

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

November 1, 1950

Interesting Old Chests Here

The Monterey History and Art Association is the proud possessor of a number of very old and very attractive chests, most of whose origin dates back to a couple of hundred years ago. Tourists and local visitors to the Old Custom House and to the Stevenson House are always greatly interested in the workmanship, the painting and the delightful scent which pervades the air as the covers are lifted, for most of the chests are made of camphor wood.

Two of the largest chests we have written about in the Diary recently. A large black one, painted in the soft colors peculiar to that type, and another, equally large, without the flower painting and generously studded with brass nails. The former was once the property of Escolastica Rodriguez de Dye, well known in Monterey in the days when her husband was a business partner of Thomas Oliver Larkin, and the other was recently given to the Association by Mrs. W.R. Holman. The latter is an excellent example of the camphor chest.

A mellow old red chest, elaborately painted, was also among the early day treasures of Escolastica de Dye. It was purchased from her daughter, Mrs. Martha Bolton, by Mrs. Mary Greene, a number of years ago and has since been on loan at the Custom House. A smaller one, covered with dark rawhide, was brought from Spain by a member of the Boronda family before the occupation by the Americans, according to a tag fastened to the interior of the lid.

A small chest in the recessed window of the Custom House overlooking the bay, is the color of old ivory. It was made by John Lewis about 1835, according to his son, John Lewis, the donor. Mr. Lewis had a jewelry store in Pacific Grove for many years.

In front of the curator's desk in the Custom House rests a very old trunk or chest. It came from the Casa de Oro when that building was presented to the State of California by the Misses L., M., and V. Jacks.

In the north room there is a beautiful wooden trunk. The rich and delicate quality of the original blue paint which had covered it is worn thin now. This trunk also belonged to Mrs. Greene. She purchased it a number of years ago in Mexico and has generously loaned it for exhibit purposes. It is probably the oldest of all the

chests on display. It is made of Mexican cypress, thus dating to the time before they discovered cedar in Mexico.

An old and very handsome chest on legs, which was given to the Monterey History and Art Association when that group was first organized, by Mrs. John McGee of Pebble Beach, should also be classified with the Oriental and Mexican ones. It came from Spain and was called a baul cabinet or a bargueno.

In the Stevenson House there are two interesting chests on display. One is a small painted camphor chest, given by I.C. Cook of Pacific Grove in memory of his wife. An unusual small wooden chest or trunk, obviously hand-made, has been loaned by Mrs. D.L. Mason of Salinas. It was brought by her father, John Henry Lisk, when he came to California in the 1850's with his brother, Myron Lisk. John Lisk married Mary Lugarda Castro. The trunk is painted a light blue, is without lining and has an interesting old lock.

Many of these old chests were used as an article of trade from China and came in sets, one fitting inside another. Many chests which later found their way to California were first traded for fur and hides in Alaska.

Hope chests were made and used by the early Egyptians, and the 13th century Italian bride was carried to her husband while seated on a "cassone" or dower chest, but the early ones which came to California were a necessity rather than of sentimental value. There were few storage places or cupboards in the early Western home, so the first settlers used these camphor chests for their blankets and "best clothes."

English maidens also followed the practice of a trousseau chest, which was known as a "bride's wains." In many instances craftsmen started making the chest the day the young woman was born and presented it to her just prior to her marriage.

When the pilgrim father came, history tells us, there were more chests aboard the Mayflower than there were people. Early Virginia colonists were the first to use cedar in the construction of chests, because of the abundance of that wood. No one knows just when the moth repellent qualities were first discovered.

But the patterns of courtship, marriage and housekeeping have changed and the furniture manufacturer tells us that there is no longer a great

demand for hope chests. The modern young woman wants a functional chest rather than one for storage.