

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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New Year's Eve In Early Days

The Rev. Walter Colton, Monterey's first Alcalde and the builder of Colton Hall, wrote in his diary, "Three Years in California," his impressions of New Year's Eve in this, the first capital of California.

One hundred and ten years ago he jotted down his impression of the celebration in the Far West and quoted from the poet Shelley to illustrate his description of the important occasion.

"Friday, Jan.1. Last night, while the sentinel stars were on their mid-watch, the old year resigned its scepter, and departed amid the wailing hours to join the pale shadows of the mighty past. The strong winds, awaking in grief, shook the forest leaves from their slumbers, and poured from cloud and cliff their stormy dirge.

"As an earthquake rocks a course

In its coffin in the clay.

So white Winter, that rough nurse,

Rocks the death-cold year today:

Solemn hours wail aloud.

For your mother in her shroud.

"But nature never leave the throne of time vacant. An heir to her wide domain was invested at once with the imperial purple, while woods and waterfalls, the organ cloud and the sounding sea, sung his coronation hymn. The great tide of time moved on as before, rolling in events pregnant with the fate of nations. But men, blind to these momentous issues, hail the eventful year - in which perhaps their own coffins swing (?) with egg-nog (?) Out of their frivolity. Their mirth is the bubble that paints the rainbow on Niagara's thundering verge "

Colton's description of Monterey's weather in 1846 might have been written today, so we quote from his diary as noted a few days later: "It is mid-winter, and yet the robins are all out singing as if the buds of May were bursting around them. You miss none of the favorites in meadow or grove. Hill and vale are echoing with their wild numbers (?). This is not a gush of music that is to be followed soon by silence. It is not an interval of sunlight that is to be succeeded by cloud and hail. All these charms belong to the season and make you forget that it is winter. You look to the sun and see

that he circles far to the south; but you look around you arid find the sparkling streams unfettered by frost and hear the whistle of the ploughman as he breaks the glebe. You say to yourself, there is no winter in California."

On Jan. 6, 1846, Colton noted in his diary: "As I was sitting in the house of an old Californian today, conversing very quietly about the condition of the country, I felt something break on my head, and, starting around, discovered two large black eyes, lighted with their triumph. It flashed upon me that the annual egg-breaking festival here had commenced. The rules of this frolic do not allow you to take offense, whatever may be your age or the gravity of your profession: You have only one alternative, and that is to retaliate if you can. You have not to encounter the natural contents of the egg these are blown out, and the shell is filled with water, scented with cologne, or lavender, or more often, with gold tinsel, and flashing paper, cut into ten-thousand-minute particles. The tinsel is rubbed by a dash of the hand into your hair, and require no little combing and brushing to get it out. Ladies will work at it for hours and find some of the spangles still remaining. When a liquid is used, the apertures are closed with wax. so that the belligerent may carry it about on his person

"The antagonist is always of the opposite sex. You must return these shots, or encounter a (?) which is even worse. Having finished mv chat. I bade my good California friend and his daughter, mv eggshell opponent, good morning, but turned into a shop, procured an egg or two. and re-entered the mansion of my friend by a side door, where I watched my victim. A few minutes brought her along, all unconscious of her danger. I slipped from my cover and, unperplexed dashed the showering egg on her head. Her locks floated in cologne. I was avenged and now stood square with the world so far as egg-breaking is concerned. This seems like children's play, but here you are forced into it in self-defence."

The above is written Jan. 6, 1846 long before the Lenten season began. We have read and had old-timers tell us that all year long in Old Monterey families sat together and made cascarones (**garbled from text here to end**).