The Ladies of Bent's Fort

By ENID T. THOMPSON

Imposing and colorful was that most famous of all American trading posts—Bent's Fort on the Arkansas. A great mud castle, with walls of sun-adobe brick rising 14 feet above the plain, it enclosed a bewildering jumble of one- and two-story adobe buildings, including warehouses, a dining hall, shops, trading rooms, apartments for 200 men and their Indian wives, even a billiard room. Bent's Fort, it has been said, was probably the most imposing work of man between the Mississippi and the Rio Grande.

Its Spanish-type placita and roof promenade were thronged with women, the Indian and half-breed wives of mountain men, Mexican senoritas, ransomed Comanche captives and an occasional white woman from the East.[1]

In spite of this comment by Walter Omeara in the 1960s, the ladies of Bent's Fort do not seem to have been too well delineated in accounts of the fort, or in the studies of its history. They were probably entirely too much part of everyday life to have been considered unusual and reported, although accounts do exist of beautiful and unusual ladies, or of special stories.

The First Lady of Bent's Fort in the heirarchical sense was Mis-stan-stur, Owl Woman, Cheyenne wife of William Bent. She was daughter of Grey Thunder, Cheyenne chief

and keeper of the medicine arrows. William Bent began courting her, Cheyenne fashion, sometime before 1835. His suit was successful by late 1836 or the very early spring of 1837. William Bent was the leading white man in Cheyenne territory and the best friend the Cheyennes ever had, and he observed the Cheyenne proprieties in his courtship and marriage. Under these customs Yellow Woman, Mis-stan-stur's sister, followed her elder sister to Bent's lodge as bridesmaid, and in 1847 after the death of Owl Woman married William. Four of William's children — Mary, George, Robert and Charles — were Owl Woman's children. Julia, the youngest, was Yellow Woman's.

In the important years of Bent's Fort, 1837-1847, Mis-stan-stur, Owl Woman, was definitely the First Lady of Bent's Fort, and she and all the fort visitors knew it. She was the closest thing to a real Indian princess since Pocahontas, and she was lovely in person and in spirit. The lovely sketch by Lt. Abert reproduced in *Through the Country of the Apache Indians in the Fall of the Year 1845* identified by Abert only as "an Indian Princess" and "wife of a prominent white trader" is identified by a great-great-granddaughter as Mis-stan-stur, Owl Woman.[2]

The original drawing was on the back of the definitive Abert sketch of the fort and was once owned by Fred Rosenstock (Denver P.M.). Abert in his record commented that the lady kept her looks because she wasn't subjected to the drudgery of the usual Indian wife of a trader, expected to do all the lodge and camp chores, to tan 20 buffalo hides a year, and to respond cheerfully to "Alice" regardless of given name. William Bent spent a great deal of time in the lodges of her tribe, and she went on William's numerous trading expeditions, but when she was in Bent's Fort, she was First Lady. The years of her courtship and marriage must have been as romantic as the white man-

Sketch of Mis-stan-stur, Owl Woman, Cheyenne wife of William Bent. Drawing was made in 1845 by Lt. J. W. Abert, while Owl Woman posed on a billiard table in Bent's Fort.

—Photo by Special Permission: Jack Howell Books, San Francisco, Calif.

Indian princess romance was supposed to be and so seldom actually was.

In spite of being First Lady, Mis-stan-stur wasn't the earliest woman at Bent's Fort. Two pre-fort burials, both female, were discovered in the course of the National Park Service archaeology of 1963-66. Both are unidentified Indians. One theory about one burial is that the woman died in the smallpox epidemic while the fort was being built. At this time, the adobe walls of the fort were being constructed inside a timber stockade. When the woman died, in the panic attendant on the epidemic she was hastily and summarily buried, before the stockade was burned and abandoned as a sanitary measure. The year of

this epidemic is generally given as 1831, and it is the epidemic that scarred William Bent.

Jackson Moore, the fort archaeologist, writes that "this burial has every appearance of haste and minimal concern." Burial 2 on the other hand was a "normal-appearing flexed burial in the tradition of the aboriginal Southeast."[3] Both burials may, of course, have been pre-Bent, but the ladies were definitely "in" Bent's Fort and should be listed.

