

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

April 21, 1950

Early Days at the First Theater

Another story about an early theatrical performance at the First Theatre in California was been given to this column by Paul Pioda of Salinas whose grandfather, E.L. Williams, wrote it in February of 1894. Mr. Williams, was the Second Carrier in "The Story of Bardolph" which was presented at the theater on Monday evening, February 11, 1850, three years after the first performance, "The Lion Son of '76," given in the fall of 1847.

Lieutenant Derby, who took the part of Gadshill in the performance, also took part in the first performance in the theatre, which had originally been a sailors' rooming house built by Jack Swan. Lieutenant Sully, also one of the actors, was the artist who designed the seal for the City of Monterey and directed the first Fourth of July celebration after the adoption of the State Constitution.

"Situated in Monterey, at the bottom of the hill on the left hand side of the street going up to David Jack's house, there is a one-story adobe house, a long, low building of which Jack Swan, a pioneer of 1843, was owner, and from which he drew a goodly rent at the time, it was partly used as a theatre in February, 1850.

The building stood north and south, the north end of which was divided into rooms with entrances from the west. These rooms at that time rented for \$40 per month. The south end of this building was converted into a theatre, with a stage and appropriate scenery, with opening toward the east. The scenery was painted by Lieutenant Sully, he having inherited the genius of his father who was a famous artist in Philadelphia.

"The program here given is identical and an exact copy, excepting the third column of names, of the original in the possession of the writer. There were no presses or printers in those days, and the programs were all written for distribution by Lieut. Hamilton, now on the retired list of the army as colonel.

"Of all who participated in the amateur performance on that night, as depicted in the program, Colonel Hamilton and the writer are the only ones alive, at least the former was, when writing to the latter from Brooklyn, N.Y., about a year ago (1893). He had then surrendered his command at Fort Hamilton, in New York harbor. His letter recalled many a forgotten theme

in Monterey and among them the theatrical performance of the "Gadshill Robbery" and "Box and Cox" on Monterey evening, February 11, 1850.

"It is needless to say that the performers all acted well their parts. The orchestra was composed of the military band, whose playing of the national airs and other pieces, added much to the enjoyment. The assemblage was all the English-speaking residents of Monterey, and a very large number of the Spanish and their descendants. The latter, although not understanding the language of the performers, were delighted with the acting, and particularly with the farce, "Box and Cox."

"To use the vernacular of the present day, the house was "filled to overflowing, there was not being standing room", and many were compelled to listen from the outside of the building.

"The building, scenery, and dresses were afterward given over to the non-commissioned officers and privates of the military companies then stationed in Monterey. The privates continued to have performances for their amusement for some time afterward; the officers did not perform again.

"It is to be remarked that even so far back as forty-four years ago there was among the military officers an uncertain and very uneasy feeling as to the future of the American government. They called the theatre, "Union Theatre", as indicative of their wishes and patriotic hopes.

"Of the officers mentioned then holding the rank of lieutenant, all were alive at the time of the firing on "Fort Sumter", remained firm for the Union, and five of them gallantly met their deaths, with sword in hand, on the field of battle.

"Lieutenant Hamilton, while in charge of the battery in Florida, was ambuscaded by the enemy, his men being nearly all killed. He was not killed in the encounter, but for years suffered much from the crippling wounds he received. He was promoted Colonel of his regiment February 20, 1864, for gallant and meritorious services in the Battle of Olustee, Florida.

"Lieutenant Sully, promoted to the rank of colonel, was, during the rebellion, in command at Fort Sully (named for him) on the Yellowstone River, holding the Sioux Indians in check. He was afterward appointed to the command of the Northern Military Department of

California, and on April 26, 1877, was at the Occidental Hotel, then on Montgomery street, San Francisco, on the way with his family to Fort Vancouver where he died a year afterward.

“Lieutenant Derby acquired fame in California as a great wag and humorist. He was known as “Squibob” and as the author of “Phoenixiana”, a book containing his wittiest and best. About three years after his performance of “Bardolph” he was ordered to New Orleans, where he sickened with a fever and became utterly blind and died within a year.

“W.H. Chivers was a “West-Pointer”, and in Monterey Commissary’s clerk, not holding any rank in the service; he was afterward for many years, until he died, clerk of the United States District Court in San Francisco.

The program follows:

UNION THEATRE

Monterey – Monday, February 11, 1850

Will be presented the Story of Bardolph, Dramatis Personae.

Prince Hal, Lieut, Hamilton; Falstaff, Lt. Sully; Poins, Lt. McEwing; Gadshill, Lt. McLean; Bardolph, Lt. Derby; 1st Carrier, Lt. Moore; 2nd Carrier, E.L. Williams; Chamberlain, Lt. Jones; Sheriff, Lt. Miller and Dame Quickly, W.H. Chivers. To be followed by a Dramatic Recitation by Lt. Hamilton after which a Comic Song by Lt. Sully; after which a Melancholy by Lt. Derby; the whole to conclude with the Laughable Farce entitled “Box ad Cox,” Lt. Sully; Cox, Lt. Derby and Mrs. Bouncer, Lt. Moore. Immediately after which the audience will retire to slow music. Doors open at half past six o’clock. Curtain rises at 7 o’clock precisely. Tickets delivered at the doors. No postponement on account of weather.