

Lafayette in the 1930s and 1940s  
Speech by Mickey Myers and Lou Borghesani  
to the Lafayette Historical Society, April 12, 1977

Lou Repetto: We have with us tonight two gentlemen whom I've had the pleasure of knowing for 28 years, that's my tenure in the city of Lafayette. And both of these gentlemen have been more or less inspirations to me. Number one, they're older than I am. Number two, they have lived some of the fun history of Lafayette, when it was really sort of pre-tunnel days, when things were more relaxed. I've heard these stories, so I guarantee you a real fascinating evening.

The first gentleman who will lead this thing off is the hardest working person I've ever seen. There isn't a thing that you can ask of this man that he won't do. If you ask him to do the impossible, he'll do it. It will take him a little time, but he'll do it. I met this fellow back in October of 1951, and it's been a heck of a relationship. He's a dedicated person who's a real credit to our community. I'd like you to know Charles "Mickey" Meyers.

Mickey Myers: Well you know, when they told me about this I went home and wrote out a bunch of stuff. Then I tore that up and wrote out some more, tore that up and scratched up some more. So, I'm not sure if what I'm going to say tonight is something you want to hear. But I'll tell you one thing, my job, as I understand it, is to get up here and talk to you folks. And your job, as I understand it, is to listen. But now, if any of you get done before I do, just hold up your hand and I'll sit down.

I'm not really an old timer or pioneer here. I came to Lafayette in 1936 from Visalia, California where I was operating earth moving equipment, building roads and highways and things of that nature, for the Union Paving Company. This was at the time when the bridge and the tunnel was being completed, and they were upgrading all the roads going into the bridge.

The Union Paving Company got the contract to do the stretch from Walnut Creek to Charles Hill, and I was the first carryall scraper on the job. My job was to run up and down the right-of-way scraping the grass and mixing it with the dirt so it would decompose before they started cutting the hills down and building a road. We took a big slice out of that hill between here and Walnut Creek, or thought we did anyway. But, boy, when they came along with this freeway, they really took a slice out of it.

At that time, if you were going through Lafayette toward Walnut Creek, you could only go as far as Moraga Road. You had to go down along Golden Gate Way because the road didn't go straight ahead. There was a hill there, with a little church on top if you'll notice in your history book, and they had to demolish that church before we could build a road through there.

Now, I got a room with a fellow named Luther Chandler, who operated a grocery store on the corner of Hough Avenue and at that time, Tunnel Road (Mt. Diablo Blvd.). And I ate my meals in Lou Borghesani's Bar and Restaurant there. And that's the first time I got to meet Lou.

Well, this Chandler was Lou's stepfather-in-law. And being I had to room with him, he played a fiddle, I played a guitar and Babe (Lou's wife) played the piano. And our entertainment was to get together in the evenings and play and sing and we had a helluva time.

That winter, we had completed the road, you might say, and were putting down the sub-grade. And it must have rained 30 inches that year, some of which we could use this year. But I couldn't work for

about three months, so Luther Chandler said, "Why don't you come and work in the store with me, while you can't work on the road." So, I thought, might as well.

But when it came time to go back on the road again, he says, "Mickey, construction work's all right for a young guy, but you're getting to the point you oughta settle down. Why don't you buy the grocery store?" I asked him how much he wanted for it and he said, "A thousand dollars for the stock and fixtures." I barely had enough money to eat on in those days, where was I going to get \$1000? But the deal sounded pretty good, so I wrote back East and borrowed \$1000 from my sister, and I went into the grocery business in Lafayette for a thousand dollars in 1937, lock, stock and barrel.

And Mrs. Starks, Eleanor's dad, had owned a meat market down in back of the old hotel, from 1915 to 1917. In 1915 he bought this lot on the corner of Hough Avenue and Tunnel Road, and he started building a store up there. He completed it in about 1917. Then in 1920 he built living quarters on the back of it and moved the family in there from his ranch out on St. Mary's Road. He built the original store on this property. The picture in the LaFayette History Book is of the original store on that corner.

Then in 1935, nobody probably remembers Clarence Brown's store across the road, but that building was there, and he demolished that building and built a new store on that corner which is exactly the same size as it is now, not counting the two-story building on the back.

But at that time in the northeast corner, Heinie Hodapp had a barber shop in there. And then all along the Hough Street side, Capt. Sanford had a real estate office in there. Anyway, it was at that time in 1935 that he sold Luther Chandler the stock and fixtures and leased the building to him.

