

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **Custom House Commotion**

There are probably some folk who remember that there was a stir in 1893 over the threat of disposing of the old Custom House in order that a large and handsome hotel might be built upon the reservation. News of that proposal appeared in a San Francisco paper of that year but evidently the backers of the project did not carry out their intentions or the citizens objected so strongly to the loss of the historic building that the idea was dropped almost before it was begun.

The story which was written by a reporter of that day, told of some of the historical events and social gatherings which had taken place within the three-foot walls. In 1844 the United States frigate Savannah was at anchor in the Bay of Monterey. Then, as now, naval officers were popular socially, and there were any number of pretty Spanish girls in and about Monterey. The Spanish maids could not converse in words, so the reporter wrote, but that was only a minor disadvantage. So the officers of the Savannah borrowed the Custom House and gave a grand ball there. The American and Mexican colors probably were intertwined to show the harmony between the hosts and guests. But the next year the two nations were at war.

However during the ball, so history says, the Contradanza and El Son alternated with the military schottische and the five-step polka that night in perfect amity. That was 97 years ago, so there is probably not a maiden alive today who danced that night in the Old Custom House.

"The next use to which the house on the bluff was put, the story continues, "was as headquarters for the conquering marines who had taken possession of Monterey. Captain Mervine, the commander lived there until the end of the Mexican war. (Fort Mervine, within the Presidio, was named for him.) The United States then continued it as a Custom-house. Doctor Canfield was a collector there, and a Mr. Irland succeeded him. The last collector Monterey had was Mr. T. Porter. His daughter, Kit, was born there. She became the belle of Monterey and married Mayor Effey of Santa Cruz. After a magnificent wedding, the couple chartered a car for their wedding trip.

At one time a regiment of United States troops was stationed at Monterey. The old Custom-house being government property, and also on account of its size and convenient location, was turned into officers' headquarters. The building like all adobes, was warm in winter and cool in summer, and while the officers occupied it, it took on a gay and youthful air and a fresh coat of whitewash, we suppose. During the long summer evenings the verandas were favorite lounging places.

In 1893 the building was occupied as a residence by a Spanish gentleman by the name of Ruards, who was a "Notary Public, Conveyer and Translator". He had been a resident of Monterey since 1850.

Dr. Chester Hare informs the Diary that the home of Charles Warnes was at the end of Madison street, on a narrow short street which until a few years ago was known as Broad street. Doctor Hare afterward owned the home and lived there until he sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Marion [?]. Two of Mr. Warnes' daughters are living in San Francisco, Mrs. Minnie Donaldson and Mrs. Lilly Boughton, both former residents of Monterey who went to school here and were active in the social life of the community for many years. Mr. Donald operated the shoe store on Alvarado street now owned by Jack Hilbert.

Mr. Warnes bought the tract of land once known as the Johnson Tract. It was bounded on the west by High street, on the south by the Jack's property, on the north by Jefferson and Monroe street on the east. From Larkin street on up the hill, Doctor Hare remembers as a cow pasture. Warnes is remembered by "old timers" as a dapper man with a white goatee and mustache. His picture appeared in the Peninsula Diary in connection with the story, published a few days ago giving the history of the Bohemia Saloon.