

Speech by Oliver Hamlin III  
Lafayette Historical Society's Pot Luck Dinner  
Veteran's Hall, April 27, 1982

Richard Johnson: I'd like to now introduce our main speaker of the evening and tell you just a few things about him. Ollie Hamlin, as he likes to be called, was born in Oakland, attended school in Piedmont, graduated in the Class of 1938 from Piedmont High School, and attended Stanford University in the Class of 1942. He then went on into the Navy, and served four years in World War II on the destroyer "USS Farragut". He married Virginia Sayre in Oakland, graduated from Stanford in 1942, and the University of Berkeley with an MBA in 1947, worked in the Bay Area for several years in sales work, and finally in 1950 he came to Lafayette. He'd known Lafayette for many years before this, but he built his home in 1950, off Old Jonas Hill Road. He's raised his children in the Lafayette School, he's maintained an office, and he's a realtor here in the City of Lafayette for over 22 years. It's our pleasure to hear from Ollie Hamlin.

Oliver Hamlin:

Thank you, Dick, very much. I'm going to turn a recorder on if I may. We had another occasion with my father when we had a hundred year ceremony, and we had photographs and a good time, but I always wished that we had had a tape recording of what he had said, so if you don't mind, I'm going to turn the recorder on.

In the last two weeks or so, since Dick asked me to make a talk, I've really had a good time. It spurred me on to dig into some old files, and even though I was familiar with the history of the Hamlin property and so forth, it takes an occasion like this to dig a little deeper. And I've learned more details in the last two weeks than I have in a long time here.

I ran across a file cabinet from my father labeled "Old Real Estate Files". And among other things, I ran across the original deed here, a hand written deed of the property here that was purchased by my great grandfather (that's my grandfather's father) in 1871 from John Pearson and his wife Jennie. It's a hand written document. It's really a beautiful specimen in itself, but one of the interesting things about the property was that it was a portion of the Rancho Acalanes and also a portion of the Rancho Colorados, so when you get around to describing all those things in the old days, it takes 2 pages of description to describe this property. And they had some very colorful language in the old days. I might just mention a few. My wife was kind enough to type this out, because this handwritten document is kind of hard to read.

But it goes back to the land grant from the Mexican Government to Juan Bernal and Joaquin Moraga containing 3 square leagues of land, and the interest conveyed here was 200 acres for \$3,000. That in itself sounds like a pretty good deal. When you read on, it says "together with the improvements now on said ranch placed there by Seth Swain and people after him." And also a portion of the Rancho Acalanes, and they go on to describe in terms of chains and links so many degrees one way or the other, and the colorful thing is that beginning at that certain stake in the garden of John Pearson, who is the fellow who sold the property, formerly J. E. Stevens, formerly S. M. Swain's garden; then 33 degrees along a fence and 6.80/100 chains to a station, and so forth, as surveyed by K. W. Taylor, County Surveyor in 1864.

Then, because it was part of Rancho Acalanes, a part of Rancho Colorados, it goes on that the property was bordered on the north by George Yoakum and Daniel Small (these are all names that are

in the history of Lafayette) on the east by Walter Renwick and on the south by lands of Michael Carroll, and on the west by the county road leading from Lafayette to the Redwoods. And that means Redwood Canyon, and the town of Canyon there. This was the main road in the old days that went straight up where Old Jonas Hill Road is now. And years ago that road got too steep and they had to abandon it, and they developed the curvy section that goes up the hill today.

And it even goes on to talk about an agreement that John Pearson, the one who sold the property, had with Horace Carpentier dated 1868. So, the way I understand it, that my great grandfather, the fellow that bought this property, was pretty much a contemporary of Horace Carpentier, and he's a very famous fellow. And my Grandfather who moved out here with his family at the age of about 3, (my grandfather was born in 1870), and this property was bought in 1871. And he moved out here at age 3, and they lived for many years here in Lafayette. I was reading some of these documents in the Historical Society, (Jennie Bickerstaff Rosenberg had written a history of Lafayette recently) and I noticed in there that her family's property joined our family property, and they were playmates here, so my grandfather was a contemporary of Jennie Bickerstaff, and the gentleman before that was probably approximately the same age as Horace Carpentier.

