

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

May 18, 1967

A Remarkable Dramatic Heroine

Today we will try to give readers more interesting facts about the work of Lizzie Bingham, the young actress who appeared in the first play ever produced in Monterey. The productions took place in Jack Swan's adobe building now known as the First Theater in California. The first play was "The Lion of '76," with Mrs. Bingham as Martha Washington.

Returning to Mexico while her husband, C. E. Bingham was still in the Army, Lizzie, to while away the time following the occupation of Monterrey (Mexico), joined an amazing dramatic company. Our heroine was offered a permanent position which she declined because, she said, she knew nothing about the business and could not read. So enthusiastic were her friends that they were not discouraged at what seemed impossible difficulties. A young officer, a great admirer of the drama, essayed the pleasant task of reading the dialogue of the play to Lizzie, when it was discovered that her memory was of the most remarkable tenacity.

"Nothing could exceed the rapid transitions of her face as the plot and sentiments of the play dawned upon her naturally bright mind. It was putting celestial light into a dark place, opening up new thoughts, which filled her with electrical sentiment. It was, indeed, an intellectual miracle to behold how readily she comprehended the most novel situations and worked out their natural results," our writer of 1882 declares in his story entitled "Career of a Remarkable Woman."

Her progress was remarkable and rapid. This simple woman, in spite of her early disadvantages and crude surroundings, was soon able to play acceptably before refined people. "The Lady of Lions" and Marianna in "The Wife," parts that required professional experience, she mastered in half the ordinary time needed.

The consequence was that she became the idol of the company. Her good nature was invincible, her manners almost childlike. Her studies, her rehearsals, her self-constructed costumes, her triumphs before the footlights were achieved without materially interfering with her domestic duties or her strong desire to be a nurse to the very sick in the hospitals.

At the end of the Mexican war, the second lieutenant of dragoons was ordered to the Pacific Coast, and Lizzie

was the only woman who was permitted to take part in the long and terrible journey across the continent, so that story relates, but I am not sure that the statement is correct. I think that by that year several women had made the trip. Bancroft says that the Dragoons arrived in Los Angeles Dec. 29, 1848.

The next installment of the Peninsula Diary will tell of Lizzie Bingham's appearance in both Los Angeles and Monterey and her theatrical career in both places.