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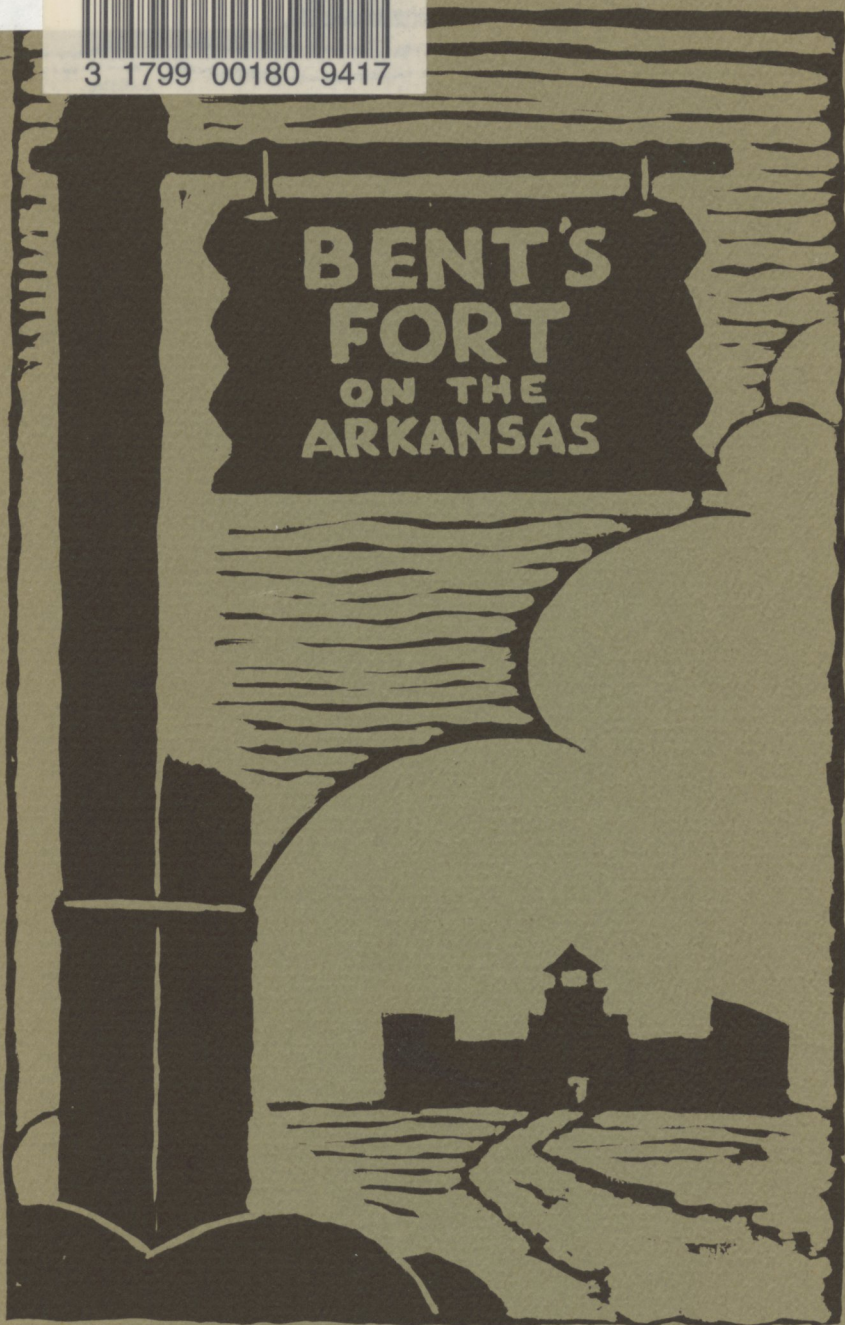
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**BENT'S
FORT
ON THE
ARKANSAS**



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF COLORADO

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Foreword



AT A POINT along the meandering Arkansas River, between the present towns of La Junta and Las Animas, once stood an adobe fort important in history, adventure and the development of Colorado and the West. This was the fort constructed between 1829 and 1833 by the Bent brothers, William and Charles, and Ceran St. Vrain. The Bent brothers were traders and this was their frontier outpost, adjacent to the strategic Santa Fe Trail. Here Indian tribes of the plains traded buffalo hides; here trappers, traders, soldiers and travelers stopped for rest, for supplies and for some of the comforts of civilized life. For nearly twenty years this remarkable mud-brick fortification stood as an island and a harbor of safety in the vast and unconquered Southwest. Here an army stopped en route to New Mexico; here such men as Kit Carson, General S. W. Kearny, "Uncle Dick" Wootton and other famous personages of that era made their temporary home. The fort made possible a traffic in hides and a resultant trade which promoted settlement of this era. Without such fortification the white man might well have found this region untenable for many years.

