

## EARLY LAFAYETTE HISTORY, 1846-1927

A talk given by Jennie (Mrs. William) Bickerstaff Rosenberg at a meeting of The Contra Costa Historical Society held in Lafayette on the evening of May 23, 1956. Mrs. Rosenberg was 85 years old at the time.

Judge Bray's introduction of Mrs. Rosenberg: "Mrs. Rosenberg, we are delighted to have you here to speak to us tonight about the other days in Lafayette. You have contributed tremendously as a school teacher, as a citizen and as one of the outstanding women in Lafayette, to the building of this community. I now present you Mrs. William Rosenberg."

### Mrs. Rosenberg:

Our subject tonight is "Early Lafayette History". I think we can begin with only one person and that is Elam Brown. Elam Brown was born in New York. His father and mother went to Massachusetts while he was quite young. They moved to Ohio when he was seven years old and later on moved farther west. When he was eighteen, his father died and he took over the care of the family until he was twenty-one. At that time there was a great deal of excitement about the West. So many people were interested in planning for their future, better homes, new country, new ranches, and so Elam Brown wanted to go west.

He married Sarah Adams and then began farming in Illinois where he cleared one hundred eighty acres. He lost his wife and in 1846 Mr. Brown determined to emigrate to the Pacific Coast. He therefore formed a company from the residents who were living near him and they began making preparations for the long journey across the plains. Together with fourteen families and sixteen wagons, on May 1, 1846, they crossed the Missouri River and started on their trip across the plains, with Elam Brown as captain.

On the way they had many difficulties. One time their cattle stampeded on account of buffalo and 120 head were lost. This was a great loss, but they went on and fortunately were able to buy more cattle along the way to draw the wagons. Sickness was also prevalent and at one time half the company was down. They were six months on the trip across the plains. There is a lantern which Elam Brown gave my father and which was used during their night stops on the long journey.

Finally the company reached Sutter's Fort. But the next question was where to locate. It was decided to go on to the Santa Clara Valley and all were happy to be at their journey's end. But there was more trouble, for Sanchez, the Spanish bandit, was creating a reign of terror. Finally he was conquered and the company of settlers divided, some going to Monterey, others to Santa Cruz, San Jose, and Elam Brown going to the redwoods in Contra Costa County.

Here in 1847 Elam Brown spent the summer, whip-sawing lumber which he hauled to the San Antonio Creek and then took across the Bay to San Francisco.

Something else happened in 1847. Elam Brown married Mrs. Margaret Allen who had lost her husband on the way coming to California. Elam Brown had four children and Mrs. Margaret Allen Brown, eleven, so they had quite a family.

The same year, 1847, Elam Brown heard that William A. Leidesdorff had a ranch for sale which he had purchased from a Spaniard by the name of (Candelario) Valencia. Mr. Leidesdorff agreed to sell the Rancho Acalanes to Elam Brown. The rancho, consisting of 3,328 9/10 acres, was bought for \$900, which money Mrs. Brown had brought across the plains in an eight-day clock.

I shall try to give the locations of the boundaries: Looking toward the east, just beyond the Lafayette Park Theatre, we can imagine a line running north and south. This is the eastern boundary of Rancho Acalanes. Continue north about half way up on the hills, then turn west and continue through Happy Valley until you come in line with the foot of Charles Hill and then continue south until you are in line with the Lafayette

Reservoir. Turn east and the south boundary of the rancho passes through the reservoir and continues until it meets the first line running north and south.

In 1848 Elam Brown settled in Lafayette. There are different stories about just where he settled first. One location given was an old adobe which was on Roy Bunker's place in Happy Valley. I still remember the old adobe ruins. Later with the help of his family, a house of redwood lumber was built on a lot on what is now the west side of Hough Street about one block south of Mt. Diablo Blvd. At the present time the Emporium and Fabric Store are located there.

