

## More About Bent's Old Fort

A cover bearing the postmark, "Bent's Fort, Col, Mar 23," and encasing two letters, one of which began with "Bent's Old Fort. Col. Terr. Feby 24th 1867," recently was loaned to the Division of History by Mr. John T. Bent of Rochester, New York. Mr. Bent wrote that he knew nothing about Charles (Charley) S. Frances, who was the author of the letter written at Bent's Old Fort, nor did he have any information about Miss Mate M. Peck of Elmira, New York, to whom the letter was directed. The second letter in the envelope bore the date Dec. 31st, 1866, and was addressed to "Much esteemed Friend." This evidently had been written by Miss Peck.

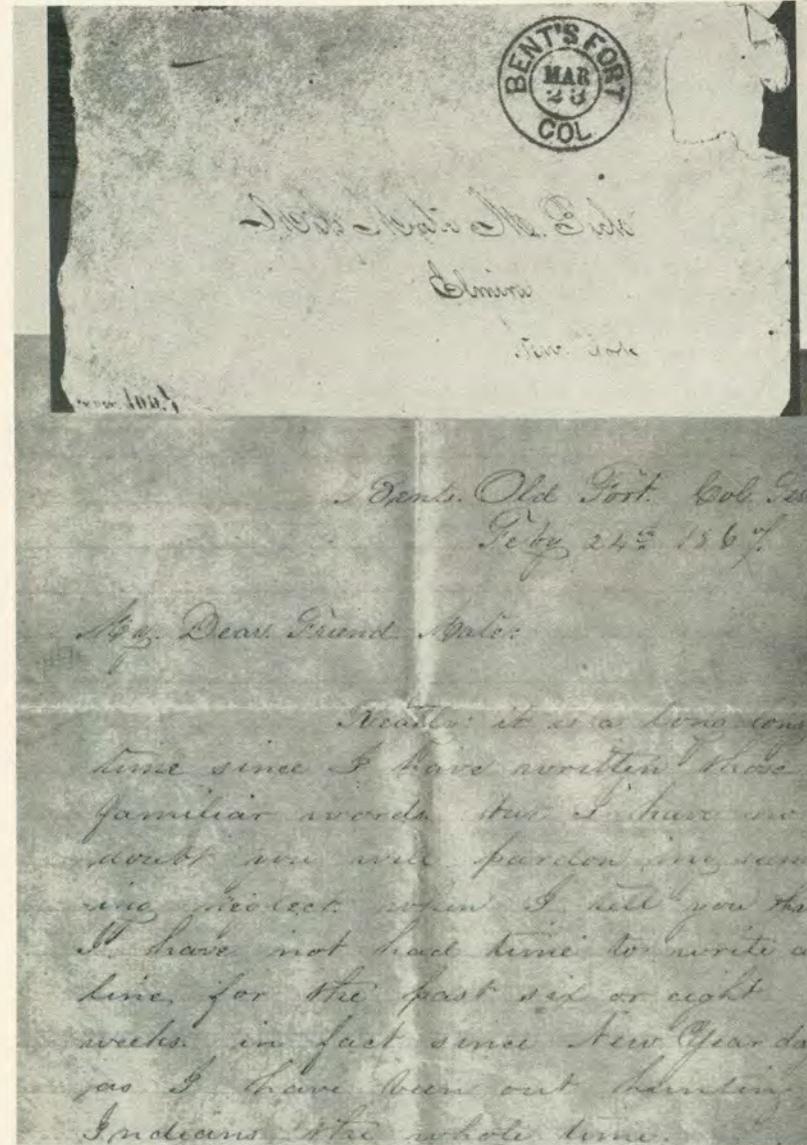
Said John T. Bent in writing to the Historian's office, "I cannot help but feel that 'Charley' may have had a rather vivid imagination, although perhaps I am doing him an injustice. At any rate, Charles Frances' letter makes fascinating reading."

There is no question about the "vivid imagination." It evidently was stimulated by Miss Peck's letter which said in part:

"As day after day flew by numerating into weeks and even months bringing no word from Soldier Charlie, I fully believed I was forgotten, or else that he had never returned from that last expedition. The doubt caused by the last thought was, however, turned to gladness when yours was at last received. . . 'Tis very pleasant to receive your letters so full of wild and fearful adventure for they vary so from all my others, and it is a real relief. My imaginative mind has pictured you a Hero and I can see you, with my mind's eye, conquering those dreadful savages. Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the brave and daring soldiers. They set a noble part,—but if I may be allowed to express my feelings, I will say I do not like the picture. It makes me shudder. Yet I suppose the awful Indians must be subdued . . ."

