

Bent, St. Vrain & Co. among the Comanche and Kiowa

BY JANET LECOMPTE

Bent's Fort on the Arkansas was not built exclusively for the trade of the Cheyenne and Arapaho. Its owners, Charles and William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, intended to trade with many other tribes, especially the Comanche, the most numerous Indians of the southern plains.¹ Although in 1835 William Bent made the long journey to Texas to seek the Comanche's business and the Indians were friendly, it was another seven years before trade with them was achieved. In the fall of 1842 Bent, St. Vrain and Company built a log post in the Texas panhandle on the south fork of the Canadian River (Red River or Rio Colorado) for the Comanche and Kiowa. The post was popular with the Indians and profitable for the company, and by the summer of 1845 another Bent post of adobe had been built within a few miles of the log fort; but in the spring of 1846 the Comanche became hostile, and the Bents abandoned their Canadian River posts, probably permanently. In later years the ruins of the adobe post were known as Adobe Walls and became the site of two Indian fights, both celebrated in numerous "true-west" stories and Sunday-supplement thrillers as the "Battle of Adobe Walls." About the era of Bent traders on the Canadian little has been written, that little being a snarl of myth and contradiction.

When the Bents and St. Vrain built their picket post on the Arkansas in 1833 or 1834, they wanted to trade with the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Snake (Shoshone), Sioux, and Arikara, as their trading license shows.² By the time that they

¹ In 1846 Charles Bent estimated the population of Cheyenne at 1,500, Arapaho at 1,600, Kiowa at 2,000, and Comanche at 12,000, counting only the Indians of New Mexico (which included present southern Colorado) and not the many thousands of Comanche in Texas. U.S., Congress House, Bent to William Medill, November 10, 1846, H. Exec. Doc. 17, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 1849-50(?), p. 193.

² U.S., Congress, House, License issued to Charles Bent, December 13, 1834, for two years, *Licenses to Trade with Indians*, H. Doc. 97, 23d Cong., 2d sess., 1834-35(?), p. 3; Janet Lecompte, "Gant's Fort and Bent's Picket Post," *The Colorado Magazine* 41 (Spring 1964):111-25.



The Arkansas, below Bent's Fort.

had completed their big adobe post down the Arkansas from the picket post, they were seeking more Indians with whom to trade. Word of the new trading post reached Indians far to the south. When early in 1835 some Comanche showed up at Bent's Fort with skins to trade for American goods, the Bents were delighted to see them; and in the summer of 1835 William Bent went south to trade with nearly 2,000 Comanche gathered on the Red River of Texas.³ The Indians received him kindly, but it was another five years before the Bents managed to persuade these numerous and horse-wealthy Indians to visit Bent's Fort again.

There were several reasons why the Comanche would not trade after 1835 at Bent's Fort. One reason was that two posts had been built for the Kiowa and Comanche in their own country in present Oklahoma.⁴ In 1835 Auguste P. Chouteau, a skillful

trader backed by the powerful American Fur Company, built a post at "Fort Holmes" for the Comanche on the Canadian near the mouth of Chouteau Creek at the northern edge of Cross Timbers; and in 1837 he built another for the Kiowa on Cache Creek near present Fort Sill in southwestern Oklahoma. Consequently, these Indians could buy goods more conveniently at Chouteau's posts than at Bent's Fort. They also could buy goods there more safely, for during the war between Texas and Mexico both sides had sent agents to the Indians to gain their loyalty, setting the tribes to fighting among themselves. Among those opposing tribes were the Kiowa and Comanche against the Cheyenne, making trade at Bent's Fort difficult and dangerous.⁵

When Chouteau died in December 1838, his trading posts had been closed, to the distress of the Comanche who came to trade at Fort Holmes in the spring of 1839.⁶ But Chouteau's death did nothing to alleviate the hostility the Comanche felt for the Bents, who were allies of their Cheyenne enemies. In June 1839, while three thousand Comanche were camped on the south side of the Arkansas across from Bent's Fort, a party of them killed the Bents' horse-herder and made off with between forty and one hundred horses, accounts differing in the number.⁷

As Bent, St. Vrain and Company licenses for the years 1836 and 1838 indicate, the Bents probably did not trade with the Comanche, nor did they maintain posts or traders in Comanche country during that time. The license for 1836 was granted for two years on November 8 at St. Louis and showed that the company employed thirty-eight men for trade at "Fort William on the north side of the Arkansas River 40 miles north of the Spanish Peaks, 120 East of the Rocky Mountains and 5 below one of the Principal Forks of the Arkansas; at a place called the Big Timber about 90 miles above the Santa Fe road on the American side of the Arkansas River; at a point on the

