

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Lizzie's Other Roles

Today we will continue our story of early theatrical performances in California including those given in California's First Theatre in Monterey, now a state historical monument.

From the crudest beginnings, theatrical matters gradually assumed a more civilized character and make-shift playhouses, with some attention to scenery and wardrobes, made their appearance. The company with which our heroine Lizzie Bingham, was associated, grew more compact and she consequently enlarged her range of characters, not confining herself to two or three legitimate plays, but passing rapidly from the gentle Juliet to the imperious Lady Macbeth, down through the long range of jolly soubrettes and singing chambermaids. She committed to memory long tragedies by hearing them read once or twice to her, and never depended on the prompter for support, so history relates.

One informant writes "she never trusted wholly to man's instinctive respect for protection. In accordance with the spirit of her surroundings, she knew the value of a pistol and how to use it, and it was well understood that in the folds of her dress was concealed a weapon that would be appealed to if insulted by a work or look from recklessness of the opposite sex. With fear she was unacquainted; but it is certain that her faultless conduct was the true armor of her protection, instead of any show of force."

For five long years, Lizzie pursued this tumultuous and adventurous life in the towns and in the mother lode country of California. She occasionally had her triumphs, and they were peculiar and characteristic.

This delightful bit of Lizzie's experience in California is told in the 1882 issue of Popular Magazine: "On one occasion the citizens of a large and prosperous town, who had built a theatre, sent a formal invitation to Lizzie's theatrical company to make them a visit. The 'principal comedian' was sent ahead to announce the proposed arrival of the company. Owing to the sudden rise of the rivers, the messenger was two days in reaching his destination; he was chased by a grizzly bear and repeatedly shot at by hostile Indians. When the Company finally reached the town a committee of

citizens was awaiting them and the 'ford,' to escort the ladies of the troupe.

This honor was accorded to them because of the fact that with the exception of the wives of some of the emigrants—and they not very prepossessing—there was not a woman living in the country for many miles around. Many of the miners had not seen a woman since years before when they left their New England homes. When they arrived, the men, in their joyous exuberance, greeted Lizzie with three long cheers. A sturdy old miner approached her and with great natural gallantry, assisted her from her mule's back, then delicately kissed the tips of her fingers."