

When Was Bent's Fort Built?

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Bent's Fort, the large adobe structure which was the most famous fur trade post of the Southwest, was erected on the north bank of the Arkansas about ten miles northeast of present La Junta, Colorado. It was located on the Northwest Quarter of Section 23, Township 23 South, Range 54 West.¹

Many conflicting statements have been made as to the date of founding of this adobe post, and also regarding one or more stockades said to have been constructed in the region prior to the erection of the adobe fort.

The most extensive history of the post was written by George B. Grinnell and was published as "Bent's Old Fort and its Builders," in 1923. Much interesting information on the fort and its denizens was assembled in this publication, but on the matter of the date of founding, no thorough research was pursued and questionable secondary accounts were accepted.

Grinnell says the Bents probably came to the upper Arkansas region in 1824, and bases the idea on a supposed statement of William Bent. "Testifying before the joint committee of congress which inquired into Indian affairs in the plains in 1865," writes Grinnell, "William Bent stated that he first came to the upper Arkansas in 1824, and that he had made that region his home ever since."²

Bent made no such statement. He said that he had lived in the region thirty-six years, which would date him back to 1829, not 1824.³ William Bent, born in 1809, was but fifteen years old in 1824. And his first years as a trader were spent on the upper Missouri, where he learned the Sioux language and was given the

¹Description in the deed transferring the fort site to the State Historical Society of Colorado.

²George B. Grinnell, "Bent's Old Fort and its Builders," in the *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1919-22* (Topeka, 1923), 2.

³Bent's statement of 1865 reads: "Having been living near the mouth of the Purgatoire on the Arkansas river in Colorado Territory for the last thirty-six years, and during all that time have resided near or at what is known as Bent's Old Fort, I have had considerable experience in Indian affairs from my long residence in the country." *Report of the Joint Special Committee appointed under Joint Resolution of March 3, 1865, with an Appendix* (Washington, 1867), 93.

name of Little White Man by the Sioux, as stated by Grinnell (Bent's Old Fort, p. 2).

Grinnell goes on to say: "This date, 1824, for the first expedition of the Bents and St. Vrain is probably correct, although it has been generally assumed that the journey was made in 1826, and that the first stockade, above Pueblo, was built this same year. Coues, in a footnote in 'Jacob Fowler,' states that this first stockade was built in 1826 on the north bank of the Arkansas, about half way between the site of the present city of Pueblo and the mountains."⁴ This introduces a string of statements, each copied from an earlier and unreliable secondary source. Grinnell copies from Coues (1898),⁵ Coues from Inman (1897),⁶ Inman from Hall (1889),⁷ and Hall from Bowman (1881).⁸ There are slight variations in the successive renderings, but in essentials they are the same.

C. W. Bowman, who wrote the "History of Bent County" in the Baskin *History of the Arkansas Valley, Colorado*, was a Las Animas newspaper man who came to the region in 1873. Bowman wrote (p. 827): "The firm of trappers known as Bent, St. Vrain and Company, consisting of Charles Bent, Ceran St. Vrain, and Robert, George, and William, brothers of Charles Bent, came to the site of Bent's Fort in 1826, from the Upper Missouri or Sioux country, whither they had gone from St. Louis in the service of the American Fur Company. They at once constructed a picket fort, containing several rooms as a place of defense and headquarters preparatory to opening trade with the Indians." Charles and William Bent, as will be shown later in this article, did not come to the region until 1829; and George and Robert Bent were but twelve and ten years old respectively, in 1826.⁹ Also, the Bent and St. Vrain partnership was not formed until 1831 or 1832 (see later in this article). So this Bowman assertion cannot be true. Bowman continues: "Two years later [in 1828], they commenced at the same place a large adobe fort which was finished in 1832." This also is an unverified statement, which Grinnell (p. 4) accepts and repeats.

To bolster the above chain of writers who speak of the construction of a wooden stockade in 1826, Grinnell says: "George Bent [son of William Bent] states that there were two stockades, the first built above Pueblo about 1826, the second near the mouth

⁴Grinnell, *op. cit.*, 2.

⁵Elliott Coues (Ed.), *The Journal of Jacob Fowler, etc.* (New York, 1898), 47.

⁶Henry Inman, *The Old Santa Fe Trail* (New York, 1897), 389-92.

⁷Frank Hall, *History of the State of Colorado, etc.* (Chicago, 1889), 163-66.

⁸C. W. Bowman, "History of Bent County" in the Baskin *History of the Arkansas Valley, Colorado* (Chicago, 1881), 827-29.

⁹The Bent Family Bible gives the dates of birth as follows: George Bent, April 13, 1814; Robert Bent, February 23, 1816.

of the Purgatoire about 1828. This second stockade is perhaps the one the Bents and St. Vrain used while they were building Bent's Fort." But this George Bent, half-breed son of William Bent, was not born until 1843, lived among his Cheyenne relatives in Oklahoma most of his life, and his dates are unreliable. For example, Grinnell writes (p. 2): "He [George Bent] said that his father, William Bent, stated that he was in the Sioux country about 1816, but the date is clearly wrong, as William Bent was born in 1809 and was only seven in 1816."

