

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 22, 1964

Actors In Old-Time Theatre

It was in the fall of 1847 that four volunteers, Matt Gormley, Bill Tindal, Jack Moran and Long Lee, came up from Santa Barbara on military duty, consigned to Co. F, 3rd Regiment, U.S. Artillery. They were in the minstrel line and had given two burnt cork entertainments to the Santa Barbarans before leaving. In Monterey they were joined by Aleck Patterson, Pete Earl and three local characters designated as "Tips," "Taps," and "Tops." With this company, the "management gave two performances in the old Cuartel Building, south end, upstairs. This was undoubtedly the first effort at minstrelsy, on this coast." These Statements came from old copies of the Monterey Weekly Herald.

The first theatrical performance ever given in California took place in the old adobe storehouse adjacent to Jack Swan's saloon and it came to pass this way. About the time that Stevenson's regiment of New York volunteers was disbanded, three companies, including the colonel, came up to Monterey. Soon after, the soldiers attempted a theatrical exhibition, which was a success. Encouraged by their liberal patronage, the managers induced Jack to fix seats, stage and scenery in the old adobe. The bills were gotten out in due form, posted, printed with blacking pot and brush, and programs written announcing "Putnam, or The Lion Son of '76," as the first piece to be played.

C. E. Bingham impersonated the '76 Son, and Mrs. Bingham was Martha Washington; Charlie Cluchester, George Washington. Frank Wensell and his wife took part. John O'Neal, Mr. Fury and Pete Earl belonged to the company also.

"Damon and Pythias," "Box and Cox," "The Golden Farmer," "Grandfather Whitehead," and "Nan the Good-for Nothing," were pieces in the repertory of the company.

John Harris, Tom Beech, Capt. Wingfield, Mrs. Kettlebottom, and Lt. Derby were also among the leading spirits of the troupe. The years 1849 and 1850 were memorable in the thespian records of Monterey.

The Mrs. Bingham who impersonated Martha Washington in what is now known as the First Theatre, "was the subject for a story printed in Popular Monthly in April of 1882. The article was "The Career of a

Remarkable Woman," written by T. B. Thrope. It tells how, after years passed amid hardships of pioneer life as the daughter of a soldier, in constant fear of Indian uprisings during the Seminole War, Lizzie, as she was known, accompanied her father to the Rio Grande, where he served under General Taylor.

During this time, she became engaged to a "handsome orderly" attached to the general's staff, and the wedding soon followed. The date proved to be the preliminary opening of the battle of Buena Vista. In the confusion that preceded the clash of arms between the troops of General Taylor and Santa Ana's troops, the bridegroom, young Bingham, was dispatched with important orders, deliverable to Colonel Jeff Davis. The duty was dangerous. and he was discovered and surrounded by a party of guerrillas, This was the same young man who played the part of '76 Son in "The Lion Son of '76." in which his wife played Martha Washington.

(To be continued)