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### History Rebuilt at Bent's Fort

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# History rebuilt at Bent's Fort

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By Marjorie Barrett



FROM A DISTANCE in the bright sun of the Arkansas River valley the reconstructed Bent's Fort gives the impression of being a shimmering mirage.

Up close it takes on substance and reminds one of a Hollywood set.

In other words, the National Park Service's latest contribution to history is new, shiny and unreal. It needs patching and the erosion and the baking of a summer of relentless heat and the wear and tear of hordes of tourists to give the look and feel of authenticity.

**BENT'S FORT**, however, has impact.

There is nothing that one has read of Bent's Fort that prepares a person for the reality of it. The National Park Service has done a fantastic job of recreating the trading post while stabilizing and protecting it for future generations.

The fort is all but completed, with only a few mop up operations still in progress. The formal dedication of the Centennial-Bicentennial project is not scheduled until July 25.

Already it is more popular than ever in becoming a tourist attraction.

Bent's Fort is located some eight miles east of La Junta on the actual site of the original fort.

"We had quite a discussion over that," John Patterson, Park Service supervisor, reported. "There were a lot of people who wanted to know why we would want to build over the original and why didn't we build adjacent to the ruins. There were others who felt that the ruins and the fort reconstruction side by side would be confusing to tourists."

There was actually little remaining of the old fort. Time, neglect and scavengers had all contributed to the downfall of the site.

"We found that it wasn't the water from

above that had been the downfall of the adobe quite so much as it had been the water seepage from the ground," Patterson said. "In rebuilding that was one of the areas we built differently than the Bent brothers had. They put the structure on the bare ground. We put in a foundation with rocks for drainage and we added a moisture barrier. We have built it for now on. The exterior walls are three feet at the base, tapered to two feet at the top. We have stabilized brick in the core to carry the weight."

Bob Smith who was supervisor in charge of the construction for the Park Service, elaborated on the work at the fort.

"WE HAVE CONCRETE foundations," he pointed out "and the foundations are wider than the walls. We have stone curbing around all the exterior walls to handle capillary water. We felt justified in using the technique because it was not unusual in Bent's time."

The center core is built with stabilized bricks, which were made in Canon City. The rest of the adobe bricks were built offsite by some workers from New Mexico and by George Reed, a La Junta sand and gravel pit operator.

"We had trouble in finding a place to obtain the adobe," Patterson reported. "We wanted to match it but we didn't want to take adobe from the historic site."

The similar adobe was located some seven miles away and the small brick works was set up there and the bricks delivered to the construction site.

A majority of the bricks were made by a machine capable of turning out 35 bricks at a time. Some, of course, were hand made.

Smith reported that after interviewing and hiring a great many workers who professed to know how to design bricks few of them actually did when construction was begun.

There are large jack pine vegas and latias and Smith pointed out that originally if vegas had been used there they would have been Ponderosa pine rather than Jack pine. For safety sake the roof has been treated in a slight-

ly different fashion, also with gravel atop it to protect visitors from slippery mud.

**"THERE IS A COLLAR** around the structure," Smith continued, "so walls cannot pull apart."

All of the electrical wiring in conduit is buried deep in the walls, as is the plumbing.

"I would say that probably the hardest part of the job was the obtaining of materials," Smith said. "You just don't go out to a lumberyard and buy what we needed. Then we had the problem of working with present day workmen who had never learned to use a broad ax or an adz."

Smith, who in his 23 years with the Park Service has worked on just about every kind of project, has developed a few theories about Bent's Fort after having studied it first hand over the more than year of construction.

"I don't believe that the Bents (Charles and William) built it just as a trading post," he said as he walked up and down inside the fort's thick walls. "Just as we are reading today of private citizens through the CIA and the FBI being brought into working for the government on one level or another as spies and observers, I think the government had a hand in Bent's Fort."

"It is built like no other trading post," he went on. "Look at it. It is a fort. If it was a fortified trading post it wouldn't have been this big. It is just too big and too well fortified."

**HISTORY REPORTS** that Charles and William Bent, brothers from St. Louis, along with Ceran St. Vrain, became interested in trading with the Indians and the Mexicans of the lower Rockies and Southwest in the 1820s.

