

Interview with Donn L. Black, First Mayor of the City of Lafayette

Interviewed by George W. Wasson, Mayor of Lafayette in 1976-77

George Wasson (GB): This is an interview with Donn Black, and it's always one of those interesting spellings, Donn. I know two people who spell their name "D-o-n-n", and I've forgotten, Donn, whether there is a middle initial there.

Donn Black (DB): "L". And it's not Donald, it's "Donn L. Black".

GW: OK, Donn, the purpose of this is that the Historical Society likes to keep a record of as many historical voices as we can find, and there have been a number of people's voices, old timers who have lived in the area for a long time, for instance the most recent one is Dr. Clifford Feiler. We spent an hour or so taping, he's one of the very early citizens of Lafayette. They are kept in the library in Lafayette, and some years from now you can send your grandchildren around.

DB: That would be great.

GW: They can hear your voice. Now, what I'd like to know is, you are Lafayette's First Mayor, and unfortunately, the purpose of recording this right now is you're getting ready to leave Lafayette, and we'll get to that in a moment. Tell us a little bit about your background, where you came from, when you first came to Lafayette, and where you were born, things like that.

DB: Both Arlene and I grew up in the state of Oregon. I grew up in Baker over on the eastern side of the state. And Arlene grew up in Oswego, near Portland, although Arlene was born in Oakland, but migrated to Oregon at a very early age. We both went to college at Oregon State and met there. Then I went to Law School at NYU, Arlene went to Europe. And it was during that time that a lot of our friends from Oregon who had come to the Bay Area and were so enthusiastic, and we were a little nervous about the Portland climate. I had a job in a law firm there, but we decided to come to the Bay Area and bask in the sunlight of California. So that's what we did in 1959.

Our first daughter was born in Palo Alto. Shortly after I got out of the Air Force, I came to Stanford, as a teaching fellow, for a year. Arlene's grandparents lived in Orinda, and it just so happened when we first arrived that we babysat Grandma's house for two months just at the time I had taken a job with Orr, Hewing and Wendel, a law firm in Oakland. From there we rented a duplex in Sunset Village that we found by simply seeing a "For Rent" sign on the lawn. After the duplex got too small, that was daughter number two, Jenny, we bought a house in Sunset Village, where we lived until 1967. When that house became too small, that was when Alex arrived, we moved to 3341 Springhill Road where we have lived 'til now, 1980.

GW: You mentioned your children just by name. How many children do you have, and I guess the thing to do is to say when they were born rather than to say how old they are right now.

DB: That will be hard to remember. Let's see, Kathy is the oldest. She was born in 1959 right after we got back. Then Jenny, who is now at UCLA, was second. She was born the following year in 1960. Then Alex, who is just now graduating from Acalanes, was born in '61. There's obviously something about the air in Lafayette that causes children.

GW: Yes, well, two girls and a boy. That's the same kind of arrangement we have, except our boy is first, then the two girls. Donn, the place where I guess I first ran into you is when you were real active in the Design Project. You might talk a little about that, or any other thing that you'd like to talk about. How you got first interested in Lafayette's importance.

DB: Well, it began after we purchased the house in Sunset Village and had become a little active in the neighborhood Improvement Association, Sunset Village had a number of neighborhood concerns.

GW: Undoubtedly, a service station was on the...

DB: The old Texaco station was a real problem for everybody. The threat that really got us going, the first time I remember getting interested in anything outside the neighborhood, was when it looked like somebody was going to purchase the property on Mt. Diablo Blvd. behind the Texaco Station on the Mt. Diablo Boulevard side of the creek. For various reasons I can't now remember, it looked like commercial zoning would jump the creek and get into Sunset Village. So as good homeowners do, we got excited. The Design Project happened to be working on a Mt. Diablo Blvd. beautification project in that same area.

The idea was to plant oleanders along Mt. Diablo Blvd. The tactic was to make the area look so good that the County authorities wouldn't have the nerve to turn it into commercial property. I can remember that Stan White was then president of the Design Project. I wrote him a letter telling him how important all this was. He called me the day he got the letter to suggest I join the Design Project. That seemed just right! Lafayette wasn't feeling like my home town at the time. I was obviously looking for something, some way to get involved, so Stan's invitation came at just the right time. That was 1963.

