

BENT'S OLD FORT



Here on the banks of the Arkansas in southeastern Colorado lie the remains of Bent's Old Fort—significant fur-trading post, Indian rendezvous, and way station on the Santa Fe Trail. Located in the heart of the Indian country and at the crossroads of key overland routes, the fort was a natural trading point. From establishment in 1833 to destruction in 1849 it was regional headquarters for trappers and Indians alike, and so the chief point of contact between whites and the Indians of the Southern Plains. As the Mexican War approached, the new forces of the day transformed the fort. In 1846 it became a military rendezvous and staging base for the American conquest of New Mexico. Though its years were brief, few outposts were more instrumental in shaping the destiny of the Southwest.

PROBING THE SOUTHWEST

By the close of the American Revolution, New Spain's northern frontier stretched from eastern Texas to the Pacific, effectively barring rich Mexico from intruders. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, explorers crisscrossed the Great Plains. After them came fur traders, the vanguard for American expansion into the West. Some pursued the beaver into the northern and central Rockies, others pressed southwestward into the Southern Plains and lower Rockies, seeking both furs from the Indians and trade with the Mexicans.

When word reached the Mississippi Valley in 1822 that Mexico had thrown off its Spanish shackles, merchants lost no time in testing their information. Several parties set out at once from Missouri for Santa Fe, where they sold their goods at a handsome profit. Soon traders were stopping at Taos and expeditions were pushing on into Mexican territory to trade with Indian tribes there. Their success encouraged others, so that by 1824 the Santa Fe trade was well established.

Trading caravans generally traveled to Santa Fe by two routes. The main trail began at Independence, Mo.—after 1827 the chief outfitting point—and ran across the plains of Kansas to the Cimarron Crossing of the Arkansas River. Here the trail divided. One branch crossed the river and passed over the Comanche-infested Cimarron Desert to a point near Las Vegas, N. Mex., where the two

branches merged into a single route. The other, the Mountain Branch, continued up the Arkansas to Timpas Creek in Colorado, took a southwesterly course through Raton Pass, then joined the other branch near Watrous. Though the mountain route was longer, it was a safer, easier road.

Among the first to become interested in trading with the Indians and Mexicans were the brothers Charles and William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, all sons of prominent St. Louis families. It was the booming Mexican trade of the 1820's that turned their eyes toward the southwest.

After some solid experience in the Upper Missouri fur trade, the three men transferred operations to the Arkansas River, where they built a small stockade near present Pueblo, Colo. The next year, 1830, they formed the partnership of Bent, St. Vrain and Company. Charles Bent was responsible for arranging credit in St. Louis and purchasing and forwarding goods to New Mexico. William Bent oversaw all Indian trade. St. Vrain, and later Charles Bent, marketed goods in New Mexico.

The concept of a great trading establishment on the Arkansas came from Charles Bent soon after formation of the partnership. To hold, and exploit, this territory he knew that they would need a central fort as powerful as those along the Missouri River. The partners pondered well the best location for so great an investment. Yellow Wolf, a Cheyenne chief, influenced the Bents by pointing



Charles Bent William Bent Ceran St. Vrain

out that the fort should be built close to both the bison country and the hunting grounds of several Southern Plains tribes. Finally the brothers chose a spot on the north bank of the Arkansas, about 12 miles west of the mouth of the Purgatoire River. This placed them just north of the New Mexico boundary, close to the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Ute, Comanche, Kiowa, and Kiowa-Apache, and well within range of roving bands from other tribes. The location also aided the company's business since trading caravans could go on to New Mexico without leaving the Mountain Branch of the trail.

William Bent started work on the fort sometime in the late 1820's or early 1830's. He built with adobe, both because it was fireproof and there was little timber available on the plains for so large a structure. As more than 100 Mexican laborers made mud bricks, Americans hauled in timber for roofs and gates. Gradually a building took shape that could be described by a later visitor as one that "exactly fills my idea of an ancient castle." By 1833 the massive impregnable mud fortress stood completed in the midst of an unbroken prairie.

CENTER OF A GIANT EMPIRE

From their location in the heart of the plains the Bents and St. Vrain for 16 years managed a private trading empire stretching from Texas into Wyoming, from the Rockies to middle Kansas. Beyond this, they had major commitments in the

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Santa Fe trade proper: large mercantile stores in Taos and Santa Fe, and yearly caravans that traversed both the Cimarron and Mountain Branches of the trail. They "were mighty men," one historian has written, "whose will was prairie law, who could sway whole tribes, who knew Indians and Mexicans as few others did."

