

## History Beat

By Neal Hotelling

August 11, 2023

# History's script for First Theatre may yet end triumphantly

**J**ACK SWAN'S saloon at the corner of Pacific and Scott streets in Monterey is known more commonly today as California's First Theatre — State Landmark No. 136. Swan is often referenced historically as “an English sailor.” He was born in London and had served on a variety of ships, working his way around the world before arriving at Monterey in 1843 at age 25. However, based on his later activities, Swan clearly considered himself a miner.

He operated his saloon in the small building nearest the Presidio and added

### Whaling companies

Swan also could have said landlord, as after his building's brief service as a theatre (1848-1850), Swan rented the former saloon and boardinghouse to a whaling company. Surveyor William Brewer recorded in his diary (published by Yale in 1930 as “Up and Down California”) that when he was in Monterey in May 1861 there were two active whaling companies. Augusta Fink's “Monterey” (1972) reports “Captain Davenport's group operated out of the Jack Swan adobe” and continued to do so into the 1870s. By 1874, whaling had waned and Swan's long, one-story adobe again became a boardinghouse.

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the large, one-story adobe in 1846 as a boarding house for itinerant sailors. However, like most of the men of Monterey, Swan went to the American River in 1848 in search of gold. In addition to his brief venture in the northern gold fields, there are also records of him managing a mine in Jolon in the early 1870s and his belief that he found oil in Arroyo Seco in 1878. Further evidence that “miner” seems to be a more accurate description is that he gave it as his occupation for both the 1870 and 1880 census records.

In 1870 Swan claimed to own real estate valued at \$20,000. However, he died on Jan. 6, 1896, a beloved pauper, and was buried in Monterey. He had earlier sold the run-down building at Pacific and Scott to John Martin of Mission Ranch. Swan's grave was unmarked until 1898, when friends arranged a simple marker.

The smaller building at Swan's was then occupied by another Englishman, Fred Smith (1881-1919), who ran a curio shop there for about two decades. Smith came to California in 1879 with his wife

Sophie. They raised four first-generation Californians in Santa Cruz before moving to Monterey in the 1890s. The building's history was already valued by the townsfolk as important

for its role as California's first theater, but while Smith maintained the smaller building, the large adobe structure remained unused and was deteriorating.

### Temporary repairs

As public concern grew, the W.R. Hearst California Landmarks Fund purchased the theater in 1905 and deeded it to the state in 1906. Still, other than Smith's efforts, the state did little to stem further deterioration of the structure.

California owned three properties in Monterey — Swan's, the Custom House and St. Junipero Serra's landing site. While a bill to fund work on the three properties made its way through Sacramento, Monterey's Chamber of Commerce funded some temporary repairs in late 1916 before the winter rains.

Anna G. Andresen, chairman of the California History Committee of the Native Daughters of the Golden West, wrote in the January 1917 Grizzly Bear magazine that the theater was in "deplorable condition" with one wall "rapidly disintegrating." She went on to opine, "If this building is allowed to fall in ruins, which it surely will



PHOTO/MAYO HAYES O'DONNELL LIBRARY

This circa-1930 postcard shows the restored First Theatre building with several whalebones out front, reflecting the period when the building was the base of Captain Davenport's whaling company in the 1860s and early 1870s.

within a few years, tradition will preserve its memory for us but a short time. If physically preserved, it will carry its story all the more vividly, and thus keep open more clearly the communication between the past and the present.”

The state authorized the funds and renovations were completed over the next couple of years. The Monterey Cypress announced that on July 11, 1919, “For the first time since 1860, the historic theatre will open for entertainment.” The program shows it was a diverse concert with vocal solos by Maria Antonio Field, but opened with a recounting of the theatre’s history by Smith. For Smith, it was just in time. He died a month later.

### **Historical museum**

A full-page story in the April 22, 1923, Long Beach Press-Telegram recounts the history of the theater and describes the “long rectangular adobe, which boasts no particular architectural beauty.” A museum was in the “long wing of the building, which is approximately 75 feet by 12 feet,” and displayed relics from the olden days of Monterey, among them the baptismal font of the Carmel Mission (later restored to the Mission) and a light from the ship “Natalia,” which was wrecked in a December 1834 Monterey Bay storm. Also still in place was a wooden partition, hung on hinges that had served as a curtain. “It was raised and lowered like the lid of a box.” The smaller building then served as a tearoom.

On Feb. 6, 1934, California’s First Theatre officially became State Landmark No. 136. Other Monterey area sites on the 1934 list of 11 new landmarks included Colton Hall (No. 126), Serra’s Landing site (No. 128), and the Carmel Mission (No. 135).

In a discussion of the building in her 1934 book “Old Monterey,” Laura Bride Powers wrote of a desire to bring dramatic presentations back to the theater. “What a delectable pleasure to see one of the good old plays produced in the old room, by some of the players of Carmel — Herbert

Heron, father of the Forest Theatre, for instance — to put it through.”

In January 1937, it was not Heron, but Olga (Mrs. Sidney) Fish of Carmel’s Palo Corona Ranch who offered to produce a series of old-time dramas at the historic theater. She got the ball rolling but died in April. Carmel’s Denny-Watrous management team (founders of the Carmel Bach Festival) picked up the challenge and selected an 1880s melodrama, “Tatters: Pet of Squatters’ Gulch.” It was performed June 3-5, 1937, at the First Theatre.

Because the floor was flat, simple wooden benches were created to be shorter near the stage and continually higher for those sitting farther back. With the theater restored, the smaller building became the museum, but was transformed into a barroom on play nights. It served soda pop because the state would not allow alcohol.

Directed by J. Galt Bell of Los Angeles, who began doing summer theater in Carmel in 1930, "Tatters" proved so popular that it was revived for five more nights, July 1-5, 1937, and then again and again on weekends through mid-August. In September 1937, Denny-Watrous put on a new production, "In the Shadow of the Rockies." It marked the beginning of the Troupers of the Gold Coast, who next produced "49ers" over Thanksgiving and continued to produce early melodramas at the First Theatre for more than 50 years into the 1990s.

### **Restoration continues**

The First Theatre was closed in 1999 due to needed repairs. Similar to a century earlier, lack of funding delayed the work — for more than 20 years. The work is now well underway and, thanks to the Monterey State Historic Park Association, the building will soon reopen for special events and to the public for Christmas in the Adobes.



*PHOTO/'WHAT'S DOING' MAGAZINE, MARCH 1950*

During a break from rehearsals, theater manager Hazel Watrous, seated at far right, watches as artist/actor Bruce Ariss serves soft drinks to other actors in the barroom of the First Theatre.

The historic park association is the non-profit supporting agency for the Monterey State Historic Park. Until 2009, MSHPA was known as Old Monterey Preservation Society. Decades of organizing Christmas in the Adobes, supplemented by proceeds from the stores it runs at the Custom House and Pacific House, built up a fund from which \$426,000 went toward the current work at the First Theatre. Additional grants came from Save America's Treasures (\$194,000), the Community Foundation for Monterey County (\$50,000) and Monterey Peninsula Foundation (\$20,000). The state put more than \$500,000 into seismic retrofitting of the building.

Additional funds are needed to finish the historic association's plans, which include reviving the old 19th century melodramas to bring the First Theatre back to life on a more consistent basis. For more information on the group's work, visit [MSHPA.org](http://MSHPA.org).

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