

Interview with Joan Merryman,
Picture Editor of *La Fayette, A Pictorial History* (1976)
October 7, 1976
Interviewed by Angela Broadhead

Angela Broadhead (A.B.): Joan, before we talk about the book itself, won't you tell us how the idea for this book came about?

Joan Merryman (J.M.): Like many other communities thinking about the bicentennial, in April of 1975 Sandy Kimball and I discussed doing something for 1976. The Historical Society board had always in previous years turned down my efforts to have a historical calendar. So I thought if we can't have a calendar, we'll have a book instead.

Sandy has been in public relations work for over 20 years and has done publicity for our group for eight years so she was the logical one to do the writing. And I was the logical one to do the pictures because I'm always ferreting things out and getting pictures and information. We took it to the board and we optimistically told them it would cost \$1500. That's what the local printer said it would cost. The cost since then has somewhat escalated.

(A.B.): You were talking about these photographs (in the book), where did you get some of your photographs? Perhaps you'd like to talk about some of these people who gave you these photographs.

(J.M.): The Historical Society and its predecessor, the Historical Committee, have been collecting photographs since 1967 so we had a very large base to start with. Then we just took off from there. If we didn't have a picture of something, we just went out and found one.

It's fun to go through people's attics and get pictures. One of my favorite pictures is one of Sybil Wilkinson's. That's the one of the Town Hall. We had a rather stark post card of about 1916 which wasn't terribly interesting. And Sybil happened to have a picture taken in 1914. It shows her new buggy which was given to her on her 18th birthday. She took a picture of her two gentlemen callers from Oakland (in front of Town Hall). Sybil is somewhat over 80 and would not give me the names of her gentlemen callers. But the picture is there in the book.

She (Sybil Wilkinson) has a number of pictures, having lived in the community for over 80 years. She was in the first Walnut Festival (in Walnut Creek) and was a princess. There is a magnificent picture of her and I haven't been able to talk her out of it.

(A.B.): Not even a copy?

(J.M.): No, she just won't. But I'll never give up.

At one time in the community we had an excellent newspaper called *The Squire* from 1968-1974. Unfortunately, it went belly, up in 1974. The former editor now lives in Danville and he is a devoted string saver. (Joan now talks about the generosity of John Mustard who gave the society lots of pictures. She talks also of sharing photos with the Moraga and Orinda Historical societies.) *The Squire* took the only good picture of the first city council in 1968.

One of the most difficult pictures to get and one which I think represents old Lafayette the best is the picture of the fisherman on the back page. It was taken about 1910 and it is Ken Brown's who lives on top of the hill about a mile straight up overlooking Acalanes High School. He and his wife, Ada, live there. He saves things but he doesn't know where anything is which makes it rather difficult.

Ken had a small picture no longer than your index finger that was terribly bent, scratched and crumpled as though it had been in his blue jeans for a year or so. This picture he said was of his father fishing in Lafayette creek. To try and get it away from him and to reproduce it was difficult. However, eventually, we were able to and air brushed the scratches. There's a family argument in the Brown family (Sybil Brown Wilkinson and Ken Brown) about it. Sybil says it was a member of the Root family and Ken says it was his father, Lloyd. They do both agree that it was taken in Lafayette. Sandy (Kimball) was quite clever in not mentioning any names as she says that "there was a time in Lafayette at the turn of the century when there were trout in Lafayette Creek. The fishermen (unnamed) are now gone."

Anyone who is doing anything in any historical society in Contra Costa County should go and see Louis Stein who has been collecting for many, many years. He used to spend his summers on his father's ranch just east of Acalanes High School. They moved to Lafayette in 1915, I believe. Louis is the ultimate string saver and has an entire attic of early pictures of Alameda and Contra Costa County. I would give a prize to his wife, who is a lovely lady, and has put up with Louie's collections all these years. Anyway, we went in and spent a morning with Louie going through his pictures. He was most generous in allowing us to use anything that he had.

One of the disappointments in the book was that we were not able to put in a lot of children's pictures. Sandy and I would argue about it and she said it just didn't fit into her outline.

Alice McNeil Russi gave us sometime ago pictures of herself and of her brothers and sisters at an early age. They are really great pictures and Alice hasn't changed at all. There's a picture of her with her red hair and looking a little devilish. She still has red hair and she's still a little devilish.

Alice's hobby was taking pictures. She lived here (Lafayette) until the 30's and then she married and moved to Pacheco. Alice would go around and take pictures of the Plaza and all

of the buildings since she lived next to the Pioneer Store which faces on the Plaza area. She was in a perfect spot. The cover picture (of the book) is one of hers. It shows the blacksmith shop, the hotel, part of the Pioneer Store and the area of about 1915. She has a number of pictures and also has been very generous about sharing them with us.