Bent's Fort was built by Mexican workmen recruited in Taos by Ceran St. Vrain or Charles Bent, and sent to the site of the fort to work under superintendent-foreman, William Bent. Kit Carson was crew chief of the timber crew down at Big Timbers producing the lumber used in the fort. We can safely assume this to have been 1830 or 1831 to 1833. The timber crew was all male, but the fort site had the protection of the timber stockade, and it is reasonable to assume that the Mexican workmen brought their women to the fort during its construction[4] — not for comfort only, but because in the tradition of adobe building, men made the bricks and laid them, and women applied the finishing plaster. If women renew this finishing coat constantly, there is very little heavy repair work to be done in adobe. The women apply the thin plaster with their bare hands or with pieces of sheepskin. The longevity of the walls of the fort — they were still standing in fairly good condition up to five feet when Frederick Hackson Turner went to see them in 1913[5] — proves that this plastering was well and faithfully done for many years. This argues the presence of a large crew of working women. So do the numerous layers of interior pastel washes. In some rooms as many as six different washes and colors showed up in the archaeology. There was *tierra amarilla* (red), *tierra blanca* (white) and *tierra del oro* (yellow), all probably bought in Nambe Pueblo, and hauled by muleback down the Timpas. The crew of unnamed, unknown and unremarked women mattered a great deal in the appearance and comfort of the fort.

In addition to these unnamed Mexican women, numerous unnamed Indian women must have been at the fort. Women were always considered a necessity at a fur-trade post. Mountain men went to the posts as much for recreation as for security. Bent's Fort gave them more than the usual post: it offered company, good food, drink, tobacco, light and warmth, laundry, conversation, books and newspapers with news of the East and Europe if desired, and so there must have been feminine companionship. There needed to be replenishment for the spirit as well as for the possibles bag.

William Bent was known as the best and strictest disciplinarian of his traders and Indians in the entire Indian trade. He kept a tight reign on his men and a close watch on their behavior. He allowed no vice as such in the fort nor indeed any Indians at all between sunset and sunrise. It was natural that, forbidden the fort, there were squaw towns. There must have been raucous and unruly communities within reach of the fort, but it was definitely not inside. There was more decorum inside Bent's Fort than in any post on the West, and any Indian women were married to the men of Bent's Fort.[6] This decorum may have had something to do with Bent's standing with the Cheyennes, or vice versa, because the Cheyennes were known as the cleanest and most virtuous of the Plains Indians. More Cheyenne women were sold as wives to white men than from any other tribe; they were known to be good wives.[7]

William Bent married Owl Woman with Cheyenne ceremony, including the bride price and the use of a Cheyenne "bed-set," to bring harmony and happiness to the lodge. This bed-set consisted of a white canvas or tanned-hide bedspread, and a full length piece to hang as a wall at the side of the bed, beaded according to directions of a tribal head woman, who had marked it and prayed over it before she completed the design. It was shown to the

tribe as part of the ceremony of marriage, and gifts for the young couple were left under it in the bride's father's lodge. After the marriage it moved with the couple's lodge. It is interesting to picture Mis-stan-stur's bed-set in William's quarters in Bent's Fort[8], along with a barrel of claret and a knobbed safe from St. Louis.

As a matter of custom, Yellow Woman, William Bent's second wife, would inherit the bedset and the children of Bent's marriage to Owl Woman. These women and the children were always treated with the utmost respect and courtesy. William dearly loved his children and tried very hard to preserve both their heritages for them.

George Bent repaid the care he had been given by serving as his father's chief historian to Hyde, Grinnell and George Campbell, but he was entirely Indian as a matter of choice.

Charles became renegade Indian, perhaps not surprisingly after Sand Creek and later seeing Yellow Woman, the only mother he had ever known, scalped by O'Connor's men.

Robert, living at home with his father, was forced by Chivington to take part in the Sand Creek massacre, and he, too, turned Indian.

All this brought little joy to William Bent, but his daughters did.

