

Dudley Thickens  
A Talk on the 1920's in Saranap and Lafayette Areas,  
and the Vast Influence of the Railroad

Introduction: Dudley, we know that you have lived in this area for quite some time, would you tell us, did your mother and father grow up in this area too? (The name of the interviewer was not recorded.)

Mr. Thickens: No, they grew up elsewhere. And my father passed away and we moved out here in 1917. I recall the end of the war in Saranap, when one of our neighbors was doing handsprings and jumping around. I asked my mother what that was all about and she said the war was over. So that remains in my mind to this day.

In Saranap in those days the homes were few and far between. They didn't have electricity. They didn't have East Bay MUD water. Everybody had to have his own well. We used oil lamps and lanterns in those days until the light company came in, probably around 1923.

The railroad in those days was the big thing, of course. The trains ran through from Oakland to Sacramento, and at that time they had a big station at Saranap. A branch line went from Saranap up to Diablo.

Why we used to have to go over to the James Dewing dairy in the evening for milk, across the flat and over the bridge, up on the bluff via Bridge Road. At the end of Bridge Road was the bridge. He had a farm in there, which is where we used to get our milk. I can recall that when my mother and sister and I would go up there in the evening to get our milk, we could look toward Saranap and see the lights of the station and the general store, the focal point of the whole area in those days. Very few cars then, you know.

Question: Was the Dollar estate already part of Saranap?

Mr. Thickens: Oh no, that was a long way off yet. At that time it was the Naphthaly Ranch. Samuel Naphthaly, I think, was one of the builders of the railroad. We knew some of the people who lived there too, the Andersons. Mr. Anderson, the foreman, and his wife and daughter, Lily, who I went to school with down in Saranap.

I went to the Saranap School for about 5 years, first through fifth grades of elementary school. It was about a six block walk from home along the main street that paralleled the railroad, across the tracks and over to the school which was adjacent to where the present firehouse is now, and the clubhouse (Saranap Improvement Association). The Improvement Association donated the property to the Fire District when they folded up. I guess the Fire District got the school property, too. I transferred about 2/3 of the way through fifth grade up to Walnut Creek because they rearranged the grades. I think Mrs. Dewing was teaching then, Jennie Bickerstaff Dewing.

Question: Where did Mrs. Dewing live then?

Mr. Thickens: Right down at her place in Lafayette, in a little white cottage. We knew her quite well because she and Mr. Dewing went to the same church, and he'd come around on Sundays to pick us up and take us to church. We went to the church in Walnut Creek on Locust Street.

I lived in Saranap until about the time I got married. I went to high school in Danville, San Ramon High.

Question: How did you get to school in Danville?

Mr. Thickens: I took the train to Walnut Creek and then the Sacramento-Northern bus to Danville and went up to Diablo. That was the first year, 1928-29. Then the following year they got their own yellow school bus, they called it the Yellow Peril. It was one of the earlier types. I'd take the train to Walnut Creek then the bus to school.

Question: Was the school where the San Ramon School is now?

Mr. Thickens: Yes, right at the south end of town. It was a funny thing though. I was in the Mt. Diablo Union High School District in Concord, and if you wanted to go to a different school district you had to get special permission. But I had a friend in Lafayette, one of the Chandler boys who lived down on Moraga, and since he went to Danville I wanted to go there too. So my mother aided and abetted me, and got the permission for me to go there. But today kids get bussed all over out of their districts, so it shows you how times change, especially in the east. I look back on that as kind of amusing. You read all about bussing today, and in those days you had turn heaven and earth to get *out* of your district.

Question: How long would it take you to go from Saranap to Walnut Creek and San Ramon?

Mr. Thickens: Once I got on the train it took about 2 minutes to get to Walnut Creek, then about 20 minutes from there to San Ramon. It was the old highway then, two lanes with an asphalt hump in the middle. I don't know what the reason for that was, but it was quite dangerous in a way. If you were going fast in later years and hit it, it could turn you over. Finally they did away with that.

The highway going up there was wider, the space off the road on one side where the branch line I mentioned earlier went along the road up to Danville. So that helped provide a wider highway. They took the tracks out about 1921, I guess, discontinued the branch line train and substituted the bus.