The story told in this booklet, in pictures and words, is a product of considerable research. Stories told by travelers, giving an eye-witness account of life at the fort, serve as the main source of information. It must be pointed out that there are conflicting sources; the size of the fort, for example, has been adjudged differently by different visitors. Fortunately, a drawing made by Captain J. W. Abert while visiting the Fort in 1845 was recently discovered by Dr. LeRoy Hafen of the State Museum. This diagram of the fort was on the back of a drawing of an Indian made by Captain Abert and was a part of a collection of drawings in the hands of Mr. Fred Rosenstock of Denver. This drawing enabled the Historical Society to begin excavations at the fort site for the remains of the adobe walls. The fort itself has long since become a part of the soil or been carried away brick by brick by the neighboring settlers for their own structures.

With the aid of the Abert drawing and the able guidance of Herbert W. Dick, archaeologist with the Trinidad Junior

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College, the first diggings were begun in the latter part of October 1953. The findings made by Herbert Dick and James T. Forrest, Deputy Curator of the Museum, were rewarding and illuminating. The adobe bricks of the foundation were clearly discernible after careful excavation. The size of the bricks, the width of the wall and the position of certain support posts were all evident. Excavation will be continued at the fort site until the exact outline of the fort and all other information obtainable from sub-surface remains have been uncovered.

The research and the excavation involving Bent's Fort are not strictly of academic interest. For years the Daughters of the American Revolution of La Junta and environs cared for the fort site and only when they were assured by the State Historical Society that proper care would be taken of the grounds did they relinquish their deed to the property. Their continued interest and the interest of the entire surrounding community convinced the directors and administrative heads of the State Historical Society that this was indeed one of the potential historic sites of the entire State. At the close of 1953 the D.A.R. turned over to the State, specifically to the State Historical Society, the deed to the plot on which the fort once stood. The committee appointed by the State Museum, composed of George S. Cosand, Chester E. Beck, Henry Frank, Jr., Inez Nelson, L. P. Strain and John Johnson, has cooperated fully with the Society on this subject.

The Society has long range plans for Bent's Fort. When it becomes a financial possibility, work will be started on reconstruction of the fort — sections being rebuilt as time and money permit, until eventually the fort will stand as it did when the Bent brothers were masters of this outpost of the Southwest. It is believed that one day this will be one of the most impressive museums of its type in the State and in the United States.

Credit for this booklet goes to H. G. Miller, the artist who made the drawings, Dr. LeRoy Hafen, who edited the text, and to Roy Hunt, who made certain revisions in the corrected text.

JAMES T. FORREST, Deputy Curator,
State Historical Society of Colorado.

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The reader will note that this booklet has been imprinted on one side of the page only. This has been done to give these drawings the best possible presentation. The blank pages might well be utilized for travel notes, for comments on Colorado History, etc.

BENT'S FORT

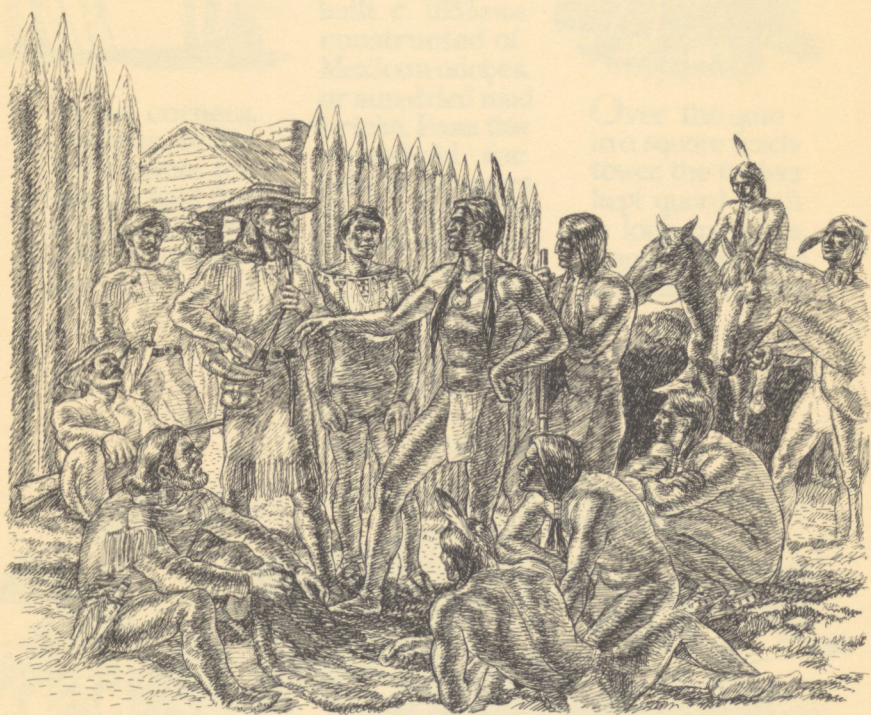
ON THE
ARKANSAS



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Drawings by Harry G. Miller Jr.

