

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Tombstone Epitaphs Tell Historic Tales

"Thomas Williamson, Murdered in Monterey County, Nov. 9, 1855."

So reads an epitaph on a tombstone in the Monterey Catholic Cemetery. He was killed by Garcia and his wild gang, who fired from ambush, the old records inform us. There are many other stones dated 1805 when a bad epidemic in that year, similar to influenza today, killed a great many persons.

Then there is an amusing, but nevertheless sincere tribute, among the stones in city cemetery, which once appeared in Ripley's 'Believe It or Not.' It reads: "Emma, Beloved Wife of J.O. Johnson, Born in Ohio, April 14, 1844, Died Sept. 13, 1884: She Was Always Right!"

In our cemetery wanderings we read with interest the name Spence upon several headstones. The graves were marked: Dona Adelaide de Spence, Born 1811 in Monterey, Died. 1875; Don David Spence, Born in Scotland died in 1875; and their two baby daughters, who died two days apart March 18 and 20; and then a son, who died on the 25th of the same month, probably from diphtheria.

The name Spence was a well-known one in the very early history of Monterey County. The founder of the family was David Spence, who became secretary of John Beggs and Co., hide and tallow merchants of Liverpool, England. In 1822 he was sent to establish a branch office in Callao, Peru, and two years later he was ordered to Monterey. Here he found a fitting field for expansion. He served as alcalde under Gov. Arguello and also held many offices of importance in the Mexican regime.

Guinn's History of the Central Coast tells us that Spence took up two grants of land. The first was called Buena Esperanza, in the Salinas Valley, containing 12,000 acres, and the second; the Llano Buenavista, also in the Salinas Valley, and including the present site of Spreckels.

Spence married Adelaide Estrado. She was born in Monterey, the daughter of Mariano and Isabel Estrada natives of Monterey and one of the best known of the Spanish families. Dona Isabel was the sister of Gov. Arguello and daughter of Jose Dorio Areguello.

Josefa Cano Stokes, wife of James Stokes, "Born Nov. 15, 1815, Died Sept. 16, 1855," was another interesting and historical marker in the old cemetery. James Stokes was an Englishman who came to Monterey in the 1830's and became a prominent trader, druggist, and consulting physician to Gov. Figueroa. He married Dona Josefa Soto de Cano a widow and mother of five children. James and Josefa raised 10 of their own.

Dona Josefa was baptized in Mission San Antonio where her father, Damaso Soto, was a soldier under the king of Spain. Married first to Gil Cano, soldier of Mexico, in 1827 at, San Carlos Church in Monterey and widowed in 1838, she married James Stokes and saw the flag of a new nation raised over the land of her ancestors. The Stokes Adobe, later known as the Gragg Adobe, and now Gallatin's restaurant, was built by James Stokes.

We gazed for a long time upon the graves of Josiah Merritt and his wife, Dona Juana Castro de Merritt. Merritt was born in New York State Aug. 21, 1796. He was a lawyer who had practiced in New York City before arriving in Monterey via Texas in January 1850. He took an active part in organizing Monterey County of which he was elected judge, serving until 1854. Shortly after arriving in Monterey he married Juana Castro, eldest daughter of Simeon Castro, judge of the first instance under Mexican rule and one of the most influential citizens of the community. The Merritt Adobe on Pacific street was built by Judge Merritt.

Standing alone in the cemetery is a marble shaft bearing the name Rosalia Vallejo Leese, Born Jan. 27, 1811; Died July 30 1889. Dona Rosalia Vallejo Leese was the sister of Gen. M. G. Vallejo, and the mother of Rosalie Leese, the first child to be born in Yerba Buena, now known as San Francisco. A number of years ago, the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a bronze plaque upon the Leese home site on Grant avenue, between Jackson and Washington streets, in San Francisco, a location which is now the middle of Chinatown! The Leese family once owned the Larkin House in Monterey. Thomas Oliver Larkin entered into an agreement with Jacob P. Leese to trade properties shortly after the Gold Rush, Leese taking over the Larkin House and Larkin getting the San Francisco holdings of Leese.