

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Cheerless Habitations

Sir George Simpson, a member of the Hudson Bay Company, further describes Monterey as he saw it in 1842, in his book "The Authentic Narrative of a Journey Around the World," published in London, England, in 1847.

"Externally the habitations have a cheerless aspect in some consequence of the paucity of windows, which are almost unattainable luxuries.

"Glass is rendered ruinously dear by the exorbitant duties, while parchment, surely, a better substitute than a cubic yard of adobes, is clearly inadmissible in California on account of the trouble of its preparation and, to increase the expense, carpenters are equally extravagant and saucy, charging three dollars for such a day's work as one is likely to get from fellows that will not labor more than three days a week.

"After all, perhaps the Californians do not feel the privation of light to be an evil. While it certainly makes the rooms cooler; it cannot by any possibility interfere with the occupations of those who do nothing; even for the purpose of ventilation, windows are hardly needed, inasmuch as the bedding, the only thing that requires fresh air, is daily exposed to the sun and wind. And to the California housewives, the bed is quite a show, enjoying as it does, the full benefit of contrast.

"While the other furniture consists of a deal table and some badly made chairs, with possibly a Dutch clock and an old looking glass, the bed ostentatiously challenges admiration with its snowy sheets fringed with lace, its pile of soft pillows covered with finest linen or richest satin, and its well arranged drapery of costly and tasteful curtains.

"Still, notwithstanding the washings and the airings, this bed is but a whited supulchre, conceding in the interior a pestilential wool mattress, the impregnable stronghold of millions of las pulgas.

"As to public buildings, this capital of the province may, with a stress of charity, be allowed to possess four. First is the church, part of which is going to decay, while another part is not yet finished; its only peculiarity is that it is built, or half built, of stone. Next comes the castle, consisting of a small house surrounded by a low wall, all of adobe.

"It commands the town and anchorage, if a garrison of five soldiers and a battery of eight or ten rusty and honey-combed guns can be said to command anything. Third in order is the guard house – a paltry mud hut but without windows.

"Fourth and last stands the Custom House, which is, or rather, promises to be, a small range of decent offices, for though it has been building for five years, it is not yet finished.

"The neighborhood of the town is pleasantly diversified with hills and offers abundance of timber. The soil, though light and sandy is certainly capable of cultivation; and yet there is neither field or garden to be seen.

"If one were to judge from appearances, even the trouble of fencing would exceed the light of California patience, for here and there were premises enclosed after a fashion by branches of trees stuck in the ground; and this miserable makeshift was the less excusable as the adjacent pastures were inconveniently overgrown with the prickly pear, growing to a height of 12 feet, and armed with spikes too formidable for either man or beast to encounter.

"Monterey is badly supplied with water, which, in consequence of the extraordinary drought of last year, lately brought a dollar a pipe. The small stream which flows through the town is generally dry in summer, the very season when the water is most needed."