

"BENT'S FIRST STOCKADE — 1824-1826"

By CHARLES W. HURD



Charles W. Hurd

Charles W. Hurd was born in Ontario, Canada, Sept. 23, 1876, and lived on a farm in South Dakota for fifteen years. He attended Beloit, Wisconsin, College Academy and then came to Colorado to attend Colorado College from which he graduated in 1902.

After forty-three years with the Sante Fe R.R. he retired and devoted his time to the history of the Arkansas Valley.

His research and study have resulted in two published pamphlets: "Boggsville, Cradle of the Colorado Cattle Industry" and "Bent's Stockade."

A westerner of the "hearty type" he has climbed Pikes Peak fifteen times, most recently the summer of 1959.

My story of Bent Brothers and their doings is not, strictly speaking, a family affair. It's a tale of the times in which they lived, a century and a half ago.

Bent Brothers built a number of Forts and Trading Posts, here and there in what is now Colorado. The

first of these was not much more than a stockade and was located some distance northwest of the present site of Pueblo. The builders were proud of their achievement and called it their Fort. I have chosen this Fort as a pivot point for my talk this evening, and in what I have to say, William W. Bent is the leading figure. He was to the West what Daniel Boone was to Kentucky. He came from Missouri as a boy of fifteen years, and in the end, "he showed the world." Associated with him were three brothers, Charles, Robert and George; also two Frenchmen, Ceran St Vrain and his brother Marceline.

An important chapter in the lives of these men began in the year 1824. That was the year they left their home in St. Louis, broke the ties of civilization and started out on their great adventure.

At that time, St. Louis was not more than a village but it was recognized as a coming city. The Mississippi was conceded to be the boundary line between the known and the unknown world. All beyond was wilderness, the haunts of savages. The river has been accepted as nature's barrier to the westward movement of the English speaking people.

All west of the Mississippi was foreign territory. First the Spanish claimed it. They sold to the French; but the Indians were in possession and claimed it as theirs by right of occupancy and as their hereditary domain for all time.

Furthermore, prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century, it did not seem that the United States would ever have any need for the vast territory west of the Mississippi. At

that time there was a movement of population westward from the eastern seaboard, but their world was wide, extending from the Great Lakes south to the Gulf. There was room for all. In 1789 Thomas Jefferson made the statement that it would be a thousand years before the country would be thickly settled as far west as the Mississippi.

The ancestors of the Bents came from England, where they lived in county Hantz. We first learn of them at Boston in 1773, when the father, Silas Bent, the grandfather of our Bent Brothers, boarded three English ships one night, with a gang of patriots, and dumped the cargoes of tea into Boston harbor, to show the English that Americans were not going to pay any import duties.

And that's not the end of the story, The English took up the challenge, to show the rebels that if they were going to be good Englishmen, they would have to obey English laws and customs. Continued antagonisms led to the Revolutionary War and to the Declaration of Independence.

Times were tough in the post war years, money was scarce, credit was poor and there was but little business. People were discouraged.

Then men began looking around for better locations, with conditions more propitious. A few brave spirits climbed over the mountains, the Alleghanies, to see what was on the other side. Daniel Boone was one of them. He kept on going until he got away west, into what we call Kentucky. Then he went back home after his family. He told of the wonder of the country he had seen, with its grand prospects, rich soil, great forests and many rivers.

Daniel Boone's tales of his adventures created a lot of excitement. Many families packed their belongings and headed over the mountains

in search of choice locations for homes. The movement picked up in numbers until it seemed that most of the Atlantic area was going to be deserted.

In 1804 a family arrived in St. Louis that was destined to have leading parts in important doings of their time, particularly in the West. Silas Bent, the father, was a man of large affairs. His wife Martha, was a wonderful woman. Their family grew until they had eleven children, seven boys and four girls. They had arrived in St. Louis at an opportune time. The Louisiana Purchase was an accomplished fact. There was much excitement about the newly acquired territory. The fur trade was getting started in a big way. Opportunity was knocking at every door.