It would have been very shortly thereafter, George, that you and I met because you were so active in the Lafayette Improvement Association. During those years the Improvement Association and the Design Project were acting like a defacto city government, as best we could, and so the people in those two organizations got together a lot.

GW: I don't recall when the first attempt at incorporation started in Lafayette, but I think it was before you got here. And I know it was, I got here before you did. So it was before the two of us were here, but were you involved in the second effort at incorporation?

DB: I frankly can't remember when the first try was, I think there had been an abortive attempt in 1940. Just after we arrived, the first time we voted in Lafayette, incorporation was on the ballot. I can remember deciding to vote against it because I didn't understand the implications, so voted for the status quo.

GW: I, almost exactly the same thing, I remember having worked just a little bit against it, although the Improvement Association really didn't take a whole big stand on it, but it was one of those things that people did. But then the next time around you were very, very active. But, well, we'll get to that, then you did become very active in the Design Project thing and chairman of it, I guess.

DB: Yes, I was President in 1964 and 1965. It was during that time that the Design Project, it was kind of a Committee idea, decided to see what could be done about moving toward incorporating. It wasn't as though a decision had been made that we should incorporate. The idea was that it really ought to be looked at. The chief frustration for the Design Project at that moment was the sign situation in Lafayette. We kept trying to work with the County, and the County kept promising us that we'd have an ordinance. But we somehow never did. I see now it was just that the staff didn't get to it because they had other more pressing things to do. More than any other one thing, it was the frustration over not being able to do anything about the ugly sign situation that made us start looking at the importance of city government, to be able to decide about and act on things like that.

So in 1966, Walt Miema, then Design Project Chairman appointed a committee. I remember so vividly the committee was Ned Robinson, Bill Chilcote and I. Walt instructed the three of us to "go out there and get something going". We talked with a number of others, I'm sure you and other representatives of the Improvement Association, the Chamber of Commerce and others.

It was finally agreed that the thing to do was to put together an incorporation study. So we got \$3,000 together. John Kennedy raised that money. I'm still not sure where he got it, but he did a good job of it. We hired Lou Kraeger, a true professional, to give the report balance and acceptability. The bottom line was to see what the finances of the situation would be for a City of Lafayette, and what the level of service would turn out to be, the extent to which we could improve police services. It was an interesting exercise. Everybody took an assignment. One group was to figure out what the population would be. Another group analyzed fire service. And finally the cost of it all.

GW: So you put together kind of a profile of a budget.

DB: Yes. The big news was that a city would not need a property tax. One of the things that made it work out so well was the timing of incorporation.

GW: Did you fellows know about it at the time?

DB: Oh yes, it was planned. It meant about a half million dollars for Lafayette. We missed the maximum by about 27 days. As you well know, most of the subventions that cities get from the State for the first year are prorated to the date of incorporation, while, as was then the rule, the County carries all the services for the entire year of incorporation. So, Lafayette got about \$500,000 in subventions for fiscal '68, '69, but had only negligible expenses. Not bad, a half million dollar reserve to start out on.

GW: A little bit about the campaign. It was a well done study, and I'm sure from the outcome of the study it showed it was a good possibility for the City of Lafayette. The objective being home-rule, bring all these services right back home so that we didn't have to make all these trips to Martinez. Do you want to talk about how many candidates and how they went about getting so many candidates?

DB: There were 20 candidates. The key was that not a single one of those 20 candidates opposed incorporation. Ned Robinson was a good example. Ned had opposed incorporation earlier, in '59, and as I recall, was actually elected to the council that would have sat had incorporation succeeded then. His opinion had changed, based on new facts. So every candidate was very supportive, and I think most of the candidates were out campaigning harder for incorporation than they were for themselves.

GW: I was going to say, that was part of the scheme. Really, you had so many candidates, you were all assigned to different functions. You would have to go to coffees, but the objective was to tell people the advantages of incorporation.

