

Interview with James (Jack) Cosso
November 16, 1982
Lafayette Historical Society
Interviewed by Angela Broadhead

Angela Broadhead: Jack, the Historical Society is interested in hearing from families who have lived in this area for a long time. Would you tell us how your family happened to come to this area of Lafayette?

Jack Cosso: That's pretty hard to answer. You see, I was born in Alameda, California. When my dad wanted to buy a place for himself, he chose Lafayette.

In Alameda, my dad worked for Angelo Ghiglione, the brother of Frank Ghiglione of Lafayette. My dad was a vegetable gardener in Alameda where there was plenty of water for irrigation. He thought water was plentiful in Lafayette, but this was not the case in the Happy Valley area.

A company started digging a well with the old-fashioned steam engine equipment. My dad was supplying the water and was carrying the water there with a big horse and water wagon when the tragedy occurred.

He was sitting on the wagon and he was putting water into the wagon when the whistle blew on the steam engine, when they let the steam out of the machine over there. The noise scared the horses and they bolted. My dad lost control of the horses and he let go of the reins and jumped off the wagon. It's just like people say, it's destiny! Now those telephone poles are half a block apart, in those days, and he jumped off the wagon and hit the pole. He couldn't miss it six inches one way or six inches the other. I was only six years old then, and I can't remember exactly, but I think my father lasted a week.

He had his brother come from Italy, from Genova. (My dad had come from Genova, too). And he had just arrived when this accident happened. My dad had bought the ranch, and we struggled. He had a mortgage on it, and everything else, and my uncle stayed there.

Angela Broadhead: How big a ranch is this, now, that you're talking about?

Jack Cosso: The one on Happy Valley, there were fifty-five acres.

Angela Broadhead: Did you have a lot of vegetables?

Jack Cosso: No. And this is where part of the Happy Valley School is. And I had three brothers and one sister, and my mother was expecting when my father got killed. My dad passed away on August 11th, 1922, on his birthday. He died on his birthday, and my sister was born on the 4th of September. And then my mother and my uncle ran the ranch, and we struggled. And we made it during Depression time. We finally pulled out. And seven years later, my uncle married my mother. This was about 1928 - 1929, right during the Depression. Right during 1928 - 1929, my mother married her brother-in-law. It was the same name, and then we had a step-brother, and he was born in 1929. John, I think, is 53.

Angela Broadhead: Then your uncle and your mother ran the farm. You had vegetables, and what else?

Jack Cosso: Well, we didn't have too much, tomatoes, squash and stuff. See, the thing that my dad had in mind, it didn't turn out that way. He was used to what he was doing in Alameda where the water was plentiful. But where we dug that well, there was no water. We had to change tactics. In the winter time we had spinach, and later we had cabbages. In the summertime we had tomatoes and squash and stuff like that. And then we had an orchard, too. We had pears, we had peaches. That's about all. We had walnuts. The ranch was full of walnuts, but we dug them out because we figured we couldn't make a living on the walnuts.

Angela Broadhead: Where did you take your produce?

Jack Cosso: To Oakland.

Angela Broadhead: To Oakland! You want to tell me about that as you remember it?

Jack Cosso: A horse and wagon.

Angela Broadhead: And how did you go? Old Fish Ranch Road?

Jack Cosso: No, the other was still there, the old tunnel, the Old Tunnel Road was there, and I remember my dad would leave at midnight and he'd get back at noon the next day. It was about twelve hours to go with a team of horses, to go on the route and then to come back. And then after he'd get to the market, he'd have to go pick up boxes and crates. It really takes time. And then he'd go back and he'd get back about twelve. It was a long, long day. Twelve hours, from midnight until twelve at noon.

Angela Broadhead: Do you ever remember going with him?

Jack Cosso: I think I went once or twice. Then in 1922, my dad passed away. I know my step-dad, my uncle, he drove the horses a few years, but not even a few years. I think we bought a truck in 1924, a little small truck, and it was much better, a little better. I remember then my step-dad bought three wild horses from Oregon. I'll never forget that. We used to put them in the stable over there, and you know they were not used to being tied up, and they'd try to break their rope and chain, and a couple of times I was hit, swung around with their heads, like that, and you'd be in between. Boy, I got scared plenty of times.