BENT'S FORT



The Bent brothers, William and Charles, with Ceran St.Vrain, are said to have built a stockade trading post on the Arkansas River before they built their famous adobe structure known as Bent's Fort. The Bents and St.Vrain were interested in trade with the trappers for beaver skins, in barter with the Arapahoes, Cheyennes, Kiowas and Comanches for buffalo robes, and in the overland traffic to Santa Fe.

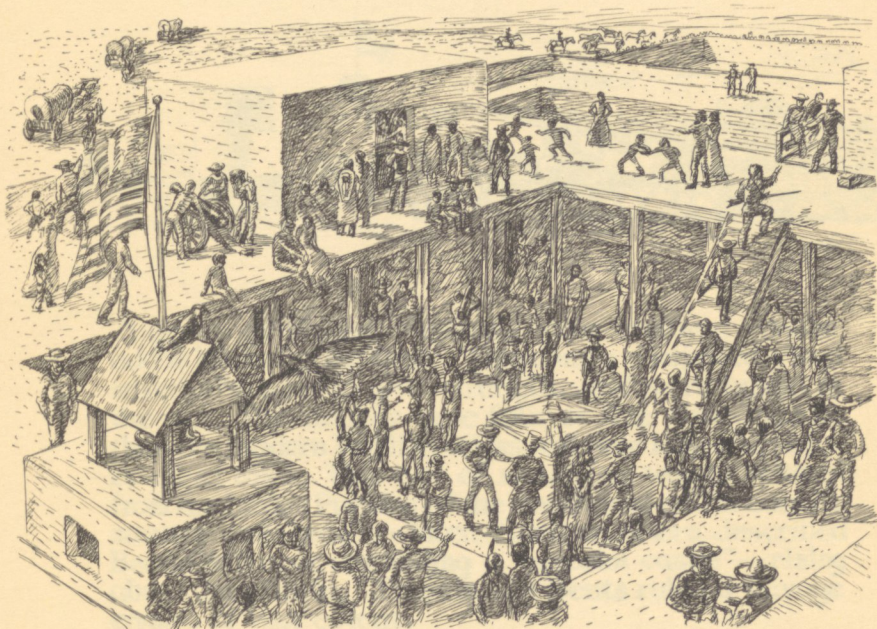


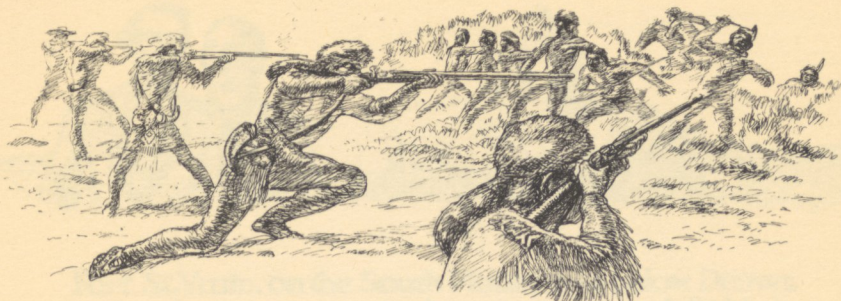
At two corners, bastions, or circular towers for defense, held fire-arms, sabers and keen-bladed lances. ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

Bent's Old Fort, built c. 1832, was constructed of Mexican adobes, or sun-dried mud bricks. From this stronghold, for nearly 20 years, Bent and St. Vrain traded with the savage tribes for furs and buffalo hides. A strange medley of races lived here, 500 miles from the white settlements.

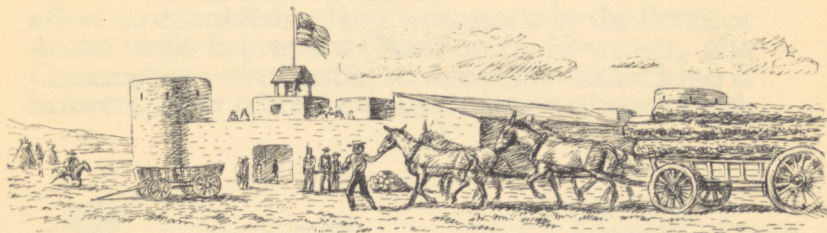


Over the gate in a square watchtower, the traders kept guard with a long spy-glass, against surprise attacks by Indians.