DB: Yes. Because it really did look like we were on solid economic ground, with no property tax needed. That was the thing most people were concerned about. They didn't want another tax, and that's understandable. From the responses that the candidates got, police service was the most pervasive concern. We truly did have thin police services. For the people working on incorporation, the number one item was planning.

GW: But incorporation did happen, and there was an election of five members to the City Council. You might say a little about that if you like.

DB: Well, it was quite an interesting group, really. Robert Fisher came out of the blue. He was relatively new in town and had not been particularly active on the kinds of organizations we've already mentioned. But he was a skilled campaigner, a totally presentable kind of person. Totally enthusiastic. He pitched in and did a great job on the incorporation campaign and ran the best personal campaign of anybody involved.

Gordon Holmes was a very close second in terms of a personal campaign. I'll never forget that he arranged to have an old time "Vote for Holmes" fly-over, I don't know if you remember that day. He, of course, was extremely popular in town, and came within 3 votes of Bob Fisher for top vote getter.

And of course Jack Marchant, who has been here about as long as anybody I know, and was the best known. He had done all kinds of good things for Boy Scouts and other groups in town. So he was a logical councilman.

And then Martin Cogburn, who again, as far as I know, was very well known in local activists circles. I have the impression he had been very active, on a county basis, as a Republican politician. He was well connected in the Republican Party, and he knew how to get votes. It didn't hurt that he was a CPA, because everybody was very nervous about the financial situation.

GW: And then of course you...

DB: We got two lawyers, a doctor, a builder and a CPA, a decent balance in the council.

GW: Quickly, Donn, on how people got elected, who got four year terms and two years?

DB: The top three vote getters were elected for four years, and the other two, Martin Cogburn and I were elected for two years, so the two of us ran again, two years later.

GW: And I remember, just to quickly get around that, you did run a second time around, and you were elected, and Martin Cogburn ran, was defeated. And then Jack Marchant elected not to run, he resigned from the Council. So in effect there were three seats available the second time around. That's when Ned Robinson was elected to the council. Let's go back then, now we've got the City incorporated, now the first thing we have to do, one of the first orders of business is to elect a Mayor. And I might add, you probably wouldn't say this, but there is a very, very strong campaign, even though in fact you were the next to low man of the vote getting, you had worked hardest for, it seemed, for the incorporation. And with a very strong movement by a lot of people to make sure that you become the first mayor, and with the cooperation of the rest of the council, you were elected the first mayor of Lafayette. And did you serve a full twelve months?

DB: No, I had a nine month term. It was shorter than the normal one year term, but an exciting one. We didn't have a City Manager for the first three or four months.

GW: I have to ask you, what were the first problems?

DB: Mainly getting an office and procedures established. Fortunately, three really crucial things happened right at that time. First, we retained Charlie Williams as City Attorney. He knew the municipal ropes, including how to get a City started.

Second, our first City Clerk was a marvelous, experienced woman, extremely knowledgeable about the inner workings and record keeping required of a City Hall. Her name was Naomi Hess and she had been City Clerk of Berkeley. A great gal. She served as City Clerk that first year and kept us out of trouble.

The third thing we did right was to hire Ernie Marriner as City Manager. We interviewed a lot of people, and had many more applications. Ernie Marriner didn't actually apply, we sought him out, and got him to apply. We stole him from the City of Pittsburg. They never forgave us, but from the first interview, it was obvious from that he was our first choice. That was a key situation for the new City. So when he came aboard after about four months, we rented offices and got the organization going.

GW: Well, now, one of the things you had to do was to get the whole general plan worked out. I don't know where the concept of the Forty-Niner group came about, whether that was quoted to the whole council who put it together or whether that was somebody's brain child, or that sort of thing.

DB: I don't recall exactly how that got started. The new Council wanted a lot of citizen input, especially concerning the general plan. It may have been that Gordon Hall, our planning consultant suggested the Forty-Niners. In any case, Norm Tuttle agreed to chair that effort. That was another early plus for the City because Norm did such an outstanding job.

