

## Furs and Forts of the Rocky Mountain West

A. J. FYNN\*

"The westward moving frontier of the American people is beyond all doubt the most interesting subject that American history presents. Here is written the fullness of American energy, its daring resourcefulness and ambition; here the rate of national growth registers itself in more telling figures than mere statistics of population; here, with rifle, axe and plough; with canoe, bullskin boat, and pack-horse, the man of backwoods and plain shapes the national dream of empire into the sturdy stuff of trading-post and ranch and farm."

Whether one would readily accede to the statement above in its entirety, or whether one would choose to make modifications in the way of either strengthening or weakening it, is something worthy of reflection; but there can be no doubt in the mind of any student of our country's history that the elements necessary to be crowded into the great western picture of North American nation-making, to give it completeness, are far more numerous and of greater import than a casual observer would suspect. In the great Book of Time, the story of the United States comprises only a page, but on that page a proportionally large space must be given to the unparalleled flood-tide of humanity sweeping westward in a moment of time, so to speak, from the most famous river of the North American continent to the world's greatest ocean.

The first fifty years of the nineteenth century witnessed the great migratory movement over the Appalachians. Like the Helvetians of old, the cis-Alleghenians felt their territories to be too narrow. On the other side of the mountains was an immense region seemingly calling across its borders to the restless and ambitious colonizers to push westward the formidable natives, to build homes, to utilize the watercourses, to found cities and to establish states. To this wide strip of frontier land came the enterprising longshoremen from the western Atlantic. Within those outlying forests wandered, hunted, fought, settled, and labored the Boones, Clarks, Logans, Robertsons, and Lincolns. The whole movement was rapid. Like the great Roman, these men "came, saw, and conquered." The Mississippi River was reached and crossed. The bottom lands along its western bank became changed like magic. Then the grasses of the rich prairie beyond beckoned the settler and his family.

\*Among the papers left by the late Dr. Fynn was this article, one of the last written by him. Dr. Fynn had served faithfully and with distinction upon the Board of Directors of the State Historical Society for a number of years preceding his death on Dec. 30, 1930.—Ed.

<sup>1</sup>E. C. Semple, *American History and Its Geographic Conditions*, 178.



It may not be easy at first to observe, in this great rapidity of action and unavoidable turmoil of migration, a kind of pause here in the movement, or, at least, a change in the sort of activity, in this continent-crossing; but it was nevertheless a potent reality. The kind of life and manner of settling, which had been brought over the Eastern mountains, was not so different in character from that which had been going on since the days of John Smith on the James or the Pilgrims at Plymouth. Such migration, inland, from the seaboard to the Missouri River, resembled the sweeping tide of an ocean, reaching momentarily farther and farther; but, in character remaining simply an extension of a homogeneous mass. At the eastern borderline of the plains the settler paused, looking toward the setting sun into the unattractive westland, but the dangers to settlements in those hostile regions and the doubtfulness of success upon those uninviting lands held back him and his kindred, for which reason the advancing civilization of the fifty former years was halted.

So, between the rich prairie land of the Mississippi-Missouri country and the distant rectilinear coast of the Pacific, was a zone, continental in size, destined for an exceptional future.

Let it not be supposed that the plains, mountains, plateaus, parks and river valleys were entirely unenlivened by sound of man or beast, during those long pre-settlement years. Everywhere the wilderness had resounded with barbaric human outeries and unrestricted turbulent animal discordance. The call of the wild was constantly on the air.

The Louisiana Purchase territory, from the very first, was a source of much discussion by everybody, from presidents to plebeians. Its eastern portion, as already noticed, was sought and settled in days immediately following the land transfer, but its western part, an irregular division reaching over plains to mountain peaks, stood barren of settlements and was but slightly known. The old frontier stood back on the prairies and bottomlands along the two great southward flowing rivers. New frontiers were destined to be established, but not simply to consist of a pushing forward of old frontiers. They were to have their origins in isolated districts on the Pacific and along the Rockies.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition had a tremendous influence in leading to a better understanding of the mountain regions. It was very instrumental in creating upon the western wilds an industry which for many years was pursued with no lack of interest, and characterized by a body of human beings, diversified and unrivaled elsewhere on the continent.

The fur industry had been pushed by Frenchmen and Englishmen northward to Hudson Bay, westward overland to the

Pacific, and southward on the Mississippi; and, as is well known, St. Louis became the incomparable mart for the transaction of big business extending far away into the Rocky Mountain region.

A string of traders reached from this frontier commercial center westward to the sources of the largest rivers and interwinding streams, along which the solitary trapper pursued his lonely and dangerous way. While congress was everlastingly discussing the nature and resources of the Purchase, its relation to slavery and kindred subjects; while Texas was passing through its various vicissitudes; while the great hosts of settlers were spreading over the Mississippi lowlands and moving onward upon the gently ascending prairies; the trappers and hunters of the Rockies were gaining knowledge of those wild lands—first-hand knowledge, destined to be of inestimable value to the builders of highways and railroads, to miners, engineers, scientists, and travelers of the approaching years.

The fur trade has been called the oldest industry in the world, extending back to the days of the cave man, who, among the cliffs and ledges, found a ready-made home but not ready-made clothing. The little quadrupeds of North America, especially the beavers, drew huntsmen and trappers up the banks of the St. Lawrence to the Great Lakes, from them to the source waters of the Mississippi, and on, on, over flat lands, valleys and mountains from the Father of Waters to the father of oceans.

Several hundred years ago, in the wild buccaneer pre-Columbian days, Europe had begun to send out her fur-trading expeditions into the unsettled, animal-abounding regions of the Old World, and to establish fur-trading centers in many of the larger towns. Companies were formed, agencies were established, and fairs were held to promote the industry. Royalty and aristocracy displayed wonderfully handsome and costly robes, and fashions in the wearing of this or that animal skin tyrannized society.

Transferred to American soil as soon as the northern nations became established, the business grew to immense proportions. Supply and demand in this New World played leapfrog to gratify the votaries of fashion in the Old. On the northern part of the continent little trading stations grew up like magic; and many an important city, as, for instance, Albany or St. Louis, owes its origin and early prosperity to this business. Bargainings on a large scale were consummated with skins as a medium of exchange. The Indian was always an important factor in every branch of the industry, from trap to trading vessel.

In 1670 the famous Hudson's Bay Company came into existence. Its employes overran thousands of square miles of northern lands bordering on the oceans and smaller water bodies. On its



semi-isolated, far-extended, frozen territory its comparatively scanty and widely-scattered population established laws, imposed penalties, built forts, held in possession ships and other agencies of transportation, with that independence which naturally grows up under exceptional physical conditions in detached and uninhabited regions. The whole enterprise was of a strikingly monopolistic nature. There were, however, numerous conflicts with the French, especially on the southern rim of this vast area. The disputed intervening strips of territory, after scores of years of contentions between the rival nations, became undisputed possessions of the British, following the Treaty of Utrecht, in 1713. For the fifty following years, to the end of the French and Indian War, when the English came into possession of all Canada, the great Company moved along in peace and prosperity. Its output was large, numbering thirty or forty thousand skins annually; and the dividends were immense.

