

Josephine Powell
Oral History

Interview with
Josephine (Mrs. Alvin) Powell
and her daughter, Mary Powell Flanders

February 12, 1973, by Dorothy Helmick

Mary: The Gerow family goes way back and had a blacksmith shop in Orinda at the crossroads. Now, in that tape, she talks about a Toby Aboloe in the first grade.

Q: I keep wondering, our friend William Aboloe claims he's a native of Lafayette, but I don't think he is. His family lived in San Jose.

Mary: Well, I think I pinned him down. He admitted he grew up in Oakland. But this is Tony Aboloe, our man is William Aboloe.

Q: There were 500 people in Lafayette, in 1924.

Mary: Tell her about the phone system. Was there a telephone system?

Mrs. Powell: There was a phone operator in the library, with the post office all together in one room. We had a phone that you cranked. And if anyone wanted to know where their children were, you called the operator in the library and said, "Do you know where Mary Powell is?" Her name was Mrs. Michaut.

Mary: And her son, Roy, was in my class. That makes her a pioneer. He is about 52, so that makes her in her eighties. She is a wonderful person. Another early name is Alvin Medau. They are still living here. Mr. Medau has had a stroke.

Mrs. P: He's lived in that house since 1920.

Q: Now, you say you ordered large supplies. And did they come out on the train, then by truck?

Mrs. Powell: No, I don't think the train brought them, as the train just had a whistle stop for passengers, no freight, no station, just a little box on the side of the road where you waited. And you had to flag the train down so that he saw you, or he didn't stop.

Mary: I think we went to Walnut Creek for our food. I know we went there for our meat.

Mrs. Powell: We got some things over there too, but they would have delivered it by truck. I don't remember getting any furniture.

Q: Did you build a house here? Was it on Boyer Circle?

Mrs. Powell: Oh no, there wasn't any address. It wasn't on Boyer Circle. It was off of Moraga Road.

Q: There is a new subdivision in there now, called Tanglewood. Is that the area, 22 acres, pie shaped in its size?

Mary: Yes, that's it. The oldest house still there was mine and the present owner is a counselor at Acalanes High School. I think it is Tanglewood Court.

Q: Was there just one elementary school then?

Mary: There was one school that had four rooms for eight grades, two grades in each room. Mrs. Christian was the principal and taught 7th and 8th grades. And Mrs. Olive B. Gates taught 5th and 6th. Those two never changed, but the other two often changed. I had Mrs. Caverly and Miss Clark, a Mills College graduate.

Q: How long did Olive. B. Gates stay there?

Mary: She was there when I left in 1932.

Mrs. P: She was there when we built the house in 1924.

Q: Now, when you graduated from elementary you went right into high school by train?

Mary: No, my father thought we should go to University High School. The only way you could get into University High School was to be "signed up at birth". We were not, so the only way was to go to Claremont Jr. High School, which gave you "one step in the door" to University High. The only way to get into Claremont if you lived out of the district was to get "released" by your school district and find your own transportation in there, which was the train. And it stopped at the corner of College and Shafter, that's where Claremont Jr. High still is. So, we left Lafayette School at the end of the 6th grade, only because we "had" to get into University High ultimately.

Q: Now, if you didn't go that way, where did the people go to high school who lived in the area?

Mary: Well, there was Concord, Mt. Diablo Union High School. Everyone went there, except the two Powell children. The 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades went on the same train, in the other direction.

Mrs. Powell: What was the route into Oakland of that train? I've tried to remember it, that cold, damp little valley.

Q: That is now called Canyon Road. Can you drive to it now?

Mary: Yes, but I suspect now that there is a landslide!

Mrs. Powell: It's easier to take a horse rather than take the main road. When Tony went into East Oakland to work, she took the back roads.

Q: Well, Shepherd Canyon Road and Park Boulevard go up over Canyon Road and come down to Moraga. If you go up to the Moraga Shopping Center and go to the right of the hill, it's still a very rustic route.

