

Published November 25th, 2009

Lafayette's Venerable Christmas Tree

By Susie Iventosch



Photo Andy Scheck

A beacon for guests and residents alike, the venerable centurion coastal redwood (Latin -*Sequoia sempervirens*) stands vigil in its holiday splendor at Diablo Foods in Lafayette. This particular tree, a landmark for many decades, has been witness to tragedy and triumph, surviving a devastating fire in 1976 and now hailed as the centerpiece of the city's holiday spirit. It is one of the most sought after sights in town as it ushers in the Christmas season, bedecked with thousands of miniature white lights.

According to Mary McCosker of the Lafayette Historical Society, Jennie Bickerstaff planted the tree in her family's garden in the late 1870s or early 1880s when she was just a young girl. She was the only child of Delilah and James Bickerstaff, the family that founded Lafayette circa 1877. The Bickerstaffs arrived by wagon train from Pennsylvania to settle as farmers, and in 1879 built their home in the same location where Diablo Foods exists today.

Jennie went on to become a local school teacher who was adored by her students. When she died in 1966, the family house was razed and a retail building erected in its place to house U-Save Central, later replaced by Lee Brothers - both grocery stores. Eventually, Lee Brothers went bankrupt and Ed Stokes, who had been employed by both of these companies, founded Diablo Foods in 1968.

In 1976, the building burned to the ground, nearly killing the redwood tree in the process.

"We were able to rebuild the store, but the tree was completely burned," Stokes remembers. "The branches were still there, but the limbs were scorched and burned. After a year of waiting, the foliage finally came back."

McCosker says that Percy Whitten, a Lafayette resident, watered the tree and took care of it during the first year after the fire and is

credited with bringing it back to life.

Diablo Foods showers a great deal of care and attention on the famous tree to keep it in the best shape possible. While the grocery company does not actually own the land where the tree resides, it takes great pride in this redwood the community so enjoys.

"We hired an arborist to take care of the tree," Stokes said. "He drilled holes in the sidewalk to allow air and water to get to the roots."

Arborist Thomas Raeth of Lafayette Tree and Landscape was born and raised in Lafayette.

"In the 52 years I've lived in Lafayette, this tree has always been here," he said. "My dad started our company in 1958 and as a boy I watered most of the trees in Lafayette. We'd go out early on Saturday mornings when there was not much traffic and I'd sit on the back of the truck watering the trees as he drove."

Raeth enjoys taking care of this special tree and credits Diablo Foods for their huge part in it.

"Diablo Foods is doing a great community service - fostering the health of the tree and, by lighting it each year, they've established a wonderful tradition for the community," he said. "It is not inexpensive to maintain this tree."

The tree's location in the center of a paved parking lot makes it difficult to get nutrients to the tree, but the many holes surrounding the tree serve this purpose. Raeth pushes nutrients and fertilizer through semi-annual soil injections. He maintains a regular pruning schedule to keep the tree healthy and because the electrical box for the lights is mounted on the trunk, the box must be moved every so often to keep the trunk from devouring it.

"Even though the light cords are strung vertically, after seven consecutive years of the same lights we really need to completely remove and restring them and remount the electrical box," Raeth added.

Connie Collier, co-owner of Diablo Foods (and daughter of Ed Stokes) said her family has been lighting the redwood tree for the past 15 years. The tree is illuminated daily from 5:30 p.m. to midnight during the holiday season.

"It takes about one and a half days and five parking spots to re-strand the lights each year because we have thousands and thousands of lights on it," Collier pointed out. "We usually light it from Halloween through January 2."

In January of 2010, they will remove all of the existing lights from the tree and restring it with LED lights.

"We love this spectacular tree and we love Lafayette," Collier said. "My brother, Dan, my dad and I - all of us at Diablo Foods enjoy seeing the tree lit up for Christmas and the community really seems to love this tradition."

As a history docent, McCosker agrees. "The kids just love seeing this piece of continuous Lafayette history. It is such a nice tradition here in Lafayette. The 3rd graders all know about Ms. Jennie's Tree and they can relate, because she was roughly their same age when she planted it more than 100 years ago."

Diablo Foods

3615 Mount Diablo Blvd Lafayette, CA 94549-3778 (925) 283-0737

Lafayette Tree and Landscape

1924 "A" Walnut Drive

Lafayette, CA. 94549

(925) 284-7816

www.laftree.com

Lafayette Historical Society

Email: office@lafayettehistory.org

Visitors can read the commemorative plaque near this majestic tree, revealing a small snippet of history.



Margaret Jennie Bickerstaff at the gate of her home around 1930; the redwood tree is at the back left of the photo. Photo courtesy of the Lafayette Historical Society

Reach the reporter at: suziven@gmail.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA