

ANDREW H. YOUNG  
Author of *THE IMPROVERS*  
At Lafayette Town Hall, November 11, 1981

Introduction by Ruth Dyer

[Ruth Dyer is a teacher at Acalanes High School, a member of the Lafayette Design Project, and the Lafayette Improvement Association. She made the "initial effort at chronicling the history of Town Hall. Her published pamphlet is titled, "A Town Hall for Lafayette."]

I would like to introduce Andrew Young, author of "The Improvers of Lafayette." Mr. Young himself is an Improver, and for many years has been a Lafayette resident. Many remember him and his wife Evelyn when they lived here and gave so much for this community. He's a native of Boston, educated at Roxbury Latin School and at Harvard. During the Second World War he served for 39 months in the Navy and ended that service as a Commander of an amphibious ship in the Pacific. Then he devoted 20 years in the Naval Reserve.

It was a business transfer that brought him here to Lafayette in 1947, and in his position with Liberty Mutual Insurance, he served as Division Manager of Business Policy Production. He was an LIA (Lafayette Improvement Association) member for many years and President in 1963 and '64. He served on Supervisor Moriarty's local liaison committee. During this time, there was a vacancy on the County Planning Commission and many people and many organizations urged Andy to apply for that position. He was chosen out of 15 applicants. He has been on the County Planning Commission since 1967, remains in service there, and has served three terms as Chairman.

He is known for his knowledge, conscientiousness and integrity. Andrew Young, himself an achiever, has an exhibited concern for the future of Lafayette and for Contra Costa County. Andrew Young will tell us about "The Improvers of Lafayette."

THE IMPROVERS  
Andrew H. Young

Ladies and gentlemen, Lafayette 70 years ago was a pretty dull place. Probably the residents didn't think of it as dull. Actually the town had over the years enjoyed a good deal more activity than the average small agricultural community.

Early in the town's history it was a regular overnight stopping place for those who drove the lumber wagons carrying redwood logs from Canyon to the port of Martinez. Other visitors came because of the grist mill built by Elam Brown. After the logging petered out and the grist mill was sold, Lafayette was still a popular stopping place, due to its location. It was a day's journey from Oakland; a day from Martinez, a day's trip from Clayton, Somersville and Nortonville, a convenient ride from Dublin. There had been a hotel in Lafayette since 1853. There was a bar, a blacksmith shop, general store, meat market and other business enterprises. In other words, it was a busy little town.

Compared to today, however, there wasn't much in the way of recreation. Telephones and movies were found only in cities. There was a device called a wireless, but this hadn't yet developed into a radio.

The suggestion that you could have a device which could present in your living room happenings as they occurred in the rest of the world and even on the moon would have earned you a trip to the lunatic asylum.

Recreation had to be provided locally. There was an occasional wedding or other event to bring people together. But the really notable affairs were the dances held occasionally in a local barn or similar inadequate setting.

When the founders of the Lafayette Improvement Association met for the first time, 70 years ago tonight, their action wasn't spontaneous. Initial discussions had already been held. The first meeting, on November 11, 1911, formalized decisions which had already been made. Lafayette was to have an organization for public benefit. There were problems for which solutions would be sought. There was also a need for social events.

Early in the life of the organization there was a lot of discussion about a town hall and how it could be provided. This was a big undertaking for a relatively small number of families, and the initial efforts just didn't pan out. In time, however, due to the gift of land and a substantial sum of money by the Ghiglione family, this hall was constructed and has served ever since as home base for the association we honor tonight.

Ruth Dyer has written the history of Town Hall, and it is impossible to overemphasize its importance to the community.

Most everyone knows about the dances and the grand costume balls held by the Improvement Association. Few residents realize how many groups of all kinds have used this as a meeting place. I'll mention only a few, the Boy Scouts, Garden Club, Women's Club, School district, and the forerunners of the Dramateurs and the Laf-Frantics which still provide good plays and entertainment to enthusiastic audiences. This has been a true community center. For a number of years it was in use for a variety of purposes six nights a week.

But the most important function of Town Hall over the years was its use by the Improvement Association for its regular and special meetings. This is where the public heard the candidates for public office. This is where some of those candidates who became officials spent uncomfortable hours explaining why Lafayette residents couldn't receive services they desired. This is where the pros and cons of bond issues, of service districts, of changes in land use, incorporation and other matters received a thorough airing.

If the Improvers had done nothing but provide this building for the community, this would have been adequate claim to fame. However, they did have a tremendous range of interests of which I can mention only a few tonight.

The Association was always much interested in transportation. In 1913 the Sacramento Northern Railroad started operation. This was an important event, since it was now possible to reach Oakland and even San Francisco in a relatively short time. However, in its early years the Sacramento Northern was primarily a people carrier. Lafayette was a farm town. Farmers have to get their produce and animals to market. In the early 1900's this wasn't easy.