Such prosperity must naturally invite contestation. Individuals and small business organizations entered the fields here and there. The Northwest Fur Company, organized and holding possession of lands on the western coasts whose rivers poured into the northern Pacific, became a bitter rival for about thirty years, but was finally merged with its more powerful opponent. The interesting and enterprising Mackinaw Company held the trade of the Great Lakes.

In 1808 John Jacob Astor established the American Fur Company (subsequently changed to the Pacific Fur Company) in the Oregon country, with the intention of forming a line of fur posts across the continent, with a settlement at the mouth of the Columbia as a shipping point for vessels, to and from China and Japan. In the midst of very flattering prospects, Astor's resident partner on the coast rashly sold out the business to the Northwest Company, on the ground that the British, with whom the United States was then at war (1813), would immediately take possession of it. Astor, from that time on, confined his extensive fur business principally to cis-Rocky Mountain territory.

The adaptability of that great plain and mountain country for the success of such activity was self-evident. The idea could naturally be an inheritance from the East. The settlers along the Atlantic seaboard, from the first, carried on a fur trade as long as there were animals enough to make it profitable. The Jamestown Colony did an important business in that line along the Potomac and Susquehanna. In the very beginning of Dutch colonization it received paramount attention on the Hudson. Northward, on the New England streams, it has continually flour-

ished, proportional, of course, to the limited area. In Canada, as is well known, it was the chief contributor to the Frenchman's livelihood.

Abandoning the profitless over-trapped coast streams in due time, the fur-hunters pushed upward along the interior water-courses. Ever on the lookout for favorable fields, they passed farther and farther toward the setting sun. Out upon the newly acquired Louisiana Territory they spread, where fur-gathering became the all-prevailing pursuit.<sup>2</sup> There, at the sources of the Mississippi, Missouri, Platte, Arkansas, and scores of important lesser streams, with their network of fur-abounding branches, altogether interlacing thousands of square miles of territory; and down on the plains, with their millions of wild bisons, peltries and hides were obtained, tied into bundles, carried to the waterways, placed in boats, and floated down streams to their destination.

Aside from the abundance of animals of all kinds, from mink and beaver to bear and buffalo, offering to the fortune-hunter every degree of profit, excitement, and danger, the surface of the land, unimpeded for travel upon the major portion of the region, favored the advent and efforts of such individuals as trappers and hunters.

It was not a country of jungles and swamps. There were elevations, forests, and fordable streams. To climb over the elevations was laborious, but the difficulties were greatly mitigated because traveling, in a general way, was along the streams flowing through the smoother canyons, valleys, and passes. There were some entangling bushes along the brooks; but the trees on the uplands were generally conifers, and, except in a few richly wooded places, were thinly scattered, resembling groves rather than typical forests. The streams could usually be crossed without great difficulty. The beds, as noted elsewhere, were dry in many places at certain times of year. In high-water seasons the rivers were inestimably useful as means of transportation.

These streams and rivers east of the Great Divide, along which the hunters and trappers pursued their lonely and dangerous ways, not only flowed out over the lands toward almost every point of the compass, but, what is of special significance, converged to an exceedingly important vantage point in the Mississippi Valley. Here St. Louis was established, just before the Revolutionary War. Men and nature united to make it a fur center. The founders were Frenchmen, adepts in fur business.

<sup>2</sup>Long after the United States acquired Louisiana, three-fourths of its population were hunters and boatmen, while all derived their livelihood from the trade in furs.—J. B. McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States*, IV, 470.



The site was remarkably favorable for such an enterprise. Rivers for more than a thousand miles in length, from mouth to mountains, flowing over a gentle incline with considerable celerity on account of starting from a mile-high elevation even east of the foothills, carried, simply by force of gravitation, great cargoes of delicate furs and heavy hides down to this unrivaled mart of the midwest. From here river boats and ocean vessels bore the raw goods to tanneries and garment-makers scattered over a very extended country on two continents. Business was brisk. Good prices created heavy demands. The streams alive with cargoes fascinated and captured swarms of traders and trappers who pushed upward along the waters of the Osage, Kansas, Arkansas, Red, and then overland to the more remote and rugged regions of the Missouri and Yellowstone.

The great Hudson's Bay, the Northwest, and the Pacific fur companies, as we have seen, covered the great snow-abounding lands of the farther north. Along with the increase of western fur activities smaller organizations sprang up here and there, which added very much to the general business. The central place of interest, however, continued to be St. Louis. It became the Montreal of the Mississippi. Back in 1805, before the organization of the Astor Company, in that city the Missouri Fur Company had been created; and from that neighborhood a picturesque heterogeneity of hunter, trapper, trader, agent, courier, boatman, and nondescript had spread out toward the northern Rocky Mountains.

Along the many watercourses, varying in size from the great Missouri down to the intermittent rivulets, those nomads with rifle and axe broke the silence of the solitudes and aroused the curiosity, and, in later times, the anger of the ever-watchful natives.

Some three years after the organization of the Missouri Fur Company, a branch office of Astor's famous company—immortalized by Washington Irving—was established, as already referred to, and threw its lines of business into the northlands, especially those inclosing the wild streams whose waters find their way into the Missouri. Contemporaneously with this, the American Fur Company, in which Colorado people might be especially interested, began that tremendous business which demanded the establishment of trading posts over a large, almost indefinable area.

As a matter of historical interest in this connection, it should be noticed that the Missouri Fur Company was a name almost synonymous with that of Manuel Lisa, and recognition is due him among the other great traders of the West, if for no other reason

than because he was a Spaniard whose people, as history has reiterated and reiterated, were not attracted to the fur trade as were the French. Back before the beginning of the nineteenth century, while his people still held possession of Louisiana, he had become interested in the fur business, and secured the exclusive right of trade with the Osage Indians on their river. His blood doubtless helped him to gain that privilege, and also gave him notable advantages in dealing with those western tribes. He went up the Missouri, in 1807, built a post on the Bighorn, returned to St. Louis, spent several years in organizing and reorganizing the industry, and in closely supervising this great pioneer project, extending finally into the great Northwest.

For a score of years this notable man, whom Chittenden classes as "the most active and indefatigable trader that St. Louis ever produced,"<sup>3</sup> passed up and down the streams, endured countless hardships; succeeded remarkably in keeping the Indians peaceable during the War of 1812, when British agents were busy trying to incite the various tribes to insurrections; made a notable attempt to reach William Price Hunt of the Astorian Company on Hunt's famous overland journey, that the fur business in the West might be better conducted; built a fortification, Fort Lisa, on almost the exact present site of Omaha; was constantly engaged in bitter embroilments with other traders jealous of his success; endured the hardships of traveling up and down the rough Missouri at least a dozen times; and, according to Chittenden, made through those hostile lands, journeys which combined would reach farther than the distance around the earth. The erection of a line of forts and permanent headquarters was inestimably valuable in making exploration safe and convenient in those danger-abounding regions. The energies of this man contributed incalculably to more intelligent information regarding the character and conditions of lands along the northern and eastern sections of the present state of Colorado.

