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Thousands of lights adorn historic tree

By Pippa Fisher



Photo Pippa Fisher

And with just a flick of a switch Lafayette is feeling the holiday spirit. The beautiful redwood tree outside Diablo Foods is shining as it does every year at this time - thousands of twinkling lights brightening the night.

It is a familiar sight to those in Lafayette and is a sure sign the holidays are upon us. But not all are aware that the tree has quite a history.

According to Mary McCosker of the Lafayette Historical Society, the redwood was planted by Jennie Bickerstaff Rosenberg, daughter of James Bickerstaff, in the late 1800s.

Jennie first came to Lafayette in 1875 when she was 7 years old. In 1877 the family traveled back to Pennsylvania because Jennie's mother was sick. However the family returned two years later and James Bickerstaff built a cottage on an acre of land, on what would become the site of today's Diablo Foods, bought from Lafayette founder Elam Brown in 1879. Jennie, who went on to become a longtime teacher in various locations around the county including Moraga and right here in

Lafayette, helped her father plant a garden including the redwood that has survived all these years, even after the house was torn down in 1964. Jennie had lived in that house for 85 years when she died aged 93. Diablo Foods has been on this site since 1968.

But the tree's survival looked doubtful for a while. In 1976 Diablo Foods burned to the ground. The tree was badly damaged.

"My father loved that tree," says Diablo Foods co-owner Connie Collier, referring to her father, Ed Stokes, who founded the store. Collier says her father nurtured the tree following the fire. With constant attention from an arborist, Stokes saw the tree back to full health.

The tree, which sits in front of the store, is watered deeply via holes drilled into the parking lot.

"We've been putting lights on it for the past 30 years," says Collier, explaining that they leave the lights strung all year round. "We used to take the them off every few years when the lights were heavier, but with improvements in technology they weigh less now and can stay."

The lights come on at Halloween and stay on each night from 5:30 p.m. until the new year. Collier says the exception to that was last year when they kept the lights on through January until they had held her father's Celebration of Life.

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