

Oral History
Clifford Feiler, MD
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Dr. Clifford Feiler, physician and civic leader, came to Lafayette in 1939. He talks about the small village where there were no banks and no bus service and where he was the only medical doctor.

- The Improvement Association and The Design Project were two of the important organizations before incorporation in 1968.
- Eugene O'Neill, one of America's great writers, was perhaps Dr. Feiler's most celebrated patient. O'Neill and his wife, Carlotta, lived at Tao House in Alamo.
- Dr. Feiler also discusses the tremendous changes in medical science made possible by the miracle drugs developed since World War 11.

Angela Broadhead (AB): When did you come to set up your medical practice in Lafayette, Dr. Feiler?

Dr. Clifford Feiler (CF): I first came to Lafayette in the summer of 1939 after I'd graduated in Medicine from the University of California. While waiting for my license, I investigated the entire state for 3 months. I accumulated a lot of data on the population and business, number of doctors and their age, industries, climate and many things such as that. After 3 months of collecting data, I picked Lafayette and I've never regretted it.

When I came to Lafayette, the new tunnel had just opened. The new growth was just about to begin. The population was around 1,500 and I think the population of Walnut Creek was probably around 2,500. At that time I had difficulty finding a place to rent for my home and my office. Finally, I settled on a little cottage on Golden Gate Way that is still there on the corner of First Street across the street from the old Pioneer Store. That was my home and office.

At that time we didn't have bus service. A few of us got together and it was quite difficult to get a bus company to service this area. Greyhound refused to do it. Finally, we got a private bus company that came out from Berkeley to give us bus service. At the same time we had no banks and we could not get a bank. Finally, I believe it was the Mechanix Bank of Richmond that came out with a trailer and took deposits in the trailer. But it was decreed unlawful, and so they closed that. Eventually, we did get a bank that was located where Lloyd's Bank is now on Mt. Diablo Blvd. Since then there are any number of banks in Lafayette and it's difficult to remember how difficult it was to get the first bank.

Incidentally, when the first bus came through, we had a great big celebration, parades, and everything. It was quite an event.

About that time, Lafayette was very well known for its horse shows. We would get entries from all over the state and even from Nevada. I happened to be the secretary for several years. The horse show grounds were held on the property of the old dairy that was run by Machado. This property is now Silver Springs and was owned by Dr. Oliver Hamlin, the President of the Horse Show. His son was on it, too, Judge Oliver D. Hamlin. Sky Hy Ranch was all part of that property. Dr. Hamlin was rather elderly and he died when the horse show was in its 11 or 12th year. That was just about the end of the Horseman's Show.

We later did try to organize a horseman's country club in the vicinity of Sky Hy Ranch, taking memberships around \$100 apiece. We were supposed to get a certain number but we were only able to get about half the number required. The horseshow grounds were sold shortly after. The Machado Dairy went out, too. It's surprising the number of dairies that were in this area.

The Horse Shows would generate a lot of social events. There was a Kangaroo Court and a big cage where people were put if they didn't have western attire. The night before the Horse Show, there was a big Horse Show dance in the Town Hall. They'd whoop it up in there so that the building actually swayed! The floors are made so that they do bounce up and down.

Athletic events were also held in the Town Hall in the 1940's. I remember when they played basketball there. Another use for Town Hall was for the use of Boy Scout meetings. For a short time the downstairs of the hall was used as a classroom from the overflow of the Lafayette School.

The church across the street, which is now used as a Masonic Hall, across the street from the Lafayette School, was also used as overflow classroom space. The Methodist Church on Moraga Road, which was the only church at that time, was also used as classroom space.

In the 1950's the post office was on Moraga Rd. across the street from the fire house. That building is now used as a nursery school.

The area that is now the Fiesta Shopping Center was a huge ditch, a creek. There was a gas station on the corner of Mt. Diablo and Moraga Rd. When Garabotti bought the property, he put a huge concrete sewer in the gully for water drainage in the late 1950's and early 1960's. That creek used to overflow regularly. The area in front of my office, Moraga Rd., and across the street where the library is now used to flood regularly. I remember one winter in the 40's when water was standing there for 2 months!

