

## Letters and Notes From or About Bent's Fort, 1844-45

Copied from the *St. Louis Reveille*\*

[*St. Louis Reveille*, June 6, 1844] "We feel pleasure in welcoming again to the city, William Bent, the well-known and enterprising Spanish and Indian trader. He arrived yesterday, on board the *John Aull*, accompanied by Messrs. Simpson, Glasgow and other gentlemen, from Chihuahua and Santa Fe. A native child of the mountains, called, in English 'slim face' of the Cheyenne tribe, comes with this party.

"The sum of \$28,000 in specie was brought in by this party. They left Chihuahua on the 10th of March, and Santa Fe on the 10th of April. They came by Bent's Fort, where all things were in proper order and condition. The company had, in some instances, to pay an export duty on the specie which they have brought away, of from four and a half to six per cent. Some came off without paying any duty. The large Caruvan from Santa Fe and from Bent's Fort, will be here in twelve or fifteen days. There was no snow on the mountains, but the water courses were very high, owing to frequent heavy rains."

[*St. Louis Reveille*, June 14, 1844] "From the Prairies.—Charley Bent and the other traders, left at Pawnee Fork by the express that has arrived here, were near falling into danger with a force of several hundred Indians, on the Arkansas, near the great crossing. Several different tribes, the Chayennes, Sioux, Apaches, Kiawas, and others, as is supposed, were scouring the plains 'in cahoot,' and but for the prompt action of the traders in drawing themselves up and forming their defence, there is little doubt that they would have been stripped of their property and, perhaps slaughtered.

"A grand movement among the Camanches is soon to take place, as we understand, and many thousands of them are to meet for some important pow-wow during the present month. They are daring and desperate Indians when once embarked in an enterprise, but they seldom attack until they see advantage clearly on their own side. What the meaning of this proposed convention is we are not informed, and what bearing it may have upon Clay or Calhoun, Van Buren or Polk, Tyler or the annexation of Texas, we are not prepared to say."

[*St. Louis Reveille*, June 22, 1844] "A party of Santa Fe traders arrived yesterday on the steamer *Balloon*. They report

\*Through the kindness of the Newberry Library of Chicago we were able to procure recently, as an inter-library loan, three volumes of the *St. Louis Reveille*, from which these items were extracted.—Ed.

the main body to have reached no further than Walnut Creek, in consequence of the impassable condition of that stream, and, in fact, the whole country, occasioned by the flood." [The water in the Missouri was reported to be the highest since 1785.]

[Letter from Bent's Fort, August 25, 1844, appearing in the *St. Louis Reveille*, Oct. 12, 1844]

#### "THE MYSTERIOUS DRUM

"What on earth can all that drumming mean?"

"It must be a party of Texans, on their way to New Mexico, who have mistaken this post for a Mexican fortress! Don't you think we'd better be getting things a little in order to receive them? How are we off for cartridges for the six-pounder? Have we any balls for the swivels. Perhaps they may try to take us by storm, without giving us an opportunity to explain who we are!"

"Don't you think, sir, it's a war party of Comanches?"

"No, sir! Comanches don't carry drums, nor would they make such noise in approaching the place they mean to attack."

"What on earth can it be?"

"I'll tell you," says one; "it's the Delawares coming to take revenge of the Cheyennes and Sioux, for killing that trapping party this summer."

"But who the devil ever heard of the Delawares carrying real bona fide soldier's drums? Or who ever heard of an Indian beating a drum like that? Why, that rub-a-dub sounds as if it was beaten by a man who has been all his life at the business—aye, and there's more than one pair of drum-sticks rattling there!"

"Maybe it's Slim Face, come back with a party of sojers, to drive them free men, what catches buffalo calves, out of the country!"

"No; you may depend it's a party of Texans going to Santa Fe, and who have got short of provisions, so they came up here to see if they can't get some; at any rate, let them be whom they may be, they will not catch us napping. All hands get your guns in readiness!"

Such was the conversation on a clear, sultry afternoon, about the middle of this month, as the whole party at Fort William were assembled in front of the Fort, listening to an unusual sound upon the river. Presently, an object was perceived slowly coming round the bend, a mile or so below the Fort.

"It's a single man, a horseback—get the spy-glass!"

"Is it an Indian?"

"I can't tell; he carries his gun in front of him, like a white man, and I think he's got a hat on!"

"Give me the glass. It's a white—he's got a fur cap and coat on, and carries his gun like a white man!"

"But do you see anything like a drum? What can make all that noise?"

In a few minutes the object of so much conjecture approached near enough for us to discover our old friend "Slim Face," just from the United States. He was asked if there were a party of soldiers on the river. He said, no; but he left Mr. Wm. B. and his party at the salt bottom below.

"But what means that drumming which we hear?"

He couldn't tell—he first heard it when he was in the big village, away down the long water, and it had been ringing in his ears ever since. He thought it was the whites "medicine."

After ascertaining that Mr. B. and his party would not arrive until the next day, we retired into the fort, but still unable to account for the constant rub-a-dub.

The sound continued all the next day; but, as we knew that Mr. B. was on the river, and that if any hostile party had been in the neighborhood he would have sent an express to the Fort, announcing the fact, we remained comparatively quiet.

