

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 30, 1950

Pioneer of Pioneers

Jacob Primer Leese, one of Monterey's very earliest settlers, was once the owner of the Larkin House. After the Gold Rush, when San Francisco became the busiest port on the Pacific; Thomas Oliver Larkin entered into an agreement with Jacob P. Leese to trade properties, Leese (the brother-in-law of General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo) taking over the Larkin House and other Monterey properties, and Larkin the San Francisco holding of Leese. The Leese family occupied the now famous adobe for many years, from whom it passed into the hands of Robert Johnson, once mayor of Monterey.

The story goes that the Johnsons, who had a rare feeling for the old place, restored the house and replanted the old garden, building the stone wall that runs so beautifully along Calle Principal, and removed the frame house, which had occupied the lot where the garden now is, to a lot on Tyler street.

When the time came for the Johnsons to relinquish ownership, someone cabled Mrs. Harry S. Toulmin, then in England, that the house was for sale. Thus the adobe came back to a direct descendant of the most prominent American in the transition period of California history. (From "Old Monterey" by Laura Bride Powers).

Jacob Leese was born in St. Clairsville, Ohio, August 19, 1809. He was engaged in the Santa Fe trade in 1830, coming to California first in 1833 and returning in 1834, when he settled in Los Angeles. In 1836 he entered into partnership with Nathan Spear and William Sturgis Hinckley, both Americans which had for its purpose the establishment of a mercantile business at Yerba Buena on San Francisco Bay, the town William A. Richardson had laid out, and of which he was the first settler. Leese began his house upon the lot officially granted to him, July 8, 1836, in time to celebrate Independence Day by a feast and dancing at which the American flag was first raised within the limits of the future San Francisco. Among his guests were General Vallejo and his sister Rosalia, to whom Leese was married the following April.

Through the kindness of Henry R. Wagner an unpublished letter from his collection, addressed by

Leese to Abel Stearns of Los Angeles, was printed some years ago in the California Historical Quarterly:

Mr. Abel Stearns

My Dear Sir:

Offer my Best Respects to you and Mr. N (?) Pryor, and all Enquiring Frientz. I do take the Pleasure to inform you that I am wile, and also Mrs. Leese who doez send her Best Respectz to you. The name above Mentioned is I do suppose and new name to you for whiche I have the pleasure to inform you that I wuz married to a young Lady of Monterey on the 12 of Last Month in the Mission of St. Salano. It was something of the Sly, but after the fation of uz Yankeyz in the Weestern part of the U States. Cince my Mariage it has created a great talke among the people of the Country – which wauz in concequence of ittz being done so Sly and not a coustom of the Country but they are now getting quite tame on the Subject and some sayz that it was bien echo.

I do Send you by Capt Steele 288 Deer Skins for whiche I do wishe for you to Dispose of for me in Heidez or Tallow at St. Pedro at Vesselz pricez you can take them on your own acc at 50c eache or I will allow you Sic percent on their saliz – If you do want any Flower let me Know and also send my Bagz as I have constantly my Bagz in employment in My Launchz and cannot spare them Elour I can let you have. Put in San Pedro at \$2 per aroba – If you have any good Wine to Spare you can do me the favour to Send me one or Two barillz for My own youce By the first opportunity and By So doing.

You will much oblige your most

Affectionate Friende

Jacob P. Leese

On April 15, 1838, a daughter was born to Mr. and Mrs. Leese, named Rosalie after her mother, the first child to be born in Yerba Buena.

Leese was naturalized as a Mexican citizen in 1836, and in 1841 became the grantee of the Canada de Guadalupe & Rodeo Viejo & Visitacion rancho, adjoining today's southern limits of San Francisco and familiarly called "Visitacion Valley."

Leese acted as interpreter at Sonoma in June, 1846, when the Bear Flaggers arrested General Vallejo, and accompanied the General, his brother Salvador, and

Victor Prudon when they were taken as prisoners to Sutter's Fort.

On February 2, 1892, the San Francisco papers had this to print:

"Having realized a comfortable fortune Mr. Leese retired with his family to Monterey where he lived in quiet, unostentatious manner, occasionally visiting this city and always welcomed by his pioneer friends as the pioneer of pioneers. In latter years he met with reverses and he died poor...

"In 1889 [?] Mr. Leese returned to San Francisco after a prolonged absence in the East, and on August 4 of that year he was knocked down and run over by a wagon while crossing Fourth street from Pioneer Hall. His head and arms were badly cut. He was conveyed to St. Luke's Hospital and remained an inmate to the time of his death (February 1, 1892), kindly cared for by his brother pioneers...

"The deceased leaves a son (Jacob R. Leese, born April 15, 1839, at Monterey) by his marriage to the sister of General Vallejo.

A number of years ago the Pioneer Society placed a bronze plaque on the location of the Leese Home on Grant avenue, between Washington and Jackson streets, in San Francisco, now Chinatown. Jack R. Leese, the son of Jacob Primer Leese, lived on Abrego street, across from the Abrego adobe. For many years he was an interpreter at Angel Island.