

NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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PORTRAIT OF Rachel Larkin painted by J.B. Knapp which hangs in the parlor of Larkin House on Calle Principal.

INSIDE:

Monterey's Artist-Mayor

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The Not So Illustrious Career of Artist J.B. Knapp Mayor of Monterey

By Virginia W. Stone

The broken shards of history lie scattered over a wide domain. There are the diaries, such as Alcalde Walter Colton's, that provide a charming read even today. There are the papers, belonging to such notables as Oliver Larkin, that give wide-ranging attention to affairs commercial, governmental, and personal. There are, of course, legal documents of every description: deeds, wills, court records, and census reports. The yellowed pages of early newspapers and fading photographs offer tantalizing glimpses into the history of the times.

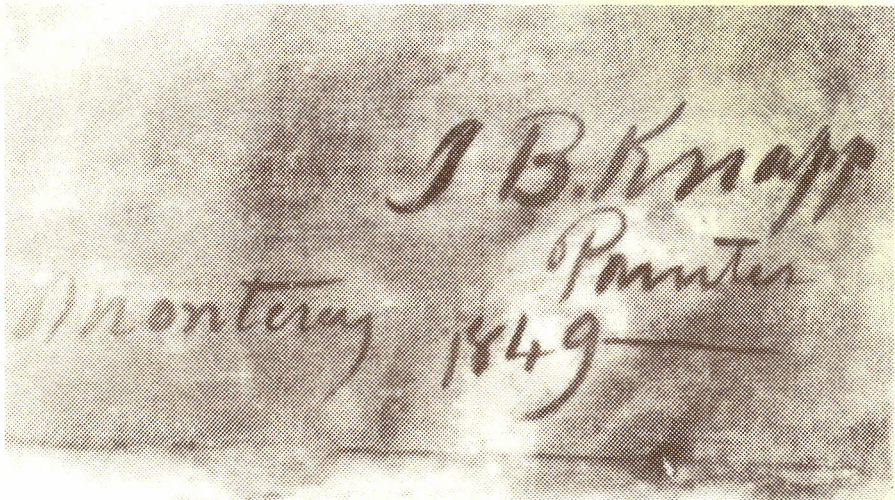
And then there are the portraits of the propertied men and women of the age. Usually unsmiling and stiffly posed, little of the subject's personality is conveyed to history's passer-by.

In a collection of historical material, random, yet intriguing hints, often give us another perspective. A line or two here and there, a casual reference, a stray letter, a story "handed down", and even a signature in graceful 19th century script may offer significant help.

In reality, our desire to "know" a subject is defeated before we began. Our only recourse is to gather as many of the historical shards as we can. History's monument will forever be a broken ruin, although the outline may become more clear or the design better defined.

In the charming Monterey colonial home, once belonging to Thomas Oliver Larkin, merchant and United States Consul to California during the Mexican period, a portrait of his wife, Rachel Hobson Larkin, hangs over the fireplace in the parlor. At first glance, her expression seems unyieldingly severe. Her large, dark eyes are tinged with sadness, but there is a sweetness about the mouth that allays one's first impression. The dress she is wearing is of broadly striped silk with lace over-collar and cuffs on pink velvet. The only other warmth of color is the slight flush along the high cheekbones. A delicate diamond brooch with two pendants is pinned to the pink velvet bow at the collar. This lovely piece of antique jewelry is now in the possession of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Mrs. Yanqui, as she was called, is seated in a red leather armchair with a random stack of books by her side. This same chair, now being restored, along with the consul desk in the study, are the only two pieces of furniture known with certainty to have belonged to the Larkin family



SIGNATURE ON the back of Rachel Larkin's portrait by J.B. Knapp, 1849.

when they lived in Monterey before their move to San Francisco in 1850.

The front of the canvas is not signed, and an examination of the back of the painting does not tell us of the identity of the artist. When research was being done by Amalie Elkinton several years ago, it was Esther Goodhue of the State Department of Parks who remembered that the painting had been conserved in the 1970's and a new backing placed over the flowing script of the signature, "J.B. Knapp, Painter, Monterey, 1849."

The only other portrait known to be by Joel B. Knapp is owned by Dr. Vernon F. Leidig, of South Pasadena, a descendant of Marianna Escamilla Watson, the subject. On the back of this painting appear the words, "Painter: J.B. Knapp (PINY) (undecipherable) 1849." According to family stories, the painter was Bohemian. Surely, they meant he was a Bohemian type as almost any itinerant painter would be judged to be.

