being knocked off the shelves. My father took a wheel barrow into the store and cleaned that up. Then, in our home, my mother had one of those breakfronts for china, and that fell over completely, so she lost a lot of dishes. So it really did cause quite a bit of damage over here.

Q: What can you tell us about the Town Hall?

A: That was built in 1911. To raise money for that, it was built by the Improvement Club, they gave some dances in a nice barn owned by Fred Graff in Happy Valley. A man by the name of Alfred Gerow built the Town Hall, and after it was built, they'd have a big dance once a month and people would come from far and near, San Francisco, Oakland. In fact they'd run a special Oakland-Antioch train that would lay over until about 1 a.m. so people could come out on the train and then go back after the dance.

And, of course, the women of the town would all get together and make potato salad, great big tubs of it, and coffee. They really gave them wonderful suppers. It was a lot of work, but it was fun. I never heard people complain of work. They worked awfully hard, but they all just seemed to take it for granted. That's the way we all lived. Anyway, that's the way the Town Hall was paid for.

Q: Tell us about the time you got into trouble on the way to school.

A: Now what do you want me to tell those things for? I really don't know which time you mean. I think she means this one. Between our place and the school, there are two little bridges over creeks that came down there, and in the winter time the water would get up very high at night. But one time it got up over the bridges during the day. So, my father put on his big hip boots, and went over to carry the children across the bridges. But when he carried the school teacher over, I don't know what happened. She did a lot of kicking and squealing, and when he got to the second bridge, she sort of hesitated, but allowed him to carry her over. That isn't what you meant, I'm sure.

It was probably this one. There was a row of walnut trees, I'm sure that you know that walnut trees had to be grafted for the English walnuts. Well, once in a while there'd be a few English walnuts down on the road, and quite a few of us from school would go down to look for walnuts. One day the lady that owned the place saw us and went over and told the teacher that we were stealing her walnuts. Well, I was the only dumb one. The teacher asked for those who had been down in the walnuts to stand up, and I just stood up, the only one. I got expelled for the afternoon. I went home in fear and trembling, I thought sure the folks would get after me. But when I explained it, it was all right. I just went back to school the next morning. I think that was the time you wanted me to tell about, wasn't it?

Q: Tell us about the other times.

A: Well, I think that's enough about my checkered past. Some of the things that happened were really very amusing, and when I was talking to my brother, trying to get some ideas from him about the way we lived, we remembered the time when my father first bought a Ford, his first car. And he bought it from a man in Walnut Creek. When it was delivered, the gentleman brought it over, and my youngest brother he couldn't have been more than 14 and rather small, got into the car with the man who took him around the town square and showed him how to stop, how to start it. Then he said he had to take him back to Walnut Creek. Well, my brother took him back to Walnut Creek, and when he got home he wanted my father to go for a ride. Well, Father said he'd wait, but Mama went, and then it was no time at all before my brother took me out to teach me to drive.

Now if anyone knows anything about those old Fords, you'll remember that if you didn't use your feet just right, you'd be in trouble. Well, he took me out into the Moraga Valley. It was very quiet out there, but when I went to turn around, with him telling me so carefully how to turn, I killed the engine. We were up against some wild rose bushes, those pretty little bushes with tiny pink flowers that used to be all along the highways. So, there we were, up against those bushes, and when he cranked the engine to restart it, I guess I did the wrong thing and shoved him into the bushes. When he came out from

under the bushes, he had all those little pink rose petals all over his head. So, when I asked him to tell me some things I could talk about, he said, "Tell them about the pink rose bushes."

Q: Did you ever remember you grandmother?

A: My grandparents, Robert and Charlotte Thomson, lived in Happy Valley, and I used to go up there and spend vacations with them. That was wonderful, because grandmothers always spoil children. They had a little saddle horse, and when afternoon came, grandma would always say, "Wouldn't you like to go for a ride on Dolly?" So I had a wonderful time up there, and spent a lot of time there. As a matter of fact, that little house is still up in Happy Valley where my grandparents lived. It's been remodeled. Years ago up there you could look down and see where Happy Valley makes the turn around, but now it's so built up and with the trees and all you just have to drive right upon it before you can see the house. But I always had a wonderful time when I went up there.