

squash, sweet cakes and chocolate to drink. At that time, Luisa and Victor had been married about five years. In 1841, they had a baby girl, Josefina, and a toddler son, Jose. Luisa and Victor were just starting out together. They had been living in this new home for two years.

Luisa arranged the beds and bedding for the Captain as he describes: "The Senorita who had been busy in the mean time in overhauling a number of bags of wool, now gathered it

More on the Castro Adobe
In his book *El Cerrito: Historical Evolution* Edward Staniford gives us more insight into Victor and Luisa's home: "The young couple first lived at the old Castro adobe casa at San Pablo, then moved in 1839 into the one-story adobe casa which he built with Indian labor near El Cerrito Creek. Victor constructed a large beautiful rancho casa, adding to the original southern adobe a western wing in the early 1840's; which became the main casa, and a northern wing in the late 1840's; This three-part casa enclosing an attractive patio open to the east."

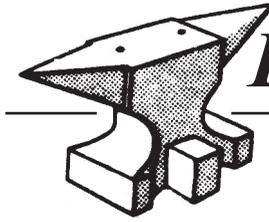
up and spread it over the sacking bottom of the bedless bedstead in the next room, which was just large enough to contain the two bedsteads which were alongside of each other, a few trunks and two chairs, with scarce room for a person to move between them, spreading a sheet over the wool and tucking under the edges, she completed the arrangement with clean sheets, blankets, 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...." The Captain slept in the poster bed surrounded by bed curtains, while Victor and Luisa slept with their two children in the smaller bed.

Victor got up early in the morning, before daylight. He and his Indian vaqueros set off on horseback to bring in 300 cattle into a corral near the house. Victor lassoed two of the biggest and brought them down to the landing by the captain's boats. His crew prepared the meat to take over to the ship. The captain ate breakfast down by his ship with his crew and then went geese hunting. They left for San Francisco around 11 AM and were back on the *Alert* by 4:00 PM.

Life at the Castro Adobe was filled with daily chores of ranch life, hosting visitors, preparing meals, taking care of small children and trading ranch goods. Forces of nature could make life challenging and require rebuilding. One thing both Capt. Phelps and others of the time said about Victor and Luisa was that they were hospitable to all who came to their home.

Reference materials for this article:

- Phelps, William Dane. *Alta California, 1840-1842: the Journal and Observations of William Dane Phelps, Master of the Ship Alert*. Introduced and edited by Briton Cooper Busch. Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1983.
- William Heath Davis. *Sixty Years in California*. San Francisco: Andrew J. Leary Co., 1889
- William Heath Davis. *Seventy-Five Years in San Francisco*. 2nd Edition, Edited by Douglas Watson. San Francisco: John Howell, 1929.
- Staniford, Edward. *El Cerrito: Historical Evolution*. El Cerrito, CA, USA: EC Hist. Soc., 1976.



El Cerrito Historical Society

P O Box 304, El Cerrito, CA 94530
elcerritohistoricalsociety@yahoo.com
www.elcerritowire.com/history

Vol. 29
No. 1

The Forge

April 2013

The Official Publication of the El Cerrito Historical Society, Copyright © 2013

Our Next Events:

EL CERRITO LIBRARY CENTENNIAL

7:00 PM Friday, June 14, at the El Cerrito Library

LEARN ABOUT THE CERRITO THEATER

10:00 AM Saturday, June 15, at the Cerrito Theater

We have two important events coming up. 2013 is the 100th anniversary for the Contra Costa County and El Cerrito Library. On Fri. June 14th at 7 PM we are co-sponsoring a celebration of the 100th anniversary, along with the City, The Friends of the Library, and the New Library Committee.

The very next day, on Sat. June 15 at 10 AM, we have a special event at the Cerrito Theatre. We will hear from Jennifer Dowling Posedel, who will talk about the history of East Bay theaters, and Gary Lee Parks, who will talk about theater aesthetics and design. There will also be a tour of the theater.

The El Cerrito Historical Society is a volunteer, non-political, non-profit corporation that has as its purpose the preservation and appreciation of the history of El Cerrito. It does this by providing educational and research opportunities; by the collection of historic photographs, documents, artifacts and cultural objects; by advocating the preservation of historic resources in the city; and by encouraging others to help further these aims. Anyone may join; dues are \$25 (Household member), \$60 (Sponsoring member), and \$300 (Life member).

The Castro Adobe, 1841

by Joanne Rubio

What was life like at the first adobe-brick home built in El Cerrito? The captain of the ship *Alert* who sailed into San Francisco Bay in the winter of 1841 tells us in a journal he wrote during his time spent in California. Captain William Phelps had been sailing up and down the coast for a year trading goods from his ship. One section of the ship would be set up as the trading room with items such as knives, spices, furniture, fabric, boots, rugs, paper, clothing, dishes, building materials, tools, gun powder, sugar, rice, macaroni, coffee, chocolate, almonds and raisins. In December of 1841, Victor Castro and his crew of Indian workers rowed across the bay to the San Francisco harbor from the dock he built out on what we now call Pt. Isabel. He intended to arrange trades with the six ships in the harbor. The *Nymph* and *Catalina* were from Mexico; the *Alert*, the *Bolivar* and *Don Quixote* were from the United States;

and the *Index* was from Britain.

The weather had been stormy off and on for a week and a gale-force wind came up at midnight on December 11th. Unfortunately, Victor's whaleboat ended up going to pieces with Victor and his crew being rescued from the bay by Captain Phelps. They spent that night and the next on the *Alert*. On December 13th Captain Phelps and his crew set out in their "cutter" (a small sailboat) for Victor's home on Rancho San Pablo near Cerrito Creek. The captain wanted to get a supply of meat for his crew from the "few thousand head of cattle" Victor had on his ranch.

It took two hours to sail across the bay. When Victor

arrived home, he found that one of his two buildings had been destroyed by the storm. The adobe that was the main house was still standing. The captain and his crew of five men spent the night at Victor and Luisa's home. Captain Phelps talked about the home in considerable detail and from this we learn things that were otherwise never recorded. Captain Phelps described the three-room home as having "small rooms". He appears to be describing an

adobe where the rooms open to each other, which was a new way of building adobe homes in 1840 called "Monterey Style". This new style was based on the first of it's kind built by Thomas Larkin in Monterey.

In the middle room there was a pine table with five or six chairs. A wooden clock stood in one corner of the room and an "open closet" stood in another corner. The closet held a collection of utensils, empty bottles and other "crockerly". Victor and Luisa would have traded with visiting merchants for these items and they likely came from many parts of the world.

After saying they had supper the Captain mentions two other men who were in the room: "Two Frenchmen (Rancheros), 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 for pillows and ponchos for blankets..." Victor had a business of ferrying merchants, ranchers and their families to different points on the bay in his boats.

A room on one end of the home was a storage area. "The boat crew were quartered with the Indians in one room, where with sides of leather, hides and deer skins, they made themselves quite comfortable." The hides and tallow served as "money" for trading so they needed to be in a secure place---inside the home. Luisa prepared supper for their guests, workers and her own family. Unfortunately, Captain Phelps does not describe the meal that Luisa had served. A typical meal at the time often included a chili meat stew, corn tortillas, goat cheese,



The Castro Adobe ca. 1890 - El Cerrito Historical Society Collection