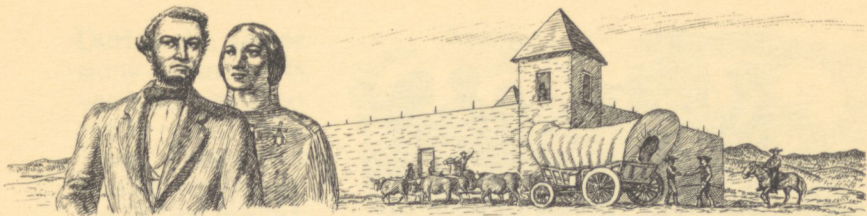




One winter, while Kit Carson and eleven men were cutting logs in the area of the Fort, a war-party of sixty Crows stole all the horses and mules. Kit's party trailed the Indians through the snow and surprised them in camp. The Crows attacked savagely, but the whites defeated them, killing two. Meanwhile, Little Turtle and Black White-man, two friendly Cheyennes, stampeded the animals from the rear and saved the herd. Seeing this, the Crows scattered and returned north over the prairies on foot.



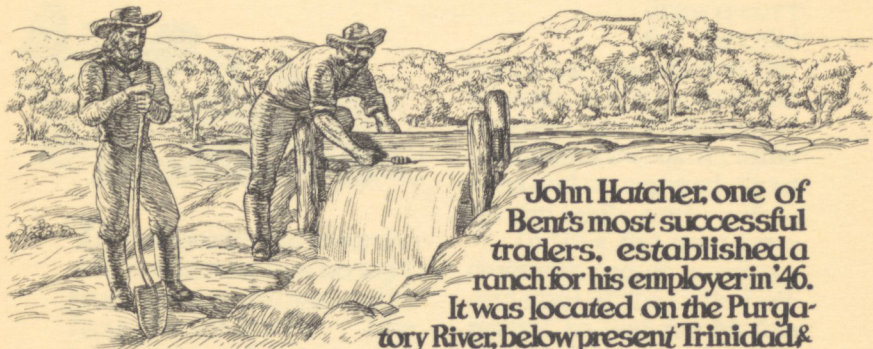
A group of skilled Mexicans were employed to make adobe bricks for the Fort. These were composed of mud mixed with wool to give strength, and were baked in the sun. The adobes were four or five times larger than the modern building bricks, and were laid up in walls 2 to 4 feet thick. This type of structure was developed from the Indian Pueblos of the southwest and is cool in summer and warm in winter. Early travelers described Bent's Old Fort as resembling a "baronial castle"—rising above the prairie. From it, the Bents ruled a savage empire of vast extent.



Fort St.Vrain, on the South Platte River below Denver, was another post operated by the Bent and St.Vrain company. It was usually under the management of Marcelline St.Vrain, a brother of Ceran. Marcelline married a Sioux maiden who bore him three children. Because of a difficulty with the Indians he left the country permanently.



A third, but unsuccessful effort to establish a Fort was made by the Bents at Adobe Walls in present Oklahoma. However, the Comanches were hostile to this post - attacking it in force. After a brief existence it was abandoned.



John Hatcher, one of Bent's most successful traders, established a ranch for his employer in '46. It was located on the Purgatory River, below present Trinidad, & here Hatcher constructed the first irrigation ditch in Colorado. For about two years crops were planted and raised, but Indian troubles forced abandonment of the project.❖

During the winter many amusements were planned to while away the time. There were dances, candy-pulling frolics, in which all the teamsters and laborers took part ~ ~ ~ ~ ~



In the courtyard, gay plumage of strutting peacocks astonished the Indians, who called them "Thunder Birds."



St. Vrain once bought a pair of goats in St. Louis, intending them to draw a cart for the child-

ren. One was killed on the way out, but the other was always a great curiosity to the Indians, as it clambered and scampered about on the walls and roofs.

In time the goat grew cross with age, or perversity, and chased the little half-breeds to and fro as they laughed or shrieked in mock terror. The Indians had never seen a goat before.



To celebrate the Fourth of July, wild mint was brought from the mountains, and ice from the ice house. The trappers made merry over frosted mint juleps, which they jocosely termed "Hailstorm."

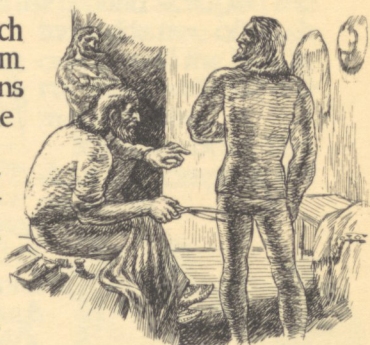


Chipeta, half French and half Mexican, was the housekeeper. Charlotte, the Negress cook, described herself as "de only lady in de whole damn Injun country" -



The store kept candy and ginger for children.