Mary, William's oldest child, was born in January 1838 at Bent's Fort. She was educated by her mother on the Cheyenne trail and in the Cheyenne traditions, and this education was continued by her aunt-stepmother. William had her educated in her white heritage by the Boggses at Westport, Missouri, and in the home of his sister, Mrs. Carr, in St. Louis. She chose to make her American home at William Bent's farm in Westport, and there in 1860 she was married to R. M. Moore. In the 1860 U.S. census of Jackson Co., Mo., is a listing:

Moore, R. M. Westport
age 27 Farmer $500 prop $500 pers. prop born Ohio

Copy of portrait of Mary Bent Moore, daughter of William Bent and Owl Woman. Born in January 1838 at Bent's Fort, she was later educated in St. Louis and Westport, Mo., where she made her home at William Bent's farm in Westport. She was married at the farm in 1860 to R. M. Moore.

—Photo Courtesy Library, State Historical Society of Colorado

Mary A. age 23 Indian born Kansas Terr. $1150 prop. married within one year 1 slave see also George Bent (Westport) age 15 Indian born Kansas Terr. in R. M. Moore family

Mary as a girl had naturally been the belle of Bent's Fort whenever she was there. In one diary of a Western trip, written in 1855, a young man wrote:

> August 5, 1855, Went down to the "noonery" to see Miss Bent today. She pretty much Indian.[9]

The fact that he referred to the fort as a nunnery bears out William's reputation as a disciplinarian.

After their marriage, Mary and Moore lived for several years in the Westport farm home, and it was during this period that the home was considerably expanded and remodeled. The house still stands, and the only changes made to the original Bent houses were the additions, still easily distinguished, made by Seth Ward when he purchased it in 1871. It is a Southern-style home of great beauty and dignity. During some renovation within the past five years a tunnel, from the original Bent summer kitchen to the creek that marks the Kansas-Missouri border, has been discovered. This tunnel is probably the last station on an underground railway during the slavery troubles, although there are stories of Seth Ward using a tunnel to smuggle furs. Sometime during the Civil War, the Moores moved onto the Bent ranch in Colorado. They became solid substantial citizens of Colorado. Moore became a judge, they lost a grandson in World War I, and ultimately they left the silver and furniture that William Bent had given them as wedding gifts to the State Historical Society of Colorado.[10]

Julia, the youngest of William's children and the only one born to Yellow Woman, was lighter and more yellowish than Mary, who was a large swarthy woman.[11] Julia was never a lady of Bent's Old Fort, having been born at Big Timbers in 1849 after the first fort was abandoned.

William married a third time, in either 1865 or 1867, after the death of Yellow Woman in the Indian wars. The

last time he married in Westport, and the young woman was named Adelina Harvey. She was the half-Indian daughter of the Missouri fur-trader Alexander Harvey, who has been described as "the roaringest of the river men and fur traders."

Adelina must have been like her father, because Francis Cragin leaves notes that she was only 22 years old when William died in 1869, and that she had been in a Westport bawdy house and carried William off and married him when he was drunk. They moved to Colorado, and when Bent died she claimed half the estate, but the children and/or the children's executor, A. G. Boone, offered her 1/6 share, equal to that which each child got.[12]

When William Bent's brother, Charles, met Ignacia Jaramillo in Taos, she was a young widow of good family with a small daughter named Rumalda. She was elder sister to Kit Carson's Josepha, and was known for her beauty, grace and charm.

Mrs. Charles Bent was the mother of three children by Charles: Estafina, Alfredo and Teresina, and she was very well known socially. Ruth Fish wrote to Charles Hurd that Charles Bent was extraordinarily social, and that he did much entertaining. This was a factor in his selection as governor of New Mexico.[13]

Ignacia Jaramillo Bent was often present at these social functions, and was also at the trial of the revolutionists and all other activities having to do with the New Mexican accession, and was introduced as Mrs. Bent. The interesting thing is that there has never been a shred of evidence found saying where, when, or by whom Charles Bent and Ignacia were married. In light of all the documentation about Kit Carson's marriage to Josepha, this is rather odd. It might perhaps explain the scrubbed pages in the Bent Family Bible in the collections of the State Historical Society, and the separation of the early parish records of Taos Parish from the others in the Smithsonian Collection.[14] This lack

Maria Ignacia Jaramilla, elder sister of Kit Carson's wife, Josepha, met Charles Bent in Taos, N. M., and later bore him three children. Known for her beauty, grace and charm, she was the acknowledged first lady of Taos and later of New Mexico, when Charles Bent became governor.

