

Sidelights on Bent's Old Fort

By ARTHUR WOODWARD*

For several years it has been my conviction that William Bent did not completely burn and destroy his fort on the Arkansas. The recent archeological work undertaken by The State Historical Society of Colorado, and the preliminary report of Dr. Herbert W. Dick in the July, 1956 issue of *The Colorado Magazine*, "The Excavation of Bent's Fort, Otero County, Colorado," has only served to confirm my belief. To bolster archeological facts, however, I submit the following brief account of contemporary evidence and subsequent data obtained by Prof. F. W. Cragin of Colorado Springs from Col. J. L. Sanderson, Boulder, Colorado, 1903.

It has always been a matter of mystification to me why various writers on the subject of Bent's Fort have been content to let the post slip into oblivion after Bent abandoned it. Why has no one attempted to trace the subsequent use of the old structure from 1861 to 1880?

As to the matter of the burning and destruction of the fur post, J. S. Calhoun, Indian Agent at Santa Fe, wrote to Col. W. Medill, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, October 5, 1849: "... One of the owners of Bent's Fort has removed all property and caused the Fort to be burnt." This, it must be admitted, is only hearsay evidence, but the fact remains that in 1849, not 1852 as Grinnell and others mentioned, there was a rumor circulating that Bent had destroyed his post and moved out. Another eye witness account of the "destruction" of the place was a Mr. Paladay (?)¹ who claimed that he was an employee of Bent and was absent from the fort when Bent blew it up. He was at a camp at Hole-in-the-Rock and heard the explosion. Later, on the 22nd of August, 1849, he

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¹In a letter written by Colonel W. O. Collins, commander of the 11th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry with headquarters at Fort Laramie, Dakota Territory (Wyoming) in 1862, he said: "I have employed an excellent interpreter whom I intend to keep permanently if the Government will pay him. His name is Leo Pallardy, a Frenchman, or rather of French parentage, born in St. Louis, raised in St. Charles, Missouri, and for the last seventeen years a resident among the Indians and agent and trader. He was interpreter for General Harney and also for the Sioux chiefs at Washington City on a visit to the President a few years ago. He is about 32, a very good scholar, a capital hunter (he brought in an antelope yesterday) and thoroughly acquainted with the country and the Indians from the Rocky Mountains to the Missouri. His dress is a black buckskin hunting coat, highly ornamented, and light buckskin pantaloons with moccasins. He occupies the tent with Caspar and myself and makes himself generally useful in packing, unpacking, loading, etc."—Agnes Wright Spring, *Caspar Collins* (New York: Columbia University, 1927), 109-110. Various spellings have been found for the name "Pallardy," and this man "Paladay" probably is the same as the guide hired by Colonel Collins.—*Editor*.



CRAGIN COLLECTION, PIONEERS' MUSEUM, COLORADO SPRINGS
BENT'S OLD FORT

From a photograph presented to F. W. Cragin by J. L. Sanderson of the Barlow & Sanderson Stage Co.

visited the post and walked among the still smoking ruins. He published his account in the *Missouri Republican*, October 2, 1849.²

The latter item seems to be the most circumstantial one I have seen. Calhoun heard that the fort had been "burnt," Paladay said

²Through the courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society we quote the item from *The Missouri Republican*, October 2, 1849: "Later from the Plains.—Burning of Bent's Fort Confirmed.

Correspondence of the Republican.

Independence, Sept. 27, 1849.

"I have a little more information from the Plains, perhaps of a later date than you are yet in receipt of. Today, Messrs. Paladay and Riley, who accompanied one of the Government trains under charge of Capt. Keits, as far as the Little Arkansas, arrived, by way of Bent's Fort. Mr. Paladay had been in the employ of Wm. Bent, at the Fort. On the 16th of August, he was sent over in the direction of Kit Carson's settlement, on the Moro. In returning he fell in company with the train of Capt. Keits. While they were encamped at the Hole in the Rock, they heard distinctly a loud report, resembling that of cannon. They journeyed on—crossed the Arkansas river on the 22d August, and came up to the site of the Fort, and saw that the rubbish of the buildings was all that was left. It had been burnt down by the Indians, and was still smoking and burning on the 24th, when they left it. They now were able to account for the report, as the magazine belonging to Bent had been fired. The guns and traps were consumed, and it is supposed all the goods, books, &c., of Bent's concern, had shared the same fate. The pack saddles and riding apparatus were not destroyed, as they were still in the bastions. What had become of Mr. Bent, or any one connected with the concern, they could not tell: there was no trace of them or their whereabouts. As our informant came on down the Arkansas, they saw the trail of the cattle from the Fort. On the 17th of the month, Mr. Bent relieved Mr. Fisher, and the latter went over towards Taos.