Mrs. Powell: There were little weekend summer cottages there.

Q: Well, they are still there. Do you remember about two years ago there was a discussion about Hippies moving into the little houses in the Canyon? That's where it was. And you know who upheld those Hippies and owns a lot of property there was the principal at Emerson School, Berkeley, Mr. Lincoln Barker. Well, how many people were in Lafayette School, in 8 grades and four rooms?

Mary: There were 25 in each room, 10 or more in each grade. I have all the class pictures, that would be about 100.

Q: When did they get to the place where they had to expand the Lafayette School, was that after the Second World War?

Mrs. Powell: Oh, I'm sure Mr. Ellis was there by that time and the school was added on to.

Q: Were there quick periods of building and a lot of houses going up at one time, or was it slow in developing?

Mrs. Powell: Oh, it was slow. Then the Caldecott Tunnel was built, that opened up things.

Q: When was the low level tunnel built?

Mary: It was between 1932 and 1935 because I was in Junior High and I did a paper on it, because my father knew the engineer and I got to interview him. So, it had to be the years between '32 and '35. [Editor's note, the Tunnel opened 12/5/37.]

Q: Now, did your father commute to Oakland on the train?

Mary: Yes, but once in a while he drove. People always teased him about "making the long trip home tonight". Well, we came across a diary the other day of my mother's, kept when I was a little girl. And she made endless entries as follows: "Went to the city for lunch. Stayed in Berkeley for the night with Mother" (that's my grandmother). Or "Went to the city for the day. Raining. So decided to stay all night in the city."

Mrs. Powell: Yes, it was quite a long trip and you thought twice, before you went all the way out there to Lafayette at night. Well, you could go for miles with no civilization, but we didn't have any crime in those days, so that didn't matter at all. We just worried the car might break down.

Mary: I used to drive with the Whitaker family into Oakland. There was a huge farmers' market at 14th and Washington. They used to spend \$10 and they had a large family and just filled the car with groceries for \$10. That was an all day excursion and you hoped to get invited. That was my very best friend, Shirley Whitaker, who is now married to Alvin Medau. Now, Mother, you could tell about Father starting the Lafayette Improvement Club?

Q: Now, he was president. I have some notes here from something that says the original idea of a low-level tunnel was originally born in the Lafayette improvement Club, under George Meredith.

Mrs. Powell: I'll tell you a funny sidelight about that. They met once a week in the Town Hall, which is still there. And in those days Amos and Andy were on every night and no one could miss it. So they brought a radio with them to listen to Amos and Andy.

Q: It also is said that the Improvement Club was responsible for bringing East Bay Water to Lafayette.

Mrs. Powell: Yes, Mr. Sturgeon lived next to us, the engineer on Boyer Circle.

Q: And when Roth was governor, he promised he'd make a highway down at the street that went through Lafayette, Mt. Diablo Blvd. This was how Highway 24 was developed. Now, did he promise the Lafayette Improvement Club or was it some particular person?

Mrs. Powell: No, just the club as a whole. Mr. Meredith was very up and coming about getting new things started. He was really very advanced, because I thought of him as an old man. He was very advanced for his years. He lived right down by the train station.

Q: Now, where were the train stations? Was one up at the end of the present School Street?

Mary: There were two, one stop was Saranap and then on to Concord. Oh, there was one in the Canyon on the way to Oakland.

Q: Well, I note that the station was around Reliez Station Road area. Was that one of the two in Lafayette?

Mary: Yes, that's it. You know where the school and the Town Hall are? You go straight down School Street, it dead ended at the railroad. Now, the next one was just going around the bend, toward Walnut Creek, a very short distance. Not over a quarter mile there was another stop, for the other children. That is Reliez Station Road, which is now at the Olympic Boulevard.

Mrs. Powell: It was over by the Dollar Ranch. I never rode it in that direction. Probably near the Tice Valley area and Rossmoor.

Q: In looking at the map and finding your property, which is around Tanglewood Court, it is only in the last year or so that they have really started building there.