Grinnell refers to Porcupine Bull, oldest man among the Southern Cheyennes at the time of his death in 1913, as saying that the Cheyennes and Arapahoes moved south from the Platte River in about 1826. "This old man asserted that the Bents and the Cheyennes first met at the mouth of the Purgatoire River," continues Grinnell. "This was soon after the Cheyennes began to move south of the Platte, probably in 1828. The Bents were encamped at the mouth of the Purgatoire, or had a stockade there" (p. 4). Porcupine Bull said that at this meeting Yellow Wolf made friends with the Bents and "suggested that the Bents and St. Vrain build a post near the mouth of the Purgatoire, and said that if they would do this he would bring his band and others there to trade." Grinnell adds a footnote (p. 4): "I have had the story in detail from Porcupine Bull's own lips, and George Bent has repeated it in letters to George E. Hyde. Porcupine Bull insists that George and Robert Bent were with their elder brothers at this time, and says that at this meeting Yellow Wolf gave names to the Bents and St. Vrain. To Charles Bent he gave the name of White Hat; William Bent he called Little White Man; George Bent was named Little Beaver; and Robert Bent, Blue (or Green) Bird. Ceran St. Vrain was named Black Beard." The old Indian's insistent assertion that young George and Robert Bent were there is evidence that the meeting took place at a later date than suggested by Grinnell, for George and Robert were but young boys in 1828 and were not on the upper Arkansas so early.

These supposed stockades have jumped around a bit, if we believe the various writers. According to Bowman (Baskin, p. 827), Bent, St. Vrain and Company built a picket fort, in 1826, and it was at the site of the later adobe Bent's Fort. Frank Hall has the company build their stockade in 1826 on the north bank of the Arkansas midway between present Pueblo and Canon City and maintain it for two years. Inman, following Hall, has the stockade erected in 1826, and locates it between Pueblo and Canon City. Coues copies Hall and Inman, locating a stockade above Pueblo in 1826. George Bent, in an article in *The Great Southwest* magazine of December, 1906, listed the places on the Arkansas

successively occupied by his father (William Bent). He did not mention a post of 1826, but started with a "stockade built in 1828 on the north bank of the Arkansas, seventy-two miles above the mouth of Purgatoire creek." This would be some miles *below* Pueblo (and possibly refers to Gantt's Post, mentioned later).

Now comes Grinnell supposedly quoting George Bent that "There were two stockades, the first built above Pueblo about 1826, the second near the mouth of the Purgatoire about 1828" (p. 2). Then he adds still another, at the site of the adobe fort, and occupied while the adobe Bent's Fort was being constructed (p. 6).

The foregoing statements regarding the supposed presence of the Bent brothers and Ceran St. Vrain and of their reputed stockade on the upper Arkansas during the years 1824 to 1828 are almost certainly not true; and the continual repetition of an error does not make it a fact.

Let us now leave the Indian stories and the unsubstantiated secondary accounts that have been repeated so often and see what we can learn from authentic records. First, regarding the whereabouts, prior to 1833, of the founders of Bent's Fort.

Of the founders and early owners of Bent's Fort the first one to come into the Southwest was Ceran St. Vrain. He was the second son of Jacques Marcellin Ceran de Hault de Lassus de St. Vrain and Marie Felicite Dubreuil St. Vrain, and was born at Spanish Lake in what is now St. Louis County, presumably on May 5, 1802.¹⁰

Among the first to engage in the overland traffic from Missouri to New Mexico, he set out in the fall of 1823. A long and difficult winter journey of five months brought him to Taos in March. In writing on April 24, 1824, to Bernard Pratte, who probably outfitted him, he reported: "it is now 37 days Since we arived and we have Sold but very fue goods & goods is at a verry redused price at present. I am in hopes when the hunters comes in from there hunt that I will Sell out to Provoe & Leclere, if I doe not succeed to Sel out to them and othere hunters, my intension is to buy up goo[d] Articles that will Sout [suit] the market of Sonora to purchess mulls; but I Shall first doe all I can to mak arrangement with Provoe & Leclere to furnish them with goods. Should I Succeed there is no doubt but it will [be] a verry profitable business. . . ."¹¹

Whether or not St. Vrain went to Sonora has not been determined, but in February, 1825, he was in Taos and there outfitted

¹⁰[Paul A. St. Vrain] *Genealogy of the Family of De Lassus and St. Vrain* [1944], 18, 22. R. P. Bieber (Ed.), *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade, 1844-1847* (Glendale, 1931), 61, says he was born in 1798.

¹¹St. Vrain's letter, printed in [Dale L. Morgan], *Provo, Pioneer Mormon City* (Portland, Ore., 1942), 24-25.

Thomas L. (later "Pegleg") Smith and nine other men to trap in the San Juan and Colorado river country.¹²

Apparently Ceran returned to Missouri for a supply of goods, for he is reported as setting out in May, 1826, with a wagon train bound for New Mexico.¹³ Some time after his arrival at his destination St. Vrain received, on August 29, 1826, from Antonio Narbona, Governor of New Mexico, a passport for himself and thirty-six men to go to the state of Sonora for trade. The Governor's subsequent letter indicates that there were about a hundred men in the Sonora-bound company.¹⁴ This venture to the Arizona country, which involved a number of the famous furtraders of the Southwest, does not primarily concern us here.

