

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Stories of Old-Time Thespians

There is a fascinating story concerning two of the performers in the first play every produced in California's First Theater in Monterey: C.E. Bingham and his wife Lizzie, who played in "Putman, or the Lion Son of '76."

It was in the fall of 1847, that four volunteers, Matt Gormie, Bill Tindal, Jack Moran and Long Lee, came up from Santa Barbara on military duty, assigned to Company F, 3rd Regiment, U.S. Artillery. They were in the minstrel line, and had given two burnt cork entertainments to the Santa Barbarans before leaving for Monterey. They were joined here by Aleck Patterson, Pete Earl, and three local characters designated as "Tips," "Tops" and "Taps." With this company the "management" gave two performances in the old Cuartel building in an upstairs south room. This probably was first efforts at minstrelsy on the coast.

The first theatrical performance ever given in California is believed to have taken place in the old adobe store house adjacent to Jack Swan's saloon, now known as the First Theater in California, State Historical Monument, and it happened this way:

"About the time that Stevenson's regiment of New York Volunteers was disbanded, three companies, including the colonel, came up to Monterey. Soon after, the soldiers attempted a theatrical exhibition which was a success. Encouraged by their liberal patronage, the managers induced Jack Swan to fix seats, stage and scenery in the old adobe. The bills were gotten out in due form, posters printed with blacking pot and brush, and the programs announced "Putnam" as the first play to be produced.

The principal characters were C.E. Bingham who impersonated the '76 Son, Mrs. Bingham, as Mrs. Martha Washington; Charlie Cluchester, George Washington; Frank Wensell and his wife took part, John O'Neal was Mr. Fury, and Pete Earl also was in the company.

"Damon and Pythias." "Box and Cox," "The Golden Farmer," "Grandfather Whitehead" and "Nan, the Good for Nothing," were plays in the repertory of the company.'

John Harris, Tom Beach, Capt. Wingfield, Mrs. Kettlebottom and Lieut. Derby were among the leading spirits of the troupe in 1849 and 1850, memorable years in the thespian records of Monterey.

Mrs. Bingham who impersonated Martha Washington at the First Theater in 1847, was the subject of a story printed in Popular Monthly in April 1882, the article entitled "The Career of a Remarkable Woman" was written by T.B. Thrope.

"The early days of California exhibit a frontier heroine who in the future will be remembered for her remarkable natural powers of mind and success in overcoming what should have been insurmountable difficulties. Yet by some strange fatality, her history up to the present time has failed of any desired recognition." The foregoing was the opening paragraph of the story of the life of an early day actress in Monterey.