So, anyway, they moved out here and they farmed the land. The original Hamlins came from French Canada (in Quebec, a little town called Les Grondine on the St. Lawrence River.) He came out as a teenager, approximately 15 years old, and during the Gold Rush days. He came down to Panama, walked across the Isthmus of Panama, and took a ship up to San Francisco. And I've learned that he went to Grass Valley, probably to the Gold Rush. He had to have his taste of the Gold Rush, like Jim Holiday describes. I've read portions of Jim's book, how people went to the Gold Rush, not to stay for a long period of time, just to get it out of their system. They would go there and find whatever they could find, and then come back home or settle elsewhere in the West.

So he went to Grass Valley for awhile, then he came back and bought some land in the Oakland area where Albany is now, near McKeever's Hill where the race track is. Then they moved to Lafayette, and my grandfather went to the schools in Lafayette, and eventually went to a school called St. Joseph's Academy in Oakland, rode his horse, as I understand it, most every day into Oakland, back again. Later on when he went to Cooper Medical School in San Francisco, he would take the horse in for the week and stay, and go to San Francisco on the ferry boat, I guess, and come back on Friday. He was a country boy, and he had a love of horses. And eventually, it was shown where he had an interest in the Lafayette Horse Show that was on the family property.

I have to read a passage here from Dorothy Mutnick's book. I had so much fun going through this book, and I just have to congratulate her on all her research that she's done. But there's a passage here from the Contra Costa Gazette, 1860, where this same property that my Great Grandfather bought was for sale in 1860, and I'm quoting here, "A desirable farm near Brown's Mill, Lafayette, Contra Costa County, is offered for sale. It contains 160 acres. (That was probably the part that was in one of the Ranchos, not both of them.) All fenced, with a stream of water running through the premises, a new cottage house containing 6 rooms, all lathe and plaster, a good barn, 40 x 60, also a fine orchard of cherry, plum, peach, apple, all in bearing. For further particulars, inquire Henry Classen on the premises." Well, Henry Classen, I've learned here, was a son-in-law of Seth Swain, who built the house. So when you consider that he bought the 200 acres plus one of the best houses in the area for \$3,000, that was a pretty good deal then.

So, eventually, I learned in this book of Dorothy Mutnick, that the house burned down in about 1875 - a complete loss from a faulty flue in the house. And they rebuilt the house probably not as well as what the original house was. But they were farmers, and they prospered off the land, and in about 1891, the wife died of the original Oliver Hamlin, and they moved back to Oakland. My grandfather got married and became a doctor in Oakland, and was active there, but he always had a very fond memory of Lafayette growing up. And in the early 20's he started to come back pretty regularly, and developed what we call a cabin site on part of the old property. In the meantime, they had leased the property out to a family, Joe Machado, maybe some of the people here would remember the dairy. They ran cattle, then eventually they started a dairy for 15 years called Alta Crest Dairy.

While I was growing up in the 20's, I remember the Machado family, and all the children. I think they had 8 children in this house of about 1,000 square feet. I can remember Cecilia and Teressa and Frances and Tony and Agnes and Mary and Joey and Sophie. Sophie Wing, the youngest, still lives in Lafayette and I see her quite often.

When I would come out as a city boy, we would come out and we would learn how to ride a horse, learn how to milk a cow, and learn how to drive a car. In those days, we would call it the "Flat" where Silver Springs is now, and you'd put the car in gear and go. There was nothing in the way, so it made it pretty easy to learn how to drive a car. And my Grandfather was a sportsman. He would have rifle ranges and trap shooting, and there was just nothing in the way to bother his activities.

So, they had this cabin up there at the old cabin site. Someone tonight mentioned the electric lanterns. There were these cast iron lanterns that came from Lake Merritt in Oakland when Lake Merritt had the old gas lanterns. Back in the 20's, I guess, when they electrified Lake Merritt, and somehow or other he got hold of many of these old cast iron lanterns. He had a friend that was an electrician, and all the way up he had these gas lanterns leading to his cabin site, which added a lot of flavor.

So, that was in the 20's. In the 30's, I kept coming out here with my father and my grandfather, and about 1940, my father decided that he wanted to build a house. He'd lived in Piedmont all these years, so he talked to a friend of his named Bill Barnes, who was the head of the Moraga Company for many years. He had 200 acres of land to build a house on. And so he asked Bill Barnes, his friend, "If you had all this land, where would you select a home site?" And so he told him, "If I were you, I'd build a house on top of the hill and get the best view you could find."