That Rachel and Marianna evidently shared a close relationship is confirmed by some of the church records of the time which, before the American occupation in 1846, were, of course, in Spanish.

The children born in the Monterey area to Thomas O. Larkin and Rachel Hobson Larkin were all baptized at San Carlos Church in Monterey, and the baptismal documents state that the parents were Protestants. The god-parents were all close friends of the Larkins and included, among others, William Hartnell, Encarnacion Vallejo de Cooper (Larkin's sister-in-law), David Spence and his wife, and Jose Abrego and his wife.

On January 18, 1845, under the baptismal number 4616, we find the name of Maria Rachael, "in articulo de la muerte" (an article stating that she was close to death), about 38 years old, born of Manuel Hobson

and Isabel Hom (undecipherable). Her god-parents were listed as James (undecipherable) and Marianna Escamilla, obviously the Watsons who lived a block north of the Larkins on Calle Principal.

On the next day, January 19, 1845, baptismal number 4617 records the birth of a baby named Juan Baptista Larkin who died within one hour. On January 20 little Santiago Larkin was buried with the comment "Nacio enfermo de fiebre, jurio a la hora de nacida" (born sick with fever, sworn to in the hour of his birth). Juan Baptista Larkin and Santiago Larkin were undoubtedly the same child.

These records seem to indicate that Rachel was gravely ill at the time of her confinement, and fearing imminent death, was baptized in a ceremony that would give her spiritual comfort and assure her that she would be buried in sacred ground should she die.

Thus her good friends, James and Marianna Watson, proved their friendship to Rachel in the hour of her crisis by acting as her godparents. Rachel did recover and bore one more child in April, 1847, Alfred Otis Larkin, father of Mrs. Alice Toulmin who later purchased her grandparents' family home and eventually deeded it to the state of California.

Other than the fact that we know painter J.B. Knapp was given the commission to paint Rachel Larkin and Marianna Escamilla Watson, what else is to be found about this early Monterey artist? There is only a brief line in Bancroft:

Knapp, Joel B., 1848, came from Hon. and went to the mines.¹

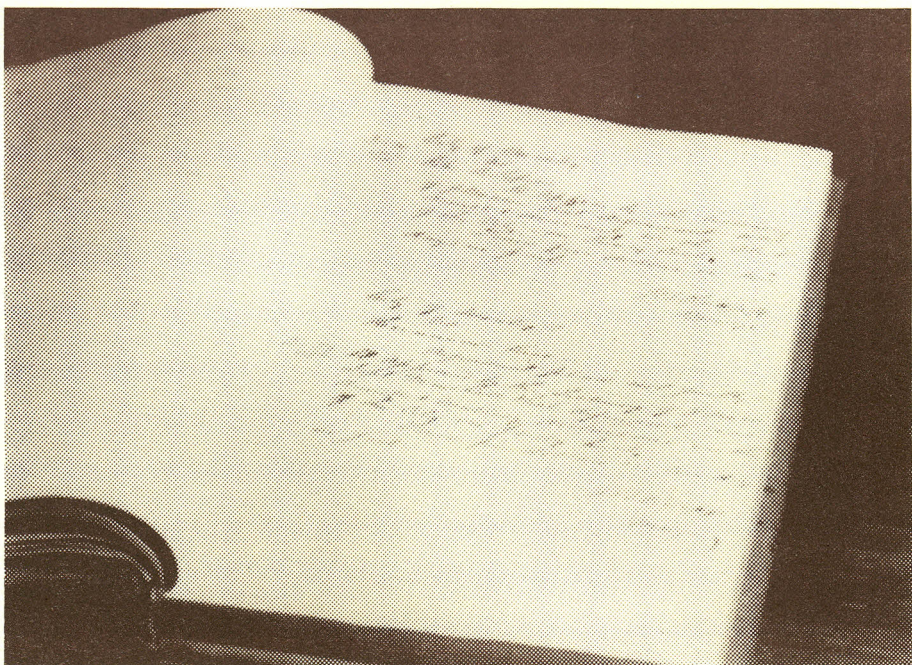
... On March 16, 1849, he signed as witness with William H. Smith to a complicated legal agreement between Oliver O. Larkin and Bethuel Phelps of Benicia over land in that area. It is possible that Knapp was at the Larkin house painting Rachel's portrait proving to be in a convenient way to serve as witness. ²

Later in January, 1850, a petition of residents who hoped to incorporate the pueblo de Monterey lists a J.B. Knapp as one of the signers.

