

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Mrs. John C. Fremont, A California Hostess**

The Manuel Diaz who advertised the Castro Adobe for sale in a raffle in *The Californian*, the state's first newspaper, both in Spanish and English in May of 1848, was the son-in-law of the original owner, Don Jose Castro. According to Bancroft's *History of California*, Manuel Diaz was a Mexican trader, who became alcalde of Monterey 1846 and grantee of the Sacramento Rancho. He was a member of the first jury in Monterey and a member of the Common Council after the United State occupation. He was said to have bought the schooner *Santa Cruz* and in her to have moved his family and effects to Lower California about 1848. But there was a Manuel Diaz in Monterey in 1851, so it may be that he did not dispose of the adobe in his raffle and therefore changed his plans about going to Lower California.

In 1845 Thomas O. Larkin describes Manuel Diaz as "aged 35 years, a quiet man, of some influence and property, well disposed to the United States."

Don Jose Antonio de la Aguirre, who was to have the raffle tickets on sale at his Santa Barbara home, "was a Spanish Basque." According to Bancroft "who was born in 1793 and came to California in 1834. He was engaged in trade in California being the owner of several vessels. From about 1838 he made Santa Barbara his home. He was an excellent type of old-time merchant."

When Col. John Charles Fremont came to Monterey with his wife, Jessie Benton Fremont, and their daughter, Lilly, they resided with Madame Castro the wife of the Mexican General Castro, in the house on the Mesa about which we have been writing. In "Immortal Wife" by Irving Stone, which is the life story of Mrs. Fremont written from her letters and other authentic sources there is this description of the old adobe: "Madame Castro's house was the former Mexican governor's home; a huge ballroom fronted the bay, two adobe wings ran back from the water to meet a garden enclosed in soft-colored adobe walls; the roof was rough red tile, the floors of smooth red tile, and there were hedges of pinks lining the garden walls and walks.

"The ballroom was now rented as a warehouse for a flour merchant. Jessie was ushered into one of the wings which contained two rooms, high-ceilinged, the

adobe walls whitewashed. They were innocent of furniture except for a wood stove in as small anteroom. Jessie presented compliments to Madame Castro, who loaned them two cots and two chairs, several pots and pans, a few dishes and some flatware. General Fremont left at once for San Francisco. After weeks had passed a ship arrived from San Francisco, and a number of sailors began bringing crates up to the Castro house. When everything was assembled Jessie found that her husband had sent her two high, roomy New England bedsteads, plenty of sheets and blankets, woven East Indian wicker chairs, a beautiful inlaid teakwood table, enough Chinese matting to cover the tile floors, white lace material for curtains. Chinese satins and French damasks for draperies, two exquisitely shaped English pottery punch bowls to be used as washbasins, colorful French and Chinese satin-cushioned bamboo couches and chairs, two big grizzly-bear skins to be thrown over the matted floor in front of the fireplace; tin candlesticks and tall white spermaceti candles under whose light she and her father had worked so many hours in their library in Washington. Wrapped as through it were the prize of the shipment, she found a copy of *The Arabian Knights*, the only book in her possession.

Hospitality was as natural for Jessie Benton Fremont as breathing, so when the Constitutional Convention opened in September, she had open house every afternoon. While she could serve no varied menus, she had become good at making rice puddings, and the delegates were expert with their guns and fishing lines. Few came to dinner without a bird or fish in hand. She set up a long wooden table in the big garden. Here every afternoon 10 to 15 delegates would gather to talk politics and discuss the convention. There were three other American women in Monterey, Mrs. Thomas O. Larkin, Mrs. Riley and Mrs. Smith, all pleasant and hospitable women who did their share in entertaining the delegates.

"One evening Robert Semple said to Mrs. Fremont "we were saying among ourselves how surprising it was that you could achieve such comfort in a queer place like Monterey."

"Jessie looked about her critically, trying to see the rooms through the eyes of a stranger. On the floor were the two bear skins, the windows draped with elegant Chinese brocade, the adobe walls were crudely whitewashed, and on the Chinese rattan furniture were

cushions covered with exquisite French silks. The only wall decoration was a picture of St Francis, while on the Chinese teakwood table was the representation of another religion, a bronze Buddha; alongside were a two-year-old copy of the London Punch and her Martha Washington sewing basket. She replied to Semple thusly:” Gentlemen I find it true to period, Pioneer Forty-nine, worthy elements from all over the world, guarded by a California grizzly.”

It is in this same house that Mr. and Mrs. Frank Work now make their home, and where so much history has been enacted.