

Pacifica pioneers recall City's early days



Jean Bartlett photo

Jean Fassler and Karl Baldwin at the Pacifica Coastside Museum.

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Recently two Pacifica trailblazers stopped to visit the Pacifica Coastside Museum (Little Brown Church Building 1910). Jean Fassler, a Grass Valley resident, is Pacifica's first mayor. Pacifican Karl Baldwin is Pacifica's first permanent city manager.

"The vote to incorporate in 1957 was close," Fassler recalled. "Not everyone was happy a City Council was formed."

The Sacramento-raised Fassler first got to know Pacifica because her late husband Joe had this "little shack on Linda Mar Beach." Married in 1942 and living in an apartment in San Francisco, the couple worked hard and turned that little shack into their first Pacifica home.

"It was such a shack originally that I didn't know what board to stand behind to change my clothes," Jean laughed. (Eventually that first home was bulldozed when Linda Mar Beach became a State park.)

By the time locals were talking incorporation, Jean and Joe were the parents of three – two sons and a daughter. Joe worked for Chevron and Jean was PTA president of Linda Mar Elementary.

"I didn't decide to run for City Council on my own," Fassler said. "People really pushed me to do it."

The popular PTA president won the most votes making her mayor. Members of Pacifica's first City Council were: Fassler, George Mason, Don Miller, Gerry Schumacher and Harold Feyge. Having never run a City Council meeting, Fassler headed to another city to observe.

"Five men came in with their cigars and their nonchalant attitudes and took their seats on the stage," Fassler said. "They wouldn't let anyone speak. I said to myself, 'I'll never do that. That's no way to run a meeting.'"

Before the City Council hired Karl Baldwin as city manager, the Council brought in Jane Hicks as acting city manager. At the time, the Council was using a former tiny real estate office, donated by Sharp Park developer Ray Higgins, as the first City Hall.

"We put curtains up on those windows," Fassler said, "and were subsequently dubbed 'petticoat politics.'"

From early on, Fassler journeyed a trail of politeness and patience to get the job done. When the newly-elected mayor asked the county manager to go over the budget with her, she was told, "Don't worry your pretty little head, I'll take care of it." But Fassler continued to stand next to him, noting she was ready to begin learning.

"What could he do?" Fassler laughed. "He began to explain things."

"I did my homework," Fassler said. "I had to keep the people informed that I represented and make decisions based on facts." Fassler served on City Council for seven years and was mayor three times.

Prior to coming to Pacifica, Karl Baldwin served as San Mateo's assistant city manager for five years. That was when he met his wife Eileen. From Kent, England, Eileen had served in the Royal Air Force for seven years and now she was travelling, including a visit to a friend in San Mateo.

"We met at a badminton court," Baldwin said. "We married in 1951."

Baldwin's next job was as first town manager of Los Gatos. He did that for five years and then took the job with Pacifica. The couple still lives in their 1959-purchased Pedro Point home.

"It was such an interesting time," Baldwin said of 1958 Pacifica, "so much had to be brought together – lighting, sanitation, the fire department, etc. – so we could function as a City. I remember putting together our first City budget, one original and five copies. In those days, we didn't even have good duplicating machines. But we got things going." Baldwin was city manager for nine years.

In 1967, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was looking for individuals with experience in municipal local government to work as public administration advisors and Baldwin headed off to Vietnam, with Eileen and their two children following. Through Baldwin's work with the USAID, home would also be Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. The family returned to Pacifica in 1982.

Fassler decided to retire from City Council to "let someone else take over." She then became the first woman to be elected to the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors where she served for 12 years. She additionally served on the Coastal Commission. She was appointed to President Lyndon Johnson's National Committee on Beautification. She is the voice behind Interstate 280 being condominium and building-free. And there is so much more.

"I was able to do all of this because my husband was very supportive," Fassler said. "And I was able to learn a great deal about what makes a City work because Karl was such an honorable and wonderful person to work with. And he always answered every question I asked and I asked a lot."

Both Fassler and Baldwin were happy to meet at the remade Little Brown Church. They are huge fans of Pacifica and its history.

"My three children were baptized here," Fassler noted. "And Rev. Herschel Harkins (pastor from 1943 to 1965) was the dearest person in the whole world. He would walk down the street, and no matter the weather he would always say, 'Isn't it a beautiful day?' and he meant it from his heart. I always enjoy coming back to Pacifica."

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