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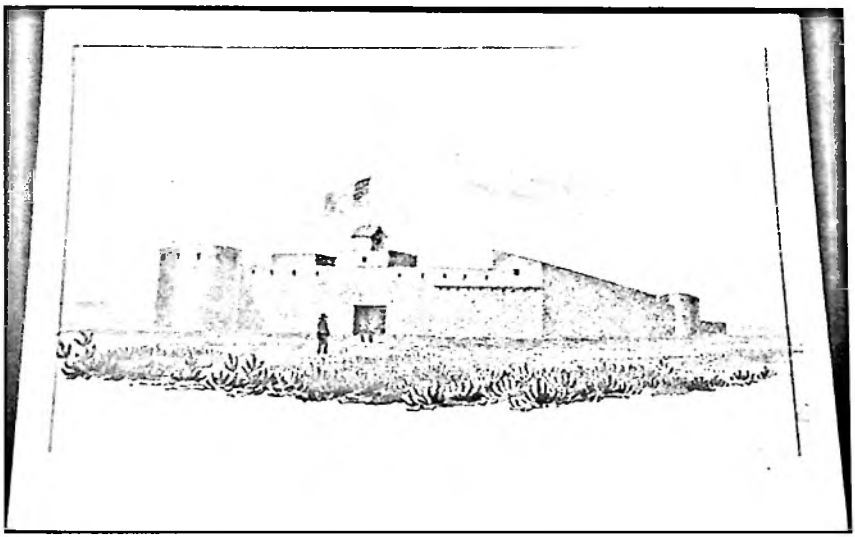

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An original drawing of the castle on the plains by Lieutenant J.W. Abert in 1845

# Bent's Fort: An Outpost for Cultural Exchange and Exploration of the West

**By Emma Perkins**

## Our Author

Emma Perkins was born and raised in Boulder and is currently a student at Fairview High School. In addition to pursuing the IB Diploma, a high academic honor, she swims for the Fairview Girls' Swim Team.

Her paper on Bent's Fort won first place at the 2016 state National History Day competition and represented Colorado at the national competition. The focus of her presentation was on the role Bent's Fort played in the cultural exchange and exploration of the West. Emma's paper also won the Denver Posse's History Day award and is presented in this issue of the *Roundup*. Writing is something she hopes to continue to pursue through college.

# Bent's Fort: An Outpost for Cultural Exchange and Exploration of the West

**By Emma Perkins**

*"The Indian trade transplanted by Bent, St. Vrain, & Company . . . filled the vacuum of the central plains, irrevocably tied the Southwest to St. Louis, and so helped prepare the way for the final influx that would make the nation whole."*[1]
David Lavender

Bent's Fort stood from 1833 to 1849 as an essential post for western trade in the middle of the Santa Fe Trail. The adobe castle invited a rich mix of American, Mexican, and Native American peoples to exchange goods and consequently became a hub for the exchange of culture. The fort also accelerated the exploration of the West by proving it was possible to live and thrive in the wide-open plains and serving as a base for westward movement.

## The Santa Fe Trail and the Creation of the Fort

The Santa Fe Trail was an 800-mile dirt path that flowed through the great plains of the American West, extending from Independence, Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico.[2] Opened in 1821, it formed a link to valuable trade outposts in Mexican territory, providing a pathway for trade with Indian tribes occupying the vast land.[3] By the late 1840s nearly five-thousand wagons a year made the journey.[4] No major settlements existed along the route until 1833 brought the establishment of the fort that overshadowed all others of the time:[5] Bent's Fort, "an adobe empire that shaped the destiny of the American Southwest."[6]

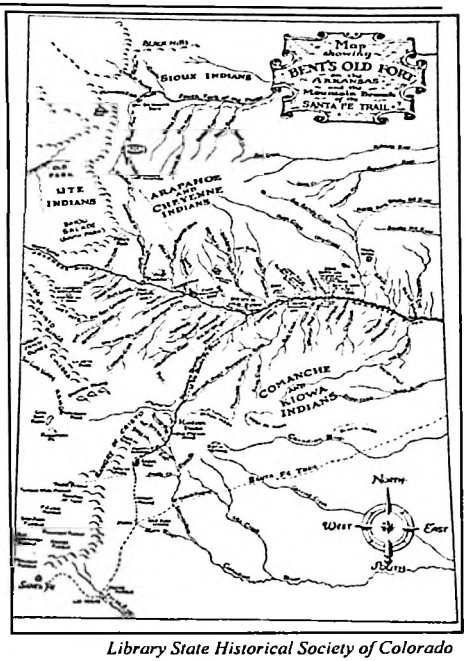
The fur trade drove much of the traffic on the Santa Fe Trail. In the 1830s, buffalo hides were the highest demand, and Native American trade was the easiest way for trappers to obtain them. One man was especially intrigued by Indian trade: William Wells Bent.[7] William, born 1809, and his brother, Charles, born 1799, grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, a town "born facing west" that consisted of shops filled with Indians, Negroes, Spaniards, Canadian trappers, and American hunters trading side by side, foreshadowing the variety to come at Bent's Fort.[8] Inspired by wild tales of western mountain men and trapping, Charles entered the furtrade business, trapping for a private company in the early 1820s. William followed, and the two became experienced trappers and travelers. By 1827, the declining beavertrade left Charles unemployed, bankrupt, and, after his father's death, responsible for William. Taking a risk, he turned towards New Mexican trade.[9] He and William led their first wagon train from St. Louis to Santa Fe in 1828. In the following years, Charles completed multiple trips, becoming one of the most accomplished and knowledgeable travelers and traders of the Santa Fe Trail.

Meanwhile in Taos, a trading town near Santa Fe, a Frenchman and acquaintance of the Bents', Ceran St. Vrain, had established himself as a prominent trader. After numerous trips, Charles pursued partnership with St. Vrain: he would manage transportation of

goods and Ceran would run Taos trade. In 1830, Bent, St. Vrain, & Co. was established. The first year was a success: business flourished and the system proved very efficient.[10]

As Charles initiated his business venture, William joined an independent trapping group in the winter of 1829.[11] During this time, he had his first encounter with a group of Cheyennes along the Arkansas River. Out of kindness, he hid them from Comanche enemies, bonding with the Cheyenne tribe and unknowingly planting a seed that would influence the growth of the United States.[12] William quickly became fixated with Indian trade, traveling between camps to barter for goods. He built a headquarters stockade at Fountain Creek near modern day Pueblo, Colorado, where customers could seek him out. By 1832, the growing business could support more imported goods. William described the opportunity to Charles, and the idea for a powerful central fort bloomed.

In the summer of 1832, the brothers and Cheyenne chief Yellow Wolf selected a location on the U.S.-Mexico boundary.[13] Thirty miles above the Cheyenne meeting place, Big Timbers, the location considered traffic on the Santa Fe trail, trade potential with the Cheyenne, Ute, Kiowa, Arapaho, Pawnee, Comanche, and Apache, and the roaming grounds of more distant tribes; it was in the heartland of the plains (see map).[14] Around 100 Mexicans hired from Taos built the adobe fort.[15]
On November 12, 1833, the completion of the largest structure between Missouri and the Pacific[16] was appropriately announced by a meteor shower: "Like an explosion of meteors on an autumn night, Bent's Fort would light the vast prairie, changing it forever."[17]

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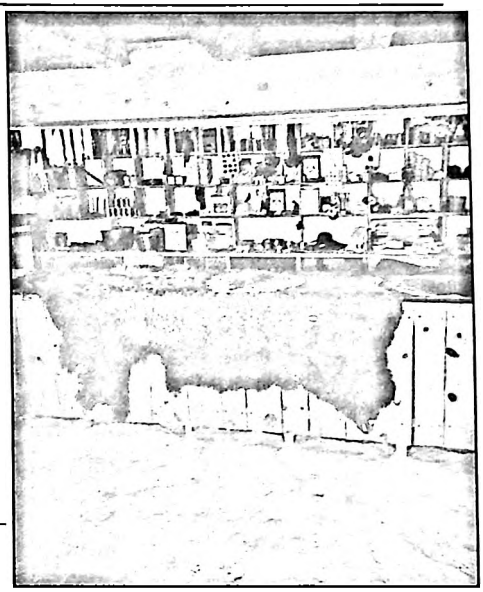
**Map showing Bent's Fort in relation to Plains Indian tribes**

