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De Laveaga Train Depot Gets a New Old Look

By Andrea A. Firth



The train depot team-in back, Frank Baldwin (left), Kay Norman, and Tom Romaneck; in front, Becky Kemsley (left), Joyce Nelson, and Charlie Vollmar. Photo Doug Kohen

Sometimes it takes a village. The members of Orinda's Historic Landmarks Committee (HLC) had been planning a major facelift for the de Laveaga train depot for a couple of years. The depot, located at the corner of Bates Boulevard and Davis Road at the Crossroads, is the only remaining station from the long-defunct, narrow gauge California & Nevada Railroad. Flush on manpower but short on funds, the HLC had not determined how it would pay to fix the depot's peeling paint and rotting boards and spruce up the landscaping.

Then came a fortuitous call from Becky Kemsley, a member of the Orinda Valley Garden Club, to Charlie Vollmar, Vice President of the Orinda Historical Society. Vollmar then circled back to Kay Norman of the HLC, and the project got on track.

The Orinda Valley Garden Club was the recipient of an anonymous \$1,000 donation designated for the group to apply, with their able gardening skills, to beautification projects in the city. (Each of the city's four garden clubs has received the same anonymous contribution for the past three years, and they have worked together on several landscaping projects around Orinda.) "We decided the train depot would be our next project," says Kemsley. The Club has provided the majority of the funding for the repairs and

painting and will work on planting the beds around the station in the fall.

A three-man team of Vollmar, Frank Baldwin, pastor of the Orinda Community Church, and Orinda resident Tom Romaneck, a painter, has managed much of the heavy lifting. Vollmar has his hands in most historic renovations in the city these days. "Living in Orinda I find our history is uniquely celebrated," says Vollmar, "and I like to contribute and be a part of that." He organized the replacement of the station doors, which are exact replicas of the previous six-panel Victorian-style doors. The new doors were manufactured by Economy Lumber, which is owned by Orinda resident John Bacon, and donated at cost.

Baldwin, a member of the HLC, is a railroad historian who did extensive research on the Orinda leg of the California & Nevada Railroad and the de Laveaga depot to ensure that the refurbishment was as historically accurate as possible.

One new and "old" addition to the depot is the signage on the eastern, exterior wall (see photo page A1). An exact replica, down to the shape of the sign and font and point-size of the text, was recreated from an early photograph (c. 1900) of the depot. The sign includes the mileage from San Francisco to the original de Laveaga stop near Miner Road-28.9 miles. Baldwin thinks the mileage includes the distance on the ferry ride from San Francisco to where the line started in Emeryville.

Romaneck donated his labor and skills to the venture, which included certified lead abatement of the building and painting inside and out. The train station paint color was matched to the original 'depot green.' "Thousands of railroad station depots were painted that same green color," says Baldwin.

With oversight and coordination from Norman and the help of many hands, the depot renovations will be completed by mid-September.

"And our next project is restoration of the mural at BART," says Vollmar. The landmarked mural was originally designed by local artist Loni Bee and depicts many of the historic sites throughout Orinda. First dedicated in 1978, the mural was renovated in 1996, but rain and sun have taken a toll on the mural and it's time to give this old painting a fresh coat of paint.

A Bit of Local History

The de Laveaga train station is one of the fourteen historic sites all third grade public school children in Orinda visit during the annual tour conducted by the Orinda Historical Society. The 10' by 16' board and batten building was erected on the de Laveaga property near Miner Road in 1891 when the California & Nevada Railroad, which had been running between Emeryville and San Pablo, was extended to Orinda.

The depot building has a distinctive, sharply curved roof with a shingle covering and copper overlay along the ridge. The pagoda-style roof design is unlike other train stations of the era. "It's possible that the depot was built by Chinese laborers," says Kay Norman, a member of Orinda's Historic Landmarks Committee. "They believed the curve of roof would ward off evil spirits by causing them to slip away. We don't know if it's true, but it could be an explanation."

City dwellers from San Francisco and Oakland would take the narrow gauge rail line to picnic in the Orinda

hills. The train reversed direction at the last stop at Bryant Way and made the return trip to Emeryville going backward all the way. Investors in the California & Nevada Railroad had planned to extend the railway through the Sonora Pass to Bodie and down to Colorado to meet up with the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroads. Unfortunately, too few riders and too little cash brought the railway to a close in 1904. The de Laveaga depot was moved to the family's property and used as storage shed for many years, and subsequently donated the city in 2000.

To arrange a tour of Orinda's historical sites for your community group or friends, contact the Historical Society, (925) 254-1353.



Interior of the depot showing the curved roof line.
Photo Doug Kohen



A segment of narrow gauge track displayed outside the depot. Photo A. Firth



1 Orinda Union School, 26 Orinda Way (Community Center)

Built in 1925 and served as a school until 1973 when it became the Community Center.

2 California and Nevada RR Trestle Remains, Orinda Community Park

Behind the older children's playground on the right side of the creek look for a post with aqua-colored paint—the remains of the trestle for the narrow gauge railroad.

3 1920 San Pablo Creek Bridge, Orinda Way and Camino Pablo

The County built a bridge across San Pablo Creek in 1920.

4 Casa Verana, 128 Camino Pablo

Built in 1921, the first commercial structure in Orinda Village, known as the White Swan, had a small store, gas station, and a refreshment stand. The brown-shingled building has been expanded and houses businesses today.

5 First Firehouse, 107 Orinda Way

(Orinda Village Antiques)

Built in 1923, it looked like a garage and housed one truck. Served as the firehouse until 1942.

6 First Store (Phair's), 10 Avenida de Orinda

Built in 1924 by E. I. de Laveaga to provide goods and services. Ewart Phair became the owner in 1941 and the building was renamed.

7 Second Firehouse

Behind the Phair's Building

Built in 1942, this firehouse was torn down due to flooding from San Pablo Creek. Look for the remains of the old wooden flagpole.

8 Miss Graham's Riding Academy, 63 Orinda Way

The Riding Academy was located next door to Orinda Motors (toward Camino Sobrante where the garage now sits).

9 Safeway Parking Lot, 2 Camino Sobrante

During Orinda's early days, the parking lot site was used for rodeos.

10 BART History Mural

Left of the BART entrance on the exterior wall

Created to celebrate the bicentennial, the mural of Orinda's historic sites was designed by local artist Loni Bee.

11 Orinda Theater, 2 Theater Square

The Art Deco style theater built in 1941 is the city's most prominent landmark.

12 Pony Express Marker

Minipark, northwest corner of Camino Pablo and Brookwood Road

The Pony Express came through Orinda at least 11 times. Follow the path behind the fountain to find the plaque on a rock.

13 Bryant Station Marker

At the end of Bryant Way next to the freeway

This was the end of the line for the California & Nevada RR, a narrow gauge railway from Emeryville. Look for the big rock across the street from the landscaped circle outside of Theater Square.

14 de Laveaga Train Station, Bates Boulevard and Davis Road

Originally located near Miner Road, the station was one of three stops on the California & Nevada RR in Orinda. The train depot was moved to this location in 2000.

Source: City of Orinda Historic Landmarks Committee

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