GW: Well, it was called the "Forty-Niners" because there were, I remember, seventeen of nine, or nineteen of seven or something like that.

DB: Right, and that took a long time, two or three years, but it was all worth the effort. Gordon Hall, the planning consultant, was in some ways ahead of us. He, as he should have been, was throwing out a great many ideas, alternatives and ways to go. Some were considered quite controversial. The Council simply didn't have adequate time to go through that process in sufficient detail. So, the Forty-Niners did the job.

GW: One thing that happens when an area incorporates is that land-use decisions are now made "at home". Not only do the active people no longer have the problem of going to Martinez, but everyone has the City Council close at hand and can get to them any time, a matter of a five-minute drive. There were, I'm sure, some pretty trying things. Maybe you can recall some of the things that first upset the Council in the planning stage. For instance, as a starter, maybe you'd like to take or not take any position with respect to what we then called Zeebec.

DB: Right, that was a very traumatic thing. Zeebec was an apartment project that had been approved right up to building permits by the County. There was a dispute about whether the new City had the legal power to terminate it. I remember feeling we were risking a big law suit over it. Finally, Jack Marchant, Martin Cogburn and I voted for it. I voted for it not because I liked it, but because I really didn't think we could stand a major law suit right at that time, and I didn't think the project was that bad. It was a tough decision for the Council, very controversial, and of course, a year later when it was being built, a lot of people wondered what the devil had happened. A lot of people were upset.

GW: Well, incorporation did happen in 1968 and this is 1980, we haven't yet mentioned the date, this is June 1, 1980, sitting in Donn Black's living room, a very pleasant spot in the Springhill area. In 1980, that property does not stand out quite as much, as it did then. At the time, the hillside was cleared off, there were no trees, and there was no landscaping at all, and there were these rather large buildings up on a prominent hill. It did get a lot of attention.

DB: I remember, Stan White made a suggestion that I think everyone wished we had heeded. He suggested doing a scale model, because he was afraid it was out of scale for the hill. It turned out he was dead right. That's what is really wrong with the development. It was just too massive for the site. Our Planning Commission had approved unanimously. But I think a model would have let everyone see that there was just too much building mass there for that small hill.

GW: Let me add one other thing here, Donn. You and I both know, because we've both been on the Council, and have been active in it, from the very beginnings, the City Council of Lafayette has been a volunteer organization. You are elected, but you don't get paid anything at all. So it isn't as though there's a great reward, other than seeing this whole thing come together and see some of your dreams and hopes really be accomplished. But you don't get paid for it, so it really costs you money, in effect. Having done it for the four years, or the two years of the first term and the four years of the second term, I don't suppose you have any misgivings about that, you've done it in the first place.

DB: Oh, no, it was a great experience. However, six years was about right for me. I think I would not have enjoyed another four year term. I don't know if you felt that or not, but I felt myself running out of steam.

GW: Well, I only served one term, and I could see that if you put in the next four years potentially half way through it, you might run out of gas, and that's not the commitment you ought to make. For example, there were twenty good candidates in the first incorporation effort, or first vote. There had been an adequate number of candidates almost every time, with the exception of the most recent election, when there were only two candidates and two vacancies on the council. But mostly there has been a contested effort and very good candidates. You pick good people to run for these jobs.

DB: That's right, there's no need for anyone to serve a long time on the Council. There are a lot of good people available.

GS: Now the first thing that we've talked about is the problem of Zeebec. What other kinds of things do the Council or did the Mayor get involved with? And you did serve a second term as Mayor a few years later, so you had a shot at doing it after the City was...

DB: No, as a matter of fact I didn't.

GW: Oh, you've only been Mayor once?

DB: Yes, as you know, the Mayor is selected by the Council on a kind of rotation system. As it worked out, my next term would have been the first year of the term I decided not to run for.

