

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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In Old Monterey

"When I was a little girl, said Mrs. Mary Elsnore the daughter of Milton Little, builder of the Kimball Hotel in Monterey, "Monterey was the first city of California, because it was then the capital and also gold was discovered within 200 miles of it. My father, Milton Little, settled here in the first days, for he left New York in 1844. Two years later, my maternal grandmother, also of New York, sailed around the Horn with her five children and came here also. Father came to seek his fortune, but grandmother had other reasons. She had been told that a sea voyage would be good for her five children and that California was a good place to bring up children, and thus she saw an opportunity to gratify her love of adventure. A year or two later, father married her oldest daughter, Mary. The ceremony took place in what is now known as the Robert Louis Stevenson House and Mather Cotton, then the alcalde, assisted by the chaplain of the Navy Rev. Walter Colton, read the marriage rites.

"On one of the streets near the waterfront, there was a little adobe house with iron bars before the windows. That is where my parents first lived. The walls of this house were all of 3 feet thick and the oaken doors were unusually heavy and long ago had brass hinges 8 inches long. Then, at night, stout shutters of oak protected the windows because you see, after gold was discovered in 1848, this dwelling was used as a banking house the first, I think in California."

Pointing to a camphor wood chest, covered with pig skin and gayly painted in an oriental design, Mrs. Elsnore said to her interviewer, "That chest was the safe. It was almost primitive. Father at that time was deputy alcalde under Mather Cotton and had charge of the public money which had to be cared for. Then the miners began coming to Monterey with their sacks of gold dust and could find no safe place to leave them so they would bring them to my mother who labeled them with the owner's name and simply dumped them into the chest. It was a big chest and sometimes it would be two-thirds full of pure gold. The men never took a receipt and mother kept no records. But when the miners returned, their gold would be waiting for them and there never was any trouble.

"In the ranches surrounding Monterey, there was immense wealth. To give you an idea, I remember a Spaniard who gave, besides land and other gifts, 1,800 head of heifers as a wedding present to his daughter."

Although the Spanish costume was never worn in Mrs. Elsnore's time, she remembered that the women were always handsomely gowned and usually wore silk.

When they paid calls or did their errands, they rode in oxcarts. She said you could not imagine how clumsy they were with no springs, and wheels of solid wood which rumbled ponderously over the rough roads. Cushions helped somewhat to make the seats more comfortable and a hide was spread on the floor to protect dainty slippers. A Mexican peon always walked at the head of the oxen and at the command of the mistress would halt frequently to grease squeaky axles with soft-soap.

A lady never, never rode horseback, although the men were constantly on their horses. All the old Spanish customs were practiced. "We often danced but not like young people do today," Mrs. Elsnore insisted in this long-ago interview. "There were no clubs or community dancing then, but balls were held in the home sala and we danced Spanish dances. These parties were informally formal and began anytime between three and seven and were usually over by 11 o'clock. We never remained after 12 o'clock. All the guests were supposed to be socially equal so there were no introductions. An invitation constituted an introduction to all the guests."

Mrs. Elsnore also recalled that for some weeks before and after Christmas there was a festive period and they attended many parties and balls. There was a custom of using cascarones, she said. Weeks before an important occasion, eggshells were filled with gold confetti and then sealed. These were used for playing games and also as an invitation to dance. Breaking the shell, a gallant would let the confetti float over the head of the girl he desired for a partner. Even if he had not been formally presented this was quite correct, and if she wished to continue the acquaintance, she spoke first the next time they met. Mrs. Little, the mother of Mrs. Elsnore would prepare as many as 25 dozen of these cascarones for the family to use at a single party.