In the fall of 1827, Ceran St. Vrain left Taos with a trapping party headed by Sylvester S. Pratte. While trapping in "Park Kyack,"¹⁵ Pratte died and St. Vrain, who had been serving as clerk, assumed command of the company. They visited the Green River country and finally returned to Taos about the 23rd of May, 1828, with about one thousand beaver skins.¹⁶ St. Vrain was involved during 1828-29 in the settlement of the S. S. Pratte estate.¹⁷ He was in partnership with Paul Baillio in 1828, as is indicated in St. Vrain's letter to Messrs. B. Pratte and Company (reporting the death of S. S. Pratte and dated September 28, 1828) wherein he requests that the balance in his favor of \$522.26 be paid to his partner Baillio.

A passport to Chihuahua and Sonora was issued to St. Vrain on September 30, 1828.¹⁸ If he followed through with a trading expedition to those areas, no further record regarding the venture has been found.

¹²"Sketches from the Life of Peg-leg Smith," in *Hutchings' California Magazine* (October, 1860, to March, 1861), 319.

¹³Henry Inman, *The Old Santa Fe Trail* (New York, 1897), 406. Inman says that Kit Carson was in the company, but in this he is evidently mistaken.

¹⁴The original Spanish documents are reported and cited by T. M. Marshall in "St. Vrain's Expedition to the Gila in 1826," in H. M. Stephens and H. E. Bolton, *The Pacific Ocean in History* (New York, 1917), 429-38.

¹⁵For some time the identity of "Park Kyack" has been a puzzle. In a letter of John Wilson, Indian Agent at Fort Bridger, August 22, 1849, we found a reference to North Park as "Decayague, or Buffalo Bull Pen."—*House Doc.* 17, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 185. Major S. H. Long was told in 1820 that North Park was known as the Buffalo Bull Pen.

¹⁶St. Vrain's letter to Messrs. B. Pratte and Company reporting the death of S. S. Pratte, and dated on the back, September 28, 1828, and the statement of the men who accompanied St. Vrain after Pratte's death, and signed September 1, 1829. Both documents are in the P. Chouteau Maffitt Collection of the Missouri Historical Society at St. Louis; photostats in possession of the writer. These documents do not say what caused Pratte's death, but Pegleg Smith (*Hutchings' California Magazine*, 420) says it was the result of hydrophobia caused some time before by the bite of a lap dog that was not known to be rabid. It was but ten days after Pratte's death that Smith's leg was broken by an Indian arrow, which led to the amputation of the leg and to Smith's becoming known as "Pegleg." At the time of the arrow shot, Ceran St. Vrain was standing beside Smith.

¹⁷See the two undated papers giving accounts, notes, list of men and amounts due each, all pertaining to the Pratte estate. These apparently accompanied St. Vrain's letter of September 28, *op. cit.*, and are found in the Missouri Historical Society collections. The amount listed as due C. St. Vrain was \$1910.02-½.

¹⁸Ritch Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino.

St. Vrain must have returned to Missouri in 1829, for the next spring he was captain of a large train that traveled the Santa Fe Trail and reached Santa Fe on August 4, 1830.¹⁹ In reporting his trip and business he wrote to B. Pratte and Company on September 14, 1830, that he expected to return to Missouri by March following. He sent the letter by Andrew Carson (brother of Kit), whom he hired to take one wagon, eleven mules, and six hundred and fifty-three beaver skins back to Missouri to be sold by Pratte for St. Vrain's account.

The first step in the formation of a partnership between Ceran St. Vrain and Charles Bent is reported by the former in his letter from Santa Fe of January 6, 1831:

"I had maid all the necessary arrangements to Start home by the 1st of this month, and Should have Started had not Mr. Chs. Bent proposed to me an arrangement which I think will be to our mutual advantage, the arrangement is this, I have bought of Mr. Chs. Bent the half of his goods, for which I have paid him Cash. I am to remain here to sell the goods, and Mr. Bent goes to St. Louis for to bring to this Country goods for him and my Self. I remit you by Mr. Charles Bent Six hundred Dollars which you will please place to my credit. I am anxious to [k]now the result of the Beaver I Send last fall, and would be glad you would write me by the first opportunity and let me now what amount I am owing your hous. if you have not Sold the mules I Send last and Mr. Bent Should want them doe me the favor to let Mr. Bent have them."²⁰

Charles Bent went back to Missouri and in late August, 1831, left St. Louis for Santa Fe with a train of goods.²¹

The first documents we have found evidencing the actual or legal existence of the partnership of the two men are the two notes signed at Santa Fe on September 1, 1832. The first reads: "One month after date we promise to pay James and Robert Aull or order Eight hundred and forty two dollars and sixteen cents for value received which amount I promise to pay immediately on my arrival at St. Louis.—Bent & St. Vrain."