An old French tailor from New Orleans lived at the Fort and made buckskin clothes for the men. He also tanned the hides himself.



Andrew Green, the negro cook, warned the children not to play in the ice house, as they might get sick.

During the winter months the carpenter and a negro blacksmith were kept busily engaged repairing the wagons for the annual caravan to Westport in April.***





From the roving Indians the traders learned how to skin and tan buffalo robes. The dead animal was turned upon its belly, the hide split above the spine and thus peeled downward. Later, the women pegged out the skins on the ground scraped the



inner side free of flesh and tanned the hide by rubbing it with the animal's brains.

It took about ten days to complete the process.

Bull-boats, the only native craft used upon the plains, were constructed of buffalo-bull hides, sewed together and stretched over a framework of tough willows, and fastened together with rawhide. When finished, they resembled rounded tubs without stem or stern.



The Indians could handle these clumsy boats with considerable skill. Heavy loads were ferried across the shallow rivers of the west by this means. The bullboat was typical of the Plains Indians, though the tribes at the head of the Missouri, the Snake and Green River also understood the construction.





Each year, before the trapping season began, the bourgeois, or commander of the trading post, signed contracts with the mountain men, advancing supplies, for which they paid at the end of the season. Bent and St. Vrain sent their most experienced traders with various Indian tribes to secure buffalo robes after the fall hunt. Bent's Fort differed from most of the posts in the fact that it dealt more in hides than in furs, due probably to its location at the edge of the buffalo range. The Arapahoes especially were known as the "Buffalo Indians":

The trappers, after binding themselves to the service of a trader, made their preparations for long absences, some times lasting a year or more. Mules were preferred as pack animals, and the Mexican "aperajo" or pad rather than the sawbuck saddle.



One by one, the "buckskin brigades" filed away into the wilderness. Dick Wootton, a noted Bent's Fort trapper, relates in his book that on one trip he was absent for two years, returning with \$25,000 worth of fur.



Ofttimes, in the dead of winter when game was scarce, the trappers were reduced to starvation. Rabbits, grouse, or even rattlesnakes were eaten to sustain life. In the summer time, while traversing unknown deserts,

they were tortured by thirst as they sought life-saving springs or buffalo wallows. The bleaching bones of wild animals told their story of suffering and death. Especially dreaded were the terrible *Jornado del Muerto* (Journey of death) and the white wastes west of the great Salt Lake. But even these dangers failed to dim the restless spirit that drove the trappers on beyond the ranges.



Added to the perils of the mountain men were the swollen rivers that rushed down from the mountains each spring. These were forded or crossed by swimming. Nothing but death could stop the progress of these hardy adventurers, with their Indian women and their bright-eyed half-breed children. Their mode of life, their lodges and their viewpoints were those of the Indians with whom they consorted.



In catching the beaver, the trapper spent many lonely and hazardous hours, penetrating to every nook and valley in the Rocky Mountain region. He planted his traps under water, attaching them by a chain to a heavy stake projecting above the water. This stick was daubed with *castorum*, an extract taken from a dead beaver. The scent was an irresistible attraction to live beavers, which, swimming above the trap, lowered their hind feet to the creekbed while sniffing, and thus were caught.



The trapper then removed the skin and tail, the latter a rare culinary delicacy. At night the trappers assembled in their camps and compared notes on the day's catch, or Indian "sign."



Over their roaring fires the hardy adventurers made merry over barbecued haunches of venison or buffalo hump-ribs, telling tall yarns to while away the time. Never was their vigilance relaxed against a surprise attack.

One of the most famous
of Bent's traders - was
"Uncle Dick" Wootton.



This name was given him after he arrived in Denver and dispensed free liquor under a cottonwood tree on Christmas Day, 1858. Later, "Uncle Dick" built a toll road across Raton Pass, southern Colorado, where he remained many years. As early as 1852 this adventurous mountain man drove a herd of 2000 sheep to California, crossing over Cochetopa Pass in the Continental Divide - and travelling through the Salt Lake Desert country.



Lucien Maxwell, one-time foreman of Bent's Fort, married a daughter of Judge Beaubien of Taos, and thus inherited the vast Beaubien and Miranda land grant of approximately 1,000,000 acres. Here he lived like a baronial lord, but died at Ft. Sumner in 1875, in comparative poverty.



The wagon master was in absolute control of the train, ordering its movements, looking after the condition of animals and equipment, and issuing rations. Bales of buffalo robes filled the wagons and herds of horses and mules were taken along for sale.