## At the Heart of the Plains: The Exchange of Goods and Cultures

As Charles sent goods down the trail and St. Vrain handled Taos trade, William managed the fort. A "cosmopolitan feel of trade, politics, and society"[18] evolved. Between 1834 and 1849, a staggering variety of people made the fort a hub for cultural exchange. At any time the languages of Cheyenne, Comanche, English, French, Sioux, Spanish, and Ute were heard.[19] Occasionally the list included even German, Russian,

Apache, or Navajo. These languages and the people who spoke them "wove together in a rich tapestry held together by the universal sign language of the plains."[20]



Trade motivated the gathering: people of different cultures exchanging goods from all over the world created an opportunity to encounter exciting new things and ideas. In exchange for buffalo hides or horses,[21] Indians could attain manufactured items that could revolutionize their lives such as guns, powder, flints, knives, kettles, pots, brass, and wire.[22] Additionally, the fort fostered trade with Santa Fe. For Mexican gold, silver, and mules, American traders offered imported rum and alcohol stills, sugar, coffee, rice, tea, and domestic items.[23] Many of these goods were manufactured in Europe or Asia, elevating the market to a global scale. By cultivating this trade, Bent's Fort formed a link in an international exchange system that incorporated items and people not only from the U.S. and Mexico, but from countries across the Atlantic.[24] Indian life was significantly changed by diseases and domesticated plants and animals brought over from Europe, but also expanded to reflect their fascination with European crafts and the hundreds of new manufactured items from distant shops and forages: tipis could house British furniture and French horns could call a tribe to dinner.[25] European immigrants later flooded the region en-route of the California Gold Rush and, they, in turn, would find diversion in bartering with Indians for exotic souvenirs.[26]

The lure of trade inevitably invited the pool of cultures to mix beyond exchanging items.

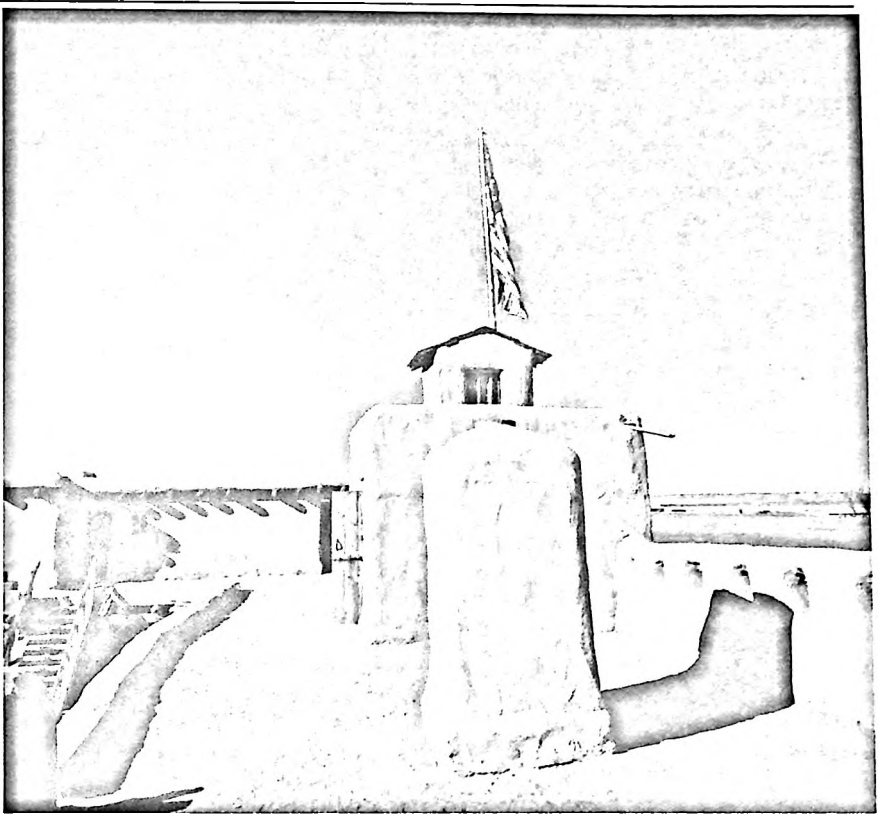
A visiting soldier journaled that the fort was "'a perfect Babel of a place not only from heterogeneousness of tongues but from differences of character assembled. [It] had all sorts from polished gentlemen down to the rough daring man of the mountains. As well as the untamed savage.'"[27] The fort's employees consisted of nearly 100 men and women, including many nationalities, from French clerks to Mexican herders.[28] The inhabitants fostered cultural exchange, especially because color, race, and religion had no significant impact on social standing at the fort. Charlotte Green, the Bent's slave cook, and Jim Beckwourth, a black mountain man, were held in high regard. People of all classes and colors were included in daily "yarn spinning" (storytelling),