William Bent, resident manager of the fort, received his trade goods from two sources. From St. Louis caravans brought wagonloads of beads, cloth, ammunition, and other items prized by the Indians. These were exchanged for bison robes and other peltries either at the fort or in the Indians' camps, where they were carried by company agents. From New Mexico, Charles Bent and St. Vrain sent horses, blankets, and silver, items obtained by barter at the stores the two men operated in Taos and Santa Fe. Part of these goods were traded at the fort, the rest were sent on to Missouri with the pelts and robes collected during the season. Within a few years Bent, St. Vrain and Company had built up a profitable business whose existence depended upon friendly relations with the Indians and suppression of competition.

Bent and company met competition head on. When other companies tried to tap the Indian trade by establishing posts on the South Platte, St. Vrain built a trading post in their midst. The new fort, a branch office to Bent's Fort, succeeded in maintaining the company's ascendancy in that region. Rivals soon learned that competing with the Bents was not the quickest road to profits.

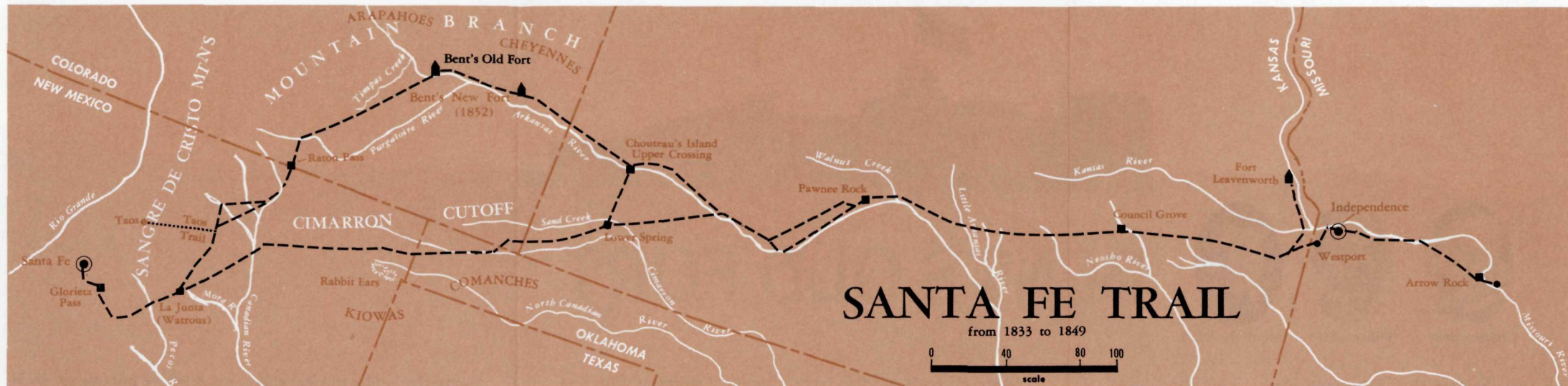
By skill and subtleness the Bents achieved greater influence among the Indians than rival traders. Of the numerous tribes trading with the company, the most important

were the Southern Cheyennes, upon whose hunting grounds Bent's Fort stood. William Bent, "Little White Man" to the Cheyennes, saw that they continued to remain as friendly as they were before the fort was established. He required his employees to be fair in bartering and restricted the use of whiskey, a favorite device of other firms.

In the mid-1830's Bent married Owl Woman, the daughter of Gray Thunder, one of the most powerful of the Cheyennes. He also encouraged peace among the tribes, for their intermittent warfare hurt business. The deadliest of enemies could trade at Bent's Fort in an atmosphere of peace.

LIFE AT THE FORT

As the principal outpost of American civilization on the southwestern Plains, Bent's Fort was a fairly self-sufficient institution. Employing about 60 persons, it required the services of numerous tradesmen: wheelwrights, carpenters, gunsmiths, and blacksmiths. Many nationalities were present, causing one visitor to remark that he thought he "heard at one time as many as six different languages, French, Spanish, German, English, Comanche, Arapahoe—a perfect Babel of a place." Among the better known figures of the West employed at the post at one time or another were Lucien B. Maxwell, Thomas O. Boggs, Baptiste Charbonneau, and Kit Carson.



