

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **The First 'First Theater'**

The Eagle Theater in Sacramento, often spoken of in connection with California's First Theater in Monterey, was opened Oct. 18, 1849, and was the first theater built in California, according to a short item appearing in the quarterly of the Historical Society of the capital city.

The seating capacity on the main floor was 300 and in the gallery about 100. During the opening days, the charge for a dress circle seat was \$5 and on the main floor, \$3. Performances were held three times a week and an orchestra of five pieces furnished the music. In January 1850, the Eagle Theater gave its last performance and the troop moved to San Francisco.

Our First Theater in Monterey was not built for a theater as was Sacramento's, but for a sailors' rooming house, by Jack Swan in 1847. 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 old adobe technically the "First Theater in California," a coveted title very irksome to larger cities which would like to claim the title.

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 the 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 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 Historic Landmark. Its

audiences now hiss the villain, applaud, the heroine, and stamp and shout in the best '49 manner.

The first latter-day 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 "Troupers of the Gold Coast" went on the boards.

Tickets for the performance in 1937 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, and mellowed light came from oil lamps and Jack Swan's blazing fireplace.

After the performance the association's hospitality committee served punch and cookies in the old saloon for the membership in attendance and for the Troupers of the Gold Coast, as has been the custom on June 3, Monterey's birthday, since the reopening of the theater under the direction of the History and Art Association in 1937.