"Mr. Fisher says, that in some of his conversations with Red Wolf, the chief of the Cheyennes, the chief told him he was very anxious for Mr. Fitzpatrick to return, as he promised; that he and the old men of the tribe wanted to live with him; that the young men were desirous of fighting with the whites. He also said to those at the Fort to keep the gates closed against many of the Arapahoes, as they would do them injury. The Indians also said to those about the Fort, frequently of late, that they intended to go over to the settlement of thirty whites, southwest of the Arkansas, in the direction of Taos, and take all their corn, of which they have an abundance. If they raised any objection, they would then take their cattle; and if they still objected, they would make way with the men.

"The company, as they came in, met a party of Cheyennes, to whom they told their numerical strength, and asked them if they wanted to fight them or not. They replied no. They then tried to get some information respecting the burning of the Fort, but all they could learn was, that the Eutaws had done the deed.

"What is done by the Government for the protection of the many trains that have left here this summer and fall, and the many emigrating parties to California, as well as those returning, you can best tell; but that something ought to be done, and efficiently too, for the continuance and permanency of this great trade, and the safety of the lives and property of the many who will venture every one, who has any discrimination, must see.

"Yours, &c., in haste, _____"

it was blown up. From subsequent information contained in Cragin's interview with Col. J. L. Sanderson, it would appear that at least a portion of the old building had been partly destroyed by an explosion. Mr. Seeley's account, cited by Dr. Dick, and the archeological evidence presented in the ruins themselves, seem to bear out Paladay's report that some time between August 16 and 22, William Bent exploded some powder in a room or rooms and pulled out.

Colonel Sanderson, at the time of his interview with Cragin, was living at Boulder, Colorado. He told Cragin, December 10, 1903, that he had been western partner and general superintendent of the Barlow & Sanderson Overland Stage, Mail & Express Company.

The first stage line operated by this outfit in 1860 was from Otterville, the terminus of the Missouri Pacific Railway, to Kansas City. Later it extended its line from Kansas City to Sedalia, and afterward the firm ran lines from Kansas City to Leavenworth and Fort Scott in Kansas. When the Civil War broke out it interrupted the stage service in Missouri, but the partners obtained a contract to haul mail to Santa Fe. This was in 1861. The Overland Mail & Express Company was then organized by these same two partners as a private concern; it was not a stock company.

The line swung into full operation in 1861. Stations were established from 10 to 12 miles apart, the locations depending upon the availability of good water. Every fourth station was a "home station." Each driver had to handle the reins from one home station to another. Horses were changed at the "swing stations" and thus four teams were used on such runs. The stages were pulled by four and six horse teams, according to the condition of the roads.

Among the stations cited by Sanderson on this run was Fort Aubrey, named for the noted plainsman and long distance rider, F. X. Aubrey. This home station was near Aubrey's Crossing on the Arkansas, noted by Sanderson as a fair ford. Here were built a cottonwood log house, stable and corral. These stood about four miles below (east) of the present Syracuse, Kansas, not many miles east of the Colorado boundary.

In 1861 the company built a home station where Fort Dodge was later built in the same year. The first camp at Dodge consisted of a few tents down on the river where the soldier-laborers, who were sent out to construct the new post, lived. At the crossing of Walnut Creek, Kansas, was Peacock's Ranch, which was there prior to the construction of the company's station. Later this was called Cottonwood Station, and at this point Fort Zarah was built by Gen. Samuel R. Curtis in 1864.

West of Fort Zarah and Cottonwood Station was another home station at Fort Larned. Here was a thirty-five mile stretch of road without water. Between Larned and Fort Dodge was a "swing station" on Coon Creek. There were other stations along the route at various points: Cimarron Crossing, Bluff Station, Big Sandy, Old Fort Lyon, New Fort Lyon, Bent's Old Fort, Timpas, Iron Springs, Hole-in-the-Rock, Hole-in-the-Prairie, Gray's Ranch, Dick Wootton's and on south into New Mexico.

