

The Spider Dancer

If you've wandered around the local Sierra a bit you've come across the Lola Montez lakes, just north of the freeway and a nice destination for a picnic (See the map on page three). You've also come across Mt. Lola north of Truckee on 89 and a good day hike.

Elizabeth Rosanna Gilbert

Those Lola's are named after the famous spider dancer, Lola Montez who died of pneumonia in 1861, but not before leaving a little bit of herself in the hearts of California's miners.

To understand Lola Montez you have appreciate her spirit

Lola had an adventurous spirit. Eliza Gilbert, a.k.a. Lola, was born in Ireland and showed her spirit early, evading an arranged marriage to a 60 year old judge and eloping with an English lieutenant. The union lasted 5 years after which she began her dancing career. As she became famous she traveled the world and even to lawless California. When she danced in Munich the King of Bavaria convinced her to be his mistress. He also named her Countess of Landsfeldt. That lasted until the king was ousted and Lola left town. He was ousted partly because of Lola against whom students at a local university rioted. While in Europe Lola also was an intimate of Franz Liszt and Alexander Dumas.

Loal arrived in America to dance. She danced her way west and married again coming to live in Grass Valley.

Lola's first dance in Grass Valley was scandalous. She appeared in flesh colored tights with two cork spiders. Her dance was a combination of writhing, spinning, and whirling with the action growing more and more frantic as she tried to throw off the spiders. The audience was shocked. She was booed and hissed. The show was a money maker though and she continued to great fame as people came to see the scandalously clad woman behave in scandalous ways living up to her scandalous reputation which had evolved from her scandalous life.

Lola also met Lotta Crabtree while in California and tried to convince Lotta to go on tour with her. Lotta's mother was smarter than to allow that..

There are many stories about Lola, smoking cigars whipping a newspaperman who gave her a bad review, and shooting at a lover who disappointed her sending him dodging bullets down the street with his pants undone. This all gave rise to "Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets."

While in California and living in Grass Valley in 1854, she decided to take the trip to Reno, or rather where Reno would some day be. This was before the railroad so she traveled by horseback with one companion taking some days to do the trip. Her companion, James Delavan, MD, said she visited the Donner Cabin and "brought away with her some of the human bones, which are quite plenty there."

You can see Lola's Grass Valley house at 248 Mill St. in Grass Valley. It's a state historic landmark.

Afficianados of California may see some discrepancies above, but the sources don't agree on Lola. They don't agree on her birth or her death. One says she died of a stroke another of pneumonia. One says she died in poverty another that that is a lie. A book on the subject which I have not read is, Lola Montez: A Life by Seymour. It's 480 pages long and the ISBN number is 0300074395 Yale University Press. An interesting website which I didn't use for the material above is: <http://www.uq.edu.au/~entjohns/lolaindex.html>



From the DSHS News Archives*:

“...and then the Dance. The dance was what all had come to see, and there was an anxious flutter and an intense interest as the moment approached which would bring her before the house. She was greeted with a storm of applause, and then she executed the dance, which is said to be her favorite, and has won for her much notoriety. The Spider Dance is a very remarkable affair. It is thoroughly Spanish, certainly, and it cannot be denied that it is a most attractive performance. As a danseuse, Madame Lola is above mediocrity. Indeed, some parts of her execution was truly admirable. We shall endeavor to do her full justice in another notice.”

Daily Alta California 5/28/1853

LOLA MONTEZ.—The public of San Francisco will have an opportunity to gratify its long awakened curiosity, on Thursday night next, by visiting the American Theatre, where and when Lola Montez will make her *debut* before a California audience. An engagement has been made with her by Mr. Baker, and she will appear on that night.

We can say nothing of her theatrical ability, never having seen her upon the stage. But who has not heard of her and her gallant spirit, her independent and Republican nature? Who has not

heard how the sins of the aristocracy were heaped upon her because she possessed the royal favor, and how her troublesome Democracy was got rid of by the usual tyranny of despotism exile? Are not these things written in the books of the history of Bavaria?

This favorite and sport of fortune, now a member of the ballet, now a Countess; now brilliant with the smiles of majesty, now dragged by a mob through the streets of a revolutionary city; ready with the pen as with the steel, and dangerous with both — comes from the palaces and royal theatres of the East to the borders of civilization, where free hands and free hearts construct temples for the Muses, and free thought and free welcomes greet those who seek our favor. We doubt not she will meet a fair, and just, and generous reception.

Daily Alta California , May 23, 1853



*Editor's note: just kidding about the Donner Summit Historical Society archives. Our archives don't go back quite that far. The picture above is German and purported to show Lola with King Ludwig of Bavaria.

More on Lola

“She looked her loveliest as she pirouetted into view, her long slender legs in flesh-colored tights, for she no longer danced without the requisite maillot. Her glossy hair, wreathed in flowers, fell to her shoulders. Her skirt consisted of tiers of tinted chiffons creating the illusion of a spider’s web, entrapping her as she spun around, constricting her step. With the music slowing down she struggled to free herself and shake off the spiders lurking in her chiffons. As the dance grew more frantic she shed the spiders and stamped then underfoot. They were stage props made of whalebone, cork or rubber. When the music changed to jig Lola spread out her hands and feet like a spider (Ross 223) and leaped from one side of the stage to the other. The effect was as grotesque as it was riveting. It all ended with fire and abandon, as stamped on the last of the fallen spiders. Sometimes she did the dance in pantomime without the props (Ross 224).

A woman in Connecticut thought that Lola “flounced about like a stuck pig, and clenched her short clothes, raising them nearly to her waist, while with a thin, scrawny leg she keeps up a constant thumping upon the stage, as if she was in a slight spasm” (*Nevada Journal* Jul 17, 1852 qtd in Varley 110).

In Grass Valley, after the local parson called her a “shameless devil in the guise of a beautiful and fascinating dancer”, Lola donned her “Spider Dance” costume and went to see Mr. Wilson. She ended up staying for tea with him and his wife.

