

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Ball Park

The Monterey Ball Park is a part of Monterey's historical background along with the old buildings, the land grants and the people who help to establish this most attractive part of California. The ball park as a playground goes back to 1892, covering years memorable for many a thrilling event.

Father Ramon Mestres, pastor of San Carlos Royal Presidio Chapel for many years, was probably the first renter of what is now the ball park at Adams and Franklin streets. The land had once been covered with a sea of yellow wheat. Presumably crops would have been harvested and sown over that spot for many years more had not Father Mestres approached the Jacks family in 1892 with a proposal to rent the property. There were his boys, he explained. He wished to provide a baseball park for them. The lease was arranged and he paid \$150 for a year's use of the land. So began the history of the park, dedicated 58 years ago and rededicated on February 22, 1928, when Mrs. Mary Jacks Thomas presented the block of land to the City of Monterey for a ball park. On the bronze tablet embedded in the huge granite marker at the corner of Franklin and Adams streets, is inscribed "Dedicated to Sports, February 22, 1928. Monterey Athletic Field, the gift of Mary Jacks Thomas."

After acquiring the year's lease in 1892, Father Mestres immediately began improvements, The land was leveled, a fence built and a grandstand raised – "a very small grandstand, but a grandstand just the same," said Father Mestres when interviewed in 1928. A team was organized in short order, many of the boys coming from the San Carlos Cadets. Competition was provided by the Father from Santa Clara.

It was not long until the world of fashion at Del Monte was eagerly following the sporting life on the new field. On days of games Father Mestres' grandstand was crowded with the elite of the countryside and with many visitors from distant cities.

Among the players in those days were Tom Driscoll, Charles Martin, Arthur Requa, Harry Wolters and Billy Johnson. In later years Johnson moved to Paso Robles, where he took over the management of the hotel there.

Harry Wolters, starting under the sympathetic eye of Father Mestres, rose in the ranks of baseball until he won national fame in the major leagues and later became coach at Stanford University where he and his wife now make their home.

Father Mestres, negotiator of the lease, organizer, manager and coach of the team, and superintendent of construction, rounded out his duties by umpiring the games. If Monterey had a true sportsman that man was Father Mestres, according to those who knew him before his death several years ago.

At the close of the first year Father Mestres renewed his lease for four more years. In this period baseball grew in popularity and the fame of the Monterey field spread far and wide.

Still, baseball was far from being the only attraction at the park. The festival of festivals was the church fair, an event lasting 10 days. Beneath a great tent covering the field, according to a story told to a reporter many years ago, fancy articles were sold, and rich food – Spanish dinners, chicken, tamales, enchiladas. Every night there was dancing and every day horse and foot racing, and tug-of-war contests with Del Monte. Father Mestres smiled when he told that Monterey won the tug of war. Edward B. Gross was on the team.

After five years a rise in rents obliged Father Mestres to abandon his lease. Apparently it made little difference whether rents were paid or not, for the boys continued to play baseball as long as they pleased on the field. Monterey's ball park was well on its way to being a reality.

An interesting announcement has come from Father James H. Culleton of Fresno, Provisional President of the Academy of California Church History, telling of the proposed monthly publication of *the Academy Scrapbook*. Father Culleton was formerly assistant pastor at the Royal Presidio Chapel in Monterey.

Academy Scrapbook is tentatively intended as a vehicle which will bring to the general public, historical material which is now beyond its reach; stories from files of old newspapers and other old periodicals, documents that have never been published in English, extracts from old and rare books and California Indian material, as well as biography of persons who played a part in the religious and moral life of the state.