I ran that grocery store and Bill Rupp ran the meat market there, until Eleanor graduated from high school, when I talked her into coming to work for me. I paid her \$10 a week, which wasn't bad. We got along pretty well, so I asked her to marry me. And in September of the next year we got married so I wouldn't have to pay her the 10 bucks anymore! Eventually we tore out the partition where the barber shop and real estate office were and had the whole store for a grocery store, and at that time a very modern grocery store. We put in all new fixtures and shelves and refrigerators. And at that time frozen food was just coming in, so we put in frozen food cabinets. And boy, we were the best in town. We were selling hamburger for 19 cents a pound, coffee for 39 cents a pound, and bread for 10 cents a loaf.

Mr. Starks built the building in the back of the store in 1945, and then I sold out the store to Mort Sparling who put a drug store in there, in 1949. Then in 1964, after Mr. and Mrs. Starks had passed away, we covered the creek back there and put the parking lot in.

The highlight of the year when I arrived was the annual Horse Show and Fiesta de Lafayette. Now, I got here in 1936, and I understand the horse show started in 1935. Lou tells me they had a Fiesta in 1934, but the Horse Show started in 1935. Anyhow, I got here in time to celebrate the 2nd Annual Horse Show. At that time there were about 300 horses here from Contra Costa County and other East Bay cities around. And it was a two-day program, held in August that year at the Hamlin Ranch, out on the corner of St. Mary's Road and Moraga Road.

It was kicked off by a parade, started out at the horse show grounds, went up Brook Street, across Dewing and paraded down Mt. Diablo, then went back to the horse show grounds. This parade was

really something to see. They had every kind of wagon, buggy, stagecoach, floats, anything you can think of was in there; besides all the horses and beautiful silver saddles and bridles and costumes that they wore. It was really something to see. I can still see the horsemen, though. On the east side of that arena was a little hill, and I can still see the horsemen bearing the flag, come up over that hill, down into the arena. It made an impressive ceremony out there.

That year, I think, everybody in Lafayette joined in the festivities of the horse show, and it proved the ability of Lafayette to entertain with games and food and dancing, special events, all kinds of things down at the Town Hall and at the horse show grounds. They provided entertainment for young and old alike, and presented the opportunity for good clean fun where everybody could cut loose and enjoy themselves to the fullest. As I understand it, the original idea of the Fiesta, was to raise money to improve the playground at Lafayette School.

To give you some idea of the variety of entertainment they had at the horse show, in 1943, which was the last year they had it, I believe, on account of the war, Lou and I were pretty prominent business men in town in those days, and they got us out there bulldogging calves in the arena. We didn't know anything about it, but they told us, "Now, when the cowboy catches him, throw him down and tie his legs so he can't get up." Well, here they came, and Lou's roper caught his calf first, and he tied the legs up and stood up, and the calf stood up too, right away. I finally got mine down, got him tied up, so I won a big trophy for that.

In the '30s and '40s Lou's was the place to go. Lou's at that time was in the old red building that now sits in back of the Roundup, parallel to the creek and facing Hough Avenue. At that time it faced Mt. Diablo Blvd. right about where the parking lot is now. Lou's was the place to go in the evening, I'll tell you, any evening or during the day or any time, that place was crowded. It was a gathering place for everybody in Lafayette, I think. (There were slot machines!) But on Saturday night the place was crowded, and on New Year's you might as well not try to get in at all. You might get in the door, but you'd never get up to the bar to get a drink!

In those days for entertainment, there was generally a dance on Saturday night, either at the I.D.E.S. Hall in Walnut Creek (we called it the Holy Ghost Hall), and they had the best food there, more food than I ever saw. It was a big old wooden building, and they had benches all around the room. You'd dance for a while then go get a plate of grub and sit on a bench and eat it, then go dance some more. That was great stuff then. Then in the summer time, we went up to Valente's Ranch on Acalanes Road. They had an open air pavilion and we used to go up there to dance. Boy, it was beautiful up there on a moonlight night, and have a girl with you. Now, in those days, the high school kids who frequented the dance quite a bit, didn't have cars like they do now. And they walked from Lafayette to Valente's. They walked from Lafayette to Walnut Creek to the dances, to the picture shows, and they came back late at night. They didn't think anything of it. There was no mugging or murder going on in those days.

