

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

September 13, 1965

Jessie Fremont

On Sept. 1, 1849, California's Convention was called to order in Colton Hall with 48 delegates present and Dr. Robert Semple presiding.

During the time the convention was in session there was much social life in the Old Town of Monterey, with Mrs. John C. Fremont (Jessie Benton Fremont) as one of the most gracious hostesses.

When Col. Fremont came to Monterey with his wife and little daughter, Lilly, they resided with Madame Castro in the house on the mesa, now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Work.

The Castro adobe was the former Mexican governor's home; a huge ballroom fronted on the bay, and two adobe wings ran back from the water to meet a garden enclosed in soft-colored adobe walls. The roof was soft red tile, and hedges lined the garden walks according to Irving Stone's description in "The Immortal Wife." The life story of Mrs. Fremont written from her letters and other authentic sources.

The Castro home was furnished sparsely but in a gracious and hospitable manner. Mrs. Fremont was ushered into one of the wings which contained two high-ceilinged rooms, the adobe walls whitewashed. They were innocent of furniture except for a wood stove in a small anteroom.

Jessie presented her compliments to Madame Castro, who loaned them two cots and two chairs, several pots and pans, a few dishes and some flatware. Fremont left at once for San Francisco, and after two weeks had passed a ship arrived from San Francisco. Sailors began bringing crates up to the Castro house.

When everything was assembled, Jessie found that her husband had sent two large, high, roomy New England bedsteads, plenty of sheets and blankets, woven East Indian wicker chairs, a beautiful inlaid teakwood table, enough Chinese matting to cover the tile floors, white lace material for curtains, Chinese satins and French damask for draperies, two exquisitely-shaped English pottery punch bowls to be used as wash basins, colorful French and Chinese satin cushioned bamboo couches and chairs.

Hospitality was as natural for Jessie Benton Fremont as breathing. When the Constitutional Convention opened in September, she held open house every afternoon.

While she could serve no varied menus, she had become good at making rice puddings and the delegates were expert with their guns and fishing lines. Few came to dinner without a bird or a fish in hand. She set up a long wooden tables in the garden.

Every afternoon 10 to 15 delegates would gather to talk politics and discuss the convention. There were three other American women in Monterey. Mrs. Thomas Oliver Larkin, Mrs. Bennett Riley and Mrs. Smith, all pleasant and hospitable women who did their share in entertaining the delegates.

One evening Robert Semple said to Mrs. Fremont according to a paragraph in the "The Immortal Wife." "We were saying among ourselves how surprising it was that you could achieve such comfort in a queer place like Monterey.

"Jessie looked about her critically, trying to see the rooms through the eyes of a stranger. On the floor were the two bare skins, the windows draped with elegant Chinese brocade, the adobe walls were crudely whitewashed and on the Chinese rattan furniture were cushions covered with exquisite French silks.

"The only wall decoration was a picture of St. Francis, while on the Chinese teakwood was a representation of another religion, a bronze Buddha; alongside were a two-year-old copy of London Punch and her Martha Washington sewing basket.

"She replied to Semple thusly: "Gentlemen, I find it true to period, Pioneer Forty-nine, worthy elements from all over the world, guarded by a California grizzly."