Certainly one of the toughest early decisions the Council made was to terminate the local fire district, and to go into the larger Consolidated District in order to reduce taxes, and to obtain what was claimed to be and probably has proven to be, an increased level of fire service. But, again, there were a lot of people who didn't want to see the local fire district go. And Terry Ring, who has always been a friend, but who's fairly capable of being pretty ornery on his feet, was one of those who felt most deeply that it should not go. At one Council meeting I had to gavel him down. I recall being less than confident that the gavel would slow him down, but he responded just fine. So some of those moments at our meeting got kind of exciting.

GW: Well, that one did raise a lot of flack within the City, because it really had been a good, and a very active Lafayette Fire District. But I recall the economics that we evaluated at the time, I was not on the Council, I was still in the Improvement Association at that time. It was very clear that there was a great savings to be had, and the services could even be increased by joining the Consolidated Fire District. It seemed like the right thing to do, and yet there were good arguments on the other side as well. They had people who had put together that fire district that had done a good job over many, many years, and it was kind of their own little child which was being thrown out, so to speak.

DB: Yeah, it seemed kind of backwards. We had just incorporated the local control, and here we are about to turn our local fire department over to a larger, multi-jurisdiction agency. That rubbed some people the wrong way.

One of the most humorous remarks I ever heard in a public meeting happened during that debate. A lady had strenuously argued for keeping the local fire district. One of her points was that the local fire district provided a lot more personal service. The Chief of the Consolidated District was there, that night, to answer questions. She turned to him and said, "Mr. Farelli, I hear, and isn't it true, that your firemen refuse to come out and get cats out of trees for people?" He got up and without a smile said, "Yes madam, that's true. So far we've never found a cat skeleton in a tree."

GW: They do climb down!

DB: Yes. One of the major reasons for incorporation was to double the level of police services. That could happen because under the City "no-tax" budget we could afford the services of two officers on duty in the City at most times. It was pretty clear that the County Sherriff had only one officer in our area at most times. So in round, rough numbers we were able to double police services.

I can remember Stan Pedder, who was a council candidate, told a true story about having had an intruder in his home the prior year. He had apprehended the man, whom I guess was not particularly dangerous. After calling the police, he had to sit there with the man he had arrested for some five or six hours until the police arrived to take over.

You would remember that people seemed to feel that more deeply about inadequate police protection than any other one issue. I mean, people were worried and afraid. The new City contracted with the Sherriff for its police services. At least the first several years of the contract service worked very satisfactorily. The Sherriff was assigning dedicated men to Lafayette, and they tended to stay. And some of them became personal friends of everybody, and they knew the kids. And in those early years, it seemed to work very well. Costs kept jumping up, but so did costs for everything else.

GW: I think partly because the police officers wanted to see themselves as having an opportunity to go on to the job of lieutenants, and so forth. And there wasn't going to be that in Lafayette if they stayed very long, because it was really going to be a very small group. And then we did join with Moraga when Moraga finally incorporated, had a joint police force, which again increased the services to Lafayette and services for Moraga and kept our costs down some more, and I thought that was working out very well. Then all of a

sudden Moraga decided they wanted their own department, and so we are now back with contract with the County again. I think we're still getting good services, it's a matter of what you want to pay for it.

DB: That's one of the major items of expense.

GW: The other kind of serious big expense that the City will always have is the maintenance of roads and the way our community is laid out with several valleys. We have some major thoroughfares that handle traffic, and unfortunately they are not wide boulevard-type streets. They, except with the exception of Mt. Diablo Boulevard, they're like your road out here in Springhill, and my road out in Burton Valley, and Moraga Road going up over the hill. They are difficult roads to maintain and if something happens to them, a lot of expense. Do you have anything to say about that?

DB: Yes. I went through a sort of a metamorphosis about roads out of my experience on the Council. It was the 77-93 issue, whether Lafayette should promote a new loop highway, or parkway or whatever, from 24 through Moraga through Burton Valley back to 24 at Reliez Station interchange. Originally I thought it was a good idea, primarily because the new route promised to unclog several really congested, sometimes dangerous, traffic snarls, like Snake Hill in Lafayette and Moraga Way in Orinda.

