

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Old Pianos

A letter of inquiry from North Saint Paul Minnesota, prompts me to write a column today about the old pianos of old Monterey, for this letter writer wishes to know about the Great Union Square piano now in my home, Casa Soberanes, on Pacific street. She writes that a piano dealer in Twin Cities has told her that I am an owner of one of these old makes of pianos and she also has come into the possession of one of like make and wishes to know more about its history. That information I do not have nor do I know where to obtain it.

Several years ago a gentleman by the name of N.E. Michel visited in Monterey for several days hunting out all the old pianos, their history and the various makes and later published a book called "Old Pianos" by Michel who is also publisher of "Michel's Piano Atlas" 9123 Terradell street, Rivera, California. So I am able to answer some of her questions but certainly not all and I doubt that Michel can, for under the picture of my "Great Union" he simply gives the name and serial number 20736 and my name spelled wrong, and the address on Pacific street.

A man by the name of E.D. Holden has written a book about California's first pianos. The subject is of interest because at least one of these first instruments once occupied a conspicuous place in the sala of the Casa Abrego on Abrego street. The original Abrego instrument is now on exhibit in the museum of California Pioneer Society on McAllester street in San Francisco, given by a late descendant, Mrs. Dulce Bolado Davis of the Santa Anita rancho, in San Benito County.

Music in the early days in Monterey was limited to guitar and violin, both great and small. The church likewise made use of the same instruments, supplementing them with the discharge of firearms occasionally. Concerning the latter phase Lieut. Augustus Wise in his "Los Gringos" describes a mass at Mission Santa Clara in 1846.

"During the service an infatigable cannonier, outside, gave frequent feux de joie, from a graduated scale of diminutive culvering-made of brass in shape of pewter porter pots, half filled with powder, and the charge rammed down with pounded bricks—this, with music of

kettle drums, cymbals, and fiddles, made a very respectable dim."

Pianos were practically unknown, as the following, excerpt from "California Pastoral" shows;

"While Commodore Jones was in Monterey many balls were given in his honor by Larkin and others. On one occasion Larkin borrowed of Abrego one of the three first pianos brought from Baltimore by Captain Smith, one sold to Jose Abrego, and another in San Pedro to Euogio Celis and a third to M.G. Vallejo of San Francisco. Abrego granted the request of Mr. Larkin, but suggested that a piano would not be of much use since no one knew how to play on it. But to the surprise of all, it was solemnly affirmed, the boy Pedro Estrado succeeded in playing the instrument, although he had never touched one before! It was proposed to send the boy to Mexico, to be educated in music, but the advice of David Spence prevailed, who thought a carpenter more useful than a musician.

An inquiry into the movements of both Commodore Jones and Captain Stephen Smith reveals that the American Naval Officer was at Monterey in October, 1842, and that while Smith in the American brigantine George Henry was on the coast in 1841, it was in 1843 that he brought the three pianos mentioned. In fairness to California's understanding history it must be borne in mind that much of the material making up the "California Pastoral" was obtained from the resolutions of old timers themselves and not based upon documented evidence, writes Mr. Holden.

To General William T. Sherman, the lieutenant, Stephen Smith had once confessed that his coming to California was due to Daniel Webster, who had assured him that the United States would surely annex it, sooner or later. During Smith's 1841 visa he arranged to bring back a steam sawmill. This he did in 1843, along with the three pianos. The saw mill was set up at Bodego—the first steam mill—in fact the first steam engine of any sort in California between 1841 and his second arrival in 1843. Smith married a Peruvian lady by the name of Torres whose brother Manuel later became the husband of Mariana Richardson, daughter of the builder of Yerba Buena's (San Francisco) first dwelling. Abrego paid \$600 for the piano Smith delivered to him in Monterey.