and gambling, forming bonds between peoples of different heritage.[29] Mexican and Indian cooking styles were incorporated in the fort's meals.[30] The best presentations of cultural and societal union were the nightly dances: Lewis Gerrard, a fort visitor, wrote, "Such a medley of steps is seldom seen . . . the halting, irregular march of the war dance, the slipping gallopade, the boisterous pitching of the Missouri backwoodsman, and the more nice gyrations of the Frenchman-for all, irrespective of rank, age, and *color*, went pellmell into the excitement."[31]

Interracial marriage was another prominent method of cultural crossing with the frequent coupling of white workers and Mexican or Indian women.[32] Marriage into a tribe offered company to lonely travelers and, more importantly, served a sounder method of economic stability than offering bounties of alcohol (in his journal, Colonel Henry Dodge noted that Indians "will sell their horses, blankets, and everything else they possess for a drink of [whiskey]"[33]).[34] William Bent himself married a Cheyenne named Owl Woman, and after her death married her sister, Yellow Woman. He made an effort to foster both cultures through his children, a perfect example of the type of cultural integration that could occur.[35] It was not uncommon for lonely white traders to take Indian wives and have children with them.[36] Peace between peoples was another objective for William and his fort, both between tribes and between Mexicans and Indians.[37] Keeping good relations with Indians was essential for business, but also demonstrated William's respect for the plains people.[38] He kept on good terms with the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes and their enemies, the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches, overseeing trade with both sides.[39] William facilitated numerous intertribal councils and peace talks at the fort, the first between the Cheyenne and Arapaho and their enemies, the Pawnee, in 1835.[40] Lieutenant James W. Abert, present for a later talk in 1845, noted how the Indians and whites negotiated frontier style: seated on buffalo robes on the council chamber's dirt floor.[41] George F. Ruxton, another visitor, journaled (with spelling errors) a similar scene during a peace talk in 1847: "Chiefs of the Shain, Kioway, and Arpaho, sit in solemn conclave with the head traders, and smoke the 'calument' over their real and imaginary grievances . . . over clouds of tobacco and kinnikkinnik, these grave affairs are settled and terms arranged."[42]

## Symbol of Manifest Destiny: Exploration of the Western Frontier

Bent's Fort played a significant role in the American movement to explore and expand to the West. Following Texas (annexed 1845), President Polk's call for acquisition of California and Oregon in the name of Manifest Destiny boosted momentum for Americanization of the plains, turning heads towards Bent's Fort.[43] The Bents had "built a vast mud castle that Mexico came to fear.... There was reason. For here was the spearhead of American expansion to the Southwest...."[44] Before the U.S. declared war on Mexico in 1846, General Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West advanced down the trail, stopping at Bent's Fort to restock supplies and re-



convene.[45] As the war progressed, William Bent provided guides and relayed information that later convinced Kearny to continue his expedition to California after he annexed New Mexico.[46] At about the same time, John C. Frémont led an expedition to survey California, or, as he states in his journal, "of the prairie region southward,"[47] and Lieutenant J.W. Abert ventured to survey the presentday Oklahoma panhandle; both utilized the fort.[48] After leaving Bent's Fort, Kearny's troops took Santa Fe[49] in a quick, nearlybloodless encounter, and "once the way was prepared, New Mexico, Arizona, and California were inevitably lost." The frontier leapfrogged past the fort, a crucial post for the physical invasion of the West.[50]

