

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Earliest School

During the studies of the various stories written about Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell the teacher, who opened the first school taught by an English speaking person in California on the grounds of Santa Clara Mission, we have found much of interest upon which to do further research. Several of the writers who have chosen Mrs. Isbell's life and work as subjects for articles have had differing opinions as to dates and other details. This much we do know – that for more than four years she, with her husband, Dr. Isaac Isbell, lived in Monterey and here she again opened a school.

Mrs. Isbell's niece, Mrs. Olive Mann Isbell Ingersoll of Concordia, Kansas, has sent to her very old friend, Mrs. R.A. Hall of Los Altos, a fund of information about the early California educator. Mrs. Hall, who visits Monterey often, has kindly loaned this material and copies of several other articles, to Mrs. William Kneass, the curator of the Stevenson House, who, in turn, has provided the historic items to this column.

Miss Mann wrote that a copy of a magazine article about Mrs. Isbell written and sent to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 was destroyed by a fire in her home but she has a teacher's book published in 1937 called "Reminiscences of Some Early California Teachers" written by Laura Esta Settle, president of the California Retired Teachers' Association, in which Mrs. Isbell is referred to and given the honor of being the first English speaking teacher of the first school.

The Santa Paula Chronicle of March 31, 1899, published a long article on March 31, 1899, following the death of this grand old lady. Another article about the Isbells was printed in "The Ojai," April 3, 1895.

There is a question as to where the school was located in Monterey. Mrs. Isbell related in an article which she wrote in 1893, "They specially fitted up a room for me over the jail." The Isbells arrived in Monterey in April and we find in Walter Colton's "Three Years in California – 1846-1849" this notation: "... On Monday, April 12 – the old prison – too confined and frail – orders given for a new one."

From "Monterey – All Between Two Covers," written by the late A.C. Jochmus of Pacific Grove, the following reference is made to the jail: "The prison was first built

by Walter Colton, adjoining the old calaboose, but in 1855 a new and more substantial one was erected as the county jail, in the school house building (Colton) Hall." He also writes, "The Cuartel was also used as a schoolhouse until the school was transferred to Colton Hall." We also know that the "old calaboose" was built in 1832 by Governor Figueroa and stood at the junction of Pearl and Munras – then known as California Street.

Since the new jail was built in 1855 and Mrs. Isbell began to teach in Monterey in 1847, the school must have been over the "old calaboose." M.E. Dudley has written in an article entitled "California Pioneer Schools" in which he lists "First American School in California, Mrs. Isbell first teacher in state."

From Larkin's account books now in the possession of the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Mrs. Kneass found this recording: "On May 1 rented a room to Mrs. Isbell for \$12,50 per month. She rented this room for three months and twenty-three days, the total rental amounting to \$47.08. Larkin's daughter, Caroline, was evidently one of the pupils, as in the store accounts kept by Larkin of his customers, the Isbell account is given a credit as follows: "By schooling of Caroline, \$5.00. It is also interesting to note that on the same day that Mrs. Isbell moved out of the school room it was rented by Mrs. Townsend and Miss M. Eager – August 23, 1847. In September 1847, Miss Eager carried on alone and continued to rent the room for a school.

Mrs. Isbell's memory is kept green in Santa Paula where she established a home many years ago. There is a public school there named in her honor and years ago a current events club raised sufficient money to put a rather special and interesting stone at her grave in the Santa Paula Cemetery. In 1940 the graduating class of Isbell school assumed the care of the grave.