

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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An Early Dance

At the time of Henry Cerruti's visit to Monterey in quest of material for Herbert Howe Bancroft's History of California (1874), he visited Casa Soberanes, the adobe home of Mrs. Feliciano Soberanes, where he seems to have gathered some interesting and entertaining information concerning old Monterey.

Bits of this historical data is contained in a recent publication issued by the Bancroft Library for the members of the Friends of the Bancroft Library and designed and printed by the Gillick Press of Berkeley to the extent of 500 copies.

Through the courtesy of the Bancroft Library, we are privileged to quote from these paragraphs. which relate the happenings during the visit of Bouchard and his men, when Monterey was sacked and burned. Of interest also is a description of the early dances of the period as told by this 76-year-old lady who welcomed the foreign caller into her parlor.

After being asked a few questions as to the important events which had taken place in Monterey during her lifetime. Mrs. Soberanes assured Mr. Cerruti that the most trying period took place toward the year 1818, when Bouchard and his lieutenant, Gomez, sacked and burned the Presidio of Monterey. She told that she had witnessed the blowing up of the "casamata," the bomb proof chamber, by Don Ignacio Vallejo on order of Gov. Sola. She had followed the family of Lt. Estudillo when, by another order from the governor, he went forth from Monterey at midnight; she had camped at Rancho del Rey under a wagon drawn by oxen, and, until supplied with clothing from the good friars, suffered from the cold.

"However, our town was soon rebuilt and since then I have not suffered any great sorrow," Mrs. Soberanes concluded.

Another daughter of Mrs. Soberanes, Anita, played, at her mother's request, the Jarabe, once the national dance of the native Californians. Mrs. Shaw had complied with this request much to the satisfaction and pleasure of Mr. Cerruti, Mrs. Soberanes proceeded to explain how, in the good old days the Californians danced the Jarabe.

We will quote the lady's own words: "The jarabe is a dance that somewhat resembles the jig so popular among Americans from the states of Virginia and Alabama. It was danced by a couple, the dancers facing each other and, to the music of the harp, guitar, and violin, moving their feet in such a way that it was a pleasure to watch them. It was customary to give a prize to the girl who excelled, and the reward was given in this way. Some of the spectators took off their hats and put it on the girl who was dancing. She continued dancing for some time until another dancer came to relieve her."

Mrs. Soberanes recalled a dance held in 1842 at the time that Commodore Jones returned Monterey to the Mexicans, when the officer and a number of his fellow officers attended the festivities. He enjoyed so much the way of dancing in old Monterey that without anyone telling him he took off his cap and placed it on the head of Dona Ramoncita de la Torre, and when the time came to redeem it he gave her 100 pesos. The little girl refused this present, but the "commodore was so insistent and his gallantry so polished that she finally accepted it. Her manner was so gracious that on the following day the commodore went to visit her at her home," Mrs. Soberanes recalled.

Henry Cerruti, one of California's early historians and assistant to Herbert Howe Bancroft, ended his Monterey visit thusly: "Being hungry, I bid adieu to Mrs. Soberanes and her amiable daughter and retraced my steps to the Washington Hotel. a large adobe building where I spent the night, and on the following morning I accompanied Gen. Vallejo on board the steamer Senator, bound for Santa Cruz and San Francisco."