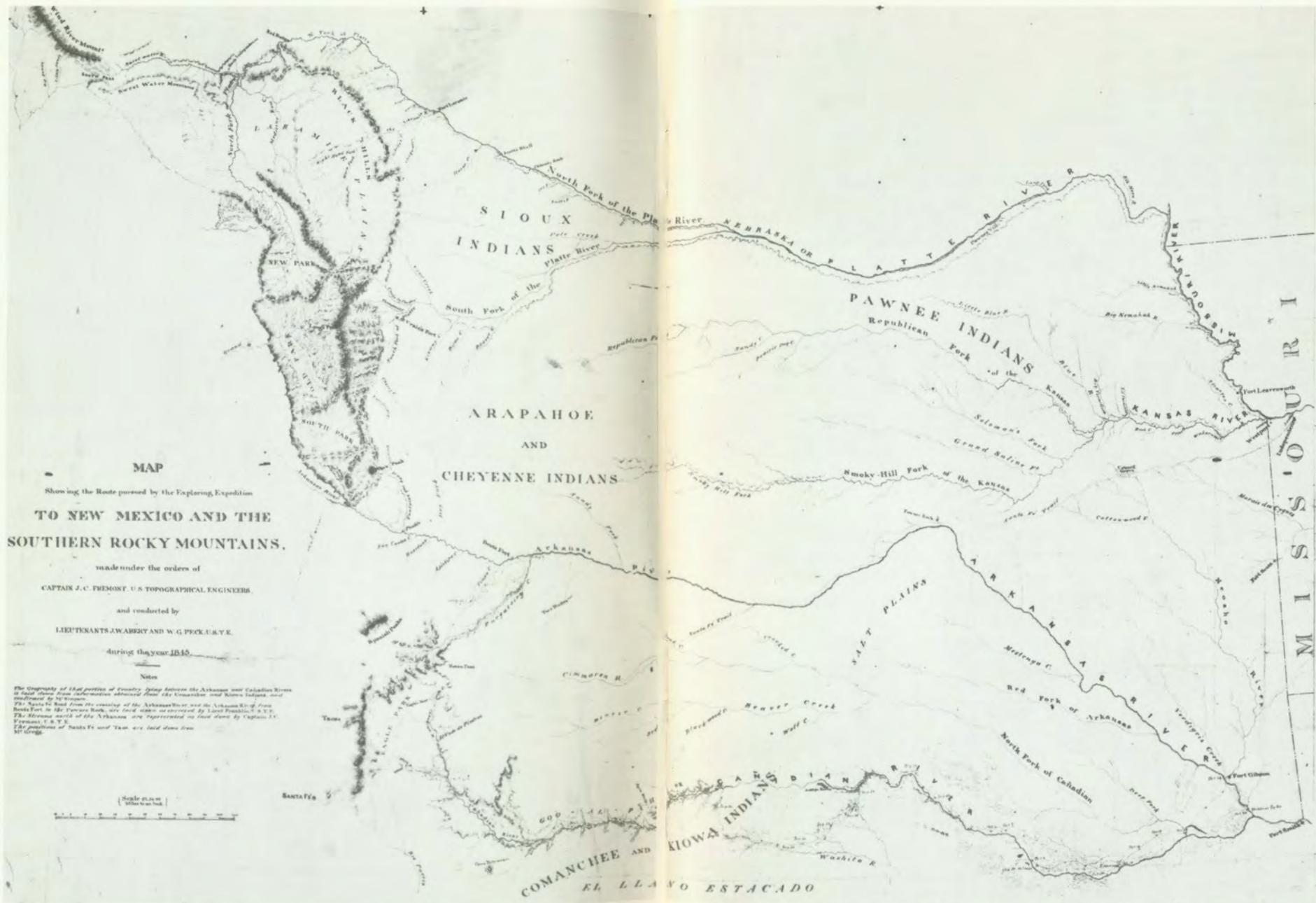
³ U.S., Congress, House, Col. Dodge's Journal, H. Doc. 181, 24th Cong., 1st sess., 1835-36(?), p. 24; Louis Pelzer, ed., "Captain Ford's Journal of an Expedition to the Rocky Mountains," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (March 1926):566-67. See also Lecompte, "Gant's Fort and Bent's Picket Post," pp. 111-25.

⁴ At this time the Comanche ranged from the Arkansas to the Texas Gulf Coast and into northern Mexico, living in winter upon the headwaters of the Trinity and Red rivers and in the Wichita Mountains and in the summer on the prairies beside the Canadian and Arkansas rivers. U.S., Congress, House, H. G. Catlett to Medill, May 12, 1849, H. Exec. Doc. 5, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 1849, p. 967. The Kiowa lived south of the Arkansas and north of the Wichita Mountains, but they also ranged far to the south and west. James Mooney, "Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians," Seventeenth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), pp. 171-74.

⁵ See Janet Lecompte, "Auguste Pierre Chouteau" in *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen, 9 volumes to date (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1965-72), 9:63-90; George B. Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), pp. 35-62; Mooney, "Calendar History," pp. 171-74.

⁶ Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, 32 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904-07), 20:108.

⁷ John E. Sunder, ed., *Matt Field on the Santa Fe Trail* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), p. 143; J. Neilson Barry, "Journal of E. Willard Smith while with the Fur Traders, Vásquez and Sublette, in the Rocky Mountain Region," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 14 (September 1938):258; Thomas J. Farnham, *Travels in the Great Western Prairies* (1843), ed. R. G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels* 28:165; F. A. Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1912), p. 141.



A map of the area served by the traders' forts east of the central Rockies.

Fork of the river Platte, about 50 miles east of the Rocky Mountains, and 12 miles above the junction of the Cashe [sic] La Poudre with the Platte; on Boiling Fountain Creek about 20 miles above the mouth of the River St. Charles north side of the Arkansas, and about sixty miles east of Pike's Peak; and at Gant's old Fort, six miles below the mouth of the St. Charles River on the north side of the Arkansas; and about 7[5?] miles east of Pike's Peak, with the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaha & Kieway Indians." By July 26, 1838, when Bent, St. Vrain and Company next was issued a two-year license, its capital, number of traders, and trading locations had increased. The license showed thirty-one men employed at Fort William; at Big Timbers; at Fountain Creek; "at Fort Lookout, on the South Fork of the River Platte, about 15 miles east of the Rocky Mountains, and twelve miles above the junction of the Cache La Poudre with the Platte; and at Wolf's Den, about sixty miles north of the Spanish Peaks, on the north side of the Arkansas and about 5 miles below the river Warfeno; with the Cheyennes, Sioux, Arrapahoes, & Kiowa Indians."⁸

Although the Comanche were not mentioned in the above trading licenses, the Kiowa were. The Bents did not necessarily trade with these Indians, for licenses signified intent only. If there was such a trade, it probably was not carried on in Kiowa country, as none of the Bents' licenses for these years mention trading locations south of the Arkansas. The licenses show that the company was steadily expanding its trade along the north side of the Arkansas and to and beyond the South Platte between 1835 and 1840, and if the Kiowa were customers they probably came to Bent's Fort to trade.



It would appear, then, that the Bents did not trade with the Comanche at all from 1836 to 1840 and built no post, or none of consequence, south of the Arkansas during that period. The posts on the Canadian did not exist at this time, according to Josiah Gregg's map of 1844 showing his routes to and from New Mexico in 1839 and 1840. Neither his outgoing route to Santa Fe along the north bank of the Canadian in the year 1839 nor his return route in 1840 on the south side of the river indicates any trading post.⁹

After Chouteau's death the Comanche suffered from lack of trade. In 1839 Josiah Gregg and an escort of U.S. dragoons marching up the Canadian River met Comanche who refused to smoke the peace pipe with these men who were thought to be Texans. When the Indians recognized Gregg's party as Americans, they were welcomed, "for we like to trade with the white man," said the chief.¹⁰ Despite that sentiment the hostility of the horse thieves at Bent's Fort in the summer of 1839 probably ruined any chance of trade with the Bents until peace was restored formally. In the summer of 1840 peace was made between the Cheyenne and Arapaho on the one hand and the Kiowa, Comanche, and Kiowa-Apache on the other, at a camp on the Arkansas near Bent's Fort.¹¹

