

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

July 17, 1968

Theater in Old Monterey

The never-to-be discourteously mentioned records of our '49 and '50, "were memorable eras in the thespian records of Monterey." Says the little old guide book of Monterey. In those days California's First Theatre was opened with brilliant success, and then the long forgotten Bingham appeared in that long-for-gotten drama "Putnam or the Lion Son of '76."

They were memorable days indeed; for Lt. Derby known to the literary world as "John Phoenix" and Squibob," was one of the leading spirits of the stage. But the thespian records came to an untimely end, and soon Monterey no longer tempted the widely strolling player.

Going back over the theatrical records of old Monterey newspapers recalls that in 1905 the Bagby Opera House was the popular theater but by Monday evening, Dec. 11 of that year, T.A. Work opened his playhouse on lower Alvarado street.

Al Hoffman, who was in his youth an actor and producer, has made a record of the theater and its attractions since Oct. 12, 1905, when C.H. Bagby presented "The White Slave," featuring Dorothy Grey, in his opera house. He advertised profusely in "The Monterey New Era."

This attraction was followed on the 19th by "Under Southern Skies" and on the 21st by "Britt-Nelson" fight pictures. Other plays which attracted large audiences in November and December were "Dora Thorne" with Cuba Niblo in the title role; and Carol Arden in "Polly Primrose: by Paul Wilstreach, a comedy.

The opening play at the T.A. Work theater was roundly roasted, but the second night's bill received very good reviews. The theater was under the management of the Monterey Opera Company. "Shadows on the Hearth" was presented by Arthur G. Aiston for the first night and changed to "At the Old Crossroads" for the second performance.

After concluding a successful run at the Majestic Theater in San Francisco, Mr. and Mrs. James Neill appeared in "The Private Secretary." At the Work Theater on Dec. 18, 1905. In the cast were Frank McVickers, Marie Gordon, Orral Humphreys and Francis Slosson.

Opening in 1905 season at the Work was Alberta Gallatin starring in "Cousin Kate," with Wilfred Rogers in the male lead. For days before Jan. 21 the old town was excited over the coming appearance of Nance O'Neill in the "Fires of St. John," with McKee Rankin and Andrew Robson. The house was sold out.

"Hooligan in New York" with James L. McCabe in the title role, came to the Bagby Opera House on the 18th of January of 1906. In February the Star Amusement Company presented moving pictures and illustrated songs each Sunday night at the Opera House.

Probably the first minstrel shows appeared in Monterey in February of 1906—at the Work. "There was a small but appreciative audience" at the Work when Frederick Warde gave a recital. "Shakespeare and His Plays." Another sold-out house was on the occasion of John Cort's presentation of Florence Roberts in "The Strength of the Weak," by Alice M. Smith.

A merry musical mix-up, "My Wife's Family," with Appleton and Lerry, comics, was followed in March by Abbott and Bryant Opera Company from the Princess Theater, Melbourne, would present Nellie Stewart in "Sweet Nell of Old Drury." Big house the first night; small returns the second, according saw the opening of still another theater in Monterey—the Theater Comique—at Main (Calle Principal) and Franklin to the New Era.

Everyone flocked to the Bagby Opera House 1906, to see stereopticon views of the San Francisco earthquake and destruction. July 11, 1906, saw the opening of still another theater in Monterey—The Theater Comique—at Main (Calle Principal) and Franklin streets.

The building, formerly used as a skating rink was remodeled with a gallery and seated over 400 people. The new enterprise was under the management of the Monterey Amusement Company F.L. Ordway, president, James Cross, secretary, and Dr. Thorpe Arnold, manager.