And I think about that same time, the Hearst Ranch had opened up, and my father had an opportunity to go down to San Simeon. If any of you have been there, you realize it is a beautiful place up on top of a hill with a big commanding view; so that convinced him that he would like to build a house on top of a hill. And he called it Sky Hy, and it's still called Sky Hy. So he built his home in 1940 and by that time I was in college and my sister had married Albert Rowe at that time, so they built an adult house. The house was a very nice home and it spread all over the hillside, but it didn't have very many bed rooms. It was built as an adult home, and so I knew that when I was in college.

Then the war came along and the gasoline was a problem. So after the war started, my father had to move back into Oakland. And he lived in Grandfather's home there on Lemox Avenue near Lake Merritt, and he leased the house to some Pan American fliers. There were several of them. They were never all there at the same time, so it was a nice arrangement, and all during the war years, I think the home was leased to Pan American fliers.

So when I came back from the service, and after my Grandfather had died, I think it was 1943, when I was overseas, my father got the idea that he should start to subdivide some of the land. In 1944, he got together with a real estate fellow named Fred Wood in Oakland and they worked up a subdivision plan. And they started to put their name on the community. It was called "Lafayette Homelands", starting on Moraga Road and St. Mary's Road. And there is a Hamlin Road, and there's an Oliver Court and there's a Rowe Place, named after my sister's family.

And one interesting thing was that when they started to work up the brochure, and tried to describe to people from Oakland how to find this property in Lafayette, they found that the main street had several names. If you remember, from Mt. Diablo Blvd. to about St. Mary's Road, it was called Commercial Street. From then on, it was called Jonah Hill Road, and then there was an Old Jonah Hill, and somehow, I don't know how, the Jonah Hill got changed to Jonas Hill, but there were several names, and it was confusing to describe.

So my father got a petition of the property owners between Lafayette and up the road where Rheem is, and petitioned to Jack Cummings, the Supervisor, that they should change the name of the road to Moraga Road. So he was able to do that. Imagine how difficult that might be today to get all the property owners to agree on changing the name of the road. But he was able to do that. So the lots sold pretty quickly and they went from Unit I to Unit II. That was 1944, 1945. I had talked my father into carving out a nice knoll that I had always remembered as a boy. And so Virginia and I decided to build a house in 1950 on this knoll.

At that time, Lafayette was growing and I can remember the School Board was looking for a site for the present Stanley School, the Intermediate School. And they contacted us, and we went to two or three School Board meetings. I can remember M. H. Stanley, and Elizabeth Freeman, and others. They were interested in either our property or the Ghiglione property where they finally settled. And I think they ended up paying twice as much per acre for the Ghiglione property. But Elizabeth Freeman finally explained that there was a creek on our property. And they were worried about the problems of the drainage and the creeks. So they settled on the present site where Stanley School is now. So the School Board was happy and we were happy.

Then in 1953, Jack Marchant came along, and the city was growing. And my father worked out a deal and sold him 41 acres, I think, for the site of Silver Springs now, and it turned into 65 homesites, and 65 homes. Another 10 years later in 1963, my father sold some more property to Jack Marchant, on the upper end of Old Jonas Hill Road. I think it was 11 acres and 13 sites, and then in 1973, my father decided it was time that he should sell his home up on Sky Hy, so he did sell the home then, and 48 acres that went along with it, to Steckoll Development Co. and Fidelity Savings. At that time he moved back into Piedmont and that is where he died late in December of 1973.

I don't think that my father really had that plan in mind, kind of a 10 year plan to sell some of the land and keep the balance, every 10 years, but that's kind of the way it worked out. And it's probably a better plan, if you're thinking about it, rather than selling the whole ranch out at the same time.

The one thing that I have to talk about is, and there's a picture on the wall over there, where we had a 100 year ceremony in 1971. We decided that we ought to have a hundred year ceremony, 1871 to 1971. So we decided, and I talked my father into the fact that we ought to buy a brass plaque. We've never had a brass plaque, and so we decided. It was on Easter Sunday at my home there on Old Jonas

Hill Road. And we gathered the family together and we dedicated the brass plaque which is at the base of the flag pole that I have in my home, and you can read the inscription. It says, "This commemorates 100 years of the property being in the Hamlin family and it's dedicated to the five generations of Hamlins who have lived on the land."

So, even the flag pole that we have in our yard I personally moved from the old cabin site up on the hill down to the present site where it is on my lawn.

One other interesting thing to mention is that as a real estate person, I'm interested in documents and survey stakes and corner stakes. For years, this barbed wire fence on the eastern end of the property had been there. And in the old days the cattle ate up the shrubbery, so that you could get a line of sight without any problem, in a straight line. But now after Mother Nature takes over, there are just any number of trees and shrubs to get in the way, and you couldn't see 10 feet.

