

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Lizzie Bingham, Pioneer Actress**

"California's First Theater stands on Pacific Avenue, and is an adobe building, the property of Mr. John A. Swan, one of our earliest pioneers and a gentleman possessed of a great fund of information about the earlier days of the state." From the *Monterey Weekly Herald* and the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, we extract the following information in reference to the first Thespian performances in the Golden State, write the editors of the Monterey Handbook.

"It was in the fall of 1847, that four volunteers, Matt Gormley, Bill Tindal, Jack Moran and Long Lee, came up from Santa Barbara on military duty, consigned to Co. F, 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, U.S. Artillery. They were in the minstrel line, and had given two burnt cork entertainments to the Santa Barbarans before leaving. In Monterey they were joined by Aleck Patterson, Pete Earl and three local characters designated as "Tips," "Taps," and "Tops." With this company, the "management" gave two performances in the old Cuartel Building, south end, upstairs. This was undoubtedly the first effort at minstrelsy on this coast."

"The first theatrical performance ever given in California took place in the old adobe store-house adjacent to Jack Swan's saloon, and it came to pass this way. About the time that Stevenson's regiment of New York volunteers were disbanded, three companies, including the Colonel, came up to Monterey. Soon after, the soldiers attempted a theatrical exhibition, which was a success. Encouraged by their liberal patronage, the managers induced Jack to fix seats, stage and scenery in the old adobe. The bills were gotten out in due form, posters printed with blacking pot and brush, and programmes written announcing 'Putnam,' or 'The Lion Son of '76.' As the first piece to be played."

C.E. Bingham personated the '76 Son, and Mrs. Bingham was Mrs. Martha Washington; Charley Cluchester, George Washington. Frank Wensell and his wife took part. John O'Neal, Mr. Fury, and Pete Earl belonged to the company also.

"Damon and Pythias," "Box and Cox," "The Golden Farmer," "Grandfather Whitehead," and "Nan the Good-for-Nothing," were pieces in the repertory of the company.

John Harris, Toni Beech, Capt. Wingfield, Mrs. Kettlebottom and Lieut. Derby were also among the leading spirits of the troop. 1849 and 1850 were memorable years in the Thespian records of Monterey."

The Mrs. Bingham who impersonated Martha Washington, in what is now known as the First Theater, in the very early days of Monterey, was the subject for a story printed in *Popular Monthly* in April of 1882. The article "The Career of a Remarkable Woman" written by one T.B. Thorpe.

"The early days of California exhibit a frontier heroine who will in future time be remembered for her remarkable natural powers of mind and success in overcoming what should have been insurmountable difficulties. Yet, by some strange fatality, her history up to this time has failed of any deserved recognition." The foregoing is the opening paragraph of the story of the life of the early day actress of Monterey.

After years passed amid hardship of frontier life as the daughter of a soldier, in constant fear of Indian uprisings during the Seminole War, Lizzie, as she was known, accompanied her father to the Rio Grande, where he served under General Taylor.

During this time she became engaged to a handsome orderly attached to the general's staff, and the wedding soon followed, the date proved to be the preliminary opening of the Battle of Buena Vista. In the confusion that preceded the clash of arms between the troops of General Taylor and Santa Ana's troops, the bridegroom, young Bingham, Lizzie's husband, was dispatched with important orders, deliverable to Colonel Jeff Davis. The duty was dangerous and the young bridegroom was discovered and surrounded by a party of guerrillas. That young man was the same young man who played the part of '76 Son in "The Lion Son of '76," in which his wife played "Martha Washington."

When Lizzie learned, according to the story, where her husband was imprisoned, she donned a picturesque costume of Spanish peasantry, mounted a mule, and started with the blessing of all the soldier boys for the camp of the enemy, which she penetrated as a vender of fruit. When she finally reached her husband, she informed him where a saddled thoroughbred horse could be found at his disposal.

The personation of a Mexican girl, and her successful conquest with the Mexican officer, were evidences, to close observers, that Lizzie possessed great dramatic

talent. This idea was encouraged by her husband, who had once been an attache of a New Orleans theater.

At the end of the Mexican War, the second regiment of dragoons was ordered to the Pacific Coast and Lizzie was the only woman permitted to take part in that long and terrible journey across the continent in the winter of 1847.

The unexpected breaking out of the gold excitement caused the volunteers to desert almost in a body, and the remnants of the theatrical corps in which Lizzie had attached herself moved to Monterey, where the English drama, with some regard to appointments, was for the first time, regularly established, Lizzie being the pioneer actress of California. In the enterprise, her husband and a number of well-known citizens donning the 'Sock and Buskin," assisted the company while it remained in its newly established quarters.

When General Taylor organized recruits for his Nicaragua expedition, C.E. Bingham joined and his noble wife, heartbroken at leaving her twin daughters, determined to accompany him. They were taken captives after many weeks of fighting and hardships, and cared for by the sisters at the Hospital of St. Vincent. But this merciful consideration came too late, according to the published account by T.B. Thorpe, and Lizzie Bingham passed away far from California and the First Theater.

As far back as 1882 the author was thinking of history and wishing for the proper appreciation of one of the state's first actresses, when he finished his article with the following lines:

"Lizzie will, nevertheless, soon be forgotten, but as time wears on and the theaters of California grow in importance and become rich in traditionary lore, the antiquarian will search out the pioneers of the profession, and the name of Lizzie Bingham will assume its true and proper recognition as the pioneer English speaking actress of California.