

June 6, 1952

Medicine Man

John Bidwell, associate of Gen. John A. Sutter, founder of Sutter's Fort at Sacramento and owner of Sutter's Mill where gold was discovered in 1848, wrote in December, 1890, in his "Life in California before the Gold Rush": I have said there were no regular physicians in California. Later, in 1843, in a company that came from Oregon, was one Joe Meeks, a noted character in the Rocky Mountains. On the way he said, "Boys, when I get down to California among the natives I am going to palm myself off as a doctor." From that time they dubbed him Dr. Meeks. He could neither read nor write. As soon as the Californians heard of his arrival in Monterey they began to come to him with their ailments.

"Dr. Meeks' first professional service in Monterey was to a boy who had a toe cut off. Meeks, happening to be near, stuck the toe on, binding it in a poultice of mud, and it grew on again. The new governor, Micheltorena, employed him as surgeon, according to documented history. Meeks had a way of acting and looking very wise, according to Bidwell, and of being reticent when people talked about things which he not understand.

One day, so the story is told, Meeks went into a little shop kept by a man known as doctor Stokes, who had been a kind of hospital steward on board ship, and who bought ashore one of those little medicine chests that were usually taken to sea, with apothecary scales and a pamphlet giving a short synopsis of diseases and a table of weights and medicines, so that almost anybody could administer relief to sick sailors. Stokes was the builder of the adobe house at Hartnell, Polk and Calle Principal, later owned by the Escolle family, the Graggs, and now the site of a restaurant.

"Dr." Meeks went to Stokes and said, "Doctor, I want you to put me up some powders." So Stokes went behind his table and got out his scales and medicines, and asked, "What kind of powders, Dr. Meeks" "Oh, just common powders, patient not very sick." "If you will tell me what kind of powders, Dr. Meeks—" "Oh, just common powders." That was all he would say.

Later Dr. Stokes told about Monterey that Meeks knew nothing about medicine, but people thought that perhaps Meeks had given the prescription in Latin and

that Dr. Stokes could not read it. But Meeks' reign was to have an end. An American man-of-war came into the harbor. Thomas O. Larkin was then the United States consul at Monterey, and the commander and his officers went up to Larkin's store, among them the surgeon, who was introduced to Dr. Meeks. The conversation turning upon the diseases incident to the country. Meeks became reticent, saying merely that he was going out of practice and intended to leave the country, because he had not been able to get medicines.

The ship's surgeon expressed much sympathy and said, "Dr. Meeks, if you will make me out a list I will very cheerfully divide with you such medicines as I can spare." Meeks did not know the name of three kinds of medicine, and tried evasion, but the surgeon cornered him and directed the question so that he had to answer. He asked him what medicine he needed most. Finally Meeks said he wanted some "draps." And that was all that could be gotten out of him. When the story came out, his career as a doctor in Monterey was at an end, and he soon after left the country.

In 1841 there was likewise no lawyer in California. In 1843 a lawyer named Hastings arrived via Oregon. He was an ambitious man, and desired to wrest the country from Mexico and make it a republic. He disclosed his plan to a man who in turn told John Bidwell, Sutter's friend. In Monday's Diary we will tell the story of this part of California's past history.