

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 6, 1951

From Horses to Opera

The Bagby Opera House was a landmark for many years on lower Alvarado street in Monterey. Not only was it the theater but it was the gathering place for the social events of the town in the early 1900s. O.H. Bagby, whose daughters, Mrs. Enid La Grindeur and Mrs. Cecil Cooper, are residents of Monterey, was the owner.

The Opera House had once been the upper story of the Fashion Livery Stable and when that location was condemned as being unsafe for crowds, the stable itself became the Opera House. Where the fancy and not-so-fancy carriages once entered became the lobby; where these conveyances were stored when not in use, was remodeled into the body of the house with seats added, and the horse stalls became the stage.

Recently one of the former managers of the Opera House, Carroll Robinson, revisited Monterey and showed us some of the old pictures of the Opera House and related some interesting stories of the building after it became a moving picture house, opened by him on June 1, 1910. Robinson's grandparents had once owned the Alta Vista, a large two-storied adobe building at the corner of Pierce and Franklin, where the telephone building now stands. Robinson came to Monterey in 1890 from Maine and now lives in Southern California.

It has been told that Bagby built his Opera House in 1875. The upper floor was reached by a steep stairway and the hall had a flat floor that it might be used for the social activities of the community when troopers did not trod the boards. The room was about 50 feet in length and would hold less than 300 persons. We have heard that odors from the stable beneath seeped up through the cracks in the floor as the audience sat enthralled over the Monterey Dramatic Club's presentations.

The Dramatic Club was organized on November 7, 1897, at the Bagby Opera House. S.B. Caruth was the president, E. Michaelis, vice president; A.C. Jochmus, secretary; J.W. Bagby, treasurer; F.S. Voshee, business manager; S.J.B. Tewsburg, stage manager, and F. Hillman, stage carpenter and electrician. On December 16th, this ambitious club was ready to present "The

Ticket of Leave," a strong British melodrama abounding in deep plots and thrilling situations.

The Thespian Dramatic Club presented a laughable comedy, "My Neighbor's Wife," on March 12th as a benefit for a family who had lost their entire household furnishings by a fire. Again on April 12, the club gave "The Open Gate," "a performance that would compare with any professional entertainment ever given in this city." A grand ball followed, the dance music was new and included four pieces in the orchestra.

On May 30th, 1889, The Thespians gave a patriotic drama for the entertainment of the townspeople and played to a full house for the benefit of the Naval Reserve. The play itself was "a stirring one, abounding in thrilling situations and was well rendered, but William Lansing, the director, left town with the entire proceeds." Ad Gunzendorfer became manager of the Opera House in June of 1898.

Frank Bacon, who later became a star and the idol of Broadway when he played "Lightnin'" in the play by that name, came to Monterey in 1904 in a rural classic, "The Hills of California." It was a "sentimental home drama, abounding in natural comedy situations and purest heart interest." Bessie Bacon, his daughter, supported Bacon in the cast. The prices were 50 and 75 cents for admission.

"The Thoroughbred Tramp" which showed at the Bagby for two nights went "on the rocks" here and the members took "the railroad route" out of town.