However, it turned out that many, if not most, citizens we heard from didn't think it would be a good idea. So, as you well know, it got reviewed very, very carefully. In the process of all that, I finally came to realize that there really wasn't any way we were going to be able to build enough roads to keep traffic congestion from building up from time-to-time. I got the point that new roads tend to generate their own traffic. So, traffic congestion becomes a given, the real issue becomes land use, density. Jobs vs. environment. Mobility vs. taxes. All the classic no-growth questions. And the expense.

Really, Lafayette didn't have enough money to even buy the signs for a project like that. And about that time, the State was cutting Caltrans back. So, I'm glad that it worked out that way, for the best. It was a hot issue, a lot of disagreement. It was a perfect example of hometown democracy in action. All the ingredients money, property rights, free enterprise, state politics, environment, materialistic values, the works.

Inevitably it all shakes out through the democratic process to a decision that we are going to tolerate some traffic congestion, and will spend a little more time getting from here to there, realizing that government cannot solve all the frustrations or accommodate everyone.

I want to tell you another little story about roads, another little lesson we learned in the early days. Every time a question came up about putting in a new stop sign, it got referred to the road engineer over at County Public Works. Invariably the engineer would come down and say, "No, that will impair the road and is not acceptable." Well, it was almost a year before I figured that the only consideration the traffic engineers had in mind was a very mathematical calculation about how many cars could get down that road, and that's all they were looking at.

Of course, it always was true that if a stop sign was installed at a corner, it would reduce the number of cars that could pass through that street. But that had very little to do with other concerns like speed, safety or noise situations, or anything else. The Council didn't approve many stop signs that first year, but when everybody saw where the engineer was coming from, stop signs to control speed started popping up everywhere, especially in Burton Valley!

GW: I think that we probably all agree that they don't necessarily control speed, but they sure help every now and then to make somebody slow down.

DB: A prime example is Silverado. It has a number of stop signs, and it sure slows me down.

GW: It isn't very popular, and in the wee hours of the morning, I think they're more likely to be unobserved. But one thing to get a little more closer to your part of home here, here we are in the middle

of Springhill, and one of the big pushes now days is the "Save the Buckeye Ranch" which is right on up your road here. So as long as you live here, anyway, do you have any comments about that?

DB: Well, I would like to have it stay. It's a unique facility that we are fortunate to have, and it's just amazing the people you run into that use it. But unfortunately, the land up there is so expensive that the only hope of saving it seems to be with public money. Unfortunately, that's just another possibility Proposition 13 rules out. I'm afraid it's doomed.

GW: It's not a question, to try to save it. But I think I'd have to agree that it's a great amount of money to come up with. But if it were to go to subdivisions, you'd certainly have more traffic along Springhill Road.

DB: That's true. We'd want to have three or four stop signs!

GW: Yeah, and the same thing would happen. And you also know about the walkway project that's a little controversial.

DB: It's the old question of whose ox gets gored. In this neighborhood, everyone's in favor of the walkway, except the people who are going to lose what they conceive to be a part of their front yard. Technically it's almost all public right-of-way, but that frontage has been used by the adjoining owners for a long time. They have their landscaping into that public right-of-way.

GW: It's too bad you don't have an old Sacramento and Northern right-of-way running through the middle here like we do out in our area. Two other things I'd like to talk to you about. One, you were leaving town and going into Oakland. I don't know if you want to comment on why you're leaving this grand and glorious city of Lafayette.

DB: We bought this house because of its location. We had kids who had just started school. We're walking distance to elementary and high schools. Now our children are all out of high school, so we don't need this location any longer. I work in Oakland, and am finding the commute a burden. That's a big part of it.

Since being off the Lafayette Council, I've become more and more involved in Oakland civic matters. I'll be president of Oakland Rotary next year, and that's going to take a lot of time and being in Oakland evenings. The primary reasons have to do with the children being out of public school and no longer needing the swim club and other kid-related things. So now other kinds of considerations start to enter in. Even our house is no longer really the kind of house that we'd choose for just the two of us. As well as it has served our family, now Arlene and I need a different kind of a house that works better for just the two of us.