Charley evidently could not resist the temptation to entertain his friend with a tale about how he went to Fort Phil Kearny, at the summons from Colonel Carrington, and how he and his men found a whole party of cavalry dead. Those familiar with the details of the Fetterman Massacre near Fort Phil Kearny know that fight took place only about six miles from the fort and that Captain Tenadore Ten Eyck found the bodies of Fetterman and his men, 79 in number, on December 21, soon after they were killed.

Charley Frances may have hunted Indians, but we doubt if he took his men in the dead of winter from Bent's Old Fort on the Arkansas up to the foot of the Big Horn Mountains in northern



LETTER MAILED FROM BENT'S FORT

March 23, 1867

Wyoming, as his letter states. It was John (Portugee) Phillips who rode from Fort Phil Kearny to Fort Laramie for relief of Fort Phil Kearny, after the Fetterman fight, in December 1866.

We are, however, printing the letter because of the Bent's Fort postmark. According to records of the Post Office Department now in the custody of the National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D. C., "a post office was established at Bent's Fort, Bent County (formerly Huerfano, Las Animas, and Pueblo Counties), on April 7, 1863, with Lewis Gregory appointed as postmaster. It was discontinued on December 2, 1873. The records do not show that this office was known by any other name. The post office at Fort Lyon, Bent County (formerly Huerfano, Las Animas, and Pueblo Counties) was established as Fort Wise on March 5, 1862. Its name was changed to Fort Lyon on August 2, 1862."

The letter, signed Charley and addressed to Miss Mate M. Peck, Elmira, New York, follows:

Bent's Old Fort, Col. Terr.  
Feb'y 24th 1867.

My Dear Friend Mate:

Really it is a long, long time since I have written those familiar words. But I have no doubt you will pardon my seeming neglect when I tell you that I have not had time to write a line for the past six or eight weeks, in fact since New Year day as I have been out hunting Indians the whole time.

During the first fourteen months that I have been in Colorado I have not had a harder time scouting from the fact that I have been in the Mountains and there the Indians have the advantage of rocks and trees. I will give you a slight sketch of my wanderings so you can form some idea of my life or of a Scout and Hunter's life.

On Christmas day I received a letter from Fort "Phil Kearney" stating that the Indians were rising "en masse" near that Fort and asking me to come if I possibly could, and bring my men with me. I called in my runners and started. We travelled day and night from Pueblo and arrived at the Fort on the last day of December. We found the Garrison very much excited, the Indians being only five miles distant. The day before a party of ninety-five U.S. troops were sent out and the Commanding Officer had not heard from them and they feared that they were lost.

I reported to Col. Carrington and asked him what he was going to do, and got from him an answer that he "did not know." I told him to get his soldiers ready for duty in the fort and that I with my party of fifteen men would follow the trail of the Cavalry. We started out and after travelling about twenty miles came on the most horrid scene that I ever witnessed."

In a ravine about three hundred yards long, lay the whole party of Cavalry, dead, and so horribly mutilated that recognition was impossible. Not one of the ninety-five was alive. This sight raised our anger and after burying the bodies we started back for the Fort and told our story, and asked for volunteers to go with us and avenge their comrades' death. I got thirty men and mounted them and started out on the Indians' trail. It was not long before we struck one of their Camps of about fifty lodges and immediately gave them battle. Our attack was so sudden that they had not time to get their ponies. We soon had them scattering over the Prairie in all directions and fought them until none were left.

We would not give or take quarter and kept following them up the trail until we had to return to the fort. We reached Kearney a week ago. I lost ten men during the time I was gone. I got home here yesterday and today I have devoted to you.

It is now almost a year since our correspondence commenced and I on my part have never regretted the step I took in answering your first, in fact I have experienced much pleasure in receiving and perusing your letters.

You have no idea what pleasure it gives one when far from home and friends to receive letters from them, but I am getting to the end of my sheet please send your Photo, and I promise to send mine as soon as I can get to Denver and see an artist, which will be in April.

Write soon and believe me ever your friend I remain with regards.

Charley.

Direct to:  
Charles S. Frances  
Bent's Old Fort  
Col. Terr.

#### NOTES ON BENT'S OLD FORT

In the *Daily Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), Jan. 9, 1866, there appeared a letter telling of a trip from Denver to Bent's Fort. We quote in part:

We left Denver at a quarter before nine o'clock yesterday morning, dined at Frankstown, and supped at Colorado City. The drive was made in ten hours which is pretty good staging. Pueblo was reached at daybreak this morning and from there we have taken it quite leisurely in the belief that the Santa Fe coach would be half a day or more behind us in arriving. We came in a little before ten and found it had arrived five hours before. We are thirty-seven hours from Denver and a distance of 205 miles. The traveling speed is from seven to eight miles per hour. . . . Great numbers of buffalo have recently come into the valley near here. We met this evening at Spring Bottom, a wagon loaded with two tons of hams and hearts, for the Denver market. One man with it killed fifteen in one day, all within a circuit of one hundred yards. On another day he killed seven.