When a new subdivision called Silver Springs Estates was developed in recent years, part of their property bordered on ours. At one point near the old cabin site, the corner of two lots came together, I think it is Lot 29 and 30. When the surveyor got around to locating the permanent corner stake and to attach his orange colored flags to it, that new stake came within only two inches of that old barbed wire fence which has been there for well over 100 years, and I really got a kick out of it. I cut the grass away each year, so we can see that orange flag on the survey stake near the old barbed wire fence.

So, as I look back, I was a city boy. I do have fond memories of growing up in Lafayette, I learned how to milk a cow, I learned how to drive a car, I learned how to shoot a gun, and to ride a horse. And I can't think of a better place to live, and we are here to stay!

Thank you.

Question: In your research, do you have any idea how your great grandfather financed the purchase of the 200 acres?

O.H.: Well, as far as I know, he paid for it. He probably sold the land that he had in Oakland. He had a farm in Albany area, and he probably sold that and bought this one. I believe this is so, because I've never been able to find any indication of a mortgage.

Question: Well, I ask, because so many of these historical things you read about, the original Don Marsh, he comes out here and buys a piece of property. You often wonder what he bought it with.

O. H.: In this case, he must have sold another piece of property in order to buy the land in Lafayette.

Richard Johnson: It's been a delightful evening and we look forward to seeing you again. Thank you.

**NOTE: This information was added to O. D. Hamlin's tape after the talk was completed.**

This is Ollie Hamlin again. This is after the talk, but I want to include in this tape a couple of things that I omitted in the original talk.

I referred to the documents that I found in this package of documents from my father. In addition to the deed, which I described earlier, I found a Declaration of Homestead here, dated 1873. Also handwritten, similar to the original deed, and the interesting thing is that it's signed by Lizzie Emler, wife of Oliver Emler - (Emlah, as it's spoken in French) and at the bottom it's signed with her mark, Lizzie Emler (Emlah). And the notary public here testifies that they had witnessed her mark with an "X" on the document. So that indicates to me that they weren't able to write the English language, and perhaps they were not able to write any language, and they signed their document with an "X".

Another interesting thing on the document I discovered was dated 1892 here, the decree settling the final distribution of the estate of Elizabeth Hamlin. This is the wife of the first Oliver Hamlin. I believe she died in 1891, and this document is dated January, 1892. It refers to the real property as described pretty much as in the original deed, and also to the personal property which is described as follows here to wit:

Household furniture, 2 wagons, harness, farming implements, 4 horses, 24 head of cattle, 3 hogs, and 3 dozen poultry.

Now this was her worldly possession, and this was the way they described their worldly possessions in those days. It's a far cry from what it might sound like on today's record.

Another document I ran across later on, this is dated March of 1929, when Dr. Hamlin, my grandfather, had provided this cabin site up in the hills of the property. He was a doctor in Oakland, and he wanted to have a telephone, and this document is between Dr. Oliver Hamlin and the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company for the sum of one dollar in gold coin. He got the Telephone Company to run one metallic telephone circuit, iron wire of 2,700 feet in length, running from the county road in the town of Lafayette to the residence, which is 2,700 feet away, and that would be the cabin site. Dr. Hamlin provided the poles and for one dollar in gold coin, the Telephone Company agreed to provide the telephone circuit for that distance. That sounds like a pretty good deal, also.

So in 1929, he had started this cabin site. I think a few years later, they developed it into a full scale cabin. I remember it was one large room with a screened in porch. One side of it was the dining area, the back part was the kitchen and the bathroom area, and the other side was the gun cleaning area and perhaps a bar. And in the front was a sitting area. That provided a lot of entertainment for Dr. Hamlin and my father and our whole family.

In later years, I know that we utilized the cabin site in my high school years. We had a beer bust for the football team at the end of the senior year about 1937. And my sister, Mignon, I know utilized the cabin site for her Spinster Dinner in 1939. They went out there a day or two before they were married and had the Spinster Dinner, spent the night, and utilized the cabin there for their party with all her bridesmaids.

The cabin is long gone, but in recent years, Virginia and I have recycled, so to speak, the old cabin site, and we now have a wood platform which my daughter Jennifer helped build, and now we have put a trellis over there and grown some ivy up on the trellis with some used material. And we still have the original concrete step there that went to the old cabin. It has the "O.D.H." on it, and imprinted in concrete with a large fern, and the "O.D.H." is imprinted with some cartridges of bullets and rifles there that carved out the initials "O.D.H.". That's still there, and we hope it will stay for a long time.

