Bent's Fort in 1846

By Edgeley W. Todd*

Interest in Bent's Fort, the most important stronghold of United States expansion into the Southwest, has always been great. Recently David Lavender's book-length study of the Bents and the trading empire that they and St. Vrain controlled has focused attention anew upon this post on the Arkansas River in southern Colorado.[1] The recent excavation of the foundations of the fort, as reported in newspapers and in a recent issue of *The Colorado Magazine*,[2] has furnished new evidence concerning the actual physical layout of the fort, and provided much information about its construction.

An item of exceptional interest which gives another description of Bent's Old Fort as it appeared to a contemporary observer one hundred years ago seems to have been overlooked by research workers until now. Who this observer was has not been determined; but unlike many travellers who visited the fort and left us either no description at all or only generalized ones, he took pains to record his impressions in detail. His description of the fort was printed in the *Saint Louis Reveille*[3] on May 17, 1846.

St. Louis newspapers of that era and during the preceding decades are full of references to enterprises in the trans-Mississippi

* Edgeley W. Todd, Associate Professor of English, Colorado State University, at Fort Collins, Colo., has here contributed an item of more than ordinary interest relating to Bent's Old Fort. The anonymous author may have been an Indian trader at the fort.—*Editor.*

[1] David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Garden City, 1954).

[2] Herbert W. Dick, "The Excavation of Bent's Fort," *Colorado Magazine*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (July, 1956), 181-196.

[3] In 1934, Dr. LeRoy R. Hafen, then editor of *The Colorado Magazine*, printed in its pages a number of news items pertaining to Bent's Fort that had originally appeared in the *Saint Louis Reveille* in 1844 and 1845. (See *The Colorado Magazine*, Vol. 11, 223-227.) He did not, however, include this item. Neither is this *Reveille* item included in Lavender's bibliography.

country—to explorations, fur trading activities, the Santa Fe trade, emigration to California and the Oregon Territory, and similar undertakings—as expansion, glorified with the name of Manifest Destiny, moved westward. What gave special relevance to a description of Bent's Fort in May of 1846, however, was the fact of war with Mexico. That this was foremost in the minds of the editors, Charles Keemle and Joseph M. Field, is evident from editorial remarks prefacing the article: "Fort William, or Bent's Fort, on the Arkansas," they wrote, "—the boundary line between our Indian territory and New Mexico—is a point which is destined to become of deep importance, as events are urging; and the following accurate description of it, with the neighboring country, must possess much interest at the present moment."

Just how urgent these events were the editors did not spell out. But newspaper readers in 1846 would not have needed special briefing. An illustration of why they would not is furnished by a striking coincidence. The same issue of the *Reveille* that carried the article on Bent's Fort also carried a special news item reprinted "From our Extra of 12 o'clock last night." This in essence was an announcement of the opening of the Mexican War, which Congress had declared only five days before, on May 12, 1846. Of the numerous events and territorial ambitions that had led up to that decision, one decisive action precipitating hostilities was the crossing of the Nueces River by Mexican General Arista in the preceding April. The Americans regarded this movement as an invasion of their territory in Texas, and President Polk urged Congress to act. He signed the proclamation of war on May 13.

General Zachary Taylor in the meantime was already poised on the lower Rio Grande with an army. Even before Congress declared war, he had pushed the Mexicans back across the Rio Grande. After the declaration he led his army against the Mexican coastal city of Matamoros at the mouth of the river. It was this attack that was announced in the *Reveille* on May 17—in a column alongside the final part of the Bent's Fort article. Headlines read: "GLORIOUS NEWS!!! The Mexican Hawks Defeated! Victory of General Taylor! 700 of the Enemy Slain!! Matamoros in Ashes!!!" A column of news reported this stroke in detail.

With events of this character taking place on our southern border, it is not strange that the *Reveille* editors regarded Bent's Fort as "a point which is destined to become of deep importance" or that they should have considered a description of it of peculiar interest to their readers "at the present moment."

That the author of the article also viewed Bent's Fort in terms of the conflict with Mexico—and indeed slanted it in that direc-

tion—is clear from his emphasis upon the military aspects of the fort: its ability to withstand siege, the impenetrability of its walls, its armaments, its capacity to stand off "any force that can be brought against it in this country." He was especially emphatic about one paramount consideration, namely the nearness of the fort to the Mexican line: ". . . what gives it [the Arkansas River, which flowed but a few hundred feet from the fort] . . . consequence is its being the boundary line between the American and New Mexican possessions, which latter are on the west [actually south] or opposite side from us, *and within short cannon shot range*" [italics supplied]. He was clearly alert to the strategic location of the fort in 1846.

This was, in fact, the year the late Bernard DeVoto has so aptly called "the year of decision."[4] Affairs of great moment were taking place all over the West. Fremont was maneuvering on the Pacific coast and would seize Upper California in the autumn. The Mormon Saints were on the march across the plains to establish an empire in the Salt Lake basin. The members of the so-called Donner party, representative Americans looking for a new place in the sun, were rolling along the Platte, heading for their rendezvous with destiny in the frigid defiles of the Sierra Nevada. The long-pending Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain was to come to a peaceful settlement in June. And above all, as part of the planned attack against Mexico and her possessions, the Army of the West—some 1600 dragoons and volunteers commanded by Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny—was to start that same June from Fort Leavenworth down the Santa Fe trail on the long trek that would ultimately lead to the subduing of New Mexico and the conquest of California, with a stop-over in late July at Bent's Fort to pick up supplies and recondition men and horses after the torturing heat and drought of the plains.