The second note is for a like amount and is similar to the first except that it was due in ten months.²²

¹⁹St. Vrain's letter of September 14, 1830, written at Taos and addressed to Messrs. B. Pratte and Company. Original in the Pierre Chouteau Collection of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. See also Mrs. F. H. Day's sketch of Ziba Branch in *The Hesperian*, III, 337 (October, 1859). Branch, who left New Mexico for California with the Wolfskill party in the fall of 1830, came to Santa Fe with St. Vrain's party of that year.

²⁰Letter to Messrs. B. Pratte and Company, in the Missouri Historical Society collections.

²¹From a letter of Thomas Forsyth to the Secretary of War, dated at St. Louis October 24, 1831, and printed in *Sen. Doc.* 90, 22nd Cong., 1st Sess., 77. Forsyth says that Bent had thirty or forty men in his party and was using oxen to pull the wagons.

²²These notes were found among the papers of James Aull at the Commercial Bank of Lexington, Missouri, by Elmer R. Burkey in 1936, while work-

Now let us trace the activities of Charles and William Bent to 1833. Charles was born November 11, 1799, and William on May 23, 1809.²³ So Charles was nearly ten years older than William. Charles and William early engaged in the fur trade on the upper Missouri River with the Sioux, as early as 1823, according to Allen H. Bent.²⁴ George B. Grinnell reports George Bent, son of William, as saying that his father went among the Sioux while but a boy, and Grinnell adds: "Wm. Bent could speak the Sioux language fluently, and it is said that in these early years the Sioux gave him the name of Wa-si-cha-chis'la, meaning Little White Man, a name that confirms the statement that he entered the trade on the upper Missouri while still a growing boy."²⁵ Charles Bent was appointed an Indian Sub Agent for the Ioways in April, 1827.²⁶

We have found no reliable evidence that either Charles or William engaged in trade over the Santa Fe Trail and in the upper Arkansas River region before 1829. Charles Bent, while Governor of New Mexico, in a proclamation to the people of Santa Fe on January 8, 1847, said: "In the year 1829 I came for the first time to this country."²⁷ William Bent, testifying before the Joint Special Committee of Congress investigating the condition of the Indian tribes, in 1865 said: "Having been living near the mouth of the Purgatoire on the Arkansas river in Colorado Territory for the last thirty-six years, and during all that time have resided near or at what is known as Bent's Old Fort, I have had considerable experience in Indian affairs from my long residence in the country."²⁸

Although William was not actually at the site of Bent's Fort all this time, as we shall show presently, the statement does indicate that he did not come to the region until 1829.

ing for the State Historical Society of Colorado. These notes are referred to and part of the letters are quoted in R. P. Bieber, "Letters of James and Robert Aull," in *Missouri Historical Society Collections*, V, 278-80.

²³Record in the Bent family Bible, in possession of the State Historical Society of Colorado.

²⁴Allen H. Bent, *The Bent Family in America* (Boston, 1900), 121. The Kennerly diary, kept at Fort Atkinson on the Missouri River, records the arrival of Bent—presumably Charles, although the first name is not given—at that place in a keelboat on May 13, 1824. R. E. Twitchell in *The Leading Facts of New Mexican History*, II, 234, says Charles Bent graduated from West Point, but we have found no verification of this.

²⁵G. B. Grinnell, "Bent's Old Fort," etc., *op. cit.*, 2.

²⁶Letter of William Clark to his son Lewis, St. Louis, April 27, 1827. In 1826 Charles Bent had been recommended as Sub-agent for the Ioways. St. Louis file, Indian Department Archives, Washington.

²⁷Proclamation quoted by P. A. F. Walter in "First Civil Governor of New Mexico," in the *New Mexico Historical Review*, VIII, 118.

²⁸*Report of the Joint Special Committee, appointed under Joint Resolution of March 3, 1865, with an Appendix*. (Washington, 1867), 93. The biographical sketch of William Bent, published in the *Colorado Chieftain* of Pueblo on May 27, 1869, following Bent's death near Las Animas, Colorado, on May 19, says: "Colonel Bent has spent nearly forty years of his eventful life in the Rocky Mountain Region. He had scarcely arrived at the age of manhood before his life of adventure began and from that early period of his life until the present time his home has been in the far West." "Nearly forty years" would bring him to the far West in 1829 or later.

Charles and William Bent were in the Santa Fe Trail caravan of 1829. In fact, Charles was elected Captain of the company.²⁹ Inasmuch as Major Bennett Riley and his United States troops escorted this trader caravan to the international border, we have adequate accounts of the trip.³⁰ The route was along the Cimarron cutoff and not by way of the site of Bent's Fort.

