

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Old Cemetery Epitaphs

"Thomas Williamson, Murdered in Monterey County, Nov. 9, 1855." So read an epitaph on a tombstone in the Monterey Catholic Cemetery. He was killed by Anastacio Garcia and his wild gang, who fired from ambush, the old records inform us. There are many stones dated 1805 when a bad epidemic in that year, similar to influenza of today, killed a great many persons.

Then there is an amusing but nevertheless sincere tribute, among the stones in the city cemetery, which once appeared in Ripley's "Believe It or Not." It reads thus: "Emma, Beloved Wife of J. O. Johnson, born in Ohio, April 14, 1844, Died Sept. 13, 1884, 'She Was Always Right'."

In our cemetery wanderings we read with interest the name Spence upon several headstones. The several graves were marked: "Dona Adelaide de Spence, Born 1811 in Monterey, Died 1875; Don David Spence, Born in Scotland, also died in 1875; and their two baby daughters, who died two days apart, March 18 and 20th, and then a son, who died on the 25th of the same month, probably from diphtheria.

The name Spence was a name well known in the very early history of Monterey County. The founders of the family was David Spence, who became secretary to John Beggs and Co., hide and tallow merchants of Liverpool, England. In 1822 he was sent to establish a branch office in Callao, Peru, and two years later he was ordered to Monterey. Here he found a fitting field for expansion. He served as alcalde under Governor Arguello, and also held many offices of importance under the Mexican regime.

Guinn's History of the Central Coast tells us that Spence took up two grants of land, the first, called Buena Esperanza, in the Salinas Valley, containing 12,000 acres, and the second, the Llano Buenavista, also in the Salinas Valley, and including the present site of Spreckels. Spence married Adelaide Estrada in 1829. She was born in Monterey, the daughter of Mariano and Isabel Estrada, natives of Monterey and one of the best-known of the Spanish families. Dona Isabel was the sister of Governor Arguello and daughter of Governor Jose Dorio Arguello.

Maria Josefa Cano Stokes, wife of James Stokes, Born Nov. 15, 1815, Died Sept. 16, 1855, was another interesting and historical marker. James Stokes was an Englishman who came to Monterey in the 1830s and became a prominent trader, druggist, and consulting physician to Gov. Figueroa. He married Dona Josefa Soto de Cano, a widow, and mother of five children. James and Josefa raised ten of their own.

Dona Josefa was baptized in Mission San Antonio where her father, Damaso Soto was a soldier under the King of Spain; married first to Gil Cano, soldier of Mexico, in 1827 at San Carlos Church in Monterey; widowed in 1838, she married James Stokes, and saw the flag of a new nation raised over the land of her ancestors. The Stokes Adobe, later known as the Gragg-Adobe, and now Gallatin's Restaurant, was built by James Stokes,

We gazed for a time upon the graves of Josiah Merritt and his wife, Dona Juana Castro de Merritt. Josiah Merritt was born in New York State Aug. 21, 1796. He was a lawyer who had practiced in New York City before arriving in Monterey, via Texas, in January 1850.

He took an active part in organizing Monterey County of which he was elected judge, serving until 1854. Shortly after his arrival in Monterey he married Juana Castro, eldest daughter of Simeon Castro, judge of the first instance under Mexican rule and one of the most influential citizens of the community. The Merritt Adobe on Pacific street was built by Josiah Merritt.

Standing alone in the cemetery is a marble shaft bearing the name Rosalia Vallejo Leese, Born, Jan. 27, 1811; Died July 30, 1889. Dona Rosalia was the sister of General M. G. Vallejo, and the mother of Rosalie Leese, the first child to be born in Yerba Buena.