These experienced mountain men were always prepared to repulse attacks from the hostile Comanches, and did so easily.



In 1848, a savage attack was made on a Bent train at Pawnee Fork by Red Arm's band. The leader was shot down as he led the charge, and the Fork was thereafter called Red Arm Creek by the Indians.



The men with the wagon train were organized into messes ~ the Delaware and Shawnee hunters messing together.



In April, after the winter trade had been completed, the wagon train started for the Missouri River. The journey lasted 6 months, as the distance was 500 miles each way. Each of the heavy wagons was drawn by three yoke of oxen, and a wagon master was in direct charge, although William Bent usually went along.



Hunters accompanied the train and supplied the attendants with fresh buffalo or antelope meat.

At Westport the wagons were unloaded, the bales of robes piled on the levee, and the wagons were driven outside town where grass and water were abundant.





While William Bent sold his robes in St. Louis, his men went into camp near Westport, and the bullwhacker and traders danced and drank at the Last Chance saloon.

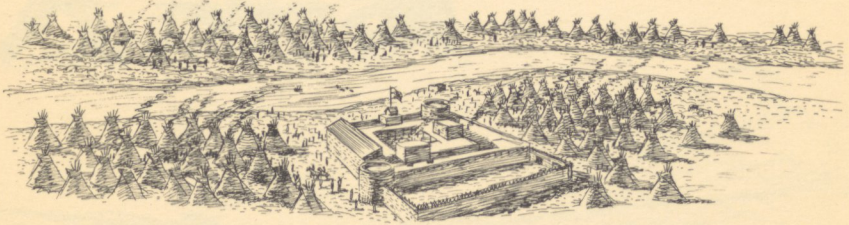


The wagons were loaded with trade goods brought back by Bent, and the long journey home began. It was mid-Autumn before the brown walls of Bent's Fort were sighted.



Arrival at the Fort was occasion for joyful re-unions. Wagons were put away, ox-yokes and chains were hung in orderly rows, and the men made ready for the winter trading activities.

One morning, in 1839, a band of sixty Comanche warriors, hiding in the bushes by the river, swiftly surprised the Mexican horse-guard, and when he bravely tried to save his charges, three Comanche arrows pierced his heart.



Under William Bent's wise guidance a great peace treaty was perfected between the warring Indian tribes at Bent's Fort in 1840.



Marauders on the Old Santa Fe Trail were not always Indians. A band of white cutthroats robbed and murdered, on the Little Arkansas, a wealthy citizen of New Mexico - Don Antonio Jose Chavez.



One-eyed Juan, a celebrated Mexican vaquero, was a fixture at the Fort.
His sole occupation was to break wild horses.



He could ride a vicious buckner with a dollar in each stirrup, without losing the money beneath his feet.



In 1843-44 Kit Carson made his second trip with Colonel Fremont. Sent back to Bent's Fort from El Pueblo to buy mules, he arrived at the junction of Cherry Creek and the South Platte two days before Fremont's command, although he had had to travel many more miles. This celerity was characteristic of Kit.

In 1846, a party of Mormons, on the way to Utah, were halted by winter snows. They built a row of cabins and a church across from Fort Pueblo.