Here is a picture of Elam Brown as I knew him. He looks cross but he wasn't, he was a very kind man. We called him Grandfather Brown, so when I say Grandfather Brown, I mean no relation, but just a very kind way of recognizing Elam Brown. His wife we called Grandma Brown.

One day Mother and I went to call on Grandma Brown. I was about seven years old and I was knitting a wristlet. Grandma Brown was so pleased to see that I, such a little girl, was knitting this wristlet that she gave me her knitting needles, which I still have. They were all very kind, friendly people.

In 1853, Elam Brown built a flour mill near the present site of the picture house (Park Theatre). Before the mill was built it was necessary to go to San Jose to get the wheat made into flour and the round trip took a week. I still remember seeing the old mill and I wish I could tell you more about it.

We are very thankful to the Lions Club for finding one of the stones that ground the grain behind where Peter Thomson's Blacksmith Shop had been located. I had known of the stone for a long time and had spoken to different people about it and had hoped that it would be put in the plaza sometime. It remained for the Lions Club to get the stone and place it in the park.

The plaque on the stone reads:

"The Pioneer Settlement in 1853, the grist mill of which this stone was a part, was erected beside the creek south of this plaza. Elam Brown, owner of the mill, came here in 1846 to make Lafayette the first settlement in Contra Costa Co. Erected by Lafayette Lions Club. August 13, 1955."

Error: The Pioneer Settlement in 1853 should have been 1848, because that is when Elam Brown settled here.)

Now let us give the Lions a hand because they did it. I think it is wonderful that we have this relic of the old mill and I should like to say once more that the mill was built in 1853. Now I must explain that in some of the school books it says: "In 1857 William Hendrick purchased a tract of land from Mr. Loucks of Pacheco and on it erected a dwelling house and a flour mill. This mill was the only flour mill ever operated in Contra Costa County." (This is in error.) We are very grateful to the Lions' Club for bringing this piece of the old mill to us and it is there where we may see it for a long time to come. (Editor's note: this paragraph was not in Mrs. Rosenberg's oral recording of the speech but was in the typed edition.)

Perhaps I might speak of the early location of the town of Lafayette. It was down on what we now call Golden Gate Way, a short distance beyond the Park Theatre. You will find some of the old locust trees still standing there. They are a part of the old settlement of early Lafayette. A church was also built there and later, around 1886-87, the old pioneer church building in Lafayette was moved from its original location on Golden Gate way to a new site on land donated by Elam Brown. Location of the site was just east of the present First Western Bank on Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

I have here a picture of the old school house and this picture shows a group of Lafayette young people. The building was not in use as a school at this time but was used as a place where young people could have a little fun. In the doorway stands Will Hough with his violin and the young people have come out to have their pictures taken. This is a picture of the first school house in Lafayette.

Benjamin Shreve came to Lafayette in 1852. During the winters of 1853 and 1854 he taught school. The people were very anxious to have a school. I believe there were twelve children at that time. In 1855 he started a store which was later moved to its present location across from the plaza and is now the Toy Store. The present Pioneer Store on Golden Gate Way is not the old Pioneer Store.

Mr. Shreve, who as I said, taught school, was the first school teacher in Lafayette. He also named our town La Fayette after the French General. In 1857 he petitioned Congress to have a post office in Lafayette, I would like to tell you something about the store as I remember it.

I was just a little girl then and I went to school in the second school house which was behind the Lafayette Methodist Church. When we went home from school we would always go along by the creek which was near the store and see what had been thrown out from the store. There was always something very interesting; little boxes, bright colored papers or some little things that were very wonderful to us at that time.

Then we would go on to the store and pick up the mail. As you went into the store on the right hand side was first a showcase with thread, needles, ribbons and all kinds of things for sewing. The ribbons were beautiful and one day my mother gave me some money so that I could buy a small piece of each kind for the crazy quilt which I was making. On the shelves were some pieces of cloth and calico and things like that. Farther down on the same side of the store there might be a couple of hoes or pitch forks, a scythe, parts of harness and several horse collars.

