

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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She Lived in the Custom House

Mrs. Millie Birks, one of Monterey's real old timers, told a story to a Herald reporter in 1938, which we think would be of interest to our readers today when there has been so much said and written about the Custom House, the oldest Federal building west of the Rocky mountains.

Mrs. Birks, lived in the Custom House for 12 years as a child and her two sisters, the late Mrs. Daisy Culp, and Mrs. E. J. Bolce of New Monterey, were born there. Another sister, the late Mrs. Ruth Darling was born in the First Brick House on Decatur street. Mrs. Birks has lived most of her life within a stone's thrown of the Custom House, for even now she has a continual uninterrupted view of her home at Scott and Tyler streets.

Mrs. Birks related that her aunt, Mrs. J.G. Lambert, with her husband Capt. Lambert, were custodians of the Custom House under the Republican administrations for 24 years, from 1862 to 1886. Mrs. Birks was four years old when her mother brought her to the Custom House in 1872, and they lived there until 1884, with the Lamberts.

At that time the Lamberts were forced to vacate because Capt. Ruurds, justice of the peace and Democrat, was appointed the custodian by the Cleveland administration. He had been living in a little squatty adobe just about where Allen's shoe store is now. Mrs. Birks has a newspaper photograph dated 1896, of Capt. Ruurds standing out in front of the Custom House with government agents—Controller Wise was in charge of them—sent here to move out the fishermen who had squatted, by the building little shacks on the property near the wharf. That little piece of property jutting out into the water was called "Squatters' Flat" because of those shacks.

The custom House in those days was already used as a private residence by the custodians. Miss Evelyn McCormick, late well known Monterey artist, had her studio in the north end at one time. Many of Miss McCormick's paintings of Monterey adobes and historic building are owned by the City of Monterey and hang in Few Memorial offices and in the Monterey Public

Library, as well as in many of the private homes in the community.

Mrs. Birks remembers that at one time the young people of the town laid a dance floor in the part now used as a museum, and many balls and parties were held there, among them Mrs. Birks' own 18th birthday celebration.

Mrs. Lambert had fine little bathing beach out in front of the Custom House. The beach came right up below the building before it was filled in to make a place for the railroad tracks. On the beach Mrs. Birks remembers was a 16 room bath house, and everybody came there to swim. It was a protected "little crescent of sand, exactly like the Grove Beach only smaller, with high ground around it." Mrs. Birks recalled during the interview.

Mrs. Birks also remembered that the children used to drop stones right down from the porch of the Custom House into the water as it swirled up around the north end of the building.

"During our stay there the Custom House was always kept in repair, its tile roof kept intact, and the historic building kept open for inspection by visitors." Mrs. Birks also recalled that her aunt, Mrs. Lambert planted four cypress trees beside the building, two of which are still there.

Capt. Ruurds died in the Custom House, and after his death Captain Lambert acted as caretaker again until the time when the Native Sons of the Golden West took over and held their meetings there, as did the Native Daughters.

On January 1, 1930 the old Custom House Reservation was taken over by the State Division of Beaches and Parks, after it had been purchased from the Federal government through matching funds from the State of California and group of local citizens.