

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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More About Lizzie Bingham

In our last issue of the Peninsula Diary we left Lizzie Bingham, early California actress on her arrival in Los Angeles with the Second Regiment of Dragoons in which her husband was enlisted as a sergeant, in 1848. Now shall continue with her career in the southern city and in Monterey where she appeared in California's First Theatre.

In Los Angeles when the Bingham's arrived there was stationed a company of Col. Stevenson's Regiment of New York Volunteers. Some of its members were amateurs and other theatrically disposed people. A Company of strolling comedians also arrived, and event which was hailed with enthusiasm by the quiet people of the old Pueblo.

A hide and tallow warehouse was transformed into a theatre, plays were presented, sometimes from necessity, the young men played the female roles. This theatrical stimulant roused in the heart of Lizzy for the first time the possibility of making a pursuit she had taken up as an amusement. "She listened with the keenest interest to the tales she heard of the triumphs of the profession, and of the magnificence of the Temples of Thespis," our unknown author writes.

She maintained her self-possession, and undertook the parts assigned to her with a gravity and strict attention to business that would have been natural to the most experienced actress.

The unexpected breaking-out of the gold excitement in California caused the Volunteers to desert almost in a body, and the remnant of the theatrical corps to which Lizzie had attached herself moved to Monterey, where the English drama, with some regard to appointments was for the first time regularly established. Lizzie being the pioneer actress of California. In the enterprise, her husband and number of well-known citizens donning the "sack and buskin," assisted the company.

No written description can give any idea of the difficult work performed by these pioneers of the drama. It was seldom they had a room which was adopted for any proper representation, rarely ever any serious attempt at scenery, often their drop-curtain was made up of bed-clothing. Their rehearsals at the miner's camp took place under the trees and by the light of a bonfire. There is an excellent book, "The Theatre of the Golden Era in California" by George R. MacMinn, which tells much of interest for those interested in the state's early playhouses

and those who played in them. We recommend it for good reading.

The wardrobes in these early day theatres were such as every actor could invent with his limited resources. The whole thing was a travesty; but the gold was a fact, and the finding of it a substantial reward.

The miners, in their "devil-may-care" costumes, in their talks, frolics, quarrels, poverty, wealth, reckless generosity and apparent indifference to the future presented a drama of life which was never before performed under the sun, and in contract with which the quirks and quiddities of the Thespians appeared very assured, and paled in insignificance, seemed to be the opinion of most writers of the theatre in the early days of California.

The miners paid liberally, they all agree, to witness the theatrical display, and the artificial life went on-a strange contrast to the real that surrounded it. There was one sight often represented of the company, with their wardrobe under their arm in a bundle, awaiting in the dining room of the hotel for the boarders to finish their dinner, and give way to the actors for their performance.

A crisis was at hand when Lizzie, who was ignorant of the delay of the performance happened to look into the dining room. A miner, one of the ones who had taken his time, saw Lizzie and with profound astonishment and delight is reported to have said, "Was that a real woman, or only one of those theatrical fellows fixed to look like one?" "If that's the case," said the miner, choking in his utterances as if he had asthma, "and she will come in here and tell me she wants the room, I'll give it to her."

Lizzie was informed of the proposition, who assuming one of her blindest smiles, without the least hesitation put out her hand, at the same time accompanying the action with the request that he would allow the play to go on, promised a free seat from which to witness the performance.

"Why God bless your heart" said the old miner, his eyes filling with tears, "you shall have the room all to yourself for a month if you want it, and at my expense!" Then putting up his revolver, and encouraged by the cheers of the crowd, he allowed Lizzie to lead him away.

In the next issue of the Diary we will continue the story of Lizzie Bingham.