

Oral History of Jack Marchant
November 30, 1984
Lafayette Historical Society

Ollie Hamlin: This is Ollie Hamlin doing an interview with Jack Marchant with his wife, Esther, at their home at 1043 Meadowlark Court in Lafayette on November 30, 1984.

Jack Marchant: I want to tell you a story about an experience I had with Henry Kaiser many years ago. I wrote him a letter and asked him if he would supply the concrete to be used for the Mt. Diablo Therapy Center. My kid brother and Essie and I were interested in it, and after writing this letter, Mr. Kaiser called me back and said he would furnish *all* the concrete we needed for that project, and I have never forgotten that. At the time he didn't want me to tell anybody, because he was afraid that everybody else would want him to do the same thing.

Then the other little story I like to tell is about John Janssen who lived right down here in Lafayette. He was sort of a buddy of mine, I used to be friends with a lot of other tractor drivers, and he was working with a shovel. And he turned and said to all of us there, "I don't feel good", and then he just fell over dead. You will have to forgive me if I cry a little. Now let's get back to you.

Ollie Hamlin: There are a few basic questions I want to ask for the Lafayette Historical Society. When was it that you first came to the area?

Jack Marchant: About 1950.

Ollie Hamlin: Where did you grow up and go to school?

Jack Marchant: I was born in Havana, Cuba. I lived in Berkeley from 1914 to 1942. I attended local schools in Berkeley, University High School, and got an AB degree from University of California in Berkeley.

Ollie Hamlin: You worked with your brother, Paul, didn't you? Was he older or younger?

Jack Marchant: Paul was my younger brother, and we worked together for a long time. We worked up in Kensington near Berkeley for quite awhile before the war. I think we built about 90 houses up there in north Berkeley. It was under the name of Marchant Brothers. Then Paul went overseas in the service, and he had a lot of experience with the Engineers Corps. Later on it was under the name of Marchant Construction.

Ollie Hamlin: It seemed to me that your home building was pretty much localized to the Lafayette area and also in Orinda.

Jack Marchant: Yes, to a degree we built in Lafayette, and Orinda and Danville and Rowland Orchards in Reliez Valley and many other areas. There was one area in particular over the hill which was one of the nicest with a lot of old timers still living there. It was immaculate, and the same people stay there, and they enforce their restrictions, and they get the city somehow to keep their streets paved. That's more than I can do here.

Ollie Hamlin: You had a reputation for having satisfied customers with your home buyers. You must have had a good follow up system.

Jack Marchant: Well, we always tried to do our best. We were always proud and glad to hear good things about the re-sale of Marchant homes.

Ollie Hamlin: Jack, you had a style of your own in your homes. Did you have a rural background to develop your ranch style home?

Jack Marchant: Not really. I had read several books, and I liked the colonial the best, but we also built a few contemporaries. There is a doctor down the street who is a radiologist at John Muir Hospital, and another one nearby which was contemporary, but most of them were colonial or western ranch style.

Ollie Hamlin: That style seems to last with the years, and it is popular. You also had a career of teaching, didn't you, before you started building houses with your brother?

Jack Marchant: Well, that was in between. It was during the war. I was in the Maritime service and overseas for 3 years, and after that I taught school for 3 years. After we joined up with Don Lawrie and did business as Marchant and Lawrie for a short time.

Ollie Hamlin: I remember that name.

Jack Marchant: My brother, Paul, had a very tragic ending. He was flying up in the Mountains near Bishop, and he got caught in a big storm, and he was killed in a plane crash.

Ollie Hamlin: My wife and I do see Shirlee from time to time who was Paul's wife, and she is now married to Teller Weinmann who is an old friend of ours from Piedmont. They now live in Woodside. Teller's father, Dewey Weinmann, was a judge in the Oakland area many years ago. You bought the land from my father, Judge Hamlin, where Silver Springs is now in about 1953.

Jack Marchant: Yes, I still have one of those old cast iron lanterns and a wooden watering trough around my place at home here which came from your ranch.

Ollie Hamlin: Yes, those were the old gas lanterns which used to be around Lake Merritt in Oakland before they had electroliers. My grandfather, Dr. Hamlin, had a summer cabin up in the hills above Silver Springs area, and he had a friend who salvaged a few of those fancy gas lamp posts and installed a string of them on the way up to the cabin in the hills. He had them all electrified, and they were great. I guess you had a theory of how to go about purchasing land for your projects.

Jack Marchant: Yes. I would get together with Lee Schell, whom I brought into Rotary and is an old friend. We would get together and work out an estimate of what the land would cost to develop, and work from there. We bought in acres of land which would give a chance to do a nice job and mostly in colonial or California, ranch style or whatever. I had a book one time which went into those old colonials back East, and I just kind of fell in love with that style. For the most part, they were the California Colonial ranch style.

Ollie Hamlin: Are they easy to maintain?

Jack Marchant: They are attractive. As I say we would buy a piece of land, and we would get together and make estimates of what the property would yield, how many sites, and if it looked good, we would go ahead with it. Lee Schell is an old friend who I brought into Rotary as I did with many of the old timers in Lafayette. Walt Meima, retired plumber, is another.

Ollie Hamlin: Well, I would hear about your reputation of satisfied customers all the time, and I'm sure you like to hear about that also. And you also stayed with the same sub-contractors most of the time.

Jack Marchant: A good deal of the time, but now and again we would shop to make sure we were getting the right prices. Plogco Sheet Metal is an old friend of ours.

Ollie Hamlin: In 1968, the City of Lafayette incorporated, and you were one of the first councilmen. Was that a positive experience for you?

Jack Marchant: Oh yes. Originally the first council acted as both the Planning Commission and the City Council. And later on we realized it was too big a job for the council alone to handle, so they formed a Planning Commission, and that was a big step in the right direction.

