

Lafayette Historical Society
Russell J. Bruzzone
Oral History
November 20, 1984

Ollie Hamlin: This is Nov. 20, 1984, and I am taking an oral history with Russell Bruzzone for the Lafayette Historical Society. This is Ollie Hamlin doing the interview. Let us begin by asking when your family first came to the Lafayette area? What year was that?

Russell Bruzzone: It was the year 1906 when they first came to Lafayette.

Mr. Hamlin: Would that be your grandfather?

Mr. Bruzzone: Yes, that was my grandfather Frank Ghiglione.

Mr. Hamlin: I have heard a lot about Joe Ghiglione, and I see on the map there are several Ghigliones, an E.O. Ghiglione and an R.O. Ghiglione.

Mr. Bruzzone: R. Ghiglione is Frank's wife, Rose, my grandmother, and E. Ghiglione is Emil Ghiglione, my uncle, who is Frank's son.

Mr. Hamlin: So your grandfather's name was Frank, and also your father's name.

Mr. Bruzzone: My father's name was Joseph. This is my mother's side of the family, the Ghigliones. My grandfather's name was Frank, and his wife, who was my grandmother, was named Rose. Their son was Emil, and their daughter, who is my mother, was named Dahlia.

Mr. Hamlin: Do you know how they happened to settle in Lafayette and Happy Valley?

Mr. Bruzzone: My grandfather was a truck gardener and they grew vegetables. They used to raise vegetables down in the San Pablo area near where the old race track was. They decided to move, and they sold all that land and moved into the Rockridge district of Oakland. They also came out here and bought some land near Brown Avenue in Lafayette Acres on the side of the hill. His idea was to raise vegetables there, because it was the sunny side of the hill, so he could be the first into the Bay Area with vegetables which he always did. That was a very lucrative business in those days, because the Imperial Valley had not come into its own yet.

He was always the first into the Bay Area with vegetables. The Brown Avenue land wasn't very good there, so he sold it. But before he sold it he built a home for my grandmother on Brown Avenue. She came out here and stayed one night, and she didn't like it. So she went back to Oakland, and never came out again. Then they sold the land there and bought the land where Stanley School is now, and they started buying the land in Happy Valley.

Mr. Hamlin: I believe you grew up in the Oakland area. Can you remember coming out to Lafayette in the early days and seeing the farm and the conditions then?

Mr. Bruzzone: Yes I can remember the farm. I was raised in Oakland, but I can remember coming out here for the first time when I was 5 or 6 years old. We used to come out maybe 4 or 5 times during the summer and go on the ranch mainly where Stanley School is now. After that when I was about 13 years old, I would come out here and work for my uncle every summer on the ranch.

Mr. Hamlin: Did your wife, Joan, come from this area? Where did you meet her?

Mr. Bruzzone: My wife, Joan, came from Marin County and was raised in the town of Fairfax. She went to Stanford when I was there, but I never met her there. I met her later at Standard Oil when I was working there. We got married and after that I worked about 28 months at Standard Oil. Then I quit my job and went down to Venezuela and made ice cream with a man named Gordy Coats in Maracaibo, Venezuela. And I was down there for 9 months and Gordy Coats was there for about 2 years. Then I came back to Lafayette and started to build homes. That would be about 1954 when I started building in Lafayette.

Mr. Hamlin: Tell me the story of the Lafayette Town Hall which was connected with your family.

Mr. Bruzzone: The Lafayette Town Hall site was an idea which my grandfather had when he thought it would be nice to have an area and a club where the people could meet. He dedicated the land with the proviso that he would have 50% of the vote, so nothing could ever happen to the land unless he or the family approved, it went for many years without any trouble. My grandfather gave half of the money for materials, and the rest of the money came from the community, and all other labor was contributed. So the whole thing was built for a very nominal sum of maybe \$400-\$500 for materials, and everything else was contributed by public utilities and by the people for their work.

Mr. Hamlin: About what year was the building built?

Mr. Bruzzone: I'm not sure, I wasn't around then.