There is nothing to indicate that the Bents were included in this peace; nevertheless, on August 3, 1840, a partner of Bent, St. Vrain and Company, who had gone to St. Louis in May with the company wagons, took out a license for trading with the Comanche and Kiowa, perhaps in hopes that peace would be made in his absence. The locations for trade with the Comanche and Kiowa were described on the license as "a point on the Canadian forks of the Arkansas, near the junction of the north & south fork of the Canadian & west of Cross Timbers 200 miles."¹² These two locations are widely separated. The junction of the north and south forks of the Canadian is in eastern Oklahoma; Cross Timbers, a dense hardwood forest five to thirty miles wide, stretching north and south some four hundred miles between the Arkansas and the Brazos, was in the center

⁸ U.S., Department of War, Office of Indian Affairs, *Abstract of Licenses Issued to Persons to Trade with the Indians, Letters Received*, St. Louis Superintendency, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁹ Josiah Gregg, "A Map of the Indian Territory, Northern Texas and New Mexico," in Carl I. Wheat, *From Lewis and Clark to Fremont, 1804-1845*, vol. 2, *Mapping the Transmississippi West* (San Francisco: Institute of Historical Cartography, 1958), opp. p. 181.

¹⁰ Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 20:126-27.

¹¹ Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, pp. 63-69; Mooney, "Calendar History," pp. 175-76. The Kiowa-Apache were Apache who had been attached firmly to the Kiowa tribe for many years.

¹² *Abstract of Licenses Issued*.

of Oklahoma.¹³ Two hundred miles west of Cross Timbers could have referred to the site of Bent's Canadian River posts, but the designation is very vague. Perhaps trading houses or shacks sturdy enough to protect the trader and his goods were actually built at these two locations, only to disintegrate when the trader returned to Bent's Fort in the spring. It is more likely that no such temporary posts were erected, for in the summer of 1840 peace was yet to be achieved between the Bents and the Comanche.

In January 1841 Charles Bent wrote that he expected 1,500 lodges of Comanche near Bent's Fort in the spring, with an equal number of Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Sioux.¹⁴ In March 1841 thirty-one Comanche and Kiowa chiefs arrived at Bent's Fort; and, wrote Charles Bent, "They have made peace with us."¹⁵ The Comanche and Kiowa delegates accepted presents and asked that a white man be sent to their village nearby, as hostage to indicate Bent's good intentions. When an American trader set off for the village with his two Kiowa squaws, whom he meant to return to the Kiowa because he was tired of supporting them, on the second day out he was shot in the back. After the Indians made proper retribution for his death, peace was restored and the traders were sent into the Kiowa and Comanche country, more than doubling the number of Indians with whom the Bents traded.¹⁶

Although peace was made there is no evidence that traders sent to the Kiowa and Comanche in the fall and winter of 1841-42 built their posts on the Canadian River, and there is some evidence that they did not. The Bents' trading license for 1842 specifies trade with the Kiowa and Comanche at "Cross timbers & mouth of Beaver Creek on Red river,"¹⁷ both of these locations being hundreds of miles from the later site of Adobe Walls.

By the fall of 1842, however, the first Bent post on the Canadian was erected. While his partners were in St. Louis in

¹³ Randolph B. Marcy, *Exploration of the Red River of Louisiana in the Year 1852* (Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer, 1853), pp. 84-85. See also accompanying "Map of the Country between the Frontiers of Arkansas and New Mexico Embracing the Section Explored in 1849, 50, 51 & 52, by Capt. R. B. Marcy, 5th U.S. Infy."

¹⁴ Charles Bent to Manuel Alvarez, Taos, N.M., January 16, 1841, Benjamin Read Collection, New Mexico State Archives and Records Service, Santa Fe.

¹⁵ Charles Bent to Alvarez, Taos, March 15, 1841, Read Collection.

¹⁶ Alexander Barclay to George Barclay, Fort William, March 12, 1841, Barclay Papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, Calif.

¹⁷ License issued to Bent, St. Vrain & Co., July 28, 1842. *Abstract of Licenses Issued*. Cross Timbers covered an enormous area and the location of a post therein would be impossible to pinpoint without better description. "Beaver Creek on Red river" refers to a site in the Comanche country on the Red River of Texas about fifty miles east of present Wichita Falls.

the summer of 1842, Charles Bent had been busy at Bent's Fort making another contact with the Comanche and Kiowa and sending traders to build the post on the Canadian, as was shown in June 1843 when Captain Philip St. George Cooke, camped at Walnut Fork with Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain, wrote in his journal:

With the Camanches and Kiowas Mr. Charles Bent made here last summer, a kind of peace or truce; they asked for traders amongst them, and in the fall he established a house about 200 miles to the South on the Canadian river.¹⁸

Contemporary Mexican records also testify that the Bents had established a fort on the Canadian before the summer of 1843. On June 5, 1843, the Juez de Paz of Las Vegas, New Mexico, reported that the Texan invaders of that spring had come "as far as Bent's Fort on the Rio Colorado [Canadian]."¹⁹

The 1842 post on the South Canadian River was of horizontally laid logs. It was located on the north side of the Canadian about a mile above the mouth of Mustang (Big Blue or Big Clear) Creek, between the Canadian and the high, sloping bluff to the north called *Gúadal Dóha* (Red Bluff) by the Kiowa when they held their annual sun dance there in the summer of 1840.²⁰ John Hatcher was its builder. Hatcher probably began trading with the Kiowa during the 1830s if they came to Bent's Fort; by 1845 he spoke their difficult language and had been adopted as a son by a Kiowa squaw.²¹ The post dealt largely in mules and horses stolen from the Mexicans and in buffalo

¹⁸ William E. Connelley, ed., "A Journal of the Santa Fe Trail," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 10 (1925): 239.

¹⁹ Mexican Archives of New Mexico Doc. 7256, New Mexico State Archives and Records Center, Santa Fe.