Silas Bent soon won a reputation for his ability and for his accomplishments. He was the first District Judge of St. Louis. His success in that office led to his appointment as Judge of the Superior Court of the Territory. He became Deputy Surveyor for Louisiana Territory.

Charles was the oldest of the children. He was born in 1899. Silas Jr. was the youngest. One of the girls married Lilburn Boggs who became Governor of Missouri. He became the father of Thomas Boggs who established the Boggsville settlement, only two miles out of Las Animas. Silas, the younger, became known around the world. He was with Commodore Perry in 1853, on a mission to Japan, the exclusive nation. When their war-ships steamed into Tokyo, belching forth heavy black smoke, the people were amazed. They had never seen the like before. Perry and his officers went ashore and shook hands all around. There they tarried for a time and made so many friends that the Japanese people opened their doors to them and to all the outside

world, in trade relations and in friendly overtures.

In later years this youngest member of the Bent family gave his time to the study of ocean currents. He charted the Gulf Stream and the Japan Stream through their courses.

At an early age the boy, Charles, was caught up in the excitement of the times. When the Lewis and Clark expedition returned from the Pacific in 1806, Charles was only seven years old. On one occasion, Messrs Lewis and Clark were being entertained at the Silas Bent home. As these men told of their experiences, talked about the Indians and described the wonders of the country they had traveled, Charles sat on the floor with his eyes and his ears wide open, not missing a single word. His career was fixed by that event. As soon as he would get to be a man he would go out West. He would be a trapper.

It is known that Charles Bent was a member of the Ashley expedition in its early stages. History does not appear to state why, or when, he quit. On his return to St. Louis, he and his brother William, who were always great pals, talked things over. They planned a trapping expedition of their own. They would go as soon as they could. William was then a bit young for such a strenuous undertaking. They had better wait a year. Then Charles went East to study at West Point and get some military training.

The home of the Bents in St. Louis was a substantial affair, made of stone and on the bank of the Mississippi. There was a good barn and sheds for horses and cows. There was plenty of acres too and great stacks of wood for winter fire. It looked like a large farm yard at that time, but now the location is in the heart of the city and the old house is gone.

Any records that I have been able

to find do not give us much information about the educational facilities of St. Louis at the time of which I speak. Probably attendance was not compulsory. Mrs. Bent was too busy to give much help beyond the A.B.C. period. Her children arrived, with remarkable regularity, one every two years. Even Charles, the first born, appears to have been short changed in number of school years. His letters are faulty. William's writing is worse. Perhaps he didn't have much chance to go to school, or did not care to. When he was really too young to leave home, we find him trapping with his brother Charles on the Missouri among the Sioux Indians. That was life. The great out-of-doors was all the school he wanted. The west was calling.

Then came the day for which Charles and William had long been planning. Getting away from home was not easy for the two boys. The father insisted that William was too young, and the mother could not part with her boy. The father admitted that Charlie needed him and finally gave his consent. The mother buried her sorrow in her bosom. The venture never did have her consent. Her wail of woe still rings in our ears. "Well, I hope that the whole family doesn't decide to go. I like it here, We've already turned our faces westward three times since our marriage. I refuse to cross the river."

Leaving home was equally hard for the two young men. It was a big event in their lives, a "Red Letter Day." Yet they were courageous and, in parting, offered words of cheer. "We're going West and we'll make you proud of us. We'll never forget that we are Bents."

Many men have attempted to write the story of Bent Brothers in the West and the stories are all different. The factual story that one might be able

to write would not be continuous. There are many breaks between the known facts. On a great many points the matter treated are highly controversial. Some early writers wrote of Bents' expedition into the West without knowing much about it. They were widely quoted. Others come in with contradictions. A hundred years have passed and some of the disputed points are not yet settled. We do not have definite information on the make-up of the Bent party. What arrangements they had with The American Fur company we do not know. Bent Brothers may have been working for a fixed salary. It is more likely that they were subsidized by the fur company.