Mr. Hamlin: I believe the Lafayette brochure puts the date about 1914. That brings us up to a more recent date. I do know that the land where Stanley School is now located was owned by your family.

Mr. Bruzzone: Yes, that was owned by my grandmother. My grandfather passed away in 1927 and naturally my grandmother inherited the land, although my Uncle Emil, or as everyone would call him Joe, worked the ranch. But it was always in the name of my grandmother, and that is where the Stanley Jr. High School is now.

Mr. Hamlin: It is interesting to me that in 1950 when we started building our home on Old Jonas Hill Road, the school district contacted my father regarding his land for a possible site for the Jr. High School in the area where Silver Springs subdivision is now. They considered that site and they ended up buying the Ghiglione parcel, because it was more level and it didn't have the creeks in it, and I guess it was more central. I can pin point that date as 1950.

Mr. Bruzzone: You know it was strange, Ollie, because I tried to get them to buy your land instead.

Mr. Hamlin: Well, vice versa, Russell. We preferred that the school be located closer to downtown. Was it also part of your family's property where they built the Happy Valley School on Happy Valley Road?

Mr. Bruzzone: Yes and no. When the Stanley school site was taken, we went to Nicki Cosso, and we bought the land from Nicki. Then Nicki sold us the school site and the land behind the creek which was to the south of the creek, and he kept the piece which is probably still in the Cosso name now. So the money which was acquired from the Stanley school site was transferred over to the Cosso site. Then part of that land was again condemned for the Happy Valley school site.

Mr. Hamlin: So then your family was involved with both the school sites.

Mr. Bruzzone: We were involved with all 3 school sites. Half of the Lafayette School site on Moraga Road was part of the family property. My grandfather was instrumental in locating the Lafayette school there. He sold the land in those days for the same price that he paid for it just to make sure that the school was in that area and in the center of town.

Mr. Hamlin: Gosh, I never knew that. Then you moved to the Lafayette area and bought the home on Hope Lane where you live now from Elliot Johnson.

Mr. Bruzzone: Yes, Elliot Johnson, who was a famous attorney from Oakland and who was the Head of the Trustees of the Sanitary District. He had passed away, and his wife sold the property to me in 1959.

Mr. Hamlin: Elliot Johnson was a friend of my father in the Oakland area. Then you must have been active in the home building business, because you bought an acre from me in December, 1958 on Old Jonas Hill Road and built a couple of houses there.

Mr. Bruzzone: Yes. I wanted to upgrade your area and to get Marchant out of there so that your property would be worth a lot more. I put two nice homes in there, and that helped make you, Ollie.

Mr. Hamlin: Right. And I want you to know that I took the money that came from that sale and built a tennis court up on the hill near my home, and we are still enjoying the use of the tennis court to this day. Now Russell, I have to ask you about the story about the Plaza Shopping Center in Lafayette. There was a big hill there, and you had an idea of doing something better with it. Can you tell me about that?

Mr. Bruzzone: That was a strange story. My father never did any developing, only as a broker. He never knew anything about land developing. He had some friends who would always say that they could drive past a piece of property and never see it. Over and over they would pass by it. And one day I was going down Mt. Diablo Blvd. and turned right, southward, on Moraga Road and I looked into the rear view mirror, and I saw the hill behind me which is where the Plaza Center is now. I saw the eucalyptus trees and I pulled off to the side of the road and started to laugh. I have passed that hill I don't know how many thousands of times, and I had never seen it as a potential site.

So the next day I started on trying to acquire all that property. It took some time, and then I contacted the Johnsons who had the major part of the property, which was in an estate. The thing that was interesting in that was that Mr. Johnson's sister was the mother of a girl I went to grammar school with. Her name was Anderson, and just before the sale was completed by the court, because it was an estate sale, she came up to me and said, "Russell, do you remember me?" I said I was sorry, but I didn't remember. She said, "I'm Mrs. Anderson, and I could not be happier than to have you buy

this property." I had not seen her since I was 12 years old, and she still remembered me. It was very nice.