²⁰ Mooney, "Calendar History," pp. 175, 181, 183. Mooney's chief source is Kiowa tradition as recorded by Set-t'an (Little Bear) in a calendar history with pictographs representing the most important events of each year. Mooney says his interpretation of the pictographs is from Set-t'an as well as from old men of the tribe, white pioneers, and published sources; but he does not document his statements which are frequently inaccurate. Errors, for instance, in the following statement of Mooney on page 281 regarding the building of the log post on the Canadian are the date of the winter of 1843-44 and the site of the adobe post as above the log post: "In the following winter K'ódal-aká-i, 'Wrinkled-neck,' a clerk of the Bents, built a log trading house about a mile below *Gúadal Dóha*, 'Red Bluff,' on the South Canadian, near the mouth of Mustang creek and a few miles above Adobe Walls, in the Texas panhandle. . . . It is also stated that the same man, at a later period, built another trading post at a fine spring a few miles above this one at *Gúadal Dóha* on the same (north) side of the river." Rafael Chacon, a distinguished and well-educated man who traded in that region from 1856 to 1858 is the source for the "horizontally-laid logs." This description he must have obtained from the Indians, for by the time he was at the site, "the log fort of Bent & St. Vrain had entirely disappeared." Interview with Rafael Chacon by F. W. Cragin, Trinidad, Colo., December 20, 1907, Cragin Collection, Pioneers' Museum, Colorado Springs.

²¹ Mooney, "Calendar History," pp. 181, 183; George Bent to F. W. Cragin, Colony, Okla., October 5, 1905, Cragin Collection; John Galvin, ed., *Through the Country of the Comanche Indians in the Fall of the Year 1845: The Journal of a U.S. Army Expedition Led by Lieutenant James W. Abert* (San Francisco: John Howell Books, 1970), p. 40.

robes, which were the chief trade products of the Kiowa and Comanche.²² Business was good. A trader on the Platte reported in March 1843 that the Comanche trade had salvaged an otherwise poor year for Bent, St. Vrain and Company.²³

The log post was not abandoned when the more famous adobe post was built down the river, as contemporary references to both posts indicate. In September 1845 Lieutenant James W. Abert wrote of "Bent's trading houses on the Canadian," in the spring of 1846 Charles Bent referred to "our forts on Red River," and in the fall of 1846 Ceran St. Vrain spoke of his "trading houses on 'El Rio Canadiano.'" ²⁴ The references also suggest that neither post was given a name. Half a century after they were abandoned, George B. Grinnell called the later one "Fort Adobe," probably from information of George Bent. It would be most convenient to call it "Fort Adobe," as Grinnell's followers have done, but there is no contemporary reference to that or any other name. If either post had had so simple a name as "Fort Adobe," would not Bent, St. Vrain, and Abert have used it?²⁵

²² Writes P. St. George Cooke of the Kiowa and Comanche in 1843: "Last year, near Chihuahua they took 150 women and children prisoners, having slain the men; they robbed them of horses and mules: these besides buffalo robes, they offer to Mr. Bent in trade; he declined the mules for fear of their stealing them." Connelley, "A Journal of the Santa Fe Trail," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (September 1925):240.

²³ "The news from the Arkansas is that Bent & St. Vrain have done nothing but look to their Comanche trade to bring them out which if report is true will do so." W. D. Hodgkiss to A. Drips, Platte River, March 25, 1843, Drips Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

²⁴ Charles Bent to Alvarez, Taos, March 4, 1846, Read Collection, U.S., President, *Message from the President of the United States, in Compliance with a Resolution of the Senate, Communicating a Report of an Expedition Led by Lieutenant Abert, on the Upper Arkansas and through the Country of the Comanche Indians, in the Fall of the Year 1845*, S. Doc. 438, 29th Cong., 1st sess., 1846, pp. 6-7, 44, 48; U.S., Department of War, *Report of the Secretary of War, Communicating in Answer to a Resolution of the Senate, a Report and Map of the Examination of New Mexico, Made by Lieutenant J. W. Abert, of the Topographical Corps.* S. Exec. Doc. 23, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 1847, p. 96.

²⁵ In a letter to George E. Hyde, George Bent referred to "Adobe Fort," perhaps meaning the adobe fort, for the half-Cheyenne Bent habitually left off definite or indefinite articles. Bent to Hyde, Colony, Okla., December 13, 1905, George Bent Papers, 1904-18, Denver Public Library Western Collection. Following this letter of Bent's, Hyde called the fort "Adobe Fort." See George E. Hyde, *A Life of George Bent, Written from his Letters*, ed. Savoie Lottinville (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 67, and "Kit Carson's Fight at Adobe Fort," *Frontier Magazine* 4 (April 1906) 3-5. See also George B. Grinnell, "Bent's Old Fort and its Builders," *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1919-22* 15 (1923):42. In one reference—but that one a much quoted source—Grinnell switched the name to "Fort Adobe"; see *The Fighting Cheyennes* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 45, in which he was followed by Clarence A. Vandiver, *The Fur-Trade and Early Western Exploration* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1929), p. 281, and David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1954), p. 247. Neither the letters of Bent to Hyde in the Denver Public Library nor to F. W. Cragin in the Cragin Collection have "Fort Adobe" therein. Ruth M. Cristensen of the Southwest Museum (Los Angeles), depositor of many Bent letters to Grinnell, reports that a careful survey of these letters failed to turn up a single "Fort Adobe" (Christensen to Lecompte, September 29, 1971); nor does such appear in the detailed index to the two hundred Bent letters in the Coe Collection, Yale University (Archibald Hanna to Lecompte, February 18, 1972).

The success of the log post was sufficient to warrant the more permanent adobe fort, which was probably constructed in the spring or summer of 1845, to judge by lack of reference to it before the fall of 1845. Its builders were John Hatcher and, according to Cheyenne tradition, one Fisher, who could be only the well-known Bent trader Robert Fisher. They selected a site at a fine spring ten or twelve miles downstream from the log post, just above the mouth of what was later known as Bent Creek (or West Adobe Walls Creek, Kit Carson Creek, or Bosque Grande Creek), and two miles above and opposite the mouth of White Deer Creek.²⁶ Billy Dixon, who lived at the

