

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 28, 1958

Memorial Performance

Twenty-one years ago, on June 3, the Monterey History and Art Assn. sponsored the re-opening of California's First Theater under the Denny-Watrous management. The first play presented was "Tatters, the Pet of Squatter's Gulch," directed by the late Galt Bell. A group of young people, known then as it is today as "The Troupers of the Gold Coast," took part in the melodrama and also in the olio which follows.

The night of June 4 the Troupers will present "Ten Nights in a Bar Room," as part of Monterey's 188th birthday celebration. A party will follow in the old bar room sponsored by the Monterey History and Art Assn., to which all in attendance at the show are invited. Strolling musicians will entertain as usual.

The first performance in 1937 opened the old theater after its restoration and will be recalled by many of the members of the History and Art Assn. who attended as well as those who participated in the show. Galt Bell was the originator of the now famous marathon production of "The Drunkard" in Los Angeles. Bell flew back and forth between Monterey and Los Angeles during the rehearsals and assisted Dene Denny in creating the olio. The cast of the melodrama included Bob Bratt, Ross Miller, Gordon Knowles, Mary Mable Henderson, Lloyd Weer, Byington Ford, Ruth Marion McElroy, William Shephard, Betty Carr, Ivy van Cott, Betty Bryant, Jerome Chance, Rex Flaherty, Connie Flavin, and Frank Wilkinson.

Blackie O'Neil was master of ceremonies and the sets and curtain were designed and painted by the late Phil Nesbitt. Peninsula artist Wolo, a noted artist who spent much time on the Monterey Peninsula in those days, designed the handbills and other cartoons to announce the event.

Associated with the First Theater in all the years since the reopening are Rhoda Johnson, in charge of costuming; and Kay Knudsen, lights. Mrs. Johnson also costumes La Favorita, Duena, and the attendants for the Merienda, which celebrates Monterey's birthday on June 3 each year.

The roster of directors, players, accompanists and back stage-helpers appearing on the long succession of programs for Gold Coast Troupers' productions contains

many names not only well known locally, but important in the world of the theater.

Chief among these is the late famous American actor. George Marion who directed "In the Shadow of the Rockies," opening at the First Theater in August, 1937, Steve Cochran, now prominent in Hollywood, played the villain in "The Streets of New York" and directed another of the melodramas. Robert Emmett, currently making a name for himself on Broadway as a TV writer, played numerous leads with the Gold Coast Troupers under the name of Bob McMenemy, a native of Monterey. The late Roland Telfer directed a long list of plays, as has Rhea Diveley.

Among the very early barbershop quartets on the First Theater stage was that composed of Leo Abinante, Harold MacLean, Bill Crabbe, and the late William M. O'Donnell. Sets have been created by Remo Scardigli, Maxine Albro and Erica Franke.

The late B. Franklin Dixon appeared in numerous plays and stage managed several. Edward C. Hopkins, now residing in Southern California, sang a part in "Pinafore" and was piano accompanist for a number of productions. Both Mary Greene and Isabel Hartigan Tilden played character parts in the Troupers' production of "The Drunkard."

Mrs. Vera Stewart, curator at California's First Theater, hopes that some early player in the Troupers or a theater enthusiast who saves programs, will provide these missing programs from the scrap-book she is composing as an historical record for the Monument: "In the Shadow of the Rockies" Sept. 1937; the first Tatters performance June 3, 1937; and "Moor Born" March 16, 17, 18 and 13, 1939.