We enjoy hiking up there. We've developed it into a nice" picnic area. And we've culverted the creeks on the way up. We've provided a jeep road, and in the dry weather, I can drive my car up there. And it's only a ten minute walk from where we live here on Old Jonas Hill Road.

One other area I forgot to cover in the speech really was about the Lafayette Horse Show. The Lafayette Horse Show was on the grounds of the family property there bordering on St. Mary's Road. I think the Horse Show in Lafayette lasted for about ten years from 1932 to 1942, which was it's last year. I rode in the Horse Show myself a time or two, and in 1941, my grandfather, Dr. Hamlin, was elected the President of the Horse Show Association, and he led the Grand Parade.

We have several pictures of the parade through Lafayette, and the grand entrance into the field grounds. He led the parade. My father was also a director of the Association, the Horse Show Association, at that time.

And we have some other pictures here, in 1942, which was the last year, where they have a picture of the four generations, Dr. Hamlin and my father and Albert Rowe and his son, Peter Rowe, all were in the Lafayette Horse Show in 1942.

Another thing that I forgot to mention, when Joe Machado sold the dairy, about 1941, and moved to another ranch, a fellow named Harry Gates, Harry and Loretta Gates, took over the old house. And they ran cattle on the property for many years. Harry was an old fashioned American cowboy, and he could fix most anything. And he ran cattle and lived in the house. He was also active in the Horse Show in the final years. And we have known Harry and Loretta for a long time. They have moved away from Lafayette now, and live up in a town called West Point in Calaveras County.

We have a lovely oil painting that my father bought, of the original barn on the property there with a horse that was probably Harry Gates' horse. This painting has a picture of the barn and a beautiful cottonwood tree which, incidentally, is still there, near the entrance to Silver Springs. It has a very fresh spring feeling. My father had this picture in his office in San Francisco in the courthouse for many years, and now I have it hanging on the wall in my office.

I have another painting that I'm proud of that was done by Lyle Lund, a neighbor here on Old Jonas Hill Road, that was done in pastel. It's taken from the knoll there where we live, looking down towards the old barns and the pear orchard, and the barns and the house. And I also took a photograph of this same scene that he painted, and they're both on the same picture there. This brings back the old memories of the old days before the barns were torn down.

Recently, I had occasion to talk to Jack Marchant, who bought the property in 1953 and developed the Silver Springs subdivision, and asked him if he saved any of the timbers or lumber out of the old barns. He told me he got one of these cast iron lanterns, which he has in the front of his house. And he saved the old wooden water trough, which he treasures made out of redwood and hand carved. He has that in his front garden. And he also said that some of the lumber from the barns were used as fencing in some of the houses in Silver Springs.

There's one final story that I'm going to relate here that goes back to straightening out the title of the property. Remember, I told you that the original Oliver Hamlin was a Frenchman with a very thick accent, and when they asked him what his name was, he said "My name is Oliva Amla'," and it got written down the way it sounded to someone who heard it, Emlei, Emler, Hamley, and in various stages

and documents over the years, it was spelled in different ways. And I ran across maybe as many as ten different spellings in reading this book by Dorothy Mutnick of the history of Contra Costa County.

So, when my father decided to go through the subdivision process in 1944, the title company was a little nervous here when they found so many different names on the documents. So he filed what they call a Quiet Title Suit for the determination of identity of all these names that are spelled in different ways, so that once and for all, Oliver Emler (is Oliver Hamlin) and Lizzie Emler and Elizabeth Hamley and Elizabeth Hamlin were determined to be one and the same person. And once and for all, the title was settled here. And I have a copy of the original document endorsed and filed in June of 1944 in the County of Contra Costa.

And so to wrap this up here, this talk that I gave to the Lafayette Historical Society was given on Tuesday, April 27, 1982, at their annual meeting. It's been a pleasure for me, and I was pleased to have my son Jonathan present at the dinner and hear the talk. And he brought his roommate, Tim Pinkerton, and a friend Scott Bolland, and a friend Kay Crocker. They heard the talk, along with Virginia, at the meeting. And all in all, it was a very pleasant experience for me, and I'm glad at we can put it on tape so we can play it again and the rest of the family may hear it sometime.

Editor's note: The Dorothy Mutnick book referred to is "Some California Poppies and Even a Few Mommies, a History of Upper California During the First One Hundred Years". Although the book is out of print, it is available at the Lafayette Library.