

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 20, 1951

### **The Gold Coast Troopers**

California's First Theatre has been written about time and again, its history, its shows and those who take part in them, and Jack Swan, the builder, but it remained for Isabel Hartigan, the curator, to write the story of the historic building's present happenings behind the scenes.

The article was one of the leads in the recent issue of "News and Views" published by the State Park Commission for the pleasure and education of the personnel, the curators, rangers and employees of the vast system.

"The Troopers of the Gold Coast" who date from the reopening of California's First Theatre on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1937, and now number over 500, celebrated their 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary and 1204<sup>th</sup> performance on Monterey's 181<sup>st</sup> birthday, June 3<sup>rd</sup>.

In April 1935, the Monterey History and Art Association, Colonel Roger S. Fitch, president, started a movement for the restoration of California's First Theatre to its former appearance and use. At this time the building was being used for a museum only. With the help of the membership, the city and interested people the interior of the building was rearranged as a theater, complete with stage and footlights. It was ready. Who would put on the show?

Laura Bride Powers, then in charge, sent to San Francisco for some theater or show manuscript. Mrs. Hartigan stated that she remembered one especially beautiful, bound in red leather, with which came a bill for \$35. Needless to say it was sent back. They then obtained several of old plays from the state library and asked local thespians to read them. All were enthusiastic but it took the Denny-Watrous management to put on the show, wrote Mrs. Hartigan.

"Mary L. Greene was in charge at the Theater from January to June of that eventful year, 1937. She really went through some pretty hectic days. People all over the place, painting scenery, building sets, cooking glue on her kitchen stove, telephoning (phone was also in the kitchen), in and out of her living room (now the green room). Some one has a headache. 'Have you any aspirin?' 'May I take a nap on your couch?' 'How about

a pencil?' 'Do you know where we can find an old gun?' And the endless rehearsals on and on, into the night."

Finally the show was ready and on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1937, after more than 75 years of darkness, and in celebration of Monterey's 167<sup>th</sup> birthday, "The Troopers of the Gold Coast" presented "Tatters, the Pet of Squatter's Gulch," a rollicking old melodrama, with "Olio" to a full house. The Theater was now a living thing and the Denny-Watrous management received the concession from the Park Commission.

Mrs. Powers retired and left the Custom House June 9, 1937, and as this was "Number One Monument," Mrs. Greene took over there and Mrs. Hartigan returned to her home, after several years as Mrs. Powers' assistant. The next day she was called back to take over the theatre and later became the curator.

Soon after the first show, the Denny-Watrous management put in the benches, which were more practical than the folding chairs which had been loaned by the City of Monterey. A bit later the "bar room was fitted up to hoodwink the most critical observer, bar room chairs, gambling tables, brass cuspidors, liquor bottles, a bar with the traditional footrail and even a bartender during the performances, handle-bar mustache and all the trimmings," (soda pop only).

Mrs. Hartigan writes: "It takes clever directing to adapt the old shows to this tiny stage. 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' with 'Olio.' is the present production. I am often asked: 'Who is?' or 'What is Olio?' and 'What is the difference between a drama and a melodrama?' The dictionary says, 'Olio: music; a melody of various musical pieces.' In modern terms, we would say, 'vaudeville.' In the early part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century many operas were melodrama: highly sensational and romantic, interspersed with songs and accompanied with music. The melodrama of the First Theatre always has a happy ending. Always with a moral; 'Crime does not pay.' It differs from the mystery play in the fact that you know from the first entrance who the villain is and who the hero is. In the mystery, you would be kept guessing until the last act."