In 1861 the partners obtained permission from William Bent to occupy Bent's Old Fort, and Colonel Sanderson and his wife renovated some of the rooms in the abandoned post and moved in. Thus the post became one of the "home stations" on the stage line from Kansas to Santa Fe.

Sanderson said that when the company moved in it found the walls standing to a height of about twelve feet and a portion of one of the towers still standing.

For the next twenty years the stage company kept the old post in fairly good repair, especially the main dwelling rooms and the main wall, which reached up to the height of the roofs. The kitchen and dining room were on the south side of the enclosure. On the east were three rooms north of the main gate and two rooms south of the gate. There were two rooms in use on the north side, none on the west. The remains of the old adobe ice house south of the post were still visible during the 1860s.

Concerning the controversial date of the establishment of the old fort, Sanderson stated that Colonel William Bent told him it was built in 1828.³

Colonel Sanderson owned a small photograph, badly faded, of a drawing of Bent's Fort made some time during the period when the stage company used the post as one of its "home stations." The dim sketch shows a stagecoach drawn up in front of the gate, part of one tower (probably the northeast) and the walls, ragged and uneven, are indicated. (The original photograph is now in the collections of the Pioneers' Museum of Colorado Springs.)

So much for Colonel Sanderson's brief account of his occupancy of the old station. Bent's Fort was regarded as sort of a half-way point on the Kansas City-Santa Fe run, and a general repair shop was kept there for the stages on the long run of approximately 1,000 miles. The station was estimated to be 600 miles from Kansas City and 400 from Santa Fe.

Another man interviewed by Cragin was Theodore Clearmont Dickson, who, on November 4, 1907, said that he was a member of

³The date of establishment of Bent's Old Fort is a controversial question. See: Herbert W. Dick, "The Excavation of Bent's Fort, Otero County, Colorado," *The Colorado Magazine*, Vol. 33, No. 3, July 1956, p. 182.



CRAGIN COLLECTION, PIONEERS' MUSEUM, COLORADO SPRINGS
COL. J. L. SANDERSON

Green Russell's "Georgia Party" who came to the Rocky Mountains in May, 1858, hunting gold. When his party passed Fort Bent, they found it occupied by a party of four or five men who had a considerable stock of trade goods and were dealing with the Indians.

Professor Cragin opened a correspondence with George Bent, son of William and his Cheyenne wife, and in the course of this contact, Cragin queried Bent on the old fort on the Arkansas. In a letter dated October 5, 1905, George Bent wrote in response to one of Cragin's letters of September 30, 1905:

"Towers of Bent's Fort were round. One tower was built northeast corner and one Southwest corner. These towers were built to protect outside walls from Indians or other enemies. To climb the walls from the Towers one on Northeast protect the North and East Walls. One in Southwest protected South and West walls.

"Fort Bent, the double gates were on East side, small gate was North side. Another gate was on West side going into adobe corral. Corral gate was facing south towards the river. Lot of prickly pears was planted on top of the walls of this corral clear around so no one could climb over it.

"Thick iron was nailed over these doors so they could not be burnt from outside by anybody. They looked like iron doors to look at them.

"The Towers had square windows to shoot out from. In these towers the Company had guns, pistols, swords and lances. It was plan to run to these Towers first thing when attacked. Another Tower was built over the big gate for Watch Tower. They had a fine telescope in this tower. Many times this saved surprize (*sic*). During day time some one was looking out this Tower. There was a Flag Pole and Flag of course and one Cannon.

"When Cheyennes and Arapahoes came to Fort in Fall for Winter Camps near it to trade. When they move in sight of the Fort they fired this Cannon. This meant for everybody to come to the Fort for their big feast which was customary. The men eat first. The women had to unpack their ponies with their loads, then the women and children would come next. Same time the Company made present to them. Knives to skin buffalo, paints, combs and powder and bullets.

"The rooms were all built inside of course. There were good many rooms, store houses, Blacksmith shop and Carpenter shop. There was Billiard Hall also when the Fort was in its prime. I understand the Indians all had big time when the Fort was finished. The Cheyennes and Arapahoes all moved back to the Arkansas River from the Black Hills after the smallpox was over with.