On the other side of the store there were small boxes for the mail and in the show case there was Star Tobacco, pipes, etc. Besides, there were some nice little boxes of popcorn, Cracker Jacks, you know, and the boxes had prizes in them. Sometimes there would be a ring which made your finger green when worn, but that made no difference, it still was beautiful. Then farther back in the store was coffee, teas, sugar, flour, crackers, molasses, etc., etc.

Weekday mornings, the stage came from Walnut Creek, bringing mail to Lafayette, picking up the outgoing mail and perhaps, if there were passengers, continuing on to Oakland with the mail. In the afternoon the stage returned to Lafayette bringing the mail and perhaps some passengers.

On the way for the mail, we often saw Grandfather Brown coming from his house for his mail, walking slowly and leaning heavily on his cane. He was an old man by then, but was interested in all that was going on.

Horace Shreve, in a column written in the Knave wrote: "My grandfather, Benjamin Shreve, died in Lafayette in 1890. My father, Milton Shreve, continued operating the store and ranch property until 1898, at which time he disposed of the properties and moved to Oakland."

The second school house was built back of the present Methodist Church. This was later moved over to Mt. Diablo Blvd. and was used as a post office, library and telephone operating unit. Later the building was sold and at present it is the Shillalah Cafe.

We had three hotels. The first one was built on the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Blvd. by Milo Hough in 1853. This burned, I was told, and the second one, which I still remember, was built on the same location and it also burned down. The third hotel was built by Philip Lamp and this also burned down.

We had another very interesting man in our community, Peter Thomson, who came here from Canada. He had learned the blacksmith's trade and as a journeyman, spent four years at his trade. He came to Lafayette and worked in a blacksmith shop which in later years became his own. I can remember Mr. Thomson very well, not only as a blacksmith but also as one of the members of the Methodist Church when the building stood on a hillside east of the plaza.

In cold weather he made a fire in a little old stove in the rear of the building and in stormy weather he would sit and wait for the minister and the few members who formed the congregation. If the storm was

too bad, he would wait until he felt sure that the minister would not come and then he returned to his home. For years he was superintendent of the Sunday school.

Did Elam Brown have children? Yes, he had four by Sarah Adams Brown, his first wife: Thomas, Warren, Laurence and a daughter, Margelina.

Thomas Brown was a very important man in our county and lived in Martinez. In 1850 he was elected County Clerk and Recorder and held that office until 1855, when he retired from that position and was elected Supervisor. He held that office for one year. He studied law and in 1860 was licensed to practice in the Supreme Court. He continued to practice until 1880, when he was elected Judge of the Superior Court.

Then there was another son, Warren Brown who joined his father in the redwoods. In the fall of 1850 he was elected to the Office of County Surveyor. He also was elected Sheriff of the county in 1869 and served until 1871. Warren bought five hundred and fifty acres adjoining that of his father on the east side of the Acalanes Rancho. He married Laura A. Hastings and as they had no children they adopted a boy, Henry Hastings, who was known to us as Henry Brown. (Editor's note: Henry Toler Brown.) He married and they had four children, two girls and two boys. A daughter, Stella, is now Mrs. Millikin and lives in Happy Valley. Another daughter, Mrs. (Sybil) Wilkinson, lives on Wilkinson Lane in Lafayette. The boys, Chester and Lloyd, have both passed on.

Elam Brown's daughter, Margelina, married Napoleon Bonaparte Smith. Grandma Brown's son, Josiah Allen, helped my father build the two front rooms off our house in 1879. Our house is across the street from the Pioneer Village (Happy Valley Inn) on Mt. Diablo Blvd.

Another son, Andrew Allen, came across the plains with the caravan and on the way his wife died and was buried in the state of Nevada. She left a daughter, Elizabeth Jane, now deceased. Elizabeth Jane married William Me Nell and left a son, Robert, who later bought the Pioneer Store and is the Robert Me Neil whom we know.