Space is lacking, and the purpose of this article does not demand a minute and extensive presentation of that half century of semi-barbaric life in those trans-Mississippian wilds. The organization, reorganization, and disorganization of almost innumerable fur companies, large and small, stable and unstable, constituted an important part in the great program of events, but only a glance can expediently be given to those multiform agencies that contributed so generously to the great work of preparing for a civilization in the solitudes of the far West.

There had been from the first years of the century a few estrays and wanderers of a nondescript nature who had traveled

<sup>3</sup>H. M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, I, 129.



through these Rocky Mountain regions with their eyes on the natural fur-bearing animals of the region, but it was not until about the year 1820, when the Long expedition had passed over the country, that the trappers and traders became an important and more or less permanent factor in the region now comprising the State of Colorado. Trails leading from the northeast up the Platte River to its extended and widely separated source streams among the mountains, up the Arkansas from the southeast to its numerous fountain tributaries fed by the eternal snows of the Great Divide, up the Rio Grande from the south (after the establishment of the Santa Fe Trail had awakened the hardy, enterprising adventurers of that region to the possibilities of fruitful far lands to the north), leading through enticing nature-made passageways—all converged within what is now Colorado. From very remote and widely separated regions came that heterogeneity of human species which was destined, in the years to come, to play such an important part in giving to this region that prestige which, afterwards, it was to gain as a fur-producing district.

The experiences of William H. Ashley and Jedediah S. Smith in their great work of exploration, 1822-1829, and the discovery of a great central route to the Pacific were of special significance, not only on account of the geographical knowledge obtained but because their passage extended through the northeastern portion of Colorado. The whole enterprise was associated with men whose names were famous in early Colorado history. These leaders were not only explorers but noted fur traders. Ashley, with Andrew Henry, another distinguished trader, was the founder of what became the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. With these men were united, in one capacity or another, many others of their kind—men who were indispensable factors of the Colorado history of those times.

Ashley was a Virginian by birth, a resident of St. Louis, governor of Missouri in 1820, and in 1822 head of a fur company. In his first expedition, near Ft. Osage, he lost a keelboat and a cargo of furs worth ten thousand dollars. But reverses, hardships, and dangers never discouraged him. Andrew Henry, his partner, was from Pennsylvania, had joined the Missouri Company in 1809, was attacked by the Blackfeet and defeated at Three Forks of the Missouri. Undaunted by adversity, he crossed the Divide, built a post and was the first American trader to carry the fur business over to the Pacific side of the Range. He amassed wealth, but lost it by becoming surety for defaulting debtors. He died a poor but highly honored citizen.

Smith was a New Yorker, and "was one of the most remarkable men that ever engaged in the American fur trade. He was

like that distinguished character of later years, Stonewall Jackson, in combining with the most ardent belief in, and practice of, the Christian religion, an undaunted courage, fierce and impetuous nature, and untiring energy."<sup>4</sup> After many almost miraculous escapes from Indians and grizzly bears, in various parts of the country from the Mississippi River to the Pacific coast, "this Christian hero of the wilderness met an untimely death on the banks of the thirsty Cimarron,"<sup>5</sup> in 1831. He was killed by stealthy Comanches, while digging for water in the dry bed of the stream.

Ashley, in 1826, had sold his fur interests to three of his associates, who carried on the business under the firm name of Smith, Jackson, and Sublette. After the death of Smith, the firm—the Rocky Mountain Fur Company—consisted of Fitzpatrick, Sublette, Bridger, Fraeb and Gervais, names very familiar in Colorado history, and names attached to objects of interest in the Rocky Mountain region.

There were four Sublette brothers all interested in the fur trade, of whom Milton and William were best known. A disease in the leg, after two amputations, caused the death of Milton at Ft. Laramie in 1836. William, the most distinguished of all the brothers, was a brave mountaineer and successful trader. The brothers were Kentuckians, and their grandfather was claimed to be the slayer of the celebrated chieftain, Tecumseh, at the battle of the Thames.

Jackson was one of the noted traders and frontiersmen of his day, from whom the charming valley in Wyoming derives its unclassical name, Jackson's Hole.

Thomas Fitzpatrick, a prominent member of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, appears on the horizon as fur trader, government agent, and noted guide. He had many engagements with the Indians, who bestowed upon him the sobriquet, Broken Hand.<sup>6</sup>

James Bridger, another noted Virginian, was one of the ablest of hunters, mountaineers, and guides of the Great West. His family migrated from Richmond to St. Louis in the early part of the nineteenth century, and James, at the age of thirteen, was apprenticed to a blacksmith. In 1822 he was with Andrew Henry exploring the Rocky Mountains. He is the first white man known to have seen Great Salt Lake. Becoming a partner in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, he explored the country and led expeditions out in every direction, constantly fighting with the In-

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 552.

<sup>6</sup>Hafen and Ghent, *Broken Hand, the Life Story of Thomas Fitzpatrick, Chief of the Mountain Men.*



dians, carrying an arrowhead in his back for three years until it was extracted by the missionary of Oregon fame, Dr. Whitman. After the disbanding of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, he entered the service of the American Fur Company, with which he was associated until in the forties, when the fur trade was losing most of its prestige. In 1843 he built Fort Bridger on the Green River in southwestern Wyoming, and it became one of the most important establishments of its kind in the great western country. For many years afterward he was constantly in demand by the government and other agencies as guide and leader in all sorts of hazardous undertakings. Probably next to Kit Carson he is the best known of the Rocky Mountain scouts.

Of all representatives of that type of man, however, the first place of honor must be accorded to Kit (Christopher) Carson, whose name stands out as a symbol of the best and bravest of the far western frontiersmen of the nineteenth century. Born in Madison County, Kentucky, in 1809—the birth-state and the birth-year of Abraham Lincoln—Carson, at one year of age, was removed with the other members of the family to Missouri. His father having died on account of an accident in a timber forest a few years before, Kit at fifteen was apprenticed by his mother to a saddler living in Franklin, the chief frontier settlement of the state. Various fur companies were carrying on a lively business in the Northwest, as already noticed, and the names of the various traders and trappers became familiar to the ear of young Carson. During those boyhood days the child had seen the constant stream of men, interested in the fur trade, traveling on the Missouri River. By steamboat and keelboat, on horseback and on foot, the motley line of human beings pushed along, up the river and down the river, with manufactured articles, foodstuffs, weapons, and peltries.

The well established Missouri River Trail and the then lesser known Santa Fe Trail joined at Franklin, and a rivalry of interests reached out to the northwest and to the southwest. The saddler's trade did not appeal to Carson, and since the forests of Missouri had offered him opportunities for outdoor activities, this boy of seventeen, already an expert with the rifle and a lover of frontier experiences, joined a caravan in 1826 en route to Santa Fe. This undersized, sandy-complexioned, freckle-faced, soft-voiced, Scotch-Irish lad took his place among the experienced companions of the party with that modesty which ever characterized him even when he became, in after years, a nationally known figure. This initiatory journey of seven hundred and eighty miles, through the wild lands of Missouri, Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico, was typical of the overland traveling of

the day, and served to bring out those unusual characteristics of the man, and establish that reputation which added to itself honors upon honors until the day of his death, in 1868. Fascinating as is the career of this hero of the West, full of notable deeds and remarkable vicissitudes, all these must be passed over to give the attention of the moment to the subject directly at hand.

