

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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California's First Theater

On Saturday evening, June 3, 1961, more than a century after Jack Swan built his saloon on Pacific and Scott streets in Monterey, California's First Theater, a State Historical Monument, will celebrate its 24th birthday, observing its reopening as a playhouse on June 3, 1937, by Denny-Watrous management. In accordance with its annual custom, the Troopers of the Gold Coast will give a special production on Saturday evening, June 3, for the members of the Monterey History and Art Assn.

On the tenth anniversary, May 31, 1947, there appeared this paragraph in The Herald; "With its year-round weekend showings of old melodramas, it is the only, "legitimate" playhouse between San Francisco and Santa Barbara, its unique history and hilarious entertainment attracting visitors from all points of the coast."

One hundred and thirteen years ago, in the spring of 1847, Jack Swan, "pioneer," built himself a saloon for sailors and whalers on the corner of Pacific and Scott streets in Monterey. A long, narrow edition on the south end of the saloon gave lodging for the sailors. In the spring of 1848, the men of Col. J. D. Stevenson's Regiment, quartered at the Presidio of Monterey, entered into an agreement with Jack Swan for the use of his saloon and lodging house for a theatrical performance.

With lusty enthusiasm the spirited and talented members of the company gave the first paid performance in California. "Putnam, the Iron Son of '76," thereby making Jack Swan's adobe technically the "First Theater in California," a coveted title very irksome to larger cities which would like to claim it.

Seats, on improvised benches, were sold at \$5 each and the occasion was a gala one although only five women were reported to have attended the "first" performance. Tallow candles were used for footlights, and a wooden partition served as the curtain. This partition is now bolted to the ceiling about midway in the theater.

As time went on, the building became a drug store, a tea-room, a shop, and the crumbling, decaying edifice would have gone the way of so many early California landmarks had not a few public-spirited men of vision

taken it over and purchased the First Theater and deeded it to the State of California, Division of Beaches and Parks. The legislature voted funds for its restoration, and today, the historic adobe is known far and wide as California's First Theater, State Historical Landmark. Its audience now hisses the villain, applauds the heroine, and stamps and shouts in the best forty-nine manner.

The first entertainment, on June 3, 1937, was sponsored by the Monterey History and Art Assn. So, it was on the occasion of Monterey's 167th birthday that the first theater, dark for more than 75 years, once more raised its curtain and the newly organized "Troopers of the Gold Coast" went on the boards.

Tickets sold for \$2.50 each, the management having installed benches, on which were crowded the elite of "Old Monterey" with patrons from Carmel, Del Monte, Pebble Beach, Pacific Grove and the San Francisco press. Many of the patrons came in costume, a typical orchestra played in the old saloon (as it will again on June 3, 1961), and mellowed light came from oil lamps and Jack Swan's blazing fireplace.

After the performance the association's hospitality committee will serve punch and cookies in the old saloon for the membership in attendance and for the Troopers of the Gold Coast, as has been the custom on June 3 since the reopening of the theater under the sponsorship of the History and Art Assn., in 1937.