—Photo Courtesy Western History Department, Denver Public Library

of records also arouses some interesting questions about the lack of Charles' conversion to the Catholic Church (Kit was converted before his marriage), and the increasing animosity between Charles Bent and Father Martinez. On the padre's part, he may have sensed a professional slight as well as a personal dislike. Nonetheless, while Ignacia wasn't ever First Lady at Bent's Fort, she was the acknowledged First Lady of Taos and New Mexico, and she appeared at the fort on social occasions. During Col. Stephen Watts Kearny's visit to the fort in 1846, there was a tremendous fandango or ball given at the fort, and it was attended, according to Mr. Cragin, by Mrs. Metcalf, Mrs. Boggs, Mrs. Charles Bent, Mrs. Kit Carson, Mrs. George Bent, and Indian women, along with their husbands.[15] It is to be hoped that Mrs. Bent was properly honored as wife of the senior partner, but where was Mis-stan-stur?

Mrs. George Bent was mentioned, wife of the younger Bent brother and partner, the one who carried the billiard table from St. Louis to the fort. She was originally a lady of Taos named Maria de la Cruz Padilla, and was of good birth and breeding and great beauty.[16] Their family was a girl named Rumalda, perhaps for her step-cousin, and a boy named Elfego. Very little is known of this branch of the family.

The Mrs. Kit Carson at the party was Kit's third wife, Josepha Jaramillo. After a first marriage to an Arapahoe Indian named Singing Wind and the birth of a daughter Adeline, Kit was widowed.

He then made an unsuccessful suit for a niece of Ceran St. Vrain, Feliceté. He later married a Cheyenne belle called Making Out Road, who divorced both him and his half-Arapahoe daughter in the Cheyenne fashion. Finally, however, in early February 1843, Josepha and Kit were married in a romance that lasted 25 years, until death parted them for a few days in the spring of 1868.

Other ladies of the Bent's Fort community included Teresa Suazo, who had originally been married to Matthew

Kincaid, but who left him and married Alexander Barclay. She was with him in the building of El Pueblo and the Hardscrabble settlement, but visited the fort often or entertained William at Hardscrabble.[14]

The St. Vrain ladies were sometimes at the fort, but Ceran's wife, in particular, never left much impression on it. Ceran St. Vrain's second wife was Louisa Branch, daughter of either Ziba Branch or Alexander Branch, mountain men whom he encountered on his California expedition of 1830-31.[15] David Lavender says Luisa was his second wife, and that a Beaubien girl was his third, married in the summer of 1843. There is no information about any first marriage, and no records of the third,[16] although Grinnell says that both Maxwell and St. Vrain married Beaubien girls.

There is some documented information about the ladies that Marcellin St. Vrain introduced into the company at the fort. In the Pratt Diary,[17] several ladies are recorded:

> Bent's Fort, July 14, 1848. Messers Bent and St. Vrain are absent in the states, but the fort is occupied by people in their employment — in all at this time 26 souls — and a most mongrel set they are too! Americans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Mexicans, Indians, and half-breeds. . . .
> One of the St. Vrains has two Sioux squaws, sisters, who live with him here in the fort and by both of them has children. . . .

There were five of these children, and one of the women was Big Red, who subsequently married Billy Bransford of Trinidad. One of her daughters married E. B. Sopris. Another Indian wife of Marcellin was Tall Pawnee Woman, whom he heartlessly abandoned with two children in 1849, before his marriage to Elizabeth Jane Murphey. He reclaimed the children later, although this was no comfort to Tall Pawnee Woman.

Pratt also noted in his diary that Seth Ward had a squaw with him at Bent's Fort with four children. He could have been referring to Ward's wife, Lizzy Geary, eldest daughter of Eldridge Geary of Fort Geary. Lizzie had four children. Pratt was apparently unaware of the social structure of the frontier, or he would never have referred to Lizzie as a

squaw. He lister other women in Bent's Fort:

> a Spanish woman and a very good looking one, too. In addition (to Marcellin's and Ward's wives and the Spanish woman) there is one more female, the wife of a Spaniard engaged as a herdsman.