There is every evidence that the Bents had about twenty or twenty-five men with them and they probably had as many as fifty horses and mules. They carried a supply of trinkets for trade with the Indians. Their experience as trappers on the Missouri would be valuable in preparing for their new venture.

On leaving the banks of the Missouri, about where Kansas City now stands, the expedition headed due west and would follow the Arkansas when they reached it, a few hundred miles further on.

It's plain to be seen why they were headed for the upper regions of the Arkansas. The Managers of the American Fur Company well understood that the Mississippi, the Missouri and the Platte had already been worked. General Ashley and the St. Louis Fur Company, of which Mona Lisa, a Spaniard, was head, had held to the north country, because of its cool waters and the finer furs. The Arkansas was but little known. It would be virgin territory for trappers and should be a rich feeder for the ware houses at St. Louis. It was important for them to send this expedition

under Bent Brothers, into the territory, to scout the country and hold it against all competitors.

The expedition started out in the spring of 1824. Bent Bros. knew, in a general way, the route they would take but they hardly knew where they were going. They would take care of that when they got there. They would locate somewhere in the mountains. All they knew about the country was what had come to them from Lieutenant Pike's trip in 1806 and from Major Stephen H. Long in 1820.

When these men left the Missouri, they left civilization behind them. There were no trails and no maps. They were lost to the world, but that was to their liking. Someone was smart in the planning. John Jacob Astor's foresight was as good as his hindsight. No doubt he anticipated that a wealth of furs could be gathered from the waters of the Rocky Mountain region, by the men who got there first.

We don't know where the young prospectors first made camp and we don't need to worry about that. Probably they pulled stakes frequently in the first two years, as that was a part of the game. We can be sure however that they didn't make any prolonged stops until they got to the mountains. It's a safe bet that from the time they got their first view of Pikes Peak, and some of the high ones, while still far out on the plains, they would not be satisfied until they got there.

In my mind's eye I see them stopping here and there, attracted by new wonders and other spots strangely beautiful. Probably they would be loathe to leave the Arkansas that had been their line of travel for a couple of months. Its tumbling waters would lead them on and on, to the heart of the Rockies, but they dare not

follow. They had a definite mission. They were hunting for the best of the furbearing territory.

For the next two years, the Bents were somewhere in the hills, and pretty much out of sight. We can only follow them afar off. But little information has come down to us regarding their daily doings. A few historians have dealt lightly with this period and others have entirely ignored it. Still others have denied that the Bents were in the country at that time. In truth, these men do not seem to have left any land-marks that would enable us to trace their ramblings of the first two years in the mountains. There are some bits of masonry in the Beaver Creek country that have never been explained. We have them in mind for further study.

For the first two years, the men were doing some trapping and hunting but the Bent Brothers mainly interested in scouting the country, charting its physical features and getting acquainted with the Indians. These were mostly Utes, Cheyennes and Arapahoes. The Utes were mountain Indians while the others occupied the plains.

Contrary to expectations, the Bents did not have much contact with the Indians during the first few months. The Indians surely knew of the presence of the white men in their country. From safe distances they surely spied on the white man's camp but they were not going to venture too close. By nature the Indian was a cautious individual and full of curiosity. His natural impulse was to not get too close to anything he couldn't understand.

Then Charlie Bent decided that if the Indians were not coming to him, he would go to the Indians. Of necessity, the good-will and co-operation of the Indians was of first importance, if the fur business was

going to be a success. In later years, when the Bents had many regular trappers in the field, the Indians brought in more furs than did all the others.

Both of the Bents had pleasing personalities and made friends easily. The Indians responded to this spirit of good-will.

Hither Came Ceran St Vrain

Sometime late in 1826 Ceran St Vrain came over from Taos, via the San Luis Valley. His wagons were loaded with furs for St. Louis. The Bents put on what they had baled and ready to go. That seems to have been their first shipment to the home market. St Vrain returned next year, bringing a fresh supply of goods from St Louis for the Mexican trade. There is strong evidence to show that the two younger Bent boys, Robert and George, aged 13 and 15 years respectfully, accompanied St Vrain from St Louis to join their brothers Charles and William. In later years George insisted that he helped build the stockade.

