

History Beat

By Neal Hotelling

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Swan traveled the seven seas, sold pies, and launched a theater

HISTORIC PRESERVATION is an interesting challenge. Simple structures can become treasured touchstones of our past. However, unless their stories are kept alive through the generations, their significance is lost. And when these buildings cannot be visited, their tales are rarely told. Such is the case with Monterey's First Theatre. More than a century ago, it was deemed worthy of preservation and interpretation, but it has been mostly closed to visitors for more than 30 years.

I've been around long enough to have visited the landmark before it was shut down for repairs. I am assured by officials of State Parks Commission and the Monterey State Historic Park Association that the

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theater will welcome visitors once again for this year's Christmas in the Adobes. A shout-out also to the Community Foundation of Monterey County, which provided a large grant for the restoration. As I reported last week, that organization was started in the 1940s as the Monterey Foundation to help assure preservation of the town's historic buildings.

Opium trade

For those not familiar with the First Theatre, let me tell you about its history and the man who built it, so as to encourage you to visit it when it reopens.

John Alfred "Jack" Swan was born in London on Nov. 22, 1817. He was the 10th of 11 children. His parents were both Scottish, married at Edinburgh, and moved to London soon after their first son was born.

At age 10, Swan and two of his older brothers went to work on a ship owned by their merchant uncle. When the uncle's business failed, Swan returned to his parents in London until he was apprenticed in 1832 on the schooner Barkley. At 14, the young apprentice began a five-year stint sailing the Mediterranean and seeing the world — at least, the Old World.

Upon returning to London, he left the Barkley and joined the crew of the Marquis, on which he sailed from London to Bombay. From there he crewed on the Cornwallis to Lintin, China, arriving in April 1837. He served a few months on the Agnes, captained by his older brother,

Robert, and then became second mate on the Harriet, serving in the opium trade for two years, until October 1839. He then joined the Harlequin, which brought him to Mazatlán in July 1840. He traveled overland to the Gulf of Mexico and sailed to New Orleans, arriving just before Christmas 1840.

Around the world

In May 1841, Swan took a steamer up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to Cincinnati. After walking to Cleveland, he served the rest of the year on schooners in the Great Lakes. Making port in December at Ogdensburg on the St. Lawrence Seaway, he took a stage to Albany, sailed

down the Hudson River to New York City, and there joined the crew of the Lucy Ann, which returned him to New Orleans. There, Swan joined the crew of the Dumfriesshire, which brought a

load of cotton to Liverpool in early April 1842. At age 24, Swan had literally worked his way around the world. He spent most of 1842 in England visiting family and seeing his mother for the last time, then left for Valparaiso, Chile in November.

Traveling through the Straits of Magellan, Swan reached Valparaiso in February 1843, then, taking a steamer, reached Callao, Peru in March. After a month walking around Peru, he caught a schooner to San Blas, Mexico and then Mazatlán in May. From there he arrived in Monterey in the summer of 1843 on the Soledad.

Back on land

Swan decided to stay in Monterey, but when he couldn't find work on shore, he went back to sea on the Californian, under the command of Monterey's Capt. John B.R. Cooper. On June 7, 1844, after two voyages with Cooper, he left the sea, and would proudly later write, "I have had nothing to do with the sea except as a passenger since I opened a store in Monterey in 1844." In Monterey, Swan began creating his own future by baking pies that proved very popular with the influx of Yankees making their way to the Mexican capital of Alta California.

As with many historic events in the Old West, dates can be mysterious. According to some early sources, Swan opened his saloon at the corner of Calle Estrada



PHOTO/CALIFORNIA STATE LIBRARY COLLECTION

Jack Swan's saloon was already renowned as California's First Theatre on Pacific Street in Monterey when this photo of it was taken in 1901. Swan lamented the building's condition in his later years but noted that it was in better shape than the government-owned Cuartel.

HISTORY

From page 23A

(now Pacific Street) and Scott Street before the American occupation began in July 1846. It was then shut down, as were all other saloons, by order of Rev. Walter Colton, the American in charge as Monterey's Alcalde.

The official version today is that Swan bought the lot, which had a small house on it, in 1846 and began building an adobe extension that he planned to use as a boarding-house for itinerant sailors. We can speculate that he rented the adobe earlier for the saloon (and possibly his pie store) and bought it at a discount when the saloon was ordered closed.

Shiny things in the water

Toni Jackson (paramour of Ed Ricketts) wrote in the June 1946 *What's Doing* magazine that the first use of Swan's re-opened saloon as a theater was in the fall of 1847, when four soldiers up from Santa Barbara put on a minstrel show, joined by three local comedians — Tip, Tap and Top. The 1875 *Handbook of Monterey*, however, clarifies that that performance was at the "old Cuartel building" and that "the first theatrical performance ever given in California took place in the old adobe storehouse adjacent to Jack Swan's saloon and it came to pass in this way: About the time that [Col. John D.] Stevenson's regiment, New York Volunteers, were disbanded, three companies, including the colonel, came up to Monterey. Soon after, the soldiers attempted a theatrical exhibition, which was a success. Encouraged by their liberal patronage, the managers induced Jack to fix seats, stage and scenery in the old adobe."

The *Handbook*, and virtually every reference since, states that "Putnam; or the Lion Son of '76" was the first

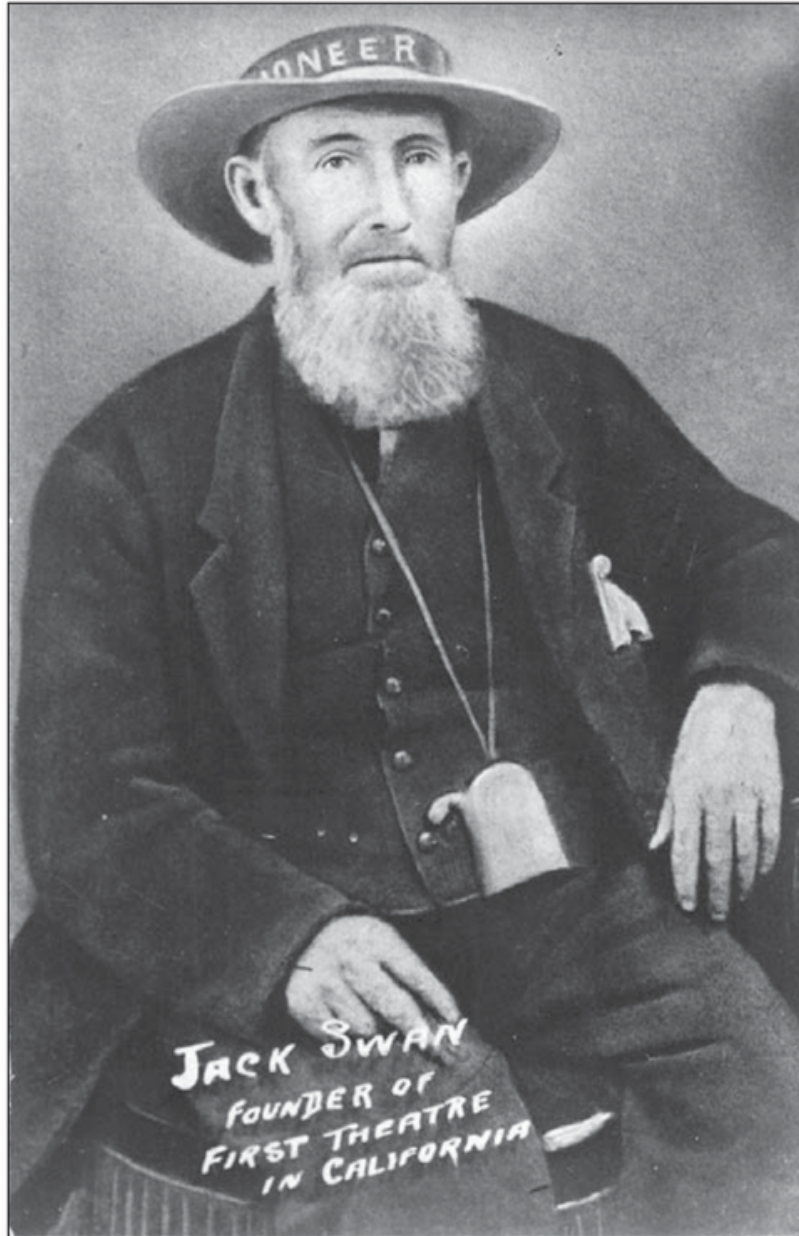
play produced. Bancroft's history even gives that title, dating the performance to spring 1848. However, unless they were doing a parody, it was more likely "Putnam; or the Iron Son of '76" — a popular 1844 play by Nathaniel Bannister about Revolutionary War hero Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam.

The Handbook lists several other plays performed by the troupe at Swan's and suggests, as does Jackson, that performances continued into 1850. If so, there was likely a time in later 1848 that the theater went dark after word reached Monterey that gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill.

At that time, most of the men left town for the mine fields, including Jack Swan. For Swan's mining efforts, read "A Trip to the Gold Mines of California in 1848," a book published in 1960 by the Book Club of California. Edited by John Hussey, this is Swan's personal account, penned in 1870, of the months he spent as a prospector on the American River.

Perhaps in defiance of the 1875 Handbook, in 1881, the Monterey Californian newspaper published an alternate version of the theater's history. That article claims that the first dramatic performance at Swan's was "Romeo and Juliet," with "the late lamented Lieutenant Derby as Romeo, and no lady could be found for Juliet," stating there were "no English-speaking ladies in Monterey then." Derby, however located the large, Dutch wife of another soldier and convinced her to play the part. "Her broken English made a farce of the piece, which was highly relished by the not over critical audience ... especially the balcony scene, where he made her look as ridiculous as possible."

Whichever version may be accurate, the fact that Jack Swan's Saloon hosted the first theatrical performances in California remains undisputed. Next week we will delve into Swan's later years and the transformation of his simple saloon into State Historic Landmark No. 136.



PHOTO/EARLY POSTCARD

Jack Swan, a fixture in Monterey for more than 50 years, was known in his time as the "Pioneer of 1843," and he wore a banner wrapped around his signature top hat to assure everyone knew it.

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