Angela Broadhead: Now, what were the horses for?

Jack Cosso: Well, the horses were to run the farm, you know, plow, and disc, and rake, we used to have hay out on the hill, to cut hay and all that. We'd raise enough hay to feed three horses. We had the barn, there. The barn is still there.

Angela Broadhead: The barn is still there! Is that the one on the south side of Happy Valley?

Jack Cosso: You know where the Happy Valley School is, well, next to the school is my brother's. My brother owns two lots. He has the house, he wanted the old house. He asked us if we wanted it, we said, "Yeah, you can have it." He just moved in there Sunday.

Angela Broadhead: Now, this is the family home when you first came to the Lafayette area. Do you have a picture of that, by any chance? If you do, we would be delighted to have it.

Jack Cosso: Oh, gee, I don't know. I'd have to go through, there was an older home there, and that's still there, too. That's the dark one, dark black.

Angela Broadhead: Who lived there?

Jack Cosso: Oh, nobody lived in that one. We just kept it as a storage place. That's about it. I went to school.

Angela Broadhead: Yes, how did you remember going to school in the morning?

Jack Cosso: Well, I went with a horse and buggy.

Angela Broadhead: By yourself? Or with your brothers?

Jack Cosso: Oh, yes, by myself. Then, my sister came, and I used to carry my hay in my wagon. I had a trotter, a real trotter. Boy, I'll tell you, that horse could really go. I was so young, that one time, I remember, I was going so fast down here where Deer Hill is, that we came so close to the hill, and I couldn't hold him any more, and he got away from me.

I was sitting on the wagon, and he hit the side of the hill there, and then he went down all the way to Lafayette, and I remember I was screaming and screaming. And we went past where Diablo Foods is and then I was down, and I was screaming. And down there where the Roundup is, across the street there was a butcher shop, and the guys came out, and got in front of the horse and they slowed him down, and then he stopped there.

And then I remember, on the other corner was the old hotel, do you remember that?

Angela Broadhead: Well, I've seen pictures of it.

Jack Cosso: I remember it well, it was two stories. I remember when it burned.

Angela Broadhead: So, when you went to school, you went right in front of the hotel and then down...

Jack Cosso: I went around the hotel, and past the hotel then where the Fiesta Shopping Center is, that was all berries in there. That was a swamp there.

Angela Broadhead: A stream.

Jack Cosso: Let's see, there were two bridges. There was one bridge there where the hairdresser is, and then there was another one down below farther. There were two of them. One was close to the school. I remember one, because when I went to school, there were two other kids, we went down there, I'll never forget, because when they talk about disciplining kids, in those days, it was different then it is now.

There were two boys. I'll never forget that, because you know what they did? We went down under the bridge, and the water was down there, and there were pollywogs there, and when they got in the class room they held them in their hands and stuck them in the girls' backs, down their backs. Oh, did

they get in trouble! I went down with them, I happened to get out of it, but the other boys, they put them out in front of the school. I mean, the class, then they gave them a whipping.

Those pollywogs, you know, they look like lizards. Boy, I'll tell you, they really set us up there. I didn't get up there, but the other two did. I didn't do it, see, they're the ones that did it. I went down there with them to catch the pollywogs, but I didn't bring any in school. The other two did, and they got a spanking for that.

Angela Broadhead: Who was the teacher, do you remember?

Jack Cosso: I think it was Mrs. Richardson, because there was only Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. Christian.

Angela Broadhead: Oh, she was with the school a long, long time. So you remember Mrs. Christian too?

Jack Cosso: I've got a picture here of Mrs. Christian, but this is not the old one. This is just, heck, I think that was two or three years afterwards. The one that my brother has is older than that. I forgot to get it. See, that's Mrs. Christian right there.

Angela Broadhead: About what year is this, Jack?

Jack Cosso: Oh, let's see, I must have been about, this is probably 1927.

Angela Broadhead: Tell me where you are, Jack.

