

Published November 23rd, 2022

Lamorinda's historical societies join forces with a Caldecott Tunnel/Orinda blast-from-the-past event

By Vera Kochan



"Images of America" authors from left, Susan K. Skilton, Alison Burns, Mary Solon and Mary McCosker Photo Vera Kochan

Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda's historical societies put their collective heads together and produced an event that drew an overflow crowd of history buffs from the Lamorinda area. Expecting an audience of around 30, thanks to final RSVP tallies, the Nov. 6 event ended up with 91 curious attendees at the Orinda Community Center.

On the agenda were slide presentations by both Lafayette Historical Society President Mary McCosker and Mary Solon highlighting their book titled "Images of America: Building the Caldecott Tunnel," and Orinda Historical Society President Alison Burns' presentation featuring excerpts of her newly published "Images of America: Orinda."

paths and trails traversed along streams and creek beds, one of which became known as Fish Ranch Road, thanks to the Oakland Trout Company, which catered to travelers on horseback or by carriage. These roads became quite busy due to farmers and other merchants conducting business between the two counties.

McCosker and Solon's presentation began with facts from the late 19th century and pre-Caldecott Tunnel days when dirt trails and roads connected Alameda County over the Berkeley Hills to Contra Costa County. Many

In 1903, a tunnel was built above the present location of the Caldecott and was dedicated as the "Inter-County Tunnel" (later called the Kennedy Tunnel). The dirt road tunnel was so narrow and arched that two tall buggies could not pass each other. "Drivers" had to light fires onto newspapers in order to control the visibility of the one-way traffic.

Realizing that this tunnel was inadequate, the two counties agreed to construct a new tunnel through the Berkeley Hills. Finished in 1937, the three-year project became the first two bores of what would eventually turn into the Caldecott Tunnel. Originally known as the Broadway Low Level Tunnel (or Broadway Tunnel), this endeavor was completed the same year that the Bay Bridge was finished.

In 1960, the tunnel was officially renamed the Caldecott Tunnel, after Thomas E. Caldecott who was mayor of Berkeley in the early 1930s. As Highway 24 received an upgrading, plans for a third bore began to materialize. Opening in 1964, at a cost of \$25 million, the "middle bore," complete with 5-acres of sea foam green-colored tiles, was used to reverse the flow of traffic according to commute hours.

Tragedy struck in 1982, when a collision involving a gasoline tanker truck turned the third bore into a chimney sending smoke and flames throughout the tunnel. Tunnel temperature was estimated at 1,800 degrees, killing seven people. If there can be any saving grace to the catastrophe, the accident happened after midnight when there were few cars on the road.

The fourth bore was completed in 2013, at a cost of \$420 million. Containing 3.5 million tons of reinforcing rebar, the Caldecott Tunnel currently contains two eastbound tunnels and two westbound tunnels, thereby ending the tedious commute-switching reversal of traffic that the third bore was subjected to.

Burns began her "history lesson" with an explanation as to why a Brit is the president of Orinda's historical society, let alone to go on to write a book about the city's past. She explained that she and her family have traveled the world, and in doing so have learned about various cultures which gives her a certain objectivity. She did add that she is now an Orinda resident.

Choosing from various photos in her book, Burns gave brief descriptions relating to each while building a historic timeline of Orinda's more interesting events. The cover of Burns' book is a photo taken in the 1940s depicting an Orinda Fire Protection District vehicle.

A 19th century photo of Alice Marsh explains that while married to William Camron, they purchased a Mexican land grant in 1876, and named the new subdivision Orinda Park after her favorite poet Katherine Fowler Philips (aka Matchless Orinda).

A late 1800s photo depicts four women in long white dresses walking down a dirt road. They are members of the James Miner family, who later inherited his property which today is known as Orinda's Sleepy Hollow.

Orinda Village was the dream of one man, E.I de Laveaga, who in 1921 began to create a community that included a general store, garage, riding stables, a swimming lake and country club. When the Depression hit, his fortune all but vanished, yet he managed to repay all of his debts more than 10 years later.

A train running on a trestle over Miner Road is depicted in an 1890s photo. It eventually crossed over what is now the 18th fairway of the Orinda Country Club. The train continued past Orinda Village toward Bryant's Corner dropping off picnickers.

One photo from 1937, shows an early Orinda library building surrounded by a sizable amount of snow on the ground; and a 1939 Orinda Union School class photo of first and second graders was taken amidst the rubble of a deteriorating building.

The late 1800s brought the drilling-for-oil fever to Orinda; the 1940s saw the movie craze come to town with the opening of the Orinda Theatre; and the 1960s saw the Cold War hysteria hit new heights with the building of bomb shelters.

To quote from Burns' Introduction page: "While landmarks and plaques may tell one story about a city, it is the people contained in these pages - in the photographic journey that charts Orinda's unfolding evolution - who have the final word."

To purchase "Images of America: Building the Caldecott Tunnel" by Mary Solon and Mary McCosker, or "Images of America: Lafayette" by Mary McCosker and Mary Solon, visit: Lafayettehistory.org. To purchase "Images of America: Orinda" by Alison Burns, visit: Orindahistory.org. To purchase "Images of America: Moraga" by Susan K. Skilton, visit: Moragahistory.org.

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