Now, I'd like to digress a little bit. The Lafayette Lions Club came into being in 1939 here. Johnny Miller and our County Recorder, Ralph Cunningham, came to Lou's one day and said that the Martinez Lions Club would like to sponsor a Lions Club in Lafayette. Well, Lou got busy and I think I was the first one he signed up. We finally got enough to charter a Lions Club, and we were chartered at the World's Fair on Treasure Island, July 4, 1939. We were chartered as the World's Fair Club, and it was the first club ever chartered at a World's Fair, and we became known as the World's Fair Club. We have that on our letterhead even today. Quite an honor for our club.

After Acalanes was built, in 1940 or 1941, Irwin Mattson, the teacher and coach at Acalanes, came up to Lou one day and said, "Lou, you know, I would like to light that ball field out there, and the district doesn't have any money for that sort of thing". So Lou came up with the idea that he would sell bonds to Lions and other business men around the community, and get enough money to put up lights on the ball field. So we got Paul Navé, an electrician in Walnut Creek, who was also a Lion, and asked him to give us an idea how much money it would cost. He estimated the thing at \$16,000. So Lou got out and sold those bonds. He had a committee, but he was the big cheese anyway. He had \$50, \$100, \$500 and \$1000 bonds. We had a meeting, Lou and I and Mattson and Paul Navé, with the School Board. We made the proposition to them and they gave us their blessing. So, Lou sold enough bonds to raise \$16,000, and we lit the ball field. The bonds were paid off in four years from gate receipts. The reason they were paid off so soon was that at the end of the season they would draw a number, and if your number was that bond, they'd say "Come in and get your money." But most all the fellows who had the big bonds just said, "Keep it as a donation."

When I got here in 1936, I don't remember a concrete sidewalk in town. There were some wooden ones. Pioneer Market had one, and Starks' had some wood, and a porch-like thing over Brown's, but no concrete sidewalks. I think the reason was that the road was just dirt. But when they came in and built the new road, then there were curbs and gutters, and they started building sidewalks at that time.

Starting from the store (Starks') in 1936 and going east, there was about 100 feet of vacant property there, and the store was the only thing there. In fact, when Dad Starks said he was going to build a store up there, everyone said, "Why are you going to build a store clear out of town?" Then there was nothing till you came to what used to be the little school house, a building that housed the telephone exchange, the post office and the library.

Now, Amelia Schott was Postmistress at that time, and Marie Mischaut was the telephone operator. Catherine Shutt was also one of the operators, took one of the shifts. Carrie Van Meter still hauled the mail from the station at that time, but I think she took care of the library, too. Then you came to Marie Bill's place and Mannuel Lucas's service station there on the corner. Later he put in a better station, the Associated station.

And that was all the buildings there were 'till you got down to the Pioneer Store. Going west, where Lou's place was, next to him Bert Mornini had a service station. And next to him Ed Morrison had a combination plumbing shop and fire house, and beyond that I think there was a drug store. I don't know if Stanley had the drug store and Winkler worked for him at that time, or if that came later. And that's all that was over there.

Now, on the north side of the street, of course there was the blacksmith's shop, Eleanor's uncle owned the blacksmith shop. We used to go down to his house, a big two-story house back there in the trees. That guy was an artist. In the house he had made rose bushes and things in his shop, leaves and petals on them, and I noticed there were holes in the leaves and wondered if he'd run out of metal or something. But he said, "Well, you never saw a rose bush that didn't have holes eaten in it, by the bugs, did you?"

Right next to that was a little bitty shack, a hot dog and ice cream shack, then Carrie Van Meter's house. They tore these houses down right about the time we got here, summer of '36, and those buildings across the road next to Oak Hill Road, there were about 3 of them. Clarence Brown had a

hardware store and Heinie Hodapp had a barber shop and I think Garrett had a shop over there. This store where Clarence Brown had his hardware shop was the one he moved out of and Dad Starks moved all his stock and fixtures over there and kept them there while he tore down the old store and built his new one.

That was in 1935. By the fall of '36, those buildings were all gone. They had to be demolished so as to widen tunnel Road (Mt. Diablo Blvd.). So I can say that by Christmas of '36, there were no stores beyond Carrie Van Meter's house. After you crossed Oak Hill Road, there were just houses, Thomson's, Hall's, Weldon's and a few others.