Today we take broad level well-paved roads for granted. It's hard to realize that 70 years ago the main road to Oakland was little more than a dirt track, dusty in summer, and sometimes impassable in winter. The road followed the contours of the land. It went up, down and around, with frequent crossings of gullies. Something better was badly needed. The LIA mustered the help of other communities and was the prime mover in securing a great improvement, a paved road all the way from Concord to the tunnel. This road was finished in 1915.

The new road attracted more traffic, and served to focus attention on another inadequate accessory, the tunnel. As many of you know, of course, the old tunnel had been suggested way back in 1860, but wasn't completed until 1903. It was constructed of wood beams, and originally was too low for a load of hay, so had to be raised in height. This old tunnel was narrow, it was dark (lights weren't installed until 1918) and water dripped in places from the ceiling.

Again, the Lafayette Improvement Association took a leadership role. It mustered support throughout Contra Costa County and in the East Bay, and worked on the legislators in Sacramento. This all took a lot of time and effort, but finally in 1928 the state passed the necessary legislation. There were high hopes of early completion, but this wasn't to be. Construction finally started in 1934 and the tunnel opened late in 1937. Everyone recognized the importance of this new facility and the Lafayette Improvement Association received a lot of recognition for its efforts.

With completion of the new tunnel, the old main road became a state highway and over the years this also required a lot of attention from the "Improvers", as they were called by the local newspaper, "The Sun". As traffic increased, there were widenings of some stretches of road. Perhaps some of you in the audience remember that there were at times four lanes, in other places three lanes and at times only two. I can't remember anything more unsettling when driving that old highway than pulling into the center lane to pass a slow vehicle only to have another car coming in the opposite direction also pull out and come toward you "head on". In those days drivers played "chicken" almost every time they used the highway.

Besides the obvious dangers of the highway there was the nuisance of heavy traffic, which built up rapidly after World War II. There were no freeways, of course. The state highway ran right down Lafayette's main street, and you took your life in your hands attempting to cross. Both the LIA and the Chamber of Commerce worked hard to get improvements. The first, in 1948, was a traffic light at the intersection of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Moraga Road. The Sun described this as "Lafayette's Pride and Joy". The highway was finally "four-laned" in 1950.

The biggest improvement, however, was the Lafayette Bypass, which came in 1957. This took traffic around the town, and made possible the rejuvenation of Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Through the efforts of Lou Repetto and other businessmen, the center dividers were added, the unsightly wiring put underground and landscaping installed. The Improvement Association enthusiastically supported these improvements and others which came later with the establishment of a broad-based community organization, the Design Project.

There was another matter in which the Lafayette Improvement Association played a primary part. A few years ago we had a drought and as a result we're all conscious of the importance of a dependable water supply. In the 1920's California had a five year drought. There were problems everywhere. In Lafayette, people had only wells, of course. One after another, these dried up, until only a few were

operating and these were at reduced capacity. This was a serious problem because of the needs not only of people, but of farm animals, which were both valuable and essential to the economy.

The Improvement Association decided the town needed a public water supply. The big question was: how could this be obtained?

Oakland and some other East Bay communities had formed the East Bay Municipal Utility District. This was building the Pardee Dam to impound the waters of the Mokelumne River, and its aqueducts would pass right through Lafayette. Why not just hook into this system?

This was more easily said than done. EBMUD's district was defined by state law. It was necessary, first, to go to EBMUD and get its cooperation in efforts to expand the district. Next, contacts had to be made with legislators in Sacramento. Finally, the residents of Lafayette had to obligate themselves for bonds to design and install a local water distribution system. This all took time and lots of work, but the matter finally went to vote in 1931. 193 votes were cast, and when these were counted, showed an amazing decision: 193 "for" and none "against".

This action by the LIA was important of course for Lafayette. It was also important for many other communities in the East Bay and in Contra Costa County because the change in the law, secured by the LIA, also made it possible for other towns and cities to hook into this fine water system.

The organization we're honoring tonight also acted with great distinction on still another matter. The public water supply, the new low-level tunnel and highway improvements all led to a building boom in the late 30's and following World War II. Many of the homes were built on small lots and this caused a serious problem as many septic tanks failed. In the mid 1940's, even the state department of health became concerned, saying that a typhoid epidemic could break out at any time.

The Lafayette Improvement Association tackled this problem also. Working with other central county communities, it worked to establish a sanitary district. Unfortunately, this was turned down by the voters in 1945. The LIA studied the problem, then got together with Walnut Creek and Saranap to form a smaller district. Meanwhile, the people in surrounding communities were having second thoughts and asked to be included. The next time this matter went to vote it was successful, and that's how we obtained the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District, which as you know, serves not only Lafayette, but Orinda, Moraga, Walnut Creek, the San Ramon and Diablo Valleys, and even Concord and Clayton.

Right here, I'd like to make a point, though our Improvement Association has been much involved over the years with local issues, it's influence has gone far beyond the borders of Lafayette. These illustrations, the original "hard road" to the tunnel, the new Caldecott Tunnel, the improved state highway, the freeway, EBMUD and Central San (Sanitation) all were of great importance to a great many communities.