Yet strangely enough, the 1850 census of Monterey, which was initiated in June of that year, does not list the artist J.B. Knapp. It does, however, list an 18 year-old "female", Arabella Knapp, born in New York, and living in the household of Milton Little and his family. This would be a natural haven for the young woman while her husband was away since her sister, Mary, was Milton Little's wife. One can't help wondering just where Arabella's husband was since we know from the petition of incorporation for Monterey that he was in town in January of that same year.

Bancroft's entry noted that the Joel B. Knapp he lists had gone to the mines. At some point in time, successful or not, he must have returned to Monterey and married Arabella Eager, who had come here with her sister Mary and her mother, Lucy E. Eager, a rather doughty woman who had been excommunicated from the Mormon Church.

Thus in June of 1850 he was gone again. Perhaps he was away



PAGE FROM THE DAYBOOK of the Mayor's Court, City of Monterey, in J.B. Knapp's hand, January 27, 1852.

on a commercial venture of some sort. If so, it must have been an extended one for him to leave his wife, who was pregnant at this date, in the care of her sister and brother-in-law. A more likely possibility is that he had returned to the mines following the glimmering possibility of making a fortune in gold when the weather in the Sierra was more salubrious.

A special census taken in 1852, now located in the State Archives of the Secretary of State in Sacramento, tells us more:

J.B. Knapp, age 30, Artist, born in New York, came from Sandwich Island. Arabella Knapp, born in New York, came from New York, age 19. James M. Knapp, age 2, born California.

This special census did not mention a fascinating bit of biographical information. J.B. Knapp, artist, and a man who had "gone to the mines", was currently mayor of Monterey. The young man had been elected to that prestigious office on January 12, 1852, by a landslide total of 82 votes.

Now it is apparent that besides his artistic talent, J.B. Knapp was considered to be a leader of men. An unsuccessful miner, a Bohemian artist as mayor of Monterey? Indeed! It appears that Monterey's link to the artistic world was being forged.

In his capacity as mayor, Knapp was expected to hear the various cases of those malefactors brought before him. A little over two weeks

after his election, on January 27, 1852, Mayor Knapp is recording his first cases in a leather-bound ledger which bears the following inscription as its preface:

Day Book

Docket of the Mayor's Court of the City of Monterey, State of California, containing the trials of investigations of the Breakers of the city ordinances and by Jurisdiction conferred in the city charter. *

In his flowing script (the signatures on this document and on the portrait are obviously from the same hand) he wrote the following:

City of Monterey

January 27, 1852

vs.

Joseph (Indian)

Breach of the Peace

It appearing by the testimony (sic) of Wm. D. Robinson Marshall of the City that defendant was drunk and disorderly in the Streets of the City, ordered said Joseph be imprisoned six days, or pay a fine of five dollars in lieu thereof.

J.B. Knapp

Mayor of Monterey

The same sentences were handed out to Antone (Indian) and an unnamed defendant described only as (Indian). The three were probably happily carousing together as there was no mention of fighting, a charge often paired with being drunk.

Incidentally, Joseph (Indian) was arrested again on March 1 of that year after Marshall Robinson picked him up "dead drunk and brought [him] to the Calaboose in wheel borough" (sic). Because this was Joseph's second offense, he was sentenced to a \$5 fine or 10 days in jail.

The majority of the cases heard by Mayor J.B. Knapp involved a defendant being found "dead drunk" in the public streets of Monterey by the indefatigable William D. Robinson, City Marshall. Most of these hapless men were Indians, although one Luiz had the designation (Californian) after his name.

Selling liquor to the Indians was a more serious crime. On June 16, for example, one Santiago Rosa was found guilty and fined \$25 or sentenced to 30 days in jail.

Sometimes J.B. Knapp used creative justice. On April 13 one Cacoba (Indian), who had been arrested earlier for being drunk and fighting in the streets, was brought to court. After he had been taken to jail on the previous charges, he had broken a lock and escaped. This time he received what appeared to be a light sentence--\$10 or 20 days in jail and "one dollar extra for the lock". Since the \$10 was a princely sum in those days, the 20 days in jail were evidently a foregone conclusion.

The last case that Mayor Knapp heard in his year as mayor was a murder charge against Augustino Escobar, a formidable man, who, with his wife, Carlota, brought in the bears for the bull and bear fights held behind what is today's Pacific House and also behind Governor Castro's residence on Pearl Street.

