

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Early-Day Libraries

We have just read an entertaining and historical article in the California Historical Society Quarterly under the date of December 1959 by Hugh S. Baker, a third generation Californian, a graduate of Stanford University and now a professor at the San Francisco State College. The title of the article is "Rational Amusement in Our Midst" which deals with public libraries in California, 1849-1859.

Mr. Baker writes "Originally each mission had a library, even though a small one. The library at Mission San Carlos Borromeo is one of the best preserved collection in the northern part of the state, as that at Santa Barbara is the best preserved in Southern California.

"At the beginning of 1849 no lending or club libraries existed in California, but before the end of the year one subscription library at Monterey, the State Library, and commercial reading room at San Francisco were organized. These were the first of a number of institutions in addition to the bookstores which provided groups of readers in the state with an important supply of books for pleasure and entertainment.

"One of the purposes of the libraries in the state was to provide a gathering place for young men. The constitution of the Monterey Library Association, adopted in 1849, stated the idea thus: "The design of this association is, through a library and reading room, to afford amusement, entertainment, and profit to a large class who, without its aid, would waste their time in the frivolities and questionable pastimes so prevalent in our state."

The Alta of March 16, 1855 said "It ... is a nucleus around which friends of literary and social refinement and elevation, may cordially unite."

Mr. Baker continues: "Fittingly enough, the first public library, was founded at Monterey, which for so many years had been the seat of the Spanish government, the capital of Alta California under the Mexican rule, and the seat of the first government after California passed into the hands of the United States. Late in 1849, Rev. Samuel Hopkins Willey, a Presbyterian clergyman, and the Rev. Joseph A. Benton, a Congregational clergyman, thought of a library as a part of their missionary efforts.

Following the traditions of the Atlantic Seaboard and the Middle West, they founded an association library of high standards; it established a pattern in the state, for the present system of public (now free) libraries. So that this library would benefit as many young readers as possible, the fees were nominal – one dollar a month or eight dollars a year. The printed catalogue of 1854 listed books of literature (poetry, essays and fiction), history, biography, travel, science, and theology. There was also in the collection a special section of books in Spanish, including works in Spanish translation by such authors as Scott, Defoe, Cooper, Hugo, Dumas and Eugene Sue. Such entertaining books must have appealed to many of the Spanish speaking people still living in Monterey, In 1859 the collection amounted to 2,500 volumes, according to the state register of 1859, a goodly beginning for a cultural tradition for the Golden State."

The Monterey Weekly Herald of Sept. 19, 1874 said that the officers of the Monterey Library in 1853 were: Milton Little, president; J. R. Knapp, vice president; W. S. Johnson, treasurer; and D. R. Ashley, secretary. The article also stated that the library was neglected and locked in El Cuartel; the editor wanted the library revived.

The second public library to be founded in California, also situated in Monterey was the State Library. In its earliest days it was neither a lending nor a public library, but for the use of the legislators and executives. It grew into our present great State Library at Sacramento after the capital was taken away from Monterey.