GW: Well, and the other thing that I wanted to say, whether you want to or not comment about it, while you've been involved in politics in Lafayette, Mrs. Black, Arlene Black has been involved with other elective offices in Lafayette, having been on the school board, do you want to comment on her activities in those things?

DB: Sure. Arlene was very active in local school affairs. From that she became interested in state-wide school issues, and a short time after she went off the Lafayette School Board, she became involved in the California State P.T.A. Ultimately she became their Sacramento lobbyist, and learned the ropes of lobbying in that way. After that she was employed by the California Division of the A.A.U.W., the American Association of University Women. For two or three years now she has been their lobbyist in Sacramento, and has just recently taken on another client, which is a national association of text book publishers. She spends a great deal of time in Sacramento, several days a week. So in that sense her focus and interests are really outside the community of Lafayette as well.

GW: Maybe we can plant the seed for you to run for State elective offices, from that part of the Bay. And then you and Arlene can move to Sacramento.

DB: Seems unlikely.

GW: How about your children, any of them expressed any interest in politics?

DB: No, not a bit. It's a little surprising. We've had a hard time getting them interested even in school activities. Alex campaigned a little in high school. No they are busily trying to figure what they are going to do career-wise, they seem to be heading off in different directions than either Arlene or I would have found interesting.

GW: Well, I don't suppose at the time you were in high school, you were contemplating becoming Lafayette's first mayor, or even incorporation drives of any kind. The community probably, as I, didn't even know what incorporation was all about.

DB: Yes, of course. You watch your kids and see them change their minds about every second week. Our eldest, Katherine, has apparently settled in on the idea of building restoration.

GW: That's a good point to raise right now. One of the things that the Historical Society, for instance, is very much interested in is to restore some of the old buildings that are kind of behind the facade. Some of them are available and can be seen from the little Plaza Park right at the corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Blvd. It's one of those things, again, that take more money than anybody could even conceive of putting together right now, but it would be nice to restore that, maybe we'll get your daughter.

DB: Yes, that would be a great idea! And, you know, it gives me an opportunity to mention something I think that Lafayette could profitably do. That would be a memorial park. I got the idea from Ashland, Oregon's Lithia Park, the backdrop of their Shakespeare Festival. The idea would be that the City would provide the legal frame work and the impetus. City Planners would put together a kind of schedule of improvements that people could sponsor. For example, special trees, walkways, fountains, a duck pond, and so on. People who wanted to memorialize someone else, living or dead, could sponsor a special tree or fountain, etc., marked by a simple plaque. I had intended to propose that concept to the Council, but just haven't found the time.

GW: As a matter of fact, that's the kind of concept that our society would like to kind of get people interested in, because, as you say, one person is not going to come up with that, a hundred thousand dollars to do a thing, but there are conceivably a hundred families or a hundred people that might come up with a thousand dollars, and we don't care whether it comes in one lump or whether it comes in a hundred pieces, it would be nice to have it all together.

And again, as you say, with a planner that we have set aside, that is we, the Historical Society, have set aside a chunk of our assets for seed money in an effort to try to restore some of those buildings that are along the Plaza Park there. Again, it's the same thing, but it's a kind of, it could be a memorial fund, and if it generates as seed, if it could generate some additional funding, eventually we could get five or ten thousand dollars together, we could do a thing. Because you know, also in that same area, there is an acute shortage of parking, and eventually if some of those buildings aren't going to be remodeled or something like that, probably some of them will have to be torn down and other areas converted into parking. And rather than have it all become just one big large parking lot, it would be nice to have some of that in the form of a park.

DB: Well, if anyone has any doubt about how a park like that could be used, we ought to send them to Ashland, Oregon. It's really a joy to watch people enjoy Lithia Park. People just sit there, relaxing, watching a swan, or whatever. It's a beautiful thing, and it's the kind of thing Lafayette has not been able to do. You know, there has been a price to pay for starting the City on a no-tax basis. We did severely limit our civic opportunities. Somehow that's always seemed incongruous to me. I've often thought about it. Lafayette is a city of lavish residential properties. Maybe that's the underlying problem. We have been so focused and intent on our own half acre that we haven't left any dollars for the common areas. It's a fascinating question of how to use one's resources.

