

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Travels of A Famous Chair

"I hope that presently this relic of the past will make its last journey and find its last resting place within the sheltering walls of the Old Custom House at Monterey," wrote Juan B. Alvarado regarding the Belter chair which has just been acquired by the Monterey History and Art Association.

Mr. Alvarado, the grandson of Governor Juan B. Alvarado, has written the following history of the chair as he received it from members of his family.

"As far as I can recall from a conversation which I had with my father John C. Alvarado in 1909, the arm chair was part of a set of Belter furniture obtained by Governor Alvarado and his wife, Martina Castro de Alvarado for their home in San Pablo, possible in the early 1860's. I do not think these furnishings were ever installed in the Monterey home, as by 1852 the Alvarado family were definitely settled in the two-story adobe at San Pablo. This house and a surrounding 50 acres were subsequently known as the "The Alvarado Homestead." I believe the house was built prior to 1830 by Martine Castro's father. In fact I have in my possession certain papers wherein Mariano Castro applying for a grant of the Rancho Cuchigunes or San Pablo as the year 1823 states that he has already constructed a walled house surrounded by an orchard and garden, etc."

Edward Bosqui, a San Francisco pioneer, wrote an article which appeared in the California Historical Society Quarterly, in December, 1942. "Among others who frequented the Palmer Cook Company Bank at this time were Andres Pico, Pablo de la Guerra, Jose Covarrubias and Juan B. Alvarado, who made it his headquarters when visiting San Francisco." In May 1852, at Alvarado's invitation, Bosqui visited him at his San Pablo ranch. He complains that for breakfast he was given no milk, butter, or fresh meat, but only carne con chili Colorado, tortillas, jerked beef and coffee.

The above will establish the fact that Governor Alvarado was living in 1852, at San Pablo Rancho, now in the center of Contra Costa County.

"Bosqui's criticism annoys me," write Mr. Alvarado, "because I remember that away along in the 1890's when I used to spend my summers on the various

Alvarado and Bolton ranches near Jolon in Monterey County, they had no butter nor did they have fresh milk. Good old condensed milk was what we used and many a plate full of chili con carne have I sopped up with tortillas."

During the 60's and early 70's Governor Alvarado was in his own right the owner of part of Mission San Jose lands and had some right and title to land near Santa Clara, according to his grandson now residing in San Francisco. He owned these together with his wife, Martina, who acquired them through inheritance...14-22nd, of the San Pablo Rancho approximately 18,000 acres. Off these landed estates they must have lived in comparative luxury and with a house well furnished, his grandson believes. The two daughters and three sons all received adequate educations including attendance at Santa Clara college for two of the boys.

About the time of Mrs. Alvarado's (Martina) death in 1875 disputes as to the ownership of various parts of the rancho became so involved that the whole tangle was thrown into court for adjustment. Mr. Alvarado of San Francisco, believes it was a matter of eight years before all the legal tangles were unraveled and final settlements were made. The aging former governor, after all the legal struggle, found himself practically landless and with a very small income.

"It was sometime during this bleak period that my maternal grandfather, Mr. Bolton came into possession of the Belter furniture and it was moved to San Francisco. Mr. Bolton had known Governor Alvarado since 1848 and they had been fast friends," writes Juan B. Alvarado as he tells the story of the 'chair' the History and Art Association has acquired from him for exhibit at the Custom House. Mr. Bolton died in 1889 and the estate was finally divided among five heirs in 1894. The large armchair was allotted to Mr. Alvarado's aunt who subsequently had it shipped to her home in Paris, France, where it remained for over 25 years. So aside from its historic value it is muchly traveled chair.

Upon the aunt's death the chair was inherited by Mrs. John Alvarado and was then shipped back from Paris and delivered to her home in San Rafael. In 1932 upon the death of Mrs. Alvarado, the chair passed into the possession of her son, Juan B. Alvarado, by inheritance. In 1936 he sold the Marin County home, placed the chair in storage for 10 years. For the past six years it has had a place of honor in Mr. Alvarado's apartment, 1900 Washington Street, San Francisco.

The chair was insured for safe transportation by Mr. Alvarado for \$500 and has been appraised as a "rosewood Belter, heavily carved antique arm chair in beautiful condition with original upholstery in back and seat, at \$350.

This new acquisition for the furnishings of the Old Custom House may be seen in that historic building each day in the week, including Sunday, from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m.