

{ Pulgas }

by Francisco Nieto Salazar

Fleas were a constant reminder that humans are food. The summer months in California brought such an onslaught of these that the residents of any Indian rancheria would have to burn their huts down and move to better grounds. If the fleas were well-organized and astute, they would strike in the night and get into everything before making their presence known. The fleas were especially grateful for the arrival of the Spaniards, for with them came bold new flavors of blood and rich opportunities to hide behind the layers of clothing they wore to protect the shame of their white bodies.

In the Missions the fleas were so plentiful that they could have fed a friar. They got into everything, living in the beards of soldiers and in every bed. They would often turn up swimming in a bowl of soup. On rare occasions they became so vicious and numerous that they would suck a body down to skin and bone leaving a wrinkled husk that barely resembled its owner from the night before. At least the Indians had the good sense to burn down their ruwas, but the gente de razón (people of reason) and all those living behind the adobe walls of civilization could only watch them, scratching themselves raw, and wishing that they could too put a torch to their dwellings.

