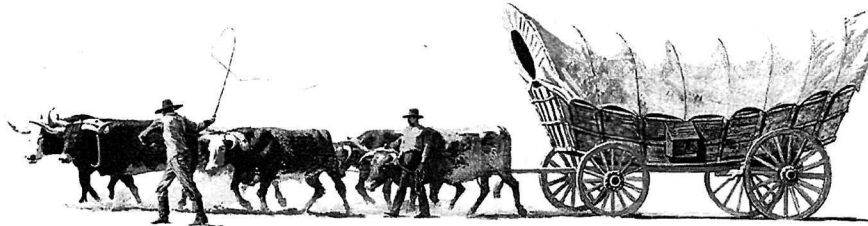




Livestock



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 and **please stay on your side of the fence.**

Livestock Used by Bent, St. Vrain & Company

Historically, 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 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 grazing horses, mules, and oxen being brought in to the relative security of the corral for the night. Other travelers noted the sounds

and smells of the livestock.

Within 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 *Nuevo México* and the United States was critical to freighting goods and thus, to commercial success.

Care of Livestock

Maintaining 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-divisional 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 and other pests.

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. 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, Bent, St. Vrain & Company bought horses arriving from *Nuevo México* along the *Camino Real*. They also purchased horses brought in huge herds from California or traded 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 keeps 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."

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.

Milk cows were important at the fort for milk, cheese and butter. In 1845 fort employee,

Alexander Barclay, wrote that the fort had twelve milk cows and about thirty others that could be sold.

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.

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 some 60 head of mules and he will doubtless dispose of them with great advantage to these Volunteers, many of whose horses are completely broken down, and their owners, now fatigued with marching on foot, will not stand upon trifles at the price of a fresh animal."

Sheep

In the 1840s sheep were an increasing financial factor for the fort and the eastern markets. The Bents 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.

Poultry

Barclay mentioned that thirty chickens and forty turkeys were kept to add variety to the dinner menu. Dominiques, Rhode Islands, and Barred Rock chickens might have been seen during the 1840s. Today you can see Dominiques in and around the corral and chicken coop.

The numbers vary throughout the year. Chicks that hatch this summer might be seen next summer mothering their own babies.

The turkeys were probably *Gallinas de la tierra* or "chickens of the land," wild turkeys.

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, 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 thunderbirds, 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 Chorchis Bente (Charles Bent, Ceran St. Vrain, and George Bent).