In 1831 Carson enrolled his name with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. For five years he had served in various capacities and had accompanied, during that short time, many expeditions throughout this whole great western country; and his keen intellect, notable powers of observation, bravery, sobriety, and unrivaled self-possession had placed him high among his contemporaries.

In the early thirties, when he began to throw his energies into the trapping industry, the fur trade of the mountain and foothill regions was at its flood. The bluffs and passes were criss-crossed by trails of white and red trappers. From the scattered trading posts of the piedmont regions of the eastern plains, winding paths intersected like nerves, joining to one another ganglionic centers. Along the Arkansas River and its upper tributaries for a hundred miles among the mountains, even to the Great Divide, well beaten paths with thousands of less traceable branches prevailed.

The fur trade has been looked upon by many as a short-lived incidental subordinate activity in connection with western history and the early-day annals of the state. The widespread field upon which the business was conducted, the transactions of prominent traders in adjoining regions as well as in Colorado territory thus dissipating the attention of chronologists, the pre-eminence of the state as a great gold-producing district in later times, and the rapid rise of other industries in still more recent years have had a natural tendency to minimize the importance of the western fur-trading era and bedim the eye to the magnitude and significance of the whole activity, strange and half-barbaric as it was, during almost a half century.

The time, however, is not very remote when the fur trade was the leading and practically the only business west of the Mississippi River, and the unrivaled branch of commerce on the North American continent. It was not a spectacular business and was accompanied with not only great dangers but tremendous losses. Competition among companies and individuals was often bitter, resulting in deep animosities and deadly conflicts. Many valuable bundles and cargoes of furs were lost by theft or accident in the transportation. Horses were killed or stolen by the Indians. Foolish bargains were made by the pelt-gatherers, unused as they were to business as transacted in the marts of



more civilized communities. In these transactions alcohol played its own regrettable part, in befogging the brains of the unsophisticated mountain men at the mercy of worldly-wise purchasers.

Posterity has derived numberless benefits bestowed upon the Rocky Mountain West by the intrepid trapper and hunter, the true pathfinders of danger-abounding localities, destined soon after to become the cultivated lands and business centers of a new people.

Unusual and diversified was the personnel of the transactors of this many-sided traffic. The enterprise was conducted on a stage, barbaric on the one hand and civilized on the other; hence both groups and individuals conducting it were naturally of greatly varying characteristics.

Noticing the several persons into whose hands the business of the fur trade fell, and omitting the merchants and capitalists like Astor and others who resided in the far east away from the chief agents in the business, we first encounter the important individual known as the trader. He was usually the representative of an individual or a firm back on the Mississippi River or beyond. At some post, fort, or other covert, he established himself and carried on his transactions with whomever he found having the sort of goods he wished. He usually dealt in anything the customer had to offer, from the large, coarse, heavy peltries of the buffalo to the small, more valuable skins of beaver and mink. The business was carried on either by simple barter or by the use of money. The place of business was stocked with those necessities or expedients which are usually in demand on the part of hunter and trapper: the customary rougher articles of clothing, weapons, and ammunition, and the more common accessories—smoked meat, liquor, and tobacco—which generally are found in the ordinary frontier cabin. The visitors were heterogeneous. Stray Mexicans, Canadians, and Indians from various tribes, with small parties of regular trappers and hunters, augmented occasionally by many other vagrants, with something to buy or sell, constituted the multiform concourse of humanity, always coming and going.

Passing to the trappers themselves, one finds, as in society generally, a great variety among them as a class, from the cruel, intemperate, and malicious type at one end of the procession to the sober, gentlemanly, and trustworthy kind at the other. The average representative, however, stands out as a semi-nomad, and, especially in the mountain districts, a pedestrian rather than an equestrian. He was hardy, rough, illiterate, and courageous. He was extravagant in speech and dress. He loved adventure, and

courted danger more than he shrank from it. He was inured to privation, and stoically faced adversity. He often suffered keenly for the very necessities of life. He took things as they came, and gave but little thought to the future. Being constantly in the midst of tragedies, the very pronounced uncertainty of his being alive on the morrow contributed notably to his indifference regarding what a day might bring forth.

Hardly less than the Indian himself, he reflected the influence of his environment. Nature, in all her various moods, was his constant companion; and the wilderness of the mountains and plains constituted for him a rough but effective training school. Safety compelled him to become instinctively alert, and the very character of his occupation made him an exceptional marksman. The very freedom of speech and action to which he was accustomed in the wilderness unfitted him for transacting business successfully in the marts of civilization. Falling into the temptations of semi-civilized frontier society, he was constantly losing his hard-earned acquisitions. On the moment of his coming into the vicinity of trade centers, sharps and swindlers were dogging at his heels.

In general activities, what was true of the trapper was also true of the hunter. Each could take up the general pursuit of the other without any apparent discord. The hunter could not long remain oblivious to the enticing opportunities about him, so on the tiptoe of expectancy he sets his traps, thus modifying the nature of his occupation; the trapper, finding himself in the midst of dangerous human enemies and wild beasts, realized the constant necessity of a valuable weapon, and the ability to use it effectively.

From the standpoint of business relationship, there were two classes of trappers. The members of one worked in groups for a company. They lived in the wilderness and after accumulating a bundle of peltries brought it to the place of sale and turned it in at a regulated price. Having disposed of his goods, the trapper was too often likely to spend his hard-earned money in a wild orgy, and to run into debt before finishing his carousal. In this way the fur dealer held his customer, year after year, in bondage.

The other class came to be known as the free trappers. They were well exemplified by such a man as Kit Carson. They were not held in service by any company. Of the two classes they bore the better reputation. They were bold, prided themselves on their independence, and did business with the traders in free and easy fashion. They went to the most convenient trading point, and, if prices were unsatisfactory, they sought other markets, going often as far as St. Louis. As a means of better protection to



themselves and property, they usually went about in small congenial groups. Like trappers in general, they were very susceptible to the temptations of trading circles and city society, and many of them left the financial results of a year's hardships and dangers in gambling houses and tippling places.

