

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Monterey's Elegant Spa

In anticipation of the Grand Military Ball at the Navy Postgraduate School on the evening of Oct. 26, we thought another story about Hotel Del Monte might not go amiss. It was the old hotel which the U. S. Navy chose as the permanent quarters for this important school, when it was determined that such a school should be established on the West Coast. The Grand Ball will be held in the large and beautiful old dining room and the dinner which will precede the dancing will be held in the Ball Room. The hosts at the event will be the Monterey Peninsula Chapter of the Reserve Officers Assn.

On June 12, 1880, a lightning express train of six carnages laden with what was called "the flower of San Francisco's aristocracy", brought the first guests to California's new resort the great Hotel Del Monte.

In one of the series of Keepsakes from the Book Club of California there appears a history of Del Monte as told by James D. Hart, president of the club, vice-chancellor of the University of California and chairman of the English department. He also is the operator of the private Hart Press; Dr. Hart says in part.

The idea of a spa as elegant as any on the eastern seaboard or the Riviera was conceived by Charles Crocker, a member of the Southern Pacific's "Big Four." For their holding company, the Pacific Improvement, he bought from David Jacks the hotel's Monterey site, and the narrow-gauge track connecting it with the main Southern Pacific line between San Francisco and Los Angeles. In this Xanadu of the Pacific Coast, Crocker decreed that a Victorian version of a pleasure dome should be built and be superintended its hundred days of construction.

Set in the midst of a 126-acre park with tapestried flower beds and exotic trees was the hotel itself, with an architectural style called Swiss Gothic. Pearl gray outside this masterpiece of jigsaw carpentry was all white inside from hardwood floors to ornate chandelier. The three-story main building surmounted by an 80-foot central tower, extended its turreted and pinnacled façade and broad verandas along the front of 340 feet. Curving gracefully from both ends were arcades of glass and wrought iron connecting with annexes that helped

to accommodate the 750 guests the hotel could house, wrote editor Hart.

Further description spoke of the grounds: "From the main building walks and roads radiated to the livery stables, the track for gentlemen races, a polo field, the tennis courts, the great maze of seven-foot-high cypress hedges through which gravel paths meandered, and the private lake at which boat landing was a clubhouse equipped with billiard tables, bowling alley, and bar. Beside the bays edge was a glass-roofed bathing pavilion with four swimming tanks each heated to a different temperature.

Contemplating this luxury, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote: "The Monterey of last year exists no longer. A huge hotel has sprung up in the desert by the railway. (?) Invaluable toilettes figure along the beach and between the live oaks, and Monterey is advertised in the newspapers and posted in the waiting room at the railway stations, as a resort for wealth and fashion. Alas for the little town, it is not strong enough to resist the influence of the flaunting caravanserai and the poor quaint penniless native gentlemen of Monterey must perish like a lower race before the millionaires of the Big Bonanza." James D. Hart remarks here: "A half century before Steinbeck, Stevenson spoke of the dispossessed of Tortilla Flat, but the death symbolized by Del Monte was not to be stopped."

Reports tell is that when the great hotel suddenly caught fire and burned to the ground on May 31, 1887, Mr. Crocker announced that since it had been a good investment and a pleasure to run, he would rebuild immediately. The new hotel possessed a vast ballroom and a dining room 170 feet long. To the grounds were added a golf course. President McKinley visited there, arriving in a coach drawn by six black horses.

In 1919, Del Monte was sold to a group formed by the Pacific Improvement Company's general manager S. F.B. Morse. "A vigorous young Yale graduate, Morse understood the new era and soon resuscitated the hotel, but five years after it passed into his hands, the great wooden building burned in another disastrous fire, Sept 27, 1924. In 1926 a great edifice of Spanish-California style was opened, to it were still connected the old annexes refurbished though they were." Hart wrote in the Keepsake.

For another generation, the Hotel Del Monte continued its proudly elegant tradition until commander by the

Navy during the World War II, a disposition from which it never recovered for it was sold in 1947 to become the United States Naval Postgraduate School.