

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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First Theatre Has Long History

It has been interesting to go back through old scrapbooks and minutes of the Monterey History and Art Association and discover much history pertaining to California's First Theatre since 1932 or thereabouts.

We find a story in the old Herald files of Feb. 25, 1932, which reads: "Col. Fitch reported progress at a meeting of the directors of the History and Art Association, of the work of restoring the First Theatre. Drainage and heating systems have been installed, the interior has been improved, the grounds cleaned up and a brick sidewalk laid. A stone retaining wall will replace the dilapidated board fence on the upper side, and funds have been made available by the State for repainting the exterior."

"Col. Fitch's suggestion that the theatre's old stage and wooden curtain be put in condition for use in amateur theatricals was enthusiastically received by the directors that day."

Also taken up at that meeting of the Association in 1932 was the subject of markers for the historical buildings in Monterey. It was estimated that the first 13 markers would cost about \$150. Three of the directors immediately subscribed \$50 each for the purpose: Mrs. Mary C.W. Black, Mrs. Sidney Fish and Miss Maria Antonia Field.

On June 3, 1937, the theater was ready for the productions of old-time melodrama. Miss Dene Denny and Miss Hazel Watrous were granted the concession by the California Division of Beaches and Parks, and since that date have been untiring in their efforts to present suitable plays upon the old and tiny stage where once a goodly number of early historical figures trod the boards.

Not only have the Denny-Watrous Management produced old plays but they installed the benches in the theatre, replacing the uncomfortable folding chairs which had been loaned by the City of Monterey, when the theatre was first reopened. A bit later the "bar room" was fitted up in a manner to hoodwink the most critical observer, with bar room chairs, gambling tables, brass cuspidors, liquor bottles (empty) and a bar with the traditional footrail. Only soft drinks are served however. This handsome bar had been stored in the

rear of John Sparolini's grocery store on Alvarado street, once the site of a real bar room.

The varied and constantly growing collection of old bottles behind the bar invariably attracts the interest of visitors. Also displayed in the lobby are gold pans, miners' picks and candles, old lamps, spurs and bridles, an organ – as well as many photographs of scenes from early plays produced by the Troupers of the Gold Coast. Miss Denny and Miss Watrous have traveled through the Mother Lode country looking for antiques for the bar room and props for the theatre productions.

A story on California's First Theatre would not be adequate without mention of the handiwork of Mrs. Rhoda Johnson, who from the very beginning of the Denny-Watrous management, has designed and made all the costumes worn by the Troupers. For the most recent melodrama "Camille" now playing at the theatre, the costuming is exceptional. The fabric, color, and design of the hoop skirted gowns worn by the leading lady Sue Lowry are particularly beautiful.

A very lovely white lace dress is trimmed about the neck with a cherished piece of heirloom lace which had once been worn by Mrs. Johnson's grandmother. Another outstanding costume was given by Martin Flavin and had belonged in the wardrobe of his mother.

Mrs. Johnson has two titles on the program of "Camille." She is listed as "Costume Designer and Executer" and "Supervisor of Authentic Periods and Styling."