AB: I know that you were very interested in improving and beautifying Lafayette. Would you tell us about some of the groups that were active at that time?

CF: There were a number of groups. The (Lafayette) Improvement Club was very active in trying to improve Lafayette in the 1940's. One of the things that was proposed has finally come to pass but it took about 35 or 40 years to do it. I was chairman of a committee on the Improvement Club that was very active at that time. I called a meeting of all the property owners on Mt. Diablo Blvd. and we got almost 100% response. We had a dinner meeting in the old Legion Hall. Many of these people were property owners from out of town. At the meeting we discussed beautifying Mt. Diablo Blvd, the main street in town, by having some conformity of all the buildings there. There would also be an entrance at the back along the creek with a parkway and a pedestrian way. There would be an entrance on Mt. Diablo and also on this parkway. They all agreed to it. They appointed their own chairman, but unfortunately he never called another meeting and the idea fell flat.

About that time we tried another thing to improve "the Strip" as Mt. Diablo was called, dominated by gas stations and night clubs. I was chairman of a committee on the Improvement Club and we asked architects from U.C. to draw up a plan with a parallel street running from either Moraga Rd. to Mountain View or all the way to Sunset Blvd. We could have opened up and put a street through there with the purchase of only 2 lots. This was published in the paper and unfortunately there was criticism and it was dropped. It was thought that a few people were doing this for financial gain. There was no evidence of that at all. Now they are doing almost all of that with their Lafayette Circle.

And a few years later the group got together and formed the Design Project. The Design Project was able to put the center strips in and the trees and the undergrounding of the telephone wires and an improvement of the signs which were a terrible jungle. The Design Project also sold trees for the beautification of Lafayette. They did just about everything which the city government does now. They were extremely active.

One of the things that people didn't like was that they had to go to Martinez so much for hearings. So they thought they would prefer local representation. It went to a vote. The Design Project loaned them the funds to go through with it and was very instrumental in seeing it through to incorporating. We incorporated in 1968. When we did incorporate, our past-president of the Design Project was the first mayor, Donn Black.

AB: Dr. Feiler would you like to tell us something about your medical practice and perhaps something about one of your famous patients, Eugene O'Neill?

CF: Well, in as much as all of the O'Neill family are gone now, except Oona, his daughter, I guess I can discuss it.

Eugene O'Neill first came to Lafayette and rented E. K. Wood's home on Charles Hill. This is now a very beautiful residential development. The original home is still there overlooking Mt. Diablo. It was one of the first homes that had a swimming pool. He rented that for a while and I believe that's how he became enamored of this area. Then he built a home between Danville and Alamo called Tao House which I think means "peace".

Eugene O'Neill's wife's daughter, his step-daughter, lived in Lafayette on Mountain View Drive in the house that has the poplar trees on the corner of Brook Street, Roy and Cynthia Stram. They had a boy. Her mother was Carlotta O'Neill, an actress, and she was O'Neill's third wife, I believe. When he lived out here, Cynthia Stram was a friend of my whole family. He (Roy) asked me to see Eugene O'Neill who had just built this house in Danville. After that I saw him regularly and I was his physician.

At that time O'Neill was quite a recluse because he had a very severe case of palsy. This was in the war years, early 1940's. He was very embarrassed about appearing in public. Even when I came to see him, I had to tell him when I was coming, and they would open the gate. They had a servant, but servants were hard to keep during the war years. Frequently O'Neill would answer the door if he knew who it was.

O'Neill was born the same day I was, Oct. 16. O'Neill had done newspaper work the same as I had. O'Neill had had T.B. similar to me when I was young. O'Neill had been to Haiti, to Christof's Citadel, had had malaria. We had a great deal in common. I'd spend an hour there on a visit. He was an extremely interesting conversationalist. His home was very, very interesting, too.

Every room had shelves of library books. Even the hallway. The books were typical of the room they were in. For example, the kitchen was full of all kinds of cook books. Then he had a little room that had a piano that is rather famous, a player piano. He had a lot of music and records in there and he liked jazz music. Incidentally, he played the player piano quite a bit.

