

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 9, 1952

How Monterey Got Its First Piano

The death of Julia Bolado Davis at her home near Tres Pinos in San Benito County a few days ago brings to mind her early connection with the history of Monterey. She was not only a descendant of Gen. Juan Bautista Alvarado, the governor of California from 1836 to 1841, and Gen. Mariano Vallejo, but also the granddaughter of Don Jose Abrego of Monterey.

Don Jose was a Spanish merchant who came to Monterey from Mexico in 1834 with the colonists under Don Jose Maria Hajar on the vessel "La Natalie," which is said to have been the vessel on which Napoleon escaped from the Island of Elba. In 1835 the vessel was sold to smugglers who carried on their dishonest business for a few months until it was wrecked in Monterey Bay. Pieces of the wood from the vessel are on display in the Old Custom House and in many private homes. Don Jose Abrego used portions of the timber from the vessel when he built his adobe home at the corner of Abrego and Webster streets in Monterey.

Abrego was young when he arrived in Monterey. He was intelligent, with some capital, and of good repute, according to Bancroft. He became a prominent citizen, holding office continuously from 1836, as "comisario de policia," administrator of San Antonio Mission, customs official, member of the Assembly and treasurer.

In 1836 Senor Abrego married Josefa Estrada, a half sister of Governor Alvarado and moved at once into a part of the house he had built for his bride, and to which additions were later made. In the Old Custom House are several pieces of Dona Josefa Estrada de Abrego's needle work, given to the museum in memory of this cultured Spanish woman.

Abrego acted as state treasurer of Alta California up to the American occupation of Monterey on July 7, 1846. After that he conducted his store in part of his home and began the manufacture of soap from fats and wood ashes. He continued his business until, during the gold rush, Eastern ships began bringing in perfumed soap and he could not compete.

Mrs. Davis had in her possession until a few years ago the original piano, one of the first in California, which had been in the Abrego home. A slip of paper fastened inside of the instrument and written by Don Jose, had

the following inscription on it: "In 1841 Capt. Stephen Smith arrived with his vessel in Monterey, and I engaged him to bring me a piano on his next trip to this country. In March 1842, he returned to this city (Monterey) in a brigantine; he had three pianos on board. I bought this one from him for \$600. He then sailed for San Francisco, where General Vallejo purchased one and the last was sold to K. de Celis in Los Angeles." The Abrego piano was given by Mrs. Davis to the California Historical Society a few years ago and is now on display in the society's headquarters in San Francisco.

Another piano which had once been used in the Abrego adobe has been returned to Monterey and is now on display in the Old Custom House. It is the gift along with several other historical items from the family of Edward Abrego, a grandson of Don Jose and Dona Josefa Abrego. Also in one of the cases in the Custom House is the christening robe of Mrs. Davis, whose mother was the daughter of Don Jose and Dona Josefa and whose father was Don Joaquin Bolado, the owner of vast property in San Benito County. He came from Spain and purchased these ranches from a family named Larios, who were the grantees.

During a visit which we enjoyed with Mrs. Davis several months ago in her Tres Pinos home, she told us a charming story about her mother. She was a girl of 16 when she married Don Joaquin Bolado in the old Monterey home. He had bought for her a beautiful pair of long gold earrings which she was to wear for the first time on her wedding day. Pointing to a handsome long mirror hanging in the hall of her home, Mrs. Davis said that her mother could not understand the marriage ceremony recited in Latin by the parish priest, so she spent the time shaking her head and looking in that very mirror to see the new earrings sparkle and perform.

Senor Jose Abrego died in 1878 and his wife passed away in 1890.