We know by name some of the women who worked at the fort. There was Charlotte Green, wife of Dick Green, both negro slaves, belonging probably to Charles Bent, freed by William in 1847. Charlotte was famous all over the frontier for her flapjacks, her biscuits, and her pies; also for her dancing and her often repeated claim "I'm de onliest lady in de whole dam Injun country."[24] Actually, she was not. Rosalie Rice was wife of Ed Rice, the Bent's Fort carpenter, and an extraordinarily good looking woman. During Lewis Garrard's sojourn on the Taos trail, he reported that Rosalie left Ed for Ben Raymond, another Bent employe, and went trading into Comanche country with the trading crew. She earned her way by serving as mess cook.[25]

Another lady named was Chipeta, widow of Jose Maria Valdez, who was killed at Turkey's Mill at Mora in 1847. Chipeta may have been the herdsman's wife referred to by Pratt, because she was very good looking, and William would have felt a responsibility for her after 1847. She dipped the tallow candles used in the fort, and did other chores.[26]

Men on the Santa Fe Trail looked forward to arriving at the fort for good food, baked bread — "Bread . . . ah, Bread again,"[27] and for getting laundry done.[28] Tailoring and sewing were done by a tailor, a Frenchman from St. Louis, who was also an expert tanner. He had a shop fitted up for his own use, and made clothes of anything from broadcloth to leather.[29] He would have left mending to the ladies who did the laundry, however.

There was a room next to a cistern that was probably known as a washroom. This was doubtless fitted out with a cannoa or trough made of a cottonwood log for washing either hands or clothes. The wives of all the employes must

have served the fort in some domestic capacity, because there was a good deal of work to be done.

The children were very well disciplined, keeping in their own part of the fort. George Simpson originally lived at the fort as a schoolmaster. The children's activities centered in their quarters, or the cook's room, eating there, or at a second table in the dining room with the women. The table was spread with a cloth, and tablecloths connote washing and ironing, as well as serving at table.[27] There was a crew of women by function, if not by name, including the Mexican plasterers.

Several more women are known by name. William Bent was known to have ransomed white women and children from Indians. These rescued captives were brought to the fort until they could be reunited with their families or escorted east with a wagon train. Until some arrangements for their futures could be made they doubtless worked about the fort. The earliest ladies named were Mrs. Harris and Mrs. Horn, ransomed in 1840 from the Comanches.[28]

In 1845, Mrs. Dale and her young son, Paul, were ransomed from the Pawnees. They were ransomed separately from different bands, and when the lost little boy was brought to the fort by a trading party, he was taken to the cook's room to be turned over to the women for care. When he arrived in the big kitchen next to the cook's room he spoke to the woman bending over the fire. She turned around to answer — and she was his mother.[29]

There is no record of William Bent or Bent-St. Vrain ever being recompensed for these ransoms. The records may exist, and have not been found, or Bent-St. Vrain may simply have written them off as an overhead expense. Records would make certain the number freed, however. One story is told of a Mexican woman freed from the Navajos who married a herdsman at the fort. When her Mexican husband came to the fort to reclaim her, she declined to return to New Mexico with him. She liked life at the fort better than life in the New Mexico colonies.

The most famous American lady visiltor to Bent's Fort and the most meticulous observer and recorder of the place, in the eventful summer of 1846, was Susan Magoffin, wife of Sam Magoffin, sister-in-law of James Magoffin, and a Southern lady. In an upper room at Bent's Fort, furnished with her own furniture and attended by a French physician, she gave birth to a stillborn child. Mrs. Robert Bent and Mrs. Eugene Leitsendorfer of Taos were in the fort at the time, and could not have been indifferent to her plight, so may have assisted. Mrs. Magoffin saw nothing of the fort except the reception room, and her own private room, which was a luxury in that crowded summer. She noted with envy, though, the Indian woman who on the same day — July 31, 1846 — had given birth to a healthy son in the room below hers.