We do not have knowldege of any relationship, in business or otherwise, between Ceran StVrain and the Bents, prior to 1826. Beginning at that time, a close friendship existed between them. A partnership was formed under the firm name of Bent Brothers and StVrain. This title first appears in the story of Bent Brothers for the year 1826. The transactions of this firm covered a wide range of territory that reached north to the south Platte and south to Santa Fe.

When the Bents had been in the West two years, it was time to take account of their operations and decide whether or not the plus signs in support of the business exceeded the minus signs. Would the record of their experiences be favorable? That was the purpose for which they came. Their backers were men of large in-

terests and were awaiting the verdict. Much was at stake.

For several reasons, the year 1826 has been spoken by writers as "A Red Letter in the Fur Trade." It was a time of expansion. The opening of the Santa Fe Trail gave access to a vast new territory in the southwest; and first explorations in the northwest gave promise of big business in furs. Bent Brothers were alert to the situation. They decided to establish a regular Trading Post, prepare for an increase in business, and hold the territory.

A century and a third has passed since Bent Brothers entered the territory. Historians have known of the existence of a Trading Post somewhere at the mouth of the Fountain but they have never been able to find it.

In Vol. I of Frank Hall's History of Colorado we read that in 1826 Bent Brothers and Ceran StVrain erected a stockade on the north bank of the Arkansas, about mid-way between the present site of Pueblo and Canon City. The same story, with slight variations, appears in several other Colorado Histories and in a dozen other publications.

The question arises as to why no one, in all these years, has been able to pin-point the location of this structure known as "Bents' First Stockade." Possibly none took the trouble to investigate, so that they might elaborate on the subject. Most writers have been content to copy from one another and let it go at that. A few cleverly evaded the subject, just failing to mention what they couldn't explain.

Some others have had the audacity to deny the whole story, saying that it just couldn't be so. Probably most of the confusion stemmed from the statements in Colorado Histories that the stockade was located on the north

bank of the Arkansas. Of course if they searched that area none ever found it.

Many years ago I became interested in the exploits of Bent Brothers in Colorado and I took it upon myself to investigate the setting of the Stockade story. I was somewhat familiar with the country between Pueblo and Canon City, having traveled it many times by train, bus and auto, over the old highway and the new. I could find likely spots for a stockade but never could see any ruins.

My quest for the facts in the case went on for years. I delved around in seats of learning far and near. I perused musty books, dusty newspapers, even searching through unlikely shelves and dark corners. The subject was elusive but there was always the hope that someone had written something about it and I might be able to find it.

Finally, failing to find the story I wanted in print, I took to the field in search of the ruins of the old Stockade. I was a hiker and a mountain climber. What more thrilling outing would a man want? I got on the bus at Pueblo. The sign of the window read Canon City. I asked the driver to let me off at Beaver Creek. Beaver in the olden days was a lively place where everybody stopped for rest and to lunch in the "Half Way House." The scenery was grand and the water was fine.

I covered the ground afoot in all directions. I thought that surely someone in the neighborhood would be able to tell me something about Bent Brothers and their Stockade; but no one knew anything about either. In my rambles I found some interesting sights. There were the elaborate foundations of old ranch headquarters that had been ruined in the flood of 1921. On a nearby hill was an abandoned burial ground

that was sad to behold. In other places I was able to follow sections of the mountain branch of the old Santa Fe Trail, where the ruts were deep.

Failing to find any prospects of success close to the river, I left old highway 50 and went about five miles inward to the farming area, Penrose and Glendale. I questioned everyone I met or could find. Not a single person could give me any information. Most of them were co-operative, suggesting that I call on so and so as they had been in the country longer and knew more about it.

I went home, thinking that perhaps the Historians had been right. Perhaps they did build on the north bank of the river and the floods have washed away the ruins or covered them up.