I was there the day that Oona, his youngest daughter, who had been the debutante of the year before in New York, married Charlie Chaplin. He was sort of a roué character with several paternity suits and

several marriages. O'Neill had no use for him. He was really down in the dumps, all the shades were drawn on that day that they were married. No music. It was really pathetic. However, the marriage lasted. It was remarkable.

O'Neill was a nationally known critic of Hitler and *Mein Kampf* was there at the house. He was very critical of Hitler. He also said that he had written several plays that had been translated into Russian. He had a great deal of money in Russia but he couldn't take it out unless he went to Russia. He would never do that.

Concerning, O'Neill's palsy, his hand would shake so much that he would tie a towel around his wrist and around his neck and pull his hand to his mouth when he wanted to drink a glass of water. It would shake so much, really pathetic. We tried to get some of the new medicines, but they were too experimental and he didn't want to try them. Now there are medicines that do improve palsy.

At that time he was writing a series of historical plays. Cynthia Stram was doing the typing for him. Some of his most important plays were written in Tao House. The Tao House was a very beautiful home overlooking Mt. Diablo. It had a big picture window overlooking Mt. Diablo and then on the opposite wall there was a blue wall mirror. If you were facing the inside wall, you would see Mt. Diablo reflected there.

He had 50 to 100 acres and he used to have a chicken house there and he raised white leghorn hens. He also had a famous dog who is buried in the garden there.

Mrs. O'Neill, Carlotta, could really control him. She just bossed him around and treated him like a little boy. She did everything for him. She was really very good to him but very bossy. She was an actress from the word go! She was always acting. She was very beautiful and it was as if she was on the stage all the time. She was also a gourmet cook. She was always cooking up something special and would give me samples of it.

I think that Carlotta was the one that made them move, he really didn't want to move. She wanted to get back into things. San Francisco first, and then they went to New York. She wanted to be around the theatre. They had a great many battles there and she was declared insane. The doctors back there phoned me near the time that she passed away. They wanted to know about her mother, Mrs. Nellie Tharsing, who used to live at Cynthia Stram's. I had her in a rest home near the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley. She went insane, too. A senile thing, deterioration. Then she passed away. It was very interesting that Carlotta followed almost the same course. She had mental deterioration.

I believe that O'Neill had a little mental problem there at the very end, too. He had liked his alcohol, but he had it well controlled when I knew him. He had the kindest eyes, the saddest looking face and expression. He was really an overwhelming personality. He was a tremendous guy. Calm, a peaceful sort of a person. Pathetic that he had to be sort of a hermit because of his palsy.

AB: Do you happen to have any photographs of that time?

CF: No. I'm a member of the foundation that has finally gotten the government to declare Tao House a historical monument. The state is now going to manage it. They are still in the process of figuring out what to do with it. How to get adequate access to it is a problem. They have a lot of pictures. The

foundation has some pictures of me with O'Neill and there are also pictures of the house which is being restored. That society is very active and I believe it's a museum dedicated to O'Neill.

AB: Do you have any photographs of early Lafayette?

CF: I don't believe I have any pictures that are not already in the collections.

AB: Dr. Feiler, would you like to tell us a little bit about how your medical practice differs now from when you first came to Lafayette in 1939?

CF: At that time a family doctor or general practitioner made house calls. Every morning I would make many house calls. I was probably the only doctor for 5 or more years for Lafayette, Orinda, Canyon and Moraga. Walnut Creek only had two doctors and a part-time doctor all through the war. I had to make many house calls day and night and I have probably delivered 2,500 babies. That's more than the population when I came here.

I had to belong to six or seven hospital staffs at a time. There were none in Walnut Creek and none in Lafayette. We had to go in to Alta Bates in Berkeley, Herrick Hospital, Children's Hospital in Oakland, the three hospitals in Oakland on Pill Hill, Martinez Hospital in Martinez, and the Concord hospital. Sometimes I had to go as far as Concord and Diablo on house calls.