According to local legend, the Escobars would pack a magnificent

picnic, and then wend their way to the top of Huckleberry Hill near Carmel. Augustino would build a cozy little platform in a pine tree, and then he and his wife would enjoy their bounteous feast. At twilight the two would leave a baited trap at the base of the tree and then climb up to their little nest.

If a bear took the bait and was caught in the cruel jaws of the trap, it was Augustino's job to muzzle him, and see that he was loaded into a cart for his journey into Monterey. Here, he must have had help, for a grizzly, mad with pain, would object mightily to becoming the object of a crowd's amusement.

Escobar, who owned considerable land in the area, was brought to court on a warrant by the coroner. The case was considered to be justifiable homicide and Escobar was freed. Unfortunately the day book lists no details of the case, which was heard on December 24, 1852. However, Mayor J.B. Knapp was not only a short-timer now, but it was Christmas Eve.

It is not known when Joel B. Knapp, ex-mayor of Monterey, and his family left the area, but leave they did. A few years later he surfaces in a series of six letters written to Oliver O. Larkin who had been living in San Francisco since 1850.

In one letter Knapp writes:

Many did well at one time in Monterey, but followed their success too long there. Had they left when you did they might have been better off now.⁴

Knapp had obviously taken his own advice. In the six letters he wrote Larkin between June 4, 1855, and October 10, 1856, he was still following the golden will-o'-the-wisp of a fortune in the mines as well as continuing his artistic career.

In his first letter of June 4, there are several references to the fact that he was looking after Larkin's mining interests on the Feather River while staking his own claim there:

You will doubtless remember having information on the day we walked down to Mission Street that you had felt disposed to assist my family in San Francisco in case I could be of service to you on F. River...⁵

He chides Larkin for delegating another man to attend to his claim (possibly a Mr. Stone "who left the boat at Sacramento") and assures Larkin:

I walked over a portion of your Ranch and learned from parties there that it contains one of the richest mining districts in the state.⁶

Again, he assures Larkin of his willingness to work on his behalf:

Nothing would give me more pleasure than to attend to any business you may see fit to entrust to me on F.R. I am confident if I were located there that I could be of much service to you and in a short time do well for myself.⁷

When next Knapp writes to Larkin, a year has passed, and he is now living in Nevada City, California. On June 6 he responds to a letter obviously written by Larkin to him on June 4:

The U.S. Mail is usually a day or two behind the Express.'

Although he is living in mining country, he does not write of claims but of his own artistic inclinations:

I have heard nothing further from the Daguerrotype man. If you please you may call on him. My last letter to him remains unanswered. A gentleman arrived here a few days since, and is about opening up a gallery. And I am inclined to believe that Mr. Plongeon set him up, on the strength of information contained in my letters to him, which perhaps in part accounts for my not hearing further from him. If you could ascertain the facts in the matter of Mr. Plongeon without letting him know that I have made any inquiries on the subject, you would oblige me. You could ask him if there are any establishments of the kind in Nevada, and if so who they belong to, &c...When I go down I will bring my tools &c and execute any picture you wish painted with pleasure...'

In a postscript he adds:

Mr. Plongeon's Gallery is in Montgomery Street, No. 113 upstairs.

It seems as if Knapp entertained hopes that Mr. Plongeon would help him in setting up a gallery in the wilds of the Sierra. Also, he obviously had brushes and would travel.

He thanked Larkin for information about Jimmy, who must have been his two year-old son listed in the 1852 census in Monterey, and who, from other references was staying with his maternal grandmother in San Francisco. Arabella and "little Jo" are living with him in the gold country.

Knapp's next letter to Larkin was written from Nevada City, July 23, 1856, and informs him of the disastrous fire which destroyed over 400 buildings on July 19. Thankfully, he adds, his own home was spared although a homeless family is lodged there and his wife's clothing has been taken to help the refugees.

On September 19, he writes a lengthy letter chronicling the destruction of the town and of his desire to sell his place and move to San Francisco. He is obviously still using his "tools", but with the devastation there his livelihood is dramatically reduced:

I wanted to finish Mr. and Mrs. Waller's picture and one or two others, and in the meantime attended to the other matter. I have done very well here the last year, it is true, but as there is no prospect for a year to come I think it would be folly to remain and spend what I have made...

Judge [Royal H.] Waller was here a few days since and I promised to take his pictures down and finish them but if I can get a berth in San Francisco in the C.H., Mint, P.O., or in any city office, I should prefer it to the brush for a livelihood...

