

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Shakespeare in 1850

Lt Alfred Sully, who arrived in Monterey with Col. J. D. Stevenson's regiment of New York Volunteers, took part in the first play to be produced in California's First Theater on Pacific street, fell in love and married Manuelita Jimeno, a Spanish senorita, and finally rose to be a general In the United States Army, wrote many letters to his father, Thomas Sully, in Philadelphia, concerning his life in Monterey. Copies of letters have been given to us by his grandson that we might entertain our readers with their contents.

In a long letter written from Monterey in February 1850, Sully tells his father that there is in town now quite a neat little theater. With a bit of bragging, he also reports: "Scenes painted very fine by myself, acting very so-soish. However, the audience are not of a very discerning nature it does to pass the time. About two weeks ago we, the officers, gave the people a treat in the shape of a little Shakespears. I intended to have sent you one of the bills but have lost it, however as near as I can recollect this is it." And Sully proceeds to give his father the list of the cast for "The Story of the Gadshill Robbery," and two acts of "Henry IV."

Sully evidently took the lead in this first play. Lt. Derby, who later became a famous humorous and wrote under the pen name of Phoenix, took part. At the close of the play Lt. McLean, in the role of Gadshill, made a pathetic speech in character. Then there was a comic song by Mr. Macready, followed by another song by Forest (Lt. Derby) and the whole concluded with the farce of "Box and Cox," Sully wrote his father. There were three women in this part of the program, Mrs. Bouncer, Miss Charlotte Cushman, and Mrs. Bingham. Our readers will remember the story of Lizzie Bingham, who traveled through the Mother Lode after leaving Monterey with her husband and twin daughters, playing in the various mining camps. She was the subject of a story printed in "The Popular Monthly" in April 1882, entitled "The Career of a Remarkable Woman."

At the end of the presentation of "Box and Cox," the audience retired with slow music, according to Lt. Alfred Sully's report. "It all went off with a great deal of applause and the audience very much gratified, particularly as they had nothing to pay."

Cheering his family in far off Philadelphia, young Sully wrote: "Plenty of fun and a good commanding officer, but I fear this will soon be broken up Gen. Riley, who you know is the lieutenant colonel of this regiment has been promoted a colonel of the 1st Infantry. This will take him to Texas, and we will be getting a commanding officer that everybody considers a hog, so I will not stay here if I can help it."

A report on the state of the weather in Monterey in 1850 is interesting: "The rainy season is at last I believe over. Fruit trees are in bloom and the ground again covered with flowers. The country begins to look like it did when we first arrived here, quite refreshing after dreary season when all was parched and dried and the muddy times over boot tops and no bottom.

"Even my horse seems to enjoy the change, for he with Lt. Mullin's horses, have the privilege of roaming where they like. All day long you can see them chasing each other and kicking up their heels for pure joy. At sunset they come home to be cleaned, fed, and put to bed. People have already begun flocking to the mines. The town already begins to look deserted of its male population. The news from there are as exaggerated as ever. Some few sensible persons, I noticed in my ride yesterday, have begun to plow and plant, so it is hoped we will not be as bad off for eating as we were last year.

As a postscript to his letter of Dec. 29, 1849, Lt. Sully wrote his father this bit of news: "Miss Matty is married to a Presbyterian parson here. One Willie, a very nice man."

In Dr. Rockwell Hunt's book "California's Stately Hall of Fame," we have found this note: "Willey had not long been in California before he met Martha Jeffers, a charming maiden of adventurous spirit who had accompanied her sister, the wife of Capt. Wescott, to Monterey. Their marriage, Sept. 19, 1849, was indeed a social event." The Rev. Mr. Willey was chaplain of the Constitutional Convention held in Colton Hall that same year. He also conducted a school and founded the first library in Monterey for the English-speaking population.