Now I'd like to talk about a little argument that's going on. I would swear that C.C. Morse started the first newspaper here in 1936 but Leo Coleman told me that Al Snedeker started some newspaper before. And I can't remember that or find anyone else that remembers it. I thought Morse started the first paper here, the *Lafayette Sun*. Marie Snedeker told someone that her husband did have a little tabloid type of paper at one time, before 1936. But anyhow, Morse had the paper for a couple of years and he sold it to a fellow by the name of Wadsworth. Then Morse bought it back again and then sold it to Carl Detar. I think Morse was in cahoots with Detar, or something like that, then they eventually sold it to Silverman. He went up there on Oak Hill Road and built that place up there, and at that time he put in presses and everything else in a big building, and printed the newspaper here.

During the '40s, the war years, St. Mary's had pre-flight (school) out there, and there were a lot of servicemen in the area. Lafayette became famous or notorious as "The Strip". It was called that on account of all the night clubs we had. After you got by Upper Happy Valley Road coming from Orinda, Knappenberger had the Red Mill. Then you came into town and right where the road curved you had The Curve, so-called because of the curve in the road, Cape Cod house now. Then you came down to where Lafayette Federal is, that was the Alsam. Then you came down to Gus Schwartz's Tunnel Inn, then down on the corner of Oak Hill Road and Mt. Diablo Blvd. was the Rose Lee, later changed to El Molino and later again to Danny Van Allen's.

That takes us pretty well through the 1940s and after Lou relates his experiences maybe we can answer some questions.

Lou Repetto: Thank you, Mickey. To wind it up we get Mickey's buddy and an old friend of ours, Lou Borghesani, who was quite a businessman in this town. When I first met Lou I don't think I'd ever met anybody who was so enthusiastic about anything that had to do with Lafayette. When retirement time came, he figured he'd leave the city that he'd helped put together. So, Lou, would you come up here please and give us your account?

Lou Borghesani: Well now, folks, you're going to hear the first construction man speaking. And I'll tell you some of the things that happened and didn't happen (and why) in Lafayette.

I was born in 1902 in Martinez, so I was familiar, more or less, with Lafayette. But at a young age I wandered around the United States on construction work. I knew about Lafayette by traveling through, going to Berkeley by way of the old tunnel which you were scared to go through, but you went through anyway. I followed construction work for several years, and in 1926 I was in Florida during the hurricane there and had to come back to California because everything stopped. I came back to Martinez and went on the bridge job where they were testing for the railroad bridge.

When that was through, I came to Lafayette because the dam had been started (1927) and I became foreman on this job. I was foreman on the job the night it caved in, in 1928, at 1:30 a.m. One of my men on a truck hauling dirt came running out. I happened to be at the far end of the dam and he says, "Hey Lou, the dam is caving in. It's cracking!" I thought the guy must have been drinking. So I rushed in (I had a Hudson Brougham then) and sure enough, it was cracking and sinking. It had sunk 10 feet in some places, at the outer edge of it, in a big 100-foot circle. We got hold of the big men out there, Mr. Sturgeon and others, and we had the job stopped. We had 10 more days to finish, but we stopped, and that was the end of that job. I think the water company finished the job about two years later.

I went back to Martinez and went on the dirt job for the railroad bridge. I eventually got in on a beer truck through my parents, and it was promised that if I did well on the route I could buy it. Well, I had Lafayette, Concord and Orinda. And when the day came for the agreement after I'd worked the route up, it didn't materialize. So, I quit on June 5th, 1934.

I was practically broke, so I rushed over to the people who were going to back me up in this business, one in Pittsburg and one in Port Chicago and told them what happened. I said that there was a little business in Lafayette that I knew about and that I'd like to buy it. That was Ma Hunt's place, the Lafayette Inn. Ma Hunt was a well-known person, famous for her pies. And people would come in for years asking about her. I never knew her personally, but I knew the family.

Anyway, that's how I happened to come the 6th day of June, 1934, I'll never forget that, walked in, asked the people who were leasing the place if I could buy the business. Well, they wanted \$1150, and all I could get was \$950 from these people. So, they looked it over, they were shrewd people, and had a little money. And I told the others, "Look, supposing I give you \$950 and pay the rest in 3 months." They went for it. But the deal had to be that night and the next morning I took over, because I didn't want to lose any of the stock they had, I knew what they had. So, they did make a deal, and the next morning at 7 o'clock I was in there doing business. Fortunately, I was able to raise the rest of the money in the next two or three months. And that's how I started business.

