

CAPTAIN PHELPS VISITS VICTOR CASTRO IN EL CERRITO, 1841

William Dane Phelps of Massachusetts was the Master of the ship Alert from 1840 to 1842. His diaries of the trip were published in 1871 under the title Fore and Aft. He traded, hunted and visited ashore extensively during those two years, and, of interest to us, he makes mention of Governor Alvarado in Monterey, and he refers to San Pablo on more than one occasion. Here are some excerpts from his visit with "Vetro" Castro in December of 1841.

"Sund. 12th. Last night about midnight it commenced a severe gale. A whale boat belonging to Don Vetro Castro, who came to the ship last evening in her with a boats crew of Indians, swamped along side and went to pieces.

Mond. 13th. Afternoon went with Don Vetro to his farm on the opposite side of the Bay about 15 miles distant. Started with the cutter and 5 men at 1 PM, and arrived there about 3. Poor Vetro has been quite unfortunate the last week. The wild Indians had stolen about 30 horses from him last Monday. On Saturday he came over to the ship and lost his boat, and on returning home with me today, found one of his houses had been leveled by the tempest. After supper we all began to make arrangements for the night, with the prospect of a stormy night. No one could think of sleeping out of doors, and as the pitiless storm had spared the poor fellow but one house, and that containing but three rooms which were very small, I felt rather curious to know how we were all to be disposed of. Don Vetro although having a splendid farm of his own and a few thousand head of cattle, was sadly deficient in buildings and possessed but of few articles of furniture, and indeed so few that they could all be enumerated at a glance. They consisted of mostly two bedsteads and one bed, 1 pine table, 5 or 6 chairs, a wooden clock in one corner of the principal room, and an open closet in the other in which on some rough shelves were arranged sundry articles of crockery, odd knives & forks, broken spoons, and a row of empty bottles. However poor a Californian Rancherio (sic) may be, they always contrive to have one handsome bedstead, and although it may have to stand on a ground floor, it has generally as good a bed, curtains, & the other etc., as can be found in the best chambers of well to do folks at home, and this bed is always given up to a stranger who passes the night with them, even tho the man's wife & children sleep in the open air, as is often the case, for the Californians with all their vices, and failings, are hospitable in the extreme.

My host was but just started for himself, and had an excuse for being so short of the conveniences of life, which most of them have not. His wife also was young and inexperienced in the art of housekeeping and I could not help contrasting our necessities, with our wants which the present opportunity afforded. The boat crew were quartered with the Indians in one room, where with sides of leather, hides & deer skins, they made themselves quite comfortable. Two Frenchmen (Ranchieros) who were here waiting to get a passage over the bay, stretched themselves out on the floor of the room where

I was sitting, taking their saddles and pillows and "ponchos" for blankets, and soon gave evidence of sound sleep. The Senorita who had been busy in the mean time in overhauling a number of bags of wool, now gathered it up and spread it over the sacking bottom of the bedless bedstead in the next room, which was just large enough to contain the two bedsteads which were alongside of each other, a few trunks, and two chairs, with scarce room for a person to move between them, spreading a sheet over the wooland tucking under the edges, she completed the arrangement with clean sheets, blankets, &c., and I was told that my bed was ready. But instead of letting me take possession of the temporary one I was desired to occupy the carved mahogany high poster with the handsome curtains. Again this I protested inasmuch as this one was much the widest and the other was but a scant pattern for a man, his wife, and two children. On any other ground I should have offended them by saying a word on the subject, and as it was, they insisted and I had to comply. the next difficulty was, who should go to bed first, but a hint from Vetro gave me to understand that it was expected of me. Therefore bidding them "buenas noches", I stepped inside of the curtains and soon disposed of myself. Nor were they long in following my example, but as they seemed to have some trouble in the disposal of the children, I urged to have one of them put in with me, but no, I must keep my bed to myself. And so unpleasant did I feel in dispossessing them in this manner of their accustomed comforts (and Heaven knows they are few enough) that it was a number of long hours before I composed myself to sleep. I was awakened before daylight by my host, rising and mustering his Indians and horses to start off in pursuit of his cattle. My principal object in coming over here was to get a good bullock or two as none were to be had at Yerba Buena. At early daylight I hear Vetro and his Indians depart, and again I fell asleep, hoping that my hostess in the meantime would make her toilet and vacate the room, but at sunrise I ascertained that she was still moored in "blanket harbour," and as there was no sign of her getting under weigh, I found that I must, therefore. Partly dressing myself within the curtains, I emerged from them to behold what would perhaps have shocked my modesty had I not been a family man, a pretty young woman sitting in her bed nursing an infant. But however as she did not seem disconcerted neither did I. So bidding her good morning I took my gun and sallied out in pursuit of game.

Tues. 14th. Shot a few geese, and went to the boat where breakfast was preparing. While eating, Vetro and his Indians drove a herd of about 300 bullocks into an enclosure near his house. From these he selected two of the fattest, threw the lasso over them and run them down to the boat. While the crew was killing and dressing them, I jumped on a horse and went in pursuit of geese, was absent about $\frac{1}{2}$ and hour and returned with 8. Geese and ducks are uncommonly scarce at this season and quite shy. 11 AM started for the ship & arrived on board at 4 PM. Ends calm & pleasant.