Jack Cosso: Here I am right here, see, right there. This is a Lucas, and this is a Curran. You know James Curran? Oh, this fellow passed away. This is Alexander. This is George Morrison. You ever heard of Morrison? You might know this fellow, he used to sell cars in Lafayette, Manuel Alves. Do you remember him? Manuel. This is Frank Bunker. He passed away. Huntsman. This one here, Hermans, remember the Hermans on Moraga? This is one of them. They're twins, these two are twins. She's a Capri now, she used to be a Giusto, this is Lucas, this is Jane Crossett. They used to live down in Happy Valley. This is Armanino.

Angela Broadhead: Oh, yes, I know that name too. Listen, may I take this and have it photographed in case we don't have a copy of this, or would you prefer not to let it go at all?

Jack Cosso: Well, it's not the oldest one.

Angela Broadhead: That's OK. I don't think we have that one.

Jack Cosso: Well, you can take it and record it.

Angela Broadhead: Tell me more about school. It was a two-room school house, right? Other people have told us that there were two rooms.

Jack Cosso: The first school was separated. I mean, the one in the back, I remember, see the church, that's the original. See, I think it was sixth, seventh and eighth grades, and from the first grade to sixth grade was in the other side. It was a shack, it was only a one level floor. We had an epidemic one time, I forget what it was. But some kids took it at school, and we grabbed all the stuff where it was

and put it back outside the school and it caught on fire. And part of the corner of the school I remember burning down.

Angela Broadhead: Do you remember about when that was, Jack? I've never heard of this fire before.

Jack Cosso: Yes, there was a fire in the back of the school. Oh, that must have been in, I can't remember, it must have been 1921. I don't remember whether Dad was still alive or not, see I was young, see, only seven years old. It must have been 1921, because I remember when we moved from there, we went here, I remember that. We marched, I remember, all the class rooms marched there. And there must have been about seven or eight kids to a class. That's all there was.

Imagine, in 1928, when I graduated, in our grammar school, ours was the biggest class that ever graduated in the elementary school in Lafayette, and there were only 19 of us. Eighteen or nineteen, and this is part of it. That was the largest class, and I think there were eighteen or nineteen in the class. And that was in 1927 or 1928.

Angela Broadhead: Alright, now, I've got the picture of the two classes, and I've got a picture of two teachers. Now, a little while ago, you talked about taking your horse and buggy to school. Tell me how you put your horse and buggy away. Tell me, what was the routine?

Jack Cosso: Well, in the morning, I'd get my horse hooked up on the buggy, and then I'd have a big sack, and I'd put the hay in the sack, and I'd take the hay with me. At noontime, at lunch time, I'd go feed him. I'd feed my horse, and then when we moved to this school, the grammar school in Lafayette, they made us the stall. They had everything. That's where they keep their equipment down there now. I remember the place, I used to go there and feed my horse. You know, down there around what is that, First Street, where is that?

Angela Broadhead: In the back? That building in the back?

Jack Cosso: Yes, that building in the back. There was a stable there, they built that on purpose. Imagine that the school built the barn there for us. We put our horses in there. Over at the old school, we'd just leave them outside. We'd take them off the wagon, and we'd tie them to the fence there and we'd feed them there. And then, when we moved to the new school, I mean the new school down there by the auditorium, they made a place for us. That didn't last too long, because, oh, I'd say another year or two, and then it was gone.

And then the barn was there, and nobody would take any more horses. And then it started to move fast. Lafayette was getting rid of their horses and traveling with either truck or by car. We started seeing cars coming pretty fast, it was 1923, 1924, 1925. You started seeing cars. Horses were fading away.

Angela Broadhead: So, then, when you graduated from grammar school, did you go to high school in this area?

Jack Cosso: No, I didn't go to high school.

Angela Broadhead: Yes, you were too busy with other things, weren't you?

Jack Cosso: I had to come home.

Angela Broadhead: You had to come home and help with the family. I know that was very typical of a lot of kids because these were depression times, weren't they?

Jack Cosso: Yes, and a lot of times, I didn't even go to school. And there were neighbors across the street over at the ranch, and their name was McGuire, and he was an attorney. And I heard once that he got after the school district to make me go to school. Sometimes, when it was really hard times, I wouldn't go to school. The only times I'd go to school, when it was raining, you know, when it was slow. When it was the harvesting, I had to stay home. There was nobody there, and heck, I was young, besides. Heck, I was only, when I was going to grammar school, I was only twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. I was only fourteen when I graduated out of grammar school.