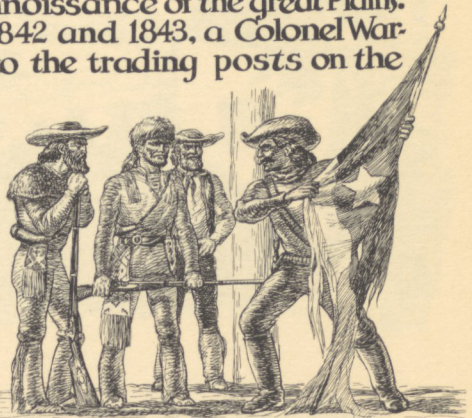




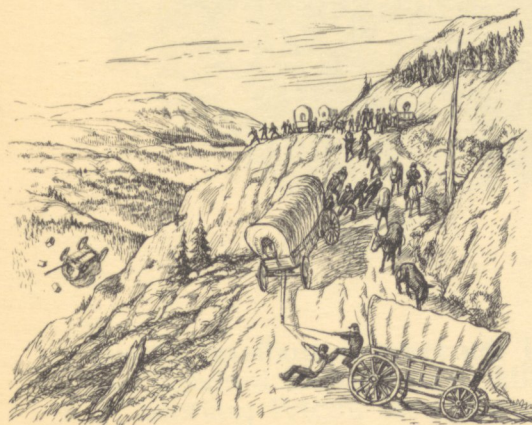
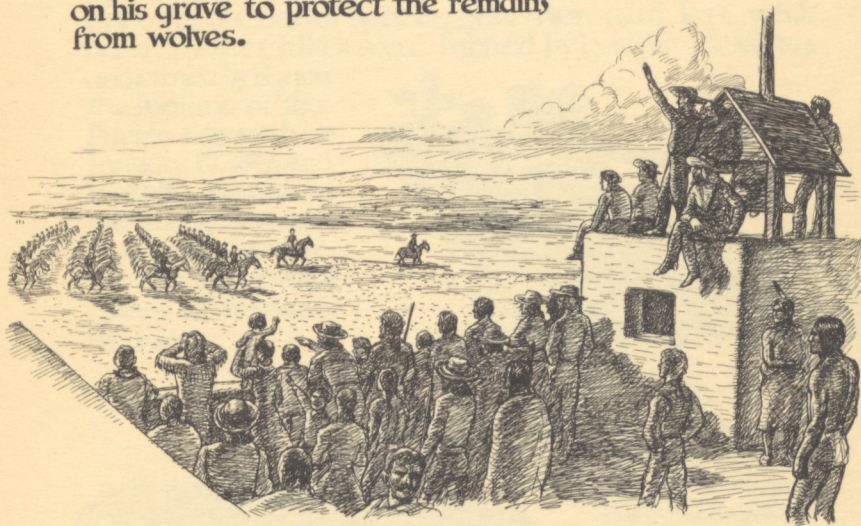
Among the early military expeditions that stopped at Bent's Fort was that of Colonel Henry Dodge and his First Dragoons, who passed by in 1835 on an Indian reconnoissance of the great Plains.

At a later date, in 1842 and 1843, a Colonel Warfield from Texas came to the trading posts on the Arkansas and South Platte to recruit trappers for an invasion of New Mexico.

After a successful attack upon the village of Mora, the Texans were surprised by a force of Mexicans who captured their horses. Warfield's men burned their saddles and walked back to Bent's Fort. This experience effectively ended the "war" and the veteran fur trappers returned to their normal occupation.



In 1846 General Stephen W. Kearny led his Army of the West past Bent's Fort toward Santa Fe. Mexican girls, squaws, and traders watched the wonderful spectacle from the flat roofs of the Fort. At the head of the long column rode William Bent, who guided the troops over rugged Raton Pass. Shortly afterward, in the same year, George Bent, one of the brothers, died of consumption and was buried near the outer walls. Cactus was planted on his grave to protect the remains from wolves.



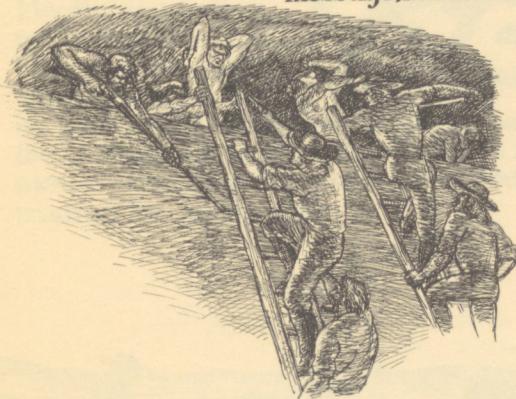
Great hardships were encountered by the troops when they entered the rocky defiles of the Pass. In some places ropes were attached to the rear wheels of the wagons and soldiers thus retarded a too rapid descent. Many wagons overturned and were smashed on the rocks below.



Upon the conquest of New Mexico, General Kearny appointed Charles Bent as governor, and left with his army for California. Incited by certain Mexicans and crazed by liquor, the Indians of Taos Pueblo revolted on January 19, 1847, and brutally murdered the kindly governor, who was then visiting the picturesque village of Fernando de Taos.



Charles Bent died trying to write a message, but his wife, her children and



Mrs. Kit Carson, her sister, were saved by friendly Mexicans, who knocked a hole through an adobe wall, admitted the governor's family to an adjoining house, disguised Mrs. Bent and Mrs. Carson as peons and set them to grinding corn +

Fearful retribution overtook Taos Pueblo, where two hundred Indians were killed when Colonel Sterling Price's men stormed the Pueblo.

William Bent once lay at the point of death from an infected throat closed by corrupt matter. An Indian doctor, named

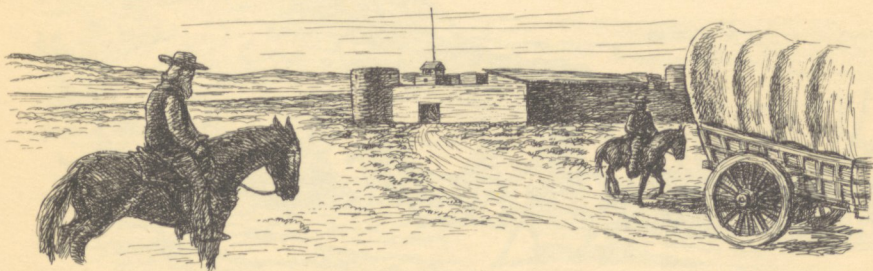
Lawyer, saved his life by tearing the obstruction out with sand burrs, laughing as he performed the operation.