²⁶ Both the Kiowa tradition as transmitted by James Mooney and the Cheyenne tradition as transmitted by George Bent must be used with great care. Mooney's interpretation of Set-t'an's Kiowa calendar history says the following: "In this winter (1845-46) K'odal-aká-i, 'Wrinkled-neck,' built a trading post on the South Canadian. . . . This post was in the panhandle of Texas, on the north bank of the South Canadian (*Gúadal P'a*, 'Red River') just above Bosque Grande creek and about 2 miles above the entrance of Red-deer creek (*Ko' gá-i P'a*, 'Elk Creek'). It was in a swampy and well-timbered location, just west of one of the main trails from Arkansas river southward. It was owned by William Bent, called by the Kiowa *Máñtahák'ia* ('Hook-nose-man,' 'Roman-nose') who, in the spring of 1844, had built a trading post, as already noted, at *Gúadal Dóha*, higher up on the same river. Both were in charge of a clerk known to the Kiowa as K'odal-aká-i, 'Wrinkled-neck.'" Mooney, "Calendar History," p. 283. There are some errors here. Bosque Grande Creek was Bent Creek, Red-deer Creek was White Deer Creek, and the post at *Gúadal Dóha* was built well before the spring of 1844 and not, if we believe Mooney's own statement elsewhere in the same book, by William Bent but by "Wrinkled-neck." George Bent writes: "Bent and St. Vrain built trading post on South Canadian River in 1844. Wrinkled Neck he was called by Indians Frackle Hands also. English name Hatcher and Fischer were the ones that built Adobe Walls on Canadian River this was built to trade with Kiowas, Comanches and Apaches as these tribes did not come to Bents Fort much to trade. Just before this these 3 Tribes were at war with Cheyennes and Arapahoes. This trading post did not do much these 3 Tribes were to hostile those days." George Bent to F. W. Cragin, Colony, Okla., October 5, 1905, Cragin Collection. Between 1905 and his death in 1918, George Bent, half-breed son of William Bent, wrote hundreds of letters about the Bents and Cheyennes to George B. Grinnell, George E. Hyde, and Francis W. Cragin. About the date of the founding of the adobe post on the Canadian, Bent's information is typically contradictory. To Cragin he wrote the date as 1844 (Colony, Okla., October 5, 1905, Cragin Collection); yet, only two months later he wrote Hyde that it was built in 1848 (Colony, Okla., December 13, 1905, Denver Public Library). Grinnell says Bent wrote him that "in 1912 an old Kiowa told him that Adobe Walls was built sixty-seven years before, i.e., 1845." Grinnell, "Bent's Old Fort and its Builders," p. 15n. Yet, a statement of Bent's reproduced in Olive K. Dixon's *Life of "Billy" Dixon, Plainsman, Scout and Pioneer* (Dallas: P. L. Turner Co., 1927), p. 133, says: "I cannot find out when it was built." Neither Grinnell nor Hyde were above tailoring Bent's material to fit their assumptions. Grinnell discards Bent's "old Kiowa" informant and his date of 1845 and concludes that the fort was built "before 1840, probably before 1837," basing the date upon an Indian tradition that in 1837 a party of Arapaho met the Kiowa and Comanche when they went somewhere to trade. "Probably to Fort Adobe, and not to Bent's Fort, for, as the Cheyennes and Arapahoes were constantly at Bent's in those days, the Kiowas and Comanches would not have gone to trade at a point where they would have been almost certain to meet enemies." Grinnell *The Fighting Cheyennes*, p. 48. Grinnell was apparently ignorant of A. P. Chouteau's posts where the Arapaho could have met the Kiowa and Comanche safely. Hyde similarly misused his source. In 1906 Hyde accented George Bent's date of 1848 for the founding of the fort. Hyde, "Kit Carson's Fight at Adobe Fort," p. 5, but later he appropriated Grinnell's erroneous date and actually put it into George Bent's mouth: "This post had been built many years before, probably before 1840, by my father and Ceran St. Vrain." Hyde, *Life of George Bent*, p. 356. Lavender set the founding of the fort as not before 1845 and did 1845, because Lt. James W. Abert passed the site in September 1845 and did not mention the fort in his report (see *Bent's Fort*, p. 405), but Lavender is in error. Abert not only mentioned "Bent's Houses" three times in the report but located both forts on his map (see pages 276-77).



The "battle site" at Adobe Walls.

site of the post for twenty years, described it as being on the east side of Bent's Creek close to the low sandhills of the Canadian and more than a mile from the river itself. The clear stream beside the fort was fringed with willows, cottonwood, hackberry, and chinaberry. In the trees "wild turkeys roosted by the thousands, while deer and antelopes in great herds grazed in the grassy bottoms."²⁷

Descriptions of the adobe post are confusing. Lieutenant A. W. Whipple, passing the fort in 1853, described it as "a large building finely situated in a grove of trees, and containing a spring of water within the court. An acequia from the river insured the garden in front from the ill effects of a dry season. The place is now desolate, its only use being to designate a ford."²⁸ The trader Rafael Chacon found the adobe walls in good preservation in 1856-58 and indicated that the fort had been a large and strong one with yard-thick walls eighteen or twenty feet high and loop-holed or port-holed all around, enclosing a space perhaps three hundred paces square. There were four towers, one on each corner, and log buildings around the inside of the walls. The entrance was in the middle of the south wall. Chacon noted also that the post was located half a mile from the Canadian on a "nice little creek" where there were many large cottonwoods.²⁹ Captain George A. Pettis, with the Kit

Carson campaign against the Plains Indians in 1864, took part in the "Battle of Adobe Walls" and described the wall as nine feet high, enclosing a space eighty feet on a side, with a gate on the east side, which disagrees in almost every particular with Rafael Chacon's description.³⁰ In 1877 Tom Autobees visited what was left of the post and drew a little diagram of it.³¹ Autobees said that the creek running near the old fort was called Adobe Walls or Kit Carson Creek. Set-t'an, James Mooney's Kiowa source in "Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians," used a drawing of the fort or of a building within the fort as the symbol for the outstanding event in Kiowa history of the winter of 1845-46.³²

The adobe post appears to have been in operation only two years, 1845 and 1846, and Ceran St. Vrain was its chief trader. In February 1845 St. Vrain wrote from Bent's Fort to his partner Charles Bent at Taos that he had not gone to trade with the Kiowa in the early part of the winter of 1844-45 because of lack of men and animals and because both William Bent and he thought they could trade all their goods on the Arkansas; but now it appeared that if St. Vrain did not trade with the Kiowa, the company would have half its goods left on hand. St. Vrain also reported that William Bent, trading with Yellow Wolf's Cheyenne on the Cimarron, thought the Kiowa would come to trade on the Arkansas. St. Vrain does not say in this letter, dated February 11, 1845, that his Kiowa trade otherwise would have been conducted in the adobe fort on the Canadian; in fact, there is nothing in St. Vrain's letter to indicate that either post existed or did not exist at this time.³³

By the fall of 1845, however, there is no doubt that both posts existed and that St. Vrain was the partner in charge. Lieutenant James W. Abert, who left Bent's Fort for the Canadian with John Hatcher as guide in August 1845, expected to find the Comanche and Kiowa assembled at "Bent's trading houses on the Canadian," waiting for Bent's wagons.³⁴ Presumably the wagons arrived shortly, for St. Vrain spent the fall and winter of 1845-46 trading at the "forts on Red River," as Charles Bent called them. St. Vrain wrote Bent at the end of December that he had so far traded 750 robes and that prospects for a good trade were fair.³⁵ By early 1846 war was ex-

²⁷ Olive K. Dixon, *Life of "Billy" Dixon*, p. 108.