Mary: Mother sold the property originally in 1953 to a Nosera family. They in turn sold it to the party who then began to develop it. There was a long period of time when it was in the hands of a family named Nosera.

Q: Tell me a little more about the Japanese families who had truck farms.

Mary: Well, I hate to tell you some of the sad parts of the Lafayette Improvement Club. As a little child, my memory is of my father coming home and telling us how we must keep the Japanese out of buying property in "desirable neighborhoods". Now that's sad. This was long before the war, Mother. This was called "lowering our property value". It was very important to keep Japanese off Boyer Circle because that got near our property line. So we have to face these sad things too.

Q: That's true. But the intriguing thing to me is that I don't think there are now Japanese families. There were, but not now. I think they leased the land from the Italians who owned a lot of land, a lot of Italians. Theresa Rossi's family, for example.

Mary: Now these people owned a lot of land. Long before any of us "Anglos" got in here. And I have a feeling they were leasing the land to the Japanese. Yes, because part of where the Rossi land would be is part of that area which is now Orchard Road and Sierra Vista. Now, on Happy Valley I had a good friend, Phyllis Peterson, whose family had a little fruit orchard and he owned that.

Q: Wasn't most of that land owned by Italians?

Mary: Margy Wishart (Mrs. Ian) now talks about all the people, the Italian people, who own all the hills behind her. It's not the Rossi's, but another name, Ghiglione.

Q: Now, I presume that when the war broke out that the Japanese in Lafayette were rounded up just as they were everywhere else and were sent, where, to the County Courthouse in Martinez? What happened to their property?

Mary: Now, Chisato Eiroshi would be my own personal example. When I left and went on to Claremont Junior High, she stayed and went in a group to Mt. Diablo Union High the way the other kids did, and they just told me the other day at that elementary school reunion we had, that she went back to Japan, married an Anglo (white American) and had a family. She is still living.

Q: You had a Lafayette School reunion?

Mary: Yes, elementary. It was organized by Phyllis Peterson. She's a secretary in the Acalanes School District. She's not married and lives in Rossmoor. She had Betty Bunker, and the Rossi girls, the McNeil family, Lucile Coleman, Shirley Whittaker. Yes, all of these people are still here, Alice McNeil.

Q: Lafayette is intriguing now. I met Mrs. Rossi, Sr. in the Lucky Store one day after Christmas. I was looking for something, just after we came back from Italy, and she had this very aristocratic look about her. She had on a black dress and very proper hairdo, and you can just tell an aristocratic Italian woman anywhere. She was talking to me about something about Lafayette. Her sons now run the best, absolutely best, cabinet shop in the whole area. Mr. Rosenberg used to have that role in Lafayette.

Mrs. Powell: Now, do you suppose they bought it from him? No, he did it out of his home, that would be Mrs. Dewing's home (Jennie Bickerstaff). She was the pioneer and he was a late immigrant from Germany. I think the cabinet stuff was a hobby with him. He may have made his living at it in the old county and in Southern California. He happened to come to Lafayette because he married Jennie Bickerstaff Dewing. He met her in Santa Cruz and he didn't have to work after he came to Lafayette.

Q: Tell me about this.

Mary: He met her in Santa Cruz. She was a very fine woman and they were very fond of each other. They were elderly people then. And he said he wanted to call on her or court her, and she was very pleased to have him do that. But he said that he had no money, "I am a poor immigrant", but she said

that didn't matter and he said he would come to call on her when he had established himself. He came to call on her and they were married ten years later and he moved into her house. This was Jennie Bickerstaff Dewing.

Mrs. Powell: She taught Mary in Sunday School. She taught in Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church. Every Sunday Mary learned the same story in the Lafayette Methodist, the same story.

Q: Now, was this Jennie Bickerstaff who was teaching in the Methodist Sunday School?

Mary: Now don't blame that on her, I probably had a fix on the baby Moses.

Mrs. Powell: Every Sunday we'd ask her what she learned in Sunday School and every Sunday it was the same story.

