

# NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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## Merienda and Fandango

Frontispiece: Illustration from "Spanish Arcadia", published by The Powell Publishing Co., Los Angeles, 1929.



# Merienda and Fandango

## Enjoying the Good Life In Earlyday Monterey

Basking in the warm sun, congenial company, good music and plenty to eat and drink — these are the elements that make the Monterey History and Art's annual "Merienda" such a memorable occasion. The picnic — traditionally held to celebrate Monterey's birthday in early June — is part of a long tradition of such gatherings on the shores of Monterey Bay. Thomas Jefferson Farnam reports being invited to one such affair during a trip here a century and a half ago. Writing in the overblown style of the day, it is difficult to determine whether the visitor was impressed more by the food or the female company:

D. Bale was one of the guests, and kindly conducted us to the place selected for the ceremonies. It was among the trees, a short distance southwest of the anchorage; a wild, rude spot. The old trees, which had thrown their branches over the savage before the white man had touched the shores, were rotting on the ground and formed the fuel of our fire! The ancient rocks stood around, covered by the moss of ages! The winds sang in the trees . . . . The old wilderness was there, unshorn and holy . . . .

When we arrived, half a dozen brunettes were spreading cloths upon the grass, and displaying upon them boiled ham, dried beef, tongue, bread, pies, cigars, and various kinds of wines, from the vineyards of the country; so that a "festa" (sic) proved to be an invitation for us to eat and drink among a group of joyous children and smiling lasses. Who is not glad to see me repeat words that speak of the smiles of women? I do not mean those heart-rending efforts at grinning, which one often meets in mechanical society; but those pulsations of genuine joy and truth, which come up impulsively from woman's real nature, shedding on the dwelling place of the race the sweetest elements of the social state . . . .

We ate and drank freely. Who could not do otherwise? The mellow laugh of childhood, the holy kindness of maternal care, the pride of the paternal heart, the love of woman, the sky and fragrant breezes of a California lawn, the open sea, the giant woodlands, the piping insects, the carolling of a thousand birds, the voices of boundless hospitality, invited us to do so. The finest dish of all the goodly array of fat things, the brunette lips excepted, was the roasted mussels . . .

Such outdoor excursions were popular and frequent, according to Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez in her book "Spanish Arcadia":

The "merienda," or picnic, was a form of entertainment very much in vogue

among the Californians. These affairs were attended by whole families, and sometimes by entire neighborhoods or villages, and were occasions for much jollity and innocent mirth. Those who were too old, too young or too feeble to ride horseback, had to content themselves with carretas, but the more vigorous always preferred prancing steeds. Each horseman carried a fair one on the saddle before him, his feet thrust forward in the stirrups, the reins held in the left hand, the lady's waist protectingly encircled by his right arm, and away they galloped over hill and dale . . . .

Into the carretas tumbled the children and such of the women who perforce preferred that slow means of locomotion, and in them also were stowed a generous supply of roast turkeys, chickens, tamales, enchiladas, dulces, and beef and mutton to be barbecued. Arrived at the chosen spot, generally some delightful flower-strewn dell, by the side of a clear, rippling stream, the party halted, the bountiful meal was spread on the grass and all fell to with the hearty appetites of an outdoor people. Afterwards there would be horse-racing, guitar playing (and) singing . . . .

Music and dancing played a very important part in the lives of Californians during the Spanish and Mexican periods. Both inhabitants and visitors would have no trouble corroborating Walter Colton's often-repeated observation that "A Californian would hardly pause in a dance for an earthquake, and would renew it before the vibration ceased."

Dances were held at the drop of a sombrero. Most large residences, whether on the ranchos or in the pueblos, had a large room, especially designed for this activity. Many dances were also held in the open air with hard-packed earth as a ballroom floor. Don Antonio Coronel, reporting in 1834, describes such an affair. It is translated in H.H. Brancroft's "California Pastoral:"

. . . A large space in front of the house selected was roofed with boughs, three of its sides being covered with white cotton stuff adorned with ribbons and artificial flowers. The fourth side was left open, and there horsemen collected in a group, a strong fence preventing the intrusion of the horses. Around the three enclosed sides were seats for the women. The musicians, consisting of a violinist, a guitarist, and two or three singers, stationed themselves in a corner, where they were out of the way. The master of ceremonies, or "bastonero," was called "el tecolero;" and from the first he was present organizing everything connected with the ball. He led out the women when they danced singly; beginning at one end of the salon. Clapping his hands, he took steps to the music in front of her whom he desired to call out. She rising went to the centre of the salon, and with both hands taking hold and extending her skirts, began to dance to the sound of the music. After taking a turn or two in the centre of the salon, she retired and another took her place. In this way all the women present were in turn called out, except such as could not dance or did not desire to do so, and these, for compliment's sake, rose, and giving a hand to the tecolero, were by him turned and reseated. While the women were dancing, the men on horseback kept up a continual movement, and by sky-larking, coming and going, and disputing places, each endeavoring to force his horse to the front.