The railroad played quite an important part in our lives. In later years when I went to work, sometimes I'd be right out in front with the motorman and baggage man and brakeman. And we'd stop at the Lafayette station. And I know Mrs. Carrie Van Meter would throw on the mail sacks (she'd be on the platform) and I got to know her through that. She was a good friend of Mrs. Dewing's, too. She lived in a two-story house about where the Safeway store is now. And I'd see her from time to time.

In fact I think I worked for her one day and Mrs. Dewing would have me come down to work for her on Saturdays from time to time. And when I did that (this was before I worked in Oakland) I'd take the train to West Lafayette, which was around Birdhaven Court, and I'd get off there and walk up to School Street. And the old Town Hall was there and Lafayette School and a few cottages, and I think the Methodists had a small church there on the other side. And I'd go up to the main corner and walk up the street to her place, and she'd drive me home in the evening.

Question: Youngsters nowadays find it quite hard, to find jobs for spending money, was it hard to get jobs then? And tell us what you got paid. It would be interesting for young people to compare today.

Mr. Thickens: She gave me about \$3.00 for a half a day, which was a full day's work, but that was pretty generous, actually, because some people wouldn't pay that much for a day's work. A lot of them when I first started out paid 25 cents an hour which was the going rate, for kids. And \$2.00 was a lot of money in those days, too.

Question: What did you do for Mrs. Dewing?

Mr. Thickens: Just anything she wanted around her place, mainly in the garden.

Question: She had a lovely garden. I remember seeing pictures of it and her house and the beautiful redwood tree that's still there.

Mr. Thickens: She had one that I helped her plant. The house was L-shaped, with the street out here, and then paralleling the street was part of the house. And to the west side was the front porch. And it was in this little garden formed by the L where she had a sun dial, too. It could be that the one that's there was the one I helped plant, I'm not sure. Her sun dial had a motto on it that said "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be" and I've often wondered what ever happened to that. It was on a white pedestal, turned on a lathe, then the bronze dial itself.

Question: Do you remember being there when the house was torn down?

Mr. Thickens: No. I hadn't been around there for quite some time. I did stop by to see her a couple of times when I came home after work in later years. She was getting rid of some of her things then. I know she had a picture of ship that stands out in my mind. I think it was The Vaterland or one of the sister ships. But she insisted called it "The Vaterland". I believe I tried to correct her, but she insisted that that was it. Apparently her parents had come over on it from Germany, or where-ever it was.

Question: By this time she was Mrs. Rosenberg. Did you know Mr. Rosenberg too?

Mr. Thickens: I met him, yes, he was a craftsman. And Louise got a chest of drawers from her grandmother in San Antonio that was partially damaged, and he fixed it up, repaired it so you wouldn't know where it was damaged. He was quite an artisan and skilled in that type of work.

I was just trying to think. Just east of where the Safeway Store is there used to be a hill. They took all that out and I think there was a fellow by the name of Charles Brown who had a hardware store there. And I also believe there was a church up on top of that hill, too, the Good Templars. And there was a hotel down there, too, that burnt down about 1925, we could see the smoke from Saranap.

I think some people bought the property where Brown had his place up there, and they lived there for a while. And I believe right in that area Myrtle Kitchen and her husband lived for a long time. She had a sister, Louise Dumas her maiden name was, and she used to get off at Hillgrade (a former stop on the bus route, and earlier the train route going from Saranap to Diablo and Danville) and she'd get on there and catch the bus going to Danville High.

I didn't know she had a sister named Myrtle at the time, but I met Myrtle on the bus from time to time and used to talk to her, and finally it developed that she was her sister. We used to take the Greyhound in those days back and forth from downtown Lafayette. And you'd run into people and get

to know them, whereas on BART everyone is strangers. It's not like catching the same bus at quarter to seven every day, with the same people.

Question: When you went to work then, did you ride the Greyhound or did you ride the train?

Mr. Thickens: I rode the train until they took the trains off. I worked in Oakland, I can't recall just when I started. Well, I worked in Oakland until about 1939 or 1940. And in 1939 they discontinued the ferries and opened up the Bay Bridge. I think it was January 15, 1939 to be exact. The buses started the next day, and they would detour into Saranap, one bus sent in the morning. And I wrote the Public Utilities Commission and pointed out that we were well over a mile off the bus route, so they ran one down Dewing lane. That was the street that connected with Bridge Road and went right past the Dewing place in Saranap. And then it turned and went over Warren Avenue and back up Boulevard Way to the highway. I'd get on there every morning at 6:15 and ride the bus over.

