

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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A Fine Impression

This is the second installment of the story of Lizzie Bingham, who played the part of Martha Washington in the first play ever produced in California's First Theater in Monterey. The play was "Putnam, or the Lion Son of '76."

Accustomed to the hardships of frontier life as the daughter of a soldier, in constant fear of Indian uprisings during the Seminole War, Lizzie, as a girl, had accompanied her father to the Rio Grande, where he served under Gen. Zachary Taylor.

There she became engaged to a "handsome orderly" attached to the general's staff, and the wedding soon followed. The date proved to coincide with the opening of the battle of Buena Vista. In the confusion that preceded the clash of arms between the troops of Gen. Taylor and Santa Ana's troops, the bridegroom, young Bingham, Lizzie's husband, was dispatched with important orders, deliverable to Col. Jeff Davis. The duty was dangerous, and the young bridegroom was discovered and surrounded by a party of guerrillas.

(That was the same young man who played the part of '76 Son in "Lion Son of '76," in which his wife played Martha Washington.)

He had time to destroy his dispatches when he was taken prisoner and borne in triumph to the town of Encarnacion. Gen. Taylor sympathized with the distracted bride and offered every possible assistance to learn the fate of the dashing orderly. Finally, the wife of a rancho informed her of the capture of her husband, and further, that he was to be shot, in retaliation for some outrage committed by the Texas soldiers.

At this information Lizzie donned the picturesque costume of the Mexican peasantry, whose language she spoke fluently.

She mounted a mule and started with the blessing of all the "sojer boys" for the camp of the enemy, which she penetrated as a vender of fruit. Because of her appearance she was at once arrested and brought before the commanding officer, who at first was disposed to punish her for her impertinent intrusion, never doubting she was a native of the country.

The officer, however, was finally struck by the beauty of her face and coquettish ways and commenced what he intended to be a flirtation. Lizzie played her part so well that her strolls were not interfered with. She finally reached her husband and informed him where a saddled thoroughbred would be found.

One night Bingham stole away after his guard was stupefied by drink and bribed by silver. At the last picket he was challenged but he put his horse at full speed, followed by excited pursuers, who kept up the chase until within sight of the American pickets. Lizzie, totally unsuspected, took a circuitous route and reached her destination safely, receiving congratulations for her bravery from the whole army, her appearance being greeted by tumultuous cheers.

The impersonation of a Mexican girl and her successful coquetry with the Mexican officer 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 a New Orleans theater.

(To be continued)