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'Our light is on' - Visitors welcome to the Lafayette Historical Society

By Grace Gonzalves



Lafayette Historical Society is open for business to offer insight into the community's past. Photo Grace Gonzalves

Walking down Mt. Diablo Boulevard, there were people on the sidewalk, a heartening sign that the library was open. Past the library, down some stairs, under soaring books and left on Golden Gate Way, the sidewalk was empty except for a sign shouting, "The History Room is OPEN."

Three individuals sat at a few seats in a clean, small room with cabinets and tables along its perimeter. The Tuesday morning crew. They greeted me warmly.

At first glance, the room looked a bit small and empty. Volunteer Patrick Kikkert offered me a tour of their offerings. In drawers, artifacts spanning from parasols to pistols were revealed.

Unlike a museum, the clean, organized space does not seem sterile. The handwriting on the binders is personal, the stories handed from the mouth of the donor to the mouth of the volunteer.?

We circled the room, right to left, and the immediate nature of history was available at the fingertips. As Kikkert spoke, an old brown barrel became a young boy's guilty mistake. The scars on an anvil started out as ugly breakages in the metal and transformed into a bit too much ammunition one Fourth of July night.?

"The story goes that during Fourth of July celebrations or whenever a particularly celebratory event went on, he would turn his anvil into an impromptu cannon, fill it with gunpowder and set it off. Supposedly, in 1865 when news came of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, he [the blacksmith] got carried away and put a particularly large charge in it and it broke the anvil in two."

The society has occupied this room on the ground floor of the library for 10 years, according to volunteer and recording secretary Nancy Flood. "We didn't have much space prior to this. ... The picture files were in the old library," Kikkert said. "Otherwise most of the material would be in people's garages and attics. There was no central space where we could put them and where people could view them."??

The Lafayette Historical Society is definitely a place of interactive learning; people who wander through its doors interact intimately with the volunteers. It is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization in operation since 1973. "Originally there was a historical committee which was related to the library," said Flood.

This description on its website describes the society's aims perfectly: "We believe in the power of history to ignite the imagination, stimulate thought and provide enjoyment. Through our collections and programs we strive to link Lafayette's history to the lives of people."?

"We are sort of a hidden gem; we do not get a lot of traffic," said Kikkert, who showed this reporter their visitors log, which included a couple names over the last several months - and then a yearlong gap.

Volunteer Sande Hubbs explained to me how the pandemic affected their volunteer staff: "We used to all be here at the same time but of course with ... COVID we closed completely and then when we reopened it was just in small groups."

In most instances, visitors to the center are curious about the history of their own property, and they are shown aerial photographs of their land in years past, maps of the town over the years, et cetera.?

Less trodden are the oral histories, transcripts of the society's interviews with characters from the city. Many of these oral histories are now available on the society's website, but the content is most special when read where the volunteers can add anecdotes and direction.?

The archives and materials kept in this space are brought to life by its loyal volunteers who are interested in sharing their findings with others.

"It is wonderful to be a part of Lafayette and its history," Kikkert said, "and it's fun to help people who share that same interest."

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