There was a great variety of dances, from the stately to the most lively. Some were based on the waltz step; others had their origins in Spanish folk



dances. One of the most popular was La Contradanza, in which partners lined up in two rows, the men facing the women, similar to the Virginia Reel. Others were for two or more partners, such as the jarabe and the jota. Many called for nimble minds, as well as nimble feet, for the dancers were obliged to recite and exchange verses, often extemporaneously and usually of an amorous nature. The fandango originated as such a dance for a couple. The man would begin with castanets, or by snapping his fingers in time with the music. After several verses were sung, the music would stop and the singer would cry out "bomba!" The man had to recite a verse. The music would start again and then stop. This time it was the woman's turn to recite. If she could not or would not, it was the man's turn again. Another man would then step forward and the tecolero would lead out another woman. The word fandango later became used to describe a whole evening's entertainment, as well as a specific dance.

The most popular account of early California days is, of course, Richard Henry Dana's "Two Years Before the Mast," published in 1842. In it, Dana describes a dance to which members of the boat's crew were invited:

After supper the gig's crew were called, and we rowed ashore, dressed in our uniforms, beached the boat and went up to the fandango . . . . As we drew near, we heard the accustomed sound of violins and guitars, and saw a great motion of the people within. Going in, we found nearly all the people of the town — Men, women and children — collected and crowded together, leaving barely room for the dancers; for on these occasions no invitations are given, but everyone is expected to come . . . . The music was lively, and among the tunes we recognized several of our popular airs, which we, no doubt, have taken from the Spanish. In the dancing, I was much disappointed. The women stood upright, with their hands down by their sides, their eyes fixed upon the ground before them, and slid about without any perceptible means of motion; for their feet were invisible, the hem of their dresses forming a circle around them . . . . They looked as grave as though they were going through some religious ceremony, their faces as little excited as their limbs; and on the whole, instead of the spirited, fascinating Spanish dances which I had expected, I found the California fandango, on the part of the women, at least, a lifeless affair.

It is difficult to make Dana's observations jibe with the accounts of other visitors. In 1829 for example, Alfred Robinson described a party held in a sala some fifty feet long and twenty feet wide:

A crowd of interlopers was collected about the door when we arrived, now and then giving shouts of approbation to the performance within, and it was with some difficulty we forced our entrance. Two persons on the floor were dancing 'el jarabe.' They kept time to the music, by drumming their feet on the floor, on the heel-to-toe system, with such precision, that sound struck harmoniously upon the ear, and the admirable execution would not have done injustice to a pair of drumsticks in the hands of an able professor while the onlookers cheered them on. The attitude of the female dancer was erect, with her head a little inclined to the right shoulder, as she modestly cast her eyes to the floor, while her hands gracefully held the skirt of her dress, suspending it above the ankle so as to expose to the company the execution of her feet. Her partner, who might have been one of the interlopers at the door, was under full speed of locomotion and rattling





Detail from Charles Nahl's painting, "The Fandango", a romantic illustration of California life in the first half of the Nineteenth Century.



along with his feet with wonderful dexterity. His arms were thrown carelessly behind his back, and secured, as they crossed, the points of his serape, that still held its place on his shoulders. Neither had he doffed his sombrero but just as he stood when gazing upon the crowd, he had placed himself on the floor.

Particularly skillful dancers drew loud applause from the crowd. When a woman generated such enthusiastic following, men in the crowd would often place their hats on her head, one on top of the other. When she could hold no more she would take the pile in her hands, still dancing all the time. More hats were thrown out on the floor and sometimes coin. When she returned to her seat, the tecolero would bring these to her. Each man was expected to redeem his hat by paying what he pleased.

Most of the dances originally came from Europe by way of Mexico or South America. Variations on dances were common, even in settlements short distances apart. In her book, "Dances of Early California Days," Lucile K. Czarowski gives two very different versions of the popular dance "La Yucca," one from King City, the other from what is now the Watsonville area.

When the first pueblos were established in California, the new settlers clung close together, sharing most activities, including social gatherings. All were invited to attend, whether rich or poor, official or artisan. Liquor was freely consumed at these affairs, with the men wandering away to the nearest tienda for a bottle of brandy to fuel their dancing prowess. After the ball, the men would escort the women home, playing music. Once their partners had been seen safely to their doors, the men would often roam the streets on horseback, singing somewhat bawdy parodies of the songs they had just heard. Often tiring of this, they would ride off into the fields to lasso or "colear," (seize by the tail) some unwitting and startled animal.

On the more remote ranchos, during the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century, all travelers were received with the greatest hospitality. They were never asked how long they would be staying and there are stories of money being put in a guest's room to save them from the embarrassment of asking for a few "reales." Any visit was an excuse for a dance, and in most haciendas, almost everyone knew how to play some sort of instrument.