²⁸ "Extracts from the Preliminary Report of Explorations for a Railway Route . . . from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, by Lieutenant A. W. Whipple," in *Reports of Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*, 13 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Beverley Tucker Printer, 1859-60) 3:33-34.

²⁹ Interview with Chacon by Cragin.

³⁰ Capt. George A. Pettis, quoted in Edwin L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days, 1809-1868* (N.Y.: Press of the Pioneers, Inc., 1935) 2:736.

³¹ Interview with Tom Autobees by F. W. Cragin, Avondale, July 29, 1908, Cragin Collection.

³² Mooney, "Calendar History," p. 183.

³³ St. Vrain to Bent, Fort William, February 11, 1845, Read Collection.

³⁴ Abert, *Through the Country of the Comanche Indians*, pp. 5, 38-39, 40, 43, 44.

³⁵ Charles Bent to Alvarez, n.p., n.d. (February 1846?), Read Collection.

pected between the United States and Mexico, and Charles Bent wrote on March 4 that runners from Comanche traders had reported that the Comanche were afraid to go to "our forts on Red River" because of a rumor of troops there. On March 6 Bent announced that one of the traders had deserted from the fort on Red River and had come to Taos, bringing a Spanish woman who had been prisoner among the Kiowa. St. Vrain, he wrote, was trading very well, and the Indian villages were beginning to approach the fort for trade.³⁶ It was not long after this optimistic report that St. Vrain abandoned his Canadian River forts, for he was back at Taos at the end of April 1846.³⁷

After the abandonment of the fort contemporary letters and reports and eyewitness descriptions are not available. However, there are stories told at second or third hand, tribal legends, and rumors. Certain similarities exist in these stories: Indian hostility, for instance, is a theme common to all of them. Each one, perhaps, contains some truth; but sources are generally unidentified or unreliable, and differences from one account to another are so marked that none can be fully credited.

The story of Ceran St. Vrain's departure—and the only story that mentions him—was told by scout Billy Peacock many years later:

The Kiowas and Comanches had run off [St. Vrain's] stock. He ran up a white flag and invited their chiefs in for a council. As soon as these chiefs entered the stockade he closed the doors and promised them death unless the stock was returned speedily and he was given safe conduct to Bent's Fort.³⁸

Billy Peacock's story is plausible, but it is undated and its source unknown.

George Bent's story is also plausible, if undated, and he gives his source:

In 1868 Maxwell told me and also Black Beaver Delaware Indian there were six of them that left this post in the night. The Comanches had taken all the ponies from there. They buried every thing and left afoot in the night they all wore Moccasins. They told me they had awful time in walking on prickly pears at night they were making back for Bents Fort. They took nothing except plenty of amunition, as there was all kinds of game in the Country then. Black Beaver told me they killed fat wild horses on Cimmaron River and roasted ribs.³⁹

³⁶ Charles Bent to Alvarez, Taos, March 4, 5, and 19, 1846, Read Collection.

³⁷ Charles Bent to Alvarez, Taos, May 1, 1846, Read Collection.

³⁸ Paul I. Wellman, "Some Famous Kansas Frontier Scouts," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (August 1932):347.

³⁹ George Bent to F. W. Cragin, Colony, Okla., October 5, 1905, Cragin Collection.

To George Grinnell, Bent expanded his story, which could have referred to an earlier departure, perhaps from the log fort in 1842 or 1843 when Carson and Maxwell were known to have been working for the Bents. William Bent, said his son, sent his best men—(Kit) Carson, (John) Smith, (Lucas) Murray, (Lucien B.) Maxwell, (Robert) Fisher, and two Mexicans—a cook and a herder—to the Canadian to start a trade chiefly for horses and mules. They remained for some time and traded quite a herd of animals. One day the Indians killed their Mexican herder and drove off all their animals but two or three. The traders buried most of their goods and started at dark on foot for Bent's Fort. Cactus pierced their moccasined feet causing inflammation and fever. At daylight hostile Indians appeared. Murray told his men to bunch up the mules and scatter out. They shot three Indians and three or four horses, the Indians withdrew, and the Bent men made it safely to the Arkansas.⁴⁰ It is curious that no one but George Bent tells of this singular adventure; available biographies of Carson, Smith, Maxwell, and Fisher do not mention it except with George Bent as the source.⁴¹

A third story of the abandonment of the post, told by Dick Wootton as his own experience, sets the date as the winter and spring of 1849-50, which is impossible, since Bent's Old Fort was abandoned in 1849. Wootton relates that two or three Comanche came to Bent's Fort demanding a trader to buy their robes and buckskins on the Canadian. Wootton took twelve or fifteen men and two wagon loads of goods and went down to the adobe fort on the Canadian. The traders remained "pretty much all winter" shut up in the fort, for the Comanche were not friendly. Two or three Indians were all that the traders allowed inside the fort at one time, and they passed goods out through a hole in the wall the size and shape of a ticket window, at which the Indians would shoot. The traders started home in the spring with twelve big Pennsylvania wagons loaded with furs and reached Bent's Fort without having to do any fighting, after what Wootton called "the most hazardous trading expedition I ever had anything to do with."⁴²

⁴⁰ Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes*, pp. 308-10, 319-31.

⁴¹ The latest biography of Kit Carson is Harvey Lewis Carter's "Dear Old Kit": *The Historical Christopher Carson* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968) which follows Lavender's *Bent's Fort* in allowing Kit a winter at Bent's Canadian post, but the editor has a difficult time in finding a period when Kit was not otherwise occupied between 1842 and 1849 and does not quite succeed. Kit's memoirs say nothing about it. See also the following writings in Hafén, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*: Ann W. Hafén, "John Simpson Smith," 5:325-45; Harvey L. Carter, "Lucien Maxwell," 6:299-306; and Harvey L. Carter, "Robert Fisher," 4:97-102.

⁴² H. L. Conard, "Uncle Dick" Wootton (1890; Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1957).

