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Lola Montez, The Spanish Dancer

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about E Clampus Vitus, and all the fun we're not getting to experience because of this damned virus. I've been especially missing the doin's, and all the fun stuff that always happens there. Being rather new at this, I only have a handful of these experiences in my gun belt. The rest of you have many more, and I'm sure you are missing them as much as I do.

One of things I miss the most is the HOCO. I love the tradition of it, the knowledge that we are doing a ceremony that goes back over a hundred years, longer than that if you read the various "histories" written by our forefathers. In my head, I can hear JJ's voice, coming from far and near, hither and yon..."And so recorded!" I love brother Warthog's passionate words, and his now famous cigar smoke. I love seeing Redbeerd get pissed because someone forgot their place....and waiting for him to realize that it's him. But, one of the most exciting parts for me, is when we get to hear the names of the famous people who have been Clampers before us.

One of the names that has piqued my interest is **Lola Montez**. I heard that name before I was a Clamper, when I was studying to get my masters degree in Theatre. She wasn't a hugely important person as theatre people go, but she was a name in a textbook on theatre history, so she stuck with me. But now, since there is nothing on my mind but wondering when we will get to hang out together again, I decided to look her up, and find out who she really was.

Lola's real name is Eliza Rosanna Gilbert. Her father was Ensign Edward Gilbert, and her mother was Elizabeth Oliver, daughter of the High Sheriff of Cork, (that's in Ireland). Lola claimed to have been born in Limerick, Ireland, but her birth certificate, which was found in the 1990's, says she was born in 1821, in Grange, County Sigo, Connacht, Ireland...wherever the fuck that is.

In any event, her family moved to India, where her father was posted. But, he died of Cholera almost immediately upon their arrival. Her mother (who was 19 at the time), a year later wed Lieutenant Patrick Craigle. Craigle spoiled little Eliza, and she became a "half wild, queer, (not that kind of Queer) wayward little Indian girl." Always a mischief maker, she was sent from place to place to attend school. She once ran naked through the streets of Montrose, Scotland, which resulted in her being sent away to boarding school, and then after more trouble, she was sent to another boarding school.

At the age of 16, in 1837, she eloped with Lieutenant Thomas James, but they were separated five years later in Calcutta, India. She then became a professional dancer. She had her stage debut in London, under the name Lola Montez, the Spanish Dancer, but some people recognized her as Mrs. Thomas James, and her career there was hampered. So, she went to the Continent, and found great success in Paris and Warsaw. At this time, she was accepting favors from many wealthy businessmen, and was considered a "courtesan."

I never really looked up that word "courtesan" before, but I had an idea I knew what it meant. I was right. It means a prostitute, but one who is very high class and sees only high class, wealthy, and important men.

Anyway, in Paris she had affairs with many men, including Franz Liszt (the famous composer, conductor, and

pianist), Alexandre Dumas (who wrote the Three Musketeers), and Alexandre Dujarier, the owner of the most popular newspaper in France, *La Presse*. In 1844, the two argued over Lola attending a party. Dujarier went to the party in a very drunken state, found her there speaking with Jean-Baptiste Rosemond de Beauvallon, a French Creole journalist who supported slavery. In his drunkenness, he challenged de Beauvallon to a duel. But Dujarier was not an experienced swordsman or marksman. He completely missed de Beauvallon with his pistol shot, but de Beauvallon's shot hit Dujarier in the right cheek below his eye, killing him.

In 1846, Lola went to Munich, where she became the mistress of aging King Ludwig I of Bavaria. When they first met, the King asked her if her bosom was real. She replied by tearing off enough of her garments to prove they were real. Because of her influence on their king, she became very unpopular with the local population. In spite of this, Ludwig made her the Countess of Landsfeld, a title of nobility, which included a large annuity.

She was very powerful politically in Bavaria, which only made her more disliked by the population. She championed the ideals of liberalism, and was against the conservatives and the Jesuits. In 1848 a revolutionary movement started, and ultimately Ludwig was forced to abdicate, causing Lola to flee to Switzerland where she waited in vain for Ludwig to join her. When that didn't happen, she went to France, and finally back to London.

In London, she met and quickly married a young cavalry officer named George Heald. He had recently received a large inheritance, which no doubt made him more attractive to Lola. But the terms of her divorce from Thomas James did not permit either of them to marry if the other was still alive. The Healds were forced to live in France and Spain,

but their tempestuous romance was in tatters in two years, and strangely, George Heald was found drowned.

By 1851, Lola was in America. She managed to resurrect her career as a dancer and actress, and in 1853 she arrived in San Francisco. Her performances created a great stir in local society, as most of her dances would be classified as "exotic." She soon married a newspaperman named Patrick Hull. They quarreled from the start, which seems to have been a normal situation for Lola. They moved to the Nevada County gold camp of Grass Valley, where Lola had invested in a mine, wanting to settle down. But, the marriage failed shortly thereafter. She lived in Grass Valley for more than two years, in a small cottage which you can visit today as California Historical Landmark # 292.

While in Grass Valley, Lola had lots of fun. She performed her erotic *Spider Dance* at private parties, and she made a pet out of a brown bear. She put the bear on a leash, and took it out for exercise on the streets of Grass Valley. The bear was devoted to Lola, but let someone get too close to her, the bear got extremely unfriendly, extremely fast.

One incident with the bear seems bizarre even by the standards of gold rush California. On that day, Lola was feeding the animal, when suddenly it rose on its hind legs and engulfed her in a mighty embrace, almost crushing her ribs. That night, the Grass Valley miners called on Lola. In spite of her protests against such action, the men insisted on trying the beast for attempted murder!

The trial was convened and commenced. Lola was not certain that the miners were just playing a joke on her. The trial proceeded with prosecutor, defense attorney, judge, and jury. The most staid courtroom decorum was observed. Ultimately, the bear was acquitted! The jury found that the bear "was a beast of sentiment and good taste." They

admitted to a man that the "temptation to hug Lola always is excessive." Lola still was not sure that this wasn't a joke.

In a nearby boarding house run by her parents, a young aspiring actress took notice of Lola, and asked her for help in furthering her career. Lola was happy to provide dancing lessons to the 6 year old girl, and encouraged the youngster's enthusiasm for performance. Her name was Charlotte Mignon Crabtree, but she would later be known as Lotta Crabtree, one of the wealthiest and most beloved American entertainers of the late 19th century.

Lola was next to tour Australia, during their gold rush of the 1850's. In 1855, she performed her famous *Spider Dance* at the Theatre Royal in Melbourne, raising her skirts so high that the audience could clearly see that she wore no undergarments. Her performance was decried as "subversive to all the ideals of public morality." The theatre soon began to show monetary losses, and Lola was forced to go elsewhere.

In 1856 at Castlemaine, she was "rapturously encored" after her performance of *Spider Dance* in front of 400 miners, including members of the Municipal Council, who had adjourned their meeting early so as to attend the performance. But a week or so later, Lola drew the wrath of the Council after her hot temper caused her to insult the audience after a performance. She returned to San Francisco in May of 1856.

Lola failed to reinvigorate her career after that, and spent her last days living in Philadelphia, smoking cigarettes, visiting with old friends, and wasting away from Syphilis. She died at the old age 39 on January 17, 1861. She is buried in Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY, where her tombstone reads "Mrs. Eliza Gilbert."

Her influence on culture has been vast. There are many characters in plays and books that are based on Lola. There

have been at least ten films, several TV shows, many novels, and some musical recordings all based on her and her dances. There are two lakes and a mountain named after Lola in Nevada County. At 9,148 feet, Mount Lola is the tallest mountain in Nevada County.