

September 11, 1957

### First Theaters

We enjoyed the privilege on Saturday of speaking to the Santa Clara County Pioneers at a luncheon in the De Anza Hotel in San Jose and showing the colored slides of many of Monterey's historical adobe buildings.

The announcement was made by the president, Percy Thompson, that the organization was completing plans to visit Monterey on the evening of Oct. 19 to attend California's First Theater and enjoy the Troopers of the Gold Coast in a production of "Lightnin'." Frank Bacon, the author of the play who starred in the leading role in New York during its long run there, was a San Jose resident during his young manhood, so naturally the pioneers are exceedingly proud of the play, its success and of the author-actor.

All of the above is certainly history in action! – the cities, De Anza, Pioneers, First Theater, "Lightnin'", Frank Bacon and Monterey's historical monuments.

Dr. Rockwell D. Hunt in his recent publication "California Firsts" has this to say about the first theaters in California:

"There has been not a little controversy about the first theaters in California. This has been occasioned largely by confused meanings and uses of the term. When referring to the theater, is it the physical structure, or the building, that is meant, or the theatrical performance in a building erected for that specific purpose, or merely some kind of a show that might be called a theater, irrespective of the physical setting?

"Obviously no single date or place could apply to all these meanings. The zeal for a favored location, expressed in a spirit of local patriotism, has also been a source of confusion. If there happens to be an established tradition in a town or community, the people there are loath to accept any contrary evidence, however authentic."

According to Bancroft:

"The first public dramatic performances are claimed for the United States garrison at Sonoma, in September, 1847, and for an amateur company, chiefly Californians, at San Francisco." Contemporary references to this company are found in the Californian (first newspaper) in October of that year, and later dates.

The building at the corner of Scott and Pacific streets in Monterey is claimed as California's first theater. This was an adobe building erected in the year 1847 by Jack Swan, a pioneer of 1843, as a lodging home for sailors. Members of Col. J.D. Stevenson's Regiment stationed at the Monterey Presidio, contacted Swan, asking for permission to use the adobe building in which to put on a play. He consented and "Putnam, or the Lion Son of 1776", was presented in 1848, the first paid public performance, it is claimed, in California.

The old adobe building fell into a state of disrepair. It was variously used as a drug store, curio shop, tea room and museum, and for "other humdrum purposes." Not until 1937 was action taken to restore the theater, and the first performance in the refurnished building took place on June 3 of that year, sponsored by the Monterey History and Art Assn. The occasion was also Monterey's 167<sup>th</sup> birthday. Monterey's First Theater is an historical monument, owned by the State of California and administered by the State Division of Beaches and Parks.

The reconstructed building is visited yearly by throngs of tourists as one of the many significant landmarks of historic Monterey, capital of the province before the American conquest.

Dr. Hunt reports: "Another city comes forward with its claim. Here is a statement by no less authority than Constance Rourke in the Woman's Home Companion, for May, 1928:

"And at Sacramento in October, 1849, the first complete theatrical performance in California was given in the new Eagle Theater, a small affair of canvas walls with a roof of sheet iron upon which the rain beat a small tattoo ... The stifling interior of the theater boasted a dress circle and a paraquet, the stage had a drop curtain."

The Eagle Theater opened Oct. 18, 1849, with the "Bandit Chief" as its attraction. Reporting the opening night, the Placer Times of Oct. 20, 1849, says:

"The house opened to a full, and we may add, fashionable house, for the dress circle was graced by quite a number of fine looking, well costumed ladies, the sight of whom was very revivifying."