William Waldo, who was in the company, has given us some interesting data on both of the Bent brothers. Of the 1829 party he writes: "On the proposal of Dr. David Waldo [brother of the writer], Captain Bent was unanimously elected captain of the company, consisting of about sixty men and thirty-six wagons freighted with goods." After crossing the Arkansas and entering the sandhills the company ran into an ambush of Comanches. "It was owing to Captain Bent's great ability as a military commander," writes Waldo, that one man remained alive. I saw Charles Bent charge alone and check fifty Indians that had killed one man and were in close pursuit of another. It was in this surprise that this heroic act occurred. I can see him now as plainly as I saw him then, mounted on a large black horse, I think bare-headed, with his long black hair floating in the wind; and I as distinctly remember his words of defiance when he made the charge, as though it were but yesterday, although they were spoken more than half a century ago."³¹ Waldo also describes William Bent riding a black mule and racing the Comanches at the same fight.³²

Charles Bent returned to Missouri with the traders in the fall of 1829.³³ He must have gone out from Missouri again with the caravan of 1830, for he was in New Mexico in the fall of that year.³⁴ In the winter or early spring of 1831 he set out from New Mexico to go to Missouri for trade goods for himself and Ceran St. Vrain. It was August before he had assembled these goods and was ready to leave St. Louis. With a party of thirty or forty men, his wagons pulled by oxen,³⁵ he headed for the Santa Fe Trail. They traveled

²⁹It might be argued that Bent's selection as Captain of the caravan of 1829 would indicate that he had been over the Trail before. But a man of wide experience and acknowledged leadership was sometimes chosen as Captain on his first trip. For example, Jedediah Smith was leader of his company in 1831, although he had never been over the route. There were always other members in a company who had been over the road, and could give necessary geographical information.

³⁰For the fullest account of the expedition see Otis E. Young, *The First Military Escort on the Santa Fe Trail, 1829*, etc. (Glendale, California, 1952), which cites the various sources.

³¹William Waldo "Recollections of a Septuagenarian," in Missouri Historical Society's *Glimpses of the Past*, V, 73.

³²*Ibid.*, V, 64.

³³O. E. Young, *op. cit.*, 143, 145; and Waldo, *op. cit.*, 77.

³⁴Ceran St. Vrain in his letter of September 14, 1830, *op. cit.*, writes: "I have also lent Mr. Charles Bent one wagon which you will please receive." Subsequently, and before January 6, 1831, St. Vrain bought half of Charles Bent's goods and formed a partnership with him (St. Vrain's letter of January 6, 1831, cited above).

³⁵Report of Thomas Forsyth, printed in *Sen. Doc.* 90, 22nd Cong., 1st Sess., 77.

the Cimarron route, were caught in November snows, and lost some of their oxen by freezing.³⁶

Now as to the activities of William Bent. He went to New Mexico in his brother Charles' caravan of 1829, presumably returned to Missouri that fall and came out again to New Mexico with Charles in the spring of 1830. Of this round trip to Missouri we are not positive, but he was in Santa Fe in August, 1830, and on the 25th of that month with a small party set out on an extended trapping expedition to the Gila River country of Arizona. He was still on the Gila in December, 1830.³⁷ According to extant records, he returned to Missouri in the fall of 1832.³⁸

General H. M. Chittenden, in his chronology of the traffic over the Santa Fe Trail, says that Charles Bent led the principal spring caravan from Missouri in 1832 and returned in November of that year.³⁹ We have seen no contemporary record of Charles Bent leading a west-bound company from Missouri in the spring of 1832. In view of the snowstorm difficulties of his late fall trip of 1831, to New Mexico, and from italicized portion of the statement that follows this sentence, it appears probable that he did not return to Missouri until the fall of 1832.⁴⁰ The *Upper Missouri Advertiser* reported in the fall of 1832: "Captain Bent and Company have just returned from Santa Fe. The amount of property in coin, gold and silver bullion, mules, furs, etc., is very considerable, although few have returned rich. *What this company has may be considered as the avails of nearly two years* [italicized by the present writer] . . . Supposed amount \$190,000."⁴¹

³⁶Albert Pike, later famous as a journalist, Masonic figure, and literary personality in the State of Arkansas, accompanied Bent to New Mexico in 1831 and published some of his experiences in his *Arkansas Advocate* in 1835. This "Narrative of a Journey in the Prairie" was later reprinted in *Publications of the Arkansas Historical Association*, IV, 66-139. See especially pages 74 and 78-79.

³⁷An account of the venture is found in the journal of Robert Isaacs, a member of the party, published in the *Missouri Intelligencer* of October 6, 1832 (copied from the *Missouri Republican*.)

³⁸Letterbook of James Aull at the Commercial Bank, Lexington, Missouri. In James Aull's letter from Lexington to Edward Tracy at St. Louis, he writes on November 10, 1832: "I now send you inclosed in this mail [?] three other envelopes, one thousand five hundred dollars U. S. paper (\$1,500) and Bent and St. Vrain note of 1st Sept. last for J. and R. Aull for \$842.11, payable on W. Bent's arrival at St. Louis." The Bent and St. Vrain note for \$842.11, dated at Santa Fe, September 1, 1832, and payable one month after date, is then copied in the book. In Aull's letter of November 3, 1832, he had written: "Captain Bent passed through town yesterday, on his arrival at St. Louis he will pay you \$611.18, being amt. owing by him to our establishment in Independence, also \$16 cash lent here and the amount of the enclosed acceptance \$35, making in all \$662.18." In view of the name in the above letter, of November 10, the "Captain" Bent of the November 3 letter is presumed to be William Bent, but it may refer to Charles Bent.

³⁹H. M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West* (1935 edition), II, 511.

