

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Pioneer Actress

The first theatrical performance ever given in California took place in Jack Swan's adobe building on Pacific street in Monterey, now known as California's First Theatre. In the cast were Mr. and Mrs. C.E. Bingham.

It was related previously how this couple was married on the date of the preliminary opening of the Battle of Buena Vista. In the confusion that preceded the clash of arms, the bridegroom was dispatched with important orders to Colonel Jeff Davis, but was captured by a party of guerillas.

When Lizzie Bingham learned where her husband was imprisoned, she donned a picturesque Spanish peasant costume, mounted a mule, and started with the blessing of all the soldier boys for the camp of the enemy, which she penetrated as a vender of fruit. When she finally reached her husband, she informed him where a saddled thoroughbred could be found.

This impersonation of a Mexican girl, and her successful coquetry with the Mexican soldiers were evidence to close observers that Lizzie possessed great dramatic talent. This idea was encouraged by her husband, who had once been an attache of New Orleans theatre.

At the end of the Mexican War, the second regiment of dragoons was ordered to the Pacific Coast and the only woman permitted to take part in that long and terrible journey across the continent in the winter of 1874, was Lizzy Bingham.

Gold excitement caused the volunteers to desert almost in a body. The remains of the theatrical corps to which Lizzy had attached herself moved to Monterey, where the English drama was for the first time regularly established, Lizzy becoming the pioneer actress of California. Her husband and a number of well-known citizens joined in the enterprise.

When General Taylor organized recruits for his Nicaragua expedition, C. E. Bingham joined and his noble wife, heartbroken at leaving twin daughters, determined to accompany him. They were taken captive after many weeks of fighting and hardship, and cared for by sisters at the hospital of St. Vincent. But this merciful consideration came too late, according to the published account by T.B. Thorp and Lizzie Bingham passed away from California and the First Theatre.

"Lizzie may soon be forgotten," Thorp wrote, "but as time wears on, and the theatres of California grown in importance and become rich in traditional lore, the antiquarian will search out the pioneers of the profession, and the name of Lizzie Bingham will assume it's true and proper recognition as a pioneer English-speaking actress of California."