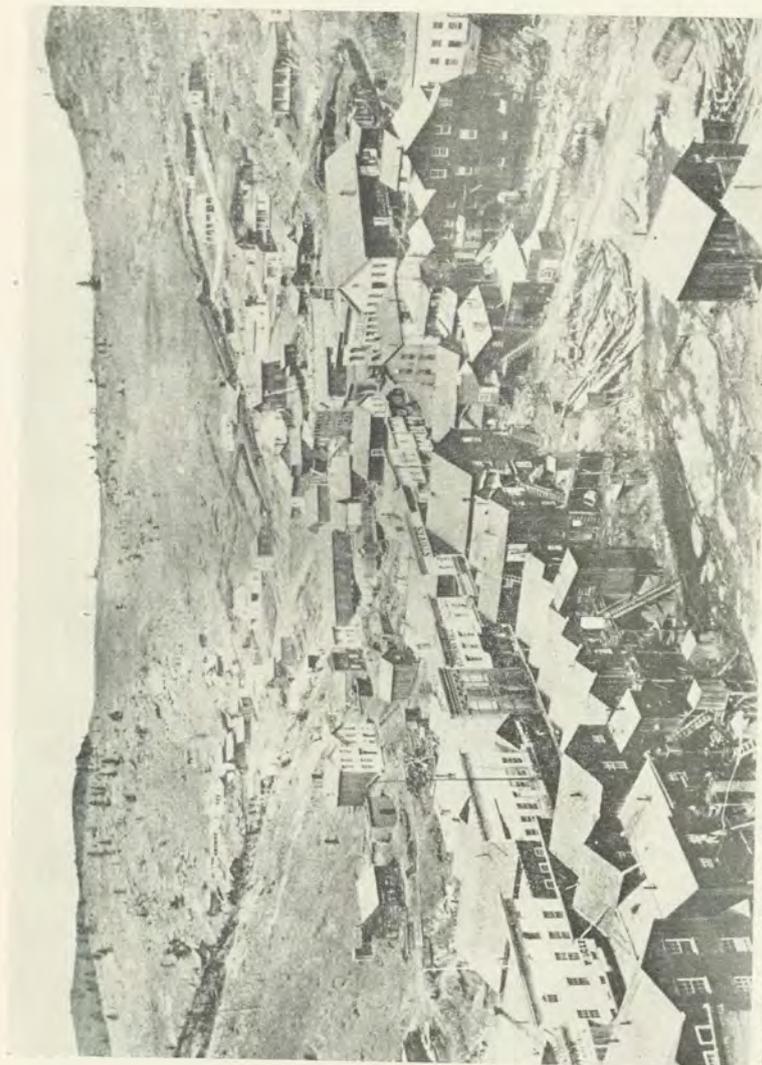
"Bent and St. Vrain built trading post on South Canadian River in 1844.

"Hatcher and Fisher were the ones that built Adobe Walls on the Canadian River. This was built to trade with the Kiowas-Comanches and Apaches, as these tribes did not come to Bent's Fort to trade much. Just before this these 3 Tribes were too hostile those days.

"In 1868 Maxwell told me, and also Black Beaver, Delaware Indian, there was six of them left in the post. In the night the Comanches had taken all the ponies from there. They buried everything and left afoot in the night. They all wore moccasins. They told me they had an awful time in Walking on prickly pears at night. They were making back for Bent's Fort. They took nothing except plenty ammunition, as there was all kinds of game in the country then. Black Beaver told me they killed fat, wild horses on the Cimmaron River and roasted ribs.

"Bent's Fort was covered, that is the roof, with dirt. The walls were whitewashed inside of the rooms. The Fort had a big Council room also to hold Council with Indians. Kit Carson told me before he died, 1868, he was employed by Bent & St. Vrain and was in charge of 12 men cutting timbers for the fort when one night a war party of Crows stole all their animals. Three Cheyennes, 2 men, 1 woman came to their camp that evening and stayed all night with them. These Indians tied their ponies that night as there was plenty of cottonwood limbs for them to eat. Little Turtle and Black Moon both told me they were the Indians that came there with squaw. Carson had all the horses running loose as there was plenty of cottonwood for them to eat.

"The snow was on the ground. Crows had drove off all the horses except 3 Indian ponies. Black Moon died only a short time ago. He told me he got on his pony when Carson's horses were missing and found the horses had been stolen and the trail heading north in the snow. So Carson must have been employed before the firm built the Fort."



Central City, 1864, by George D. Wakely. This view was made from much the same place as the one by Henry Paul in 1862. The street from the lower left of the picture to the middle is Main Street, with Eureka (and Lawrence) Streets in the middle, from left to right.