In a short time, I got a letter from a lady in the country. She complained that I had been in her country, calling on her neighbors but had failed to call on her. In the same letter she told me that several years previous she had found some old ruins in the country, which she couldn't understand and neither could anyone else. She knew that I was hunting for something and she surmised that what she had found, might be what I was looking for. She asked me to come up and see. I promised to do so. Time went on. I got another letter, with a drawing of the ruins she had discovered. Her drawing and my vision of what I expected to find matched very well. That led to our getting together on a visit to the site.

My study of Forts, Trading Posts and Stockades had given me a good idea of what to look for. When I reached the site, there it was, just as I had expected it to be, except that the Stockade was larger and had four sections. Inside were the remains of three stone houses. One of them had

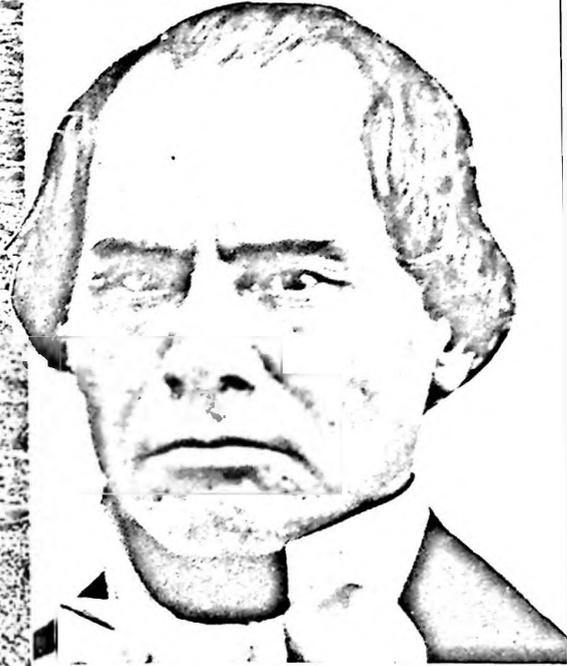
a good fireplace; probably each of them had one but they didn't show it. The whole thing was much more elaborate than I had anticipated. Only the stumps remained of the posts that made up the stockade. The early settlers probably cut them off for use in their fences. The stumps were of good size, set tightly together, practically in two rows making a tight fence of double strength. The builders had dug a trench in the disintegrated rock, then set the posts deep and wedged them fast with rock. The stumps are of cedar and well preserved. Most of the stumps appear to be missing, as the result of a fire, but I can scrape off the soil and find the burned ends. I sat down to feast my eyes on the ruins, the immediate surroundings, the vale in front of me and the hills. As I pondered, it became clear to me that the site was well chosen. It was a choice spot. Back of me about a hundred yards was the creek, with its clear water running through a rocky bed that had been cut deep in the side of the hill. In front of me was the grass land that would be ample for all needs. It is said to have been wild-horse country in the early days.

Nature had been lavish with her gifts in this little glen, providing wood and water, fish and fodder, game and building material. It all added up to a near paradise for a man with traps and a gun. There was beauty everywhere. It was romance land. Freedom was in the air. There was something about the setting that was good for a man's soul. It was good to be there.

The Indians added color to the scene. The charm of their primitive existence loomed large and matched the mountains. They were a rugged race of men. There were the stable Utes, the more aristocratic Arapahoes and the fighting Cheyennes; all of

The Bent Brothers and Their Old Stockade

The Bent Brothers and their old stockade erected 1824.



Upper left: Remains of Bent's "Old Stockade" located on Turkey Creek SE of Colorado Springs.

Upper right: William Bent

Lower left: Charles Bent

Lower right: Ruins of one of the old stone buildings on site of stockade grounds.

Photos taken by Charles W. Hurd, author of this paper on Bent's old Stockade. Charles Bent picture taken from one owned by Bent Masonic Lodge No. 2, Taos, N. M. William Bent photo from State Historical Society of Colorado.

them dignified and of dauntless courage.