Rumor or confusion with others forts may have caused the conceptions held by later visitors to the adobe fort. Lieutenant W. C. Whiting, exploring the Texas frontier in the winter of 1849-50, referred vaguely in his report to the Comanche as the "destroyers of Bent's fort."⁴³ Lieutenant Whipple passed the ruins in 1853 and wrote: "There, many years ago, whiskey was sold to the Indians, who, in a fit of intoxication, murdered the occupants and set fire to the establishment"—indeed, the tragic end of many a post, but not this one.⁴⁴ Edward F. Beale, who visited the ruins in 1858, wrote that William Bent had built Adobe Walls as a branch of Bent's Fort and "becoming disgusted one day at the Indians who had killed some of his oxen, he fired and destroyed it and left for Bent's Fort," a probable confusion with the big post on the Arkansas.⁴⁵

Neither primary sources nor the many dubious versions of the abandonment of the forts on the Canadian leave a clear idea of how that event occurred. Primary sources at least reveal that it was Ceran St. Vrain (and not Murray or Wootton) who was in charge in the spring of 1846 and that the posts were abandoned between March and May of that year because of Comanche hostility, which was to continue unabated for three more years.

Comanche hostility was becoming manifest by the spring of 1846. In May a Bent, St. Vrain and Company train was attacked and one man killed near Pawnee Fork on the Santa Fe Trail by Indians who were thought to be Comanche.⁴⁶ In June Comanche were reported hostile to the whites, and the Cheyenne refused to visit them.⁴⁷ In the fall when Lieutenant Abert asked Ceran St. Vrain his opinion of the Canadian River as a

227-30. Wootton himself spent that winter at Taos, serving as juror, acting as guardian for children of Simeon Turley, posting bond as sheriff, and greeting the survivors of Frémont's fourth expedition.

⁴³ U.S., Senate, Lt. W. H. C. Whiting, *Reconnaissance of the Western Frontier of Texas*, S. Exec. Doc. 64, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 1850, p. 249.

⁴⁴ See Lt. A. W. Whipple's report in *Reports of Explorations and Surveys* 3:33-34. The murder of all the occupants of the post would hardly have passed unnoticed, but there is no contemporary corroboration of this alleged event.

⁴⁵ U.S., House, E. F. Beale, *Wagon Road—Fort Smith to Colorado River*, H. Exec. Doc. 42, 36th Cong., 1st sess., 1860, p. 25. If Beale is not confusing Bent's abandonment of this post with Bent's Fort, his statement tends to support Lavender's contention that William Bent built the post himself, traded there, and destroyed it. Lavender bases his assumption on his own statement that "William Bent was the partner in direct charge of Indian relations and field operations" and that George Bent, in a letter to Hyde, December 13, 1905, says, according to Lavender, that "his father was the builder of Fort Adobe." See Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, p. 405. George Bent actually said: "Adobe fort was built by William Bent & St. Vrain," probably referring to the firm, for, as we have seen, George Bent described Hatcher and Fisher as its builders.

⁴⁶ Louise Barry, "Kansas Before 1854: A Revised Annals," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 30 (Autumn 1964):358.

⁴⁷ Charles Bent to Alvarez, June 11, 1846, Read Collection.

route for returning to the United States, St. Vrain, said Abert, "cautioned me not to attempt it, as he had been warned by the Kioways of a settled determination of the Camanches to kill all the whites who would attempt to go through their country, and therefore he had not sent any persons to his trading houses on 'El Rio Canadiano.'"⁴⁸ By mid-May 1847 the Comanche had begun their most intense season of attacks against trains and troops on the Santa Fe Trail. By August they returned to their own country for their fall hunt, but their white scalp-count for the summer was sixty, along with about 330 wagons and 6,500 head of stock stolen or destroyed.⁴⁹



A Comanche attack on a wagon train.

Despite the relentless hostility of the Comanche, Bent, St. Vrain and Company took out a license on September 10, 1847, to trade with the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Pawnee, "and others," their trade locations including "Wolf tail creek, Canadian fork, and False Wachita south of the Arkansas river,"

⁴⁸ U.S., Senate, *Report of the Secretary of War, Communicating . . . a Report and Map of the Examination of New Mexico, Made by Lieutenant J. W. Abert*, S. Exec. Doc. 23, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 1847, p. 96. The Comanche were angry at the great mortality from measles among their children, which they attributed to the "evil breath" of the white man, but their continuing hostility had deeper causes.

⁴⁹ Barry, "Kansas before 1854" 30 (Winter 1964):500-36 passim. Thomas Fitzpatrick counted only twenty-seven white men killed that summer.

in the heart of the Comanche range.⁵⁰ If the Bents hoped that Comanche fury would cease before the winter was out, they were to be disappointed, and they surely sent no men to these dangerous locations.

Early in 1848 Lieutenant Colonel William Gilpin marched into Comanche country with about three hundred Missouri volunteers and was reported to have "made considerable slaughter" among the Indians.⁵¹ In February 1848 the Kiowa told Indian Agent Thomas Fitzpatrick that they meant to terminate their alliance with the hostile Comanche and to join the peaceful Cheyenne on the Arkansas, as they did.⁵² The Comanche continued their attacks on travelers on the Santa Fe Trail in May and June 1848, and in July soldiers were again sent against them but ineffectively. By the middle of July their attacks ceased, and they apparently returned to their country to hunt. In October 1848 Fitzpatrick had a council with six hundred lodges of Apache, Comanche, Kiowa, and Arapaho at Big Timbers on the Arkansas, but only a small part of the Comanche nation was represented.⁵³ It was not until the middle of February 1849 that four delegates from different bands of Comanche arrived at Bent's Fort to make peace, which Fitzpatrick accepted;⁵⁴ but again a peace made with a few bands did not mean peace with the entire tribe, as plainsmen all knew.

Hostility of the Indians hastened the demise of Bent, St. Vrain and Company. In the summer of 1848 Ceran St. Vrain returned to St. Louis, settled up the company's debts, dissolved the firm, and went to live out his life as a contractor, merchant, and miller in New Mexico, leaving William Bent as the only remaining member of the original firm on the Arkansas. In July 1848 Bent took a license in his own name to trade with the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, Apache, and Kiowa, listing his traders as John Smith, Charles Vashen, Alexis Mason, John Hatcher, William Peterson, Andrew (black), E. Longlade, Alexis Duran, Blas Garcia, and M. Derosia. The next year at the same time he took out another license identical in every respect except that the employees were listed as John Smith, Charles Vashen, P. Carboni, Marsin, Charles McCue, J. Denison, R. Fisher, B. Riter, and J. Sanders.⁵⁵ He did not expect to trade

with the Comanche, nor were his old employees Kit Carson, Lucien Maxwell, Dick Wootton, Luke Murray, and Black Beaver among his traders.