As communities grew larger, social distinctions became more pronounced. No longer was the whole town invited to a dance. By 1840, only those with formal invitations were allowed to attend the "bailes" (balls), given in the grand houses. Guards were posted to keep out unwanted door-crashers. This did not mean the uninvited gave up dancing. They gathered for what were now known as fandangos, to drink and dance the night away.

There were other changes as well.

Before 1831, according to Bancroft, young men would never dance in the presence of their parents, unless permission had been granted. Dances usually were over by eleven in the evening and came to be scoffed at by the young as "early candlelighters."

Inspired by wedding ceremonies, where music and dancing often lasted for several days following the actual service, party-givers began to vie with each other to see how long they could keep a dance going.

Often guests would ride all day, and dance for several nights before returning.



The record of longevity was probably set in San Diego. One Don Miguel Pedrorena gave a dance lasting three days, which became the talk of the town. Piqued by this, two of the town's leading citizens, aided by Captain Walker of the "Clarita," succeeded in providing entertainment for eight days and nights. During the day, they danced in town. At sundown, the party would repair to the beach and take small boats to the "Clarita." Dinner was served, and after a short rest, they danced again, afterwards returning to the pueblo to dance all through the night.

"Cascarone" balls were probably the most eagerly anticipated social events of the year. They were held between November and Lent and were part of the carnival atmosphere just preceding Ash Wednesday. Dozens of eggs were prepared by making holes at both ends and blowing out the contents. The shells were then filled with colored paper, or similar glittering material, and then sealed. At the ball — depending on the mood of the company, and how well the participants knew each other — the eggs were broken on a partner's head, allowing the contents to spill over the head and shoulders. The more decorous would approach each other and, after a proper salutation, exchange the egg breaking ceremony. Often, a more flirtatious senorita would initiate the action, stealthily approaching a gentleman victim from the rear, break one of her eggs over his head and then attempt to disappear into the crowd. The increasing number of visitors and emigrants entering California in the 1840's began a series of changes which sharply accelerated after the raising of the United States flag in Monterey in 1846. Local residents continued their passion for music, but the tunes were changing. Bancroft quotes Captain Phelps, a veteran trader on the California coast, about the impact music had on Californians. Phelps reported that he was asked by American authorities in Los Angeles if he had any ideas for pacifying the apprehensive Angelenos, after the American takeover. Phelps replied:

**"You have a fine band of music; such a thing was never before in this country. Let it play one hour each day in the plaza at sunset, and I assure you it will do more toward reconciling the people than all your written proclamations, which, indeed, few could read." "My suggestion was adopted," continued the captain, "and the results were soon evident. At first the children of the hill ventured down and peeped around the corners of the houses. A few lively tunes brought out the "vivas" of the elder ones, and before the closing of the day, quite a circle of delighted natives surrounded the musicians. The following afternoon, the people from the ranchos at a distance, hearing of the wonderful performance, began to come in. I saw the old priest of the mission . . . sitting by the church door, opposite the plaza, and introduced him to some of the officers. The old man said he had not heard a band since he left Spain fifty years ago.**

**" 'Ah!' said he, 'that music will do more service in the conquest of California than a thousand bayonets.' "**

Gradually the jota, jarabe and fandango gave way to the schottisch, polka and other American and foreign dances.

The old songs — brought to the new and untamed country by the original



Spanish settlers — began to fade. Typical of these was La Paloma Cuencana, reflecting the gentler times “before the world rushed in:”

# LA PALOMA CUENCANA.

*Moderately.*



1. ¡Ay! se fué mi Pa - lo - mi - ta, ¡Ay! se fué ro -  
Ah, it was Pa - lo - ma, lit - tle dove, Stole a - way my



ban - do mi al - ma, En com - ple - ta paz y  
rea - son with her love, From its calm and peace ac -



cal - ma, ¡Ay! se fué, se fué, se fué. . . . .  
cus - tomed! Ah, 'twas she, 'twas she, 'twas shel. . . . .

2. Cuando el sol sus campos dora,  
Alumbrando el horizonte,  
Por las faldas de aquel monte  
Vive en calma mi paloma.
2. When the sun gilds fields with golden light,  
Gleaming on the clear horizon bright,  
Far upon the mountain's height,  
Lives in peace my Palomita.

Soon after the occupation by American soldiers and sailors, the little dove had changed her tune. She now sang:



¡Ay! vien - en los Yan - kees, ¡Ay! Los tien - en ya.  
Ah! here come the Yan - kees. See! They're com - ing by.



Vien - en a qui - tar - les, La for - ma - li - dad.  
Now let's all go ea - sy, On for - mal - i - ty!

2. Ya las señoritas  
Que hablan el inglés,  
Los Yankees dicen, “Kiss me!”  
Y ellas dicen, “Yes.”
2. See how the young ladies  
Rush English to learn!  
“Kiss me!” say the Yankees.  
The ladies answer, “Yes.”



## SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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