(A.B.): Joan, what are some of the problems involved in getting the book published? Maybe you'd like to tell us about the money problems, or the printer, or co-coordinating or whatever you would like to include at this time?

(J.M.): Well, when you have three people involved in something, they all have their own interests and aims. Sandy was interested in writing. I was interested in getting the most pictures in and the printer was interested in the layout and type. He used Centaur (the name of a font), which was created around the turn of the century, and was absolutely right for this type of book. But everyone had a different interest. I would suggest that if we were to do it again that one person be in charge, and let him do it the way he wanted. A lot of time was spent discussing which way to do it. You got three people and four opinions.

Money wasn't a real problem except that we started out with the idea that it would cost around \$1,500, and be ready for Christmas of 1975. It finally became finished in Sept. of 1976 costing between \$4,500 and \$5,000.

(A.B.): Do you want to tell us about life at your house during all this time, Joan?

(J.M.): Well, fortunately we have a very large dining room and a somewhat understanding family. I think the family is delighted that it's over so they can call the house their own again. One of my sons called the book "Mom's hobby" because he thought it would never get finished. I'm delighted to say that "Mom's hobby" is finally between two covers and out of the dining room.

(A.B.): Do you have any other comments about any other portion of the book? Were there any photographs that you really hated not to have included?

(J.M.): Oh, yes all of the Alice McNeil Russi childhood pictures. Also a picture that Sybil Wilkinson gave us of two children in her family about the turn of the century gathering acorns under the tree in front of Elam Brown's house. It was a superb piece of photography, especially at the time when people went in for more formal family photographs.

One set of pictures that I was disappointed about not including was the formal family portraits. There was a lady in town who used to rent out her parlor every six months and the photographer would come and take the pictures. We have two or three families with the same background, the same pictures, the same gateleg table with fringed tablecloth and then different people gathered around the table. I'd really like to have some of those. I'd like to have some character shots. Nancy Flood gave us a picture of one of the Floods. It's of an

older woman seated in a straight chair next to a doorway and it has almost an Andrew Wyeth feeling to it in light and subject matter. I suppose it's not a picture of historical importance, but it's a very moving picture and I like that. But we couldn't include it. If we had 128 pages, we still couldn't get all the pictures I'd like.

One thing that Sandy and I and the board agreed on entirely was dedicating the book to Fern Powell Davis. She's a unique individual. But I guess not so unique for she is a Mills girl graduating in 1922. Fern and I were on the Lafayette Library Board in the mid-sixties. Mary Paige of the Design Project came to the Board and asked if we would like a group of pictures and would we like to start a historical file. Fern never turns down a challenge. That's the reason the Library Association started the book sales, we needed the money. And the money was divided into thirds: one third for the Library Association, one third for the art displays and one third for the Historical Committee.

She (Fern) has worked long and hard. She was a school librarian and has a marvelous sense of organization. She tries to organize the rest of us without visible success. But she never gives up. It is really through her efforts that our society has grown and flourished and put us where we are now. So we did agree that the book should be dedicated to her.

We had a lot of fun making up dedications. It's very, very hard to write a dedication. My favorite one which was summarily dismissed was, "To Fern, whose love of Lafayette culminated in her move to Walnut Creek." No one liked that. We just tried everything and a friend of mine said just keep it simple and put, "Archivist, Lafayette Historical Society." That just said it. And that's what we did do.

One of the things we worked hard on in writing and in choosing our pictures was in showing the change in the community from a small one-horse town. There was one general store. At the turn of the century, or a little bit later, there was one telephone in town and that was at the Pioneer Store. Alice tells of earning a nickel going and running and telling the neighbors that they had a telephone call at the store. That's how she earned her extra pin money. But we wanted to show how the community was, a very simple, rural, somewhat isolated community because, of course, the tunnel wasn't opened at the time. You could get out here only by going over Fish Ranch Road which was a somewhat tortuous trip and somewhat dangerous. The papers mentioned every week of a Mr. Jones and his horse and wagon going over the cliffs on the trip.

Watching the community grow, and during the war there was one doctor in the community and that was between Walnut Creek and the tunnel. And we used a picture of a bulldozer in the 40's, and of houses being built. The town really turned into a bedroom community after WW II, so that's what we wanted to show, the change in the community. It's a great pity that going through our pictures of houses that many of the old Victorian houses, or even the simple plain houses are all gone, we only have three pictures of houses in the book that are still in the community.

(A.B.): Thank you, Joan, for telling us about putting out this Lafayette Historical Society book in 1976.

This interview was taped by Angela Broadhead on Oct. 7, 1976 at the Broadhead residence in Lafayette.