

# **Travelers bugged by strange bedfellows Lodgings harbored pesky critters and sleepless nights**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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I was watching the news today regarding the infestation of bedbugs and about fleas carrying West Nile virus. The media went on and on about people traveling all over the world and the result is that diseases and bugs of all kinds are being spread over areas once free from such things.

Bedbugs are ornery little critters that bite you after you've gone to sleep and cause you various forms of consternation and discomfort.

They are ugly little critters if you've ever seen one up close, say, maybe waking up just as the little monster is getting ready to bite you on the nose near your eyeball and sending you into a frenzy. The same goes for those pesky mosquitoes.

So, what's that got to do with history?

Well, it's kind of like all the stories so many of us have told about having to walk through 10 miles of blizzard in bare feet to school in the "good old days."

Maybe that's a little exaggerated, but when you read some of the old tales of bedbugs, mosquitoes and other assorted critters in the old West, you just have to believe them and be glad things have improved with time.

With that said, let's take a look at some recorded history about the wretched little critters that still bug us today (pun intended).

Way back in 1769, Portola and his band of explorers were looking for the Bay of Monterey, but missed it and ended up in the vicinity of what we now know as Purisima Creek on the ocean shore of San Mateo County. The party's diarist, Padre Crespi, recorded the following observation:

"Friday, Oct. 27, 1769, After three hours travel in which we must have advanced two leagues, we halted near the beach, on the bank of the third arroyo, where we found vestiges of a village, but, according to what we were told by four heathen from the preceding village who have accompanied us, the people of this one have moved to the mountains. I named this place Arroyo de San Ibon (now called Purisima Creek). All the

inquisitive persons who wished to see the habitations which had been abandoned by the heathen, some few grass huts, were covered with fleas, for which reason the soldiers called it Village of Las Pulgas.”

Seventeen years later, a Frenchman, La Perouse, sailed into the Bay of Monterey on his worldwide tour of exploration and also took notice of the California flea:

“This general architecture (of the Indians’ huts) of the two Californias has never undergone the smallest change, notwithstanding the exhortations of the missionaries. The Indians say that they love the open air, that it is convenient to set fire to their house when the fleas become troublesome, and that they can build another in less than two hours.”

Just imagine; if you had an infestation of critters, all you had to do was burn down your domicile and throw up a new one. Of course that’s not very practical today . . . in most cases.

With the beginnings of westward immigration and the Gold Rush, it seems writers were much more descriptive of the discomforts of the unwanted guests crawling about their tormented bodies.

One of the best descriptions of the torments of fleas and bedbugs is recorded in Edwin Bryant’s book, “What I Saw in California”:

“I was not in good humor, for the fleas, bugs and other vermin, which infested our miserable lodgings, had caused me a sleepless night, by goring my body until the blood oozed from the skin in countless places. These ruinous missions are prolific generators, and the nurseries of vermin of all kinds, as the hapless traveler who tarries in them a few hours will learn to his sorrow. When these bloodthirsty assailants once make a lodgment in the clothing or bedding of the unfortunate victim of their attacks, such are their courage and perseverance that they never capitulate. ‘Blood or death’ is their motto; - the war against them, to be successful, must be a war of extermination.”

Later in the book, he once again vents his innermost feelings in bitter words and with stinging detail:

“I do not like to trouble the reader with a frequent reference to the myriads of fleas and other vermin which infest the rancherias and old mission establishments in California; but if any sinning soul ever suffered the punishment of purgatory before leaving its tenement of clay, those torments were endured by myself last night. When I rose from my blankets this morning, after a sleepless night, I do not think there was an inch-square of my body that did not exhibit the inflammation consequent upon a

puncture by a flea, or some equally rabid and poisonous insect. Smallpox, erysipelas, measles, and scarlet fever combined, could not have imparted to my skin a more inflamed and sanguineous appearance. The multitudes of these insects, however, have been generated by Indian filthiness. They do not disturb the inmates of those casas where cleanliness prevails.”

The bugs that plagued the pioneers had to be dealt with over the years, and were, especially in the 1920s and 1930s in Solano County.

In 1929 mosquito abatement became a serious subject in Solano County. The Fairfield Lions Club, Vacaville Women’s Club and the Chamber of Commerce, Suisun Wednesday Club, Rio Vista Kiwanis Club and Vallejo Chamber of Commerce threw their support behind a Mosquito Abatement District and circulated petitions. Curiously, in Benicia where the mosquito problem was especially serious, the Kiwanis Club didn’t support the effort in the beginning.

In a meeting at the Vallejo Chamber of Commerce in October 1929,

A. E. Emerick who was in charge of the Napa Mosquito Abatement District, related many facts about abatement to the members. He showed that in the 28 districts in California that a tax of 10 cents per \$100 actually saved more than the cost of the tax. Others pointed out that during the fruit harvest season that productivity increased 25 percent with the reduction of mosquitoes.

By November 1929, Ralph Sheldon and dairyman D. Cereda, of Cordelia, convinced the Benicia City Council of the benefits of an abatement district. The Mosquito Abatement District was formed in late 1930 and oiling troublesome spots was begun to fight the pesky pest.

A Solano Republican newspaper article in April 1931 wrote of the successes achieved once the Mosquito Abatement District began its labors:

**MOSQUITOS FALL IN OIL THE PATH OF ABATEMENT AIDS** - Were it not for the work done by the Solano Mosquito Abatement District during the previous autumn and winter, and the past few months of this spring, this community would now be fighting off the worst flight of mosquitoes ever “enjoyed” here. This is according to Fred Rush, Superintendent of the district, who has a force of some 15 men at work in various parts of the district.

“Few citizens realize the amount of work that has been done since the district was formed last winter, but a trip to the tules south of Suisun and the marsh near Cordelia, as well as in other parts of the county, will reveal a great deal of permanent mosquito

control work already accomplished through drainage, flood gates, cuts and dikes.

“Oiling has been going along at proper levels during the spring and while not all mosquito larvae have been eliminated, due to the lack of cooperation by a few of the prominent gun clubs in the marsh, still there will not be the serious flights this summer as last. One by one the gun club owners are being won over to Mr. Rush’s way of reasoning, and in time all of them will take steps to rid their resorts of the mosquito pests.

“The workers under the direction of Superintendent Rush have stopped several bad flights near Dixon and Vacaville, as well as in Benicia community within the past few weeks.

Rio Vista was also saved a lot of blood when a great breeding place was discovered.

A resume of the activities of the district shows that Mr. Rush has done a remarkable amount of work since he took charge of the abatement work.

“So, if the citizens are not badly tormented this summer, it will not be an accident, but will be the result of the hard work of Mr. Rush and his crew.”

Methods of eliminating pests have evolved over the years with elimination of oiling and the use of selected pesticides. Recently the Mosquito Improvement District has enlisted the aid of “mosquitofish” in the battle. The two-inch-long freshwater minnow is placed in horse troughs, fresh water ponds and other permanent breeding places to gobble up mosquito larvae.

Today, as old marshes, swamps and wetlands are revived in Solano County and other areas, the Mosquito Abatement Districts have their work cut out for them in the fight to stop disease-carrying pests.

Uncontrolled immigration has even revived some cases of malaria brought in by people who are carriers of the disease. It’s a tax worth paying, and a pat on the back for the employees that do the work to protect us is in order.

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