Well, time went on, and I attended several of the meetings here of the Improvement Club, with Mrs. Heatherington, Mr. Snedeker, and several others. We talked it over and they had this Fiesta coming at the Town Hall. That was 1934 and I had my place of business going pretty good. Things were pretty cheap: 10 cents for a hamburger, 10 cents for a glass of beer, people going to work for a dollar a day for 8 or 9 hours work. But anyway, we talked about this Fiesta they were going to have, and I thought what a wonderful thing for my business. I'd just move it down there to the Town Hall for one night. So I did just that, closed down my business and moved everything down there, and carried on my business with all the proceeds going to the Improvement Club for this Fiesta.

Well, we did real well. I think we even had some slot machines down there that night, too. By the time that successful night was over, we talked about having a horse show in connection with the Fiesta. It was greeted well by Mrs. Snedeker and the Floods and others, Mrs. Heatherington and Stanley, all of whom were tied up with the Town Hall. So I got to working on that, and got hold of the Floods, Dave Finley, McNeil, Soule and Paul Alberts, the main man, (he had a riding stable somewhere out here) and asked them what they thought about it, and they thought it was a great thing.

And Paul Alberts put it all together. And this horse show started in 1935 on the school grounds here in Lafayette (there was about 2 or 3 acres there) and the sheriff's office came along and helped us make an arena and that was the first horse show, September 1935, and the second Fiesta. And then

from 1936 on, all the horse shows were on Dr. Hamlin's property. The first money that was raised helped put the tennis court at the grammar school, around \$2700.

So, that was how the horse shows got started. They were strictly amateur horse shows. We had a lot of wonderful horses. The Sheriff's Posse was in there, the Castro outfit of 100 horses, Pleasant Hill had side saddle exhibitions. And I would not let the committee go into anything else but a strictly amateur show. It remained that way till the last year, when it changed a little and they allowed some more or less professional riders in, with blue ribbon awards and all that.

But up until then, we didn't allow it. Anyone could enter and everyone got a ribbon or honorable mention of some sort. Someone could come in with a swayback horse with a rope around its nose, but as long as they performed their duties, they got a prize. One year some of the committee decided they were going to change it, so I said, "Go ahead, but I'm through." But toward the end they weakened because I wasn't going to raise a hand and nobody was donating any prizes either.

The Lafayette Horse Show also gave birth to the Contra Costa Sheriff's Posse, about the second year. Johnny Miller started it with a beautiful array of horses, and that same posse grew to quite an extended posse. They went to the Islands and performed and also went to Eisenhower's inauguration. The Western Horseman's Magazine was created here, too, by Paul Alberts.

The East Bay Utility District was organized May 22, 1923, and the Mokelumne water reached local distribution on June 23, 1929.

Sidewalks were put in in Lafayette in about 1937 or 1938, starting at Hough Street down to where the old Post Office used to be, and there was quite a step-off to go to Bill's and remained that way for quite a few years until they improved it. Then it went up to Col. Garrett's building. The work was done by the people who were doing the work on the highway.

Lafayette had a lot of things going, it was a lot of fun. Horses used to come into my place during the day. I had a hitching post and water trough and a man to take care of the water in it with blue rock, to make sure the horse's never got sick. We rented that space from Sullinari. The horses would come in, and I had a white coat and a big scoop shovel, and about 7 or 8 people working in my place. But I remember one time Peggy Donaldson rode her horse in, she had a stable over in Orinda. And I said, "Hey Peggy, get that horse out of here, he's getting nervous!" He didn't make it, so I go in and get my white coat and my shovel, open up the double doors and shovel it out. And I use to buy one-inch boards to keep the horses from going through the floors. I also kept a supply of carrots, and every horse got a carrot and every rider got a beer if he stayed on his horse! And that's about it.

Mickey Meyers: One more thing. Lou and I were on the membership committee of the Horseman's Association when they had an option on 43 acres of land between Jonas Hill Road and Burton Station. And they were going to build a clubhouse and stable and corrals and arena for a permanent place for the horse show. It's a crying shame that never went through, because Lafayette would have been known the world, over for the horse show. But it came up in the war years, about 1943, and just fell through.

Lou Repetto: Thank you, gentlemen.