

# Working Together to Collect the Oral Histories of Lafayette

By Amanda Kuehn



The Lafayette Historical Society is hoping to obtain oral histories from longtime Lafayette residents who may have been involved in things like this 1931 annual dinner of the volunteer fire department in Lafayette. Photos courtesy Lafayette Historical Society



Girls from Brownie Troup 215 and Girl Scout Troup 948 celebrate the 68th anniversary of the Girl Scouts in 1951. "If we had an oral history from one of these (now grown up) girls, we would have an interesting story to accompany it," says Judie Peterson of the Lafayette Historical Society.

Maya Angelou once wrote, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you." Each of us has a story to share, a history inside of us that is waiting to be told.

The members of the Lafayette Historical Society believe in the power of history "to ignite the imagination, stimulate thought and provide enjoyment." Through their collections and programs, the society strives to link the history of Lafayette to the lives of its people. One way they wish to do this is by documenting oral history, but recording people's stories can be harder than you might think.

"The historical society has been doing oral history for centuries," said History Room coordinator Judie Peterson. "We have some really old ones on old reel tapes. We've been trying to resurrect that program but it's been really difficult." Although LHS has a long list of Lafayette residents ready to share their stories, the process of documenting has been a challenge, she explained.

Last fall Peterson contacted Maureen Newmann, program coordinator of Lafayette Senior Services. "She was doing a project on seniors coming in and writing in the community center and I said,

"What do you think of collaborating and doing an oral history project?"

Newmann was on board. "We try to partner with other Lafayette community organizations, including Saint Mary's and their creative writing program," said Molly Cohen, administrative assistant of Lafayette Senior Services. "We do a class called Document Your Life's Story. It's been really well received."

The class is run by an intern from the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing program at Saint Mary's College. Peterson thought Senior Services might expand the program and use the SMC intern to help with the oral history project.

Representatives from LHS and Senior Services met with Candace Eros Diaz, MFA coordinator of admissions and student services and Ryan McKinley, a candidate in the MFA program. The group decided that LHS would create a list of Lafayette residents and McKinley, funded through one of SMC's Social Justice Internships, would conduct interviews and help to transcribe old tapes. The hope is that this will be an ongoing arrangement.

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Walter "Wally" Costa in his office in 1966. Costa was mayor of Lafayette in 1973 and will be one of the first to provide his oral history to Saint Mary's College MFA candidate Ryan McKinley.

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