Mr. Allen had learned the saddler trade and when he came to Lafayette he had a shop and made harness and saddles. Later on he lived in Walnut Creek and married the second time. His wife's name was Charlotte Maloney. We called her Aunt Charlotte and Andrew Allen we called Uncle Andrew. So you see we had grandpas, grandmas, uncles and aunts all around us.

I would like to tell you a little about Nathaniel Jones. He married Betsy Allen, Grandma Brown's daughter. He came here in 1847 and in 1848 wanted to settle in this location. Grandfather Brown was willing to sell a tenth of his 3,328 and 9/10 acres and so he sold him 372 acres for \$166. That was a good deal, wasn't it? Mr. Jones owned a hundred acres of valley land, one hundred and fifty acres of tillable hill land and the balance, good grazing land. He had about five acres of choice fruit trees and around his house were locust trees, some of which are still standing. The seeds of the locust trees were brought to the state in 1846 by Major Stephen Cooper and Mr. Jones planted them in the spring of 1848. He called his place "Locust Farm".

Mr. Jones held several important offices in the county, being the first Sheriff, afterwards Public Administrator and Supervisor. By driving up Lower Happy Valley Road about a mile you will see "Locust Farm" on your right. Nathaniel Jones is buried in Lafayette Cemetery.

I would like to bring you some of the interesting stories copied from other sources:

"In 1860 the Lafayette Library Association was formed, which signaled the first effort made in the county to bring to the homes of the public the advantages of reading."

In 1913 a movement was started to form branch libraries from the county library at Martinez. In 1914 Mrs. Whitbeck, librarian of the Martinez County Library, came to Lafayette and went around to several places in the town to see if she could find a location for a branch library. She had a box of 25 books with her and she came to the post office and asked Mrs. Van Meter, who was postmaster, if she could leave her box of books with her. Mrs. Van Meter said, "Yes". But she received no salary that first year as librarian.

The next year she received five or ten dollars a month, she told us she could not remember which. The post office at that time was a small building on Mrs. Van Meter's lot which is now the site of the Safeway Market. (Editor's note: not the current Safeway store.) Later the library and post office were moved across the street to the second schoolhouse building of which I told you and which had been moved there for that purpose. At the present time that building is called the Shillalah.

In 1927 the library was moved to the basement of the Town Hall. As the need was seen for a permanent building, a library association was formed and the present building on Moraga Road across from the Methodist Church was the result. The library was moved into its present location in September of 1940. For 25 years Mrs. Van Meter was postmaster of Lafayette and she served as librarian for 33 years, until 1947.

I want you to see how progressive Lafayette was even in those early years. Here is another story I copied from an old paper, "County Fairs".

"The Contra Costa County Agricultural, Horticultural and Mechanical Society was organized temporarily Jan. 15, 1859 with L.I. Fish as president. The first regular officers were elected May 14, 1859 as follows:

- President, Honorable T. A. Brown,
- Vice-presidents, W. Bradford, D. Small, E. E. Cox, W. T. Hendricks, J. O'Brien, John A. Hamilton, D. Goodale, W. J. Caldwell, D. Carrick and Jose Martinez,
- Treasurer, Elam Brown,
- Recording Secretary, H. Fassett,
- Corresponding Secretary, Nathaniel Jones.

At this meeting Lafayette was selected as the place for holding the Fair, which was to take place on the 11th of October, 1859. At a later date the place of holding the Fair was changed to Pacheco."

You see that the president of this society was Honorable T. A. Brown, Elam Brown's eldest son, and recording secretary was Elam Brown.

People have asked me about the Lafayette Cemetery. Who was responsible for it? When did it begin? I copied the following from original papers:

"Lafayette, Aug. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1874

1st. At a meeting of the citizens of Lafayette for the purpose of forming a Corporation under the Laws of the State of California to be designated the Cemetery Corporation of La Fayette.

