

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

August 14, 1968

The Washtub Mail

A nice little story that bears repeating in this Diary is that concerning The Californian's only rival as the purveyor of news, The Washtub Mail.

Just on the outskirts of Old Monterey were some springs which were the washtubs of the town. The section is now known as "Washerwoman's Bay" and is to the right of the entrance from Fremont street to Aguajito road. Prior to that, the washing is said to have been done where Washington, Abrego and Pearl streets meet when that section was flooded by a stream running from the hills.

To Washerwoman's Bay went the maid servants and the housewives who could not afford servants. Each babbled of the things she saw and heard in her own home.

Often, too, a young man would stop to chat with his favorite. So all carried such thrilling tales of the intrigues and the plots of Alvarado to imprison the foreigners who had helped to make him governor.

But their real information came from the Indians, always on the move, who stopped at the springs, and from the politicians, who told some news that they might hear more.

For the gringos, who necessarily were not numbered among friends of the prominent Californians. The Washtub Mail was the one means of hearing the "town talk." For a trinket, a new mantilla, or a piece of gold, these washerwomen would tell anyone the very latest news. It was almost sure to be true, too, for they wanted people to come again with more gold pieces and bright scarves.

Walter Colton said, "It is an old mail that has long been run in California and has announced more revolutions, plots and counterplots than there are in mummies in Memphis."

Only when a love story was involved did the Washtub Mail prevaricate. No one bought love stories, so there was no need for them to be true.

During the time that Capt. Sherman, was here, one of the officers became deeply enamored with a certain Spanish maiden. He went night after night with his guitar and, seated on a rain barrel beneath her window, sang passionate love songs.

Being an American, he did not know that when she failed to put out her light in the window or drop some note to him, that she was refusing his love more plainly than words could have done. At last, weary of being disturbed by his unwelcome music, she attached a rope to the cover of the rain barrel and held the other end at her window. In the midst of his saddest song, she pulled the rope. The music was literally "drowned." and her slumbers never again were disturbed by the Americano.

Life in Monterey in Sherman's time was not all a round of gaiety. Early in February 1847, the war in Baja California came to an end, and specter of war that had been threatening Alta California vanished before the actual force of the American fleet.

Meanwhile, far from weighty problems were being solved in Monterey. Colton was working night and day to suppress gambling and vice. By March he had laid the foundation for the new school, "Colton Hall." "The building," he said, "is to be 30 by 60 feet, two stories, suitably proportioned, with a handsome portico. The labor of the convicts, the tax on liquor and the banks of the gamblers must put it up."

Two months later the first monte (gambling bank) ever run in California was opened in a little shack called the Astor House. It would rank in this day as a sixth-class boardinghouse. After a great deal of scheming, Colton gathered 50 of the gamblers into the hotel parlor without in the least arousing their suspicions.

He addressed them: "I have only a few words to say. Gentlemen, you are each fined \$20."

The alcalde of San Francisco was the first to "come through." "Come on, my good fellows," he said. "Pay up and no gambling: this money goes to build a schoolhouse where I hope, our children will be taught better principles than they gather from the examples of their fathers."

So, to help the school, the fines were paid without another murmur.