

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Monterey's First Theater

The late Francis Doud, who was the sergeant-at-arm at the Constitutional Convention held in Monterey in 1849, enjoyed relating to Mrs. H. McIver Porter his knowledge of the First Theater, the owner, Jack Swan, and the men and women who took part in the first plays that were produced there. Mrs. Porter was compiling a small brown book at the time, 1910, the sale of which was to help in the financing of the restoration of the old adobe building on the corner of Scott and Pacific streets, known as California's First Theater and now a State Historical Monument, administered by the Division of Beaches and Parks. So it was to Mr. Doud that the author went for information.

After telling Mrs. Porter how a theater came into being in the adobe building which had originally been built as a rooming house, when a group of New York Volunteers came to Monterey with the U.S. Army and wanted to act. Mr. Doud went on to tell the story of the life of the actors after they finished their tour of duty at the old Presidio on the hill.

"Oh I kept track of their careers after they left and swelled with pride when I thought that they had been my friends. There was Capt. William T. Sherman, who, as Gen. Sherman in the Civil War, not only made himself more feared, but more respected by the enemy than any other general in the Federal Army.

"Capt. E.O.C. Ord who became Maj. Gen. of Volunteers, was given a command of Pennsylvania reserves and took part in the battle of luka and capture of Vicksburg in 1865, he was in command of the Army of the James and the department of Virginia, and was in the battles that ended the war. After the war he was made a brigadier general in the regular Army. The Presidio up here was named for him, but it is not generally known according to the belief of Mr. Doud. Later on Fort Ord was named for the Army officer.

"And Captain Charles Smith. Hamilton, dear handsome, debonair Captain Smith, star actor; he resigned from the Army in 1853 and engaged in farming, but when the Civil War broke out he became a colonel of the Third Wisconsin Volunteers was made brigadier general and commanded the left wing of the Army of Tennessee and the Sixteenth Corps. After the war he engaged in

manufacturing in Fon du Lac, Wis.; was president of the University of Wisconsin from 1869 to 1875; and was United States marshal for the District of Wisconsin from 1869 to 1877.

"Then came Capt. Henry Wagner Halleck, who became captain of Engineers in 1853, but left the service a year later and took up the practice of law in San Francisco, where he was commissioned major general of the regular Army. You know how he continued to rise until he was made general-in-chief all the Federal armies which place he held until 1864, when he was superseded by Gen. Grant. Besides, he was the author of many military and scientific works, and books on mining law."

Francis Doud hardly paused in his recollection of the lives of these famous men who had been his friends in Monterey many years before. His next thought to Mrs. Porter was of Lt. Derby: "Lt. Derby, who became famous in the literary world under the non de plume of 'Squibob.' I did have some of his works here, but unfortunately lent them to someone not honest enough to return them. He was a smart fellow, the literary genius of the lot.

"Last, but not least was dear old Gen. Sully. He was our scenic artist. His father was the great portrait painter Thomas Sully, whose pictures are world-famed, especially his "Washington Crossing the Delaware," hung in the Boston Athenaeum, of which so many copies have been made. There were also numerous others, whose names I cannot now recall. Remember, these men were not merely figures in history to me, but personal friends whose careers I watched with a great deal of pride.

"A member of old plays were given among them being 'Nan, the Good-for-Nothing,' 'Damon and Pythias,' 'Grandfather Whitehead,' and 'The Golden Farmer.' In the last named play Lt. Derby, who was the comedian was made to say, "I may ha' stolen eggs, but I never sucked um.' He was wonderfully droll, and the way in which he got it off made such a hit that for months it was heard on the streets of Monterey."

The group made such a success of their plays that it was decided to give something big and after considerable debate Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" was decided upon. Mr. Doud remembered. But some one hesitantly remarked that there was not a suitable Juliet. Finally it was decided to offer that role to Mrs. Wensell. "What if

she did weigh 200 pounds and have a broad German accent?" She should be the light and airy Juliet, and Mr. Doud laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks at the remembrance.

Then Mr. Doud laughed again when he told how scarce flowers were in those days but that he had a vegetable garden up near the Presidio in which grew some lovely cabbage sprouts. "Of these we made a fine bouquet which was presented to Juliet at this time, he said. "The funny part of it was that she never once realized during the whole performance that she was being laughed at and accepted the sprouts with as much grace as though they had been the finest American Beauty roses."

"Oh, yes, they were great good days. History was made fast for California and for Monterey, in particular," So Mr. Doud's story of California's First Theater ended.