

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The First Pianos

No volume of Bancroft can vie with his "California Pastoral" for both charm and interest. Between its covers may be found delightful bits of tradition and gossip about the life in the "Land of Promise" during these lotus days when the slightest excuse was cause sufficient for inviting one's neighbors to a baile according to E.D. Holden, who has written of California's first pianos. Because at least one of these pianos once occupied a conspicuous place in the sala of the Casa Abrego on Abrego street, we thought it would be interesting to review the Holden article in the Diary today.

Music in the early days of Monterey was limited to guitar and violins, both great and small. The church likewise made use of the same instruments, supplementing them with the discharge of firearms occasionally. Concerning this latter phase Lieutenant Augustus Wise in his "Los Gringos" describes a mass at Mission Santa Clara in 1846:

"During the service an indefatigable cannonier, outside, gave frequent feux de joie from a graduated scale of diminutive culverins – made of brass in shape of pewter porter pots, half filled with powder, and the charge rammed down with pounded bricks – this, with music of kettle drums cymbals, and fiddles, made a very respectable din."

Pianos were practically unknown, as the following excerpt from "California Pastoral" shows:

"While Commodore Jones was in Monterey many balls were given in his honor by Larkin and others. On one occasion Larkin borrowed of Abrego one of the three first pianos brought to California. They were brought from Baltimore by Captain Smith, one sold to Jose Abrego, another in San Pedro to Eulogio Celis and the third to M.G. Vallejo at San Francisco. Abrego granted the request, but suggested that a piano would not be of much use, since no one knew how to play on it. But to the surprise of all, it was solemnly affirmed, the boy Pedro Estrada succeeded in playing the instrument, although he had never touched one before! It was proposed to send the boy to Mexico, to be educated in music, but the advice of David Spence prevailed, who thought a carpenter more useful than a musician."

An inquiry into the movements of both Commodore Jones and Captain Stephen Smith reveals that the American Naval officer was at Monterey in October, 1842, and that while Smith in the American brigantine George Henry was on the coast in 1841, it was in 1843 that he brought the three pianos Bancroft mentions. In fairness to California's outstanding historian it must be borne in mind that much of the material making up the "California Pastoral" was obtained from the recollections of the old-timers themselves and are not based upon documented evidence, writes Mr. Holden.

To General William T. Sherman, the lieutenant Stephen Smith, had once confessed that his coming to California was due to Daniel Webster, who had assured him that the United States would surely annex it, sooner or later. During Smith's 1841 visit he arranged to bring back a steam sawmill. This he did in 1843, along with the three pianos. The saw mill was set up at Bodega – the first steam mill – in fact the first steam engine of any sort in California. Between 1841 and his second arrival in 1843 Smith had married a Peruvian lady by the name of Torres whose brother Manuel later was to become the husband of Mariana Richardson, daughter of the builder of Yerba Buena's (San Francisco) first dwelling.

Captain Smith did well with his piano speculation, selling his entire stock, and for that which Don Jose Maria Abrego bought, the former Mexican hatter, who had come to California with the Padres – Hajar colony in 1843, paid \$600.

Concerning the piano sold by Smith to Don Eulogio Celis there is no record, as far as we have been able to find, but both the Vallejo and the Abrego pianos have left their mark, the latter being today in the museum of the California Pioneer Society on McAllister Street in San Francisco.

Young, energetic and provided with some capital Abrego upon his arrival embarked as a merchant in Monterey, where he prospered both financially and politically. He held the offices of sub-comisario, administrator of San Antonio Mission, Custom House officer, member of the assembly, substitute member of the tribunal and treasurer in charge of territorial finances from 1839 to 1846. In 1836 he married Josefa Estrada, the half sister of the then Governor Juan B. Alvarado, and when building his new home incorporated into his sala or ball room, timber of the brig Natalia which had been wrecked at Monterey and in which he arrived in California.

Abrego's marriage was blessed with many children, one of whom married Joaquin Bolado native of Santander, Spain. To the latter's child, Mrs. Dulce Bolado Davis, fell both the grandfather's piano and a part of the former Huerta del Rey, now known as the Santa Anita rancho in San Benito County. A few years ago Mrs. Davis presented the piano to the Pioneer Society.

The instrument was made by Brell-Kopf and Haertel, Leipzig, and was imported by Braun and Focke, Baltimore. Its pedals are of brass, and two brass candle holders project from its front above the keyboard, on either side of which Don Jose Abrego cause the following statement to be inscribed:

"This is one of the first three pianos brought to California. Its history is as follows: In 1841 Captain Steven Smith arrived with his vessel in Monterey, and I engaged him to bring me a piano on his next trip to this country. In March 1843, he returned to this city in a brigantine, he had three pianos on board. I bought this one for \$600. He then sailed for San Francisco, where General Vallejo purchased another of the pianos. The third piano was afterward sold by Captain Smith to E. Celis of Los Angeles. Jose M. Abrego.