A very large proportion of these men had Indian wives, and these were a very valuable asset in their fur-gathering occupations. Such alliances threw them into friendly relationships with the Indians in general; for, after all, the natives were the bone and sinew of the western fur trade, especially in the Rocky Mountain country. They guided the white man into the beaver-abounding recesses, helped him build or carry his traps, and convey the peltries for hundreds of miles over dangerous and bewildering paths. These Indians hunted and trapped in their own peculiar way, bore enormous loads of peltries to white trappers, hunters, or traders, and disposed of them generally at ridiculously low prices. "By far the larger part of the fur was taken by the Indians and came into the possession of the traders only by exchange, and it was in this traffic that the white man first made his acquaintance with the tribes."<sup>7</sup> It is particularly unpleasant to recall the unfortunate use of liquor in connection with the trade relationship between the white man and the red in our western country. Concerning this phase of the business, Sabin writes: "But there was no dearth, in 1832, or for half a century thereafter, of liquor for the Indian trade upon the plains and in the mountains, whither it was transported at first in the flat kegs on back of mule and horse, and later in wagons."<sup>8</sup> The effect upon both races is expressed in the following emphatic words: "Smallpox and alcohol were the gifts of the white man to the red; and the latter gift was the worst, for while it scorched the heart of the receiver it withered also the soul of the donor. If the Indian would stop at no sacrifice to obtain his dram, the white man would stay at no meanness to supply it. Consequently, by the eagerness on both sides arose those well known practices: the gradual dilution of the keg until the drunken Indian was trading for only water; the false measuring, by inserting thumb or finger into the gill, or covering the bottom of the tin cup with a layer of paraffin; the adulteration by tobacco and pepper, that the dose might poison sooner; all those wretched deceits by which the weak second party should be cheated the more roundly. Truly the beaver and the buffalo had their revenge."<sup>9</sup>

(To be continued)

<sup>7</sup>Chittenden, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>8</sup>E. L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 106.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.



## Furs and Forts of the Rocky Mountain West\*

ARTHUR J. FYNN

Along with the typical trader and trapper were other personages of interest who were employed in one capacity or another in the fur business of the Rockies. Next to obtaining the peltries from the animals was the problem of transportation, and many different sorts of people were engaged in conveying them from the canyons of the Platte and Arkansas, for fifteen hundred miles, to St. Louis, the natural mart toward which the trails and rivers converged. In the upper country, after being taken from the traps by Indians and white trappers, the furs were packed on the backs of mules and horses, or borne downstream in light watercraft. Taken to certain points along the water courses, they were moved on by more pretentious conveyances.

Canoes, made from cottonwood logs and best known as dug-outs, were often big enough to carry large loads of peltries down the various rivers, even to the Mississippi itself. The Mackinaw, a flat-bottomed boat thirty or forty feet in length and from ten to fifteen feet in width, was able to carry several tons of fur, and was especially needful in conveying buffalo pelts. The much discussed bull boats, made by sewing together and stretching over a wooden frame several buffalo skins, were, in shape, round at the ends, and in size some twelve by thirty feet and perhaps two feet in depth.

\*This is the second and concluding portion of the article by the late Dr. Arthur J. Fynn, which was begun in our issue of November, 1931.—Ed.



On account of their requiring only a few inches of draught, they were used on the shallow rivers sweeping out from the mountains over the plains.

While each of the simpler conveyances was used to carry on a more or less important and independent business, there was, especially in the later years of the fur trade, close association between them and the larger craft operating to the eastward, nearer the mouths of larger rivers. The Missouri River steamboat, which had supplanted the old and rude keelboat of the days of Lewis and Clark, was the most helpful and spectacular boat of this far inland country. She stood imposingly high above the surrounding floats, like a proud hen above her brood of chickens. She skimmed over the smoother waters and pushed her way through the opposing currents like a thing of life, to the utter astonishment of the prairie-dwellers. Her revolving side wheels, tall, smoking chimneys, throbbing engines, and fluttering flags impressed the casual visitors from mountain and plain with the fact that the fur industry was pushing toward the mountains, over prairie and plain, as a harbinger of civilization. In glimpsing this panorama, this moving procession of human beings, reaching from Pikes Peak to the Mississippi River, it must not be forgotten that many loads of peltries on the backs of animals or in the lumber wagons of the day were conveyed from the mountain trapping places to the Missouri-Mississippi waterway entirely over the land routes, chief among which was the great Santa Fe Trail.

This big, many-sided activity, therefore, drew unto itself a variety of individuals, with special qualifications and peculiarities in various directions. Three nationalities—Americans, French, and Spanish—were always in evidence. On the ground floor were the nomadic Indian and the anomalous trapper. Closely associated with these were the trader, the manager of the trading post, the clerk, the camp keeper, the carpenter, the blacksmith, the cook, the boatman with his crew, and a score of other individuals, or groups of individuals, much diversified in culture, character, and general efficiency.

The places at which these many sorts and conditions of men met to transact business differed in accordance with the character of the business and the conveniences of the locality.

In a remote corner of the country, here and there, was the rendezvous, a converging point which had been agreed upon at the annual gathering in the former years. Regular company employees, free trappers, bands of natives, wandering fur-gatherers, and other specimens of humanity, having anything to buy or sell, came with their goods, disposed of them and obtained their necessary equipment for the coming year. Then the trains of horses

which had moved westward over the uplands for hundreds of miles from the East with their heterogeneous loads of merchandise moved backward to their various destinations with their bundles of peltries.

The rendezvous was a peculiar and picturesque feature in western history during the romantic days of the fur industry. The secluded spot of earth, enlivened by patches of forests, jagged rocks, yellow grass plots, and interspersing wild shrubbery, the clear, stirring air tranquilized by murmurings of gentle streams, presented, either in the glare of the noonday sun or in the soft light of the star-studded sky, a fascinating scene for the transaction of that unusual line of business. Add to this the variety of strange characters, with their strange costumes, strange weapons and accouterments, strange speech, and strange behavior, and the representation is unique. Before the breaking of camp there was likely to be much gambling and drinking, and many an irresolute trapper would return to his lonely retreat "empty handed, heavy hearted" after a week of debauch.

The overland journey from the meeting place of trader and trapper, whether to nearby river points or to the more noted marts on the larger eastern water courses, presented a lively spectacle. The burden-bearing animals with their valuable packs moved downward over the hot, dry plains, giving to the whole caravan the suggestion of a great, sluggish centipede. Each pack averaged about a hundred pounds, and its value was determined by the kind of peltries of which it was composed.<sup>1</sup> The price paid for good beaver skins was about six dollars per pound. The load on the back of a mule might, therefore, be worth five hundred dollars or more.

Skins of the various animals of the Rocky Mountains were often hidden by the trappers when there was danger of their being lost, stolen, or taken by desperadoes. They were put into dry pits in the sandy earth and covered with leaves, branches of trees, and sod, in such a way as to conceal all evidence of soil disturbance. Dust, half rotten bark of trees, or unsuspecting rubbish of any kind was employed to secure the buried articles from the scent of wild beasts or the sharp eyes of human marauders. Fires were sometimes built, in order to lessen still further any evidence of surface disturbance.

Of all centers of activity, however, throughout this great fur-bearing region, the trading posts or forts, serving generally in the two capacities of protection and trade, were the most character-

<sup>1</sup>A pack of furs usually contained ten buffalo robes, fourteen bear, sixty otter, eighty raccoon, one hundred and twenty foxes, or six hundred muskrat skins. H. M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, Vol. I, p. 40.



istic and important. They were scattered over a great area of wilderness, like oases on deserts, and were especially numerous along the Missouri and its tributaries. Within the borders of Colorado they served their purposes with striking efficiency. The greater number of the famous ones were out on the plains within approximately short distances from the mountains. A few, however, were more or less well-equipped mountain forts and were situated where exposure to hostile white and red men was most keenly felt.