Angela Broadhead: Yes, and that was very typical of that time. Well, tell me what you remember of Lafayette. There was a hotel, you remember, when you were going to school.

Jack Cosso: And there was a butcher shop, and there was a Pioneer Market, that was over there where the bicycle shop is. That was the only thing that was there. Mrs. Hunt's Hot Dog Stand was across the street there from the Hotel and the Post Office. You know where the Safeway is there. Right in front of there. And in back there was a big vineyard there. On the hill, there were grapes.

When I went to school, my step-dad would take care of the ranch, the points, you know, the share (plowshare) on the plow, he'd take it off the plow, and then when I'd go to school, I'd drop it off to Mr. Thomson. He had the blacksmith shop right there where the Safeway Store is. I remember because the hill was there approximately where the Mobil Station is. That's where the hill was. There was a little church on it, I remember that. And the old road used to go down in between where the theater is. That's the old road there. That was how you went to Walnut Creek.

Angela Broadhead: What do you remember about Mr. Thomson?

Jack Cosso: Well, Mr. Thomson was one great guy. Then sometimes when I had to horseshoe a horse, I'd bring him down there, too, before I went to school. I'd bring the horse there, and then I went to school, then I'd walk back for the horse. And he'd have it ready for me. I can remember him just like he was there today. I remember the gray-haired beard. He had a beard, and he had this big white hat on. Over there was that fire, I remember, dust, I'm telling you, that old shop was really old stuff.

Angela Broadhead: Do you know we have one of his anvils in the library? You'll have to come see it. Mr. Medau, Al Medau saved that old anvil, and we have it in the Lafayette Library. So sometime, when you're there, you'll have to go look at it. I'm so glad you remembered about Mr. Thomson because we have pictures of Mr. Thomson and the Blacksmith Shop.

Jack Cosso: And Mrs. ____ what was her name, now? The Post Office Master. Van Meter.

Angela Broadhead: Tell me how you remember her.

Jack Cosso: I remember her, and I remember who took it after, too. Schutts, and she had a brother, and he went into the Highway Patrol. I remember him. I wonder if he's still alive. There were two sisters and one brother, and I think it was the youngest that took Van Meter's place in the Post

Office. I remember once, we had a little problem there. We didn't have a problem, it was my step-dad's fault.

Mrs. Van Meter used to make the check out to pay the taxes, see. He used to go down, give her the money, pay the tax, and then she'd mail it. Then Van Meter passed away, Mrs. Schutts took over. He'd go down there, have the check made and she gave the check back to my step-dad, and he took it home, and didn't pay the taxes. And we got a notice about a year later, and he goes out and looks at the letter. The check was still in there, and oh, he got mad. He says, "Man", he says. Well he should have. Mrs. Van Meter had always done it, and he thought it would continue to be done the same way.

Angela Broadhead: That's interesting. Do you remember other people?

Jack Cosso: Yes, then I remember Morrison, the Fire Department. I went to school with his son, George. I don't know if he's still around or not. And his daughter married an undertaker, I heard, the one that owns, I don't know if he's there any more, I think they got divorced. Hulls?

And who else do I know? I know her, I know she's Mrs. Capri. Now see, the women make it hard, because when they get married that changes their name, and you can't follow them through. But the kids, you know, he's still around, Mr. Armanino, Al Armanino, he's still around. James Curran, he's still around. He's retired from the water company, he lives over there, he's another old-timer. Now there's a guy you should see him. James Curran. That's him. He's the second one from the left on the top row.

Angela Broadhead: Will you tell me what you miss most about Lafayette as you remember it as a child?

Jack Cosso: You mean the good part of Lafayette?

Angela Broadhead: Yes, the good part and the bad part. What do you remember most?

Jack Cosso: Well, everything was all right, the only trouble is that we had to work hard. I mean, it wasn't like today. The roads weren't the way they are now. Naturally, we walked to school. After I got rid of the horse, I used to walk to school. Once in a while, they'd pick you up, well, in those days, they used to give you a ride easier than they do today.

