

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

November 14, 1952

Jack Swan's Rooming House

On display in the Green Room of California's First Theater are a number of interesting and historic items which should delight the theater-goer. Arranged in two cases are a number of old time costumes and other objects reminiscent of the theater in early California.

Of special interest is a handsome banjo, a gift to the First Theater from Mrs. Richard Bell of Carmel. The banjo was once the delight of Lotta Crabtree and she played it many times, when she visited Mrs. Bell's aunt in Louisville, Kentucky. When Mrs. Bell was about 11, she met Lotta and heard her play the very banjo now displayed in the First Theater.

The instrument was five strings and a silver bell arrangement inside the rim which gives it an unusual tone. It was made by Dobson and took a prize in New York for design, workmanship and tone.

Mrs. Bell presented the instrument in memory of her son, the late Galt Bell of Carmel and Los Angeles. Galt Bell directed the first play presented by the Denny-Watrous Management at the theater in June of 1937. He was at that time already well known throughout the state as the producer of "The Drunkard" that was running at the Theater Mart in Los Angeles.

On June 3, 1937, an announcement appeared in all local papers, as in many through the state, that California's First Theater at Monterey was to reopen that evening. The play, produced by local talent, was "Tatters, The Pet of Squatters' Gulch." Costumes, dances, songs and acting were all to be in the style of 89 years ago, when Montereyans of 1848 paid five dollars a set to watch performances in the old adobe by Jack Swan.

It is interesting to note that a number of persons whose names appeared on the program 15 years ago are still active in the First Theater. Among the names we found on the first program whose names also appear on the program of this month's production of "Camille" are: Mrs. Rhoda Johnson, the designer and maker of all the costumes worn at the theater, and Miss Catherine Knudsen, who has charge of the lighting. Others familiar to the theater goers on the Peninsula are: Bob Bratt, Connie Clampett Flavin, Lloyd Weer, Billy Shepherd, Ruth Marion McElroy, Frank Wilkinson, Mary Marble,

Gordon Knoles, Ivy Van Cott, Ross Miller, Alma Hearst, Manuela Hudson McLean and Milton Latham.

The First Theater building was first acquired as state property through the activity of the Landmarks League. Carmel Martin's father acquired the building from Jack Swan, the pioneer who built the adobe in 1847. It first served as a sailor's rooming house and was later turned into a theater when a group of New York actors, on the point of disbanding in Monterey, asked for its use to produce plays.

Jack Swan died in 1896, and his theater – which had been built from the proceeds of pies sold on the streets of Monterey – began to disintegrate. In 1909, or thereabouts, a group of Montereyans bought the property and deeded it to the State of California. It is administered under the direction of the Division of Beaches and Parks.

Mrs. Lester Hartigan is the curator, and Mr. Hartigan assists behind the old bar during intermissions. The First Theater is open to the public from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. six days a week, and there are performances every weekend.