2nd. On motion of C. S. Whitcomb, Elam Brown was chosen chairman of the meeting and G. W. Hammett Sr., secretary.

3rd. On motion of C. S. Whitcomb: Benjamin Hodges, John Taylor, Warren Brown, G. W. Hammett and C. S. Whitcomb were chosen directors of said Corporation for the first year.

4th. The meeting adjourned to meet on Saturday at 3 o'clock p.m. 1874.

Signed G. H. Hammett Sr., Secretary"

The Corporation, having been formed, the next step was to buy land for the cemetery:

"Oct. 15, 1874. Received of C. S. Whitcomb one hundred dollars \$100 as payment for 4 and 1/2 acres of land for Cemetery purposed. W. M. Gorham"

This is the history of the beginning of our Lafayette Cemetery, but many changes have taken place since that time. For years there was no caretaker and several times fire swept over cemetery because of dry weeds. In 1937, all preliminary requirements for the formation of the Walnut Creek, Alamo, Danville, Lafayette Cemetery District were made.

The formation of the proposed district was made under the statutes of 1909, designated as Act No. 1282 which required the signatures of 51 percent of the qualified voters residing within the proposed district. The total assessed valuation of the proposed cemetery district was \$4,700,000 and that assured a very small tax to raise the necessary funds to maintain the Lafayette and Alamo cemeteries.

A Committee was chosen:

- E. B. Anderson, Johnson Thomas, Walnut Creek;
- Alden Jones and Mrs. Flora Jones, Alamo;
- Charles Wood, C. E. Weister and Judge A. E. Clark, Danville;
- Mrs. R. E. Me Neil, Mrs. C. S. McNeil, Roy R. Bunker and Mrs. M. J. B. Dewing (now Mrs. Rosenberg) of Lafayette.

Mr. E. B. Anderson, who gave much of his time and energy in helping to form this district, said the following:

"Much of California history and fame was made by citizens now departed. Let us the living, show our gratitude and respect to them, our pride in this, our community, by maintaining in reverence and dignity the final resting places of our sacred dead."

We have spoken of the cemetery. I think we can speak of several of our early settlers who are buried there.

John Standish, an early American inventor, with his son Philander, who invented the Mayflower steam plow, settled in Lafayette in 1857. John Standish operated the flour mill started by Elam Brown in 1853. On top of the cemetery hill, a large sandstone monument marks his resting place. On it you can read:

John Standish  
Inventor

Born in Pawtucket, R. I.  
Nov. 20, 1797

Died in Lafayette  
Nov. 27, 1867  
Aged 70 yr., 7 days

The Standishes were direct descendants of Captain Miles Standish, who came to America in the Pilgrim *Mayflower* in 1620, a fact of which they were justly proud.

Nathaniel Jones who was the first sheriff of Contra Costa County from 1850-1852 and who later also served as public administrator and supervisor, was buried in the northwest corner of the cemetery near the driveway. The headstone which marks his grave was placed there by the Native Sons of the Golden West.

The third grave, of which I wish to speak, is that of our first school teacher, the man who named La Fayette, the man who petitioned Congress to give us a post office, and the man who was our first postmaster, Benjamin Shreve. His grave is farther south near the driveway and for some time had no marker. His grandson, Horace Shreve, had a marker placed on his grave.

I was asked to say something about my own life. My father came to California in 1868. He was here for several years, went back to Pennsylvania, married and in 1875, Mother, Father and I came to Lafayette, California.

We had a little place of several acres, south of the Town Hall. There was no Town Hall then and there was no road on the south. Our place joined Dr. Hamlin's father's ranch and I used to play with Dr. Hamlin, he wasn't a doctor then, he was just a little boy. We lived there about two years but as Mother was not well, we went back to Pennsylvania in 1877 and lived there two years.