Over the years the Improvers had so many interests, it's possible to mention only a few:

- a) The Post Office. There was careful watch always over its facilities and service.
- b) Telephone service. The Improvers battled for an expanded calling area and reasonable rates.

- c) Control of liquor licenses, of which there were many.
- d) The Library. The LIA housed this for a number of years and when this was no longer possible, assisted the forming of the Library Association. It promoted legislation which permitted setting up service districts, and supported formation of LIB 1, the service area which provided the present Lafayette Library building.
- e) The Sacramento Northern Railroad.
- f) Bus service. Much to its later sorrow, the Improvers supported Greyhound's bid for an exclusive franchise, and battled hard for good service and reasonable fares.
- g) Fire protection. The LIA kept a watchful eye on plans and budgets and generally was the only representative of the public dealing with the fire district.
- h) Refuse disposal. (Had cleanup campaigns in '73,'74.)
- i) Police protection. The LIA was influential in securing a local sheriff's substation for a number of years. Even in recent years the LIA has demonstrated its concern for protection, with its management of "operation I.D."
- j) Recreation (EBRPD (East Bay Regional Parks District), County Parks Department, Community Center founded by Ralfe Miller, a past president of the LIA)

Though I've given all these interests only brief mention, I should give some time to one important function, land use planning. The Improvers started this phase of their activities back in 1931. As the town grew in the 40's, 50's and 60's, so did the problems. The LIA was a watchdog organization which worked hard for orderly development. It established ties with the County Planning Commission and the Planning staff, and won a lot of respect in Martinez, where the decisions were made, of course, prior to incorporation. The Improvers are largely responsible for the way this town ultimately developed, with a single relatively limited business district, high density residential development close in and the semi-rural atmosphere which is so highly prized.

There were two very important planning matters on which the Improvement Association played a major part. One had to do with what was called the "Soule Property", extending from the vicinity of the Orchard Nursery to the reservoir. The Improvers were able to convince the Planning Commission on this development, but not the Board of Supervisors. They finally went to court on this one, and lost that decision too. However, this very prominent property never has been developed, so the LIA really won out after all.

The other really important matter was the routing of the BART tracks and the location of the Lafayette Station. As many of you will recall, BART's original plan was to run its tracks north of the freeway east to Lafayette. The system would then be carried on an elevated structure across the freeway, through what is now the Plaza Center, and across town to the Sacramento Northern right of way, which it would follow to Walnut Creek.

The Improvers were adamantly opposed to this, insisting there was only one good solution, which was to use the freeway median all the way to Walnut Creek. BART subsequently changed its plans and announced it would stay north of the freeway, but locate a station east of Pleasant Hill Road to serve Lafayette, Walnut Creek, and the San Ramon Valley. The Chamber of Commerce, the Design Project and The Improvement Association all worked together to defeat BART, with the result you all know: use of the freeway median, a station located in downtown Lafayette, and a road network which works well. An additional benefit for the whole mid county was the reconstruction of the freeway with additional traffic lanes and ramps.

One more subject, and then I'm going to finish up.

Incorporation of Lafayette was first mentioned at a meeting of the Improvement Association in 1927. Over the years there was sporadic interest.

A 1946 study was favorable, as was the Lafayette Study in 1953 by graduate students from U.C. Berkeley. However, residents at that time weren't too interested. In 1954 some property owners in Happy Valley attempted the incorporation of their area and came close to bringing it off. In 1963 a group of downtown property owners also made a serious attempt to incorporate a limited area along Mt. Diablo Boulevard. The Improvement Association's reaction to both these efforts was that any incorporation attempt should include the whole town.

The first attempt to incorporate the greater Lafayette area was started in 1957. This resulted from a study which had been made by Bill Zion, a past president of the LIA. The town's residents weren't ready for this change. They turned incorporation down decisively.

The successful incorporation vote in 1968 must be credited to the Design Project and to Donn Black, who masterminded a broadly-based study committee. Many of those who were active in the Improvement Association were on this study committee, favored incorporation, and backed the successful effort. One of these individuals was John Kennedy, a past president of the LIA.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the short length of 30 minutes or so you can't do justice to an organization such as the Lafayette Improvement Association. In writing a book on this topic you also fail to hit the target. You can say a few words or write a paragraph about a topic, but you can never convey to readers or listeners the many hours, and sometimes days, weeks and even years which were required to accomplish some of the projects taken on by the Improvers.

We have today a modern, attractive, well run city. This results in great part from the interest of your residents, and the abilities of the many citizens who gave their time to governmental activities. However, Lafayette has a long history, 134 years if my figuring is correct, and much of what exists today turned out well because of efforts made in the past. A good big slice of those efforts was expended by a single organization.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that with this short review you'll begin to share my enthusiasm for a most unusual and effective group: the Improvers of Lafayette!

Above are the remarks of Andrew H. Young on November 11, 1981 at a meeting of the Lafayette Historical Society and the Lafayette Library Association in observance of the 70th birthday of the Lafayette Improvement Association.