⁴⁰Manuel Alvarez, United States Consul in New Mexico, in writing at Washington, D. C., on February 2, 1842, to Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, told of New Mexico incidents of 1841, and said: "Mr. Charles Bent (of the firm of Bent, St. Vrain and Company, well known in New Mexico as agents for several trading establishments on the Arkansas and Platte rivers), having resided in that country for the past ten years, and most of the time in the Valley of Taos, arrived from Fort William on the Arkansas." Printed in H. H. Dunham, "Side-lights on Santa Fe Traders, 1839-1846," in the 1950 *Brand Book* (Denver, 1951), 272.

⁴¹Quoted in the *Little Rock Advocate* of December 5, 1832.

Charles Bent captained the big west-bound caravan of 1833. James Aull of Lexington, writing to Santa Fe on May 15, 1833, said: "Captain Bent is taking out a large quantity of goods this year, reports say \$40,000."⁴² The organization of the trader company and election of Charles Bent as captain took place at Diamond Grove, about 160 miles west of Independence, on June 19, according to the frontier newspapers.⁴³ Whether this 1833 caravan traveled the Cimarron route or went by way of the Bent's Fort site has not been determined, but in view of his large quantity of goods and the establishment of Bent's Fort in that year (see below), it is reasonable to believe that he traveled by way of the fort on the Arkansas.

The Bent and St. Vrain wagons eastbound from Santa Fe in the Fall of 1834 definitely went by way of Bent's Fort. The *Missouri Republican* of October 14, 1834 reports: "A small company of traders arrived in this city last week from Santa Fe. They left early in August, taking Taos in the route, and thus extending the journey across the Rocky Mountains to the trading posts on the Arkansas river. They met with very few Indians and suffered with no interruption whatever in their progress home. We understand that the regular fall company was to leave Santa Fe about four weeks after their departure. . . ."

"The present company brought with them eleven wagons which, with the contents, belong to Messrs. St. Vrain, Bent and Company."

To summarize, Ceran St. Vrain reached New Mexico early in 1824 and his movements, rather well revealed in the records, show no trading activity on the upper Arkansas prior to 1832. Charles and William Bent did not go to New Mexico until 1829. The route of their wagons in that year and in 1831 was along the Cimarron trace, rather than on the later "Mountain Branch" of the Santa Fe Trail by way of the upper Arkansas and the site of Bent's Fort. If their fort had been in existence by 1831 they almost certainly would have taken the route by it, as they did regularly during the years after the fort was established.

There is also an important piece of circumstantial evidence that the fort was not in existence in 1830: The Colonel Bean company of trappers journeyed up the Arkansas River from below Big Timbers to the mountains in 1830 and of the four known independently-written accounts of the journey, each giving considerable detailed information, not one mentions the existence of Bent's Fort or of any other post on the upper Arkansas that year.

⁴²Aull letterbooks, *op. cit.*

⁴³See the *Missouri Intelligencer*, July 20, 1833; *Niles Register*, August 9, 1833.

That expedition and these writers are to be discussed in a later article.

Now as to the building of the adobe fort. Grinnell says that four years, 1828-32, were consumed in the construction. He gives no authority for this except Cheyenne tradition. He says Mexican laborers were brought up to make and lay the adobes, and this latter was doubtless true. Shortly after construction began, he says, the smallpox broke out, and William Bent, Ceran St. Vrain, and Kit Carson caught it, and were badly marked by the disease. But Grinnell adds, "The marks were evidently temporary, for the portraits of these men do not show any marks on the face."⁴⁴ If this early construction was in 1828 or '29 the three men named were not there at all; their known movements place them elsewhere in those years.

The tying of Kit Carson, in the winter of 1830-31, to the supposed building of Bent's Fort at that time, which Grinnell does, is entirely unwarranted. Kit went to California with Ewing Young in the fall of 1829 and did not return to New Mexico until the spring of 1831. Later that year he joined Thomas Fitzpatrick's trapping party, and in the spring of 1832 joined John Gantt's trappers. Carson was on the Arkansas River in the winter of 1832-33, in the employ of Captain Gantt, who that winter built Gantt's Post on the north bank of the river, about six miles below the mouth of Fountain Creek. It was during the winter 1832-33 that Carson and companions had the famous fight with the Crows that Kit describes in his autobiography,⁴⁵ and which Grinnell describes as taking place two years earlier and presumably in connection with the building of Bent's Fort.

In the spring of 1833 Carson was in Gantt's Post on the Arkansas.⁴⁶ Carson became a very close friend of Ceran St. Vrain and of Charles and William Bent, in fact his first printed biography (by Peters) was dedicated to Colonel St. Vrain. But in his autobiography Carson does not mention any connection with Bent's Fort until he gives up trapping and becomes a hunter at the fort in 1840.⁴⁷

It is entirely possible, and indeed probable, that Grinnell and the other above-mentioned writers who speak of supposed stockades built by Bent and St. Vrain are referring to Gantt's Post, a wooden structure built in 1832;⁴⁸ or possibly to the log house and

⁴⁴Grinnell, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁴⁵Edited by M. M. Quaife (Chicago, 1935), 24-28.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 62-64.