All of the men were experienced in trade, having operated earlier in the Upper Missouri.

In 1829 the three set up a stockade outside Pueblo and the following year they formed a partnership, Bent, St. Vrain and Co.

Each man had a specific role to play in the operation. Charles Bent was to arrange for credit in St. Louis, buy the merchandise and see that it was shipped West. William Bent was in charge of the Indian trade and in the beginning St. Vrain marketed the goods in New Mexico.

It was Charles Bent's idea to build the fort and it was Yellow Wolf, a Cheyenne chief, who influenced the choice of location.



Bent's Old Fort lies in the distance in the middle of prairie land eight miles

The location put them just north of the New Mexican border of the time, close to the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa, Kiowa Apache and Ute Indians and within easy range of other tribes.

It is unsure exactly when William Bent began the building of the fort. Some say 1828, others 1830. It was completed by 1833.

Many of the workers came from the area around Taos and, according to Patterson, there were women on the construction crew just as there were in the reconstruction.

**BENT'S FORT WAS SUCCESSFUL** in those early years, unbelievably so. Reports talk about incredible profits on everything.

Jim Marshall of Colorado Springs is spending the summer at Bent's Fort dressed as a mountaineer displaying old skills to new audiences. He showed off his gun, a replica of the Green River Forge flintlock, which is part of his costume.

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out of La Junta. The name, Bent's Old  
Fort, differentiates this first trading

**\$35,"** he reported, "and yet records show Bent  
sold them for **\$300."**

For 16 years the Bent's Fort flourished by  
meeting competition head on, remaining  
friendly with the Indians and trading  
judiciously.

The regular population of Bent's Fort ranged  
from 40 to 60 people, including a black, Char-  
lotte Green, who served as cook.

When war broke out with Mexico the U.S.  
designated Bent's Fort as the advance base for  
invasion of New Mexico and it was the rendez-  
vous spot for Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny's  
Army of the West.

After Kearny and his troops took Santa Fe  
and New Mexico, Bent's Fort more and more  
was used by the government and in general  
served as a military fort.

The influx of people did irreparable harm to  
the ecology. Indians rebelled over the wanton  
disregard of the land and over the ever-increas-  
ing number of whites coming to the area.

In 1847 Indian warfare began.

post from a subsequent one built by William Bent.

**THAT SAME TIME**, Charles Bent, who had been named governor of the Territory of New Mexico, was killed during a revolt in Taos.

St. Vrain left the fort to relocate in New Mexico and William Bent in 1849, after a bout with cholera which decimated many of the tribe members, packed up and closed the fort.

History says Bent set fire to the fort as a final act but Smith thinks that is just a romantic legend.

"What was there to burn?" he asked, looking around him. "He could have set fire to the roof. Have you ever tried to set fire to this kind of roof? I think what he may have done after he loaded his wagons was to blow up the black powder left in the magazine to prevent others from getting it. It makes a lot more sense."

Bent moved down the Arkansas some 38 miles, built another stockade and tried to revive Indian trade. In 1852 he built a large stone post which was called Bent's New Fort. Bent retired in 1861 and died at his ranch on the Purgatoire River.

History reports that in 1861 and for several years after, the Barlow and Sanderson Stage Company used part of the fort as a repair shop and as a residence for the general manager.

The railroad closed the stage line and the fort was abandoned. Farmers and ranchers cannibalized the fort in the years that followed — taking adobe bricks for use on their own homes and outbuildings.

**IN 1912 THE DAUGHTERS** of the American Revolution erected a plaque and in 1920 title to the land and ruins was given to the Daughters, who held it until 1954.

At that time title was transferred to the State of Colorado under the care of the State Historical Society. Bent's Fort was declared a National Historic Site in 1960, and in 1963 the National Park Service took over the active administration and completed drawings and archeological reports on the property.

The Park Service drew up a master plan for Bent's Fort in 1973 and between 1973 and 1975 money was appropriated by Congress for the fort's reconstruction. The reconstruction with Mershon-Gimeno Construction Co. of Denver as contractors began in May 1975.

Now it is all but completed.