After long winters in the mountains, trappers brought in their furs to Bent's Fort and stayed to spin yarns, gamble, and celebrate. They came with Indian wives and halfbreed children not only to dispose of their catch but to outfit new expeditions and visit with old friends. Here was the only place in the region where they could obtain supplies for a new season.

Because of its location in the heart of the Indian country the fort was the natural spot for meetings between the Southern Plains Indians and the U.S. Government and for intertribal councils. In 1835 troops under Col. Henry Dodge met near Bent's Fort with chiefs of several tribes to discuss depredations that had taken place on the Santa Fe Trail. Five years later, at a great peace council held 3 miles below the fort, major tribes—including the Cheyenes and Comanches—feasted, danced, and exchanged presents purchased from William Bent. The peace concluded at this council was never broken. In 1846 Bent's Fort was chosen as headquarters for the Upper Platte and Arkansas Agency, a move that took advantage of both the fort's location and William Bent's singular influence with the Indians.

WAR WITH MEXICO

Powerful as the Bents and St. Vrain were, events beyond their control were destined to destroy the company. Relations between Mexico and the United States had long been strained over the Texas question. In 1836, after colonizing Texas, Americans had successfully revolted against Mexico. The next year the United States extended diplomatic recognition to the Republic, and shortly after the Texans petitioned for annexation to the United States, aggravating an already tense situation. When annexation came in 1845, Mexico viewed the act as one of war. With the approach of armed conflict, the United States designated the adobe trading post as the

advance base for invasion of New Mexico. It soon became the rendezvous for Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny's invading Army of the West.

The long-expected war opened on May 13, 1846. Two months later Kearny arrived at the fort with a force of 1,650 dragoons and Missouri volunteers. Closely behind rolled some 300 wagons of Santa Fe traders, which Kearny's column to all appearances was protecting. Here they remained until early August, then they pushed southward on their mission of conquest. In August 1846, after 17 days on the Mountain Branch, Kearny's army marched unopposed into Santa Fe and raised the American flag over both that city and, symbolically, all of New Mexico. Henceforth New Mexico would be American.

After Kearny's army left Bent's Fort, Government wagon trains congregated there in ever-increasing numbers. Government cattle overgrazed nearby pastures. Quartermaster stores piled up in the fort, and Government soldiers, teamsters, and artisans occupied its rooms. Bent, St. Vrain, and Company had supplied an outpost for military expansionism and a convenient substitute for the fort the War Department had failed to build.

THE FORT IS ABANDONED

The steady flow of soldiers across the Plains during the Mexican War, together with the influx of settlers, goldseekers, and adventurers that came later, constituted a white tide that irrevocably changed the Great Plains. Watering places were fouled, precious wood was wantonly used, bison were frightened away from accustomed haunts. The company was caught between the millstones of resentful Indians and invading whites. Indian warfare commenced seriously in 1847, and from then on the days of rich trading were gone. Meanwhile, Charles Bent, appointed governor of the newly won Territory of New Mexico, was killed in a revolt in Taos. This blow, together with the sharp decline in business,

destroyed the firm. St. Vrain now departed to New Mexico, probably after selling his interest in the fort to William Bent.

The final blow to Bent's Fort came in 1849 when cholera, probably brought by emigrants, spread through the tribes. What little trade remained dwindled to a standstill. William Bent, disillusioned and disappointed, had had enough. Loading his family and a few employees into wagons, he set fire to the storerooms and powder magazine and abandoned the fort. What had been the center of a giant commercial empire was left a smoldering monument to Manifest Destiny.

Bent moved 38 miles down the Arkansas to Big Timbers where, in a temporary stockade, he attempted to revive the Indian trade. In 1852-53 he built here a large stone post that became known as Bent's New Fort. (The first fort is thus known as Bent's Old Fort.)

Trade never returned to its prewar volume, but Bent stayed in business until the eve of the Civil War. After leasing the new fort to the Army, he retired to his ranch on the upper Purgatoire. There he died in 1869.