⁴⁸The fur trade venture of Gantt and Blackwell is well reported by one of their men, Zenas Leonard, in W. F. Wagner (Ed.), *The Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader and Trapper, 1831-1836* (Cleveland, 1904). The license to go through the Indian country, issued by William Clark on May 5, 1831, to Gantt and Blackwell, lists 61 men in the party (Spanish translation of the permit is in the Huntington Library, San Marino). William Clark gave Gantt

horse pen Jacob Fowler built at the mouth of Fountain Creek in January, 1822.⁴⁹

There had been many traders on the upper Arkansas prior to the building of Bent's adobe fort; and a number of Americans and Frenchmen had made their way from the St. Louis region to this area and New Mexico shortly after 1800. R. E. Twitchell's *Spanish Archives of New Mexico* lists many documents referring to these intruders. James Purcell, Baptiste La Lande, Lorenzo Durocher, Santiago Clamorgan and Zebulon Pike are merely the more famous ones of the first decade. Among the more prominent fur trappers on the upper Arkansas between 1810 and 1820 were Ezekiel Williams, Philibert's party, and the large companies of Chouteau and De Mun. So the Bents and St. Vrain were in no sense the pioneers in this region.

Another line of evidence indicating that Bent and St. Vrain were not trading with the Indians of the upper Arkansas before 1833 is found in the record of licenses issued by William Clark to persons engaged in Indian trade.

The record of licenses granted by William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, should reveal data on Bent and St. Vrain's trade on the upper Arkansas, if any such existed prior to 1833. The Abstract of Licenses granted for the years ending in September of 1830, 1831, 1832, and 1833, published in the government documents—Serial numbers respectively, 207, 219, 234, and 254—do not list licenses to either Charles or William Bent or to Bent and St. Vrain. The Licenses for 1830 and 1831 do not list locations on the upper Arkansas or Platte as places for trade. The abstracts for 1832 list "Union Point on the Arkansas" as one of the several places at which William Sublette is authorized by his license of April 25, 1832, to trade. For 1833 the only pertinent license is that of "Soublette and Campbell," issued April 15, 1833, and which lists among the places of authorized trade, "a point of woods on the north side of the Arkansas near the foot of the Rocky Mountains."

Among the licenses for 1834, is one of April 2, 1834, to Nathaniel J. Wyeth to trade—among various places listed—"at Union point, on the north side of the Arkansas, near the foot of the Rocky Mountains." Astor, Bonneville and Company, by the license of April 16, 1834, also may trade "at Union point on the north side of the Arkansas," in addition to other named places.

and Blackwell permission to take 180 gallons of whiskey "for use of their boatmen" etc. The permit was dated April 10, 1831, and the period was for three years.—St. Louis Supt. File, Indian Department, National Archives. The company left St. Louis in the spring of 1831, and for at least two years was engaged in trapping and trade in the Rocky Mountain region.
⁴⁹E. Coues (Ed.), *The Journal of Jacob Fowler*, etc. (New York, 1898), 75-77. This structure may have been destroyed soon thereafter by fire or flood, for we find no subsequent mention of it by name.

Then comes the first positive item that especially concerns us. The list reads: "1834, December 13.⁵⁰ To Charles Bent for two years, with 29 men employed, at Fort William, on the north side of the Arkansas, about forty miles east of the Rocky Mountains, about 20 miles north of the Spanish Peaks and about five miles below one of the principal forks of the Arkansas." Also he may trade at "Union Point on the north side of the Arkansas near the foot of the Rocky Mountains." He may trade with the "Arapahoes, Cheyennes, Kiawas, Snakes, Sioux and Arickaras" (Ser. 273, Doc. 97, p. 3). Thereafter the licenses were issued regularly: May 9, 1835, to "Bent and St. Vrain"; November 8, 1836, to "Bent and St. Vrain," at "Fort William," "Big Timbers," on South Platte, twelve miles above the mouth of Cache la Poudre, on "Boiling Fountain Creek," and at "Gantt's Old Fort," for two years, with thirty-eight men; July 26, 1838, to "Bent and St. Vrain" for trade at "Fort William" and approximately the same places as listed in the license of 1836; etc.⁵¹

It is surprising that despite all the records of trade and travel over the Santa Fe Trail and of accounts of fur trade activity in the West, no contemporary account of the building of Bent's Fort has been found. The present writer has searched for years for such a story, but without success. In 1936 Elmer R. Burkey spent a year working for the State Historical Society of Colorado, searching contemporary newspapers and collections of records in Kansas, Missouri and elsewhere, with instructions to look especially for anything on Bent's Fort and the Santa Fe Trail traffic during the 1820s and '30s. His search for a contemporary account of the founding was fruitless.

