

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 28, 1952

Colton And The Local Scene

One hundred and six years ago today Commander Stockton informed Walter Colton of his appointment as Alcalde of Monterey. Colton wrote in his diary "Three Years in California" that he had dreamed, as most people have, of the thousand things he might become in the course of his life, but that it had never entered his vision that he might become or should succeed to the dignity of a Spanish Alcalde.

Colton further stated that he much preferred his berth on board the "Congress" the ship upon which he had arrived in Monterey, and that the judicial functions in question at that time should continue to be discharged by the two distinguished gentlemen, purser R.M. Price and Dr. Edward Gilchirst.

But, as he wrote, the services of these officers were deemed indispensable to the efficiency of the ships to which they were assigned. This left Colton with no alternative. His trunks were packed, his books boxed, and in an hour he was on shore, a guest in the house of Thomas Oliver Larkin, Esq., whose munificent hospitalities had reached every officer in the squadron and every functionary in the interest of the flag.

The hospitality of the Larkins was appreciated still more by Colton because of the fact that there was not a "public table or hotel in all California." High and low, rich and poor were thrown together on the private liberality of the citizens. Though a quasi war was in existence, all the amenities and courtesies of life had been preserved in Monterey. According to Colton's diary, "One's person, life and liberty were as sacred at the hearth of the Californian as they would be at your own fireside. He will never betray you; the rights of hospitality, in his generous judgement, require him to peril his own life in defense of yours. He may fight you on the field, but in his family, you may dance with his daughters, and he will himself wake the waltzing string."

On Thursday, July 30th, Colton commenced the duties of his office as Alcalde of Monterey. His jurisdiction extended over an immense territory, and over a most heterogenous population, so he thought. In Monterey were emigrants from nearly every nation, representing a peculiar agglomeration of national habits, virtues, and

vices. Here was the reckless Californian, the half wild Indian, the roving trapper of the west, the lawless Mexican, the licentious Spaniard, the scolding Englishman, the absconding Frenchman, the luckless Irishman, the plodding German, the adventurous Russian, and the discontented Mormon. All had come here with the expectation of finding little work and less law. In this discordant mass Colton had to maintain order, punish crime, and redress injuries, so he related in his diary on the first day he held office.

On July 31, 1846, Colton wrote a description of Monterey as he saw it during that first week of his residence here. He stated that nearly all the houses were of one story, with a corridor. The walls built of adobes, or sun-baked brick, with tiled roofs. The center of the house, he said, was occupied by a large hall, to which the dining room and the sleeping apartments seemed mere appendages. Everything appeared to Colton to be in subordination to the hall, and this was designed and used for dancing. It had a wood floor, and "springs nightly to the step of those who are often greeted, in the whirl of their amusement, by the risen sun. The dance and the dashing horse are the two objects which overpower all others in interest with the Californian."

Colton went on to relate in his day by day account of activities in Monterey that the fiddle had been silent since the United States flag went up, due to the fact that many of the men had left to join General Castro. But when they returned covered with disaster, the fiddle would be called upon to resume its fantastic functions; wrote Colton, "you might as well attempt to extinguish a love of air in a life-preserver as the dancing propensity in this people."