Whether on mountain or plain, there was always a similarity in the general construction and most prominent features; for, wherever found, the two chief factors, defense and trade, were always outstanding. The variation of environment gave to the one or the other of these factors the ascendancy, arising from either locality or contingency.

They were typically quadrangular in shape, with thick walls two stories in height, numerous port holes for cannons and small arms, two bastions at diagonally opposite corners, barracks, blacksmith equipment, and other needful incidentals.

While danger was always something to be guarded against in migratory movements west of the Mississippi River, the necessity of pronounced military structures did not appear until near the close of the fur-trade period, and it reached on into the days when the white men were overrunning the country, killing the buffalo, and extending railroad tracks over the hunting grounds.

In the sixties, great bitterness had arisen between the two races, and the necessity of erecting substantial forts in the Rocky Mountain country was keenly felt by the frontiersmen. As examples, Fort Mitchell, in Nebraska, was built in 1864; Fort Fetterman, in Wyoming, in 1867; Fort Casper, in Wyoming, in 1864; Fort Reno, in Wyoming, in 1865.

In the area now comprising the state of Colorado, perhaps the most noted of military posts was Fort Massachusetts, near the Sangre de Cristo Pass on the eastern slope of the San Luis Valley. It was built in 1852, but abandoned in 1858, at which time Fort Garland was founded a few miles distant, on the site of the present Fort Garland.

At the other end of the state, to the northeast, was Fort Sedgwick, a typical temporary military post, built in 1864. It was established to protect the vanguard of whites who were gradually pushing their way toward the Rocky Mountains along with the construction of railroads, enterprises which naturally incensed the natives. In New Mexico this type of fort was well represented in old forts Marcy and Union.

The structures, however, which are naturally associated with

the western country were those larger ones chiefly on the plains and built at an earlier time primarily for trade, with protective features sufficient to make them safe to their inmates. Of this class of more pretentious posts was the well known Fort Laramie, in the southeastern part of what is today Wyoming, on the Laramie River, and Fort Bridger, in the southwestern part of the same state. Within the area of what is today the boundary of Colorado were numerous forts, erected to meet the general business of the times, and, in some cases, to foster the traffic of rival traders. The larger waterways naturally drew the majority of such structures to their banks, but lesser streams also, here and there, offered attractive sites which were successfully utilized. The South Platte, with its several advantageous mountain affluents, and a long portion of its course running almost parallel with the main ranges, was an outstanding fort-sustaining stream.

In 1832, near the junction of the South Platte and Clear Creek, on the northern outskirts of the Denver of today, a trading post was built by a French-Canadian trapper and trader, Louis Vasquez. Clear Creek itself was known in those days as Vasquez Fork, and very fittingly bore the name of that notable pioneer merchant of the South Platte district. Reports affirm that the post was constructed of cottonwood logs reenforced by adobe walls. Before rival forts sprang up it drew trade from the trapping grounds extending considerably north of the Cache la Poudre and along the mountains southward to the prolific streams of South Park.

In 1836, Lancaster P. Lupton established on the east side of the South Platte a fort, first called Lancaster but afterward Lupton, from which the town of Ft. Lupton has derived its name. Remnants of this structure are still in existence.

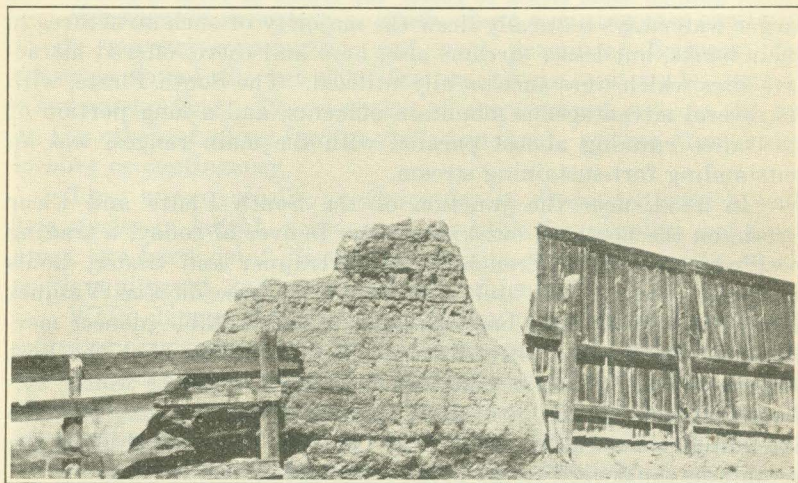
About five miles farther down the Platte was Fort Jackson, built by Henry Fraeb and Peter A. Sarpy. It was used as a trading post for two years only, 1837-38, and was then forsaken.

At a distance of about a mile down the South Platte River from the mouth of the St. Vrain Creek stood Fort St. Vrain. In the palmy days of the thirties, it was the largest and most important structure of its kind on the South Platte River and was a branch of the famous Bent's Fort on the Arkansas, being built by Colonel Ceran St. Vrain and the Bent brothers. It was built of adobe bricks and measured about one hundred and twenty-five feet in length by seventy-five in width, with walls fourteen feet in height. It was in many ways more pretentious than the usual run of the trading forts of those days, and was modeled on much the same plan as its archetype down on the Arkansas. It stood about half way between Ft. Laramie and Ft. Bent and on a well beaten, commerce-inviting trail joining the two. On the ruins of St. Vrain



Fort the Colorado Daughters of the American Revolution have placed a handsome marker.

There were several other posts—generally of short duration and little business and leaving to the state barely anything more than a name—which were scattered over various portions of the northern plains. Their chief value to us is their suggestiveness of the diversified life and the motley caste of actors playing their parts on that broad arena.



A PORTION OF THE WALL OF FORT LUPTON AS IT APPEARED IN 1913

Five miles below the Lancaster-Lupton post, Louis Vasquez and Andrew Sublette built Fort Vasquez, similar in character to those already noticed. From the highway its ruins are visible to-day, with walls standing two or three feet above the ground.

Over at the western border of the state, on the left bank of the Green River, stood Fort David Crockett, a one story adobe building constructed by a little group of men who had cast their interests into the fur business of that then somewhat remote transmontane region.

Another of the dauntless French fort-builders, Antoine Robidoux, built a trading station on the left bank of the Gunnison River about two miles below the mouth of the Uncompahgre. Erected in the early thirties, it survived only a few years before it was burned by the Ute Indians.

Two St. Louis traders, Gantt and Blackwell, built a small post, in 1832, on the north bank of the Arkansas some five miles east of the mouth of Fountain Creek. Facts concerning this enterprise are few, with the exception that it was known as Gantt's Fort, and

was succeeded in the early forties by the well known Pueblo, the rather inglorious predecessor of our "Pittsburgh of the West."