The fort symbolized American civilization in the western wilderness.[51] In the 1830s, only a few daring visionaries thought of continental expansion because the plains were thought to be for barbaric Indians, uninhabitable by white men. But the Bents and their adobe empire inspired a new way of thinking: one could live, survive, and even thrive in the "golden glow of the West."[52] The

Bents and St. Vrain were pathbreakers themselves and their fort sheltered more well-known pathbreakers, Kit Carson, Jim Beckwourth, Old Bill Williams, and more as they opened up the Southwest.[53] Their explorations led to settlement, earning them recognition as the real pioneers of the West.[54]

The company's social and political connections in Santa Fe and Indian relations helped initiate New Mexico's annexation and a U.S. presence in the West.[55] The fort was the first hand of American commerce in that part of the country,[56] accelerating the exploration and Americanization of the area in the 30s and 40s.[57] In his journal, George F. Ruxton described it as "very striking, standing as it does hundreds of miles from any settlement, on the vast and lifeless prairie . . . the solitary stranger passing this lone fort, feels proudly secure when he comes withing the sight of the 'stars and stripes' which float above the walls"[58] (see Appendix II).

"Outpost of manifest destiny" is a grand and fitting title for Bent's Fort: a catalyst for change, it ushered the idea for expansion to the Pacific. It is possible that without the fort, western expansion and the Mexican boundary would have evolved differently, or perhaps not at all. An essential jumping-off point for expansion on the southwestern edge of the American frontier, it offered a way for the country to explore even farther west.[59] The fort's significance proved "bigger than its purpose, its functions, or its personalities. The fort had a profound effect on the westward movement. In fifteen short years, the entire frontier passed through its gates: trappers, traders, merchants, an army of conquest, gold seekers, ranchers, and finally farmers."[60]

## Last Days and Legacy

The war with Mexico (1846-1848) initiated the undoing of the fort as the constant flow of supply wagons disrupted normal business. The war excited the raiding spirit of many tribes, increasing the frequency of aggression. The flood of emigrants and army trains also angered the Plains Indians because buffalo herds were scared off and killed. Tensions rose, the U.S. looked to police the plains, and the chaotic conditions hurt Indian trade.[61]

At one point, St. Vrain offered the fort to the government for $15,000 (the offer was declined) without consulting William, straining their relationship. In 1848, Ceran lost interest and turned

over his share to William.[62] The War Department was still considering a purchase, and William could have made a hefty sum, but he adamantly refused to sell for sentimental reasons.[63]

Indian trade declined with overhunting of buffalo and an outbreak of cholera[64] when the 1849 California gold rush brought a tide of whites, spreading the "Big Cramps" across the plains.[65] The epidemic extinguished half the Southern Cheyennes within weeks. With the Indian trade damaged beyond repair, the fort could no longer support itself. On August 21, 1849, "the death boom of the prairie's greatest feudal empire split the evening sky."[66] William Bent supposedly refused to let the army or Indians take over his monumental fortress and burned it to the ground himself.[67]

This mysterious termination is also somewhat tragic: the westward expansion facilitated by the fort ultimately led to the end of the peaceful era it created with the relocation of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.[68] "The ground in the vicinity of the old fort is a cemetery in which lies the bones of the Indians of both sexes and all ages; of trappers, traders, and adventurers, emigrants and American soldiers."[69]

In 1976, the fort was reconstructed by the National Park Service using archaeological excavations, diaries, and original sketches. The reconstruction allows Bent's Fort to maintain a legacy of exploration as a place where visitors can fully immerse themselves in the past and explore what it was like to be at the adobe fortress which once stood as America's first stronghold for exploration and exchange in the Great Plains of the West.[70]

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