

1

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FIRST THEATER IN CALIFORNIA
(Summary by John Samuel Fox)

The building which was destined to house the first theater in California was built by John A. Swan, sailor, adventurer, baker of pies, and keeper of boarding house for sailors. From the time he was twenty years old, Jack Swan roamed the five oceans and the seven seas until, in 1843, he settled in Monterey. He had spent a dozen years at sea, had no money, but was a good cook. This then, would be his first California venture - to bake pies for the Boston traders. From their custom and that of the Montereyans, who took strongly to the Yankee dish, Jack's fortune was made.

He then decided on another venture. With the proceeds from the sale of pies, he bought a piece of land on Calle Estrada, now the southwest corner of Pacific and Scott streets. There he built the first boarding house for sailors in Monterey, and decided to have a saloon in it as an added attraction. The long adobe structure was finished in 1847. Thereafter, the boarding house and its saloon was a favorite rendezvous for the sailors.

In March, 1847, the first detachment of the First

New York Volunteer Regiment arrived, to be followed shortly by other troops. Among the New Yorkers were a number of clever men who, to relieve the monotony of camp life, produced several plays in the barracks during the early weeks of their stay. As the days grew warmer, these affairs were held out-of-doors and no admittance fee was charged to the performances. At the end of the year it became apparent that the companies would be mustered out of the service. In order to make a living, these amateur actors decided to produce their plays for money. The question was, where could they get a hall?

The most suitable place in town was Swan's hall. As a matter of duty to the community, the saloon-keeper agreed to let the thespians use his largest room, and the task of transforming it into a theater got under way. A stage, a foot or more in height, was built at one end of the hall. An orchestra pit was fenced off by a rude railing, and boxes for the socialites were marked off along the side walls. The gallery was set up at the far end of the hall in the form of bleachers made by resting rough planks on large boxes. A row of candles from the commissary store served as footlights. The auditorium was lighted by whale oil lamps and chandeliers made by nailing pieces of wood crosswise with candles stuck in holes bored at the outermost ends.

The front curtain was at first made of two red and two blue blankets sewn together, but this was soon replaced by a wooden drop which, swung on hinges from the ceiling, could be lifted like the lid of a box. The back drops and scenery for the first plays were also made of different colored blankets. Later on, these too were replaced by scenery made of wood and canvas and painted by members of the company. The wardrobes were also makeshift, but financial success induced the company to have new tunics, cloaks, gowns and other needed costumes made. A ladies' dressing room was back stage, while the men had to climb to the attic.

This, then, served as Monterey's theater until another adobe house near the mole was fitted up for shows in 1849. Then Swan resumed management of his building, turning it into a lodging house for whalers. Some time in the seventies the building became a drug store, later a tea shop, and, after Swan's death in 1896, fell into complete disrepair. In 1909 the adobe was acquired by the State and restored. In its present form it serves as a museum, under the jurisdiction of the State Park Commission.

150 years ago.
California, 1846 - Chronological list of
events relating to areas now State Parks &
Monuments or near such areas -

Pisces, ~~then~~ ^{then} ~~General~~ ^{General} ~~founder~~ ^{founder} Mexican regime.

Capt. John Fremont visits Monterey in January.
In February Capt. Fremont is in vicinity of
Big Basin.

In early March Fremont is ordered to leave
California by General ^{Jose} Castro. Fremont defies
Castro & goes his way to summit of Gabilan
(Fremont) Peak - On March 6, 1846, crosses U.S.
flag over his fort. Crosses Gabilan Peak during
night of March 9th - 10th & proceeds northward to Oregon.
Fremont's operations in California stir up ill feeling
between Californians & Americans which leads to -

"Bear Flag" Revolt and capture of Sonoma on
June 14 by American settlers of Napa & Sacramento
Valleys -

U.S. flag raised over Custom House, Monterey, July 2,
1846, by crews of U.S. ^{Ship} Cyrene, Capt. ^{William} Merriam, commanded

U.S. flag raised over Custom House, S.F., July 9, 1846
by members of crew of ^{U.S. Ship} Portsmouth, ^{Capt.} John B. Mont
gomery, commanded - "Portsmouth Square" is named
for the ship & "Montgomery Street" for the commander.