Her story, contained in a diary, is one of the treasures of Yale University. It is also the most complete record kept by one of the ladies of Bent's Fort.[30]

There are many other, later ladies of the fort: Uncle Dick Wooten kidnapped his first bride from Taos and fled with her to Bent's Fort; later, in 1856 he met his second wife, Mrs. Mary Ann Manning, there.

The stage station had hostesses and cooks, and other women camped there on the southern immigrant route.[31] But the chief thing is — there were a great many more ladies, both named and unnamed, in the history of Bent's Fort than has been realized.

FOOTNOTES

1. O'Meara, Walter, *Daughters of the Country*, p. 210.
2. Taylor, Cress, in the Bent-St. Vrain Collection, *Western History Collection*, University of Colorado, Boulder. Much of the Owl Woman material comes from her, including Owl Woman's Indian name. See also David Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, pp. 175-176.
3. Moore, Jackson W., *Bent's Old Fort*, an Archaeological Study, p. 38.
4. Construction details from Grinnell, Moore, Lavender, Phillips and others.
5. Turner Collection, Box 33, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif. There is a snapshot of Turner in front of the standing walls.
6. O'Meara makes this judgment on Bent, but Grinnell and others report the "no Indians" rule.
7. *Wright Mss. Miscellany*, Kansas State Historical Society. Wright also comments that John Prowers "bought" his wife.
8. Rath, Ida Ellen, *The Rath Trail*, p. 13 for details of Cheyenne customs.
9. *Nixon Diary*, Coe Collection, Yale University, Aug. 5, 1855 entry.
10. The house in Westport at 1032 W. 55th Street is now owned by Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Campbell, who are very aware of its history. The initial structure, two stories and six rooms, was built by Bent in the 1850's, probably 1858. Sold to Ward in 1871
    Schauffler, Edward R. *Kansas City Star*, May 2, 1949

Abstract of land at 1032 W. 55th St., Kansas City (Westport)
Dec. 5, 1833 Edward Partridge of Jackson County (bishop of Mormon Church)
1838 deeded to Alexander Doniphan
1840 Dr. Johnston Lykins, first postmaster
1857 Edmund Price, Westport, second mayor of Kansas City
1858, April 6 William W. Bent
1871 Seth E. Ward
1942 Leland W. Browne
1950 Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Campbell

11. Cragin, Francis, *Notebook III*, p. 39, abstract
12. *Ibid.*, p. 32. Also *Kansas City Times*, July 30, 1965.
13. *Hurd Collection*, State Historical Society of Colorado. This is an interesting note, because when all the partners were at Bent's Fort, it was always the suave Ceran St. Vrain who acted as host and who sat at the head of the table, in spite of the fact that William was the number one man at the fort.
14. These records were closely examined for facts. None found.
15. Cragin, *Notebook VIII*, p. 3.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 3, also see *Barclay Papers*, Bancroft.
18. *Wolfskill Diary*, p. 2, Huntington Library. Also Lavender, DeBusk Memorial.
18. *Wolfskill Diary*, p. 2, Huntington Library. Also Lavender DeBusk Memorial, State Historical Society of Colorado 359/2
19. According to Michael Beshoar in the DeBusk Memorial, Ceran became mad nine years after the Beaubien marriage and died ultimately in a St. Louis asylum. This of course does not jibe with sales of flour in the Cherry Creek diggings, so is not reported as history.
20. Pratt, Orville, Cragin, *Notebook XVII*, p. 34.
21. This quote appears in almost everything written about Bent's Fort.
22. *Wah-To-Yah*, p. 249.
23. Grinnell, p. 61.
24. Field, also Grinnell, p. 61-2.
25. Farnham, p. 107.
26. Phillips, Rufus, Lecture at La Junta, Jan. 8, 1928. In Hurd Collection.
27. Parkman, *The Oregon Trail*, p. 260.
28. *Barclay Diaries*. Barclay was factor at Bent's Fort, 1838-1842.
29. Reported in Lavender, p. 256.
30. Magoffin. See Lavender, p. 256-7.
31. Cragin, *Notebook XI*, p. 6.

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