Mary: One interesting sidelight on that is that when this was the Methodist's allocated spot, they sent a young student minister every Sunday. You'd never know who he would be. Remember, Mother, these young student ministers would preach this amateurish, student type sermon and they were pretty hard. And I went for "social" reasons, but then the day came when Bishop George Miller arrived. He was a prominent Methodist Bishop from South America and he had just retired from a big career in Central America, right? Costa Rica. And he was sent back to his headquarters, which was Oakland, and he did not want to retire. He asked for a small struggling church that was having a hard time, so guess where they sent him? Lafayette.

Mrs. Powell: And he came to the Improvement Club and said he was the minister of the town. And my husband was the president of the Improvement Club and he was trying to keep the bars off the main drag, so it would not be a honky tonk place. So when he asked the Bishop if he would help him, the Bishop said he would if he would come to his church.

Mary: So my father became very active in the church, very active. And we all admired the Bishop so much.

Q: How long was he here?

Mary: When I came home during the war he still was here.

Mrs. Powell: I think he must have been here about 15 years.

Mary: I was here from '45 to '46 and his daughter, Evelyn, is a leading psychologist on the radio, Evelyn Burger. She has an office in Oakland, is a PhD. She is one of the busiest marriage counselors. Anyway, the day that Bishop Miller arrived in Lafayette is the day the church really started building up. We had intellectual "meat" for the very first time.

Mrs. Powell: He was a very, very wonderful man.

Mary: This was a proving ground, a teacher/training ground for ministers. We never knew whom we'd have. They sent them from Berkeley. Remember the succession of young couples, young ministers who lived next door to the church? Someone was always raising money so the baby could have a crib, or so

the poor young couple could have a new rug. They really struggled. And the Christian Endeavor was the heart of the social life of any non-Catholic teenager In Lafayette.

Q: The Catholic Church in Lafayette is fairly new, isn't it? It's up on the end of Hamlin Road, I think.

Mary: Where did it used to be in our day, that little Catholic Church?

Mrs. Powell: Up in Walnut Creek.

Mary: But when I was a little girl, where was it?

Mrs. Powell: There was no Catholic Church in Lafayette.

Mary: Mother, tell about when you started the hot lunch program in the Lafayette School. My mother was a social worker. She was married to a doctor and interested in public health. She was a leading citizen in terms of getting out and doing things. And she started a hot lunch program and the school orchestra. And that year we gave her a baton for a Christmas present.

Mrs. Powell: The baton was in the piano bench and then was used by someone who never gave it back.

Q: Did Dr. Powell practice in Berkeley or Oakland?

Mrs. Powell: He wasn't in practice, he was in public health.

Mary: He started the Oakland Public Schools' Health Program from scratch, under the Health Center. His name was Alvin Powell and he started it in 1920. He did that job until he resigned, in 1932 and went to be an ortho-psychiatrist in Albany Schools and taught at Berkeley in the Education Department, as a lecturer.

Q: Now, don't you think you should talk more about the hot lunch program?

Mrs. Powell: We had a lot of very poor children who brought nothing to eat or drink. All we had to do was get a committee together. They came to make soup and hot chocolate and sell it so that we could buy something for the next day.

Mary: I can smell the hot chocolate right now.

Mrs. Powell: I think we charged 5 cents for the soup or hot chocolate.

Mary: I don't think we paid anything, I think you raised the money in the PTA. We had wonderful programs in the Town Hall to raise money. Betty Bunker would tap dance, the school orchestra played, (which were Mary and David Powell - which the two Powell children horned in on). Mr. Shou was a German, I thought an "aged" German, piano teacher, who went door to door in his little Ford to teach piano to anybody who had a dollar for a lesson. He was the musical instruction in the area, taught anything you needed to have taught. He came up the hill in his little Ford to our house.

Q: One of the things that I found some place in here was a quote from Lewis Rodebaugh, the passenger agent for the trains. He says: "The lack of water was a hindrance to the railroad", to the lack of development in Lafayette.