If it were possible I would like to get a situation at once. It costs something to live in S. F. But I would be as well off there as here, for there is nothing to be done here, and it costs about double to live here, to what it does in S.F. ¹⁰

In a postscript to Larkin, Knapp wrote about the forthcoming presidential election in the fall of 1856. He declares that he has always been a Democrat, but can not go for Buchanan or Fillmore, and therefore may be listed with many other Democrats who would vote for "Fremont, Dayton & the Rail Road too." Fremont, of course, was the candidate from the fledgling Republican party who lost the election to Buchanan. Four years later Abraham Lincoln would be the standard-bearer for the Republicans.

Knapp is still in Nevada City on October 5 trying to sell his house. He sounds quite desperate about a sum of \$200 still owed, although he declares the property to be worth at least \$1200.

He writes Larkin quite testily, obviously in reply to a statement in Larkin's letter to him:

You say that Judge Waller informs you that I have not had time to finish his picture "and therefore must have plenty to do." Now the only reason his pictures have not been finished is the fact that I require another sitting from each which I have not had the opportunity to take. Had they have been to sit, their pictures would have been finished months ago. So you will see it has not been for want of time. ¹¹

Knapp adds that he is grateful that Larkin sent him the "Herald Tribune by express and sundry papers pr U.S.M." He adds he is a member of the Fremont Club and that the Republicans will "pull a large vote in this county".

The last letter is written five days later, and it appears that Larkin has promised to come up with the needed \$200 on the Knapp property. The deed and mortgage are being sent to him, and the Knapps are on their way to San Francisco.

The Stage for Sacramento leaves here every morning at 2 o'clock and arrives at Sac. City about one o'clock P.M. in time for the boat which reaches San Francisco between 10 and 11 o'clock same evening. ¹²

Apparently Knapp made his way to San Francisco with his wife and child and a reunion with his "little ones" who had stayed with his mother-in-law. Perhaps Larkin helped the young man to get established and gave assistance to his family. Certainly Larkin had been a valuable ally of the young artist, but with his death from typhoid fever in 1858,

this patronage was lost.

It is time to gather up the bits and pieces of a man's life: a one-line biography, a census report, daybook entries, and a few letters. Of course, there are the portraits. It is unfortunate that Joel B. Knapp did not have the time or inclination to do a self-portrait that would allow us to see the features of the young artist who was once a mayor of Monterey.

Footnotes

- 1 Bancroft, Hubert Howe, Works, Vol. IV, p. 702.
- 2 Larkin, Thomas O. The Larkin Papers, ed. George P. Hammond, Vol. VIII, 1848-1851, pgs. 51, 178.
- 3 Day Book, Docket of the Mayor's Court of the City of Monterey, Colton Hall.
- 4 Larkin, Thomas O. The Larkin Papers, Volume X, 1854-1858, p. 303.
- 5 Ibid., p. 158.
- 6 Ibid., p. 159.
- 7 Ibid., p. 160.
- 8 Ibid., p. 279.
- 9 Ibid., p. 279.
- 10 Ibid., p. 303.
- 11 Ibid., p. 311.
- 12 Ibid., p. 314.

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- 1 Bancroft, Hubert Howe, Works, A.L. Bancroft and Co., Publishers, 1886.
- 2 Killian, Charles H., "El Toro y El Oso", What's Doing, Vol. 1, No. 3, August, 1946, pp. 53-55.
- 3 Larkin, Thomas O. The Larkin Papers, ed. George P. Hammond, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964.

Documents

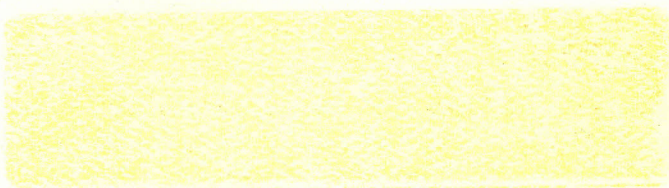
- 1 Special Census of Monterey, 1852, State Archives of the Secretary of State in Sacramento.
- 2 Day Book or Docket of the Mayor's Court of the City of Monterey, Colton Hall.
- 3 Records of San Carlos Church, Monterey.

My thanks go to the many people who helped in the research for this article, especially Amalie Elkinton whose idea it was and who did some of the initial findings. Thanks to Lydia Criley, Esther Goodhue, Monica Hudson, and Paula Jones of the California Department of Parks and Recreation, Dorothea Sallee of Colton Hall, Barbara Burdick, and Virginia Land.

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