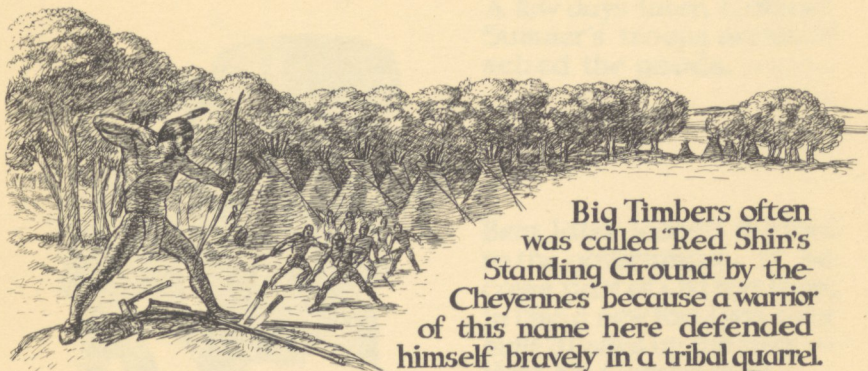
Cholera attacked the Cheyennes on one occasion while Owl Woman, William Bent's wife, was with them.

Little Old Man, a Cheyenne brave, mounted his horse and defied the unseen enemy - but it struck him down as he chanted his song.

Finally, the Indian-trade declined, and Colonel Bent, after vainly trying to sell his post to the government, abandoned the old Fort in 1849. However, he did not retire from the fur trade, but moved down the Arkansas River, where he continued trading for many years ~

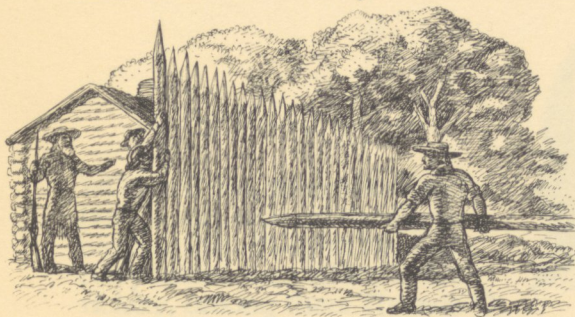


Bent's New Fort was then built at Big Timbers, on the Arkansas. Later it became Old Fort Lyon.



Big Timbers often was called "Red Shin's Standing Ground" by the Cheyennes because a warrior of this name here defended himself bravely in a tribal quarrel.

The first structures built by Colonel Bent at the Big Timbers were three log houses. These were located near



present Prowers, Colorado, and were used only as temporary quarters during one winter.

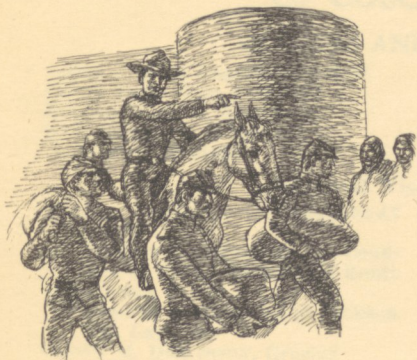
At this time, Colonel Bent began freighting for the federal government over the Santa Fe Trail.

He then built his new fort of stone.



Colonel Sumner caused abandonment of Bent's New Fort in 1857. He had been fighting the Cheyennes, and when^{the} Indian agent wished to store the Indian annuities in the Fort, William Bent moved out rather than become involved in the quarrel.

A few days later, Colonel Sumner's troops arrived^{and} seized the goods. ✧✧✧✧



Bent later leased the Fort to the government. It became part of Old Fort Lyon. In 1866 a new Fort Lyon was built 20 miles up the river... Here Kit Carson died.

William Bent, meanwhile, had built a stockade on the Purgatoire in 1859. Many of his old companions assembled in this vicinity, among them Thomas O.

Boggs, who founded the small town of Boggsville, near Bent's stockade. Strangely~ the great figures of the

fur trade ~~~ centering at Bent's Old Fort, died within a few years, Kit Carson in 1868, Colonel Bent, on his ranch near Boggsville in 1869, Ceran St. Vrain at Mora, N.M., 1870.

Thus ends the dramatic story of Bent's Old Fort.



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Colorado Magazine

LeRoy R. Hafen, *Editor*
State Historical Society of Colorado, State Museum, Denver

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