Other visitors would also see the fort this summer of 1846. George Frederick Ruxton, young Lewis Garrard, and Francis Parkman all converged upon Bent's post on the Arkansas and left literary records of their visits: Ruxton in two books, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* and *Life in the Far West*, Garrard in his sprightly *Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail*, and Parkman in his classic *The California and Oregon Trail* (later simply titled *The Oregon Trail*). Any one of them could have written the account printed below but probably didn't.

The *Reveille* article gives another impression of some of these events and experiences. History records the role that Bent's Fort was playing in actions that were to render decisive changes in the drama that was being enacted on our western borders. To realize

[4] *The Year of Decision, 1846* (Boston, 1943).

some of these implications is to add another level of meaning to the words of the anonymous writer who took time to describe Bent's Fort in the crucial spring of 1846.

What follows duplicates in full the text as printed originally in the *Saint Louis Reveille:*

Bent's Fort—The Rendezvous.[5]

Fort William, or Bent's Fort, on the Arkansas—the boundary line between our Indian territory and New Mexico—is a point which is destined to become of deep importance, as events are urging; and the following accurate description of it, with the neighboring country, must possess much interest at the present moment. The writer is a most intelligent friend of ours, now at the fort, and the letter, from which we extract, has been received within a short time by a mutual acquaintance.

Description of Bent's Fort.

(Furnished for the Reveille.)

This establishment is constructed of what is termed in New Mexico *adobes*—a sun-dried brick, which becomes hard and firm, and durable. They are 18 inches long, 9 inches wide, and 4 inches thick. They are not made with as much precision as our brick, but when put up, make a wall that is strong and passable. The fort is an oblong, the wall about twenty feet in heighth [*sic*], and sufficiently thick to resist all attempts with small arms. At the angles are round towers, commanding the outside of the walls; so with some swivels, and a couple of six-pounder brass pieces which we have, the place can be defended against any force that can be brought against it in this country. The area enclosed within the walls would probably comprise over an acre, which is subdivided by high walls; so, in case of a siege, all the horses, mules, cattle, wagons, &c., can be secured and protected inside the walls. Round the inside of the wall of the fort *proper*, are the storehouses, shops for blacksmith, gunsmith and carpenters, men's quarters, private rooms for gentlemen, dining room, kitchen, &c. Over the dining room, and perched on the very top, overlooking all the buildings, is my sanctum. The buildings have flat roofs, covered with *adobes*, and rendered perfectly tight, affording a pleasant promenade, with a view of a vast extent of surrounding prairie, meandered by the river, with a back view of the Rocky Mountains—the Spanish Peak[s] and Pikes Peak, towering amid the clouds and glittering in the sunshine. To judge from a distant view of these mountain piles, they are not much removed from chaos. They would seem to have been left rough hewn by their projector, and stand as a knolled and rugged frame to a beautiful landscape picture. Time seems to add to the asperities of these mountains instead of softening them away, and there they will stand, with their jagged sides, as long as time may last—the same black, dreary-looking landmarks for unborn travellers to steer by.

Our style of living is superior to that of ordinary Indian traders, having abundance of substantials. Flour, corn, beans and whisky we get

[5] From a photostat furnished by the Newberry Library, Chicago. Since the present article was written and submitted for publication, Dr. Nolie Mumey's book entitled, *Old Forts and Trading Posts of the West. Bent's Old Fort and Bent's New Fort on the Arkansas River, Vol. I*, (Denver: Artcraft Press, 1956), has been published. Part of the *Reveille* item has been used therein on pages 35-36.—*Editor.*

from the Spanish settlements. Milk, poultry, butter, eggs, &c., are kind of indigenous affairs. All we lack is *murphys* [potatoes], which we shall try to raise the coming season.

There were twelve cows kept at the fort to furnish milk for the winter, and now there are thirty that could be put in requisition, if necessary. The company keep a large stock of cattle, employing Mexicans to herd them. These men can be had for from six to eight dollars per month, payable in goods, at an advance, on an average, of five hundred per cent. They are good workers, and attentive to their business, which is all that can be said in their favor. To show you how very choice they are in names, I will introduce you to Maria Jesus Arriano, our cow-herd; a more sinister-looking, dirty scamp you could never wish to meet with. They are all a poor, cowardly, despicable, thievish, gambling set—but little removed from the Indian, and only fit to drudge, break wild horses and mules, and herd cattle and sheep in this world, and be ——— in the next; which latter fate inevitably awaits them, unless they speedily reform, of which, at present, there are no hopes.

Bent's Fort is on the main branch of the Arkansas river, eighteen hundred miles from its mouth, and one hundred and thirty to its source in the mountains. Though dignified with the soubriquet of river, the stream here is, in reality, only a creek, being no more, in ordinary stages of water, than thirty or forty yards wide; but what gives it more consequence is its being the boundary line between the American and New Mexican possessions, which latter are on the west [south] or opposite side from us, and within short cannon shot range. The country far about is a wilderness, and must ever remain so, from the scarcity of timber and general sterility of soil; which, however, though light and sandy, produces a sufficiency of herbage for the sustenance of vast herds of gregarious animals roaming the plains, and will always afford a home for such Indian nations as live by the chase. Around us are the most powerful and warlike Indian tribes on the continent—the Comanches, the Kiawas, the Arrapahos, the Yutas, the Cheyennes, the Apaches and the Pawnees—all buffalo-eaters, and all great scamps. St. Louis being in north latitude 38° 37′ 28″, makes us, according to Lieut. Fremont's observations, 35′ 28″ south, and 14° of longitude west of you. I suppose there is no great difference in the seasons or temperature, except that here we are not subject to the sudden changes which are experienced with you, and are blessed with a pure and exhilarating atmosphere. The coldest and most piercing winds come from the north-east, and (as much of an antithesis as it may seem) the warmest and softest winds from the north-west, sweeping from the very top of the snow-clad mountains. The climate is salubrious—delightful.