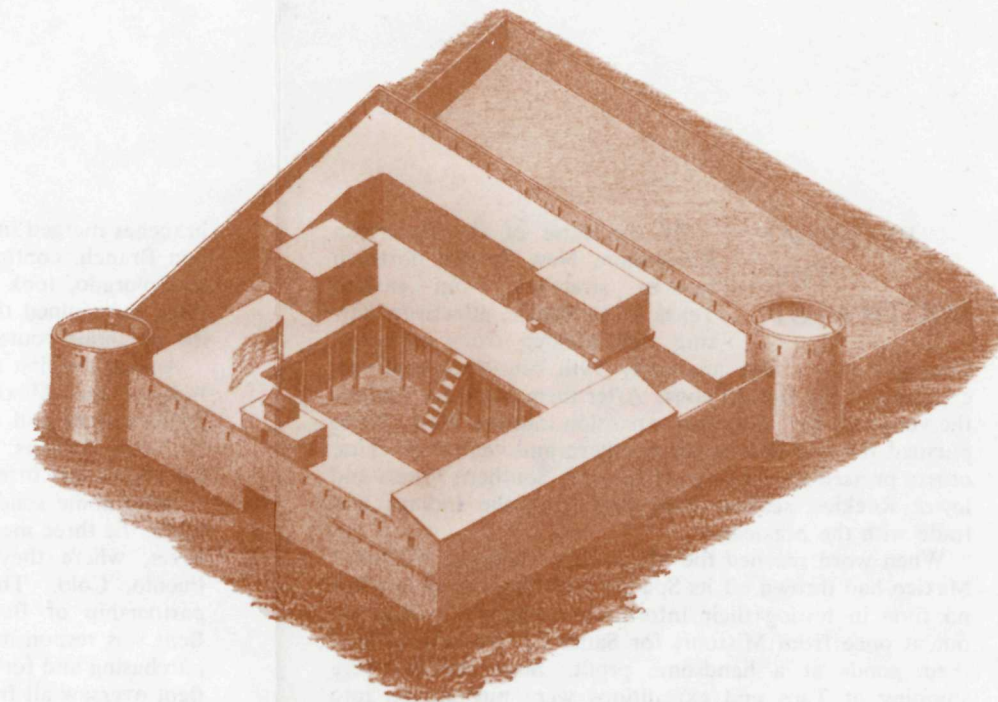
THE FORT AS A STAGE STATION

William Bent's work of destruction was more symbolic than substantial. By 1861, after a decade of disuse, the fort's rehabilitated adobe walls sheltered a stage station, the principal stop on the Barlow & Sanderson stage, mail, and express route between Kansas City and Santa Fe. Here the superintendent-general manager lived for a time, and the company maintained a general repair shop. After railroads had replaced the stage, the buildings served as cattle corrals. Gradually the fort collapsed and disintegrated. Some of the adobe bricks were probably removed by ranchers and found their way into other buildings in the vicinity. By 1915 parts of the old walls were still standing. Elsewhere only mounds outlined the fort's dimensions.

BENT'S FORT IN 1845

Lt. James W. Abert, a topographical engineer on John C. Frémont's 1845 expedition, sketched both this aerial perspective and the front view over. The following year he returned with Kearny's army and made the wash drawing of a Cheyenne Indian from which this folder's cover is adapted. He described the fort on his first visit:

'The fort is composed of a series of rooms resembling casemates, and forming a hollow square, the entrance on the [north] side. A round tower on the left, as you enter, and another diagonally opposite, constitute the flanking arrangements. The outer walls, which are nearly two feet in thickness, intersect in the axes of the others, thus permitting their faces to be completely enfiladed; the outside walls of the enceinte and towers, pierced with loop holes, are continued four feet above the flat roofs which serve for the banquette, which being composed of clay cannot be fired by inflammable substances that might be cast upon it; the whole is built of "adobes," sunburnt brick, formed of clay and cut straw, in size about four times as large as our common bricks. The roofs are sustained by poles. On the [south] side is the cattle yard, which is surrounded by a wall so high as effectually to shelter them. The coping of the wall is planted with cacti, which bear red and white flowers.'



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■ ABOUT YOUR VISIT. The site is 8 miles east of La Junta and 15 miles west of Las Animas on Colo. 194. Both towns are served by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad and Continental Trailways. ■ ADMINISTRATION. Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The National Park System, of which this site is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the great historical, natural, and recreational places of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of all the people. A superintendent, whose address is Box 581, La Junta, Colo. 81050, is in immediate charge of the site. ■ THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—the Nation's principal natural resource agency—has a special obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.



U.S. DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR



National Park Service

CREDITS: C. Bent, Denver Public Library; W. Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, State Historical Society of Colorado

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