At length the party arrived; the sound continued. We looked for the drummer and the drum, but could not see neither. The wagons were unloaded—the trunks of the party carried to their respective rooms. The sound still continued louder than before. What on earth could it be! Mr. T. B. seeing, by my countenance, that I was laboring under great anxiety about something, asked me to walk into the room. I did so; and behold—not a file of soldiers, but one of the "Reveille." The rub-a-dub was accounted for!

After devouring (not the papers, as the Nashville folks did Kendall's "Santa Fe Expedition," but) the news which they contained, I forwarded the whole file to the editor of the "La Verdad" at Santa Fe, with the request that, after copying, without much mutilating the papers, he would, the first opportunity, send them to California, to be forwarded thence to the Sandwich Islands, and from thence to China; so, your friend Sterling need not be at all surprised, if, by the next overland mail from India to London, he receives, via New York, a request from the "Sun's Brother," that he will forward a receipt for making that same "turtle soup."

How are you, citizens?

J. B-y.

Fort Williams, Arkansas River,

August 25th, 1844.

[*St. Louis Reveille*, Oct. 31, 1844]

“MEXICAN AND INDIAN WAR

Fort William,  
Arkansas River, Sept. 20, 1844.

“Messrs. Editors Reveille: By a letter received yesterday by Mr. Wm. Bent, from his brother George, dated at Taos, New Mexico, the 9th inst., we are informed, that hostilities have commenced between a portion of Eutaw Indians and the citizens of New Mexico. It appears that, some time last fall, the former Governor of Santa Fe (Armijo) granted to a Frenchman, named Portalance, and an Englishman, by the name of Montgomorie, authority to raise a party for the purpose of invading the territory of the Navajo Indians, with whom the Mexicans were then at war, but returning from the Navajos, rather unsuccessful, they fell in with a band of Eutaws, who were then at peace with the Mexicans, killed several of them, and drove off a number of their horses and mules.

“A few days previous to the date of Mr. B’s letter, the Eutaw Chief (Spanish Cigar) called upon the present Governor (Martines) at Santa Fe and demanded satisfaction for the outrage committed on his tribe. The Governor refused to give him the desired satisfaction, and the Indian seized him by the throat, and commenced shaking him. Martines drew his sword, and run the Indian through the body;—he then gave orders to his soldiers to fire, and six of the Indians who had accompanied the Eutaw Chief were killed upon the spot. The Indians then retired to Albuquerque, where they had left their lodges, charged upon the citizens of the place, and killed ten of them; they then decamped from among the settlements—but it is feared they will augment in numbers, and make another attack soon.

“The Indians in this neighborhood appear to be not a little alarmed at a report which has reached them, of an intended invasion by the Delawares and other tribes on the frontiers of the United States, next spring, to get revenge for the murder of a trapping party of Delawares, who were killed by the Sioux and Cheyennes, on the head waters of the Kansas, this summer.

“Mr. E. Leitensdorfer and party from the United States arrived here the 17th inst., and left here yesterday morning for the Spanish country. They report having left Mr. S. C. Owings, of Independence, Mo., and party, with twelve wagons, and Wethered, Gentry and others, with their wagons, at the crossing of the Arkansas, on the Santa Fe trail, on their way to Santa Fe and Chihuahua, the 13th inst.

“Mr. C. Bent and party have not yet arrived, but we are looking for them daily.

“Yours truly,

J. B.”

[*St. Louis Reveille*, May 11, 1845] “Mr. Bent, and a party of gentlemen from Fort William on the Arkansas River arrived here yesterday on the steamer *Hibernian*.”

[*St. Louis Reveille*, May 18, 1845] “Mr. Sausser and several gentlemen of Mr. Norris’s company arrived here yesterday evening on the steam boat *Lexington*. They left Santa Fe on the 16th of April, and had very favorable weather on their way in. The annexation news had reached Santa Fe before their departure, but it created no excitement of popular feeling. The Governor had issued a proclamation, desiring such of the foreigners as were so disposed, to meet at a place designated and receive their protection papers. Very little attention, however, was paid to the proclamation, as no apprehensions were entertained of any immediate difficulties. Another party of Santa Fe traders arrived yesterday on the *Henry Bry*.”

[*St. Louis Reveille*, May 27, 1845] “Several traders from the head waters of the Arkansas river arrived here on Sunday last [May 25] with 160 packages of robes, furs and skins.”

[*St. Louis Reveille*, Sept. 16, 1845] “From Fort William. The *Independence Expositor* contains a letter from Fort William, on the Arkansas, dated July 27th. The writer says: The present company for Santa Fe have chosen this route in preference to that of the Cimaron, in consequence of the extreme dryness of the season, and supposed scarcity of water on the other route—it is also said that the whole Comanche nation are on the western route.

“The New Mexicans, we are told here, are still amicably disposed to our people. Whether there is really a declaration of war on the part of the Mexicans, these northern people are equally in the dark with ourselves. I do not anticipate any trouble with them in any event.

“The stopping at the fort is a most delightful interlude in our journey. Nothing can exceed the kind and hospitable treatment of the Messrs. Bent and St. Vrain, and the traders and clerks in their employ.”