The earliest contemporary report found is in the letter of William Laidlaw to Pierre Chouteau Esq., written from Fort Pierre, present South Dakota, on January 10, 1834: ". . . I understand from the Sioux that Charles Bent has built a Fort upon the Arkansas for the purpose of trade with the different bands of Indians, that he may be able to draw about him, and if judiciously carried on cannot fail to be very injurious to the trade in this part of the Country. The Cheyennes have remained in that part of the Country depending I have no doubt on that very establishment and if kept up I have very little doubt but that a great many of the Sioux will follow their example. . ."⁵²

⁵⁰At first it looked as if this date might be wrong, as the method of reporting was changed this year, and this item is out of proper sequence. But in the National Archives in Washington we found a William Clark letter of December 15, 1834, which says: "Enclosed herewith a statement showing the necessary particulars of a license for Indian trade, granted by me to Charles Bent on the 13th inst."—St. Louis Superintendency File.

⁵¹St. Louis Superintendency File, Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington. The abstracts of license for the years 1835-38 inclusive, apparently were not published in the government documents.

⁵²Upper Missouri Outfit, Letter Book B, December 20, 1832, to August 25, 1835, in the Chouteau Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

This would indicate that the fort was built the preceding summer, in 1833.

When Colonel Henry Dodge and his First Dragoons came down the Arkansas in the summer of 1835 they mentioned passing the remains of Gantt's Post;⁵³ and they stopped at Bent's Fort and held a council there with the Indians, but none of the diaries or reports say when the post was founded.⁵⁴

Robert Newell, who took employment with Bent and St. Vrain in the spring of 1836, tells of going to the fort⁵⁵ in July, but he does not give the date of the fort's establishment.

Matt Field, prominent journalist of St. Louis and New Orleans, visited the post on his way to New Mexico in 1839 and wrote: "Fort William was founded six years ago by William Bent of St. Louis, after whom it is called."⁵⁶

Thomas J. Farnham who passed Bent's Fort on his way to Oregon in 1839, wrote a long description of the post and said: "Fort William, or Bent's Fort, on the north side of the Arkansas eighty miles north by east from Taos in the Mexican dominions, and about one hundred and sixty miles from the mountains, was erected by gentlemen owners in 1832, for purposes of trade with the Spaniards of Taos, and the Eutah, Cheyenne and Cumanche Indians."⁵⁷

William Waldo, whom we have previously mentioned as being with Charles and William Bent on the trip of 1829 to Santa Fe, wrote: "I believe it was in 1833 that Messrs. Bent and St.

⁵³The official journal of the expedition, *House Doc.* 181, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., 23, records on August 1st: "Captain Gantt [who was guide of the expedition] started this morning for the purpose of collecting the other villages of Arepahoos together; marched four or five miles; passed a deserted trading establishment." Hugh Evans, who kept a journal on the march, wrote: "Aug. 1st. The command marched today about 5 miles passed and old trading establishment formerly occupied by Capt. Gant" (*Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XIV, 210). Rufus B. Sage, who went down the Arkansas in 1843, writes in his *Rocky Mountain Life*, etc., 303-304, "Some six miles below the mouth of Fontaine qui Bouit are the ruins of an old fort, occupied several years since by one Capt. Grant [Gantt] as a trading post." As late as 1860 a traveling correspondent of the *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), reported in his paper that on April 10 of that year he "reached and crossed the Arkansas at Gantt's Fort." John Gantt's interesting career need not be traced here. See A. B. Maloney, "John Gantt, Borderer," in *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XVI, 48-60.

⁵⁴See the official journal of the expedition and Hugh Evan's diary, both cited in the preceding footnote. Captain Lemuel Ford, leader of one of the companies, also kept a journal of the tour. On August 6 he reported reaching "Bent's Fort a trading house on the Arkansas River here we found one of the Bents and a Mr. S[t. Vrain] Traders with a considerable establishment of goods these were the first White men we found living in the Indian country in a march of One thousand Miles. . . [Aug. 7] dined with Mr. Bent Styraim [St. Vrain] called (Saura) [Ceran] where we had a good dinner" (*Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XII, 566-67).

⁵⁵Memorandum of Robert Newell's Travels in the territory of Missouri," original manuscript in the University of Oregon library, Eugene, Oregon; microfilm copy in possession of the writer.

⁵⁶Printed in the *New Orleans Picayune*, July 12, 1840.

⁵⁷Printed in R. G. Thwaites (Ed.) *Early Western Travels* (Cleveland, 1906), XXVIII, 161. The journals of Sidney Smith and O. Oakly, companions of Farnham, do not give the date of the founding of the fort; nor does the journal of E. W. Smith who also passed the post in 1839 (*Colorado Magazine*, XXVII, 161-88). Farnham's statement as to the date of founding cannot be depended upon, in view of the fact that when he reaches Fort Hall and Fort Boise, present Idaho, he says that each of these was built in 1832. We know positively, from contemporary sources, that both were built in 1834.

Vrain built Fort William, or, as it was subsequently called, Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River."⁵⁸

Frank Triplett, in his *Conquering the Wilderness* (Chicago, 1883), 182, writes: "Bent's Fort, or Fort William, as it was at first known, was situated on the Arkansas, and was the property of St. Vrain and William Bent. It was built in 1833."

As indicated above, contemporary historical sources on the founding of Bent's Fort are almost non-existent, and far from so definitive as we would like. But unless and until some fugitive contemporary record is happily discovered, we shall have to depend on the extant primary sources, and these indicate that Bent's Fort was built in 1833.