The Pueblo was probably constructed by George Simpson, an Indian trader, and others, and the eccentric James P. Beckwourth claimed to have played a principal role in its erection.

This place bore a bad reputation on account of the disreputable characters accustomed to gather there. Old trappers, hunters, traders, and wandering malefactors—vagabond Frenchmen, Americans, Indians, Mexicans, with a heterogeneous mass of Indian wives, resorted to this old post, exchanged goods, stole valuables, drank Mexican whiskey, quarreled, and murdered in true freebooting style.

After the massacre of Christmas day, 1854, in which about fifteen white men were butchered, the place acquired the reputation of being haunted, and rapidly went to ruin.

In 1826 the four Bent brothers and Ceran St. Vrain entered into the business of fort-building in the southern part of the state by erecting a rude trading-post on the north bank of the Arkansas River at a point approximately half way between the sites of the present Pueblo and Canon City. In character it was a temporary stockade, and was protected by heavy stakes driven into the ground inclosing the living and trading quarters. After two years it was abandoned.

There were several good reasons for taking this step. There was destined to be an increase in business. To be near or upon the famous Santa Fe Trail was an almost inestimable advantage. At a point farther down the river, the traders would be thrown into close relationship with a half dozen great Indian tribes of the plains and could participate in the traffic in buffalo hides.

The spot chosen for the new post was down the Arkansas River at a distance of about seventy miles, and half way between the present towns of La Junta and Las Animas.

As a trading fort of those times, Bent's establishment overshadowed all others and may serve in this connection as the best illustration of such structures.<sup>2</sup>

The six Bent brothers were all more or less closely identified with Colorado history, though two of them were never within the borders of the state. They were of French-Canadian descent and were natives of St. Louis. Charles, the oldest, was born in 1799 and Silas, the youngest, about two decades later. John and Silas never appeared upon Colorado soil, as already indicated, but Charles, William, Robert and George, along with Ceran St. Vrain, another Canadian, having already been employed for a short time

<sup>2</sup>The State Historical Society of Colorado has among its collections in the State Museum a replica of Bent's Fort.



in the American Fur Company, cast their fortunes into the fur activities of the Rockies.

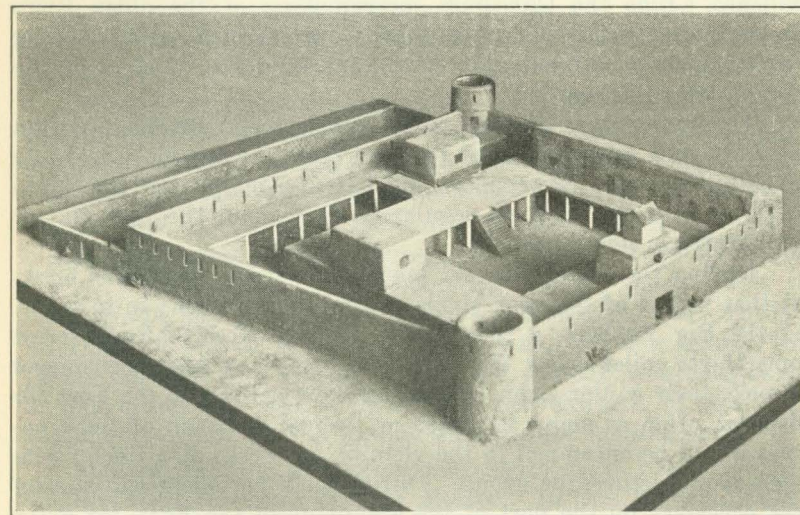
The structure was begun in 1828 but was not completed until 1832. In order to make it safe against fire, adobe clay was used chiefly in constructing it. Such material also recommended itself because it made the building cool in summer and warm in winter. A great quantity of wool was brought on wagons from New Mexico as a substitute for straw in making the bricks.

Four years were consumed in constructing the fort because of various unavoidable delays. One hundred and fifty Mexicans and several whites were employed in doing the work. Smallpox broke out among the employees, which caused a suspension of activities for a while. It is reported that at the same time the disease was contracted by William Bent, Ceran St. Vrain, Kit Carson, and several other more or less notable persons and, though none of this group died, they were all more or less pitted.

When completed the building stood on the north side of the Arkansas River and nearly square with the points of the compass. There seems to be a difference of opinion regarding the exact space enclosed by the outer wall. The generally accepted figures are one hundred and fifty by one hundred feet. There is authority for the statement that, from east to west, the building measured one hundred and thirty-five feet, and from north to south one hundred and eighty feet. The walls were fifteen feet in height and six or seven feet in thickness at the base, tapering to two feet at the top. The main entrance was thirty feet in width through the east wall by means of two massive plank doors, which were plated with nail heads to insure them against fire. Above this entrance was a square watchtower, surmounted by a belfry, which in turn supported a flagstaff. Reaching upward to the height of thirty feet and bulging out from the building in the usual fashion stood two bastions, or round towers, fitted into the walls at the northwest and southeast corners. They were ten feet in diameter within walls and on the lower floor of each were large loopholes for cannon, and on the upper floor smaller ones for ordinary firearms. Since these towers stood out many feet away from the walls, with the exception of each narrow line of contact at the corners, an opportunity was given for observing and firing upon an enemy coming from any direction. It can be seen that, with such an arrangement, an enemy was in as great danger lurking under the shadow of the wall as if he stood out in the open. Under such conditions wall-scaling would also be impossible. For further efficiency in the matter of observing an approaching foe a long, powerful telescope, balanced on a pivot, stood in the watchtower, which had windows on every side. Here also swung a little meal-time bell. Within

easy reaching distance along the walls were hung muskets, lances, sabers, and all other ordinary sorts of frontier weapons. The outside walls were pierced by loopholes. At vital points throughout the building were stationed cannons and other ordnance to be used at a moment's notice in case of attack.

Fort Bent was much more than an ordinary trading post. It was an institution, standing like a castle in the middle ages far away from the stirring, throbbing world on the outside. Within the thick, outlying protective walls was an isolated community, enjoying many blessings of civilized safety and hospitality in contrast to the dangers and hardships that loomed up immediately when the outside world was reached. In the busy time of year there were a hundred employees, consisting of many classes and conditions of servitude; clerks, traders, trappers, mechanics, herders, teamsters, common laborers, and several children. A resident physician cared for the health of the inmates and ministered to travelers. Many of the group had Indian wives. William Bent, the chief personage, married a Cheyenne maiden, to whom were born four children. After the death of his first wife he married her sister.