The bus had a couple of accidents. I was on one where we ran into another Greyhound bus one morning on the Bay Bridge, right where it goes around the curve going toward the tunnel. And we got hit by a bus and a truck right behind us in succession one morning. That was one of the things that led to a slowdown of bus travel on the Bridge, because they used to barrel over at about 55 or 60 miles an hour. And this was just when they had only three lanes on the lower deck, you know. The Key System trains were still running.

I remember, too, one morning waiting out in the fog for the bus. It came over Warren Avenue to Boulevard Way. They had a new driver on that day and he didn't know where he was, and went right past me across the street, and he hit a light pole, left it shattered but still standing in sort of a V shape. Well, he just backed up, let me in, slammed the door and away we went. I remember, a couple of neighbors were asking me about that pole and how it got that way. I wouldn't tell them.

Question: Then would say that transportation was one of the biggest changes that has come to Lafayette?

Mr. Thickens: Very definitely. It's a very marked change, the transition of it from the time the trains ran out here as I knew them. As I say, in those days the roads were practically nothing. They had the old tunnel up in the hills up by Canary Cottage where it went through. And then finally in about 1937 they got what they called the Broadway Tunnel which they put through, which they renamed after Caldecott. I recall going to the Claremont for the ceremony the day they renamed it. They had some engineers there and some different city, county and state people there and had quite a little program about it. Some of his relatives were there, and it was quite a show.

Transportation in the early days when I lived in Saranap would come out of Walnut Creek to Lafayette and it all centered on the railroad. They had about 7 or 8 trains a day, and 2 or 3 of them didn't stop. They were Sacramento trains that went on to Chico, and went right through. They didn't stop anywhere this side of the river over at Pittsburg, except at the S.P. tracks. And maybe it stopped in Concord. But they were competing with the S.P. all the time and the S.P. built their big train bridge across the straits of Martinez.

And that was about 1930, and Sacramento Northern had to take about a half dozen of their cars and rework the electric motors so they could get up to 70 miles an hour. And the S.N. had a shorter route, plus the fact the electric trains that went through Lafayette and Walnut Creek would go right across

the N Street bridge and up to 8th and K streets (Sacramento), and then over 8th street to J and up to the Union Station. So people could get off right down town within a couple of blocks of the capitol building. It was a very good route.

Question: Since you sound like you were a travel enthusiast, did you by any chance take photographs?

Mr. Thickens: Oh yes. Like everybody else, we all took pictures of the trains here and there. I have some.

Question: Would like to tell us where your family did its shopping when you first came to Saranap, then as you grew older and came into Lafayette?

Mr. Thickens: Actually, we didn't have any choice for shopping in Saranap before the advent of the automobile. As I mentioned a little earlier, opposite from the station, which was a long station in those days because they moved express freight across it and a passenger part, and a long platform for longer trains, was the general store of Saranap.

It was typical store, just like you might find even today up in Canada. I recall the first proprietor there was Mr. Grist. I don't know who might have come before him or who came after him, but I do know that for a long time there was a Barthol family, two brothers, one after the other owned it and ran it. H. M. Barthol was one and Charles Barthol. They had it for a long time. They had everything down there that you'd want in those times.

And I want to say that during the early days when our Post Office box was number 52 in Saranap RFD, the postmaster was a Mr. Bunker, Roy Bunker, and he was from Lafayette. Initially, he didn't go all around Saranap like they did later on when they would come to within a block or two of your house to a cluster of mailboxes on the road. But they had a couple of wagon wheels mounted on a post, right down in front of the General Store in front of the station and the boxes were placed all around that on a post. So you'd go down there and you could either twirl it or walk around to where your box was, and ours was number 52. I know I liked to twirl it in those days.

Question: Is this the Bunker that we know then, Mrs. Irene Bunker?

Mr. Thickens: I don't know her, but it was Roy Bunker and his son. I can't think of his name but he went to Danville also, the same time I did.

And, I ran into another fellow hiking on the hill here, Sanders. He has a ranch over here. I believe he went out there, too, or else to Concord. I got to talking to him, and he turned out to be one of the people who'd get on the train. It would pick them up in Moraga, or actually further than that, Canyon, Pinehurst and where St. Mary's College is. That was a later development.

