

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **The Early Theater**

There is a fascinating story concerning two of the performances in the first play ever produced in California's First Theater in Monterey—C. E. Bingham and his wife, Lizzie Bingham—who played in "Putman, or the Lion Son of '76,"

It was in the fall of 1874, that four volunteers, Matt Gormley, Bill Tindal, Jack Moran and Long Lee, came up from Santa Barbara on military duty, consigned to Company F, 3rd Regiment, U.S. Artillery. They were in the minstrel line, and had given two burnt cork entertainments to the Santa Barbarans before leaving for Monterey. They were joined here by Aleck Patterson, Pete Earl, and three local characters designated as "Tips," "Tops" and "Taps." With this company the "management" gave two performances in an upstairs south room. This probably was the first effort at minstrelsy on the Coast.

The first theatrical performance ever given in California is believed to have taken place in the old adobe store house adjacent to Jack Swan's saloon, now the First Theater State Historical monument, and it happened this way.

About the time that Stevenson's regiment of New York Volunteers were disbanded, three companies, including the colonel, came up to Monterey. Soon after, the soldiers attempted a theatrical exhibition which was a success. Encouraged by their liberal patronage, the managers induced Jack to fix seats, stage and scenery in the old adobe. The bills were gotten out in due form, posters printed with blacking pot and brush, and the programs written announced "Putman," as the first piece to be played.

The principal characters in the story we will tell today are C.E. Bingham who impersonated the '76 Son, and Mrs. Bingham, Mrs. Martha Washington; Charley Cluchester, George Washington; Frank Wensell and his wife took part, John O'Neal was Mr. Fury; and Pete Earl also was in the company.

"Damon and Pythias," "Box and Cox," "The Golden Farmer," "Grandfather Whitehead," and "Nan, the Good-for-Nothing," were plays in the repertory of the company.

John Harris, Tom Beech, Capt. Wingfield, Mrs. Kettlebottom and Lieut. Derby were also among the leading spirits of the troop. 1849 and 1850 were memorable years in the thespian records of Monterey.

The Mrs. Bingham who impersonated Martha Washington at the First Theater in 1847, was the subject of a story printed in Popular Monthly in April, 1882. The article "The Career, of a Remarkable Woman" was written by T.B. Thorpe.

"The early days of California exhibit a frontier heroine who in the future will be remembered for her remarkable natural powers of mind and success in overcoming what should have been insurmountable difficulties. Yet, by some strange fatality, her history up to the present time has failed of any deserved recognition" The foregoing was the opening paragraph of the story of the life of early day actress in Monterey.

After years passed amid hardships of frontier life as the daughter of a soldier, in constant fear of Indian uprisings during the Seminole War, Lizzie, as she was known, accompanied her father to the Rio Grande, where he served under General Taylor.

During this time she became engaged to "a handsome orderly" attached to the general's staff, and the wedding soon followed. The date proved to be the preliminary opening of the battle of Buena Vista. In the conclusion that preceded the clash of arms between the troops of General Taylor and Santa Ana's troops, the bridegroom, young Bingham, Lizzie's husband, was dispatched with important orders, deliverable to Colonel Jeff Davis. The duty was dangerous and the young bridegroom was discovered and surrounded by a party of guerrillas. That young man was the same young man who played the part of '76 Son in "The Lion Son of '76," in which his wife played Martha Washington.

(To be Continued)