



## Livestock



Oxen, horses and mules may be seen grazing on the meadows and prairie surrounding the fort. A visit to the fort is not complete without a visit to view the livestock in the corral which can be accessed through the northwest bastion. Although the animals are trained and gentle, they are very large. Please use common sense around them. Please stay on your side of the fence.

### Livestock Used by Bent, St. Vrain & Company

Historically, the Bent, St. Vrain & Company was dependent upon domestic stock for its very existence. Draft animals were used to maintain a constant exchange with major trade centers and from widely scattered outposts. Cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and poultry provided a steady supply of food for the fort employees, as well as for travelers on the Santa Fe Trail.

At certain times of the year vast herds of animals could be seen near the fort walls. One observer reported on the spectacle of several hundred horses, mules, and oxen being brought in from grazing to the relative security of the corral for the night. Other travelers noted the sounds and smells of the livestock.

Within the Plains Indian societies, wealth was often measured in terms of horses owned. Tremendous prestige was bestowed upon individuals who were successful in capturing, trading for, or stealing horses and mules.

The breeding and use of oxen, horses, mules, and donkeys as draft or pack animals in *Nueva México* and the United States was critical to freighting and commercial success.

### Care of Livestock

Such vast herds would not be practical in today's world, but the sight of horses, mules, and other animals in and around the fort is still a thrilling part of a visit. The park maintains a yoke of Red Devon (oxen), several Spanish Barbs (horses), a pack mule, a flock of chickens, and half a dozen peacocks.

Care of the park livestock is a multi-division effort. Experienced staff schedule veterinary and farrier care whenever necessary and

maintain a regular vaccination program. The park follows National Park Service Integrated Pest Management principles to control horse flies.

Twenty tons of weed free hay and five-hundred pounds of grain are purchased each year to supplement daily grazing. The park's livestock have free range over three hundred acres of grassland north of the Arkansas River.

### Horses

Horses were much in evidence at Bent's Fort in 1845-46. Most were Indian ponies. These horses were of African-Berber origin and are now called Spanish Barbs. The Spanish Barb horses came to the new world with Cortez in 1521. Some of them were lost, some escaped or were traded. In any case, the Bent, St. Vrain & Company bought horses arriving from *Neuvo México* along the *Camino Real*. They also purchased horses brought in huge herds from California as well as trading for them with Indians who acquired the animals from Mexican rancheros.

A number of New Mexicans are known to

have been engaged by Bent, St. Vrain & Company to herd the fort's livestock and break some of the wild horses acquired through trade. In 1846, fort resident, Frank Blair Jr. wrote, "The company keep a large stock of cattle, employing Mexicans to herd them."

The Hispanos of northern México enjoyed a well-deserved reputation as exceptional horsemen and muleteers. Isaac Cooper commented that even the "Comanches themselves cannot excel them" in their "daring and seldom unsuccessful equestrianism."

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## Cattle

Cattle were a major source of income for the Bent's. In 1846 William Bent had an order for five hundred "beeves" from the Army. He purchased Spanish cattle, black, brown and red, from *Nuevo México*. These Mexican cattle were the broad heavy-horned type that could also be trained and used as oxen.

The Bent's would trade one good ox for two worn out ones, which would be put out to pasture for fattening and then traded to later

travelers. The same system was used for mules and horses. The Indians did not like oxen to eat so they were generally not stolen enroute.

Oxen are emasculated bulls trained to work in pairs from the day they are born. Oxen can be any breed of cattle. The cattle you see at the fort today are Red Devon oxen. They are one of several breeds that might have been seen at the fort in the 1840's. They are used to pull the park's freight wagons during local parades and special events.

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## Mules

Mules were tough, often taking the place of horses. Many preferred to ride a mule in rough country. Accounts tell of William Bent astride his favorite black mule riding "hell-bent-for-election" after some raiding Comanches. He could have afforded the best horse available but chose a mule.

Thousands of mules were sent back to Missouri by the Bents each year. Most came from *Nuevo México*, purchased from the Indians who stole them from the Mexicans. Others were purchased from haciendas, or captured from the wild herds. Mules were predominantly black and of medium size.

Some were used as pack animals and for pulling freight wagons, but most of Bent's mules were sent east to market and sold to the Army for riding or pulling wagons. The army traded their worn animals at the fort after the long haul from "the States." In 1846, Lt. James Abert wrote, "Captain Walker ... has 60 head of mules and he is in hopes to dispose of to ... (the) Volunteers." Many of whose horses were completely broken down, and their owners, fatigued with marching on foot, would not stand upon trifles at the price of a fresh animal.

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## Sheep

In 1840's sheep were an increasing financial factor for the fort and the eastern markets. The Bent's shipped hundreds back east to St. Louis every year. Mutton was also eaten at the fort. The sheep were raised mostly near Taos by Bent, St. Vrain & Company's Mexican herders. They were taken to Bent's Fort at the time the wagon trains were formed up to head east. Sheep could often be seen grazing on the south bank (Mexican side) of the Arkansas River.

Sheep were of no interest to the Indians so were fairly safe to herd east. They were

probably of Spanish origin. The Churro Sheep, introduced into New Mexico before 1550, became the standard breed of the southwest. Purebred Merino rams were not brought to the areas of Santa Fe and Taos until 1859.

On his journey across the plains in 1839, F. A. Wislizenus, M.D., noted that he saw "... sheep and goats ..." at the fort. Alexander Barclay, fort clerk, wrote that sheep were plentiful "in the Spanish Country..." and he suspected that several would soon be purchased.

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## Poultry

Barclay mentioned that thirty chickens and four turkeys were freighted from St. Louis to add variety to the dinner menu. Dominiques, Rhode Islands, and Barred Rock chickens might have been seen during the 1840's.

Today you can see Dominiques in and around the corral and chicken coop.

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## Peacocks

Peacocks were brought in to provide color and possibly to act as an alarm. Their booming voices announced the approach of visitors.

George Bent, the son of William Bent, once wrote that several peacocks were at the fort, and that their "...plumage and harsh voices astonished and more or less alarmed the Indians, who called them

thunder birds, nun-um'a-e-vi-kis."

Mexicans called them *Pajarros Reales*, "royal birds," or *Pajarros del Arco Iris*, "birds of the rainbow." They were signs of nobility, especially for Don Carlos Bente, Don Carlos Sambrain, and Don Chor chis Bente (Charles Bent, Ceran St.Vrain, and George Bent).