GW: Well, I think we can have the gorgeous individual properties, and still have some benefits of even a small tax. If you recall, when we had the drive for open space, had the drive for recreation district, it's a

matter of a few cents. And admittedly, it does grow, and then it is a tax, but eventually you get something done. If you just limit yourself to having no tax and providing services that no taxes will provide, you can very well be status quo for a long time. The other thing I was thinking, it would be nice, had the reservoir been the center of the city rather than at one end of the city. And, as you know, the center of the city is there because of the old logging trail that went out from Mt. Diablo Blvd. out through Moraga, out to where many years ago, there were a lot of redwood forests. Too bad that road didn't go out from the edge of the reservoir and we'd have this nice park with a big reservoir beside it, the city offices around looking over it.

DB: You are indeed a visionary.

GW: We'd never get our work done.

Well, when we think of going to Oakland, you're just moving down the road a piece.

DB: It is just outside Lafayette. I've no doubt we'll be back often. Friends, events, Kaffee Barbara's. So many great people and friends here.

GW: Speaking of people, are there any other names, not people who were on council, but just other residents of Lafayette who, in Happy Valley area...

DB: You mean in the cityhood sense of Lafayette? Mary Paige must be mentioned. She always wants to take a very silent back-seat role in everything, but more than almost anyone I can think of, she has been the idea person in so many of the City's campaigns. Certainly in the incorporation effort she has been marvelous in terms of coming up with great ideas.

And Bob Kahn, who was always concerned, often critical, but essentially supportive of cityhood. He kept us on our toes. John Kennedy, Dr. Clifford Feiler in the early days, he was a real worker, and Stan White. Lou Repetto, you know Lou very well. Lou was a steady, dedicated worker for Lafayette.

We need to give Percy Whitten a lot of credit for keeping things stirred up. Percy probably contributed more Japanese flowering cherry trees and redwood trees than could be counted. They're all around. Good citizens all, and many more we've not mentioned.

GW: Then we go on to the more recent people who have been on the council since we incorporated. But in a way, that's the pay from the council business, the glory and the recognition.

DB: Well, and there are so many people that contributed as much along the way that really aren't recognized, but they know. They know what they did.

GW: Well, I don't know exactly how much time we have on the tape, and I'd hate to have the buzzer go off right in the middle of a sentence, so maybe while we can do it we can wind this up now. And then if we have some more time we can either fill it out or forget about it and save it. I want to thank you very much for spending an hour almost, here on a Sunday afternoon in your house. And I've taken you away from some of your other duties like unfortunately packing your boxes with things to take out of our community. I'm sorry to see you and Arlene and your family go.

We appreciate all you've done for the City over the years, and I might add that while this will go down in history, as an interview with Lafayette's first mayor, he's not an old man with a grey beard or anything like that. He's very reasonably young, and very active, very respected, very competent, a capable attorney in Oakland. You mentioned the firm but not the name.

DB: Wendel, Lawlor, Rosen & Black.

GW: We really appreciate you spending some time doing this and you can mark it down in your diary. Your children can say that any time they want to, they can come out to Lafayette, go to the Public Library, and ask for the taped interview with Donn Black, Lafayette's first mayor.

DB: George, I can clearly see now that being involved with Lafayette, no, the people in Lafayette, has been extremely high priority for me. I chose to give countless hours to the whole affair, because it was entirely satisfying. I can also see that that isn't it for most good people, which explains why we have a no-tax, no big splash kind of town. And that's OK. The democratic form of government is such a great idea. God, left to my own devices, I'd have made Lafayette a showplace of the West, at the expense of most citizens who clearly preferred to have their own house and lot be a showplace of the neighborhood, or of the West. It takes all kinds, right? Then, not so much now, I was the kind who needed a strong sense of hometown, of civic service, of validation. I got it all. It was terrific!

Thank you, Lafayette! Now it's time to move on, time for a change. Thank you, George, and the Historical Society, for wanting to preserve Lafayette's history. It will be appreciated.

GW: Thank you, Donn.