A REPLICA OF BENT'S FORT

(Owned by the State Historical Society and on exhibition among its collections in the State Museum, Denver)

The various rooms were comfortably sheltered with permanent roofs and walls. The barracks were provided with the necessities and conveniences demanded by the diverse occupants. In the center of the large court stood the press for squeezing robes and furs



into compact and convenient bundles for shipping. At one side was the indispensable blacksmith shop. At the back stood the billiard room and the bar room, although the use of liquors was very restricted, and carousals were not allowed. In convenient nooks and corners were numerous warehouses and storerooms. Several women were occupants of the building—mostly Indian wives of prominent white personages engaged in various kinds of business. Children amused themselves as best they could in their more or less restricted quarters. "In the kitchen presided Charlotte, the negress cook, famed for her pumpkin pies."<sup>3</sup>

Back of the Fort proper was the corral, inclosed by an eight-foot wall, with a small opening into the court and a larger one at the extreme west end for the entrance and exit of animals. On the top of the surrounding wall thriving cactus plants grew, and served as an excellent protection against wall-scaling. Magpies, eagles, and mocking birds were encouraged to make their homes about the Fort to add liveliness to the scene. At a short distance away was the icehouse for the storage of meat and other perishable goods. Holidays and festival occasions were duly observed. A piano graced one of the apartments and other instruments were in evidence. Like the Christmas merrymaking of the olden times which Walter Scott tells of, authority was thrown aside, dancing was engaged in without respect to rank, and the dangers of the morrow were disregarded.

The winter days brought many travelers and strangers within the Fort, and news furnished by them from the outside world was joyfully received. Newspapers and letters came in over the Santa Fe Trail with approximate regularity throughout the year, but at comparatively long intervals.

During the colder weather business about the Fort was brisk. At that period of the year Mexicans and natives came in to trade. At the Big Timbers, a twenty-mile stretch of cottonwood forest some thirty miles below the Fort, many Indians were accustomed to make their winter camp. Bringing their peltries to the Fort for disposal, often as many as fifteen or twenty thousand of these natives would be encamped in the vicinity for weeks at a time, forming a most picturesque group. During such periods great caution was necessary on the part of the occupants of the Fort, for great quantities of venomous liquor from Taos and other parts of New Mexico would incite the drinkers to deeds of murder among themselves, and especially against the inmates of the building.

Indians as a rule were not allowed to enter the Fort. A counter was arranged at the door entrance over which business was transacted. William Bent was the head and front of this trade.

<sup>3</sup>E. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 191.

Charles, his brother, and Ceran St. Vrain spent most of their time in Taos. Aside from the prime business of buying and selling furs, a lively trade at the Fort was carried on in disposing of horses, mules, and trappings.

When the April days roll around scenes about the building are lively. The native tribes gradually disappear for the hunting season. William Bent is preparing for his annual trip to the Missouri River, five or six hundred miles away. To go and return will require a half year. Twenty or thirty wagons are carefully filled with bundles of peltries. Ox teams are hitched to wagons, and the great procession moves down the river at the rate of about ten miles per day. Camping places, good wood, pure water, and productive grass-plots must be carefully selected. Wagons must be greased and occasionally repaired, guards must protect the procession by day and night, and much attention must be given to the nourishment and convenience of man and beast. Sand, dust, mud, and storms are destined to be encountered, man and beast sicken and perhaps die, but at length the end of the journey is reached. The contents of the wagons are disposed of, and those same wagons are reloaded with food, clothing, weapons, and other necessities of life. Then the long homeward journey is begun, and ended when the leaves of the mountain trees are falling, as a result of the autumnal frosts.

For twenty years this remarkable building, with all its activities, its tragedies and comedies, existed. In the early and middle forties, when traffic on the Santa Fe Trail was at its height, Bent's Fort assumed the combined proportions of a great Oriental caravansary and an Occidental mercantile house. Here it stood on the plains, the central point of interest, the isolated refuge of wanderers on a widespread danger-abounding region. Here dwelt the scout, guide, and protector of travelers in a strange land. Here, at intervals for several years, Kit Carson was a resident hunter, supplying the Fort with buffalo meat. Here, in 1846, General Kearny, on his memorable march from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe, halted for several days to arrange supplies for his soldiers.

General Kearny, in possession of Santa Fe in 1846, appointed Charles Bent Governor of New Mexico. In the following year a conspiracy was formed, resulting on January 19, 1847, in a massacre in which Governor Bent was killed at his residence in Taos.

Robert and George Bent died at the famous old Fort; but William, who from the beginning had been the dominant spirit—in fact, for the first few years of its existence it was called Fort William—bravely bore the burdens and responsibilities connected with it. For several years he was a government freighter.



In the late forties he began negotiations for the sale of the Fort to the government. Since its value had been tested in several ways and especially in its use as a base of supplies for General Kearny's troops when operating in New Mexico, such a purpose seemed reasonable. There was also a more impressible reason. He remarked that he felt lonesome in the old place. His wife and two brothers had died there, and memories of the past haunted him. He is said to have offered the structure for the modest sum of sixteen thousand dollars, but the government hesitated, proffering twelve thousand. Impatient at the slow progress made by the government in attempting to consummate the proposition, the owner loaded all his valuables on sixteen wagons and moved away from the building, having set fire to what was combustible. The building was restored in the early sixties and served for a time as an overland mail and stage station. After being again abandoned, it fell into ruin. Today a granite monument marks the spot on which the half venerable building stood. "William Bent was undoubtedly the first permanent white settler in what is now Colorado, and for a long time he was not only its first settler but remained its most important white citizen."<sup>4</sup>

On the same noted river, at Big Timbers, about forty miles to the east of the ruined fort, another, built of stone and adobe, was constructed in 1853 and 1854, slightly smaller and less pretentious than its model. Its walls were nearly as high and at its two diagonally opposite corners stood the conspicuous bastions. Bent used it as a trading post till the autumn of 1859, when he sold it to the government. Colonel Sedgwick, whose dramatic death occurred at Spotsylvania in the Civil War, and from whom Sedgwick County received its name, was sent into this region during the same year to fight the Indians, especially the Kiowas. Large supplies of commissary goods came from the East about the same time, and the construction of larger quarters to accommodate increasing soldiers, officers, animals, food, and equipment was carried on in 1860. It was at first called Fort Wise in honor of Governor Wise of Virginia, but in 1861 the Civil War had burst upon the country and the name was changed to Fort Lyon in remembrance of the death of that brave general at Wilson's Creek, Missouri, in August of the same year.

The old fort served its purpose during the period of hostilities, but a flood in the Arkansas undermined its walls in 1866, which made it useless as a military post. It was used afterwards for some time as a stage station.

A new Fort Lyon was built at a distance of about twenty miles farther up the river. It is today a notable government hospital.

While fur trading with the Indians was a notable feature in relation to all the western posts, it was an especially important factor in connection with those on the Arkansas. Here first of all was the great Santa Fe Trail, along which the product moved in vast quantities. Again the present states of Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas held within their borders important and populous hunting tribes—Arapahoes, Cheyennes, Kiowas, Comanches, and several others—that naturally and conveniently came to the Bent buildings to dispose of their wares.

Having married among the Indians, William Bent had great advantages in carrying on business with them. He had no rival in the whole fur-producing region in that business to which he gave the greatest efforts of his life.

It can hardly be reiterated too often that the trappers and fur traders were the real pioneers of this great western land. For forty years fur-gathering was the chief industry of the state.

<sup>4</sup>George B. Grinnell, *Bent's Old Fort and Its Builders*, 19.