Mary: That's true. Tell her about digging the well, Mother. Talk about the lack of water, how you had the man with the divining rod.

Q: Well, what he says was that he got together with Colonel Garrett, H.M, Stanley and George Meredith to talk about developing Lafayette and at that point they got the Improvement Club to work on forming the Lafayette Water District. They were putting down wells and nothing was coming up and Lafayette could not grow beyond that point. Everybody had their own well and pretty soon there were too many people. So how did they go about forming a water district?

Mrs. Powell: Well, we wouldn't buy the property until they could get water. So the man you were mentioning sent up a man with a divining rod, and he says there is water right here. So, we gambled the \$500 on that well.

Q: Did Mr. McNeil drill it?

Mrs. Powell: One of the boys, the McNeil boys, before we would buy the property. If we didn't find water, we weren't going to buy it. So we struck an underground stream, about 500 feet down. Loads of water, and very soft water.

Mary: Our friends would wait to wash their hair at our house on the weekends. The stream was ceaseless. Just put on the pump and pump it up to a big tank on the hill, and it came down by gravity. Now you know what they've done, they've covered the well up. I was there with the present owners and said "That's where the well is." He said, "There's a well under there?" I told him it was the best water in the county. They have city water now and sewer. But of course then you had your own septic tank.

Mrs. Powell: We had to put in our own electricity poles and had to pay for them too. PG&E would bring us "juice", but we had to put in our own poles.

Q: How much did they cost?

Mrs. Powell: I don't recall, but they did eventually pay us back for them. Later on we had to put in our roads and water and septic tank before we could live there. Then we built the house, first the swimming pool.

Q: But first you bought a house, a portable house, out of the Sear's catalogue to get David out here so he could live. He had a respiratory disease.

Mrs. Powell: It was a little house, a prefab. It came on a truck and they unloaded it up on the hill. This was in 1924 when David was one year old.

Q: Mom, when did they get a city water system put in?

Mrs. Powell: What was the big reservoir above our property, was it the Lafayette Reservoir?

Mary: That is still called East Bay MUD. That property abutted ours and we were never allowed to ride the horses back there, remember?

Mrs. Powell: You couldn't swim in it or anything. It was a reservoir. That was there when we came here in 1924 but it wasn't open, the water went to Oakland. Mr. Sturgeon brought water from Hetch Hetchy. Maybe it was built there after we came here.

Mary: Tell about starting the library.

Mrs. Powell: Mrs. Van Meter had that little library and the books all came from Martinez. I had nothing to do with that. That was there when we came, near the drug store.

Mary: Once a month you had to sign up. And there was that kerosene stove smell. And the telephone operator and the post office with Mrs. Medau all in that same small room. We each had a mailbox and you had to open the box to get your mail out.

That library service was once a month and you signed up. It was a big decision, to see what you could get that lasted a month. And it was very good. She never failed us, ever, to get a book. All the kids in town were terrified of her. She lived in the "spook" house across the highway and we wouldn't have been caught dead going anywhere near that spook house. She always let all the weeds and everything grow so that it was just like a little jungle all the way around the house. And she kept the shades down.

Mrs. Powell: She wanted to be alone. Said she had no one and one day along comes this postcard from someone, showing her child. Mrs. Clarence Shedd (Gladys Van Meter) was her niece, lives in Rossmoor.

Q: Did you grow up in Berkeley?

Mrs. Powell: Yes, I went to high school in Berkeley.

Mary: I would say that most of the people living out here now came out of rejection of the Berkeley and Oakland schools. Down towards Wells Fargo, that was all little wooden houses. A lady there made the most marvelous cake. I thought she was middle aged when I was a little girl. And Mrs. McKee on St. Mary's Road had eggs. And I went on the horse with the saddle-bags and once a week bought three dozen brown eggs for 35 cents. I put them in the saddlebags and went home, hoping they wouldn't break. They had to be brown eggs.

Mrs. Josephine Powell died in 1974.