Angela Broadhead: Everyone knew one another. Is that one of the things you miss? Everybody knew everybody, didn't they?

Jack Cosso: Right, you knew everything that was going on. I just thought of something else. You want to know something old about Lafayette. She was here before we were. That's Mrs. ___ the postman's wife, she's still alive, Mrs. Bunker.

Angela Broadhead: Yes, we have interviewed Mrs. Bunker. Isn't she a nice lady? Yes, we've talked to her, and her talk is in the Lafayette Library, just as yours will be. She's a nice lady, and very interesting.

Jack Cosso: Boy, she was something. She was some woman. She remembers, she remembers, I went, to school with her son.

Angela Broadhead: Tell me, now, what do you like best about Lafayette today?

Jack Cosso: Well, I like the way Lafayette came to be. You know, it's just like, you know, how valuable it is. I never thought of that. We came here, we were practically born here and I've got to tell you the truth, we've got property here. But if anybody had any foresight we'd own the whole town, like Mr. Bruzzone. I remember, you know, Russell Bruzzone. Well, I knew his grandfather.

Angela Broadhead: Did you? Tell me about his grandfather.

Jack Cosso: He was a great guy. He was a fantastic guy. He had foresight. You know what he told my dad? I remember, I'll never forget it. He said, whenever you've got any money, buy anything. Buy! And he had a son who never bought that much land. You remember Joe. I guess you don't remember that. He passed away just two weeks after my step-dad and he didn't have that much. Now, this would be, Russell, this would be, the one I'm talking about.

Mr. Ghiglione would be a grandson, would be, because Joe, he only had a son and a daughter. Mr. Ghiglione and the son didn't have any children and the daughter had, she married a Bruzzone, that's Bruzzone, not Ghiglione. She had two boys and a girl. I don't think her sister ever got married. Russell's the oldest, and then there's Milton Bruzzone. And I knew their father, and I knew Mr. Bruzzone. I knew Russell's father and I knew Russell's grandfather on his mother's side. I remember his mother too.

Angela Broadhead: What else do you remember about Mr. Ghiglione?

Jack Cosso: See, he owned property over there in Happy Valley. I think he died around 1924 - 1925, something like that. But he was some guy. Mr. Ghiglione's brother was my godfather. Mr. Ghiglione's brother owned property in Alameda. That's how my dad met my mother, because my mother came from Italy and went to work for Mr. Ghiglione's brother, he was Ghiglione too, and his name was Angelo.

And this guy was named Frank. And she went to work with him as a nursemaid and my dad worked in the farm. My father met her when she went to work for Mr. Ghiglione. And then my father married her, and that's how it got started. And when I was baptized, Mr. Ghiglione's brother, Angelo, stood up as the godfather.

Angela Broadhead: I'm so glad we mentioned that in our little talk. I want to thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy day today.

Jack Cosso: Oh, I'm not busy. I'm planting onions up at the ranch.

Angela Broadhead: Yes, now how many acres do you have?

Jack Cosso: Well, we have, between all brothers and sisters, we had, let's see, my sister's got a place there, and my brother has a place there, and what we have left is about eight or nine acres.



From left to right: Louis Cosso, Joe Cosso, Jack Cosso, Johnny Cosso and Vic Pagliero. March 3, 1994.

Angela Broadhead: Oh, that's a lot of property in Lafayette. And you still have it in farm land?

Jack Cosso: Well, we just putter. We don't farm, we just play. See, I've retired now. I retired five years ago, and my other brother's going to retire next month. And then my other brother's going to retire in May, so there will be plenty to give me a hand over there. Try to keep the place clean.

Angela Broadhead: If we think of some other things, we'll get in touch again, and I thank you again.

Jack Cosso: Thank you.

Angela Broadhead: It was a pleasure to talk with you.

Mr. James (Jack) Cosso was born in Alameda, California, on August 24, 1913. His family moved to Lafayette in 1920. He married Florence Brusaschetto in 1940. They have two boys, Louis M. Cosso and James C. Cosso, who also live in this area.