And then I acquired the other parcel from Torchio, which is Lloyd Torchio's father, and then bought the piece of property where the Mobil Station is now from people by the name of Kitchen. Then I started taking down the dirt. It took 18 months, and all with local people. We also worked from 5 until 9 at night in those days every day. The hill was 65 feet high, and it had upwards of 200,000 cubic yards of dirt on it.

Mr. Hamlin: Then what did you do with all that dirt?

Mr. Bruzzone: Part of the dirt I hauled to Concord to an area called Four Corners and filled it in and made a commercial center out of it. I hauled some dirt to Stanley school and leveled their field. I hauled dirt up into Happy Valley and filled a valley up there. In fact I hauled dirt all over Contra Costa county for over 18 months. I would give dirt to anyone who would take it. It was a long, long job.

Mr. Hamlin: Did you buy your own equipment?

Mr. Bruzzone: Yes, I bought all the equipment except the big dozer (bulldozer) that ripped the hill. Tony Lobo was a friend of mine who passed away several years ago, and he and I bought a new loader, which was a small loader in those days, and we did all the work ourselves. We bought the trucks. With the exception of the dozer which belonged to Tony Lemos. I went to Tony and said, "I can't pay you until the job is done maybe 18 months later." When I finished that job, I think I owed Tony about \$25,000 which doesn't sound like much now, but is the equivalent today of about \$150,000 to \$200,000. During the next 18 months, I paid Tony off and all this was with a hand shake and nothing in writing. Tony carried the dozer work all himself financially.

Mr. Hamlin: That is a fantastic story. I know you created this site in Lafayette, and you filled in another site in Concord and later built another shopping center on it. Very few people have that much foresight to do what you did on that project. Some time later you bought a lot of land in Moraga from Utah Construction Co. That's another story. How did that come about in Moraga?

Mr. Bruzzone: I started buying finished lots up there from Moraga Land Co. which was owned by Utah Construction. Roughly 1/4 of the lots in Burton Valley, I would buy together with Jack Marchant, John Osmandsen and John Prentice. They would split the lots up about 1/4 to each of us. Then I thought Utah was doing it wrong, so I went to them to ask that they sell me their land and get a capital gain, raise the price, and I can pay them a bigger profit, get them out of ordinary income and get them a capital gain. They said "No, they didn't think it was right." They said it did not make sense. However, 6 or 8 months later, they came back and said they wanted to talk to me, and thought it was a good idea. Then they sold me the rest of the ranch which was undeveloped. Over a period of 3 to 5 years, there were four different purchases, and this was a very major undertaking for me.

Mr. Hamlin: I imagine so. It was really the whole town of Moraga.

Mr. Bruzzone: It was over 2,500 acres, and it was a big gamble for me. In working with Utah, I want to say that they were the finest company I ever had the privilege of working with. A handshake with them was as good as a contract or better. They never caused any problems.

Mr. Hamlin: In the interest of time, I would like to concentrate on the Lafayette area for purposes of this interview. You have had your share of commercial building in Lafayette and Moraga and also home building. Could I ask you what type of construction do you prefer to do?

Mr. Bruzzone: I enjoy all type of building, commercial, apartments, single family residential but I would say that single family residential custom homes are the toughest by far. There is no comparison, because of the hundreds of decisions you have to make and the different personalities that come into play. A home is a huge investment for every family, and it is highly emotional. It is very, very difficult.

Mr. Hamlin: Now you have some sons and family members in the business. How many children do you have, Russell?

Mr. Bruzzone: I have 6 children. The oldest is a girl. Then I have twin boys, and then I have 3 more sons. The oldest is Kathryn who has a law degree and a MBA. The next two boys are in partnership in building right now. They buy some lots from me, and build on them and contract their own work on speculation. The next boy is another attorney with an MBA. The next boy, who is the fifth offspring, runs 3 liquor stores, and my last son helps the other two boys (the twins) who are contractors. He has just graduated from USC.