Ollie Hamlin: As I remembered one of the first things the new city fathers went after was to revise the signs and to bring down some of those huge big real estate signs on the boulevard (Mt. Diablo Boulevard). The real estate guys were probably the worst offenders.

Jack Marchant: You're right. I had forgotten that. You remember a guy named Tom Duffy who had the biggest sign in town? He is still around here.

Ollie Hamlin: That was an important element to change the looks of the boulevard.

Jack Marchant: For a while there, it seemed like everybody in town was vying to have the biggest sign. Esther was on the group called the Lafayette Design Project, and we had such a time getting the PGE and the telephone wires down in the middle of town.

Ollie Hamlin: Yes that took awhile, but that was a major step forward. You continued to do some building and developing after the city incorporated. Did you find that the permit process changed much?

Jack Marchant: Well, some. You remember Rudy Krintz. He was a good friend of ours in Martinez. Also Tony deJesus in the building dept. I understand that he owns quite a bit of land around Lafayette.

Ollie Hamlin: It could be, but I am not aware of that. You were on the first City Council, what would you say were the main pluses and minuses of incorporating?

Jack Marchant: I think it was a good thing.

Ollie Hamlin: Orinda is now going through the process. I think Lafayette tried 3 times at the polls before they finally voted for incorporation.

Jack Marchant: I think you're right. There certainly was a time when everyone in Lafayette was vying for the biggest sign, and I think Tom Duffy out did them all.

Ollie Hamlin: It really shows now on the boulevard that in recent years they have taken the wires down and gone underground and landscaped Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

Jack Marchant: That project we did out there in Happy Valley, they are all underground. Happy Valley Dell, that's the one. They have more original owners than most, and their streets are beautifully paved. I don't know how they do it. I've tried for years to get this street re-paved with no luck.

Ollie Hamlin: Going back a few years, were you on the original Board of the Lafayette Federal Savings & Loan Association? You were with them a long time.

Jack Marchant: The old Lafayette Fed. We used to meet at our home up the hill on McGraw Road. We would meet there for hours and plan this thing. At first we were going to have a bank which is a little more flexible than a Federal Savings, but there was another group which was about ready to file, and they talked us into joining with them. That was the original group Lawrence Wallace, a hell of a nice guy, Harry Morrison, Don Doughty, Lloyd King and Bruce Howard. Now it is called Cap Fed (Capital Federal Savings from Sacramento).

Ollie Hamlin: Those are all old names around town. Bruce Howard is a good friend of mine, and I still play tennis with him. He is retired now, but he is the busiest retired guy I know with all his activities. He must have started in the early days of Lafayette Fed.

Jack Marchant: Harry Morrison was the first President. He made himself President and Chairman of the Board too. There is an old story I like to tell about him. He used to drink a lot. We used to keep telling him that our loan association couldn't afford it, so one day I took this cane or one like it, and my snow cap, and I had a patch ready in my pocket and I stood up and I said "Beware you pirate - I'm old man Silver and I'll get you if you don't do things right around this place". And that really went over big.

Ollie Hamlin: Well, that Savings and Loan Association is still going strong as ever, particularly since it became Cap Fed (Capital Federal Savings).

Jack Marchant: They seem to be doing all right. I have a good friend down there, the name of Terry Horan.

Ollie Hamlin: Now one more thing I wanted to discuss. Weren't you connected with the Lafayette Senior Citizens project in Lafayette?

Jack Marchant: Oh yeah. We owned a big bunch of property on Moraga Blvd. Hirsch Morton and I designed a project once there that we thought would be great. I got up and made a talk about it, and everybody in town seemed to boo me, so I said it isn't worth it to me to have to walk down the street and to see people who I would like to have as friends, that I value as old friends, not being friendly to me. I gained a lot of friendship that way.

Ollie Hamlin: What kind of a project was it? Multiple? That seems to be a very stable project the Senior Citizens housing.

Jack Marchant: We owned the whole block in there from Moraga Road down Moraga Boulevard and down to Golden Gate Way with the exception of the Nursery School.

Ollie Hamlin: You owned the whole block?

Jack Marchant: Yes and we still own a lot of it except what we sold to the Senior Citizens project. That project is well kept up, and it has a tremendous waiting list.

Ollie Hamlin: They finally have a project like that in Orinda now near the Orinda Community Church. The people objected to it at first, but it seems to be a very necessary thing, similar to Rossmoor. There are a lot of happy people living in Rossmoor.

Jack Marchant: Oh yes. Hirsch Morton lives out there now.

Ollie Hamlin: I didn't know Hirsch moved out there. He doesn't seem old enough for that.

Jack Marchant: We used to have an awful lot of good times down at his place. He is one of our best friends.

Ollie Hamlin: He is a very jolly type of person. I guess he used to work for you.

Jack Marchant: Yes way back. Originally he worked for us as a draftsman. That's when we were really going strong in that funny little office in the back there. One day he caught his ring on a bale of wire, and he went scooting over the top of this bale of wire, and it is a wonder he wasn't killed, but somehow he landed just right and got out OK. He and I had a lot of good times. Still do.

Ollie Hamlin: Hirsch is still very active for the City of Lafayette.

Jack Marchant: He lives in Walnut Creek now, but he feels like he is still part of Lafayette.

Ollie Hamlin: Jack, I think that's all the questions I had for you today. I would like to take along this newspaper account you gave me about yourself which would provide some more background. You are a very important fellow to the City of Lafayette, and the Historical Society wanted you to be interviewed. An oral history doesn't have to be exactly accurate about dates and places, because it is just whatever you remember. It is just important to get the person's own reflections on the matter. I want to thank you very much for your time and effort for this talk.

Jack Marchant: You are more than welcome.