

Nilda Rego: Voices from the past keep Lafayette in memory

Nilda Rego | Days Gone By

IT WAS IN 1993 that Bill Eames sold his Lafayette-based company to Longs Drugs. It wasn't a small business. He had acquired some 80 pharmacies along the way. Bill's Drugs was a very well known name.

Eames sold his business, but kept his building and his office in Lafayette. The longtime pharmacist didn't exactly retire, just changed his focus, serving on numerous charitable boards as well as the boards of half a dozen community banks.

Then, working with his part-time employee Julie Sullivan, he wrote his autobiography. This still wasn't enough.

Eames wanted to preserve a bit of Lafayette history. He wanted the story of the Lafayette businesses and the people who ran them to be told. So about 5½ years ago, he gave Sullivan — who held a bachelor's degree in journalism, taught English and worked for a publishing company — the project to capture these stories.

"Voices of Lafayette, A Collection of Oral Histories" is the result of Sullivan's work. It came out this spring and is available at the Lafayette Library for \$19.95.

Some businesses, like Bill's Drugs and the Lafayette Seafood Grotto, aren't around anymore. But their voices remain, so clear and sometimes so poignant that you can see, hear and smell what

Lafayette was like before BART, Starbucks and the Internet. Beverly Panfilli Littorno talked about her parents, Adolph and Barbara Panfilli, who opened a small fish market on Old Tunnel Road in 1945. That market evolved into the Lafayette Seafood Grotto.

"I guess I must have been about 10 or 11, right at the end of the war "... My grandparents still lived in Antioch, so we would drive from San Francisco to Antioch on the weekends. When we drove through the tunnel and came to Lafayette, my dad would always say, 'This would be a good spot to put in a fish market.' And that's how it all started.

"My dad and mom opened the Crab Shack around the end of 1945, the first day of crab season, which is the first Tuesday of November. " My dad would go down to the wharf at three o'clock in the morning, get the fish and pick up my mom, then they'd drive out to Lafayette. They'd close the market around six o'clock at night.

Do you know where McCaulou's is on Mt. Diablo Boulevard? On the top, where McCaulou's is, was a little building, and that's where they sold the fish and cracked and cleaned the crab. People would drive up to the Shack and honk the horn. If my brother and I happened to be there, we would run down, taken an order, then run back up. Then my dad or mom would crack and clean the crab."

William McNeil remembered that his grandfather ran Lafayette's Pioneer Store from 1902 until his death in 1935.

"When he first bought the store, it housed the post office and the town's first and only telephone. It had no number, then later it was Lafayette One. If anyone in the entire Lafayette area was wanted on the phone, the call came to the store. One of the children, either my father or his sister, would walk or ride to the person, collect a fee and tell them they were wanted on the phone. My dad used to ride his pony all the way to Moraga to deliver messages and be paid ten cents."

In 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, five Japanese families lived in and around Lafayette, including George Kaya, his parents and siblings.

In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the executive order relocating all people of Japanese extraction from the Pacific Coast.

"We had about a month's notice to dispose of everything we could. We were told to have a plate, a fork and knife and a cup and a suitcase of clothes, a blanket and pillow. We had to report to Byron. The boss of the Moraga Land Company helped us get to Byron. It was on a Sunday morning. I was lying down in the back of a pickup truck going through Lafayette at something like eight o'clock in the morning. My vivid recollection was, 'I wonder if I'm ever coming back.' We had no idea how long we'd be gone," said Kaya, an accountant now living in Walnut Creek.

"Voices of Lafayette" is a good read, even if you have never heard of or even taken the exit off Highway 24 into Lafayette. Once you read these 53 stories, you might recognize Lafayette as the town you either grew up in or wished you had.

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