

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Theatrical Travels in Early Days Full of Their Own Drama

Today we continue our story of early theatrical performances in California including those given in California's First Theater in Monterey, now a state historical monument.

From the crudest beginning, theatrical matters gradually assumed a more civilized character and makeshift playhouses, with some attention to scenery and wardrobes, made their appearance. The company with which our heroine Lizzy Bingham was associated grew more compact and she consequently enlarged her range of characters, not confining herself to two or three legitimate plays, but passing rapidly from the gentle Juliet to the imperious Lady Macbeth, down through long range of jolly soubrettes and singing chambermaids. She committed to memory long tragedies by hearing them read once or twice to her, and never depended on the prompter for support, so history relates.

One informant writes: "She never trusted wholly to man's instinctive respect for protection. In accordance with the spirit of her surroundings, she knew the value of a pistol and how to use it, and it was well understood that in the folds of her dress was concealed a weapon that would be appealed to if insulted by a word or look from the recklessness of the opposite sex. With fear she was unacquainted: but it is certain that her faultless conduct was the true armor of her protection, instead of any show of force."

For five long years Lizzie pursued this tumultuous and adventurous life in the towns of the Mother Lode county of California. She occasionally had her triumphs, and they were peculiar and characteristic.

This delightful account of Lizzie's experience in California is told in the 1882 issue of Popular Magazine:

On one occasion the citizens of a large and prosperous town, who had built a theater, sent a formal invitation to Lizzie's theatrical company to make them a visit. The principal comedian was sent ahead to announce the proposed arrival of the company. Owing to the sudden rise of the rivers, the messenger was two days in reaching his destination; he was chased by a grizzly bear and repeatedly shot at by hostile Indians. When the

company finally reached the town a committee of citizens was awaiting them at the ford to escort the ladies of the troupe.

This honor was accorded to them because of the fact that with the exception of the wives of some of the emigrants—and they not very prepossessing—there was not a woman living in the country for many miles around. Many of the miners had not seen a woman since many years before when they left their New England homes. When they arrived, the men, in joyous exuberance, greeted Lizzy with three long cheers. A sturdy old miner approached her and with great natural gallantry, assisted her from her mule's back, then delicately kissed the tip of her fingers, explaining: "Glory be to God! Now I feel like a man, not a savage."

Lizzie returned these demonstration gracefully, and desiring to please her humble admirer said:

"Sir, would you be so kind as to do me a favor?"

"Madam, I would die to serve you!" was the response. "I left a little woman at home just your size. I think I see her now standing before me."

"Then" continued Lizzy, "take charge and be careful of those two champagne baskets." The baskets were slung over the mule's back after the fashion of a panier. "I want to entrust them to a sturdy honest man like you."

"Certainly," said the miner, carefully raising the cover of one of the baskets. Then stepping back with astonishment as he beheld an infant and heard its plaintive cry. But his amazement grew more profound when he heard an infantile voice from the other basket. He had discovered twin babies. Lilly and Rose, children of Lizzie Bingham, as attractive little ones as every blessed a mother's eyes.

Then it is told that the old miner's conduct at this revelation could not be described. His breast heaved, his lips quivered, his eyes filled with tears. He finally took up the little ones in his arms and kisses them over and over again. Then with unsurpassed tenderness, he asked the favor that he might be allowed to carry them at the head of the procession that started into town.

(To be continued)