I was throwing away some old charts recently and when the janitor saw them he was amazed. Office calls were \$1.00 and house calls were \$2.00. A delivery of a baby was \$50.00 and that included 9 months care, plus well-baby care for 6 weeks after, plus many house calls after to check the mother and the baby. They used to keep the mother in the hospital for 10 days at that time. The University of California started getting the mothers out of bed on the 3rd day, and when I started doing that one of the hospitals (I won't mention the name) threatened to throw me off the staff. Later they were all getting the mothers up after three days. By the end of the year I was getting them up on the first day and here again the hospitals complained. But later on they were doing it.

At that time I was doing quite a bit of research on new medicines. I was the first one to have immune globulin. It was manufactured by Cutter Lab and all of it went to the armed services. They gave me 300 vials for investigational purposes and I used it. We had some terrible epidemics of the chicken pox and measles. This helped a great deal in the relief in some of these cases. It didn't cure it, but it helped to relieve it.

I had the first penicillin. When they sent it to me, it was insured for about \$85.00 and was in a million units. You can now get a million units for about 15 cents! I wondered at that time when it would be like aspirin. It's almost like that now. I also had the first cortisone which was very expensive. I remember using it on a man who had a bone infection, osteomyelitis, for a couple of years. It was cleared up with that and penicillin.

At that time, bone infections were treated with live maggots. It was horrible. You would buy them and put them on and they would eat away all of the dead tissue. They would clean the wound and it would take months and months to heal.

As far as venereal diseases go, we didn't see as much then. When you did see it, there was a familiar saying, "One night with Venus and the rest of your life with Mercury." It would take years of arsenic

and mercury bismuth injections in the vein and in the muscle, potassium permanganate washings. And it still wouldn't cure them. Then they started using fever therapy for brain syphilis. Now, almost only one big shot of penicillin clears them both up.

Another thing that is very different is the way we looked at abortions. It was considered a horrible, criminal crime and you could lose your license. There were patients, however, that we had that would have their health markedly jeopardized with having too many babies. There was the tubal ligation for sterility and the vasectomy for the male. These were looked upon almost as an abortion and had to have 3 doctors' consent to it before it could be done.

In 1939 there was no penicillin. Sulfa was the very first antibiotic and it made people very sick. When I first came to Lafayette, one of the prime causes of death was pneumonia, a huge cause of death. We were quite concerned. We gave them sulfa until they were actually blue. But, thank God, I made my reputation. I was just out of U.C. and I saved them. I was really fortunate in that we had sulfa. The sulfa we have nowadays is not nearly so toxic and is much more effective.

The medicines we use now, this was 41 years ago, we had none of them then. We didn't have the vaccines. I remember an epidemic of polio when I saw 32 cases of polio in this county in one year. We had to give lots of artificial respiration with a respirator. We had to send them to the county. Once I had a patient who needed a respirator but none were available at the county hospital. I had to rush him in my car to San Francisco General Hospital where I knew the Chief of Infectious Diseases, Dr. Geiger, a very famous doctor. They saved the patient but I was really called on the carpet for taking a contagious disease through two counties. Dr. Geiger finally excused me for it. It was illegal to transport patients in this way but we didn't have any other means of treating them.

In the early 1940's we first recognized measles in mothers as the cause of birth defects: deafness, blindness and stunted growth. Now with measles vaccine that is practically eliminated. It was in the 40's that we first found the connection between the two.

One of the greatest new developments in medicine is the elimination of perhaps half of our psychiatrists by the use of mood elevating medication that affects the brain chemistry. They are really saving a lot of lives. We would lose them as suicides from depression. We are now saving them without a lot of long therapy on the couch.

It's so much more gratifying for us to practice medicine now. You have so much more to work with. About the only thing that I use now that I was taught in the field of pharmacy when I was in medical school is maybe aspirin. It's an extremely good medicine. A lot of people don't know that.

AB: Thank you, Dr. Feiler, for taking time from your busy Saturday morning to give the Historical Society your view of Lafayette from 1939 to the present in 1979.

Dr. Clifford Feiler was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on Oct. 16, 1907. A graduate of U.C. Medical School, he began his medical practice in Lafayette in 1939. He and his wife, June Shaw Feiler, reside in Lafayette.