Mr. Hamlin: That is a wonderful thing. Do most of them live in Lafayette?

Mr. Bruzzone: They all live in Lafayette or Moraga.

Mr. Hamlin: Getting back to the Plaza Shopping Center in Lafayette, I have noticed that you have had to operate a business or two when they run into difficulty. One name comes to mind was Danny Boyle's restaurant and the liquor store. Did you do this out of necessity?

Mr. Bruzzone: The liquor store was planned from the date of that building. I always had the right after 10 years to take over the operation of the liquor store. We always planned to have two liquor stores. We now have three. That was a plan for one of the sons. That's a good business, and that was planned. The running of the restaurant was by necessity only to help out a friend. I don't want to run a retail business, it's too much work.

Mr. Hamlin: In your construction business, I'm sure you have had to deal with various government agencies such as the County and several cities. Do you see a difference in dealing with Contra Costa County and the various cities? Is it easier one way or the other?

Mr. Bruzzone: When I first started building, you could start on a raw piece of property, apply for the subdivision, and within three months have a foundation in for the house. In dealing with the City of Lafayette, you are lucky to get approval for the curbs and gutters within 18 months to two years. The costs of lots have escalated so much that they have to sell in the range of 10 to 20 times of what they did when I first started building in 1953. The environmental impact is tremendous. They have never made a change in any lot I ever had other than to escalate the cost somewhere in the range of \$15,000 to \$20,000 per lot. The time and delay in interest charges and in the emotional strain is absolutely unbelievable.

Mr. Hamlin: I can appreciate that. Would you say that the City of Lafayette is any different from Moraga or Concord or Walnut Creek?

Mr. Bruzzone: I will rate them that Lafayette by far is the toughest. There are very few builders or developers in Lafayette other than those who live here. They all ask me, except maybe Jack Marchant, why I continue to build in Lafayette. It's not worth it. Moraga is about 3/4 as hard. The rest of the cities, like in Concord, there are no problems there at all. They are very fair and very easy to deal with.

Mr. Hamlin: That is a very interesting comment. I don't know where the end of it is for the developers in the area. That leads me to my final question of what you see in the area of development in the Lafayette area for the cost of homes or for the future of young people being able to come back and live here, the affordability factor. Would you care to comment on that?

Mr. Bruzzone: I don't see how the older people and the new generation can afford to live in Lafayette until we have a master plan, a planning commission and a city council that believes in equity and fairness. In other words, when a person lives on a quarter acre lot and has the same topography as the next door, he should not be required to put in a half acre, or one acre, or five acre or a 20 acre lot just because you are a minority of being a developer of an unimproved piece of property. It is very unfair. I think that in the long run, it is going to be a sad situation for Lafayette. I believe that zoning is going to be superseded by the State of California, and we are going to have some kind of federal housing laws, because the cheapest home I can build now in Lafayette is \$350,000 if I can find a quarter acre lot.

I doubt if more than 10% of the people who live here now could afford to acquire their own residences if they were to buy them new. We have all been very fortunate, because we acquired our homes when, they were worth between \$25,000 to \$35,000 to \$45,000. All those homes now sell for \$350,000 up to \$750,000. People just cannot afford these prices. So I hope there is going to be wisdom and fairness and equity some day, which I feel is non-existent presently in Lafayette.

Mr. Hamlin: I've been in Lafayette since 1950, and all I can say is thank goodness for Proposition 13. I have discussed this with many people, and if I had to turn around and buy my own home what it is worth today, I just could not afford it. This is true with a lot of people.

Mr. Bruzzone: I hope that other people realize this and that we have some fair minded people running for office. That is the problem we have. I am not interested in politics, and most of the people I truly respect will not get into politics but someone has to get in there and at least bring out the other side of the spectrum.

Mr. Hamlin: Russell, thank you very much for your time. This is about what I wanted to cover today. And I know that you are a man of a lot of experience and family background in Lafayette. I think you are becoming a living legend in your own time here, and you are still a young fellow. So thanks very much for your time and I'll keep in touch.

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