The little lady of the hills, who discovered these ruins, is deserving of great credit for her persistence in quest of the story hidden there. Others came and saw them too, but lightly passed them by. My friend held steadfast to the hope that someday someone would come up with the information that would solve the mystery. These stumps and these stones surely stood for something and it would be something big.

Another lady I know who was like-minded too; Mrs. Daisy Malone, late of Avondale Colorado. Her historical sketches frequently appeared in the Sunday Chieftain of Pueblo. Under date of April 26, 1963 she wrote, "At the head of Turkey Creek the small stone forts are an unsolved mystery. Did pre-historic people build them or are they part of the early Spanish and Indian troubles?"

These two ladies never met. Neither of them knew of the others existence but the two of them had, independently, made the same discovery. They had the same heart's desire for the answer that no one knew.

In 1828 Bent Brothers abandoned their Fort. We do not have all the answers as to the reasons for their coming and their going. It seems likely that one of the reasons for building in the hills instead of near the river was to avoid the danger of a too close contact with Indian warriors. The Utes lived in the Mountains. On the plains were the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. The mountain Indians were hereditary enemies of those on the plains. The Ute trail followed the north bank of the Arkansas. It was used by the Utes on their frequent excursions to the plains to hunt buffalo and gather scalps.

The foot hills were not occupied

by any tribe, but the area was "no man's land" and it was a dangerous place to be. The Bents found that out after a period of years.

The history of Bent Brothers and their doings through subsequent years is better known. These men achieved fame, fortune and high honors. Fort Bent, twelve miles west of Las Animas, was the greatest institution of the kind in the West. It was visited by travelers on the trail, by men in all walks of life, and by Indians all.

After leaving the Stockade, Charles Bent spent most of his time at Santa Fe, where he became the first Governor of New Mexico, under United States rule. He ruled wisely and well but he came to his death at Taos in January 1847 in a Mexican and Indian uprising.

William Bent became the leader in the operation of Fort Bent as a Trading Post and he was clever at it. He married among the Indians and that made him one of them. His wife was Owl Woman, the daughter of the Cheyenne Chief. After Mr. Bent's marriage, all the Cheyennes were his customers and all other Indians were his friends. He became a man of great influence among them.

Because of the influence that Mr. Bent had with the Indians, the government officials at Washington appointed him as Indian Agent. He resigned from that position in 1859 and retired to his ranch on the Purgatoire, two miles east of Las Animas. There he died April 19, 1869. He was buried on the ranch. His body was moved to the Las Animas cemetery some time later.

The years following Mr. Bent's retirement brought the culmination of Indian hostilities and it is likely that he went to his slumbers in great discouragement. It had always been his hope that the government and the Indians might settle their differences

peacefully and that the Indians might not be deprived of their lands. His death came at the darkest hour in Indian history. He probably felt that life's labors had been lost and that his years had been unfruitful.

It remains the task of someone, who may come after, to draw aside the curtain that shades the past, take account of the one who played well his part and give credit to his deeds.

Fort Bent
Sept. 1, 1848

Mr. C. St. Vrain.

On my arrival at this place I found things in a very bad condition. Mr. Frain was still here. Mr. Hamilton who from all accounts was worse than Frain. Between them they have made waste and destroyed a good deal of property and no one knows what's become of it. He hindered every person that came along at a gallery and would let them do nothing. If they done any trouble he would pay them extra. I sent Frain off. It was terrible how things were being carried on here this summer. Barnum took what whiskey there was left and nacked the head in the barrels and throve it ought. Hatcher gave me the money he collected from Gilpin's Command. I have paid F. Smith, Barnum, Garnia, and others ought of it. Gilpin requested me to send his account. I send to him also the one enclosed to you. Up to this date the warehouse is still in the use of the U.S. They take their stock this morning from here.

Yours,
Wm. Bent.

(This letter carried to C. St. Vrain, St. Louis, Mo. to R. W. Camble. No Postage. Copied from the original letter in the Blair Collection, Manuscript Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