In 1879 we returned to Lafayette and then my father bought one acre of land from Elam Brown for \$84. This acre lies on the south side of Mt. Diablo Blvd., west of the Shell station. Josiah Allen, Grandma Brown's son, helped my father build the two front rooms of our house, the house where I still live. I graduated from the Lafayette public school and the San Jose Normal School which is now called San Jose State College, in 1892.

My first school was Moraga School in what was then called Glorietta which was a small settlement a mile from Mt. Diablo Blvd., in the west end of Moraga Valley. There was another school in the eastern part of Moraga Valley and it was called the Willow Spring School. I was there seven years and received \$60 a month, taught all grades and one year of high school. In those days we didn't have a high school near us and it was thought best to give the children the advantage of one year of high school in grammar schools of one, two or three teachers.

My trustees were: Mr. John Olive, Mr. Ed. Gerow and Mr. Dan Eusted. They were very good trustees and supported me in all my difficulties.

My first way of traveling to school was by horseback. Here is a picture of the school house and this is a picture of me on Topsy, my horse. It was five miles to school by way of the county road, and three miles over the hills. But there were five gates to open and one was a "shoulder gate". Now a shoulder gate is one where you must get off your horse, put your shoulder to the gate and open it, lead your horse through, shoulder the gate to close it, then mount your horse and ride on. Later I had a horse and cart.

I have some very pleasant memories of those school days. When I traveled by cart, I stopped for Esther Gerow and took her to school. On the way home sometimes Mrs. Gerow, Esther's mother, would come out and say, "I just baked bread today and I churned butter, now you must have a piece of bread and butter," and it was very good, too.

I have never forgotten dear little Tony Avila in the first grade. Pointing at the picture of a hen in his first reader I asked, "Now, Tony, what is this?" "That is a shick-eeñ." (Accent on the last syllable.)

There are other pleasant memories— Olivette Moraga, Alma Reynolds, Esther Gerow (who is now Mrs. Symmons) who were all outstanding students.

My next school was the Lafayette School where I taught three years. The following year I went to Pacheco and was there six and a half years. The last year I was in Pacheco, Dr. Leech of Walnut Creek came and asked me to come to Walnut Creek to teach. This was at Christmas time and I said, "No I can't come until the end of the year in June. If there is a vacancy then, I will come."

At the end of the year there was a vacancy and I went to Walnut Creek. The trustees were Dr. Leech, M.B. Coelho and Captain Duncan. When Mr. Coelho saw me he said, "Oh, I know you. You lived in Lafayette, you had curls then, I know you." Yes, he knew me because he was one of our neighbors in those early years when we lived in Lafayette and I was only five years old.

I began teaching in Walnut Creek in 1910 to 1918 and then again in 1923 to 1936, which gave me twenty-one years in Walnut Creek and Saranap.

I failed to tell you that Elam Brown was a member of the Convention that framed the State Constitution at Monterey in September, 1849, and also a member of the first two Legislatures after its adoption.

What kind of a man was Elam Brown? He said:

"Amid all the various surroundings and positions through life, I have never struck or been struck; never run for or from a man or boy. I have had but few lawsuits or contentions. I have never bet a cent on a race or cards and never dealt in stocks. I was never intoxicated by liquor, although I was raised in a tavern, but I have never dealt in the article since. I have never cheated a man knowingly out of a dollar, but the reverse has occasionally occurred. I do not intend this as a boast, but as an acknowledgment of the blessing bestowed on me through a long life by my good and benevolent Creator."

Elam Brown died in 1889 at the age of 92 years. Grandma Brown died in 1884 at the age of 89 years. They are both buried in the Martinez Cemetery.

(Editor's note: This talk was recorded on reel-to-reel tape. In 1994 the tape was copied to an audio CD. The quality of sound is very good. From the tape it sounds like Mrs. Rosenberg was reading from prepared notes.)