This is a great rambling old frontier trading post; with tremendously thick adobe walls; bastions, and all the necessary defences (sic) against Indian assault.

The stage company have made it a very complete and comfortable station. Thus far the journey has been as pleasant and expeditious as one can expect by stage.

On Feb. 15, 1866 there appeared the following letters in the *Daily Rocky Mountain News* under the heading "Our Santa Fe Correspondence:"

Santa Fe, N. M.  
Feb. 1, 1866

In my last able bodied epistle dated, "Bent's Old Fort," you received an outline of our trip to that place. Our Stay there is more than worthy of mention; that travelers may be prepared for such a misfortune.

"Bent's Old Fort," as it is now called, was built by Col. St. Vrain, in 1834. Carson was at that time a hunter for him, and Bill Bent, a sort of "Major Domo." St. Vrain says that he has sent as many as a hundred thousand Buffalo skins from the place in one year.

There is a little story afloat to the effect that St. Vrain, Carson and Bent sent to St. Louis for a gentleman to come out, and make up a four handed game of eucher. The gentleman receiving a handsome salary for so doing.

The halcyon days of Bent's Fort are gone. Travelers forced, by accident, to sojourn there, have the uncomfortable companionship of an empty bread basket, at a very liberal price. There is no reason for this. There is every opportunity certainly, that the keepers of the next station above, have, and one would think even more there; one is ever sure of a palatable meal of well cooked food.

It is an absolute impossibility for the stage coming from the States to make close connection at Bent's Fort, with the stage from Denver. The passenger must stop, and has no other means of protecting himself than that offered by the liberality of the stage company which now objects to the carrying of a well filled hamper of eatables, persons going to Santa Fe will do well to remember this, or they will go hungry.

The next station beyond, Iron Spring, is well kept and comfortable. The landlord can "keep a station."

[Following this is a long description of Lucien Maxwell and his ranch and a trip to New Mexico.]

Bent's Old Fort  
February 9, 1866

"En Route" for Denver. We are again keeping Lent involuntarily. This trip has had a most excellent result. Gen. Brewster has had the opportunity to inspect the country, discover the necessities of the people in the stagecoach way, and also of meeting such men as St. Vrain, Maxwell and Carson. From these men he has obtained the information that will enable him to organize and put in operation, a line from Denver to Santa Fe. That will shorten the distance over any traveled route over one hundred miles; also to arrange for the connecting road that will join the "Smoky Hill" at Pond Creek.

This branch from Santa Fe to the O.D. Co's main route, will enable the coaches to make the trip from Santa Fe to Fort Reily in seven days. Early in the summer the railroad is to be completed to Reily; then the General is confident that the time from St. Louis to Santa Fe can be reduced to eight or nine days.

February 11. Tonight we are under the hospitable roof of our genial friend, Col. A. G. Boone, with our feet at his comfortable fire, and a glorious concoction of the rosy, for the minor man, in our fist. The Colonel spins an occasional yarn, we do the listening. These yarns are too long for our little epistle to ye *News*, but not too long for *Harper's*.

We seldom appreciate the benefit that accidental meeting of such men as Col. Boone gives one, until the moment for taking advantage of it is gone. This will not be the case this time with

Russell.

The *Daily News*, Feb. 8 and 14, 1866, carried the following announcement:

Santa Fe  
Stage Company

Through Route from Denver, Colorado, to Kansas City, Missouri, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Arizona Gold Mines.

U. S. Mail, Passenger & Express Coaches leave the office of the Company in Denver, Colorado, every Wednesday morning for Kansas City, Missouri and Santa Fe and other points in New Mexico, making quick time and affording every reasonable accommodation to passengers and shippers of express. This line of First Class Coaches passes through Frankstown, Colorado City, Pueblo, Booneville, Union, Las Vegas, Santa Fe . . . and eastward from Bent's Fort in Colorado, running on the River road, the best natural road in the Union, the country through which it is located abounding in fine scenery, and luxuriant grasses, and Buffalo and other game of almost every kind—to Fort Lyon, Fort Larned, Council Grove and Kansas City, on the Missouri.

Coaches leave Kansas City every Friday to Denver and Santa Fe.