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Bent's Fort is Where Colorado Began

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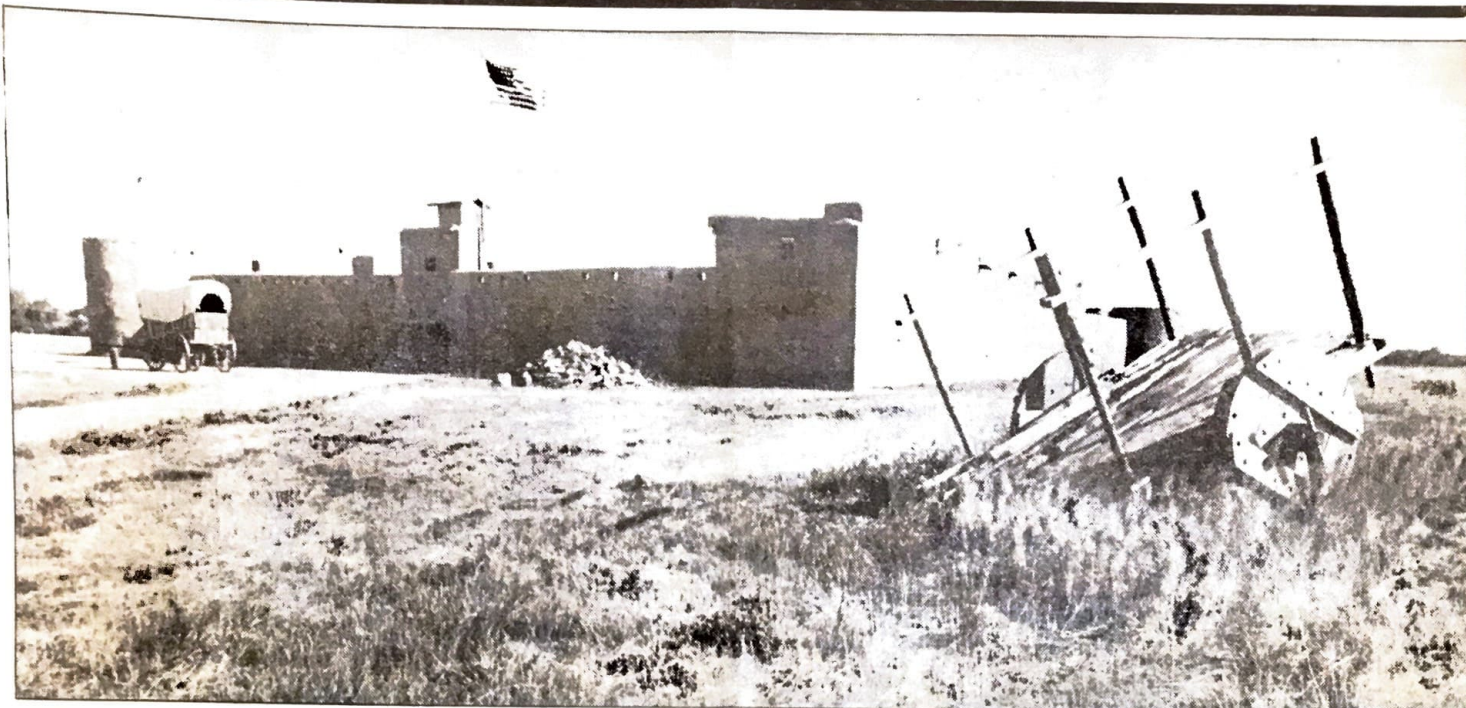
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State/Region



Bent's Old Fort near La Junta flourished from 1831 to 1849 as a stopping off point for settlers, soldiers and adventurers traveling the Sante Fe Trail.

Bent's Fort is where Colorado began

Story by JOE GARNER
Photography by FRANK KIMMEL

LA JUNTA — When shadows lengthen late on a summer afternoon, setting the imagination in motion, a wagon train 50 days out of Independence, Mo., swirls up dust as it lumbers off the sand hills toward the Arkansas River.

The destination of the wagon train 150 years ago was Bent's Fort, now reconstructed as Bent's Old Fort, one of 10 Colorado sites administered by the National Park Service.

The outpost was the Denver of its day, the commercial, industrial and transportation hub for the Rocky Mountain West.

"Think of this as the only truckstop between Independence and Santa Fe," said Bill Gwaltney, the chief ranger. "If you had a gun to be fixed or a wagon to be repaired, this was where you found the blacksmith to do it."

"When you had traveled hundreds of miles from Missouri, and this was the only structure you saw and people were eating off tables with white cloths, you thought it was a big deal."

Today, most tourists hurry past Bent's Old Fort, 175 miles southeast of Denver, on their way to Colorado's other, better-publicized parks, forests and attractions. Some 43,000 people visited Bent's Old Fort last year compared with 2.5 million who visited Rocky Mountain National Park, the state's most popular draw.

"We didn't know about (the fort) until we stopped at a gas station," said Emma Huebbers, a retiree from Crystal River, Fla. "When we were told it wasn't too far away, we came to see it. We're trying to see all we can while we're in Colorado."

Colorado began at Bent's Fort. It was built in the 1830s by brothers Charles and William Bent, and their business partner, Ceran St. Vrain. Fur traders from St. Louis, they were intent on the lavish profits they gave themselves on beaver pelts



Sam Walker, left, a seasonal ranger from Fort Laramie, Wyo., appears in authentic dragoon garb of the mid-1800s. Walker is one of several costumed staff members who greet visitors to Bent's Fort. Though not a military installation, Bent's was a way station and trading post for the Army. Above, pine marten pelts harken to the days when trappers frequented the fort.