And they got a lot of school students from Lafayette. Most of them went to Concord, but some of them went to Danville. It was an odd situation where certain people were in the Concord District and others in the San Ramon High School District. And they'd all be taking the same train. I actually went over to Concord and took a post-graduate course in 1932-33 and took some commercial subjects. There wasn't much doing then, so I went over there for a year, and took a fifth year. That was interesting, too, a nice group of people over there. I can't recall the principle's name, but she was an institution over there, just like Miss (Garside?) was in Walnut Creek. She used to be our principle.

And when I went to the school in Walnut Creek, when I got up to the main building, they had portables where the 5th grade was, and the 6th, 7th and 8th were in the main building which is all torn down. They took the whole hill out, and it's where Simon's Hardware is now. They had a 2-story building, and the lower part was devoted to two huge areas for physical ed. on rainy days. And the K classrooms were upstairs. We'd all assemble in four lines out in front of the steps, and we'd salute the flag there. And they'd play a Souza March, and we'd all march in. We did that day in and day out for four years and there was never a quibble about it then, nobody ever questioned it. But now it makes some of these hippies, I guess, squirm. They need a little schooling like that.

Question: Can you tell us about some of the other people you remember in Lafayette? Did you meet any store owners or anybody when you used to come over to work for Mrs. Rosenberg?

Mr. Thickens: I didn't meet too many people, actually, because I'd get off the train at about twenty after seven and walk over to her place. And she'd drive me home afterwards in the evening. But there were several people whom I met who were friends of hers, but I can't recall their names too well now. She owned another place that was two or three streets back, one called Bickerstaff. And once in a while she'd want to go over and work on that place. So I'd go over with her and we'd work there. But I really didn't see too many people.

Question: Did you ever go in the Pioneer Store?

Mr. Thickens: No, I don't think I ever did, really. There was no need to. My knowledge actually, as far as Lafayette is concerned, was because of the trip down to her place and whatever I did where she might drive or want to go and the people who came there to see her during the day. The railroad, again, was the predominating factor in Lafayette. They had quite a little industry there. They had Hurt and Lloyd, who were receivers of rock, sand and gravel. And they had quite an operation.

They had 2 or 3 sidetracks where the Lafayette Station was. And when I worked for the railroad in Oakland, in later years, there'd be a couple of times at the end of March where they had this *ad valorem* tax period, where goods and warehouses around the piers were taxed by the state the 31st of March. Why, Libby, McNeil and Libby would ship all their canned goods out that they could. And the Rosenberg Brothers, who dealt in dried fruit and nuts, would ship them out too. There'd be an awful lot of work to do billing the freight those 2 or 3 nights.

And normally after I'd changed to a job that started at 11 and stopped at 8, I'd catch the 8:40 train home. But 2 or 3 nights I would have to work later than that and there was no alternative but to come home on the freight train. They had so many cars at that time that they'd have to, what they called "double the hill", from Oakland. They'd go up into the hills and go over that grade, through the tunnel and put them on a sidetrack down at Pinehurst or Canyon.

Anyway, I'd have to work late in those days and come home on the freight train, and I remember one time I got home about 3:20 in the morning. And walking from where I got off the train at the Saranap Station down to my place, by then I'd hear the westbound train whistling for Walnut Creek, too, from Sacramento. So it made a short night and a long day the next day. It was all part of the job.

There are a lot of things that will probably come to me, and if you can think of any questions later on or anything I can tell you, I'll be happy to do it.

Question: Thank you very much. We'll think of some others, I know, and you can help us with the answers.

Mr. Thickens: I'll jot down any names that come to me. I'd like to think of more of the people who used to go to school from Lafayette, Eddy Armanino was one. They're still in the area. He went to Danville, and he'd be on the Danville bus.

There again, bus travel is a famous vehicle for bringing people together if school wouldn't. However, with only 120 kids in the whole high school you couldn't help but know them all. We got a very good high school education as a result of that. I don't think there were more than 25 students in any one class, and we'd go through 9 periods.

I think we got a far better education than they do now, because they'd work on you and needle you if you didn't get your work done. It was obvious with so few there that you had to participate. So it was a good thing. I recall, too, when I was going to San Ramon High the base slid out from the Lafayette dam up here. That was in 1927 or 1929. But I remember talking to Eddie Armanino about it and it made the news.