It is highly unlikely that William Bent ever tried to trade at his Canadian River posts again. His licenses of 1848 and 1849 indicate no such intention, and Indian hostility would have made trade not only dangerous but also unprofitable. Nevertheless, David Lavender's *Bent's Fort* sets an arbitrary date of the winter of 1848-49 to reopen the fort, first, with Carson, Maxwell, Smith, Fisher, and Murray who limp back to Bent's Fort in their tattered moccasins; second, with Dick Wootton and his Pennsylvania wagons; and third, with William Bent himself, who blows up the fort after his oxen are stolen.⁵⁶

In reality, it was no time to be opening, reopening, or even maintaining a Plains Indian trading post. Posts which had existed as late as the fall of 1848—Fort Laramie, Pueblo, Hard-scrabble, and Bent's Fort—were all out of business by the fall of 1849. In August 1849 William Bent removed his property from Bent's Fort, blew up its magazine, and abandoned it, "it being considered by him impossible to hold possession of it against the united tribes of Indians hovering around it."⁵⁷ Afterwards Bent settled down quietly in Big Timbers, thirty-five miles east of his old fort, and spent the rest of his days trading with his wife's people, the Cheyenne.

In the meantime the trading posts on the Canadian decayed. General John P. Hatch remembered in later years that he had examined Adobe Walls in 1848, when "only the broken walls were to be seen and that there was much to indicate that the place long since had been abandoned."⁵⁸ A gold seeker of 1849 wrote that his party had gone up the Canadian until it came to "Bent's old semi-dilapidated fort."⁵⁹

The old buildings disappeared into campfires and the old adobe walls melted down in the wind and rain, but for another quarter-century the ruins had their uses. In 1864 Kit Carson kept his horses and wounded men within the weathered walls during battle.⁶⁰ By this time the ruins had acquired the name

⁵⁰ D. D. Mitchell to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, St. Louis, September 13, 1847, Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs, St. Louis Superintendency.

⁵¹ Barry, "Kansas before 1854," 31 (Summer 1965):140.

⁵² U.S. House, Thomas Fitzpatrick to Thomas H. Harvey, St. Louis, October 6, 1848, H. Exec. Doc. 1, 30th Cong., 2d sess., 1848, pp. 470-73.

⁵³ Barry, "Kansas before 1854," 31 (Summer 1965):140-73, 188.

⁵⁴ Report of Thomas Fitzpatrick, St. Louis, May 22, 1849, Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs, St. Louis Superintendency.

⁵⁵ *Register of Licensed Traders, 1847-1873*, Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives, courtesy of Jane F. Smith.

⁵⁶ Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, pp. 309-10.

⁵⁷ *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), October 2, 1849, quoted in Arthur Woodward, "Sidelights on Bent's Old Fort," *The Colorado Magazine* 33 (October 1956), p. 278.

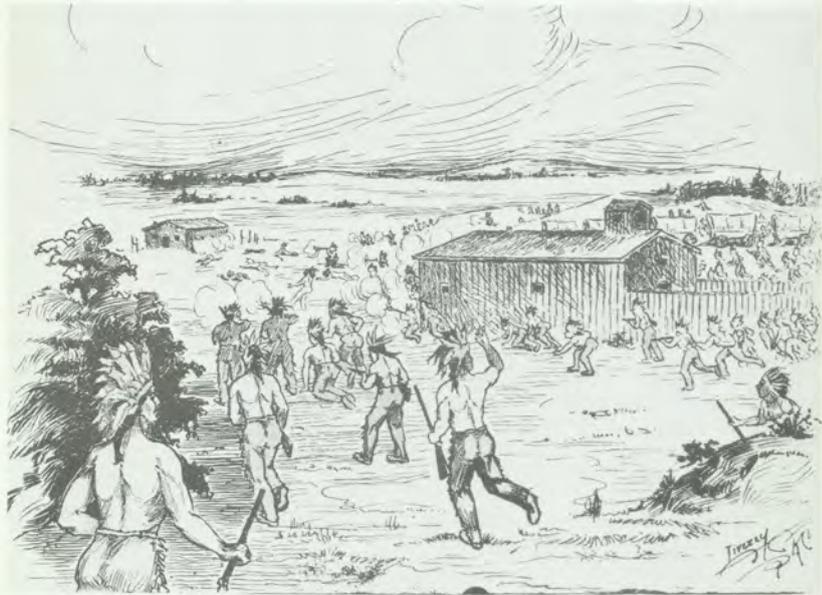
⁵⁸ Olive K. Dixon, *Life of "Billy" Dixon*, p. 132.

⁵⁹ *The Southern Shield* (Helena, Ark.) December 22, 1849, p. 2, quoted in Grant Foreman, *Marcy & the Gold Seekers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), p. 263.

⁶⁰ The best-documented account is C. B. McClure, ed., "The Battle of Adobe Walls, 1864," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* 21 (1948):18-65.



Artists' views of the "Battle of Adobe Walls" reflect historical confusion and artistic license.



"Adobe Walls," which later was adopted by a nearby town established in the spring of 1874 by buffalo hunters from Dodge City. They too had a fight with the Kiowa and Comanche, and thus the "Battle of Adobe Walls" came to refer to either of the two famous fights.⁶¹

⁶¹ Billy Dixon's account is still the most exciting (Olive K. Dixon, *Life of "Billy" Dixon*, pp. 131-83), but a good scholarly account is G. Derek West's

One of the buffalo hunters, Billy Dixon, returned to Adobe Walls in 1883 and filed claim on three sections of land on Bent Creek. There he married, raised a family, and lived for nearly twenty years in a house whose front yard encompassed the former site of the ruins. When the south wind swept the sand from the yard, the foundations of the old fort could be seen. Wrote Billy: "Whoever built those walls certainly built them well," a belated and anonymous tribute to the first white occupants of the Texas panhandle.⁶²

MRS. LECOMPTE, a resident of Colorado Springs, is the author of several articles in The Colorado Magazine and in The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West series.

⁶² "The Battle of Adobe Walls (1874)," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* 36 (1963):1-36.

⁶² Olive K. Dixon, *Life of "Billy" Dixon*, p. 241.